

# ~ GAIA - The Princess ~

## by romansilence

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Additional disclaimer: This is an alternative story, dealing with sexual relationships 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. There also are some depictions of violence and torture that go a bit beyond what one usually sees on X:WP or SG-1; just so you'll be warned.

Pairing: Xena / Gabrielle: established relationship; and Sam / Janet: established relationship.

Timeline: Follows X:WP up until the end of season four, with Xena and Gabrielle ending up on a Roman cross. I stay with the canon until then, except for two little things: the two of them have been lovers ever since Xena first died in season two and neither Ephiny nor Solari were killed by Brutus. You might not see them 'til later in the story but believe me, they are important.

The timeline for Stargate: SG-1 is more difficult to assess but it follows the show until 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. There also are spoilers for a few episodes that occur later in the show, p. e. Ascension, 48 Hours, Desperate Measures etc.

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

This is a sequel to [GAIA](#). It might be easier to understand this story having read the first part. GAIA - THE PRINCESS takes place about one year after the end of GAIA. There are a lot of flashback to events that have taken place since then.

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### Prologue: **Previously on GAIA**

The team of SG-1 gates to the planet Gaia where they are greeted by the surviving members of the Amazon Nation of Ancient Greece. For centuries protected by Artemis and her host Athena, an Ancient, technologically they are far superior to Earth, and they offer to share their technology, provided that the SGC sends an all-female research team under the command of Major Samantha Carter and Doctor Janet Fraiser. The Amazons are led by Gabrielle, High Queen of the Amazon Nation, and her Consort Xena, Commander of the Amazon Armies. Both

of them are more than two thousand years old and immortal.

They encourage the budding relationship between Samantha and Janet and help Samantha to deal with her memories of Jolinar. Samantha and Janet become lovers. As soul mates Samantha and Janet develop a psychic link that allows them to feel the other's emotions.

When Cassandra on her last day at summer camp gets captured by Nirrti, Xena, Samantha and the others come to her rescue. Nirrti is captured. Her unwilling host, Larina, is the Captain of Gabrielle's Royal Guard. In order to free her, Xena, Samantha, Gabrielle and Janet have to restore her original personality: Tirrin, child of Egeria, one of the oldest Tok'ra still alive.

At the end of Cassandra's school break, Samantha and Janet return to Earth and Samantha moves in with her lover and their daughter. Stephen, the gay brother of Janet's ex-husband, comes to visit and the SGC gains a new member.

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## Chapter One: **Captured**

### THE PRESENT: SOMEWHERE IN THE GALAXY

She had anticipated the hard kick to the back of her knees but that didn't make it any easier to keep her balance and it didn't make the hard floor any softer. She tried to tell herself that this was not the first time she had been captured by a Goa'uld but she also knew that this time was different.

This time she was alone.

There would be no Daniel to talk them out of it, no Teal'c from whom to draw strength, no O'Neill focussing the attention of their captors with his smart-ass remarks.

She was alone, blind-folded, and bound; without the faintest idea who had her in their clutches or where they were going. She only knew that she had been captured after the new recruits she had led on a supposedly routine mission had safely fled through the gate, that she now was onboard of a Goa'uld mother-ship, and had just been marched down the corridors to the pel'tac.

She cocked her head at the sound of an opening door; she heard some of the Jaffa snapping to attention and the warriors directly around her getting down on a knee. At least that's what it sounded like.

Another kick propelled her forwards and she only barely avoided breaking her fall face first. She felt eyes on her.

"Where are the rest of your Jaffa? And where is the rest of the Tau'ri shol'va?"

"Three Tau'ri escaped through the ring. Eight Jaffa died in your service, my Queen."

"What happened? My warriors were not supposed to be hurt." The voice sounded more troubled than angry.

*A Goa'uld genuinely concerned about her subjects? How strange, she thought.*

"As per your plan, my Queen, we hid around the Chaapa'ai and remained invisible. The enemy marched away from the ring and we were about to spring the trap when we were unexpectedly spotted. Two of my men were instantly killed. Her comrades fled through the ring but we were able to capture her, my Queen."

"You failed me, Jaffa. She is just one insignificant woman. They won't send SG-1 to the rescue for just one female."

"My Queen, she is SG-1. She is Carter!"

"Get her on her feet. Remove the blindfold." Samantha looked into black eyes, set in a face of oriental beauty. "How many of your men did she kill?"

"Of the eight we lost, she killed six. The rumours were right, the Tau'ri have become powerful and Carter was a worthy adversary, my Queen."

The eyes in front of her flashed yellow. "Watch your tongue, Jaffa. You failed your God, and yet you brought me what I was after. You brought me the one who killed my children; so, I will consider forgiving your incompetence for now."

The ribbon device adorning the woman's hand flared to life, and Samantha Carter was hard pressed not to cry out. She recognised the energy driving it as hatred, pure unadulterated hate.

"You will beg forgiveness for killing those I loved, Carter. You will regret killing your Gods before I'm through with you."

The pain suddenly stopped, and she did the only thing she could think of: she laughed. The mesh of the ribbon device hit her cheek when she was backhanded, and only the two Jaffa holding her kept her upright.

The burning on her left cheek told her that her skin was broken. It would probably leave a scar. Anger welled up in Samantha's eyes but her voice stayed calm.

"Pathetic. You're all the same, so predictable, so easy to anger, so easy to kill."

The ribbon device hit her again. It felt as if it was burning a hole in her skull and her next words came out in gasps.

"There were so many of you snakeheads. It's hard to keep track. Sokar, Apophis, Seth, Imhotep, Nirrti, Osiris, Hathor, Ammonet, Ra...argh...."

She cried out, a long agonised cry but the pain didn't stop. Focussing all of her considerable willpower she raised her head and looked into the eyes of her captor. Her cerulean eyes had darkened considerably and reflected the hatred in the glowing orbs of the Goa'uld with equally strong feelings. Suddenly it stopped.

"Get her out of my sight. I'll deal with her at home."

-X-X-X-

#### THE PRESENT: EARTH - STARGATE COMMAND

Major Janet Fraiser, M.D., Chief Medical Officer of Stargate Command, was pacing the length of the briefing room next to General Hammond's office. It had been ten hours and eleven minutes since the group of recruits, her best friend and lover had led to a supposedly uninhabited planet for their first gating experience, had returned - minus one blonde astrophysicist.

"A routine run", Samantha had told her during the pre-mission physical. "I'll just take the kids for a walk. I'll be back before you know it."

*'Routine - as if anything having to do with the SGC had ever, could ever be routine...'*

The rest of SG-1 and the search-and-rescue specialists of SG-12 had been immediately deployed. They had found Samantha's Carter-special and her flack-jacket, as well as over half a dozen bodies of Jaffa whose identification tattoos had been burned out; one of them with Samantha's combat knife still sticking in his throat.

O'Neill and the others were still out there searching for any clues who could have taken her. One of their forensic experts was trying to reconstruct the markings of the Jaffa; not an easy task considering that the bodies belonged to simple Jaffa warriors and thus were tattoos and not golden inlaid brandings. And the only thing Samantha's science team had been able to find out by analysing the crystal of the DHD was that the Gate had not been used between the return of Major Carter's team and the arrival of the search-and-rescue group.

Janet knew that she should be in her office in the infirmary and tend to her paperwork, but here one level above the control room she just felt closer to her missing lover. Still, when Colonel O'Neill had radioed in earlier, she couldn't bring herself to descend the stairs and listen directly.

"Doctor Fraiser, I'm afraid the S&R teams have not yet found anything. All we can do is wait for them to find the decisive clue." General George Hammond said from the edge of the stairs; his eyes gentle with worry for his god-daughter and her partner.

A good soldier knew how to wait, but with what they had to deal with on a daily basis, it was

hard to keep his calm. The bald general would move mountains for every single man and woman under his command. That's what made them so good at what they did. His unflagging support and care for them inspired their loyalty and let them more often than not beat impossible odds.

However, he was honest enough with himself to admit that SG-1 held a special place in his heart, and not only because of the blond, blue-eyed major he had known since she was born. Daniel was like a son to him and Jack O'Neill a headstrong younger brother. Teal'c over the years had become a friend and the commanding officer of the SGC often relied on the tall man's quiet strength.

George Hammond knew he should set an example and retire to his office to do some paperwork but instead he stood in the conference room and surreptitiously observed his CMO who was right beside him staring at the dark ring below. He had seen her pull all-nighters and more over the years but he never had seen her that withdrawn and weary.

Jack O'Neill's report had not sounded optimistic, but he was not ready to give up just yet. The general could almost feel the tension emanating from Janet. That was the last incentive he needed to speed up his long-term plan; but to set everything in motion and warn his allies he had to keep up appearances a bit longer. So, someone else would have to call in the help he had in mind, people he was not supposed to call upon since the Joint Chiefs had severed all ties with Gaia and the Amazon Nation.

"Siler, get a hold of Lieutenant Hailey, Major Williams, and Nurse Powers. I want them in the briefing room ASAP. Doctor, change into your BDUs. You're going on a mission. Call Cassandra and tell her that I'll have her escorted to the base."

"Cassy is in Virginia at my grandfather's, sir. I don't want to worry her."

"Doctor, this will not be over in a day or two. She has a right to know. Tell her that Samantha is missing and you're going on a rescue mission. Join us in the briefing room as soon as you're ready."

-X-X-X-

Less than fifteen minutes later, the small doctor took her usual seat at the conference table. Lieutenant Jennifer Hailey, Major Jessica Williams, and Master Sergeant Alicia Powers were already waiting.

"How's Cassandra, doctor?" General Hammond asked when he entered from his office.

"She's worried but promised to stay put when I promised that you would keep her informed."

"I'll see to it, doctor. Neither the Tok'ra nor the Asgard answered our requests for help. Colonel O'Neill and the others have found no traces, no indication of who is behind Major Carter's

disappearance. Basically, we ran out of options. So, I decided to pull out a gun I have been ordered not to use."

"The Amazons!" Janet whispered.

"Yes, Doctor Fraiser. In five minutes I will order the gate room and the control room cleared of all personnel and dial the coordinates of Gaia. If you decide to make this jump, you will be in direct violation of the orders of the Joint Chiefs and the President. It could effectively end your careers; so, I will not order you to go."

"I'll go alone, sir."

"No, doc, you will not. I owe Major Carter. I'll be at your side," Jessica Williams said. "I'll go and get my gear, General Hammond, sir!" She saluted and left the room with Jennifer and Alicia hard on her heels.

When they were alone, Janet asked, "Why are you doing this, sir? You could get in a lot of trouble."

"There's more going on than I can tell you at the moment, Doctor, but bottom line is that the Amazons are Sam's best and possibly only chance at the moment. Queen Gabrielle and Consort Xena have assured me that regardless of the political situation we can always count on them," he answered.

"They were very hurt when we brought them the orders of the Joint Chiefs to break any ties with them and put their planet on the red list," Janet said pessimistically. In her eyes the alliance between Earth and Gaia had been a done deal; the Pentagon, however, had stopped the whole proceedings under the pretence that the Amazons would not be reliable and in the long run could even be a danger to Earth.

General Hammond looked at his CMO and fought with himself. He longed to tell her that things were not as dire as they appeared to be; he wanted to tell her the truth but for now the strategist won out over the godfather and friend; so he simply said,

"The Amazons will help. Sam and you made very strong friends in the Queen and her consort, Janet. You saved their lives and according to their code of honour they have to help you."

"It never would have gone this far if not for that narrow-minded JAG officer. It was the bond, the sexual bond between warriors that made the Spartans the fighters they were," Janet said angrily.

"You exaggerate, doctor. Commander Sturges is not to blame. You said yourself on more than one occasion that he's an honourable man. Even with his report and things as they were, Kinsey and his friends had to pull all the strings they had to get this decision through. Sooner or later the Joint Chiefs will be forced to change their minds about allowing same-sex-relationship in the military and this whole fraternisation hysteria. - And now, go, doc. Your team is already assembling."

"Yes, sir. Thank you for doing this for Sam."

"If not for their shield, I would go myself. I love Samantha as if she were one of my daughters."

"Sir, let me dial the gate. This way they might let you off the hook."

"No, Janet, that's my job. Just get her back."

"We'll do our best, sir." Janet impulsively hugged General Hammond.

-X-X-X-

#### THE PRESENT: GAIA - HOME WORLD OF THE AMAZON NATION

The four women stepped through Athena's Ring. The clearing was empty but Janet knew that the Amazons had been put on alert the moment the first chevron had been locked and that the surveillance monitors must already have picked up on their arrival. A couple of minutes later, the distinctive form of Consort Xena dropped out of the trees and swept the smaller doctor in her arms. "What's wrong, Janet?"

The compassion in the raven-haired woman's voice broke through Janet's defences and she burst into tears. Xena closed her arms tighter around the shaking body and cast a questioning glance at the other women.

In a quiet voice Major Williams told her what they knew about the mission and Samantha's disappearance.

"Let's go to the village. We have some preparations to make."

The consort made as if nothing had ever happened between them, and Janet soon found herself strapped in one of the seats of the aircraft Samantha almost nine months ago had named XS-01. They were on the way to P3X-321 where Samantha had disappeared.

"How are you holding up, Jan?" the red-headed Queen asked. "How do you feel?"

"Afraid. I can't lose her, Gabrielle."

"Xena will find a way to get her back, Jan. Try to relax. We'll need about eighteen hours to arrive at the planet. The ship's sensors then will tell us if there was a ship in orbit and where it went. The sensors will pick up the distortion of normal space occurring whenever a classical hyperdrive is used."

"I know you'll do the best you can, Queen Gabrielle. I'm sorry for the way we parted three

months ago."

"You have nothing to be sorry for, Janet. You were only following orders, and the last word has not yet been spoken on this front."

"We missed you." Janet said softly.

"We missed you too, Jan, but if there's one thing one learns by being immortal it's to be patient. Samantha and you were not the only ones being cut off from friends and loved ones."

Janet looked around the passenger area of the small aircraft. Jennifer Hailey and Aria were cuddled in each others arms and Jessica Williams was in an animated discussion with the Amazons' weapons' master. Her friend Alicia had opted to follow on board of the *Scythia*, the Amazons' flagship, to make sure that the infirmary was prepared for Samantha's special physiology following Janet's exacting instructions.

"I'm afraid, Gabrielle." Janet burst out.

"I know, Janet. Sam is the other half of your soul; that's why you can't let your fears win. Close your eyes and concentrate on her love for you. You can reach her as soon as you let go of your fear. Follow your connection straight to her heart. Search for the light. At the moment it's nothing more than a single, tiny point of light in the darkness but it's coming closer with every breath you take."

Janet gave herself over to the Queen's soothing voice. Her fear slowly ebbed away. When she reopened her eyes, tears were running down her face and she was smiling.

"Sam is alive. She has been hurt, but she is alive."

-X-X-X-

#### THE PRESENT: ON BOARD OF THE HA'TAK

Light years away a blond woman slept on the cold but smooth floor in the holding cell of a Goa'uld mothership and whispered her lover's name.

-X-X-X-

#### THE PRESENT: ON BOARD OF THE XS-01

Hours later the ship was on auto-pilot and all but Janet seemed asleep. She was too tired to sleep and instead reminisced about the strange and wonderful path destiny had let them on during the

last year.

Thirteen months ago she never would have thought possible to tell the woman she loved about her feelings, or that Samantha had been just as afraid of being rejected as she had, or that they would live together and sleep in each other's arms every night.

Thirteen months ago she never would have hoped to reconnect with her beloved grandfather and now they were talking on the phone every week. He had accepted Samantha as her life partner and he loved Cassandra.

Thirteen months ago, she never would have thought it possible to be deliriously happy and scared to death at the same time.

The small doctor closed her eyes and concentrated on her breathing. She needed to sleep but the memories were more insistent. Janet remembered Samantha's uncharacteristic exuberance after having met the leaders of the Amazon Nation for the first time.

That evening at O'Malley's had been the beginning of a great adventure and of the fulfillment of her greatest dreams; perhaps that's why it had now come back in all its detail, beckoning a series of other equally cherished memories; their first kiss, the first time they made love.

Janet felt a hand on her shoulder, a gentle familiar touch but not the one of which she had been dreaming. "Janet, you have to strap yourself in. We're about to land."

"Gabrielle? How long did I sleep?"

"Not long enough, my friend. You still look tired. The sensors found an ion trail from a ha'tak. We'll follow it as soon as we pick up O'Neill and Daniel. Teal'c, Bra'tac, General Hammond, and the other SG-teams will wait for the Scythia."

"General Hammond? But he can't just leave the SGC. They need him."

"To make a long story short, General Hammond decided to join the search for Samantha on P3X-321 when one of his contacts told him that the Joint Chiefs were about to suspend him for sending you to us for help. After that SG-1 and SG-12 stayed out of range of the MALP's radio system. Three more teams were sent to bring them back but they put themselves under General Hammond's command. And the gate should be out of order by now. It seems as if the central memory board of the intranet is currently not accessible..."

"Protocol Omega-One. It scrambles the gate addresses. Without the right passwords it's highly doubtful that anyone will get the gate to work; at least not until they find another Samantha Carter to break the code; and Sam enlisted Daniel's help to create the passwords."

"So, no one from Earth will be able to follow us for quite some time. That's good news, though it could produce some serious fall-out later."

"As Master Bra'tac would say, we'll build that bridge as soon as we come to the river," Colonel O'Neill sounded as tired as Janet still felt but the mischievous twinkle in his eyes cheered her up a bit as well as his tight hug. "Besides, it just wouldn't be fair if the Amazons had all the fun. Right your highness?"

"Colonel O'Neill, Jack, welcome aboard the XS-01. Would you like to have a look at her controls?" They went to the front of the small aircraft. After their first rather adversarial meeting the Air Force officer and the consort had forged a deep friendship based on a shared, rather strange sense of humour and their experiences as military leaders.

Daniel sat down next to the small doctor and put a comforting arm around her shoulders. She sank in the comfort of his embrace and fell asleep. When she woke her head was resting on a much softer surface. The Queen had taken Daniel's place while the archaeologist was bent over a computer screen next to Jennifer Hailey.

"What happened, Gabrielle?"

"Daniel is checking our database for the Goa'uld who probably has Samantha. During the old kingdom the star the recruits described was the symbol of ..."

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## Chapter Two: **The Search Begins**

### THE PRESENT: ON BOARD OF THE HA'TAK

"Here, Tau'ri, have some water." Sam slowly stood and took the mug the tall Jaffa offered her through the bars of her cell. There was a good chance that it would be poisoned or otherwise tainted but somehow she wanted to trust the giant with the gentle brown eyes.

"Thank you... What is your name, Jaffa?"

"Aisato."

"Thank you, Aisato."

"You are welcome, SamanthaCarter."

Samantha could feel the faint vibrations of the hyperdrive and slowly the knowledge began to sink in that the only chance to get out of here would depend on her and her alone.

Teal'c had taught all of them how to Kel'no'rem to center themselves in times of need. She never had been among his best students, but there was nothing else to do and during their sojourn with the Amazons she had lost most of her misgivings against this "waste of time", as she had called it

at the beginning. She had learned to draw strength from the meditation and in a way had even made it into a part of her daily routine, especially after remembering that her mother just had started to teach her some of her own relaxation techniques before her sudden death. She sat cross-legged, closed her eyes, and focused on her breathing.

Two hours later Aisato checked on the prisoner and her guard. She still was in deep meditation.

This Tau'ri female was not what he had expected, not at all like the other humans he was used to deal with on a daily basis. The people on his world loved their Queen. They never would even think of laughing at her, but this one had; and she had the instincts of a warrior and the proficiency of a seasoned fighter, a veteran of many battles. For a fleeting moment he speculated what it would be like to fight at her side but he quickly crushed the thought. His Queen wanted her death, but first she would break the beautiful blonde, body and soul.

Aisato had been in his Queen's service since he had received his first primta, and after his father's death he had been named her First Prime. He had thought that he knew his Queen. She had never shown any interest in Goa'uld politics, content with taking care of the three planets that composed her domain; but right after the visit of this cloaked stranger she had ordered him to mobilise her troops and make the ha'tak battle ready.

Five groups had been sent to wait for the arrival of the Tau'ri but it had been his group to confront them. The others by now were back with their families on Schu, their home planet. Less than two days respite for the meditating blonde. Less than two days before he would have to torture and kill her.

-X-X-X-

## THE PRESENT: ON BOARD OF THE XS-01

Janet was frustrated beyond belief. Tracking the ion trail turned out to be more difficult than she would have thought though the consort and the Amazon warriors seemed content with their progress. The trail for some reason beyond her understanding could only be picked up in normal space. So, they had to drop out of hyperspace regularly to make sure that they still were on the right track. A couple of times they even had had to backtrack.

This was all taking too long; Janet was pacing the passenger area of the small ship.

Since the Queen had helped her to concentrate, she had held on to her connection with Samantha like a lifeline. Their connection was the only thing making this whole situation at least bearable. Samantha was considerably calmer than earlier but she still was scared and hungry.

Daniel followed her relentless track with worry in his eyes. He registered her sudden stumble and kept her from crashing to the hard floor. He cradled her in his lap. Her breathing was flat and when he gently pulled her eyelids back, the pupils didn't react to the light.

Consort Xena checked her life signs. "Niva, call the Scythia. Tell them to catch up as soon as possible. I was afraid that something like this could happen."

"What's wrong with Janet, Consort Xena? That's no simple passing out, right?"

"No, it isn't. We'll know more as soon as she comes to again but something happened to Samantha."

"Could you be any less specific?" O'Neill grumbled.

"Gabrielle could you? That's more your domain."

"Colonel O'Neill, since their first return from Gaia, Major Carter has been injured during one mission or the other, right?"

"Yes, three or four times, your majesty," Daniel answered on behalf of his confused friend.

"And how many times did you have to wait for a medical team to arrive for her treatment?"

"None, the doc had always already been waiting for us." He paused a moment. "Do you really want to tell us that the Doc somehow knew about Carter's injury? That they have some mind reading thing going on?" The Colonel asked.

"No, not exactly. It's more like some sort of empathy. They can feel each other's feelings, strong feelings like love, hate, pain, anger, joy. It's hard to explain but Janet can feel Samantha's pain, and I'm afraid that at the moment it must be really strong to cause this kind of reaction in Janet."

"And when the two halves are reunited they become one in heart and body, and even separated they will never be apart and gain the favour of all the Gods for they were stronger than the wrath of Zeus," Daniel slowly chanted with Janet's head still in his lap. He looked into the Queen's gentle green eyes. "Soulmates really exist? It's not a myth?"

"No, it's not a myth, Daniel. Soulmates exist though I doubt that the part about humans having had two heads and four legs is based on fact," Gabrielle answered with a smile.

"Wow!, That's grand," he whispered, his fingers gently stroking the unconscious woman's face.

"Soulmates? Someone care to enlighten me! Sounds like romantic crap." Daniel threw his commanding officer an evil glance and the expressions of the others ranged from pity to compassionate amusement.

"Colonel O'Neill, just imagine a love so strong that you can feel it even light years apart. You should not look down on it lightly," Master Niva gently chided him.

Surprisingly he didn't make any further comments but quietly returned to his seat.

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## THE PRESENT: THE PLANET 'SCHU'

The ha'tak had landed several hours ago, at least four, she estimated. It was hard to keep track of the passing of time in her cell. Samantha heard the unmistakable sound of armoured boots on the steel floor; slowly she got to her feet, and stretched. Six guards took position in front of her and Aisato opened the door.

"SamanthaCarter, my Queen has ordered that you be brought before her. This is your escort. Armed guards are posted all along the way to the palace. I will leave your hands and feet unrestrained if you promise not to try to escape."

"Why would you do this for me, Aisato? Why would you trust me?" Samantha asked genuinely puzzled. "It's the duty of a prisoner to try to escape."

"I don't expect any less of you, SamanthaCarter, and in the end I will have to kill you, but for now just see it as a courtesy from one warrior to the other."

"You have my word, Aisato."

She stepped out of the cell and her escort closed around her; every twenty to thirty paces there was another guard posted. Even with all of her weapons she probably wouldn't have been able to escape. She held her head high and tried to memorise every detail of her surroundings. There were forested hills in the distance. They followed a gently sloped road to the palace, marked by elegant marble columns with a big star topping the entrance arch, matching the tattoos the Jaffa were wearing on their foreheads.

Over the years Samantha had seen a lot of pretentious Goa'uld palaces and on the outside this one was no exception. On the inside it looked different, almost homey with a lot of oriental rugs absorbing the harsh sound of the warriors' boots. The throne room, however, was very familiar and sinister with a sarcophagus on one side and a whole plethora of things that looked like they had been taken right out of a medieval dungeon on the other.

To get her mind off what undoubtedly would happen to her, she concentrated her attention on the woman sitting on the throne. During their first meeting the Goa'uld had been clad in a simple black robe. Now, she was wearing a night blue gown covered with silver stars. She would have been beautiful if not for the hatred distorting her features.

At the moment her anger was directed towards the tall Jaffa. "Why is she not bound? Do you take your responsibility this lightly?"

"No, my Queen," Aisato answered while sinking to a knee. "She promised not to try anything,

my Queen."

"She promised? And you believed her? She's nothing more than a shol'va."

"SamanthaCarter proved to be an honourable warrior, my Queen. She gave me her word and I saw no need to humiliate her with restraints."

"And why would she give you her word?"

"Just a courtesy from one warrior to another," Samantha answered in his stead and was rewarded with a blast from the ribbon device that knocked her a few feet back on the hard floor.

Her whole body was screaming in pain but she refused to show it. She wouldn't give this snakehead the satisfaction.

"Not bad for an amateur! You got potential. A few hundred years from now you might even be able to do some damage with your toy if you practice diligently, that is!"

Another blast from the ribbon device hit her in the chest with enough force to propel her almost to the door that was flanked by two guards who aimed their staff weapons at her. It hurt like hell but she forced an unimpressed smile on her face.

"Get her on her feet! It's time she starts to pay for her crimes."

Instead of dragging her back to the throne, two Jaffa helped her on her feet and guided her back in front of the throne. She looked into the hate-filled black eyes and a bit of O'Neill cockiness overcame her.

"Before you start boring me to death with your rambling and posturing, care to tell me who the hell you are?"

The woman literally flew from her seat and stood only an arm's length from her. This could be her chance.

"You preposterous mortal, don't you recognise the mother of Gods, the mother of all mothers?"

"That's how Hathor introduced herself. Didn't do her any good."

A blow to her chin knocked her head back while her guards still held her arms. All her instincts told her to fight back, but the more rational part of her mind preached patience. The Goa'uld had to come closer for her plan to work. It was a question of timing.

A mesh enforced hand hit her mid-section. She grabbed it and hurled herself around while liberating a zat'nikitel from the arm holster of one of her guards and broke the hold on her arms. Using the Goa'uld as shield, Samantha retreated towards the throne. She felt a blow to her neck and the world went black.

When she came to, she was bound to a contraption that in her world would have been called a St. Andrew's cross. Adrenaline was still pumping through her veins and she fought her restraints.

"They have been forged to hold men twice as strong as I am, SamanthaCarter. Resistance is futile. Drink, my Queen wants you rested for your punishment. Try to relax."

Samantha took a few sips of the water Aisato offered her and thanked him. She could feel one of her eyes swelling shut from the Goa'uld's uncoordinated blows and remembered what the Queen had been shouting while she'd waited for her chance.

"I am Nut, sister of Geb, mother of Isis, mother of Osiris, mother of Seth. You will pay for the death...."

-X-X-X-

#### THE PRESENT: ON BOARD OF THE XS-01

"Can't you get her to wake up? It's been over two hours now. What the hell happened that she's so out of it?" O'Neill asked while pacing the passenger area of the XS-01.

"I'm sorry, Jack. It's entirely up to Janet and Samantha. We have to wait 'til she comes back to us. The Scythia will come in range in about two and a half or three hours. Janet will rest more comfortably in one of our guest quarters. The Queen will go with her and watch over her. That's the best we can do," Xena answered with a hint of worry in her voice Daniel immediately picked up on.

"How strongly will Janet be affected by what happens to Sam? Will she..."

"Will she die if Samantha is killed? We don't know. The surviving half has been known to lead a productive and even happy life without its mate but Samantha and Janet are very special. Their connection is the strongest we've ever seen. We don't know." Gabrielle answered his unspoken question.

Xena took her beloved in her arms and whispered, "They will be okay, my love. They both are strong and have a lot to live for. We will catch up with that ship and get Samantha back."

"By the time we find her she'll probably already have freed herself," Jack O'Neill added his two cents. "The woman is too damn brilliant for her own good. She'll find a way."

-X-X-X-

## THE PRESENT: SCHU, IN THE THRONE ROOM OF NUT

"Cut her clothes off. Perhaps we can also strip away a bit of her arrogance."

After a moment's hesitation, Aisato signalled two of the female servants to execute his Queen's orders who then stepped up to the dais on which the St. Andrew's cross had been mounted. She now was wearing a pair of grey slacks and a black top. Black eyes locked with blue.

"No one escapes the mother of Gods. No one lays a hand on me. You now will pay for your blasphemy."

She slowly unsheathed an obsidian dagger from her waistband and punctured the main artery in Samantha's right leg. A fountain of red liquid immediately erupted, and the Air Force major surprised herself with the thought that she was lucky to get such a quick death. She would bleed out within minutes. And there was nothing she could do to fight it. It made her angry, but she would be damned to show the pain she felt at losing her love and her daughter.

Nut studied her reaction like one would an insect and Samantha held her gaze as long as she could - and then there was darkness.

-X-X-X-

It was dark around her, darker than any night she could remember, darker than her quarters under the mountain during a blackout. She turned around and was surrounded by more darkness. Then she found the light, just a tiny dot, too far away to be real but she was drawn towards the bright dot, and as she got closer it became bigger, a ball of shining light.

*Janet.*

-X-X-X-

## THE PRESENT: ON BOARD THE XS-01

Janet opened her eyes and found her head resting on Daniel's thighs.

"The Scythia will be in range in a few candledrops." The weapons' master said.

"Daniel, what happened?"

"Janet, you're awake! That's great." Janet tried to sit up. "Take it easy. You were unconscious for more than four hours."

A shadow passed over the beautiful face and she called for the Queen and her consort. "Xena, Gabrielle, they have a sarcophagus. She will kill Sam again and again. We have to get to her. She's so scared, so alone."

Janet now was openly crying, consumed by the fear of what else the sarcophagus would do to her beloved if they didn't get to her in time. The effect it had had on Daniel years ago weighing heavily on her mind.

Xena took the shaking body in her arms. "Tell her that she's not alone; tell her that you love her."

They both closed their eyes and silence settled in the cabin of the small aircraft as if they all were waiting for something miraculous to happen. Half an hour later Xena and Janet simultaneously opened their eyes again. Janet gave the tall woman a shy smile.

"Thank you, Xena."

"You're welcome, Janet. Is Samantha alright?"

"As good as can be expected, Xena. She felt me. She knows that we are on her trail." Janet fell silent; she could only hope that it would give her lover enough strength to tide her over.

"The young warrior is strong. We will get her back, healer," Niva, the Amazons' weapons' master, said. "The Scythia is hailing us. They are ready for the transport."

"I want to stay here but if I faint every time Sam d... Sam is put in a sarcophagus, I'll be a liability to you all. You don't have to go with me, your majesty."

"You'll need someone to talk to, Janet. We will not be too far behind the others, I promise."

Janet hugged Jennifer and the others, and the blink of an eye later they were on board of the Amazonian flagship. Gabrielle led the small brunette to the bridge where they could monitor the progress of the other ship.

-X-X-X-

#### THE PRESENT: ON BOARD OF THE 'SCYTHIA'

A few hours later, the Queen convinced Janet to go to the commissary but the young doctor only played with her food.

"Janet, you have to keep your strength up. Samantha will need you when we get her back."

"I know. I'm just not hungry at the moment." Janet answered with a small pout.

"Eat, doc, that's an order!" General Hammond said while taking a seat to her right.

"General, sir," Janet looked at him with tired eyes, "why did you risk coming here? What went wrong? Why did the President not interfere?"

"Doctor Fraiser, Janet, I'm afraid I don't have any answers right now. Let's just say that I called in a few markers. I'm sure that everything will play out just like we want it to."

Janet had spent enough time in the military to recognise when something fell under the need-to-know category. She also knew better than to insist on a more detailed answer.

-X-X-X-

## THE PRESENT: SCHU - THE THRONE ROOM

Samantha didn't resist when she was taken out of the sarcophagus and put back on the cross. Guards lined both walls but there were no servants present and no sign of the Goa'uld.

"Aisato, would you tell me more about Nut, about your Queen?"

"You really don't know, SamanthaCarter? I thought you only said this to make my Queen angry?"

"Goa'uld tend to make mistakes when you get them angry enough. It has worked in the past and would have worked this time. But in Nut's case, no, I really don't know about her." Samantha answered, omitting that Jolinar's memories in the meantime had provided her with quite a bit of information on this particular snakehead. "I might have heard her name but nothing more. Please, Aisato, I want to understand."

The tall Jaffa searched her face and her eyes for any hint of deception or duplicity. Even though he didn't understand his Queen at the moment he was very protective of her.

An hour later, Samantha thanked him for his information. It had given her a lot to ponder. The portrait he drew had next to nothing to do with the angry, vengeance-thirsty, unstable being she had met. The Queen he talked about was compassionate and genuinely cared for her people. The humans on her planets were healthy and prosperous. She was a good ruler.

Samantha somehow had to find out what had happened to bring about such a drastic change; and she had to do it fast, before the sarcophagus let her lose perspective of right and wrong, like it had with Daniel; before she would lose her very soul.

At the moment her connection with Janet shielded her against the dark part of her soul and she desperately needed to trust this connection. She knew that it was the only thing that ultimately would be able to bring her back, should she really give in, should she really greet the darkness as

an old friend, should she really no longer care if she survived or who else would live or die.

No, she had to get out; she had to get back to her family, to Janet and Cassy.

She tried to shake herself out of these dark, foreboding thoughts by thinking of her partner. She remembered her jealous fit when Janet's former brother-in-law Stephen had unexpectedly visited. He was a friend now but then she had stormed off on her hog, at the beginning of winter, without a jacket or a helmet. Janet had been angry with her, for running off, for saying what she did, for being irresponsible but in the end they had made up.

Samantha smiled at the memory but she didn't get the chance to reminisce any more. A voice startled her out of her pleasant thoughts.

"What did you do to my son? Why did you kill Seth?"

Samantha took a deep breath and considered her options. She could alienate the woman even further with her answer or she could try to tell her the truth - Jack O'Neill or Daniel Jackson.

"It was an accident. I didn't want to kill him. The Tok'ra asked us to find him. He had his own little court in a secluded house in the country. The young men and women there worshipped him because he had clouded their minds with Nishta. We broke his influence and led them to freedom. Seth tried to escape and injured the Tok'ra who was with us. He gave me the ribbon device. I only wanted to stop him but the blast was so strong. Every single one of his bones was crushed. He looked almost surprised."

Samantha didn't even try to mask how much she had been shaken by the events but she didn't trust this Goa'uld enough to let her know that the Tok'ra in question had been her father.

The bound woman expected another attack, but the dark haired woman abruptly turned around and left the throne room without another word. Samantha followed her with her eyes. This certainly was not the reaction she had expected, especially considering the cold fury in the Goa'uld's eyes.

About ten minutes later the woman returned with guards and servants in tow. "Do you regret killing my youngest child, Tau'ri?"

"No, he is responsible for countless deaths. Over the last three thousand years, he made his followers kill themselves whenever he was bored or had to leave for other reasons. He killed them. No, I don't regret his death."

A sudden silence fell over the room at Samantha's stark but sad words.

"Turn her around. Whip her, and only stop when she apologises for my child's death."

-X-X-X-

## THE PRESENT: ON BOARD OF THE XS-01

"That's the third shadow trail we followed today."

Daniel Jackson was audibly frustrated as were most of the others on board of the small ship. It was the fourth day of their search, not counting the time they had lost on the planet from which she had been taken. The trails were constantly getting weaker.

"From our last stop there is only one possibility left," Jennifer Hailey answered, "but fortunately we won't have to go back there to chart our new course. We mapped the area and can use the data to set a new course."

A sudden flash of insight crossed Jack O'Neill's face. "We can triangulate the next check-point?"

Jennifer's nod was almost imperceptible.

"Then why the hell didn't we do this earlier?"

"Take it easy, Jack" Xena said. "We never before took the time to map the area. We were too hell-bent on making progress. The equations this is based on are very complex. It takes at least three hours to complete. Until now the ion trails have only led us a couple of hours astray; so, going back was easier and faster.

"Can you speed it up, Lieutenant Hailey?" Jack asked.

"No sir. This is one of the fastest computers I've ever seen. Short of disassembling it and streamlining the processors, I don't see what we could do - and even then we probably would be lucky to get it back the way it works now. It's beyond what we can do, sir." The frustration in Jennifer's voice was more than evident.

-X-X-X-

## THE PRESENT: SCHU - THE THRONE ROOM

The first two strokes cut a big X in her back. She cried out in pain.

Teal'c would certainly see it as a sign of weakness and the Jaffa witnessing her flogging might think so as well, but Jack O'Neill, despite his usual bravado, had taught her that one had to pick one's battles. She certainly wouldn't win this one by trying to appear invulnerable or immune to pain. They already knew that she was mortal.

Her chances to escape were less than slim; so, there was only one thing left to do: she had to

keep her integrity. She had to make it clear that, regardless of what they did to her, they never would be able to break her spirit. She only hoped that she hadn't deluded herself.

And then there was this persistent foolhardy thought that she would be able to change the Goa'uld's mind. She had to make her understand that they only wanted to protect their world and that given the circumstances they didn't have a choice. It probably was one of her rare blonde moments but for now it at least kept her from answering the alluring call of darkness.

The third and fourth stroke threw her back to reality and soon the pattern was evident: two lashes, a break, two more lashes, one above, one slightly below the previous strokes. This was the first real whipping she had ever experienced, but somehow she knew that the wielder of the whip could do a lot more damage than he actually did. Theoretically she should have passed out long ago.

Samantha no longer was screaming with every mark left on her body. It had changed to one continuous scream that soon left her hoarse.

Suddenly, it stopped.

The hand of a woman offered her some water. She wanted to gulp it down but remembered Janet's repeated lessons and only took small sips.

Aisato's voice whispered from behind her. "Tell Queen Nut what she wants to hear. I don't want to kill someone as brave as you are."

Samantha heard the concern in the Jaffa's words and she answered. "I can't apologise for what was right. Just do your duty. I won't hold it against you. My integrity, my sincerity is the only thing I have left. I can't give it up."

If the Air Force major still had been able to discern between the placement of the strokes she would have felt that the next hit her right on top of the very first. Her voice was gone long before she finally, mercifully passed out.

-X-X-X-

THE PRESENT: ON BOARD OF THE XS-01

"Here, Jack, eat something," Daniel offered him a trail bar. "We will get her back."

"I know, Danny-boy." He fell silent for a few seconds. "I just hope that we won't be too late."

"Don't even think of ruining our track record."

-X-X-X-

## THE PRESENT: SCHU - THE THRONE ROOM

When Samantha came to, she found that her legs no longer supported her body. She could not feel her legs.

A surge of panic ran through her body and mind but she quickly calmed herself down. Was it possible that one or more of the lashes had injured a nerve? Yes, it was possible, but she didn't think that this was the case.

In a strange way, she trusted the big Jaffa with the gentle eyes. She didn't doubt that he would and could kill her but that...

Samantha suddenly remembered her Special Ops training, the final test.

They had been taken from their beds and put in a crude bamboo cage. After regaining consciousness, she had found bruises on her breasts and the inside of her thighs; there also was dried blood. Theory had paled in contrast to the reality she had had to face.

Then, they had wanted her to believe that, while unconscious, she had been brutally raped. They had wanted to break her with the fear of being subjected to this kind of violation again and again - but all it had achieved was to strengthen her determination.

She had not given in then, and she would not give in now.

Samantha tried to take stock of her physical condition but the over-all pain was just too much. The scent of her own blood made her slightly nauseous, and suddenly she knew why the whipping had not yet resumed. They once again would let her bleed to death. It was not very creative but she welcomed the chance at oblivion.

-X-X-X-X-X-

## Chapter Three: **Still Searching**

### THE PRESENT: ON BOARD OF THE SCYTHIA

Janet opened her eyes to the worried green orbs of the Queen; her own desperation was palatable in her voice. "She's still in the sarcophagus, Gabrielle, but she's sleeping now. She was in so much pain. I will lose her if we don't find her fast. I wish I could take it for her."

The Queen took the other woman gently in her arms. "I know the feeling, but unfortunately there is nothing we can do. I feel this way whenever Xena gets hurt. All we can do is to try to make it

easier for them."

"I didn't want to reawaken painful memories, Gabrielle."

"You didn't, Janet. It's hard to feel helpless. Believe me, I know. I had to live it more than once."

"When she's in the sarcophagus I know what's going on with her, but out of it she blocks me. I didn't understand it at first, but now I think that she only wants to protect me. She doesn't want me to know what they do to her."

"Samantha is and will always be a warrior, Janet, just like Xena; and there's nothing we can do to change that. It's just what and who they are," Gabrielle answered. "I'm sorry, but you just will have to get used to it."

"At least I don't have to like it. And I hate to feel this helpless. I'm a doctor, that's all I'm really good at."

"Don't sell yourself short, Janet. You're more than that, much more. I want you to relax."

"That's easier said than done." Janet cautiously added.

"I know, Janet; it never is. There's nothing we can do but to wait. And there's no sense in wasting our time."

"So, what do you have in mind, your majesty?"

"I never had a chance to get the story of our rescue from your point of view. I already spoke with Sam when we were at your grandfather's but her description of the Tok'ra force field blocking our usual scans was more descriptive than what she said about the whole rescue mission. The reports of my Amazons gave me a pretty good idea and I also have put down everything you both told us right after. However, the story is still missing something." Gabrielle said.

"I'm no storyteller, Gabrielle, but it might keep me from worrying myself sick."

After a few awkward minutes, Janet found herself recalling the whole story, starting with Samantha's repeated nightmare.

-X-X-X-

## THE PAST: EARTH - JANET'S AND SAMANTHA'S HOUSE

"Sam, Sammy, wake up. Wake up, baby!" Janet gently shook her lover who was sitting up in bed, screaming Xena's name. She had been jostled awake almost an hour ago by Samantha's distress crashing through their link like a tidal wave. The small doctor had held her in her arms

and tried to comfort her, but quickly was running out of options; waking Samantha seemed the only one left.

"Was it the same dream, baby?" Janet asked a few minutes later when Samantha had calmed down some.

Samantha nodded and sought comfort against her beloved's chest.

"That's three nights in a row. Come, I'll make us some hot chocolate and you'll tell me what you remember." Janet pulled a big t-shirt over Samantha's sweating body. She also dressed and led her unresisting down to the kitchen.

A couple of minutes later and with the help of some milk, chocolate syrup, and the micro-wave oven, the two women were sitting side by side in the living room with their steaming cups.

"I'm not entirely sure that it was the same dream. There are more details. It somehow reminds me of Queen Gabrielle's stories.

"I don't know what threatens Gabrielle, but Xena rushes headlong into an ambush in order to save her. Xena takes out two thirds of the opposing forces, but finally succumbs to half a dozen of tranquilizer darts. When she comes to, she finds herself in some sort of laboratory, no, a cross between lab and dungeon. She's naked and spread-eagled in one part of the room.

"A bright beam illuminates a rectangular plane on the wall to her right. I can feel that she's worried but somehow it all does not seem real. Gabrielle is brought in, bound like some sort of mummy and placed where the light is. She's visibly struggling but to no avail; she can't get free. Xena arches her back; she's hit by a whip, over and over again.

"One moment I see Xena's point of view and the next I see Gabrielle's. Someone beats and tortures Xena, and Gabrielle has to watch. They use Jaffa pain sticks, ribbon devices, and a whole plethora of more traditional things. It goes on and on, like some sort of loop with variables.

"The worst part is that I feel that I have to do something, that somehow I have the key, that I have to help them, but I don't know how. That's when you woke me. Thanks, by the way. I know it's only a dream. The Amazons would have sent word if something was wrong with their Queen, at least I think they would, but for the life of me, I can't figure out what my subconscious wants to tell me."

"Why don't we try to find out, baby? The meditation technique Xena taught you; perhaps that way you can delve deep enough without losing control and will find an answer. Gabrielle taught me what to do to help." Samantha looked at her partner with wide eyes, so Janet continued. "She said that one day we might need it to differentiate between dream and reality, to find the truth behind the surface of fleeting images."

"How could she have known?"

"I don't think she knew. It's only natural that a human being seeks clarity every once in a while. Xena and Gabrielle gave us time-honed tools to find it; and with a bit of luck we even will find more."

"Do you really think we can do this on our own?"

"It's worth a try, Sammy."

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#### THE PAST: EARTH - CHEYENNE MOUNTAIN

"Then at least authorise a standard recon by SG-1, sir."

"No, Major Carter, there's no reason to check this address out now. Put it on the list we'll deal with it in a few months. Dismissed."

"But sir...." Samantha objected. She was standing in front of General Hammond's desk, next to Janet and couldn't believe her ears.

Their meditation session had taken the better part of the night, but it had convinced them that the High Queen of the Amazon Nation and her consort were indeed in trouble and needed their help. Samantha and Janet didn't know who had captured them, only that they had to do something.

"Sir, this is really important," Janet added her two cent.

"I won't send you or any other of my men in God knows what kind of danger just because you had a nightmare and some sort of vision. We dialed Gaia and were told that everything is alright. Queen Gabrielle and Consort Xena are on a short trip and will be back in a couple of days. You can speak to them then. The President is due the day after tomorrow and insists on speaking privately with the two of you. It seems he is highly impressed by our new allies. You will stay on base. That's final. Dismissed."

Samantha saluted and Janet reluctantly followed her. She carefully closed the door and stomped off to her lab with Janet in tow.

"All we know now is that the Amazons are not aware of the danger their leaders are in. We should have tried harder to convince him, argue with him, Sam. Xena and Gabrielle need you."

"They need us, but arguing wouldn't have done any good. Didn't you see the vein on his forehead? It was throbbing. I know him. When he's in a mood like this nothing will change his mind and without the general's permission there's only one way left, but I can't ask you to do that."

"What's our first step?"

"Janet, we probably will get court-martialled if we really do this. Do you really want to risk your career because I had a couple of bad dreams? Do you want to risk losing Cassy?" Samantha asked.

"For a card-carrying genius you can be annoyingly dumb, my warrior. I love you. I would risk everything for you; I'll follow you wherever you will go. And I believe that what we saw during the meditation is real. They need us. We're in this together. So, what's our first step?"

"Cassy needs you, Jan. She needs her mother." Samantha said pleadingly.

Janet looked at her partner and knew that she was right. Cassandra needed her. She closed her eyes for a moment. She then went to the wall mounted telephone to her right.

"Doctor Fraiser here, sergeant, give me an outside line, please, bugs-free... No, patch it through to Major Carter's lab."

Samantha looked questioningly at her lover. *What did Janet need a secure line for?*

"Thank you, sergeant.... No, I'll dial myself." The small doctor once again closed her eyes to help her remember the right sequence of numbers and quickly punched them in. Samantha recognised a number in Washington, DC.

It rang six times and Janet was about to give up when the other end of the line finally was picked up.

"Mac, it's Janet. I need some advice... Yes, I know what time it is; just answer my question and I let you go back to sleep... Sorry, don't take it personally; I'm just in a hurry... I have to know something... Okay, if someone disobeys a direct order from one's commanding officer, what will happen... Article 32A... A hearing... Let's say for humanitarian reasons... Good. Thank you, Mac... No, only hypothetical... No, I'm fine. Go back to sleep. I'll call you in a few days at a more civil hour, and thanks again."

Seeing Samantha's confused face she quickly explained, "Mac is an old friend of mine. She's with JAG. She said that should there be any charges, there will be a hearing after article 32A where a judge will decide if there are sufficient reasons for a court-martial. She said that if lives were saved by disobeying the orders the worst case scenario would be a dishonourable discharge; so, Cassandra will be safe according to the President's written guarantee."

Samantha looked at her partner and studied the determined set of her jaw and shoulders. She knew from experience that there would be no changing of her mind, but she also knew that they still were walking on very thin ice concerning military protocol and regulations.

"Fine, Janet. I give, but should push come to shove I will take responsibility for dragging you along. I will convince them that I didn't give you a choice. It's the only way to really make sure

that nothing will happen to you and Cassy. And I won't be contradicted on this one, please."

Now, it was Janet's turn to study the astrophysicist's face. Under normal circumstances she would have had a lot to say about Samantha's overbearing protectiveness, but now simply was not the time to call her on it. They didn't have the time for an argument, so, she simply asked. "What will be our first step?"

"First of all, we have to get out of the mountain." Samantha slowly answered, immensely relieved that her fiercely independent lover chose not to contradict her just now. The rational part of her mind knew that they were all but through with this particular part of their discussion but like Janet she was driven by the deep-seated instinct that they had to act fast. So, her mind slipped into soldier mode.

"Go to the infirmary. Pack what you think we will not be able to get on Gaia. I'll do the same here. Without the resources of the SGC we will need the help of the Amazons. I only hope that we will have more luck with convincing them than we had with the general.

"In an hour I'll come down complaining about a headache and dizziness or something. You will bring me home. I still have the cell phone Gabrielle gave me. We leave a message for Cassy, contact the moon station, and gate to Gaia. - You know we really are lucky that she has this sleepover at Tara's tonight."

Two hours after leaving General Hammond's office Janet and Samantha were ready to go. Next to the note for Cassandra was an envelope labelled "General George Hammond. Eyes only."

The Amazons on duty at the moon base didn't question their use of Athena's Ring and they didn't question why the two Earth women didn't use their own Stargate.

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## THE PAST: GAIA - THE COUNCIL HALL

They stepped through Athena's ring and quickly made their way to the village, more than just a little surprised that no one had tried to stop them or had at least been sent to greet them.

Warriors in full gear and battle masks were in the main square, their eyes glued to the door of the Council Hall, their ears straining to find out what all the shouting was about. Samantha and Janet slipped through the lines. They recognised Aria in one of the front rows. Samantha got her attention and sent her a couple of hand signals asking her to sneak them in the large room. The young Amazon nodded and let them to a back door.

Inside they found the council of Elders, the weapons' master, a couple of armed guards, and Major Jessica Williams, the leader of the current research team. There was a lot of shouting going on. A few of the Elders obviously were accusing Earth of having something to do with the just reported disappearance of their Queen, her consort, her regent, a contingent of Royal guards,

and a ship. General Hammond's call had made them suspicious.

Samantha's whistle was loud and shrill enough to potentially pierce a few eardrums, but had its desired effect. The women all fell silent and turned their eyes to the three newcomers.

"Earth has nothing to do with their disappearance, venerable Elders." Samantha said instead of a greeting.

"Says someone from Earth; very reassuring." Someone murmured rather loudly.

"I give you my word as a warrior." Samantha simply stated.

"That's good enough for me." Weapons' master Niva answered and walked to Janet's side. "Do you know where our Queen and her consort are held and who has them?"

"We think we know where they are. We have a gate address, Master Niva, but we don't know who or why." Janet answered.

"You know where they are, but you have nothing to do with it. What kind of crap are you trying to sell here, Earthlings?"

Samantha took a deep breath. She knew that what she was about to tell the assembled women on her world would have possibly earned her a session with a shrink. General Hammond at least had given them the benefit of the doubt. She only hoped that Amazon spirituality would be strong enough to believe her. So, she quietly told them about her dreams and the meditation session she had had with Janet.

There was stunned silence in the room. Finally, a silver-haired woman slowly rose from her seat. She leaned heavily on a cane and limped over to them. Samantha didn't know why, but she took two steps forward and knelt in Amazon fashion in front of the crone.

"Look at me, Samantha Gabriella Carter."

A surprisingly firm hand was laid on her cheek. Samantha raised her bent head. Her gaze was captured by intense grey eyes that seemed to see to the bottom of her soul and beyond.

"Do you know who I am?"

"Yes, but I thought you didn't leave the lower regions of the temple?"

"I had reason to change my mind, warrior child, and before: just because I didn't let everyone see me, doesn't mean that I stayed inside all the time," the old woman said with a smile. Her voice became very soft; obviously she didn't want to be overheard by anyone else. "After you returned to your world Xena came to me and finally let go of her guilt. During all these centuries her feelings were so strong, her self-loathing, and self-recriminations. I never blamed her; Artemis wouldn't have wanted me to, but I couldn't stand seeing her in so much pain. Now, I no longer

have a reason to stay separated from my Amazon children."

The woman turned around and addressed the rest of the room, "Now is a time to fight, with heart and head. Give the young warrior and her healer whatever they ask for." Then she once again turned towards Samantha, "Let me know when your preparations are made, warrior child. I will go with you."

Samantha knew that she should at least have tried to convince her to stay behind but she simply couldn't do it, so she answered, "Yes, Mother Egeria."

The old woman left the hall the way Samantha and Janet just had come in and took Aria with her. When the door closed behind her, the same grating voice from earlier said.

"It can't be. They haven't been here long enough to be completely initiated. Only the initiated can perform the ritual you described. I don't believe you." The owner of the voice was an overweight brunette with beady brown eyes.

"Do you doubt Mother Egeria's word, Pecana?" Master Niva growled. "I don't."

The woman cast an angry stare at Master Niva and left the room. No one followed her.

"What do you need, Samantha Carter?" One of the elders wanted to know.

"The gate we will have to use is heavily guarded: ten Jaffa, staff canons, and a watch tower. Queen Gabrielle and Consort Xena are held in the basement of some dilapidated temple about a mile and a half from the gate. I don't have any intel on the others." Samantha said.

"So, the first thing we will have to do is to create a diversion, take out the watch tower and keep the guards from calling for reinforcements." Niva commented.

"And how do you intend to do this, young warrior?" Another sceptical elder asked with sarcasm in the voice.

"I have an idea, but we might need some outside help.

"Some time ago SG-1 was captured by the Goa'uld Hathor. Teal'c flew an old death glider through the Ring and General Hammond took out the watch towers. The glider has been returned to Chulac and Master Bra'tac would certainly help us. We then could send in some ground troops," Samantha clarified.

"We might not need the Jaffa, Major." Major Williams said. "Two of my group were assisting Consort Xena with a new vessel she's been building. It's small enough to fit through the Ring, highly manoeuvrable, a state of the art weapons' system and enough room for about a score of people. Before Consort Xena left she had a little test ride that exceeded her expectations. She told us that she adapted a few features from our phantom fighters. Susan and Janey told me that it had been a really wild ride."

"This would make things much easier. Do you think Xe... the consort would mind, Master Niva?"

"No, she wouldn't mind. The ge... Consort Xena was waiting for your next visit to show off her new toy anyway. If it serves to get her and the Queen home, all the better."

Samantha easily detected the strain in the older woman's voice and instinctively knew that it was due to the fact that her just newly returned wife now once again was missing. Larina was the Captain of the Royal Guard and thus always at the Queen's side when she left the planet. During a hunting trip the Goa'uld Nirrti, in need of a new host after escaping Cronos' torture, had possessed her body and she only had been freed with Samantha's and Janet's help during their first stay with the Amazons.

"Let your best pilot do a test flight with the new ship. I'll need a few snipers in the ship to guard our back as soon as we touch ground. Enough ground troops to secure the gate. Another squad with special ops experience to take the temple or whatever it may be."

"Slow down, Samantha. What's a sniper? And what's special ops?"

"A sniper is a sharp shooter, someone who is able to hit the wing of a dragonfly at two hundred feet. And special ops, special operations, means that someone is trained to infiltrate buildings, get information, kill, and get out without being seen or heard."

"I understand. It will be no problem to find qualified volunteers. I'll get back to you in half a candlemark."

"Master Niva, Major Carter, count us in. Four of my group are civilians, but of the rest everyone has had battle experience on or off world. We would be honoured to participate." Jessica Williams said.

Before the weapons' master could answer, Samantha said, "I'm sorry, Major Williams. I appreciate the offer but it won't be possible. Major Fraiser and I are AWOL. We left the base against General Hammond's explicit orders. Following my command or even going with us would leave a permanent reprimand in your files."

"I'll still be with you, Sam. You saved our collective asses more than once, and I owe you personally. Besides, these women have made us all feel at home in their world. It's time to give something back."

"Volunteers only, Jess. Tell them what to expect, worst case scenario; and you will keep your mouth shut when I accept full responsibility for whatever happens." Samantha answered with a forced smile and looked down at the outstretched hand when she surprisingly was clasped in a warrior handshake.

"Master Niva?" Samantha called when Master Niva and Major Williams were about to leave the

room. "There's a lot of open space around the temple. I would feel better if we had a few Tok'ra crystals to go underground."

"I'll see to it, young warrior."

The door closed behind her. They heard the weapons' master yelling orders. Janet put her arms around her taller lover and held her for long minutes without talking. She could almost see the wheels turning in the head.

"Relax, Sammy. You'll need your strength later," Janet whispered in her ear.

"I know, Jan, but it's so spooky. I really met Egeria. She talked to me. To the Tok'ra this is like meeting the Virgin Mary descending straight from heaven. When I knelt in front of her, it was as if every story Jolinar has ever heard about her was suddenly in my head."

"But that's not all, right?"

"No, it's hard to explain, but the moment I saw her, I knew her. It was like an echo of what I'm feeling for you. Deeper than Jolinar's memories, deeper than her love for Martouf, much deeper, older; almost as if the part of Jolinar that still was Artemis suddenly had come to life, if only for the fraction of a heartbeat," Samantha answered hesitatingly. "It's frightening and wonde..."

Before Sam had a chance to go into further detail, Master Niva burst through the front door. "The ship doesn't work. We tried our most experienced pilots but none of them could even get the machines to engage. There must be something wrong with it."

"Master Niva, are the rest of our troops ready?" The other woman nodded. "Good. I suppose Consort Xena was at the helm during the test flight, right?" Another nod. "Good. The access codes, Xena might have blocked them. I'll have a look. Janet, please go to the infirmary. Get the rest of your supplies and one or two healers. We might need them; bring a healing device if they have one."

"Be careful, Sammy." Samantha nodded and followed the weapons' master in a light jog.

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Three quarters of a candlemark later, Janet arrived with her backpack at the open space in front of the laboratories; two Amazon healers had already joined with the rest of their forces. They had urged Janet to stay with them, telling her that a healer's place was not at the front lines. Having had this discussion more than once with General Hammond, she didn't even bother with an answer. Instead she had gone to meet with her partner. In the place of the green pastures to which Janet had become used, there was a steel platform. It was empty.

Niva and a small detachment of Royal Guards greeted her. The weapons' master told her that everyone was ready to go. The ground troops already were close to the Ring and would follow

the ship as soon as they got the all-clear. Samantha initially had planned to let Mother Egeria and her escort form the rear of the ground troops, but the crone had insisted on going with the first line, in the ship. Samantha would pick them up at the temple as soon as she was confident that she had the ship well in hand.

"Sam? I thought she wanted to leave the flying to someone else," Janet asked incredulously, already suspecting that her adrenaline-driven partner would have used any excuse to fly something brand new, especially if others had already tried and didn't get it to work.

"The warrior tried Janet, really. The ship easily responded to her commands, but as soon as she let go of the controls the engines died down. We even tried a pilot change in flight, but it went on autopilot and landed. It's different than our other ships, almost as if it had been made especially for her."

"So, Sam's in her happy place," Janet commented with a smile designed to hide the question marks popping up in her mind. *A ship that could be handled by Consort Xena and her lover only, strange. Was it because of the naqada in their blood or was there more to it?* It intrigued her to no end but now was not the time to ponder this specific mystery.

Master Niva's voice snapped her back to the here-and-now, "Happy place? What do you mean?"

"Just a figure of speech Colonel O'Neill uses whenever Daniel, Doctor Jackson gets the chance to spent some time on a dig. For Sam, it's playing with new technology, finding out how it works, understanding it. She tends to forget everything around her."

"Look up. Here they come."

High in the sky was a very small black dot. As it came closer it looked like a big bird, an eagle, no, more like a very big hawk. Then it was gone, simply gone from one moment to the next. Janet squinted her eyes and tried to find it again. A strong breeze passed her and suddenly something appeared on the platform.

It took her breath away. It was all lines and curves; its black hull was glistening in the sun. It was elegant, stunning, beautiful; everything aircrafts in her eyes definitively were not. And it was more than that; it looked like a predator ready to swoop down on its prey. There was only one word that adequately described it. It was perfect.

A panel slid aside and a couple of Royal guards left the airplane, chatting excitedly among themselves.

"Illiana, report!" Master Niva barked.

"A perfect joyride, weapons' master," the older woman who had once guarded Samantha in the infirmary answered with a big smile. She added in a more professional tone. "All systems work at one hundred percent; weapons are operational and about the only thing we were able to operate on our own after Samantha Carter unblocked them."

Samantha left the aircraft and greeted her lover with a kiss. "Isn't she a beauty? She obeys the slightest command and her inertial dampeners are a dream come true. You can do loops and rolls without feeling it in your bones. It's just great. Her engines are quieter than a fly on the wall. I think they work with some kind of anti-gravitational field or negative gravity. It's way beyond everything we can do on Earth; and I haven't the faintest idea how it really works. I can't wait for Xena to explain it to me. It's revolutionary and not the type of technology the Amazons usually work with."

"Calm down, baby. Yes, it's beautiful, and I don't want to throw a wrench in your enthusiasm, but it also is too big to fit through the gate, much too big with these wide wings."

"Oh, they're retractable, no problem," Samantha answered with one of her brilliant smiles. "And we will go through with activated cloak. They won't know what hit them. Let's go. The others are already waiting at Athena's Ring."

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Ten members of the Royal Guard, including Illiana, the weapons' master as temporary leader of the Guard, Major Williams and two other members of her team, Janet, Mother Egeria, and Aria were belted in their seats and on the short way to the Ring. Suddenly the comm was activated and a voice announced an audio message from Earth.

General Hammond ordered Samantha and Janet to come back to the SGC and immediately report to his office.

Samantha tapped the response button. She said, "I'm sorry, General Hammond," and cut the link.

She turned towards her lover and smiled sadly at her, "Well, now it's official. We're not only AWOL but also disobeying a direct order of our superior officer."

"We knew it would happen sooner or later, Sam. It was our decision, and when all of this is happily over we will worry about how to deal with General Hammond and the rest of the brass."

"You're right, Jan. We have something more important to do," she kissed her lover and reactivated the comm. "Priestess Melosa, please dial Athena's Ring. XS-01 is ready to descend." Samantha said.

"XS-01, warrior?" Someone asked.

"A ship needs a name or at least a designation, and until Consort Xena has a chance to properly name it, I'm going to call it XS-01, Xena's secret," the young woman answered and smiled at the soft snickers coming through the comm. link.

A few moments later Melosa's voice came over the comm. link. "Activated. Scan confirms ten

Jaffa in the immediate vicinity of the Ring, young warrior. May the spirit of Gaia protect you."

"Thank you, Priestess Melosa. We'll do our best to bring the Queen and her consort back."

She didn't say, "We'll bring them back safe and sound", knowing that Janet's and her vision of the forces guarding the gate had been correct caused her to fear that the rest also had been based on reality.

Xena definitively was hurt or injured, and though Gabrielle had seemed physically unharmed at the time there was no telling how long she would stay that way and what seeing her consort suffer would do to her soul.

Considering the stories she had read about the two of them that should have been enough to keep her worried. She also knew that a simple whip never would have been enough to break the consort. She was tougher than that - and Gabrielle never would dishonour her lover's pain by giving in either.

Samantha cloaked the ship, retracted the wings, and switched from jet propulsion to something she had dubbed 'heli power'; it let the powerful aircraft hover like a silent bird. Samantha let the ship sink until it was right in front of the gate.

-X-X-X-

#### THE PAST: M5X-179

"Master Niva, Illiana, prepare the weapons. We're going in." Samantha gently pushed the control stick forwards and only moments later the other side came into view. Though going through the gate thanks to the effort Samantha had put in, was by far no longer the bumpy, stomach turning ride it had been at the beginning, it still was far from the smooth monorail trip the ship now made it.

Niva gunned the watch tower and Illiana took out one of the big staff guns. Two passes later none of the guards was left standing. They died without knowing what had hit them.

Janet began to have a very bad feeling. Yes, they had a new toy the Jaffa didn't know anything about but it had been too easy, much too easy. She had the bad feeling that their unknown enemy's main forces would be waiting for them at the temple. The tense lines in Samantha's face told her that her lover probably harboured the same dark suspicions.

Samantha landed the ship close to a wooded area to the right of the Gate. The external sensors had told them that the only life signs on the planet were centered around the old temple. Unfortunately a dampening field kept them from scanning the interior of the structure.

The warriors of the Royal Guard secured the Gate and Illiana sent the all-clear back to Gaia.

Minutes later a squad of warriors stepped through and immediately fanned out.

They obviously knew what they were doing and Samantha decided to let Master Niva handle the routine procedures; and not only because she knew the Amazon warriors' strengths better than anyone else.

"Master Niva, would you..."

"I'm on it, warrior. Group two and three, guard the Gate. Illiana, take the scouts and find out what we'll have to deal with. I don't like it that we can't get any readings of the temple or its immediate surroundings. Group four, prepare the crystals."

-X-X-X-

"Samantha Carter: Mother Egeria wishes to speak to you." Aria reported with her right knee touching the ground.

The old woman had taken a seat on the trunk of a fallen tree and motioned for Samantha to sit next to her. Samantha studied the older woman's silhouette. The form of her eyes and nose reminded her of the people of the East but not Japanese or Mongolian. She knew she should be able to place it, a part of her knew this woman almost as well as herself, but it was just out of her reach.

"Why didn't you take command, warrior child? They all would have obeyed you - and please don't bore me with the obvious reasons."

Samantha smiled. "Master Niva needs to be occupied. It doesn't do any good for her to have time to think about her mate, at least not too much."

"You are wise beyond your years, Samantha."

"No, not really, all I know is that I would be a nervous wreck if something like this would have happened to Janet."

"Mother Egeria; I want you to stay with the rear guard when we go in."

-X-X-X-

"Are you sure that this is what you want?"

"Yes, warrior child."

This time it wasn't the symbiote that answered but the host. Diti was older than most of the

System Lords' hosts, being as close to an Ancient as any mortal could get, thanks to the teachings of her long dead lover.

"I am tired of going on without her, warrior child. And now that Xena finally has forgiven herself, there's no need to hold onto this life any longer."

Samantha meanwhile was down on her left knee, clasping one of Egeria's hands between her own. The crone's other hand once again was on her cheek. She was tempted to close her eyes, but what she saw in Diti's eyes made her decision easy.

"Then, that's how it shall be." Samantha said and reverently kissed the still strong hand.

Before the Air Force major had a chance to get back on her feet one of the scouts returned.

Samantha and the weapons' master listened pensively to the detailed report. They had been prepared for Jaffa, but not for the presence of a rather large contingent of Tok'ra, at least that's what the sand-coloured clothing proclaimed them to be.

They now would need more than just a few crystals to succeed. With the Tok'ra involved, it was more than probable to assume that they already had created a large network of tunnels under the temple and leading away from it. Instead of growing their own little escape tunnel they now would have to find another way in and out. The dampening field still prevented them from getting any energy readings out of the dilapidated building.

"I don't like it," Master Niva muttered. "We have no way of knowing if the dampening field is not also a force field like the one they use to protect their ships. We will need more equipment to get through a force field and it will take time, time we don't have with the Queen and the consort at their mercy. We'll have to work with the worst case scenario."

"It at least seems so. Doesn't mean that I have to like it, Master Niva," Samantha answered with grim determination in her voice.

"Now you sound like our Queen, young warrior. We could ask for reinforcements from home and lead an open assault against the temple."

"I'm thinking more of a multi-pronged attack, Master Niva. Janet, the dungeon or whatever it is they hold the Queen and the consort in, do you have any idea how deep underground it might be?"

"I'm not sure, Sam, but it must be way under groundwater level. There was moisture on the walls, and then there was the smell... Yes, definitively under groundwater level. Why?"

"If we're lucky the people underground won't hear it when we attack the guards at ground level. Janet, I want you stay with Egeria and Aria, the whole time, and please, don't argue with me."

Janet only nodded. Her lover was in command mode, and there was enough of a soldier in the

doctor to know when it was best to simply obey an order.

"Master Niva, please, post one of the Guards next to the DHD, ready to dial out any minute. Half of the sni... the sharp shooters will fan out in the trees to guard our retreat. If push comes to shove, we could come in hot. See that the back of the Ring is also guarded. I don't want to be taken by surprise. Pick ten of your best fighters to come with me, divide the rest in two groups. Timing will be of the essence. This is what we'll do..."

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The still cloaked ship left the ground. Egeria had insisted on going with Samantha and the others. The discussion with Samantha had been cut short by Egeria's simple statement. "This is how it has to be, warrior child, and besides you'll need one of these."

Samantha took the ribbon device but didn't put it on. She really didn't like using them, but she also knew that she probably wouldn't have a choice. The first time she had consciously used one of them, in the escape tunnel of Seth's stronghold she had been shocked how her anger, fear, and pain had been transmuted into energy and the cold satisfaction she had felt looking down on the Goa'uld's dead body had reawakened a lot of her old fears. Now, she knew herself better, in Janet she finally had found her centre of balance, but she also was not naïve enough not to know that the darkness she feared was waiting just around the corner.

-X-X-X-

## THE PRESENT: SCHU - THE THRONE ROOM

Her thought processes must already have suffered from her stay in the sarcophagus. *What had she been thinking? One could not argue with a Goa'uld, one couldn't even talk to them reasonably.*

She had still been weak when they had dragged her out of the sarcophagus. Her hands had been bound to a metal bar that ran behind her neck and her feet were held apart by another inflexible metal device. She was made to kneel in front of the throne and introduced to the joys of a Goa'uld pain stick that reminded her all too vividly of her time on Netu. She couldn't help but cry out at the intense pain.

"Why did you kill Isis and Osiris? They were helpless. They were supposed to remain in the containment jars for another millennium, until they had learned their lesson."

This snakehead really had the potential to surprise her. Unfortunately, the woman saw her silence as another insult and made her displeasure felt. Then she heard a familiar voice.

"Please, my Queen, give her time to answer."

Surprisingly the raven-haired woman didn't punish him for his insolence, and Samantha had a short respite.

"Isis was already dead when we found the jar. The containment field malfunctioned. By that time," Samantha said with effort, "Osiris' jar was only cracked. He took a young woman as a host, a young woman who still has horrible nightmares about the atrocities Osiris made her commit. He allied himself with Anubis and tried to kill some friends of ours. We stopped him."

"What happened to my child?"

"Our friends have a way to separate the host from the symbiote. The host returned to Earth and the symbiote has been transformed. It now is a Tok'ra."

"Is this how the Goa'uld you have been a host to has been removed?" Queen Nut asked with a hint of real interest in her voice.

"No, she was a Tok'ra. She died under the torture of an Ash'rak. She willingly gave her life to save mine. The Tok'ra lost a lot with her death," Samantha answered honestly.

"What was her name?"

Samantha tried to stall. She knew that Jolinar had stolen a small ship from Nut when she tried to escape the Ash'rak. "You don't want to know, Queen Nut."

"Answer!"

"Her name was Jolinar of Melkshur."

The reaction was swift: Nut grabbed the staff weapon from a startled Aisato and shot her point blank in the chest.

-X-X-X-X-X-

## Chapter Four: **The Rescue**

### PRESENT DAY: ON BOARD OF THE SCYTHIA

"Do you want to talk about it, Janet?"

"No, Gabrielle... yes, I think I should. I'm sure that I could help her but outside of the sarcophagus she shuts me out. She doesn't want me to feel what's going on, and the signals I get when I can reach her are really strange. I can feel her love for me. I feel her pain and her fear and even her anger. But I also feel some strange kind of concern for this Goa'uld, this Nut. I'll have to

think about it but I'm not ready to do this just yet.

"Let's work on our story. It will keep my mind off things I can't change, and remind me that one can beat even impossible odds. And you can fill me in on the things that I missed."

-X-X-X-

## THE PAST: M5X-179

They were lucky. The sensors on board the XS-01 found nothing that indicated the existence of a force field and the dampening technique their opponents used at close range also was easily penetrated by the superior sensor array of the XS-01.

Samantha fine tuned her plan in a short radio conversation with Master Niva. She flew close to the roof and the walls of the temple to check for energy barriers of any kind, and finally brought the aircraft to the other side of the building.

The XS-01 touched ground as close to the entrance as possible and Samantha gave the signal. Moments later the south side of the temple was attacked by Master Niva and half of the warriors. Explosives detonated close to the walls at the north side. Jaffa burst from behind the dilapidated outer walls and tried to fight them off, flanked by a group of Tok'ra with staff weapons and ribbon devices.

The guards at the front entrance, however, were unfazed by the pandemonium breaking out all around them and didn't move a muscle, just as Samantha had predicted. She checked her weapons and slipped the ribbon device on her fingers. She took position to the right of the door, opened it and sent two precisely aimed shots at one of the two Kull warriors standing there. Her research with Xena had taught her that the throat was the most vulnerable part of the intimidating armour. The next one fell seconds later before he even had the chance to aim his disruptor gun.

The other three and the two remaining guards were close behind her when she sprinted to the wall and peered inside. They waited for Niva and a dozen of the guards to join them while the rest of the warriors, now under Jessica Willams' command, were still fighting at the ramparts, keeping their opponents busy.

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The inside of the temple was eerily quiet and calm, too calm. Samantha followed her instincts and ordered everyone to drop to the ground only moments before salvos of staff weapon fire burst over them at chest level. The answer was fierce and short.

Their attackers had been hidden behind the big pillars holding up the temple's roof. It was a decent though probably improvised manoeuvre, Samantha fleetingly thought while emptying the

magazine of her weapon, a Carter special with which she had gifted the consort before returning to Earth after their first stay, but they obviously had not been prepared for the firepower of their Amazon enemies or for their fierce determination.

Samantha was on one knee, cautiously surveying the carnage and finding that her own forces for all outer appearances had only sustained superficial injuries.

Suddenly a staff blast whizzed by her left shoulder; in quick succession, she heard the sounds of a body hitting the marble floor, an agonised cry, and the Amazons' equivalent of a P-90 discharging a round of bullets. She instinctively turned around and the first thing she saw in her peripheral vision was a Jaffa warrior crumbling in a heap. Her eyes then fell on Janet who was lying on the ground, unharmed but slightly disoriented; next to her was Egeria covered in blood from collarbone to abdomen, and behind them stood Aria, holding the rifle in her shaking hands.

For a very long heartbeat she was paralysed. Finally she called the rest of her small contingent at attention. The warriors of the Royal Guard quickly surrounded them in a protective ring. Janet was on her way to crawl over to Egeria, following her healer's instinct. When she came closer she knew that there was nothing she could do but at least she had to try.

Samantha was already kneeling next to the old woman when Janet began to try and stop the blood loss. Neither Samantha nor the dying woman were paying her any attention.

"This is not how I wanted to do this, Mother Egeria."

To Janet's surprise the voice that answered her partner was not the double toned one of a Goa'uld or a Tok'ra but a very pleasant, feminine voice with an almost musical quality to it. The few words she spoke were enough for her to know that she would love to hear much more of it.

"We also didn't foresee that it would happen this way. I had hoped to see Gabrielle and Xena for one last time. Let's do it now. Egeria will need all her strength to survive the transference."

"May you be reunited with your love for eternity," Samantha answered formally, bent down, and kissed the dying woman. A shudder went through her body, her eyes flashed for a short moment.

Janet didn't believe her eyes. Samantha, her Sam had willingly offered herself as a host - and it obviously had been planned in advance. *Yes, Egeria certainly wasn't your usual run of the mill snake, but still...* It was something she had been sure would never happen.

Before she could give voice to her concerns, Egeria's body flashed in a blinding white light; it slightly brushed her cheek, and the body was gone. The fleeting touch had sent a barrage of emotions and images to her mind and now she knew that everything would be alright. She had heard about ascension, but she never would have thought that it could be this breathtaking and beautiful. Suddenly, it felt right. The old woman now was with her love, she was with Athena, reunited for eternity.

Samantha slowly stood, judging by her stance and words obviously still the one in control.

"Master Niva, has the temple been secured?" The other woman nodded. "Good. You and six others are with me. Illiana, Janet, Aria, you form the rear guard."

Samantha purposely strode towards the stairway to the basement, but the weapons' master's voice stopped her.

"Prin... Young warrior, wait! I know you are anxious to find our Queen and her consort, but it's my duty to protect you and Mother Egeria. Please, stay back with the others and let us do the mop-up in the basement. Consort Xena trained all of us to be silent, efficient, and if need be, deadly. Let us do our job."

Surprisingly, Samantha only nodded and stepped aside to let the warriors of the Royal Guard take point. Her reasons to acquiesce to Master Niva, however, had nothing to do with security concerns.

The distinctive sounds of fighting drifting in from the perimeter were no longer important. Janet's uneasiness and fear were. It was almost overwhelming. *She's afraid for me, Samantha thought, but I will be alright. Egeria is not Jolinar. We'll have to speak about this, later.*

Samantha took Janet in her arms and held her tight. "I'm fine, baby; we all will be fine, my love." She said softly.

Janet returned the embrace and searched her lover's blue eyes. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I was afraid that you would talk me out of it. She will not stay with me for long. Egeria said that during the last days or weeks of her existence, she wanted to be as close to her lost love as possible. Her departure for Earth was planned for the end of next week."

"My heart understands, Sammy. When Egeria's host..."

"Diti; her name was Diti."

"When Diti ascended her energy touched me. I think she wanted me to understand that you would be alright. I fleetingly felt the peace and joy she experienced at being reunited with Athena. My heart understands; it's my head that has problems keeping up."

"We don't have the faintest idea what a second symbiote dying in your body will do to your body chemistry or how you will deal with the residue of Egeria's memories should she choose to leave some with you."

"Would you have been able to deny her request, Janet?" Samantha quietly asked.

"No, my love, but I can't help but worry about you."

- - - -

Before Samantha could answer, a young warrior returned and lowered herself on her right knee in front of the major as if she were one of her commanding officers.

"The basement has been cleared of thirteen hostiles, young warrior. Master Niva asks you to come down. There are two corridors of Tok'ra design branching off. Both of them are guarded by the machine souls."

"What's your name?"

"Fasira, young warrior."

"Please lead us to the weapons' master and your sisters, Fasira. I want a group of four to stay back and guard the staircase. See that no one sneaks up on us from behind."

Four women to Janet's right brought their right fists over their hearts and replied, "We heed and obey."

Samantha adjusted the ribbon device and followed the young woman down the steps. Her mind was running a mile a minute. The Amazon warriors were acting more and more strangely towards her the longer this mission took.

'*We heed and obey.*' She never had heard this particular expression addressed to anyone but the Queen and her consort. It was possible that she just never had paid attention when someone used it to answer the weapons' master or the captain of the Royal Guards - but she knew herself good enough to easily discard this possibility. It probably was only a war time thing.

Her attention was quickly refocused on the here and now when they were greeted by two other members of the Royal Guard guarding the tightly bound unconscious bodies of eight Jaffa warriors that had been stripped of their armours and weapons. They followed a corridor and passed a small guard room where five corpses were a silent testament of Amazon effectiveness.

Samantha and her group joined with the others about five hundred paces later. Niva and her contingent of warriors were waiting behind a wall of wooden barrels in what once must have been a big storeroom. The basement ended here.

In front of the openings to the typical, dully elegant Tok'ra tunnels stood two of Anubis' super soldiers or "machine souls", as the rebel Jaffa and the Amazons called them.

Samantha took a calming breath; at once reassured and surprised that her new symbiote obviously didn't feel the need to let her presence be known. She could feel her at the edge of her mind, but it was more like the memory of something than the reality of it.

She knew she would only have split seconds to take the two statue-like soldiers down and keep them from raising an intruder alert. The sounds of battle had faded away after only a dozen steps

down the stairs; so, Samantha was reasonably optimistic that their approach had not yet been discovered.

The red crystal in the palm of her hand flared to life; its energy wave rippled through the air. One of the super soldiers sank to the ground and his companion didn't even have the time to turn his head before he succumbed to the same fate. Samantha quickly stepped over their bodies and touched the walls of the right corridor. She cocked her head as if it were able to speak to her. She did the same with the left corridor.

"Janet, Illiana, Fasira, Aria, and two others, you are with me. Master Niva, please take the rest and follow the right corridor. I'm pretty sure that you will find your sisters there. Get them out of here and back to Gaia, some probably are in need of medical attention. Keep radio silence. I'll call as soon as we have found the Queen and her consort."

The weapons' master was slightly shorter than the blond Air Force pilot, but her grim nod let her appear as if she would top Samantha. However, when she turned around Janet detected a hint of reluctance in her movements; and she easily could understand why.

For the proud warrior it was a question of honour to participate in the rescue of her leaders. Samantha's order instead had fulfilled the deepest desire of Niva, bondmate of Larina, captain of the Royal Guard and one of the missing warriors.

*But why did she follow Samantha's orders at all? Janet asked herself not for the first time since the begin of this mission. Yes, Sam had a strong command presence but after all as the weapons' master Niva was forth in command of the Amazons' forces and with the other three captured she even was their uncontested commanding officer. Compared to that Sam was nothing more than a stranger. Did they only obey her because of Egeria's words or was their more to it?*

Janet's mind returned to the task at hand when Samantha unholstered the zat resting close to her right hip. Ever since their return from Gaia, she not only had increased her training and the sparring sessions with Teal'c but also her weapons' training. With a ribbon device at her dominating hand, she worked to increase her accuracy with the other. She not only had learned to master the Goa'uld weapon to a point that she was able to use the device either to heat water or obliterate any obstacle; the instructor at the SGC only two weeks ago had attested her by now being perfectly ambidextrous. The veteran had even speculated that her regular top scores would not be beaten for years to come.

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Luckily their combat boots made almost no sound on the crystal floor. The first room they checked was empty, so were the second and the third. In the forth room they found a pile of Amazon weapons; zats, combat rifles, crossbows, daggers, a staff Janet immediately recognised as belonging to Queen Gabrielle. She instinctively took it.

The members of the Royal Guard took all the weapons they recognised as being of personal

value to their owners and were about to disintegrate the rest with a zat'nikitel when Samantha saw a glimmer at the bottom of the pile. She bent down and retrieved a sword in a worn scabbard and a metal ring that only could be Xena's chakram. Samantha never had seen it before, but had heard enough of Gabrielle's stories in the almost two months they had spent on Gaia to have no doubt. She slipped the scabbard on her back and almost absentmindedly secured the chakram with a leather strip at her belt, totally missing the wide, astonished eyes of her companions.

They followed the slight curve of the corridor and found another eight rooms, all empty and all individual sleeping quarters, making testament of their inhabitants' orderliness or lack thereof. Someone obviously had planned to stay here for a long time.

Samantha signalled the others to proceed with the utmost caution.

Her mind was busy trying to make heads or tails of the whole thing. *The Tok'ra, a large contingent of Jaffa from different tribes, and Anubis' soldiers; it just didn't add up. What had brought these warring factions together? What did they hope to gain from kidnapping and torturing the leaders of the Amazon Nation? Why now?*

There simply were too many questions.

The corridor suddenly became wider; another fork was ahead of them. Illiana wanted to split up, but Samantha stood in the middle and just listened, oblivious to any potential danger. She then purposely strode to her right and the others followed, slightly puzzled. Not even the highly trained Amazon scouts had heard anything else than the breathing of their companions. This corridor had no rooms; instead there were small barriers of varying height every ten or fifteen paces on both sides; obviously for defensive purposes.

They had just rounded a corner when angry voices erupted from a room or another corridor about fifty paces ahead and to their right. Samantha instantly recognised one of them: Anise. The other voice also sounded female, but it took Samantha another ten paces to know to whom it belonged. It was Osiris.

Surprisingly the entrance to the big room the raised voices led them to was unguarded and Samantha used one of O'Neill's favourite gadgets to peek around the corner with a wide-angle lens of her own design that allowed her to see every square inch of the whole room.

There were two Jaffa standing impassively at the wall to her left. A tall, naked, dark haired form that only could be Consort Xena was shackled to the back wall but it was impossible to discern if she was unconscious or not. Three Tok'ra were sitting at a long table to her right, busy checking what looked like tissue and blood samples.

Anise and Osiris were standing at the foot end of some sort of operating table and what was on the table nearly made Samantha's stomach turn. The telescope almost dropped from her hands and she pressed her back against the wall with one hand clamped over her mouth.

The heated discussion drifted to her ears. "I told you this wouldn't teach us anything, and besides,

she was the wrong one to do this experiment with. We want to find out how they became immortal and how to duplicate the process. Trying to kill them won't help us."

"One thing is for certain, if this didn't kill them, nothing will; and we already learned a great deal. You just have to look at it with a scientist's eye. And besides, your slap and torture method certainly didn't work either."

"I tell you, the only way to get them to talk is to kill a couple of their guards. They value every one of them," Osiris oily voice finally said.

Samantha knew that she had to act fast. She silently ordered Illiana and one of the warriors of the Royal Guard to take out the two Jaffa. Fasira and Aria were to keep the Tok'ra scientists at bay. She would deal with the two Goa'uld, and the other Amazon would stay with Janet.

The moment the Jaffa crumbled under the assault of the Amazons' weapons, a shot from Samantha's ribbon device tore the one Anise wore to shreds. The blond Tok'ra was propelled to the ground and clutched her bleeding hand. Samantha's next shot slammed against Osiris' chin as if it had been a right hook, testament of the control the Earth warrior had over the ribbon device and her emotions. It knocked the Goa'uld out before she had a chance to activate her personal force field. The two young Amazons held the surprised Tok'ra scientists at gun point; none of them were armed.

Janet stepped in and nearly stopped dead in her tracks. She heard the gasping of the woman at her side and quickly slipped into doctor mode. Gabrielle's chest was spread wide open, most of the arteries to her heart were cut. They obviously had been in the process of removing her still-beating heart. To what end she didn't even want to guess. Thankfully she seemed to be unconscious.

"Sam, I need you."

Samantha took a place at the other side of the table after barking the orders, "Tie them up; I want them all to face Amazon justice. Free Xena. Guard the door."

"Put some gloves on, Sam. I need an extra pair of hands."

The tall soldier fought hard against the bile rising once again. She knew that technically the Queen of the Amazons was unable to die but she never before had seen so much damage done to a body. The removal of the heart, it seemed, had been the latest in a long series of Mengele-like experiments. The ribbon device clattered to the ground and she reached for the healing device Janet had slipped into her breast pocket before they had left Gaia.

"I forgot about this thing."

Samantha's eyes flashed and she said with Egeria's voice. "I'll take care of Gabrielle. Xena needs your help, Janet."

Janet swallowed hard, her worry for her lover almost winning out over her Hippocratic Oath. "Don't overdo it, please. You're still weak from the transference."

"Go, young healer." It definitively was not a request but an order.

Once again the soldier in Janet won out and she went to care for the prone body of the consort. The warriors had positioned her on her right side, obviously the least damaged part of her body.

Her back was a mass of raw, bleeding flesh. Her legs were broken just below the knees, the shin bones shattered and sticking out. The arms also seemed to be broken in two places. The front of her body was liberally covered in bruises and cuts. Her neck bore the mark of a Goa'uld pain stick and her forehead the distinctive remnants of the use of a ribbon device.

The small doctor almost jumped out of her skin when she heard Xena's voice. "Gabrielle, have to..."

"Gabrielle will be alright, Xena. She is in good hands. Let me take care of you." Janet said.

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During the next half candlemark the room was eerily silent, except for Janet's voice quietly requesting one item or the other while treating the consort. Fasira knelt next to her opened backpack. The small doctor didn't know from where the young warrior got her knowledge, but she had an uncanny instinct of what she needed one moment before she asked for it. Aria's eyes were fixed on what these two were doing.

The attention of the others, including their trussed up Tok'ra prisoners, was riveted to the operation table in the middle of the room. The yellow ray of light of the healing device by now was enveloping Gabrielle's whole body. Everyone who dared to have a closer look at her would have seen how the cut blood vessels were slowly reattaching themselves, how the lungs once again started to work, how the extracted ribcage began to retract itself, the bones knitted together, and how the skin inch by inch closed over the wound.

Meanwhile Samantha marvelled at the monumental difference between the time when Jolinar had been in control and she had been nothing more than a prisoner in her own body and this time. Yes, Egeria was in control now, but what Samantha felt had nothing to do with her former experiences. She didn't feel oppressed or dominated; she didn't feel out of control. Somehow Egeria was a part of her.

After about a quarter candlemark she could feel how the symbiote was getting weaker with every passing moment. So, Samantha did something she never would have thought even possible. She took control of the healing device and used her own strength to finish restoring Gabrielle to health.

She heard Egeria's voice like an echo in her head. "Thank you, warrior child, your help is

appreciated."

Her mind answered, "Please, Mother Egeria, rest. I can do it alone."

"We'll do it together, Samantha."

The mother of the Tok'ra was not to be denied. Samantha could feel how Egeria used the reserves of her body to fuel the healing device and the energy of her own spirit to control it. But she also felt something else that made her thankful that the symbiote was directing the healing. She tried to ward these feelings off. This definitively was not the time to lose control of her emotions, but there was no denying her anger and need for revenge, both slowly getting stronger.

It took another half candelmark for Gabrielle to finally open her eyes. Samantha sank to her knees and the healing device dropped to the floor next to the ribbon device, but she quickly was back on her feet.

Before she could make sure that the Amazon Queen really would be alright, she heard Xena's hoarse voice from behind. "Stop her!"

Out of the corner of her eyes Samantha saw how Anise tried to run.

Her hand immediately went to her side; with a flick of her wrist she severed the leather thong holding the chakram. She threw it. The weapon bounced off one wall, hit the Tok'ra scientist in the back, ricocheted off another wall, and returned to her still outstretched hand. She bent down and exchanged the chakram with the ribbon device. Her usually soulful blue eyes now were cold and dark.

Samantha shortly glanced at the Queen who was slowly sitting up and steadied herself at the edge of the table. She was very pale, but Samantha was sure that she would be alright. So, she refocused her efforts on the Goa'uld.

Osiris had the misfortune to be in Samantha's way and was disposed of with a swift, hard kick that let her crumble in a heap. Another kick turned the prone body of Anise on her back; the ribbon device flared to life and hit its mark, the area between the Tok'ra's eyes. The woman's whole body convulsed under the onslaught.

Gabrielle looked at Samantha with disbelieving eyes, as did everyone else in the room and forced herself on her feet. She assessed the situation and found Janet hunched over Xena, but with her expressive brown eyes frozen in shock.

"Janet, stop her. You're the only one who can."

As if in a trance Janet obeyed. She slowly stood and walked over to her partner, her mind searching for the sphere of light that was her beloved's love for her. She could feel it but she could not see it. Janet snuggled against Samantha's back and closed her arms around her lover's slim waist. She closed her eyes and once again searched for the light. This time she found it,

behind a veil of darkness.

The small doctor called her lover's name. To her it was as if she was shouting it loud enough to reverberate through the tunnel system, for the whole world to hear. All the others heard was a quiet whisper, "Sam, Sammy, come back to me."

Had the eyes of the others reflected astonishment until then, they now were full of wonder and awe. As soon as the words had been spoken the ribbon device lost its power and Samantha's hand fell to her side.

Aria stared at the two women from Earth as if they were the physical manifestations of Gaia herself. Samantha Carter not only had effectively used Xena's chakram but the weapon also willingly had returned to her. She had caught it without even a hint of scratch. And now the mere contact with her lover had been able to still the raging fury she had seen in Samantha's eyes.

Janet gently nudged her beloved around and stripped the ribbon device from her hand. She took the strong but limp hand and brought it up to her lips. She gently kissed the palm of Samantha's hand and pressed the fingers against her cheek. She fell to her knees and clung to Janet's lithe body as if it were a lifeline. Candelights passed in silence and the small doctor saw how the veil isolating her lover became thinner and thinner but before it was totally gone radio silence was broken by Master Niva.

"Incoming hostiles; eight Jaffa heading your way, young warrior. They got past our defences."

"I'm on it, Master Niva. Get the other prisoners," Samantha ordered.

"They are already on their way home. We came back to lend you a hand. We took care of the other Tok'ra and Jaffa and are about two candelights behind them; entering your part of the tunnels now."

The radio fell silent and Samantha was back on her feet, the unflappable soldier back in control but the coldness of her eyes was back.

"Janet, help Gabrielle to get over to Xena. Fasira, you and the others secure our prisoners for transport. Illiana, take special care with Osiris, but try and do not harm the host. I'll take care of the Jaffa."

Before the others could even acknowledge her orders, she had picked up the chakram and was gone. For the fraction of a heartbeat Janet stared at the Carter-special Samantha had discarded prior to helping Gabrielle.

"Damn it, follow her. Stop her. She isn't even armed."

"She is, Janet. She has Xena's sword and her chakram." Gabrielle answered with a discernible amount of sadness in her voice while Aria helped her to get over to her consort.

Janet looked at her as if she had completely lost her mind. "A sword against staff weapons and zats?! She doesn't even know how the fuck to use this thing."

"She knows, Janet. She learned it during her sophomore year." Xena said with a still very weak voice.

"Yes, and she said she stopped after the first semester because she didn't get the hang of it." Janet retorted in a mixture of anger and worry, and - Janet admitted to herself - in an effort to keep herself from panicking.

"She quit because the instructors didn't have anything left to teach her, and because she refused to become the poster child for college sports." Xena explained quietly.

The next moment all colour drained from Janet's face and she had to hold on to the bloody table to keep her balance. "Sam needs me," she said and rushed out of the room.

"Aria, keep the healer safe." The young woman was gone in a flash.

Illiana kept the other three Amazons busy with the prisoners to give their leaders some much needed privacy.

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Janet and Aria rounded the corner to the corridor with the living quarters at a dead run and nearly stumbled over the prone body of a Jaffa. His throat had been cut, apparently with a single stroke, Janet registered in passing.

Samantha stood with her back to them, the bloody sword in her hand; in front of her seven more corpses, one of them with the chakram half embedded in his chest. The ground littered with cut off bits of staff weapons and the crystal walls bearing evidence of staff fire.

Janet could feel the dark energy emanating from her lover. She had seen her in countless sparring sessions with the Amazons, with Teal'c and other members of the SGC. Samantha always had displayed effective accuracy in her moves and regardless of the outcome she had stayed cool and detached. Even Colonel O'Neill who was able to get a rise out of every other opponent never had been able to get her to lose her composure.

Even now her breathing was regular and she was standing absolutely still, just like in one of her exercises with the captain of the Royal Guard Janet had observed a few months prior. Master Niva had ordered her to stand in the middle of one of the training fields with a blindfold over her eyes. She had to gauge from where the attack would come. It was the same this time. She visibly waited for them to make the first move.

Janet made Aria stay back and stepped closer to her partner.

Still a body length away she could feel the tension rising in Samantha.

Janet closed her eyes and once again searched for the presence of her lover in her mind's eye. This time she easily found the sphere of light behind the dark veil. It was almost totally obscured but she felt it and she reached for it. The veil expanded, it came closer and closer.

She touched it and she could feel the alluring darkness of her lover's soul and began to understand why Linea had been so fascinated with her. The message she had left on the main computer after leaving and almost destroying the base had not been the only one. She also had sent a short note to Samantha's personal email account. They had found it together after they had ended up in Samantha's lab to regroup. "My debt to your people has been paid, Samantha, but one day we will see each other again, and then I will take you with me as one of my own, a kindred spirit." But her lover's soul was larger than Linea ever would be able to grasp and she would allow no one to take her away from her.

So, Janet didn't shrink back from the darkness; instead she stepped closer to the dark veil and the first layer dropped to the ground. She once again reached for the light and another layer of darkness shrank away.

The small doctor didn't open her eyes when she once again snuggled against her taller lover's back and clasped her arms around her waist.

This time she didn't shout or whisper Samantha's name; she just waited for her to pierce the last of the veils on her own. Samantha always had been able to find her way back on her own, regardless of how long it took or how hard it had been. She didn't want her to feel too dependent on her intervention - though at the time rationalizing her actions was furthest from her mind.

Finally Samantha's fingers let go of the sword and it clattered to the ground. Samantha turned around and immediately sank to her knees; her head pressed against Janet's stomach as if trying to hide there. Janet bent down and gently kissed her lover's hair. Samantha began to tremble from deep inside. Despite her resolve, Janet couldn't let her go through this alone.

She pried her beloved's sword hand away from her back, bent down, and kissed her palm and the inside of her wrist. *It tasted of blood and salt and of Sam, her Sam.* Then she once again put the hand against her cheek.

"I love you, my Sammy. All of you." She said softly.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I left her. I left her all alone." Samantha whispered with the voice of an anguished child Janet knew all too well from her beloved's nightmares.

"No, Sam, you returned. You didn't leave her alone. You returned and you held her and she's safe."

They had had this conversation often enough over the last couple of years for Janet to know that the gentle soul of her lover never would forgive herself for the quasi-abandonment of Cassandra.

She also carried the burden of guilt for a lot of other things she hadn't had any control over or any chance to change, but next to Jolinar threatening Cassy this was her most vivid memory.

Minutes turned into candlemarks.

Samantha looked up and searched eye contact. Brown eyes smiled at frightened blue orbs and Janet said, "I love you, Samantha Gabriella Carter."

"I killed them."

"They were the enemy, my love. They wanted to harm us; they wanted to kill Gabrielle, and Xena, and Illiana, and me. You did what you had to do to keep us all safe."

Neither woman noticed Master Niva and a score of warriors skidding to a halt next to the Jaffa with the chakram in his chest.

"I enjoyed killing them."

"I know, my love."

"And you still love me?"

"I love you, Sammy-baby, all of you, for always. The bright glimmer when you find a new puzzle to be solved, the dark shadow when you had to do something you abhor, the mischievous smile..."

Janet once again bent down and kissed her lover. Their lips met, their eyes closed, and just like in Samantha's dream two spheres of blinding light fused together, creating something strong enough to illuminate the whole universe.

The kiss ended only when they had to come up to breathe.

Janet pulled her taller partner back to her feet and quickly let herself be engulfed in her strong arms. Her head rested at its familiar spot on Samantha's shoulder. She listened to their heartbeats, no, to their heartbeat because ever since the first time they had made love the rhythms of their hearts were in perfect sync. Janet knew that they would be alright.

-X-X-X-

THE PRESENT: ON BOARD OF THE XS-01

The members of the search team had found their own way to cope with the inactivity and constant false trails.

Jessica and Niva were trading war stories; Jennifer was either pouring over the computer readings or drawing comfort from Aria's calm presence. Daniel was studying the databanks to find more information on Nut. There still was no word from the Tok'ra, and Jack and Xena were tinkering with the reload sequence of the rear gun to keep their minds busy.

They dropped out of hyperspace next to a gas giant. Jennifer immediately manned the sensor-array and scanned for ion trails. Daniel had switched the monitors to long range scanners, and after a while muttered, "Star system ahead. Three planets, in synchronous orbits around a sun... There's a Stargate on the biggest of them, all of them are inhabited."

"Anything else?"

"We're still too far away."

"Niva, send a signal to the Scythia. We'll check them out. Tell them to stay back."

Xena would have felt better going in there with the superior fire power of the flag-ship but unfortunately it didn't have a cloak and she didn't want to alert the inhabitants of any of the planets to their presence.

-X-X-X-X-X-

## Chapter Five: **In the Pit**

### THE PRESENT: SCHU - THE THRONE ROOM

Once again Samantha knelt in front of the dark haired Goa'uld.

"Jolinar was a traitor. She talked of friendship and an alliance but then she simply disappeared, stealing one of my ships."

"Yes, she stole your ship. She had an Ashrak on her trail and she knew that the System Lords would take it out on you should she be found in your domain, Queen Nut. She didn't betray you; she simply had no other choice."

"How would you know? Why should I believe anything you tell me?"

"I easily could have told you what you wanted to hear, Queen Nut. I could have lied to you and told you that I regret the death of your children, of the Goa'uld I killed, in the hope that this time you would not put me in a sarcophagus after killing me. I didn't lie then and I'm not lying now. I'll always tell you the truth as I know it. When Jolinar was killed, she left me with her memories."

"Jolinar told me that with the Tok'ra host and symbiote usually die together."

Samantha was surprised that Jolinar had spoken this openly with a Goa'uld but now the trust she felt for the Queen began to make more sense. So, she once again overruled the O'Neill voice in her head and looked up.

"The Tok'ra don't believe in taking unwilling hosts but the Goa'uld attacked the planet where she was hiding. She was afraid to die. She panicked and jumped into me. In the end, when the Ash'rak found her on our planet, she sacrificed her life to save mine."

"You may ask me one question, SamanthaCarter."

This Goa'uld really was full of surprises.

"There's one thing I don't understand. You have been separated from your children for thousands of years. Why act now? What happened to make you this angry? Aisato told me what a good, conscientious ruler you are, and the eyes of your servants are filled with trust, not with fear. What happened?"

The Goa'uld's face registered surprise but she didn't answer her, so Samantha pressed on.

"I don't regret Seth's death. He harmed a lot of people but I regret the way he died. I dreamed about his face for months, about the surprise on his face. It had been the first time I really used a ribbon device. I didn't know how to control it and I was terrified by what I could do with it if my emotions would ever get out of hand. Don't let yours control you now."

When the painstick discharged right over her heart she realised that she had gone too far.

-X-X-X-

## THE PRESENT: ON BOARD OF THE SCYTHIA

In Gabrielle's quarters the Queen and Janet continued their work on the story of Xena's and Gabrielle's abduction and torture at the hands of Anise and Osiris, with Janet filling the other woman in on a few very private moments after the successful rescue mission. There were a lot of intimate details; so, Janet made it clear that she didn't want most of it to be put in an official scroll but she also felt the need to share it with the Queen.

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## THE PAST: GAIA - IN FRONT OF THE SCIENCE LABS

Against Xena's loud protestations Samantha had healed her legs, at least enough to take the bulk of the pain away and allow her to walk with a little help. She now was safely belted in the XS-01 with Gabrielle sitting at her side and Janet monitoring the bone knitters she had attached to the

consort's broken arms. Samantha was at the helm and the cloak had been deactivated.

Except for a skeleton crew at Athena's Ring, the task force as well as the injured and the prisoners already had gone back. After making sure that Xena and Gabrielle would be alright, Samantha initiated a three hundred miles search pattern to make sure that they hadn't left any hostiles behind.

The search indicated faint life signs about two thousand miles to the west but no hint of any technologically advanced civilisation. The moon would be kept under observation - at least until they had found out why the Queen and her consort had been targeted and why now.

Two candlemarks after the others and six and a half after their departure, Samantha landed the XS-01 on its platform in front of the laboratories where they were greeted by Priestess Melosa, the Council of Elders, and Captain Larina who had her right arm in a sling but seemed otherwise unharmed by her recent ordeal.

The two Earth women left the aircraft first to arrange some kind of transport for the leaders of the Amazon Nation. They stepped onto the platform and everyone, including the priestess dropped to a knee and saluted them with their fists over their hearts.

Samantha froze in mid-motion; only the Queen, the consort, and the Queen's Regents were accorded such an honour. Janet also was deeply puzzled by this strange behaviour, but she quickly recovered and led her lover to the side of the welcoming party where she imitated the position of the others.

Gabrielle and Xena exited the small vessel followed by Master Niva and Illiana who were reverently carrying Xena's sword and chakram. An eerie quiet lay on the open square and then one voice shouted. "Hail Queen Gabrielle! Hail Consort Xena!"

Other voices joined in and soon it was as if the whole planet was here to greet their Queen. Gabrielle gave a signal; Xena enforced it with a piercing birdcall, and slowly the chanting of their names stopped and an expectant silence fell over the assembled Amazons; every one of them waiting for Gabrielle to speak.

Instead Priestess Melosa got back on her feet; her voice was calm and carried.

"Amazons, sisters, children of Artemis and Athena, hear my words. Today, we thought our beloved Queen lost; the heart of the Amazon Nation gone. Today, we thought Consort Xena lost; the strength of the Amazon Nation gone. On this day of grief and confusion, when the forces of darkness prepared their attack, the Amazon Nation was blessed by the coming of two strong warriors. They brought back to us our heart and our strength. On this day the true blood of a warrior has been revealed by her actions and what has been sundered shall once again be one. On this day the heart of a healer for the first time showed her real strength.

"The minions of darkness have been captured and will be dealt with, but first let us rejoice and prepare a celebration worthy of this momentous occasion."

The reaction of the others spoke of joy and exhilaration, but the two Air Force majors nonetheless felt chilled to the bone by her words. Obviously in the few hours since the last of the Jaffa and Tok'ra warriors had been taken care of, word must have been spread about what had happened during the rescue mission and both of them couldn't help being slightly worried.

Another shout of joy rippled through the ranks of the still kneeling Amazons but quickly died down when Xena's whistle seemed to fill the whole space.

"Sisters," Gabrielle's voice easily carried, "today Xena and I have been rescued from a fate far worse than death. Today's actions will have widespread consequences but now is not the time to dwell on them."

The Queen's eyes for a short moment found Priestess Melosa's and the other woman acknowledged the message with a nod.

"Yes, we have reason to rejoice but we also have reason to mourn. Tonight we will light the funeral pyres for the three Amazon warriors who lost their lives during the rescue mission, and tomorrow we will celebrate as only Amazons can."

While the women once again were shouting in joy an honour guard formed around the Queen and Xena, and another around Samantha and Janet. Xena disdained the use of a litter and so the walk to the village was kept deliberately slow.

Kneeling and saluting Amazons of all ages lined the way and they stayed on their knees even after the Queen and her escort had passed. Janet shortly glanced behind her to see them getting up out of the corner of her eyes. It was confusing, to say the least.

Master Niva led them to a medium sized hut next to the Queen's own quarters and told them to get some rest and that she would be back to get them when the time was right. She also told them that all their questions soon would be answered and welcomed them to the Amazon Nation.

Samantha raised one of her eyebrows in an almost Xena-like fashion but got nothing but a smile for her troubles. She was bursting with questions and could feel the same from her lover but they both knew that for the time being no answers would be forthcoming.

There also was a tiny voice in her head that told her it probably would be better not to get any answers.

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There was a tub waiting in the bathroom, filled with steaming, scented water. They did far more than just washing. Janet and Samantha both felt a need far greater than that. Janet could sense that her blonde lover was still shaken by her fight with the Jaffa warriors, by the darkness that had overwhelmed her, if only for a few moments.

Only telling her that she was loved, all of her, simply wasn't enough; Janet had to show her.

She began by washing Samantha's back and gently massaged the taller woman's rigid shoulders. She let her fingers do the talking and began to let her love for the taller woman seep through their connection. She filled her lover's soul with the emotions coursing through her own, with the bone-deep security of her love, of their love.

Finally Samantha turned in her arms, buried her face against her neck, and began to cry. Janet had one hand at the small of her back and the other between her shoulder blades, both thumbs tracing circles over her spine. When the tears subsided, Samantha raised her head and sought her lover's eyes.

"How can you love me after what I've done? How can you love me after you've seen what I'm capable of? You devoted your life to save others, and all I do is destroy life. How can you stand staying with me? How can you love me?"

Janet brought their lips together and kissed her but she knew that this simple gesture never would be enough to quench her lover's anxiety. What Samantha was fighting with now went far deeper than simple insecurities; it called in question what and who she was, the very essence of her being.

"I love you, Samantha Gabriella Carter. I did from the very first moment I saw you, and every time I look at you my love grows. Every time you risk your life for others my love grows. You are my best friend, and everything I always searched for in a partner, in a lover. Today, you might have enjoyed killing the Jaffa, but you never would have harmed them had they not been intend on harming us.

"Samantha, you are kind and compassionate. You killed them, but you didn't make them suffer, Sammy. I'm not afraid of the darkness of your soul. It will not win. Your soul is too bright, too beautiful to be swept away. Instead of fearing it you can learn how to use it."

"But you're a doctor; you took an oath to do no harm."

"I'm a doctor in the Air Force, Sammy. I also vowed to protect my country and my comrades in arms. Did I ever tell you about the time I almost killed an enemy soldier?" Samantha shook her head in negation. "I just had been promoted to lieutenant and posted to the medical support group in Kuwait. Our main orders were to monitor the situation in the refugee camps. I just had settled in when a new marching order came, sending me to the frontline.

"It was the first time that I was with a field unit. They were doing patrols at the border; it was all very basic with a tent for the medical supplies and a make-shift operating theatre. There was not much to be done but tend to a few bruises and scrapes. Then the patrols were intensified and one afternoon I found myself alone with my nurse and two guards.

"The base commander had insisted on everyone being armed at all times, but we still were not

prepared for the jeep coming towards us at breakneck speed. I didn't recognise the markings but the guards were convinced that it was one of ours. Two armed men jumped out and shot them point blank, not giving our men the shadow of a chance. One of the newcomers kept his weapon trained on us while the second man and the driver dragged another one out of the vehicle's rear. He was covered in blood, a chest wound. The first man demanded that I treat him immediately; his British accent spoke of an upper class education but his eyes were as cold as ice. He ordered me to get the wounded man back on his feet or I would have to watch how my nurse died a slow, painful death."

Samantha's arms around the smaller woman's waist tightened. She feared that she knew exactly what would be coming next.

"They ushered us into the tent and put the patient on the table. They took Alicia's weapon but somehow missed mine. The wounded man had been lucky; the bullet had passed straight through his right side, a clean shot from a large caliber. The damage itself was not too hard to repair, but blood loss was a real concern. The man, I later learned that he was Ahmed Madhiddin Bey, one of Saddam's most trusted advisors. He needed rest and medical care to stand a chance. The men began to argue in their own language. The first one, the one with the cultured accent wanted to stay as long as possible to give their leader apparent a fighting chance - at least that's what I believe they were saying. The others wanted to leave immediately.

"One of them jerked on Alicia's arm and pressed the barrel of his gun against her neck. He shouted at his companions and they shouted back. He dragged her towards the tent flap, intent on leaving with her. Only then I understood that he wanted to take her with them to care for their leader. It was two heartbeats later when I remembered my still concealed weapon but I knew that I didn't stand a chance against three armed men. I had to find another way."

Janet closed her eyes in remembrance, and just as she had done when Samantha had told her about the crash landing and her captivity, it now was her turn to be comforted by their emotional link sending her love and reassurance. For a split second Janet thought that she had achieved her goal of getting Samantha out of her self-depreciation but she also knew that she would have to finish her story for the sake of them both.

"The only one I had any power over was my patient. He was unconscious and would have been too weak to pose any kind of threat. I stepped behind his head, flipped the safety off my 9mm, and pressed it between collar bone and throat. The bullet would penetrate the muscles, pass straight through the heart and lung and probably lodge in his spine. It would be a quick death.

"That's what I told the men. The one with Alicia instinctively used her as a shield at the sound of my voice. The man with the British accent was convinced that I was bluffing. I slightly turned the weapon to show them that the safety was off. I told them to let Alicia go and to give her weapon back. The first man asked me what they would get in return and I promised that I would go with them to take care of their leader. The one with Alicia seemed to know enough English to understand my demands but he obviously wasn't pleased. He barked something and refocused his weapon on me. The first man, the Brit, signalled to the driver who clocked his comrades from behind with the butt of his rifle.

"The force of the blow propelled him and Alicia forwards and to the ground. I heard the distinct sound of a neck breaking. Alicia instinctively crawled towards me and they didn't stop her. I gave her my weapon. She kept it in position and I finished bandaging the wounded man's chest. I told the Brit that it would be best to let him rest for at least a couple of hours and that the first of the patrols wasn't expected to return before late afternoon. It was a lie; the first of our men were due back in less than an hour. They had killed two of our men and I wanted them to pay for it.

"The driver and the Brit began to whisper, their weapons still aimed at my chest and head. Then the Brit told us that they couldn't risk waiting and that I would come with them. The driver pushed the table outside into the glaring sun. The Brit had his weapon in my back and forced me to walk beside the gurney. Out of the corner of my eyes I saw something move. I didn't know what it was but acted on instinct. I pretended to trip and fell on the ground. One of the SF's obviously had survived and felled the Brit with a single shot. Before the driver could react, another shot rang out and he slumped on top of his leader.

"Alicia stood in the entrance of the tent, shaking like a leaf in the wind. I stared at her and the weapon clutched in both hands. Only when I heard the pain filled moan of our saviour did I remember what I had been trained to do. I worked on autopilot, and in the end both of our guards survived."

Janet sought her lover's eyes, afraid that her story had brought back too many painful memories, but what she saw was barely contained rage and through their link she felt a bone-deep need to protect her, always and everywhere.

"I took an oath to do no harm, but I would have killed this helpless man without remorse had his comrade harmed Alicia. I wanted them to pay for what they had done to us, to our guards. I looked at the dead bodies and I was glad that they were dead. In base camp they had taught us how to defend ourselves and how to kill. They didn't tell us that you can feel satisfaction at ending your enemies' lives."

Long minutes of silences followed. The small doctor was securely held by Samantha and in equal measure held her taller partner.

"You don't think that I'm a monster?" Samantha asked in a small voice.

"No, my love. I think that you're very brave."

Samantha offered her a small smile at the use of her own words that didn't really reach her eyes.

"Sam, everyone can lose control once in a while, especially when people we love and care for are threatened. I think you are very brave because for you it's much harder to bear when it happens and because what you do makes it more liable to happen. You know yourself much better than most people do, Sammy. You're a great officer and an even better human being because you don't let yourself be dominated by the dark side of our work."

"It's not our work, Janet. The darkness is a part of me. It's what gives me strength," Samantha whispered.

"Yes, my beloved, it gives you strength, the strength to do what has to be done. I know it frightens you to lose control but I'll always be there to bring you back, Sammy. You are my life and my soul, and I won't let you slip away from me."

The tall woman closed her eyes and let Janet's love wash over her like a purifying wave. In her mind's eyes she saw the sphere of light, the one streaked with grey and black spots and lines, the one she was convinced represented her soul. The other sphere was coming towards it and when they touched hers began to glow from within. Suddenly she knew with absolute certainty that Janet had been right: Janet always would be there for her, even when they were not together, they never would be apart.

She opened her eyes and looked in Janet's smiling face. They slowly stood and stepped out of the big tub without losing eye-contact. They were dripping wet but didn't bother to dry themselves. Samantha kissed her smaller partner and carried her to the adjoining bedroom. The mattress groaned under their weight but they didn't break the embrace or the kiss.

When they finally had to stop to breathe, Janet's brown orbs were speckled with golden highlights and Samantha's eyes had taken on a silvery hue. The small doctor took control and rolled them over. She pressed her body against Samantha's and claimed her with mouth and hands, leaving no doubt whatsoever to whom the tall scientist belonged. Samantha loved to be taken this way, but this time was even more intense than usual. They never before had been this aware of their emotional connection, and they never before had actively used it during their love-making. When they brought each other to climax at the same time it was like a fusion of energy; more than a temporary union, this had the feeling of forever-after, of eternity.

Janet draped a thin sheet over their bodies, and both of them waited for the wonderful, new sensation to subside but it didn't. It stayed with them when they fell in a light sleep, and it was still there when they woke from the firm knocking at their front door. They answered and Master Niva told them that the sun was about to set and that it was time for the funeral pyres to be lit.

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After a quick shower they slipped into the tunics that had been laid out for them and left the hut. The weapons' master had been waiting and led the two officers to the open space in front of the temple. Where Nirrti had been destroyed and Larina and Tirrin set free now were four pyres waiting to be lit; three for the fallen Amazon warriors and one in remembrance of Diti, Egeria's ascended host.

Priestess Melosa was standing on the uppermost step of the temple, Queen Gabrielle and Consort Xena a couple of steps below her, all three had donned simple white tunics similar to the ones Samantha and Janet were wearing. On the other side of the pyres the Amazons were assembled; all of them in ceremonial leathers and masks. On the right side the team from Earth was

gathered, wearing dress uniforms and standing at attention, among them Jennifer Hailey, Michaela Neddes, and Alicia Powers, the nurse Janet had just told her lover about.

Samantha presumed that they had been sent to bring Janet and her back to the SGC, and she was not looking forward to face General Hammond any time soon.

The weapons' master led them past their comrades to the entrance of the temple where Xena signalled them to stand next to her.

"Amazon sisters, daughters of Artemis and Athena, today we say goodbye to four of our own. Diti, Tehda, Kelsi, and Patra gave their lives in battle. When their funeral pyres are lit and their bodies will be consumed by the fire, we all will commit to memory their lives and their sacrifice for the Greater Good of the Nation." The priestess raised her arms to the sky.

Sixteen warriors stepped from behind the temple, their bows ready to send burning arrows towards the skilfully layered pyres. The Queen nodded her assent, the arrows found their intended targets and the wood immediately caught on fire.

When the flames began to leak towards the sky, Xena began to sing the traditional Amazon dirge, unchanged since thousands of years. Soon a second voice mingled with the consort's deep tones. It was higher but not less full or carrying.

Janet cast an astonished look at her partner. Samantha had a wonderful voice but had always adamantly refused to sing in public. In the privacy of their bedroom or during one of their rare outings on Samantha's Harley, she often surprised her with a song but always resisted giving any further performances.

The Air Force major singing in front of a crowd, in front of a bunch of people who could talk about it at the SGC was strange enough; but her singing a traditional Amazon mourning song, the small doctor was certain she never had heard before, was close to mind-boggling.

In the deep recesses of her mind, Janet knew that she should be alarmed but something in the rhythm and melody crept into her very soul. It soothed her and at the same time it made her inexplicably proud. It made her feel as if she were a part of something bigger than herself, bigger than the SGC. Words and melody began to repeat themselves; a third voice joined in, and Janet was vaguely aware that it was the Queen's.

Janet didn't know if it only was the eerie atmosphere but to her the three voices were in perfect harmony. She closed her eyes and before she really was aware of what she was doing, she also was singing.

Janet didn't have the faintest idea where the words came from or what all of them meant, or how she came to know them but the energy and longing pulsing through her newly strengthened link with Samantha simply were too strong to resist. She never had considered herself a good singer but this felt like the right thing to do; so she stopped questioning her feelings and reactions, and abandoned herself to the moment and the strong sense of community the funeral song was

creating.

After the next pass all Amazons present raised their voices in praise and remembrance of the lives lost in the line of duty.

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Jennifer Hailey looked on with astonishment, her eyes wide she stared towards the temple steps. Some part of her wanted to rush over there and drag her two superior officers over to the other Earth women, where they belonged. She was compelled to remind them of their duty to Earth and the SGC, but the bigger part of her couldn't help thinking how at ease they looked, standing in front of everyone else, wearing strange clothes, taking part in age-old Amazon traditions as if they never had done anything else. It looked like they belonged.

It was just hard to wrap her mind around all the changes, especially the changes in one Major Samantha Carter.

She had had her mind made up about the woman before they even had met. Jennifer never had been second-best at anything before but when she joined the Air Force Academy she found herself constantly battling the ghost of one Samantha Gabriella Carter, brilliant student, great athlete, great pilot. She became angry and bitter because she felt that she didn't measure up.

Then the woman had showed up and despite her eagerness to find her wanting, she had had to grudgingly admire her brilliance, her straight forwardness. Samantha Carter had saved her career this day; she had shown her for what she was studying, and she had taught her the difference between scientific curiosity and reasoning and military courage and reasoning. The tall blonde became her idol and she was honest enough with herself to admit that she had a crush on her superior officer.

But here on Gaia she had learned about the human being Samantha Carter, someone capable of losing herself in a game, of laughing, of simply having fun. Consort Xena had a knack of bringing out the playful side of Samantha Carter and her relationship with Doctor Fraiser, though shocking as hell at first, had obviously given her the security she needed to allow this playfulness in her life.

Jennifer closed her eyes for a moment and let the mourning song wash over her, leaving behind a sense of community and belonging she couldn't remember ever having felt before. Minutes later she opened her eyes to the startling realisation that this feeling was worth risking General Hammond's wrath, regulations be damned.

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The dirge ended and the flames of the pyres died down. Priestess Melosa let her arms sink to the

side and retreated inside of the temple, followed by Xena and Gabrielle - and after a moment's hesitation and the Queen's quiet order "Come!" by Samantha and Janet.

Lieutenant Hailey and Nurse Powers instinctively made a step towards the temple; they knew they had to return their two superior officers to Earth as soon as possible. The only way to cover up their disobedience and unauthorised absence was to get them back to the SGC before the President's visit. Granted General Hammond was still angry at them, but the fact that they had been right about the Amazon Queen and her consort spoke loudly in their favour.

Master Niva, Aria, and Sabrina Levinson stopped them and invited the Earth women to the village where a get-together would be taking place. It wasn't a real party in the Amazon sense of the word but still a celebration; the celebration of the life of the fallen Amazons, of their children and ancestors; the celebration of the lives their sacrifice in battle had saved; the celebration of the Amazon Nation and its future.

Jennifer and the others gladly accepted the offer. On one hand, coming from a family where the public expression of feelings was frowned upon, she still was awed by the Amazon way of saying good-bye to their loved ones and wanted to experience more of it. On the other hand, she knew that she or anyone else from her group never would have the courage to interrupt a conversation between the Queen and Major Carter. And last but not least she wanted to learn more about what had happened in the Tok'ra tunnels that had all the Amazons buzzing with excitement over the tall blonde Air Force officer.

-X-X-X-

#### THE PRESENT: ON BOARD OF THE SCYTHIA

Gabrielle was about to ask Janet how she had experienced the funeral ceremony when the brunette slumped over in her chair with the faint echo of something the Queen just had put to paper ringing in her ears.

*In her mind's eyes she saw the sphere of light, the one streaked with grey and black spots and lines, the one she was convinced represented her soul. The other sphere was coming towards it and when they touched hers began to glow from within. Suddenly she knew with absolute certainty that Janet had been right: Janet always would be there for her, even when they were not together, they never would be apart.*

This time there was neither light nor darkness leading her to her lover. Everything around her was grey as if Samantha were stuck between light and darkness. But Janet still could feel their connection and sent her love for her partner ahead of her, along the pulsing threat that ultimately would lead her to the other part of her soul.

She silently pleaded: "Please, let me stay with you, let me help you. I want to take your fears. I want you to take my strength."

And for the first time in more than a week Samantha seemed to answer: "You are my beacon of light, my beloved. You are my strength. You are what keeps me safe and sane."

Janet answered, "Please let me stay with you. You don't have to face her alone. We won't let her win."

Later none of them knew if it had been a real conversation, a mind-reading thing as O'Neill would call it, but they both remembered the same words and the confidence in Janet's voice and Samantha's need to escape the darkness looming just around the corner.

-X-X-X-

## THE PRESENT: SCHU - THE THRONE ROOM

Water, she was lying in a pool of cold water. She didn't want to move. She didn't want to open her eyes.

An armoured boot hit her rib case. "Get up, Tau'ri. My Queen is not finished with you."

"Shackle her hands behind her back and put her in the pit. I'm tired of killing her. I want to see her fight."

Samantha was dragged to her feet and manacles put on her wrists. They were cold and hard and had a bit of give but not enough to get out of them. She instinctively tested them and found them connected with a short chain. She heard the grinding sound of stone scraping against stone.

The armoured boot once again kicked her; she instinctively went with the blow and fell what felt like at least seven feet to another stone floor. Most of her weight landed on her right shoulder and the flaring pain told her that it probably was dislocated.

She somehow managed to get back on her feet in time to duck the armoured fist of a young Jaffa warrior who evidently believed her to be an easy target. Her next evasive manoeuvre propelled her against the hard stone wall of the rectangular pit that had opened in the middle of the throne room, and miraculously popped her shoulder back in place.

The warrior used Samantha's slight disorientation to get a couple of punches in and threw her to the floor. He looked up in triumph and was rewarded by a naked foot hitting him hard in the groin. Samantha jumped up and punched her head against his primta. He keeled over and a roundhouse kick took him out.

Aisato ordered her to back off while two of his warriors carried the unconscious man away. Another, older and probably more experienced fighter immediately followed.

He was fast and with her hands still trapped behind her back she took a few heavy blows to her chest and abdomen. Suddenly she saw an opening but instead of taking the obvious bait, Samantha dropped to the floor and hooked her legs around his knees. She closed her strong thighs and brought him down. Pressing her advantage, she used her forehead as a battering ram against his skull. The back of his head hit the floor and she was left slightly dizzy but with another unconscious Jaffa.

Samantha knew that she had been lucky but her next opponent certainly would not repeat his predecessors' mistakes. So, while backing away from the fallen warrior, she also managed to get her hands in front. She cried out in pain when her shoulder once again popped out of its joint, and this time she consciously rammed it against the wall to be prepared for her next opponent.

She heard the taunting words of the Goa'uld. "Is this the best my proud warriors can do? Being bested by an unarmed, naked female?"

Two young warriors jumped in the pit. They worked together, and if not for the hand-to-hand training of the Amazons she would not have stood the slightest chance. They had taught her how to fight an opponent one could not see by using her other senses.

They circled her and instead of keeping at least one of them in her line of sight she stood still and waited for them to make the first move. They were so easy to read, she could have laughed. Instead she tried to appear frightened and exhausted. Samantha knew that she was running on adrenaline alone but she also knew that it would keep her going for another couple of hours.

She heard how the Jaffa to her right held his breath, the air on her right suddenly shifted and she jumped straight up. Her naked feet hit the back of the Jaffa who had been about to tackle her around the waist; his momentum increased and his colleague didn't have enough time to get completely out of the way. He stumbled but stayed on his feet and drew his dagger.

Samantha knew that she had to act fast, before the other one was back on his feet. She ducked under his angry sweep and got close enough to feel his breath on her skin. A quick jab with the outer edge of her hand just under his Adam's apple followed. It would momentarily block his windpipe without crushing it. She plucked the dagger out of his suddenly weak hand, flung herself to the floor to avoid being hit by a blast from a zat, and without really looking threw the knife. She looked up at his cry of pain and saw that it had hit its intended target: the hand of the first Jaffa holding the zat'nikitel.

The weapon slid over the floor and came to a stop only a few feet from her feet. Grabbing it and fighting her way out of the pit would be the obvious choice but there still were about a score of by now probably rather angry Jaffa she would have to deal with. But that's not why she retreated to the wall and pressed her back against the cold stone.

Her hands were shaking and her breathing ragged - but not from exertion alone. She had angled the edge of her hand only at the last moment. He couldn't be much older than Rya'c, Teal'c's son, and though all of her instincts had told her to kill him she had pulled her blow. And her first instinct after almost being zatted had been to eliminate the threat by embedding the knife in his

heart, not in his hand.

It was only due to Janet's calming presence in her mind that they were still breathing.

Two older Jaffa jumped in her pit with staff weapons aimed at her chest while four others helped their fallen comrades out.

A wave of weariness washed over her; fighting her own darkness was much more draining than fighting physical threats. She closed her eyes and immediately was cocooned in the comforting blanket of Janet's love. Her heartbeat returned to normal and she opened her eyes.

The guards lining the pit were arguing about the honour to best the female Tau'ri. Aisato decided for them by jumping in the pit and landing lightly on his feet. He was not armed.

He was checking her posture and she did the same. The tall man had the advantage of having seen some of her moves; he had seen her speed and strength.

"My Queen, please, let me remove the manacles."

"No, I want to know how good she really is. Can't make it too easy, can we?"

Samantha sought the eyes of the Goa'uld. "Nut, why don't you fight your own battles? Or are you too afraid to lose? I want to fight you."

"My Queen would kill you in a way even the sarcophagus would not be able to restore you, SamanthaCarter," Aisato answered. "As soon as I have defeated you, my Queen will be satisfied and you will be allowed to rest."

"I don't want to fight you, Aisato, not now. Once we start I'm not sure I could keep myself from killing you. It was hard enough with these youngsters."

"He's just a Jaffa, my First Prime but still a Jaffa. Why should you be interested if he lives or dies?"

"He reminds me of a good friend of mine, Queen Nut. I don't want to harm him."

"I don't care what you may or may not want. Fight!"

They traded a few blows, intended to test the other's defences. Samantha quickly found out that a year ago she would not have stood a chance against the tall warrior. He moved faster than Teal'c and didn't miss even the tiniest opening; and every one of his blows would leave ugly bruises. She soon had to rely on the manacles to enforce her blows.

Suddenly a fist hit her midsection. She stumbled back and went to her knees. He had to crouch to deliver a follow-up hook with the other hand. It split one of her lips, and she instinctively lashed out and hammered the manacles on the base of his neck. He lost his balance and landed on his

hands and knees, and when he came back up the colour of her eyes had changed.

-X-X-X-

#### THE PRESENT: ON BOARD OF THE SCYTHIA

"Come in, General Hammond, but please be quiet."

"There is news from the XS-01 and the comm. system in your quarters is malfunctioning," he instinctively whispered.

"I deactivated it. I didn't want Janet to be disturbed. I suppose they found the planet where Samantha is being held, right?"

"Major Carter is held in the palace on the main planet. The XS-01 is on its way to plan the rescue. How did you know?"

"I didn't, general, I just felt Xena's relief and her joy that the waiting is over and she finally will be able to do something."

"I'm sorry, please forgive me."

Gabrielle and Hammond whirled around and stared at the still unconscious woman on the Queen's bed.

"You didn't mention that she speaks during these 'episodes', your majesty."

"Please call me Gabrielle. After all you're a friend."

"With pleasure, Gabrielle, but only if you return the favour and call me George. - So, what's wrong with Janet? You seemed to be as surprised as I am."

Gabrielle sat on the edge of the bed and wiped the perspiration off Janet's forehead and face. "She never spoke before. This time is different. She jerks as if she were hit. Sometimes she moans. If it weren't for the pain they're going through, it would be utterly amazing."

"Do you want to tell me that Samantha is doing this to her, through their link or whatever you may call it?"

"It's the only explanation, George. Before, Janet was just unconscious. She told me that she only had contact with Samantha when the sarcophagus repaired her body. Janet's reaction now leads me to think that this time Samantha is awake and Janet is with her."

"But you don't know for sure, right? You don't know if it's dangerous for Doc... Janet."

"No, there's no way to tell; all we can do is to wait."

"We could try to wake Janet up, Gabrielle."

"We could try but I doubt that it would work, and even if it did, Janet would not thank us for doing so. Their connection is too strong. It might even be dangerous for both of them. It's ironic, only yesterday I told Janet that she could only give Samantha strength but that it's impossible to take her pain away. It seems she has proven me wrong."

"I'm sorry, you just lost me. Is this not what usually happens with soulmates?" General Hammond asked, still visibly worried.

"To the best of my knowledge, no. I always thought that there could not be a stronger connection than the bond between Xena and me, but what Samantha and Janet share has grown far beyond anything I've ever heard of. I can't wait to talk to them about it."

"Let's hope that we get Sam back soon."

A knock on the door prevented Gabrielle's answer.

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## Chapter Six: **Dreaming in the Pit**

### THE PRESENT: SCHU - THE THRONE ROOM

When Aisato came back to his feet and looked up the colour of Samantha's eyes had changed. They now were almost black and so cold it made him shiver.

Against his men she only had defended herself and used the openings they offered to her advantage, but now she started to attack, oblivious to the blows she had to take to get through his defences. There suddenly was a lot more force behind her blows, enough to turn the handicap of wearing manacles to an advantage.

He just hoped that she would not be able to fight on this level for long. Aisato involuntarily stepped back when the chain hit his right cheek. Samantha used the sudden distance between them to follow up with a roundhouse kick to his chin but he stepped back at the last moment and she overbalanced. He kicked her full force against the knee and she went down. He jumped to come on top of her but she rolled away and was back on her feet before he could change tactics.

She thrust the chain of the manacles over his head and she pulled as hard as she could. He still managed to get back on his feet but she held on. He slammed her against the wall. So, it was an open question what would last longer, his air supply or her already waning strength.

Samantha was beyond any reasonable thought, running on instinct alone with what she always called her 'dark side' firmly in control. When he once again tried to crush her against the wall she used his swift backwards movement to flip over his head, by all outer appearances, apparently giving up her advantage, her only advantage.

Exploiting his surprise and disorientation she quickly opened the clasps to his front armour and yanked the Goa'uld larva out of his gut pouch. The unthinkable manoeuvre brought him to his knees and she knocked him unconscious with a swift knee shot to his chin. He then hit the ground with a loud thud and she toppled on top of him as her injured knee finally gave out. She held the squirming future Goa'uld still in her hand. It seemed to be very young and probably would have stayed with him for many years to come.

She unsteadily got to her knees, intent on showing Nut what she thought of her offspring. She wanted to smash it against the next wall to make sure that it never would get the chance to enslave a human being again.

A low moan drifted to her awareness, and without any further hesitation Samantha stuffed the larva back in the pouch. A zat hit her and she crumbled next to him, faking unconsciousness while a group of Jaffa dragged Aisato out of the pit.

Samantha knew she should at least mentally prepare for her next opponent but her mind was running amuck. It would have been so easy to kill the snake, obeying a higher justice, somehow, but she also was sure that she had made the right decision. She had stopped herself; she had stopped the darkness; and Janet's voice telling her that she was very brave even brought a smile to her face.

The Goa'uld's voice snapped her back to reality. "See that my First Prime and his injured warriors are well cared for. Put the metal screen over the pit and give the Tau'ri woman some clothes. - You just earned yourself some rest, SamanthaCarter."

Just when she thought she had Nut all figured out, the Goa'uld did something to surprise her but now that the immediate threat was gone she simply was too weary to think about it. A small door in the metal lattice work that had closed off the pit a few minutes ago opened and a bundle of soft fabric landed almost on top of her. She found a pair of slacks and a tunic that could be slipped over the head and closed at the sides as well as a blanket.

As soon as she was dressed she fell asleep, accompanied by the comforting feeling of being cradled in Janet's love, and she dreamed of the time in the brig after their rescue of Queen Gabrielle and Consort Xena some nine months prior.

They had known that General Hammond couldn't let their blatant disobedience go unpunished, and both had been rather relieved that he had decided to keep it inside the mountain.

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## THE PAST: EARTH - THE SGC

They both had been prepared to be arrested upon their arrival on Earth but instead one of the SFs asked them to report to General Hammond's office immediately. What the Queen and her consort had told them after the funeral was a lot to take in and they had spent a sleepless night just holding each other. And even now it was not too far from their minds.

Janet whispered to her that it was a good sign. Foregoing the obligatory post-mission physical could only mean that he knew about Egeria having taken Samantha as a willing host.

General Hammond let them wait and Samantha was fidgeting until Janet inched a bit closer and touched Samantha's arms with the back of her hand. They were called in and stood at attention in front of his desk. He took his time acknowledging their presence and when he finally looked up he studied them for a long time.

They were wearing a combination of black cargo pants and black t-shirt - the Amazon version of combat clothing. Even if their BDUs had not been beyond repair from the blood and gore of the battle, they would have opted for the Amazon clothing.

They knew he would not make it easy for them; so both were relieved when he finally spoke. His face was a non-committal mask.

"Major Carter, Major Fraiser you are charged with disobedience of direct orders of your commanding officer. Do you deny these charges?"

"Sir, no, sir, General Hammond," they answered simultaneously.

"Do you have something to say in your defence, any of you?"

"Sir, no, sir," Doctor Fraiser answered.

"Sir, I'm the se..." a hand on her arm and the determined look on her partner's face made Samantha stop in mid-sentence, and so she simply said, "Sir, no, sir."

"Well, this report does. In fact it has quite a lot to say. It details what happened on Gaia and what you did to save the lives of Gabrielle, High Queen of the Amazon Nation and her consort. Queen Gabrielle asked that a commendation should be placed in your records for exceptional courage and for fulfilling tasks and duties well beyond the responsibilities of your duties." He let his words sink in and then asked, "Do you also think that you deserve such a commendation, Major Fraiser?"

"Sir, no, sir," Janet answered without a moment's hesitation.

"Elaborate."

"General Hammond, sir, whatever I, whatever we did - it doesn't change the fact that we acted in direct violation of your orders, sir."

"Major Carter?"

"Sir, Major Fraiser is right. We are prepared to pay the price for going AWOL and for disobedience, sir."

The bald man studied their rigid composure. He knew they both were nervous and slightly afraid, but they also were good officers and stoically held their ground.

He slowly stood and put his hands behind his back. "Nothing of what led to your successful rescue mission will find its way in your permanent record; officially it never happened."

"The President is due to arrive in two hours. He requested that you both be his personal escort during his stay; he expressed a special interest in the naqada reactors now powering the base, the Tok'ra healing device and the skin regenerators and bone knitters retro-engineered from the Amazons. So, you both will give him the grand tour.

"The trial against the Queen's captors will take place a fortnight from now. The leaders of the Amazon Nation expect both of you to be present, together with SG-1 and representatives from the diplomatic corps and JAG. They want to show us how Amazon justice works. Besides, my official report will say that you were both on downtime when you decided to use outside resources to check on the Queen and her consort. This, however, will not keep you from being punished for this little stunt.

"As soon as the President and his entourage are gone you will report to the brig where you will have the next five nights and days to think about the chain of command. Dismissed."

"Sir, is Cassandra alright?"

"She's with SG-1. Colonel O'Neill volunteered himself and Teal'c to take care of Cassandra. I sent Doctor Jackson along as well; this way he gets out of the mountain for a change and can keep an eye on the others. Cassandra knows the basics of what is going on. I gave them all an abbreviated report on your adventure as soon as the message from Gaia arrived." Then he added with a hint of smile, "Cassandra told me to let you know that she was alright and that she's enjoying herself with SG-1. It's a vacation of sorts for her. - And now, go and get yourself in your dress uniforms."

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Five days and five nights in the brig were not too high a price to pay; at least that's what Samantha had thought at the beginning. Then the nightmares began. During what passed as daytime under the mountain she was bored out of her mind and from the second night on she was

afraid to go to sleep. It was as if her mind insisted on making her relive every last one of her painful memories. Five nights suddenly seemed a very high price to pay.

Janet woke in a panic. She was sitting upright in bed, her skin cold and clammy, her sleep shirt and sheets soaked through with sweat. Her eyes were open; she knew she was not sleeping but in her mind's eyes the nightmare continued. The diminutive brunette knew that it weren't her dreams she was experiencing every night, that it were not her memories but each night it was becoming more difficult not to totally get caught up in them.

This night it took her almost half an hour to shake herself out of the nightmare's grasp, out of this one image that kept repeating itself over and over again: A slender hand with long fingers holding a combat knife and slitting the throat of a man; the tall man falling to the ground, his face a mask of pain and surprise.

She slipped out of her sweaty shirt and into a new one waiting on the footstool that doubled as a nightstand in her cell. Sitting cross-legged on the bed she used all she had learned from Queen Gabrielle and Teal'c to clear her mind and concentrate on her partner, sleeping two doors down the corridor.

She closed her eyes and searched for the light of Samantha's love. Finding it was the easy part, making her beloved aware of anything but the images of bloodshed and pain haunting her every night was another thing altogether.

Janet knew which part of the past her partner was reliving at the moment. Samantha had told her about her time as a prisoner during the first Gulf War during their first stay on Gaia. She had told her of the guilt she felt at killing these men. She had told her how much she had enjoyed ending their lives. She had told her how afraid she was to totally lose control and how close she had come to just doing this over and over again the last couple of years.

This night her meditation didn't work. It was as if Samantha's mind was caught in a time loop. She couldn't let this go on any longer, regardless of General Hammond's reaction, regardless of the fact that this was the last night they would have to spend on the base, apart from each other.

Janet stood, put on a pair of shorts and light sneakers and sent a silent thank you to the skies that General Hammond trusted them enough to obey his orders without locking their cells or posting guards outside - but at the moment Samantha was more important than his orders. Seconds later she slipped the shoes off and sat on the edge of the small bed in Samantha's cell. She was violently tossing and turning and completely oblivious to the imploring voice of her partner.

Janet slipped under the covers, holding on to the thrashing woman as tight as she could. As expected Samantha reacted violently to the arms closing around her. Janet reached for the strength that allowed her to haul around the bodies of marines more than twice her size and pull all-nighters whenever necessary without being the worse for wear the following day. She held on and once again closed her eyes.

Her mind reached for the thread of soft light that was her connection to Samantha's soul. This

time, however, she wasn't interested in the sphere in itself but concentrated on the dark spots. The body in her arms became calmer as she gradually was drawn into the tortured mind of her lover; suddenly it was her hand holding the combat knife. It trembled but not in fear or in horror. What she felt was closer to exhilaration and triumph, and when she found the man's dying eyes there also was satisfaction and joy.

There was more: It suddenly felt as if she were drowning in a sea of hot blood, suffocating her, washing her away, leaving nothing behind but the will, the need to go on killing. The blood washed over her, wave after wave. There was nothing but darkness and blood.

Janet instinctively caressed Samantha's tear stained cheeks. A tiny part of her refused to be swallowed by the darkness and the faint light of their connection guided her through the sea of dark red. She could feel her beloved's breathing change to a more normal rhythm and with it was better able to control the situation but she also knew that it wasn't over yet. She concentrated on the light but withstood the temptation to return to it.

The images of bloodshed were gone but they had been replaced with a deep sense of depression. Janet's mind ventured deeper into the darkness. The blood was receding, but the darkness became thicker as if it were a physical force. She knew she had to break through this barrier to really reunite with her lover but she also was sure that she would not be able to force her way in.

So, she did the only thing she could do: she accepted the darkness. It wasn't a conscious decision. There was no reasoning behind it. She simply felt that Samantha needed her and with a certainty she didn't have the faintest idea she possessed found her battered soul.

She almost stopped when she saw her surrounded by a ring of flames licking at her feet as if it were the fires of Netu - another one of Samantha's recurring nightmares. She continued on, irresistibly drawn to her lover's pain, to the other half of her soul.

Janet opened her eyes and looked into the familiar and sorely missed blue orbs of her partner. In a reversal of the usual sleeping positions Samantha's head was resting on Janet's shoulder, one of her legs was draped over her own and a long arm across her waist. Samantha blinked a few times as if to make sure that the woman next to her was not an apparition, a shadow crossed her face and then one of her rare, dazzling smiles spread and she whispered.

"Thanks for coming to my rescue, my love. Thanks for loving me despite myself."

Janet once again caressed her partner's face and answered. "How could I not love you, my Sammy? I love all of you, and if this means defying an order to get you out of a nightmare than that's what I will do. Where you go I go, be it by day or night, in reality or dream. I'm yours and you are mine, forever."

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Several hours later they once again stood nervously in front of their commanding officer, this

time wearing dress blues. They had been summoned and now waited to be admitted. When the door finally was opened they stood at parade rest, as close to each other as humanly possible without actually touching. General Hammond's admin motioned them in and gently closed the door from outside.

"Take a seat, ladies. Samantha, seeing the dark circles under your eyes I asked you more than once if everything was alright with you. Why didn't you tell me about your nightmares? And don't try to pull a 'Carter' on me."

Samantha looked up in surprise and found the kind eyes of her godfather not the stern face of her commanding officer. She offered him a small smile.

"I saw them as part of the punishment, sir. I thought I deserved it for disappointing you, Uncle George. I presumed..."

"Next time, don't presume; just be honest with me. I'm not Mackenzie. - And you, Doc, why didn't you tell me?"

"How could she tell you something, she rationally had no way to know, sir? You would have thought that we had communicated in secret and once again disobeyed your orders," Samantha said before Janet had a chance to answer. "And besides, Doctor Fraiser knows me well enough to respect that I wouldn't want anyone to know of such a weakness, anyone but her."

"How did you find out, sir?" Janet asked, curiosity overriding her bad conscience.

"The new addition to the science team, Stephen Harrington... I caught him sneaking out of the secondary observation room, stealing a disk with the night activities in Major Carter's cell. He obviously didn't know about the back-up system and tried to keep you both out of trouble by making the disk disappear.

"Don't worry," he added when he saw the women's expressions, "there won't be any repercussions for him or for you. Actually, at the moment he's working with Doctor Jackson to create an alternative version of the surveillance cameras in both of your cells and the brig tract corridor. When they're finished they will show that you both slept sound and deep these past few nights.

"And now, I want you both to go home. You're off duty for the next three days. Go, and reconnect with each other and with Cassandra. Dismissed."

The women, at first, were too stunned to speak. They automatically stood, saluted, and turned around to leave the room. Before they reached the door, Janet's curiosity once again got the better of her.

"Sir, may I ask, why are you doing this?"

The bald man gave her a heart-felt smile and answered. "The first time I saw Samantha she had

just been born; even then I felt compelled to protect her. She now is well capable of taking care of herself but I still help whenever I can. There also is another, less private reason. The SGC needs her. We need you both, Doctor; Earth needs you - and I won't allow stupid regulations to keep you from doing what you do best, from protecting Earth."

"Thank you, sir."

"Dismissed, ladies!" he said gruffly, and when they closed the door behind them, they heard him adding, "You're welcome, Janet."

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Janet offered a short thank-you to the Airman who had brought them back to their home while Samantha was already at the door and inserted the key. They quickly stepped inside and the taller woman drew Janet in a breathtaking hug.

"I missed you so much, my love. It hurt so much, knowing that you were so close without being able to talk to you, to touch you, to see you, to hold you," she whispered and kissed Janet whose eyes smiled back up at her.

When the kiss broke, she answered. "I missed you too, Sammy. But you know as well as I do that we were lucky. We were very lucky."

"I know, Jan. He had to discipline us after we openly disobeyed his orders. I know, but I still missed you, so much," Samantha said with a hint of a pout that made Janet's smile even wider.

A mischievous smile appeared in her eyes. "Then, my love, why don't we go upstairs and get reacquainted?"

"Best offer I had in weeks."

Janet was almost dragged up the steps to the bedroom. They set a new record in getting out of their clothes; then time suddenly stood still. They were standing at the right side of the bed and just stared at each other, studying each square inch of the other body as if it were the first time. Janet was the first to break the spell. Her hand moved almost of its own accord and touched the faint scar just under Samantha's rib case, left over from a fight with some unfriendly natives.

"You're too thin, Sam. You have to take better care of yourself."

Instead of giving an answer, Samantha stepped closer and kissed Janet, not the soft reassuring kiss they had shared downstairs but a passionate joining of lips and tongues. During their incarceration their connection had only made itself felt in the nights when both of their defences had been down but now it once again flared to life and they both opened their minds for the other, revelling in the security of their love.

They sank on top of the bedspread, completely oblivious to their surroundings, interested only in feeling as much of the other's skin against their own as possible. There was almost no gentleness or subtlety involved when they each quickly entered the other's centre, overwhelmed by the primal urge to reconnect on a purely physical level, driven by the need to once again take possession of their mate's body. They came together and Samantha fell asleep even before her heartbeat had a chance to return to a normal rate with her head resting between Janet's breasts.

Janet stroked her lover's back and waited for the inevitable nightmare. Their bout of primitive love making had stilled a deep seated hunger in both of them but it had not been enough to vanquish the taller woman's demons. In the loneliness of the cell at the base Samantha had been helpless against their overwhelming force, and only their link, only Janet's help had been able to soothe her lover's soul at least partially.

The only way to really get rid of the dark memories and dreams, Janet knew from experience, would be to bring them to light, to talk about them.

Samantha turned in her sleep; her head now rested on Janet's shoulder and one of her long arms was draped over her middle. The beautiful face was tense and when the hand on her hip balled to a fist Janet knew what she had to do.

She closed her smaller hand around the fist and consciously tapped into their bond. She could feel the darkness lingering at the edges of Samantha's soul and mentally stepped in front of it. She built a wall, blocking the darkness, and soon was rewarded with Samantha's fist opening and the intertwining of their fingers.

Janet shortly after joined her lover in a deep slumber, undisturbed by frightening dreams.

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In the early hours of the afternoon, Janet once again opened her eyes and glared evilly at the ringing phone on her bedside table.

"Fraiser!"

"Oh, Mom. I thought you guys would still be at the base. I only wanted to leave a message. I wanted to let you know that I'll stay at Stacey's tonight. See you tomorrow after school. I love you. Bye."

Janet heard the click of the severed connection. The teen could as well have spoken to the answering machine for all the chance she gave her mother to say something. Her first reaction was anger, but on the other hand sleepovers at her best friend's house were a frequent occurrence and neither girl had to ask for permission every time. Add the fact that she still was a bit sleepy and now no longer had to think about leaving the enticingly naked body she was snuggled against. Her anger abated.

She turned her head and looked into sleep fogged blue eyes. "I heard Cassy's voice. Do we have to get up?" Samantha's voice was deeper than usual.

"No, my love, go back to sleep. She'll stay at Stacey's."

"Don't want to sleep." Samantha answered and kissed a conveniently in range breast. "I can think of better things to do," she added, now a good deal more awake.

Samantha tentatively licked the smooth skin in front of her and was rewarded by a harsh intake of breath.

"You, Major Carter, are a tease, but two can play that game." She quickly slid out from under the taller woman and positioned herself on her side, facing her partner.

-X-X-X-

## THE PRESENT: SCHU - THE THRONE ROOM

Samantha woke with the security of their love covering her hurting body like a blanket. After they had shared these dream memories Janet had let her know that her rescuers were close, and Sam had sent her back. She had felt her lover's underlying anger and her need to take revenge on her torturers, stronger than her doctor's oath to do no harm. She would need her lover and her medical expertise when they found her, but Janet also would need her - and that was all the incentive she needed.

Samantha looked up to find the metal lattice work still covering the pit. She supposed that it was still early in the morning.

She forced herself to stand up and stretch as best as she could. She was far from comfortable or relaxed but it allowed her to take stock of her injuries and her reserves, at least as far as her still limited range of movement allowed. She followed a familiar routine of slow flowing movements, Janet and she had developed after the Pentagon had ordered the SGC to sever all ties with the Amazons.

Whenever Samantha was on Earth, they stood in their backyard at the crack of dawn and exercised. At first Cassandra had almost toppled over with laughter; now she joined them regularly but of course they were forbidden to let any of her friends know about their little routine. She had announced that she would never forgive them.

The thought of their teenage daughter brought a smile to her face followed by a frown when she felt eyes on her. She didn't stop her exercises but concentrated on her hearing: there were two sets of breathing but she only felt one pair of eyes on her.

Samantha stopped and opened her eyes. Aisato stood at the edge of the still covered pit and

studied her.

"Why did you let me live?" he asked. "I'll never betray my Queen to let you escape."

Samantha laughed and slowly lowered herself to the hard floor, reclining against the wall. Her whole body felt like one big ugly bruise and she was a lot less relaxed than her posture indicated but also managed to keep her uneasy feelings about the other person present out of her voice.

"I know that you are loyal to your Queen, Aisato. If only half of what you told me is true, she is not like other Goa'uld. I didn't kill you because your death would not have served any purpose. I still would be a prisoner and your children would have lost their father. I'm sorry that I found no other way to defeat you than to attack your primta. I hope the larva is alright."

"It was very agitated last night but I'm alright now. Thanks for asking, and there's no need to apologise, SamanthaCarter. It was a sound strategic decision. My Queen wants to speak with you."

The cover began to be retracted and a ladder was lowered.

"Do you need help to climb up?"

"No, thank you, I'll manage."

A low table with fruits and bread and comfortable looking couches had replaced the torture equipment. Nut was sitting on one side with her back to the door and she was led to the other. Aisato pressed her into the cushions.

"What do you want, SamanthaCarter?"

The woman once again had surprised her, and once again she had to decide which kind of answer she wanted to give her.

And she decided to follow the strange inner voice that told her to trust this moody woman.

"I want to go home and take my partner in my arms. I want to turn back time, so, that you never learned about the death of your children. I wished the Goa'uld would never have come to Earth in the first place. I wish they would not force themselves on their hosts. I want to play chess with my daughter."

"Your daughter?"

"Yes, my partner adopted her four years ago after her parents died." Samantha saw no need to tell Cassandra's real story. Her trust didn't go this far.

The Goa'uld didn't answer or comment but instead began to peel and slice a fruit that resembled a very big peach. She ate one of the slices and offered the rest to her prisoner. It smelled delicious

and suddenly the Air Force officer became all too aware that she had not eaten since being captured - evidently the sarcophagus also took care of such minor details.

"Please, eat!" the voice had changed from the double tones of the Goa'uld to the smooth voice of a woman.

"I'm Neged, host to Queen Nut. She wants you to know that I was not forced to become her host."

Samantha studied the woman's expression. She knew from experience that the symbiote could sound like its host while still being in control and voiced her doubt accordingly.

Neged laughed. "It's a lot of work and it can be very draining to subdue the personality of an unwilling host permanently, at least if one does not rely on a sarcophagus.

"I was eighteen when Queen Nut's former host started to grow weak. I volunteered to take her place when the time had come, together with about a score of others. Nut and Larka, that was the name of my predecessor, wanted to make sure that we really knew what it could be like. They spoke to us, together and separately. Nut even told us that sometimes she would have to take control. She would have to force us. Most of the other girls returned home, and I also was frightened.

"I didn't want to risk spending my life as a prisoner in my own body but I also had a glimpse of all the knowledge I would gain, all the good I could do for my people. I stayed. Larka recovered from her illness, and it was only ten years later that the host really died of old age. I became Nut's host and until recently I didn't regret one single day of our time together."

"It sounds like the relationship of a Tok'ra with its host, a real symbiosis. I wish I could believe you."

"Do you know where the Tok'ra come from, young Tau'ri?" Samantha nodded and Neged's next words left her speechless. "Egeria is Nut's sister."

Samantha closed her eyes and a flood of memories flashed through her mind. She had been sure that Egeria had left nothing behind when she died shortly after the trial against the renegade Tok'ra and Jaffa. These images told her otherwise. There was more: a vague suspicion.

"I believe you. You said that until recently you didn't regret your choice. Am I right to think that it started with Anubis' visit?"

"What do you know of Anubis?"

"Not much more than the basics. The System Lords defeated him a few thousand years ago and sent him to exile. Now, he is back, and he has gained much knowledge and power. He wants to take over the System Lords but first he has to make them trust him, and the fastest way to do this is to destroy Earth. He wanted you to attack Earth directly, right?"

Two elegant eyebrows arched up and the woman nodded. "How did you know?"

"That's how he works. He convinces others to do his dirty work. Earth is protected by a treaty with the Asgard; the System Lords would have to retaliate should we be attacked openly. Only a few weeks ago he sent an asteroid on a collision course with our planet. He blackmailed the Tollans into sending destructive weapons through our Gate, and when it didn't work he almost destroyed their home world."

-X-X-X-

Samantha saw a flash of blue peeking around a column and continued talking. "It might be a wise decision to take a few precautions."

"Indeed, it was almost too easy to take out your guards," the tone of Xena's voice was light but her eyes were hard and cold when she appeared behind the Goa'uld and pressed her sword against the woman's throat. "Put your hands where I can see them! - Are you alright, Samantha Gabriella Carter?"

"I am now, Consort Xena. Please don't hurt her."

"She will have to face Amazon Justice, Samantha," Queen Gabrielle said while keeping Aisato down with the end of her staff.

The room suddenly filled with heavily armed Amazons and about a dozen SGC soldiers. A small form quickly crossed the room from the other side and fell on her knees next to blonde. Samantha winced when strong arms closed around her battered torso, and her lover immediately snapped into doctor mode.

Janet raised the hem of the tunic and gasped at the bruises liberally covering the strong body. Niva helped her to take the manacles off and kept her from trying to stand up when she saw the swollen, misaligned knee.

"I'm alright, my love. Everything is fine, now that you are here."

"Nothing is fine. You are hurt; you were tortured and killed and..."

Samantha put a slightly trembling finger on her lover's lips. "I love you, Janet Rebecca Fraiser, will you join with me? Will you consent to be my wife?"

"Yes Sam, I'd love to be your wife; but first I want you to heal."

The rational part of Samantha's brain knew that Janet was right; now was not the time or the place to talk about this but she couldn't help herself. "I want to be joined with you before we

return to Earth, Janet. I won't allow them to come between us any longer. I don't want to hide how I feel about you."

Janet knew of only one way to reassure her injured lover. She kissed her, a long and passionate kiss that left both of them breathless.

"Janet, should we get Samantha to the XS-01 or can we use the transporters?" Gabrielle asked softly.

"The transporters are faster, and they will not further harm her, your majesty."

"Queen Gabrielle?"

"Yes, Samantha?"

"Please don't hurt her. Despite the appearances, she's not like the other Goa'uld. She's Egeria's sister."

"You have my word, Samantha. We will not harm her or her warriors. We had the element of surprise on our side; so, no one was killed. You will get the chance to speak on her behalf during the trial, Amazon justice has to be satisfied."

"Thank you, your majesty."

White light enveloped Janet and Samantha and they were gone.

Nut, mother of Gods, was surrounded by enemy soldiers. Had they been in the service of Anubis or one of the System Lords she already would be dead but still, it would be too easy and extremely unwise to trust these strangers.

"I'm in your hands. I don't expect leniency for me but please do not harm my people, and if you can, spare my host. She had no part in what I did to Samantha Carter."

Jack O'Neill arched an eyebrow at Nut's words; Consort Xena looked equally unconvinced but the Queen seemed ready to give the dark-eyed woman the benefit of the doubt.

"What you did to Major Carter will be duly recorded and put before an Amazon jury. They will decide your fate. You are our prisoner and as such will be treated with respect."

"Why don't you just kill me and my warriors and take what is mine?"

"Because they are not Goa'uld," Teal'c said.

"You are the shol'va I heard about," Aisato said quietly, still prone on the ground. "You killed your God."

"The Goa'uld are false gods. I am Teal'c of Chulac, a free Jaffa. You now are in the hands of the Amazons, they are honourable warriors and will treat you with fairness."

"I don't fear your justice, and I request to stay at my Queen's side. That's where I belong."

-X-X-X-X-X-

## Chapter Seven: **Healing**

### PRESENT DAY: ON BOARD OF THE SCYTHIA

In the infirmary Doctor Janet Fraiser listed Major Carter's injuries, desperately trying to keep her professional side firmly in control. Aside from the obvious injuries, Samantha had lost far more than fifteen pounds in the ten days of her disappearance, fifteen pounds she could not afford to lose; her heart showed signs of a recent short-term trauma and her blood work was a mess.

Now, more than ever Janet was frantic with worry. The naqada levels in her blood were completely out of control, making it impossible to give her any painkillers. The fear for her beloved was even strong enough to make her discard her overwhelming anger and need for revenge, at least for now. Samantha finally drew her closer.

"Janet, Jan-baby, look at me. I'm alright now. There's nothing that won't heal given a bit of time. My ribs are wrapped; you stabilised my knee, so now it can wait a few hours. The only painkiller I need is you. The whole time, all these days you were my strength. You kept me sane. I dreamed of being held by you, and now all I want is to make it real. I need you, Janet."

Janet studied Samantha's face and though it was against everything she had learned at medical school, her soul answered her beloved's plea. She tried to calm her conscience with the knowledge that short of sending Samantha to an operation theatre right this moment, there was nothing else she could do.

So, the tough CMO of the Cheyenne Mountain Complex, the small woman who made bad-ass marines shake in their boots, for once followed her heart and had Samantha transferred to their rooms. She joined Samantha on the bed. She had planned on just watching over her lover though there was no sign of concussion and apart from the damaged knee and a considerable weight loss. Despite herself the emotional turmoil of the last few days was taking its toll and she also quickly fell asleep.

Instead of being haunted by bad dreams, they saw the time after their punishment, when General Hammond had sent them home. It was as if they were continuing the dream memories from the night before.

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## THE PAST: EARTH, JANET'S AND SAMANTHA'S HOUSE

Samantha tentatively licked the smooth skin in front of her and was rewarded by a harsh intake of breath.

"You, Major Carter, are a tease, but two can play that game." She quickly slid out from under the taller woman and positioned herself on her side, facing her partner.

Janet gauged her mood by studying her blue eyes. They had always told her what she needed to know, even long before she could get the same information by probing their bond. Samantha's eyes were an open book to Janet, even when everyone else saw her as cold and detached. She could tell that Samantha needed to escape the memory of her dark dreams but she also saw that it would be only temporary.

So, she let the back of her finger's glide aimlessly over Samantha's side. The blue eyes widened slightly. Caressing her sides and then moving up to the sensitive skin of Samantha's breasts was one of her favourite ways to initiate their love making. But suddenly Janet changed tactics and found one of the ticklish spots about which only Cassandra and she knew.

Samantha almost jumped out of her skin, and before she had the chance to react, she had been flipped onto her back. Janet was straddling her and began to thoroughly exploit her sudden strategic advantage. Her victim tried to get a hold of her hands to keep her from the most sensitive spots but quickly was laughing too hard to defend herself effectively. She squirmed under her captor and the feeling of hot skin brushing against her centre distracted Janet long enough for Samantha to retaliate. It didn't take her long to reverse their positions and soon they both were howling with laughter.

Janet felt the change in Samantha almost too late, almost missed the moment when the tears escaping her eyes no longer were tears of joy. She quickly propped herself against the headboard and drew her lover as close as she could.

She knew that Samantha had yet to deal with the consequences of everything she had learned about her origins and ancestors, of Egeria choosing her as her last host, though the symbiote was still so exhausted that she had not made herself felt at all, and first and foremost of the psychological consequence of the rescue mission itself. This was the first step and Janet was glad that she reacted this openly and not by shutting everyone out, even her partner.

She whispered to the sobbing blonde, not to get her to calm down but to make her feel safe enough to let go completely. Without relinquishing her firm hold on Samantha, Janet tucked a thin blanket over their still naked bodies and felt strong arms encircling her waist.

When the tears slowly subsided she whispered, "I love you, Samantha Gabriella Carter, now and always."

That brought fresh tears and Janet let her lover cry herself out. The flow finally stopped and to Janet's relieve Samantha didn't try to distance herself from her. She didn't even attempt to change their position.

"I hurt, Janet."

"I know, baby. Don't try to push the pain away. Give it to me. You don't have to carry it alone," Janet answered and opened herself up to her partner's pain.

The feeling of loss was overwhelming; it emanated from the very centre of Samantha's being, from the very core of her soul.

For the flicker of a heartbeat she felt how Samantha tried to do what over the years had become second nature, how she attempted to protect her lover and herself from the rawness of her emotions, but Janet didn't flinch and didn't turn away, and so Samantha simply let her in, all the way.

Janet acted on instinct alone. She mentally stepped closer; becoming a participant instead of only being an observer. It was an experience neither of the women later would be able to put into words. It was an experience too intense to be sustained long but it strengthened their connection.

They also learned a lot about the other. Samantha now knew about the one feeling, the one defining moment that had made Janet what she was; and Janet's suspicions about the significance of the death of Samantha's mother had been confirmed. They also learned a lot more about their partner's strengths.

Janet was the first one to speak. "I love you, Sammy."

Samantha didn't answer immediately. She turned her head and made contact with deep brown eyes.

"I wish it had been me." At Janet's obvious lack of understanding, she added, "I wish I had been the boy whose arm you bandaged with your favourite scarf. I wish I had been the first recipient of your calling as a doctor."

Janet smiled at her, with a core of wonder in her eyes. Then they took on a familiar sparkle. "I for my part am glad you're not that boy, my love. We never would have become lovers, otherwise."

"Why not? You once were married to a man."

"The boy's name is James, James Timothy Fraiser, my brother."

Samantha feigned a thoughtful expression and answered with a smile. "You're right, baby. I too am glad that I'm not him - else, I couldn't do this."

She claimed the smaller woman's lips with a passionate kiss, lifted her up at the waist and positioned her at the centre of the mattress.

"Or this."

She renewed the kiss and began to caress Janet's breasts, gently at first but when Janet rolled them to the side and started to knead her buttocks, she intensified the pressure.

Like their first orgasm this day, this one came quickly and forcefully - but they both also felt a difference.

The first time they had answered the call of their bodies; now, their need came from deeper within, as if the union of souls they had experienced needed to be completed by actions. When the first onslaught had subsided they continued at a slower pace, alternating touches with caresses, chaste kisses with passionate bites that almost broke the skin, oblivious to everything but each other.

Their love-making always had been more than just sex, but now it was as if they had opened the door to another dimension, beyond passion, beyond desire, beyond love, beyond logic, beyond reasoning, beyond science.

They fell asleep with their limbs still entangled, and this time there were no nightmares. But both of them felt as if they had finally come home.

- - - -

When Samantha finally reopened her eyes it was dark. The digital display of the bedside-radio showed a quarter past ten in the evening. She blinked the sleep out of her eyes but was reluctant to move and likely wouldn't have - had it not been for the demanding grumbling of her lover's stomach. They both hadn't had anything to eat since breakfast at the base, and at the time they both had been too nervous anticipating their talk with the general to eat much.

So, she carefully disentangled her arms and legs from Janet's, grabbed some sweatpants and a t-shirt, and ambled down to the kitchen. She poured herself a glass of water and instinctively turned to the drawer with the menus - a necessity with two workaholics and a teenager in the house, even if one discounted the fact that one of the adults was known to burn water when left to her own devices.

Samantha leafed through the collection of pizza places, Chinese take-out, Thai order-in, Greek restaurants etc. without finding anything that met her fancy. Light footsteps told her that her lover was awake. She turned around and only then saw the bottle of wine on the kitchen table and the note leaning against it. Janet unfolded it and began to read to her lover.

*Dear Moms,*

That brought a big smile to Samantha's face. She stepped behind the smaller woman, encircled her waist with both arms and looked over her shoulder.

*There's vegetable lasagna in the fridge. Put it in the oven for thirty minutes. Daniel helped me prepare it. He also bought the wine. Would you believe that he and Jack had a real discussion about why wine or beer goes better with lasagna? Anyway, I hope you'll like it.*

Janet and Samantha chuckled softly.

*Teal'c and Daniel said that the two of you need some time alone after being confined to the base and all. So, we decided that the welcome home party will be postponed 'til tomorrow. Don't worry about food and drinks; SG-1 has all the bases covered. We'll be there around seven. Have a good time - and Jack said: Don't do anything he wouldn't do; whatever that means. See you tomorrow.*

Cass

"Janet, did you ever ask yourself what devil possessed you to adopt a half-grown child?"

Janet turned in her lover's arms. Samantha's face was completely serious. The question was unexpected; so, she at first didn't know what to answer.

"No, Sam, of course not. Why?"

"I only asked because if you ever should have second thoughts you only have to think of tonight and this note to know that it was the right decision," Samantha answered in a quiet voice.

"Do you ever regret that you didn't take her yourself?"

"Not since I moved in," Samantha answered; then she vigorously shook her head. "What the hell brought this on? I came to the kitchen for food, not to get all sentimental without a reason. You still hungry, my love?"

"Sam, level with me, please. You wouldn't have brought it up if it didn't bother you to a certain degree."

"I really don't know, baby. It's almost as if all my emotions were haywire. I feel out of control, and I don't like the feeling."

Samantha took a seat on a conveniently placed kitchen chair and pulled Janet on her lap.

"Sometimes I think my life only really began when I finally admitted my feelings for you. And since I have you and Cassy, I feel like I hit the jackpot. So, the only thing I really regret is that I didn't have the courage to say something earlier, much earlier."

The heartfelt confession was rewarded with a kiss, and interrupted by now two loudly

complaining stomachs which started a round of very un-major-like giggling.

Finally, Janet took control. "Open the bottle and set the table, please. I'll take care of the lasagna."

"Will do. I'll also light the fireplace. I missed holding you."

"Great idea, Sam."

- - - -

They both were pleasantly stuffed when they finally adjourned from the kitchen to the living room and the nest of cushions and blankets Samantha had artfully piled in front of the fireplace. They were snuggled against each other, content to sip their wine and look at the flames - until Janet suddenly felt her lover's distress pulsing through their bond.

She drew her closer and whispered, "Talk to me, Sammy."

Samantha blinked a couple of times, and Janet saw tears glistening in the corners of her eyes when she quietly answered. "I barely knew her and she still is a part of me but I hurt. It's almost the same pain I felt when my mother died. Why does it hurt so much? It's not normal; it's not logical."

Janet suppressed a smile at her lover's need to rationalise everything.

"Sam, emotions are seldom logical, but from my point of view you have every reason to feel this way. When Jolinar gave her life to save you, you mourned her, right?"

Samantha nodded cautiously, not entirely sure what her lover had in mind.

"She left you with most of her memories. Egeria is a big part of these memories. She is the mother of the Tok'ra."

Samantha raised her head and tried to sit up on her own but the other woman held her tight. "Jolinar lost her mother without ever knowing her," she finally whispered.

"If you think about it, it's much more than that, Sam, at least if I understand it right," Janet answered. "For all Jolinar knew, Egeria was her mother, and like all the Tok'ra she felt a connection to her, a deep connection but..."

This time Samantha sat abruptly. "But for Jolinar it was more. Whenever she thought about Egeria or one of the others talked about her, it touched something deep within, something just out of her reach. Their genetic memory doesn't include personal memories. It doesn't include the likes, dislikes, experiences of their ancestors.

"Jolinar had flashbacks, almost like I did when I tried to keep her under control. They didn't make any sense to her, so she tried to ignore them. Ironical, isn't it?"

Janet didn't answer and Samantha didn't expect her to.

"Since I know about Artemis and her transformation to Jolinar, they do make sense, perfect sense. Jolinar loved Lantash but not the way Artemis loved Egeria or I love you."

Samantha fell silent. She sought the brown orbs. "I don't want to lose you, Janet."

"I love you, Sam, all of you: the carefree woman, the great lover, the brilliant scientist, the tough soldier, the person needing the reassurance of my arms and the person able to do what has to be done. I love all of you, Samantha. I'll always be at your side, my love."

Samantha smiled at her and they fell asleep in front of the fireplace.

-X-X-X-

#### THE PRESENT: ON BOARD OF THE SCYTHIA

Samantha and Janet woke at exactly the same moment. They were both smiling. Their eyes locked and Janet whispered, "I'll always be at your side, my love."

Without a second's thought Samantha jumped out of the bed and knelt on her injured knee; slightly surprised at her pain free-movements.

"Janet Rebecca Fraiser, will you marry me? Will you make me the happiest woman in the world?"

Big brown eyes studied her from head to toe and the initial professional worry was replaced with a smile.

"Yes, Samantha Gabriella Carter, I'll marry you, whenever and wherever you want, but first there is something else I need to do. The way you move makes me believe that Xena sneaked in while we were sleeping and used a healing device on you. I have to make sure that you really are alright."

"Always the doc," said Samantha with a smile while she slowly stood and stretched to her full height. "Why don't you check me out while we take a long, hot shower? Unfortunately a sarcophagus doesn't come with a built-in bathroom."

Samantha's attempt at humour brought a pained smile to Janet's face. She knew that sooner or later they would have to speak about everything that had happened for both of their sakes but now was not that time. So, she let herself be pulled to her feet and dragged to the adjoining

bathroom.

It didn't take her long to satisfy the physician in her but the lover checked Samantha even more thoroughly. Every square inch of Samantha's body received attention, and she soon took her inspection back to the bedroom.

Samantha was insistent on starting one of her own, and so it took them another four hours before they were ready to face the outside world. A big part of both of them, however, didn't want to deal with all the unanswered questions, not with the questions they themselves had and not with the questions the others undoubtedly would want to ask.

But there also was the undeniable fact that they both needed sustenance. Both of their stomachs were complaining loudly. They slipped some clothes on that they found in a wall-closet. The Amazon BDUs fit as if they had been made for them, at least they would have if not for Samantha's considerable weight-loss.

Samantha's natural curiosity woke on the way to the mess hall and she peppered Janet with questions about the ship, questions Janet didn't have the slightest idea how to answer. Just before they reached their destination, Janet stopped her with a kiss and Samantha finally understood that she had asked the wrong person and smiled sheepishly.

"I'm sure Xena will give you a thorough tour of the ship, including the engines, my love."

-X-X-X-

The big room resembled the Amazons' community dining hall. When they entered they overheard a conversation between two young warriors.

"I still don't understand why we have to be respectful to this damn Goa'uld. She's our prisoner; she should be treated as such."

"We just follow orders, Kaja, the Queen's orders."

"Well she wasn't this generous with the Tok'ra we captured during the rescue mission."

"And I don't remember you being part of that mission, Amazon," Samantha's voice was cold and the young women instinctively scrambled from their seats and saluted her with their right fists over their hearts.

"Ma... Major Carter, we... we meant no harm. It was just talk, nothing more," Kaja stammered.

"Sit down, both of you. Didn't Queen Gabrielle teach you that gossip has a way of biting you in the butt once it's started?" Seeing their guilt-ridden faces she added, "The way we treat our prisoners reflects on us. Queen Nut will stand trial for her crimes, but you have to understand

that she did what she did because she was hurting and because someone has told her some outright lies and half-truths."

"Why are you so forgiving? We heard that she killed you and tortured you and forced you to fight against her Jaffa."

"News really travels fast here. Understanding why someone did what he or she did, does not mean forgiving them. I understand Nut but it will take more than that to make me forgive her."

Samantha felt Janet's hand on the small of her back and smiled at her partner.

"One day I will forgive her if not for her sake then for mine."

"I don't understand," Kaja's friend blurted out.

"If I don't eventually forgive her, I will always have a black spot in my heart. I will always feel anger and hate for her and in the long run it will eat up all that is good and bright."

Samantha looked at the young faces that in the meantime had gathered around them and added, "If I don't forgive her, she will always have some power over me."

"And now, excuse us. We're sort of hungry," Samantha said with a smile when her stomach decided to add its two cents.

When they turned their backs to the giggling young women Samantha's sharp hearing picked up Kaja's voice.

"Wow! That was way deep. Do you think it's true what they say?"

A new voice answered, "Quiet. Master Niva made it clear that we're not to indulge in this kind of gossip. She said the Queen would be really displeased - and I for my part really don't want to end up on the Queen's bad side."

"You're right, Jaspy, but I still..."

Samantha and Janet grabbed something to eat from the buffet and retired to a small table in the far corner of the room.

"Did you mean what you told the girls?"

"Amazons, young but Amazons nonetheless."

"Girls, Amazons, same difference."

"Now, you're channelling Jack O'Neill, my love. And yes, I meant what I said. It took me years to forgive my father for my mother's death. I was so angry at him and the military that I stopped

seeing the things in life she had loved, simple things, like clouds in the sky or the first flower peeking through the snow.

"These things returned slowly when I reconnected with my grandmother. Despite everything he had done to her, she taught me how to forgive him, and I swore to myself that I would never again allow such a black cloud to grow in my heart. But I also learned that these feelings, that forgiveness cannot be hurried."

"I'll be at your side the whole way, Sammy."

"I know, my love. That's what makes it all bearable, that's why I'm not lying in bed, curled into a tight ball and wallowing in self-pity, frightened out of my mind. If this whole mess was good for anything it's that you'll always be there for me, no matter what."

They shared a gentle kiss and finally began to attack their plates with vigour. Samantha was about to scoop up the last spoon-full of blue Jell-O when Aria found them.

The young woman brought them a message from the Queen, telling them that a meeting to speak about the immediate future would be held at their convenience, a debriefing of sorts.

-X-X-X-

Samantha was not particularly looking forward to recounting the details of her capture, not during this debriefing and specially not during the upcoming trial, but she also was not one to postpone the inevitable.

So, half an hour later, they stood in the senior staff-room of the Scythia, making small-talk with SG-1 and the weapons' master while waiting for the Queen and General Hammond. The leaders of the other SG-teams were already seated.

Samantha fidgeted nervously but considerably calmed down when she learned that she would not have to talk about her time on the ha'tak and Nut's planet. The Goa'uld and Aisato had given a detailed written report that General Hammond told her to review before the next day, when the trial against the Goa'uld would be held in the mess-hall come community hall.

The jury would only have to decide about the punishment because Nut had pleaded guilty on all charges: abduction, physical assault, torture, and murder. As members of the rescue team neither Gabrielle nor Xena would take part, but over the course of the last two days elders from Gaia and other Amazon planets had arrived to fill the ranks according to Amazon law.

"I'm thankful that I will not have to take the stand, your majesty, but I'd like to address the jury before they make their decision," Samantha said after she had fought down the surprise that it had been more than two days since her rescue. She really must have been out of it.

"It is customary for the injured party to be offered to speak, Samantha," Xena answered, unsurprised at her request.

"Good. - General, what will happen with the SGC? Janet told me that you risked your careers to come to my rescue."

"As Master Bra'tac would say: we'll build that bridge when we come to the river. I set a few things in motion before I left Earth, Sam, but it's too early to talk about it. And now, Major, I think you and the good doctor should try and get some more sleep. You both still look tired."

"We'll see to it that they get some more rest, General, but if you don't mind we'd like to have a few words in private with your officers," Xena said with a reassuring smile.

"Let's go, campers. Someone has to make sure that all these Amazons don't run Master Bra'tac ragged in the training's hall," Jack O'Neill said while shoeing the others out of the room.

When the four of them were alone Janet blurted out, "You don't need elders to hold a trial. Every adult member of the Nation would have done."

Samantha looked at her partner and her eyes widened in sudden understanding.

"Except to hold a Grand Jury!" She turned her attention to Gabrielle. "I know that who I really am is an open secret among the Amazons. It's obvious in the way they treat me that they know, but I thought we agreed to keep it under wraps for the time being, your majesty."

There was hint of accusation in her voice to which Xena immediately reacted. "What makes you think that it's done for you? Nut is a Goa'uld but she also is a Queen in her own right, the leader of her people. She deserves royal treatment."

"I apologise, Queen Gabrielle, Consort Xena. It was presumptuous of me," Samantha answered with an embarrassed blush.

"It's alright, Sam; your words have a certain truth to them. We had to tell the regents and elders the truth, after the hard time you had getting support for the rescue mission. For the rest of our people your actions are enough to gain you special treatment. Saving our lives has given you both a special place in our society and the history of the Amazon Nation. In their hearts you are one of them even if you choose never to make it official."

"And the prophesy does not make it any easier; I heard the warriors whisper in the mess hall."

"No, it doesn't but now is not the time or the place to discuss that either. Have you decided yet how you will be joined?"

"We didn't exactly have time to talk about it. Sam wants to do it before our return to Earth. On Gaia, Priestess Melosa could officiate. We don't know yet."

"We would be honoured to hold the ceremony on Gaia, Janet, but you still would have to decide what kind of ceremony you want. There's the private exchange of vows in front of friends and family, and there's a sacred Amazon joining, in front of the whole nation."

When she saw that Samantha had to suppress a yawn Gabrielle quickly added, "You don't have to decide immediately. I'll send some scrolls to your quarters to explain the differences. There's no need to hurry; it will be at least a week before we reach our planet. - And now go and get some rest."

Janet and Samantha left for their quarters, at the door Samantha turned around and said. "Thank you for healing me, Xena."

"You're welcome, Samantha, it was the least I could do, but please don't forget that the healing device could only treat your direct injuries. You still will have to regain your strength and stamina."

-X-X-X-X-X-

## Chapter Eight: **Revelations**

### THE PRESENT: ON BOARD OF THE SCYTHIA

A plate with snacks and a pitcher of iced tea were waiting in their room but they had too much to think about to be hungry. They both knew they soon would have to talk, but for now, neither of them was ready. So, by unspoken accord they stripped and snuggled in bed.

Their minds wandered back to the conversation in the temple all these months ago, after the funeral pyres for the Amazons who had fallen during the rescue mission had been lit and they both had joined the Nation in the singing of the dirge.

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### THE PAST: GAIA - THE TEMPLE

The dirge had ended and the flames of the pyres had slowly died down. Priestess Melosa had let her arms sink to the side and had retreated to the temple, followed by Xena and Gabrielle - and after a moment's hesitation and Gabrielle's quiet order "Come!" also by Janet and Samantha.

Never having seen the inside of the temple before Samantha Carter was dumbstruck by its simple elegance. She looked at the columns supporting the roof of the ante-chamber which was inlaid with shimmering crystals depicting the familiar constellations visible from Earth's Northern Hemisphere. She touched one of the elegant stone pillars, expecting its surface to be smooth and

cold; instead it almost felt like silk to her sensitive fingertips.

Melosa led them through another room with murals of Ancient Greece: Athena in a sword fight with Ares, the God of War, with her right hand bound behind her back; the same woman with glowing eyes hunting a white buck; a young woman who only could be Diti bathing with her dark haired lover.

The next room was small with a multitude of cushions on the floor and a couple of low tables with an assortment of fruits, bread, and cheese. Pitchers of water and steaming pots of tea completed the light meal. The priestess pressed a panel on the windowless wall and left. The whole wall slid to the side, revealing an atrium with an olive tree illuminated by the rising moon.

Janet and Samantha stared at it as if at an apparition. The tree was only slightly taller than the one in the guest palace but its top was considerably broader and brighter. What made it even more special was that it really wasn't a single tree. Two trunks came from the ground but at thigh-level they leaned closer to each other and a few inches higher they intertwined, one wrapping itself around the other and vice versa.

Janet instinctively sought the comfort of her taller lover's arms and Samantha responded in kind.

The small doctor remembered all too well when she first had dreamed about the olive tree. She remembered the intense feeling of longing and the feeling of loss and loneliness when waking up she found herself in the arms of her husband, the day after her wedding. She should have known then that giving in to his pleading had been a mistake; she should have known that they never would be like these trees, two and one at the same time. Janet also remembered the last time she had had the olive tree dream, the day she first had laid eyes on one Captain Samantha Gabriella Carter, resident genius of Stargate Command. This last time the longing had had a silver lining of hope.

She turned her head and found Samantha's eyes. They looked at each other, oblivious to their surroundings until Queen Gabrielle clearing her throat brought them back to reality. They turned around and joined the Royal pair on the cushions.

"Samantha, Janet, we are in your debt. I fear to imagine what would have happened to us and our companions had you not come to our rescue. Master Niva told me that they only learned about our disappearance shortly before your arrival. How did you know?"

Samantha knew that the weapons' master probably already had given a detailed report concerning what had happened on Gaia and during the rescue mission, but she also could understand the Queen's need to hear everything from her perspective. So, she hesitatingly told them about her subsequent nightmares and the ritual they had performed to find answers. She gave a precise account of the rest of the mission, glossing over their disobeying direct orders, and ended up with telling Xena and Gabrielle that they were not in their debt and that they would do the same for any friend in danger.

Of course Xena picked up on her slight hesitation when General Hammond was mentioned and

didn't let her get away with it. "Lieutenant Hailey and Master Sergeant Powers let us know that you are in trouble with your CO because of what you did."

"We left the base without permission, and when he ordered us to return, shortly before gating to M5X-179 we refused. We disobeyed direct orders and it wouldn't surprise me if we had to face a court-martial on our return," Janet answered matter-of-factly, adding, "We knew the consequences when we came here but considering the outcome we would do it again - and that's all there is to say."

Xena and Gabrielle exchanged glances that clearly told that there was a lot more to say and that they wouldn't let it go, not like this; they also knew that now was not the time or the place.

"We had to do everything in our power to get you back, however, it wouldn't have been possible without the backing of Master Niva and Mother Egeria's blessing," Samantha added in an effort to change subject.

There was a long period of silence during which all four women seemed to gather their thoughts. Finally, Gabrielle said, "Egeria. I'm all too aware that I owe my health and my sanity to you and Egeria, Samantha. I was at the end of my rope when you two began to put me back together. I would like to thank her personally."

"She's resting, your majesty. She said she would be back when the time is right. Using the healing device has seriously sapped her reserves, more than she let me know at the time. I should have done something to protect her. What could have been weeks or even months has been cut down to a few days because I didn't know how to help her. She said that she wants to go in style, surrounded by her children, her true children, the Amazons and a few of the Tok'ra still loyal to their cause. I'm sorry, your majesty," Samantha answered with downcast eyes.

"There's no need to apologise, Sam. We knew of her plans for some time now and had the chance to mentally prepare for her passing, all of us," Xena said quietly. "Gabrielle and I both know what it's like having to go on without the one being you love above all else. She held out for a long time and deserves to rest. I'm sorry that you have to go through this unprepared."

"I admit that it happened faster and sooner than I would have wished. I would have liked to get to know her better but I knew what I was getting myself into," Samantha answered. "But I have the feeling that you didn't ask us to come here to talk about Egeria, right? You both seem kind of nervous."

Xena and Gabrielle exchanged amused looks. "Patience really isn't your strong suit, Sam, but you also are rather perceptive. What you did during the rescue mission could be of considerable consequence to the both of you. By morning the whole Amazon Nation will probably have heard about the fact that you mastered the chakram and used my sword with mastery. We have to decide how much of the truth we want them to know." Xena said.

"I was lucky with the chakram, Xena. That's all."

"There's no such thing as luck when handling the chakram, Sam," the tall woman answered and Samantha thought she detected a hint of sadness in her voice. "I'll show you. Come stand beside me."

Rising Xena took the chakram from one of the low tables; both women stood and turned towards the inner courtyard and the olive tree. The tall raven-head threw the round weapon and it ricocheted from the walls and columns; she then stepped back and Samantha grabbed it seemingly without any effort. She looked puzzled at her hand and then said, "I didn't want to catch it. It was almost as if it made me do it."

Xena took it from her and put it back on the table, then she said, "I know, Samantha. There's something in your blood calling for it. It's hard to explain, Sam. It's easier to show. It's time for you and Janet to see our children, Gabrielle's and mine. Come!"

They stood and Xena led them in an adjoining room without windows or other visible doorways. Most of the walls were covered with pictures from top to bottom, portraits of women in Amazon garb or dressed in other traditional attire; rows and rows of 6x8 inch images, some of them faded with time.

All of them bore a certain, some a striking resemblance with the leaders of the Amazon Nation. On the far wall the picture tapestry ended in the middle. Samantha's eyes were fixated on the last three pictures.

Janet followed her lover's eyes, gasped, and stood staring with an open mouth. Suddenly the many obvious similarities between Xena and her partner began to make sense as well as the less obvious quirks she shared with Queen Gabrielle like the intense look of concentration they both had when focused on their work. She instinctively put her arms around her taller partner and let their connection speak but she still felt the muscles tensing in the lithe body and decided to get her out of the room.

They stepped back into the small room with the view of the olive tree. Janet inched around and stood in front of Samantha. One hand was resting on the blonde's hip and the other gently cupped her face.

"I love you, Sam. Nothing will ever change this, no matter what. You are my world, Samantha Gabriella Carter. Where you go, I go."

Xena and Gabrielle took their customary positions on a couple of cushions with the Queen cradled in Xena's arms and let the younger women come to terms with what they just had seen.

"I'm sorry that you had to learn it this way," Gabrielle said after the other couple also had taken their seats. "It wasn't planned this way. We wanted to give you a choice before letting everyone know. We wanted to let the both of you slowly grow into what could be your new life."

"How? Why? Why didn't you tell me from the beginning?"

"If we had told you the moment you stepped foot on Gaia would you have believed us? Would you have believed that your great-great-grandmother came from another planet and the union of two immortal women?" Xena asked in an effort to guide the younger woman back to the comforting realm of reason and logic.

Samantha felt Janet's hand at the small of her back and slowly relaxed her rigid posture. The calming presence of their emotional connection soothed her and gave her the chance to see all of this more rationally. Her mind was running a mile a minute and created question after question not really following a logical order or any kind of priority. Doubting Xena's word, however, not once crossed her mind.

"How did my great-great-grandmother come to Earth?"

"In the middle of the nineteenth century a team of British archaeologists came close to finding the DHD. She had orders to sidetrack them while others got the dialling device to another location, further away from the Gate. She fell in love with one of their leaders and decided to stay on Earth. You're the last of her line," Gabrielle answered.

"My brother has a daughter."

"Yes, but according to Amazon law it has to be a direct line, from mother to daughter. So, it's not the same." Xena said with resignation, convinced that Samantha would insist on further pursuing this matter but Samantha's mind was already on something else.

"The Amazons knelt for us because I'm related to you, to their leaders. They all knew the whole time and never said a word. Why? Why not be honest?"

"No, Samantha, they knelt because they heard what happened on the moon. For them an age-old prophesy is coming true. It has nothing to do with your ancestry. They don't know. Only a handful of people knew from the beginning: Illiana, Egeria, and Melosa. Niva and Larina guessed after a few training sessions," Gabrielle answered calmly. "You have Xena's talent to use and adapt whatever you're taught to your needs."

Samantha's next question was unexpected. "Why? Why did you offer yourself up to so much pain? Having children only to see them die time and again. What made you do something like this?"

Xena and Gabrielle looked at each other, the sadness in their eyes confirming Samantha's words. Xena closed her arms more firmly around the slender form of her wife.

"The easy answer is that the joy children bring far outweighs the sorrow of one day losing them. But there's also a more complicated answer. Make yourself comfortable. It's a rather long story.

"When Gabrielle and I returned to the Amazons after the crucifixion, the laws were a lot more restrictive than they are now. At the time Amazon law demanded of the Queen to give the Nation an heir of her own blood; that meant that she had at least to try to get pregnant."

Xena began to explain only to be stopped by her wife, "Xe, my love, I don't think they need this much detail."

"They have to know how it all began, baby," Xena gently insisted.

Gabrielle finally nodded and continued the explanation, "We told the Council of Elders of our immortality the day of our joining but they had a hard time dealing with it. One day, a few moons after the end of Xena's punishment..."

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#### FURTHER IN THE PAST: EARTH - THE AMAZON VILLAGE IN THESSALY

"What in Tartarus were you thinking, Ephiny? Dumping a damned male in my bed while Xena is on a hunting expedition. Are you completely daft or do you have a death wish?"

"I thought it would be easier for everyone concerned if Xena were not in the vicinity while you ..." the curly-headed woman was visibly embarrassed.

"While I what?" Gabrielle asked with a look that could have turned Medusa into stone. "And it better be a damned good explanation."

Two curse words in almost as many sentences, this was so unlike the usually gentle and soft spoken bard that Ephiny internally grimaced and almost stumbled over her words when she answered.

"While you fulfill your Queenly obligation to give the Nation an heir, my Queen."

"Hera's left tit! While I do what? What by Hades are you talking about?"

"A child, an Amazon Princess of your own blood, one that will carry on the line, your line. I'm sorry the elders insisted that you prove your willingness to respect our traditions as soon as possible."

"Screw the Elders!" Gabrielle started pacing. "First of all get this sorry excuse for a man out of my sight and out of the village, now!"

The Regent signalled two of the Royal Guard who dragged the hapless man out of the Royal hut.

Having reached the front part of the hut for the third time, Gabrielle stopped and stared out of the window onto the village square. Angry energy was pouring off her, and Ephiny found herself strangely attracted and a bit frightened by this unexpected side of her friend and Queen. Gabrielle suddenly turned around.

"I need some answers, Regent Ephiny. Queen Melosa never had children of her own, so don't tell me this crap about a child of my blood."

"With Queen Melosa it was different. She was the bond-mate of the former Amazon Princess and thus the logical choice for becoming the new Queen. The Queen and her daughter were killed in an ambush when I had just started my warrior training. A warlord wanted to make us leaderless in order to lead us into slavery. We fought him off but a lot of our warriors died. Melosa had fought like a woman possessed, always at the front lines, regardless of her own safety. In the end she was severely wounded and no one believed that she would survive. So, the Council of Elders named the former weapons' master as the new Queen.

"The woman always had had a mean streak and it turned out that she was not strong enough to withstand the temptations of power. No one was safe of her temper tantrums and random punishments, not even the children.

"Melosa slowly healed. She planned to leave the village as soon as her health was completely restored. She said that staying would only remind her of everything she had lost.

"Being joined in the name of Artemis is almost as strong a bond as blood. So, the elders came and asked her to challenge the new Queen, as was her right as the only surviving member of the Queen's extended family.

"When the Queen heard about it, she had the elders arrested and charged with treason. The unprecedented act changed Melosa's mind and she challenged the former weapons' master. It was a hard and long fight, but she came out victorious. Before she took the mask she solemnly vowed to always stay faithful to her lost love.

"A couple of years later the council approached her with the request to give the Nation an heir and she surprised everyone by naming her younger sister. She told them that this was as close as they would ever come to get an heir of her blood and reminded them of her vow. Melosa had proven herself to be a good Queen and everyone liked Terreis, so they accepted."

Silence settled over the room and Gabrielle resumed her pacing. After a few candledrops she said, "Call a Council meeting. I'll tell these old meddlers that I will never cheat on my consort and that you will be my heir. You already have my right of caste, so it shouldn't be a problem."

"It's not as easy as that, Gabrielle. An heir is about the future, and I'm older than you are. Besides, I already tried this argument. I even threatened them with Xena's wrath, but this time the Elders won't be easily swayed. Now that you decided to rule the Amazon Nation for good, they insist on having a child of your blood. With Melosa's bond-mate a line of Queens died out that had ruled the Nation for more than fifteen generations. They want stabi..."

This instant the door to the hut burst open and Xena stood in the door frame. She was breathing heavily and searched for her partner's eyes. "Are you alright? I could feel your anger."

"I am now." Gabrielle raised one of her hands towards the warrior and Xena took her

protectively in her arms, reaffirming her feeling that her small wife was in reality far from 'alright'.

"What happened?" The question was directed towards Ephiny who squirmed uneasily under the piercing blue eyes but Gabrielle answered.

"The Council of Elders mistook me for some sort of broodmare and had my loyal regent here put a 'stallion' in our bed. They don't want my bloodline to die out."

Silence weighted heavily on the room for what to Ephiny seemed like an eternity she spent wishing she were at the other end of their territory to escape the consort's expected fury.

Then Xena burst into a fit of laughter. "Did they get into the healer's supply of henbane or are they simply drunk? Gabrielle will still lead the Amazons when their great-great-great-grandchildren are old women. She doesn't need an heir. What part of immortal didn't they understand?"

Seeing the concern still etched onto Ephiny's face, her hilarity gradually changed to something close to anger, especially because her connection with Gabrielle let her understand how upset her lover really was at finding a naked man on their bed.

"They listened but they didn't believe you. I didn't believe you. I saw you sweating and bleeding, both of you. You can't be immortal," Ephiny answered in a quiet voice but with a hint of defiance.

"Eph," Gabrielle answered, "do you really think Artemis would have let us get away with lying about something this important? The only reason she attended the council session was to make it easier for all of you to believe us."

Ephiny's eyes went to the hilt of Xena's sword.

"Oh no, don't even think about it. Believe us or don't, your choice. We're immortal, not invulnerable. So, there will be no demonstration of our ability. Just get it into your head and don't even think of trying such a stunt ever again. Xena is not the one with the mean temper in this relationship. Understood, Eph?"

"Yes, your majesty," the regent said, lowering herself on one knee and putting a fist over her heart.

Gabrielle snuggled closer in Xena's arms and visibly relaxed. "So, now, what do we do with the elders?" Gabrielle turned her head and read her lover's face. "Oh no, my big dumb warrior; when I said no demonstrations I especially meant you, my love. We'll find a diplomatic way or some legal loop-hole.

"Ephiny, I want you to bring to me every scroll, every bit of parchment ever written about succession rites, heirs to the throne, the right of caste, the royal bloodline, everything. And a

detailed account of the duties and rights of the Council of Elders; playing matchmaker certainly shouldn't be part of their job description."

"That's a lot of reading material but I'll get it to you, my friend. And to make up for my mistake I'd like to help sort it out."

The three of them poured over the numerous scrolls for days and then summoned the Council of Elders.

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The spokeswoman of the elders even had the audacity to call the Queen on refusing to mate with the man they had given to her, especially since they had gone to so much trouble to find close to the consort in height and colouring. Xena growled at them and they immediately fell silent.

With a calming hand on the raven-haired woman's arm Gabrielle spoke, "Members of the Council of Elders, we appreciate your concern for the continuation of our line but the way you chose to express your concerns was out of line. It definitively crossed the boundaries of what the council, of what you are supposed to do."

There were loud murmurs of disapproval and even outrage. Xena stopped them with a loud whistle.

"Be quiet and listen to what our Queen has to say," Ephiny said while stepping closer to the Xena and Gabrielle. "The Queen's anger at the 'surprise' we dropped on her was such that it was felt by her consort several leagues away and brought her back at a run. That alone should tell you that everything they told us after their joining ceremony is true. The Queen and the consort really can sense each other's feelings and they really are immortal." Sensing the next loud outburst coming she added, "Now is not the time for long explanations. Just accept at face value what you have been told and be assured of Artemis' blessing."

There still was some discontented murmuring among the assembled elders but this time the trio on the dais waited them out.

"In the early days of Amazon history," Gabrielle said, "the Council of Elders has been formed to help and to advise the Queen. Over the centuries they even became responsible for naming a new Queen should the old one die without leaving an heir or giving away her right of caste. There were even a few times in history when the Council of Elders acted as a regent for a Queen too young to rule by herself.

"So, the council acted within their right when naming the predecessor of Queen Melosa. However," Xena's voice gained force without getting louder, "the Council of Elders never has had the right to force the Queen to do what they want. And that is exactly what you tried to do a few days ago. You severely overstepped your bounds - and according to the history scrolls not only with Queen Gabrielle but with generations of Queens before her. This will end, now and

forever."

Stunned silence greeted Xena's announcement.

"From now on, every single Elder who takes it upon herself to make my decisions for me will be removed from the council and replaced by someone who knows better," Gabrielle said and let her words sink in. "And as Queen of this tribe and the Amazon Nation I tell you that I will give the Nation an heir to the mask if and when I think the time is right. The law clearly states that the Queen must have an heir or someone holding her right of caste. Ephiny has my right of caste; so, you have no legal ground on which to stand. Your concerns, however, are legitimate."

"Your reaction to the news of our immortality showed us that our sisters are not ready to accept the truth about the Queen and me. Some simply might not believe us but others would begin to treat us differently, to lionise us just because we can't die. It also could pose some problems in our endeavour to reunite the Amazon Nation," Xena continued.

"For the sake of stability an official announcement will be made that the consort and her Queen will refrain from having children in order to concentrate our energy on the union of the Amazon tribes and villages of the world in one Nation. This should keep even the most outspoken of our sisters quiet." Gabrielle added, "Tell them it's a sacrifice we willingly make in order to create a strong and united Amazon Nation."

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## THE PAST: GAIA - THE GREAT TEMPLE

"That doesn't exactly explain the pictures in the next room," Samantha said thoughtfully but with a hint of irritation in her voice when Gabrielle took a break to reposition herself in her wife's arms.

Janet gave her lover a slightly disapproving look because she could feel that the harder part of Queen Gabrielle's story was yet to come but she also sent her a disarming smile and put one of her hands on top of Samantha's nervously tapping fingers.

She took the hint. "I'm sorry, your majesty. I meant no disrespect but I still don't understand. What you told us only confirms that you had no intention of giving the Nation, what did you call it, 'a child of your blood'. Something must have happened to change your mind. And it also doesn't explain this prophesy thing."

"No, it doesn't, Samantha," Xena finally said. "I know you deserve an answer but it would take the rest of the night to even come close. It's ..."

"Something happened, something terrible. A lot of people died, people you loved. You and Gabrielle having your first child and the beginning of this prophesy thing is somehow linked together, right?" Janet said in a quiet voice, waiting for one of the other women to nod before she

continued.

"Dear Goddess, it's true, all of his stories were true - and we didn't believe him." Janet said.

Seeing the clearly confused expression on the faces of her companions the small doctor continued,

"My father was military, Army, as was his father and the father of his father, but my grandfather on my mother's side was a teacher, the dean of the department of ancient history at the University of Charlottesville in Virginia. He saw to it that all of his grand-children got a well-rounded education. We always spent the Christmas holidays with him and Grams and he told us stories of Ancient Greece and Rome, stories never to be found in traditional history books.

"One winter, I was about eight or nine, my brothers and I came down with a severe case of the flu and he told us a story to get our minds off the snowflakes invitingly dancing outside of our bedroom and the voices of the other children shouting outside, reminding us how much fun we just missed. The three of us also had a case of really guilty conscience because the day before we fell ill, on our way to our grandparents' house, our father had told us that we would be punished if we didn't obey. We thought getting ill was the punishment.

"The story he told us... I don't know why I thought about it just now. I haven't thought about his stories for years," she ended suddenly losing her nerve.

"Take your time, Janet, tell us what you remember. It might be important," Xena encouraged her, hoping to find the answer to the one question for which they didn't have an answer, yet.

"It's been a long time ago. But it somehow started with Caesar's death in Rome and the seizure of power by Octavian. The Gods were angry because he won Rome by betrayal and lies and not by the power of his armies. They sent a plague."

Janet spoke slowly, like piecing back together the parts of an old jigsaw puzzle without being certain that it still had all its pieces.

"It was called the red death and like all epidemics attacked the weak and the poor, the very young and the very old first. It began very slowly and for years no one took notice.

"While Octavian was changing his name to Augustus the Great, while he was busy expanding his powerbase from Rome to the rest of the Roman Empire, the epidemic spread but it still kept to the quarters of the poor and the outcasts. At the battle of Action the last of his opponents, Marcus Antonius, was soundly defeated; and the day Antonius and Cleopatra killed themselves the red death reached Rome and began to kill regardless of status or wealth. One of its first victims was Gaius Secundus, the son Octavian had from a servant in the household of his mother, the only son of his blood.

"The red death swept through the Roman Empire like the plague did in the Middle Ages. The priests of the Olympian gods tried everything short of human sacrifices.

"It is said that one day a woman wearing silver armour and a helmet with a mask came to the emperor in a dream. She told him that the man who one day would take his throne would not be his son but be the child of his heart. She also told him that the red death no longer differentiated between emperor, priest, and beggar, and that he would have to change the way he ruled the Roman Empire if he wanted the epidemic to end.

"For the first time in his life, the man who had the Senate declare war on Cleopatra and thus had tricked his best friend into betraying his country, for the first time Augustus the Great was afraid. He heeded the words of the woman and changed, and slowly the red death lost its hold and was soon forgotten - but everyone still remembers the long reign of Rome's first Emperor, Gaius Julius Caesar Octavianus, later known as Augustus, the Great.

"Gramps also told us that when this cold was over we still would be there to tell about it and we still would have the chance to decide about our lives. He didn't exactly contradict our father but he gave us the opportunity to see things with other eyes."

There was a long moment of silence before Samantha said, "In the fifteenth year after the ides of mars a plague came to punish the betrayers and their seed, and a great ruler was born out of a tyrant in tears."

"Sam? How?"

"It was on a piece of paper in one of the books on Greek grammar you gave me a couple of months ago. It struck me as curious to find a Latin text in a Greek book. But I still don't understand."

"I don't know for sure, Sam, but I think that the red death also killed a lot of Amazons and that this somehow let the Queen change her mind. I think by having their first child they wanted to prove to the Amazons that the Nation still had a future," Janet answered her lover though she also tried to gauge Gabrielle's reaction.

"I really would like to get to know your grandfather, Janet," Xena answered.

"I can try and contact him, but I don't know how he'll react. We have not spoken in more than ten years. Except for the annual birthday and Christmas card we don't have any contact. But I know that he still lives in the house he and my mother have been born in, though Mom had asked him more than once to move in with them after Grams' death. I can understand him. The manor has been in the family since before the War of Independence."

Another long period of silence followed with the two immortals sensing that their younger counterparts were not ready to delve into their respective pasts.

"There was a lot of truth in the story your grandfather told you, Janet," Gabrielle finally said.

"We heard a lot of rumours, one contradicting the other. We tried to stay clear from the hot spots

of Roman policy, and over the years we managed to step by step overcome the distrust and petty jealousies of the other Amazon tribes scattered throughout the known world.

"It had been hard work, especially for Xena, but they finally accepted me as their leader, their High Queen.

"In the year of Cleopatra's death we had a big meeting of all the tribes to prepare for the evacuation, and for the first time they also brought their families, their mothers and daughters and granddaughters. Some of them had fallen ill during the long journey and before we knew how the red death was taking its toll.

"At first it looked like a common cold with headaches, fever, and a sore throat. Just when we began to let our guard down, the formerly sick were assaulted again. It started with very high fever, nausea, vomiting and diarrhea, and finally..."

"Internal and external bleeding," Janet whispered. "The red death was a hemorrhagic fever."

"Yes, Janet, possibly the most serious and most deadly outbreak of hemorrhagic fever in the history of Earth," Gabrielle answered tonelessly. "Xena and the other healers tried frantically to find a cure, but nothing worked. All we could do was to try and make it easier for the ones infected."

Gabrielle's voice was shaky in remembered horror. Her memory was rife with images she wasn't eager to describe to anyone else, not now, not ever.

"Artemis had provided us with a communications device, in case of emergencies," Xena took over the story telling. "And we called on her, but even her superior knowledge at first proved helpless against the plague.

"Athena used her natural healing abilities to ease the suffering of the infected. She didn't care if they were friend or foe. She gave all she had to give - but it wasn't enough.

"Thousands of people died and all we were able to do was to ease their suffering. Sometimes, she told us, one had to let Nature have her way. She said that a new balance would come after the plague had run its course.

"Despite her words she continued to work on a cure or at least some kind of immunisation. She took blood samples and surprisingly found antibodies in our blood, Gabrielle's and mine. We were the only ones. The ambrosia had rewritten our respective DNA, and it now produced antibodies against everything even remotely harmful. Athena at first tried to reproduce the overall effect, even though she risked creating more immortals, but it didn't work.

"She then tried what you would call gene splicing and one month after the first funeral pyres had burned in our village her antidote was ready. It not only prevented further infection; in combination with Athena's natural healing abilities, even the worst cases were cured. A modified version was administered as a vaccine. Unfortunately it could not be synthesised but had to be

extracted from our blood and cells. We had a sufficient amount to make sure that the Amazons would be safe but not enough to make the whole plague end. We had to let it run its course.

"Being untouchable by the red death made the Amazons even more suspicious in the eyes of the general population and we decided to set our evacuation plan in motion earlier than initially planned. We wanted to avoid any run-ins with the Roman army. That's why I had a chat with the Roman Emperor. He took me for the embodiment of Justice herself, come to punish him for the way he got his throne, and it seems, my visit scared some sense in him."

"When Xena returned to our village in Thessaly we began our preparations in earnest. Artemis came to us. She was flustered and worried. After a lot of prompting she admitted that there had been an accident at the lab. One of the experiments in combining the healing effects of our blood to the benefit of the Nation had been exposed to a light dose of radiation and star...."

"You let her take eggs for experimentation?!" Janet burst out.

"It seemed like a good idea at the time. The eggs had the full set of genetic information without the immortality twist that runs throughout the rest of our cells."

"Cross ovular fertilisation, wow! I never thought it would work. What kind of radiation did she use? How did she combine the eggs? Was there any kind of pre-selection?" The medical researcher in Janet quickly overrode the other aspects of her personality.

Samantha looked from one woman to the next, trying to wrap her mind around what she just had heard. Before Queen or Consort could answer Janet's question she asked, "Just take a step or two back, would you? You mean to tell me that Artemis/Athena accidentally fertilised one of Gabrielle's eggs with one of Xena's, right?"

Janet just nodded.

"And that you then decided to let it grow into your first daughter?" This question was directed towards the women sitting across from her.

"To make a long story short: Yes, Samantha. Gabrielle carried our first daughter. When we told the Council of Elders a few moons after the implantation they saw it as a sign that our new beginning would be an auspicious one.

"At the same time one of the advance scouts we had sent to Egypt to check out Athena's ring returned with a scroll. It contained a vision, a prophesy of sorts, the high priestess of Isis had had the night of Cleopatra's death. It's this prophesy our sisters finally see fulfilled since you successfully threw the chakram and saved our lives though the first rumours came up when you both helped to bring Larina and Tirrin back."

"What does it say?" Samantha asked in an almost toneless voice.

"When the darkness of old is about to descend again on the righteous, two heroes will arise, the

first born out of the union of two great warriors, the second born out of love for the other. They will do what no one could before them; they will save what never should have been in danger. They will bring together what never should have been torn asunder; they will end the cycle of hatred and lead all that is living into a new era."

"Sounds like a pretty tall order but I don't see what it should have to do with us." Samantha answered almost defensively.

Xena only raised an eyebrow at the comment.

"I have to admit," Janet finally offered, "that Sam did quite a few incredible things since joining the SGC, and before. I also concede that she has an innate ability to use this round weapon of yours, Xena - but this prophesy is talking about two people and it makes them out like some sort of superheroes, saving the universe for good, or something. So, it definitely doesn't sound like us."

Xena and Gabrielle were looking at each other, each of them waiting for the other to react first. Finally Gabrielle took a deep breath and said, "Our first daughter was named Diti, in deference to Athena's just newly-refound partner. She was born in the year thirty before your current Earth calendar. Since then our daughters and granddaughters and great-granddaughters have had a lot of loving relationships. They were as totally devoted to each other as they were to our, to their offspring - but none of them, ever, had..."

"...had the connection Sam and I share," Janet finished Gabrielle's sentence; and after waiting for Gabrielle's nodded confirmation, she continued, "In all these centuries, with thousands of worlds available to chose from, none of them ever found her soulmate??"

The small doctor cast another inquisitive look towards the other couple and then continued, "You waited for this, for us to happen but it never did; and when you long had given up, Sam and I came along - and you don't have the slightest idea why we are what we are, right? Why we are what you are?"

Another bout of silence followed before Xena broke into a bright smile. "Samantha may be the genius, but you are the bright one in this partnership."

Expectedly Janet coloured slightly. Samantha, however, wasn't as shy as her partner, "There really never have been any soulmates since you came here?"

"Don't get ahead of yourself, Sam. Yes, there have been and there are now soulmates on Gaia and in the Amazon Nation, more than only a few of them in fact. Sadly, none of them ever were among the children of our blood."

Gabrielle let the overall range of her words settle in. She saw Samantha's blue orbs widening and Janet's brown take on a thoughtful expression and then concentrate on her hands.

She nudged Xena with her elbow but the raven-haired woman chose not to respond.

"I'm the first to have found the better half of my soul?" Samantha asked, "I was the first to find my soulmate in more than two thousand years?"

Xena indicated a slight nod.

There was another moment or eternity of silence while they either looked at each other or avoided to do so.

"How?"

"We don't kn..." Gabrielle took a deep breath. "Actually, Xena has a theory. She thinks that after we came back from dying on the Roman crosses at Mount Amaro, there was a part of our souls that had been melded together. We sort of became one soul."

Samantha's eyes lit up. "So, you never expected to find the other half of a pair of soulmates in your offspring because you knew that both of your souls already resided in your daughters and granddaughters."

"Only that it wasn't true," Xena continued. "Our souls united but this new, united soul..."

"...didn't have a soulmate to balance it," Janet suddenly added. "I can't even begin to understand or to rationalise it, but I think that this soul was searching but it didn't have a counterbalance until I met Sam. That's scary."

"We belong together," Samantha took over, "on a more fundamental basis than you or I or everyone else ever would have thought possible. Yeah, that's scary, and wonderful."

Silence fell and the two women from Earth probably wouldn't have broken eye-contact if a grenade had exploded next to them. The rulers of the Amazon Nation wanted to give them the chance to at least start to cope with the surprising, potentially life-changing information they just had been given. They, however, had not counted on Janet's and Samantha's agile minds.

"So, how do we find out?" Janet asked no one in particular.

"We could trace your family line, and also the one on my father's side. Perhaps we'll come up with something. We could even make it a game to get Cassy to help."

Janet kissed Samantha on the cheek and answered, "It's a starting point, and Cassy will have a blast. It would be like a treasure hunt. I can ask my mother for help."

Xena hated to be the one to bring them back to the realm of facts but it had to be done. "Don't get your hopes up. More than two thousand years is a long time. You probably will not find any conclusive evidence."

"Xena, darling, they want to be sure, and they have to start somewhere." The tall warrior smiled

at the Queen. "Besides, I sense at least one story in there waiting to be found.

"Sabrina plans to continue her research on Earth next month. She found a few leads in my stories on where to find more of our scrolls. I'm sure she'd gladly help you."

"We'll talk to her about it before we return to the SGC to face General Hammond tomorrow," Janet answered.

"What you told us, about my great-great-grandmother, what will be the consequences? What do you expect from us?" Samantha needed to know.

"Expect? Nothing! Hope? Everything," Xena answered with an almost pained half-smile.

"We will never force you to accept your heritage, Samantha, and want nothing more than what you are ready to give, than what you both are comfortable with."

Gabrielle said softly and put a calming hand on her consort's cheek. It was one of those gestures Janet and Samantha had learned to read as a sign that there were some hurtful memories involved.

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## Chapter Nine: **The Trial**

### THE PRESENT: ON BOARD OF THE 'SCYTHIA'

Samantha woke to the sound of two people arguing but trying to keep their voices down.

"No, sir, I will not wake her up. Her injuries have been healed but Sam is still weak and needs all the rest she can get."

"But Doc, it's only breakfast." The voice of Samantha's commanding officer almost whined.  
"Carter has to eat, especially if she's still weak."

Samantha heard the genuine concern behind his adolescent attitude and started to get out of bed but stopped when Janet spoke again.

"I know you're worried, Colonel, but give us some more time. Sam will be alright. She's tough."

"That's what I'm afraid of, Janet. Don't let her bottle it up."

There was a long moment of silence between them, full of memories and feelings of which neither of them wanted to talk and about which she definitively didn't want to think.

"We'll see you for lunch, sir, and thank you, Jack."

"Just take care of her," he answered gruffly.

The door closed, but Janet didn't join Samantha in the bedroom. Instead she heard faint sniffing. Foregoing a robe she jumped out of bed and knelt in front of her crying lover.

"Please, don't cry, my love. Everything will be alright."

"You're so thin, baby," Janet said.

"Sarcophagus diet, can't recommend it." When her attempt at humour didn't even elicit a smile, she added, "We'll speak with Teal'c and Master Niva about a conditioning program, and I promise I'll eat everything you want me to, even mashed potatoes."

That finally got her a smile. "You hate mashed potatoes, Sam."

Janet's voice was still shaky and Samantha finally understood that with O'Neill her lover had been hiding behind her doctor's mask. So, she sat down next to her and cradled the robe-clad body in her arms.

"We'll get through this, my love, together. Your love kept me from turning evil. It always will, no matter how far away you are. You're my beacon of light, baby, guiding me out of the darkness."

Brown eyes found hers and Janet once again started to cry. What she said between sobs allowed Samantha to piece together what had shaken the strong doctor.

When the violent sobs turned into tears, Samantha said, "It was only a dream, my love. It was only a dream. I didn't kill Nut; I didn't turn to darkness. I didn't go on a rampage against the System Lords. It was only a dream."

"In reality, you saved me; you always will. Even if I had totally lost myself, you still would have found a way to get me back. I would have followed you out of the depths of hell or from the heights of heaven. There's nothing stronger in the universe than our love."

Janet snuggled closer against the naked body of her lover. It felt so good to be held and reassured, but a tiny voice told her that it should be the other way round. She should be the one to nurture and comfort her partner; she should be the strong one.

Somehow her self-recriminations must have seeped through their link because she suddenly was wrapped in Samantha's love as if in a soft blanket.

"I heard part of your conversation with Jack O'Neill, Janet. I won't bottle it up; I promise. I can't hide my feelings with you and I don't want to. You will help me through the occasional nightmare and tell me to get real when I start to berate myself for getting caught in the first place."

But there's one thing you have to understand.

"This time was different. What happened was only physical. I don't want to downplay it; I wouldn't wish what happened to me on our worst enemy, not even on Kinsey. But it was only physical. Jolinar and the Entity messed with my head without wanting to. Hathor wanted to make us believe that everyone we loved was long dead. She played mind games with us, as did Apophis on Netu. Nut didn't. She was straightforward for a Goa'uld."

"Sammy, what she did to you would have broken just about anyone else."

"Anyone else does not have your love to see them through, Janet."

Janet wanted to protest but Samantha put one of her fingers on her lips and whispered, "I'll show you."

Janet was helplessly drawn in while Samantha one by one lowered all of her considerable mental defences. Layer by layer was stripped away, and at the centre of her soul, the core of her being, there was a shining sphere of light, at the centre was their love for each other, too strong to be destroyed.

An eternal moment later, Janet started to guide Samantha through her own mind. At the very centre was a point where the different aspects of her personality seemed to merge, the doctor, the woman, the daughter, the mother, the lover, the soldier, the friend, the partner, the granddaughter; right there, at the nexus of all of this also was the sphere of light.

None of them had ever thought of using their link this way. Over the months they had learned to rely on it to make sure that the other was alright. It flared to life when they were making love but they never before had consciously tapped into it this way; and neither Janet nor Samantha had believed it to be this strong.

When they finally opened their eyes the tears they were crying were tears of joy and gratitude.

Janet's stomach protested its emptiness and Samantha's joined in but they still were reluctant to move.

Janet said softly, "Master Niva once told me that a real Amazon joining is more than just for this life. She said that it's a joining of souls for all eternity. I think I would like this, to tell everyone that you're mine and I'm yours for all eternity."

"We didn't even look at the texts the Queen sent over, Jan. Are you sure that this is what you want?"

"Yes, my love. It's what I want."

-X-X-X-

After a lengthy lunch with SG-1 and a few others, Xena gave Samantha a thorough tour of the Scythia. She was engrossed with the technical details and her mind was already coming up with possible applications for Earth's use. She even stopped worrying about the upcoming trial and her testimony.

Samantha recognised Gabrielle's regent from Gaia as the spokeswoman of the jury. All she knew about the woman was that her name was Bedria and that she was joined with a member of the Royal Guard. She never had had anything to do with her but there was something in her eyes she didn't particularly like, but still the Queen would not have named her as her regent if she would not trust her.

During the first few minutes of the trial it looked as if everything would be cut and dried, as if everything would be over quickly.

Bedria read the charges; Nut pleaded guilty; Samantha was asked if the written confession the members of the jury had been given to read was correct. Bedria listed the jury's options for punishment.

And faster than Samantha would have thought possible she was asked if she had something to add before the jury retired, "Yes, I do. Honourable members of the jury, I ask you to consider extenuating circumstances."

Indignant huffing was heard in the audience but Samantha was only focused on the brown eyes of her partner.

"Amazons risked their lives to save you, Earthling, and you want us to simply let her go?" Bedria asked with barely masked outrage.

Samantha reluctantly broke eye-contact with her lover and looked at the stocky woman speaking for the jury. Unfortunately her face was covered with an Amazon war mask that made it impossible to read her features.

"Regent Bedria, honourable jury, the last thing on my mind is to let Queen Nut go unpunished. All I ask of you is to make sure that this trial is not about revenge but about justice."

The comments from the audience immediately changed in tune. "Well said." - "Spoken like a true Amazon." - "A true daughter of Artemis." - "Justice, yes."

Bedrias's body posture stiffened. "We have heard your recommendation, Earthling, and we thank you."

She then turned her attention to the other jury members. "Dear colleagues and friends, I want you to keep in mind that this Earthling just has suffered horrible torture. Her reasoning might have been affected by her ordeal."

Bedria began to turn around as if to dismiss the blond Air Force Officer. Stunned by the repeated insult from the spokeswoman, Samantha quickly rounded the banister and glared at her. She barely kept enough hold on her temper to limit herself to a verbal response only. Her voice was cold and controlled.

"Regent Bedria, with all due respect, that is enough. I let your disparaging use of words go unanswered once but I will not let it happen again. This is a question of honour.

"My name is Samantha Gabriella Carter. I'm a Major of the United States Air Force. I'm Tau'ri, you might even call me a human, but the way you use the word Earthling is clearly intended to be insulting. If you ever do it again I will judge it as an attack on my honour and will act accordingly. This is the first and only warning you'll get." Samantha's voice was calm but cold as ice.

The body posture of the regent visibly stiffened but Samantha ignored her. Instead she addressed the other jury members.

"Regent Bedria, however, has brought up a good point. My reasoning might indeed have been affected." She let her words sink in. "I'm a physicist and a soldier, a warrior. As such I don't presume to know much about psychology but wouldn't it be a much more natural reaction to want revenge for what was done to me?" Samantha let her words sink in and added, "However, this has nothing to do with my feelings. It has to do with Amazon justice and with an Amazon sense of honour."

The woman to the right of Bedria stood and removed her mask. "Why do you think there were extenuating circumstances, young warrior?"

"I think that Nut was not entirely in her right mind at the time, Captain Larina."

Because Larina had commanded the Sycthia during the rescue mission, she thus had qualified for sitting on the jury.

"Would you please elaborate, Major Carter?" another woman asked.

Samantha sighed; she hated having to speak in public but not because she didn't know how.

"Doctor Fraiser and I have a daughter. Her name is Cassandra. We adopted her four years ago but we both love her as if she were born of us, of our bodies. We always will love her, regardless of what will happen in the future. She is a good and bright kid but should she become a thief or a killer we still would love her. We would not stand in the way of justice but we still would love her. If someone made me believe that Cassandra had been murdered without cause, I might have lost it too. I also might have wanted revenge. Anubis convinced Nut that we, that SG-1 killed three of her children without just cause. She was blinded by grief.

"It doesn't excuse what she did but in my book it makes it a lot more understandable. So, when

you make your decision please take this into account. And there's one more thing you might want to consider, honourable jury.

"As far as I can tell, Queen Nut is loved by the people on her planet. She guides them more than she commands them. She helps them to prosper. They are loyal to her.

"Nut is a Goa'uld but she's not like the others. I'm convinced that she genuinely cares about her people. Taking her away for an extended period of time has the potential to destabilise the society.

"May the wisdom of Athena guide your decisions, honourable members of the Grand Council."

-X-X-X-

Ten minutes later Samantha and Janet sat closely together on a few cushions in the Queen's private meeting room. The small doctor wanted to take her lover in her arms because she sensed her barely suppressed agitation through their link, but caution won out with the leaders of the SG-teams sent to Samantha's rescue sitting close by.

*To hell with caution, Janet thought. They all had heard Sam's proposal. Sam had just called her 'her mate' in front of everyone. Keeping up false appearances no longer was necessary. And so, Janet closed her arms around Samantha's slender frame and was rewarded with a grateful smile.*

Teal'c and Daniel entered and glided easily on the floor but O'Neill and General Hammond seemed to have a hard time to find a comfortable position. Trays with refreshments were brought in and the consort joined them.

"Queen Gabrielle sends her apologies. The jury asked for her input during their deliberations. You really gave them some things to think about, Sam."

"You spoke like a true Amazon, young warrior," Master Niva said while she lowered herself on her right knee to give her report. "Your highness, the scouts are on their way and will report back in three candelmarks at the latest. I sent them to the local temples and inns; so, it shouldn't take them long to find the answers we need. I will be notified as soon as the first of them returns."

"Thank you, weapons' master." Xena said. "Please stay, and help yourself to something to drink. They probably will take all night to make their decision. For now we have other things to discuss. General, do you want to tell them or should I?"

"I'll do it, your highness. After all it was my idea." General Hammond said. "During the trial against Anise and the others I approached Consort Xena and High Queen Gabrielle with an idea.

"I was getting increasingly worried about the growing influence of Senator Kinsey and the NID; especially about their seemingly limitless funds. I started investigating and what I found had me

even more worried. The money the NID is so generously spending comes from a group of private investors. They call themselves the 'Trust' - and it took weeks just to find out that name alone.

"It seems that for some time Adrian Conrad was one of the players, but they cut him off when he became obsessed with the idea of being healed by a symbiote."

A shadow passed over Janet's face at the mention of the man who nearly had her beloved killed two and a half months ago. She forcibly brought her mind back to General Hammond's voice.

"We had nothing but suspicions concerning the other members of the Trust but we needed to find out. So, I came up with a plan to bring them out of hiding."

It didn't take Samantha and Janet long to understand where this would lead and they looked at their commanding officer with new appreciation and deepened respect. Daniel wasn't far behind them, and less subtle in his praise.

"Crafty, sir!" he commented. "So, since you and the rest of the upper command level of the SGC apparently deserted Earth, they should feel that their goal is in reach and become less cautious."

"Yes, son, but for the benefit of everyone else I'd like to stick to the order of events."

"Sorry, General Hammond!"

"It's as Doctor Jackson said. I wanted them to feel safe, safe enough to come out of hiding - and I thought that one victory would do the trick, but Consort Xena made me understand that it wouldn't be that easy. So, we did some fine-tuning and put a few security measures in place. I helped to get a few Amazon scouts in positions where they can keep an eye on things."

"The conditions the consort transmitted for a treaty were staged to sound as offensive as possible to the more conservative elements among the Joint Chiefs without being strategically unsound. Kinsey and his cronies had to pull a lot of strings to get the rejection of the Amazons' offer through; and we still had to tweak things a bit."

"From then on the Trust was sure that they had a solid foothold in the Pentagon and became more confident, more aggressive. My friends among the Joint Chiefs had voted against the treaty and soon were approached by representatives of the Trust. That gave us a few names of the string holders and a couple of other leads."

"We originally had planned to stage some sort of operations' breakdown in a few months in the hope that they would try and take control of the base and the Gate. I'm sorry that I didn't tell you about the plan earlier but I needed your reaction to be as genuine as possible, Majors."

"We understand, sir. Is this why you insisted on sending our resident psychologist with us to Gaia?" Samantha asked.

"Yes, Major Carter. I had my eyes on Mackenzie since the incident with Macello's little toys. I doubt that he knows who he really is working for but he's their eyes and ears on the base."

"So, what's next? What will happen now?" O'Neill asked.

"Well, colonel, we'll return to Gaia and wait. We have to let this play out without our direct interference. With a bit of luck they will hang themselves and if not we will expose them at the court martial hearings on which they undoubtedly will insist. It's as public as one can get without really going public."

"Then we'll need someone reliable in JAG," Colonel O'Neill commented.

"Yes, we do. Admiral Chegwiddden will make sure that we get a couple of his best officers for our defence. He's an old friend."

"So, the report from this Sturges guy was also part of your plan?"

"No, Jack. Commander Sturges came to his conclusions without any outside influence, but it helped our cover story." General Hammond answered.

"Mac..., Colonel Mackenzie told me that he's an honourable man, but as the son of a Navy preacher he was bound to be a bit more conservative than others," Janet added.

They talked a few more minutes about strategies and possibilities, and while the others decided to have an early dinner Samantha and Janet retired to their rooms.

-X-X-X-

As soon as the door to their temporary quarters closed behind them, Samantha gave her lover a passionate kiss that left them both breathless. Janet had felt her lover's body stiffen slightly when she had heard Sarah Mackenzie's name. Samantha's jealous streak had come out full force when they first met but ever since the incident with Stephen, Samantha did her best not to act on it. Janet still knew every time but since she no longer had to fear her temper tantrums she even felt a tiny bit flattered by Samantha's feelings.

"I love you, Sammy, no one else. I want to be with you, no one else."

"I'm sorry, Jan. I know I have no right and no reason to react this way. I'm sorry, baby."

"You are the one I love, Sammy. There's no need to apologise. I am yours, just like you are mine, and I can't wait to tell it to the whole universe. But for now I'm going to show it to you, up close and personal."

Janet claimed her partner's lips and Samantha willingly surrendered but had the presence of mind

to manoeuvre them closer to the couch. Suddenly the edge of the seat pressed against the back of her knees. She was pushed further back and landed on the soft leather-like seat. Without breaking the kiss, Janet straddled her and began to pull the black t-shirt out of her lover's pants. Samantha's hands found Janet's buttocks and pulled her closer.

It had become a private ritual between them that Janet took the lead whenever her partner felt vulnerable or insecure. So, Samantha didn't hesitate when the small doctor ordered her to take her top and bra off. Janet licked her lips in anticipation at the sight of her lover's proudly erect nipples.

Samantha let her hands wander up to her lover's waist and began to pull at Janet's shirt.

"No, baby, leave your hands right there at my waist, just where they were. You're about to be ravished and I don't want any distractions." Samantha looked at her with dilated but pleading eyes. "Just enjoy, Sammy."

Janet's voice now had a husky quality that betrayed her own arousal but Samantha knew from experience that she would not act on it anytime soon.

Once again her mouth was claimed and their tongues performed an intricate dance. Samantha put all her passion in the kiss but kept her hands where they were, glued to Janet's shapely behind. She moaned in disappointment when the kiss broke too soon but was rewarded by the sight of the golden speckles only desire brought out in her lover's eyes.

Janet the whole time had supported her weight on her knees and with her arms bracing themselves against the backrest of the couch. She put a gentle kiss on each of Samantha's eyes and the blue orbs obediently stayed closed without any further order. Janet changed her position and lowered herself on her love's lap - and though they both knew that the taller woman could easily throw her off, the astrophysicist still relished the feeling of being helplessly pinned down. Janet was so gentle when she was demanding; it made her feel cherished and safe.

Soft fingers painted the landscape of Samantha's face with featherlike touches, starting with the forehead and the temples, retracing the nose and cheekbones, passing over the jaw line and chin and ending up at her lips. Samantha instinctively opened them slightly. The invitation was accepted and Samantha began to suckle Janet's slender digit like a child. It withdrew, too soon, and she moaned in frustration. The finger instantly was back, pressing against her lips, sealing them - and as a good soldier Samantha would obey the unspoken command.

Then the contact was gone. Without Janet's familiar weight pressing down on her Samantha might have panicked at the sudden loss. She heard fabric scraping against fabric, and then something hit the floor. It didn't take a genius to know that Janet had just slipped out of her own shirt and regulation bra. Samantha imagined her lover's perfectly sculpted torso with breasts that inspired worship. In her mind's eye she saw the dark aureoles tighten in arousal and the stiff nipples demanding to be kissed but she didn't move a muscle. The only sign betraying her lustful thoughts was a slight acceleration of her heartbeat.

Two fingers touched the hollow of her throat; fingernails trailed over her skin and brushed by her nipples. Suddenly they were rolled between thumb and index finger and Samantha arched her back to show her approval. Her heartbeat picked up even more when the gentle rolling became more intense and finally morphed into a pinch. A hand closed around her right breast and started to gently knead it. The other hand disappeared; Janet's tongue flicked the hard nub and she arched her back even more.

As if in answer to her silent pleas Janet's mouth closed around the nipple, and Samantha's arousal shot right between her legs, intensifying the already painful throbbing of her clit. No other lover ever had wielded this much power over her. None had been able to penetrate her defences, but with Janet Samantha had learned that her tendency to take charge during sex had been nothing but the reflection of her unwillingness to let them all the way in. She still loved to be a bit dominating and Janet loved to let herself be guided.

Hand and mouth traded places. Janet pressed her backside harder against Samantha's hands to get a better angle. Samantha's whole body was trembling with need. A moan escaped her lips and Janet sealed them with her own, pressing her own breasts against the hard nipples.

Janet whispered in her ear, "My poor baby. You're such a good girl, so brave. Tell me what you want, my love."

The sensuality of her lover's voice hit Samantha deep in her soul. She was unable to answer, so only a whimper escaped her lips, but Janet didn't need words to know what her beloved so desperately craved.

"Open your beautiful eyes for me, Sammy, look at me."

Brown orbs held blues. Janet shifted her position; one of her knees was now between Samantha's thighs. She wouldn't be able to hold this position for long but at the moment more important things were on her mind. She unbuckled the belt of the BDU trousers and sent a silent thank you to the Amazon seamstress who had designed loose fitting combat wear and another thank you that her lover had gone commando this morning.

Samantha spread her legs a little wider and her heart skipped a beat at Janet's next command. "My breasts need your touch, baby. Caress them with your hands but don't touch the nipples."

Samantha eagerly obeyed while Janet's right hand played with her blond curls. She was dripping wet and they both knew that it wouldn't take much to push her over the edge. So, Janet's hand wriggled a bit deeper but took care not to touch Samantha's clit.

"Please, Jan, please make me come," Samantha pleaded and Janet happily obliged her. She rotated her wrist and entered the taller woman's folds with two fingers while her thumb pressed down on the clit. The muscular frame under her began to buck. Samantha shouted her name at the top of her lungs and finally collapsed against the back rest.

Janet waited for her beloved's breath to calm down before she withdrew her hand, valiantly

ignoring her own throbbing need, and began to clean her lover's juices from her fingers.

Samantha gasped at the sight and felt her own arousal return. Her blue eyes darkened in answer to the burning fire in Janet's orbs. It was time to give her lover the same gift she had just received. She pulled Janet closer and pulled them both to their feet. She scooped the smaller woman in her arms and somehow managed to get them to the bedroom without losing her slacks or tripping over her own feet.

Putting Janet on the bed, she whispered, "Now, it's my turn to show you how much you belong to me, my beloved."

Her voice was deeper than usual and made Janet shiver in anticipation.

-X-X-X-

The Grand Council needed until midday to come to a decision, not the least due to Regent Bedria's insistence on having both the symbiote and the host killed. In the end they found a rather creative solution that would not disturb the societal structure of Nut's planets. They sentenced Nut to two years of imprisonment in her host's body. A modified version of the Tollan separation device not larger than the crystal of a ribbon device would be worn around her neck. The symbiote would be able to see and hear everything that happened around her but would be unable to make herself heard or interfere with the outside world. Her host, Neged, would rule in her name and no one but Aisato, her First Prime, would know.

The palace servants, Jaffa warriors, and others who had witnessed Samantha's treatment would be told that she had been tortured to determine the worthiness of the Amazon Nation and Earth as allies. In her heart Samantha doubted that anyone would fall for such an explanation but all in all she was content with the decision of the Grand Council.

After the official announcement there had been a tiny voice telling her that the Goa'uld had been let go too lightly, but it disappeared after she had had the chance to read the reports of Master Niva's scouts. They confirmed her gut feeling that Nut was not like the other Goa'uld they had encountered over the years. She was seen as a ruler, not as a god. Even the temples were not dedicated to her but to concepts and ideas like health, justice, or fertility. At the inns and taverns the scouts had heard the people worry about the alien ship onto which their Queen supposedly had been escorted. That her First Prime was with her, however, seemed to ease their minds.

As she told the young Amazons a couple of days ago: it was not about personal revenge but about justice. But she also had been truthful when she had told the jury that she personally was not yet ready to forgive her torturer.

-X-X-X-X-X-

## Chapter Ten: **Homeward Bound**

### THE PRESENT: ON BOARD OF THE SCYTHIA

The next morning the Scythia left the orbit of Nut's main planet with the XS-01 safely tucked in one of the cargo bays. Samantha and Janet spent most of the day with the teams of the SGC who had set out to her rescue. They all were anxious about the future, not only about the court-martial they might face but also about the future and the security of Earth should the NID and the ominous Trust gain the upper hand.

From the second day of their journey back to Gaia, the Amazons distracted them as best as they could with sparring sessions or by making them work as part of the crew.

Jennifer Hailey was in heaven helping out in the engine room. Daniel was happily reviewing the scrolls Queen Nut had given to the Amazons. They evidently told the story of the arrival of Nut and her people at their current star system thousands of years ago and the early development of their society. Daniel was bubbling over with excitement when they all met to share their midday meal.

Samantha spent the mornings exercising under Master Bra'tac's watchful eyes. She was content with her range of motion, her flexibility, and speed but slightly disgruntled at her lack of stamina. Every day Samantha told herself that she would resist the temptation, but every day when they came back from their lunch, Janet convinced her to take a nap with her, and every day she quickly fell asleep in her lover's arms.

In the afternoons they continued together what Janet had started at the Gabrielle's insistence, the retelling of the rescue mission and the trial against the abductors and torturers of Gabrielle and Xena. The telling was not easy for Samantha and she relied a lot on Janet's support and quiet strength. Despite everything she had to admit that it was good for her to recall these days because it not only brought back painful memories but also happy and funny ones.

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### THE PAST: EARTH - SAMANTHA'S AND JANET'S HOUSE

They had been back on duty for most of a week after their confinement at the SGC and their unexpected time off. There were only three days before they were expected on Gaia for the Trial against Osiris, Anise, and the others. Garshaw, Selmac and a few other members of the High Council would be present as well as Bra'tac and his apprentice Rya'c as representatives of the free Jaffa.

Samantha had spent the better part of the afternoon trying in vain to figure out how an artifact worked that SG-6 had brought back from their last mission. It looked like a generator of sorts but

so far, she'd been unable to find out what it really did. Samantha was more than only slightly frustrated.

To make a bad day worse a small fire at one of the labs delayed her departure for about an hour, and on the way home it started to rain and Samantha found herself stuck in a traffic jam due to a multi-car pile-up. So, she was not only one hour later coming home than she had planned but also completely soaked through, just because she had insisted on taking the bike this morning. And to top it off, a rental car was blocking her driveway.

She stormed into the house shouting, "Janet, you wouldn't believe the day I had. I'm soaking wet and some idiot is blocking our drive..."

Samantha stopped in mid-word and mid-stride at the sight of a uniformed woman sitting on their couch and chatting with her lover and Cassandra. "I'm... I'm sorry!" she finally stammered.

Janet was quickly at her side, checking her with a doctor's eye. "Let me introduce you - and then you'll take a long, hot shower and change, baby. I don't want you to get ill."

She turned towards their guest who in the meantime had left the couch. "Sam, this is Lieutenant Colonel Sarah Mackenzie, an old friend. - Mac, I'd like to introduce Major Samantha Carter, my best friend and the love of my life."

Almost a lifetime of military training asserted itself and Samantha immediately snapped to attention, despite the fact that she was startled by her lover's openness.

"At ease, Major, please call me Mac. All my friends do, and everyone who brings such a smile to Janet's face can't be anything but."

The brunette Marine colonel said with a smile and an outstretched hand. Samantha offered a cautious smile of her own and took the offered hand. Janet then shoed her lover to take her shower.

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Thirty minutes later, Samantha still hadn't returned to the living room and the small doctor went in search of her lover. She found her in the bedroom, showered but undressed, with her tousled hair still slightly wet, sitting on the bed and staring at the wall with unseeing eyes. "Hey, baby, are you alright?"

"She's a colonel, Jan. She's in our house; she knows." She half babbled, half whispered.

"Most of the SGC knows, my love, Mac is an old friend, in fact she was one of my patients, one of my first patients. We immediately hit it off, and if she wanted to do anything about gays in uniform she could have outed me years ago. Try to relax, Sammy. Mac can be trusted."

"She's the JAG officer you called before we went to Gaia, right?"

"Yes, Sam. Believe me, she's no threat. I hope you don't mind but I told her that she could stay in the guest room for a couple of days."

"No, Jan, I don't mind. I trust you - though I had hoped to have you all to myself before we gate to Gaia."

"I'll make sure that we have some alone time when we're there; I'd like to spend some more time at the clearing with the waterfall. It's only a couple of days, baby. And now, hurry and get dressed. I left Mac with Cassy to raid the takeout drawer; and someone has to make sure that our darling daughter doesn't go overboard."

They had a great Chinese meal while Sarah and Janet talked about some past adventures and Samantha and Cassy listened and laughed. When Cassy excused herself to do the rest of her homework, Sarah asked.

"I never thought you would end up adopting a child, Janet."

Janet reluctantly gave her the official version, the one she also had told her parents.

"All of her family died in a car accident. Sam saved her before the wreck exploded. Cassandra's blood was poisoned by some of the fumes she inhaled after the accident. She's very sensitive to medicines and chemicals. So, I offered to take care of her because I know what to look for. But you're right, I never would have thought that I could be a good mother but over the time.... I may not have given life to her but I love her as if I had. She's really become my daughter."

Sarah Mackenzie was a lawyer, a good one at that, and she sensed a cover story when she heard one but as a military brat she also knew that now was not the time to call her old friend on it - not with the blond major practically bristling with protectiveness. So, she wasn't surprised by Samantha's question.

"Not to be nosey, Mac, but what brought you here? Just a social call?"

"Yes and no," the lawyer answered, repeating what she already had told her friend. "Admiral Chegwiddden chose me to act as an official JAG observer during a treason trial of one of our allies. I was ordered to report to the Cheyenne Mountain base at 0800 the day after tomorrow for a briefing and travelling instructions. I admit I was a bit worried about Janet after her cryptic call and decided to use my two days off to check on her."

Samantha's left eyebrow rose considerably but she didn't say anything.

"I know that Janet works at the Air Force Academy hospital but what are you doing, Sam? Cassandra told me that you travel a lot."

"I have an office at NORAD. I'm an astrophysicist and coordinate some joint research projects

with other observatories. Travelling is part of the job." Samantha answered and Sarah sensed another prefabricated response but something else was nagging her at the back of her mind.

She took a sip of her orange juice and suddenly she remembered. "You're the Sam Carter who wrote about wormhole theory?"

"Yes, but how does a JAG Marine know about it?" Samantha answered defensively. "No offence, but you don't look like someone fascinated with theoretical astrophysics."

"None taken, Sam, and you don't either. No, one of my colleagues told me. His name is Bud. He didn't speak about anything else for months after the book came out. He spent hours trying to verify your equations but it seemed that a lot of it simply goes over his head. He will be so miffed that I got to meet you and he didn't. He would have a million questions for you." Sarah answered with a disarming smile.

Samantha rose and disappeared in one of the rooms in the back. She handed Sarah a calling card with an email address written on the back. "Tell him to send his questions there. It's supposed to be for discussions with other scientists but over the years I learned that sometimes good ideas come from people thinking outside of the box. Tell him to put the words 'flygirl approves' in the subject header when he first uses it. One of my staff will answer him - though it might take a few days. Sometimes we're really busy."

"You don't know what a treat this will be for him, Sam. He recently lost one of his legs in the field and is still in recovery. He can use all the help he can get."

"Is there something I can do, Mac?"

"I don't think so, Janet. He's at Bethesda."

"Then he's in good hands. The doctors there are among the best we have."

"Oh, yes, you think? Well, I wasn't so sure about that when this sleep deprived second lieutenant threatened me with a very big needle," Sarah bantered.

"What shall I say, Mac? It worked. You stopped trying to get out of bed and put weight on your broken leg."

"As if I had a choice, Janet. You can be scary, sometimes."

"Thanks, Mac, you just won me a bet," Samantha quipped in. "The whole S... staff at the hospital is speculating if she always had this command presence or if it came with the responsibility of being the boss."

"As far as I know, Sam, it was always there."

"Would you two stop talking about me as if I were not in the room with you, please?!"

"I'm sorry, baby." Samantha said though she didn't sound apologetic in the least.

They spend some more time talking and bantering, and then retired to their respective rooms.

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The next morning, just before sunrise Samantha opened the door to the kitchen to go for her run. She heard unfamiliar steps coming from behind and swirled around defensively. Samantha immediately relaxed when she saw their guest in a running outfit.

"Care to join me, colonel?"

"It would be my pleasure, major." Sarah answered.

"What do you usually do in the morning, three miles, five, seven miles?"

"Most days I only have the time for a four to five circuit."

"There's a lot of time before I have to go to work, so why don't we take the seven mile scenic route? I'll leave a note for Jan; in case she wakes up early."

"So, she still doesn't like running?"

"No, she says that she's at a natural disadvantage because of her short legs, but she's really good at hand-to-hand combat." At Sarah's obvious disbelief she added, "It's a long story, Mac. Let's go!"

About a mile into their run, the Marine asked Samantha to pick up the pace a bit, and after three miles they started to push each other. Larina and Niva had been excellent examples when it came to conditioning; so, Samantha was still far from reaching her limit and she also made sure that her running partner didn't overtax herself. It was fun for both of them, and when they slowed down to a jog to cool down before returning to the house they both were laughing.

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Samantha and Janet both had to go to work. They left Sarah with a list of sights and the route to the Garden of the Gods, but they both had not counted on the fact that Colonel Mackenzie was as much a workaholic as they were.

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The phone in Samantha's lab rang. "Major, are you stuck or could you escort a visitor?"

"I have nothing urgent here, General Hammond, I'm still stymied by the artifact SG-6 left at my doorstep."

"Come to my office, ASAP."

"Yes sir."

Minutes later she was standing in front of General Hammond's desk. "We were expecting someone from JAG to observe the trial on Gaia. The lawyer in question, a Colonel Mackenzie decided to report in a day ear..."

Registering the brilliant smile he stopped his explanation. "Is there anything I should know, Major Carter?"

"Sarah Mackenzie is a good friend of Doctor Fraiser, sir. She spent the last night with us. I should have known that she wasn't the sight-seeing type. I didn't expect her before tomorrow morning; it was really hard not to tell her the truth last night."

"She's waiting topside. Bring her down. I'll ask the rest of SG-1 and Doctor Fraiser to come to the briefing room. Tell her everything she has to know. I'll join you later. I'm in the middle of something."

"I understand, sir."

"Dismissed major."

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Sarah Mackenzie was standing at the main entrance of the Cheyenne Mountain Complex. She was stuck between two security fences, waiting for someone to bring her in. Now more than ever she was at a loss as to what a high-security and obviously top-secret facility in Colorado could possibly have to do with a foreign, sovereign nation. She longingly looked towards her car, suddenly wishing she had gone sightseeing instead of donning her uniform and trying to work.

She had been waiting for 9 minutes and 38 seconds when the fence behind her opened. She had expected some some wet-eared Airman to escort her to the base commander, but when she turned around she saw a familiar figure clad in a black regulation t-shirt and green BDU trousers.

Samantha was standing at attention and saluted.

"Sam, I should have known. One doesn't get your scars just by looking through a telescope."

"Busted Mac, come on. Let's go. It's a long way down and there's a lot to tell. General Hammond sends his apologies; he will join us later."

Sarah was really impressed by the number of people milling through the corridors and by the strange mix of Air Force and Marine personnel working with civilians.

They were about to step into the second elevator on level 11 when a voice called from behind. "Sam, Sam, wait! The artifact in your lab, the guys want to know if they should include it in the transport to... to Nevada." Stephen stopped himself from referring to Area51 when he saw the stranger standing next to his friend.

"No, not yet. I'll need another day to figure it out."

"Alright, boss, I understand. If we don't give these boys some pointers it will only gather dust in the desert."

"Stevie, they're not that bad, just a bit unimaginative. Just give me another day."

"I'll tell them, Sam," he said and left.

"He talks like a nerd but he doesn't look like one."

"He's not the only one on this base, Mac. Besides, I'm a nerd. I'm just not geeky."

Before Sarah could answer, the door of the elevator opened at level 21 and Janet joined them, with a salute. "Welcome at Stargate Command, Colonel Mackenzie. Hi Mac, I should have known that you would be too curious to wait until tomorrow."

"Janet Fraiser, you have some explaining to do."

"You will get all the answers you want and probably more before this day is over, Mac."

When they stepped through the door to the briefing room the rest of SG-1 were already present, which meant that O'Neill must have literally dragged Daniel from his lab to make it on time. Janet introduced everyone.

Four hours later a very wide-eyed Lieutenant Colonel Sarah Mackenzie was staring at the other occupants of the room, trying to wrap her mind around the science fiction-fantasy novel she just had heard.

"Carter, I think our guest needs to see it with her own eyes. Do you think Siler could dial up a nice uninhabited planet for us?!"

"Is this an order, Colonel O'Neill?" Samantha asked, only too aware of the severe case of cabin fever her CO developed whenever they spent enough time Earth-bound for him to start catching up on his paperwork.

"No, Major," General Hammond ordered from behind her. "Open the blast doors. SG-12 is scheduled to return any minute. That will show Colonel Mackenzie what this base is all about. That should make enough of an impression until we'll gate to Gaia the day after tomorrow. By the way...

"Colonel, welcome to Stargate Command. I hope my flagship team didn't scare you out of your wits just yet."

"Thank you, General Hammond," Sarah answered with a crisp salute. "It's a lot to take in, sir, but I'm a Marine. We don't scare easily."

Before Colonel O'Neill had a chance to challenge Sarah with his favourite Marine-against-Air Force taunts, the blast door opened to the sound of the first chevron of the Gate being locked. When the event horizon burst outwards with its customary 'kawoosh', Sarah involuntarily stepped back. The energy once again was sucked in and the shimmering pool appeared for the fraction of a heartbeat before the iris closed.

Siler's voice announced, "Receiving IDC, sir. It's SG-12, right on time for a change."

"Open the iris, Sergeant."

"Sir, request permission to be excused but I think I figured out what this artifact is good for," Samantha suddenly said.

"Doctor, do you have the time to give our guest a tour? We can finish the briefing later. Major Carter, I'm looking forward to your preliminary report. Dismissed." General Hammond said.

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Another three hours later, Samantha looked up from her desk just as Janet and Sarah stepped into the lab.

"So, did you figure it out, Sam?"

Samantha offered them both a bright smile. "I thought it was a generator, but it isn't. It doesn't create energy; it absorbs energy. It's a very simple mechanism. Just put it next to a generator or reactor and switch it on. It not only absorbs the energy, it somehow dissipates it."

"And what's so fascinating about this?" Janet asked.

Sarah's answer came faster. "Put it in a bomb; shoot it at a nuclear plant or something and one could effectively take out the whole energy grid of one's enemy."

There was awe in her voice.

"Yes, potentially it could be very dangerous, but I don't think that it would work as a bomb. It has to be directly connected to a specific part of a generator. We could use it to control the temperature of nuclear plants make it impossible for them to overheat." Samantha explained.

Janet, however, knew her partner well. "But...?"

"But I don't think that we will be able to retro-engineer it any time soon. It's a simple enough mechanism but the physics behind it are beyond complex; in fact they contradict our current understanding of physics, notably the thermo-dynamic laws. I'm not sure I understand it and SG-6 reported that it's one of a kind."

"Meaning?" Sarah asked.

"It means that I found out what it does and I have a very faint idea how it does what it does, which leaves us with two options: we can take it apart and try to rebuild something we don't even half understand or we put it in storage for use in an emergency."

"Does this happen often? Being between a rock and a hard place?"

"Yes and no, Mac. We already have quite a few of these unique potential weapons. It's not up to me to decide, fortunately. I like to figure things out but the thought of possibly spending years worrying about the same problem," Sam said as she shook her head in disgust. "No, if that was what I wanted to do I would be in Nevada not here."

She turned her attention to Janet. "I'll need about two more hours to finish up here. Why don't you call it a day? Give Mac here some time to wrap her mind around what she learned today. I'll be back in time for Jack O'Neill's barbeque."

"That's why we stopped by, baby. To tell you about the barbeque."

"Oh, I already had a call from Daniel and a visit from Teal'c telling me about it. I was recruited to convince you to make your special pasta salad, Jan."

"That takes almost two hours to make, Sam," Janet protested but caved when she saw the pathetic puppy dog eyes turned towards her. "I'll see what I can do, Doctor Carter."

With this half promise Samantha was left alone and hurried to get her report for General Hammond and the section chief of Area51 ready. Janet's pasta salad was best when it wasn't completely cooled down yet.

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Ninety minutes later she looked into the kitchen and the sight of Sarah licking something from Janet's finger brought back all the insecurities and jealousy she thought she had buried after the

incident with Stephen, her lover's former brother-in-law a few weeks ago.

She had seen her lover in the arms of a stranger and stormed off like an immature teen on her bike, without her helmet and disregarding speed limits. She remembered returning home, completely soaked from the rain and early snowfall, and she remembered how the young man had opened the door and told her how worried and angry her partner had been.

"... have a better handle on your emotions next time." Janet's words from the incident with Stephen now echoed through her mind and became an order.

Janet's voice snapped her back to the present. "Hey, Sam, you're early. Are you alright?"

"Yes, Jan, just a bit tired; nothing a quick shower won't cure." Samantha knew that she was once again running away. It was just not as evident as the last time. She knew it was immature but when it came to Janet she felt helpless in a way she never had before.

"Good, take your time, but first taste test the dressing. I think it still needs something."

Janet scooped some up with her index finger and offered it to her and suddenly her jealousy was gone.

"Rosemary, just a tiny bit." She answered with a smile totally out of proportion to the occasion.

"Yes, that's it. Thank you, Sam."

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## THE PRESENT: ON BOARD OF THE SCYTHIA

Gabrielle laughed when the Earth women proceeded to tell her about the barbeque and O'Neill's not really subtle attempts to get Sarah to rise to one of his Air Force-versus-Marines baits. Then they ended their storytelling session for the day.

As soon as the door to their quarters closed behind them Janet kissed the taller woman and said teasingly, "So, you became jealous of Mac over salad dressing?"

"No, yes, I... it was only a moment. No, it was the dancing a few days later that really got to me. I know in my heart and in my head that you never would hurt me this way, baby. But sometimes it's almost as if the Neanderthal instincts brought forth on P3X-797 are not completely gone. I'm sorry, my love."

"Don't be too hard on yourself. You didn't act like a Neanderthal during the party."

"I only stormed on the dance floor and claimed you for myself, very civilised."

"Did you hear me complain, my love?"

Another more passionate kiss sealed Samantha's lips before she could answer.

"Besides, Mac is as straight as a stick."

"That's what I once thought of you, but it's also not the point. Mac is a very beautiful woman. She is strong and confident, good at her job, and she doesn't run off to the next planet to get killed or injured or possessed by who knows what."

Janet closed her arms around her lover. She knew that Samantha's reaction had next to nothing to do with Sarah Mackenzie or any other woman. It was more of a backlash from her recent ordeal, but at the same time it seemed to come from somewhere much deeper.

Janet opened her mind to their connection and felt the depth of her lover's distress. She drew her in the circle of their love. Samantha slowly relaxed and let herself be led to the bedroom where she snuggled in her partner's arms. Janet just held her and gently stroked the small of her back.

A few minutes later Samantha said. "I'm sorry that I'm such a wuss."

"Sam, look at me, look into my eyes. Yes, that's better. You are a very beautiful woman, Samantha Gabriella Carter. You are strong and confident and good at your job and compassionate. You had my attention from the very first moment I saw you, sitting on one of the infirmiry beds and trying to look bored but with your eyes cautiously scanning the whole room."

"I was looking for the new CMO I had read so much about and whose brown eyes had me captivated even on a grainy photo."

"Charmer. I never told you when I fell in love with you, when I discovered that I was in love with you."

Samantha's eyes grew bigger and Janet knew that she had her undivided attention.

"Do you remember when those thugs tried to rob us, when we were coming from the movies? They threatened us with a knife. You simply stepped in front of me, shielding me. You took them out when talking didn't stop them and you blushed when I thanked you. That was the moment I knew that I was in love with you."

"I expected you to be angry with me, to tell me that as an Air Force officer you are able to defend yourself but I couldn't risk you getting hurt." Samantha whispered, "I was so afraid that you would never talk to me again."

"With anyone else I might have been angry, Sammy, but to you it just comes naturally. You put yourself on the line and save the world on a regular basis, and you never make a big deal of it."

"Yes, I'm worried sick when SG-1 is overdue and you risk yourself for me and everyone else. It's true that sometimes I wish that you had a boring nine-to-five job but then that wouldn't be you. I love you because you have the courage to do what has to be done and what no one else can do. I love you because you really don't know how beautiful and brilliant you are.

"Oh, you listen and smile politely when someone tells you, even if that someone is the President of the United States or one of the Asgard singing your praise, but it's almost as if it doesn't touch you. It's almost as if you really don't believe it, as if you were not proud of what you have done."

Samantha abruptly sat up and Janet feared that she had gone too far but then her lover's face gentled.

"I feel pride when I solve a problem or manage to get a better score at the shooting range. I'm proud of my career and that I came as far as I did without my father's help. I'm proud that I have won the love of the most beautiful and compassionate and smart woman in the universe. But it would be stupid to be proud of my looks or my intelligence, Jan. That's just something I was born with, and one can only be proud of things that have been earned."

A wave of anger flickered over Janet's face and to mask it she gave Samantha a gentle kiss on the forehead. "Oh Sammy! Let me guess, that's your father speaking here, right?"

Samantha nodded hesitantly.

"He was wrong, baby. I'll give him the benefit of the doubt and concede that he only said this out of concern for you and not because belittling what you are made him feel better."

She prevented any protest by putting a finger on her beloved's lips.

"Yes, Sam, your beauty and your brains are a product of genetics, mostly at least, but a lot of beautiful and very intelligent people waste these gifts. What counts is what you make of them, and from my point of view there's no reason why you should not be proud of the way you are using your gifts because you don't act to soothe your ego but for the benefit of others."

Samantha's eyes lit up with a sparkle of mischief. "You are so beautiful when you snap into mama-bear-mode, my love."

"Don't change the subject, Samantha. You know that I am right."

Samantha snuggled back in her lover's embrace, reluctant to meet Janet's eyes.

After a while Samantha said softly, "Don't let anyone ever tell you that you are less than what and who you are. All you'll ever need is in your heart and in your head, Sammy."

Janet immediately recognised the dreamlike quality of her lover's voice. She had learned to associate it with Samantha's memories of her mother or grandmother. She placed another kiss on her lover's forehead but didn't comment.

"Since my mother's death I allowed no one else to call me 'Sammy'. You are the only one. Thank you, my beloved."

"Thank you for letting me in, Sammy," Janet answered quietly.

"She would have loved you."

"And I'm sure I would have loved her too." Janet added, "She must have been a very wise and compassionate woman. How did she end up with someone as hard and uncompromising as your father?"

The small brunette was still angry at Jacob Carter's refusal to speak to his daughter since he learned about their relationship.

"He wasn't always like this, Jan. When I grew up he was different, at least most of the time. He never was one for hugging and snuggling, and he was gone a lot but when he was home it always was a lot of fun. He played with me and read to me. He always had time to listen and to teach me one thing or another.

"My mother always made him smile, even when he was angry or in a bad mood. Sometimes they argued, mostly about him having to leave again on a mission.

"Looking back, I think that he loved her very much, more than he ever would be ready to admit. He lost the light in his life when she died. He may be judgemental, Janet, but he's not a bad man."

"And you ask yourself why I love you! Baby, sometimes you're just too good to be true. Your heart is so big, Sammy."

"I love you, Janet. I don't want to imagine what having to live without you in my life, what having to live without your love would do to me."

"If I have any say in it, Sammy, you'll never have to find out. I'll never leave you." Janet kissed the blond head resting on her shoulder and felt the tense body relax.

Sometime later Samantha whispered, "Thank you for banning my stupid insecurities, Janet."

"It's not stupid, baby. I'll tell you as often as you need to hear it that I love you and I'll always be there for you. I can't wait to make it official, my love."

"I love you, Janet," Samantha answered in a sleepy voice and soon relaxed in a deep sleep. Talking about her feelings, especially her fears still was very draining for Samantha but Janet was ready to hold her for the rest of their lives whenever Samantha allowed herself to show her vulnerability.

-X-X-X-

Now more than ever Janet was determined to have a real Amazon joining with her beloved, consequences be damned. She wanted a ceremony performed by the priestess in front of the temple at the break of dawn, a union of body, heart, and soul, never to be broken, not even in death. She wanted to wear the sign of their love at the inside of her wrist, for everyone to see and for Samantha to touch should she ever have any doubts.

This night she dreamed of presenting her resignation as an Air Force officer to General Hammond, and though the uniform had taken up a considerable part of her adult life her dream-self didn't even feel the slightest bit of regret at this step.

Opening her eyes she studied Samantha's peaceful face in the faint illumination of the night light. The yellow glow made her look even younger than usual and the small doctor knew that to protect Samantha she would do more than just defy the orders of the Joint Chiefs or military rules of conduct.

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## Chapter Eleven: **New Revelations**

### THE PRESENT: ON BOARD OF THE SCYTHIA

The next morning Samantha's mind wandered back to their return to Gaia to take part in the trial. There was something about it sitting just at the edge of her awareness but staying stubbornly out of reach. It stymied her and she longed to get out of bed and pace, but she also didn't want to worry Janet who was still sleeping in her embrace and so she tried to keep herself still.

In the fortnight since the rescue, Xena and Gabrielle had completely recovered, physically at least. When she had looked into Xena's eyes after passing through Athena's Ring with Janet, Sarah, and the rest of SG-1 she had almost felt the dark-haired woman's simmering anger; an emotion to which she easily could relate.

The interrogation of the prisoners had given them a lot of answers but no insight into what Anubis had hoped to achieve with supporting these machinations.

The Jaffa, though wearing the marks of different Goa'ulds, had proudly admitted to being in the service of the ominous former System Lord. Their leader had told them that he and his warriors had been sent on this mission to prove that they were better warriors than the physically much stronger machine souls, and in his eyes they had succeeded, considering the ease with which the Tau'ri woman had taken them down.

After some prompting and being threatened with the use of a Za'tarc detector, the captured Tok'ra confessed to having been lured by Anise's promise that their host would become immortal. However, they had denied any affiliation with Anubis or any other System Lord. When asked about Osiris and the Jaffa they all had insisted on knowing nothing about her fealty to Anubis. They instead had claimed that the Goa'uld, according to Anise, had turned against her kin and wanted to join the Tok'ra.

Osiris and Anise had refused to answer any questions but thanks to the Tollan separation device, the Amazons had been able to get a lot from Freya and Sarah.

The archaeologist at first had been frightened. She had felt the symbiote's presence even though it had not been capable of taking control or influencing her in any way. It had taken a lot of prompting and Larina talking to her about her own traumatic experiences with Nirrti to get her to make a statement. And from what she had told them, Osiris had not seen beyond its own interests when working as Anubis' emissary. The possibility of gaining an immortal host simply had been too big a temptation for the symbiote. Osiris had apparently believed that possessing such a host would make him Anubis' equal.

At the time it had mystified Samantha why the powerful Goa'uld would risk such a competition to form but now she started to get an idea. Anubis had wanted to use Osiris but he didn't trust his fellow 'god'. Making him lie in wait for weeks for the High Queen and her consort to leave the protection of their planet had freed Anubis to prepare other more clandestine projects, like sending the naqada enhanced asteroid on a collision course with Earth to circumvent the treaty with the Asgard, like talking to Nut and who knows how many other minor Goa'uld, inciting them to seek revenge for one wrong or the other done to them over the centuries.

When she looked at it now, she was convinced that Anubis had been and still was preparing the field for something big; and that somehow their current problems with Earth and with the Trust were also part of his plan - a thought she quickly dismissed as paranoid.

Freya simply had been furious with her symbiote. Over the last twenty plus years she had become accustomed to the Tok'ra's single-mindedness and stubborn nature; and her quiet insistence more than once had been able to change the symbiote's mind. When she had started to argue against this newest harebrained scheme, the scientist had simply taken over and cut her off without regard. All she wanted now was to get rid of the troublesome presence of the symbiote who in her book had betrayed everything the Tok'ra stood for.

The trial against the unlikely co-conspirators had taken over a week, very short for Earth standards but long for the Amazons. The jury had carefully listened to all the eye-witnesses, and when Janet had given her statement concerning Consort Xena's and High Queen Gabrielle's injuries quite a considerable number of faces in the audience had turned grey and green and a few had rushed out to the nearest restroom.

In contrast to the trial against Nut that jury had only needed two hours to come to a decision about the sentences.

The Jaffa had been given the choice to either return to their master or to join the free Jaffa on Chulak, and only a handful of them had decided to brave the wrath of their God. Colonel O'Neill had argued against simply setting them loose, and though the Amazons agreed that this represented a certain security risk, they also were adamant about not punishing a warrior for following orders.

Osiris had been removed from Sarah's body and changed into a new personality, willing and eager to fight with the Tok'ra, though as far as Samantha knew Garshaw and Selmac were still keeping an eye on it.

Sarah Gardner was still in counselling but well on her way to recover from her traumatic experience.

Originally the jury had wanted the Tok'ra to deal with their renegade members but after learning how much they had been duped by Anise and Osiris they had asked to first be judged according to Amazon standards. Surprisingly the Queen had spoken on their behalf and in the end they had been sentenced to undergo a lengthy purification ritual and to serve as slaves to the Amazon Nation for two season cycles. Most of them were with male hosts; so, they served their time on one of the Amazon planets where men were allowed. As far as Samantha knew their natural arrogance had created a few problems in the beginning and a few of them had a Tollan separation device put on them, but all in all it seemed to work out.

The decision about Anise had been the hardest because the High Council of the Tok'ra refused to accept her among their numbers even after the old personality would have been erased. They were willing to give the other renegades a second chance and to once again accept them, but Anise had betrayed everything the Tok'ra stood for by deliberately working with a Goa'uld. That had left the Amazon Council with quite a dilemma.

They finally had decided to separate her from the host and keep the symbiote in a suspension tank until a willing host could be found, but a few minutes before the extraction, Anise had poisoned Freya and herself with nerve gas. It had taken Xena's, Janet's and Garsahw's combined medical knowledge to save the host but there was nothing to be done to save the symbiote. Master Niva had told Samantha that Freya had stayed with them for a few months and was now back with the Tok'ra though she was not ready to become a host again.

Colonel Mackenzie's report to the Joint Chiefs via Admiral Chegwidden had been objective but it ended with a personal statement that spoke clearly of how impressed she was with the Amazons' sense of justice. To their, especially Janet's, surprise she had even fully accepted the physical punishments as an integral part of their culture. She had told them that like probably everyone else she had been sceptical at first but her talks with the Amazons had helped her to understand and now she could accept it because it was not forced on the delinquents, because it was their choice.

Samantha recalled all these details to keep her mind from wandering back to her own part in the trial. She had not expected that it would be this difficult or painful. Answering the questions of

the members of the High Council when called to testify had not been too hard. She even had managed not to blush too deeply at the audience's reaction to her description of handling the chakram and Xena's sword. The difficult part had started when Egeria had been called to the stand.

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## THE PAST: GAIA - DURING THE TRIAL

When the mother of the Tok'ra told the jury about the staff blast hitting and killing Diti Samantha not only heard the words, but she also felt them as if it had been her body being ripped apart. She relived every emotion the symbiote related.

She tried with all her mind to distance herself, to rationalise her feelings by comparing them to Jolinar's memories. She was a scientist after all; she should have a better handle on her emotions.

During their first stay on Gaia she had learned to deal with Jolinar's memories and now what was left of the Tok'ra in her mind no longer intruded in her thoughts and dreams. She was now easily able to differentiate between Jolinar and her own memories, and could access both sets just as easily. She felt comfortable with it, but what Egeria now made her feel was different, very different.

It didn't feel like the experiences of someone else. It felt like it really was her pain, her feelings. It frightened her a bit, and at the same time she heard Egeria's inner voice telling her that she was sorry and that Samantha would be safe. It was disconcerting but she believed her.

Egeria then spoke about finding the Queen with her heart almost ripped out and how they had healed her, but she didn't tell the jury everything there would have been to say. She made it sound like an ordinary healing, more complicated and draining because of the seriousness of the injuries but all in all no different than thousand others. Samantha only had limited experience with the healing device but she knew that there was something the symbiote didn't tell them and didn't want her to know, at least not yet.

She asked Egeria about it but the answer she got was at the same time final and no real answer at all. "Everything will be revealed when you are ready, Princess Samantha Gabriella."

It made Samantha angry and she started to argue. "I'm not a child, Egeria, and I'm not a princess. I deserve an answer."

"Yes, you are, Samantha, just be patient, then you will understand."

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## THE PRESENT: ON BOARD OF THE 'SCYTHIA'

Now she was starting to understand what Egeria had been trying to tell her and felt that she had to share her new-found knowledge with Janet, Xena and Gabrielle.

This morning during her training with Master Bra'tac her mind continuously had wandered back to the trial and Egeria's death. Finally fed up with her lack of focus, the wise Jaffa had sent her to kel-no-rem, and upon her return, about three hours later, she had flown through her exercises without a hitch.

Now, she was sitting in Gabrielle's and Xena's quarters, and didn't know where to begin. She was sitting in a reversal of their usual position, safely ensconced in her lover's protective embrace and caressed by the soft tendrils of love and support Janet sent through their link.

The Amazon Queen entered carrying a plate of refreshments and Samantha asked her to call Xena. Samantha said that Xena also needed to know what she had to say.

"I'll go and get her myself, Samantha."

The immortal woman left the room and Janet sought her lover's eyes. "Are you alright, Sam?"

"No, not at the moment, but I will be. This morning I found out a few things you, Xena, and Gabrielle have to know."

"You spoke with Egeria?" There was no surprise in Janet's voice, in fact she almost sounded as if she had expected something along these lines sooner or later.

"Yes, I think one could call it talking but at the same time it's more, different, deeper. It's hard to explain."

Janet kissed her worried lover, the door opened and she whispered, "Remember, Sammy, I love you, no matter what."

Xena and Gabrielle took their customary places on a few cushions and Samantha took a deep breath.

"When Egeria died I told you that she had not left anything behind, no memories, no knowledge, nothing; and at the time I didn't know if I should be thankful for it or not. It turned out that I was wrong.

"While I was Nut's prisoner I heard Egeria's voice like a faint echo. It made me want to trust this Goa'uld despite everything she did to me. I later explained it with the fact that she was Egeria's sister but it's not that easy. Today, while meditating I learned that there's much more to it, but I don't know where to start."

Samantha fell silent and the other three women gave her the time she needed to find the right

words.

"Before we went to find you, on M5X-179 Egeria asked me if I would consent to join with her should something happen to Diti. She told me that Diti didn't have much time left and that she also would die soon. I accepted but that was not her original plan. She never planned on blending with me. She only did it to make sure that the two of you would be alright, a contingency plan of sorts."

"But she told us that she wanted to touch the shadow of Artemis' essence via Jolinar when her life ended and that she needed to be with you to do this," Gabrielle said incredulously.

"Yes, I know. She wanted to touch my mind while dying. She had planned on ascending with Diti. Though Egeria was weak she could have regained her strength in a new host but she didn't want to. Though Diti's body was failing, Egeria wanted it to end. She wanted to be reunited with the other half of her soul."

Xena's and Gabrielle's face had turned simultaneously ashen white and the small Queen whispered. "She gave up an eternity of enlightenment to help save our lives. Dear Goddess, what have we done?"

"No, Gabrielle. She didn't see it this way, and her ascension was only postponed."

"So, that's why the concentration of naqada in your blood didn't change as it should have," Janet said. "And I thought my theory was wrong."

"It also explains why you didn't feel any other after-effects, and why you thought that she left without a trace." Xena added.

"Yes and no, Xena. This morning while meditating, I heard her voice in the stillness of my own mind. Though it wasn't a real voice; it was more like a quiet presence, very familiar, almost as if it already were a part of me. It had been there all the time but I had not been ready to listen. It needed some sort of trigger. I think she wanted to make sure that I didn't become overwhelmed with her memories and her knowledge."

"Her knowledge?" Janet asked with worry and surprise now evident in her voice.

"Yes, but I can't read it like an open book. I can't access it at will, but it will be there for me should I really need it. It won't make me more of a target for the NID than I already am but I would still appreciate it if it could stay out of the archives."

"Of course, Sam, it will not leave this room," Gabrielle reassured her.

For a few minutes silence reigned in the room and then Janet asked, "Why did she leave you with such a burden, Sam?"

"I don't think that it was intentional, Jan. Something happened before she died..."

"It happened," Xena said softly, her strategic mind already one step ahead, "when you both healed Gabrielle. The trauma to her body was so severe under normal circumstances it might well have taken decades to heal and even with a healing device it should have taken years. You both expended too much energy to make it work this fast, and that's when it happened."

"Yes... at least I think so. She not only touched my soul, she somehow bonded with me, on a deeper level than host and symbiote usually do, even with the Tok'ra. And she did all she could to protect me from it. She didn't make herself felt the weeks before the trial not only to regain some strength for her last journey but also to build some sort of protective screen that filters her memories and her knowledge. Like I said, it's hard to explain."

Feeling her partner's worry, she slightly turned to her left and added softly. "I will be alright, Janet. It's just a lot to take in all at once. And I'm reasonably sure that Egeria will be easier to deal with than Jolinar. And I won't be alone; this time, you will be there for me all the way."

"I love you, Sam."

"And I love you, baby."

Samantha refocused her attention on the other two women. "There is one more thing you both should know: Three hundred years ago, Athena came to Egeria and Diti and told her what had happened. Egeria knew that she would not be able to restore Artemis to her former self even before you returned to Gaia, Xena. She wanted to join her beloved even then, but Athena convinced her that she still had important work to do, for the Amazons and the Tok'ra.

"When you first told us about her, you said that her spiritual powers let her see into the minds of the enemy and that she saved a lot of innocent people - and it's true that her abilities surpassed the norm. The information she imparted on you and the Tok'ra on the plans of the System Lords or other dangers, however, most of the time came directly from Athena. The other Ascended were not thrilled by her actions but they also didn't stop her. Even after her death she continued to protect the Amazons."

"But why? The report you gave General Hammond on Orlin was very clear about what the Ascended think about interfering with mortals."

If Samantha was surprised that the leaders of the Amazon Nation were up to date with her reports she didn't show it.

"I don't know, your majesty, and only a couple of years ago I would have searched for a purely scientific explanation. Since then I learned to trust my instincts and my feelings, so, I like to believe that the other Ascended only allowed Athena to interfere like she did because even then they felt her bond with Diti and Egeria. I'd like to think that their connection was stronger than anything else, stronger than death, stronger than ascension, stronger than hundreds of years of separation."

"Just like your connection to Janet and mine to Gabrielle," Xena added softly.

-X-X-X-

After these exceedingly sappy words they quickly called it a night. Both of the smaller women wanted to show their closet-romantics how much they needed and how much they loved their tough warriors.

For Samantha and Janet, however, this night was not about making love or bringing each other to orgasm. It was about caressing the other's soul through their link. It still was very new for them to tap into their bond deliberately, but at the moment this was exactly what they both needed.

They both needed to reassure themselves that this newfound presence in Samantha's mind had not changed her or their relationship. Samantha opened her soul and let her partner all the way in. There were no barriers and no boundaries. Nothing was hidden, not her love for Janet and Cassandra, her love for her team and her godfather, and many others who had touched her life over the years.

Janet touched her beloved's fears and regrets. She read her greatest wishes and desires, and at the same time Samantha was exploring her lover's soul.

It was more intense than anything they had ever done before, and it was more than just therapeutic. Now, for the first time, they knew that they were not only bound to each other, they were one. They truly had one soul in two bodies.

-X-X-X-

## THE PRESENT: GAIA - THE VILLAGE SQUARE

The next day they arrived on Gaia. The Scythia transported the leaders of the Amazon Nation, the Earth women, and the SG-teams down to the central square of the main village. Xena and Gabrielle were greeted by the members of the Council of Elders who had not taken part in the Grand Jury. It seemed very formal at first but the atmosphere changed while the big plaza filled with other inhabitants of the village. The SG-teams were treated as heroes, especially when they tried to explain that they had not done much to free Major Carter.

Soon Janet's attention was diverted towards the entrance of the infirmary. Two people were stepping over the threshold, one was on crutches, and after a heartbeat's hesitation the brunette began to run. Janet's eyes darted over her daughter's frame with a physician's competence but her mind was in worried-mother-mode.

**THE END**

Coming soon: the sequel GAIA - Bridges to the Future

Feedback welcome under romansilence[at]yahoo.de

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