



STAR'S END
BY KAYE THORN

A STARGATE ATLANTIS FIC

*“And this gray spirit yearning in desire
To follow knowledge like a sinking star,
Beyond the utmost bound of human thought.”
-Alfred Tennyson*

Chapter One: Conflict

Humankind has understood history as a series of battles because, to this day, it regards conflict as the central facet of life.
-Anton Pavlovich Chekhov

Year One

Soft white reflected off the screen of the laptop upon the desk, and the faint whirring of machines and footsteps echoed through the open door. A salty fresh scent lingered in the air, emanating from the ancient walls that had spent more than ten thousand years in the sea. An occasional thunk broke the lull of the room, merging with the endless sounds of keyboards and metal instruments. Several people were interspersed amongst the cluster of tables, occupied with their work. A loud crash suddenly resonated through the room, and everyone looked up at a short man standing sheepishly near the entrance. He bent down for the large metal box he'd dropped onto the floor and clumsily gathered a series of spilled items.

A bespectacled scientist glared at him, slamming down his mug of coffee. "Corrigan could you be anymore careless? Or loud? We're trying to concentrate."

His young partner elbowed him in the side, sympathy in her green-blue eyes. "Don't be so hard on him Ray, we're all still in shambles since the arrival. I couldn't even find my translations this morning. Besides, I could use a break."

She pushed down the screen of her laptop and straightened out her lab jacket, then re-clipped stray chestnut hairs that had fallen around her pale face. A skinny sandy haired woman across the room stretched her arms overhead and grimaced at her associate.

"I agree, Hemmings. You've got to lighten up. We've been at it all morning."

"Well, it's what we're here for, Dr. Simpson," he said, picking up a small item off the table. "However, I will continue."

Both made faces at him. The woman ambled over to their station, glancing down at the notebooks scattered on the table.

"You've been busy, Faith. How far did you get on the translation?"

"Pretty far. I'm afraid there's nothing exact about these pieces." She motioned to the series of foreign objects that Dr. Hemmings was studying. They'd been found earlier in one of the labs on Atlantis. "No 'this is an on-off switch,' or 'watch out, it explodes'. The Ancients just didn't leave instruction manuals lying around for us lesser folk. It was all stuck in their heads."

"I was afraid of that--"

Another crash echoed through the room, making all three jump and acknowledge the new person in the room. Haughtily the man side-stepped Corrigan [whom he'd just knocked over] smirking at them.

"Guess who was first to get the new gene therapy from Beckett?"

"Abrams?" Dr. Simpson said sarcastically.

“Welcome to the ATA club, Dr. McKay.”

“Now you’re not the only one in this room who can use specific Ancient technology, Dr. Stuart,” he said, clasping his hands.

“Don’t get too excited yet,” she said, her countenance deadly serious. “We estimated only a fifty percent or so chance for uptake. And there’s always the chance this retrovirus won’t transfer on humans, but I have the utmost faith in Carson’s abilities.”

“No worries. It worked!” McKay said, raising a finger and smiling.

“What? How do you know?”

He stepped forward and pointed to his chest, where a strange green light was glowing from a small object clinging there. “This activated afterward. That’s got to be what made it go on.”

Her eyes opened wide and Dr. Hemmings dropped the magnifying glass in his hand.

“I was working on that earlier,” Ray snapped. “It happened to disappear when I went down the hall.”

“You have no idea what it is. You couldn’t even get it on,” he simpered.

“So you decided to steal it?” Faith said incredulously, stepping around the desk and helping her fellow scientist pick up his equipment. “Dr. McKay, You can’t go playing with alien technology! God knows what it is!”

“Pssht, I read your translation. It’s not like it’s a bomb.”

Faith stared at him. “You took my work? Do you know how long I had to sit here to make up for it?”

“You stole research and Ancient gadgetry?” Dr. Corrigan said, peering up from the floor. “Then stuck an unknown object on yourself? That’s one of the stupidest things I’ve ever heard.”

“I was experimenting. At least I’m not an awkward klutz who goes around dropping expensive lab equipment,” McKay said, tapping his foot. “And I was busy with real experimentation.”

“We’re busy with *actual* science here. And at least I’m not an arrogant loudmouth with my head too far stuck up my-“

“Real science? You’re a bunch of voodoo doctors,” he snorted. “Refresh me on your PhD thesis of human cannibalism in archaic societies?”

“We prefer doctors of anthropology,” Faith said through clenched teeth. “Miles is very adept at such a multi-faceted subject.”

Dr. Simpson stomped over and swept a hand towards the article on his chest. “Give me that and stop being a pri-“ A second later she retracted it in alarm. “What the--?”

Faith stared at her and the object.

“Oh that’s real mature-“

“Shut up, McKay,” she said, somewhat distantly. “Sarah, do that again.”

“Why don’t you?” he snapped.

Reluctantly her counterpart repeated herself with the same result. Faith’s face brightened, and she grasped one of Corrigan’s instruments on the floor, heaving it at the annoying scientist. He shouted and ducked, but it hit him squarely alongside the head.

“Missed me,” he said, turning on her. “You can’t throw things at people. Are you insane?”

“Guys,” she said, shocked.

“Yeah, we saw it,” Sarah said in astonishment.

Ray circled Rodney, transfixed on him. The other backed away, glancing at them each nervously. “It deflected.”

“Huh? I didn’t feel anything.”

“Exactly.”

McKay smiled and peered down at the green device. “It protected me. It acted like a shield. Quick, try something else.”

Automatically Dr. Hemmings raised his leg and struck at his knee; it had no effect.

“Try again!” Rodney said enthusiastically. A myriad of activity ensued.

Five minutes later, a tall form passed by the doorway, but suddenly stopped at catching sight of the outlandish scene. One scientist brought a chair down on Rodney McKay’s back and another hit him (where the sun don’t shine), but he didn’t move a muscle.

“It’s remarkable,” a willowy blonde said. She was one of several newcomers attracted to the scene.

“See why I radioed you, Connie?” Faith said, playfully nudging her.

“Dr. Stuart, Dr. Elliot, you know as well as I do, scientific study is not a game,” Dr. Wagner said, hiding a smile. “But who could resist a free punch at Dr. McKay?”

“What’s going on here?” A man with dark messy hair stepped into the gathering, his hazel eyes full of concern.

“Ah, Sheppard,” Rodney said nonchalantly. “We were just testing a piece of Ancient technology.”

“Really? It looked more like a scientists’ coup, or a really bad game of dare.”

Faith lowered her notebook and folded her arms, smiling. “That’s basically what’s going on, Major.”

He raised an eyebrow. “In that case, shoo fellas.”

Disappointed, the others departed, but Faith stayed and caught Dr. Corrigan by the arm. "Hold on Miles." She confronted McKay. "I believe you owe him an apology."

"For what?"

"I don't know, being a rude jerk?"

"That was nothing--"

"C'mon McKay," Major Sheppard interjected. "Be a big boy and say you're sorry to the noble Dr.-?" he paused, and gazed at her searchingly.

"Faith," she said. "Faith Stuart."

"Glad to meet yet another person on base," he said, his eyes warm and appraising. The other scientist made a disgusted noise. "Rodney, say it. Atlantis will never get up and running if you don't stop fighting," he chided. "Or do I have to shoot you?"

"Hold on-" Faith hesitated, then beckoned Sheppard. "Forget it, Major." Corrigan coughed loudly, but she ignored him. "Why don't you try something on McKay?"

Sheppard's face became brighter. "Are you saying I *should* shoot him?"

"Yes."

"WHAT?" McKay shouted. "You're crazy! That won't work!"

"You know it will," she said, waving a hand at him. "Stop being a chicken. If scalpels, chairs and people didn't get through, then a bullet won't either."

"Bullet. See how casually she says that?"

"If Sheppard doesn't do it, McKay, I will!"

"Wouldn't you love to try," he replied, swaggering a bit. "Go ahead Major."

Sheppard lifted an eyebrow and quickly drew his sidearm. "If you say so." He aimed at Rodney's leg, then pulled the trigger.

The gunshot rang in the air, followed by the lightest tink of metal, as the bullet fell harmlessly to the floor. McKay lowered his arms and blinked erratically.

"Am I alive?"

"Unfortunately," Corrigan muttered.

"Now that was cool," Sheppard interjected.

"Do you know what this means?"

Faith rolled her eyes. "That nothing can stop the wearer--"

“This is huge,” McKay said, throwing out his arms in example. “We got to try something bigger, better, more dangerous-“

“Well in that case, why don’t you jump off a balcony?” Connie said sarcastically.

Sheppard and McKay glanced at each other greedily, then dashed out the door with Corrigan at their heels.

“Men,” Faith sighed.

Faith and Connie followed them down the corridors, apprehensive about what juvenile thing they’d do next. They found the men on the balcony overlooking the gateroom.

“This should be high enough,” McKay said. He stepped back nervously from the edge. “It is pretty high.”

“Hurry up,” Corrigan muttered.

”McKay,” Faith said, coming around the corner. “You need to stop wasting everyone’s time, including yours. We know the damn thing functions, so get it off and figure out how.”

“No way.”

“Alright fine,” she said. Gritting her teeth, she pinched Corrigan.

“Ow! What was that for?”

“For encouraging him.” She pointed at Rodney. “And a taste of what’s coming later to you.”

Miles perked up a little and allowed himself to be dragged off to the side.

Rodney backed over to the railing, then balked. “I can’t do it,” he moaned.

“Why not?” Sheppard asked impatiently.

“I can’t willingly- it’s too-“ he paused and gazed at him. “You do it. Push me.”

“Are you sure?” The scientist nodded. “Say when.”

“Ok...ready.”

Sheppard emphatically slammed him in the chest, knocking him backwards over the railing. The room came to a standstill, a series of gasps drowned out by a distinct thud.

“Oh my god.” Dr. Weir, a short brown haired woman [the leader of the expedition] appeared across the upper balcony, accompanied by Dr. Peter Grodin.

The Major grinned at her and exclaimed, “Whoa! Did you see that?”

“Yes!” she cried, hurrying to the railing. “What were-“

A split second later, McKay popped up from the ground, smiling like an idiot.

“I’m fine,” he shouted.

Everyone rushed down the main stairs and clustered near him, relieved and amazed.

“Beckett’s gene therapy worked,” he said.

“I’ll say,” Faith growled.

He rolled his eyes at her and pointed to his chest. “I was able to activate this afterward. It’s a personal shield that protects against anything. It must have inertial dampening properties too, because I felt nothing. Watch.” He turned to Grodin. “Hit me.”

Immediately he swung at McKay, but his arm deflected harmlessly. He hollered in pain and glared at him. Chuckles broke out against the bystanders, but Dr. Elliot resisted, making hers into a fit of imitated coughing.

McKay peered at him knowingly. “You didn’t have to swing so hard. Notice how he didn’t even hesitate.”

Weir stared at him wryly. “I’m trying to fathom how you thought it was a good idea to test this device by being thrown off a balcony.”

“Believe me, it’s not the only thing we tried,” he said, lifting a finger expectantly.

Sheppard said proudly, “I shot him.” Weir frowned, but he shrugged. “In the leg.”

A few other scientists stepped up, jabbering eagerly.

“We tried more than that Mr. Scientific Procedure.”

“Chairs.”

“Box cutters.”

“Scalpels.”

“Metal rods.”

“Jealous?” McKay blinked and said loudly, “I’m invulnerable.”

“Yes green with envy,” Weir said sarcastically. She shook her head and swung for the stairs. “Alright, take it off. Let’s have our meeting.”

Crestfallen, he reached for the device, but his hand strained against the green shielding. He looked up worriedly. “This could be a problem. I can’t get at it.”

Sheppard eyed him suspiciously and tried grabbing it too, with the same result. “Just checking.”

Dr. Corrigan shook a fist. “See, this is what happens when you steal advanced technology.”

“You stole-“ Weir gaped at Rodney, but threw her hands up. “I do not want to know.”

“I didn’t steal anything.” McKay snapped at him.

“Oh yeah?”

Faith edged towards Dr. Weir as Corrigan began loudly making accusations at him. “Scientists plus incredibly advanced technology equals four year olds in a toy store.”

“No kidding.” The woman sighed and spoke up. “Okay enough-“

“Faith.” A voice whispered, and someone tapped her shoulder. “Let’s get out of here.”

Weir pointedly instructed individuals and cleared the floor, scattering the large gathering. Connie skedaddled out of her path and tugged Faith into a side corridor.

“Whew, we narrowly missed being plowed over there,” Faith commented.

Connie chuckled and glanced at her forearm. “Cool, it’s almost lunchtime. Scientific discovery makes me hungry.”

Faith felt an empty grumble in her belly, at the mention of food. “Ugh. *Commotion* makes me hungry. Let’s go then.”

They scooted past several people towards the dining area, and bounced the morning’s events off each other.

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A low panoply of voices rose once in awhile but were sparse in the high vaulting room. It was crowded with hungry scientists and soldiers clinking and talking over their lunches. Lengthy windows spilled golden sunlight across the floor, and looked out to the sparkling ocean and graceful spires of the city below. A chair clunked at one of the tables cradled in the corner, where a couple women sat.

“Hey Lanie,” Faith said.

Connie waved her fork in greeting, next to her a scientist named Christina nodded.

She checked out their lunches and picked up hers resignedly, muttering indistinguishably in her British accent. Catching a few words, Christina put down her sandwich and both elbows on the table. She gazed at the others inquiringly.

“Aren’t you guys tired of having the same thing every day?”

Faith glanced perturbedly at her food. “I enjoy a nice turkey sandwich on an occasional basis, not daily.”

Connie sighed. “Yeah, but it’s not like there’s a Safeway or Papa’s Diner available through the next Stargate.”

Faith perked up a bit. “Well not exactly, but other civilizations contain their versions of restaurants and grocery stores. You just won’t find any Big Macs or chocolate cake.”

“Thank you Dr. Culture,” Connie said, smacking her on the back. “I propose next time we find such a place, we feast on the lunch special.”

The others mused in agreement, but Christina fell silent. She tightened her hands and gazed downward. “That would be nice. I just don’t like going through the gate that much.”

“Dr. Brown,” Connie scolded. “You can’t be serious. You’re on a Stargate mission by just being here. Why not-“

“Oh quit it,” Faith said, nudging her.

Leaning forward solicitously, Christina said in a low voice, “Do you know exactly what happens to your body mass and your atoms when you step through it? If you could comprehend five percent of the wormhole physics I do, you’d lock yourself in an airtight container.”

“It’s understandable,” Faith said.

“But the fear versus the wealth of technology, experience and-“ Lane glanced slyly over her shoulder towards a table full of men. “resources?”

“Well,” Christina paused, perusing the selection. “You’ve got a point.”

“See?” Lane patted her on the arm. “There’s a lot to be discovered right in our own backyard.”

“Like Harrington,” Connie said, spotting a scientist putting away his tray. The three pivoted in the direction she was staring.

Christina tilted her head. “Eh. He’s alright I guess.”

“Captain Larson?” Lane suggested.

Faith elbowed her. “No way. Awkwardness factor. I’m on his team.”

Christina drew aback. “Whoa. When did you get assigned to an offworld team?”

She shrugged and picked up her water. “Ernest brought me onboard again shortly after we got here. Andrew’s kind of jealous since he’s been trying to get his own team.”

“Now Andrew,” Lane pointed her fork at them. She exhaled appreciatively, and the other two women nodded eagerly in agreement.

Faith choked loudly. “Ew God, he’s my brother!”

“C’mon Fae, you know what we’re talking about.”

She gave them the evil eye. “Uh no.”

“Fine,” Christina said, laughing. “How about you? Anyone in mind?”

“Hmm, not really,” she said, digging distractedly into her food.

“C’mon,” Connie said, pulling away her tray.

She looked at her pathetically, and sighed in exasperation. “Okay, some of the soldiers are agreeable.”

“Like who?”

“Major Sheppard,” Connie blurted out. “Lt. Pettinger, Gillins...”

“Constance!” Faith rebuked, kicking her reproachfully.

Her friend grinned knowingly. “Admit it. I can read you like a book.”

“Men in uniform? I didn’t peg you for the GI Joe type,” Lane teased.

“You know I’m from a military family, Andrew, my Uncle, both grandparents—”

“She thinks soldiers are totally hot.”

“Grab him then,” Lane demanded.

“Hey,” she said, lifting both hands in the air. “Think what you want, but I am not in the market for a guy at the moment. And why did this become Faith’s dating clinic?”

“Easy there,” Christina said, trailing off. She glanced beyond Faith’s head, motioning stealthily. “Man advance, twelve o’clock.”

Confused, Faith moved and found Dr. Grodin headed in their direction. He stopped next to her, appearing quite preoccupied. “Dr. Stuart, you were translating the compilation containing the shield’s text?”

“Yes, why?” she said, somewhat startled. “What did McKay do now?”

“I need you to complete it with our team. His life may be in jeopardy.”

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“...the atomic planate shielding adds defense against radioactive emissions and kinetic forces too.” “Faith leaned back from the laptop screen and twisted hopefully in her chair to the scientist sitting next to her.

He ran a hand through his blonde hair in frustration, lowering his head.

“Does it mean anything?” she asked helpfully.

He smiled soberly and glanced at the blocks of Ancient text. “Pretty much nothing we didn’t know before or can use. Is that really all of it?”

She quickly ran over the screen once more and shook her head. “I’ve been through this several times. That’s the extent of the material. Sorry Dr. - uhm?”

“Collins. Feel free to call me Scott,” he said lightly. He stood up and thoughtfully examined translations scribbled neatly across her papers. “You were very helpful, but what we needed wasn’t available.”

“Thank you, Scott,” she said.

From his position in a far corner, McKay decidedly scrutinized them, yelling, “You done?”

“Yeah,” Collins said, slumping into his chair. “We’ve got nothing.”

Rodney flung his scanner at Dr. Hemmings, and scurried over. He sidled Faith from the desk, and picked up her notes, reading them disappointedly.

“Are you sure this is correct? Couldn’t you have substituted the wrong definition or something?”

“No,” Faith answered, gritting her teeth. “Everyone makes mistakes, but I didn’t.”

He busily cross-referenced between the computer screen and notebook, as if searching for a glaring omission.

Collins folded his arms. “Dr. you don’t even know Ancient. Dr. Stuart is perfectly capable—”

“This here,” McKay said. He wheeled on Faith and ran a finger along a particular sentence. “That sounds weird. You must’ve messed it up.”

“It’s fine. That is a direct translation.” She glared and tried to take the notebook away, but he held on tight.

Collins peered over his shoulder at the text. “Sounds alright to me.”

“Did I ask you?” he snapped, giving him a withering look. “Are we trying to seal my impending doom? Because it sure sounds like it!”

“Keep this up and I’ll have a hand in it,” she growled.

He backed away warily, and sized her up wonderingly. “Okay then.”

A faint whooshing sounded as the door to the lab suddenly opened, admitting a worried Dr. Weir. She came over to the trio and gazed at them.

“Did you find anything?”

“I don’t know. No?” Nervously he thrust the notepad at Dr. Weir, keeping a watchful eye on Faith. “You check.”

Bewildered, Weir glanced at the paper, then at the scientists. “Dr. Stuart, I thought you were translating the object reference?”

“I did,” she answered, glaring icily at Rodney. “Dr. McKay just doubts my work.”

Weir briefly studied the notes and screen, then smiled. “Well I don’t. It’s why you’re here.”

McKay stepped away slightly, still nervous. "So you prefer hiring homicidal anthropologists?"

"Rodney," she said disdainfully. "There's nothing wrong with Dr. Stuart or her performance. Obviously the solution wasn't in here. Sorry."

"It's alright," Collins said. He brightened and looked at Faith. "I'm done for today. Would you like to grab a bite?"

"Sure," she said, smiling conspiratorially.

McKay frowned. "Oh ha ha, in front of the dying man."

Collins spun on his heel and walked out with Faith.

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"Hit me."

"Hit me."

"Hold."

"Flip 'em sucker," he said evilly. "You're going to bust."

"Well aren't you snarky?" Faith said, lifting an eyebrow. "I'll bet you busted!" She snatched at the facedown cards on the bed. "20 and...no way- 21? Crap!"

"I win!" Andrew guffawed loudly and scooped up the betted items lying in between them on the sheet. "You have learned an important lesson tonight: I am the Blackjack Master."

"Nuh uh, cheater." She uncrossed her legs and jumped at him, tearing the backward baseball cap off his head.

They wrestled for a moment, until she was unceremoniously dumped off the side of the bed. He fully stretched out his legs and leaned back against the pillow, laughing. He smoothed his messed up brown hair with his fingers and tore into a betted chocolate bar. Faith appeared over the edge, clutching the baseball hat.

"I win this one."

His eyes flashed open, and he grabbed at it, successfully latching on after a few tries. They struggled, but he gripped it tightly and reeled it next to him. He curled over it, and Faith let go to avoid being squashed.

"Ugh, give it back," she said, pounding him on the back.

"Nope," he mumbled underneath his arm.

As she tried to dig at him, a sound emanated from the door, signaling someone was there.

"Get it," she demanded.

“No you. I’m winning right now.”

“Fine,” she sighed, poking him. “What am I? Your doorman?”

“No, just my little sister,” he said, laughing.

She straightened her hair and threw him a dirty look. “Little sister who can still kick your ass when she wants to.”

She waved at the wall console, and the doors slid open. The light spilled into the dim hallway, revealing Sheppard there in full gear.

“Major,” she said startledly. “This is a surprise.”

His eyes narrowed in confusion and glanced around, to see if he had the right area.

“Hey Fai...Dr. Stuart, uh-“

“Not looking for me,” she said immediately.

He shook his head. “Sergeant Stuart actually.” He lifted a finger and shifted uneasily. “I didn’t make that connection. Are you his wi-“

“Sister.”

“Did I mix you up?”

“No, these are his quarters. Andrew’s over there,” she said. She jabbed a thumb at the lone form of the man on the bed.

Her brother perked up at hearing his name, but stayed still. “Faith, who is it?”

“Major Sheppard.”

Andrew snapped to attention, hopping to his feet and rushing to their side.

“Yes sir?”

“Stu- Sergeant, you’re on duty. A child named Jinto is missing. Floor to floor search, teams of two.”

Her brother went to his stuff and hustled around, getting his equipment on.

“Is that one of the Athosians?” she asked curiously.

“Yeah. Have you seen him?”

Her stance slackened as she leaned against the door edge. “I’m not sure. Earlier I saw a few kids playing by the north research lab and living area, but they’re usually over there every night.”

“I’ll check it, but they’re likely gone by now,” he said resignedly.

“If you need anything, I’d be glad to help.”

He nodded and motioned to Andrew, who suddenly popped up behind them. Faith lightly put a hand on his shoulder as he passed, and grabbed the baseball hat off his head.

“I’ll take that back,” she whispered.

Andrew grunted and quickly tried to snatch it, but had to walk on with his superior officer. Major Sheppard glanced back at her, grinning in amusement.

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Every fiber of her body stretched and moved in quick rhythm with each jaunting step, her feet echoing down the long hallway. Faith inhaled one last large gulp of sweet air and came to a halt. She bent over and braced against her knees a moment, while wiping the sweat from her forehead. A bit unsteady, she strode to her water bottle on a nearby ledge and through a set of tall open doors. Glinting stainless steel and faint humming met her as she entered the infirmary, weaving across the wide floor. She found Connie slouched at a table of microscopes, reading a book and tiredly munching a bagel. Her friend waved at her nonchalantly, and checked her watch.

“You’re in earlier today,” she said bemusedly.

“Mmph,” she said, shrugging. “I went straight to sleep last night cause the power outages were driving me nuts.”

Dr. Beckett ambled over from his computer in the corner, clutching a small scanner. “Aye, it’s bloody annoying. It’s hard to run a facility when you can’t see anything. I don’t know what’s going on, but I hope they fix it.”

“You’re too good a doctor to rely solely on electronics, Carson,” Faith said.

He smiled and patted her on the shoulder as always. “I can only hope.”

She swigged the rest of her water and slipped next to Connie, stealing some of her bagel and examining the book.

“Is this what you were up to all night? ‘Advanced Protein Sequencing’?”

Her friend slid the book away protectively. “I can’t help it if there’s not much to do on infirmary shift. We’ve only been here a few days, so no one’s coming in here yet. Although-“

“What?” Faith perked up at seeing the furtive expression on Connie’s face. “Something good?”

“There was an allergic reaction, and-” she leaned in closer. “McKay was in here last night. He fainted.”

“Oh really?”

“He kind of freaked out in the control room after the malfunctions and the search effort,” she said, trying hard not to grin.

“Huh.” Faith bowed her head a moment and swallowed some air before looking at her friend again. “So, about these malfunctions...I’ve seen Grodin popping all over the city this morning. It’s got to be serious if he’s running about.”

“I don’t know,” Connie said. “I didn’t think Lantian technology could have problems.”

“Try saying that to Andrew,” she said, waving her hand. “He’ll go on and on. Still, I think something goofy is afoot.”

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One foot tapped against the side of the chair, swinging in an off patterned beat. Occasionally a finger scraped across the pages, furthering the journey into the book. Preoccupiedly Faith absorbed the text, trying to pass the time and her boredom. Dr. Weir had recently put a restraint on personnel, restricting civilians to the living quarters section. Lieutenant Miller had mentioned a “security breach” or whatever when he’d herded her from the infirmary, but she was still annoyed.

“Hey.”

Faith jumped in her seat, dropping her book in surprise. She found Corrigan standing behind her, appearing quite irritated.

“Hi?”

“We’re needed.”

She hesitated, not sure what he was talking about. “But there’s a-”

“Not for us.” He pulled her up, hurrying with her along the hall. “Just be on guard. There’s a weird entity floating around our power generators.”

“A wha?”

“And they found the Athosian kid in a lab. They think he might’ve caused it and the outage problems.”

“Oh boy,” she said in a low voice.

He pushed her through a set of copper colored doors, into what appeared to be a closet. Instantly a console slid open on the wall, revealing a glowing map of the city. Miles touched a region of the northeast section and everything slid shut. A moment later, the doors slid open again, revealing a completely different room. They stepped out into an Ancient research lab, like many others they’d found on Atlantis. Mind boggled, Faith gaped at the room. Two Marines stood guard at the transport entrance; two other people were sitting at consoles with various complicated devices.

“How long have we known about this stuff?” she gasped.

“They found it early this morning.”

McKay scurried over, pulling along a nervous young boy. He wore the traditional clothes of Teyla Emmagen’s people and his hair fell in a mop around his ears. Faith bent over to greet him, offering her hand.

“You’re Jinto?”

He took her hand awkwardly and smiled shyly. “Yes. Hello.”

“I’m Faith. It’s good to finally meet you.”

McKay’s mouth twitched and he motioned to him. “I wish I hadn’t. You know how much he could’ve messed up in here by now?”

A flash of anger split across the woman’s face, and she frowned at him. “McKay! He’s only a child.”

Impatiently he tapped a stylus against the computer pad he was holding. “Dr. Stuart, we are in big trouble if we can’t get in shape with that *thing* floating around. And from what I can tell so far,” he pointed to Jinto. “He released it.”

Faith glared at him and directed her attention to the child. “How are you doing? It must’ve been awful cooped up here.”

The boy glanced at McKay and edged towards her. “Yup, but I’m alright.”

She kneeled to his level and said encouragingly, “Why don’t you show me some of the things you discovered in here?”

Jinto brightened a little, but McKay charged in between them. “Doctor, can you get to work? There’s a ton of things to be translated over here. We need to hurry.”

She tilted her head and said frostily, “Maybe you wouldn’t have to if you hadn’t shot down Dr. Weir’s offer to teach other scientists Ancient. Then there’d be no need to shove linguistically skilled others to slave over your work.”

She walked away, tagged along by the Athosian boy. He pointed towards a black cylindrical machine emanating an intense yellow light. “I started over there.”

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The pen paused as she scrutinized the translation and Ancient text carefully. Completely absorbed, Faith made side notes on a separate pile of paper, hardly believing what she was reading. She passed an earlier half off to McKay, who was busily studying diagrams on his laptop screen. They’d passed many hours like this, silent and intent on their business. Faint snatches of whispered conversation floated from a console nearby, where Miles was cooperating with a physicist named Dr. Hays.

After reading his pages, McKay peeked at the rest of Faith’s progress, and froze.

“No way.”

She lifted her head and edged back slightly, finding his face uncomfortably close to hers.

“This is-” He made a pleased noise and gazed at her studiously. “What do you think?”

Taken off-guard, she shifted the notebooks towards him and pointed at them sequentially. “According to the logs, the Ancients captured the Energy Being awhile before they left the city. They believed studying it could help them with their path to Ascension. It’s composed entirely of energy, feeding off it, becoming bigger and-”

“More charged with each resource,” he said helpfully.

“Exactly. And it’s intelligent, so the more fuel it gets-”

“The worse it’ll be,” he said, his brow wrinkling in worry.

“We’ve got to get this thing,” she said, sighing.

He nodded and ran a hand along the cylindrical machine beside him. “This containment vessel *should* do the trick. It emits an energy signature that attracts the creature, traps it and manages to hold it.”

“I hope we can do that,” she said, handing her handiwork off to him.

He strolled over to Corrigan and Hays, who were still pouring over their notes and devices. A few minutes later, McKay stood up attentively, a hand on his radio handset. A distant crackling and muttering could be heard, and he began talking fervently.

“We didn't touch anything. It could be the Entity causing random malfunctions. Proximity to that large of an energy disturbance could cause the Ancient technology to go haywire.”

He walked around in a circle, blindly rambling into the microphone. Everyone was watching him now, realizing something was up. McKay dropped his papers suddenly, murmuring even more worriedly.

“Dr. Weir, what’s their condition?”

Ten minutes passed before he returned to them, sitting down next to Faith.

“Ford and Damon were attacked by the Entity,” he said disbelievingly.

“Oh my god. Are they-?”

A crackle emanated from McKay’s earpiece, and he relaxed considerably. “Beckett’s got them. Damon’s fine and Ford’s a bit scathed, but he’ll make it.”

She put a hand on his arm. “Do you want to leave?”

He swallowed hard, but shook his head. “No. We should keep doing this.”

“Okay,” she said understandingly. “If you need to though... I can finish.”

“I know,” he said, handing her back the notebooks.

“Thank you.” She picked up her pen and immediately began transcribing. Quickly her words flowed in ink across the paper, as her eyes slid over the Ancient text.

He edged closer to observe, impatient but curious. “So- you are helpful after all I suppose,” he murmured.

She hesitated a moment and looked at him. “You are too, when you’re not on my nerves. Thanks.”

“Ah. Well you haven’t killed me yet.” He laughed and lowered his eyes.

A pregnant pause permeated the space between them, and they focused on the laptop screen distractedly. A second later, the transporter doors slid open, admitting Dr. Weir and Major Sheppard into the lab. Urgently they hurried over to the pair, appearing very disturbed.

Sensing the tension, Sheppard said loudly, “Are we interrupting?”

Both snapped their necks upward, and rose to their feet.

“Not at all. We’re practically finished,” McKay said lightly.

Dr. Weir threw a hand towards the transporter. “Apparently it’s an elevator too. We can stop taking the stairs all the time.”

“Huh.” McKay shifted uncomfortably, remembering the small device still attached to his chest. “How nice for you all.”

Sheppard shot him a wry look. “So what’ve you got?”

McKay tapped a few buttons on his computer and started talking about their findings, much to the amazement of the two. They appeared more bothered after he finished and swiveled back to Faith.

“Dr. Stuart was useful in figuring this out.”

The Major shifted in surprise. “Really? Never expected you to say something like that.”

Faith stretched her limbs and met Sheppard’s eyes, breathing a quiet laugh.

McKay studied her and caught the all expectant expression on his comrade’s face. “What?” he asked, suddenly wheeling on the soldier.

“Nothing,” Sheppard said innocently, a low tone in his voice.

“So, what next?” Dr. Weir said, interrupting the implied conversation.

McKay snapped out of his uneasiness, and placed a hand on the Ancient device. “We’ve got to figure out what we’ll do with this baby.”

“Did you just say ‘baby’?” Sheppard said, revolted.

A loud yawn reached their ears, summoning Faith over to the desk behind them. Jinto blinked slowly and sleepily picked his head off the table, where he’d been napping. He peered at them confusedly, and rubbed his eyes.

Faith nudged his arm playfully. “Evening, sleepy head.”

Dr. Weir smiled and said, “Okay, I think someone needs to return Jinto to the living quarters.”

Faith nodded in agreement. "He's had a long day." She collected her belongings and helped the boy to his feet. "C'mon let's head out."

Softly she said goodnight to the men, and acknowledged Dr. Weir. With an encouraging hand she helped Jinto to the transporter, and allowed in one of the Marines nearby. As the doors slid shut, she felt a strong gaze on her back, but didn't turn around.

.-.-.

"This is quite inconvenient," Carson said randomly. He tapped his fingers on a counter, breaking the silence of the infirmary.

Faith looked away from the window, where she was watching the morning sky. "It's not so bad." She wheeled over in her desk chair, and hugged him sympathetically. "I know how much you worry about your patients."

He laid a hand thankfully on her shoulder, sighing a bit. "Aye. How long do they expect us to last without power? It kept stopping over and over until they completely shut it off."

"I'm sorry we weren't able to catch the entity last night. Perhaps if McKay and I had finished earlier, it would've been tricked into that trap."

"It's no one's fault, love," he said defeatedly. "We're in this because of that bloody thing." He gazed at her thoughtfully. "It was decent of you to take an extra shift last night. Who knows if we'd have another attack?"

She raised a finger. "My motives were purely selfish. After yesterday's, I wanted to be on watch."

"Corporal Damon is on your team isn't he?"

"Yes. I just didn't want someone else, like Cavanaugh or McKay being put on in his place."

Carson laughed. "No worries there. He's joined Major Sheppard's team."

"Ouch. I don't envy him."

"Me neither," he said resolutely. "I'm perfectly happy here in my own lab, not having to go through those wormhole thingies to visit aliens."

"Personally, I can't wait to start going offworld again," she said, teasing him.

He leaned close to her and whispered, "You m'dear are out of your mind, along with everyone else who's fascinated with the damn things."

She smirked at him and said devilishly, "Poor Carson. You keep forgetting...we're on an alien planet. The homeworld of the gatebuilders, the Ancestors--"

He coughed and awkwardly pushed a binder at her. "Okay, that's enough out of you."

They went on playfully for a few minutes, before a voice broke their match. Their earpieces went static then the voice repeated itself, saying, “Medical team to the gate room.”

Beckett hurtled out of his chair and began to grab things and stutter a response. “Right away, Major.”

He ordered over his shoulder for her to grab his medical kit, but found her already holding it and rushing out the door.

“Biro was supposed to relieve me in another hour,” she mumbled as Carson joined stride with her.

They entered the gateroom and immediately descended on the group of people standing in front of the Stargate. McKay was lying weakly on the floor, ogling them.

“Thank you, take your time. Man down.”

Faith helped him sit up and handed Carson various items while he started examining the scientist. Wonderingly, she peered up at Major Sheppard, Dr. Weir, Teyla, and Dr. Grodin.

“What happened?”

“We got rid of the Entity,” Grodin said, appearing relieved.

“Yes *I* did,” interjected McKay, huffing loudly.

Dr. Weir crossed her arms and nudged him with her shoe. “You mean in addition to Teyla’s idea plus Peter and John’s assistance in prepping?”

“Uh huh, *with* me jumping head first into an alien life form, ultimately risking my life,” he said sourly.

He tried to jerk his arm away from Carson, but the doctor held on tightly.

“Am I dead yet?” he asked, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

“Nope,” said Beckett. He smacked him lightly on the back and dropped his stethoscope. “Not a scratch on you, far as I can tell right now.”

“Then it seriously worked,” said McKay.

“What worked exactly?” Faith said, pausing curiously.

She poured over him and spotted a small familiar object lying on the floor. She reached for the shield device and picked it up with caution.

“You can’t use it,” McKay said smugly.

She exhaled testily, feeling her patience wrinkle. “It only imprints on one person. I know. I translated the text.”

He lifted it out of her hand and dropped it on himself. “I mean it won’t function anymore. The creature drained it when I went to throw the Naquaada generator through the gate.”

“Rodney, I’m impressed,” Beckett said fleetingly.

“Me too,” she admitted, feeling a small pain in her forehead.

“Really?” he said, wide eyed. He faced Faith eagerly. “Enough to lend me that Ancient Velonan volume of algorithmic theory?”

“Not a chance,” she said, startled and somewhat irritated. “Especially as Hemmings is going to eat you alive.”

“Thought so,” he said, hanging his head dejectedly.

Beckett helped him to his feet, and thumped him encouragingly. “C’mon, we’ve got to check a few more things.”

“Oh goody.”

He and Faith dragged him down the hallway, closely followed by the others.

Chapter Two: Bound

*“The friends thou hast, and their adoption tried,
Grapple them to thy soul with hoops of steel.”*

-William Shakespeare

*“Any partnership demands that we give and give and give
and at the last, as we flop into our graves exhausted,
we are told that we didn’t give enough.”*

-Quentin Crisp

A flurry of clicks and zippers rose as pockets were closed, vests put on and supplies packed. Larson towered over them, monitoring their progress closely. He helped Faith to her feet and tightened one of the straps on her pack.

“Thanks,” she said sheepishly.

He smirked at her, and good-naturedly smacked the soldier next to him. “C’mon Corporal, we’re set to leave *now*.”

The soldier finished snapping his vest on and saluted him. “Yes sir, Captain.”

Larson went to the last member of their team, a nervous man having trouble with his bag. “Alright there Dr. Marshall?” he asked.

The man fumbled with his glasses and straightened them, as he stooped under the weight of his things. “Ye- yes.”

“Good. Let’s hit it guys... -and lady.” He hailed a technician sitting high in the control area, waving his arm. “Dial it up!”

The four made their way to the platform, halting near the center. The elaborate patterns on the Stargate started to light up, locking underneath their corresponding Chevron. The middle ring lit up and a kawooshing wave sprung towards them, then rearward. It collapsed, forming like a wall of water. It shimmered on them as they walked up to it in a line, holding their gear. Captain Larson scanned them over one last time, then stepped through the gate with them.

They emerged on a stone dais, glaring sunlight meeting them. The gate whooshed quietly as it shut off, disconnecting the wormhole from Atlantis. A sea of knee high grass expanded a good distance outward, fenced on the edges by innumerable trees.

“This is promising,” said Corporal Damon.

He went down a flight of steps with Larson, followed closely by Faith, then Dr. Marshall. Their boots swished against the tall growth, everyone alert but calm. They heard the occasional chirp break the silence, but the area lay unstirred.

“I wonder what we’ll find here,” Larson said, somewhat sarcastic.

Marshall took in their surroundings and replied, “What or whoever, they’re fairly far away. They must not use the gate regularly.”

“Or it’s a defensive tactic,” said Faith. “Usually, Pegasian civilizations build farther from the Stargate. They associate it with the Wraith and therefore want less to do with it. However they’re usually drawn by the economic and traveling advantages.”

“Therefore there should be signs of recent activity,” Marshall concluded.

“Exactly.”

They reached boundary of the trees, finding mostly a tangle of large branches. A cascade of shadows fell from the tall dank trees, mingling with the dark far-reaching undergrowth. They studied the way before them, wondering whether to go on, or if it was possible. Damon removed his sunglasses and squinted at a tree, summoning Faith to him.

“Hey Doc Stu, check this out.”

She slunk to his side and scrutinized what he was pointing at. Ahead, a large wooden plack with tight curled writing in red paint was nailed to an old gnarled trunk. Bits here and there were peeled or chipped, making it hard to read.

“What does it say?”

Faith walked forward slowly, attempting to decipher it. ““Only friends here...pass judgment-’ I can’t read the rest.”

Suddenly a branch cracked underfoot, causing Damon and Larson to jump. Guns held high, they skirted her, scoping their surroundings.

“I don’t like the looks of this. I think we should scrub the mission.”

Dr. Marshall remained several feet away, fiddling with his glasses. “We can’t make that determination until we know why it’s here.”

“Clearly there are people here,” Faith said, motioning conspicuously to the sign.

“Well they might not be nice people,” said Larson, matter of factly. Faith moved towards the tree, but he grabbed her elbow and marched the team to the gate. “Not so fast missy. We’re going to check in with Atlantis.”

She tried to wrench her arm free, but he didn't let her go until they reached the DHD.

"That's Dr. Missy to you," she growled.

"Dial it up Marshall," he said, ignoring her.

The scientist jittered slightly, then began sequentially entering the address. He pressed his palm into the middle, causing a series of glyphs to light up. It froze a moment, then faded back to its previous state.

"Um Doug?"

"The wormhole didn't engage," he said blankly.

He attempted it again, with the same result. Larson tapped his foot and urged Faith over.

"You do it."

It didn't work.

"What's wrong? Don't tell me we went to a planet with a broken DHD!"

Marshall examined the device closely and sniffed. "There's nothing wrong with it. It dialed and everything. The wormhole's not establishing because the Atlantis gate must be active."

"But nobody was scheduled to leave after us," said Damon. "Maybe a team is in distress and needed to return early?"

"This team is in distress," said Larson, in frustration.

"No we're not," Faith said, elbowing him. "Why don't we do what we came here to do? I should get a better look at that sign. It might not say what I thought."

"I agree," echoed the other scientist.

The Captain sighed, but relented. "Fine, but caution."

The team returned to the unusual tree, the two soldiers moving along with her, as if glued to her hip. They were not happy about sticking around. Marshall hurried ahead of them to the sign, his notebook in hand. Faith's boot caught a rock and she tripped, getting caught by both men.

"Easy boys," she said, smiling.

In their distraction, they barely noticed a small object whiz by, or the following thunk. Dr. Marshall shouted hysterically, making the trio jolt. The scientist whipped at them, allowing them to see the small stake and fletch of an arrow sticking out of his backpack. Instantly, more arrows

flew at him, striking him in both legs and the stomach. Damon hollered in surprise and the three stumbled away from Marshall. Before they knew what was happening, the ground gave way beneath them, a series of loud snaps merging with their yells. A torrent of dirt, plants, wood and rocks tumbled with them into darkness, until they slammed into a compact bottom. A large stone landed alongside Faith, striking her in the forehead. A spike of blackness met her, and she knew no more.

.-.-.-.

The thin band of light across her vision exploded into a bright glare as her eyes fluttered open. A panoply of shapes and colors swam before her, blurry and unfocused. She blinked furiously and moved her hands to rub them, but nothing happened. Her senses slowly returned, and she realized her hands were bound tightly behind her back. Her sight cleared, allowing her to finally see.

Damon was opposite her, slumped tiredly against a wooden wall. He perked when he saw her awake, studying worriedly.

“Heya,” he whispered.

A painful throbbing began on the side of her head, and her mind swirled around nauseously. She winced and held still a second. “What the hell happened?”

“We were captured.”

“Of course we were,” groaned another voice. Larson struggled to sit straight in his corner, where he’d been lying on the floor. “I’m glad you’re alive Stuart.”

Remembering Marshall at once, she glanced around, but they were the only ones there. They were in some sort of cabin, with crudely hewn furniture and items strewn about, and wooden bars slatted against the windows. A small gap in the doorway showed there was a beam laid against it outside.

Larson gazed at her reproachfully, sensing her thoughts. “They strung Marshall up on a tree near the gate and killed him. I saw it as they took us out of the pit-trap they dug.”

“Who are *they*?”

He shook his head. “No idea-”

He shut up at hearing the rustling of footsteps and a grating noise echoing from the door. The entrance opened, admitting three intimidating men. One was older and huskier than the others, grey hair clumped on top of his head, and his clothing rich. He grunted to a younger skinny sentry, who obediently stood at the door.

His other companion gruffed at them, “Get up.”

He kicked the Marines in the ribs and grabbed Faith by the shoulders. Unsteady and anxious, the three stood stonefaced in front of their captors.

“Trespassers,” said the old man. He straightened his red leather coat and stared at them inquiringly. “Who are you?”

When they did not answer, the guard punched Damon. He toppled, landing hard on the leg he was obviously favoring.

Larson mumbled to him sympathetically and spoke up. “I am Captain Ernest Larson of the United States Marine Corp. This is Corporal Oliver Damon and Dr. Faith Stuart. The one you killed was Dr. Doug Marshall, a good man.”

He scraped his nails against his bearded chin, the corner of his mouth crinkling pleasedly. “He is not dead yet. But your words mean nothing to me Caa-ptan. Why are you here?”

“We’re explorers,” answered Faith. “We travel through the Stargate seeking friends and knowledge.”

The man grasped her wrist in anger, wrenching it hard. “You are soldiers! My men found your weapons. Only our friends know where not to fall!”

“We wish to be friends,” she said, her throat tight in pain.

“Outsiders are not accepted here,” he bellowed, slapping her. “You are nothing, trespassers!”

“We can help,” Damon blurted out, pitying Faith. “We’re good friends to have. We’ve defeated many Wraith.”

“The Wraith have not fed on the Unde for generations. Good many have fallen by our hands.”

“On foot probably, but not in ships,” Damon said astutely. “We have technology of the Ancestors, and advanced weapons. We can help protect you.”

His eyes flashed. “The Ancestors are gods. You are pitiful burglars violating our holy grounds.”

“We didn’t mean to-“

“Enough,” he commanded. The guard shoved the trio to the floor. “You will die by starvation; an example to our enemies.”

He motioned to the others and stomped out of the room. The door thumped ominously; leaving them sprawled on the floor.

“We’re screwed.”

.-.-.-.

“We’ve got to get out of here,” said Larson. He got to his knees and tried peering out of a window, with limited success.

“What do you propose we do, MacGyver?” asked Damon.

“Shut up, I’m thinking,” he snapped.

Damon rolled his eyes and crashed his butt onto the floor. “This’ll take a while. In the meantime could someone conjure up Tylenol? My ankle’s killing me.”

“It’s probably sprained,” she said, noticing the way he was holding it.

“I thought as much,” the soldier replied.

Faith gazed around the room and restlessly wiggled her leg, unexpectedly feeling a familiar lump in her sock. “Ernest,” she hissed. “Come here.”

Dolefully he made his way to her side, and said, “Please don’t tell me you sprained your ankle too.”

She nudged him reprovngly with her toe and lifted her boot towards him.

“Sorry, no handless foot massages yet. I haven’t finished taking that class.”

She sighed and twisted around, allowing him to see the lump protruding out of her shoe. “I’ve got a pocket knife in my sock. Now if you want to saw off these ropes and get out of here, I suggest you take it.”

His eyes opened wide. “You actually took my advice? I decided I was kidding cause no one listens to me anyways.”

“Captain, even you don’t listen to you,” Damon said, sniggering. “Or we’d be outta here already.”

Larson turned around and struggled around her shoe with his bound hands, trying to slide it out. Faith held her breath so she could stay still, the fingers very ticklish. He finally got it into his hands and gripped it assuringly, a smile breaking out on his face.

He looked at her keenly. “If we get out of this, I’ll buy you pounds of chocolate and be your love slave.”

She snorted and allowed him to shove the open knife into her palm, their backs touching. Damon crawled over to supervise, in case she went too close to their team leader’s body.

“Hold fast,” Larson instructed. He began vigorously sliding his ropes against the blade, and little by little the fibers frayed. Finally she heard a faint snap, and Larson moved away, shaking his arms free. He took the knife and sawed at her bindings, removing them quickly. She jerked her arms as the rope broke, raising them gloriously past her head. He started on Damon, though the soldier winced several times and shifted uncomfortably.

“Take it easy, Captain.”

“No time Corporal.” He got him loose then darted to the door, testing it. “Damn, I was hoping for a stroke of stupid luck.” He turned to his team, his eyes glinting. “Here’s what we’ve got to do.”

.-.-.-.

Faith jumped off the chair, grinning smugly. She went over to Larson and Damon by the door, whispering.

“They fell for it. They don’t seem too happy either.”

“How many?”

“The same two.”

The men tightened their grips on each of their handmade weapons, and gave one to Faith. They’d broken the legs off a table and sharpened them with the pocket knife. They heard footsteps outside and lifting of the beam. The door was flung open, and the two men flew at them. The one with a bow was clubbed over the head, making him go after Faith and Damon. Larson leapt away from the second man, who brandished a dagger at him. He kicked and punched him, in an effort to disable him. Faith dodged her attacker, but lost her weapon, ending up in a hand to hand grapple. Damon hopped out of the way and awkwardly swung at the man, missing entirely. The Captain wrested the knife from his attacker and coldclocked him, then rushed at the other, stabbing him swiftly. The guard fell dead to the floor with a loud thunk. They bent over the fallen, stripping them of their weapons.

“C’mon,” Larson hissed.

Faith put her arm under Damon’s and helped him limp out of the cabin. Larson slunk ahead, checking for obstacles.

“I can get us back to the Stargate,” he said lowly.

They cut through the trees along a dirt road, following it away from their prison. Soon, he pointed out a large row of posts across their route, completely blocking the way ahead.

“The village is that way. The paraded us there earlier. We’re going to skirt it.”

Suddenly, they heard a loud gunshot ring in the air, automatically making them duck.

“Was that-“ Faith stuttered.

“We found our weapons,” Larson said brightly.

“Sir,” said Damon, grabbing his jacket for support. “We can’t risk retrieving them.”

The soldier shirked him off, nudging him onto Faith. “We can’t risk not getting them. The Gate’s going to be guarded.”

They sidled in the direction of the noise, and began hearing a panoply of laughter. They knelt among the bushes, the Captain commanding Damon to stay put. He and Faith crawled on, finding the source of disturbance. In the center of a clearing, four men sat over *their* belongings, going through various pockets and playing with the guns. Larson silently motioned his instructions to Faith, and she crept around to the other side. Ready herself, she ran behind one of the men, bashing him in the head. The three others leapt in surprise, yelling and drawing their weapons. One charged at her, but met her boot and stick. She heard another yell and fall to the ground, Larson’s knife in his throat. The last guard decisively raised a gun he’d held, and sporadically fired at Faith. She dove behind a boulder, narrowly missing the bullets. Larson grunted and leapfrogged on the assailant, finishing him off.

He went over to Faith and helped her off the ground, beaming at her. “Good job.”

He rifled amongst their stolen equipment, tossing her a vest and Damon’s P-90. He supplemented himself, pulled out the rest, and herded back to their teammate. They startled a distraught Damon, who was lying in wait amongst the foliage. Larson gave him a vest and two semi-automatic handguns, but was greeted sourly.

“That’s my gun,” he said to Faith.

“Quit it. I know how to use it,” she sniped, taking him on her shoulder again.

“I’ll have to thank your brother for that,” he muttered.

Awkwardly they made their way, the Captain leading them through the dense forest. Twenty minutes later, they emerged on the border of the meadow, finding it completely clear.

‘Stay down,’ Larson motioned to them.

They went further down to search for the Gate, unable to see it from their cover. Their nerves were taut and their muscles strained; their bodies aware of each tiny movement. A few yards farther, they paused, hearing a faint voice.

“He-...lp.”

Taken off guard, Larson mouthed to them, ‘Marshall.’

Quickly they went on, and soon located a familiar spot. Now, a gaping hole was beneath the wooden sign, signaling the loathsome trap and a ghastly sight. The sign was still tacked to the tree, but tied below it was Dr. Marshall. His body was torn and covered in blood, as if beaten horribly. Faith lowered Damon to the ground, while Larson surveyed the surroundings. Getting an all clear, they dashed to his side, examining his wounds. His eyelids opened slowly and he acknowledged them, before he moaned and exhaled in pain.

He stopped moving.

“Get him down,” Larson commanded, pulling out a knife.

Hastily they sawed at the ropes and laid their comrade onto the grass. He assayed the scientist’s body, while Faith began applying pressure on large wounds. His fingers lid from the man’s neck and he desperately faced her.

“No pulse, we need to do something-“

Suddenly, a thunderous crack sounded overhead and two figures sprung out of the branches, landing atop the pair. Instinctively Faith screamed and kicked against the hulking body, flailing and struggling to rise. Her fingernails met his cheeks, but halfway onto her knees, a pain shot into her shoulder, as a knife pierced her skin. She rolled and smashed her fist at the attacker, her left arm in wrenching agony. The rocky soil scraped against her as she strove against the knife. With her free hand she clawed for a nearby stone, wriggling closer and closer. Finally she gripped it, and slammed it into his head, knocking him unconscious.

“Stuart,” Larson gasped.

He slugged his way over and pushed the man off, easing her up. She seethed at his touch and removed her jacket, feeling the warm pooling of blood on her back.

“God,” he murmured. He patted her rewardingly and shoved a packet of gauze at her, returning to Marshall’s side.

“He’s dead,” he said, falling back from the corpse.

Faith messily wrapped a bandage over her shoulder, trying to repress the urge to cry.

Damon came up behind them, dragging himself along. “I’m sorry guys.”

Larson looked at them soberly, defeat and anger simmering in his eyes. “Stuart, take Damon. I’ll take Marshall.” She hesitated, but he said pointedly, “Now!”

With some assistance, she donned her vest and jacket, then took Damon on her good shoulder. The team endeavored for the Stargate, walking carefully in case there were more traps. Damon entered his IDC and they went through the open wormhole, not looking back.

.-.-.-.

The gateroom was silent and the lights low, a serene glow settling over the city for the evening. Unexpectedly, the glyphs on the Stargate began to cycle, and an open wormhole formed.

A man's voice echoed in the room, "Off-world activation. Receiving Corporal Damon's IDC."

"Lower the shield," replied Dr. Weir.

A moment later, Larson came backwards through the portal, half dragging Dr. Marshall with him. His team members emerged next to him, striving to walk properly. The Captain respectfully laid the scientist on the floor, covering him with his jacket.

He turned to Damon and Faith, saying sternly, "Both of you. Infirmary."

They complied, limping out of the gateroom as people began surrounding Larson.

.-.-.-.

The clean linen sheets of the hospital area loomed invitingly in front of them as they entered. Damon's boot clapped irregularly on the floor as Faith brought him to a bed, burdened with his weight. Dr. Beckett and Dr. Greene descended on the pair, appearing quite concerned.

"What happened to you?"

She clenched her teeth and took off her vest, shaking her head. Carson saw the red stain on the jacket, and grabbed her hand, motoring her towards an empty bed.

"Sit down."

"But Oliver, he sprained his ankle. Larson's hurt. Marshall--"

"Shh, love," he said, gently removing her jacket.

He freed a trickle of blood as he removed her crude bandage and slid aside her tank top. He handed her gauze and picked through a nearby drawer, allowing her a moment of stillness.

"Are you okay?"

She lifted her head and saw the next bed over was occupied by none other than Major John Sheppard.

“I dunno,” she said hoarsely.

Carson threw out gauze and pressed something cold against her wound.

“This is deep. You’re going to need stitches.”

She nodded weakly and gripped the bed as he started working on her.

“How did this-”

“I was stabbed,” she said, angrily recalling the attack.

Sheppard sat up in bed, watching her intensely. “You were attacked?”

“Yes, on M49-GF7.” She caught sight of the bandage on his neck. “You were too?”

His eyes darkened. “It’s been a hard day for a lot of us.”

She froze, feeling the suture needle begin its work.

Beckett patted her good shoulder a minute later. “Didn’t flinch at all. Does it hurt anywhere else?” She parted her hair and showed him where she’d hit her head, then where she’d scraped her side. He rolled up the bottom of the shirt, shaking his head. “You’ve got a nasty abrasion there.”

“I could do with some aspirin,” she said hopefully.

“You seem like you could use a cleaning up,” he said.

She peered at her clothes and noticed she was caked with mud and blood.

“Can I leave then?” she asked, longing for her bed.

Sheppard chuckled, but Beckett gave him the evil eye. “Not a chance. You’ve lost a good deal of blood, and may have a concussion. Wash up here. You’re staying.”

At that moment, the doors slid open to the infirmary, and Dr. Weir came in, escorting Larson.

“Carson,” she said. “Take care of Captain Larson, and make sure he doesn’t leave until he’s okay. He keeps trying to debrief me.”

Dr. Greene tried to commandeer him, but he swerved towards Sheppard and Faith.

He stopped in front of her. “Faith, are you alright?” he asked, seeming a bit frantic.

“I’m good.”

He was hunched so pathetically, that Faith leaned forward and hugged him. He drew back slightly, but returned the embrace. Sheppard coughed behind them and he jumped, finally noticing his superior officer.

“Major, sir. What are you doing in here?”

“Long story,” he replied, raising an eyebrow. “You?”

“Long story sir.”

Dr. Greene grabbed Larson and managed to tug him away, placing him near Damon. The two soldiers exchanged a few words, then settled in their beds.

A half hour later, Faith found herself clean and ravenously eating in her infirmary bed. She was starving, but no longer sore. Beckett had given her something for the pain, finally stopping her headache and muscle complaints. Sheppard watched her eat interestedly, enviously eyeing her cup of blue jello.

“Feeling better?” he joked.

She nodded and eagerly ate another bite. He shifted in his bed, glancing at the now sleeping Damon and Larson.

“Where’s the fourth member of your team? Dr. M...?”

She paused, putting down her spoon and not looking at him. “Dr. Marshall. He died.”

“Oh. That sucks.”

“Yeah,” she said quietly.

Chapter Three: Truth

“‘All truth is simple.’ Is that not doubly a lie?”

Friedrich Nietzsche

“After all, the ultimate goal of all research is not objectivity, but truth.”

-Helene Deutsch

A small beep sounded as Faith’s watch changed the hour to 10 am, and she stepped out of a curtained area. She gathered her hair in her fingers and cinched it with an elastic band. She slid stealthily past a row of beds, but a voice broke the infirmary’s silence.

“Leaving so soon?”

Damon lowered the magazine he was reading and wiggled his bad leg atop a pile of pillows.

She smiled guiltily. “Beckett cleared me fifteen minutes ago.”

“Lucky.”

She dropped her shoulders tiredly. “Don’t worry; I won’t have fun until you’re outta here too.”

“Or missions?” he said, wistfully.

She motioned to the sleeping Captain Larson in the bed next to his. “At least not till he’s better too. No team, no mission.”

He brightened considerably. “Good.”

“Now be quiet so you don’t wake *him* up, and have an even worse injury.”

“Ha ha.”

She waved goodbye to him and turned to leave, but immediately bumped into someone else. Her friend Connie stood in her path, appearing quite apprehensive.

“Faith Stuart, what did you do to yourself?” she asked angrily. “When Beckett said you were in here-“

She put an arm on Connie’s shoulder, ushering her into the hallway.

“I realized Carson wasn’t letting people in to see us, not after the attack. Don’t get hysterical,” she lulled, but getting suspicious asked, “What were you doing in the medical area?”

Her friend gulped in a few breaths of air and regained her stature. “Kirkland brought me in to look at this tissue sample from this crazy insect that Sheppard’s team encountered.”

“Did it attach to his neck?”

Connie narrowed her eyes at her, and said, “Yes. That’s where they recovered it, a piece of the pincher or sucker thing. Why do you know that?”

“No, I didn’t sneak into the lab to steal your limelight,” she said reassuringly. “Major Sheppard was in the same infirmary quarter, actually in the bed next to me- and no, I was nowhere near his neck.”

Her face relaxed considerably and she grinned at her strangely. “Oh.”

“Shut up,” Faith said. “Now show me the bug.”

.-.-.-.

“Teyla believes it’s related to the Wraith?” Faith straightened in front of the microscope, turning to her friend.

“Ugh yes. It was very scientific of her to mention it.”

“Freaky cool. I assume you’re going to DNA sequence it?” she said, hopeful.

Her friend hesitated, suddenly becoming interested in a strand of her hair. “We already kind of did that...”

Disappointment surged in her chest, and she gasped dramatically. “Damn it, Constance!”

“Wait,” Connie said, backing away slightly. “I saved the comparison part for you.”

“Really?” The other woman nodded. “Aw thanks.”

“Gee you’re moody,” she said blatantly. “What has Beckett got you on?”

“No idea,” Faith answered, half shrugging.

“Ah.”

.-.-.-.

The filled cup wobbled tediously on the tray, which slid along the table with its handler. Faith navigated it halfway off the edge around the platters, attempting to balance it with her waist and add food to it simultaneously. Her arm was incredibly sore and of no help, and her method wasn’t working well.

She'd spent the last several hours debriefing Dr. Weir about their failed mission and a plethora of curious associates or concerned friends. She was starving. The tray was about to flip over, when someone suddenly reached out to grab it and met her hand.

She looked up gratefully at her meal's savior, and found Dr. Collins there.

"I got it," he said, lifting the tray. "A little hard one handed."

"Thanks," she said, flushing red. "Mind helping?"

"Not at all," he said dismissively. "Would you care to join me?"

"Okay," she said quietly, still feeling embarrassed.

She followed him to a table, where'd he already had his meal spread out. He placed her food across from his, and they settled into opposing chairs. Both picked up their sandwiches, but he paused and motioned to her listless arm.

"What happened?"

"The armed natives on M49-GF7 didn't like us too much."

His face softened in understanding. "You were teammates with Doug?"

She shifted awkwardly and swallowed part of her drink. "Yeah. He-... it was very bad."

"I'm sorry. Who else was with you?"

"Captain Larson and Corporal Damon," she said, her voice low.

Collins shook his head regretfully. "I don't know them."

The corner of her mouth moved in reminiscence. "They're great, really fun and smart. I don't know many times Larson has saved our asses."

"You're lucky to have good partners," he said slowly. "I haven't been offworld yet."

She interchanged her spoon and lifted an eyebrow at him. "It's amazing. Except when aliens are trying to kill you."

They both laughed.

.-.-.-.

At the end of lunch, Collins returned his tray with her, and they walked together, until they reached the living quarters section.

“Well,” he said gently. “I hope your arm feels better.”

Her arm twinged responsively. “Thank you. It’ll be sore for awhile though.”

He smiled and turned away, smiling. “See you around, Faith.”

She went down an adjacent hall, saying hi to several people along her route. Five minutes later, she reached her brother’s quarters and found the entrance wide open. She appeared around the corner, peeping a hello. Andrew pivoted in his desk chair, distracted from a conversation he’d been having with Larson. Her teammate was draped lazily across his friend’s couch, chattering nonchalantly.

“Ah, there’s the patient,” he said, waving in greeting. “Haven’t seen you since the morning’s meeting.”

She nudged next to him on the seat, clearing a place for herself. “What are you on about Mr. Bruises-No-Knife?”

He examined her, noting that her arm listlessly hung at her side. “Not abusing injured body parts.”

“I was not abusing-“

“Oh, then why aren’t you moving it? When Dr. Beckett let you out, he told you to take it easy.” She punched him with her right fist, but he pointed at her in return. “See? Dr. Know-It-All?” Andrew responsively kicked his friend in the foot. “Hey, watch it,” the marine said, retracting his leg reproachfully.

“It’s my job to be the annoying brother,” he said, uncrossing his arms.

“Then what am I? Chopped liver?”

“You’re supposed to be a commanding authority, a role model, somebody who can make people do whatever he wants, a clean cut jerk-“

“Or a weirdo boss who takes advantage of his supplants?” Larson crinkled his face eerily and waffled his fingers teasingly at Faith.

She smacked them good-naturedly and sniggered. Andrew slid closer in his chair, and grabbed the back of his friend’s t-shirt.

“No, cause then I’d have to shoot you, or worse,” he whispered.

“As if,” Larson laughed and pushed him, sending him wheeling away. “I’m your homie, goombah, pal, sidekick- your real bro.”

“Dude, you’re right,” Andrew replied, gripping his palm amicably.

A second later, they playfully tried to knock each other over, causing Faith to scramble for her safety.

“Boys, boys,” she said chidingly.

Finally they broke apart, as Larson managed to send Andrew onto the floor.

“I am still champion,” he said, pathetically raising his arm overhead.

“Impressive,” she said, sarcastic.

“Ah.” Suddenly Larson beckoned her near, pulling something out of his pocket. “The champion will share his bounty with you, in payment of his debt.”

He placed a partially broken linty chocolate chip cookie in her palm.

“Thanks,” she said, surprised and a little repulsed.

Andrew ungraciously heaved himself off the floor and stared at the cookie.

“What debt?”

Faith raised it up and down, as if weighing its worth. “This? I believe the words ‘pounds’ and ‘slave’ were in there too,” she said with a haughty smile.

Larson’s face fell, but then Andrew landed atop him, pinning him in a headlock.

“Gotcha.”

He struggled a moment, then gave up. “Uncle.”

“Andrew, quit it. Ernest promised me pounds of chocolate and to be my love slave if we got off the planet, M49-GF7.”

“Hmm...he’ll have to fulfill it then, minus the fornication part,” her brother said matter-of-factly.

He tightened his grip and probed his friend’s pockets, removing three more cookies and a brownie from his pockets. He gave them to his sister, keeping one for himself.

“We stole these at lunch. Enjoy.”

“Sure, pick on the invalid’s stash,” growled Larson. Immediately he jerked out his knees and threw off his friend. He fell onto the floor, and Larson rolled over on the couch, groaning. “Oh ow...shouldn’t have done that.”

Faith dropped one of the deserts on his chest, and pointed at each of them. “Seriously, you guys need a baby-sitter. You quit picking on defenseless people. You Mr. Bruises, take a nap.”

Shaking her head, she left the room.

.-.-.-.

Connie’s fingers flew across the keyboard, the faint tapping filling their ears. Faith and Dr. Kirkland edged closer to the screen, relieved when a program window appeared. She glanced at them and moved to let Faith in.

“There it is. Let the fun begin!”

“I wish I could’ve helped from the start,” Faith mumbled absentmindedly.

Kirkland frowned at her. “There’s no way you were going near my test-tubes with that arm. And you still aren’t.”

Connie poked him with a pencil, but all three of them focused on the screen, combing every inch of it.

The next couple of days went quickly, as Faith flew in and out of the lab. There was an increased flurry of activity, Beckett, Wagner, and Mos joined the research. Damon left the infirmary and she barely saw anyone, except at lunch, where she increasingly bumped into (and ate with) Dr. Collins. On the fifth day of arguing and analysis, the six professionals found themselves sitting yet again in front of a computer. Dr. Beckett lounged beside the printer, gathering each piece of paper that spit out. He peered at the last page then distributed the reports.

“Everybody ready?”

There was a resounding “yes,” and they collected their tools, following him out of the infirmary lab. They went down the long passages to the conference room next the control area. They settled around the large table, setting out papers and electronic devices. Dr. Weir was at the head, with Carson standing beside her. McKay, Sheppard, and Teyla came in too, accepting handouts and sitting down.

Dr. Beckett activated a computer and looked at Dr. Weir. “May I?” She acquiesced, and he began talking. “As I’m sure you’re aware, Major Sheppard came in contact with a creature named the Iratus bug. After previous suppositions, we decided to compare it in depth to the Wraith. The results are unnerving.”

He clicked through a series of diagrams and pictures, guiding them along. “Using samples recovered from the Major and our specimens, we’ve concluded that yes, the Iratus is unquestionably related. Phenetically and genetically, they share many uniform characteristics.”

Sheppard winced and a bustle of flipping pages ensued. “They both use a specialized mechanism to latch into their victims, draining away energy and strength until death. Using this, both can recover after sustained injuries and regenerate repeatedly, making them bloody difficult to kill. Also using Ancient database information, we concluded the Wraith evolved from the Iratus, most likely with an incorporation of human DNA. Part of the Wraith genome *is* still genetically human. They are phylogenetically evolved from the Iratus and humans cohesively.”

He stopped, seeming exhausted. A small murmur broke out, but Weir cleared her throat, causing everyone to fall silent.

“I can’t believe the Ancients let this happen right under their noses,” she said. “The only way this could’ve occurred is if they unwittingly seeded a planet home these things.”

Sheppard lowered the report and put his hand on the table. “If all this is true, couldn’t we use it somehow against ‘em?”

“What are you suggesting?” broke in McKay. “Calling them up and making fun of them? Ha ha, you’re part human?”

Ignoring the scientist, he looked inquisitively at Beckett. “Maybe some sort of weapon?”

Carson’s face wrinkled in concentration. “You mean genetically alter them to be harmless?”

Teyla leaned forward. “Like the Ancestors, the Wraith have special abilities to control their ships, which give them massive advantages-“

“They couldn’t use them anymore,” McKay said suddenly, snapping his fingers. “No Wraith weapon means them not blowing the crap out of us.”

Faith’s mind reeled wildly. “If we remove the Iratus genes, leaving only the rest behind...they might essentially be human.”

Beckett uprighted himself. “Do you know what all of you are asking? To delete entire genetic code?”

“You were able to do it with Ancient gene,” said McKay.

He exhaled loudly and slid into a chair. “That was single gene therapy. This would be the reverse, on a massive scale.”

“Could you do that Carson?” Weir asked.

Beckett paused a moment, fidgeting with his papers. “I believe so, but it would take time and resources.”

She folded her arms and met his eyes seriously. “If you’re sure, go for it. Whatever you need.”

.-.-.-.

The wide conference room doors swung open, releasing the meeting onto the veranda. Faith caught a fervent Connie by the elbow.

Her friend stuttered. "I can't believe it- potential eradication of the Wraith--"

"Don't get too excited," said McKay, appearing next to them. "On that scale? And it might not even be possible."

Connie scowled at him. "Of course it's possible. We've got dozens of the smartest people in the galaxy and millions of innocent humans to save. We'll do it."

"Whatever you say, Captain America."

.-.-.-.

The familiar humming of the drive pods started as the Marine in the pilot's seat began touching various instruments on the flight console. Sergeant Stackhouse paused as more systems went on, and swiveled around. He studied the scientist in the fourth chair next to Hansen, who was pouring over notes.

"Dr.," he said, catching her attention. "Are you sure about this?"

She laid the notepad on her lap and met him eye to eye. "Yes."

Larson spoke up from the co-pilot's chair. "Don't question her motives Sergeant. You're lucky she and Corrigan didn't ask for a science armada."

"I heard that," Miles said, popping his head out of the ship's back half. "Get on with it, Paul. Dr. Weir cleared us to find what the hell happened on the planet, so go."

"Just checking before I put my team in danger, which by the way includes you."

He returned to the console, mumbling. The craft lurched slightly as he maneuvered it into position, communication with the control room. The jumper entered the gateroom and Larson began entering the address for M49-GF7 into the ship's DHD. The Stargate lit up and the puddlejumper dived through it. They emerged above the familiar meadow, but the sky was fairly dark and rainy.

"Cloak," Larson instructed.

They made their way over the treeline, Larson directing the pilot. A few minutes later, they spotted the domestic's sprawl of buildings.

The HUD popped up and Stackhouse hummed interestedly. “I’m not reading many life signs in this area.”

Faith crept behind him, checking out the view. “Actually, that makes sense. This is too small to be a settlement or a town.”

“Maybe an outpost?” Miles suggested.

“They’re defending something here,” the pilot mused. “That’s probably why you were attacked. We definitely should check it out.”

“Now aren’t you glad we came?” said Larson.

“We’ll see.”

.-.-.-.

The soft light of Weir’s office caught in the pen that Corrigan kept flipping over, sending small flickers at his companions. On Faith’s other side, Larson appeared somewhat irritated by it, but said nothing. Dr. Weir finished reading over their notes and slid away the computer screen.

“Well, what do you guys think?” she asked.

“We discovered the ruins of a more technologically advanced city close to the gate. The place we were held prisoner is military in nature, a defensive outpost. Also, there are more than several defensive structures placed around the gate and in proximity, including the traps.” The Marine paused, and subtly poked Faith, causing her to sigh before proceeding.

“We’re positive the region is a holy place to the indigenous population of M49-GF7. There’s an apparent history of repeated culling and decimation by the Wraith. Like many cultures in the Pegasus galaxy so far, the modern people worship their ancestors and the Ancients. We found a ritualized center in the ruins, filled with offerings, written prayers, and related art. The actual settlement is farther from the gate, probably another defensive tactic. They probably make pilgrimages to the ruins to perform religious rituals.”

Larson broke in again. “Because we intruded into this area and fell into their traps, they attacked.”

“Thank you for your efforts,” said Dr. Weir. “I’m sorry you lost a teammate, but Captain I’m going to suggest that you start searching for a replacement when Corporal duty returns to duty.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

They talked for twenty more minutes, sifting through the data. Soon, Weir dismissed them, but asked Faith to remain behind.

“I’d like to have a word with you.”

Confused, Faith retook her seat, and waited until the two men had left. Weir rolled close to her desk and put her elbows on the surface, interlacing her fingers.

“How are you doing?”

“I’m fine,” she said immediately.

“You’ve had arduous week,” Weir said, eyeing her knowingly.

Faith slouched over, not bothering to hold herself up anymore. “Yes. It’s one thing after the other.”

“You’ve made great advances this week. Don’t be afraid to slow down. Burying yourself in work...it’ll burn you out.”

“That’s how I’ve always done things,” she replied distantly. “How I managed to graduate so early, double degree...”

Weir let out a muted “hmm” and collapsed her arms. “I know the feeling. Try to take it easy for awhile or stop for a breather sometimes. If you need to talk, I’m here.”

“I will, thanks.”

She stood to go, but her boss stopped her a second. “Stuart,” she said muffledly. “Your barn door is open.”

Faith laughed and walked out, surreptitiously zipping her pants.

Chapter Four: The Common Life

“At last a vision has been vouchsafed to us of our life as a whole.

We see the bad with the good... With this vision we approach new affairs.

Our duty is to cleanse, to reconsider, to restore, to correct the evil without impairing the good, to purify and humanize every process of our common life, without weakening...it.”

-Woodrow Wilson

The group was waiting in front of the Stargate, monotonously checking their watches and standing in awkward silence. Faith was beside Larson, blankly staring at her brother, who seemed ready to blow a gasket. Finally, a spindly soldier sprinted out of nowhere, and nearly collided with them.

Andrew said emphatically, “Parker! Where- what- Keep up the shenanigans and I’ll be keeping Larson and Faith in your place!”

“Ha, you wish,” the Captain said. His friend smacked him on the back in retaliation, causing him to flinch. “Take it easy Stuart.”

“Dude, are you in shape for duty?” Andrew mumbled in concern.

“Sergeant, is this your entire team?” An Athosian woman came to their side, examining each of them inquisitively. Her blonde hair was bound in tight braids, her sun darkened skin contrasting her worn handmade clothes.

Andrew motioned to her and the new arrival. “Parker, this is Selene-”

“Selena,” she corrected.

“Our guide Selena Sheridan-”

“Selena Sheddan,” interrupted Faith and poked him. “My guide on loan to you.”

Parker appearing somewhat perplexed, removed his hat respectfully and murmured hello.

Andrew coughed and moved towards the Gate. “Parker. Larson. Forsey. Sis. You ready?” He hailed the control area, shouting, “Hit it!”

As the gate began to light up, Larson snapped, “Hey, my call.”

Stifled laughter broke out amongst their companions.

.-.-.-.

“So how open are these people to newcomers?”

Selena shouldered her bag more and confidently stepped onto a path leading from the Stargate. “Very, as long as they aren’t afraid of you. The Ancestral Ring is guarded year-round; they know all that passes here.”

“Oh great,” mumbled Larson.

She flipped her head towards the Earthlings, tilting her head low. “Do not be afraid. My grandfather came from amongst their people. My distant kin live in the village.”

“Really?” said Faith, piping up again. She fell into stride with the guide, curiosity piqued. “How common are inter-planetary relations?”

Her brother and teammate rolled their eyes and slowed their walking to avoid overhearing the academic interrogation.

.-.-.-.

Corporal Damon hopped away from a console, breaking a conversation he’d been having with a control room technician. His teammates appeared at the crest of the stairs, and he waved at them.

“Hey guys. Have fun without me?”

“Not at all,” Selena said politely.

“Same ol’ stuff,” the marine answered. He walked past him with the team, fixed intently on Weir’s office ahead.

“Oh.”

.-.-.-.

A small sound at the entrance rang, letting Faith know someone was at her door.

“It’s open,” she said mindlessly.

She continued flipping through her reference material and scratched her pen across various sentences.

“Hi.”

She glanced over her shoulder and saw Dr. Collins in the doorway. She smiled and swung away from the desk. “Hi Scott.”

“Am I bothering you?” he asked, indicating her work.

“Not at all. Have a seat if you’d like.”

He settled in an armchair beside her, laying a conglomerate of items he held onto his knees. “What are you up to?”

She waved her hand carelessly at the small pile of papers and items. “Just reviewing notes, rubbings, artifacts I got from today’s mission.”

His mouth opened slightly in surprise. “You’re already going off-world again?”

She flicked one of her pages with a finger, not looking at him. “Mostly for research, but technically yes. Just don’t tell Corporal Damon that.”

He chuckled. “Anything in particular you were searching for?”

“Um- we’ve spent a lot of time making contact. Our team’s Athosian guide helps us meet people on friendly worlds. In particular, I’ve been looking at any civilization that managed to hold out against the Wraith, to see what made their society survive. Perhaps find references to higher technology.”

“Speaking of ancient cultures,” said Collins. He lifted a folder out of his lap, and handed it to her. “I finished with the first batch of notes you lent me.”

She hummed a bit, impressed. “Hmm. Let’s take a peek.”

She opened it and ran across a page inside before returning it to him. “You’re a quick study.”

He touched her hand gently, beaming at her appreciatively. “It’s generous of you to teach me Ancient. I know it takes a good deal of time and patience to learn anything.”

“Well,” she said softly. “I have all the time in the world.”

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“You should reconsider.”

Christina pushed aside her auburn hair and continued focusing on the screen before her.

“Fae, by all means have fun exploring, expanding your horizons or whatever, but I’ll stay on Atlantis. Find any cool stuff, bring it to me here, and I’ll have fun figuring it out with you.” As Faith opened her mouth, her friend patted her on the shoulder. “Tell Andrew I said no.”

“C’mon Chris,” she said. “He was happy to finally get a team of his own, but he can’t go anywhere if no one’s on it.”

“He’s not keeping you?”

“No. Soon as Oliver’s back, we’re going our separate ways. He’s got Parker, but still needs people.”

“Did he try Hays?”

“Taken.”

“Parrish?”

“Useless.”

“Lindstrom?”

“Not interested.”

“Grove?”

“Are you kidding? The guy believes he’s allergic to naquaada.”

Christina snorted loudly, earning a dirty look from a technician at a nearby console.

“Stop distracting me,” she muttered to Faith.

“Hey,” she replied, shaking her finger. “Don’t shoot the messenger. I bring you coffee when you’re on duty for the sole purpose of distracting you.”

“And I’m happy about it, but don’t make me act stupid,” her friend said, hunching in her chair. “Or Grodin and Roger will put me on more days up here.”

“I thought you liked it up here?”

Her friend tapped on a few keys, pretending to work. “I do, but it can be boring as hell. I’d rather do stuff in the labs.”

“I think the control room is rather exciting... I mean the entire base of operations-“

Christina shoved a notebook towards her, glaring. “Shut up. You come up here to work too.”

“Hey I’m fine. You wouldn’t be “stuck” here if you hadn’t made fun of Roger’s-“

Suddenly a loud beacon went off and the Stargate lit up, springing out a massive wave before the shield spread against the event horizon. Dr. Weir walked behind the console they were at, going to a brown haired Canadian man at the Lantian DHD.

“It’s Major Sheppard’s IDC,” he said.

“They’ve only been gone a few hours,” she said, clearly surprised.

A crackled came over the speakers, before a voice said, “Atlantis, this is Sheppard. We’re coming in hot.”

The two scientists looked at each other, dropped their things and snuck to the upper railing. Dr. Weir paused a moment, but nodded to the technician.

“Lower the shield,” she said, striding to the balcony too.

The shield disappeared, and a series of bright blue beams flew through the wormhole, striking places near several armed soldiers around the gate entrance. They dived out of the way, just as Major Sheppard, Teyla, Lieutenant Formd, and McKay came sprawling into the room.

“Raise the shield!” commanded Weir.

A split second before, a blast shot into the room, striking an unnerved McKay in the face. The scientist fell unconscious to the floor, as his comrades shouted and sprinted towards him, Weir joining them.

The two women above jolted, and got closer for a better view.

“Medical team to the gate room,” Weir yelled.

Faith briefly radioed the infirmary, and was relieved to hear Sheppard say, “I’ve got a pulse.”

“Thank you Faith,” Carson said, going off-radio.

Christina pointed at the scene, wide-eyed and fearful. “See? That’s why!”

She sighed, peering closer at McKay’s limp form. “It was only a stunner.”

“*Only?*”

.-.-.-.

Faith delicately lifted an elaborately bound book from the counter, running her fingers along its edges.

“I’m grateful you’re letting me look at your things,” she said.

Selena grinned and opened the cover in her hands. “My pleasure. I enjoy helping others, especially teaching them.”

“Oh, were you an educator on Athos?”

“No, my level was not high enough. My education fell short at a young age, when I lost both parents to the Wraith. My expertise was in crafts, work of the hands.”

“You seem perfectly capable of anything to me,” Faith said reassuringly.

“Thanks.”

She placed the book down and picked up a small pouch with a series of small decorations on it.

“Now what’s in here?”

They were busy pouring over a series of tools, when they were interrupted. An armed soldier entered the open doorway and came to them.

“Excuse me... ma’am, Dr.”

They jumped, staring at him. Faith cleared her throat. “Yes, uh-?”

His eyes met hers nervously and he answered, “Lieutenant Kagan.”

“Can we help you?”

He motioned to Selena and turned to her. “I’m afraid you’ll have to come with me miss. This area’s off-limits now.”

Both blinked.

“Okay,” the Athosian stammered.

Faith caught the woman by the elbow, staying her. “Wait a minute. What the hell’s going on here?”

He edged up to the desk, but didn’t go any closer. “All non-base personnel are being temporarily moved to the south side of the complex.”

“Why?”

“Yes, why?” Faith said, coming to her side.

“There’s a potential security breach, cautionary measures are taking place. I have my orders Dr.”

“Against the Athosians,” Selena said staunchly, her green eyes sparking.

He shifted uneasily and finally maneuvered around them. “Please just come with me. Dr. Weir wants to speak with all of your people.”

Selena hesitated, looking searchingly at Faith.

“It’ll be alright. I’ll see what’s going on,” she said, easing her forward.

The woman sighed, and walked out of the room with the soldier behind her back.

.-.-.-.

A good many soldiers were placed around the city, seemingly around every corner. Unfortunately she didn’t know any of them, and saw no sign of her brother. However, she had no problem maneuvering down the corridors, though she caught a few of the guards watching her.

She discovered Dr. Weir’s office was empty and was leaving the walkway, when she bumped into John Sheppard.

“Sorry about that,” he said pleasantly. “Bit preoccupied- didn’t see where I was going.”

“Glad I found you Major,” she said stiffly.

The smirk faded off his face. “You don’t look happy to see me.”

“On the contrary,” she said, stepping in his way. “You are just the person I need to talk with.”

He glanced at the soldiers and technicians in proximity, and thumbed to the outdoor exit behind him. “Maybe we should do that out there.”

He led her out onto a balcony overlooking the city, wide open to the fresh ocean air and sunlight. He turned to her and leaned casually against the edge.

“I can guess what this is about.”

“Really?” she said, jutting her chin out.

“The Athosians,” he said. Her eyes narrowed. “Ah, I am right. Listen, I know it’s a little severe...it wasn’t even my idea, but there’s enough suspicious circumstance to warrant it.”

“Yes, but it was on *your* orders.”

He hesitated a moment and placed a hand on his side. “Five out of my team’s past ten missions we’ve been attacked by Wraith. It’s clear that it’s no longer coincidence.”

“I’m sorry about that,” she said, truthful. “But couldn’t you have more respect for fellow human beings? We’re talking about a people who have had everything, everyone taken by the Wraith. There’s no possible way they would consciously assist them.”

He stepped towards her, his expression contrite. “Look, I’ve heard you’ve spent considerable time amongst them and you’re close, especially with the whole Anthro thing- but there’s no reason to worry.”

She stared at him and uncrossed her arms. “Don’t pretend to understand me, Major. I know you’re friends with Teyla Emmagen, but that hardly gives you or I the right to treat them as we see fit. My friend Selena was hauled off like a prisoner by one of your minions. No explanation, no dignity.”

“Dr. Weir and Sergeant Bates are sitting down with everyone to figure things out, smooth the wrinkles, maybe with our people too. Everything will clear on its own and we’ll be back to normal.”

“It better,” she said. She frowned and spun on her heel, abandoning him on the balcony.

.-.-.-.

“You seem agitated,” Lane said to Faith.

She handed her a test kit and snapped her case shut, lifting it onto the rack above them.

“I am,” muttered Faith.

“I thought you’d be excited.”

“I would be, if not for our current circumstances.”

Lane stepped down and sat nearby, watching her dig further into her bag. “Oh come on. It’s fantastic. Discovery of land on Lantea... whole new possibilities right at home.”

“Potential dump site for dozens of innocent humans,” said Dr. Parrish, being particularly vocal.

Faith threw an arm up. “Exactly. What the hell is management thinking?”

“Do not be afraid Faith Stuart,” said a voice.

It came from the open hatch of the puddlejumper, where they found Selena Sheddan standing. Larson appeared behind her, grinning.

“Captain,” she stammered. “How?”

He showed the Athosian woman into the puddlejumper and sat on the padded bench next to the scientists. Selena helped Faith to her feet and get off the floor.

“My people have decided to move to the mainland now. We will help you explore it, determine if it’s safe for all of us.”

“I can’t believe it. You *want* to go?”

“Yes, everyone does. We can make a true home there and return often amongst you when our trust is regained. Do you not approve?”

She shook her head. “It is a great opportunity, so long as none of us gets eaten.”

“I think we’d eat it first,” said Selena, causing them to break out in laughter.

.-.-.-.

Larson’s hands relaxed on the controls, and he prodded Faith in the co-pilot’s seat.

“What is this? Our third trip back to the mainland today?” he said.

She mumbled in agreement, hardly paying attention to him as she flipped through a checklist.

“You know, you should pay more attention,” he chided. “After today I won’t be flying you there anymore.”

She dropped her clipboard startledly. “What? Why not?”

“Reconnaissance, genius,” he said, tapping her gently in the head with his fist. “Flying back and forth like this gets tedious, especially when that’s all your doing. Most of the soldiers are returning offworld soon as the last Athosian is gone.”

“So you’re going offworld without me??”

“Yeah. Damon’s back the day after tomorrow.” There was a pregnant silence before he spoke again. “How would you like to fly the jumper?”

“What?” she said, shocked. “Me? Fly?”

“Sure it’s in your blood, literally. We’ve got tons of time to practice, and you’ll need the skills while this project goes on.”

He pressed a few buttons on the console and stood, switching seats with her. Immediately Faith felt a rush of adrenaline surge through her veins as she gazed out on the ocean. HE directed her hands to a pair of clear grips, and started.

“Now, try to relax and focus.”

.-.-.-.

The puddlejumper hovered a second above the ground, before it neatly landed within the designated landing area. Lane and Holling came to the back hatch as it opened, freeing its passengers inside.

Faith swung onto her friend, laughing breathlessly. “Lanie! I flew the jumper!”

“You didn’t!”

She nodded wildly and her friend grimaced jealously.

“The more people we have to pilot ‘em, the quicker the relocation effort can wind down.”

“Whoa Sparky,” said the Marine. He grabbed her by the back of the jacket and towed her into the hatch to help with the unloading. “Markham, Walker and Reed are staying to help monitor the jumpers.”

“I’m not going to crash it.”

He lifted an eyebrow, a wry expression plastered on his face. “I know. One might believe you’ve flown a craft before.” She smiled devilishly but didn’t answer. “Uh huh, I thought so.”

He stuck his head out of the hatch again, and said loudly, “Hey Dr. Pryce, Mr. Athosian. A little help?”

Chapter Five: Lost Connection

“Only connect ... the passion, and both will be exalted, and human love will be seen at its height. Live in fragments no longer. Only connect, and the beast and the monk, robbed of the isolation that is life to either, will die.”

-E.M. Forster

“...the unknown in a human lifetime and a sense of where to look for the threads, how to follow, how to connect, find in the thick of the tangle what clear line persists. The strands are all there: to the memory nothing is ever really lost.”

-Eudora Welty

The straps cut into Faith’s shoulders as she adjusted the bag slung across them. She collected her things in the puddlejumper, and velcroed them shut into various pockets. She called to Markham, who was still in the pilot’s seat.

“Thanks again Sergeant.”

“No problem.”

She left the bay and made her way to a flight of stairs. As she turned down a hallway, she heard footsteps and her name in the distance.

“Faith.”

Roused to attention, she saw Collins ahead of her.

“Hi.”

“Long time no see,” he said.

“Yeah,” she murmured, shifting the pile she was holding. “I’ve been so busy lately.”

“Hey,” he said with concern, reaching out. “Let me take that. It looks heavy.”

Feeling sheepish but grateful, she surrendered it to him.

“Thanks it is.” She glimpsed her freed hand and surprisedly noted the time on her watch. “I’m going to be late. I got to go for this meeting.”

“I’ll walk you if you’d like. Where you headed?”

“Control tower,” she said, pointing to a bend in the hall. They went the way she’d been going earlier.

They were silent for a minute, but he said suddenly, “You know, I was looking for you. I finished with your second batch of notes.”

“Very good,” she said startledly. “I’m sorry I wasn’t around. I’ve been on the mainland all week.”

“Really, you were involved in the relocation? I’m surprised it didn’t take longer.”

“Well, the survey went pretty quick. We’re positive the land is arable and safe. In fact, I’m going the next day or two to deliver a more permanent communications system.”

“The Athosians are staying out there? Haven’t they been cleared?”

“Yes, they’ve already started on a settlement and planning crops for food production.”

“Wow, are you going to be there awhile?”

“Not much longer and my business will be done. They’re pretty much on their feet, and some of the other scientists are going to study the local ecosystem.”

“I’m glad to hear that. It’s nice bumping into you,” he said, sidestepping a few people in their way.

His clear blue eyes met hers and she felt a tingle travel down her spine. He lowered them and laughed nervously.

“I’m sorry; I’m probably making you uncomfortable.”

Slightly abashed, she fingered the cuffs of her sleeves. She had gotten filthy today helping the Athosians work. Her hair was falling out of its braid, and there were dirt streaks on her skin and jeans, even her face.

“No I’m self-conscious already. I don’t think I’ve been filthier in my life. I mean walking down the halls covered in dirt...”

“You’re pretty in anything,” he said. “Even mud.”

They had emerged on the edge of the gateroom, but Faith stopped in the archway, staring at him coyly.

“Dr. Collins, are you flirting with me?”

“Yes,” he said, smiling stupidly.

They bantered jestfully on the way up to Dr. Weir’s office, being rather boisterous. She reclaimed her papers at the door, approaching him slowly.

“I’m going in now. You can stay there if you’d like.”

“Perhaps I will,” he said lightly, leaning against the wall.

Dr. Weir escorted her to a seat and closed the office door before sitting down herself. She accepted a folder of notes from Faith and began to flip through them. She lifted an eyebrow at the scientist.

“You’ve been busy.”

“Yes indeed,” Faith replied, sighing somewhat. “With all those people we got a lot done.”

“That’s good to hear,” said Weir. “No one destitute or bitter? Or had to tax themselves to death in the whole rush of this madness?”

“Nope. Except for a few hurt feelings from the accusations, we’re all good.” The scientist crossed her arms, smiling knowingly. “For me, this is fun.”

“I figured as much. Your graduate profile said you’d done research studies with New England tribes?”

“Yup.”

“You’ve been at it for over a week... Did you know your team members resumed reconnaissance once gate travel was re-established?”

Faith shifted in her chair and nodded, feeling a small pang of jealousy. “Ernest Larson told me as much, especially when Damon was back on his feet. They’ve been doubling up with my brother or Stackhouse’s team till I’m done.”

“Long as things aren’t getting more hectic,” her boss said. She picked up the file again and began reading the details. “I have to wait for the reports from Markham but so far, you’ve done a fine job.”

“Thank you,” she said eagerly. “By the way, I wanted to thank you for putting me at the head of this- well the Athosian’s readjustment. It was a generous move.”

“Oh that wasn’t my idea,” said Weir. She looked over the edge of the papers, a smirk hidden on her face. “It was *strongly* recommended to me.”

“By who?” she asked, suddenly confused.

“Major Sheppard.”

Faith languidly opened the office door, feeling a bit tipsy with all that was happening. It was weird. Collins jumped to his feet and laid a hand on her arm.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah, yeah,” she said, incoherent at the moment. “I just realized everything’s not the way I thought. The Athosians are pretty happy about getting kicked off Atlantis, people I yell at end up praising me, and everyday I’ve been having mindlessly having lunch with a charming physicist.”

“Does that mean the lovely Anthropologist would have dinner with the charming Physicist?”

She blinked and looked at him pleasedly. “Absolutely.”

.-.-.-.

“Were you trying to kill us?” repeated Larson.

He tailed the scientist out of the jumper and caught him by the arm. The man swung around to face him, nearly knocking him over with a hulking backpack.

“Quinby!” His voice echoed in the ship bay, resonating off the high walls.

Damon and Faith immediately flanked them, physically separating the two.

“Chill out Cap,” the Corporal said, lightly hitting him with his knuckle. “I think it was kind of funny.”

“What was so funny about a river of acid and falling boulders?”

“Well, Faith translated his name to mean ‘Lord of the big tumbling rocks’,” he said, chuckling a bit.

Faith lifted a finger and nodded vigorously. “That’s right, Erne.”

Larson grimaced and nearly spit at Quinby. “You should’ve figured out odd energy signature in a dark underground tomb meant ‘you might die’.”

“Uh, I should’ve taken the runes I found literally,” piped Faith.

“People shouldn’t ignore warnings from dead people,” said Damon. “Think of King Tut’s curse.”

“Oliver don’t get me started,” she said, poking him.

“The point is,” interrupted their leader. “Somebody convinced me there was a potential ZPM on an abandoned planet with a space gate, then threw himself into the hidden chamber, launching a thousand booby traps-“

“And destroying ancient artifacts,” added Faith quietly.

Larson pulled himself out of Damon’s grasp and pointed at the bay exit. “Quinby, consider yourself off our team. And if I have any credibility left, *any* team on this base.”

The scientist hung his head sorrowfully, and schlepped away in shame.

“You could’ve been a bit nicer,” she said.

The captain placed his hands on his hips. “I’m choosing the next guinea pig. When people almost kill your friends, you tend not to like them.”

“Aw,” the pair chorused.

“We *are* best buddies after all,” Oliver said teasingly.

Larson narrowed his eyes and prodded at them, indicating the backwards hats on his teammates’ heads.

“And look at you guys. What are we, the hole in the wall gang?”

Faith stepped up to him and twisted his hat the wrong way, mussing his brown hair so it stuck out under the sides.

She pinched his cheek and laughed. “Now you’re a member too, *pal*.”

His shoulders fell submissively and he sighed. “Woo.”

He dragged them back to the jumper for their things and passed out the bags. Faith reclaimed her supplies and reverently removed a silver case from a nest of vests. She laid it gently on the floor outside, bending over eagerly to check its contents. In tact and whole inside was the sole artifact she’d managed to salvage, a pale blue and white vase.

“Everything okay here?”

She jumped, nearly kicking the box over. She picked it up, gripping it possessively. John Sheppard stood behind her, armed and seeming concerned.

“I heard shouting,” he said, scanning the room.

“That was just Captain Larson losing it,” she said, shrugging.

“Oh,” he replied, his expression wary.

The Marines appeared beside them, Larson nervously twiddling with his bag.

“Faith, I did not ‘lose it’,” he scolded.

“Yes you did Captain,” said Damon quickly.

The officer looked embarrassedly at Sheppard. “My new scientist nearly killed us.”

The Major bowed in understanding. “I know the feeling.”

Larson shook his head and walked away. “Ah, I’ll debrief you later Sir.”

Damon ran at his heels, saying conspiratorially, “Make sure you add in the acid part.”

Sheppard watched them depart, then remarked, “This was enlightening.”

“Uh huh.”

As he started to leave, she cleared her throat, ignoring the fraying nerves in her stomach.

Oh god.

“Major?”

He stopped, and took a few steps back towards her. “Yes?”

“I uh- wanted to thank you for supporting...recommending me for the relocation effort.”

He froze, grinning awkwardly. “Elizabeth told you about that eh?”

“Yeah. I also wanted to apologize for my behaviour. It was very rude, especially after you did this-“

“You deserved it. You were very passionate about your values and your work. That’s something I admire.”

“But I feel terrible-“

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” he said, raising his eyebrows.

“I-”

“Well, I got to head out. Good luck finding a new teammate.” He gazed at her over his shoulder.

“And you *can* call me John.”

.-.-.-.

”Should I wear the purple one?” Faith asked worriedly.

“Hold on, I’m almost there,” snapped Connie. “Quit talking to me on the radio. You’ll wear the batteries out.”

“I can’t.”

A minute later her friend entered her quarters, out of breath and exhausted. She yanked Faith from in front of the mirror and examined her head to toe. She straightened the straps of the halter dress she was wearing then stepped back.

“Very nice. You need to stop freaking out.”

“Okay fine. But should I switch-“

“No, navy’s a good color on you.” She grasped Faith by the arms. “Breathe.”

“I haven’t done this-” she exhaled slowly. “since Ethan.”

“I know, you’re so closed off to people, particularly men. I’ve seen you drool though. I remember when Ryan asked you out, you nearly knocked him out.”

“Your brother was a different story,” she protested. “He was making fun of me.”

“Because you tried to set me up with Andrew!”

“No way, I’m not that cruel. You were fawning on him whenever he came to visit me in college. ‘Oh And will you be my man?’ ”

Her friend circled restlessly, attempting to pick at the half pile of hair on her head. She smacked Connie’s hand in retaliation.

“Nuh uh. No touch zone.”

“You need to let your hair down...literally too. Then you’d be gorgeous.”

“Sure, I’ll take advice from someone who had pink hair when I met her,” said Faith, fiddling with her earrings.

“That’s it,” Connie exclaimed. “We’re getting out of here. You got ready too early and sitting here is going to drive you and I nuts.”

She yanked Faith to the entrance and down a hallway.

“Where are we going?” she asked, trying not to trip.

“No idea.”

.-.-.-.

“Aren’t you glad we dropped in on Lanie?” asked Connie.

She strolled next to Faith, checking to see if she was still nervous after the visit to their friend.

“Yes,” she admitted. “Lanie could calm a bloodthirsty man eating lion.”

“Now you’re ready to seduce your man.”

“I am not going to *seduce* him,” she said, mouth hanging open.

Connie began listing out dirty scenarios as they walked along, but Faith attempted to plug her ears shut.

“I am not listening!”

“Dr. Stuart,” called a voice.

Both women halted in their tracks, returning to an open door they’d just passed.

“I heard you. Please get in here.”

Perplexed, Connie nudged Faith into the room and walked off.

“Don’t take too long.”

Annoyance burning in her chest, she went in and found herself in one of the Ancient labs. To her disappointment, McKay was sitting at a desk, focused on his screen. Not bothering to look up, he beckoned to her with a finger.

She sighed and came to his side. “What do you want?”

He slid a pile of paper in front of her. “Check these translations will you?”

“You’ve got to be kidding,” she said angrily.

“No I’m not.” He motioned to a nearby console where a German scientist was sitting. Next to him, a messy dark haired man had his face buried in his arms and was asleep behind the computer. “Einstein and I with beginner’s luck and notes, managed to hobble this together, but we need an expert to verify it.”

“What is it for?”

“Specifications for the weapons platforms on Atlantis. Very important.” He snapped his fingers twice in row. “Hurry, I need it soon.”

She glared at him murderously and flipped messily through it, not reading a word. She called over to the scientist, who she knew to be Dr. Vogel.

“Glauben Sie diesem?”

The other scientist frowned at McKay. “Es ist nicht eine Überraschung,” he said.

Vogel’s companion awoke at hearing his voice and groggily struggled to sit up straight. It was Sheppard, yet again.

Yeesh, he’s everywhere.

The two scientists went on in German for a few more minutes, until she ended it, saying, “Ja dummer Man.”

Dr. Vogel said in a heavy English accent, “Dr. McKay, let Dr. Stuart go. She’s busy.”

A flood of worry and fury flowed into her body, her cheeks reddening slightly. She caught Sheppard’s attention, her heart thumping loudly in her ears.

Rodney finally snapped upward, glaring at Vogel. “I know you were talking about me. And what’s the matter with you, this is serious.”

“Well, some of us have more important things to do,” snapped Faith.

McKay whipped around in his chair, scrutinizing her. “Like what?”

She rolled her eyes and crossed her legs impatiently, her heel clacking on the floor. Noticing her dress for the first time, he paused, curious and suspicious.

“You look nice.”

She smacked the desk and wildly threw the papers at him, making them fly everywhere. Her eyes met Sheppard’s hazel ones, and she saw them soften.

He tilted his head and said amusedly, “She’s got a date.”

McKay leaned back in his chair superiorly. “With who? Is it even human?”

Faith finally whacked him alongside the head.

“Duh.”

He failed to duck out of the way, and rubbed his scalp in pain, glaring at her accusingly.

“See! You’re violent. A homicidal scientist.”

“McKay, my personal life: none of your business,” she snapped. “If you’ll excuse me-“

She walked out of the room.

.-.-.-.

The night sky was ablaze with thousands of stars in the velvety black sky. The celestial light and faint glow of the city mingled far below, glittering the cerulean blue ocean. Collin’s shoulder touched hers as he came closer on the balcony railing, studying the sky above.

“I come out here sometimes to see if I can find home.”

“Do you miss it?” she said softly.

“Not really, mostly my sister and mom. My dad died a month before we left, everything there reminded me of him. All I know is that I’ve been finding marvelous things here.”

“Oh.”

His fingers trailed onto hers and down the back of her palm before he took it. He leaned closer, searching her features wonderingly as he neared her. His warmth began to flow over her in waves, and he leaned in, kissing her gently.

Chapter Six: Brother

“A brother may not be a friend, but a friend will always be a brother.”

-Samuel Richardson

“Am I my brother’s keeper?”

-Cain

“Son, brother, father, lover, friend. There is room in the heart for all the affections, as there is room in heaven for all the stars.”

-Victor Hugo

A light tink resonated beneath the long fingernail as it tapped the chipped white paint. The woman bent for a closer view of the artifact, her shadow falling across the desk.

“Christina.” Faith hurtled towards her friend, ushering her away from the spread of ancient items. “No touching *please*.”

“Wow you’re nigh anal as Katie.”

Faith scowled at her and inspected for damage before re-taking her ground. “Call it protective intervention,” she said. “And I’m sure your sister would love to hear you say that.”

“Bah,” said Christina dismissively. “I’ve said worse to her.”

Faith picked her jacket off the bed and unfolded it. “Aren’t you a nice person.”

“Ha ha.” Christina watched her do a check in a small mirror, then said, “So, I heard you had a hot date last night.”

She sighed and meekly faced her. “Connie has a big mouth.”

“It’s true?”

“Of course,” she said, plopping into a chair. “Last night and practically every day for the past week.”

“Huh. Somebody’s been busy,” Christina said, smirking.

“Don’t be a smart ass.”

Suddenly the quarter’s doors opened, Connie and Lane jaunting into the room on time.

“Ding dong.”

“Howdy.”

The pair crashed onto a nearby couch, nodding at the others. Immediately, Christina moved in front of Connie, staring blankly ahead.

“Hmm it just got stinky in here.”

She collapsed on top of Connie, squishing her on the couch. Both women broke into fits of laughter, but Lane scooted away in shock, hitting the armrest and end table. The resulting tremor knocked over a few objects.

“Guys,” Faith said, leaping out of her chair. “Do you mind?”

Lane picked up and rearranged the items, but paused as she lifted a silver picture frame. In it, a teenage version of Faith was sitting in a park swing, one hand on the chain, the other atop a little girl’s head. The toddler’s sandy brown hair was tied into pigtails with ribbons and a splotch of dirt was visible on her overalls. One of her fingers was bent in her grinning mouth, and her blue eyes sparkled joyously at the camera. The features of both were vaguely similar.

Lane flipped the picture toward Faith and said, “I haven’t seen this photo.”

Connie took the frame from her, examining it. “That’s Abigail, Andrew’s daughter, right?”

Faith reclaimed it, cradling it carefully in her arms. “Yes. I found this on my hard drive a couple days ago. It was among my old back-up files.”

“You have a niece?” Lane said in surprise.

Faith somberly placed the frame in its former resting spot. “*Had* a niece... goddaughter too. She died six years ago, when she was four.”

“God, why?”

“Congenital heart defect inherited from her mother.”

“Was Andrew married?”

She shook her head. “No his girlfriend got pregnant when they were 19, but they broke up when Abby died. He blamed her.” She held still a moment, then squinted at them. “Enough busy bodying. Let’s get you guys out of here so you don’t break all my stuff.”

“We wouldn’t do that,” said Connie, as she was pushed from the room.

The women were still together in the late afternoon, and found themselves at dinner too. They grabbed the usual table, and went on with the same old nonsense.

Lane traded deserts with Christina, then randomly tapped her foot against Faith's. "Why aren't you offworld right now?"

"That? Our team isn't going anywhere for awhile."

Christina murmured with a mouthful of Lane's pie, "I'm sorry."

Faith stared at her wryly. "No you're not."

The other woman smiled. "You're right, I'm not."

Lane elbowed Christina. "Why?" she asked.

"Larson's sworn off missions till he finds someone he likes, or at least won't kill us."

Connie sniffed in disbelief and said, "Yeah, that's going to happen. You might as well cement your feet to Atlantis. Sister, you're going nowhere."

"Ack," said Faith. "I don't care what the man says, I won't be stuck on this rock- eh city. I love it, but I love the Stargate more."

"Don't be so dramatic," said Lane, waving her spoon. "What about the temp team you guys were on?"

"That's not able to happen again, at least not for awhile. Andrew finally has his people; now we're shortchanged."

"Oh."

"At least you're going places Lanie," said Connie. "With that environmental study you've got."

"Yeah, how are things on the mainland?" asked Faith.

"They're pretty good," answered Lane, perking up. "We've been doing scores of soil and water surveys to establish the dominant biosphere on the Lantian terrain. The area's mainly boreal forest with a mix of coniferous and deciduous trees, mainly due to the lack of development. There's an amazing diversity in plant species, though they're similar to those on other planets.

There's a fairly constant and temperate climate for potential agriculture, though the Athosians have expressed interest in hunting too. We're trying to start a survey of the fauna species, which has been hard in the denser flora areas. Several patches of grassland have developed seemingly in the middle of nowhere, we're investigating that too. One of the crazy biologists, Denis, tried to convince us it was possibly human derived. He was trying to divert attention from the fact he

broke the hydrographic equipment. It was too bad, cause we were just starting to discover the viability of the fresh and salt water systems.”

“Wow,” said Christina, blinking away her glazed expression.

“Like you were paying attention,” scoffed Lane, holding her fork threateningly.

Faith grabbed it from her. “Give me that, crazy. And to avoid the impending massacre, let’s switch gears. Christina, I understand you said no to Andrew, but why don’t you join our team.”

The woman gazed at her pathetically. “Uh thanks, but no thanks.”

“Come on,” said Connie. “You’re the only other person here who could operate a gun. Then at least half of us would be going offworld.”

“What do you mean?” asked Faith incredulously. “You’ve been offworld tons of times.”

“Yeah,” replied Connie. “With Beckett and a hoo-ha of medical people. Those were awesome unforgettable times full of treasured memories and adventure.”

“Sure,” interrupted Christina. “As I explained before, no.”

“Fine, you loss,” said Faith, throwing her hands in the air. “I-”

“Fae,” said Connie suddenly, poking her. “*Your* man, three o’clock.”

All four of them straightened in their seats and watched Collins coming towards their table.

“Whoa,” whispered Christina to Faith. “He *is* dishy.”

“Did you think I was lying?”

“Yes.”

The other two shushed her and assumed dumb smiles as he greeted Faith.

“Hey,” she said softly.

He leaned close, as if to kiss her cheek but paused, seeing the three women staring at them.

“Am I missing something?” he asked awkwardly.

She chuckled and whispered, “Good idea, but not in front of these wolverines.”

His chin tilted in understanding, his eyes glittering with amusement. He stood up more, addressing them.

“Hello ladies.”

“Hi,” they chorused.

“Scott,” she said, pointing to the women. “This is Christina, Connie, and Lanie. Girls, this is Scott Collins.”

“Nice to meet you.”

He took Faith’s hand and lifted it close to him, half bringing her out of the chair. “Can I steal you now, or are you busy?”

“No, I’m done,” she said quickly, and picked her tray off the table. “See you guys later, I guess,” she said over her shoulder.

“Bye,” they replied.

Collins grinned as they walked away. “I like your friends.”

“They think you’re cute,” she said, rolling her eyes.

They reached the table for the trays, but as she was about to put it down, ran into Captain Larson. She moved aside from Scott for a moment, and greeted her teammate.

“Hey Ernest.”

“Hi,” he grunted, abandoning his tray too. “See you later,” he added, and left.

The two glanced at each other.

“He still grumpy?” he asked.

“Yup.”

.-.-.-.

A bright spot appeared on the surface of the vase, as Faith moved her magnifying glass over it. A series of minute engravings circled the rim, which were hard to read. She was busily comparing them to another piece of work she’d recovered on M49-GF7. A second later, a voice spoke, causing her to jump. Larson had appeared on the other side of the lab table, not bothering to say hello. She had seen him around, but hadn’t talked to him in a week.

“You scared me,” she said, huffing.

He grinned stupidly. “Sorry. I’ve got great news.”

Faith lowered her arms, staring at him suspiciously. “You never say sorry. What’s going on?”

“We’re not trapped here anymore,” he said. “We’ve got a mission tomorrow.”

“What? How?”

“I found a guy,” he exclaimed, causing her to back away slightly.

“Are you sure?”

“Definitely not some idiot. He’s smart, and will get along with us.”

“Well, who is it?” she asked pointedly.

“Dr. Collins,” he said.

Faith dropped her magnifying glass, and her eyes widened. “Col..lins?”

“Something wrong?”

“Why did you pick- him?” she stuttered.

“I’ve seen you two hang out and work together, so I know he’s team compatible. And he seems to understand everything you say, so he must be smart. Did I do something wrong?”

“Erne...we get along... as in we make out,” she said flatly.

“Huh?” he croaked.

“We’re seeing each other.”

His shoulders fell. “Oh.” He composed himself for a minute, then said, “I’ve searched for a long time, Fae. So why couldn’t he-“

She lowered her head and shook it. “Your own rules say no dating in the team.”

His irises glinted darkly as he met hers seriously. “I know. It’s why you and I stopped-”

“That was a long time ago,” she said gently.

He paused. “Forget the rules. Maybe we need new ones. If it makes a better team, let’s go for it. Please just think about it.”

She sighed. “Fine I will.”

The Captain smiled and turned to leave, but she stayed him. "I'll talk to him- but you've got to promise not to hold me against him."

He nodded and left the lab, leaving Faith preoccupied with her conflicted thoughts.

.-.-.-.

"We need to talk," said Andrew, pulled her book away.

"Where'd you come from?" she said jokingly.

She'd been so absorbed, she hadn't noticed him enter her quarters. He put it on a nearby table and pushed her feet up, making room for himself on the sofa.

"What?" she asked, seeing the stern lines in his face.

They stared at each other for a minute, and she felt her heart sink.

Uh oh.

"I'm going to kill Larson."

"This has nothing to do with him--"

"I should've known he wouldn't keep his mouth shut. You *are* his best friend."

"Excuse me," he said reprovingly. "You planned on not telling me you were seeing someone?"

"Exactly."

"What is wrong with you? I'm not evil."

She snorted. "Uh huh. Admit it, you don't like me getting near anything that has a--"

He grabbed her shoulder, seeming nauseated. "Okay okay I get the idea. Is it a crime for a brother to protect his only sister?"

She swung her legs off the side of the couch, frowning at him. "It is when they beat the shit out of them. Remember Ethan?"

"Hey," he said defensively. "You said yourself that he jipped you on that publishing deal."

"Yeah, but otherwise he was a perfect gentleman, even after you broke his nose."

Andrew exhaled loudly. "Get a grip. What is this Collins like?"

“He’s charming, kind, intelligent, and very cute.”

“If he’s so perfect, why haven’t you told me anything?”

“I didn’t get the chance, and I didn’t want to-“

“How serious are you?”

“Not very,” she snapped. “Quit grilling me. You always do this! You have to find out via my stalker because you’re so damn clueless.”

“Ernest is a good friend,” he said. “And I thought we were friends too.”

She narrowed her eyes. “Oh really? Maybe he isn’t such a good friend as you like to think. He doesn’t tell you everything.”

“Like what?” he said skeptically.

“I’ll bet he forgot to mention this one guy I dated at the SGC....oh wait it was *him*.” She watched his jaw drop and said smugly, “Yeah that’s right. We were exclusive for some time, and on each other like hyenas. But then I got shot up during a botched mission, remember? Said he couldn’t lose someone like that, right in front of him. It seemed a coincidence he dumped me at the same time that you joined the SGC for the ATA research. Ever since then he’s always there to let you know my dirt, to keep an eye on me when you’re gone.”

Andrew put his hand out to her, but she shirked, standing up angrily. “You need to start trusting your sister and not some self-centered loony wreck.” She felt tears sting the corners of her eyes. “You and I *were* best friends, especially after mom and dad died. You took care of me, but I grew up before you. That drove you mad.”

“In a way yes,” he said bitterly. “Imagine your little sister graduating high school at fifteen and accepted to the best schools over you. No wonder I joined the military.”

The studied each other, but Faith spun on her heel. She smacked the room’s control panel, and stomped through the sliding entrance.

.-.-.-.

“I cannot believe them!” she exclaimed. Her shoes clattered on the floor as she restlessly circled Collins’ desk, pacing back and forth. “What is the idiot trying to do? Break us up so he can have the perfect team?”

“Easy there,” said Collins soothingly. He reached out to stop her, pulling her into his lap. He brushed the hair from her face carefully, his arm wrapped around her waist. “You look ready to explode.”

She leaned against his shoulder and touched his chin.

“I’m sorry. I hope you don’t think I blame you.”

“Not at all. I just don’t want to see you this upset. I’ll bet like you, Larson is tired of being here twenty-four seven.”

“Well,” she said, nose to nose with him. “I’m going to tell him you said yes. I know it’s what you really want.”

Unexpectedly he threw her back in his lap and kissed her.

Chapter Seven: Twenty Bridges

“Life is a bridge. Cross over it, but build no house on it.”

-Indian proverb

*“Twenty men crossing a bridge,
Into a village,
Are twenty men crossing twenty bridges,
Into twenty villages,
Or one man
Crossing a single bridge into a village.”*

-Wallace Stevens

“Is that it?”

Larson peered over Faith’s shoulder at her bag, which she was stuffing with a small package. She slouched backward, urging him away from the shop stand.

“Thank you,” she said to the merchant behind the wooden counter. She fell into stride beside Larson, as he led her back down the village road. “Yes that’s it.”

“Okay,” he said flatly, staring straight ahead.

She withheld a sigh, feeling annoyed with this continued treatment. They’d had a shouting match two weeks ago, when she’d confronted him about his behaviour. The Marine had denounced her accusations, and been sulky and silent ever since. This mission was an onerous repeat of their past few outings. They met Damon and Collins in the main square as they’d arranged, both men appearing amused.

“Done with your shopping yet?” said Damon, teasing Faith.

“I was collecting information and bartering for local artifacts,” she said stubbornly.

“Uh huh. Well we were ‘collecting’ too.”

Larson abruptly knocked the Corporal’s hat off. “Quit being a smartass. Collins, did you find anything?”

“We had an interesting lunch,” he said, lightly. “Oh- and there’s an increase in aerial electrostatic forces.” Larson blinked at him blankly; the scientist pointed to the sky. “It’s going to rain.”

“Fantastic.”

Faith took a few steps forward, beckoning to them. “Then we should get a move on.”

The men gathered themselves and followed her to a side street, alert and curious.

Disappointed that she'd remembered, Damon asked, "Where're we going again?"

"To see the village Elder," she said distantly. "He knows everything here, and is a respected leader amongst his people."

"Sounds like a nice *long* excursion," said Collins, glancing conspiratorially at the Corporal.

Faith laughed, seeing the soldiers' appalled expressions.

.-.-.-.

A thick but fresh scent coated the air, drifting from the herbaceous plants lining the many windows of the archive. Strong sunlight streamed through the openings, and mingled with several dim candles placed on the old tabletops. The room's walls were lined with shelf upon shelf of scrolls and books, placed in neat piles. The team sat on hard wooden chairs in the center, next to a table piled high with old documents and open volumes. The men lounged there listlessly, twiddling their thumbs or playing with various objects from their pockets.

Faith was scooted against the table, opposite the village elder. Deep wrinkles lined every feature of his ancient face, and his lengthy white hair and beard encircled his head like a collar. His finely made robe fell flowed over the sides of his lap like a river, swaying as he moved. He pleasedly gauged the young woman's reaction, and held out his gnarled knuckle.

"You are a very fine lady, Dr. Stuart."

She smiled. "I appreciate you taking the time to share your heritage Xanan."

He bobbed slowly in agreement as he studied her. "Like Ikaro said, 'The wise must share knowledge with the young.' Someday soon it will be time for you to share your mind with your progeny." His eyes roved towards the three men, catching Collins' attention. The scientist gazed at him wonderingly, easing up in his chair as he watched the pair.

"We'll see," she said kindly to the old man.

Xanan shifted and removed a coiled paper from atop the pile, spreading it in between them. It was a faded map elaborately decorated with illustrations and text, though several splotches marred its surface.

"Therefore, I will tell you the story of Lokria." His fingers traced a few lines, delicately tapping the ink. "A thousand years ago, it was the most beautiful planet in existence. Nothing was ever in want; it was more fertile and prolific than a woman's womb. There, existed unimaginable treasure. Across the planet grew great cities of silver towers and wondrous things, gems fell from the sky and gold paved the streets. Two powerful civilizations flourished there and endured for many generations under the Wraith: the grim Gygan and the gracious Nacus."

Intrigued, Faith asked, “Your people?”

He nodded and continued, “We were once the most magnificent race in our prime, but that soon changed. A High Prophet named Aeshyl proclaimed the nearing doom of our world, and that only the Jewels of Phelai could protect us. Long before remembrance, they had been brought to Lokria by Ctessus, the first King.

However, jealous Gygan wanted them and the Nacus’ treasure to themselves, so they made war against us. By their hand, the Nacus were exiled through the Ancestral Ring, never to return.”

“Why couldn’t they go back? Didn’t you have the address?”

“Of course, it is etched into the annals of our history. Countless many have sought the treasure and our homeworld, but none have returned. It is said the Gygan placed a horrendous monster at the mouth of the Ring, who swallows all trespassers.”

At this, someone snorted loudly. Larson stood and tapped her on the shoulder. “Are you done with this nonsense?”

She ignored them, and said patiently, “May I have the glyphs of Lokria?”

He hesitated, appearing quite troubled. “If you were to go- your lives would be forfeit.”

“Don’t worry, we can take care of ourselves.”

Exhaling slowly, he scribbled a pattern onto a scrap of paper, and handed it to her. “May the Ancestors’ blessings go with you.”

“Stuart, what’re you up to?” interrupted Larson, suspicious.

Irritated she stood from the table, but bowed to the Elder. “I’m afraid we must depart. I am grateful for your wisdom.”

“My pleasure. Agahus dydom, fair child.”

She snatched the things he’d given her, and practically kicked her team out the door. They walked on a bit, before the others surrounded her inquisitively.

“Did we have to stay there so long?” complained Damon.

Larson picked at the paper in her closed palm. “What did you want with that Lokria crap?”

“Boys, you really need to start listening,” she snapped. “It isn’t crap-”

Suddenly Scott gestured to her, a strange expression on his face. “You think ZPMs are there?”

“What?” the soldiers exclaimed.

She rolled her eyes at them and smacked Larson in the arm. “See? He listened.”

“I was,” he said, shifting uncomfortably. “When he said ‘treasure,’ but the mention of Wraith culling made me lose interest. So you really think he’s telling the truth?”

Collins pushed forward, and said flatly, “He just doesn’t know what *the* truth is. He’s telling another story from his ancient culture. ‘Protective jewels’ could only describe one thing: ZPMs.”

Larson laughed stupidly, grinning like he hadn’t for weeks. “We better get this to Atlantis.”

.-.-.-.

Weir paced perturbedly in front of them for a minute, rubbing her chin. She gathered herself and placed both hands on her desk, gazing at the team seriously.

“You’re telling me there’s a chance you found a ZPM?”

“Yes *ZPMs*, ma’am,” answered Larson.

“I’m sure you can understand my reluctance. It was not long ago that the same belief put your team in jeopardy.”

He winced slightly, muttering something under his breath. “This is different. I actually have credible source this time.”

“A ninety year old man and an anthropologist?”

“Yes,” he said stiffly. “Is there something wrong with Dr. Stuart?”

“No,” she said lightly. “You have a go ahead.”

They murmured to her thankfully, but she stayed them for another minute.

“And Captain, think before you act. Don’t be mistaken to believe I didn’t know of your recent behavior. I hear everything that happens in this city.”

He froze, struggling with himself for a second. “Yes ma’am.”

.-.-.-.

The Captain stormed down the control room stairs, leaving his team behind on the balcony. They watched him uncertainly, giving each other strange looks.

“Weir sure tanned his hide,” said Damon, trying to save face.

“Don’t be mean to him,” she scorned. “At least we got can go on the mission.”

“No, you’re happy *you* can go on this Lokus thing,” he said. “The ‘us’ doesn’t really matter.”

“Lokria,” she corrected.

“Whatever.”

Collins took Faith by the elbow, smiling helpfully. “Well, I’m excited too.”

“Sure you are lover boy,” said Damon.

He smacked his teammate on the back, then torpedoed down the stairs to find Larson. Faith stared after him, shaking her head.

.-.-.-.

Collins and Faith hurtled out of the gateroom at top speed, ignoring their early morning grogginess. As they went along, they jabbered eagerly over the radio to their team.

“We’re go for launch guys.”

Larson’s voice crackled back with an exasperated tone. “We already know, for the umpteenth time. Grodin already notified us. Now get your scientific asses up here before I change my mind.”

A few minutes later they emerged in the flight bay, finding jumper three already lit and running. Larson beckoned to them from the pilot’s chair, and closed the hatch as they hopped in.

“Geez, it took you guys long enough.”

“*Excuse me.*”

Collins set aside his pack carefully and slid into his chair, chattering cheerfully. “The probe had to check viability. The only difficulty was the gate’s in orbit around the planet.”

“So the Nacus’ monster?”

“Just a bunch of people walking into outer space and explosive decompression.”

“Ouch,” said Damon. “Not the way to go.”

“It’s a good defensive mechanism too. The Gygan must’ve launched it after the civil war. But they couldn’t or wouldn’t unless-“

“They’ve got spaceships?” said Larson brightly, patting the flight console.

“At least their ancestors did,” added Faith.

“Kiddies, this trip is getting more interesting by the second. Hold tight.”

The Puddlejumper maneuvered into position and before they knew it, dove into the active Stargate.

.-.-.-.

The plethora of stars was steadily replaced by sky as the ship descended on the planet. Stretches of dank woodland and terrain spread out below in merging forms, occasionally branching into neat square patterns.

Faith leaned forward in her seat, gazing eagerly at the window. “There’s signs of civilization here.”

The HUD popped in front of them, a series of numbers and diagrams formulating on the hologram. Collins eased into his feet, examining the readings intently.

“Sure are. Huh.”

“What?”

“We’re not getting any energy readings.”

Larson tried to look at him and the controls simultaneously. “Translation? No ZPMs? Cause if so, I’m turning this puppy around.”

“We probably wouldn’t be able to tell from here anyway,” he said calmly. “But we do need to go down there.”

“Fine,” the Marine muttered.

Collins retook his seat, but preoccupiedly picked up a scanner and began working on it quickly.

.-.-.-.

“Please make sure your seat backs and tray tables are in their full upright position until we’ve made a complete stop. Thank you for flying Atlantis airlines.”

The puddlejumper whined as it settled onto the ground, signaling their landing. However it took them twenty minutes more to make it outside, geared and ready.

“Happy now?” Damon said to Collins.

He ignored him and continued busily tapping at the small screen in his palm.

“You’ll thank me later,” he said distantly.

“Thank? We just lost a good chunk of time-“

“Shut up Corporal,” reprimanded Larson. “We do what the smart guy says in certain cases. That’s why the smart guy is here.”

“I’ve heard that before.” The soldier wrinkled his nose and fiddled with his hat. “I think I’m starting to break out from his cream stuff.”

Larson tapped Faith on the shoulder and asked, “Where to Doc? The souvenir shop or the ice cream stand?”

She didn’t answer, but instead walked slowly towards Collins.

“Scott, what’s wrong?” she said, concerned.

She knew that look.

He lifted his head, and turned the gadget in her direction. “We took hundreds of life sign readings.”

“And?”

“This planet, and everything on it...is dying.”

Chapter Eight: Life's Necessity

“A breath of will blows eternally through the universe of souls in the direction of Right and Necessity. It is the air which all intellects inhale and exhale, and it is the wind which blows the worlds into order and orbit.”

-Ralph Waldo Emerson

“He who wishes to maintain that the past of mankind no longer has any absolute value in life ... must also be ready to deny his own life until the present moment, indeed in advance until the last moment, as worthless.”

-Johan Huizinga

Larson gazed skyward, then back at Collins. “Looks uh- pretty icky, but prettier than ole Los Angeles.”

“Are we about to get hit by an asteroid or something?” said Damon, jerking suddenly.

“How could he possibly know that?” said Faith. She turned to Collins and said softly, “What’s happening?”

He dropped his hands at his sides dejectedly. “I almost wish it was an asteroid. Impact eradication and nuclear winter are a better way to go- at least survivable compared to starvation and radiation exposure.”

“Radiation?” snapped Larson, gawking at him. “Explain. Now.”

“Take it easy, we’re not in immediate harm.”

“You just said ‘radiation exposure!’”

“I meant to the people on this world, not us,” he said, sighing. At the soldier’s blank stare, he went on. “That stuff I made you put on is extra protective against UV rays. We’re not going to be in harms way for the time period we’re here, but it doesn’t hurt to protect ourselves.”

“What about the other people we detected?” squeaked Damon.

“Anyone here who’s unprotected for a long time is likely to suffer the full effects of UV exposure. See all that brown stuff up there? NO₂. It’s killed the ozone layer on this planet and the environment too. There’s probably floods of acid rain, which is why everything’s dead too.”

“What did this? Could the natives have done that?”

“I’m not sure. I don’t think the people on this planet caused it. Otherwise we would’ve detected higher technology.”

“Guys come here.” Larson corralled them close to him, and said lowly, “Higher technology or not, we’re going to be extra careful. The people on this planet aren’t likely to be friendly. Keep your guns ready at all times.”

“I don’t know Erne,” said Faith. “They’re not likely to be a threat, especially if they’re dying.”

“Tell that to Marshall,” he retorted. She narrowed her eyes at him, making him back away. “Sorry.”

.-.-.-.

They passed a series of small hills and dead trees, following Collins’ directions. They’d picked up an isolated group of signals (likely a town) down a particular road. They were going by foot so they wouldn’t startle anyone with the puddlejumper. Soon an outcropping of buildings appeared, hedged along the sides by continuous fields of withered crops.

The dusty road gave way to cobbled lanes and cramped houses. Tightly shut windows overlooked them, and a majority of the places were boarded up. Empty market stands stood here and there; occasionally there was a tool or toy lying by the roadside. Their footsteps were loud and echoed against the high stone walls. The whole place seemed abandoned.

“Where is everybody?” replied Collins in confusion. “It said they were around here.”

“Probably hiding then?” suggested Faith.

“From what?”

“Armageddon.”

Larson studied the streetway and pointed further ahead. A tavern sign hung above a wide arched doorway, which looked swept and tidy compared to the others. “There’s probably somebody in there. When crap happens, you need a bar.”

“This early in the morning?”

“Especially.”

They cautiously encroached on it slowly, Larson creeping through the door first. A thick stale surge of air billowed out as they entered a dark room, lit poorly with candles. Ragged blue curtains were closed against a half dozen boarded windows, the only source of color in the murky room. Numerous eyes turned in their direction, belonging to dirty people gathered in clumps around tables. Many of them had splotchy and flaking skin, or were pale as a ghost.

A grizzled elderly man stood clumsily out of a rickety chair, which had a heavy coat and hood slung on the back. He hobbled toward them, shaking his hand.

“Do all ye have a death wish?”

Larson stepped backward as the man neared them closely.

The elbow clutched over his weapon twitched reflexively, but Faith nudged him and whispered, “Careful.” She said politely, “Excuse me sir, what do you mean?”

He cocked his head. “Ma’am, I mean the retribution of the heavens. Erndis pours her poison upon the earth, and Sólvar burns us with his flaming whip. The time of judgment is here, and we’re being punished. You’re crazy to go outside.”

“Karel.” Another man stepped from behind the main counter, brandishing a rag at the old man. “Don’t be scaring newcomers.”

“Bah,” he gruffed, and slugged away.

The other came over with some effort, his large frame sagging. His clothes were very loose and dirty, but neatly pressed.

He bowed a bit, and Faith swore he winked. “You are definitely not from here.”

Suddenly a short plucky woman popped beneath his arm, clutching several empty cups. “Specially if you don’t know about the Plague.” She examined them eagerly, and asked, “Where *are* you from? Did not the Plague reach your lands?”

“Easy there, Bera,” he said soothingly, patting her head. “They just got here. Don’t you harass these guests either.”

“But Laec!”

Her face fell, but Larson waved his hand dismissively. “Ah it’s okay. We *are* from far away.”

She brightened considerably, but Laec abruptly urged them to a table. He eased Faith’s bag from her shoulders and helped the men with their things, stacking them neatly beside each chair. He shooed Bera away for food, and took a seat himself.

Collins retrieved a pen and scooted in. “How long ago did the “Plague” start?”

Laec scratched his scalp troubledly. “Six months ago I believe.”

“*Six?*” gaped Collins. “How’ve you survived this long?”

A shadow fell across his face and he grimaced. “Luck and borrowed time. Many died before we realized how bad it was. Some from the light, the rest by starvation. Our food failed and our stores run low. We hunt and scavenge with the moons anything that’s left, and our people live under the hidden stars. We cannot spare water to wash clothes, because most of it’s tainted.”

“God,” muttered Larson.

“My place serves as the ration house,” said Laec proudly, leaning forward. “What condition is your land in? How did you fare?”

The group hesitated, but Faith spoke first. “It is perfectly fine. We come from another world, through the Stargate, the Ancestral Ring.”

The man shook his head, laughing loudly. “Very funny.”

“What?” asked a startled Damon.

Laec tapped the table with his heavy hand. “The Ancestral Ring is only legend. The Nacus stole it in the age of Myth during the war over the Jewels.”

“You think *they* took it?” Faith said slowly.

“Yes,” he said boredly. “It disappeared after they left through it and the Wraith invaded Lokria.”

“Laec,” interrupted Collins. “You still have the Stargate. It’s in orbit high above the planet.”

“Orbit? Like our moons?” he said incredulously. “Even if it were true, only the Wraith live among the stars now. The Nacus must’ve been destroyed by them, and the Ancestors left long ago.”

“No, we are from another world far far away. We came through the Stargate.”

“Such a thing is not possible,” he replied impatiently. Bera appeared behind them and he motioned to her. “Ah, your food is here. Eat your fill, and quit such nonsense.”

“Laec, we-“

Abruptly a loud bang echoed in the room, causing them to leap onto their feet. The front door flipped on its hinges, bringing in a gust of wind and blinding sunlight. A series of yells filled the room, and Bera rushed over, slamming it behind the pair of men who’d entered. They were hunched and panting, sweat dripping from their faces as they lifted off heavy leather hoods and coats.

The bar owner barreled down on them and yanked one of them by the collar. “Aksel! What are you up to?”

He coughed and sputtered, wide-eyed. “A giant metal bird...”

His companion wrested him from Laec’s grasp, frowning. “We saw a *ship* come from the sky! And it wasn’t Wraith.”

Laec froze a moment, clenching his hands. He turned to his strange guests, staring at them, transfixed. “You did. You were telling the truth?”

The quartet exchanged looks and Larson nodded. “Yeah. Why don’t we sit and figure out how to save your planet?”

.-.-.-.

“Do you know what started this?”

“I told you Captain, I haven’t gotten anywhere.” Collins dropped his notes onto the table, and gazed at the soldier tiredly. For the past few hours he and Faith had been extensively interviewing people in the bar. They were trying to piece eyewitness accounts together.

Faith rolled her eyes at him. “Nobody saw anything. People start burning from sun exposure, the sky goes dark, and life goes down the drain.”

“In that case, pack it up,” he said, jabbing a thumb at the door.

“You can’t be serious.”

“I am. We can’t waste time on something we didn’t come here to do and have no idea about anyway.”

She scowled angrily, but he fended her off. “Easy there, Doc. I’m not abandoning the cause. We need to check in with Atlantis and see what to do before we get in trouble for not going on our planned fishing expedition. I just don’t want to get you guys in hot water. Alright?”

“Fine,” she said resignedly. “But we come back, or I steal the jumper and string you up naked in the village square.”

“Sounds fair to me,” he said heartily.

They gathered their things and headed to leave, but Laec barred their way. “Where are you going?”

“We have to go,” said Damon, nudging past him.

“But you can’t leave! Please?” he said desperately.

Collins extended his hands calmly. “It’s okay, we’ll be back soon. We have to go see if we can stay here longer.”

Bera appeared behind them, and laid her hand on the Corporal’s. “Stay at least till sunset? It’s not safe.”

Damon's head fell and he said gently, "I'm real sorry Bera."

"Soldier," Larson said. He shoved him outside, and smacked him on the head as the door slammed shut behind them.

"Why'd you do that sir?"

"You were drooling, Corporal."

"Was not."

"Was too," echoed the others.

Collins grinned at the pathetic look on the Marine's face, earning himself a glare.

"C'mon guys, she was pretty," the soldier exclaimed.

The other men murmured in agreement, but Faith decisively punched him in the back.

"Oliver!"

"Ow!"

"I'm sure *Mrs. Damon* would thank me for that," she said scathingly.

The Corporal's smile disappeared.

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The communications system crackled in silence for a moment, before Dr. Weir spoke again.

"Very well, proceed Captain."

Larson turned from the jumper console, and found his entire team staring at him.

"What?"

"You didn't mention the dying planet Larson," said Faith flatly.

"Of course I didn't. It was a simple check-in. After all, it was possible we were walking into a man-eating dragon or such," he said sarcastically. They were silent, and he blinked. "I don't want to get pulled off this mission because it's difficult. So what do we do?"

"So we're still going after the ZPMs?" said Damon quietly.

"What about them?" he replied. "We haven't gotten anywhere."

“You know,” started Collins. “Even if we find them, we probably can’t take them.”

“Why not?” said Larson, suddenly getting out of his seat. “It’s what we came here for.”

“Yes, but if they really ‘protect’ the planet, then we can’t remove them without disabling any potential defensive systems. It might be the reason they’re still around today, or survived cullings in such a precarious environment.”

Larson narrowed his eyes and fell silent a moment. “If this is happening right now...it’s likely that these ‘systems’ are broken. Then we *could* take the ZPMs.”

“In that case we’d have an obligation to try and fix it. Or the ZPMs might be depleted-“

“*You* stop talking,” Larson snapped at him.

“Sir,” interjected Damon. “He’s right.”

“Either way,” whispered Faith. “We have to at least try.”

.-.-.-.

“This would be a lot easier if we could see the damn things from the sky.” Larson slammed his fist against the wall, causing his team to jump.

Faith stopped mid-speech with one of the villagers, and gazed at him steadily. “Well we can’t, so calm down.”

“You mean detect, sir?” said Damon sleepily from his corner chair. “If we were searching by sight it wouldn’t make a difference now anyway. It’s nearly dark out.”

“Don’t get snarky Corporal,” he snapped back. “I didn’t intend to spend the night here, but it looks like we’ll have to. I’m still figuring out what to say to operations. If we’re not smart, Sheppard’s team will come themselves, and I’ll get my ass kicked.”

“We wouldn’t let that happen,” said Collins, mumbling over the screen of his computer pad.

“Uh huh,” he said skeptically. He jutted his chin at Faith and asked, “Doc, why don’t any of these people know anything?”

Faith apologetically excused the person she was speaking with, and rose from her chair. “Most of this area is poor agrarian. Such communities are generally less educated and wouldn’t harbor more detailed information. It’s like searching for words on blank pieces of paper; the odds are low of finding what you’re searching for.”

She sighed and stretched her limbs, but a restless tension remained quivering in her muscles. Tiredly she lowered her shoulders and walked towards the door.

“I’m getting some air,” she said over her shoulder.

“Not alone you’re not,” said Larson, motioning to the team. “Damon you go with her.”

The younger officer opened an eye, but didn’t make an attempt to move his feet from atop a nearby table. “Sir I’m exhausted. You said I could take it easy till it was time for my shift to guard the jumper.”

“Why is everyone questioning my orders today?” the Captain said, throwing up his hands.

“I’ll go with you,” answered Collins. He tucked his computer into his bag and looked up at them. “I need to get my readings done anyway. I wanted to measure the radiation exposure differential when the sun was down.”

“Sure,” the officer replied, slouching into a nearby chair. “Nothing like a nightly stroll alone with a female counterpart on a strange new world. Hardly sounds romantic to me.”

“C’mon Scott,” said Faith, rolling her eyes.

She grabbed his hand, earning an “ooo” from the other men. She glared at them and hurried out of the tavern, slamming the door behind them.

.-.-.-.

A cool wind brushed their faces, light but carrying the decaying smells of the world around them. Sheer hulking outlines of naked wilting trees cast shadows onto the air’s filmy twilight. Simple yet beautiful towers and archways broke the monotony, but added to the honeycombed emptiness of the streets. The pair’s boots were muted and slow on the dirt, and their hands twined contentedly in the space between them. Collins swung their arms a little and gazed at Faith, his blue eyes glittering warmly in the low light.

“You feel like going back?” he asked.

She was silent a moment but shook her head. “Not yet. I wanted to check out that place by the bridge.”

“We passed that twenty minutes ago, and it’s pitch black. Why don’t we go in the morning?”

“I don’t feel like going in yet. Please?”

He pulled her to a stop mid-stride, and pressed her palm. “What’s wrong?”

“This is going to sound stupid, but— I don’t want to deal with the guys’ antics anymore. They’ve been driving me nuts, particularly when they start pulling the stops on you. And I haven’t done anything here, only sat on my butt all day talking.”

His face lightened a bit and he loosened his hold on her. “That’s what’s bothering you? Faith, I can take care of myself, in fact now it’s my turn to take care of you. You have a place on this team, more so because of your history. Don’t convince yourself otherwise. The time’s coming when everyone will be needed.”

.-.-.-.

Considerably happier and cheered up, they returned back to the main road for the tavern. Ten minutes later, they were closer to their goal but Faith’s feet were starting to hurt. Their pace slowed considerably, though the darkness still made them wary of their speed and surroundings. Collins’ shoe struck a pebble, sending it clattering forlornly along the walk in front of them. As they passed a narrow side-street, a shadow suddenly jumped out of the alley.

Startled and mid-yell they hopped back, hearts thudding loudly in their chests and Collins wildly drawing his gun. As it moved through the air, the figure came into the lighter portion of the street. It revealed an older weather-beaten man with very long beard, heavy clothes, and his hands held up in defense.

“Please!” he exclaimed. “I mean no harm.”

Collins stepped in front of Faith, and said skeptically, “Really? Was that before or after you jumped us?”

“Forgive me. My name is Gunnar. I was told to seek you, the newcomers.”

The scientists glanced at each other then puzzledly at the stranger. “Where did you hear that?” asked Faith.

“From Vadin the blacksmith. He told me you would believe my story.”

“And what would that be?” said Collins, slowly lowering his gun.

“The beginning of the Plague. I saw that which brought our doom.”

.-.-.-.

“Larson, just listen to him!”

The Captain uncrossed his arms, studying Gunnar closely. The newcomer stared back at him, as if waiting for his next move.

“How do I know he’s not going to lie?”

Collins scooted his chair nearer to him, and dropped his fist on the table. “Because it’s a plausible explanation- and the only one we have.”

“Okay, shoot.”

Gunnar blinked, and started unsurely. “Before the Plague, I was a trapper. Six months ago I was on excursion in the deep forest, in search of rare pelts. I’d had a good hunt, my back was piled high with fair burden too. Late afternoon, as I returned towards the village, I heard the warning bells ringing afar in the main square. Our town was set on a lovely hill above the forest vale, and as I looked upward, a great light pierced the sky. It swamped the horizon, growing brighter and sharply in size. Fearing it might be Wraith, I fled back into the confines of the forest.

I went mile after mile from my home in terror, of which I am now ashamed. I took shelter in a cave and lay in wait for a long time. When daylight came, I tried to go back, but found I had lost my way. It took four days to return home. During that time, it seemed that a curse had stricken the world. The sky was brown, the air foul, and the streets of Cherus completely empty. I knocked on a dozen doors before I found a neighbor. He told me that no the Wraith had not come, but rather a bizarre Plague. It was dangerous to walk in the light, the rain stung like acid, and a majority of the populace was at the hospice. Some had died already, other lived in agony. They suffered from excruciating pain or bled to death, their bodies seemed as though burned in a flaming inferno.

My own daughter and son passed on with my wife. Many left, for all those who stayed...all died. After my loss, I went forth to find help. I came to one village before this one. Danea has survived far better than any I’ve seen before.”

He finished and Larson was silent for a moment. He turned to the scientist and motioned awkwardly. “So what does this mean?”

“We’re dealing with a classic case of a massive Gamma Ray event, likely resulting from a hypernova.”

“You mean supernova?” said Larson, his brow wrinkling with confusion.

“No, hypernova,” answered Collins. “think same, but on a scale much more catastrophic and powerful.”

“I thought supernovas were just exploding stars hanging around out there. I’ve seen pictures of ‘em.”

Collins pulled his computer screen towards him and toyed with a few of the keys. “These are rarer—and more deadly, since it was a Wolf-Rayet star. It went into collapsing mode, ending its self-destruction in a massive eruption of material and gamma rays-”

“Why is this dangerous?” interrupted Collins. “Is there-”

“Gamma rays have the highest frequency and energy of electromagnetic radiation. Their properties allow them to cause major damage, especially when in contact with living material.

When bursts are given off by objects close to planets, the rays can strip away at the atmosphere and ozone, wreaking havoc on the biosphere.”

“In other words,” said Faith quietly. “It can cause mass extinctions. The Ordovician-Silurian event was responsible for the second largest annihilation on Earth.”

Getting wider-eyed by the minute, Larson said troubledly, “Mass extinction...how sure are you?”

“Positive,” answered Collins, dropping his stylus. “The data, symptoms, and witness accounts predict it. We need to bring in another science team. If it’s true, there’s nothing we can do and will have to evacuate.”

“Okay then,” said Larson resignedly, dropping his arms. “First thing in the morning we’ll get more of your kind and I guess that’ll be it.”

“Wait a minute,” said Faith, a new feeling creeping up on her. “What about the ZPMs?”

“Faith, we can assume what our top priorities are here-“

“Think! It may be the key.”

“What?” said Larson flatly.

She half-stood, her voice eager. “After listening to the lore of Lokria, I’m beginning to think this problem has been a recurring event throughout their history. Look, the civil war began after predictions of “doom”. What if it was the same thing? Scott, you said yourself that these stars can be actively violent throughout their lifecycles. What if these people’s predecessors knew that and designed a defense for their civilization?”

“A star-shield?”

“Exactly.”

“It sounds nuts to me,” said Larson truthfully. He paused a moment and examined the pair. “But what the hell, nuts is sanity to us. Let’s go get those ZPMs!”

Chapter Nine: Catalyst

“To be a catalyst is the ambition most appropriate for those who see the world as being in constant change, and who, without thinking that they can control it, wish to influence its direction.”

-Theodore Zeldin

“We stand united; we speak as one...and we will transform this moment into a catalyst for unity and positive change.”

-Bill Frist

Gaps of green and yellow appeared in the fading ebony blanket, the emerging light of dawn twisting the sky with streaks of dull color. The air was deathly still and silent, no animals or wind awaking with the new day. Faith sighed and gripped her jacket tighter around her, feeling a chill pass through her. She had grown used to the sound of water in the morning, especially when she was able to catch the dawn.

There was a sudden crunching noise behind her, followed by the clunking of slow boots. Larson toddled to her side and yawned loudly. She glanced at him and grimaced, returning her attention to the sunrise.

“Aren’t you a lovely sight?” she said sarcastically.

He snorted and peered at the sky. “I got up to move the Jumper. Damon scared away some kids last night snooping around the hull. Don’t want them stealing anything.”

“Pfft, they’re probably just hungry. Anyway, what were you thinking? Flying when you’re tired-”

He bumped her with his elbow and interrupted. “Hey I’m perfectly fine flying this early.”

“Sure,” she said playfully. “Crashing that T-3A Firefly at four am before your pilot screening was just a coincidence.”

“Crash *landed*. The engine stalled on me,” Larson replied gruffly.

“Liar.”

“Nerd.”

“Buffoon.”

“Floozy.”

“Butthead.”

“Oh that’s original,” he scoffed, and poked her in the back. She jumped and gave him an evil look, shuddering as a wisp of chilly air escaped into her jacket. Noticing, he took off his and draped it around her shoulders. “There. Now what are *you* doing up?” he asked.

Faith raised an eyebrow quizzically. “Atlantis radioed to check in. You should’ve heard it.” She reached and gently tilted his head, confirming that he wasn’t wearing his headset.

“Larson!”

“Oops?”

Softly her fingers grazed his scalp and over the curve of his ear, marking where the equipment would go. He shuddered and swung his head towards her, their faces dangerously close together.

“You shouldn’t do that.”

“What?”

“Because it reminds me of—things. Us.”

“I— sorry Erne,” she said awkwardly, stepping back from him.

“Rule number fifteen,” he quipped, glancing at her.

“That was not a number fifteen.” She rolled her eyes and muttered, “Rule number two.”

“Rule number two, using rule number two.”

“Oh for goodness sakes,” she said, throwing her arms in the air.

Larson grinned evilly, earning himself a punch in the bicep. Faith shook her head and walked back into the inn.

.-.-.-.

“¡Ayuda!”

A short scientist wobbled out of the jumper, and banged into one of the soldiers, dropping one of the boxes he was carrying. Lanie Pryce scurried from behind him and picked it up off the ground.

“Careful Iggy!”

Along with the two pilots, they dragged the piles of equipment to a building nearby. The front door swung open, and Captain Larson's team came out, grabbing supplies and boxes quickly.

"How goes it Lanie?" asked Faith.

"Exciting," her friend said sarcastically. "Hey Stevens, watch it with the EDAR."

The lieutenant adjusted his grip, a large instrument slipping from his hands. "The what?"

"Environment Data Acquisition Robot. Nevermind," she said, grabbing it. "Don't touch anything that looks expensive."

A half hour after the second team arrived, they had set up inside the main room of an inn, instruments and supplies scattered across the floor. They sat in a circle around one of the tables, Dr. Collins filling in the newcomers.

"...so now we have who knows how many people on a dying planet."

"Our job," interjected Dr. Quintero. "is to see if this planet is salvageable, then set up a plan to get everyone offworld."

"Sounds easy enough Iggy," said Stevens, slapping the scientist on the back.

"You have no idea."

.-.-.-.

The faint sound of snoring echoed from the back of the jumper, causing all four people to look behind them.

Larson rolled his eyes and regripped the controls. "Isn't he supposed to be helping us?"

"Give Gunnar a break, we've been searching these mountains for four hours," said Faith.

"This is the glamorous part of missions Cap," remarked Damon.

"Speaking of which," said Larson, getting up from the pilot's seat. "Doc Stu, it's your turn to man the jumper. Your excursion, your search now."

He patted her on the shoulder and lay down on a bench across from the sleeping Lokrian. Irritated, Faith put down her notes and took the controls, veering the jumper sharply.

She smirked as she heard a thud, and a loud, "Ow!"

After another hour, she finally caught sight of a low valley, hidden by the towering mountains. She lowered the jumper precariously into the air above it, and saw ruins.

“Hey guys, look at this,” she said, and brought up readings on the HUD display.

Collins snapped awake and crawled into the empty front seat, pointing out a small section on the grid. “There’s only one building partly in tact.”

“Looks like a good place to start.”

They landed the jumper one hundred feet away from the building, setting down with minimal disturbance. The team picked up their equipment, Faith pulling out the vests from the cargo overheads. She dropped one on a still sleeping Larson, causing him to sit up, startled.

“Why are we stopped?”

“Found some ruins. We’re going exploring,” said Faith.

“Isn’t that my decision?”

“Only when you’re awake.”

“Very funny.”

Outside, there were tumbles of stone and tangled overgrowth. The crumbled remains of a road spread out before them, covered with weeds and barely distinguishable from the surroundings. The building they had spotted from above was in similar condition. Its roof was caved in, half the walls were falling down, and its pillars had long tumbled to the ground. The team approached it precariously, studying it.

Collins circled it and stared upward, rubbing his chin. “It looks stable enough.”

“Probably,” said Faith. “Seems like it was—“

“*Probably?*” interrupted Larson. “We’re not going in until you’re sure—“

Gunnar fell to his knees beside them, pointing to the ancient faded letters engraved on a nearby pillar. “Omom, ziun d’ldal...sulan lyos zik Phelai m’rkos,” he murmured. “Mand konom ...”

“Phelai, he just said Phelai,” Damon said loudly.

Faith extended her hand, helping the older man to his feet. “Gunnar, you know what this place is?”

“The words signify no other. It is the Phelai Temple in the last city of the Gygan people.”

She looked astutely at the Captain, raising an eyebrow. “We’re going in, Erne.”

“Is he sure?”

Gunnar crossed his arms. “It says so on the pillar.”

They entered through a break in the walls, climbing over piles of stone that littered the main hall. A long colonnaded walk led across the Temple, to a small chamber on the other end. The outside wall was largely in tact, and covered with carvings of text and images. Fascinated, Faith pulled out her camera and began shooting the sections of wall nearby.

She motioned to the chamber entrance, and asked, “Gunnar, are you able to read the text over the door?”

“Well enough,” he answered. “It says, ‘By Nature’s law we will not fall—something—the guardian cast it away’.”

“Sounds convincing enough for me,” she said, packing away her camera.

Larson held out his arm to stop her, and pointed his flashlight into the dark chamber. “Hold up. This seems too easy.”

“The fact we’re about to walk out of that place with ZPMs?” said Damon sarcastically.

“Exactly,” said Larson. He pointed to Dr. Collins. “Are there any energy signatures coming from there?”

“None yet,” said the scientist, studying his scanner. “But something may be blocking them.”

“So—“

“Just stop.”

Faith flicked her flashlight on and walked into the chamber, causing the men to scramble after her. The chamber led down a narrow passageway and into another cavernous room. She shone her light onto the high vaulted ceiling and over the surroundings, finding rubble and a series of equipment lining the walls. A large statue twenty feet high stood in the centre.

The men came to a crashing halt behind her, staring around. Collins urged Faith over and wandered towards the machine apparatus. Wide crystal panels jutted out from a series of terminals, which surrounded a tall screen against the wall. Some of the equipment across the room was smashed in by rubble.

“This looks Ancient in design,” he murmured. “This must be the shield.”

“This room looks faulty in design,” said Larson, waving his flashlight around. “Watch out for debris.”

Ignoring him, the two scientists picked over the panels, trying to turn the devices on. Collins pointed to a particularly large protrusion, and gestured Faith towards it.

“Try touching that.”

She waved her hand over the crystal, and suddenly the machines sprang to life, many lights flickering on. A minute later the machine turned off with a faint hum. Collins thumped it in a few places and bent over, peering at it.

“Huh, the power source is dead or the circuit is broken.”

“Can you fix it?” asked Faith worriedly.

“Turn it on again if you can, we need to see what this thing does,” said Larson.

“This place has to be thousands of years old. Something eventually has to kink,” said Damon, tapping it with his foot.

“Don’t do that,” said Collins, pushing the foot away.

He spent time going over the apparatus, while Faith took pictures until the batteries in her camera died. Finally, he called them over to the machine.

“Hey!” said the scientist. “I found the power source in the statue.”

“We may have to crack it open to get the ZPMs out,” said Larson.

“That’s very likely. I managed to reroute the power coupling. The original path was destroyed by falling debris.”

Faith stared at Larson in horror, but lowered her head. “If we need to do that, then we’ll have to. Let’s see if this thing works first.”

“Okay Faith,” said Collins, pointing to the machine. “Stand over there and try reactivating it on my mark. 1...2...3!”

She hovered her hand over the crystal, and smiled as the instruments sprang to life.

“You did it—“

A moment later, a series of sparks sprang from one of the panels, and a deep rattling began emanating from the floor.

“Uhm Scott.” Faith waved her hand in front of the machine again, but nothing happened. The rumbling increased, shaking the rubble around them and causing stones to loose from the ceiling.

“Turn it off!” shouted Larson.

“I can’t!”

“Collins!”

The scientist leapt toward the statue and began pulling wires out, but parts of the walls began to collapse.

“Fae!”

She turned to see Larson running in her direction, his eyes wide and wild. She glanced upward too late, and felt a sharp pain, then darkness enveloped her.

.-.-.-.

“This is all your fault.”

“Excuse me, Mr. Let’s Turn It On.”

“You could’ve killed us all!”

“I saved us, Captain.”

“Bunch of good it did.”

The voices grated loudly in her ears amidst a swirl of pain and confusion. Slowly Faith opened her eyes, blinking rapidly as the light blinded her.

“Wha—happened,” she murmured.

“Hey there,” said Collins, stroking her forehead. “You were hit by falling rocks.”

“Yet again,” said Larson. He came up to the cargo bay bench she was lying on, and folded his arms. “Thanks to this fool.”

“Shut up Larson,” she snapped, trying to sit up. “We all weren’t careful enough. We couldn’t have seen this coming either.”

“Well, it was almost worth it,” grimaced the soldier. “We found two ZPMs...”

“Completely depleted,” said Collins. “The device caused a power surge and completely drained the modules. If they were fully loaded, we might not have survived.”

“Aren’t we lucky,” said Faith, holding a hand to her head. “This is going to be one hell of a headache.”

“Lie down,” said Collins softly. “You’re going back to Atlantis.”

“But—“

“No.”

.-.-.-.

Carson shone a small light into Faith’s eyes, causing her to wince. She screwed an eye shut and looked at him pathetically.

“You m’dear, have a concussion,” he said, shutting off the light. “I’ll give you something for the headache, but you need to stay here and rest.”

An hour after she had settled into one of the beds, Collins stopped by the infirmary, bearing brownies from the cafeteria. He took one of her hands and squeezed gently, placing the food in her lap.

“Thanks.”

“Any better?” he asked.

“A bit, the drugs are kicking in. How about you?”

He looked over his shoulder before answering. “I was just chewed out for a half hour by Dr. McKay. He thinks I wasted the ZPMs, though by my calculations, they couldn’t have powered the city shield for more than a half hour.”

“McKay is a jerk,” she said reassuringly. “Nothing lost, nothing gained. If Larson tries to give you trouble too, I’ll kick his high and mighty ass.”

“This is why I love you,” he said, laughing.

Faith smiled strainedly and tightened her fingers around his. “What are they going to do about the Lokrians? They can’t stay there.”

“Doctor Quintero has contrived a contraption that could be used to drag the Stargate out of orbit. We can start planning an evacuation soon as it’s on the ground.”

“Where to? They can’t possibly think of bringing all of those people here.”

“Weir wants us to convince the Nacus to accept the Gygan onto their homeworld.”

“Oh sure, it’ll be a cinch,” she said sarcastically.

.-.-.-.

“I still think you’re crazy,” said Larson. He moved a hand towards his hair, but Faith swatted him. “Ow.”

“Don’t touch it. I spent enough time getting that mess tamable.”

He looked down at his shirt woefully, patting his chest where his vest normally was. “I feel naked out of uniform.”

“No one wants to see that,” she said.

“Oh but you did repeatedly,” said Larson, smirking.

Collins coughed behind them and stepped in front of Larson. “I’d appreciate it if you didn’t talk like that to her, especially since she just got out of the infirmary.”

“Doctor—“

“Fellas,” said Faith. “We’re going to be late. I don’t need you brawling and messing up your hair. Damon and I have agreed if you fight, we’re going to break your necks.”

“Fine,” they said simultaneously.

“You’re adults, act like it.”

They entered the Control room quietly, following Faith to the Stargate. In the middle of the platform was a middle aged woman with upswept hair and traditional clothing. Faith shook the woman’s hand and introduced her to each member of the team.

“This is Nila, head of the Lokrian Council. She is going to be negotiating with the Nacus Elders.”

“It is a pleasure to meet more of your people,” said the woman. “You have already provided much aid to my world. We very are grateful.”

After they went through the gate, they entered the main town and made their way to its municipal building. The town hall was airy and large, set with high walls and many windows. They were escorted into the centre chamber, where the Nacus Elders were waiting. Among them was Xanan and two other men, bowed with age, but stately. The Atlantian group stood before the trio, who were seated behind a long table. Faith kicked Damon in the shin as she noticed him fiddling with his hair.

“Greetings to you again,” said Xanan. “We were surprised to receive your message two days ago.”

“Sorry about the short notice er—sir,” said Larson. “We’re really low on time.”

“Time. There is never enough time,” replied one of the Elders. “But indeed this sensitive matter needed to be decided quickly.”

“Have you reached a conclusion?” asked Faith politely.

“Yes. Will Lokria’s representative sit beside us here? We will negotiate the terms of an agreement.”

Nila stepped forward and took a seat beside the three men. For the next three hours, the representatives conferred, with occasional input from the Atlantians. At last, the group stood up from the table, shaking hands and nodding agreeably. The Gygan were free to migrate from Lokria, despite their hostile past. Larson’s team left the meeting bearing a copy of the agreement and gifts from the Nacus Elders.

.-.-.-.

The four glasses clanged together as the team held up their cups in a toast. Damon chugged the drink down immediately and coughed, holding his thumb up to the others.

“Very good.”

Collins and Faith passed a look, then dropped their glasses onto the floor without drinking. Larson laughed from his perch on the bed, and joined the Corporal, choking down most of the contents in his cup.

“Not bad. Those Nacus sure know how to make a brew,” he said, his nose scrunched up.

Faith passed her cup to him. “No thanks, I’d rather not burn my throat off.”

The Captain patted her on the shoulder and grabbed it, raising the glass. “I think we accomplished a lot this week. As good ole Doc Stu says, ‘Be a catalyst for change.’ I used to think that was nerd-speak, but we made a difference. So here’s to my team.”

“You mean our team,” interrupted Damon, causing them all to laugh.

Chapter Ten: Asunder

*“Everyone sees they cannot well live asunder,
nor many together, without some rule to which all must submit”.*

-Algernon Sydney

“Andrew is not going to be happy with you,” said Larson, nudging Faith with his elbow.

Both looked back at the market stall, where one of the merchants was greedily hovering over a pair of grey Nike gym shoes. Faith tightened her grip on the bag she was carrying, and laughed nervously.

“Are you kidding? He never wears those. Why he brought them to another galaxy is beyond me.”

Damon chuckled at her. “You’re becoming a regular con artist, Doc.”

“Am not, it was a fair trade—“

“You know, I think that concussion caused more damage than Dr. Beckett believed,” said the Captain.

“Too bad for you Scott isn’t here,” said Faith. “Now I can do this—“

She kicked the back of each soldiers’ boots, causing them to stumble and trip.

“Thanks, ruin another pair of my boots,” Larson said loudly.

“What’s that supposed—oh no you don’t.”

“Oliver,” he said furtively, patting his teammate on the back. “Faith was so drunk the night we met, she threw up on my military issued boots, which I had to pay for.”

“Did not,” she snapped, nearly dropping her bag. “You were drunker than I—“

A high pitched whine broke the stillness of the town center, and a gust of wind rustled the trees around them. The trio gazed up into the sky, pink from the fading dusk. A series of black triangular shapes appeared over them, a shrill sound emanating from their wings. Screams broke out from the houses and people behind them.

“Wraith!” shouted Larson.

A cold dread gripped Faith as she watched the darts begin to take up people in the distance. She had only read reports from other teams; she had never encountered the Wraith grabbed her arm and they started to run, ducking under the cover of overhanging trees. Ten minutes later, they

came across more villagers, their voices renting the darkness around them. The continual whine of Wraith ships hummed in the sky above them. The group was headed straight toward the town. Faith waved at them and shouted for them to stop, but they ignored her and continued running.

“There’s more ships that way,” she yelled. “Follow us!”

Larson yanked her arm and hissed, “What’re you doing?”

“We can save them. They can come back with us.”

“Obviously not. We have to save our own hides first.”

She tried to free herself, but he tightened his grip on her wrist, forcing them onward. The darkness finally encompassed them, and they fled quietly, guns drawn.

“I knew we should’ve parked closer,” wheezed Damon. “Screw—scaring the locals.”

“We couldn’t have known.”

“Quiet!”

A second later, a beam of light whizzed by their heads, nearly missing Faith. A chorus of voices echoed amongst the trees ahead of them. They ducked and ran another way, breaking into a clearing. Suddenly a series of Wraith stunners flew in their direction. Amidst the faded light, they caught sight of the Wraith firing at them, and lifted their guns, returning the shots. The enemy retreated, but the trio followed. They found a dozen more amongst a pile of bodies, feeding on several humans. The soldiers opened fire on the feeding Wraith, allowing one of the people to break free. A young girl around twelve years old came rushing towards them, and was caught by Faith. She stared in horror at the dying humans, as they shriveled and died. One of the stun blasts unexpectedly hit the Corporal in the chest, knocking him to the ground.

Larson dropped his gun and picked up his fallen comrade. “Faith,” he called. “Lay down cover fire. We’re not far from the jumper.”

She froze a moment, but nodded and aimed at the Wraith, felling many as possible. They retreated backward into the forest, stumbling in the undergrowth. The cloaked puddlejumper was waiting for them near a small hill, studded with fallen trees and ancient ruins. The group collapsed inside the cargo bay, Larson dropping a still unconscious Damon onto one of the benches. The small girl fled into a corner when she was released, and buried her face in her knees. Faith dug through the overhead nets, and pulled out several ammo magazines, stuffing them into her pockets.

“What’re you doing?”

“Going back out there.”

“No you’re not,” replied Larson, snatching the P90 out of her hands.

“Ernest, give me that.”

“No.”

She reached for the gun, but he threw it on the bench behind them and seized her by the arms. She struggled against him, but he dragged her into the co-pilot’s seat and sat on her.

“Let me go! Larson please, at least do something about those ships.”

“I can’t,” he said gently. “We’ll be targeted.”

“Please.” Her voice broke as she gazed at him pleadingly.

As he shook his head, she wrenched an arm free and punched him squarely in the face. He fell to the floor, letting her stand upright. She smacked the controls, bringing up the HUD. It showed several enemy ships flying directly overhead. Faith released several drones at once, which flew and destroyed three of the craft. Suddenly a large beam landed several feet from the jumper, blasting the ground and narrowly missing them. Larson surprised her from behind and tackled her to the floor, pinning her arms behind her back. He tied her hands with his belt and stood up, grabbing the jumper controls.

“Sorry Fae.”

.-.-.-.

“I can’t believe you tied me up.”

“I can’t believe you punched me and tried to commandeer the jumper.”

“Hey, if you would stop being a self-centered jerk—“

“Calm down,” said Dr. Weir. She stood up behind her desk, gazing at them sternly. “You two need to stop biting each other’s heads off.”

“That’s a major request,” mumbled Larson.

“Not really,” said Dr. Weir. “You have effectively taken your team off active duty.”

“What!”

“No way.”

“Sounds right to me,” quipped Faith.

Larson looked at her suspiciously. “What did you tell her.”

“Nothing,” interrupted Dr. Weir. “These red flags were already in your file. I shouldn’t have overlooked them Captain.”

“Like what?”

“Your previous engagement to Dr. Stuart, her current involvement with Dr. Collins, the deaths of two team members—“

“I don’t know how you attained that information, but I assure you it has not affected us.”

“I’m afraid neither of us can be sure of that. I’m making all of you talk to Dr. Heightmeyer. She will make a recommendation to Major Sheppard as to whether you can return to active duty, or remain together as a team.”

“Crap.”

.-.-.-.

“Fae. Fae! Slow down.”

Faith picked up her pace to a brisk walk, ignoring Larson and forcing him to jog to catch up. He caught her by the arm, stopping her in the middle of the hallway.

“We’re supposed to go together.”

“I didn’t feel like walking with you,” she said tersely.

“Why-”

“Stop being so paranoid Larson.”

“I thought it’d look better if we went with each other. I want to get back out there just as much as you.”

“I know.”

They walked silently onto Dr. Heightmeyer’s office, and were greeted by a short blonde woman.

“Please come in.”

They sat on opposite ends of a white couch, not looking at each other.

“Thank you for coming,” said Dr. Heightmeyer. “I know the circumstances which brought you here were less than agreeable.”

“Oh they were,” said Larson. “In fact, there’s no reason for us to be here.”

“Really? Dr. Weir brought up her concerns with recent behavior by your team. Seems Captain, there’s been tension between you and the others.”

“It’s more than tension. Faith physically assaulted me.”

“Apparently Dr. Stuart was trying to help out the local inhabitants. Do you think that was reasonable?”

“No, why else would I have tied her up? There was a contingent of Wraith, who probably outnumbered us one hundred to one. I was protecting us-“

“You were protecting yourself,” interrupted Faith. “And not just from getting eaten or blasted apart, but so you wouldn’t have to deal with losing me. Why else would you be so clingy lately?”

“I was not.”

“Good point,” said Heightmeyer. “I’ve read your history, and think Captain; you’ve been trying to keep her under your thumb.”

“Excuse me? She’s the one who punched *me*. I think she’s the one with issues.”

“Dr. Stuart, you were overzealous in reacting to the situation. Your actions in trying to protect so many people were unrealistic.”

“I realize that, but I had to do something Doctor,” she said quietly. “I’ve seen people shot up, blow apart, and cut open, but never fed on, particularly children.”

“Do you think that has any relation to the loss of your niece?”

“What? No. Maybe. It was a long time ago.”

“It’s the reason she didn’t want kids,” said Larson. “She was afraid of going through the same thing Andrew did.”

“Shut up Erne. You were the one who said you didn’t want any till you were out of the SGC.”

“That’s not true. I wanted to start trying and you said no.”

“Stop acting like we’re dating. We were over a year ago. Quit bitching.”

“Enough,” said Dr. Heightmeyer. “The first thing you two have to do is stop arguing. Express yourselves non-aggressively.”

“Fine,” they said simultaneously.

“Good. Now let’s figure out where this animosity came from. When did you first start fighting like this?”

“It started right after Lee Gardner died on P84-Q51, disabling that Go’auld bomb...”

A series of soft white lights shone from the infirmary walls, keeping Faith awake. She sat up in bed, cringing as she felt throbbing pain at her waist. It was hard to move with the bandages tightly wrapped around her wound, which she’d received from a Jaffa staff blast. The faint sound of snoring emanated from a bed at the opposite end of the room, from behind a curtain. Faint clunks suddenly sounded from the doorway, and Larson entered, hobbling along on crutches. Faith smiled, relief flooding her chest. The last time she had seen him, was after surgery and they’d barely spoken.

“Hey Cap,” she said softly.

“Hi,” he mumbled, troubledly making his way to her bedside.

“Glad to see you’re up and about,” she said. “I’m stuck here for another week.”

He gazed at her steadily, a hollowness in his eyes that she’d never seen before. She felt her heart drop into her stomach.

“What’s wrong?”

“Lee is dead,” he said inaudibly.

“I know. General Hammond told me. I can’t believe Lee saved us all like that.”

“I nearly lost you,” said Larson, his voice lowering.

She bent over slowly, wincing as she felt the pain again. She kissed him gently, trying to reassure him that she was still there, and alive. He pulled back from her touch, not looking at her.

“Fae I—I almost got you killed too.”

“But you didn’t.”

He took her hand, his fingers clenched tightly around hers. “You intoxicate me, confuse my judgment,” he said sharply. “I couldn’t live if my errors cost your life like it did Lee.”

“Stop it. You didn’t kill Lee, that bomb did.”

“This could happen again, and I might not be able to stop-“

“What’re you saying Erne? You’re not Superman.”

“No, but I can prevent it.” He quickly slid a small gold ring off her left hand and dropped it in his pocket. “I love you, but I can’t watch you die.”

Faith stared at him blankly, the pain in her chest overwhelming the one in her stomach. “Just like that. You’re saying it’s over?”

“Yes. We can stay on the same team, but we can’t be involved anymore.”

“You’re being stupid Ernest Larson.”

“I didn’t stay on the team much longer after that. It was too hard seeing him every day. Eventually we became friends again, but things never were the same...”

Dr. Heightmeyer was silent for moment before answering. “This explains a lot.”

“I assure you there’s plenty more,” muttered Larson.

“Let’s hear it.”

.-.-.-.

“Now lower that lever—no—the other one.”

The puddlejumper lurched suddenly, losing altitude in a deep dive. Both women hit their heads on the back of the seats, and stared at the bed of water rushing at them. Faith leapt for the controls and righted the jumper.

“Pay attention Lanie,” she snapped.

“Hey, don’t bite my head off. You need to be more specific.”

“I’m sorry, I’ve just been on edge lately—“

“Try the past three weeks,” scoffed Lanie.

“Okay yeah I have. I can’t stand being stuck in the lab all the time.”

“Girl, you have every right to join another team. It’s not you who was off active duty.”

“I realize that, but I can’t help but feel it’s half my fault. I really chewed Larson apart in front of the therapist.”

“Well it’s not your job to worry about him anymore. You’re joining my team for a mission, and that’s that.”

.-.-.-.

“Ci?” asked Faith.

“It’s a word. I win.”

“Uh huh, cheater.”

“You’re a bad loser,” said Collins, grinning widely. “I’ll let you win next time.”

Faith dumped the Scrabble board onto the table, and raised an eyebrow. “Just don’t tell anyone I lost to a physicist.”

“I’m going to tell everyone in the city.”

“Thanks,” she said, sighing.

He took the game board from her hands and gripped her palm assuringly. “Hey now, we’re supposed to be cheering you up.”

“We are?”

“Yes. You’ve been noticeably gloomy the past few weeks.”

“You’re right. First it was the no-gate thing, but now I can’t help but feel guilty that I go off-world and the others don’t.”

“Hey I’m fine,” said Collins.

“But you go out with Kaufman and Sheppard’s team.”

“Maybe that’s who you should talk to.”

“Who?”

“Major Sheppard. He’s the one you should convince to let Larson back out. Then we can all be a team again.”

“You seem all too agreeable with this,” said Faith, looking at him suspiciously.

“Dr. Heightmeyer forced me to talk with Larson. We’re fine now, long as he doesn’t tie you up again. I swore I’d kick his ass if he did.”

“Don’t you know that’s my job?” she said, laughing.

.-.-.-.

Across the table, Connie made a face and lowered her sandwich.

“Is it just me, or is this bread stale?”

“It’s not exactly bread,” said Faith. “It’s a variation from some kind of grain we picked up off-world.”

Christina dropped her sandwich onto her plate, staring at it. “Alien bread? Oh great, who knows what’s in that.”

“It’s perfectly fine. The Athosians used to grow the same species,” said Lanie, taking a bite.

“I don’t know where that Sergeant Hanson has been taking you guys, but since when do you go grocery shopping?” asked Connie.

“The food supplies started running out two weeks ago,” said Lanie. “Our team was sent out to trade for supplies, along with a load of others.”

Christina pushed her plate away slowly. “So either starve or eat alien food. Oh great—“

Faith blanked out for the next few minutes, ignoring the rant that her friend was on. She didn’t understand some of the expedition’s reluctance to adapt to such foreign surroundings. A figure moving across the room suddenly caught Faith’s attention, and she stood up from the table.

“Where’re you going?”

“Put my tray away? Thanks.”

“Erm—“

She hurried across the room and down the adjacent hallway, until she caught up with the person she was after. She touched his shoulder, causing him to turn around.

“Major Sheppard? I need to talk to you.”

He nodded in greeting, but pointed down the hall. “Sorry, but I’ve got to be somewhere.”

“This’ll only take a minute, it’s important.”

“Sorry, but I’ll have to talk to you later.”

“Forgive me, but what’s so important?”

He paused a moment, gazing at her intently. “We’re about to evacuate the city.”

Chapter Eleven: Confrontation

“We must dare to think 'unthinkable' thoughts.

We must learn to explore all the options and possibilities that confront us in a complex and rapidly changing world.”

-James W. Fulbright

Faith shouldered her pack uneasily, watching as the glyphs on the gate began to light and spin. She glanced at her friends next to her, and smiled to herself. Christina was frozen still, her face full of worry as she stared at the dialing Stargate.

“Calm down Chris, it’s easy.”

“Sure, you do it all the time. If you knew half the stuff I did about this thing, you’d be scared shitless too.”

“If McKay can do it, you can,” said Connie teasingly.

“McKay! I don’t know what harebrained scheme he has in mind, but I’ll do something bad to him if this city isn’t here when we get back.”

“You almost sound fond of Atlantis,” said Faith.

“Of course, it’s home now. Ancient spaceship or not.”

The line ahead of them began moving through the gate, scientists and soldiers alike. On the other side, they were greeted by a group of simply clad people with straw hats, who bore large baskets of food. They were directed to a small antiquated town, surrounded by meadows and fields upon fields of crops. In the houses aligning the main street, people watched them curiously from doorways and windows. They reached a large town hall in the middle of the village, tall and very spacious. Inside, it was devoid of most things, the main chamber having been cleared out for the visitors. Faith’s group ended up unpacking in a corner nearest their door, setting up their bedrolls and belongings. Two hours after they had settled in, most of the hall was full of Atlantis personnel, bumbling about their business. Faith found Dr. Vogel in the midst of the confusion, and pulled him aside.

“Have you seen Andrew?”

“Not since our last mission,” said the scientist, shrugging. “Half of the soldiers are camped outside, though. You might try there.”

On the border of the town, a series of small tents were pitched on the outlying meadows, providing a second camp. She wandered into the midst of it, searching for her brother. Near the center, a group of Manarians were unloading various baskets of food from a wagon, and distributing it to the men. Curious, she wandered over and questioned them about the food and their growing methods. While conversing with a young woman about turble root, another group of Manarians pulled alongside in an empty cart, full of crates and baskets.

“Kera!” called one of the men driving the wagon.

The young woman turned and flushed red, standing up quickly. “Father I was just—“

“I told you not to tarry or bother the Atlantians. Now go home immediately.”

“It was my fault, I was delaying her with questions,” said Faith insistently.

“We are farmers madam, and our livelihood relies on time. It’d be best if you did not hinder any more of our people,” he snapped, and wheeled the cart away.

Bewildered, Faith looked at the other women in the second cart; none of them had seemed bothered by her. They averted their eyes from her and walked off without speaking to her further.

.-.-.-.

The late morning sun glistened on the cobbled street of the market way, which was lined with shops, stands, and small houses. The scents of fresh baked goods and flowers wafted through the warm summery air. Collins, Faith, and Connie ambled along aimlessly on the road, chewing on food they had received earlier for breakfast.

“This world isn’t so bad,” said Collins heartily.

“Yeah the food’s good,” replied Connie, swallowing a bite. “But the Manarians seem kind of hostile.”

“Maybe they’re just paranoid?”

“No she’s right,” answered Faith. “They’re acting strange, though they could just be miffed about putting us up with shelter and food.”

“Or that.”

“There’s nothing to worry about,” she said lowly. “You didn’t hear it from me. There are cloaked jumpers stationed near the camps.”

“Why am I not surprised you know that?” said Connie, raising an eyebrow.

“Hey there, toss it over!”

Unexpectedly a large ball the size of a grapefruit rolled to a stop in front of the trio. A pair of small boys waved from across the street, grinning toothily. Faith smiled and picked up the ball, heaving it to them.

“Thanks!”

“Well maybe not all of them,” said Faith.

Connie glanced at her knowingly, noticing how her friend watched the children playing. She clapped Faith on the back reassuringly.

“There’s still plenty of time for you,” she said.

“Excuse me?”

Connie winked at Collins. “Fae wants at least four kids.”

Faith moved towards her angrily, but the other scientist darted away, laughing. Before she could give chase, Collins caught her arm and held her still.

“Easy there,” he said.

“I’m going to wring her neck later,” she replied, looking at him pathetically. “I wasn’t ready for you to hear things like that.”

“I don’t take anything Connie says seriously.”

“You take everything seriously,” she said softly, and lowered her head.

.-.-.-.

The small battery icon in the corner of the computer screen blinked repeatedly, signaling it was almost out of power. Faith sighed and closed the laptop, putting it back in her bag.

“Faith.”

She looked up to find her brother walking quickly towards her, a worried expression on his face. “What’ve you been up to?” she asked.

“Pack your stuff fast. We’re getting out of here.”

“What—why?” she stuttered. “Is the city clear now?”

“Yes,” he whispered, handing her a small gun. “Everyone is going back shortly, and we’re going to be among the first group out. Get your friends too. Manara is not safe anymore.”

“Did something happen?”

“There was an attack on Atlantis,” he said soberly.

“Wraith?!”

“No, and keep your voice down. Genii. They gated in while we were gone. Major Sheppard believes the Manarians told them we wouldn’t be there. We were instructed to get everyone out immediately, without raising suspicion.”

“Okay okay.”

She roused several of her team and friends, informing them on what had happened. They hurried after Andrew with their belongings, making a rush for the Stargate.

.-.-.-.

“Ugh gross!”

Connie dropped the Ancient instrument she was holding, a piece of goopy sea slime hanging onto it.

“Careful!” yelled McKay from across the room.

She glared at him irritably. “Shut—“

Faith yanked her arm and pulled her behind one of the consoles.

“Don’t argue with him, you’ll just get more work,” she whispered.

“But, this ispeon labor,” complained Connie.

Dr. Sullivan glanced at them from nearby, and rolled her eyes. “In case you didn’t notice Dr. Elliot, we *are* the peons.”

“I noticed,” she snapped. “Hey Fae, how much time do we have left?”

“I don’t know,” she replied, shrugging. “I think I left my watch on Manara—“

“Hey Lady Chatterboxes,” said McKay. “I need this stuff catalogued faster. We have six other labs to do this week.”

He was interrupted by a glob of green slime that hurled through the air, and landed squarely on his face. It dripped down onto his shirt, and he put down the clipboard, to wipe at his eyes. The other scientists in the room cheered, and they all went hurtling out of the lab before he could see.

.-.-.-.

The three women watched Dr. McKay circle around Dr. Weir's desk, yelling fervently. The slime stain still was splattered across his blue shirt. Two soldiers stood outside the closed door, watching the group carefully for any hint they would try and run.

"Are you *trying* to get fired?" Connie hissed to Dr. Sullivan.

"Hey, it got us the afternoon off," she replied snidely. "I was very productive this afternoon without McKay breathing down my neck."

"Well you think being rounded up by soldiers means this is a good sign?!"

Faith folded her arms and remained silent, watching the two women bicker back and forth. Finally the door to Dr. Weir's office opened, and they were ushered in. They sat in front of the desk, all innocently returning the glare Dr. McKay gave them. Dr. Weir leaned forward, searching their faces.

"Ladies, do you understand why you're here?" They all nodded quickly, and their boss continued. "Now, I don't necessarily agree with the tactics employed by Dr. McKay here, and I know he isn't very popular among some of you—"

"Excuse me! I am very well liked," interrupted McKay.

"Rodney."

"Sorry. Continue."

"Sure. As I was saying—"

The door to the office suddenly opened, admitting Major Sheppard. He looked at the women in surprise, then glared at Dr. McKay.

"Rodney, did you use my soldiers to boss around scientists?"

"I was physically assaulted!" he said, throwing his hands in the air. "I merely asked two soldiers to help round up the offenders."

"Getting sludge thrown at you isn't a crime, and you probably deserved it," replied Major Sheppard. He motioned to the women. "You're free to go. I'm sorry about this."

"John," said Dr. Weir. "Whether or not he deserved it isn't the issue. One of them did something, and I'm going to take the proper action. Now ladies, which one of you threw it?" Immediately Connie and Faith pointed at Dr. Sullivan, who pointed back at them. "According to eyewitness reports, it was Dr. Sullivan. So Elliot, Stuart, you're off the hook."

Both stood up and closed the office door behind them, smirking to themselves. Major Sheppard was standing outside, reprimanding the two soldiers as they passed by. Faith stopped in front of him, and cleared her throat.

“Major, might I have a word with you?”

He glanced at Connie, then ushered Faith along the walkway and out onto a veranda. He faced her grimly.

“How can I help you? If this is about the soldiers—“

“No, nothing of the sort. I meant to talk with you before the evacuation. It’s concerning my teammate, Captain Larson. I’d like to request you allow him back onto off-world duty.”

“Oh boy,” he murmured, rubbing his chin. “There’s not much I can do about that. One of the Docs herself said—“

“Forget what Dr. Heightmeyer said,” interrupted Faith. Think about what it means as a soldier, to be stuck doing menial tasks while your friends go out there and risk their lives. Would you just sit back and take crap, when you should be out doing your duty?”

“No.” He inhaled roughly and looked her squarely in the eye. “I will do what I can, but if shit hits the fan, you’re going down with me ma’am.”

“Thank you,” she said, smiling.

.-.-.-.

Larson squeezed Faith tightly, knocking the air out of her. “Thank you,” he said roughly.

“No problem” she huffed. “Now let me go.”

Damon smirked as the soldier abashedly released Faith. “Cap, repeat after me. ‘I love you. I worship the ground you walk on. I am your willing slave.’”

“I am not saying that,” he said. “I have some dignity left.”

“You had none when we were in Weir’s office. Boy was she ticked.”

“You’re very good at groveling Oliver,” said Collins, chuckling.

“Hey I’m married; it’s one of my many talents.”

“Anyway Faith, I’m not sure how you did it, but I’m glad you had the guts to stand up for me,” said Larson, patting her on the back.

“She used her womanly wiles.” Collins rolled his eyes at Damon, who shrugged. “Hey I had to fend off dozens of men from your little lady here before she met you.”

“It was two guys,” she said, laughing. “Lord knows I have my hands full with you three.”

Collins wrapped an arm around her waist and squeezed.

“Now where’s my welcome back cake?” asked Larson.

Chapter Twelve: Home for the Holiday

*“Happy, happy Christmas, that can win us
back to the delusions of our childhood days,
recall to the old man the pleasures of his youth,
and transport the traveler back to his own fireside
and quiet home!”*

-Charles Dickens

“I miss snow.” Christina turned away from the balcony railing, and looked at Connie. “What do you miss about this time of the year?”

“Gingerbread houses. My family always makes crazy big ones, then gives half of them away to the neighbors. They were so good.”

Lanie tapped her hand on the chair’s arm thoughtfully. “I miss the decorations. Two weeks till Christmas, and no lights, tree, wreaths...it’s a shame.”

“No gifts either,” said Connie glumly.

“What are you talking about?” asked Faith, raising an eyebrow. “I have stuff for everyone.”

Christina patted her on the shoulder. “Looks like Ms. Clause will be paying us a visit this year instead. Am I getting those satin Gucci heels I asked for?”

Faith laughed. “I’m not the only one. Some of the personnel celebrated Hanukkah yesterday, and I’ve seen people buying an inordinate amount of stuff offworld.”

“Yeah I might’ve bought something for you guys,” said Connie furtively.

“Crap, now I have to go shopping. Where’d you find everything?”

“I traded and brought a few things with from Earth,” said Faith, smirking.

“You went shopping in March? Damn, you’re worse than me,” said Lanie.

.-.-.-.

Christina circled a paragraph on the computer tablet, and showed it to the other woman.

“Your argument is faulty. You’re contradicting your introduction here.”

“I should’ve caught that,” said Dr. Anelli. “The Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle—“

“Can you guys keep it down?” asked Connie, waving her fork. “Work gives me indigestion.”

The other scientist rolled her eyes. “No, that’s because you go running off into the biology lab right after lunch.”

“I have a strong stomach!”

“You do not—“

Their conversation was interrupted as Lanie’s cup thudded onto the table, and she pointed beyond their table. At the entrance to the cafeteria, several soldiers were dragging a thin long bundle wrapped in a tarp. When they reached the center of the room, they unwrapped it, revealing a skinny sapling with whorled leaves. Its base was secured in a large basin, filled with dirt.

“Is that?”

Half of the room stood up and clapped as the tree was raised on its base. It was approximately eight feet high and similar in appearance to an evergreen tree. The soldiers stepped back to show their handiwork.

“We thought we’d take this little tree home and decorate it,” said Lieutenant Ford, grinning widely.

Faith touched Lanie on the arm. “It’s starting to look like Christmas after all.”

.-.-.-.

The parchment made small scuffing sounds as it was wound and tied off. Carefully Faith placed it aside and reached for another. Larson tapped his shoe impatiently against the leg of her chair.

“Hey, can you guys hurry it up a little? The storm is getting worse and we have to get back.”

“We know Captain,” said Collins. He looked up from his corner of the table, where he was huddled over an ancient manuscript. “We may not get a second chance to look at these.”

Larson shook his head and reached into Faith’s bag, pulling out a camera with a large lens attached. “The locals already don’t like us. Let’s not get stuck here taking our time.”

Faith grunted and nabbed the Canon from him. “Fine Mr. Pushy.”

They photographed the rest of the documents, then packed their belongings. Damon peered through the window at the torrent of rain outside, and sighed.

“I’d really like to be home right now with a cup of coffee, reading my e-mail. You’d think we’d get a few weeks off around the holidays.”

“It wouldn’t make much difference,” said Faith, zipping her jacket. “We’d still be stuck at work.”

Larson pushed open the front door, clutching his gun tightly. “Eh, let’s go.”

They stepped out of the library into a large muddy puddle, and a torrent of rain. They walked awkwardly on the road, which was washed out from the water. The trail through the woods towards the Stargate was also flooded, forcing them to walk farther off through the trees. The wind blew hard against them, whipping their hoods back and lashing the rain at their faces. The ground grew harder to walk on and the trees snapped in the force of the gale above.

Collins and Faith lagged considerable distance behind the others, since they weren’t as well equipped. While they were climbing up a steep hillside, Collins suddenly lost his footing. He shouted as he went tumbling down the embankment. Faith yelled for the soldiers and clambered down after him, sliding down halfway and getting mudcaked in the process. He was crumpled in a heap at the bottom, and groaned loudly when Faith reached him. Carefully she helped him roll onto his back and sit up, causing him to wince.

He gazed dismally down at his left leg. “I think it’s broken. “

“Don’t try to move it you’ll just make it worse.”

The soldiers appeared at the top of the hill crest and peered down at the scientists.

“Stay down there with him,” yelled Larson. “We’ll bring back help.”

Faith wrapped her arms around Collins, letting him lean against her. She wiped the dirt from his face and worriedly watched the hill, reassuring him silently as the rain poured onto them.

.-.-.-.

“Man, how do you keep getting higher cards?” said Andrew, eyeing his sister suspiciously.

She shrugged and flipped a card onto the bed. Andrew did the same, then groaned.

“King beats Jack,” she said grinning. “I think—“

A faint clacking emanated in the doorway, causing both to look up simultaneously. Collins was in the entrance, balanced on a pair of crutches, as he kept the weight off his left leg. Faith swung her legs off the bed, and motioned for him to sit down.

“What’re you doing out of the infirmary? I thought Beckett was holding you.”

The scientist shook his head and kissed her cheek as he sat. “Nope. No complications, just a simple fracture.”

“Good to hear,” said Andrew, nodding in his direction. “Erne was already complaining at lunch that he lost another team member.”

“I thought the Cap didn’t like me too much,” replied Collins.

Andrew flipped a card onto the bed. “He likes you well enough if he considers you part of his team. That fella is a conundrum.”

“Do you even know what that word means?” teased Faith. She placed another card on the bed, and sighed as her brother whooped in victory. She leaned against the other scientist, looking at him slyly. “Erne already has a temporary replacement for you. He says if you don’t hurry up and heal though, he’s going to break your other leg.”

“How nice of him. Who’d he pick?”

“Dr. Tazia Anelli. She offered to help after she heard about your leg.”

“She’s a good friend,” said Collins matter-of-factly. “If I find out Larson has been pissy with her—“

“Don’t worry,” said Faith, patting him on the arm. She took out another card, and glanced at her brother. “And, tell Scott what you were doing the other day.”

The soldier rolled his eyes. “This is the umpteenth time I’ve told it. Anyways, while my team was out the other day, Forsey gets the idea to wander off. Two hours later, he comes back half naked, carrying two huge dead birds. Apparently he went hunting with the locals after having a little too much of their ale. So then, we had to play cook in order not to offend them, as is tradition with ML-8C66. Right after we get back, Forsey walks still drunk into Dr. Weir’s office with the birds. Guess what we’re having for Christmas dinner? These Trewdalin something something.”

Collins raised an eyebrow and peeked at Faith’s card deck. “I think people are getting a little overly zealous about Christmas.”

“It’s one of the biggest reminders of family and home,” said Faith.

“Wait till you see the decorations in the cafeteria.”

.-.-.-.

Tinges of pink and purple light poured through the tall windows, which were taped full of paper snowflakes. It gleamed off the top of a tinfoil star at the top of a tall tree. It stood in the midst of the mess hall, and was decorated with paper chains, cardboard and cookie ornaments, and fabric

bows. At its base was a pile of crudely wrapped gifts. A multitude of people in slippers, pajamas, and bathrobes gathered around it, sitting on the floor and chairs nearby. Dr. Weir stood next to the tree with two scientists, passing out gifts as names were called. Collins, Damon, Lanie, Christina, Connie, Larson, Faith, Andrew, and Corrigan sat in a cluster around a table, which was loaded with a number of already opened gifts.

“Dr. Stuart,” said Weir.

A small package made of notebook paper was passed over and written in short neat handwriting was, “To Faith Stuart, from Scott.” Eagerly she ripped the paper and found a small metal pendant hanging from a black cord.

“Thanks,” she said softly, and put it on.

Warmth and joy continued to grow throughout the morning, as gifts were opened, coffee was passed out, and several group games played. At evening, they ate a close to traditional candlelight dinner with every member of the expedition, including the Athosians. After a chorus of “Merry Christmas, Happy Christmas,” they all went to bed.

Chapter Thirteen: Instinct

“The very essence of instinct is that it's followed independently of reason.”

-Charles Darwin

“There is no instinct like that of the heart.”

-Lord Byron

A high pitched tone broke the monotony of the darkness and light flooded Faith's vision. She blinked rapidly, fuzzy shapes becoming coherent. The tone sounded again, and she rolled into a sitting position, reaching for her slippers.

“What is it?” came a low grumble from behind her on the bed.

“Don't know.”

She shuffled to the quarters' door, opening it with the wave of her hand. The doors slid open to reveal an olive skinned woman with dark hair.

“Oh Tazia,” said Faith, stifling a yawn.

“Thought I'd find you here,” the older woman said, smiling. “Larson sent me to get you guys.”

“For what?”

“Team meeting in a half hour.”

Faith lifted an eyebrow. “But it's New Year's Day. Our mission isn't till Monday.”

“You told me how uptight he is about mission stuff since he got back,” said Dr. Anelli with a sigh.

“I wonder if he has some sixth sense,” said Collins, as he appeared behind Faith, crutches in hand. “About knowing when to ruin our fun.”

“Don't mention it at the meeting Faith,” said Dr. Anelli. “Or he'll be asking questions about how you two managed to you know...”

“Point taken.”

Collins draped Faith's jacket over her shoulder helpfully, pecking her on the cheek.

“I can tell you're enjoying this,” said Faith lowly, smirking. “Have a nice day off.”

“Erne, give me the controls.”

“No way. Last time you tried to fly, you punched me and nearly got us blown apart by Wraith.”

“You know Dr. Heightmeyer told you to stop bringing that up,” snapped Faith.

“The exact person you’re going to see after this,” said Tazia. “If you don’t quit bitching.”

The scientist settled back into her seat and picked up a tablet, scanning the readings once more. Larson gripped the jumper controls tightly, bringing up the screen which showed data from the planet below.

“It’s been twenty minutes; we’re not going to find anything.”

“Okay really, shut up Captain,” said Dr. Anelli. “I read an energy signature somewhere, and we’ve only been in orbit—“

A small beep suddenly interrupted her, the puddlejumper readings zeroing on a faint signal from the continent below.

“That could be anything,” said the soldier skeptically.

“On a planet whose known population technology levels date to the Renaissance? Sure.”

Grudgingly Larson let the scientists guide their flight back to the planet. They landed on the forested foothills of a weathered mountain range. The sun was low over the trees, casting long shadows at their feet as they left the jumper.

“We spent too much time in the village,” said Larson, watching Dr. Anelli walk away with her scanner. “I think we should come back—hey!”

He scrambled after the others, dogging their steps. The woods thinned an hour later, and they climbed onto the rocky slopes of the mountainside. Upon the edge of a hill, Tazia stopped abruptly, raising her scanner in triumph.

“It’s right below us, underground,” she said, peering over its side.

“Whoa there doctor,” said Damon, grabbing her by the shirt. “Don’t fall.”

“There’s probably a cave or something,” said Faith, studying the ground.

“Y’know, this is starting to seem awfully familiar.”

Tazia tucked her scanner into her belt and rolled up her sleeves. “Captain, if you do not want to come with, that’s fine. However, I’m going down there.”

“I highly advise against such action. It’s hard to see anything.”

Faith flicked on her flashlight, pointing the beam at the soldier. “That’s what these are for.”

“Ha ha.”

The two women proceeded slowly down the hillside, followed shortly thereafter by the men. They found a craggy entrance to a moderately large cave, which opened towards them. Dr. Anelli took the lead, carefully navigating the cave with her scanner. The route split several times, until they found themselves in a high vaulting cavern. A metallic thud echoed throughout the area as Damon suddenly walked into a tall object. He shone his flashlight ahead of him, and jumped.

“What the heck—“

“Is this place?” finished Larson.

Their lights trailed around, highlighting a series of strange equipment, full of electronics panels and glass chambers. Faith stepped closer to the equipment, causing it to spring to life. Dr. Anelli’s scanner beeped in response, flickering as it pointed out the origin of the energy signature.

“A lab of some kind,” said Anelli, touching it tentatively.

Faith nodded. “Ancient in design.”

“Not like anything I’ve seen before.”

Larson stepped between the panels and the scientists, his knuckles white from his grasp on his gun. “Don’t go touching anything then.”

“For Christ’s sake.”

“Sir,” interrupted Damon. “I think they know what they’re doing.”

“Take pictures, send them to Atlantis, get back-up, then you can play.”

The Captain slipped Faith’s camera from the outer pocket of her backpack, and shoved it in her hands. She rolled her eyes and elbowed him away, popping the flash on the camera.

“Fine.”

A half hour later they walked towards the exit of the cave, every corner of the cavern documented and photographed. The soldiers marched behind the scientists, to keep them from darting back. The women passed the camera in between themselves, chattering and pointing out details on the camera’s LCD screen.

“You could probably pull up some kind of log via that screen.”

“If I can read it, though the initial inscriptions are all in Ancient.”

The lit entrance ahead suddenly dulled, a series of figures standing against it. A second later, they broke towards their group, their loud footsteps echoing through the cave.

“Retreat to the cavern,” yelled Larson, pointing his P90.

The scientists dashed ahead, flying through the cave’s passages. There were clattering sounds of thrown objects hitting against the stone. They re-entered the cavern, and Damon pulled the women behind the lab consoles. A spear lodged itself in a screen a second after Faith ducked. Showers of sparks hit the air, torches landing on the cavern floor around them. The soldiers fired rounds into the darkness, breaking their attackers’ yells with cries of pain. Faith peered around the edge of the console, wide-eyed as she watched. A series of mannish individuals dressed in animal skins were dodging behind other equipment to avoid the bullets, spears and clubs in their hands. The glass chambers shattered in the spray, sending glass splattering into the air. A moment later, a series of loud thuds hit the console, and a large misshapen face appeared in the shadows above Faith. Another clouted Damon repeatedly, knocking the weapon from his hands and sending him to the floor in retreat.

Faith threw her bag at the hands reach for her and scrambled away, glass cutting her arms and pants. A large body fell onto her, then wrestled her off the ground. She clawed at the flesh of her attacker to no avail, and was hoisted onto a large bony shoulder. They jolted into a run, disappearing into the darkness and leaving everyone else behind.

.-.-.-.

Splinters of pain broke the dark numbness, causing Faith to bolt awake. She struggled as a pair of hands held her by the arm and shoulder, pushing her to the ground.

“Shh, stay still Faith.”

Faith’s head rolled backwards and she met the eyes of Dr. Anelli. “Tazia?”

“Hold still, I’m almost done.”

Sharp pain stung her where a piece of glass was pulled out of her skin with a pair of tweezers. It was replaced by a white gauze bandage, which was taped across her wrist. Faith studied her comrade, noticing in shock she was only dressed in a t-shirt. Their surroundings were stone cave walls, crudely painted with various scenes of animals and landscapes. At the far end of the passage were two hulking figures lurking in the shadows. Faith herself was dressed in some sort animal skin, with a belt of flowers around her waist and painted patterns encircling her limbs.

“What the hell happened? Where are we? Why are you—“

Tazia helped her to sit up, patting reassuringly. “We were kidnapped by some sort of cavemen.”

“Great.”

“The Kashi,” said a small voice in the corner, startling them. A blonde woman crept from the shadows, dressed in a similar fashion. “The Accursed. They are wild men, sick and cruel. They are ruled by instinct and live in the mountains, coming into our villages to kidnap women and kill our men.”

“Why?”

“It is their mating season.”

A shiver of fear ran down Faith’s spine while she glanced at the figures lurking nearby. “We have to escape. I am *not* waiting around for that.”

.-.-.-.

“I still cannot believe Weir only sent you,” said Larson, drumming his fingers on the edge of the console.

“Thanks for the trust,” said Stackhouse.

The Captain waved his hands in the direction of the scientist sitting behind the broken battered equipment. “I believe in you Sergeant and the others...except for this yahoo.”

Corrigan stood up behind the console, holding a computer tablet tightly. “For your information, I was able to translate fragments of the data we recovered from those devices *you* shot up.”

“It only took two days,” snapped Larson.

The anthropologist rolled his eyes. “Well if you’re going to be like that—“ Damon tapped Corrigan on the back and said something low to him. The scientist’s eyes opened wide and he flubbed wordlessly a minute before continuing. “We uh managed to find out what was going on here. A series of experiments were being conducted, to explore an alternative food source for the Wraith.”

“Like what?”

“Genetically altered retrograde evolved humans.”

“Huh?”

“Something genetically similar to the human species’ closest ancestor, known in mainstream culture as the ‘caveman’.”

“I already knew that,” said Damon, pointing to his black eye.

“This galaxy keeps getting weirder and weirder,” said Larson.

“This is exciting. Whoever did these experiments—“

“You can stop now Miles,” said Stackhouse, putting a hand up. “Captain, what’re we going to do?”

“Track them down.”

.-.-.-.

“You need to eat. We need strength,” said Alara, holding up a piece of meat towards Dr. Anelli.

The scientist shirked and politely pushed it away. “Sorry I have a thing about eating charred rat and plants that resemble vomit.”

“You’re forcing us to eat your share,” said Faith. “I am not watching them beat you again for not eating. It’s not that bad. It tastes like mutated chicken.”

Tazia made a face and turned away. “What I’d give for some good Indian food—“

A thunderous boom echoed in the distance, followed by the sounds of yells and pops. The women leapt to their feet, knocking aside the remnants of dinner.

“Gunfire!”

The sound of yelling came closer, their captors coming madly in their direction down the long tunnel.

“We’re going to ambush them.”

“Faith, what?”

Alara dropped off her dress and tossed it to them. “We shall drop it on their heads.”

Faith uncinched hers, spread it in her hands and they aligned themselves on either side of the entranceway. Another boom caused two of the cavemen to come rushing wildly into the area. The women simultaneously leapt towards them, throwing the dresses over their captors’ heads. They yelped in pain as all three women punched and kicked them, then used the men’s dropped weapons. One more boom echoed nearby, rattling the rocky walls. Three more captors rushed towards them, but stopped in their tracks, slumping dead to the ground. Dumbfounded the women paused over the downed men. A group of six Atlantians appeared in the rocky aisle, guns and stun grenades in their hands. They stared at each other a long moment, until the naked women sheepishly picked up their blood covered dresses.

Quickly all five of the soldiers held out their jackets, averting their eyes. Faith slipped on Damon's and zipped it.

"So hi," said Faith, breaking the awkward silence.

"You look like you went on a cave themed spring break," he said, chuckling.

Faith punched him in the ribs and pointed at Larson. "What took so long?"

"Little bit of this, little bit of him," said the Captain, motioning to Corrigan.

Alara stepped over the unconscious men, shrugging. "At least you came before the mating ritual."

"Mating ritual?"

"Don't ask."

.-.-.-.

The infirmary lights blazed white along the walls, too bright after the days Faith had spent in captivity. She flinched as Beckett sponged her cuts, tsking when she moved.

Tazia moved the ice pack off her black eye and looked at them. "Did I do an okay job Carson?"

"Suitable, just ensuring this is not infected."

Faith gagged at the bloody bandages he pulled off, and turned her head away. In the entrance, she saw Collins staring at her.

"Hi."

"Hey."

The scientist clunked his way over, giving the bed a wide berth. He allowed Beckett to finish and leave before he settled on the bed next to her. Carefully he pushed a strand of her wet hair aside, examining her bandaged arms.

"Larson caught me in the hall, told me about something to do with cavemen kidnapping you. Is this why I haven't seen you in three days?"

"Yes," sighed Faith. "But our team and Stackhouse's managed to save us."

"Sounds like one hell of an encounter."

"I'm sure next week's mission will be less exciting."

Collins tightened his grip on her hand, causing her to wince. "About that," he said. "Maybe you should take some time off. Stop taking so many risks."

"What? Why are you even asking me that?" said Faith, sitting upright in bed. "It's not like this was one of our more dangerous missions."

"It's not the first time," he said lowly. "You managed to constantly get yourself beat up, knocked out, and cut to pieces. How many scars can I count on you? At least a dozen."

"Scott, I am **not** taking a break," she snapped. "End, finale, finito."

"You're being reckless."

"You're starting to sound like Larson. And guess what, I don't date him anymore."

His eyes hard, he picked up the crutches, hobbling out of the infirmary in silence.

.-.-.-.

"C'mon, you have to stop sulking," said Connie, flipping her pen in Faith's direction.

The other woman gave her an evil look and continued typing. "I came in here to work with you on that research, not to distract myself with him."

"So what, you two are over? Face it; he's the best thing that's happened to you besides the expedition."

"So you don't want to discuss the gene we found?" asked Faith.

"No."

"Then I'm leaving."

Faith closed the laptop and slipped it under her arm. She shook her head and turned on her heel. At entrance, she was stopped by Beckett, who slid the doors shut in front of her.

"Sorry m'dear, but only authorized medical personnel are leaving this area for the next few hours."

"Huh?"

"Dr. Weir is instituting self regulated level four quarantine till further notice," he said, wandering away. "There were two deaths and a possible viral outbreak on one of the piers." He motioned to Connie, handing her a hazmat suit. "Zip up Dr. Elliot."

She pointed at Faith as she stepped into the cumbersome garment. “Lady, we’re having a talk when I get back.”

Most of the infirmary staff went on call, leaving the wards fairly empty. After nearly an hour, Faith’s boredom got the best of her and she sat near Kirkland to talk. He looked at her oddly, then moved his equipment three feet away from her.

“There is no way you or I are infected yet,” she said.

“Unless it’s airborne, then we’re all screwed,” he said, frowning.

Faith fake sneezed in his direction, causing the scientist to skitter away frantically.

The hours passed slowly, with little information dripping into the infirmary. More people had died, and many were now infected. The city sensing the outbreak, had locked them all within their sections, leaving them trapped. Faith had abandoned her work and sat quietly on a corner bed, surrounded on all sides by anxiety and worry. An insistent warning bugged her, that there was little hope for their predicament. She flipped onto her side, her head swimming from frustration and pain.

I could die, there is no cure for this. And I would leave what behind? No children, no legacy of work. A broken relationship and screwed up friends. I can see why Collins fears for me now. But I cannot give in. Can I?

.-l.-.-.

“Hello? Earth to Dr. Stuart.”

The blank mindlessness snapped, returning Faith to the brightness of the infirmary. She rolled over, finding Connie standing over her in a lab coat.

“Con, why are you here?”

She took a seat on the bed, shrugging. “A few people died from the nano-virus. We knocked it out with an EMP by detonating a naquadah generator above the city. I’ve been trying to wake you up for a couple minutes, what happened to you?”

“Just did a lot of thinking.”

“About that?”

“Yeah. I’m going to take care of it,” she sighed. “I’ve been an idiot.”

.-.-.-.

Faith took a deep breath and squared her shoulders before walking into the lab. She found several people hunched over computers and equipment, working busily. She poked Collins, he glanced in her direction and went back to tapping his tablet.

“Can I speak with you?” she said lowly.

“No.”

“It’s been ten days.”

“I can wait.”

“Scott, you’re leaving this lab, even if I have to break your other leg.”

He glanced at her a moment then lowered the tablet. He followed her out under the watchful eyes of other scientists. They rounded a corner and stopped, looking at each other anxiously.

“I came to tell you I won’t give up going on missions,” she said.

He groaned and turned. “That isn’t what I wanted to hear.”

“Because I know you don’t want to either. But—“ she said,” grabbing his arm. “I demanded Larson ask for secondary science based missions. No more primary reconnaissance.”

He eyed her a moment, then stepped closer, taking her hands. He gripped her gently and whispered to her. “It’ll do. I want you around for a long time.”

Among a flood of relief, she felt a sting of resentment and frustration.

Chapter Fourteen: Broken

*“I'm broken when I'm open
I don't feel like I am strong enough...
I don't feel right when you're gone away.
The worst is over now and we can breathe again
You steal my pain away,
There's so much left to learn, and no one left to fight.”*
-Shaun Morgan

The air was damp and heavy, surrounding the scientists in a thick mist. The light was dark blue, the sun hidden behind banks of storm clouds. The crumbling remains of a towering stone wall pierced the sky above. Brief flashes illuminated the area, emanating from a camera that repeatedly shot a series of faded inscriptions. A red haired man stopped scratching at his notepad a moment, watching the woman holding the camera.

“Dr. Stuart, you’re going to run out of battery before we get halfway through,” he said.

Faith patted her bulging vest pocket. “Nope, I have a half dozen charged lithium batteries in here.”

“Oh.”

A lone female figure walked several yards towards them, and lowered the gun she carried. “I’ll take that to mean you’re going to be out here longer,” said the soldier.

“Yes,” snapped the man. “Now please leave us to do—“

“Gooden. I didn’t agree to bring you out here to play and waste my time. I did so Moses could decipher the device we found. Yet you sit here writing slowly and oohing over every little thing. Now get snapping too.”

Faith walked around to the other side of the wall, while Gooden wandered off towards the other buildings. A half hour later, she turned her camera off and bent towards an oddly shaped rock. She discovered a winged animal figurine etched into stone and caked with mud.

“Dr. Stuart?”

“Over here.”

The soldier appeared next to her, watching her carefully clean the figure with a cloth. “I think we should get back inside, it’s starting to rain.”

“It’s alright Lieutenant Crown,” she said dismissively. “It won’t last very long. I have to document a few things over here. You guys go in.”

“Maybe that’s how things work on your team, but not with mine. I’m keeping an eye on you till you’re done.”

She smirked at the other woman and rose to her feet. “Hardly. In fact I never get one moment of privacy with my team.”

“I wouldn’t mind that myself. A team should be like a family, that’ll save your ass and do anything for you.”

“It can be a very thin line when it crosses into personal territory.”

The soldier raised an eyebrow. “Is that why you’re out here with our kind, especially on Valentine’s Day?”

“Something like that.”

“Stuart, I am out here because I do not have that, even back home. I’ll walk you back to the Gate if you want to go back to Atlantis. There’s still time left.”

“I appreciate your concern, but I’d rather remain here until my work is completed,” said Faith firmly. She pushed back wet strands of hair and tucked the stone creature under her arm, leaving the soldier behind.

.-.-.-.

Drops of water slid from her hair onto the floor and her t-shirt, the moisture making it cling to her back. She grabbed a brush and walked out of the bathing area, stopping in her tracks as she entered her sleeping quarters. The blond scientist sitting on her bed rose to his feet and looked at her concernedly, his arms crossed.

“How long have you been sitting there?” she asked anxiously.

“Fifteen minutes.”

“Wow, and I only got back an hour ago.”

“Christina mentioned at lunch she saw you come back.”

Mentally swearing at her friend, she managed a grim smile. “Couldn’t you have waited a bit? I have spent the past four days in rain and mud.”

“I haven’t seen you in a week,” he said, frowning. “You took off without a word and even missed our dinner the other night.”

“Sorry, kind of got pushed into it by Weir. No one else was available—“

“That’s strange, because Larson said you asked him about it beforehand.”

Crap.

“Maybe I did. I needed to get away from here and everything.”

He dropped his arms, staring at her pensively. “And me?”

Yes. You're pushing me hard towards something that always brings pain. Why can't we stay as we were? How can I tell you that? Maybe I can't...

She remained silent, running the brush through her hair and not looking at him. He strode across the room and took her by the arm, making her look at him. His blue eyes were taut and questioning, filled with a lurking pain and loneliness.

“If there’s something going on, tell me. I love you.”

The same look Erne gave me the day we broke up...

Memories flashed across her vision, the searing pain of her heart splintering into pieces, the bloody mess of her hand as she punched the wall over and over, crying through the night...She didn’t want to go through that again He had started pulling away and now she was; it had to end before they both broke..

No.

“I can’t,” she stuttered, her eyes penetrating and shielded. “I think you need to leave.”

“Fae.”

“I have given you enough Scott, I cannot give you anymore. I’m not ready to.”

He stepped away, shock on his face. He looked at her questioningly, but said nothing further as he walked towards the door.

.-.-.-.

“You did what?”

“I am not discussing this with you further,” said Faith, glaring at Connie.

Lanie uncrossed her legs and leaned forward on an arm, examining them both closely. “This isn’t a disaster, calm down.”

“I thought you said this one was different,” said Christina, shrugging.

“You’re not helping,” replied Lanie sharply.

“He was to an extent, but I don’t want to go so far down that path again, just to crash. I cannot handle it,” mumbled Faith into the pillow she was holding.

“You cannot know that for sure,” said Lanie. “This is going to hurt bad anyways. You’re still in shock.”

A tone at the door sounded, and slid open to reveal Andrew, Faith's brother. He strode across the room and slid between Lanie and Faith on the bed, putting an arm around her.

He motioned to the women. "Sorry ladies, super big brother time now."

Christina glared at him, but willingly left the room with the others. Andrew turned to his sister, stroking her head.

"What happened? I thought things were going well for you."

She shook her head against his shoulder. "They were at first, but slowly went downward. I think I am going to turn into a hermit and live alone on a planet."

"You have to stop running Faith."

"How do you think I got here?" She said bitterly.

“I think you came trying to start over, yet you have people like your boss, brother and ex along for the ride,” he said, nudging her. “It’s not a bad thing, believe me.”

“Yet I still manage to screw myself over,” she said, burying her face in his shoulder. The wall of shock and anxiety slowly began to recede, and let the tears flow through.

.-.-!-

The cart bumped along on the road ahead of them, making Damon cling precariously to the wagon edge. He glared at Larson and Faith on the ground below.

“Why do you get to walk?”

“Because we rode on the way from the town,” replied the Captain, rolling his eyes.

Grumpily he turned back towards the forefront, earning a prod from Tazia. “Don’t keep doing that, you’re making us unsteady,” she said, clutching her equipment tightly.

Faith ignored them as she walked along; flipping through the pictures she had taken on the farms.

“You know you can take a break with that,” said Larson, attempting to take the camera.

“With what?”

“The science thing. We came for a food mission because we needed a break, especially you.”

“How thoughtful of you, she said, snatching the DSLR back from him. “But it is fun for me.”

Larson shook his head and slowed his pace, until they were walking farther behind the cart. “You barely have said a word to me and you’re cold as ice to Tazia.”

“You expect me to cooperate with someone who now hates me because I broke up with her friend? She’s being childish and I’m not going to encourage it.”

“If you cannot work with her, how do you expect to work with Collins?” he asked, throwing his hands in the air.

She shrugged. “I expected as head of the team, you’d make that decision.”

“I am *not* choosing between the two of you.”

“Because you know you’d pick me, face it Erne.”

Midstride he yanked her to a stop, his eyes hard. “I do what’s best for everyone. In such a case, I’d kick you off and keep Collins. He has a more applicable skill set to the type of missions Damon and I should be sent on. You need to be back in Atlantis, safe and not getting the crap taken out of you.”

“I can’t believe you,” she said, struggling against his grasp.

“Try me Dr. Stuart. Prove me wrong and you can stay, otherwise—“

She wrenched her arm free and pushed him away, stomping after the cart of food they’d traded for.

.-.-.-.

A half hour later they had nearly reached the Stargate. Damon willingly had given up his seat to Faith, who preferred Tazia’s icy silence to Larson’s insistent badgering. Their guide chattered as he drove the cart, the farm hands falling asleep in back. The gate came into sight in the midst of a clearing hedged on all sides by thick forest. The air was quiet, no movement besides the wind rustling the trees. A deafening series of shots suddenly rang out, bullets thudding into the wood and barely missing them. A series of men in dark grey uniforms appeared behind nearby trees.

A pair of combatants rushed them, struggling with the cart’s occupants. The farm hands leapt crazily aside, darting for the trees along the trail. Their guide was shot in the chest and fell to the

ground, causing the pair to grab at the women instead. Faith freed herself and ran towards the Atlantis soldiers, who were firing from the bank of trunks. She picked up her handgun, but Larson abruptly grabbed it.

“Hey!”

He stuffed it under his vest and glared at her, shoving her aside when she tried to grab it. Tazia broke from behind the cart, a quad of men following her. One of them shot at her with a thick barreled gun, hitting her in the shoulder. She sprawled on the ground, one of them coming towards her. Faith dashed from Larson’s side, grabbing the man’s attention. Tazia kicked him in the chin, and stumbled towards the other woman. Faith grabbed a hold of her and brought her to her feet. The man behind them refocused and aimed at their retreating backs. A moment later he fell dead, a bullet in his forehead.

Damon charged forward, killing the other two men who stood atop the cart. Larson joined them, shielding the others. A shot rang from behind a tree, and instantly both soldiers shot in its direction. Silence descended upon the clearing again, their ears still ringing from the gun blasts. Larson and Damon scouted the area and returned to their group, finally lowering their weapons.

“We killed about seven Genii,” said Damon.

“Genii? What the hell do they want with us?” said Tazia, gasping in pain.

“Interrupting their trade, revenge?” suggested Faith.

“It’s hard to read a dead man’s mind,” said Larson grimly, poking a corpse’s gun with his shoe. “C’mon, let’s get you back to Atlantis doctor.”

.-.-.-.

The bed squeaked as Tazia sat down, gripping her still bleeding shoulder. Beckett shoed Faith away, pulling on gloves and grabbing surgical utensils.

“You going to be okay?” she asked, and received a small nod in return.

As she exited the infirmary, Larson accosted her, leading her down the adjacent hallway.

“Where are you taking me?”

“You’ll see, but we need to go now.”

They entered the gate room upper level and walked towards Weir’s office. She and Major Sheppard rose to their feet, clearly surprised.

“Captain,” said Major Sheppard. “I heard you ran into some trouble, but—“

He eyed Faith's jacket, which was covered with Dr. Anelli's blood.

"This is what happens when we don't listen to the mission field reports," said Larson, urging Faith to the desk. "People get hurt."

Weir came around her desk, worriedly studying the scientist. "You should go the infirmary immediately."

"I'm okay," said Faith, loosing herself from Larson. "This is Dr. Anelli's blood."

"The woman got shot. Beckett thinks it missed the lung since she's not dead," said Larson. "She was the temporary replacement for Dr. Collins, who broke his leg on a mission."

Dr. Weir raised an eyebrow. "I am familiar with the incident. I feel just as bad when people are injured on missions Captain, but we cannot stop going through the Stargate."

"Not my point. I think the right people need to be put on teams and we need better preparation," he said. "New galaxy, new rules."

"Are you saying Dr. Stuart is not qualified? I've read her file. She seems fine to me," said Major Sheppard, gesturing in her direction.

Faith smirked at him.

"Not that. When people keep getting hurt though, something needs to be done," said Larson strainedly.

"But I'm not," interjected Faith.

"You only threw yourself in the middle of gunfire."

"You weren't going to help Tazia," she said, narrowing her eyes.

"Major Sheppard," interrupted Larson. "I would like to request—"

"No," said Sheppard simply.

"With all due respect sir, no?" asked the soldier. "I don't think that's appropriate."

"Captain, return to your quarters until further notice. I'll deal with this situation later. Write up your report and have it tomorrow at my door."

"Yes sir."

"Dr. Stuart," said Sheppard. "Come with me."

.-.-.-.

The corridor sheathed Larson in pink light from the adjacent window, signaling dawn. There was a distant thud behind the quarter's door, before they slid open, revealing Faith. Her hair was unkempt, her uniform crinkled and deep shadows under her eyes from lack of sleep. She purposely blocked the entryway with her legs and body.

"Good morning," he said, smirking.

"What's so good about it?" she asked groggily.

"Can I come in?"

"No."

He raised an eyebrow at her. "Is there a reason why?"

"You know."

"C'mon Fae," he said, but she shook her head. He pulled his hand from behind his back, dangling a thick book in front of her. "I bear a gift."

She eyed it warily and accepted it, allowing him into her quarters. She settled into the chair by her desk and crossed her arms. "What do you want?"

He settled on the couch arm, his hand on his knee. "I wanted to know what Sheppard discussed with you. He was strange with me after I turned in my report yesterday."

"He wanted to know if I liked your leadership," she said reservedly.

"And?"

"I said I wouldn't have backed you weeks ago if I didn't believe in you."

"Oh thank you," he said, rising to his feet. He reached to embrace her, but was pushed away.

"I didn't do it for you. I just told the truth."

"I am very very grateful. I thought he was on the verge of replacing me or throwing me into the brig for making an idiot out of myself."

She smirked. "Nah. And you didn't have to bribe me either."

"I wanted to. I just started realizing what you did the other day for Tazia. I wanted to say I'm sorry," he said, putting his hands out.

“You didn’t trust me,” she said softly.

“I am sorry for that too.”

“Really? Because to get by in this galaxy we have to be there for one another.”

“You’re always there for me Faith.”

“Now who’s exaggerating?”

“I’m serious. Even when we’re at each other’s throats, you’re there for me.”

She eyed him carefully, and said slowly, “Were you drinking last night?”

“No, why?”

“Cause,” she laughed. She stood aside the desk and pushed down the lid of her laptop. “I was up all night writing a report for Weir.”

“What kind?”

“Mission field report. Guess she heard what you said. Wanted it right away.”

“You normally do those for me anyways.”

“Yes you lazy dog,” she said. “And I read over yours for Sheppard. Sounded fine.”

“I sounded genius, insightful, and intelligent?”

“It’s a report, not a personals ad,” she said, rolling her eyes.

“Speaking of which—“

“I am not discussing *it* with you, of all people.”

He put his hands submissively in the air. “No, I just wanted to say I think you’re handling it well despite—“

“Your assbattery.”

“Assbattery. And for now I’m on your side.”

“Told you so.”

“Oh shut up.”

She shrugged, not looking at him. “Think the team will survive this?”

“It’ll have to.”

Chapter 15: Healing

“The friend who can be silent with us in a moment of despair or confusion, who can stay with us in an hour of grief and bereavement, who can tolerate not knowing... not healing, not curing... that is a friend who cares.”

-Henri Nouwen

The din of the lunch hall filled the air, forks scraping plates and people chattering cheerily. Six women were huddled at a corner table, talking enthusedly.

“Not the weirdest thing I’ve heard of, Dr. Kastner,” said Connie. “Parrish came into the infirmary a month ago with a plant *bite*.”

“Sting you mean?”

“No, bite. The thing clamped down on him with these pointy nettles when he touched it. Part of it was still in his hand until Beckett pulled it out.”

“Eurgh that’s gross,” said Christina.

“If you ask me, he’s knows a lot, but is useless in the field,” said Connie. “Poor Kaufman’s team.”

“Pryce is seeing him,” said Dr. Kastner, smiling and biting into her sandwich.

“Not seeing,” said Lanie, turning red. “We went out on a picnic once and it was a disaster.”

“Ladies,” said a voice suddenly behind them. All six looked up to see Dr. McKay standing behind them. “I need Dr. Stuart immediately,” he said.

Faith pushed her tray away and followed him to the nearby corridor. He pulled out a sheaf of notes, written in English and Ancient.

“The data device your team found last week has to be translated.”

“I know,” she said, placing a hand on her hip. “It wasn’t my discovery though, it was Collins—“

He lifted a hand to silence her. “But you’re on his team? You’re the anthropologist assigned to work with him, therefore it’s your responsibility to translate it.”

“What’s so important about it?”

“Just have it done by Friday, a lot depends on it,” said McKay.

Faith raised an eyebrow expectantly. “Like what?”

He ushered her along, until they reached a nearby lab. Collins was sitting at a work table with the small data device they'd found hooked up to a computer. He looked disgruntled as the door opened and McKay entered with Faith.

"Back so soon, McKay?"

"I've brought you help," he said, urging Faith towards a chair.

"I don't need any help, and I'm sure you're wasting her time."

"Half of this makes no sense, Collins," said McKay, tossing the translation on the table. "Either you're just incompetent or too distracted."

Faith and Collins glanced at each other tentatively before focusing on the device.

"She's the one who taught me," said Collins, his mouth twitching.

McKay stared at him a second then handed him a pen. "Complete it correctly I do not want anything blowing up."

They waited till he was out of the room to talk, not looking at each other. Faith picked up the translation notes, surveying it.

"You have a lot right, but your syntax is wrong in the second half."

"Ah we'll fix that then."

She gingerly scooted the computer towards herself, reading the screen. "Better leave it to me. You do your analysis thing. This is about power conduits and I have a feeling they'll be using it for something."

"Analysis thing?" he said blankly. "Could you give me more credit than that?"

"No, because I am trying to work and I have McKay's foot up my ass."

"Well that's nothing new," he said lowly. "Mine would love to join his."

Faith spun in her chair. "Excuse me? I think we've managed to keep quite civil thus far, so can we keep it that way?"

"Sure, we can share that illusion."

She rolled her eyes and sidled away, not looking at him. After two hours of chilling silence, they finally finished. Collins gathered their work and took off quickly, abandoning Faith in the lab. Grudgingly she picked up her work and returned to her lab station on the other side of the tower.

She remained there for several hours, piddling through the pile of notes and objects she'd recovered in the past month.

As she was engrossed in examining the stone figure from P56-Y07, the door to the lab opened, admitting Larson. He was carrying a tray of food from the mess hall.

"Last person I expected to see," she said, barely acknowledging him.

"I came to rescue you from Collins, but apparently I am too late," he said, placing the tray in front of her.

"This is uncharacteristically nice of you, Erne."

"You missed dinner. It was over an hour ago."

"I'm fine."

"Sure. How are you doing really?" he asked skeptically. "You did well this week despite Collins' return."

She lowered her brush, and shrugged. "I think we're mutually ignoring each other."

"Is that an improvement from the shouting match you had Monday?"

"To me it is," she said.

Larson placed both hands on the work table, shaking his head. "What am I going to do with you two?"

"Hey, it's working thus far."

"Barely," he said, eyeing her curiously.

"So you going to run to Sheppard yet again?" she said, smirking.

"No, because for now I can stand you two. I can imagine how odd this looks to other people."

Faith picked up the biscuit from the tray, biting into it slowly. "Not really. I know only a small percentage of people on base."

"Any of them particularly err—attractive?"

"I am not having that conversation with you of all people," she said, staring at him.

"Well it would help you come back, Fae. And keep Collins out of your hair."

“I thought that’s what I had you for,” she said, semi-jokingly.

“As much as I’d like to, we both know I can’t always protect you,” he said softly.

He stepped close to her, brushing a piece of hair from her face. The touch sent a long forgotten shiver down her spine, that she hadn’t felt in over two years. His brown eyes read hers perfectly, and he closed the gap in between them. Before she knew what was happening, his arms were around her waist and her hands on his shoulders, as he kissed her. In a whorl of breathlessness and emotion, they left the lab together, headed for Larson’s quarter’s.

.-.-.-.

Sunlight streamed through the curtained windows, spilling onto the small bed nearby. A loud conversation echoed in the background and through the quarters, irking Faith. She buried her head further under the pillow, attempting to drown out the voices.

“Morning sunshine.”

“Don’t ever call me that again if you want to keep your teeth,” said Larson.

He shifted in the doorway and shoved Andrew Stuart further into the hall, blocking his view of the bed. The Sergeant backed away and glanced past Larson curiously.

“Y’know you missed puddlejumper training this morning. Sheppard had a few words to say about it too.”

“What do I need that for? I fly the damn things at least once a week.”

“This isn’t like you at all—in fact…” Sergeant Stuart stepped forward and looked around the side of the Captain’s head, spotting the women’s clothes on the floor. He smiled and smacked Larson on the shoulder amicably, laughing. “You dog, I could’ve covered for you if you’d told me.”

Larson glanced at him nervously. “It was rather sudden, no warning.”

“Well who was it? That woman in botany? Oceanography? Or one of the—“

Faith shot up in bed and tossed the pillow on the floor, glaring at Andrew. “It’s me! Now go so I can sleep, and you guys can kill each other later.”

Andrew’s eyes opened wide, then turned dark. “Ernest,” he said seethingly. “We need to have a talk.”

Larson touched the door controls and stood back, smiling. “Sorry, busy.”

Pounding emanated from the other side of the door, while Larson returned to the bed, securing himself next to Faith.

.-.-.-.

“We are going to have to talk about this sometime Faith,” said Andrew, trying to pull her to a stop.

She shirked him off and continued down the hall, ignoring him and the looks of passersby. She pivoted down a hall, nearly losing her brother and banging the box and bag she carried against a wall.

“How long has it been going on?”

Faith stopped aide a door, knocking on it loudly. “Four days Andrew.”

It opened, revealing Connie in the entryway.

“You’ve been sleeping with Larson for four days? Are you nuts? You were only engaged!”

Connie’s mouth fell open and she stared at Faith. Her friend grabbed her arm and dragged her down the hall, leaving the irate soldier behind.

“Sorry Andrew, important business.”

They sprinted away quickly, not stopping until they’d reached the entrance of the jumper bay.

“Thank you,” gasped Faith. “I managed to ignore him till now, and I have a mission in twenty minutes.”

The other scientist yanked her by the elbow before she could move. “Hold on. You and *Larson*?”

“Yes,” sighed Faith. “It just happened.”

“Faith Mercia Stuart, you’ve lost all sanity.”

“Insanity is bliss.”

“Oh please.”

“Why does everyone stick their nose into my business?” she asked, throwing her hands in the air.

“You’ve been hurt enough. We don’t want to see you go through more,” murmured Connie.

Larson appeared behind them, toting an empty metal crate. He gently tugged on Faith’s ponytail, smiling at her. “I agree. Now let’s head out.”

“Bye guys,” said Connie grimly, watching them disappear into a nearby jumper.

Shortly after, the ship hurtled through the open Stargate, emerging over a cloven valley sprawling with trees. Damon turned in his seat towards Faith, watching her until she noticed.

“What?”

“Are you sure this treasure will still be there? Those locals didn’t seem very trustworthy.”

“Those *artifacts* are perfectly safe with the village elder’s family. They will be getting most everything back in time.”

“Uh huh, sure.”

Larson landed the jumper on the fringes of the forest, several hundred meters from the village. They split up between the jumper and the town hall, where their artifacts were based. On her third trip to the ship, Faith found herself alone, carrying a thirty pound case. She stopped outside the loading door, sliding the case carefully onto the ground. She sat atop it for several minutes, closing her eyes and absorbing the cool breeze. There was a sudden cracking noise nearby and her eyes shot open. She found a burly short man coming at her, a knife raised and his eyes on the artifacts. Picking up her firearm, she aimed and yelled at him.

The man froze, grinning with beady greedy eyes. A second later she felt a sharp prick in the back, and a heavily breathing individual standing there.

“Drop it,” said a husky voice.

She let it slip from her hands, and it hit the ground with a dull thud. The other man tucked away his knife, and went into the jumper, sorting through the boxes. As Faith and her captor stood watching, there was a surprised grunt and shattering sound behind her. The man harmlessly collapsed, Collins appearing next to her. Immediately she snatched the gun, pointing it at the other robber before he could react.

“Step away from the spaceship,” she said angrily.

The man glared and moved for his knife, causing her to shoot him in the arm. The man shouted and rushed Collins, causing Faith to fire again. He crumpled over, bleeding heavily and swearing.

Her hand shook as she lowered the gun, gazing at Collins. She glanced downward momentarily, her eyes opening wide.

"You smashed him over the head with 1500 year old pottery!"

"You're welcome."

They restrained the wounded robbers and left them in the woods far from the ship.

"Do you think Larson and Damon are okay?" She asked Collins.

He handed her another zip tie for the robbers' feet and rose to his feet. "The Captain can take care of himself. Since when do you worry about him?"

Faith averted her eyes and bit her lip. Collins froze, his face slightly flushed.

"Oh."

"It was--"

He waved his hand dismissively. "We have to find the soldiers immediately, there might be more bandits out there. You got my back Stuart?"

She nodded, and he smirked in acknowledgment, handing her the gun. They strode towards the village, unsure of anymore robbers in the area.

.-.-.-.

The quiet hum of machines filled the control room, along with the murmurs of voices. The lone figure of Faith climbed the stairs from the gate area below, stopping at one of the consoles. She scooted a chair next to Christina Brown, and sat down.

"Evening."

The other woman eyed her crumpled uniform and shadowed eyes. "Where've you been? Didn't you guys get in this morning?" asked Christina.

"Yep. But we all went to bed the minute we got back. Spent the night chasing burglars and loading artifacts."

"How thrilling. So glad I miss those sorts of things."

Faith lightly smacked her, spattering some of her tea from the cup. Brown wheeled her from the console, then attempted to grab the tea.

"Keep the condiments away from the 10000 year old equipment."

"Relax Christina," said Faith, sipping from her cup.

"Hard to do when there are three Hive ships on their way to Atlantis."

Faith choked on the tea, coughing and gasping for air. "What!"

The scientists at nearby stations looked at them oddly, causing Christina to draw her close.. "Our sensors picked them up this morning, they're two weeks away from the city."

"There's nothing we can do can we?"

"We'll have to blow it up."

"You're joking," said Faith.

Christina shook her head, causing the other woman to bolt from her seat.

"Where you going?"

Faith found herself in front of Larson's quarters, out of breath and grasping at him when he opened the door. He pulled her into the room, and pushed her onto a couch. Faith clutched his arm, wide eyed.

"What's wrong?"

She swallowed hard. "There are Wraith on their way to Atlantis. And if nothing works, we're blowing up the city."

"Yes," he replied, remaining motionless. "I got pulled into a meeting this afternoon to listen about it. Thanks to that I only got four hours of sleep thus far."

"You're only concerned about the fact you didn't get any sleep?"

"No," he said, stroking her arm. "I am concerned about what'll happen to you, if we'll get home, and that Andrew took a swing at me today."

"Oh. I didn't mean to cause that."

"Don't worry about it. For now focus on other things."

She raised an eyebrow. "Like the fact we're all going to die or be cut off forever from Earth?"

"No, we're not. They will find a ZPM somewhere and save Atlantis, while you're safely off-world at the Alpha site," he said.

"Since when did you become an optimist?"

"Because I needed to be."

"I am not leaving you here to fight a last stand Erne."

"Then I will come with you," he said slowly.

She studied him, touching his cheek softly. “You have changed. So is this just a fling—“
“Something more,” he said, tucking an arm around her.

.-.-.-.

The door to the lab slid open, admitting Lieutenant Ford. Under each arm he carried camera equipment and a tripod. Faith came from the corner, where she’d been hovering over translations.

“Already my turn?” she asked, easing the camcorder from him.

He slid the tripod open, bobbing his head. “Yeah, already gone from A through S.”

Faith wheeled a chair in front of the tripod as Ford set up the camera. He fiddled with the settings and wires before motioning to her.

“Alright, in a minute.”

Crossing her legs, she examined the camera lens. “My folks are really going to enjoy what I’m about to say.”

“Well I hope they have security clearance?”

“Yeah,” she said. “My uncle is one of the liaisons between Britain and the SGC.”

Ford held up his hand, signaling the start, a red light flickering on. Taking a deep breath, Faith began talking, trying to keep her emotions in check.

“Gran Mildred—ah crap I forgot she doesn’t have clearance...”

“It’s okay, they can separate it or something later,” said Ford. “Go on.”

“Gran, I can’t say much, but I want you to know I’m okay, Andrew’s okay. Even though I’m not your blood, you took me into your family. I love you and hope to see you someday soon.”

She paused, and Ford peered over the video camera. “That it?”

“I can’t exactly mention I’ll either die trapped in this galaxy or from life sucking aliens.”

“Good point.”

“Next, to this only family I have remaining, Uncle Mark and Aunt Sandra. You guys are in every respect my parents and Andrew’s. You deserve to know everything, though so much has happened this past year. I have gone through so much mentally and physically, but I think I’m a

better person for it. I expanded my horizons to unimaginable limits. I am truly blessed to have this experience while I can.”

She paused, choking back a sob as the tension rose in her chest. “I am not sure if I’ll ever see you again. There is a highly advanced race called the Wraith on their way to Atlantis to destroy it. We’re outmanned and outgunned. Either we will die fighting or lose the ability to gate home. Because I love you so much, I didn’t want to give you false hope. Know whatever happens, my thoughts are always with you, wherever I am.”

Swallowing hard, she signaled for him to stop. He nodded and capped the camera, the red light shutting off.

Chapter Sixteen: Hopeless

*“When we have lost everything, including hope,
life becomes...disgrace and death....”*

-W. C. Fields

“Feel free to remind me again why we’re going on missions when there are three Hive ships coming?” asked Damon, shifting his gun boredly.

“Because we need food,” answered Faith.

“And possible sources of power,” interjected Collins.

“How about impossibly awesome weapons?”

“Sure why not? A couple impenetrable shields and an armada of ascended beings too while we’re at it,” said Collins, rolling his eyes.

The Stargate’s center sprung out in a wave, then stabilized into a calm blue puddle.

“After you,” said Larson, motioning to Damon.

They raised their guns and stepped through, emerging on the other planet. Miles of fertile green fields spread concentrically from the gate, marred by the ruins of forts and barracks. In the distance ahead, a long road stretched before them, leading to a shadowed tree lined city. To their surprise, a young boy stood to the wayside, staring at them. The jar he held slid through his unclenched fingers, crashing to the ground.

“Hi there,” said Damon, walking forward.

The boy’s eyes opened wide and he screamed, running down the road at top speed towards a distant roadside building.

“Uh oh?”

Faith put her hands onto her hips. “Now you’ve done it.”

“What? All I did was say hi.”

“I don’t think we should stick around,” said Collins.

They watched as men armed with weapons exited the building, running in their direction.

“Collins, dial the gate now,” said Larson, loading his gun.

“Wait a minute,” said Faith, putting a hand on his arm. “We just got here.”

As the second chevron began to light up, the band of men circled around them. Faith walked forward, palms raised outward. Larson tried to yank her back, but several men aimed at him. Their leader stepped towards her, his brow furrowed.

“Who are you?” he asked in a booming voice.

“I am Dr. Faith Stuart,” she said, motioning to them in turn. “This is Dr. Collins, Captain Larson, and Corporal Damon. We came from Atlantis.”

“You do not appear as the ancestors,” said the man. “I am the Ring Marshal, Therian. Why have you come here?”

“To trade and to learn. We’re explorers.”

Therian pointed at the two armed Atlantians. “You bring soldiers. During the regular periods of the year, they would be shot on sight.”

“There are plenty more where we came from,” said Damon threateningly.

“Shut up,” snapped Larson.

“We came because the Wraith are on their way to the Ancestor’s city to destroy it,” said Faith.

Wide eyed, Therian murmured to his men. He examined Faith closely, then pointed at Collins. “You and he may enter Pareil. The others may not.”

“No way,” said Larson, tightening the grip on his gun.

Faith forcibly lowered the weapon and touched his face, kissing his cheek. “I’ll be okay.”

His eyes searched hers, and he sighed. “Okay go ahead. But if anything happens to you, there will be nowhere in the universe they can hide.”

Collins and Faith relinquished their weapons to their teammates, then followed the Pareans to the city. The ruins of the forts extended to the outer ring of the city, which stood forlorn and empty behind battered and burned walls. The skeletons of tall spires and towers littered the backdrop. The main gate unlocked, revealing a crowded urban area. Remnants of rubble was littered between, crushed and charred.

"Were you recently culled?" Asked Faith, wide eyed.

"No," answered Therian. "Men did this. War with no end. A truce was made because there were few left to fight it."

"There's no reasoning for such a thing," said Collins, pulling out his camera.

Faith grabbed it from him tucking it in her vest pocket. "Who?"

"The Tsionii. They once belonged with us to a confederation of planets, but since our civilization fell two hundred years ago, they and our neighbors cause us nothing but trouble."

Therian led them down the main road, pointing out features of their town. Faith studied the buildings, getting an odd feeling.

"How old do those buildings look?" she whispered to Collins.

"Can't be more than a few centuries. Otherwise I don't think they'd still be there. Why?"

"They're similar to Lantian structures."

He glanced at the leader, his guards, then back to her. "These guys don't seem Ancient-ish at all."

Therian stopped in his tracks, looking at them strangely. "Do you have any questions I might answer?"

"No."

"Your older sections of the city, they seem Ancient in design, not wholly though," said Faith.

"True," he said, nodding. "Their blood runs in our veins, but our race is only an offshoot."

Smiling, he held his hand out. "Shall we continue?"

Ignoring it, she pointed at the center of the square, where a raised platform stood.

"Faith," murmured Collins. "That's an Ancient control chair."

.-.-.-.

The radio static crackled in the silence of the room, causing Larson's team to stare at the communication device anxiously. Damon glanced nervously at Faith and tried to speak, but she held a hand up to silence him.

"They nearly shot you on first sight and they threatened our soldiers?" said Weir's voice over the radio.

"Ma'am, they have Ancient technology just lying around, who knows what else is here," said Larson. "We need another team to make things go faster, and in case they unravel."

"I managed to negotiate the soldiers' entry into Pareil," said Faith. "In exchange for letting us have unlimited access, they wanted food and medicine."

“We barely have enough for ourselves Dr. Stuart,” said Weir. “The potential ZPM has more importance at the moment. Do not trade anymore of it unless given further authority.”

“Acknowledged.”

“Another team will be waiting for you at the gate in fifteen minutes. Atlantis out.”

Larson flicked the radio into standby mode, eyeing Collins and Faith critically. “You really think we’re close to a ZPM huh?”

“Yes.”

“We found stuff like this before—“

Collins shook his head. “But not a *control chair*. It is more than a definite sign of ZPM presence.”

“I am amazed Weir gave us an extra team,” said Damon. “Guess we’re just that desperate.”

They exited the fort to the main road, thanking Therian for the privacy and heading for the Stargate. Dr. Vogel and Dr. Simpson greeted their team, followed by two soldiers toting equipment.

“Guten tag, Frederich,” said Faith. “Ich sehe die Soldaten tun, die schwere Arbeit.”

Dr. Vogel laughed and nodded. The arrivals followed them into the city and set up in the main square. Curious bystanders began to gather around, whispering and pointing. Therian pulled their team aside, introducing them to a small group of people.

“This is our town elder’s wife Mairin, my lieutenant, our country historian, and Rolann, representing our high Reeve.”

The soldiers took the sideline and Faith stood speaking with the Pareans while Vogel, Collins, and Simpson spread through the complex surrounding the Ancient chair. Mairin led the conversation, her nature soft spoken and inquisitive.

They were interrupted by an impatient Rolann. “You seem to have come across us quite by accident, tell me how did you hear of our world?” he asked.

Faith exchanged a furtive glance with Mairin, who slightly shook her head. “We learned of you from information we gathered on our travels across the galaxy.”

“Would such information be available for trade?”

“I’m afraid it’s non-negotiable,” said Faith, raising an eyebrow. “What use would this information have to you?”

“To expand our trade network and acquire the technology to defend ourselves from the Wraith.”

“You once had the ability here,” she said, gesturing to the Lantian-like ruins.

“So it would seem,” he said raspily, a glint in his eyes.

A small thunk interrupted them, Collins standing back from the chair, a ZPM in his hands. The Atlantians froze, staring at it with bated breath. Dr. Simpson ran the scanner across it, then sighed.

“It’s dead.”

“Crap.”

The Parean historian walked cautiously towards Collins, examining the ZPM. He touched it tentatively and said, “I know of a place where such devices are spoken of in plentitude.”

.-.-.-.

Gracefully spring columns adorned the entrance of the steel building which stood in the midst of the valley enclosed around them. A domed lattice of metal capped it, glinting sharply against the sun. Faith circled the entrance, gazing at the obscuring cliffs above.

“I can see why the Wraith missed it, this is barely visible from above.”

“Overhanging rocks and a thousand year old building. This doesn’t appear too safe,” said Larson.

“Few venture here, for it is a senseless risk,” said the historian.

Collins backed onto his heels, shielding his sight. “I am starting to agree with the Captain.”

Dr. Vogel spoke lowly to Faith and her eyes widened. “The house of eternal arms...no—power!”

Dr. Simpson slung her bag over her shoulder eagerly. “Obvious to me and the readings I’m getting say we’re getting closer.”

Rolann declined entry to the complex, leaving Mairin to guide them in. High walls of hard stone encircled the inside of the structure, every inch covered with inscriptions. The floor was cracked and overgrown, but the center was a metal plate six feet in diameter. Its surface was engraved identically to the walls and encrusted with dirt. The historian pointed to writing on the stone, frowning his brow.

“We were unable to read this, for the language is lost to us.”

Faith ran her fingers over the letters, cleaning some of it carefully. “This is Ancient. It is commonplace in sites like this in Pegasus.”

“When our predecessors were close to the Ancestors, there was civil war and those with conflicting beliefs left. Our people further fractured, and the language was purposely outlawed and forsaken. All whom secretly understood it were lost in the Great Culling two hundred years ago.”

Vogel paced before the wall, studying the readings on his screen. He motioned to Larson, pointing to a hand-shaped engraving on the wall.

“Hold on—“

Larson put his palm in the space, and suddenly the floor began to shake. The metal plate began to recede into the ground, but stopped a fraction of the way. Everyone peered over the edge, aiming their flashlights into the blackness below.

“It’s a door,” said Mairin, wide-eyed.

The historian crossed his arms angrily. “All this time and we never were able to—how did you?”

“Ancient gene probably,” said Collins, pushing against the wall. A panel slid out abruptly, causing the soldiers to draw their guns. The compartment was filled with control crystals, most of which were shattered. “This would be why it’s broken.”

Vogel’s scanner blipped, a small spot appearing on the screen.

“Goodness!” said Simpson, grinning. “Energy signature consistent with an active ZPM.”

“Collins, how long would it take to fix that door?” asked Larson.

“Couple hours at least. I’d have to reroute the controls and some of the power conduits.”

Larson flipped open his vest, pulling out a small package and slapping it onto the metal door.

“Too long.” He ushered towards the front entrance. “Move it.”

“You can’t just pop it open,” said Simpson. “You could bring the whole thing down.”

“If you don’t get out there, you’ll go up with it,” said Larson, pulling out the detonator.

When they were safely outside, the C4 ignited, sending up a pile of debris, but the building remained intact. As they were clearing rubble, a dozen soldiers appeared, racing to the lieutenant’s side.

“Sir, what happened?”

“Just exploratory investigation, not an attack. Remain to assist,” he said, pointing at the debris.

The path was soon cleared and they returned to the metal door, finding a wide opening blown in its side.

“Gee it worked,” said Simpson sarcastically.

“Who is going down?”

Several people raised their hands. Larson motioned to Simpson and Martinez, an Atlantis Marine. “You guys go back to the gate with the dead ZPM and wait. If we don’t radio you within two hours, call Atlantis.”

“Yes sir.”

“Perhaps I should stay here and direct any potential rescue operations should the need arise. I will send down seven of my men with you,” said the Porean lieutenant.

After a half hour, they had constructed a pulley system, the Atlantian and Porean teams lowered into the opening one by one. Damon flicked on a large tactical flashlight, illuminating the platform they were standing on. Vogel gestured to Collins, showing him the scanner’s screen.

“This looks like some giant underground outpost,” said Collins.

“Genii?” asked Larson warily.

“No,” answered Faith. “This is very Lantian in structure. Probably predates most above ground architecture.”

“We have much ground to cover, maybe we should split up?” said the historian.

Nodding, Larson directed them into teams of five. Mairin glanced at Larson and the historian, her eyes fearful. “Stay safe while you may.”

Collins and Vogel guided their respective groups down adjacent corridors, leaving a group of Porean soldiers behind. A short distance ahead, Collins stopped in his tracks, directing Larson to aim the tactical flashlight. The darkness melted, revealing several puddlejumper.

“Sweet!” said Larson, flashing the light towards the roof.

Collins grabbed his elbow, rolling his eyes. “You can play with those later.”

They passed through a series of doors, which only opened at Larson’s touch. Parts of the complex were damaged, leading to dead ends. Soon the ZPM signature grew strong and Collins stopped their party outside of a closed door.

“I think we found it.”

Larson snorted, placing his palm in the inscription on the door. “No need for dramatics.”

Bright light filled the room which appeared beyond the entrance, a pedestal in the center. Dr. Vogel stepped back from it, handing a ZPM to Faith and pulling out his scanner.

He nodded to her, and she glanced up at Larson, beaming. “It’s live.”

Consecutive gun shots rang in the air, a thud following, as Robinson a Marine dropped dead behind Collins. The Pareans took aim at the Atlantians, causing them to draw their weapons. In the ensuing commotion, Faith was knocked to the floor by Mairin, bullets narrowly missing their heads. Larson and Damon exchanged fire with the Pareans that had escorted their teams, the Corporal hit in the process. They turned their guns towards Mairin, who was in the process of helping Faith to her feet.

The scientist stepped in front of her, raising both arms. “Whoa guys, she saved me and the ZPM.”

“She’s Parean,” said Larson, stepping closer. “Why would she help us?”

“I am a captive of this world,” said Mairin. “Our planet was pillaged by Pareil. We were forced to marry our captors or die where we stood. If Pareil attains this energy source, they will be able to use the weapons of the Ancestors and conquer more planets. This I cannot let happen. Forget me; find the historian who has escaped to find reinforcements. He will bring the men down upon us.”

“Oh shit.”

Damon limped to the doorway, pointing his P-90 towards the hall. “Let’s go.”

“We’ll go ahead. Damon, protect Fae at all costs,” said Larson. He handed a gun to Mairin. “You know how to fire this?”

“Yes.”

Collins, Vogel, Mairin, and Larson warily navigated down the halls ahead of the others. Several doors later, they encroached on a widening in the passageway, and were immediately overtaken by enemy fire. Aided by the life signs detector and measly flashlights, they managed to eliminate the five Parean soldiers that had come down with them. They found no sign of the historian, and continued towards the main entry. As they rounded the bend to the main chamber, Collins stopped Larson in his tracks.

“Captain,” he hissed. “We cannot get out through the main entrance. We’re either going to need another way out or have to leave the ZPM here.”

The soldier pointed across the platform at the other side. “There’s a jumper bay over there. The only way to get there is here, or to double back and risk getting cornered. This is the best shot. On my mark, we run.”

“But—“

“3, 2, 1...go!”

They ran in a cluster up to the platform, Faith and Damon lagging slightly behind. When they had reached the edge, three Porean soldiers slid down ropes through the opening above, firing at them. One of the shots hit Vogel in the shoulder, causing him to fall. Collins struggled with one of the Poreans, until Mairin knocked him off. Faith and Damon rushed to help, raising Vogel to his feet and pushing him forward. Damon collapsed to his feet, clutching his thigh in pain. Faith grasped his arm tightly, her heart beating fast in fear and dread. The four were descending the platform, when a loud rattle emanated from above and the light from above was blotted out. In horror, they watched as an avalanche of rocks and debris fell through the hole above, onto Faith and Damon. They crumpled to the floor, their bodies covered by dirt and stone.

“NO!” hollered Larson, his voice riddled with rage and pain. He dashed towards them, but Mairin restrained him. A rain of bullets from above nearly missed him, and peppered the floor around them.

“They’re dead,” she yelled.

In the murky darkness around her, Faith could feel her heartbeat thudding in her ears and pain across her body. Blackness descended across her vision, and she heard the faint echo of running footsteps. The bitter taste of blood filled her mouth, and she surrendered her mind into hopelessness, knowing she was dying.

Goodbye.