

Beginnings

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Sequel to "Shifting Views". Note that this features the alternate Samantha Carter from "Points of View", and the Janet Fraiser and Beta Site in the universe she came from and returned to. So it really has very little from the actual show, and is definitely somewhere out in the grey zone between fanfic and original fic.

Featured fandoms: Stargate: SG1

Featured pairings: Sam/Janet

A.S.S Story codes: ff

Story rating: PG

Arrival

Colonel Janet Fraiser woke to the sound of birds singing and green-tinged light filtering through the fabric of her tent. The night chill still lingered, and drops of condensation lined the metal rods that held the tent up.

She adored this time of day. Sure, the birds weren't actually *birds* as such, being more closely analogous to Earth lizards, but their sounds were strikingly similar. And the light would still be a slightly strange color even if she left the tent, although her vision had almost adjusted to that.

The sound of a knuckle knocking on a wooden surface came through the tent fabric. She kept a small table next to the tent just for that.

"Colonel?" a voice said outside. Young, male. Her aide, lieutenant Greensmith.

"Just a moment, lieutenant," she said, pitching her voice loud. "I'll be out in a minute."

"No hurry, Colonel," came the reply. "There's an hour yet before the new batch are due to come through the gate. I just wanted to make sure you had time to get some coffee before that."

Janet couldn't help smiling. Greensmith was a good boy. Brevet-promoted in the field to fill one of the holes left after far too many killed soldiers. Just like she'd been. A few short months before, she'd been a captain. A field research medical officer, bright enough to reasonably expect an eventual promotion to Major and a position of Chief Medical Officer somewhere.

"Thank you, lieutenant," she said. "I'll be there in time."

Except there'd been a sudden alien invasion, wiping out all humanity's major population centers with orbital bombardment. By chance, she'd been at the top secret off-world base called Beta Site when the Goa'uld struck. By the time they'd managed to contact anybody in authority back home, they'd just told her that she was a colonel now, and to convert the base to Earth's first self-sufficient colony.

She made her way out of the sleeping bag and dressed. Her uniform still had her captain's bars on it, with something approximating a colonel's eagle drawn in marker pen next to them. She kind of liked it that way, so she hadn't even tried to get proper insignia. There were far more important things to get anyway, now that they could get things from Earth at all again.

One by one, the day's concerns popped into her mind as she gave her short hair a rough brushing. With some luck, she'd be able to squeeze in a quick shower after the next batch of colonists had safely arrived. There'd been a cryptic message about some VIP coming through, so she felt she had to be there, even though the regular arrivals were pretty much routine now.

She left the tent in search of caffeine.

When the time came for the Stargate to open, the early morning sunshine had been replaced with a steady drizzle. The gate itself was on top of a small and flat hill, looking out over the base camp turned permanent village. A wide path had been worn in the grass of the hill, and some day soon now they really should cover it with gravel or something, so it didn't turn to a long, steep mud pool every time it rained.

The gate started to spin. Chevrons slammed into place, and the activation bubble annihilated some raindrops before it settled into the familiar silvery ripple. A few

seconds later, colonists started coming through.

"See anybody you recognize?" Janet said. She was standing off to the side, with Greensmith next to her holding a large umbrella.

"Not really," he said. "But don't VIPs usually go last?"

"Or first," Janet said. "How many are due to transfer over today?"

"About forty," he said. "With materials for another three prefab huts, hopefully. Plus food, fertilizer and a few more strains of barley to try out."

Janet sighed.

"You know," she said. "This really isn't what I signed up for."

"Me neither, sir," Greensmith said. "But, you know, this is probably more important than anything the recruiter even knew about."

"It probably is, at that..."

Janet's voice trailed off into silence. She'd just seen someone she recognized come through the gate. A scientist from the old Stargate Command. Someone she'd heard a *lot* about in the last few weeks.

"Is that Samantha Carter?" Greensmith said, disbelief clearly audible in his voice.

"Looks like it," Janet said. "She'd qualify as a VIP, I guess."

She'd met Carter back at the SGC, before the attack. They'd cooperated on a few research projects, figuring out the function of stuff that Janet and the rest of SG-3 had brought back through the gate. They'd got along quite well, and might have become friends if they'd seen more of each other. But then the Goa'uld attacked, and somehow Carter managed to bring in the Asgard and save the world.

When the gate closed, Janet headed for Carter. Nobody else she recognized had come through, and if there had been someone more VIP-worthy than Carter she *would* have recognized them. Carter was dressed unassumingly in khaki-colored pants, a sensible-looking coat and sturdy boots. Her long, blonde hair was tied up in a pony tail, which hung down onto the top her well-stuffed backpack.

She looked good.

"Doctor Carter?" Janet said when she was close enough to be heard.

Carter turned to her. An odd expression passed over her face, and then she smiled and offered her hand.

"Captain Fraiser!" she said. "It's a pleasure to see a familiar face."

Janet shook her hand.

"Actually, it's Colonel Fraiser these days," she said. "Or just plain Janet."

"Oh, I'm sorry," Carter said. She gestured vaguely towards Janet's shoulders. "I thought those meant..."

Janet smiled wryly. "They do," she said. "I'll get proper ones as soon as we reach the industrial age."

Carter's eyes flicked towards the fairly shabby camp in the distance.

"It's still rough, huh?" she said.

"It gets better," Janet said. "But you'll see for yourself soon enough. What brings you here, anyway?"

"They didn't say?" Carter looked surprised. "I'm one of the colonists. I'm here to stay. And help bring about that industrial age, hopefully."

"Oh," Janet said. "No, we only heard that someone important was coming through. I assumed it'd be some bigwig here for a visit."

She held out her hand to Carter.

"Samantha Carter," she said. "I hereby welcome you most warmly to the planet Promise. You'll be staying in..."

She turned to her aide. "Greensmith? Where will she be staying?"

Greensmith flipped through his clipboard full of papers.

"Building 24," he said. "I'm sorry I didn't spot your name earlier, ma'am, we could've arranged something better. This is just a bed in an eight-person hut."

"No, no, that's fine," Carter said. "I've had quite enough of special treatment for a few years already."

"In that case," Janet said, "I'd better let you catch up with the other colonists so you don't miss orientation."

"Yeah," Carter said. "Um, will I see you later?"

"Of course," Janet said. "It's still a very small world."

"Right. Of course."

Carter nodded at Greensmith and set off down the hill, hurrying to catch up with the rest.

Janet turned to Greensmith. "Did she seem a little weird to you?" she said.

He shrugged. "I don't know," he said. "I never met her before."

"The one in the far corner on the left is free," someone said when Samantha stopped inside the door to building 24 and looked confused.

"Thanks," she mumbled.

Most of the building was a single large room, with windows on two sides and beds between the windows. There were wooden screens between the beds, to give some semblance of privacy. There was also a chest of drawers and a tiny table in each partition. The floor, walls and ceiling were made out of hastily painted plywood, and the furniture also showed clear signs of being cheap and quickly made. At the head of the bed folded and plastic-wrapped bed linen lay.

Samantha dropped her backpack on her bed and sat down next to it.

Look at the bright side, she thought. At least it's in the same universe where you were born. You're off Earth, with all its bad memories. You're in a new place, where you can build a new life. And...

Her hand went to the pocket where she kept the letter.

All you have to do is work up the courage to hand it over. It's not that hard. The *other* Samantha Carter wouldn't hesitate.

"Hey," someone said.

Samantha looked up. A curvy, fairly young woman with long black hair was leaning against the screen separating Samantha's bit of the room from the next one.

"You missed the instructions, didn't you?" the woman said.

"Yeah," Samantha said. "I got caught up."

"Wasn't much anyway. Tomorrow we start working. We live here until we build something better. We eat whatever the military gives us until we grow or hunt something else. Dinner's at six. My name's Louisa."

Samantha looked at her.

"They gave you a new name?" she asked.

"No," Louisa said. "That part I added myself."

"Good," Samantha said. "I got a bit worried there for a moment."

"No you didn't."

Samantha smiled. "No," she said. "I didn't. I'm Samantha."

"Charmed, I'm sure," Louisa said. "I hope you don't snore."

She turned and returned into her own area.

A new life indeed.

Samantha got up from the bed and shrugged out of her coat. She picked the backpack up and opened it. If she was going to live here until she helped build a new home, she might as well unpack and get as comfortable as possible.

Dinner was served under a canvas roof spread over a large number of sturdy wooden tables and lots of rather rickety chairs. Samantha was no expert at judging crowds, but she guessed that somewhere close to five hundred people gathered to eat. The food wasn't exactly haute cuisine, but it was hot and plentiful. She, like everybody around here, ate heartily. Back on Earth, it had been a while since she'd been sure where her next meal would come from. One got into the habit of eating a lot when given the chance.

"Mind if I sit down?"

Samantha looked up. Colonel Fraiser was standing on the other side of the table, dinner tray in hand.

"No, of course not!" she said. "Please, have a seat."

Janet sat down.

"So," she said. "How's Earth?"

"Don't you get reports?" Samantha asked.

"Yes, I do," Janet said. "But I don't have the time to read them."

She put her fork down into a piece of vegetable that looked a lot like a green carrot.

"Our first extraterrestrial staple food," she said. "Contains several vitamins, a couple of valuable trace elements, and lots of digestible starch for energy. Almost better than potatoes. There's only one drawback."

Samantha waited.

"And that is?" she said when Janet popped the piece into her mouth, making it obvious that she wasn't going to continue without prompting.

Janet swallowed, then sighed.

"It tastes like broccoli," she said.

"That's a drawback?"

Janet put down her fork and glared at Samantha.

"I'm not sure if I want you on my planet," she said.

Samantha couldn't help but smile.

"I'm a pretty good scientist," she said. "If you let me stay, maybe I can find you something that's just as healthy but tastes like chocolate chip ice cream."

Janet pretended to think about it.

"All right," she said. "You can stay."

She put another forkful of beef stew into her mouth. In between a pair of lips exactly like ones that Samantha had kissed not long ago. Other lips that regularly kissed another Samantha Carter.

"Have I got something on my face?"

Samantha's train of thought abruptly derailed, and she felt herself blush.

"No," she said. "I was just... thinking."

"Nice thoughts, by the look of it."

Samantha gathered what courage she had.

"Um," she said. "I've got something for you."

Janet looked surprised. "For me?" she said. "Why doesn't it come through regular channels?"

"Because it's not from a regular source," Samantha said. "Not even close."

She reached into her coat pocket and took out the envelope she'd been carrying

from the other universe. It was wrinkled and not particularly clean, but it was still intact and the writing on its front was still clearly legible. She handed it to Colonel Fraiser.

Janet looked at it and frowned.

"Dr Janet Fraiser," she read out loud. "No rank?"

"No," Samantha said. "Please open and read it in private."

"Oh-kay," Janet said. "Since you ask so nicely."

She put the envelope in her own pocket.

"Now," she continued. "Tell me about Earth."

Colonel Janet Fraiser sat down on her bed. It was long since dark outside, and she was exhausted. There never seemed to be enough hours in the day for everything that needed to be done, even with the local days of twenty-six hours and change. There was always another report to read, another plan to decide on, another crisis to handle, another personell problem to sort out, another...

She sighed and fell back onto the bed. From one of her pockets came the sound of crumpling paper.

Oh. Right. The mysterious letter Carter had given her. She fished it out of the pocket and looked at it.

"Dr Janet Fraiser," the writing on the front said. Handwritten, not typed.

Suddenly, she frowned and sat up.

Handwritten in her *own* handwriting. What the...?

She fished a knife from its sheath on her belt, quickly sliced the envelope open and fished out the paper waiting inside.

"Hello, Pudgy," the letter began. A chill traveled down Janet's spine. It had been a *long* time since she'd heard that nickname, and she'd thought that the only other person who knew of it had died in a car crash back in 1989.

"Don't worry," the letter continued, "nobody else knows about it. And if you burn this letter after you've read it, nobody ever will."

Blackmail? But no, she couldn't believe that of Carter. And the letter wasn't threatening anything.

"In college freshman year, you and Rebecca Dayton drank way, way too much at a frat party. You both fell asleep in her bed, and when you threw up in the middle of the night you just left and let her think she'd done it. You felt so bad for that that you bought her a Christmas present that was far more expensive than you could really afford. As a result, you lived off ramen noodles for an entire month."

A wry smile forced its way onto her face. Ah, college. So much fun. So many stupid acts.

Stupid acts that nobody else learned about. Ever. The smile turned to a frown.

"Senior year, you dated Maria Rodriguez for three months even though you couldn't stand her personality. But she had the most fantastic legs you'd ever seen, and when she got stoned she was absolutely *amazing* in bed."

Janet frowned again. She'd never told anybody about that, and at the time she'd lied through her teeth even to her friends about her feelings for Maria. For somebody else to know that, they'd have to be a mind reader.

Or they'd have to be Janet Fraiser. She looked again at the writing on the envelope. It still looked exactly like her own.

"Have I got your attention yet?" the letter went on. "I'll assume I have, and that you're dying to know where this letter comes from and who wrote it. To answer the

second question first, I am Captain Janet Fraiser, Chief Medical Officer at Stargate Command, U.S. Air Force. And I am writing this to you from another reality."

She put the letter aside, got up from the bed and paced the tent. She had to catch her breath a little. Sure, she'd heard that Carter had somehow managed to get assistance from an alternate Earth, the people of which had told her how to contact the Asgard. But so far it had just been a fantastic story, something she did believe in but that still wasn't quite *real*.

A letter from herself made it real, and suddenly the weight of it crashed down on her like a ton of bricks. There were *other Earths* out there. With other Janet Fraisers. One of them was, obviously, CMO at Stargate Command. But there must be more, ones who made their choices differently than she had. One who did drop out of college to be an aid worker in Africa. One who did try for the acting career. One who got caught smoking dope at USAF Academy and got kicked out.

It made her head spin. She sat down on the bed again to read the rest of the letter.

"This is a log saw," the sergeant said. She held up a metal bow with a yard-long saw blade along the open side. "This, you use all by yourself, on logs that aren't too large."

The new arrivals were sitting on a slope out in the forest. The trees around them and the undergrowth looked a lot like that of southern Canada, if you didn't look too close. In front of them a couple of combat engineers stood. The task for the day was to cut down trees and make planks out of them. The planks would then be left to dry for a few months, and after that they could be used to build houses.

The sergeant held up a saw that was nothing but a foot-high and two-yard-long saw blade with a large handle at each end.

"This," she said, "is a timber saw. It takes two people to use it. We'll use it to cut logs down to planks. To do that, we place a log over a thin trench and saw up and down. Being on top sucks, because you have to straddle the trench. Being on bottom sucks because you get all the sawdust in your face."

Louisa turned towards Samantha.

"Gee," she said. "She makes it sound so *tempting*."

"Well," Samantha said. "Fresh air, exercise, what's not to like?"

Louisa turned back and looked at the sergeant, who was going on about how to properly use an axe.

"I could get to like *her*," she said. "Just look at those arms! Do you think she prefers top or bottom?"

"Maybe she prefers men."

Louisa snorted. "Then she's pretty much out of luck, isn't she?"

Samantha looked at her, confused. "What do you mean?"

"Take a look around you," Louisa said. "Check out the scenery."

She did. She couldn't see all of the people from where she sat, but more than three quarters of them were clearly visible. And of the thirty or so she could see, about twenty-five were women.

She looked questioningly at Louisa.

"We've got a whole planet to fill, remember?" Louisa said. "Better to start with a lot of females. It'll even out in the next generation."

Samantha felt stunned. It made sense, of course, but to use that sort of cold-hearted planning on humans... was probably necessary when it looked likely that the Earth might be destroyed at any moment.

"Didn't you pay attention at orientation back home?" Louisa said. "They covered all this after we were selected."

Samantha looked away.

"I wasn't at the orientation," she said. "I kind of called in a bunch of favors to get here, so I joined in late."

"Really," Louisa asked.

Before Samantha had a chance to make up a response, a two-person timber saw landed between them.

"You two," the sergeant said, "make planks. Do you remember what I said about that?"

They both looked up at her.

"Check," Louisa said. "Top keeps legs spread, bottom gets everything in the face."

The sergeant looked at Louisa for what felt to Samantha as a very long while.

"Yeah," she finally said. "That's it exactly. Just let me know if you need any help with that."

"So much for your theory," Louisa said when the sergeant was out of earshot. "I'll let you know tomorrow what she prefers."

Samantha laughed.

"You do that," she said. She got up from the ground and hefted the saw onto her shoulder.

"Come on," she said. "Let's get to work."

Towards sunset, they dragged their aching bodies out of the forest and back to the camp. Louisa had become steadily less talkative as the day proceeded, which Samantha quite liked. She wasn't much good at the social chatter at the best of times, and while she found she rather liked the immediacy of physical work it left her little energy to use for talking. With sunset fast approaching, they walked in silence through the fresh resinous smell left the trees. Or maybe it was coming from her hair. She and Louisa had kept switching positions in the plank-cutting trench, so both of them had sawdust stuck all over them.

"I can't make up my mind which I want more," Louisa said as she entered the camp, "dinner or a shower."

"Shower," Samantha said. "You can eat while you discuss the logistics of plank-cutting with the sergeant."

"Well, yes," Louisa said. "But I could equally well eat now and we do the discussing in the shower."

"Nah, I don't know," Samantha said. "Call me an old-fashioned prude if you will, but I don't think you should do the common showering until the relationship is at least half an hour old."

"You may have a point," Louisa said. "Let it be shower first. You coming?"

"No, too hungry," Samantha said. "I'll..."

"Doctor Carter?"

They both turned towards the interrupting voice. It came from lieutenant Greensmith.

"Yes?" Samantha said.

"Colonel Fraiser wonders if you'd like to have dinner with her," he said.

"The Colonel?" Louisa said. "Now I see why you had little interest in a mere sergeant!"

"It's not like that," Samantha said. "We knew each other before... Before."

She turned to Greensmith.

"Sure," she said. "I'll come. When?"

"Would an hour be enough for you to clean up?" he said. "There's no hurry, there's enough paperwork to keep the Colonel busy far into the night."

"Yeah," Samantha said. "That'll be fine."

"Good," he said. "An hour then, in the Colonel's tent."

"In her tent?" Louisa said when he'd left. "Do you think there will be candles?"

"It's not like that," Samantha protested. "We're hardly even friends."

"Right," Louisa said. "Sure."

"That was some letter you gave me," Janet said.

There were no candles. There was the inside of a well lived-in and quite big tent, with full standing height and a separate bedroom. In the outer room there was a desk, a few chairs, a couple of propane lanterns, one of which stood on a table. On the table a dinner had been laid out. With proper porcelain plates and silver cutlery, although the food was still based on packages from Earth augmented with some local vegetables.

"I have no idea what it said," Samantha said. "She just told me it'd be enough to convince you that it's for real, and..."

They'd passed through the appetizer before the letter got brought up. Until then, it had just been small talk. About logging, mostly.

"It did that all right," Janet said. "It feels very strange to get a letter from another version of yourself."

Samantha grimaced. "Try *meeting* another version of yourself," she said. "I still can't decide what weirded me out more, the similarities or the differences."

Janet pulled a gas-powered heater closer and started transferring food to her own plate.

"And she was in a relationship with the other version of me," she said.

"Yes," Samantha said.

"Did they look happy?"

"Yes. Very much so."

Janet pushed the heater over to Samantha, and watched her while she served herself. She was a beautiful woman, there was no question about that. Even now, with a few bruises and scratches, and the odd spot of hard-to-remove resin on her skin. She was smart, kind of funny and generally pleasant.

And Janet recommended her to herself. She alternated between finding that tempting and creepy.

"Is it why you came here?" she asked.

Samantha concentrated on her food for a little while.

"No," she said. "Or yes. Partly. I think."

"Well, that seems to cover all eventualities."

Samantha laughed a little.

"It does, doesn't it?"

She looked up at Janet.

"I've been carrying that letter around for months now," she said. "At times I was badly tempted to open it and see what it said, but... In the end I decided that Earth held nothing but bad memories for me, and that I wanted to try to start again elsewhere. Then it was just a question of exactly where to go. And this was the only place that really had anything that set it apart. So I came here."

Janet drank some orange juice. Reconstituted, from concentrate shipped in from Earth.

"And what set this place apart was me," she said.

Samantha briefly tilted her head to the side. "Well, yeah," she said. "I'm not expecting anything, it's just that..."

She caught Janet's gaze.

"The alternate me told me to give myself the chance to be happy. That's what I tried to do by coming here. Giving myself a chance."

Janet liked the sound of that.

"So you don't expect me to tear your clothes off and drag you to my bed?" she said.

Samantha frowned. "I don't think I'd like it if you did. I kind of want to get to know people first."

Janet smiled.

"Good," she said. She put her elbows on the table and rested her chin in her hands.

"If this was an old kind of date, on Earth, before," she said, "then I'd ask about where you came from and what you'd done and who you knew and things like that. But now, asking that kind of thing would only be painful."

Samantha looked at her.

"This is a date?" she said.

"I'm having dinner alone with a beautiful, smart and nice woman," Janet said. "Sounds like date to me."

"Doesn't a date require at least a minimal level of interest?"

"You choose this planet because I'm here. That has to count as at least a minimal level of interest."

Samantha gestured vaguely towards Janet and then herself.

"I was more thinking of the other way around," she said.

"Did you miss the part about beautiful, smart and nice?" Janet said.

"Well, no, but there are plenty of women like that here."

Janet raised an eyebrow. "If there's anybody here even half as smart as you," she said, "I want to know about her right away. We need all the smart people we can get if we're going to survive here."

Samantha looked surprised.

"I'm just an astrophysicist," she said. "That's completely useless here."

"An astrophysicist with extensive experience in deciphering alien technology, ex-traterrestrial chemistry and non-human biology," Janet said. "And who keeps her head on straight in a crisis."

"Yes, but..."

"Come on!" Janet said. "Don't sell yourself short! You know quite well that if you could publish the work you've done for Stargate Command you'd have Nobel Prizes for physics, chemistry *and* medicine."

Samantha looked away.

"If Stockholm still existed, maybe," she said.

"Yes," Janet said. "Sorry. It's difficult not to mention anything from before."

"Yeah," Samantha said. She looked back towards Janet.

"So, this is a date, is it?" she said.

"Definitely," Janet said.

"Are your dates usually teetotal?"

"Well, no, but any kind of drinkable alcohol is *way* down the priority list for shipment from Earth. There's been talk about setting up a still, but..."

Her voice trailed off as Samantha took a pint bottle from her coat pocket and put it on the table. "Glendronach Single Malt 12yr", the label on it said.

"Want some?" Samantha said.

"There's some dessert," Janet said. "With coffee. Whisky would go well with that."

"Good," Samantha said. She turned to her cooling dinner.

"So," she said. "What are *your* plans for the future, Colonel Fraiser?"

Janet looked at her.

"Please," she said. "Call me Janet."

It was late at night when Samantha returned to her alcove. She and Janet had ended up drinking the entire bottle of whisky, while lamenting that it almost certainly was the only one of its kind on the entire planet. They'd talked, about wishes and wants and, in spite of their intentions, of what had been. Samantha had told the story of how she saved the world, and had tried to describe how it had felt to kiss herself from another reality. Janet had, of course, a never-ending number of stories from her off-world missions. Samantha had read the reports from all of them already, but there were plenty of things that never made it into the official version for some reason or another. Many of them highly entertaining, it had turned out.

So it was with a smile on her lips, a song humming in her throat and the tingle from a quick peck on her cheek that Samantha made her slightly wobbly way through the darkness towards building 24 and her bed. She made an effort not to make any noise after she entered the house, so she wouldn't wake up her housemates. The irritatingly sober little voice at the back of her mind reminded her that drunk people never were as silent as they thought and she might as well not even try, but she ignored that. She wasn't particularly drunk anyway, she thought as she pulled on her oversized sleeping t-shirt and snuggled in under the blankets. Just enough to be nicely fuzzy. She closed her eyes and listened to the sounds of the night. The creaking of the building in the wind. The chirping of the cricket-analogs outside. The snoring of Elma over in the corner. The soft crying of Louisa in the next partition over.

Samantha's eyes snapped open. Crying? Without thinking about it, she slid out of bed and tiptoed over to Louisa's bed. She sat down on the edge of it, behind Louisa's back.

"Hey," she said. "Bad date with the sergeant?"

It was a few moments before Louisa had caught her breath enough to reply.

"No," she said, "the date was fine."

"Are you going to see her again?" Samantha said, since she couldn't think of anything better.

"Maybe," Louisa said. "I don't know."

Samantha reached out and stroked Louisa's shoulder. Louisa turned over to face her, grabbed her hand and held on as if it was a life line and she was drowning. Without letting go of the hand, Samantha moved so she was leaning against the head of the bed, and Louisa's head was resting on her stomach.

"Why are you crying?" Samantha whispered. She stroked Louisa's dark hair with her free hand, hoping that it'd be taken as the comforting gesture it was meant as.

A strangled, bitter laugh mixed with the sobs.

"It's stupid," Louisa said.

"Pain's never stupid," Samantha said.

Louisa was silent for so long that Samantha started wondering if she'd fallen asleep.

"Back home," she finally said, "before..."

Samantha kept stroking her hair.

"I was never one for long relationships," Louisa went on. "I'd go clubbing, meet someone, be with them for a night or a week, move on. Some of my friends insisted that I had to be unhappy, but I wasn't. I liked my life."

Samantha remained silent.

"Thing was, after every time I'd met someone new, I'd call my sister. It was like a ritual we had. I'd call and say, hey, I met someone new. She'd say, wow, that's great, maybe this time it's Miss Right. And I'd say no, she's not, but she's got a great ass, or she's fantastic in the sack, or she's really funny, or she can get free tickets to Rangers games, or whatever it was that was special about them."

She wasn't sobbing any more, but Samantha could feel tears growing a wet patch in her shirt.

"So when I came back here tonight, I wanted to call her," Louisa said. "Only I can't do that ever again, because she was on Manhattan when the *fucking* Goa'uld blasted New York City."

Samantha closed her eyes and buried her face in Louisa's hair. For her inner eye, images of Jack being hit by multiple staff weapon blasts flickered past.

"I'm so sorry," she mumbled.

Again, the sad, strangled laugh.

"You lost people too, I'm sure," Louisa said. "I know I'm very, very far from the only one who lost someone. They said in the briefings before we came here that somewhere between a hundred million and a billion people worldwide died in the attack. And do you know what scares me most about those numbers?"

"No," Samantha mumbled. "What?"

"The *span* of them," Louisa said. "There's *nine hundred million* people that may or may not be dead, and we just *don't know*. It scares me stupid."

Samantha turned her head and rested her cheek on Louisa's scalp. For a while they just sat here, finding comfort in simple human presence.

"Sometimes I dream of her," Louisa said. Her voice was stable again, but still full of tired sadness.

"Your sister?" Samantha asked.

"Yes," Louisa said. "I dream that she survived the initial blasts, and got caught under the rubble. That she lay there for days, slowly dying. That she's scared and cries for her big sister to come save her, like when we were kids. I wake with my heart racing a thousand miles an hour, and I just want to rush over there and dig through the concrete with my bare hands."

"I watched my husband die," Samantha said. "He was shot, only yards away from me. There was nothing I could..."

Her voice died off.

"Oh," Louisa said. "I'm sorry."

"At least I never had to doubt what happened."

Again, she sat silent for a time. Again, Louisa broke the silence.

"Do you think it'll ever get better?" she said.

"Yes," Samantha said, without hesitation. "We're alive. We'll heal, and we'll rebuild, and we'll build anew. We just have to decide to do it, to go forward instead of getting stuck in what's gone."

She could almost hear Louisa think.

"Hey, Samantha?" she said after a while.

"Yes?" Samantha said.

"I met someone new."

It took her a few moments to get what Louisa was doing. When she did, she felt tears well up in her own eyes.

"Wow, that's great," Samantha said. "Maybe this time it's miss Right."

"Nah," Louisa said. "But you wouldn't *believe* what she can do with her tongue."

Samantha smiled through her tears.

"Tell me all about it," she said.

Living

Samantha raised her rifle, stuck it slowly over the snow-covered log she was hiding behind and aimed at the animal that had just walked out from behind a large rock. From the look of it, it filled the same ecological niche that boars held on Earth. It had a heavy, low-set body on short legs and a head that hung low over the ground. Large brown tusks protruded from its mouth, making a strong contrast to its thick white fur. All in all, the thing probably weighed more than Samantha and Louisa did together.

"Do we know where its heart is?" Samantha whispered.

"Aim for the head," Louisa said. She was lying next to Samantha behind the log, her own rifle still slung on her back.

The thing started to dig into the frozen earth at the foot of a tree. It broke the surface using its tusks, then scratched the loose fragments away with its feet.

Samantha breathed out, put the crosshairs of her scope in the middle of its head, relaxed and squeezed the trigger. The familiar recoil kick threw her aim off, but by then the bullet was well out of the barrel. After the split second it took her vision to readjust to non-magnified reality, the animal was lying on its side twitching.

"Nice shot," Louisa said. "You've got a talent for this."

They stood up.

"Better wait until it stops moving," Louisa said. "We're not in a hurry, might as well be careful."

"Do you think Kathy will be able to make it taste good this time?" Samantha said.

"I doubt it," Louisa said. "But it's nourishing, and we need the skin. Also, I'm told that some of these things have been bothering the sheep."

The forest was still and silent, any sound efficiently absorbed by the foot-deep snow. The trees hung heavy with white, and thin and chilly sunlight filtered down through their branches.

"What's this thing's name, anyway?" Samantha asked as they were cleaning it out for transport.

"I heard someone call it an ice boar," Louisa said. "Which is a pretty good name, I think."

"It seems apt."

They worked on in silence, cutting off the parts of the animal they didn't want for food, materials or research and put the rest on a small sled. It was heavy and dirty work, and the intense cold didn't make it any easier.

"Did they have to put the site on a planet with winters from Hell?" Samantha muttered, more or less to herself.

"Apparently they thought it'd be nice to have the base in a place that can actually support it," Louisa said. "And this isn't winter from Hell. Gamma Site is on a planet so cold that some of the snow is carbon dioxide rather than water. *That's* winter from Hell."

They strapped the sled to themselves, put on their skis and set off for home. It wasn't easy skiing through the forest pulling a sled, but it still beat walking for several miles through snow that in many places reached waist deep.

The two of them had become close friends, in spite of their very different personalities. As long as they'd been forced to live within easy earshot of each other they'd

both made an effort to stay on good terms, and when the time came to start building a permanent home they'd realized that without the other they'd both be pretty much alone. So they built a house together. One bedroom each, a large common kitchen and once the ground thawed they'd lay the pipes and build a proper bathroom. Until then, they had an outhouse and the common shower hall a minute's walk away.

"I think we should hurry," Louisa suddenly said.

Samantha turned to look at her, and then followed her gaze upwards. While they'd been traveling, the sky had turned from clear blue to a leaden grey.

"Snow?" Samantha asked.

"Almost certainly."

They increased their pace, moving forward in silence and with grim determination.

The truth was that they didn't really know how bad winter on Promise would be, since the first Earth visit to the planet had been less than one local year ago. The official version was that it wouldn't be any worse than the middle of Canada, but Janet had told Samantha that that was really just a guess. They'd had a couple of satellites up taking pictures of cloud movements, and they'd jacked those into climate modeling programs and ran simulations. So if Promise was sufficiently like Earth, they'd be fine.

"And if it's not?" Samantha had asked. They'd been having dinner in Janet's cabin, as they usually did a couple of times a week.

"Then we're either unlucky, it gets much worse and we die," Janet said. "Or we're lucky, it gets less bad and we stay alive."

"Or we could go back to Earth," Samantha said.

Janet shook her head.

"No," she said. "We can't. Or, I guess, we *could*, but it wouldn't do us any good. We're not telling the people here, but Earth is really messed up. The Goa'uld's orbital bombardment threw enough dust into the atmosphere that the global average temperature has dropped almost five degrees already. It's July back home, and there's still snow falling as far south as Houston. There won't be any harvests from the grain belt this year, and international shipping has stopped. Food is already getting scarce, and the Pentagon's estimate is that around 90% of the US population will die from starvation, exposure and disease over the next twelve months. For the rest of the world, nobody really knows, but there's been seismographic signs of nuclear groundbursts in the general area of the Russian-Chinese border."

Samantha stared at her, shocked.

"But we're still getting shipments," she said. "We're getting food and machines and medical supplies and all sorts of stuff from Earth."

Janet got up from her chair and moved over to the window looking out over the snow-covered village.

"So are the other two offworld sites," she said. "Because at the moment it looks like we're the best chance our culture has of surviving."

Samantha tried to absorb that. It wasn't easy.

"So why aren't there any more people coming through?" she said.

"No more are being let through. We already have what's supposed to be enough for a viable colony," Janet said. "And, in case you hadn't noticed, a ten-to-one ratio of women to men. Plus, and this is another thing that I'm not really talking about publically, several pallets of cryogenically frozen sperm and insemination equipment. We'll start encouraging people to use those as soon as we know the colony is stable."

Samantha laughed, a short and joyless laugh.

"We shouldn't have called this place Promise," she said. "We should've called it Ark."

She rose and went to look out the window, carefully placing herself just as close to Janet as she dared. As the other-universe counterparts of herself and Janet had predicted, she'd fallen head over heels in love with this Janet. Unfortunately, it didn't seem like it had worked the other way around. Sure, they were pretty close friends and they spent quite a bit of time together, but every time Samantha tried to go even a little bit further she was ever-so-gently rebuffed.

"I think that's what Gamma are calling themselves," Janet said. "But then, they're mostly living in caves, so maybe they feel it more strongly. And they still haven't found a viable long-term food source."

"What about Alpha?"

Janet sighed.

"Their climate has turned out all right," she said. "The year is much shorter there, so they've already been through two cycles. They're no worse off than us when it comes to food."

"But?"

"But it turns out that Earth metabolisms are like candy to the local microbiology. They're having really bad problems with diseases. They think they'll pull through, but at the moment it's not a fun place to be."

Samantha clasped her hands behind her back.

"So we're the last, best hope?" she said.

Janet gave her a surprised look, then laughed.

"Yeah," she said. "Maybe we should have called the place Babylon 6."

Samantha looked uncomprehendingly at her.

"Oh come on," Janet said. "Surely you must have watched Babylon 5?"

Samantha shook her head. "Was it good?" she said.

"It was excellent," Janet said. "Pity it never got finished."

"I wish I'd seen it," Samantha said.

"Not that it'll at all be the same," Janet said, "but if you wish I could retell at least large parts of it."

Samantha looked down at Janet with a peculiar expression on her face.

"You know it by heart?" she said.

Janet looked back up at her, defiant.

"I've got a good memory, and I liked it enough to watch the episodes over and over again."

"That is so geeky!" Samantha said.

"Well, we can't all be tall blonde Miss Perfects!"

"Oh no!" Samantha said, waving her hands in denial. "I didn't mean it like that! I'm impressed, nothing else!"

Janet glared at her for a few heartbeats.

"So do you want to hear about it or not?" she said.

"I'm all ears."

Janet left the window, sat down and poured herself some cooling coffee.

"Ok," she said. "First you need to know the people."

Samantha sat down as well, in her chair across the table.

"Are they hot?" she asked.

Janet smiled. "Let me tell you about Ivanova..."

From then on, the retelling of Babylon 5 episodes became part of their regular dinners. Samantha suspected that Janet changed and made up quite a bit of it, but she certainly didn't mind. She liked hearing about how Susan Ivanova's and Talia Winters' love grew as they battled the Shadows, no matter how much like wish-fulfillment the stories seemed or how they contradicted each other. And, of course, it was yet another reason to spend time with Janet. Which was both a blessing and a curse. Samantha had hoped that her infatuation with the petite commander would fade over time, as she got to know the real person better. And in a way it did, but only to be replaced with full-blown love. She tried telling herself that it could never be, that Janet wasn't interested, that she couldn't have that kind of relationship with someone under her command. Those thoughts helped, in a way. As the months passed and the winter grew fiercer, Samantha resigned herself to living with an empty heart. She dedicated herself to helping Janet as much as possible, and took the gratitude she got as her reason to wake up in the morning.

And then, one day when she came over to Janet's house for dinner and B5, she found the commander sitting in the darkness staring out through the window.

"Janet?" she said while she shook snow from her parka and hung it up to dry. "What's wrong?"

"It's gone," Janet said. Her voice sounded hollow. The smell of the biochemistry group's moonshine was in the air.

Samantha remained standing by the door, ice melting in her hair and dripping on her thick sweater.

"What is gone?" she said.

"Earth," Janet said.

"What? How can Earth be gone?"

Janet took a swig from a bottle Samantha hadn't seen her holding in the dark.

"No clue," she said. "But neither we nor Ark or Pestilence have got any call-ins from SGC for more than 72 hours now."

"Did you try calling back?"

Janet's nod silhouetted against the slight less dark square of the window.

"It connects just fine. But we can't get any radio contact, and when we shoved a camera through, it showed us a large cave covered in ice. With no DHD, so I'm not sending anybody through to check it out."

Samantha frowned. "That's not even possible. A gate address can't just suddenly start going somewhere else."

Janet shrugged. "As I said, there's no DHD and I'm not going to risk *anybody*. Things were pretty dire at the other end anyway. There was apparently a fair bit of resentment at food and resources being sent offplanet when tens of millions were starving at home. No, I'm sure the SGC is gone. We're on our own."

On an impulse, Samantha knelt next to Janet's chair and gently put arms around the smaller woman.

"Hey," she said. "It'll be all right. We're pretty well prepared. We're going to make it."

Janet turned to look Samantha in the eyes.

"Ark are starving," she said. "I offered to send what little food we can spare, but that wouldn't be enough to make a difference so we decided that it'd just weaken us for no reason. Unless a miracle happens in the next week, they're going to start ship-

ping their hardware over to us. No use for that when they're all dead."

Samantha stayed where she was, trying to put strength into Janet by sheer force of will. Hopefully, at least contact and body heat helped somewhat.

"Pestilence now," Janet went on, "they're kind of all right. They've got enough food, and those of them who still live seem to be immune to the diseases. Problem is, we still have no understanding of the diseases and they kill nine out of ten people who go there. So even if everybody here went to them, the survivors after the sicknesses took theirs would still be below the viability threshold. And we don't dare let anything from there come here, for fear of contagion. They won't give up, of course, but even if they manage not to die out there's no way they'll retain a technological civilization."

Tears ran down Janet's face.

"We're *it*, Samantha," she said. "We're the only chance our culture has of survival. And it's all *my* responsibility. I'm not sure if I can do this."

Samantha felt as if the howling winter outside had blown into her and frozen her insides.

"Hush," she said. "Of course you can do it. You've done it until now, haven't you? Everybody here trusts you."

That wasn't what she really wanted to say. She wanted to tell Janet that she didn't have to be alone, that she only had to whisper a yes and Samantha would be at her side to support and help her every second of every hour of every day. But she didn't. If Janet had wanted that, she'd have said something long ago, so saying it now would only add to her burdens.

Janet let her head drop forward and rested her forehead against Samantha's.

"What if I get it wrong?" she said in a low and scared voice. "What if we all die?"

"Then nobody will ever know," Samantha said in an equally low voice. "If you do it, which I'm sure you will, we'll all think you're a hero. And if you fail, there'll be nobody to criticize you."

Janet laughed a little.

"Cold comfort," she said.

"Better than none," Samantha said.

Janet moved her head away far enough that she could see Samantha clearly.

"Samantha?" she said.

"Yes?"

"Promise you won't leave me?"

Samantha's mouth went dry. Her hands went sweaty and the room swam around her.

"I won't," she somehow managed to get out. "As long as you want me here, I'll never leave. I promise."

"She shouldn't be called Colonel any more," Louisa said a few days later.

They were out hunting again. Kathy and her chef team had finally figured out a way to make ice boar taste good, which combined with its habit of bothering livestock had made it their primary prey.

"Why not?" Samantha said.

"Well, she rules the entire planet, doesn't she?" Louisa said. "Someone who does that should have a cooler title than colonel."

It had been a good hunting day. They shot two already, and marked them for pickup by snowmobile. They'd found spoor of a third, and was closing in on it. On

Earth, they would've been dead silent, but for some reason many animals on Promise had very poor hearing. Including the ice boars.

"Like what?"

"I don't know. Dictator? Supreme Ruler? Empress?"

"Nah," Samantha said. "Too showy. If anything, I think it should be something simple. Like 'Boss'."

Louisa climbed over a fallen tree.

"Boss," she said. "Boss Fraiser. Yeah, that kind of works."

She stepped off the tree and immediately sank down to her armpits in loose snow.

"Fuck!" she said. "I hate this damn snow! How long is it going to last anyway?"

Samantha climbed up onto the tree, and with joined efforts they got Louisa up from the snow and onto the trunk.

"Month before last," Samantha panted. "According to our projections."

Louisa glared at her.

"Your projections are crap," she said.

"Yeah," Samantha said. "We kind of figured."

"So are we going to die?"

Samantha shook her head. "The weather hasn't got much worse in the last few months," she said. "Hunting is good enough that we won't starve, even if it'll be a bit of an involuntary Atkins diet. We'll be all right. People live in worse places on Earth."

Louisa looked up to where the wind tore the tops of the trees. It was almost still down by the ground, but up there it looked quite uncomfortable.

"Are there places like this on Earth?" she said.

"Well, there are places with the snow and the cold. Maybe not any with this kind of wind."

They both looked up again. For a few moments, all that could be heard was the wind's steady howl.

"How bad *is* the wind?" Louisa asked.

"I think we should have another look at that," Samantha said.

The government of Promise met in the dining hall. There had been talk about building a dedicated administrative building, but Janet didn't like it. She preferred to hold meetings where people could see. It built trust, she said. Let the citizens of the colony feel that they knew what was going on.

So when there was something to be talked about that everybody probably shouldn't hear, they started the meeting with the most mind-numbingly dull items they could find until all listeners had left. Then they got down to business.

"The short of it is that the climatology team's assumption that Promise works like Earth wasn't quite true," Samantha said. "And since we placed our meteorology measurement stations according to Earth best practice, we've missed that until now."

She was standing in front of the free-standing whiteboard they put up when they had meetings. So far, there was nothing written on it. Around the table in front of her sat Janet, lieutenant Greensmith and the heads of the supply, construction and strategic planning groups.

"What does this mean, in practical terms?" asked the head of strategic planning, a 30-something woman by the name of Kate Tailor.

"First, the winter is going to last a lot longer than we thought. Our current best estimate is another 26 Earth months," Samantha said. "Fortunately, it shouldn't get any

colder than it is now, so we should be able to deal with that."

Tailor nodded. "Yes," she said. "Not fun, but not a disaster either."

"The bad part is the wind," Samantha continued. "We now expect that to reach about 40 meters per second over the next few weeks, and stay there for the next twenty months."

"That's one hell of a storm," the head of construction said. She was the youngest of them, a slim, dark woman by the name of Sonya Macek.

Samantha nodded. "The local ecosystem has adapted to it," she said. "The branches of the firs entangle, and form a kind of roof. Below it, there will be almost no wind at all."

"So what's the problem?" Greensmith said.

"The problem is," Janet said, "that we cleared away a whole lot of trees to build the village. We don't have any protection against the wind."

Samantha nodded. "Exactly."

Lisa Hudson from strategic planning sighed. "So what do we do?" she said. "A couple of weeks is nowhere near enough to move the entire village in under the trees. Can we wind-proof the buildings somehow?"

"Nope," Macek said. "Simply don't have the materials. The way we've built things so far, they should stand up to maybe 20 meters per second. Any more, and they're going to get really drafty."

"Um, actually," Samantha said, "I think we do have a construction material that might do."

"Oh yeah?" Macek said. "And where have you hidden that?"

Samantha smiled a little.

"In the wells," she said. "At the temperatures we're going to have for the next two years, ice is as strong as concrete. All we have to do is figure out a decent reinforcement material and a way to apply it to the buildings. The pumps are already designed to be good down to minus forty or so, and we have plenty of power to run them."

Macek blinked. "Ice," she said. "Yeah, I guess that could work. The norwegians used it back home, didn't they?"

Samantha nodded. "For temporary harbors in the Arctic. They reinforced the ice with straw."

"Hard to get straw from under the snow," Macek said. "But we can start out using packing material from all the crates from Earth. Yeah, this could really work."

"Do it," Janet said. "Wake people up and start right now. We don't know how much time we have. Start with the warehouses, workshops and the like. Do homes last. If we don't finish them in time, people can sleep in the dining hall, or we can convert a couple of workshops back into dormitories."

Macek stood up.

"Yes, sir," she said and hurried off.

Samantha and Janet walked back to their homes through the wind and cold. Louisa and Samantha had built their house as close to Janet's as politically possible, on Samantha's insistence, so they were headed in the same direction. Occasionally, Samantha wondered if that had really been such a good idea. It made it very hard to forget Janet's existence.

Not that she would have even if she hadn't seen her house from her bedroom window.

"Do you know how glad I am that you came here?" Janet said.

Samantha shrugged. "Sonya is smart," she said. "She would've figured out the ice thing eventually."

"But probably not before we had some losses," Janet said. "This way, with a bit of luck, we won't lose anything. How did you figure it out anyway, when the meteorologists missed it for months?"

"The ice boars' hearing," Samantha said.

Janet frowned inside her heavy fur-lined hood.

"The ice boars' hearing is crap," she said.

"Exactly," Samantha said. "While Earth boars have excellent hearing. So something made good hearing not be an evolutionary advantage here. And, well, howling wind for three years out of every four would do that. Once I thought of that I moved a couple of measuring stations up above the treetops, we plugged the new data into the models and there we were."

"The influence of boar's ears on climatology," Janet said. "How are you with butterflies in far-off countries?"

"I'll let you know when I run into one."

Janet laughed. The sound of it made Samantha feel unreasonably happy.

"I stand by my earlier statement," Janet said. "I am so glad that you came here."

Suddenly, she reached her arms up, grabbed Samantha's hood, pulled her down and gave her a quick kiss on the lips.

Samantha's mind went blank. The instant froze, as if the intense night cold had suddenly permeated her brain. All there was was an eternal moment where Janet's lips touched hers.

Janet let her go again. Their faces were still only a handspan apart.

"Um," Janet said, suddenly looking nervous. "I'll see you in the morning, ok?"

"Yeah, sure," Samantha's mouth said with only marginal input from her brain. "In the morning."

Janet turned and quickly walked off towards her house.

The next few weeks were hectic. Sonya Macek and Samantha took turns overseeing the ice-reinforcement of the village, Sonya doing the day shift and Samantha the nights. When she wasn't busy with that, Samantha tried to keep track of the weather. Day by day, satellite photos showed huge pressure systems building symmetrically on each side of the equator, systems that they now were sure would remain stable for the many months that would pass before the planet again wobbled its eccentric way close to its sun. Day by day, the winds grew stronger and the ice work got more frantic. Samantha kept a kind of countdown on a big piece of paper on the dining hall wall. This is how much wind our non-reinforced houses will take. This is how strong the wind is now. This is how fast it grows. This is when the curves intersect in a howl of broken timber and shattered belongings.

With one week to go until the red zone, neither Samantha nor Janet or Sonya slept at all. There were too many houses and too little time. Reluctantly, the triage of homes began. Samantha made sure that Janet's house got treated early, and was too tired to care that her own and Louisa's remained to be done. The world turned into a continuous nightmare of darkness, freezing cold, ice and merciless wind. Exhaustion turned her into an automaton, a being with no feelings or reactions other than those needed to get the work done. Other people were like shadows around her.

When they finally lost the race against time and the wind started tearing the house she was working on apart, what she felt as the huge logs came tumbling over her was

an intense sense of relief.

Slowly, Samantha drifted into consciousness. Time passed, and all of a sudden she remembered having been awake for a little while, while also remembering not having known that a moment ago. Consciousness brought with it a feeling of softness and warmth, the sound of howling wind in the distance and a dull constant ache. She tried to move her hand, and the ache exploded into slashing knives of pain. She gasped.

"Samantha?" a voice said. Janet's voice. "Are you awake?"

With an effort, Samantha opened her eyes. Above her was a slanted ceiling made from logs. Drying herbs hung from lines stretched from one side of the room to the other. She knew those herbs. She'd gathered quite a few of them herself, and hung them on the lines in Janet's bedroom.

"What happened?" she said. The slashing pain punctuated every breath she took.

"Your house collapsed," Janet said. "You got an entire wall over you. Fortunately you fell into the snow, so you weren't entirely crushed, but you have several cracked ribs and probably a concussion."

The pain looked like a huge red-black thing squeezing her field of vision.

"Hurts," she said.

"I'll get you some more morphine," Janet said. "Try to sleep, if you can."

There was a pinprick in her arm, and soon after she sank back down into blessed darkness.

The next time she woke up was more abrupt. She just opened her eyes and was awake. There were much fewer aches and pains, and she felt rested and clear-headed. Tight bandages encircled her chest, making it a little hard to breathe. Which was a vast improvement over the pain she dimly remembered from before. Slowly and with effort, Samantha sat up in the bed.

She was still in Janet's bedroom, which was a mess. Trays with half-eaten meals littered the large table, together with a lot of coffee mugs. Wrappers and containers for used medical supplies were thrown in the corners. Clothes lay strewn randomly around the room. Just about the only well-ordered part was the bedside table, on which non-used medical supplies were carefully lined up.

And, finally, on the hard wooden floor next to the bed, lay a sleeping Janet Fraiser.

Samantha sat looking at her until she woke up.

"Hi," she said as a still sleep-confused Janet looked up at her.

"Oh," Janet said. "Hi. How are you feeling?"

"Pretty good, considering," she said. "How long have you been here? And why am I not in the infirmary? I hope it hasn't been damaged?"

Janet sat up and shook her head to clear it. She reached out for a coffee mug, and quickly swallowed a few mouthfuls of room-temperature black liquid.

"The infirmary is fine," she said.

Samantha waited for the rest of the answer.

Janet got up from the floor.

"Do you think you're up for eating something?" she said. "I took you off the IV a while ago, so you should be getting hungry soon."

Samantha frowned. "IV? How long have I been lying here?"

"It's been four and a half days since the accident," Janet said. "You've been here since then."

Samantha just looked at her, letting the earlier question fill the silence.

"I, um," Janet said, not quite looking Samantha in the eyes. "I just couldn't stand having somebody else treat you. I had to make sure it got done right."

Samantha smiled. "Thank you," she said. "And I am getting hungry."

"Right," Janet said. She picked up a radio and spoke briefly to someone in the kitchens. Then she sat down in a chair at the foot of the bed.

"Food will be here soon," she said.

Samantha leaned back against the pillows and closed her eyes. She was already getting tired again.

"I shouldn't be doing this," Janet said.

Samantha opened her eyes.

"What?" she said.

"I shouldn't be treating you like this. I should have let them take you to the infirmary like anybody else."

There were tears in her eyes, on the verge of spilling out.

"But I panicked," she continued. "When I saw those huge logs fall over you, I just panicked. I didn't care what happened to anybody or anything else, I just had to make sure that you got saved."

Samantha kept silent. She didn't know what to say.

"I don't think I can be your friend any more," Janet said, and now the tears were running down her cheeks.

Samantha's heart stopped. Or, at least, it felt like it did.

"What?" she said. "Why?"

"Because I'm not your friend," Janet said. "I haven't been for months. I'm in love with you. I don't know when or where or how it happened, but I am. I'm sorry. I'll just have to keep my distance from you."

The stopped heart inside Samantha started beating again, and its fuel was, to her own surprise, anger. No, something stronger than that. *Fury*. Cold, barely under control fury.

"Like *hell* you will," she said. "I won't accept that. If you go, I'll follow. I came here because I thought there might be a chance for a good life here, and there is. There is good work to be done. There is good people who I can help. There is a community to help build. There is a wonderful, beautiful woman to love, who just told me she loves me back. I'm *not* going to lose any of that. I've lost enough already, we all have. I'm not taking it any more."

She paused to catch her breath. Janet looked at her with a mixed expression on her face.

"I'm the commander here," she said. "I can't be in a relationship with any of my subordinates."

"Says who?" Samantha said. "The Pentagon? They're not there any more."

"Social dynamics," Janet said. "It's no good in the long run. People get wrong ideas."

"They already treat me like your second-in-command," Samantha said. "Everybody already knows that our relationship is more than professional. So that's no excuse."

"Never the less," Janet said. "I'll stay alone."

Samantha stared at her.

"Do you intend for the colony to fail?" she said.

Janet frowned. "What?"

"Well, that's the signal you'll be sending out, isn't it? That we should look back, adhere to old rules that no longer apply. That doing things like they've always been

done is more important than living."

"That's not..." Janet started. Samantha interrupted her.

"You could do the opposite, you know," she said. "Lead by example. Show the way forward. Show that *you* at least are planning for a future. Build a life. Get a family. Be a beacon of hope for everybody else."

For a time, they looked at each other in silence.

"I'm trying to think of why I can't do that," Janet said. "I can't come up with anything. But I'm not sure if that's because there isn't anything, or because I just want it too much."

"The people who planned this colony meant for there to be families," Samantha said. "They meant for us to grow and prosper. I can't imagine they meant for you alone to stand outside of that."

She could see a wave of relief pass through Janet. The worry and tears on her face were replaced by a smile. A tired and wan one, but still a smile.

"So what happens now?" Janet said.

"If I get to decide," Samantha said, "you come over here and give me a good, long kiss."

Janet got up from her chair and walked over to the bed. She sat down next to Samantha. She started putting her arms around her, and leaned forward into a warm embrace.

Samantha screamed.

Instantly, Janet jumped back.

"Oh my god!" she said. "Your ribs! I'm so sorry!"

Samantha blinked away the tears of agony that blurred her vision. With the pressure gone, the pain was fading fast.

"That's all right," she said. "I asked for it, didn't I?"

"I'm your doctor," Janet said. "I should've known better."

"I still want a kiss," Samantha said.

Carefully, Janet sat back down on the edge of the bed. She leaned forward as gently as she possibly could. Their lips met, and opened into delight.

Future

After more than two Earth years of winter, spring was unbelievably welcome. After more than two years of constant howling storm, clear blue sky and soft winds were like a dream come true. The human village's houses lost their supporting ice coverings. The wind-powered generators that had let them save their Earth-provided Naquitar reactors for future need was being replaced by ones harnessing rivers of melted snow coming down the mountain. Fields were being cleared, and seeds were getting ready to be planted. Fresh shoots from the forest were already supplementing their diets. Life was, in short, quite good. The colony had lived through the winter, and knowing what would be coming made them feel certain that they'd make it through the next one just fine.

Boss Fraiser was pacing back and forth in front of the recently de-iced infirmary, paying no attention either to the warmth of spring or the sunshine. Her face was set into a frown, that occasionally deepened into a scowl as she looked up at lieutenant Greensmith on the infirmary porch.

"Remember, *you* ordered me to do this," Greensmith said, waving his P90 assault rifle in the general direction of Janet.

"I know," she said. "And I regret it."

"Sam wants it," he pointed out.

Janet clenched her hands into fists.

"I know," she said. "That's kind what makes this hard instead of impossible."

From inside the infirmary, a bloodcurdling scream came.

Janet stopped her pacing and winced.

"A few more like that and I *will* go in!" she said.

"In which case you ordered me to shoot you," Greensmith said.

Janet looked at him.

"Come on," she said. "You wouldn't shoot *me*."

"Have I ever disobeyed one of your orders?" he said.

Janet glared at him, then resumed her pacing. She had already worn a visible path in the fragile spring grass. She hated this kind of waiting with a passion. As long as it was anything medical, she wanted to be in there and in control. But this time Sam had convinced her that she'd be too emotionally involved to be reliable, and she should stay outside. It wasn't even as if it was a procedure, as such. It was a straightforward part of life, as old as the species. So she waited, and she paced, as the hours passed and the slightly too yellow sun traveled slowly across the slightly too blue sky.

An eternity later, the door opened. Janet had long since decided that something had gone seriously wrong and everyone inside the infirmary was long dead. Of old age.

"She can come in now," Louisa said.

Janet was up on the porch and through the door before Greensmith had even put aside his rifle. She stormed through the waiting room into the little six-bed ward where she knew Sam would be. Pulse racing, she forced herself to slow down before she walked in.

In the bed closest to the window Sam sat. The spring sunlight shone on her, glinting off her blonde hair. Hair that was mussed and sweaty, sticking out every which way. Sam herself looked worn and tired, and had the most beatific smile on her face

that Janet had ever seen.

In Sam's arms, held against her bared chest, a small dark-haired bundle suckled her first meal.

Janet stopped dead, unsure what to do. Sam looked up at her.

"Hey," she said. "Why are you all the way over there?"

Carefully, so as not to disturb the baby, Janet approached and sat down on the bed. She reached out and gently caressed the small, downy-haired head.

"Say welcome to Promise's first native," Sam said. "Isn't she beautiful?"

"Very," Janet said. "Welcome, little one."

They sat there, watching, while the baby drank her fill and fell asleep. In the distance, the infirmary staff cleaned away the remains of the birth.

"Have you decided which name you want to give her yet?" Janet asked.

"Yes," Sam said.

She looked into her beloved's eyes and smiled.

"Cassandra," she said. "Your daughter's name is Cassandra."