**Long Ago (And Far Away)**

by kristen999

**Summary**

WWII-based AU. The Team as we know it has been transplanted to the South Pacific. (Originally written and posted elsewhere in 2009.)

**Notes**

Notes: Everybetty and I wrote this many years ago and I thought it should be archived on AO3. I imported the chapters and fought with photobucket which tried to steal all the art that went with this. (It still holds some images captive). Enjoy!

Original Author notes:
There was an immense amount of research involved in this undertaking; however, we are not historians, so please be aware there will probably be inaccuracies and we did take some liberties with a few historical facts and military protocol for creative license reasons. Includes swearing and ethnic, racial and gender-based slurs as was typical of the time.
Chapter One

The sunset was gorgeous, reds and deep oranges embracing a serene blue sea. The moment was absolutely perfect, something to cherish and hold on to. But, like all beautiful moments, it was fleeting, brought to a sudden halt as reality came crashing down.

The throaty rumbling of cassowary calls and the cries of the seemingly always mating riflebird competed with the hum of a million buzzing insects. It was the same battle every day and raged from dawn to dusk on New Guinea. The creepy-crawlies had won this round, their noise drowning out anything on two or four legs. That is, until the 475th Fighter Group and their eighty-eight engines arrived.

John slapped his neck, crushing whatever was dining there into a bloody smear. With miles of peaceful ocean in front of him, it was hard to imagine the swarms bursting out of the jungle behind him. Chiggers, wasps, cockroaches, fleas. They were a relentless pestilence, as if on orders from Tokyo to devour them whole.

He flicked his wrist and looked at his watch; twenty hundred hours had come and gone. He was late. He wiggled his toes in the sand while glaring at his dusty boots. Socks that hadn’t seen real soap in
over three weeks were stuffed inside the heavy Red Wings. He hated having to put them back on, but his men were waiting.

Groaning loudly he stood, both knees popping, but he never tore his eyes away from the lapping waves as he forced his feet into crusty socks and old leather. He’d stop by his tent to splash on some Aqua Velva to cover up the aviation fuel and sweat that clung to his skin. Maybe he’d put on a pair of pants. Sometimes it sucked being an officer when all he wanted to do was hang out in shorts and a t-shirt.

His cap was crushed from being used as a pillow for too long so he bent it back into shape and swatted the air around his face with it, fending off a squadron of bloodsucking mosquitoes. No use wearing it; the weather was just too damn hot. He made his way up the beach and had just stepped up to the dirt road when a jeep nearly clipped him.

Oily brakes screeched and a pimply-faced kid no older than eighteen jumped out. “Oh, Lord. Sorry, sir. Are you--”

“Stand down, Private. I wasn’t paying attention to where I was going.”

“I just didn’t see you, sir. And my L-T said he was gonna chew my ass a new one if I didn’t bring him--”

“Take a deep breath, Private…”

“O’Malley, sir!” the squirrelly private shouted as he saluted.

Milk-white skin covered in a multitude of freckles and a carrot-orange crew cut. Could the kid be anymore Irish? “It’s fine. No harm, no foul. Go on. I wouldn’t want your CO to be pissed that I kept you.”

“Yes, sir. Thank you, sir,” the private stammered, scrambling into his jeep and nearly stripping the clutch as he gunned the engine.

John grimaced at the painful sound of the jeep stop-starting before taking off down the dirt road. He checked the time again and sighed. “Crap.”

He doubled-timed it back to his bunk with a watchful eye peeled for privates barely old enough to drive. His quarters were at the far end of the base, close (sometimes too close) to the officers’ latrine and the mess hall.

The door flap of the canvas tent had been closed up tight and he sighed with familiar resignation as he began working the recalcitrant zipper. It got stuck halfway up the flap but he managed to yank it down and step through, only to have a web of mesh attack him. “Damn it, McKay!” he growled to himself as he tried to detangle from the triple layer of netting.

By the time he changed into a fresh tee and slid his arms into his khaki over-shirt he was sweating through both layers. He looked down at his boots, remembered why he laced them loose, and chucked them off before quickly pulling on a pair of trousers.

His crew was going to kill him for being so late.

He stripped the belt from his shorts, threaded it through the loops of his pants and verified that his knife and .45 were secured. The trunk by his bed was unlocked despite McKay’s insistence that the Aussies stationed on the base had sticky fingers. He opened the lid and shook his head.
What on Earth McKay could think he had that was worth stealing? His clothes stank to high heaven; sea water and a sprinkling of laundry powder got rid of grease and oil stains but not much else and a few of his t-shirts could crawl away on their own after too many forty-eight hour stints of not changing.

He shoved his clothes to the side and dug around for his comb. It was only as he spied the sorry-looking, broken-toothed thing on the floor of the chest that it dawned on him that a few issues of his Superman comics were missing.

“You’re a dead man, McKay,” he muttered.

Standing before the broken mirror attached to the center tent pole he tried to wrangle into place his unruly hair but the humidity had made it untamable. It was a pointless battle, but he figured he’d try to appear presentable for tonight. Then again, he wasn’t gonna try too hard. Officially he was off duty, so he didn’t do anything about his heavy five o’clock shadow.

The walk to the officers’ club was a minefield of tent stakes and inches-deep puddles of mud left by the daily deluges. Briefly panicked, he patted down his shirt front then smiled as he remembered, and pulled a wrinkled pack of Lucky Strikes and a Zippo running low on butane from his pants pocket. It took a couple tries for the flint to ignite in the damp before he lit the end of his cigarette. Smoking gave him a few seconds of clarity only matched in the highest altitudes of the sky. Or, according to a certain annoying navigator, it was a false, chemically toxic high. McKay could be so annoying.

John hurried past airmen and soldiers, nodding instead of saluting at those he passed. The deafening roar of engines overhead gave him pause as he counted the P-38 Invaders returning from supplying artillery fire for the Marine battalions making their way in-country twenty miles north. The landing strip was at the far end of the base and it had only taken him a few days to get used to the noise of the hourly takeoffs and landings before he could sleep right through them.

The P-38s were attack craft with sleek bodies painted in dark and light greens. The twin propellers were huge, able to push speeds up to four hundred and fifty mph and they had glass noses instead of solid steel bearing the squadron’s emblem.

“They all make it back?”

John glanced up to see the smiling face of Captain Evan Lorne. His dress shirt was completely unbuttoned and both sleeves were rolled up. The captain sported a two day-old beard which was surprising since he was usually a weird stickler for regs. Then again, John couldn’t recall the last time he’d seen a can of shaving cream; they’d all been forced to use soapy water that left razor burns.

It was tough enough for ships to bring them food provisions let alone ‘luxury’ items. Thankfully New Guinea had enough berries, bananas, and pineapples to supplement their C-rations. They’d also hired a few of the locals to climb trees loaded with fresh coconuts, since many airmen had learned the hard way that the rotted ones on the ground caused dysentery.

“Not sure. The 5th Squadron returned from a bombing run earlier... we lost three escort fighters to heavy fire.” John exhaled heavily. “Resistance’s been pretty fierce.”

“Capturing Noemfoor Island’s the final step in MacArthur’s grand plan,” Lorne remarked with only a little contempt as he lit a cigarette. “Bombing Biak using Navy carriers isn’t working. If we capture those airfields the Japs built at Noemfoor, we’re only ten miles from their main airbase.”

“Yeah, bomb the hell out of Biak and hope we weaken their forces enough for those crazy paratroopers,” John remarked, having memorized the objectives. Things always sounded better on
Lorne chuckled. “You don’t like jumping out of airplanes, sir?”

“I prefer staying inside the cockpit. Besides, all this is just warm up. We capture Biak and we’ve got a launching pad to strike Vogelkop. And that leaves fifteen thousand Japanese troops between us and retaking the rest of Western Guinea. Piece of cake.”

They all knew MacArthur’s real objective. The whole Guinea campaign was another step on his path back to the Philippines and it didn’t matter how much blood was spilled to get there. The drive was relentless. Island after island. Landing after landing. Always moving west. The death toll on both sides was ringing into the thousands. But no one spoke out loud about the general and his plans; John had learned that the hard way.

He kept his eye on the sky, counting the returning planes. “Eighteen. Looks like we lost two,” he sighed as he crushed his cigarette with the toe of his boot, taking with it a few of the dozens of bugs that wriggled all over the ground. Damn place was infested with insects, but that’s what happened when you cut and burned down a jungle to plant your base on.

No sooner had one squadron returned than the next one took off, the sky now filling with the Flying Knights. John’s heart raced along with the P-38 fighters as they set off to protect the vulnerable B-29s readying on the east airfield. The raids were constant, reaching an almost non-stop twenty-four pace of bombing, and the engineers had cleared out a third landing strip just to keep pace with the relentless attacks.

John watched the fighters take off from the rocky roadway, imagining his hands on the throttle and the adrenaline rush of twelve thousand pounds of aircraft under his control.

“You miss chasing Zeros?” Lorne asked, his eyes glued to the fighter planes.

“Naw, they still chase me,” John said, smiling. “If I recall, one almost took out your tail the other day.”

“What can I say? All those cameras make my bird heavy in the ass,” Lorne chuckled.

The two of them stood there, watching the flying fortresses take off next and silently wishing all the crews success. The lighter, more maneuverable P-38s would engage any Japanese air opposition and hopefully clear the skies for the heavy bombers to drop their payloads.

“I can’t imagine flying one of those beasts,” Lorne said, pulling out another cigarette.

“I have.”

“Of course you have.” John shot him a dirty look and Lorne smiled. “I mean, with your colorful career, I shouldn’t be surprised you’ve been in a B-29.”

“Is that your kind way of saying I’m old, Captain?”

“You weren’t there when the Wright Brothers took off at Kitty Hawk?”

John only had three or four years on the Captain. “You know, my engine had a hell of a squeal on our last mission. Maybe I should have you dismantle it and oil all the gears. Shouldn’t take you more than ten hours.”

Lorne’s smile disappeared. “Or maybe I’ll buy you a drink.”
“Now you’re talking,” John said, clapping him on the back.

“Besides, I doubt McKay would let me touch a single cog of his precious modifications,” Lorne snorted.

John wanted to throttle the genius who put the officers’ club in the middle of camp. Walking through pockets of steam made his t-shirt fuse to his skin and he flapped the collar of his over-shirt in a futile attempt to cool down.

Lorne took a long swallow from his canteen and pressed it to his sweaty forehead. “Maybe Pete scored some ice today.”

“I’ll give him my Miss June pin-up for a cold beer.” John laughed then stopped short in front of the large, inviting tent. “Crap. I forgot to check the daily fuel reports,” he sighed, and started to turn away.

Lorne grabbed John’s shoulder. “With all due respect, sir, we’ve done over five hundred sorties in the last three months. We have a couple days off. How about enjoying them?”

“And if this week’s supply transport got hit and all our extra fuel and ammunition are at the bottom of a coral reef?”

“Then it’s Colonel O’Neill’s problem for the next seventy-two hours, sir. Let him duke it out with the Navy brass. That’s his job.” Lorne pushed open the flap. “There’re real electric fans in there.”

Dusk was settling in with storm clouds ready to dump another five inches of rain. It down-poured every day as the monsoon season started gearing up again. John scanned the thick brush that threatened to overrun the base with its vines and trees.

“Don’t think it’s dark enough for one of her visits, sir,” Lorne said quietly.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about. Come on; let’s go in before McKay sends the MPs to find us.” But John gave the jungle one last glance before joining his waiting crew for a much needed night of relaxation.

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The officers’ club was a 20 by 20 green Army tent that leaked at every seam, despite fifty degree declines for all the water to drip down the top flaps. It was the officer with the least seniority’s duty to go around and replace the overflowing buckets during a storm. Plywood boxes outnumbered chairs to sit on while men played cards on fold-up tables and empty munitions crates.

The bar stood in the back; several members of the 5th Air Corp Engineers had built it after clearing away acres of impenetrable jungle for the runway.

“This is the Allied Radio Network with your news for this June 18, 1944.”

John tuned out the newscast, not wanting to hear about the war effort. He stood in front of a small fan circulating the same hot air in a fruitless effort to cool down, and started listening again when Benny Goodman drifted out of the crackling speakers.

“Can I get ya something, Major?”
John tossed a smile and a nod at the tall, gangly kid behind the bar. Corporal Pete Petoskey was as laid back as he was lanky. He’d been a young bartender in Detroit at night and apprenticed as a plumber during the day before the draft snagged him. His casual manner helped balance the daily stress involved with maintaining supplies for hundreds of vehicles and the miles of bureaucratic red tape that went with it. He was also the scratch man for off the book supplies and that made the twenty-something very popular.

“Got anything other than jungle juice?” John inquired, giving Pete a charming smile. Alcohol was scarce; the last real supplies had gone dry months ago and now the only source of inebriation was fermenting the fruit around the island, or worse – soaking bread in rubbing alcohol and mixing it with grapefruit juice.

“For you and your men? I’ve got rum.”

“No shit?” Lorne grinned from ear to ear.

John had been prepared to give away Miss May and Miss June for some watered-down beer. He was still dumbstruck when a glass appeared in front of him and his eyes grew wider at the three ice cubes melting at the bottom.

Pete was cool as a cucumber, pouring the unlabeled bottle of liquor as if it was the brown water they boiled daily. Who knew how long it had taken to smuggle it or cook it up in the back of the mess. One thing was for sure, each bottle would fetch a week’s pay. John swirled the drink in his glass before sipping, showing his appreciation of the effort and the risks probably taken in obtaining it.

A scan of the other tables told him that several other crew members had already enjoyed a couple rounds. Good. They deserved it. And considering what their next set of orders was…well. Nope. He wasn’t supposed to think about that for the next seventy-two hours.

“Thanks, Pete.”

The corporal smiled. “No problem, sir. Sergeant Dex’s already used it to sucker a bunch of guys from the 112th outa two months pay. He said he got tired of waiting for you to show up.”

That would explain where his gunner was. John spotted Ronon at one of the far tables, dealing a hand of poker; a single bottle sat next to a stack of chips.

“How much does he have to wager with?” he asked.

“Oh, about a pint. He took a couple of glasses with him, but he hasn’t lost even a shot’s worth,” Pete chuckled.

“That’s because his expression is always the same,” Lorne piped in.

The bartender cocked his head in confusion until John added, “Yeah. Always pissed off.”

The three of them laughed, and the officers tapped the bottoms of their glasses onto the bar in salute before taking large swallows. The rum left a trail of fire down John’s throat, forcing his eyes closed.

“Jesus!” he exclaimed, nearly choking on the vile liquid.

“It’ll put hair on your chest, sir,” Pete laughed.

“I’d say that’s already covered,” John choked out between bouts of coughing.
“Oh, for crying out loud. Are you drunk already, Major? I only stepped out for a few minutes,” a familiar voice whined.

John’s face was flushed and he reached for the glass of water that Pete had poured in anticipation. After gulping down half the tepid liquid he turned to his other crewmate. “No, not yet, McKay. But gimme enough time and I might.”

Lieutenant Rodney McKay’s over-shirt was still tucked into his trousers and was buttoned all the way up. Even in this sticky, stifling heat he wore long sleeves due to his constant fear of disease-carrying mosquitoes. Consequently, he drank triple the average airman’s water rations and complained more about the miserable weather than anyone.

McKay scowled at John. “If you ask me, things were better during Prohibition.”

“No one did,” Lorne muttered under his breath.

McKay whirled on the captain, all gears winding up for full-on rant mode when John grabbed him by the collar and dragged him over to the bar. “Come on, have a shot.”

McKay let out a squawk of protest and swatted John’s fingers away while trying to fix his uniform. “Watch it. Do you know how hard it was to get all the wrinkles out? I had to pay some local fuzzy to hang it on a very tall and precarious tree branch to dry so no one would take it.”

“No one’s gonna steal your clothes and besides...” John wiped his wet hand on his trousers. “They’re already wet.”

“It’s drizzling outside, Major,” McKay huffed.

“Wasn’t raining when we came in,” John said, smiling at Pete as he doled out another shot.

“Gee. Has it been two whole minutes?” McKay groused, crossing his arms.

“Good point,” John conceded, handing him the shot glass.

McKay rolled his eyes at the offered drink. “If I wanted bacteria-laden fruit juice, I’d drink the hooch you force me to concoct for you and Ronon.”

“It’s real ru-um,” John enticed, swirling it under his navigator’s nose.

“Really?” McKay curled his hand around the glass and sniffed it suspiciously. “No citrus, right?”

At John’s very serious headshake he relented. “Wouldn’t want it to go to waste on those who think drinking vinegar serves as a suitable substitute for the real thing,” he muttered before swallowing.

Lorne snickered as McKay gasped at the liquid fire and sprayed rum all over his own t-shirt. “I’m going to find my crew, sir. You guys have fun.”

John leaned back against the bar with a wide grin while his lieutenant’s face went from red to violet. “Did I mention it had a bit of a kick?”

“I just burned through ten thousand brain cells, Major! Remember that the next time you ask me to calculate longitude and latitude when navigation’s on the fritz and visibility’s zero.” McKay grabbed one of the few empty chairs and sat down heavily, pulled off his cap to run his hand through his disheveled hair and waved it at his sweaty face. “The humidity has to be ninety percent in here.”

“Your head stores most of your body heat. Maybe you should leave the hat off,” John suggested.
“Says the guy whose scalp’s not at risk.”

“Risk, McKay?”

“Hello? Malaria, Typhus, Dengue Fever, not to mention the million other tropical diseases carried by a single insect bite. I keep sending letters to HQ about our staggering loss ratios from illness versus battle casualties. Not that any of them have the I.Qs to figure out that the damn insects are the real threat and we should be allocating more research to medical prevention of—”

“Lieutenant.”

“Right. Shutting up.” McKay slid his cap back on and reached for the canteen constantly holstered at his belt and took a long swallow.

Duke Ellington was up next on the radio. John recognized the tune, couldn’t put his finger on it, but it was one of those numbers that got your toe tapping to the beat.

This was what it was all about. Talking and drinking. Relaxing or playing games. Like rare snapshots on the beach. He lived for this. He fought for this.

“Son of a bitch!”

All heads spun at the sound of a chair falling to the floor. One airman was calming another; a deck of cards was scattered across the table. John had seen it a hundred times before. Alcohol and money jacked up tension and stress. Then he noticed how Ronon sat quietly, shuffling another deck, eyes passing briefly over all those at his table.

John was the ranking CO, but he didn’t care for using his oak leaf if he didn’t have to. Blowing off steam was pretty rare on base and was sometimes a much needed diversion. So he watched and waited. Players switched places; new blood replaced those too intoxicated to keep up. It wouldn’t matter, though; Ronon rarely lost at cards.

He watched out for his crewmate as some of the players gathered up their chips, knowing when they were being outplayed. One of the officers headed for the bar to drown his sorrows in liquid comfort. John didn’t recognize the face, but ten new squadrons had just arrived and eight more were due in the next two days.

“Hey, Corporal, how about something that doesn’t taste like gasoline?”

Pete was wiping doggedly at a water ring stain with a dingy cloth, shook his head in response. “Got jungle juice, sir, but it’ll cost ya.”

The officer sighed. “I just lost two weeks pay.”

“Then you still have two weeks left,” Pete said, leaning on the bar with a grin.

The officer’s gaze wandered over to the unlabeled bottle and his eyes grew wide. “Hey, how about some of that rum? I’ll pay whatever you want for it.”

“Sorry, sir. That’s for Major Sheppard’s squadron.”

The lieutenant glanced over, eyes now going even wider as he noticed John for the first time and quickly straightened and started to raise a hand in salute. “Maj--.”

“At ease,” John cut him off.
The officer relaxed a little, but he hadn’t stopped staring, making John uneasy under the scrutiny. “Something bothering you, Lieutenant?”

“No, sir. I mean…it’s just…”

“Just what?”

“You’re Major Sheppard, sir.”

McKay rolled his eyes. “Here we go.”

“Last I checked,” John drawled, taking a swig of his drink.

“You used to fly with the Flying Tigers.”

“Yep, a couple years ago.”

“You hunted down Nips before any of us.”

“Not this again. Who hasn’t heard about your exploits over Burma?” McKay grumbled.

The lieutenant looked like he’d just graduated flight school despite the rank on his sleeve. “Is there anything you could tell me? You know. Some advice? I have a P-40 Warhawk.”

All the aerial drills in the world and hours clocked in the cockpit could never replace real air combat. “How long’ve you been flying, Lieutenant?” John inquired, feeling his every year in the air.

“About three months, sir. But most of that was over the last few weeks, doing mop-up over Borneo.”

John tried not to grimace. Four years ago the Army had controlled the Air Corps. Then after Pearl they’d gone from 500 to 6,000 pilots in under two years and expanded into their own sector of the military, all green recruits. It was hard to imagine being that wet behind the ears. From the cornstalks of Kansas to the tropics halfway across the world. Green airmen with six months of exercises against hardened Japanese pilots with years of dogfights over Manceria.

“Always attack in a group. The Zero can outmaneuver you every time. Don’t enter a turning fight. Always use a slashing attack then dive away to set up the next one.”

“But…I mean. That’s not what we were taught,” the lieutenant questioned.

“Excuse me, but the Tigers suffered fourteen losses and racked up three hundred kills in a single year. I’m assuming basic math competence was required for flight training?”

“McKay…” John warned, part impressed and part embarrassed that his friend knew those stats. He turned to the airman. “The P-40 can achieve a superior attitude much faster than the Zero. Use it to your advantage.”

“Yes, sir. Thank you.”

The young officer stood there, revealing the stress of too much responsibility hefted upon a set of shoulders no older than twenty-one. John didn’t want to talk about combat today. He wanted to drink and argue with his crew about who had the hottest curves, Veronica Lake or Claire Trevor. He was a Lake man himself. Loved the hair and the mystery.

Sweat pooled at his hairline as he flicked away the ants crawling over the bar to give him a few seconds to think. McKay stood up, ready to pull him over to a table for what would probably be a
spontaneous discussion of needed instrument adjustments.

John lived to fly, but that didn’t mean he gloated over those he shot down. But he was surrounded by a bunch of kids; the least he could do was talk to them. “Something else you wanted to know, Lieutenant...?”

“Lieutenant Betts, sir. Um.” The young man looked around; a couple airmen from a nearby table had stopped talking and had begun listening in. “Is it true? You’ve flown bombers and Invaders, too? Before joining the Tigers?”

John had flown more than that, but that wasn’t important. “I’ve been behind the stick of a few fighters.”

“Now you command the 17th Recon Unit.” The lieutenant looked at McKay. “With um...”

“With what?” John pressed, feeling defensive.

“With a very interesting crew,” Lieutenant Betts quickly added.

“They’re the best,” John said proudly.

McKay beamed and John knew there would be no hearing the end of the man’s list of contributions to their current run of successful missions. He reminded himself to keep all future praise out of his navigator’s earshot.

Lieutenant Betts nodded in Ronon’s direction. “Dex. He’s your gunner.”

“Yeah,” McKay said.

Betts cleared his throat. “He’s non-commissioned.”

“Yeah, he’s a non-com.” John challenged. “But he’s part of my crew and he won’t be excluded from any of our activities.” That included allowing him inside the officers’ club, a battle John had fought long and hard for and still put up with a lot flack for breaking such huge protocol, but he’d pulled in every favor in the book. It seemed to have worked for the time being.

Betts nodded. “I hear tell he’s a hell of a gunner. Never seen him in action but know the stories.”

“They’re all true,” John announced.

“If you don’t mind me asking, how did he join your crew?”

“How?”

“Well...he’s not...”

“White.”

“Yeah. I mean, yes, sir.”

John nodded at Pete to pour him another drink. “First off, he’s Polynesian. And secondly, that’s a very interesting story...”

It was pouring again, like it had the day before and the day before that, covering the base in rivers of mud. John’s boots sank all the way to his ankles, and each step made a slurping sound as he trudged
through the gunk. This was his third temporary base in four months and they were gearing up for another drive to the mainland.

And with what? Spitballs?

He stomped through the puddles, splashing rancid water halfway up his pant legs. They hadn’t seen supplies in over twelve days; for all the talk about New Guinea being the Navy’s front, their boats certainly got picked off enough by Jap subs. He hadn’t had eight hours of sleep in the last week. It seemed every night if there wasn’t a storm crashing and rattling its way overhead it was a Jap air raid, sending him and his men scrambling out into the dark in their boxers (for those that bothered wearing them in the heat) to the .50s they had bunkered all over the base.

And if physical action wasn’t needed, his head would take over. He and McKay had been on a boondoggle expedition for badly needed parts for his embattled squadron. At this rate, they were going to have to swap out pieces from the motor pool. And they were done on ordnance.

But he’d be damned if he told his men to fly over Lau to record enemy troop movements with orders to conserve ammunition because they risked running out.

By the time he arrived at the airfield he was soaked to the bone. He shook out his arms, drops raining from his fingertips, sheeting down his arms and face. A quick flick or three of his head had water spraying in all directions.

“What are you, a dog? Jeez! Ever heard of an umbrella?”

“Yeah, you got one?” John grumped, leaving a trail of mud-spattered footprints inside the temporary hangar. No chance of drying off in here either; the tent trapped humidity, turning the hangar into a pressure cooker. If he pinched his skin, it was bound to ooze water.

McKay sat on the ground, surrounded by hundreds of motor parts. John winced at what he was sure was a stroke coming on as he realized it was from their plane. “What the hell? Those are supposed to be inside the bird!”

“Duct tape. I’m trying to repair this… this heap with duct tape!” McKay spat, waving his hands around at the guts of their engine. “You just had to push the limits on our last run, didn’t you? Well guess what, Major? We carry thousands of pounds in radar and surveillance equipment. We’re not a hang-gluder with guns. We’re heavy.”

“Bombs are fuckin’ heavy and I never had a problem before. Besides, we were being shelled. I was just keeping us from meeting some of the Rising Sun’s finest face to face.”

“Next time try getting out of the way of the bullets.”

“I was. In a diving motion,” John replied, demonstrating by drawing his hands in a steep, downward gesture.

McKay was on his feet, pointer finger out like a dagger, face going from pink to scarlet when he couldn’t chew John out like he wanted to.

John didn’t budge while McKay fumed silently, sweat pouring down his rosy cheeks. In some ways John envied his navigator. At least he had something purposeful to do. A task to distract a wandering mind.

They were grounded after all.

“Don’t you have three months worth of pencil pushing to do?” McKay asked finally. His words
were snappy but his features carried less hostility. Were even a little sympathetic and that was something John didn’t want to be on the receiving end of.

“Is there a reason for pulling out the motor when I asked you to look at the left dorsal gun?”

There were those familiar burning blue eyes. John knew exactly how to get the vein in his friend’s left temple throbbing. McKay scowled in righteous indignation. “We have a pair of specially fitted one thousand pound engines.”

“I’m well aware of this.”

“So that means we should be able to fly faster than five hundred miles an hour.”

John laughed. “Those are factory specs to get government contracts. I should know. I used to work for Wright Manufacturing.”

“Really?” McKay expression broke out in wonder. “Are they related to--”

“No, but they thought it’d sell more engines. Though I did hit five-ninety once.” John shrugged. “That was without machine guns or fancy cameras.”

“What’s the point of having specially made turbocharged engines if they don’t live up to their name? No, don’t answer that. I’m not in the mood for some cocky response.”

“They do tend to overheat when I push ‘em too hard.”

“I fixed that problem already. You can thank my ingenuity for coming up with a cooling system.”

“And I did when I gave you six issues of Life.”

McKay snorted, “That you got by trading in moonshine that I distilled.”

“Still cost me a week’s worth of coffee.” McKay seemed genuinely horrified to John’s amusement. “It was worth it. Didn’t want Uncle Sam’s re-fit.” Like hell would he go back to the limitations of 330 mph.

McKay however was a bloodhound on a scent, unable to let go. He picked up a screwdriver and started waving it around. “We’re still inefficient. We’re only hitting four-eighty. These engines have the power capability to reach five-fifty. I just need to fine tune it. Strip out redundancy, lighten a few areas. Maybe I can play with the torque a little but then heat will start building up...”

Rodney McKay was all about science. John never questioned McKay’s mind; in fact, he was often astonished that the man wasn’t locked away in a government lab, constructing the world’s next super weapon. It was amazing luck that he was part of John’s crew. Of course, when John’s luck was on a hot streak, it was on fire. When it was bad... well, those were days he’d rather forget. “I take it that’s a bad thing?”

McKay snorted. “Ever heard of the Laws of Thermodynamics?”

John shot back, “First, second or third? You want Carnot or Thomson’s version?”

Leaving McKay speechless was a win in John’s book, so he took advance and changed fronts. “What about the heavy gun that helps keep us alive?”

“Beyond repair,” his friend huffed.
“That’s not an answer. We can’t spare any Brownings. Hell, we can’t spare any nuts or bolts. All our supplies are bottlenecked outside New Britain. As of right now, we’re cut off.”

“We wouldn’t be cut off if they hadn’t sent most of the fleet to North Africa,” McKay muttered.

“Doesn’t change things. So, about our artillery?”

“Last I checked, we had mechanics for lowly scut work.”

“Says the man knee-deep in engine innards.”

“Did I mention that our so-called ‘state of the art’ cameras must be from the Civil War?” McKay thrust an accusing hand at the underbelly of the plane. “We could draw stick figures and be more accurate than the resolution from those lenses.”

“We’re twenty-five thousand feet up and flying though storms that’d ground most commercial craft at home. That’s why we’re a specialized unit. And you’re avoiding the subject. If you have time to play mechanic, how about fixing what’s actually broken?”

“There’s an art involved in rebuilding an engine. A sophistication beyond fit tab A into slot B. You don’t need a genius; you need a priest to fix the left gun.”

“I’m sure I can find another miracle worker. Maybe that Russki. What’s his name? Zelinsky... Zelenkovich?” John teased, knowing exactly the effect of his inquiry.

“He’s Czechoslovakian and don’t you dare compare the two of us!” McKay snarled. “I don’t know what you expect me to do. The shaft was jammed and something damaged the chamber. I dumped it off for spare parts. If you run, maybe you can retrieve it before someone melts it down.”

McKay dismissed him with a shooing motion then wiped away the sweat collecting at his brow with his fingers, leaving a smear of grease streaked across his forehead.

John left without saying a word, content with letting McKay act and look like a grease monkey.

The maintenance part of the hangar was appropriately busy as it was the backbone of the base. Its unsung heroes worked eighteen hours shifts or longer, repairing everything from bullet-riddled wings to fuselages with gaping holes. It was dirty, demanding work, the least glamorous of duties, but vital to the non-stop bombing operations and coordinated attacks with the Navy off the coast.

This was where broken planes were stripped and gutted for parts and precious steel. P-40s, B-20s, even a few fallen Mitsubishi ‘Sally’ and ‘Ann’ Japanese attack bombers all waited in the metal graveyard to be turned into much needed scrap.

Repair crews yelled back and forth over the noise of welding tools and blow torches. John made his way to the far end of the hangar; the area reeked of burnt oil and smelting steel. He eyed the piles of discarded wheel mounts and twisted propellers among heaps of mangled metal.

“This is a needle in a haystack,” John muttered. He was taking one last glance around when he noticed a guy sitting on the floor with the pieces of a very familiar machine gun surrounding him.

“Hey! What’cha doing over there?”

The mechanic never glanced up, clearly focused, to the point of tunnel vision, on his task. “Fixin’ this,” he replied.
“Yeah? What’s wrong with it?”

The mechanic kept his head bowed. “Extension assembly’s messed up.”

“That all?” John inquired.

“No.”

John watched him scrape inside the gun barrel with an odd, flat tool. “I think it needs more than just a cleaning.” The guy didn’t respond, and it piqued John’s curiosity even higher. “I dunno. Thing looks pretty shot up. Might be better to melt it down.”

“A gun’s meant to fire bullets.”

John smiled. “Yeah, it is. This one crapped out when a Zero tried to ram into my bird.”

The guy finally looked up and quickly scrambled to his feet. “Didn’t know I was being addressed by a superior officer, sir.”

“That’s because you never looked up.” John paused, gauging the mechanic’s reaction.

The man stiffened, waiting to take a dressing down, but kept his eyes locked with John’s. Ready and willing to accept his reprimand.

“I won’t fault you for your dedication.”

The mechanic remained at attention but John shoved his hands in his pockets and adopted a casual stance. “Can you fix it?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I’ve got it on pretty good authority that it can’t be fixed. Wanna tell me how it’s salvageable?”

“Assembly’s got dents inside, but I’m smoothing them out. Oil buffer’s bent, so it can’t lubricate the barrel. Gonna straighten it. Stop cartridge’s sheared off.” The mechanic shrugged. “That’s easy to replace.”

John was impressed. “That’s a lot of pieces to keep up with.”

“Fifty-six in a Browning.”

“What’s your name?”

“Sergeant Dex.”

“Major John Sheppard. You got a first name?” he asked, extending his hand.

“Ronon.”

“This is where you shake my hand, Ronon,” John encouraged.

“Um...yes, sir. Sorry,” Ronon replied, taking John’s hand awkwardly.

John was pretty sure the guy wasn’t showing off by almost crushing his fingers. Ronon was large with several inches and about fifty pounds on John. He was young and had that driving glint in his eyes. “When did you sign up?”
Two years ago.

Yeah, John could tell. Those who were drafted fought hard and fought with loyalty. Those who asked to go to war and fight were an altogether different type of soldier.

“I was stationed at Wheeler Field a few years ago. Hawaii’s a beautiful place.”

The muscles in Ronon’s neck knotted with tension. “Yeah, it is.”

John nodded to himself, a suspicion confirmed. Hawaii was a U.S territory. Thousands volunteered after the bombing of Pearl. It didn’t take a genius to guess where Ronon was from, and John had been around enough native Hawaiians to spot a person from a Polynesian background. But one thing was bugging him.

Ronon had curly hair down to his chin. It was unheard of in the military, not just bending the dress code, but obliterating it. He had to admit it was cool seeing someone else get away with defying regs, and so blatantly.

John gestured to Ronon’s head. “How’d you keep it?”

“I told them I took a religious oath not to cut my hair till Japan burns in Hellfire.”

John nodded. He’d never had much experience with the judge advocate side of things except for disciplinary actions that didn’t require a court hearing. For all he knew there was a hidden loophole for side-stepping that aspect of the dress code and not just the couple of inches John got away with.

“Religious, huh?”

The big man didn’t reply or change expressions, but John could see the smirk in his eyes. “Were you in Hawaii long, sir?” Ronon asked with a smooth change of topic.

“About a year, but not during the bombing at Pearl.” John had been flying missions over Burma months beforehand. He’d known, like a lot of other people, that the U.S would go to war, but none of them had been prepared for the attack on American soil. At least not Hawaii.

Ronon was quiet, lost in thought or memories. Maybe both. He stood there in a green T-shirt, damp with sweat; his dog tags appeared as specks of metal against the bulk of his huge form. A heavy belt hung slightly low on his hips, weighed down by a side arm, knife, and extra tools.

John cleared his throat, uncomfortable with the silence. “What maintenance group are you with?”

“I’m not.”

“Motor pool?”

“No.”

“Why are you here?”

Ronon crossed his massive arms. “I was bored. Finished my regular duties and decided to hang out. Sir.”

“You hang out here?” John asked curiously, looking around the hangar. “On your down time?”

Ronon shrugged. “We can’t afford to throw away artillery when it can be fixed.”
If only other airmen were as studious as this guy, John thought. “What’s your designation?”

“I’m a gunner.”

“Which squadron?”

“None.”

“What do you mean none?”

“I don’t belong to a crew.”

Maybe the heat had poached his brain, but John couldn’t fathom what he was hearing. “What do you do exactly?”

“I drive the fuel trucks.”

Ronon was Marine huge. All bulging muscle with a couple tattoos inked across thick, tanned arms. It was possible he had a short fuse. “You working off an article eight?”

“No, sir!” Ronon growled.

“Sorry, sometimes my thoughts need a filter before they reach my mouth,” John joked. But he knew he’d crossed a line, jumping to conclusions about disciplinary problems. “Figured you might crush annoying COs with your bare hands when they say stupid things.”

Ronon’s expression went from pissed to pleased. John knew a lot of officers who wouldn’t admit out loud to their mistakes. “Got any theories why you’re not shooting down Nips?”

“Maybe.”

“Yeah. Me too.” John sighed.

He was all too aware of the tendencies of the military. Realizing that a lot more time had passed than he intended, John checked his watch. Crap. He had a meeting in ten minutes and was going to have to double-time it in order to make it.

“Look, I have to go.”

“Okay.”

“I’ll be back.” John pointed to the mess on the ground. “I expect my Browning to be working when I return. It belongs on my Havoc, not in a scrap yard.”

Ronon grinned. “I’ll see what I can do.”

-----------------------------------------------

Water trickled down John’s cheeks and nose, and a stubborn drop lingered at his chin. He’d stepped outside the hangar just as the bottom had dropped out of the sky. Because of the torrential rains, his
clothes had gone from slightly soggy to plastered to his skin in the thirty seconds he’d been out in them. He stood there waiting, catching the last of the sports scores from the tiny radio sitting on O’Neill’s desk.

“The Tigers beat the Yankees, 3-2. Rookie Stirnweiss, hit his first major league homerun and Detroit’s Overmire improved his ERA to 3.14. And that’s your sports for May 27th, 1943.”

Colonel O’Neill turned the volume off after the report. “I hope you didn’t track mud in here, Major. I just had the floors cleaned,” he muttered without looking up, preoccupied with sifting through wrinkled maps and dog-eared reports scattered across a wobbly-legged desk. A tiny fan sat on the very edge and the light breeze it managed to stir in the heavy, humid air ruffled the inches-high piles of paper barely held in check by paperweights.

The colonel nearly spilled his mug of coffee as he waved his hands in a flourish of triumph. “Ah, here they are!” He finally looked up at John, scrunching his eyebrows together. “Good grief, Sheppard! You look like a drowned rat.”

“Kinda feel like one, sir.”

“Yeah, well. It’s the monsoon season and all. Oh, by the way,” he added with a thrust of his chin over John’s shoulder, “General Hammond’s asked to sit in on this meeting.”

John turned around to see General George “Texas” Hammond sitting quietly in the corner, studying him with hawk eyes. It was disconcerting, standing in the same tent as WWI flying aces that he’d read about in *Battle Birds* when he was a kid. “Nuts” O’Neill he’d served under for a year but Hammond he only knew by reputation.

“As you know, Sheppard, we want to leap frog the Jap forward defenses and hit Hollandia by June. We can only do that by securing a base northwest of Sarmi,” O’Neill announced without pretext.

“Yes, sir.” John knew all about the upcoming offensive and the failed attempts to gather the proper reconnaissance for it.

“There are eleven thousand hardened enemy troops entrenched in and around Hollandia,” Hammond spoke up. “They’ve already given up Sarmi as a loss and abandoned their air fields there. They expect our assault at Aitape, but not both.”

“But we still don’t know where their airstrips are between Aitape and Hollandia,” John recited from previous briefings. “And the past three attempts to gather surveillance have been hampered by heavy cloud cover.”

“Then unhampered it this time, Major. Your squad needs to pinpoint those damn airfields. Find out their completion rate and what we might be up against in terms of air power,” Hammond demanded. “We won’t get another chance. This is a three-pronged operation with the Navy and Marines. Thousands of lives are at stake. Find a way to get those pictures.”

“Yes, sir. What’s our deadline?” John asked.

“In the next three days,” Hammond announced.

Three days? John could only find one problem with that.

“I know what you’re thinking. You’re down a crew member. Sergeant Markham’s accident was a terrible loss,” O’Neill said kindly. “You never want to lose a man in battle. It’s harder when it’s just a dumb accident.”
Markham’s death had been a senseless waste, a freak mishap. One moment he’d been walking toward their Havoc and the next, a truck full of sweaty nitro hit a hole in the dirt road and exploded, killing him, the driver and one other. All three men had been incinerated, depriving their mothers of proper burials.

“I know it’s only been four days since the accident, but you need to select a new gunner.” O’Neill tossed a half dozen files at him. “Here are the best candidates. All arrived last week; you get first pick.”

John dreaded this. He’d been flying with Markham for a year. There was a special bond created when confined inside a metal beast for hours, a harmony between your men, the air, and your plane. Most of John’s career he’d been solo. He’d preferred it that way.

Or he thought he had.

He flipped through performance jackets and evaluations, staring at some impressive stats, but his gut wasn’t going for any of them.

“There a problem, Sheppard?” O’Neill looked on expectantly. “Hard to choose?”

There were three lieutenants and two master sergeants; all five airmen had been enrolled during the Air Corps’ big push in ’39. When John was in flight school he trained for thirty-two weeks. Now they rolled out navigators, pilots, you name it, in ten weeks flat. These candidates had actual experience with various types of bombers, a real rarity, but John trusted his instincts. And they were telling him to look deeper.

“What about Sergeant Dex?” John asked casually.


“I think he arrived the last time we were supplied with fresh bed sheets,” John deadpanned.

“Well then, lemme check the stack labeled ‘bath and beauty’, ” O’Neill responded with a sigh as he began digging through boxes and notebooks on the floor. “And why am I looking for someone I’ve never heard of?”

“I talked to him earlier. He was repairing one of my Brownings on his down time.”

“Really?” O’Neill hmmed to himself, still searching for the wayward file. “Sounds like he needs more duty hours.”

“I think he really likes his job,” John quipped then added under his breath, “If he were allowed to actually perform it.”

“Got it, no, wait…why aren’t these in alphabetical order?” O’Neill grumbled.

The ceiling banged in the high winds and the overhead light bulbs flickered as the temporary generator struggled to meet the electrical demands of the base, and the metal walls of the Quonset hut shook, making it feel like the whole thing would collapse.

“Found it,” O’Neill said, waving the file. He hooked the back of his chair with his leg and slumped down to study it.

John stood there with arms at his side and tried to keep still hands that hated being idle. There was a reason why his fingers were covered with calluses before he’d hit his thirtieth birthday. But he
waited as patiently as he could while O’Neill flipped through Dex’s jacket. It took him longer than it should’ve; a good CO knew how to read between the lines of any eval and Nuts was one of the best.

Then O’Neill handed the service record to Hammond who wordlessly flipped through the contents before finally giving it to John. Both men’s features were schooled into carefully neutral expressions.

“Sergeant Dex doesn’t have the proper experience required for a position on your squad,” O’Neill began. “I’m sure after a couple of years under his belt he’ll make a fine officer.”

John honed in on the comments section of the jacket since it was the only thing that truly mattered to a commander. “Says here, Dex identifies ammo by touch after his first day, exceeding the three week requirement.”

Bullets were color coded for gunners for ease of learning and John knew a few that still relied on them in the heat of battle. He skimmed for more highlights and read them out loud. “Mastered the principles of the pursuit curve, hit targets on the fourth day…helped fellow lagging cadets between classes…. Ranked first in accuracy of Turret Topline, Spadegrip shotgun, M2 Basic and M2 Heavy barrels.”

“There’s a difference between achievements in class and actual air combat. You know that,” O’Neill objected.

“Served with the 18th Fighter group over Guadalcanal, made Corporal. Action over the Solomons, promoted twice. Huh…he’s flown in both the A-20 and the P-61,” he argued.

His COs communicated silently with each other and John knew this was his only opportunity. “The 61s are used exclusively for nighttime operations. When am I gonna find another gunner with that type of experience?”

“I didn’t say it wasn’t impressive, Sheppard. But those were joint Allied programs with the RAF,” O’Neill countered.

Right. Ronon had served with the Brits—not with a U.S. crew. Different cultures, different views. John resisted the urge to bang his head against the bureaucratic walls in front of him. Ronon Dex was the right person; he knew it. There was no logical explanation, no personal connection or real reason to go to bat for a complete stranger. What he had was a feeling, a stupid tingle that had saved his ass more times than he could count.

“Sirs.” John looked from O’Neill to Hammond. “Both of you’ve followed your guts in the air. Used evasive maneuvers before getting a visual, fired a wild shot that by some miracle found its target.”

“Major Sheppard, this is about more than trusting your instincts. You’ve got good ones-- most of the time.” Hammond got up and looked John right in the eye. “This is about winning a war. You command the only recon squadron in New Guinea. There’s no other unit. We’re stretched thinner than women’s stockings out here. Every time I turn around, HQ diverts another squadron to Africa, France, England.”

John stood straighter and gave the second in command of the Army Air Corps over Guinea his full attention. But he kept his shoulders squared, his jaw set.

“Do you understand me? You guys are all we have. The only ones with the skills to pull these missions off. The 17th Recon has six planes. Six of the most trained, experienced crews. Why, half the guys we’ve got are ones you recruited from the Tigers when you got the assignment. I know a few people who are still pissed that you stole Captain Lorne for yourself.” Hammond must have
thought he wasn’t getting through and switched tactics. “We’ve even allowed McKay to keep his unauthorized modifications.”

“Modifications that’ve been one of the reasons for our high success rate, sir,” John retorted respectfully.

“Which is why we’ve given you a lot of leeway,” Hammond looked over at O’Neill for help.

“He’s right, Sheppard. This has nothing to do with policy. I was one the loudest supporters for the Tuskegee project. Hell, I want any good man under me. Brown, black, red, white or blue. This isn’t what you think,” O’Neill growled. “If you were in command of any other squadron, I’d say do whatever you want. Take him. I don’t care as long as he can shoot.”

“What is it, Major? Haven’t been rebellious enough lately?” Hammond took two quick strides to his chair, thumbed open a briefcase and fished out a thick manila folder. “You have a very colorful history. It takes a lot of money to fly as a civilian. Especially to join those illegal air races across the desert. How many of those did you participate in?”

“Don’t remember. A few,” John hedged. He’d flown in dozens, winning several.

Hammond didn’t buy it. “You live for the thrill. There’s no aviator worth his wings who doesn’t. I’ve seen kids become test pilots after they got bored with those idiotic contests. Pretty exclusive club back then. How many active airmen were there when you graduated?”

“I’m not sure, sir.”

“Don’t lie to me son. You know.”

“One hundred and ninety-two.”

Hammond gave a low whistle. “Fewer than two hundred men. Hot shots and rabble rousers creating the backbone of the Air Corps. The military got experienced men and you guys got to play with the fastest machines on Earth.”

“Seemed like a good fit, sir.”

“You’re one hell of a pilot, Sheppard. Got yourself a matched set of bronze and silver stars. Distinguished Service Cross, couple of Flying Crosses. I won’t bore you with your other merit awards. Thirteen years of training and testing.” Hammond shook his head in the same disappointed manner of John’s father. “For every achievement you had to do something stupid.

Your tendency to buck authority hasn’t helped your career. Performing unauthorized maneuvers, risking expensive government property in the process.” Hammond flipped through his jacket and raised his eyebrows at a particular entry. “You buzzed the Golden Gate Bridge?”

John kept his mouth in a straight line.

“Not to mention disorderly conduct. I know about the one Jack covered up for you. Distinguished airmen do not get into bar fights, no matter what the reason, Major.”

O’Neill rolled his eyes and Hammond gave up the argument there. They’d all be in the brig if the brass actually cared about the roughhousing that took place off duty. “I guess what I’d really like to know is…why the hell would you purposely crash that B-15?” Hammond demanded.

John knew he’d always have to defend his choice made on that hot day in Arizona. The Army had
recruited him for his expertise as a test pilot and that meant measuring all safety factors. Not that certain companies with their shareholders’ eyes on the bottom line would care. “I didn’t intend to crash, sir. But I knew those engines would stall out at two-sixty. All the previous exercises were purposely conducted under one-ninety.”

“That wasn’t your call to make, Major.”

“The ink was practically dry on the contracts. I worked for Douglas. All they smelled was a fat government contract. They didn’t give a damn about the men who’d die in those cockpits!” John growled, knowing but not caring that he was overstepping his bounds in front of a superior.

“You disobeyed a direct order to keep your plane at the conditions agreed upon for the final test flight and instead you destroyed a prototype that cost more than a lifetimes’ worth of paychecks.” Hammond was a bottle cap ready to pop. “Did you think to report your suspicions up the chain of command?”

“I tried. When no one listened, I took the chance and accepted the consequences, sir.”

O’Neill came out from behind his desk, trying to calm things. “Okay, alright. We all know about Major Sheppard’s exploits as well as his accomplishments. Uncle Sam never bought those birds after a thorough investigation. It ended up saving millions of dollars and more importantly, lives.”

“Yes, it did,” Hammond agreed, his focus on John. “And it saved your ass. So you started slowly rebuilding the pieces of your career, came on as part of our coastal defense program. Then you went and retired to join a bunch of mercenaries.”

“Sir, with all due respect, the Tigers were one of the most respected squadrons of the war,” O’Neill spoke up.

“And do you really think those who volunteered knew that at the time? Or was it all money and glory?” Hammond questioned O’Neill.

“If you’ll recall, sir, I wanted to join that mission,” O’Neill responded, arching an eyebrow. “Come on. They destroyed over three hundred Zeros and only lost fourteen men.” O’Neill turned to John. “You know I’ve given you whatever you’ve needed. I’ve even looked past the regs on your hair. And before you say anything, I know all about your superstition about keeping it long. Hell, once I was assigned a mission I never changed my shorts ‘til I got back.”

Hammond actually took two steps away from the colonel.

“Give me one mission to test him out, Colonel; that’s all I ask,” John implored. He sought the proper argument, teetering between begging and yelling. “Entire operations depend on our data. I know that. The difference between success and failure lies with my squad’s ability to gather accurate intel. I’m not out there trying to collect the most kills. I’m trying…” John swallowed. “I’m trying to do the best I can…to prevent more casualties. I was recruited after my stint with the Tigers to command this squadron. Allow me to do it.”

The gears were turning, each of his superiors gauging the validity of his argument.

“Look. There might be more experienced gunners out there. But how many of them witnessed the bombing at Pearl? How many lived there? Pearl’s not just a shipyard, or a base. It goes beyond the deaths—it was an attack on someone’s land. If anything, I think Dex has more to fight for than a lot of us.” He stiffened his back and pulled back his shoulders. “Sirs.”

Hammond wandered back to his chair and sat down heavily, fishing a pack of smokes from his shirt.
pocket. “I rarely tell those I’ve placed in command what to do. I’ll leave the decisions to you, Jack.”

“Oh, gee, thanks. Is it happy hour yet?” O’Neill sighed, rubbing at his temples.

John waited, tension a familiar knot in his shoulders and stomach.

“Take him out, Sheppard. See how he does. A commander always knows on the first mission if it’s the right fit.” O’Neill picked up a leather attaché case and handed it over. “I expect a full report when you return.”

John took the case, feeling its literal and figurative burden. “Thank you, sir.” He waited for Hammond to nod a dismissal at him then exited the tent to go see his new gunner.
Chapter Two
John rarely flaunted his rank, but sometimes it had its privileges. Like flagging down a jeep and having a private return him to the hangar. The freshly-dug road made for a bumpy rodeo ride that had his knees banging the front compartment of the vehicle. They hit a large rock and he was almost thrown out when the kid overcompensated by swerving hard to the right.

“Sorry, sir,” the private apologized.

“No problem,” John replied through gritted teeth while gripping the jeep’s frame even tighter.

Those thoughts not preoccupied with his repeated impending doom were centered on the attaché case sitting precariously on his lap, its leather bindings protecting the intelligence for the next mission. After the meeting, John had gone to one of the tents used for briefings to study the next target. He spent hours there, memorizing the mountain elevations protecting the valley. A five-year old map provided by the Aussies had proven useless and without current pictures, it was like pinpointing a location in the Rockies using charts from the Lewis and Clark expedition.
“You need anything else, sir?”

John blinked, not realizing they’d arrived at the airfield. “No, thanks for the lift,” he said as he hopped out.

It was clammy outside; the rain had slowed to a drizzle and the air was filled with mosquitoes. He swatted at the one chewing on his earlobe as he surveyed a squadron of B-12 bombers readying for take off. Over a thousand horsepower coursed through nine hundred pound engines; it had his ears ringing before he could hurry inside the hangar, away from the deafening roar.

Tools and plane parts were scattered about on the floor. A wrench tried to trip him up but he managed, barely, not to fall on his ass before making his way past rows of wounded birds to find a familiar outsized man intent on testing out the sight of John’s machine gun. “You got that fixed?”

Ronon lowered the weapon’s barrel to stand at attention. “Haven’t tested it yet.”

“I’ll make arrangements for you to do it at the firing range,” John said, tapping the attaché case against his knee.

The big man started gathering up his tools to clear up the area. “All right.”

“I’m sure Corporal Levi from supply can transport the Browning over there. No need to carry it,” he added with a chuckle. The gun weighed in the neighborhood of two hundred pounds, though he had little doubt that it was something the big man would’ve been willing to do. “But right now I need you to assemble your gear. We’ve got a busy couple of days ahead.”

“What?”

“Yeah. I want you to spend time with our bird, getting to know her. I’m not sure if I can take you up for a quick run today or not. Depends whether McKay’s got her insides back together.” John started walking, checking subtly to see if he was being followed. “I know you’re used to bombers, but the weight distribution’s different in ours. You’ll acclimate. We’ve got less firepower than a normal A20 to fit all the surveillance equipment. We only have two pairs of heavy guns, so you won’t have six to play with. Of course, we’re designated an F model Havoc for photo recon and that got changed to the XF-3 for the turbo engines we got.”

The sound of Ronon’s heavy footsteps was the only thing that told John that he was right behind him.

“It gets kind of confusing. Just stick to Havoc, it’s easier. We alternate between night and daytime operations, sometimes both. And we sleep in four hour rotations.” The walking mountain had yet to respond so John slowed to a stop and turned to address him. “Am I going too fast for you?”

“No.”

Yeah, definitely a man of few words. John was breathing heavily from the brisk pace he’d set and the humidity sucking away his lung capacity, but the big man wasn’t even showing a single drop of sweat. “Are you sure?”

“I could outrun you anytime,” Ronon replied, quickly adding, “sir.”

John tried not to chuckle. “I meant with your new schedule.”

Ronon made a good attempt at his brick wall impersonation, but his eyes gave him away. He clearly had no clue what John was implying.
John waited for a reaction, maintaining a placid smile until Ronon finally spoke. “You’ve transferred me to your squadron. I’ll do my best, sir, but I’m not a trained mechanic.”

“A mechanic?” John echoed. He was slow on the uptake at first but then it finally dawned on him. “No, Sergeant. You’re my new gunner.”

Ronon froze mid-stride. “I’m part of your crew?”

“Yeah, you are. Took a look at your jacket. I’m lucky to have you. Not sure if you’ll feel the same way once you meet McKay,” he added wryly, “but there’s the rest of the squadron to get to know.”

It was going to take a while to get used to such a non-vocal crewmate. Finally, Ronon absorbed the situation, nodding once before meeting John’s eyes. “I won’t let you down, sir.”

“I know you won’t.”

Ronon scanned the hangar walls as if taking in all the noise and equipment with a new sense of self-awareness. “Which plane is ours?”

John experienced a moment of pride at the way Ronon said ‘ours’ with such enthusiasm. “This way. I’ll make the first introduction but unfortunately I won’t be staying; I’m late for something.”

When there was no immediate questioning of what John was late for and where he was going, John smiled. It was refreshing, not having a person question your every decision and it gave him a three minute reprieve of silence while they walked to the next hangar before being accosted by a red faced, pissed off navigator. McKay reeked of fuel, the entire front of his shirt was smeared with grease and his hair was caked with sweat and dried oil.

“I’ll have you know I’ve spent the last five hours piecing together this pile of nuts and bolts that the Army has the nerve to call an engine. Do you have any idea how many parts make up the motor of such a highly advanced reconnaissance plane?”

“571,” John replied without a second thought.

John allowed some satisfaction at McKay’s stunned blink and muttered, “Huh.”

“You’re gonna miss chow if you keep jawing,” he teased.

“Is it dinner time already? No wonder I started daydreaming about creamed chipped beef without gagging.” He grabbed his canteen and chugged down half of it before choking and sputtering as he gazed up at their plane. “Excuse me? Get off of there! This isn’t a jungle gym! Hello? Are you deaf?”

McKay stormed over to the wing where Ronon jumped down and started inspecting the turret. “You’re not authorized to be here! This is a very specialized plane, only eighty-eight of them in commission. Just in case you can’t comprehend that, it means they’re very, very expensive. Hey, don’t touch that!”

Ronon ignored the ranting and examined the machine gun mounts, his hands gliding over the glass dome before he walked over to investigate the underbelly and the bomb doors. “We go out and take pictures?”

“We gather intel on whatever’s needed to keep our guys from going into missions blind. Sometimes we go out two or three times a day,” John answered. “It’s not glorious. We don’t blow up targets or shoot down enemy planes.” He rubbed the back of his neck and cracked a rueful smile. “Usually.”
If Ronon was disappointed he hid it well. “But it helps us win.”

“Yeah. Without us, our casualty rate would be... well, let’s just say we’d be losing a lot more guys out there.” John ran his fingers over the wing in awe of what he commanded. “What we do matters,” he said softly.

McKay snapped his fingers. “Excuse me! I hate to interrupt this fun-filled lesson, but who is this guy?” he demanded, jutting his finger at Ronon.

“’Scuse me, boys, I forgot. This is Lieutenant Rodney McKay, our navigator and all-around miracle worker.” John fought to conceal a grin. “McKay, shake hands with our new gunner, Sergeant Ronon Dex.”

John had never witnessed someone’s eyes bulge out of their head the way McKay’s did and for once, the man was struck speechless.

“I’ve gotta go. You two should head to the mess and get to know each other.” After glancing at the way both men eyed each other in suspicion, he amended his words. “Or, maybe just grab a bite to eat.”

“Wait a goddamned minute, Sheppard! Sheppard!”

John waved goodbye, knowing he’d have all night to listen to McKay rant about not including him in the decision, but right now, he had an important appointment to keep.

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It took longer to finagle another jeep and stop by his tent to grab a few things than he’d expected. Night had descended quickly, doubling the cacophony of swarming insects and the cries of nocturnal predators. The headlights were twin candles in the blackness and the sergeant was a set of tense muscles behind the wheel, probably scared shitless that he’d drive them off the so-called road.

John knew he was breaking curfew, a rule set up to protect the base. Between snipers taking pot-shots at them, and nightly attempts to take out the planes sitting idle on the runway... Sabotage, random attacks, pirate radio broadcasts and sleepless nights- they were all part of the Japs’ strategy to wear down morale and make it harder to catch a few hours sleep.

Now, driving off base was asking for even more trouble; enemy patrols were always sniffing around.

“You can stop right here,” John instructed.

He grabbed his knapsack from the back and unsnapped the strap of his sidearm as he peered into the foliage. When he failed to hear the jeep roar back to life he turned in confusion to see Sergeant Miller pull out his own weapon and step up to his side.

“Return to base. Come back and pick me up in an hour,” John whispered sideways without taking his eyes from the surrounding jungle.

“I’m not leaving you out here unescorted, sir,” Miller hissed back.

The sergeant was in his early twenties, if that, and built like a wrestler with broad shoulders, the neck of a pit bull, and arms like small tree trunks. John was as grateful as he was annoyed. “I’ll be fine. The only thing that can attack me out here is the bugs.”

“No can do, sir.”
“Look, Sergeant, I’m a big boy. I think I can take care of myself.”

“Not if you’re outnumbered, sir.”

John paused and turned around, going nose to nose with his overprotective escort. “Outnumbered by what?”

“The natives, sir. There’s no telling what the fuzzies might do.”

John laughed. “I guess they can look pretty scary, but without their help we wouldn’t have a base or even the extra labor to keep it going.”

Miller stuck at John’s side, his twitchy trigger finger bound to kill some poor rodent or take out an unlucky major’s foot. “Anyone that dresses in feathers and animal skins can’t be trusted. They’re not civilized, sir.”

“They live off the land and the last I checked, there wasn’t a Macy’s or Sears ‘n’ Roebuck catalog around here. A little face paint doesn’t scare me; does it scare you, Miller?”

The burly sergeant straightened to his full six-two height. “No, sir. But I heard some of them are cannibals and I--”

“I’ll be fine. I’m not going to be boiled in oil or made into a stew. Now, return to base and come and get me at twenty-two hundred. That’s an order, Sergeant.” John recognized the stubborn set to his shoulders, the unwillingness to leave a CO in perceived peril. None of his superiors had been able to break him of the same habit, but he’d learned from the most ornery SOBs how to try. “I’m not telling twice! Now move your ass or you’ll be digging latrines for a month!”

“Yes, sir!” Miller saluted sharply before turning on his heel and reluctantly returning to the jeep.

Miller was a good enough soldier and John appreciated his loyalty, but discretion was more important right now. He waited until the vehicle got swallowed by the blackness and the engine grew silent in the distance. Then he scanned the darkness until his eyes adjusted and he was able to pick out a break in the screen of plant life. A path created by centuries of foot traffic led him into the lush foliage; the mud was only ankle deep now, but after a few weeks of the monsoon season such trails would quickly become knee-high traps of sludgy glue.

Not for the first time did John think to himself that New Guinea really was hell on Earth.

Mud traps weren’t even the worst of it. The constant downpours fed the jungle growth and provided the enemy with plenty of cover to hunker down under while they waited for the Allies to come stumbling through. That’s why when it came to their missions, failure wasn’t an option. If John’s squadron didn’t return with good intelligence, more soldiers would return home in body bags.

“Major, it is good to see you again.”

The female voice came from out of nowhere, but the speaker soon stepped out of the shadows and into the faint moonlight.

“How many times have I asked you to call me John?”

Teyla always looked him directly in the eyes, the intensity of her gaze able to tear down the barriers he put up. “Every time we meet,” she answered with a knowing smile.

John rubbed at the back of his neck, flicking away a tiny black bug trying to take refuge under his
collar. “But friends use each other’s first names,” he prompted.

She raised an eyebrow. “Are we friends, Major?”

“Well, friends help each other in times of need…”

“So do allies.”

“This is true, but would a simple ally bring you these?” John dug into his knapsack and pulled out five Hershey bars.

“No, they would not. I am grateful for these, but how does chocolate help during these trying times?”

“It doesn’t. The candy’s for the kids. This, however,” John continued as he pulled out a spindle of heavy nylon thread, “makes the best fishing line. I know how often your peoples’ get cut on the coral.”

Teyla took the offered spindle with a broad smile. “This is very generous. All the ships have disrupted our normal fishing areas; this will be of great help. Thank you.”

“I’ve got these, too,” John said excitedly, showing a half-dozen small cans in the pack. “It’s evaporated milk. I know it’s not much…”

“It is more than we have now,” she said, grabbing his hand.

John snatched his away out of instinct, ducking his head to conceal his embarrassment despite the cover of night. “I think I have some chewing gum, too. Even grabbed a few packs of Lucky Strikes… I know that you disapprove, but you could trade ‘em with other tribes and get a lot more in return.”

“It is fine. I know these items are difficult to acquire,” Teyla reassured him.

Most of the stuff he’d won at poker games or he’d cashed favors in for. Not to mention skimming a few of McKay’s supplies, thus fueling his silly paranoia over the Aussies for fun. “Well, being an officer and all, it’s a little easier for me.” John shrugged.

“I am sure it is.”

The ease with which she saw right through him was unnerving; her body language said what she was too kind to call him on. He cleared his throat over the buzzing chorus surrounding them and gave her a lopsided smile. Sometimes he wondered if he’d been bunking with too many soldiers over too many years. It was easier to joke with his crew or give an order than to hold a conversation with a civilian.

Especially such an exotic one. Teyla wore a grass skirt, but the strands were modestly (and frustratingly) double layered. Most Papuan women went topless, but she wore a simple creamy white homespun linen shirt. Her skin was a clear, shimmery golden brown and her face was devoid of the usual streaks of paint. She wore her coppery hair long and pulled back instead of elaborately braided and adorned with beads or feathers.

“Why do you study me?”

“I’m sorry. It’s just--”

“That I am different from the rest of my people,” she finished for him, her eyes darting away. “I am.”
John had never asked why she was more refined than those she looked after. As much as he wanted to know, it wasn’t his place to press.

Teyla was thoughtful, choosing her words carefully. “My father was an Australian doctor in the army. He met my mother when fighting from the Great War spread here. She was Austronesian, those who arrived thousands of years before the people of this great land.”

“The Papuans.”

“Yes,” she said, looking up at him in surprise. “Unlike what many perceived, she was an intelligent woman who could read and write. But I did move with my father to Australia for many years.”

“The adjustment must have been difficult.”

“When I returned, I couldn’t even remember the language of my people.”

John heard the pain in her voice and fumbled for the proper words, though he had more than an inkling as to how she felt. “It’s tough to be caught between two worlds. Unsure where you really belong.”

Teyla gazed up at him. “I believe you understand how I feel, Major.”

There it was again, that feeling of being openly exposed, but his barriers quickly snapped into place as he stood straighter, forcing his thoughts to focus on the business at hand. But Teyla beat him to the punch.

“You need my assistance.”

God, he hated this. “Yeah, I do.” John handed her a copy of the poor quality map. “I know it’s not very detailed. But that’s Ranonga Bay and the area is thirteen miles due north. We know the Japs are building more airfields, but we don’t know where.”

“I can help you focus your search. When do you leave?”

“In three days. I know it’s not a lot of time.”

Teyla looked up and laughed. “Since when do you not require things quickly?”

John chuckled with her. “Never.”

“I will return at this time in two days. Your base is half a day’s journey and the information you need takes a day to travel by foot. I will be cutting it close.”

Teyla gathered up the supplies and this time John grabbed her elbow. “Why do you do this?”

“One day the people of New Guinea will know freedom. First, it was the Chinese, then the British. We have always been occupied, only the faces change. When I was a child it was the Australians; today it is the Japanese.”

“But you’re helping us.”

“There are those who will always treat us as lost children, confusing us with the more rural tribes further west. Our newest enemy rapes our land and views us as beasts to be slaughtered. We are a simple people; we do not own guns, but some of us can help fight in other ways.”

John didn’t know how Teyla gathered her info or whom she dealt with to get it. He suspected some
of the gifts he gave her proved to be useful tools in obtaining the intel responsible for his squadron’s success rate. “Do I put you in danger?” he blurted.

“We are at war, Major. We are all in danger.” Teyla piled the supplies into a straw rucksack, slung it over the back of her shoulders and withdrew a small machete from the belt above her skirt. “Do not worry about me; this cuts through flesh as easily as it does the underbrush.”

The two of them smiled, easing the tension caused by their conversation. It was growing late and catching Ronon up to speed on his unit’s SOP in such a short amount of time was a daunting task he faced, not to mention finding time to sleep between trainings and debriefings.

Teyla touched his shoulder, chasing his thoughts away. “I should go. We both have busy days ahead.”

“Yes, we do.” John watched her leave but called after her before she disappeared into the tropical tangle. “Once we move further in-country it’ll be safer for you and your people to visit.”

“I’m sure many of my people will continue to help build your military bases, Major.”

John mentally slapped himself for his poor choice of words.

“But it would be nice to visit under safer conditions,” Teyla continued smoothly before slipping into the jungle.

Then he was left with the song of the jungle and the lingering smell of tropical flowers. The familiar drone of an engine gunning its way towards him soon broke through his reverie. He didn’t want a certain paranoid sergeant to come charging through the jungle thinking his CO was about to be placed on the local menu so he hurried out of the flora to catch his ride back to the base.

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Ground crews removed the camouflage tarps, unveiling the white, crushed coral airstrip underneath. John mentally went over data obtained earlier from the intelligence officer, calculating their flight path while keeping in mind a storm brewing off the coast and weighing the odds of meeting the enemy. Last they’d heard, Japanese air presence was concentrated over Hollandia, but random patrols prowled up the coast.

He glanced at Lorne; the man’s jaw was working at a huge wad of gum with nervous energy. “Don’t forget to spit that out, Captain.”

“Yes, Pops.”

“You’re a real smartass, you know that?”

“Yes, sir,” Lorne shot back cockily. With a salute he sped up to walk beside the newest member of the squadron. “You ready to fly with the top recon squad, Dex?”

“We’re the only recon unit stationed here,” McKay grouched from behind them, still struggling to secure the straps of his parachute pack.

John slowed down to help but McKay slapped his hands away. “I’m not a child, Major.”

“No, you just act like a toddler that missed his nap.” John muttered as he finished fastening McKay’s
chute to his flight vest and yanked on his emergency pack, verifying it was hooked in place.

Lorne had continued chatting with Ronon and getting the Hawaiian’s usual monosyllabic replies until he started with the third degree on the newbie. “There’s a few things you should know, Sergeant. Always trust Sheppard, no matter how insane his orders. Follow them and he’ll get your ass outa the mission alive. He’s the best pilot I’ve ever known. We clear?”

“Yes, sir.”

“You might be good at shooting down Nips, but that’s not your job,” Lorne warned.

“Oh, yeah? What is my job?” the big man growled.

“To keep your crew alive.”

“I know that.”

“Do you?” Lorne pressed.

There wasn’t a shred of doubt in Ronon’s tone. “I’ll protect them.”

“See that you do. You haven’t been here long, and you have no idea how many men would kill to be in your place.”

“Know that, too.”

“Come on, McKay, get a move on,” John said loudly before doubling his stride to break up the private conversation.

“Hey, this isn’t a race,” McKay griped.

“Yeah, it is. We’ve got two hours before sunrise. And that’s not counting the pre-flight check and running around in circles.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. Is the Earth’s orbit too inconvenient for you, Major? Maybe if I wave my hands really fast it’ll slow down time.”

“That’d be really cool,” John said as he eyed threatening clouds brewing on the horizon. “Isn’t that what Einstein’s theory is?”

Lorne clapped McKay on the back. “Yeah, maybe if Poindexter here takes apart the engines and builds a time machine out of it, he’ll prove Einstein right. Then maybe the Big Brains could offer him a job.”

“I’ll have you know, Captain, I’m more than qualified to…” McKay paused mid-sentence then clamped his mouth shut.

Lorne tapped out a smoke. “What’s that, Lieutenant?”

“McKay’s not crackers enough to be with those nut jobs,” John cut in. “Besides, why would a real genius want to sit in a lab all day staring at chalkboards and debating theory,” he said, looking directly at his crewmate, “when he can be saving lives here?”

McKay gave him a quizzical expression, his brain slowly registering the weight behind John’s words. “Yes, well. I’m sure everything I’d accomplish would be top secret and I wouldn’t be able to-
“Brag?” John retorted.

Lorne snickered and McKay glared at him before huffily storming ahead.

Ronon wisely stepped out of the way before McKay accidentally barreled into him; the big guy raised in eyebrow in amusement at the way McKay’s load of equipment made him waddle up the muddy path.

Ronon gestured at the peeved navigator. “He always like this?”

“Yup, pretty much,” John grinned. “But I wouldn’t have him any other way.” Ronon clearly didn’t get it, but there was plenty of time for him to learn. “You didn’t say much during the briefing.”

“Didn’t need to.”

John’s brain still whirled with enough facts and figures to make his head hurt. “Are you sure? Asking questions to clarify mission objectives doesn’t make you look stupid- not asking questions does.”

Ronon faced John while they walked, his soft leather helmet making him look like a lineman ready to hit the gridiron. ‘The Japs might be reinforcing Hollandia by sea. We don’t know how many airfields they’ve got, or how many planes. Visibility’s sucked for weeks, so we’re going out and not coming back ‘til we get some pictures.”

“Well, good. Glad I could fill in the blanks for you,” John said with a pat on the big guy’s shoulder as they reached their plane. John passed an eye over the Havoc, then turned to watch the five other crews prepare to embark.

They were a rag-tag bunch, flying modified bombers pieced together with spare parts. John nodded at Lt Stackhouse, a former test pilot like himself who helmed the Eager Beaver. They’d been stationed together in Hawaii, aware of the other only by reputation. John had joined up with the Tigers while Stackhouse had flown fighters over the Philippines.

Then there was Captain Fuller, a kid born with a God-given talent to fly. Fuller was only twenty-four, freckle-faced and almost too tall to fit in the cockpit. He’d transferred from the 37th where he’d manned B-25 bombers. “Hey, Major, did you hear Lindbergh’s teaching the 475th at Hamilton?”

“I guess they don’t have enough playboys in Australia,” John drawled.

“Hey, the guy gets the hottest dolls and he’s as old as you, Pops,” Fuller teased, grinning a gap-toothed smile.

As the captain took off toward his plane John made a note to have the crew of the Birddog volunteer for latrine duty next week.

He surveyed his men; they were a combination of adventure seekers, hot-shots, discipline problems and the cream of the crop. All hand-picked from a long list of volunteers and a few he’d bribed to join.

John didn’t do speeches. “See you guys during the post mission briefing.”

Never wish for success out loud. Never say good luck or even break a leg Those were the rules.

He climbed the rungs up to the cockpit, his own parachute and gear nearly crushing him into the tiny seat of the forward compartment. The side instrument panel always pinned his .45 against his hip,
leaving a spectacular bruise across his thigh, but he wouldn’t fly without it. Most pilots were afraid that their weapon would be used against them if they got shot down. John would rather have something to defend his crew with, and if it came to it, he’d preferred eating a bullet over being captured. The intel in his head was too dangerous to fall into enemy hands.

“Will you be careful over there? I know Tarzan lived in a tree, but this is a plane filled with decrepit and delicate equipment. Don’t break anything,” McKay snapped at their new gunner as he settled in.

John could only fight a grin at the sight of Ronon’s long arms and legs, not to mention two hundred something pound frame trying to cram inside the little domed fish bowl he was forced to sit in.

“Don’t make me come back there,” he warned.

“Like you could fit, Major.”

John fastened the chin strap of his helmet and plugged in the radio cord that hung around his neck, the connection making a crackling sound inside his headphones while practiced fingers started the engines.

“Alright, guys, *Pegasus* will be the flight leader. *Black Jack*, you’re formation lead.”

“Copy that,” Lorne’s voice echoed in his head set.

“Let’s try this mission *again*. Six hundred miles there and back. We’ll head for twenty-five thousand feet,” John radioed.

“Don’t forget about the abnormal magnetic variation issues from the coast,” McKay reminded him.

“I was just about to say that, if you’d gimme a second,” John responded with painstaking patience before re-opening the channel. “Double-check your deviation on heading every ten minutes, boys. The interference out there is still a bitch.”

The engines roared to life, the blood rushed to his ears, and all his nerves tingled with electricity. John swore his heartbeat ramped up in sync with the increase in speed. Nothing matched the adrenaline rush of take-off. Nothing. The jungle slowly morphed into an expanse of green tree canopies, then smears of green paint, and finally a mere speck swallowed up by the sky.

His squadron all checked in as they climbed to their cruising altitude. “From here on out we’ll maintain radio silence. Sheppard out.”

After a steady climb, he activated the internal com. “Dex, McKay, make sure your masks are on.”

“No need to remind me, Major.”

John covered his nose and mouth with his own, adjusting the pour. “That’s my job, Lieutenant. Sergeant Dex, what’s the word?”

“Think mine has a kink in it.”

That wasn’t good. At their altitude they all needed to be on oxygen. “McKay, go check on Ronon’s line. See what’s blocking the flow.”

“What did you do? Mistake it for a vine and try to swing from it?”

“Do it without talking, McKay.”
“Major, he just growled at me! Hey, I’m not some ape, you know!”

“Maybe if you’d stop calling him Tarzan? Now how about maintaining that radio silence?” John snapped.

The increase in altitude was supposed to position them over most of the storms they’d been warned about, but turbulence rocked their plane as John struggled to keep their bird on a steady course. This was the deadliest part of any flight. Not the approach toward the target, or the times when they circled for the weather to clear, or when they were caught and had to race for their lives.

No, it was the long stretches of lonely silence, mile after mile of navigating by McKay’s point of sight signals. Radio aids were forbidden except in times of emergency and at this height, they didn’t even have the ocean waves to go by. He could monitor their speed, follow a course charted using outdated maps, and be ready at an instant for evasive maneuvers if an enemy squad came out of the next cloud formation. The second he dropped his guard, he could lead them astray or get them all shot down.

Time ticked down, two hours of quiet save for the hum of the engines as each man kept his eyes open and fingers ready for anything.

Then McKay broke the silence, his voice startling even though he kept it low. “Alter your heading five degrees.”

John made the proper adjustment, noting they were close to the target, if the intelligence was accurate. He had modified their trajectory based on Teyla’s information, pushing them a whopping six miles south of the original position. No one had batted an eyelash at his suggestion; he knew it was his rep that they hedged their bets on.

Instrument readings told him they were supposed to be north of Sarmi even if he couldn’t see the outline of the land mass. Time to go lower and get a look-see. He tilted his wings back and forth to signal the others to start dropping.

Nineteen. Eighteen. Seventeen thousand feet and John’s palms were sweating. The cloud obstruction was thick and blinding.

Fourteen. Thirteen and enemy ground radar could now pick them up. They were too high to be spotted by sight, but he risked complete exposure.

The entire area was masked by heavy cloud cover. God only knew if they were over the right spot.

“McKay?” he whispered.

“The window is closed.”

Great. McKay couldn’t see shit. They used code words because the Japs sometimes listened in on their internal radio broadcasts; he really needed to change the ones he’d allowed McKay to pick out.

“What’s that odor? Do you smell that?”

“McKay, not now!” John hissed, trying to maintain radio silence. He’d noticed the rotten egg smell, too, but it wasn’t burning chemicals and that was all that mattered at the moment.

Lorne flapped his wings three times. No joy there either. It was time for another circle. This was the same nightmare John had over and over again. Doing run after run without an opening to take the pictures. He dipped his wings twice, ordering another pass.
The whole squad circled and circled and circled a fourth time. John was beyond pissed; he was fuming, cursing the weather, the coast, anything he could think of. A beam of sunshine broke through the heavy fog, painting targets across their bows. It wasn’t like they could be escorted with fighters like the bombers; their success depended on stealth more than anything.

Fuck.

Then it hit him. The maps, the intel, something Teyla had said when she’d given him the updated coordinates.

“Our people fear the wrath of the fire gods there. Be careful, Major.”

He was so stupid. “McKay!”

“What?”

“Are we near any volcanic activity?”

“How should I know?”

“Were there any indications on the maps you plotted?”

“You mean the ones drawn by grammar school children?”

“McKay!”

“These islands are made by volcanoes,” Ronon’s voice came over the com.

The skies were clear above but they’d been blocked by a mist for the past two hours. It had to be more than just rain.

“Major! It’s a sulfuric cloud. That’s what I smell.”

“Follow the cheese,” John radioed to the other planes, giving the code to stay on his lead.

John had been stationed in Hawaii for a year, Ronon his whole life. Slowly erupting volcanoes could obscure the air with steam and dust for weeks, even months.

“Get ready to point and click, McKay,” John whispered into the radio.

Twelve. Eleven. Ten thousand feet.

They rarely ever dipped this low.

Nine.

Eight.

Then they punched through the clouds and into clear skies.

Airfield surveillance was usually a nightmare since they were always camouflaged. But the one below was wide open, a blinding white lane of smashed sea coral inviting its planes to return.

And an entire squadron of Zeros was coming home, touching down before their eyes.

“You got what you need, McKay?”
“Yes! Move, Major! Move!”

John yanked hard on the flight stick, hitting the throttle and using all the extra torque of their turbo engines to get them the hell out of there and into the cover of vapor above. Their birds were designed to fly higher than fighter planes; it was their only salvation. But they were still only a re-fitted bomber and their airspeed was no match against the lighter, more maneuverable Zeros.

They needed time to reach a higher elevation that the enemy couldn’t.

But time wasn’t on their side. Twelve of the enemy broke formation, aborting their landings and heading right for them.

John’s squad couldn’t climb fast enough.

“Come up, baby, come on,” John ground out between gritted teeth. His arms spasmed and strained, thousands of pounds of force shoving him back into his seat as he struggled to maintain acceleration at such a sharp ascent.

Every rivet vibrated; the fuselage shook with stress. Then John’s eardrums throbbed with the concussive pounding of Ronon’s .50 caliber machine guns.

That meant the Japs were in target range, but so were they.

John began a series of Stuarts, something he’d never done at a ninety degree angle while bullets filled the space where their bird had been. Ten o’clock, three o’clock. A set of Zeros split off from their six o’clock positions, and tracer fire lit up the morning sky.

*Birddog* was taking heavy fire and *Eager Beaver* couldn’t shake the two Japs trying to chew up her tail.

They were going to be overrun. He had to draw the enemy away from the rest of his squad. “Hold on, guys,” he warned his crew.

“What? Why?”

John ignored McKay’s panicked surprise as he banked hard right, the heavy Havoc shuddering with the sudden change. Two Zeros flew right by, and in his peripheral vision, he watched three others break course in pursuit.

“What are you doing? Our only chance is to reach thirty thousand feet!” McKay screamed in his ear.

“What the hell, sir?” Lorne shouted.

“Make sure my eggs are cooked the way I like ‘em, *Black Jack,*” John relayed back.

Ordering the rest of the squadron to scramble in opposite directions and reach for the maximum ceiling possible and rendezvous later was the best course of options.

“Ronon! Prepare for a zoom dive!” John yelled.

“Roger!”

John didn’t have any forward guns. He mentally reversed his line of sight in his head, diving enough for his gunner to fire at the enemy behind them. God, he wanted his own gun; his fingers instinctively curled around a non-existent trigger.
“Christ, Dex got one!” McKay bellowed. “No, make that two!”

“How many are left?” John yelled, craning his neck to peer through the windshield.

“Um… eight. Two others our guys brought down,” McKay answered.

Their plane shook as they took heavy fire. John dived again, setting Ronon up for another go. He needed to take out the Japs chasing them, or they’d be blown out of the sky as they tried to climb out of reach. Plane debris showered down all over them and he prayed it wasn’t one of their birds.

Ronon let the enemy have it, the Brownings deafening within their metal beast.

One of the more nimble Zeros decided to come at them head on. John banked left and the plane flew right by before turning for another run at them.

“Climb again. I’ll get him,” Ronon radioed.

If he tried to ascend, they’d be in a single trajectory and be easily picked off. But John didn’t see any other enemy craft; most were either in pursuit of the squad, or had abandoned the chase.

Maybe they were out of fuel; the Japs had been returning from somewhere.

Havocs were built to take a lot of punishment so he followed his gut, seesawing at sharp angles to throw the Zero off before rolling to his three o’clock then soaring even higher.

“Oh, God, we’re dead!” McKay yelled.

John wouldn’t make it easy; he squeezed the throttle and sent them into a complete vertical incline, the plane straining with the effort. His eyes felt like they were going to pop out of their sockets, and his head was ready to explode. He was dizzy to the point of blacking out, his vision graying at the corners.

Ronon’s guns were metal baseball bats to his skull and John wasn’t even sure if he was breathing. It was all about muscle memory and instinct, struggling to hit five hundred mph at one hundred and twenty degrees.

Cannons exploded in his ears and the blue sky became a fuzzy shroud.

“Take it down!”

John didn’t know whose voice it was, but it cut through the din in his head.

“Major.”

“Sheppard!”

“What?” he rasped.

“Unless you want me to puke again, level out,” McKay panted.

John squinted at his readings, focusing on the speedometer and their thirty-eight thousand reading. “Sorry, McKay,” he managed to get out before sucking in a lungful of air.

He forced himself to ease down and slowly lowered to thirty thousand. “Okay…it’s okay.”

“Are we? Are we really alive?”
All the muscles in John’s body melted into his seat and he wiped at the sweat coating his face. “Yeah…I think so…Dex? Ronon? What’s your status?”

“Still here.”

John closed his eyes for a second. “That was some shooting.”

“That was some flying,” the big guy responded. “Are all our missions gonna be like that?”

“God, I hope not,” McKay wheezed out on a shuddery breath.

“No,” John said, his hands still shaking. He took a few seconds to regain control and stared out the window. “Um…McKay? Think you can find our way home?”

“I have no idea where we are now! We could be miles off course. What am I supposed to base a dead reckoning from?”

“Good. I’ll wait for your coordinates.”

John yanked the cord out from his radio and waited for his heart to finish exploding.

Dinah Shore was singing about an old acquaintance; her sweet voice soared above the memory of whirring engines. John stared inside the tumbler of amber liquid, his perspiring hands making the glass slick. His chest ached and his head still swam from the memory of that flight.

“Didn’t you get a silver star after that, sir?”

He was lost between a phantom adrenaline rush and the effects of the bootlegged rum warming his veins. “What?” he stammered

“Maybe if you let the major breathe, he might answer your question,” McKay growled from John’s left side.

“Um…yeah…I think,” John tried to answer the kid.

“Yeah, yeah, just one more medal to add to your collection.” McKay rolled his eyes. “And to correct you, Lieutenant, we all earned silver stars. You know. For the record.”

The sights and sounds of the officer’s tent finally cleared the cobwebs and John rubbed his fingers over the bar. It was ’44 not ’43 anymore. He looked up at Lieutenant Betts’ wide eyes and noticed all the others that had gathered to listen in.

John shook off the last remnants of the memory and allowed himself to relax. “We worked as a team on that mission. Always remember that.”

“Yes, sir.” The lieutenant beamed. “Sounds like Dex lives up to his reputation.”

John just grunted as a reply but gave a sly grin. “You know, if you wanna know anything else, you can always ask him yourself.”

Betts paled a bit and cast a wary glance back at the poker table. “Yeah, I’m good, sir.”

McKay coughed out a laugh. “Smart move, Bettsy. You may just live through this war after all.”
Sheppard was putting on a good show but only two other men in that bar knew how close it had been that first flight out with their new gunner. Ronon had thankfully meshed with their team immediately, like he’d been there all along (even if Rodney would certainly never say it loud, especially within earshot of the big Hawaiian,) but it almost hadn’t been enough.

“Hey, Pops, tell ’em about that time you --”

The crowd of faces around them had grown, all gathered to hear tales of the famous Major Sheppard. God, they all looked so young! They should be sitting with their arms around a girl at the local soda shop, sipping egg cream, not strapped with sidearms and drinking rot gut in a tent in the South Pacific.

He could tell his CO was growing antsy under their collective moon-eyed gazes. Everyone had heard of the legendary pilot, but few knew the man beyond the myth. One thing Rodney did know was how much Sheppard hated being in the spotlight. And he was just good enough a friend to do something about it.

“Oh, please! He’s just a pilot,” he sighed with dramatic aggravation.
Betts, who was obviously wet behind the ears and fresh out of flight training still had all the cocky, puffed chest pilot bravado down pat. He was the first in his P-40 squadron to have three Zeros to his credit and Rodney knew he was considered among the best and the brightest of the newbies. And of course, so did Betts.

“Just a pilot? You ever felt six g’s or pulled out of a death spiral?”

McKay laughed. “Six g’s? 58 meters per second squared? Did you actually learn anything in pilot training beyond how to flip the collar of your jacket and pull the cord on your parachute? At six g’s the human body experiences g-loc. That’s loss of consciousness, Bettsy.”

The young lieutenant’s face flushed red with anger or embarrassment. Rodney didn’t really care. If a fly boy got knocked down a peg or two his job was done.

“And as far as death spirals,” Rodney continued, “the one thing most of you hot shots forget to do is close the damn throttle off. I know it can be hard when your brain only knows ‘go faster’ but once you cut the acceleration and position your lift vector up, fiddle with the rudder or whatever the hell else you do…” he waved a hand in the air.

One of Betts’ toadies grew some balls and piped up. “Yeah, it’s so easy, why ain’t you flyin’, ’stead a takin’ pictures and playin’ with yer… camera?” He elbowed another goony looking kid next to him and the two brayed like donkeys.

To this point Sheppard had maintained silent contemplation of his drink and seemed to be pretty oblivious to the whole conversation.

Rodney knew better.

“What’s your name, son?” Sheppard asked calmly.

“M-malarkey, s-sir,” the toady stammered.

“Hm - good name,” Rodney muttered.

“Lt. Malarkey,” Sheppard continued before taking another sip of his rum, “what do you do every day?”

“Kill Nips, sir!” the kid shouted with gusto.

“Mm hm,” Sheppard continued, clearly unimpressed. “And where do you find those Nips, Lieutenant?”

“Wherever I can, sir!” This got him a low five from his goofy sidekick.

Rodney’s eyes practically rolled out of their sockets onto the floor.

“Yes,” Sheppard replied laconically. “Are you in the habit, Lieutenant, of aimlessly flying the skies of the South Pacific, wasting American fuel, wasting the Air Corps’ time, risking the lives of your squadron while you hope to happen upon a Nip or two?”

Goofy sidekick backed off a bit and returned his attention to his watered down punch.

Malarkey chewed for a second on the inside of his cheek, then replied. “No, sir.”

“Good. Glad to hear it, son. So how do you find these Nips you kill?”
“Orders, sir. They tell me where the Nips are.”

Rodney was tired of waiting for Sheppard to lead the kid to his target. “And how do you think Command knows where they are, how many of them there are, what their ground to air defenses are, hm?” he asked smugly.

The young pilot looked to Betts and his buddy for reinforcement but they left him high and dry. “Recon,” he muttered.

“I’m sorry, what was that?” Rodney prodded.

“Recon, sir,” the kid finally grunted out.

“Yes, recon. That would be those ‘pictures’ I take. And the maps that I draw. And the courses I plot. You’re welcome, by the way.” Rodney took a satisfied sip of his rum and swallowed roughly against the burning in his throat and the urge to gasp.

Sheppard picked up his own rum and looked into the glass for a long moment. Then without looking up he said quietly, “Treat your navigators well, Lieutenant. They may be the only thing that brings you home.”

Then he turned to Rodney and tapped his glass against his navigator’s.

Rodney nodded his understanding and acceptance of the gratitude, and he echoed Sheppard’s muttered toast. “Los Negros.”

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He knew in his gut it was going to be a bad day. While a man of little patience for the silly superstitions that Sheppard and most of the other pilots had, and of NO patience for the… the voodoo vision dream crap the local fuzzies yammered on about, Rodney couldn’t dismiss the tiny inner voice that said, find an excuse- any excuse- not to fly today.

He pulled a pair of socks out of his chest and raised them to his nose. About to take a less than surreptitious sniff, he glanced over to see that Ronon had somehow entered the tent silently and was sitting on Sheppard’s cot. The big man had cocked an eyebrow and was smiling.

“Haven’t done wash in a while,” Rodney mumbled, his face reddening as he tossed the socks back down and commenced rummaging for another pair. “And you could help, you know,” he said louder as he dug through his chest. “Check the trunk at the end of his bed. Sheppard must have a clean pair of socks in his gear. It’s not like he’s worn any in the last few weeks.”

“He’s gonna need ’em today,” was the laconic reply from the cot.

Rodney grunted as sweat poured down his forehead and stung his eyes. “Yes,” he huffed as he pulled more stuff from his chest, “remind me again whose bright idea it was to have the man leave the hospital and jump into a plane?”

“Sheppard.”

“Right. Sheppard. If we’re lucky he won’t pass out at the controls and drop us in the middle of…” Only in the South frigging Pacific could a man break into a sweat from looking for - “aha!” he announced, standing up and triumphantly brandishing a rolled up ball of olive drab socks.
Ronon just grunted out a ‘congrats’ then leaned back on his elbows on the cot.

“And where is Major Malaria, anyway?” Rodney continued griping as he sat on his cot and began stuffing one foot into the scratchy woolen footwear. “I told him to take his Atabrine every day. Hell, he’s the one always pushing them on all the rest of us. Nasty, bitter, little yellow piece of… oh, for crying out loud! I knew this was going to be a bad day! It’s the holey ones!”

“What makes ‘em holy, McKay?” Ronon smirked. “You have the Pope bless them or something?”

“Oh, you’re a regular Abbot and Costello rolled into one, you know that?” Rodney thrust a foot into the air to show one pale big toe sticking out from the end of the sock. “I hate these socks! I hate the way I can feel the sole of my boot and they always give me a blister. With all the… the rot around here I’ll probably wind up septic. Oh my God… they might have to cut off my foot!”

“It’s not like it could slow you down any more, McKay,” came a drawled comment from the tent’s entrance flap.

Any snide retort was stopped by the sight of his CO taking a few slow steps into the tent and then oh so subtly reaching out a hand to the center pole for support.

All these years in the South Pacific, and before that various tropical locales, had made Sheppard almost as tan as the natives here. The open glass canopy of most of the birds he flew and the time he spent on the beach in his spare time had burnished him to a healthy bronze.

But any speck of color he’d once had seemed to have been leached from his skin, leaving behind a shade closer to milk than coffee. Even the whites of his eyes were a jaundiced yellow.

Sheppard recoiled a little under Rodney’s scrutiny and scrubbed a hand at the back of his head. His hair was normally longer than regs allowed - Nuts O’Neill seemed to turn a blind eye to it for the most part and rumor had it that Sheppard had either made a bet or a deal with the Colonel but no one had ever gotten the real story behind it. After a few weeks in the base hospital it had grown out even longer and stuck out in ruffles and cowlicks all over.

“C’mon, McKay. You act like you seen a ghost.”

Quickly picking up one of his boots and shoving his foot into one with a grimace as his bared toe hit cold leather, Rodney shot back, “I think Casper has more color than you do right now. Sit down before you fall over, would you?”

The cot creaked as Ronon rose from it and assumed a casual at-ease stance. “He’s right.”

The pilot sighed but straightened with noticeable effort and let go of the post. “I’m gone a few weeks and suddenly you guys are agreeing with each other? What is this, a mutiny?”

“I think mutiny is for ships, Major. And I think even Roosevelt and Hirohito could agree on how bad you look and how incredibly stupid it is to send you - no, send us out on a mission today,” Rodney finished as he planted his booted feet on the ground.

“Look,” Sheppard sighed. “It’s either me or we get Caldwell back--”

“No!” was a duet sung by his two officers.

Sheppard gave a sickly grin. “See, there you guys are agreeing again. You’ll be happy to know that Caldwell’s already back in Bouganville.”
“Thank God,” Rodney muttered.

“Oh, c’mon. The guy couldn’t be that bad…”

“He told me my upgrades didn’t meet regs and wanted me to, I believe what he said was ‘put them back the way the US Army Air Corps and God intended.’ Jeez, the guy bleeds olive drab, I swear.”

“He ordered me to get my head shaved,” Ronon grunted.

Sheppard turned to the still very un-regulation haired gunner. “I see you followed his orders about as well you do mine,” he observed dryly.

“Thing’s kept popping up,” the big man said with a wide grin. “ Couldn’t help it if I never made it to the barber.”

“Yes, and you still owe me for that ‘fire’, Ronon,” Rodney said pointedly.

Sheppard shook his head then walked over and sat down heavily on his cot. “I was only gone two weeks, right?”

“Seventeen days,” Rodney corrected, then realized what he’d said. “Or around about that, anyway.”

“You guys are creeping me out with all this lack of hostility. Please don’t tell me this is on my account… I was sick as a dog but…”

“If you’d been a dog Beckett would’ve put you down,” Rodney interrupted. “How you could let it get that bad… You were in liver failure for chrissakes.” Rodney steamed with more than the tropical heat.

Sheppard paled even further, although it wouldn’t have seemed possible. “Look, McKay, I’ve been dealing with this since ‘41. Burma was… well, it was worse than this. We were all-volunteer, and meds and doctors were few and far between. I went to Beckett when it got bad, but it hit me harder this time is all. And before you start railing on me about the frigging Atabrine, it won’t do me any good because—”

Rodney waved a hand dismissively. “I know, you already had it, Atabrine is a prophylactic, doesn’t stop the reoccurrences; I got the speech from Beckett already.”

“Well…. Good,” Sheppard said shortly. Then he looked over at his gunner. “You have anything you wanna light into me about, big guy?”

Ronon just crossed his arms comfortably. “Nope. I think McKay covered it pretty good.”

“Again with the collusion. Seriously, what happened while I was gone?”

“Caldwell,” Rodney grunted.

“Enemy of my enemy and all that,” Ronon said, nodding.

Sheppard sighed and scrubbed again at his nape. “You two getting along, Ronon quoting the Bible… Boy, I really was gone too long.”

You have no idea, Rodney thought. And when he glanced over at Ronon their newly tenuous alliance seemed intact as he saw a confirming single nod of the head from the big man.

“Well, this little reunion has been just dandy,” Rodney said as he stood from his cot and flipped open
his chest. After a few seconds of digging he found a small metal canister and unscrewed the top. A
noxious, stinging chemical smell filled the humid tent as Rodney dug two fingers into the gelatinous
material inside.

“Jesus, McKay!” Sheppard cried as he covered his nose. “What the hell is that stuff?”

“Dimethyl phthalate,” Rodney bit out through clamped jaws as he began to slather the ointment on
his neck.

“Smells like jet fuel,” Ronon grunted through his grimace.

“Rocket fuel,” Rodney corrected as he reached down to put it on his ankles. “A derivative of rocket
fuel,” he amended. “It’s an insect repellent.”

“It’s a people repellent,” Sheppard gasped through his hand. “You are not getting in my plane with
that on, McKay!”

Rodney brandished an oil slicked finger at him. “When I’m a multimillionaire, and disease free after
the war, you’ll be singing a different tune, mister.”

“That’s Major Mister, to you, Lieutenant,” Sheppard growled. “And what the hell are you talking
about?”

Rodney rolled his eyes but screwed the top back on the canister and tossed it back into his chest. He
paused and considered Aussies with sticky fingers then shoved it down under Sheppard’s Superman
comics and some dirty underwear, practically guaranteed to stop anyone from looking any further.

“It’s my own formula,” he said smugly as he dropped the chest lid. “It’s gonna make me a fortune
back home. You know, when my old man moved us all over the border into the States I didn’t speak
to him for a whole month. And where does he move us to? Niagara Falls! I could see Canada out my
bedroom window. Monumentally unfair. But where did he get a job?”

He didn’t wait for an answer to his rhetorical question, wrapped up as he was in already counting his
millions. “Hooker Chemical! When I get back I’ll see old man Hooker and offer him first crack at the
patent. It’s either this one or diethyl-meta-toluamide,” he mused, tapping a greasy finger on his chin.
“Needs a better name though, that one. Maybe the initials. DMT… DEMT, DEET… hmm. Nah, this one’s better…”

“McKay!”

Rodney startled out of his reverie at the barked, implicit command. “Sorry.”

Sheppard shook his head and laid back on his cot. “The fumes are giving me a headache, McKay.
Go wash it off. We’re wheels up in an hour, and I’d better not get a whiff of that shit, got me?”

“But--”

“No buts, McKay. Off! Now!”

Rodney looked over and saw that whatever détente he’d reached with the big Hawaiian had come to
an end. Ronon sneered and plugged his nose in silent agreement… with Sheppard.

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Their destination was Los Negros. Actually, more like a stretch of sea a hundred miles off the coast.
The value of the Admiralty Islands, Los Negros in particular was enormous. In the grim arithmetic of war, their capture saved more lives than they cost by obviating the need to capture Truk, Kavieng, Rabaul and Hansa Bay. As an airbase, the Admiralties’ value was great, for aircraft based out of Momote ranged over Truk, Wewak and beyond. And as a naval base, their value was greater still, as they combined a fleet anchorage with major facilities.

Some of that military mumbo-jumbo had made sense to Rodney when it had been reported during briefing. He got the gist at least- lose Los Negros and possibly lose the war. No pressure there.

MacArthur and Nimitz had fought over whose prize it was, like two squabbling kids, but had finally made peace and divvied it up between the Navy and the Army.

So why was it the Air Corps coming in to save the day again?

Word had come down the pike that Japanese naval ships had been spotted circling like sharks in the waters off the coast, and HQ had given the order to find out what the Japs were up to. Their squad each got a sector of five hundred miles to search. And five squadrons of bombers were waiting for the word to descend on the carriers and bomb them back to Tokyo.

Just like all their missions it seemed, they had the whole of the US military machine waiting on their intel.

With a sigh, Rodney rechecked his instruments against the map spread out on his lap. This far out to sea the readings became just that much more important, what with any discernable land masses having been left behind hours ago and nothing but dark grey ocean as far as the eye could see below them.

He dug into the front pocket of his flight vest and pulled out his worn but trusty compass. It was just a battered stainless steel clamshell on a fob; one click of the knob opened the case to reveal not a pocket watch as it appeared but a yellowed crystal compass. It had been in the McKay family for generations, back to England where his great grandparents probably used it to tramp through the moors or hike the Cotswolds or something equally rustic. All Rodney knew was that he grew up in 20th century Canada, Toronto to be precise, and had had no use for a compass since the buses took you wherever you needed to go.

His mom had pressed it into his hand the day he headed off to boot camp. She said his Uncle Meredith had used it during the great war, and had returned with nary a scratch. Of course, Uncle Mer had been stationed in India, a hundred kilometers from any action, and spent his days as liaison to a maharajah or something, so Rodney wasn’t sure how the compass fit in there but his mom had been crying so hard he just didn’t have the heart to argue with her.

He’d scoffed, of course, because, superstitions were for flyboys with ridiculously long hair and gunners with even longer hair. But they flew mission after mission, skidding in by the skin of their teeth, parts dragging, wounds bleeding -- none for him so far, thank God, and maybe that also figured into the whole maybe there is something to the ‘lucky McKay compass’ but there was no way he would ever breathe a word of it to anyone.

So instead he left it closed and rubbed his thumb over a favored dent in the front of the case, then slipped it back into his front pocket.

A quick glance at first relieved him when he saw Sheppard hadn’t seemed to notice. A more discerning look left him dismayed.

His CO was holding onto the yoke with knuckles almost as white as his complexion.
Rodney turned and saw that their gunner’s eyes were also trained on Sheppard. The big man gave a ‘what can you do?’ shrug but Rodney saw the real concern in his steadfast gaze.

He turned again and gave a surreptitious glance at--

“What can you do?”

Rodney started but quickly looked back down at his map. “Stop what?” he asked casually.

“I’m fine.”

That elicited a snort from the back of the plane that could be heard even over the engine drone.

Sheppard let out a long slow breath through his nose before responding. “Cut it out, the both of you. McKay, how much longer?”

Rodney checked his panel and leaned over to peer out through the glass at the sun. “What’s our speed, Major?”

“Holding steady at 340.”

A few calculations and a few more glances outside and Rodney nodded his head. “At this speed, should be another 27 minutes….. Now.”

Ronon spoke up from the back. “Couldn’t you just say ‘about half an hour’?”

“Well, I could have if my skills didn’t extend beyond ‘when the big hand is on the three and the little hand--’”

“Damnit! What is with you two?” Sheppard barked.

That made Rodney pause as, if anything, he and Tarzan had been getting along better than usual.

“I might ask the same, Major,” he shot back.

His only answer was an increase in the plane’s speed and Sheppard’s nine-mile stare out the front window.

“Yes, pour on more fuel so we can get there a few minutes earlier,” Rodney muttered as he calculated how much petrol they had left. It was always the thing that made him the antsiest, worrying not that he couldn’t find them a way home but that they’d stay in the air long enough to get there.

He juggled some numbers in his head and paled a little. “Actually, seriously, Major, don’t waste fuel.”

“It’s not a waste, McKay!” Sheppard growled. “We’re already late.”

“Late? Late to what? They aren’t expecting us,” Rodney said with a laugh. “I’m sure Tojo and the gang are holding up the works, waiting on us to arrive. Besides, you don’t even know IF there’ll be anything there! Lorne or one of the other crews could find them.” He didn’t mention the other IF - if the threat even really existed.

“We should’ve been here two weeks ago, Lieutenant! We have no idea what they’ve been up to all this time. I knew about it and ---” He trailed off with another sigh and his hands tightening on the yoke. He was practically leaning forward as if will alone could make the plane go faster.
“I know.” Rodney said quietly. “Teyla told us.”

“What? You … I mean… who?”

There was another snort, even louder as if to compensate for the revved up engines from the back. Rodney bit back a grin. “Who, Major? What, you think you’re the only one who knows about the native Mata Hari?” He would almost swear he could hear the sound of his CO’s teeth grinding together.

“How?”

“She came to see you,” Ronon answered from the back. “We told her how sick you were…”

“Yes, she was quite upset. I think she may have cried, and even swooned a little,” Rodney confirmed smugly.

“Knock it off, McKay,” Sheppard muttered, but his pale complexion was blossoming with pink in his cheeks.

“Oh, it was quite tender, really,” Rodney continued. “She rushed right over to the hospital tent, no doubt to wipe your fevered brow, but those Neanderthal MPs wouldn’t let her in. When Beckett found out, whoo, I don’t speak Gaelic but I think I recognized a few choice words--”

“Wait, Beckett knows her too?”

This time Rodney couldn’t keep the laugh from breaking free. “Oh, please, Major! It’s a base with eight hundred smelly sweaty guys. Aside from the few times the fuzzy gals waltz over with their…” he flailed a bit for words…. “bosoms… bouncing about…”

Sheppard’s eyebrow shot up into his hairline at that.

“What? Bosoms is a perfectly adequate way of describing … anyway… a gal like Teyla is within a kilometer of base and every guy is gonna know it. It’s too bad she wears a top, though.”

“McKay!”

“What? It’s true! Besides, everyone knows she’s sweet on you and you’re sweet on her, so it’s hands off. Maybe not eyes off, but---”

The tail was practically bobbing up and down as Ronon’s rumbling laugh filled the tiny Havoc.

“What? Yes.” Rodney muttered. “But yes, she told us that she told you about the ships. And she really was genuinely worried about you, and she checked back just about every day. She really is a pretty swell gal, I gotta say. Oh, and don’t worry, I gave her your pills.”

Sheppard’s eyes finally turned away from the glass. The pink had gone cherry red, and spread to the tips of his ears. “You gave her my--”

“Atabrine,” Rodney confirmed with a nod. “Again, as if we don’t see you palm your pill every night at dinner. Makes sense, actually. Doesn’t do you any good, but at least it can help her.”

Finally taking pity on their poor flummoxed major, Rodney pointedly checked his gauges and changed subjects. “We should be closing in soon.”
Sheppard snapped back to attention, flipped some switches and leaned forward to stare out the glass nose.

“Sergeant? Ready back there?”

“Ready, willing, and able, sir.” Rodney glanced back to see Ronon curl his fingers around the trigger and place his eye to his sights.

“Eyes open, McKay?”

“Camera's loaded and operational,” Rodney verified.

“Let’s go see what we can see, fellas,” Sheppard said quietly as he pushed the wheel forward and they began their descent.

Teyla’s intel was good. That and the peculiar luck they seemed to have meant that their assigned sector was the jackpot. Barely thirty minutes later they got their first view of a Japanese aircraft carrier.

230 meters long from bow to stern and bristling with anti-aircraft armament, she sat like a fat queen bee, barely moving despite the choppy grey waters that held her. Worker bees, smaller naval cruisers surrounded her. And to the north, a Yamato-class battleship.

The camera’s frenetic whiny clicking was the only sound in the Havoc as they dropped in closer.

“Holy crow,” Sheppard muttered disbelievingly. “I think that’s… crap, is that what I think it is?”

Just over the horizon an even larger behemoth came into view. This carrier was 260 meters long and a dozen or more Zeros perched on her deck along with eighteen Nakajima ‘Kate’ bombers and ten Kawasaki fighters they’d code named Tonys. It was only half her known complement but the amount of firepower just in the planes alone…

“It’s the Zuikaku,” Rodney whispered.

A growl issued from the tail of the plane and Rodney turned to see their gunner shifting his position, his finger tightening on the trigger of his Browning.

“Sergeant!” Sheppard hissed.

There was a second’s hesitation but the big man relaxed a fraction and answered back with a sharp nod.

The Zuikaku and her sister carrier, the Shokaku, were the premier vessels of the Imperial Navy. And they’d each carried a complement of aircraft responsible for the attack on Pearl Harbor.

“This… This is big, guys. This is… bigger than big,” Sheppard whispered in awe, his eyes glued on the threat below them. “We have to get this back to HQ. Now! McKay, you got enough film?”

Rodney stuttered out a nod and began the process of retracting the camera. “Yeah, yes, sir. Go ahead. Go. Go!” His heart was hammering so hard in his chest his whole body was rocking to its beat. The combined firepower below and on the carriers was enough to take out Los Negros at least. If Momote was lost…

“Shit! They saw us!”

“Well, of course, they saw us!” Rodney spluttered as he urged the camera in faster.
“Thought we’d have a little more time,” was the muttered reply from the pilot.

The tail of the plane dipped as Ronon shifted a box of ammo closer to the Browning with what Rodney would swear was an eager growl. When Rodney glanced back, eyes wide with terror, he saw the gunner’s face lit with a feral grin.

Then Ronon opened fire.

The inside of the tiny plane exploded with the rapid deployment of the Browning. Each of the .50 caliber shells packed over ten thousand foot pounds of power, and the metallic clatter of the linkage belt as it fed through the gun ran in counterpoint to the booming of the gunpowder igniting.

The sound was literally deafening, and that was before the carrier answered back with a barrage from its own anti-aircraft guns. Each shell measured five inches in length; one direct hit and they’d be blasted out of the sky like a clay pigeon.

Rodney pulled his lips in and bit down against a scream of terror as Sheppard began an almost vertical climb for the skies.

Ronon was letting forth guttural cries as he fed line after line of ammo through the Browning. Then he suddenly stopped and swung the gun ninety degrees. “Comin’ on our tail!”

Sheppard cursed but kept the wheel pulled back with grim determination.

A quick glance at the altimeter confirmed they’d made it (barely) out of range of the big guns on board the carrier. But as Rodney turned to look out the side window he saw them. A line of small, but getting rapidly bigger, black dots. The Tonys had been launched and were honing in, like a line of angry hornets and they’d been the kid with the stick.

With one hand Sheppard kept their steady climb while the other began strapping his mask into place. “We got one chance, guys. Tonys’ll outmaneuver us if I give ‘em time. O2 on! Lt. McKay, get on the horn! Keep the line open on channel eight and key the code in rapid bursts, every five seconds. If we don’t make it, at least maybe we can get the info to one of the others who can. Sergeant Dex, make me proud. Kill as many of those sonsabitches as you can.”

With a quickly muttered, ‘Roger’ from each of them, affirming they’d received and understood their orders, McKay and Ronon fell to their individual tasks as Sheppard began a sharp turn while maintaining their ascent.

It was well understood, what their one chance was, slim as it was. The Kate was fast, probably one of the fastest planes in the skies above the Pacific and a good pilot could make one dance a Lindy Hop in the air. But she didn’t climb well. Correction: she didn’t climb as well as their turbocharged Havoc.

So, if they could avoid the guns long enough, conceivably they should be able to climb their way through the clouds and to freedom. Conceivably.

The lead Tony closed in on them and let loose a fusillade of bullets from the dual machine guns mounted under its nose.

Sheppard banked hard, tipping the plane on its side before righting itself and continuing the mad dash for the higher altitudes.

Ronon fed another chain of ammo through the Browning, sweat pouring off his forehead. He shook
his head angrily like a wet dog, his long curls flinging off beads of moisture.

Rodney tuned in channel eight and began pressing and releasing the mike key in a steady pattern, waiting through the eternal five seconds between each burst, hoping to hear the squawk back that said they’d gotten the message through.

A puff of black smoke from the tail of the Tony said Ronon had hit his mark. That and the triumphant yell the big man let loose. Thankfully, it had been muffled by the oxygen mask; the noise in the tiny plane was already so thunderous Rodney was certain they’d all return stone deaf.

One Tony down, another nine to go, Rodney fretted as one hand kept up the steady repeating signal and the other tried frantically to keep track on the map where they were flying.

His eyes were pinned on the instrument panel when it erupted in a shower of fiery sparks and smoke. The metal cartridge of a 127mm shell stuck absurdly out of the wreckage.

Rodney stared, horrified and stunned at how close it had hit. And what damage it had caused.

“Mckay! You good?” Sheppard yelled.

When there was no immediate answer the pilot turned and looked back over his shoulder, his already pale face gone skim milk gray. “Rodney?”

“Yeah,” he squeaked out tentatively, not really yet willing to tempt fate and confirm his lack of harm. “Yeah, Major, I’m good. The instrument panel… not so much.” Then he caught movement out of the corner of his eye and flinched.

Flames were licking at the corner of his map. He beat at it hysterically with his hand until there was nothing but a black and crispy stain where Australia used to be.

We are so doomed, was Rodney’s only thought as Sheppard returned back to his piloting and Ronon kicked away one empty crate of ammo and started into another one.

Rodney pulled out the canister of fire retardant and sprayed down the small fire that still smoldered in the ruined panel.

The next half hour was a deafening, stomach churning series of rolls, banks, dives, and the clatter of the .50 cal ammo barely heard over the explosion of gunfire and the increasing whine of the engines as Sheppard and the plane strained to elude their pursuit. Ronon managed to pick off three of them, and as Rodney watched them plummet to the ocean below he could only think that it could be them next.

One Tony flew close enough that he could see the pilot’s face. He was expecting a leering yellow mask, madness in the Jap’s eyes as he bore down on them with a laugh and a sneer. What he saw was a kid of maybe seventeen. His face was placid under his thin leather helmet; at least until his tail rotor took a hit and he started to spiral downward. Then there was abject fear and terror. When the cockpit caught fire Rodney closed his eyes and hoped that at least when the kid hit the Pacific it would be a quicker death than burning alive.

They’d been climbing, dodging and weaving for the better part of an hour before the last of the remaining pursuers broke off and began high tailing it back to the carrier. The Tonys were known to be piggish with fuel, and it was that or drop like a rock into the sea.

Rodney was about to breathe a small sigh of relief when the last of the retreating enemy suddenly broke off and circled back, diving straight for the Havoc in a clear attempt at taking them down with
him. Their plane rocked with the wind stream the plummeting Tony kicked up, and it was only a last minute goose of acceleration that cleared them out of his way into the deep. And with that went the last of the Japs. For now.

How they managed to run the gauntlet they did, and survive, was a combination of piloting expertise, Ronon’s blood thirst with the Browning and that odd lopsided luck they had. Good luck finding the carriers. Bad luck being seen. Good luck it was Tonys that chased them, Bad luck losing the navigation panel. Good luck evading their pursuers… It didn’t take a genius, even if he was one, to figure out what came next.

“Alright,” Sheppard sighed into the com as he slumped in his seat. “That’s the last of them. McKay, where the hell are we?”

Rodney took several long, deep breaths of ozone tainted air and willed his heart not to explode out of his chest. When he could hold his map open without his hands shaking too badly he smoothed it out and began the laborious process of fixing their position. Already a difficult enough job, having his instrument panel shot to shit was going to make it near on impossible. It was a good thing he was a genius…

“Best I can tell,” he began as he double-checked the time and the sun’s position, “we’re about a thousand miles from nowhere,” he finished with a dismal sigh. “We could be half way to Okinawa, we traveled so far north.”

“We need to be south, McKay,” his CO growled.

“Well, you flew north!” At the death-threatening glare Rodney shook his head. “Fine take her about 180 degrees, for a start. I’ll… figure out something from there,” he sighed again as he cast a glance through his shattered window out at the wide, grey sea below. “And when you can take us lower, do it.”

“How we doing on fuel?” Ronon keyed in.

“Not. Good,” was Rodney’s terse reply.

Suddenly the rear hatch opened and Rodney’s map was almost sucked free; only a last minute, desperate grab held the precious material in the plane.

With his other hand he pressed his oxygen mask to his face. “Are you crazy? We’re at 20,000 feet! What if my oxygen or my seat harness had failed?”

Ronon grinned behind his own mask and lifted an empty ammo crate. “Lightening the load,” he noted as he flung the wooden crate out the open hatch. This was followed by another crate half full of the heavy .50 caliber shells.

“Hey! That’s - we need that!”

“McKay, we don’t dump the extra weight, the whole plane’ll end up in the Pacific,” Sheppard drawled. “We may still, if we don’t find some place to land.”

“Oh, no pressure!” Rodney whined. “I’m trying! I have nothing but turn of the century instruments and an outdated map.”

“Can you do this or not, McKay?”

Rodney paused at the serious tone his CO had asked the question with.
Can he do this? How can he not? With their lives, and worse the balance of the whole blasted war in his hands… God, he almost wished he’d accepted Oppenheimer’s offer. It’s not like the stakes could get much higher, and a sterile lab with coffee and donuts, and a bathroom, and lackeys, and definitely no one shooting at him! was looking more tempting by the minute.

“Of course, I can, Major,” was his somewhat calmer reply. “Just keep the plane flying and I’ll … do … something…” He returned to his octant and map and fell into quiet calculating, while struggling not to listen for the sputter of the engine as it ran out of fuel.

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His gaze kept flicking back up to the blackened and shattered panel of navigation instruments; a small curl of acrid, greasy black smoke still rose from the ruin. With a resigned sigh he dug out his lucky pocket compass and popped it open. The needle behind the yellowed crystal spun madly for a bit, then settled into ticking back and forth between the panel and somewhere off to their left.

Great. The electric short had magnetized the metal panel, and because the normal wonkiness of compass readings out here when surrounded by volcanic islands wasn’t enough, now the compass wanted to read the panel as north. So no matter which way they flew, it would always appear they were northbound.

Evening, when the stars would be visible and he could navigate celestially, was still several hours away. They had fuel for ten hours of normal flying, but nothing of what they’d been doing was even approaching normal. Climbs like the ones Sheppard had been making drained fuel at twice the norm, and they’d already been in the air over four hours.

Rodney gazed out the window at the waters below. Sheppard had brought them down to a thousand feet; this was normally a good navigating altitude as he could see the outline of land masses, but seeing as how there weren’t any, they needed to be lower.

“Can you take us down to five hundred, Major?”

Sheppard hesitated as his eyes scanned the horizon. “Makes us awful easy pickings, McKay.”

“Understood, sir, but seeing as how all I have left is checking wind direction and hoping the weather report got it right, I need to be lower. Unless you’d like to wet your finger and stick it out the--”

“Lieutenant…” came the warning growl.

“All right, all right. I need to see the water.” He met Sheppard’s tired gaze. “It’s all we have left at the moment.”

His CO gave a short nod and eased the yoke forward and lowered the plane until Rodney could see the white caps. Thankfully, the Pacific wasn’t living up to its name; waves several feet high roiled and crested below. Rodney took in the direction of the wind blown sea spray then checked his logs. Now they were getting somewhere. Where exactly that was had yet to be determined.

“Well, unless the Trade Winds have suddenly reversed course, which with our luck… well, I’d say we’re headed home-ish.”

“Ish?” Ronon piped in.

“Well, this close to the equator, we’re near the Intertropical Convergence Zone, or as we in navigational circles call it, the ITCZ. Which normally means little wind at all… the hot air just rises and doesn’t really go anywhere. So I’m seeing whitecaps which means there is wind, so we are
south of the equator. Which is home-ish. And the direction of the winds here should be from the southeast. So if we use that as our guide, we can head southwest, and find our way home,” he finished triumphantly.

Then a few more facts clicked into place in his head. “Of course,” he continued, more soberly, “there’s a diurnal cycle to the precipitation in the ITCZ. Clouds form in the late morning and early afternoon hours and then by 3 to 4 p.m., the hottest time of the day, convectional thunderstorms form and precipitation begins.”

When he finished his impromptu lecture he saw that his two teammates were not getting what that meant; he could tell by the lack of panic on their faces.

“It means,” he added with a sigh as he checked his watch, “we should be headed into a very bumpy ride real soon.”

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The plane was quiet for the next few hours save for the occasional grunt from the gunner of “Opening!” followed by a blast of wind whistling out the open gun hatch. Ronon continued scouring the plane for anything not pinned down and had stripped the poor gal practically down to her walls; Rodney had had to dive for the chest that contained their life raft and emergency supplies before it could be launched out of the Havoc.

Ronon appeared to think for a minute, then he dumped the raft and pack of rations and maps on the floor of the plane, then tossed the chest out with a grunt.

Sheppard hadn’t moved in his seat. His back was ramrod straight, his neck held rigid, shoulders back, as if he’d been turned to stone where he sat. When Rodney would give the occasional flight path correction, the pilot barely stuttered out a nod of affirmation he heard the request, instead just making the alterations with as little movement as possible.

They could all see the massive bank of storm clouds rolling towards them. Rodney had souped their plane up beyond all her given limitations, but even they couldn’t out run a storm front. Water drops were already spattering against the Havoc’s frame and she was so empty and hollowed out that they sounded like gunfire.

Then the noise they had all been dreading came. It was small, subtle at first. A hesitation in the hum of the engines. Then it became a stutter, then a stammer. One cough, then two more.

Not a breath was drawn as an asthmatic wheeze issued from the right engine and the plane dipped a little.

Sheppard gripped the wheel tightly, scanning furiously out the rain covered windscreen. “McKay! Gimme something! An atoll, a… a frigging sand bar… anything!”

Rodney closed his eyes. His thumb settled into the dent in his compass and he rubbed furiously while making promises to a deity he professed no belief in.

“McKay!”

Just wait for it...

“Chutes on, men! I’ll take her up as high as I can. Sergeant, grab the raft! Lieutenant- you have the emergency pack.”
Wait for it…

The engine hacked out a cloud of greasy smoke, started to die, then suddenly revved back to full strength.

Rodney gulped, let his galloping heart slow down to an uneven trot before trying on his normal smug expression.

“That would be the reserve reserve tank.”

“The reserve-- what the--?”

Folding his compass discretely back in place with a shaky hand, Rodney nodded. “I put in a reserve tank back up. I um, wasn’t sure I’d had time to calibrate it and connect it properly. But I was tired of chewing my fingernails down to the quick every time we went out, so I gave us a little … edge.

Between our initial fuel capacity of 1,851 kg and the extended capacity we got from the alterations to the bomb-bay adding another 500 kg, we were already fuel heavy. I had to figure out if the added weight of another fuel reservoir would actually cancel itself out with the extra weight we were pulling, but I managed to find the room by gutting some of the bomb loading equipment and I didn’t even have to reinforce the plating in the frame.”

He smiled happily but was dismayed by the lack of joy on his CO’s face.

“What? I thought you’d be--”

“And you’re just telling me this now, Lieutenant?” Sheppard yelled.

“I told you… I wasn’t sure it would work.. False hope and all that…sir.”

“How much fuel we talking about?” Ronon rumbled from in back. Rodney flashed him a grateful eye roll; it appeared maybe their détente was still holding.

“Another 500 kg. Should keep us in the air another couple hours.” He tried another weak smile on the major.

Sheppard rolled his neck and stretched like a cat in his seat before slumping back over the wheel. “Coulda done without the heart attack, McKay“, he said almost so quietly as to not be heard over the plane noise.

“Sorry,” was Rodney’s reply in almost as soft a voice. He did feel badly; the extra stress wasn’t doing the sick man any good, and it was clear whatever stamina he’d managed to muster up this morning was long gone.

But he knew Sheppard was no good with concern, in fact, he tended to react almost violently to it, so Rodney settled back in to watching the seas below them and the ominous black cumulonimbus clouds piling up at their tail.

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Rodney was certain they were near a land mass. They had to be. The storm front was nipping at their heels; the small plane was already bobbing and weaving like a cork on the ocean. And they hadn’t been able to spare the fuel to allow Sheppard to take them up above it.

And to make matters worse, the storm winds whipped at the ocean’s surface, stirring up chaotic, and
thus, untraceable, froth and spray.

He was back to the radio, keying the mike in a repeated code pattern, his ear tuned for the answering squawk that said the signal had been picked up. Then his ear picked up something else.

This time, when the engine started hiccupping, everyone on board knew there’d be no tertiary reserve tank.

Rodney’s heart sank. He’d let them all down. He glanced back to see that Ronon had his eyes closed and was muttering something quietly. Sheppard was practically folded over the wheel with exhaustion; his eyes were half-lidded but never strayed from the windscreen.

“Guys”, Rodney began solemnly. “I just want to say… I just want to say…” He tried formulating something that would be appropriate for their steadily impending demise but words had always been one of the few things he’d failed at. August 3, 1943. At least he knew the day that would be on his memorial marker.

While he was grasping to put his thoughts to voice he caught a glimpse of a small black dot off to their right.

“Major!”

The pilot sat up abruptly and turned a pale, red-eyed face to him.

“Follow that bird!”

Somehow Sheppard mustered up enough energy to crook one eyebrow skyward.

“Have you gone crackers, McKay?”

“No yet I haven’t,” Rodney said firmly. “I’m serious. Follow that damn bird!”

To his credit, Sheppard didn’t hesitate. Much. He turned the plane towards the small flapping gull without further question.

“Bird’s headed into shore, isn’t it, McKay?”

Rodney turned to see Ronon with a shit-eating grin on his face. “See it all the time back in the islands. Birds sense the storm coming and head for cover.”

“That is the hope, that is the hope,” Rodney affirmed.

A few minutes later they were rewarded with the sight of a dark shape on the horizon. Land. And hopefully not Japanese occupied land, or active volcano land, or no open space to land, land…

Seconds later the shore line came into better view and Rodney paged furiously through his maps to see if he could identify it.

A lagoon, a pair of mountains thrusting up through the clouds on the north end. “I think it’s Boratu.”

“If you’re right, McKay, she’s got an airstrip,” Sheppard said. His voice was ragged but hope lent it some strength. “Not a finished one… we just got her back from the Japs and they burned it on their way out, but it’s clear. Everyone strap in tightly; I can’t promise it’ll be pretty.”

Rodney grabbed frantically at his harness and tightened everything down until his circulation was being cut off. With a mental rub at the compass in his pocket he clamped his eyes closed as the tops
of trees came closer and closer. Nothing but dark green foliage as far as the eye could see. There was no place to land. There was no -- there ahead was a strip of blackened soil, barren save for vines and brush that had taken over.

The engine coughed out its final drop of fuel and they coasted in, the landing gear catching on the tree canopy. A hard jolt jarred the plane as it bounced once, twice, and finally skidded to a rest, her nose almost touching a tall wooden pole.

The ticking of the cooling engine was the only sound for a long pause, then Sheppard said in a weak voice, “Radio tower. Send ‘em the coordinates and tell ‘em to bomb the Japs back to Hell.”

Rodney gaped at the order. “Me? But the commanding officer should…”

Sheppard was passed out over his control panel.

“Should probably get some rest,” Rodney sighed.

When he emerged from his trip down memory lane Rodney was relieved to see that the crowd had dispersed. He turned to see that Betts had wandered back to the table where Ronon was playing cards. The surly gunner gave the young turk a long up and down look, then grunted before finally moving an ammo crate over for the kid to sit down on and shoving another man’s cards over to give him room to play.

Malarkey and his buddy were seated at the far end of the bar, their drunken bodies barely staying on the upturned rifle crates they were using as barstools. Malarkey told a joke, grinning so hard that Rodney’s jaw ached as the goofball sidekick let out a donkey laugh and fell off his crate.

A far cry from the oohs and ahs of admiration Sheppard and the team had gotten after their return with the Hollandia airstrip intel. That had been nice, Rodney had to admit. It got them a week of back slaps and handshakes, even from the men that normally called him Poindexter and threatened him with limes. And of course, the silver star.

No medals after finding the Japanese armada. No hullabaloo, no cheers or even recognition by the brass. No, if word ever got out, how close they had come to losing the Admiralties... morale was already tenuous as it was, both here and back home. The war effort hadn’t gone anywhere near as smoothly as all the top brass had claimed it would.

So the squadrons were dispatched quietly; they rained Hell down on the two carriers and returned back to base with a ‘mission accomplished’ answer for General Hammond. The old man had visibly sagged with relief for the briefest of seconds before saluting and dismissing them all from his ready room. Likely to partake of the eighteen year old bottle of scotch everyone knew he kept in his lowest desk drawer.

He looked over to share his reignited fire of indignation at how their near—really, really near death had been summarily ignored when they had probably been responsible for preserving the whole balance of the war effort. Sheppard was totally absorbed in staring at the bottom of his empty glass.

The man needed these days off but Rodney hoped he wasn’t planning on drinking his way through all of them. He looked more like he needed a month’s worth of square meals and the next three days sleeping.

So he’d at least be healthy for their suicide mission to Biak.
These directions go all around your line of flight and form SURFACES OF CONES which go out from your plane into space.

GUNNERY SENSE

OVERTAKING
Side view out of range.

TURN-IN
For wing up, for a moment seems to hang still in the air.

ROLLTHROUGH
Facing you, he rolls high wing down.

GUNS BEARING
Head on, growing bigger and steadying.

The planes in the white circles show how the fighter looks from the bomber during the different phases of the attack illustrated.
Ronon laced his fingers behind his head, cards spread out in a full house, watching his opponents throw down losing hands in disgust. He loved winning, loved it even more when he suckered everyone in the final round of heavy betting for one last chance at a big payday. Airmen mumbled under their breaths, a few stalked away, a couple told him ‘good game’, but mostly they all went to the bar to get drunk.

He collected his winnings of candy, chocolate, cash, and cigarettes. All good trading material for favors and supplies, but most of his pay went back home to his family. The rum was a bonus; not a single drop had been lost, and he planned on saving most of the bottle for rough nights alone in his bunk in the quarters he shared with three other NCOs. For now, he owed his friends a shot so he worked his way around those huddled around tables, deep in conversation and gossip.

During the last rounds of the poker game the crowd had swelled around Sheppard as it often did, hopeful for tales of heroism, but as the alcohol poured, men shifted in and out and his crewmates were eventually left alone. There was an empty stool near McKay; Ronon clapped Sheppard on the shoulder in greeting as he walked by before taking a seat in the far corner.

His CO nodded slightly, but his posture was tense, all barriers up and battened down. Ronon knew to keep his distance when Sheppard was like this, decided to just leave him be. Alcohol did funny things to people; it loosened tongues, inflamed tempers or seduced you into quiet reflection.

McKay sat there studying his drink, no doubt thinking about its chemical make-up. The navigator was usually like the wind, constantly in motion, always howling and kicking up dust. It was unsettling to find him reserved, lost in thought, voice oddly silent.

There were times for raising your people up with a joke, and others when you allowed the mood to take its course. Ronon plopped down his bottle, soaking in the odor of mildew and sweat and nodding his head as a dame crooning about lost love poured from the tinny radio.

A shot glass appeared in front of him and Pete poured the rum without a word before giving the bar a cursory swipe with his dingy rag and hurrying off to tend to the men at the other end.

Ronon curled his fingers around the glass, tilted it toward Sheppard in a salute, and chugged the fire down. He closed his eyes, the sultry voice now replaced by a newscaster with an update on the fighting in Europe. Had it only been a couple of weeks since they got the news about the change in the war?

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It was another god-awful muggy afternoon. Ronon went to bed and woke up covered in sweat with flies or mosquitoes always buzzing around his face. He’d grown accustomed to feeling and smelling like a pig; with fresh water rationed tightly, the constant rain was often the only thing that washed away the daily filth. After weeks of gray skies and terrible weather it was strange to see the sun shining, almost as if it knew there was something special going on today.

Low level charges went off in rapid succession; men hooted and hollered at the pathetic excuse for
fireworks. Ronon had half a mind to thunk the skulls of the nitwits who thought a celebration was just cause for blowing up precious ordnance in a war zone. Funny how there was never a CO around when a boot needed to be shoved up someone’s ass.

Two men high fived each other, cackling and lurching about under a palm tree. Both were privates, but despite the difference in rank, he kept his mouth shut. Serving in a combat role meant everything, and he wouldn’t ruin it by looking for trouble. Turning a blind eye burned deep inside, but he’d rather wield a gun than the potato paring knife he’d likely get if he caused problems.

Music blared from transistor radios and he followed the sounds, adjusting the sack across his shoulder, bare feet digging into the wet sand. He’d left his mud-caked boots under a fallen tree so none of the jungle critters could take off with them. Crews gabbed in huddled groups on the beach, a few nodded in his direction, others ignored him. He preferred being invisible; it was less hassle.

The whole barbecue party idea wasn’t his thing and it was the last place he’d rather be. They’d had an event free operation the night before followed by a ten hour run over the north coast in the morning and he was dead on his feet. But Sheppard had asked him to join in the rare moment of fun and he’d never told his CO no before, and never planned to.

Hawaii’s sands came in colors from allover the spectrum, white, black, pink and green. But this beach was a dull, rocky gray. New Guinea was far from his grandfather’s fields, but the waters that slapped the shore carried the same salt and dirt across the Pacific. The ali‘I, the original canoe builders, had set sail from places unknown, maybe from the mysterious Rapa Nui, or Asia. Who knew?

Did it matter? The ocean was the bringer of all life, binding them all together and tearing them all apart.

Men gathered around small fire pits, listening to the ongoing news reports and the big band music Sheppard enjoyed. Orchestras soothed many souls, but the instruments lacked the natural rhythm of drums hollowed out of hundred year old trees.

He searched for a shock of black hair or long sleeves and a buttoned collar but saw only crew cuts and khaki shorts. Fresh crews rotated in daily with experienced squads from the Solomon and Wake Island campaigns. Weary men who hadn’t seen their families in a year or more shuffled off to the next sultry, muddy island.

There was no sign of his crew or even the rest of his squadron. It wasn’t as if he normally mingled with them a great deal, more like the occasional exchange of a few words here and there- years of staying silent to avoid drawing attention was a hard habit to break- but since becoming the gunner of the Pegasus, more people spoke to him and a few even asked for advice.

“What’cha got there, Dex?”

The familiar voice had him really regretting showing up at the picnic. He and Sergeant Sal “Nooch” DiNucci had arrived at Guinea on the same day, both assigned fuel truck duty despite the differences in their records. DiNucci had been fresh out of boot camp and couldn’t find his way out of a paper bag. He strutted over, reeking of gasoline fumes that all the helmet showers in the world couldn’t rinse away.

DiNucci fished out the comb he kept at all times in his back pocket and ran it through his thick dark hair; his breath was heavy with alcohol. “What’s in the bag?”

“Something I caught for the barbeque,” Ronon replied.
“Oh, yeah? Well, my pal Lee risked his life catching one of those dangerous giant wombats.” DiNucci gestured at his buddy. “We chopped off the head and stuck it on a spit.”

Some guy hustled over, his unbuttoned shirt revealing a flabby gut that bounced as he ran. “What’s goin’ on, Sarge?”

DiNucci clapped the private on the back. “I was just telling Dex how we hunted down that wombat.”

“We?” the kid asked, chubby cheeks raining sweat in the sweltering humidity.

“I couldn’t risk scratching up this pretty face. I’ve got broads back home who’d be disappointed if anything happened to it,” DiNucci said, rubbing his clean shaven mug. “Only coconut oil and aloe touches my skin.”

Ronon kept from rolling his eyes; DiNucci was as loud mouthed as he was vain.

“Yeah, you’re a regular Bogart. You ran when I cornered the damn thing, Nooch.” Lee regarded Ronon, eyes lingering on his hair then settling on his sergeant’s stripes. The patch seemed to silence whatever comment had been at the tip of his tongue. “I hunt buck back home, but I ain’t never seen such a vicious thing. Shoulda seen the size of its teeth when it tried to bite me.”

“Yeah, they’re ferocious,” Ronon deadpanned.

“And they carry diseases,” DiNucci added.

“Which is why we’re cooking it longer,” Lee elbowed his buddy.

It was a wonder they defeated any Japs with an army filled with the likes of these two.

“So c’mon, Dex. Stop stallin’ and tell us what’s in the bag” DiNucci said with an unfriendly grin and gesturing at the heavy burlap sack.

Ronon slid his prize off his shoulder, settling it onto the sand, and yanking open the drawstring. “Caught a wild boar.”

“Holy shit!” Lee exclaimed, gawking at the huge beast. “How many bullets did it take?”

“None. Slit its throat,” Ronon replied.

“But that there must weigh over two hundred pounds,” Lee whistled. “Boars got sharp tusks and aren’t real friendly.” Then he caught his first whiff of the corpse and held his nose. “Golly, that stinks.”

Ronon had reached his limit for chitchat, only vaguely listening to the private’s drawling babble.

“We’ll have to roast it in pieces if we don’t wanna wait hours ‘fore chowin’ down. And um…we’ll have to gut it. You know the best way, Sarge?”

“Of course he does. That’s how you ate before, right, Dex? I bet hunting it brought back memories of home,” DiNucci prodded, mockery and derision in equal parts.

“You must love C-rations then,” Lee laughed, but harmlessly. The hayseed was clueless to the sarcasm. “Did you all have ways to keep the extra meat refrigerated?”

“No. We all lived in straw huts without running water and my grandfather used to behead our
enemies and bury the skulls as a sacrifice to our gods.”

Lee fished out a pack of cigs from his shirt pocket, eyes bulging out of his head. “Guess it’s lucky the Army got you. Musta been tough learnin’ to be civilized and all.”

Ronon just ignored the private’s ignorance. DiNucci snatched the pack of smokes from the private, slipping a cigarette behind his ear. “Yeah, who knew Uncle Sam was so desperate these days?”

Fire burned in his craw; all it’d take was a single punch to lay DiNucci out. But Ronon had worked too hard, endured men ten times worse than this asshole. No matter the satisfaction, he wouldn’t disgrace himself, or Sheppard, who had put his neck on the line for him on the very day they’d met.

Smiling was more satisfying. It unnerved people, caught them off guard.

It only took seconds for DiNucci to balk, breaking under Ronon’s relentless gaze. Then something else caught his attention and he jutted his chin behind Ronon’s shoulder. “See what I’m talking about. We start allowing anyone into the draft and people forget their place. Who invited the fuzzies to the party?”

Ronon was in DiNucci’s face before he realized it; the smaller man stumbled, almost tripping in his haste to scramble away. Ronon stood his ground, grinned wolfishly again, soaking up the fear, but restraining himself from pushing too far his carefully forged boundaries.

“Make sure they don’t burn the skin, just leave it crispy,” he grunted, shoving the dead pig into DiNucci’s arms before heading over to greet the newest guests.

A small group of Papuans, locals who traded fruit and provided labor, carrying woven baskets and fishing nets filled with the latest catch, stopped and scanned the various clusters of grunts. Their faces were streaked with colorful orange and red markings like those of local birds and each member’s hair was braided with feathers.

They were dressed for a celebration, the leader’s chest adorned with necklaces of pearls and animal teeth. He finished searching the beach, wrinkled leathery eyes finally settling on Ronon. He raised a hand in greeting.

“Hey,” Ronon said, gesturing back.

“I am Suebu Omdawame; the major said there was a great sing-sing today.”

“Yeah. There was huge landing in Normandy…um…a beach in France.” Ronon paused, surveying the puzzled expressions. “We’ve opened up a new front against Hitler and…” Biting his tongue, he shook his head. “We have won a great battle against those that are allied with the Japanese.”

There was much loud murmuring and a rapid exchange in their strange tongue. Ronon recognized a few random words from previous encounters, but it was a completely unfamiliar dialect. Omdawame nodded at Ronon, said something to his people, and they each, one by one, started presenting him with yam roots, coconuts, fish, and clams.

Ronon waved his hands. “You don’t have to give these to me.”

“They are for the feast. It is our way to show the host our share,” Omdawame explained. “The major is not here and as his appa, we offer it to you.”

The Papuans were a proud seafaring people, living off the land, hunting and fishing -much like his own. Knowing it was an honor, Ronon inspected the food briefly. “Thank you.”
They all stood there, outsiders to the activities surrounding them yet, like the sea, each of them were bonded together for the moment.

“We will prepare a cooking fire and wait for the major,” Omdawame said, walking toward an unoccupied portion of the shore, ignoring the collective stares and whispering (some not so softly) from the grunts hanging out.

Ronon stood back, isolated from them all, and startled embarrassingly when a female voice spoke.

“Good afternoon, Sergeant.”

He spun around to the lithe and stunning woman before him. “Afternoon,” Ronon mumbled.

“You don’t strike me as the shy type. No need to blush on my account,” Teyla said, smiling.

Standing to his full height, he grunted, “I’m not shy.”

“No? Then it must be the sun that’s colored your cheeks,” she grinned knowingly, eyes darting about the various gatherings.

“He’s not here yet,” Ronon grunted.

“Who?”

“The person you’re trying really hard not to look for.”

“Major Sheppard invited me. It is a long walk home and I was merely searching for him so I would not have to wait alone,” Teyla said sharply.

Ronon gestured toward Omdawame and his people. “What about your friends?”

“They are from the nearby Yewea tribe, those who helped build this base. My people live much further east.”

Ronon knew there were thousands of tribes on Guinea, each with their own customs and culture. Those closest to what passed for civilization on New Guinea (mostly American and Australian military bases, both current and from the Great War) tended to be a bit more... civilized. The men usually wore loincloths or fabric pouches, the woman skirts. One of the Aussie commanders had ordered the purchase of regulation tee shirts for the fuzzy gals to wear when around the men on base. The woman had oohed and ahhed at the bright white cotton, had patiently allowed demonstration of how they were worn, then returned later, wearing the shirts... with the fabric cut away to re-expose their breasts. While Teyla was exceptional, being half-breed and living amongst the whites as easily as the Papuans, her people were considered much more modernized than most. Missionaries had set up schools and medical clinics in her village.

“I’ll wait with you,” Ronon said, settling his bare lower legs on the blistering sand. God, it was hot; at home it always stayed warm, but not like this. Even with an unbuttoned shirt, the heat was stifling. Still, he was in the presence of a lady, and slipping out of his shorts for a dip in the water was out of the question. The grunts openly gawking at the presence of a real live woman turned away when he sent icy daggers at them. When she made no attempt to join him, he smirked. “Now who’s shy?”

Teyla adjusted the layers of her grass skirt and settled down next to him. The breeze off the ocean carried the aroma of roasting meat and she breathed in deeply. “Reminds me of the great feasts we had after a successful harvest as a child. We’d hold ceremonial dances that would last into the night.”
“If my grandfather had a good crop of sugar cane, he’d let me join in the canoe races in celebration. One time when I was eight, all my cousins got really drunk and couldn’t steer their canoes in a straight line. I had to guide them back to shore before the current dragged them away.” Ronon beamed fondly at the memory. “My mother nearly tanned my hide after that.”

“Why? You rescued your kin.”

“I waited until I won the race before going after them,” he chuckled.

Teyla shared in his laughter then gazed out at the sea. “When you go home, will you go back to tending your grandfather’s farm?”

“No.” His face hardened. “When I was fifteen all the surrounding land was bought up by rich outsiders. The fields were so large you couldn’t see the borders. Then they brought in the Chinese and the Japs to tend them ‘cuz they were cheap workers.”

“What did you do?”

“Someone had to put roofs on all the new homes.” Ronon shrugged. “A few years ago I went to Pearl Harbor when the Americans moved part of the fleet there. I got a job in the shipyard.”

“Is that where you were trained to shoot?”

“Learned to fire a gun when I was five. My grandfather taught me the ways of his father. In his days the konohiki oversaw our people. Back then no one owned the land. We all hunted and grew only the food we needed. Paid tribute to our ancestors, and to the land that granted us life.” Ronon ran his fingers through the sand. “There was a time when all of Hawaii was fishing villages. We didn’t even grow much ko.”

“Ko is the sugarcane?”

“Yeah. Once the whites…I mean once the Americans started arriving, they changed the rivers, forced many to higher grounds while they created the fields. I think my grandfather regretted raising the waters to grow cane. He knew things were changing. That’s why he was happy I moved to the shipyards to learn a skill.”

Ronon couldn’t recall a time he’d talked this much, to a complete stranger, but when he looked at Teyla he felt a familiar connection. The two of them were adrift in a strange part of the ocean, trying to survive until they saw where it planned to take them. “I was lucky. Met a gunnery sailor who hunted moose in Alaska. We stayed up all night at a bar and the next day he took me to a shooting range where I kicked his tail. After that, he showed me all about high caliber weapons.”

“You are a great gunner. I am sure your grandfather is proud that what he taught you as a child serves you now.”

“He died a couple weeks after the bombings. I fight for his memory and for what was done to our land.” Feeling his face burn in anger, Ronon scrubbed a hand over his eyes, pushing back dark thoughts. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t be telling you this.”

“No,” Teyla said. “It helps to share such burdens. If you keep them hidden for too long, they have a habit of revealing themselves when we least expect it.”

“Can’t allow unexpected things to distract me. In the air, or out here,” Ronon grunted. Her eyes were a myriad of sparkling colors and he watched them stray from his face, to the Papuans creating the fire pit. “There another reason why you didn’t want to hang out with them?”
Teyla’s relaxed manner was replaced by stiff shoulders and a tightened jaw. “Omdawame does not approve that I cover myself or that I have a voice in trade talks.”

“Kinda like the shirt – half the fun is being surprised.” Ronon watched, amused, as her face passed from outrage into a good natured grin before planting a sharp elbow into his bicep. “Hey, that hurt,” he chuckled, rubbing where a bruise would develop tomorrow.

There was loud shouting as some of those carousing got into rough horseplay. Two airmen argued and gestured wildly until one of the grunts tackled the other, and the two of them rolled around in the sand. Ronon and Teyla watched as the two traded sloppy punches, then collapsed in laughter at each other’s antics.

“And why don’t you join your people?” Teyla asked quietly.

“Like being by myself.”

“Wouldn’t that be easier in your tent?”

“Sheppard asked me to come.”

“He has a way of drawing people in; it can be hard…” her face broke with an amazing smile. “It is hard to resist.”

Ronon merely grumbled in agreement.

“Why do you follow him?”

“He’s my CO,” Ronon blurted.

“There are many commanders stationed here, are there not?”

Ronon observed his surroundings, caught crews swapping tales of glory, trying to top one another. A year ago, he’d be hiding out in his tent. “I’d never have my revenge on those who ravaged my home if it wasn’t for Sheppard. Never be able to prove myself worthy of wearing the uniform.” He worked his lower jaw, locking in on her gaze. “Or know how it felt to have earned someone’s respect.”

“Someone you admire,” Teyla said.

“Yeah.” Feeling slightly embarrassed, Ronon cleared his throat. “Besides…no one flies like him.”

“Yes, I have heard the stories. They rival many of our own legends in their colorful descriptions.”

Ronon lowered himself onto his elbows, sprawling out. “You should hear about some of our missions.”

“I think I know something about your harrowing adventures,” she replied, arching an eyebrow.

Ouch. Yeah, point taken, he thought. Curiosity was a rare indulgence and something had been nagging at him for a long time. “How’d you meet him?”

He saw the refusal on her lips, but then she seemed to change her mind, stalling by pulling a strand of hair away from her sweaty brow. “Our crops and villages were burned by the Japanese. Those not murdered were forced into labor. At least with the Americans, my people are paid in supplies for their help building the bases and airstrips.”

Teyla unsnapped a leather container from a belt around her skirt and took a long pull of water from
it. “We are merely a set of strong backs that speak a funny language and wear animal skins and feathers. Most soldiers speak to us as if we are deaf and dumb when we know more about this land than they ever will.”

Ronon remained respectfully silent as she continued. “Not all soldiers are rude. A few have adjusted to our ways of dress and culture, giving us common courtesies. The major actually looks my people in the eye when he speaks to them. I’ve watched him discipline men for being disrespectful.”

Her thunderous expression softened. “After our people helped build the third airbase, I escorted members of the Ralila tribe over to sign on for work. The major had just finished inspecting some of the planes.” She laughed. “His hair and face were covered in oil stains. I waited for the usual compliments about my hair or skirt, but he didn’t make any. Instead he offered his hand in greeting and asked if my people were getting what they needed or if we required anything specific.”

Her story didn’t surprise Ronon. Sheppard’s charisma was as legendary as his flying.

“It takes more than a smile to win me over, Sergeant,” Teyla said as if reading his thoughts. “Many men around here have spoken sweetly to me, but the major’s always listened to what I’ve had to say.”

“Yeah, that means a lot,” Ronon replied, lost in thought.

“I am sure it is a great honor to be his gunner.”

“I’m not his gunner. The three of us are a crew.” Teyla got it, her face a canvas of genuine happiness. Ronon’s matched it. “You know, if it wasn’t for your help, we wouldn’t--”

“No need to thank me. All of Guinea seeks to rid those invading our homes. Some tribes may not like talking to me, but I have the eyes and ears of many. And that is what is important.”

“How--”

“Hey, Dex! How’s about sharing your company with the rest of us?”

Ronon clawed at the beach, pushing back natural instincts to jump up. DiNucci’s gait was tenuous at best, his goofy pal following closely behind with a cup in each hand undoubtedly filled with rot or jungle juice.

“You owe me one, Sheppard,” Ronon growled under his breath.

Teyla and Ronon rose to their feet at the same time as the drunken sergeant swayed slightly in front of them. “Aren’t you gonna introduce us?” DiNucci leered, his eyes burrowing down the front of Teyla’s shirt.

“No,” Ronon growled, stepping in front of her.

Teyla boldly sidestepped him, eyes hard. “Is it customary to bother those in a private conversation?”

“Private?” DiNucci hmmmmed to Ronon. “I’m sure one of us is a lot better company. Wouldn’t want Major Sheppard to find out you’ve been pawing at the natives.”

“You need to stand down!” Ronon snarled.

“Stand down? We’re the same rank, Sergeant. Or did you forget?” DiNucci sneered. “Oh wait. Sheppard conned Nuts into allowing you into the officers’ tent.” He wet his fingers and slicked back
his hair. “Just because those two are color blind, doesn’t mean the rest of us are.”

“Um, Sarge? Shouldn’t we be gettin’ back to the barbeque?” Lee questioned as they garnered more attention from the other soldiers.

“I’m just saying what others are too chickenshit to. How come he gets to go into the officers’ tent?” DiNucci snapped, grabbing one of the tin cups from the private’s hands, sloshing the drink around. “Like you’re better than us or something.”

Being allowed inside the officers’ club as a non-com was unheard of, crossing lines of tradition and protocol. Ronon rarely went in, but Sheppard insisted on many occasions, and he reluctantly followed, generally staying in the corner and out of the way to keep the peace. Secretly his chest filled with pride at how hard his CO had fought so he could enter some hot, stinking Army tent. It wasn’t about entering the officers’ club; it was about other impenetrable barriers.

“C’mon, Sarge.” Lee tried steering the drunken sergeant away.

DiNucci wrinkled his nose and dashed down the last of his drink. “Back home, you ‘n’ me wouldn’t even stand in the same line.”

“Makes sense, Sergeant. See, with your record, the only line you’ll be in after the war is the unemployment line. Decorated gunner like Dex? Employers’ll be lining up to hire him.”

Ronon looked up and immediately recognized a set of lieutenant’s stripes, but not the face. The man was tall and well built but he still somehow looked out of place surrounded by meatheads like DiNucci. His crew cut was sandy brown, his eyes were blue behind round, spotted lenses and a tattoo of strange pictographs on his left bicep stuck out from under his rolled up sleeve.

The sergeant’s back stiffened at the comment but he kept his lips clamped shut while the crowd laughed and elbowed each other.

The lieutenant maintained an air of nonchalance, pulling his glasses from his face and wiping studiously at the lenses with a handkerchief from his pocket. “The last I checked, gentlemen, we all wear olive drab. Isn’t that right, Sergeant?”

Everyone remained at attention, and DiNucci barked, “Yes, sir. Sorry, sir.”

“Good. Let’s honor those who’ve stormed foreign shores.” The lieutenant took the tin cup from DiNucci’ hands and handed it over to Lee. “Why don’t you lay off the rot for the rest of the day? Clear your head. We’ve all got missions early in the morning,” he added to the onlookers. There was a silent dismissed and the crowd dispersed, scattering off to find other entertainment.

The lieutenant sighed and swiped at the perspiration running down his face before putting his glasses back on and looking up at Ronon. “Looks like I missed all the fun. O’Neill had all of the officers in for a powwow; we just got released. Think most of the rest of them went to freshen up.”

“Yes, sir,” Ronon said, unsure what the man wanted.

“I actually came over because I saw you, Miss Emmagan. I was wondering if you would sit down with me one day to discuss your people’s migration patterns across Guinea? It’s kind of a fascination of mine.”

Teyla glanced at Ronon confusedly then back up at the officer. “Um… of course...?”

“Oh, gosh, forgive me. Lieutenant Jackson. But, you can call me Daniel, ma'am.”
Before Teyla could respond, the lieutenant fumbled at a radio squawking on his belt.

“Oh, crap! That’s the colonel. Look, it was nice meeting both of you, and I’ll get back to you, Miss Emmagan, on the migration patterns,” he said in a rush as he scrambled to his feet. “Ant ivi nere. Nita tana fale. Ia toto!” he shouted as he ran off.

“What was that?” Ronon asked, staring at Jackson who was already halfway to HQ.

“That would be him excusing himself and wishing us well. In almost perfect Fataluku. What a strange man.”

Ronon pulled his dog tags away from where they clung to his sweat-drenched chest, running his hand under his soaked curly hair, pushing back thoughts of shaving for taking a dip in the ocean. “Erupting volcanoes got nothing on how hot this place gets.”

“Why not go for a swim?”

“I’ll wait. It’ll rain soon. It always does,” Ronon said, feeling the compounding moisture build in the air.

His stomach rumbled as the scents from the picnic began drifting over, but it would be another hour before the boar would be ready. That was if the two stooges prepared it right.

“How many times have I said that I don’t like the beach? I don’t like sand, chiggers, fleas, mosquitoes; do I need to go on, Major?”

“You said you were hungry and this is where chow’s being served.”

“It’s hot out here. You might not care about sunburn and heat stroke, but I do.”

“This is the Pacific. It’s hot everywhere, Lieutenant. Now, come on.”

Ronon couldn’t hide a smile as the familiar sound of his crew’s bickering voices drifted over. They all worked twelve to sixteen hour shifts, but Sheppard had his command duties on top of that and was rarely seen in social settings. Officers didn’t usually fraternize with enlisted or NCOs because of the rules of conduct so the big ‘hero’s’ appearance at the picnic brought men flocking to him. Sheppard moved inches at a time, stopping to chat with those clamoring to get a word in. McKay stood close by, eyes constantly rolling in mock contempt.

Lorne and the other captains of their squad slowly made their way around the group to chat with the men or snag spots on the beach. Soon the stretch of sand was filled with bomber and fighter squadrons, and social circles moved further apart to give each other space.

The Normandy invasion was the first step to stomping back the Nazis, though it left Ronon wondering when the military would throw that type of support behind the Pacific front.

_Their front._

“Hey, thought I saw you hiding out over here.”

“Just hanging out.”

Sheppard stood, hair still shower damp, in a fresh pair of shorts and shirt, the latter hanging open in deference to the heat. His eyes tried to flicker evenly between Ronon and Teyla but eventually lingered on the true object of his focus.
“Major, it is good to see you again,” Teyla said, rising. “The sergeant has been keeping me company.”

“Well...um...that’s good,” Sheppard stammered much to McKay’s snorting amusement. “Sorry, we’re late. Got stuck in a paper pushing contest.”

Captain Lorne came trotting up behind them, pumped up with enthusiasm before any conversation could begin. “Hey, sir. We’re ready when you are.”

“Count me out of your caveman games,” McKay sniped, folding his arms across a puffed out chest. It was amazing the man was still standing in this weather with his boots, pants, and long-sleeved shirt buttoned up—over a tee, he realized with a groan. Ronon’s interest was piqued by the navigator’s words and the mischievous looks between Sheppard and Lorne. “What’s going on?”

“Just a friendly game of football.” Lorne grinned.

“Have I mentioned my long arm before, Captain?” Sheppard taunted.

“Did you play quarterback for the Union or Rebel side of the Civil War, sir?”

“Here it goes,” McKay muttered, plopping himself down on the sandy soil at a respectful distance next to Teyla.

“You’re only a few years younger than me, Captain, and I’m going to kick your ass!” Sheppard responded with a wicked grin, then blushed at being caught cursing in front of a woman.

Teyla grinned, caught up in the playfulness, and gestured at Ronon to jump in. He nodded at her and turned to the dueling COs. “Which side am I on?”

“Oh, we’re picking teams.” Lorne gestured. “Fair’s fair.”

“Fine. But since I’m ranking officer, I pick skins.” Sheppard smirked, removing his shirt and tossing it at McKay’s head.

“Hey! I don’t want your infectious, smelly uniform! You should cover up— you’re a walking Chinese menu for disease carrying insects! I’ll take Dengue Fever off of column A...”

Sheppard laughed as he tugged his shorts up. His weight loss from a few months ago had them still drooping on his hips. “It’s the only way to tell sides, Lieutenant.”

“And gives your team the advantage in the heat,” Lorne muttered, stuck in his t-shirt for the game. Grunts gathered around each team captain, eager to prove themselves.

“I get Dex as first pick,” Lorne called out.

Ronon smiled as Lorne’s crew whooped in excitement. Sheppard gave the captain a dirty look as Ronon stepped into place beside the other commander.

As the teams were picked, the other men knocked knuckles with Ronon and he allowed himself to be caught up in the excitement. It wasn’t every day he had a chance to knock his CO down without getting in trouble, but more so, it felt good to relax and have fun for once.

During the third play of the game, Ronon easily barreled and dodged past bare chests and backs, tackling a familiar body full force before he threw the ball. Ronon got to his feet, offering his hand to
help Sheppard up.

“Thanks,” Ronon huffed, his face flushed.

“For what? Smashing me to the ground?” Sheppard grunted, favoring his back.

“For everything.” Ronon smiled, clapping him on the shoulder.

Sheppard shrugged off the gratitude. “Then how about taking it easy?” he drawled.

“That’s not what you taught me.” Ronon winked and smiled at Teyla who looked on with McKay on the sidelines.

The off-key sounds of inebriated voices pulled Ronon out of his reverie, his ears cringing at a godawful chorus of words that weren’t even sung along to the radio. Airmen could give the drunken sailors at Pearl a run for their money. McKay and Sheppard shared expressions of pain as the singing increased to levels that’d cause dogs to howl.

Men draped arms around one another, bellowing the music at the tops of their lungs. This was about time with your buddies and crawling inside a glass of jungle juice to forget about the altar of sacrifice they were all being asked to climb upon this week.

Capture Biak and the rest of the Jap strongholds would fall and this hellhole would finally be free. Ronon gulped the rest of his rum in a single swallow. The men here had a heavy task, softening up ten thousand hardened enemy troops for an amphibious invasion. He scanned the room, sobering with the knowledge some of these faces would never return.

Before a single bomb was dropped, their squad had to map the way. Ronon’s eyes landed on McKay swirling his drink, deep in thought, then on Sheppard, who was hunched over the bar as if it was the only thing holding him up. Officers continued to massacre whatever song was on, while it appeared the war itself bore down on his CO’s shoulders. When Sheppard shuddered visibly from that enormous weight, Ronon knew it was time to go.

He pushed off his stool, snagged his bottle of liquor and elbowed McKay in the side.

“Hey, what was that for?” the lieutenant complained.

Ronon gestured at Sheppard’s tense form and McKay grumbled unintelligibly under his breath, taking three gulps of a glass of water. The navigator pushed Sheppard’s third or fourth drink aside and Ronon snatched up Sheppard’s hat, plopping it onto his head. “Let’s go,” he commanded.


Ignoring his CO’s confused protests, Ronon reached out to lead him away from the bar. “Time to get some air.”

“I can walk on my own,” Sheppard snapped, jerking away from Ronon’s hand as they went outside.

“In a straight line?” McKay snarked.

“I only had a few drinks, Lieutenant,” Sheppard grumbled.

“Someone’s in a foul mood.”

McKay was right; Sheppard was a fairly even tempered commander, even laid back most of the time.
For a night geared for some R&R, it had failed miserably. “What’s got his boots?” Ronon whispered.

“The success of the biggest Pacific operation to date?” McKay shrugged. “The man likes to fly, not be the center of stories and hero-worship.”

The hike back to their bunks was like navigating through a small swamp, their kicks sinking into puddles of sludge. Ronon was sick of having to wash his trousers every time he walked across the base, and if he wore shorts, he had to spend ten minutes scrubbing his legs clean before going to bed.

McKay stopped short, patting down his belt. “Crap. I left my canteen at the bar.”

“Thought it was fused to your hip,” Ronon snorted. At the man’s ill tempered gaze, he hooked a thumb back. “Go get it. We’re not going far.”

“I’ll be right back,” McKay mumbled, pulling his right foot out of mud hole with difficulty. “Keep an eye on him.”

“Always do.”

Ronon watched him hurry back to the officers’ club before slowly going toward his CO’s side. “You know that this is a three-man crew, right?”

“Don’t start.”

“We’ll get the pics, don’t worry.”

“Worrying is my job.”

Ronon grabbed Sheppard’s eyes with his own. “Our job, you mean.”

Drinking wasn’t a good means of stress relief for Sheppard; it only made him paler in the moonlight. “This is still a new thing for me. Ten years in a single seat and all.”

“Yeah, I know,” Ronon said. “It’s not easy dealing with change.”

Sheppard relaxed a little, his shoulders losing their stiffness. “No, it’s not.”

Any reply was cut short by sounds near the jungle’s edge. Ronon moved toward the brush with his sidearm out, only to holster it when Teyla appeared from the darkness.

“I am sorry. I didn’t mean to --”

“No,” Ronon interrupted. “We were just discussing the distribution of weight... on a flight,” he said, shooting his CO a meaningful look.

If Sheppard could kill with his eyes, Ronon would’ve been a dead man. Teyla stepped closer, her bronze skin radiant in the nighttime sky. “I wanted to say hello before your big mission.”

“We have a few days off to relax,” Ronon explained. If anyone could take his friend’s mind off the war, it was Teyla. He nodded at his CO. “I’m gonna take off. I think the maintenance crew is ripe for the picking tonight,” he smirked.

Teyla regarded him in confusion. “Ripe for what?”

“Poker,” Ronon grinned, looking up at the stars poking through the haze. “Looks like we’ve got a break in the rain.”
“As McKay would say, wait ten minutes,” Sheppard joked, stuffing his hands into his pockets as he stood next to Teyla.

One day Ronon was going to ask her how she kept her clothes so clean looking, traveling constantly in the mire. “See you guys later,” he said, from behind his shoulder, knowing he was leaving his CO in the best of hands.
Ronon was good, Teyla observed with amusement. His time among the whites was rubbing off on him, lending him social graces that were a pleasant surprise. His excuse of a poker game had been much more subtle than he would’ve accomplished when she first met the man.

When the heavy canvas tent flap closed behind him as he headed off to his poker game, it muted the noise from within the club into the background of the insect music. And left her standing in awkward
silence with the major.

Normally the pilot was easy-going, clearly comfortable in his own skin. Their conversations were usually pretty relaxed, even right from their first meeting. It was one of the things that drew her to continue their… alliance. Friendship had been the first word that popped into her head, but she quickly shoved it aside. Friendship was a two-way street and she was certain that Major Sheppard didn’t feel that way about her. Well, maybe not certain, but she couldn’t allow herself to think any differently.

When they first met he had talked with her as if speaking to an equal. With respect and even a little deference, the way the men acted in the Jane Austen books she treasured as a girl. As they continued their acquaintance, and familiarity grew between them there came jokes and even a flirtation with… flirtation, harmless as it was.

But now the man stood quietly, his hands shoved in his pockets, his back and shoulders set hard. She could sense tension rolling off of him in waves.

“Perhaps I have come at a bad time, Major,” she said softly.

He seemed to shake himself a little, then he gave a small smile. “Sorry. Head’s a thousand miles away right now.”

“Your mission,” she commented knowingly.

He let loose a long sigh and slumped a little. “Yeah. The mission.”

She lowered her eyes spoke with hesitation. “Your leaders believe that they can take Biak back from the Japanese.”

“Yeah.” He cocked his head and studied her. “Why, you don’t?”

She considered her answer for a moment, then as she began to speak, the tent flap was flung open and a clearly inebriated airman came stumbling out of the officers’ club. The young man never gave them a second look before lurching into the nearby bushes and being noisily sick.

The major grimaced and muttered a ‘let’s walk’. He joined her at her side and the two began a slow slosh down the muddy road.

“So, before we were so rudely interrupted,” the major began, “your thoughts on Biak?”

“Biak is an island that my people rarely visit, because its shoreline is very dangerous. The currents are very strong, and most of the coast is sheer cliffs, jagged rocks and sea caves. My people refer to it as the island with teeth.”

“Teeth, huh?” the major said, flashing a smile. “Sounds about right. But you said ‘rarely.’ That means they have landed, right?”

“Yes. Our boats are small and light and there are areas along Teluk Cenderawasih, that is the bay your people call Geelvink, where they can and do land safely.”

The major stopped mid-stride and turned to her. “Do you uh, think if McKay got you some maps you could point those areas out?”

“I believe so, yes,” Teyla agreed. “But what I meant by telling you this is that I do have knowledge of Biak that your leaders perhaps do not. If they did, they would not be so eager to attempt what I
fear will be certain failure. The Japanese presence on the island is legion. They have subjugated most of the islanders into enslavement; before the natives knew what was happening, the Japanese seized control of the only drinkable water sources. It was fall to the power of their conqueror or die of thirst within days.

Major, you must tell your leaders that to attempt this will mean almost certain defeat and the loss of so many of your men.”

“Tell my leaders…” The major stared up at the sky and chuffed out a laugh. “MacArthur wants Biak, MacArthur gets Biak, Teyla.”

His face glowed pale in the moonlight before he turned it back into shadow. “But I’ll give the Colonel the intel; I suppose he can pass it up channels. Maybe it’ll do some good.”

With a shrug he turned and they began walking back in the direction of the officers’ club. After more of that awkward silence the major suddenly asked, “You need anything?”

“No, thank you. The children loved the newest candy bars, by the way. What did you call them?”

“Zagnuts. Figured the kids would get a kick outa having coconut a slightly different way.”

“They did, as did I.”

“Well, good,” was the only reply.

Unsure what was behind his distraction; if it was worry over the mission, to which she had just added, or something else entirely, Teyla determined that her visit had been ill advised. It was clear that her presence was only being tolerated.

The major had received her information, and it seemed that was sufficient for him.

As they approached the officers’ tent she separated from his side towards the jungle path. “I wish the safe return of you and your men from Biak. Tell the lieutenant that if he wishes, I can come back tomorrow to help him with his maps.”

When she got no answer she blushed lightly and turned to slip back into the rainforest.

“Teyla?”

She glanced back at her name. Sheppard was a dark form against the light coming from the officers’ tent.

“I- I’m sorry.”

“For what, Major?”

“Being such lousy company tonight. I just…”

“You have a lot on your mind, I know. And I’m afraid I have added to it, and for that I am sorry.”

“Don’t apologize, please. Your help has saved more lives than you will ever know. I - I don’t think I’ve told you that.”

She smiled at that. He told her on nearly every occasion they met how appreciative he was. “I do what I can to help you.” Then she hesitated. “I mean, all of you, the Americans. It is our fight as
much as yours, Major. Maybe even more so.”

“Yeah, the Americans,” he echoed.

The sound of a woman’s voice came drifting from the tent, sweeter and much slower than the jazzier stuff the officers usually liked.

“Long ago and far away, I dreamed a dream one day…”

“That’s very pretty,” she remarked.

The major stepped closer, arms length away now. “Yeah, it’s Jo Stafford. They call her GI Jo. She does these great USO shows for the boys at the front.” He listened and nodded his head in time to the slow lazy beat. “It is pretty. You, uh... you ever dance?”

“Dance, Major?”

“You know,” he said with a lopsided smile. “Dance.”

She felt color rise to her cheeks and she was thankful for the cover of night. “I, I should probably go,” she stammered. “It is late and…”

While she struggled to answer she saw the major shiver as if caught by a sudden chill wind. By reflex she rubbed her own bare arms but the sultry night air barely moved. “Are you all right, Major?”

“Yeah, I’m --” He shook again and wavered a little on his feet. “Think I’m probably comin’ down with something. You’re right, it’s late. You- you should get home while there’s still a break in the rain.”

She studied him with growing concern. His complexion had gone even paler but in the light from the tent she saw spots of pink high in his cheeks and a sheen of sweat had broken out in beads over his face.

“Very well,” she replied slowly. “Are you sure you are okay to get back to your tent? I could call for someone-” she started, waving a hand towards the officers’ tent.

“No!” he cut her off sharply. “No, I can --” He stumbled and his knees started to bend.

She stepped up and grabbed him by the biceps. “Major!” She could feel heat radiating off him and the muscles in his arms were rock hard, like woven iron ropes. She felt him shudder again, his whole body going taut under her hands. “You need help,” she gasped as she stumbled under his weight.

“No!” he whispered sharply, looking her straight in the eyes. “They can’t know... the mission…”

“But, Major. What about your crew?”

“All those young men in there...I don't want 'em to worry...Just need to get to Beckett; he'll know what to do. He'll inform my crew.”

He saw her hesitation. Another set of shivers quaked through his body but he maintained a lock on her gaze. “Please,” he hissed.

His eyes were glassy with fever but there was no denying the almost pleading look he gave her. Besides, she reasoned, even were she to call for help and a corpsman came, he’d wind up with Carson anyway.
“All right,” she relented as she wrapped an arm around his waist and began walking him towards the hospital.

She felt him lean a little of his weight on her and he uttered a soft ‘thanks.’

The rain started back up just as they reached the infirmary. It was a massive Quonset hut, white with the internationally recognized red cross symbol painted on its tin roof, walls and doors.

She walked them around to the side, then, slipping her arm out from around him she eased him up against the wall. She cast an appraising eye over him; the shaking was now non-stop and the rain was soaking him to the skin. Not totally convinced he wasn’t going to fold up right there she nonetheless saw him nod resolutely.

Three sharp raps on the side door and a young woman appeared at the rain-smeared window. She was dressed in a khaki blouse and slacks, her light brown hair caught up in a ponytail. Some of Teyla’s worries eased as she saw who it was.

The door opened and the nurse ushered her in quickly. “Come in out of the rain!”

“Thank you, lieutenant,” she replied but didn’t step in. “I have need of Dr. Beckett, please.”

The nurse’s eyes went wide. “Are you okay, Teyla?”

“Yes, I am fine, thank you. But I have a… friend …”

“Oh! Oh, of course,” the girl said brightly. “Well, just hang on a second, okay? Are you sure you don’t want to come in?”

Teyla glanced over to see the major was still on his feet but the wall of the hospital seemed to be more responsible for that than anything he was doing.

“No,” she said firmly, “thank you.”

A few minutes later a dark haired man in a similar khaki uniform but with a white doctor’s coat and a stethoscope draped around his neck popped the door open, his eyes immediately scanning her for obvious injury. “Teyla, love, are you all right? Jennifer said you needed help?”

“It’s not me, Doctor,” Teyla replied, inclining her head in the major’s direction as he stepped out from the shadows.

“Och, not again, lad,” Beckett said with a sigh. “Well, come on in now! Standing out in the bloody rain isn’t going to do you a lick of good.”

“He needs --” Teyla broke in, then hesitated at presuming to speak for the airman. Another glance and another nod and her decision was made. “I believe he requests… discretion, Doctor Beckett.”

“Biak,” Beckett said with a knowing nod. “All right, lad. Let’s find a place to get you set up. Teyla love, can I prevail on you to keep an eye on our patient for a wee bit longer?”

A minute later the doctor emerged from the door, a medical bag in one hand, an IV stand in the other and a bulging knapsack slung over his shoulder. There was even a bag of saline bloating the pocket of his lab coat.

Not even blinking at the rain now coming down harder, he hefted one of Sheppard’s arms around his shoulder and wrapped a hand around the sick man’s waist. He raised his voice against the rising
winds and the chatter of raindrops hitting the pool of mud they were standing in. “I think the VIP tent is open! It’s across the base. Can you give me a hand, love?”

Teyla slipped in on the major’s other side and they slogged through the camp, propping the major’s fever heated body between them.

The VIP tent was the size of the quarters most of the officers shared, but once they stepped in Teyla immediately saw how different it was.

The area under the tent had been partitioned off into two areas, a sitting area up front and presumably a sleeping area in the back; the view was currently of an Oriental screen of wood or bamboo with an ornate dragon design painted on it.

Similarly decorated rugs covered the floor in piled up layers and Teyla grimaced to see the mud running off their shoes onto the rich wool.

“Och, don’t worry your head about that, love,” Beckett said as he eased John down into a chair. He dropped his bags and equipment and slipped off his coat before wiping a hand down his face to clear it of water. “Some highfalutin general wants to plant his fat cushioned arse in here, he can bloody well deal with the mud like the rest of us.” Then he quirked a smile. “Sorry, dear; mother is always on me about my language.”

He shot a hand out and laid it on the major’s forehead. “That’s a goodly fever you’ve got brewing there, lad. Right then, you know the drill. Strip off and get into bed, I’ll be in in a bit. Unless you need--”

“Got this,” Sheppard muttered tiredly, but he did accept a hand up out of the chair so he could stagger his way, arms wrapped tightly around his quaking body, behind the screen.

“Here you go, lass,” Beckett urged as he opened a storage chest and pulled a towel off the top of a pile of linens. “Dry off. Or at least as dry as you can get here, eh?”

She swiped the rough fabric over her bare arms and face, then squeezed out the sodden, dripping ends of her hair. Her legs, bare below the knee in the shorter skirt she wore in deference to the flooding, were covered in mud to her shins. Living in Guinea, she was no stranger to mud, but here, among these opulent surroundings, she felt uncomfortable.

She heard Beckett chuckle and she looked up to see him grinning. “It feels quite lovely, actually,” he said. “Mud ‘tween the toes.” She dropped her eyes down to his feet. He’d shucked his mud-covered boots and stood on the thick rug, wiggling his equally mud-covered feet.

She wiggled her own with a small laugh; the doctor was one of the few others who always made her feel at home. Then she glanced at the partition with guilt at her laugh.

“Tut tut, not to worry, dearie,” Beckett said kindly as he noted her concern. “I’ll get him fixed up right as… rain,” he finished with a smirk. “Probably not the best of images, though, eh?”

“It just seemed to come on so suddenly,” she said. Although, on reflection, she had noted there’d been something… off about the man from her first approach.

“Aye, that’s the way it works. The parasites build up in his bloodstream until it reaches a tipping point. The brain makes the body’s temperature shoot sky high in an attempt to boil the wee buggers to death. The sudden onset of the fever and the rigor- the violent shaking… all part and parcel I’m
afraid. He probably felt a wee bit under the weather…” At that he smirked again and ran a final hand through his hair, flinging droplets from his fingertips. “It’s funny how much we equate illness with rotten weather. Anyway, I’ll go take care of a few things and get him back on the mend soon enough. Don’t worry, lass.”

It hadn’t been that long ago that she’d had word that the major was dying of the very same thing that had brought her here. Weeks in hospital had followed, and he hadn’t returned to full health for weeks after that.

She didn’t doubt the doctor’s skills; he had been a frequent visitor to the nearby villages, helping her people, saving most of them. And she knew he’d done it without the knowledge of his commanders.

But she’d also seen firsthand, the havoc that malaria could wreak on a body.

As if reading them, the doctor broke into her thoughts. “It isn’t the same as the last time, love,” he said quietly. “The parasite level was so high he was in liver failure. It appears the major has learned his lesson,” he continued, a bit more loudly, likely for his patient’s benefit, “and hied himself in more timely.”

Her suspicions were confirmed when a shaky voice announced from behind the partition, “I heard that.”

“No doubt you did, Major. Nothing wrong with your hearing,” the flight surgeon shot back. “Well, duty calls, lass. I trust you’re good to make your way home?”

She smiled. The jungle was as familiar to her as the dusty streets of Darwin. “I am, thank you, Dr Beckett. But I thought, perhaps, I could stay and help?”

“Oh, I dunno, lass,” Beckett said as he rubbed at his chin. “Not quite sure it’d be… appropriate.”

She straightened her back and folded her hands, readying for a fight. Growing up the daughter of a doctor, working in the clinics her father had set up and taking her knowledge home to help care for her people, she was more than up to helping. And Beckett knew firsthand of her abilities.

But it seemed her argument would be unnecessary.

“Although,” Beckett mused, “I don’t have any nurses to spare right now. The last set of casualties those mad men sent back from the most recent suicide mission is taxing us sorely.

I suppose I could have one of his crew come help. I’ll bet the big man and the squirrelly chap would be very nurturing.”

“You are not a very good liar, Dr Beckett,” Teyla said matching his smile.

“No, lass. No, I’m not. Probably why I’m still not married, much to my mum’s constant consternation.” He hefted his bag and pack up. “Give me a little bit to get him set up. This part usually makes him cranky so I’ll let you know when you can come on back.”

She eyed a chair in the sitting area. Next to it sat a wooden crate that someone had tossed a slip of fabric over to make it look fancier. On it sat a small pile of magazines with movie stars on the cover.

She perched herself in the chair and started reading about Lauren Bacall while the doctor went to the back.

After a few coarse words, and a long stretch of silence punctuated by only a few softly spoken words
and the creak of cot springs, the doctor emerged with a grim look on his face.

"His fever has gotten quite high," he said quietly. "I’ve started him on the chloroquine and given him some antipyretics and the combination usually brings him round pretty quickly. But in the meantime, I’ve set up a bowl of water and rubbing alcohol. I’ll warn you, the chloroquine can be very hard on the system so be on your toes… or it might wind up on them if you understand me, love."

"I have seen many people through the blood fever, Dr Beckett. And besides… my toes cannot get much dirtier," she said with a small smile.

"Right you are, dear. He’ll be a bear for a bit, but once the fever comes down and the shaking calms he should sleep. I’ll be back to check on you in a little bit."

He leaned a little closer to her ear and patted her shoulder. "I know I leave him in good hands."

Then he picked up his mud-filled boots and headed back out into the rainstorm in his bare feet.

Teyla approached the screen and cleared her throat loudly. "May I come in, Major?"

"McKay w-warned me this would happen."

"Major?"

"N-nothing. Come on in. The p-party started without you."

She rounded the corner and approached the cot where the major lay covered to the waist in a dingy gray sheet. His face and chest bore a sheen of heavy sweat and his muddy feet stuck out the bottom of the cover. Shudders wracked his body even in the tropical heat.

"Doctor Beckett warned me you might be… out of sorts."

"Oh, I’ll b-bet he used different words," was the droll reply. "You and B-Beckett seem awfully chummy."

"Doctor Beckett and I have much in common," she agreed. "We were both children when our parents moved us from home to Australia. He became a doctor in the military service of his new country just as my father was. And Dr. Beckett has lent aid where he could for my people. He is a good man. And more importantly," she continued as she picked up the bowl and cloth that had been left for her, "he is a good physician. And he assures me that you will be… I believe he said ‘right as rain’ very soon."

"Now th-those are words I picture him u-using."

A stronger wave of shaking made the rickety cot rattle under him as he stared at the cloth in her hand. "Th-think I’m c-cold enough, th-thanks."

She dunked the rag and soaked it well in the tepid water-alcohol mix. "But you are not cold, Major. Quite the contrary, I’m afraid."

As she lifted the dripping cloth she caught his eye and she smiled. "You of course, knew this."

"Had to t-try. I h-hate this p-part."

"I’m truly sorry, Major. But as you say, you have done this before and you know that eventually,
when your fever breaks, that you will feel better.” She paused and took in how completely miserable the man looked, just a glimpse before he schooled his features into an expression of silent resolve.

His hand wrapped into the sheet at his waist and tugged at it, proprietarily. “Didn’t Beckett have any nurses?”

“I have training as a nurse, Major. And I’m afraid the war effort has left your hospital shorthanded. Dr Beckett did suggest that Sergeant Dex or Lieutenant McKay could—”

“No. That’s quite alright, thanks,” the major interrupted hastily. “You know what you’re doing?”

“I have nursed many people through malaria, Major. If you will allow me to demonstrate….”

Without giving him time to protest or become further embarrassed she picked up his hand, and starting by running the wet cloth over his wrist, especially over the pulse point under his thumb. She took the opportunity to rest her fingers there, taking in the rapid fluttering before turning his hand palm up on the cot. Moving the cloth up his arm, she could feel the shivers contracting the muscles. And as the alcohol evaporated on his skin he just shook harder.

Continuously dipping and re-wetting the rag, she wiped away the sweat and grime from his shoulder and his neck, down onto his chest and belly, all the while trying to ignore the way the cot rattled and the set to the major’s jaw as he tried to keep his teeth from chattering.

For a half hour she worked in near silence, moving from one hand up over and down to the next. When the bowl went dry she sloshed in more water and rubbing alcohol. The fever seemed to be abating; in fact she was certain that the flesh under her fingers was cooler than when she’d started.

And while the shaking hadn’t eased, the major had become lethargic and slow to respond to her infrequent comments.

“Major?” She laid a hand on his shoulder and shook it gently. “Major?”

“Still here.”

She quirked a smile of relief at his response. “Are you falling asleep while I’m talking?” she teased.

“No…” He shook his head, his dark hair whispering on the pillow. “Just feeling…” He shuddered hard and then swallowed, his stubble darkened Adam’s apple bobbing in his throat. “Feeling a li’l sick,” he whispered. “Keep talkin’ - helps distract me.”

She rinsed out the rag and dipped it again, wiped it slowly over his forehead and down his cheeks to his neck, cleaning away the cold sweat that had beaded there.

“Dr. Beckett said that the chloroquine might upset your stomach. I believe he will be returning shortly with an anti-emetic.”

“Anti…?”

“Emetic,” she filled in with a smile. “To help calm your nausea.”

“You really do have training. You sound like a doctor,” he whispered and the corner of his mouth quirked up.

“Well, I spent a lot of time working with doctors,” she replied. “My father first and foremost.”

“He’s an Aussie?”
“He was,” she replied sadly. “He passed away several year ago. Typhus.”

“’m sorry. I shouldn’t’ve…”

“No, that’s quite all right. I do miss him… he was a good man. He was a doctor during the Great War, when the Germans were our occupiers. The Australians liberated the island…”

She rinsed and dipped as she talked, keeping her cloth cool and damp and concentrating her ministrations on his wrists and elbows at the pulse points and his belly where she could cool his core temperature.

“My mother started working in his hospital as a cleaner. One day, she was mopping the floor and she noticed that the urine in one man’s collection bag had gone dark. We call it blackwater fever, when the malaria gets so bad that the blood cells die off in large numbers and color the waste. She was afraid to tell someone, but my father had been kind to her, had lent her books to read after he found out the missionaries had schooled her. She told him about it, and he told she had saved the young man’s life.

When the war was over the Australians stayed to help govern the land and rebuild what the Germans had destroyed. Things became more… lax, you could say. He taught her medicine and she became a nurse for him. Then,” Teyla finished with a smile, “she became his wife.”

“Bet she’s pretty.”

“She is, but how would -?”

Teyla grinned when she saw his smirk. “Thank you, Major. My mother was very beautiful in her youth. And smart. And she wanted only the best for me. Which is why when I was twelve my mother sent me to live with my father to live in Australia. He had been called back and my mother… she could not leave the island of her birth. The thought of Australia scared her too badly, but she knew I could receive proper schooling there.”

“Musta been rough, leaving your mom behind.”

“It was, but I adored my father. School was… difficult. The academy was mostly military children; their parents were officers, ambassadors. I… well let us just say that I was one of very few brown children. There was one aboriginal girl there. Her parents were wealthy sheep farmers and had adopted her. Janda Mary was a good friend…”

She paused as memories flooded back to her.

“She was taken one day. By the government. But I had my studies, of course. And my father was very proud of how well I did. And as long as my marks were good, he assumed that I was happy, doing well. It was… hard. You would think as the daughter of a wealthy, very well respected man that things would have been easier.”

“No, I wouldn’t.”

Teyla paused at his muttered comment, unsure if he had meant it to slip out. “But I was really never of his world. My heart stayed behind in Guinea.”

Her thoughts drifted miles away and years back, from childhood games in the jungle to the smell of her father’s pipe tobacco.

“So you came back?”
She startled at the prompt, smiled and placed the cloth in the bowl. “I did. My father passed when I was twenty. I came back to Guinea, to my mother and village, and I opened a clinic here. It isn’t much, but my father’s estate allowed me money to purchase some equipment and medicine to bring back with me.” She lowered her voice conspiratorially. “And Dr. Beckett makes monthly visits. The children love him. Her smile broadened. I believe only he could make children smile, even knowing they are getting vaccinations.”

“Doc knows his way with a needle,” the major grunted. “Believe me.”

“That’s right, Major?” came a bright voice from behind the partition. “I have my choice of where those needles go in, you know,” Beckett continued with a grin as he stepped into the room carrying all of things, a pot of tea.

“Oh, I know, doc.”

“So, how’s our patient doing, lass? Prickly as usual?”

“The major has been quite cooperative,” Teyla teased back. “And I believe his fever may have come down some.”

“Really? Well, that’s a spot of good news there. His shaking seems to be subsiding?”

“He reports feeling sick to his stomach, as you had said, Dr Beckett.”

“He is right here,” the major said grumpily.

“Well aware of that, lad,” Beckett said as he picked up a wrist and shot his watch forward. “Pulse is a wee bit better too. Slow only for a hummingbird, but I’d say there’s improvement. And I brought something that should speed your recovery. Sorry, Major, but this doesn’t come in one of my famous needles.”

“If you would, lass?” he asked as he handed Teyla a tin cup. He poured some of the tea from the pot into it and the tent filled with an aromatic herbaceous steam. “I attended a conference put on by our friends, the Chinese. Odd little fellows, bowing every other minute, and I couldn’t understand most of their bloody chop-chop, but one chap had gone to university in the states, spoke impeccable if American English. And he introduced me to Qinghaosu.”

He set the pot down and took the cup from her just as Teyla felt her fingers burning from the heated tin. Beckett winced and pulled a handkerchief from his pocket, wrapped it around the cup. “It needs to be drunk as hot as possible, according to the Chinaman. They’ve been using it for centuries there and he claims it works miracles with malaria.”

The major struggled to sit up and Teyla quickly perched herself on the edge of the cot, allowing him to lean against her as he reached up with still slightly trembling hands for the tea. He blew on it, took a tentative sip and grimaced.

“Tastes like you washed your socks ‘n’ drawers in it, doc.”

Beckett raised his eyebrows and bounced on his toes. “They have another formulation, Major. Uses glycerin and gelatin to form a…”

The major blanched and sipped hurriedly at the tea. “Mm…” he said sarcastically. “Good stuff, doc.”

“I thought you might like it,” the doctor said wryly. “Right then. Drink it up. When you’re done with
it, have another. My pot should keep it at the right temperature if you don’t dilly-dally. Speaking of temps...” He dashed his hand out and rested the back of it on the major’s forehead. “I think the lass is right. Feels lower. Now the shaking is passing I would imagine you’re pretty sore?”

The major nodded as he continued trying to sip the scalding liquid. “Feel like I went ten rounds with Joe Louis.”

Teyla raised a questioning eyebrow and Beckett chuckled. “Boxing reference, dear. He feels like a two hundred pound man has been beating on him for the last hour. Malaria rigor will do that to you.”

He reached into the pocket of his white coat and pulled out a glass syringe, tugged the rubber cap off with his teeth before injecting it into the major’s IV. “There you are, Major. A little poppy juice to take the edge off.”

The doctor then pulled another syringe out and smiled. “This one’ll calm your stomach down, but it can’t go in your IV.”

The major handed his tea over to Teyla with a sigh and stuck out his arm but Beckett just shook his head. “I promise it’s not personal, Major, but I need more meat for this one. Phenergan is nasty stuff.”

“I'll just give you gentlemen a few minutes then, shall I?” Teyla said as she rose from the cot with a reassuring pat to the major’s shoulder.

As she passed the partition the cot creaked and a few seconds later there was a hiss and a word she pretended not to hear.

Beckett emerged soon thereafter. “He’s all set, love. The combination of the two, along with the rum I smell on his breath, should have him sleeping like a wee bairn soon.”

“If it’s all right with you, I’ll wait to see if he needs anything before leaving.”

“Och, I think it’s dandy, love. A little TLC is just what the doctor ordered. G’night, Major!” he called to the back of the tent.

There was only a grunt in response.

Beckett rolled his eyes but smiled. “Guess I deserve that. Night to you too, Teyla. Jennifer has said she’d come by before rounds in the morning to check on him. Good luck,” he added quietly with a grin before slipping back out into the rainy night.

She cleared her throat as she went to the back. The major was settled back against a stack of pillows, the cup of tea back in his hands. He eyed her over the still steaming brew. “Sorry,” he mumbled.

“About what, Major?”

“The colorful language.”

“I grew up on a military base, Major. I assure you I have heard much worse.”

“Still.” He took another sip and grimaced, then closed his eyes and dashed the last of the tea into his mouth. He gasped and sucked in air over his burning mouth.

“Oh!” Teyla started with concern.

Sheppard just waved a hand at the pot of tea and gestured for her to pour him more. “If Beckett says
this stuff works,” he hissed through heat-reddened lips.

“There is no rush, Major--”

“Yeah, there is,” he said harshly. “Much as he knows how important this mission is, Beckett won’t clear me for flying if I haven’t kicked this in the next two days. So yeah, there is a rush.”

Biting her tongue, Teyla poured him another cup of the tea and handed it to him, wrapped back up in the handkerchief.

“Perhaps I should go and let you rest.”

He sighed and shook his head. “I’m sorry. Look, you’ve been great, Teyla. I just… there is so much riding on this.” His eyes were clearer but tired as he met her gaze. “The guys who will be thrown at the ‘island with teeth’ need to get the intel we’re gathering. Thousands of lives might be lost without it. And I can’t let that happen.”

“I understand, Major.” She smiled kindly. “Drink your tea.”

He drank the second cup a little more slowly. As the drugs filtered through his system he became groggy, and his words began to slur. Finally, the nearly empty cup started to drop from his hands; she quickly grabbed it and took it away to place it on the bedside table.

His eyes were heavy-lidded and he smiled muzzily at her. “Thanks.”

She placed her fingers on his wrist and felt the now slower and steadier rhythm of his pulse beat beneath the still warm skin under his thumb. “Can I do anything for you, Major?”

“You can call me John. Think uner the cir-cir…” He blinked and forced his eyes open a bit further. “Under the circumstances and all…”

“Major, I --”

“You once said we were allies. Think this might go a li’l beyond allies, don’t you?” His grin was sloppy but genuine.

Somewhere, somehow, after all these months of doubting and forcing herself to believe otherwise, Teyla realized that all the while she’d fought to deny it, there it was. They had become more than allies. She cared deeply for … John… it felt strange to even think his name. And she allowed herself to believe… to recognize, that he cared for her.

“All right, John,” she said with a smile.

“Good,” he replied with satisfaction. He let his eyes close and he snuggled back into his pillows. “And thank you.”

“For what?”

“This,” he answered, waving a hand in a lazy circle. “Beckett’ll tell you, I’m a lousy patient.”

“I am happy to do what I can to make this easier on you. It also helps keep my nursing skills sharp,” she teased.

“You said your mom was a nurse?”

“Yes. She still helps out in the clinic. And yours?” she tried tentatively. Through all the stories she
had shared of her life, she knew very little about his.

“My mom… she passed away when I was seventeen. Car accident. Her car went off the road… it was a long time ago.”

“I’m sorry,” Teyla said sadly.

“Me too,” he sighed. “She was… think the docs called it melancholia. She was sad, all the time. Spent days in her room, wouldn’t talk to my dad, or me.” He kept his eyes closed and his voice grew softer with sleep and reminiscing. “My father just started staying at his office late, then overnight. My brother was already engaged, took a job with my dad. I’d try to get her to come out, to eat something.”

He swallowed and moved his head restlessly on the pillow. “Sometimes it worked. One night, I got home from school. Mom’d made dinner. She’d cleaned herself up, put on a pretty dress, and she was smiling. Then she said she was gonna take a drive. Take in some fresh air. She gave me a kiss, took off in our Ford.”

There was a long pause and Teyla thought maybe he’d fallen asleep. Then he sighed, long and low. “Funny how she managed to find the one stretch of highway without a guard rail.”

“Oh, John,” she breathed in deep sorrow. “I…”

But he continued as if not hearing her. “I let her down. I shoulda known what she was gonna do. She depended on me to make sure she’d be okay.”

“John, you were only a boy.”

“I left for flight school that fall. Haven’t been back since.” He lifted a heavy hand and scrubbed at his eyes, finally peeking out at her, his gaze hard and dry. “Damn Beckett and his goddamned ‘poppy juice.’ I’m sorry.” Then he clamped his eyes shut and turned his face away on the pillow. “I’m pretty tired, Teyla.”

“Of course. I’ll be in the next room if you need anything.”

“I won’t,” he said shortly as he tugged the sheet up to his chest.

Teyla wandered to the front room and curled up in the big chair to reflect on the sad boy who had been looking out at her through John’s green eyes, and her new understanding of how he had become the man he was today.
Storage of medical supplies under canvas,
68th Medical Depot Company
Water dripped from holes in the ceiling, droplets splattering odd shaped patterns across the maps and photos John was trying to memorize. The heavy canvas banged on the tent poles under heavy downdrafts and if it didn’t let up soon, flooding would uproot the tent stakes completely.

He burned the image of Geelvink Bay into his brain, tracing a few of the more promising landing areas Teyla had pointed out. The latest intel had Colonel Kuzume Naoyuki buried in a maze of caves and tunnels, just waiting for the American siege. They’d been bombing the hell out of the island of Biak since late May, but it was time for the ground assault and that meant the Navy needed detailed
photos of the shoreline for troops to come ashore.

The tent blew open when Lorne entered, the zipper ripped from his fingers by gusty winds as horizontal rain pelted John in the face. “Sonofabitch!” Lorne gave the stubborn zipper a mighty yank, sealing shut the flap. “Sorry, sir. I came by with the latest weather updates.”

“You doing double duty, Captain? Last I checked, that was the intelligence’s officer job,” John sighed, fumbling for his mug of coffee, staring dejectedly when he found it empty.

“Here, this might wake you up, sir,” Lorne said, offering him a Lucky Strike.

John took the cigarette, patting his shirt pocket for his lighter and flicking the flint several times unsuccessfully.

It took five seconds before Lorne pulled his own out, holding the flame in front of John’s cigarette, the gesture making him feel feeble. “You have a report?” he snapped irritably.

Lorne pocketed the Zippo, then slapped down a beat-up leather satchel on the table. He rifled through inches of paper before pulling out the needed intel. John grabbed the latest from HQ wordlessly, flipping through upcoming twelve hour weather forecasts and visibility level predictions. There were two more, back to back, storm fronts pushing through, joining the current tropical pressure to usher in a monsoon. For the past six days it had rained almost non-stop, dropping close to forty inches, nearly drowning the base.

“I’ll radio O’Neill and tell him we’re leaving as soon we’re fueled and ready to go,” John said, crushing the papers in frustration.

“Nuts already knows; he figured you’d push the operation up by a few hours, so the birds are getting gassed and the crews are being briefed by Lieutenant Dutton.”

So, that’s where their intelligence officer was. John scrubbed a hand over three days worth of stubble, his skin still felt sticky from sweating out the last of his fever. There’d been barely enough time to shower and shave, not to mention gearing up.

“If you don’t mind me saying, sir, you look like crap,” Lorne muttered.

“And if I do mind you saying so, Captain?” John sniped. “Beckett released me this morning.”

“Did you pull a gun on him?”

“He knows how important the mission is.”

“I’ll take that as a yes then?”

“The war doesn’t care if I’ve been sick or not, Captain,” John grit out, repeating the same thing he’d said to Ronon and McKay who had visited him the last two days. “This is nothing new for me.”

“I’m your wingman, sir. It’s my job to look out for you when you won’t,” Lorne said without missing a beat.

John took a long drag on his smoke as he listened to the pounding rain. “I know you do; never would’ve made it out of Burma without you.”

Lorne straightened to his full height. “We were the Tigers. We watched out for each other.”

Just as his crew did for John now. “You know I wouldn’t go out if I wasn’t fit. Wouldn’t endanger
the mission like that. My fever broke last night. I know my limits, Captain.”

“I’m fully aware of that, sir.” Lorne turned, facing the sealed opening, the storm roaring outside, daring them to come out. “Ready?”

“Audaces fortuna iuvat, Captain.”

Fortune favors the bold. Or maybe just the insane, John thought.

-----------

All six Havocs sat on the rocky airstrip, engines revving, eighteen men waiting on a signal to take off into the maelstrom. John peered through the cockpit window, waterfalls of rain blurring the outside into a greasy smear.

“Are you trying to break a record, Major? You miss being playing flying ace, so you’re trying to best the number of times one can go from infirmary bed to pilot’s seat?” McKay muttered from behind.

“Am I a broken record, Lieutenant?” There was no need to turn around; John could feel McKay’s impending outburst and decided to tamp it down before it exploded. “I’m fine. What’s the latest from the dope sheet?”

“Zero visibility at all ceilings, forty mile per hour winds, gusts up to sixty. High pressure’s going to try to shove us west. Time to target should be around two point three hours if we’re lucky, barring going off course. And if you plan on skimming the shoreline the whole time, then we’re going to encounter extra fun from twenty mile coastal winds.”

“I’ll keep her as steady as I can.”

“Goody. Have fun staring at your instruments the whole time while I pull my hair out because I won’t be able to use a single celestial reading. Not that I’ve gotten any sleep after hearing the weather reports,” McKay ranted.

“I had a two whole cups of coffee earlier,” John retorted, knowing that’d piss McKay off since supplies had dried up two weeks ago. Dealing with his Lieutenant’s caffeine withdrawal had been hellish.

“Did you save the grounds at least?” McKay demanded, salivating.

“I’ll roll them up into a cigarette…or were you gonna eat them?” Ronon’s voice rumbled out of the back.

“Just because you drink coconut milk, doesn’t mean the rest of us have the dietary requirements of infants. Coffee is to be savored and loved by men with high IQs and who have to make hundreds of calculations at a time.”

“I’m not the one having a temper tantrum,” the sergeant pointed out.

John ignored the squabbling, listening in as control gave them the all clear. He slid on his headset and jacked into the com to the other crews. “All right, boys. We have a go.”

----------------------------------------------------------------

Every pilot worth his wings had flown through tropical storm conditions before; it was a weekly occurrence during his time over Burma. The small Havoc shuddered, metal screeching during a take
off that put them directly in the path of wind gales that batted the plane around like a toy. The Pegasus climbed to its cruising altitude, John’s hands white-knuckled on the flight yoke.

It was a bitter fight, keeping the bird steady through rapidly changing air drafts. He constantly altered their elevation, finding smoother sections for a few minutes until the plane rattled and leaped around like wild bull when they encountered rougher air.

The cabin remained silent during the flight, John intent on their heading, calculating how far they were being knocked off course and compensating for it. McKay constantly sent out radio signals to the other planes, verifying their positions. So, far they were sticking fairly within range of one another. The Birddog had dropped a thousand feet suddenly, but returned a few minutes later and rejoined formation.

“God, I think I’m going to throw up again,” McKay moaned.

“You drinking water, Lieutenant?” John asked, unable to take his eyes off his instruments for a second. This was the second time in an hour McKay had gotten sick.

“That’s what I need, to have liquid sloshing around my stomach while we bounce around like a pinball.”

“Ronon, make sure McKay’s taking in fluids,” John ordered their gunner. He couldn’t allow the Lieutenant to get dehydrated from puking too much.

“I don’t have anything to plug my nose,” Ronon complained, the cramped plane slowly filling with the sour odor of vomit.

John was a seasoned vet, and had skipped breakfast for this very reason, but even his empty belly rolled as the Havoc became the wind and rain’s punching bag. “Only an hour to target,” he informed his crew.

There were no visual cues to detect massive turbulence; it kept him tense, waiting for large masses of air to suddenly collide at different speeds. If his bird hit those air pockets, she could be ripped completely out of control. It was his job to ride it out, or seek a safer section of sky.

The yoke jerked out of his grasp when they hit a wild change in wind direction, and the plane tried to flip over. “Hold on!”

He grabbed the yoke, wrestling with the controls; his skull slammed the ceiling of the cockpit then the side window. Fighting his controls, he eased them down to dip under the thermal updraft. He clenched his jaw, veins popped out down his forearms from the muscle strain as he steered them away. “Sorry about that,” he said, letting out a breath.

“Sorry? Did you forget we were nearing a mountain range, Major? I thought you pilots understood the fundamentals regarding changes in air temperature, especially during a storm!” McKay hissed.

“How about letting the man fly?” Ronon growled.

“How about letting the man fly?” McKay barked back.

John rolled knotted shoulders; he didn’t need bickering today. He knew his sergeant got bored on these long trips when there wasn’t much to do, so McKay’s constant sniping riled the big man up.

“Will you two sh--”

“Holy crap! Pull up, Major, pull up!”
“Why?” John jerked hard on his flight controls, eyes peering out the window. “What’s--”

The Havoc jolted violently and John’s eyes saucered as a familiar Havoc clipped them. “Fuck!”

“It’s the Eager Beaver… I… I didn’t… they came out of nowhere!” McKay yelled in a panic.

Alarms beeped; red lights flickered off and on. They spun like a top while dropping thousands of feet per minute. John’s wrists cracked and popped, struggling with the yoke vibrating in his death grip.

“Oh God, Oh God!”

“McKay! I need a report on the damage!” John snarled between clenched teeth.

“I can’t see anything except buckets of water!”

“We’ve lost the right wing-tip. Looks sheered off!” Ronon bellowed over the noise.

Yeah, that was what John was afraid of. He grappled the controls, amending his adjustments, pulling them out of the plane’s death spiral. But there was no getting the nose up; they were going down, and all he could do was try to slow their descent.

“Lieutenant, radio Black Jack, tell ‘em to proceed with the mission!” he barked. “Prepare for impact!”

There was no time to bail out; they were dropping to eight, seven, six thousand feet. John tried to steer them away from the mountain range, toward the jungle, but there was no fighting gravity.

“Level out, baby, come on,” John panted, eying their speed.

They were skating right under a hundred and fifty mph.

_Slow it down, slow it down!

Down to one-ten.

Then the tree canopies were rushing up to meet them.

John heard McKay’s scream, then his face smashed the instrument panel.

---------------------------------------------------------------------------------

It smelled like the inside of a furnace, smoldering metal and searing hot steel. The thick odor burned the inside lining of his throat, forcing him to suck in a harsh breath that aggravated his lungs and triggered a series of coughs that sent white-hot bursts of pain through his face and jaw, and rattled his skull.

John’s mouth filled with copper and he spat blood onto his instrument panel. The cockpit was cast in darkness, the front windshield sporting two large wavy cracks across the middle with a waterfall cascading down the front. His head swam as sensation slowly returned to his body. The left wing flap levers dug into his aching ribs and a tenderness had spread across his chest from colliding with the flight yoke.

“Guys?” John rasped. He licked his lips, swallowing. “McKay?… Sergeant?” he yelled louder as waves of pain pulsed across his cheekbone.

“We’re not dead?”
John fought his body’s desire to slump in relief at his lieutenant’s voice. “Ronon?”

“He… he’s moving around back there,” McKay groaned. “Want me to--”

“Go!” John ordered, eyes slamming shut against the growing vertigo. They were in enemy territory and there were emergency protocols to follow, but something was wrong, his brain and body weren’t working right.

“Major, I’ve got Ronon. He’s a little wobbly, but appears fine.”

“Get your hands off me!” the sergeant growled.

“Fine! I’m not a human crutch to begin with, and oh, thanks for asking, I’ve damaged my wrist beyond repair. Probably broken my arm, too!”

The bickering words faded in and out as John’s thoughts grew disjointed. “We’ve got to…” He was still sitting down, hands cradling his pounding head. No, not his head…his whole face. “McKay, start burning all our intelligence.”

“Yeah, yeah. On it.”

There was a rustling of papers and a shocked squawk. “Major, we’re filling up with water!”

Did they crash in the ocean? “Thought I got us over land?” John mumbled.

“Hey! Are you okay, Major? Major!”

The tiny craft began filling with charring smoke. John felt a hand grip his shoulder and blinked up into Ronon’s face. “You need help?” the burly sergeant asked.

“We need to destroy all the maps, too,” John said, taking Ronon’s hand.

He allowed the bigger man to pull him up, but the moment he was vertical, fire shot up his left leg and it buckled under his weight. John screamed, grabbing at the source of intense pain, but it was everywhere, knee, leg, ankle. He squirmed in his seat, the cramped compartment suddenly shrinking as someone drilled nails into his limb.

Ronon’s meaty hands grabbed John by the shoulders to keep him still. “Sir, let me look. Where are you hurt?”

John’s stomach rolled with nausea, eyes focusing long enough to study the blood stain spreading on the bottom of his left pant leg. “Oh, crap,” he muttered.

“What’s wrong? I can’t see past Tarzan’s head!” McKay barked.

“Sir, can you hear me?” Ronon demanded.

John panted, adrenaline fueling the fear pounding inside his ears. “Think my leg’s broken. Snapped the bone bearing down on the rudder.”

“Can you walk? The plane’s flooding, so unless you can breathe under water, we have to get out of here!”

“Give him a minute!” Ronon snarled at McKay.

“Enough! Both of you!” John snapped. “Get the emergency pack. Grab all our canteens and any
“Ammo.” He rubbed beads of sweat out of his eyes and took a shuddering breath to prepare himself for the inevitable pain. Looking up at Ronon, he breathed, “On the count of three?”

Ronon nodded, grabbing John under the armpits.

Swallowing back the bile rising up his esophagus, John gnashed his teeth. “One….Two…Three!”

He stood shakily, shifting all his weight to his right leg, his left one consumed by boiling acid and flames. Ronon maneuvered him out of the seat, draping John’s left arm around a broad shoulder, the sergeant moving them backwards out of the sardine can. John hobbled, keeping his busted left leg off the ground, fingers curling around Ronon’s bicep as the world swayed.

Water sloshed on the floor of the plane, soaking their pants, and John had to lean heavily against his gunner, body trembling with strain. Their Havoc had carved a deep trench into the jungle and they had to climb a steep incline through the nose to get out through the hatch. Each step was a hot knife skewering and twisting in his shin and ankle.

McKay’s wan face was streaked with grime; bleeding cuts peppered his forehead. He waited outside in the pouring rain, hands clutching the emergency kit, eyes darting at every chirp and caw from the foliage. “I put us a hundred miles south of the Jap airbase and smack dab in the middle of hostile territory,” he hissed.

Ronon wrapped his other arm around John’s waist, bracing him for the exit outside. “Ready?”

John’s energy was depleted from the short walk out of the cockpit, but he gave Ronon a sharp nod, splattering droplets of sweat everywhere. It was more a plunge than a step, and they landed calf deep in muck, the water doing little to cushion the electric shock to his leg.

He cried out, the blinding pain all-consuming, gray spots darkening his vision. Then all his strength gave out and John allowed the darkness to take him.

-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

Ronon held his CO to his chest to keep him from falling over, frantically searching for a dry spot to lay him down, finding nothing but running streams of water.

“Christ!” McKay yelped, accidentally dropping the emergency pack when Sheppard went limp.

“Be careful with that!” Ronon snapped, ears straining against the cacophony of buzzing insects and the millions of water drops pelting against the rainforest.

McKay flailed for the survival kit. “Damn it!” he cursed, snagging the olive drab strap, and almost losing it again. “God, my wrist’s definitely broken.”

Ronon listened for the sounds of boots or rustling through the foliage, but when leaves and twigs were drenched in heavy layers of rain soaked moss and deadfall, it silenced any signs of the enemy. “We’ve got to get out of here.”

McKay’s hair was plastered against his head, his face ashen, his body quivering. “Yeah? Where? And what about Sheppard?”

“If we don’t find some cover, the damn Japs’ll find us. You want to see what they’d do to him?” Ronon challenged, ignoring the trickle of blood being washed off his temple. Since hitting the bulkhead, the world teetered back and forth, forcing him to adjust Sheppard’s weight so they didn’t both fall over. McKay was a fish out of water, panicking for air and there wasn’t time to wait for him
to pull things together. “Let’s move,” Ronon said.

“Wait a damn minute. I’m ranking officer. I give the orders!” McKay snarled.

“Then give them!” Ronon snapped back.

“Okay, okay. We’re on the wind side of the mountain; all the streams feed north into Geelvink bay, which puts us…”

Ronon growled.

“We’re in the middle of a freaking swamp that gets over three hundred inches of rain a year! There’s nothing around here but lowlands!”

Go, go, go! Ronon’s brain urged, but he couldn’t give into terror. “You’re our navigator. You’ve studied the maps, memorized the terrain. Our position is in your brain at all times!” he shouted his version of a pep talk.

“We’ll head south. That should take us down river…I think.” McKay stared at Sheppard slumped against Ronon’s body, eyes glued to the spreading redness down their CO’s trousers. “No, I’m sure of it. But first we have to get away from the wreckage and get the major fixed up. Find a fallen tree or something.”

Vicious insects bit at Ronon’s neck and face; a ravenous cloud of them descended over Sheppard’s legs, the scent of fresh blood promising a feast. He swatted at them one handedly, holding onto his CO awkwardly. “Which direction?”

“Um…this way,” McKay gestured behind them. “Maybe we should build a litter...or something?”

“We’d never get through the jungle. It’s too packed,” Ronon replied, slipping his commander down gently. He grabbed Sheppard’s wrist and pulled his arm across Ronon’s own shoulders as he was taught, then reached between his legs, grasping his CO’s uninjured knee and lifting him in a fireman’s carry. With his right arm free, Ronon pulled out his .45. “Just tell me where to go.” At McKay’s questioning stare about who was leading, he added, “Do they have jungles in Canada?”

With a gulp, Rodney shook his head, feet slurping through the sludge to stand by Ronon’s side. “We’ll go together.”

There were no trails to follow, just a tangled mess of swampy foliage, the canopy of trees above swallowing up the sun and trapping the humidity. They stumbled over the saturated ground, thousands of mosquitoes dining on patches of exposed skin. McKay’s good hand was in constant motion, but after endlessly slapping at the tiny hordes, he gave up with a curse.

Moving was agonizingly slow; add in the extra weight of his CO across his back, and Ronon was drenched in sweat, his calves burning from the intense work-out. His head was pounding, and he put everything into the simple task of putting one boot in front of another.

“Let’s stop… here,” he panted, spotting a large set of roots jutting the ground.

McKay slumped over a massive fallen tree, exhausted, closed his eyes as he huffed for breath. Ronon lowered Sheppard over the protruding roots, keeping his neck supported. “Hey,” he gestured at McKay.

“What? Oh,” McKay scooted closer. “Ouch! These things are digging into my ass,” he hissed, but carefully cushioned Sheppard’s head to his thigh, searching for the carotid. “Pulse is strong...feels
“His leg isn’t supposed to be crooked,” McKay said staring, face paling even more.

The bone below the knee was deformed, part of it pressed up against the skin, stretching it unnaturally. Ronon traced the tibia’s alignment, noting the distention that ran toward Sheppard’s bloody sock. “His foot’s bent the wrong way.”

McKay swallowed. “We’ve got to splint it,” he said. Ronon looked up at McKay’s grim face, right wrist cradled against his chest. “We need to remove his boot and immobilize the joint below and above the break. But you’ll have to do it quickly.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s the only thing keeping his ankle stable. If you take it off…”

McKay’s eyes widened.

“…It’ll swell up like a balloon and…”

The navigator slapped his hand over his mouth.

“Take a deep breath!” Ronon snapped, but McKay was getting greener around the gills. “Put your head down.”

“It’s just…well…I’ve never seen…and…”

“We don’t have a lot of water and you can’t afford to puke again.”


Ronon couldn’t do this by himself. All his life he had struggled alone; now he needed the strength of his crew. He’d had basic battlefield triage like every grunt, but seeing his larger than life CO, his friend’s leg, mangled and bleeding in the middle of the fucking jungle...

It was almost too much.

“I need your help.”

McKay whimpered, slowly easing Sheppard’s head off his thigh. “I…I don’t think I can do this.”

“You have to!” Ronon snapped.

“Right. Because I look like Florence Nightingale,” he mumbled, stripping the survival pack from his shoulder. “Of course we should have done this before we moved him to prevent shock, though crashing in the middle of this godforsaken--”

“McKay!”

“Okay, okay,” the navigator snapped, rummaging through the supplies. “Let’s see…we don’t need forceps or a thermometer…ah, got gauze bandages, straps…we’ll save the morphine for later. Here
we go…wooden splints…oh, and Sulfadiazine tablets,” McKay said, looking up at Ronon’s quizzical expression. “To…uh…sprinkle over the…you know,” he waved at the contorted ankle.

Ronon bent over Sheppard’s leg, using his back to shield him from the raging downpour. He loosened the laces and carefully removed the Red Wing by the worn rubber sole. The sock underneath was sodden with blood and he sliced open the fabric with his knife, revealing jagged parts of the bone that had pierced through the skin.

Bile churned in his belly at the sight, but Ronon quickly crushed the powdery tablets and sprinkled them into the open wound, then applied the pressure bandages and used ties to secure them in place. “I’ll hold the splint; you wrap the dressing around the ankle.”

“Hey! Get away, you sonsabitches!” McKay snarled, swatting at the flies buzzing over the appetizing injury. “Um….oh God, I can’t believe I’m doing this.”

“Hurry up!” Ronon hissed.

“If we don’t do this right then the edges of the bone could damage a blood vessel or cause nerve damage!”

McKay awkwardly wrapped the gauze three times around and over the splints as Ronon held the ankle still. When it looked like McKay was about to pass out, Ronon took over, and slipped heavy rubber bands around to help keep Sheppard’s ankle immobilized. He snapped two out of the five, but kept his cool as he struggled putting the boot back on the heavily cocooned ankle.

“Grab a couple sticks,” Ronon said. He was proud when McKay did so without comment, returning with two fairly identical in length. Quickly he splinted the rest of Sheppard’s limb, using what little padding he could get from the kit so it wouldn’t be too uncomfortable.

By the time his task was complete, Ronon’s brain felt twice the size of his head. His fingers traced a large goose egg at his temple and swore there was a smaller one on the back of his skull.

“You okay?”

Ronon didn’t realize his eyes were closed and opened them to a set of worried blue ones. “Fine,” he grunted. “Let’s get that taken care of,” he said, pointing at McKay’s wrist.

“I’m actually conscious, and would prefer not to suffer permanent damage from your manhandling,” McKay replied, holding his arm across his chest. It was all bluster, since the navigator acquiesced as soon as Ronon glared.

“Just be careful. Does that word exist in your limited vocabulary?”

Unlike Sheppard’s injury, McKay’s wrist was too swollen to see which bones were broken. They were out of splints, but Ronon dug out Sheppard’s wrinkled pack of smokes to support the joint, securing the last of the bindings around the cardboard, McKay flinching with every wrap of fabric.

McKay’s color was chalk white by the time he was done, and Ronon offered the man his canteen, worried about dehydration from his earlier bout of motion sickness.

The barrage from above doused every inch of fabric to Ronon’s skin; water pooled in the folds of his clothes, soaking his hair past the saturation point. It was like being a human mop in an overflowing bucket of dirty water.

McKay held out a packet. “Here, we should take these, but seeing as I can’t do anything one handed,
you should open them, preferably without using your teeth.”

Ronon grabbed the foiled square pack of salt tablets. “This is just going to make us more thirsty.”

“Can’t be thirsty if you’re dead.”

“Got anything else useful in there?”

“Besides the fact that part of it came apart inside the plane? Oh, lookie here, Atabrine,” McKay gave a sad look in Sheppard’s direction. “Oh wait. Hello,” he grinned, shaking a half empty bottle of insect repellant.

Ronon snorted, “We’ll see if it does any good.”

McKay was smart and squirted some over Sheppard’s leg, scattering the frenzied insects away for the time being, then doused them both. He quickly stuffed everything back inside, holding his injured wrist to his chest and choo-chooing for air. After getting himself together, he pulled a small compass out, calculating stuff under his breath. He slowly turned around in a circle to gain his bearings, only to wipe at the endless spray running down his face in annoyance.

“We close to the river?” Ronon asked, earning him a scowl. “I thought you said this was the way downstream?”

“Stream? If you happened to look around, this whole place is one large floodplain.”

“You write out the mission maps. You have to--”

“I plot a course based on landmarks given to me by the intelligence officer, which is an oxymoron if you ask me. So, let me see, oh right. We should make a left at the big tree.” McKay pointed aimlessly. “I wonder which one?”

“Didn’t you look out the window?”

“When we were hurtling through the sky, or when we hit the ground?”

“Will you two knock it off?”

Ronon instantly crouched next to his CO. “Sheppard?”

“What’s…” Sheppard propped himself awkwardly onto his elbows, taking a shaky deep breath. “What’s our status?”

“No signs of enemy movement, but they’ve got to know we’re here,” Ronon said, cutting off any sarcastic remarks from the irritated lieutenant. “We were just discussing our position,” he glowered at McKay.

“I can’t be totally sure, but I might know where the river empties out based on the last log I plotted just before we went down. With the impending invasion, the closer we get to shore, the better our chances of sending a signal up and getting rescued.”

“HQ will probably order another bombing right before the amphibious assault,” Sheppard agreed, wiping water out of his eyes to scan the jungle. “Um…McKay? If we’re following a river downstream, shouldn’t we be near one?”

“Well, yes. I was just calculating the easiest way to get there,” McKay answered, fiddling with his compass to stall for time.
“Lieutenant,” Sheppard growled.

“We’re ten miles out…give or take a mile,” was McKay’s quiet reply.

Ronon bit his lower lip in frustration; Sheppard blanched even further if that was possible. With his CO’s busted leg and limited supplies, the trek would feel like a hundred mile death march.

“We near any high ground?” Sheppard inquired.

McKay looked positively forlorn. “Not to my knowledge.”

“Anyone grab a chute?” Sheppard squeezed his eyes shut when he shifted too much, fingers crushing one of the roots. “We could use the fabric as a makeshift tent.”

Ronon felt like hitting something in frustration for not thinking on his feet in a crisis. “I forgot about them.”

A quick glance at McKay showed the same anger and regret reflected in his expression. Neither of them had grabbed anything extra.

“We could try using the plane as shelter,” McKay suggested. “We’re far enough away from any major Jap base that we might be safe there overnight.”

“We don’t know how entrenched Naoyuki’s men are in the mountains. They could be more spread out than we think. If they saw our bird go down, they’ll want to track us. They know our forces are gearing up for something; capturing us alive would be vital,” Sheppard countered.

“It wasn’t like we were shot down. There was no smoke or fire to light a trail. Besides, we better hope they didn’t see the crash or--” McKay allowed his negative way of thinking to trail off.

No one wanted to think how the accident could have blown the rest of the mission for the remaining squad.

“I could check it out. It won’t take me long to scout the area.” Anticipating an argument, Ronon made a show of standing and pulling out his sidearm. “We need the intel.”

“I don’t want us splitting up,” Sheppard argued.

“It’s a half click at the most.” Ronon wouldn’t back down, but neither would his stubborn CO.

“Enough with the staring contest. I say let him go, Major. It’d be nice to know if we should be running for our lives.”

Sheppard only had so much energy and by judging the lines of pain etched into his face, the man was diverting most of it to battling the pain in his leg. “Fine. Be careful, Sergeant. Don’t do anything risky; that’s an order.”

“I won’t let you down,” Ronon grunted. He patted McKay on the arm, the two of them communicating silently.

Don’t get yourself killed.

I won’t. Look after Sheppard.

He knew the navigator would protect their CO with his life, and Ronon wouldn’t leave his crew unless he felt going back to the Havoc was imperative to their survival. With one last nod, he
plunged into the bog, praying he wouldn’t come back to find the jungle had swallowed up his friends.

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Visibility was a few inches in front of his face, blurs of vines, low hanging branches with flowers, and angry biting pests. A Jap could be hidden off to the side and Ronon wouldn’t notice the bastard with the constant rain blowing in his face. But his ears were attuned to the noises of life. If an enemy approached, the animals and insects would let him know with their silence.

The Havoc had flattened a significant gouge through the forest, forcing him to stay hidden in the outside edges of the dense vegetation. Waiting in the shadows, Ronon watched for signs of troops, but all he saw was a tree kangaroo perched above the broken plane, tying to decide if it was safe to jump on top of it. With his weapon pointed straight ahead, he crept toward the tail, using it for cover until he entered the hatch.

The compartment was flooded thanks to the ditch the nose had dug on the way down, the jungle claiming most of their stuff. Ronon slopped around inside the metal beast, hands searching for anything useful. He went toward his part of the craft, knowing exactly where he’d stashed his chute, but it’d been tossed around and lost with the rest of the clutter.

He clambered over toward McKay’s seat, knowing the man kept his chute close by at all times. There wasn’t time for a thorough search, not with the long hike through the jungle ahead of them. No one had said it out loud, but with the severity of Sheppard’s injuries, their CO was in serious trouble if he didn’t receive medical attention. There was a secret stash of Hershey bars somewhere, but the hidey hole under McKay’s station was empty and covered with water.

Busted camera parts,.50 caliber ammo boxes, water-logged magazines. Nothing! He trounced around, his boot connected with something firm and he scooped up their emergency life raft bundle. If they were going to use the river, this would definitely come in handy. But he still couldn’t find the damn chute.

With a growl of frustration, he shoved his hand into the water, searching the metal floor, his fingers brushing over a familiar strap.

Yes!

Ronon pulled out a parachute pack and looped it over his shoulder along with the life raft pouch. He’d give it to Sheppard and McKay so he could come back here and keep an eye on the plane a bit longer before deeming it safe enough for use as a shelter. If the Japs didn’t come by in a few hours, it was a safe bet they hadn’t seen it come down.

He squinted through the monsoon, watching and listening, noticing the quiet under all the insect noise. The birds had stopped chirping. Getting trapped inside the Havoc was suicide, so he slowly hopped out, his gun trained in front of him.

His ears perked up at the whispering cadence of Japanese, sharp high-speed accents despite the hushed tones. Ronon made his way in the opposite direction which was thankfully the way he’d come. Blending in with the trees was easy, the weather for once taking part in his collusion.

There were five of them scavenging the plane for supplies, twitchy little men scanning a jungle that concealed him from sight. How dare they loot the one thing he felt at home with, that he’d fought so hard to defend! It’d be easy to wait here, picking them off one by one with a couple well-placed headshots. He took aim at the leader, the one ordering the others by waving around his rifle.
No. This wasn’t the time for revenge; he couldn’t risk losing his life this way, leaving Sheppard and McKay alone. His finger eased off the trigger and he started backing away into the brush just as six more Japs converged from out of nowhere, the two groups speaking to each other rapidly.

Then they merged and started to fan out and Ronon backed away even further, then ran as quickly and as quietly as he could to get back to his friends.

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The heart of the jungle beat with Ronon’s, urging him onward, covering up his labored gasps for oxygen with its blare. The mud was a layer of grease coating the ground and his boot slipped, throwing him off balance. He skidded on his hands and knees and he lurched back to his feet, almost falling back down when dizziness swept over him.

His head roared, pressure built up behind his eyes, blurring his vision. “Not now,” he growled, pushing the pain away.

He timed his sprint to the crash site and had run faster with the threat of discovery by the enemy. Even with a keen sense of direction, the forest mocked him with layer upon layer of greens and browns.

Where were they? He circled helplessly, anger and fear swelling inside his chest.

“Sergeant!”

Thank God! Ronon raced toward a familiar voice, locating his bedraggled friends. Both of them had their weapons out; McKay’s wavered nervously in his hand, Sheppard’s was steady in a pain channeled iron grip.

“We’ve got to go,” Ronon said, stopping long enough to start helping Sheppard up.

“What? Why?” McKay babbled, taking three attempts to holster his .45.


“Found the chute. When I left, eleven enemy troops emerged. They stared searching the plane and I took off,” Ronon huffed out of breath. “We have to leave.”

“Were you spotted?” Sheppard grit his teeth as he struggled to his feet, all the color draining from his face.

“No,” There was no time to waste; they needed to place some distance between them and the Japs. Ronon draped Sheppard’s arm over his shoulder and wrapped one around his CO’s waist. “Ready?”

Sheppard gave a sharp nod. McKay swallowed grimly, compass out in his good hand. “This way.”

It had taken a combat engineering brigade and tons of fuel to cut and burn down the jungle for an airbase. Wild growth, jam-packed trees, they all formed barriers that cut skin and tripped their feet. Ronon would’ve given anything for a bulldozer or even a machete.

Sheppard hobbled and hopped, keeping up with Ronon’s furious pace through the snarl. His CO never complained; he cursed, using every swear in the book as they trudged further. Ronon was taking on more of the major’s weight, pulling Sheppard up by the belt when he stumbled, the trek exacting a heavy toll on the injured man.
They’d been going for close to two hours; Sheppard’s breaths were harsh and ragged against Ronon’s neck. “Just a little further, sir. You can do this,” he encouraged.

Their pace slowed to a crawl, battling the brush and mud taxing them to their limits. McKay slipped constantly, ripping holes in his trousers on sharp hidden rocks, and each time he fell, it took longer to pick himself back up. The rain never let up and there wasn’t an inch of them not covered by muck or insect bites. Ronon had practically dragged Sheppard the last twenty minutes, focusing on McKay’s back to keep him going.

Finally his CO simply ran out of gas, dropping like a stone, Ronon staggering down next to him. “Sheppard!”

But the poor Major was too busy throwing up to pay him any attention.

“McKay, wait!” Ronon barked.

The lieutenant spun around, nearly falling on his ass in the process. “What’s…what’s wrong?” he panted, sinking to his knees to join them on the ground. “Oh God, why’s he doing that?”

Pain. Head injury. Who knew, but they had to stop. “We should find a place to rest. Take up a watch,” Ronon suggested, his body melting into an exhausted lump.

“Yeah? Where?” McKay demanded, crawling over to Sheppard who had sagged into the earth. “Major?” he whispered, placing a hand tentatively on the man’s shoulder.

Sheppard’s whole body trembled and it scared McKay, but it terrified Ronon to see their leader consumed by such pain, silencing the voice they were both used to following.

“John?” Ronon rarely used the pilot’s first name, hoped it’d get a response. He rolled his friend onto his back, hazel eyes straying unfocused, fingers clawing the insides of his palms. “Major!”

“I’m here,” Sheppard rasped. “Just…” he licked his lips. “I’m--”

“Don’t talk, we’ll take care of things,” Ronon said with a squeeze to the man’s good knee.

“No, I’m good,” his CO insisted, but didn’t budge.

“Yeah, you look it,” McKay mumbled, his pasty complexion only a shade better than Sheppard’s.

Ronon walked towards a thick, low hanging tree limb, testing its strength by pressing on it fully. Another branch ran nearly parallel next to it that was just as substantial and he climbed on top, satisfied that it would hold enough weight.

“What are you doing?” McKay demanded.

“Creating higher ground. Help me break off these branches,” Ronon said, searching for pieces of the same length.

“Oh, I get it. I used to have a tree house,” McKay perked up. “Of course I didn’t build it. Dad didn’t follow my designs suggestions and it fell apart one winter. Though I suspect a certain group of squirrels was involved in…”

“Less talking,” Ronon interrupted, annoyed at the difficulty of snapping wet wood.

“Yes, I’m very adept at construction with my one good hand, and not my dominant hand I might add.”
Despite the complaints, McKay was good at delegating, suggesting where to place the makeshift beams and the best way to anchor the whole thing together with the remaining ties from the survival kit. In less than half an hour they had a basic platform a few feet above the mud and Ronon unpacked the parachute, spreading the fabric across it.

McKay squatted next to the major who fought very hard to appear as if he was really inspecting the crude dais from the ground. “Good job, guys.”

Ronon knelt down with his crew to do an inventory of supplies. His canteen was almost empty, but he had grabbed an emergency one from inside the Havoc when they’d first evacuated.

Even half conscious, Sheppard realized what Ronon was doing and pulled out his water and shook the contents. “Mine’s three fourth’s full.”

All eyes were on McKay, who squirmed when he pulled out his. “Um, I’ve got a little left.”

A little was a splash at the bottom, leaving less than two canteens of drinking water between them. Sheppard handed his container to McKay, “You can share with me.”

“I’m not going to take water from an injured man,” McKay refused.

“You’ve been sick, Lieutenant, you need the fluids.”

“And you’re losing blood and need it even more, Major!”

“You both need it,” Ronon argued, knowing they’d only be able to stretch the rations by a couple days at the most in this humidity.

The only food in the plane had been some dried biscuits which McKay had snatched and he ate the cold, bland dinner in earnest. Sheppard waved off his portion, curling onto his right side, eyes screwed shut, muttering about giving him a few minutes.

Ronon swallowed his ration in a few bites, washing it down with a gulp of water, then stretched out his back. “I’ll take first watch.” He looked down at his CO huddled on the ground then up at the Lieutenant, the two of them doing that odd silent communication thing.

McKay fumbled with the survival kit and pulled out one of the thin-tubed medical syrettes, chewing on his lower lip. “Major?”

“Lieutenant,” came the gruff reply.

“You need to rest and that means getting up in an uncomfortable tree and sleeping on limbs held together by spit and vines.” At Ronon’s baleful glare, McKay added. “And unless you want to attract every Jap within two miles with your screaming when Tarzan helps you onto your bed of sticks, I suggest you take this morphine like a good Major so we can hop through the jungle tomorrow.”

Sheppard lifted his face from where it rested on his forearm, looking at the syrette like he wanted to kiss it.

“You’ll be out for only a few hours,” Ronon, said ganging up on the man. “If anything happens, it’ll be easier to grab you if you’re not in pain.”

All they got was a nod in response, a true testament to the agony their CO had to be in. McKay was quick, stabbing the syrette into Sheppard’s thigh, watching the man’s eyes flutter closed and his body uncoil from its rigid, overwrought posture.
“At least one of us will get some sleep,” McKay muttered, patting Sheppard on the arm and clumsily scrambling onto the makeshift shelter. “Oh, God. These things are going to poke holes into my spine.”

Vigilant of Sheppard’s broken leg, Ronon picked up his friend and carried him over to the rudimentary platform. McKay helped settle their CO with utmost care, checking his pulse and elevating his leg atop the emergency kit.

“You know I’m claustrophobic, right?” McKay grumbled, propping up a small limb as a pole. Ronon draped the rest of the parachute over them to keep the rain from soaking them while they slept.

“Did you just tuck us in?”

“I’ll wake you up in two hours,” Ronon answered, spreading leaves and vines on top to help camouflage the olive fabric, hoping the Japs weren’t in the process of surrounding them.

Two hours came and went and it was Ronon’s turn to catch some sleep, which consisted of him laying down and waking up to a scream sometime later. He bolted awake to a face full of nylon, fingers yanking at the chute that had fallen on top of them from the weight of the rain. Sheppard wrestled with the parachute next to him, then there was a zipping sound, and fat drops of rain poured in from the new opening.

Ronon had his .45 out, Sheppard the K-bar he’d used to cut through the cocoon. Ronon jumped off the stand, searching for the source of the yell, his eyes landing on McKay’s petrified face as a large jade and pink speckled snake slithered across his lap.

“Get it…get it…”

“Hold still,” Ronon said, watching the snake’s head dart back and forth, a tiny cherry tongue slipping in and out of its mouth. “Think it’s a Kellback. It’s harmless.”

“I don’t care!” McKay hissed.

The Kellback was eight to ten feet long, its slender, scaly body starting to coil around McKay’s waist.

“Think it wants to take refuge under your clothes,” Ronon said amused, though he felt bad when McKay’s face turned green.

Switching his .45 for a knife, Ronon waited for the snake to bob away from McKay’s body and snagged it around the head, chopping it off. “Looks like we have breakfast.”

“Yeah? I’ve spent the last hour trying to start a fire. It’s nice we’re issued waterproof matches, too bad everything’s too wet to burn,” he said in disgust.

Ronon sat down hard on the ground when his head throbbed, the adrenaline rush leaving his body. “Why were you trying to start a fire?” The last thing they needed was to alert the enemy to their whereabouts.

“Hello? We only have enough water for today. If we can’t boil any then we won’t have anything left to drink.”
“What about our water purification tablets?”

Ronon and McKay turned toward the worn-out voice of the major. Sheppard used the side of a tree to prop himself against, his face framed hideously by blood-shot eyes and dark bruises.

“Yes, those would be the packets missing from the kit, save for a single lonely box of tablets.”

Sheppard ignored McKay’s sarcastic reply. “We’ll ration the tablets. Crush ’em into a powder and stick to collecting rainwater which is less likely to be contaminated,” he said, clawing at his trousers, grinding his teeth. “We ready to head out?”

“What about breakfast?”

“Don’t think the Japs will care if we’ve eaten, Lieutenant,” was Sheppard’s bitter reply. Resting his head against the tree, he allowed the water to drip over his forehead. “But we’ll have some tasty raw snakeburgers later.”

Ronon flashed his teeth in a grin, making quick work of their future lunch and wrapping the chunks of meat in a bandana from his pocket. “I’ll tear apart the shelter,” he said getting up, and walked over to where the tree truck was holding up his CO. “Ready to hop down?”

“No,” Sheppard grunted.

Ronon was impressed; Sheppard didn’t pass out when he was helped off the platform. The pilot snagged two fistfuls of Ronon’s shirt, burying a scream into his shoulder. McKay fluttered around like a bird, actually folding up the chute with his left hand, nervously shooting looks in their direction.

“I’m good now,” Sheppard mumbled, pulling himself upright by using Ronon as a crutch. “I’ll lean right here,” he said, placing a hand on another tree, looking like death warmed over. “Go cover our tracks.”

It took two minutes to break everything down. McKay gathered up the kit and raft; Ronon strapped the chute around one shoulder, offering Sheppard the other.

McKay checked his compass, grumbled about directions and the need for the sun’s position and pointed into the brush. “Follow the yellow brick road.”

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Ronon wanted to set the whole place on fire and watch it all burn. He hated the creepers, the fucking lizards, and ants, all the humming wings, the caws of too many birds.

He ignored the lightheadedness that had increased since daybreak, and the way Sheppard whimpered and moaned, talking nonsense about leaving him behind. McKay slipped and Ronon picked him up with his free hand. “Come on, move it,” he growled.

They were all soaked to the bone, exhausted, and hungry. Then McKay froze in his tracks and Ronon almost collided with him. “Hey!”

“It’s…it’s a trail,” McKay huffed, hands on his knees trying to learn to breathe again.

“You call that a trail?” Ronon muttered, staring at what used to be a centuries worn route, the beaten down area now a stream of calf high mud.
“Yeah, well it used to be footpath,” McKay grumbled. “But this is a good and bad thing.”

“I think finding…signs that people have walked through…here over the years…is a good thing,” Sheppard spoke between ragged gulps of air.

“Yes, it means we’re getting close to the river…”

“But?” Ronon prodded.

“But,” McKay said, waving a hand. “It means not only do we have to worry if we’re being followed by the Japanese, but now we have to deal with cannibals who want to cut off our heads and or skin us alive.”

“Way to think positively,” Sheppard drawled.

“I’m sorry, Major. Not everyone is like Teyla’s people. This is an untamed land, filled with thousands of indigenous groups with hundreds of different languages.”

“That doesn’t make them--”

“Cannibals? Yes, it does. The Sawi tribes are headhunters with large populations scattered here on Biak and West Guinea. Maybe you didn’t hear what happened with the missionaries who tried to convert those around here.”

“ McKay,” Ronon rumbled.

“Then there’s the 3034th Infantry in the Solomons when they encountered the friendly natives. What about Fuji? No, of course not, because your head’s always in the clouds. You like to talk about respecting other cultures. What about the rituals of eating flesh for power and voodoo--”

“You forgot tar and feathering.”

“You think I’m joking?” McKay asked aghast.

“No, that’d require that you had a sense of humor.”

“Oh har har, Major. Why don’t you take it on the road with Hope and Crosby?”

“So, are we going to follow the path or what?” Ronon grumbled. If they didn’t get going, he didn’t think he could muster the energy to move at all.

“We’ll follow the trail,” Sheppard ordered.

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There wasn’t a real way to actually follow the trail; it was filled with so much mud that it was nearly impossible for a mobile person to slog through let alone Sheppard and his busted leg. In boot, Ronon had run a mile in six minutes and could walk it in under twelve. They had been searching for the river for over ten hours in between rest periods, and he doubted they had even gone five miles.

And that was if McKay was right about where they were headed.

The jungle leeched energy; between the sweltering steam and their limited rations, it slowly drained the life out of each of them. The salt tablets made Ronon’s mouth salivate, and increased his desire to simply gulp down the entire dirty stream beside them. They had combined canteens earlier, so during the rest periods, Ronon collected the rainwater in the remaining ones.
For lunch they had snake and Sheppard a morphine shot for dessert. The major was draped between him and McKay, since Ronon had almost fallen down when it felt like ice picks starting drilling into his skull.

Sheppard was boneless and high, laughing one minute, quiet the next. Most of the time he was simply unconscious and Ronon would have to glance over to make sure he was still breathing to quell the growing fear in his gut.

“We…we…have to stop,” McKay gasped, falling to his knees and taking everyone else with him.

Ronon handed him the canteen two hours before the agreed upon time.

McKay took it with a shaky hand, blue eyes dulled by pain and dehydration. “No, we need to--”

“Drink it,” Ronon growled.

When McKay didn’t pull rank, he knew it’d been the right decision.

Ronon built the next shelter by himself, it took longer because he’d forget what he was doing or the stupid ties didn’t twist the right way. By nightfall, the night crawlers had come out and no amount of insect repellent would ward them off.

McKay’s drawn face was covered by stings and bite marks, but he was busy using the remaining bug stuff on Sheppard. “Get away you bastards!”

Ronon wasn’t naïve; insects were driven by the allure of fresh or dried blood. With all the walking and lack of fresh field dressings, they could only do so much to keep the wound from oozing through the bandages.

“Best thing we can do is get some rest so we can reach the river in the morning,” he said.

“Yeah? Think he has that long?”

“Could you walk all the way into the night? Without sleep or light to see by?” Ronon asked.

McKay spun around, shoving his face into Ronon’s, “Since when are you the sensible one?”

“Since I’m not the one with a broken wrist that’s the size of my arm.” Ronon didn’t say anything about the navigator’s bouts of dizziness or weakness.

“Yeah, well. Don’t think I haven’t thought about enjoying some morphine myself.” But the man wouldn’t take any from Sheppard.

Ronon pointed at the swollen bug bites that inflamed McKay’s cheeks. “Have you taken your allergy stuff?”

“I keep diphenhydramine in my flight vest.” McKay slumped down into the sludge. “I’m fine.”

None of them were fine.

If Ronon didn’t sleep soon he wouldn’t be able to walk come dawn. “I’ll take first watch.”

“No, I will,” McKay said, pulling out his compass. “I want to make the final calculations to the river.”

There were stars in the sky, but Ronon wouldn’t point out the obvious. “Wake me in two hours.”
Sheppard was still out, either from shock or blood loss, or both. Ronon checked the splints to see if they were still stable and lifted up his burden and placed him on top of the shelter. He climbed up and pulled the chute over them, using the side that hadn’t been split open that morning.

It was inching closer to dawn and Ronon waited for a rat to scurry closer, timing the exact moment to plunge the blade into its brain. He thought maybe two hours sleep was worse than no shuteye at all, but then his belly rumbled and he was glad to be awake to catch breakfast.

“Shi. Shizukani!”  (Hush! Quiet!)

He held his breath, counting the seconds as leather soles splashed a few meters away. His fingers curled around his K-bar, readying to slit the teenager’s throat without a second’s thought. They were all young, ratty uniforms hanging off their bony frames, flinching at random sounds. One of them was smoking a cigarette, and whispered a harsh rebuke to his buddy.

Ronon fought the rage, hand twitching in urgency, heart slamming against his chest.

“Ochitsuite,” (Relax) the pal responded with a laugh, the others joining in as they razzed the worrier.

The platoon walked west; if they’d known which direction to gaze, it’d be easy to spot the parachute. But it was just another patch of green among thousands, and he didn’t dare breathe, scared to death that the slightest sound would attract attention.

Ronon’s body trembled from staying perfectly still, vision graying at the edges. Then the voices faded, the splashing noises dying with them.

Finally he allowed sweet oxygen into his lungs and Ronon stepped into the foliage, never taking his eyes off the disappearing backs of the patrol. With his gun trained, senses attuned to the jungle, he crept back to his friends and opened the flap.

“We need to get to the river now,” he hissed inside.

“Are you sure they went the other way?” McKay whispered.

“Yes,” Ronon huffed, not bothering to tell him they could have changed direction.

“But they might be following the trail to the river and if we’re all going the same way, then--”

“How about keeping…the silence thing…so the bad guys don’t hear us,” Sheppard rasped.

“Does that include your imitation of a TB patient, Major?”

Ronon kept his mouth shut, focusing on the forest, allowing it to tell him if the enemy was within ear shot. He could feel the heat coming off Sheppard, could smell sickness sweat out his skin, and avoided looking at his CO’s pale face.

McKay had to know how bad off Sheppard was; they’d shared the same space, which was the only reason why Ronon cut the man some slack with all the bitching. McKay’s insults increased with anxiety, only skyrocketing with the stress of running for their lives.
Except they weren’t even running.

“Um…are we going the right way?”

It was the third time McKay had asked the same question, gaping confusedly in all directions. McKay rarely lacked confidence, never spoke it out loud when he did, and Ronon thought about giving him extra water, but they hadn’t stopped long enough to gather more and the last he’d checked, they were almost out of those tablets.

“Sergeant.”

Ronon didn’t want to listen to what Sheppard had to say. “What?”

“You need to…you need--”

He was about to tell him to shut up, damn the chain of command, when the ground underneath them fell away.

Then they were falling too.

Ronon’s fingers slipped through thick muck that became a river, his body lost to a current of rocks and twigs. It wasn’t a raging waterfall, but it was fast, and he held onto Sheppard, keeping both their heads above water.

His hip bounced against a boulder, branches slapped his face, and all the while there was no stopping the current.

“McKay!” he shouted.

“Sonofabitch!”

McKay’s curse was music over the roar of the mudslide; the three of them got spat out onto a rocky bank, the only thing keeping them from being engulfed by the river below was a mesh of vines and an embankment of fallen tree limbs and bamboo.

Ronon stared up in the rain, his whole body trapped in a vat of brown glue, a thick layer of mud covering him from head to toe.

When his brain recovered from the shock, he flung his arms about, searching for Sheppard while craning his neck to locate McKay---only to see a large man, covered only in tattoos, looming over him, a large spear leveled at his throat.

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The man was a vision out of Rodney’s worst nightmares. The Japs may have been the enemy, but at least they were a known entity. They had cities and cars and electricity and clothes, for Pete’s sake. And they may have slit your throat as soon as look at you, but they didn’t eat you when they were done. At least not that he’d ever heard of.

But this guy? This guy looked… Dear Lord, if he didn’t look hungry. He wasn’t very tall but his body was a hulking mass of mud-tattooed muscle. His face bore streaks of yellow and if there wasn’t a bone through his nose, there were feathers pierced through his ears and woven into the nest of short dreads piled on top of his head.

As Rodney’s gaze dropped lower he gulped and found himself muttering a bastardized version of the prayers his nana used to say over worn rosary beads. Around the man’s sagging stomach he wore a thin rope of hemp-like plant fiber upon which hung several dried bones. They looked ominously like human finger bones.

Naked as the day he’d been spawned from Hell, the man was more frightening than a whole squadron of Japs with handguns and bayonets.

Ronon scooted backwards, carrying Sheppard’s unconscious body with him as he tried to put his bulk between the native and the injured pilot.

Crabbing as best as he could with one hand and the medkit, Rodney inched along the embankment, his eyes never leaving the stranger with the spear. He had only made it about a foot when his back
hit something firm and unyielding. He looked up to see, oh, God, why don’t they wear clothing?

Another native, this one shorter and fatter and with a few less accessories. His stomach thankfully sagged over his… but it served as meager cover.

Rodney’s mind started racing as he thought about how a man could get so fat living on fruit and rodents and then he realized there was no way one could, which had his heart racing so fast he waited for it to stutter to a stop like a misfiring engine. At least dead he wouldn’t have to watch as they started on his limbs…

The first native (Rodney wouldn’t allow himself to think headhunter) barked out a command and five more forms emerged from the jungle. They were now completely surrounded.

Ronon growled and pulled Sheppard in tighter while his hand scrambled through the mud and foliage. His hand curled around a rock as big as a grapefruit and he lifted it in feeble warning.

Their CO stirred in the gunner’s arms and moaned as his eyes fluttered open. “Whaa? Wha’s goin’ on?” he asked dazedly.

“Just some friends dropping by,” Rodney said with false cheer. “Nice natives, right? Nice? You think they know Teyla?” he asked sideways at Ronon.

Ronon’s eyes stayed pinned on Feathers, his fingers white-knuckling the rock. And when did he lose his handgun? “Don’t think so, McKay.”

“Yeah, be too much to ask, huh?” Rodney said tiredly.

As Sheppard roused further he caught sight of their presumed captors and possible devourers. His hand went to his hip automatically, looking for the handgun that normally rode there. But its holster was not just empty but ripped and hanging, a tatter of fabric flapping in the rain.

Figures the two who could actually hit the broad side of a barn had both lost their weapons.

Rodney’s gun was still in its holster. He could feel it digging into his hip, pinned between him and the mud bank, and also, of course, on the side with his broken wrist.

Taking a firm clamp on the inside of his cheeks with his teeth, he tried to both subtly lift his ass high enough to get at his .45 and get the fingers of his bad right hand to unsnap the weapon free, all while a hundred and fifty kilos of cannibal stared at him from half a meter away.

He failed at the subtlety part, especially when a cry broke free past his chewed shut cheeks as broken bones grated against each other. But not a one of the natives even blinked.

Easing it out of its leather holder, Rodney switched the gun to his left hand and aimed it at Feathers, assuming the fancy headgear made him the chief or whatever cannibals had.

There was some murmuring from the natives but it was silenced with a sharp rebuke from Feathers. The chieftain took a step forward, towards Rodney.

“Shoot him, McKay!” Ronon hissed.

Rodney’s left hand was wavering, his position awkward and tenuous on the muddy riverbank. But he managed to keep a bead on the middle of Feathers’ bare chest.

Sheppard was so out of it he was still feeling around for his lost weapon, and it seemed the whole drama was playing out without him in the audience.
“Take the shot, McKay!”

There was no need to take his eyes off his target; he could hear the fury in Ronon’s voice.

It would be easy enough, right? Six bullets in the gun, six natives dead or dying.

But there was something in the way that Feathers never wavered in his stance, just met Rodney’s gaze, unblinkingly calm.

Rodney had never killed a man. Two years spent in this godforsaken place, and he had never been individually responsible for the death of another human being, Japanese or otherwise. Sure, he had felt the little thrill of triumph and relief when pursuing enemy planes spiraled away, leaving nothing but a trail of dark smoke behind. But he had never pulled a trigger or released a bomb. He had sat and prayed and hoped for the death of the enemy, but had never taken life himself, and he never wanted to.

How ironic that it was the whole reason why he was in Guinea in the first place.

Feathers waited him out, and must have determined on his own that the soft white man was no threat. With a wave of his hand and a few grunted words, several of his men converged on their small group while one took off silently through the jungle, barely rustling the thick foliage as he went.

“D-don’t come any closer!” Rodney shouted, waving the gun in what he hoped was a threatening manner.

But the natives completely ignored him and closed in on Ronon and Sheppard.

The gunner let out a wild cry and struggled with raising the rock while keeping a grip on their semi-conscious CO. Rodney had suspected that Ronon had a concussion, could tell from the big man’s occasional missteps and fumblings that something was wrong. And the way he held his head with closed eyes and breath held, when he thought Rodney wasn’t looking, told him all he needed to know, genius that he was. And of course there was their trip down the mountainside riding the mudslide that could have added injuries too numerous to contemplate.

Whatever it was, the hand holding the rock aloft wavered and then dropped. Ronon shook his head, as if trying to clear his vision, and he frantically pulled Sheppard in closer to his chest while clearly fighting to keep his eyes open and focused.

And still, Rodney couldn’t pull the trigger. And still Feathers held his eyes with his, a calm, almost fatherly look in them. Then the chief raised an open hand and slowly lowered it while maintaining their shared gaze. Rodney found himself echoing the native’s motion, lowering the gun as if hypnotized, though he knew he wasn’t; it was silly nonsense to start with and he was much too strong-willed to succumb so easily if it wasn’t.

But nonetheless, he followed the silent direction while desperately hoping he wasn’t consigning them all to a stew pot.

The rock was easily- too easily- taken from Ronon’s grasp. Two natives gripped the much bigger man under the armpits and raised him to his feet.

Rodney was relieved to see it was more aid than dragging at least, though they stayed flanking the gunner on each side.

The slightest sound of breaking twigs and the hiss of bodies passing through wet leaves was the only herald to the arrival of several more natives bearing two long pieces of bamboo.
Scenes from movies Rodney had seen as a child of the headhunters tying the hapless explorers onto spits and propping them up over raging fires flitted through his head and he moaned as they closed in on Sheppard’s body. But as they moved Rodney saw the bamboo part and he noted vines strung between the two sturdy trunks. It was crudely constructed travois.

They lifted the pilot onto it; Sheppard struggled in their hands only briefly before going limp and they quickly lashed him into the stretcher before heading off into the jungle. The two with Ronon didn’t prod but they waited until he stepped into place and followed the stretcher before doing the same.

Rodney looked back to see that Feathers was still staring at him. The chief gave a small nod and waited as Rodney clambered to his feet. After slipping in the mud, trying to get his feet under him and bracing himself with the hand still clutching the gun, he startled as he felt a hand slip under his arm. The fat native helped him to his feet and Rodney stuttered out a ‘thanks’ before making a decision and shoving the gun into his waistband. He swept up the medkit and joined the caravan through the jungle, destination completely unknown.

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After what seemed an interminable trek that wound through foliage so thick and lush that it blocked out most of the feeble sunlight, up a steep incline and then down a crumbling and slippery slope, along a river where large dark shapes lurked just under its waters and ominous splashing sounds greeted their encroachment, and finally along an almost discernable path of mud and foot-flattened greenery, they emerged into a small clearing at the foot of a mountain.

A community of huts, made of bamboo, branches and dried grass and held together with mud and what smelled suspiciously like excrement of some species, crouched like a fairy ring of toadstools surrounded by jungle.

A few of the natives stared at the motley crew as Feathers directed those bearing Sheppard’s litter to one of the larger huts.

Ronon was clearly on the verge of collapse; the big man’s feet were dragging and catching on every rut and root and he stumbled, about to fall, and was kept upright only with the help of his two guards.

Rodney knew how he felt.

Days now with little in the way of fresh water, no food aside from the small snake filet and the occasional fruit that Ronon had picked for them, and the pain of his broken wrist gnawing at him like a dog with an old bone was wearing him down to fumes.

He felt his own feet start to betray him, his knees weaken, at several points in their journey, with only his dubious buddy to prop him up. It felt wrong, thinking of the man who was helping him as Fatty, but since the man wore nothing else as an indicator, there was nothing else coming immediately to mind. And if the name was good enough for Fatty Arbuckle, he figured the cannibal wouldn’t mind.

Several small children, laughing and playing with a mangy dog, heedless to the pouring rain, stopped and stared with slack jaws at them. They pointed and muttered in their strange, vowel-laden language as their group passed by.

Rodney followed into the hut and allowed himself to collapse into a cross-legged half sprawl against
the hut wall, out of the way. The natives laid Sheppard out on a woven straw mat and bade Ronon lay down on another.

A few minutes later three women entered the hut.

One woman was huge, even bigger than Rodney’s friend Fatty. A straw skirt to her knees was her only covering and her massive, pendulous breasts hung onto her broad, generous belly. Her sopping wet hair was long and graying, with different colored dyed twine or yarn wrapped around tiny braids, making her look a little like Raggedy Ann with rainbow hair. Deep wrinkles ran from the corners of her eyes in the leathery skin of her face.

The other two women were a much younger with yellow, rain-streaked mud painted whorls on their arms and bellies and they had dyed some of the fronds on their grass skirts as well.

The big woman walked over to Sheppard and with assistance from one of the guards, they helped ease her slowly to her knees. She laid her hand on his cheek, then ripped open his shirt and bent to place her ear to his chest.

A few seconds later she lifted her head, her expression inscrutable. Then she clapped her hands twice and her helpers pulled small but deadly looking knives from their skirts.

“W-wait a second!” Rodney cried, lurching forward, trying to get to his feet. “What the hell are you doing?”

His gluttonous guardian put a hand to his chest and pushed him back down to sit on the floor with a silencing glare.

Rodney watched in horror as the two women walked up to the unconscious man, knives clutched with deadly purpose. Then heaved a sigh of relief that had him almost melting onto the mud floor of the hut as they used the knives to begin slitting the man’s clothing into pieces. The razor sharp blades made short work of the wet and muddy uniform, leaving him completely naked on the mat only a minute later. The older woman then took one of the knives and sliced through the fabric holding the splints around Sheppard’s mangled leg.

Without hesitation she bent over and, only an inch from his ankle, took a deep sniff. She scowled and shook her head, then turned and uttered something to the litter bearers. Two rushed over and helped her back to her feet. Rodney noticed how deferential they were to her; she was clearly someone of authority here.

Ronon had remained quiet on his mat, but his head was turned and he’d been at least trying to keep an eye on what they’d been doing with his CO. When he saw the girls approaching him with the knives he growled and sat up, waving them off but listing to the side.

The big woman grabbed Ronon’s face in her hand and pulled it to her. He glared balefully right back at her but didn’t withdraw from her grip. She stared into his eyes, then turned him roughly to each side to look at his ears. What passed for a neurological exam in deepest Guinea apparently done, she released her hold and turned away without a word.

Over to Rodney.

As the hulking woman waddled his way Rodney shrank back against the hut wall, cradling his injured arm in a protective huddle around his middle. “No, no. Uh-uh, no way you’re practicing your voodoo on me!”

The woman stopped and cocked her head. “What is this voooooodoooo?” she said in broken but
Rodney’s eyes grew wide and he found himself at a rare loss for words. “You. You…”

“I speak the English, yessir,” she confirmed with a nod. “Fathers taught me long time before.”

“You… your father taught you English?”

“My father. Your father. All our father. And Father who art in heaven, too.”

Rodney could only blink at that.

“Missionaries, McKay,” came Ronon’s tired voice. “They musta come by here years ago.”

“Oh, fathers… priests! Okay, okay… are um, any of the fathers still around?”

“Oh, nosir. Some have the blood fever, some have the spots. Some leave to talk to other children and not come back.”

“Ch-children?”

“Yessir, all Father’s children, the fathers say. They want to tell others. I tell them the Devil is with the others, they are not like us, but still they go. And they not come back,” she repeated with a sad shake of her head.

Rodney gulped back his revulsion at what he could only imagine happened to the priests who tried to preach to the Others. He was still trying to dispel the image of heads on stakes when another person entered the hut.

This one was a tiny, wizened old man. He was toothless and his cheeks sank in, leaving him looking like an apple left out in the sun. His one eye was cloudy white but the other was sharp, like the dark beady eye of a raptor. His hair was solid gray but clumped into dreadlocks with yellow mud. More yellow mud colored his close gray beard and sideburns. His only garb consisted of several strings of hemp-like plant fiber around his middle from which hung dried plants, small bones, and several small cloth pouches and a a… Rodney had only seen them in National Geographic, couldn’t remember what the anthropologists called them. But the man had a dried gourd over his privates.

He walked over to the big woman and stood on his tiptoes to rub his cheek against hers as he petted her long yarnlike hair before turning the hawk eye on Rodney.

“The fathers make him David. David was small but he slew the mighty Goliath,” she added solemnly.

Rodney took a deep breath and allowed himself a brief moment of believing this was all a nightmare, brought on by a typical rancid mess hall meal and too much rum punch before bed.

“And, what… what did the fathers make you?” he finally managed to ask politely.

“They make me Martha,” she said with the first smile Rodney had seen her offer. Her teeth were stained red, which Rodney knew was from the betel gum that the island people enjoyed. “They say Martha knew not the Father but opened her home and heart to him,” she recited proudly. “Fathers tell me I do the same for them.”

“Martha is a nice name,” Rodney said with an answering if a bit tentative smile. “I’m Rodney. I… I don’t think there’s a um, Rodney in the Bible. Sorry.”
She happily seemed unoffended by his name. She turned and waved a hand towards Sheppard.

“What did fathers make dying man?”

“D-dying? Why do you say dying? He’s not- he’s not dying,” he tried more firmly. “And his name is John. John Sheppard, and there are both Johns and shepherds in the Bible,” he added inanely.

She made a tsking noise with her mouth and murmured something to David. He got a knowing look on his face and went over to tend to the unconscious pilot.

“The shepherd’s blood has smell of death, yessir. He is hot as a stone left by the fire pit.” Then she folded her hands as a child would for bedtime prayers. “Does the shepherd know the Father?”

“Know the- does Sheppard know - you mean God? Does he believe in God?” Rodney screeched incredulously. Leaving aside the fact that he really didn’t have a clue what the pilot did or didn’t believe, the fact that she was so calmly ready to resign him to death had him apoplectic. He rose shakily to his feet, locking his knees in place and leaning heavily against the hut wall.

“No! No, he’s not ready to go to God, or whatever,” he said with a groan.

Martha nodded once and fixed Rodney with a resolute look. “If the shepherd does not know the Father, he must be given time to learn Him.” Then she turned on her heel with a grace belying her size and walked over to join David at Sheppard’s mat side.

Rodney could only look on incredulously. He turned to see Ronon had been listening to the exchange.

“Sounds like you gave her the right answer, McKay.”

Rodney let out a shuddering breath and sagged back down the wall. “It’s not like these people are going to be able to help him anyway,” he remarked morosely. “And we’re giving him time for what? We both know there’s no rescue coming; we’ll just end up three more hash marks on the missing, presumed dead scorecard.”

“McKay-”

“No, Ronon. Just... God, I’m tired.” A few still ragged breaths later he finally slumped over onto his side, curled up and fell asleep on the mud floor.

He awoke to an annoying tickle on his face. He wrinkled his nose and grimaced but the tickling just... moved. To his lip.

With a sputtered cry and his left hand batting painfully at his face, Rodney sat up and opened bleary eyes in time to see the shadow of something with way too many legs skitter off underneath the hut wall he was still curled against.

He shuddered with revulsion and made another cautious swipe at his face. Gah, but he hated bugs.

The hut was dark but for a small clay pot over near Sheppard’s mat. A pungent, herbaly smell wafted from the flame that licked out its opening.

Martha and her two helpers were hovering over his body; the big woman’s bulk blotted out
Rodney’s view of what they were doing.

Ronon was snoring on his mat. Another, larger clay pot sat next to him and Rodney caught of whiff of bile that roiled his stomach. For a change, he was just as glad it was empty.

He rolled his head about slowly, letting his eyes adjust to the darkness and trying to ease the kinks from his neck and back. With every wince, he vowed never again would he complain about his ratty old cot and thin gray linen covered pillow back at base.

As he lifted his hand to rub at a stubborn knot in his neck he paused to stare at the freshly wrapped splint that covered his right wrist. The swelling had abated somewhat and the pain had been tamped down to a sharp ache.

He licked his dry lips and tried to remember what he’d eaten that could’ve left such an acrid taste in his mouth. A vague memory of his mouth being forced open and a paste of chewed leaves made him shiver but he had to admit, he had expected to be in a hell of a lot more pain.

A loud groan issued from Ronon’s mat as the big man stirred and sat partially up, his eyes remaining clamped shut. One of the young women crept over, pulling the clay pot closer before easing him onto his side. She spoke quietly to him, as Rodney braced for the vomiting to come, but Ronon settled back down and seemed to go back to sleep.

Finally working up enough energy to climb to his knees, Rodney stiffly, painfully crabbed his way over to see what Martha and her nursemaids were doing.

He immediately regretted doing so as when he saw what was being done to the injured man.

Sheppard was still naked, but he’d been painted in swirls and symbols with various colors of mud and drying clumps of plant paste. A sheen of sweat coated him from stem to stern and his face, under his now three-day-old beard and the eggplant bruise that encompassed his nose and both eyes, glowed palely in the meager light from the pot lamp. In odd counterpoint to the ritualistic mud markings were a smudge of soot on the man’s forehead and over his heart, a crudely drawn cross in charcoal. A rosary of purple glass beads lay in the middle of his chest; it rose and fell with each slow, stuttering breath the sick man took.

But the worst part of the whole bizarre display was the squirming, writhing leeches that were latched onto the grotesquely swollen ankle and knee joints. The nasty creatures were sucking greedily and were bloated to the size of a man’s thumb.

“Oh, my God! What are you doing?” Rodney hissed. He lunged forward, thinking only of getting those things off of Sheppard.

Martha had only to reach out with one beefy arm to fend him off, almost knocking him onto his ass in the process. “Nosir,” she said with a stern shake of her head. “They suck out the bad spirits.”

“Bad spirits? What is this, the Dark Ages? Gah, why am I asking? This is more Pleistocene than fifth century.”

Even in the near dark Rodney could see the calmly puzzled stare that Martha had fixed him with. He wiped a shaky hand down his own sweat-covered face and sighed. “They are parasites, probably carrying any number of diseases and you have put them around his open wounds, Martha. Please take them off.”

At that she smiled and waved a hand. “They will be off when it is their time to be off.” Of course, just as she completed her off koan-like pronouncement one of the largest of the leeches dropped off
onto the floor of the hut. Martha’s smile broadened into a red-toothed grin as she plucked up the now only sluggishly writhing beast between two thick fingers and dropped it onto the fire pot. There was a needle thin roil of black smoke as the leech wriggled fruitlessly in the flames. A few seconds later there was a high-pitched *keening* noise and while the analytical part of Rodney’s brain (arguably the largest part) was saying it was fluids in the soft creature’s body that were heating to boiling and air was escaping as its flesh split, it sounded to the more primal part of his brain like the thing’s dying scream.

He shivered violently despite the oppressive heat. Then his gaze narrowed and he leaned over to squint in the dim light. He was clearly in the throes of a hallucinogenic drug or maybe he burned with a sky high fever of his own because it almost looked like the swelling had come down some around the breaks in Sheppard’s leg.

Maybe he really was losing it.

“Looks better, doesn’t it?”

Rodney whipped his head around, wincing at the white-hot lance of pain that ran down his neck into his shoulder blades, to see the glint of Ronon’s eyes in the firelight. The big man had rolled onto his side facing their CO and had a ringside seat to the bizarre circus going on around Sheppard.

“Sure, yeah, I guess so,” Rodney said but while shaking his head. “That and a nickel’ll get him a cup of coffee.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

With an aggrieved sigh Rodney sat back on his butt and scooched until the wall supported him once more. “It means he’ll die of his head injury or internal bleeding or blood poisoning before we ever had to worry about his leg.”

“They’re doing what they can, McKay,” Ronon replied quietly with a look dashed at their nurse.

Martha seemed utterly unconcerned with their conversation as she continued to fuss over Sheppard and her slimy black pets.

“I know they are, but somehow I don’t think mud and leeches are gonna do much for him. Maybe we should’ve let the Nips take us.”

The gunner growled, low and long.

“I’m serious, Ronon! The Nips may be evil little sonsbitches but they have modern medicine. At least Sheppard would’ve had a fighting chance!”

Ronon’s eyes narrowed. “You really think Sheppard would’ve rather been a prisoner? Maybe I’m not the only one with a head injury.” Then he rolled onto his back and draped his arm across his eyes in clear dismissal.

Dandy. The one person who was conscious and spoke more than rudimentary English was now not speaking to him.

He allowed a moment of self-pity, rubbing at the throb in his arm as he watched Martha finish up with whatever island voodoo she was performing. She must’ve been satisfied because she spoke a few words to her helpers. The two girls helped the big woman to her feet and she brushed dried mud from her wrinkly knees.
“Is that it?” Rodney asked.

Martha cocked her head. “If the shepherd lives through the night--”

“If?” he squeaked back. He heard Ronon shift on his mat and knew the big man had heard.

“The shepherd burns hot, Rodney,” the woman replied. His name sounded odd from her tongue. “The cooling mud can draw some heat but it is not enough. We have little good water left and it is for drinking. The other men, the ones you fight. They make everyone who goes for more good water dead.” She mimed shooting a gun.

Sheppard had tried to warn HQ of Teyla’s intel, that the Japanese had sewn up all the fresh water supplies on the island. When the first wave of Marines hit the beaches they would quickly find themselves without fresh water, and in this heat, it would be deadly.

Snapping his fingers as fast as his mind was working, Rodney gestured at the pot holding the still smoldering fire. “Do you have any more of those?”

Martha nodded slowly. “Many.”

“Good.” With a purpose now, Rodney felt his aches and pains fade into the background. He stood shakily and walked over to the pack he’d clung to throughout their jungle adventure. “I can make more good water, Martha.” He fumbled with holding the pack and opening it with his one good hand then pulled out the glass bottle with the remaining water purification tablet.

When he looked up one of the native girls had already returned with an earthenware container of water. The girl handed it over with a few softly spoken words.

Rodney dropped the pack and reached over for the pot of water. When the big woman seemed reluctant to give it to him he gave her the universal gimme sign with his hand.

“This water is not good, Rodney,” she said, still clinging to the pot. “Those who drink it have sickness, make muddy water from their insides and die.”

Rodney’s stomach lurched at the actually well-described symptom of dysentery. He held aloft the jar with the single little white Halazone tablet. “You have your magic, Martha, and I have mine. Only my magic, is science.” He dumped the last tablet into the pot and poked his fingers in to crush it into powder, then stirred. “See, you just oxidize a little dichloramine-T with potassium permanganate in a mildly alkaline medium, like, say, sodium carbonate and boom! Bob’s your uncle, you’ve got a chlorine salt that bleaches away all the bad stuff in the water.” He licked the water off a finger and grimaced happily at the metallic taste.

Martha crossed herself as Rodney tipped the bowl to his lips and took a small sip.

“There. A little water and Sheppard’ll perk right up,” he said with conviction in his voice only. He walked over and eased down to his knees next to the pilot. “A little help here?” he said querulously as he realized how hard it would be one handed.

One of the girls dashed a questioning look at Martha. The big woman hesitated but finally nodded. The girl joined Rodney and helped lift Sheppard’s head and shoulders while Rodney eased the pot rim to his CO’s lips.

“C’mon, Major,” he urged. “Just a little water. Sorry I don’t have rum.”

The water went into the man’s mouth but just pooled and dribbled down his cheeks.
With a sigh of defeat Rodney put the water down. “Maybe later,” he murmured while awkwardly patting the man’s shoulder. Heat radiated from his skin and Rodney noticed that the sheen of sweat had evaporated and not been replaced.

He felt a hand on his own shoulder and looked over to see Ronon had resumed his watchful position from his own mat.

“Nice try, McKay. Maybe we can get him to drink some when he wakes up.”

Rodney let his head drop to his chest. “He’s dying, Ronon,” he whispered. “And there’s not a damn thing we can do about it. Maybe if we’d stayed in the jungle, we could’ve held out until the landing. Or found a way to make it to shore. Get a signal fire going. You were right. I shouldn’t’ve let them take us… I should’ve used the gun.”

Ronon clapped him hard on the back. “If you’d shot one the rest would’ve killed us on the spot, McKay. And we’d still be stuck in the jungle and Sheppard would be dead. You did the right thing. You’re at least giving him a chance. In fact, the fat lady sent one of her men off to get help.”

“Help from whom?” Rodney asked doubtfully.

“Back at the base? I dunno. She’s really set on saving Sheppard’s life, I guess so she has time to save his soul.”

Not even enough energy left to reply, Rodney curled up on his side between the two men and closed his eyes, allowing himself a cowardly retreat into sleep.

He awoke with a start and dread heavy in his empty stomach. He was afraid to open his eyes and see Sheppard cold and dead mere inches away. But he forced them open, all at once, like ripping a bandaid off.

The hut was empty except for Rodney and the still thankfully breathing Sheppard. It was daylight, or what passed for it in monsoon season. The hiss of a steady downpour and the spatter as it pelted the roof of the hut were the only sounds.

The leeches were mercifully gone but nothing else had changed during the night. Sheppard’s chest still rose and fell in a slow and stuttery cadence and all the bizarre mud and charcoal markings were still there.

Glancing self-consciously around the empty hut, Rodney picked up the rosary beads. As his fingers caressed the smooth, cool glass an image of his mom suddenly hit him. His dad was a man of science. His mom, on the other hand, had a belief system that mixed equal parts Catholicism with the mystical. She knocked wood and fretted over broken mirrors while whispering Hail Marys and the Lord’s Prayer. She attended church on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Sundays for the whole three hour Latin mass, but Friday nights would often find her in her friend Helen’s parlor where they would gather around a ouija board with their cigarettes and old fashioned beers. The first Saturday of every month was her visit to Madame Marushka’s house. The crazy old Polish lady smelled of mothballs and cat piss but his mother would sit for an hour while the Madame laid out tarot cards on an old velvet cloth draped over her dining room table. That none of her predictions came true was never a deterrent.

He choked out a small laugh as he realized that his mom would probably really like Martha.
“You are awake, Rodney?”

Damnit, how did she move that bulk around so quietly?

Subtly dropping the beads back down on Sheppard’s chest he turned to see Martha at the door of the hut.

“Your shepherd still lives,” she said with a smile. “The Father has given him more time.”

Then she stepped into the hut and as she moved toward him Rodney realized that her oversized frame had eclipsed his view of her two helper satellites coming in behind her. One carried what looked like a rolled mat and the other balanced two of the ubiquitous clay pots in her hands.

The three women bustled over to where Sheppard lay and went about rolling him onto his side, pulling free the now soiled mat he’d lain on and putting down a clean one. A lid was removed from the first pot and the hut filled with the stench of all manner of garbage rotting in the summer heat.

Putting a sleeve to his nose Rodney gagged. “Dear God, what is that?”

“It is durian fruit,” Martha replied as she dug her fingers into the pot. She lifted free a clot of orange paste and showed it to Rodney. “The Father makes the durian for us. To eat, to cool the blood, to make good babies. *Ketibaan durian runtuh.* Your giant friend went out with David and the others and they come back with many fruit. It is very good luck, to find a fallen durian. It means Father wants the shepherd to live.”

Rodney watched in horror as one of the girls tilted Sheppard’s head up and Martha began wiping the gunk on his lips and gums.

Rodney held his breath, waiting for the gagging and vomiting to come but could only gape in awe as he saw Sheppard’s tongue move in his mouth, then sneak out to lick some of the orange paste.

“See?” Martha exclaimed brightly. “Come, Rodney. You can feed the shepherd.”

“Wha? What, who me?” Rodney stammered. “I … I don’t…” but he reluctantly walked over and eased creakily down next to Sheppard’s mat. He eyed the pot of durian with a grimace. The air was so heavy with humidity it barely moved and the stench was even more overpowering closer up.

With a shudder of revulsion, he dug two fingers in and tentatively spooned some paste into Sheppard’s mouth. There was even more of a reaction this time, and it appeared as if the major was actually enjoying the flavor.

Curious, Rodney lifted a finger towards his own mouth but the smell was too strong. He pulled in a deep breath and touched the paste to his lips, then took the briefest of tastes.

Seconds later he was shoveling more of the delicious fruit into his mouth. It was creamy, nutty, like an almond and peach flavored custard.

“See?” Martha said, clearly pleased. He scooped up another two fingers then paused with the realization that he was temporarily forgetting his nursing duty. So he scraped some of it back in the bowl, then dabbed a little bit more in the now stirring man’s mouth.

This time Sheppard actually seemed to smack his lips and then Rodney saw him swallow.

Despite the seeming miracle brought about by the stinky fruit, Rodney knew that what Sheppard really needed was water. He hadn’t had a drop to drink in almost a day and any water left in his
system had long been sweated or pissed away while he lay unconscious.

“Do you still have the water I made last night?” Rodney asked.

“Only a little bit,” Martha said sadly. “We gave some to the giant and some to you last night.”

Oh. That would explain why he wasn’t as shaky this morning.

“Thank you, for that, and I’ll take whatever we have. For Sheppard, of course. And I really hate to ask this, but… I have this … condition. It’s called hypogly— you know what? I need food. I, I know it sounds selfish but it is a real problem and—”

Martha just stared at him as he gibbered on and he would swear he saw her eyebrow rise in a rather Sheppardly manner. But she nodded and turned to the girl bearing the other pot. “My daughter, Miriam, can get something for you to eat.”

“Oh. Miriam, that’s a nice name,” Rodney muttered while averting his eyes as she leaned over to give the pot to her mother. In the daylight the girls’ state of undress was a little more glaring and a lot more disconcerting. And thinking of…

“Also, could… you... Could you get something to um,” he waved his hands in a vague gesture in front of him. “A cover for the shepherd- for Sheppard, I mean.”

Martha scowled and shook her head as she handed Rodney the remaining water. “The shepherd is already too hot. He needs no warmth.”

Rodney sighed and scratched the back of his head in thought. Then he brightened. “You know the story of Adam and Eve?”

“Oh yesir,” Martha beamed. “It was one of the first the fathers teach to us.”

“Good, good. So, um, you remember, after uh, Eve bit the apple? Do you remember what happens next?”

He expression darkened but she nodded. Then the proverbial light bulb appeared over her head and she grinned, showing all of her betel-stained teeth. “Ohsir, yesir. The fathers tell us why they read this story. For first moon time they stay here they are always pink in the face and averted their eyes. Then they tell us why.”

“Yes, that’s right. So could you… do something… for Sheppard?”

She spoke a few words to the still as yet unnamed girl who left the hut and returned a minute later, dripping wet and holding a broad banana leaf.

She handed it to Rodney, who took it with a muttered, “Thanks, that’s awfully… literal of you.” He laid it strategically in place then sat back on his heels.

“Okay, Major, this time I mean business. You need to drink something.” He slowly eased Sheppard’s head up into his lap and tapped his chin. “C’mon, wake up enough for some water and you can have all the stinky fruit you want.”

He was rewarded with a soft moan as Sheppard shifted his head towards the sound of Rodney’s voice.

“There you go, Major.” He shook the man’s shoulder a little and felt relief wash over him as he saw
Sheppard’s eyes try to open. His lids were swollen and he only managed slivers, but Rodney could see they were fixed on him.

“Mm-kay?”

“Yeah, it’s me, Major. Sorry it’s not Teyla but you’re stuck with me.”

“Whrrr… whaa…”

“Water first, then questions. And swallow this time.” With the semi-conscious man’s head propped against his chest, Rodney lifted the pot awkwardly with his good left hand and tipped it up to Sheppard’s mouth. The first bit dribbled down his chin, running rivulets through the mud drawings on his chest but with a little patience, that Rodney was always told he never had, he managed to get Sheppard to swallow a few gulps.

By the time he was done there was only a little chalky white sediment left at the bottom, all that remained of the last of their water purification tablets.

When he was sure that Sheppard had swallowed it all down he let the man lay back down on his mat, fighting with himself not to just push the major away. Still early in the morning and it had to be a hundred and ten in the small humid hut. And Sheppard felt hotter than that.

“R-rodney?”

“We’ve already established that, Major. Good to see your brain hasn’t been completely boiled,” he muttered.

“Where are we? Is this…. hospital?”

“Do you see any pretty nurses or dull grey sheets?” Then he sighed, his attempt at banter completely lost on his dazed CO. “No, we’re um… actually I’m not really sure where we are. Biak, still. Some uh, nice people found us. See?” He pointed over to where Martha still sat, beaming with delight as she watched them.

Sheppard turned his head and squinted through his swollen lids at her.

“That’s Martha. Martha, this is Major John Sheppard.”

“I am pleased to meet you, shepherd,” she intoned in a clearly taught manner.

“M Ma’am,” Sheppard managed to squeak out while he stared at her. It was funny, but Rodney had already almost gotten used to the big woman’s mostly naked form and yarn hair. But he could see where the pilot might be convinced it was a fever-induced hallucination.

“Do you know the Father?” Martha asked solemnly.

“He’s not ready to answer that question!” Rodney hurriedly broke in. “The fever makes him addlepated.”

And maybe it wasn’t too far from the truth.

“McKay?”

“Yes, Major. We have established that,” he answered with a sigh.

“Whr are we?”
“A village. On Biak. In the middle of the godforsaken South Pacific. I, I don’t know.” He swiped sweat from his brow and sagged tiredly. Because the leg and septic infection wasn’t enough, the smack of his face on the control panel of the Havoc had apparently, but rather unsurprisingly, left the pilot concussed, at least, as well.

“Are you… are you okay, McKay?”

Rodney looked down to see that Sheppard was looking at him, his brow wrinkled with concern.

“Me? Oh, great. I’m dandy. Peachy keen. Broken arm, starved and thirsty, and -” he stuttered to a stop as he glanced down to see Sheppard’s hand balled into a white-knuckled fist and he was shaking.

His cracked wrist throbbed like a rotten tooth; he couldn’t imagine what a leg that looked like Sheppard’s must feel like.

“Martha, do you have any more of that… plant.. Stuff. The stuff you gave me that made my arm feel better?”

“The dawakawa?”

“Sure, yeah, um, the green plant paste you gave me last night. The dawa-dawa?” he echoed, the word as strange on his tongue as the taste had been. “Can you get some of that for the major?”

The big woman nodded and levered herself painstakingly to her feet. “Miriam will bring food and medicine.”

“Where’s Ronon?” Sheppard asked suddenly.

Yeah, where was their gunner? “Martha, do you know where Ronon - the giant man is?”

“He has gone off with my sons to find water. The giant said he was not afraid of the Japanese men who guard it.”

The pilot groaned and shook his head restlessly. Rodney fought the desire to do the same. The big lunkhead had to play hero.

Martha gazed for a moment at Sheppard, then met Rodney’s eyes. “You should pray for the shepherd, Rodney.”

Rodney paled and colored at the same time. “Yeah, I’ll get right on that. Thanks.”

She nodded her acceptance, possibly not getting his sarcasm, and walked out of the hut into the rain.

Leaving Rodney alone with a dying man.
The morning and afternoon passed at a mercillessly slow pace. Sheppard was given some of the plant paste and soon after his fists and jaw unclenched and he fell back into a quiet stupor. Conversation was limited to him waking, bleary and confused, asking where they were again and again. Rodney managed to get him to drink some water he caught in the empty pot, hoping the rainwater would be clean enough for drinking but swishing it until the remaining dregs of Halazone dissolved for good measure.

Martha’s daughters, Miriam and the other he learned was Zipporah, came in infrequently to bring food. He mushed the bananas into tiny, slimy balls and got Sheppard to eat some of it while he gnawed on a breadfruit and dried meat of unknown (not that he really wanted to know) derivation.
The smell in the dank hut was rancid; body odor and urine and dried blood overlay the subtle stench of infection from Sheppard’s leg. Ominous red lines had begun streaking up his calf from his ankle.

And the rain never let up.

Rodney stayed propped up against the wall but still close to his CO. As the day dragged on he allowed his chin to drop to his chest and he would doze until Sheppard moaned or cried out. Rodney would hurry over with answers and reassurances, and coax some more rainwater between his trembling cracked lips, then collapse back against his wall as Sheppard would drop back to sleep.

Evening came with only a darkening of the gray outside. Ronon returned with a bullet graze on his arm but no water. The gunner’s mood was dark and threatening as the storm clouds overhead. But he didn’t say a word, just dropped down, cross-legged, on their CO’s other side and rested his chin in his hands, his elbows on his knees as he kept silent watch.

Martha came back late with Feathers and Fatty, who turned out to be her sons, Daniel and Jacob. They had different colors of mud held in clam shells and coconut rinds and refreshed the symbols painted on Sheppard’s body where they had smudged or rubbed off. They spoke softly over his body and Rodney caught a few words that made him realize they were praying.

He also didn’t fail to notice the way they pointed at the streaks of infection on Sheppard’s leg and murmured amongst themselves over it.

Late that night, Rodney was awakened by something. He rushed over to Sheppard’s side but the man was still asleep or in a deep stupor.

Rodney wiped a shaky hand over his face as he felt his heart drumming in his chest. Then he heard what had woken him up. There was a subtle booming off in the distance, almost covered by the susurrus of rain outside. But seconds later the ground shook beneath him.

“The bombing’s begun.”

He looked over to see Ronon’s eyes shining in the dark.

“Of course it has,” Rodney moaned. “Because we didn’t have enough to worry about.”

“It’s miles away from us, McKay,” Ronon said quietly. He laid back down and knitted his fingers behind his head. “It’s a good thing, actually.”

“What?” Rodney hissed. “How is being trapped on an island being bombed a good thing?”

“Because first off, it means there’s gonna be American troops on the island. And secondly, it means I can take another crack at getting some water tomorrow. Nips’ll be running for the caves under all that shelling. Means the water won’t be guarded. Or at least as not as heavily,” he added as he glanced at the torn piece of his shirt tied around his bullet wound.

Sheppard stirred and let out a low moan then settled back into sleep.

Ronon looked pointedly at their CO and met Rodney’s eyes. “Maybe I should skip the water and just go for help.”

Rodney didn’t reply, just curled up on his side and tried not to panic at the thought of another day trapped inside the hut with his dying friend.
Whatever was in the plants and other mumbo jumbo that Martha and her family had been using, it was enough to keep Sheppard breathing into another day.

This time Rodney was awake before Ronon was. The bombing had continued through the night and every tremor had Rodney bolting awake, his heart pounding as he waited, counting like he had through thunderstorms as a kid, to see if the bombing was getting any closer. He’d finally gotten so wired on adrenaline, around sunrise he gave up trying and convinced himself to get some work done before the heat really set in the next morning.

The rain stopped, for the first time in a week, when Ronon sat up abruptly on his mat. Rodney himself had started as the silence after the deluge was ironically almost deafening.

Before the gunner could voice it Rodney said, “He’s still alive.”

Ronon swallowed roughly and nodded. “Good.”

“You uh, still planning on going out again today?”

“Youp.” Ronon wiped his face and stretched, then noticed the uncomfortable silence that had followed his answer. “Why?”

“I think you should stay,” Rodney said with only the slightest of hesitation.

“’s that an order, sir?”

“Do I have to make it one?”

The big man showed no defiance on his face; in fact were there to be a description for the normally stoic man’s expression it would be… much like the one Rodney was probably wearing right now. Fear. Desperation. Panic at being forced to watch a man, a friend, dying by literal centimeters as the infection crept up his leg.

Rodney couldn’t bring himself to force the man to stay. And maybe some of their fabled luck, woefully unseen these last several days, would make an appearance and Ronon could find help and get them rescued.

The word ‘go’ had barely finished leaving his mouth before the big man was vaulting to his feet, hovering only a second at the doorway to glance back at Sheppard and then meet eyes with Rodney. “I’ll bring back help,” he said, then slipped off into the early morning light.

Martha and her odd brood came in a short time later, the one girl (Rodney thought it was Miriam) carrying a basket of fruit and the other a pot of what Rodney thought was boiled potatoes but turned out to be something they called taro tru.

Feathers (he just didn’t look much like a Daniel) and Fatty (ditto for Jacob) bore massive pots of water.

Martha caught him staring and shook her head. “This is from the slow part of the river, where it rests on its journey down the mountain. It is not for drink, only to wash and cool the shepherd.”
So Rodney contented himself with some bananas and even tried gnawing on a lump of the taro stuff. It tasted pretty much how it looked, but the pit in his stomach didn’t much care… potayto, potahto….let’s call the whole thing off…

He stepped outside and allowed himself to call it stretching his legs, taking in some fresh air and enjoying the first merely horrifically humid day in a week. Certainly not avoiding watching as his commanding officer was manhandled through what passed for an outback sponge bath.

For the first time he was actually able to see more of the layout of the tiny grouping of huts. They were laid out roughly in a spoke and hub pattern, smaller huts like the one they were sharing circled a much larger central hut. The children were out with their dog, enjoying the break in the rain, and they splashed about in the puddles as only kids do.

Several women were gathered around a fallen log, pounding out what looked like giant lumpy pancakes over it as they chatted away.

Rodney was struck by how a scene could be so foreign and yet so… provincial.

No longer hampered by the heavy rain, the bugs were already out in force. Rodney slapped at stings on his neck, then pulled out his damp, mildewy handkerchief to mop his already sweat-covered face. He almost missed the rain.

After waiting what he thought a sufficient amount of time for Sheppard’s flock to be done with his ministrations, he dove back into the cover of the hut, chased by a swarm of tiny black flies.

He had timed it well. Sheppard looked… cleaner. At least he did for a few seconds as Martha and her girls began painting him once more with mud and charcoal. The rosary was back in its familiar nest in the middle of Sheppard’s chest. And thankfully, the banana leaf was back in place.

Martha looked up at his entrance and smiled. “The shepherd is awake. He asks for you. I asked him if he knew the Father…”

Oh, God… literally.

“…He said he knew many fathers, some better than others. I have offered to teach him of Our Father who art in heaven…”

Rodney groaned and rubbed at his aching arm. It was purely reflex, the pain was particularly bad, probably due to the lack of sleep and water and palatable food and the lovely green plant paste that he’d actually come to look forward to in all its nastiness.

But his actions served to distract Martha from her impending sermon. She frowned and looked at his arm. “David is making more of the dawadawa. You would like?”

“Oh, I would like,” Rodney replied eagerly. Then he looked at the still stirring man on the mat and paused. “Is there… is there enough to share with Sheppard?”

“Oh, yesir. It grows most plentifully around our home. But only David can make. David is puri puri… a sorceror. The Father works through him when he makes medicine. Very powerful magic.”

Rodney just blinked at her pronouncement of the great and powerful David, a man barely taller than the niece his sister sent pictures of.

“Here.” Her daughters helped her to her feet. “You sit with your friend. Eat. I will come back with medicine.”
Rodney lowered himself to the floor next to his CO and waited while the man fixed his wandering eyes on him. His gaze was bleary but had more clarity than it had the previous night. Plants and mud, or maybe finally getting some food and water had perked him up measurably.

“Hey,” Rodney started out lamely, at a loss as to what to say. How are you feeling just didn’t seem all that wise a question to start with.

“McKay? We still on Biak?”

“I wish I could say you slept though our rescue but sadly, we are still on Biak.”

“Whr’s Ronon?”

“Oh, he’s around. Probably flirting with one of the pretty native girls.”

Sheppard fixed him with a muzzy but still heated glare. “Where. Is. He?”

“He went to get help. The raid started last night. He figured our troops would be on the ground today.”

Sheppard tried feebly to rise to his elbows.

Rodney waved his hands in what turned out to be a needless gesture as Sheppard collapsed back after only the briefest of attempts.

“Just stay laying down! Uh, please, Major, sir,” he quickly added at the glare that earned him. “You’ve been unconscious for the better part of two days, living on nothing but banana pap and Halazone-flavored rainwater.”

Sheppard closed his eyes and lay back, ran his tongue over his dry, cracked lips and grimaced. “That explains the taste.” Then he opened one eye and fixed it on Rodney. “They feeding you? You tell ‘em about the--”

“Hypoglycemia? Yes, and I offered a dissertation on the pancreas and the cyclical nature of blood sugar levels and they fed me bananas and cold potato things which, actually, now I think on it, were ideal choices as they both contain complex carbohydrates. And yes, before you ask, they are feeding Ronon as well.”

He sat back on his heels and smiled. “Martha and her family have been taking very good care of all of us, Major. In fact, I may have Beckett come back and learn a few of her tricks.”

“I’d take some a Beckett’s good stuff right now,” Sheppard moaned.

Rodney paled and the smile dropped from his face. “Sorry, I know. Martha has some stuff that seems to get you through, but no… it’s nowhere near as good. I think it’s probably like aspirin… it’s a plant paste, probably contains salicylates like willow bark, which is where Bayer first… sorry. Um, we… we have one more ampule of morphine. I could maybe split it… Unless…” he swallowed and noticed the rigidity of Sheppard’s form on the thin mat. “Unless you need the whole thing now.”

True to form, his stubborn CO just shook his head shortly. “I’ll wait for the jungle aspirin. What did the raid sound like?”

Rodney recognized a change of topic when he heard one, was used to them from his year long acquaintance with his reticent CO. He sighed but answered. “It sounded like bombs. Lots of bombs. But Ronon said they were miles away.”
“Wonder if Lorne got any intel back.”

Ah. He knew where this was leading. They hadn’t completed their mission, but the raid had gone on anyway, possibly without their badly needed information.

“I’m sure he did,” Rodney replied smoothly. “Besides, Major, you know they wouldn’t have stopped the landing, no matter what intel we supplied them with. You told O’Neill what Teyla told you. He wired it up the chain of command and nothing changed. Because what MacArthur wants…”

“MacArthur gets,” Sheppard sighed. “They’ll be lambs to slaughter, McKay,” he whispered.

“If that’s so, it’ll be no fault of yours or ours,” Rodney spat out. “Japan started this whole mess, blame them! Germany started it before them, blame Hitler! Blame Roosevelt and Churchill and, and …”

“Alright, Rodney. I get the picture.”

“You uh, you want something to eat?”

“Nah. ‘m good. Thanks. You eat.”

Rodney would have believed the man was drifting to sleep, his eyes closed in silent repose on the mat. But Sheppard’s hands were balled into tight fists at his side and he was shaking; with fever or fear or anger… Rodney had never been one to read others’ emotions well, but he figured it was probably a combination of all the above and then some.

Thankfully, Martha and David returned a short time later, the little old man bearing an earthenware bowl of the promised painkiller. They managed to coax Sheppard into taking a generous mouthful and gave him some water from their drinking stores. After half an hour his fists uncurled and though still silent, he looked a little more at ease on his mat.

Martha caught Rodney’s eye and gestured him to follow her and David out of the hut.

The afternoon heat had built up, but at least it had cleared away some of the bugs, and looked to be working on drying up the muddy puddles.

Rodney watched as the odd couple exchanged loaded looks, then David spoke, for the first time that Rodney could recall. His lack of teeth gave him a weird, whistling lisp.

“The shepherd is very sick.”

Rodney nodded, “I know, but he’s doing better, so thank you. Whatever you’re giving him really seems to be doing the trick.”

“Nosir,” David said solemnly. “I make his pain better, but he is very sick. The blood poison, it is here,” he said tapping his knee. “When it reaches his manhood,” and at that the little man made a completely unneeded gesture next to his gourd covered groin, “he will die. We must take the leg.”

“Take- take the leg?” Rodney said, way too loudly he realized. “Take the leg?” he repeated in a harsh whisper. “No, no way. You can’t do that here. You can’t do that, period. He’ll die!”

Martha put her meaty hand on his arm and squeezed. “David tells truth. We have seen it, many times. But David has big power, power of the Father and the magic. He can save the shepherd but only if we take the leg.”
“Look, I appreciate what you’re doing here, I really do. I mean, honestly, you’ve kept him alive longer than I thought possible, and you and your family have been great, just aces. The fruit and the plant stuff and the… mud. But there? The real world? He swept his hand in a giant circle. Out there it’s almost halfway through the twentieth century. And we have penicillin and, and, IV’s, and, and sterile operating theaters. Do you even understand what a germ is? Have you heard of Joseph Lister?”

Martha’s soft brown eyes just watched him calmly throughout his tirade. Her lack of response deflated him and left him physically and mentally sagging.

“If you ‘take his leg’ in these conditions, he’ll just wind up dying anyway. So why put him through it?” he asked in a voice barely above a whisper.

The big Papuan woman appeared to consider his question. Then she brightened and shouted something in her native language. Another woman, only slightly thinner and younger popped her head out of a nearby hut; Rodney was struck by how the scene could’ve been transplanted to his neighborhood in the Falls.

A few words were quickly exchanged and then the second woman bellowed for someone else. Word went down the New Guinea version of Ma Bell, down the line of huts. From the fifth hut emerged a tall, strapping man. His gourd was long and curled and the feathers in his headdress plumed out in a riot of reds and golds.

And he was on a primitive pair of crutches.

He ambled over, gracefully maneuvering through the sloppy mud. As he neared Rodney saw why Martha had beckoned him. He had one leg. The other had been severed at the knee and ended in a scar covered stump.

“This is Jonah,” she said proudly. “He was one of our best hunters. The evil ones planted thunder in the ground and during a hunt he stepped on it.” She made an explosive gesture with her hands. “His leg was too badly damaged to save, so David took it and saved his life. Now Jonah is a teacher for the boys coming of age for their own hunts.”

That would explain the half dozen little heads stuck out of the tent Jonah had left, staring wide-eyed and giggling. One of the boys was bold enough to fully leave the hut and the others laughed and tried to jostle each other into joining the brave one. So apparently Guinean classrooms were the same as any other once the teacher was called away.

“Okay, Martha. Message received, loud and clear. But, I think it best that I talk to him about it. Um,” he rubbed listlessly at his arm and tamped down on thoughts of what it would feel like to have his own limb hacked off. “How long until… You know.”

“It is a job best done while the shepherd still has strength left. We will make preparations and wait on your decision.”

Rodney nodded and took a deep breath, steeled himself to go back in and tell his CO that a headhunter wanted to chop off his leg. And Rodney agreed with the idea.
he hadn’t been chewing on the local *galanga*, a root that the troops had quickly discovered through the fuzzies that when chewed gave them a buzzy, hallucinogenic high.

As the realization sank into his bruised melon head, Sheppard settled and chewed on a scabby lip. Then he rolled his head slowly on the mat. “No way, McKay. Just…. Just tell ‘em thanks but no thanks.”

“Major, I believe them. Do you understand what it means to say no?”

His CO managed to fix his roaming eye on his lieutenant. “I. Understand.”

“You can’t!” Rodney fumed. “You’re the great and powerful John Sheppard, hero of the Pacific, killer of seven Zeros in one blow, breaker of hearts in every port. And you’re just gonna lay there and die on a filthy mat in the middle of the jungle?”

Sheppard paled but scowled angrily. “If that’s what it means, then yeah, Lieutenant, that’s what it means.” He sucked in a breath and shuddered hard, his fists balling once more at his sides.


“They can’t save *all* of me, McKay. So you may as well just go and let me die on my filthy mat in peace.” Then Sheppard closed his eyes and continued to breathe deeply and raggedly in silence.

“What? Is that what this is about? Of all the…” Rodney felt heat rise to his already sweat-covered face. “It’s a leg, Sheppard! Once we get back they can fit you with a new artificial leg.”

“Yeah, and then what, McKay?”

“What do you mean, then what? You LIVE. You go home with the rest of us and find a Mrs. Major Sheppard and make little Sheppards. Get a dog and a job and pay a mortgage. Normal things.”

“I’m a pilot, McKay. That’s all I am.”

“No, that’s what you do,” Rodney spat back. “What you are is a headstrong, stubborn ass.” He paused and smiled. “Sir.”

“That’s what I do then,” Sheppard bit back. “And what I can’t do if I don’t have both legs.”

Rodney waved an aha! finger in the air, oblivious to the fact that Sheppard still wasn’t looking at him. “Douglas Bader.”

“Who?”

“Douglas Bader. RAF. Lost both legs in the 30’s, plane crash while performing some dunderheaded stunt, much like the kind I’m sure you loved to do. He’s out there now, over Europe, giving Hitler’s demon spawn all kinds of Hell in the air.”

That got a response. Sheppard cracked one eye back open and stared at him. “Are you serious?”

“Absolutely,” Rodney affirmed. “Cross my heart and hope to not die in the armpit of the world. Please. Trust me. This needs to happen. Do you trust me?”

His CO gazed back evenly at him for a long heartbeat. Then he closed his eyes and swallowed roughly. “You’re my navigator, Rodney. I’ve always trusted you to get me home.”

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The hours after his conversation with his CO passed long and painful for Rodney. A great deal of that pain was witnessing Sheppard’s obvious growing agony. The *dawadawa* was clearly no longer able to even put a dent in what must have been excruciating pain in the man’s mangled leg.

The brief respite they had from the rain ceased at noontime, the hottest part of the day. The hut was a reeking sauna that Rodney couldn’t escape from. He swatted aimlessly at swarming black flies, barely even flinching at their tiny stings and trying not to think on all the diseases they carried.

They particularly liked the blood soaked mud and fabric patch on Sheppard’s ankle, gorging in numbers so great they were almost a solid teeming black mass. The sight made Rodney nauseous and he fought mightily to keep his taro and banana breakfast where it belonged. In a rock hard lump in his stomach. Mercifully, the conversation had been more than the pilot’s weakened constitution could bear and he’d drifted off into a fitful sleep, oblivious to his tiny feasting visitors.

So Rodney watched out the hut’s opening as the natives began their ‘preparations.’ Men and women carrying wood and earthen pots and trays laden with fruits and tubers filed in and out of the largest hut in the center of the village.

But keen in the back of Rodney’s head was the realization that Sheppard had never actually said that he agreed to or wanted the butchering that Martha insisted was needed. Implicit in his statement was that he was relying on Rodney to make the decision for him.

It may have been the only time the pilot had ever shown fear.

And who could blame the man? Sick, in horrible pain, confronted with — with options too ghastly to even try to imagine. Options that would leave him crippled for life… or mean he watch his body continue to sicken and fail as the rot continued its insidious march… and there was always a third scenario, one that niggled at the back of Rodney’s head that said they would put the man through unfathomable agony and have him bleed out or have the infection already established a foothold beyond stopping.

As late afternoon finally crawled in, the smell of wood smoke and flowers began to drift over through the heavy air from the big hut. Miriam came by with food that Rodney ignored but the black flies loved; a little later Zipporah showed up with a strange package.

She laid it at Rodney’s feet, roughly square and wrapped several times over in a tanned animal skin. She smiled shyly, then said, in the first English Rodney had heard her speak, “Mama said this is … to … help you and the shepherd.”

Rodney was briefly stunned by the pronouncement, but as the girl slipped back out of the hut he began unwrapping the package with one shaky hand, his heart racing with anticipation as his brain flipped through all the possible things that could help them. A radio, left behind by one of the missionaries, or a box of penicillin? As he fumbled with the heavy skin he laughed almost hysterically. A time machine, to take them back to before the fateful mission or even back to home and America and they could warn the government about Pearl Harbor or… he’d always thought that Einstein was wrong, that time could be changed, that great bridges between the stars could be breached with…

Then he did choke out an actual laugh as the final piece of skin was parted to reveal a very worn leather bound Bible.

He allowed the manic burst, fed it with all his misery and disappointment and fear. Then he wiped away the sweat mixed with hot tears from his cheeks and tossed the book as far away as he could.
The sky was finally darkening, Ronon still hadn’t returned, and Martha would be coming soon for his decision. Rodney had never felt more alone or scared in his whole life.

By the time Martha came to him, Rodney had settled on his decision. Which was to not settle on a decision. The longer Ronon was gone, the more Rodney’s fantasies took hold, nurtured with his growing desperation. The gunner was returning with help, a whole platoon of the United States’ finest. They had blasted away the last of the Japs and Ronon was right now leading a team with a corpsman. No, a doctor. A field surgeon, maybe even MacArthur’s private physician. And they would come with a full complement of antibiotics and morphine and, and, they would radio in one of those fancy new helicopters that Sikorsky had produced. It would land in the middle of the village and sweep them all back to clean sheets and painkillers and the creamed chipped beef Rodney’d been oddly craving. And Sheppard would keep his leg and the war would end and Rodney could go back to his lab and his coffee and dismiss all this as a horrid nightmare.

So he waved Martha away and told her with bold certainty that Ronon was sure to arrive at any minute with help and they could just keep their voodoo Christian magic to themselves.

The big woman looked at him with great sadness in her eyes, but she nodded, went over and picked up the Bible and turned to leave the tent.

Without looking back she paused and said, “I will pray for the shepherd. And for you, Rodney.” She folded her bulk protectively over the book and walked back out into the rainy night.

Rodney snorted dismissively. Then hunkered back down near the doorway and peered out into the inky blackness, waiting for their rescue.

The long night that followed badly shook his resolve. Sheppard’s fever spiked high and fast, and Rodney was kept busy running outside to dunk his emptied food bowl into the muddy rainwater and trying desperately to cool his CO’s burning flesh.

As if the rain wasn’t enough, a full-fledged thunderstorm blew in. The walls of the hut swayed in the strong winds and the pitch black night would whiten with lightning bolts so close Rodney could swear he heard the electric shriek as they rent the sky. The crack of thunder followed so immediately it was almost simultaneous with the bursts of light.

Sheppard moaned and tossed in his fever and Rodney found himself muttering curses, damning everyone. Ronon for abandoning him and probably getting himself killed out in the jungle, Martha for her pious reserve and certainty that God could solve everything. Sheppard for getting hurt and not getting better and most of all his cowardice in leaving the damned decision up to Rodney.

And then he cursed himself, for not knowing how to fix things, for not having figured out a way to save them all and get them home in one piece. It was the only goddamned job he had, and he was failing. Failing them all, but mostly failing one of the few men he actually considered a friend.

Then, as if maybe there really was a big guy upstairs, laughing it up most likely, there was a lightning strike so close that Rodney felt the electric charge run through his body, calling every hair on his body to attention just as the world went white and the explosive boom shook the ground.

His heart hadn’t even had time to pick up its frantic beat when another jolt shook him.

“That was close.”
He whirled around to see a dripping, mud-covered, blood-spattered Ronon filling the doorway. He sloshed in a few feet then collapsed into a heap on the floor of the hut.

Rodney immediately began to head over but the big man waved him away where he sat, breathing heavily. He wiped water from his eyes and squeezed out his short dreads, flinging raindrops away from his hands.

He tried to give the man some time to gather himself, but Rodney was too anxious. “Did you find help? What did you see? Where did you go? Are you alright?”

Ronon leaned back tiredly on his hands. “Got close. Real close. I was up on a ridge, and I saw some of our guys. Infantry. They had a couple howitzers, they were putting up a good fight.”

“And?”

The gunner shook his head. “Japs were everywhere, McKay. They were completely outnumbered. The Japs managed to swarm into the one bunker, took over the howitzer. They turned it back on our boys. It… it was a massacre, Rodney. They never had a chance.”

Then he growled and pounded the floor with a fist. “Sheppard told them it was foolish! We knew there were too goddamned many of them!”

Then he sighed and looked over at their CO. “How’s he doing?”

“Not good. His fever spiked. I’ve been doing what I can but… Ronon, they want to take his leg.”

“What do you mean? Who wants to- you mean they want to cut his leg off?”

“Martha and David,” Rodney confirmed grimly. “They say it’s his only chance of survival.”

“Yeah? And what does Sheppard think?”

“I think you can gather how he answered.”

Ronon shook his head angrily. “I’ll head back out in the morning. I’ll try a different route. I’ll get help, Rodney. No way they’re taking his leg.”

“He doesn’t have time for that,” Rodney replied quietly. “And now he’s so out of it… it’s up to me to decide. I’m…” He straightened a little. “I’m ranking officer and his wingman. He’s getting worse, Ronon. I think we should let them do it.”

“You’re gonna decide to make the man a cripple?” Ronon hissed back.

“You think I want this? You think I like having to make a decision like this? To have his life and literal limb on my conscience?” Then he sighed. “I’m a genius.”

Ronon scowled. “Yeah, so I’ve heard.”

“No, I mean, I’m really a genius,” Rodney repeated.

“Yeah? That’s so, what are you doing here when you should be doing thinky things at some college or laboratory?”

“Actually, that’s where I was, before the war. I was at MIT, working with Loony Loomis in the Rad Lab. That’s the radiation lab. We had a good run there; I helped develop the radar system we’re using right now, as a matter of fact, although I take no credit for the half-assed way they’ve set up the
towers or the way -- anyway, I hooked up with Lawrence and moved out to Berkeley. I was working on the cyclotron, we were making real headway and I was considered something of a rising star at my young age, especially my work on wormhole theory. Then at a party I was introduced to J Robert himself."

“Oppenheimer?” Ronon filled in, disbelief clear in his voice.

“Ol’ Oppie himself, yup. I knew I’d met a kindred spirit when I overheard him say ‘I need physics more than friends’.” Then Rodney smiled sadly. “At least I thought so at the time. To sum up, I joined his team and we began…” He paused and debated a moment, then decided to hell with national security if he couldn’t share it with a lowly gunner or risk a feather-wearing cannibal overhearing. “We were laying the groundwork for an atomic bomb. The bomb to end all bombs.

Then one day I was talking with Feynman. His parents were Jewish, came over from Russia or Poland or somewhere. And they’d had word from the homeland that Jews were being taken from their homes, never to return. Hitler had just started his shenanigans apparently. Feynman was a screwy kid, scrawny and mild-mannered. Real milquetoast. But he got all fired up, said he’d love to see Hitler’s ugly mug when they drop the bomb over Berlin. And that’s when it hit me. This was a real bomb- a nuclear bomb, that could kill literally millions of people. Just one! I have trouble killing spiders, though granted, not that much, but I couldn’t have that kind of life or death power. I’m not that guy,” he finished lamely.

“So I packed up, went home and worked at Bell Aircraft back in Buffalo until the war started. I got drafted and here I am.”

He returned back to Sheppard’s side and scooped up a handful of murky water and poured it gently over his CO’s head. “I don’t want to make this decision, Ronon. I have to.”

----------------------------------------------------------------------

Ronon agreed to take over caring for Sheppard while Rodney slept. When he awoke at daybreak, he cracked his eyes open with dread, but Sheppard was still alive and had even woken up enough to talk with Ronon.

Rodney knew that today would be the day. He would tell Martha to carry on with the amputation. Trying to postpone the inevitable, he remained curled up on the ground, and watched through slitted eyes as Ronon fed some brown banana mash to their CO.

“You sorry I put you on my crew?” Sheppard asked the gunner.

Ronon shook his head. “Nope. Knew what I was getting into, how dangerous it’d be. Don’t beat yourself up about it. I’d rather be here than driving fuel trucks.”

Sheppard cracked a sickly smile then gestured Ronon closer. Rodney strained to hear his weak voice.

“You need to think about getting you and McKay outa here. Make your way down the mountain to the shore.”

No way, was the grunted dismissal.

“I’m serious. Keep moving, you and Rodney should be able to outrun the Japs in all this jungle.”

“We’re not leaving you behind, Major.”

“I’m…” Sheppard winced and his forehead creased as he took a sharp breath. “I’m not trying to be the hero here. But I’m… I’m not doing so good, buddy. And I need you to get McKay home.”
Rodney sat up and cleared his throat loudly. “That’s my job, Major, remember? To get us all home.”

“Rodney, I didn’t mean—”

“I know what you meant. You meant Ronon and I should abandon our commanding officer to save our own hides. That what you think of us, Major?”

Sheppard rolled his head on the mat. “No, Rodney, but—”

“Good, glad to hear it. We are all going home. I… I think you should let them save you, Sheppard.”

“You mean let them chop my damn leg off,” Sheppard growled.

“It’s just a leg, Sheppard,” Ronon said, meeting eyes with Rodney. “If McKay says it needs to be done, I believe him.”

Their CO looked from man to man, then squeezed his eyes shut and clawed fitfully at the dirt floor as an obvious wave of pain swept over him. Without opening his eyes he muttered, “do it.”

Once the decision was made and communicated to Martha, the natives swarmed in and took charge, leaving Rodney gaping at the organization and care they all took. Bare naked, mud covered and feather bedecked savages, operating like a modern medical staff, they hoisted Sheppard onto a stretcher made of vines and bamboo and carried him over to the center hut, Ronon and Rodney scrambling at their heels.

As they entered Rodney’s jaw went from gaping to the floor. It was as if the interior had been designed by one of those surrealist painters currently in vogue, working from pictures of the Sistine Chapel.

One whole wall was taken up by a massive wooden crucifix. Jesus was stretched out on it but he’d been painted in different colors all over his body and feathers had been woven into the crown of thorns. Mary filled one corner; she too had been painted and befeathered and trays of fruit and flowers had been arrayed around her sandaled feet.

Rows of roughhewn benches faced a massive altar that held a bulbous clay oven that belched thick black wood smoke out its chimney-like top. Staves of metal stuck out of the front opening. Rodney gulped as he realized they’d be used for cauterization, thus answering one of the many questions he had about how this would work.

The procession passed through the main room into a second, smaller area. They laid Sheppard out on a table and Martha’s daughters hurried over with pitchers of rainwater. They sluiced it over his body, washing away the mud, sweat and blood, allowing it to pool around their feet under the table.

Ronon then took up his position at the head of the table. He hoisted himself up on to the tabletop and pulled Sheppard’s head and chest into his arms. Sheppard grabbed on to the arm wrapped tightly around him with white knuckles. His one good eye was saucer-wide and he was visibly trembling. Rodney saw Ronon bend to mutter something in his ear and he stuttered out a nod but grabbed on even tighter.

Rodney came forward with the last ampule of morphine. He waited until Sheppard was able to meet his gaze. There was fear there. No, more like terror, but there was at the end, resolution. And trust. Rodney squeezed his arm in reassurance then jabbed the needle into his hip.
Seconds later Sheppard wilted a little, the lines in his face eased a bit and his eye closed down.

Ronon firmed up his tight grip around Sheppard, then wrapped his other arm around him, effectively pinning his arms to his chest between them.

Fatty and another native Rodney had never seen, this one almost as tall as Ronon and built like a bulldog, all chest and shoulders, each stood at Sheppard’s feet. Fatty took the good leg and Bulldog gently grasped the bad one.

Rodney took it as a good sign that manipulating the mangled ankle had only elicited a grimace out of the drugged pilot.

Then Martha and David entered together with their daughters. Martha held the Bible and David had been decorated with dots of white mud and strings of flowers around his neck.

Feathers came in last, holding the largest machete that Rodney had ever seen.

He stepped to the side of the table and waited, weapon in hand, for the command from the sorcerer.

David kissed Martha, then walked up to the table. The top almost came up to the little man’s chest. He closed his eyes and muttered softly. It was the third time through the incantation that Rodney recognized the ‘spell’ as the words of the rosary he’d been trying to remember. He slipped his hand into his shirt pocket and pulled out his lucky compass. Began murmuring the words along with them.

Then the little man dipped his finger in a bowl held out for him by Martha. The tip was covered in a purple dust that Rodney recognized as pulverized clam shell.

The sorcerer drew a line above Sheppard’s knee, stepped back, and nodded at Feathers. Then he proclaimed solemnly, “It is time.”
Teyla sat cross-legged, hands resting on her knees as the young man stood before her and the relatives of a close family friend. Kameha was handsome, with thick braided hair the shade of night, indigo streaks and dots of paint carefully depicting his tribe’s identity bright across his cheekbones.

“I offer thirty golden clam shells as a token of my sincerity,” he said, head bowed.

The use of seashells as currency hadn’t been used in many years, though it was still a highly valued symbol of esteem. Narata and her husband looked to Teyla for guidance before answering.

She nodded, and the couple accepted the token before moving onto the discussion of a dowry for the possible marriage. Kameha was a skilled fisherman and the idea of their daughter marrying such a respected person of the village had increased their excitement. The conversation filled Teyla with conflict, believing as she did that love between two people came first, the choice to marry to be made together. But the lives of those in the modern cities of Australia were not the same as those of her people, or the thousands of other tribes dependant on the land and the treaties between neighboring villages.

Mediating such affairs was a rare thing for her; Teyla’s advice was mostly sought in practical matters, not tribal traditions. The ruling council respected her education in things they did not understand, but resulted with improved crop yields or better health and prosperity. They still shied away from her input on customs, thinking her more a student than a teacher.

Even now, her mind floated between the importance of an alliance between these two families and that of news about the fate of her American friends. Her heart was sick, knowing that the major and his crew had not returned from their mission over Biak.

John’s friend, Captain Lorne, had fought valiantly to conceal his grief over the terrible tragedy. Not only had they lost Major Sheppard’s crew, but the plane that struck them during the horrific weather had also crashed, all aboard feared dead. The roar of engines had pervaded the three days and nights afterward, the sheer number of bombers sometimes blocking the sun and moon from view.

Frightened children fled to their mothers’ arms when many of the metal beasts returned wounded, bleeding smoke as they limped back to their coral runways. Teyla found herself searching the sky for all the various returning planes, hoping to spot a familiar winged horse painted across the side of one of them.

“Teyla? Are you all right, child?”

She looked up at Narata’s dark mahogany face, a lifetime in the sun wrinkling the skin under her eyes. “I am fine. I apologize,” Teyla offered.

Kameha stared at her clothes curiously; when their eyes met, he bowed his head, embarrassed at being caught looking.
“We are done for now,” Rukupioa, Narata’s husband, announced, gathering the precious clams. “We thank you, Teyla, for your wisdom during a difficult time.”

Narata remained, slender fingers rubbing at the smooth oyster shells on her long necklace. “Do you think the white doctor will continue to visit us?”

Disease was and always would be the biggest fear among her people, a silent killer that wiped out whole families and villages overnight. Dr. Beckett’s medicine and mosquito nets were seen as blessings and the major’s plane disappearing, a bad omen. Many knew of the friendship between her and John’s crew; a few of the hunters had even spoken to Ronon, sharing secrets on the best techniques for tracking wild boar.

Narata was silent and Teyla was once again mortified that memories had easily distracted her. “I think Dr. Beckett will come when he can, but I fear he will have his hands full once the Americans begin their dangerous assault. I do not believe they realize how deep the caves go on Biak or how many people they can conceal from view.”

“The Island of Teeth has devoured many souls; I will pray for the white men during their battle,” Narata said as she took Teyla’s hand. “And I will pray for your missing friends.”

Teyla wasn’t naive; war claimed all indiscriminately, even the lucky ones. It wrought only ruin and great sadness. She would grieve in her own way in private, when that tiny part of her had given up completely on her friends’ safe return. Unfortunately her duties did not disappear because of sorrow; on a day of rare sunshine, it was foolish not to take advantage of the dry weather.

This was only the second year that her village had attempted to grow extra yam and taro for trade instead of the amount required only for their numbers. Teyla needed to show how the soil could be tended for farming without the slash and burn method that was so common.

A flock of birds scattered from their perches in a rainbow of color, and she was instantly alert for the disturbance. It wasn’t uncommon for a Japanese soldier or patrol to wander close by, or even an American platoon. Women carrying jugs of drinking water huddled in the center of the village; a few young boys grabbed spears and knives to join with those investigating in the direction of the noise.

The low bellow of a conch shell sounded twice, signaling the arrival of friendly visitors. Teyla eased her hand away from the bone handled knife hidden by her skirt, always prepared to defend her people from an enemy attack.

Curiosity wrestled with obligation, but the decision on whether to investigate what was happening was made for her when Narata came hurrying.

“What is it?” Teyla asked her friend.

Narata had to catch her breath from sprinting on such thin, boney legs. “There is a messenger from the Island of Teeth; it is hard to understand his words, but he says that three men fell from the sky. One is a giant and the other like a mad cuscus who does not stop talking.”

“And the third?” Teyla asked, her heart pounding in her chest.

“The third they say is a shepherd, but he is gravely ill and requires great medicine.”

Teyla could not trust her ears; perhaps she only heard what her mind wanted. “Take me to this messenger,” she said, so she could see for herself the proof that the *Pegasus* crew had once again performed a miracle.
Wishing to avoid interest as much as possible, Teyla had usually waited for the cover of night before visiting the base. Her friendships with Beckett and the major were discrete ones, both men having provided her with supplies and medicines that would have gotten them in trouble with their COs. John had concealed from his superiors that she gave him information for her protection. He feared they’d want to exploit her sources with various native tribes across Guinea too often, or even force her to find intel, putting her in danger.

She had dismissed the subterfuge as unnecessary, but John had insisted he had seen such tactics before. She thought he might have witnessed something similar with the Chinese during his time in Burma, but he spoke rarely of his year there. Teyla volunteered the information she discovered about troop movements, or the construction of bases of her own volition. It was in the best interest of all that the Americans benefit from her network of ‘observers’.

Today she had a mission to complete, and no amount of staring, whistling, or yelling was going to stop her. Slipping on base was easy; searching for her query unescorted was another story.

“Ma’am, you can’t be here,” a voice came up from behind her.

A soldier with shorn blonde hair and broad shoulders started to reach for her arm. “Private,” Teyla said, seeing the stripe on his shoulders. “I need to see Captain Lorne. It is of vital importance.”

The private seemed baffled at her request, probably thinking she wandered from her village. “Look, ma’am, I don’t know Captain Lorne, and if I did, I couldn’t allow a civilian on base.”

“He is the Captain of the Black Jack, and flies with the 155th Recon unit. I must find him. If you do not know where he is, please take me to someone who does,” Teyla insisted.

“I...I can’t…” the private stammered, clearly confused by her knowledge of personnel. “I can’t violate protocol, even for a beautiful woman.”

“Then how about Lieutenant Jackson?” Teyla asked, thinking of another officer’s name.

“Look ma’am, I have to escort you off the base.” The private hesitated momentarily, clearing unsure about touching her arm.

“Hey! What’cha doin’ there?”

Teyla sent a prayer of thanks for the interruption, turning around only to face the sergeant with whom Ronon’d had a confrontation several weeks before. Knowing time was of the essence, she tried appealing to him. “Sergeant. Please, I need to talk to Captain Lorne.”

“There’s no barbeque today, ma’am,” he replied, eyes glued to her chest. “I know you know Major Sheppard’s crew, but right now—”

“Please.” Teyla wasn’t past using her attributes as an advantage and took the man’s hand. “Sergeant…?”

“Sergeant DiNucci, ma’am,” he said, beaming.
“Sergeant DiNucci, I know you will help me. You said all the women back home turn to you in their time of need,” she lied.

“Well, of course they do,” DiNucci grinned, left hand slicking back his hair. “Say, maybe there is something I could do. But I think Captain Lorne is busy right now --”

“I have information about Major Sheppard’s crew,” Teyla said, unwilling to play around anymore.

“The major? But his plane went down --”

“They’re alive, Sergeant. And I need to--”

“Alive?” DiNucci cut her off. “You know they’re alive?”

“Yes, and I need to find Captain Lorne so he can go find them,” Teyla said, almost crushing the man’s hand in relief that someone was listening.

“You, Private!” DiNucci barked. “Find us a jeep.”

“But...um...I” the private said hesitantly.

“Gotta problem with your ears, buddy?”

Clearly confused and scared of being yelled at, the private ran off.

Teyla was shocked at the turn of events, shocked more by the person who was actually going to help her locate Captain Lorne. Her expression must have given away her feelings because DiNucci was staring at her.

“I might not be much, but I’m all you got, ma’am.”

Teyla left it at that, nodding, willing to take any help she could get.

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Captain Lorne sat on an ammo crate, cigarette burning in one hand, dark bags under his eyes from too many sleepless nights and the burden of filling his missing CO’s boots. They were inside one of the metal supply huts surrounded by shelves sagging under the weight of engine parts, propellers, and other things Teyla was unsure about. A small crowd of airmen had gathered around, not too close, but within earshot of the discussion.

“You’re telling me that some native came all the way from Biak to let you know that Major Sheppard, McKay, and Dex are alive?”

“Yes,” Teyla said firmly. Sensing the captain’s skepticism, she pulled out the proof the tribesman had brought with him. “This is one of the major’s dog tags.”

Lorne took the metal identification, tracing Sheppard’s name and serial number in silent contemplation.

“How do we know the headhunters didn’t already kill them?”

Teyla glared at Sergeant DiNucci. “They are not headhunters. And there would be no reason for them to lie about such a thing.”

“But there’s cannibals all over there, ma’am,” DiNucci rebuked, smacking a piece gum.
“Yes, there are. The further west, the more war-like many tribes have become.” Teyla turned to Captain Lorne whose brow was deeply furrowed. “I trust the man who came to my village. He would not have come all this way in such a short amount of time unless it was urgent.”

“How did he travel hundreds of miles in a little over two days? And how’d he know where to find you? I’m aware of your… connections, Ms. Emmagan, but there’s a hell of a lotta jungle out there,” Lorne finished, ashing his cigarette.

“The people of New Guinea are great seafarers, Captain. If you traveled the same route as your ancestors, you know which currents to use to your advantage. It took him over an entire day. The messenger is part of the Sawpai tribe; they are indeed a fierce people, but they accepted certain aspects of Christianity many years ago.” More men had stopped in the middle of their work, listening eagerly. Teyla cleared her throat. “I have only met a few of them, but they are allied with the Dahni tribes who go back and forth between Biak and the mainland. The Dahni have helped the Australian Army and are great fisherman that a few of my people have alliance with through marriage. They knew exactly where to locate me and escorted him to my village,” she said with conviction.

Teyla could see it in Lorne’s weary eyes, the hope, and the desperation to believe that what she said was the truth. But he was a good soldier, keeping things schooled under a mask of cool reason. He clutched the dog tag, chewing on his lower lip. “How far away from the Jap base are they now?”

“I can show you on a map since Sawpai village is near an important river, but it is far enough to be away from your military action.”

Lorne pinched the bridge of his nose. “That means there’d be no place to land. Not to mention getting authorization to fly into the middle of a hot zone.”

This was her opening. “Do you not fly recon, Captain? Is your mission complete for the time being?”

“It is, ma’am. If I thought there was the slightest chance I could go, I would.” Lorne curled his fingers around the tag. “Did this… native say how they were? It’s been five days since the crash.”

Tendrils of fear enveloped her heart. “Sergeant Dex, I think is slightly injured, Lieutenant McKay, I think is more so. I do not speak the language of the Sawpai, so there was a lot of gesturing and broken English that I understood. I believe Major Sheppard has a badly injured leg and is very ill.”

“I might be able to get a few men together, but I know I can’t take Beckett or any of his staff with me.”

“Not even a corpsman?” Teyla asked.

“No, ma’am. As of yesterday, the amphibious assault began on the western coast of the Jap stronghold and from what I hear it’s not going well. We’ll be taking overflow of inbound casualties from the M.A.S.H unit south of here. I’m not even sure Colonel O’Neill will approve such an operation while there’s a Navy offensive goin’ on.”

“We will not be near it,” Teyla assured him.

“We?”

“Saul does not know you, Captain. He only speaks a little Dahni and even less English. And you do not speak any Papuan language. Plus the Sawpai will be more at ease with er… a familiar face.” Lorne was a smart man, if a bunch of white soldiers appeared it could make for a tense situation.

“Saul?”
“Saul Gumannume. Many of the Sawpai have taken biblical names from their time with the missionaries.” Ignoring the captain’s skeptical expression Teyla pressed on. “My father was a physician in the Australian Army and I worked in many of the clinics he had set up. He had no other family, Captain. I was always around him, I have training in medicine and I fear the major and his crew will be in need of someone with these skills.”

“Have you seen battlefield triage?” DiNucci asked, running a comb through his hair.

“Have you, Sergeant? I have tended many broken bones and illnesses from living in the wild.”

It all rested on Captain Lorne’s fatigued shoulders. A dozen men crowded the tiny corner, all holding a collective breath.

“I’ve been with Major Sheppard since Burma. Once a Tiger, always a Tiger. We always look after each other,” Lorne said standing, stressed features replaced by determined ones. “Most of my squad’s been transferred to temporary duties. I’ll have to ask for volunteers and—”

Before Lorne had finished his sentence, a dozen hands shot up in the air. If only the crew of the Pegasus knew the loyalty of those who served around them.

“You have a bomb run to escort tomorrow, Larkin,” Lorne admonished one of the enthusiastic men. “Only those in non-combat roles in the next three or four days. I’ll have to run everyone past their COs, too.” He shook his head. “Petoskey, you’re in charge of supplies, what if we run into trouble?”

“Ever been to Detroit, sir?” the lanky corporal replied. “I can handle myself.”

Teyla found herself smiling at the young man’s confidence despite the seriousness of the situation. He had swagger, and she remembered him trading ‘surplus’ supplies with her people for exotic items or the hooch desired by servicemen. Since many were scheduled to fly out in one capacity or another, it left Petoskey and to Teyla’s shock, Sergeant DiNucci who was just as eager to help as any of the flight crews.

“Slopping through mud pits and jungle rot can’t be good for a cake eater like you, Sergeant. All the broads might go topless, but I bet they’d kill you before listening to your jawin’.” Lorne turned to Teyla. “Pardon my language, ma’am.”

DiNucci went ramrod straight. “I know people think I’m just a good-lookin’ wop from Brooklyn and I ain’t never gonna be a big cheese or nothing.” With a nervous swipe at his dark, wavy hair he looked at Teyla before addressing Lorne. “I drive the fuel trucks cuz the only thing I was good at back home was staring at a dame’s gams. If we’re taking Biak, Captain, what good am I here? Any bonehead can take my shift, but all the flyboys got their work cut out for them.”

“Why would you do this?” Teyla blurted out, regretting it instantly.

“Because no matter how much I drink, or how much I hate this place…the uniform means something, ma’am.”

Lorne blew out a puff of smoke in silence and scrubbed a hand over his face, before directing a set of intense eyes at Teyla. “Are you sure about this, ma’am? If I pull off getting the right transport and convince O’Neill I don’t need a Section Eight for wanting to bring along a civilian—”

“Saul must come with us.”

“There’s no way I’ll be allowed to take some fuzz—, some native onto government property. O’Neill would have my head.”
“That’s if the savage don’t try to chop it off, sir.”

Anger burned in Teyla’s heart, but there was a time and place for such a thing. There was no speaking to men like DiNucci, but she sensed Lorne was a good man. “He must come with us. I have never been to Biak and we would waste much time searching for his village. There is no predicting running into the less friendly tribes or the Japanese patrols. Plus...I believe Saul sees it as a mission from God.”

“That’s a load of horse--”

“Can it, Sergeant!” Lorne snapped at DiNucci, the other soldier visibly flinching.

The captain got a hold of himself, popping his knuckles and gnawing at his lower lip.

Teyla was a good judge of character; this was a rare display of emotion for the officer. “We only have to follow the river to Saul’s village. If he could take a canoe here, Captain, then he can lead us back, of this I have no doubt.”

Lorne rubbed a hand through his hair and over two day’s worth of beard. “If Sheppard trusts you, that’s good enough for me. Plus, you’ve saved our bacon on several missions. I’ll beg, borrow, or steal if I have to. And if you think the--if Saul is an asset, then he’ll come along.”

Teyla released a breath she didn’t know she’d been holding. Now it was her turn to ask a tough question. “If you cannot find a place to land. How will we get there?”

There was a twinkle reminiscent of John’s in Captain Lorne’s eye. “Leave that to me.”

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Teyla had occupied her time inspecting the contents of the heavy black medical bag Lt Keller had provided her, including a few items Dr. Beckett had included. It was aged from many years of use and although very sanitary, the leather smelled of mildew and antiseptic. Knowing which instruments and medicines were inside would cut down on any possible errors. She thumbed through a medical manual on battlefield triage, paying close attention to the pages on the type of injuries John might have suffered based on Saul’s descriptions.

Mostly she was in need of a distraction from the increasing knots in her gut, the deafening roar of engines overhead, and the unease of the company she kept.

The young supply officer, Petoskey, was the calmest, writing to his girl back home, eyes occasionally drifting up from the frantic scribbling of his pen. A few times he shared the poem he was writing for Teyla’s approval, his cheeks blushing slightly when she nodded or gave a suggestion.

Sergeant DiNucci spent his time chain smoking and pacing back and forth. Saul carved at a hunk of wood with a sharp ivory knife, unaware how his actions set the soldier on edge. Teyla had convinced the Sawpai to wear a thatch of cloth over his lower region, but it did little in the way of clothing the rest of his pierced and tattooed body. He hummed under his breath, occasionally flicking away at the flies that buzzed about his nest of braided hair.

“Must he keep doing that?” DiNucci hissed at her.

“He is merely carving a wild boar, a symbol highly valued by his tribe. I believe he does it for luck,” she answered smoothly.
“I meant the mumbling.”

“Afraid he’s putting you under a spell, Sergeant?” Petoskey snorted, then lowered his head when Teyla arched an eyebrow in disapproval.

“I have told him we may be going up in one of your planes. Although I believe he is a warrior in his tribe, the idea of flying above the clouds is a scary one. This is his way of mentally preparing for such a feat,” Teyla explained. She would not admit a similar type of fear despite being in a plane several times.

“Do you think he’ll bug out, ma’am?” Petoskey asked curiously, waving his hat in front of his face. It was balmy, the air thickening with moisture as the sky readied to squeeze out more rain.

“He will not put anyone in any danger,” Teyla assured both men.

“See that he doesn’t,” DiNucci said, patting the sidearm hanging over his hip. “Last thing we need is for the savage to go off his trolley.”

“That will not be necessary,” was Teyla’s tense reply.

The sergeant pulled out a tiny cracked mirror from his shirt pocket and held it up, running the tip of his tongue over his teeth before slipping it back. “You writing a book to your girl, Petey?”

Teyla ignored their talk about women, choosing to focus on the upcoming hours and praying that they were not wasting what little time she feared they had. Saul had drawn the cross in the dirt floor of her hut whenever he spoke of the dying shepherd. She prayed that Captain Lorne hurried, for even if they found a place to land, who knew how long it would take to trudge toward the village. Even as she worried, the sky darkened with the newest storm, and more rain fell.

“All right we’ve got a go; let’s gear up, and move out. Ms. Emmagan, you and Mr….you and um, Saul, need to debrief our pilot before takeoff.”

Upon hearing his name, Saul stood, multiple shell necklaces clinking around his thick stocky neck. “You… the shepherd’s big man?”

“Big man?” Lorne looked up at Teyla.

“Chief or leader.”

“No, kind of the other way around,” Lorne mumbled, his eyes distant. Haunted.

Rising, Teyla dug out the map Lorne had given her earlier to help pinpoint where Saul’s village was located. “Are you not flying us?”

The question broke the captain’s rare moment of reverie. “I’m not qualified to fly this type of aircraft,” Lorne replied, slyly. “DiNucci, Petoskey. We’ll do an equipment check and briefing while our bird gets gassed up.”

Instead of the airfield, they headed toward the beach. Saul stuck close to Teyla and for the first time she noticed a set of multi-colored beads clutched between his fingers as he spoke softly under his breath. She was touched by his generosity and bravery, risking so much for complete strangers. Teyla reached out to touch his arm, when everyone stopped short—everyone except Captain Lorne.

“What is this?” Teyla asked, confused at the aircraft floating on the ocean.

“This, ma’am, is a seaplane,” Lorne said with a little awe. “Only been in one a few times. The water
makes for a strange runway.”

“Bet the major’s flown one,” Petoskey chuckled, then clamped his jaw, as if jinxing them.

“You will have to ask him when we find them,” Teyla said in reassurance.

DiNucci gave a low whistle. “Wish I had a camera. How’d did ya score a Navy bird, Captain?”

“They don’t call him Nuts for nothing. And it’s not ours. Belongs to the Aussies.” Lorne turned to them, chin held high. “I don’t do speeches, but Colonel O’Neill was to the point. He told us to bring the crew of the *Pegasus* back home. And that’s exactly what I intend for us to do.”

There was an echo of “yes, sir.”

Saul, who understood very little English, sensed the energy of the captain’s words. With his rosary beds wrapped around one wrist, he stood tall, even though his eyes betrayed his fear.

Captain Lorne turned his fierce gaze at the Sawpai then Teyla. Straightening her back, she announced, “We are ready.”

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Flying was chaos in motion, like a canoe caught between choppy waves and warring currents. Teyla’s body still thought it was falling, and her legs were weak and shaky with their first few steps onto the beach. Her lunch of bananas and yam soup stirred uneasily around her belly, unlike poor Saul who had gotten sick several times from the constant bouncing motion. It was a small blessing; the Sawpai was so overcome by nausea that he saw more of the inside of a paper bag than outside the window.

All pilots had to be insane, she concluded.

Lorne stood behind the nose of the aircraft, a rifle pointed into the tree line, rain drenching his uniform. Caution was a soldier’s armor in battle, saving him from bullets and bombs alike. But it wouldn’t help here; an engine’s roar was like thousands of conch shells announcing their arrival. If the enemy wanted them…it would wait until they came within the safety of the dense jungle cover.

Petoskey and DiNucci, men not accustomed to firing weapons, mimicked their CO by hiding behind the metal bird of prey with their .45’s drawn in unsteady hands. Saul was anxious, clearly wanting to go, his pasty face gaining its color back since exiting the aircraft. He moved from foot to foot, rosary beads dangling around his neck instead of clenched in a white knuckled fist.

“We go?” he asked her.

Their pilot lit a cigarette, hanging out of the doorway, waiting for a command. Lorne gnawed on his lower lip, and Teyla wondered how many holes he’d torn into it over the course of the day. “Thanks for the lift, Lieutenant,” he said, glancing up from his studious examination of the landscape. “We’ll stay in radio contact. First sign of trouble, you take off, got it?”

“Sure you don’t want an extra hand, sir?”

“No, stick with the plane,” Lorne replied. Keeping the barrel of the rifle trained in front of him, he gestured at the other airmen. “I’ll take point. You two cover the civilians.”

“Captain,” Teyla objected.
“Ma’am, I’m in charge of your safety and--”

Oblivious of the captain’s words, Saul walked past him toward the foliage, glancing over his shoulder. Lorne’s mouth hung open, snapping shut when Saul gestured for them to follow as if they were confused children.

DiNucci wiped his face with the edge of his soggy sleeve. “Are we really gonna trust the savage, sir?”

“You mean the guy who lives here?” Petoskey shot back.

“Yes, we are,” Lorne said irritably. “In silence.”

Her supply pack was loaded down with the extra medical bag; the heavy weight dug between Teyla’s shoulder blades as she walked. Wet sand thickened into sludge, mud slurping as they walked. Her skin was slick with sweat and bug spray, but it didn’t keep the insects from sinking their stingers into her.

“Sergeant, cut down some of this brush and try not to hack your hand off in the process,” Lorne ordered.

DiNucci obeyed with a quick nod and pulled out a small machete from his bulging backpack as they entered the stifling rain forest. The vines and roots didn’t bother Saul, but they smacked and tripped up the others and he had to slow down so the Americans could keep up. Darkness fell under the canopy of trees and in the background of animal chatter and insect wings was the low distant rumbling of gunfire. Only a hundred miles away, beachheads were being invaded by tanks and men, and Teyla feared that the sands would be washed in blood.

After twenty minutes, she found herself side by side with Saul, the two of them leading the rescue while those not used to crushing humidity slogged through tiny streams and lagged behind.

“How long until we reach the river?” she asked their escort.

Saul brushed a hand over a set of tiny orange flower blossoms while studying the water level that almost reached their knees. “River is not flood. When comes the big flood, we will be home.”

“Mind asking him when that’ll be?” Lorne huffed behind her, his cheeks bright pink.

“He has no way to tell us in the way we keep time. You will feel the water levels rise when we are near the river,” Teyla informed the pilot. She felt bad for him; it was obvious the man had never spent much time on the ground. “It could not be too far. Access to fishing is vital to a village’s survival.”

DiNucci slashed at knots of plants and branches, trying to pave the way for his CO, even if Saul walked without the need of a machete. When the sergeant stumbled, Saul spun around, catching him by the elbow, keeping him from smacking the ground.

The sergeant waffled, sloshing water everywhere, finding his balance thanks to the offered hand, but quickly jerked his arm away. Saul didn’t blink, turning back to his trek without a second’s thought. DiNucci hacked at the brush with extra vigor, grumbling a ‘thanks’ in afterthought.

A green and brown spotted lizard used the top of Teyla’s head to leap onto a low hanging limb. Eyes fixed on their sloppy, non-existent path, her mind became preoccupied by nagging doubts.

Giving the Americans accurate details about terrain and passing along what neighboring tribes had
witnessed concerning the Japanese helped rid them from their land. Acting as a go-between for the military presence and the local peoples provided food and supplies for many whose crops were ruined by the war.

But this? Were her doubts about her identity and place in the world spurring these reckless actions? Did she think by having any type of impact, it would fill the holes of her insecurities?

Surely the major and his crew thought of her as nothing more than a useful local. Someone who reminded them of a girl back home.

Home. This was an assignment and soon John, Ronon and McKay would leave, just like everyone who came to Guinea. And once again she would feel lost, struggling between two worlds who didn’t know what to make of her.

Teyla shoved those thoughts away, burying them deep with so many others. John wasn’t an ally, he was her friend; she shared a bond with Ronon, and while McKay was still a bit of mystery, Teyla knew a good heart when she saw one. They deserved this chance.

“The flood. We are close.”

Saul’s words were a light slap of reality and Teyla suddenly felt the heavier humidity and the trickle of water over stones. Lorne and the others stayed behind them, out of exhaustion, or realizing the strategic benefit allowing them the lead. The woods thinned as they came upon a wide and murky, muddy river and Saul took her hand when she was too slow on the uptake, guiding Teyla toward a pathway beaten down by foot travel.

Adrenaline, excitement, worry, all vied for her control. Fueled by anxiety, Teyla ran after Saul who was caught up in the moment of returning home from a long journey.

“Wait!” Lorne shouted.

There was no time. Rain, mud, or her yelling companions, none of them were going to stop her. Finally the jungle cleared to a circle of straw and mud huts, and the thriving activity of village life. Saul was greeted like a returning hero, throngs of women and children clamored around in chattering excitement. Saul gestured wildly at Teyla and Lorne and the others who caught up to her, their faces flushed crimson and soaked in sweat and rain.

Two large beefy men with long shields and spears approached, their sharpened weapons pointed at the ground. DiNucci scrambled for his gun, but Lorne slapped his hand. “Stand down.”

The two warriors were joined by six others, forming a row, and preventing their visitors from crossing their breadth. Their eyes lacked hostility, mud splattered postures at ease, their bodies unclothed except swirls and dots of colored mud. A slender man with sharp cheekbones and long white feathers braided in a headband approached Saul, handing him a spear and shield in a ‘welcome back’ gesture.

“What’s going on?”

Lorne surveyed the rural community, trained eyes darting from hut to hut, scouting the layout. Teyla waited until his gaze landed on her before speaking. “I am not sure.”

Saul appeared agitated, his attention seesawing between his fellow warriors and the rescue party, speaking frantically. The warrior who returned Saul his weapons shook his head solemnly, causing Teyla’s stomach to flutter in apprehension.
Saul’s whole body sagged, like someone had poked a hole in his soul, releasing its energy. Face screwed in a mask of anxiety, he spoke frantically to Teyla in his dialect. With growing frustration at the communication barrier, he took her hand again, transmitting all his fear.

Teyla nodded. “We must follow Saul,” was her pronouncement.

“We go to Father’s house,” Saul said urgently and began dragging her.

It was a race; for what, Teyla did not know. But it felt as if the whole village ran with them. Saul brought them to the opening of a dwelling much larger than any of the communal shelters. Perched on the roof was a crude cross of bamboo, smoke filtering out of the openings.

It was like being struck by lightning, the significance of the building crushing her heart.

“Where are we?” Lorne asked.

“It is their house of worship,” Teyla whispered.

“Why would Major Sheppard’s crew be in there?” Petoskey asked in confusion.

It could have been ignorance, hope blinding the young man from the sorrow in Saul’s eyes, but Teyla pushed forward into the hut, her eyes unable to focus to the sudden dimness. Dozens of candles glowed inside, burning wax mixing with powerful incense and the rank odor of animals and body heat.

Her vision adjusted painstakingly slowly to an empty room lined with rows of crude seats surrounding a handmade altar. Rain pounded heavily on the thatch ceiling, providing a creepy tribal backbeat to the voices drifting out from the other side of the sanctuary.

“Do you hear that mumbling?” Petoskey whispered.

Lorne said something, but Teyla’s heart hammered, blocking out his words. She pushed aside strands of hanging beads and shells, charging into the next room. A pungent stench overwhelmed her nostrils, death and decay blending with burning wood.

Then her mind saw things in stunned flashes.

John, naked and laid out on a table, strangers covered in paint and mud surrounding him, restraining him.

A man with a massive blade poised over John’s leg.

Then guns cocking and panicked shouting.

Finally, time overcame shock and things went from slow motion to way too fast.

“Son of a bitch!”

“Holy--”

“Drop it!”

Teyla moved forward before shocked lips remembered how to form words. She stepped beside Lorne, his rifle aimed at the machete bearer’s head. “I said, drop your weapon!” he growled.

“Kill him, sir!” DiNucci snarled.
“Oh God, they’re sacrificing the major!” Petoskey gasped.

“Are you nuts? We’re glad to see you, but lower your guns!”

Teyla blinked and one of the strangers morphed into the disheveled image of Rodney McKay.

“Lieutenant? What the hell’s going on?” Lorne growled, barrel unwavering from its mark.

“Lower your cannon, Captain, and I’ll tell you, sir!” McKay snapped.

“Not until that man moves away from Major Sheppard,” Lorne insisted.

“Sir, don’t! They’re gonna hack him to pieces,” DiNucci hissed.

“No, they’re not,” came Ronon’s voice.

Fear’s shroud slowly dissolved and Teyla saw what her mind had been too astonished to comprehend. Two of the people circling the table were John’s crew. Ronon had the major pulled up into his arms, holding him tightly around his chest, McKay stood next to his friend’s head. Between them were a few men and women bent over in prayer.

“We must take the leg, or the shepherd will die,” an older woman pronounced, her bulk emerging from behind the man bearing the large machete.

Stealthily, several warriors had entered behind the airmen, spears in hand, but not raised to strike. They stood there calmly, waiting out the drama before them. Lorne swept the hut with a swift glance, eyes landing on the perceived threat to his CO.

“I won’t let you harm Major Sheppard,” the captain affirmed his intentions at the blade wielder.

“Do you think we wanted to do this?” McKay demanded. “But now that you’re here, did you bring help? Where’s Beckett?”

The large muscled man lowered the machete and laid it on the dirt ground, bowing his head and backing away. The moment the ‘weapon’ was no longer hovered near John, Lorne carefully walked over and kicked it away, lowering his rifle to his side.

Petoskey followed suit, hand shakily holstering his .45. “Thank God,” he mumbled.

DiNucci was frozen in his tracks, eyes skipping across the room, too paranoid and scared to follow suit.

“Secure that weapon, Sergeant,” Lorne ordered. When the man didn’t comply, Lorne took a step forward. “Now.”

Shaking his head, the panicky Sergeant licked his lips and unsteadily put his gun away. “We just gonna let these cannibals finish what they were doin’, sir?”

“No, we’re not,” Lorne snapped.

Teyla brought her anxiety under control and eyes that’d been glazed over in panic studied John critically.

“What has happened to him?” She unshouldered her heavy pack and pulled out the medical bag. In three quick strides Teyla leaned over the table, swallowing back the bile rising in the back of her throat.
“Leg’s broken.”

“Your diagnosis is astounding, Dr. Dex. You forgot to mention the slight rash around his ankle, too.”

“You’re not helping, McKay” Ronon said, his voice heavy from exhaustion. “Can you help Sheppard?”

“I will try,” Teyla announced. “I need to see, please hold the light over here.” A tiny old man with a cataract-covered eye understood her to a degree, taking a torch from one of the guards and casting it above the major’s leg.

John’s ankle was grossly swollen to twice its size, the skin around the break puffy with inflammation, seeping blood, and dead tissue crusting around pieces of exposed bone. His foot was misaligned, the dying flesh gray with red spider webs of infection. The stench made her want to gag, but breathing through her mouth quelled the need to throw up. Heat emanated from the limb as her hands traced the tibia, locating the position of the break where it poked out under the skin under his knee.

Opening a packet of sulfa powder, Teyla emptied the contents into the open wound on his ankle. “What course of treatment has the major been given?”

“Besides leeches and crushed plants to eat?” McKay bellowed.

Teyla moved to the head of the table, aware of McKay’s penetrating gaze behind her. John’s body burned out of control, his entire completion a ghastly white except for the bright flush of his cheeks and the tips of his ears. Slits of hazel blinked up at her, glassy eyes widening in anxiety at her presence. Realization dawned on her, the large leaf the only thing covering him. Teyla turned to the airmen who’d been shocked into silence by the condition of their larger than life CO.

“Captain, do you have any cloth to cover the major?”

“Cloth?” Then Lorne’s eyebrows shot up in understanding. “Oh…yeah, I think I can find something.”

Teyla checked John’s pulse, the vein pumping at a hummingbird’s rate, his skin dry and searing beneath her fingertips. Her father’s voice rang in her ears, lectures, stories, discussions with other physicians about patients. There were so many needs, so many priorities.

One thing at a time.

Lorne had taken off his overshirt and spread it over John’s lower half, keeping both legs exposed. “Is there anything else I can do?”

“Inside my bag is saline and an IV; please bring them out and unroll the tubing.”

“On it,” the captain obeyed.

“Am I in the middle of a hallucination? Or did you earn a medical degree when I wasn’t looking?”

Teyla ignored McKay, intertwining her fingers with John’s hand. Calm the patient. “I am going to help you, Major. Do you understand?”

“Is that…you, Teyla?”

“Yes, it is, Major.”
“Sup’sed to call me… John.”

Teyla squeezed his hand. “I am going to help you, John.”

“You’re glowing.”

“That’s the morphine talking,” Ronon spoke up.

“Of course,” Teyla replied and took the IV tubing Lorne handed to her. “Thank you.”

Palpating for a vein was challenging, John’s skin tight from dehydration. “When’s the last time he had water?”

“Pretty recently, but very little,” McKay answered. “Supplies are limited and we used the last of the purification tablets the other day.”

“Hey, have some of ours, we brought extra,” DiNucci volunteered, handing a canteen to the Lieutenant.

“Oh, thank heavens,” McKay breathed and started gulping it down.

“Slowly, Lieutenant,” Lorne warned.

DiNucci unscrewed the cap of a second canteen, holding it in the air longer than expected, waiting on the gunner to accept the offered water.

Ronon stood there, eyes flicking between the water and the sergeant. The two men stared at each other for three long seconds before Ronon simply took the canteen with a nod. “Thanks.”

Teyla slapped a rubber band around John’s forearm, hoping to perk up a vein. She tapped at several meager options, failing miserably. “Come on,” she encouraged, tracing a sliver of blue near his wrist. The needle flashed, hitting the mark, and she inserted the IV, taping it in place. “I need someone to-”

Petoskey was there in an instant. “Allow me,” he said, holding the saline bag in the air.

Rummaging through her supplies, Teyla slid open a small wooden box and examined the glass medicine vials inside. Reading the dosage, she filled the syringe with a larger amount, praying the Penicillin was the miracle drug her father had proclaimed. It worked wonders on many illnesses for her people, but could it battle such a widespread infection?

“Sheppard’s septic. Do you know what that means?”

“Yes, I do, Lieutenant. And there has been much success with antibiotics, or are you unaware of such a treatment?” she bit back, wiping an area on John’s hip clean with an alcohol wipe before popping in the needle.

“Of course I’m aware of Penicillin, I didn’t know you were is all,” he said, backpedaling.

“Let her work,” Ronon warned.

“Work? Sheppard needs a doctor, not a nursemaid, or someone who learned from reading pulp romances about nurses,” McKay waved his hands about.

“If you have medical knowledge, then come over here and help me,” Teyla challenged, hoping deep inside that the Lieutenant’s intelligence was that expansive.
“Me?” McKay stammered. “I’m…it’s just…how many times have you practiced…I mean…”

The large woman who had been assisting the machete bearer approached, giving Teyla the impression that she’d been allowed to examine John thus far because the elder had allowed it.

“What kind of magic are you using on the shepherd?” she demanded, strategically placing her body in front of the table, blocking Teyla ability to attend to John.

“It is white man’s magic. It is very powerful,” Teyla assured her.

“No magic can save the shepherd’s leg. It is poisoned. We cut the root of the poison,” she said with a chopping motion of her hand.

“No,” Teyla glowered.

“See this, Major? Only you could have two women arguing over who can mop your brow,” McKay snorted, but it was obvious to anyone how freaked out he was about the situation. Glancing down at his CO, he gave John a pat on the shoulder before walking over to the woman who obviously was in charge. “Martha, this is our friend Teyla. She um…she practices great magic of many missionaries.”

“Does the Father guide your hands?” Martha demanded suspiciously.

“Yes, he has,” Teyla answered. “With your permission, please allow me the chance to help John.”

Chubby fingers took a hold of Teyla’s and Martha rubbed the pads of her thumbs over Teyla’s palms, feeling her pulse points. With eyelids squeezed tightly closed the healer prayed, moving wrinkled hands to Teyla’s face.

“I feels the goodness inside you,” Martha said, opening her eyes. She made a cross over Teyla’s chest, “Your heart is strong with the Father. Part of it is sad, seeking a new way. You must walk the path and fill the empty. All things are possible with the Father.”

As soon as Martha stepped away, McKay nearly burst from staying silent. “Could we get back to the part where we go to a nice base hospital with lots of good drugs?”

“We must hurry,” Teyla said finding her voice again. “Captain, we will be moving the major once I stabilize him for transport. I’m going to need a--”

“A stretcher. On it, ma’am,” Lorne said, looking relieved at having a task.

Ronon and McKay were not going to leave their CO’s side and DiNucci and Petoskey were just as eager to have something to do. Saul sensed what was going on and he spoke to his fellow warriors and gestured at Lorne and the others to follow them.

The soldiers left, taking with them some of the building tension. Teyla wrapped a BP cuff around John’s arm, squeezing the pump, her attention straying to the rosary beads rising up and down on the major’s chest, then to the eyes at half mast watching her. Her mouth went dry at the trust being bestowed in them and she curled her fingers to prevent the trembling upon the instrument reading.

“McKay, I need your help.”

“Um...of course,” he replied, but didn’t budge. Teyla gave him a sharp look, spurring him into action. McKay kept his gaze away from the horror of John’s leg and wrung his hands together.

“What do you need?”
“I want you to take the saline bag and squeeze it.”

“Squeeze it?” McKay echoed, holding the bag up and folding the top to flush the liquids. “Is this safe?”

“It is to build up his pressure, and yes, it is safe. It is performed when the patient requires a large amount quickly,” Teyla explained, pulling out two tin cans and prying off the lids.

“What do you need me to do?” Ronon asked, his arm still firmly holding John to his chest. The gunner’s face was haggard, covered with a few days beard, eyes pleading with her to allow him to contribute in some way.

“Talk to him,” she suggested. Ronon’s chiseled mask of stoicism slipped, revealing exactly how much he didn’t want to do that. Didn’t know how, or what to say. “I am going to need your help in a minute, but John needs your strength right now,” Teyla urged him.

That was all it took and the big gunner crouched down, distracting him with whispered words not for anyone else’s ears.

Teyla had never used a plasma package before, had never seen one. Doctor Beckett had explained the premise of carrying a blood supply that didn’t require refrigeration. She still remembered how much it killed the doctor to stay behind, nurses rushing around in the background as an airman was wheeled into the background.

The kindly physician had slipped ‘just in case’ supplies into her pack, with handwritten notes and handbooks stuffed along with them. The tin cans contained a pair of 400 cc bottles, one contained dried plasma and the other enough distilled water to reconstitute it.

Another miracle.

She remembered her father’s words when the war had broken out. “When man learns new ways to slaughter his children, medicine finds new ways to take care of them.”

Teyla mixed the contents of the bottles and three minutes later John had a unit of much needed plasma.

“That’s really cool,” McKay said in awe. He watched as she struggled to find a vein along John’s other arm, the taut flesh unyielding to her tricks. “We tried to…I mean Martha and her family. They…their herbal voodoo kept him going. But there was nothing we could do about…you know. Infection and blood loss and…”

“John is still alive and that is a testament to your and Ronon’s efforts with those of this village,” Teyla said, inserting the needle higher up on the major’s arm, below the bicep. “This should help his pressure,” she said.

“About earlier. What I said, about you reading dime novels and stuff…I’m…um, sorry.” McKay rolled the saline bag some more, casting his gaze over his friend’s form, then meeting Teyla’s eyes. “He’s seems to be perking up.”

“The fluids will do him good,” Teyla responded. “And thank you. But there is still more to do. Sergeant, I will need your assistance with the major’s leg now.”

The runner gently eased away from his CO, trying to lay him down on the table, but John would have none of it, struggling to sit up.
Teyla moved, bending over John, whose fevered eyes latched onto hers. With a shaky hand he grabbed her shoulder with more strength than she thought possible. “Teyla.”

“Yes, John. I am here.”

“Please…Please, don’t take my leg… I don’t know what… I mean… I said agreed before, but… I don’t know if I could live…”

Teyla gripped his fingers; even with that little contact, his fever burned her skin. “Shh, all I am going to do is bandage it up. It will hurt, even with the morphine, but I will not do anything else to it, I promise.”

“I… I have nowhere else to go… if I can’t be in the air,” he whispered, shaking his head. “What would I do?”

Teyla knew it was the drugs and illness taking its toll and weakening his fortified boundaries. “You would do whatever you set your mind to,” was her firm reply.

His head flopped down on the table, mumbling about desks then the need to get back to their plane. McKay kept the saline bag in the air and, nodding for the gunner to move, he bent to John’s ear and started babbling about what Teyla swore she heard was ’bat man.’

Taking out a book, Teyla studied the instructions and diagrams. “Could you wrap these padded bandages all around his ankle? It will keep the bones from jostling during transport,” she instructed.

Ronon took the thick wads and gently strapped them around the swollen joint. Teyla was struck by a sudden image of a giant bear trying to pick a flower between its massive paws. When he finished, Teyla took out a flexible splint that looked like a small rope ladder. She passed it down the back of John’s leg, and around his heel, and up the surface of his foot.

John moaned, jerking his leg and Ronon held the limb still while McKay distracted the major with tales of a joker. Teyla gave the diagrams another look and guided a second splint down the left side of the leg, around the heel, and up the other side of the leg.

She felt Ronon’s eyes watching her. “It says to splint the foot at a right angle to his leg.”

He shrugged. “Whatever has to be done.”

Ronon held the splints while Teyla wrapped roller bandages around them to hold everything in place. Sweat poured down her face in the boiling hut; Martha and a few of her people respectfully watched from a distance. The compound fracture was finally securely in place, but she was only halfway done.

Teyla pulled out something similar to a small bean bag and checked the medical guide about how to cushion the tibia properly to prevent more pain. “Please lift up his leg so I can put this under it.”

Ronon complied, eliciting a sharp cry from John, but the gunner quickly lowered the limb while keeping it elevated. Teyla finished placing wooden splints along the limb and secured them in place with more bandage wraps.

Outside the room, voices and the noise of pounding boots signaled the arrival of Lorne and the others who dragged a primitive stretcher behind them. “We’ve got a litter,” he announced.

“We are almost done,” Teyla replied, fingers trembling from the tail end of her adrenaline rush. Surveying her work, she wiped away beads of sweat off her brow and gratefully accepted Sergeant
DiNucci’s canteen to wash the grit out of her mouth. The liquid was stale and warm over her tongue, barely able to quench it. With a pang of guilt, she bent over the major. “Here,” she urged. Supporting his head, she held the canteen to his parched lips.

Water poured out too fast, but John gulped it all down, a tiny bit dribbling down his chin. “Easy,” she warned. He coughed as it went down the wrong pipe, his face blanching as the choking reverberated through the rest of his body.

“How long since his last morphine dose?” she asked.

“Just before you got here, but we only had one syrette,” McKay replied.

“I will give him another dose once we are loaded on the plane to make the trip easier on him.”

“The saline is finished,” McKay said, holding up the empty bag.

Teyla quickly switched out the units, aware of all the eyes watching her. “I believe we are ready.”

Martha appraised the splinting job, but avoided all the tubes snaking into both John’s arms. With an almost maternal touch, the grandmotherly woman straightened the rosary nestled on John’s chest, and fingers dabbed with yellow plant sap quickly painted several dots and lines on his cheeks and forehead and a cross over his heart. “May the Father keep watch over the shepherd and his angels.”

“I think your people might be the angels, ma’am,” Lorne spoke softly.

Martha shook her head. “Nosir, those who protect all Mother’s land are.”

With a final shake of her head, those pressed against the corners came out of the shadows to oversee the departure of their charges. The large feather-bedecked man who had been tasked to cut off John’s leg walked toward Ronon and clapped him on the shoulder without need for words.

“Rodney, I will see you one day in the valley, with all the Father’s children,” Martha smiled.

“Yeah, um… hopefully a long time from now,” McKay fumbled over his words. Then he surprised everyone when he gave the woman a quick peck on the cheek and muttered, “Thanks, Martha.” The old woman beamed, her wrinkled brown face splitting with a red-stained smile.

Saul came forward with three other warriors, each positioning themselves at the corners of the table. Saul looked to Lorne for a signal.

The captain straightened to his full height, Petoskey and DiNucci waiting to help transfer their CO onto the litter. Saul and his warriors lifted John from the table to the stretcher, and relinquished their care to the Americans.

Lorne took one end of the litter and peered down at his CO. “Good to see you, sir.”

“It’s…good to be seen. We…all accounted for?” John rasped. Craning his neck, McKay and Ronon anticipated his actions and quickly came into view. “We’re missing one.”

Teyla gathered her supplies, slinging her pack across her back, stepping next to Lorne and gazed down over John.

John visibly sagged into the litter. “Permission…to proceed.”

“You ever been on a seaplane, sir?” Lorne asked.
His crew and comrades closed ranks to listen in. “No, can’t...say that...I have,” John replied.

“There’s always a first time, sir,” Lorne chuckled, allowing a slight grin. “Even if we got an Aussie pilot.”

“What?” McKay squawked.

Ronon’s rumbled laugh filled the hut and Teyla allowed a small smile for the first time in days.
British and Canadian materials and equipment for replacement therapy:  
A. British (right) and U.S. Army dried plasma units.  
B. British dispensing set for plasma.
Conclusion

It really hadn’t been fair. John had been fighting the pain that grew exponentially as each day passed. He’d laid as still as he could on the thin, stinking mat, not even able to swat the stinging black flies away, because even the smallest movement would turn the constantly gnawing pain into white hot teeth with a pitbull’s grip on his ankle. It would travel up the shattered bone in his leg and leave him gasping through clenched jaws as he struggled not to shake and make it worse. The adventure books he’d gobbled up as a kid would always have the injured heroes blacking out with their pain, but that turned out to be fiction in its purest sense.

When Rodney had told him that the only thing left was to have his leg hacked off, he’d fought it like the pain. Laid still and not answered and tried to will it away. But the pain had finally beaten him down, left him desperate enough to actually wish his leg gone just so the unrelenting pain would just STOP. There was one syrette of morphine left, and John wanted it so badly. But to waste it, just to wake up again in the same place with the pitbull waiting… So when Rodney said he should give in, he did.

The rest was a whirlwind of painted brown faces, hands and water and strange words and movement that had him as close to that heroic blackout as he’d ever gotten. Finally laid out on the table, as the natives in their feathers and gourds had gathered around, he had found his still place again. The pain had ebbed just enough for his heart to race with panic at his hastily muttered ‘do it.’ He could hold out, he could wait another day. Ronon could try to bring help again. He’d seen the red streaks, knew well enough their portent. But they had Penicillin, the great Miracle Drug that cured everything if you believed the stories.

Ronon climbed up on the table with him and pulled him into a firm grip, his arm a steel band across John’s heaving chest.

He couldn’t do this. He couldn’t let a native clad only in mud and feathers slam a steel blade into his femur. What had he been thinking? What the hell had Rodney been thinking? Was he under some native sorcery? A spell or a plant given to him so he would do the cannibals’ bidding?

His heart was pounding against his sternum, sending reverberations throughout his entire body. He could feel his head and limbs thrum with fear-drawn adrenaline. He opened his mouth, gasping in the humid, fetid air. His own stench, infection and old blood and cold sweat. He tried pulling Ronon’s arm away from where it was constricting his chest, holding him in place while a painted monster waited patiently with his machete. The arm was a restraint on his breathing. On his singular desire to crawl off the table and back to the small quiet hut.

Suddenly he felt warmth as Ronon dipped his head down next to his ear. The big man’s dreads were a scratchy tickle on his cheek.

“You can do this, Sheppard.”

John tightened his feeble grip on the steel band but didn’t answer.

“Live, Sheppard. If there is one thing I’ve learned flying with you, it’s that you have a strong will. Strongest one I’ve ever known. You’ve got balls of steel. And you will not give in to your fear.”

John choked out a laugh. “Think it’s winning, buddy.”

Then Rodney was there, his face a pale sweaty mask. Fear showed there too, but when he met John’s eyes he saw the strength there he’d always counted on.

His crew. Two men he’d die a hundred times for. And they’d already proven they would die for him. Ronon could easily have gotten himself and McKay out to the shore, made them temporary shelter until they could set up a signal fire. With the thousands of troops descending on Biak, they would likely be rescued eventually. But they’d stayed for him.

He tightened his grip on Ronon’s arm, but pulled it in closer, bracing himself in his friend’s sheltering grasp. He knew they would get him through this if humanly possible. He stuttered out a nod and Rodney jabbed the needle into his hip.

It was little worse than the sting of the black flies. Then he felt the ice water that suffused his system, spreading an ironic warmth throughout his body. He sagged, let his eyes close as the world dropped away and he was left suspended in a comforting fog. He could hear the voices around him, knew the machete would be biting at the bone of his femur soon. One chop would likely not be enough, and the thought should’ve scared the crap out of him, but it seemed so distant and blunted.

After waiting an eternity for the blade to fall, John realized there were harsh voices breaking through the fog. Then the sounds of rattling metal, the distinct ratcheting of revolvers being cocked. He could feel Ronon tensing behind him.

He blinked and drifted and the next he knew, Teyla’s face was swimming into view in front of him. He smiled. Or at least he thought he did, because when Teyla met his eyes there was only deep concern. As she bent over his body the realization of what she was seeing brought heat to his face and he moaned, tried to fold in on himself protectively. Then something was draped over him and he wilted with relief.

He floated in his head for a while, rousing only to answer questions with what he hoped were the right words. When he felt hands manipulating his bad leg he jolted back, his heart pounding with fear that it had all been a dream and they were taking his leg right there and then. He tried to get Teyla’s attention, last minute, panicked regrets tumbling about in his feverish brain. Her words were reassuring and he was able to accept that his leg was safe, for now, and that would be enough.

The trip through the jungle was a nightmare, almost enough to make him beg for the convoy to stop, just long enough for him to catch his breath. Gasping with each jouncing step his litter-bearers took on the uneven path, John had struggled to keep his jaws clamped shut, bottling up the screams in his throat. There could be Japanese around, and his silence was crucial.

A small yelp finally broke free as a branch bent by someone’s forward progress snapped back and struck his splinted leg. The group froze in place, listening for the yelled orders of Japanese troops. John closed his eyes and prayed his weakness wouldn’t be their undoing. After a minute of listening to fat raindrops plopping onto the foliage Lorne nodded an all clear, then shot a meaningful glance at Teyla. She placed her fingers on John’s neck, pressing gently on his carotid. She pulled anther syrette of morphine from her pack, then he felt the prick of the small needle. She smiled at him, swiped a hand over his forehead and pulled free a leaf from his hair.

The promised cocoon of the morphine was there, hovering on the periphery, but the trip was rough enough to keep him awake until they broke free of the jungle, emerging out onto a rocky gray beach. There he saw his first seaplane. The pontoons were jarring but he could imagine touching down on the ocean’s surface with them, water spraying up in his wake as he skimmed across the waves… And with that thought he finally sank into the black.
There were murmured voices, alternating soft and harsh. John listened from the bottom of a deep pool. He lay on the bottom, the water warm and dark, his breathing even and calm despite the water.

“The choice is no longer yours to make, Lieutenant. You were relieved of that duty the moment the major was placed in my care.”

“You saved Sully’s leg just last month!”

“Captain Sullivan’s break was much cleaner and infection never had a chance to set in.” There was an exasperated sigh but the voice softened. “The leg needs to go, Rodney.”

“Look, Doc- Carson. Please. You aren’t even willing to try? You’re going with the diagnosis of a couple of senior citizens in war paint?”

“Your native granny was right, Rodney. The infection has spread too far, and the best I can do for the major is to remove the leg.”

“I- I don’t know that that’s best for the major,” was the quiet, almost hesitant reply.

The lure of staying in the warm dark pool was strong. He had heard enough to recognize they were talking about him, what they were trying to decide for him. Just as he had back on Biak, he was tempted to let the decision be made for him. He knew - and had known- that the choice made him a coward. But the thought of losing his leg scared him beyond measure. He would be shipped home. Back to his father and the big quiet house. Patrick Sheppard would put on a good show for everyone. His son, the returning war hero. How proud he would seem as he tucked the blanket around his wheelchair bound son with thoughtful tenderness. Everyone would shake John’s hand and praise him for his sacrifice then wander off to the tables groaning under the weight of food and drink his father would so generously pay for.

Then the crowds would drift away and he’d be left alone to wheel about the cold, empty rooms, with his own weight to bear- that of his father’s condemnation and disappointment.

John stirred as his thoughts brought a shot of adrenaline. His heart kicked up a notch and sent the chemical racing through his body, awakening him further and sparking a new fire in his damaged leg. He heard a moan, and the reverberation through his broken nose set off a throbbing ache that made him realize he had made the sound.

“How about we do this one at a time, Rodney?” came the doctor’s weary but affectionate rebuke. “How are you feeling, lad?”

His lips were dry, stuck together and he felt skin rip as he parted them. His voice was a dry whisper as he fumbled for an answer. “I- I-”

“Major?” he heard from both men simultaneously. He cracked open one eye as he surfaced from the pool. Beckett and McKay were standing at his side. Rodney’s eyes were wide with concern.

“How about we do this one at a time, Rodney?” came the doctor’s weary but affectionate rebuke. “How are you feeling, lad?”

His lips were dry, stuck together and he felt skin rip as he parted them. His voice was a dry whisper as he fumbled for an answer. “I- I-”

“Easy, son.” Carson nodded at someone out of John’s range of vision, and a moment later the smell of lemon drifted through his swollen nose. A white cloth dabbed gently at his mouth. It was cold, dripping with water. His raw lips stung with the added lemon but the flavor was well worth it, the citrus cutting through the paste, loosening his tongue from the roof of his mouth as he sucked greedily.
“Not too much,” the doctor admonished. “You may be going in for surgery soon.”

John swallowed roughly, licked the lemon water from his lips. “Leg?”

“Aye. It’s your best option, son. But now you’re awake, I’ll give you a say in the matter.”

A large head hove into John’s view from behind Rodney. His gunner was there, a fresh square of gauze on the hit he’d taken to his head. As he wakened further he noticed Rodney’s arm was in a sling.

“You okay?” he asked, flicking his eyes at both of them.

“Yeah, we’re good,” Ronon answered. Rodney lifted his broken arm briefly then sighed. “We’re good,” he echoed.

“Teyla?”

“Right behind you,” Carson said with a smile.

John turned his head enough to see that his lemon water-bearing angel was indeed Teyla. “We are all good, John,” she said, smiling.

“Aye, lad, everyone’s present and accounted for. It’s you we’re all worried about.”


“It’s my professional opinion, Major, that we amputate your leg at the femur or the hip, depending on what I find during the surgery. The femur cut would allow you use of a prosthetic limb at some point in the future…” He left the rest unsaid. But even through the morphine haze, John understood, if he had to take it at the hip, he would remain legless and bound to a chair for the rest of his life.

“’s not an option, if there’s only one choice.”

Carson sighed and nodded. “We could try high doses of Penicillin to beat back the infection. If we can stop the sepsis, I may be able to salvage the leg. But I must advise you, Major, that waiting could prove fatal. Your condition right now is quite tenuous.”

John looked into the eyes of each of his friends. Read their fear and concern. Teyla squeezed his arm as if trying to lend him some of her own vital strength. Rodney attempted a smile, but it never reached his eyes. His gunner quirked his own grin, feral as ever. “You know the answer I’d give you, Sheppard.”

He did know the answer, had known it all along.

“I want to keep my leg…” he said as calmly and strongly as he could.

Carson’s face crumpled and he began nodding his reluctant acceptance.

“… but I want to live more,” John finished.

The doctor smiled and patted his shoulder. “Understood, Major. I promise we’ll get you through this.”
Time passed in a haze. He awoke infrequently, pain shaking him from sleep but only briefly. The slightest stir or moan would bring the ice water back to his veins and he’d sink back into velvety blackness. Sometimes he dreamed of flying, the gray ocean rushing beneath him, no Zeros, just the clouds and the sun warm on his face. The first peace he’d felt in the skies in years. Other times his plane would be spiraling out of control as he fought the stick, the same gray ocean now granite cold and hard as he smashed into it, exploding into a white hot fireball that would wake him gasping and screaming. He was vaguely aware of hands on his face, on his arms, shushing him back to reality so he could slip once more back into sleep.

Then came a time when he surfaced from his pool and the pain was there but muted and distant.

Music was playing softly from somewhere. He heard a loud cry, off in the distance. There was the sound and vibration of pounding feet as the cry grew strangled and more urgent. Then it stopped abruptly.

“Think that was O’Donnell,” was softly muttered.

“Nope,” was the reply. “O’Donnell didn’t make it- he died yesterday. Think that’s Brigman.”

“Oh. Brigman had the burns, right?”

“Yeah.”

“So where were you this morning?”

“Flew out with Lorne. His gunner took shrapnel in his shoulder. Was just a cleanup run. Didn’t hit any resistance.”

“You uh, find anyone?”

John opened his eyes and blinked away the film in time to see Ronon grin. “Yeah, we picked up three who made it to the airstrip. Looks like they’re all gonna make it.”

“Really? Wow, that’s -- hey, he’s awake!”

“Think you’re right, McKay. Hang on, I’ll go get the doc.”

“Major? Am I right? Of course, I’m right, I’m a genius!”

John curled a small smile at that and was rewarded with Rodney’s face breaking into a wide grin.

Ronon came clomping back in, his boots loud on the metal floor. “Doc’s right behind me. He awake?”

“You doubt me?” Rodney asked, hand on his heart as if wounded. “He smiled.”

“Morphine’ll do that for you,” came a Scottish brogue as Beckett came into view. “How are you feeling, lad?”

John was struck with a wave of déjà vu. He had no idea how much time had passed since he’d last been asked that question. But as the fog thinned he remembered with a start what had happened then. His hand scrabbled on the bed at his side, his fingers questing over the sheet for his leg.

Beckett stilled his hand, squeezed the fingers fondly before putting them back on his stomach. “It’s still there, son.”
Relief surged over him, made his eyes well up. He squeezed them shut but felt a hot tear crest the lip of his lid and trace down the side of his cheek.

It made the doctor smile. “You gave us quite a scare this week, I’ll have you know. Even had you prepped and ready to go in. Another more urgent case came in and bumped you down a place in line. By the time we came back for you your fever had come down a notch or two, so we waited it out.”

John sniffed back warm salty moisture. It moistened his throat enough to allow a softly breathed, “Thanks, doc.”

Beckett folded his arms and stiffened his back. “Let’s see how grateful you are at the end of a week, flat on your back in that thing.” He nodded his head at the end of the bed.

John lifted his head, dug his chin into his chest and gaped at what had been done to his leg.

A dark angry red incision ran from just above his knee, down his shin andbraceleted his ankle. Shiny steel staples held the flesh together at the two joints and heavy black sutures zippered down his lower leg. Wood and gauze bandages made a kind of scaffolding that cradled his leg from thigh to ankle and the whole construction was held aloft by a system of pulleys that hung down from the ceiling.

Beckett sighed then continued. “And realize that you’re staring down the barrel of another seven to ten weeks there.”

John tried to picture ten weeks on his back. The notion should’ve freaked him out, but the morphine haze just left him staring, with what was likely a goofy smile, at his still attached, though Frankenstein-inspired leg.

Beckett turned out to be right. The first week was relatively easy. Morphine kept him comfortable and he dozed through most of it. When he was awake it was to catch up on news of how the battle on Biak was going or goings on around the base. Who made it back and in what condition. The news was mostly bad. Hundreds had been killed since the battle began, thousands more terribly wounded. But the true toll was being taken as Teyla had warned. Lack of clean water had made thousands ill, and weakened thousands more who succumbed to the various tropical diseases. As men grew desperate and panicked during the shortages, accidents became commonplace; a bad gunpowder mix here, an overloaded jeep there. Ten times more were dying due to illness and poor leadership than the Japs killed.

Then John learned the fate of the Eager Beaver. After it had plummeted out of the sky and struck the Pegasus, it crashed into the Pacific. Pieces of the plane had washed ashore; all aboard her were missing, presumed dead.

The news weighed heavily on John’s conscience. Young Lieutenant Betts had been her pilot.

“Oh, now don’t start the guilt thing again,” Rodney moaned.

“I put him in that plane, McKay,” John growled back.

“No, he volunteered. Because he was cocky and figured ‘fly one plane, you’ve flown ‘em all.’”

“He never got any training,” John started.
“Because there wasn’t time,” Rodney spat back. “Nieves had dysentery so bad he couldn’t leave the latrine long enough to fly the mission. Nuts needed the Beaver up there and Bettsy waved his hand in the air.”

At the time John had figured the kid was a natural enough talent, he could pick it up. By the time he’d gotten the weather reports, it hadn’t occurred to him that the storm might be too much for the young pilot. And it had cost the lives of three good men. Rodney could sputter about it all he liked, but John knew those deaths were on him.

As week two started, Beckett began him on bed exercises. Small hand weights for his arms and chest at first. The single pound dumbbells had his limbs shaking and his face covered in sweat, but one of his crew or Teyla was usually there with a towel and words of encouragement. More awake, his morphine cut back, the days stretched long and tedious in front of him. He had a small radio that sometimes managed to get in the Armed Forces station. He followed the news as the war progressed. The European theatre was seeing success, beating back Hitler’s men by the day, but the Pacific wasn’t going nearly as well. And it had him itching to get out of bed and DO something.

Week three started off badly. He’d developed a bedsore on the small of his back. The only time he moved was when they changed his sheets or an orderly helped him onto his bedpan. Now he had the added bonus of nurses coming in to change the bandages on his ass. Rodney chiding him about his weight loss making his ass ‘bony’ didn’t help, and neither did Beckett’s pointed reminders that if he’d taken the leg he’d have already been up and around on crutches.

He’d made his bed and apparently, he was gonna lie in it. A lot.

He was struggling with a tray of food, propped up against a mound of pillows when he looked up to see Nuts O’Neill himself striding his way. John dropped his spoon and tried to straighten up by digging his elbows into the thin mattress. The tray tilted and threatened to slide off his lap but the colonel caught it with a smile and hand wave.

“At ease, Major.”

“No other position to take, I’m afraid, sir.”

“You have a point.” O’Neill pulled over a chair and plopped down casually. “So. You got to keep your leg.”

“Apparently, sir.”

“Good on you. Helps we have Beckett, of course. The man’s one of my prizes. Traded him off the Aussies for a few boxes of whiskey and a surgeon who probably drank half of them his first week there.”

“I owe him my life, yes, sir,” John replied. The colonel rarely visited the hospital and as John looked around he saw many of the other patients and staff staring his way. Nuts seemed oblivious to the attention.

“Is there, uh, something I can do for you, Colonel?”

“Funny you should ask, Major. I was here to do something for you.”

“For me? Sir?”

The colonel was eyeing up John’s traction setup. His eyes widened as he traced first the healing incision and then the rope work up the ceiling. “Geez, the Seabees come in and set that up for you?
No wait, Army Corps?"

“From what I hear tell, sir, it was my guys. McKay is still out ‘cause of his broken arm and Dex… well, he just likes to keep busy.”

“Yeah, I’ve heard that about him. Guess you made the right pick with him after all.”

“With both of ’em, yes sir. Wouldn’t be here without them.”

“Or a certain Papuan Mata Hari, I hear. Guess I know now where all your mystery intel was coming from.”

John blushed. “About that, sir…”

“Her information saved a lot of lives, Major,” O’Neill brushed off. “And I’ve had the pleasure of her acquaintance. And believe me when I say it was a pleasure. Wow, she’s a good-looking dame.”

“Y-yes, sir--”

“Not what I’m here to talk about,” the no-nonsense commander cut in. “I have a proposition for you, Major.”

“Anything, sir, John said sincerely. “And by the way, thank you, sir. I know Lorne had to get your blessing on picking our asses up.”

“Don’t forget the seaplane.” O’Neill flashed a smile. “So. What do you know about jets, Major?”

“Um, they go real fast? Or at least they’re supposed to. They have their own special fuel formula. The ratio of burn to oxygen is--”

“Good, right, they go fast. We’re rounding up a list of names, and I’ve thrown yours in the hat. After this whole silly war thing is over, how’d you like to try flying them?”

“M- me, sir?”

“Yes, you, Major, and stop with the modesty bullshit. I need the cocky Sheppard who knows damn well he can fly anything with wings. You still that man?”

John looked long and hard at his mangled leg suspended in front of him. Was he still that man?

“If you’re worried about the leg, Beckett says give it a year and you’ll be back on your feet and flight ready. He seems to think you have the right stuff still.”

Huh. John hadn’t heard any such word from the doctor. His talk was more of the ‘wait and see’ and ‘you’re getting better but still have a long road ahead of you’ type.

As if reading his mind, O’Neill lowered his voice and leaned in closer. “See the doc is a smart man. He has to keep you on a short leash since there’s no two ways about it, you’re stuck for another five weeks at least. Then the plaster goes on and you’ll be hobbling around on crutches for another four to six weeks at least. Spent some time similar to yours,” he said softly, tapping at his knee. “But what the doc don’t understand, being only a medicine man and not having spent any time on a bed pan himself, is I know you need something - something to drive you, keep you going. A reason to get outa that damn bed,” he growled, staring spitefully at the narrow cot.

“So,” he said, wiping his hands on his trousers and rising from his chair, “in conclusion, you get your reason, and we get a pilot to test our jets. Ever since he saw the Brits got them, Major General
Arnold has been chomping at the bit. He’s jealous as hell. Any objections to Edwards, Major?”

“Air base, sir”

“Yeah. It’s California. You have a problem with that?”

“No, not at all, sir.”

“Good. Warm and dry. Good for the leg, too. The humidity here is a killer.” He rubbed his knee then made a vague salute that John was still lifting his hand to answer as the colonel dropped his. Then O’Neill let out a low whistle. “I think I see another reason coming this way, Major,” he muttered out the side of his mouth. “One with great gams…”

“I don’t know who you’re talking about, sir,” John stammered as Teyla and his crew headed his way.

“Funny, thought it was your leg broken, not your eyes,” O’Neill grunted as he walked away.

“What did Nuts want?” Rodney asked as he dropped heavily into the chair the colonel had just vacated.

“He offered me a job,” John said, still trying to adjust to the news.

“What kind of job? You can’t even take a cr--”

“Not now,” John snarled as he felt his cheeks flush and darted a quick glance Teyla’s way. “For later, after the war is over. Whenever that is.”

“Soon, I’d imagine,” Rodney said off-handedly.

“What’s soon, and why would you think that?” John asked, narrowing his gaze. “Spill it, McKay.”

“Well, you know they liberated Paris this week. The Allies have decended on Hitler like a pack of wild dogs. Paris was a big chunk out of his - hind portions,” he stammered with a wary look at Teyla. “Russia will get the scraps. I hear Roosevelt and Churchill are already arguing over how to divvy up Germany.”

“That’s Europe, Rodney,” John said tiredly. “Pacific isn’t going so hot.”

“True, true. But I put in a few calls to some old friends. What with all the down time I have on account of my badly broken arm.” He lifted his sling and deliberately winced.

Teyla patted Rodney’s shoulder like a patient mother. It did the trick; Rodney continued with his tale. “Anyway, Once Europe is all over but the crying, there are plans for Japan. Big plans.” He winked dramatically; his smile was smug.

“He’s talking about the bomb,” Ronon chimed in.

“I know what- wait, how do you know? You told him about the --”

“The bomb, yeah.” Rodney blushed lightly and traded a heavily loaded look with the gunner. “I was trying to make a point.”

“Anyway, my friends tell me that they’ve made a breakthrough. I can practically guarantee you that by the time you’re up and about, the war will be ending. More with a bang than a whimper, I’m afraid,” he added. “Huh. It’s strange to think about it. The war being over, I mean.”
“What will you do, after, Rodney?” Teyla asked.

“I uh, suppose I’ll go back to Bell. Say, Bell has the contracts for the jet prototype,” he said brightly. “You’ll still be flying planes with my… modifications.”

“That’s comforting,” John replied dryly.

“Hey! My modifications saved our bacon more times --”

“And you, Ronon?” Teyla asked loudly over the squabbling.

The big man smiled and averted his eyes. “Go back to Hawaii. I’m hoping they’ll rebuild Pearl, and can use a strong back. And I, uh. I got a girl waiting for me.”

Teyla grinned broadly as John and Rodney sputtered. “Why that’s wonderful, Ronon. What is her name?”

“Melena. She said she’d marry me if I came home.”

“And after all this time you never thought to mention this?” Rodney almost screeched.

“Didn’t wanna jinx it,” the gunner mumbled. “And you’d think I was stupid and backward for being superstitious.”

Rodney nudged at the lucky compass that John knew he had but Rodney didn’t know he knew he had. “Yes, that would be a silly superstition,” he muttered.

“So, Sheppard gets his jets, Ronon gets the girl, I get unlimited coffee. Maybe I’ll get a cat… What about you, Teyla?”

“I will stay here and help re-build Guinea,” she said with a touch of sadness.

“You know, Hawaii is almost a halfway point between the states and here. Maybe we could all meet there, after the war? Ronon, you can put us all up, right?”

The big man laughed and knocked Rodney in the shoulder. “Sure, McKay. You can sleep on the floor.”

“Not with my back --”

“And I’ll teach you to surf,” he said to John.

“That’s standing on a board in the water, trying not to drown as a tsunami hits you, right?”

“Pretty much, yup.”

“Sounds cool.” John leaned back against his pillows and took in a deep breath. Outside the war still raged and he had almost a year of recovery to face. But here, amongst his friends, even in a crappy tin hospital in the middle of the jungle on the other side of the world, he felt completely at home.

The End.
Battle of Biak-

Biak’s Japanese garrison of 11,000, taking advantage of coral caves that honeycombed the terrain, held out until August 20th, 1944. The bloody battle for Biak produced some of the worst fighting of the entire campaign and cost 10,100 U.S. casualties on land and sea. There were 471 KIA, 2,433 WIA and 7,200 lost to illness and accidents. About 4,700 Japanese were killed, 220 captured and the rest were pinned down in the islands interior.

Japan

Approximately 202,100 Japanese soldiers, sailors and airmen died during the New Guinea campaign.

The largest number of deaths, 127,600, occurred in Papua and New Guinea with a further 44,000 dying on Bougainville and the remaining 30,500 dying on New Britain, New Ireland, and the Admiralty Islands.

Australia

A total of 5,770 Australian soldiers are known to have died in Papua and New Guinea, the Bismarck Archipelago and Bougainville. The Royal Australian Navy suffered a total of 1,094 deaths in operations throughout the Pacific and Indian oceans against Japan.

United States

The Americans suffered approximately 16,850 casualties during the New Guinea campaign. Over ten thousand men suffered from disease or illness, and approximately 7,000 American soldiers, marines, sailors and airmen were killed.
15,000 civilian deaths. (estimate)

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Original Author’s notes: This was without a doubt, marathon story, with plenty of peaks and valleys writing wise. As always, I couldn’t have done this without my fellow Jedi, Beth. For all her long nights, crazy late-night phone chats, and mighty editing skills. She can make words shine on a raining day. This was a tough story to weave in and out heavy bits of history, character moments, and battling AU versions of the people we love, all the while trying to make it exciting.

Big thank you to Tridget for taking all our images and making them beautiful. There wasn’t a single picture that she didn’t alter in some way to create a seamless presentation.

The biggest thanks to all the readers who stuck by us through each and every chapter. Your words of encouragement was music to the muse. For all those who waited for the complete version, I hope you enjoyed the journey and would share your thoughts with us.

Until next time!- Kristen

Author’s note: This was Kristen’s original idea for BigBang and I am proud to have had a part in bringing it to fruition. No one writes action scenes as well as she does, especially when she puts Sheppard into pilot!mode.

The AU aspect taxed me sorely, as I had grown comfortable with the voices we all know and love, and I no longer had that recognition to fall back on. No current pop culture references, reining in some of the voices to fit the military standard we had placed them in, working in the bonding of the team we all know and love while considering the views on race and gender of the times. I was happy to hear that most found the voices still recognizable as our Team.

Happy we were able to bring some folks long ago and far away with us. And posting this as I am tonight, to me it’s still Wednesday, which is Veterans Day for us in the States. But no matter where you are, give thanks for the men and women who put their lives on the line for the safety of you and yours. Take care and be safe.

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