They circle around each other; they’re team. Everything else is background noise. "Newton’s law of universal gravitation states that any two bodies in the universe attract each other with a force that is directly proportional to the product of their masses and inversely proportional to the square of the distance between them."

Notes
This is a story that struck me suddenly while working on *this is the uprising*. I wanted to explore one of the teams I've previously used in this verse, see more "from the sidelines" as it were. Canonical characters (including SG-1) make appearances, but more like cameos. Focus here is going to be on OCs and minor characters we don't see or hear that much about otherwise. This Daemon AU is part of the *ghost and raven*-verse, but I don't think it's completely necessary to read the other stories first for this to make sense; I'll explain things along the way. Please enjoy!

It might seem like I've completely abandoned this fic, but I promise I haven't! It's just so busy right now. I'm in the middle of revising/updating previous fics in this 'verse, and I want to finish the sixth fic, "seeking antebellum", before I return to this one. I've got a few chapter drafts and ideas lying around and waiting. I'll go through this fic and revise/update it like I've done with the others, to fix grammatical and continuity errors, and standardize spelling from British to American for coherence, and other details like that. Thank you everyone who has read, left kudos and comments thus far!
the law of gravity

i.

the messenger

“Thank you, Staff Sergeant,” she says to Hill. “I’ll take it from here.”

“Ma’am.” Hill gives him the briefest of looks as if saying Don’t screw this up, before he turns and

“Lance Corporal MacGrimmon, report!”

The bark is not wholly unfamiliar. He rushes to obey. Sergeant Hill is there, waiting, by the
threshold of the hangar; and he’s not alone.

He raises his gaze in surprise. The person standing there is not at all whom he imagined it to be;
not the old man or the chief. A stranger. He snaps into attention anyway, back straight, because
the person nearing is wearing dress blues. Sharply cut. Not carrying weapons with her.

Also: Air Force. Wait, what?

Now what? Juno wonders for the both of them. Oh, this ought to be good.

This makes no sense. What’s a zoomie doing here? A Major, to boot. There’s not a speck of dust
on her uniform. She has a pleasant kind of face, that easy-going character that’s easily likeable.
Her Daemon isn’t that large, moderately fierce. Doesn’t look ready to rip his throat out. J.J. takes a
leap of faith to mean that she comes bearing good news.

“Thank you, Staff Sergeant,” she says to Hill. “I’ll take it from here.”
leaves J.J. and Juno to their fate. And he wonders if this means not a sudden unexpected demotion but a longed-for opportunity. There is nothing to speak silently of where this zoomie comes from, her mission.

She asks him to walk with him outside, on the track running westward in a circle above the base and he cannot obey. Follows. Tense. She seems pretty relaxed, as if this is a routine thing. At first she is rather quiet, as if waiting for him to make a move; a test? And he says, “Permission to ask a question, ma’am?”

“Granted.” The way she says it – like she comes from somewhere with a pretty relaxed attitude to protocol. The hint of a smile.

“Why are you here, ma’am?”

“Let me introduce myself. I’m Major Amanda Hurst of the US Air Force, and I’m extending an offer to you on behalf of the Program for which I work.” Sounds like it needs a capital P, that. She looks at him from the corner of his eye, and he tries his best to seem just intrigued enough but not too curious, but the words don’t reveal anything at all – so: classified. To some degree, at least. Secrets. “An opportunity to do something very unique.”

Probably means there’s paperwork to sign before he can get to know what exactly he’ll be signing up for – or refuse without ever knowing.

“And what exactly is this … program, ma’am?”

“I’m afraid I cannot reveal anything pertinent until you agree to sign a non-disclosure agreement. But,” she says, pauses in step to look at his face and he follows suit. “I can tell you that this is might be the most amazing thing that could happen to you. You were recommended to us by Lieutenant Gregory Martinez of the USMC.”

Greg? Hasn’t exchanged words with him for a while. They try to meet up sometime every now and then, though, when their leave corresponds with each other. Good guy; and to be recommended … What kind of base does that? What kind of place selects its individual marines so carefully? This has to be something else.

Ugh, what if we get stuck lifting weights? Could be nothing at all that it claims to be, Juno says across their Bond, privately so that the Major cannot hear.

“Do you think you’ll be up to the challenge, LC?”

Without hesitation: “Yes, ma’am.” Adding, carefully (is this a test?) -“I believe myself capable of figuring out a way to beat the odds, ma’am.”

She smiles. “You need that kind of attitude with the Program. Think about this over the weekend. If you’re still interested by then, call this number. Ask to speak with me.” Hands a card with neat, sleek print on it. Very anonymous: a number, her name and rank. No insignia or logo stamped in the corner.

“What if I were to say yes, ma’am?”

“Then transport will be arranged to base, and after signing non-disclosure agreement you will be told everything,” the Major explains. Need-to-know. “Think about this closely.”

“And … what if I were to say no?”

“Then we would not bother asking again,” she says brightly. “The Program only requires the best,
the most dedicated.” Something implied which he cannot quite catch. Maybe it’s just the usual: the
chiefs all say that. *You’re the best and that’s why you’re here.* No matter where.

She begins to move away. “That is all, Lance Corporal. As I said, think about it.”

(As it turns out, that was not a weird day at all by comparison.)

That isn’t quite how it starts, though. One version of it, more like.

It starts when J.J. drops out. It’s part accidental (the moments stacking together and creating a
critical point), part rebellious teenagehood coming into form. They’re seventeen, and Juno’s
Settled on a final, absolute Shape four months earlier. They like it.

All right, so J.J. wouldn’t have minded if his Daemon was a bit tougher-looking. Part of the
image, he guesses. Has to be – should be – that way. On the other hand, with a Daemon with such
kind, soft expression, people are a little bit less likely to deem him an unreliable thug at first
glance, the dangerous stereotypes. God knows they suffer enough of those. The constant
underlying dangers and fears.

They’re seventeen, and he hasn’t gotten straight A:s ever but it’s gotten worse over the years and
mom and dad they ask him to try harder; when he doesn’t pick up, pleading amounts to
arguments, and hours of sulking silence, and skipping out on classes and duties. His dad, Jimmy,
is a baker. Whole lot of people don’t think that, that stern face doesn’t fit the picture, they think.
They all help out in the off hours, the whole family have got to do that for the business to go
around. J.J.’s seventeen, he’s tired of it all, he wants - he wants something **more**. Something
within him reacts. He’s had enough.

Mom and dad despair. Wonder why he’s suddenly made this turnabout from sweet and kind to
roughly rude and dismissive. Skips classes. Gets into trouble. They’re worried, and he’s just - for a
moment, he doesn’t want to care about anything. Loitering, they think. Frightened at the thought
of what he might get up to, late nights. Not at all like his younger siblings, the twins and little
Jonah who isn’t that little anymore, a scrawny boy of fifteen (and J.J. doesn’t tell until long
afterward why he’d come home with scraped-up fists that Thursday night, doesn’t explain why
he’d picked that fight for them looking down at Jonah and calling after him using his deadname)
and they’re disappointed he’s not shaping up. Not fulfilling the dreams as he should. Doesn’t
come with them to church anymore on Sundays.

Hadn’t ever thought he’d end up in the Corps.

Greg says, once, can’t quite recall the exact moment; they’re sitting on the bridge, they’re turning
eighteen in less than a month (funny thing: born nearly the same day, moms best friends who met
at the ward) and they grew up in this neighborhood together and didn’t notice the differences of
the world until they’re older – J.J. first – and Greg had says: “I’m thinking about signing up.”

And J.J.’d thought he was being thoroughly ridiculous. Couldn’t see him like that at all.
**“You? C’mon, be serious, man.”**

**“Sort of am.”**

Greg’s dad is in the Corps. Been kind of quiet lately and J.J. finds out why, eventually, later. How
Greg’s dad didn’t come back home.

**“And you? You gonna be stuck here, as what, a baker?”**
And he shrugs and almost says yes, but he’s tired of this place, he wants to see new things. He’s not doing all of the stuff mom and dad are worried about, though. Think they worry too much. “Nah.”

“Tell you what, let’s do it together, a month from now.”

They’ve done a lot of stuff together; like brothers, blood doesn’t really matter; it doesn’t matter at all.

Greg nods, enthusiastically: “Chicks dig that kind of stuff, y’know, with the uniform –”

J.J. shakes his head. “You’re off your rocker.”

“Hey, let’s make it a bet.”

“You wanna sign up as a bet.”

“Turn us into decent men.”

“Seriously, you’re off your rocker.”

And twenty-seven days later, they’re standing in the recruitment office and there’s a guy telling them about possibilities and turn-abouts for the future. Chances. That it’s simply a good thing; (J.J.’s wanted to get out of town for ages; and he hasn’t got the grades to apply to uni, nevertheless the money. and Greg smirks, the most challenging look. a challenge like that has got to be accepted.)

He’s granted a twenty-four hour leave. As if Staff Sergeant Hill might know what this is about, or has a hunch. Knows that he has to think. Grants him as much. J.J. is both relieved and confused. Heads off base, downtown, away from Quantico and its familiar air. There’s this nice and cozy place that serves really nice beer with perfect fries and there aren’t a lot of whites here, so he feels he can unwind fearlessly, relax. Join in a game of poker. Some old friends are there. Laughter and banter and casual remarks.

After, he considers the number the zoomie Major had given him. Tries looking it up online but it doesn’t yield results. Whatever this is, they want to keep in a secret. An amazing opportunity – unique …

A search for ‘The Program’ is even more useless because the term is so generic. He tries, anyway, just to see. But it leads to nowhere, and he goes to bed not really tired, but restless, and might dream odd things. Wakes up not that refreshed but he makes up his mind, there while stirring his coffee.

He can do it. This base here, it’s not a place that feels like the place to really be. Not home or especially pleasant, though he has been far worse off too. A tour in Afghanistan. That was kind of rough. There had been no mentions of abroad or even tours.

He considers the number. Picks up the phone, using his left thumb to press the digits one by one and hovers for a second over the final button. Then: yes. He’s going to do this. Of course he’s going to do it.
Three rings.

As if knowing – as if waiting for this – it’s the Major speaking and she simply asks: “Have you made up your mind?”

He takes a deep breath. Before the plunge. “Yes, ma’am. I have.”

Please, God, don’t let me regret this, he prays as the transport – and how weird is that, being picked up so secretly and privately? – bears him and three other recruits (but not especially young or fresh-faced so maybe that’s the wrong word) through Colorado Springs to a place the driver simply calls ‘The Mountain’. It’s like any base, surrounded and fortified and guarded. Marines with rifles patrolling. IDs checked.

The man by the control station is gray-haired and looks at them, their temporary Guest IDs and the complicated paperwork which the driver (damningly anonymous too in his cammies) had had them sign, and he smiles as if knowingly. “Welcome to the Mountain,” he says, a brief salute. Then onward.

They enter on Level One, and Major Hurst is there. The ride had been tense and thrumming with excitement. No one knows more than him, and here he finds out their names: Thompson, Markham, West. Mixed backgrounds, experiences, ranks. From the outside they are simply the most ragtag bunch and yet they have been personally picked, reviewed, considered.

Past the greetings: they sign a document which is long and full of tiny script. His vision starts to swim but he tries to read it all, orderly and slowly – they are given time. Can pull out if they want to but no one does. Reaches the line eventually and puts his name there. Next new IDs are issued, photos taken anew.

“Better stuff will be fixed later,” the Major says, handing them the freshly laminated plates to attach to their cammies. “But at least you’re no longer Guests. This way.”

Toward an elevator. There are some thirteen sublevels marked there, and they go all the way. Then, across a hallway – grey, the basic underground works. First time J.J. has been in a base this deep underground and it is much larger than before. Still they haven’t been told much.

“So, we’re going to be let in on the big secret now, ma’am?” Lieutenant West asks pleasantly.

Another smile. “Soon enough.”

Another elevator. This one requires a code and a secure key to enter, and it’s a bit larger. Goes even deeper. Major Hurst presses the button labelled 28, each lower level having a higher number than the other. The ride is surprisingly smooth; though there is not a hint of rust, there’s just something about this place that seems a bit … antiquated. Like a left-over nuclear bunker from the Cold War, looking to have never been renovated from the outside; the inside is another story. Going down makes his ears pop uncomfortably, but J.J. refuses to let the slightest discomfort show. No one shuffles their feet. Hearts are thrumming loudly. This is it. What they’ve signed up for.

Some underground bunker. Oh, great.

Down here, as they leave the elevator behind, there’s loads of folk moving around. Reminds him of an aircraft carrier, though maybe not as cramped. The hallways are brightly lit. They follow the green and red lines on the floor, past some bulkheads. Up a curled stair. A conference room of some kind, with a large briefing table at the center. There’s a large plasma screen on one wall,
catching his attention. High-tech. But Major Hurst gestures them away from that. There’s a large
window and it’s covered in a protective grey shield of steel. An airman is waiting in the corner of
the room.

A brief exchange: “More newcomers?”

“Yeah. I’m giving them the Grand Tour – thought I’d start out big.”

“You always do, Hurst,” says the airman, inclining his head and chuckling. “All right. Want to do
the honors?”

“No, you go right ahead, Tim.”

A button is pressed and the shield lifts. It’s not as loud or bulky as expected. A sliver of light: the
room below comes into view. Spacious.

“This is an old missile silo,” Hurst explains, but J.J. just vaguely listens because there’s something
very weird in that room. It doesn’t look like it belongs here. In fact, it looks unlike anything J.J.
has ever before seen.

It’s a … ring. Tall. Sitting there quietly. It’s grey and brown and there are symbols raised onto its
surface; maybe steel, or something else, hard to tell. Actually, it looks more like one ring within
another. There is a glimpse of marines spread out below, a protective half-circle around the
mysterious ring; almost like a mock-up of a ceremony of prayer;

“What’s that?” blurs Markham.

“That is the reason you’re here, gentlemen,” Hurst says. “This is the Stargate.”

The whatnow? Juno scoffs. That’s the cheesiest codename we’ve ever heard.

And it looks nothing like a weapon or nothing.

The Major glances at her wristwatch. “And the show should be starting right about … now.”

All of a sudden the inner ring begins to spin. Turning from left to right in a decisive, gentle move.
J.J. follows the movement with his eyes, realizing that the edges of the thing aren’t entirely smooth
but there are these raised … things – he had no words for them. Like clamps, maybe, shaped a bit
like broad, thick Vs.

A voice calls over the intercom:

“Chevron One encoded!” as the spinning pauses, the V-shaped clamp moves, locking down for a
moment and lights up in orange, like the marking of a symbol. Then the spinning starts all over
again. “Chevron Two encoded!” This happens twice, thrice, five, six times; and the last time, the
voice declares: “Chevron Seven locked!”

And blue freaking light bursts out of the ring, out of thin air, speeding from the edges and to the
center like a rapid wave. A surge outward. Stabilizing. Major Hurst doesn’t even blink. J.J.’s jaw
drops as the ring is now filled with water. Except it’s not really water, too blue and deep and it’s
hovering in a completely unnatural way inside of the ring.

What. the. fuck.

He isn’t the only one thinking this. But he can’t tear his gaze away. A team of people – in
cammies, armed with some model of the P-90, it looks like – are moving below. A blonde
woman; a grey-haired guy; some other younger guy who appears like he’s talking half a mile a minute, wearing glasses (civilian?); and there’s a big guy carrying some weird staff. They move toward the ring of light. Step into it.

Disappear.

Then the light flickers off.

No sign of the people just walked through the not-water.

*What. the actual. fuck.*

“That’s the Stargate,” Hurst returns to saying very calmly far too calmly like what. what. is this normal around here? “That’s an alien device archaeologists found in Egypt in 1924.”

“… Alien,” Markham repeats, stunned. Blinks. Refrains from repeating what they’re all thinking: *is this some kind of sick joke?* He isn’t reprimanded for the lack of protocol.

The Major acts very understanding at their stunned befuddled confusion. “Yeah. I could barely believe it at first either. You just witnessed the formation of an artificial wormhole – think of it a bit like temporary highways through space. We dialed a planet a few hundred lightyears away from Earth.”

Planet. Lightyears. Aliens.

**Stars.**

*Oh my God. What have I gotten myself into?* is J.J.’s first thought.

His next is: *Oh my God. I wish I could tell Jonah and the twins about this!*

“This, gentlemen, is why you’re here. SG-1, the people who just left, is a so-called offworld or Gate team, who explore other planets, greet the natives, and expand our knowledge about our galaxy and the Stargate system.”

Team. J.J. glances at the men by his side. So they’re to become a team now? Like that … SG-1?

It’s Thompson who voices the question.

“We’ll see. You’ll be tested individually and in groups, and, if you’re lucky enough, you may find yourself part of a team. I’m not going to lie, this is going to be tough. It’s going to be weird. You will do things and see things you probably cannot even imagine,” Hurst answers.

“Could you give an example, ma’am?” West asks, like testing the limits of his own mind.

“There’s a race of aliens out there called the Goa’uld. They’re our number one Bad Guys at the moment. They’re a parasitic race that crawl into your neck, attaches itself to your spine to tap into your nervous system, and takes control of your body. They like to pretend they’re gods and enslave the human race.” At their silence – too shocked to know if this absurdity can be laughed at or not – she adds: “And that’s just the tip of the iceberg. Come on, I’ll show you the rest of the place.”

A gesture at the nearest door. J.J. forces his feet to move. They feel heavy like his boots have been replaced with lead. It’s difficult to think.

Major Hurst sounds cheerful and understandingly gentle (as if to somehow soften the shock) all at
He tries to call, but reaches only voicemail. Number’s outside of the covered area. J.J. leaves a message on repeat (ends up almost yelling, incoherently, the shock finally setting in and he’s pretty sure the only reply he’ll get is hysterical laughing) – there’s an alien device a Stargate a gateway to the stars;

“Greg, you – How long have you known about this shit? and been unable to tell me? You. You made me watch Wormhole X-treme! and, oh, God, this is why you guffawed through the whole first season, isn’t it?! and told me that it’s worth watching and there’s something, something very realistic ‘bout it, huh? Huh? Why the hell did you tell me you were assigned to D.C., you fucking liar?!’"
Chapter Summary

“so we won’t be fighting bad guys?”

Chapter Notes

(2018-09-28) If you're reading this, it might be because seeking antebellum has been completed. I want to thank everyone who's read, left kudos and/or comments!! And if you're here, thank you so much for continuing this journey with me! This is the next step.

According to my drafts, I started writing this chapter in September 2016. I did intend to continue this fic earlier ... really ...

I just started trying to make sense of all my OCs, characters, places, the timeline, etc. in a kind of spreadsheet before continuing writing the actual fic. To organize my mind and have some place to fact check so I get it all right. And I realized I've used 150+ named or described characters in this series (probably more, to be honest, still counting). No wonder I've started to confusing myself about who's doing what when and in relation to who and what they like ...

On one hand it's somewhat frustrating; on the other it's lovely and great that my OCs (and the minor canon characters) have begun such a life pretty much on their own. It's as if they're demanding to be written, and I'm fond of all these guys (as is obvious from these fics). Anyway, all of this sorting out backgrounds and timelines is one of the reasons it's taken me this long to update this fic (and I'm still working on it).

Would anyone be interested if I created some kind of Dramatis Personae for this series/universe and made it accessible for others to read?

Anyway -- once more onto the breach!

(2018-10-18) Chapter updated/revised, fixed a spelling error.

ii.

space

“so we won’t be fighting bad guys?”

It takes days, weeks, before any of them get to be anywhere near the Stargate again. There are physical tests and medical exams and psych evals. There are other kinds of tests too. Feels a bit like a mix of boot camp and high school. Doing both push-ups and math in the hours in-between; trials. Simple duties, cleaning up. Getting to learn the place. The levels. They’re given access cards but it’s not high-up enough to take them everywhere and anywhere. Hurst oversees them mostly, but there are others too.
What they’re calling the Stargate 101 is like a compressed term of college rolled into a few afternoons: history, a brush on linguistics, on physics. Names of all the planets and places and aliens – aliens! aliens! – and everything else they need to be aware of. Things they need to know by heart as well. So much yet to learn. Too much. They’re barely scratching the surface. Encouraged to delve into as many reports as possible in their free time.

The mess hall and the gym, they are sort of normal places. Actually many rooms of the base are sort of normal places. It’s just the Stargate that tilts everything else off-kilter. Thankfully, there are lots of normal people here: marines, as well as scientists, civilians. Doctors. All sorts. When finding out that J.J. and the others are “newbies”, they are happily understanding, and there are the odd comments, of course. The exchanges of stories. Warnings of what not to do and when exceptions can be made. Rumors beginning to be touched in order to understand the workings of the Mountain.

Such as: “SG-1 are the legends, man. I mean it, the legends. They started it all, y’know, back in ‘97 – O’Neill and Jackson first, of course, in ‘94. They are the legends. All the weirdest stuff happens to them but, man, they are the legends.”

And: “Don’t act too surprised when some guy comes back from the dead. Happened to Dr Jackson – this weird light show and something about radiation poisoning or some crap. Came back about a year ago. Bound to happen again sometime. Don’t ask me how, just roll with it.”

Or: “Avoid the Botany Lab on level sixteen this week. SG-14 brought back this ticklish, carnivorous fungi that almost ate Morrison.”

Or simply: “Hey, MacGrimmon – you’re LC MacGrimmon, right? If you see Lieutenant Smith wandering around, please direct him back to the infirmary. Keeps wandering off – temporary amnesia, got stung by this bee on P4S-919. Guy thinks he’s an alien; well, that we’re aliens and that he’s the normal one from ‘919. Cheers!”

So. Not exactly the most normal base, by any or all accounts.

Their own time to actually step through the event horizon of a wormhole themselves doesn’t come until weeks and weeks later. They’ve been on guard duty a few times, apart and together. Mingled with the rest of the crew. J.J. may or may not have taken a fancy to one of the marines, which he knows can be a bad and complicated thing, but, honestly after these last few weeks – still not over the part about aliens – he cannot reprimand himself. At times like these a girlfriend would be nice. Very nice. Unwinding. Not that he could’ve told her anything about … anything … if she’s a civilian from outside. No, would be easier with someone from the inside. Except, you know, regulations against fraternization and all that, and J.J. likes to respect the rules. Doesn’t sit well to break them. Even if protocol is kind of different here – ‘relaxed’ may be the wrong word. Just different.

The Mountain is like a world of its own.

Finally: it’s time. They know the regs and the protocols and the warnings. It’s time. They watch the Stargate turn and listen to the Chief repeating the mantra: “Chevron One encoded; Chevron Two encoded; Chevron Three encoded; Chevron four encoded; Chevron Five encoded; Chevron Six encoded; Chevron Seven locked!”

The wormhole begins existing.

It’s always as spectacular and amazing and breathlessly alien to look at. Once, Dr Lee tried to explaining how it worked. The doc is kind but tends to babble distractedly. J.J. just couldn’t follow. He’ll leave the science to the scientists.
It’s still pretty cool.

(He’s heard a brief mention of the Ancients. Another alien race they know too little about: it’s not the most important kind, because the Ancients don’t seem to be lying around and they aren’t at war with them, so it’s not J.J.’s problem.

The matter at hand is about the Goa’uld and Kull warriors, the kind which had destroyed the second Alpha Site and killed so many people, Tau’ri and Tok’ra and Jaffa alike. Those are the Bad Guys; that’s all.

He doesn’t hear more about Ancients until much later.)

The planet is named oh-so-catchingly P4X-650: the Alpha Site. The third one, after the other previous two had been either abandoned or destroyed by the enemy. This one is better than the last ones, they say. More permanent, cut into a mountain much like Cheyenne. Better defenses. Because of its likeness with the Mountain on the interior, at first J.J. wonders if they didn’t make an accidental U-turn.

There’s a Control Room, the now-getting-familiar panels and blinking lights. Personnel in uniforms same as theirs. Major Hurst tells them there’s a bay full of F-302:s – some kind of fighter jet recently perfected. But as marines they won’t be anywhere near those. Instead they’ll be trained for ground-bound combat. “Hopefully,” Hurst says, “you’ll spend more time talking with friendly neighbors than being shot at. That is a sign of a successful SG-team.”

There is a Captain there with them too, who’s going to take over their rookie training, a different kind of drill instructor: a couple of weeks out here, getting a taste of the off-world life. A small portion of it, anyway. Mission objectives vary. It’s not all about going out there to shoot a gun. Captain Briggs’ team, SG-17, is on temporary leave, one of them injured with a broken leg.

“So we won’t be fighting bad guys?” West asks, sounding a tiny teensy bit disappointed. Fancies the action, at least the good bits of it.

Hurst nearly laughs. “SG-1 gets to fight the bad guys. Us Redshirts, we’re the background noise. Plus, there’s the alliances to make, the peaceful recons, avoiding trouble. The quieter the better, really.”

“Redshirts’?” Thompson blinks, not getting the reference, and J.J. decides that this is a guy he’s got to marathon Star Trek with sometime to see whether he’s worthy.

“Yeah, ‘cause we’re the ones ending up dead without coming back.”

And she is briefly morose, voice and face dark and serious, and they all grasp that moment. No one laughs. Then she shakes her head and lets it go, and it’s okay to make noises again.

She leads them outside. The air is crisp, a bit chilly. The sky looks … normal. Blue, with a scatter of clouds. There is a dirt road. A few buildings, temporary modules. Vehicles. The forest doesn’t look that alien. Earthlike. Trees will always be trees, Juno remarks. Nice to know.

Then the Major directs them to turn so they have the sun at their backs and the base to the left-hand side, and they see the imposing shadow of a nearby moon. No: not one. Two, three moons to be seen with the naked eye.

“Woah! That’s quite a sight,” Markham says.
“This is where you’ll be staying for the next three weeks. Your first taste of offworld life. How do you like it this far?” the Major asks.

“Let me guess. No pizza deliveries out here,” West says.

A dry chuckle. “They’d deserve one hell of a tip,” Markham says.

A first step – no, this could be a giant leap. If he could call home and tell the parents, tell his siblings:

*Aliens are real. There’s life on other planets, and I’m spending the night six hundred and forty lightyears away from Earth …*

“Oh, and Briggs has hidden a naquadah-enhanced warhead somewhere around here and they’ve got to find it before it goes off.

*Great fun,* Juno says, and they throw themselves into the fray.

Markham’s been hit, and though they’ve been warned about zat’nik’tels and seen what they can do in the controlled environment of a lab at the SGC, seeing it for real is terrifying. One second he’d been right behind him, upright, stalking forward with his Dæmon and the next J.J. felt the discharge – electric, powerful – sweep right by, and it struck Markham right in the chest. Slumped over. J.J.’d guided him to the ground while Thompson returned fire. The in’tar looks and feels much like a P-90, though the recoil is weak, and the red flare of light so strange. Has different settings; can tickle, or stun a person completely.

(A zat doesn’t have settings.)

“Okay, now what?” West grunts, kneeling behind a fallen root: the tree must’ve been a hundred feet tall, once, with ease. It’s an oxygen-rich world and that’s an advantage they can use right now. Not dangerously rich, however, or they’d not be here without SCBAs. But gravity is also about a hundred and fifteen percent that of Earth due to the planet’s extra mass, so the extra oxygen is greatly welcome. All of them are already winded, weighed down even though there’s
nothing more to the gear than usual. Arms feeling slightly heavy.

J.J. frowns. Well, they can’t just dump Markham here. Guy’s out cold. “West, you stay here while he comes ’round,” he directs. “Thompson, with me.”

“Hey, what about –” West starts resisting.

“We got to find that IED, remember?” Thompson’s the explosives expert. Knows how to disarm them and shit.

“But he might not come to for hours. There’s just one Snake.”

It’s kind of funny: how quickly they’ve adapted. Already picked up the lingo from the Gate Room. Don’t want to stand out as Rookies, after all.

“Then protect his unconscious ass! We won’t leave someone behind,” J.J. barks. This alien planet may not hold sentient life, but there’s other kind of life, and they can’t just leave Markham lying in the dirt waiting to get eaten or bit by an alien snake or infected or whatever. Besides, Briggs plays a Snake, but what if more are lying in ambush they don’t know about? No scenario is complete without an ambush. “That’s an order, Lieutenant.”

For this exercise, he’s been picked as acting leader. Rank only plays a part around here. With the SGC, leadership is key, and all four of them will be tested for it, to find boundaries. Besides, they may not form a proper SG-team at the end. Could be delegated elsewhere.

It’s really, really weird; another thing to get used to. J.J. isn’t, not yet, even if Greg warned him about it.

“Yes, sir.” Grouchy, but obedient, West moves to kneel next to Markham’s body, taking care not to touch his Dæmon, sprawled side-ways by his feet. Peers into the distance, in’tar raised.

J.J. takes point and Thompson follows. The trail isn’t cold yet. Occasionally they can hear laughing from ahead, tauntingly. The Goa’uld aren’t much for stealth. Prideful – but you got to watch out. They play games. Mess with people’s heads.

Literally.

They succeed. Thompson gets the bomb to go quiet instead of going off, and they all live, and Briggs-the-Snake corners them in a creek full of fallen logs – a mess left behind by a storm, a lightning strike not too long ago. The fake Snake is accompanied by two other guys – marines, but J.J. has learned their names yet – surrounding them, and Markham’s still unconscious half a mile away with West, and J.J. is swearing because his in’tar’s fucking jammed. And Thompson disarms the bomb and releases a set of in’tar volleys and takes the guys out cleanly. The guy was clearly surprised himself, disbelieving.

On the trek back to the Stargate, he can’t stop talking about it.

“That was awesome.”

“That was shit, man,” J.J. says. He’s covered in dirt, hungry, tired, and really needs to take a piss. He’s pretty sure he sprained something in that fall, too.

“Yeah,” Markham agrees. He’s still got one hell of a headache, woke up less than an hour ago all confused, but stumbles on like a soldier refusing to complain.
“I disarmed the IED under fire and got ‘em. Like, right in the chest! Did you see that shot? It was great.”

“Someone,” Markham says, and gives Thompson the middle finger, “make him shut up.”

West slaps Thompson’s back hard enough to make him cough. “Where did we stash those in’tars?”

“Come on, guys,” Thompson says, a tinge of hurt. “Admit it. I was good. The hero of the day.”

“Yeah, yeah, you saved our asses, hooray. What’s the opposite of Shut Up and Color? You do that,” Markham says.

J.J. rolls his eyes.

_Please, Juno shares the thought pressingly, don’t let this end up being our team after all. We’ll be up the wall in a week._

_A week? J.J. thinks, already exhausted. Try a day._

At least Briggs is suitably pleased with them. Says they did good. A show of teamwork, and good leadership, willingness to listen when J.J. took command despite being a mere LC. And, Captain Briggs adds, pretty nice marksmanship. As if Thompson’s ego needed to hear that.

“But,” Briggs says before they’re allowed to leave for the Alpha Site, “you know what you did wrong?”

J.J. doesn’t answer.

West frowns. “Sir?”

“You left the Goa’uld there without double-checking. You turned your back on them.” Briggs looks at them one by one severely: “Never assume they’re taken down by the first shot.”

“Sir, no, sir.”

“Second thing. You shot without checking which one’s Goa’uld, and which one’s the Tok’ra operative. Yeah, that’s right,” Briggs says humorlessly. “Lieutenant Tyler had that role, and you had him down with one shot, ignoring his signal.”

“Uh, what signal, sir?”

“You turned off your damn radios.”

“Sir, that’s not it,” J.J. has to protest. “I double-checked. We’re on the right frequency.”

“And if the Goa’uld has got radio-cancelling tech on them? Did you try to figure that out?”

“No, sir,” J.J. admits, ashamed. Feels like being chewed out at base camp, in front of all the witnesses in the world. Like he’s failed the biggest test of his life. Immediately brings him down from the high;

Even Thompson’s sobered up now. “We’re sorry, sir.”

“At least you’re not dead. All right, back to the Mountain. You guys can sleep on this,” Briggs says, a nod, an order. “Markham, remember the address?”
“Yes, sir,” Markham says, slightly taken aback.

None of them has actually used the DHD before. There’s always a supervisor with them offworld, and at the Mountain there’s a Control Room for that. Out here? No such thing.

“Go on, then. It’s going to be dark soon, and that’s when the venomous frogs come out.”

West leans closer to J.J. “He’s kidding, right?” he murmurs, glancing at Briggs.

“Don’t know, man,” J.J. mouths back. Because, seriously, at this rate the shocks are coming, he wouldn’t be surprised if the Captain has taken them to a planet full of raving plants and man-eating reptiles and super-storms, and if they fail to dial Earth correctly they’ll be forced to spend the night here.

The Captain doesn’t even raise an eyebrow. His Dæmon is looking at them, a narrowed gaze, silently. Markham dials, hesitating for half a second before rapidly pressing the symbols in the correct order.

“IDC,” the Captain reminds briskly.

“Yes, sir.” Markham does that too, quicker than he dialed the Gate. Getting the hang of it, and maybe a bit nervous being scrutinized like that by the Captain.

“IDC received and confirmed, Sergeant Markham,” a technician’s voice reaches them via radio. “Iris is lowered.”

They step through the Gate.
ad infinitum

Chapter Summary

"heard you’re a hero now."

Chapter Notes

(2018-10-07) Thank you everyone who has read, left comments and clicked the kudos button! This chapter ties into and is sort of a fix-it of "Heroes" from SG-1 (see tags). Because we all love Janet Frasier. Please enjoy.

ad infinitum

"heard you’re a hero now."

It’s accidental.

His promotion comes three months later, by chance and yet not. He’s not had the luck to become part of an actual offworld team, not yet. Instead he has various other duties in the Mountain and away from it. Not that that’s bad. J.J. sees cool stuff anyway. And enough of the whirlwind to learn that this kind of life is routine here. Alien invasions, parasitic computer viruses, robots, the works; no big deal. People here have to adapt or it’ll drive them right into a wall. No choice.

He’s on guard duty in the Gate Room often enough. Sometimes stationed at the Alpha Site. Guarding. Watching. Waiting for the worst to happen, ready to act if it does, ready to jump in as backup if a team’s coming in hot. Mostly boring. But that’s good too. Boring means no one’s about to get shot dead.

He ties bonds with people on the base, marines and a couple of airmen from wherever but mostly the marines. It’s just easier, that way. And he tries chatting up the cute Lieutenant Lynn. Doesn’t go too well. Not that she burns him too hard; didn’t scar him for life, but he’s going to avoid her in the coming weeks. At least he wasn’t embarrassed in front of Markham or West or any of the other guys.

He’s started thinking that if he were to get a girlfriend who’s part of the SGC, at least that’s one secret he wouldn’t have to keep from that potential someone. Could complain about the weirdness of the place aloud to each other. They’d both understand.

The base is like a village. A small city of its own. Thrives on whispers and rumors but they all know how to act strictly professional. Wouldn’t work otherwise. As the months pass he gets to learn more and more of the place and its people, about the legend that is SG-1. Stuff they’ve done
to save the Earth. The near-invasion by the Goa’uld. Of nukes never going off thanks to them.

He doesn’t get to talk with SG-1, even meet them in person, not for months, and J.J. honestly isn’t sure if he wants to, with all the stuff that keeps happening to that particular team.

It’s accidental.

Martinez is part of SG-17 and his team is called in for back-up on some planet, P3X-666. Except Martinez is down with the flu (a case so bad that it sounds like he could be hacking out his lungs and leave them on the floor: the docs are taking care of him though. J.J. wonders if they have some kind of alien miracle medicines stashed away). And someone, maybe Hurst, manages to pull the strings to have J.J. take his place for time being, bewilderingly; maybe it’s just the way of things, the roll of a dice and now it’s his turn. West has been assigned a spot in SG-9. It’s his turn now. Accidentally.

To be part of a team is something else. Something special. An honor. They all say it, anyway. J.J. has longed and feared fiercely for weeks, tensely awaiting the action. This is it. General Hammond gathers them around the briefing table. The meeting is short. A team, SG-13, is in trouble.

That in itself is not that unusual. Except today it is, because there’s this camera crew hanging around – led by this obnoxious guy named Bregman – recording stuff, in case of a possible unearthing of the SGC one day in the future. Someday, they claim, someday the declassification of the program will happen, and then everyone will want to know what happened inside the Mountain. What its heroes looked like.

General Hammond is not in a good mood for any of this. The events on P3X-666 is just the tip of the iceberg.

An ambush. Sounds bad. They need a medic. SG-1 is going too; they will be today’s heroes, J.J. knows: the rest of them are, as Hurst once said, the Redshirts. The backdrop venue, but no less important.

They go.

Lieutenant Colonel Dixon, leader of SG-13, is there with some pet scientist. What they’re investigating J.J. doesn’t know and frankly he doesn’t care. Adrenaline is pumping harshly through his veins and he has been to the Alpha Site, sure, but this is a whole other planet and darkness has cast a thick shroud around them all, and they’re under attack. Goa’uld. They’re real. Ambush. The cries over the radio are thin and panicked and weak. Sharp bursts of gunfire. Brief lights in the dark: white and red and blue. They’ve got wounded.

The doc, Frasier, sets to work. J.J. provides cover fire. Wants to move, but the doc needs to patch up the patient first, or the damage will be worse. Losing blood. The grass beneath their boots is soft and mossy. The sky dark and dotted with foreign constellation. There’s a gas giant within sight of the planet and maybe this is no planet but a moon - J.J. doesn’t know, doesn’t care. A glimmer of violet, distantly.

He recognizes the guy, vaguely. Lieutenant Wells. The damage looks bad; J.J. faintly hopes (but cannot waste too much emotional energy and concentration) that it looks worse than it actually is. An open wound surrounded by burns, his uniform torn revealing the frail human body beneath all that cloth and Kevlar; there is a glimmer of blood, of exposed muscle. Wells’ Dæmon whimpers and writhes;
“Staff weapon,” Dr Frasier says curtly to Major Carter when she kneels next to them, offering assistance, a P-90 slung over her shoulder. The guns are thrumming. Sharp, short, steady bursts. Wells is in a bad way. SG-13 have been stuck here for too long without backup, night creeping up on them and nowhere to go.

“Can he be moved?” the Major asks.

“I need to a stretcher and more bandages. Help me with this,” Dr Frasier instructs, and the Major obeys without issue, steel-faced. Whatever has been said, dry jokes in the mess hall and gym about redshirts – Major Carter and the rest of the high-ups, they care. They care.

They all matter.

No time to linger on the sentimental. There are ships in the sky – Death Gliders. Al’kesh. J.J. peers upward; kneels in the dirt in attempt to hide as one of the ships makes a low sweep, engines whining, an alien sound.

*Please, Mary, please don’t let me die here on this miserable fucking planet.*

Slowly, far too slowly, they get Wells on a stretcher and they begin to break cover. Want to run. Have to move like the most unlucky pieces of the board, zigzag through the grass which is turning to mud as the fire spreads and boots upturn it. Shouting voices. Orders issued over radio. SG-7 is trying to hold the Gate so that they can escape and now Smithers is shouting: “*Colonel O’Neill, our position is being compromised! We can’t hold the Gate much longer!*”

*Please, Mary and Joseph. Don’t let us die here.*

Running. Running.

They have to fall back. Move. Move.

He sees like in slow-motion from the corner of his eye, the figure of O’Neill – the legend, the man who can’t be moved or die because he’s Colonel O’Neill – he’s hit. Falls. Shit, shit, shit. The hint of a Jaffa, of the bad sort: a staff weapon still smoking. Hit O’Neill right in the chest. The Colonel’s Dæmon is collapsed right atop of the Colonel on its side, unmoving.

Breathing?

Breathing (please let it be) –

*Oh please oh please Mary –*

“*Sir!*” Carter shouts. Panicked and trying not to be. “*Colonel!*”

A team, J.J. remembers Hurst saying, *is almost sacred. Like family – once you’re in a team, you and your squad stick together. Like glue.*

Like glue.

Like glue.

Carter rushes to O’Neill side to check his injury. Radios Smithers by the Gate. The situation is approaching FUBAR every second a little closer a little closer a little closer; and now O’Neill’s down, and if they lose the Gate they’ll all be stuck –

Somehow, somehow J.J.sees all in clarity: it’s not the all-encompassing of night anymore, just the
brush of dawn overheard. Painting the sky beautifully pink and red and glowing like life itself. He sees, hears the heartbeats and the breathing like thunder and they form the lightning, striking the ground. Juno is rushing right next to him close and hurriedly hurriedly they move;

“He’s alive but unresponsive,” Carter says. Martinez rushes forward. Helps. Carter handles O’Neill’s Dæmon, carefully, with covered hands, pulled-down sleeves: the taboo never breached; supporting the Dæmon to lay more comfortably on O’Neill’s chest so that they can be carried together to safety. Still an action of intimate trust, like only family would do.

Dr Frasier and Jones have set down the stretcher with Wells on it. Wells is wailing, whimpering, and his wound is worse than the Colonel’s. Staff blast nearly ripped right through his spine and his Dæmon, trembling in his arms, is heaving sharp weak breaths and J.J. has seen the horrible things happening before. The doc chants *no no no hang on stay with us all right stay with us*. Wells could be weeping.

It takes half an eternity to reach the Gate, the Death Gliders and Jaffa haunting them from both air and ground; Jones and Frasier carrying Wells between them, and Teal’c and Carter supporting the unconscious O’Neill. Martinez and J.J. provide meagre cover hurrying hurrying hurrying;

Fifteen feet from the Gate, fire nearly blasts them all apart – and in the daze, two more Jaffa appear in front of them, as Smithers frantically begins to dial Earth home safety so close now so close;

One of them is aiming a staff weapon at the doc. J.J. sees it before he can process it and doesn’t think. Moves. The doc isn’t meant be here, a civilian. Instincts. Sees the flare of fire. Grabs the doc’s shoulders and tears her down and he might’ve wrenched an arm out of a socket, but they’re not dead not dead. Wells cries out as he tumbles off the stretcher. J.J. is pressing the trigger. One Jaffa falls. Teal’c fires a salvo with his zat at the other one. Clears the way.

If the SGC has received the code requesting to lower the iris, J.J. has no idea. Someone shouts – “*Go! go! go!*”

They obey.

Helping the doc to her feet. Getting Wells off the ground. Running. Thundering feet.

*Go go go* –

They leave the planet behind.

The promotion comes as a surprise.

He doesn’t really remember, to be honest, what happened on PX3-666 until later. Until after the cold shower, getting the dust out of his hair and the blood off his hands (he cannot recall how it got there or whose it is) and cleaned his gun. Routines. Safety. Once he’s back in his bunk.

That night he sleeps like the dead.

In the morning, the camera crew are all gone. Driven off by General Hammond in a cold fury. Nuisances and in the way.

There’s footage, are the whispers, they managed to get as the rescuers returned: they got a shot of O’Neill’s unmoving body and quiet Dæmon, of Major Carter’s stoic face streaked with dirt and stressed shocked tears, of a Lance Corporal’s stoic anonymous uniform, splatters of blood and the
dust of spent ammo, the heavy breathing and the doc leading the stretches, and someone shouting: *Turn that fucking thing off!*

There’s footage. Unsure if they deleted it or not, burned the tapes. The SGC won’t let the pictures get leaked, they all know that. It’s imperative. The privilege of nondisclosure and agreements of silence (but even those are constantly hard at risk, especially in today’s computer-generated age. All it takes is one good hacker.)

They’ll make it. Wells is going to face some serious therapy and so is the Colonel, but they’ll make it. They’ll be all right.

And Dr Frasier got away with a bruise and an aching arm and, hours afterward once the storm has settled into calm, she thanks him. J.J. cannot still clearly remember what for. Says: *Just doing my duty, ma’am.*

*(I just reacted.)*

After the ceremony, brief as it is, J.J. gets a twenty-four hour window of leave, and he calls mom and dad. Cannot tell them much, of course. Just that he’s had a long fucked-up day but no one died, so there’s that. Emotionally much more drained than he’d expected. As if he’d learned nothing from Afghanistan.

Maybe the three first months were so quiet and calm by comparison and that’s why this was such a shock.

He’s not sure.

He calls his brother Jonah next. The wonderful thing with Jonah is that he doesn’t even need to say much to convey a whole world of words. If he lived closer to Colorado they could’ve met up for coffee or a beer. Now the landline will have to do. J.J. skips the unusual greetings. Says instead: *You’d better call me Corporal now, little brother.*

“Hey, J.J. Enjoying the scenery?”

“Yes, because it’s so amazingly beautiful down here,” he answers and rolls his eyes. Continues to lift the weights while staring blankly ahead. The oddly framed painting of a beautiful colorful nebula just happens to be hanging on the opposite wall. Why they’ve hung it there, instead of a large mirror like the rest of the room, J.J. will never know.

Maybe to inspire them and remind them that, hey, going to outer space is the Usual Deal around here.

Martinez joins him, settling in the empty bench-press by his right side. “Heard you’re a hero now.”

J.J. doesn’t answer for a bit. Shifts. Admits: “Dunno even what happened, man. I was just … there.”

“Aren’t we all. So what’s it feel like, huh? Having been offworld proper now.”

Honestly?

Part of it sucks.
“Not the first time I was hoping for,” he quips instead, aiming for lighthearted.

A hum of acknowledgment. “Yeah. I got off easy, my first,” Martinez admits. “Went to M4-whateveritwas for some party-like ceremony with the locals. Didn’t get wasted or anything, mind. I was the responsible one, back then. Which was kind of a pity since there was this big orgy ...”

“Spare me the details.”

“Real friendly folks,” Martinez smirks. Reaches out a hand to slap his shoulder. “One day you might experience it yourself. I mean, you’ve got to be placed in a Gate team sooner or later.”

J.J. stops. Grabs his flask and takes a few big gulps of cool water. The sensation of sweat pooling in his neck is a comfort, familiar, this repetition.

“Yeah. Hope so.” To stop being part of the clean-up crew and actually face the stars in person.

Imagine.

“Ever think, y’know, the Program will go public?”

J.J. shrugs. Hasn’t thought about it that much.

He can’t even begin to imagine the chaos that would ensue.

Martinez tries to make him laugh; J.J. could never get away with lying to him, and the guy is one of those who tries to cheers up the others, even if his attempts may suck. “Maybe better it doesn’t. Imagine they tried to make the Stargate into some kind of airway. But, like, to other planets,” Martinez says, adopting a nasal, pompous voice, like pitching a commercial: “‘Come visit P4X-whatever! Great accommodations! All meals highly nutritious military rations without flavor! MREs! Beware: Aliens may try to eat you or your shoes!’”
the calm before, part one

Chapter Summary

“once upon a time, there’s this city. one day a group of explorers from another planet found the city hidden at the bottom of a big, deep ocean …”

Chapter Notes

(2018-10-12) Thank you everyone who’s stayed with me this far!! You're all awesome and without readers these fics would not be here in this shape today! I started this chapter in September two years ago. Yeahh time sure flies and I haven't gotten any better at all at updating regularly. BUT now I can tell you all I've made a dramatis personae for these fics. At first it was going to be something like a Word-doc, simply based on my handwritten notes, but it just got real complicated real fast and difficult to navigate (I keep losing track of all my characters). So it's actually over here now: its own site. yyeeahhh, I miiight have gone slightly overboard, but these fics are dear to me and so are the characters. Anyway, my plan is to collect everything there, backgrounds on my OCs and timelines and stuff, because I like order like that. Yeah. so umm, please enjoy. (if you want to. thank.)

Also, Happy Coming Out Day to everyone it may apply to! Remember, don't others against their will, and don't feel pressured to come out if you don't want to! Stay safe!

iv.

the calm before

part one

“once upon a time, there’s this city. one day a group of explorers from another planet found the city hidden at the bottom of a big, deep ocean …”

Te’reem · Pegasus
2005 (Terran time) · 184 days before the Uprising

The settlement is pretty big by Pegasus standards, small simple villages scattered across the landscape. Continent is divided by sizable lakes and rivers, and these folks use boats to get around. There are the remnants of ruined towers still whispering in the forests by the beaches and the plowed fields, and the roads were once larger and more robust. Cracks in the dirt, pavement hinted under the layers of moss. It’s like an echo from a time before the Cullings, of an era all too brief of peace and plenty.
J.J. isn’t an archaeologist by any means, but he could bet a month’s coffee rations that there used to be a large city here, teeming with life. Now the villagers are struggling through the desolate aftermath and have rebuilt, replanted, resown. Resilient is the word, Juno muses.

Teyla Emmagan guided AR-1 to this planet five Earth months earlier, helping to establish trade relations and, thankfully, the people of Te’reem are a pretty nice bunch. Have their own cultural mannerisms, of course, as all people do. They don’t trade with coins out here – few places do – but in exchanges of other goods: meds mostly for the Lanteans’ part, and manpower during harvest season.

“Next time the Doc asks for volunteers,” Kemp huffs under the weight of another load of grains, “tell me to shut up.”

“Gladly,” DeSalle says grimly, back heavy with sweat.

A bit up ahead but still within hearing range, Gladys doesn’t comment, just continues to work.

The Te’reem seemed to find them sort of amusing at first. Asked about AR-1 and other teams they’d previously had contact with. Talked very politely, of course, and J.J. hopes that none of his team’s words or gestures or whatever can be taken as insult. Who knows. It’s happened often enough on other planets, with other teams. With his own team.

Once they’d been introduced to the village chief, so-called Elder Piatos, and all the niceties were over with, the farmers were more than happy with their help. Most farmers have big families, and everyone is helping out, all but the youngest, the sickest, the frailest. There’s a woman who’s got to be in her seventies at the least and she’s lifting like a pro.

Yeah, resilient is the word.

There are also kids. Unfortunately. Kids too small to work the fields (which J.J. is kind of glad to see because they shouldn’t be out there) but with all adults at work one way or another – it takes a village and all – that leaves them without supervision, or would have.

An innocent question, a brief remark, and then Piatos has smiled like a sun and said: “Oh, but the offworlders are capable warriors! One of them can watch the young ones.”

And, oh, wait, wait, that’s not what I meant, J.J. tried to start saying. And then to refuse would be very impolite and they don’t want to start another conflict – and J.J. had glanced at Kemp, who’d smirked, and DeSalle – nope, he may be a medic but the mood he’s in today, the lack of coffee (there is so little left now. they’ve tightened up the rations once again) – nope. And that left Gladys.

“If you think,” she’d said, given him a look, “that maternity is some kind of universal constant for all women, think again.”

“Yeah,” Kemp had said, faithfully backing her up: “think again! Sir.”

And that’s how J.J. ended up sitting here in the shadow of an open hut trying to keep track of a dozen kids. The oldest could be seven or eight (though the Te’reem claim they are fifteen, so that must be how they measure their years), and the youngest is just so tiny that J.J. is kind of scared that he’ll accidentally drop her on her head or something.

Kemp had practically shrieked with laughter at the sight, before saluting cheekily and saying: Good luck with that, boss.

Okay, so it’s not that bad. He doesn’t have to do all the heavy lifting today and instead kind of
laze around. Except he doesn’t get to laze around, and he doesn’t know these kids, barely the
caught all the names, doesn’t know what makes them tick. Has watched over his siblings years
ago when they were kids, but other than that, he’s really got no clue what to do with all these little
feet running around.

And if they can run! Jeez. Never sitting still for one moment, constantly chattering or laughing.
Asking questions. Realizing the potential danger he gave his P-90 to DeSalle earlier on, because
these kids are now poking at the rest of him, remarking at the funny way he dresses, the funny
way he’s cut his hair, the funny way he talks …

And of course they wonder about Juno. The Tau’ri have Dæmon in Shapes which differ from
these out here in Pegasus. Likewise, the Te’reem have never seen Dæmons like theirs. These kids
are still so small that none of their own Dæmons have Settled. They keep shifting back and forth
into whatever Shape suits their needs at this hour, this day, this week.

There’s one little boy, much quieter than the rest of them, who remains seated next to him. Turns
out he’d had an accident and scarped up his knee pretty bad a couple of days ago, and the injury’s
slowly healing. He sits there downturned with his sleek Dæmon in his lap, on the wobbly stairs
next to the Corporal, who awkwardly ponders what’d happen if he lost one of the kids. Or
dropped the tiny girl in his arms who couldn’t be older than a few months. Imagines the faces of
Dr Weir and the Major if AR-4 ruins the trade alliance with the Te’reem because of the
questionable decision to leave him supervising a bunch of kids.

No, we won’t screw this up, says Juno calmly. We won’t get demoted.

Maybe. But we could get demoted.

J.J. turns to the silent boy. He’s stroking his Dæmon behind the ears – it’s sort of dog-like, except
with a coloring J.J. has never before seen, and its eyelids are drooping heavily, its long ears
relaxed, contently.

“So, hey, kiddo,” J.J. says. Clears his throat. “What’s your name?”

The boy doesn’t immediately react, though the nose of his Dæmon twitches. Then he looks at J.J.
and smiles a bit. Reckons he’s somewhere around five or six years old, by Earth standards. His
face is thin but healthy and his eyes gleaming with alertness. Still no reply. For a brief second J.J.
wonders if the Gate translation matrix has gotten messed up.

He grins, hoping it doesn’t look too stiff and awkward and doesn’t scream get me away from here
please. Freeing one hand from the sleeping baby, who thankfully doesn’t stir, he gestures at his
chest: “I’m J.J.”

The boy doesn’t immediately react, though the nose of his Dæmon twitches. Then he looks at J.J.
and smiles a bit. Reckons he’s somewhere around five or six years old, by Earth standards. His
face is thin but healthy and his eyes gleaming with alertness. Still no reply. For a brief second J.J.
wonders if the Gate translation matrix has gotten messed up.

He grins, hoping it doesn’t look too stiff and awkward and doesn’t scream get me away from here
please. Freeing one hand from the sleeping baby, who thankfully doesn’t stir, he gestures at his
chest: “I’m J.J.”

The kid looks at him, very concentrated, and suddenly smiles: a wide toothy grin that lights his
whole face. He and his Dæmon share a brief look, before he twists to look at J.J. again, and then
he begins to rapidly move his hands while mimicking with his lips soundlessly.

And realization dawns on J.J., who blinks. Shit. I’m a fool.

Then: Shit, I know some ASL, but how the hell do I talk with this kid in an alien language?

When it’s apparent he’s not catching on, the kid (with patience which he deserves a gold star for)
repeats the signs very slowly. Gesturing toward himself and his Dæmon, and maybe that’s
spelling out his name? maybe? His body language is open and tentative, curious, a hint of
frustrated. Then, tilting his head, the kid makes a gesture for the third time so it’s getting kind of
familiar – what does it mean? – and points at J.J.’s Dæmon. Does it
mean *Daemon*? or name? or…or…?

“Oh! this is Juno,” he says, as clearly as he can. Can the boy hear any noise at all? The way he looks at his lips: trying to read them. How he manages that, with the Gate and alien languages being translated in real-time and all, J.J. has no idea. That’s science way above his head. “Ju--no,” he repeats when prompted.

A moment of consideration. Then, determinedly, the kid makes a series of signs. Representing phonemes or letters? Reaching out to touch his free arm: and now the kid wants him to repeat that. Great. It looks sort of complicated.

J.J. tries not to drop the baby and at the same time repeat the fluid motions of hand that the boy just showed to mean Juno’s name spelled out. For the first time in his life he begins to doubt his own dexterity. Apparently he did okay, because the kid smiles encouragingly.

This way the evening progresses. The boy is really quite talkative now that it’s established that J.J. is a good guy, and he often points at things either to explain them in his sign language, or have J.J. talk about them. Soon enough sitting on the stairs to the hut isn’t enough and the boy leads him around the nearby area, pointing out the signs for *tree, road* (he thinks: could be *gravel* or *dirt* too), *hut* or *house*, and *Daemon*, and something that could be ‘human’ or ‘friend’ something, because he points at J.J. and then at the other kids each time he makes that sign. J.J. isn’t entirely sure which but smiles anyway and repeats to learn it.

The kid shares his alphabet, slowly but surely, drawing in the sand and signing. Fortunately it’s pretty close to Ancient, and J.J. has studied those letters after arriving in the City and finding that knowing the language can help you around a lot. Not that he can understand Ancient, but recognizes most symbols.

A peel of laughter leaves the kid’s mouth when he can finally share his name by spelling it out.

Meanwhile the baby sleeps peacefully (they left a kit with her, blankets and diapers and a bottle). And as the minutes turn into hours, work in the fields progress and J.J. figures someone’s got to come relieve him soon. Right. Right?

The other kids run about with their Dæmons playing freely, and J.J. does his best keeping an eye out. As long as no one’s getting hurt, there’s little point in stepping in. And once they’re tired, they flop down on the grass near him.

At this point they gather around J.J. demanding tales about his homeworld, about Atlantis; a glimmer of hope, of whimsical awe in their eyes:

They ask if he’s met any Ancestors – Ancients. He’s got to shake his head *no* to that, meeting an outcry of disappointment. He tries telling a story, like he imagines people do to kids and grandkids, not sure if it’s in him to make it exciting. Folds an old mission report into a child-friendly format: tries to talk about the SGC without actually mentioning it. The Earth is still somewhat of a secret, after all.

(Ever since Colonel Sumner died because the Wraith tortured him, interrogated him about information about a new rich feeding ground, it’s become a new rule: don’t mention Earth, not to any alien or stranger. Don’t name it, don’t reveal where it is, don’t let anyone know there’s a Galaxy Far, Far Away.

They’ve got enough troubles anyway.)
“… and the team got home safe from the snow planet and, uh, they lived happily ever after. The end.”

The storytelling was difficult, and J.J. tried to use his body language as much as possible for the deaf boy’s sake. Thankfully, about halfway through, one of the older kids had started signing, making it a bit easier. J.J.’s brain is tired, and he would very much like for his team to return now and relieve him. He’s sat in this position so long his left leg is starting to go numb.

One of the little ones yawns. Scratches her nose.

“What does ‘team’ mean?” one of her playmates asks, innocently, wondering at this concept. “Is that another word for family?”

It takes J.J. aback more than it perhaps should’ve. Forces him to think. It’s just a simply innocent question and maybe they’re just wondering about the dictionary definition.

“A team, it’s … like me and my three friends, we’re a team. We’re always there for each other. Watching out backs. Uh, looking out for each other. Team’s the most important thing for my people.”

“Like family!” one of the kids exclaims brightly.


Another kid raises their hand. “Could you tell us another one? please?”

Should’ve brought a laptop, Juno idly remarks. Something with a kid-friendly movie on it. Like Finding Nemo. Did anyone bring that to the City? Got to bring one next mission, just in case.

J.J. tries to scrape up another idea to tell. “All right. Uhm, once upon a time … there was a, a city, a huge city made of steel and glass –”

The enthralled silence is interrupted by a curious question: “Why was it once upon a time? Weren’t you there?”

“Uh, all stories from my world start that way. Though I was there in this story.” The kids seem to accept that answer, and allows him to go on. “So, once upon a time, there’s this city. One day a group of explorers from another planet found the city hidden at the bottom of a big, deep ocean. The explorers were trying to find the, uh, the Ancestors to find out more about them …”

Dusk approaches. Alien cicadas are singing at a distance. Finally the others return, sweaty and tired, and DeSalle is smirking like a goon at the sight of the Corporal surrounded by kids, one leaning on his shoulder and a baby in his arms.

J.J. is, at this point, quite desperate for a break. (There’d been fight among the kids, but thankfully the situation was resolved. One boy started crying, his knees scraped up after he tumbled, and that woke the baby up. Five minutes later, the boy was running around laughing, the incident forgotten. Still, J.J. is kind of worried he’ll have some angry mother yelling at him for being a bad babysitter.)

“Having fun, boss?”

“Shut up. Everything done?”

“Yeah,” DeSalle says, rolling his shoulders, “we’ve just got the last haul of our share out of the
barn. It’s waiting by the Gate with Gladys.”

One of the kids stands up, dismayed when it becomes apparent that J.J. and the others are preparing to leave, packing their things. “One more story!” shouts a girl; chorused by the others: “One more, please! one more!”

“Hey, DeSalle …”

“Don’t even think it.”

“Hey, I could tell ‘em a story,” says Kemp and J.J. nearly wants to bury his face in his hands. Because Kemp’s version of a children’s tale might include more than enough explosions and half-dressed women, a copy of a Bond movie, and his story-telling skills will probably be atrocious; honestly, no kid should have to suffer through that.

Kemp, of course, notices the look, and makes a noise like wounded, gasping, eyes wide. Very theatrical, making the kids laugh. J.J. rolls his eyes.

“My poor heart! Don’t you trust me, boss?”


They leave the gathered huts and dirt roads behind, a gaggle of kids hovering nearby all the way to the Gate, waving and shouting after them clearly happy to have been visited. Elder Piatos and some other adult villagers linger too, saying their thanks and offering words to relay to Dr Weir and AR-1. Formalities are returned.

J.J. feels oddly tired for having sat around most of the day, letting the rest of his team do the heavy lifting. Now they are all saddled not only with their usual light-mission packs and weapons (required also on friendly trade missions such as this) but also sacks full of grain. Gladys dials the Gate, the lights of the alien ring spinning before the wormhole springs to life. Now such a familiar thing, but also a wonder, every time.

They return to a City also an act of familiarity: they haven’t been here for too long, but long enough to make the base into more than just a base. Secured most areas, created not just armories and bunking quarters but rooms of recreation, places for movie nights and poker games and laughter. Calls the marines’ quarters the Citadel for short, name catching on quickly in the early days, and that’s where J.J. spends most of his time off-duty.

The Wraith are a threat, they always are but here … here is almost safety, even without the shield. They’re aware of their vulnerability but also aware of their own strengths as a cohesive unit. Every person of the Expedition – from the shyest astrophysicist to the greenest Private – they all pull their respective load in order to make Atlantis home.

Lieutenant Miller greets them by the base of the stairs along with a security team. Life’s pace is regular at the moment; few other teams are off-world, they’ve exchanged the humid, dry evening of Te’reem for the cool recycled midnight air of the City. Johnson’s there too, relieving them of their burden.

“Looks like you got the nice stuff,” he says good-humoredly. “Trip gone well?”

“Yeah. Nothing to report.”

“Good, we’ll let the Doc know. Hey, J.J., how come you stink less than normal?”
Another roll of eyes. “Very funny.”

“Oh,” cuts Kemp in: “the boss here played nanny for the village kids. Let the rest of us work our asses off. I think it’s some kind of payback since that time when –”

Gladys mutters something on her breath, and Kemp falls silent grumpily.

Miller’s eyebrows rise slightly. “Okay … whatever. Sergeant Bates and the Major want to hear that you’re back safe, and the grain’s got to be taken to storage. I’ll help you guys out with the lifting.”

“Want to join us in the rec room for poker or something tonight?” J.J. suggests.

“Nah, sorry, duty roster’s on until midnight and we’re going offworld tomorrow,” Miller says with a shrug. “No-can-do.”

Kemp grins. “You’re the most anal person ever, you know that, LT? Always polishing your boots and never late to anything. Have you ever taken a night off and gotten drunk? For real, I mean.”

J.J. rolls his eyes and chooses not to comment.

Unable not to overhear – Kemp is not the most discrete talker – Jenkins, also from AR-3, clicks his tongue as he passes them by in the corridor, heading the other direction. He pauses in the middle of a step and exclaims: “Hey, planning a party without me? What’s the deal?”

“That’s an idea! Next Sunday we’re all free, and I’ve got booze. Anyone else?” Kemp says before anyone else has the time to agree or disagree. He reaches out a free hand to pat Miller’s closest shoulder. “I’ll teach you everything I know about the Finer Arts.”

“Won’t take too long, then,” Gladys murmurs, and J.J. bites back a smile.

Miller meets that statement with an intense, competitive stare. “You’re on.”

(a peaceful ending to a peaceful day.)

Five days later, a Storm unlike any envelops the City, and a Genii strike force Gates in, and Miller and Jenkins are dead.
The alarm blares through the Mountain, hours before the strike:

An armada is coming. Anubis. He’s bringing his Mothership and Death Gliders and Goa’uld Al’kesh all under the command of Anubis, and they’re going to destroy the Earth.

J.J. is in the Mountain, prepping for the day, stepping into his TAC vest. His shoulders are kind of sore from last night – but man, it was a good night, so worth it. And she was hella cute. They exchanged numbers five days ago and went on an old-fashioned date. He filters out the chitchat of the other guys as he puts on his boots, holding back the urge to whistle, and he really has to call her again tonight, whenever he’s off duty, to see if she’s got time to meet later this week, yeah.

The alarm isn’t that of the Gate spinning into action.

Airman Rye runs into him. Literally: J.J. is sitting on the bench right next to the door as it slams open. The guy’s breathless and wild-eyed, and every man in the lockers turns to look at the kid,
bewildered.

“Emergency meeting! Dr Weir wants everyone on Level 22!”


There’s no reason for the kid to lie. Must’ve been sent to collect those who’ve just come in for duty and haven’t put on their radios yet. Whatever this is about, it’s got to be important.

“You heard him,” J.J. says, standing up sharply. “Let’s go!”

“This is your new team. Kemp, DeSalle, Gladys. Corporal, you’ve got the most Gate experience. You’ve been assigned the leader of SG-19. Your team has been chosen for the opportunity of a lifetime …”

Every marine and airman on base is there. So are some civilian doctors and Dr Frasier, and Dr Weir has gathered them in the only room on base large enough to fit them all with ease.

Dr Weir says: “A Goa’uld armada is on its way to Earth as we speak.”

J.J. doesn’t know yet what the fuck this means; all he knows is it’s bad, they’re all probably going to die unless SG-1 or someone pulls of a miracle. They’ve got the Prometheus, the F-302s – J.J. has heard rumors about this new squadron, Snake Skinners – sure, but … against a full armada? No chance.

No chance.

“This base is now on high alert. SG-1 is on a mission to find an Ancient Weapons Platform which we may be able to use in our defense. But it is not and cannot be our last hope,” Dr Weir says, so calmly, too calmly for a woman who’s been in charge of the SGC for a little over a day. “All marines are to report to their respective commanding officers. All Air Force personnel will find their new assignments aboard the Prometheus, which will begin ring-ups within the hour. Civilian personnel are to remain on base until instructed otherwise.”

It all starts thirty hours earlier with a bombshell:

General Hammond is leaving the SGC, and there’s this woman – assertive face, dark hair – some civilian – she’s going to be in charge now. Dr Elizabeth Weir. J.J. can’t understand what the hell this is about, but he is not in a position to ask questions. The high-ups, though; yeah, surely they must see that this is not what the SGC should be? It’s a military base, and Dr Weir, this diplomat, shouldn’t be here. Kicking the General out of his office. And that Senator Kinsey gives J.J. the fucking creeps.

But all he can do is bite down and carry on.

His duties won’t change: no one tells him to get the hell out of the Gate Room, where he has Guard Duty. No, J.J. is going to carry on, and he’ll continue walking these halls and exchanging jokes with Martinez and listening to the amazing, embellished stories from the SG-teams;

It all starts eight hours earlier with a whimper, not a bang:

J.J. is on Guard Duty in the Gate Room when SG-1 leave to explore this ruin, this Ancient place –
some kind of archive of alien knowledge, and Dr Jackson had been talking a mile a minute but the rest of them were pretty tight-lipped and their shoulders tense. Another team, SG-2, found the ruins on PX2-439 and J.J. has no idea what that really means.

Not yet.

They come back with fire at their backs, and Colonel O’Neill is rushed to the infirmary, and J.J. hears in the corridors: Ancient Repository of Knowledge – the Colonel did it so that his team wouldn’t have to take the risk – it’s started messing up his brain or something, and it’s a Sentence of Death.

J.J. isn’t sure if the guys telling him this are joking at first; their faces are straight and no one’s laughing.

And then Markham says: “I read that report. The Colonel started talking that alien language, forgot everything else. I think he’d have died if the Asgard hadn’t fixed him.”

This time, there are no Asgard or other Kindly Aliens From the Sky to help them out.

“Seriously,” Markham says, “I think he’s in big trouble.”

It starts when Anubis’ army reaches the Earth.

J.J. is in the Gate Room. They’re on stand-by, ready to dial the Alpha Site. If the Prometheus is destroyed and SG-1 fail to return, and Earth is lost, they have standing orders to go there. To leave.

Not just SG-personnel, but select important people from Earth. Politicians. Scientists read in on the Program.

Dr Weir and the brass are up in the Control Room, monitoring the situation, listening. Radio signals. J.J. doesn’t know what’s going on, can only wait, and he wants to pace but can’t. He wants to pray, but can’t.

He can’t imagine what it looks like outside: the sky – it’s night here in Colorado, but it might be day in Antarctica, bright and heaving. A sky darkened with ships – how many? How powerful? And the other people, the cities, the civvies who don’t know about the Gate – is this how they’ll find out? First Contact, and everything razed to the ground and erased;

J.J. breathes through his nose.

Juno wants to walk around. Can’t. She glances at the Control Room for a sign. Nothing.

*Should’ve tried calling again,* Juno whispers.

There wasn’t time, and J.J. is sure that – if pandemonium has broken out and the public has seen the ships – all the lines are jammed. Still should have, though.

*I hope you’re doing okay, little brother,* J.J. looks at the grey dark ceiling: a prayer. *Mom, dad, sis, bro, I love you, I love you and I don’t want to die like this.*

*Amy, I hope you’re doing okay.*

(she could die today. along with all the rest. unknowing, at work in her beloved archives of books, and he doesn’t even get to say goodbye.)
The ground never shakes.
They never dial.

“It won’t be easy, it will be fraught with dangers and unknowns. That is why we are asking you, not ordering you, to go. You must now make that choice.”

“It’s destroyed! Anubis’ ship, his fleet – it’s gone!”

Dr Weir is laughing in relief. People are cheering, hugging. J.J. blinks rapidly, his whole body sagging and he needs to find a phone and call his family.

“The Earth is safe,” Dr Weir says into the Mountain’s intercom: “SG-1 made it. We’re safe! You can stand down, everyone. We won’t be leaving Earth today.”

SG-1 return to the Mountain without Colonel O’Neill. J.J. hears the snapshots: a weapon, Ancient tech, alien devices, a stasis chamber. The Colonel isn’t dead but asleep, and that Ancient Knowledge is still wreaking havoc; they can’t wake him up.

So the Colonel has to stay there, in frozen dreams, while the rest of them mop up the mess.

The Battle of Antarctica has caused a whole range of problems. International treaties at stake; keeping the public in the dark; the Ancient Weapons Platform. There’s a lot of politics and debates and stuff going on upstairs.

The only noticeable difference is that, all of a sudden, the SG-missions are further in-between. Dr Weir is cautious. J.J. figures she wants to keep up an air of normalcy on base – wisely – but it’s difficult after the Battle. It’s like a façade, brittle and thin.

J.J.’s duties carry on as normal.

Slowly, whispers spread: of a new opportunity, of a new discovery, a Lost City, and an Expedition to go there. Whispers that the SGC might have another commander, a military leader, while Dr Weir starts to gather people for this Expedition, whatever it is. It takes weeks, and then the rumors take hold. J.J. probably only hears a fraction of it.

He tries to shut it out, actively. Ignore all of that, because if he considers it too deeply his mind will be wrecked too.

Once off duty, he hurries back to the apartment – lucky to get one and it’s actually a pretty civilian kind of life. Almost like a normal day job, except he guards a Stargate on the weekdays, and there’s the occasional alien invasion.

The following two months he meets Amy for drinks and movies and sex so often he guesses they’re actually a couple now, right? And it’s good, it’s really good; an echo of a blessedly normal life; he spends as much time as he can with her. It’s pretty frustrating not being able to tell her the whole truth – can’t say where he works, what he does.

She’s a librarian and works a lot with the local community, and he finds himself texting her a lot. Returning those smiley faces and hearts with glee. Clichéd, but he can’t make himself mind. Her
Dæmon is a soft thing and maybe one day they’ll be so close they’ll touch each other freely. Share a Bond of their own. J.J. wouldn’t mind that. Wouldn’t mind at all.

He catches himself thinking about kids. Just briefly. An image: the apartment, and it’s cozy and warm and he isn’t in danger, Stargate Command a lull far far far away, and Amy and he curled up a bed and a baby in a crib. It’d be nice, but reality clashes with the dream.

As long as he works with the SGC, it can’t happen. Can it?

He stays at her place mostly. It’s inviting, and she introduces him to a whole range of books he ought to have read, and they binge watch a whole TV series in a weekend, and J.J. seriously considers a future here. If he gets to stay in Colorado, guarding the Gate Room, he won’t mind; see a little bit of new sky, sometime, maybe, with an offworld team, but he doesn’t want to be away for too long. It wouldn’t be fair on her, and J.J.’s heart beats too hard for her to leave her behind.

“Well, solider?

What do you say?”

J.J. meets his future team on a Wednesday.

He drags himself out of bed heavily. It’s barely half past four, and Amy twists in the sheets and groans: “Again?”

“Sorry, babe,” J.J. whispers and kisses her softly. “Got to go.”

All SGC personnel must be reached by phone in case of an emergency. It isn’t this time, but he gets a text at 3:12 from Martinez saying: ‘heard command is looking for u, better be on time, best tie’, so J.J. assumes it’s important enough to warrant warnings should he be two minutes late.

“I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

“Mm-mm,” she sighs into the pillow. “Better be.”

The base isn’t that far.

He’s called to the Conference Room. Dr Weir is there, as always impeccable, and there’s this Colonel – marine. J.J. snaps a salute, comes to attention.

And there are others there. Strangers in uniforms, and the Colonel – Sumner – says he has been chosen for a mission. Hand-picked for an important Expedition, and these people are going to be his team. And J.J. is excited and scared and his heart aches all at once, because everything’s going so well, too well;

“Where are we going?”

“Overseas?”

“I … yeah. Still a few weeks until we ship out.”
“And it’s classified,” Amy echoes, a disappointed sigh, a pressing weight on his soul. Juno can’t bring herself to look Amy’s Daemon in the eyes. “Okay. I get it. I dated a marine before.”

She told him that. They also broke up because there’s just too many differences between the civilian and the military life (and that guy had on top of that happened to be a cheating asshole). But J.J. had hoped and hoped and hoped, and damn it if he isn’t in love with her. She brings him comfort and he’s imagined things. Time moving forward. Together.

“I’m sorry.”

“I know, honey,” she says, “but this isn’t going to work out. Let’s just … let’s just face that.”

“Look, it’s – We’re not leaving for another month, or two, I don’t know. It’s not all set yet. We could.”

Something. Work it out. Try. (And where J.J. is going he can’t call and he can’t send letters, and he feels horrible telling all these fucking lies.)

“To the place we’ve been searching for. Dr Jackson has nearly found the Gate address.”

“I’m sorry. I love you.”

“Don’t arm yourself with guilt. I’ve met men like you before. You’re always heartbreakers.”

J.J. breaks up with Amy on a Wednesday. They both cry a bit. It isn’t full of anger: there’s merely disappointment, a sigh, a heave. The argument fades as he lays out the facts. That he doesn’t know where he is going but it’s too tempting to pass by (a childhood dream: exploring the stars: his own team: the responsibly weighs on him heavily).

He packs his stuff and returns the key, and wishes her well. Says he could write, just to check up, if he can (one day).

The lie lies bitter on his tongue, because J.J. has no idea if Atlantis will be a one-way trip. he’s agreed to go because he thirsts for adventure. he hadn’t meant to fall in love.

He says: Be safe, yeah?

And she says: You too. See you around, soldier.

“Where we’re going?

We’re going to find Atlantis.”
The Storm claims Atlantis from without. The Genii try to claim the City from within.

J.J. and the others of the Expedition are stranded half a galaxy away, and they don’t realize this until hours and hours afterward.

They’re on Manaria, hiding out. The locals put up with them but J.J. thinks they’re not too happy: the Lanteans, they come bearing gear and what other stuff that can be carried, but not nearly enough because they hope the plan to save the City will work out (nothing to worry about). Things left behind. There isn’t enough food for them all if this stay will have to be extended and their rations run out, and the locals are busy struggling to survive themselves. Trapped between Cullings. They’re kind enough to make space for them, to let them build tents and make fires, but J.J. can see it in their eyes: they aren’t quite welcome.

They could find an Alpha Site, of course. Resettle. Rebuild. And the Athosians – what about them? Their homes and crops were on the Lantean Mainland, and now, now the Storm might have swept it all away.

Hope. What they sorely need is hope and right now it lies with Dr McKay, Dr Weir, and the Major, who mean to save Atlantis on their own. Some haphazard plan involving lightning strikes. Miller and Jenkins still haven’t returned: there’s one Jumper still inbound from the Mainland with the last few Athosians, and Emmagan, Dr Beckett, and Lieutenant Ford.

To be without both the Major and the Lieutenant is disconcerting. Sure, they are often away from the City together as AR-1, but still. This is different. Without the CO and his XO, Staff Sergeant Bates is left as their superior officer. Not that there’s much need to boss anyone around right now; just keep a look out, watch over the Expedition.

Their temporary place of refuge is full of not just marines but every civilian in the city too: physicists, geologists, medical personnel, botanists; you name it. And Dr Weir’s back on Lantea and not here to hold heartening strengthening speeches or make promises.

J.J. patrols his hours of duty, watching over the others sitting around the campfires set up – night’s falling – sharing MREs. Civilians and marines all mixed up. They chatter, voices hushed. Carefully. Haven’t heard anything from the City yet. A group is huddled up in a circle and playing cards. Some of the scientists are sitting in the open back of one of the Puddlejumpers they’d brought with them, gathered in front of an active laptop screen and at first one could think they’re
watching a movie or something, but a closer look reveals that it’s not entertainment at all but a simple simulation of possible predictions: what could be happening on Lantea right now, the Storm about to overtake the City. Not very heartening.

They’re overdue. Morrison, by the Gate, checks in every half hour; and the Doc, McKay, and the Major ought to’ve called in by now to tell them that all’s well; Ford should’ve been here now – an hour, two hours ago – with that Jumper. Could mean nothing. They could’ve decided to stay in the City and help with the plan.

There’s no word.

There’s no movement.

The Gate is still.

This could mean it’s just taking a little longer than it should’ve; the plan’s solid, should be solid, is promised to be. The scientists like Dr Z have tried to explain it in easy terms. They’ll use the lightning from the Storm itself to power the shields – the naquadah generators can’t, and they haven’t got any of those fancy alien batteries lying around.

Dr Weir, McKay and the Major will disconnect the lightning rods from four different stations and then wait in the Gate Room, which will be the only safe place. *Halls full of electricity, raw power, Dr Z had said, very dangerous, high risk, a chance it won’t work.* Makes J.J. shiver at the thought. They’d made sure to move all computers and other stuff that can’t handle that away from the corridors, into safe areas that shouldn’t be affected.

If it fails, the waves will drown the City and it’ll fall to pieces at the bottom of the ocean. An ironic end, somehow. And then the rest of them would be left to fend for themselves, to survive: they could, under Bates’ guidance, with the allies they’ve now gathered. Find someplace to settle down and start farming, but no one wants to do that.

They’re late. Ford, Emmagan, and the last of the Athosians should be settling in the camp, but there’s no sign of them and the Gate is silent. Could mean nothing.

Could mean nothing.

But the feeling in his gut is heavy, and J.J. trusts his instincts. Those same deeply ingrained instincts have saved him in the past. Right now, he’s far too uneasy to joke around and have a good time. Conversation is hushed. They’re all worried.

They may never see the City again. They may never regain the ability to dial Earth, either. Though Dr Z has the control crystal necessary for that so if they ever found a power source, they could use any Stargate in Pegasus: just slot that crystal into the DHD and they’re good to go. Minor safety. But it’s not like they’ve found any ZPMs are lying around this far. That’s what they need: a ZPM, or a black hole, or a star exploding;

J.J. looks at the alien, Manarian sky, these stars he can’t name, and wonders what Amy is doing. It’s sudden, the thought: is she okay? is she safe? is she alone, or did she find someone who isn’t a total asshole, like him, who left, just like that, when things where turning out well –

(so fucking selfishly)

“Hey, Boss,” Kemp says, approaching from behind and interfering with his thoughts. “Food’s being served.” Kemp holds out a bowl. Soup.
J.J. accepts the portion wordlessly, and Kemp takes seat beside him. They don’t talk much. Food tastes dry and grey: this concern overrides his appetite, but he forces it down. Needs the energy. He’ll be thankful later.

It takes hours before there is a sign.

Nine or ten, Earth-time; standard hours they’ve established for the sake of simplicity, also offworld. Scientists are working on a more appropriate way to measure time in the City, something about a Lantean calendar. Gate Lag can be horribly tiring and confusing. Not a slow approach but the instantaneous change from day to night. J.J. and his team have pulled shifts sometimes involving over sixty hours of daylight in a single stroke, travelling from one planet to the next without pause. Left him kind of numb for the rest of that week, his sleeping pattern all wonky, but it cleared up. Got used to it. They all get used to it.

They look at the camp. Spread out on a field outside of the local village, they seem so – vulnerable. Far too vulnerable. Tents are set up but as well as a handful of invisible Jumpers (the only lie: they don’t want to startle the locals, and, sadly enough, can’t always trust them with that much intel. The less that can be spread on and eventually reach the Wraith, the better), centered around half a dozen smaller fires. Alien constellations move languidly over their heads.

Noise. The crunch of boots on soft soil. J.J. swirls around, safety off, P-90 poised, finding another marine there. He lowers the weapon to point at the ground.

“Hey, J.J.,” Lieutenant Snow from AR-9 comes up behind him. The man’s Dæmon casts a long shadow in the yellow firelight, a sharp contrast to the white light issued from the flashlight attached to the barrel of his P-90. “Your round’s up.”

Right. J.J. relaxes frantically. “Two hours, then it’s Thompson’s turn,” he reminds him, and Snow nods. “Heard anything?”

But Snow says: “No. Nothing yet.”

They’re both thinking it: they could be dead. They could be dead – the Major, the Doc, Lieutenant Ford – they could be dead, and they’ll never know for sure until it’s too late.

They have orders to dial the City in fifteen hours if they don’t hear back from them. If they can’t get a lock, then …

They don’t speak of it. J.J. shares a nod with Snow, who takes up point, and heads for the third fire. Finds the rest of Snow’s team there alongside his own; Kemps in disquietly tapping his leg, and DeSalle is lying on a blanket looking at the foreign stars, and Gladys’ face is pale, illuminated by the PDA in her lap. Looks like she’s reading something. Old reports or a digitized book. There’s a whole lot of them they’ve started uploaded on the intranet to have both physical and digital copies, an archive of their own of knowledge and history and science, and now all might be gone.

All might be gone.

DeSalle brought his guitar with his pack, and now he’s playing softly; a trickle of melodies, a humming voice, plucking the strings aimlessly.

All they can do is wait.

Wait.
The static of the radio breaks into words. It’s Private Lindsay who’s watching the Manarian Gate for activity.

It’s been fourteen hours and the sun is up after a brief, intense night. J.J. hasn’t slept well.

The wormhole opens and settles, and J.J. is on his feet, joining curious masses while listening on the radio to what’s happening.

“We’ve got an incoming wormhole! Sergeant, it’s the City, Major Sheppard’s IDC.”

“Copy, I’m on my way.”

By the time J.J. gets there, a dozen marines have taken point around the Gate, weapons ready for the worst, a few armed Athosians behind them, including their leader, Halling. No one steps through.

Instead there is a call.

“Sergeant Bates, this is Dr Weir. Do you copy?”

“Five-by-five. Good to hear your voice, ma’am,” the Sarge answers.

“The worst of the Storm has passed. The City is safe,” Dr Weir says, and people behind J.J. cheer. His own breathing is immediately easier. But the City is quiet. “You can begin returning. Sergeant, we need to talk.”

The Storm is over.

(and J.J. hears the Doc’s ominous words, and the feeling in his gut doesn’t go away.)

Packing up camp takes a while. They want to erase traces. Thanks are given to the Manarians by Sergeant Bates, but then there is frost in the air, and J.J. and his team don’t know why until they step through the Stargate and into the City.

Atlantis is quiet. There are two human bodies and their Dæmons, dead and still, in the infirmary. They have been covered by white sheets by Dr Beckett: and there’s no sign of Miller or Jenkins to greet them, and J.J. can suspect what’s happened but doesn’t want to believe it. Doesn’t want to.

There are bodies. Their uniforms are darkly green and their Dæmons alien, and they are strewn like litter in the corridors and walkways, and J.J.’s blood turns to ice with disbelief.

There’s been an attack. Incursion.

Genii.

Details are contradictory and vague at first. There are stains of blood in the Gate Room and on the pristine Ancient consoles, and empty ammo shells littered on the floor. Alien, as well as Terran semi-automatics, a hail from a P-90.

Not only that, but parts of the City have been damaged by floods and water needs to be pumped out; in some parts of the City it’s already happening automatically thanks to some Ancient system, while in others it must be done manually. Windows have been scattered by harsh winds.
Thousands of year old ceramic pots, left behind on balconies, have been smashed to rubble and dead plants fallen over the edge. But the lights come on without problem.

There’s only a mild breeze. Slightly cold.

Dr Weir greets them as they return and people are allowed to go to their quarters, to see to their labs and set up shop again. Marines reporting in. The Doc is morose, severe in her calmness. Lieutenant Ford is there, silence in his eyes, and the Major’s back is stiff and a finger still resting uneasily on the trigger of his P-90, face shadowed and colder than usual.

Beneath the stairs out of the line of sight for those returning through the Gate but yet present is another body: one of the Genii. The leader of the strike team, J.J. later learns, a man named Acastus Kolya, and the man had been executed by a headshot, front to back, and it had been precise. A single bullet. The man had held Weir hostage, and the Major had taken the shot in quiet steady fury.

There’s video footage, City’s internal security kicking in during the surge of power given by the Storm. Over sixty Genii dying, dull thuds against the Gate’s iris, a drum;

Miller and Jenkins are dead.

They’d been friends. Every marine in this City has to be at least able to tolerate each other, and with time they’ve gotten close; they work both on and off duty, side-by-side for hours and days at a time. Conflicts must be resolved as soon as they arise. Handpicked by Colonel Sumner or other superiors, they’re not just anybody: but some of them are strangers, were strangers, up until they walked through the Stargate to Atlantis for the first time. Left Earth. All they’ve got here is each other.

J.J. has lost people before, but it’s never felt this close, and it’s never made him this detachedly angry. It seeps through his bones and makes his heart ache, and he watches the closed caskets with growing fury.

Everyone is there for the memorial. The ceremony is slow and gentle and unrushed, and the Lantean sun is shining outside. The storm is over. The waves have passed, and they didn’t drown.

They send the caskets through a Spacegate, because they can’t dig graves in the City and they have no means yet discovered to safely burn the bodies.

It wasn’t meant to be spread but someone got their hands of a copy of that security footage. Ends up somewhere on the intranet servers, and J.J. finds Kemp in the Library, curled up on an Ancient sofa with a laptop across his knees and a few other marines with him, gathered around.

“What’s this?”

They’re not meant to have it. As team leader, J.J. should be disappointed and angry and stern, but his body is tired and soul all sore. He glares at Kemp, who despite his easy-going nature meets the stare steadily and shrugs, seeking a claim of innocence. J.J. doesn’t buy it for a second.

“Look, we’re just curious, okay? Never actually seen the Major fight.”

“So,” J.J. says, evenly: “you’re watching footage you’re not supposed to have access to.”
Miller and Jenkins die in that video.

So do over sixty Genii, but J.J.’s mind isn’t on them at all.

“Didn’t think he actually knew how to, y’know,” says another of the marines present, Hester. “He’s pretty good for a zoomie.”

“I don’t care. That’s not the point,” J.J. says, crosses his arms. “Get rid of it.”

“But I,” Kemp starts, and AR-4 tend to bicker, sure, but they’ve never really fought before, and this isn’t something J.J. wants to fight over. Argued quietly, yes, in the heat of the moment, offworld when a mission’s about to fall southward and they’re tired and blood sugar levels have dropped and the Wraith are nearly upon them. But here, in the City? Where there are no Wraith and they’re meant to be safe and relax for a little while?

And Kemp exhales and stops the playback. Closes the laptop. “Fine. Should’ve seen his moves, though.”

“Lieutenant,” he barks, no order, nothing specific, but Kemp gets it, slamming his mouth shut.

The other marines disperse. Someone else has a copy, probably, they can watch. He lets them go. They’re not his team. Someone else will deal with them. No doubt a scientist will go through the intranet, and every base computer if they have to, to wipe that video file from places it shouldn’t be.

“Aren’t you the least bit curious?” Kemp says at last.

And J.J. can honestly say: “No.” because he’s seen so much shit, so much shit during his time with the SGC and before that, and he’s seen people die and people kill and it isn’t pretty and he’s a marine, yeah, he’s a proud marine, but he understands that this whole thing isn’t something the Major’s going to want to boast about. He never did it to show prowess or prove himself as a soldier or whatever. The Major was defending his home, their home, their City. He was taking it back from the enemy.

J.J. had hoped they wouldn’t be facing human enemies out here, though. Be betrayed like that.

Betray in turn.

Fighting Goa’uld in human hosts is harsh but this is worse, because the Genii aren’t Wraith, they aren’t possessed by any Snake; they’re human and struggling to survive, too: and they made this choice.

They killed Miller and Jenkins. They took the Doc and McKay hostage and were going to take the City, and the Major had retaliated. J.J. would have done the same.

“Want to yell at me?” Kemp asks, waiting, almost at attention.

“No. But if you stick around I might.”

Before he takes his leave, Kemp looks at him and mutters a quiet: “Sorry, boss.” He’s genuine, a stricken note of realization entering his voice.

It’s weird, in a way. He’s a Corporal, and normally a soldier like him wouldn’t command Lieutenants or other enlisted officers; but things are different with the SGC, things turned around because out of the team he’s got the most experience with the offworld life. Any other place and
time, a Lieutenant wouldn’t refer to a Corporal as his boss and obey his orders this easily. It’s one of many things they’ve gotten used to.

“Just … don’t mention it to DeSalle or Gladys. They’ll have your head.”

“I know. I won’t.”

J.J. exhaled wearily. “Get some rest, LT.”
Two years. (Strange.)

They’ve already been two years in Atlantis. Not to the day, but almost.

Things have changed. He’s made Sergeant. He’s found and grown into a great team. Turned thirty; god, he’s getting old, the middle-age crisis hitting him in the face amidst Wraith ambushes, narrow escapes and meteor showers.

(But the party was great, a surprise arranged by Kemp and the others all of the marines were invited (of course), and most gifts were alcohol or ridiculous. He got a care package from the old folks, and his little brother Jonah sent him one of those colorful cards that bleep a horrible tune when you open them. J.J. keeps it pinned to the board above his desk.)

J.J. spent over a year at the SGC, learning the ropes. Or at least he thinks he did. Things are different here in Atlantis, and time seems to have another meaning, and there’s so much he’s had to learn anew. At the beginning, he wasn’t so certain about his team and the others. Sure, he knew some of them. Markham. Thompson. A few others from the Mountain.

Others? Completely new; and he’s got to trust them more than anything out here. And instinctively, he does. These people have been chosen for Atlantis. If the Old Man and Sergeant Bates and the others say these men and women are good marines, good airmen, good scientists, dependable, trustworthy, then J.J. finds no reason to dispute it.

The first year in Atlantis on their own, J.J. had spent most days trying not to think about the terrifying reality that if they died out here, no one on Earth would know, there would be no memorial. Dad, mom, Jonah, they’d never know. And that scares J.J. more than almost anything. Dying unnoticed and alone.

At first, anyway.
With time, other fears reveal themselves. The Wraith. The possibility of losing other marines, his team. Ships screaming in the sky, beaming people up. Worlds razed, disappearing;

(There’s this mission J.J. will never forget. A peaceful planet, the people farmers. AR-4 had been there for half a day when the first Dart arrived, and then another, and they’d scrambled to hide. J.J. saw a family disappear right in front of his eyes. His team struggled to keep together – barely made it to the Gate, but the Wraith were using it. Locked out. Stuck. They’d had no choice but wait, huddled up in the Jumper, and Gladys held the stick in silently shaking hands, and there’d been a whole Hive in the sky. J.J. couldn’t give the order to fire drones, because he knows his team wouldn’t make it, the Jumper’s position away. They’d waited silently until it was over and the Hive had jumped into hyperspace, away.

Returned to find the town smoking and empty.

J.J. had a long session with Heightmeyer after that. Wasn’t his last. Won’t be.)

Oh, there are beautiful moments too.

Once – once – he sees a star explode.

Distantly from the ground of a planet orbiting a gas giant. His team dragged along by a bunch of eager scientists. The planet is a safe distance from a nova explosion, won’t get its surface scorched by the blast. The waiting takes half an eternity and J.J. is checking the perimeter for the fourteenth time when it appears.

It’s this pinprick of light, and Juno looks at it, wondering: *huh? that’s it? just looks like another star*, until he’s allowed to glimpse it through the small telescope Dr Collins had brought. Enhancing the image.

And that moment, J.J. sees that nova – it’s beautiful. Spreading out in a millisecond from nothing to an unfathomable size, and the light is, for that moment, brighter than everything else in the universe. And he looks at it and wonders: how long until that light is seen by Earth?

And then his heart sinks and he realizes that that would take millions of years, and his family are never going to see this.

His team are here, among the witnesses. Kemp has been murmuring about boring babysitting duty, but is silences when the new light blinks in the sky as the star reaches its crest. DeSalle also looks through the telescope and there’s awe in his expression, and Gladys is the one to suggest they take a Jumper for a spin above atmo to get some readings. J.J. suspects she’s been hanging out with the scientists too much, adapting to their nerdiness. Not that he’s going to call her out.

His family won’t see it, no, but – his team will. And his team has quickly gotten close. Like family.

Two years. Not to the day but almost;

They’re going to gear up for another mission; briefing was an hour ago but they’re not dialing out until after sundown, so J.J. has time to browse the Citadel library for something new to read.

The books are an echo of Earth and (the old) home and comfort, and he still thinks about Amy sometimes (chest compressing tightly painfully) as he thumbs the pages. He has this bad habit of earmarking which Amy would tell him is a big, *big* no-no. Actually tore a book from his hand,
first time she saw him do that, stroke the cover and said *You’re going to ruin it!*, and she’d been upset and adorable and J.J. had apologized and promised to make it to her by making her favorite for dinner.

He traces the spines. Titles. God, so many titles. There’s a lot of science packed in here, but since they reestablished contact with Earth they’ve expanded the library to include all kinds and the collections stretches across the wide expanse of the room and is spilling out slowly. Amy would love this place.

Hm, maybe he should try that new fantasy series, Fire and Ice or something. (*Kemp, of all people, said it’s great, but when J.J. finds a forum on the intranet dedicated to it where even Rutherford endorses it, he feels obligated to try*). He finds a copy, takes it from the shelf, remembers to write his name on the *Borrowing*-list (to simply take a book unannounced is a great crime in this City), before he finds a cozy corner to curl up. Opens the first page.

A couple of hours later, he heads to his quarters to pack up the last stuff he needs and get changed. The mission is projected to be an overnight haul due to the unpredictable weather, Jumper ride included, so he places the book atop of his kit. A spare t-shirt, a thicker jacket – the settlement on M20-999 is near one of its poles, and right now it’s nearing winter there. Though their houses are sturdy and they’ve got electric generators

J.J. takes the scenic route to the Armory.

(One of these days he’s got to talk with the Quartermaster about ammo allotment, which still tend to be below the average requirement, especially for a mission this long.

Once, AR-6 got cornered, an ambush, the engagement lasted for a stretched out two or three hours, and they ran out of ammo, and sprinted to the Gate as soon as they had the chance. Was back during the first year, every resource spread thin. J.J. remembers when they got back, Faulkner bruised and Stackhouse shook up, and Major Sheppard had had a heated debate with Sergeant Bates. Eventually, every team is allowed an extra magazine.

It still isn’t enough, when some Wraith refuse to die even if you put a dozen bullets in ‘em.)

It’s an outdoor route, along the mid-height levels of the City, balconies spanning the entire length of the buildings and making connecting bridges, and the breeze is cool and refreshing. He sometimes takes the long way round to admire the light on the waters as the sun is setting, a brilliance of gold and rose. Like a fine wine, or something. They pause for a moment, and Juno leans her paws against the railing and J.J. breathes deeply.

Okay. Simple mission, he tells himself: *We go in there, greet the locals, make the deal, continue to Te’reem, exchange the goods. Yeah. Take it cool.*

(it won’t be one of the disasters. no Wraith. they pray for it.)

After a few moments, they continue walking, and they’ve only come a couple of hundred yards when J.J. sees something in the corner of his eye. A uniform. Is about to wave a hand hello when he stops himself.

It’s not a fellow marine. It’s the Colonel.

He and Dr McKay are sitting on a bench, backs turned, fifty or so yard away and they must be unaware of the marine’s presence. They’re talking; J.J. can’t hear it, but they’re sitting close together, a couple of beer bottles on each side, and Dr McKay is making vivid movements with
his hands. Whatever he’s saying makes the Colonel shake with laughter, and so incredibly
familiarly Dr McKay’s left arm falls around the Colonel’s shoulders. The Colonel doesn’t fight it.
The doc’s Dæmon is curled up in his lap, or maybe both, so incredibly close, and the Raven isn’t
flying but sitting there on the Colonel’s left shoulder, a steady weight. A sight which J.J. has
begun to find familiar and not utterly, utterly alien.

As J.J. watches, Dr McKay’s hand comes in contact with the Colonel’s Dæmon, and neither of
them flinches or withdraws. J.J. knows he really should get out of here, but finds it difficult to
move, some profound feeling he can’t name settling in his gut.

As J.J. watches, their faces turn toward each other, eyes half-closed and silhouettes sharply
contrasting the warm glow of the falling sun. Noses bumping, a brief kiss, and the doc’s mouth
turns into a smile (but not a mean sneer, which isn’t something J.J. can’t recall seeing before) and
the Colonel whispers something softly (smiling, warmly), and they kiss again;

He has to go. This isn’t something meant for his eyes. J.J. retreats quickly, quietly, finds the
nearest door.

When he reaches the Armory, Gladys is already there, putting on her TAC vest. J.J. wordlessly
takes his from the labeled peg and pats down the pockets to ensure they’re full, clicks the P-90
into place, and he feels Gladys’ gaze burning on his neck.

“You alright?”

“Huh? what?”

“You just kind of seem a bit shook up, is all,” she says.

“Oh. No, I’m fine,” J.J. says, and that’s no lie. He can’t name that feeling in his gut, but it
definitely isn’t sinister.

Gladys nods; whether she buys him is another story. But J.J can’t tell her, or his team, not like this,
an open room where anyone can walk in. He trusts his team with his life, but J.J. realizes – like a
heavy punch to the chest – he can’t betray the Colonel like that and out him behind his back.
Some truths simply can’t be told.

(Gladys would understand. During all their time in the City, J.J. has had to deal with Kemp
starting and failing a relationship twice and whining about it. And DeSalle has hooked up with
this nurse, but Gladys never mentions a boyfriend, no Significant Other. One late night, J.J. saw
Dr Kusanagi coming out of Gladys’ quarters, and he won’t ask and won’t tell.)

There may be whispers in the corners of the rumor mill. That bet his team made months ago when
Atlantis first landed on New Lantea, it wasn’t the only one; and J.J. still think they’re walking a
risky line with it.

Maybe he isn’t the only one to have seen the Colonel and the doc on a balcony or a Pier or a
darkly lit corridor. Maybe. Still doesn’t make it his call.

“I’m fine,” he repeats, and he means it. The Colonel and the doc had been happy out there.
Happiness is something they all could use more of in Atlantis.

He holds back a sigh that wants to escape his tightening chest. God, he needs to get out more.
Wasn’t that what DeSalle said, once? I could introduce you to this cute physicist, DeSalle had
said, a few months ago, or someone from the medical department. You need to relax, get out
more; missions don’t count. Sometimes you’re wound so tight I wonder you’ll get an aneurysm,
“Seen the others yet?”

“DeSalle’s on his way. Forgot his toothbrush.”

J.J. wants to bang his head into the nearest wall. *Always something.* “Ah, shit. Knew it was something.”

Gladys grins. “Atta boy.”

“You know, one of these days …”

“Yes, I know, Sergeant,” Gladys says, smirking. “Not my fault you could use a supervisor. Go on, I’ll make sure the others get here on time.”

J.J. sprints to his quarters – the inside route, using a transporter – in record time, nearly knocking over a scientist with a datapad, and he runs into Hester who sidesteps in the last second and calls after him, laughing, *hey Sarge, what’s the rush?* J.J. grabs his toothbrush, double-checking his mental list once more, before running back.

By the time he gets there, Kemp and DeSalle have arrived and are hefting their backpacks. Pretty heavy this time, for the overnight stay, plus they’re carrying extra bags in each hand. They’re going to trade salt for grain, and the team are carrying some seventy kilos between them.

They head for the Jumper Bay. Pick Jumper six, because number three is under maintenance, and number four’s being used by AR-12 on another mission right now. To J.J. that’s no matter, but Gladys says it’s a bit jarring, like the pilots have favorites. Or maybe the Jumpers have favorite pilots. He’s not sure. The ATA-gene stuff is complicated, and he’s glad he doesn’t have it, even if it would be useful on occasion.

They get settled, dumping the salt in the back. Gladys in the pilot’s seat, J.J. beside her. Kemp’s chattering with DeSalle, looking forward to the mission. They’ve never been to M20-999 before, but people there are supposedly very nice, and the planet have spectacular auroras pretty close to the main settlement. Kemp has brought a camera with an empty memory card, and now he snaps a first picture. Though J.J. has his back turned, Juno lets him see for them, and Kemp is annoying the fuck out of DeSalle already by taking a photo together.

“This ain’t a camping trip, LT.”

Kemp laughs. “Sorry, Sarge.” He stops taking pictures, but doesn’t pack away the camera. J.J. rolls his eyes and clears his throat.

“Control, this is Jumper Six. We’re ready to go. M20-999.”

“*Understood, Jumper Six,*” he hears the technician, Banks. “*Dialing now, stand by. ... Jumper Six, you’re go.*”

The floor retracts and they see the blue glow of the wormhole, and Gladys smoothly lowers the Jumper into position. She’s become a good pilot, going from zero to this. (In the beginning, every flight was jarring, and Kemp had jokingly said *Pretty sure we’re going to crash this time* at every mission start. Gladys wasn’t amused.)

Instinctively, J.J. braces himself, gripping the arm rests a little too tight.
“Good luck, Recon Four,” Banks says.

“You too, Control,” J.J. answers. “See in you tomorrow.”

He nods at Gladys, and she brings the Jumper past the event horizon.

The rumors were right. The auroras on M20-999 are gorgeous, streaking across the sky in azure and a pale green, and the people of M20-999 have plenty of stories to tell. They believe the souls of their ancestors are up there to watch over them. AR-4 are here to trade, not interfere with beliefs, and they don’t talk about magnetic fields.

They stay for quite a while. Settling the deal: the people here need the salt to preserve food. Carrying the salt to a storage barn in the heart of the village. There’s a chill wind cradling the landscape, neverending.

Their hosts insist they stay when a snow storm rolls in and freezes the rooftops, and they huddle around a fireplace, logs constantly stoked. The house is made of stone and thick wood, and J.J. shrugs out of his parka. They could’ve stayed in the Jumper and rode out the storm, but the old lady, U’ua, insists, and to refuse is to be rude.

U’ua lives here with her family. Husband taken by the Wraith a long time ago, but she’s got kids (all grown up and some of them dead, Culled) and grandkids. Her Dæmon is bent and kind of thin, ragged from age and the cold.

Kemp takes photos. Tries to catch a glimpse of the auroras through a small window, but the glass is too thick and uneven and snowfall too heavy. The locals are intrigued, and Kemp explains how the camera works. Ua asks they take a picture of her and her family, and Gladys helps arranging them so they can all fit in the frame.

“Oh, you too, you too!” U’ua says when the marines step away, and she waves them in.

J.J. grins and pushes DeSalle in next to one of U’ua’s sons, and Gladys by his side, and Kemp sets the camera on automatic before rushing to squat down next to J.J. in the corner of the frame.

“Okay, say ‘cheese’!”

“I don’t understand the significance,” U’ua says with a smile, “but very well. Cheese!”

Afterward, J.J. promises to have the photos printed out and returned to U’ua and her family, framed if he can. He’s sure Dr Weir wouldn’t mind if his team went back to M20-999 real quick in a week or so.

The snow storm lasts the whole day, and they settle down to share a meal with U’ua’s family before bunking down to sleep. Little else to do. They lie down on the floor (gently refusing U’ua’s offer to let them have the beds), huddled in sleeping bags and extra blankets. J.J. lies on the periphery, listening to his team breathing (and snoring), using the light of the fire to read until his eyes are too tired to function. Eventually Juno, nestled on his chest, goes slack, exhales, and they fall asleep.

Next morning, the storm’s settled and they’re good to go. It’s still cold as hell and they put on their parkas before walking outside, where snow has created valleys and hills. They stay for a while, helping to shovel paths between houses.

They load up in the Jumper, including two wooden crates of the fish-like things they came here to
trade for. It’s not going to take long before the Jumper stinks, so J.J. is eager to return to the City with the load.

U’ua sees them off. She pats their cheeks, and Kemp takes more photos. “We’ll return with those pictures in no time, ma’am,” he says.

“You are good people,” Uua says. “Safe travels to you.”

“Safe travels,” J.J. echoes. Dr Weir said, in the briefing, that that’s how these people say goodbye to each other.

“You ever think,” DeSalle says as the Jumper rises through the air, aiming for the Stargate, “we’re going to defeat the Wraith?”

“We did the Goa’uld,” Kemp says, then falls silent, because they didn’t. Sure, most System Lords are gone. Not all. Not all. A Goa’uld possessed Colonel Caldwell and tried to destroy Atlantis. A Goa’uld kidnapped the Old Man and almost killed Snow, and the scar in J.J.’s belly aches in remembrance. He’d later learned that the Goa’uld that had possessed the NCIS agent who stabbed him was named Athena, and she died when the SGC extracted her.

A pessimistic part of his brain can’t imagine the possibly of the Wraith ever dying.

This is war that’s never going to end. A war they never came to Pegasus start, because the Ancients were assholes who didn’t leave any warnings about this deadly enemy. No instructions to say: Don’t go here. Get the hell out.

“Just thinking about those people down there,” DeSalle says quietly. “If the Wraith didn’t exist.”

A pause.

“Yeah,” Gladys says. A sigh. “I don’t know, LT.”

They don’t talk more about it for a long time.
newton's third law, part two

Chapter Summary

“take care, yeah?” | “you too, soldier.”

Chapter Notes

(2018-10-20) Thank you everyone who has read, left comments and pressed the kudos button!! I'm working on the "'real'" sequel to seeking antebellum, a John/Rodney focused story, and I might start uploading that before this fic is complete. I just need to come up with a title ... I've also got another fic lying in wait, which is set about a year after seeking antebellum, but I figure I should complete that other one first. Please enjoy!

viii.

newton’s third law

part two

“take care, yeah?” | “you too, soldier.”

In the end, it’s DeSalle’s fault. Surely it is. You just don’t bump into cute physicists by mistake.

It’s so cliché. J.J. is in the Mess, and then she’s there, asking if the empty seat across from him is available. Which, yeah. Of course. J.J. glances to his right. DeSalle smirks, and then excuses himself, saying he’s got to hit the gym, and that leaves J.J. alone with Dr Rachel Potts.

Okay, to be fair, it’s not that bad.

She’s a First Waver, like him. Been offworld. Experienced things which most astrophysicists can dream of actually touching once in their lives. She spends most of her time aboard the Aurora these days, but right now the ship is in a wide orbit around New Lantea, cloaked, undergoing minor maintenance. Potts is wonderfully vibrant when she talks about the stars. Within twenty minutes, they’re discussing Star Trek (she’s a big fan. J.J. approves), sharing favorite moments, and that turns into equations of real science, and she doesn’t make it seem boring. She asks about his missions.

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J.J. finds himself talking about the meteor shower he once saw over Atlanta when he was a kid. How he heard it on the news it was going to happen, and he stayed up all night waiting for it to occur. How he kept waiting for more such signs; a red moon; a solar eclipse;
And maybe this is the next one in his life.

It’s not like they can exchange numbers, but they look at their schedules, and the Aurora is going to hang around for another week or so.

“Movie on Thursday?”

“It’s a date.”

It is definitely a date.

Next morning, J.J. rises early, a mission coming and he gears up, humming on his breath. It was a nice night, and they’ve already planned a second date. The Aurora too is going on a mission, but should be back within two weeks.

When he reaches the Gate Room, his team is waiting, and Kemp gives him a once-over. The Lieutenant is far too pleased with whatever he finds, and J.J. mentally prepares himself for the onslaught of a thousand questions and teasing remarks.

“Oh, hi, Sarge. You look happy, boss.”

Of course DeSalle has told them his matchmaking skills finally paid off. He must be so proud of himself. Bastard.

“Don’t, LT. Just don’t.”

Kemp murmurs on his breath: “J.J. and Rachel –” Honestly, why should he expect anything else? Sometimes he can’t believe Kemp made it past Private.

“Oh my fucking god. LT, stop being such a fucking ten-year-old.”

Thank god, Gladys is here, Juno exhales. Sometimes her presence is intimidating enough for Kemp to shut up; this is one of those (growing increasingly rare) times.

“Ten?” J.J. says, sharing a look with her as she approaches, all geared up for the mission. “Corporal, you’re seriously overestimating the LT.”


As the Gate starts to spin, one chevron turning on after the other, Kemp wriggles his eyebrows.

“Lieutenant,” is the only warning J.J. gives.

“I mean it. I’m happy for you, boss. She sounds great.”

“I’m going to have you demoted.”

“Go! Go! Back to the Gate!”

“Fall back! Kemp, dial the Gate!”


J.J.’s brain slowly sluggishly registers the overwhelming noise. P-90. Ta-ta-ta-ta. Ejection of bullets. Ta-ta-ta-ta. And voices. And trampling feet. And he’s moving, dragged across the jagged
ground, but he can’t see where they’re going. His whole right side is numb.

“Watch out! At your two!”

“I see it, I see it. Go!”

Ta-ta-ta-ta.

“Not without the Sarge!” Gladys shouts.

“And not without you, Lieutenant!”

J.J. tries to speak. “Gla –” something, “LT –” a name, “Salle –” anything or maybe: Help me, or What’s happening? all broken up by static. His throat is dry. Fear. Adrenaline. He can’t differentiate between the two, and the numbness is spreading from the right side of his body to his left and he can’t move.

A sensation of being lifted. But it’s not him. Juno. Gladys’s Daemon has got his teeth – huge and deadly but now they’re gentle – trapping Juno, like a cat lifting its kitten into safety. For a moment, confused and dazed, a blurry sky is above him and the ground beneath, all at once, and feels the steady grip of Gladys’s Daemon on his back, an anchor;

“I got him, I got him! Let’s go!”

Ta-ta-ta-ta. Ta-ta-ta-ta.

“Kemp, the Gate!”

“Dialing! Come on come on come on … – Control, this is Kemp, we’re coming in hot!”

Ta-ta-ta-ta. Ta-ta-ta-ta. The sharpness of Wraith stunners searing past;


Kawoosh.

A low rumbling. Growing steadily in pitch. J.J. is dizzy. Someone’s holding onto him, and they’re in front of the Gate now. The brightness of the light makes his eyes hurt.

“Together, on three. One, two –”

Pins and needles. They carry him to the infirmary, and Dr Beckett fusses over him for quite some time. Samples, a scan.


“Stunner?”

“Aye,” Dr Beckett says. “You were hit in your side, Sergeant. Can you move your right arm for me, please?”

J.J. tries. It’s all sticky and heavy. Ugh, he hates being stunned. That sensation of falling and, in a way, it’s worse being half-conscious and unable to move, than when you’re completely knocked out. “Uh, not yet, doc.”
“Don’t worry, it will pass. You should be able to move in a couple of hours. I was told it was a quite direct hit.”

“My team?” he asks hoarsely. Must know.

“They’re in a meeting with Dr Weir and Colonel Sheppard. I’m sure they’ll be here soon. None of them were injured. Try to rest, son.”

The doc checks the IV, pats his arm, and leaves.

J.J. looks at Juno. There are no marks on her back, no dents. But he can feel the echo. It’s grounding and comforting, and relief like no other fills his mind. Gladys saved them.

Gladys saved them.

“Hey.”

“Morning, sleepy head.”

“Time is it?”

She glances at her watch. “Oh-three-hundred.”

He blinks slowly. He thought it was early evening when they dialed back, and his brain is kind of mushy still. He hates being stunned. “How’s the team?”

Gladys takes seat on the plastic chair next to the bed. J.J. can move now, no problem, but the doc insisted he stayed the night. The pillow is nicely soft, and he’s slept in far worse places.

“Went to bed,” she says. “We took shifts. They’re fine. You okay, Sarge?”

“Yeah. Not too bad. What I don’t figure is how the Wraith got to us so fast.”

“Dr McKay says it could’ve been the MALP. The Wraith know what kind of tech to look for, so … Either that, or they’re lying in wait.”

“Ah, shit.”

“Yeah,” Gladys nods. “But the docs are working on it. Trying to find a way to mask it, or something. I’m glad you’re okay, Sarge.”

He sits up. Looks her in the eye. “You saved my life. Thank you.”

“Someone had to. Said you needed a supervisor, didn’t I?”

Maybe he’s not all back yet, because he blurts, unable to stop himself: “You’re my best friend.” Maybe the docs gave him something, a sedative, loosening his tongue;

“I know,” she says wisely, “because otherwise this team would’ve been a fiasco and I’d be stuck with kindergarteners. Look, I can see what you’re thinking, J.J. It’s because I’m a woman, right?”

“… Yeah. Uh, I guess?”

“And you’ve never served with a woman this way before, and now we’re friends, so that’s weird.”
“I … yeah, I guess,” he says, again, kind of confused where she’s going with this.

She looks him in the eye. “As long as you don’t fall in love, we’re fine.”

Fall in love? It hasn’t crossed his heart at all.

But he does love her, deeply, more deeply than he ever expected. They’re like brother and sister. Family. He can’t imagine life without Gladys, but he can’t imagine it without Kemp or DeSalle either. They’re a singular unit, a gravitational mass drawn to a common center;

He doesn’t know how to form the emotion into words.

He nods instead. “I get it.”

Gladys’ whole demeanor changes, from caution to openness. There’s a gleam in her face, and she leans forward. “So, I heard you were on a date last night.”

Oh, no, not her too. It’s been less than twenty-four hours, and J.J. would’ve liked to be more certain about where his thing with Rachel is going before everyone found out. These things can feed the rumor mill for months. Now he can’t use the intranet forums anymore.

“Did DeSalle announce it to the whole City or what?”

“Nah,” Gladys grins. “I know Rachel – girls’ poker night. All I’m going to tell you about it.”

“Can you … does she …”

“Yeah, she likes you, Sarge. So, I’m saying, as a friend, you mess with her and you will live in Hell the rest of your life.”

She’s sincere. He nods. “I won’t. I promise.”

“Good.” Gladys stands up, rolls her stiff shoulders. Everything back to normal. “I’m going to turn in for the night. See you in the morning, Sarge.”

“Goodnight, Corporal.”

The date had been nice, but, truth is, they hadn’t even kissed.

Because J.J. hesitates. Keeps hesitating. In this City, living this kind of life, on the edge – could he survive being in love?

He and his team could die. Rachel could be trapped in an explosion aboard the Aurora. Or they could simply fall out, have a fight, an escalating argument, and in Atlantis there is no place to hide from each other.

But then – then, J.J. remembers that time on the walkway. The sunset, and the Colonel and the doc. Happiness.

(if they can, then we can)

“Do you have a moment?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. Those Suckers can’t get to me. It only stung a bit. Look, uh, my team’s leaving on a mission soon, don’t know when we’ll be back. You’re leaving tonight with the Aurora?”

“Yeah, we’re going to survey a nebula.”

“Take care, yeah?”

“You too, soldier.”

The Aurora spends fifteen days in deep space. They don’t use subspace comms unless there’s an emergency. Sometimes, at brief intervals, the Gate opens and transmissions come through.

Halfway through its mission, he gets an email, forwarded from Control:

> Hey, soldier. We’ll return to the City soon. That nebula was so beautiful. We’ve taken a lot of interesting readings. It’s amazing, being out here. But I look forward to returning to the City.

> Do you still have time for that second date?

---

**P57-081 · Pegasus**

**334 days after the Uprising**

“Whose … fucking idea … was this?!”

J.J. doesn’t tell Gladys to take it easy. The Jumper turns and rattles. Darts on their tail. The Corporal yanks at the controls, gritted teeth, and DeSalle dials the City as soon as they’re in range, and the Jumper makes another swift twist to avoid being hit.

They had barely begun exploring P57-081 when the Wraith found them.

“You can do it, Corporal.”

> Joseph and Mary, let us live.

“Dial the Gate!”

J.J. starts pressing symbols in the correct the sequence for New Lantea. Chevron one, two, three –

A drone manages to find its mark, and a Dart disappears in a blaze. Still two more after them. J.J. has heard about – has seen – the level of Colonel Sheppard’s control of Ancient tech; how the guy can fly a Jumper without being in it, how he can fire half a dozen drones at once. Gladys swears loudly; she can’t do that.

“Going to politely ask Command … to stop … sending us on these shit! –”

This jolt is stronger than any of the others, and the HUD flickers. For a second, J.J. nearly loses his cool. That is a bad, bad sign. Are they losing power? The Wraith must’ve hit but how? Where?

“We’re out of range – I can’t dial,” J.J. says. “Gladys, talk to me.”

“I’ve lost control! Shit, I think the drive pods shut down.”
The planet the Spacegate orbits is a brilliance of blue and green. Moments ago, all they saw was the active Gate against backdrop of darkness and stars. Now, the planet begins to slowly fill more and more of the windshield. They’ve lost contact with the Gate. Can’t contact Atlantis.

Shit.

“Losing power,” Gladys warns.

“And altitude!” Kemp says. “Losing altitude _fast_, guys!”

“Not helping! Sarge, there’s a – a – I don’t know what it’s called, a box of crystals above the, the _-_

J.J. stands, hurries to the back of the craft. Yeah. He has no idea what the hell to do if all the crystals are broken or burned out – can that happen? – but Gladys is asking. He finds it, pulls it open. The crystal array is meant to be lit, a soft pale glow. It’s completely dark. Nothing working, and he has no idea how to fix any of this. (This flash of a second, he understands deeply why it’d be nice to have a Colonel Carter or Dr McKay on the team.)

“It’s completely dead, LC.”

“Fuck,” Gladys whispers. “I hate this part.”

The blueness of the planet is giving way to a slowly rising haze of fire. It’s skimming the upper atmo. One of the records they haven’t fulfilled yet: crashing a Jumper, tumbling through the atmosphere of another world. The question no one dares to ask is: will the damaged ship survive entry?

“Hang on. Brace yourselves! We might lose the dampeners. Strap in!”

J.J. breathes through his nose. “You heard her, boys! Get ready!”

This is going to get bumpy.
newton's third law, part three

Chapter Summary

they may be very very screwed.

Chapter Notes

(2018-10-26) Thank you, everyone who has read and left comments!! A hundred kudos - I never thought that, honestly, since this fic is OC-centric. So I'm very grateful and happy! Your encouragement means so much. Thank you!! Recently I've had a rough time, so I've been rereading comments to cheer myself up :) You're all great!!! I also want to thank anyone who has checked out that site I made as a dramatis personae for this 'verse - I'm glad someone appreciates it :) And I kind of like making an archive like that, it's a good challenge, so I'll do my best to keep it updated as I continue writing these fics.
Also, the next fic in this 'verse will be all about John and Rodney. Looking forward to that! (if only I come up with a title...)
Again, thank you, and please enjoy :) 
(2018-10-27) Chapter revised, fixed a couple of spelling errors.

ix.

newton’s third law

part three

they may be very very screwed.

J.J. can’t remember the crash.

Before: the windshield, obscured by flames. The heat, the pressure; the enormous strain on the ship, and the utter silence, the lack of alarms and no one screaming. The pull of Gs. They’re all held in place in their seats, and he cradled Juno in his arms and prayed and maybe he lost consciousness for that flaring second of impact;

He wakes up – maybe Juno wakes up first. Not sure. It’s dark. Is this death? He feels roughened up, like he’s been through a grinder or a particularly bad fistfight, all bruised. Slowly, everything sore, he forces his muscles to obey. Opens his eyes. It’s still dark.

Breathing. Next to him.

Someone wheezing.
“… Everyone okay?” J.J. manages to squeeze out the words.


“I’m okay,” DeSalle says.

“No,” Gladys says, matter-of-fact: “My ribs hurt like hell.” Her voice is strained and coming from an odd place, not from right in the pilot’s seat. It’s so dark, and J.J. blinks but still can’t see. So he lets Juno see for him: a grainy world without color, but at least he can make some sense of his surroundings.

DeSalle slowly untangles himself from the straps, crawls out of his seat next to J.J’s, down in the direction of the controls.

Down? Down. Yes. The Jumper is angled with the nose pitched downward, not fully at ninety degrees but maybe around twenty, twenty-five. Everything that hadn’t been strapped down and secured before the crash has been thrown around and tangled up. A groan, a gasping breath. The machinery groaning.

DeSalle grabs the medical kit behind the pilot’s seat. “Let me check. Stay still, LC. Be right there.”

“The Gate,” Kemp says. He sounds dazed and confused. Juno helps him see in the dark: the consoles are unresponsive. The Jumper’s silent. Something blocks any outside light – the windshield is full, but that’s not space, not vacuum. Kemp looks kind of woozy and might throw up, but otherwise he doesn’t seem injured on the outside. It’s the inside that worries J.J., and hearing Gladys’ admission makes his concern skyrocket. “Got to use the Gate.”

“It’s in space,” J.J. says, wearily. Pulls himself to a standing position. He has to hold onto the seat to not fall over. First things first: got to check on his team. Then find a way back to the City. Then there are the Wraith. Did they come after them? If those Dart follow … “No way to get to it.”

“No, no, I know, but – the radio? The wormhole might be open a little longer. Send an SOS.”


“Sit still,” DeSalle says. “Okay, deep breath. And another. Okay, this might hurt. I’m going to apply some pressure to see if – yeah. Hey, anyone have a flashlight?”

A cough.

“Sounds like you’ve broken something. Take it easy.”

“I’ll try, LT.”

J.J. fumbles for a flashlight in his kit and hands it to DeSalle. The sudden brightness makes his eyes water, and now he can use his own eyes to see. It’s even worse now, the Jumper a mess. An open case lies by his feet and someone’s kit has fallen forward and is resting against the dead HUD.

DeSalle opens Gladys’ TAC vest and pulls up her shirt a bit, and there’s a glimpse of a hellish bruise, blooming across her side angrily. She’s on her way of developing an impressive set of black eyes, too, and her Daemon is sprawled across the flight controls. They both must’ve been thrown forward, and they’re lucky they weren’t squashed at the impact, or broke all their teeth.
Gladys mouth isn’t bleeding, or her head, which is the only good thing J.J. can say right now. Wincing, they sit up slowly:

Kemp cringes at the sight of her. “Holy shit, Gladys.”

“Yeah,” she says humorlessly. Glances at him: “Sergeant, what are we going to do?”

“Give me a sec,” he says. They may be very very screwed. But, hey, this kind of shit happens all the time to AR-1, doesn’t it? And they pull out fine. They pull out fine. Like a cat with nine neverending lives (maybe that’s why they keep taking Dr McKay on all those missions that on the outside seem weird for an astrophysicist, he thinks wryly). Okay. J.J. has to be optimistic. It’s his job. Get his team through this alive. They’ll be fine. One step at a time. “Gear up. Take everything you can carry – and don’t tax yourself, LC. We may be stuck here awhile, and need to find a defensible position until rescue comes.”

“What about the Darts, sir?” DeSalle asks.

Yeah. J.J. thinks for a second. “What’s the heaviest onboard?”

“Well,” Gladys says, tenderly cradling her side as she stands, “drones are out, but. Check in the back. Should be an M60.”

It’s a little bit better than a P-90. Heavier, better range. J.J. has never tried to take down a Dart with one, though. He’s heard the rumor that the Old Man did once, though. Gladys would be the woman for the job. She’s got a lot of long-range training, her specialty. But her ribs wouldn’t handle the recoil too well right now.

Okay. First things first. They need to get out of the Jumper, get some air. Set up camp, treat their injuries.

They begin to climb.

Sunlight greets them sharply. The air is still. Jumper Four is buried in a sand dune. The softness of it helped to catch the fall. Some of the ground is charred and upturned, and desert isn’t that big an area. There’s a line of trees just a couple of miles away, some kind of palms and twisting branches, and the undergrowth is nicely thick with something that could be alien fern. J.J. inspects it through his binoculars, mentally weighing the options. The Jumper is a big neon sign: a forest, even a small oasis, would provide better cover. Their radios still work, so once Atlantis sends a rescue, they can find them that way.

No signs of the Wraith yet.

J.J.’s packed as much extra ammo as he could in his kit and slung the M60 over his shoulder, while DeSalle has the medical kit. Sadly they couldn’t find a grenade launcher; it’s not standard for every Jumper on every mission simply because they don’t have that many to spare, even since the Colonel has ordered more from Earth. Kemp helps Gladys climb out and over the Jumper – they get the hatch open with the emergency mechanism, but due to the angle it’s a foot-high drop to the ground. Which is a lot with broken ribs. Before they go, Gladys tries to mentally command the Jumper to shut itself, but it refuses to listen, and eventually J.J. tells her to stop trying. The desert is abandoned: no signs of life. Hopefully, that means no scavengers will turn up.

They reach the treeline walking in a single file. He orders Kemp to take point, DeSalle and Gladys – she can walk on her own – in the middle, and J.J. covers their backs. Behind them, the Jumper grows smaller and smaller. A dot of green. Then it disappears behind a dune. The horizon behind
it is obscured by a rising wall of dust, winds heading their way, so J.J. doesn’t bother covering up their tracks: nature will soon do it for them.

Alien birds sing in the distance, the noise strange. The only lifesigns this far. After walking for just a half an hour, the heat is pervasive and sweat trickles down J.J.’s back; must be upward to ninety degrees.

“Almost there,” he says. “Skies are clear.”

Gladys is holding onto a lifesigns detector. “Can’t see anything either, Sarge. Some small animal life, that’s it. Looks like we’re alone.”

J.J. presses them onward for a while longer. Into the trees, which aren’t monsters but normal-sized, and the canopy not that thick. The trees are pale and twisting upward, and not providing as much cover as he hoped. They set up camp by the roots of one of the largest ones. DeSalle insists on checking them all out for injuries.

J.J.’s bruises are mild. Gladys took the brunt of the hit. DeSalle suspects he has a concussion, and patiently sort of waits for her to get all dizzy and throw up. She says she feels fine, apart from her ribs. DeSalle tells her to be still to not aggravate it more, but doesn’t apply any bandages because the pressure would just increase the pain of her broken blood vessels beneath the skin.

“Next time you tell us to strap in,” Kemp says seriously, “you do that too, Corps.”

“Yeah,” she laughs and then stops herself. “Ugh. Yeah, I’ll remember.”

He glances at his watch. They’re been away from the City for only an hour; not due back for another twelve. Since that beacon failed, that’s how long they have to hold out: twelve hours.

He sets up the M60 and finds a spot on the edge of camp where he has a good view of the sky. A patch. In atmo, they’ll hear the high-pitched roar of a Wraith Dart long before they see it.

“Sergeant,” Gladys says, an offer and request rolled into one.

“No way, LC. Get some rest.”

She swallows any protests. “Yes, sir.”

Two hours later; still no sign of the Wraith. J.J. cannot relax. Juno paces, a quiet circle. Night has fallen shockingly quickly and temperatures are rapidly dropping. DeSalle and Gladys have huddled up in their sleeping bags, Dæmons helping to keep them warm, and Kemp is keeping the fire stoked: a tiny thing which J.J. decided they could risk some twenty minutes.

“Hey, J.J.,” Kemp says softly. He walks up to his side. “You had that second date yet?”

He shakes his head. “She’s aboard the Aurora.”

“Oh. Yeah. Remember it now, the Corps told me,” Kemp says. “That cute physicist with the glasses is on the ship too.”

J.J. wonders, but doesn’t ask, if Kemp knows. Instead he teases: “Two years and you still don’t know the names?”

“Yeah, sue me,” Kemp says. “Like, okay, there’s Dr Make-Everyone-Cry …” (J.J. rolls his eyes; yeah, of course, that’s the impression Kemp has of Dr McKay. the doc isn’t actually that
terrifying, and J.J.’s views may have been subtly tinted in a different light ever since he saw the
doc and the Old Man on the balcony two weeks ago.) “… and there’s Dr Z, he’s cool (he doesn’t
make anyone cry), and, and uh, Cute With the Glasses. And of course your girlfriend, Sarge.”

“Seriously, LT. There ain’t not a single name in that list, and she isn’t my girlfriend.”

“Yeahhh, you’ll say that in a week when the Aurora lands.” Kemp winks.

Maybe he’s right. Maybe he’s wrong. Either way, he’s overstepping, as usual. “Don’t make me
have a word with the Old Man about cleanup duties. I’d suggest KP if you didn’t burn everything
down every time you enter a kitchen.”

“For fuck’s sake, Sarge, it was one small fire.”

“Wake up. Wake up! Wake up!”

J.J. scrambles into consciousness, and DeSalle’s shaking his shoulder warningly. Jarring. Juno
looks around: the fire’s gone out to mere smoldering embers, and Gladys is out of her sleeping
bag, and Kemp’s on his side, startlingly alert. It’s not as dark before: a hint of dawn. Hues of
purple. Can still see the stars, though. He can’t how many hours it’s been – no idea how long the
nights are on this planet.

“Listen,” Gladys says sharply. She’s by the M60 – must have relieved Kemp while J.J. slept – and
a finger is on the trigger, waiting, waiting, but the magazine is still full.

They hold their breaths.

It approaches.

Dart. The whine unmistakable: a Dart.

“Shit.” J.J.’s on his feet, reaches for a weapon. “Gladys …?”

“I got it, Sarge. Please, trust me on this.”

He does. She isn’t the one to make bad decisions, and DeSalle doesn’t interfere either, even if the
guy frowns darkly.

They hadn’t spread out much and DeSalle and Kemp start packing up while J.J. watches the sky,
and Gladys tells them what’s going on at regular intervals, looking at the lifesigns detector, where
the Wraith are. They’re circling. Searching, starting from the crashed Jumper and out. Coming
closer every heartbeat.

“It’s coming this way!”

“Take cover!”

The whine grows louder than ever, and a small speck in the sky –

Gladys presses the trigger. The ammunition belt is fed into the machine gun smoothly, heavily, the
noise so loud. J.J. draws comfort from it.

Misses on the first pass.

“Ah, shit, shit.” Got to wait a second so the barrel can cool down.
The Dart isn’t deterred. It comes around, and this time it activates its beam. The light sears onto his
irises. The Wraith must’ve realized they can’t pick them all up at once, because the Dart is
beamimg things down. Warrior drones. He can see four of them: two o’clock, between the trees.

“Scatter!” J.J. shouts. “Wraith on the ground!”

Again, Gladys holds down the trigger, and the Dart veers off course when the bullets hit their
marks.

After a second, there’s a low boom: a crash. Out of sight, but J.J. turns around to face it briefly:
there’s a hint of a billowing cloud of smoke and dust and fire a klick or so away.

“You did it!” Kemp cheer.

“Not over yet, boys,” she says, but she doesn’t try to move from the M60. J.J worries that the
injury has gotten worse, and Gladys doesn’t want to be a burden. “Wraith, two o’clock!”

“I see it,” J.J. says. The Wraith fire the bright blue of stunners, and the marines return it with hard
ammo. He and DeSalle advance slowly. They can’t outrun this. Best they can do is face it and
fight.

These warrior drones must be hungry, because the first one goes down easy, just a handful of
bullets. Sometimes it takes twenty, fifty, an explosion. They’re running toward the marines coldly,
determinedly, completely without expression, and the blaze of the stunners is too too too close for
comfort.

“Die, Suckers, die!” he hears Kemp behind him, and the ta-ta-ta-ta on repeat from his P-90.

DeSalle takes out the second one.

Gladys shouts: “Hit the deck!” J.J. drops, Juno flattens herself against the ground, and DeSalle
next to him, and something arcs above their heads. A grenade.

The boom takes out the third Wraith.

The last one now – J.J. wonders if Wraith ever feel. There’s no fear or hesitation or even anger, no
reason. Only hunger. It’s dazed by the explosion, and the shockwave blew its mask off, torn it in
two. The white skin is burned and the face so fucking hideous; they’ve never seen one without the
mask before. The face is even more alien, all white and drawn out and eyes blurry, and it makes a
noise J.J. can’t even begin describing.

They’re still on the ground – “Stay down!” Gladys shouts, and J.J. listens to the punch of the
M60, covering his head and Juno curling up behind a thick root to shield themselves from debris.
When he looks up, the Wraith is lying on the ground, dead.

Kemp is breathing heavily. “That was awesome, Corps.”

“Yeah, but my ribs are hating me,” she says.

“Hang on.” DeSalle stumbles to his feet.

As DeSalle checks on Gladys again, Kemp and J.J. walk up to each of the dead Wraith in turn.
Got to make sure they stay down. A couple of headshots is the best way. Or, according to AR-2,
cutting heads off: that’s what that Satedan guy, Dex, did when helping them out of that ambush.
According to one rumor on the intranet, the Colonel tried to convince General Landry to send
them swords so that Dex could start training the marines. J.J. isn’t sure if that’s true, though.
“We’re clear,” he announces.

They don’t know if the Dart survived, if its pilot made it. Maybe sent a distress signal loud enough for the whole planet to hear. Wraith have that tech.

J.J.’s instinct is to get the fuck out of here, so they pack up camp as quick as they can, and decide to head for the Jumper before the sun is up. Maybe they can fix it. Enough to send an SOS.

If more Wraith arrive, they can’t wait for Atlantis to send a rescue – they’re not overdue yet. He checks his watch. Three more hours.

They had come to check out this planet, maybe find a settlement. If there is a human population on this planet, cut off from the rest of Pegasus because of the Spacegate, they live far away from here. There’s no sign of civilization in the vicinity.

It could just be them.

And the Wraith.

“I don’t think I’ll fly, Sarge,” Gladys says wearily, an hour later when they’re huddled in the Jumper. “Even if I knew what’s wrong … I’m not an engineer.”

They can’t breathe any life into the machine. Well, for a spluttering second, the HUD came on, and the panels glowed. It was enough to get a bunch of alarms and warnings in Ancient. Then it went quiet. Jumper Four is officially out of commission, and J.J. imagines, easily, what kind of shitstorm the scientist are going to throw at them for this. Each Jumper is an important, unique piece of Ancient equipment and losing one of them isn’t like losing a gun. Not that easily replaceable.

“We need to hold out here,” J.J. says, and needs to make them believe; “Atlantis will send a rescue. Someone’ll come get us. We hold this position until they get here.”

“Yes, sir,” DeSalle says.

“What if the Wraith get here first?” Kemp asks.

“Then –”

“Then I’ll do what I did earlier,” Gladys says.

(He’s going to talk with the Old Man after this mission. Once they’re home. About courses in fixing Jumpers, and about giving Gladys a promotion from LC and some well-earned leave.

All of them. Someplace nice, without Wraith or crashed ships or upset locals shooting them down. Didn’t Lieutenant Ford once say his team found this paradise planet, long beaches, plenty of sun, not a soul as far as the eye could see …?

Yeah. Got to talk with the Colonel about that.)

“Control, this is Recon Four, come in. Mayday, mayday.”

The Gate is in space, in orbit above. They can’t see it without a telescope, and they can’t tell if it’s active. But starting at 11:00 hours, Standard Atlantis Time, the second they are overdue, they send radio bursts: brief messages, hoping. Taking turns every ten minutes. Eventually, they’ll be heard.
by an opening wormhole.

“Control, this is Recon Four. Please respond. Request immediate assistance. Jumper Four has crashed. Over.”

Nothing yet.

DeSalle peers out from the open hatch. “Still clear.”

“Control,” J.J. repeats, “this is Recon Four – mayday, mayday.”

Static.

“Atlantis, this is Recon Four requesting assistance, please respond.

Mayday, mayday …”

“Hang on,” Kemp says, twenty-eight minutes later. “I see something.”

“Wraith?”

“I – no. No, it’s a Jumper! We’re getting rescued – woohoo!” Kemp steps out a bit and starts waving his arms in elation, even though he probably can’t be seen and definitely not be heard. Doesn’t deter him. “Over here! Over here!”

“This is Jumper One, do you read? Over.”

Ah, shit, they sent Recon One. J.J. is never living this one down. Getting rescued by the premiere team is kind of … yeah. Not a lot of guys can boast that, but it also means you’ve screwed up royally. Why the heck couldn’t they send Recon Five or something? It must really be a boring day for AR-1 if they have time to do this.

J.J. clears his throat. “We read you, Jumper One. We’re in Jumper Four. All systems nonresponsive, so we could use a lift. No casualties.”

“Understood, we’re on our way. Just hang tight,” Colonel Sheppard says.

He removes his hand from the radio. “You hear that, guys? We’re going home.”

Gladys smiles tiredly. “Sounds good, Sarge. Sounds good.”

Jumper One circles around, lands nearby. Hatch lowers. The whole team is there: armed to the teeth, prepared for the worst. All to fetch up some guys whoo crashed their Jumper. J.J. is deeply embarrassed, but does his best not to let it show. Ronon Dex nods in greeting before peering into the distance, as if expecting a sudden attack. It isn’t unjustified.

The Colonel makes a point on checking on each of the marines. It’s a quick and subtle thing, the way he says their names, making sure they’re all whole and accounted for. DeSalle talks with the Colonel, says that Gladys could use a medic and a moment under that scanner in the infirmary; meanwhile, Dr McKay barges past them into Jumper Four.

“Oh my god, what have you done, this is useless now.”

“Wraith shot us down, doc,” J.J. says. Got to defend Gladys, who actually saved their asses more than once.
“I can see that!”

“Easy, McKay,” the Colonel says, climbing into the Jumper after the doc. J.J. half-expects there to be a glimmer of light: a crystal coming online, some movement. But there’s nothing. “We’ll tow it back later. I’m sure you can fix it.”

“I thought they had piloting lessons?” McKay says suspiciously. “I thought they had piloting lessons with you, Sheppard.”

“To be fair, so did you.”

Dr McKay is clearly indignant at the implications. “I didn’t crash a rare, thousands-of-years-old Ancient spacecraft onto an alien planet!”

“Yet.”

J.J. kind of wants to keep listening (because there’s no hesitation whatsoever in the men’s bickering and their synch is fascinating) and kind of … not. Is this how they flirt?

Okay, Juno mutters, forcibly derailing that train of thought, let’s not think about that. One line too many.

He turns to his team again. DeSalle has herded Gladys into Jumper One, and is now chatting with Ford, while Teyla Emmagan asks Gladys something quietly. The LC shakes her head. She looks pretty beat up in the daylight, her face a big bruise and that usually tight knot of hair at disarray.

It’s another few minutes before they pack up. Together, they manage to manually heave the surprisingly heavy hatch closed, so that no scavengers or wildlife can take up residence inside of Jumper Four. His team settles in the back of Jumper One while the Old Man begins the preflight – a quick process – and Ford joins them, asking about the mission, the bullet points. J.J. hands over what he can. His body is still sore from the crash.

The debrief is blessedly swift. Before it, they’re all sent to the infirmary for a check-up: only Gladys is held there for a longer time.

Dr Weir is there, not just Sergeant Bates, and the entirety of AR-1 because of their involvement in the rescue. Dr McKay is relentlessly bitter about Jumper Four and calls them all incompetent about crashing it, of course, but J.J. expected that and told Gladys, before the meeting, she did a damn good job: she got them out alive. That’s what most important.

Thankfully, Colonel Sheppard is a good buffer between the doc and the rest of the world, and at one point he actually seems to kick Dr McKay’s ankle under the table, and the doc quietens down. For a while.

Someone will be sent to collect Jumper Four. The Daedalus or the Aurora, preferably, so they can lift it aboard and fix it later. Due to the Dart, a larger Wraith presence – present or future – cannot be ruled out.

“All right,” Dr Weir says. “For now, we’ll mark P57-081 as potentially hostile.”

“I’ll update the entry,” Dr McKay says.

(The list of Hostile Planets, Visits Not Recommended is growing worryingly long.)
Kemp is unusually subdued, but that happens sometimes when they’re in the same room as the Old Man – Kemp can be a somber soldier when he needs to. He has the necessary reverence for their CO, however unconventional Colonel Sheppard is, the zoomie in charge of a hundred marines.

And it works out, and that never really ceases to amaze J.J.: when it first began, he’d darkly thought: *this is going to be FUBAR within a month.* But the Colonel’s turned out to be competent, and he doesn’t try to alienate himself from the marines – even if hanging out with the Old Man on a casual, daily basis doesn’t happen much. Only Ford does that, as far as J.J. is aware; sure, the Colonel talks to people in the corridors, and they’ll mingle at the bigger celebrations. But he doesn’t join all the poker games and weekly movie nights and everything else announced on the intranet forum.

The meeting wraps up with a question directed at him. J.J. has given them the short story, and he’ll write up his report before going to bed (prefers it that way. Some guys gather up their missions and they write once every week, but J.J. can’t keep it all sorted in his head like that). He mentioned Gladys several times, how vital she was to their survival. The Colonel asks to have a chat with him later today, as J.J. is Gladys’ team leader and supervisor. He can see where this is going.

It’ll be a nice surprise once Gladys is let out of the infirmary.

He writes, just in time to send it with the next databurst between the City and the Aurora:

Hi Rachel,

My team’s just returned from a rough mission but we’re okay. Gladys asks me to tell you she’s fine. She broke a couple of ribs, but she’s in the care of Dr Beckett’s team now. It would be great if you could pass that on to Dr Kusanagi.

I hope you’re doing well. Is the mission good? You get to see such awesome stuff aboard the Aurora. All we saw on P75-081 was a whole lot of dust and trees. It was kind of shitty. I wish I was aboard the Aurora with you.

I’m absolutely up for that second date. Which is a date. Yeah?

Please take care,

J.J.
universal constants, part one

Chapter Summary

*the chevrons won’t lock.*

Chapter Notes

(2018-11-01) Updates might slow down for a while. The next few chapters of this fic, which are (kind of confused) drafts right now, have a certain weight and touch on dark themes. I'm not going to reveal everything but I'm working on an arc of three-four chapters soon to come, which are ... pretty dark. There *will be* a happy ending, but plenty of angst, too. Just a heads-up. There's going to be some time travel and stuff, so, kind of confusing to write but hopefully I'll be able to straighten it all out so that it's readable.

Oh, and I'm working on the next fic in this series. [Here is a sneak peek of a scene from the first chapter](https://example.com) (with John and Rodney!) while you guys wait. Thank you everyone who has read, left comments and kudos!!

(2018-11-02) Chapter re-uploaded. I realized I accidentally published a draft, not the complete chapter; there were some tiny bits missing, some details. But now it's all in order.

x.

universal constants

part one

*the chevrons won’t lock.*

Two weeks after the disaster that was P75-081, they’re gathered in the Gate Room for Gladys’ promotion ceremony.

J.J. chest swells with pride. She isn’t the only marine stepping up – there’s PFC Oakley becoming Lance Corporal; Olsen rising to Captain; Gamble to LC; Herschel to Specialist – but to J.J. (selfishly), Gladys is the most important.

Kemp is all serious in his dress blues, everything polished and gleaming and neat, but he can’t stop grinning. DeSalle salutes her proudly. Colonel Sheppard pronounces her a full Corporal, an oath is sworn, and everyone cheers: pretty much every marine not currently offworld are here. Someone whistles sharply (J.J. doesn’t need to turn around to know who it is).
Later that evening, many of them have a couple of hours off, so they throw a party. All Gamble’s idea, of course.

AR-9 is more or less up and running now – Snow is on the fast track of his recovery, and been on a few missions; other times, he’s in the Control Room, so J.J. actually sees more of him these days. The Lieutenant’s knee is still a bit screwed up and there’s metal plating and shit holding it together. He’ll never run like he used to. But he does join his team whenever he can, and the Colonel makes sure accommodations are made so that the LT doesn’t have to return to Earth, to become one of the forgotten thousands of veterans.

(The scar on J.J.’s belly from the Goa’uld attack hasn’t faded. But it doesn’t hurt anymore.)

They’re all there: almost every team, except AR-12, Whitney’s team, who are offworld. Some of the marines who don’t belong to any teams yet, who guard the Gate Room and have other duties. Even Sergeant Bates stops by, briefly (which is nice; guy doesn’t wind down a lot). There’s alcohol from near and far away – J.J. doesn’t care to ask when Brittany got hold of that brandy from M30-716 – and music that is probably outdated, because everything reaches Atlantis months and months after it’s released on Earth.

Half of the marines are still in their day uniforms, though most of them shrug off their jackets, and Kemp has now switched from his dress blues to an old pair of jeans and a horribly colorful t-shirt, and Lieutenant Cadman has her hair down (J.J. still finds it kind of weird to see any marines with hair past their ears, nevertheless shoulders; no base he’s been on has been this homely, this relaxed. Time off is still time on base). They’re in the upper levels of the Citadel, near one of the rec rooms. Gamble has his quarters nearby and seems to be using it as an open bar.

It’s all good fun, and one of those times when no civilians have been invited. Nothing wrong with civvies, but sometimes – sometimes they need these moments away from the geeks, the scientists. Though those on Gate teams have seen some shit (this is the Stargate Program, after all), they aren’t marines.

At some point near midnight, when things have crested and started dying down – they’ve all got duties in the morning – Colonel Sheppard appears, unannounced. J.J. sees the Dæmon before he sees the man entering the corridor onto which the party has spilled out; a shadow of wings on the floor, and then the Raven itself.

He snaps to attention, that part of his brain that’s still wired to strict protocol and age-old regulations overwriting the rest. But the Colonel says calmly: “At ease, Sergeant.” as he walks into the room.

Ford spots them, waves a hand from where he’s sitting on a couch. The Lieutenant doesn’t seem that bothered that their CO has dropped in, but Ford’s been with the Colonel through the thick and thin as a team, has battled alongside him and must know more about him than any other marine on base. (Does he know about the Old Man and Dr McKay? Has he seen them on a balcony, or maybe offworld on a mission?) As his teammate and XO, Ford’s got a more relaxed attitude.

“I heard there’s free beer and came to take a look. Don’t worry, Sergeant, I’m off-duty.”

“Yes, uh, sir,” J.J. says.

And then the mountain of a man that is Ronon Dex walks up behind the Colonel and, without warning, wraps his arms around the Old Man and lifts him off the ground and to the side, easily dumping him on a spot to the left. The Colonel is surprised but not alarmed, but J.J. blinks at seeing his CO literally manhandled around like that. (Only team could get away with it.)
“Jeez,” the Colonel wheezes, a startled laugh: “Could’ve asked me to move out of the way. Like civilized people.”

“Yeah, I could’ve,” Dex smirks. “Not as much fun.” He pats the Colonel’s back, and the Old Man passes them by.

Dex nods at J.J. in greeting. There’s respect there, between the ex-Runner (everyone knows his story, mostly by rumor) and the marines. Their military backgrounds are similar, and the guy is surprisingly easy to hang out with. Doesn’t say much, mostly. But then sometimes Dex surprises them with a completely unexpected joke or long sentence.

Dex throws himself right into it. Well. ‘Throw’ is the wrong word: he lurks on the edges for a while, then spots four guys gathered around a table playing poker. Walks over and asks to join them, and J.J. didn’t know he knew the game.

Meanwhile, the Colonel’s walking around, and some marines want to chat, say hi, shake a hand or pat a shoulder. The song changes and Wade – one of the Second Wavers, who at first had seemed careful and tense and always polishing his boots – leaps onto a white couch and plays air guitar during the solo, and he must have had some of the hot cider. That shit has a good kick. Kemp’s taking photos again, no doubt planning to spam the intranet forum dedicated to *Off-duty Recreation & General Fun* (who named these, anyway?) – the Lieutenant has cleaned up the memory card since they went back to M20-999 with those pictures of lady U’ua and her family.

(J.J. printed a copy to keep for himself: the locals and his team together, the hearth warm in the background. A nice day, no fighting, no struggle; what most missions usually aren’t. Has it pinned over his desk.)

There’s a minor uproar when Wade finishes his air guitar solo and falls of the couch, nearly onto his face. God, he is so smashed, someone should take care of him. And in front of their CO, no less. Actually, when Wade sees the Old Man, his face goes through all the existing shades of mortification and he sort of shuffles backward to take cover behind a fellow marine, also one of the newer guys, Blake.

J.J. is there, laughing and drinking and talking with the other guys, but every now and again his gaze is drawn back to the Colonel. The Old Man might slouch his way through every meeting and on the surface seem forever laidback, but, truthfully, it’s not often anyone sees the guy relaxed and happy and just, well, simply an unburdened human.

(Human. There are those whispered rumors, too – with such a strong ATA-gene and unusually Dæmon, so late to Emerge: what if he isn’t – what if? But no one has ever confirmed those particular stories. J.J. doesn’t know what to believe. The Old Man is many things, but alien, Ancient? He grew up on Earth, same as then. And Ronon Dex and Teyla Emmagan are alien but they’re also human, and, yeah, it’s complicated.)

J.J. sips at his beer and decides to try poker when Evans throws his hands in defeat, and Dex’ expression is vindictive. Maybe he could get some story or two out of the big guy.

Rutherford whistles low. “Hell, Dex, who taught you to play?”

Dex shrugs. Okay, not an important detail then.

“Hey, J.J.,” Snow greets when J.J. sits down on the chair Evans left.

“Mind if I’m in?”
“Not at all, Sergeant. Welcome.”

“So,” J.J. smirks, “whose winning streak is it tonight?”

“Specialist Ronon Dex,” Rutherford says, and he pats the big guy’s back. “Defeated Evans twice in a row! No one’s done that before. Lieutenant got so prissy he left.”

“Yeah, I noticed.”

“Okay, my turn to shuffle,” Yamato says, gathering the cards to make the deck anew.

“No cheating this time,” Johnson says sharply.

“Hey, where’s the faith in your fellow marine.”

“You mean the one that disappeared five rounds ago, yeah,” Rutherford mutters, “a black hole fucking ate it.”

The Colonel walks up behind them, and he leans over Dex’ shoulder, nodding to himself, an eyebrow raised. “Good luck with that, buddy.”

“Leaving already?” Dex asks, not looking up from his hand. J.J contemplates his own: one, six, a queen, ten, four. Not too good.

“Yeah,” the Colonel nods, “just checking there won’t be any Drunk and Disorderlies in the morning.”

“No, sir!” Johnson shouts, and then looks sheepishly embarrassed at the even more raised eyebrow. “Uh, no, sir.”

“Mission tomorrow?” Dex asks.

“You know, you could check your email once a month,” Colonel Sheppard says, but it’s an amused remark, like this is an age-old argument, or maybe Dex’ dislike of Earth tech; this is the banter between people of a team, not a CO hacking down on his subordinate. “Yeah, M2-uh-3-whichever.” The Colonel makes a wide gesture with his hand: “That one with all the glaciers. McKay knows.”

Dex smirks, and his Dæmon turns their head to stare right at the Colonel’s, which has found a perch high up in the ceiling, on a beam stretching across the length of the room. It’s a sharp, knowing look, and J.J. recognizes it too well from within his own team. Doesn’t want to analyze it too closely.

“McKay always knows.”

Colonel Sheppard rolls his eyes and doesn’t comment on that. “Oh-nine-hundred in the Jumper Bay. Winter gear.”

The inexplicable smirk doesn’t fade, but Dex’ dreads bob as he moves his head, an affirmative, before the Colonel takes his leave.

Johnson’s grumbling about his hand. The guy has no poker face whatsoever, yet he won’t give up.

Rutherford clears his throat, frowns: “What was that about, Dex?”

“Ask Sheppard,” Dex says. He’s one of the few people around not to use the man’s rank when
talking about or addressing him, but he’s not an Earth marine, so J.J. guesses that must be okay. He heard that Teal’c was the same back on Earth, calling Colonel Carter and General O’Neill by names rather than rank.

“Oh hell no,” Rutherford splutters: “that’s never going to happen.” You don’t just ask your CO that kind of questions. Everyone knows that.

Dex smirks. His teeth are very white. “Then you’ll never know.”

By the eight date, J.J. is pretty sure that, yeah, this is going steady, and this is going well. Rachel’s great. They never stop seizing opportunities. Can’t do that in Atlantis. And J.J. is kind of mind-blown at how fast this has gone from oh, okay, she’s nice, she’s cute to oh my god, I never want to let go.

So, okay. Maybe, maybe, he’s started to fall in love with Dr Rachel Potts. They get on so easily, no matter the weather. A shared wavelength;

Six weeks after their first date, the Aurora is on a mission on the other side of the galaxy, and Recon One is aboard. Something about helping to evacuate the people of a planet that is headed toward its end – a big volcano, like Yellowstone on steroids; it’s an urgent mission of mercy.

AR-4 and other teams have been suspended from their missions for a moment, so that evacuees can use the Gate. Two hour after the Aurora’s jump into hyperspace, someone dials into Atlantis. Dr Weir, with some leader or politician from that planet – T … something. Tanaris?

Their faces are full of confusion and fear and awe;

J.J. and his team have been waiting for the go-ahead for their mission to M97-111 for an hour now, and Kemp paces, and DeSalle hides a yawn into his elbow when there’s an incoming wormhole; Gladys mutters Oh, great, we’re never going.

When Dr Weir walks out of the event horizon, they straighten up – and then suddenly, a shout on the radio; an open frequency from the other side of the wormhole so that Control can’t miss it. It sounds like Dr McKay.

“Atlantis, raise the iris! Raise the iris! A lava fissure has opened beneath the Gate – raise the iris now!”

“Do it!” Dr Weir orders, and it’s in the nick of time. The iris is normally a stable shield, but it starts to glimmer as if being bombarded. After a couple of seconds, the Stargate shuts down, and the radio transmission dies with it.

Lava? J.J. glances at his team. The hell kind of planet has the Aurora been sent to?

“What is the meaning of this?” the Lead Guy of the Tanarians demands. It’s justified. From their perspective, this could probably look like some kind of trap.

“Chancellor Lycus, I – we’re not sure, but we’ll figure it out,” Dr Weir promises. “Sergeant, dial back immediately.”

The technician at the helm today, Chuck, does so.

The chevrons won’t lock.
That can only mean the Gate has been disabled, destroyed. Gone. What if the Aurora – Rachel would do everything she could to help those people. She’d. She’d …

Gladys moves to stand next to J.J. and murmurs, quietly: “She’s okay.”

J.J. exhales slowly. “Yeah, Corporal. Sure.”

He wishes he could believe.

The Aurora makes landfall five and a half hours later, and the passenger list has gone from fifty Atlantis crew to over a thousand refugees. There’s also a second Warship, in orbit around Tanaris, engines frozen, and the Daedalus goes back and forth a number of times to fetch the people there. The casualty count is miraculously low: Dr McKay worked out a plan (last minute and mind-blowing, as usual) and, as a bonus, the Expedition now has a second Ancient Warship. Just got to fix it to make it battle-worthy.

J.J. isn’t there to greet Rachel at once, because four hours earlier his team is cleared to go, and he can’t stop a mission for the selfish reason of wanting to wait to check that his girlfriend is okay. He goes through the motions on M97-111 in a distracted daze.

Then they’re back, and he doesn’t pretend with false excuses: DeSalle pats him on the back and tells him to go. J.J. hurries from the Control Room without even bothering to drop by the Armory to disarm, and goes to the Astrophysics Department, their main labs on level seventy. But Rachel isn’t there; there are some scientists at work in the biggest of the labs, and a couple of them looks up at the marine in bewilderment, but most of them are completely oblivious, so absorbed in their work. No Rachel. J.J. turns on his heel.

He nearly runs down Dr Z on his way out, who by luck manages not to spill scalding coffee over both of them. The scientist’s Dæmon sidesteps, and the doc nearly drops his datapad.

“Shit, sorry, doc. Sorry, have you seen Dr Potts?”

The man adjusts his glasses. “I think she just left for the mess. How so?”

“Thanks, doc! Got to go! Sorry!”

Dr Z shakes his head and mutters something incomprehensible in Czech. Probably an insult.

The City is full of strangers.

For a brief time, the evacuees have nowhere to go but here: Dr Weir allocates whole buildings for them on the north side of the Inner City. Some of those rooms were used, in the first year, by the Athosians. But the Athosians were few – the Tanarians number over four thousand; add to that four thousand Dæmons of various alien Shapes. Most of the Tanarians are farmers and scattered families who once fled from other Culled planets to make a fresh start on Tanaris. Now they’ve lost their homes and valuables and mementos a second time, and they cling to their children tightly. Atlantis must be frightening and strange to them.

The City hasn’t been this busy since the Ancients left it.

On-duty marines are hard at work making sure there’s food for everyone and that people have places to sleep and that the refugees don’t touch any Terran or Ancient tech, accidentally or not. Activating dormant machines by mistake. Or starting fights out of sheer terror and confusion of being here. Medical teams spread out to give the refugees health checks, especially the last group
who most likely were exposed to toxic smoke and dust.

It’s uncertain how long they’ll stay – may be days, may be weeks. Dr Weir negotiates with the Taranian leaders, and Recon Teams are prepared to be sent out to explore potential candidates for a new Taranis.

J.J. dodges past a Taranian family in his rush to the mess hall.

“Rach! Rachel.” He’s out of breath, and tries to appear casual. Which is difficult when you’ve run down fifteen levels of stairs, across half a dozen hallways; he manages to catch up with her only a few steps from the entrance. Her Dæmon turns at the sound of his voice.

“Hey, soldier. What’s the rush?”

“You are.” _Oh, god_, Juno sighs. _Please, we aren’t teens, why are we so awkward? That is nowhere as suave as you think it is._ “I mean – fuck. Did I say that out loud?”

“It’s okay,” she says. “I was worried, too. Was the mission okay?”

“Yeah, I. Yeah, sure,” he says, losing his balance. “I was worried about you, with the Aurora and the volcano and everything.”

“I was never on the planet,” Rachel explains, and J.J.’s heart is calming down, finally. “My engineering team were busy getting refugees aboard and making lifesupport go around – we’ve never had a thousand people on the Aurora before.”

“Shit, I was so worried when I heard. They really evacuated all those people?”

“Yeah,” she sighs. “The volcano’s disrupted everything, the ash cloud’s making it inhabitable. Poor people. I talked with some of them, this family, they’re already refugees from another planet that was Culled a few years ago.”

“Shit.”

“Yeah.”

For a moment, they don’t speak. Simply sharing that insurmountable feeling of rage and sorrow and hopelessness that the world never changes and there are too few happy endings.

Then Rachel offers a hand. “You eaten yet?”

“Nothing but MREs,” he says, and follows her into the mess hall.


Jumper Four has been put on hold, its repairs on standby as all engineers have been scrambled to help with repairs of the new Ancient Warship, the Orion.

“For fuck’s sake.”

“Sounds like that’s what you’ve been doing.”

“LT. I mean it.”

“Look, all I want to know, and I’m not going to scuttlebutt this –”
“Hey, DeSalle,” J.J. says loudly, directing his voice toward the back of the craft, where the Lieutenant is checking that the medpack is in order: “they ever teach you how to do a vasectomy?”

“Sure,” DeSalle smirks. “It’s easy. Want me to demonstrate on the LT?”

Kemp goes quiet. For five seconds. Then he glances at Gladys (who is trying not to laugh) and says: “I can’t believe we’re discussing this in front of a lady.”

“You fucking numpty,” Gladys mutters. “I can’t believe you made LT.”

“Look, for the hundredth time, what the hell is a ‘numpty’? And why am I the one being called that and not DeSalle?”

Gladys turns her head to look at him. “That a serious question?” God, she manages to keep a straight face and everything. Very admirable. Kemp’s Dæmon sticks out her tongue in response. Oh, very mature. Great. J.J. rolls his eyes and takes seat next to Gladys, and the Jumper hums quietly as the hatch closes and the ship begins to rise.

“Okay, kids,” J.J. says. “Settle down. Let’s get this show on the road.”

Six weeks later, Recon One have a mission to P70-800. Should be gone twelve hours, but less than halfway through they return;

J.J. is in the Gate Room, waiting for the Gate to carry his team away on their own mission, when there’s a unpredicted incoming wormhole. His team take up positions with the other marines, ready to defend the City; lowering their weapons when Chuck announces the IDC and Recon One steps through.

Dr Weir meets them on the threshold. “We weren’t expecting you yet.”

“Yeah, it’s a long story,” the Colonel says, and all of Recon One is … subdued; strange. It isn’t grief, or the weary shock of a battle where everything’s gone to hell and friends have died, but whatever it is, J.J. cannot name it. An overwhelming sensation, and he has a weird sense of déjà vu.

(But that’s impossible; this has never happened. Maybe it was a dream.)

There’s a lockout program written: P70-800 makes the fifth world on the List of Forbidden Planets, and they are to send no more teams, no ships, not even MALPs.

This slips J.J. and his team by as another report, but since it makes the List, rumors are quick to rise and spread. Mostly, he ignores it. Life goes on. His team’s missions continue, clockwork motions; a few weeks into their dating, J.J. realizes he’s spending almost all his nights and other fre hours with Rachel. Just hanging out. Like normal people back on Earth would, except here there are no restaurants or cinemas for him to take her to, and no way to offer a ride and kiss her on the doorstep.

She’s at ease about it. Playful.

After a couple of months, he finds himself talking about fear.
It’s not easy. Not what the guys in the barracks would discuss, and he didn’t do it with Amy. But Amy didn’t know about the Stargate, about the Goa’uld. Rachel is different: she’s been there, seen it. The Battle of M22-535, the Wraith in the sky, the Aurora burning. She was there, and she keeps going, just like he keeps going;

It’s the kind of common ground he maybe needs.

They’re in a quiet corner of the Citadel, one of the rec rooms which for the moment is private, but they’ve diverted their attention from the movie a long time ago. He’s relaxed and sleepy and Rachel’s curled up against his side.

“I’m working on a paper,” she says. “Birth and deaths of stars. And, you know? If the SGC is never declassified, no one’s going to read it.”

“Seriously?”

“Well, I’m using some research that’s known on Earth. But some of it, the first-hand accounts … The things we see, we do here.”

“Maybe they’ll declassify it,” J.J. murmurs into her hair.

“Depends, I think. I mean, is the world ready? What would people do? People are so messy.”

Yeah. Hell.

“It scares me, a little,” Rachel whispers. “Thinking about the future, like that. I mean … there’s just so much we don’t know, and with the Wraith …”

“They don’t know we’re here.”

“Not yet.”

This is the first time he’s heard this time of pessimism from her. He realizes her fists are tightly curled around the edge of the blanket, clutching it to them closely, an attempt at building a shield. “I’m scared every time you leave the City with your team.”

Exhale: “Me too. When you leave with the Aurora …”

They don’t visualize the horrifying possibilities, don’t shape them into words. That would make them real. Instead, J.J. hugs her closer.

Maybe, maybe, it’ll all come out one day; maybe, the Wraith will be gone in a dozen, a hundred years and the Goa’uld shadows and humans will freely thrive and explore all galaxies, and they’ll learn to build more Stargates and ships and Zero Point Modules (that utopian dream the scientists gush about over lunch). Maybe. Maybe.

Recon Four are due to leave for M18-098 tomorrow, pretty early, so when midnight passes J.J. has to admit it’s time to move from the couch. Rachel is understanding and they part ways, and he’s had a long day and falls into bed, nearly forgetting to take off his boots.

The five moons of New Lantea glow peacefully.

The night is silent.
once upon a time, part one

Chapter Summary

the first timeline begins thirty years earlier.

Chapter Notes

(2018-11-03) A heads-up: some new tags have been added to this fic. These are Temporary Character Death, Time Travel, Ascension, Alternate Timelines, Temporal Paradox, Angst with a Happy Ending, Whump, Grief/Mourning and (in the relationships section) Miko Kusanagi/Gladys (OC). Please read this note. It's a little spoiler-y, but also reassuring. If you don't want spoilers, just look at the tags. This chapter begins an arc of this story which might seem off-putting once you're past the first few paragraphs, so I'm just saying: yes, this seems horrible, but there will be a happy ending and they will live. Those new tags, Angst with a Happy Ending and Temporary Character Death? They'll be okay. Everyone will be okay. I just love time travel stories, okay? The once upon a time arc will be three or four chapters long, and it's full of time skips. It's a time travels story with echoes of future fic (in a way it is). But once I had this idea, I couldn't let it go. The arc is in some ways inspired by "The Last Man" but isn't really an episode remix (also, in a way, drawing from the movie Interstellar and Back to the Future) (how is that for a teaser?). The title and summary of this chapter should explain some things, too. All character death in this chapter can be considered temporary. Therefore I'm not tagging "Major Character Death", even if it may seem like that at first. I'm adding some new tags to this fic; please check them if you feel uncertain. The rating remains M. If you feel like I should tag it "Major Character Death", even if it's temporary (there is a sequel, after all), and there's time travel involved, please tell me and I'll add that tag. Okay, end of the big note.

As you can see, there will be fifteen chapters. Once this fic is complete I'm going to start uploading the John/Rodney-focused sequel.

Thank you everyone who has read this far and left comments and kudos!!

(2018-11-05) Chapter updated/revised, I changed some details when I realized there were several continuity errors. It's fixed now, but it might be worth a re-read.

(2018-12-29) This and a couple of other chapters were updated again. Realized I'd messed up the drafts and mismatched some names.

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xi.

once upon a time

part one
“(the first timeline begins thirty years earlier)“(recording starts)

“… like any Ancient lab but I don’t think so. These readings are … odd.”

“Odd?”

“I believe he means to say ‘I don’t know and I don’t like it’. I don’t know, he’s usually faster than this at figuring it out.”

“Ha-ha-ha. Yes, very amusing, Colonel. Let me work.”

“We’ve found dozens like these before … Why are the lights out, doc?”

“Hang on. There. Happy? … Here we go, here we go.”

“Hey, doc, is that a stasis pod? Right there.”

“Let me check – don’t touch! Damn it, Lieutenant.”

“I didn’t, doc! Looks, hands free. Except for this.” [shakes camera]

“Hm, this isn’t a stasis pod. It’s … I think it’s a machine. In a way, it’s …”

“McKay, you didn’t finish that sentence.”

“It could be some kind of drive.”

“A drive? An engine?”

“These readings are – Yes, that’s a possibility. A prototype. Questions is: for what? Let’s see if we can get it online.”

“Woah, woah – careful.”

“Yeah, that was a power spike.”

“… hear that?”

“I do not hear anything.”

“I can hear it too.”

“Maybe it’s the gene. Okay, I think we should …”

“Colonel!” [ground trembles and groans]

“What’s happening?!?”

“I don’t know, I – some type of energy discharge and it’s massive – A force field. It’s creating a force field.”

“Shut it down!”

“I’m trying, I’m trying – yelling at me does not help! Oh, god. It’s overloading. I think it’s, oh
god. It’s a force field. We’re trapped.”

“Disable it! ... shit, we can’t – Nothing’s happening, I can’t shut it off ... Something’s activating
 – Rodney!? Rodney!”

“...dith. Mer –”

“Colonel, watch o—”

“Sh–”

“John!”

(recording ends)

Atlantis, New Lantea · Pegasus
January 29, 2007 (Terran time) · 393 days after the Uprising
The First Timeline

“Recon Four, we’re dialing now,” Amelia Banks says.

J.J. gives a quick thumbs-up. “We’re ready.”

His team are leaving on foot this time; the MALP showed the vegetation around the Gate is too
dense for a Jumper. Which might just be as well. Jumper Four is still being repaired, and Gladys
isn’t too happy with the replacement they’re generally assigned – Jumper Thirteen tends to act up,
according to Gladys. J.J. can’t quite understand, but that’s just Ancient tech, and without the gene
he will never truly know the feeling.

The Stargate activates: first chevron, second.

“Hope we find something interesting,” Kemp says. Rocks back and forth on his heels impatiently.

Third chevron.

“Yeah,” DeSalle says: “As long as it isn’t another ‘020.”

Fourth chevron.

“God,” Gladys groans, “don’t remind me of that planet.”

Then it stops. The Stargate spins anew;

“Wait – incoming wormhole! Dr Weir, please report to the Control Room. Defense teams, stand
by.”

The marines in the Gate Room immediately take up positions to give cover fire, if necessary, J.J.
and his team included. The Gate bellows outward, a great kawoosh and settles. A few seconds.
Stillness. He waits, tense, and the iris glimmers;

“Receiving IDC. It’s Recon One,” Banks announces and drops the iris.

Dr Weir walks out of her office. “They’re early.”
Ford exits the Gate first, and his expression is … hard. Distraught. Dex follows and then Emmagan. The gate shuts down. J.J. blinks in confusion. Where’s the Colonel and the doc?

Dr Weir goes down the stairs to meet them. “Lieutenant, what happened? Where are Colonel Sheppard and Dr Weir?”

Now J.J. realizes, Emmagan’s face is drained with fallen tears. Paler than she should be. Fists clenched. “They are gone.”

“Gone?” Dr Weir frowns. “The Wraith … ?”

“No, doc,” Ford says. His hands are shaking. “No Wraith. There was no attack. There’s this, this device and – They’re dead.”

The Gate Room is quiet. The marines stare at one another in disbelief.

“How?” Dr Weir presses. Incredulity. Mistrust. J.J. has lowered his P-90, and he hangs onto every word like a lifeline.

“The machine killed them,” Dex growls. Unlike the other, his grief is overshadowed by anger.

“There is … there is nothing to retrieve,” Emmagan says. “They are gone.”

The data is painstakingly translated by Dr Weir; emails with Dr Jackson are involved, and the precise findings are not revealed the whole Expedition. The terrible scope. The horrifying details. P70-800 remains a Forbidden Planet.

No one is to Gate there; and as soon as the ship is available, Colonel Caldwell makes a flyby with the Daedalus. The Ancient facility is destroyed in a nuclear explosion.

Someone leaks bits and pieces of the translation onto the City’s intranet. Missing words. Lieutenant Kemp finds it, one day, and on a whim copies the text file onto a USB memory before the entry is erased. It reads like the entry from a diary. A scientist’s log;

Dr Weir has the intranet forum entry deleted within twenty-four hours, and a warning is issued, by orders of the SGC and the IOA, to not speak of this further.

Lieutenant Kemp hides the USB stick in his drawer.

Recon One does not return to P70-800. Ford has some shaky video footage he took of the place right before it happened, and Dr Weir looks at with a team of scientists, analyzing, it before sending AR-9 with several scientists to carefully examine the place: an Ancient lab: a prison: J.J. doesn’t know. No one really knows. Scientists make recordings, collects data, but the place is deemed too dangerous and they have to leave before the machine takes another life.

The announcement is made thirteen hours later, after AR-4 has returned from the jungle planet. It had been gruesome work, and maybe J.J. had hacked more ferociously at those vines than he needed to clear a path. But – His brain refuses to let the information sink in. Juno mutters, again, again: No. that’s impossible. (recon one never dies). (they always return) The planet was empty; they found nothing useful, returned empty-handed. In time to listen.

Everyone has already heard.
“People of Atlantis,” Dr Weir says over the intercom, and his team are in the Citadel with AR-7, silently gathered and waiting for the miraculous news that the Old Man has somehow risen and walked through the Gate fine; Recon One always returns; they wait and wait, but no such message comes. “It’s with great sorrow I must tell you that Colonel Sheppard and Dr McKay are dead. The cause has been determined as a malfunctioning Ancient device on P80-700. As of right now, that address is off-limits to everyone on this base, including myself. A memorial service will be held tomorrow at 1900 hours. That is all. Thank you.”

The mission to M18-098 goes to hell.

The explosion shatters them. J.J. runs, runs, runs. Tries to get to him. He hears DeSalle screaming, and J.J.’s arm must be broken in at least three different places but J.J. can’t feel it yet. Only the screaming. He runs. Gladys behind. His vision whitening. Breaths. heavy. tight. did they crash?

They fell. They’re still falling.

He shouts, hoarsely: his name over and over and over and over again

the Lieutenant doesn’t answer.

(the casket sent to Earth is empty.)

J.J. talks with Ford. Like AR-7, he asks: let us remain like this. They don’t one some new guy, an unknown face in their midst. This is a space that cannot be filled. Ford understands, agrees: and Recon Four (a relic of the past) permanently becomes a three-person team. Whether they’ll go on missions anytime soon is a different question.

J.J.’s shoulder is eight levels of fucked up, and between the shock and the rehabilitation and PTSD and surgery, he can’t sleep. Some days, he and Gladys and Kemp sit on a random Pier in silence, and they drink and try to laugh, and think about DeSalle and the happier bits of the past. Looking at photos. Never letting go. (They didn’t plan to end up as Lifers, but that’s pretty much what they’ve become.)

One of those times, a chance decision, they end up sitting on the same balcony J.J. first saw the Colonel and the doc over a year earlier, and a wave of sorrow washes over him, but it isn’t sharp and cold. Not the shock of DeSalle’s death.

In the stillness, waves cresting upon the Pier below, the finds himself saying: “You were right.”

“What about, Sergeant?” Gladys asks.

“The Old Man and the doc. You were right. I saw them, once. Together on this balcony, a couple of years ago.” It’s not his place, but they aren’t here anymore, and J.J. knows his team won’t disrupt their memory, taint it in any way. “It … I still remember it because I don’t think – I don’t think I ever saw them at peace like that before.” Or after. “They were happy. I just think … Someone else should remember it.”

Kemp contemplates his bottle. Then he raises it. The stars glimmer. “To the Colonel!”

“To the doc,” Gladys says. So solemn. The place where DeSalle should have been is an echo, a shadow behind their backs, and sometimes they’ll turn around and helplessly search for traces of a voice, a Dæmon that was theirs;
J.J. raises his own glass to meet theirs in the toast. “To DeSalle. Emmanuel.”

(we loved you)

(we’d break the stars to get you back, if we could
if we could
if we could)

Atlantis, New Lantea · Pegasus
2011 (Terran time) · 2,275 days after the Uprising
The First Timeline

“Good morning, Staff Sergeant.”

J.J. nods at Private Diaz (god, so young, fresh-faced: an Fifth Waver: a goddamn kid) as she passes him by in the corridor. “Morning, Private. As you were.”

His heart beats nicely fast; he got a good run in before his duties start at 0800 hours.

These days, he’s swapped the offworld adventures for a comfortable office. Oh, he dives into the action sometimes, when required. But his shoulder still acts up, especially on rainy days, and even Dr Beckett and Dr Keller combined haven’t managed to fix it all up after the explosion. But he’s lucky. He could’ve died and lost his team: J.J. walked away (okay, was carried, on a gurney, and the surgery and rehabilitation took weeks and weeks). He’s okay, and his team is safe.

They are still his team, even if they rarely go out as AR-4 these days.

Humming softly on his breath, J.J. steps into the transporter and lets it take him to the Control Room. The daily routine as the Head of Security – wow, it’s been over a year now, and he’s at last getting used to it. At last.

Sure, there are bad nights. Dreams, and wishes he was in fighting shape so he could be out there with Kemp – a spry Captain now, leading his own offworld team – and Gladys and DeSalle. But they’ve had to make choices, some tougher than others. Still. J.J. grabs every chance he can to step through the Gate: he doesn’t want to leave it behind. That feeling. Even if it’s different.

(his team an echo)

His shoulder isn’t too painful today.

“Sergeant!” the technician, Banks, says. “There’s an unscheduled wormhole.”

The event horizon flares to life.

“Incoming transmission. It’s Midway, sir. Priority one message,” Banks says and J.J. looks at the computer screen, sees the listed names: it’s all airmen and marines. Looks like the person sending it (a video file) is no one other than General O’Neill, and J.J. is kind of surprised. Didn’t that guy retire a couple of months back? Ah, must’ve been another rumor. Again.

He leans against the Ancient console carefully and activates his radio. “Colonel Lorne, please report to the Control Room. Incoming message from Earth.”

(Lorne becomes their CO two months after Sheppard’s death. It takes a long time to get used to that. General Landry issues a statement and there is a promotion ceremony, and J.J. tries not to feel
angry, this festering darkness in his heart; he fights it; (can’t win)

Ford leads Recon One. Continues to. Still XO. Subtle differences. Dex has cut his hair short, something about an ancient Satedan custom after the death of a commander. Emmagan remains, steady as a rock, and she speaks about her lost friends with sad nostalgia. Athosians have a different way of grieving, used to losses, used to it since they’re mere kids – it’s not the first time she has lost someone important to her. Out of all of them, Ford takes the worst brunt of it.

J.J. tries his best cheer him up and on. Offer something when necessary. The first few weeks after the memorial, Ford had looked like a wreck, even if he kept insisting he’s fine.

They all say they’re fine.

And live goes on. Moves on. It has to.)

“It’s a video file,” Banks says, and they gather around the nearest plasma screen, and she presses play.

“Colonel Lorne,” General O’Neill says. “I’ve got good news for you. Very good, in fact. Here it is: starting today, the outdated policy known as ‘Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell’ has been irrevocably rescinded. Which is about damn time, if anyone asks me. So, that’s it. ‘Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell’ is no more. I’ve added instructions to forward this message to every marine and airman and airwoman in the City. Now, the SGC won’t let me stay on this line forever. Bye, kids, and you’d better start arranging a Pride parade.”

J.J. looks between the screen and Colonel Lorne. Waits for a reaction.

“It’s about time,” Lorne muses. “Okay. I’ll write a bulletin. Sergeant, make sure this file is distributed to all base personnel, and not just military. This affect everyone.”

“Yes, sir,” J.J. says. Relieved, suddenly;

J.J. locks himself in his office. There’s just too much damn noise.

Kemp has thrown a party: due to this sudden imbalance in people’s ability to concentrate because they’re too happy, (the only good news in a long time) J.J. has talked with Colonel Lorne and given all military personnel five hours off, a spontaneous decision which might come back to bite them in the ass.

Someone’s knocking on his door. He really wants to tell them to go away.

“Enter.”

It’s Gladys. Subdued. And then she smiles, a careful but broad expression like she can’t stop herself. “Sarge, there’s something I got to tell you.”

He looks at her.

“J.J., I … I’m. I’ve been wanting to tell you for a while. I’m a lesbian.”

J.J. crosses the room and offers a hug: she accepts, and maybe just to hide her face. “I’m happy for you, Gladys. God, you’re so amazing, sister. You’re awesome, okay? Don’t let anyone else tell you otherwise.”
There’s a sniffle. She’s composed again when they break apart.

“So who’s the lucky girl, huh?”

“Would you be surprised if I said she’s a cute astrophysicist with glasses?”

J.J. grins. “Sorry, but not really.”

“You’re invited to the wedding. I, uh, I haven’t asked her yet, though, so don’t mention that bit to Kemp.”

“We’ll be there,” he promises. “We’ll all be there. You told the others yet?”

She shakes her head. “I’m trying to find Kemp, but I wanted to tell you first.”

“Take your time, Sergeant.”

Unusually shyly: “Want me to introduce you to my girlfriend?”

He grins. “Please do.”

“Hey, sweetheart.”

Rachel smiles at him through camera. The video feed is in real-time: the Aurora is close enough. In orbit around a star a few lightyears away, but a subspace message can reach that far. J.J. has been waiting for a slot of privacy all day to talk with her.

“You’re late, soldier.”

“Yeah, but for a good reason this time.”

“Wait, is that paint on your cheek?”

J.J. laughs: it releases from his chest, and he doesn’t want to hold it back. “You won’t believe it, honey. Kemp has been flying all over the City drawing Pride flags. Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell has been rescinded and there’s been a party all day; I had to give people time off. I’ve had three different marines coming out to me.”

“Finally! That’s great! It’s about time that changed.”

“Oh yeah. And. It got me thinking …”

Rachel starts laughing. “I was wondering when you’d ask.”

J.J. clears his throat and reaches for something off-screen. A little box. Velvet. “It’s taken this long for it to reach Atlantis, I ordered it from Earth weeks ago and now you’re not even here to give in person, sorry, honey. But Dr Rachel Potts, sweetheart, my – stop laughing! oh god, I can barely do this as it is. Rachel … Rachel, will you marry me?”

She kisses the camera, as if the motion could traverse the lightyears between them and land on his face.

“Yes, soldier. I will.”

Five months later, J.J. stands at the altar in the Chapel. Rachel is stunning, and it’s hard to breathe,
looking at her. Believing.

Kemp sits in the front row, and Drew and Snow and the other First Wavers surrounding them, and that’s Gamble squeezing Herschel’s hand; (there are shadows where DeSalle should be, and Rutherford and the Old Man and the doc, Wade and Hester and a hundred thousand forgotten names).

J.J.’s eyes are watering, chest tight. Difficult to breathe. His injured shoulder aches (relentlessly).

It’s the second wedding Mr Woolsey has officiated since December. The first was Markham and Stackhouse, and J.J. (and every other marine) was specifically told to act surprised when Stackhouse went down on one knee in the mess hall. It was nice, a subdued ceremony, and the Anthropology department sewed a huge Pride flag for the occasion. It still hangs in the Citadel rec room.

(J.J., sometimes, looks at that flag and remembers the Colonel and the doc on the balcony. They deserved to be here. They should have been the first.)

“… do you, Rachel Victoria Potts, take James MacGrimmon as your lawfully wedded husband?”

“I do.”

J.J. is crying. He doesn’t care.

“… and I declare you wife and wife.”

Gladys marries Miko a year later, just when things have started settling down. And shortly after that, J.J. has to sit down when Gladys says: “We’re pregnant.” and explains about the sperm donor and all of the hoping, the waiting, the tears and impatience;

Emma Gladys-Kusanagi is born, to the day, eight years after the Expedition first left for Atlantis. A healthy baby and utterly perfect, and Captain Kemp quickly becomes the most doting Uncle ever. J.J. feels overwhelmed and blessed when he and Rachel are asked to be Godparents.

“You can’t say no, boss,” Kemp says seriously. “Gladys is giving you that look again.”

“Okay then, Corps. But I take no responsibility if this goes FUBAR.”

“Don’t worry, Sarge,” Gladys says, still tired from the twelve (!) hours of labor (J.J. will never complain again in his life), but happy, oh, so happy. At peace, for a moment. “We trust you.”

There are missions in-between: alien discoveries: wars ending: new ones beginning: a new star churning to dust. There are important announcements, and eight more people drop by J.J.’s office to come out that month even if he thinks at first it’s strange – he’s just the Head of Security. But then, after a while, he gets it. They trust him and it’s one of many steps: most of them come out of their team first.

Team is the most important thing, after all. Sticking together. Like glue.

There’s whispers about an upcoming declassification, but J.J. doesn’t truly think it’ll come true.

The year he makes Major, Kemp breaks up with Hooper twice in a row. How the hell does that even work? When J.J. asks, Kemp evades.
By January, Hooper is pregnant, they’ve just found out; by the end of the day everyone in the Citadel knows and they’re already planning a surprise (which won’t be) baby shower. J.J. briefly fears for the safety of the world. Kemp, a dad?

(after the third miscarriage, they stop trying.)

J.J.’s dreams are haunted. Of missions gone wrong. Losing his team. Fears fears fears and then the explosion where he can’t move. He wakes up shaking and crying, and Rachel holds him. Says everything will be okay. Everything will be okay. Breathe. Breathe. Breathe.

He has long talks with Dr Heightmeyer.

The sleeping pills help a little.

LOG 1. ‘The experiment [???]s well. Simulation is [successful?] with many [???]. Council disagrees, of course, and believe it is too dangerous but [I? we?] shall proceed. If working correctly, the machine will sever the restraints between the [human/person] and Anima, allowing for great distances to [be traversed?] while the [B]ond between them remains [intact]. This factor will be of [great?] aid in the War, and will help those [taken?] by the Enemy to survive.’

LOG 5. ‘Third experiment commencing.’

LOG 13. ‘Experiment failure. Not according to [projections? simulations?]. Will attempt again.’

LOG 24. ‘The failsafe mechanism did not engage. Experiment unsuccessful. Council have discovered [and] will force us to abandon this. The project must stop. All data [deleted?] from primary systems. Perhaps one day we will return and [reconstruct? repair?] the [machine], and we will win the War.’

Atlantis, Atlantica (P33-015) · Pegasus
2017 (Terran time) · 4,407 days after the Uprising
The First Timeline

Emma Gladys-Kusanagi is one of the brightest kids J.J. has ever met. At four years old, she’s keen to learn everything about everyone, and she knows all names and ranks of every marine in the City. She can recite the names of a dozen stars and already explain what an orbit is;

“They’re being boring,” Emma declares. Her Dæmon, leaping from Shape to Shape impatiently, threatens to make a mess of the neat stack of papers on the desk when they jump onto it, exploring everything. “J.J., I’m hungryyyyy and booored.”

“Okay, then let’s go eat. Everyone gets happier when they eat.” He glances at his watch. Okay. He can sacrifice an hour, or two, or maybe three. How could anyone say no to a kid? Stands up and takes the offered hand. It’s so tiny. “You know what they’re serving today?”
“Mashed potatoes. My favorite!” She basically drags him from his office, and J.J. can’t be upset with her. His favorite godchild (okay, only, because Gladys and Miko decided that one child is enough, for now).

(The wall over the desk is so full of pictures he can’t possibly make any more fit: different worlds, and his team, his family, is in every single one of them. Emma’s added drawings, lines of color and words like mom and mama and uncle Kamp and uncle JJ, and J.J’s heart swells every time he looks at them.

The centerpiece remains a photo taken years earlier, in the warm wooden house of a family on a world of snow; they’re smiling at the camera, he and DeSalle and Kemp and Gladys, and lady U’ua and her family. Before it started. Before it all went to hell.

Maybe, maybe one more picture can fit onto the board, though. Just one more.)

The Orion is destroyed above Te’reem.

They pick up the two Hives on long range sensors and rush to aid the people there: this Culling will be devastating. They’re almost too late. Darts sweep low and the houses are burning. J.J. is on the ground, helping to get people evacuated through the Gate and with the Daedalus, when the sky suddenly blinks; The light outshines the sun.

Colonel Lorne shouts into his radio: “Orion? Orion, answer! Orion! Daedalus, what happened? What’s your status?”

They get a thousand people to the Alpha Site, but there are many more who don’t make it. Too far away. The Gate closes, and the refugees don’t wail, don’t scream, don’t panic. They stare blankly at the Lanteans as they’re huddled up in blankets and the docs look at the kids to make sure they’re okay (alive) and everyone is still, so still, so quiet. They set up tents around Base Camp and light fires to cook food.

There were fifty crew aboard the Orion, including Dr Zelenka and a First Wave team of marines. The memorial is held on the Alpha Site.

In the aftermath, J.J. finds himself walking around the Alpha Site, aimlessly, offering blankets or meaningless words or MREs, and then a young man walks up to him. There’s recognition on his face, but J.J. can’t remember him, or his Dæmon. The man – could be in his early twenties, but his eyes are much older – raises his hands and starts signing.

And J.J.’s heart nearly stops. It’s the child – the child he looked after a decade ago, when his team where there, collecting grain (the happier days) – it’s the child, who is no longer a child. All grown up, and his Demon has Settled.

J.J. forgets how to breathe and, slowly, hesitating, he signs back: Juno does her best to help him remember how to do it. Meticulously he spells out the young man’s name, hoping he hasn’t misremembered completely.

The child – the child is gone: how many horrors has he seen? Are his parents, his siblings, alive? His planet is ashes and the Wraith will surely scorch the remains as punishment for the humans’ impudence and refusal to die;

‘Hi, D-a-a-r.’
The young man smiles. Recognition. He signs: ‘J-J. Is your team here?’

The sign for team is the same as for family. It hurts to look at.

J.J. nods, “Yes,” but breath is expelled from his lungs and he fights the tears welling up in his eyes, and he ends up changing the words when he signs them: ‘No. Your family, where?’

Daar’s smile fades. ‘In the sky with the Ancestors.’

J.J. opens his arms, and Daar’s hug is bone-crushing and shuddering and they both cry, wordlessly, for a few moments. Breathing. Unable to put to words their losses and their broken dreams.

That’s where Kemp finds them. Kemp’s worried expression turns to confusion.

“Boss?”

“Kemp, remember the kids from back in the old days? When you hauled grain and I played babysitter? This is Daar,” he says, and signs the name for the young man to see. ‘This is K-e-m-p, my team, friend.’

Daar lays a hand on his heart in the way the Te’reem greet friends and family. ‘Hello, K-e-m-p. I am happy to see you.’

“Oh my god, I remember now!” Kemp exclaims. “And you’ve all grown up now!” Theatrically, Kemp steps up to Daar and measures him with a hand, comparing his height to his own, making Daar smile weakly, an echo of the past. “Holy shit, I can’t believe this. Are your friends still around? Are your people okay?”

J.J. translates slowly after Daar says: ‘Some in the sky, some are here. Mother and father in the sky with the Ancestors. I remember you and your family. Is it true? Are some of your family in the sky with the Ancestors?’

He struggles to translate all of that back into English, and not only because the signs are hard for his untrained eye to read.

“Sorry, kiddo,” Kemp says, now subdued. “DeSalle, he … You remember DeSalle? He’s gone.” He points at the empty blue sky. “But Gladys is okay. She’s in Atlantis, she has a kid, a daughter – that’s why she isn’t with us here today.”

‘I am sorry, K-e-m-p, J-J. About D-e-S-a-l-l-e. He is with the Ancestors. They look after him now,’ Daar signs. ‘Tell me about the City of the Ancestors and G-l-a-d-y-s and D-e-S-a-l-l-e, a story? And I will tell you about my family.’

They linger on the Alpha Site for eighteen days, and J.J. visits Daar as often as he can, and they talk for a while time each time. Makes sure he’s okay.

He’s not, no one is; but they pretend to be.
Fifteen years down the line, J.J. talks with his team. They sit down for a long while, and a blanket of solemnity falls over them like snow. Colonel Lorne has been going over the roster, and Recon Four is out there less than two times a month. There are names on the waiting list, more urgent, faces fresh and minds eager and not yet taunted by nightmares. Kids, in J.J.’s eyes. Hell, Airman Bryant was born in 1999. Little more than a child. sent to war. to destroy.

(The Wraith are out there.)

“We aren’t going to stop being ream,” he says, “but … we may not be going offworld as Recon Four anymore.”

They’re busy, anyway. He’s Head of Security, and Gladys is completing her studies, encouraged by Command to do so, while also being a mom, a full-time job of its own. Kemp leaps from opportunity to opportunity, place to place;

“It’s been a good time,” Gladys says. Salutes. “Sergeant.”

“Didn’t you hear a word?” Kemp says. “We’re still team. So what if we don’t get sent out on offworld missions.”

“Technically,” J.J. must add, “we’re still AR-4; Captain Ford’s trying to make that tradition. On the roster, the new team will be Recon Four Beta.”

“Official Lantean Veterans,” Kemp muses: “The survivors of the First Wave. We should start a club.”

(what did you dream this time? Rachel whispers; J.J. shakes awake countless nights in a row and the new psychologist isn’t as good as Heightmeyer, and he’s switched meds that only help minimally.


It’s not beyond what could happen.

Oh, J.J., I’m sorry. I’m sorry.)

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Virginia, U.S., Earth · Milky Way
2020 (Terran time) · 5,462 days after the Uprising

The First Timeline

“I’m here, mom, dad,” he whispers. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry I couldn’t come earlier.”

J.J. goes to Earth too late for his parents’ funeral. It was quick, sudden. (Violent.) His team sent a thousand condolences. Rachel stays by his side the whole journey, through Midway and into the Mountain and onto the commercial aircraft carrying them to Virginia. The house looks the same, and he drowns in memory. Everything is being packed into boxes. Stashed away. Hidden.

His little brother Jonah’s crying into his shoulder, and J.J. holds him. A wind blows across the field. It’s a sunny day as they lay the flowers onto the gravestone. The protests are for another day: those never end. They never end.

His sister tells him about the ceremony through tears. How they sang. The church was crammed
with people and every neighbor was there, and they raised their hands to the sky;

“I can’t believe …”

“Hey? It’s going to be okay,” J.J. promises. “We’re going to be okay.”

He wishes that was true. He wishes he could carry his brother and sister and everyone to safety: through the Stargate to Atlantis. Away from all this shit, these horrors, the rising fears. But the new General at the SGC is stern-faced and rigid and follows every rule to the dot, and those plans of declassification has been put on hold.

Indefinitely?

J.J. doesn’t know.

(riots) (shock) (outrage) (denial)

There’s a leak six months later, and, in the end, the SGC cannot stop denying it. the uproar rises like a wave and covers the Earth, and the SGC sends sporadic news reports, video footage, newspaper clippings. J.J. holds his breath every time. He tries to email his family, but is only told by the SGC Communications Staff that their servers are busy and his messages are on hold.

(streets don’t burn but almost. so much fear. so much fear.)

The recall to Earth shouldn’t be surprising. They want some recon teams but mostly Captain Ford and Dr Keller and other senior staff. Mr Woolsey (greying rapidly) despairs and agrees; no other choice.

Shouting matches in Mr Woolsey’s office. Kemp overhears one, and retells it to J.J. as fast as he can.

Captain Ford goes to Earth. Emmagan says goodbye by the stairs, pressing her forehead to his, and the Captain blows raspberry kisses at the baby in her arms, and Dex pats his back strongly, a wordless good luck.

Kemp looks at the closing wormhole. “What if they don’t let him come back, boss?”

“They will,” J.J. says. It could be a lie.

Someone on Earth argues that Wraith are sentient and alive and righteous; and these folks have never seen the suffering of Pegasus, never touched a scorched planet, never seen the corpses. Bile rises in J.J.’s throat when he hears about it.

They call the Colonel Sheppard a murderer, because he Woke them and he killed Sumner and he led the Lanteans to fight the Wraith. It’s tainting his memory, somehow. J.J. doesn’t like it. The smear campaign rages for months.

They say the extinction of a species can never be allowed, even if the Wraith will kill indiscriminately and raze civilizations. Captain Ford defends his friend and former CO until he runs out of words.

General Henderson of the new SGC sends a solemn message through the Gate about a world on the brink of war and the approach of a race called the Ori. J.J. is in the Gate Room when the
message comes and Colonel Lorne is there, of course. He calls for Major Ford. The rest of Recon One follows: but none of them step further than the Gate Room. Ford and the others refuse to leave Pegasus after the fiasco of the last time and the wars going on, churning the planet slowly apart.

“General,” Major Ford says. “We’ve looked into the Ancient database about the Ori. Sir, I recommend you prepare for evacuation.”

“The Alpha Site is ready to receive SGC personnel in an emergency.”

“No, sir, not the Mountain,” Major Ford says: “Earth. If it’s the Ori, you need to evacuate the Earth.”

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The Lantean-Genii Peace Treaty is revoked with the death of Cowen years and years before. There are many different reasons why, all interconnected to a single point in spacetime which, in this version of reality, has ceased to be. Radim takes over but is assassinated by his own councilors, and it’s all downhill from there;

Atlantis hears about it too late. A team is burned alive and no one finds the answers. A few months later, a second team is nearly annihilated on a rocky moon where little lives, and only Yates survives, haunted forever and he returns to Earth as soon as he can: he cannot stay in Atlantis anymore. J.J. never finds out his fate. The new commanders of Stargate Command – fingers pointed by the IOA, the Grand Puppeteers – demand retribution. When the first a-bomb goes off, they send Colonel Ellis with the newly launched Apollo to neutralize the threat, ignoring Dr Weir’s advice;

The Genii go underground, and the war begins openly and they can’t keep up. Another offworld team is killed.

They catch the attention of the Ancient Replicators six months after that; and six months after that, Atlantis is under attack and Dr Weir is dead. The Aurora and is locked in battle with the Replicator fleet above New Lantea, and they give as much cover fire as they can do let the City escape. The sky full of fire: the shields nearly fail, a blast reaches the South Pier and rips a building to shreds and eight people die in the singular explosion;

J.J. loses hours of memory from that day. (Gladys was in a Jumper. And he. Fighting? No; waiting, helplessly. Someplace. Waiting. Listening. Space passed them by. Major Lorne was in the Chair, taking them from New Lantea forever.)

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Atlantis, Atlantica (P33-015) · Pegasus
2028 (Terran time) · 8,203 days after the Uprising · Year 24 (Atlantis Reckoning)
The First Timeline

J.J. isn’t in the room when Atlantis is declared its own free, independent Citystate, twenty-four years after the Expedition began.

He’s in the infirmary when the declaration is made; Gladys needs to be more careful. Okay, so, getting infected with some alien virus isn’t her fault, exactly. Still. J.J. checks up on her. The docs keep her in the infirmary for several days, monitoring carefully, and Emma is displeased and worried when J.J. demands a line on the subspace comm to the Aurora to tell her about her mom. Miko even more so; the first time that year she leaves her wife’s side, to teach Emma about the Aurora’s systems no less, and Gladys comes down with a skyrocketing fever.
“I’m okay, boss,” Gladys says between wet coughs. “ Doesn’t feel worse than a cold.”

“Let me worry, Sarge,” J.J. says; shit, she’s so fucking stubborn. No wonder she married a woman of the same fervor. “It’s my job.”

(Everything has changed.)

The turbulent road lies behind them, and he applauds with the others as Colonel Lorne makes the announcement on the Citywide comms. But, deep down, there’s a knife stuck in his heart slowly twisting. He thinks of those who couldn’t be here. Names on repeat, and so many names that have been lost forever;

(they should’ve been here)

(god, they should’ve been here)

They’re made independent. The announcement comes: Rachel squeezes his hand tightly. There are no fireworks. They can’t waste resources on such frivolous things.

Sometimes, his dreams are full of blood and regret and he wonders: could they have saved anyone else? what if the Prometheus hadn’t been destroyed – could they have gotten more people out? could they? Could they?

J.J. managed to save his brother. Jonah had arrived at the City with the Aurora, eyes wide as saucers and they’d cried as they hugged in the Gate Room. Then he asked about the twins, their little brother and sister, and Jonah mutely shook his head.

Contact with Earth was lost six years ago.

Theories differ. A destroyed Stargate. The war, pollution, all going to hell. The Ori. The Apollo makes a fly-by at a distance, but given the state the Milky Way is in, its new commander, Colonel Meyers, doesn’t dare to venture too close. The radiation levels were off the charts. There’s no sign of life, and there’s only debris in orbit: what could have been the Daedalus and the Odyssey.

Colonel Caldwell dies in orbit over Earth, the Daedalus exploding.

General Carter falls six months later, along with General O’Neill and Dr Jackson and Teal’c as they try to get people through Earth’s Gate to anywhere, a safer haven – Ori ships in the sky, and cities burning;

Atlantis never knows the full truth, only that they must be dead.

Emma turns sixteen and decides she wants to be a scientist. She wants to fly, see the stars, join the Aurora crew. Gladys and Miko wanted her to have the chances they had: a university, to travel, to see their homelands. But Emma never gets to see Earth more than as old footage and grainy satellite images.

New Lantea is her home. Has always been. She is a true child of Atlantis.

DeSalle would’ve been proud, J.J. thinks. God, so damn proud: he’d have embraced any of his
team’s kids as his own.

It’s not how he would’ve wanted to be remembered, though, echoed in the name of Gladys’ daughter. DeSalle would’ve wanted to be there for the birth and the rearing and the celebrations and the tears. DeSalle would’ve wanted to be there. DeSalle *should have* been here.

The anniversary of M18-098 comes and goes.

J.J. goes to the Chapel and lights a candle.

“Hey, buddy,” he whispers to the walls of steel: “Emma joined the Aurora crew today. Did I tell you Dex has been teaching her hand-to-hand? Gladys found out, and I thought she’d be pissed. Instead she steps in and corrects her technique. And I know Major Hailey will take good care of her aboard that ship, but I’m scared as fuck I’m going to have to organize a rescue.”

(In the end, J.J. doesn’t sent a rescue team, because Emma checks in right on time: he, Gladys, Miko, Kemp, Rachel, they’re gathered in the Control Room waiting for the subspace message to reach them, and Emma smiles and waves at the camera.)

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The War with the Wraith never ends.

The scientist try to come up with solutions to force the Wraith into hibernation. Maybe, that way, they would have enough time to work with the Genii and make their plan of destroying each Hive in turn with atomic bombs work.

There isn’t time.

Sure, their alliance with the Travelers helps. They have the Apollo, too. The ship is battered since the last battle with the Wraith. The Aurora fares better, and they’re trying to get the Traveler ships back into working shape so they can return to battle. Some Travelers don’t fight, they run, they run and find corners of the galaxy to linger for a while; they’ve got families to protect.

They got the naquadah mine on M22-535 up and running, and they’ve turned the Ancient facility there into a pit stop for all ships in the area to make repairs and refuel, resupply. They manage to hold it free from Wraith for three years. Then the Wraith catch up, and the Lanteans decide it is better to destroy the moon altogether than let any of the Ancient tech fall into enemy hands;

The war never ends.

**Atlantis, Atlantica (P33-015) · Pegasus**

**2033 (Terran time) · 10,000 days after the Uprising · Year 29 (Atlantis Reckoning)**

*The First Timeline*

“Master Sergeant.”

“Colonel.”

“You headed for the Pier?” Ford asks. Looks older, far older than he should be. Worn-out and spread thin and that scar from eight years ago has healed as much as it ever will; Ford will carry the remnants for the rest of his life.

“Yeah, to inspect the shipment,” J.J. nods, and he isn’t feel too spry either. “Duty as Head of Security to make sure the goods are safe and fit for human consumption.”
Ford steps into the transporter with him. “You kind of remind me of Sergeant Bates the way you say that, Sergeant.”

J.J. smiles at the memory.

(Bates died saving lives. They held a memorial in the Chapel, but the casket was empty. The body disintegrated with the Hiveship.)

They still cling to memories of Earth. To their first home. They are still marines, and Colonel Ford retains that notion; the traditions, at least the good comforting ones. The Original Teams are getting older. Not offworld as much. The younger ones step up to the mark – Sergeant Bryant’s team is still spry and on the move. Major Ford takes Recon One out sometimes. Rarely. But sometimes. Visits Balkan. New Athos. The beautiful, peaceful worlds, not yet razed by the Wraith (but even they will not stay untouched for long). Helps rebuild Sateda.

Teams are more mixed now, too, marines and scientists and Athosians and survivors from Te’reem and there’s even a Traveler. A survivor from an ice planet; the final remnant of the civilization on M30-716; humans from the other side of the galaxy. Ronon Dex has gathered over a hundred Satedans – survivors of the Great Culling – and they’re clearing the land at Sateda to begin anew. They all converge on Atlantis.

And the exploration of the first days has given way for establishing better trade relations and making Atlantis know again as a hub of safety, and Pegasus begins to converge on it. J.J. is still wrapping his head around readily when he’s on the South Pier looking at the skies, and watches the clouds part as a Traveler ship comes in for a landing, to refuel.

The City is full of life.

(He could be happy here.)

That year, there are fifty births and half a dozen weddings.

But the funeral is what they remember. Teyla Emmagan has led the Atlantis Council through peace and war and into safety. She made sure they started having elections, creating a real democracy, and she was voted the first Prime Minister. The acceptance speech was grand and subtle all at once, and J.J. kept thinking about Dr Weir: Emmagan was who they needed to fill that void.

The Athosians perform their sacred Ring Ceremony. A long life is to be celebrated, and natural deaths are holy. The singing haunts the hallways. Dex has written a Satedan kind of poem – he did the same for the first memorial, after the Colonel and the doc (in J.J.’s mind this eternal pair, like protons and electrons in the heart of the atom). Called it an elegiea.

Colonel Ford rises to his feet after the singing and the dancing, and he smiles, so fond:

“Teyla was the greatest friend I could ever ask for. She saved my life – more than once, but the first time she did it, we’d known each other for … what? a few weeks? She saved me from the Wraith anyway, because that’s what team does. Pull each other from the fire.

Teyla’s … irreplaceable. She taught me so much about being a leader. And other things, too. How to be a friend, how to barter. How to spar. That first time she gave me a lesson in banto’a, I was pretty damn terrified, because I’d just seen her kick Major Sheppard into the mat so hard he bounced.”
Scattered laughter from the Veterans. J.J.’s going to cry again, damn it. He blames it on his age: crying is perfectly normal at fifty-seven.

“And I was so bruised after that. I thought: god, I am never going to be able to do this. But you know what? I did. We did.

We have all lost a great friend today. Someone once said … Dr Weir was the heart of the City, and Colonel Sheppard its soul. Maybe that was true. And for my team, Teyla was the heart. And the brain, a lot of the times – but really the heart. She could make sense of things the rest of us couldn’t. Teyla and Kanaan were a blessing to have on our team. In our family. I’m never going to forget her. If I do, when age catches up with me, remind me, every single day the rest of my life, about Teyla and my team. About Teyla and Ronon and Sheppard and McKay.

Teyla was a great mom. Everyone knows that, don’t you? Torren John Emmagan is the first baby born in the City for ten thousand years. That’s a pretty big deal. You want to know what I did when Teyla told us she was pregnant? I nearly passed out. No, seriously. Then I thought she was joking. And then, of course Torren John was born and my team became the City’s first godparents – the Athosian word for that works better. It translates roughly to ‘we who guard the children’.

And now that Teyla is gone – but not from our hearts – that what we have got to be. We who guard the children. They are the future – the descendants of Atlantis. We are the future.

Teyla and Kanaan helped us make that future. Let us make the best of it.”

J.J. can’t sleep. His mind is too full and dreams vivid. Twists and turns, and the lights click on around midnight.

“It’s okay if you want to read. I don’t mind the light.”

He does not yearn for books. “Rachel?”

“Hmm?”

“… do you miss the Aurora?”

She chuckles. “Sometimes. Rainy days …” a soft sigh. “Emma is taking good care of that ship, though.”

Emma is all grown up now. A scientist, part of a crew exploring the stars. They want to chart all of Pegasus. And maybe, maybe venture outward; (the war never ends)

(if the Wraith find them again, they may have no choice)

Maybe one day, Emma will command her own vessel.

“Tell me about that nebula again?” he asks softly. “Please?”

Rachel rolls onto her side to face him, kisses his cheek. “You never grow tired of hearing about that one, do you, soldier?”

“I’ll never grow tired of you.”

“Cheeky. All right. We got the readings five days earlier, on long-range sensors …”
“Ford,” Dex says after the second memorial: “was a better warrior than I first gave him credit for. After Sheppard and McKay died, he led our team. He was a good leader. And Ford was a friend. He never saw me as a Runner, only as a human being.

He deserved a better kind of death.

I’m the last of Recon One. The Strike Team dies with me. I’m going to leave Atlantis and reunite with my people on Sateda. I won’t forget, though. All marines are my marines, and this City is also my City. But my time here is done.”

Every Veteran marine is there to see him off, and some of the scientists, and Dex gives thanks and they compare old stories. He leaves with the last of the Satedans: Sincha, Ha’en, Ursus. The doctors give Dex’ prosthetic leg one last check and Dex thanks them, the (technically retired) Dr Mallory in particular. The woman who removed his tracking device and first set him free.

She pats the leg: “As long as you don’t mess this up, I’ll be happy.”

J.J. is kind of surprised when Dex draws him and his team into a bear hug. He might be injured and getting on in years, but Dex hasn’t lost any of his raw strength. Recon Two (what’s left of it) and Nine and Seven receive the same treatment. Scattered pieces of a puzzle;

“Look after yourself, big guy,“ Markham says. He hasn’t been himself since Stackhouse died, and J.J. is glad to see him back on his feet, if only for a little while. If only for a little while.

“I will. Take care,” Dex says: “Oorah!” (Ford’s taught him that.)

The marines are one as they respond: “Oorah! Oorah!”

J.J. is pretty sure he’ll never see Dex or the other Satedans ever again.

Kemp bets that J.J. is the first who’s going to get Alzheimer’s. J.J. tells him to get his head out of his ass, but Gladys is really quiet that evening as they have dinner with her and Miko. Both women are subdued. To be fair, J.J. spends most of that night cooing at the baby; Emma and her partner had their son sixteen weeks ago.

Next morning, Gladys asks to take a walk, and he’s confused and worried and agrees. J.J. carefully breathes the air: kind of chilly. Atlantica is caught in the throes of winter, and he’s wearing an extra coat. Doesn’t keep the wind out.

They circle the North Pier.

“I got the test results back,” Gladys says suddenly. “Multiple sclerosis.”

A hand reaches into J.J.’s chest and squeezes. No cure. Not even here. Maybe their kids or grandkids will figure it out; but the Lanteans haven’t yet, and it’s doubtful they will within their tiny lifetime. Even in this land of miracles and starbursts.

“How long?” he asks.
“Symptoms started showing a few weeks ago,” she says quietly. “We’re treating it, but … yeah. Just holding it in check.”

“Does Emma know?”

She shuts her eyes tight. “Miko and I contacted her yesterday, after dinner.”

“God, I’m sorry, Nichole.”

But she smiles. “I’m okay. You know what? I’m happy. I’ve lived a good life. I’m scared, but … I got you, the team, my wife, our daughter … I’m happy.”

“… then I’m happy, sister.”

“We should get out of this cold.”

“Yeah, I heard Miko’s threatening to knit you another sweater. No insult to your wife, of course!”

Gladys laughs: “J.J., I can already tell you what you’re going to get for Christmas. I saw the yarn. It’s very nice; the color suits you.”

“Oh my god,” he feigns utter horror, “I’ll Gate offworld!”

It doesn’t go well. The battle. Severely crippled, the Aurora circles a red dwarf in tight orbits, and the Hive pursues it relentlessly;

relentlessly;

Colonel Hailey does all she can for her crew. To the last. She sends them off in Jumpers and F-302, and she rams the Aurora into the Hiveship before it can begin its Culling of the planet below. She saves a million lives that day.

Emma returns home in a daze. Gladys and Miko hug her tight. Not everyone made it. Some were trapped, broken sections of the ship, shields gone, venting oxygen. Some didn’t make it out.

It was their last ship, but that doesn’t stop them. A few months later, Emma joins the crew of an old Traveler ship, and J.J. is certain Gladys gathers all intel she can on Commander Larrin (just in case).

They see her off. It’s not a research vessel. It is a ship if war, and they’re going to fight the Wraith. It’s all they do, these days.

“Don’t worry,” Emma says, “we’ll be fine.”

The Traveler ship goes missing in the quadrant of space furthest from Atlantica.

After several weeks, they manage to piece together the evidence: witnesses from the planet below, the Hiveship, the explosion. There was too little time to get to the escape pods.

Gladys and Miko are shells, emptily walking the City’s corridors, and the thought strikes J.J. briefly: if they could’ve. what if? what if. but how?

“Still not learned to knock, LT?”
Kemp rolls his eyes and barges right into J.J. and Rachel’s quarters. They’ve switched up: larger, more comfortable, another tower. The Citadel remains marine ground, and Major Scott has set up training grounds there for the new recruits.

There’s talk about changing names, making it a United Force like on Sateda. Marine, Air Force, Earth countries – what difference is that out here? J.J. has held a few lectures himself on team reconnaissance.

“Oh, please, Sarge. I haven’t been Lieutenant since I was thirty-something.”

“And I’m retired. Okay, Major, what’s up?”

“Also retired. And I need to use the Gate.”

J.J. raises an eyebrow. “Then ask Control? Or someone on the Council? I’m not Head of Security anymore, and you’re younger than me so you ought to remember.”

“Well, this isn’t about me. Per se. It’s the Colonel.”

“Colonel Hailey can use the Gate whenever she wants.”

“No, it’s the … Look, boss, you won’t believe it if I tell you, so just let me show you.” Kemp digs around his pockets and withdraws a memory stick. One of those old Earth ones, and J.J. doesn’t use it a lot because it’s slow; but sometimes he breathes life into it, for old times’ sake. Bouts of nostalgia. He shouldn’t encourage Kemp like this, but J.J. sighs and opens up his laptop, boots it up. Kemp sticks the USB into the slot.

There are two files: a text file and a video. Kemp selects the latter.

It’s grainy at first, dark. Then, a white flash: a lamp. It turns, and the camera turns too. Voices filter through. Eerily familiar, though, at first, J.J. can’t place them.

“… like any Ancient lab but I don’t think so. These readings are … odd.”

“Odd?”

“I believe he means to say ‘I don’t know and I don’t like it’. I don’t know, normally he’s faster than this at figuring it out.”

“Ha-ha-ha,” sighs the first voice, “very amusing, Colonel.”

“We’ve found dozens like these before,” someone else says right behind the camera. The voice is young. So fucking young. “Why are the lights out, doc?”

“Hang on. There. Happy?” Light floods the image, and it shows the inside of an Ancient building, familiar fixtures in the walls, rising pillars, untouched consoles. Dr McKay dusts off the nearest console with a hand: “Here we go, here we go.”

Colonel Sheppard steps into the picture. Then it clicks: that other voice, that’s Ford, filming with a small hand-held digital camera, like they used to the missions of the past. And there’s Teyla Emmagan (this is before she had her son) and Dex upright;

Oh, God.

Lieutenant Ford whistles. “Hey, doc, is that a stasis pod? Right there.” He swings around, and in the middle of the room there’s this block of Ancient metal that looks eerily like a tomb.
“Let me check – don’t touch! Damn it, Lieutenant.”

“I didn’t, doc! Looks, hands free. Except for this.” He shakes the camera to prove his innocence.

“Hm, this isn’t a stasis pod. It’s … I think it’s a machine. In a way, it’s …”

“McKay, you didn’t finish that sentence,” Colonel Sheppard says.

“It could be some kind of drive.”

“A drive? An engine?”

(it isn’t. they figured it out long after: it isn’t a drive to propel them forward or make shields or protect them. the Ancients tried to cover up their mistakes but failed.)

J.J. can barely breathe.

“Look at the timestamp, Sarge,” Kemp says. “Look at it.”

In the corner. A ticking time, and – the date. Thirty years earlier. God. J.J.’s heart hurts, all of a sudden, and his mouth is like sand: he swallows harshly. Thirty years. This is mere minutes before. Before. Before they died, and everything changed. J.J. still remembers that day in icy clarity: the jungle planet; Ford stepping out of the Gate, wordless horror, shock; Emmagan’s empty face; Dr Weir’s questions – what happened? what happened?

This is the last memory before they died.

“I found it among Colonel Ford’s effects while we were sorting them,” Kemp says quietly (and, god, J.J. can’t process that Ford is gone).

“And you want to go there?” he says flatly. “You want to go to P80-700.”

(someone had called it The Most Forbidden Planet since Dr Weir locked it out of the computers and the Ancient devices. more urgently than any of the others on the list. maybe they’re right. it’s too dangerous to go there.)

“Boss,” Kemp says, “Gladys and Snow have been looking this over dozens of times. Yeah, they know. And Drew and Markham. They’re ready to go: we’ve got allies, Sergeant. All we need is the word. We’re not going without you, boss.”

J.J. faces him. Kemp is utterly serious. His Dæmon meets the stare and does not move.

The City’s lights dim, and then brighten, and J.J. remembers: the Colonel could … The City has been silent ever since the day Recon One returned sundered, giving off no signs of sentience or intelligence or whatever else was actually the deal. It doesn’t speak. But now, the lights flicker. A slow blink. It’s almost … like an affirmative. Warming.

“Yeah,” Kemp says, “that’s happened whenever we’ve locked ourselves in to talk about this.”

“After that mission,” J.J. says, slowly, to make sure Kemp understands the weight of every word: “that address was locked out. Deemed too dangerous. That machine –”

“Dr Weir translated,” Kemp says, “and I got the text file right here. The machine, it’s a failed Ancient experiment to separate a person from their Dæmon, well, to be able to allow incredible distance between them, even when they can’t fly. To save lives during Cullings. A secret lab built by Ianus. It came online when Recon One arrived and grabbed those with ATA and severed their
“Bonds like a guillotine. It was an accident, they weren’t meant to die. We’ve got to go there and stop them from bringing it online.”

“The Daedalus was sent to destroy the facility. I read the report. They nuked the hell out of that planet.”

“Yes,” Kemp says, undeterred, “thirty years ago they did. So all we got to do is be there earlier …”

“… Jesus, Major. You’re serious.”

“Boss, we owe them to try.”

Someone once said that they’re part of the City’s genetic makeup, and J.J. knows something changed, utterly, when Recon One returned without them;

The City blinks again.

(the whispers after the Uprising, when it started coming out: the Old Man, he can hear the City speak; J.J. had heard about it and not believed, and DeSalle had laughed a little: I’ll believe it when I see it. You really think the City can think?)

“We got stuck on the calculations. After …” Kemp swallows dryly. “And then, we found a file, meant for us to find. Atlantis finished the calculations for us.”

A headache lurks up on him, but J.J. can’t help it: he is intrigued, and god, it would be nice if they could somehow (miraculously) save Colonel Sheppard and Dr McKay. Be the heroes one more time.

“I think we’re meant to go there, back in time.”

Oh, Kemp is ready to lay it all out, a speech:

Time. Oh, J.J. knows the theories how to bypass the linear flow of the human senses: SG-1 did it, and it’s happened by accident before – dial a planet, a solar flare intersects the wormhole, step through … wham.

He doesn’t bring that up. He says: “Major, we could risk court martial.” Dr Weir might be dead, but the List of Forbidden Planets still applies, and Colonel Hailey will not be happy about this if she finds out. No, but she cannot find out;

“To hell with risks! I’ll take that risk a thousand times to save any of my team, and the Colonel – the Colonel’s our CO. It’s just … it makes sense, boss. The readings, that device. Miko agrees. She’s been over the old data. She thinks we could find a way around it and get them out of there; we’re working on a plan and how to avoid meeting ourselves from the past, because that could be bad. She’s got the City’s sensors looking for solar flares right now.”

“You’ve been over this with Gladys’ wife? Jesus. The whole City’s going to find out!”

“Yeah! Maybe! And actually, I don’t care! I can’t sit on my ass any longer. Miko’s been thinking about this for years. Gladys has been thinking about it – they’ve discussed it, while watching Emma grow up – you know that? Nearly twenty years, she’s been working on ways to bring them back. Calculating. All this time, while the rest of us have waited! For stuff to change and nothing’s happened, only good people die and the Earth’s gone and it’s all fucked up!”

(god, he is right, he’s right. J.J. has been a coward, not wanting to admit it. but he gave up – a
long time ago. after DeSalle died and the team broke. after their were lost.)

Kemp implores: “Boss, let’s do this. Let’s save them. We could warn them about the Ori. Hell, tell them where the Destiny is going! Everything. To save lives. Save Earth. Maybe stop the Wraith, the Replicators, the Genii … Sarge. J.J., please.”

Billions of lives.

In the end, J.J. cannot argue. His heart wavers. And he can’t be selfish enough to deny this chance. Who could be so cruel? Who could?

He closes his eyes. Sighs.

Once more, Juno whispers, onto the breach; (it could be the last)

“I’ve got to talk with Rachel first. No one with the gene should go.”

“You can’t convince Miko and Gladys not to.”

J.J. stares at him. “How many people are in on this, exactly?”

Kemp takes a deep breath. “The team, Miko, Markham and Herschel. We’re going. It’s already decided. No one of us stays behind.”

leave no one behind. not ever. the Old Man drilled it into their spines;

Shit. J.J. cannot back out. Of course he can’t. He looks Kemp in the eye. “All right. I’ll talk with Colonel Hailey about using the Gate.”

Kemp nods. “Say, say that we want to surprise Jinto and the kids. New Athos, tomorrow, early as we can. We can dial from there; in fact, that’s easier. The address is only locked out from our Stargate. Miko has that in her calculations. Boss, we need to leave within three days, or we’ll miss the window.”

The City hums pleasantly; even J.J. can feel it now, low in his bones. Makes him shiver. But he isn’t afraid, even if he should be.

(for the first time in thirty years, the City speaks)

“Okay. Done. Tomorrow.”

They’re actually going to do this. They’re actually … God, the fact that is J.J. even contemplating this. Altering time and space. Rewriting history. What the fuck. And yet. And yet. And yet.

DeSalle. Emma. Stackhouse. Rutherford. Drew. Colonel Sheppard. Dr McKay. Dr Weir. All the others. All the others who aren’t here;

“… Let’s meet up in the Jumper Bay at oh-nine-hundred. Only concealed arms. (Just in case.) And check with the Mess what we can bring with us; I am never touching military rations again.”

Kemp smiles and straightens his back. Salutes: “Yes, sir.”

Too late to back down now.

“I know,” Rachel says simply when he tells her the unabridged truth of the plan.
“The hell?”

“I know,” Rachel says simply when he tells her the unabridged truth of the plan. “The hell?”

“Miko asked for my opinion on some calculations and wanted data on solar flares. I … well. I extrapolated.”

“Why am I the last person being told …?”

“I think they’re trying to protect you,” Rachel says, “in case they’re caught or it doesn’t work.”

J.J. sighs. She reaches up and kisses his cheek.

“Well, what are we waiting for? I’ll start packing. You go talk with Colonel Olsen about using the Stargate for a little joyride.”

They can’t gear up in any obvious way; they’re in civvies and have stashed away some weapons in their backpacks. Minimum requirements in case they run into Wraith. Miko and Gladys have said their goodbyes to their daughter and bouncing grandson, and Emma might not know the full truth but she’d understand. Rachel refuses to let J.J. go alone. So, on the outside, it looks like Recon Four is on a nostalgic trip with their spouses to visit the home of an old friend.

They ask to use a Jumper – Snow generously tells the young technician all the unpleasant details about his arthritis and his scars and the last knee replacement surgery when the tech dawdles, and the kid nervously tells them Oh of course sure you can have a Jumper, of course and hastily clears them for number Thirteen (Eleven and Twelve are under maintenance).

“Not as good as Jumper Four,” Gladys says sourly as they take seat and await word from Control that it’s okay for them to descend.

“I thought it kept acting up after they fixed it,” Kemp says. “Ride never as good as before after that crash.”

“Yeah, but it’s always going to be my Jumper. Ugh, whoever flew Thirteen last used all the wrong settings.”

“Let me,” Miko says and she adjusts some of the settings, not needing to be told how Gladys likes them. The scientist balances a laptop on her knees, and there’s data there which J.J. cannot pretend to understand. But Gladys trusts Miko, and J.J. trusts Gladys.

“Hey, Corps?” Kemp says. “Don’t crash us, will you.”

Fondly: “Shut up, you numpty.”

“Please, love, don’t be rude,” Miko says, though she’s smiling. They’ve been over this many, many times.

J.J. activates his radio. “Control, this is Jumper Thirteen, asking for clearance to leave for New Athos. We won’t be gone long.”

“Understood, Thirteen. Stand by. Dialing now. … All right, you can exit the Bay. Happy travels.”

“Thank you, Control. Thirteen out.”

J.J. reaches over and squeezes Gladys’ shoulder. “This is it.”
“Like old times,” she murmurs, and they fly through the Stargate.

(the first timeline begins thirty years earlier.
that is when they need to go.)

(recording starts)

“– Teyla, Dex, you guys okay? What the hell happened?”

“I am fine, I …”

“I’m okay.”

“The machine, it … the light – Colonel? Doc? Oh, shit. Shit, shit –”

[static, silence. heavy breathing. Teyla leans down and lays a hand to Colonel Sheppard’s neck, searching for a pulse. his Dæmon lies motionless in the mirrored chamber, trapped by an invisible barrier. Dr McKay lies at his side, his Dæmon haphazardly thrown to the side by the energy surge.]

“No, no, no. Sir! Wake up. Wake. Up.” [the Lieutenant begins compressions of the heart.] “One, two, three; one, two, three – Teyla, check McKay! – three; one, two –”

“Aiden … He is dead.”

“No, no. CPR. Teyla. Now! That’s an order!”

“Lieutenant, the machine …”

[a low, deep rumble. everything shakes. the bodies do not move. slowly, the two Dæmons fall. they are turning into dust.]

“What the hell? Oh, god. No, that’s not supposed to happen! NO!”

[the bodies are still. the Daemons disappear. the humans follow.]

“… oh my god. No, no, this can’t. No. Dial, dial the City, tell them – we need a medic and, and. scientists to fix this, to –”

(recording ends)
P70-800 · Pegasus
January 28, 2007 (Terran time) · 392 days after the Uprising
The First | Second Timeline (the intersection)

New Athos was a world of day: it’s night here, encompassing, the sky alien with the stars in the wrong places. The planet below is a mass of compact darkness. For a moment, light floods it; then the Stargate shuts down behind them, and the darkness returns.

J.J. blinks at the windscreen as it clears. “Did it work?”

“Only one way to find out,” Gladys says. She directs the Jumper to a low trajectory, within the atmosphere. They can’t see much. There are no people here: no smoke, no fires, no lights. With a thought she turns on the Jumper’s floodlights, which they’ve found to be useful at night and underwater.

Trees. Even in the strangest places, there will be trees; a comfort.

“Scanning for subterranean structures,” Miko says.

“That’s what it was, yeah?” Kemp says. “Underground.”

“According to the database, yes.”

Markham cautiously enters the cockpit. “What’s the word?”

“Reading no signs of bombardment or nuclear radiation. They haven’t been here yet. No lifesigns,” Gladys says, the data reflecting on the HUD, colorful diagrams showing little or nothing.

“So. It worked?”

“According to the calculations the City completed, it should be January 28, 2007. Earth time.”
Should be. Only way to find out is to wait for Recon One to arrive.

J.J. suppresses a shiver. They haven’t thought this part out yet, not properly. Do they confront the team, warn them? Leave a message? Or do they simply bomb the shit out of the dangerous facility with the Jumper’s drones?

They’d spent several hours in orbit over New Athos, cloaked, debating. Some yelling had been involved, raised pulses. Angry glares between Dæmons. Only more questions.

It was Drew who asked: “How are we getting back?”

And Miko had said: “Time is … not linear. We are going to be … outside of it, I think. Imagine that we’re from timeline A, and when we do this, we’re going to make timeline B. Diverging from our own. Even if we calculated a way to travel thirty years into the future, it would be …”

“Different?” Kemp had suggested.

“Unfamiliar to us,” Rachel had explained. “With other us living their own lives.”

“So. Back to the Future,” Markham had said quietly. “Part two.”

“Yes,” Miko had said, “and we’re fixing it. Putting things right.”

(Saving the world, little steps at a time.

J.J. wonders: fearing: what if they fuck everything up more? Good intentions, all going to hell. What if Gladys don’t get married? What if she doesn’t have her daughter?

What if DeSalle still dies?

No, Juno decides, we’ll make sure they’re saved. Somehow.)

They’re risking their very own existence. In a sense, they don’t exist yet. Though, according to Miko, who as the theoretical physicist and only person in the Jumper who actually can explain anything of quantum theory, that’s not true. Time is not linear. It’s, like the Doctor would have said, a wibbly-wobbly ball of … stuff.

God, thinking about it gives J.J. a headache.

Rachel softly squeezes his shoulder, comfortably, we can do this an echoed thought between them. His hand meets her hand. Thank you.

“First things first,” he says aloud, “we disable the facility.”

“I vote we use drones. Long-distance, no risk of anyone getting hurt,” Kemp says.

“Problem is they’d detect the residue from the weapons fire,” Gladys says. “And Atlantis is the only place with access to that tech in this time, as far as we know, so …”

“Problem,” Markham echoes.

“How about C4?” J.J. asks.
“Also detectable,” Rachel says. “Plus the risks of having to go down on foot and set the charges.”

“Everything is detectable. We all know how persistent the Expedition is. If we leave traces of ourselves, that visitors from the future were here, well.” Gladys purses her lips.

“I think whatever we do … Look, maybe it doesn’t matter how?” J.J. says.

“How do you mean?” Kemp asks.

“I think we should talk with the Colonel.”

Stunned silence.

They’ve never discussed this part, and Markham looks at him seriously. “And tell him … what? That we’re from the future and we’re altering the timeline to save them?”

“Oh.” Isn’t that what Kemp said when he came to his quarters to lay out his arguments to persuade them to go? Tell them about the future, the truths, the wars, the deaths, the lives, the dangers. Warn them about the Ori – and, selfishly, oh, but is it selfish to want to save lives? – about M18-098, the Wraith, DeSalle dying –

“There,” Miko says suddenly, bringing the debate to a halt. “We have something on the scanners.”

With a thought, Gladys brings it up on the HUD: below, hidden beneath the landscape of woods and trickling rivers, is a structure dug into the earth itself. Carved into the rock. A secret lab. It’s a small maze, but only on one level.

J.J. leans over the piloting seat and adjusts his glasses to get a better look. The image is bright and complex. “Access?”

“There’s a tunnel, there,” Drew sees and points at the screen. “It connects to a hatch at ground level. Not even a transporter. Could be an emergency exit of some kind.”

Gladys nods. “That’s how they got in the first time.”

“Will get in,” Markham says. “Right?”

“Look, can we just stick to one tense?” Kemp pleads.

“Okay,” J.J. says. “We know leave Atlantis at 09:23 SAT. The Stargate’s nearly an hour on foot from the facility, and they only find it because of the mention in the database. So they have a location, possibly inaccurate but close enough. Any way for us to extrapolate the exact time and date and such it actually is right now?”

“I have an idea,” Rachel exclaims. “The stars – that’s the key. We have the data from the database on this planet, including its location in the galaxy relative to New Lantea. If we compare …”

“Yes!” Miko says. “Hang on, this won’t take long.”

An hour later, after churning the numbers, they know that the calculations were correct. It’s a little under twenty hours until Recon One are due to arrive. The MALP won’t be sent for seventeen.

This gives them time to think. Also, eat. They break out the boxed so kindly prepared for them by the mess hall staff. Some of it originates from planets the Expedition hasn’t made contact with yet in this timeline, and it’s all very strange.
To think it’s real. Happening.

They don’t speak much as they eat. Gathering their forces and their thoughts.

They still have a chance to withdraw. Turn back. They could watch and do nothing, and nothing will change. But that’s not why they’re here. That’s not why the City helped them foresee a solar flare to carry them back thirty years.

“We could disable the Stargate,” Herschel suggests.

Bury it. Destroy it.

“No,” J.J. says. “There’s things we should tell them.” The wars, the Ori, the starvations and the hopes and fears and dreams; and, selfishly, oh so selfishly, he needs to tell the Colonel about M18-098 and DeSalle and the Dart; he needs to save his team, and if they save the Colonel and the doc, they can do that. They can change everything.

It’s decided.

what goes around …

19.4 hours later:

Aiden remembers to bring the digital video camera this time. Easier to remember all the details for the report this way, especially since they’re going to an Ancient outpost.

Oh, McKay is really excited about that. Ancient tech! Aiden – nah. Like, if they find a big space gun, he’ll be happy. Something to fight the Wraith. But with their luck it’s probably something unfinished and inoperable. Some Ancient kid’s science project before the War began. Or something.

The database entry about this planet was very vague. Basically (according to the Colonel, who translated the entry for them, probably paraphrasing the hell out of it) it’s a research station that the Ancient Council didn’t like, and they ordered the project – whatever work being done here – to be shut down. There were no mentions of names, no indicators as to who exactly built the place.

Recon One has explored at least a dozen similar sites: Ancient abandoned buildings. Most used for development and research of particular kinds. Weapons. Ascension. Communications. This one is dug into the earth, according to the database, and not right by the Gate either. After sending the MALP, Dr Weir okayed them to go, and this time they’re walking. Jumper One needs some maintenance and the Colonel doesn’t like flying the other Jumpers (he hasn’t said so, but Aiden notices it every time they’re using any other of the Jumpers than their primary).

“Ugh,” McKay groans. Because of the quite (okay, very; must’ve rained recently) muddy ground, he’s cradling his Dæmon tightly to him, and Aiden does the same. The Colonel has the real advantage of not having to worry about getting his wings dirty: his Dæmon took off a while ago, scouting ahead. Dares to do that when there is no indication of settlements or people anywhere in the vicinity of the Stargate. “Why did we walk? There’s nothing. No power signatures. We could’ve flown – why didn’t we fly?”

They’ve been walking for less than half an hour and this is the first complaint from the doc. Wow, a new record.
“I told you –” Colonel Sheppard starts.

“Yes, yes, but this is not a path or road or anything meant for walking on. There’s mud in places there shouldn’t be. I swear, if there’s nothing here …”

Aiden’s gotten braver in the last few years. But he doesn’t dare to tease the Colonel and the doc that someone isn’t getting laid tonight. Because, well. His CO. Uh, nope. Not crossing that line. But he glances over his shoulder to exchange a knowing look with Ronon, who’s bringing up the rear.

Teyla, ever the diplomat, cuts in: “The database indicated the research was being done into a weapon of some kind. Surely the Ancients left something, if the effort was to fight the Wraith.”

“Yeah,” the Colonel says.

“I’m bothered, though. That thing about the Council being against it? Or at least not really supporting the effort?” McKay shakes his head.

“Look,” Sheppard says, “are you getting anything on the scanner?”

McKay holds up the Ancient device. “Nah.”

“Cause I think we’re seeing something up ahead.” His Dæmon must be seeing it for them, and Aiden stops walking when his commander does. “Woah.”

“What?” McKay demands, a mixture of irritation and concern.

“Uh, it’s … kind of a crater.”

“What do you mean it’s ‘kind of a crater’?”

“Asteroid strike?” Aiden asks.

“I don’t know, that’s simply what we’re seeing. Trees and stuff are gone, and it’s like the ground’s caved in. There’s definitely been an explosion of some kind. Some evidence of small fires. It’s about five, six klicks that way,” Sheppard points in a direction, between the trees. Sun’s to their right. The foliage makes it impossible to see that far. Aiden can’t see any smoke. “It seems pretty recent, too, because nothing’s overgrown and, there’s some dust in the air.”

McKay sighs heavily.

“You think Wraith?” Ronon asks.

“That, or the Genii’s been using it as a weapon testing site. But I’m not picking up anything yet, no energy signatures or nuclear fallout.” The doc sounds angry and disappointed. He was looking forward to this mission. Hoping to find something to fight the Wraith. Looks like someone else got here first.

“We should check it out,” Sheppard says. It’s what they do.

The Colonel’s description was pretty correct. It’s … kind of a crater.

Aiden has this vague memory of seeing a TV documentary about the meteorite that struck Tunguska a hundred years ago. Black-and-white images of a desolate landscape, thousands of acres of knocked-over trees and burned stumps. The forests here are also ruined but in a much
smaller, contained area, and it’s centered around a hole in the ground, maybe three or four hundred feet wide. An uneven circle. The ground is caved in. He’s getting flashbacks to M31-927, and Adria shivers a little. It would just suck if someone got stuck.

At least, this time, they’re staying away from the immediate destruction and don’t try finding a way down. There aren’t even ruins, a semblance of artificial hallways and pillars and walls, left. Sheppard reminds them to be careful, and Aiden keeps an eye on the ground before each step. Doesn’t trust it. Adria leaps over a fallen log and turns her head this way and that, trying to determine the extent of the damage.

If this is weapons fire, it was powerful, but very controlled, very … neat? Yeah. That’s the word.

“I’m getting readings. Residual energy patterns.” McKay fiddles with the lifesigns detector, recalibrating it to scan not for structures but for energy and whatever else is useful. Aiden can’t name the details. “Huh. This is …”

Sheppard clears his throat. “McKay? What that a good ‘huh’ or a bad ‘huh’?”

“… shh, I’m working.”

Teyla reaches his side. Her expression is wound tight, perplexed, and Kanaan exudes unease. Something about the way he moves. The sensation is slowly creeping up on them, too. Aiden’s first thought is: Wraith, she’s sensing Wraith, and he seeks the sky. It’s empty. No Darts.

“Something wrong?” Aiden asks quietly.

“Not as such. I … I cannot explain it. I feel almost as if we are being watched.”

Aiden tenses, looks around. Catches Ronon’s attention and they share a look. Silently. Ronon’s Dæmon’s back is curled and fangs exposed, and, yeah, they’re not alone about this feeling. Like his neck prickles. Something in the woods makes a noise, a creaking branch, a swaying tree in the wind, rustling bushes. In the treeline beyond the range of the destruction.

“Sir …”

“Yeah,” the Colonel says, suddenly. “Yeah, I noticed. Stay frosty.”

McKay lifts his gaze from the scanner. “Huh?”

“Are you reading any lifesigns?”


“How many? Where?”

“Two.” Could be two Wraith; could be a human and their Dæmon. “Five, six hundred yards right in front of us, just … appearing out of nowhere. Maybe a cloaking device?”

“Ronon, Teyla, Ford,” Sheppard says, lifts his weapon, and they do the same, preparing. McKay’s suddenly lost focus on the Ancient device in his hands, gulping nervously as he fumbles to tuck the lifesigns detector into his TAC vest, exchanging it for his P-90 which he’s let hang loosely from vest until now.

Aiden slowly, slowly moves toward the target, muzzle raised. There. Movement, in the treeline. Sheppard signals them to stop.
“Show yourselves,” he says, commanding loudly.

“We mean no harm,” Teyla says.

The strangers – still too far away, crouching behind bushes, can’t make them out properly. And maybe Aiden’s eyes are fooling him, but he’s pretty sure, suddenly, that the stranger’s wearing some kind of camouflage gear, a uniform.

“I need to speak with Colonel Sheppard,” is the answer. The voice is unfamiliar, but there’s something about the accent. Like … Aiden can’t make sense of it, but his gut tells him that – fuck, this person, they know. About them. Atlantis. Sheppard. They know Sheppard’s name. An ally? But if it was an Athosian or Te’reem or whoever, they wouldn’t have the need for this sneaking around.

“Who are you?” Sheppard asks and doesn’t move.

“I’ll explain everything,” could be a promise. “Please, I need to talk with you, s… Colonel. Alone. I’ll explain everything.”

*That’s more than a hiccough, that’s deliberately hiding something,* Adria whispers.

Yeah.

“I’m unarmed, just me and my Dæmon,” the stranger insists, refusing to move from their hiding place.

“How do you know my name?” Sheppard demands.

“It’s, it’s complicated. Deutch’s prescription kind of complicated.”

*Huh? The heck does that mean?*

Dr McKay snaps into attention, though, so that means something to him. He exchanges a frantic look with Sheppard, and Aiden’s sure they’re sharing something quick and vital, a wordless conversation.

And the Colonel says: “And how are we sure you’re telling the truth?”

A pause. The stranger weighing answers or options, or both.

It’s just one person and their Dæmon. It doesn’t sound or feel like a Wraith, if that makes any sense. If necessary, they can fight this person and win; the odds are unfair, really. Especially if the guy’s telling the truth about being unarmed.

“This mission, where I’m from, it was the last one your team went on,” the stranger says. “It fucked some things up and now we’re fixing it. Please, I need to have a word with Colonel Sheppard.”

Aiden struggles to comprehend what the fuck this means and why are they listening?, but McKay and Sheppard, they’re looking at each other and then McKay nods, and Sheppard says:

“Okay, we believe you. And I can see you’re unarmed and alone.”

Aiden lifts his gaze slightly and, yeah, up there, on a perch of a treetop and looking down, is Sheppard’s Dæmon. Seeing things they can’t.
“I know,” the stranger says simply. Doesn’t sound scared or shocked or …

They know. Their names. About the team, and the City too? About the Colonel and his Raven, and this particular mission, and … and …?

_The fuck?_

Sheppard hands over his P-90 to Teyla, who shares the same alarm as Aiden and Ronon. Disquiet. “Look,” Sheppard says quietly, “I think – this guy’s a time traveler.”

“What?” Ronon says blankly.

“David Deutch is a theoretical quantum physicist,” McKay explains at a hundred miles per hour: “In 1991, he published a theory on time evolution equations and, well, it’s complicated but it’s – according to quantum physics, there’s nothing to stop time travel and we know it’s possible using a Stargate and solar flares. Only a person with Earth origins would know about Deutch. Ergo, this person is a time travelling human. from Atlantis. in the future.”

_That’s …_

“Doc, that’s, that’s one hell of a leap,” Aiden says. Glances at the Colonel. “Sir, you sure it’s a good idea, going in there alone?” He doesn’t want to leave his CO’s side, let him walk into such a dark unknown. Especially unarmed. That’s totally against is principles as a marine, and his grip of his weapon tightens. But Sheppard is already handing over his P-90 for Teyla to keep, though he keeps his 9mil and knife, and the vest is on. He’s too damn calm. No, Aiden doesn’t like it. At all. By the looks on Teyla and Ronon’s faces, they feel the same.

Oddly enough, McKay is pretty calm. Most situations when they are separated or there are unknowns, McKay babbles and is concerned and fearful: now, he looks at Sheppard, and a hundred little things are shared between them that Aiden can’t accurately pick up on.

“He’s asked specifically for me. He’s unarmed, and alone,” Sheppard says, “and … I got a gut feeling. Look, ten minutes, that’s all. If I’m not back in ten, go all in to rescue me.”

Aiden doesn’t like it, but an order is an order, and he wants to be a good marine. Nods stiffly. “Yes, sir.”

“Anything more I should know before I go, McKay?”

“I’m as in the dark as you,” McKay says with a shrug. “Ask them about Atlantis.”

“Okay then.” Sheppard squares his shoulders, and turns to the source of the stranger’s voice. “We’ll have a ten minute chat. That enough?”

“Yeah, that should be enough to explain,” the stranger says.

Sheppard walks toward the woods, and Aiden mentally begins the countdown.

________________________________________________________________________

_what goes around …_

John has seen some fucked up shit in this galaxy. But time travel – oh, there’s been that. Indirectly. And it’s been fucking up his life and the paradoxes have created him. Not that Icarus said as much, but he’s connected the dots.
So, this thing, finding an Ancient outpost smashed to bits and a stranger talking about Earth quantum physicists – must be Thursday.

He approaches carefully, and Shy doesn’t take their eyes off the stranger. From that angle it’s difficult to make out faces, but they can see enough: it’s an old guy, dark hair greying, cut close to the skull. Dressed in a uniform speckled with various shades of green and brown. Tactical. A soldier’s uniform, but there are no arms. His posture is relaxed, arms hanging at their sides, hands exposed. His Daemon is getting onto its years as well, fur losing its glossiness.

“Hi. So, you want to talk with me?”

And the man’s expression changes from guarded, closed, to … it could be relief? John’s not sure. There’s something … familiar about this guy. Like they’ve met before, but there are no people this age in Atlantis.

“Hello, sir. Yeah. We need to talk.”

And it clicks. Atlantis. Of course: of course. This is a marine. John’s gaze searches for dog tags or a name, but nothing’s written on the uniform.

“So we have met,” he says, raising an eyebrow.

“Yes, sir,” the man says, like he’s said it before. before. a hundred times. (but when?) And the man raises his hand to salute and he smiles. “Sergeant MacGrimmon.”

Oh. John stares for a moment, as it sinks in: yeah, that is the Sergeant. Older. Late fifties or early sixties, and he’s wearing glasses, that’s new, and there’s no insignia on that uniform, no City, no flag. Yet. Holy shit, that’s Sergeant MacGrimmon. One of the First Wavers, loyal to his team and to Weir and the City. And in this section of his mind, John has always considered the marines … fixtures, just as much part of the City as the walls and the rooms and the Stargate at Her heart. Some may go and some may come, new faces, but especially the First Wavers, they’ll always be Lanteans. Yet, he’s never considered them to change. Never imagined where they’d be at in five, ten years – god, he’s scared to think that far ahead (the SGC might not exist and the City drown and the Wraith take them all).

And now, right in front of him, is living breathing proof that some part of Atlantis will survive.

From where in the future does the man come from?

“You’re, uh. Looking a bit different, Sergeant,” he says.

Even with Rodney explaining, quickly agitatedly quietly across their Bond, about solar flares and wormholes and what that Terran reference meant – it’s a lot to take in. Part of John’s brain, that rational bit, simply refuses to believe.

“Well, that happens with age.” A dry chuckle. “Jokes aside, it’s really good to see you, sir. I know this must seem …” A wave of hand, gesture seeking closure. “But there’s a reason why we’re here.”

“We?”

“Well, we … I didn’t come here alone. As if I could figure this out on my own,” Sergeant (must be Staff Sergeant, at least, and probably retired) MacGrimmon says. “I’m going to try to be succinct. We’re from the future. And it’s – it didn’t turn out all well. Some things, but … Sir, your team didn’t return from this planet in my timeline.”
A cold grip squeezes John’s heart tight. “My team?”

“Emmagan, Dex and Ford returned, but not you and Dr McKay. The outpost, there’s this Ancient device, a failed experiment. It killed you, and Dr Weir had this place bombarded from orbit and the truth hidden. It made the List of Forbidden Planets.”

This is a lot to take in, but John forces himself to remain standing and listening. Must’ve gone a bit pale, because the marine pauses. Looks worried. God, what else? And what has this man seen? If … if he, and other? if they’ve travelled back in the past … they wouldn’t just do that on a whim, a weekend trip – this is serious, this is very fucking serious, and John’s brain scrambles to catch up.

“Go on, Sergeant.”

“A lot of thing’s happened. We decided it’s best we tell you, sir. The truth. And you’ll probably let your team know eventually, which I personally think is more than okay, but Rach… one of the physicists thought it was best to keep it contained. Something about causality loops. Don’t ask me, I’m not a scientist.”

John smiles a little, weakly. “Tell me about it. Can’t promise I can keep this from my team, which I’m sure you can understand. So. The future. And you’re here to … change it?”

“Already have, sir. We destroyed the facility ten hours ago.”

So, that’s why. There was something familiar about the pattern of the damage. “Drones?”

“Yes, sir,” MacGrimmon says grimly. “We argued about the best way to do it. This way, the device is completely destroyed. It’s important you and the doc get home safe.”

 Saved our lives and we didn’t even know it, Shy remarks.

John is hit by the thought, almost wants to sit down: Life in outer space is strange. Those laws of nature he’d once thought unbreakable are being upturned left and right. Effect before cause;

Floored, he isn’t sure how to proceed. After a hesitating moment, he says: not knowing what the hell else to say: (where they really meant to die here?)

“Thanks, Sergeant.”

The Colonel is young and alive and it’s strange, but also a good feeling. J.J.’s breaths are easier than they’ve been for months. Since Emma … Since. Since. It’s almost difficult to look at him, all those burning memories; and the Colonel, this Colonel, doesn’t know it, doesn’t know about how the Earth burned and about the empty graves;

So he tells him. Lays it out in the briefest of terms – how things fucked up after he and the doc died; the City’s lights dimmed and hope began to fade and the Wraith never ceasing. The SGC’s mistakes and the chaos of the declassification, and then contact with the Ori and the armada headed for Earth; losing contact; he tells him about the Aurora and the Orion and the Daedalus being destroyed, and there isn’t time to list all the names but J.J. will never forget them.

(his doesn’t mention Gladys’ daughter. the grief, the agony is too sharp, too near; he can taste it in his lungs.)

He tells the Colonel about the Replications and Dr Weir’s death, and how they fled to Atlantica with Major Lorne in the Chair; compresses the years into fleeting fleeting moments, ghosts disappearing into the night, a wind, a breath.
The pain in J.J.’s shoulder has returned. A phantom.

The Colonel listens closely. Doesn’t interrupt. When J.J. simply cannot speak anymore, he takes a deep breath.

“… I’ve got a lot to think about.”

“Given your link with the City,” J.J. says, “we thought maybe you could give the City the information somehow. A safe place to store it.”

“You know about that?”

“Yes, sir. There’s – a lot of things came out after the declassification.” And the IOA, the Earth, they tried to bring the dead man into the dirt, soil his memory and every action and every step taken. Someone had found out about his alien DNA and his Raven and his link with the Ancient City atop of that (Ford trying to defend his dead CO. the hearings. the accusations.) – the Earth crying out, calling the dead man a Strangeling, the murderer of a species, a Thing That Shouldn’t Be –

But J.J. swallows the tired anger, and says: “Sir, it doesn’t change anything for us. And the City marines, we’ll always have your back.”

The Colonel’s face is hard to read. “Okay. Okay. It’s – a lot to take in.”

He doesn’t call J.J. a liar.

“There’s one more thing – call it a favor,” J.J. says at last, and cannot quench the desperation. “My team, Recon Four, we’re going on a mission to M18-918 in … I don’t know, a few weeks? Yeah. This year. It’s probably in the City’s roster already. There’s a ruin of a city there. Wraith attack, and I’m injured in an explosion. DeSalle is killed, taken by a Dart. If … I came back to do more than save you and Dr McKay from an Ancient device. I know it’s selfish to ask, sir. But …”

“But the Lieutenant is team,” Colonel Sheppard says softly. Takes it all in. He’s dealt with shit before, so, sure, there’s some shock in his expression, but not outright outrage and disbelief. It’s kind of comforting, actually. J.J. had tried to steel himself for any kind of reaction. Denial Hysteria. This calmness is uplifting. Or maybe the Colonel is just really good at hiding it, withholding the meltdown until the time travelers have cleared the area. “I understand. I’ll do what I can to make sure it doesn’t happen.”

Exhale. Inhale. He can only cling to faith. They’ll never know if Colonel Sheppard succeeds. Will they? “Thank you, sir. Thank you. And. It’s real good to see you again, sir.”

The Colonel smiles suddenly. “Funny, I saw your team just a few hours ago in Atlantis. Weird how all that works.”

J.J. chuckles dryly. “Sir, just wondering, how are you going to explain this to Dr Weir?”

“I probably won’t,” Colonel Sheppard says honestly. “Who’d believe me? Nah, I guess my team is just going back home, and no one really has to know. But McKay is going to science the shit out of this. This type of thing, I’m not going to be able to keep it from my team.”

Team sticks together, like glue;

“I understand, sir. Better lock out this address, though, like last time. Just in case.”
“Another Forbidden Planet, got it.” A nod. The Colonel frowns. “I’m more concerned about you guys. I’m no McKay, but I know enough about time travel to understand that you might not be able to get back.”

The first worrisome days, after Colonel Sumner died and the Wraith rose and the City was a giant unknown, the marines had thought the zoomie wouldn’t last a month. Would drown them. And, God, that they ever hesitated – J.J. can’t even remember what he felt that first year, before the Uprising, before they cared. So long ago. The Old Man always always always held onto Leave no one behind;

“Don’t worry about us, sir. We knew the risks.”

“Where are you going to go?”

“We’ll see. We know some planets you don’t know about yet. Oh, one more thing,” J.J. remembers before he turns. “Good things are going to happen in the future, too. The next U.S. president in your timeline is going to repeal Don’t Ask Don’t Tell, but, I don’t know, maybe you could talk with General O’Neill, push for it. He’s a good ally. The earlier the better.”

The Colonel regards him quietly. Reads between the lines. Then he sighs, defeated. “That one’s out there, huh?”

“Yes, sir. We all … I always thought you and the doc should’ve been there. The first.” It’s kind of cryptic, but the Colonel’s eyes widen a fraction. Comprehension. “Don’t worry, sir. I won’t tell. Just … I’m kind of curious. Since when …?”

“Well,” the Colonel drawls, lingers on the syllable. Seems like he wants to get it off his chest, somehow, and he may not be able to safely come out to the marines in the City or anyone on Earth yet, but a time traveler – J.J. is almost overwhelmed that the Colonel trusts him that much. God. “We got married last year on New Athos.”

J.J. wonders if the team was there. Maybe. Maybe – oh, of course, of course they know (knew). Ford must’ve struggled so hard to keep his mouth shut, and there were those moments with Dex and Emmagan – of course. They know. They’re team.

Laughter breaks free, suddenly. Relief. At least, even in the timeline when all went to hell and it was all too brief, the Old Man and the doc were happy. It was just too short. Far too fucking short. (this time they’ll have more time)

“Seriously? God, Kemp’s going to have a field day when he hears this.”

“I know about the bets.”

“Really, sir?”

“Ford.”

“Ah. Right. We’re sorry, sir.”

“That’s okay, Sergeant. And I’m glad, hearing that it’s going to get better. Easier.”

A moment of silence. Profound. J.J. really should’ve thought this out better, what to say, how to. A script. To follow. God, his heart aches, just seeing the Colonel breathing and the Raven – alive;

(we did good, Juno whispers, we completed the mission.)
“My team’s waiting for me,” J.J. says at last. “I should go.”

The Colonel nods. “Yeah, and my time’s nearly up, too. My team’s ready to rescue me if I don’t talk to them soon. Take good care of your people, Sergeant.”

“Yes, sir. I will.” J.J. straightens his back and salutes. The Colonel’s expression is serious as he returns it. “It’s been an honor, sir.”

“If you ever need help, you know how to contact us,” the Colonel says. “Good luck.”

Deep down, J.J. is certain they will never meet again. How could they? They’ve interfered enough, and contacting the Colonel, the City, again would only reopen old wounds. They did what they came to do. They prevailed. He’s so damn proud of his team, his people; this grief, pounding with each heartbeat, isn’t encompassing, complete, desolating.

“Thank you, sir. I know you’ll take care of the City and its people. And I know no one really knows yet, but – you have, will have, the support from all the marines.”

A final salute goodbye, and J.J. turns; the Colonel walks the other way, to gather his team and go home.

Home.

That sounds nice.

(... comes around)

John finds his team waiting where he left them.

“Sir?” Ford asks, worried.

“I’ll explain once we’re back in the City. But we can’t tell people about this. Not yet, anyway.” Maybe not for a long time. He shares a look with Rodney, who might understand the implications better, more rationally, than anyone else. Even himself. Hell, John is very confused about what’s just happened.

But he doesn’t disbelieve.

The old man had known things only an Atlantis marine would. Behaved like. And looked like: the same Dæmon as Sergeant MacGrimmon, albeit older, much more worn. Some of those things he said …

John believes.

“John?” Teyla asks.

“Let’s go back to the Gate.”

“They were from the future,” Rodney says.

No point in lying. “Yeah.”

“And … not a good one.”
John frowns. “What makes you say that?”

Rodney’s quiet for a moment. “You died in it.” How the hell did he even …

_Sometimes we think too loud._

Exhale. John doesn’t say it aloud, but focuses on him, their Bond: _You too: in their timeline, we didn’t make it off this planet._ (the caskets were empty)

Rodney doesn’t make a noise that can be interpreted, simply reaches out, and John squeezes his shoulder briefly. They’ll have a long talk once they’re back in the City. A really long talk, and they’ll find some way to store the information the Sergeant gave him deep in the City’s memory. To stop future mistakes and disasters.

“Hang on,” Ford says, eyes wide as saucers, “they pulled a _Back to the Future_, but with a Jumper instead of a Delorean? … Holy shit.”

“Pretty much. We have to tell Elizabeth to lock this planet out from the database. Just in case,” John says. “And some other stuff. We’ve got to agree what to write in our reports.”

“Oh god,” Rodney exclaims, “what _do_ we write? There’s so much scientific data I want to dissect. The solar flare, first, how did they predict it? And –”

“I’m more interested in _who_ that guy was exactly. Sir? Did they show their face to you?”

“Sorry. I swore not to say,” John says.

Rodney will find out, soon enough. He always finds out. And with their Bond, hiding it for long will be tough. And one day, they’ll all find out.

“An Atlantis marine,” Ronon decides. “We didn’t see a lot but we saw how they moved.”

“I concur,” Teyla says.

John can see how the Lieutenant’s gears are twisting and turning, trying to find the answers. He probably will, in time. In time. Whispers to himself and Adria, too curious: _But who … which team …?_

“Okay, we all know what we’ll tell Weir,” John says, interrupting: “to lock out the Gate. I can do the talking.”

Ford nods, distracted, then shrugs his shoulders, straightens his back. “Yes, sir.”

“We will do what we must,” Teyla says.

“You’re going to tell us _everything_, though,” Rodney demands sternly.

“One day,” John agrees. “Let’s go home.”
once upon a time, part three

Chapter Summary

(the second timeline begins when no one returns to P70-800)

Chapter Notes

(2018-11-05) Thank you everyone who has read this far, and given support with comments and kudos!! I noticed a few continuity errors in chapter 11, but that's fixed now. It's mostly details but if you noticed any such errors, feel free to re-read. This chapter might seem pretty similar to chapter 11, in some respects, but it's vastly different in others. It marks the near-end of this fic (but it's not over yet!! there's more!!! please hang on!!) and, wow, it's been a ride. It's been a ride. The rest of the story has now been written, so I'm going to upload one chapter a day or something until the end.

Please enjoy, and, again, thank you.

xiii.

once upon a time

part three

(the second timeline begins when no one returns to P70-800)

Atlantis, New Lantea · Pegasus

January 29, 2007 (Terran time) · 393 days after the Uprising

The Second Timeline

“Recon Four, we’re dialing now.”

J.J. gives a quick thumbs-up in Banks’ direction. “We’re ready.”

His team are leaving on foot this time; the MALP showed the vegetation around the Gate is too dense for a Jumper. Which might just be as well. Jumper Four is still being repaired, and Gladys isn’t too happy with the replacement they’re generally assigned – Jumper Thirteen tends to act up, according to Gladys. J.J. can’t quite understand, but that’s just Ancient tech, and without the gene he will never truly know the feeling.

The Stargate activates: first chevron, second.

“Hope we find something interesting,” Kemp says. Rocks back and forth on his heels impatiently.
“Yeah,” DeSalle says, “as long as it isn’t another ‘020.”

“God,” Gladys groans, “don’t remind me of that planet.”

Then it stops. The Stargate spins anew;

“Wait – incoming wormhole! Dr Weir, please report to the Control Room. Defense teams, stand by.”

The marines in the Gate Room immediately take up positions to give cover fire, if necessary. J.J. and his team included. The Gate bellows outward, a great kawoosh and settles. A few seconds. Stillness. He waits, tense, and the iris glimmers;

“Receiving IDC. It’s Recon One,” Banks announces and drops the iris.

Dr Weir walks out of her office. “They’re early.”

Colonel Sheppard walks through the event horizon, materializing first, Dæmon on his shoulder; Dr McKay follows, then Lieutenant Ford, Emmagan, Dex. All in order.

“Colonel Sheppard,” Dr Weir greets. “We weren’t expecting you yet.”

“Yeah, it’s a long story,” the Colonel says and sounds a little bit … confused. Bewildered? J.J. isn’t sure. He’s never quite seen this exact expression on his CO’s face before. He steps further into the City, passes by Recon Four. For a brief moment, the Colonel’s neck strains but he doesn’t move, and the Raven fixes their gaze on the team. J.J. shivers inexplicably. The Colonel tells Dr Weir: “We need to talk. Your office?”

“Of course.”

“Oh, and lock out the address to P70-800,” Dr McKay is swift to add.

“Going there is a bad idea,” Ford agrees. “I recommend no one travels there again.”

Dr Weir nods. Doesn’t question: no matter who says that, if a team says a planet is too dangerous to visit, they lock it out. No exceptions. They all know to take the rule seriously. She direct an order at one of the technicians: “Find the address and add it to the lockout program.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

(The second timeline begins when no one returns to P70-800 and all is well.)

_Atlantis, New Lantea · Pegasus_  
2009 (Terran time) · 1546 days after the Uprising  
_The Second Timeline_
“Sergeant,” Amelia Banks, in charge of the Control Room today, greets: “Good morning. We have an incoming wormhole. Incoming transmission. It’s Midway, sir. Priority one message.” She activates the City’s comms. “Colonel Sheppard, please report to the Control Room. Incoming message from Earth, priority one.”

The Colonel – full bird now, and there’s a couple of gray hairs at his temples, but otherwise he’s in good shape – arrives within a few minutes, his team in tow.

They still go on missions, even if the SGC probably hates it. Hey, the pragmatic part of J.J.’s brain hates it, because the Old Man is their CO and full bird and shouldn’t be risking his life every second day for fun. Even as tantalizing Pegasus can be. But no amount of argument can make him stop exploring the stars. No other Head of Security in the universe must be as worried about their CO on a daily basis as J.J. is.

They’re more mature, too: Ford’s just made Captain. Emmagan is a backbone which J.J. cannot see this team without. Wrote a book and stuff – it’s in the Library. But the Satedan still decapitates Wraith for his day job and, hey, J.J. doesn’t mind. And Dr McKay is … Dr McKay. Hairline’s receded a little bit, but he as severe and impatient as ever, and he’s already saved their lives twice this week.

“What’s up, Sergeant?” the Colonel asks.

“A message from General O’Neill, sir,” J.J. explains. “Looks kind of important. Seems to be addressed to all military personnel, but with a note that Colonel Sheppard should see it first.”

Dr McKay frowns. “I thought he retired. Nevermind. What is it? We’re busy. I’m in the middle of an experiment.”

“Take it easy, McKay, we’ve got time,” the Colonel says, and J.J. has heard that tone before, gentle and teasing beneath that exterior of stainless steel. “Let’s hear it, Sergeant.”

“It’s a video file,” Banks says, and they gather around the nearest plasma screen, and she presses play.

“Hello, Colonel,” General O’Neill says. “I’ve got good news for you. Well, all of you. You might want to sit down. Big, big news. Are you sitting down? Okay, here it is: starting today, the outdated policy known as ‘Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell’ has been irrevocably rescinded. Which is about damn time, if anyone asks me. We’ve been lobbying for this for a while, and it’s finally been voted through. So, that’s it. ‘Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell’ is no more. I’ve added instructions to forward this message to all military personnel in the City. Now, the SGC won’t let me stay on this line forever, but whatever that rumor is about my retirement is – yes. Yes. I would have if it weren’t for the Destiny messing everything up. Also, Sheppard, your team’s invited to the wedding, because Carter insists – don’t say no. Well. Bye, kids. You’d better start arranging your own Pride parade.”

The Colonel is looking kind of pale. Emmagan puts a hand on his free shoulder, gently smiling.

And then Dr McKay stands up (he sat down on the nearest chair half-way through this, so abruptly J.J. worried the guy was having a heart-attack) and he walks up to the Colonel. They look at each other for a second, two. The whole Control Room is quiet, everyone listening to the message and letting it sink in, realizing how important, how huge this day could be;

“Hey, John,” Dr McKay says.

“Huh?”
“Want to get married?”

“But you’re already married,” Dex says. Calmly. It takes a moment for that to register. Emmagan is smiling knowingly, and Ford smirks, too, and the Control Room is silent. All focus is on the Colonel and the doc.

“Yes, well, properly married,” Dr McKay says. “We should invite my sister and your brother and do it like we wanted to the first time.”

The first time?

Hang on. They’re … already married?!

The balcony. He saw them on the balcony. Years ago. The whispers: the rumors: not denied nor confirmed. Resting, waiting. It’s laid there at the back of all their minds, almost forgotten in the hurry of life passing by. How long ago was it they truly tied the knot? J.J. is curious and awed, all at once, of their incredible patience and the strength of such a bond.

“… Rodney,” the Colonel says, drawing out the syllables: a thousand memories and expressions in that name, and the way the Old Man says it (been done so many times right in front of their eyes), it’s evident it’s fond and teasing and full of love. “Sure, I’ll marry you.” And he wraps an arm around the doc’s shoulders and draws him in for a swift surprisingly chaste kiss.

There’s a wolf whistle (must be one of the marines down by the Gate), a cheer, and people are suddenly standing up to applaud. The tips of the Colonel’s ears burn a bit, but he and the doc look happy. And J.J. relearns how to breathe.

“J.J., I … I’m. I’ve been wanting to tell you for a while. I’m a lesbian.”

“…you’re amazing, sister. You’re awesome, okay? Don’t let anyone else tell you otherwise. … So who’s the lucky girl, huh?”

“Would you be surprised if I said she’s a cute astrophysicist with glasses?”

“Sorry, but not really.”

“You’re invited to the wedding. I, uh, I haven’t asked her yet, though, so don’t mention that bit to Kemp. Or DeSalle, really.”

“We’ll be there. We’ll all be there. I promise.”

They’re all drawn into it, marines and civilians both. The music is horrible and the booze okay, but that’s not at all the point. People are happy, laughing, hugging, and the video message is playing on repeat in the background. J.J. is drawn into it inevitably. Gladys holds Miko’s hand and holds her head high, refusing to be afraid anymore.

He’s pretty sure he sees Markham offering his hand to Stackhouse and leading him to a couch to make out. It ends up being a parade of sorts, picking up people all over the City as they go, spreading the word. Kemp takes so, so many photos. (J.J. imagines his quarters will be a collage of its own before today is over.)

J.J. loses sight of the Colonel and Dr McKay. But Captain Ford runs into him on the sixtieth level of the Central Spire and starts talking about wedding arrangements and needing to dial Earth as
soon as possible, urgently, and J.J. just blinks at him. Slowly.

“It’s for the Colonel and the doc, but don’t tell them yet. I want to invite their families. They’re already read-in on the Program and Atlantis, and this is where it’s going to be. Anyone using the Gate right now?”

“Uh,” J.J. is derailed. “Sure, I don’t see why that would be a problem. The Gate isn’t scheduled until nineteen hundred.”

“Great! Got to go. Later, Sergeant,” the Captain salutes cheekily and then is off at a quick pace. Okay.

So, there’s going to be a wedding …

“You’re late.”

“Yeah, but for a good reason this time.”

“Wait, is that paint on your cheek?”

J.J. laughs: it releases from his chest, and he doesn’t want to hold it back. “You won’t believe it, honey. Kemp has been flying all over the City drawing Pride flags. Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell has been rescinded and there’s been a party all day; I had to give people time off. I’ve had three different marines coming out to me, and, oh, right, Aurora’s been rerouted back to the City. Emmagan’s orders, she wants everyone to be here for the wedding.”

“Finally! That’s great! It’s about time that changed. But what wedding? One of your team?”

“Well, Colonel Sheppard and Dr McKay – Captain Ford’s talking about it being some military ceremony (he’s planning everything apparently), and everyone in the Expedition is invited. Everyone. And. Speaking of …”

Rachel starts laughing. Doesn’t question that bit about the Colonel and the doc.

“I was wondering when you’d ask.”

The second time, they do everything they can to fight the Wraith, and the Replicators when they inevitably wake: Dr McKay has a plan J.J. thinks at first sound impossible. To blow up a planet. To make it implode.

He’s not sure who’s the most surprised when it actually works.

Patrick Sheppard is an old man and there’s an IV attached to his wheelchair. But he insists to be there. His oldest son and his wife are both there, and there’s a kid – looks to be around Torren John Emmagan’s age, and the two kids have hit off. They might be the most bored ones, too young to properly understand the weight of this moment, and Emmagan says it’s only going to be a little while, then they can play.

It’s taken over a month to put this all together. The Colonel is such a private person, J.J. thinks this has got to be the biggest thing that’s ever happened to him – except walking through the Stargate for the first time. Nothing tops that.
They’re all here, gathered in front of the Stargate. Marines. J.J. puts on his dress blues: shoes polished. (For a second, he thinks of all the men and women who couldn’t be here. The dead. Then he sighs, quietly, and lets the thought go.) Rachel, by his side, has dug out something nice from her closet that isn’t a work uniform.

Captain Ford stands in the front row of marines which together form a walkway from the engraved stairs to the Gate. The marines have dusted off their ceremonial sabers and carry them at their side. Dex is there, of course, and Emmagan; and plenty of marines volunteered but the room simply isn’t large enough to make them fit. Only eight where chosen to make the arch.

The audience is crammed onto the balconies of the Control Room, overlooking the Stargate, and J.J. is among the crowd on the floor below. He looks at the marines, seeks out Gladys – she’s part of the arch. He smiles at her. Her eyes are a little watery, and Miko Kusanagi waves a little. Dr Weir made sure everyone has the afternoon off. They’re all here.

There are no seats, but J.J. had tried to make people follow ranks as they lined up. At first. Then he’d realized that this is such a unique place that following such a custom is hopelessly difficult, and this wedding is about breaking norms and breaking free. The First Wavers are drawn to the front line, and Kemp is ready with a camera (at Ford’s request).

An excited murmur ushers through the crowd. Dr Weir asks everyone to quiet down. “Dearly beloved,” she says, “well, Dr McKay specifically asked me to use the term ‘queerly beloved’ for this special occasion …”

Someone chuckles. J.J. holds back a grin, squeezes Rachel’s hand, and he looks at the expectant couple.

“We are gathered here today …”

Dr McKay seems kind of nervous (but that’s normal), and the Colonel doesn’t speak aloud but something changes in his expression, and Dr McKay stops fidgeting; they could be speaking after all. Their hands are clasped. The Colonel’s in dress blues, a rare sight, and the medals on his chest gleam. Suddenly Dr McKay is leaning forward a little, rocking impatiently on his heels, and the Colonel smiles, wrinkles around his eyes, whispers something, and McKay holds himself back.

“Do you, Rodney McKay, take John Sheppard as your lawfully wedded husband?”

“I do.”

“Do you, John Sheppard, take Rodney McKay as your lawfully wedded husband?”

“I do.”

The rings aren’t new. They’ve worn them for years, hidden away. Simple bands of steel.

(Their vows are simple enough: an echo of their first wedding, the Colonel had said, and they had even told the story of a visit to New Athos, years before, full of hopes and fears and dreams.)

“By the power vested in me, as leader of this Expedition, I declare you husband and husband. You may now kiss –”

Dr McKay must be forgetting there’s an audience even as cheers break out and J.J. applauds and there’s the flash of a camera going off. The man is actually trying to dip the Colonel. J.J. is impressed. He’s not sure if he would dare to be so bold in front of his spouse’s father and all of Atlantis.
They don’t want to waste any rice and couldn’t get their hands on that many petals, but someone ordered a bucket of glitter from Earth. It’s nicely appropriate and reflects off the lamplights, and the Stargate casts a great shadow behind them, a testament of the journey from its beginning all the way here. It is as if the City itself is rising a second time as the audience gives its ovation.

The six marines, Dex and Emmagan in the twin rows lift their ceremonial sabers from their sides to form a great arch for the newlyweds to pass through. Ronon Dex carries no saber, of course, but his heavy-duty sword; and Teyla, opposite to him, the traditional banto’a rods of the Athosians. The Colonel and the doc pass through the arch, and Lieutenant Kemp snaps a hundred pictures;

Five months later, J.J. stands at his own altar in the City’s Chapel. Rachel’s dress is a wave of pearls and white, and every time they look at each other they want to cry and laugh and J.J. had fiddled for half an eternity in front of the mirror, fixing up his dress blues. They’re all here. The marines, the civilians, the scientists, the outcasts.

Kemp and DeSalle sit at the front row. Colonel Sheppard and Dr McKay with their team are right next to them; there’s Markham and Stackhouse, and Snow and his team; they’re all here.

J.J.’s eyes are watering, chest tight. Difficult to breathe. He wants to kiss Rachel’s nose and her lips and her cheeks a hundred thousand times; she’s not sure whether to cry or laugh, too happy, too unbridled. She choose Gladys and Miko as her brides of honor, and Botany arranged the flowers beautifully.

It’s the third wedding Dr Weir has officiated since December. The second was Markham and Stackhouse, and J.J. (and every other marine) was specifically told to act surprised when Stackhouse went down on one knee in the mess hall. It was nice, and they filled the Chapel with balloons. Also, glitter. God, so much glitter, and the large hand-sewn Pride flag (Anthropology’s idea when the Colonel and the doc got married) still has its place of honor in the Citadel, and no one remembers whose idea it was they all sign it. Dr Weir wrote a bulletin afterward, strongly advising against using glitter, mostly because of the risks it’ll creep into every little corner and hide there, and end up in the ocean and their water supply, so this time Botany helped out; the scattered petals are pink and purple.

“… do you, Rachel Victoria Potts, take James MacGrimmon as your lawfully wedded husband?”

“I do.”

J.J. is crying. He doesn’t care.

Atlantis, New Lantea · Pegasus
2012 (Terran time) · 2,210 days after the Uprising
The Second Timeline

“It’s happening? It’s happening right now?!”

Miko gently steers J.J. aside, and Gladys groans as another contractions hits. “Please do not upset my wife,” Dr Kusanagi says. “She’s having our baby.”

Miko gives him a sharp look.

“Sorry, sorry, sorry.”


“Yes,” Miko says politely, “be calm or go away, please.”

Dr Keller arrives with the midwife within ten minutes, and J.J. and the team wait anxiously outside (ushered out after Gladys declares they’re too distracting, *for fuck’s sake, get out of my face or I will kick you, Sergeant*) and he counts the minutes and hours;

The Colonel drops by, asks for a sitrep. This is so stressful, and J.J. can just begin to imagine what the Colonel and his team went through when Emmagan gave birth to Torren John *offworld* and everything. J.J. is so tense his jaw aches, so DeSalle has to do the talking, and the Colonel assures them that they’ve hired the best midwife in two galaxies and they shouldn’t worry.

Then, after eleven and a half hours, there’s a beautiful wet cry of a newborn, and he’s crying again.

The doors open, and Dr Keller beckons the team into the suddenly cramped quarters, and, oh, oh, there she is:

Kiyoko Gladys-Kusanagi is born, to the day, eight years after the Expedition first left for Atlantis; named after Miko’s mother, who demands so many photos (Kemp has a field day), a little sad she could not be there. They can’t tell her or any other family on Earth, after all, about Atlantis and the alien sky or why they are having a baby on base.

A healthy baby and utterly *perfect*, and J.J. is overwhelmed and blessed when he and Rachel are asked to be Godparents. And, of course, DeSalle and Kemp will be the most doting Uncles that’s ever existed – perhaps, *perhaps* with the exception of Captain Ford, Dex, the Colonel and the doc: Emmagan’s son, little T.J., just turned two years old.

They’re in the room gathered around the bed, Gladys exhausted but happy and Miko so damn proud, when Dr Weir makes the announcement on the intercom. The next few days, they’re bombarded by congratulations and cards and flowers and gifts – toys and blankets and baby stuff (one baby shower wasn’t enough, it seems) – and J.J., Kemp and DeSalle decide to take the brunt of that so that Gladys and Miko can get some rest and focus on their daughter.

*All is well.*

There are missions in-between: alien discoveries: wars ending. There are important announcements, and eight more people drop by J.J.’s office to come out that year even if he thinks at first it’s strange – he’s just the Head of Security. But then, after a while, he gets it. They trust him and it’s one of many steps: most of them come out of their team first, then the rest of the base, their superior officers, their friends; team first.

Team is the most important thing, after all. Sticking together. Like glue.

There’s whispers about an upcoming declassification, but J.J. doesn’t truly think it’ll come true.

“Boss, you won’t believe this!”

“There’s a lot of things, Captain,” J.J. says. “You’ve got to be more specific.”
Kemp’s smile stretches from ear to ear. “Guess what.”

“She said yes?”

“She said yes. She said yes!”

“I swear, if there’s another wedding this year, I will puke,” DeSalle declares. “I am not going to be ashamed about it, either.”

Kemp is the proudest man to ever be proud, and he brings up Hooper and her awesomeness every five seconds. Or four, or two. He’s so insufferable about it that J.J. can sympathize with DeSalle, but, honestly? when J.J. married Rachel he was the same. He is the same, even now. Just a little bit more lowkey about it.

He pats DeSalle’s shoulder. “It gets easier. What about you and …”

“Nah. Not our kind of thing,” DeSalle says. “We’re happy the way things are. Didn’t I tell you, boss?”

“Tell me what?”

“I’m ace,” DeSalle says simply. “Not aro, but ace.”

J.J. nods, sips his beer, and filters out the background noise to focus on his friend. “Cool. Marie okay with that?”

“Yeah. We’re the same. So you know about those words? Wasn’t sure anyone did.”

“This is the future, brother,” J.J. says. “Hey, didn’t you hear? They’re arranging a Pride parade in the City in a couple of months, check the intranet. We could fix, I don’t know, t-shirts or something. Recon Four For Ace Rep.”

Something about DeSalle’s whole demeanor changes, a subtle thing, and his Dæmon straightens up a bit. “Yeah?”

J.J. smiles. “Yeah.”

The declassification is a moment of utter chaos. It lingers for months.

_The Colonel and his team are forced to go to Earth to testify and be questioned and there are whispers: some people on Earth consider the Colonel a murderer, an executioner of entire species because his actions started their War with the Wraith._

_J.J. thinks they’re all wrong._

_But then there are people who think otherwise. Who celebrate. Who want to use the Gate to explore the universe to its fullest._

Stargate Command might be dismantled and the City sent to Earth, stranded. They wait anxiously for news, and no one knows how to breathe.

The team stay up several long nights in a row. Dr Weir releases each bit of news onto the intranet as soon as it reaches Atlantis, and J.J’s team gathers with the other marines in the largest rec room
in the Citadel. Snow wires a computer to the biggest plasma screen, and the murmurs die as they get to see the footage. More from that conference, wherever it is.

Press, media, questions. SG-1 is there, Dr Jackson, General Carter and General O’Neill in front line, and it takes hours before any Lantean appears. They’re explaining things. Missions. How the Gate works. All from scratch. Dr Jackson lays down the timeline and details of the Goa’uld War (a threat that is over now) and then, after three hours and fifteen minutes, he mentions Atlantis and the Wraith.

Colonel Sheppard doesn’t look nervous to the outside eye. But the guy has got to be. A little pale, even in the sharp headlights; J.J. doesn’t think this thing, being away from Pegasus, from the City, can be good for him. Dr McKay isn’t there, an incomplete equation, and the Colonel wears his best charming smile and politely answers their questions. The press is relentless – of course; it’s their job, their right. Doesn’t mean they have to like it.

“Colonel Sheppard! Colonel, is it true that the Wraith still pose a threat to us? to humanity?”

“Our operations in ceasing the Wraith War are still ongoing.”

“Smooth,” Kemp murmurs. “Sure he’s not related to a politician?”

“Shh!” someone in the back row hisses.

“Colonel Sheppard! Allegations have been made online about you fraternizing with the Chief Science Officer of the base, even that you’re illicitly married. What do you have to answer to this?”

It’s the first question that floors him, and a sudden silent rage makes J.J.’s guts clench. The hell kind of question is that? That has nothing to do with Atlantis or the base or …! He glances at his team, the other marines. Their expressions are pensive, and Drew is frowning, and Hershel whispers to Brittany: Not this fuckload of shit.

It’s no secret that the IOA might try to drag the Colonel into the dirt – after everything: the death of Sumner: his unusual command: his breaking of norms: his Dæmon: and this, marrying the man he loves after the repeal of Don’t Ask Don’t Tell; they’ve dug into his past, too, to the Black Mark in Afghanistan and blurred-out reports – and they could be attempting to make the Earth agree.

The Colonel hasn’t taken the Raven with him into the picture. Given they can be some distance from each other, J.J. wouldn’t be surprised if Colonel Sheppard has hidden his Dæmon away somewhere. A locked room. Or maybe the shelter of a tucked-away roof. Guarded by loyal Lantean marines to followed him and the doc to Earth as an escort; J.J. volunteered, but was denied (Dr Weir is right that they can’t spare every Atlantis Recon team. Still. J.J. should be there, doing his duty, not sitting here three million lightyears away waiting for disaster to occur).

General O’Neill leans in toward his microphone. “That kind of bullshit question isn’t why we’re here today, ladies and gentlemen. Next question.”

“The people of Earth need to know –”

“Next question.”

(The General won’t be there to protect them next time.)

Someone on Earth argues that Wraith are sentient and alive and righteous, and these folks have never seen the suffering of Pegasus, never touched a scorched planet, never seen the corpses. Bile
They call the Colonel a murderer, and say the extinction of a species can never be allowed, even if the Wraith will kill indiscriminately and raze civilizations.

The Colonel is recalled to Earth six time for hearings and arguments and disputes. Dr McKay, Emmagan, Dex and Ford go with him (against General Landry’s orders) every time. Markham and his team become the standard security escort early on, and after each return trip they tell the Atlantis marines the things that aren’t spelled out in the reports.

The last time, a mob attacks the convoy of cars ferrying them to the press conference and a bullet-proof window is shattered (someone paid a lot of money for this). The Colonel and the doc and the marines are beamed up to the Odyssey, an emergency beacon. The Old Man is a bit bruised, shook up but not saying it, and Dr McKay is so furious he could destroy planets. J.J. doesn’t disbelieve that.

They return to Atlantis for the final time; Recon One does not visit Earth again.

AR-1 is nearly sundered two times that year.

Once, Dr McKay is brought back through the Gate carried in Dex’ arms, there’s blood all over the Colonel and his face is wet and he refuses to leave the doc’s side. Captain Ford thunders after them, back turned, laying down cover fire until the Gate closes, and the team is quiet except for Emmagan shouting for a medic. And for a heart-stopping moment time stands still and J.J. can only stand there, on the stairs, and stare in horror.

But the doctors save Dr McKay’s life, and eighteen days later the doc is on his feet again, and the Colonel has full night’s sleep for the first time in forever. (J.J. asked Ford to make sure.)

“Sergeant … Sergeant. I’m bored. I’m booored.”

His office isn’t just an office: somehow, Miko and Gladys have commandeered half of it, and he hasn’t got the heart to remove the playpen or the growing stash of toys, and the plush animal (llama?) has its place of honor on the shelf. And all the photos. It’s slowly becoming Kiyoko’s second playroom. And, deep down, he doesn’t really mind.

“Kiyo, sweetie, you don’t have to keep saying that long and boring rank.”

Kiyoko is one of the brightest kids J.J. has ever known. At six years old, she’s keen to learn everything about everyone, and she knows all names and ranks of every marine in the City. She can recite the names of a dozen stars and explain what an orbit is; she loves the Jumpers, and they’re all positively terrified every time Kiyoko walks into one because the whole thing lights up like a Christmas tree. She has her mother’s ATA-gene and her mom’s unrelenting drive to figure everything out.

Her favorite day of the weeks is Wednesday, because that’s when New Athos dials in to join on Atlantis Interplanetary School Day – Dr McKay (who is, deep down, a huge damn softie) has set up an educational program for the children. Kiyoko isn’t the only kid that’s been born in recent years, and the New Athosian children adore coming to the City to learn and to play with their agemates. There are others, too: from Te’reem, from Balkan, various worlds. A chance to meet-and-greet.

Unfortunately, it’s only Monday, and J.J. really should get this report written.
Oh, what the hell. Paperwork can wait. J.J. puts down the pen. “Where’s your mom and mama, huh?”


“Don’t you want to hang out with T.J.?”

She shakes her head. Stubborn as her mom. “He’s boring.” Okay then. So it’s That Kind of Day, where Kiyoko has to proclaim everything and everyone Boring (that happens once a week or so). Only one thing can make it better. “J.J., I want food.”

“Okay, Kiyo, let’s go eat.” He glances at his watch. Ah, screw these reports; Colonel Sheppard will understand if J.J. send them in past midnight. “You know what they’re serving today?” He offers his hand, and she takes it. It’s so tiny, and she basically drags him from his office, excitedly talking, making him laugh.

“Mashed potatoes! That’s my favorite! And pasta. That’s my favorite, too. They’re both my favorites. No, chocolate is my favorite favorite …”

(The wall over the desk is so full of pictures he can’t possibly make any more fit. Maybe, maybe one more – just one more.)

“Afterward,” Kiyoko declares, “we’re going to build a rocket.”

He can’t deny his favorite kid. “What do we need to build it?”

“I got almost everything in my room,” Kiyoko says and she excitedly describes the booster systems and engines they’re going to cut out of cardboard and papier mâché and paint colorfully (with their names on, of course). Kiyoko decides it must be pink and purple, and J.J. has been watching *Star Trek: Voyager* with her so that’s what she names the ship.

And, a couple of days later, J.J. races down the hallways in the Citadel with Kiyoko in that rocket. She’s wearing a tiny flight suit, curtesy of the combined efforts of himself and Dr Mallory, who is good with a needle and thread. And everyone marines smile and salute, making sure to greet them as Captain Janeway and (they’d argued about this bit; Kiyoko won) Ensign Kim.

Gladys laughs so hard she nearly falls of a chair when she first sees them – the rocket had been another one of her daughter’s secret projects – and then she hugs Kiyoko close, so proud she could burst.

Rachel kindly helps to repair the rocket when the engines fail.

The second time Recon One nearly sunders, the Colonel has been shot (front to back), and McKay is holding onto him refusing to let go. J.J. leads the rescue team; the woods are littered with bodies and ammo shells, and they run. Toward the fire. Toward it.

DeSalle reaches the scene first: the Colonel is white as a sheet and the barrel of the weapon is overheated, and McKay is barely holding him up – “John? John, oh my god, no. no. no John don’t leave me don’t you dare –”

(it’s frozen onto J.J.’s eyelids forever)

They get them to Atlantis in a daze.
The Colonel has surgery and spends eight days in a coma. Dr McKay refuses to leave his side. No one can coax him away, and most days, Ford or Emmagan or Dex are there too.

No one sleeps.

The figure out the ZPM Equation, this Holy Graal with which they can build Zero Point Modules of their own. Oil is obsolete. For an eternal second, Earth is on the brink of another war. SG-1 travels around the globe but they don’t bring arms: they bring stories, they bring technology and they bring hope. They build houses for the homeless and bring water, and in a daring move, O’Neill orders the Odyssey to beam up the gathered nuclear arsenal of the planet. Instead of reintegrating it, Carter stores the data on a crystal. Then they smash the crystal into a million shining pieces.

Using Ancient and other technology, carbon dioxide levels on Earth drop, and they save the oceans. The forests grow. It’s beautiful.

They send ships to explore the solar system and beyond.

His brother Jonah writes letters: he’s going to be a teacher, and he’s going to Mars.

J.J. visits Earth. It’s changed. It’s the same. His parents’ house remains, but the lawn is greener and the sky unhindered above; but there are ships passing through, with anti-grav tech and ion engines. Leah owns the house now, and she prefers to have the paper delivered on print rather than digitally. Serves coffee, and asks to hear everything new from Atlantis. He brings his team once, and Kemp gives hugs and takes photos, and DeSalle and Marie hang back, shaking hands. Leah oohs and aahs over Kiyoko (she’s gushing about her school science project proudly), who gets an unfair amount of Christmas present, and they sing the carols and watch the fireworks.

But Recon One never returns to Earth. There are press conferences, TV specials, interviews requested.

At one point, Colonel Sheppard sends a message that ends up being broadcast across the planet; General O’Neill probably finds it amusing.

He smiles gently at the camera and says: “I’ve been asked a thousand times, but I have nothing to do with Terra anymore. My place is here, in my City, with my people. Atlantis is my home.”

When the requests don’t immediately cease, Dr McKay follows it up. It’s succinct, and the message is shared in the City, too, of course (Kemp laughs so hard he can’t breathe, but J.J. merely sympathizes deeply and makes sure to check every future incoming transmission extra deeply just so that nothing unasked for slips through).

“Leave my husband alone or I will sue. You know who you are! Mongrels.”

(the governments and the media leaves them alone after that.)

The wall over the desk is so full of pictures he can’t possibly make any more fit: different worlds, and his team, his family, is in every single one of them. Kiyoko’s added drawings, lines of color and words like mom and mama and uncle Kamp and uncle JJ and uncle Salle, and J.J’s heart swells every time he looks at them.

In one of the photos – one among hundreds – there is a warm wooden house of a family on a world of snow; they’re smiling at the camera, he and DeSalle and Kemp and Gladys, and lady U’ua and her family. So long ago. Another: the wedding, he and Rachel. And Gladys with Miko.
The pattern growing.

Maybe, maybe one more picture can fit onto the board, though. Just one more.

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**Atlantis, New Lantea · Pegasus**

**2029 (Terran time) · 8,771 days after the Uprising · Year 33 (Atlantis Reckoning)**

*The Second Timeline*

“**You work here?!**”

Jonah’s eyes are wide as saucers when J.J. shows him around the City. It’s like his little brother is a kid again and J.J.’s taking him to Disney Land.

“This is awesome.”

“**Brother,**” J.J. has to point out, “**you live on Mars.**”

“Yeah, well, the colony isn’t that cool yet. We don’t have a flying City. Flying! And they say terraforming is going to take like a hundred years. Though it’s nice we got a Stargate now. Makes the domes feel a bit less cramped.”

With Midway back up and running, they can visit each other on the weekends. That’s the plan, anyway, and Dr. Weir is very positive to making traveling between Pegasus and the Milky Way easier. There are many families that can be reunited now. And the public has gotten used to Stargates; Earth is no longer divided. They’re building settlements on Mars and exploring Io and sending research ships to Titan, and the SGC has set up Stargates of their own, taken from uninhabited dead worlds, to make it all easier for people to go there.

Jonah and his partner moved to Mars five years ago; he’s got a job as a teacher there, since everyone is bringing their kids. It’s pretty perfect. They’re happy. The twins have visited a dozen times, but this is the first time any of them has been to Atlantis.

J.J. grins. “**C’mon, I’ll introduce you to my team.**”

“I’m prepared,” his brother says, seriously, and holds up the paper bag. Something inside of it rattles. “I brought presents.”

“**Trust me, Kiyo’s going to love you.**”

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Atlantis is a City now, truly. Full of life. There are generations and there are children, and there are ships in orbit. People live here, work here; a colony of its own, free from Earth, free from everyone. Their Independence declared, but contact with Earth hasn’t been shut off: they thrive, and they are happy.

It glimmers so beautifully;

(If the Earth is another place,

but it isn’t dead)

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Oh, and General O’Neill does retire.
The third time Recon One nearly sunders is the last one.

Emmagan is in the infirmary, sits on the plastic chair. Her son is there. All grown up, a supportive hand on his mother’s shoulder. Dex has cut his hair and has taught Torren John how to fight in all the Satedan ways. Kept doing it until age starts catching up with him, and there’s that scar that never truly heals. Colonel Ford hasn’t been to Earth for years; not since his cousin Sheri died. (J.J saw him off that day as he left for the funeral.)

McKay lies on the bed, wrapped in white sheets and the machinery bleeps, steadily, a fading pulse. General Sheppard holds his hand.

Early in the morning, before dawn, one of the nurses calls for J.J. – he’s still one of the go-to guys, even if he isn’t the Head of Security anymore. The doc is deteriorating fast, and they’re running out of options. They haven’t found the cure to old age. He is summoned, and J.J. goes. He feels like, in a way, it is his duty. To offer his support any way he can. And he is one of the Veterans. One of the First. To witness and bear memory and recite (pass on) and remember;

The General’s thumb strokes, so gentle, across the back of Dr McKay’s hand. The gnarled vein. His Dæmon, fur a dark grey, is curled up on his chest. They aren’t speaking aloud, but the two men are looking at each other unhesitatingly. General Sheppard’s Dæmon is nowhere to be seen.

(J.J. might be getting far too old, because he can’t properly recall the last time he saw the Raven. Last week? The week before? A month, a year, a decade ago? It seems to have … simply, quietly, vanished. J.J can’t recall. Didn’t see it happen. When was the last …?

“John,” Dr McKay murmurs, a hoarse whisper.

“What else?”

“I want … I’d like to see Earth again.”

Sheppard lifts the doc’s hand to his face, holds it there. So gentle. So gentle. So gentle. They can barely make out the words: “What else?”

“Every … every little thing. There’s so much! But …” a cough rattles the doc’s lungs, and he stills. “… we ran out of time.”

“Hey,” General Sheppard says softly, and smiles a little: “Made those vows on New Athos, didn’t we?”

Dr McKay’s eyes water. They aren’t distant: they’re sharp, alert, awake, and entirely focused on the General. “We did.”

J.J. doesn’t understand, and he should leave: this is not for his eyes. The first time he saw them on the balcony wasn’t for his eyes either, and he carried that with him for a long time. But something compels him to stay. Emmagan weeps quietly, still tears upon her cheeks. She and Dex hold each
other, and Colonel Ford’s breathing isn’t steady.

Then Dr McKay whispers: “I think … I’m ready to go, John.”

The New Lantean sun is rising.

When he first started this job, a lifetime ago, J.J. never thought – never dreamed – he would end up here. He is overcome with emotion to run through the City and find Kemp and DeSalle and Gladys, gather them. Just … hold them. Close. Maybe it’s silly, but he misses them, and they’re okay and in the same City, so why does he miss them? J.J. wants to hold them, anyway. Did he ever tell them how much he loves them?

General Sheppard holds Dr McKay’s hand. The grip is secure, a lifeline. The General sighs. And J.J. can’t tell where the light starts and where it ends: it spreads outward, suddenly, and he has to cover his eyes, it’s so intense. The machinery hooked up to the doc shrieks in alarm, and the nurse rushes in to the room;

When he can see again, the bed is empty.

J.J. has only seen that light once before. Once, years ago, when Major Sheppard nearly died and his Dæmon revealed itself. When the City rose and the Wraith ships screamed in the sky and the Major –

*God, how could he have forgotten?*

“Mother?” Torren John asks, startled. As an Athosian, he has been taught to believe. He carries the stories of his people in his heart. “Was that …?”

Emmagan doesn’t answer at first.

J.J. stands on the threshold, a silent witness: soon he has to go. An announcement must be made. Someone should light a candle, gather the flowers; he cannot force that load onto Colonel Ford and his team. They need time. Yes, J.J. should go, and call for Gladys and Kemp and DeSalle, and tell them. Someone should dial Earth to let them know.

“The Ascension,” Colonel Ford explains. “It’s – they become energy, they don’t really die. I still don’t know how it all works. McKay tried explaining it so many times.” Fondness, starkly: “It’s okay, T.J., they’re okay.”

Emmagan smiles through her tears. “I am sure we will see them soon again.”

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**Atlantis, New Lantea · Pegasus**  
**2075 (Terran time) · 25,599 days after the Uprising · Year 71 (Atlantis Reckoning)**  
**The Second Timeline**

The funeral is held at the height of spring. There’s a surge in the water. The ocean warm and bright. The eulogy is heartfelt, and Gladys doesn’t bother to hold back her tears, and Miko holds her hand and her daughter the other.

“J.J. was a brother. A dear friend. Team. I don’t know who said it first, but team sticks together like glue, and that’s true. Like the planets of the solar system is kept together by the laws of gravity, even though we’ve drifted this way and that through the years, we move together as a unit, and that pull toward each other never dies. J.J. is still alive in our hearts. We begin as stardust, and we end as stardust.
I’m going to miss him. By god, I’ll miss him. He was my brother.

I’m the last piece of Recon Four. Saying goodbye to them, one by one, has been …

I’ll always miss them.

And who knows? Maybe there’s some universe out there in the multiverse where they’re still alive. All of us. And I’m sure that, no matter if those theories of relativity are true, we’re always a team. I know that in each and every one of those universes, we’re a team, sticking together.

Like glue.”
universal constants, part two

Chapter Summary

does he know a truth J.J. doesn’t?

Chapter Notes

(2018-11-07) Thank you everyone who’s read and left kudos and comments!! I was going to update earlier, but life got in the way.
(2018-11-09) Chapter updated/revised, fixed a few spelling errors.

xiv.

universal constants

part two

does he know a truth J.J. doesn’t?

Atlantis, New Lantea · Pegasus
February 11, 2007 (Terran time) · 406 days after the Uprising

Over breakfast in the mess hall, Captain Olsen lays out his latest theory on why P70-800 has made the list of Forbidden Planets: there’s a new idea every week spreading across the intranet, even if Dr Weir has erased the original evidence. The Colonel’s report about AR-1’s mission there hasn’t been released and maybe no one will ever read it.

That List isn’t very long, but each location in its own way horrifying.

(Once, they almost made a repeat of the disaster that could’ve ended the SGC by dialing a world on the edge of being swallowed by a black hole, tearing at the laws of wormhole physics and creating a paradox of time. Thankfully, Dr McKay looked at the City’s long range sensor data and stopped the dialing sequence just in time, milliseconds to spare. One of those miraculous moments when the doc saved their asses before people even realized it.)

“I heard there’s giant plants that eats you.”

J.J. rolls his eyes. “You hang out with Dr Parrish too much.”

Olsen insists: “No, no, but hear me out …”
“It’s probably some dangerous weapon or radiation or something,” Snow says. “Something, I don’t know, mechanical.”

Gladys nods. “The Ancients left all kinds of junk behind.”

“Yeah,” Hooper agrees. “I wouldn’t be too surprised if one day the Old Man activates something no one ever should.”

Inexplicably, J.J. shivers, as if feet suddenly crossed his grave;

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P70-800. it’s one of the most important planets in this galaxy, but J.J. doesn’t know that yet. it makes number five on the List of Forbidden Planets, and he doesn’t pay that much mind. his team leave for their own mission and don’t have time for questions (yet).

There’s something going on with Colonel Sheppard. It has gnawed at J.J.’s mind now for a while: a slow thought turning. A subtle shift in the Colonel’s attitude toward Recon Four. It may have started months ago, but in the last few weeks it’s become more and more apparent.

(Since P70-800. It all started there.)

The Colonel is hiding something, and it isn’t His Thing With Dr McKay.

The Old Man has more buried in his chest than most people realize. Hell, that whole thing with his Daemon being so unique and Emerging so late would be enough to tilt a whole life upside down. But the thing is, most of whatever the Old Man’s burden are, they wouldn’t – shouldn’t – bother J.J. like this.

But, a few times, he’s found himself stared down by the Colonel at a distance: a bit like a detective looking at a puzzle, trying to fit all the pieces together. It’s nothing that he can pin down and it’s not like he can walk up the Colonel and angrily demand answers. J.J. racks his brain, tries to figure out what he’s done. A recent mission? Is the Old Man displeased with Recon Four?

Does he know a truth J.J. doesn’t?

Does he know J.J. knows about him and the doc?

We’re going to be demoted, Juno despairs, I just know it.

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“The hell?” Kemp hisses on his breath, a hint of panic as the Old Man suddenly enters the locker room and starts gearing up. “Is Recon One coming with us on this mission? That wasn’t in the bulletin.”

“Hi guys,” Colonel Sheppard says pleasantly. “Do you mind if I join you?”

He’s the CO. Even the most nicely framed request is an order, and J.J. has never disobeyed.

“Not at all, sir,” J.J. says.

And he wouldn’t mind, truthfully (being joined by AR-1 is becoming a badge of honor and they went to Deserum together) – if only it weren’t for the last few weeks and that change and now the Old Man is coming with them to M18-098?
Oh, fuck, Juno whispers and the wormhole disappears behind them: this is a test, ain’t it? Some kind of inspection? Team performance? Or something. This is going to end with us demoted, for sure.

No, J.J. whispers back: We’ve got to stop worrying.

M18-098 is a world of dust and the sky is a hundred shades of pink: a long, slow dawn, the days holding sixty hours and the nights even longer. They sent a MALP a Lantean day earlier, which gathered data about the planet, its orbit, its atmosphere, its gravity. No signs of life in the vicinity, but there’s this note in the database. The Ancients built something on this world long ago; what, though, is the big mystery. A settlement. Perhaps they seeded human life here.

Colonel Sheppard had said, in the Armory, that he’s just coming along as an observer. That he isn’t pulling the shots; J.J. is still in command, which, how weird is that? Does he really dare to boss around his CO? And J.J. hadn’t said it but frankly thought the Old Man’s talk about a change of scenery, some inspection of other Recon Teams, to be bullshit.

This is the kind of thing that Lieutenant Ford would do, or maybe Bates. Not their CO himself.

The fuck is up?

But his team keep their masks on, and Kemp is jittery; oh, the guy bravely hides it but J.J. notices. J.J. does his best to remain calm and go on as usual. They spread out in a familiar pattern, like this is any mission of an unexplored uncontacted world, with the Colonel hanging back. Which, yeah, weird: any other times when his team has been involved with working with the Colonel, the Old Man has been at the front, leading, giving orders. This time, the Old Man quietly lingers a few steps behind them, the Raven on his shoulder. The Dæmon’s head is raised and eyes sharp. Occasionally, there’s a twitch of wing or the neck turns this way and that, peering into the desolate landscape. But no noise.

So, yeah, it’s weird. Being followed. J.J. suppresses a shiver. Something is up, but what?

He’s got to calm down. Probably nothing. What the hell is he trying to accuse his CO of – being paranoid? Too much on his guard? Caring too much about his marines, so much he’ll gladly follow them into the unknown?

According to Atlantis’ database, there’s a colony here, a settlement, not far from the Gate. Within walking distance. Something about the planet’s magnetosphere makes flying difficult here; the scientists advised against using Jumpers, and they’d also warned that other tech may act up. J.J. takes these warning seriously. He read the report about how AR-1 crashed on that Kid Planet during the first year, where the kids sacrificed themselves thinking it kept the Wraith away; that shield was built by the Ancients. Disables Wraith craft. Disables all advanced tech, actually.

There’s a possibility that this planet’s magnetic field is a variant of such a shield, only it’s farther up in the atmosphere. The MALP wasn’t affected when they sent it, so they assume their gear will work on ground level.

They’ve been walking for a while when J.J. seeks out Gladys. “Anything?”

She shakes her head. “Nothing on the lifesigns detector.”

Kemp has dug out a pair of small binoculars from his vest, and he’s peering toward the dusty horizon. They reach the crest of a hill, and below, there’s a small stream of water, cradling the
bedrock. Flora is sparse. Reminds J.J. of a savanna. With the long days, a lot of the time the planet bakes in the heat of its sun; DeSalle prepped for that with an extra bottle of sunscreen, which he’ll probably pass around if the two suns rise to their full.

“There,” Kemp points ahead. “See that? Looks like a structure.”

Yeah, looks like. A few klicks away, towers break the neat line of the horizon. By Pegasus standards it’s a pretty impressive ruin; maybe a city? Towering structures of stone. It might even be inhabited. The MALP hadn’t been able to detect anything, but that’s only half a truth.

The Old Man doesn’t say anything, waiting for J.J. to make the call.

“Could be people, sir,” DeSalle says.

“I can’t see any smoke or signs of campfires or anything,” Kemp says, lowering the binoculars.

“Well,” J.J. says, “let’s find out.”

Normally, when on a walk of this kind, they’d intersperse it with words. Small, easy ones. The silence wouldn’t be awkward. Now, they’re all too aware of the Colonel’s presence.

Not even Kemp makes a single lazy joke.

The planet’s ring system spins lazily above them, and dawn is breaking into day fully. The sky steadily turns from purple to gold to a pale hue of blue. Temperatures also begin to rise, and J.J. is starting to feel the strain of the extra gravitational pull – scientists said it’s something like one and a half G. Which is a lot of extra weight, even for a trained marine, when dragging it around for hours.

After half an hour or so they’re drawing nearer, and it’s so quiet. Too quiet. They can see the silhouette solidify: it’s a city. Stone towers, brick walls. Sturdy-looking, but not amazingly advanced. The sand and grass is beginning to give way to broken pavement, bricks laid down hundreds of years ago, carefully.

“Doesn’t look Ancient to me,” J.J. says as they approach what looks like the main gates, a great arch of stone holding itself up. Pretty impressive work.

As they get closer, he can make out the stonework, and it’s not all polished and shining. There are dents in it, careful markings.

“Sergeant,” Gladys says, looking at one of the columns, “take a look. This looks like Ancient writing.”

The Colonel joins them. J.J. doesn’t know (not fully; and this is one of those things they Know About But Don’t Ask) all the details of how the Colonel has learned to pretty much speak the Ancient language from scratch, so fast; by the end of the first year, it was getting obvious that the Old Man understands Ancient even better than Dr Weir, maybe even Dr Jackson. Not that anyone’s compared.

J.J. moves to the left and the Colonel, who’s got his aviators on, casually, to shield his eyes from the sun, peers at the stone.

“An old dialect,” he says. Studies the text for a bit, and J.J. glances around. The nearest buildings are imposing and dark. Stone is withered and some of the structures are crumbling. They could have been abandoned decades ago. But not too long ago, or the ruins would’ve been churned
down by wind and sea and changing land, the brick eaten by dust. So, humans.

A Culling? Or did they abandon it for other reasons?

“Kemp, have you got your camera? Snap some pictures of this, will you, for the archaeologists.”

“Yes, sir.”

“It’s a greeting,” the Old Man paraphrases: “hello travelers, have fun checking out our city, don’t break into our Sacred Temple … Huh, a warning that thieves will – have their hands cut off? … Well, humans lived here, once upon a time. There’s no Ancient tech here.”

J.J. trusts the Colonel when he says that. With his gene, he should be able to sense any piece of Ancient technology from who knows how far away.

The wind picks up. Maybe there could be sandstorm here, and, with this heat, J.J. is keen to keep moving. Explore some buildings. Could still be life here; in Pegasus, even abandoned planets don’t remain that for long. People always move, relocate. Refugees from Cullings flee to worlds once inhabited and they clear the ruins and seek to start anew.

The Temple was once an awesome building, the heart of this city, the rising tower of a bell now silent. On the outside, it’s been stricken by storms and harsh winds for a long time: weathered down to its bare bones. It’s the biggest building in the city, which they’ve wandered around in for some time, searching for clues.

There are some. Broken pots, pieces of wood and metal that were tools, furniture, strewn around. Broken doors, empty windows. No light, no smoke. Whatever happened here, happened a long time ago. The people who lived here must all have been Culled or fled elsewhere.

They decide to split up: Gladys goes with Kemp one way, and J.J. with DeSalle another, with the agreement to rejoin outside of this old Temple in exactly forty minutes. He’s unsure about ordering the Colonel around, so J.J. is relieved when the Old Man says he’ll go with him and DeSalle.

(Strange; he says it like the decision was made before J.J. even gave the command to split up.)

“Okay, meet up here at 1300 hours. We’ll head that way, you this way,” he gestures down the street, which runs in front the Temple. A main street of some sort, and once there was greenery here, trees: old giants which have been cut down, leaving only stumps, or, in the case of some, burned to grey husks. It gives a clue: something violent happened here, once. “Gladys, see if you can find anything Ancient.”

She nods sharply. “Got it.”

The houses nearest to the Temple are grand enough, and the walls may have been plastered white. They peer inside one of them, J.J. taking point, and the Old Man keeps up the rear. The Colonel’s shoulders are oddly tense for this peaceful a mission. But J.J. has never really interacted with him offworld like this; maybe he projects differently compared to within the City; it could be this is how Colonel Sheppard always acts with his team, barring pulling the shots.

The house’s wooden door is still intact, if fraying at the edges, and hanging loosely on iron hinges. Creaks when J.J. pushes it open and he flicks on his flashlight. It’s considerably cooler and darker inside. There’s a table, an overturned chair, a piece of stone that looks a lot like an oven. There’s even a bowl on the table. Knickknacks. A life interrupted.
The room is rectangular and the walls white, with a green trim on them and a fresco on one of the smaller walls, like this was Ancient Rome or Greece. There’s a back door, and J.J. can see daylight beyond it.

DeSalle follows him inside.

“Left in a hurry,” he remarks.


J.J. nearly stumbles on something. Looks down. His heart sinks. It’s dusty, made from wood and yarn and cloth so lovingly: a children’s toy, a doll. Whoever made it took the time to sew on painted wooden buttons for eyes and stitch a smile onto the doll’s face.

He shares a look with DeSalle.

“Colonel, sir. I think people lived here not too long ago. Could just be months or a few years.”

The Colonel, who’d lingered on the street outside, steps over the threshold, but doesn’t bring the Raven. It’s cramped in here. J.J. holds up the doll, and the Colonel’s expression says everything.

“No bodies, sir,” DeSalle says.

“No,” Colonel Sheppard says softly, “there wouldn’t be.”

J.J. sighs and puts the doll on the table. Yeah. If the Wraith … Suckers wouldn’t leave bodies to rot. “Let’s go on.”

They keep moving, leaving the empty house behind. The Old Man keeps an eye on the sky, in two ways now: the Raven has taken flight, out of sight entirely, and that never ceases to creep J.J. out a little. He couldn’t imagine walking away from Juno like that. Doesn’t want to.

They find more of the same: abandoned houses, a snapshot of horror and fear, of life interrupted. There’s a chart lying on the dirt road, and whatever was in it has rotted away. Wind’s picking up speed, and sweat pearls on the back of J.J.’s neck. Must be eighty degrees out. Arid.

The Colonel makes no sign of sensing any Ancient tech, a hope that is dying with every step. This is going to be one of those gloomy reports: J.J. hates writing them. (The image of the doll is printed onto his memory steadily. Can’t help but wonder what the kid looked like, what their name was, their family. If they screamed. If they felt any pain. If it was quick.)

“Sergeant, this is Gladys.”

“Go on, Corporal.”

“No signs of life. There’s nothing technological here, either, nothing Ancient. Only ruins and plantlife. Looks like people left in a hurry, dropping things were they stood.”

A sudden attack. (Cullings always are.)

“Same over here. Keep looking for a little while more. We’re almost at the edge of town. We’ll complete a circuit then meet back at the Temple.”

“Understood, sir. Gladys out.”

These types of missions, it’s their task to document everything they find. To photograph and take notes, and determine how safe it would be for a team of archeologists to return to study the place.
If there are books or writing, they must try to make copies. Dr Weir is adamant: preserve history, the stories, the myths, the mementos. Atlantis’ database can easily archive whole civilizations;

And it’s easier, in a way, that there’s nothing of technological value here; no reason, no excuse, to gather physical objects and bring them back to Atlantis. J.J. has no desire to take anything from here. To loot the empty graves.

They’ve reached the end of town – nothing new or useful – and are making a turn around when the Colonel stiffens and stops walking. He’s listening, and then he makes a sign: J.J. and DeSalle don’t move.

“Sir?” J.J. asks.

“We’ve got an incoming wormhole.”

_Shit, his Daemon is that far …?_ The Gate is five klicks away. Can’t see it from within the twelve-feet tall, thick walls surrounding the ruined city, the final defense; and the Old Man’s Raven is way out there – Holy shit. *Holy shit.*

DeSalle might also be unsettled by the thought, but he’s all business to the outside eye. “Who, sir?”

“Wraith.” The Old Man is in control now. Activates his radio. “Corporal, LT, we have two Darts incoming, flying low. They’re headed for the ruins. Take cover immediately.”

“Yes, sir!” Kemp’s voice crackles in J.J.’s headset.

There’s no way they can make it to the Gate in time, plus the Wraith will keep it busy, keep them trapped, for thirty-eight minutes. Can’t dial out until the next cycle. Two Darts. J.J.’s mind snaps into overdrive; they must use the ruins as their shield, and they’re already running, sprinting across the broken street. Shelter.

They should be able to outlast two Darts.

This planet’s magnetic fields, could that help them? Flying low. The Old Man said the craft are flying low – to avoid the magnetic fields in high atmo? How high? God, J.J. should have listened more fucking closely to the scientists when they reviewed the MALP data; he can’t remember what they said about altitudes.

One thing they’ve learned is that the Darts require a free line of sight to beam people up. Can’t do it through roofs, can’t get a lock; so they scatter, head for the nearest buildings.

“We set up a defense so they have to approach on foot,” the Colonel says. Directs them to take up points (not too close to each other: if a Dart makes a sweep, it cannot pick them all up at once) using a half-broken building as shelter. Enough roof to give them shadow while also offering a view of the sky, and they press themselves against the walls. J.J. peers upward, P-90 at the ready.

Can’t hear anything.

“MacGrimmon to Gladys,” he hisses. “Position?”

“We’re inside one of the buildings, sir,” she answers. “Can see some of the sky. Nothing yet.”

The Darts will be here within a minute.

They can hear it now. The whine.

Closer.

The Colonel taps his radio again. “They’re coming from the same direction as the suns.”

“Copy that, sir,” Gladys says.

J.J. inhales deeply.

The Darts fly across the city. The Old Man orders them to hold their fire, and the marines follow the order, however grudgingly. The muzzle flash will give away their position.

Got to hold out.

Hold on.

This planet is empty: but the Wraith must be checking for survivors. Stranded travelers seeking shelter. It’s possible they left machines, probes, behind to alert them of visitors, an active Stargate.

J.J. holds his breath.

The Wraith must be realizing they can’t lock onto any targets this way, yet understood there’s something here – an energy signature – the slightest of movements – a handful of lifesigns.

Colonel Sheppard traces one of the Darts as it appears above them, moving north to west in a lazy half-circle, with the scope of the M60. Odd: J.J. saw him gear up with that, not the P-90, in the Armory. Yet, it hadn’t registered as that important. Part of J.J.’s brain had simply thought it was the Old Man making a statement – as if one is necessary – by selecting a really big gun. But now …

“Sir,” Gladys says into her radio softly, “we’re ready to open fire.”

“On my signal,” Colonel Sheppard says. “Don’t leave your cover unless you have to. Three, two, one, mark.”

There’s the echo of P-90 fire, and J.J. pulls the trigger as well: they all do: aiming at both Darts, whichever is in range of their two positions.

The sudden explosion jolts the ground: the Darts release volleys of fire, spontaneously. Trying to lure them out. A nearby building shakes and shatters.

The Old Man fires a series of steady bursts, and there’s a hiccough in one of the whines, dulling in the air, and then the smoke trailing after the damaged Dart. Still going. It makes a pass not far from their position and that eerie beam of light;

“Corporal, LT, we have a landing party,” Colonel Sheppard warns.

The damaged Dart flies away, fleeing. But they’ve got another problem now. DeSalle swears loudly as he inserts a new magazine.

“We see it!”

“Hang on, I’m trying to get visual,” the Colonel says but doesn’t move and J.J. wonders – oh. The Raven. It’s followed the Darts, flying back from the Gate; fast, but maybe not fast enough;
“Seven of them,” the Colonel says. “Could be more out of sight. They’re spread out on a square south of your position, five, six hundred yards. Be careful. Try to circle back to our position. We stand a better chance against them together.”

“Copy, sir, we’re on our way.”

The first Dart, its trajectory marked by fire from its burning engine, is moving upward. Then, suddenly, it’s like it hits a wall. It ceases whining, as if the engines have stalled, and it dips sharply downward. The magnetic field. Shorting things out. The Dart crashed into the wastelands between the city and the Gate.

The second Dart makes lower and lower swoops, realizing the danger. It nearly hits the bell tower of the Temple. Sharply, it turns, flying beyond the city. For a moment, the horrible roar dies.

J.J. mentally reviews their gear: his team each carry a couple of grenades and flashbangs, and he has some C4 in his pack. If he remembers correctly, the Colonel also prepped with C4 in the Armory. If they could set a trap …

Was a while ago since they did urban warfare. Got to be smart and use the terrain to their advantage.

He crouches down and hurries to the Colonel’s side, other side of the window which they’re using to fire through. Got to move soon. The Wraith must’ve pinpointed their location. “I have an idea, sir. That building across from the Temple, it’s got a back door.”

“I see where you’re going with this, Sergeant.” Approval.

“We use our C4 to set a trap, but we need to lure them inside the building somehow.”

Colonel Sheppard considers it for a few seconds, expression unreadable. “I’ll do it.”

J.J. had a gut feeling the man might say that. After all, if a Colonel is wild enough to lead an offworld team, he’ll offer: of course he will. But he’s their CO, automatically making it a terrible idea. J.J. doesn’t want to imagine a future where this plan fails.

“Yes, sir.”

“You make sure to keep your team safe, Sergeant. That’s an order.”

For fuck’s sake, Juno swears. This is unreal. He’s the CO! Normal people don’t throw their CO into the pit to lure in the piranha!

Outwardly, J.J. keeps that reaction between himself and his Daemon, and he doesn’t care much if the Colonel can see the stern disapproval in his eyes. “Yes, sir.” Stiffly, he turns his face in DeSalle’s direction. The Lieutenant’s face is harsh, Dæmon tense: he’s heard every word. “DeSalle, contact the others. Tell them to circle around, to the shadowed side of the Temple, that building with the bell tower.”

“Yes, sir.” DeSalle ducks his head and relays the words, telling the team to get ready, asking for their exact position. Kemp and Gladys has had to take the long way around to avoid being cornered by the Wraith. Fighting off seven or more of them in one go is too dangerous for only two marines.

“Sir,” J.J. says again, as they start to move, jogging in an unclear line toward the Temple. “I
seriously disagree –”

“I gave you an order, Sergeant.”

Jesus, this is what the Old Man is like on every mission, isn’t it? Not always laidback and casual and smiling at the locals; throwing himself in front of every possible danger. For fuck’s sake. No wonder Ford and Emmagan have to be on the team too, to keep it sensible. To keep him alive. Now that’s J.J.’s job, an extra load of stress atop of his other priorities.

They run toward the Temple.

There’s a glimpse of white. A Wraith hand, a stunner, a body covered in black leather. DeSalle lays down cover fire, and the Wraith stumbles. Doesn’t immediately die. He releases a few more bullets, keeping the thing down, before catching up.

“There’s eight more converging on our position!” the Colonel shouts. “Second Dart’s unloaded its cargo.” His Dæmon is letting him see that? No time to ask. Over a dozen Wraith. This is quickly getting bigger than they may be able to handle.

Could the Colonel do that thing he did when he and the doc got trapped under the rubble on M31-927 – send an SOS to the City? If they could send backup … Maybe the Daedalus, or the Aurora – God, do they have thirty-eight minutes?

Gladys and Kemp are already at the square at the back of the Temple, seeking cover. The sun stark. DeSalle’s told them about the plan, and they don’t seem overly convinced.

“Give me the charges,” the Colonel orders. They gather the C4, and the Colonel shrugs off his backpack, the weight hindering. Kemp takes it. “Corporal, I want you and Lieutenant Kemp to find a way up that tower, see if you can find a sniper position. Sergeant, take DeSalle and find cover.”

“Yes, sir.”

Dr McKay is going to send us back to Earth, Juno thinks in horror.

J.J. has the remote. Better than a timer, in this case.

“At my signal, press that.”

“Yes, sir.”

Possibly in a bodybag.

Then the Colonel goes. The whine of the Dart is gone; instead, feet are approaching. At least eight Wraith, armed drones, warriors with white faces, and more could be arriving through the Gate as they speak.

They open fire. Distractions. Got to buy the Colonel time to set up the charges. J.J. lobs a stun grenade across the street and dives behind a fallen cart, and the Wraith are momentarily frozen and dazed. Together, they concentrate the fire on one of the warriors without marks – those are usually more well-fed and therefore harder to kill. Gladys and Kemp are laying down fire from above.

“Die, Suckers!” Kemp yells. He hears it, faintly.

One does. Falls back. The paved street is painted with dark blood.
The radio crackles, and in the din, J.J. almost misses it.

“Ready over here. Wait for my mark.”

“Yes, sir.” He seeks out the others. “Get ready!” He counts to five, then orders: “Cease fire.”

The moment he does, a shadow falls across the road. The Raven lands atop one of the buildings, sunlight on its back, catching the attention of the Wraith with a low, grating croak; it’s the first noise J.J. has ever heard it make, and it’s audible for miles from that high perch. A lazy stretch of wings.

“Hey, you! Yeah, I’m talking to you guys.”

The drones are the first to turn around. Colonel Sheppard just stands there, in the doorway of the ruined house, waiting for them to come. J.J. wants to rush in there plow the Wraith down and stop this; disobey the direct orders.

During the Uprising, J.J. was there; fuck, Major Sheppard had been just as unsettling in that moment, his Raven dancing around, taunting Colonel Everett’s wolf;

“Come on then. I’m the one you guys want.”

Either the Wraith are gullible, or they’re very hungry. Combinations. The masked drones run toward the building, firing their staff stunners, and J.J. orders his team to resume firing. If they can pin them down – force them into the building – it might just work.

The Colonel ducks from the fire and out of sight, into the building. J.J. hates being unable to see what’s going on, and the noise is unbearable. His P-90 is running hot. One Wraith falls, but the rest are in pursuit. From this position, J.J. can’t tell if the Colonel’s clear.

“Now, Sergeant – mark!”

“Everyone, cover!” he shouts, and DeSalle ceases fire, turns away from the incoming blast. J.J. presses the button.

The building is smashed to pieces. A cloud of smoke rises, and debris flies everywhere. He and DeSalle are outside of the dangerous line of the shockwave. As the dust clears, the house disappears too: only a foundation is left, and one of the walls, unsteadily standing, deeply cracked. Nothing alive.


A second of silence which could be an eternity, a year; enough time for Juno to begin panicking and come up with scenarios.

Then the Colonel answers calmly: “I’m clear, I’m on the opposite street. Are you reading any lifesigns?”

“Gladys?”

“No, sir. Just us.”

The explosion was a pretty big announcement.

“Hang on,” the Colonel says, and they can hear how he’s started running. “I’m on my way.”

“Understood, sir. DeSalle,” J.J. says, turning to his teammate. “What’d you think of that, huh?”
The Lieutenant dusts himself off. “That was a big, nice boom, boss. Also, please don’t make any reruns of this show.”

“Duly noted,” he says wryly. “Gladys, Kemp, return to our position. We’ve got to get out of here before more Wraith arrive.”

“Yes, sir.”

It’s been more than half an hour, so the wormhole should’ve ended by now; those Darts were merely scouts. The first winds of the storm blowing. When they fail to report back, no cargo, no prisoners, whatever Hive sent them will probably assume there is a force here, humans fighting back.

They have to hurry to the Gate and get the fuck off this planet.

The eerie noise of the Dart beaming, not down but up; it’s so sudden J.J. would’ve missed it. Flying this low, the Dart’s speed is incredible.

“Scatter!” the Colonel shouts, appearing around the corner. The timing is eerie.

And the Colonel runs, not toward shelter or J.J. or Kemp or Gladys but toward DeSalle who is right in front of the Dart’s beam, and he grabs the Lieutenant by the TAC vest. Violently drags him aside into the shadow of the bell tower, and they fall onto the ground. The beam misses them, barely.

DeSalle rolls over, dazed.

The Colonel crouches and aims the M60, doesn’t even hesitate. Follows the direction of the Dart, knowing it, maybe it’s the noise: ta-ta-ta-ta heavily. A low boom, a trail of fire; J.J. doesn’t know if the Dart is hit bad enough to crash, but it doesn’t return.

“DeSalle?” J.J. compresses the urgent questions into the name.

“Yeah, I’m okay.”

“Does anyone see where that Dart went?” the Colonel demands.

“Sir,” Gladys answers, the sharpest eye, “it’s turning in the direction of the Gate. Looks like it’s been hit. Do we pursue?”

“Negative, Corporal. We’re getting off this rock.”

“Sir?” J.J. asks. Breath struggling in his lungs. Thundering fear: he’s going to have nightmares about this moment, the Dart’s sweep toward his friend. “How did you know about the Dart?”

“That’s a complicated question, Sergeant,” the Colonel answers and doesn’t look at his face. He offers a hand to help DeSalle stand and, slightly dazed from the near-miss, the Lieutenant takes it. “Let’s get you and your team back to base.”

And J.J. realizes, a sinking sensation, that that’s all he’s ever going to hear. Whatever the truth is, the Colonel won’t speak of it. He’s never gotten the vibes from the Colonel of lying directly before. Sure, there are hidden secrets; there was the Dæmon That Wasn’t before the Raven Emerged, but … Not like this. To his subordinates. This time, J.J. is certain, the Old Man is blatantly stepping around the unearthed mine, like a man under oath to conceal this truth. But
why?

He saved them. He saved their lives. And now he can’t talk? Won’t talk?

J.J. only nods. “Yes, sir.”

They run toward the Stargate.

Dr Weir has a brief with the team in the aftermath, and Colonel Sheppard does most of the talking. It’s thankfully short, and she tell them to get some rest; they can wait until tomorrow to turn their written reports in. A relief, actually. J.J. is tired even if the mission was shorter than planned.

M18-018 is, to the Archaeology department’s disappointment, marked as a hostile world, not to be visited for some time. The chance of Wraith returning in the near future is too great.

When they return, Teyla Emmagan is waiting in the Gate Room. And after the brief, she seeks out the Colonel. There’s something in-between their words.

“Did all go well?” she asks the Colonel, and J.J. is too damn curious not to eavesdrop. Even if the Colonel probably knows it. That Raven sees so much.

“Yeah,” the Colonel says. “Favor’s returned.”

“I am glad.” Teyla bows her neck, and the Colonel lightly presses his forehead to hers in the Athosian greeting. The air is lighter when they part. “Rodney is asking where you have been.”

Colonel Sheppard raises an eyebrow. “I told him about the mission.”

“Yes, but I believe he forgot.” The pair begin to walk away, down the stairs. “He has spent a long time in his lab.”

“Needs a wakeup call and some coffee, then, huh.”

Mild laughter: “I believe so. When I told him where you were, Rodney was …” They walk through the tall doors and out of sight.

J.J. heads to his quarters for a shower.

He has a lot to think about.
J.J. has the weirdest, weirdest dream that night:

When he reaches the cloaked Jumper, the hatch is lowered and his people wait anxiously on the threshold. He shuts off his radio during the conversation, and now Rachel asks: “Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” J.J. says. And it doesn’t feel too much like a lie. His heart is heavier than ever, but – God. The Colonel and the doc are alive, they’re going to return to Atlantis, and everything’s rewriting itself. A new script. It’s enough to break his heart all over again. Maybe they didn’t save themselves, but those who didn’t make it the First Time … they have been saved.

“Yeah,” he says, louder: “We will be.”

The hatch closes behind them, Gladys already at the controls. “The Gate is active,” she says quietly. “They’re leaving for Atlantis.”

“Let’s wait until they’re through,” J.J. orders. Before they have to decide which way to go next. This is the decision they’ve truly been dreading, and, to be honest, no amount of debate can settle his heart. They’ve changed things and now – can they ever return? Even if they somehow found a way – which future would be waiting for them? They could stay here and try to forget. Settle
down on some planet, one yet undiscovered by the Expedition, make a haven there;

“I wasn’t scared before,” Kemp says softly. “Now I … kind of am. If that makes any sense. Everything’s changed, hasn’t it?”

It has. God. It has.

“Where are we going to go?” Markham asks.

“Anywhere,” J.J. says. Rachel reaches out, takes his hand. “We did good, guys. I’m so damn proud of us.”

Jumper Thirteen slowly lifts off, the hum of the engines increasing. Upward. The low orbit. All of time and space waits for them, and they could make something new out of this. Shape a corner of this galaxy into their own. The planet’s sun rises behind them.

And suddenly, it doesn’t.

“I’m losing control!” Gladys shouts. “What the – I don’t understand what the hell is going on, but controls have frozen. Drive pods are online but nothing’s happening. Not moving at all.”

“The stars,” Rachel whispers. J.J. stares. She’s right. The stars are … gone. So is the planet. The blackness is infinite and the Jumper isn’t moving. It’s like they have been snatched, in-between the seconds, and they aren’t above P70-800 anymore.

Is this the punishment for changing the landscape of time? Is this the Others, those Ascended beings, or maybe God if They exist? J.J. looks at his team in desperation.

This place, it isn’t even a place. The Jumper’s navigation system is going haywire, trying to pinpoint them but nothing makes sense. This spot is seemingly outside of the normal realms of the spacetime, and their lives could be endless or over in the blink of an eye, impossible to tell. Standing still.

J.J. doesn’t know how long they’ve waited, when suddenly there’s a great grinding noise. Sort of like they’re inside of a bottle (trapped with the ship and the crew drowning) and a giant unbottles it. The Jumper doesn’t move. It isn’t the end J.J. imagined when he stepped into the puddle, thirty years earlier.

“Sergeant …?” Kemp murmurs.

A sliver of light. Not a flashlight, and not a star. It begins outside of the windshield and grows steadily. Into a shape. It’s reaching inside of the craft, and then it’s in there, in the back compartment, upright. Markham reaches for a weapon uselessly, and Herschel clutches a lifesigns detector which shows nothing but themselves.

“I see it, Major. I (don’t believe it but) see it.”

Is that a person? It could be. Stepping toward them. J.J. reaches for gun, but what point is there in that? He lowers it, thumbs the safety on again, and drops it into the floor. A dull thud as it hits the ground.

“Lower weapons,” he commands, and Markham and the others follow it. Rachel stands up, at his side, keeps hold of his hand. I’m here. We’re here. Whatever happens.

From the light, a question: “Recon Four?”
“Uh, yeah,” Kemp says. “With company.”

J.J. squints at the light. “Who are you?”

“If I say my name, the Others will find me faster.”

“And we’re listening to you why?” Gladys asks, arms crossed. Trust her to argue with a nameless entity of light, and J.J.’s heart thunders because his brain’s starting to connect the dots. The possibilities are terrifying and overwhelming. “Release my ship!”

The voice is … amused? “I will. I’m here to help you get out of here and return you to your time frame.”

“I don’t see what we’ve got to return to,” Gladys says harshly.

“Yes, you rewrote the timeline. I know.”

J.J. blinks. “You know?”

“I wouldn’t be here if you didn’t.”

And J.J. recognizes that voice: oh, of course, of course he recognizes it; it’s exaggerated, that sentence, that drawl. He stares at his team in shock. They’re starting to understand, too. Markham’s jaw is dropped.

“… Waz sur Hölle?” Herschel whispers, mostly to herself:

“Don’t worry, you’re still alive and you’re not hallucinating.”

J.J.’s throat is dry. “Si –” He cuts himself off before he can form the word, a name, a rank, a hint. If the Others … if the Others … the Others. “You … Ascended?”

“Well, we agreed death was boring, so we ruled that out. I’m running out of time here, so you got to make your choices. You could stay in this timeline, live out your lives in peace on some planet and never see Atlantis again. Or we could return you to your future. Your timeline still exists.”

“You can do that?” Gladys demands. “But we changed it.”

Miko understands, somehow. “Quantum physics doesn’t rule out the existence of multiple parallel realities existing next to each other. It’s viable that they may be able to interact …”

“Yeah, pretty much.”

“Boss,” Kemp says quietly, “we did what we wanted to do. But … they’re right, yeah? We aren’t getting younger. And that future’s fucked up in some ways, but it’s also our future.”

“I can’t decide for all of us,” J.J. says.

“No,” the light, the presence (God, he cannot even think the name, it’s too bizarre) agrees. “Anyone who wants to stay behind can do so.”

“Okay,” J.J. says, and looks at his team, at Miko, Markham, Herschel. Waits for their answers.

And there’s no choice but this: they take it.

The stars return and the Jumper’s back to life: panels begin to glow, and Gladys leaps into the
pilot’s seat and grabs the yoke. The sky is clear and the planet below them, a mass of green. And the light’s gone, taken a solid shape. J.J. still doesn’t have the ability to name it – not out loud; this disparity between what he knows in his mind and what he knows in his heart – and perhaps that is for the best.

The entity, so casually, leans against the closed hatch. Could almost fool them as being human if not for that echo of light around his form, and there’s no sign of the Raven.

“J.J.?” Rachel whispers. “That is …”

“Yeah.”

A sigh. “Why’s nobody listen to me when I tell them not to use names? It’s the simplest of instructions –”

A second voice announces: “As if you’re the one to talk about following orders. Honestly.”

J.J. looks around but can’t find the source of the voice, not at once.

“You’re late.” A touch of annoyed, a taste of fond: “Where’ve you been?”

“You’re ridiculous. We’re Ascended. We can’t be ‘late’. I found a black hole so we can send these people home.” The second presence steps into view, seemingly out of nowhere. A lifeform. J.J.’s mind reels.

“A black hole?” Miko asks, shockingly calm about this whole thing. J.J. can admire that.

“Yes, something with a gravity well deep enough for us to utilize in a slingshot maneuver to return you to your original timeline. There’s more than one way to travel in time or across universes and in this case we need a little bit of both. And, before any of you ask, no, according to the laws of relativity there’s nothing to stop this from happening. It’s all very complicated and your brains couldn’t understand it so that’s all I’m going to say about it.”

“Yeah, he’s kind of cranky; took him a while to figure this out. A few days. weeks. months …”

“A few years because you were busy being distracted! Instead of focusing on this problem you want to check out that nova and look at that galaxy and now –”

“Like I said. Cranky.”

“J.J.,” Kemp whispers frantically, “it’s –”

“I know.”

“They’re …” Kemp hesitates, maybe remembers that vague instruction not to use names because of the Others – the Ascended beings with their rules and shit and J.J., honestly, has never paid that much attention to what the Others truly are. Not since it became clear that they don’t give a damn about the living. “Why, how are they …?”

J.J. sighs wearily: why the hell does Kemp still think he has all the answers? It’s like he’s reverted back to that young LT.

“You’re so overly dramatic,” the doc rolls his eyes at the Old Man but, God, it’s so tender and loving; there’s mistake in its meaning. Makes J.J. think about the balcony thirty years ago and touching hands and a gentle kiss under the stars. “We could’ve just …” a series of flurry gestures, complex, untranslatable but the Old Man must understand everything. “But no, your idea’s always
the same, let’s complicate things by actually talking with these people first before –”

Equally: “I thought this was your idea?”

J.J. clears his throat. He has this eerie sense of déjà vu. How many times haven’t they seen the pair bickering like this? And thought it was … that it didn’t mean that much. “So you’ll bring us home?”

“Yeah. We all set?”

The doc grumbles something unintelligible. Like he’s still … the doc. But he would be. Wouldn’t he? Or? J.J. needs to finds out more about Ascension. He’d naively thought it meant to lose oneself, somehow, because the first time it happened to Dr Jackson the guy wandered aimlessly and wound up amnesiac on a random Milky Way world, SG-1 stumbling on him in a daze. And most Ascended beings seem to be assholes, by all accounts; J.J. wondered if it came with the package. Now, he doubts.

They don’t look like pure unbridled energy. They appear to be … solid enough.

What the fuck, Juno whispers, the most profound statement they can make right now at this particular moment as it’s happening.

“Okay, let’s,” the Old Man says. “You guys get in the Jumper and strap in. It might get a little bit bumpy.”

The landing is a bit rough. J.J. keeps his eyes tightly shut. The bumps and jarring noise, except there’s no noise, and they can’t feel the wormhole.

And then it stills.

“… did it work?” he hears Markham say.

“Jumper Thirteen this is Control,” the announcement by radio. So blunt. Takes a second to focus. The voice: sounds like one of those younger technicians, whatever his name is, J.J. can’t concentrate on that. The Stargate is behind them, still open. “Welcome back. Did you have a nice trip to New Athos?”

He opens his eyes. They’re in the Gate Room.

“Yeah, uh, sure, Control,” J.J. answers, voice all over the place and heartbeat uncertain. Not sure at all of what the hell he’s saying or what the technician is talking about. He is shaking too. All of him. New Athos? New Athos what? Are they really back in Atlantis? “Sure. It was. Productive. We’re, uh, we’re parking now.”

Gladys grips the controls tightly, and, with shaking hands, she makes the Jumper rise to the Hangar to park. Automatic.

“Thanks, Jumper Thirteen. Control Room out.”

Holding his breath, he turns to look at his friends. They’re okay, or they will be.


Impatiently: “We really should get back now.”
“Yeah, yeah. Just, one thing. Sergeant Gladys.” She snaps to attention. It’s difficult to look at them. At the light. As if they’re starting to lose cohesion again, their true nature giving them away. “You should get a doctor to check you out, to make sure.”

Make sure what?

“Oh, and there’s a Traveler ship inbound for the City, going to land in a couple of days. Try to act normal.”

Gladys stands up. Legs a bit like jelly, but she takes one step and then two, Miko at her side. The Colonel doesn’t say anything more, just smiles, putting a finger in front of his lips.

J.J. blinks. They’re gone.

“… I don’t understand,” Herschel says. “What was that …? A Traveler ship? There’s none scheduled to visit for weeks – Gladys?”

Miko’s crying, clutching her wife, and then, then, J.J. understands. Slowly. Suddenly.

It’s not all the same.

(they saved the future,
   a piece of it)

His and Rachel’s quarters are as they left them, with one exception. A datapad lies on the desk, and he usually keeps the space neat so he grabs it, an instinct. Or maybe someone else is ruling his hands that moment. Turns it on. There’s a video message, relayed via subspace. He presses play, already crying. Again, damn it.


“J.J.,” Gladys says, before the door’s closed behind her: “the – it’s gone, no trace of it. I don’t have MS anymore. It’s like I never had it. The doctors have run every test they can think of. It’s not there –”

They end up an embrace. Disbelieving.

“Oh my god, sister,” J.J. whispers, soul breaking and stitching itself back together;

“Emma is alive and,” Gladys can’t finish the sentence, shuddering. And she blinks through the tears and smiles. “We got a message, did you too? She’s alive, my daughter is alive.”

J.J. looks up, and the City dims and brightens, a pattern, and it’s clearer than ever. The hidden pattern of messages buried there.

Thank you.
We did good, we did good

I’m proud of you’re my best friend I’m proud of us.

I love you we’re a team and stick together (like glue) whoever said time is linear is a liar (we shattered spacetime for you)

we die together: we live together:

Atlantis, New Lantea · Pegasus
February 12, 2007 (Terran time) · 407 days after the Uprising
The Current Timeline

J.J. has the weirdest, weirdest dream that night. He dreams his team float in a Jumper in the middle of nowhere, a section of space without stars. Maybe the belly of a black hole, and there are other people there and a baby (no, a girl; a woman all grown up – he even knows her name, for some reason, buried in a warm corner of his heart). A latent memory.

He can’t make sense of what the team is saying. They’re talking about folding the universe is half and a Forbidden Planet; about breaking the laws of gravity and reshaping relativity;

He wakes up next to Rachel. Aurora’s in orbit above New Lantea, and they’ve shared quarters for eighteen weeks and J.J.’s life might be at its peak (thus far, anyway).

A half-aware yawn: “… hmm?”

“Just a dream. We’re okay,” he kisses her shoulder (so soft), and he rolls over and falls back asleep.

He (almost) forgets about the dream.

Six days after the mission to M18-098, J.J. sees the Colonel sitting on the balcony next to the mess hall with his team, overlooking the waters as they eat dinner. It’s quiet, peaceful. The night sky is blanketed with stars. The Colonel’s right next to the doc, and Ford on the corner of the table, and Dex and Emmagan on the other side. Their faces are relaxed and happy, and Dr McKay talks vividly, using his hands almost as much as his mouth.

Something about hyperspace travel and F-302s, and the Colonel interrupts, saying: “No, I meant like in The Empire Strikes Back.”

Dr McKay rolls his eyes. “The science is so inaccurate and you know it.” But there’s a hint of fondness there. “Yes, there’s some merit in the idea the Millennium Falcon –” Colonel Sheppard’s expression is victorious at the reference. “– could latch onto a larger ship and travel in hyperspace with it. Ancient tech is compatible and that’s why the Jumper can do it with, say, the Aurora. But, but! the F-302 is Earth technology and not equipped for hyperspace. Even if it latched onto the hull of whatever ship with a drive, it might at best be able to hold on and become part of the field; at worst be torn apart by the differential forces –”

“But Sheppard has a good point, doc,” Ford says. “Like, what if you could fight in hyperspace? It would be useful against the Wraith.”
The doc is so busy he doesn’t notice or blink – or maybe simply doesn’t care – when Colonel Sheppard steals one of his fries.

“Any ship moving within the field would break apart,” Dr McKay says. “Simple laws of quantum physics.”

J.J.’s team passes them by in search for an empty table of their own. He balances the tray of food, and the Colonel raises his head minutely, a tiny nod. J.J., not really understanding why, nods back.

His team settles on the far side of the balcony, behind a giant plant which Botany takes care of. The department insists on having green decorations in all common areas and rec rooms, and, yeah, it is kind of nice, gives the sense of the place being properly lived in.

“ Heard about Jessie?” Kemp says.

DeSalle forgoes the cutlery this time. A burger should be eaten using hands. “No, what?” Takes a big bite, expecting this to be another one of Kemp’s attempts to rile them up or spread rumors about people’s love affairs or whatever.

“Alien mosquito bit him on the Alpha Site and he had a bad reaction.”

J.J. straightens immediately. “He okay?”

“Yeah, thanks to Wade,” Kemp says. “Found the Sergeant on the jogging track convulsing, but got him to the medics in time.”

“Tyler’s got to be more careful,” Gladys says. “That was lucky. Wait, was he out running on his own? That’s against the regs.” The Old Man was specific on that point. Going places without your team, on the Alpha Site or anywhere else offworld, is generally a bad idea.

“Well, yeah. I think.”

DeSalle shakes his head. “Nothing’s happened on the Alpha Site before, so I understand why the Sergeant wouldn’t think it’s dangerous being out on his own.”

“Still, bad move,” Gladys says. “He’s lucky.”

J.J.’s got a thin line of sight of the Colonel’s table, and his concentration wavers. They’re not eating anymore (well, Dex is but not the others), and McKay must be arguing, still, and the Colonel’s folding a napkin into a paper airplane, or maybe spaceship. Emmagan looks amused at her team’s antics.

Like so, the Old Man says, demonstrating whatever he’s trying to prove.

Dr McKay plucks the paper airplane right from the Colonel’s hands. The Colonel doesn’t seem bothered by this at all. Suddenly stopping talking, Dr McKay refolds the napkin, very concentrated, an intricate shape. Emmagan says something – could be: I thought we had already settled this matter – but the voice is wrong and it takes J.J. a second to connect that to the movements of her large Dæmon. Right, Athosians do that, let Dæmons speak aloud frequently and at large, even outside of family, outside of Bonds;

Ford laughs. As if.

Why are we doing this here? Dr McKay says loudly. I should be designing this in a computer in my lab, not folding napkins to prove –
“Pass the salt, please.”

“Huh?”

“J.J. The salt?”

J.J. blinks and slowly hands Gladys the salt. She gives him a look. That eyebrow. No question. He shakes his head, and the moment passes.

“So, team movie night?” DeSalle says.

“Yeah!” Kemp says, and turns to J.J.: “You’ve got to join us, boss. You spend almost all time with your girlfriend, we’re feeling left out here.” He even pouts. “C’mon, man.”

Oh, he’s so fucking insufferable, but he’s team and J.J. kind of loves him. “Depends on what we’re watching.”

“Voyager?” Gladys suggests. “We left off at season three, I think.”

“Finally converted you, huh,” J.J. grins.

“Well, what can I say? Janeway all the way.”

“Captain Kirk,” Kemp says. Of course.

“Commander Sisko,” J.J. says without hesitation. “All the way.”

“Then I guess my favorite has to be the bald guy,” DeSalle sighs. “With the, I don’t know, was it a tendency for Shakespeare quotes?”

What was that thing on M18-098? It’s like it changed everything. But … nothing has changed. J.J. doesn’t know what this feeling is, can’t name it, and he can’t decide if he likes it.

“No, that was Q. That annoying guy, the one with the …” Gladys snaps her fingers. “Wasn’t it?”

The dream … Whatever it was. It’s not important. What’s important is here, now. His team. This moment. That’s what important. It’s what they’re able to change even with the smallest steps, like Armstrong on the moon;

“You’re more like Dr McCoy, DeeDee,” Kemp says and pokes his friend’s shoulder. “Kind of grouchy. I mean, not like Dr-Make-Everyone-Cry …”

“Guy, you’ve got to stop using that nickname.”

“What? It’s true. I mean it in the nicest way possible.”

(what the Colonel knew, saving their lives on M18-098, pulling DeSalle from the beam of light, six days ago. feels connected somehow. to the improbable dream. yet … not that important, anymore. a piece of the past, and it’s time to move on.)

“Nineteen hundred, rec room on level thirty,” Gladys says. “I’ll bring the popcorn.”

“Done deal.”

When J.J. looks their way again, Recon One are clearing their table. There’s a shape moving across the sky, and it’s a silent night, the stars clear, and over the waves he can hear the flap of
wings. Recon One stands, and the doc and the Colonel leave together, the same direction, whatever if might be. Emmagan and Dex not far behind.

Lieutenant Ford waves his hand in J.J.’s direction, noticing him, an easy grin, shoulders relaxed. He nods in return and it’s like a weight releases its grip and he can breathe. Whatever that dream was and the mission to M18-098 – J.J. can let it go. His team is here, safe, sound.

The City below sparkles in the night.

All is well.

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