

Title: Breaking The Silence

Author: Elizabeth

Email: elizabeth@starwarriors.net

Category: Angst, Hurt/Comfort, Jack/Team, Gen.

Pairing: None

Rating: 13+

Season: Season 4

Spoilers: Slight for several.

Sequel to: Silent Torture. You ought to read that story first (it's much shorter than this one), or this sequel may not make much sense:

Summary: Jack and his team must deal with the aftermath of a mission gone wrong.

Warnings: Strong imagery and a bit of language.

Status: Complete May 2006.

Notes: This is in response to those who requested a sequel to Silent Torture. I believe Jack to be a very strong-willed character, however after the events of the previous story, I don't think even he could get away without having a severe reaction. Many thanks to Euphrosyne and Karen (Kent) for their excellent betaing and help, the story now makes a lot more sense <g>. As always, feedback is appreciated and will be replied to. However, no flames please. I can burn my own toast without any help, thank you.

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<< *One man went to mow, went to mow a meadow.* >>

<< *One man and his dog, "woof", went to mow a meadow.* >>

<< *Two men went to mow, went to mow a meadow.* >>

<< *Two men, one man and his dog, "woof", went to mow a meadow.* >>

<< *Three men ...* >>

He was singing that English children's rhyme as they descended the steps leading from the gate. The agricultural view that greeted them had almost encouraged it and he was in a buoyant mood, loving being outside. Could he help it if the lower functions of his brain enjoyed indulging in these little rituals, while the higher functions automatically took in everything else around him? He was completing a threat assessment without even being aware of it. He did it whether the situation seemed harmless, or not.

A neatly laid out dirt road ran away from the base of the steps, neatly cutting the well-tended fields in half. Rows upon rows of a short wheat-like crop waved in the breeze, a striped pattern of yellows and browns, where the sun and clouds alternatively coveted the vegetation. It stretched away for miles, the never-ending view of swaying crops merging like a mirage towards the distant horizon. Faint baying of domestic animals added to the tranquil scene. The only thing missing were the farmers: the natives; the aliens; the indigenous peoples, Jack thought to himself. Although he still kept singing the quiet refrain just loud enough to get a rise out of Daniel beside him. The archaeologist shook his head slightly in mute amusement, but said nothing. He'd decided long ago that it made no difference if you encouraged Jack, or not. Carter was busy checking out the DHD for the return trip, while Teal'c kept a watch over her.

"Seems fine, sir," Carter announced, before the wormhole switched off behind them, allowing the gentle breeze to whip by them and through the centre of the large unnatural object. No matter how many times he'd done this, this never grew old. He'd been an adrenaline junky as a child and the need had never left him.

Jack checked over his team as they fell into step before him, Teal'c taking point and Carter settling in behind the large alien, before glancing once more at Daniel.

<< *Four men went to mow, went to mow a meadow.* >>  
<< *Four men, three men, two men, one man and his dog, "woof", went to mow a meadow.* >>

He'd enjoyed singing that one with Charlie, when his son was still learning to count.

The teaching rhyme had been found in a children's poetry book given to him years ago by a British SAS officer he'd once served with. Fletch had been one of the few men he'd instantly taken a liking to and they'd hung about together a lot in the lull between action. Their same off the wall humour and appreciation of the absurd had amused the rest of the joint team during their few quiet evenings. They could recite whole Monty Python sketches between them and whiled away many an hour playing cards or chess. Being a new parent, Fletch already had a whole repertoire of children's poems and had a habit of singing nursery rhymes just to annoy the rest of the men with the repetition. Therefore, it wasn't a surprise to receive a nursery rhyme book through the post once the mission was complete, as Fletch had been aware they were expecting their first child. Jack couldn't share his knowledge of what they'd done together, or where they'd done it, with anyone else, and two years later Fletch was dead. His body was never recovered.

Jack had fallen asleep on the couch the night before their last mission. Which meant he woke up with a crick in his neck, and an awful racket from the TV that had left him

feeling a hangover would have been less painful. The old black and white film he'd been watching had somehow morphed into the incongruous sights and sounds of The Teletubbies singing the old nursery rhyme. It nearly put him off his Fruit Loops for life!

However, the memories that hearing the old rhyme being sung brought back to him were happy ones, which stayed with him all through the morning until after they'd stepped through the gate. This particular song had been one of Charlie's favourites. They'd sung together in the car, Charlie fidgeting about in his seat with childish paroxysms of humour, laughing and giggling as his dad **somehow** forgot how to count backwards, yet again! Not that Jack could actually sing anyway, but Charlie didn't seem to mind that.

<< *Five men went to mow, went to mow a meadow.* >>

<< *Five men, four men, three men, two men, one man, and his dog, "woof", went to mow a meadow.* >>

No one could "woof" quite like Charlie.

The planet was quiet, too quiet for a farming community, which usually spent long hours out in the fields. The crops were too well tended and mature for that. The hairs on the back of Jack's neck stood up and he told his kids to look sharp. Not that they needed telling, but it was his responsibility to remind them, just the same. He wasn't going to lose any of his team through inattention if he could help it.

They followed the road for several miles until they spotted houses in the distance, talking quietly amongst themselves as Carter carefully collected soil and vegetation samples on the way.

The UAV had spotted the buildings a few days ago and the planet had been immediately slated for a personal visit. At that time the natives had dropped what they'd been doing, waving their homespun-garment covered arms at the strange object buzzing above them in the skies. No weapons had appeared to shoot the strange invader down, but neither had the very human-looking inhabitants run screaming and panicking back into their wooden houses.

So where were the locals now?

Jack felt the strange niggling feeling in the back of his neck increase. The rest of his team were on high alert too.

<< *Six men went to mow, went to mow a meadow.* >>

<< *Six men, five men, four men, three men, two men, one man and his dog, "woof", went to mow a meadow.* >>

Charlie had gotten all the way up to twenty and back before he'd tired of that particular song, but Jack would often sing it, just to get the smile off his son at the memories it brought back to both of them. He could picture it now, his son sitting beside him in the car, the air conditioning blowing small tufts of his hair across his forehead, as the young eyes turned towards him...

no.

No.

NO!

Charlie's eyes were white, blank, and lifeless. Bony fingers reached out towards him, as a silent scream rose to his lips. Around him, in the fields, dozens of lifeless bodies staggered towards him, arms reaching out, begging for help; white eyes beseeching him to rescue them, blaming him for being too late to protect them.

He lay on their dead bodies.

Children... children... children.

Dozens of them, all lifeless, rotting in the cold dark pit, and he hid among their bodies. He camouflaged himself, like a coward, among the dead innocents of Jaffa punishment, and lived to tell the tale.

Why did he always survive?

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He woke to the sound of his own screams dying on his lips. He sat up in the bed, immediately replacing the scream of horror with a grunt of pain, as his body reminded him not to move so fast. Christ! If he was lucky, only Daniel would have heard his crybaby act and not the whole damn neighbourhood. They must sometimes really wonder what kind of nutcase they had living in their street.

At least Cassie wasn't still here to listen to it all. The youngster had visited regularly over the past few days. Daniel had orchestrated the first visit, after one of the younger man's frequent insights. She hadn't said a word, just sat there and held him, held him closer than anyone else had been able to since his rescue. And she'd come over to keep him company every day since. She still didn't ask him to explain anything. But her presence had been the only thing that kept him sane, and kept the nightmares away, at least temporarily. He couldn't imagine not having Cassie in his life now. At least one youth was alive thanks to him, but she was **only** one, even if an important one.

Accusing eyes seemed to bore at him from across the grave. Each of those dead children had been important to someone.

He carefully rolled over on to his left side and eased his injured left leg out of bed, allowing the uninjured right one to follow and drape beside it. Then he pushed up with his left arm so that he didn't have to strain the right one, which was strapped to his chest in an immobiliser to support his dislocated shoulder. His ribs were only badly bruised, not broken, but even so they objected to the strain on his chest as he pushed himself upwards. The headache, from the king-sized concussion was now

nothing more than a background ache. It had been swiftly denied to gain him freedom from the infirmary. But the Doc, being well versed in the care of a certain Colonel (and used the higher math O'Neill correlative equation, which took whatever answer he gave and added 5 for the true number) still sent him home with a baby-sitter. Which explained why he expected to see Daniel appear anytime within the next couple of seconds.

Sure enough, just as he'd managed to get to the edge of his bed, there was a small cough from behind him, roughly where the bedroom door was.

"You OK, Jack?"

The voice was quiet and hesitant, as though the speaker knew the question was redundant and didn't expect to get an answer.

"I'm fine, Daniel. Go back to bed."

The clock on the cabinet only read 0330 hours and Jack reached for his crutch, propped up conveniently by the bed, listening to the rustle of the other man's pyjamas in the dark. Jack had worn his usual sweat pants and tee-shirt to bed, which were fine for wandering around the cool house at night.

"Do you need anything?" Daniel persisted. "Can I can get you a glass of water, or something?"

"No Daniel," he replied wearily, not bothering to turn around to look at the concerned face. Besides, it would hurt too much to do that, so he wasn't really chickening out on facing his friend. At least that's what he told himself. "I'm just a bit stiff. Been lying down too long in the same position, I guess. I just need to move around a little. You go back to bed, I'll be fine."

"Oh, OK," came the still quiet voice, but Jack heard the bare footfalls drag on the carpet as Daniel reluctantly turned and retreated back to the spare bedroom.

Jack had no doubts that Daniel was just itching to stay nearby and make a fuss over him, his friend's generous nature probably frustrated at not being able to get into Jack's psyche and talk over what had happened. But that was Daniel for you, ever the archaeologist, digging into other people's lives, searching for the truth, analysing whatever it might tell you. Even if you weren't yet dead! Sighing with resignation, but relieved to have put him off for the moment, Jack leaned onto the crutch with his left hand and hauled himself upwards.

It took a few breaths to calm his body again before he was ready to move off, and he hobbled slowly out of the room. The dark familiar hallway allowed him to hide, however superficially. His broken ankle wouldn't have been so bad if he'd been able to manage a **pair** of crutches. He was so versed in their use that he could even play hockey while using them. But with his shoulder also out of commission, he was unable to do anything with his right arm. Fortunately, if you could call it that, at least his injured shoulder was on the opposite side to his injured leg, so at least he could manage a single crutch on the left side to give him a bit of mobility. If both injuries

had been on the same side, coupled with his bruised ribs, Doc would surely have had him tied to a wheelchair. That would have given his team even more reason for keeping him closer company, and he didn't think he could have coped with that much crowding right now.

If only these damned nightmares would leave him alone, he might not have had the broken ankle. It had only been a bad sprain on the planet. Granted, a **very** bad one, from what Fraiser had muttered, but at least then it had only required support bandaging.

Unfortunately, after Daniel had taken him back into the infirmary for his second check up, the nurse had administered a mild analgesic. That, coupled with his recent lack of decent rest, had allowed him to almost immediately drop off to sleep on the bed, and they'd left him there. One nightmare later, he'd accidentally flung himself off the bed, unfortunately landing badly on the concrete floor on his injured ankle. The broken ligaments had been unable to compensate for the sudden painful pressure and one of the bones had snapped. It wasn't anyone's fault, but everyone felt guilty about it, which had made his feelings of being at the centre of attention even more uncomfortable than before.

He slowly made his way down the hallway and into the kitchen. Daniel had left his pain meds in the middle of the worktop, but he was determined to ignore them. Especially after the infirmary fiasco. He hated the way those things fogged up his mind, helping his memories to break free in his sleep. Which was never a smart move after a mission had gone bad.

Even he didn't want to be around when his new nightmares started making friends with his old ones.

Managing to get the refrigerator door open, while still holding on to his crutch and balancing on one leg might have made for a good comedy routine, but he persevered. He soon had a cold bottle of water clutched precariously between two fingers, as the rest of them gripped tighter onto the hand-rest of the crutch. He had visions of dropping the bottle onto his foot, adding to his bruises, but he managed to make his way down into the living room and settle himself on the couch without mishap. Once there, he reached over for the TV remote and turned the sound down, then started flicking through the various channels. He wasn't sure what he wanted to watch, just so long as it took his mind off his dreams. Dreams filled with dead children that he had been unable to save.

Finally deciding on an old black and white western, he then had to struggle to open the bottle, which he dealt with by wedging it between his legs as he used his left hand to twist off the top. Thank God Daniel had decided to leave him alone and wasn't a witness to his pathetic attempt to remove the bottle cap. Colonel O'Neill, the great Tau'ri warrior, reduced to almost wetting his pants while opening a damn water bottle. Quickly swigging a deep cool mouthful, he determinedly concentrated on the macho cowboys on the TV, posturing for all they were worth on their Hollywood horses. Firing their replica guns, and killing enemies who came instantly back to life as soon as the cameras stopped rolling.

He envied them their make-believe problems.

The flickering light from the television threw oddly mobile shadows around the darkened room, keeping him company as he laid his head back against the couch. He wasn't aware of finally falling asleep and didn't care if the cowboys had bested the Indians yet again, or not. But at some point, the grainy image of the old film was replaced by the dim haunting light of the pit, one image morphing into another.

*<< Seven men went to mow, went to mow a meadow. >>*

*<< Seven men, six men, five men, four men, three men, two men, one man and his dog, "woof", went to mow a meadow. >>*

Children in homespun brown and red garments were playing innocently around the adults, as they worked under the sun, harvesting their labours. Cotton-wool clouds chased each other across a pale blue sky, high above the idyllic scene. Jack watched as youngsters played hopscotch, throwing small pebbles onto stick drawn lines in the dust, or skipped with crude ropes held in tiny hands. While elder children learned the skills needed to survive by proud parents. Crops were trimmed back and harvested, large hands knowingly feeling over the stalks, testing for ripeness, smaller hands helping, less knowledgeable. Adults smiled indulgently at the keen youngsters. Berries were picked, hands quickly tainted by the leaking juices, young mouths sneakily tainted the same colour. Laughter filled the air as lunches were eaten between the swaying plants. A pregnant woman walked towards him, smiling, rustic skirts swaying with each step. Her hands lovingly cradled her swollen belly, as she dreamed of the day her child would also join the community.

Suddenly, the sky grew darker as the menacing hum of engines grew ever louder behind him, ruining the peaceful scene. He wanted to turn around to see what was coming towards them, but he couldn't move, frozen as time moved around him.

His eyes were transfixed on the woman, as she continued to glide towards him, seemingly floating between the swaying crops. Her face changed from a welcoming smile to a horrified grimace, as she began to clutch desperately at her stomach. He could see movement from beneath her arms, even through the heavy native clothing. Small hands pushed against their mother's skin, tiny bloody digits gradually breaking through the gravid flesh. The woman screamed as the baby sought freedom from its own future. But there was to be no escape, as the ground opened up around them. He, the struggling children and the pregnant woman sank beneath the all-consuming soil, far from the scorching sun.

He never had met them, never had seen them alive.

Why had they been too late?

Staff weapon blasts sounded in the air, far above him, criss-crossing the skies in a deadly hunt for the last surviving natives. His terrified eyes looked at the children, already dead, their skin gradually turning black with decay around him. Insects slowly flew around the rotting meat, gorging themselves on the bounty beneath them. They buzzed in and out of the gaping mouth of the pregnant woman, who lay a few feet away from him. He could almost reach out and touch her, but he didn't dare move. He

imagined the baby crying out to him from within its mother's womb and he couldn't shut out the sound.

The wailing sounded so loud in his mind.

Why didn't it stop?

He couldn't scream.

He wanted to.

He wanted to rage against this crime, shout his fury and his impotence to the skies and enemy, but he couldn't. It would have meant his death. He didn't want to survive by hiding among the dead innocents, but he was well trained. Conditioned. Under orders. And so, he strove to survive. Like always.

And he hid.

He fumbled with uncoordinated fingers against his radio, turning the sound down until only he could hear it. His fingers were slick with blood off his forehead wound and they smeared across the unit, slipping off until he tried again. The blood attracted the flies.

Always the flies.

But he kept still as the Jaffa hunted overhead for him. He forced himself to remain quiet, not to moan in pain as his bruised body lay across the hellish carpet of dead youth. He felt small bones pressing into him and quashed the nausea that rose. He crawled over to lose himself into the shadows at the side, each movement a torture to mind and body. Try not to think. Try not to see. Try not to feel.

Bile rose in his throat as he willed himself into invisibility.

He hoped, in what he knew must be his last seconds of life, that his team had made it home safely. Surely the Jaffa must find him at any moment? Pull him from this fetid pit. Remove him from this harrowing scene. But they didn't. Tiny blood covered feelers landed on his face as the insects scavenged. They made no distinction between the living and the dead. His nose took in the stench of dead flesh and he refused to scream.

Grown men don't scream.

Seasoned officers don't scream.

Jack O'Neill doesn't scream.

Daniel was beside him within moments of the stillness being rent.

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His living room was a crazy swirl of light and colour as the room coalesced around him, the brightness quickly replacing the darkness in his mind. Daniel's face hovered a few feet away, as his team-mate stayed out of the way of flailing limbs. Being injured didn't guarantee that Jack wouldn't lash out if he felt threatened.

"Bad dream, huh?" Daniel asked, as he shifted uncertainly between obviously wanting to help, but knowing his friend needed the space more.

"Something like that," Jack replied, as he wiped a shaky hand across his tired face. His bruised body ached after falling asleep, slumped over on the couch, and he was glad Doc Fraiser hadn't been the one to find him in the morning.

"I was just making breakfast. You hungry?" Daniel asked, giving Jack some privacy as he made his way back into the kitchen. "It's just bacon, eggs and coffee, decaf for you, but I've made enough for two."

Jack knew damn well the breakfast was more for his benefit than Daniel's. All Danny ever really needed for breakfast was coffee, which he seemed to inhale straight through the air. The younger man usually had a late morning snack at the base, but anything else was wasted on his taste buds until at least three cups of coffee had been ingested. To him, coffee was a religion and didn't belong in the same conversation as food.

"Yeah, sure," Jack replied as he levered himself up and hobbled after his friend. He'd stiffened up overnight, but a hot shower after breakfast and some clean clothes would make him feel a whole lot better. He cursed himself inwardly. A shower and a change of clothes wouldn't clean away any of those memories.

Daniel had already pulled out a chair for him at the dining-table, so he settled himself down and waited the few moments it took for two plates of food to appear. He wasn't really hungry and picked at, rather than ate, the offerings. He hadn't felt like eating since he'd returned from planet whatever. It was more just something to take his mind off things, rather than to appease any hunger. The bacon had already been cut up into bite-sized pieces and Jack allowed himself a small grin at his friend's thoughtfulness.

"You know, Janet's going to get worried if you don't start eating again soon," said friend spoke into the silence. "You need to take those painkillers on top of food, not fresh air."

"Yeah, well, since I don't plan on taking them, it's not a problem, is it?" he retorted, eyeing the mess he was making on his plate. He swished a piece of bacon through a runny egg, reluctantly putting it in his mouth.

Daniel watched in silence as Jack played with his food. The dark circles under the Colonel's eyes were a dead giveaway that he wasn't sleeping well and his face was beginning to look gaunt, a telltale sign he wasn't eating either.

Daniel longed to push his friend into talking and letting him help with whatever was bothering him. Not that it was difficult to figure out the subject matter.

Jack and dead kids. What was there to guess over?

Jack had been even more tight-lipped than usual since they'd rescued him, but Daniel didn't think it would be a good idea to push him just yet. Timing was everything with Jack and he'd only recently been released from the infirmary. The horror of the whole situation was one that suggested it was better to let Jack get his legs back under himself a little first.

Besides, Daniel had to get back to the base in a few minutes, so now wasn't a good time to start what he couldn't finish before leaving.

"I've got to go back in and do a spot of work this morning. Will you be OK for a few hours?"

Jack barely moved, but his face did screw up for a brief moment. Whether in disappointment, or amusement, was hard to tell.

"I was hoping to get a shower, but it can wait. I've smelled worse than this before." Yes, he thought - when I was stuck in a pit full of dead children. You couldn't smell anything worse than that.

Daniel now felt guilty. It wasn't like Jack to ask for help, however obliquely put. Jack could hobble about the house on his own, but he'd need help to get a stool into the shower to sit on, help covering the cast on his ankle and dealing with the immobiliser. Probably even some help to clean all those places his left arm couldn't reach. Even without those limitations, it was probably wise to be nearby in case he slipped in the wet.

"Sorry," and he really was, "But SG4 are due out later today and Nyan's ill, so he didn't get chance to finish some preparation work for them. I can't even locate anyone who could find the data, encrypt it and email it over in time. The work should only take two or three hours, at the most."

"Whatever."

Jack pushed his plate away, no longer even pretending to eat. Daniel pursed his lips and cursed the luck that forced him to leave his friend at this awkward time.

"I could ask Sam or Teal'c to come on over."

Jack harrumphed.

"I'm not asking Carter to help me in the shower and by the time you organise transport for Teal'c, you'll be almost finished yourself. Nah, it can wait."

The voice sounded flat and Daniel really wished he didn't have to go, but who knew what problems could come from just one word being misinterpreted when a team was off-world. It was a serious responsibility and one he couldn't ignore, no matter what his personal preferences.

“I’ll be back as soon as I can. I’ll pick up something for lunch too. What do you prefer?”

“Whatever you want.”

So no help there then, Daniel thought, not that he was surprised. At least Jack didn’t say not to bother at all though.

“OK. Finish your breakfast and leave the plate there. I’ll take care of it when I get back.” There was no point in hoping the plate would actually be empty by the time he returned. “I’ve left your pills by the sink.” And there wasn’t really any point in hoping they’d be gone either.

Jack never even looked up as Daniel collected his coat from by the door and picked up his briefcase.

“I’ll see you later then,” he called back from beside the front door, but Jack already seemed miles away and didn’t answer.

Jack listened as the door closed, followed a few moments later, by the sound of a car door clunking shut. Its engine roared into life and the sound faded as the car disappeared down the road.

He was alone at last, for the first time in days.

It wasn’t that he didn’t like Daniel’s company, or any of his team’s, under normal circumstances. He loved his kids and would do anything for them. They were all so diverse and unique, truly the best of the best. He really was blessed with the company he kept these days.

But, right now, his mind was too clouded by the pain and images of his last mission to deal with anything clearly. And he really couldn’t afford to make the effort of putting on an act for those around him.

He knew Daniel had been keeping his distance since they’d got back home, but it wouldn’t last long. His natural curiosity and need to help would soon get the better of his patience. He also suspected that Carter was itching to crowd his space too, concern oozing from every pore on their different faces. He’d be doing exactly the same, if any of them had lived through what he’d endured. But he couldn’t cope with them right now. Maybe later on, once he’d had a chance to process everything. Once he’d been able to lock it away in that dark corner of his mind, where he filed all the other bad stuff that he didn’t want to face any more. Maybe then he could deal with the team’s nightmares over it. Maybe then he could come up with some glib remark, some O’Neill’ism to put their worries about him to rest.

Or maybe not.

At least he felt certain that Teal’c understood, as the quiet man usually did. The battle-hardened alien’s empathic support was a welcome relief.

He felt dirty.

All he'd been allowed under Doc's beady eye had been bed-baths and they never left him feeling clean, merely not **as** dirty. If he closed his eyes and allowed the memories to resurface, he could almost smell the bodies around him. The darkness behind his eyelids brought back heartrending images to his tired mind. The girl, not more than five years old, who'd still managed to keep hold of a small wooden doll. The young boy, with a rough bandage around his hand, covering up who knew what scrape he'd gotten into. And the pregnant woman, with her dead eyes, that seemed to glare straight at him. They'd all stunk, their decaying flesh attracting flies and other native insects to come, and feast and lay their eggs on the plentiful bounty.

He'd crawled across their corpses to hide against the side of the pit, in the shadows, his hands pressing into their forms, his fingers digging into what remained of their flesh. The baby would already be dead inside its mother's womb. A part of his mind screamed, as he wondered if the child would have survived if he'd gotten there sooner. Rigor mortis had already come and gone, presumably days ago.

Tears had run down his face as he'd been violently sick amongst them, the side-effects of the concussion leaving him little chance of respecting whatever dignity they had left. But above all else, there'd been the smell, the overpowering smell that had kept him company. Even when he'd shut his eyes, it haunted him.

Jack's eyes opened to clear away the horrific scene, and he almost jumped out of his chair, the need for fresh air suddenly overpowering.

Grabbing the crutch, he made his way back to the bedroom, and then fought his way into some clean grey sweat-pants and sneakers. Grey to match his mood. Luckily he found a pair of sneakers at the bottom of the closet that he'd toed off without unlacing the last time they were worn. He was too impatient to struggle out of his immobiliser and into a fresh sweat-shirt. So he found a heavy cotton shirt that he could slip over his left arm and drape over his right shoulder, tucking the sleeve into his immobiliser to hold it in place. Then he made his way over to the front door, and grabbed his wallet and keys before leaving the house. The door slammed behind him and he stopped to just take a few deep breaths. The early autumn air was crisp and cold and the morning sun was just beginning to burn off the night's dampness.

He hurried down the path as fast as he could onto the sidewalk, hardly noticing the way his body objected to the gruelling movement. Over the years he'd become so accustomed to managing various injuries and their handicaps that he studiously ignored them. His ribs hurt with each twist and jolt of his chest, but he merely gritted his teeth against the sensation and carried on. His ankle swayed like a pendulum with each movement of the uneven gait, which caused excruciating pain in his shoulder from the crutch. So every few feet he took his weight off the crutch and walked carefully a short distance on the cast. Alternating like this he moved ever forward, away from the house and the stillness within.

His clothing did little to protect him from the cool, damp air, but the breeze blew against his face, ruffling his hair, acting like a balm on his troubled spirit. Thoughts of the pit were gently brushed away by the sounds of the early morning life outdoors.

He'd no idea where he was headed; he just had the desire to keep moving, until he couldn't go any further. Realistically, he realised that probably wouldn't be very far. The more distance he put between himself and his suburban home, the more chance he had of waving a cab down, but even then he'd no idea of where to go. He thought of visiting Charlie, something he often did if he needed to think things through. Sometimes it brought a fresh perspective, being able to discuss a situation with his son, when he couldn't talk with anyone else. Maybe it was just being able to voice his problems that enabled him to reach a decision. But he preferred to think it was Charlie helping him out. It was a comfort of sorts. However, he didn't want to be near his kid when he remembered all those other dead children. The memories of his son could be upsetting enough some days, without associating him with that God-awful mess too.

Damn.

Just when he thought he'd got a few minutes peace, the images had crowded his mind again. There'd been a young boy, red haired and freckle faced, still clutching a wooden animal of some kind. Now blood darkened its once clean surface, dried across the animal's face and mane as it lay on its young owner's ruined chest.

The chill of the day worked its way through his clothes, but he walked on, heedless of the goose-bumps that covered his skin. The need to keep moving overrode everything else. People moved politely out of the injured man's way, some calling out a greeting as they recognised him, but it all went unnoticed as he passed by. He felt as if he hurt all over, but nothing seemed to eradicate the visions from his mind. The well-kept gardens beside him morphed into fields. Gaily coloured flowers changed into alien ripening crops.

And houses grew into pit walls.

Eventually, he found himself in the neighbourhood park. He couldn't recall which direction he'd taken, or which path he'd used to get there. He was just suddenly there, in its midst. He stood next to a bench, abruptly aware of how cold, tired and weary he was. However, the sounds of children playing around him filtered through the turmoil in his mind and he sat down carefully on the dew-covered seat, and looked around.

Mothers pushed strollers just like they had for generations. Youngsters played a game of soccer in the distance, with just as many girls as boys flying back and forth between the homemade goals. Shrieks of laughter, punctuated by the occasional curse, as each team lost, and then regained the ball. He guessed it must be the weekend for so many kids to be out of school. It was amazing how easily you lost track of the days when you 'travelled' as often as he did.

Nearby two children chased each other through the trees. Their looks so similar, they had to be brother and sister. The taller boy kept just ahead of his shorter sister, holding a doll above his head. Eventually, he let the younger girl catch him and tickle him until he relinquished her toy. Then he ruffled her hair, before leading her away in the opposite direction.

As the sun continued to burn off the morning dampness, he relaxed and allowed its warmth to leech into his bones as it dried his clothing. He only realised he'd been shivering when he finally stopped trembling. Damn. Doc was so gonna have his hide if he caught a chill out here. Tough.

From somewhere behind him he caught the refrains of a nursery rhyme he hadn't heard in a long while.

*“Ring-a-ring o' roses, A pocket full of posies, Achoo!, Achoo! We all fall down.”*

He swivelled around on the bench, cautiously sliding on his butt so he didn't twist his chest, to watch the scene playing out behind him. Six small children, nursery school age, skipped around in a circle, while their mothers kept watch from a nearby bench. The children laughed with each other, holding hands, until on the last words they all let go and dropped to the ground. All giggling with innocent enjoyment, as they played 'dead' for the short time they could manage, before scrambling enthusiastically to their feet to begin the game again.

A few seconds of playful stillness for them equated to several days of agony for him. The bright sky darkened to a dull grey in his mind, their smiles of happiness turned to grim death masks, and brightly coloured clothing turned to earthen browns crusted with rust-blood reds.

*<< Eight men went to mow, went to mow a meadow. >>*

*<< Eight men, seven men, six men, five men, four men, three men, two men, one man and his dog, “woof”, went to mow a meadow. >>*

Rows upon rows of carefully tended crops wafted in the breeze and lifeless children rotted, while heartbroken parents were taken to God knows where.

He hurriedly pushed himself to his feet and stumbled backwards awkwardly, in a panic. Then, before the children had even started to sing another verse, he was hobbling away. He'd only taken a few slow steps when he heard shouting from behind him and so he twisted around slightly to see what was happening. A young boy, maybe about ten, came charging down the path after a runaway dog. The German Shepherd, a beautiful long-haired creature came running towards him. His lead flying behind him as his tongue hung out of the side of his jaws, flapping up and down with his running gait, as his tail waved enthusiastically.

“Zack!” The boy yelled, trying to slow the dog down. Although the height of an adult dog, the animal didn't seem much more than a gangling juvenile, and had yet to fill out to suit the length of its legs. Zack took one moment to turn towards his young owner, barking at the fun of the chase, before charging ahead again excitedly.

Jack tried to step out of its way, just as the dog realised they were going to collide and tried to run around the man. Neither of them could move quickly enough and Zack collided with the crutch, knocking both him and the man down onto the gravel path in a flurry of arms, legs and paws.

It took Jack a few moments to catch his breath before he could even try to move again. He didn't know which part of him hurt the most, including his pride. It was probably lucky he hadn't had more than a mouthful for breakfast; otherwise it might very likely have made a reappearance. The pooch was up almost instantly, then leaned down to lick the side of his face, almost apologetically.

"You OK, mister?" the boy asked breathlessly, as he finally caught up. He took hold of the dog's lead and pulled the enthusiastic animal off the semi-prone man. The boy's face was beet red, although it was difficult to tell whether it was from the run or embarrassment.

"Huh?"

The world continued to swirl around him sickeningly for a moment, before it resolved into the boy, the dog held safely next to him and a middle-aged woman who was suddenly crouched beside them. Her eyes studied him appraisingly.

"Are you alright?" she asked Jack, as she placed a gentle hand on his shoulder. "Do you hurt anywhere? Silly question, I'm sure." She watched, as the injured man seemed to get his bearings. "Obviously you're already hurting. Can you get up, or should I call an ambulance?"

Jack thought about it for a moment, gently testing out his various appendages, before deciding he wasn't really any worse off than before. And certainly not keen on another visit to the infirmary. He'd probably have fresh bruises from where he'd hit the gravel path hard, but nothing likely to reach his top ten injury list. With his immobilised arm unable to break the fall, he'd landed hard on his knees before toppling over. He could feel the stinging already on his face, knees and hands, where he'd scored them on the rough ground.

"I'm so very sorry," the woman apologised, "I've told Jed to take Zack to classes, but he's so sure he can train him himself." She was already reaching into her purse for her mobile phone.

Looking up into the woman's face, he shook his head as she dallied over the phone. "No, don't, I'll be fine." She waited a moment, before making her mind up and putting the phone away again.

Taking a deep breath, Jack pushed himself up with his left hand, the broken skin tingling under the pressure. He let the woman help him into a sitting position and slowly looked around. His pants were torn at the knees and he no doubt looked in an even worse state than before. Unfortunately, he now also seemed to be the centre of attention for several of the nearby mothers and children.

Just what he didn't want and couldn't wait to get away from fast enough.

"I'm really sorry, mister," Jed defended his dog, obviously afraid that they were both in serious trouble now, at least from his mom if not this stranger. "Zack just likes to play. He wouldn't hurt anyone on purpose, honest."

“It’s OK, I’m fine. Just gimme a minute, here.”

He reached out towards where his crutch had fallen beside him and the woman reached over his legs to hand it to him. Then placing her arms around his waist, she ignored his protests as she helped him to his feet again. He flinched as his ribs protested, but didn’t say anything. She was only trying to help and he didn’t want to make more of a scene than there already was.

He stood swaying for a few seconds, but once she felt he was steady she withdrew the support. Looking him over, she tried to see if he’d been badly hurt from the altercation. Maybe she should have called an ambulance anyway, and then her attorney, she thought worriedly. Her eyes strayed from the tears in the knees of his pants, upwards, to the scratches on his face. Suddenly, recognition dawned.

“You’re Mr O’Neill, aren’t you?” she asked.

“Yeeaaaah,” he replied cautiously. It wasn’t always fortuitous when people knew who you were. It was a lesson he’d learned long ago.

“I’ve seen you down at the school, coaching the Pee Wee hockey team. You do a great job with them. Jed was already too old when we moved here, but I’ve often seen you there at games. The kids like you a lot.”

“Well…” He just shrugged his shoulders, then grimaced as his injured one reminded him he’d just banged it again.

“Look, let’s get you home,” she interrupted his hesitancy. “Is there anyone here with you, or can I give you a lift back somewhere?” She looked around to see if anyone was rushing over for him.

“Nah, thanks a lot, but I’m fine now.”

Now she recognised him, the woman studied Jack and his paler than normal complexion. He was always full of life, throwing himself into whatever he was doing, and enjoying the hell out of himself in the process. It was no wonder the kids loved him. He was just like them when he joined in.

She’d heard the stories, of course, about the death of his son and the subsequent estrangement from his wife; they constantly circulated among bored parents. He was supposed to be someone important in the mountain, and a good catch from what was said. Not that she was looking. She was very happily married, thank you! But that didn’t mean she didn’t have eyes in her head to appreciate an attractive, single male when she saw one. So what was he doing out here on his own, when he should probably be back home in bed, with someone to take care of him?

“You’re not fine,” she told him with finality. “Look, you have to let me give you a ride home, it’s the least I can do after Zack knocked you over. I’m sure you can’t live that far from here and Jed and I were just on our way home anyway.” The look she gave her son was enough to warn the boy that this was only part of his punishment.

“Well, if it’s no trouble.” The truth was, he was a bit shaky and although he wasn’t far from home, it was further than he really thought he could manage at the moment.

“No trouble at all and I’m not parked far away.”

“OK. Thanks. I’m only just down the street, but I’d appreciate the ride.”

“Good.” She smiled and fell into step beside him as she led the way back to her car, enjoying the jealous looks from some of the other women. Now that the excitement was over, their audience gradually disappeared, leaving them in peace as they slowly moved away. This time Zack padded along quietly beside his young owner, as though aware that he’d better be on his best behaviour for the rest of the day.

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Daniel rushed back to the house for the second time in under half an hour. His mind was going through a hundred different scenarios concerning just what Janet might be capable of if he didn’t find Jack, and in one piece soon. It didn’t matter that he’d only been gone a couple of hours, or that he’d hurried through the work as quickly as he could. Janet had complained vociferously when she’d seen him on the base. She made it clear that she didn’t care if the General had called him back. Jack was under no circumstances to be left on his own and if his team couldn’t take care of him, then her nurses would. Knowing just how much Jack would enjoy that, he’d promised to be home within the hour, and he had been. He’d come back expecting to find Jack asleep, or watching television. He expected to hear him complaining about still needing help to get that shower that he had wanted that morning.

Instead, he’d come home to an empty house.

Damn the man.

Couldn’t Daniel even get through one day without Jack trying to give him a heart attack? Knowing the Colonel couldn’t walk far, and hoping against hope that he hadn’t taken a taxi somewhere further away, he’d gotten back in his car and driven around the neighbourhood. A quarter of an hour later he was back and dashing inside the house again to see if Jack had returned. If he hadn’t, then he was going to have to phone Sam and Teal’c and organise a private search party, before they called in the troops. Oh crap. Janet would make sure he’d suffer at his next medical!

Jack hadn’t even taken his cell phone with him. Damn it. The man simply wasn’t well enough to be out on his own.

Jack could drive him to distraction on the best of days and this definitely wasn’t one of those. Jack hadn’t had a proper night’s sleep since they’d rescued him and his latest disappearing act made it all the more obvious how much Jack was affected by their last mission.

This time though, as Daniel opened the door, he was greeted with the sound of cursing from the bathroom. He breathed a huge sigh of relief before shutting the door behind him. Whatever the current problem was with Jack, at least he was safely back

home, and Daniel wasn't going to let him out of his sight again any time soon. He no longer had to fear the Wrath Of Janet for losing her number one favourite/not-so-favourite patient.

"Jack?" he called out, to give the other man some warning he was no longer on his own. The fact that Jack was cursing fit to burst was a good indicator he might need some time to get himself together. "You OK?" Daniel was moving towards the bathroom as he called out, each step taking him nearer the cause of the x-rated language he could hear. "Do you need a hand in there?"

Jack didn't answer, merely continued grumbling to himself, but more quietly now he knew he had an audience.

Daniel knocked on the bathroom door, giving Jack a chance to object to his presence, before slowly opening the door. There was no way Daniel was going to leave Jack to struggle on his own in the shower, if the man had been impatient enough to start something he wasn't capable of finishing. Although Daniel might be tempted to give the man a reproachful earful as soon as he'd finished. Instead, he was faced with the sight of Jack, sitting fully clothed on the edge of the bathtub. His crutch was laying on the floor next to a rumpled shirt, as he struggled, more or less single-handedly, with the first aid box balanced on his lap.

"Can't get the damned thing open," Jack complained, as he handed the kit over, his eyes darting everywhere but at his friend.

Taking the box, Daniel noticed right away that there were scratches on Jack's face and, looking him over further, observed scrapes along his hands and ragged tears in the knees of his pants.

"What on Earth have you been doing? I've been looking all over the neighbourhood for you." Relief warring with concern, made his voice harsher than he intended.

Jack just shrugged his shoulders, painfully. "Needed some fresh air."

"And this?" Daniel asked, his free hand waving up and down from Jack's face to his knees.

"Got knocked over by a damned dog."

"Are you OK? Did you hurt anything?" Daniel was instantly worried and it showed in his voice, calmer now that the panic of earlier was over.

"Yes and no. Bruised my pride more than anything. Owner of the dog gave me a lift back."

"I was worried," Daniel replied as he balanced the open box on the sink and took out some antiseptic wipes. "Janet gave me such an earful when she saw me on the base. She'd have been using me for needle practice if anything had happened to you."

Opening one of the small plastic envelopes, he started to clean up Jack's face. Using one hand under the chin to raise the face upwards towards the light, Daniel could see the scratches along the chin and cheek much better. He used his other hand to gently clean the grazes, teasing away any tiny bits of grit.

"Sorry," came the guilty sounding response, which made Daniel smile. Jack could sound like a four year old at times, which did nothing to temper his team's desire to take care of him when he was ill.

"This isn't too bad, you know, but you're probably going to have bruises tomorrow."

"Bruises won't kill me," Jack spoke carefully around the wipes dabbing at his face.

"Maybe not you, but Janet's not going to be pleased if she gets a load of these before they've healed."

"I'll tell her I tripped bringing in the mail."

"Yeah, as if she believes anything we tell her anyway!"

That brought a small smile to Jack's face, but it disappeared almost as soon as it had appeared.

It was obvious that something was still disturbing Jack on a deep level, so Daniel stopped talking. He continued to clean up Jack's face and then moved on to the knuckles of his right hand, where it had been trapped beneath his body. Then the palm of his left hand, where a long graze suggested he'd put his hand out to try and stop his fall. Daniel cleaned out a few bits of grit from both. Jack didn't even flinch as Daniel applied a bit of pressure to clean out the wounds. It was obvious though that the injured man was tiring, as his eyes kept sliding shut. There was no way Daniel wanted to keep Jack sitting on the edge of the tub, especially if he'd have to clean the scrapes on his knees. Even Jack's hard head was likely to be hurt if it hit the porcelain.

"Come on, let's finish this off on the bed. You're going to have to take the pants off anyway for me to check your legs." Blood from Jack's skinned knees was beginning to soak through the scuffed fabric of the pants, now destined for the trash.

Daniel reached down for the crutch and handed it over, noticing how stiffly Jack moved to stand up. Keeping his hand hovering around the other man's waist, just in case, Daniel shadowed him as he moved slowly down the hallway to the bedroom.

"Do you want a hand getting undressed?" he asked as Jack sat down heavily.

"Nah, I can manage."

"OK. I'll just go and fetch the kit again then."

Daniel listened to the quiet moans as Jack struggled out of his pants. By the time he returned, a few seconds later, Jack was just sitting up again after pulling the last pant's leg off, over the cast. But he hadn't had time to attempt the tee-shirt yet, with

the immobiliser in the way. Looking at the bare legs, it was obvious he'd landed heavily on both knees. Both were highly abraded, with grime, grit and smears of blood covering them.

"Let's get your shirt off first, eh?" Daniel encouraged.

Jack just sighed, so Daniel gently removed the shoulder immobiliser, before sliding Jack's tee-shirt over his left arm first, then more carefully over the right one. That left Jack sitting in only his boxers.

"Do you still want a shower? You look done in to tell the truth."

"Nah, maybe later." Then he yawned, loudly, which made Daniel smile, until he remembered why his friend was so tired.

Jack was pale and had closed his eyes. Now that he was safely back home, and the adrenaline rush from being knocked down had faded, his mind wandered back to the pit... again.

Why was it that he could get through any nastiness while on a mission, but the minute he was home safe and sound, with little to do, every tiny detail came back to haunt him? Of course he understood the reason why, psychologically, but that didn't mean he had to be happy about it!

Daniel felt the tee-shirt, still clutched in his hands, and realised it was a touch damp on the front. His car had been covered in morning dew when he'd set off for the mountain and it didn't take a doctorate to figure out Jack must have been out in the damp air. That meant he'd been outside quite a bit longer than Daniel had initially suspected. He wasn't going to call Jack on it at the moment, but just how far had the man wandered in his condition?

"Let's get these knees cleaned up then and maybe you can get some rest. You didn't get any real sleep again last night, did you?"

Jack didn't reply. He didn't even open his eyes to glare at him, which told Daniel something was still seriously up with his friend. Opening another antiseptic wipe, he was soon dealing with the mess Jack had made of his legs.

Jack kept his eyes closed, trying desperately to forget the images that kept coming to mind. As Daniel worked on him, he remembered all the times that he'd had to tend to Charlie, as the adventurous boy, ever like his father, had gotten into one scrape or another. Each boo-boo had needed the tender touch of at least one of his parents. Every touch of Daniel's hands on him seemed to bring the memories into sharper focus. But then the images of Charlie started to morph to the children in the pit, especially the young boy with the bandage on his hand. Who had tended to him? Which parent had held him close, told him things would be all right? Watched as he'd been butchered?

Jack started to feel hemmed in again and tried to stop the shakes that were starting. However, the more he tried to stop them, the more they fought to be set free. His body

felt like it was trying to pull itself apart. He couldn't lose it with Daniel here. His team had been on edge enough since he'd been rescued. And he could only guess at how bad it had been for them, waiting at the SGC before it had been safe to return to the planet for him.

Several wipes later and Daniel was getting fed up with the other man's flinching. The Colonel could get through bullet wounds without blinking an eyelid, yet he flinched over simple grazes.

"Jeesh, will you keep still, Jack? You're worse than a child!"

As soon as the simple rebuke had passed his lips, Daniel realised his mistake. Jack's eyes opened and looked at him for just the barest of moments, but in the time before they locked shut again Daniel saw the all the hurt and horror in them. Both of Jack's hands clenched into tight fists and the man's teeth ground together, as though trying to keep a torrent of words from overflowing.

"God, I'm sorry, Jack. I didn't mean that. Please believe I didn't mean that."

Jack tried to turn away, so that his friend wouldn't see how close he was to breaking down. He hadn't slept for more than a couple of hours at a time over the past few days. He was exhausted. Every time he shut his eyes, the images of the pit came back to him and he remembered the feel of the dead bodies beneath his own, and the awful smell that was around him.

Even worse, he couldn't shake his disgust with himself for hiding among the murdered innocents.

But he couldn't get away from Daniel. The only way was backwards and, to do that, he'd have to raise his legs onto the bed and shuffle away like a crab; something his battered body couldn't do quickly enough to escape his more agile friend. The inner conflict resulted in his rocking back and forth; his body physically unable to move, yet his mind desperate to do so, as Daniel grabbed for his left arm and held it.

Daniel easily interpreted the panicked reactions of his friend. You didn't need to be an anthropologist to do that, and he decided enough was enough. Sitting beside Jack on the bed, he did what he thought he probably should have done days ago and put his arms around the other man, bringing the agitated body closer. Why was Jack always the first to offer help and support to anyone else in need, yet the last to ask for it when he needed it himself? Daniel could only guess at how much his friend, the parent of a dead child, was hurting after what he'd been through. He could imagine a great deal, but could he imagine enough?

He felt Jack stiffen beside him and try to resist the arms that closed around him, but Daniel wouldn't be denied this time. Remembering all the occasions he'd been held by Jack, particularly after he'd almost shot him during his sarcophagus addiction, only fuelled his resolve more. With one hand he pulled Jack's head down to his shoulder, resting it in the curve of his neck. He was just as determined not to let go, as Jack was to get away. It was a sign of just how tired and confused Jack was that Daniel was able to hold him so easily.

“Just let it all go, Jack. It’s eating you up. I’m not leaving you in that place any longer.” Jack bucked against the gentle tone; clearly afraid it would be his undoing. “Let it out. It’s only me here and I’m not going anywhere.”

“No, Daniel. Let me go. You don’t know what you’re asking.”

The voice was a mere whisper, while its owner battled to regain control of his turbulent emotions. Losing control was something he just didn’t do. Ever. The fact that he might was obviously almost more frightening than the cause of the emotions themselves.

Jack continued to struggle against the grip that held him and Daniel took advantage of the fact that not only was Jack injured, but also exhausted.

“No. Not this time. Just for once in your life admit that you’re not super-human and that you might need someone for a change,” he almost pleaded, his own guilt at having left Jack behind in that horror making him desperate to atone. “No one could go through that and not be affected. Not even you, Jack. Probably, maybe especially, not you. You can’t keep all that locked up inside you. Not this time. And I won’t let you.”

Daniel felt the first shakes run through his friend’s body and Jack’s panicked reaction, as he continued to push against him. But he just held him closer, rubbing one hand against Jack’s neck and head while the other caressed circles around his waist.

“Just let it out. Just this once. It’s not wrong. Let go.”

Daniel almost didn’t believe it when he felt the first muffled sobs stifled against his shoulder. Muffled intakes of breath as Jack struggled to remain in control.

“Let it go, Jack. Just let it go. It’s only me.”

Jack tried to pull away once more, a quick jerk to the side that nearly worked. But he was too tired to fight any more and Daniel easily pulled him back in to place against his side.

“It’s only me Jack. There’s nothing to be afraid of. Trust me.”

Daniel thought he should have been happy when he finally felt them, quiet tears dampening his shoulder. But all he felt was sadness. Jack made no noise as he cried, defiantly refusing to let go completely. Daniel had never witnessed Jack cry before and he didn’t realise until then just how much it must have taken to make the hardened soldier break down.

Jack must have seen him in tears many times, especially after Sha’re’s abduction and subsequent death. The older man had always been the most stalwart of supporters, never making Daniel feel that he shouldn’t give in to his emotions, or feel embarrassed about them. Jack had always been there, with a shoulder to cry on, or a quip to bring a smile, or a promise that things would get better.

Now it was Daniel's turn to return the favour and comfort the friend he held as dear as a brother, while he succumbed to the horrors of the last mission. Of all the people that could have been injured there, stranded alone amongst the degrading remains of those children, why did it have to be Jack? Children were his biggest weakness; his greatest enjoyment and his greatest sorrow. He could survive anything but the mistreatment of innocent children.

Daniel sat there with Jack for a long time, listening to the sounds of his friend's grief as he quietly wept against him. Jack's shoulders heaved with the strength of his emotions and the battered body trembled. Jack made little noise, as though trying to hide his weakness. But the tears still soaked through Daniel's tee shirt and he felt the cold as they spread through the material. He continued to hold his friend, gently rocking back and forth, as Jack himself had done a short while earlier when trying to control his despair. Daniel fell into a natural rhythm that he'd seen used by adults when soothing an upset child, and he hoped it was working with Jack. He remembered how Jack had soothed him in the storeroom, once he'd dropped the gun, and he wondered how many times all those children in the pit had been rocked by their parents.

What thoughts had gone through Jack's mind while he'd been trapped there with them all that time? And how many people would have been driven mad by the experience?

Time went by without either of them noticing its passage. Gradually, the tears stopped, but Jack didn't move, his hands limply resting in his lap, while his upper body was still supported by his friend. Daniel wondered if he'd fallen asleep, exhausted by the unexpected ordeal.

"Hey, you OK?" he asked quietly into the nearby ear, not wishing to spoil the moment with unnecessary noise.

Jack sniffed. "I guess."

"Let's get you into bed then. You must be tired after all that."

Daniel pulled back just far enough to see Jack nod slightly, the silver head still bowed down, though whether from weariness, or embarrassment, he couldn't yet tell. Probably both knowing Jack.

"Come on then, but let's get that immobiliser back on you first."

He reached over to grab the aid and helped Jack back into it, trying not to notice the tear-streaked face. However, he handed over a tissue out of the box of Kleenex on the nightstand, turning away from the sight of a nose being roughly blown. Jack was just as entitled to his privacy now as before, and Daniel knew his friend would definitely be getting embarrassed now that the storm had passed. Or at least it was over for the moment. Daniel doubted that sort of horror could be gotten over so quickly.

He helped Jack stand up for the moment it took to pull the sheets down out of the way, and then quickly covered him up once he was laying down.

It was still only mid-day and the sun streamed in through the bedroom window, so Daniel went over and pulled the curtains closed, leaving the room in soothing darkness. Maybe Jack might now be able to get a few hours of proper sleep. He walked away, not intending to say anything more, but Jack's quiet voice stopped him just before the doorway.

"Thanks." It was a typically brief response, but it would have come from the heart.

"You're welcome." Daniel replied, equally as quietly. "Get some sleep, I'll see you later."

Jack didn't bother replying, so Daniel left, pulling the door to behind him, but leaving it slightly ajar. He wanted to be able to hear if Jack needed him later, but hoped that he wouldn't. He was amazed he'd gotten the other man to open up to him at all. He hadn't said anything with words, which was very typical for Jack, but the wet patch on his shoulder spoke volumes for the level of trust between them. Daniel felt immensely grateful that in some small way he'd been able to help his friend out for once, instead of the other way round.

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The afternoon passed peacefully for Daniel while he worked on a few reports, logging in externally to the SGC. Jack hadn't stirred once, even when Daniel had crept down the hallway to check on him. Only now, after Jack had silently submitted to his grief, did Daniel begin to understand just how deeply what had happened had affected the older man. He couldn't imagine how he'd cope himself under the same circumstances. How could anyone get their minds around a situation like that? He was just glad to have been able to help, no matter how little he'd actually done. Perhaps now, Jack could start to sleep a little easier and put back on some of the weight that he'd lost over the past few days. It might not happen overnight, but they'd all be there for him, for as long as it took, and as much as he'd let them.

Jack hadn't been able to eat while trapped on the planet, surviving only on his bottled water. But once they'd got him back, he'd hardly touched any of his food in the infirmary. He'd played one nurse off against another in his bid to fool them about how much he was actually consuming. Fortunately, neither his team, nor Janet had been as easily fooled. Daniel knew Janet had been reluctant to release her patient while he was still so preoccupied and evasive. Eventually, she'd been persuaded by his team's arguments that they had a much better chance of getting Jack on the mend, away from others' prying eyes, and in his own house.

Sam and Teal'c had been reluctant to stay behind at the base and not join Daniel at the Colonel's right away. But they realised that, under the circumstances, he was much more likely to open up with just his best friend there, rather than with many witnesses. Now they sat quietly in Jack's living room, listening to Daniel briefly recount what had happened. Part of him felt guilty for describing something Jack would wish to keep private, and he knew Jack would not be happy if he found out Daniel had told them. But another part of him considered that they were all family. Family cared for each other. It was a concept he'd only recently learned to understand himself, after his

solitary childhood. But thanks to their caring of him, particularly Jack, it was one he'd come to value. Sam and Teal'c would keep the secret too and never let on they knew.

"Perhaps now he'll be able to come to terms with what happened," Sam hoped, deeply concerned at what she'd heard. The Colonel might be her CO and someone she couldn't afford to get too close to, for propriety's sake, but that didn't mean she didn't care about him intensely.

"It is unlikely that one incidence of emotional release will be sufficient for O'Neill," Teal'c replied, "considering the severity of the cause."

"He's right, Sam," Daniel agreed as Sam dipped her head. "Jack's biggest weakness is children. I can't imagine what he went through all that time, not even knowing **if** we were going to be able to get back for him."

"O'Neill also has a propensity for assuming guilt when a mission fails. I expect that he feels we failed the native population by not going to the planet sooner."

"But that's ridiculous," Sam objected, the volume of her voice rising a little before she lowered it again quickly. "There's no guarantee that our arriving any sooner would have made any difference. We could have arrived in the middle of the take-over and been abducted, along with everyone else, or killed outright. Too many Goa'uld know who we are now."

"I'm sure Jack knows that too, in his mind, but his heart's another matter and that's what's hurting right now."

They were silent for a moment, each lost in their own thoughts.

"So what do we do?" Sam finally asked.

"What we always do," Daniel replied. "Just be there for him for as long as he needs us."

Standing up, Daniel stretched and headed down the hallway. The day had been a roller-coaster of emotions for him and he was drained.

"I'm going to start something to eat. Hopefully, he'll be hungry later on, but I know I haven't had anything since breakfast."

"Do you want a hand?" Sam asked, standing up to follow him.

"Only if you promise not to blow anything up," he grinned back at her.

"Honestly. One tiny accident and you guys never let up," she smiled back at him, grateful for the change of subject.

"Ah, but it was spectacular, you have to admit. I've never seen Jack lost for words before. His face as he studied what was left of the microwave was classic. I don't think even he could believe it."

“Hey, just because I’m a woman, doesn’t automatically mean I’m any better in the kitchen than you guys.”

“You have many other talents MajorCarter that more than make up for any lack of culinary abilities,” Teal’c assured her as he followed them down the hallway. “I will watch over O’Neill while you prepare our meal.”

His two team-mates nodded at him as he moved past them. He quietly entered the master bedroom, his arrival so soft as to not disturb the man still asleep in the bed.

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Teal’c sat and watched as his friend and commander slept, the evidence of his recent trials very apparent, even in the dim light of the bedroom. His right arm, still restrained by the immobiliser, was just visible under the covers. His face, already gaunt and troubled, now sported fresh grazes to add to his invalid appearance. Teal’c had no need to Kelno’reem yet, but he allowed his mind to drift as he pondered the character of the human before him.

Teal’c had often wondered what drove this man; this unique individual who had come to mean so much to this outcast Jaffa. He had spent the majority of his ninety odd years following the dictates of a God, who had turned out to be no more than an evil parasite. After growing suspicious of the various Gods many years earlier, Teal’c had yearned for a way to uncover the truth and inform his people. But he had never found a viable way. Even Bra’tac, who had also lost faith many years before him, had encountered no more success. Conditioned by generations of subservience, they both had very little choice but to carry on serving and watching from within the ranks of the Jaffa armies.

Then along came these physically inferior Tau’ri, delicate beings of limited years, still learning the ways of the universe, yet able to upset the order seemingly overnight. These vulnerable, brash humans who managed to turn everything previously assured in life into uncertainties. And their front-line leader in the fight was the complex man before him.

This one Tau’ri, this human, slated for death in a Goa’uld dungeon, whom Teal’c had exchanged mere moments of communication with, had turned his life completely upside down. A few words, a calculating look from those deep eyes and Teal’c had left everything behind. It was the first ripple in a pool that had since spread to many other Jaffa and continued to grow, even now. Did this man even understand what he had started? O’Neill’s name might not be known by every rebel Jaffa fighting for freedom, but dedicated students of history would surely record his name before that of even Teal’c.

O’Neill took in more with those eyes than most people would ever understand. He was far more intelligent and sensitive than he was ever likely to be credited with, even by those who purported to know him best. The deepest part of him, his soul, he kept well buried and possibly no one would ever truly know him to that level. However, from one warrior to another, one brother-in-arms to another, one parent to another,

Teal'c felt he could appreciate what O'Neill must have endured on that planet. It would have torn at the very core of his being, to see those young lives crushed so casually and discarded like so much detritus. Left to the scavengers and carrion feeders.

It was indeed an inhuman act, but then the Goa'uld were not human.

Ultimately, it would be their downfall.

O'Neill stirred in his sleep and Teal'c leaned forward in his seat a little further. His friend was moaning slightly. The words were difficult to follow, but there seemed to be some repetition. Particularly of the words 'men', 'mow' and 'meadow'. Teal'c did not understand the references, but he knew the subconscious had ways of filtering unsavoury experiences during sleep. The words were not necessarily important on their own. It was their association that gave them strength.

O'Neill's breathing suddenly increased in pace, his body jerked and his right arm moved, struggling against the immobiliser. His face reflected the pain the movement had caused and the brown eyes shot open. After a moment of looking around the room, his eyes settled on Teal'c, filling the chair in the corner.

"Teal'c?" he asked, obviously not sure if he was still dreaming.

"It is I, O'Neill."

"Good, cause otherwise there really are monsters lurking in the dark."

The corner of Teal'c's mouth twitched slightly upwards. One of his earliest introductions to O'Neill's humour was when they were all transported to the penal planet, Hadante. His commander had requested him to 'take point and look scary'. O'Neill had an unusual way of complimenting his friends, but it was part of his nature and Teal'c appreciated the strange, but honest approach of saying things as he saw them. Gods and politicians would say one thing while meaning another, but Teal'c valued the more direct approach. It was something a warrior could understand.

"Give us a hand, will ya?" the man in the bed requested, as he struggled to sit upright. O'Neill rarely hid his need for assistance from the Jaffa, as he did from his other team-mates, which Teal'c also took as a compliment. As one battle hardened soldier to another, they had been through too many similar situations to feel the need to hide their understanding of each other's feelings. "I must have stiffened up. I feel about a hundred years old."

Teal'c paused in his efforts to reach for his arm and quirked an eyebrow upwards.

"Indeed you are not," he informed his friend, who smiled as he realised what he'd said. "I know you are but half my age."

"Yeah, well, I still feel like it. Where's Daniel?" he asked as he swung his legs out of bed and stood up, allowing the large hand on his arm to help steady him on his one

good leg. Teal'c patiently waited for him to get his balance, then helped him lean over to collect the ever-present crutch.

"Both he and Major Carter are preparing our evening meal."

"He was going to help me get a shower, but it can wait I suppose." A slight hint of petulance had entered O'Neill's voice, which Teal'c considered a positive sign of the Colonel's recovering spirits.

"I can assist you," he immediately offered.

"You don't mind?" O'Neill looked surprised, then shook his head slightly at his own realisation that, of course, Teal'c wouldn't mind.

"I do not and I think you will feel refreshed afterwards. If you tell me where everything is before we start, then I am sure we can proceed quite efficiently."

"It'll be a bit of a squeeze, both of us in there, big guy."

"We have been in tighter places before, my friend."

"That we have."

They shared a look, then O'Neill moved slowly towards the bathroom, the cool air helping to remove the last vestiges of his dream. Teal'c walked closely behind him, just as Daniel had done earlier; ready to catch him if he fell.

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After some slight discomfort while removing the immobiliser and covering the cast, Teal'c helped Jack into the shower stall and on to the stool. Although both were grown men and should have struggled in the limited space, the shower turned out to be remarkably easy. Teal'c had little difficulty in working with one hand, whilst supporting O'Neill, if he needed it, with the other. With his greater Jaffa strength, it wasn't difficult for him.

Once O'Neill was clean, Teal'c left him sitting under the spray to rinse the soap away while he dried himself off and re-dressed. Then he disappeared for the few moments it took to fetch some clean clothes. He closed the toilet seat and helped O'Neill to sit down while they both worked on drying him off. Neither were embarrassed by the lack of privacy. Then Teal'c helped to dress him in some comfortable sweats once he was dry.

O'Neill moaned at having to have the immobiliser replaced, but the large Jaffa countered that by providing a remarkably gentle and close shave to make his friend feel even more presentable. Then they made a slow progress to the living room, where Jack sat down on the couch with a grateful sigh. He might not object too much to his fellow warrior helping him out, but he was still thankful when it was all finished. The fact was he felt better now than he had in days.

“You’d make someone a great nanny,” Jack quipped as Daniel and Sam appeared from the kitchen, encouraged by the sounds of the two men passing by.

“Sir!”

“Jack, you’re up!”

“Yes. And no, I’m not. I’m down. Sitting down. What are you two up to in there?”

The shower had improved his spirits tenfold and he thought a bit of normal team banter might go down well with the rest of them too. Although he was slow to look Daniel in the eye.

“Chicken stew with tiny dumplings,” Daniel replied, pleased with Jack’s improved demeanour, while fully understanding any shame his friend might be suffering. No matter that it wasn’t deserved.

“Dumplings, huh? Well, I can’t miss those.” It didn’t escape his notice that they were probably trying to feed him something to encourage his appetite, while not making it too hard to digest.

“And since I only helped,” Carter carried on, “It’ll still taste like chicken.”

“It’s only just started, so it won’t be ready for another hour yet. Do you want to watch TV while we’re waiting?”

Daniel was hoping that the smell of dinner cooking would whet Jack’s appetite; and to that end he’d used some of his favourite herbs in the dish. He also hoped that if he served him a smaller portion, that he’d finish it and want more. If they could get Jack to eat that would mean one less thing to worry about.

It would also be one less reason for Janet to be gunning for him once she saw the mess Jack had made of his face, hands and knees. Was Daniel a coward? When it came to the diminutive CMO? You betcha, to paraphrase the Colonel.

They spent the next hour discussing anything but work, watching reality TV and making fun of the various contestants or guests. The team appeared to wind down and relax with each other. But within each of them was the knowledge that the next mission wasn’t far away and could possibly turn nasty at any moment. They seemed to be biding their time, cautiously aware that just one comment could shatter the peace, and bring the horror crashing back down again. But in the meanwhile, they pretended to be average people, with average problems, enjoying an average laugh over an average television set. Well, OK, a Jack O’Neill average sized huge television set.

Partially fulfilling Daniel’s hopes, Jack did finish his smaller portion of food, but he didn’t want any more. While he enjoyed the jokes and the laughs around him, revelled in it in fact, a part of him still couldn’t let go of what he’d survived. Perhaps if he could understand the reason for it all, then he could apportion it somehow, and file it away where all the other bad stuff went. But it was so senseless.

A few hours of undisturbed sleep couldn't make up for several days' lack of, especially with a recuperating body. He felt tired again, incredibly weary, and he stared at the last few spoonfuls of gravy running around the plate beneath him. The sight mesmerised him. The team had stayed in the living room to eat and Sam had balanced his plate on a cushion in his lap. No one had had to cut up the stew sized bites for him and he'd been able to manage on his own.

The gravy continued to run across the plate beneath him, as the conversation around him drifted farther away from his attention. Each slight movement of his legs changed the effect of gravity on the plate, moving its contents. His friends laughed, trying to encourage him back into the conversation. He heard something about the merits of Hollywood films versus Pinewood, but instead he was fixated on the tiny congealing flakes of fat in the cooling gravy.

A fly buzzed around his head somewhere. It reminded him of something.

Something recent.

The bright lights of the living-room greyed down to the darkness of the pit. Brown congealed gravy turned into dark red. Blood dried over the darkening skins of the small bodies around him.

<< *Nine men went to mow, went to mow a meadow.* >>

<< *Nine men, eight men, seven men, six men, five men, four men, three men, two men, one man and his dog, "woof", went to mow a meadow.* >>

Where were all the farmers who'd tended those immaculate fields?

Why were only the adults taken?

Why not the children?

Why not the pregnant woman?

Did the parents see what happened?

Did they fight for their children?

Were they forced to watch, then herded away like cattle? Their hopes ruined as their futures were blasted into oblivion.

A small mottled face stared sightlessly at him, while he hid in the shadows. He'd drifted in and out of consciousness many times now, not knowing how long he'd been down there. The concussion was a bad one, leaving him frequently nauseous. He only had one canteen of water and a couple of energy bars to keep him going. But who could eat or drink down there?

He felt sick.

He **was** sick.

What he'd done made him sick with himself.

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“Jack!” “Sir!” “O’Neill!”

Three voices and a hand on his arm brought him back to the present.

Daniel was sitting beside him, Carter was kneeling on the floor and Teal’c was standing on the other side of Daniel. They were all looking at him, their expressions worried. As he looked away from them, he noticed his plate, now broken on the floor, the gravy spreading across the hardwood, though the cushion was still on his lap.

He didn’t know what to say and neither did they.

Carter was the first to break the silence.

“I’ll clean this up, sir,” which she proceeded to do with her usual efficiency. First she took the plate and cutlery away, then returned with a small bowl of soapy water and a cloth to mop up the gravy. Jack stared at her, watching her movements, as precise as always, while the two men watched him. He tried to ignore their concerned stares. He’d had enough soul-bearing for one day.

Finally, Sam was finished and there was no longer an excuse for distractions.

“Where were you, Jack?” Daniel asked, his hand still resting on Jack’s arm, where it both comforted and annoyed him.

“Where do you think I was?” Jack replied, his voice on the edge of anger, possibly too weary to go any further.

“Can you talk about it?” Sam asked, as she sat down on the floor beside him, tucking her legs neatly beneath her, while avoiding the damp area.

He shook his head, though his eyes reflected the visions behind them.

“It’s going to have to go in a report soon,” she continued softly. So far Fraiser had released him from writing his report until his healing was further along. “It might help to use us to get it all into order. We saw some of what you went through, so it’s not like we don’t know most of what happened.”

“Janet’s going to make you go and see MacKenzie before she’ll sign you back on duty anyway.” Daniel continued quietly. “And we all know how much we like **him**.” In fact, the rest of the team had already been requested to see the dubiously successful psychiatrist.

“He is as welcome as excess gas in an airtight container,” Teal’c voiced above them, causing all three to look upwards, the sombre mood temporarily broken.

Even Jack managed a tiny grin. “That’s a fart in a bottle Teal’c, but I guess you already knew that.”

Teal’c replied with a tiny bow and then lowered himself to sit cross-legged next to Sam, their knees touching, but neither moving away from the other’s personal space. Family didn’t mind about closeness and these three people **were** his family, he reminded himself.

“But he is, none-the-less,” the Jaffa confirmed.

“Yeah. I guess I’m not looking forward to that, but even I can only buck the system so far.”

“Then use us,” Daniel told him, moving his hand off his friend’s arm and behind his back instead, holding him in a very loose hug, despite the audience. To his surprise, Jack didn’t pull away. “None of us could have gone through that unscathed, but this goes deeper, doesn’t it?”

“Most demons lose their power when you bring them in to the light,” Teal’c added. “We are your friends and fellow warriors. We guard each other on the field of battle and this is no less a battle, though the enemy can no longer be seen. Allow us to assist you, as you would surely assist us, O’Neill.”

Jack took a deep breath and looked at the faces around him. They’d all been through so much together over the years, seen each other to hell and back. Repeatedly. They’d survived horrors even Hollywood couldn’t imagine. They were the number one team, surviving against all the odds. The people around him weren’t uninformed civilians. He didn’t need to worry about security, or protect them from the horrors of war. When SG1 went on a mission, they saw the same things he did, heard the same sounds he did and smelled the same smells. There wasn’t anything he wouldn’t do to get them safely back home again and he knew the reverse was also true.

The three faces around Jack watched as the expressions flitted across his features, the careworn face reflecting his inner conflicts. It seemed obvious he was trying to get his thoughts in order and they waited patiently for the outcome. No one could force the Colonel to do anything he didn’t want to. He’d even resign from the service before allowing himself to be coerced, if he didn’t agree with his orders. Finally, he seemed to come to a decision and took a deep steadying breath.

“I don’t really remember how I wound up down there, anyway. I know I was already hurt when I got there. I have vague memories of being chased by Jaffa and leading them away from you guys, but I don’t remember much of that, or why.”

“We got separated from Teal’c and Daniel.” Carter tried to fill in the memory for him that his head injury had erased. “You managed to pin down a group of Jaffa so I could catch up to them, but then you couldn’t reach us. You kept falling further behind, no matter how much cover we gave you. In the end you said to gate home and bring back reinforcements. That’s when you started to lead the rest of them away from us.”

“I wish you wouldn’t do that,” Daniel sighed. “We nearly lost you - again!”

Jack shared a look with Teal’c and understanding passed between the two older men.

“And don’t go looking at Teal’c like that. Sam and I aren’t any more valuable to the SGC than you are!”

Sam smirked at that. She agreed with every word Daniel had just said, but as a subordinate to the Colonel, she wasn’t allowed to voice it.

Jack nudged one of her legs with his right foot.

“Hey, no dissent in the ranks, Major.”

But the lighter mood couldn’t be held for long and Jack started to talk again, his face taking on a blank expression as he recalled what had happened.

“I remember running along the edge of a ridge somewhere, although it’s all pretty vague, then staff-blasts nearby, and I’m falling. A big ‘owie’ sometime around there, probably when I hit the bottom. I’m in trees, lots of them, dodging between them, stumbling, then there’s a clearing...” Jack’s eyes looked down at the cushion he was absentmindedly pulling a thread from, pausing for a moment before carrying on. “The next thing I’m aware of is I’m down some dark hole. My head’s pounding like it’s about to explode and I know I’ve hurt my shoulder and ribs. It’s too dark at first to make out anything, so I try to climb out, only I can’t. The ankle gives way and gravity does a loop-de-loop and I’m back on my ass again.”

He paused again, as his face turned towards the large picture window, but the tranquil garden scene didn’t seem to register in his vacant eyes.

“I can’t see for squat yet, in fact most of my senses seem to have been scrambled, but my hearing’s coming back on-line and I can hear the Jaffa up above still marching around like it’s some damn Fourth of July parade. So I hide as well as I can and wait.”

His voice caught for a moment, but he wouldn’t lose control again.

“The smell’s awful and I wonder if I’ve fallen in the trash heap, or the latrines. Nothing feels right yet. And I’m thinking it would be just my luck to end my days down there, imagining you guys having to come and dig my body out. I’ve turned the sound down on my radio, not too far that I can’t hear if you guys signal, but I get zilch of course. That’s when I take the first of a few unscheduled naps.”

He took in a deep breath and the others saw the strain on his face as he struggled to keep his emotions under control.

“The next time I wake up, my eyes are a little better and I get my first good look at the accommodations.”

For a few moments he didn’t say anything further and they wondered if he’d be able to. His hands shook slightly, but no one mentioned it. Each remembered the sight that

had greeted them when they'd finally found him and they'd all had difficulties writing their reports.

"I keep dreaming about them, hearing them calling me, begging me to help them... I didn't realise when I first woke up, but I must have crawled across them, putting my boots and knees on them. I wasn't with it, ya know... I swear to God, I didn't realise what I was doing."

"We know Jack. You were still concussed when we found you three days later."

"I could see some of their faces, the ones on the top layer that were facing me. A couple of them still had toys with them. Hand crafted, working joints, the lot." His voice went quiet and he returned to picking the thread from the cushion.

"There was a pregnant woman, her belly really full like she didn't have long to go. I kept wondering if we'd been just a few days earlier, maybe I could have saved the baby... at least saved one of them... I still had my knife..." He didn't notice the tears appearing on the faces of his two younger friends, his own eyes weren't focussing on anything any more. "Do you know how difficult it can be to keep a baby quiet?" Teal'c nodded, though whether Jack was remembering his own early fatherhood, or simply considering how difficult it would have been to remain in hiding while looking after a baby wasn't clear.

"I felt their bones beneath me, each time I moved. I guess there must have been a lot of kids in that village. Do you know what it feels like, to feel that, underneath you? It's not like mud, or stones, or anything else. There's a unique feel to meat and bones as they settle. You can tell by the smell too. And the flies. God, there're always flies, aren't there?"

No one answered that question. They didn't think he really expected them too.

"I tried to eat. I had a couple of energy bars, but I couldn't face them. I knew you'd be trying to get back to me, but you took so long and I couldn't keep track of time. I slept a lot, I think. I tried to lean against the side of the pit when I was tired. I couldn't put my face down, not on them." He shook his head violently. "I didn't hear the Jaffa for ages after that, so I tried to call you, but you didn't answer... I was thirsty, but I didn't have much water... You see, I'd thrown up earlier on one of the kids. A little girl with brown hair. At least, I think it was brown. Everything was dirty down there and it was getting difficult to tell. Maybe my eyes were still a little funny... I tried to wash it off her, but I knew you'd be getting back and I couldn't spare too much. It didn't really help much anyway; it just ran off her arm and disappeared to the body beneath her... But I did try... It was just too hard."

Sam finally let the tears fall down her face as the Colonel tilted his head back to look at the ceiling, blinking back moisture in his eyes that he refused to let fall.

Daniel longed to pull Jack towards him and hold him close, as he'd done earlier. But he knew the other man wouldn't allow his grief to surface again with witnesses. "It's OK, Jack," he said instead, being the only form of support he knew would be allowed

this time. However, the Colonel seemed to collect himself a lot more easily than he had previously and he gave Daniel a small smile.

“It’s just that they were only children. What had they ever done to deserve that? They hadn’t lived, or done anything yet.”

“The Goa’uld do not need reasons for what they do,” Teal’c answered. “Perhaps they merely needed adult labourers and did not wish to waste resources on raising children, as yet unproductive.”

“That’s barbarous!” Daniel stated, shocked at such brutality.

“Not to mention short-sighted when planning future resources,” Carter couldn’t help but point out, despite the scathing glance her CO sent her.

“I speak merely of what I have seen with my own eyes.”

“If I could think of just one good thing out of all this, maybe I could come to terms with it, or at least accept it...” Jack moaned, “but there’s nothing.” He flung the cushion away, needing some form of physical relief, but careful to avoid Carter in front of him.

“I can,” she surprised him by saying, and then reaching over to place a hand tentatively on one of his injured knees. “**You**. You survived.”

There was silence for a long moment, but Jack then shook his head. “If we’d gone there just a few days earlier, maybe they could all have survived.”

“No, Jack, there’s no guarantee of that. If we’d gone there any sooner, we’d probably be just as dead as those children.”

“And maybe we could have saved them, got them out of there.”

“I don’t think so,” Carter argued. “Whichever Goa’uld it was must have had quite an army to do what he did so efficiently. We would probably have been far too outnumbered.”

“And do not forget we are well known to most Goa’uld now,” Teal’c pointed out. “They will actively seek us if they think we are nearby. They would consider it a great sport to capture us. You cannot start to question what has already occurred, or your own actions now, O’Neill.”

“Oh, I think I can. It’s not like I’m doing a great job when a whole village’s children are massacred!” O’Neill’s voice got a little louder.

“Sir, that was **not** your fault. And how can you forget all the good you’ve done out there?”

“Well that should certainly fill a postage stamp,” he snarled.

“Jack, you know damn well you’ve accomplished a lot of good.”

“That won’t mean squat to those children out there, or their parents, wherever the hell they are.”

“Maybe not, sir, but what about the ones we **have** saved? Like Cassie and Nyan, the Touched, the Nasyans and even Shyla’s people.” Sam spared a brief look at Daniel at the Princess’s name, but he only smiled back. His team-mates had long ago helped him overcome the guilt of that mission. “Think of where they’d be if it wasn’t for us.”

“OK, I’ll grant you that, but as you said, that was a team effort. You and Daniel are the brains around here; the one’s who figure things out. I’m merely hired muscle to see you get back home safely again. And I didn’t even manage **that** last time.”

“No, Jack, you’re much more than that and you **did** make sure we got home, almost sacrificing yourself in the process. It was **our** choice to return to the planet for you, which is something you’ve taught us, to never leave anyone behind.” Daniel gave Jack’s arm a quick shake, as though trying to jolt his belief into the older man. “You have so much more to give than you realise. Who was it that convinced the Argosians to rebel against Pelops? Or got Tonane’s spirit guides to reveal themselves and return the SGC personnel? Or Malikai to stop the time-machine? Or even get that computer probe to release Sam? Those were purely Jack O’Neill moments. Nobody else’s.”

“Sir, so many people trust **you**, and because of that, so much else has been achieved.” Sam started to list names off on her fingers. “Thor, Garshaw, Travell, Mother Reetou, Selmak. Hell, even my father trusts you, which is saying something.”

“OK, I’m getting the picture **you** guys think I’ve made a difference.” He fidgeted under their accumulated scrutiny. But he couldn’t understand why other people might see him as special, and he certainly wasn’t prepared to forgive himself for the death of those children yet, even if at the back of his mind he realised how illogical carrying that guilt was.

“Jack, everyone on this planet would think you’re the world’s number one hero if they knew what we did here. Who put everything he had on the line, when he broke orders and led a mission to save Earth, after I’d been to that alternate universe? Who risked his life when the open gate got stuck to a black hole? Who helped convince that Orb to allow us to transport it to a new world and not obliterate ours? Who was the only one capable of bringing down the rogue NID operation when it threatened the alliance?” Those were all missions Daniel remembered where Jack had meant the difference between life and death on an apocalyptic scale. But he concentrated to find one pivotal moment where Jack couldn’t deny his importance being acknowledged by someone other than themselves. “Who did Thor pick as Earth’s Ambassador to the Goa’uld?”

Jack looked slightly surprised by Daniel’s fervent listing of some of their successes, and his team felt encouraged.

“We have all survived many missions together, O’Neill, with you as our commander.”

“Yes, sir. Look at us, a real disparate group of people if ever there was one,” she laughed at them. “A scientist, an archaeologist and a Jaffa. It sounds like a poor joke, and I’m sure many people thought it was when we first got together. You’re the one who melded us, made us work together and showed all those others it could be done. We’re **the** team, the only team still together, the one team that shouldn’t have lasted ten minutes. Yet we did.”

Jack sighed. Some of what he heard made sense and his team certainly seemed to believe what they were saying. But he still struggled to reconcile their positive feelings, against the terrible price that had been exacted on the natives. He was a soldier and he’d seen many horrors in his life, but maybe this one was just too terrible for an oft-bruised psyche.

“So where’s this all going, kids? Cause I’m failing to see how this makes it all OK that those children were butchered, while I came home again, safe and sound.”

Not exactly safe and sound, more than one person thought.

“Maybe that’s exactly it, Jack, just as Sam said.”

The Colonel merely looked puzzled, or maybe he was getting too tired to follow their arguments any further.

“Sir, **you** are important. Maybe that **is** the good thing to come out of this. The only thing we can console ourselves with... They died, but you were saved among them.”

“That’s not much comfort, Carter.” He rubbed the bridge of his nose, a sure sign of a headache, before dropping his hand back into his lap again.

“Maybe not, sir, but sometimes that’s all we have. We have to accept it and move on.”

“Those children died, O’Neill, but I know of a group of others who even now play games, where a short time ago they did not.”

“No riddles, Teal’c. Please, I’m too tired for any more.”

“The Orbanians. You enlightened Merrin and, through her, you brought childhood to many others who would otherwise have never experienced its joys.”

Jack raised his left hand again and covered his face. “I don’t know T, I just don’t know anymore.” The last few days had left him emotionally drained, the present one even more than all the others put together. He’d broken down on his friend’s shoulder, something he’d never allowed himself to do before, and received comfort from his team. Altogether it was very uncharacteristic behaviour and he didn’t know how to deal with it. However, his body did and he yawned, loudly.

“Come on, Jack. Time you went back to bed.”

“Not yet. It’s not as though I’m going to sleep anyway.”

“You did earlier after we talked.” Daniel didn’t allude to the fact they’d done more than just talk. He didn’t think Jack would appreciate knowing the rest of the team were aware of his breaking down earlier. Even though no one could blame him, now that they knew more about what had happened. “Maybe this time it’ll be easier too?”

“Talking can sometimes lessen the subconscious desire to sort things out when we’re asleep,” Carter added. “Maybe all this will have helped.”

“You kids spending the night?” he asked, rubbing his eyes, before letting his hand drop again, like he no longer had the strength to hold it up there.

“Yes, if that’s OK, Sir.” “I’m already in Janet’s black book.” “That would be satisfactory.” Came three separate replies, as Daniel helped Jack to his feet.

Sam and Teal’c watched the two men walk slowly down the hallway, before exchanging looks. Maybe they’d helped their friend and maybe not. Jack was usually a very steadfast personality and his reaction to this disaster had shaken them all. They only hoped their support had been enough to shore up his flagging spirit until he could regain his strength, in both mind and body.

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Daniel quietly and gently helped his friend out of his sweats and into a tee-shirt for the night. He then waited patiently until Jack had finished in the bathroom before helping him into the bed.

“Thanks,” Jack said again, simply, in a repeat performance of earlier in the day.

“Will it help?” the younger man asked, as he stopped from leaving, to look back from the doorway.

“I honestly don’t know.” But some of the strain had lifted from the Colonel’s face and a small smile appeared in its place.

Daniel smiled in return, the first genuine smile he’d felt like for many days. “Get some sleep. I’ll see you in the morning.” Daniel switched off the light and quietly left.

Jack watched, as the door was pulled almost shut and smiled at the sight. His friends would be listening out for him, as usual, just as he did for them. Of course, he preferred it the other way around, but being part of a team meant they all looked out for each other, equally.

He didn’t necessarily agree with everything his team had said. No, there wasn’t a guarantee that if they’d gated to the planet any sooner it would have made a difference. But they’d never know, would they?

Yes, he could agree that they’d had some major successes out there, but that didn’t mean their failures hurt any less. And their failures were **his** failures. He was the team leader and if anything went wrong, it was, ultimately, his responsibility. Maybe they couldn’t understand that, but that was why he was in command and they weren’t.

But their concern and care got to him as it always did; burrowing its way slowly through the defences he'd built up over the years. Bulwarks designed to stop people from realising just how much he really felt under the hard-as-nails front he put up.

Tonight's session in team bonding wouldn't be enough to stop all the nightmares that plagued him from the last mission, but it would help to hold them at bay until he could exorcise them in his own time and manner. That might take a long while, but knowing his team was there gave him comfort, even if he couldn't tell them. Somehow, he felt they probably already knew.

But one thing had happened today that had definitely amused him. He realised he'd gone the whole day without taking any of the Doc's pain pills and no one had noticed!

Comforted by the subdued noises from down the hallway, he let his mind wander. The images were still there, but they no longer seemed quite as sharp.

And from somewhere an image formed of Charlie. His son really had enjoyed all those nursery rhymes. And he **did** love to 'woof'.

<< *One man went to mow, went to mow a meadow.* >>

<< *One man and his dog, "woof", went to mow a meadow.* >>

He drifted.

He gradually stopped thinking.

And he slept.

\*\*\* The End \*\*\*