

Title: Dangerous Journey

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Category: Angst, Drama, Hurt/Comfort, slight Action/Adventure.

Pairing: None.

Rating: 13+

Season: Three? Sam's a Major.

Spoilers: Minor one for The Broca Divide

Summary: After the team split up, Jack and Daniel get into trouble.

Warnings: Slight violence, a bit of blood.

Status: Complete February 2002.

Notes: This is only my second attempt at fanfic, so apologies if my research leaves a little to be desired. Feedback would be appreciated. However, no flames please. I can burn my own toast without any help, thank you.

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"And another fine day greets us on PX yadda, yadda, yadda." O'Neill spoke aloud as he and Daniel hacked their way through the lush green foliage, "I never thought I would miss the dry air of desert heat, but it's about time somebody turned the air conditioning on down here."

"3694." Daniel interrupted, then noting the puzzled look off his CO added, "the planets designation."

"Yeah, whatever. Why can't we give 'em names, something normal that you could remember."

Daniel grinned at his companion's sweat soaked back, deciding not to mention that the rest of the team could remember the numbers perfectly well, thank you. He also suspected that Jack did too, but just liked annoying everyone else because he could. Feeling the sweat dripping down his back, he was brought back to the present and the Colonel's comment. He, himself, was used to the desert heat and felt at home in those types of atmospheres, but even he was irritated at the way his clothes defiantly clung to him. They'd only been moving for two hours and already he felt thoroughly drenched. Jack hacked off another branch from their path with his machete and Daniel nonchalantly followed in his wake, happy to pretend to be doing his fair share. Every now and again he would give a half-hearted swipe at the jungle-thick greenery. He was fairly sure that Jack was aware of the ploy, but not concerned enough to comment on it. They'd gated to the planet earlier that morning and found terrain that alternated between wet and fertile on one side of the gate, and dry and arid on

the other. The gate seemed to be situated in a natural border area between the two different land types, leaving them in a quandary as to which direction to explore. Daniel thought back to how Jack had typically solved the problem by flipping a coin.

“You did say this place was uninhabited, didn’t you, Carter?” he’d asked as he’d caught the coin.

“Yes, no signs of humanoid life within the area the UAV covered and no large predatory animals either. Smaller, deer and antelope types, but nothing large enough for us to worry about.” She grinned as he continued to look at her, head cocked to one side, a questioning look on his face. The coin was still covered between his hands. “Yes, sir?”

“Heads, or tails?”

“Uh, pardon?”

“Heads, or tails? Heads we split up, tails we pick one direction and stick together.” he’d explained as if it was the most obvious decision to make.

“Oh!” she loved it when he grinned at her like that, “In that case I’ll have heads.”

“Don’t you like us any more?” he teased as he removed his top hand, to reveal the head of the coin uppermost, “Guess we’re splitting up then. Which do you want, wet or dry?”

“Sounds like a commercial for something…” Daniel muttered to himself, catching Teal’c’s confused gaze.

The Major looked around her, “Think I’ll go dry, for a change.” She’d experienced far too much aggravation with her niece and nephew on a recent visit, where all they’d wanted to do was go swimming, “Definitely dry.”

“OK.” the Colonel replied, deciding to split the scientists between him and Teal’c, an unconscious decision to keep one brawn with each brain. Not that he didn’t appreciate both scientists could take care of themselves, especially Carter. However, even her experience didn’t match his or Teal’c’s and it was his responsibility as CO to take care of them. “You and Teal’c get to build sand castles then, whilst Danny Boy and I play Tarzan. If there’s no sign of trouble we’ll camp out tonight and meet back here tomorrow at sixteen hundred. Radio contact every two hours. Let’s not forget we don’t know who put the gate here, even if there’s no butler at the door.” He knew the Major didn’t really need such obvious reminders, but it was fun to see the mildly annoyed expression cross her face. “Be careful kids.” He looked over at Daniel, “Ready Jai?”

“Jai?!” the archaeologist glowered at him.

“Think positive,” the Colonel smirked at him, “I could have called you Jane.”

“Oh, I give up. Lead on McDuff.”

“That sounds more like my line.” The Colonel retorted as he lead off in the exact opposite direction that Sam and Teal’c had just gone.

“They’re all your lines Jack.”

“Guess I just never learned to share.” he grinned back as Daniel started to follow him towards the edge of the jungle.

Several hours later and Jack was beginning to wish he'd just plumped for them all going the arid way. It's not as if he hadn't spent enough time in hot countries during his Special Forces days, but a guy could have preferences, couldn't he? Jack O'Neill could handle whatever mother nature threw at him, but it didn't mean to say he had to like it. He certainly didn't appreciate his clothes doing a shower curtain impression, clinging to every part of his body. He knew Daniel was behind him without looking. He always seemed to know where the archaeologist was, his senses constantly attuned to the sounds of his friend's movements. He also knew Daniel wasn't doing much in the way of clearing a path through the jungle, but the trees weren't really that dense and he liked a regular work-out. He was an action kinda guy, preferring physical stimulus, whereas Daniel would be working his brain on overtime behind him. That was where they differed. They were the closest of friends and colleagues, yet so diverse in their characters, that they were almost polar on any topic. It didn't matter. Daniel did the thinking bit and he did the action stuff.

Jack didn't like to have to think too hard, although in hostile situations his mind could step up a gear with lightening speed. He'd juggle ordnance and personnel statistics, no longer seeing the scenery, but defence and attack positions. His reactions accelerating to suit the situation. It wasn't as though he was dumb. Anyone in the military knew how hard you had to study to progress to the level of Colonel. He might camouflage his intellect to draw the best out of others, or to melt into the background when it suited him, but thinking for thinking's sake wasn't his thing. He could leave that stuff to Daniel, his own little executive toy. He reminded him of those silver bauble things that were a craze a few years back. Let one go and watch it whiz back and forth until it's energy had all dissipated. He liked that analogy. Just pick up your own Daniel and watch it go waaaaay over there and, if you're really lucky, it'll come back to you in one piece afterwards. Unfortunately, this particular version had a habit of getting into trouble and not coming back, as promised on the manufacturers label. Perhaps someone in production had stuck the wrong batteries in this particular 'how to keep your Colonel occupied' toy.

It was noon when he decided to call a break.

“Come on Danny, time to feed that brain of yours.”

He felt his friend literally walk into his back, before an “Oh, sorry Jack.” was mumbled behind him. Their radio checks with Sam and Teal'c hadn't produced anything of note. She'd taken her ubiquitous samples, for God only knows what, and were now headed over towards some hills to try samples from a different elevation. Jack had noticed the trees thinning out and had picked a clearing with several fallen trunks that they could sit on to eat their rations. Handing over a nutrition bar from his own pack to Daniel, he took a long drink from his canteen as his friend started making notes in his journal.

“Eat, Daniel.” He instructed, getting an irritated scowl in return.

“I'm not a dog, you know.” Daniel grumbled.

“I know, you'd be a hell of a lot easier to train otherwise.” he raised his eyebrows in a challenge.

“Just no throwing sticks, OK?” his younger friend replied, smiling, as he took a bite between writing down his notes on their current mission. Jack wasn’t fond of paperwork and was quite happy to keep it to a single mission report once they’d got back. It might be succinct and suffer a brevity of personal observations, but it would be tactically correct and still complement the styles of the other three members of his team. Daniel might say what colours the flowers were, or how strong their perfumes, but Jack would note thorns, toxins, and the creatures that hid within them.

After a ten minute break he led them off again. They’d been travelling for only an hour more when the jungle finally opened out to a more open vista. Once out of the trees the air dropped a noticeable few degrees and a brief wind blew around them. The Colonel rotated his shoulders, allowing the wind to get at his back and help to dry his sweat covered jacket. He had considered taking it off at one stage, but decided that protection against the jungle environment was more pertinent. Just because the UAV hadn’t spotted any large predators around the gate, didn’t mean squat for what could hide in the trees in a jungle. Bare skin was fair game for any creepy crawlies in there. He’d been in places like this before and even the smallest scratch could prove debilitating if you weren’t cautious. Daniel, he noted, had done the same, either automatically following his CO’s lead, or having learned from past mistakes. Taking note of everything around him, scanning the horizon, he couldn’t see any potential hazards. There was a herd of grazing beasts in the distance, probably those antelope types, he thought, taking out his binoculars to make sure. Satisfied that there wasn’t anything untoward at the moment, he led them away across the open ground. There were still clumps of few trees dotted about, if they needed protection, but a lot more low growing bush and plant life now, covering the ground.

“You bored yet?” he asked Daniel a couple of hours later. They were now walking side by side. There hadn’t been anything of any interest for the archaeologist so far on this trip and Jack was sure it must be driving the man to distraction.

“I suppose so, but I guess it’s also nice to have a safe, dull trip once in a while. I mean, how many times does this happen?” he took off his glasses to clean them yet again and absently placed them back on his face.

“OK, we’ll go another hour or so and then camp for the night. It might be a safe planet, but it’s also been a monumental waste of time as far as the SGC’s concerned.” Reaching for the transmit button on his radio, he called out to his other team mates. “Teal’c, Carter, how’re ya doin’?”

“O’Neill, I was just about to signal you. I consider we have a problem, but MajorCarter disagrees.”

‘Uh, oh.’ Jack thought. “What’s happening guys. Is there a problem, or not?” There was a pause as he heard the Major cursing in the background, “Carter, talk to me.”

“It’s nothing, sir.” Another pause, “I tripped. It’s stupid, really. Just twisted my ankle a little bit.”

Carter swearing was not a ‘little bit’. “Teal’c?” their CO demanded.

“I believe I should assist MajorCarter back to the Stargate. I consider her to be in significant pain.”

“Can you make it back to the gate before nightfall?”

“I believe so, O’Neill. We have stopped many times to collect samples and consequently have not travelled far.”

Teal’c definitely sounded as though he was bored too.

“OK.” The Colonel replied, “Carter, you’re outta here. Teal’c get her back to the SGC.” He could almost see the Jaffa nodding his head in acquiescence as he replied,

“We will depart immediately. Will you and Daniel Jackson also be returning now?”

Jack thought about a second walk through the jungle in one day and looked over towards Daniel for his reaction. They’d probably travelled a lot further than the other half of his team and it would be an arduous journey if they tried to return now. His friend just shrugged a ‘not bothered’ look back at him, but his body language suggested Daniel didn’t relish another jungle trip right now either.

“Nah, we’ll stay here the night. We haven’t seen anything so far, but we might as well give it a few more hours before we blow the planet.” Jack waited, almost on auto-pilot for the Jaffa to query ‘blow the planet’, but there was a lengthy pause instead before the big alien replied,

“As you wish, O’Neill. We will see you back at the SGC tomorrow.”

The Colonel broke the connection and headed off once more, pleased to feel the sweat drying on his back at last.

“We could always play ‘I Spy’.” he offered his younger friend.

“You know Jack, I sometimes worry about you!” Daniel joked back. He’d never known anyone who had lived through so many horrors as Jack had who could still act the child. The soldier could frighten Daniel with the intensities of his nightmares and yet he still had an irreverent and humorous outlook on life.

“I spy with my little eye, something beginning with T.”

“Ohhh, come on Jack, at least try harder than that”

They walked on, still seeing nothing of interest, until Jack had to call a halt. They’d reached the base of a rocky area, which seemed to stretch into more significant mountains in the distance. The Colonel didn’t fancy trying to go over them, and getting stuck part way when twilight hit. They’d given the planet a fair try and it had left them wanting. Might as well call it a do. He stopped for a moment to listen for any sounds around him, satisfied that he couldn’t hear anything to give him cause for concern. They’d seen no signs of anything dangerous all day. The largest creatures still being those antelope types on the far horizon and nothing had spooked them either. Deciding they were as safe here as he could be certain, he removed his back-pack.

“Time to set up camp Danny. We might as well have an early night and head off back first thing in the morning.”

They only pitched the tent from Daniel’s pack, deciding they’d take turns to sleep inside whilst the other was on watch. The Colonel was busy setting up the stove to heat their supper, whilst Daniel wandered over to the rock face. He didn’t go more than a few hundred metres, but the Colonel kept an eye on him nonetheless. Something had obviously got the younger man’s attention though, as he craned his head back and forth, and started to climb upwards. Jack was immediately on alert as the younger man started the climb, but reasoned that the kid must have skinned up a few pyramids in his time, so what was one rock face compared to that?

“Hold on Danny. What’s the rush?” he asked resignedly as he grabbed his back-pack once more and hauled himself over after the errant scientist, easily finding hand and foot holds on the rough surface, beneath his rapidly ascending team-mate.

“I thought I could see a trail going across higher up this face and the shadow of what could be a cave over there.”

The Colonel looked to where Daniel was pointing and, yes, there was a distinct darker shadow with a ledge running beneath it. It was a good twenty five metres higher up and set at such an angle in the rock that it couldn’t be seen from where they’d set up camp.

“And you didn’t decide to fill me in on this **before** you jumped up ahead of me?” he asked with exasperation. His executive toy had just whizzed off again. He had a feeling of déjà vu and struggled to catch up to Daniel who, unfortunately, had a good head start on him.

The climb was relatively easy, although Jack wouldn’t have liked to have done it in the dark and within a few minutes Daniel was standing in front of an opening about two metres high and two across. Jack roughly grabbed him away from the entrance towards the side.

“What! Are you nuts?” he hissed, although he felt like screaming in frustration.

Daniel stared back at him, completely puzzled about Jack’s rough behaviour, until he realised what had got him worried. Standing there with the sun behind him, he would have been a perfect silhouetted target for anyone hidden in the darkness inside the cave.

“Oops, sorry.” he apologised, as the Colonel calmed down, then just as quickly, he slunk around the corner, clinging to the wall as he entered.

“Jeez, Danny.” the Colonel groaned, as he had no option but to hurry once more after his friend. Once inside the cave, he grabbed hold of Daniel’s jacket and held him still until their eyes had adapted to the dark. The entrance didn’t immediately open out into a cave, but instead led off down a wide tunnel into the darkness. Grabbing his torch, the Colonel cradled it against his gun as he led the way cautiously away from the disappearing daylight. They walked past three bends in the tunnel, cautiously stepping past each one, and gasped at the sight that finally met their eyes.

Physically stunned by a sight they’d never expected to see, their brains nevertheless continued to process the scene in front of them. Reminded of their trip to the Land Of Light and the de-evolved people there, they were still shocked to see the very essence of Neanderthal-like people before them. Primitive was the only way to describe the women and children who huddled in the dark, away from them. They hid their eyes from the torch beam, perhaps sensitive to light, or probably just terrified of something they couldn’t understand. They were short and stocky, dressed in fur skins, crudely shaped and fastened to protect their bodies from the elements. Thick hair covered their prominent facial features and they grunted to each other, a primal guttural sound and nothing that Daniel could have interpreted, except as raw fear.

“Where are their men?” the Colonel whispered, his years of experience never letting him down, aware they could be in danger from the unseen.

Daniel shook his head, still awed by the sight in front of him. How had these people come to be here, on a planet with a stargate? Were the two connected? How long had they been here, developing? They couldn’t have placed the gate here, so who did and why? Automatically, the

linguist took a step forward, his empty hands outstretched, as he pondered how to begin to communicate with such an ancient people.

In the limited light that the torch gave out in the pitch black, the Colonel caught sight of three young males, off to their left. They were approaching them stealthily, carrying metre long spears and were taking aim at the intruders. He took in their presence and their intentions instantly, giving him enough time to push Daniel roughly to one side as a youngster let fly with his weapon towards his friend. Unfortunately, his change of position put him in the weapon's line of flight and he felt a fierce burning sensation across his left side, at his waist. He didn't want to hurt these people, but he'd an aversion to being made into a kebab. He fired a round of ammo into the roof, the sound deafening in the enclosed space, and was relieved to hear the low sounds of fright as the natives moved away from them, towards the back of the cave. The Colonel pointed his weapon at the young males and they too fled towards their mothers without protest.

"Danny?" he called and looked beside him to see his friend laying out on the floor, unconscious. 'Damn' he thought. Why'd I push him so hard? No time for recriminations now, though, must get Danny away from here first. He reached down to grab his friend and was jerked back by the pain in his side. 'Oh, shit.' He saw the shaft of the spear still stuck through his waist, although so close to the surface of his side that another couple of centimetres and it could have missed him altogether. The adrenaline was still flowing, he thought absently, as he couldn't feel much pain yet, although he knew he would later. The spear poked through him from front to back, a nice metre long piece of wood, one centimetre in diameter, with a crude flint tip, making him look like a cherry on a stick. Normally, he'd have broken the protruding ends off and tried to keep the object in place until he'd found medical help. However, there was no help to be had here and he had his friend to rescue first.

As the point of the spear was behind him, he knew he couldn't reach to pull the rest of it through in the one jerk that would hopefully leave him still conscious. He realised he had to do something quick, before he either lost courage, or the natives gained theirs. Deciding that the first step would be to remove the unstable rear length off the spear that was jutting out of his front, he released his hold on the M-90, letting it hang loose from his vest straps. He placed his now shaking hands next to each other on the grisly protuberance, slippery from his own blood. He gritted his teeth as the movement sent waves of pain through him and resolutely snapped the spear about a hands width from his skin. Luckily, it was a fragile item, probably only a training aid for the youngster and it broke easily. Next, he lined himself and the remaining stump of the projectile up against the cave wall, subconsciously aware of the seconds passing by and the need to get away to safety quickly. He sucked in a lungful of air and, carefully blanking his mind of what he was about to do, rammed his body against the wall. Through a haze of pain, he was aware of the spear being quickly forced through his side. Then, before he had time to consider the next painful step, with one quick grab of his left hand behind him, he was able to pull the remaining few centimetres through. He could feel the blackness approaching, but refused to acknowledge it as he let the bloodied item drop to the floor. Daniel needed him, the pain could wait, Daniel needed him, the pain would wait, he recited to himself again and again. He couldn't consider treating his wounds until he'd gotten them away from here, so reaching down once more, he grabbed Daniel by the back of his jacket and slowly dragged him back to the cave mouth.

No one made any attempt to follow him and soon he'd reached the welcome light. Standing still for a moment, both to catch his breath and spy out the land, he noticed a series of steps down to the ground that they hadn't seen before. They would take them some way away from the camp, but the Colonel knew he couldn't manage his unconscious friend down the same way they'd climbed up. Silently apologising for the way he was dragging him, the Colonel cradled Daniel's head within his forearms, as his legs and feet bounced behind them. It was an awkward position for him, bent over, shuffling backwards, but he didn't think he was capable of carrying his team mate just yet. He was

still feeling faint and nauseous from removing the weapon. Perhaps later, after some first aid treatment. Anyway, Daniel would probably wake up soon and the younger man could take care of him instead. He was sure the holes in his side would quickly develop an infection without treatment. He dragged his friend as carefully as he could down the rough steps that seemed to have been hacked into the rock face. It was as he was staring down onto Daniel's peaceful looking features, noting the absence of his glasses, when did that happen he wondered, that Jack noticed the blood on his hands. Gently tipping his friend's head to one side he saw the ugly gash on the back of his head, leaking the precious fluid into the jacket collar and onto his hands.

Maybe it was the last of his adrenaline rush, Jack wasn't sure, but it seemed no time before they were back on the ground and he was dragging his friend back towards the camp. The steps had brought them down several hundred metres away from their camp and behind a large scree of boulders. About to drag Daniel into the open, Jack caught the sounds of guttural voices in the distance and peeked around the largest boulder. The native men, also as ancient in their appearance as the people in the cave, were ripping the tent to pieces, trashing their belongings, hunting for anything they could use and not finding anything of interest amongst the strange items. Jack felt weary with relief that they obviously hadn't heard the commotion in the cave. Either the sound had been deadened by the bends in the tunnel, or the men had only just this moment returned and been delayed by finding the camp. However, that did cause him a problem. They now only had the provisions that Jack still had in his back-pack and he still needed to get Daniel safely away from there. Staring down at his own side, he saw the stain of blood seeping across his jacket, the pain intensifying as the adrenaline wore off. As quietly as he could, he started dragging Daniel in the opposite direction of the camp, still hidden from sight by the rock scree, but keeping low down, he edged towards the nearest clump of trees.

Numbly, as he concentrated on remaining on his feet, the Colonel considered the natives and their latest escape. Perhaps they only had poor hearing as, no matter how careful he'd been with Daniel, he must have made some slight noise. They must have had pretty good eyesight though to live so far back in the cave, as he hadn't seen any sign of the torches, or fires, you would normally associate with a simple society. However, their luck continued to hold, as no one followed the injured Colonel as he painfully dragged Daniel back towards the jungle.

He'd risked stopping only once, as he knew he'd not last long without at least some basic first-aid to stop the bleeding for both of them. He made the decision once he was convinced he was a safe distance away from the natives. Shucking off his back-pack, and wincing at the pain the movement caused, he got the medikit out and found the antiseptic and the bandages. Kneeling down, he cleaned and covered the cut on the back of Daniel's head first, trying to be as tender as he could with his shaking fingers on the large lump he found there. "Definitely a concussion there, Danny Boy, probably a grade two or three." he joked, hoping the damage wasn't as bad as a fracture, but Daniel didn't respond in any way.

Deciding he'd better take care of his own injuries next, he slowly removed his jacket. He would have removed the tee-shirt too, but found it was now sticking to the wounds, both front and back, where the blood was drying. Deciding the sweat soaked tee-shirt sticking to him was actually helping the blood to clot around the holes, he decided not to disturb the site. Reaching for his belt knife he roughly slit the tee-shirt from top to bottom on the right side seam. Pulling his right arm and head out of the remaining tatters, he rolled the remainder down towards his waist into a sausage shape and tied it around his waist so it wouldn't pull on any freshly forming scabs. He swallowed some antibiotics, although he knew in the humid atmosphere around him, that these precautions would probably not prevent an infection. Knowing he also needed to replenish lost fluids, he drank

again from his canteen, although they hadn't had time to find any replacement water since setting up camp earlier and it was now half empty. He'd have liked to have given Daniel some too, but he couldn't do anything about that until the archaeologist woke up and that didn't seem like happening any time soon.

Deciding he'd caught his breath a bit, he carefully put his jacket back on and then his back-pack. He weighed up whether to continue dragging Daniel in his hunched up position, which pulled on his side, or risk trying a fireman's lift back to the jungle. He decided it was a toss-up either way, but at least if he was carrying Daniel he could probably walk quicker and, once back in the cover of the trees, rest up overnight. So, cursing at the pain it caused him, he dragged the limp archaeologist over his shoulders and carefully set off in a direct line towards the stargate. He trusted his sense of direction, which rarely let him down.

It might have taken only an hour to cover the distance from the trees earlier, but the return journey took several in the dim light. Jack was weary beyond belief as the sun finally sank. He'd had to cover more distance this time, taking careful note of where he placed his feet. He had no doubt that if he'd fallen he would never have been able to pick Daniel up again. The pain no longer hammered quite as much as earlier, but Jack put that down to exhaustion effecting his senses, rather than the wounds actually hurting less. Thankfully, he didn't appear to be bleeding anymore, but he knew he'd lost more blood than the good Doctor would be pleased with. 'Just too damn stubborn to give in, O'Neill.' he mentally chastised himself.

Once he reached the relative safety of the forest, he settled in the first small clearing he came across and let Daniel slide from his shoulders. He needed to sit down himself for a few minutes before he could concentrate on doing anything else.

Deciding against building a fire, just in case the natives were on the lookout for them, the Colonel got his rain poncho out of his back-pack and made a bivouac by throwing it over a couple of bushes and wedging it into place with some rocks. Definitely not artefacts this time, he thought to himself. Next he removed his jacket and placed it on the ground, dragging Daniel over onto it. He felt far warmer than he thought was likely, as the temperature had dropped slightly, and a small warning bell rang in his mind about fever. However, as there was nothing he could do but take more of the first-aid antibiotic pills, he was grateful that at least that he could cope without a fire. He was worried about whether Daniel was OK without added warmth though and decided to huddle next to him and at least share some body heat. Although he tried to stay awake, he soon succumbed to the need for rest and dozed, his gun by his side.

He woke up twice during the night. Once when Daniel stirred beside him, although the archaeologist didn't fully wake up. He took in his CO's bedraggled state and asked where they were, then quickly slipped away again into non-responsiveness. Once he was woken up by snuffling noises nearby. He wasn't sure what was out there, although it sounded large enough to be a threat if unfriendly, so he fired a couple of shots in its general direction, which seemed to frighten whatever it was away. The Colonel barely stayed awake long enough to hear the sounds dying away before he fell asleep again.

He woke up fully with the dawn. He was hot and found it difficult to concentrate, like a heavy mist was settling over his mind, making it hard to follow thoughts. Grabbing a mouthful of water from the canteen, he took some more antibiotics. He now knew they were insufficient for the local bacteria, but at least they might be helping to keep the symptoms down. His problem for today was knowing that he had to get them both as near to the stargate as possible. Teal'c wouldn't be aware of them being overdue until 1600hrs and then a S&R team would have to walk out to find them. He checked his radio was still working OK. He'd already noticed Daniel's was missing, but couldn't

work out when that had disappeared. Daniel was a lot better at taking care of his equipment these days and he was sure the radio had been there yesterday. However, no use crying over spilt milk as his Grandma would say. One radio was enough for when the rescue party came through.

He knew he couldn't continue to either drag or carry the archaeologist today, so he needed to make some sort of travois instead. There were plenty of young saplings around, with the type of branches he needed for the task. Reaching for his machete, which was still hanging off his pack, he wandered round the nearby trees. It didn't take long to find a few pliable branches just the right size for his design. Hacking them off was painful though and he tried not to twist his waist too much, wincing as his side flared with each movement. He dragged his prizes back towards the makeshift camp and Daniel. He'd had occasions in his past to make these contraptions out of whatever was handy and, reaching over for his poncho, soon had a serviceable platform strung between the long poles. Shorter branches were fastened at ninety degrees between them, using up all his roll of twine, stabilising the structure. He always carried that stuff with him and it had come in useful on several missions. It was an essential survival item in his book. He removed the shoulder straps off his back pack and managed to fasten them to the makeshift stretcher, feeling quite pleased with the results. It was long enough to lift Daniel completely off the ground and, provided he could avoid the worst of the roots and obstacles that would get in the way, it should last at least the day. He dragged Daniel onto it, hopeful as his friend stirred for a moment, but resigned as he soon went back to sleep. As a last minute addition, he took off both their belts and fastened them together around the stretcher, under the arms of his somnolent team-mate, in such a way that it should keep him from sliding down the structure when it was lifted.

Deciding he was too hot to wear his own jacket, despite the risks of insect bites, the Colonel placed it as a pillow under his friend, hoping it would cushion his head against any sharp moves. Next he wedged what remained of his pack between Daniel's arm and body, praying it wouldn't fall off. He placed the radio in his pocket and taking one last mouthful of water, gingerly crawled into the harness and stood up, lifting the travois behind him as he rose. As the travois was quite long, the angle wasn't too steep, so Daniel didn't seem to be in any immediate danger of sliding off behind him, despite the restraining belts, leaving the Colonel grateful for small mercies. Although his side still hurt with each step, this arrangement was a lot better than yesterdays and he slowly started to pick his way through the sparse trees, heading for the thicker jungle and home.

Back at the SGC, it was 1700hrs and there still hadn't been any communication from the overdue half of SG1. General Hammond headed to the control room, not surprised to see their resident alien standing at a perfect parade rest behind the technicians.

"Teal'c. Any word yet?" he asked.

"No General Hammond. They are now one hour overdue. It is not like Colonel O'Neill to be late, especially after Major Carter's injury. He would wish to know that she was healing well. I request your permission to return to the planet."

"I agree it's not like the Colonel, however I don't wish to jump the gun here if he's only been delayed. We've already retrieved the MALP, so how about you going back to check on him by radio first? Find out what's keeping them before we send out the troops."

Teal'c bowed his head, too concerned about his overdue friends to allow his dry humour to query the Earth idioms Hammond had just used. "I will be ready to depart in five minutes." and he swiftly turned to gear himself back up for a return trip through the gate.

Exactly five minutes later he was standing at the foot of the ramp as the wormhole stabilised before him, its beauty for once unnoticed by its lone attendant. Teal'c walked briskly through its horizon, already reaching for his radio as he emerged into the early evening light on the other side.

"Colonel O'Neill?" he queried, his voice slightly more raised than normal.

There was a long pause, causing the Jaffa to worry, before a quiet voice replied.

"Teal'c, am I glad to hear your voice."

"Colonel O'Neill, what is your situation?" He hadn't liked the strain that he could hear in the voice, even over the radio's normal effect on sound waves.

"We've had a bit of a situation here. Can you get a medical team over?"

"I will arrange it immediately. What are your conditions?"

There was another pause and he could hear deep breathing before the Colonel continued, "Daniel's out cold, banged his head."

More silence, as though his CO could only manage a few words each time.

"And yourself?"

"Umm, I can make it towards you. Nothing that can't wait."

Teal'c was familiar with the Colonel's stubborn streak about personal injuries, admired it in fact, as a show of how strong these apparently weaker Tau'ri could be. However, he needed to know the truth if he was to help his friends.

"O'Neill, I need to ensure we have sufficient medical supplies and personnel for your needs. Please can you state your condition?"

"Oh, for Christ's sake." The curse managed to come through loud and clear, causing a slight grin to form on the Jaffa's face, "I've been skewered, front to back on my waist, but the bleeding seems to have stopped."

"Skewered?" Teal'c asked, not understanding what type of injury this was, or how to prepare for it.

"The Doc'll know. How's Carter?"

"She is resting in her quarters."

"Good."

Teal'c thought it unlikely that the Major would remain there, once she realised her team were having difficulties, but Doctor Fraiser had been quite adamant that the scientist was not to be disturbed.

"I will arrange for medical assistance now then O'Neill and contact you once we are ready to proceed."

“Only one more problem then, Teal’c.” His friend sounded exceedingly tired. “We had to detour to avoid the locals... I’m coming in from a slightly different direction... more north, west, west, of yesterday.”

“We will locate you O’Neill. Perhaps you should rest and save your energy.”

“Negative, old buddy. I’d sooner get Daniel nearer if I can... Not sure how serious his head is... I’ll keep going until the light gives. Maybe you can reach us before then.”

“We shall try, O’Neill. I shall contact you again shortly.”

Teal’c broke the connection and immediately turned back to the DHD. Once his GDO signal had been acknowledged he rushed back through the wormhole to arrange the rescue of his friends.

The Colonel put the radio back safely in his pocket and knelt down by Daniel. He’d wormed his way out of the travois as soon as Teal’c had called. It took all his energy to concentrate on putting one step in front of another, without having to concentrate on communicating as well. He’d taken advantage of the distraction to have a short break and took several long, deep breaths. Was the air getting thinner? He remembered to take another couple of pills and swallowed a mouthful of water with them. Daniel was restless and he managed to dribble a few drops into his friend’s mouth, but he didn’t dare give him more until he was awake to swallow properly.

“Well, Danny Boy, the cavalry’s a comin’ and we’d better make tracks if we’re goin’ to meet ‘em part way.”

Slowly, he crawled back into the harness and stood up, his side complaining every inch of the way. He knew he’d not be able to last much longer and he meant to get as far as he could before nightfall. Maybe Teal’c could even catch up with them if he managed to get far enough. Carefully, in the waning light, he looked down to the ground and put one foot in front of the other.

He wasn’t sure how long he’d been walking now, dragging Daniel behind him. He’d zoned out some time ago and, looking up, was surprised to see how thicker the foliage had become. He’d been dragging the travois over roots and other obstructions in the undergrowth, without realising, ignorant of the strain he could be putting on the structure. As though by some cruel joke of fate, just as he was cognisant again of his surroundings, he slipped and fell, yanking his right ankle painfully as his foot caught on something. He managed to stifle a curse as he felt an increased throbbing from his side and turned his head around to check on Daniel. The archaeologist, thankfully, was undisturbed, the travois having remained upright. Slowly, he struggled out of the harness and checked his side, disgusted to feel a fresh dampness on the rolled up tee-shirt. He scooted backwards slightly and checked out his lower leg. His foot had been caught under a loose root and his ankle protested as he removed it. Checking it over, he couldn’t feel any breaks, so it was either a sprain or a strain, but neither of those were good options at the moment. Where the hell were his team? He was tired, bleeding and sore, trying his best to get Daniel back to help and it was all going to hell. What’s more, the sun was starting to sink and he didn’t think anyone would be safe moving through the jungle in the dark.

“Colonel O’Neill?” came the Jaffa’s voice from his pocket.

'Thank you Lord.' he thought as he retrieved the radio, "Teal'c?" even he was surprised by how weak his voice sounded.

"I apologise for the delay, O'Neill, but it took longer than anticipated to arrange the medical party."

"Colonel?" came Janet Fraiser's voice, "What are yours and Daniel's conditions?"

"Another house-call, Doc?" he couldn't resist teasing.

"Yes. I hope your insurance is all paid up. How're you doing?"

"Daniel's hardly stirred since I knocked him out."

"**You** did?" came the puzzled reply.

"Long story, doc. Accident. Someone tried to make him a shish-kabob." He laughed weakly, "Got me instead."

"So Daniel's got a head wound and you've got two puncture wounds. On your waist, Teal'c said. Is that all?"

"I think you could say I've now whacked my ankle too. Not broken though. Is that enough Doc?" he really hoped it was, as he didn't think he could stay awake much longer. He was so desperately tired and the sweat running down his back was a big distraction. He felt like he was burning up and his head hurt. His vision suddenly seemed to be wavering in and out and everything seemed to be slowly fading away.

"It will do for now Colonel. I want you to stay where you are. We're going to send the UAV out to help in the search, but we'll be able to use the radio signal to home in on you too. Stay still for now. I don't want you moving any more. That's an order Colonel."

"Happy to oblige, Captain." he almost whispered. Five minutes ago he was desperate to keep going, but now it was all he could do to remain awake. "I'll signal with the transmit button every few minutes."

"We will be with you shortly, O'Neill." Teal'c's solemn voice avowed and the radio went quiet.

The Colonel looked back at Daniel and considered how to make them more comfortable until help arrived, then he felt the first drops of rain on his head. 'God, it never rains, but it pours.' he thought, too tired to be angry any more. Unfastening Daniel from the travois, he gently pulled him off and hobbled around the trees they were in, trying to stay focussed and keeping any weight off his damaged ankle. Finding a couple of trees that he could wedge the travois between, he'd quickly made them another bivouac. Slowly dragging his friend and the rest of their provisions under the meagre shelter, he was able to keep at least most of the rain off them. Huddling up next to Daniel once more to keep the unconscious man warm, he realised his fever was suddenly down and he felt shivery instead. He ached all over, even his shoulders were now hurting, and before he realised it he'd fallen asleep.

His was disturbed by a strange mechanical sound overhead and he vaguely remembered something about using the UAV to track them down. He was sure the airborne camera would never be able to see them through the jungle canopy though. 'Damn', he thought, I was supposed to be signalling with the radio. How long ago was that? The rain had developed into a heavy storm and the evening light had all but disappeared with the heavy, dark clouds. Reaching weakly into his pocket for his radio, he called out.

"Teal'c?"

"O'Neill? How are you? We have been unable to raise you for some time."

"Guess I zonked out for a bit. Was that the UAV I just heard?"

"Yes, but it has been unable to aid us in ascertaining your location. However, I have noted the time and I will ask the pilot to tell us it's approximate location when you heard it."

"It's got pretty dark out here. Are you guys OK?"

"Yes, but we have had to call a temporary halt to our search during the storm. The lack of light is hindering our progress to a significant degree."

The Colonel wanted to ask something else, but his thoughts scattered from his mind. Lying down once more, he gratefully closed his eyes and shut out the pain that seemed to be radiating from every part of his shivering body. Listening to Teal'c and then the Doctor's frantic calls, letting their familiar voices calm him, he gradually slipped away into pain free unconsciousness.

The rescue team had fanned out to cover as much ground as possible, once they'd reached the approximate location of the UAV at the time the Colonel had said he'd seen it. They'd set off at first light, the storm thankfully over, and they'd made good progress, only taking a couple of hours to reach the vicinity. One of the team let out a yell, as he saw the unnatural structure wedged in the trees and soon Teal'c and Doctor Fraiser were kneeling down by their fallen comrades.

Daniel stirred almost immediately as Janet lifted his eyelids to check his pupil responses and she breathed a sigh of relief, leaving him to one of her Lieutenant's to complete the check up. Next she turned to the Colonel, whom Teal'c was trying unsuccessfully to rouse. He looked a mess. His face was flushed with fever and he moaned when moved. His shoulders were badly lacerated and she looked round for the cause, seeing Teal'c pointing to the straps on the simple travois above them, also soaked with his blood. It was quite a serviceable contraption, but without wearing any protecting fabric, it had done his bare shoulders a lot of damage. She removed both boots and socks, again getting a moaning reply from her patient as he tried vainly to push her aside. Teal'c grasped his arms as gently as possible to restrain him, whilst the doctor checked out the obviously swollen right ankle. She agreed it was probably not broken, but an x-ray would be done back at base. Next she gently removed the blood soaked tee-shirt, studying the pus filled holes that weeped onto her fingers as she prodded them. Red veins of infection traversed his torso and, again, he squirmed and tried to crawl away as she treated the wounds.

As the medics opened out both of their stretchers, two of the nurses loaded a now bandaged Daniel onto one of them. The CMO watched out of the corner of her eyes whilst continuing her treatment of the Colonel. She cleaned his shoulders and covered them with a dressing, indicating for another nurse to strap his ankle. She then cleaned up his side as best as she was able, applying a large

wound dressing to help soak up the leaking fluid. Once he was secured on the stretcher, she attached an IV of fluids to a pole, piggybacked with antibiotics. She also placed the Colonel on oxygen, to help his depleted system. Both men were dehydrated, although Daniel to a lesser degree, however the Lieutenant still attached a similar IV to his stretcher, preferring to err on the side of caution. Getting a quick report off her, Janet was pleased to note that Daniel seemed to be getting more cognisant, so he seemed to be on the mend, although he would still have x-rays and an MRI once they got back to the base. It never paid to take risks with this particular team. Having resorted to sedating the restless Colonel for the journey, the Doctor gave the word and they set off back to the gate. It would be an awkward journey carrying the two stretchers over jungle terrain, but they had several spare people to clear the way and they could take shifts with the stretchers. Teal'c chose to walk between both his team mates, in case either woke up. Neither did during the three hour walk back and Teal'c dialled the DHD himself upon reaching the stargate, concern etched in his dark face.

Hammond breathed a sigh of relief as the rescue team exited the wormhole. His relief was hampered however as he caught sight of the two stretchers being carried through by the medics and the professional looks sported by both the Doctor and the Jaffa. He hurried down to meet them in the corridor, as they rushed past him towards the infirmary. Not wishing to delay the doctor, the General grabbed hold of Teal'c's arm and gently stopped him.

“How are they, son?”

The huge Jaffa looked down on him, “I do not know General Hammond. Daniel Jackson has a bad head wound and has not awakened properly since we found them. The Colonel has serious wounds to his side and lesser ones to his shoulders from dragging Daniel Jackson. He has also damaged his ankle. He slipped into unconsciousness before we could find them and has not awakened since, although he tried to move from Doctor Fraiser when she was tending him. I believe the doctor thinks he may have got an infection from his wounds. If I may be excused General?”

“Yes, of course.” Hammond replied, knowing the Jaffa would want to catch up with his teammates. It was also a fair bet that the Major would be aware of her team's circumstances by now. The General knew that orders had been given for the Major not to be disturbed, but SG1 had a unique bond and he felt sure the Major would have found out somehow by now.

By the time Teal'c reached the infirmary, Major Carter was already there, perched on a pair of crutches, detesting the fact that they hampered her need to move and, boy, did she need to move. This was all because of her! If she hadn't put her foot in that goddamned rabbit hole, or whatever it was, then the Colonel and Daniel wouldn't have been left alone on that planet to whomever had done this to them. It was all so stupid, stupid, stupid. Teal'c watched her agitated movements, seeing the guilt written there.

“Major Carter, am I right in thinking that you blame yourself for the Colonel's and Daniel Jackson's injuries?”

She stopped her awkward pacing and hobbled back to lean on the wall beside him.

“I guess so.”

“And yet, you know you are in error for doing so.” It was not a question, but a statement of fact.

“Yes, but it doesn’t make me feel any better, knowing it could all have come out so different if this hadn’t happened.” She stared down at her bandaged right foot, but in her mind she was seeing the two stretchers being rushed past with her team-mates onboard. Both men were unconscious and the quick, serious look Janet had given her spoke volumes about the seriousness of something, but she hadn’t wanted to delay the doctor to ask.

“So what happened, Teal’c? I only found out when I couldn’t find anyone for supper last night.”

Teal’c could see that the Major hadn’t had a good night’s sleep. She’d probably been awake and worried all night. He told her everything he knew, whilst they waited for the Doctor to emerge from the emergency treatment room. General Hammond turned up after an hour, joining them in their vigil and Teal’c repeated his tale once more. The General would need comprehensive reports later on, but this would satisfy his needs for now.

It was a good three hours before the Doctor emerged to greet them. Although she’d removed her surgical scrubs, her face was strained and it was obvious how tired she was. First she’d endured the trek across the planet, through jungle conditions, and now she’d had to spend several hours patching up her friends.

“Daniel’s got a grade three concussion and is being taken back to the ward now. His x-ray and scans have all come back clear though. He’s already showing signs of being cognisant, so I’m hoping a few days bed rest will be all he’ll need..” She paused for a moment before carrying on, “The Colonel, however, is in a far more serious condition. He took a spear of some sort through his side, there were small wooden splinters still embedded in both entry and exit wounds. There’s minor internal damage which we’ve repaired in surgery and all things considered he was pretty lucky there. He came within a whisker of having his Colon punctured. However, he’s running a very high fever and I’m not sure our antibiotics are strong enough to fight the infection. He’s got lacerations across his shoulders from dragging the travois that he made for Daniel and he’s sprained his ankle somewhere along the way too. He should recover from his injuries, but we need to get his fever down as that’s far more of a threat right now. He’s being taken to the ICU as we speak and he’ll need round the clock nursing until he starts to rally. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’ve got some reports to write up. I’ll let you know as soon as I know anything.” She wiped a tired hand across her forehead and turned around, heading for her office.

“Can we see them?” Sam asked.

Janet shrugged. She’d long ago given up on trying to keep any kind of visiting hours in this infirmary. The people who worked for the SGC lived dangerous lives and often it seemed the only thing that kept them going was the strong bonds the individual teams formed, the strongest one being between SG1. She looked at the scientist, resting on the crutches, with a frown on her face.

“They won’t know you’re there yet, particularly the Colonel, but I guess you can visit. However, if I see you putting any weight on that foot, Major, you’ll be grounded even longer. Do I make myself clear?” Although weariness could be heard in her voice, there was also a touch of humour and Sam nodded in acquiescence.

The General took his leave of them, satisfied that he’d be notified of any change in his officers’ conditions and left the remaining two members of SG1 to check up on their team-mates. They headed first over to the ward, where they found Daniel already settled into one of the beds, a large wound dressing over the back of his head. A nurse hovered in the background, busy with her normal routine, but also nearby in case her patient needed anything. Daniel, however, was still out of it. Janet hadn’t mentioned whether she’d used a general, or a local anaesthetic for putting what

must have been stitches in the back of his head, but it didn't look as though their friend would be rejoining them for some time. Teal'c noticed that the IV had been removed, which he considered good news.

"Let's go and see the Colonel." Sam asked and Teal'c led her away towards the ICU at the further end of the medical facility. It was not hard to track down their friend as there were only a couple of ICU beds in the facility. Janet didn't like to send her patients to the USAF hospital, unless she had no choice, and in that situation their own nursing staff went with the patient. Even in that secure facility, knowledge of the stargate was restricted. It could raise security issues if a patient talked in his sleep, or rambled under the influence of drugs. Even if most staff ignored the mutterings as the inconsequential actions of a sick person, it was still a risk someone would ask too many questions. Here, it didn't matter who said what, or when. However, so far there wasn't the need for a larger medical facility and the CMO made do with what she had.

The Colonel was generally pale beneath the white sheets, although his cheeks were flushed and clammy looking. The edges of dressings could be seen around his shoulders and monitor wires disappeared through his hospital gown above his chest and a pulse ox monitor was attached to one finger. IV tubes of fluids and antibiotics ran into his arms; his team recognised some of the equipment from their frequent trips to the infirmary, but they couldn't tell whether he might also be on pain-killers and sedatives too. They saw signs of another tube running to more discrete areas beneath the sheets, but it was subtly camouflaged by banks of equipment running down one side of the bed. The beeps of the various monitors disturbed the silence, the only other noise being the restless movements of the man in the bed. A nurse worked in the background, turning to give them a brief smile as they settled by his side. The nurses were used to having visitors there at all hours, they quickly got used to working around any team members hovering there. Sam and Teal'c listened to the machines watching over their friend, wondering how long it would be before the Colonel woke up.

Wishing to split themselves between their two team-mates, Teal'c made a suggestion.

"I will go and wait with Daniel Jackson, if you desire to stay here with Colonel O'Neill."

"Yes, Teal'c. Daniel will be worried what's happening if he wakes up alone." Sam's face had hardly left her CO's since they arrived and, not even noticing Teal'c's slight bow, was soon left to her vigil alone.

Teal'c had gone into a light state of Kel'no'reem when he'd settled by Daniel's bed, but was instantly awake when he noticed the first stirrings of his friend.

"J'ck?" the quiet voice asked as his eyelids started to flutter.

"Daniel Jackson. It is Teal'c. I am glad to see you awake again."

Daniel turned towards the deep voice and his eyes slowly focussed on his friend. Moving his head slowly around, he took in his surroundings and relaxed, happy to be back home in clean, dry sheets. He took a small sip from the straw that Teal'c placed by his face and then noticed the Jaffa was the only team-mate with him.

"Where's Jack and Sam?" he asked, dreading the answer. Was Sam more seriously hurt than they'd thought? Was Jack hurt and was Sam with him? Why was he in the infirmary, he belatedly thought?

Hazy images of cowering women came back and the vague impression of Jack hovering over him at some point. The rest was a complete blank.

“Major Carter is watching over Colonel O’Neill, who is in your Intensive Care Unit.”

“What?” Daniel almost shouted, sitting up in bed and instantly regretting the agony it caused to his head and the feeling of nausea that hovered nearby. His hands grasped at the back of his head, coming into contact with the large wadding there and only semi-aware of the nurse gently forcing him to lay back down. The nurse pressed the call button, which would show up on Doctor Fraiser’s monitoring station. She knew how attached to this particular team the CMO was and guessed she’d want to explain the situation to the patient herself. The Doctor was there in an instant, taking over from the Lieutenant and putting her hands on Daniel’s face, forcing him to look at her.

“Easy, Daniel. Do you know where you are?”

“Of course. How’s Jack?” he insisted, showing clearly that his mental processes were in top gear.

“I won’t lie to you. He’s very sick at the moment, running a fever from infected wounds, but we’re hoping the antibiotics we’re giving him will bring his temperature down.”

“I want to see him.” he demanded, trying to struggle back into a sitting position. Even feeling as weak as he did, he wanted to go and check on his friend.

“You can’t at the moment Daniel, you’ve got your own injury to consider. You’ve had a very serious concussion yourself. I promise I’ll let you know how things are progressing.”

Daniel stopped struggling beneath her, tiredness taking hold of him once more.

“If you lie here quietly for a couple of days we’ll see if you can get up then. However, if you get up too soon you could put your recovery back and then it will take even longer to go see the Colonel.”

“You promise you’ll let me know?” He looked over at Teal’c too as he said this.

“Yes.”

“You have my word.” Teal’c also avowed. “Can you tell us what transpired on the planet?”

“Don’t remember much, actually.” A tired voice replied as Daniel shut his eyes again. “We found a cave and there were primitive people hiding inside. I remember Jack pushing me to one side and then it’s all a blank.” His voice drifted off and in his dreams he imagined being dragged by Jack, a hurting Jack, mumbling to himself as he dragged his team-mate through the trees.

The nurse pressed the call button as the Colonel started writhing in the bed once more. Teal’c helped to hold his confused CO down as his friend struggled in his grip, the sick man too weak to offer more than token resistance. He listened to the words his friend was speaking, knowing they were not directed to him, but to some other part of his delirious world.

“Bastards, why won’t you let us help him?... Get your kicks outta this do ya?... Watching us watching him die?... You’re not men, you’re animals...”

The Colonel had see-sawed between raging fevers and shivering with cold for the past two days. The rigors seemed to be draining any energy reserves he had left and the staff were getting more concerned as time passed. Doctor Fraiser had warned about the possibility of convulsions and coma if his situation didn't improve soon.

"Nat...Nathaniel, come on kid, wake up... Bastards, what'ya hit him so hard for?"

The Jaffa continued to hold his friend on the bed as the Doctor arrived and quickly adjusted the sedative through his IV.

"He's spiked again, I see." she said, the tone harsh, but her manner concerned as her patient slowly relaxed once more. The nurse moved past them and slowly began the process of sponging the Colonel with tepid water, a routine they had become familiar with over the past 48 hours. Teal'c and Sam had helped with this chore, needing to do something to help their friend and not being able to do anything else as useful. They sponged him when his fever raged, arranged for blankets when he shivered, held his hand if he seemed at all lucid, which was rare, and listened to his ramblings when he was delirious. Most of his talk seemed to be directed towards captors, pleading with them to let him help someone.

They knew so little about this man's past and they'd no idea what incident might be bothering him so much. They'd seen him having nightmares many times in the past and it was something they rarely discussed. The Colonel was adamant that all that bad stuff was in the past, covering his reluctance to talk about it with 'matters of confidentiality'. Although they knew he wasn't at liberty to give specifics about past missions, they also took his reticence as the avoidance tactics it was. Only when he was unaware of his actions did they learn much about his past and how ugly and painful it seemed to have been. However, this particular nightmare seemed to be a new one. Could something to do with their last mission have sparked off a particularly bad memory?

The Colonel turned his head towards the cooling cloth, as the nurse worked on him, and Sam wordlessly took the item off her. Sharing a silent smile together, the nurse left the two team members to look after their CO and found other background work to occupy herself with.

Sam stared down at her CO's handsome face, now flushed with fever, his forehead creased as though troubling over something. Slowly his eyelids fluttered open and his deep brown eyes looked up at her. Usually they were sharp and piercing, their gaze missing nothing, despite their owner's typically nonchalant appearance. Now they were glazed over and unsure.

"Carter?" a quiet voice asked and she smiled down at him. It was the first coherent word they'd heard from him since his return.

"Hi, Sir. How're feeling?" she asked, aware from the periphery of her vision that the nurse had quickly left the room.

"How's Daniel?" his gaze darted about, settling briefly on Teal'c, and then focussing on her again.

"He's going to be fine. Don't worry. It's you we've got to get well now."

"No, you don't understand." he was starting to get agitated, "They hurt him, wouldn't let me help. Nat's only a kid, doesn't know the score. Got to get Nathaniel out before they kill him."

Sam glanced over at Teal'c. What was this all about? Teal'c shook his head at her.

“Who’s Nathaniel, sir? Daniel was hurt on that planet we gated to. Can’t you remember?”

Doctor Fraiser arrived at that moment and gently moved Sam out of the way so that she could reach the Colonel, quickly updating herself on his condition via the monitors above him.

“Colonel? Can you hear me?”

The Colonel ignored her, struggling to sit up in her arms as she manually took his pulse, looking past her to his 2IC.

“I tried to save Daniel. Couldn’t save Nat.” Now he looked very confused and worried, “They hit him... head wound... Stupid kid was out cold... Tell me they didn’t let him die. I didn’t watch Daniel die, did I?”

Suddenly he went limp in the Doctor’s arms and she gently laid him back down on the pillows, straightening the sheet up over him.

“Janet, how much more of this can he take?” Sam asked her, as their friend lay motionless once more.

“Well, at least he knew who we were this time, even if he is still confused. At least it’s the longest spell he’s been awake for so far.”

“Does that mean this is good news, Doctor Fraiser?”

“Well, it’s not bad, Teal’c.” she looked down at her patient, not resisting the urge to run her hands through his hair. ‘Get well soon, Jack. We miss you.’ she wished him quietly and silently updated his chart.

It was the following morning that Doctor Fraiser decided to release their other patient. She studied the sullen man with only mild amusement. If it wasn’t for the still serious condition of their CO, watching Daniel would have made her laugh. Sam, still leaning on crutches, waited for her to give the OK for Daniel to get up. His tests were OK and the stitches in the back of his head were healing fine, he just had to take it easy and not rush things. Not that they’d be rushing anywhere soon with the Colonel still in the ICU though.

“OK, but you’ve got to take it easy and take the painkillers I’ve given you. If you experience any odd symptoms come back to me straight away. I’ll see you again tomorrow morning anyway.”

“Good.” Was all he said as he swung his legs over the edge of the bed. “Uhh, clothes, anyone?” he asked as he stared at his bare legs under the hospital gown. In normal circumstances Jack would have gone back to his apartment by now to get him some jogging bottoms to wear, instead of the embarrassing gowns, a favour he’d return when the situation warranted it. The nurses didn’t seem to mind, as long as it didn’t interfere with any injuries. Daniel wondered if the female staff (who were in the majority here) preferred seeing their bare chests, rather than their bare backsides. It was obvious to Daniel that the Colonel had a big following here, despite his notoriously bad temper when hospitalised, although his elder friend seemed completely oblivious to the effect he had. Janet handed over some fatigues and pulled the curtain around the bed to afford him some privacy as he dressed.

A couple of minutes later he emerged and headed off for the ICU, belatedly waiting for Sam to catch up with her crutches. When they arrived at the Colonel's bedside, Teal'c moved out of the way for him and moved a chair over for the Major to sit down in.

"The Colonel has been suffering from the feverish dreams that seem to plague him when he is unwell." Teal'c informed them. Janet had only just confirmed that the Colonel's temperature was finally starting to come down, although it was still too high for him to be released from the ICU. At the moment he was asleep, although he had woken up for a brief instance that morning whilst the General was there. He'd still been confused and the base's CO had gently told his 2IC to go back to sleep, an order that had been instantly carried out, much to Hammond's amusement.

Janet appeared beside them and went through her routine checks on her patient.

"It was a particularly strong infection and I've had to use some really strong antibiotics to even begin to fight it."

She was explaining this more for Daniel's benefit now, as Sam and Teal'c had rarely left the Colonel's side for the last three days, only moving for any significant time to visit Daniel. Although the Colonel was still and pale under the sheets, at least he seemed calmer now, the delirium abating.

Daniel reached over for one of the still hands, lying outside the sheets and took it in his own hands.

"Oh, Jack. What have you done to yourself? Saving my skin again were you?"

As if in response, Jack turned his head towards the voice and slowly opened his eyes.

"Dan'l?"

"Yeah, Jack. I'm here. You're going to get better now, you hear me?"

Jack, however, was not completely cognisant yet and his eyes fluttered shut once more.

"Gotta get outta here, Danny. Didn't mean ... push so hard... Bastards, leave him alone. He's only a kid... Wake up Danny, Dan..." his voice faded away, but they could all hear the remorse in his tone.

"I think the memories seem to be separating now." The Doctor noticed and seeing the confused look on the archaeologist tried to explain. "The Colonel's been delirious at times and seems to be confusing you getting hurt with something from his past. A similar scenario from what he's been saying. Someone under his command being hurt whilst captured and being forced to watch this other person die."

Daniel nodded.

"I think he must have pushed me away from a spear and got hit instead." he thought aloud. "Honestly, trust Jack to put himself in the line of fire and still feel guilty about it afterwards." If the situation wasn't so serious, he'd have laughed. He turned towards his two tired looking team-mates. Even Teal'c looked a shade paler than normal. "Why don't you two take a breather? I've been resting in bed for days and don't mind taking a spell on my own for a bit. You two must be worn out."

“That’s a good idea.” Janet concurred, “Go and get a shower and a decent meal inside of you for a change. The Colonel’s not going anywhere for the moment.” She studied their reluctant faces, “I can make it an order if you want.”

Sam nodded in resignation and reached for her crutches. They were annoying the heck out of her, but she knew they were essential to her recovery and she planned to be able bodied by the time the Colonel was released into their care. She also had no doubt about that happening at some point. SG1 cared for their own when either one of them was down, even if it was the Colonel, who had an aversion to being taken too much care of. The SG teams ran better home care systems than any agency could ever hope to compare to. Hobbling out after Teal’c, she took one backwards glance and saw Daniel reaching over to their CO again, talking to him in that gentle voice he reserved for his best friend.

It was the following day and they were all there when Jack opened his eyes once again. This time he actually looked around him and settled, first on Daniel’s hand still around his own, and then on the expectant faces around him. If anyone other than his team had been around, he would probably have pulled away from the gesture, however, they were on their own and he didn’t. More than one person wondered if he needed to feel the very real flesh to separate the reality from the nightmares.

“Hey Jack. Glad to see you’ve decided to join us at last.” Daniel greeted him.

Sam reached over with a beaker of water and he took a long sip from the straw before he turned away from it and she replaced it back on the cabinet.

“How’re you feeling sir?” she asked.

“How long’ve I been here?” he asked groggily, realising he wasn’t in the general ward.

“You’ve been here four days, Colonel.” Doctor Fraiser replied from the door. She walked over to him and past his team-mates, who moved obligingly out of her way. “How are you feeling?”

He blinked over at his team, noting the worried, sleepless expressions on their faces, “If I look like that lot, then does crap mean anything?” Although the voice was lacking in anything like it’s usual timbre, his humour shone through like a beacon after several days darkness and everyone chuckled.

“You’ve had an infection from the wounds in your side, but that seems to be finally clearing up now. You’ve got some impressive lacerations in your shoulders through pulling that travois and you even managed to sprain an ankle. Not bad for one day on your own, Colonel.”

“We aim to please.” Was his quiet reply, although he was smiling as he saw his team were all OK. Well, maybe Carter was leaning on crutches and Daniel had a ton of cotton wool behind his head, but that was minor compared with what they could do when they really tried!

“I want you to go back to sleep Colonel. You’ve got a lot of resting to do for your body to regain it’s strength and those wounds in your side to heal. Quite nasty those. A wooden spear, I’d guess.” He nodded at her assumption, “So get some rest, let your team get some rest and I’ll see about moving you back to the ward tomorrow.”

He took one more look at his team, before closing his eyes and drifting off into sleep again, no longer plagued by dreams of losing Daniel, or anyone else. Janet shooed the rest of his team out of the unit with a firm command.

“Now go and rest, the lot of you. Once I’ve got the Colonel settled in the main ward it’s going to take all of our combined resilience to keep him amused there until I can release him. Go home and I’ll see you all tomorrow.”

Obediently they left together, leaving the Doctor to write up her patient’s latest medical notes and then update the General. He’d pestered her on a daily basis for an update and had called into the ICU on several occasions, although he always left quickly whilst other team members were there, not wishing to intrude into their own private world. Janet turned the lights down slightly over the Colonel’s bed and, after tucking the sheets in around his quiet form, left him to his rest.

The following day when the rest of his team came to visit, they found Jack had already been moved into the main ward and already had a visitor. General Hammond was busy getting a report off the now more aware Colonel, who was propped up by a mass of pillows. He still had an IV in his arm, although all the other monitoring equipment had been removed, however he still looked pale to the practised eye. As soon as the base’s CO saw them, he patted the Colonel on the arm, and with a brief “Take care son. I’ll see you later.” He left them alone.

Daniel wandered over to the bed first and settled himself down on the same plastic chair that always seemed to be there.

“How’re you feeling now, Jack?”

“Glad to be back in the warm and dry. How about you?” He included all of them in his gaze.

“Fine. Janet’s going to see me later on today and then I should be able to get rid of this thing.” Daniel said, feeling the dressing behind his head.

“Same here, sir,” Sam answered, glad to be finally rid of the crutches, although she now had a walking cane, “although the ankle’s still a little bit tender. If I’m careful with it I should be back on duty in a few days.”

The Colonel breathed a sigh of relief. His team were all OK, that’s all that mattered. Daniel leaned over and rested his elbows on the bed, eager to talk to Jack, now that he was awake.

“So tell me,” he started, “what exactly happened back there? I don’t remember anything, maybe hazy images, after we entered that cave and saw those people hiding there.”

The Major moved over to sit on the end of the bed and Teal’c pulled over another chair, lowering himself to sit elegantly upright in it.

“Not a lot, actually.” The Colonel shrugged. His voice was still quiet, although a lot firmer than it had been yesterday. “There were some boys, probably the equivalent of their teenagers, over to one side, hidden in the shadows. I didn’t see them at first, they were so quiet. I guess they considered us a threat, or maybe they just wanted to prove themselves to the rest of the group. Who knows? Anyway, one of them lobbed a spear thingy at you. I managed to push you out of the way, which

was when you hit your head... uhhh, sorry about that by the way.” He looked down, rather sheepishly at the bed, but Daniel was quick to reassure him,

“Hey, don’t worry about it. I’m grateful you saved me from being speared.”

“That was the general idea, but I didn’t manage quite as well as I’d intended.” He still felt guilty about having caused the younger man a nasty injury, no matter if Daniel didn’t seem upset about it.

“So what happened next, O’Neill?” Teal’c asked, as the pause seemed to stretch.

“Well, I managed to frighten them off with an ammo spray over their heads and got Danny out of there.”

“And your side?” Sam queried. Trust the Colonel to leave that part out.

“It wasn’t much, so I pushed it out. I’ve had worse. Anyway, by the time I got Danny-boy here back down to ground level, the men of the tribe were busy ransacking the camp and I’d no alternative but to head back to the trees and hope they didn’t follow us. I hope you didn’t have anything you needed in your pack Danny, but I couldn’t risk going back for it.”

“Nothing that I would have wanted you to risk your neck over, no.”

“So that is when you made the carrying arrangement for DanielJackson?” Teal’c asked.

“I heard about that.” Sam said, “It sounded like a good sturdy structure, given what you had available.”

“Where there’s a will, there’s a way, as they say. Wasn’t too difficult.”

Daniel was looking back and forth at this. He’d not really given it much thought as to how Jack had carried him back, assuming that the rescue party must have carried him most of the way. Sam saw his questioning gaze and, realising that the Colonel wasn’t likely to elaborate on what he’d done, explained it to him.

“The Colonel managed to make a travois out of some branches and his rain poncho. He used the straps off his back pack for a shoulder harness and wrapped you up in both your jackets.” Daniel nodded at this, turning to look at the dressings over his friend’s shoulders, barely visible under the gown, now coming to understand where those injuries had come from. “I’ve had to make one myself in the past. They’re not the easiest of things to make sufficiently strong to last.”

“And you managed to do all this after being injured?” Daniel was again amazed by his friend’s strength and determination. Jack just shrugged, saying nothing. “How long did you drag me for?”

“Not long, I guess.”

“You were, in fact, only four hours from the gate when we found you, O’Neill.” Teal’c supplied a more accurate time frame.

The Colonel scowled over at the big Jaffa. One day he was going to have to explain the concept of modesty and how it related to Jack O’Neill. Teal’c merely stared him down. Deciding to change the subject, he looked over at his Major.

“So, anyway. Did you manage to find anything of any interest over there? I’d hate for the trip to have been a complete waste of time.”

“Sorry, Sir, but nothing came back in the samples. Anyway, we probably wouldn’t want another run-in with the locals there. They don’t sound very amenable to negotiation. Have you thought at all about them? Where they came from? Why we hadn’t seen any evidence of them before?”

“They were probably nomadic.” Daniel supplied.

“More than likely.” The Colonel agreed and they all turned to him. It wasn’t like him to have any great anthropological views and he stiffened under their glare. “I mean, there wasn’t any evidence of long-term habitation around those caves, no signs of agriculture. They probably followed the herds on their migrations, using various caves, or hides spread throughout the territory.”

“That is a reasonable hypothesis, O’Neill.” Teal’c volunteered, rescuing his team-mate.

The Colonel didn’t know whether to be amused, or annoyed. Did the two super-brains really think he didn’t have any grey matter in his head? Although by the cotton wool feeling he had in it at the moment (probably the result of the Doctor’s happy juice) they probably weren’t far wrong. He settled back down into the comfy pillows, as tiredness suddenly started to make itself known. His eyes closed against his will, but he let them, knowing his team wouldn’t mind. As he was drifting, he listened to the banter start around him, the comforting sounds of his team lulling his tired body. They were discussing the origins of the natives of the planet and he enjoyed listening to his team around him. They thought it unlikely that the natives had been transplanted by the Goa’uld, as they’d be unlikely to be interested in such simple people, preferring intelligent hosts, even if they did then over-write that mind completely. Plus, the arrogant Goa’uld liked beautiful bodies and, although not unkindly, Daniel mentioned he didn’t recall the people he’d seen being anything like beautiful. Although that did pose the unanswerable question of who put the gate there and why?

The team chatted back and forth, watching in satisfaction as their CO drifted off to sleep again, relieved to have him safe and in their company again. Janet came and checked over him, reassuring herself that his vitals were as good as could be expected. She was so practised in her ministrations that she didn’t even wake him. His temperature was still high, but no longer in the life threatening range and the infection was finally clearing up. Assuring her friends that the Colonel was making good progress, she made a few notes on his chart and left them to their discussions. Nothing short of a major emergency could separate this team when one of them was incapacitated and she’d long ago given up trying.

Later that day, the Colonel woke up again to find only Daniel on watch. He was sitting reading a book on ancient Peru that looked as though it was a museum piece itself.

“Any good pictures in that, only I left my colouring book at home.” The Colonel asked, smiling as Daniel jumped at the interruption.

“Jeez, Jack. Give me some warning next time!” Daniel smiled back. “Have a good sleep?”

“Not bad. Bit draughty in this damn smock though.”

“Yeah, about that. Thought you might want these.” He handed over a pair of jogging bottoms from the Colonel’s locker, which he’d been keeping out of sight of the nurses.

“Danny boy. I knew you wouldn’t let me down.”

Looking around the ward and noticing no-one else was within immediate sight, Jack swung his legs over the bed and Daniel helped pull the pants up over his knees. Next, he steadied the man as Jack tenderly stood up, being careful of his bandaged ankle. Daniel held him upright for the brief moment required for the injured man to pull them up the rest of the way himself. Daniel knew better than to get too close and personal with his independent friend. Then he quickly helped him back down into the bed, as Jack had definitely gone paler and had started to shake.

“OK?” he asked him.

The Colonel took a moment to settle his limbs, then nodded his head.

“Just got a little dizzy there, but I’m OK now, thanks.”

“They’re not, you know, pressing on your side are they?”

“Nah, didn’t pull them up quite that far, but it’s good to know there’s something other than this stupid dress between me and the fresh air when I get up. Where’d Teal’c and Carter get to?”

Daniel started to laugh, which peaked his friend’s interest.

“Sam wanted to go to the local library. Something about getting some science books out for Cassie, for a project at school. Anyway, Teal’c never having been to a library....” he shrugged his shoulders, “You can guess the rest.”

“So next thing we know is Teal’c’ll be joining the library himself, I suppose?” Jack couldn’t help but grin at the thought of the huge Jaffa starting off in the children’s section and nobody, but nobody, daring to challenge him!

It was at that moment that Doctor Fraiser homed in on the voices and found her most awkward patient awake again.

“Hello, Sir. How’re you feeling?”

‘Sir’ really wished people would stop asking him that. He knew by the time he’d been here a few more days he’d want to strangle someone for it. Not that he could be really angry with the Doctor though; she was only doing her job, and a good one too. It had saved his sorry butt more than once, including this time, going by all the extra attention he was getting.

It was less than 48 hours since he’d woken up properly, so he wondered why he was getting tetchy a little earlier than normal. Although he was here so often it was difficult sometimes to realise one visit had ended before another one had started.

“Fine. How long do you reckon before I’m outta here?” he knew he wasn’t in any condition to leave now, but it always helped to stop him going stir-crazy if he had a plan to work towards. He appreciated that the Doctor usually gave him enough respect to be honest with him, understanding his need to be in control.

“What? Tired of us already?” she joked as she did a quick manual check of his pulse, resps, and temp, halting his ability to reply for a moment. “Let’s take it easy for a few days and then see how

things go. You've still got a slight temperature from the infection, although it's nearly all cleared up now and the lacerations on your shoulders are healing over nicely. The ankle shouldn't really be a problem for long, although with a weakened system you're probably still likely to struggle for a while. However, because of the infection, there's been a delay in the healing to your side. I just want to see that starting to clear up properly and then we'll see about some home care. Fair enough?"

"Sounds fair to me." He was pleased to know there weren't any long term complications for him to overcome. Normal re-hab meant he'd be back on his feet in no time, usually faster than the nurses were happy with. All except Doctor Fraiser, however. In the few short years they'd known each other, she'd become almost an honorary member of SG1. She'd become familiar with the O'Neill approach to self-help, his 'I'll walk out of here with or without your assistance' attitude, but surprisingly it tended to work. The Colonel had amazing recuperative powers and she'd gotten used to watching out for him, ready to lend a quiet hand if he pushed just a little bit too early.

"Good. Do you feel up to something to eat? I don't think you're ready for anything too heavy yet, but I can get some soup from the canteen, if you want."

He realised that he was a little hungry, although as Janet had said, not overly. He nodded and Daniel jumped out of the chair.

"I'll go and get it. I haven't had any lunch myself yet, so I'll bring mine back too. Do you want anything, Janet?"

"Why, Doctor Jackson. Is that an invite to lunch?" she asked, batting her eyelids, playfully.

"You never know your luck." Daniel replied, "I'll bring you a sandwich back." With that he scampered out of the ward without a backward glance, leaving his book lying on Jack's bed.

"Well, at least I've got something to read now," the Colonel half joked, "although the belief system of ancient Peru is hardly on my top ten list."

"If you're really up to it, I could scrounge up some of the local newspapers for you."

"Yeah, that'd be great, thanks. I just can't sit here with nothing to do."

The doctor had a good idea of what happened when the Colonel's mind had nothing to occupy it. She'd seen his files and grown to know the man. She knew he was highly intelligent, despite his appearance to the contrary and, without anything to keep his mind busy, it would wander. She was frequently concerned about how easily he could return to the past and the horrors there when he was ill and unable to keep his usual control.

Her personal opinion was that was why the Colonel was such a physically active person. Being constantly on the go prevented his mind from becoming fixated with the past and the terrors that must have swamped him on many occasions. She knew the General was also of a like mind. He had already asked her to let him know when the Colonel would be up to some 'light' paperwork duties. The General had a tendency to provide as many distractions as he could for his 2IC when he was forced into bed rest. They might not mention it in as many words, but they both knew an inactive Jack O'Neill could quickly get retrospective and depressed.

He certainly wasn't up to paperwork yet, but the Doctor was sure she could find some sports papers around somewhere. Perhaps she could send Ferretti out on a shopping trip? She knew if she smiled sweetly enough and especially if she mentioned it was for O'Neill, then he'd be sure to go.

"I won't keep you trapped here any longer than I have to, Sir." She said quietly, placing a gentle hand on his arm.

The Colonel didn't usually like his private space intruded upon, especially here where the normal values of privacy flew out the proverbial window, but he smiled ruefully back up at the Doctor.

"I know Janet, I know."

"Well let's check those bandages of yours then, before Daniel gets back and then you can have something other than intravenous to eat."

Five days later and both O'Neill and the infirmary had finally had enough of each other. Doctor Fraiser had given her blessing to the Colonel being allowed home, but only on the proviso that someone was with him at all times and that he didn't moan when she checked on him each evening. His recovery was proceeding at its usual faster-than-normal rate and the doctor admitted that the recalcitrant Colonel wouldn't heal any faster at the SGC than at home. In fact, going by past experience, she knew he'd heal far faster at home than here. She felt confident that his team would keep him from doing things too fast; they were still feeling over-protective after nearly losing him again and unlikely to let him do anything risky. Plus they were used to his sometimes gruff, taciturn behaviour and not fazed by it, unlike some of her newer medical staff. Having an injured O'Neill in the ward did wonders for sorting out the wheat from the chaff, as far as her nursing intake went.

Having seen that the Colonel had dressed himself without any embarrassing incidents, like falling over from getting vertical too quickly, she rang Daniel's quarters. It seemed as though the archaeologist must have broken all land speed records before he appeared in the infirmary, hair askew, collecting the wheelchair by the door en route.

"Come on Jack. Your flight awaits." He greeted eagerly.

The Colonel had to laugh as Daniel waved him over to the chair, "You sure you've got a licence for that?" he enquired as Janet gently helped him down into it. Although he hated the thought of being wheeled through the base, he had to admit that Janet was right. Even without the added hindrance of the still sore ankle, he knew he wasn't up to making it all the way to the top and then over to the car park without help. He also knew the Doctor was letting him out earlier than say Warner would have done. She was trusting him to take it easy and he had to at least meet her part way. It was a small price to pay for freedom from the infirmary walls, which seemed to close further in on him each day.

"Here are his meds," the Doctor handed Daniel a packet and then looked down at her patient, "and I'll be seeing you each evening until further notice."

"Yes ma'am." He threw her a perfect salute, almost keeping his balance as Daniel quickly turned the chair towards the door and away from her immediate care.

The journey back to the surface wasn't quite as quick as the Colonel would have liked. It seemed as though half the staff needed to wish him a speedy recovery and by the time they'd reached the car park he was feeling quite overawed by it all.

"A bit too much too soon, Jack?" Daniel asked as the Colonel made a motion to stop. Daniel watched as his friend seemed to drink in lungfuls of fresh air and leaned back into the chair.

His friend grinned back up at him.

"You been mind-reading again, Danny?"

"Where you're concerned, Jack, I'd have trouble finding it!"

He continued to push the chair over towards Jack's jeep and opened the passenger door for him, ignoring the complaints about ungrateful civilians. He helped Jack into the seat and made sure the seatbelt didn't pull too much against his friend's injured side, much to his 'I'm not an invalid' annoyance. Then he deftly folded the wheelchair back up, meaning to return it later, and placed it in the back.

"Now tell me," he said, leaping into the drivers seat and turning towards his passenger, all seriousness in his face, "you know what I'm like with mechanical things. Which way is first and which reverse?"

"Are you going to be like this all week?" the Colonel asked, not knowing if he'd have the energy to cope with a 'bouncing' Daniel for long.

"Oh, I think I can manage at least a week." His younger friend replied, absently pushing his glasses back up his nose. "Got to help the old and infirm, you know. Janet made me promise." He smiled at his friend, watching as an amused, but resigned expression settled over his face, and gently drove the car out of the complex.

Sam and Teal'c had been making themselves at home in the Colonel's house for the past two days. The fridge had been stocked with fresh food and alcohol-free beer (Janet's instructions) and the house had been cleaned up and freshened. Even his clothes had been washed, ironed and put away. After working so closely together for the past few years, they had very little to be modest about within the team and they knew their way around each others houses perfectly. The guest room had been sorted out and they'd already made a rota between them for taking care of their often grumpy patient. Daniel always seemed to have the first watch when it was the Colonel's turn to be looked after.

Teal'c was busy cooking a traditional Chulakian meal when Daniel turned up with their CO and, between their joint eagerness, they soon had him settled on one of the couches. Although he hated being made a fuss over, once he'd been passed the television remote control, the Colonel was soon engrossed in a sports channel and the indignity was forgotten.

"What's this?" he enquired eagerly, as Teal'c handed him his plate of mixed vegetables and meats, along with a dose of pills from the bottles Daniel had left in the kitchen.

"It is a near approximation of a meal we like to serve when a warrior returns home. I have had to substitute many of the ingredients for the ones I would prepare on Chulak, but I hope it is to your

liking.” The Jaffa bowed his head slightly in respect, as he so often did with his new-found comrades in arms.

“Are you kidding? I’m starving. After that infirmary food I could eat a horse.”

Teal’c looked momentarily puzzled and, unnoticed by the Colonel who was already tucking into his first mouthfuls, it was Daniel who came to his rescue.

“Have I not prepared the correct meal?” Teal’c enquired of the linguist.

Daniel smirked as his injured friend took yet another ungraceful spoonful of meat, “It’s fine Teal’c. Jack just used another one of our sayings. It means he’s **very** hungry.”

“Very hungry, I’d say.” commented the Major as she brought in a plate for herself and Daniel, sitting on the far end of the couch that the Colonel was sprawled across.

“Although is that not a strange saying, as surely no one could eat a whole one of those large beasts in one meal?” Sometimes he could understand the origin of the Tau’ri sayings and sometimes they made no sense to him at all.

“You know us, Teal’c,” Daniel supplied, “we’re nothing if not inconsistent.”

Teal’c gave up and returned to the kitchen to retrieve his own meal and joined them, although he decided to sit crossed legged on the floor with his plate in his lap.

Once they’d finished the meal, Daniel got out the video he’d hired and they proceeded to watch The Mummy Returns, again. Teal’c sometimes liked to watch a film twice, as he didn’t always understand the background plot on the first viewing, although he was getting better as time progressed. Not having had the benefit of being brought up within the Earth culture, he sometimes missed important references altogether. By the time someone had explained a plot twist to him, the scene had changed and he failed to understand that part of the film.

“So Teal’c,” began the Colonel, “I never asked before, but how did your trip to the library go?”

“It was a most amazing building, O’Neill. So much learning available to you. You Tau’ri are certainly fortunate. A Jaffa does not increase his position by being uneducated, but never before have I seen such books on so many diverse subjects. I am particularly interested in reading a series of your books, a reference collection called The Encyclopaedia Britannica. There is much information there. However, MajorCarter thinks that it is unlikely I will be allowed to hire the entire series for the duration it will take me to study them.”

“I told him we’d club together and buy him a set.” the Major told them, knowing the other two would be only too happy to help.

“Hey, don’t go spending all that money. I’ve got a set up in the loft doing nothing.” the Colonel replied, dragging his drooping eyes from the screen. “Teal’c, you’re welcome to use those and we’ll buy you something else instead.”

“You have the complete set of Encyclopaedia Britannica?” Sam asked, amazement in her voice. Sure, she knew the Colonel was knowledgeable, but to keep a huge reference collection didn’t seem his style.

His voice was quiet and he looked steadfastly at the television as he replied. "We got them for Charlie."

There was a long pause as his friends wondered how to reply to that information.

"Umm, are you sure about giving them away then, Jack? I mean, if they were Charlie's?" Daniel was equally quiet and, even though he hadn't moved from the chair, the Colonel felt as though his friend was right beside him.

"Yeah, they're not doing anything up in the loft. Someone might as well as get some use out of them."

"I would be honoured to receive such a valued gift from you O'Neill." Teal'c replied, understanding the importance of what the Colonel was offering him. "I will treasure the memory of your son each time I look upon them."

"Yeah, well, you're welcome." The Colonel replied, feeling uneasy under all the scrutiny.

"Where is this loft?" Teal'c then asked, having never been to this particular room before.

"Come on." Daniel said, rising from his seat, "Whereabouts are they, Jack?"

"Sara labelled the boxes. One of the ones labelled, books, I suppose."

Daniel led Teal'c up the stairs, whilst Sam took a brief moment to rest her hand on the Colonel's leg. He still didn't look away from the television, but she could see his facial muscles twitching in an effort to remain emotionless. Gathering the empty plates from around the lounge, she left to sort out the washing machine, leaving the Colonel alone with his thoughts.

An hour later Daniel and Sam were busy playing poker with the Colonel, whilst Teal'c was busy searching through the many boxes up in the loft. Having found the treasured collection, carefully packed in a large tea-crate, he was nonetheless interested in another collection he had come across during his search. They were travel guides and atlases from around the world. One book in particular had caught his attention, as it had many hand written notations throughout, and he took it back down the stairs to enquire about it.

"Colonel O'Neill, I would be interested to know the purpose of this book."

He held out the book to the Colonel, who took it as he placed his cards face down on the coffee table. Taking a quick look at the cover, his hands started to tremble as he flicked through the pages. His team were startled to see the colour drain from his face. Slowly he let the book slide onto the floor and, with a speed which belied his current condition, he fled the room.

"Have I done something wrong?" Teal'c asked.

"I don't know yet." Daniel asked as he reached over for the book. Slowly, he showed Sam the cover, then flipped through several of the pages. It was an Arabic dictionary.

"I think this must have been Sara's." he announced. "Cause there are words hand-written on several pages and they're not in Jack's writing." There were also several crayon marks throughout the book, probably done by Charlie, he guessed. Many words were highlighted, as he scanned the pages, and several sentences were written in the margins, in a poor attempt at the written language.

He was sure that this book must somehow relate to Jack's imprisonment by the Iraqis, but surely Jack would never have spoken to Sara in this language. So what was this book doing here? Once again, their lack of knowledge of their CO's past was a stumbling block. They knew very little of his enforced stay in that country, but they knew it could not have been pleasant.

"This book, Teal'c, translates the meanings of words from one language into another. This one is in Arabic, which is the language of the people of Iraq." The Jaffa nodded. "See here, in the margins." He pointed out to Sam, "These aren't spelt correctly, but if you speak them phonetically, as they sound spoken out loud," he explained for Teal'c, "they make sense."

"So what do you think Sara was doing with this?" Sam asked.

"I don't know. Jack's never discussed his time there with me, but I can't imagine him ever saying these things to his wife. Sufficient to say these words written down the margins aren't ones you'll find in any tourist guides. I'm ashamed to say that I know what some of them mean and they aren't polite. I just can't imagine why he'd use that language at home."

There was a long pause as they each considered what might have happened.

"Maybe he didn't know he was saying them." Sam said in sudden comprehension.

"You mean he might have been talking in his sleep?" asked Daniel.

"Or in his nightmares." Teal'c agreed.

"He has them now, all these years later. How bad must it have been when he first came home?" Sam asked.

Daniel looked at the book in his hand, at the awful things written on the pages.

"We have to find him." he said worriedly. "No wonder he reacted as he did. This must have been one heck of a shock. Why on Earth would Sara pack this with his things?"

"Maybe she didn't realise she had. It must have been a terrible time for them, when they split up, I mean after Charlie..." Sam didn't know what else to suggest, but she couldn't imagine the woman would have deliberately left such an emotional bomb-shell for her then husband to find. Some people could be extremely cruel as their marriages broke up, but she couldn't believe it of Jack's ex wife, even if she'd only met the woman briefly once.

"I will check his telescope platform." Teal'c offered, even though he didn't think his CO could have managed the steps with his injuries.

"I'll check the rest of the house." volunteered Sam.

"I'll do the garden and garage." said Daniel.

However, three minutes later, when they returned, there was no sign of their friend.

"Janet's going to kill us." Daniel said. "We've only been home a day and already got emotional shock and missing patient."

“Special Forces trained, or not, he has to be somewhere,” Sam stated “and he couldn’t have gone far. He hasn’t even had his evening meds yet.”

“O’Neill will not return until he wishes to. If we are to keep our promise to Doctor Fraiser and make sure he takes all his medications, then we must find him soon.”

“Come on, let’s check the neighbourhood,” Daniel said, “if we’ve each got our mobiles we can cover more ground.”

Jack had rushed out of the house, unaware of the looks off his team mates. He just had to get out and into the fresh air, away from the memories that book had brought back: the stench of unwashed, dying bodies; of blood and vomit; urine and faeces; of the degradation of human life, left to fester in unclean cells. He’d no idea the dictionary existed. When had Sara bought it? Well, that was pretty obvious. Sometime after he got back from the USAF hospital. Sometime after the doctors pronounced him able bodied – if not able minded. They were probably glad to be shut of him, the once proud and confident officer who had been reduced to a wild, unkempt travesty of a man; one who’s only instinct left was never to give in to authority figures. Refuse all attempts to access your psyche. Never let the other man know he’d won. Withdraw so far into yourself that no one can hurt you anymore.

Even after his rescue, the humiliation of his hospital treatment haunted him. Not that the doctors and nurses meant to hurt him, of course, but how could they truly understand what he’d been through? Shaving his head to rid him of the lice that infected him, didn’t remove the conditioning from the mind inside. Watching his frail body like a hawk as he tried to take his own baths by himself didn’t restore his dignity, even if they meant no harm. No, in some ways the months he’d spent in the various hospitals, whilst he was gradually transferred back home was even worse. In the prison he’d known he was with the enemy and he’d known exactly what to expect of them and he gave no quarter. In the hospitals it was his own people who looked on with pity and more than a little fear at the violent looking officer. Oh, how he hated pity. There was no way he was going to give these people anything, either.

However, that time had been long ago now. Slowly, with Sara’s and Charlie’s comforting presence, he’d been able to climb out of the deep hole he’d preserved himself in, but the horrors never released him fully from their grip.

Slowing down his uneven gait and bringing his mind back to the present, he realised he was at the bottom of the street. Looking around him, he stared straight into the eyes of Mrs Murphy, the old lady in the end house.

“You’re looking kinda lost, Mr. O’Neill. How’re you doin’ today?” she asked with rheumy eyes that still missed nothing.

“I keep telling ya, it’s Jack.” he patiently said, in a voice that suggested he’d had this conversation many times before.

“For someone that has as many medals as you’ve got, a little respect isn’t too much to offer.” she replied, beckoning him over to her.

Slowly, he opened the gate, noting that it no longer squeaked on its hinges, and wandered over to where the old lady sat on her porch swing.

“Yup, you fixed that gate good. Only trouble is I can’t hear the delivery boy when he brings my groceries no more. Means he has to wait longer while I go find my purse.”

The Colonel just grinned at her, “There’s no pleasing some folk.”

“Well, did I ask you to fix it? As if I couldn’t have put a bit of oil on it myself!” The words were hard, but the voice was light and filled with humour. The old lady liked her younger neighbour. She’d known at the first glance of this tall, confident man that he was military. Heck, she was in the military neighbourhood and had lost both her husband and two sons to war. Didn’t take much to realise this man was an important one too. He had ‘authority’ stamped all over his assertive manner. As the years had passed by he’d made a good neighbour, doing odd jobs for her, taking her shopping if he was home and generally keeping an eye on her. It was a shame he wasn’t home more often, but she knew he was a Colonel at the nearby complex and was away from home often. Probably explained why he wasn’t married either, which was a shame.

She’d been in his house often enough and knew the signs of someone who did more than sat behind a desk giving out orders. And she also knew the signs of someone hurting, both physically and emotionally on this occasion, by the way he held himself. There were deep shadows in his eyes. Oh, those eyes! If only she’d been twenty years younger, and single, she laughed to herself.

“Something funny?” Jack asked, glad of the distraction.

“Just thinking what a handsome pair we’d have made if you were older, or I was younger.” She patted him on the leg as he gingerly seated himself down.

“I’ve told you before, I don’t think I could have kept up with you!”

“Nonsense. I’d have taught you everything you’d have needed to know. And maybe you could’ve told me some things too.”

“Such as?”

She looked down to where his hand still rested at his waist. He was taking deep breaths, trying to force the pain down from his headlong rush out of the house.

“Like why a fool rushes around when he’s obviously not up to it.”

“It’s just a scratch. Got it gardening.”

She almost laughed.

“Gardening my ass, Mr. O’Neill. I’ve no doubt it was earned doing something quite important, but there’s more than one type of hurt, isn’t there?” She reached out with thin, but steady hands, and cupping his face, turned him towards her. “What’s troubling you?” she asked in a much softer voice.

“Just memories.” he replied, staring past her into the distance.

“Good, or bad?”

“Does it matter?” his eyes narrowed.

“Does the sunshine matter after the rain? Of course it does.” She settled her hands back on her thin lap and stared at the sun going down, much as the Colonel had returned to doing. “You know, all I have left now are my memories, of Ian, of my boys. Some good, some bad. The things I’d like to do again if I could, the same things I know I can’t, ‘cause life’s not like that.” She turned to study the younger man’s face, seeing the darkness in his eyes and wondering what he’d had to do that still hurt him so much. It was only the good ones, she thought sadly who had regrets; those who cared about their actions. “We can’t undo the past, Mr. O’Neill, or we’d have learned nothing and, despite all the sadness there, I’d not trade my memories for anything. It’s what makes us who we are. But they can only hurt you if you let them, the only power they have is what you give them.” She smiled a genuine, warm smile at him and he couldn’t help but respond in kind.

Finally looking away and down the street in the fading light, he could see his team heading towards them.

“Gotta go.” he apologised to the elderly lady.

“That search party for you?” she grinned.

“Yeah, they would be mine.” He slowly stood up and hobbled painfully down the path.

“Take care, Mr. O’Neill.”

“You too, Mrs. Murphy.” he said as he shut the gate behind him, just as his team surrounded him.

“Jack! Why the hell didn’t you tell us where you were going?”

“We were worried about you sir.”

“It was not wise to have travelled so far O’Neill, in your condition.”

“I know, I know. I just had to get out of there, OK?” He was both annoyed at having to be dragged home like an errant child and also, once again comforted by their presence. They kept at a slow pace as they followed him back to his house, concerned about his unsteady movements, but he refused all offers of help. Once they’d got back inside to the warmth though, he gingerly headed straight up the stairs and for his bedroom.

Deciding he still needed some space, they left him to get undressed on his own, and settled in the lounge, relieved that another potential disaster had been averted. Sam was just about to start making the next meal, when their slowly returning sense of calm was jolted by his call.

“Ahh, guys. I think I may need a hand here.”

Rushing up the stairs, only pausing to knock on the door, they entered and found him sat on the bed. He’d only managed to remove his shirt so far and was holding his left hand against his bandaged side. As he pulled it away, they could see blood on his hand and more seeping through the dressing on his front.

“Oops.” he said sheepishly, for some reason actually grinning as he studied himself. This was something he could cope with. Physical stuff was OK.

“Janet’s going to kill us.” Daniel repeated from earlier.

“I will go and telephone Doctor Fraiser.” Teal’c said quietly and left immediately.

“Why don’t you just lie down until Janet gets here?” Sam asked him, gently pushing him back onto the pillows. “I don’t want to risk disturb the dressings myself, if she’s going to be here in a few minutes anyway.”

“Do you think I’m going to get detention for this?” the Colonel asked as Daniel swung his legs onto the bed.

“Not half as much as we’re going to get.” he responded, “Everyone knows you’re a pain in the arse and wont do as you’re told. Whereas they expect us to do exactly as we’re asked.”

“That’s ‘cause you haven’t got my natural charm and wit.” the Colonel replied, grinning, but his eyes were getting heavy and Sam felt like panicking as they shut.

“Colonel, Sir, wake up. Don’t go to sleep on us.” She knew she was acting over-protectively, but he’d scared them once too much recently.

“Don’t worry, Major, I’m only tired, honest. Not lost enough blood to be a problem.”

“And you’d know that, would you?” she replied sarcastically, fear causing her to forget she was still talking to her CO, even if she was in his bedroom.

“Oh, ya. Been here many times before. Should give out badges for this, I’d have had a drawer-full by now.”

With that, he finally fell asleep, leaving the two remaining members of SG1 to watch over him, doing all they could to make him comfortable until the Doctor arrived. Sam went for his first-aid kit and placed another dressing against his side, whilst Daniel rearranged the bedding over him.

Teal’c come back into the bedroom a few minutes later.

“Doctor Fraiser says we should keep him quiet, comfortable and warm. She is on her way now.”

“Well, we’ve got all that covered.” Daniel said, looking at Jack all tucked up in the bed, oblivious to them.

All they could do was watch over him, until they heard Janet’s car pull up onto the drive. A few moments later she was being shown in by Teal’c and she ushered the rest of SG1 out of the room.

Pulling down the duvet, she gently shook the Colonel awake as she carefully cut the bandages from his side, wanting to disturb the injury as little as possible.

“Oh, hi doc.” Jack said, as his sleepy eyes took in her small face. “Umm, sorry about another house-call.”

“Colonel, I don’t know what to say. You’re only out of my sight for a few hours and already you’re in trouble. Want to tell me about it?”

“Not particularly. Is it bad?” he asked, looking at where her expert fingers had gently peeled away the blooded bandage. They were now poking around his waist and back, for which he had politely rolled part way over.

“No, you’ve just pulled a couple of stitches. I can take you back to the base, or give you a local and re-stitch them here.” She’d no doubt as to which option he’d prefer.

“Here’s fine.”

“OK, when’s the last time you took any of your meds?”

“Lunch time.”

She tutted him.

“Jack, you’re going to be the death of me. I’m going to give you some now, as well as a light sedative, whilst I repair this damage. Then I want you to sleep without moving from this bed until morning. Understood?”

“Yes ma’am.”

She almost lost her resolve to be angry and very nearly laughed at the guilty little boy look he gave her. She was tempted to ruffle his hair, but you didn’t do that to an aware Jack O’Neill, so she reached for her medical bag instead. She always carried around more supplies than the average medic. Her experiences with the SGC had taught her to be prepared and she had more than enough supplies to look after the Colonel.

The Doctor was aware of the rest of SG1 waiting patiently outside the bedroom. Once she’d finished patching up the Colonel, bagged up the soiled dressings, and helped him into more suitable bed wear, she invited them back in. The Colonel was rather sleepy by this time, a combination of his recent activities and the sedative she’d given him.

“I feel I must apologise for bringing that book to your attention, O’Neill. It was not my intention to bring unpleasant memories upon you.”

“t’s OK, Teal’c.” a slightly slurred reply came from the bed and dazed brown eyes struggled to look up at them. “Didn’t actually know she had that.”

“Had what?” the Doctor asked, looking around at them.

Sam leaned down to whisper in Janet’s ear, “Teal’c found an old Arabic dictionary of the Colonel’s wife.” The Doctor nodded back, planning to get a fuller explanation later.

“Just warn us next time Jack, before you dash off like that. We didn’t mind you going, but what would have happened if you’d needed us and we couldn’t find you?”

“We know there are things you feel you can’t talk to us about sir,” Sam continued gently, “but we’re here, now, and we care about you.”

“I know kids,” his voice was even quieter, “but that caught me off guard... Those days back then... especially the hospitals, the looks and stares... Hated it. Still do... Don’t like being hemmed in, held down, dependant... Walls closing in...” He yawned and closed his eyes, his head lolling to one

side, "Sometimes I forget the times are different... Still need to get outside, to the air." Finally, he stopped talking and Janet ushered the team away from the sleeping man and back down the stairs to the lounge.

"I guess that explains why he's always so grouchy in the infirmary." Janet commented once they were all seated in the Colonel's lounge.

"I never realised why it means so much to him, to be able to get about as soon as he can." Sam added. "I know he hates being ill, but I never understood the reason behind it before."

"We must endeavour to make Colonel O'Neill's recuperation's more agreeable from now on." Teal'c suggested.

"You could have a good idea there." Janet said, always trying to improve the lot of her patients. The Colonel was in her care far more often than she liked and if she could find a way to make his stays happier, then she was all for it. It was the least she could do for her extraordinary friend.

"So what do we do?" Daniel asked, "Check out hockey matches? Trip to the zoo? Fishing in the lake?"

"They would be places to start." the Jaffa agreed. "Let us ask O'Neill in the morning. I, myself, must return to the SGC now, but I will return then."

"Come on Teal'c. I'll drive you back." Sam offered.

"And I've got to get back to Cassie. Those books really helped by the way, Sam. She got an 'A' for that exercise."

"I'll come over at the weekend to see what else she's up to. Or perhaps we could get Cassie over here? You know how much she and the Colonel adore each other. Maybe have a bar-b-que if the weather holds up."

"Another good suggestion." Daniel commented, as he followed them to the door.

Once everyone else had gone, he quickly went back to check on his friend, who was still soundly asleep, unaware of the consternation he'd caused. He tidied up the house, carefully hiding the dictionary in the spare room so that he could return it to the loft later, secretly. They'd still got to get the Encyclopaedia's down anyway. Noticing how late the time had now got to, he went to bed himself, making sure both bedroom doors were open so he could hear any noises from his friend.

It was late the next morning when Daniel decided it was time to wake Jack up. He hadn't heard any disturbances during the night, so the sedative must have done his recuperating friend some good.

The Colonel woke to see Daniel perched on the edge of his bed, a breakfast tray of hot foods balanced on his lap. Toast, bacon and eggs, orange juice and coffee were there. He could hear the sounds of the rest of his team coming from downstairs, through the open bedroom door. He shuffled himself upright in the bed and greedily took the proffered tray, his stomach growling at the aromas. He took a bite of toast, noticing Daniel now had one of his baseball caps, upturned, in his hands. Several pieces of folded up paper rested inside the cap and Daniel thrust it before him.

“Come on, pick one.” he encouraged.

“Pick what?” the Colonel asked, puzzled, as he finished off the toast, dripping crumbs past the tray onto the bed.

“Just pick one and you’ll see.” Daniel grinned at him.

‘Oh well, here goes nothing’ the Colonel thought as he reached down to the bottom of the cap and brought out one of the folded papers. He looked at his friend, but Daniel only grinned,

“Open it.”

Never being one to disobey a direct order, well, maybe that was a moot point, but he opened the slip of paper anyway.

“Picnic in the park?” he asked.

“Yup, that’s the activity for today. Janet’s OK’d some stuff for you, as long as we don’t overdo it, or stay out too long, so dress up warm. We’ll be waiting for you downstairs. We’re picking Cassie up on the way too as she’s on holiday today.”

“And those others?” the Colonel asked, eyeing the cap that Daniel had taken back.

“Now that would spoil it for the other days, wouldn’t it?” Daniel replied, heading back to the door, “Don’t drop too many crumbs in the bed. Sam’ll get annoyed if she has to change the sheets every day. Come on, eat up, the day’s awaiting.” He grinned back as Jack tucked into another slice of toast, picking up a slice of crispy bacon with his fingers. Etiquette wasn’t Jack’s strong point, actually being any kind of ‘correct’ wasn’t Jack’s strong point. The way he cared for his people and brought the best out of them was his strong point. Taking care of them up to the point of his own life. Now **that** was Jack’s strong point and Daniel wouldn’t have wanted him any other way.

Once Daniel had left the room, leaving the door slightly ajar, Jack took a moment to collect his thoughts. He didn’t actually remember a lot of the previous evening, after the sedative that Janet had given him. He knew his team had been there and he’d talked to them, but he couldn’t remember what he’d said. He was sure it didn’t matter. Each day was a new day and a fresh start, putting the past one more day behind him. Finishing his breakfast and slurping the hot coffee down without spilling it, he wandered over towards the en-suite for a wash. Noticing a walking cane had appeared by his bedside, he laughed at the thought of him and Carter with the same aid.

Janet had told him to stay away from baths and showers for a while, until his side was further healed, so he started to fill the sink with hot water. He stopped for a moment to listen as Teal’c queried something about the cartoons on the television. He could just make out Carter replying to him from the kitchen, where he could hear sounds of food being prepared.

So he was going on a picnic today, was he? What were the rest of the activities in that hat that Danny had squirreled away from him? It didn’t matter. Usually, he hated being ill and cooped up. It weakened his hold on the past, lowered the barriers he’d put up to protect himself from his memories. This time was going to be different though. Somehow, his team seemed to know what he needed and it felt good to be home with them.

Yes, despite it all, life could be good.

*****The End*****