

Title: Grey Days

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Category: Angst, Drama, hurt/comfort, slight action/adventure.

Pairing: None.

Rating: 13+

Season: Three. Set after '100 Days' and 'Shades Of Grey'.

Summary: Just as his team are trying to come to terms with Jack's behaviour a mission goes wrong.

Warnings: None.

Status: Complete November 2001

Notes: This was my first attempt at fanfic, but later on I found myself unhappy with a lot of what I'd put in, so I decided to do a re-write in May 2002. Feedback would be appreciated. However, no flames please. I can burn my own toast without any help, thank you.

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O'Neill wandered around the SGC, not particularly noticing the salutes or greetings of those around him. He'd been in a daze for a week now, ever since getting back from that debacle with Maybourne and Makepeace. Well, it felt like a failure to him anyway, having to flush out a traitor from in their own midst. Hardly the kind of thing you could be proud of, or write home to mum about. Not that you could exactly write home about anything that went on here though, he thought with a grin. Who'd believe it, for starters?

It was bad enough that he'd been having such a hard time reacquainting himself with protocol after his safe return from Edora (and, boy, had that little rescue surprised him), but next he'd been ordered under cover to rescue the alliance protecting Earth from the Goa'uld. He'd had to say some god-awful things to his team, before even being able to get his feet back under the table again. He knew Teal'c had no problems with understanding the situation he'd been placed in and accepting him back, but Sam and Daniel were another story. Jack could sympathise with Daniel's difficulties; his younger friend hadn't grown up with the military and didn't have a deceitful bone in his body. So how could he possibly be expected to understand the Colonel's behaviour? How could he understand how easily Jack had slipped into character, even though it had been tearing him up on the inside? He had hoped Sam would have forgiven him by now, though. She'd grown up in a military family, moving from base to base with her father all her life. Surely the idea of covert ops wasn't so unfamiliar to her, that she couldn't accept what he'd been forced to do? Couldn't she see through the act and the lies to the soldier obeying orders and the man underneath?

He'd done his best to protect his team, having no alternative but to put on a good show for his audience, but part of him was hurt that his team (his friends who ought to have known him better) couldn't see something else was going on. For himself, his training and experience led him to be a good judge of character. OK, he wasn't impervious to error, but he usually had his finger on the pulse of a person's nature and always knew when something was up with a member of his team. Was he, himself, so unreadable that they didn't know an act when they saw one? Even when the cat was out of the proverbial bag?

He'd just parted company with Teal'c, after sharing lunch together in the canteen, but neither Sam nor Daniel had joined them again. The Colonel knew the two younger members of his team were trying to get back to normal, but the atmosphere was still strained between them. The old easy banter hadn't come back yet and he felt as if his jokes were being forced. Daniel usually pretended he didn't hear them and although Sam laughed, it didn't light up her eyes like it used to. God, he missed her smile. He'd have come in to work for that reason alone, if none other. Jack felt very alone and returned to his quarters. General Hammond had just ordered him to take a few days off, but he still needed to finish some paperwork and pack his bags before he left. A Colonel's work was never done and all that.

He reached his quarters and settled down to finish off the reports for his last two missions, as well as tidying up some previous ones that had somehow managed to find their way back into his in-tray. Pesky admin, always making sure he dotted his 'i's and crossed his 't's before they could be safely filed away in some black hole somewhere. The work was boring, but as there wasn't anything else to interrupt him, he soon finished the task and dumped it back into his out-tray again. Normally, he'd have been figuring a way to play hooky with this team by now, whilst trying to avoid being spotted by Hammond in the process.

The General had seemed very concerned about him over the last couple of days and he was always touched when the older man let his feelings show. O'Neill had never served under a more honourable CO and, even though his mouth got in the way of his brain sometimes, he always strived to make the older man proud of his team's work. Ah, there was the rub though, to quote that old English bard, Shakespeare, or whatever his name was - his team. He sighed as he packed up his holdall. Just how long would it take to get his team back together, where they belonged? How could he look out for them when they were barely communicating with him? No matter how old they were, he still thought of them as his kids: Daniel, who needed a child's harness to keep him and his boundless enthusiasm out of trouble; Sam, his 2IC, so bright, beautiful, intelligent and with one heck of an attitude behind a gun; and Teal'c, so much older than himself, but with the naivete of a child on Earth. Yes, they were his kids and he was proud of them and all they'd accomplished since they'd become SG1. They were his family now; he certainly didn't have anyone else in that category any more. He hoped that, given time, they could make up again. They had to, there was nothing else he cared about anymore. Well, he did still care about Sara, but she'd moved on and they hardly saw each other any more. Silently he shut the door behind him and left the base for a cold evening alone.

Hammond waited until the remaining three quarters of SG-1 were seated before him. He'd even had to arrange for another chair to be brought into his office to accommodate them all. He could have had this discussion in the briefing room, but he felt this talk needed more privacy than the more open style larger room afforded. Satisfied that they were all settled, he took a few moments to collect his thoughts.

“I’ve called you here because I think it’s time I put a few little problems to rest. I’ve noticed a strain between you and Colonel O’Neill over the last week and I need to be sure that everything’s going to return to normal, or I can’t sanction any more off-world missions for you.” No one interrupted him, which he took as a good sign. “I’ve given him five days leave and I want to be sure he’s coming back to a team that’s ready to support him in all ways.”

He looked at each one of his subordinates, watching the guilty acknowledgement of events appear on two, whilst the third looked back steadily.

“I know you’re confused about recent events, but I want you to know that the Colonel was under strict orders to keep his under-cover mission secret from you.” He could tell from their expressions that they already knew this, but were still having difficulties accepting it. “The Colonel wanted to tell you, begged me in fact to give him permission, but it wasn’t up to me and we were both over-ruled. You should also know that if his under-cover status was revealed and you were thought in any way to be complicit in his behaviour, then your lives would have been under direct threat, as was his own during the entire time. It was an extremely dangerous mission and not one that just anyone could have accomplished.” Although O’Neill could frequently be a pain in the ass, Hammond was grateful he had such a resourceful officer under his command. “Actually, the Colonel was more concerned about your safety than his own. He even tried to get me to restrict you to the base for the duration, but we decided that would have looked suspicious. He warned me he’d have to scare you off to keep you safe and it was a difficult decision for him. He knew he was under surveillance at home and his fears that he was being watched here turned out to be true too, unfortunately. It was never a matter of trust with him about not telling you. Orders were given and, as a loyal soldier, he had no choice but to follow them.”

This flow of information at least had got their attention, the General was pleased to note, although it also annoyed him. None of this should have come as a surprise to them. Knowing the Colonel though, he probably hadn’t talked much to his team about events. He wasn’t the talking type and the military was full of them. Soldiers who’d been to hell and back far too many times to still have the words left in their vocabulary. It was also a coping mechanism they developed if they wanted to survive and carry on serving, which the very best, like O’Neill, did.

“I know you were also confused over his reactions at being rescued from Edora. I was puzzled myself at first, but after having forced a small talk out of him I think I understand a little better.” He remembered almost having to order his 2IC to sit down and tell him what was going on and the memory brought a small smile to his face. “You see, Jack’s been left behind enemy lines on too many occasions in the past, the details of which I’m not at liberty to disclose. Hell, even I’ve not got high enough clearance to access most of them.” That brought a small smile from two of the team before him. “Suffice it to say he’d convinced himself that no one was going to be able to rescue him. He seriously didn’t think he was that valuable to us.” It saddened the General, that only Teal’c seemed about to stop him to argue that point. “You must admit, no one could have realistically expected you to have been able to build that particle accelerator. It was an incredible feat Major.” Sam merely nodded her thanks at that praise, obviously caught up in the General’s speech and still a little numb by the explanations coming forth. “Thinking he’d no options, he settled for a life he thought he could never have here, one without warfare, or the responsibilities he has here. Don’t forget, he’s not only responsible for you, SG1, but also for the rest of the base and the planet, where that gate’s concerned. Basically - he survived, as he’s been trained to do.”

If only he could tell the Colonel’s team how much the man had had to survive in the past, but that wasn’t up to him to divulge. Only the Colonel could do that and he knew the man never would. It would bare more of his soul than O’Neill would be comfortable with. “He’d begun to adapt, as the only thing he could do if he was to live there and help the people there survive too. Don’t forget that

with their reduced numbers, the natives would have had troubles too. Then you did the impossible and got through, suddenly pulling the rug out from under his feet again. He'd got used to a whole new lifestyle, leaving rules and regulations behind, and he found it difficult to adjust to being back. I don't know if most people could have reacted any differently. He is human, just like the rest of us." He paused for a moment, to draw breath and consider his own feelings of guilt over the situation. "Then I do the unthinkable and land a sting operation on him, before he's even had chance to settle back down." He shook his head sadly. How could one person cope with everything that had been thrown his way over the years?

"Listen, I know the Colonel can be difficult to understand at times, but I can say without a doubt that he is the best officer I have ever had the privilege to work with. You may not always understand the reasons for what he does, but I have the utmost confidence that he has your best interests at heart, more than any other officer I've met. Now people, do I have your assurances that everything will be resolved by the time the Colonel returns? As I've said, I'm not willing to let a team go off-world that aren't 100% behind each other." He studied the three people before him. Teal'c was his usual stoic self, bowing agreement in his regal manner, whilst Daniel nodded, mutely. Sam sat to attention with a "Yes, Sir."

"Good. Dismissed." the General replied, stopping them just short of the door as they left, "Just one thing before you go. Please don't tell him I said what a good officer he is, he's difficult enough to manage as it is." They were hard-pressed not to laugh as they left, Daniel shutting the door behind him.

"I guess he's right." Sam considered quietly, as they made their way back to the labs.

"Did I not tell you that the Colonel would have sufficient reason for his unusual behaviour?" Teal'c asked them.

"I guess so." Daniel replied, shoving his glasses back up his nose, "I just don't understand the military some times, that's all."

"Would you rather the Colonel allow this planet to come to harm?"

"Of course not!"

"Therefore, you should not judge a man until you can see the path he has had to walk." The Jaffa replied sagely.

"I wonder what he's doing now?" Daniel pondered as he pressed the elevator call button.

"Probably going crazy with boredom already." Sam replied, with a smile on her face, suddenly feeling the burden of the last few weeks starting to dissipate. "You know what we should do?" she asked as they got in the elevator. The other two looked curiously at her. "Have a bar-b-que! It's been months since the last one, with everything that's happened."

"I think Colonel O'Neill would appreciate that." Teal'c commented.

"Yeah," replied Daniel, "I'll call him and ask him if he wants it at his place. It'll give him something to sort out for the weekend. Do you mind if I invite Janet and Cassie?" His friends shook their heads. "They're like family too, but I'd like it if it was just us apart from that, I think we have some bridges to cross before next week."

The other two agreed, Sam adding “I wonder if he’ll tell us what exactly he was doing whilst undercover. He must have had us under surveillance at some point and we never knew it.”

“Undoubtedly so, Major Carter, for him to have been witness to Colonel Makepeace’s treachery. Even I was unaware of his proximity.” There was respect in the warrior’s tone.

They left the elevator and crossed the corridor to Daniel’s lab, where the archaeologist quickly reached for the phone and dialled Jack’s home number.

The Colonel had been relieved beyond measure when Daniel rang, feeling sure his team would still be sore from his apparent bad behaviour for days to come. His worries lifted, even though he realised everything might not return to normal immediately, but they could build on that.

The bar-b-que was booked at his place and everyone had had a fun time. Even the weather had stayed warm and sunny for the time in Autumn and, although some conversations were still a little forced, it felt good to be back together again. The easy camaraderie was beginning to reassert itself between them. Jack had spent most of the afternoon either cooking, showing off his prodigious outdoor culinary skills, or chasing Cassie and her dog around the garden. The young girl loved her favourite ‘Uncle’ and frequently let him catch her, to throw her up in the air, or hang her upside down. No matter how old she grew, she’d always enjoy bringing this side of him out. Then they’d watched two Star Wars films that Cassie had brought over for Teal’c’s benefit, before they each finally drifted away home, Teal’c pondering if he could actually engineer a light sabre.

That had been six days ago and now they were off-world once more and relying on each other’s skills to save their lives, whilst under fire from Jaffa hordes.

They’d gone back to PX4 something or other, the Colonel could never remember their designations and much preferred to use the local’s name, in this case Verdán. This was their CO’s first visit here, as the rest of his team had previously made first contact with Colonel Makepeace, whilst he’d been busy infiltrating Maybourne’s operation. The natives were peaceful and lived a simple rustic life, living in small villages of family groups. Each village was led by a council of three elders, who were chosen each year by the rest of the village. Daniel thought they’d probably been transplanted from a planet other than Earth, although they may have been uprooted from Earth prior to that. The young anthropologist wondered if ‘Verdán’ could have come from the word verdant, for green, another clue as to their roots on Earth. They lived in large wattle and daub huts, herding cattle type animals and harvesting crops, weaving their own clothes. They were happy with their lifestyle, having no desire to acquire higher technology and only vaguely interested in SG1’s obvious advances in science.

They were intrigued by their visitors and a little puzzled by the Colonel’s vague explanation as to his replacement of Makepeace, but welcoming all the same. No one had used the ancient portal for many generations and the Verdans were amused by Daniel’s attempts to uncover their past. The past was the past to them, they preferred to enjoy the here and now, which they did with the aid of a strong local brew. Every meal was accompanied by the ‘Leau’, which could make for an interesting afternoon’s work. The Colonel found himself relaxing again and enjoyed watching Daniel’s attempts at translations after a cup of the alcohol. Teal’c, as usual, was unaffected and Carter held her drink almost as well as he did, but the archaeologist hardly noticed when his glasses slipped down off his nose.

The Verdans ancient tongue was now so diluted as to make it very difficult to trace it's path. It seemed the people also had a fad for changing words, names and meanings with great regularity. They held competitions every year, aided by the Leau, where they would compete for the most outrageous noun changes. Daniel had to admit defeat when he discovered the word for fire had had twelve different meanings in the last two hundred cycles. The linguist thought it was crazy, but as O'Neill pointed out, if it worked for the Verdans, who were they to argue.

On their first visit under Makepeace, they'd found evidence of Goa'uld interference and many of the village elders told tales about their forefathers being forced to work in the gold mines. At least the description sounded like gold, but it was difficult to be sure without further testing, as the mines were supposedly long since depleted. This was the reason for Earth's continued interest in the planet though. Perhaps there were still some interesting ores to be bargained for with Earth's modern mining techniques. The native children still loved to play in the old ruined tunnels and many times the men had to go in and rescue them when children got lost there. It was assumed that the Goa'uld had given up on this world because the mines were no longer profitable, but the Colonel was ever wary, as too many times their enemy had suddenly appeared on the same planet behind them. Sam had once hypothesised that the Goa'uld must have a way of monitoring gate activation's and deliberately came along just to annoy them.

Their CO's suspicious nature was proved to be well founded, as the third day into their visit a youngster came running back to the village. Out of breath from his running, the young boy declared that the portal was opening and strangely clad beings in bright shiny armour were marching out. O'Neill and Teal'c immediately rushed out to the stargate, a mere half-hour's walk away, leaving Sam and Daniel to gather all the villagers together, ready to move out. Using binoculars from behind a ridge, they were able to make out a dozen Jaffa scouring the vicinity of the gate.

"It won't take them long to find the village. Why the hell have they come back now?" O'Neill said, looking at Teal'c. "Do you know which little snake-head that lot report to?"

They both studied the armour design as another group exited the gate. "I do not recognise their insignia." Teal'c replied, puzzled, "It may be a minor system lord that I have not come across before. Perhaps he is trying to harvest wealth off planets the major lords have abandoned, where he will not feel challenged. I have seen it done before as a means to attain power independently."

"Well, let's get back to the village before we become snake bait." the Colonel quipped before creeping back down and high-tailing it back to the others. Waiting until they were out of hearing range of the Jaffa, the Colonel was able to update the rest of his team via radio before they got back.

Once they were back at the village they were able to explain in greater detail to the nervous elders what they'd seen. Carter and Daniel had meanwhile managed to gather all the rest of the people into the main square, where the elders explained why they were in danger and needed to hide.

"Why have they come back now after such a long time away? Have they come here because of you?" Noton, the most senior asked. He was a kindly man and had never had to face such an occurrence before. He wasn't blaming the SG team, at least not unless proof was forthcoming, but he was worried both for his family and his people.

"I honestly don't know," the Colonel replied, "but we've got to get out of here now before we find out the hard way. Any suggestions for a defensible hiding place?"

“Only the mines.” Noton replied. “We know our way through them and the tunnels are narrow enough to defend, but we only carry spears and poison darts for hunting. From what our history lessons teach us these will not be enough for the evil doers.”

“Don’t worry about that,” O’Neill replied, “our weapons ought to be enough, providing we don’t run out of ammo.”

He checked his P90, taking the safety off, and signalled to Sam and Daniel to get the people moving. “Lead on MacDuff.” he signalled to Noton, who didn’t understand the name, but understood the request. He waved to his people and began to lead the way towards the mine complex. It was an hours walk in the opposite direction to the gate, but they would have to hurry to avoid being caught out in the open.

They travelled as quickly as they were able to, with children and a couple of pregnant women, but the Jaffa were quick to find evidence of their movements. They’d only just made it through the mine entrance before the first staff weapon blasts came. SG-1 placed themselves between the Jaffa and the natives, the Colonel always the last to retreat, making sure everyone was safely behind him. The light was poor, provided by torches lit in niches in the walls, by the villagers as they went, whilst SG-1 put them out as they passed. However, the Jaffa seemed to be able to smell their quarry in the dark and continued to track them. SG-1 had the advantage in the small tunnels though, as the Jaffa could be heard coming and had no option but to surrender their cover to use their long handled staff weapons. Teal’c also struggled with his, but he had the advantage of his other team-mates in front to cover him whilst he readied the weapon. P90’s were a lot easier to use in the limited space and even the village men managed to down a few Jaffa with their spears, as they worked their way deeper into the complex.

“Where the hell are we retreating to?” O’Neill shouted at Carter, working alongside him, as he reloaded again.

“Noton told me there’s a back exit to the system that emerges in the mountain range, far away from the stargate. There they can block the exit and escape through a pass to an old abandoned village. Apparently, some of the slaves used to escape that way in the past.”

“Good.” was his reply as the Colonel focussed once more on the next Jaffa’s that could be heard approaching.

Time passed, Jaffa fell, and once more their CO prayed for more speed, for the villagers to get around the next turn. There was always another corner and each one prompted a fresh hope for a way out of this mess. The Colonel had long ago tuned out the sounds of the children’s panic and the women trying to hurry them along, too frightened for the youngsters to voice any fears for themselves. He was now acting on auto-pilot, his muscles responding to well-known routines, fuelled by adrenaline. He ignored anything that detracted from the flow of enemies constantly coming their way. Aim and fire, regroup, reload, aim and fire. It was like a mantra, buzzing from his head, through his nerves, to his body.

The village men had long ago used up their meagre supply of weaponry. Now they hurried along with the rest of their people, relying on the SG team to keep them safe. The Colonel took a brief moment to check on the progress behind him, as he steadied himself to take on the next wave. Daniel and Teal’c had just disappeared around the next bend in the crazy system, but he sensed them getting ready to provide covering fire for his and Carter’s retreat. Three more Jaffa appeared,

the loud thunk-thunk of their marching gait giving them away long before they actually appeared. He briefly wondered why they never attempted to use stealth in their attacks, but the Jaffa's arrogance was the Tau'ri's gain.

He took the first Jaffa down that appeared round the corner and Carter was aiming for the second when her gun jammed. It took only a moment for O'Neill to finish off her intended target, as she ditched the weapon in favour of a back-up. Unfortunately, it was too long a time to stop the third Jaffa, who appeared already aiming and firing. The Colonel managed to squeeze off a shot, but the bullet missed his intended target as the Jaffa moved, instead striking him on the arm. He saw the weapon's fire go wide and it felt as though time slowed, as he instinctively guessed it's trajectory, straight towards his 2IC. His battle hardened reflexes continued without conscious thought and before he could voice a warning, he'd bowled her over and out of the way. He was momentarily aware of the stunned expression on her grime filled features, as the blast struck the rock-face behind where she'd been standing. Carter continued to stumble backwards, with a horrified expression on her face, as the rock wall exploded with the impact. The supports for the mine shaft gave way under the concussive force, blocking the tunnel and leaving the air full of thick, choking smoke.

"Sir? Colonel?" Carter shouted as she crawled forward, unable to see much until the air cleared. She heard shouts from behind, as people continued to wail over the din and her team mates called out to them, "God, Jack, where are you?" she called again, desperation colouring her voice as she continued to feel for him by hand in the gloom. She no longer worried about the Jaffa, as it seemed fairly obvious the tunnel was at least temporarily blocked and they were safe for the moment. She'd worry about dealing with them later on, but for now she had to find her CO. The dust and smoke slowly settled and she could make out the edge of the rock fall. The tunnel was indeed blocked and, as her eyes made out the different colours and textures of the formations, she could see her commander caught up in the very edge, at the bottom of the scree. The right side of his body, including his arm, leg and part of his chest were covered by the smaller, but sizeable debris. She knelt down beside him, but he didn't respond to either her calls, or her touch.

"Sir?" she asked again as Teal'c and Daniel appeared beside her.

"How is he?" Daniel gasped, as Sam felt for a pulse in his exposed neck. It was there, feeling strong and steady to her fingertips.

"He's alive, but I don't know how badly hurt. Let's try to get this lot off him."

Teal'c lifted a few of the larger rocks away from the vicinity, trying to avoid affecting the stability of the mound. The large Jaffa didn't want to cause a slip that could further move and jostle their CO, but every time he tried, he caused movement in the unstable slope,

"This is unsatisfactory, Major Carter. I fear we may injure him more if we do not get expert assistance first."

"You're right." she agreed.

As much as she wanted to free the Colonel to check him for injuries, the three of them were not enough to be able to extricate him on their own. At least he seemed relatively stable for now and it seemed the lesser of two evils to go and get help,

“Can you get out the back way and go back to the base for help? At least the Jaffa aren’t going to be bothering us in here any time soon.”

Teal’c nodded. “I will return with haste. I fear our radios will not be able to communicate through the mines, but I will return as soon as I am able.” He replied and went to catch up with the natives to follow them out of the mine. He knew it would be a longer trip back to the gate from the back exit, but it was the best he could do for the moment. He had no doubts about his ability to avoid detection, especially when the life of his friend and commander depended on it. The Colonel’s condition would only deteriorate the longer he was left without medical aid.

Daniel watched as Sam tried to clean their friend’s face of the loose shards and dust settling on him, “Is that blood?” he asked, looking at a small dark patch beneath the unconscious man’s head.

Sam nodded. “Yes, but I daren’t move him to check it out.” She investigated what she could of his body and, whilst not finding any evidence of broken bones, couldn’t believe there wasn’t damage where she couldn’t reach. Daniel helped her in removing what little debris they could off him, but it was more for their benefit, rather than the Colonel’s, as he remained unaware of them throughout the long wait for rescue.

The hours passed and it seemed as though the natives must have managed to escape. Several times they tried to radio Teal’c, but all they got was static in return. Finally, they stopped trying, having faith in the Jaffa’s ability to evade capture and bring back help. They hoped the natives were safe, but their thoughts were now fully occupied with their friend. They were grateful, nonetheless, when a few of the village men returned later to confirm the safety of the village. They offered to help free the Colonel, ashamed that in their flight they hadn’t known of his accident. Unfortunately, though, there was nothing that could be done to help at this late stage, even with all these extra people. Carter had enough basic first aid knowledge to know the Colonel had been trapped for too long to risk removing him without medical aid and drugs. All they could do was wait for Teal’c to return.

They’d grown numb from sitting by his side on the hard, cold ground and their concern grew the longer O’Neill remained unresponsive. Daniel had put his jacket over the unconscious man and Sam had used a med-kit to clean the cuts and grazes she could see. Part of her was glad he was unaware, because of the pain he would undoubtedly be in, but a larger part of her knew it was a bad sign that he still hadn’t come round. How serious was that blow to the head? It had stopped bleeding, but if they didn’t get help for him soon, they’d also have the problem of infection to deal with from the wound.

They lost track of the time as the day passed by, hardly even aware of the village men keeping a quiet vigil with them. Finally they heard fresh noises behind them and were momentarily startled by the sound, afraid that the Jaffa had returned. They both breathed a sigh of relief though, when they saw it was Teal’c and a rescue team, with the CMO and two medics in tow. Teal’c explained to Sam that he’d avoided the Jaffa without any difficulties, almost disdainful of their lack of vigilance, and they’d not been anywhere in sight upon his return. It seemed as though they’d decided they couldn’t afford any more losses and retreated, another sign of a lowly system lord. Doctor Fraiser immediately dropped down by the Colonel’s side, checking his vitals whilst shooting questions at them. She placed an oxygen mask on him and started an IV of fluids and drugs, before letting the rescue team work to get him free. Six SF’s with mountaineering experience had volunteered for the rescue mission. They were able to work together to remove the rubble around the trapped officer, whilst stabilising the remainder, to prevent it sliding any further down over it’s victim. It didn’t take long under their expertise before the Colonel was being uncovered and they could gauge the damage hidden from sight.

The Doctor and her medics watched the rescue, constantly monitoring their patient as the rocks were methodically removed. Fraiser was glad that his team had left their commander alone for their arrival. There was always a problem with crush victims who'd been trapped for more than a few minutes. It could be dangerous for the victim to be freed before medical help arrived, due to chemical imbalances that the trapped muscles produced and then released into the system. She watched over the proceedings carefully. If the Colonel had been awake, he would no doubt have been hollering at the abuse his body was suffering, but he didn't stir once, which was more frightening to the observers.

His team watched as Doctor Fraiser catalogued each injury as his body was slowly revealed. His lower arm and lower leg were both bent at unnatural angles. They were closed fractures, so the Doctor was hoping for less blood loss. This would, hopefully, also reduce the risk of shock and there was less likelihood of an infection getting in. She'd noticed the blood loss from a gash somewhere at the back of his head though. She gently ran her hands over his head, testing as lightly as she could for any irregularity before they attempted to move him. She couldn't feel any movement, to her relief, however he'd obviously suffered a severe impact on landing and she could feel a swelling forming around the wound. Only tests back at the base though would confirm the level of damage, or when he regained consciousness. She opened his jacket and sliced through his T-shirt, gently palpating his chest and stomach, checking for either rigidity, or the lack of it, in the wrong places. As she probed his chest she could feel too much give in a couple of ribs. "Damn." The others heard her quietly moan. She couldn't see any bruising indicative of internal injuries, or bleeding, but with the number of broken bones he'd suffered, he'd be lucky if there wasn't any other hidden damage.

As he was gently extricated, her team started to fix splints. The CMO herself fixed a cervical collar, not even needing to measure this particular patient for the correct size. Soon they had him completely free of obstructions and Fraiser co-ordinated getting him on the stretcher for the return trip to the gate. Once again he didn't respond to the movement, causing everyone more worry. Four of the SFs took the stretcher between them, cautiously raising it off the ground. Teal'c walked ahead to clear the route of any possible dangers and Carter and Daniel walked beside the Colonel, needing to be close. A few of the natives escorted them back, saying goodbye at the gate, but the team were hardly aware of their presence any more.

The enemy Jaffa had indeed long since disappeared, leaving no clues as to who they served, or where they'd gone. SG-1 were no longer interested in the reasons why, merely relieved that they had left and not hindered their rescue of their CO. Sam momentarily wondered about coming back later on when the Colonel was recovered, or sending another team through to find the answers for them.

The Colonel's condition hadn't changed during the long walk back to the gate and once safely in the SGC Fraiser rushed him to the infirmary. She left the General staring at the backs of the retreating SG-1 members, who were still too stunned to do more than act on auto-pilot. Dr Warner saw to their examinations and treated their small collection of cuts and bruises, sending them all off for showers once finished. Daniel and Teal'c allowed Carter to use the facilities first and once they'd done, returned automatically to the infirmary to wait outside the OR for news. General Hammond found them there and managed to get the gist of the story from them. He was happy to leave a full briefing for later, once they'd got a report off the Doctor about O'Neill's condition. The base's CO had a rudimentary knowledge of first aid, as required under his command, and he'd seen enough of the Colonel's appearance to know that the signs were not good. Everyone was silent, each with their own thoughts as the hours dragged by.

When Fraiser appeared, having changed from her bloodied scrubs into a clean gown, she studied the strained expressions of the people waiting and wished she had better news for them.

“He came out of the surgery well, but he’s not out of the woods yet.” She paused, tired and weary after her efforts over the past few hours. “I guess you all knew about the arm and leg, both tib/fib and radius/ulna breaks. Painful, but straight forward and they should heal OK over the next few weeks. He dislocated his right shoulder too, which wasn’t apparent at first from the way he was lying, but I’ve reset that and there doesn’t appear to be much ligament or nerve damage. He’s got two broken ribs and, again, I’m grateful for whatever luck follows the Colonel around, because there’s no evidence of internal injuries so far. He’s still seriously bruised around his abdomen though and will be in pain from all these injuries for a while to come.” She paused again, thinking over the catalogue of damage she’d had to deal with. “The real problem is his head. He took a really bad knock when he fell and hasn’t shown any inclination to wake up yet. He’s got a small fracture to the back of his skull and, although there’s no evidence that it shouldn’t heal with careful management, I’m bothered about his current lack of awareness. I’m hoping he’ll wake up soon, as the scans are showing some brain activity, but all we can do is wait for him to come out of it when he’s ready. Would you like to see him?”

It really was a redundant question, as all four bodies moved past her as soon as the sentence was uttered, and she followed them into the intensive care area of her small infirmary.

They weren’t surprised at the machines attached to their friend. Any patient with a head injury needed careful monitoring. It was just so unlike the Colonel to be so quiet and still, a contradiction to his natural state; always on the go, always moving or talking. The head of the bed was raised slightly, to ease breathing with his injured ribs and his chest was strapped to support them. They could see evidence of the cast on his lower leg, which was again slightly raised, the outline showing through the sheet covering their pale team mate. Both arms were outside the cover, one casted from the elbow to past the wrist, resting on a pillow, whilst the other had an IV running into it. There was also a wound dressing to the back of his head. Numerous small cuts and grazes marred his face and hands and they could see the evidence of fresh bruises starting to appear, which would no doubt grow to spectacular proportions over the next few days. Other tubes ran into more discreet areas of his body, not readily noticed by the quiet visitors. The urinary catheter would remove waste products, whilst the hemodialysis helped curtail any possible kidney damage from crush syndrome.

Silently his team arranged themselves around the bed, borrowing chairs from around the area and settling in for however long a haul it might turn out to be. General Hammond quietly took his leave of them. He felt confident that he’d be notified immediately upon any change in his subordinate’s condition and he thought SG-1 didn’t need his intrusive presence right now. Each lost in their own thoughts, Sam, Daniel and Teal’c quietly reviewed their feelings for their CO and what losing him would mean to each of them individually. They’d just been starting to get it back together as a team and now they worried whether that the chance might have been lost.

That’s how the three of them remained for the next four days, as they watched the nurses working around them, doing their regular checks on their patient. The infirmary staff moved around SG-1, hardly noticing their presence as they cared for the Colonel; moving him slightly, checking for bed sores, checking reflexes and responses, double-checking monitoring equipment, changing IV’s, monitoring drugs, anything to give an indication that their patient’s condition, or level of awareness, was changing.

SG-1 were a haunted looking threesome, even Teal'c had an air of despondency about his normally calm face. They only left the infirmary individually, to fetch meals back, or to shower and use the bathroom. One would leave whilst the others would wait their turn by his bedside. Janet sighed when she saw a table appear, followed by two laptops and some ancient books of Daniel's. Any other team would have been ushered away by this point, for taking such liberties, but SG-1 seemed to make the rules up as they went along. No one could begrudge the premier team their special privileges. Maybe it was because of their strong attachment to each other that they were pulled back from the brink so often, as the CMO hoped might happen now, which was why she relented.

No other team still had all their original members intact and, certainly, there was an unspoken feeling amongst base personnel that as long as SG-1 remained whole, then anything could be overcome. Now with their CO in such a poor condition, people left them alone, troubling them as little as possible. It would have surprised the Colonel to know that nearly everyone on the base asked over him at some point. Fraiser wouldn't allow casual visitors though, so General Hammond was the only other person who saw him, but O'Neill was never left alone. Sam and Daniel worked on translations, with Teal'c providing an oft-needed Goa'uld approach to perception. They spoke to their friend all the time, even throughout the night. They took it in turns to sleep, so that someone was always awake and talking to him. They kept him up to date with the base's news, hoping that somewhere inside his head he was listening to them and trying to come back.

Their anxiety would have lessened if they'd known that their CO was indeed listening to them. Although his sluggish mind was struggling to force his body back to a similar awareness, he was trying. He couldn't remember what had happened, or where he'd been, but he'd been in enough trouble to safely guess his present location. He knew the sounds of the infirmary too well to not realise where he was. At first he concentrated on the background beeps and whooshes of the machines, which confirmed he was tied into a gamut of the Doctor's technology. Then, as the days passed and he drifted in and out of awareness, he recognised individual voices, hearing his team and then the Doctor, but not understanding at first what they were saying. Slowly his mind cleared and he could follow their conversations.

It was day four of his coma that brought about the change. The Colonel was listening when Daniel lost a full morning's work; his system had crashed without the archaeologist having remembered to save it at any point. It was as near as O'Neill had heard the young man come to swearing. He'd wanted to comfort him when he heard the catch in Daniel's voice, as the younger man moaned that he couldn't think straight until Jack was better. He could picture Daniel standing there with his arms wrapped around his stomach, Carter holding him to comfort him, with the Jaffa's ever steady presence beside him. He tried desperately once more to move, to open his eyes, or move his arm, to do anything to let his team know he was aware of them and he cursed at his own inadequacies.

It was then that Daniel, through the tears in his eyes, looked over and drew in a sharp breath of air.

"What is it?" Sam asked, concerned, as she followed Daniel's eyes to the bed.

"It's Jack, I'm sure his fingers moved." Daniel rushed to the bed and took the older man's hand. "Jack, can you hear me?" Then his face broke out in a huge grin as he felt the slightest of pressures from the hand in his grasp.

Sam rushed out to find Fraiser, tears suddenly rushing down her smiling face as Daniel grasped his friend's hand tighter. "Jack, can you open your eyes for me?" He could see the Colonel's pupils moving under the closed lids, as he continued to encourage him, and was rewarded when both eyes slowly opened. The brown orbs were drowsy and dull, but they still managed to focus on his two remaining friends and a small grin appeared on the pale face.

“How many times have you told me to save what I’m doing?” He managed to whisper through his dry throat. Daniel laughed and Teal’c nodded a welcome back as the Doctor rushed in, a look of relief on her face.

Her pen light instantly at the ready, Fraiser moved past Teal’c to start checking the Colonel’s reflexes. How he hated that thing, he thought as he blinked at the intrusive brightness through half-closed lids.

“How’re you feeling Colonel?” She asked the expected question, noting his pupil response first and waiting for what reply a newly awakened coma patient would use; all necessary to evaluate his conscious state.

“Tired... sore... confused.” The response was quiet and slow. Sam poured some water into a beaker that had been waiting for him since his arrival and put the straw to his mouth. He took a small sip, relishing it’s coolness as it slipped down his parched throat. “What’d I do this time? Are you guys all OK?” He asked, slowly looking around him and noting their exhausted expressions.

“They’re all fine.” Fraiser replied for them, “Or they will be now you’re back in the land of the living. What do you remember?” She saw the puzzled, far away look in his eyes and wasn’t surprised at his response.

“Not sure, it’s all kinda fuzzy, but I seem to remember digging Teal’c out from the gate. How did I get here?” He saw the concerned looks about him and knew he was obviously missing something, but he didn’t have the energy to worry about it now.

“It doesn’t matter for now Colonel.” The Doctor reassured him. “It can all wait until later. You’ve had an accident and taken a knock to the head.” She could see O’Neill squirming slightly, no doubt trying out his body, checking for damage, and he groaned slightly. That saved her from having to check for nerve responses. She stilled him by placing a hand on his good shoulder. “It’s not a good idea to move just yet, Sir, you’ve also got a bit of a collection of broken bones too, but you’re going to be OK.”

He nodded his understanding as he looked down at himself; bandaged chest, casted arm and leg too. Jeez, it’d hurt when he’d tried to move, but he was too damned tired to try out that manoeuvre again, or investigate any further for now. There’d be plenty of time to try again later, he thought sleepily as his eyes drifted shut and everything faded away once more.

Fraiser watched, with a sigh of relief as his eyes closed and his breathing settled into the healing rhythm of natural sleep. It was the best thing for him and, now that he was out of the coma, they could all be assured that he was just sleeping and on the road to recovery. She looked at the shocked expressions on the rest of SG-1’s faces and realised that they were still reacting to their CO’s memory loss of the last two weeks.

“Don’t worry too much about that. Retrograde amnesia isn’t uncommon after a head injury. We’ll just have to see if his memory comes back over the next few days. It usually does.”

Sam bit her lip. “Do you think that his mind could have deliberately shut it out?” She faltered. “It’s been such a hard time for all of us.”

Fraiser shrugged her shoulders, in a very non-medical way. “Who knows how the mind works. It might be kinder in his current condition if he doesn’t remember just yet, considering how stressed

he was at the time.” Her voice was a little harsher than she’d intended it to be. She’d been keeping an eye on the unhappy Colonel, as had been the General, even if his team hadn’t. “But it’s up to the Colonel now. All you can do is be there for him, whether his memory comes back or not.”

She returned her attention back to her patient and straightened out the sheets over him again, checking the equipment once more around him. Now her biggest problem would be how to keep him occupied and quiet whilst he was in the middle of his recovery, without her nursing staff using up all their holiday quotas. JOIST, ‘The Jack O’Neill induced staff trauma’ syndrome was a recognised condition in the infirmary. He could reduce the most experienced of nurses into quivering wrecks within a week, especially when he was in pain and avoiding medications.

She looked around and faced the three remaining members of SG-1, noting relieved expressions now settling on their faces. Well, two faces were almost smiling and the third looked a lot more relaxed than it had done earlier that morning.

“Well folks,” she started, “here’s the problem.” She nodded down towards their CO, who was now blissfully unaware of them, safely in the arms of Morpheus. “How’re we planning to keep him in bed for the next few days without us having to handcuff him to it?” The tension that had been building for the past few days burst like a bubble and laughter filled the room as their friend slept on.

As the days passed, the Colonel was able to stay awake for longer and longer periods. They even managed a complete game of cards the following day, before he fell asleep on them again. Nobody mentioned the missing two weeks and they didn’t dissuade his reasoning that his accident had happened during his rescue from Edora. It seemed kinder not to mention his undercover work, or the harsh feelings that had existed between them in the aftermath of both missions. Daniel and Sam continued to work by his bed and the General brought in some light-weight reports for him to read. Nothing confidential, as his 2IC still had a tendency to fall asleep, leaving the pages to drift onto the floor where someone else would have to pick them up. His bruises were now out in full force, looking wonderfully garish against his pale skin and white bandages. However, as O’Neill wasn’t one for looking at himself in mirrors, it didn’t bother him as much as his team-mates, who were constantly reminded of how near they had come to losing him.

As his appetite increased and his strength returned, Fraiser let him up for short periods of time, mainly to go to the bathroom and back, as he hated bed-baths and the bedpan even more. He voiced his disgust at the wheelchair and the orderly in constant attention, but even he realised he couldn’t yet cope without the help. She’d already discontinued the catheter and the hemodialysis; as happy with the results of her ongoing tests as the Colonel was unhappy with taking them. The first time he’d rushed to get up, in typical O’Neill fashion, and she’d had to hold him steady for a moment as dizziness had overtaken him. “Take it easy.” she’d cautioned and after that he’d moved more slowly, desperate to do things on his own. To the Colonel, the worst thing that could happen was a lack of control and being under her tender ministrations was just that.

It was now a week since he’d regained consciousness and the Doctor was happy with his progress. Head trauma’s could be tricky and could throw the unexpected curve at you when you least expected it, but she’d seen nothing to indicate any worrying trends: no muscular weakness, other than couldn’t be attributed to his other injuries; no vomiting or double vision; and no changes in his level of consciousness to indicate progressive brain damage. Keeping the Colonel here actually put him under stress, which didn’t help his recovery. Therefore, she made a decision that other civilian doctors might have disagreed with, but the SGC was not your usual organisation and she couldn’t

run her infirmary, nor treat her patients, like any other hospital could. She'd send him home, where he'd be happier, as long as his team went to watch over him. It would do them all good to get away from the SGC together, give them time to relax before they were next called upon to offer life and limb in the cause of interplanetary peace, or whatever the current euphemism was for the job they did. Anyway, there was nothing to stop her calling in on her friends each evening to make sure her most difficult patient was behaving himself, was there?

As she approached his bed, he was sitting up and alone for the first time since the accident.

"All on your own, Colonel?" She asked, as she started to pick up the mess from the floor. This time he'd been tearing sheets off one of her blank patient chart pads and making paper planes, which he'd then been aiming for the waste paper basket. It must have been difficult, folding the paper with one arm in both a cast and a sling. However, he must have figured a way round that as, to his credit, most of them had made it. Once the basket was filled, the area around it had started to look like an airforce junk yard.

"Uh huh. Told them to find a life outside of here. Even got them to take that table back, although I had heard the canteen was offering a reward for it's safe return."

The Doctor grinned in response, as she squashed his origami handiwork, much like a metal crusher would have done. "Your latest test results are back and I'm glad to say there's nothing out of the ordinary. You're making another text-book recovery, so I'm going to send you home for the rest of your convalescence."

She grinned at his response. He reminded her of a goldfish, opening his mouth, but without any sound coming out. Eventually his wits caught up with him and he gulped, "Really?"

"Yes, really." She nodded and watched his face light up with some much needed colour at long last.

As much as she might have wanted to keep him here for a few more days, under observation, she knew it was a nigh-on impossible task with this particular patient. He always found some way to sneak out, or bully her as he got stronger. Many was the time, under previous visits, that she'd found him absconded into the canteen, or Daniel's lab, or the staff lounge, looking for all the world like he'd no need of her services any longer. He was just too good at this disappearing act and too good at bluffing the staff for them to not realise he hadn't been released from her care yet. At least when the rest of SG-1 were about, and not out on another mission, she could rely on them to help keep an eye on him. Knowing the General had decided to keep SG-1 on stand-down from active duty for a few weeks, prompted her decision to release him. However, she also needed to curb his natural tendencies to overdo things. She'd let him go now, whilst she still had some control over his attitude, rather than let it drag on and lose him to his own sensibilities later on.

"I'm going to let you out of here, but only if you behave yourself." Now his face took on a guarded expression, "You're going to go straight home and to bed, no driving, and someone has to be with you at all times."

"My team can do that." He said, with a slight grin on his face. He didn't want to let on just how much more fun he'd have at home with his team, than stuck in the infirmary.

"I know." She replied, "I'm going to have a word with them now, as you get dressed. However, you already know the drill about food, alcohol and medicines, so I'm not going to bother repeating myself. *No* and I mean *no* exercise, other than strictly necessary. No jogging round the park, or running up and down the stairs. I want you to keep to your bed for the next few days, so no nipping

topside for stargazing either. It's too cold for you in your present condition. I'll be popping in doing a few house calls and I'll let you know when you can get up. Also, no getting your casts wet, so I'm afraid it's having to wash using the sink until I can replace these with braces."

His face had fallen slightly during this recitation. It wasn't anything he hadn't heard before, but it seemed obvious Fraiser was going to be keeping a close watch on him, especially if she was planning on regular home visits.

"If you feel anything unusual, headaches, nausea, that sort of thing, you're to get in touch with me immediately, no matter what the time of day or night it is. Do I make myself clear, Colonel?" She stressed his title, leaning on the bed and looking him straight in the eyes. This was obviously not just a chat between friends, but more of a military order.

"No beer, huh?" He mock growled at her, as though this was the only part of the conversation he'd heard.

She shook her head and smiled back, knowing he'd accepted her terms. "No beer. Are you OK to sort yourself out whilst I get the others?"

He nodded, hating having someone help him get dressed.

"There's a nurse down the hallway, just holler if you need anything." She moved over to a nearby cupboard and brought him a clean set of fatigues and underwear from the supply she always had in stock, especially for SG-1. Unfastening the back of the hospital gown first, she left him to get out of it on his own, then pulled the curtain around the bed before finding the rest of SG-1 to give them their CO-sitting duties for the next few weeks.

She found the rest of the team in Daniel's lab, struggling to settle down to work, having been forced out of the infirmary by the Colonel himself. Her chat with General Hammond earlier had convinced him to keep them on stand-down for a few weeks. This way they could alternate catching up on background work around the base, whilst taking turns to watch over their CO at home, until he was fit again. They looked up when she walked in, obviously worrying if the Colonel had taken a downturn.

"Everything OK?" Daniel asked, quickly shutting his laptop.

"Everything's fine." She replied, allaying their initial fears, "In fact, that's what I've come to see you all about. I'm letting the Colonel go home, providing someone takes care of him."

"Are you sure he's up to it?" Sam asked, remembering his still bruised appearance from that morning. All three of them looked a little puzzled by the Doctor's decision.

"I know it seems a little early and if it were anyone else I'd keep them here a few days longer under observation, but you know the Colonel. The minute I turn my back he'll be off like an unguided missile and he's already getting vocal with the nurses. Poor Lt. Michaels only asked if he was ready for his next pain meds, but I could hear his reply from the other end of the infirmary. He hates being cooped up in there and providing someone can keep reins on him at home, I'm sure he'll be a lot happier and heal a lot quicker there."

Teal'c looked like he had a small smile on his face at that comment, whilst Daniel was trying to picture someone struggling to get the obstinate Colonel into a set of childrens reins.

“However, there are a few ground rules to go with this. He’s under complete bed rest, apart from use of the bathroom, until I say otherwise. I’ll be popping in each evening after work to check on him and make sure he’s taking his meds. Good food, lots of protein, fibre and fluids, absolutely no alcohol and lots of sleep. That’s about all he needs for the moment, but he’s not to be left alone, under any circumstances, or the deal’s off. Any questions, or problems?”

“I can see no problems, Doctor Fraiser.” Teal’c replied for all of them.

“I can go and get some food in, as I need to get some things for myself anyway,” Daniel started.

“Whilst Teal’c and I take him home.” Sam finished.

“That’ll mean leaving his Jeep here, which probably isn’t a bad thing.” Daniel thought aloud.

“Good.” Fraiser smiled and turned to Daniel. “Daniel, do you mind giving him a hand? He hates the nurses helping him to get dressed, so I left him to it, but he’s bound to be finding it difficult.”

“Uh, huh.” He eagerly replied, getting up and rushing out of the door whilst the CMO turned back to the other two.

“Thanks a lot for this. He’s probably going to get grumpy as he heals and he’ll be in considerable pain if he avoids his meds, although I’m slowly reducing the dosage now. He’s not allowed baths or showers yet, until I can get rid of those casts, so he’s going to have to struggle using the sink. You might want to keep an ear open whilst he’s in there. He’ll still be sleepy a lot of the time and not overly hungry, but I don’t really expect any problems. Just promise me you’ll call me straight away if anything seems amiss. As I said, if it were anyone else, or someone without such a close support group, I wouldn’t be doing this at all.”

“Do not worry about Colonel O’Neill. We will take good care of him.” Teal’c reassured her. The Doctor nodded, smiling in relief and left them.

When she got back to the infirmary she found a very happy Colonel being helped into his fatigue jacket by Daniel. “Lots of vids.” O’Neill was saying as she collected a wheelchair and pushed it over towards them. The Colonel eyed it in disgust and was about to complain when she raised an eyebrow and he shut his mouth again silently. He held his good arm out to Daniel and his friend helped him off the bed and into the hated contraption.

“Here are your meds.” She handed over a bag. “Everything’s labelled and I’ll be checking each day to make sure you’re taking them all.” She looked down right into his eyes again, giving him no chance to look away. “No skipping them, Sir, or I’ll have you back in here so fast you’ll think you’re in a tail spin. Understood?”

O’Neill just grinned back up at her. “Don’t know what you mean, ma’am.” He joked, looking far happier than his current appearance would suggest. He still looked a mess, she thought unhappily, but years of dealing with an injured Jack O’Neill had taught her that he was somewhat unique and deserved to be treated as such. She admired her friend immensely and cut him far more slack than anyone else, although her patience had its limit if pushed too far. She was still the CMO when all said and done.

Sam and Teal’c chose that moment to appear, with their bags packed in record time.

“Ready for off, Sir?” His 2IC asked, taking the back of the wheelchair.

“Home James!” Came his instant reply and Fraiser heard Teal’c querying who James was as they disappeared, leaving her feeling strangely bereft in the now quiet infirmary.

The journey back to their CO’s place wasn’t a long one. He’d deliberately chosen a location close to the base, as befitted his 2IC status, but it also made it handy for the rest of his team in times of emergencies. However, the struggle getting in and out of the wheelchair, combined with the journey, had worn him out. Teal’c helped him out of the car and, once inside, upstairs and in to the master bathroom. Sam got fresh bedding sorted out and politely left whilst Teal’c helped him out of his fatigues and into comfy jogging bottoms. She returned a few minutes later with the medicine bag and a glass of water and between them they soon had a shaking Colonel into the bed.

“Here you go.” She said handing over the requisite pills. He downed them without protest and laid back, falling asleep instantly, whilst they arranged spare pillows under his arm and leg.

Teal’c took the used bedding downstairs whilst Sam continued to stare at her CO for a while longer. They’d all suffered during his last two missions. If only they’d stopped to think a little while longer, maybe they’d have realised the Colonel might have been hurt more than they. That almost fateful mission to Netu, when they’d all risked everything to save her father. He’d been wounded then too, trying to protect her. He’d let himself be Goa’uled by Hathor, rather than let it happen to her or Daniel. He’d wanted her to leave him behind when they were trapped in the Antarctic. There were just too many instances of him sacrificing himself on his team’s behalf.

How could one man be so strong and take on so much pain for others? Because he cared too much?

Why had they shut him out so easily upon his return and felt the need to punish him so much? Because they cared too much too?

Looking at him now, battered and bruised from saving her once again, only deepened her feelings for this man. His confused response at finally being rescued from Edora was probably just that; as Hammond said, he’d been confused after thinking that he’d been left alone yet again, one of his worst nightmares come true. Then his undercover stint for the alliance. He’d been protecting them yet again, trying to save them from being abandoned by their allies. Finally, she could imagine how much it must have hurt him to lie to them. After all, they seemed to be the only people left in his life now, his family as much as anyone else had ever been. The Colonel was unlike any other commander she’d ever known, constantly putting his own safety and needs behind that of his team, not the other way round. She eyed the few scars she could see as her friend moved slightly in his sleep, subconsciously trying to find a more comfortable position for his damaged limbs, the sheet moving slightly with him, across his chest.

It’s not as though she hadn’t seen him in various states of undress whilst on missions, in the infirmary during examinations, or even whilst tending injuries off-world. He was neither modest, nor shy about his physique. It was simply *him* and on missions you didn’t have time for that kind of self-awareness. No one did. However, she couldn’t deny having a certain curiosity about him, although she wasn’t able to openly study him whilst other people were about. It might have led to the wrong conclusions. Now, with no one to watch, and the object of her curiosity fast asleep, she could pay attention to the faint marks that peppered his visible skin. A knife wound here, a bullet mark there, the Goa’uld entry mark which she knew was behind his neck. Was that one the remains of a staff weapon blast, or some long ago reminder of his time in Iraq? She knew something of the ways the average POW was treated in those places, techniques involving (amongst other things),

chains and electric shock treatment. Various tortures left vague patterns on the victims bodies and she'd heard he'd been held for four long months in one of those prisons. These were just the few scars she could see. She knew he had many more traversing his body, hidden for now beneath the sheets.

She'd known that he was ex-special forces, prior to transferring over from the Pentagon. She'd used her contacts and had accessed some basic information before she'd committed herself to the move, but it was surprising how little intel she could access. Her first meeting with him had come as a shock. He was far more charismatic than she'd ever expected from his concise reports, not at all like the stiff-shirted officers she usually reported to. Initially she'd taken his rebuttal of her as the standard macho 'I don't like women' attitude, but in disguise. However, it was only a matter of days before she'd realised she really didn't have to prove herself because she was a woman. He genuinely did only have a problem with scientists. He expected her to prove her weight first and foremost as a soldier, if he was to accept her on his team. That was something she now knew he'd expect of anyone in the dangerous games they played going through the gate. Their very lives depended on it and if he was prepared to give his for them, he damn well expected the same level of dedication in return. Although he'd never let anyone sacrifice themselves for him, she thought wryly.

She laughed quietly at her own naiveté, remembering how strong she'd come over in that first meeting. Talk about getting hold of the wrong end of the stick. Yet she realised now it was probably that very attitude that'd endeared her to the sarcastic Colonel in the first place. He probably thought if she fights like she talks, she's OK by me. If only he would talk to them sometimes, let them in on what he was thinking, then maybe this whole mess might never have happened.

As if hearing her, the Colonel twisted on the bed, quietly moaning in his sleep, saying something she couldn't understand. He flinched from something she couldn't see and, although she couldn't understand the language he was using, she guessed by the tone he was probably cursing at something, or someone. Worried that the pain from his injuries was permeating his sleep and disturbing his rest, which he needed, she reached down and gently ran her hand through his hair.

"Shhh, Jack. Everything's OK, rest easy."

To her surprise, he stilled under her touch and a slight smile slowly graced his once again peaceful face.

Had he just been remembering something from real life? He was as tight-lipped as a clam about his service history and never mentioned his past missions. How much had he lived through back then, to make him the man he was now? He was, undoubtedly, a man of uncommon valour and his damaged body only served as a testament to both his physical and mental strengths. He must have so much pain locked inside him and not just from Charlie, again something he never discussed. They'd all been witness to his occasional nightmares, when some situation they'd been in had disturbed his sleep and brought back demons from his past. You trod carefully around the Colonel when that happened and even the infirmary staff knew to approach him carefully when he was in the throes of a bad dream. His body tended to react on years of self-preserving instinct and he'd lash out with deadly accuracy before he'd wake up and realise where he was.

Deciding that if she was much longer, Teal'c would send out Search And Rescue, she quietly left the room. She left the door slightly ajar, so they could hear any disturbances from downstairs, and went back down to where the Jaffa was trying to master the washing machine.

“Major Carter,” he started, “I am unfamiliar with the controls of this make of machine. It is different from the ones at the SGC, please could you assist me?”

She showed him how to work the panel on the washer and then settled herself in front of the television set, where Teal’c joined her a few minutes later. They settled together on one of the couches, in companionable silence to watch the day time soap’s, until Daniel turned up with enough food to feed the SGC for a month.

Daniel was a good cook, a skill he’d perfected on Abydos, and once they’d got all the shopping put away he started preparing vegetables and meat for a simple stew. He put it on a slow cook, giving the Colonel plenty of time to sleep the afternoon away, hoping he’d wake up hungry. Sam tidied up the house. It wasn’t as though O’Neill left things deliberately messy, but their lifestyles often meant that they’d have to leave in a hurry and not be back for days. This was even more so for their CO, with his extra responsibilities at the SGC. Teal’c hovered, a task he actually enjoyed, having never come across a machine like this before his introduction to suburbia, whilst Sam dusted around him.

She took a moment to study the collection of medals over the fireplace. Her military insight into the sort of deeds done to earn them always made her stop and evaluate. These were no sit behind the desk, paperwork shuffling awards. She was unsure why the Colonel had them so prominently on display, rather than the more usual photos, it was just another puzzle to the man. Maybe they reminded him that everything he’d endured had been for a worthwhile cause and valued. Maybe they reminded him of the comrades he must surely have lost along the way, or maybe he just couldn’t handle the pain of having family snapshots on view. She doubted that if she asked him, he’d ever tell her. He rarely revealed personal information, which was in direct conflict with his attitude if any of his team had a problem. His ready wit and sarcasm led the casual acquaintance to think there was nothing deep about the man, but that was so misleading once you knew him. Sam didn’t know of anyone deeper or with a more mysterious past.

As if on cue, they all heard him shout from above. “What ya doin’ down there, leaving a sick man all on his own up here?”

They grinned and wandered up to where their team mate was sat up in bed, struggling to re-arrange the pillows behind him single handed and looking bereft of anything to do. The aromas of hot food coming up the stairs had woken him from the first really restful sleep he’d had, now he was away from the infirmary.

“What ya cooking?” He asked as he looked up at them.

“Something Janet would approve of.” Danny replied, as he helped plump the pillows up behind him. “Hungry yet?”

“Little bit.”

“OK, something that’s definitely not pizza coming right up. Where are we going to eat?” Daniel looked around the room and at the single chair by the bed. It just never occurred to any of them not to eat together, like they did with almost every meal of their lives whilst on duty.

“Why not just sit on the bed?” Sam asked with a shrug of her shoulders and, as no one seemed bothered by that informal suggestion, that’s what they did.

A large mound of buttered bread was gently placed in the middle of the Colonel’s legs and bowls of hot stew quickly disappeared along with it. Even the patient managed a full helping, although he

couldn't cope with the cheesecake afterwards. He obediently took his pills off Sam, which left Daniel smirking, because he was sure he wouldn't have taken them so willingly off anyone else and Sam took the empty plates back down to the dishwasher.

O'Neill soon felt the need to relieve himself and gestured towards the adjoining doorway. "So who wants to help an old man to the bathroom?" He asked as he threw the bed sheets to one side.

"Guess we could toss for it?" Daniel responded, pushing his glasses up his nose and routing in his pockets for loose change.

Teal'c merely looked puzzled again, as yet another new idiom was thrust his way, "I will help you O'Neill, but I must remind you that I am in fact older than yourself."

"I know, I know." The Colonel grunted as Teal'c took his left arm and gently pulled his CO upwards. Teal'c assisted O'Neill to the toilet, but respecting his privacy, exited the bathroom to wait for him outside the door. It was at this point that Sam returned with freshly made hot coffee's for everyone. She frowned at the empty bed and Daniel nodded his head towards the master-bathroom with Teal'c waiting patiently outside, so Sam put the tray of cups on the bedside cabinet to wait.

Inside the bathroom, the Colonel was carefully washing his hands, trying to avoid wetting his cast. He stared absentmindedly in the mirror, at the bruises on his face, when his eyes caught something black that had fallen behind the linen bin. Drying his hands, he hobbled over without calling for Teal'c and reached down to retrieve the article to put it in with the rest of the laundry. It was his black bull cap. Carefully leaning down to pick it up, he reached for the lid off the bin and was about to drop it in when images started to flash through his mind. At first they were fleeting and indistinct, not making any sense, but then they started to coalesce.

He remembered bringing the rogue unit back through the gate. He'd been wearing that cap at the time. He remembered arresting Makepeace and the stunned reactions of his team: telling Carter how he'd not been acting like himself since he'd met her; telling Daniel how there wasn't much of a foundation to their friendship; Daniel telling him they'd drawn straws to visit him and he'd lost.

God, how could he have been so cruel to them? The only true friends he had left.

Then he remembered how they'd already been stressed because of his behaviour on Edora. Jesus, he'd even asked Laira if she wanted to come back with him. He'd been such a dope, trying to do the right thing by her, putting his own desires behind him and getting it all wrong in the process. He must have looked damned ungrateful to his team. He felt as if someone had punched him in the guts. He still couldn't remember how he'd got his present injuries, but it was obviously nothing to do with Edora.

How could his team bear to be here with him now? He could only vaguely remember Hammond giving him time off as things were so bad between them.

He opened the door back into the bedroom, still clutching his cap and ignored a confused Teal'c waiting for him. Hardly aware of anything around him, he hobbled precariously without support, ignoring the pain from his leg. Teal'c reached out for his arm and he jerked away as if stung, getting the attention of their other two team-mates.

"Get away from me, all of you." He growled, hurt and confused as images continued to assault him, so strongly that he was having problems separating the images from the past with what his eyes

could see of the present. It was too much of a jumble. He couldn't think straight as his senses were bombarded.

"O'Neill, what is troubling you?" Teal'c asked again as he followed his friend's unsteady steps towards the main bedroom door.

Sam noticed the cap he was carrying and seeing the vacant look on his face, quickly worked out what was happening, "Oh, God, he's remembering."

Teal'c and Daniel had both moved in front of him by this time, blocking his exit from the room and the stairs beyond.

Sam tried to reason with him, "Jack, it doesn't matter. Whatever you're remembering, it's all gone now, forgotten."

"How can you stand to be with me, after all I've done to you?" He almost shouted at them, quickly turning, trying to get away from them as they closed in on him. He needed air to breathe and they were making him feel claustrophobic. Unfortunately, his leg gave out beneath him as he turned and he collapsed to the floor with a painful grunt. Luckily he landed on his left side and the deep pile carpet helped to cushion his graceless fall.

"Jack?" Sam dropped to her knees by his side, leaning over him, "Are you OK? Did you hurt anything?"

He clenched his good fist and tried to thump it into the carpet, but found he didn't have the leverage to vent his frustrations, "Only the most important things I've ever had." He murmured quietly. "Go away, get outta here."

Daniel joined Sam on the floor beside him, "What're the most important things, Jack?"

The Colonel's breathing had quickened and he was almost hyperventilating, as his mind struggled to keep pace with the memories vying for attention. It felt like he was drowning in them. His friends watched, fear on their faces as they tried to deal with this sudden and dangerously emotive situation. O'Neill tried to crawl away from them using his left arm and leg, but nothing seemed to work properly.

"Why can't you leave me alone?" He whispered. "Can't you see I'm no good for you? I'm nothing but a cheat and a liar. You deserve better than me, please go." Their injured friend pleaded. "I'll tell Janet I kicked you out. I'll take the responsibility." He turned his head into the carpet, suddenly too tired to talk, or move anymore, just hoping they'd go and leave him in peace.

Sam gently took the cap from his limp fingers and reached towards his face, slowly turning it back towards her, surprised to see moisture gathering in his eyes. In his current condition it was no wonder he'd been overwhelmed.

"Come on, Sir." She coaxed, "This is just turmoil after the accident and everything coming back so quickly. We need you. What happened were just misunderstandings and we've got over it. It was all forgiven. Please believe us Jack. Please."

He blinked up at her, then Daniel and Teal'c, who both gazed down at him softly, in concern.

"Is it?" He seemed uncertain. "I can't remember it all yet."

Sam was sure after her recent contemplation's that they were all in agreement. "Yes, we forgave each other days ago."

The Colonel's breathing was slowly starting to even out, as the initial rush of images steadied and he listened to her, calming down. He couldn't remember ever feeling so exhausted and unable to move. Daniel reached out towards him.

"Come on Jack, there's nothing to beat yourself up about. Let's get you back into bed, or Janet'll have our hides."

The weary man nodded and let Daniel carefully roll him onto his back, mindful of his injuries, then reach under both arms to haul him slowly upwards. He relaxed fully into the younger man's strength, seemingly unable to move by himself. Teal'c helped support him once righted and they walked him steadily back to the bed, one slow step at a time. O'Neill laid down and Daniel straightened the sheets over him as Teal'c sorted out pillows under his casts again.

"Go to sleep, Sir." Sam instructed and they watched as their CO silently slipped away from them, worn out by the emotional upheaval of the last few minutes.

"I don't want to go through that again." Daniel commented as Sam took the drinks back down the stairs, followed by her team mates.

"We keep thinking he's impervious to pain and emotion," Sam replied, "but we're wrong. He hurts just as easily as the rest of us."

Teal'c had always understood that O'Neill was only doing a job to keep them all safe. "He keeps his feelings locked within himself, hidden behind humour, but he feels more deeply for us than mere comrades. Was our last mission not just another example of that? He risked his life for one of us again."

Once back in the lounge, the Jaffa reached for the phone at the bottom of the stairs. "I think we should inform Doctor Fraiser, as she may wish to re-examine Colonel O'Neill for further injuries."

"I think you're right," Daniel agreed, "but she's not going to be pleased with us."

Teal'c nodded his head in that slight manner which signified agreement and proceeded to punch in the number for Cheyenne Mountain.

When Fraiser appeared at the house, she wasted little time in letting the waiting SG members know exactly what she thought of their invalid caring abilities. Her eyes flashed with suppressed anger and concern that her faith in them may have been misplaced, at the cost to her patient. However, she mellowed a little when they explained it was the Colonel's memories coming back that had triggered the episode. Be that as it may, if he'd hurt himself further, she promised they were all going to get their next year's injections off the trainee nurses. The doctor told them to wait downstairs as she went up to the master bedroom.

The Colonel was still asleep and she had to shake him gently to wake him. Blinking sleepily at her, he smiled.

“Hi Doc.”

“Hi yourself, Sir. Hear you’ve been doing acrobatics this afternoon, so how about I just check everything’s still in the same place as I left it earlier?”

He just grinned back up at her, feeling more relaxed, even with his injuries, than he had been for some time and the Doctor noticed the difference.

“How much do you remember?” She asked.

“Nothing to do with this,” he said, indicating his current condition with a nod of his head downwards, “but I think most things prior to it, like Edora and Makepeace.”

Fraiser nodded. “It may never all come back you know.” She told him.

“I know, been here, done it before, got the tee-shirt, but it doesn’t bother me.” He replied, perfectly happy to exchange a few days remembrances for the friendship of his team back.

She knew from his medical records that he no doubt had been in exactly this position before and knew what to expect. If anyone could handle being messed about in the head, it was probably the stubborn Colonel.

She checked each of his injuries with practised eyes and hands and even removed the dressing from the back of his head. She might not have approved of this afternoon’s antics, but it seemed as though everything had worked out for the best in the end.

“That’s it for now, Colonel. You go back to sleep and I’ll see you again tomorrow. Won’t be long at this rate before you’re back on your feet once more.”

“Uh, huh. Thanks, Janet.” He knew he’d come very close to being chewed out and he wouldn’t have blamed her, now he was thinking clearly again.

“You’re welcome Jack, just no more accidents, OK?”

He mock saluted her with the wrong hand, to which she laughed, and then settled back down sleepily once she’d gone.

Left alone with his thoughts, he couldn’t believe how close he’d come to trashing his ‘family’ yet again. He realised that although he had extenuating circumstances for most of what he’d done recently, he was still lucky that they seemed to care for him, as much as he cared for them. They’d actually forgiven him, in spite of everything. He guessed that sometime in his life he must’ve done something good, or why else would he have such loyal friends now?

Smiling, he closed his eyes and quickly drifted off to sleep again, so he missed hearing the Doctor tell the others that they wouldn’t be needed for needle practice after all. Although neither would they be getting any second chances!

Teal’c elected to stay over that night and they soon had a rota worked out, giving each of them a chance to catch up on other things. The Colonel woke up in the morning to being fussed over by the Jaffa, complete with a continental breakfast already laid out on a tray. He hated the fussing part, but

once more was overwhelmed by his team's continued loyalty. After he'd finished eating and Teal'c took the tray away, he got his friend to find him his latest astronomy book, a gift off Daniel, and read until Danny and Sam appeared at mid-day.

"So what're we doing now?" their CO asked when all three appeared together in his bedroom, "What vids did you get to watch?" he asked Daniel, as someone always hired video's out whilst they were on down-time.

"Uh, you're meant to stay in bed Jack and the TV's downstairs."

Their friend's face fell. "Oh, come on, you know I can't get stuck here with nothing to do but read."

"Well, " Daniel started, secretly pleased that his friend was reading the book he'd bought him, "I could go and get my set and put it in here. After all, I'll probably be over here most of the time anyway."

"Way to go, Danny boy." The Colonel grinned and Daniel turned to Teal'c.

"Give us a hand?"

Teal'c nodded. "We shall return shortly, Colonel O'Neill."

Then they both left, leaving Sam in charge.

She'd been downstairs for half an hour, preparing dinner, when she heard cursing from the bedroom. Rushing back upstairs, she found him struggling to get out of bed.

"And just where do you think you're going?" She asked, slightly alarmed after yesterday's events. He raised his eyebrows.

"Only the bathroom, I'm not going AWOL just yet."

He tried to stand, but caught his casted foot in the sheet as it draped on the floor. For one frightening moment it looked as though he might have fallen again if she hadn't reached him first. He grinned as her arms snaked around him, relieved beyond words at her unhesitating touch. It felt so good to be back to normal and he slipped into the old flirting routine.

"Didn't realise this was a date, Major."

Sam struggled to remain calm, giddy against the mixture of his familiar humour and the feel of his bare waist against her arms. Well, it was bare beneath the strapping for his ribs, anyway. How many of the women back on the base would kill to be in her position now, she thought. Being with a half naked Jack O'Neill in his bedroom. She didn't realise just how uptight she'd been around him lately and how much she'd missed being this close until now.

"I'll walk you through the door, Sir, but that's as far as I go on a first date."

"It's Jack, especially when you've got your hands around me in my bedroom."

She couldn't help but laugh, it was almost as if he'd been reading her thoughts.

“Well, in that case, I hung my Major’s title by the door when I came in too. It’s Sam to potential boyfriends.”

He grinned down at her as he steadied himself against her and then hobbled slowly into the bathroom. She retrieved him once he’d called that he’d finished and helped him back to the bed, noticing that he’d actually allowed her take most of his weight.

“So, I’ve got potential then, have I?” He asked, raising his eyebrows, as she helped to straighten all the sheets back onto the bed around him.

She was about to retort with a joke about his ‘potential’ when she noticed a semi pensive look cross his face. He couldn’t possibly be serious, could he? For a brief moment she actually considered the possibility. No, of course he wasn’t. He was injured and tired.

“Time for you to lie back down fly-boy and get some rest.”

He wasn’t sure why he’d just baited her and felt a moment of regret at her easy dismissal, but in truth, he did feel tired. He allowed her to help re-arrange the pillows on the bed and then took the pills she gave him, washing them down with the ubiquitous glass of water. He couldn’t ignore his heavy eyelids any longer, and silently moaned that he seemed to be nothing else these days, but sleep. However, he was still aware that it was better than the alternative, which was being dead.

As sleep claimed him once more, he felt the weight of the past few weeks slip away. Soon Danny and Teal’c would be back with another TV and video player and they could enjoy watching whatever Daniel had brought them. A few days, all together, healing more than just broken bones was exactly what the doctor ordered and Jack didn’t mind that one little bit. His last conscious thoughts were about getting back to work. How fast he could get around the SGC with his casts on – motorised wheelchair versus crutches.....

The End