

Title: Struggling Back

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Pairing: None.

Rating: 13+

Season: Three? Sam's a Major.

Spoilers: Slight for The Fifth Race, The Nox and One False Step.

Summary: A primitive race take exception to SG1's intrusion and Jack pays the price.

Warnings: Slight Violence.

Status: Complete March 2002.

Notes: I'm still new to fanfic writing, so apologies if my research leaves a little to be desired. I am trying harder, honest! Feedback would be appreciated. However, no flames please. I can burn my own toast without any help, thank you.

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Jack O'Neill strode through the maze-like corridors of the SGC feeling extremely pleased with himself. It had been a glorious weekend and he'd had a terrific break from work. Sunshine, Bar-B-Que., beer, friends and, to top it all, his favourite team had won. What more could a man want? Well, he had plenty of ideas about that and some were definitely x-rateable, but he wasn't complaining. He had a job he thoroughly enjoyed doing and the company of friends who'd go to any lengths for him. A picture of Daniel popped into his mind and he amended the last thought. Some friends had to be restrained from going too far, because they were always getting their asses kicked off the bad guys.

He headed towards the control room for a brief update on matters, before settling down to whatever reports were inevitably waiting in his in-tray.

Sam Carter practically heard the bounce in his step as the Colonel came to a stop behind her seat. She didn't even need to turn around to recognise his footsteps, but did so anyway, smiling up at him.

"Good morning, Sir. Have a good weekend?"

"You betcha." he replied, head on one side as he studied the picture being transmitted by the MALP onto the screen before her. "What'cha got there?" His expression was curious.

“PC3 188, actually.” she said, as she turned enthusiastically back to the screen. Once more taking control of the MALP, she started panning the camera around the area. “One of the addresses you programmed in from the Ancient’s information.”

“And did I pick us a pretty spot then, Major?” he swayed behind her on the balls of his feet, looking at the image of a thickly wooded area, surrounding the gate. It never ceased to amaze him how many planets were similar to their own. Of course, he understood the need for similar geographies if you were going to transplant a similar species throughout the galaxy, but it amazed him nonetheless. He was about to make a comment to that effect, when a sly smile stole across his face. Better not mention any big words in front of Carter. It was far too much fun to play his intelligence down when she was around.

“Difficult to say so far, Sir. Environmental conditions are all within tolerable ranges. I was about to ask the General for permission to send the UAV through to look for life signs. That’s if I can get above the trees, they’re pretty close to the gate here.” She turned around to look up at him again, as though asking permission, smiling in response to the relaxed expression on his face.

“OK, you’ve sold me on it. I’m going to catch a coffee and then I’ll be in my office. Seen Danny and Teal’c anywhere?”

“Daniel was working on the artefacts SG4 brought back and Teal’c was taking a class in the gym earlier.”

He nodded at her, grinning slightly as Carter turned eagerly back to the screen, then he spun on his heels and headed out. Their last two missions had been peaceful and boringly uneventful. Not that he was particularly complaining about it, though, but neither did he want to spend the rest of his military career collecting samples. However, it was still a nice change when nothing went wrong for a while. Far too often his team had come back with more holes than they’d signed out with and he took each slight against his people personally. The past few weeks had been a godsend, or at least a fake godsend, he thought. Without running into any of the scheming slimy snake-heads, his team had all had time to unwind a bit more between missions.

Carter had been up to her slight little neck in doohickeys, having an intellectual party for one as report after report, on whatever she was doing, filled up his in-tray. One of these days he might actually admit to reading them. Daniel had been in rock heaven for the sleep-challenged. He’d been babbling non-stop about some statues SG4 brought back and the Colonel was debating about handcuffing the scientist to his bed for a full night’s rest. Ahhh, it was days like this that he appreciated the luck that had landed him with such a disparate team of people. Brawn and brain, that’s what they were and, speaking of brawn, that was Teal’c over in the corner of the canteen, eating breakfast.

Grabbing a bowl of cereals and a coffee, he joined the Jaffa who was just finishing off his toast.

“Hiya Teal’c. What’ya up to today?” he queried as he started to shovel the food down his mouth.

“I have two more training sessions on Jaffa fighting techniques to conduct, then Daniel Jackson has requested my assistance in a translation he is having difficulties with.”

“No rest for the wicked, huh?”

Teal'c just looked back at his CO, not sure if he wanted to follow his current train of thought. The Jaffa felt a lot of guilt for things he'd done whilst working for Apophis, but this could just be the Colonel's sense of humour again. O'Neill noticed the hesitancy on his team-mate's face and realised what he was thinking.

"A joke, Teal'c, that's all."

Teal'c raised an eyebrow, an indicator that he now understood at least part of what was being said and finished off his glass of milk.

"What of you, O'Neill? How do you intend to occupy yourself today?"

"Oh, you know me. Can't wait to hit the office. Requisitions, mission reports, staff schedules. I'm all raring to go here." A slight smile appeared on his face, in contrast to how the Jaffa knew the Colonel really considered paperwork.

"Perhaps you would appreciate a sparring session in the gymnasium once you have finished?"

"Yup, I'll hold you to that." O'Neill quickly finished off the bowl and downed his coffee in one gulp.

"You'll get indigestion like that." came the amused voice of the CMO as she lightly settled in to the chair next to the Colonel. She'd also selected the cereals, but preferred orange juice over coffee.

O'Neill just laughed.

"Cast iron constitution here, Doc. That's what living off those MRE's for a lifetime will do for ya."

"Which reminds me." The Doctor interrupted, "We've got an urgent requisition in for another shipment. A couple of the last cases were damaged and I've banned their use as their sterility's in question. I don't suppose you could see your way to authorising the paperwork asap, could you?"

"For you Doc, anything."

"Why, Colonel. I didn't know you cared." She jokingly batted her eyelashes at him and he smiled as he pushed his chair away.

"Pure self interest, Doctor. I want you watching where you put those needles next time I'm in for a jab."

"But Colonel. I always know precisely where I'm putting them."

"Exactly!" was his parting shot as he made a quick getaway. It was hard work to get one over the diminutive Doctor, when she had such an arsenal of weaponry at her command.

Teal'c bowed to her as he followed his leader out of the canteen, but then they went their separate ways for the morning session.

O'Neill sighed with relief as he put the last folder in his out-tray, marking the requisition for Janet as urgent, and pushed the chair back. One of the secretaries would empty the tray on their morning

rounds. It was amazing how being accident free for a few weeks and having a relaxed team improved his mood towards the more mundane tasks. Deciding it was time for a bit of fun, he went in search of the one team-mate he hadn't yet seen so far this morning. His favourite pain in the backside would no doubt be in his lab, pouring over some mouldy old manuscript, or oozing over an artefact. Rock, he had to remind himself, sniggering over how many times he'd wound the archaeologist up over that one. The best ones were always the simple ones, he thought, as he took the lift to the lab's level.

As he expected, Daniel was deep in concentration, studying some photocopies of a document, making notes here and there, cross-referencing. Occasionally, he'd push his glasses back up his nose, as they repeatedly slid back down again.

Creeping silently up behind the scientist, the Colonel waited until he was a hair's breadth away before announcing in a loud voice.

"I'd get them re-measured if I were you."

It was all he could do to not laugh out loud as Daniel jumped in shock, throwing the pen in the air and nearly falling off the chair.

"Jesus, Jack! When the hell are you going to grow up?" his face was red with shock.

"Not ever if I can have this much fun." Jack sniggered back, reaching down for the pen, which had rolled under the table.

Daniel soon calmed down, his immediate thoughts of retribution dissipating when he saw the teasing look on his friend's face. It wasn't often Jack got the chance to relax this much. Being responsible for the care of SG1 and, as the base's 2IC, the welfare of everyone else, he had a lot on his plate. His role attracted more than his fair share of stress. Not that it stopped him fooling around, per se, it just made it more difficult.

"So, what'cha up to?" the Colonel asked, looking at the papers Daniel was working on.

"Deciphering some translations SG9 took off a temple wall off their last mission. I'm hoping it'll tell us what happened to the people there. It looks like they suffered a natural disaster, but...."

"Where there's a stargate, there's often a Gould. Yeah, I get the picture."

Daniel turned back to his copies, eager to sort out the puzzle, but halted when he realised Jack wasn't moving. Looking back over his shoulder, he studied the older man; hands thrust in his pockets, rocking on the balls of his feet, eyes scanning the room, but settling on nothing. This did not bode well for peaceful studying.

"Sooo, I take it you've finished your work and are bored now." It wasn't a question.

"Umm, just wondered if you'd eaten yet? No big deal." O'Neill studied the floor.

"OK. Let's go get some food. I guess I need a break anyway." Daniel carefully stacked his work up and left it to one side. It would be impossible to concentrate with Jack around in one of his 'I've nothing to do and you're going to entertain me' moods. He knew children more mature than the Colonel at times. Cassie, for one, although the two of them together were almost more than even he could manage. The Colonel and the young alien seemed to get up to more mischief together than the

whole of the nearby primary school. Only last week there'd been the joke foaming sugar in his coffee, down the mall. Cassie had assured him it was her that had snuck it in, but the grin on Jack's face suggested otherwise. Sometimes he felt like a baby-sitter he thought ruefully, as they made their way to the canteen.

The following morning at 0800, SG1 were in Hammond's office having a briefing on Carter's planet, the view-screen showing pictures the UAV had sent back. The forest extended from the gate in all directions, closing in on the structure, totally unaware of it's presence. The only gap in it's density around the gate was the one made by the wormhole, as it whooshed outwards. O'Neill was impressed with Carter's ability to get the UAV up out of the trees in such a small distance. The UAV continued on it's flight and the team watched it's progress without comment. Then three members leaned forward in unison as, about twenty miles from the gate, it had spotted what could only be a man made irregularity in the trees. They couldn't see much of anything else in the forest, due to the canopy, but Carter had made the machine do a sweep of the cleared area several times. A natural formation, it most definitely was not.

'Oh, here we go.' thought the Colonel, amused, as he watched the fascinated expression grow on Daniel's face. He could almost hear the cogs whirring from here. He shared a look with Carter, who'd also stopped to study their team-mate. Her eyes rolled upwards. She'd been expecting this since yesterday evening, but had kept quiet until the meeting, wanting to spring the surprise. Unconsciously, the archaeologist leaned further towards the screen, mouth slightly opened, as he studied the objects in the centre of the clearing. There was a semi circle of nine large standing stones in the middle of the clearing. It was difficult to judge their size from the overhead angle, but they looked about twice man height. There was also a rough stone slab, maybe an alter, beneath the tallest one in the middle and, on the alter, a small stone statuette.

"So, Danny," O'Neill started, "see anything you fancy?"

"Uhhh?" Daniel replied, barely taking his eyes off the screen, much to everyone's amusement. Even Teal'c had the slightest of expressions on his face.

"I said.... Do you want to go visit?"

"Umm, yes Jack... I mean, of course, yes Jack. We have to find out who made this and where they are now."

"The gate itself seemed to be unattended, but....." began Carter.

"The stone clearing appears to have been recently maintained." Teal'c finished for her.

Hammond watched his people interact, as they studied the visuals further, replaying the tape. Jackson's intense study of the clearing; Carter scanning through the environmental data sent back; the Colonel jotting down an ordnance list next to his other doodles; and Teal'c's patient perusal of the other three.

"OK, SG1, you have a go for 0930. Due to the distance of the site from the gate, you can have three days on the planet. However, this is primarily a mission for retrieving samples, Major. It's unlikely any natives will have anything of any technological value for us, but if the Colonel feels it's safe enough, you can study the clearing Dr. Jackson."

“Yes, Sir.” the Colonel acknowledged, as the General rose from his seat. They each grabbed their mission dossier and left the briefing room.

“Well kids. Just enough time to decide what you need to grab and saddle up. See you in the gateroom and don’t be late.”

Carter grinned at his obvious dig at Daniel, whilst Teal’c bowed as he moved ahead. Daniel, as always, ignored the jibe and continued ahead, studying the photographic stills in the folder. As they each went their own ways, the Colonel headed on down to the armoury to sign out the weaponry they’d need. He couldn’t help thinking that their luck with easy missions was bound to run out soon and now was as good a time as any.

At 0929, O’Neill, Carter and Teal’c were waiting at the bottom of the ramp, as the chevrons lit up in front of them.

“And here we are commuters,” the Colonel began “ready to board the Stargate Express to PC3 188. Tickets will be collected at the end of the journey and for those of us who are late,” he eyed Daniel, as the archaeologist came running in, “the fine will be to catch the next conveyance.”

“Sorry guys, forgot to grab my note books.” Was his unapologetic explanation.

“Good luck SG1.” Hammond’s voice boomed at them from the control room and the Colonel turned round to throw him a quick salute, before leading his team through the wormhole.

O’Neill had already surveyed the surroundings before the rest of his team came through, his P-90 resting comfortably between his arms. Carter and Daniel emerged side by side, the Major also doing a quick scan around, and the Jaffa bringing up the rear.

“Well, this is a bit..... dark.” was his comment, as they looked at the forest around them. The trees were close together and the canopy dense, so the light was quite dim around them.

“Any indication of animal types?” he asked, looking towards Carter. They’d all noticed the lack of sounds from around them and it made them uneasy. As they listened, they were aware of the resumption of bird calls and what could have been monkeys in the trees, but the sounds were sparse.

“Unfortunately, no, Sir. The UAV couldn’t get close enough and the MALP didn’t spot anything.”

They had to step down off the large, round plinth the gate was perched on, which explained why the MALP hadn’t been able to move away from the gate. Carter’s first duty was to check out the DHD, which she did and pronounced it fit for use, before turning back round to her CO.

“Well, as we don’t usually have the flora without fauna, I suggest you watch out for anything creeping or crawling that isn’t us.”

Watching Teal’c’s automatic move to follow the archaeologist, who was already several yards away, O’Neill sighed towards Carter, who grinned back.

“Daniel?”

“Umm, yes Jack?”

“Would you care to wait until Carter’s been able to collect her samples first? I mean I’d hate to have to tell the General we came all this way and forgot the one thing we’d been sent for.”

“Oh, yes, of course, sorry Sam.”

The Colonel watched Daniel, as the younger man almost burst with impatience to be going. Ahhh, the enthusiasm of youth, he remembered it well. He also remembered having longer, darker hair, but youth wasn’t everything. Experience had to count for something, right?

It only took a few minutes for the Major to be happy with the samples she’d collected, which were then bagged, labelled and safely stored on the MALP. Carter then redialled for Earth and the unit was soon back at the SGC.

The Colonel set a measured pace in the direction of the clearing and they quickly fell into the familiar routine of him on point, the Major beside Daniel and Teal’c bringing up the rear. Bird song could be heard, infrequently, above them and the occasional skittish sounds of small creatures in the undergrowth. O’Neill felt uneasy. He couldn’t pin down the source and that bothered him. He’d seen trees with funny coloured leaves before (these were almost blue) and he’d seen grass in different shades before (this was yellowish, where the undergrowth didn’t cover it) and even the pinkish sky had been seen before. So what was the problem? He put it down to too many easy missions messing with his head.

A couple of hours later, he decided to call a brief halt.

“Chow time, kids. Let’s take ten.”

They’d entered a natural clearing, only a few yards in diameter and he chose the largest fallen log for himself to sit on. A commander had to set standards, after all. Movement in the branches far above caught his attention and he could see vague small monkey type animals racing about. A few nutrition bars, swigs of water and Daniel’s note taking later, they were off again. The temperature was pleasantly warm and the Colonel tried to put the feeling of unease behind him. They stopped another couple of times for the Major to collect some more samples. Soil, pebbles and vegetation were all bagged and packed away for good measure, before Daniel’s impatience could be mollified.

“It’s all right, Danny. We will get there before nightfall.” O’Neill laughed at his friend’s enthusiasm.

“I know. It’s just that normally if we find a site like this, it’s been long deserted. If these people are still about, we may be able to study them, learn how they did the things they did.”

“Well don’t get your hopes too high, we may not be staying.”

“But this could explain so many mysteries of our own pre-historic sites.”

Carter was also looking questioningly at her CO by this stage. She too was looking forward to studying the stones.

The Colonel sighed. Sometimes the overly bright could see everything around them and yet still miss the obvious right in front. “And what do you suppose they use that alter-type slab for?”

Daniel paused for a moment, puzzled by the cynical tone in his CO’s voice.

“They are often sacrificial, are they not?” Teal’c asked from behind them.

“Umm, yes.” the anthropologist was forced to quietly agree. He’d suspected it when he’d first seen the pictures, but his excitement had clouded his caution. Not an unusual occurrence in the Colonel’s opinion.

“So just promise me you’ll watch yourself.” O’Neill asked, briefly looking back at him. “If the neighbours are at home, we want to be out before they invite us in for lunch. I don’t want to be on the menu.”

“We could be wrong, you know. Aren’t you even just a little curious about them?” Daniel asked, not quite prepared to drop the subject yet.

“Nope.”

“Even though we used to live like that at one time.”

“Ahhh, the memories. Bringing home the bacon used to be so much more fun back then.”

Carter giggled behind him.

“Yes, having the little woman waiting to be dragged about by the hair. Don’t you miss that Major?”

“Must be why I got mine cut, Sir.”

“Just don’t do a Teal’c on us and that’s an order.”

They could hear the grin in his voice, even with his back to them, and the two scientists turned around the gauge the Jaffa’s reaction. As usual, the ex-First Prime was expressionless, but they could still recognise the slight smile through the façade.

“Oh, I don’t know, Sir, saves an awful lot of washing.”

“Carter.....”

The banter continued over the next few hours, although they never took their eyes off their surroundings, nor ignored the sounds around them. The Colonel made them pause twice more for short food and drink breaks and by early evening they’d reached the clearing.

Silently, they eyed up the scene, the Colonel signalling for Teal’c and Carter to check the perimeter before he’d let Daniel loose inside. No-one seemed to be in the vicinity, so he let Daniel pass, following a step behind, constantly scanning the area. Daniel and Carter were soon into their ‘oohing’ and ‘aahing’ stage, as they made their joint way round the site.

“Don’t you think it’s a bit of a coincidence, there being nine stones?” Daniel eventually asked her.

“As in nine chevrons on the gate?” she mused.

“It’s just a thought.”

“Even though it looks as though the gate hasn’t been used for a long time?”

“Maybe it’s just part of their folklore now.” He’d wandered to the main ‘alter’ and was now studying the rough stone statuette. “I can’t see any writings, or markings, anywhere round here.” he sounded disappointed. “This statue seems to be an animal of some sort. Maybe a bear?”

“Bear?” the Colonel exclaimed, quick to home in on the one topic of conversation that could have a direct bearing on them. He gripped his P-90 a little tighter.

“Well, we are in a forest. A lot of early societies worship the local animals, imbuing them with magical, or god-like properties.”

“Would these natives sacrifice such creatures?” Teal’c asked, looking at the alter and then back at their CO. The Colonel also eyed the slab with suspicion, gauging it’s size in relation to animal or human dimensions. Unfortunately, his only experiences of bears led him to believe the slab was too small for the average adult animal, at least of earth varieties. The surface was recessed in the middle and a groove led from one corner to the ground. He had a sudden vision of blood running down it’s side – human blood. He shuddered.

“It would depend on the culture in question. Sometimes... yes.”

“And sometimes....?” Their leader hunched his shoulders towards the anthropologist.

“Sometimes... no.” Daniel dipped his head, as though only just considering any real threat to their safety.

O’Neill was carefully studying the clearing, not the huge stones themselves, twice his height now he was close to, but the ground beneath him. Teal’c was also doing the same.

“O’Neill, I believe there may have been people here recently.”

“You too, huh? OK, time to clear out kids. Danny, record whatever you want to record and let’s vamoose.”

“Vamoose?” Teal’c queried, never letting his gaze drop from the surrounding trees.

“Vamoose, as in scam, scurry, skiddadle, blow the joint.” He too was constantly surveying the surroundings, “As in let’s get outta here. This place is starting to creep me out.”

“OK, Jack.” Daniel had learned long ago to trust the Colonel’s instincts. He was quick to unpack the video recorder and quickly ran it around the complete site, walking around each stone in turn. Once completed, he joined the others, as O’Neill led them cautiously back into the forest.

They’d only gone a few hundred yards from the clearing when the Colonel felt the hackles rise on the back of his neck. Something wasn’t right. He hadn’t heard any movements from around them, but he knew the sensation of being watched when he felt it. He’d got used to the shy lemur type monkeys overhead and this didn’t feel like them. Looking around didn’t bring any answers and neither did listening. He could still hear bird-song, although it had to be said it wasn’t even as plentiful as before. Whatever was spooking him had to be a normal occurrence for the local creatures. Looking back at his team behind him, he could tell by their expressions that Carter and

Teal'c were also wary, both holding their weapons in a more than casual grip. Danny, as usual seemed to be unaware of the heightened tension, sorting through the video tapes in his pockets.

"Daniel?" he hissed.

"Umm?"

"You know that gun you carry? Now might be a good time to get it out."

That brought the young archaeologist out of his reverie and he quickly looked around at the alert state of his military team-mates.

"Don't forget, they might be friendly, just curious." he whispered, not wishing to cover over any sounds around them.

"Yeah, and Santa Clause might be a Gould." was Jack's quiet retort. Daniel sighed behind him. Why did Jack always have to assume the worst? "Hey, I'm not saying they aren't. Just saying don't count your chickens."

That answered Daniel's question. It was Jack's job to assume the worst and get them safely home, no matter what dangers they faced. That refusal to drop his guard had saved their collective butts on far too many occasions in the past.

There was suddenly a rustling sound which seemed to come from all around them. Two P-90's, a Staff Weapon and a Berretta were instantly at the ready, as all four instinctively moved into back to back positions. Nothing appeared in the brief moments that followed, before Carter gave an all too late warning. Looking directly upwards, she caught the briefest of movements and was barely able to get a shout out before the net of vine-ropes landed heavily on them. The weight knocked them instantly to the ground.

Briefly winded by the weight pinning them down, they were unable to move. O'Neill still managed to wonder at the work that had gone into making each of the heavy-duty ropes. The vines had been twisted into one inch diameter strands that were then woven together every five inches apart. The net had obviously been made to restrain something much heavier than them and the natives were obviously used to using it. The Colonel desperately tried to manoeuvre his gun under the weight of the trap, and Daniel who was pressed up tightly against him, before he lost control of the situation. Unfortunately, he could already see several natives dropping through the trees to land beside them, whooping with excitement. Spears with sharp flint-like tips were quickly poking into them through the net, dissuading them from any further movement.

"Ow, just watch it will ya?" O'Neill yelped as a spear broke the skin in his shoulder, drawing a small amount of blood. That seemed to stop the insistent prodding for a moment and both peoples studied each other intently.

There were about thirty natives in all. They were slightly smaller than SG1, dark skinned, with black eyes and thick unkempt long black hair. In every respect they looked like normal human beings. They were clothed in simple leather loincloths, with leaves and other flower decorations (or camouflage the Colonel thought more likely) attached around their bodies. They had many such items in their hair, tied on with thin vine strips, reminding them slightly of the Nox. They were all young and male, causing Daniel to think anyone not in the hunting party would be safely back at their camp.

“So now what, Daniel?” O’Neill asked, earning him another jab off a nearby spear.

“They remind me a little of some of the Equatorial Indians, but it’s too early to say.” Daniel whispered back, quickly looking down and shutting up, as a spear was nudged into his chest.

Teal’c suddenly grunted as his Staff Weapon was dragged from his hands through the net. The natives were obviously curious about the spear-like weapon and jabbed it into the soil, jeering at it’s bluntness. They threw it away into the undergrowth, when they realised it wasn’t sharp enough to be of any use to them. Teal’c hoped they hadn’t done the weapon any damage.

One of the natives spoke, a light voice, incorporating what sounded like bird-song and other animal sounds into the language and the net was slowly pulled off them. The Colonel could see the rest of the team getting their weapons ready, including Teal’c going for his spare zat. However, the natives only deferred to the receding net individually, as it passed their position, quickly pushing the lethal points back against their captives the moment they were free. None of them felt a safe opportunity arise for retaliation.

The chief came to stand immediately in front of them and, using his more ornamental spear, started gesticulating back towards the stone circle. He was obviously not very pleased about something.

“No rush moves now kids.” O’Neill ordered. The spears might be primitive, but their owners were obviously comfortable with their use. If the natives pushed just a little harder, they’d be more than singing soprano. Once the net was fully removed they felt the tips of more spears, as a few natives came forward to remove their weapons from their hands, arms and belts. They removed everything, including the valuable GDO’s, tugging unceremoniously, yanking the back-packs off them. The natives looked over everything, puzzled by the strange technology, not aware of anything’s purpose, and threw all the gear away to one side. The packs were emptied, spilling first-aid kits, MRE’s, spare ammo and other items around the ground. Their belt knives, however, were another matter and the chief smiled as he removed the Colonel’s, somehow recognising in his stance his opposite leader and challenging his authority. He ran the blade along his hand, studying the strange metal, and smiling in satisfaction at the blood it drew. He then removed a piece of twine décor from around his thigh and twisting it around the knife hilt, fastened it back to his thigh. Other natives, lucky enough to snag the wonderful tools were busy doing the same.

The chief seemed to have calmed down a bit and he put his head on one side, his eyes roaming up and down the commander’s body, assessing him. O’Neill copied the move and regarded the native in return, albeit though slitted, darkened eyes. His expression widened slightly in surprise as the chief went from using his eyes, to his hands, to investigate the tall stranger. The Colonel felt hands against his body as they roamed around his uniform, tugging at the edges of his jacket and poking between to the tee-shirt underneath.

“Perhaps they’re not sure what our clothes are.” Daniel whispered, biting back a small scowl as a spear encouraged him to be quiet.

The Colonel shrugged and carefully undid the buttons on his jacket and removed both it and the vest in one. The chief watched as the items hit the ground and then studied the black tee-shirt the Colonel wore underneath. Slowly, he put his hands under the hem of the fabric and pulled it upwards, running his hands up the flesh inside. Under other circumstances, their CO would have been up to his arm-pits in wry observations and teasing by now, but there was nothing funny about the deadly weapons pressing menacingly into them.

The chief reached down and, grabbing the Colonel's jacket, proceeded to put it on, grinning at his hunters as he turned around, parading in front of them. Then he stopped grinning and, miming to the rest of SG1, indicated for the rest of the team to remove their jackets too, which they slowly did. Three natives were quick to snag the other jackets to pull them on and SG1 watched warily as their radios, and only means of contact with home, went with the vests.

Next the chief spoke to one of his men and the Colonel suddenly found himself balancing on his left leg as his right foot was pulled sharply upwards for inspection. The natives were bare footed and their leader studied the heavy boots he wore, tapping them with his fingers. The chief looked into the Colonel's eyes, then said something and indicated his feet, making a pull away gesture. Shrugging with nonchalance, O'Neill reached down and undid both boots, pulling them off, including the socks. A brief gesture to the rest of the team from the chief, convinced them to do the same. None of the natives were interested in the footwear and simply ignored it.

"Well, this is getting interesting." the Colonel couldn't help from remarking, earning him a slight cuff off the nearest spear. He glared at the native, but it had only been a warning blow and not intended to hurt.

The chief's next move though brought forth an expletive from the shocked Colonel. The native reached out and, without preamble, grabbed him around the crotch. O'Neill wasn't sure if this was another gesture to intimidate, a need to satisfy the native of his gender, or an invitation to a date.

"Holy shit!" he shouted, angry at the intimacy, this time earning him a thwack on the back of his head, hard enough to knock him to the ground.

"Sir?" Carter shouted, but a spear prevented her from moving.

"As you were, Major." he replied through the blinding headache he now had, but at least he was still conscious for a change.

"What do you think they're going to do with us now?" she whispered to no one in particular, eyeing the natives with disgust.

"I wish I knew." Daniel replied. Every time he tried to communicate, someone jabbed him to shut him up.

"Beats me." O'Neill said as he slowly raised himself up again. He was all too aware of how unprotected they now were without their weapons. He'd been constantly looking for any weakness in the natives around them, any flaw he could make use of, but without success. Now they had the added problem of not being able to move fast with bare feet, a problem their captors wouldn't suffer from. They were on the natives' home turf and they had all the advantages.

Satisfied that their captives were now under control, the chief turned and led them away through the forest, in the opposite direction of the gate. His hunters made sure SG1 followed obediently, even though they were not tied up, never taking their eyes off the team. The natives lucky enough to be wearing the jackets started emptying the pockets of all the strange items as they went. Radios, torches and other equipment were casually tossed to one side as they progressed. Only the chief didn't seem interested in removing the weight, which meant they still had one radio near them. The Colonel had to admire their relaxed confidence. He looked back once at all their spilled gear, before another nudge from a native prodded him onwards.

The mulch of the forest floor protected their bare feet from a lot of potential damage, but as the hours passed, the small cuts and grazes started to accumulate. Even Teal'c could be heard stifling a complaint once and he had Junior to keep the damage to a minimum. Sam's light steps seemed to keep her out of trouble, but Daniel tripped once, much to the amusement of the natives, who jeeringly allowed the Colonel to help him back up again.

Three hours of silent walking later, they emerged from the forest onto a wide, dry rocky track, several yards wide, that ran steeply up the side of a mountain. The forest must have been following the edge of the mountain for some time, gradually narrowing down until the trees ran out. Now they had emerged from the tree-line to find themselves facing a long walk up a rough, gritty terrain, that would be even harder on their feet. O'Neill looked towards the edge of the wide ledge, wondering what lay down below and how far down it went, whether it could figure in any escape plans.

Some of the natives sat down to rest and the four members of SG1 cautiously copied them, relieved when no one objected. They immediately took the opportunity to study their hurting feet, each bleeding slightly from the many tiny cuts and grazes they'd collected. Although none of them complained vocally, it was obvious to the Colonel that they were each in some pain, except maybe Teal'c who had Junior to help. Gotta love the little snakelet sometimes. Looking around at his team, O'Neill noticed Daniel breaking off from rubbing a foot to study the native leader. The chief was facing the trees, waving his arms about and seemed to be offering a prayer, or performing a rite, to the forest behind them.

"So what's the head honcho up to?" the Colonel whispered across to the anthropologist, not sure if he'd get another clout for speaking. One native glared at him, but didn't move any further. In fact, none of the natives seemed to be paying quite as much attention as before. Maybe they were sure their captives wouldn't be able to escape them anymore and that thought bothered the CO greatly.

"I wish I knew Jack. I can't make the language out, it's like nothing I've ever heard before. I've usually got something basic to work from, some simple words I can understand. Then I can follow the route the language has taken and work out some simple phrases. There's nothing here that I recognise though and they won't let me even try to communicate. They seem to be mimicking animal noises a lot of the time and I've no reference for that. At the moment I'd say he's offering a blessing for our safe passage through the forest, but I'm only guessing at this point."

The young man hung his head in despair. He felt responsible for their current predicament. If he hadn't wanted to see the stones so much, they could probably have been back home by now. If he could understand the natives' language and communicate with them, maybe they might not be prisoners at the moment. So many ifs, every time they walked through that gate.

"Don't sweat it, Danny. I'm sure we'll get out of this soon." Jack told him, putting an arm around his friend's shoulder. He noticed Carter, still tugging at something in her foot.

"Major?" he asked.

"Seem to have a thorn in here, Sir."

"Allow me." Teal'c intervened and, moving over towards her, gently took the foot in one hand and used the other to expertly remove the offending article. Some of the natives watched, curiously, as though they'd never seen such injuries before.

"Thanks Teal'c." she whispered back, rubbing the sore foot, before the chief returned and indicated for them to get up again.

It was even harder walking across the dry, rocky land than the mulch of the forest floor. Every pebble and grain of sand seemed to dig in through their already damaged flesh. Once again, O'Neill was proud of his team. Sure, they'd been in a lot worse spots than this, physically, but he was proud of them all the same. No one moaned, or complained, not wanting to draw too much attention from the spears, which were always quick to follow any undue loud noises.

It was getting darker as they headed upwards, shepherded by the natives. However, it seemed only a short while later that the chief called a stop and everyone sat down again. The natives made camp for the night, away from any prying eyes of the forest and in an area where they could easily see any approaching danger. The captives were forced towards the edge of the track and a handful of natives sat nearby to guard them. Without the forest to deaden the noise, they could now hear the distant sounds of water from over the edge and the Colonel carefully looked down. It was a very long way to the bottom, a good day's climb. No wonder the natives weren't afraid of them escaping that route. Carter watched him and he whispered back.

“One heck of a drop there Major.”

The natives soon had a fire going, using flints to make a spark, and the Colonel caught sight of a large stash of branches, tucked into a crevice in the mountain side. They obviously did this a lot and made contingencies for overnight halts. No one invited them nearer the fire though, so the four made themselves as comfortable as they could where they were. They set their usual watch pattern and got what rest they could, curled up against each other on the hard, cold ground.

They woke with their captors, early the following morning. The Colonel wondered what the locals did for breakfast, as no one had eaten or drunk anything since they'd been captured. Daniel and Teal'c were watching the chief again. He was parading in front of an alcove that they hadn't seen in the dimming light the night before. It seemed to be a natural recess in the rock wall and a small statuette had been placed inside. It looked similar to a bear again. The native was gesticulating wildly and pointing alternatively towards them and the mountain edge. Striding over towards them, the chief quickly grabbed Carter by the arm, hauling her upwards and towards the drop a few feet behind them. The natives around them closed in, cheering and waving their spears. Horrified at what he assumed was about to happen, the Colonel jumped to his feet. Springing between them, despite the natives' objections, he shoved the chief away, whilst pushing Carter down into Teal'c's lap behind him.

The cheering immediately stopped and several spear points began to dig rhythmically into his skin, breaking the surface in a dozen different places. He refused to move as the leader righted himself and came to stand before him. The native's face was furious, the small black eyes cold and piercing. He spoke again in their strange language to him, pointing towards Carter and the edge of the path.

Daniel whispered up towards him.

“I think perhaps they sacrifice people here to that bear god.”

“Well, not on my shift they don't.” the Colonel ground out, his eyes slitted in a challenge to the native watching him.

The chief seemed to shrug and indicated toward the edge of the path. O'Neill felt the pain of several points sticking in him as he was forced further towards it. Taking a brief moment to glance at his

friends, he was grateful that he'd saved his Major from this fate. He saw their pale, horrified faces and heard their frantic denials, as one of the natives gave him a severe push with his hands, sending him hurtling over the edge. His team's cries followed him on the way down.

He had barely the time to try and get into a proper dive position, taking huge gulps of air, before he was flying down the long drop to the river running at the bottom of the gorge. He didn't even have time to contemplate what would happen if he hit rocks, rather than the possibly life saving water. Would it be deep enough? Hitting the freezing river in a half-way decent entry, he struggled to kick upwards through the shock and back towards the air, grateful the water wasn't any shallower. The pain from the many tiny holes in his skin was temporarily subdued by the chilling temperature and he thrust wildly upwards. He was disoriented, not prepared, and he had to concentrate, before the freezing temperature had time to paralyse his muscles.

He was caught in a strong undercurrent and struggled against the pull of the water, keeping his attention on the light filtering through the surface above him. Occasionally he hit underwater objects, but couldn't afford to think about them as he continued to swim upwards. He struggled against the undercurrent and could feel himself getting weaker, his oxygen giving out. After being dragged along for what seemed like forever, he knew he couldn't hold his breath any longer. Everything was dimming, taking his memory of everything with him and he concentrated on the faces of his team, forcing his mind to focus. Just then the current slackened off slightly and he made one last effort to kick upwards, finally managing to break the surface.

Turning onto his back with the last of his strength, he floated for a while, coughing up water that he couldn't remember swallowing, letting the river carry him. He drifted on the surface, shaking with chills. He knew he still had to get out of the freezing temperature, but was unable to make his limbs move yet. He risked resting for a minute instead, whilst he caught his breath and let his lungs recover. Then, once he felt he had enough control back, he slowly struggled back to the shore before he froze.

He travelled several hundred yards before finding a spot his tired body could heave itself out onto. The ledge dipped gradually down under the water's surface and, once he'd crawled far enough away from the water's edge for safety, he let himself collapse. He tried to calm down, his lungs still demanding more oxygen and his body shivering in the aftermath of the freezing water. He was wet through, shivering with cold and stinging from the sharp holes those spears had made. The shock of the cold water seemed to have stopped any bleeding, but he was too damned tired to check them out for now. Taking a brief note of his surroundings, he noticed the ledge didn't go anywhere. The only way back was directly up the cliff face above him. Things were just peachy. He was tired, cold and hungry. Spying a small hollow at the base of the cliff, he crawled over and curled himself up into a ball inside it to conserve body heat. Unable to ignore his exhaustion any more, he gave in to his body's demands for rest and let sleep take him.

He reckoned he'd been asleep for a couple of hours, by the time he woke up. He'd lost his watch in the river somewhere. Crawling out of his hole into the warm mid-day sun, he stretched out cramped muscles and took a good look around him. Confirming his dazed opinion of earlier, his ledge was a solitary outcrop and his only way off it was to climb directly upwards. He looked out over the river and couldn't see anywhere else with an easier way upwards in sight. He could jump back in and try his luck, but he didn't want to run the risk of being swept too far away from his team. God only

knew what the natives had planned for the rest of them, if his experience was anything to go by. His uniform was still damp and he shivered, even in the warm sun.

Hopefully, the natives would consider him dead, goodness knows how few people had survived that ceremony. Unfortunately his team might also consider him to be in that condition too. However, there wasn't a lot he could do about that right now. What he could do would be to find his way back to their weapons and then get his team back the good old fashioned way, guns a-blazing. See how the little bear fanciers liked that! His fingers curled subconsciously into a trigger holding pose and he grinned at the thought of his team's faces when he found them. His stomach took that moment to rumble, disturbing the image. It was nearly a full day since he'd eaten or drunk anything other than river water. Unfortunately, the only source of food he didn't need a weapon for was in their back-packs. If he'd got the time, he was quite an expert at making traps, but he didn't have that luxury on this occasion.

Slowly, he sat back down and started to examine himself for injuries before he set off. The movement made him wince, as the torn flesh under his feet woke up with the rest of him. The river had cleaned the cuts up and he knew his tetanus injections were up to date, but who knew about what other infections he could get. Quickly he checked out the other puncture wounds he'd assembled on his arms, legs and torso. Thankfully, nothing looked too bad, or was even bleeding anymore, so he studiously ignored them all. Not that he could do anything without a medikit anyway. Getting to his feet again, he walked away from the cliff face, so he could get a better overall look. Spying out the easiest route upwards, he walked back and found his first hand hold. His fingers complained at the lack of substantial grip and his feet complained with every movement as his toes struggled to keep their purchase. However, there was no going back. Slow move after slow move, remember O'Neill, your team is counting on you, he started the slow ascension to the ridge far above him.

It wasn't the first time he'd had to climb like this, in fact the arsenal behind him the last time had been a lot more fierce than a few flint-tipped spears, but that didn't detract from the risky position he was in. One false move and he was toast, there wasn't a safety line here, no huge Jaffa to haul his ass up. No, this time if he went down he'd do no more than make a nice splat on the ground below. A nice Jack-snack for any scavenging birds. No Colonel and no rescue of SG1, so that plan was definitely on his not-to-do-today list. Gingerly, as the sun passed it's zenith, he climbed inch by inch upwards towards safety.

"Oh, my God." Carter finally whispered after the Colonel had disappeared over the edge, too stunned, like her team-mates, to feel the spears digging sharply in them. They waited to hear a splash from below, but the distance was too great and they heard nothing. The three remaining members of his team, looked at each other in despair.

"He said it was a long drop." she said, more to herself than the others.

"I am sure Colonel O'Neill will manage to get to safety." Teal'c quietly stated, to calm his friends. He'd had to hold Daniel back and now the young man seemed routed to the spot in shock.

The chief seemed satisfied with events and soon the remaining captives were being urged to their feet again. The fire was put out and any branches capable of being reused were put back in the storage niche. Any thought of escape seemed to have been dampened slightly. SG1 were in shock, unable to get the image of the Colonel disappearing over the edge out of their minds. Even if he somehow managed to survive, he was on his own, probably severely injured. The Colonel always

seemed able to extricate them from impossible situations before, but who could he rely on now to come to his aid? Despondently, they followed their captors, still vaguely looking for an escape route, if only to help their CO, but unable to spy anything of use. Their feet protested each step, flinching on the hard surface, but the natives didn't bother to hurry them anymore and they were able to keep going. The path they were following got narrower as they progressed upwards and, as the natives were bunched up tighter in front and behind them, any hope of escape finally disappeared. It took till mid afternoon, leaving the team faint with hunger and thirst, before they were led into a cave and semi darkness. Whatever the natives normal routine for eating and drinking, they seemed unaffected by the long delay. Their systems were obviously used to the routine.

The entrance appeared to be a natural formation in the cliff and the team almost missed seeing the yawning gap, except for the natives in front disappearing within in. Torches made from branches with moss for kindling lit the edges of the cavern, as they were prodded towards the back. Several small fires were lit around the spacious cavern and woman and children sat huddled around them. Some were cooking a type of flat bread on top of hot stones by the fires, while others were stirring stews in pots being heated by adding hot stones to the water. Spears and fishing nets were hung along the walls, next to animal skins that were obviously being worked on. The women and children watched the strangers with surprise, as they were led towards a large wooden pen at the back of the cave.

The pen was made of thick sturdy wooden poles hammered into holes dug into the floor, fencing off a whole back portion of the cave. The poles reached various heights, but the minimum must have been about twelve foot high, far too tall to climb over without being spotted. They were strung together with more of the vine ropes, as thick as the ones in the net they'd been caught with, and far too tightly for a human to squeeze through. One of the natives opened a gate in the structure and SG1 were forced into the enclosure, the gate being strung back together again behind them. Once they were safely enclosed, most of the natives left to join whatever families they had there, leaving four men to watch over them. The guards were careful to never take their eyes off their captives.

Teal'c decided to return the favour and sat cross legged to stare back at them through the fence. After a while the natives got uneasy with his intense scrutiny and turned slightly away from his gaze, but never let their vigilance down enough to encourage an escape attempt. Daniel and Sam meanwhile looked around their new accommodation, still wincing occasionally when they stood on something uneven. At the back of the cave, a small stream ran down the wall, collecting in a small pool at the bottom, before disappearing down a crack in the floor. At least they had drinking water.

"Well, I guess I've been in worse places." the Major commented, as Daniel studied a collection of bones in the corner.

"Doesn't it strike you as odd, how sturdy this cage is and how tall the bars are?" he questioned.

"Indeed, DanielJackson. The net they used to capture us with also seemed to be designed for heavier prey than ourselves."

"Have you noticed the way they all initially look at us? Maybe they're not used to seeing other humans." Sam added.

"I could be wrong, here," Daniel pondered, "but considering the size of the net and the scope of this pen, plus the way they seem to revere whatever this bear type creature is. I reckon they might actually catch them and keep them here for some sort of ceremony."

“What makes you say that?” Sam asked, as she joined Daniel by the bones.

“Well, it’s just that it’s been noted in other early cultures before, plus it looks as though they’ve kept some live beasts in here previously. These bones have been gnawed by large teeth, too large for humans, and the whole pen is designed to keep something bigger than us in.”

“What would they do to these animals?” Teal’c asked, turning around to join in the conversation.

“Keep them caged for some time and then sacrifice them in a display of bravery for the young males, maybe. It’s always difficult to be precise when there’s no one still alive to tell you, but that’s what a lot of evidence suggests.”

“Well what do you suggest they want with us now?” Sam queried.

“I wish I knew Sam. I really did. Why sacrifice Jack, yet bring us back?” his voice almost caught on the mention of their missing friend.

They were interrupted by a few pieces of cooked meat being forced through the bars towards them, which Teal’c grabbed before they became too dirty.

“Well at least they’re feeding us.” she commented.

“Yes, but why?”

“Let us hope Colonel O’Neill survived his fall and can extricate us before it becomes necessary to find out.” Teal’c said as he handed over some meat pieces to his team-mates.

‘Let’s hope Colonel O’Neill is OK’ they each thought as they quickly ate the food.

It was getting dark by the time the Colonel reached the top of the cliff face. Hauling his shaking limbs over the top, he collapsed, unable to move any further. Every part of him ached, from his damaged hands and feet to the many small spear nicks he had. His shoulder ached where he’d whacked into something in the water and his uniform had taken the rest of the day to dry out properly, robbing him of body heat. Each inch of the way had been carried out with care and precision, ignoring the desire to give in, concentrating only on his team waiting for him. Some of the small cuts he’d collected had started to bleed on the way up, as they’d rubbed against the rock wall. However, there wasn’t a damned thing he could do about it at the time, bar grit his teeth and force himself on.

As his body stopped shaking and he caught his breath again, he slowly stood up and took a good look around him. He recognised being on the path they’d been on earlier and realised he was a good portion of the way back towards the forest and their gear. It was getting too dark to wander about, unarmed, and he had to consider his safety if he was to help his friends. He’d do them no good if, after climbing up that cliff, he had an accident in the twilight. His body was screaming for rest and nourishment, but he couldn’t do anything about the latter yet. Looking at the mountain face before him, he spied a small ledge a few feet up and, sighing, wearily climbed his way up there. Snuggling down into the small patch of grasses growing there, he hoped any passing natives would miss seeing him in the dark. Shuddering once more, he quickly drifted off into an exhausted sleep.

Once they'd finished their meagre rations, Sam checked thoroughly around their perimeter again, but was unable to find any flaw in the enclosure. Their guards watched, amused and confident, but didn't disturb them. Deciding to wash her feet of all the dust and gravel, she was quickly joined by the others. Their feet were sore and bruised after all the marching and giving them a cool bath relieved some of the pain. Unfortunately, they had nothing to make footwear out of and Sam was concerned about infection getting in through all the surface damage. So instead, they decided to keep off their feet as much as possible and wash them regularly to help them heal.

A small section in the far corner of the pen was summarily designated as a toilet area and they each relieved themselves before settling down for the night. The Major ordered a three tier watch throughout and it was soon agreed that they would also take turns to watch the natives during the next day. At this point they had no idea as to their fates, but it was unlikely to be any better than the Colonel's. They only hoped he was still alive and hadn't perished when he'd been thrown off.

Deciding to rest whilst they could, and take the opportunity to recoup their strength, they settled in for the night. No one had thought to give the captives any wood for fire, or leathers to sleep on like the natives did. So SG1 curled up against each other once again for warmth and two of them were soon asleep. Around the fireplaces in the cavern, natives looked on and talked to each other, excitement evident in their strange voices.

The sun was well up the following morning before Jack woke up. Annoyed that his internal alarm clock hadn't disturbed him, but understanding how exhausted he'd been, he unfurled himself and climbed back down to the track. Gravity sucks came the unbidden thought as he straightened his grubby and torn pants. He took a brief look around the terrain, scanning up the mountain side too, checking for possible dangers first. Relieved to see nothing suspicious, he set off gingerly on his sore feet, determinedly ignoring the pain. He followed the trail backwards towards the forest, relieved that he met no one on route, as he wasn't sure how quickly he could climb up out of sight. He really wasn't in the mood for greetings and he damn well knew he wasn't in the best of conditions for company, unarmed, sore and weak as he was.

It seemed to take him well over an hour to reach the outer edge of the tree line, taking much longer than they'd covered the same distance yesterday. It was difficult walking when each footstep made him wince. He hadn't eaten anything since before yesterday and the only water he'd drunk had been the stuff he'd nearly drowned in. Under normal circumstances he could manage without food for much longer than this, but water was essential. These weren't even normal circumstances and, to make matters worse, he ached in every muscle he was aware of. That climb must have really taken it out of him. He'd done plenty of climbs in his past, but guessed he'd been in much better condition back then.

The forest floor was kinder to his feet, once he was back on the softer mulch, but he had to move slower and be more cautious through the trees. All kinds of nasties could be hiding here now and he didn't feel like trying to make nice with anything this planet had to offer anymore. Carefully, he took his time finding his way back towards the stone circle, glad the natives had taken a direct route out. He had to stop several times for a break, resting his aching limbs and cursing silently as a headache started to develop. Couldn't a guy ever get a break around here?

Deliberately skirting the stone circle itself, it must have been about local noon time when he found the area they'd been ambushed in. Breathing a huge sigh of relief, he grabbed a zat gun still lying where a native had dropped it and quickly checked it worked. Thanking all the gods under the sun

for small mercies, and he knew an awful lot of those these days (even though he'd helped more than one on to the afterlife), he searched through the clearing for the rest of their gear. Local animals seemed to have ransacked the area, shredding backpacks and biting into anything their teeth could puncture. Even the tent and the sleeping bags had been completely ripped apart. Desperate for food and water, he could find only two MRE packets and looked around for water canteens and a Primus stove. He could only find one canteen and one set of dishes, but no stove. So, he mixed the powder into some cold water and drank the mixture like that. Chicken soup. Didn't taste much worse than when it was cooked he thought, glad of the intake regardless.

Saving the rest of the water and the other MRE until later, he started going through the rest of the gear he'd collected. Only one of the P-90s had been damaged, and he wasn't sure why without dismantling it, so he discarded it. Teal's Staff Weapon took a bit of locating, as something had dragged it further away, but even that fired upon command, and the Colonel's spirit lifted with each new find. One of the backpacks had survived relatively unscathed and he loaded the weapons inside, tucking a zat into his belt and slinging the P-90 over his shoulder. He managed to find all three sets of boots for his team-mates, but for some strange reason, his weren't there. Looking further around, he eventually found one, but it had been shredded beyond use, the sole completely missing. One of Daniel's was also chewed, but not that badly that it couldn't be used.

Deciding he really needed some kind of protection for his damaged feet, he pulled the remains of the other three packs together. Slicing through the tough canvas material with a pen knife from Carter's samples pack, he was able to liberate two large patches of fabric to wrap around them. He then sliced off two of the straps and, winding them around his ankles, secured the material in place. Grinning at his canvas covered feet, the Colonel stood up to test his creations. They wouldn't make the top ten in fashion footwear, and the fabric was scratchy, but a big improvement on nothing at all.

His next hunt was for any first aid materials he could find, that the animals hadn't soiled in their scavengings. Due to their high injury rates, Doctor Fraiser now made sure each back-pack came with it's own medikit, a luxury they were very appreciative of. He found a few bandages still in their sealed packages, a tube of antiseptic, still intact, and one packet of Aspirin. Not a lot left over from four packs, but more than he expected. He popped a couple of the pills, to combat the headache and muscle pains, and briefly bared his feet again to apply some of the ointment to the many cuts.

He knew he still had a long walk ahead of him if he was to find his team-mates and he needed to get a move on again. Collecting all his finds together, he managed to fit everything in the back-pack, except Teal's and Daniel's boots, which he fastened by their laces to the outside instead. Slinging the pack over his shoulders, he grabbed Teal's Staff Weapon and took one last look around. He regretted nothing else had survived, but he felt a lot more confident of getting his team back now and he set off retracing his steps of earlier.

It was early evening by the time he reached the edge of the forest again and he noticed it was getting dark early. The sky above looked overcast and he could feel the change in the air of an approaching storm. The makeshift footwear had done a good job of protecting his feet in the forest, although he doubted they'd last long once he got back on the mountain. Looking out onto the track, he was faced with a dilemma. He still wasn't able to maintain his normal pace, his hurting body slowing him down more than he was happy with. Did he carry on, not knowing how far his team had travelled and risk sleeping out on the open trail, unprotected from the coming storm? Or did he

spend the night hidden here in the forest and get an early start in the morning, hoping the storm had passed by then?

His decision was made as a loud thunderclap sounded from the distance and a heavy rainfall started. Before long the precipitation was too heavy to see through and the lightning flashed directly above. He quickly left the forest during the lightning, but returned to the cover of the trees once the electrical discharges had passed from overhead. Tiredly climbing up a study specimen, Teal'c's Staff Weapon making the job difficult, he decided to wait the storm out and spend the night there. Finding a wide enough bough to take his weight, he wedged his back-pack into a fork between the branches, making sure it was still securely attached to his shoulders. Then he jammed the Staff Weapon beside him, within easy reach. Hoping being fastened to the back-pack would keep him secure overnight, he leaned back into it's support and closed his eyes. The rain continued to pour down around him, and he started to drift, lulled by the seemingly familiar sound. The canopy of blue leaves protected him from the worst of the storm and he was soon asleep, despite the headache and the damp clothes.

The day passed in the cave without incident. Food was passed to them every few hours and they had enough water to drink from their own supply in the pen. They washed their feet several times and sat down to watch what was going on around them. Occasionally a child would come towards them and make strange gestures to them. Raising their arms, they growled and shrieked at the captives, before running off laughing. This was to the amusement of their guards, who did nothing to intervene.

“Umm, I hate to say this,” Daniel sighed, “but I think they’re miming being a bear.”

Sam groaned. “Please don’t tell me you think we’re about to get another house guest.”

Daniel shrugged, “I wish Jack were here.”

“I do not.” Teal’c objected, “I hope Colonel O’Neill is able to extricate himself from his present difficulties and aid our escape. He could not do that if he was here with us.”

“Well, we’ll soon be declared overdue, anyway.” the Major pointed out. “This is our third evening on the planet. The General will try and contact us soon and send out an SAR team when we don’t respond.”

“Wont they just fall victim to the same trap we did?”

“I don’t think so, Daniel. We just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. I don’t think that’s likely to happen twice. Also, we didn’t know for certain the natives were dangerous, whereas they’ll know something’s wrong and will be actively looking for trouble.”

The guards watched as their captives continued to make indecipherable sounds. It didn’t matter what they might be communicating to each other, their fate was sealed all the same. Throughout the day, the natives mended nets and extended them, or sharpened spears, preparing for the coming hunt. It would be a glorious celebration, but it needed to be prepared for and old nets could not hold the blessed beasts.

Day progressed into evening and fires were lit to banish the night chill. Children settled down, tired after their day’s play, and quietness descended on the industrious adults. One of the guards had just

passed some of the bread like cakes through to the team, when everyone was startled by the tinny voice coming from the radio in the chief's new jacket.

“SG1? This is Hammond. Come in please?”

The chief shrieked in horror and grabbed the radio out of the jacket, throwing it to the floor in fear. Nearby, the natives rushed away from the nightmare sound, imploring the chief to protect them.

“SG1? I repeat. This is Hammond. Respond please.”

Grabbing one of the stones from a nearby fire pit, the leader smacked it down on the radio, shattering it into tiny pieces. The sound stopped and he looked triumphantly at his tribe, having vanquished the evil demon and safeguarded them.

The natives slowly settled down, unable to continue their work on the hunting apparatus, and gathered together in the middle of the cave for reassurance. Back in the pen, the members of SG1 shared knowing looks and settled down for the night. Help would soon be on the way.

It was 0600am back in the gate room and Louis Ferretti waited impatiently for the gate to engage. A team of six extra volunteers, lead by SG2 had been ready to leave since yesterday evening. A MALP was already waiting on the other side of the gate, having been left after SG1 failed to return the General's calls. Unfortunately, by the time Hammond had decided to authorise a rescue mission, a storm was raging and it was already too dark on the planet to set off.

The wormhole made it's spectacular kawoosh and the General waited to give them the go ahead. They just had to delay a few minutes for telemetry and video feedback to be checked, before they were given the go ahead.

“SG2 and team, you have a go. Bring our people back home.”

Ferretti turned to give a crisp salute and led his team up the ramp for the roller coaster ride that would take them to PC3 188 and whatever fate had befallen SG1.

They emerged to a forest still dripping from the rainfall of the previous night. The Major instantly reached for his radio and tried several times to raise his friends, but without success. Grimacing with worry, he radioed back their lack of success to the base and signed off, ordering his second to check out the DHD. The MALP would be left in situ so they could keep in contact with the base. Preparing themselves for the march ahead, they stepped down off the plinth as the wormhole shut down behind them.

The ground squelched beneath them as they walked, following the same directions as SG1 had done three days previously. Any tracks the premier team may have made had been erased by time and the storm, but the UAV directions were just as clear for the second visitors as their predecessors. The air had the same sharp feeling after a storm that happened on Earth and the blue leaves on the trees shone in the bright morning sunlight. Keeping his team tight together and reminding everyone to be sharp and alert, Ferretti kept up a brisk pace towards the stone circle.

Waking up slowly the following morning in damp clothes, the first thing the Colonel was aware of was that he still hurt. The aches and pains were still easy to attribute to his several hours climb the day before yesterday. Perhaps he wasn't as fit as he used to be, or maybe it was his debilitated condition that prevented him from recovering quicker. However, he was puzzled by the pounding still going on in his head. It felt as if a team of miners were trying to excavate their way through his skull and any movement exacerbated the feeling. Slowly edging the back-pack free and grabbing the Staff Weapon, he climbing back down the trunk, his feet aching through the canvas coverings as he moved on the rough surface.

Once back on the ground he wandered out onto the rocky track again and paused, shivering in his clammy uniform, searching for signs of danger before setting off. He was aware that they'd have been declared overdue by now and a Search And Rescue team would probably be on their way. However, without knowing what had happened to his team, there was no way he was going to turn back and leave them any longer. He'd got their weapons back and he was ready to deal with the natives on his terms now. The SAR team could catch up later. Carefully putting one foot in front of the other, he set off on the open trail. He couldn't see any tracks to follow on the dry terrain, but there'd only been the one path before he'd been forced off and he hoped it continued like that afterwards.

He'd been walking for just over an hour when he noticed the first stomach pains. They were only a mild annoyance at first, but as the day wore on they started to compete with the rest of his injuries for attention. Deciding that maybe his starved body was craving food he decided to eat the other MRE. He had intended to save his few supplies to share with the team, not knowing what state they were in, but he'd be no use if he never managed the journey. He looked for somewhere to relax in out of sight. His senses weren't what they should be and he was concerned that only a simple distraction like eating might take the edge off his weakening perceptions. Spying another ledge up above him, he cursed that all he'd done so far on this damned planet was climb up mountains, or dive off them. Now he knew what a lemming felt like.

Climbing up the fifteen foot height to the ledge, he was satisfied that he could hide from anyone below whilst he took a quick break. Removing the back-pack, he got out the canteen, dish and MRE and mixed the powder into it again, using his finger as a stirrer. The liquid relieved his dry throat, but he refused to drink any more. He only had a third of the water left and he'd save that for emergencies. Deciding he also needed another couple of Aspirin, he swallowed them dry before packing everything up again. His body moaned as he started the decent back to the track, but he couldn't afford to waste any more time. He hadn't even reached the place where they'd thrown him off yet and he'd no idea how much further he had to travel. One thing was certain though. If anything had happened to his team, the natives were going to get back in spades everything they'd dished out. This wasn't Star Trek and no Prime Directive was going to hamper his conscience.

It was just gone local noon when the rescue team reached the stone circle and the remains of SG1's gear just a short distance away. Ferretti looked around in concern as his team brought back reports from the various bits of equipment they could find strewn around. Animals had obviously had a field day investigating everything from the team's packs. No one could find any blood to suggest the team had been killed, or injured, and the only weapon that could be investigated was one of their own, the jammed P-90. Someone found a single boot, Jack's size, chewed beyond repair, but no sign of blood on it. Looking around at the damage goods, it was obvious that wherever SG1 had gone, they had no equipment, bar their weapons, if in fact they were the ones with them. If the SGC's initial suspicions about the natives of this planet were correct, then the locals were unlikely

to understand the guns, so the Major prayed his friends were the ones armed. However, if they were armed, what had happened here? It made no sense.

Collecting his team back together, he could only convey puzzling information back to base the next time Hammond radioed through. One of the volunteers, Captain Black Wolf, of native American descent, used his excellent tracking skills and led the way beyond the circle. The trail was faint, following the rain storm, but Black Wolf was one of the best officers for this kind of rescue and the rest of the SAR team fell in behind, doubly wary after their finds.

The following morning there was a lot of movement in the cave around them. The women were busy baking more food than seemed normal, wrapping the breads up in large leaves. The children were over-excited and teased the captives in the pen non-stop, until even the guards got fed up and ordered them away.

Desperate to find out what was happening, Daniel tried many times to communicate, but it always brought forth the same result. He was either laughed at, or ignored. He felt so guilty about his lack of success that the others had to comfort him.

“It is not your fault Daniel Jackson, that our captors do not wish to communicate with us.”

“I think our language is as strange to them, as theirs is to us.” he replied. “For all I know I could sound worse than a babbling baby to them.”

“Perhaps you’ve hit the nail on the head there Daniel.” Sam interrupted. “They’re a simple people and have never met other races before. They don’t understand our guns, they thought Teal’c’s Staff Weapon was a blunt spear. Now we’re making noises they can’t understand. They might consider us nothing more than an inferior creature.”

“How ironic, don’t you think?” Daniel replied. “Here we are with all our scientific knowledge and a bunch of cavemen think we’re more stupid than they are.”

“It is indeed, ironic, but we must maintain hope that rescue is not far away.” Teal’c agreed.

Sam meanwhile had been working on the collection of bones in the corner. Shattering them with stones had produced a few sharp pieces to use as weaponry. Their guards watched, never ignoring their captives, in case they decided to try and cut their way through the vines. However, it amused them to think of the puny little shards being any use against what was planned for them. The blessed beasts had thick fur and hurting them only enraged them, making the spectacle more interesting.

The adults spent the rest of the morning finishing their preparation work from the night before. In the afternoon, the men covered themselves with red and yellow paint and danced around their fire pits, chanting and calling in their strange animal noise language. Daniel watched, but the fascination was not the same when he felt so integral to the proceedings. Soon night was upon them and the team wearily settled down again to sleep. Their feet were healing well with the regular washes, which was the only good piece of news they had if the rescue team didn’t get to them in time.

The day wasn't quite as warm as yesterday and it had taken all morning for the Colonel's outfit to dry out again. He was beginning to think that maybe the aches and pains weren't just down to old age after-all, when he started to cough in the late afternoon. Damn, damn and triple damn, he thought as he plodded onwards. He'd stopped and taken some more pills earlier, and even put some more ointment on his feet, but he was starting to feel lousy. How the hell was he supposed to rescue his team when he felt like crap? Perhaps he'd made a mistake and should have gone back to the gate and either met, or waited for, the SAR team he was sure would be here by now. No, he couldn't second guess his decision now. No matter what state he was in, his team had already been alone for over two days and he'd no idea what had been done to them. They were his responsibility, no one else's, and he wasn't going to let them down. They'd do the same for him if the positions were reversed.

He'd passed the place some hours ago, where he'd been forced into an Olympic style dive over the edge, resisting the curious temptation to look over once more. He'd kept doggedly on, feeling the canvas wearing away under his feet and the small stones cutting into him once more. Zoning out was the only way to keep going. Daniel, Sam, Teal'c, Daniel, Sam, Teal'c. Their faces called out to him, their need of him being the only thing that kept him upright, when all his exhausted and hurting body wanted to do was curl up and switch off. The path had been easy to follow all day, never giving him a choice of direction, and always leading upwards.

It was almost dark by the time he heard the sounds coming from the cave ahead of him and the smell of cooking fires assaulted his sensitive nose. Pausing for a moment before he moved again, he listened for any sounds of unusual activity. He didn't know whether he'd been lucky in avoiding detection by sentries, or if the natives bothered with them, feeling safe inside the cave as they were. It didn't matter, luck was on his side for a change, although it was too dark to do anything now. He didn't actually know if these were the same natives, or if his team were still alive inside, but he wasn't going to allow any other possibility to exist. His team were alive and nearby. All he had to do was rest up until morning and find them.

Having made up his mind about that, all he needed to do now was find a safe place to hide overnight. Groaning at the thought of yet another climb upwards, he had to admit that there simply wasn't anywhere else to hide his tall frame on the ground. Looking up in the darkness, he scanned the mountain side for any ledges. Unable to see anything jutting out, he did spy a darkened, recessed area and he made his way slowly up there instead. Thankfully, the small area was only occupied by a rough statuette of a bear, which the Colonel laid down and put at the back of the hole, anxious about knocking it off and making a noise in the dark. He managed to wriggle his body into the depression, wedging the Staff Weapon underneath him and using the back-pack as a hard pillow. He felt a cough coming on and just managed to stifle the sounds into his tee-shirt, which he pulled up over his mouth. It wouldn't do to get caught now. That wasn't going to be an option now he'd come this far. He didn't even feel his eyes closing and was asleep within moments.

Captain Black Wolf got them to the forest edge by late afternoon, confident in the faint tracks he'd been following. He'd spent a lot of time on the reservation with his grandfather, the elder being pleased to find a youngster who still had interests in the old skills. Many school holidays had been spent learning to track and hunt with the simplest of tools, all made on the trail. Black Wolf missed his favourite grandfather, who had been dead many years now, but felt sure the old man would have been proud of his skills being used to rescue other brave warriors. Although he doubted the elder would have expected his student to be honouring his teachings on a different planet. Scanning the open track in front of him, he waited until Ferretti and the others caught up.

“There is no where else for them to have gone, Major, but up ahead.”

“Well done, Blackie. Do you think you can still trail them?”

“It is not easy to follow tracks on this type of surface. A lot of the dust gets blown by the winds and leaves little to be seen, but I will try.”

“That’s all I ask Blackie.” Ferretti said as he patted the Captain’s shoulder.

“They are brave warriors and our friends. I will not let them down.”

Black Wolf and Teal’c were as much friends as the alien had outside of SG1. They both shared a sense of spirituality that often brought them together on base, exchanging tales of their histories and beliefs. Black Wolf had also been privy to the many tales told about the Colonel’s exploits and he admired O’Neill greatly.

He kept to a slower pace, following the tracks over the dry trail. It might seem obvious the direction their quarry had followed, but Black Wolf wanted to get as much information for his CO as possible, before they encountered anyone. Thanks to his eye for detail they now knew that several natives had been in the company of SG1 since the clearing. Black Wolf stopped in concern, when he found evidence of someone hauling themselves back over the edge of the path and then again when he saw signs of someone going over the edge further on. Thankfully, he’d found the other site first, or they’d have been convinced someone had perished, which would have been a whole different ball game.

As the sun disappeared, they made camp for the night. They’d no alternative but to camp out in the open, but setting up double watches and perimeter trip-wires, Ferretti felt sure they could survive any native attack, should one occur. Whatever the natives wanted with SG1, they weren’t going to get lucky twice, not on his watch.

Inside the cave, the activity was reaching fever pitch. SG1 had been woken up early by the chanting and dancing going on as the men worked themselves up into a frenzy. They watched as women and children gathered the prepared food together, along with the nets and spears they’d been mending over the past two days. Animal stomachs, containing water, were also slung over the hunters shoulders. It looked like they might be gone for a few days, which the team from Earth greeted with some relief. It would give their rescuers more chance to find them.

Cheering and hugging each other, the majority of the adult males left the cave, into the early morning light, leaving the rest of their families and elders behind. Their younger guards had been exchanged for some elderly men, but these elders knew they could safely poke their spears through the pen, without putting themselves in danger, should the captives come too close.

Wandering over to the water hole, in what had become a regular activity, SG1 took turns cleaning their feet again. The small cuts had started to heal over and the bruises were fading from purple to pale yellow.

“I think we’re probably going to get that new house guest soon.” Sam mentioned.

“Or, maybe not!” Daniel exclaimed. He’d turned round to watch the cave entrance, where the children had been playing moments before. Now, they seemed to be lying motionless on the ground.

There were shrieks from the natives left in the cave, as they seemed to notice the children at the same time, and they all rushed out. Their guards momentarily paused, not knowing whether to follow or not, but protecting their tribe from without, rather than within, won out and they left too.

Teal'c was quick to run over to the Major's collection of bone shards, their 2IC only a breath behind him, and they were soon working on sawing through the vines around the gate. Daniel, meanwhile, was concentrating on the cave entrance, watching as the natives were felled by the blue zig-zag light, typical of a zat gun. Assuming it was someone coming to their rescue, Sam and Teal'c were both stunned by his distressed sigh.

“Oh, god.”

They looked up into the ragged, dishevelled figure of their CO, leaning heavily on the Staff Weapon, as if it was the only thing keeping him upright.

He'd been woken up by the sounds of exited activity beneath him. Thankful that he'd rolled over into the rough figure of the statuette, it's pain causing him to remember it, he quickly put it back in it's place and pushed himself into the back of the recess. He couldn't risk looking to see if any of the passing natives saw him hiding there, but the loud noises of the men soon disappeared into the distance. Once silence had descended again, he pulled the back-pack on, grabbed the Staff Weapon and climbed down again, hoping it was the last climbing he'd be doing on this trip.

Taking the zat out of his belt before he went another step, he was startled to see children running out of the cave to play in the sunshine. He hadn't expected this, not children. He couldn't kill a child, excepting snakelets, no matter what. What was he to do? One of the children spotted him and they locked eyes for one moment, as the Colonel thought desperately how to get out of this. His team versus the children. Sluggishly realising he only had to zat them, and hoping the children wouldn't be hurt too much, he did the only thing he could before they raised the alarm. As each child fell silently to the ground, too startled to react as they saw their friends go down, O'Neill made his way painstakingly towards the cave mouth. The sun felt really hot this morning and his other complaints hadn't dimmed overnight.

His problems were compounded when the women and elders came running out to check on their unconscious children. He could only zat so many people at once and he was being overloaded. He'd almost as much aversion to shooting women and old people, as children. Quickly he targeted the younger, quicker women, as he moved backwards, taking out the infirm elders as they looked around in confusion. Soon he was the only one standing, but he wasn't sure how long he could keep that activity up for.

Slowly, he staggered into the cave, keeping to the side wall until his eyes adapted to the poorer light conditions. At the far end of the cave, he could make out a huge pen and there, thank god, was his team, alive and well. They were struggling with some sort of gate arrangement and he staggered over to them, only making it partway before they were free and running to him. They seemed so relieved to see him and their faces danced before him, concern etched in their features. Carter was speaking to him and he could feel Teal'c's arms on his as he felt his knees give way. Why was it still so hot out of the sun? Everything was going out of focus, the sounds of his team speaking making no sound to his ears, as his body finally gave in to it's need to shut down.

Ferretti and his team were up and away with the rising of the sun. Black Wolf took point again, some part of his soul indicating they weren't far away. Perhaps his grandfather was watching from the hunting fields of the afterlife, guiding him. He saw no more signs of incidents, but did pick up on a fresher set of rough tracks which had passed this way the day before. Tiny flecks of dried blood were left with these prints and, from what little evidence was left, this person was staggering.

Ferretti wasn't pleased with this news. It sounded too much like whoever had been over the mountainside was now tracking everyone else. It seemed one of SG1 had been separated in one heck of a fall and was now after his team-mates. Black Wolf couldn't be sure which man of SG1 it was, the prints suggested the feet were covered in some kind of torn fabric, making foot size difficult to determine. However, the Captain was sure the prints were definitely too large for Major Carter. Could it have been the Colonel, taking some punishment for his team? It was all too like the loud CO to do that. He'd never let his team be hurt, if he could take the treatment in their place. Determined to set a faster pace, Ferretti urged his scout on and everyone went on the alert once more.

They'd been going for a couple of hours when they heard the chanting coming from ahead. A group of about forty male natives came down the track, yelling and pointing their spears at the new intruders. For a few brief moments, Ferretti wondered how to play this, be nice with the natives, or show the upper hand straight away. His mind was made up when he saw their leader wearing one of SG1's fatigue jackets and the sight of at least two more behind him. He ordered a round of ammo to be sprayed above the natives' heads and was rewarded by the sight of them dropping to the ground in fear. One native, more brave than the rest reached back with his spear and launched the weapon, nearly getting one of the Sergeants. Ferretti immediately sprayed the ground directly in front of the natives, showering them with rock and ground fragments, dissuading any further actions.

The chief glared balefully at the newcomers, as Ferretti moved forwards. Grabbing the native by the arm, he yanked him up and dragged the jacket off him.

"This belongs to a friend of mine." he stated as he noticed the name patch. "Where are they?" he ground out to the cowering man before him, who showed no signs of understanding.

Three more officers relieved the other natives of their stolen possessions, including the belt knives that they could see. They were also relieved of all their spears too, which were thrown over the edge of the mountainside. One native objected and tried to run away, but a quick shot in the arm from Black Wolf stopped the man. The rest of the natives stared in renewed fear, as the hunter came back with blood pouring from a wound they hadn't seen made.

Ferretti made one more attempt to communicate. Unfortunately, there hadn't been a spare linguist available to come with them at the time. Four were off-world, one was on holiday and one was in the infirmary with laryngitis. Shaking the jacket in front of the chief once more, he demanded.

"Where is the owner of this jacket? Where are SG1?" Damn, he wished he knew more about sign language, as the natives obviously didn't understand a single word. Tales of Jackson imitating a downed UAV came to mind and Ferretti decided he wasn't going down that route. The natives had come down the track, ergo, they'd go up it. Simple.

Dropping the leader's arm, he indicated for his men to round them up. Feeling sure that these hunters would constitute the largest part of any threat in the vicinity, he left three of his men behind with them, whilst leading the rest further up the track.

“Oh my god Jack, what have you been doing?” Daniel asked, voicing his concerns as they helped the unconscious man down. Teal’c removed his Staff Weapon and the back-pack, quickly emptying the contents out.

“It appears Colonel O’Neill returned for our weapons and boots.” the Jaffa informed them, as he passed the weapons and footwear round.

“Teal’c, can you guard the cave whilst we take care of the Colonel?” Sam asked, not liking what she could see of her CO.

Teal’c nodded and, once he’d put his boots back on, jogged over to the entrance, taking his Staff Weapon with him. Even without socks, he felt far more confident with his footwear back.

Daniel was undoing the tattered remains of the Colonel’s home made footwear and tutted at the state of the feet underneath. Unlike them, the Colonel hadn’t been able to care for the damage and had been moving on them for a further two days. His feet were almost raw, they were badly bloodied and bruised.

“How come he managed to find our boots, but not his own?” he wondered.

Sam just shrugged. She’d no thermometer, but it was obvious their CO was running a temperature. Tugging his tee-shirt up, they could see the many tiny scrapes he’d collected, both from spears and whatever else he’d been doing.

“How do you suppose he managed to get back up the mountain?” Daniel pondered.

“By the skin of his teeth, looking at the state of him now.” Sam replied, annoyed by Daniel’s questions. How was she supposed to know these things? She gently rolled him over and checked over his back, noticing a long gash along his right shoulder.

“When did he do that?” Daniel asked again, but Sam ignored him this time, before just as gently rolling her CO back again and pulling his tee-shirt down into place.

His pants were ripped in many places and poking about as much as she could, without stripping him, she couldn’t see any major damage, just lots of the minor type. The fever looked as though it was the only serious problem, although too high a fever was a serious problem so far from home. He was obviously exhausted and probably dehydrated too. They’d only seen one canteen, which was nearly empty and half a packet of Aspirin which he’d probably been taking for the fever. Half a tube of antiseptic cream attested to his attempt to treat his feet. Had he been able to get anything to eat? He’d got a set of food trays with him, so maybe he’d been lucky enough to find some rations too.

“I could do with getting the Colonel over to the pool and washing his feet.” Sam commented.

“Why?” asked Daniel, looking around at all the cooking fires and hot water. “Use some of this.” He got up and wandered over to a fire with a warm pot of water on top. Grabbing the warmed pot carefully, he brought it over, going back for a small piece of fur that looked as though it might have come off a rabbit, from another hearth.

Sam took the fur and, soaking it in the water, proceeded to clean the Colonel’s feet. Copying Daniel’s earlier tutting noises, she sighed as the dirt and grit was washed off, revealing the damage

in all its glory underneath. How had he managed to walk with them in this state? She didn't believe he could go much further like this. Could Teal'c carry him the rest of the way back to the gate? Would the Colonel let him? Not likely!

Once his feet were cleaned up and the rest of the ointment applied, she sent Daniel for fresh water and fur so that she could clean the rest of him too. A Staff Weapon blast caught their attention, but Teal'c's calm voice carried back to them.

"Do not be concerned. I was merely warning the natives that it is not wise to return to their homes yet."

Obviously the Colonel's victims were starting to come around, but Teal'c had everything under control.

Ten minutes later, Carter had cleaned most of the cuts she could find, starting on his hot and clammy face and working downwards. She was finishing on his hands when he started to stir.

"You're a sight for sore eyes." he told them through a parched throat, grateful as Daniel helped him sit up and Carter held the remains of the canteen to his lips.

He took a brief look around the cave, seeing all the supplies they could liberate for their return trip and looked back over his shoulder to Teal'c's solid presence by the cave mouth.

"So what're we waiting for?" he tried for lightness, but a cough shook his aching frame. Clutching his stomach as pain gripped him, he missed Carter's concerned glance at Daniel. Perhaps fever wasn't the only thing to worry about after all.

The Colonel caught his breath and noticed them wearing the boots he'd found. "So you found your surprise then?" he grinned, nodding towards their feet.

"Yes, Santa Clause isn't a Gould after all, he's a USAF Colonel." Daniel grinned in reply, reminding them of his quip from before. So much had happened since then. Realising they needed to collect supplies for the trip home, Daniel tried to be diplomatic, without hurting Jack's feelings. "Why don't you catch your breath for a few minutes, whilst I go and collect some food and stuff?"

The younger man wandered off to sort out water and food, whilst Carter studied her CO.

"What happened to your own boots, Sir?"

"Could only find one and that was no use. Let's just say there's an animal somewhere out there with a new found taste for leather."

"Looks like he nearly had mine too." Daniel noted as he returned with an armful of stock. Dropping his finds of cooked meat, breads and water containers, he fingered the teeth marks along the top of his boots, already wondering about the life of the creature responsible.

"OK, I think it's time to leave here kids, but I could do with some fresh footwear, if you know what I mean."

Carter looked around and settled her eyes on some large animal skins nearby.

"Hang on, Sir, I think I've just spotted the ideal thing."

She wandered over to the nearby hearth and returned with two pieces of heavily furred leather, just large enough to wrap around his feet. Kneeling down to put them on herself, she jokingly smacked his hands out of the way.

“Ah ah ah, woman’s work, Sir. Just sit back and enjoy it.”

“But I still refuse to let you shave your head.” he countered, leaning back on his elbows, bringing a smile to her face. This is what he’d struggled back for, his one and only team. The nearest thing to family he had.

Wrapping the leather around his feet, fur on the inside, she used the same straps as before to fix them into place, then both she and Daniel reached down to help haul the larger man up.

“NOW it’s time to go.” he said emphatically, testing his new boots and impressed. “Hey Carter, you missed your calling.”

“Oh I don’t think so, Sir. One pair of moccasins does not a cobbler make.”

“There you go again with the convoluted sentences. Hey, Teal’c. How’s it going out there?” he shouted, walking slowly over to the Jaffa as they all followed. Daniel had squirreled away all their provisions in the back-pack by now and had slung it over his shoulders, before Jack could complain.

The Colonel was trying hard to cover the signs up, but they could both tell he was in pain. They just couldn’t tell from what. The slight furrows in his brow and the way his hands curled up into a ball spoke volumes from the stoic man. They’d all seen evidence of this many times before. It was his defence mechanism, but they’d been wise to this behaviour for a long time now. Teal’c turned around to greet his leader, the slightest of smiles on his face, just as the Colonel tried to swallow another cough.

“I can take point, O’Neill. Perhaps you should accompany DanielJackson and MajorCarter can guard our rear.”

The Colonel thought about objecting for a moment, but he knew he was well below the required level of fitness for being on guard. Part of the success of SG1 lay in his ability to acknowledge each of the other’s strengths. Teal’c was a good strategist and it was no blow to his ego to realise the Jaffa’s suggestion was a good one. He nodded in agreement and Teal’c led the way out of the cave and past the huddled, frightened figures of the natives.

The Major kept a careful watch on their captors as she followed her men back down the track, but no one followed them. She was keen to keep an eye on the Colonel too. He was trying hard to stay upright, but he was slowly hunching over, subtly holding his stomach.

Daniel looked back at her at one point, mouthing “He’s shaking.”

Teal’c made several quick glimpses back, the shadows of his team-mates catching his attention and, therefore, the knowledge that his leader was struggling. Deciding to question him, Teal’c had only just turned around when the Colonel groaned and collapsed, Daniel only just quick enough to stop him hitting his head on the hard ground.

Carter was quick to check his vitals, concerned that he was unresponsive and noting how high his temperature was getting.

“His breathing’s too rapid and he’s got a fever, possibly pneumonia, from his fall in the river. Whatever the reason, we have to get him back to base as soon as possible.”

Teal’c passed his Staff Weapon to Daniel and quickly picked up their CO, cradling him in his arms like a child. It would have been easier to carry him over his shoulders, but the Major’s warning about breathing difficulties deterred him from that method of transport. Carter moved to the front of the team, on point, and Daniel took up the rear, both protecting Teal’c and his burden in-between.

They’d been going like this for about an hour, Teal’c showing no signs of slowing down, when they saw Ferretti and his men coming up the track towards them. There were only a few jubilant shouts, however, before the SAR team took in the sight of the Colonel.

“How is he?” was Ferretti’s first question. Jack was a personal friend and they’d known each other for many years, having served together before. The Major put his hand on the Colonel’s forehead and felt the heat coming off the wet brow. Both he and Black Wolf saw the makeshift footwear and exchanged glances, knowing a bit about what the Colonel had endured.

“Bad.” Carter replied. “I think he may have pneumonia, but we don’t even have a thermometer, let alone any antibiotics.”

Ferretti indicated for Teal’c to lay the Colonel down, whilst he removed his back-pack and got a medikit out. Finding a strip thermometer, he placed it on O’Neill’s forehead and waited until the reading settled down. They were dismayed to see he had a temperature of 102F. Reaching into the kit, Louis prepared a dose of broad-spectrum antibiotics and injected it straight into O’Neill’s thigh. Unfortunately, they hadn’t any way to get his temperature down. They couldn’t even keep a damp cloth to his forehead whilst they had no other method of carrying him, bar man, or Jaffa, power.

“Once back at the forest, we’ll make a litter,” Ferretti informed them, “Teal’c, can you continue to carry him for now?”

“I can.” was the simple reply, as the huge alien reached down to pick his friend up again. Ferretti thought the Jaffa might as well have said ‘Let anyone try and take him away from me!’

Teal’c and Black Wolf exchanged a brief look that spoke of thanks, before Black Wolf disappeared to take up a scouting position at the front again. Carter and Daniel found themselves in the middle of their rescuers, SG2 having taken command of the joint teams. The two scientists were handed all their jackets and knives back. Teal’c declined his, having his hands full, and they decided O’Neill was too warm already to wear his. It didn’t escape SG1’s notice, that the fact they’d been reunited with their clothing, meant Ferretti had encountered and bested the natives.

As they travelled along, Carter filled Ferretti in on everything that had happened, Daniel explaining the lives of the natives as he saw them. Ferretti told them about finding the place the Colonel had climbed back up from and they each gave silent praise to the Colonel’s strength of character. No one knew how he’d managed to get out of the river after his long fall. Then he’d had to climb up the mountain again, before going back for their weapons. When had he started to fall ill? How much food or water had he had? Knowing the Colonel, they might never find out.

A couple of hours later they reached the rest of the SAR team, still guarding the natives. The chief glared balefully at his former captives, both angered at them for escaping and for his own lack of

appreciation of their abilities. Even their leader, whom he'd had sacrificed was back with them, although not looking too well, he gloated. He realised now lucky he'd been in catching the first group, but doubted he'd ever be that lucky again. He just hoped he'd never meet these beings again.

Ferretti signalled for everyone to pull away and, whilst the men at the back made sure no natives followed them, they quickly made for the forest edge. The sooner they could make Jack comfy on a litter, the better he'd feel. Teal'c couldn't carry the heavy Colonel all day and it would be easier to treat him laid out.

By late afternoon they were back under the trees. Hammond had been in touch during the journey and been updated on their success and Doctor Fraiser knew to expect a patient as soon as they arrived. She'd been keen to gate out and meet them part-way, but Ferretti didn't feel that was safe. No one could be sure how many other tribes there might be around and they would be back at base the following morning anyway. Fraiser was overruled and had no choice but to wait the situation out.

Teal'c lay his CO down, whilst Ferretti sorted out men to make a litter for him. It felt cooler under the canopy and the Colonel started to come round. At first he was confused to see all the activity going on around him, but Ferretti gave him a thumbs up and O'Neill relaxed, happy to let someone else do the worrying for a while. They'd been rescued, his team was safe, he was safe. That's all he needed to know for now. If only his body would stop complaining, everything would be fine.

Carter and Daniel were sat beside him and he was propped up slightly against a tree, with Teal'c on guard duty by his feet.

"How're you feeling, Sir?" his 2IC asked.

He was sure he was going to be heartily fed up of that question before long, but he knew they needed to be aware of his condition to get him safely back to base. Didn't mean he had to tell them everything though, did it?

"Oh the usual. I've just done ten rounds with Mohammed Ali and he won."

"Now the truth, Jack." Daniel encouraged, grinning at his friend's return to form.

"OK. Eleven rounds." Jack grinned back in response.

"You're impossible, Sir."

"I know. It's one of my most endearing qualities." He was suddenly finding it a lot more painful to breath though, every in-drawn breath hurt his chest and the damn miners in his head hadn't booked a holiday since they'd arrived.

"So when's the last time you ate anything Jack?" Daniel looked on in concern, not liking how quiet his friend had quickly become.

The Colonel just looked away, refusing to reply.

"Well that answers that then."

Carter passed over a canteen and he greedily drank from it's contents. He didn't even complain when she handed him a couple of antibiotic pills.

“What happened when you went over the edge, Sir?”

“I hit water, I took a drink and then I climbed out. Nothing to it.”

“Ah ha, that’ll be the abridged version then... Sir, I think you may have pneumonia and the sooner we get you back to Janet, the better.”

“Ahh, all those needles. Don’t you just love them when they’re not there?”

“I’ll tell her you said that, Sir.” Her eyes twinkled and the Colonel had the grace to look slightly worried.

Just then, Ferretti turned up with a couple of his team and a litter. They’d made it from long saplings off the nearby trees. Several jackets had been used instead of a canvas, their sleeves pulled inside out and the jackets fastened back up again. Two long poles ran through the sleeves, for the bearers to hold, and the whole thing was strengthened by smaller poles fastened with twine at 90 degrees to the main ones. One of the men had already tried it out for strength and they were happy with the results. Someone had donated a sleeping bag for comfort and Ferretti encouraged him over.

“Your carriage awaits, Sir.” he saluted the downed officer and all the Colonel could do was shake his head in mock despair.

“Don’t make me do that again Louis, I have a bad enough headache as it is.”

“Hang on a minute then, Sir.” Carter stopped him, as she fished out the Aspirin, handing him over a couple of pills and the canteen again. He didn’t feel he had the energy to get himself up, so when he was ready, he signalled for the litter to be brought over. It was placed alongside him and Daniel helped him on top of the sleeping bag. Quickly there were four officers there and he was swiftly airborne and being carried away, Teal’c, Carter and Daniel by his side.

“Look, mum, I can fly.” he managed to joke to Carter, before the headache forced him to shut out the sight of the swirling blue leaves above. Reaching down a hand to check his forehead, the Colonel managed a brief smile for her, before he slipped away once more.

By early evening they had passed the stone circle, no one bothering the ancient monument this time. Daniel felt a brief stab of regret for the missing camera and film, once Ferretti confirmed there was nothing salvageable from their gear, and they moved on. By the time night fell, they were only a few miles from the gate, but no one wanted to risk an accident in the dark. The Colonel hadn’t got any worse on the journey, in fact his temperature had come down, so it seemed the lesser of two evils. SG2 set up a perimeter watch, the recuperating members of SG1 offering to help, but having the offer declined. Daniel belatedly handed over the food contents of his back-pack and everyone shared a brief supper before settling down.

SG1 laid down together and Daniel checked Jack, startled to notice the semi-awake man shivering slightly from chills. Quickly, the team helped manoeuvre him into the sleeping bag, where he quietly went back to sleep. They then crawled into the ones they’d been given, donated by the SAR team. SG2 and the volunteers would shuffle the remaining bags between them as they took their shifts at guard duty. SG1 had their own little rota going. One of them would always be awake to keep an eye on their CO, just in case.

Daniel had the last shift and, as the sun rose, he noticed he was being watched.

“Morning Jack. How long’ve you been awake?” he whispered, not wishing to wake the others. Not that they were probably too deeply asleep anyway, they seldom were off-planet.

“Not long. Didn’t want to disturb anyone.”

“Too late for that, Sir.” Carter and Teal’c both gave him admonishing looks and the Major reached over for the canteen.

“Have a drink, Sir. We’ll be able to reach the gate this morning and get you back to Janet.”

The Colonel just sniggered, as Teal’c helped him sit up in the sleeping bag, unzipping it slightly. ‘Now wont she just be impressed with me’ he was thinking, just before the trees started doing the hula around him.

“Whoa!” he said as his head fell forward. Teal’c moved behind him and pulled the Colonel back into his chest and a more secure position.

Jack took the canteen and held it to his mouth with slightly shaking arms. He only took a small drink, not noticing the worried expressions passing between his team-mates.

The camp woke up around them and people started preparing quick MRE breakfasts, wanting to be on the move as soon as possible, but needing food for the hours ahead. Ferretti brought over helpings of scrambled eggs and crackers, which the rest of SG1 eagerly accepted, but the Colonel declined.

“Come on Jack,” Ferretti insisted, “you need something inside you. How’re my men gonna build up their muscles if you waste away on us?”

“OK, but just a mouthful. Your eggs are worse than mine.” the Colonel griped. He really wasn’t hungry, all he wanted to do was sleep, but he knew these people were worried over him and doing the best they could to help. In their shoes, which was a laugh, as he wasn’t in anyone’s shoes at the moment, he’d be doing the same thing.

Trying not to notice the covert looks being cast his way, he managed a couple of spoonfuls of the powdered eggs, before he pushed the plate away.

“Any more of those Aspirin?” he asked Carter, who immediately put her breakfast to one side to fish out more of the pills.

“No, finish your breakfast first.” he told her.

“I was on a diet anyway.” she joked back as she popped another couple of pills and passed them over with a freshly delivered cup of coffee.

“Now this is heaven.” Daniel smiled as the aroma drifted around them, greedily drinking the brew before it got cold. O’Neill couldn’t help but laugh and Daniel looked up, confused as to why everyone was laughing at him. He didn’t care, it was just so good to hear the normal banter.

Once everything was packed away, four more officers arrived to pick him up, but he delayed them a moment, reaching for the zip on the sleeping bag.

“Get me outta this thing first.” he asked his team. Teal’c continued to hold him upright, whilst Sam unzipped the bag the rest of the way. It was then easy for Daniel to grab him by the legs and the two men to lift him, whilst Sam quickly rearranged the bag underneath him.

“Hey, careful with the merchandise.” he griped again as they laid him back down, but they could see how tired he was and how much of an effort he was making to keep up appearances.

He suddenly rolled onto one side and started coughing again. Carter soon had a tissue in front of his mouth, as his own hands were busy clutching his stomach. She pulled the tissue away once he’d finished and only just managed to keep the shock off her face at what she saw. Surreptitiously showing it to her team-mates, they saw it was flecked with slight blood streaks. What was this? Thank goodness they were nearly home and back to Janet.

The four officers shared equally concerned looks with SG1. They had to get the base’s 2IC back to the SGC, before his condition deteriorated. Once the Colonel said he was ready, they easily raised the litter between them, and were soon marching off on the last leg home.

“Now mind the bumps boys. I’d hate to blow a tyre at this speed.”

“Ha, ha, very funny, Jack.” Daniel grinned in an automatic response to their friend’s humour, but their CO was soon asleep and didn’t reawaken during the rest of their journey.

It was nearly mid-day when they finally reached the gate.

One more radio call from Hammond, to check on progress, meant the Doctor was waiting for them as they emerged back onto the ramp at the SGC. Without preamble, she transferred her unconscious patient onto a waiting gurney and sped away from them, leaving a medic to quickly check there weren’t any other unexpected injuries.

Once the General had got a brief update from Major Ferretti, he let the teams leave for their post-mission medicals. It would do no good to ask anything of SG1 at the moment. They’d obviously had a very stressed few days and he looked forward to their reports. They would probably make very interesting readings.

Doctor Warner saw to their exams, with the help of several nurses. By common consent, everyone let SG1 go through theirs first, so that they could check on the Colonel afterwards. The exams took longer than usual, but they had been away for more days than planned and the Doctor wanted to be sure they weren’t bringing anything unexpected back with them. Once they were finished and showered clean, they headed off together for the trauma room. The General was quick to join them there, but it was some time before Fraiser emerged from the curtained off area.

Watching, as a trolley containing the Colonel was swiftly wheeled away towards the wardrooms, the CMO halted their questions with a raised hand.

“The Colonel’s quite sick at the moment, which is from an infection he’s picked up, probably from the river water. It’s affecting him in a similar manner to Legionnaires Disease, but we’re putting him on some heavy duty antibiotics and treating his other symptoms as they appear. If all goes well,

he could be over the worse within a week or two, but as is always the case with things picked up off world, we'll have to wait and see."

The General interrupted.

"I don't have any actual reports in yet about what's happened to the Colonel. What are his symptoms likely to be?"

"Most likely what the rest of SG1 have been seeing already. Aches, pains, fever or chills, respiratory difficulties, coughs, fatigue and, if his temp gets too high, delirium. All getting stronger as the disease gains strength. Hopefully, he'll gradually recover over the next few weeks with aggressive antibiotic treatment."

Smiling encouragingly at the worried faces before her, the CMO didn't object as they followed her to the private room the Colonel had been allocated. The nurses were busy transferring the patient to a bed. He was either asleep, or sedated. He'd already been gowned and cleaned up and his feet were heavily bandaged. The nurses were busy attaching various monitor leads to him and attaching an IV feed to his right arm, as the sheets were tucked in around him. Fraiser was soon working on the drugs for the IV, as another nurse placed a nasal oxygen cannula around his face. He looked so peaceful lying there, not at all like his usual exuberant self, as people worked on him. Once Fraiser was satisfied with her patient's condition, she arranged for a humidifier to be brought in and ordered the door shut.

"We need to keep the air moisture up, as it'll help thin any lung secretions. I'll also leave a nurse stationed here to make sure he doesn't suffer any other complications."

"Like what?" Sam asked, anxiously.

"Well, it is possible for him to suffer a variety of problems like lung damage, kidney failure or heart disturbances. A percentage of people die from Legionnaires, although this isn't quite the same... Now I don't want you to automatically assume the worse. I'm just letting you know so you can help us monitor his condition and make sure he rests when he comes round."

"Rest." scoffed Daniel, "Like he's likely to do that."

"Well, we do have one advantage. His feet are a mess and it'll be a few days before he can put any weight on them again. We need to keep him warm and quiet. Loud talking and laughing can trigger coughs, so try to avoid it if you can. Hopefully the humidifier will make the coughing easier and in a couple of weeks he'll be well on the way to normal."

"Normal?" the General cleared his throat, "I'll drink to that. I'll leave you people alone then. Come see me at 0800 hours tomorrow for a briefing. We'll discuss reports then."

He got one quiet 'Yes Sir', a bow and a nod as he left the three distracted people to their watch, not even needing to turn around to know chairs were being drawn up around the quiet bed.

It was later that evening and the Major's turn to sit with the Colonel. Daniel was off base checking out their houses for security and post and Teal'c was on a supper and bathroom run. The klaxons sounded and she could hear the extra activity outside the closed wardroom door. No one was due back in yet and the medical staff were automatically gearing up for possible casualties. It was part

of the normal routine for the infirmary staff, whether they then had patients brought in, or not. Checking that her CO was still asleep first, she smiled to the nurse and quickly left the room. She just wanted to check what the activity was about and whether her scientific abilities were needed, before she'd return to the Colonel. She didn't really want to leave him, but on a base like this, her knowledge was important.

Once she'd gone, the nurse heard a loud crash that sounded like a medical cart outside in the corridor. Quickly poking her head outside the door, she saw an orderly sat on the floor, cradling his hand.

"Tripped over my own flipping feet." came the mild complaint as the orderly struggled to raise himself one handed.

Automatically going to his aid, the nurse helped him away to one of the examining bays, fearing the man had broken something. She hadn't even shut the wardroom door, only intending to be gone a minute, but was absent long enough to miss her priority patient leaving the room behind her.

The Colonel was awakened by the sounds of the klaxons, their familiar call to duty cutting through the confused state of his mind. All he was aware of was the heat and an unbearable thirst. Natives, nasty locals after his team, rotten thumping spears digging in his arms, climbing forever, having to move, needing to keep going for his team.

Forcing his way through the vines holding him back, he climbed down once more, wincing as the canvas on his feet failed to protect them. The forest was suddenly noisy with the sounds of strange calls. The damned natives must be there somewhere. He staggered across the ground, seeing light shining through a gap ahead and headed for it. He leaned against something, desperately trying to hold himself upright, struggling to see through the sweat in his eyes. He could hear different voices now, voices he almost understood and he felt his way towards them, collapsing at the last moment into strong arms.

Teal'c had met Sam outside the control room as SG5 made an unscheduled and rapid soggy descent down the ramp.

"Hit the start of the monsoon season, Sir." was the quick explanation of their early return as the klaxons were switched off.

Hammond nodded with a quick command to get themselves cleaned up, sighing with relief that he wasn't receiving any more casualties this time. He caught sight of Carter and Teal'c in the control room above him. He was neither surprised to see them there, nor their quick exit once the emergency was cancelled.

Quickly the two returned to the infirmary, anxious to get back to the Colonel in case he woke up without them. They were walking down the corridor to the wardrooms when Fraiser ran past them around the corner. Sharing a quick glance, they rushed after her, catching sight of their CO, staggering their way, leaning heavily against the wall. They called to him as they rushed towards him, but the Colonel didn't look up. Teal'c quickly passed the Doctor and grabbed for him, just as he passed out.

Effortlessly, he scooped the limp form into his arms and carried him back to the bed. Standing back with Sam, they watched as Fraiser quickly reattached all the leads and fitted a fresh needle in the IV. The monitors continued to sound their urgent calls for attention, until they were all back in place.

“Where’s that damned nurse?” the doctor was cursing, as the Colonel started to mumble incoherently beneath her. “If I hadn’t been by my station to see the alarms go off....”

“Sorry Janet.” Sam apologised, coming to stand by her CO’s side. “I went to the Control Room when the klaxons sounded. I’d never have left if I’d known he was going to wake up.”

“Colonel O’Neill was probably responding to their sound too.” Teal’c assumed. “I am also sorry that I was not here when he needed us.” He too moved nearer his friend, as though being closer now would make up for his absence earlier.

“It’s not up to you to apologise, it’s not your fault no one was monitoring him. I hope she’s got a good reason when I find her.”

Just then the nurse returned, full of apologies when she saw the situation. Fraiser curtly ordered her to wait in her office and requested a replacement nurse.

“I can’t really blame her for going to someone else’s aid, but she should have called for help first.” Janet told them once the nurse had gone, pulling the door shut behind her this time. “Now let’s see if he’s caused any further damage to his feet.”

Pulling the sheets up from the bottom of the bed, they were not surprised to see small spots of blood leaking through the bandages.

“Damn.” Janet moaned as she started to unwrap the soiled dressings. “It’s difficult enough keeping you in bed when you’re awake, without you going walkabout when you’re asleep too.”

Sam would have laughed, as Janet was quite correct, but this wasn’t funny. Jack was still moaning beneath her and she brushed his fringe to one side, murmuring to him to try and calm him down.

“He took the dive for me, you know.” she explained to the Doctor, feeling guilty, but being sure she’d never have survived if she’d been the one to go over.

Janet didn’t say anything, but continued to remove the bandages until his feet were both clear. The damage wasn’t too bad, a bit of antiseptic and, if they could keep him off them this time, they should be all right given enough rest. She lifted his left foot up by the ankle, and gave the damaged sole a few gentle prods to test the skin. The reaction off her patient was spectacular.

Arching his back off the bed, he let her take his body weight with his left leg, as he swung his right leg up towards her face. His right foot was aiming directly towards her jaw, when Teal’c grabbed the ankle with his hand and instantly stilled the deadly manoeuvre. The Doctor shakily took a step back, letting Teal’c take both ankles, whilst she moved past him towards the IV stand.

“Even I sometimes forget.” she said to no-one in particular. You had to watch the Colonel when he wasn’t completely with it. Many a nurse had come away bruised from an O’Neill encounter, but she’d really thought he didn’t have the energy for any antics right now.

Their patient was now writhing more insistently on the bed, trying to get away from Teal'c's iron grip. He was mumbling in a strange language they didn't understand, although Sam thought she recognised the cadence and the odd word.

"I think he's speaking Arabic."

The voice beneath them was weak, but the words were harsh and spat out with venom.

"I think I'd better sedate him before I go any further." Janet said as she adjusted the dials on the IV, waiting for the drug to enter his system.

"It is a pity Daniel Jackson is not here to reassure him in the language he is using." Teal'c mentioned, still holding the struggling man down.

Sam tried to comfort the angry Colonel. He was obviously reliving some time brought on by the pain the Doctor had unwittingly wrought to his confused mind.

"Shhh, it's OK Colonel... You're in the infirmary. Everything's OK, Sir... Go back to sleep, Jack. We're here with you... Shhh."

He started to still as the sedative took effect and, once he was completely out of it, Fraiser treated his feet. She took another few minutes to re-check the dressing on his shoulder and several of the other cuts he'd collected. They were all breathing a bit easier by the time she'd finished and tucked the sheets back in around their sleeping friend.

A replacement nurse turned up a short while later and Doctor Fraiser left them alone. The nurse had heard all about the previous altercation and had no intention of letting the same thing happen twice. Her skin wouldn't be worth its salt content if anything happened again to this VIP. The Colonel might be the biggest pain in the ass when he was in the infirmary, although he could also be a charmer out of it, but the nurse valued her career. Doctor Fraiser didn't tolerate failure where her patients were concerned. It didn't matter that the Colonel was also Fraiser's friend, but it did mean she'd be more likely to be in the vicinity when anything did go wrong.

Three hours later and Daniel had returned. He'd brought back all their mail and some books and puzzles for Jack. They'd sort out Jack's bills and things for him if he wasn't able to himself. He was upset when he found out what had happened and felt guilty for not being there, but Jack was sleeping soundly now and the trauma seemed over with.

Letting Sam go for her break and Teal'c for some Kel'no'reeming, Daniel settled down with a book and started to read aloud from it. Jack didn't particularly like cultural history books, but Daniel's perverse sense of humour always included reading them to him when he was in the infirmary. Jack, for his part, used to read out hockey scores and match reviews, ordering him to wake up if he slept too long.

Lieutenant Michaels, who was sat behind him, eventually put down her magazine to listen and even asked questions. She liked the archaeologist and, like half the female medical staff, wished she'd catch his eye some day. The other half felt the same way about the Colonel, causing some interesting bantering when either one was in for a stay. She'd gone over to study her patient again and was watching his face, wondering how two such diverse personalities as the Colonel and Doctor Jackson could be such close friends, when she noticed a change. The Colonel's eyelids were

twitching, the eyes moving underneath. Quickly nudging Doctor Jackson, she pressed the call button for Fraiser and tried to encourage her patient awake.

Daniel squeezed by the nurse and reached for Jack's hand, speaking quietly to him, remembering Janet's advice to keep him calm.

"Come on Jack. Time to wake up and start annoying everyone."

He applied gentle pressure to Jack's hand and was rewarded by the gentlest of squeezes in return, just as Doctor Fraiser rushed in.

"I think he's waking up." Daniel shouted excitedly, before the nurse could say anything.

Janet did a quick check over her patient, checking his pupil response and doing a quick pain test on the back of his hand. She wasn't going to risk going for his feet again. Unfortunately, he didn't respond this time and Daniel sank back down to the chair in defeat.

"But he squeezed my hand."

Lieutenant Michaels nodded her head at the CMO and Janet placed her hand on Daniel's slumped shoulder.

"He's very sick, Daniel, you've just got to give him time. It's great news that he knew you were there for a moment, but his body needs a lot of rest. Believe me, it's going to take all our skills to keep him still once he does wake up. OK?" she felt like she was talking to a child, but Daniel often had that effect on her. Women either wanted to love him, or mother him.

Quickly going back to her patient, she was relieved to note his temperature had come down, but it was still likely to fluctuate over the next few days. She couldn't believe they'd be lucky enough to be over it all already. SG1 and the Colonel were rarely that lucky.

"Why don't you go and get some rest?" she asked Daniel.

"Teal'c will be in here later, I'll go then. What about yourself?"

"I'm stopping here tonight. Cassie's on a school trip overnight and, besides, she'd never forgive me if I didn't watch over Jack for her."

Daniel smiled at that. Yes, Jack was her favourite playmate, still pretending they were going to get married when Cassie was old enough.

"I'm going to get some rest in my office. Call me if his condition changes again." she told the nurse and left them once more.

Daniel continued to listen to the monitor beating out Jack's staccato heart beat, sounding strong and steady, and watched as the humidifier added more moisture to the air. He'd better make sure his books were OK with that. Leaning over and placing his head on the bed, he closed his eyes for a moment, before reaching out and taking hold of Jack's hand again. He didn't even notice when he fell asleep, or when Michaels placed a blanket across his shoulders. He was still asleep when Teal'c turned up for his watch three hours later, but the Jaffa left him there, quietly standing at attention by the foot of the bed. Teal'c would know the moment his commander started to wake up and he'd be ready to lend whatever assistance his friend needed.

Life went on as normal in the main ward for the next three days, but in the Colonel's wardroom it stepped up a pace. The patient was unaware of the hours passing, as he moved from fever to chills and back to fever again. Although someone from SG1 was always in attendance, Daniel never left his friend's side when the fevers raged. Sometimes he seemed to know they were there, but at others he'd be talking to people they couldn't see and they'd feel left out.

He'd curse and moan in languages the linguist didn't even know his friend was aware of. The Arabic he wasn't surprised about, but Spanish, Portuguese, Norwegian, Chinese and Russian? Most of whatever their friend was seeing couldn't have been good and he'd grab at the sheets, his knuckles white with tension. Sam once took his hand to offer some support and Janet had to sedate him further to release the Colonel's grip and then treat the Major for bruising.

Deciding they were going to have a long talk at some point in the future, Daniel comforted his friend as best as he could. Sometimes speaking in the foreign languages got through to him, sometimes not. Daniel played each fevered conversation as it came. The Norwegian language seemed to bring back happy memories and he concentrated on these when Jack seemed too far away for anything else. Sam and Teal'c kept out of his way during these moments, although Teal'c had to restrain the Colonel twice more from struggling out of bed.

The Doctor refrained from subjecting him to ice baths when his temperature spiked, as he'd a tendency to dive straight into a chill afterwards. Instead, they'd sponge him down with tepid water and feel woefully inadequate as Jack leant desperately into the slight relief. She found herself walking a narrow road between doing too much and too little, not wanting to shock his weakened system any more than it already was.

Somewhere along the line her caution paid off, as his temperature extremes slowly levelled out to more acceptable readings. She sent a silent prayer of thanks to the one God above for not taking him before they were ready to lose him.

The first thing he was aware of this time was the strange beeping of the heart monitor. It was a soothing sound, as it meant home and safety, even if the infirmary and the formidable CMO came with it first. He felt drowsy and pain free, must remember to thank her for that sometime, but he was incredibly thirsty. Someone was calling him and he concentrated on the far off sound, trying to place the voice, knowing he should recognise it.

Daniel, it was Daniel. Why did he sound so worried? He was only here, wasn't he? No need to shout there, Danny, I can hear you fine now. He managed to open one eye and had a brief glimpse of blue eyes, glistening behind lenses, before the image changed to auburn hair and that damned pen-light again. Didn't she know how much it made him squint?

"Come on Colonel. Time to open those eyes of yours again."

What? He'd shut them again? Oops. Best not to upset the good doctor. He'd prefer a P-90 to one of her needles any day.

"Come on, Sir. Are you with us yet?" She sounded so hopeful that he had to obey.

Finally, he managed to keep his eyes open and looked around him. His team were all standing behind Doc Fraiser, out of her way, like a row of dominoes, looking tired, but happy. He felt like saying several things to them, like 'Hi kids, how's it going, you look like shit', but settled instead for "Thirsty." It was all he could get past his dry throat.

"Here you go... Drink it slowly." The Doc held a straw against his mouth and he sipped until the glass was empty.

"How long?" he managed, now it no longer felt as though he had a cactus stuck down his throat.

"You've been back for three days." She couldn't help but grin at his frown. "You've been alternating between fever and chills, even took yourself off for a walk once, but you seem to be on the mend now. Your temp's almost back to normal."

"So I can get up then?" he asked hopefully, with a grin.

Before the Doctor could answer that, he felt a cough building up and curled over onto one side, pulling at the wires and tubes connected to him. Grabbing a nearby tissue, Fraiser held it for him as he shook with the effort the cough was taking out of him. The Doctor rubbed his back as he settled down, taking the tissue off him once he'd finished. He looked exhausted already. She quickly checked that all the medical paraphernalia was still safely in place before smoothing out the sheets again.

"You're coughing because your lungs are clogged up. You've had a type of pneumonia, brought on by your trip in the river. I've got a humidifier in here to help loosen everything up, but you'll still want to cough until your lungs are clear."

"Sweet. Anything else?" he asked, rolling onto his back once more, closing his eyes.

"Well, you're full of cuts and bruises and made a pretty good mess of your feet, so I wouldn't recommend you get on them for a few days yet."

He opened his eyes to stare up at her.

"So you're saying I'm stuck in this room for the foreseeable future?"

"Consider it a chance to have a well deserved rest."

"You've got us for company." Daniel offered as he moved forward, Carter and Teal'c quick to follow.

"Oh great." he moaned, a slight smile tugging at his lips anyway, "I'm heading for cabin fever with Hughie, Louie and Dewie for company."

Teal'c was about to ask who these characters were, when Sam put a hand on his arm to stall him.

"You don't suppose he could still be hypoxic, do you Janet?" she asked in a teasing voice.

"Could be... I suppose I could sedate him again and replace the nasal cannula with one of those horrible face masks. You know how hard it is to speak with one of those over your mouth."

“OK. OK, OK, I know when I’m beaten.” he laughed, then groaned as another coughing fit made him roll over once more.

They each immediately regretted the banter and Janet went to raise the bed head to a more upright position, handing the Colonel another tissue as she went past him.

“You’ve got to stay calm, Sir. Getting excited can bring on more attacks at the moment.” she told him, as he looked at her with tired eyes. “Now go back to sleep. There’ll always be someone with you if you need anything.” she nodded towards the nurse in the background, as she straightened out his sheets once more.

“A guy can’t get any privacy around here.” was his mumbled complaint, as he finally gave in to his body’s demand for rest.

“He will be OK, I mean, this time?” Daniel asked, looking at the pale form on the bed.

“I think so.” Janet replied, but her face looked happier than it had over the past three days and they all felt the tension relaxing in the room.

“That is most satisfactory news.” Teal’c stated and plonked himself in the chair without any of his usual grace. Even the strong Jaffa was in need of a rest.

“I tell ya, Carter, if they stick Jello in front of me one more time I’m gonna puke.”

“It’s only been two days, Sir. Janet just doesn’t want to stress your system.”

“Stress my system? I’m already stressed. I’m stuck here, can’t even leave the bed to use the john for christsakes.” his expression changed from gloomy to conspiratorial and Sam’s systems went on full alert. “Tell you what, you could always nick a wheelchair and we could visit the canteen.”

“Oh, no, Sir. Janet’ll have my hide if I do that. You’re stuck here and you’re not getting me into trouble.”

His smile widened. “Now there’s a thought. I wouldn’t have to get out of bed for that!”

“Sir, you’re incorrigible and, no, I don’t think you’re up to that either.” she couldn’t help but laugh at his cheek. Two days awake from a serious illness, still as weak as a kitten, and yet he was back to his old self.

“How about smuggling me in some food then? Doc doesn’t need to know if you don’t tell her.”

“Janet can smell pizza and beer from fifty paces and your stomach’s not up to either right now.”

He paused for a moment.

“You know, I could kill Daniel. This is his idea of payback.”

They were working on a jigsaw that Daniel had brought in, minus it’s box. Janet had found a tray large enough to assemble it on, but they’d no idea what the picture was meant to be.

“Payback for what, Sir.” she actually enjoyed the challenge of not having a guide.

“You know that Rubik’s pyramid you got him last month?”

“Uh, huh, took him ages to work it out.”

“That’s ‘cause I swapped a couple of corner colours over. Made it impossible to finish until he figured it out.”

“You did what?” she laughed out loud. “Sir, that was mean!”

“I know. Didn’t think it would take him so long to find out. A scalpel and glue kept our little rock boy occupied for the longest time I’ve ever seen him away from his lab.”

“Your idea of a break, was it?”

“Hey, I’m nothing if not considerate.” He tried to stifle a yawn, but the Major saw it anyway.

“Come on, Sir. You’re tired and I’ve got work to do. We can do some more of this again later.”

He didn’t complain as she took the tray off his bed and put it to one side.

“See you later, Sir. Sweet dreams.”

“They’re all of you, Carter. What other sort would I have?”

“As long as you don’t tire yourself out and don’t do anything I wouldn’t let you.”

“Spoil sport.”

“Night, Sir.”

She dimmed the light as she went, closing the door behind her. His lungs weren’t clear yet and Janet thought it might be a few more days before they were back to normal. The Doctor had removed the oxygen therapy though and the rest of the monitoring equipment, bar the IV and humidifier. He would still be on strong antibiotics for a few more days. However, he was getting a little stronger each day and seemed to be past the point of immediate worry. Once more, he’d come sailing through, despite the odds.

The alarms rang in the Control Room and Doctor Fraiser’s office. It wasn’t often the fire alarms went and it could be disastrous in the infirmary with all the oxygen equipment about. Janet ran down the corridors as staff moved into high gear, priorities running through their trained minds. How many patients? Who could be moved without aid? Who were priority cases? Running straight towards the wardrooms and the location of the alarm in the corridor, she grabbed a portable oxygen mask and a fire extinguisher. Testing the door handle for heat and finding it still cool, she burst into the room of her only patient. Orderlies moved in behind her with more fire fighting equipment and SF’s would be on their way, commanded from the Control Room. Her furiously fast thoughts covered her visit of only thirty minutes earlier, wondering what could have caused a fire and if her patient was in danger.

She was too stunned by what she saw to immediately react, other than to put her equipment down and order the personnel behind her to do the same. Someone sniggered and she wasn't sure if it came from behind, or in front of her.

There, before her in all innocence, was Ferretti with a portable Bar-B-Que., scrambled eggs in a pan and sausages on the side. Caught between the proverbial rock and a hard place, he looked her straight in the eye and asked.

“Umm, Hungry Doc?”

Looking upwards, towards the smoke alarm, she noticed it had been taped over, but he'd obviously missed one somewhere and had tripped the alarm. She went over to the intercom and cancelled the alarm, signalling for everyone else to leave the room, which they did, reluctantly.

How the heck was she supposed to deal with this? Naked flames in the infirmary were a complete no-no, but she had to admit that these were grown military men and knew how to treat fire with respect. The oxygen had been turned off to this room, even though it was still running through the pipes in the wall by the Colonel's bed. What was she to tell the General that wasn't going to get the Major into trouble?

Looking over at the Colonel, she couldn't help but smile. He was trying so hard not to laugh, curled up in the bed, clutching his stomach, tears running down his face. For once, he was the one behaving. He wasn't out of bed, wasn't up to mischief - just enjoying someone else's.

What else could she say?

“Starving, Louis.”

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