

Title: Alone Again

Author: Elizabeth

Email: elizabeth@starwarriors.net

Category: Angst.

Pairing: None.

Rating: 13+

Season: Post Series.

Spoilers: Nothing of note. Blink and you'll miss them.

Summary: This time, being left means something completely different.

Warnings: Death Fic, but not intended to be sad. A couple of swear words.

Status: Complete December 2004.

Notes: Many thanks to Karen (Kent) for an excellent beta. She almost deserves co-author edit for this! As always, feedback is appreciated and will be replied to. However, no flames please. I can burn my own toast without any help, thank you.

DISCLAIMER: Stargate SG-1 and its characters are the property of Stargate (II) Productions, Showtime/Viacom, MGM/UA, Double Secret Productions and Gekko Productions. This story is only for entertainment purposes and no money exchanged hands. No copyright infringement is intended. Anyway, if they were mine do you think I'd let anything happen to them? The original characters, situations, and story are the property of the author. This story may not be posted elsewhere without the consent of the author.

Everything's misty around me, as though I'm surrounded by airy cotton-wool. And everything's cosy and comfortable. We're all safe and happy, perched in various positions around the campfire, which crackles between us, without giving out any real warmth. Daniel's got one of those shy smiles on his face, reacting to something that's been said, although I'm not quite sure what. Carter's trying her hardest not to snort into her coffee, and not entirely succeeding. And Teal'c? The big guy's regarding me with that aloof expression that so doesn't fool me any longer. There's a slight breeze that ruffles the hair of the two youngest ones of us who still have any, and which stirs the dust from the dry ground underfoot into little eddies in its wake.

Glancing up from the faces of my contented team-mates, I see the stars shining down at me though the thin cloud cover. Yet again, they're in a strange new configuration, and I wonder about how many times we've shared moments like this. There have been so many planets, so many adventures, and so many times to remember.

But these are the times I enjoy best, when there's no sign of danger and we can kick back, taking the time to enjoy each other's company. And we do enjoy it. We're four completely disparate individuals, but we've grown together over the years into our own peculiar close-knit family. Together, we've argued and fought, and cried and laughed, like only people who truly care about each other can. We've bent, stretched and broken just about every rule in the book to get where we are, and I couldn't be more grateful. Sure, there have been some days I sure as hell could've lived without, some times that have threatened to tear my soul in two, but I can't change what's in the past. Just ask Malakai. So I try instead to be grateful for those things that I **have** enjoyed, and that I **do** possess, rather than dwell on what I've lost. And with my 'family' around me, I'm never down for very long anyway. They won't let me.

Even now, their quiet murmurs cease as they look towards me, concern and something else shining in their eyes. It's as though they're trying to communicate something through the silence, but the distance between us seems to grow and any message gets lost in the mist that suddenly surrounds me.

"General?"

The quiet voice doesn't belong to any of my team.

Where are they?

They were here, just a moment ago.

The comfortable awareness of their presence dissipates like ether, and the quiet companionship I was enjoying evaporates with it.

"General O'Neill?"

The friendly darkness slips away completely.

"Sir?"

And the cotton-wool feeling is replaced by that of another type of cotton beneath me.

Where am I?

"Are you awake, sir? Can I get you anything?"

The dream is shattered, like so many have been in my life, and immediately replaced by the melancholy memory that I'll never see my friends again. Opening my eyes I can see a young nurse smiling down at me. Her bright green eyes and eager smile try to cheer me back to the real world - the one without my family.

"We thought you were going to sleep all day," she teases me, like a treasured grandfather, as she straightens out the sheets around me. "It's a bit late for breakfast, but I'll see what I can get you from the commissary. Are you hungry today?"

It's been a long while since I've felt much hunger at all, as laying about in bed all the time hardly uses any calories. But, still caught up in my dream and remembering the many breakfasts we'd shared, I find myself asking for, "Froot Loops?"

Most people my age wouldn't be seen eating a children's cereal, but since when did that stop me doing anything I wanted to? And I still have my own teeth. So there!

Captain Janice Lange lets out a tiny laugh, as her smile continues to outdo the infirmary lights for brightness. I remember when I used to be that young. The body may be ready for the breaker's yard, but the brain cells still tick over – thank God.

"Froot Loops it will be then, sir. Even if I have to go out and buy them myself!"

Which immediately makes me feel a nuisance, as I know she'll do it in an instant. And I'm sure she has far more pressing duties to attend to, rather than fussing over decrepit old me.

"No, whatever they've got is all right. I'm not really very hungry anyway."

The smile on her face slips for just a moment as she studies me, before coming on full-beam again.

"No. Froot Loops you asked for and Froot Loops you will get. And it's never a problem, General, don't you worry."

With that, she gives my bony hand a hesitant almost reverential pat. Then she does a quick about turn and heads off through the door like a rocket, as though nothing in her life is more important than my cereals for breakfast. Sheesh!

It should annoy me, but I've gotten used to it now, the deferential way I'm treated. Although I can't help one quiet sigh from escaping. No matter how hard I grouch and complain, it's futile to try and get them to treat me just like any other patient, and believe me, I've tried. Janet would have had a fit at me before now, for some of the antics I've pulled. Then probably hidden away in her office to laugh at me. But not these youngsters. They didn't know me when I was just an ordinary officer, serving here like everyone else. No, to them I'm something special. And if they prefer to think I'm simply a little eccentric in my dotage, well there's precious little I can do to stop them.

Deciding to carry out a recon, I use the button to raise the bed-head and take in a view of the familiar surroundings.

They moved me into the SGC infirmary a week ago, and I'm not that surprised, everything considered. I'd have probably made the same decision if I'd been in their shoes, which unfortunately I'm not. I had a much better view through the window at the hospital. Heck, it was nice to **have** a window! Something you don't tend to get twenty-one floors down inside a mountain. So much else was going on around me to keep my attention, and a darn sight better choice of TV viewing too. The kids could visit regularly, which they can't do here, all except for Cassie that is. But she doesn't like to come here if she can help it, too many sad memories I guess. So she doesn't

come much now, and I know she feels guilty about that, but memories are something I understand. And, anyway, she's getting too old to be chasing around visiting me herself, which I told her. Her Hankan heritage has given her a longer lifespan, but I don't think she'll last much longer than me anyhow.

So there I was, quietly minding my Ps and Qs (and I **can** be quiet, despite what Daniel's always said), until the powers that be got wind of my condition (read impending demise) and decided to step in. Someone mentioned "National Security" then someone else queried "What if some of his 'friends' come visiting?", whilst pointing a finger up at the ceiling, and I nearly broke Mach 1 in speed during the transfer. I wonder what they thought was going to happen? It's not as though aliens aren't an almost everyday occurrence now, is it? Maybe they thought Thor was going to turn up, all bells and whistles and demand a reanimation?

I told them it was my body going down the pan, not my marbles, and who the hell would want to visit my old bag of bones anyway? But did they listen to me? Do **they** ever? It was like trying to paddle upstream, without the paddles. Nobody took a blind bit of notice and I might as well have saved my breath. Not that they don't treat me with respect (and kid gloves, darn it), because they do. It's just that I hate being helpless and a burden on others. I always wanted to go out in a blaze of glory. Always wanted the hero's glorious self-sacrificing exit. Fat chance of that happening here now, is there?

Not like my team.

Not like them at all.

And I'm too stubborn and proud to cry about that now. Ya know, if I keep repeating that, I might just believe it one day.

I'm now older than Teal'c was, when he died. Isn't that a kicker? Made one hundred and thirty last time. Who'd've expected that? Not me, that's for certain. Hated the damn party they insisted on throwing, but at least I don't expect to have to suffer another one.

I've certainly caused a puzzle by refusing to die over the years! It turned out all those unsolicited trips into sarcophagus-land, along with my so-called advanced genes, slowed down the aging process. Or at least that's what the experts think. I can't say I understand it myself, but something's sure kept this old body going far longer than any normal person has a right to expect. Then again, who said that anything about gate travel was normal? I'd always wanted to put a notice over the top of it saying 'Gate travel can be hazardous to your health'. I put it in the Suggestions Box every year. In fact, I replaced the Suggestion Box every year when Hammond removed it, just so I could keep on suggesting it! 'The Man' wouldn't let me, then, when I was 'The Man', the President wouldn't let me. Mind you, it took him a whole five minutes to stop laughing when I asked.

I never expected the job to increase my lifespan - shorten it maybe!

And I certainly never expected to be the last one to go. That wasn't supposed to have happened. Not to me.

No way. No how.

But it did.

And it's never stopped hurting - being left behind. Again.

A young strip of a corpsman suddenly appears by my side and interrupts my sad train of thought.

"Uh, General . . ."

He looks pointedly at a scratch in the paint above my bed.

"Would you care to make use of the facilities, sir?"

So polite. Bless the boy.

They know how much I hate being bed-bound, so someone stops by and offers to walk me down the corridor at almost clockwork-like intervals. Like it's recorded on a chart somewhere headed: General O'Neill's Bathroom Pit-Stops. Come to think of it, it probably **is** recorded on a chart somewhere. Go figure.

But I really don't have the energy to get up and walk this morning.

So young Stevens politely discusses the latest hockey scores as I fill the damned urinal he hands me, and I'm painfully aware that he can hear every sound I'm making. At least he has the decency to pull the curtain around me until I've finished. Then he politely takes the offensive stuff away, leaving me in peace once more.

Gads, but old age can be humiliating at times.

I'm left to stare up at the ceiling again.

And remember those I've lost.

Daniel and Sam were the first to go. I found myself sometimes calling her Sam in my mind, once she'd gone. And now I'm retired, and not hemmed in by officialdom, I can remember her more as a friend than an officer. Even though she was one hell of an officer.

We never even got to tell her father about her death. Jacob disappeared on some hush-hush Tok'ra mission and just never came home after we sent a message to him. Anise seemed genuinely upset about it when she eventually got in touch, months later. Although not as much as Sam's brother. If looks could kill, Mark would have done away with us all at the service.

I wonder if Anise's still out there somewhere, involved in some snaky little research project? Once the Goa'uld were defeated, the Tok'ra never kept in touch like they used to. Guess they didn't need their favourite guinea pigs any more. No surprise there.

The damn snakeheads were about when my team were still out there though!

And, in the end, they managed to reduce SG-1 after all.

Only Teal'c lived to tell the tale and he was never the same afterwards.

My train of thought's broken once again, this time by Nurse Hicks arriving with one of those thingies they still use to test your blood pressure. You know? The cuff around your arm whatchamacallit. You'd think by now they'd have some easier way to do this stuff, without interrupting a guy so much. Can't I just lie here and think for a bit without being constantly poked and prodded? Damned aliens did enough of that, way back when.

"General?"

It's a struggle to refocus, especially when I'm still thinking about Daniel and Sam.

"If you don't mind, sir?"

Well, actually, since you asked...

I do my best jaw-gnashing scowl at Hicks, and she beats a hasty retreat. Maybe there's some power left in the old body after all!

Then I feel a smidgeon of guilt. Poor old Hicks. She was only trying to do her job. It's not her fault if I want to just lie here and wallow in my memories.

It was so long ago. And yet it hurts like it was yesterday.

I can recall the events in the report as if they're burned into my mind, the black and white letters unable to describe the horror as vividly as I imagine it.

Daniel and Sam were investigating some ruins on P-whatever-the-heck, with Teal'c checking the perimeter, when it happened. We never did get the full story, as the Goa'uld had massacred practically everyone by the time the rescue team got there.

It had all been an elaborate hoax, a trap, with the sole intention of capturing my team - my kids. Unfortunately, the 'mock' ruins the natives had built to attract Daniel, had been unwittingly assembled over some old subterranean caverns. They were the long-time result of a naturally occurring fault-line, our geologists later confirmed. The weakened surface simply hadn't been stable enough to carry the extra weight of the heavy rocks.

Daniel got suspicious about the place almost as soon as he got there. Teal'c heard the angry response from the natives to Daniel's piercing questions, and he started to walk

back from his patrol, curious as to what was going on. Even Carter seemed itchy by this point. The locals panicked and turned their pointy little spears on both scientists, probably not understanding how powerful our weapons were, but prompting Teal'c to let loose with a warning blast towards the earth at their feet.

The ground couldn't take the added stress.

Teal'c survived, but the ruins and everyone inside them disappeared into the fissure that appeared, never to be seen again.

It was a long way down.

And two of our finest, most gifted young people, and two of the best friends I ever had, were gone. Forever.

Only one person remained alive at the village long enough to tell us a shining eyed one had set the whole thing up, returning to his ship, to wait up above. I guess whoever it was didn't even want to try ringing into the mess below, unable to pick out broken bodies amongst the collapsed rock, God only knows how many miles down. Maybe he didn't even have a sarcophagus, even if he could have located my team amongst the other dead. Or maybe his courage just ran out when the plan went belly up. The survivor didn't live long enough to give us a symbol to identify the snake, so we'll never know why he wanted my team. But I can make a few educated guesses, past experience being the grand teacher that it is. The Goa'uld all seemed to think pretty much the same, which was their downfall in the end.

How they knew SG-1 were there is a puzzle though. We've often speculated the snakes were somehow able to monitor gate travel, but never been able to prove it. Maybe it was simply good Intel. I think, upon reflection, from whatever spies they had about. There were certainly enough of them after a piece of the bounty on our heads back then. Maybe it was pure luck - luck isn't always a lady. But we'd bumped into them often enough to never be surprised by their sudden appearances.

Teal'c suffered a lot of guilt after that and never truly recovered from it. He rarely went off-world any more, preferring to attach himself to me, as my personal bodyguard from that day onwards. Not that that was much of a hardship for me, no matter how much I grouched to him about his mother-hen act. I'd lost two of my dearest friends that day and I felt as bereft as Teal'c did. My own guilt vied with his for supremacy. He might have been with them, but **I** was the one who sent them out there. **I** had the choice and **I** made the decision. **Me**, and no one else. The blame for all those who've lost their lives under my command has always stopped with me and I'll take that responsibility to the grave.

And I may not have been there when Daniel and Sam died, but I was there when Teal'c left me as the last surviving member of SG-1. I was there. And I was just as impotent to help him, as he'd been, to aid Daniel and Sam, when it happened.

He'd stayed on base, after the disaster that took our friends, or came home with me on those few nights I actually left the mountain. He continued training the new recruits, helped the linguists, assisted the scientists studying off-world gadgets, generally doing

whatever a genuine alien expert could do around the place. Occasionally, he toured our off-world sites to check on security, or train recruits *in situ*, but he never strayed far from my side for long. The rebel Jaffa were making steady inroads into Goa'uld territory under Bra'tac's command, and the tide was steadily turning, but a number of System Lords had put a hefty price on my head. I'd never thought of myself, as an individual, very important. To me, it was the people I commanded who made the difference. But the proliferation of ashraks and bounty hunters, openly hunting me, suggested differently. I should have been safe on Earth, but even here I'd made quite a few enemies over the years.

So it was that I acquired extra security, and near-constant company, during those long years after losing our friends. And it turned out to be sorely needed. His alien eyes spotted things that others missed, and twice he prevented suspicious 'accidents' from happening around me. Unfortunately, even he couldn't prevent everything, and one day I lost him too.

Another planet and another people demanding the Great Leader O'Neill be present to sign the treaty of blah-blah-whatever it was. Actually, I remember damn fine what the treaty was: naquadah, naturally (well as natural as you can get with that stuff). But my memories of that mission remain not about the natives, but about the loss of my last team-mate.

The treaty had been signed and all was hunky-dory, zippidy-do-da-done, when a heavy storm blew up from nowhere. The natives scattered, saying they were used to this, but warning us to get back to the gate A.S.A.P. and not to spare the horses. Actually, if we'd had horses it might have all turned out OK, but we were still a long way from having reliable transport for our troops back then. What worked on one planet would fail miserably on another. The gate was parked alongside a wide and quite spectacular river. I'd even been debating going fishing there if we'd had the time, but that wasn't to be.

The deluge of rain coming down was of apocalyptic proportions, unlike anything I'd ever seen before, or since. And, alongside the run-off from the nearby mountains, the riverbanks quickly gave up trying to cope with the awesome volume.

The banks broke up long before we made it back and Teal'c and I were swept away, despite desperate attempts by the rest of the teams to keep us together. We were already roped together and he used his greater strength to haul me to him as we were pulled along, never relinquishing his grip once we'd made contact. I remember very little after that. I vaguely recall the intense cold of the water, the noise of the storm, and the way I struggled to breathe through the violent torrent. But it seems I hit my head sometime during the rough and tumble, and everything else is mostly a blank.

But Teal'c was there.

I have vague memories of waking up near a small fire and him holding me to his chest, the smell of his skin familiar through many hectic, sweaty missions. He seemed to be talking to me constantly, as often as I remember being remotely aware of where I was. He talked of many things, including something about sharing body warmth to combat the cold night temperature. He talked to me soothingly, like I was a child,

explaining basic survival skills that my rattled brain wasn't able to comprehend at the time. And the sound of his voice helped to keep the darkness away, as he struggled to keep me alive. I remember being jostled about as he covered me with more layers, my mind not even wondering where they came from. And the continued flow of warm words of comfort during my few moments of lucidity. Some of the words stay with me to this day.

“You will survive O’Neill, and in future years when the Jaffa sing of these days, your name will be honoured above all. You rescued me from slavery and, by following our example, many others are now free. More will follow them and so it will spread, all in your footsteps. **You** were the first, my friend, and even I will stand in your shadow. Take care my brother and know that I will always watch over you.”

He wasn't there when they found me the next day, huddled inside a small cave. It was more of a niche in a rock wall than a true cave, but it had served its purpose well. I was alive, but of Teal'c there was no sign. His clothes surrounded me, and they were covered in his blood.

Some say he was delirious from his wounds and, having selflessly covered me with his clothes, had stumbled away to get help. But naked? Some say he reacted like some hypothermia victims, whose compromised systems mistake the extreme cold for warmth, removing what little protection they have left, thereby hastening their own deaths.

But me? What do I think?

I have a little dream, a tiny spark of hope for what might have happened. You see, I once had a ringside seat when someone else chose to change his plane of existence, rather than dying. And he also left all his bandages behind.

It's not much to keep me company at night, and no-one else believed me when I first mentioned it. They put it down to the ramblings of a traumatised mind and smiled down at me. So I didn't mention it anymore. Maybe they were right anyway. It's all such a long time ago now. Could Oma have gone back for Daniel? Could you get a readmission to the glowy club? Could he, or she, have come for Teal'c? Where would that leave Sam? I didn't know. Maybe everyone who looked at me as though I was whacko was right, and I was simply clutching at straws in my bereavement. But I do know those first days, weeks, months, after I recovered were hard.

Because I was now completely on my own.

Life sucked, but someone had to keep on going to keep the fight where it was needed. There were other Teal'cs out there in the fray, other Daniels and Carters. And at home, there were loads of folks who didn't even know they needed to be protected, against an enemy they didn't even know existed. Talk about convoluted! The kids down the road who washed my car. The pharmacist who knew more about my ailments than I did. The paper delivery boy who only managed to reach my door three throws out of five. And the guy down at the dog pound who gratefully accepted my donations to feed the mutts in there. They all needed someone to keep them safe and I guess fate decided I had to be the one.

So, over the coming years, my stars grew as the program grew. I've got three now, the same as old George. Bet he never expected that! Good old George, who died peacefully in his sleep at the ripe old age of ninety-two. A great-granddad by the time he passed on and much loved by his family.

Once he'd retired I was able to keep more in contact with him than when he'd still been active, but in Washington. Once he'd moved back home again, the previous telephone calls and emails were replaced with boys' nights in, and monthly barbecues. His family would come around, as well as Cassie's and everyone kept in touch over the years.

Cassie's also a granny now. She followed Janet's footsteps into medicine and later joined the SGC as a civilian doctor. She had the same firecracker attitude, and that earned her the same respect her mother had once commanded, even without the military pull. She fell in love and married one of the scientists here, and had three lovely children, who now have seven more between them. So between them, and Kayla's and Tessa's families, I can tell you, my back garden overflowed some days. Amongst all the kids and grandkids, there's a Daniel, a Samuel, a girl called Teal of all things, a George, a Janet, one John and two Jacks. And if anyone tells you they see a tear in my eye at that, I'll deny it - loudly. Then I'll have to kill you! Although these days, I'd probably have to beat you to death with my walking cane.

Hicks turns up again, tray in hand, approaching me a little warily after our last encounter. It's not really her fault I'm not in the mood for company today, so I smile at her this time in an I'm-sorry-I'm-such-an-old-grouch kinda fashion. It's strange how some people react to my crotchety behaviour with strange delight, while others, like Hicks, treat me like a caged tiger. Even if it's all a bluff and I lost my fangs years ago. Still, it keeps me amused.

"Here we go, General." She extends the tray as if she almost expects me to bite off her arm. "It's time for your medicine."

"Ah. Righto," I say, smiling. Still trying to rebuild a bridge or two.

She passes me a collection of coloured pills, which I can't believe I need, but I take them anyway. I can always cough them back up when she's gone.

"There," I say. Doing my best co-operative patient impersonation.

Still casting me a wary eye, she nods approvingly. "Well done, sir," she says, as she beats a hurried exit.

Ah, well. You can't win 'em all.

There's not a lot to watch around the infirmary today, only one young airman with a broken leg at the other end of the room. We smile to each other, then he goes back to the book he's reading. They'll probably send him home in a couple of days, once they're sure he can cope on his own, or his family or team can be there. That's something that still happens here, the teams taking care of each other. I'd like to think

SG-1 had something to do with that, but that's probably just wishful thinking. There are over a hundred teams here now, and more geeks and scientists than Teal'c could shake a staff weapon at. Makes me glad I'm out of it. The weekly team leader meetings must be a real hoot - not!

They wanted to give me my own wardroom, but there's no way I could have withstood the boredom of that. Not without my team to keep me company anyway. At least here, in the Fraiser Infirmary, I can watch the staff wandering about and pester them for some fun when I get desperate. I wonder what Janet would say about the name I gave the place? It's amazing what you can get away with when you're a General. And I bet George would be stunned to know it's now Hammond Mountain. That one took a lot more persuading, but by that time it seemed I was a living legend and the President could hardly say no.

A living legend.

Me.

Able to get Presidents to do stuff for me.

Sheesh!

I can hardly believe it, even now, after everything that's happened over the years. My team wouldn't know what to make of it all. Sam would smile, that tiny little smile that said she was trying hard not to lose it in front of me; Daniel would be doing his fish face impression: mouth opened, mouth closed, mouth opened, mouth closed. And Teal'c? Well, he might have two eyebrows raised instead of just one. It said a lot did that expression – if you spoke Jaffa!

The stargate didn't become public knowledge until many years after my team had died. Once the Goa'uld had been defeated, and visiting alien allies became commonplace, the then President decided to go public. The galaxy was a stabilized place, and there was a huge scope for trade and alliances. It helped to win the general population over when they were shown all the goodies we'd got for them. It was remarkably easy, much more so than we'd been expecting. I guess most people by then believed we weren't alone in the universe and it didn't come as a huge surprise. Area 51 and Roswell fanatics claimed loudly "I told you so", purported abductees filed for damages, and Wormhole X-Treme became required viewing. And the program's characters' true selves became instant celebrities, posthumously in most cases.

Global warming was tackled through renewable fuel resources. Cars now run on water – who'd have thought that was possible? Certainly not the oil producers, but not everyone was going to be happy with that particular change, even if there were plenty of new jobs for the workers involved. Improved harvesting techniques help feed many more millions, and better farming methods have resulted in more livestock all round. And medicines and health care got a huge boost from off-planet knowledge and herbs. Sometimes we came off best in the trade for goods, sometimes other planets benefited more from us. It was all swings and roundabouts, but that made it all the more real, I suppose. Of course, there were the more frivolous gains, like new recording and

playing mediums for entertainment, and alien fabrics and designs for the fashion conscious.

You rarely went a day without seeing some sign that we were now an intergalactic planet. And maybe that's why, even though we still have our own troubles down here, people are more willing to compromise and live in peace. The fact that there's now an obvious 'us' and 'them' encourages people to think we're not as different from our neighbours as we used to think. Who knows? I'm not a psychologist. Sometimes you even got to meet a rare visiting dignitary as they were escorted around the planet. Jay Leno had a field day with interviews.

And through all this, the SGC and SG-1's fame, in particular, continued to grow and grow. Posthumously, for all but me. At the time, I was still running the Command and knew that there were a few malcontents who held me responsible for what they saw as a risk to the good old American way of life. Even Kinsey continued to be a pain in the butt until he died of an unexplained DIY accident at home. I'd just received a tip-off from an old buddy in Special Forces about him orchestrating something, when a power-socket in his garage seemingly overloaded and went kabluay, taking the garage, car, and ex-Senator with it. Come to think of it, I survived many strange instances over the coming years, but never really gave it much thought before now, other than by considering myself incredibly lucky, which I put down to my Irish heritage. See Daniel, I do know big words!

There was the time a professional assassin was hired to shoot me, on the way to a press conference, but we never found out who hired him, as the gun exploded in his face. Or the time a relative of one of my dead officers tried to take me out, by rigging an avalanche whilst I was on a skiing holiday. The charges failed to go off, but the previously stable ridge above him gave way instead, killing him long before the rescuers could reach him. Or the time a fanatic tried to run me off the road, but a parked car we were passing suddenly lost its brakes and careered down after us, knocking my attacker off the side of the road and down a gully, breaking his neck on impact. I guess I've just led a very charmed life, always managing to survive against the odds, even if the price has often been too high to contemplate.

In my ninetieth year, when every child had plastic dolls in SGC uniforms, some of them looking distinctly familiar, there was an added category for the Nobel Peace Prize. It would not be awarded often, but in its first year the Award For Intergalactic Peace went to SG-1 for our work in leading the fight for the planet's safety. I accepted it on behalf of my team-mates and the SGC, but not for myself. I wanted their lives to have stood for something, and to have some recognition for the sacrifices they'd made. It was Daniel I felt the proudest for, although it was a double-edged sword. It had all come too late for him to be able to face those who had derided his theories, and to rub their egotistical noses in the dirt (like I would have done if it had been me). But Daniel's and my team's faces would be remembered long after his old associates had turned to ashes in their graves.

In my hundredth year, when every child had SGC bedding and most had posters of the ever-popular SG-1 on their walls, I had the dubious honour of receiving another award. This time it was the Nobel Peace Prize itself, for strengthening intergalactic relationships after cessation of hostilities with the Goa'uld. I didn't want to accept it

at first, until Cassie talked me around. She was so proud of all of us, she said, but especially me after everything I'd done. Especially after everyone else had died. But to me, I'd only been doing my job. It had just segued, almost without me knowing it, from retirement into Earth's primary Ambassador To Off-World Species. It wasn't a role I'd ever expected to have, but it seems Thor and Lya refused to deal with anyone else. And too many of our other allies simply preferred me over anyone else, as they already knew me. Even Bra'tac threatened to cause an incident if I couldn't be contacted, although he's now gone the way of other brave warriors too. I don't think it had anything to do with any diplomatic skills I might have possessed (and didn't). It was merely the result of having lead the SGC's primary contact team all those years ago. Strange how life works out!

Even now I'm as likely to be addressed as Ambassador as I am General. Some of my old commanders would be turning in their graves, if they could see this. Although I guess George is having a good old laugh at my expense!

Rumour has it I'm the world's most decorated soldier now. I've got more awards and commendations than I could ever fit on a dozen uniforms, and not all of those are from the Air Force, either. Since the days of 'The Announcement', as it's come to be called, other countries have chipped in with recognition of what we did. Again, I always make a point of accepting on behalf of the men and women who gave up much more than I. And I hope to keep on reminding everyone. It's the least I can do for the families of the deceased, to make sure their sacrifices aren't ever forgotten.

I'm a household name now too, would you believe it? The world's most famous soldier. Or should that be infamous? Just make sure it's O'Neill with two 'L's. I don't want to get confused with that other chap, the one with no sense of humour. I wonder how long he's been buried now?

Stevens is doing the rounds again and he wanders over with the sports papers. He's a good kid who enjoys his work. Takes an interest in his patients and goes out of his way to see they're settled OK. I tell him to leave the paper by the bed and I'll have a look later. I might even get him to place a bet for me when he gets off duty. But that's between him, me and the bedpan. I take a glance at the front page though and see some hotshot player is being interviewed over his coming transfer.

I've done so many interviews over the years, that I'm a dab hand at it now. There was a time when my constant appearances helped keep Joe Public from tossing his cookies over our new intergalactic friends. But as I said before, that period didn't last very long. Afterwards, I became a subject of fascination for the media, and the President asked me to keep up my appearances, as a personal favour to him. Maybe it improved his chances of re-election, catching the public's imagination with such a huge life change? I don't know, but he did come back for another term. And don't bother to ask me which one. I've seen so darned many come and go, they all merge together now.

I'm not sure why it was me the public interest homed in on, rather than any one of the other SGC officers. Possibly because I'd been 'The General', as well as the leader of 'Team One', but I'd hardly been the only person to risk my neck out there.

Talking had never been one of my strong points up till then, my tongue tending to run away before my brain could catch up, which generally hadn't been good for my career previously. But my laconic, never stay serious for too long approach seemed to go down well with the audiences. I was way more popular than any long-winded geek on the countless interview shows of the time, and later on I emerged from the hoo-hah as a genuine honest-to-goodness celebrity. Maybe the public thought that if I, someone they saw as one of their protectors, was at ease with them, then the aliens couldn't be all that bad. Whatever the reason, it seemed to work.

However, I never stopped feeling guilty for all those countless soldiers who didn't come back, for those who'd suffered whilst I was living the good life. There wasn't anything I could do about it, but at least I could try to make sure no one forgot about them. I found myself frequently visiting injured personnel, often puzzled by how much they enjoyed my visits. So many teams now, although the risks aren't the same out there as they used to be. They never did re-issue the SG-1 team name though. There had been such a high bounty on our heads before the Goa'uld were finally defeated, that it was felt unsafe to issue the number to anyone else. So we would always be the only one with that title. Sweet, huh?

They tell me that the kids are taught all about us in school now. It's something to do with hiding lessons of tolerance to others within action stories. And you can buy some really garish comics too if you're in to that kind of thing. I never expected to become part of a merchandising franchise! And you don't wanna know what my face looks like in plastic! My parents would never be able to look their neighbours in the eye if they were still alive, but Mom and Dad passed away many years ago, shortly after the stargate became public knowledge. I know they were proud of me, but I wished Charlie could have been there too. He'd have had a hoot, bragging to his friends, no matter that he wouldn't have been a little kid any more. Sara was thrilled and we spent many an evening together, laughing over the good old times (and there **were** many before the tragedy of Charlie blindsided us), and then again over the even stranger newer ones. Even though we never got back together as a couple, she moved nearby and helped to keep my chaotic public and private lives together. We never got past first base in the bedroom department, but I think we both thrived on the comfortable warmth of our re-established relationship. She died a few years later of natural causes. In her sleep, thank God.

It felt like I'd lost my family once more, and only Cassie, Kayla and Tessa kept me going again for a long while after that.

Even though my improved stamina kept me gainfully employed for far longer than anyone had expected, I eventually drifted out of the glare of publicity and moved out to the cabin. I was far enough away from the road for casual observers and good old Uncle Sam had a helicopter pad inserted into my nice piece of unspoiled forest in case I was urgently required back at base. It seemed full time retirement was never going to be on the cards for me. The security of the place was top-notch and overhauled every few weeks for added peace of mind. And I always had the latest mod cons fitted, courtesy of whoever was in power at the time. It was 'insisted' upon if I was going to be living on my own. I never thought I was that important, but apparently every President since Hayes has thought differently. Pesky Washington. If Davies had still been there I could have persuaded him to run some interference, but he, like all

my other long-ago colleagues is now long-gone. All those people, all those incredible individuals that I knew - gone. Not ascended; not living on another plane; but truly and finally gone. I hope they're all at peace now.

Maybe I'll be joining them soon.

Sometimes I feel a depth of loneliness too difficult to put into words. But the peace of the forest and lake came as a calm respite after the painful life I've led.

I'd spent a lot of time visiting with the girls prior to moving out there permanently. Then I sold the house and gave the proceeds to my three angels and their children, including my team's namesakes. When I finally go, I've left instructions for the cabin sale to go the same way. No way in hell, are they going to make it some kind of shrine to 'The General', and have tourists gawking at my stuff. The forest is to remain untouched for perpetuity, another perk of having friends in high places. The President did joke about renaming it after me, but I think he was joking - right?

But then again, if they didn't value my old bones so much, I wouldn't have been whisked back into care so quickly, when my body decided to catch up with my age. The press are having a field day again. News of my 'impending' demise is being splashed across the papers. I mean, come on guys, I'm only one person. The fate of the planet doesn't rest on my shoulders.

Ummm, well, at least, not any more...

But in a way, it's been nice to come back home to the mountain again, full circle if you will. Even if the most I've seen has been this ward and the corridor, when I need a potty break. If they let me out of bed that is. I hate the damn urinal and bedpan. It just isn't dignified to have some young nurse wipe my butt like a baby's, when I'm quite capable of a tottering stroll across the floor.

The nurse still hasn't got back with my breakfast, so either she's got caught up in some genuine nursing duty, or she really has gone out to buy my Froot Loops from a nearby store! And it's amazing how tired I am again, waiting for her. I'd close my eyes and have another doze, but I wouldn't want anyone to accuse me of being a doddering old man yet, incapable of managing without a mid-morning nap.

But my eyelids are so very heavy.

And I'm so very, very tired.

Everything's misty around me, as though I'm surrounded by airy cotton-wool. And everything's cosy and comfortable.

I've been here before.

We're all safe and happy, perched in various positions around the campfire, which crackles between us without any real warmth. Daniel's got one of those shy smiles on his face, regarding me with genuine warmth in his eyes. Carter's put her coffee mug down and is smiling fit to burst. And Teal'c? I've never seen him with such a satisfied

expression on his face. There's a slight breeze that ruffles the hair of the two youngest ones of us who still have any, and which stirs the dust from the dry ground underfoot in little eddies in its wake.

Their quiet murmurs have ceased as they stand and move around the fire towards me. It's a long while since I've seen them looking so happy and at peace. It's almost as though they're shining with the joy of some special occasion. But I can't imagine what's got them so excited. It seems as though they've been trying to tell me the reason for a long time, but the message has never got through before.

"Jack."

"Sir."

"O'Neill."

The familiar greetings warm my old heart in a way that's been sorely missed for too long, and Daniel reaches out a hand to take my arm.

I look down at the hand and feel its warmth spread through my arm, a tingling sensation travelling around my body as if I've suffered a mild electric shock. But I'm not worried. It's not unpleasant. In fact it feels quite – nice. This is my team and they would never hurt me. Raising my head to look back up into those familiar faces, my instincts tell me something important is happening, but I'm not sure what. They seem to understand what I'm thinking and the answers come quickly.

"Do not be afraid, O'Neill."

"It's good to have you back, sir."

"Are you ready for a new adventure, Jack?"

Why would I be afraid? I note we're still on the 'sir', even in my dreams. And what new adventure?

"Did you think we wouldn't come back for you?" Daniel asks as he gives my arm a teasing shake.

"We kept watch over you, sir, until it was time for you to join us."

"We were able to extricate you from difficulties on many occasions, O'Neill."

"Yeah," Daniel grins. "Although I don't think Oma was too pleased with us for that."

"Tough for her," Carter adds, with uncharacteristic bluntness. It only seems fair to call her Carter again, now we're all back in uniform.

Hang on, run that by me again... Oma?

"What's Oma got to do with anything?"

They all smile at me, which is unnerving if you don't know Teal'c.

"We're Ascended, Jack."

"Ascended? What? All of you?" My mind feels like a tornado has just swept through it. Relief that they're not all dead, and shock at finding them here. And I so hope it's not another dream.

"Oma came back for me and I plain refused to go without Sam," Daniel continues to explain. "I learned my lessons last time. What's the use of having all those powers, if I couldn't use them, to quote a certain Colonel I used to know. I couldn't make a difference on my own. We've always been better as a team, Jack. And besides which, I wanted my friends back."

He almost looks shy as he finishes off, his voice dropping almost to a whisper. I look at the other two, to see their faces looking at me hopefully.

"But what about Oma?" I can't believe she'd sanction this. Not after the Others threw a paddy and chucked Daniel out the last time.

"Seems she learned her lessons too, or maybe she's just picked up on my bad habits. Or yours. She's been watching the changes out there that you've been involved in, and isn't as sure about non-interference anymore. It's not as though she hasn't toasted a few baddies herself before. Remember Kheb?"

"So you came back for Teal'c too?" I reckon he must be the first ascended Jaffa. Bra'tac would have loved that!

"Daniel Jackson and Colonel Carter returned for me when it was my time. My only regret was that I was unable to explain the situation to you at the time, but you were unconscious and no longer able to hear my voice." Even now, all these years later, he looks guilty about that. For Christsakes, he saved my life back then and he still feels it wasn't enough!

"I did hear some of what you said," I say to him softly, as I reach over to grab his shoulder with the arm Daniel isn't still attached to. "You told me I would survive and that you'd watch over me."

A different tingle travels down this arm, but again, it's a sensation I could easily get used to. A part of me notices that my hand no longer looks old and frail, but full of strength and muscle again. But I'll think about that later.

"And we have, Jack. You were too important to the fight and had to live. You had a lot to do and I'm sorry we couldn't be there at your side. But we **were** there, even if you couldn't see us."

I hope you let me go to the bathroom on my own, I'm tempted to ask. It would be so easy to slip into old behaviour patterns with them, like putting back on a recently

recovered well-worn glove that's been lost for a while. But things are happening too fast and I don't feel I'm in control yet.

"So what now?" I shrug my shoulders a bit, wondering just how much more crazy my life could get. "Because if you're about to hand me a gold-embossed invite to the glowy club, I gotta tell ya, I still don't think they'd let my sort in."

"Jaaack," Daniel sighs and waves his arms about. "How can you **still** believe that? How can you look back at your life, at what you've achieved, and **still** think you're not worth it?"

"Because I'm not," I tell him quietly. "I haven't done anything someone else couldn't have done better. I'm just not like you."

"O'Neill, you are indeed the most stubborn being I have ever encountered."

Nice to know I haven't changed!

"Sir, do you really think if we're here, that you shouldn't be here too? Being Ascended doesn't mean we're God-like, or omniscient, or that **we** have delusions of grandeur. We're just another life-form now."

"One with a greater capacity to help others less fortunate, should the Goa'uld return," Teal'c adds.

"Jack," Daniel pleads again. "It's not the same without you. Whatever crazy reason you have for thinking you're not as good as we are, you're wrong. You were always what held us all together. And without you – we're just not whole."

I still have reservations about the whole 'worthiness' thing. But I kinda feel it's a rock and a hard place sorta decision, don'tcha know? Eternity in Hell for all the sins I committed in my life, and believe me there have been enough of those to condemn me over and over again; or . . . a life of Ascension I don't feel I deserve, but spent with some of the best folks I ever met, and maybe getting to atone for some of those sins I mentioned earlier.

Weeeeell, maybe not so rock and hard place after all!

It couldn't hurt to try.

Right?

"So, I get to join the glowy club too?" Even I can still hear the doubt in my voice.

"That's the plan, sir," Carter says, as she moves into the space between Daniel and Teal'c, directly in front of me. She reaches out and rests her right hand on my chest and a third tingle spreads out. I feel warm, comforted, safe and loved. It's like coming home after a long trip away. And I can't help the huge grin that breaks out on my face, .as I finally realise I'm not being left behind this time. "Would you like to learn how much we **don't** need doohickeys any more?"

“Squid 101 for beginners, is it?” I hope they’ll be easy on me. They’ve been at this for years now.

“There is still much to do out there, my friend,” Teal’c says, the welcoming weight of one of his large hands on my back. “We must go now.”

“Come be our leader again, Jack,” Daniel says, the excitement fairly thrumming through him. “I might even follow your orders,” he laughs at me gently.

“Sweet.”

Captain Lange returned with a trolley bearing a new box of unopened Froot Loops and all the extras, but stopped short of the General, who, it appeared, had fallen back to sleep again and she wondered if she ought to wake him. His face was so peaceful, even smiling in his dreams. It was a shame to see one of Earth’s true hero’s slipping away, but she felt honoured that she could know him, even if only for a short time.

Pushing the trolley next to the bed, she reached over and gently shook the old man’s thin arm, calling out his name. Long gone were the days when people were wary of suddenly appearing by this man’s side. Neither his reflexes, nor his strength, were what they had been, but that was to be expected, considering his exceptional age. He didn’t stir when she shook him, so she tried again a little harder, but not too hard for old bones. Again, nothing happened. Nor for a third time.

Trying to stop her hands from shaking, although she’d seen many people die during her career, she reached out and felt for his carotid pulse. It was still there, but extremely weak and thready, and his chest barely moved with slowly reducing breaths. Tears sprang to her eyes as she pressed the call button, knowing there was little anyone could do, or would want to. It was his time, even if no one else wanted it to be.

Doctor Brown dashed into the room a few moments later, her long legs carrying her swiftly to the bedside. It didn’t occur to her how the SGC had carried on a tradition of female doctors in the Fraiser Infirmary, she was simply grateful she’d landed such an interesting position.

Going through the usual tests, checking over the patient beneath her, she looked back at the Captain and shook her head. Words weren’t needed to explain what was happening. And the General had already made it plain that when it was time for him to die, he wanted to go without fuss, not to have doctors fighting over his pathetic corpse, trying to keep it alive.

Both women were preparing to watch over their famous patient, quietly standing guard over him while he lived his last few moments, when the klaxons rent the air. They cursed the injustice, disturbing the great man’s peace during his passing. It didn’t seem respectful, but gate work carried on regardless of any other considerations. They heard the loud slapping of booted feet in the distance and the

voice of General Taylor over the tannoy, instructing airman to lay down their weapons and not interfere with the aliens. Neither they, nor the airmen who followed the aliens through the base had ever seen an Ancient before. But by necessity, they were familiar with early SGC records of this powerful species. Many eyes watched, and security cameras filmed the astonishing scenes, which followed.

Three glowing aliens travelled through the base, their central masses and waving tendrils passing through floors and walls as though they weren't even there. They'd moved swiftly from the gate room, sure of their direction, but now slowed to a stop as they approached the dying man at the far end of the ward. Everyone else was passed without hindrance, including the other patient, who watched as mesmerised as the rest.

The three aliens could be seen to shine slightly different hues within the brilliant whiteness, enabling them to be identified as different individuals in later viewings of the security film. The silver one hovered nearest to the bed and a long stream of energy undulated its way over to the patient. It seemed to caress the old man's face tenderly, stroking over the stubbled chin and hollowed cheeks repeatedly. A slightly smaller yellowish alien hovered at the foot of the bed, its arms weaving about, as though not sure if it should approach, or not. And the larger reddish one placed itself directly between the bed and the SFs, as if in a protective stance.

A couple of minutes passed before anything else happened, giving General Taylor time to arrive at the Infirmary and join his staff in watching the incredible scene. The reddish Ancient glided over to place one of its tentacles on the patient's arm, gently copying the silver ones caressing movements. Then a moment later, the yellow one moved over the foot of the bed to finally add the last one, placing it on the man's chest. The three Ancients seemed to glow even brighter for a moment, if that was possible, before a pale blue tentacle emerged from the centre of the dying man.

No one could believe what they were witnessing, as the retired General seemed to glow before their eyes. The newly born Ancient rose from O'Neill's husk, his body disappearing and the blankets sinking to the bed as he rose above it. All four aliens seemed to weave in and out of each other, the bright display threatening the eyesight of the people watching, and one camera burnt out. Then, slowly, the four visitors drifted away through the walls and back to where the stargate was already opening for them. They hovered before the open wormhole for a while, giving their previous witnesses time to catch up, as the blue alien seemed to take one last look around him. Then all four linked up together and disappeared through the event horizon.

Jack would have been pleased to miss the memorial service held for him, if he'd known about it. Televised around the world, it was attended by many of his alien friends, including most prominently, the Asgard, Jaffa, and Nox. Thor even placed his battle-cruiser, the O'Neill III overhead, to lend weight to the proceedings. If the population hadn't been warned in advance this was going to happen, it could still have caused blind panic. And many thousands of tributes were sent in his honour. Many by government bodies throughout the planet, but also many by school-children, or

ordinary people who had been touched in some way by knowing what one man had achieved.

He would have been horrified at the larger-than-life monument raised in his memory: a brass statue of him in his class As, with his team standing slightly behind him, dressed in their BDUs. It graced the entrance to Hammond Mountain, reminding every visitor of the historic place they were entering, especially the many tourists. The escorted tours were highly popular, and brought in huge amounts of revenue to subsidise running costs.

Documentaries were made and re-made, experts talked about what their lives were probably like, and children asked if shooting stars were really SG-1, still living their incredible lives above them. And so, from a simple man's desire to protect his own people, but who couldn't even protect his own destiny, a legend was born.

“Jack, what are you doing?”

“Enjoying myself Daniel. What does it look like I'm doing?”

“Are you sure that's not dangerous, sir?”

“It's Jack, Sam. How many times do I have to tell you?”

“Most frequently, O'Neill.”

“Well you're not much of an improvement either, T.”

If a glowing white squid could be said to lift an eyebrow, it did.

“But you still haven't told me what you're doing,” Daniel persisted. “Or how you're doing it. Even I can't manage that level of control and I've been here the longest.”

Jack smirked and waggled his eyebrows at them, or at least that's how they 'saw' him.

“Ahhh, but Danny-boy, I've also been known to dip my fron into Ancient technology a time, or two, before all this started. I'm not completely dense you know.”

“Indeed,” Teal'c agreed. Jack had taken to his new state like a squid to water.

“So what is it?” Sam asked as she moved closer.

The energy played between what passed for his ever-dextrous fingers, fighting against the forces Jack used to control its movements. He manipulated the environment around it, moving, squeezing, releasing and reforming the shape that contained it. His movements as fluid as the force he controlled.

Entranced, his team watched him work, recognition finally dawning into smiles on two and incredulity on the other.

Daniel sputtered.

“A **slinky**, Jack? You have all this power and you make a damn slinky?!”

Never before had anyone heard an Ancient laugh.

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