

Title: Journeys Across The Abyss

Author: Elizabeth

Email: elizabeth@starwarriors.net

Category: POV, Angst, Tag.

Pairing: None

Rating: 13+

Season: Sixth.

Spoilers: The Abyss, Frozen, Slight for many others.

Summary: Multiple POVs about events in The Abyss.

Warnings: Language?

Status: Complete December 2002.

Notes: 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.

\*\*\*\*\*

\*\*\*Thoran\*\*\*

*“His condition is beyond the healing of a hand device. However, there is a symbiote who is in dire need of a host.”*

Many days now Kanan has waited and we are desperate for the intelligence he's gathered. His host died without being able to pass it along and soon, if a new host isn't found, all that Kanan was and could be will be lost. The information that he was willing to give his life for will also be lost. It is a tragic waste. This Tau'ri, this Jack O'Neill of which I have heard so much is his only chance. I cannot bear to think of Kanan held captive in his container until we find another host and the council is getting impatient at the delay. It all depends on this one Tau'ri and I have my doubts.

The Tau'ri are obstinate youngsters, always seeming to be in trouble, always being talked of as being in the thick of confrontations with our enemy. It is as though they have no regard for the long-term plan of races that have been in this game for far longer than they have even been aware of the stargate system. Yet, over time I have heard the manner in which they are discussed changing. A delicate hint of envy from our younger Tok'ra about their exploits. Almost an aura of jealousy about the way they go about their business in the galaxy. Reckless. That's all they seem to me. Yet their ways have been remarkably successful. Maybe not in the long term, that remains to be seen, but certainly, whilst they are roaming free in the universe, the system lords have had to divide their

attentions between our two races. We are suddenly not their main concern and that at least brings satisfaction.

This O'Neill is frequently discussed. I have no doubt that many of our young Tok'ra would wish to have him for a host. I have heard of his legendary obstinacy and belligerence to outside guidance. I am not sure he would make a good operative, although this blending is only a temporary measure. An unusual circumstance, one that serves both host and symbiote. We are not used to jumping hosts, as insects do on an animal. It is not healthy for the symbiote and frequently causes mental distress to the host. However these are unusual conditions. We need to interact with Kanan and O'Neill will certainly die without our assistance. He is an intelligent man according to all reports, so his firsthand knowledge of encounters with the Goa'uld will be most useful. We could make a lot of use for the information Kanan will be able to access of the Tau'ri and their ways. Yet his disgust with the idea of blending is already well known to the council, which does not bode well for the implantation. Garshaw Of Belote is very taken by him, so even though I have never met this man before, I am prepared to wait to judge his character until I have talked to him myself.

It will be good to have my friend back, even though I will have to be prepared for the confusion of two blendings until we have found a more willing host.

\*\*\*Hammond\*\*\*

*“Colonel O'Neill's in a coma. The fact is we may be in the position of having to decide for him.”*

I have had to make some God Almighty awful decisions in my time. Decisions that have led to the deaths of many good people. Yet never have I felt the bile so much in my throat as I do now. Jack O'Neill, my friend, my second in command, is dying before our eyes and the only solution to save him is the one thing on God's Earth that he doesn't want. Never have these stars weighed so heavy on my shoulders. Command can be an awful thing.

O'Neill is without doubt the most important field officer on the face of this planet. Oh sure, there are plenty of conflicts going about the face of the Earth at the moment. Life's always going to be like that, that's the nature of the beast. But what goes on down here on Earth isn't worth the tick on a hog's back compared to what my people face out there. O'Neill's knowledge of what faces the Earth is unique. I can't even begin to put a value on that, yet he is, at the end of the day, just one more officer. One more statistic to be used for our defence, for the greater good. It doesn't matter that this man's heroism has saved the whole damn planet before now. Not that what goes on down here is ever likely to become public knowledge, or at least during my tenure. He's even saved my own job before now, risking both his life and career when my granddaughters were threatened. Not that that compares with what else he's done for this country, or planet, but it's important to me. Not the kind of support you usually get from colleagues, but there's nothing usual about O'Neill.

As I look down now upon his wasted, heated body, I cannot believe what I'm considering ordering to be done. He is my friend and, as a friend I have no desires to lose him, but as my second in command, as the foremost field officer of the SGC? How can I even consider allowing his expertise to be lost? If I have to order this blending, will I lose my friendship with this extraordinary man? He's more obstinate than any mule I've ever known, but it's what makes him the success he is out there. This is no ordinary base, Goddamnit, and I'm not officially allowed the luxury of forming attachments with my officers, but hell fire and damnation, how can I not?

How can I not order this to go ahead?

It's just another time I wish I wasn't the officer in charge of this facility.

\*\*\*Kanan\*\*\*

For days now I have rested here, all my physical needs taken care of in this tank. All my needs except one – companionship, a host. I have so much to communicate to the council and my friends and no way in which to do it. This strange existence we have, accumulating fact after fact within our hosts' lifetimes, whilst we watch them wither and die around us. I fear if I don't get a host soon, then I'll surely go mad in this lonely existence I now live. I know they will be desperately searching for one, I have complete trust in them for that, but will it be soon enough? I'm unable to communicate even the basest of feelings to those around me, or to have them communicate to me. I cannot tell how long I have been here. Time means nothing, except for watching the shadows and shapes of those who move around me. The room does not even regulate the light for day or night, so I have no way to tell the passage of time. Only the thoughts that run through my head time after time keep me company, but it is not enough.

I learned a great deal about Goa'uld movements whilst I was away with Zipacna's fleet, but if I don't pass the information on to the council soon, it will have been a wasted journey. The information will be too outdated to be of much use. Damn this incomplete body I'm in at the moment. Where is my host? I'm incomplete. Surely I'm too important to leave here all this time? Surely the knowledge I have is too important to risk lying dormant? Don't they understand that anything they have to do to obtain me a host is worth it? I will make it happy it blended with me; tell it many things of the universe and what I have seen. Take it places it's only imagined before. I will make it up to my future partner, but if I don't get one soon I may just lose my grip on reality.

Never have I felt so alone, so worried about my future. Am I afraid?

\*\*\*Sam\*\*\*

*"Sir, I don't know if you can hear me... The Tok'ra have offered you a deal."*

Janet says there's not much time left, so here I am, inside this bulky suit that doesn't permit me the chance to hold his hand, or touch his face one last time. He's dying, everyone can see that and I want to shout out to the universe that this is wrong. He's a soldier; he doesn't deserve to die like this, for nothing, in a bed, to sickness. He wouldn't want that.

He doesn't deserve to die yet, he's my friend.

I thought I would never get over the loss of Daniel. It had been like having a brother again, making up for all that lost time with Mark. But Daniel went. At least I know he's still out there somewhere, doing something that he wants to, perhaps even helping us still, even if he can't be doing it with us. I just hope someone's looking out for him like the Colonel used to. Like he looks out for all of us. The Colonel didn't actually say or do much to show how much Daniel's loss affected him, but you could see it in his eyes, in his stance whenever anyone mentioned him. You just had to know where to look. It showed in the way he'd quickly walk away from the conversation, as though he had some urgent business elsewhere. People soon got used to not mentioning Daniel whenever he was around, it was just easier that way.

God. If I thought **that** was hard, it doesn't compare to this.

Daniel might have ascended, but the Colonel is dying. Daniel might be able to come and visit some day, after all we've seen Oma Desala and Shifu do that, but the Colonel's dying and I feel my throat choking up at the thought. I'm not even allowed to admit to myself how much he means to me. Someone might notice and get the wrong idea. There's always been the attraction thing between us. I mean, come on, what red-blooded woman doesn't notice when he enters the room? Power, charisma, tactical intelligence (well at least he admits to **that**) and handsome too. No woman is going to ignore that and I know he's shown the same curiosity about me as I have about him in the past. But we're both soldiers through and through and will never do more than perhaps have the odd fantasy until our positions allow us. After that, I'd be curious to see if that spark was still there. I do care deeply about him and I know he does about me. The times we've each hung on for the other, when most sane people would have run the hell out of there speaks for itself. I'm not even going to mention that damned machine of Anise's. The answers would have been the same for any two of us stuck on opposite sides of that force field. Maybe the wordings might have been different, but not the intent. I'm sure the General was put in a quandary about that though, but he put his trust in us, rather than Tok'ra technology, and I hope we've proved his trust well placed.

He's put his trust in me again. Asking me to do what he perhaps can't trust himself to do right now.

The SGC can't afford to lose the Colonel, any more than I can afford to lose my friend. I can't afford to lose Teal'c too and I'm not certain he'll stay around with us if the Colonel dies. Teal'c's risked his life to save mine, as much as I have his, but his primary loyalty has always been to the Colonel. Who else would have put their trust in a First Prime? Who else could have seen through the years of armour around the enemy and spotted the weak link like that? I'll never know how the Colonel did it, but his instincts are so often right on the button. I've often had my doubts about his decisions, but I'm then reminded about how little experience I've had compared to him and I realise how lucky I've been. In this man's world he gave me a chance, made me stand on my own two feet, gave me a push when others would have held me down. My respect for him is without bounds.

So how can I do this to him now? How can I ask him to do the one thing he seems to fear the most? Fear. The word is almost anathema to the likes of the Colonel, but I'm sure fear it is. After both of our encounters with Hathor, where she's made him both a Jaffa and a Goa'uld, no matter how temporary, there can be little doubt that he fears this. Now I'm to ask him for another temporary joining. Will he believe me? Will he even understand the request? He's so sick, the sheets sticking to his sweat covered body, the facemask misting over with each laboured breath he takes. Hammond knows why it has to be me, we all do. Only I have been a host to a temporary Tok'ra. Granted the blending wasn't all it's supposed to be, but Jolinar made good in the end by dying to protect me and I'm pretty certain he trusts my dad/Selmak. It has to be me and I have to live with the regrets, doubts and fears of what this will do to our relationship.

Yet I will do this. He's my friend and I can't lose him. I can assuage myself by saying it's for Earth's benefit, but my heart wouldn't be in the lie.

\*\*\*Thoran\*\*\*

*"No Tok'ra symbiote would choose to blend with an unwilling host permanently. Perhaps a temporary arrangement can be reached."*

It seems the Tau'ri O'Neill has acquiesced and agreed to the blending. I can breath again now with relief, knowing my good friend Kanan will once again walk amongst us. It will be interesting to meet his host, once he is well and can communicate again. I'm sure that for all the posturing I've heard of this man, that he will come to appreciate all the benefits of being a host, especially to one

as renowned and experienced as Kanan. They will have much to discuss, no doubt, as they have a similar history. Kanan might not have been a soldier, but his work was in covert studies of the enemy and I'm sure O'Neill must have at least a fleeting knowledge of that skill.

I've decided that even though O'Neill is critically ill, it's too dangerous to remove Kanan from our base for the journey. He's been in his sterile environment for a few weeks now and I feel the stress of the journey might have an adverse reaction to his ability to heal the host. It's better to take O'Neill to him. It will also give us plenty of time to help O'Neill recover from the shock of the unplanned blending after retrieving Kanan's information. We can also, as the Tau'ri say, debrief O'Neill of any information he has of his own experiences before we return him to his world. Perhaps after getting to know Kanan, we can even persuade him to join our cause, we have far too few members at present, so each one is valuable. Especially such a capable soldier as O'Neill is, even if he might prove difficult to bend to our will. I can only hope Kanan will be able to persuade him, if it's at all feasible. Kanan is, after all, an extraordinarily strong personality.

I will see you again very soon now, my old friend.

\*\*\*Janet\*\*\*

*"Will it hurt him?" "Can't get much worse."*

This suit is just one more barrier to stop me from getting to my patient. Already I feel like I've let him down. Now I can't even offer him the doubtful benefit of human touch as I get him ready for transport. The truth is, I don't think he's even aware of us any more, no stimulus gets any response at all now and all I can feel at this is empty. Emptiness and a sort of controlled rage at the futility of it all. I've patched the Colonel up from such awful traumas that I could write a book about his experiences on its own. Not that his medical file isn't already large enough to fill his own filing cabinet, but it's all classified anyway. So much pain for this man, so much hurt and determination. Such a will to live, but even he can succumb to coma.

This is not the way he wants to avoid dying, but it's the way it has to be.

Cassie railed at me when I told her what was being discussed. There's no way she'll ever believe this is what the Colonel wants and the thought terrified her so much, she went deathly pale herself. She still can't understand the difference between the Goa'uld and the Tok'ra, sounding much like the Colonel when she said 'a snake is a snake is a snake'. Then she stormed up the stairs to collect her things to go to Linda's so I could come back here. It was only a quick journey home, but I found myself looking out at the world from my car and wondering if the Colonel would ever see the trees again.

Why did Aiyana manage to heal everyone but the Colonel? Why not him out of all the people there? Did he have something to say to her about who she helped at the time? Even if he recovers from all this, I doubt we'll ever get to know what happened in those last minutes before Aiyana collapsed herself. It would be so like the Colonel though, to make sure everyone else was healed first. A protector to the end. So help me, he is so unique and I can't help him. He's almost a father to my daughter, discusses her education with me, helps fund things that I can't afford myself and have I ever told him how important that is to me? How important **he** is to me? No. It's not as though I haven't tried, because believe you me, I have. But you get only so far into the conversation when his eyes look away and his fingers start to pick at something, then he stammers some stupid excuse about it not being necessary, the money was just wasting away, he just happened to be there at the

time, or the saddest truth, he was going to do it for Charlie. Sometimes I want to hug him so much for all he's done and other times I want to hit him into next week for being so noble about it all.

He is noble. He's also courageous, moral, dependable and a royal pain in the butt when he's laid on an infirmary bed. But not like he is now. This isn't like him at all. This virus, which is stealing his life away from him, had better be cured by this blending and, whatever it costs him, I'll be here to look after him when he gets back.

I can be depended upon for that.

\*\*\*Jonas\*\*\*

*“What does Colonel O'Neill have to say?”*

This is strange, this journey of ours, carrying Colonel O'Neill between us as we travel to another planet to save his life. This whole way of life is still an amazing adventure for me. A short while ago I had no idea any of this existed, yet here I am now, in the middle of it all. Even though I'm still treated like an outsider by this man. When will he accept me and begin to trust me? Will I ever have that chance now?

I know that Doctor Jackson was a close friend of his, everyone tells me so and I only need to read past mission reports to learn of the risks they took for each other. I have also read Doctor Jackson's journals, at least those that were left in his office, and I could sense a deep attachment between the two men. The only thing that ever told me of Colonel O'Neill's strong feelings were his outburst on Kelowna and his subsequent silences here. Does he not know how much I regret the events that lead to the Doctor's death? Does he not realise that I would do things differently now if I had the chance? I think Sam and Teal'c are starting to accept me, but without the support of our team leader, I still feel as though I'm on trial somehow. It all seems to come back to trust and I trust that every time he sees me he is reminded of who I've replaced.

I'm learning new things every day. It's one skill I **do** have, even though I have a lot to prove as a soldier yet. I only hope that my ability to learn and adapt will one day prove to him that not everything was lost when Doctor Jackson sacrificed himself. This blending that he's going to endure sounds so unreal, yet I hope it works. If it does, I'm going to try my hardest to prove to him that I can become a reliable member of his team. I may not be the equal of Daniel Jackson, but Jonas Quinn will still become a person to be reckoned with.

I take a brief look around me as we exit onto the desert of Vorash and look back down into the unit containing my commanding officer. He doesn't stir at the change in scenery and I wonder if it isn't too late for these unusual symbiotic aliens to save him.

I want them to save him. I want to be able to prove myself to him. I want to right a wrong that I helped commit.

\*\*\*Kanan\*\*\*

This host is extremely strong willed. Never before have I encountered such an indomitable spirit. Did he not realise what was required of him before my introduction? Why was he not better prepared for what I would need of him?

Only briefly, before I was forced to attend to my host's needs, did Thoran warn me this was only to be a temporary situation. Anger flared in my companion-starved body for a few moments, before I acknowledged that I had little choice in the matter. I will have to use my weakened resources to heal this host, who I can tell is in a critical condition, before pulling back and waiting for my next host. It takes a lot out of us in a joining and can be painful, both physically and psychologically, to remove ourselves so short a time later.

This host, Jack O'Neill, is extremely weak and horrified that I am here. It is most disconcerting. It is many generations since a blending has gone like this, with the host so reluctant to share the process of melding our thoughts together. Although there are tales that Jolinar of Malkshur took a host against their permission. I have yet to be convinced of that. O'Neill accepts this blending is a necessity, yet he is only partly aware of what is happening and unable to come to terms with me inside his mind. He's a maelstrom of emotion at the moment, the tides of his fears and distrust threatening to wash me away in the storm he's creating and I must be strong to overcome it. I must force my presence here, or it will be in vain. He'll die and I'll have to return to that no man's land of sterility and loneliness until another host can be found. This man will die and any use my information holds will die with him.

He cowers away from me, shutting himself away in the darkest recesses of his mind, unable to give of himself, even to help himself. I try to placate him, to assure him of my good intentions, but the sickness of his body robs his mind of any ability to see past his convictions. It doesn't matter. It's a shame, but I can manage without. It will make it more difficult, this lack of two-way communication, as I make my way through his past and present, his thoughts, his spirit, the knowledge of who he is and how he got here. However, I will see enough of who he is to know my new host, or at least until a replacement can be found.

Replacement. Such a harsh word for who will be my next partner. Such concern over the person who supplies our outside skins, but not as much thought for the one who provides much of what goes on in the inside. Hasn't it always been thus though? The joined personalities may not be equal in body mass, but the voice of the body is as equal between the two beings, one of who remains alive for many lifetimes over the other. Still, as such, it is our way.

At last the healing is underway. I have managed to soothe O'Neill to some degree and his spirit sleeps in a far corner. There is much to be done here and I think I will help subdue his awareness until we're fully healed. After all, this is only a temporary attachment, so it's probably better for him to sleep through most of it, if I can accomplish that. Even so, I have encountered the most unusual collection of memories from this man. He has indeed led an extraordinary life and seen so much hardship and endured much pain for his cause. Without the full blending I cannot investigate much beyond the surface of these thoughts, but they are intriguing in their detail and the strength of emotion. He's been a soldier for all his adult life, fighting both in the open and in many covert situations. He has often been a loner, as I am myself, furtively infiltrating behind enemy lines to gather information. Unlike myself though, he has often acted upon that information, making decisions without the backup of his council, before extracting himself from the scene.

This is fascinating.

His latest battles are, of course, with the Goa'uld and he's certainly had many encounters with them. His skills are admirable. His ability to take a small unit of people and exact considerable damage to his opponent is worthy of praise. What is more unbelievable is that he stays with the same support group for so long. How does he accomplish that? I've never seen a unit manage to stay alive and together for so long before. Wait; there is loss here and a recent one too. My host moves, restless, as I bruise over the top of that memory and I soothe him to quiescence again before

I investigate more. It was a deep loss and all the more regretful as he feels guilty he was unable to prevent the accident that took his friend. He would sooner have died himself than lose this other one, Daniel.

That is the difference I have been feeling here. Save over sacrifice. It is how he feels we are different. The Tok'ra rightly believe that it is sometimes necessary to sacrifice a few to save the majority. O'Neill refuses to accept the sacrifice, if he believes there's a way to save as well and I can see that he's proved it many times over. How can I see this so clearly in his mind, when my own experiences have never led me to be so considerate about life over cause before? Have I been so wrong in my past lives? Could I possibly have killed so many people when it could have been so easy to save them too? Could I possibly have achieved both objectives, as easily as O'Neill seems to think it often is? I can see failures in his past too, and he suffers greatly for them, but so many successes too.

I am confused. How can such a young, reckless race as the Tau'ri appear to challenge my own conceptions on the validity of acceptable casualties?

Shallan.

I left her behind. I used what I could find out from her and left her behind. She was sure that she would be safe, that Ba'al would never know of her treachery, but I don't **know** that she's safe. I never did. I loved her and left her behind. What will O'Neill think of me once he is aware again? Once I've healed him and he starts to question me, as I have investigated him, how will he view this? This action, so fresh in my mind, will soon come to his attention. He won't be impressed by my actions. In fact I'm sure that he'll despise me for them. He, the young Tau'ri, will look down on me, the aged Tok'ra, and I am not sure I'll blame him.

If I were to go now, before he is aware, I may be able to prevent the scorn that he'll feel for me. Perhaps I can even convince him to consider a true blending with me. I have found much to admire in this host. His strength, his knowledge, his passion for his work. Yes there is much to admire and I've only just scratched the surface of who he is. The rest will have to wait until he is well again. There are brief glimpses into such sadness aroused by the words Charlie and Iraq that I want to look into, explore and, if possible, try to heal, but they will have to wait. For now, I want to prove that I can be as worthy a partner as I know he can be, if I can persuade him.

I'm about to do something I never thought I'd ever do. I'm about to go on a journey with no idea of where it'll take both of us.

\*\*\*Teal'c\*\*\*

*"Perhaps it was that repugnance of blending with another mind that caused O'Neill to behave so irrationally."*

My warrior brother is in trouble. How dare this Tok'ra, this symbiote one step removed from the Goa'uld, try to proclaim that O'Neill could possibly be responsible for leaving their base? O'Neill could never behave in that manner. If he had had enough of their hospitality, he would have come back here and loudly proclaimed his lack of appreciation for their efforts. He would also have taken much pleasure in the telling. No, this is something else. No host can move without the compliance of the symbiote within, their nerve endings are too interlinked for that, and it has never been known to happen before. But we do know, by the actions of the Goa'uld, that the opposite is very much true. As Doctor Fraiser attested, that ability does not work both ways. My brother has been taken, of

that I am sure, living a life of imprisonment as real as any nightmare he could dream. Nothing will stop my desire to aid him, but I lack the knowledge of where to find him.

I had been looking for someone like O'Neill for many years before he appeared in my life. I was dissatisfied with my role under Apophis, doubtful of his godliness, and I despaired of finding a way to free myself from his tyranny. Within minutes of communicating with this strangely attired prisoner, we had both taken stock of each other and found something we did not expect - an understanding. His eyes showed me his soul, as surely as he saw into mine and my way of life was forever altered. I had been a First Prime longer than he had even been alive, so short is their life span, yet the energy that is put into those short years surpassed mine in experience. Not that I lacked **in** experience, but in the ability to forge my own path in life. With O'Neill as my new mentor, I have learned so much, enriched my life with knowledge and gained awareness on a level I would never have believed possible before. I have gained friends who will never leave me alone on the battlefield, as nothing more than a pawn of a false god. These are gifts that I cannot put a value on.

I cannot put a value on what this man means to me and I will not trade his possible demise for any plea of inaction. This Tok'ra taints the ground of the SGC by claiming my friend a lost cause. I will not give up on O'Neill. No more than he would give up on me.

I will find him, no matter how long the journey, or what means are necessary for the hunt.

\*\*\*Kanan\*\*\*

Forgive me, O'Neill, it was reckless of me to take such a risk and now I know there will be no escape. Perhaps if I'd merged fully with you, then I'd have had access to the knowledge you've had in these sorts of missions. Mine have always been without violence, watching from within, making notes and reporting back to the council. I should never have assumed I could do what you did and now we must all pay the price. I'm sorry Shallan that I've now put your life in danger too. The only honourable thing I can do is sacrifice myself to protect her. Without me, O'Neill knows nothing and can tell nothing. Hopefully he'll survive, but I can't face the torture Ba'al will subject me to. Ba'al is merciless and won't fail to torture me for information. If I'm still inside O'Neill he'll be tortured too and no-one can withstand that. A word tinges my mind, Iraq, and a feeling of strength, but I've no time to investigate what it means, or how it might help.

Perhaps I was wrong after all. Save over sacrifice? Perhaps I changed my mind too soon.

Forgive me, O'Neill.

\*\*\*Ba'al\*\*\*

*"The host lives, my Lord."*

It's been many long years since I've felt such a challenge in my work. Sometimes, it's almost too much trouble to even want to see these pathetic creatures who occupy my guards' excesses. However, this one is different. He defies me time after time. The host interests me not, does not concern me, but the Tok'ra who was within him does. Still, though, the pitiful host tries me, constantly pits his mind against mine. It makes no difference in the long term. His mind will crumble, as they all do. The sarcophagus will see to that. It will erode his will bit by bit until he is no longer sure of who he is, or where he is. Then I will get what I want from him and throw the husk to my Jaffa to play with. If he is lucky, I might even let him die.

It's almost a pity to waste this one though. He's shown more spirit than many a prisoner through my questioning, but by the time he gives me what I want, there'll be none of that strength left. A pity. But a god cannot be tested like this, cannot allow to be seen to be bested by a mere thing.

It will not be long now. I know it and he knows it. It is the one thing we have in common.

\*\*\*Daniel\*\*\*

*"I'm not allowed to interfere."*

I just don't understand him, not that I always could, anyway. Why won't he let me help him ascend? Can't he see what's going to happen each time Ba'al puts him back in that box? Did nothing that happened to me that time register in his stubborn head? Each time he dies and is brought back to life a small part of him is wiped away in the process. Jack's one heck of a strong personality, but even he can't withstand this sort of treatment of what makes **him** who he is. He could come away with me, leave all this pain behind, but he won't.

Damnit.

It's a long while since I've been tempted to let my feelings run away with me. How does Jack always manage to do this to me? It's the same as always, once we're back together. I'll set off knowing exactly where I want to go and how I'm going to get there, but then along comes steam roller Jack and all my plans get flattened as he charges through. He can be so pig headed sometimes. It doesn't have to be 'his way or no way' all the time, does it? Is it? Is it so long since I've been in touch with anyone in this existence that I've forgotten how to interact with them?

I know I'm not supposed to intervene. Jack would probably liken it to Star Trek's prime directive no doubt. He always likes to break things down into the simplest explanations, even though he understands a hell of a lot more than he lets on. Why does he do that? Why pretend he's just a poor dumbass soldier when it's clearly obvious he's so much more? Why did he constantly head-butt with me over the simplest of things, when we should have been spending what time we had as better friends? Maybe because he enjoyed the challenge you gave him? Maybe because you enjoyed it too? The fighting was what made our friendship so much fun and gave it such depth.

I miss it.

For all the new experiences I've had since Oma helped me ascend, I guess I've miss the companionship that had come to mean so much to me. Jack was the first and foremost important being in my life after my parents died. Friends, girlfriends, even my wife came and went, but Jack was a constant. Always there, with a smile, a quip, a hug, a ruffling of the hair, just being there with a quiet acceptance that we could help each other through our troubles. Is it wrong for me to want to take that with me? Is it wrong to show Jack how much more there is in the universe than this one small portion of it?

Jack thinks he isn't worth it, that he isn't good enough for this, but how more wrong can he be? Oma said something along the lines of being judged by the **intentions** of your actions and the strength you faced your challenges with, about making a difference. The pains he's gone through to save other people have long ago scoured his soul clean of any evil he thinks still lies there. He's a remarkable man and I'm seeing him disappear bit by bit with each session Ba'al makes him endure.

Why won't he let me save him? Why won't he let me take him away from this, to be with **me**, where he belongs?

Is it fair of me to remove him from everyone else, just because **I'm** lonely? Is **that** being the gracious being Oma wants me to be? Is this some lesson I've yet to learn? Jack trusted me enough to let me go on my journey, now I've got to trust him enough to let him stay. Jack belongs here, with Sam and Teal'c and I've no right to try and steal him away, but I still can't leave him like this, even though I'm not supposed to intervene. There has to be a way to end this for my friend. I just can't sense what it is yet.

Sense, sense, sense. What is it about that? I can't intervene. I can't speak to them directly, but maybe I don't need to. A Goa'uld has got him in this condition and a Goa'uld is going to get him out of it.

Junior.

\*\*\*Jack\*\*\*

*"Do you not know the pain you will suffer for this impudence?"*

Crap.

Here we go again. Another trip on the Ba'al merry-go-round. Line up and see how many times you can score hitting the Colonel. Watch his eyes now. See the dumb man flinch. See if you can make him talk, shout, scream. See if he gives a damn about what you're doing to him. See how long before the life drains out of him this time.

Shit.

I don't think I can do this much longer. Each time gets harder and harder. Each time I hope it's the last and each time those goons come and bring me back to life again, waiting for their goddamn master to have his rest before the next session. What the hell did I ever do to deserve this? If I thought Iraq was bad, then at least I had the option of dying to end it all. It was the one weapon I had that I could hang on to. The one thing that kept me sane, knowing I could end it if I needed to. Except I didn't want to end it. I wanted to beat those bastards and return to my wife and kid. I wanted to return and beat ten shades of shit out of Cromwell. I wanted to prove to those bastards that I was better than them, stronger, more determined, more full of spit and vinegar than they were ever gonna be. Did it too.

Holy Mother Of Mercy.

I must be out of my mind. Daniel's sitting here, dressed like he's out for a Sunday stroll through the park. What happened to his glasses, did he lose them again? Damn kid's always losing stuff. I'd giggle if I wasn't so darned tired. Why am I here. The last thing I remember was boiling my ass off from whatever that long-dead-not-dead Ancient gave us. Vague images of Carter dressed to the nines in a biohazard suit saying something about a Tok'ra. Damned if I can remember what the hell that was about now. My brain's feeling so scrambled with what ball-boy's been doing to it that I can hardly remember my own name any longer.

Kanan.

That's all I can remember. Guess whoever he was bailed again, like the cowards I've always felt they were at heart. At least he cured me of Ancient whatever, although I don't think my overall condition has improved. Shit, I'm quoting Indiana Jones now, I must be really losing it. But that's what always happens when the Tok'ra get involved. Same old, same old. Never met one of the snaky bastards yet that I trusted, except maybe Selmak. Someone's going to have to explain this all to me later, because I'm sure in the dark now. Some feeling in the back of my mind, but that's it. Seeing some goddamn snake slithering it's greasy little ass away from me, then crispy critter time courtesy of balli-boy's goon troop, then back here for the summer vacation. I mean the quarters are clean, can't complain about that. Some of the neighbours are noisier than others. Real screamers, if you know what I mean. But only Ba'al don't-I-look-great-in-black deals with me. Seems I'm his personal pet project at the moment, so I guess I should feel honoured. Pissed is more like it. That's something else. I'm damned if I know where to take a leak in this place. Mind you, as they haven't fed me since I arrived, it hasn't exactly been a problem so far. They probably just hose the place down whilst I'm otherwise occupied.

Damn, damn, damn, damn, freakin' damn.

Why the hell is he asking me **that**? Why the hell should I want to go all glowy? Does he really think Oma what-the-hell-her-name-is is gonna be pleased to see the likes of me turning up on her proverbial doorstep? Not exactly the kind of character recommendation you want associated with you Danny-boy. Not on your CV. Oh hey, Oma, I just did a bit of shopping and look what I've brought home for dinner! No Danny. The glowy, floaty round the room stuff looks good on you. I'm proud of you, really, but it's not me.

I can't do that stuff. Touched the kid thinks I'm good enough, but he always did see life through a pair of rose tinted glasses. Perhaps that's the problem, he's lost them. No, the fight's down here where I'm needed. Who's going to take care of the rest of the kids if I just disappear like a dose of salts? Who's going to make sure Sara, or Mike don't get killed in some Goa'uld attack, if I just upped and went? I don't deserve that sort of release. Never did. What would Charlie think if I just left his mum to whatever fate, if the Jaffa landed tomorrow?

I'm sorry Danny. I'm sorry I've let you down again. I just hope you understand why.

\*\*\*Shallan\*\*\*

*"Is it you?"*

Who is this person who came to me as Kanan, although he no longer looks the same? Where is my friend of before? Why has this man returned for me? It makes no sense and I'm frightened we'll get caught. Ba'al no longer trusts me, even though he didn't ask me more than a few cursory questions. It's only a matter of time. Once he's finished torturing the man, then he'll come back for me for his next subject of amusement. It will take time to find and train another Lotar, but he's many lifetimes ahead of him to ponder that minor difficulty. It's a luxury I don't possess. My days are as surely numbered as the poor host I've seen being dragged lifeless to the sarcophagus once more.

I know what Ba'al's done to him and will continue to do to him until nothing remains of the brown eyed man who came to rescue me. I've seen it many times before and find it hard to believe that he's still resisting my master. It will make no difference though. Ba'al enjoys what he does and won't admit to failure. He also doesn't worry about how long it takes. For a system lord he has infinite patience.

The sarcophagus can be used infinitely.

\*\*\*Griff\*\*\*

Watching the gate light up was better than any Christmas tree display that I'd ever seen. We've no fancy iris over the gate yet, so we've always got a welcoming committee stationed there, but this was a call we were hoping for. No guarantees of course in this business, but we could hope nonetheless. We knew O'Neill was out there and rattlesnake Yu would be attacking Ba'al's place any snaky time about now. We just watched and waited, waited and watched. The Colonel didn't have a GDO to gate back home. We weren't sure if he even knew which Tok'ra planet he'd been on, so it was a fair guess he'd try to come to us here at the Alpha site, back home to people he trusted.

The chevrons lit, the wormhole stabilised and, flaming hell, a disaster stumbled through. I'd done no more than greet our wayward senior officer, when he dropped a zat and collapsed straight into the arms of the two medics waiting with us. Out like a light and none too soon by what I could see. I couldn't even begin to guess at what the tatters of his clothing suggested. I watched as the medics quickly lifted this and that, exposing surprisingly unmarked skin, but they were still clearly worried about his condition. Shock, even I could see that from his pallor, I've been at this game long enough to recognise those symptoms. Whilst they stabilised the Colonel for immediate transport back to the SGC, I questioned the girl as to what had happened. The medics listened and seemed as appalled as we did when she recounted in brief detail what she knew.

There's no way in a month of Sundays that there's a guide for how to treat someone who's been through that. God only knows how the Doc is going to put him back together now, but I can tell you what his reaction will be to any mention of MacKenzie. That useless, pen-pushing waste of space had better hope he'll never get within six feet of the Colonel, or I'll be able to hear the fall-out from this side of the gate.

The girl seems to be in a state of shock too and our small contingent of resident Tok'ra seem quite eager to keep her company for the time being, so I decide to let them question her first. I'll get all the intel back off them later. It's not as though the Tok'ra can take her anywhere from here without the SGC's say so and I'll personally guarantee that.

O'Neill hasn't stirred once since he dropped on us and once the medics say they're ready to transport him I've got the wormhole open and radioed back what to expect. I could hear the relief in Hammond's voice and, though I couldn't hear or see them, I know Carter and Teal'c are going to be waiting at the bottom of the ramp. SG1 are kind of legendary around here and though I'll not say anything to anyone about what I've heard here, the rumour mill and hero worship is going to go up another notch after this settles down. Funny thing is, O'Neill's never going to believe any of that stuff about him. Behind all that loud presence is a very private person.

There's squat I know about the man behind the Colonel, but he has to be one hell of a man.

\*\*\*Hammond\*\*\*

I can't believe we're doing this again, watching as O'Neill's brought back to base, in somewhat less than the condition we'd hoped for. Griff didn't specify over the radio what to expect, just that the medics had the basic information and the Tok'ra were questioning Ba'al's slave, who he'd rescued after all. The fact that Griff deliberately didn't report over the open line what he knew, makes me

highly concerned. He believed there wasn't a security threat from the Colonel, meaning he'd no reason to think he'd been Goa'ulded. After all, O'Neill's just come back from one of their strongholds. However, that also led me to believe that Griff knew more than a little of what had happened to the Colonel. Something he couldn't, or wouldn't broadcast. O'Neill does tend to generate that level of support.

He's heavily wrapped in blankets as Fraiser efficiently transfers him to a gurney and all I can make out is his pale skin and the strange brown clothing he's wearing. I get the impression of tatters in the outfit, but it's far too fleeting to be sure. I'd like to question the medics, Griff must have had his reasons for not saying more over the line, but I build confidence in these men who work off-world for a reason. I've no alternative but to leave the medics to rush after the gurney and hope to catch up with them once they've passed over all pertinent information to our CMO. The rest of SG1 have vanished from the gateroom like their lives depended on it and I envy their ability to concentrate solely on their CO. My worries encompass more than this one officer, no matter how singularly important he is, but right now what happened to him is of vital importance. A war between two system lords was started to gain his freedom and I need to know what he's seen and done. Or whether despite Griff's vague assurances, and the Colonel's current condition, he still might be a security risk after all.

\*\*\*Janet\*\*\*

It's been a busy few hours, running tests and double checking them, whilst stabilising my patient. Part of my mind is screaming at me for the injustice that's been done here, whilst the other half calmly goes about the job of looking after his immediate needs. How can I let the knowledge of what's been done to him calmly leave my mouth, without the nausea I feel making its presence felt with every word. My friend has been tortured to death, again and again and again. No psychiatrist on this planet has ever had to deal with a trauma such as this. No human has ever had to deal with a trauma such as this. The Colonel scores another first for the human race.

I don't think he's going to want a medal for it though.

He's malnourished and dehydrated from the poor conditions he was kept in. Even the sarcophagus can't heal that. He's also lost a significant amount of blood. That's not a surprise from the evidence on his clothing, which I show to his team and the General. They all blanch from the evidence, even Teal'c can be seen to look paler. The knife cuts are all over the front of the top and too difficult to count, as some are obviously placed across previous entries. There are the remains of some unknown substance around many tiny spherical holes, almost as though melted through the fabric, and the samples I've tested shows an acid-like liquid. What's disconcerting about these is that there's always a corresponding hole at the back of the top, as though whatever was placed there ate straight through whatever was between. Jonas suddenly runs from the room with his hand over his mouth, putting action and acknowledgement to the awareness of what this means. There doesn't seem to be an area of the Colonel's chest that hasn't experienced extreme trauma whilst in this clothing and there is no doubt that the injuries were the Colonel's, not some previous owners, despite the General's hopeful enquiry. I've tested the blood I've found on them and it's definitely our friend's.

Shallan's report of repeated sarcophagus use means we're going to have to plan for withdrawal symptoms, similar to that which Daniel went through. However, I'm hoping it won't be as extreme for the Colonel, as I feel safe in assuming he was truly dead when placed in it, unlike Daniel who was healthy at the time. Even so, considering the length of time it took the Colonel to recover from his torture at the hands of the Iraqis, I have no idea what to expect as he starts to recover from this

episode. I can keep him sedated through the majority of the withdrawal period and we've certainly learned a lot from Daniel's experiences that will help. There are drugs that will curb the cravings. But how to deal with what will be going through his mind is another matter.

The silence is heavy in the briefing room once I've finished. The guilt we're all feeling equally as heavy.

\*\*\*Sam\*\*\*

*"Over my dead body."*

Oh my God, I did this to him. Not only did Kanan prove my views on the Tok'ra wrong, but now the Colonel's suffered something no one else on this planet's ever been through before. How can they possibly help him recover from this? No one's had any experience of this before, to know how it would affect someone. I've been responsible for a living nightmare and the repeated painful death of someone I consider a dearly loved friend. How can he possibly trust anything I ever say again? How can he trust the Tok'ra, or my dad after this? Where is my dad? Why didn't he prevent this? How can the Colonel trust one of our so called greatest allies again in this fight we're in? How can we trust Thoran, who refuses to believe what we know? How will the Tok'ra feel, once the truth is out about what happened, Kanan acting precious different than the Goa'uld? If the Colonel's invalidated out of the service, then it's my fault and for all my science skills, we need men like **him** out in the field, out in the fight. Can I turn civilian and take care of him if he needs it? Jack? It's the least I or anyone else can do for this remarkably abused man.

I sit here now in this frustratingly uncomfortable plastic chair watching the face of the Colonel on the bed before me. He's in a private wardroom, away from prying eyes and listening ears. None of us know how he's going to react when he wakes up.

He will wake up. He must wake up. Please wake up and let me know you don't blame me.

He's been lying here for three days now, sedated to see him through the majority of the withdrawal period. Janet's monitoring him carefully, taking samples regularly, checking the machines attached to him to see when his body has returned to more normal readings. The IVs are feeding him everything his body needs whilst he's still asleep and taking care of that which he doesn't through one of those darned awful catheters. He'll hate that, he always does. He usually starts off by joking about it, noisily, and then increasing in volume, before his taunts about it turn to threats of what he'll do if it's not removed, with alacrity. God, but it's good to hear his voice when he gets like that. It means he's on his way out of the infirmary and, though she'll not let on to his face, I know Janet gets a real kick out of his unruly behaviour.

My recent behaviour brings me nothing but shame. I know the General was preparing to order the blending to go ahead, but it was still me who went to the Colonel. Me who said you could trust the Tok'ra. Me he believed. Me he trusted. How will he ever be able to trust anything they ever say again? One of our greatest allies and he'll never be able to forgive them. I'm not sure I can either and my dad's one of them. Granted, the Colonel seemed OK with Selmak before all this happened, but what now? Will he never be able to see my dad again without distrust in his eyes? How will that affect future dealings between SG1 and them? I love my dad, but I also have very strong feelings for the Colonel and I can't blame him for any animosity this will have left him with.

He's rarely wrong. Not always, just rarely.

What will happen if he's unable to recover from what's been done to him? Can I go blindly on, fighting the good fight if he's unable to? I've played the biggest part in getting him into this condition. This man that I owe so much to. Could I leave him to wither away in obscurity if he's forced to leave the SGC? If he's unable to function in any capacity within the mountain? Can he still even remain my friend? I have to stand up for my responsibilities and face whatever he might need as a result of my coercion.

If he doesn't have the strength to recover, do I have the strength to stay by his side, wherever his journeys take him?

\*\*\*Teal'c\*\*\*

*“Doctor Fraiser says he'll probably suffer withdrawal symptoms from so much time in a sarcophagus, but otherwise she expects a full recovery.”*

For many days we have watched over O'Neill now, many days whilst his body recovers it's purity over the sarcophagus's influence. Doctor Fraiser has started to reduce his sedative and he begins to be aware of his surroundings again. He no longer lies peacefully during his sleep, but moans and moves to unseen horrors that we can but guess at. I am perhaps more familiar with what O'Neill has endured than anyone else here. I have seen first-hand what the Goa'uld are capable of and, to my shame, participated in many such tortures of innocent victims. O'Neill has tried on many occasions to liken my past to being a victim myself, unable to escape my Jaffa duty without having my own life forfeit too. He says that without having endured and survived, I would not be here now to help correct the many wrongs I have performed. However, I know he also holds himself to blame for many instances in his own past and I am unable to absolve myself, whilst my brother also continues to carry such heavy burdens.

Now he has one burden more.

He calls out for our departed friend Daniel Jackson and it brings a fresh sorrow to my soul on his behalf. The young scholar had a special place in his heart. Perhaps the place that had been vacant since the death of his son. O'Neill and children have always been a sight to take pleasure in. I was never able to react with such unbound enthusiasm with my own son, as O'Neill shows with any child who comes near him. They seem to be as intrigued by him, as he is by them, and their presence always appears to bring a calm to his troubled spirit. Now Daniel Jackson has left this plane of existence, O'Neill has had to endure his loss in silence. It is the way of the warrior here, as it is the way of the Jaffa. Jaffa are expected to die for their god and their loss is not mourned, for they have journeyed to the afterlife to be rewarded for their service. Tau'ri do not react the same way and O'Neill certainly does not. He mourns for the passing of each life taken too soon and none more than our young friend.

Again he calls out for him, his voice laden with such desperation that I am grateful I closed the door to this room. No one will see O'Neill in this compromised state. He would not wish to be observed like this and I will not permit it. I will stand by my brother's side, protecting him from all who come near without just cause.

I could not protect him from that which Kanan caused, but now he is back by my side, I will protect him from whatever else troubles his recovery.

\*\*\*Daniel\*\*\*

*"I've got my journey, you've got yours?"*

I guess Jack was right again. **This** is where he belongs. I don't know when I'll see them again, but it's been good to spy on my old friends. To wander around these corridors and see what everyone's up to. A lot of changes have happened whilst I've been away, although Jonas has kept my office remarkably similar to how I left it. I wonder why? I'm going to miss this, now I've been back, perhaps worse than before, but I'll miss **him** more, miss him like the family he is to me.

I can't stay, even though he wants me to. I guess Jack misses me too. He's safe now and that was my main concern.

Goodbye Jack. I'll see you again some other day. I promise.

\*\*\*Hammond\*\*\*

I didn't think he was going to make it. There was a time back there when I think we all thought it was the end of the line for Jack O'Neill, Colonel, wise guy, and military pain in the ass. Thank God we were all proved wrong. Fraiser assures me he's recovering gradually. It may be a long while yet before he's back to full strength, or before the nightmares stop and, yes, I know he has them, but I'm sure work and his team will be the key to getting him back on form.

His report gave only the merest of details and I'm not inclined to push for more. To commit anything further to paper would probably prompt psychological intervention and the Colonel is as unlikely to benefit from that course of action, as the unfortunate Doctor. Thereby hangs another problem anyway. Wild horses couldn't drag O'Neill to MacKenzie and, after the debacle with Jackson and those devices of Machello's, no one on SG1 trusts him anymore. The feelings of antagonism haven't gone unnoticed by the doctor and, no matter what his personal regrets about the incident, he knows he's never going to gain their trust again. However, work related psychosis from the SGC can't simply be taken to any other civilian practitioner, so at the moment it's MacKenzie or no one. Looks like it's going to be no one. I reckon the Colonel would rather resign before he'd let MacKenzie have a wander through his problems.

It's not as though the man doesn't have plenty of experience with getting over trauma, torture or otherwise. It's just a goddamn shame that he has to do it at all. It bothers me that at one time he'd a CO who was willing to use his heartache to turn him into a human bomb. I consider that a deplorable thing to do, war on or otherwise. At least I can offer him whatever protection I have at my command to ensure knowledge of what he's endured goes no further than this small circle of friends. And we **are** his friends, make no doubt about that. We're probably the nearest thing he has to family now, even my grandchildren are included in his daily concerns. They think a lot about him too. It took all my persuading to get them to leave him alone for two minutes, so now they're chasing around the garden after Cassie's dog, creating havoc through the roses, but O'Neill merely laughs at them, warning them about the thorns.

Life is full of thorns, and this last mission has raised a bed full of them. Thoran was not pleased at what we had to tell him about what Kanan had done. He didn't want to believe me at first and demanded that he question O'Neill about events, but I put a stop to that. The last thing Jack needs is a belly full of Tok'ra angst. I've sent a message for Jacob to come and see Jack, to talk to him and find out more about what happened. I agree there's a need to share information about Ba'al, but I insist it's done in as gentle a manner as possible. I don't believe Selmak was aware of any of this happening, I trust Jacob and I think Jack does too. Perhaps a short holiday away for the whole team

and Jacob would be the ticket. Jacob's almost as near to family for him as his daughter, or at least it seems that way. I guess we'll find out when he arrives. I've arranged for Fraiser to be on hand, just in case.

There are still shadows around his eyes and a gauntness that isn't fully explained by his physical condition when he returned. But he's laughed and played with the children and eaten all the food Fraiser's deliberately placed on his plate, so I can only hope the true healing has begun. As long as he feels needed, as long as he believes his existence has a purpose, he'll continue to fight against every obstacle that's put in his way. As long as Kayla, Tessa and Cassie are here I know he'll always feel he's doing something worthwhile. That and his team, his kids as he calls them.

As much as he needs to protect them, he's needed as much by them in return. That's something the Goa'uld are never going to understand and that's why, at the end of the day, we'll win this battle. Men like O'Neill won't accept anything else.

\*\*\*Jonas\*\*\*

*"Listen... was a good idea you had there."*

It's hard to believe, as we sit out here in the sunshine, that so much has happened in the last few weeks. Having this welcome home barbeque in the Colonel's garden, it's difficult to let go of what's happened and behave as though everything's normal. But if it's difficult for me, then how much more difficult is it for him?

I'd finally accepted what a terrible thing it was for my people to blame their mistakes on Doctor Jackson. To deliberately wipe their hands of the problems they'd caused and destroy the good name of an ally. I'd recently accepted that my people made a great error of judgement and were no better than many others of the galaxy. Now I realise there is a greater evil out there and in my new life I may come across it again. The thought scares me. What happened to Colonel O'Neill was not done from a distance, impersonally. It was done close to, so that he could see the face of his torturer and know what was happening next. How do I know if I'm strong enough to survive anything similar? I know I'm not afraid of armed conflict, and I'll do my best to protect my team, but everything I've experienced so far has seemed distant by comparison. It wasn't done to **me**. What happened to O'Neill was very deliberate. His mind, as well as his body, has been subjected to something I could never have even imagined before I left Kelowna. As I said before, the thought scares me that such evil exists and that it could one day find me.

We've all done our best to protect the Colonel from any casual interest since his return. I'm pleased that Major Carter and Teal'c have allowed me to fully support them in that. Even the Colonel has shown his appreciation for my efforts by **not** mentioning anything to me. I think I'm getting used to his moods. It may be a long time yet before he fully forgives me for the part I played in Doctor Jackson's death, but if he can recover from what Ba'al did, then I hope it will come.

Ba'al will never be so lucky. Nor will he feel lucky if anyone from SG1 ever meets up with him again.

\*\*\*Janet\*\*\*

*"You're going to be fine, Sir."*

My mind wanders back over the past few weeks and I can't believe how relaxed he looks out here. Granted, if you look close, with the eyes of someone who knows him well, you'll spot it's all an act. But what an act! It shows he's on the way to getting over what's happened, or at least putting it so far behind him that it won't impinge on his daily thoughts. And that's the best we can all hope for under the circumstances. I remember when he came in for a recent daily check-up, how he zoned out when I tidied away the metal implements on the treatment tray. A gentle hand on his arm brought him back and he grinned one of those shy little smiles before shrugging it off without a word. My heart nearly broke for him, knowing my silence was probably the only thing I could do to comfort him.

Perhaps if there was someone other than MacKenzie he could go to for professional help it would be different, but we don't have anyone else with enough security clearance. Knowing what he had to go through after Iraq, and knowing the Colonel like I do, it would never be an easy treatment anyway. The Colonel's intensely suspicious of anyone accessing his inner psyche. I think it's the only way he's learned to survive what's been done to him in the past. All those secret missions that had to be kept from friends and family, it probably became as natural as breathing for him to bottle it all away once the job was done.

It's not as though he hasn't retained a healthy outlook on life. I wouldn't allow him on active service if I thought he was unbalanced in any way. We'll just all have to take special care of him, to make sure he gets over this latest disaster adequately. Adequately? That's a laugh! Makes it like some sort of equation, not the mind of my friend we're talking about. He is my friend, a special friend, and one I'm deeply grateful we managed to get back. His mind may still be battered and bruised from everything that he's been through, and I'm no psychiatrist myself, but I can see it's doing him good to be back home. Back where he belongs, amongst the people he belongs with.

Nothing in my report will ever lead anyone to question this brave man about what happened to him. Rules be damned sometimes and damn the Goa'uld too.

\*\*\*Cassie\*\*

I want to cry, I'm so relieved. I couldn't believe mom when she said what had happened and what they were going to do. There's no way Jack would really want a snake inside him, not even to save his life. Not if he knew what he was doing. Then after going ahead and giving him one, it ran off with him and got him into so much danger. How can General Hammond justify that? Can they really allow these kinds of things to happen? Teal'c keeps telling me about how much freedom the people of this planet have compared to his, yet it didn't stop this happening to Jack, did it? No one managed to stop this from happening and to stop him getting hurt so very badly.

I know Jack's hurting inside. He doesn't let it show, but I've always been able to know what he was feeling. He's always held me when I've been upset and helped me sort out my problems, but I don't understand enough about what's happened to do the same for him. Mom's been very quiet about the details, only saying that he was captured by a Goa'uld and managed to escape. I don't like to guess what's really happened, but it must have been pretty bad because she's only just allowed him out of the infirmary. I just want to hold him tight, to know that he really will be okay.

All I can do is pretend I need a hug and hope that will be enough to let me cuddle him for a change.

\*\*\*Jack\*\*\*

*“I always seem to be saying goodbye to you.”*

Daniel. Seeing him again seems to be the only good thing to have come out of this sorry mess. At least I know he’s okay. Wonder if he’s watching now?

I didn’t think I’d ever be here again and it’s a relief to be able to stand in my own garden, breathing in the perfume of the flowers and know I’m home. We’ll leave the safe and sound bit out, cause no one knows what’s gonna happen tomorrow. No guarantees in this lifetime, or any other.

I’m surprised no one’s mentioned going to see MacKenzie, the local head-up-his-ass shrink. Not worth the energy it takes to say his name. Told me Daniel needed a padded cell. Knows squat about what happens out there. So he can take his ‘bark like a chicken, squawk like a dog’ routine elsewhere. He can shove it where the sun don’t shine as far as I’m concerned. Maybe there’s a reason no one’s mentioned going to see him? Wouldn’t **that** be a first? Someone listened to what I said. Well I suppose they’ve listened before, it’s just such a surprise when they follow through.

Carter caught me staring into the fridge again. Something about seeing that light with the open door, the whiteness, seems to get me, sucking me in. It’s happened twice now. She never said a word, merely reached past me and shut the door again, shutting the light away until it didn’t hold me any more. Then she led me away, back from that place and back to my own with never a word said.

Some times it feels as though my head’s gonna explode with the anger I feel over what’s happened. I can’t though, there’s enough grief going around over that already. The only way we can **all** get over this is if I get back to normal and show them it’s all okay. God, the things I do for my kids. Carter constantly looks like she’s swallowed something nasty and I know she feels this is all her fault. Now the fog of playing dead again has thinned somewhat, I can remember more of what went on before. I know she has her reasons for trusting the Tok’ra more than I ever can and I can’t begrudge her that. I can’t come between her and her father, though I find it hard to blame Selmak for any of this anyway. It’s just an association thing that I’ll have to work on. Teal’c also feels he failed to protect me when I wasn’t able to myself. The big guy gets a bit worked up over stuff like that, folk stepping into his territory and messing on the path. A strange look passes his face whenever Ba’al’s mentioned and I know exactly what he means. Join the queue buddy, join the queue.

Doc’s been doing her mother hen routine from the moment I figured out I was back on planet Earth. Eat up Sir, drink up Sir, take your meds Sir, and time to nap Sir. I’m convinced she’s got all that spiel on tape and just pushes play as she goes past. I know she’s worried and add that to the guilt she carries for not being able to cure me in the first place and you’ve got a cocktail of problems to compare with what Carter’s carrying. I wish she’d take a leaf out of Cassie’s book and just **be** there, ya know? I’ve lost count of the hugs I’ve had off that kid today, but I’m not objecting to any one of them. Hammond’s grandkids are playing a storm through the flower borders too and if that dog digs up **one** more bone, I’m gonna think we’ve built on a graveyard here.

Hammond, George, my friend when the circumstances aren’t all-out war. He walks like there’s nothing wrong, but I can still recognise the look of being on eggshells. I know he would’ve ordered the blending if I’d refused. Not that I’m one hundred percent sure I actually did agree, but that’s all water under the bridge now. Everyone did their best under crap circumstances. I know he goes out of his way for me, just like I will for him when he needs it, and I know he puts up with a lot from my direction. Hey, my management style’s just a little unique. It works though, we’ve got an exceptional bunch of people down that mountain and not one of ‘em doesn’t pull their weight. I’d like to think I’m at least partly responsible for that.

Old George is walking round with so much doubt and guilt on his shoulders, that he might as well have it stamped on his forehead like Teal'c's tattoo. Gotta do something about that, but I'm damned if I know what. He's not gonna believe I don't blame him for anything, no more than he believed me when I told him I was okay about things. It's not so much 'Don't ask, don't tell' at the moment as 'Don't admit, don't admit'. God, what a mess we make of our lives sometimes. I reckon time is the only thing we have here too. Time for all of us to pack it up and stow it away. I'm rather good at that too. Ask Sara. Packed everything away neat and tidy after Charlie went. Packed myself up so darned much, she was almost a widow before she was divorced.

At least they're not all watching me now like a bunch of vultures. I can take a shower without sharp eyes watching, making sure the poor old Colonel doesn't fall and hurt himself. For a while it reminded of the wonderful care doled out to ex-POWs. It makes me shiver just to remember those times. I got over Iraq and I can damned well get over this. I had a family to get back to then and I've still got one now. Maybe not as cute as Charlie, but all as worthy in their own ways.

There isn't a hole deep enough that I can't run, walk, crawl, or if need be, drag my sorry ass out of for my kids. This journey aint over yet.

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