

Title: Sacrificial Circumstances

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Pairing: None.

Rating: 13+

Season: Any.

Spoilers: Very slight for Solitudes and Jolinar's Memories.

Summary: The Colonel is in trouble after the natives take too much of an interest in him.

Warnings: Language, Imagery.

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Notes: Many thanks to Sandra G, for all her enthusiastic beta'ing and Euph for her patience with medical help. 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.

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Have you ever noticed that it's always the littlest things you miss when you're on your own? Not the huge, mind-blowing observations you made as a kid, or the biggest, money-sucking hobby you've let yourself be suckered by as an adult? But the simplest of things, like Carter's smile on a dreary morning, or Danny grabbing for the coffee cup before you've even entered the room with it. Or the elevation of Teal'c's eyebrow as he makes out he doesn't understand another reference again. He doesn't fool me any more. He's soaked up more pop culture these past few years than I ever knew myself. I was already into far more serious stuff as a teenager than I was supposed to be. Off into the Air Force and wherever it could take me as soon as they'd have me. Me, and the chip on my shoulder. But they made good off us, as I did them. It was one long fling after another, country after country, mission after mission, adrenaline highs and lows, till the cows came home. Nothing seemed to matter, I was

invincible back then. Or, at least I was until a blond haired, blue-eyed beauty got me, hook, line and sinker. She reeled me in, good and proper. Suddenly, everything had a different spin on it. Mortality became a concern that had only bordered on the periphery before, as in what it did to other people. Now I had a wife and soon I had a son. I couldn't believe life could get any better; it was like heaven on earth. Heaven before the hell, when the angels came and took my baby away with them.

So much has happened since then. So many visions chase themselves through my mind as I huddle down here, cold, confused and hurting.

Carter's smile. I'd go through Netu again just for that. She's one hell of a friend. A courageous soldier, an intelligent scientist and a beautiful woman. How'd she ever get to be so much in one package? Other women don't stand a chance against her and she's no idea how the average man sees her. She comes back off missions with mud all over her face and foliage stuck in her hair, yet to me, she's the very epitome of womanhood. It makes me want to protect her even more, but if she knew I felt that way, she'd be all for the arm-wrestling again.

Danny's another one. Sweet, caring, diligent Daniel. How could one kid go through so much and still grow up into the incredible young man he has? On a par with Carter for intelligence, although in a different field, and a talent for lateral thinking that Carter lacks. So willing to trust and see the good in people and nine times out of ten, they look into those guileless eyes and are sunk. The same as the rest of us. My best friend, with whom I have absolutely nothing in common, except that we're at our best when we're together.

Teal'c. If only I could stop coughing here to get my thoughts together. An alien. An honest to God (real God that is) alien working on my team. Mine. If I could sell my story I'd make a fortune. What made that huge mountain of a man, a First Prime to a God, trust me and throw away his whole life on the few words of a cranky, old soldier? Guess I'll never really know what he saw in me, cause I'm damned if I do.

Actually, I'm probably damned anyway. I'm gonna die here, alone, as I deserve, for the things I've done. The accumulated crimes of my life would make one huge best selling novel, except I'd have to shoot anyone ... yada ... yada ... yada.

God, coughing really hurts. I'd give anything for a few moments of Doc's time and some happy juice right now. Feels as though a lung's trying to work its way up. It should be happy where it is. At least it's warmer on the inside of my skin than on the outside. Being down here's not much fun believe me. Dark, wet and cold. Did I mention the cold? As in bloody freezing? Cause it is. Freezing.

I'd have company to talk to, to stop myself going mad, only my room mates are all kinda dead and have been for a long, long time. My accommodations aren't exactly up to prolonging life, if you know what I mean. As for room service, well that just about sucks. Even if there was a bell for the porter, I guess the staff left long ago. I'm sure they must have, because the desperate calls from other similarly ensconced guests have gone unheeded since I woke here. I think it's been a couple of days. It's kinda hard to know anything right now; my brain's not exactly firing on all cylinders, if you get my drift. The cries and screams of the other occupants are what brought me

back to my senses. They seem to be mostly women. However that was long ago and over time they've started to die out, leaving me bereft of any kind of company, no matter how depressing it is. At least I knew I wasn't alone.

Snap out of it O'Neill. Geesh, you're an embarrassment to the uniform, weeping like a spoiled kid over this. So what're a few bruises and lack-lustre accommodation for a short while? Your team will soon be here.

Will they?

I don't think they even know where I am. I don't even know if **they're** alright. I hope they're alright. Please let them be alright. Me, an old soldier is one thing. Even Teal'c's likely to go long before his natural days are up. But not Carter and Daniel, please not them. They're far too young, so much yet to see and do. I can cope with this as long as they're alright.

Do you reckon it would do any good to pray for them? I think God stopped listening to me after I cursed his name when he took Charlie. Told him I didn't want anything more to do with him. I'd given so much for my country and the sake of its citizens. Why did he have to take the one really, innocent, pure thing I'd contributed to this world? He never did answer and I don't know whether that's good or bad. I've certainly got out of a few scrapes in my time, but whether that was with his help, or just down to my own stubborn cussedness, I've no idea. Guess I never will, until I face the man upstairs. I can stand up to Hammond and the Pres, but God? That's a whole new ball-game.

Hockey. Wonder how my team's doing? No, not the major league stuffs, the peewee team. I was supposed to be coaching this Sunday. What day is it today? I know the days here are shorter than on Earth, as this place has a much faster planetary rotation. I'm not sure how long I was out before I woke up. Woke up sore, bruised, hurting and wet. By the way, did I mention the HURTING bit? As in **really** hurts? Have you ever tried to undo rope-bound hands, with a dislocated shoulder, broken arm and concussion? Waking up face down on top of the previous roommates, sporting a multitude of infirmary entrance tickets is not a good way to return to the land of the living. Must have a chat with the Doc about decay rates sometime, because what I'm now sitting on definitely hasn't breathed for a good long time. I'm sorta glad the lighting's a bit poor down here, because I really don't want to look too closely at the mess.

My team has to be alright. There can't be any other reason why they're not somewhere near enough to answer my calls. I don't speak the local lingo, but I know damn well no one else in their nearby little holes understands me. They've all ignored me so far, too busy lamenting their own fates until they've no strength left and retreated into whatever faith they have to die. Maybe they've given up and died without it. From the cries I've listened to, I've counted at least ten other people like myself, left to rot in these dank wells, for want of another word, but that's only a guess. There could be many more, those too far away for me to hear and those who haven't the energy or the heart to call out. Why the hell I'm down here I don't know.

Did we do something wrong? Did we offend them somehow? Is this even some kind of bizarre compliment?

The natives, some sort of Aztec, or Mayan type descendants according to Daniel, were somewhat over-enthusiastic in their welcoming. It took us nearly a day to reach the city that the UAV spotted. A huge mud and log built city, sprawling in a vast area hacked out of the jungle. Amazing really how people manage to overcome their environments, even when they've only got the simplest of tools, like these folks have.

It's strange how they seemed to be most interested in me. I'm used to not gathering much attention, which is how I like to play it. Let them underestimate you, put you at the back of their thoughts. It's freer to work that way, unencumbered by watchful eyes and prejudgements. Normally, it's Carter or Daniel who get gawked at, the young beautiful ones, or Teal'c the awesome Jaffa, but not usually me. I mean, who'd take a second look at me, old and grizzled like I am? But these natives did. All those young, dark skinned, black eyed, black haired youngsters ogled at me, touching my skin and my hair. It's as though they've never seen any older people before. Certainly, as we got invited further inside their simple city and into the slightly more ornate temple, I didn't see anyone I would have put past late thirties. Except for the king and his priests. They were old, but they were the only ones. What happened to anyone else past middle age? Was it just their harsh lives that prevented anyone living to a ripe old age, or did something more sinister happen to them? Were they perhaps thrown down these deep, narrow pits to die like I've been?

If I'd known that all that patting and stroking of my hair was going to lead to this, I'd have been a little bit more worried about that, than the constant teasing of my team. Please let them be alright. Don't let them live forever with the guilt of what's become of me, if they don't find me in time – or if they don't find me at all.

I guess I'd like to be buried on Earth, back with Charlie. I suppose he must have seen by now that I'm sorry for what happened. He must have seen me do some damned distasteful things, but please let him see there's some little good in me too. I couldn't bear it if he didn't want me near him. Let me go to hell, if that's the case. Rather than have him disown me up there.

God. If only this didn't hurt so much.

How long have I been here now? I don't know. Three of their days, two of ours? I can't think straight any more.

I can't keep a good track of the sun from down here and I know I've been dozing on and off since I woke up. Concussion will do that to you, plus a broken arm and dislocated shoulder. Both on the same side, the left one, thank God. But I wasn't thanking God when I woke up down here, the taste of that drink still in the back of my throat. How were we to know that we were being drugged? Are we supposed to offend every off world tribe we come across by refusing the celebratory evening wine? I watched as a couple of Kingy's daughters drank it first. I thought it was OK. I suppose that was just a ruse, but how were we to know differently? I guess the girls were just packed off to bed, while we were packed off to God knows where. Well, I

know where I am. Sorta. Down this goddamn deep shaft that could pass for a well, back on Earth. Where the hell the rest of my team is, is anyone's guess.

I can't remember much of my Mayan history, but weren't they the ones who used to bury their sacrifices in the Earth? Some kind of offering to the Gods? Guess they do things a little differently here. I mean, I'm not covered in red paint, although the blood leaking from the hole in my head might pass for that. Neither was I poisoned first. Or at least I'm assuming that knockout drug wasn't a poison. No. Old crinkle face wouldn't have given it to his daughters otherwise. Or would he? Nah, couldn't have done, or at least I hope to God not. Not more deaths because of me. Please.

I'm only really certain that after a long day of welcome and tours round the city, which left Daniel gob-smacked one minute and talking ten to the dozen the next, I woke up here, alone. Well, alone except for the previous tenants, maybe five of them counting the skulls I can see. I try not to look down, not to feel the bones digging into my shins as I kneel down on them. I tried sitting, but the sharp remains dug into my bruised butt too much. Guess I had an uncontrolled flight down the shaft. Which would also account for the concussion and other stuff. For once, my ribs are intact, whoopee doo. The hypothermia invited itself along.

I would have tried to climb out once I woke up, but it was still some hours before my brain could get my body to cooperate. By then, my biggest problem was that I could feel again. Feel the bones moving in my arm, tied up together with rough rope. Not to mention the feeling of having it hanging out of its socket too. Now that's something you don't want to wake up to whilst there are youngsters about. It's not good for their social skills, believe me. Anyway, having had plenty of practise in getting out of bondage, no jokes please, I worked on getting out of the only thing I was wearing except my boxers. Can't say that I cursed too much, everything considered, and it's difficult to curse when you've got a mouth full of rope anyway. But I got there, eventually.

Once I'd got the damned thing off, I took a little nap for my efforts. Nothing planned of course; I like to be spontaneous about such things. I've been very spontaneous over however long I've been here. The cold getting to you will do that. Who knows how long I was out? No watch, you see. Everything gone, except my underwear. Guess they thought they'd pass for the loincloths the natives were parading themselves around in. Those skimpy dresses certainly gave Carter more than an eyeful, and me the chance to tease her, when some of the younger males came on to her. If the guys on Earth did the same things, they'd have been locked away pronto. I'm just glad Cassie wasn't here; there are some things worth hanging on to find out about until you're a bit older.

Goddamn it. Who's going to look out for her now, if I don't make it back? Danny isn't going to scare ten shades of shit out of those college boys if anyone tries to lead her astray. Teal'c would, but I'm not sure he understands the complexities of Earth's dating culture and you can't exactly let him have free reign away from the protection of the base. Just imagine the fallout if he ended up getting arrested for anything, or hospitalised away from the SGC! How can I protect him either, if I die here? I've got to hang on until they find me. I know they're looking. They won't stop unless they're not able to continue.

Who's going to make sure Carter gets enough of the right training to get her own command some day? It's not that she's not capable, but I want her up to **my** standards of capability. I'm not the only Colonel on base, but their experience isn't worth squat compared to mine and I'm not just being egotistical here. I want her to stay alive to enjoy her retirement one day. I want her to have kids and grandkids, if that's what she wants too. And Danny? I'm as close to family as Danny has anymore. OK, so we're all a really close team and as near to family with each other as it's possible to get, but Danny's always been a bit special. Kinda like a younger brother. OK, so I know that's a bit of a cliché, but can I help it if that's the way things feel? I don't want him to sink away into oblivion with no one to protect him from his demons. It's not as though he can even go back into polite society and carry on with a living out there, until the Stargate's made public knowledge. If that day ever comes, he'll make a killing on the after-dinner speaking circuit, but that's all ifs, buts and maybes.

Damn. It's so cold down here. I'd shiver if I still could, but I'm too damned tired now. My head's throbbing, my shoulder's throbbing and I can still feel my broken arm screaming through the nerves that travel past my shoulder. I tried to knock it back in once, but either I'm not up to it, or the muddy wall here doesn't carry enough clout. All it did was send enough stars in front of my eyes to turn day into night again for a few non-blissful minutes. I've even tried climbing out, but my body's just not responding properly. I've clawed my right hand into the wet soil, but it just came away full of mud. I thought about gouging out several holes to put my feet in, but the moment I tried to stand up, I came crashing back down again, like a cut yo-yo. By the time I woke up from another little nap it was dark once more and I couldn't see squat.

If I look up, I can just see a round hole, far above me, where the sun affords me a few hours of light before it's too near the horizon to send any more down. I've no idea how the natives dug these out, they must have been determined little moles, hoisting up bucket after bucket of mud. It's not as though they've left a lot of elbowroom, it's only about four feet in diameter, but a good forty feet down. Perhaps the ground was a lot firmer when they dug it out, as it looks highly unstable now with all the rain water that's run down it in its past. I'm bothered that if I mess about too much with the sides they'll collapse in on me. I dare say that won't bother the natives too much, they'll probably just dig out another one.

At least my gut's stopped complaining about the lack of food now. Either that, or I'm too exhausted to hear it anymore. I could do with a drink though. There is water down here, but the bad news is I've been sitting in it ever since I landed, my companions and I. It's the precipitation that's collected over the years, that can't evaporate without the sun. I'm sure it would give Carter a laugh if she heard me use a word like that. Precipitation. Precipitate. It's a pity we didn't know what would precipitate events here.

I'm so thirsty, but I don't dare drink the water, that would be the quickest possible way to die. What with the rotting meat, pardon bodies, that have been left in it, plus all the sewage from them, words like cholera and typhoid come to mind instantly. So, OK, we're supposed to be immunized against those, but that's for Earth bound variants, and might do squat for off-world ones. The last thing I need is a dose of dysentery to finish me off. So, if you've got a cast iron stomach and the will to

survive, like I have, you drink the safest stuff you have. Wonder what my team will make of that? Some folks have already said I'm full of piss, but I don't think they meant it literally. At least it keeps you alive for a couple of days longer than no water at all.

I haven't heard any noises from my neighbours for some hours now. Wonder if they've all died? Wonder if they've just given up, accepting it as part of their religious beliefs, or whether they've struggled against it, but just weren't as stubborn as me? I've yelled out, but my voice hardly carries anymore and I'm not sure if they're past hearing, or I'm past shouting. I'll admit, I'd be no good on the parade ground at the moment. My throat dried up hours ago.

I know I've taken to zoning out. It's a bit difficult not to, when you're hurting and as weak as I am. If I was out there somewhere, crawling along on my belly trying to get home, that would be different. I'd keep going as long as I had the energy to breathe. But down here, there's absolutely nothing more I can do than hang on, keep breathing in and out, keep saving my energy and wait for them to find me. Hoping they find me before my strength gives out. It's not as though the natives are going to put a big sign out 'This way to the drop zone', or is it? For all I know, Dannyboy's busy already reading the local tourist book and bringing the cavalry. I hope he is. I don't know how long I've been down here now. I don't know what that stuff was that they gave us, or if they gave me something else too, but my limbs still don't want to support me any more than they did before. Possibly it's some kind of muscle relaxant. Fraiser would have a field day if she ever got hold of the stuff. Would save all those threats of cuffing me to the bed to keep me there.

Don't laugh, O'Neill, anyone listening will think you're nuts. There's no one there anyway, what does it matter? And why the hell am I talking to myself? I can't even feel the cold anymore. Never did like the cold after our little side trip through the second gate, though Carter did make a wonderful hot-water bottle. Hammond's always joking about the heating bill for my office. Even brought me a Hawaiian shirt back from one of his family vacations once, told me I might as well dress for the conditions. Wish it was warm now. I know it's not a good sign when your body stops shivering to keep warm, but there's precious little I can do about it. I can wriggle my toes and the fingers of one hand, even kneel up to shuffle a bit, but the energy it takes is almost more of a loss than the warmth it generates. Not worth the effort.

Damn, zoned again. It might be saving me energy and the company here certainly isn't worth staying up for, but if I don't stay awake, I might miss hearing my team come looking for me. I think the hypothermia's starting to set in. Damn. I **will** stay awake and they **will** come, they've never let me down before. I've gotta stay with it. I don't have to talk, I don't have to look down at the bones at my feet, or the eyeless sockets looking back up at me through the water we're all sitting in. No, I don't have to think of them, I can think of other things instead. Like Danny pouring his heart out over some weird little squiggly lines, or Carter threatening to set off the fire alarms again with some latest test gone 'oops'. Or Teal'c pondering the virtues of spaghetti westerns, or Hammond playing Twister with his grandkids. Or Doc and Cassie taking horse riding lessons. I've been with them all, watched all of their backs at one time, or another, and I know they'll never give up searching until they find me. I just hope

they find me before the grim reaper does. And on the off chance he's found them first, I'm gonna be really pissed with him when he does come for me.

Everything's starting to get a little grey and hazy now. I've been feeling dizzy, but it doesn't matter when I'm not going anywhere. It rained overnight again and the walls of this place are still slick with the fresh downpour. I should be able to feel it against my skin as I lean my right side against it, but I can't anymore. That could mean I'm running a temperature, but I haven't got the energy to think about it. It's almost more than I can manage to keep my eyes open. Dreaming's a much more pleasant way to spend the time now. Dreaming of Charlie and Sara, back when I had everything I'd ever wanted. Playing catch, going to the game, watching him in little league, shopping on a weekend, washing the pots. All those mundane things you never really think about until they're no longer there. Nothing left but a memory that burns your heart with what you had and destroyed. That's a hole that's deeper than anything those natives could have tossed me into.

Where are they? I gave up opening my eyes some time ago. I don't even have the energy to look up at the sky anymore. Trust them to throw me down a hole that doesn't even have a star above it. How can I try and pick out a star for Charlie, to talk to him, when I can't even see any? Is it daylight? Everything feels so much easier now; my arm and shoulder don't hurt as much. I've tried to hang on, I really have. So help me, I hope they at least find my body. I want to be taken home and buried with Charlie. He shouldn't be up there on his own. Sure he has grandparents and other relatives there, but it should be me taking care of him. Will Sara object to me being buried with him? We've never actually discussed it since we split up. No. She'd never do that, no matter how much I hurt her. She knows I didn't mean to shut her out, not in my heart. She understood, even if she couldn't cope.

I don't think it'll be long now.

Charlie.

Something's nagging at my fading consciousness, something's irritating me back awake. I don't want to wake up. Charlie's nearby, I'm sure I could hear him and I don't want to lose him again.

Charlie?

Voices. People are shouting my name, lots of people. I'm not going to die after all? I'm sorry Charlie. They've come for me, as I knew they would. I don't know whether to be angry or relieved. We were nearly back together again, but my team will be angry if I gave up on them.

I'd shout back, but I can't even open my eyes, let alone talk. I can just about hear them on top of me now.

"Colonel O'Neill?" That was Carter. Thank God she's alive, that means the others are probably too. Maybe not having grey hair means they weren't good enough. Who the hell knows? I'll have to ask Daniel later on.

A light eventually shines down my tunnel. I can just make out the brightness through my closed lids.

“He’s here!” That sounds like Griff. “Holy shit, you’d better be quick.”

Language Major. Don’t want to be teaching my Carter words like that.

“Crap.” That was Daniel. So who taught him gutter speak?

“We need to get O’Neill out of there without delay.” And the big guy too. I’d look up and wave, but I can’t shift a muscle. Actually I’m surprised I’m still upright. I’d have thought I’d have fallen over by now. Possibly I’ve frozen in this position and they’ll have to thaw me out first, like one of those ice sculptures, before they move me. There’s certainly enough water down here for that.

“I’ll go down.” Carter again. “There’s not a lot of room to work and he’s going to need help getting out.”

Ten out of ten again Major. I can hear the sounds of ropes and buckles being assembled, then the rappel of someone coming down above me. It’s a careful descent, not wishing to put undue stress on the muddy walls and I can soon feel a presence in front of me. The sounds of booted feet splashing down by my feet and the feel of fabric against my shoulder as someone’s leg brushes against me. She crouches beside me and a pair of small hands cup my face to raise it to hers.

“Colonel?” She gets concerned when I don’t answer her and I feel a couple of fingers pressed firmly into my neck, checking for my carotid pulse. I hear her sigh of relief as she then moves to check my forehead. I miss the feeling of someone alive touching me when she removes her hand. I want to complain, to tell her to put it back, but my motor functions drove off a cliff some time ago.

“Sir?” “Jack?” She fumbles about on her belt and I can hear the metallic click of a first aid box being opened. There’s still a light being shone down on us, I’m still aware of the illumination, so I know the rest of my team are watching from above.

“How is he, Sam?” Daniel shouts.

“Not good.” She yells back up, giving my eardrums a workout after so long in silence.

She’s started prodding my body, which is still knelt and leaning against the wall, so that my busted arm is free of pressure.

“He’s got a broken arm, the shoulder’s definitely dislocated and there’s blood in his hair. I can’t say about internal injuries, but he’s unconscious and running a fever. Send the other harness down, I’ll have to get him into it myself.”

Finally, I manage to force my eyes open a little for her. It feels as though they’ve been glued together and it’s agony to force the lids apart. She notices immediately.

“Sir?” She raises my head again and it feels so good to be touched, to feel even the meagre warmth of her cold hands against my skin.

“Car...” I try, I really do, but the words just can’t get out. Everything is coming back to life again with this new hope and starts to hurt as she checks me over.

“We’re getting you out, just hang on a little longer, OK?” She encourages. I manage to open my eyes a little further to look at her and her eyes seem suspiciously bright, even in the poor torchlight. Is she crying? Over me? Do I look that bad? I can’t speak, but she can feel the tiny nod I manage with my head.

The sound of another harness being lowered reaches my ears, as it scrapes down my prison, and I lose Carter’s touch as she reaches up over my head for it. Without her support, my head immediately falls again, not having enough strength to remain upright.

“Here, Sir.” She speaks to me again. “I’m sorry I can’t give you anything for the pain. Morphine’s too risky. You’re too cold and I can’t chance it until we get you back to the infirmary. I can give you some water though and the promise of some nice warm blankets once we get out of here. Is that OK?”

Well, of course I knew about the drugs, how long does she think I’ve been at this game? I also know that pain’s good for stimulation, especially when you’re hypothermic, which I am. It’s amazing what bits of first aid you pick up when you’ve spent years with only yourself to fall back on in emergencies. I guess she must have seen my weak nod, because she removes her flask, before gently helping me to take a few sips.

“Sorry, Sir, I can’t let you have any more, not yet, but we’ll soon have you back in Janet’s care.”

“Nice.” I manage to croak out this time and I see the smile spread across her face, transforming it.

“Now, I’m going to have to get you into this.” She says as she starts to open up the various straps on the harness, undoing what she can to make it easier to get around me. I know the routine well; I just can’t help at the moment.

“Always said you should take up knitting.” I manage to whisper, but it just about takes up all my energy and I feel my eyes closing again.

“No, Colonel!” Her voice is sharp. “We’re almost there now.” The tone is much softer now she has my attention again. “We’ve just got to get you in this and up out of here, then you can go to sleep. Do you think you can manage that for me?”

What? Does she think I’m a kid? Just who the hell’s in charge here anyway? Well, not me apparently.

“I’ve got to figure out how to strap that arm up while getting the harness on. I don’t want to put any pressure on it, so we may have to rethink this as we go along.”

She's thinking out loud, as she fumbles about in the first aid box, pulling several bandages out and stuffing them in her jacket pockets. I'm mesmerised by the sight of the box, as she leaves it floating on top of the water. It's bobbing between some bones as her movements cause lots of tiny waves. Meanwhile, she's ignoring my preoccupation, and is busy trying to fix the harness around me. It's a bit disconcerting at first, feeling her hands around my legs and butt, though it's not like we have a lot to be modest about, having spent several years working together. We might not ogle, but I'm darned sure we've each copped an eye full at some time or other.

"Sorry." She says it several times, as her hands glide around my underwear, and she looks at me apologetically each time. Right now, I couldn't really care less, I just wanna get home. I'd do the same for her if the positions were reversed and I'd probably not be as embarrassed either. But that's what experience gets you. Carefully, she's pushing and pulling the straps around me, trying to move me as little as possible until the last moment. The feel of her on my cold skin warms me, after so long alone in the dark. No matter how much I want to close my eyes and drift off, I know I've got a reason to hang on again for a few more minutes.

"Do you need any assistance, MajorCarter?" Teal'c shouts down. Obviously the delay is worrying them.

"No Teal'c, better not." She shouts back up. "I don't think this shaft is too stable, you may make it even worse. I'm nearly done anyway. Be prepared to take the slack up when I ask."

"As you wish."

I'm trying to concentrate on the conversation, when I see Carter start to unwrap some of the bandages from her pockets. She works through the straps she's just placed on me, trying as gently as she can to bind my arm to my side, where it's less likely to get caught in the harness. She even puts some extra padding under my armpit. To say it hurts is putting it mildly, but she's learned a lot in the days since Antarctica and I find I'm able to breathe through the pain without passing out. Not bad considering how much trouble I'm having staying awake in the first place.

"Almost done now." She says as she checks the ropes above me, making sure nothing is tangled up. Then she shouts upwards. "Can you take up the slack until I've got the Colonel standing?"

"OK." Daniel calls back down and I feel the ropes being pulled taut, then I'm slowly hauled upright, as the men above start to take my weight. I still can't even lift my head up to check who's doing what above me. I don't need to though, Carter's got it all under control, switching her gaze from up above to back down on me.

"Hold it." She yells, once I'm upright and she gives me a moment to catch my breath before she checks out the ropes and straps on me again.

My head is spinning and I suddenly feel sick, now I'm standing again. I haven't felt like throwing up for hours, but it's coming back now with a vengeance. She's done a

good job of binding my arm and she gently checks the bandages are going to hold, as she lifts my head once more.

“You good to go now, Sir? I’ll be with you all the way.”

“All the way? Now there’s an offer.” I can’t help but whisper, gritting my teeth against the unbearable sensations of bruised muscles being stretched again. She smiles back at me, but there’s still the worry in her muddied face. Everything aches, not least of which are my arm, shoulder and head. I manage to reach down with my right hand and try to pull my boxers straight. I may not be wearing much, but I’ll be damned if I’m going to go back up to my team without what I have got on being in the right place. Perhaps it’s the CO in me? I doubt it’s my modesty, Carter’s just spent minutes fiddling around my butt trying to get me in this thing.

“We’ll soon get you wrapped up.” She reminds me, and then shouts up above again. “OK, but slowly. Bring us up together.”

I don’t know how many are up there, but she’s letting them pull us both up, leaving her a hand free to help steady me as we go up. Each tug, though small and no doubt as gentle as they can make it, sends a shaft of pain so sharp through me, that she makes them stop several times on the way up. I can feel the breeze increasing as we ascend, freezing my cold body even more. Each jerk of the journey, I can feel her hand on me, on an arm, a leg, or my side, keeping me with her. I do actually black out once, but she calls me back, her hands on my face.

“Sorry.” I say, through the blackness that refuses to leave me completely behind.

“It’s OK.”

I want to help so much, I hate being dependent on others, being incapacitated, but she understands.

“Almost home. Just think Janet and needles and we’ll be there.”

“No ruby slippers to click together?” I manage to joke back before I start coughing. Man, but that hurt. At least they’ve left it till now to start.

“Not this time. Just us and a nice warm stretcher.”

I grin back, “That’ll do for now.” and suck in a breath as I feel the next pull upwards.

The minutes pass and I’ve somehow still got my eyes open as my head appears over the top. Teal’c reaches his hands under my armpits and I’m soon being hauled carefully over the edge. I can feel Carter’s hands on my butt as she pushes up from below, then Daniel and Griff are reaching for my legs to take the rest of my weight.

Everything suddenly goes a little hazy, and I have to shut my eyes to keep the nausea at bay. I’m being carried horizontally away from my prison and I can vaguely hear Danny’s exclamation.

“What a mess, Jack.”

Well gee thanks, Daniel. I'd like to see you looking any better after a couple of days down there. The hands on me are warm, but not as warm as the feel of blankets beneath me when I'm placed down on a stretcher. The relief of not lying against cold, wet mud is heavenly. Even the feeling of Carter's small hands on my shoulder and arm almost don't count, as she slides the harness off me. That sort of pain I can cope with now, I know I'm safe.

Her hands run slowly over me, travelling up the length of my legs again, over my torso, over my other arm. I guess she's taking advantage and rechecking everything else really is OK, before she starts to wrap me up in wonderful warm softness.

“Do you want another drink, Sir?” She asks.

I might have nodded, I'm not really sure, but I can feel someone's arm beneath my head, which I think might be Daniel's. I don't have the energy to open my eyes again, but I know I no longer need to. I'm lifted up and I take another few sips from someone's canteen, then everything starts to simply drift away. I can just about feel Carter starting to remove the bindings on my arm and I guess she's going to splint it properly or something, now we're top-side, but even the possibility of that pain isn't enough to keep me focussed any longer. I'm warm and dry and my team have found me at last. Guess Doc's in for a nice surprise when we get back.

I finally let go and leave them to it.

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Beep-beep. Beep-beep. Beep-beep.

I try to reach over to knock the damned alarm clock off, when I realise I can't move. Everything's numb, like I'm floating. Can't feel a thing.

Beep-beep. Beep-beep.

This is so incredibly comfy. I want to yawn and roll over like one of my old dogs, but I damn well can't move a muscle.

Beep-beep.

Now I'm starting to get a little concerned. I don't use an alarm clock. I don't need one. I never have. And why the hell can't I move?

Beep-beep.

I can smell antiseptic and the sheets around me don't feel like mine. Crap. The infirmary.

Beep-beep.

I'm probably sedated to the gills. That's why I can't move anything. Wonder if the eyes work yet? Yup, just a little and that's definitely the infirmary ceiling up there.

I'm aware of the cotton wool sensation flowing over me again. Why the hell am I here?

"Colonel?" That's Carter's voice.

Beep-beep.

Hey Carter, can you kill that damned Road Runner for me? Wile E Coyote just isn't doing his job!

"Janet, I think he's waking up a bit."

"He shouldn't be waking yet." Fraiser sounds both concerned and exasperated, but I tend to do that to her. "Colonel? Are you waking up now?"

I'm busy here Doc, trying to remember what happened. My eyes slide shut again; despite my best efforts at keeping them open. The lure of sleep is just too strong.

"Sorry Sam, it'll be a few hours yet before the anaesthetic wears off. Why don't you go and get some rest?"

That's right, Doc, you tell her. She and Daniel are as bad as each other for not taking care of themselves. Although I'd love to stay awake long enough to ask her what I wasn't watching out for that got me in here. I can't feel anything to know what's busted this time.

"That's OK Janet. I really don't want to leave just yet, not until I know he's really going to be alright."

Why? What did I do?

"I know. It was a close call, but barring any complications, he **will** be alright."

Complications? What complications? Hey, Doc!

"We nearly lost him, Janet. I couldn't believe it when we found him. When one of the natives finally told us what they'd done, I couldn't believe it. Not until I'd seen it myself. It was too damn close."

What did they do to me? Why me? Was anyone else hurt?

"I know, Sam, but you found him in time and that's all that matters."

"Every time I shut my eyes, I see him down there. Looking dead, amongst all those bones. It was awful."

Suddenly, a whole kaleidoscope of images come rushing into my mind: natives, celebrating, waking up in that place, feeling myself slowly dying, then being rescued.

“But he survived. The Colonel’s tough, Sam, and he’s not going to approve of you tiring yourself out like this. Now go and sleep for a few hours, like I ordered Daniel to. I promise you, I’ll let you know if he wakes up any earlier.”

“OK, you win this time.”

I can hear the sounds of Carter’s boots walking away and then there’s the lightest of caresses across my forehead. She never does that when I’m wide awake, but I’ve felt her do this before when I’ve been in here, and I always take it to mean she’s got everything under control.

“Time to go back to sleep, Colonel. Your team’s OK. Just sleep for now.”

How does she do that? Even I’m not sure how awake I am, yet she still knows! Sleep sounds really good though. Possibly I smiled, or nodded, I don’t know, but within moments all the sounds and sensations have left again. Everything’s peaceful once more.

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Beep-beep.

What?

Beep-beep.

Something’s pressing into my face, suffocating me. Gotta get it off.

Ow! Christ, what’s wrong with my arm? Can’t move it. Reach with just my right hand instead. Gotta get this thing off my face.

“No Jack.” Danny? He takes my hand and lays it back down beside me. “You’ve got to leave the face mask on.”

Why? Infirmary again? I want to wake up, but the pull’s too much and I drift off again.

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Beep-beep.

Did you ever get that feeling of déjà vu?

Beep-beep.

I have. It’s usually just before I remember what I’m doing back here again.

Beep-beep.

“I believe O’Neill is awakening.”

“Sir?”

“Jack?”

Déjà vu. Don’t you just love it?

Guess it’s time to wake up for the kids and show them I’m OK. They’re a sight for sore eyes, as they huddle closer to the bed. What the? Well that explains the pressure on my face. I hate these masks. Why does something that’s supposed to make it easier for you to breath, make you feel as though you’re being asphyxiated instead?

“Hey.” I manage a quiet whispered greeting as I look down the bed. Oh, my, what the heck has Fraiser got me in now?

“I’ve been mummified!”

I’ve got one of those bright blue, spica, weld everything in place, fibreglass casts on. It reaches from my left hand, right up my arm, around my shoulder, and completely surrounds my chest and back. I can feel it now underneath me. Well this is going to make having a shower a lot of fun.

“No Jack.” Danny teases. “Mummies make a lot less noise than you.”

“You never met Mama O’Neill.” I can’t help but grouse back. I’m going to be out of commission for weeks like this. It’ll be a couple of weeks before I even get into physical therapy. Just Greeeeaaaat. Out of curiosity, I use my right hand to lift the sheets and check out for any other damage, just in case my foggy memory has missed something out. Nope, just one nasty piece of tubing attached ‘you know where’, and that’s going the minute no-one’s watching.

“How’d you feel Sir?”

Why do they always ask the obvious questions? I guess that’s the scientist in her. Question everything in order to build a hypothesis.

“Still full of Doc’s happy juice.” Which isn’t wrong. I still can’t feel much in the way of pain, but I guess I’ve got **that** to look forward to once she cuts back on the meds. The nice little IV line leading to my hand is confirmation that I’m still on something.

“So what happened to **you** guys?” I’d really like to know what went on back there and why I was singled out for special attention.

“What do you last recall, O’Neill?”

“Old King Fuzzface giving us that wine, then zip, until I woke up freezing my ass off down that pot-hole.” My throat still feels gunged up and tastes of that awful anaesthetic. “Any chance of a drink?”

“Here, Sir.” Carter helps remove my mask and then spoons some ice chips into my mouth. Unfortunately, she places the mask back over me once she’s done.

“Spoil sport.” I mumble around the chips, which are leaving a delicious trail of coolness as they melt.

“Sorry, but we’ve already had the lecture off Janet about helping you out. She’s threatened to ban us from here if we interfere.”

“Chicken.” I can’t help but grin back. Even feeling as washed out and tired as I do, it still feels so good to be back home, safe and sound with them. Safe, sound and warm and dry too. Can’t beat that.

“Too right.” Daniel sticks up for Carter. “You’re safe for the moment, she won’t do anything to you while you’re like that. But us? Janet’s a scary woman with those needles.”

I just smile. I’ve noticed Fraiser hanging by the door, which my team can’t see because they’re facing my way. She smiles at me, grinning at Daniel’s comments, but turns and walks away. Usually, she’s ready to leap at me the moment I wake up, but I can guess my team’s had a hard time dealing with what they saw on that planet. Even I don’t know how many natives they found down those damnable shafts. I think Fraiser’s decided to give us a few moments alone together, and I expect she’ll be back very shortly. It’s a relief to know I can’t be that seriously hurt, if she’s willing to put off the inevitable exam. I’m surprised the penlights don’t jump to attention as she goes past!

“So?” I prompt, as we seem to have got sidetracked somehow.

Danny takes a deep breath and pushes his glasses up his nose, before he starts.

“We woke up the following morning back by the gate. All our gear was there, everything where it should be, except for one item.”

“Me?”

“Yes. We dialled back and told Hammond what had happened and he sent through some volunteers to come back looking for you. I started to remember some of their tales from the evening before. Just snatches of stuff here and there, as whatever they gave us really dulled everything. Anyway, as a society living in difficult jungle terrain, very few of them live much past middle age. It’s not as though they have our weapons, or anything more advanced than spears. Although they do enjoy themselves and live life to the full, it’s very hard for them and most people die young, except for the royals, like King Fussmace, and the temple priests. They saw your grey hair as a symbol of great virility and that’s why they were so fascinated with you.”

I expect sniggers from Carter for that comment, but she doesn't do anything. I think she's still too upset by what she saw there. I'm not that strict a disciplinarian that I don't enjoy a good laugh between us, we're friends too, but no one's in the mood right now.

"It was also a significant time of the year for them, when they pray to their 'Earth' God for good crops for the coming season, and that's where things get gruesome. They believe in offering their own people as sacrifices to the Earth, by putting them in those wells, so they die nearer to her. To them, it's a way of paying for the bounty she's going to give them and they often use children, pregnant women, or skilled hunters. To their mind, there wasn't a better gift than a warrior of your stamina and age. As soon as we entered the temple, they assumed they could treat us the same as anyone else in the tribe."

"Not the best way to improve the population by killing the best of it!" I moan. At least now I understand and I'm glad it meant the rest of my team weren't at risk.

"So how'd you find me?"

"Well, first we had to get back to the city, but it was quicker this time as we still had the trail we'd hacked out the day before. Once there we went straight back to the temple and **convinced** one of the priests to tell us where you were."

Teal'c starts to smile at this, which is an unnerving sight when you **do** know the guy.

"And how did you do that?"

If he doesn't finish this story soon, I'm going to be back in la-la land and have to wait until later on for the next instalment.

Teal'c continues this time as Daniel takes a step backwards.

"I used my staff weapon to convince the priest that I could tame lightening, with which to attack his Earth God. He was most helpful after my demonstration."

"Yes." Daniel agreed. "Pity about that urn, all that writing, hundreds of years old."

I do believe my archaeologist is trying to tease me.

"It wasn't hard to follow his directions and find the sacrificial grounds." Carter continues. "They had an area cleared out on a hill not far from the city, on their horizon. It was just a matter of double-timing it and finding which pit you were in after that."

She shudders at the memory. They must have all seen lots of dead victims, but Carter had to kneel in the middle of such butchery. I just hope we don't have to go back, I don't think I could deal with people who do that.

I manage to stifle a yawn.

“So any results from the samples you took?” I already know the natives don’t have anything of technological use to us.

“No.”

“Good.” As I mentioned before, I don’t think I could really enjoy going back there. I don’t think anyone else would want to take the risk either. Which reminds me. “Who else was on the rescue team? I seem to recall hearing Griff.”

This time I can’t stop my mouth from revealing just how tired I’m getting and Fraiser appears, like a magic trick.

“No more questions for today. It’s time for me to examine the Colonel, so why don’t you all go and get something to eat and come back later?”

She’s already got my chart out and I know she’s probably made a host of observations without intruding. My team desert me without a single protest, calling out various goodbyes, as they leave me in the tender mercies of the diminutive Doc.

“Tired, Sir?” She smiles down at me.

“Uh huh.” Well, it is kinda stating the obvious. I can hardly keep my eyes open.

“That’s to be expected. I’ve just got to run through some simple tests and then you can go back to sleep.”

“How long?” I ask, as I look down at the bright blue cast, resting on top of a pillow.

“Want to leave us already?” She’s checking my nerves and the blood flow through my fingers sticking out of the cast.

“Well, there is a game on this weekend.” I mention hopefully and she laughs at me.

“I’ll see about having a TV brought in for you. You are going to be here for a little while, you know.”

“Yeah, sorta figured that one myself.”

Next she’s checking over my head and reaching for that darned penlight again.

“You know how much I hate that thing, don’t you?” I complain as she’s working around me.

“Yes, but doing what we don’t like makes us strong.” She quips back as she makes a few more notes.

“I certainly wasn’t thinking that, when I was down that hole.”

“Oh, I think you were, Sir.”

Huh?

“I don’t think many would have survived what you’ve been put through. I also know why you do it, why you keep fighting to survive. I also think they know too.”

Don’t know what you mean, Doc, and I’m certainly not going to look at you whilst you try and embarrass me. Had you noticed how the paint’s started to peel a little over there in the corner?

“Probably about time you decorated in here.”

“I’ll be sure to mention it to the General. I’ve got to update him on your condition anyway, so I’m sure he’ll be down to see you soon.” I’m sure she’s grinning, but I’m not looking back at her.

“You get some rest. That’s all you have to do for the next few days. Just lie back and let your body heal. You’ll get out of here a lot sooner.”

“Yes, Ma’am.” I give a swift salute, then close my eyes, as I hear her heels click on the floor towards the door.

Once she reaches the door, I slide my right hand underneath the sheets. Just one more job to do before I drop off, providing I can manage it single-handed.

“And leave the Foley alone!” Comes the amused, but stern voice from the doorway.

“Awwwwww.”

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