

Title: Stormy Weather

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Category: Hurt/Comfort, Drama, Angst.

Pairing: None.

Rating: 13+

Season: Anytime after four.

Spoilers: Slight for Children Of The Gods, Solitudes, Out Of Mind, Message In A Bottle, Crystal Skull and Tangent.

Summary: The Colonel is left alone and injured after a trip to rescue a UAV gets complicated.

Warnings: Language.

Status: Complete January 2003.

Notes: This story is especially for Sandra G, with my thanks for all her enthusiastic beta'ing. Without her skills, who knows if any of my fics would make sense? Also many thanks to Euph for her medical help. Without her, the Colonel might never have been the same again! 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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“So, what’ve we got kids?” O’Neill asked, his cheery voice echoed by the way he bounced on his feet behind the monitors.

Carter swivelled her head around to look up at her CO. Although he didn’t need to know every UAV transmission that came back through the gate, he was rarely unaware of what planets were being investigated at any time.

“It looks deserted, Sir, but there’re lots of canal systems criss-crossing what we’ve seen so far. It’s quite unusual compared with the planets we’ve seen.”

“And no sign of Noah, or his sons yet?”

She loved it when he grinned like that. He never seemed to get the chance to relax fully, even when not on duty, always being aware that he was second in command on the planet’s most secret and important project.

“Not yet Sir. There’s nothing in the readings the MALP’s sent back to indicate any industrial activity at all. The UAV’s done three sweeps so far and we haven’t seen any signs of any type of life at all. The planet seems thoroughly deserted.”

She turned back to her monitor, as the Colonel glanced through the control room window to where the stargate beckoned him. Deep in thought, he almost missed Daniel’s quiet comment, while the other man stared at his own monitor beside them.

“It could be some sort of grange.”

“Huh?”

“The ruins that we found near the gate, Sir.” Carter explained.

O’Neill looked over the younger man’s shoulders to a visual of what could only be called, under the most generous of terms, a rubble heap.

“Rocks, Danny?” He asked, leaning down to breath right by his ear.

Daniel brushed him away, irritatedly, missing the gleam in his CO’s eyes as he stood up again.

“Jaaaaack.” Then he looked up and sighed, realising his friend had succeeded in winding him up, despite only being beside him for a minute. Sat next to him, Sam merely grinned and went on with her own investigation.

“Some of the stones have very faded writing on them.” He punched a few controls on the keyboard and the image enlarged so that Jack could see there were, in fact, strange pictograms etched on some of the stone faces. Worn away with age, they were still recognisable, although they could have been saying ‘this way to the gents’ for all Jack knew.

“I can’t make them all out yet, but it seems to be another off-shoot to ancient Egyptian, so I’m hoping that once we’re there I’ll be able to see more writing and put it together.”

The Colonel smiled at his younger teammate’s eagerness and blind faith that his CO would somehow be able to authorise a trip to his latest planet of interest.

“And this grange thingy?” He prompted.

“Where they used to exchange corn and other produce for other essentials. Although different cultures would have different ways of either bartering for what they wanted, or selling goods for currency...”

“Daniel!” Jack interrupted in his Colonel’s ‘I’ve heard enough for now’ voice, before the linguist subjected them all to a half hour spiel in god knows what history of some other god knows what culture. One of the technicians behind them sniggered, but everyone chose to ignore the sound. “I know what a grange is. I want to know what makes you think so and what makes it important.”

“Oh. Well, it’s just a hunch really. There seem to be several pictograms that represent different farm produce and the placement of the building, fairly near to the gate, added to the canal being so near by. I’m just hypothesising that they probably shipped goods to the gate for transport elsewhere, being paid, or whatever at the ‘exchange’. It’s really just a theory without more information.”

“It could just as easily be passport control then, couldn’t it?”

“Ummm, I never thought of that.” Daniel agreed and smiled up at him. No matter how often Jack came out with these off the cuff insights, it still surprised him, reminding him that the soldier was far cleverer than he liked to let on.

“How about environmental conditions?”

“Absolutely nothing we can’t handle, Sir.” Carter replied. “A little colder than we’re used to, but nothing an extra pair of woolly socks won’t cure.”

“Woolly socks, eh?” He stared back down at his brightly polished boots, where he wiggled his toes, already itching to get back through the gate and whatever waited for them at the other side. “Well I’ll go see the General while you get your socks and passports ready then.”

He started to move away from them. He had a meeting with Teal’c in the gym in thirty minutes, which left plenty of time to prime his CO for planet whatever. He hadn’t even bothered to ask its designation, but he could easily find that out off the report logs. Whistling as he went along, he planned his sparring session with his other teammate. There was nothing like knocking the shine off the new recruits. Greenhorns who thought a grey haired Colonel with bad knees probably didn’t stand a chance against them in hand-to-hand combat. It was one of the first lessons he taught them when they entered the SGC. Never judge a book by its cover. Daniel would be proud of him!

One lost UAV and a day later, they listened as the wormhole snapped shut behind them, leaving them on top of the ramp the gate was built upon.

“Why the ramp, anyway?” O’Neill asked, as he scanned the surrounding areas. There was nothing to see in any direction, bar the canal, which ended in a huge turning circle for the boats near the gate, but he looked anyway. He knew Teal’c and Carter

would be doing exactly the same as him, but he looked anyway. Daniel would be searching, but that would be for his grange, not for incipient signs of danger, so he looked anyway. Nothing for as far as the eye could see. One canal off to their left, a heap of rubble somewhere in the far distance, also off to the left, and nothing anywhere else. They were in the middle of a large, flat plain, with no signs of any life at all, neither animal nor vegetable. As for the mineral, that would be up to Carter to find.

“No idea, Sir.” Carter eventually replied into the silence.

It was eerie, being in the middle of absolutely nothing.

“A whole heap of nothing.” The Colonel commented as he led the way down the ramp. The emptiness seemed to have even gotten to Daniel, who hadn’t made any attempt to do his usual gazelle leaping in to trouble routine.

“I do not like this feeling of abandonment.” Teal’c commented as they stepped off onto the dry ground.

“There isn’t even any grass here.” Carter agreed with him as she reached down to take her first sample. They waited, on autopilot, as she started her usual routine. She always took a sample right by the gate. Why? The Colonel didn’t know. But his was not to reason why. His was but to do and die. The old rhyme sounded in his head and he shook the strange feeling off. There was absolutely nothing here to threaten their safety. Nothing as far as the eye could see. Nowhere for anyone to hide and ambush them. So why did the hairs stand up on the back of his neck? Not wishing to pass on his vague unease to the rest of the team without anything more substantial to go on than his own feelings, he quickly led them off.

“So the UAV went down that way, right?” He asked. He already knew the way, but he took every opportunity to keep his team sharp and awake.

“Yes, Sir. Right past Daniel’s ruins.” She checked the readings she was getting with the tracking device, signalling the direction of the homing device on the unit.

“OK, heads up. Just cause we can’t see anything, doesn’t mean there’s nothing to see.”

They fell into an easy pattern of the Colonel in front and Teal’c bringing up the rear, leaving the two scientists in the middle. Not only did this mean the brain half of the team could take time out to theorise together, but the Major could keep an eye on Daniel if trouble suddenly appeared. It was a system that had proved reliable over the many years they’d been serving together. They followed the path of the canal, noticing the lack of any life in the water. The water wasn’t deep, varying between three to five feet in depth, the level ground negating any need for locks, or other water levelling controls. The whole area seemed dead.

The weather was cold enough that the brisk pace the Colonel set kept them reasonably warm as they walked. They stopped after a couple of hours for a quick snack and water break. It was only a brief one-day visit to collect the UAV and give Daniel a

chance to record whatever could be seen of the ruins before returning to base. Therefore, they didn't need much in the way of supplies, which would slow them down. Teal'c had a few MREs and a first aid kit in his backpack, Carter was carrying her supplies case and other scientific equipment, Daniel was responsible for the video camera and other recording supplies, whilst the Colonel had most of the emergency rescue equipment with him.

A further couple of hours saw Daniel scrambling over the first of several large masonry blocks lying haphazardly along the dry ground. They each spent a few minutes walking around the large stones.

"So any idea why they're no longer standing?" O'Neill asked to no one in particular.

"There do not appear to be any signs of damage, or weapons fire upon them." Teal'c stated, knowing O'Neill had already noticed this himself.

"Perhaps just lack of maintenance, Sir, after the people left." Carter said standing upon one of the stones.

The Colonel had a brief impulse to jump on a higher one and shout 'I'm the king of the castle', but then considered how he was going to explain **that** one to Teal'c and decided against it. Watching Daniel scrambling over the ruins prompted a thought of what he must have been like as a child, climbing up the pyramids with his parents. Had they frequently wanted to place him in a child's harness, as he often did? Daniel rarely got the chance to merely touch and explore like this and, even if it were only for a day, it would do the younger man good to have a free reign for a change.

"Carter, any objections to stopping here with Daniel while Teal'c and I go and find the UAV and bring it back without you?" He was sure he and Teal'c could manage to haul it back between them. It was hardly difficult terrain they were going over and if the worst came to the worse, they could always drag the mission out for two days. Teal'c had an emergency blanket in the first aid kit that they could fashion a bivouac out of whilst Carter and Daniel gated home. The Colonel was an expert in 'make do and mend'.

He nearly laughed as Daniel's head appeared like a prairie dog's from behind a block, utter astonishment written across his features. Carter laughed.

"No problems at all, Sir. You have a good walk, we'll be right here." She hopped down and passed over the tracking device, still smiling.

"Good. Make sure you are." There was no humour in that command, which both scientists understood.

"Umm, thanks Jack." Daniel answered, then quickly started emptying his backpack onto the nearest surface, preparing for a much fuller investigation than he'd been expecting.

The Colonel watched Teal'c's lips turn slightly upwards, as the Jaffa moved to follow him away from the ruins.

“What?” He asked, unable to make his mind up whether to grin, or scowl.

“Nothing O’Neill.”

“Good, cause you’ll frighten children with looks like that.”

“It does not seem to work with DanielJackson.” Teal’c deadpanned.

“No, but then nothing ever does.” The Colonel replied and they shared a quiet smile before returning to a silent march alongside the banks of the canal, gradually shortening the distance between them and the UAV.

“What do you suppose happened here?” O’Neill asked after another couple of hours.

“It is difficult to gauge without finding more signs of habitation and the manner in which they deserted them. Perhaps a natural disaster of some sort.”

“Something that killed off all the plants and animals too?”

“A lack of plant nutrition would lead to a lack of nourishment for any grazing animals.”

“Yeah and that would have a knock-on effect right up the food-chain. Perhaps the people did something, like a bomb maybe, or something got in the water table?”

“Water table? I have not heard of this expression before.”

The Colonel was about to go into an explanation of how water seeps through rock, collecting chemicals as it goes, which then get back into the food-chain when the radio interrupted.

“Colonel?” There was a note of urgency in the Major’s voice that had O’Neill reaching instantly for his radio.

“Carter?”

“Daniel’s had an accident, Sir.”

The time it took for him to sigh and curse the decision to let Danny play for a day passed in a second.

“How bad?”

“I’m afraid he’s twisted his right ankle falling off one of the blocks. It’s rather bad and his leg’s bleeding where it scraped down the stone. I think we ought to get him back to base, Sir.”

He almost heard the word ‘sorry’ as if she’d said it.

“OK. We’re on the way back, we’re only a couple of hours away.” They weren’t due to report back for another few hours yet, so neither were the SGC likely to try and contact them any sooner. He didn’t want to have Carter go back to the gate for help, leaving Daniel on his own. An injured man on his own wasn’t safe, no matter where you were. He and Teal’c were still nearer to his team than Carter and Daniel were to the gate anyway.

“Actually, Sir, I only need one of you to help me get Daniel back. I can’t carry him on my own. There’s still the UAV to think of if you’re nearly there.”

“I’ll be fine Jack.” Came a slightly strained voice, interrupting the Major’s transmission.

Part of the Colonel bristled at the thought that his Major could still think of the machine while a team-member was hurt, but he put it aside. It was her job to think of the scientific importance of missions, just like it was his to protect the personnel involved. It was true that they were only about two hours away from the UAV, if its last known location was to be believed. However, it could have coasted for miles after the control room lost contact.

“Do you think you can get Daniel back on your own?” He asked the Jaffa. He knew Teal’c could carry any one of them for several miles if needed, his symbiote gave him much better strength than his human ancestors. However, he was always happy to hear the views of his team before ordering them to do anything. He just didn’t necessarily have to do anything about it afterwards.

“Without doubt, O’Neill.”

“See you later then. I’ll go get the black box and they’ll have to be happy with that. Keep sharp.”

“I will O’Neill. I will communicate once I have retrieved Daniel Jackson.” With that, Teal’c bowed slightly and began a paced trot back towards the rest of their team.

The Colonel took a quick look around the desolate landscape once more and continued on his walk towards their missing machine, feeling even smaller and alone in the quiet plain.

Typical! Why can’t anything go as it’s supposed to? Teal’c had reported in over an hour ago to say he’d arrived back at the ruins. They’d quickly got Daniel’s ankle strapped up and should by now be nearly half way back to the gate, but where was the UAV? Still somewhere ahead according to the tracking device. Damn, but it was going to be a long, lonely hike back and clouds were gathering overhead threatening a major storm.

Sure enough, just as he found the mangled wreck of what had once been a sleek and gleaming UAV, the heavens opened. He could barely get out of his backpack and into

the poor excuse the Air Force called a poncho before he was soaked through. Putting his own sudden wet condition to one side he radioed back to his team.

“Carter, how’re you doing?”

“Fine, Sir. We’re about half way back to the gate.” Teal’c must be rushing, he thought. “It’s starting to rain rather hard, how’re you doing, Colonel?”

“Getting wet, Carter, but I’ve finally got the UAV. Way past where the technicians said it would be, by the way.” So could he help it if just a touch of peevishness entered his voice? “I’m just about to remove the black box, then I’ll be on my way back.”

“Roger that, Sir. We’ll get Daniel back to the gate and then come and join you.”

He grinned as he finally wrestled the large sensor-recording box away from the rest of the plane. “How about bringing some hot chocolate with you?” And some better waterproofs he thought as the rain started to soak through his BDU pants.

“I’ll see what I can do, Sir. Carter out.”

His only link with life other than himself on this barren place shut off and he rearranged his backpack so that the large metal unit sat in the middle of it. It was a bit of a squeeze and weighed a ton when he struggled to get it back on his shoulders, but he was soon on his way again.

Half an hour later, he had run out of invectives to describe the useless poncho he was wearing. Every little gust of wind seemed intent on blowing it about, giving more access to the rain. He was thoroughly soaked through to the skin and hating every minute of it. Thunder could be heard in the distance, behind him, and he was worried about his team, as the previously hard ground beneath him started to change into slippery mud. He radioed them again.

“Carter, what’s your position now?”

“About another half an hour from the gate, Sir. We’ve had to slow down as the footing’s getting a bit slippery for Teal’c. Daniel wanted to walk, but Teal’c won’t let him.”

Good for Teal’c he thought. The Jaffa took his responsibilities very seriously.

“How’re you doing, Sir?”

“Still doing, Carter. Let me know when you reach the gate.”

“Yes, Sir. Carter out.”

He continued in the rain, sliding as water pooled across the surface of the plain. The canal had long ago given up absorbing the increase in water running into it and flooded out across the land. He wondered about what could have caused such a

change, in what must have once been a prosperous trading route in its long ago past, into this deserted, dead, and sometimes flooded land?

The rain stopped suddenly as the thunderstorm struck. Hailstones started to rain down and he couldn't help but yelp with surprise as the large stones struck him, breaking his walking pace. Hails as large as a couple of inches in diameter started to strike his unprotected body, bruising wherever they hit. Only his back seemed protected by his backpack, although the weight of its contents was already straining his shoulders. Lightening flashed as the storm increased, the strength of the sound almost covering the voice coming over the radio.

“Colonel?”

He leant his head to one side to cover his fingers as he worked the radio.

“Yeah. What's your position?”

“We're back at the gate now. We're just going to take Daniel back, collect some supplies and then we'll come and meet you.” He knew they weren't that far away that they couldn't tell how bad the weather was over his position.

“Don't forget the thermos.” He shouted over the noise of the storm, but he still heard his 2IC's laughter in her answer.

“I'll be sure not too. Carter out.”

That was when the lightening started in a bout of fury. He saw the huge bolts of energy flash across the plain, striking the ground in several places miles ahead of him. He crouched down in the wet mud, planning to stay there until the worst of the storm was over. There was nothing taller than him around and he didn't want to make himself a target. In fact the only thing bigger than him anywhere on this plain was the stargate itself. His heart thudded with the almost certain knowledge that the gate must surely be taking some of those hits, as the ground discharged in the awesome display around him. However, no matter how concerned he might be about what was going on around him, he wasn't able to do anything until the storm let up and he could move on again.

He continued to kneel down in the mud, feeling it squelch through his pants as he curled up into a ball. The hailstones continued to pound into the ground around him and he lost count of how many times he felt himself being hit. Each strike made him wince with the force behind it. Paintball had nothing on this! He'd taken to protecting his head with his arms and hands, deciding the last thing he needed was a headache too, when a particular hit caused a pain so sharp through his wrist that he brought it back to his chest to cradle it for a moment. Gently flexing it, he guessed it wasn't broken, just badly strained, when the hailstones started to increase in size. Taking a quick look out across the plain, he tried to gauge the remaining size of the storm cloud, glad that his team weren't stuck out here unprotected with him. Suddenly, he was struck by something incredibly hard on his head and everything misted out with the pain, turning grey as he tried to reach up with his hands. He never finished the

manoeuvre as he toppled sideways, allowing the rest of the storm access to his body as the hail continued to pour down around his unresisting form.

Back at the SGC, Carter continued to pace up and down in front of the ramp, as the seventh chevron refused to engage again. Teal'c seemed to be the very opposite of his agitated teammate. His silence and motionless pose only emphasised to those who knew him, just how desperate he was to get back through the gate. At the second failure, Carter shrugged out of her backpack and charged past her teammate and up the stairs to the control room.

“What’s the problem?” She demanded, almost pushing past the General in her haste to get to the technician. “Sorry, Sir.” She belatedly apologised.

“I don’t know, the problem doesn’t appear to be our gate. What were the conditions at the other side when you came through?”

The Major looked down at her rain poncho and considered the extra provisions she had in her backpack.

“There was a heavy storm overhead. Electrical activity.”

“It was lightning directly above the stargate.” Teal'c informed everyone as he entered the room.

“Could it have struck the gate?” The technician asked, quickly thinking how that might have affected its operation.

“It could indeed have, but there is no way to know.” Teal'c replied, studying his teammate. He could tell by her expression that she was thinking hard about something and he had no doubt that it would have to do with the malfunctioning gate.

“I need to check the systems out.” She announced absentmindedly, sitting down at one of the terminals without even removing her poncho.

Hammond stared sadly at her back, then looked once more towards the stargate, before returning to his office. There wasn't any way he could help the young Major and even less way he could help his stranded Colonel. If the storm was anything like as bad as they had reported earlier, then O'Neill would need all his survival skills until they could get the gate working again. He was without supplies, not even bad-weather clothing, so his determination would have to be sufficient. The Colonel had shown on many an occasion how much of **that** he had stored.

Teal'c turned around to follow the General out, feeling as though he couldn't help either.

“I will return to the infirmary and inform Daniel Jackson of our progress.” He stated, heading back towards where the other member of the team was currently resting after having his ankle x-rayed and bandaged. Fraiser had decided to keep him there

overnight, just to be on the safe side. The young man would be frantic with worry, but Teal'c felt it only right that he be made aware of the situation.

He wasn't aware of how long he'd lain there, only that the storm had finished, leaving a constant drizzle of rain. He could feel water soaking into his body as he lay full length on the ground and he tried to sit up. His head hurt and he fought back the nausea that made his stomach roil with each movement. Looking around him, the plain was now awash with water, a good two inches running across the surface that now seemed too waterlogged to allow any more to sink through the soil. He was lucky he hadn't drowned in it when unconscious. Struggling to raise himself, he bit back the cry of pain as various parts of his anatomy complained at once. The piercing pain through his head warned of a possible concussion and he'd had those before to know the signs well enough. His right wrist still hurt where the hail had clobbered it, so he pushed himself up with his left side. Unfortunately, his left side had been uppermost during the storm and everything down that side screamed in pain. He felt certain at least one rib was cracked, but didn't think it was broken. His ankle objected to having any weight placed on it and he could tell it was swollen in his boot. Unfortunately, he didn't have any first aid supplies and his boot was better than nothing for support until he could get back. Just how the hell could he get back like this though? He was still hours away from the gate. Where was his team? Blaming his slow thinking on having something play patticake on his head, he reached for his radio.

"Carter?"

Nothing, only static.

"Teal'c? Anyone?"

Nothing again. This didn't bode well, but there was nothing to do but get back to the gate. Images of lightening flashing over the area played through his mind, but he resolutely pushed them to one side. The gate was his only way home, so one thing at a time. Get back to the gate and then see what the score was. Nothing to it. One foot in front of the other.

He set off, wincing with each step. He'd done this before, when a nice little trip into not so nice land had left him with a late-opening chute and injuries. He'd been a lot younger then, with a wife and kid to get back to, but if he could walk, stagger and crawl back then, he could darned well do it now. Never say die, eh, O'Neill? Stubborn as the day he was born. One foot in front of the other.

He zoned.

God, why couldn't it be any warmer? He couldn't go fast enough to build up any heat and his wet clothes stuck to him in the constant rain. The poncho hadn't stopped the rain from soaking into them whilst he'd been unconscious and they clung to him like a cheap shower curtain. One foot in front of the other.

The weight of the unit in his backpack pulled more with each faltering step. He debated leaving it behind, but he hated to not complete a mission. See his team home safe, complete the mission, take care of himself. They were his priorities and as much of the way he thought, as the blood that ran through his veins. If he really couldn't take the weight any more he'd leave it behind and carry on without, but something made him loath to do that. It was like admitting defeat and that was something Jack O'Neill didn't like to do. There was always a way, you just had to figure out what it was. His thoughts chased each other round his mind as he continued to struggle onwards. He kept the canal to one side, following it back towards the gate when he didn't have the energy to keep his head lifted any further. One foot in front of the other.

Somewhere he'd lost his cap. He couldn't remember where, he just felt the lack of warmth on his head from missing it. The rain seemed to get even inside the poncho's hood, further chilling him, or maybe that was his concussion. Rain swept into his eyes, the liquid blinding his view of the way ahead. Mind you as he wasn't looking ahead much, it wasn't really a problem. He stumbled, his ankle suddenly giving way and he collapsed to the ground, splashing onto his knees in the standing water. The pain in his head spiked with the jolt and he groaned with it.

Struggling to remove his backpack under the poncho, he placed it on the ground, watching distractedly as the water immediately soaked into the base. He didn't feel like eating either of the nutrition bars he had in his pockets, even though their wrappers would have kept them dry. The nausea was too bad for that, even though he hadn't actually been sick yet. He'd no intention of deliberately retching either, being fully aware of how much that would aggravate his headache. Building a fire for warmth was out of the question, as there wasn't any combustible material around and no dry ground to built it on anyway. However, he did take a few swallows from his canteen before leaning against his pack and closing his eyes. Even sitting in the water like this was not enough to stop him from falling asleep. He didn't want to, in fact knew it was dangerous with a head injury. Apart from that, a purely practical part of him still wanted to watch out for danger, to just take ten minutes out for a rest, before continuing. However, his battered body disagreed with him and his mind switched off.

They'd been working on the problem with the gate for hours now, but without success. As far as the General could understand, they were assuming that the gate had been struck by lightning and somehow shorted out. He gave permission for them to keep redialling the planet, hoping that the gate's own system would somehow reset once the charge had drained away. He didn't really understand the mechanics of the artefact he had control over, he left that to the likes of Major Carter and the other technicians.

He remembered the time when Carter and O'Neill had been stranded in the Antarctic after the gate had been struck by weaponry. However, that time it had been the gate on this side that was affected and Sergeant Siler had done an admirable job of repairing the damage and Doctor Jackson had made another leap of intuition and worked out where their missing officers were. There was nothing that could be done

this time, except keep trying to dial. If they couldn't get through in the next 24 hours, then they'd try their allies and see if anyone was nearby enough to help. However, he didn't hold up much hope for that. Their allies rarely came to them unless it was for their benefit. Jacob had managed it once, when the Colonel and Teal'c were stuck out in space, so the Tok'ra were on his list to call, but only if the next day proved unfruitful.

Right now SG1 were ensconced in Major Carter's lab. She was still busy running simulations of something or other and the other two were keeping her company. Doctor Jackson was getting around with crutches, but the General knew they wouldn't slow him behind his teammates if they managed to get the gate to engage.

He woke, shivering in what he presumed was the planet's dawn. He checked his watch, but it was smashed and not working. He'd no idea when that had happened, but it was probably during the hailstorm and it must have been a strong hit to have done the damage through the protective cover. Probably lucky then that it had got his watch, as it had no doubt protected his wrist. Having his right one more or less useless was bad enough, without the left one being out of commission too. Checking the radio brought no better news than yesterday and he sighed in frustration, before putting all negative thoughts to one side. There was still plenty of time for his kids to get back for him. Whatever the problem, they'd come for him. They always had before, no matter what the odds and he had faith in them for that. However, the nearer he got to them the better, so up and at 'em, soldier, rise and shine.

Thankfully, it had stopped raining, but the skies were still overcast, threatening to open again. A definite chill hung in the air and he shivered. The water seemed to have finally drained away from the surface, although the ground was still slushy and wet. Carefully sitting up, he ignored the way the mud clung to his pants, exacerbating the cold seeping through his bones. He wasn't surprised that everything ached more than yesterday, the pain in his head spectacularly piercing today. He took a quick drink from his canteen, saving as much as possible for later, then removed the poncho. The damn thing was useless, wet inside and out, preventing his clothes from drying. After struggling into his backpack he headed again towards the gate, stuffing the poncho through a strap. He was determined to get further this time than he had yesterday. He plodded once more along the canal side, casually noting that the extra water hadn't encouraged any possible life from further up the plain into it. Whatever had happened here was definitely final.

One foot in front of the other, he zoned again, not really thinking of anything, just watching the hypnotic sight of his boots moving beneath his gaze. Left, right, left, right. The sight repeated hundreds and thousands of times. He tried counting them, but the pain in his head sharpened to an unbelievable degree when he concentrated, so he gave up. He vaguely noticed the planet's poor excuse for a sun rising in the sky above him, but the clouds rarely gave it a break to shine through. Several times he stumbled, as his ankle complained bitterly about its treatment, but he managed to remain upright and mobile. He wouldn't give in, cause his kids would be coming for him soon.

Sara had waited for him. Charlie had waited for him. His kids would be waiting for him, just as soon as he got back to the gate. One foot in front of the other.

An occasional shadow grew from his feet when the sun broke through, but the clouds always rolled back and he shivered in the cold. Damn the cold. Damn the storm. Damn the rain that had soaked him. Damn the UAV too, come to think about it. No, don't think, because that hurt and he didn't want to hurt anymore. He didn't want to feel cold anymore either, but he couldn't stop shivering. One foot, always one foot more.

Suddenly his peripheral eyesight caught something different in the landscape and he looked up to see Daniel's ruins in front of him. Wanting to do nothing more than run towards them and sit down for a rest, he wearily continued on his achingly slow walk until he could sit down on the nearest block. Well, he was half way back, which called for some sort of celebration, he mused. Reaching for his canteen, he took a few mouthfuls, but no more. It was nearly empty and he'd no idea if the water in the canal was safe. They'd never got around to testing it and he was wary of drinking anything that didn't have anything alive in it. Removing his backpack again, he leaned back against it and decided to have a short break. He didn't want to stop long, as he knew if he didn't get out of these wet clothes soon, he'd be sure to be heading towards a serious cold and more infirmary time than he was already. He wasn't one for getting sick anyway and he was damned if he was going to start now. He didn't even bother about looking for something for a fire this time. He remembered his quick tour over the area before and had no reason to believe a store of wood could have suddenly appeared since yesterday.

He only intended to have a short break, but once he closed his eyes, he realised how tired he was. His headache hadn't let up on him yet and he was finding it hard to think about anything at all now. Not wanting to accidentally roll off the block onto his sore ribs, if he did fall asleep, he decided to lower himself to the ground and lean back against it instead. The rain started to fall again as he settled down, his head resting on his raised knees in exhaustion. He sighed and reached over for the poncho once more, placing it around him as a blanket, too tired to get up and struggle into it properly. He was barely aware of the small droplets bouncing off the plastic before he gave in to his body's need and switched off once more.

It was a nervous group of people who watched as the technician started the third dial up sequence of the day. Daniel leaned on his crutches, the look in his eyes distant, as though seeing through the very stargate to where his friend waited for them. Sam bounced on her feet, an action reminiscent of her missing CO, her backpack by her feet, where she'd refused to move it from the control room ever since their first failed attempt that morning. Teal'c stood to one side, already wearing his backpack, his staff weapon clutched rigidly in his hand, as still as stone as he watched the gate.

Hammond stood nearby, his face placid, but his heart thumping with hope that **this** time the gate would connect and he could get his missing officer back. O'Neill was out there, stranded in a storm that seemed to have been violent enough to disable the

stargate. He'd requested a medical team to be on standby, waiting until they'd heard back from the Colonel about his condition. It paid to be prepared in his experience.

"Chevron seven, locked." Came the triumphant shout of the technician as a series of whoops sounded from nearby staff. Carter did a little jump, a smile on her face, Jackson dipped his head and his mouth formed silent words of praise, whilst Teal'c closed his eyes for one brief moment before turning to face him, silently asking permission to disembark for the planet.

"Get ready." Hammond told them. "But let's see what the MALP tells us first."

The General looked over the technician's shoulder as he expertly connected with the machine that was still on the other side of the gate. The transmission it was sending back was a bit grainy and at an odd angle, like something had hit it. It looked like it was raining, a faint drizzle could just about be seen. Nothing else was visible though anywhere the camera panned; no danger, no wildlife, no vegetation and no Colonel. There was a conspicuous lack of response to their radio hails.

Hammond was instantly on the phone to summon what was now officially a rescue team.

"Rain, Sirs." The officer warned the two members of SG1 behind him, who quickly pulled their rain ponchos out of their packs before getting ready. They then quickly left the room, both exchanging quick looks with Jackson as they passed. They were waiting on the ramp as the rescue team consisting of Fraiser, a corpsman and two voluntary marines appeared. Hammond watched from above as the Major must have told the new arrivals about the weather, as each airman then got covered up before signalling that they were ready.

"SG1, you have a go." Hammond authorised from above them. "Bring him home safe."

He took a deep breath as each member of the team gave him a brief look, or a salute, before they disappeared into the wormhole. A few seconds later the hypnotising event horizon disappeared and he was left to wait and wonder what they'd find on the other side. Totally helpless until he heard from them again, he returned to his office. It wouldn't do any good to hang around his technicians, giving the impression that he expected anything other than success to follow. His people were good, the best to be had anywhere in the service. He merely had to leave them to do what they were the best at.

It wasn't the same hard rain that they'd left here yesterday, but Carter and Teal'c both remembered how violently the storm had escalated before leaving their CO. Exchanging brief looks of concern, they headed off in the direction they hoped to find their leader in. Carter radioed immediately for him, but the only reply was static. Teal'c tried his radio and then, in frustration, Fraiser tried hers, but they didn't get a reply to any of their hails. No one said anything, they knew they were all thinking the same thing; that the only reason the Colonel didn't answer was because he couldn't.

Setting a fast pace through the unremitting rain, it took three hours to get to the ruins. By now the ground was starting to get quite slippery again and they could all feel the rain beginning to seep in around their faces and down their necks, sending shivers through their bodies. They tried not to think about how the Colonel was coping with this, after so long in the open terrain, if he was injured.

Teal'c was the first to spot the bundle of desert camo BDUs huddled beside a discarded poncho, next to one of the ruined blocks. He set off at a run, hearing the rest of the team chase after him, their boots squelching in the sticky mud. Kneeling down beside his friend, he was afraid to turn him over until he had been checked out for injuries. O'Neill was lying on his side, curled into a foetal position, and unresponsive. He was wet through to the skin, which was far too pale for the Colonel's normal tanned appearance. His lips were tinged with blue, as were his fingernails, while his hands were cold and white, as they lay on the soaked muddy ground. His BDUs were covered in mud and his face and hands splashed with brown streaks, his hair as muddied and wet as the rest of him.

"Excuse me Teal'c." Fraiser ordered politely, as she moved passed him and immediately gave the marines a job to do, of holding a large plastic sheet over them whilst she worked. The others watched on as she checked for respirations and pulse, followed by testing his pupil reflexes with a penlight. Their sluggish response caused her to do a quick search for other signs of head trauma, like fluid from his ears or nose, a search rendered nearly impossible in the rain. However, he did emit a quiet moan when she ran her hands professionally across the top of his head, gently and without pressure, finding an unnatural raised area beneath her fingers. Aware of the need to get him back quickly, she swiftly ran her hands over the rest of his body, testing for other broken bones before moving him. She'd no reason to believe that he would have, given the barren nature of the planet, but he was unconscious for a reason, showing signs of head trauma, and the Doctor worked on autopilot.

Taking into account the head trauma, she placed a cervical collar on him before getting the corpsman to help move him onto a litter, immediately placing him on oxygen from their small portable supply. Working together, the two medical staff soon had the Colonel inside a thermal blanket and a rescue bag, only stopping to cut off his outer uniform once he was covered.

His body was a mass of deep bruising, especially down his left side. It must have been one hell of a hailstorm, the Doctor thought, to have done this much damage. His left arm alone had seven distinct dark round areas, although he was so cold the effects were being delayed. His right wrist and left ankle were both badly swollen and she suspected a couple of ribs might have been fractured, considering the surface bruising, but only x-rays would tell. Although he was a few degrees colder than normal, he'd soon warm up within the rescue bag, especially with the help of some chemical heat packs. Her real worries were the head injury and the sounds of congestion in his lungs. The last thing he'd need would be coughing fits with a head trauma. She couldn't do anything about internal injuries, although so far there weren't any signs of internal bleeding. Quickly attaching an IV drip, if for no other reason than the ease of administering drugs later, if they proved necessary, she settled back, satisfied for the moment.

They'd done everything they could afford the time to do on site, the most important thing now was to get him back to the infirmary ASAP.

Teal'c helped the corpsman carry the litter back, waiting until Fraiser had attached the IV bag to his vest with a clip, before setting off. Carter kept pace alongside the CMO, darting frequent looks at her CO, for the quiet journey back. One of the marines picked up the Colonel's backpack with its forgotten UAV black box and it was a subdued group that made its way back to the gate. The journey was a lot slower this time, the slippery surface making each step difficult. Twice Fraiser stopped them to check again on her patient, as people took turns to carry the litter. His temperature started to improve, but he didn't stir as she examined him and consequently was still unaware when they re-entered the SGC five hours later.

General Hammond hated times like this, waiting with concerned team members when an officer that he wasn't technically supposed to care about was being treated for injuries. One rule said you weren't supposed to care, but another rule, one he preferred to follow said how can you send these people out to their possible deaths **without** caring for them?

It had been a couple of hours since the rescue team had returned and Fraiser had whisked the heavily blanketed form of his 2IC to the trauma bay. Since then, they had heard nothing. He'd got a brief report off the Major and Teal'c and now he waited, along with them and Jackson for the CMO to reappear. Everyone had been through their post-mission medicals, seen to by other nurses, and now they settled uncomfortably in the corridor outside the infirmary. Someone had provided a chair for Jackson and he perched on the end of it, gratefully.

Eventually Fraiser reappeared and taking a brief look at their worried expressions, smiled at them.

"He should be fine," she comforted them, "providing he behaves himself and follows orders."

"Fat chance of that then." Daniel whispered, but they still heard him.

"That's not so say he isn't hurt, or going to be in some pain for several days to come." Fraiser warned them. "It's quite a list this time. I've no idea how bad the hailstones were when you left" she looked at the three SG1 members, "but they were sufficient to cause the Colonel a skull fracture at one point. Luckily it's not a depressed fracture, or he'd be in a far worse condition."

Sam gasped, she had a friend in Australia who'd experienced a bad storm, where the hailstones had killed off all their small livestock.

"Some of his bruises show the hailstones were over two inches in diameter during the worst part of the storm. He's very lucky he wasn't stoned to death."

“But O’Neill **will** recover from these injuries?” Teal’c asked. He’d never been subject to many cold weather conditions. Apophis had always shown a preference for desert and hot climates, so the ex First Prime didn’t have a lot of experience in snow and hail, or how deadly the latter could be.

“Yes, he should be, but he’s going to be bed-bound for several days, under observation for his head trauma, and until the worst of the bruising heals. I’ve had to strap one wrist and ankle, they’re swollen that badly he’ll not be able to use them. He’s cracked a couple of ribs on his left, in fact his left side is almost one solid mass of bruising. Luckily there’re no serious internal injuries, but even so, he’s going to be very sore moving anything at all for at least a week. I’m guessing that he got his head injury before the rest and was probably unconscious, maybe lying down on his right side when he got the rest of the bruising. He’s got a slight chest infection from the damp conditions, but I’m treating that with antibiotics and I don’t think that’s anything to worry about at this moment. He was bordering on hypothermic when we found him, but he’s already warmed back up and he’s sleeping comfortably at the moment.”

“Can we see him?” Daniel asked, raising himself in preparation, reaching beside him for his crutches.

“I’ve got a couple of people in the main ward at the moment, so I’ve put him in one of the wardrooms on his own.”

Rank has its privileges, Sam thought as they followed the Doctor to the side rooms. The Colonel was prone to nightmares when he was injured and didn’t like others being witness to them, so it was considerate of Fraiser to think of things like that. A few moments later they were shown into a smaller room where the Colonel lay soundly asleep in the bed. He was hooked up to a cardiac monitor and was wearing a facemask, which misted over each time he breathed. An IV was attached to the back of his left hand and leads from the monitor disappeared down the neck of the hospital gown. They could see several large and darkening bruises appearing on his left arm and the bandage around his right wrist. However, there was no sign of anything on his head, considering there’d been a mention of a skull fracture.

“What about his head?” Sam asked.

“The x-ray showed a small, simple break. As I said earlier, it’s not a depressed fracture, and there are no signs of any pressure build up, or fluid leaks, so I’ve left it alone. I’m hoping it will heal without any intervention. Of course I’ll be keeping an eye on him, hence the monitoring equipment, which is why he’ll not be leaving here for a few days yet. Besides, he also needs to get over this infection first, which is why he’s got the mask on. I’m getting drugs into his lungs a lot quicker with it while he’s not awake to complain about it.” There was a slight touch of humour to her voice, as she remembered the many arguments she’d had in the past with him over his abhorrence to the device. “Luckily, he’ll not feel like moving much over the next few days anyway.”

“You’ll keep me informed?” The General asked, even though he knew it went without question any way.

“Of course, Sir.” She nodded as their CO took one last look at the bed before leaving for other matters.

She then watched as the rest of SG1 started to pull the two chairs over that were in the room and hunt for a third before she raised her hands.

“All right, you three. Now I know Daniel’s had plenty of rest, but you two,” she stared at Sam and Teal’c, “have been on the go for hours now. The Colonel’s not going to be in any state for company for hours yet and I’ll need you all rested to help me keep him in that bed once he’s more aware.” Was that Sam, or Daniel who sniggered? “So you two go and get some rest, grab something to eat and then you can come back later, OK?”

“As you wish, Doctor Fraiser.” “OK, Janet.” Came back the two reluctant replies as they left the room.

Fraiser walked over to the bed and watched as Daniel settled himself on the nearest chair, lying his crutches down beside him. She quickly checked over the machines once more and looked down at her sleeping patient.

“No overdoing it Daniel.” She warned before leaving him to watch over his friend. Once again she was going to have her infirmary full of SG1 before the Colonel was well enough to leave.

Daniel had lost track of time, waiting patiently by the bed. Even as he watched, he could see the bruises on Jack’s arms developing more. If the rest of his body looked like this, it truly was a miracle he hadn’t been killed. He watched his friend’s face intently as his eyes started to move beneath the shuttered lids.

Jack started to squirm in the bed, flinching from unseen blows and Daniel reached for his hand, mindful of the IV in the back.

“Jack?” He asked, leaning over the troubled face.

Jack continued to writhe on the bed, his fingers tightening in a vice like grip around Daniel’s.

“Jack, you can wake up now, you’re back at the SGC.” He tried to ignore the pain coming from his trapped hand and reached over with the other one to brush Jack’s fringe away from his forehead.

The feel of something against his head sparked a reaction and Jack started to shake it from side to side. The beep of the heart monitor increased its tempo and Daniel started to panic.

“Gotta get back.” Jack murmured quietly, his voice muffled by the facemask, his eyes opening slightly but not focussing on anything.

“Jack, you **are** back.” Daniel tried to reassure him, looking with relief towards Fraiser who quickly rushed in and took in the scene in a moment.

“Finish the mission. Can’t get left behind again.” Jack continued to speak, his voice getting louder as he struggled more.

Daniel could see Janet flinch every time Jack twisted his head and thumped it against the pillow. She was quickly preparing a needle and had its contents injected into the IV within moments, her actions practised and sure. Jack gradually settled back down under his hands.

“I don’t like sedating head injuries,” Janet explained to him, “but it’s only an extremely light dose, so in his present condition, it should be enough to calm his agitation.”

Sure enough, when he looked back down, Daniel could see a pair of brown eyes trying to focus on him.

“Don’t wanna get left behind again.” The quiet voice pleaded.

Daniel doubted Jack would remember any of this conversation later on.

“It’s alright Jack, you’re home now, you’re safe.”

“Home? Safe?” The brown eyes were drooping again, losing the ability to stay open.

“Yes, Jack. It’s OK to go back to sleep. You rest and I’ll be here when you wake up again.”

Jack smiled a little at him then, before his eyes shut fully and the stress lines that had appeared over his face during the last few minutes smoothed out again. The cardiac monitor slowed its frantic pace too. Daniel gently extricated his hand from Jack’s now slack fingers and flexed them to get rid of the sudden pins and needles.

“I’m going to have to run another CT scan now to make sure he hasn’t disturbed that fracture any further.” Janet informed him, studying her patient’s head. “He didn’t wake up when we found him so, combined with the head injury, it’s not a surprise he’s a little disorientated. However, better safe than sorry. We’ll have to keep a close watch on him for the next time he wakes up, to try and stop this from happening again.”

Janet called for two of her nurses and together they adjusted the medical equipment surrounding the bed before wheeling it out of the door and down the corridor. Daniel decided to wait for them in case Sam and Teal’c returned first. It would be a nasty shock for them to arrive and find the room completely empty, not knowing what had happened. Then he’d go and get some lunch too. It was a while since he’d eaten, as his stomach decided to loudly announce. Luckily there was no one around to hear it, otherwise he was sure he’d have been immediately marched to the commissary. Why was it no one thought he could look after himself?

The next twenty-four hours were more tiring for the people clustered around the bed than for the one in it. After Daniel had explained how confused Jack had been, the rest of his team decided that someone should be talking to him all the time, so that he'd be hearing them before he began to wake up. Janet smiled at the suggestion, saying it wasn't really necessary, but it couldn't hurt. She privately thought it would be good for the rest of the team to feel like they were helping, dealing with some of the guilt they were feeling for having left him behind in the first place. Telling them that it was probably better if they took a turn when the others rested, she watched while they took individual shifts.

Daniel didn't find it any trouble to talk consistently for four hours at a time, although he doubted Jack would appreciate his views on the building histories of the ancient Chinese. If Jack could read him hockey scores and sports reviews, then it was only fair he tried to broaden the other man's mind too.

Teal'c took over for his four-hour shift and regaled Jack with some of the warrior stories he had been told as a youth. He could not be certain, but he had a feeling that O'Neill had heard him at some point and seemed to be resting more peacefully than before. Doctor Fraiser had appeared once and checked over the monitors keeping watch over his friend. He was aware that the Doctor could see the results of the equipment at the nearby nurses station, but like themselves, she liked to see herself that her friend was faring better.

Sam took over for her shift, hoping that as her CO hadn't woken up yet, he would soon do so. She'd taken some time out to go around to his house earlier and check it out for security and mail. She'd also brought back some of his books and started to read from one of the thrillers she'd found on a bookshelf. Three hours into her watch she heard a faint noise from the bed. Looking up, she was surprised to see O'Neill look across at her for a brief moment, before smiling and closing his eyes again. It was over so quickly that she almost doubted she'd seen it, but then chided herself for being so uncertain. He'd woken up, seemed to see her and know he was safe, then calmly gone back to sleep again. Feeling extremely pleased with herself, she carried on with the story until Daniel came to relieve her again.

Daniel had only been reading from the same book for an hour when he heard a disturbance beside him. Jack was looking at him with a grin on his face, which was now free of the breathing aid. He probably didn't even know of its previous existence. He coughed slightly to clear his throat and calmly asked in a quiet voice.

"I just can't wait to hear Teal'c reading me bedside stories. Actually, I think he was telling me something earlier on, but it's all kinda fuzzy."

"Jack." Daniel couldn't help but smile at the look on his friend's face. Jack seemed very relaxed and remarkably happy to be in the infirmary. Not his usual response to waking up there.

“Yeah, that’s me. Or at least it was last time I looked. By the way, what **am** I doing here?”

Jack started to move then, trying to sit up, but he quickly fell back, groaning and clutching his arms tightly around himself.

“Shit! What the hell did I do this time?”

“You don’t remember?” Daniel quickly put the book down and stood up by the bed. “You’ve got to stay still, you’ve got a skull fracture, lots of bruises and some bashed ribs amongst other things.”

“Huh?” Jack ground out between clenched lips, not being able to make his mind up which part of his body hurt most, from his head to his toes. Even his chest felt a bit tight.

“I’ll go get Janet, OK? You just lie there.”

“As if I’m going to go anywhere like this!” Jack ground back, sounding very much like himself, which made Daniel grin, even through the worry.

“It’s OK, I’m already here.” Janet greeted as she rushed in through the door. She’d been passing as she’d heard the voices and quickly got there before her most awkward patient could get into any more trouble.

The Colonel was grabbing for his ribs and only just seemed to be noticing his bandaged wrist. Before she could get past Daniel, he was lifting the bed-sheets to see if there was anything else bandaged that he ought to be aware of. Gently batting his hands away from the bedding, Janet smiled at him and turned towards Daniel.

“Can you leave us alone for a few minutes now, Daniel, so I can examine the Colonel?”

“Yeah, sure. I’ll see you later then, Jack.” He answered, looking at the crestfallen expression on his friend’s face. Nothing made Jack feel more insecure than being left in the tender mercies of the base’s CMO.

“So what’s the last thing you remember Colonel?” Was the last thing he heard as he shut the door behind him.

General Hammond decided he had a few minutes spare to go down and visit his 2IC. He’d had regular updates from Doctor Fraiser and was no longer worried about O’Neill’s condition. He’d heard there was a memory problem about the mission, so it might be a while yet before he’d get his mission report done. Whilst he knew traumatic amnesia wasn’t uncommon with head injuries, something of the Colonel’s teasing nature came to mind. O’Neill wouldn’t have done that on purpose, would he? He was convinced O’Neill’s sense of humour was quite capable of pulling that stunt for a laugh, but he was certain his CMO wasn’t as easily fooled. All in all, he was

pleased things weren't as bleak for his friend as he'd originally feared, when they'd brought his battered body back through the gate.

Nearing the private wardroom, he slowed down and peered around the open doorframe. Teal'c was sitting upright in one of the plastic chairs, the frown on his face either as a direct result of the uncomfortable position, or the Rubik's cube he was working on. O'Neill was fast asleep on the bed. Teal'c immediately noticed the General there and rose to greet him with a slight bow.

Hammond entered the room and smiled at the Jaffa.

"How is he?" He nodded towards the man in the bed.

"O'Neill has awakened several times now, but is in some pain and tires quickly."

As if he could hear them, the man in the bed moved slightly, stretching out before a small grimace crossed his face and he stilled again, never awakening.

"So I see." Hammond grinned. "I would hope for the Doctor's sake that he's always this quiet, but I doubt it'll last."

"Indeed, but it is O'Neill's distaste for incapacity that pushes his body to heal itself quicker than most Tau'ri's."

"Yes, sometimes having a symbiote must have its advantages."

"I would trade it all for the freedom your peoples have." Teal'c stated quietly.

Hammond had often wondered how the Jaffa would cope when his current friends aged and died around him, especially O'Neill. He didn't presume for a moment that Teal'c's primary loyalty wasn't to the Colonel before anything else. The Jaffa's willingness to leave the SGC, when his teammates had been captured by Hathor, had proved that. He just nodded at the tall man beside him, unsure of what to say that wouldn't sound trite against his admission. Giving him a small pat on the arm instead, he turned and left the two men alone.

Jack had lost track of the time somewhere between his many naps. There wasn't even a clock in his room, let alone a calendar. Was this just some fiendish plot of the Doc's to drive him insane? Wonder who was running the weekly team-meetings for him while he was in here? For the first time since he remembered waking up, he was alone. Great! Beep-Beep and its partner Squiggly-Line had gone, so had the damned IV, which always itched his hand like crazy when it was taped in. Even better. He could finally get out of bed and stretch his legs without anyone trying to hold him down. Anyone would think he was made of glass or something and he hated all the goddamn fuss. He'd only got a few bruises for christsakes. Just let him get the hell out of here and back home where he could eat what he wanted, drink what he wanted and scratch where it damn well itched.

Throwing the sheets back, he swung his legs round and, clutching his aching ribs, slid off the bed and onto the floor. Granted, he had to grit his teeth when his legs actually took his weight, especially his left ankle, which threatened to give way. Still, they were only minor considerations and he'd only been up for a moment, hadn't even taken his first step yet. Well, he would soon sort that. Taking a moment to actually look at the colour of his left leg, he was most impressed. That wasn't so much of an over-done tan as a cremation! God, it was one big bruise! Matched his arm rather well though. As for his stomach, he wasn't going to investigate **that** while out of bed and in one of these smocks. It was bad enough having everything free to the breeze behind, without having anything hanging out the front too, if anyone happened to look in. Reaching beside him to put one hand on the bed for support, he took a faltering step alongside it.

Crap! That hurt.

"Colonel!" Came Fraiser's horrified shout as she entered the room, to find her supposedly bed-bound patient about to crumple to the floor. His face had gone nearly as white as the sheets he was clinging onto.

Jack didn't know which was more embarrassing, being caught out of bed, or being caught hanging out of the back of the damn infirmary smock.

"Um, hi Doc." He gritted out as he struggled to hold onto the bed, aware that he was about to end up in an ungainly heap on the floor at any moment. However, the Doc was quickly by his side, grasping him around the waist in support.

"Colonel, you're going to be the death of me." She complained as she helped him back into the bed, gathering the sheets around his suddenly shaking limbs.

"You're in the right place then." He replied, lying still as she fussed over him.

Once she'd finished tucking the bedding back in again, she leaned over him and stared him straight in the eyes.

"Colonel, I don't think you appreciate just how badly injured you were on that planet. All things considered you were very, very lucky, but don't push your luck with me."

He tried to look away from her, avoiding her glare. It was rare that she got quite so vocal over his escape attempts. Granted, he usually managed to get more than one step away! Although there was that time after that funny radiation when Daniel disappeared. He fell as flat as a pancake then and Teal'c had shown a rare affiliation with slapstick by letting him! Instead of letting him look away, the Doc got hold of his chin and forced him to face her again.

"You've got a skull fracture, rib injuries, had a chest infection that you probably don't even remember and have more bruises, both internal and external, than I've ever seen on a person who's still alive before. You are not, I repeat not, going to get out of this bed again until I give you permission. Is that understood Colonel?"

She waited him out, refusing to let him look away or ignore her.

“Not even for a little bit?” He held his left hand up, his thumb and forefinger a ‘little bit’ apart. He tried to sound glib, a small smile on his face, but not a shadow of a smile graced her small features.

“Not even for a little bit, Sir, not even to go to the john. If I see so much as one inch of skin of those legs out of those sheets I’ll have no compunction about handcuffing you to the bed rails. I hope I’ve made myself clear.”

“Crystal.” He replied in defeat, as he settled himself further into the sheets. If he was stuck here, he might as well make himself comfy and looking defeated always brought out the Doc’s more mothering instincts. Which was something his still shaking body would prefer at the moment.

As she watched him settle back down beneath her, he really did seem to be feeling sorry for himself. It had probably come as a shock, how weak he was, and he couldn’t hide the tiny tremors that shook his arms. After being sure she’d frightened him enough into behaving for the moment, she decided to try another approach instead.

“Listen, Colonel. You gave everyone a bad scare and you’re still far from well enough to leave this bed. Don’t make it any worse than it is, on us, or yourself. I’ve got to make sure your head is healing sufficiently before you can move about. I know you hate being stuck here and we’ll get you home as soon as we can, but staying put now is the quickest way that’s going to happen, so why don’t we work together on this, OK?”

He let a small smile grace his face for a moment, before looking at his fingernails, the very picture of abject misery.

“How about I see if I can get a television in here for you? See if we can find a sports channel for you to watch?”

“That’d be great Doc, if it’s not too much trouble.”

“OK, Sir. You try and get some rest and I’ll be back to check on you later.”

He nodded to her, trying not to smile until she’d actually left the room, then huddled down into the pillows. The truth was, his little one step jaunt really had exhausted him. Looking up again, he spotted Daniel leaning against the doorframe, using just a cane now rather than his crutches. The man was positively beaming with humour.

“You know, one day she’s going to figure you out.”

“Don’t know what ya mean.” He grouched back, closing his eyes as the pillows called once more.

“Sure you don’t, but I won’t tell.” Daniel sauntered in the room, having quite a rhythm going with his cane. For a moment, Jack expected him to break into a song and dance routine, à la Fred Astaire.

“So what ya been up to?” He asked from behind closed lids.

“Catching up on translations that you wouldn’t be the slightest bit interested in. I thought Sam was supposed to be here with you?”

“No idea, I was alone when I woke up.”

“Well that explains a lot.”

Jack just opened his eyes and glared at him, before closing them again. “I guess she’ll be about somewhere, maybe running new simulations on the stargate after our latest trip, or checking out the UAV. So tell me more about those translations of yours. What culture’s ins and outs have you been dissecting lately to bore us with at our next briefing? I may as well know something about what you’re working on.”

Daniel tried not to smile too hard at Jack’s comments as he made his way over to the chair. He was pretty certain Jack took in a lot more of what he considered peripheral information than he let on. He might not consider everything to be necessary tactical information, but the man still had a curiosity that tended to soak in a lot more than he liked to admit.

“OK, I’m working on the language used by those people who wore the stinging nettles in their headdresses. Remember them?”

“Oh yeah. Couldn’t forget them now could I? Little guys with big smiles and not much in the way of clothing.”

“They’re the ones. Anyway, I’m pretty certain now that the language is a mixture of their original tongue and old Moorish. I think people were taken from here and transplanted through the gate, eventually cross-pollinating so much with the indigenous people that the two races eventually became one.”

As he delved more into the history of the Aswari, friendly if simple natives that they’d recently come across, Daniel watched as his friend drifted further away. He signalled for Sam to keep quiet as she entered, smiling as Jack fell into a deep sleep before he’d even finished his introduction.

Fraiser couldn’t believe this, there was something she was missing and she didn’t understand what it was. The Colonel sat there in the bed, anger emanating from every pore, although he was saying very little. That in itself was strange too.

“Come on, Sir, I know you’ll feel a lot better after a nice hot bath. You hate bed-baths as much as the next patient. Why don’t you just let Mark here take you down the corridor and we’ll have some nice fresh sheets on the bed for when you get back.”

Nothing. He sat there with his arms crossed over his chest, staring down the bed towards his feet.

Eventually a quiet “No.” reached her ears. “I can manage on my own.”

“I’m sorry, Sir, but I can’t allow that. Not with a skull fracture.” He continued to sulk and ignore her. “You can’t mobilise properly as it is. If you slipped and hurt yourself I’d have the General to answer to.” She’d already explained that she couldn’t allow a shower, due to the chance of dizzy spells from the fracture, but to no avail.

“I’ll wait till I get home then.”

His voice was a little bit louder now, edging towards the frustration he was obviously feeling. It was the same every time he was stuck in here. He’d be on the way to recovery, able to get out of bed for small steps and she’d offer him the chance to go and get a bath, but he’d refuse. It was a puzzle, but so much of the Colonel was a minefield. You never knew what was going to come out of his mouth. He was a challenge, but there wasn’t an officer she’d rather have at her side under any circumstances. Confident, competent and a little crazy by turn, but her friend and a surrogate father to her child. So why couldn’t she figure out this odd quirk in his behaviour whenever he was in the infirmary?

She had the feeling that it was something obvious she was missing, but she didn’t want to push it, or him. He was still recovering and she couldn’t risk upsetting him when he was already a patient with a serious condition.

“All right, but if you change your mind, you only need to ask.”

She waved the orderly out of the room and followed him away, shaking her head at Mark’s puzzled expression. He’d seen this response from the Colonel before and didn’t take it personally.

Sam entered the room a few minutes later, a strange expression on her face. It didn’t take much for Jack to look up at her and figure out that the Doc had spoken to her.

She didn’t bother to deny the accusation in his expression.

“She’s worried about you, you know.”

“I know.”

“So what’s the problem? I mean, it’s only a bath..... isn’t it?”

She watched his face carefully for his reaction. Reading her CO could be as difficult as understanding some of the alien artefacts they sometimes brought back. So much of the man was a mystery and so much of it heralded from his time in the services before they’d met and they knew so little of that. Due to her contacts at the Pentagon she’d been able to find out more about him than she would have been able to under normal circumstances. His records were highly classified, but she was more than capable of reading between the lines and the huge blacked out areas of his past. Huge areas of time unaccounted for, weeks or months of hospital care after unspecified missions in unnamed territories. Records of injuries received in unnamed conflicts. Records of

medals and commendations received, but no details of the acts carried out to earn them.

She thought back to the first time she was introduced to the Colonel, how she'd gone into the meeting, all guns blazing, determined not to let her femininity get in the way of being allowed on his team. She was so sure she was going to have another battle on her hands, destined to always have to prove herself in the male dominated world she'd chosen to live in. Oh, how she'd thrown in those comments about her time in the gulf, cheering on the inside at the shock showing on Ferretti's and Kowalski's faces. She'd realised that O'Neill was letting his team feel her out for him, but she only half caught his strange reaction to her words. After that first mission was completed, she'd had time to review both their actions and realised that she'd underestimated him, unfairly putting him in the same pigeonhole as all the other male chauvinists. All he'd ever wanted her to do was prove herself and it hadn't taken her long to understand why. He was willing to lay his life down for those under his protection, which included his team. He needed to know that his team were prepared to live by the same credo.

Shortly afterwards, she'd remembered the expression on his face at the mention of the gulf and began to think it over. Searching through records had proved illusive, as always with this man, but eventually pieces began to fit together: his disappearance at the height of the conflict for several months; a mention of his teammate Cromwell's flight out to a USAF hospital in Germany afterwards; months of recovery time at various hospitals, first on the continent before a transfer back to the states; commendations again before returning to active duty; seeing the odd visual record of him over those latter months and recognising the signs of injuries on the man she would later get to know. It had seemed so illusive at the time, but in later years she would scream at herself for missing the obvious: special ops missions behind enemy lines and intelligence gatherings for bombing runs. He'd been taken, she was sure of it; taken, abused and either escaped, or released, but she couldn't ever ask. It had nothing to do with the secrets act. It had everything to do with a man so private over the pains in his life that it could only hurt him more to bring it back to the fore. So she'd never asked and never mentioned what she thought.

Until now.

Only a bath. Why did that suddenly sound so ominous?

All these years of having some inkling of what her CO had been through in his life had never really impinged on her day-to-day relationship with him. All through her life, growing up with her dad, she'd had a daily familiarity with the military, that a civilian like Daniel and an alien like Teal'c could never hope to truly understand. Yet, for some odd reason now, something was nudging at her awareness, begging her to add the pieces together.

“Yeah, well maybe I just don't feel like a bath.”

The anger that Janet was sure was just bubbling under the surface was either gone, or very well hidden. With the Colonel it could be either.

“Why not?” She settled into the chair beside him, picking up the jigsaw of the Milky Way that Cassie had bought for him. “It’s usually the first thing you head for when you get home.”

“No. I like showers.”

“Not when you can’t stand for more than two minutes without falling over.” She had meant the comment to be funny, but he must have misunderstood her. Maybe the anger **was** still just underneath the surface.

“Why the hell won’t people just leave me alone. Why the hell does someone have to come and hold my hand like I’m some goddamn invalid?”

“The nurses are only there to help you.”

“Watching every goddamn move you make.”

“Why, I didn’t think you were that modest, Colonel.”

It was the wrong thing to say. Suddenly she could feel the rage building in him and she realised she’d underestimated the whole situation, drastically. If he could have managed it, she was sure he’d have been out of that bed and out of the room before he’d drawn another breath.

“Don’t you **dare** talk to me about modesty, **Major**.”

Sam panicked. If Janet came in now she’d be furious with her for upsetting the Colonel like this. She had to back off now, before the situation was irretrievable. His eyes were like shards of ice, boring into her. His hands twisting in the sheets so determinedly, that she expected the cotton to rip beneath them. She’d never once actually believed him to be worried about modesty whilst in the infirmary. Actually, she was darned sure that he’d do anything in front of anyone if it was in the course of duty and not bat an eyelid. She’d certainly never heard anything to think he was worried about being seen in the showers on the base either. Granted there was the whole ‘keep your eyes forward’ mentality that seemed necessary in the male oriented organisation, but that was by the by. So this was something else.

They stared at each other for long moments while they both calmed down. Eventually, he turned his face away, shutting her off from his view.

Why did this always happen while he was recovering? Was it something to do with being seen in the bath when incapacitated? Why did he object to being watched during recovery?

Oh, God. She could have kicked herself. Was it so simple?

Someone as proud and independent as the Colonel would have been horrified to have to deal with being stared at while recovering from being a POW. People would have stared at his scars and wounds that would be fresh on his skin. She had no doubts about the conditions of POWs when they were released, especially from some of

those camps in the Middle East. She closed her eyes and tried to imagine how badly he would have been injured after months of confinement. Injuries that would have made even the hardest nurse want to stare in curiosity.

Even now the trauma of those times could be brought back by something as simple as being watched whilst having a bath.

“They don’t know, Sir.” She stared down at her hands, not wanting to meet his eyes, not wanting to admit that she’d worked out what his problem was.

There was a pause and a deep sigh from beside her before he replied.

“Always knew you were smart, Carter.” He didn’t pretend that he didn’t understand what those few words of hers meant. The fight had gone out of his voice.

“I’m sorry, Sir. It’s not enough, I know, but I’m sorry.”

“I know. It’s just that it’s sometimes, you know, things just come back.”

He didn’t give any details and she didn’t need them. Just the fact that he knew she understood and hadn’t been angry at her for it was enough. She wanted to reach out and grab at his nearest hand. She wanted to look up and into those deep eyes and tell him she was here for him any time he needed it. She wanted to remind him that they were a team and could share anything between them.

“I hear Daniel was given a plastic duck by one of the nurses last time he was in here, Sir.”

“Yeah?”

She could tell by his voice that he’d turned to look at her again.

“Daniel knows his way around the infirmary.”

Nothing, but that wasn’t necessarily bad news with the Colonel.

“I can’t see any reason why he couldn’t take you down there and just hang about until you’ve finished.”

There was no way Sam could think of Daniel and those days being mixed together and she wondered if the Colonel could manage the same.

“And he has a plastic duck too, huh?”

There was even a touch of humour in his voice now and she dared to look up into his eyes. Any anger, or hurt, seemed to have drained away now, leaving only a tired expression behind, as he laid on the pillow, watching her.

“Yes, although there were rumours Teal’c wanted to set it free.”

He actually laughed at that and the sound warmed her heart. After everything that he'd been through in his life, it was a small thing to be able to do, to take away some of the residual pain those days still brought.

"I'll be back in a few minutes, Sir." She said as she stood up. She had a teammate or two to find and a CMO to have a quick word with. "Just a few things to sort out and a duck to find."

"Thanks, Sam." He told her as she turned away. The rare use of her first name told her how much he appreciated what she'd done, even if she didn't feel it was much herself. It obviously meant a lot to him. Sadly, she realised there weren't a lot of people in his life he **could** talk to, even if he wanted to.

"Any time, Jack." She turned around and smiled at him, one of the large smiles that she knew always had an effect on him and left the room.

Jack eyed the wheelchair with disgust. Actually, he wasn't so sure if it was disgust at the wheelchair itself, or the knowledge that he really couldn't get out of here without it if he wanted to. And he **did** want to. Life could be a real bitch sometimes.

"Just stop your grousing and get in the chair, Jack." Daniel grinned, while Teal'c wheeled the contraption nearer the bed, where Jack currently stood leaning, trying to look as though he didn't need the support. "No one's going to question your manhood, just cause you've got a few itty-bitty bruises."

"Itty-bitty bruises?" Jack replied, his eyebrows reaching up into his hairline. "I'll have you know I'm a perfectly mottled purple down one side. I checked this morning in the bath."

"Yes, Jack. I was there. Now get in the chair and stop wasting time."

Daniel couldn't help but remember the looks of the deep bruising that stretched across Jack's skin. He still couldn't believe someone could have survived the strength of that storm. His own ankle was healing nicely, taking more weight each day, but his injuries were nothing compared to Jack's. If only he'd taken more care over those blocks, none of this might have happened. He wasn't exactly sure how, as Jack would still have been caught out regardless, with Teal'c as well, but he was sure he was to blame somehow. He was glad that Sam had been able to find out what bothered Jack so much about baths in the infirmary though. At least that made him feel as though he'd helped his beleaguered friend somehow. After everything that Jack had done for him over the years, it was one of the few things he could do in return.

"Do you require assistance getting into the chair, O'Neill?" Teal'c asked, but Jack shook the proffered hand away and carefully sank down into the seat.

"Where's Carter, anyway?" He asked as Teal'c started to push him towards the door.

"Here, Sir." Came the happy reply, as his Major entered alongside the Doc.

“I was just giving Sam your medications, Sir.” Fraiser told him. “We wouldn’t want you to forget them now, would we?”

It was a long-standing joke that Jack would never remember to take his meds with him if he could get away with it. Some little battle he liked to have with the Doc, but which she won each time. Fraiser stared down at him as he sat dressed in his jeans and a thick sweater that someone had brought in for him, ‘because it’s cold out there’. He seemed eager to go.

“Would I do that, Doc?” He wore his trademark grin and she was pleased to see him looking so well.

“We both know the answer to that one Colonel. Now we all know you’re going straight home and to bed, don’t we?” She stared at each of his teammates in turn, to make sure the message got through to more than just the man in the chair.

“We shall ensure that O’Neill obeys all your directives, Doctor Fraiser.” Teal’c replied, whilst also pushing the chair speedily past her. O’Neill didn’t know whether to be annoyed or impressed at the Jaffa’s exit.

Sam soon overtook them and had the elevator ready for them by the time they caught up. They managed to avoid a lot of the mountain staff, which was just as well, as a lot of the officers wanted to wish the Colonel a speedy recovery. All the Colonel wanted to do was get the hell out of the mountain before anyone else saw him stuck in the wheelchair. It just didn’t feel right having to constantly strain his neck upwards to speak to people. Thank God he wasn’t wheelchair bound often. Fifteen minutes later they’d successfully signed out and Teal’c was helping him into the back of his SUV. Sam was driving, as Daniel still had his ankle strapped up, so Daniel joined him in the back, leaving Teal’c to sit in the front.

Ten minutes into the drive and the Colonel was wishing he was anywhere but in the truck. Every bump in the road was transferring itself through the seat and up his backbone to each part of his sore body. He tried to stifle a groan as Carter struggled to miss a new pothole that had appeared since their last trip up the mountain.

“Sorry, Sir.” She apologised as she changed gear. She put the radio on, trying to cover up the quiet sighs from behind. She knew he hated others being aware of his suffering and wished she could get him home quicker.

They’d just entered the town when another obstacle caused her to curse. In front of them a traffic cop was busy diverting cars away from the direction they wanted to go. Looking ahead she could see where a truck had jack-knifed and fallen over, blocking over half the road off. The cop was stopping traffic from getting in the way, while the driver tried to clear the debris and furniture that had spilled out across the road.

“Damn.” She hit the steering wheel as she was forced to stop in the line of traffic.

“Not your fault, Carter.” O’Neill muttered. He was beginning to wish he’d taken Fraiser up on her offer of using the ambulance to take him home. At least he could

have been laid down there, instead of having all this pressure on his back. Even though he still had only vague recollections of the storm, he knew his backpack must have shifted at some point, leaving certain areas of his back open to hailstone attack. He had a couple of whopper marks there. His side hurt most, where his kidneys had taken a bit of a bruising and he didn't think he'd be ready to eat any time soon when they got back.

Sam looked behind her to where her CO sat with his eyes closed, silently grimacing at the pain the journey was causing him. Daniel looked at her with concern. They both knew the detour everyone was being sent on would add another fifteen or twenty minutes to the trip. Jack lived on the outskirts of the town and there was no quick way to get there being sent the wrong way round in a line of slow moving traffic.

"Hang on a minute, Sir." Sam said as she got out and headed towards the harassed officer in the road.

"Excuse me, Officer Murphy." She interrupted the man, reading his nametag off his shirt and quickly getting her own ID out before he asked.

The cop looked her up and down, noticing the attractive woman and then seeing her ID. A Major at the local base, eh? His day suddenly looked a lot brighter.

"What can I do for you Ma'am? As you can see I'm somewhat busy here." As he eyed her up, he continued to shout orders at another car to backup from a different direction.

"Listen, I know you're really busy and I'd not normally try to take advantage like this, but we really need to get through here as soon as possible. The Colonel," she nodded back towards the SUV, where the officer could see three male occupants, "has only just been released from the infirmary and really needs to get back home. Being stuck in the truck isn't good for him."

She smiled in what she hoped was a winning way, well one that always worked on the Colonel, and followed hopefully when the officer walked towards the vehicle. He looked up and down the back seat, noticing one man with a bandage on an ankle and a walking cane by his side, but not old enough to be a Colonel. Didn't even look remarkably military. The man beside him though, on the far side of the seat, did have an air of authority and genuinely appeared to be in pain. His eyes were closed and the slight furrows in his forehead spoke of his attempt to keep silent on the matter. Bandages appeared down the sleeve of one arm, but nothing else that could be seen. The third man in the front, wearing a bull cap, stared back at him each time he looked at the Colonel. His expression spoke of dire consequences should he go near the man in the back. He was someone the officer didn't wish to meet on a dark night down a dark alley.

"OK." He spoke to Carter again. "Just go careful around the side, eh? I don't want any more trouble today."

"Thank you officer, I appreciate it."

She noticed the officer taking a note of the truck details, but ignored it, getting back into the driver's seat and steering the vehicle carefully around the mess in the road. Several cars attempted to follow them, but the officer quickly cut them off and returned to keeping the rest of the traffic out of the way.

"Nice going, Sam." Daniel commented.

"Isn't that taking advantage?" O'Neill questioned, a trace of humour in his strained voice.

"They do train us to use whatever advantage we have, Sir." Carter replied, smiling at him through the rear-view mirror. She didn't like the grey tinge to his face and wanted him home ASAP.

Teal'c seemed puzzled by the whole incident. "That officer seemed unusually interested in you." He commented to Sam. "I noticed the way he watched you and refused to let any other vehicles follow us afterwards."

"Another poor heart broken." O'Neill almost laughed, then caught his breath as the truck mounted and quickly dropped off the curb.

No one seemed to be in the mood to continue the conversation after that.

"Soon be home, Sir." Carter said into the sudden silence and continued to drive, being as careful as possible until they pulled up onto his driveway, ten minutes later.

Teal'c was quickly out and moved around to help O'Neill slip off his seat. Sitting up and in pain for so long had tired him out and he'd stiffened up too. Teal'c was as gentle as he could be, sliding his arms about the other man's waist and taking his weight until the Colonel was able to stand unaided. Then Daniel helped flank him as Jack walked ahead of them until they caught up with Sam, who'd already opened the front door. She and Teal'c had been over earlier in the day to make sure the house was fully stocked and ready for him, so it was a simple matter of helping the Colonel up the stairs and into bed.

He didn't complain once as Teal'c and Daniel helped to undress him, leaving him in a tee shirt and boxers before pulling the sheets over him. He was asleep almost before they'd left the room. Sam appeared with a glass of water, which she placed by the bed and then all three went back down the stairs to leave him to rest.

Three hours later the doorbell rang and Sam quickly went to answer it before it woke the Colonel up, who'd been fast asleep ever since they'd got home. Daniel still couldn't move too fast on his ankle and Teal'c had a habit of frightening off unwary callers. Jack generally thought it was funny when door-to-door salesmen turned up, but Daniel told him off for causing so much panic to the neighbourhood. Especially when the local bible salesman asked Teal'c if he wasn't concerned that his God would send him to hell if he didn't repent his sins. Apparently the salesman didn't understand Teal'c's comment that not only had he killed his God, but they'd also

blown hell up too. The man was last seen running back down the road, calling him a blasphemer, but they'd not been bothered by him since.

This time it was the traffic cop from earlier on the doorstep.

"I, uh, just wanted to see if you'd got back OK?" His assured manner of before seemed to have left him. His eyes scanned past her to where he could just make out Daniel and Teal'c in the lower lounge, both men looking towards him suspiciously.

"Yes, fine." She felt like blushing. Had this chap actually tracked her down? "How did you find me?" Then of course worked it out straight away.

"I, ah, did a trace on the car." He had the grace to look embarrassed. "How is Colonel O'Neill?" Well, obviously he'd found out the owner's full name.

"He's resting upstairs."

As if he'd heard them, there was suddenly a shout from the master bedroom.

"Carter, who's that?"

She grinned at the officer, who recognised the sound of a senior officer's bellow when he heard one.

"No one for you, Sir. Tell you later."

They both listened, Murphy transfixed by the smile on Carter's face, but nothing else came back from up the stairs.

"I really appreciate your help earlier." She told him, enjoying the fact that someone other than SGC staff wanted to chat her up. "The Colonel's not one to complain when he's in pain and he really should have come back by ambulance, but he hates all that fuss."

"That's OK.... Carter. My old man was in the Army. He was pretty much the same."

"The name's Sam." She volunteered.

"Michael."

"Is everything in order, Major Carter?" Came a stern voice from the lounge.

"Yes, Murray, everything's OK. Why don't you start dishing up the dinner, now the Colonel's awake?" She laughed at Michael, who was obviously worried in case the owner of the voice came out and demanded he leave the Major alone.

"Listen." She took a sheet of paper from by the phone and wrote a number on it. "This is my mobile number. Why not give me a call in a few days, once the Colonel's back on his feet? I'm often away, so don't be surprised if it's an answering machine and I don't get back in touch for a while, but I'll call you back when I can. OK?"

Wow. A Major in the USAF, a killer to look at and she'd given him her name and number. Christmas had just come early.

"Right. You're on." He grinned as he took a couple of steps backwards down the drive.

"Sam?" He could hear behind her. "Where did you put Jack's meds? Janet will kill us if he misses out."

"I'd better go." She grinned.

"Yeah, I'll call you later." With that he turned around and walked back to his car with a spring in his step.

Behind him, Sam shut the door and leaned against it. It was ages since someone had come on to her. She worked surrounded by the best the military had to offer, in particular the three most wanted men on base, but could she get a date? Only someone who didn't know the rest of her team would dare to come near her. She tended to come as a package deal.

"Hey. I'm lonely up here." Came a plaintive call from up the stairs and she reckoned she'd better get up there before he decided to come down here for company. Janet would be around later and they'd all be in deep do-do if the Doctor found her patient out of bed.

"OK, Sir. Coming up." She called as she almost ran up the stairs.

Daniel decided to stay the night with the Colonel, so Sam took Teal'c back to base. Janet had been over earlier and checked on the Colonel, who'd been far too busy watching the playoffs to pay much attention to her poking and prodding. She was quite happy to have the linguist stay to look after him, as he was on leave anyway until his ankle healed, providing he didn't do anything too strenuous.

For some reason Janet had left a pair of plastic handcuffs attached to the bed, that Jack seemed unwilling to explain when the others had asked.

Sam promised to collect food and other shopping on the way back with Teal'c each evening, leaving the other two members to rest during the day. They'd stocked up on a range of DVDs for the Colonel for his bedroom, made sure the TV and DVD remotes were within reach and placed a selection of books by his bed too. Daniel and Teal'c had helped him to have a bath earlier and everyone expected him to have a good night's sleep.

Moving as quietly as he could through the house, Daniel locked up and made his way to the spare bedroom. Jack had made a point of leaving the room how he knew Daniel liked it and had even put up some book shelves, where a few of the younger man's belongings seemed to have taken up permanent residence. Settling under a new quilt,

Daniel laughed at the design, which incorporated Egyptian hieroglyphs. No doubt Jack's sense of humour had taken over during a recent shopping spree. It didn't take long to fall asleep and he was just in the middle of dreaming everyone at the SGC was being forced into language lessons, when something woke him.

"NO."

"SHIT."

"Hurts."

The odd words were coming from Jack's room. No surprise there, unless the burglars were having nightmares too. It often seemed that the first night home was the favourite time for nightmares for them all. Maybe being away from infirmary eyes made them subconsciously relax enough for the demons to rear their heads? He stumbled as quickly as he could to the master bedroom, grabbing his cane and switching the lights on as he went. The last thing he wanted to do was have another accident himself and be no use to Jack. Janet would kill him.

The Colonel was completely entangled in the sheets by the time he got there, eyes still closed, twisting to something no one else but him could see.

"Fucking chutes. Shit. God, gotta get home."

Daniel didn't want to switch the main bedroom lights on straight away, and wake Jack up with too much of a shock, so he put on one of the bedside lamps instead.

"Jack." He tried to coax him with gentle words. "You're having a dream. Time to wake up."

"Get up, get up, get up. Fucking leg's gone, but gotta get home. Head hurts. Christ, but it hurts, but I gotta get home. Sara. Charlie. I'm coming."

Perhaps it was the head injury bringing some past memory back to haunt him. You could never be sure with Jack, because he spoke so little about his past.

"Jack, you **are** home, you're just having a bad dream." That was probably an understatement, knowing Jack. He gently shook one arm, moving quickly out of the way of any flying fists. He'd been caught out by that too many times in the past to let it happen again.

"Chute's not gonna open. Shit, SARA!"

With that, he shot up in the bed, waking instantly.

"You OK?" Daniel asked, settling on the bed beside him, watching as Jack took some deep breaths to calm himself.

"Yeah." Came the embarrassed reply, as Jack scrubbed a tired hand across his face.

“Here.” Daniel handed over the glass of water that Sam had refilled earlier.

“Thanks.” He downed the water and threw the sheets off. “I, uh, gotta go.”

“OK.” Daniel stood up and walked around to the other side of the bed, to where Jack was slowly standing up.

“No, it’s OK. I can cope from here.”

Jack moved past him, walking slowly on his ankle, so Daniel handed him his cane.

“God, we’re a perfect match.” Jack suddenly grinned.

“Bookends.” Daniel agreed, laughing as Jack managed to get to the master bathroom on his own.

He listened for a minute, until he heard the sounds of the toilet flushing, followed by the sink being filled and emptied. Jack then came out with his hair wet and his face only half dried from where he must have dunked it in the water.

“Promise me you’re not going to shake like a dog and drown me.” Daniel said as he took the cane back from Jack and helped him back down into the bed.

“What, and raise this headache one more notch on the Fraiser torture scale? No thanks.”

“You’re going to wet Sam’s fresh bedding.”

“She likes to make a fuss, it’s written in the team rules. Must take care of grumpy CO’s, or they remove all the batteries from your gizmos.”

“You wouldn’t?”

Jack just raised an eyebrow as he settled down.

“Did once. Well, technically, I changed over the power terminals so nothing worked. Took her hours to figure it out. Boy, was she pissed!”

Sam might have been pissed, but Jack was positively beaming at the memory. It wasn’t often he got the chance to get one up on Sam in scientist mode.

“Don’t tell me she didn’t get her revenge though.” Daniel answered as he moved around the bed to switch off the bedside light.

“Nah, it was just before that orb thing got me through the shoulder. I guess she thought I’d been through enough for one day.”

Jack closed his eyes on that memory, so Daniel turned to leave.

“Night, Jack.”

“Night, Daniel.”

“Love the bedding by the way.”

He could hear Jack sniggering as he made his way back to the spare room, turning off the lights as he went. Somehow, he hoped the interlude would take Jack’s mind off his dream so that he’d sleep OK the rest of the night. Janet had left both headache and sleeping pills for him, being familiar with the Colonel’s habits, but Daniel wouldn’t even bother to mention them to him. He knew without asking that Jack wouldn’t take them. He and drugs generally didn’t mix unless thrown together out of absolute necessity.

The following afternoon Daniel had a time of trying to persuade Jack that sit-ups in bed were definitely on Janet’s list of ‘things not to do’. The Colonel had removed his tee shirt and hooked his good foot around the bed-frame at the bottom of the bed before he’d been discovered. In the end, Daniel had resorted to threats of telling on him to the Doctor, to make him stop. The fact that his ribs were obviously hurting didn’t seem to have deterred him in the slightest.

“But I’m fed up of lying here for days on end. I’m gonna get all flabby like this.”

Daniel took one look at the lean, bare chest, covered in a multitude of colours and shook his head at Jack’s obstinacy.

“Jack, you’re in better shape than men half your age. You’re the only one that can go one-to-one with Teal’c in Jaffa techniques and you’ve never been bested yet in the gym that I’m aware of. Where the heck is all this flab you’re talking about?”

“Look, here!” He grabbed at his stomach and pinched it between his finger and thumb. “Ow.”

“That’s because you’re sore, Jack, and that skin you pinched. It’s SUPPOSED to do that!”

Jack threw his arms down in disgust, unhooked his foot and heaved himself back against the headboard, his head thumping against the wood when he landed.

“Geesh, Jack, will you be careful!” Daniel almost shouted, rushing around to check the back of Jack’s head, while the man in the bed started to grin at him, enjoying his friend’s panic.

“No need to get in a flap, Danny!”

“With you Jack, there’s every need. Now will you please just calm down and rest, like you’re supposed to? For me? Please?”

“I’m bored.” He wheedled.

Daniel sat down beside him and rubbed a hand across his forehead.

“What do you want to do? Jigsaws, logic puzzles, cross-words, board games?”

“Nah, done all those. Playstation?”

“But you always beat me on those games.”

“I know.” Jack couldn’t help grinning. “But that’s only because you’re too busy thinking instead of reacting. Let me show you how to play properly.”

“Why do I get the feeling I’ve just been suckered?”

“Beats me.”

“No thanks, I’ve seen what your last encounter did. There aren’t words to describe the colour your skin is at the moment.”

“Flattery won’t get you any points. Now get the games box out.”

That evening, they were sharing a meal of steak and baked potatoes, when the doorbell rang. Sam dashed down to answer it, to find a woman standing there, equally as puzzled to see the Major. The woman seemed to be in her mid-forties, dressed casually in jeans and a leather blouson jacket, long brown hair trailing over her shoulders. Sam immediately started eyeing her up, unconsciously copying Teal’s behaviour of the other evening with Murphy.

“Is Jack in?” The woman asked, staring past her into the house.

“He’s in bed.” Sam replied without thinking how it might sound.

“Oh, I’m sorry, I’ll come back later.” The woman blushed and immediately started to walk back down the drive. Sam could have kicked herself.

“I’m sorry, that didn’t come out quite like I meant. He’s not well. Can I help you?”

The woman turned back around and came back up to her, a smile on her face now.

“I’m Janice and I work with Jack at the local youth centre. I needed to check something out with him.”

“Hold on a minute then.”

Sam turned back into the house and was about to go up the stairs, when they both heard Jack’s shout.

“Who’s there, Carter? Your dinner’s goin’ cold up here.”

“Janice, from the youth centre.”

“Hey, Janice, come on up.”

Sam raised her eyebrows at the casual invite and stepped aside to let the woman pass, shutting the door behind her.

Janice rushed up the stairs, but Sam got the impression she probably rushed everywhere, and calmly followed after her.

Janice stopped in shock at the bedroom door, having just caught sight of the bruises on Jack’s stomach as he struggled into a tee-shirt. Her eyes trailed down the bruised arm and leg, to the bandages on his wrist and ankle.

“God, Jack, what the hell did you do?” She managed to ask.

“Training accident.” The rest of his team said in unison.

Janice had lived all her life in Colorado Springs and had heard that euphemism too many times to be taken in.

“Yeah and I’m a monkey’s uncle.”

“Hey, Danny, you’ve got a relative here.” Jack laughed and then introduced his team from over the remains of their meal.

“So what can I do for ya, Janice.”

The rest of his team were also curious. Jack rarely let on about what he did in his spare time, although discovering he helped out at the local youth centre wasn’t a big surprise.

Janice quickly got out some swatches of fabric from a jacket pocket and placed them on the bed between him and Daniel.

“I got some samples of colours for the ice hockey uniforms you suggested. I know I might be pushing it a bit. It’s a tremendous offer to volunteer to pay for them all yourself, but there’s a sale on at the moment and if we buy the fabric now we can afford to make some spare uniforms up too.”

Jack actually blushed when the others looked at him during this. If he’d realised Janice was going to bring **this** up, he’d have asked her to call him later. However, it was too late now. He looked through the samples she’d laid out on the bed. There was a nice dark blue, that reminded him of the Air Force, and blue always looked great against the ice and a red that would make a good contrast for the numbers on the back.

“What do you think, kids?” He asked his team. He was always keen for a second opinion, even if it was only to help train others in the decision making process.

To his surprise, they all picked the same. Even Janice thought it was a good idea, so she was eager to rush away and order the fabric, several rolls of it, the next day.

“Can I get you anything?” Janice asked, as she turned to leave.

“No, that’s fine, my team’ll be here until I’m back on duty again.”

“That’s good Jack, although I was going to ask you if you wanted to join us for this weekend’s hike in the woods. Obviously, I can see that’s out of the question now.”

“Yup, can’t see me climbing up those **rocks** just at the moment.” He playfully swatted Daniel’s arm at that, knowing the archaeologist wouldn’t fight back while he was still looking so gloriously multicoloured.

“It’s a shame,” Janice agreed, “I know how much you like to get out, but the weather report’s not good anyway. They’re even talking about a hailstorm, would you believe!”

Teal’c spluttered into his glass of water, as the rest of his team stared at Jack, who remained silent.

“That’s the last thing **you** need, isn’t it?” Janice continued to speak, not familiar enough with the rest of his team to notice their shocked responses.

“Yeah, who needs that?” Jack answered quietly for them. “You’ll call me when you’ve gotten the fabric then?” He quickly changed the subject.

“Yes, I’ll see myself out, Jack, you finish your meal. Sorry to have bothered you and nice to have met the rest of you.” She chatted away, excited to have someone interested and generous enough to put his hand in his pocket for a change. They were very lucky to have Jack O’Neill as a regular sponsor. “Perhaps you’ll all join Jack at the centre sometimes? We could use all the help we can get. So many kids to watch out for these days. Well, goodbye everyone.”

She waved a cheery goodbye and quickly disappeared, shutting the front door behind her.

“Well, she seemed happy.” Sam said quietly into the still stunned atmosphere. She looked down at her plate, no longer interested in the cooling food.

“Without doubt.” Teal’c agreed, wiping his mouth from the water that had splashed across it. He was somewhat annoyed with himself for having lost control like that. All this time with the Tau’ri was definitely having an affect on him, but he’d no desire to change his companions.

“So, funding the hockey team, Jack? When did that start?”

He shrugged his shoulders, pushing his half finished meal to one side. He hadn’t been overly hungry anyway, his stomach still too sore to take much at any one time.

“You know, I’ve often thought of helping out at some youth centre, or other.” Daniel continued. “I just never really knew where to go, or how to go about it.”

Jack flicked a quick look his way, before reaching for the TV remote. “Yeah, well it’s nothing much.” He replied, staring down at the button.

“Yes, it **is** Jack. I just wonder why you’ve never said anything. What’s important to **you** is important to us and I’d like to join in. I don’t have any other family than you guys and whatever you’re doing, I want to do too.”

“Same here, Sir.”

“As I do too, O’Neill, although I am unfamiliar with your currency regulations.” Although the Jaffa received regular payments to cover clothing and other expenses, concealed within the base’s miscellaneous budget, he still required someone to go shopping with him. The malls were a place of fascination for him, but the choice was frequently overwhelming and the currency confusing.

“I don’t know what to say.” Jack replied quietly. It seemed that he never expected other people to care about him too much.

“How about we play another game?” Daniel asked, reaching for the hand control units for the playstation. There were two more hand units in the drawer and he was sure a game between the four of them would break the strange silence again. “Wasn’t there a downhill skiing one somewhere? Or an ice world one?”

“Daniel!” Jack moaned and, apart from a subtle grin off Teal’c, the others burst into laughter.

The End