A Pond With No Fish

by Rachel500

Summary

As SG1 tackle old enemies and new friends, can Sam and Jack ever find a way to each other?

Notes

Stargate SG1 is somebody else's, probably MGM/Gekko Corp/Sci-Fi, and I freely admit that whoever's it is, I'm borrowing their show and they retain all rights, etc.

My first Stargate fanfic!

This AU story begins between Threads and Moebius in Season 8 of Stargate SG1 based on the premise that in a reality somewhere SG1 didn't accept the fish being in the pond (last scene of Moebius) and corrected the timeline. Hence this is a universe where Jack's pond remains fishless and obviously has implications for the way events post-Season 8 evolve. The main pairing is Jack/Sam and their relationship does form a major theme.

It's not that I particularly dislike Season 9, I actually think given the limitations the production team were working with given RDA's exit, Tapping's maternity leave and essentially having to reinvent the series, they did a pretty good job. However, as I'm not constrained by at least the first two (which had major implications for the use of their characters in Season 9) this is really what I would have preferred to see. I hope you enjoy it too.
Chrysalis

To a complete stranger, Brigadier General Jack O'Neill looked completely engrossed in conversation with his close friend and former SG1 team-mate, Daniel Jackson. Of course, to anyone who knew him well, it was obvious that Jack's attention wasn't really on the subject of whatever it was Daniel was babbling about and definitely was on the tense figure of Lieutenant Colonel Samantha Carter as she made the rounds at her father's memorial service reception. It was a sign of the deep friendship that had developed between the two men in the years since they had first gone through the Stargate to another planet that Daniel knew Jack wasn't paying attention to him but kept talking to provide his friend with the cover anyway.

The two men were stood politely off to one side of the wide formal living room in the former Washington D.C. residence of the late General Jacob Carter. They each held a glass of punch and were dressed in formal mourning clothes; O'Neill in his sharp blue Air Force uniform; Jackson in an equally sharp black suit and tie. They made quite a pair; the soldier and the scholar. Two contrasting styles and approaches; one unshakeable bond that was a constant surprise to both men given their initial antipathy. The older had grey hair trimmed short, deep chocolate brown eyes and a classic hero's face with deep carved lines and square jaw; the other had a lanky body honed in the gym and field work, startling blue eyes in an intelligent face and a new haircut that left the brown strands spiky in a messed up fashionable style that added to the slight air of absent-minded professor. In another setting, the single women in the room might have approached but there was a subtle tension in the way the men stood that warned others to stay away.

Jack nodded absently to Daniel's comments and let his brown gaze flicker back to Sam. If he knew her – and he prided himself that he did – she was due to fall to pieces any minute…now. He sighed as he saw it. The momentary flash in the sapphire blue eyes as it hit her; her father was dead; gone; as in never coming back. For a millisecond, her classically beautiful features looked like she'd been hit by a zat, one of the alien weapons the team had discovered during their first year of Gate travel. He had to hand it to her though, Jack thought, she pulled it together fast. So fast that a less observant person might have missed the way her shoulders slumped or how her chin wobbled before she pinned her bravado back into place, excused herself from the well-meaning condolences of a matronly looking woman and slipped out the side door.

Jack sighed. 'Dammit.'

'It had to happen sometime.' Daniel murmured switching from his thoughts on Incan mythology to their bereaved friend without breaking stride. 'She was running on fumes a couple of days ago when I got back from…from…' he struggled to find a euphemism.

'Being dead again?' Jack suggested sweetly.

Daniel's eyes held a measure of resignation at the quip but really, thought Jack, the younger man was making a habit of coming back from the dead; a habit he was going to have to break now that it looked like the being mostly responsible for keeping Daniel from death, the Ancient known as Oma, was going to be battling the evil Goa'uld, Anubis, for the rest of affinity.

His gaze wandered to Sam's fiancé who was stood with her brother on the opposite side of the room. Pete Shanahan seemed oblivious to Sam's distress. In fact, the man had seemed oblivious to Sam all day. Jack felt the first stirrings of anger in his gut and took a deep breath. He had tried really hard not to have an opinion about Shanahan but the cop had seemed like an OK guy…until
today. Maybe Shanahan was annoyed at not being able to sit with the family at the service, maybe…maybe the guy should get over whatever it was and go comfort the woman he supposedly loved and was going to marry.

'Dammit.' He said again as his gaze hardened and he felt his chest tighten with frustration; his hand clenched around the fragile glass he held ominously. Sam needed someone with her and Jack knew it should be Pete…so why wasn't the cop moving? Maybe he should go…no.

He and Sam had recognised years before that their feelings went way beyond being team-mates or even friends but with both of them in the Air Force and in the same chain of command a romantic relationship between them was against regulations and there was no way around it. Sam had seemingly accepted the reality of their situation and moved on; she was about to marry another man after all. Jack had let her go – how could he have done anything else? They were where they were which meant military ranks that prevented him being in a position to offer her anything and it was important to him that Sam was happy. It had been hard to accept her being with someone else but he had tried to move on too.

He had begun a relationship with another woman, a nice woman…but Kerry wasn't Sam and she'd quickly ditched him when she'd realised the truth; that Jack hadn't moved on from his feelings for Sam at all. Jack flushed. He couldn't blame Kerry for wanting out and even if he was prepared to admit she was right about his feelings, Pete was still Sam's fiancé; Jack was Sam's CO. The litany ran back across his mind like an old tape recording.

'We should go after Sam.' Daniel said conversationally.

'Daniel…'

'It doesn't look like he's going anytime soon and she needs someone now.'

Jack's eyes flickered back to Daniel surprised at the edge of anger in the other man's voice. The archaeologist was a passionate man when arguing his position but rarely roused to outright temper. Slow fuse, thought Jack. Most people underestimated Daniel because of that, usually to their detriment.

'I'll get Teal'c and meet you.' Daniel continued.

Jack nodded slowly giving in because he badly wanted to go to her anyway; he handed Daniel his punch. He followed her escape route out of the side door and hesitated not certain which way to go next. His eyes scanned the corridor and he took a couple of steps down the hallway to glance through the dining room. The table was still laid out with the remnants of the buffet and the caterers were beginning to clear up. A movement beyond the French doors in the garden caught Jack's attention and he glimpsed sight of Sam walking rapidly across the lawn.

He strode through the room and out of the doors. The garden was large; the patio giving way to a wide expanse of lawn and, at the back, there was a tall fence covered in ivy. It had an archway in the centre that led to a small walled garden filled with roses and it was where Sam had ended up. He hesitated in the entrance as he caught sight of her. She stood by the back wall near to a bench. Her back was to him but he could see her shoulders were shaking, her head, with its shock of sunshine blonde hair, was bowed and her hands covered her face. He took the remaining steps from the archway to her without conscious thought.

His hands rested lightly on her shoulders as he turned her to him before his arms slid around her to hold her as tightly as he dared. He hadn't spoken a word and had expected resistance; he got none. She curled into him, burrowed her head on his shoulder and leaned on him while she cried. He
shouldn't be surprised, Jack thought, but he was. There were times he felt that Carter still tried to prove what a good soldier she was despite everything they had been through together. His hand stroked down her back as her sobs lessened and still, they didn't speak.

Sam hiccupped and breathed in the scent of the man holding her. Jack. She'd known the instant she'd felt his hands on her shoulders that it was him; she would have known him anywhere. Her awareness came back in stages. Of the soft breaths that gently shifted her hair, of the scratchy material under her cheek as it pressed into his shoulder and of the way he was holding her, wrapped tightly in his arms. She felt comforted. She felt safe. She felt loved. By her CO. The thought had her stirring anxiously.

Jack knew the moment she came all the way back and he let her ease away, hiding his disappointment.

Sam took a step back from him and swiped at her face. 'I'm sorry, sir.'

Sir. He really hated that word. He gentled his voice, hoping she'd look at him sometime soon. 'You OK?'

Fresh tears sprang to her eyes at the question and he reached out to brush the tears from her cheek with a calloused thumb. She finally looked at him and the depth of her grief hit him like a steamroller. 'C'mere.' He snagged her hand and tugged her toward the wooden bench. They sat down.

It was a few minutes before Sam realised he hadn't relinquished her hand just kept it clasped in his own, the fingers rubbing against hers. It was amazing that the simple action filled her with the same comfort she'd felt when he'd held her. It had been almost a week since her father had died; a busy week what with Anubis trying to destroy the galaxy again, Daniel returning from the dead and trying to arrange a memorial service without explaining to her brother why their father's body had been cremated…she dashed away another flood of tears.

'You want me to get Pete?' Jack forced himself to ask the question when she stayed silent. She was never normally this quiet.

Her blue eyes darted to him confused. 'Why would I want you to get Pete?'

Jack's eyebrows rose slightly. 'Oh I don't know…because you're getting married to the guy?'

She flushed and a wave of red flooded her face. 'I forgot I hadn't told you yet, sir.'

'Told me what?' Jack asked.

'I gave back the ring.' Sam said. It was another item on the long list of things that had made the previous week busy. 'Pete and I broke up.'

His brown eyes widened. The last time he and Carter had touched on the subject of her wedding just before her father had collapsed, she had told him that she was having second thoughts. She had been about to tell him the reason why when they had been interrupted. He wondered briefly at it. Looking back, he was sure she had been about to say it had something to do with how she felt about him but it could just be the way his ego wanted to interpret what she'd said. Hell, who cared, he thought with a flash of happiness, maybe there was a chance…he stopped that thought in its infancy. He was her CO; there were regulations…he halted the mental litany as he realised abruptly that she was waiting for him to speak. He opened his mouth to say the usual words of 'sorry to hear that' and couldn't bring himself to utter them; he wasn't sorry at all. He searched for
something else.

'I broke up with Kerry.' OK, Jack thought, wasn't quite what he'd had in mind.

'The CIA agent?' Sam checked although the other woman was imprinted on her brain especially the sight of her coming out of Jack's house as though she was very much at home there.

'Yeah.' Jack shrugged at the unspoken question in her eyes. 'It wasn't working out.'

Sam nodded.

There was an uncomfortable silence; they were treading very close to the subject they never discussed – the subject that was against regulations for them even to discuss. Jack sighed. The idea that they'd left the elephant that was their unresolved feelings for each other in a room years before was laughable; the elephant usually accompanied them wherever they went and right then, Jack felt like it sat between the two of them like an unwelcome chaperone. He cleared his throat. 'Sam…'

'Hey, guys.'

Their heads snapped to the sight of Daniel standing inside the garden by the archway, Teal'c beside him. The large dark-skinned Jaffa was the fourth member of their team and despite the black suit and matching Panama hat that suggested he was human, there was still an alienness about him. The hat served to hide the gold symbol of a snake tattooed on his forehead; the mark of the Goa'uld Apophis. They had defeated Apophis years before and Teal'c's people were now free from the slavery the Goa'ulds had subjected them to for centuries.

Jack waved the rest of the team over. They were both across the short expanse of grass in a heartbeat. Teal'c stood by Jack as Daniel took the seat next to Sam and folded her free hand into his.

'How are you doing?' Daniel asked.

The question shook the control she'd regained and more tears glimmered in the blue eyes looking back at him.

Daniel's lips twisted wryly. 'Dumb question, huh?'

'Indeed, Daniel Jackson.' The gentle agreement rumbled out from Teal'c's heavy lips in a dark deep tone that prompted a shaky laugh from Sam. Jack's brown eyes flickered to Teal'c's with quiet gratitude.

'Teal'c,' Sam smiled up at the Jaffa, 'I haven't had a chance to thank you for coming all the way from Dakara.'

Teal'c inclined his head. 'It is an honour to attend the memorial service of your father who often fought alongside me to free my people from the Goa'ulds.'

'Undomesticated equines, eh, Teal'c?' Jack teased.

'As you say, O'Neill.' Teal'c's brown eyes gleamed with humour.

Sam and Daniel exchanged an amused look. The joke was an old one and reminded them of the bond the four of them shared together. Sam felt the bubble of their protection surround her and relaxed. She trusted them with her life; after all, they'd been to Hell and back for one another; literally.
'So how long are you staying for Teal'c?' Daniel asked.

'I do not know.' Teal'c wondered at his reluctance to return to Dakara. He had spent years battling the Goa'uld to win independence for the Jaffa and now he had achieved his goal, there seemed to be an assumption amongst the Jaffa that Teal'c would leave Earth and return to lead them; it was a future Teal'c had never considered. 'There is much to do on Dakara.'

Jack rolled his eyes. Only Teal'c could reduce setting up a whole new nation to such an understatement. He caught on something in Teal'c's expression and he scanned the faces of the others thoughtfully. There were shadows under, and in, all their eyes; probably in his own too. They had all been through a tough time.

'You know what we all need?' He threw out casually.

Sam's eyes were the first to narrow at him in suspicion. 'What?'

'A vacation.'

'A vacation?' Daniel repeated. He turned the suggestion over in his head. 'Actually, you know Jack, that's not a bad idea.'

'Really?' Sam asked before she could stop herself. Vacations were never usually taken by the team willingly.

Jack shot her a look. 'I think,' he stopped whatever smart remark Daniel had been about to make with another look, 'we should all take the weekend off and go fishing.'

The other three looked at him dubiously.

'Aw, come on. Rest, relaxation, some good company.' Jack continued eagerly. His eyes met theirs hopefully. 'It's been a while since the four of us spent any time together.'

Daniel caved under Jack's pleading eyes. 'I guess a weekend of fishing wouldn't hurt.' He guessed Sam would reject the idea of fishing but that the core one of spending a weekend together would be accepted.

'I concur.' Teal'c murmured realising the plan the archaeologist had formed. He hadn't enjoyed the one and only other time he had gone fishing.

All three men turned to look at Sam. She was reminded briefly of the moment they had all decided to disobey orders to stop a possible attack on Earth. They'd all looked at her for her decision then too. At least, she mused, if they were all going fishing there would be no question of impropriety. 'OK, I'm in too.'

Daniel and Teal'c stared at her in horror.

Jack's face broke into a wide smile but before he could say anything, a movement by the archway had them all turning to find Sam's brother by the entrance.

Mark Carter gestured back at the house to cover his unease at the way the four of them had turned as one; at the way the three men shielded his sister as though he, her brother, was the threat. 'General O'Neill, there's a call for you back at the house.'

Jack sighed heavily. The responsibilities of command. Why had he ever thought becoming a General and running Stargate Command was a good idea? His mind drifted to the conversation
he'd had with the President that morning; of the new opportunity that he was being offered...more responsibility...another star on his uniform...and one that would mean leaving everything he'd built over the previous eight years including the team in front of him.

Sam squeezed his hand. 'We'd better head back, sir.'

'Right.' Jack let her hand slip from his and they all stood up.

Daniel tucked Sam's hand under his arm as he escorted her back to the house. Jack tried not to feel jealous that he didn't have the same luxury of open affection that Daniel's status as a civilian provided him with. He was barely back in the hall when he snatched up the receiver Mark indicated.

'O'Neill.' He listened for a few moments. 'I understand. We'll be back immediately.' He dropped the receiver back in the cradle and turned to the waiting SG1 team. 'We have to go, people.'

'Right now?' Mark asked incredulous.

'Right now.' Jack confirmed. His eyes went to Sam. 'I'm sorry, Colonel, but we've all been recalled.'

'What can be so important about deep space radar telemetry? Can't Sam stay?' Mark asked puzzled and a little angry at being left to deal with the rest of the reception alone.

'I'm sorry but the situation requires Colonel Carter's unique...uh...talents.' Jack covered. The doorbell rang. 'That's probably the car they've sent.'

'I'll meet you outside, sir.' Sam said seeing the huffy expression on her brother's face.

Jack nodded. 'My condolences, Mark. Your father was a good man.'

'Yes,' Daniel nodded, 'I'd like to offer my condolences too.'

'And I mine.' Teal'c said.

'Thank you.' Mark said politely his eyes still on his sister.

'One minute, Carter. We have planes waiting for us at Andrews.' Jack said before he reluctantly left her with Mark.

Sam hugged her brother. 'I'm sorry, Mark.'

'Don't worry.' He indicated the room behind him. 'I'll handle it but don't you want to talk to Pete before you leave though?'

'You invited him and pressed him into coming, Mark. I told you we're not engaged anymore and I don't think talking to Pete right now is the best thing to do.' Sam's lips tightened at Mark's unhappy expression. 'I'll call you later, OK?'

'Right.' Mark gestured at the door. 'You'd better get going.'

Sam tried hard not to let his ultra polite tone upset her as she turned and walked out of the house; tried hard not to notice it was the exact same tone her father would use to make her feel guilty. She schooled her features before she climbed into the limousine and at the knowing looks wondered if she was fooling anybody.

'So,' she said brightly, 'what's the emergency, sir?'
Jack's gleeful eyes met hers across the small space. 'They found a ZPM.'
Chrysalis: Part 2

The crate was on the table next to them. The ZPM, or Zero Point Module, nestled in a bed of straw. Sam's eyes were automatically drawn to it. A long lasting powerful source of energy that was way ahead of anything humans had ever created. They needed the device to power the Ancient weapons on Earth; to travel to the Pegasus Galaxy and contact the team that had gone to Atlantis so many months before. Hope. It was strange to think that the steady orange glow of the object brought so much of the simple emotion.

Sam's hands itched. Daniel and Teal'c had been sent straight to Egypt from Washington to collect the ZPM personally while Sam and Jack had returned to Colorado to prepare for its arrival. They'd had to wait hours before it had arrived at the SGC base under Cheyenne Mountain. There was so much analysis to do, Sam thought. Ultimately, they had to find someway of recharging it so it didn't run out of power…maybe there was a way to hook up the generator Jack had created the first time the knowledge of the Ancients had been downloaded into his head but then would that work given the ZPM drew its power from sub-space…

'Earth to Carter.' Jack waved his hand in front of her face.

'Sorry, sir.' Sam pulled herself out of her thoughts to concentrate on what was happening around her. Daniel was pushing a video into the television they had hooked up in the room. Oddly, the ZPM hadn't been the strangest thing recovered from the dig in Giza; a jar containing a perfectly preserved video camera had been the real shock. The camera was consistent with their current level of technology and it was the same make and model the SGC used for field work.

'So,' Daniel said, 'as I was telling you, they found this buried with the ZPM.'

'It is most strange.' Teal'c said.

'It's incredible.' Daniel said. 'This is incredible.' He, along with Teal'c, had already seen the tape; it had been the reason why they'd called Jack and Sam into Daniel's office as soon as they'd gotten back. He pressed the remote and the screen flickered into life.

'OK, my name is Daniel Jackson. I'm part of a team called SG1 and we have just travelled back in time five thousand years…'

Sam's blue eyes widened.

'Whoa.' Jack's hands gestured at the screen. He grabbed the remote and stopped it. 'Is that you?' His brown eyes glared at the archaeologist.

Daniel grabbed the remote back. 'Just watch.'

The tape began to play again. The team watched as the Daniel on the screen explained what had happened; time travel to recover the ZPM. All four members of the SG1 team appeared one by one.

'…and there are no fish in my pond. At all. Where I fish. I think that covers it for me.' The Jack on the screen declared.

'Is that correct?' Sam asked Jack thinking about the weekend of fishing that her CO was insisting was going ahead despite the discovery of the ZPM since it was now safely at the SGC.

Jack ignored the question as the tape ran on and finished abruptly. He rewound the tape and turned
to look at her. 'Is this possible?'

'Theoretically, yes, sir. We could have fixed the machine we found and gone back in time to recover the ZPM.' Sam pushed her sleeves up her arms. 'I can't believe I agreed to it but yes.'

'I guess the benefits outweighed the risks.' Daniel murmured, his eyes sliding to the crate.

'We messed with our own timeline.' Sam gestured at the television. 'There's no telling how much damage we did.'

'But like I said on the tape, well not me but him, that's exactly why we left the tape.' Daniel said.

'Huh?' Jack's bemused eyes landed on the other man.

'To provide our future selves, us, with a checklist, a set of references if you will, that we can use to ensure the future is the same.' Daniel explained and gestured back at the screen. 'If anything doesn't match we know we screwed up.'

'You mean like there being no fish in my pond?' Jack checked.

'Exactly.'

'There aren't that many references on that tape, Daniel.' Sam pointed out. 'Even if those match, there's no telling how many more others don't.'

'But if the ones on the tape match given their range and randomness, isn't it likely that others would too? Or at least be really close.'

'Maybe.' Sam allowed.

'So if everything mentioned on the tape matches with what has happened in this timeline then we think we're OK?' Jack asked double-checking he'd heard correctly.

'Yes.' Daniel confirmed adamantly.

Jack's eyes slid to Sam; she was the theoretical astrophysicist.

Sam shifted uncomfortably. 'If everything matches on the tape then it's unlikely that anything major will have been altered.' She agreed.

'And if it doesn't?' Jack questioned.

'Then the right thing to do would be to correct the timeline.' Sam stated firmly.

'Teal'c?' Jack glanced at the quiet Jaffa.

Teal'c inclined his head. 'I believe we should watch the tape again, O'Neill, and see whether such a course of action is required.'

'Then let's watch the tape again.' Jack pressed play.

'...and there are no fish in my pond. At all. Where I fish. I think that covers it for me.' They stopped the tape.

'Is that correct?' repeated Sam.
'If it is, we don't do anything?' Jack checked.

'Apparently, nothing we did affected the timeline.' There was a hint of disbelief in her voice. All the other references had matched; there was only the question of the fish left. It seemed too good to be true.

'But we didn't do anything.' Jack protested.

'Not yet.' Sam agreed amused at the confusion on his face. Temporal physics wasn't the easiest thing for anyone to get their heads around including her. 'Apparently we were going to. Two weeks from now but now we don't have to.'

'Excellent. That's it.' Jack tapped the desk as Daniel and Teal'c gave satisfied nods and both men headed back to Daniel's computer console. 'I like it.'

Sam breathed a sigh of relief and reached for the crate. Finally, she could begin her analysis. 'OK, I'm going to get this up to the lab for analysis…'

'No.' Jack grabbed the crate before she could move. 'I'll take it. There's a whole room full of geeks up there just dying to get their hands on this.' His eyes danced with merriment as he looked at her. 'You've got packing to do.'

Sam looked after him as he walked from the room and sighed. She wandered over to Daniel and Teal'c.

Daniel shifted his attention from the monitor long enough to glance over his shoulder at her. His lips twitched at the disgruntlement on her face from not being allowed to play with the ZPM and he quickly averted his gaze before she saw his amusement.

'What are you guys doing?' Sam asked taking in the text of the Constitution on the screen.

'Daniel Jackson is attempting to help me create a system of government for my people.' Teal'c stated.

Sam sighed. She asked a simple question…

'Shouldn't you be packing?' Daniel kept his eyes on the screen. He could just see the faint outline of her glaring at him on the monitor.

'Shouldn't you?' Sam countered.

'I'm done.' Daniel informed her gleefully. He gestured at the stack of bags in the corner.

'As am I.' Teal'c said.

Sam knew when she was beaten. It looked like the guys wanted the weekend to go ahead. She sighed again. 'Fine. When are we supposed to meet?'

'An hour from now in Jack's office.' Daniel reminded her.

Sam nodded and backed out of the room. It didn't take her long to pull together a rucksack with all the essential items she needed or to change into blue jeans and a light top. She smeared another layer of lipstick over her lips and headed to the General's office. He was on the phone; the one with the direct link to the President but he waved her in as soon as he caught sight of her lurking outside his door. She hovered awkwardly just inside, absently noting that Jack had also
changed into civvies.

'Yes, Mr President. Monday? We'd be honoured, sir.' Jack scribbled a note on a pad of paper and nodded. 'Thank you, sir. We look forward to seeing you.' He hung up and scratched his head thoughtfully.

'We look forward to seeing you?' Sam repeated.

'Yeah. He wants to come visit. Say hi. Thank us for saving the world. Again.' Jack shrugged and pushed his chair back. He took the two steps to the second office door that opened out on the briefing room and poked his head around it. 'Sergeant!

Sergeant Walter Harriman appeared a moment later. Jack handed him the note. 'Walter, the President is visiting on Monday. I'm going to need you to arrange everything. These are the details I've been given.'

'I take it you will be cancelling your and SG1's vacation this weekend then, sir?' Walter asked nervously.

'No. You do not take it that I will be cancelling mine and SG1's vacation.' Jack paused wondering if he had made grammatical sense.

'I'm sure SG1 could cancel the weekend if you're needed here, sir.' Sam suggested seeing the momentary look of panic flit across the Sergeant's face.

'SG1 is actually going on leave, Carter. Suck it up.' Jack smirked at Sam's mutinous look.

'Sir, there may be details that you will need to decide…' Walter began.

'I trust you, Walter. You choose. Bunting, buffet, whatever's needed.' Jack said firmly. 'We'll be back on Sunday at 1800 hours and you can brief us all on protocol and agenda at that time.'

'But, sir…'

'And you can call that phone line the techs rigged up at the cabin if something major happens that requires my attention.' Jack's tone indicated that 'something major' was probably nothing short of an invasion of Earth. 'That'll be all.'

Walter came to attention. 'Yessir.' He hurried out of the office.

'Sir, don't you think…' Sam stopped at Jack's raised finger; the finger that denoted the time for all discussion had come to an end.

'You guys ready?' Daniel asked from the doorway loaded up with his bags; Teal'c stood just behind him.

'Sure we are, aren't we, Carter?' Jack raised an eyebrow at Sam.

'Yes, sir.' Sam sighed.

'Then let's go.' Jack reached for the bag he'd stowed under the desk.

The alarm sounded.

'Oh, for crying out loud!' Jack muttered.
Jack headed through the briefing room and down the staircase to the gate control room. The others exchanged a worried look before they dumped their bags and followed him. Sam slipped into the chair by the side of Walter ready to assist him.

'Unscheduled incoming wormhole.' Walter announced.

'How many teams off world?' Daniel asked.

'Thirteen.' Jack said folding his arms and staring out of the observation window at the ring.

'Receiving IDC.' Walter noted.

'It's Bra'tac.' Sam confirmed recognising the code a moment before the computer displayed his name.

Jack glanced across at Teal'c who looked back at him with a mixture of concern and confusion.

'Open the iris.' Jack ordered as he started to head down to the gate room, Teal'c and Daniel following after him. Sam followed at a more sedate pace and Bra'tac was already stepping through the glistening pool of blue that was the event horizon of the wormhole and onto the steel ramp when Sam took her position with the others.

Bra'tac took a moment to steady himself, more to hide his shock at the strange apparel the SG1 team were wearing than to recover from the trip through the wormhole. His dark eyes landed with amusement on his former protégé who was wearing some kind of skin-tight blue jacket and Teal'c lifted one eyebrow as though in warning; he would not tolerate teasing even from his respected mentor.

Jack stepped forward to greet him with a smile. 'Master Bra'tac.'

'O'Neill.' Bra'tac inclined in his head. His eyes drifted to Daniel and to Sam as he acknowledged them in turn. 'I apologise for my unscheduled return but it is vital that I speak with Teal'c immediately. In private.'

Jack blinked but he nodded. 'Of course.' He hesitated as the two Jaffa made to leave the gate room before he cleared his throat and gestured at the group. 'Uh…Bra'tac, we were all kinda about to head out on a…'

'Vacation.' Bra'tac nodded. 'Teal'c spoke of this to me.' He felt it was a good way for Teal'c to say goodbye to the Tau'ri. No matter what bonds Teal'c had formed with his friends, he was very definitely needed back on Dakara. Bra'tac knew Teal'c would carry out his duty to his people but if he could do it after finding some closure to his time with the Tau'ri so much the better.

'So,' Jack drawled the word out and rocked back on his heels, 'will you need Teal'c for long or…' he gestured vaguely.

'A few hours only, O'Neill,' Bra'tac reassured him, 'and then I will return him to you to assist in your battle against the fish, hmmm?'

'Come, old friend.' Teal'c grasped Bra'tac's shoulder and gently led him out of the gate room.
Jack's expression cleared. OK, a few hours delay wasn't so bad. His eyes flickered to Sam. Of course, three more hours on base and it would probably take C4 to get her out of the lab and away from the ZPM.

Daniel caught the look. 'Jack, why don't you and Sam go on ahead? I can wait for Teal'c and we can catch you up at the cabin.'

Sam's eyes shot to Daniel's face and he avoided her accusing gaze. 'Daniel…'

'Are you sure you don't mind?' Jack asked hurriedly.

Daniel shrugged. 'I don't mind.'

'Great.' Jack grinned at Sam. 'Let's go then.'

Sam wasn't immune to the gleam of eager enthusiasm in the warm brown eyes looking back at her and sighed. 'Yes, sir.'

They retrieved their luggage and headed to the top of the mountain where their chopper was waiting on the helipad before Sam could come up with an excuse why it was a bad idea for them to travel on alone. They took their seats in the back of the chopper and were soon airborne, heading to the wilds of Minnesota where Jack's cabin was located. The helicopter would drop them at an airfield and they would take a rented car for the hour's drive up to the cabin itself.

It was difficult to talk with the noise of the engines and rotors even with the headsets, and they settled into enjoying the flight. Jack felt a twinge of envy at the pilot; he didn't log enough time in the air these days, he thought with regret. Hell, he didn't log enough time out in the field these days. His initial intention to join the rest of SG1 on the occasional off-world mission had gradually disappeared under the weight of command. He missed it. He missed being with his team; missed hearing Sam's technobabble, arguing with Daniel over some random aspect of the mission and fighting shoulder to shoulder with Teal'c. He'd done better at command than he'd initially thought, his mind flashing back to a resignation note he'd typed once, but he still felt like it was an uncomfortable fit. He just wasn't suited to sitting and watching the action, he admitted silently. He wanted to be out there…on the frontlines.

Not that they had many frontlines these days. The Goa'uld were mostly destroyed and those that remained were fleeing to remote parts of the galaxy to hide as their once trusted troops of Jaffa turned on them. They had utilised the ancient weapon on Dakara before its destruction to rid the galaxy of Replicators and Anubis had according to Daniel been neutralised by Oma for the foreseeable future so it left their galaxy pretty quiet. Not that theirs was the only galaxy...

He frowned. He had an uncomfortable feeling that the President was going to press him for an answer on the job he had offered Jack when he'd been in Washington. Head of the Department for Homeworld Security. General Hammond's current post and the one his commander was leaving for a well earned retirement very shortly. A desk job. Sure he'd have oversight of the Stargate programme, the Atlantis project and the cool new spaceships but…but he wouldn't be out there and he'd be even more removed from the action. At least there was the occasional lockdown or rampant plant to take the edge off the paperwork monotony at the SGC.

'Sir?' The voice of the pilot crackled through the headset and brought Jack out of his reverie.

Jack adjusted his mike. 'Yes, Major?'

'ETA in ten minutes, sir.'
'Thanks, Major.' Jack shifted on the bench and looked over at Sam who smiled back at him before returning her gaze to the sky. The smile was enough to raise his spirits and he wondered again how one woman, one smile, had the power to do that.

Samantha Carter. He smiled a little. In his mental list of pros and cons for leaving the SGC, she definitely fell into the 'con' column. If he left the SGC he wouldn't get to see Sam that often and she would still be in his chain of command. At least if he stayed, he'd get to see her every day when she wasn't off-world. Of course, she'd still be in his chain of command. His thoughts drifted back to his break-up conversation with Kerry.

'Is the Air Force the only thing keeping you two apart? Rules and regulations? Because if it is, you're making a very big mistake.' Her eyes reflected her incredulity.

'And you know what I should do?' He asked.

'Retire.' She said.

'Again.'

'Don't get me wrong you're considered invaluable to the programme by the Pentagon but the President has appointed a civilian to run the SGC before. Just a thought.'

So, Jack considered, all he really had to do was convince President Hayes that he, Jack O'Neill, was still the right person to run the SGC but that he no longer wanted to be in the Air Force. Of course it was likely that the President would ask why and that was the sticking point...if he told Hayes about his feelings for Sam then he would in effect be admitting to his Commander in Chief that he had formed an inappropriate attachment to a junior officer. It would be a tacit admission that he was close to breaking, hell, had already broken the fraternization regulations in spirit, if not in deed. He didn't figure Hayes would set JAG on him but it would certainly make for an awkward conversation particularly given Hayes's own agenda to get Jack to take the Homeworld gig. His eyes landed back on Sam. He could never ask her to give up the Air Force and her career; she was a damned good soldier and a brilliant scientist; they needed her. But maybe they didn't a grizzled veteran like him anymore. Maybe it was about time he did something about what was between them and provided them with some options. God knew he couldn't take another Pete scenario.

The bump as they landed jolted him out of his thoughts and Jack stretched trying to get the kinks out of his neck as they climbed out. His easy brown gaze slid straight into the smirking face of the pilot who was staring at Sam with a knowing look. Jack felt his own features freeze. It was obvious the little twerp thought Carter was off for a dirty weekend with her CO.

'Colonel Carter.' Jack said careful not to let his anger show in his voice.

'Sir?' There was a flicker of surprise in her voice at the full use of her name and rank; usually he shortened it to her surname.

'Why don't you go ahead and pick up the car? I just have to confirm the arrangements for Daniel and Teal'c.'

'Yes, sir.' Sam nodded and headed across the tarmac towards the small building that housed the car rental firm.

The pilot and his co-pilot came to attention beside the aircraft as Jack's hard gaze landed on them both. 'When you get back to the SGC, Doctor Jackson and Teal'c should be ready to travel here to join myself and Colonel Carter. Make sure the helicopter is refuelled and ready to depart as soon as
'Yes, sir.' The two men answered in unison. Jack saw the flicker of surprise across the pilot's face at the realisation that the couple he had just transported wouldn't be alone and the sudden uncertainty at his original assumption. Jack decided not to push it any further. If he said anything directly the young officer would only believe his original assumption had been correct and that Jack was protesting too much. He settled for a firm nod before he slung his bag over his shoulder. He walked away and hunted with his free hand in his jacket pocket for his sunglasses.

Dammit. As much as he hated to admit it, this was the reason for the damn frat regs. There should never be a question that everything wasn't above board with him and Sam. It wasn't fair to her. She'd worked hard to achieve her current rank and she damned well deserved it. Not that anyone who knew her, anyone who'd served for a long time in the SGC would question that. Jack took a deep breath. He knew Major Sanders was new to the SGC; maybe he just hadn't had time to settle in and get up to speed with how close Jack remained to his former team and the formidable reputation of SG1.

But it wasn't all the Major's fault, a small voice prompted in his head; Jack had created the situation by travelling alone with Sam. His heart sank a little at his realisation. He'd just been so eager to get away, to get her away from the SGC he hadn't considered how it might have looked to someone else…damn. He sighed. Well, he'd done as much damage limitation as he could and hopefully Sam hadn't noticed. He caught sight of her heading for the car lot and changed direction to catch up with her.

'All sorted?' He asked as he fell into step beside her.

Sam's blue eyes snapped to his. 'They gave us a jeep. It's in lot C, sir.'

Jack sighed. 'Lot C it is and we're on vacation, Sam; lose the 'sir'.'

'Yes, sir.'

He shot her a look and relaxed when he saw the amusement glimmering in her eyes. 'Do we have a key for this car?'

'I do.' She dangled the car key between them.

Jack made a grab for the key and she snatched it back out of his reach.

'I can drive.' Sam insisted as they drew to a halt at the only vehicle in lot C.

Jack grinned at her. 'But you don't know where we're going.'

'You wouldn't give me directions?' Sam checked.

'Nope.'

'You're kidding?' She stared at him for a long moment.

'It's a guy thing, Carter.' Jack explained cheerily knowing there'd be hell to pay later for the remark.

She rolled her eyes and handed him the key.

Jack happily unlocked the doors and a few minutes later they were driving away from the air field. He made the familiar turns and was soon headed out on the road up to the cabin. It didn't see a lot
of traffic and Jack enjoyed the freedom of the open road. He'd been driving for a while before he realised that Sam hadn't spoken a word since they'd set off from the air field. She was probably mad about the whole driving thing, he thought amused. He sneaked a glance at her and his eyes snapped wide open with shock before he wrenched them back onto the road. Sam was curled up, fast asleep.

He sneaked another look. She looked exhausted, he mused with concern. There were purple shadows under her eyes and faint lines of tension around her mouth and eyes that marred her otherwise flawless complexion. Screw appearances, Jack thought furiously, he'd done the right thing dragging her away on vacation. Hell, he should have done it sooner. He tried to reassure himself that with some good food and sleep, she'd be OK. He sighed. Sam always did have a tendency to overwork and he knew she'd missed the immutable influence of their late CMO and friend, Janet Fraiser, who had always ensured that Sam rested.

God, he missed Fraiser and knew Sam missed her more. Her grief was probably only surpassed by SG1's god-daughter, Cassandra. Fraiser had adopted the young alien girl, the lone survivor of a planetary massacre, when they'd brought her back through the gate with them. In every way that mattered, Cassie had lost a mother that day on the battle field when Janet had been hit. Cassie had lived with Sam immediately after the tragedy but she had eventually asked to live with Fraiser's colleague Doctor Warner and his family; the middle daughter was her best friend. Sam had been trying to juggle too much when she was on Earth and was just away too often off-world. Jack knew the decision had been hard on them both but especially Sam. Jack figured she saw it as a failure even though Cassie understood and he knew Cassie understood because with being at the SGC he'd managed to spend time with her on a semi-regular basis. Cassie was a wise head on young shoulders and as far as Jack could see she was dealing with losing Janet and the changes in her life with a dignity that most adults twice her age didn't have. He had invited her along to the weekend but Cassie had declined claiming she already had plans…and maybe she knew the team needed some together time.

Jack frowned. It probably would be the last time the team was 'together' for a long while. Teal'c already had one foot on the other side of the gate. Jack knew the Jaffa was getting pressure to return permanently to Dakara to truly lead his people and in truth there was very little counter-argument Jack could muster to prevent it. He didn't think the Free Jaffa would go for the 'because we'll miss him' line in a big way. And they would miss him, terribly. He would miss him, Jack thought sadly. He couldn't quite imagine life at the SGC, couldn't imagine his life without Teal'c's steady and resolute presence in it and he knew Daniel and Sam felt the same. He knew the three of them were all going to have to prepare for the moment Teal'c made his departure official. Another loss for Sam to cope with on top of everything else, he mused, one that left a huge gaping hole in the SG1 team she now commanded…well, at least she would have him and Daniel…

Daniel. He shook his head. He'd lost track at how many times Daniel had 'died' and come back. Was it five…six times now? He had worried that this last time Daniel wouldn't return, more than he would have ever admitted to anyone. Sam had picked up on it; she knew him too well but he'd brushed her off. If he had admitted that Daniel might not come back…well, it just seemed to him that it would have jinxed any possibility of it actually happening. He'd lived through losing him seemingly for real too many times; didn't want to do it again any time soon. If he'd gained one brother in Teal'c, he'd gained another in the young archaeologist. Jack smiled as he considered that his occasional verbal sparring with Daniel was probably similar to that of a couple of siblings poking at each other. Most of their arguments these days were simply because it was expected; most of the banter mixed with a lot of fondness. They'd realised a long time ago that underneath all of their differences they shared a lot of the same values and one of those was loyalty above and beyond to their friends. Jack took another sideways glance at Sam.
He knew Daniel and Sam were close. If he had assumed the role of Daniel's older brother, Sam was definitely the sister Daniel had never had. They had bonded quickly; both of them finding a kinship with each other. It wasn't just that they related to each other as geeks or that they had finally met someone else who could keep up with the speed of their thinking or that they had the same insatiable curiosity about their discoveries although Jack figured that was a part of it. For him, the two of them had simply just got each other right from day one. Maybe because when they'd met, in that first initial meeting, both of them had still been innocent in a lot of ways. Jack couldn't contemplate Daniel being insensitive enough to abandon Sam when she needed them but then he knew Sam was aware of how desperately Daniel wanted to visit Atlantis and now they'd found the ZPM it made the trip a real possibility. Even if Daniel didn't start bugging him to go, Jack knew it was only a matter of time before Sam told Daniel to go. He was going to have to cut that off at the pass, Jack thought as pulled up in front of the cabin.

He jammed the gear into park and turned off the engine as he reviewed Sam's sleeping face and considered his options. He could wake her up or he could carry her inside and risk falling on his ass. So…which did he do? He wondered.
Sam woke up slowly. She stretched and came more awake at the realisation that she was still in her clothes. Her blue eyes snapped open and she shifted into a sitting position with a swiftness born out of her years of mission experience with SG1. She'd been kidnapped in her sleep once and it had made her wary. A light woollen throw had been placed over her and it slipped down to pool at her hips as she took stock of her environment. OK, she was on a bed, on top of the covers and she was fully dressed although her shoes were missing. This was good. Her last memory was of getting in the car and deciding to close her eyes just for a moment. A blush stained her cheeks. God, she must have fallen asleep on the General…Jack. OK, correction; this was bad.

'Oh boy.' She muttered. It only took a moment for her embarrassment to be chased away by her curiosity as she realised that Jack had obviously placed her in his own room.

It was neater than she had expected. The furniture was solid oak, scarred and a little worn but sturdy. The bedding was a dark green that complemented the bare wooden walls of the cabin. There was an abstract picture on the far wall and she frowned as she realised it was trying to represent the solar system. She much preferred her art to look like the thing it was portraying. There was an absence of personal effects but her eyes fell on a photo frame atop the dresser. She shoved the throw to one side and padded across the bedroom to pick it up.

It was a picture of Jack's late son, Charlie. Her finger swept over the happy image of the child. She had worked with Jack for months before she'd even known he'd had a child or the tragic circumstances around his death, an accidental shooting with Jack's own weapon. Looking back to SG1's first missions, she could see with perfect hindsight that he'd still been grieving for the loss of his son and his marriage which hadn't withstood the strain of the tragedy. At the time, she'd been so in awe of him that she hadn't picked up on the grief under the tough soldier act Jack wore so well.

She replaced the picture as her own grief swam to the surface and she pushed it away ruthlessly. She turned back toward the bed and caught sight of a note propped up against the lamp on the bedside table. She hastened over to pick it up.

'Sam, gone for a few supplies the caretaker missed. This room's yours for the duration. Make yourself at home. Back soon, Jack.'

Sam reread the note and put it back on the table with a sigh. She rubbed her hands on her thighs and pulled at her top. Her eyes landed on her bag and the fresh towels Jack had put out on the chair across the room. She wouldn't mind freshening up. OK, a shower and some clean clothes. She gathered a few items from her rucksack and made her way a little nervously out of the bedroom.

She made a cursory exploration of the cabin to get her bearings; to her right was a door that led out to the den and kitchen area; her immediate thought was that they were going to be cosy with the four of them sharing the space. Opposite the bedroom door was another which led to a second bedroom with twin beds. It was half-filled with junk and boxes and she figured it didn't get used often as a guest room. The door to her left at the end of the hall was the bathroom. She closed the door and threw the lock. The fittings were old and basic and she feared the worst as she turned the shower on full. She was pleased at the steady rush of hot water and quickly stripped off to take her place under it.

For a long time, Sam just stood with her face turned up and her eyes closed, and let the water flow over her, let the warmth soothe her. She reluctantly reached for her shampoo as the water started to lose heat. She was still tired, she thought, in a down-to-the-bone kinda way. It was just as well Jack
had driven them up to the cabin; she probably would have fallen asleep at the wheel and driven
them into a tree. Not that it excused the macho crap he'd pulled. She smiled. Back when they had
first met it probably would have riled her into a feminist diatribe as she tried to prove she was just
as capable as he was. In fact, she considered thoughtfully, the first year of serving with him had
seemed to be all about proving herself.

Jack had made it clear when they’d met that he had doubts about her. She'd known enough about
his military record and had been impressed enough by his initial leadership that she had wanted to
wipe those doubts from his mind completely especially as he seemed to maintain a distance with
her that he just didn't have with either Daniel or Teal'c. She'd figured she'd succeeded in getting his
approval after she and the other female personnel had stopped the base from being taken over by
Hathor but then there had been Jolinar…

She frowned and reached for the shower gel as her mind turned to the Tok'ra symbiote that had
briefly taken over her before giving up its own life so she would live. Jolinar had left memories of
her own life in Sam's subconscious and a changed blood chemistry that gave her residual powers to
use Goa'uld technology. It had taken a long time before she'd been able to accept that whilst her
experience had changed her, it hadn't fundamentally smothered who she, Sam Carter, was.

It had taken a longer time for her to realise it hadn't really changed how the people around her felt
about her either especially Jack. She'd believed the experience had almost put her back at square
one with her CO; that whatever trust she'd gained with him had been eroded. She wasn't quite
certain when she'd realised that he did trust her. Maybe when he'd given her permission to try
something as his life hung in the balance…maybe when they'd met the rest of the Tok'ra…it was
like a mathematical problem she couldn't quite solve. Just like she wasn't sure when her feelings
for Jack had changed; when her regard for him had changed from professional respect and a
friendship to being all the way in love with him. She did know the exact moment when she'd
realised her feelings; it was etched into her mind like a carving. It had been the instant when they
had gone to bring him home from Edora and he had walked away from her into the arms of another
woman.

Sam smiled ruefully at the memory as she rinsed off. Really her first clue should have been the fact
that she had worked night and day for three whole months to build a particle beam generator from
scratch so they could rescue him. Oh, she'd admitted to Janet that she missed Jack but when her
friend asked if it were a problem, she had brushed her off. Sam had truly missed the subtlety of the
question. It had taken that moment on Edora for the truth to smack her over the head. Even now,
she could still feel the gut-wrenching sense of loss as he walked away from her, the sharp sting of
jealousy as he hugged another woman and the staggering realisation that she was in love with her
CO. She'd had to turn away and take a breath; the whole thing had made her dizzy. Although, she
mused, that could have been the not sleeping or eating properly for three months…she had pretty
much collapsed as soon as they got back through the Stargate to the SGC…

Consciousness seeped back in and she opened her eyes unwillingly. The first person she saw was
Colonel O'Neill sitting in a chair by her bed in the infirmary; he was reading reports. So it hadn't
been a dream. They really had managed to bring him home. Her happiness dimmed a little at the
memory of him hugging Liara. He had obviously formed a relationship with the Edoran woman in
the months that he had been trapped there. Jealousy brought a bitter taste to her mouth and Sam
took a deep breath. Jack was her CO and she was not in love with him. Right.

'Carter.' Jack smiled a little self-consciously as his brown eyes snapped to hers and realised she
was awake and staring at him. 'Glad to have you back with us.'

'Likewise, sir.' She struggled into a sitting position and accepted the glass of water he handed to
her gratefully. She smiled at the sight of Daniel asleep in the chair on the opposite side of the bed.

'He passed out a couple of hours ago. I threw Teal'c out around the same time to do his kelno'reemy thing.' Jack noted as he sat back down. 'I'm still on Edoran time, I guess.'

Sam nodded. 'What exactly happened, sir? I don't remember getting back to the SGC.' Her last memory was of stepping into the wormhole on Edora.

'We stepped onto the ramp in the gate room. The General welcomed me back and I was making a joke...a really great joke, by the way, when you passed out with exhaustion.' His tone was slightly accusatory. 'You've been out for about eighteen hours. You missed the debriefing.'

'Sorry, sir.' Sam wasn't sorry; listening to him describe his time on Edora given her new feelings for the Colonel and what she had surmised had happened with him and Liara would have been excruciating.

'I hear I owe you a thank you.' Jack said folding his arms. 'Something about a partition beam thingy?'

'Particle beam generator, sir.' She automatically corrected before seeing the glint of humour in his eyes that gave away he'd been teasing her.

'And I want you to know that the next time I get stuck on a planet I want you to work just as hard as you did this time to get me home. All hours. Night and day. Don't stop for food or rest and feel free to work yourself into the ground again.'

Her lips twitched at the teasing tone even as she felt her cheeks heat, doubly glad that she'd missed the debriefing. 'Yes sir.'

'Seriously, Sam…'

Her eyes flickered back to his at the unusual use of her first name and widened at the intently solemn gaze he was directing at her.

'Thank you. I'd almost…' He cleared his throat. 'Well, let's just say it's good to be home.'

She nodded slowly. 'Any time.'

There was something in the way he was looking at her and she realised with a shock that she wasn't feeling the professional distance that usually existed between them...

But then Janet had walked in, Daniel had woken up and the mood had changed. Sam smiled as she switched the shower off and reached for a towel. It seemed most of her personal conversations with Jack were interrupted by something. The last one had been a doozy: she'd turned up at his house unannounced and had been about to declare that she was having second thoughts about her impending marriage because they'd never really discussed what was between them when Kerry Johnson had walked out of his house. The rush of jealousy had been all too familiar and she'd known immediately that, despite the fact that Jack was involved with someone else, she definitely couldn't marry Pete.

Poor Pete. He really did deserve better. She should never have accepted the ring. She shook her head. Maybe if she hadn't, Jack wouldn't have tried to move on too and she wouldn't have ended up standing awkwardly in Jack's back yard with him and Kerry. She'd thought when her phone rang giving her an out that the call had been a gift from God until the news of her father's collapse had wiped that thought from her mind completely. She'd run from Jack's back yard and raced back to
the base. Jack must have followed her because he had turned up only moments after she'd spoken with her father and learnt the truth of his condition; that his Tok'ra symbiote, Selmak, was dying and he would die too.

Sam sat down on the edge of the bath as she towelled her hair dry. She'd been so grateful for Jack's presence as she'd watched her father fade away; so grateful that whoever else was in his life he'd still cared enough to be there for her…

She glanced up at the sound of someone entering the observation room and shifted nervously as Jack sat down beside her. They both looked out at the sight below of her father lying in the infirmary bed saying a last goodbye to the Tok'ra who was with him.

'You OK?' His quiet question startled her.

'Actually I'm fine.' She replied ignoring the press of tears against her throat. 'Good even, strange as that sounds.' She attempted to explain her jumbled up emotions to him, to herself. 'I thought I'd lost him four years ago. Since then we've been closer than we ever were my whole life. In a way, Selmak gave me the father that I thought I'd never know.'

There was a moment's silence.

'C'mere.' She glanced at him and felt his arm sliding around her. She didn't think about it, she just leaned into him and reached for his hand, holding it against her. At that moment, she couldn't have cared less about the fraternization regulations or about where they were. She just knew she needed the comfort, needed his comfort and knew he'd known that too even though he didn't have to be with her. He was obviously involved with the CIA agent and he believed she was still engaged to Pete; technically she still was. But he'd come to be with her anyway and for that she was deeply grateful to him.

'Thank you, sir.' She murmured.

'For what?' He sounded confused.

'For being here for me.' She admitted, swallowing the rest of what she wanted to say.

There was another silence.

'Always.'

The word startled her and she turned her head to find him looking back at her with no distance, no evasion, nothing but love and worry for her in his eyes. She'd had to look away, only able to press his hand to her cheek, unable to speak, unable to tell him how she felt and then…

And then the Tok'ra had looked up at them and she'd slipped out of Jack's hold to say goodbye to her father. The rest of the day was a blur in her memory…

'Sam?' Jack's worried voice and the knock at the bathroom door startled her out of her reverie. He must have gotten back from shopping, she realised absently. She reached up with a trembling hand to brush her tears away. God, she had to stop crying every five minutes, she thought, ignoring the voice in her head that murmured she was grieving, that it was natural.

'Yeah?' She was proud that she'd managed to get the word out without her voice shaking.

'You want a snack? Daniel called and they're going to be another couple of hours yet. It could be late when we eat dinner.'
'Sounds good.' She answered. 'I'll be right out.'

'OK.'

She heard his footsteps walking away from the door and tightened the knot on the towel around her body before she slipped out of the bathroom and back into the bedroom. She slathered some moisture over her skin, dressed hurriedly and swiped a comb through her hair. Barely ten minutes had passed before she found herself heading towards the smell of frying peppers.

Jack turned at the sound of her footsteps and pointed at the breakfast bar. 'Have a seat. There's juice or I've got some beer or wine…'

'Juice is fine. You sure I can't help?' Sam asked as she slipped onto a bar stool and fiddled with the cutlery that was set out.

'It's only omelettes. I think have it under control.' He added the egg mixture to the frying pan.

She nodded and propped her chin on her folded hands as she indulged in watching him. He suddenly seemed to realise she was staring at him and glanced back at her over his shoulder. 'What?' He asked suspiciously brandishing the spatula.

'Nothing.' She reached for the juice and poured a glass. 'I was just thinking.'

'I'm shocked.' Jack quipped as he frowned at the slightly charred edges of the omelette. He shrugged. It was edible enough. He divided it in two and slipped the portions on the waiting plates. He placed one in front of Sam before he walked around to sit next to her with the other. 'So what were you thinking about?'

'The Ancient weapon on Dakara.' She covered hastily as she picked up her fork and took a hesitant bite. She pointed at her plate. 'This is good.'

'You don't need to sound so surprised.' Jack said smiling at her. 'So why were you thinking about the weapon on Dakara? The Jaffa destroyed the mechanism right after Anubis tried to destroy the galaxy.'

'I know.' Sam swallowed another mouthful of food. 'But before, when the Jaffa refused to destroy it, I began thinking of a way to counteract it.' She gestured with her fork. 'Just in case.'

'You did?' Jack wasn't surprised.

'Hmmm-hmmm.' Sam warmed to her subject. 'I didn't have enough time to do more than some preliminary calculations and designs so it was nowhere near ready when Anubis did press the button but if we'd managed an outgoing wormhole we might have bought enough time for me to finish it. You see I'm certain the answer is in the way the Replicators were able to counteract the energy frequency of the smaller weapon you helped the Asgard build when you still had the Ancient knowledge in your head.'

'Really?'

'Really.' Sam continued oblivious to the indulgent amusement coating Jack's tone. 'I think if I'd had more time I could have come up with an effective counter-measure.' She forked up another mouthful of omelette. 'Of course we don't need one now.' She was almost disappointed.

Jack glanced across at her. He could believe she would have come up with an effective counter-
measure; she was that brilliant. She was intent on eating and didn't notice his warm gaze for a moment. She was startled when she looked at him and found him watching her.

'What?' She asked reaching for her juice to cover her confusion.

'Nothing.'

Sam smiled realising he'd mimicked her earlier reply to him.

Jack pushed his plate away and reached for his own juice. 'So, what do you think of the place?'

His ultra-casual tone gave away how important her answer was to him and she took a sip of her drink to give herself time to think before replying. 'What I've seen of the cabin so far has been great. Rustic,' she admitted with a smile, 'but charming.'

He relaxed at her answer. After years of her refusing to go fishing with him, he'd been a little worried that she was going to hate it. 'Wait until you see the outside. It's beautiful.'

Sam bit her lip. 'I guess I missed that when we arrived. I…uh…I'm sorry I fell asleep on you.'

He waved away her apology. 'You needed the rest.' His eyes held hers. 'I take it you're not sleeping all that well?'

She shrugged, not wanting to admit that her sleep pattern was pretty much shot to pieces.

Jack decided not to press it. He'd had his own experiences with grief and knew Sam was going to have to find her own way through it; all he could do was be there for her when, and if, she did turn to him. 'Well,' he said easily, 'that's all you need to do for the next couple of days; rest.' He picked up his plate and slid off the stool, walking round to slip it into the sink. 'That and one other thing, of course.'

She looked at him warily. 'What?'

He met her gaze with a smile. 'Fishing.'

'Right,' she muttered, 'fishing.'
Jack cast his line into the pond and sighed in contentment. He and Sam sat out on the small wooden dock, their chairs close together in the confined space. When Sam had finally reconciled herself to fishing, her innate curiosity had kicked in. She had spent most of their time since asking him questions about the rods, the lines, the bait, how to cast; he'd actually surprised himself by answering with a patience he hadn't known he was capable of until she ran out of steam. She'd been quiet for the last ten minutes. He was thinking she wouldn't last for very much longer without saying something.

'This is great.'

He hid a smile as he began to wind his line back in. Ah, in the subject of Samantha Carter, he was an A student. 'I told you.'

'I can't believe we didn't do this years ago.' She murmured thinking she couldn't believe she hadn't agreed to it years ago.

'Yes, well.' Jack figured it was too soon for that discussion. They started talking about the reasons why she hadn't gone fishing with him and before they knew it they'd be talking about them. He figured she wasn't ready for that; not while she was grieving. 'Let's not dwell.' He added.

'There really are no fish in this pond are there?' She turned to look at him with nothing but amusement sparking in her eyes.

'No.' He agreed. Her laughter bubbled up and drifted over him. Life just didn't get much better than this, he thought as they smiled at each other. Their eyes held for a second before both glanced away. It was a perfect moment and a warm, fuzzy feeling stole over him as he mentally filed it away.

The sound of approaching footsteps heralded the arrival of Daniel and Teal'c. Jack cast his line out again. 'Nice.'

'Hey guys.'

'Daniel.' Jack kept his eyes on the pond. He felt the nudge of a beer bottle on his shoulder and reached up to take it. 'Thanks.'

'Walter also asked me to give you this.' Daniel reached into a jacket pocket and handed him a sheet of paper. 'It's the agenda for the President's visit. He said to call if you didn't like anything.'

Jack glared at Daniel who held his hands up and backed away to the stool he'd set up just to the side on the bank of grass. Jack put his rod down and snapped the folded paper open grumbling under his breath. He ignored the amused look Sam shot him. His eyes ran down the agenda as he took his first sip of beer. His eyes ran back down the running order. Meet and greet at eleven-hundred; Presidential briefing on the SGC’s latest activities with the SGC commander at eleven-ten to twelve-hundred in Jack's office; a Presidential speech to the whole squadron in the gate room at twelve-fifteen; a reply to the President's speech by the SGC commander at twelve-thirty; a buffet lunch for the whole base in the commissary at thirteen-hundred. Crap. He was going to have to make a speech. He crumpled the sheet of paper and threw it on the ground beside his chair.

'Well?' Sam prompted.
'Hayes is arriving at eleven. There's the session to report. A speech in the gate room, the usual.'

Jack said dismissively.

Sam looked at him doubtfully but turned her attention back to her line and made to recast. Her face showed her intent on doing it right despite the lack of actual fish.

'Hey, Jack!' Daniel called over to him. 'What exactly do I do with this?'

Jack turned to see Daniel staring curiously at a brand new fishing rod. His heart sank at the expression on Daniel's face as he remembered how many questions Sam had asked; Daniel usually asked more...he sighed and put his own rod down as he gave into the inevitable.

They stayed out fishing for a couple of hours before the fading light and their rumbling stomachs drove them indoors for food. Teal'c lit a fire and after their meal they gathered around the hearth sitting on cushions on the floor and using the sofa and chairs as nothing more than back-rests. A comfortable silence fell over the team.

Daniel took a sip of beer and reviewed the faces of his friends thoughtfully from his place on the right-hand side of the hearth. Sam and Jack had gravitated together and sat side by side with their backs against the sofa. He dropped his gaze to his beer and wondered briefly if they had taken advantage of the time alone at the cabin to finally acknowledge how they both felt about each other. That the two of them loved each other way beyond what the regulations allowed was rarely discussed but completely understood by the team. They probably hadn't discussed it, Daniel thought. For some reason he could never understand, while other rules were bent or broken, the rule regarding their relationship was one that they both kept. In his very biased position as someone who loved them both, it was way past time for them to find some happiness together. His eyes focused on Sam.

The Air Force Lieutenant Colonel seemed to get more beautiful each year as though each battle, each experience she went through simply honed the essence of who she was. She was too beautiful and too smart for Daniel not to have wondered at odd moments whether he and Sam might have had something between them...maybe if he hadn't been married when they had met. By the time he'd become a widower it had been obvious to him that Sam and Jack were falling for each other even if they hadn't been aware of it. He owed them both too much, loved them both too much, to think about doing something that would complicate it for all of them even though the Air Force regulations prevented the couple actually being together. He'd settled for being family and in truth he was happy with the way things had turned out.

His eyes slid to Teal'c who was watching Jack and Sam with a knowing look. The Jaffa warrior rarely missed anything. He preferred to sit back and observe; to only speak when he had something to say. It worked for Teal'c, and Daniel had often found that the Jaffa gained a great deal of insight into people with his approach. It was a skill that would serve him well when he officially became the leader for the Free Jaffa. Daniel took another gulp of beer to try and remove the lump that had jumped into his throat. He knew it was only a matter of time before Teal'c disappeared permanently to Dakara and he was going to miss the big guy. He shook his head a little in disbelief. If anybody had told him right after his return from their first visit to Chulak that Teal'c and he would become as close as brothers he would have laughed. Teal'c had been directly responsible for kidnapping his late wife, Sha're; directly responsible for her becoming infested by a Goa'uld. He had been astounded by Jack's idea to make the Jaffa a member of SG1 and the first few missions had been fraught. But they had gotten past it and now he couldn't imagine his life without the Jaffa. He suppressed a sigh and took another gulp of beer as his eyes flickered back to Sam again.

She would miss Teal'c too. She'd been through a lot in the last year or so, Daniel mused; Janet...
whole creepy thing with the Replicator...her father...a broken engagement – even if it had been by choice – and soon, Teal'c. His eyes slid to Jack. There was a rumour that Jack had been offered Hammond's job running the Department for Homeworld Security. If it was true and he took it, Daniel intended to punch his lights out. Sam didn't need any more changes and she certainly didn't need to lose the one person she needed the most. He was going to have to talk with Jack, Daniel mused, make sure he made the right decision and stayed at the SGC.

'Colonel Carter,' Teal'c's voice rumbled across the small space, 'of what are you thinking so seriously?'

Sam smiled back at the Jaffa. 'About the timeline.'

'You're thinking about the timeline?' Jack sounded a little indignant.

'Well, I was just considering the apparent lack of the butterfly effect.' Sam explained.

'I am unfamiliar with that term, Colonel Carter.' Teal'c noted.

'Will you stop encouraging her?' Jack grumbled but there was no heat in his words.

Sam simply smiled at him. 'The butterfly effect is part of chaos theory. It suggests that the smallest change in history could have major ramifications. Essentially if you transported a butterfly back in time, the merest flap of its wings might cause an alteration in the weather system that would change the course of history, like create a hurricane that destroys a city.'

'I see.' Teal'c murmured. 'I was unaware that a butterfly was capable of generating such a phenomenon.'

'Well, there would be other factors...' Sam began to explain.

'And you're wondering why our intervention in Ancient Egypt to recover the ZPM didn't alter the timeline?' Daniel mused interrupting Sam much to Jack's unhidden relief.

'Exactly.' Sam leaned forward. 'It's astounding that what we did didn't have a cataclysmic effect on our timeline.'

'Well, we don't know how many times we've had to go back to get it right.' Daniel said.

'What d'ya mean?' Jack couldn't help himself asking the question.

'Well, think about it. Sam's right. Given what we know happened thanks to the tape that we left for ourselves, it's unlikely that we didn't alter the timeline.' Daniel gestured with his bottle. 'Our alternate future selves had to live out their lives in Ancient Egypt after all.'

'So are you telling me now that you think we did alter the timeline?' Jack checked.

'We have no way of knowing for certain, sir...Jack.' Sam hastily corrected as he shot her a look. 'All we have are the references on the tape and they all check out so as far as we can be certain, there was obviously minimal impact to the timeline.'

'It's weird though that thousands of years ago our future selves were living in Egypt.' Daniel shook his head. 'Years and years before we were even born. It must have been like visiting an alternate reality.'

'I am uncertain of the difference.' Teal'c said ignoring the way Jack was frantically gesturing for
him to stop talking. 'Did we not create an alternate reality by travelling back in time?'

'Not in the way you mean, Teal'c. In theory, each reality has one timeline which is linear. So say we're reality A.' Sam explained. 'Now, quantum theory supposes that every time a choice is made in our reality, it creates another reality…'

'B, C, D, etc.' Daniel murmured.

'Right but the past timeline, history and events of all the realities would be the same up until the point of divergence.'

'But when I jumped into the alternate reality where Earth was under attack from the Goa'uld they were ahead of us in the timeline so I must have also jumped into the future.' Daniel said perplexed.

'Not necessarily.' Sam said. 'The choices that had been made that created that reality may have only made the attack more likely to happen earlier in their timeline than in ours.'

'So what you're saying is we effectively went back into our own timeline in reality A and changed it.' Daniel concluded. 'Just erased everything from the moment we arrived in Egypt and hoped it would all unfold like before?'

'Yes.' Sam nodded.

'But we didn't change anything.' Jack said confused.

'I said it didn't look like we changed anything.' Sam corrected.

'But weirdly there may be a reality out there where we didn't go back in time.' Daniel mused ignoring Jack's intervention. 'After all, our future selves made a choice.'

'Or there could even be a reality where one of the references didn't match exactly to the tape and we didn't correct it.' Sam suggested.

'Really?' Jack shook his head. 'So you're saying if there had been fish in my pond we might have…' he gestured vaguely, 'let it go?'

She smiled at the not-so-unintentional pun. 'Maybe.' Sam turned to look at him. 'I wouldn't,' she emphasised, 'but there may be a me out there in some reality that might have considered the risk of going back and creating more damage was greater than accepting what would appear to be on the surface a small and insignificant change in the timeline.'

'I wonder how many times we had to go back to get it completely right.' Daniel murmured.

'We will never know, Daniel Jackson.' Teal'c said.

'I guess not.' Daniel sipped the last of his beer. He examined the empty bottle. 'Anyone want to split another?'

Jack looked at the mouthful left in his own bottle. 'Sure. I'll get it.' His knees cracked as he got up and he winced a little.

Sam stretched. 'Actually guys, I think I'm going to call it a night.'

'I am also ready to retire.' Teal'c got gracefully to his feet and held out a hand for Sam to grab. He pulled her effortlessly off the floor.
'Night.' Sam murmured, her eyes sliding to Jack's as he looked up from knocking the top of the bottle he'd retrieved.

'Night.' Jack watched her until the door closed. He grabbed a glass and headed back down to the fire.

Daniel accepted the glass with his half of the beer and viewed Jack over the rim thoughtfully. 'So anything you want to share?'

'Nothing apart from the beer.' Jack said easily leaning back against the sofa.

'Did you and Sam talk?'

'Sure.' Jack agreed. 'Mainly about fishing.' He pointed his beer at Daniel. 'And I think she mentioned she had some ideas on how we could have counter-acted the Dakara machine energy thing. Something to do with the way the replicators used to respond…I don't know.'

'You're kidding me. She came up with a counter-measure?' Daniel's voice rose with excitement before it hit him that Jack was trying to divert him. He shook his head. 'You know if you don't want to talk about it, we won't talk about it.'

'Good.' Jack said tipping his bottle back and taking a long gulp.

Silence fell between them. Daniel sipped his own beer and waited. It took less time than he had estimated before he heard Jack sigh.

'We haven't talked.' Jack admitted. 'She's got enough to deal with right now with Jacob dying.'

'That's very noble of you, Jack.'

Jack shot him a look but there was a distinct lack of humour in Daniel's expression that made him relax a little. 'Besides, what's there to talk about? Nothing's changed.'

'Nothing's changed?' Daniel repeated. 'Sam's not with Pete. You're not with…Kerry?'

'Kerry.' Jack corrected and his eyes flitted to Daniel curiously. 'How'd do you know about that?'

'Teal'c and I might have heard the two of you talking in the garden.' Daniel confessed hiding his face in his beer.

Jack looked away embarrassed. 'Well, it still doesn't change things.'

'Because you're both still in the Air Force and Sam's still under your command.' Daniel concluded. 'You know it wouldn't be the first time the two of you have broken one of the rules.'

Jack said. 'Some rules you don't break. This is one of them.'

'Yeah, remind me why that is again?' Daniel asked curious. 'It must happen all the time.'

'It does,' Jack admitted, 'more than anyone in the military would like to say and I'm not denying there's a lot of 'don't ask, don't tell' that happens even on the base.' He sighed. 'But the fall-out if you're caught…' he looked back up at his friend and away again. 'I couldn't do that to Carter.'

Daniel sighed. If there was one thing Jack was passionate about it was protecting others, particularly those he cared about. 'There has to be a way around it though.' He murmured.
Jack shrugged and his thumb grazed the top of the bottle. 'I'm thinking of retiring.'

'Retiring?' Daniel almost choked on his beer.

'I only came back to help fight the Goa'uld, Daniel.' Jack pointed out. 'And the last time I checked we'd won.'

'For now.' Daniel shot back.

'Let's face it, Daniel,' Jack said tiredly, 'I kinda took the first step when I accepted command of the SGC.'

'You're still part of SG1.' Daniel argued.

'Not really.' Jack shook his head. 'I haven't been out on a real mission with you guys for a while and I'm not counting that whole Maybourne thing. I would have had to have gone whether I was part of the team or not; I have the whole Ancient gene thing.'

'I can't believe you're ready to give up.' Daniel said. 'There has to be another way.' He pushed his glasses up his nose. 'I mean in the other realities Sam wasn't in the Air Force…'

'I can't ask her to give up her career.' Jack broke in. 'It's not fair to her.'

'Well, what about you? If you did retire from the Air Force, couldn't you continue to work at the SGC as a civilian?'

Jack gave a huff of laughter. 'That's what Kerry suggested.'

'Kerry?'

'When she was breaking up with me.' Jack explained. 'She suggested the President had appointed a civilian to run the SGC before.'

'She's right.' Daniel said.

'Sure,' Jack glanced across at the archaeologist, 'so all I have to do is ask the President to let me retire but keep me in charge of the SGC without giving the slightest impression to him or anyone else that I'm only doing it because I want to be with Carter.'

'But you would be doing it because you want to be with Sam.' Daniel said confused.

'But it can't appear that way.'

'Because people will start assuming you've broken the frat regs already and the damage to Sam's career and reputation will be done just as if you had broken the frat regs in the first place.' Daniel surmised. Jack didn't reply but Daniel figured he'd nailed it. He sighed. 'Won't people assume you're retiring to be with Sam anyway?'

'Maybe.' Jack admitted. Crap, he thought, he hadn't considered that.

'There has to be another way.'

'Well, if you find it let me know.' Jack muttered resting his head on the sofa cushions. 'Besides, I haven't talked with Carter and when I do…' he took a deep breath, 'there is a chance that she won't be interested.'
'Right.' Daniel snorted. He was pleased to see his own incredulity at the idea had reassured Jack. It was time to change the subject, Daniel thought. 'So I guess if you're thinking about retiring, you're not taking the Homeworld Security job?'

Jack stared at him. 'Did I miss the memo that announced I got offered the job?'

Daniel smirked. 'So you did get offered it.'

'Hammond recommended me,' Jack admitted, 'and Hayes is keen for me to take it.'

'But you're not going to.'

'Not really me is it?' Jack shrugged. 'Besides, Carter doesn't need anyone else disappearing on her.'

'Like you would if you retired?'

'I'd still be around.' Jack said defensively wondering whether he had fully thought the whole retirement thing through. 'I'm not planning on being somewhere off world.'

'Unlike Teal'c who's likely going back to Dakara permanently.' Daniel sighed.

'You know?'

'I know.'

'So, if you know…'

'I'm not planning to go to Atlantis anytime soon.' Daniel confirmed.

'She's going to tell you to go.' Jack pointed out.

Daniel shrugged. 'So you'll refuse to release me.' He pushed his glasses up his nose. 'It wouldn't be the first time.'

'Sure. Make it all my fault.' Jack finished his beer and set the bottle down on the floor.

Daniel looked at his glass which was still half full and got to his feet anyway. He was sharing the spare room with Teal'c while Jack was bunking on the sofa bed. 'You want a hand setting up the bed?'

Jack shook his head. 'Nah. You go ahead.'

Daniel nodded. 'See you tomorrow.' He made his way to the spare room lost in thought; there had to be a way to make it possible for Sam and Jack to be together. They came up with plans to save the planet all the time; surely they could come up with a solution for this, couldn't they?
'…and then you'll greet the President…'

Jack tuned out the rest of Sergeant Harriman's briefing. They'd barely arrived back at the base before the Sergeant had insisted on taking them through the details of the Presidential visit. Jack glanced down at the briefing pack and out of the window where Sergeant Siler and his team were making preparations to the gate room. Walter must have worked his socks off the whole weekend. He felt a twinge of guilt at taking the vacation. He couldn't deny though that it had been a good two days and exactly what the SG1 team had needed. Their return had been tinged with sadness though; Teal'c had quietly announced that morning at breakfast his intention to as he had put it 'take my leave of the Tau'ri.' It had been emotional for everyone. He suspected even Teal'c had wiped away a tear or two. God knew what his actual departure was actually going to be like; it was scheduled for directly after the President's visit.

'…and then you take the lectern and make your speech.' Sergeant Walter Harriman ticked off another item on his list.

'You're making a speech, sir?'

Jack jerked his attention back to the briefing and Sam's amused comment. 'I am.'

'Really.' Daniel said dryly. 'You have it written already, I take it.'

'I've got a few things in my head.' Jack said defensively.

'Yes but would you want to say them out loud?' Daniel shot back.

Sam hastily turned her laugh into a cough as Teal'c schooled his features from showing the amusement that gleamed in his eyes.

'I just need to write them down.' Jack insisted.

'Right.' Daniel shook his head. He resigned himself to being woken up early to give Jack a hand with the speech.

'Uh, sir, the President's Chief of Staff felt that it would be appropriate for you to focus on a few things in your speech.' Walter swallowed hard as Jack's brown gaze snapped to him.

'He did, did he?' Jack muttered. Politicians. Always had to be something.

The Sergeant indicated the as yet unopened blue folder in front of the General. 'The list is in your briefing pack.'

'Thank you, Walter. I'll take that under advisement.'

'Yes, sir.' Walter checked his list. 'At the end of your speech, you should direct people to the commissary where the celebratory lunch will be held.'

'That I can do.' Jack leaned back in his chair. 'What's on the menu?'

'It's a buffet, sir. Chef finalised the details this morning and a full list of included items is also in your briefing pack.'
Jack flipped the blue folder open and shuffled to the right sheet of paper. His eyes widened at the dessert options. Pots of blue jello? He raised his eyes and met Sam's across the table. He re-examined the list. A number of things on it were Sam's favourites. It looked like Chef had a soft spot for the Colonel or maybe he, like everyone else on base, simply wanted to take care of one of their own knowing about her recent loss. Jack felt a warm glow. Some days he just loved the people he worked with.

'So, the President will probably not stay for the whole lunch period which is scheduled to finish at fifteen-hundred.' Walter concluded, ticking the last item on his checklist.

'Excellent work, Walter.' Jack said.

Walter risked another glance at the General and at the sincere look of gratitude felt his chest swell with a little bit of pride. 'Thank you, sir.'

The rest of SG1 added their own words of praise and the Sergeant practically floated out of the briefing room as the General dismissed the gathering.

Daniel lingered behind as the others filed out. Sam was heading to her lab to catch up on the ZPM analysis. Teal'c had gone to pack up his room.

'You need something, Daniel?' Jack asked as he shoved his chair back and headed for his office.

'Well, I was wondering whether you wanted to work on the speech now rather than early tomorrow morning.' Daniel slouched in the office doorway and folded his arms over the briefing pack he held. 'That way I might actually get a full night's sleep before I meet the President tomorrow.'

'I told ya, it's under control.'

'Yeah.' Daniel pushed his glasses up his nose. 'That's what you said the last time.'

'And the time before that if my memory serves.'

The heads of both men swivelled to the open door on the other side of the office at the Texan accent.

Jack grinned widely. 'General Hammond, sir.' Hammond entered the office fully and shook Jack's outstretched hand enthusiastically.

'Jack.' His blue eyes smiled warmly at the other man before they shifted to smile just as warmly at the younger man standing in the other doorway. 'Doctor Jackson.'

Daniel took a couple of steps forward to shake Hammond's hand. 'It's good to see you.'

'Likewise, son.' Hammond smiled at both men.

'You're here for tomorrow's ceremony.' Daniel stated.

'I wouldn't have missed it for the world.'

Daniel gestured at the door. He figured Hammond would want to speak with Jack alone. 'Well, I have some translations…it was good to see you.'

'Please don't go on my account.' Hammond said. 'Actually, your assessment of the situation I'm here to discuss would be appreciated.'
'O-K.' Daniel glanced at Jack and saw he was just confused.

'If you could close the door…'

'Oh.' Daniel slipped the door to the briefing room shut as Hammond did the same with the door to the corridor.

'This looks serious.' Jack noted as Hammond indicated for him to sit down.

'I've had a request from the Joint Chiefs, Jack.' Hammond took the chair on the opposite side of the desk as Daniel leaned against the wall.

'Oh?' Jack picked a pen and twirled it through his fingers nervously.

'The head of Area 51's SG Research and Development department, Colonel Mayhew, resigned yesterday.'

'So?' Jack asked wondering how that affected him and his command.

'He's recommended Colonel Carter as his successor.' Hammond tapped the arm of his chair; the only outward sign of his unease.

Jack folded his hands together around the pen; tried to keep his expression blank. 'I see.'

'The Joint Chiefs would like to approve the transfer.' Hammond gestured at him. 'From their perspective, a scientist with the Colonel's abilities would never normally spend so much time out in the field; she's too valuable an asset to risk.'

'An asset?'

'Yes, Jack, an asset.' Hammond's calm tone contrasted with Jack's anger. 'You and I both know in normal circumstances she would never have served in a frontline team. The Stargate programme provided her with a unique opportunity.'

'They've left her in place until now so what's changed?' Daniel asked before Jack could reply.

Jack pointed his pen at Daniel. 'What he said.'

'It was believed that whilst the danger to the planet was high, Colonel Carter's talents were best placed at this facility. However, the latest reports indicate that there is a low threat assessment at the present time.'

'At the present time.' Jack shot back. 'We could have another Goa’uld, or Replicator, or God knows what, knocking on the gate tomorrow.'

'I know that.' Hammond sighed. 'But you're going to have to provide me with more than that for me to be able to refuse a transfer request at this level.'

'It is a request though and not an order?' Daniel checked.

Hammond nodded. 'For the moment.'

Jack searched for a reply. 'General, you know yourself that Carter's just lost her father. She's broken off her engagement. Teal'c's leaving tomorrow. The last thing she needs right now is a transfer away from her support network and everything familiar to her.'
'Is that your professional opinion?' Hammond challenged.

Jack froze at the question. 'My professional opinion, sir.' He shot back. 'As is my assessment that she is too valuable an asset,' he spat the word out, 'for the SGC to lose.'

'I agree with Jack, General Hammond.' Daniel said quietly.

Jack could have hugged Daniel at that moment but he kept his attention on Hammond. 'Permission to speak freely, sir.'

Hammond nodded. 'Go ahead.'

'What the hell is going on?'

Hammond sighed. 'As you know the SGC is considered to be a maverick organisation by some members of the Pentagon.'

'Maverick?' Daniel asked.

'It's felt that we don't maintain the same level of discipline and order that the rest of the military adhere to.'

Jack frowned. 'That's just a crock of…'

'Truth, Jack.' Hammond inclined his head slightly. 'If we did maintain the same level, you would never have made it to that chair. Hell, you'd probably be doing time in a jail cell right now with some of the stunts you've pulled.'

Jack winced. 'We're a unique organisation with unique challenges, sir…'

'You don't have to convince me of that, Jack.' Hammond stabbed a finger on the top of the desk. 'I helped build this place.'

'Yes, you did, sir.' Jack murmured recognising that what Hammond should have said was that he had built the place.

'However, the Pentagon has a different opinion and the truth is, Jack, that the SGC had more leverage with them when Earth was continually under attack. Now that the Replicators have been vanquished, the Goa'uld, and in particular, Anubis, have been effectively neutralised as a threat especially with the Jaffa rebellion, there are some people who feel it's time to flex their muscle and bring the SGC in line regardless of it's unique mandate.'

'So you're saying because we did our jobs and got the results doing it our way, they're going to come in and change everything?' Daniel checked. 'Is it me or does that not make any sense?'

'I don't think you're wrong, son.' Hammond said. 'Truth is that some believe the ship-building programme should get greater priority than the Stargate at this point.'

'Why are you retiring? Why aren't you staying to fight this?' Jack asked.

'If I thought it would do any good I'd stay but the truth is I know I won't get through to them.'

'But you think I would?' Jack asked alluding to Hammond's recommendation of him as his successor.

'I think you have the practical field experience that even the Joint Chiefs would have a hard time
arguing with, yes.' Hammond said.

Jack sighed and threw down his pen. 'I can't take the job.'

'Why not?'

'Seriously, sir? Let's face it; a week in a desk job dealing with the Joint Chiefs and I would be facing a court martial.' Jack said.

Hammond laughed. Jack's sense of humour was one of the reasons he just downright liked the other man so much. 'But that's not the reason why you're turning it down?' He asked perceptively.

'Not the complete reason, no.' Jack admitted without expanding further.

Hammond suspected that Jack's feelings for a certain blonde Colonel were factoring somewhere in the mix but he determined this was one of those times when it was better not to ask. 'Well, I can't say I'm not disappointed with your decision.'

'Ah come on, General, you have to have a better candidate than me waiting in the wings.' Jack protested unconsciously picking up the pen again. He had a lot of respect for Hammond and hated the fact that he was disappointing the other man.

'You'd be surprised, Jack, at how few candidates there are with your unique combination of skills and experiences, not to mention familiarity with the uniqueness of this facility.' Hammond sighed.

Daniel saved Jack from having to make a reply. 'So, how do we get the Joint Chiefs to back off transferring Sam?'

Hammond looked at Jack. 'Do you have any medical evidence to back up your command perspective on her state of mind?'

'No.' Jack said. 'Our new CMO arrives tomorrow though and I could order Carter to take a full physical and psych evaluation.'

'Do it. I'll delay my decision to the Joint Chiefs until I receive the medical report.' Hammond said. 'But if the results don't back up your own position, Jack, it's going to be difficult to keep her at the SGC as much as I don't want to see her transferred either.'

Jack nodded. 'I understand, sir.'

Hammond got to his feet and Jack automatically rose to his. 'Well, it's been a tiring day. I'm going to head to the VIP room Walter set up for me. I'll see you both tomorrow for the ceremony.'

'Yes, General.' Jack slumped back into his chair. He sighed and rubbed his hands furiously through his short crop of grey hair. Carter just being transferred because of military politics…now there was a possibility he hadn't considered.
'You OK?'

Daniel's quiet question got Jack's attention. 'Yeah.' He sighed again. 'Just…' Jack gestured. 'I'd better go talk to her.' He shoved his chair back.

'I'll come with you.' Daniel said.

The SGC was a hive of activity as they made their way through the corridors taking the familiar and well worn path from Jack's office to Carter's lab. She was at her computer sipping on coffee and examining reams of what appeared to be gobbledegook.

Jack knocked on the door. 'You have a minute, Carter?'

'Yes, sir. Of course.' She swivelled in her chair surprised to see him and Daniel both enter the room and felt a quiver of nervousness at the way Jack closed the door and the strange expressions on their faces. She waved at the monitor behind her. 'I was just reviewing the initial spectral analysis of the ZPM.'

'Fascinating.' Jack said insincerely. He cut to the reason for their visit. 'I just got a visit from Hammond.'

'Oh?'

Jack jumped up on the lab table next to her as Daniel hovered close by. 'He's received a transfer request from the Joint Chiefs.' He met her confused eyes. 'For you.'

'Me?' The blue eyes widened.

Jack nodded. 'Apparently, the head of Area 51's SG R&D division is recommending you as his replacement.'

'He is? Wow.' Sam shook her head. 'That's incredible.'

'It is?' Jack hadn't been sure what her response was going to be but he hadn't expected those exact words. To say he was taken aback was an understatement.

'I mean, I don't want the job, sir,' Sam hastily assured him, 'but it's still quite an honour to be recommended.'

'You're sure you don't want the job? Because you seemed kinda excited for a moment there.' Jack said surprised at how even his voice was.

'I don't want the job.' Sam repeated. 'I love my work at the SGC and I love commanding SG1. Why would I want to give that up?' She stilled. 'It is just a request, isn't it, I can turn it down?' Her voice was a little panicked and it was that more than anything that reassured him.

Jack gestured. 'Well, the request technically went to Hammond…'

'So he's turning it down?' Sam checked.

'He's trying to, Carter, but we're going to need to give him better ammunition or his refusal will get shot down in flames and it will end up as an order.' Jack said bluntly.
Daniel explained about the politics and Sam nodded thoughtfully. 'What do we need to do, sir?' Sam asked.

'I've told Hammond that it's my professional opinion that you need to maintain your support network right now.' Jack tried not to squirm as her eyes narrowed on him. 'I'm ordering you to take a full physical and psych evaluation with our new CMO.'

Sam frowned. 'You told him I was on the edge of a breakdown?'

'We didn't say that exactly.' Jack denied.

'What exactly did you say?'

Jack looked at Daniel and indicated he should speak.

Daniel cleared his throat. 'We may have, might have, just implied that if he didn't want to risk your health then you shouldn't be transferred.'

'Oh well, that's a whole lot better.' Sam retorted.

'Ammunition, Carter.' Jack shot back. 'Who's the one person who can overrule an officer of any rank in regards to health matters?'

'The CMO…' Sam answered.

'So?' Jack asked waiting for her to make the connection.

'So our CMO could file a medical report recommending or countermanding a transfer order particularly if she feels it would be detrimental to my health.' Sam chewed her lip. She still wasn't certain she liked the idea of *that* being on her record. 'Maybe there's a different way to approach this, sir.'

'I'm open to suggestions, Carter.' Jack said.

'I know Colonel Mayhew. Maybe I can call him and get him to retract the recommendation.' Sam suggested.

'That might work.' Daniel said.

Jack gestured at the phone. 'So, what are you waiting for?'

Sam slid of the stool with an exasperated sigh and crossed to the phone. She picked it up and dialled the operator number at Nellis. 'You do realise he's probably not even in the office at this time.'

'Doesn't hurt to try, Carter.' Jack said folding his arms.

'Oh hello. Yes, please can you put me through to Colonel Mayhew's office? Thank you.' Sam said as the operator picked up at the other end. The phone rang; once, twice. It would go to his messaging service on the fourth ring, she mused. She straightened suddenly as the phone was picked up.

'Colonel Mayhew.'

Sam recognised the brisk tone of the outgoing Area 51 SG R&D commander immediately. 'Colonel Mayhew, sir. This is Colonel Carter. I hope I'm not calling too late, sir.'
'Not at all, Colonel. What can I do for you?'

'I wanted to thank you for your recommendation, sir and to ask…'

'Hold on a moment, Colonel Carter. What recommendation are you talking about?'

Sam turned her back on Jack and Daniel who were both in their own way making gestures for her to get to the point.

'The recommendation that I succeed you, sir.'

There was a brief silence before Mayhew cleared his throat. 'Colonel, I think there's been a misunderstanding. I recommended my current deputy Lieutenant Colonel Harding to succeed me.'

'Oh.' Sam wondered if it was possible to feel anymore embarrassed than she was right at that moment. Her brow creased with confusion. Jack or Daniel singularly getting the wrong impression she could understand but both of them? It took her a moment to realise Mayhew had continued talking.

'…I considered you but to be frank, Colonel, I felt that you at this point in time your skills would be better employed in lab work and progressing projects rather than in the pure management of them. However, if you want to transfer here I have several projects that have your name written all over them…'

'Thank you, sir, but I'm very happy at the SGC.'

'That's what I thought.' Mayhew cleared his throat. 'Can I ask where you got your information, Colonel?'

'From my chain of command via General Hammond, sir. He's currently reviewing the transfer request from the Joint Chiefs.'

'I see. Perhaps I should speak with him.'

'I think he would appreciate it, sir. He's currently on base here at the SGC.'

'I'll make the call.' Mayhew sighed. 'Off the record, Sam?'

'Of course, sir.'

'There're a lot of rumours circulating about what the Pentagon has in mind for the future of the SGC and the Stargate programme. A lot of nasty political manoeuvring going on and it sounds like they've put you right in the middle of it. Watch your back.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Good night, Sam.'

'Thank you, sir. Good night.'

The phone went dead and Sam hung up thoughtfully. She tapped a finger against the receiver.

'Well?' Jack asked impatiently.

She turned to see both men looking at her anxiously. She crossed her arms over the black t-shirt she wore and sat back down on the stool. 'Mayhew didn't recommend me.'
Jack's eyebrows shot up. 'He didn't?'

She shook her head.

Daniel frowned and adjusted his glasses. 'But if he didn't recommend you then why would General Hammond think that he did?'

'He hinted off the record that it might have something to do with the Pentagon's plans for the future of the SGC.' She couldn't help the shiver that coursed down her spine. 'He warned me to watch my back.'

'Good advice.' Jack said. 'I'd better go tell Hammond.'

'Colonel Mayhew was going to call him, sir.' Sam said.

Jack nodded. He seemed to hesitate before he continued. 'I think you should go ahead with the physical and psych exam. Knowing that you weren't Mayhew's recommendation isn't going to be enough to deny the request. We need as much ammunition as we can get.'

Sam looked at him unhappily. 'What if the report gives me a clean bill of health?' She couldn't believe it would say otherwise; she was coping just fine.

'Then we'll think of something else, Carter. That's what we do.' He sighed. 'Look, just be honest with your answers and let's see what the report says. Frankly, given what you've been through, I should have followed procedure and ordered an evaluation days ago anyway.'

Sam nodded dejectedly. 'Yes, sir.'

Jack jumped down from the table; there was nothing else to say. 'I'll meet you guys later for some dinner?'

'Sure.' Sam and Daniel answered in unison as he disappeared through the door.

Daniel leaned back against the lab table. 'You alright with all this?'

'Not really.' Sam admitted. She tried a smile. 'I will be though.'

'Hang in there, Sam.' Daniel rubbed her arm comfortably.

'Thanks, Daniel.' She gestured at the screen of figures behind her. 'I'd better get back to it.'

Daniel nodded. It was how Sam dealt with things; by losing herself in calculations and equations just like he lost himself in translations and artefacts. He headed to Teal'c's quarters. Teal'c might be leaving but it didn't seem right that he was the only member of the team unaware of the evening's events. He rapped briskly on the door and opened it at Teal'c's call to enter.

'Daniel Jackson.' Teal'c's eyes warmed at the sight of his friend.

'Teal'c.' Daniel gestured. 'You have a minute?'

Teal'c nodded and Daniel stepped into the room closing the door behind him. The archaeologist's eyes widened at the half-filled chest and the already neatly stacked boxes.

'Wow. You've been busy.'

'I have accumulated many things since my arrival here.' Teal'c noted.
'Moving always does that.' Daniel said vaguely. He caught Teal'c questioning head tilt. 'When we move places it always seems to reveal items from the past that we had forgotten we even owned.'

'I have not forgotten any of the items that I own.' Teal'c said firmly.

Daniel smiled. 'I guess it's a human thing.' He gestured for Teal'c to sit and they both took places on the floor sitting cross-legged. Teal'c listened patiently as Daniel filled him in on Hammond's visit and what had happened with Sam in the lab.

'This is indeed concerning, Daniel Jackson.' Teal'c murmured.

'You know I just don't get how Sam transferring to Area 51 fits in.'

'Colonel Carter has a unique understanding of the Stargate and its technology.' Teal'c pointed out. 'If she is removed from the programme it will be weakened by her absence.'

Daniel sighed. 'Because she's not around to make the SGC look good.'

'I agree with your assessment, Daniel Jackson. This appears to be a stratagem to weaken the position of the current SGC and its leaders.'

'But why?' Daniel asked plaintively.

'That I do not know.' Teal'c replied. 'But I have often observed that there are many in your military and government who do not approve of the Stargate programme and who wish it was run differently.'

'But I thought we'd gotten rid of the rogue elements when we cleaned up the NID.'

'It is often the case that when one evil is destroyed, another rises to take its place.' Teal'c said.

'Thanks, Teal'c.' Daniel said dryly. 'That's really...comforting.' He shoved his hands through his hair before gesturing angrily. 'This is just so frustrating. I mean we finally get rid of Anubis, force the remaining Goa'uld to run for the hills and deal with the replicators and...and it's like we're getting punished for it.'

'General Hammond was correct when he stated that the SGC had more power when Earth was under attack.' Teal'c surmised. 'While such threats as Anubis and the replicators existed those wishing to seek changes to the SGC were unable to do so for fear of weakening the planet's defences in its time of crisis.'

'And now we're safe they've finally got an opportunity?' Daniel said. 'As Jack would say that just sucks.' He shook his head and took his glasses off to rub at his eyes. 'It wouldn't surprise me if we ended up with another Bauer in charge.'

Teal'c raised an eyebrow. The temporary assignment of General Bauer, a hardliner and stickler for military protocol, as the SGC commander a few years previously had not been a success. 'That would not be advisable, Daniel Jackson.' His eyes suddenly focused completely on his friend. 'Would O'Neill not remain in place while such a threat to the SGC existed?'

'Yes.' Daniel sighed. 'I guess he would.' Which means Jack wouldn't retire, he thought, and there was no chance that Jack and Sam would get together. He shook his head, wrenched his mind back to the problem at hand. 'There's still a chance whoever succeeds Hammond could be a hard-ass and let's not forget how long Jack lasted with Bauer.'
'Presumably General Hammond is able to name his successor if he was able to offer O'Neill the position.'

'Maybe but I think the President likes Jack so it would have been made it difficult for the Joint Chiefs to have refused. Plus the Pentagon agreed that Jack was the best candidate when he was placed in charge of the SGC so they'd look pretty foolish if they seemed to change their opinion now.' Daniel murmured. He got to his feet and began pacing. 'When Hayes initially took over he believed that it was wrong for the SGC to be solely in the hands of the US military. Why?' He didn't wait for Teal'c to answer but supplied it himself. 'He didn't agree with the programme being led by the military and wanted to give it a friendlier face in case the existence of the programme would be revealed to the public.'

'He appointed Doctor Elizabeth Weir to run the SGC.' Teal'c supplied.

'Yes, he appointed a civilian to run the SGC.' Daniel pointed at him. He continued pacing. 'Until such time as Elizabeth recommended that Jack would be the ideal candidate to lead the SGC in the eyes of the IOA and that's important!' Daniel whirled to face Teal'c. 'That's it! I think I know how to fix this.' He started to back out of the room and beamed at his friend. 'Thanks, Teal'c.'

'I am pleased to have been of assistance, Daniel Jackson.' Teal'c murmured unsure exactly how he had helped. 'Do you require any further…'

'No, no.' Daniel called over his shoulder as he left the room. 'I have to go speak with General Hammond.'

He marched down to the VIP quarters and after checking which room Hammond was occupying knocked on the door.

Hammond opened it. He'd discarded his jacket and tie, had rolled up his shirt sleeves and Daniel could see that he'd interrupted the General's meal.

'I'm sorry, General Hammond, but I need to speak with you urgently.'

Hammond's puzzled eyes regarded Daniel as he gestured for the younger man to enter. He closed the door. 'What can I do for you?'

Daniel turned to face Hammond and the General almost took a step back at the fierce look on the other man's face. 'I know how to save the SGC.'

Hammond took in the intelligence and excitement that gleamed from the younger man's eyes; the same look that had preceded many a plan that had saved the planet. He felt his own diminished hope rising and nodded. 'I'm listening, son.'
'Jack, I'm done with the revisions on your speech...' Daniel stumbled to a halt at the sight of the Amerasian woman sat in Jack's office. Thirty-something, he catalogued. Not military given the simple smart grey suit with a cream blouse. Her brown almost black hair was pinned back in a practical chignon. 'You're not Jack.'

'I hope not.' She flashed a smile at him and her almond-shaped brown eyes lit up.

'I'm sorry.' Daniel shuffled the folders he held and stretched out a hand. 'I'm Daniel Jackson.'

She rose to her feet gracefully and shook his hand. 'I'm Doctor Carolyn Lam.'

'I'm a doctor too. Archaeology.'

'I'm a doctor, doctor.' Carolyn said. 'A medical doctor.'

'Oh. Oh, you must be the new CMO?' Daniel let go of her hand. 'I think Jack mentioned you were starting today.'

'It's quite a first day.' Carolyn Lam wished fervently for her lab coat so she could have something to do with her hands. She settled for placing them behind her back.

'Yeah. I imagine finding out the President's coming to visit on the same day you start is a bit…'

'Terrifying.' Carolyn supplied.

'Daniel, there you are. I've been looking for you everywhere.' Jack barrelled into his office only seeing the archaeologist before his brown eyes landed on the woman standing next to him. 'Carolyn. You're here already.' He gave a delighted smile. 'Welcome to the mad house.' He turned back to his friend. 'Daniel, do you have the…'

'Revisions.' Daniel handed him the folder.

'Thank you, thank you, thank you.' Jack grasped the folder like a lifeline before seeming to realise the tableau he'd interrupted. 'Oh, did you two kids introduce yourselves?'

Daniel nodded. 'I'll leave you to it.' He had hoped to find Jack alone; their session on the speech early in the morning hadn't been conducive to telling Jack about his conversation with Hammond, a conversation that had turned into a planning session that had meant he'd missed dinner with his team-mates. It looked like he wasn't going to get any time alone with Jack before the President arrived to warn him of the plan. He repressed the urge to sigh. 'It was nice meeting you, Doctor Lam.'

'Carolyn, please.' She said as they shook hands again.

'Oh you two should definitely be on a first name basis.' Jack joked. 'Daniel spends a lot of time in the infirmary.'

'Thanks, Jack.'

'My pleasure, Daniel.' Jack waved him out of his office with the folder. 'And thanks for this.'

'Yeah, I'm adding it to the list.' Daniel said over his shoulder.
'What list?' Jack called as he disappeared from sight.

Carolyn Lam looked up at him with an expression that was a mixture of curiosity and bemusement.

'Sorry, Carolyn,' Jack closed the open office door to the corridor and glanced over to make sure the briefing room entrance was also shut. 'It's been kind of a crazy day.'

'It's only oh-eight-hundred.' Carolyn noted.

'President's visiting,' Jack explained blithely, 'everybody was up early.' It had been oh-five-hundred when he'd woken Daniel to ask for help with the speech. He gestured for her to take a seat. 'How're you? How's Hank? And your Mom?'

'Mom's fine. You probably know better than me how Dad is and I'm, well, to be honest, I'm a little nervous.'

Jack nodded. 'You're going to be great, Carolyn.'

'I managed to read through most of the medical files that you sent me.' She shook her head. 'You weren't kidding about the strange diseases were you? Some of the stuff your previous medical officers have had to deal with, it's mind-boggling.'

'You're still interested though, right?' Jack asked.

'You kidding?' Carolyn smiled. 'I can't wait to get started.' Her eyes shone brightly at him. 'I can't thank you enough for the opportunity.'

Jack shrugged away her gratitude. 'I'm glad I finally convinced you to take the job. You would have made my life a lot easier if you'd accepted it last year.'

She sighed. 'I know but you've known me a long time…'

'Since you were a little girl in pig-tails when I served with your father.' Jack commented.

'And you know how I feel about the military.' She finished. 'If it was anyone else but you in charge, General…'

'Well, I'm glad you changed your mind.' Jack sobered. 'I know you'll want time to speak with your staff, see the infirmary, get settled in and all but I have a pressing evaluation that I need you to schedule.'

'Oh?' Carolyn's interest perked up at his serious tone.

'I've ordered Colonel Carter to report to you for a full physical and psych evaluation.' Jack explained.

'Colonel Carter.' Carolyn mentally reviewed the personnel files she'd received; Carter was the commander of the SG1 team and the General's former team-mate. She was looking forward to meeting the other woman. 'She recently lost her father right?'

Jack nodded. He gestured at her. 'It's pretty much standard procedure but I am going to need your report ASAP and I'd like you to copy it directly to General Hammond. Specifically we need you to comment on whether a transfer from her current position would be appropriate at this time.'

Carolyn regarded him for a long moment. 'And if my report recommends that she can be transferred?'
'Then that's what it will recommend.' Jack said simply.

Carolyn nodded. 'OK. I'll schedule the evaluation for first thing tomorrow.'

'Good.' Jack rose. 'I'll get someone to show you to the infirmary. This place is a bit of a maze until you get used to it.'

Carolyn nodded appreciatively and felt a twang of sympathy as a dozen officers descended on the General's office as the SF showed her back to the elevator. A couple of hours later with her short team talk over and her rounds of the current patient roster completed, she decided to go in search of Colonel Carter to schedule the eval personally.

She found the lab where she was assured the Colonel would be on her third attempt. She took a moment to examine the other woman without her being aware of her presence, acknowledging to herself that she was already beginning the evaluation. The Colonel was more beautiful in person than her photo and strangely, she suited the dress blues of her Air Force uniform. But even in the dim lighting of the lab, the doctor in her was already noting how loose the uniform seemed, the vague hint of shadows under the Colonel's eyes and the wan complexion. She wasn't sleeping, maybe not eating, Carolyn surmised. It wasn't unusual during the grieving process.

Carolyn rapped sharply on the open door and found herself pinned by two very startled, very blue eyes. 'Hi.'

Sam blinked as though to reassure herself she wasn't imagining the Amerasian woman in a white lab coat standing in her doorway. 'Hi.'

'I'm Doctor Carolyn Lam.' Carolyn entered quickly and held out her hand to the blonde Colonel.

'Lieutenant Colonel Samantha Carter.' Sam shook hands a little nervously. She had been intending to report to the infirmary after the President's visit; it looked like the new doctor had beaten her to it.

'I understand you're also a doctor of theoretical astrophysics?' Carolyn checked.

'Yes, I am.' Sam confirmed.

'Do you prefer Colonel or Doctor?'

'I prefer Colonel as my formal salutation.' Sam said and hearing how stiffly she'd phrased her reply, smiled to soften the words. 'But otherwise, please call me Sam.'

'Thank you, and please call me Carolyn.'

Sam's smile widened a little at the friendly warmth the other woman exuded. She hadn't felt this comfortable with a doctor since...since Janet. Her smile fell away suddenly and she looked down at the file she was reading to regain her control before she raised her eyes back to the doctor.

Carolyn noted the behaviour and mentally filed it away. She was getting a clearer idea why the General had ordered the evaluation. 'As much as I would love to claim this was purely a personal visit, I'm afraid I do have an agenda; General O'Neill wanted me to schedule a full evaluation with you.'

'I intended to stop by the infirmary after the President's visit.' Sam hurried to explain.

'I was thinking tomorrow morning?' Carolyn suggested. 'I'd like to review your file. I recall you
have some anomalies in your blood work.'

'That's right. I have a protein marker left after my experience as a host for a Tok'ra symbiote called Jolinar.' Sam explained. 'I'd be happy to explain it to you if we could do the eval today.'

Carolyn nodded slowly. 'Well, General O'Neill did say he wanted the report ASAP.' She mentally checked her schedule. 'Sixteen hundred?'

'Sixteen hundred. I'll be there.' Sam confirmed with relief. The sooner they got the damned thing out of the way the better. Her eyes flickered to the clock. 'Uh-oh. We'd better get upstairs to welcome the President.'

'Am I meant to be doing that?' Carolyn checked a little panicked.

'You're the CMO.' Sam said. She assumed the CMO would be in the welcome line-up. 'Come on, I'll show you the way.'

'This is a hell of a first day.' Carolyn mumbled as they got in the elevator. 'Is it always like this?'

'Pretty much.' Sam said. 'You'll get used to it.'

'I...uh...wanted to offer my condolences on your loss.' Carolyn said a little hesitantly.

She felt the Colonel stiffen beside her. 'Thank you.'

'I believe our fathers served together.' Carolyn said.

Sam's eyes snapped back to the doctor. 'Your father's military?'

'Actually he's another Air Force General. You've probably have heard of him. Hank Landry?'

'You're General Landry's daughter?'

Carolyn nodded.

'Wow.' Sam shook her head. 'So I guess you're another military brat.'

'Not quite.' Carolyn admitted. 'My parents broke up when I was young.'

The elevator doors opened before Sam could reply and they hurried into the next elevator which took them to the entrance of the facility where there was already a line of people waiting along with an honour guard. Carolyn noticed members of the Secret Service were also in place as they all waited for the President's car to arrive. She followed Sam to the top of the line.

General O'Neill seemed to be having problems with his tie and Doctor Jackson was trying to fix it.

'Will you just stand still?' Daniel muttered. 'I can't believe you got to be General without knowing how to get your tie right.'

'You're not doing it right.' Jack complained.

'Colonel Carter has arrived. Perhaps she can assist you O'Neill.' Teal'c said. He was in his good Jaffa robes having decided to eschew Earth dress for the occasion.

Jack's eyes landed on Sam with relief. 'Carter, can you give me a hand here?'
'Of course, sir.' She nudged Daniel who relinquished his place.

It only took Sam two seconds to fix the problem.

'How do you do that?' Daniel asked.

'It's just a question of physics.' Sam murmured as she stepped back and Jack smiled at her gratefully.

'Physics?' Daniel repeated.

'And years of doing my Dad's tie.' Sam admitted.

Carolyn saw the way all three men automatically inched closer to the Colonel supportively. They were all worried about her, she realised, not just the General, and yet with the presence of the rest of her team the Colonel seemed…calmer, more confident. The sound of an approaching car prevented any further conversation.

'Places, kids.' Jack muttered.

Carolyn found herself ushered into place and by the time the President's car drew up they were all neatly in position. It was a military thing, Carolyn guessed.

The President was the first man out of the limo. He was dressed in a formal three-piece dark grey suit with a silk blue tie. His mop of grey hair was swept back from his well-worn face and his keenly intelligent blue eyes took in the waiting line with satisfaction. Carolyn smiled at the second man out of the car. General George Hammond. She was delighted when his blue eyes landed on her and he gave her a small smile of acknowledgement as he took his place beside the President. She jolted a little as there was a yell to come to attention.

'General O'Neill.' President Henry Hayes returned the brisk salute shook Jack's hand firmly. 'It's good to see you again.'

'Likewise, sir.' Jack's smile was genuine. He actually really liked Hayes; for a politician the other man was a stand-up guy. 'You remember the SG1 team? Lieutenant Colonel Samantha Carter.'

Another salute; another handshake. 'Of course. A pleasure as always Colonel Carter.'

'Thank you, sir.' Sam replied.

'Doctor Daniel Jackson.' Jack continued as they moved down the line.

'Good to see you again, Doctor Jackson.' Hayes shook hands with the archaeologist.

'Mr President.' Daniel inclined his head slightly.

'And Teal'c.'

Teal'c bowed his head solemnly and Hayes followed the gesture a little awkwardly. 'Teal'c. Let me congratulate you on your victory at Dakara and the success of the Jaffa rebellion.' He figured it would only be a matter of time before he would be speaking to the Jaffa on an equal basis. By all accounts, it seemed everyone expected Teal'c to lead the new Free Jaffa nation.

'Thank you, Mr President,' Teal'c said, 'it would never have been possible without the help of our friends of the Tau'ri.'
I'm hoping we have an opportunity today to discuss with you how best we can help your people going forward.’ Hayes replied.

‘That would be greatly appreciated, Mr President.’ Teal'c's expression revealed nothing of his pleasure in the offer.

‘And this is our new CMO, Doctor Carolyn Lam.’ Jack winked at her as Carolyn reached forward to shake the President's hand.

'I understand this is your first day?’ Hayes smiled sympathetically.

'Yes, sir.’ Carolyn replied.

'Well, good luck with the new job, Doctor.’

'Thank you, sir.’ She breathed out as Jack moved on further down the line introducing Sergeant Harriman, Sergeant Siler, more division heads before they ran out of people and headed into the base.

Carolyn was with the rest of the SG1 team as they made their way back into the bowels of the mountain. She stood back, happy to watch as the three team members speculated on whether Jack would stick to his speech. They weren't exclusive either, Daniel pulled Siler into the discussion; the Colonel pulled in Doctor Lee. She figured if they had known her better she would have been included, as it was one of them would turn and smile at her occasionally to make sure she didn't feel left out. She was surprised at the sense of loss as she stepped off at the infirmary level; she had enjoyed the camaraderie. She looked back at the closed doors of the elevator thoughtfully before she headed for her office. According to Sergeant Harriman she wasn't needed until the speech in the gate room which gave her just enough time to review Colonel Carter's file.
The door was barely closed on Jack's office when the President unbuttoned his jacket and sat down with a sigh of relief. Jack handed Hayes a cup of coffee before he took his own seat and picked up his own delicate china cup nervously.

'So,' Hayes leaned forward and made eye contact, 'I have to tell ya, Jack that George told me your decision already.'

Jack swallowed in surprise. 'He did?'

Hayes kept the eye contact. 'He also told me the plan for you retiring and running the SGC as a civilian.'

Jack almost choked on his coffee. He set the cup back down, tried to act blasé. Had he had a stroke and forgotten telling Hammond he wanted to retire? 'Oh that plan and here I had a whole speech prepared.' He joked to cover his shock.

'I think it's a great idea.' Hayes said.

'You do?' Jack stared at the President.

'Well, as George explained refreshing the senior military chain of command here at the base and at the Homeworld office may help to satisfy the Joint Chiefs in regards to some of the perceived disciplinary problems.'

'Yes, there's that.' Jack said bemused.

'But with you in place as a civilian leader we retain your skills and experiences and your understanding of how this operation needs to run. It'll certainly keep the IOA happy.' Hayes leaned back. 'I also agree with the suggestion that your new civilian position would report directly to me and would be the lead for the SGC as opposed to the senior military position. It brings the SGC back in line with what I originally intended.' He grinned. 'I have to admit it, Jack, you've all come up with a heck of a solution. I really think this idea is the right plan for the SGC going forward.'

Jack blinked at him. 'I'm sorry, sir. It could be the early start this morning but did you just agree that I'll retire but remain at the SGC as a civilian leader with a direct reporting structure to you? And that you think this is a good idea?'

'That's right.' Hayes said cheerfully. 'Like I said, George explained the plan to me this morning.' He peered at the General across the table from him. 'Are you OK, Jack, you seem a little shell-shocked?'

'I'm fine, sir.' Jack said trying to recover from the feeling that he'd stepped into an alternate reality somewhere between the elevator and his office.

'Good because there's a lot of work to do.' Hayes said. 'It's going to take time to find the right candidates for the new senior military position here and obviously George's replacement. I'm sure you'll have recommendations as will the Joint Chiefs but I am giving final approval to George. I agree with Doctor Jackson's argument that George is best placed to understand the right mix of personality and military discipline required in both positions.'

Jack blinked at the President; had he just said Doctor Jackson's argument?
'Until George makes his decisions on the candidates,' Hayes continued, 'you'll remain on active duty. You should know I've already made a call to the Joint Chiefs this morning to inform them of the restructuring plan.' He smiled. 'It came as something of a shock to them.'

'I'm sure it did, sir.' Jack would have paid money to have witnessed their reaction to the news.

'I've also informed them that while I don't usually interfere with individual assignments, I am supporting George's refusal of their transfer request regarding Colonel Carter. The restructuring will require the knowledge and experience of your senior staff especially one with specialist expertise in the Stargate.'

'Thank you, sir.' Jack said.

'Your retirement will become official once I'm convinced we have everything in place to make the new structure a success. I'm sure there's a ton of procedures that will need revision.'

'We'll get right on it.' Jack confirmed.

'Good.' Hayes nodded in satisfaction. 'So, tell me, what else has been happening here since the last time you guys saved the world?' He asked moving the conversation on.

Jack sighed in relief and began his usual report. A brief knock on the door sometime later had both men rising to their feet.

'I guess it's speech time.' Hayes murmured looking at his watch. 'Thanks for the update, Jack.'

'My pleasure, Mr President.'

They stepped out into the briefing area and were quickly hurried down the stairs to the gate room. It was filled with most of the squadron and the civilian personnel; a few personnel remained in place to ensure the base security was maintained. There was a certain degree of pomp and ceremony as the President walked up the ramp and took his place at the lectern with the Stargate providing a dramatic backdrop.

Jack took his place by Hammond who carefully avoided Jack's eyes as the President began his speech.

'I don't often get the opportunity to come out here as much as I'd like,' Hayes began, 'not only because I love to see the Stargate in action and wonder at the technology that has made our journey into the stars possible or to see first hand some of the strange discoveries I read avidly in your mission reports.' There was a smattering of laughter. 'But because it is too rare that I can openly recognise the achievements of this facility and the incredible job that it does in protecting Earth while at the same time accelerating the development of the entire human race. Each and everyone of you plays an important role in your success and I have nothing but praise and amazement for your continued ability to provide us with an effective first line of defence and to sustain alliances that will hopefully continue to benefit our planet for a long time to come.' He paused and looked around the room. 'For your recent achievements, on behalf of myself and every citizen of this planet, I thank you.'

Hayes accepted the applause and whoops before he stepped aside with a wave to let Jack take the stand.

Jack kept a smile fixed to his face as he took the lectern and shuffled the papers so his own speech sat before him. God, he hated public speaking. Maybe he'd get lucky and the Asgard would beam him out before he actually began.
There was an expectant silence in the room.

Crap, Jack thought, no Asgard. He cleared his throat. 'I'd firstly like to thank the President for his words and for honouring us once again with a personal visit. It is our pleasure and privilege to serve...’ he settled into the speech happily recalling from memory the lines Daniel had forced him to learn that morning so they rolled off his tongue naturally. 'And finally, I'd like to remind everyone that we have a special celebratory lunch today in the commissary. And finally, finally,' he noticed Daniel's surprise as he changed the wording, 'I'd like to add my own personal thanks to everyone here for their continued support and hard work. You folks are truly the best. Thank you.'

There was another round of applause and whooping before Jack ushered the President down the ramp and out of the gate room. He vaguely heard the yell as the squadron was dismissed behind them. The commissary had been rearranged for the Presidential visit and its small area was soon packed. Hayes stayed longer than they expected and luncheon was almost over before Jack finally escorted him back up to the surface with Hammond.

'As always a pleasure, Jack.' Hayes shook his hand, returned the salute and turned to Hammond. Another salute and a handshake. 'I'll see you back in Washington, George.'

'Yes sir.' Hammond agreed. He and Jack stepped back as the President disappeared into his limo and the convoy of vehicles drove away.

'I guess we should get back to the party.' Hammond noted.

Jack waited until they were alone in the elevator before he stuck his hands in his pockets and glanced at the two star General beside him. 'So...you'll forgive me sir but when exactly did we discuss my plan to retire and run the SGC as a civilian?'

Hammond smiled at him. 'Our apologies, Jack. Daniel and I only put the finishing touches on the plan this morning before I left to meet Air Force One and there was no time to discuss it with you before you saw the President. Daniel did mention you had briefly discussed the idea with him before?'

'In passing.' Jack said trying for a light tone.

'He's a clever man, Jack.' Hammond said. 'It's a good plan. The Pentagon's power will be restricted but they get new personnel here. You remain leading the SGC and the President's happy.'

'That's Daniel.' Jack murmured. 'He's the best at this stuff.'

'That he is.' Hammond smiled.

Jack shook his head. Trust Daniel to come through for them; he always did as did the man in front of him.

'Off the record, Jack?' Hammond said quietly.

Jack nodded.

'You know why I like you so much?'

'My rugged good looks and sparkling wit?' Jack suggested.

'In all the time I've known you, you've never truly asked for anything for yourself.' Hammond said. 'For your team, for others, for the safety of the planet but not for you. Daniel pointed out to me that
you would probably have remained in place at the SGC, maybe even have taken the Homeworld job after all, while there was a threat to our operational approach.'

'General…'

'Let me finish, Jack.' Hammond squared his shoulders as he met the younger man's eyes. 'I'm not unaware of the personal sacrifice that you would have made if you had taken the job, or indeed the personal sacrifices you have made in the past. I know you and Sam care deeply for one another and please,' he held up a hand, 'don't give me that bull about her just being a valuable member of your team.'

'Nothing has ever…' Jack began.

'I know that, son.' Hammond said quickly. 'Neither of you has ever given me cause to doubt the job comes first, heck, Jack, you even shot her when she got taken over by that alien. But the fact is I should have separated you both a long time ago.' He sighed. 'Back when I ran the SGC, I felt the unique combination of talents within SG1 was integral to our success. Now, that might have been the right decision for the safety of the planet but whichever way you slice the cake, I did you both a disservice as people.' He noted how uncomfortable the other man looked at being forced to discuss the situation directly and decided to wrap it up. 'When Daniel explained how his plan could solve our wider political issues, it seemed like a good opportunity for me to correct that disservice.'

Jack shuffled his feet a little, glanced back across at Hammond. 'I think I owe you a big thank you.'

'You don't owe me anything, Jack.' Hammond said. 'As I recall I still owed you for getting me reassigned to the SGC after that business with the NID threats to my family.'

'Ah that.' Jack smiled. 'Well, consider that debt repaid. Thank you, sir.'

Hammond nodded. Given Jack had told him once that the price was Jack's soul that was quite an admission. T'd thank Daniel if I were you. It was really his plan and he formulated the arguments I used with the President.'

Jack nodded slowly and the two men smiled at each other.

'So…' said Jack as he searched for something that changed the topic.

'I understand Teal'c's leaving at fifteen hundred for Dakara?' Hammond jumped in.

'Yes sir.' Jack confirmed gratefully. 'You staying for it?'

'I'd like that.' Hammond said.

They stepped out of the elevator and headed back to the commissary as Jack filled his CO in on what they had planned for Teal'c's send off. They separated at the entrance and Jack entered the milling crowd. He looked for Sam first. He always did. He found her talking with Daniel and Teal'c. She suddenly looked over in his direction and smiled at him. He made his way across the room to them and, because he couldn't help himself without warning or regard for how it might look, swept Daniel into a bear-hug. Sam and Teal'c glanced at each other amused.

'Jack?' Daniel asked a little worriedly.

Jack released him, patted his cheeks and stepped back leaving Daniel to adjust his glasses and smooth his tie. 'Thank you.'
'The speech really wasn't that good.' Daniel said bemused.

'Not for the speech.' Jack said as he accepted the glass of juice Sam handed to him.

Daniel smiled happily. 'He went for it?'

'Thinks it's a great idea.' Jack confirmed taking a gulp of his juice. 'Hammond's planning to announce the news within the next couple of days, get the ball rolling.'

'What news?' Sam asked.

'I believe it involves Daniel Jackson's plan to prevent the SGC falling into the hands of another General Bauer.' Teal'c said.

Daniel caught Sam's inquisitive look. 'I'll tell you later.'

Sam was about to demand that he tell her immediately when her eyes caught on the clock. She gestured with a jerk of her head at the time.

Jack followed her gaze and felt his good mood dim a little.

Teal'c watched them and felt his own spirits drop. 'It is almost time for me to depart, O'Neill.'

'Ahh, Teal'c, before you go,' Daniel said, 'there's been something I've been meaning to give you but it's still in my office.'

'Why don't you two go pick it up and we'll meet you in the gate room?' Jack suggested casually.

'Great idea.' Daniel said. 'Shall we?'

'After you, Daniel Jackson.' Teal'c followed the archaeologist through the base to his office. He anticipated that it was nothing more than a delaying tactic for whatever surprise O'Neill had planned for his departure but after years of living with the Tau'ri he had no wish to spoil the pleasure that the others would elicit from the moment of revelation.

Daniel hunted through his office although he knew exactly where he'd placed the item in question. He finally picked up a box he had hidden out of sight at the side of his bookshelf. It contained a small, beautiful wooden table with fifty-holes drilled into the varnished lacquer.

Teal'c recognised it immediately; it was an original Jackal and Hounds game from Ancient Egypt, one that he and the younger man often played together. He had owned it once previously when the other man had ascended but on Daniel's return he had insisted on returning the game to its rightful owner.

'I want you to have this, Teal'c.'

Teal'c stared at Daniel for a long moment, a muscle working silently in his jaw. He bowed his head. 'I am honoured, Daniel Jackson. Be assured that I will take good care of your gift.'

Daniel felt a lump in his throat. 'I know you will, Teal'c. And hey, I expect to have a game every time I visit you on Dakara.'

'Then you will have to visit me often, Daniel Jackson, so we can maintain our knowledge and skill of the game.' Teal'c said huskily.

Daniel nodded. 'Deal.' He glanced at the clock. 'I guess we'd better get you to the gate room.'
'I will need to retrieve my staff weapon.' Teal'c said.

'Sure. We can do that.' Daniel hurried him out of the office and it wasn't long before they had the staff weapon and were walking through the door to the gate room which was already awash in the eerie blue light from the outgoing wormhole.

Teal'c stumbled to a halt. He had suspected a surprise but nothing on the scale of what had been done. The room was filled again with people. More were gathered in the control room. There were easily more people in attendance than had been crammed into the room for the Presidential visit. He nodded an acknowledgement to many as he made his way to the ramp where there was a short line of people waiting to say goodbye to him.

Daniel quietly placed the box containing the game on the waiting buggy that would take the rest of Teal'c's belongings through to Dakara. He slipped into place on the opposite side of Sam as the stunned Jaffa came to stand in front of the man who had once commanded the SGC.

'Goodbye, Teal'c.' Hammond said solemnly. 'Words cannot express my gratitude to you for what you have helped us achieve.'

'Nor my gratitude to you, General Hammond.' Teal'c placed a clenched fist across his chest as he bowed his head.

Hammond nodded and stepped off the ramp to leave Teal'c to say a goodbye to his team.

'Daniel Jackson.' Teal'c firmed his lips as a sudden wave of emotion hit him. This man, more than any other, should have hated him and yet he had forgiven him and more than that, had befriended him. 'I am honoured to consider you my friend and my brother.'

Daniel stepped forward and hugged Teal'c hard before he let him go. 'Take care, Teal'c.' There were tears glimmering in Daniel's eyes as he stepped back.

Teal'c turned and found himself embraced by Colonel Carter. He hugged her gently. 'I wish I could stay with you at this time, Colonel Carter, but I cannot.' He whispered.

'I know, Teal'c.' Tears choked her voice. She hurriedly eased back.

'You are my sister, Colonel Carter,' Teal'c stated his fondness for her coating every word, 'I wish you will always be welcome in my house.'

Sam bit her lip to keep control, tears shimmering in her eyes and Teal'c couldn't look at her anymore.

He focused instead on the man who had changed his life, who had given him hope and who had believed in him. 'O'Neill.'

'Teal'c.' Jack's voice was rough with the emotions he was suppressing.

'You are my brother and it has been a great honour to serve at your side. My people and I owe you a great debt. Should you need me, O'Neill, know that I am yours to call upon.' Teal'c murmured.

Jack couldn't wait any longer. He hugged Teal'c. 'Back at ya, Teal'c.' He forced himself to stand back, let the Jaffa go. He gave a sharp nod to the control room and the buggy rolled forward through the wormhole. Teal'c looked again at his team-mates as they shifted to stand in a line at the bottom of the ramp. They had fought together, saved each other together and were bonded in ways few could ever know or experience. They were his family. He bowed his head.
Hammond called the order for attention, for the salute of honour. Every man and woman gathered followed it whole-heartedly. Jack's hand snapped up as did Sam's; Daniel followed the Jaffa tradition of a fist across the chest.

Teal'c blinked hard against the press of his own tears. He executed his own salute and with a final look at his SG1 team-mates, whirled away and into the wormhole. The event horizon disappeared leaving a gaping hole in the middle of the Stargate.
Carolyn checked her watch and wondered whether doing a fourteen hour shift on her first day was setting a dangerous precedent. She had wandered to the General's office expecting to leave her finished report on Colonel Carter on his desk. It was a surprise to find him still hard at work although he had changed from formal dress to the more comfortable BDU. His grey head was bent over a report that was cast in a yellow glow from the single lit desk lamp. She tapped on the door.

His warm brown eyes snapped up. 'Carolyn.' He was surprised to see she was still on base. 'You still here?'

'First day.' Carolyn said by way of explanation. 'I could ask you the same question, sir.'

He smiled wryly. 'You wouldn't believe the paperwork that a visit from the President generates.'

'I believe I might.' Carolyn laughed. 'Do you have a minute, sir?'

'Of course.' He waved her in and she closed the door behind her.

She handed him the folder she held and sat down in one of the visitor chairs. 'My completed report on Colonel Carter.'

'I thought you were doing that tomorrow.' Jack said rubbing his face tiredly. He'd completely forgotten to tell Sam and Carolyn there was no longer any need for it given the President's intervention.

'She was anxious to complete it as soon as possible and I saw no reason to delay.' Carolyn said easily. 'I've already emailed you and General Hammond a soft-copy.'

'So?' Jack asked tapping the buff folder. 'What's the verdict?'

'Physically, there's nothing a few night's sleep and a better diet wouldn't fix.' Carolyn began, trying to feel comfortable speaking about a patient and silently reminding herself the normal restrictions of confidentiality didn't apply in the military.

'And psychologically?' Jack prompted.

'Bluntly, she puts up a good front but she's a mess.' Carolyn said. 'I don't believe Colonel Carter has even begun to address a lot of what she's endured in the last year. She's suppressed a lot by focusing on whatever current situation or problem is screaming for attention and because she's fundamentally a strong woman.' She sighed. 'But it's my professional opinion that with the most recent loss of her father she's keeping control through sheer willpower at this point.' She looked at Jack's serious face. 'But you knew all that before I examined her.'

Jack ignored her comment. 'Your recommendations?'

'I definitely don't recommend transferring her out of the SGC at this time.' Carolyn confirmed. 'Equally I'm against ordering her to take an enforced leave of absence. She does have a support network here and that's helping her maintain her balance.' She sighed. 'I do recommend putting SG1 on stand down for the foreseeable future. She definitely shouldn't be commanding out in the field.'

'Understood.' Jack said. 'That shouldn't be a problem. We're waiting for the arrival of a new team
member and he doesn't transfer for another month.'

'It may be longer than a month, General.' Carolyn said firmly. 'In addition to the stand down, I'd like to start her with a grief counsellor.'

'A shrink?' Jack's eyebrows shot up.

'A grief counsellor.' Carolyn reiterated. 'I'd like to try her with Doctor Kenny. She's one of the more mature female counsellors on staff at the Academy hospital. I think it would be a good fit.'

'A grief counsellor. She's going to love that.' Jack sighed. 'Anything else?'

Carolyn nodded. 'I'd like to re-examine her in a month. Take a view with her counsellor at that point.'

'Thank you.' Jack said.

'I'd like her to report to me tomorrow so we can arrange the first counselling session. The sooner we get her started the better.' Carolyn said rising to her feet.

'I'll inform her.' Jack confirmed. He responded absently to her goodnight before he locked the papers on his desk away. He headed to the locker room, changed into civvies and headed to the surface. Daniel had called him earlier to tell him he was taking Sam home. He figured he'd catch up with them there.

She was going to hate the results of the evaluation, he mused as he drove away from the mountain, but it should support the President's denial of the request and prevent any further discussion of a transfer. All in all, it was working out quite well. The President had approved the plan for him to retire and continue working at the SGC as a civilian and Sam and Daniel were effectively going to be restricted to the base for the next month which meant he got to spend more time with both of them. The only downside was losing Teal'c. They had all been crushed when the wormhole had disappeared…

Jack dimly heard Hammond dismiss everyone as he slowly lowered his hand. He was grateful; he wasn't sure he could talk. He was vaguely aware of people filing out of the gate room but his attention remained on the Stargate, his mind's eye still seeing the shimmering puddle of blue of the event horizon.

'He really left.' Daniel murmured in disbelief.

'Yeah, he really left.' Jack repeated gruffly. He glanced over at the archaeologist and realised that the younger man's face was wet. Sam looked up at him and Jack felt his heart lurch at the sight of her surreptitiously swiping away her own tears. It had been too much for her too. Jack felt the press of tears against the back of his own throat; hell, it had almost been too much for him.

He cleared his throat and rocked back on his heels. 'Is anyone else hungry? I don't know about you kids but I didn't eat a lot at that lunch.'

'A snack sounds good, sir.' Sam sniffed.

'Sure. Why not?' Daniel agreed. 'I hear Chef made peach pie.'

'Pie's good.' Jack said as he led them out of the gate room. 'I could go for pie.'

'You can always go for pie.' Daniel commented wryly.
Looking back, Jack realised, everybody else had given them space as they'd made their way to the commissary and sat down with a slice of pie each. Of course he and Daniel had ended up eating most of Sam's but the time had let them regain their equilibrium and adjust to their first hour without Teal'c even though they'd spent most of it reminiscing. They might have spent longer if Sam hadn't suddenly glanced at the clock and shot off...probably to the evaluation with Carolyn, Jack deduced in hindsight. He sighed. It was less than five hours without Teal'c and he already missed the big guy.

He pulled up in front of Sam's house, pleased to see Daniel's car still parked out front. He walked briskly up the path and knocked on the door. It was Daniel who answered and let Jack into the house. They made for the den and Jack saw Sam stir sleepily from the sofa to blink at him. There were a couple of discarded pizza boxes on the floor, a couple of beer bottles on the coffee table and the movie that was flickering across the screen was Star Wars. He looked at Daniel who shrugged.

'Want a beer?'

'Sounds good.' Jack said.

Daniel disappeared to the kitchen.

'You going to hog the whole couch, Carter?' Jack inquired.

'Sorry, sir.' Sam shifted up so he could sit down beside her. They were close enough to be touching and Jack savoured the innocent contact. His gaze flickered to the empty chair where Teal'c would normally sit.

Sam followed his gaze. 'I miss him.'

'Me too.' Jack murmured.

'Me three.' Daniel said passing Jack a bottle before he slumped into a chair. He grabbed a box and handed it to Jack. 'Pizza?'

Jack took a cold slice and bit in enthusiastically suddenly aware he hadn't eaten since the pie in the afternoon. He had put away his second slice and Luke had found the Princess when he cleared his throat. 'I'm putting SG1 on stand down for the next month.'

Sam shifted so she could look at him properly. 'The evaluation?' She asked.

Jack nodded.

'She thought I needed to go on stand down?'

Her voice was surprisingly calm and Jack peered at her worried. 'SG1 would be on stand down anyway given you're a man down.' He pointed out. 'On the upside,' he continued cheerfully, 'you can work on your projects and spend some time with Cassie.'

'I will get to spend more time with Cassie and there're a number of projects that I've been meaning to start but haven't had the time.' Sam wondered at her sense of relief. Maybe she really did need the downtime. It would be good to have a stable routine for a little while.

'And maybe you can fit in seeing a grief counsellor.' Jack threw in casually.

'She's ordering me to see a grief counsellor?' Sam slumped back against the sofa. 'Great.'
'Look, I know I'm not usually one to advocate counselling and that sharing your feelings mumbo-jumbo,' his comment elicited a reluctant smile from her and gave him the incentive to continue, 'but I seem to recall you had Cassie see someone after Janet died.' Jack said quietly. 'Why not give it a go?'

'I guess it couldn't hurt.' Sam grumbled.

Jack felt the tension draining from him. 'So, you're OK with this?'

'I'm OK with it, sir.' Sam said. 'So I'm not getting transferred?'

'Well, actually, the President spoke with the Joint Chiefs and suggested you would be needed for Daniel's plan.' Jack said. 'You're safe.' He held up his hands as the realisation that she needn't have taken the evaluation crept across her face. 'Hey don't look at me. I would have rescinded the order tomorrow morning but you were so keen…'

'About Daniel's plan, sir.' Sam said staring at him. 'You're really going to retire and run the SGC as a civilian?'

'That's the plan.' Jack confirmed cheerily ignoring how hard his heart had started pounding.

Sam held his gaze for a long moment, considered asking the question that hovered on her lips; was he doing this for her, for them? A laser battle commenced on the screen; its wild flickering momentarily grabbed her attention and also her courage. 'What about the Homeworld Security job?' She asked instead. She'd heard a rumour he'd been offered it.

'I was offered it but I turned it down.' Jack replied simply wondering if he should be disappointed with her reaction.

'You're turning down the opportunity to be a two star General.' Sam noted.

'I never thought I'd make it to the one star.' Jack laughed. 'I'm content with where I am, Carter. I've had my time in the Air Force but staying at the SGC I still get to feel part of it and it fits with Daniel's grand scheme to keep the Pentagon brass from interfering too much in what we do.'

'So, you're really going to do it?' Sam checked.

'So, you're really going to do it.' Jack held her gaze. 'The President will make my retirement official as soon as we've assigned the new military command, revised our current procedures and structure and it's all ready to go. At that point, I won't be in the Air Force any longer.' He cleared his throat. 'And I won't be your commanding officer any longer.' He couldn't make it any more explicit, Jack thought, not without having the discussion which was not going to happen given that although he could tell Daniel was pretending he was somewhere, anywhere else, he was actually in the same room.

Sam began to smile, one that seemed to light up her whole face. 'Things will be different.'

Now that was the reaction he'd been hoping for. 'Oh, yes.' His eyes gleamed. 'Things will definitely be different.'

'So how long do you think until everything's in place?' Sam asked as she settled back beside him, her eyes flitting back to the TV screen.

'Daniel?'
Jack's questioning tone had Daniel looking away from the movie action where he had determinedly kept his attention during the couple's exchange and glancing across at them. 'Jack.'

'How long until we think we'll have everything in place and I can retire?' Jack said.

'Four to six weeks, maybe.'

'Four to six weeks.' Jack repeated. He looked back at the archaeologist sharply. 'You're going to help me with all this stuff, right?'

Daniel raised his bottle. 'I'd be happy to.'

'Great.' Jack held his gaze. 'And Daniel? Thanks.'

'You did ask me to find a way.' Daniel said with a smile.

'Yes, I did.' Jack murmured. The two men shared a look of understanding before Daniel broke the contact, his gaze returning to the adventures on-screen.

Jack shifted as Sam let her head rest on his shoulder and he stretched out his legs in front of him. His eyes flickered again to the empty chair where Teal’c usually sat and felt the loss of his friend anew. At least, he thought, as his gaze slid to Sam and onto Daniel, the three of them still had each other.

End of Chrysalis
Butterflies: Part 1

Butterflies

'So what do you think?' Daniel asked gesturing at Jack across the breakfast table in the SGC commissary.

Jack sighed and lowered his spoonful of Fruit Loops. 'Daniel, did we not agree after the whole time loop thing that you would never ask me that question especially when we were having breakfast and I was eating Fruit Loops?'

'We did not agree that.' Daniel denied.

'Yes we did.' Jack shot back.

'Did not.'

'Did.'

'Not.'

They both looked at Sam who tried hard not to laugh as she confirmed the archaeologist had made that promise to the General.

Daniel sighed. 'When did you start eating those things again anyway?'

Instead of answering, Jack stuffed another spoonful in his mouth and chewed. He was grateful that Sam diverted the conversation onto the Atlantis data she and Daniel were both working on, in between helping to finalise the restructuring plans for the SGC.

Atlantis.

Jack shook his head. The day after Teal'c had left they had received an incoming transmission from the Pegasus Galaxy. One point three seconds of compressed data. Some of it had been messages home but some of it had been critically needed information and more importantly, a plea for help. The original expedition had got into a whole heap of trouble and were about to be overrun by some kind of life-sucking vampire-like aliens they called the Wraith. The newly found ZPM had been rushed into service to open a wormhole that delivered a team of Marines to help hold the beleaguered city. As soon as the wormhole closed, the ZPM was transported on the new and barely tested hyperspace-capable X303, the Daedalus, to Atlantis to help power the city's defences. So, they had managed to find and relinquish a ZPM all within the space of a week. Easy come, easy go, mused Jack philosophically.

It had been the right call. They had held Atlantis against the odds. The senior officers of the Atlantis team had arrived back with the Daedalus to debrief in person. It had been good to see Doctor Elizabeth Weir again, Jack thought, and to see her in action. When Colonel Caldwell had questioned the suitability of John Sheppard in leading the Atlantis military command, the way she had replied had been a pleasure to watch. It had been Jack's pleasure afterwards to promote the young Major to Lieutenant Colonel. The Atlantis team had left a ton of information before the Daedalus had taken them back. Sam and Daniel had been working through it every spare moment they got. It had even taken priority over the contents of Catherine Langford's estate that had been bequeathed to Daniel. The archaeologist had reluctantly handed that over to his research assistants.
Jack watched them debating on the other side of the table, not really listening, as he finished his cereal. Since Teal'c's departure, they had re-established their old routine of all meeting for breakfast in the commissary. Jack would never admit how much he enjoyed it or how much he had missed it since he had started to run the SGC. He also refused to admit how much he enjoyed the daily contact and working with his former team-mates on the restructuring. In some ways, it felt like old times. Daniel would put forward one argument; Jack would disagree; Sam would referee and usually they'd all find their way to a compromise position that was all the better for their different viewpoints. Of course, they were driving Woolsey loopy, Jack thought gleefully.

Richard Woolsey had worked for Senator Kinsey in a previous attempt to take control of the SGC but ultimately had acted honourably. He had turned over damning information on Kinsey to the President and ensured the future of the SGC. The President had made him a liaison to the IOA. When the IOA had protested that they had not been informed about the restructuring, Hayes had agreed to have Woolsey provide an oversight function for them to smooth ruffled feathers. Jack had given in less than gracefully to the order. He didn't like the man and had thought his presence would stymie the whole process. He still didn't like the man but he had to admit, albeit grudgingly, that Woolsey was doing a good job; had even provided some useful input like suggesting that since Sam was the foremost expert on the Stargate that she should be on permanent assignment to the SGC reporting directly to the Homeworld office. So despite all of the delays and interruptions that were part of the daily operation of the SGC they were on target to finish the plans within Daniel's original estimate.

Only one week and four days to go and he would be officially retired from the US Air Force and running the SGC as its new civilian leader. Jack's eyes flickered to Sam; one week and four days before he would finally be able to have the discussion with her. The one where he confessed he loved her and prayed she did the same. He wondered at the nerves crowding in his belly. He hadn't been this nervous since he'd been a teenager. The signs were good. He felt the closest he had to Sam since…since forever and yet nothing had substantially changed in their relationship. He was just her CO and former team leader and she was still just a Lieutenant Colonel under his command and a former team-mate. There was still nothing more between them than professional respect, a deep, platonic friendship and feelings neither could admit to. But they had hope now, Jack mused. Hope that in one week and four days they would finally have a chance and Jack was determined he wasn't going to screw it up.

At least, he considered as he regarded her animated face, his slight worry that Sam would be grieving too much and wouldn't be ready for the discussion had all but dissipated. Not that she was 'over' her father's death, and Jack briefly wondered if anyone ever really recovered from a loss of a parent and he knew for certain a parent never recovered from the loss of a child, but she seemed to have regained a lot of her…what had Carolyn called it…balance. He knew she had spent a lot of time off base with Cassie, some of it with him and Daniel. On base, it seemed the whole SGC team made sure she ate properly and rested. She hadn't mentioned the grief counsellor and he hadn't asked. Nor had they discussed the imminent session Jack would have with the SGC CMO on whether SG1 came off stand down especially as their new team member was arriving that morning. Jack put his spoon down and reached for his coffee, retuning into the others' conversation to hear Sam asking Daniel if he was fine not going to Atlantis. The Daedalus was scheduled to leave for another trip to the Pegasus Galaxy in less than a week.

Daniel rolled his eyes. 'I already told you, Sam, I'm OK with not going.' He glanced over at Jack with an expression that clearly said help.

'I need Daniel on the restructuring, Carter.' Jack inserted easily. 'He's not going this time.'

'Besides they'll be other times now we've got the Daedalus to provide transportation.' Daniel
pointed out.

'Yes, there will.' Jack agreed.

Sam looked from Daniel and Jack, and back again. They both gazed back at her with seemingly innocent expressions. God, but she loved them, she thought even if a part of her felt that they were mollycoddling her unnecessarily. Not that she was ungrateful; she truly had no idea how she would have coped without them since her father's death. But, she grumbled inwardly, she was much better. The past month of downtime had been exactly what she'd needed. As much as she loved her job going off-world, staying at the SGC and working through her projects, helping with the restructuring, spending the time with Cassie…it had been all been personal time she had needed. She wondered if Carolyn would approve her return to off-world missions…maybe not. She had formed something of an embryonic friendship with the other woman over the previous month and had found her very similar in a lot of ways to her late friend, Janet. Carolyn's judgement would only be based on what she felt was best for her patient.

Sam sighed and glanced at her watch. She took another hasty sip of coffee and shoved her chair back. 'I'd better get to the surface. I told Cam I'd meet him up top at oh-eight-hundred.'

Jack frowned at the mention of the young Lieutenant Colonel who was joining SG1. 'Did I really say he could have anything he wanted if he made it out of that hospital bed?'

'Yes, sir.' Sam said. 'You did and he's really excited about joining SG1 so don't tease him. Sir.'

'Just checking.' Jack smiled at her. 'Be sure and give the kid a tour before he reports for duty.'

'Yes, sir.' Sam flashed a smile at him before she hurried away.

Jack sighed and put his own coffee down. 'I'd better get the day started.'

'Are you interviewing today for the SGC senior military commander?' Daniel asked getting to his feet when Jack rose.

'Oh yes.' Jack sighed. 'Three Colonels and another Brigadier General.'

'At least General Landry agreed to take the Homeworld position.' Daniel said as they made their way out of the commissary. 'It seems like a good fit.'

'It is.' Jack smiled. He'd been pleased Hank had agreed to the assignment. He and Hank had served together. Hank didn't have much tolerance for incompetence, which endeared him to the Pentagon, but when he believed his people were competent, he gave them a great deal of latitude. He actually reminded Jack of Hammond.

'Is he coming for the interviews?' Daniel asked.

'Yeah. So's Hammond.' Jack shook his head as they entered the elevator. 'I have to wear the suit again.'

'How awful for you.'

Jack shot him a look. 'You want to sit in?'

'As fascinating as it sounds, no. Thank you.' Daniel pushed his glasses up his nose. 'I need to catch up with Nyan on where he is with Catherine's estate and I want to re-look at the some of the Atlantis data. You know there's a fascinating section…'
'Sounds like a busy day.' Jack said cutting in before Daniel got started.

Daniel smiled. 'Thanks for the save with Sam.'

'She's doing better, don't ya think?' Jack said pushing his hands in his pockets.

'You're getting the second evaluation report today, aren't you?' Daniel asked perceptively.

'Carolyn should be waiting in my office.' Jack admitted.

'She is doing better, Jack.' Daniel reassured him. 'Have you heard from Teal'c yet?'

'Not since the message he sent when Bra'tac visited.' Jack said. There had been only one visit to the SGC from the Jaffa at Dakara since Teal'c's departure; Bra'tac had accompanied the returning SG7 team along with Major Davis. Jack figured Teal'c was making a conscious effort not to return and let them all adjust to the reality he wasn't there anymore. His message had been brief; he sent greetings and hoped they were in good health. Jack's reply had, for once, been even more succinct than his friend's as he told Bra'tac to tell Teal'c that they missed him too.

'Have we heard anything from the Jaffa since then?' Daniel asked.

'Nope.' Jack shook his head.

'That's a little worrying, isn't it?' Daniel mused. 'I mean, they ask us to leave and then don't talk to us?'

Jack shrugged. 'Bra'tac didn't seem that worried. He just said that the Council felt they needed to find their own way.'

'What did Major Davis say?' Daniel asked.

'That the Council felt they needed to find their own way.' Jack repeated.

Daniel looked at him sceptically.

'OK,' admitted Jack, 'so Davis may have mentioned that he believed there might be some problems, some vague anti-Tau'ri thing going on.'

Daniel frowned heavily. 'Is Teal'c going to be OK?'

'You know Teal'c.' Jack said as they stepped out of the elevator. He was pleased when Daniel sighed but didn't press it further. They separated at a corridor junction and Jack made his way to his office. He paused in the doorway at the sight of Carolyn Lam and her father, General Landry both standing inside staring at each other angrily in absolute silence. The air was thick with tension.

Jack cleared his throat and tried a cheerful smile as he entered the room. 'So…I believe you two have met before.'

Carolyn shifted awkwardly as Landry took a deep breath. 'General.'

'General.' Jack answered.

'I just came to let you know I'd arrived, Jack.' Landry glanced over at his silent daughter. 'I know you have a meeting so I won't keep you.'

'Good to have you here, sir.' Jack replied. As a Major General, Landry outranked him and could
have insisted on full protocol.

Landry nodded. 'I'll see you for the interviews.' He turned back to Carolyn. 'Perhaps we can speak later?'

'I have a busy day.' Carolyn said shoving her hands deep in the pockets of her white lab coat.

'Then I won't hold you up any longer.' Landry strode out of the office shutting the door behind him.

Jack sat down and indicated for Carolyn to take a chair.

'Why didn't you tell me he was taking the Homeworld job?' Carolyn said angrily.

'You didn't get the memo?' Jack joked trying to avoid the conversation.

She stared at him and he sighed at her furious expression.

'Would it really have made a difference?' Jack asked gently. 'Under the new structure, all civilians will report to me including yourself so it's not like he's just become your new boss.'

'You should have told me.' Carolyn insisted.

'I admit I should have told you.' He admitted. 'Now can we move on?' He waited until she gave a sharp nod.

Carolyn settled back in the chair. 'I've completed the second evaluation on Colonel Carter. Doctor Kenny confirms that the Colonel has been very cooperative and is making remarkable progress. She'd like to continue her counselling sessions but she sees no reason to prevent Colonel Carter from returning to full duty particularly given the Colonel has passed her physical.'

'I can take SG1 off stand down?' Jack checked.

'Yes.' Carolyn tapped her fingers on the arm of her chair. 'On the condition that Colonel Carter continues with Doctor Kenny.'

'OK. I'll give her the good news.' Jack said.

Carolyn nodded and waved at his desk. 'I've also completed my comments on the latest draft of the new procedures.'

'Great.' Jack saw the buff folder and his heart sank. One week and four days, he reminded himself. 'Thank you, Carolyn.'

'General.' She rose gracefully and exited through the door to the corridor.

Jack started at the knock on the other door and gestured for Walter to enter. He half-listened to the run down of his day and accepted the briefing folders Walter gave to him. 'Walter, I'm going to need ten minutes with Colonel Carter when she brings Colonel Mitchell to report to me and you'll need to add SG1 back into the mission rotation as of tomorrow.'

'Yes, sir.' Walter suppressed the urge to sigh. 'I'll make the adjustments in your schedule as required, sir.'

Jack glanced up at the recently promoted Chief Master Sergeant and smiled. 'You're doing a great job, Walter.'
'Thank you, sir. You have a briefing with SG12, sir.' Walter indicated the team waiting in the briefing room before he left Jack with the briefing folder for the mission.

He flipped through it on his way as he wandered into join the SG team; the mission seemed a straight-forward meet and greet. He approved it and made a notation on the relevant form for the mission to be included into the gate travel schedule. He was heading back into his office when he heard Sam's voice coming up the stairs. He spun on his heel and waited for her. She appeared with the smartly dressed Lieutenant Colonel Cameron Mitchell.

God, but he made him feel old, thought Jack ruefully. Mitchell could have been a poster boy for the Air Force; a thirty-something all-American male with piercing blue eyes, an attractive face and short brown spiky hair. There was no sign of a limp from the young pilot's past injuries sustained when his F302 had crashed protecting SG1 in their battle with Anubis over Antarctica over a year before. Mitchell's doctors had been astounded at his recovery rate and he had passed every fitness test and the Stargate training programme with flying colours. Jack was amused when Mitchell caught sight of him and came abruptly to attention.

'Lieutenant Colonel Mitchell reporting for duty, sir.'

Jack didn't look at Sam for fear they would both start laughing at Mitchell's formality. 'At ease, Mitchell, before you sprain something.'

'Ah, yes sir.' Mitchell breathed out.

'Carter given you the grand tour?' Jack asked.

'She has, sir.' Mitchell's blue eyes gleamed with excitement. 'I can't wait to get started.'

Jack smiled. 'I like your enthusiasm and I have to tell ya, SG1's the best gig on or off the planet.'

'That's why I requested it, sir.' Mitchell couldn't prevent the smile forming.

'Well, welcome aboard. You've been told about the restructure?'

'Yes, sir. Sa…Colonel Carter mentioned it to me, sir.'

Jack caught the almost mention of Sam's name. He knew the two were friends from their Academy days and Mitchell had actually gotten his promotion before Sam. In theory, he was the senior officer. 'OK. So, some ground rules. Firstly, we don't leave our people behind. Ever.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Secondly, try not to get possessed by an alien today. It'll ruin your first day and quite frankly, I don't need the paperwork. Thirdly, Carter's the boss. She's the SG1 leader and she's logged the most off-world time of anyone in this facility including myself…'

'Well, only if you don't count the times you've been stuck on a planet, sir.' Sam interrupted. 'And Daniel's time on Abydos or his whole Ascension thing.'

Jack's gaze flickered to her. 'Trying to make a point here, Carter.'

'Sorry, sir.' Her lips twitched as Jack's gaze moved back to Mitchell.

'If you've got a problem answering to Carter, now would be the time to tell me.' Jack held the younger man's gaze evenly.
'Not a problem sir.' Mitchell answered sincerely. 'I'm here to learn.'

'Good. In that case, why don't you take this to Sergeant Harriman,' Jack handed him the folder he was holding, 'and have a look at the gate control room. I need a moment with Colonel Carter.'

'Yes sir.' Mitchell took the folder and snapped off another salute before he headed for the stairs.

'And Mitchell,' Jack called over to him as he took the first step.

'Sir?' There was a quizzical expression in the blue eyes.

'The fourth rule is; don't touch anything.'

'Sir.' Mitchell nodded and headed down.

Jack smiled at Sam's obvious amusement. 'My office, Carter.'

'Yes, sir.' She followed him inside and took a deep breath as he closed the door to the briefing room.

Her anxious expression got to Jack and he decided not to prolong the wait. 'SG1 is officially off stand down. You'll go back on mission rotation tomorrow.'

'Thank you, sir.' Sam breathed out in relief.

'There is a condition.' Jack said.

'Oh?'

'You have to continue with Doctor Kenny.'

He saw her absorb it and the slow nod of her head as she accepted it. 'Yes, sir.'

'OK…well…'

'Unscheduled incoming wormhole.' The announcement came over the tannoy at the same time the alarms and sirens initiated.

Both of them ran for the stairs and clattered to a halt behind Walter in the control room.

Mitchell glanced across at them and held his hands up. 'I swear I didn't touch anything.'
Jack gave a fleeting smile at Mitchell's comment. Damned if he didn't like the guy. 'What have we got Walter?'

'Incoming wormhole, sir.' The Sergeant checked the computer. 'Receiving IDC now.'

'It's the Jaffa, sir.' Sam said reading the code on the computer.

'Open the iris.' Jack ordered.

Both Sam and Jack were already moving towards the stairs when the General glanced back at Mitchell. 'You coming, Mitchell?'

The surprise showed briefly before Mitchell replied. 'Yes, sir.'

They entered the gate room and Mitchell's eyes widened at the glistening pool of blue. 'Wow.'

Daniel raced in from the corridor to join them. 'Who is it?'

'The Jaffa.' Jack said. He waved a hand at Mitchell. 'You guys have met.'

'Sure. Hi.' Daniel shook Mitchell's hand warmly. 'It's good to see you again.'

'I'm looking forward to working with you.' Mitchell replied with an easy smile.

'Just don't let him touch anything.' Jack warned.

'Which one?' asked Sam as the event horizon rippled and Teal'c stepped through onto the ramp.

'Teal'c. Buddy.' Jack stepped forward and hugged him forcefully causing the sturdy Jaffa to stagger a little. Sam and Daniel looked on amused.

'O'Neill.' Teal'c acknowledged as he endured the hug stoically. 'I am here on a matter of great urgency.'

'Right.' Jack eased off and patted Teal'c's shoulders. 'It's just so good to see you.'

Teal'c's expression softened. 'It is good to be seen.' He accepted a quicker hug from Sam and Daniel patted his shoulder as they all followed Jack up to the briefing room.

'So, what brings you to Earth?' Jack asked as everybody took a seat at the table.

Mitchell wondered briefly if he should be there but when no one protested, he sat down and leaned back in his chair.

'Two days ago, a group of Jaffa were exploring the ruins at Dakara when they chanced upon a cave in the mountain under the old city.' Teal'c folded his hands over his stomach. 'The chamber contained an Ancient machine.'

'Don't tell.' Jack said gesturing at the Jaffa. ' Somebody touched it.'

'Indeed.' Teal'c inclined his head. 'Since then ten of our people have mysteriously disappeared from Dakara along a section of the old city we had been using for shelter.'
'Disappeared?' Sam asked.

'They were enveloped by a bright green light, Colonel Carter.'

'You've witnessed it?' Sam asked excitedly.

'I have.' Teal'c scowled. 'I saw Bra'tac disappear in such a manner only a few hours ago.' He paused. 'I could do nothing to stop it.'

'This may sound like a dumb question but has someone tried turning the machine off?' Daniel asked.

'We have, Daniel Jackson, without success.'

'Teal'c, I don't understand.' Sam said confused. 'If your people have been disappearing for the last two days why didn't you come to us sooner?'

A muscle worked in Teal'c's jaw and he didn't speak for a long moment. 'The Jaffa High Council believes that until we learn to stand on own, we will be like a young deer that never learns to walk.'

'I guess that makes sense.' Daniel said.

'It does?' Jack asked.

'Well, when you think about it the Free Jaffa nation is like a newly born animal. In most cases, young animals are encouraged to stand on their own legs as soon as possible so they're able to flee from predators. Without that ability they are vulnerable.' Daniel expanded.

'So, your Council think that coming to us for help is a sign of weakness.' Sam made a face.

'They do.'

'But they must have changed their minds if you're here now.' Daniel said.

Teal'c met his friend's worried gaze across the table. 'They did not.'

'You mean you came without permission?' Jack's eyebrows shot up although he was more amused than shocked. 'Teal'c.' He made a tutting sound.

'I believe that we do not yet possess the skills required to solve this particular situation.' Teal'c stated. 'I believe we will need the help of the Tau'ri, and specifically Colonel Carter and Daniel Jackson, if we are to determine the true purpose of the machine and recover our people.'

'Carter?'

'It may not be possible to do either, sir.' She gestured. 'The Ancient technology is still well beyond our understanding. However there may be something in the information that was provided by the Atlantis team that could help.' She looked at Teal'c. 'I'd like to try.'

'What's stopping this machine making you disappear?' Jack asked.

'By the sound of it the effect is localised.' Sam explained. 'As long as we stay away from the area Teal'c was talking about, we should be fine.'

'We have already sealed off that section of the city.' Teal'c confirmed. 'Without your assistance, O'Neill, the Council will destroy the machine and any hope of recovering Bra'tac or the others will
be lost completely.' He added.

'We do owe, Bra'tac.' Daniel slid in gently.

'We do.' Jack sighed.

'Teal'c, you say the Council aren't that keen on us helping you out, are we talking violent resistance here or passive hostility?' Mitchell asked speaking up for the first time.

'Colonel Mitchell.' Teal'c acknowledged him with a small bow of his head. 'I do not believe SG1 will be physically harmed.'

'So, they'll grumble a bit when we arrive but then grudgingly let us help?' Mitchell clarified.

Teal'c raised an eyebrow. 'I believe you are correct.'

They all looked at Jack.

'OK, you have a go.' Jack said. 'Gear up.'

The members of the current SG1 team deserted the briefing room leaving Teal'c and Jack alone.

'My thanks, O'Neill.' Teal'c murmured.

'Don't mention it.' Jack said. 'Happy to help.' He reviewed his friend's stern face. After years of working with him he could tell the big guy was unhappy and about more than the disappearance of his mentor. 'Teal'c, is there something else I should know?'

Teal'c shifted in his chair at Jack's question. 'Many Jaffa are ashamed that we were unable to free ourselves without the assistance of the Tau'ri. Many others dislike our dependence on the supply of tretonin.' He noted. 'There are those who would seek to end the alliance between the Free Jaffa and the Tau'ri. They are gaining in numbers and gathering political support.' He paused. 'There is even a small faction that believes that we should use our superior strength, our warrior skills and knowledge of the Goa'uld technology to enslave humans to help with reconstruction.'

'Sweet.' Jack muttered. 'And you and Bra'tac are on the other side of the political debate?'

'We are.' Teal'c leaned forward resting his clasped hands on the polished surface of the briefing table.

'You don't agree with the whole deer thing?' Jack asked.

'I do but a young deer finds protection amongst others in the herd.' Teal'c said.

Jack nodded sagely before a small frown crossed his face. 'You're talking about us, I mean, humans being the others in the herd, right?' He checked.

Teal'c inclined his head. 'It is difficult for many Jaffa to realise that our years of serving the Goa'uld have left us weakened in many things vital to rebuild our civilisation. We have too few farmers and scholars. We require assistance to help rebuild our cities and planets. There is much the Tau'ri can teach us.'

'Which we would do willingly, without the whole being enslaved thing just for the record.' Jack said.

'Bra'tac was beginning to win support for our cause before his disappearance.' Teal'c said.
'Bra'tac.' Jack looked over at his friend. 'But not you?'

'My opinion is considered biased because of the years I spent with the Tau'ri.' Teal'c stated. 'When I return with SG1 I believe I will have forfeited my place on the Jaffa High Council which was opposed to seeking help in this matter.'

Jack reached across and clasped Teal'c's shoulder as he met his friend's serious gaze with one of his own. 'You know you can come back. Anytime.'

The sound of approaching footsteps had Jack dropping his hand. Walter hurried in. 'SG1 are en route to the gate room, sir.'

Jack nodded. 'Start dialling Dakara, Sergeant.'

'Yes, sir.' Walter took the stairs and when they followed him a few moments later they could hear the sound of the gate as it spun and the confirmation of the chevron locks. They took the stairs and joined the gathered SG1 team in the gate room.

'Ready to go, Carter?' Jack asked.

'Ready, sir.'

'I want you kids to check-in in twenty-four hours.' Jack noted.

'Yes, sir.' Sam clipped her P90 to her vest and rested her hands on it.

Daniel grabbed Mitchell's vest and pulled him back. 'You might want to stand back a bit more.'

Mitchell looked at Daniel and opened his mouth to say something when Walter announced the seventh chevron lock and the wormhole activated. The blue backwash had Mitchell staggering back a little.

'Woah.'

'Told you.' Daniel said smugly.

'They warned us in training but they never told us it would be like that.' Mitchell said his voice filled with wonderment.

Sam smiled and looked over at Jack. 'With your permission, sir.'

Jack nodded. 'Have fun.'

Teal'c bowed his head and walked swiftly up the ramp and into the wormhole. Daniel followed after him. Mitchell halted at the top of the ramp and Sam stopped next to him.

'This isn't going to hurt is it?' Mitchell checked sticking his gun into the event horizon and making a lazy circle.

'Not as much as it used to.'

'Not as much as it used to?' Mitchell turned his head to look at her. 'What kind of answer is that…' She pushed him through and followed after him.
…that.’ Mitchell said as he staggered out of the wormhole and onto the dusty planet of Dakara.

'Good trip, Mitchell?' Sam asked sweetly as she walked up to him, the event horizon disappearing behind her.

'You pushed me!'

'It's an initiation thing.' She said putting on her sunglasses and pulling her cap lower. Her eyes were already scanning for trouble. The Jaffa guarding the gate didn't look happy but they had lowered their weapons. 'Teal'c?'

'This way, Colonel Carter.' Teal'c pointed his staff weapon in the direction of the ruins and started to make his way toward them.

Mitchell glanced around eagerly, taking everything in. 'This is incredible. I mean, look at this, I mean…'

'Definitely not in Kansas anymore.' Daniel noted. He smiled at the awestruck expression as Mitchell's head swivelled from side to side taking in the sights. 'You're actually really lucky this looks like an alien planet. Normally you step out of the gate and all you see is trees.'

'Trees?'

'Something to do with oxygen in the atmosphere…' Daniel murmured hesitantly; Jack had hated explanations.

'Sure, plants generally produce oxygen.' Mitchell noted. 'So, makes sense I guess.'

There was an enthusiasm in Mitchell's voice that made Daniel smile again. He found himself relooking at his surroundings, trying to put himself in the other man's shoes not just seeing Dakara for the first time but seeing another planet for the first time. He remembered his own bewilderment at Abydos; the sense of awe, of amazement. When had travelling to another planet become commonplace to him, Daniel wondered. He hadn't even realised it had. He shook his head.

They walked on for another ten minutes sliding down a steep path before Teal'c declared they had reached their destination and brought them to a halt. Another couple of hundred metres in front of them was a small group of Jaffa guarding what looked like a square entry-way carved into the side of a mountain.

Sam looked up to get her bearings and realised they had travelled down-hill from the Dakara Stargate in the opposite direction to the old weapon. The old city was directly above them on the side of the mountain.

'This is the entrance where the underground chamber was discovered.' Teal'c noted.

'Will there be a problem gaining entry?' Sam asked wiping the sweat from her brow.

'I do not believe so, Colonel Carter.' Teal'c said. 'Jav'nec was once trained by Bra'tac as were the two who stand alongside him.' He started forward again. He stopped in front of the three Jaffa who had straightened on their approach. 'Jav'nec.' He bowed his head. 'It is good to see you, old friend.'
'Teal'c.' Jav'nec returned the greeting and glanced at Teal'c's companions questioningly.

'My friends are here to help find Master Bra'tac and return him to us.' Teal'c explained. 'I bid you let us enter.'

'I have orders from the Council, Teal'c, that no one is to enter.' Jav'nec said regretfully.

'Am I not a Council member, Jav'nec?' Teal'c argued. 'I will ensure the rest of the Council know it was my order you were following.'

Jav'nec nodded slowly. He glanced across at the other two Jaffa and gestured. 'Let them through.'

'Thank you, Jav'nec.' Teal'c said as the Jaffa stood aside.

'Thank me by bringing our respected teacher back to us.' Jav'nec said. 'Here you will need a lantern.' He handed Teal'c a nearby lantern that radiated with light.

Teal'c held it in front of him and ducked under the low ceiling of the doorway as he led the way inside. Sam was right behind him and she switched the light on her P90 noting that Mitchell followed suit. They were all relieved that there was plenty of height in the actual passageway and more than enough space to walk two abreast.

'This is amazing.' Daniel said as he ran his hands along the wall. 'These passageways look as though they were carved out of solid rock.'

'Advanced technology though, right?' Mitchell asked.

'Definitely.' Daniel's nose wrinkled in thought. 'Just look at the right angles to the ceiling and the floors.'

Teal'c stopped and gestured in front of him. 'There.'

Sam shone her light on the arched entrance in front of her. 'This is a doorway.'

'Indeed.'

'No, Teal'c, I mean this is an actual doorway.' Sam pointed with her light. 'Look, the door mechanism has obviously stopped working but you can see the different material under the rock and dirt. This was an artificial doorway, possibly to a building of some kind.'

'Maybe it was buried by an earthquake.' Daniel asked.

'Maybe.' Sam glanced back down the passageway. 'It's possible that the Ancients made the passageway as some kind of access tunnel when the building became inaccessible.' She stepped forward eagerly into the chamber and did a cursory sweep with her P90. The glow of the active machine in the centre of the chamber caught her attention momentarily but it was the chamber itself that held it. 'Oh boy.'

It was a huge dome-like structure. The curved ceiling seemed to extend upwards to a great distance. It was definitely not a natural formation. Sam could see that the walls were not made of rock but of some smooth white material. The floor was covered in dirt and debris so she couldn't tell if it was made of the same thing but it was flat and even.

'Woah.' Mitchell stared up at the ceiling.

'I believe you are correct, Colonel Carter.' Teal'c said as his eyes followed Mitchell's light. 'This
A building of some kind.'

'Teal'c, you'd better stand guard at the entrance.' Sam said. 'It's probable we're going to get company.'

'Yes,' Teal'c agreed, 'our arrival will not have gone unreported to the Council.' He moved back to the doorway.

'Daniel, Mitchell,' Sam's light landed on their faces, 'we're going to need more light.'

'If this was a building, maybe there's a light switch?' Daniel suggested.

Sam shrugged. 'Start looking, I'm going to take a look at the machine.' She saw the two men move off in opposite directions, their lights sweeping the walls for the elusive light switch. She made her way to the machine and knelt down beside it. She removed her backpack and started pulling items from it. She snapped on two temporary lights and placed them near to the device so there was enough light for her to work. Her laptop came next and she switched it on and powered it up. Her eyes started assessing the device with interest.

It was unlike the Dakara weapon which was a stone rectangular table-like shape with square panels that modified the device's energy. This seemed more sophisticated like the time machine they had come across, or the control chair in Antarctica. She frowned as she made a slow circle around the device. It was a raised semi-circle to waist height in a strange grey metallic substance. She placed her hand curiously on the surface and found it cool to the touch. It felt like steel. The sides seemed smooth were no obvious openings and the device seemed rooted into the floor. The light was coming from one half of the top.

Sam reached into her pack and took out a small brush. She used it to gently brush away some dirt and peered at the faint glow. It was almost like a monitor that had lost full power, she mused. She cast one of the torches over the other half of the semi-circle. It was covered in more dirt which she had to remove. Buttons, like a keypad, all inscribed with faint symbols.

'Daniel!' She searched the darkness for the archaeologist and found him staring at a wall. 'Daniel!' His surprised face blinked in her torch light for a moment.

'I found some symbols you might want to take a look at.' Sam said standing in the curve of the semi-circle.

Daniel quickly joined her.

'Ancient?' Sam asked.

'I think so.' Daniel peered at the symbols. 'They're very faint.'

'Can you read them?'

'Yeah...I'm going to need my notes.' Daniel looked up. 'I left my back-pack somewhere by the door, I think...?'

There was a muffled curse and a thud.

'Found it!' Mitchell shouted.

Sam and Daniel smiled in amusement as the other man brought over the archaeologist's bag.
'Thanks.' Daniel said. He immediately dug into it and brought out a tattered note-book. 'OK.' He flipped to the page he was looking for as Sam held the torch. He pointed at one of the buttons. 'I think this is the symbol for light.'

He pressed it.

'Do you think that was wise?' Mitchell asked remembering General O'Neill's rules.

There was a hum and suddenly the chamber was filled with a dim white light that radiated from the walls. They all winced and blinked as their eyes adjusted. In the brightness they could see the room better. There were two more semi-circular consoles in the centre of the room; both seemed inactive. Everything else was covered with a film of red dust.

'OK, so this is a control panel.' Sam deduced as she snapped off the torches.

'Yeah but for what?' Daniel murmured.

'The room, right.' Mitchell speculated. 'I mean you pressed the button and, hey presto, the lights came on.'

'I don't think it's just the room.' Daniel said doubtfully. 'Sam, isn't there a control panel like this in Atlantis?'

'Right. I remember reading about it in McKay's report.' She tapped into the information on her computer. 'Here.' She gestured at the monitor. 'They have consoles like this throughout the city. They monitor environmental conditions, light, life support, that kind of thing, oh and security…'

'Security?' Mitchell questioned.

'Well, they scan the inside of the city constantly looking for intruders…' she stumbled to a halt and her wide eyes snapped to Daniel's. 'That must be it.' She said excitedly.

'What must be it?' Mitchell asked.

'You're right.' Daniel agreed nodding. 'That has to be it.'

'What?' Mitchell asked again.

'It's the only thing that makes sense.' Sam said.

'What?' Mitchell inquired for the third time.

Sam took pity on him. 'When the Jaffa entered this structure they must have automatically set off some kind of Ancient security system.' She gestured. 'The Atlantis team reported that when they entered the city, it seemed to come to life around them and they later learnt that actually it had been programmed to do so at their arrival. It's possible something similar was programmed into this system.'

'OK, the Jaffa enter, and this device activates but why doesn't everything come on?' Daniel asked.

'Maybe the power's running out.' Sam deduced.

'A ZPM?' Daniel speculated.

'We've never picked up readings for one on Dakara but maybe.' She nodded. 'Now, I can see better I might be able to interface my laptop with the control panel. We might be able to access the
system.' She gestured at the blank panel at the side of the keypad on the device. 'I think this is broken.'

Daniel nodded. 'I'll keep translating these symbols.'

Sam glanced at Mitchell. 'Why don't you head out and keep watch with Teal'c?'

'Yes, ma'am.' Mitchell said.

Sam nodded absently, her mind already working out the best way to tie the device into the computer. It took her longer than she had hoped but fifteen minutes later the image that should have been on the panel was displayed on her laptop. 'Bingo.'

Daniel read over her shoulder. 'OK. This is interesting.' He tapped at the screen. 'Can you zoom in?'

She made the image larger. 'My God.'

'There's a city,' Daniel said gleefully. 'A whole Ancient city buried under the rock. This is incredible.' He whirled away and gestured wildly. 'OK, so we know the Ancients came to Dakara and built the weapon but what if they arrived earlier than that. What if they came and decided to rebuild Atlantis here?'

'I don't know, Daniel…' Sam said trying to keep him from getting carried away. 'It looks more like the size of an outpost to me.'

'Even so.' Daniel grinned her. 'There could be a ZPM here. Or another chair like the one in Antarctica. Just think of the possibilities.'

'I admit it's all very exciting.' Sam said. 'But we have a specific problem to focus on.' She reminded him.

'Right. Bra'tac and the other missing Jaffa.' Daniel moved back to stand beside her.

'OK. So we think the security system was triggered when the Jaffa entered the structure.' Sam said.

'Which led to the system scanning a particular area of the city.' Daniel gazed at the keypad and pressed another symbol. The image on Sam's monitor changed.

'What is this?' Sam asked.

'A security menu, I hope.' Daniel said. He gestured at an option on the screen. 'Click this.'

She followed his instruction and a large block of text appeared. 'What does it say?'

'I think it says that the security system is active.' Daniel murmured. His finger traced a line across the screen. 'OK. I think the system is designed to operate on three settings.'

'Three?'

'Three.' Daniel confirmed. 'The first is just to scan for intruders. The second is to identify intruders and transport them to…to some kind of holding area and the third…' His voice trailed away.

'And the third?' Sam prompted.

Daniel met her eyes worriedly. 'Eliminated the intruders completely. It killed them.'
Sam held Daniel's eyes firmly and forced herself to ask the question. 'And which setting is it on?'

'I don't know.' Daniel admitted. 'We need to go back to that previous menu. Maybe there's a way to see…'

'Colonel Carter!'

Teal'c's shout had both of them turning to the doorway to see Teal'c and Mitchell entering the chamber.

'What is it, Teal'c?' Sam asked.

'I can hear a number of voices outside the entrance way to the passage. I believe it is the rest of the Council.' Teal'c said. 'Have you been able to make any progress?'

Sam and Daniel exchanged a quick look.

'This is a control device.' Sam said gesturing at it. 'We think the Jaffa triggered it when they entered this structure and it switched on some kind of dormant security system that was tied to the area where your people have been disappearing.' She sighed. 'But we haven't found out much more than that yet.'

'We'll keep working on it, Teal'c.' Daniel promised.

Teal'c nodded. 'I will speak with the Council.'

Mitchell gestured back at Teal'c as he disappeared through the doorway. 'Should I…?'

'Go with him.' Sam said.

Mitchell hurried back through the passageway and caught up with Teal'c just as he stepped out of the darkness and into the bright Dakara sunlight.

There were five Jaffa stood arguing with Jav'nec and the other two guards. They stopped as they caught sight of Teal'c and Mitchell.

An elderly Jaffa disengaged himself from the group and headed towards them, a younger male following at his heels.

'Teal'c.' There was a cursory head bow from the older man.

'Byn'c.' Teal'c answered respectfully. His dark eyes slid to the younger. 'Cral'k.'

Byn'c's stern visage hardened as his dark gaze landed on the human standing next to Teal'c.

Mitchell gave a small hand-wave. 'Lieutenant Colonel Mitchell, pleased to meet you.'

'What is the meaning of this, Teal'c?' asked Byn'c, ignoring Mitchell.

Teal'c raised an eyebrow. 'My friends have come to assist me in finding Bra'tac and the other missing Jaffa.'
The Council voted against asking the Tau'ri for help in this matter.' Byn'c snapped.

'I believe the Council made an error.' Teal'c said firmly.

'And who are you to decide that we made an error?' Cral'k said angrily.

'I mean the Council no disrespect,' Teal'c began, 'but we do not understand the technology of the Ancients who built Dakara. Colonel Carter and Daniel Jackson have already ascertained that the device is linked to a security system once used by the Ancients that inhabited this world.'

'They have no right to examine the device.' Cral'k gestured furiously at Mitchell. 'They are not welcome here.' He sneered. 'We do not need their help.' He turned to Byn'c. 'They should be made to leave immediately and the device destroyed as the Council planned.'

Teal'c ignored him and spoke to Byn'c. 'My friends are confident that they will be able to find out what has happened to Bra'tac and the others.'

Byn'c seemed torn. He looked from Teal'c to Mitchell and back. 'Wait here.'

The two Jaffa went back to the rest of the group and a discussion took place.

'You think they'll let us stay?' Mitchell asked quietly, keeping his voice low so the words didn't carry.

'Byn'c is an old friend of Bra'tac's.' Teal'c noted. 'I believe he will argue to give us the time to find him.'

'And Cral'k?'

'He is young and headstrong.' Teal'c said. 'I do not believe he will prevail against Byn'c's wisdom.'

Mitchell nodded and as Cral'k stormed angrily away from the group discussion, he figured Teal'c had been right. Byn'c gathered his robes around him and returned to Teal'c.

'You have until sunset, Teal'c.' Byn'c said. 'At that time, we will destroy the device.'

'I understand, Byn'c.' Teal'c bowed his head. 'My thanks.'

'However, your actions in bringing the Tau'ri have raised questions about your suitability to sit on the Council.' Byn'c said. 'The matter will be discussed at sun-rise tomorrow and your presence will be required.'

Teal'c acknowledged the summons with a nod of his head. Byn'c whirled away and they watched as he and the rest of the Council walked away.

'They going to kick you off the Council, Teal'c?' Mitchell asked casually.

'I believe that is their intention, Colonel Mitchell.' Teal'c said calmly as he turned and headed back to the chamber.

'You don't seem that bothered.' Mitchell noted.

'I accepted such a likelihood when I chose to return to the Tau'ri and ask for assistance.' Teal'c said in reply.

They entered the chamber to see Sam sitting tapping on the computer and Daniel scribbling into his
'What happened?' Sam asked.

'We have been given until sunset, Colonel Carter.' Teal'c said.

'When is that?' Daniel asked.

Teal'c raised an eyebrow. 'It is four hours from now.'

Sam's eyes widened. 'So no pressure.' She muttered and motioned at Daniel to keep working.

It was a couple of hours later when Daniel took a break and headed out to the entrance-way to talk to Teal'c. He took a deep breath of fresh air and slouched against the red rock. He nudged Teal'c arm with a paper-wrapped sandwich. 'Sam packed an extra turkey sandwich in case you were hungry.'

Teal'c took it almost hesitantly but unwrapped it and bit into it enthusiastically.

'So…' Daniel began as he unwrapped his own sandwich.

'Have you and Colonel Carter made any further progress, Daniel Jackson?' Teal'c asked.

'Some.' Daniel said. 'From what I've been able to translate from the information in the system itself, there was once an outpost here much like on Antarctica on Earth. Now we think there was some kind of natural cataclysm which buried the outpost under heavy rock. Maybe a volcanic eruption, a violent earthquake, something.' He chewed and swallowed a bite of his sandwich hastily. 'The Ancients abandoned the lost buildings but at some point they rebuilt the city on the rock above which are the ruins you've been using for shelter.'

'I see.' Teal'c stated with an understanding stare.

'Now we think the security system transported Bra'tac and the others to a holding area like a jail or a…' Daniel gestured with his sandwich, 'a jail of some kind in the city.'

'Where?'

'That's the thing we haven't been able to work out yet.' Daniel admitted. 'Sam's still working on it.'

'I have much confidence in your and Colonel Carter's abilities to find a solution.' Teal'c stated.

Daniel nodded. 'I know.' He cleared his throat. 'You know this is really an incredible find for the Jaffa. The knowledge and information your people could gather from the database of an Ancient outpost could be immensely valuable. There may even be a working ZPM or another chair somewhere on Dakara.'

'I do not believe the Council will agree with your assessment, Daniel Jackson.' Teal'c said.

'But you've seen what an Ancient outpost can do, Teal'c.'

'I have indeed, Daniel Jackson, but many of the Jaffa have not.' Teal'c finished his sandwich. 'And they will no longer listen to me.'

Daniel sighed and looked briefly at the ground before he looked at his friend. 'Mitchell mentioned about the Council and…you.'
Teal'c's lips firmed.

'What's happened since you came back here, Teal'c?' Daniel asked quietly. 'It can't all be related to a...a dislike of the Tau'ri.'

Teal'c was silent for so long Daniel thought he wasn't going to answer him. 'I remember Sho'nac once said to me that I had become as feared on Chulak as once the Gods were.' The Jaffa murmured. 'So it is here.'

'They fear you.' Daniel said. His quick mind worked out the rest. 'The other leaders realised that you were the most likely person to lead the new Jaffa nation. You're the one who had the strength to rise up against the Gods, and free your people. You have support across the Jaffa that few others have. So what? They decided they had to reduce your influence and your power so they can keep hold of theirs? Is that why there's been a rise in this anti-Tau'ri movement? To undermine you?' He sighed as he read the truth in Teal'c's harsh face. 'I'm sorry, Teal'c.'

'It is not your fault, Daniel Jackson.'

'It's not yours either, Teal'c.' Daniel said softly. 'Will you be OK? Tomorrow, I mean.'

'I will.' Teal'c looked over at him.

'I could stay.' Daniel offered.

'Hey, guys!' Mitchell's excited yell had both of them turning as the young pilot stuck his head through the opening of the passageway. 'Sam's got an idea.'

They all hurried back into the chamber.

'Colonel Carter?'

'Have you figured it out?'

Teal'c and Daniel spoke almost at the same time.

Sam looked up from her laptop. 'I began thinking what if we were looking at this the wrong way?'

'The wrong way?' Daniel questioned with a perplexed frown.

'Well, we've been searching for where the device sent them as though it were a physical location.'

'Yes?' Daniel agreed hesitantly.

'But what if it's not?' Sam gestured. 'What if the holding area refers to a buffer of some kind in the security system? Maybe even an area of sub-space itself.'

'I guess that makes sense. We know the Ancients use sub-space all the time in their devices right.'

'Right.' Sam nodded happily. 'So I began to scan the memory of the Ancient device for recent additions.'

'And?'

'And I've found eleven new entries that all correspond within the time-frame.'

'OK.' Mitchell said. 'If they're stored in that thing, how do we get them out?'
'Well, thanks to Daniel's translations, I've been able to work out how the transportation system works.' Sam said simply.

'As I knew you would.' Teal'c stated proudly.

'It should just be a question of resetting the controls.'

'You can do that?' Mitchell asked astonished.

Sam blew her bangs out of her eyes. 'I think so but I'm going to need Daniel's help with the language.'

'Let's get to work.' Daniel said.

It took time to translate and reset the parameters. Teal'c watched anxiously at the entrance to the passageway as the sun began to set. He could see the approaching Council members approaching; the fire of their torches bobbing in the distance.

He made his way back to the chamber. 'The Council approaches to destroy the device.'

'I need a minute.' Sam said. 'This one?' She asked Daniel who pointed at the right symbol.

'I don't want to hurry you guys but,' Mitchell said nervously, 'we're kinda on a clock here.'

'We're done.' Sam said.

Daniel nodded. 'We're done.'

Sam took a deep breath. 'Well, here goes nothing.' She hit the enter key.
'Nothing happened.' Mitchell said looking round at the empty chamber.

'I don't understand.' Sam rubbed her brow. 'That should have worked.' She tapped an instruction into the computer and gestured at the monitor. 'It did work. The previous entries aren't in the buffer anymore?'

'But where are they?' Daniel asked.

There was a movement by the doorway and the Jaffa High Council entered along with a number of guards. They all took a moment to stare at the chamber before their attention fell on the group of Tau'ri around the console and Teal'c who stood in front of them.

Byn'c's lips firmed. 'Your time is up, Teal'c.'

'Stand aside.' Cral'k snarled. 'We are here to destroy the device.'

Sam walked around the device to stand next to Teal'c. 'Destroying this console will not disable the security system that it controls.'

'You were not given permission to speak, woman.' Cral'k's dark, angry eyes fell on her.

Sam's eyebrows shot up. 'Woman?'

'You will speak with respect to Colonel Carter.' Teal'c said forcefully. 'She is a sister of my house.'

'And besides you should listen to her.' Daniel said. 'She's telling you the truth.'

'I would hear her speak.' The female Council member from a group of female warrior Jaffa snapped at Cral'k.

'As would I.' Another more mature male added.

'Look, we believe this console is one of several that used to exist in the city to access a central computer system that helped monitor all of the city's defences and environmental controls.' Sam explained. 'When the first Jaffa entered this structure, it triggered an automated defence system. Now until the automated system is shut down completely, there's a possibility that your people could continue to…disappear.'

'How do you propose we shut it down?' The female Jaffa asked.

'The only way to do that would be to find the power source and disconnect it.' Sam said.

'I have often observed that it is wise to heed Colonel Carter's advice in these matters.' Teal'c said supportively.

'Can you do this?' Byn'c asked. 'Can you locate the power source?'

'I've taken some initial readings, and yes, I think I can locate it.' Sam agreed.

'They haven't been able to bring our people back, why should we believe they can do this?' Cral'k argued.
'Actually, I think you're wrong about that.' Daniel said. 'I think we did bring your people back.'

'Daniel?' Sam asked nervously.

'You said it yourself, Sam. It should have worked and the entries are no longer there.'

'But…'

'We didn't reset location parameters so we were wrong on where they were going to reappear.' Daniel gestured. 'Think about it. Why would they reappear in this chamber when we didn't tell the system to bring them here and that's not where they disappeared from?'

'The old area of the city.' Teal'c deduced.

'We should check the…' Daniel began.

'Go.' Sam said motioning for the two of them to leave. Teal'c marched through the Council members to the doorway, Daniel followed after him.

The Council indicated for a proportion of the guards to go with them on the search for the missing Jaffa and when they had left, their attention fell on Sam.

She cleared her throat nervously. 'About the power source?'

The Council looked at each other.

'Very well,' said Byn'c, 'you may find the power source and remove it.'

'I cannot believe we are listening to this Tau'ri female.' Cral'k said. 'All she wants is the power source for herself.'

'I promise I will handover the power source to the Council personally.' Sam said firmly.

'It is agreed.' Another member of the Council noted and swept out.

'Thank you.' Sam said to the disappearing group.

'It is we who should thank you.' The female Jaffa bowed her head and left the chamber.

Sam glanced over at Mitchell.

'Can you find the power source?' He asked.

'Sure.' Sam said pinning a smile on her face. 'Why not?' She rubbed the back of her neck.

'You should take a break.' Mitchell said noticing how tired she looked. She hadn't rested, he realised. She'd ordered him to, and Daniel, but she'd continued working.

'I will.' Sam said. 'I want to pinpoint these power readings first. Can you guard the entrance and wait for Teal'c and Daniel, let them know what's happened when they get back?'

'Yes, ma'am.' Mitchell smiled and tipped his baseball cap at her. He glanced back before he left the chamber and shook his head at the sight of her already immersed in her calculations. He headed through the dark passageway almost completely familiar with its twists and turns before he took position at the entrance way. The other Jaffa who had been guarding the entrance were no longer there; they had probably gone to search the old city with the others, Mitchell mused. The last of the
light outside was fading and Mitchell peered into the gloom, scanning the area.

His blue eyes caught on the figure of Cral'k talking with two Jaffa animatedly near to the path back to the Stargate. He frowned. The young male Jaffa worried him, not because of the dislike in his eyes but mainly because of the way he had looked at Sam. He'd seen that look before on men who had no respect for women. He relaxed a little when they turned and walked away.

It could have been considered to be a boring duty, standing and keeping watch as Sam worked inside but Mitchell was content even as the seconds turned into minutes and the minutes to an hour. He was breathing the air of another planet; its warm breeze brushing over his face and through his hair. This was what he had worked for through months of physiotherapy and training; to be part of the Stargate programme and, more than that, to join the elite SG1 team. He truly didn't care if Sam ordered him to do nothing more than carry her bags, he thought with a wry smile. A movement by the pathway caught his attention and he stared into the darkness to see three figures approaching.

Great, he thought, Cral'k and his two goons were back. He tensed, his hand sliding to the trigger on the P90 he carried as the three Jaffa started to walk towards him. His other hand reached for his radio.

'Colonel, we got some trouble out here. Three Jaffa. I suggest we call Jackson for some back-up.' Mitchell said.

There was a pause before she replied, her voice calm and controlled. 'Copy that.'

The Jaffa were almost right up to him before Mitchell shifted so he was directly in the entrance way; his P90 braced and pointed.

'Hello, boys.' He greeted them with a mock cheeriness. 'Out for an evening stroll?'

'You have no rights here, Tau'ri.' Cral'k said. 'Move aside.'

'I don't think so.' Mitchell said.

They all stared at each other.

Cral'k began to smile.

Mitchell watched him puzzled. He saw the hand movement of the Jaffa on his left too late, barely saw the gleam of the zat and the bright flash of blue as its electrical charge hit him. He was already too much in pain to feel the blow as his head was cracked onto the rock behind him by the Jaffa on his right and he was unconscious when he hit the ground.

'Mitchell?' Sam tried to raise him again. 'Cameron?' She frowned. OK, she could understand not being able to reach Daniel. It was likely he was out of range or the rock around her was distorting the signal but Mitchell should have responded. Her ears picked up the sound of footsteps approaching in the passageway.

She reviewed her situation. Mitchell was likely injured or dead; she was trapped in the chamber with a P90, a knife and her 9mm. There were three of them and one of her. She hit the light symbol and the room went dark. Her knowledge of the chamber was the only advantage she had. She dived down behind another console to the one she had been working at and aimed the P90 at the doorway.

When the shadows appeared, she didn't hesitate; she squeezed the trigger. The bright flash of the spitting bullets streamed across the chamber. One of the targets went down as the other two dived
for cover. She put down the P90 silently as she changed position and switched to her 9mm.

'Hiding will only make this worse for you.' Cral'k's voice sent a shiver down her spine. 'If you reveal yourself, I will be kind.'

Sam knew better than to respond. She took shallow even breaths, and waited. They were circling the room like sharks. She could see them moving towards the faint glow of her laptop monitor. One of them knelt down and placed something on the base of the console. A bomb, she realised. They were going to blow it up. She aimed her gun and fired, once, twice; the body jerked and fell to the side. She immediately made to move but Cral'k was on her in a heartbeat. He smashed his hand across her face and his arms banded around hers to render her immobile; his hand slapped over her mouth as he grabbed her.

'There you are.' His breath was hot at her neck and she reacted with all the basic and advanced training at her disposal slamming her head into his face behind her. She heard the grunt and, as his hold momentarily lessened, she stamped hard down on his foot. She gained more freedom; her elbow went into his stomach and she lurched away from him. He tackled her and they went sprawling across the floor of the chamber, one of her ankles twisting badly beneath her. She cracked her forehead on the floor but fought the impending darkness to kick out. Her boot caught him across the jaw and she crawled further away from him; reached for her knife. When he came at her again, she thrust it between his ribs with a desperate cry. He staggered away from her and ran out.

Dizziness threatened again but the nagging voice in her head told her she had to get up; she had a man down. Mitchell, she had to check on Mitchell. She blinked past the blurred vision and tried to sit up. Her head swam. The rush of nausea had her turning her head to the side to vomit violently. Her body shivered as the retching stopped. She moved slowly. Her ankle was throbbing; sprained rather than broken, she thought, but she wouldn't be able to walk on it. She probably had concussion from the head injury.

The flickering lights on the base of the console caught her attention and she crawled over to it. The bomb was of Goa'uld design; very nasty and probably naquadah enhanced. It was going to make a hell of an explosion and she had no time to get out or disarm it, she realised, seeing how many of the sectioned panels were already alight. She could barely walk and she would be lucky if she made it half-way down the passage when it blew and even then…what if Cral'k was waiting at the entrance? Physically, she wasn't up to another fight. She reached for her laptop and Daniel's notebook before she crawled around the other side of the console away from the stirring Jaffa she had shot. She knew she only had moments as she hastily reset the parameters again for the security transportation device. She just hoped her plan to transport out of the chamber worked; without Daniel she couldn't double check her entries. She grabbed her backpack and stuffed the notebook inside. She kept hold of the laptop and said a prayer as she hit the enter key.

There was a flash of green light.

Sam reintegrated in mid-air, flew through it for a moment at speed before her body hit the immovable object of a console; she literally bounced off it and onto a set of stairs at its side, where she tumbled downwards before coming to rest in a heap at the bottom. She dimly realised she was clutching her laptop.

OK, she thought tiredly, that had hurt. She tried to move and cried out as a fiery pain shot up her arm and into her shoulder. She panted. OK, the arm holding the laptop was broken. She gritted her teeth and sat up, almost blacked out with the pain and took a deep breath. She slowly swivelled and braced her good leg before reaching up with her good arm to wrench her whole body upwards. Her
vision swam but she was upright. She looked around her.

The location she had entered had been the coordinates of the power source she tracked just before Mitchell's radio message. At least, she hoped they were. Finding the location parameters and changing them had been a little touch and go. Her Ancient was a little rusty. The same dim lighting that had filled the old chamber when they had activated the lights was already on in the room she had transported to. So at least she wasn't in the dark, she mused. The room was large and it was a hexagon with a split level. She focused on the level she'd fallen onto. She couldn't imagine making it up a flight of stairs with her injuries. Her eyes fell on the metal chair in the centre of the room; the same chair that existed in Antarctica. She limped over and lowered herself gingerly into it. She didn't have the gene and it didn't activate when she sat down and dumped her backpack by its side.

She'd rest, just for a moment, she told herself tiredly. Then she'd work out a way to get out and back to Mitchell, check he was OK and she needed to investigate the ZPM. There had been something off in the energy readings that suggested it wasn't actually a ZPM but what else could it be? She slipped into unconsciousness; her arm still wrapped around her laptop.
Daniel was smiling as he came down the path with Teal'c and Bra'tac. The older Jaffa didn't seem any the worse the wear for his experience. He had apparently re-materialised exactly where he had been dematerialised and the small recollection of his vision going completely green made up his whole memory of the event. In fact, as far as Bra'tac was concerned, he had blinked and the sky had gone from early morning daylight to green to twilight. The other Jaffa were all accounted for and there was a celebratory feeling as Daniel followed Teal'c back to the chamber which Bra'tac had insisted he wanted to see for himself.

Teal'c suddenly halted and held up a hand. 'Something is wrong.' He said peering into the darkness.

'You are right, my friend.' Bra'tac put his hand on Teal'c's shoulder. 'There!' He pointed and they all saw what his eyes had made out in the darkness; the prone figure of Colonel Mitchell.

They ran down the rest of the path, slipping and sliding on the loose stones as they raced to Mitchell's side. He was stirring as they reached him.

'Colonel Mitchell.' Teal'c knelt down and helped him into a sitting position.

Mitchell blinked hard past the sharp pain in his head. 'Sam.' He said weakly. 'Cral'k came with a couple of goons…'

Daniel and Teal'c both stared at each other in horror for a split second before they moved. They had barely stood up when a figure, an injured Jaffa, came running out of the passageway.

'Bomb!' The Jaffa screamed before throwing himself to the ground.

The boom of an explosion inside the mountain shook the ground. Teal'c's eyes widened as he saw the fire heading toward them through the passage and he pushed Daniel to the side, throwing himself over the other man as Bra'tac yanked Mitchell out of the way.

The fire exploded from the passage-way.

Teal'c turned back to stare at the entrance with shock.

'No.' Daniel murmured as he sat up. 'Sam.' His throat closed on her name. She couldn't be…she just couldn't be…

Teal'c's body was one fluid movement as he rose and reached for the quivering Jaffa who had run from the chamber. He lifted him from the ground with one hand at his throat. The Jaffa's hands closed around Teal'c's wrist and pushed but his grip was too strong.

'Where is Cral'k? ' Teal'c growled.

'I don't know.' The Jaffa gasped.

'What was his plan?' Bra'tac asked as he went to stand by Teal'c's side.

'He believed she lied about the power source; he was going to blow up the device and show everybody. But he first intended to show the woman her place…' The Jaffa began.

'Does that mean what I think it means?' Daniel asked tightly as he helped Mitchell to his feet. The other man leaned on him heavily.
'It means he intended to take her against her will.' Bra'tac said matter-of-factly.

Mitchell swore roundly.

Daniel shook his head, struggled against the images in his head of Sam's last moments being of such horrific abuse. Another thought shot through him. God…what was he going to tell Jack? He staggered and it was Mitchell's turn to steady him.

'What happened to Colonel Carter?' Teal'c asked.

'I didn't see. She surprised us. She shot Amlac before we entered and myself as I placed the bomb. She fought Cral'k hand to hand. I saw them before I passed out. When I woke I didn't see her as I ran from the chamber.'

'Cral'k?' Bra'tac asked.

'He was not there.'

'What else?' Teal'c said sternly.

'That's it.' The Jaffa wheezed.

'You will come with us and tell this to the Council.' Bra'tac said.

'He should die.' Teal'c stated.

'And he will.' Bra'tac noted. 'For her death, his life will be taken.'

Teal'c lowered the Jaffa to the ground and shoved him toward the path. 'Walk.'

Bra'tac looked at the two devastated Tau'ri males solemnly. 'You should come too.'

They followed after the Jaffa to the building they had designated for the Council. The group swept through the torch-lit corridors leaving murmuring voices and wondering eyes in their wake.

They froze at the sound of Cral'k's voice behind the door that led to the Council chamber.

'…and so the human female attacked me with this knife…'

Before Bra'tac could prevent it, Teal'c slammed the door open with a heavy palm and stalked to the centre of the room where Cral'k was stood. The other Jaffa did not stand a chance against Teal'c's fury; Teal'c easily batted away the knife Cral'k held before his hands went around Cral'k's throat.

'I should kill you where you stand.' Teal'c growled.

Mitchell shifted uncomfortably. 'Shouldn't we…?' He gestured at Teal'c and glanced back at Daniel's grief-stricken profile.

'No.' Daniel said. *It's a Jaffa revenge thing; he could hear Jack's voice clearly in his head. He hoped Teal'c did crush the life from Cral'k's throat, he thought furiously, the Jaffa deserved it and more for whatever he had put Sam through before the explosion.

'What is the meaning of this?' Byn'c asked.

'Cral'k is responsible for the death of Colonel Carter by placing an explosive within the chamber.' Bra'tac announced authoritatively. 'More, he conspired to rape her prior to her death.' He shoved
the hapless Jaffa who had escaped the explosion in front of him. 'This one can testify to the facts.'

'Is this true?' Byn'c demanded. 'Tell us the truth, Ty'roc and we may go easy on your punishment.'

'Yes.' The Jaffa answered. 'It is true.'

'The whole story.' Bra'tac demanded.

'Cral'k approached myself and my cousin Amlac just after we had left the chamber where the Tau'ri female had been given permission to search for the power source.' Ty'roc said his voice steadying as he continued. 'He believed it was a Tau'ri trick and was determined to destroy the device and reveal her deception. He intended to show the female her place. He elicited Amlac's and my help in doing this.'

'Go on.' Byn'c commanded gravely.

'We acquired an explosive device from those used by the Kull warriors during the battle to hold Dakara against Anubis and went back. We knocked out the Tau'ri male guarding the entrance…' the dark eyes flickered to Mitchell who acknowledged him with a tilt of his head, 'and made our way to the chamber. The chamber was in darkness and the Tau'ri female opened fire on us. Amlac was hit. Cral'k and I both dived out of the way and were able to remain hidden in the darkness. I set the bomb on the device as instructed by Cral'k but as I finished setting it, she shot me.' He indicated his wounds. 'I fell injured and momentarily passed out. Before I did, I saw Cral'k and the female struggling. He was attempting to rape her.'

Daniel turned away, bile rising in his throat. Teal'c's hands tightened around Cral'k's neck.

'A bright flash of green light woke me,' Ty'roc concluded, 'and there was no sign of the female or of Cral'k. I realised the countdown was almost over and ran from the chamber. I was barely outside when it exploded.'

'And to that I can attest.' Bra'tac said.

Daniel turned back to the Jaffa, a frown crossing his face. 'Excuse me, not wanting to interrupt here but did you just say that you saw a flash of green light when you woke up?'

'Yes.' Ty'roc replied.

'You're sure?' Daniel checked.

'Yes.'

Daniel started smiling. 'That's great.'

'What's great?' Mitchell asked bemused.

'Well you get what that means, right?' Daniel looked from Mitchell's puzzled face, to Teal'c's and Bra'tac's and back. 'She's alive.'

'Daniel…' Mitchell figured the other man had lost it.

'Sam's alive!' Daniel insisted.

'I do not see how that is possible, Daniel Jackson.' Teal'c said calmly; a contrast to his continued throat-hold of Cral'k.
'She must have used the security transportation device to get away from the chamber before the bomb exploded.' Daniel explained excitedly.

'Is that possible?' Mitchell asked.

'Knowing Colonel Carter, indeed it is.' Teal'c said confidently.

'We need to go find her.' Daniel said hurriedly.

'Release, Cral'k, my friend.' Bra'tac laid a hand on Teal'c shoulder. 'He will die by the hand of the executioner.'

Teal'c slowly released Cral'k and threw him to the ground. 'If we do not find her alive, I will kill you myself.'

Cral'k spat at Teal'c's departing figure. 'Shol'var.' His eyes gleamed with hatred. 'The hatred of the Tau'ri amongst the Jaffa will grow and you will die at the hand of my Lord God Ba'al…'

The knife flew across the room and embedded itself in Cral'k's throat. They all turned to look in surprise at Byn'c. The older Jaffa waved at the body. 'Remove it from our presence.' His eyes met Teal'c's. 'It is Cral'k who is the shol'var here and I have exacted his punishment accordingly.'

'Go.' Bra'tac gestured. 'I will stay to deliberate with the Council over the ramifications of Cral'k's words and what has transpired here tonight.'

Teal'c inclined his head at Byn'c before he and the Tau'ri men left the Council chamber.

'OK, Jackson.' Mitchell said. 'Where do we start looking?'

Daniel took out his radio and waved it. 'Sam, are you there? Sam, if you can hear me, say something.'

There was a resounding silence.

'I'm thinking we need back-up.' Mitchell said.

'I agree.' Teal'c said. 'I will round up a group of Jaffa to assist in the search.'

'Actually, Teal'c, I was thinking of getting some more of us good old Tau'ri out here.' Mitchell said. 'If we're right and she used the transporting device to get herself out of the chamber then unless we find another one of those consoles we could search the whole planet and still not find her.'

'Yes, so?' asked Daniel impatiently.

'So, Sam was tracking the power source. If we get some fancy equipment out here that could do that faster…'

'We can find the source of the power and likely another console where we can access the system and find out the location she sent herself to.' Daniel concluded. 'That's not a bad idea.'

'Thank you. I'll go back to the SGC and report the situation to General O'Neill.' Mitchell said. 'You stay here and continue trying her on the radio. It might work.'

'No…' Daniel stopped him. 'I'll go back. You stay.' God only knew how Jack was going to react to Sam going missing. 'If you go, you won't be allowed to return through the Stargate with your injuries.' He said covering for the real reason although his words were true; Mitchell looked as
white as a sheet. There was no way a doctor was going to release him back to duty if he went back to the SGC.

'Really?' Mitchell touched the back of his head gingerly and when his fingers came back with a smear of blood, he figured the archaeologist had a point. 'OK. You go back. Leave your radio for Teal'c though. That way both he and I have one.'

Teal'c and Mitchell escorted Daniel down to the Stargate where he dialled home and entered the IDC on the GDO. He left them both standing together as he ran into the wormhole.

Daniel stumbled when his foot hit the ramp at the SGC, only just managed to right himself as he walked the last few steps to the bottom where Jack waited anxiously; the unscheduled wormhole already alerting him to the possibility that something had happened.

Jack's hands fisted at his sides as the archaeologist came to stand in front of him. For once, Jack couldn't think of a joke to get him over his unease and his worry; couldn't think of a one-liner that would break the tension. He could see in Daniel's eyes something had gone very wrong. His brown eyes gleamed at the younger man. Don't tell me it's Sam, he thought furiously, not Sam. Only one week and four days…

Daniel read the message as clearly as if Jack had spoken the words, knew he couldn't give the other man what he wanted. He swallowed hard. 'Sam's missing, Jack.'
Butterflies: Part 7

Jack stared at Daniel. Sam's missing. The words echoed around the silent gate room.

'But we think she's alive and that we know how to find her.' Daniel said quietly. 'We need a science team with expertise in the ZPM. We think the chamber the Jaffa found was part of an Ancient outpost like the one we have in Antarctica. Sam was tracking the power source and we think that's the best way to find her.' He continued. 'Back-up would be good; Mitchell and Sam got attacked so we could use a med team.'

Jack moved. He turned to the Airman standing by the door. 'Get Doctor Lee and two scientists of his choosing geared up and ready to leave with whatever equipment is needed. SG3 and SG12 will act as search and rescue. Get Doctor Lam and two of her people geared up and ready to leave with whatever equipment they need. I want them all in the gate room in ten minutes.'

'Yessir.' The Airman saluted and raced away.

Jack whirled back to Daniel. 'What happened?'

'It's a long story.' Daniel said rubbing his forehead. He gestured. 'I think you should come back to Dakara too. We might need you to operate the technology with that gene thing you've got going.'

'Fine. You can brief me as I gear up.' Jack said striding out of the gate room. He gestured at another Airman. 'You. Find General Hammond. He should still be on base and ask him to meet me in the gate room.'

Daniel followed Jack and explained the whole mission as the other man pulled on his gear. He was up to the point where he had realised that the missing Jaffa had probably been re-materialised at the same location where they had dematerialised when he stopped for a breath.

'Sam told me to go with Teal'c and apparently the Council gave her permission to continue working in the chamber to search for the power source to disable the system completely.' Daniel continued. 'Anyway, from what we've been able to find out, Sam and Mitchell were attacked by Cral'k and a couple of his buddies. It turns out he was working for Ba'al.'

Jack slowed in putting his vest on and nodded for Daniel to carry on. 'Go on.'

'Mitchell was knocked out at the entrance where he was standing guard.' Daniel said shifting on the bench. 'Sam took down two of the Jaffa but not before one of them planted a bomb. She also managed to injure Cral'k who ran back to the Council with a story about her attacking him.'

'Sweet.' Jack said reaching for his cap.

'One of the Jaffa was only badly wounded and when he woke up he saw a bright green flash, realised the bomb was about to go off and ran out just as we got there.' Daniel said. 'There was a massive explosion.' His throat closed as he remembered the staggering pain of thinking he'd lost Sam. 'We thought at first she was…was dead.' He couldn't look at Jack. 'But when we got the whole story out of the Jaffa who'd escaped the bomb, we realised the green flash of light meant that she must have used the transportation system to get herself out of the chamber.' He swiped a hand over his face.

'Sounds like Carter.' Jack said softly.
'Only she's not responding to the radio so she could be anywhere. Mitchell figured if we track the power source, there'll be consoles we can use to access the system and work out where she sent herself.' Daniel concluded still not looking at the other man.

'Mitchell?' Jack asked.

Daniel nodded and suddenly realised as he glanced up that Jack had crouched in front of him.

'You going to be OK going back?' Jack asked.

Daniel nodded. 'I thought…for a while, I thought I was going to have to tell you she was dead, Jack.'

Jack placed a hand on his shoulder squeezed it gently. 'Come on. Let's go find her.'

Daniel fastened up his vest and they accepted the weapons on their way into the gate room. It was already filled with people including Hammond and Landry; the wormhole already activated.

Jack marched straight to the ramp and pulled his cap down harder as he rested his hands atop the P90. Somewhere after their gearing up, Daniel realised a little startled, Jack had become General O'Neill. He had donned his military persona like a second armour.

'OK, people.' Jack said loudly bringing everyone to order. 'Listen up. This is a search and rescue so this will be all you get on the situation. Colonel Carter was attacked on Dakara by a rogue Jaffa working for Ba'al. She was forced to use an Ancient transportation system to save herself. Unfortunately, shortly afterwards, the rogue agent blew up the only known console that had access into the system.'

He gazed around the room. 'As I have some freak gene that allows me to use Ancient technology which may assist in the search, I will be leading the SAR myself. We are going to go to Dakara; find the power source to that system where there is likely another console and we are going to find Carter. It is likely that she may be injured and will require medical attention. Any questions?'

There were none. Each man and woman looked back at Jack eager to begin the mission.

'SG3 and 12 move out; science and med teams follow them.' Jack ordered. He stepped off the ramp to speak to Hammond.

'General…' Jack began.

'I'll mind the store, Jack.' Hammond said without waiting for the request. 'Good luck and Godspeed, son.'

Jack nodded and saluted before he made his way back to Daniel. The two men were side by side as they walked through the wormhole and back to Dakara.

Mitchell waited for them on the other side. He saluted Jack formally. 'Sir. Bra'tac has secured the area by the old chamber for us to work.'

'Lead on.' Jack said before issuing orders to the others.

'Have you had any luck reaching Sam?' Daniel asked as they began the walk to the destroyed Ancient chamber.

'None.' Mitchell said. 'When you left, Teal'c returned to the Council and Bra'tac got their support
for our plan to find Sam. They also organised a group of Jaffa to search the old city in case Sam transported there. Teal'c went to show them the likely spots and meet us back in front of the chamber. He gestured. 'I think they're scared we're going to blame them all for allowing Ba'al's agent to attack us.' He reached up to touch the lump on his head again.

'So, having a good first day, Mitchell?' Jack asked dryly seeing the movement.

'Well, I haven't been taken over by an alien yet, sir,' Mitchell replied, 'but I have lost Colonel Carter.'

Jack saw the crushed look Mitchell was trying to hide and knew it was guilt that the Jaffa had gotten past him to Sam. His own anger at the other's man failure to protect her briefly competed with his professionalism before the latter won out. He cleared his throat. 'Yeah, I may have not mentioned the fifth rule; expect that you will lose Carter occasionally. When was the first time we lost her?' He asked Daniel. 'Third, fourth mission?'

'Fourth.' Daniel said.

'There you go. Fourth mission.' Jack said gesturing. 'Some kid kidnapped and sold her that time.'

'Sir…' Mitchell appreciated what the General was trying to do but…

'The sixth rule, Mitchell,' Jack continued talking over him, 'is always find Carter when you lose her.' He held the other man's gaze. 'OK?'

'OK, sir.' Mitchell responded.

Jack saw the younger man relax a little. 'And hey, on the upside, you haven't been taken over by an alien.'

'The day's young.' Mitchell quipped.

They made their way down the path and Jack could see that Bra'tac had already organised a massive operation just in front of a blackened entranceway on the side of a mountain. Large artificial lights had been set up; there was a campfire burning brightly. Jaffa swarmed the area and Bra'tac was stood in the middle shouting orders.

Jack made straight for him. 'Bra'tac.'

'O'Neill.' The old Jaffa clasped Jack's forearm. 'On behalf of the Jaffa High Council I bid you welcome to Dakara and apologise for the circumstances that have brought you here.'

Jack nodded. 'Where can my people work?'

'Jav' nec! Gyr'c!' Bra'tac yelled at two young Jaffa who immediately came to order. 'Help the Tau'ri get set up and give them whatever assistance they need.'

Jack confirmed his approval to SG3 and SG12 with a sharp nod, who moved into assist the science and med teams along with the Jaffa.

'You have brought equipment to assist in finding her?' Bra'tac asked.

'We have,' Jack confirmed.

'And a medical team, no? This is good.' Bra'tac nodded with satisfaction. 'She may be in need of your doctors given Cral'k's attempt to rape her.'
'His attempt to what?' Jack asked. His eyes snapped to Daniel.

The archaeologist gestured weakly at Jack's furious glare. 'I may have skipped over that part.' Daniel admitted.

'It is unlikely he was successful.' Bra'tac said. 'If he had been able to take her, there would have been no doubt that he would have killed her after.'

Jack turned from the small group of men. 'Carolyn! Get over here!'

Carolyn hurried over. 'Yes, General?'

'There's a possibility that Carter was subjected to a sexual assault.' Jack forced the words out but kept his voice low. There was no reason for the other teams to know.

'I understand.' Carolyn said. 'I'll inform my people.' Her eyes fell on Mitchell's pale face and shocked eyes. 'Colonel Mitchell, follow me. I need to examine that head wound.'

'Me?' Mitchell blinked at her. 'I'm fine, really. It's just a scratch.'

'Sir.' Carolyn looked at Jack.

Jack sighed. 'Go with the nice doctor, Mitchell and get your head looked at.'

'But, sir…'

'That, Mitchell, was not a suggestion.' Jack clarified. 'You can join back in the search when we get a lock on Carter.'

It was Carolyn's turn to protest and Jack waved her objections away. 'Just patch him up, Doc.'

Neither Mitchell nor Carolyn was happy as they walked away so he figured he'd got the decision about right. Jack turned back to Bra'tac. 'Thanks for everything you're doing here.'

'It is the least we can do.' Bra'tac said. 'I hope our joint efforts to find Colonel Carter help to once again strengthen the bonds that exist between our two people and that you will not blame us all for the actions of one Jaffa.'

'Every barrel has its bad apple.' Jack said. 'Daniel tells me this Cral'k guy was working for Ba' al?'

'It is possible that Ba' al lives.' Bra'tac noted.

'Where is the guy, Cral'k, anyway?' Jack muttered. 'I'd like a word.'

'Cral'k's dead.' Daniel said.

'You skip over that part too?' Jack sighed again. 'Damn.' His brown gaze flickered back to Daniel. 'Teal'c?'

'No, although he did the whole,' Daniel mimed choking someone, 'but actually another Council member killed him when he revealed his allegiance to Ba' al.'

The sound of running footsteps had them all turning rapidly; guns and weapons at the ready.

Teal'c appeared and they all relaxed. 'O'Neill.' He walked swiftly to his friend. 'Has there been any word of Colonel Carter?'
'None so far. You?' Jack asked.

'We have searched through much of the city but there is no sign of her.' Teal'c reported sadly.

'It may be a long night.' Bra'tac noted. 'I will organise some food and drink.'

The older Jaffa walked off into the darkness and Jack was left with Daniel and Teal'c.

'This is most difficult, O'Neill.' Teal'c said gently.

'Jack…' Daniel began.

Jack waved his hand abruptly. 'Let's not go there right now, OK, guys?'

Both of his friends nodded.

'Daniel, why don't you go and find out what Doctor Lee and his geeks are up to?' Jack suggested.

Daniel nodded again and headed over to the science team.

'Crap.' Jack looked after the retreating figure of the archaeologist. Daniel had to be feeling lousy; he hadn't even made a token protest at Jack calling the scientists geeks.

'I must apologise, O'Neill. I assured you Colonel Carter and the rest of SG1 would be safe on Dakara.' Teal'c forced the words out. 'I was in error.'

'It's not your fault, Teal'c.' Jack said tiredly. 'Just like it's not Daniel's, or Mitchell's. Sometimes things just get screwed up; that's what happens.'

Teal'c inclined his head. 'I would have killed Cral'k with my bare hands.'

'I know and I'm sure Sam will appreciate the thought, Teal'c.' Jack patted his shoulder. He gestured at a nearby rock and they sat down. 'Daniel told me some of what's been going on with the Council.' He gestured at the scene in front of them; Jaffa and humans working together. 'I'm guessing the Council finding out Cral'k was a Ba'al agent…?'

'Has prompted them to revise their view of the Tau'ri.' Teal'c confirmed. 'Cral'k was amongst the most vociferous of those opposing our continued alliance. In many ways, Cral'k's plan to hurt Colonel Carter and blow up the device has served to only strengthen our alliance.'

'So he screwed up.' Jack said satisfied. At least something good had come out of the situation.

'He did.' Teal'c's own tone was equally smug. 'I believe this night will bring our people closer together.'

Jack nodded. 'So now we've fixed the whole Tau'ri-Jaffa thing, all we need to do is find Carter.'

'Indeed.' Teal'c murmured.

The two of them stared out into the darkness both knowing without speaking which one they would have preferred to have done first.
Sam knew she was dreaming. The park was not far from her house and she walked there sometimes. Her memory had reconstructed the picture perfect trees and gardens around her; the winding path that she walked on; the sun overhead and the breeze that fluttered over her skin. She vaguely recalled the clothes she wore; old, worn jeans that hugged her figure and showed off the lengths of her legs, the pale brown leather jacket, the old t-shirt underneath. She abruptly remembered the last time she had worn the outfit; walking in the park with an Ascended being who had made himself human just to be with her. She'd given the jacket away to a charity the day after she had returned from Velona where she had watched him ascend again to save her life. She had known she would never wear the jacket again without feeling incredibly sad…

'You looked beautiful that day in the park.'

Her head turned and she saw him walking beside her again. She smiled, pleased to see him. 'Orlin.'

The Ascended being was in his human form; an attractive man with floppy blond hair and green eyes. He had loved her completely and totally during their short time together and whilst she had been unable to return his feelings, as he had once teased her, she had liked him a lot.

She stopped walking and turned to face him. Her blue eyes met his fearfully. 'I'm dying, aren't I? That's why you're here.'

'I've come to offer you a choice, Sam.'

Sam crossed her arms. 'Isn't that against the rules? I thought you weren't allowed to help humans ascend before their time.'

He took her hand in his. She could feel the ripples of energy from him as his thumb stroked over her knuckles. 'It is the only way I can save you.'

'My friends will be looking for me…' Sam began.

'They won't find you in time.' Orlin said.

'But there's nothing wrong with me.' Sam denied. 'I'm fine. A couple of broken bones…some bruises…'

'There is bleeding inside.' Orlin said. 'The transportation system was never meant to be used the way you used it by bypassing the buffer. There was…damage when you re-materialised.'

Sam jerked away from him and began walking again.

'Let me save you.' Orlin pleaded.

'Orlin, you can't expect to turn up, tell me I'm going to die and ask me to ascend.' Sam snapped. 'I can't…I can't just make that kind of decision.'

'I know it's a lot to deal with,' Orlin said, 'but you have to deal with it now. We don't have much time, Sam.'

She whirled to a halt and ran her hands through her short crop of hair before she covered her face with them. She lowered them slowly. 'Can't you fix the damage?'
'I am not allowed.'

'But you're not really allowed to help me ascend either are you?'

Orlin looked at her unhappily. 'They have agreed to allow me to offer you this. There is more going on here then I can tell you.'

'Why not just fix me?' Sam asked plaintively.

'Because there is a balance.' Orlin said.

'So if I live I unbalance everything but if I ascend I don't?' Sam read the truth in his eyes. 'OK.' She took a deep breath. 'How do I even do this?' She asked.

Orlin put his hands on her shoulders and slid his hands down until hers were held gently in his. 'Take a deep breath and close your eyes.'

She did as he asked, felt the air ripple around her; the same warm feeling flowing over her that she had felt the day Orlin had revealed his true self to her.

'Lay down your burdens and let go to your mortal life.' Orlin continued.

Let go? She found herself standing on Dakara. She could see the passageway into the mountain. The area outside it was filled with people; Jaffa and human alike.

'Your sacrifice here will serve to unite your peoples.' Orlin noted.

Her eyes caught on Mitchell. He was sitting on a chair with Carolyn hovering over him trying to ensure he rested. She felt a wave of relief. He was alive. Her gaze moved on to Doctor Lee and the other scientists. She shook her head as Bill frowned at something on the screen.

'He's trying to find a ZPM rather than just focusing on the readings of this power source.' She realised.

'Yes.' Orlin glanced across from her. 'By the time, he realises the readings are not being distorted, it will be too late.'

Sam sighed and another man caught her attention. Daniel. He walked away from the table and over to Teal'c who stood with Bra'tac by the fire. Daniel laid a hand on Teal'c's shoulder. She could feel the weight of their guilt. Not your fault, she thought at both of them. Daniel suddenly glanced over toward her as if he could sense her. She followed the archaeologist as he left Teal'c and made his way over to…Jack. She swallowed hard at the sight of him.

His grey hair was messed up in a way that indicated he had rubbed his hands through it multiple times in frustration. His jaw was tensed; his face tight with pain. She watched as Jack glanced up at Daniel, his brown eyes briefly hopeful before whatever Daniel told him had him lowering his sight to the ground, bowing his head before the military training reasserted itself and he got to his feet.

Jack. How did she let go of Jack? She smiled sadly. Hadn't the past year taught her she couldn't?

'Sam?' Orlin's voice rang with urgency.

'I can't do this, Orlin.' She smiled sadly. 'But there are a couple of things you can help me with.' Her mind communicated her wishes and Orlin nodded sadly.

Sam turned back to look at her friends one last time. With the power Orlin provided, she held
Teal'c, Daniel and Mitchell in her thoughts for a second.

'Goodbye, my friends.' Sam whispered lightly into their minds as she watched them fade away from view.

Daniel jerked and stared hard at the empty space behind him.

'What?' Jack asked suspiciously.

'Nothing…I…nothing.' Daniel said. He had been in the middle of telling Jack that yelling at the scientists because they hadn't found anything yet wasn't a good idea when he could have sworn he had heard Sam.

'Daniel, maybe you should take a…' Jack stopped mid-sentence as he felt a hand on his shoulder and the world around him changed abruptly.

He swallowed hard. This had happened to him before; he had been in an infirmary room watching Jacob trying to heal Daniel when suddenly he, or rather his spirit or mind, had been in some freaky version of the gate room with Daniel saying goodbye to him as the other man ascended. This wasn't the gate room but his heart sank as he figured he had been brought to the large alien room for the same thing. He turned to face the person who had brought him and took a step back in surprise. It was a young, thirty-something man. Jack stiffened abruptly. 'Who are you?'

'Orlin.'

'Orlin.' Jack repeated. 'You're the one who visited with Carter for a while, right?' There was a stirring of jealousy in his gut. Sam had thought enough of the Ascended being to protect him; in fact she had almost ruined her career to help him. 'Where is she?'

Orlin gestured at the chair in the centre and Jack hurried over to it. He crouched beside her. One hand stroked her hair gently as the other searched her neck for a pulse. 'Carter? Sam?' He murmured and when she didn't rouse, his hard eyes flickered back to Orlin. 'What's wrong with her?'

'She's dying.' Orlin said. 'Her spirit is already fading…but she wanted me to bring you here.'

'Yeah,' Jack said bitterly, 'I know the drill.'

'She won't come with me.' Orlin blurted out. 'I could save her but she won't let me.'

Jack's eyebrows rose. 'Why the hell not?'

'She won't let go of you.' Orlin said.

'The hell she won't.' Jack looked back at Sam's sleeping face. His hand cupped her cheek. 'Sam! Carter!'

Her blue eyes blinked open, wide and unfocused. 'Sir?'

'Hey.' Jack stroked her cheek and she turned to him. His brown eyes softened. 'Orlin tells me you won't go with him.'

'I can't, sir.' Sam smiled sadly. 'It's really more Daniel's thing anyway.'

'You have to go with him, Carter.' Jack said forcing the words out past the lump in his throat. 'Sure you'll be on a higher plane of existence but you'll be alive…'
'Sir…'

'Colonel, listen to me.' Jack snapped. 'You are not going to die.'

'I don't think you can order me not to die, sir.' Sam said.

'Watch me.' Jack said. 'Go with him, Carter. That is an order.'

'I'm dying, Jack,' she reached up and stroked a hand down his face, over the rough jaw, revelling in the freedom to touch him that she'd never had before. 'I just wanted to say goodbye.'

'Don't you dare!' Jack held her face gently. 'Don't you dare die on me now.' His brown eyes searched her sad blue ones. 'Not when there's only one week and four days before I tell you I love you, Sam and before you tell me you love me back.'

Her hand fell away from him and he placed his forehead on hers, whispered to her. 'One week and four days, Sam, before we get the chance to dance on my roof under the stars, and while you're trying to tell me how the universe works I ask you to marry me and hope you say yes…'

'Jack.' She said softly, her eyes closing.

'Don't do this.' His voice broke as she stayed still. He shook his head in denial. His damp eyes flew to Orlin's. 'Dammit! You can save her! Do something!' 

'I can't! If she won't ascend…'

'Find some other way!' Jack demanded harshly. 'You can't tell me that you couldn't heal her if you wanted to!

'There's a balance…'

'Screw the balance!' Jack snapped.

'It would change the universe.' Orlin said. 'The Others…'

'This is Sam's life we're talking about. If you really love her, save her!' His eyes pleaded with Orlin and his voice gentled. 'Or help me save her. Please.'

Orlin glanced upwards and Jack followed his gaze uncertainly. His eyes moved up the stairs, across the upper level of the room and onto an open doorway that had been partially and violently opened; it was blackened and broken as though from a blast…like from a bomb explosion…
Jack returned abruptly back to his original location outside the mountain. He blinked hard past the swirling emotions; tried to get his bearings.

'Jack?' Daniel's quiet question was filled with concern. Jack had just stopped talking mid-sentence.

Jack's head whipped round past Daniel to the entrance way to the passage and chamber where the bomb had exploded. 'Daniel, did anybody check the chamber after the fire went out?'

'No...' Daniel said slowly. 'I told you, Sam got out.'

Jack wasn't listening anymore. He headed towards the passage calling for Teal'c, Carolyn, Mitchell, the SG3 leader.

Daniel tried to catch up with him. 'Jack, this is madness.'

'Daniel.' Jack turned to the other man briefly. 'Trust me.' His brown eyes begged Daniel to understand and the archaeologist suddenly remembered the sensation he'd had just before Jack has stopped talking; the feeling that he'd heard Sam's voice. He snapped on his torch and followed Jack.

The group moved slowly through the passageway and into the dark, burned out chamber. There was dust everywhere and everybody covered their mouths and noses to breath in as little as possible.

Jack shone his torch at the far wall. 'There!'

They all saw the ragged opening and the dim light behind it. Teal'c grasped the broken door and shoved it back with an impressive show of strength. The light flooded in and Jack strode through to it. He ignored the upper level and ran down the stairs to the chair. His heart stopped at the sight of her.

The spiritual image had been perfect but Sam's real body was very broken. There was a bruise along one side of her face; a gash on her forehead. There were scrapes and bruises along both her arms and the one holding the laptop seemed to rest at an odd angle. Her whole body was twisted.

Carolyn pushed past him along with the other medics and Jack stood still watching them work as they gently lowered her from the chair onto the ground and examined her.

He felt Daniel and Teal'c stand beside him silently and was vaguely aware of Mitchell, SG3 and SG12 along with Bra'tac and the rest of the Jaffa taking other positions behind them and on the staircase, leaving only the medical team with Sam in the centre. All their eyes were pinned to the woman lying motionless on the ground.

'No pulse.' One of the medics shouted.

'Defib now!' Carolyn yelled. The paddles were charged and handed to her. 'Clear!'

The shock jerked Sam's body but there was no change.

'Again!' Carolyn yelled.

'It won't work.' Orlin said quietly.
The clatter of P90's and staff weapons being raised at the strange man, who had suddenly appeared on the empty side of the room opposite them, filled the air.

'Stand down.' Jack ordered loudly. His eyes held Orlin's. 'You can save her.'

'There is a balance…' Orlin began.

'I told you.' Jack said. 'Screw the balance.' He gestured at Sam. 'Save her, dammit!'

'Jack?' Daniel asked nervously. 'What's going on?'

'The Others have said there is a way,' Orlin said, 'but there is a price.'

Jack's jaw clenched. 'Name it.'

'A life for a life.' Orlin said.

'Take mine.' Jack said without hesitation. *I would rather die myself than lose Carter.* Jack remembered the words as though it was yesterday. It was still true.

Orlin stared at him. 'You would do that?'

'I said so didn't I?' Jack said roughly. 'What are we waiting for?'

Orlin nodded. 'Sit beside her.'

'Jack.' Daniel took a step forward to stop him; he wanted to save Sam too but not at the cost of another friend…

Jack put a hand on his shoulder and looked at him. This was his choice; what he wanted.

Daniel swallowed hard but let his friend go.

Teal'c bowed his head and Jack acknowledged it with a pat on his arm as he moved past him.

Jack motioned for Carolyn and the other medics to move aside and sat down beside Sam on one side as Orlin moved to sit beside her on the other.

'Now what?' Jack asked.

'Hold her hand.' Orlin instructed.

Jack clasped Sam's right hand in his; noticed Orlin took hold of her left.

'Now close your eyes.' Orlin said. He transformed into his energy form. There was a gasp from the Jaffa; a reverence as they bowed their heads at the bright white light and understood they were in the presence of an Ascended being. Even the more seasoned amongst the human soldiers gaped in awe.

'My God!' Mitchell muttered.

Daniel felt his chest tightening, a sob crawling up his throat that he forced back. He felt Teal'c's steadying hand on his shoulder.

The white energy ribbons of Orlin wrapped themselves around Jack and Sam, and covered them completely in the blinding light. Minutes passed before they started to retreat as Orlin solidified
into his human form; his mortal human form.

Jack felt Sam's pulse at the wrist he held in his hand; it was steady and strong. He breathed out heavily in relief and opened his eyes. He hadn't expected to still be alive. He looked over at Orlin and immediately understood what the other man had done. Orlin had paid the price; he had given his life for Sam's.

Orlin looked down at Sam, the bruises already fading away from her skin, blooming on his. He had little of his own life left. Only one or two more breaths. 'You'll have to bring her the rest of the way.'

'Why?' Jack asked.

Orlin blinked heavily struggling to meet Jack's thankful eyes and understood the question wasn't in regards to what he had just said but rather why Orlin had made the sacrifice. 'Because she'll say yes.' Orlin said softly. He swayed and Jack moved, letting go of Sam's hand, to step across her and hold the other man. Orlin slumped against him. 'Tell her…' He gasped and was still.

Jack laid Orlin's body gently on the ground. 'Thank you.' He said quietly. He disengaged Sam's hand from Orlin's grasp and folded it into his own. His eyes sought Carolyn across the room and gestured for her.

She took one hesitant step but then her medical training kicked in and she was by Sam's side checking her vitals. Jack gently let go of Sam. He placed her hand by her side before he moved away as the doctor did her job; an IV line, oxygen mask, the transfer of Sam onto a portable stretcher. Daniel and Teal'c hovered close by.

Jack watched as SG3 moved in to help the medics lift the stretcher. She would be taken straight back to the gate, back home to the SGC. He watched her being carried away for a long moment before he took a deep breath and replaced his cap over his short grey hair. He had a job to do. 'Major Baildon,' Jack motioned at the leader of SG12. 'You'll stay with the scientists and help the Jaffa disconnect the power source here, clear up, make friends.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Everybody else, let's go home.' Jack ordered gruffly.
The infirmary room was quiet; the only sound the soft beeping of the monitor as it kept track of Sam's vitals. She had been back at the SGC and unconscious for almost forty-eight hours. There was no physical reason. Carolyn had suggested it might have had something to do with Orlin's oblique statement that Jack would have to bring her the rest of the way back but Jack had no idea what he'd meant. Neither had Daniel whose own memory of being ascended was admittedly vague and patchy. Everybody else was equally at a loss.

Jack shifted in his chair and looked at Sam. He rubbed his eyes tiredly.

'Any change, sir?' Mitchell asked from the doorway.

Jack looked over at him and shook his head.

Mitchell cleared his throat. 'Bra'tac has arrived and you're needed in the briefing room, sir.'

Jack frowned but shoved his chair back and got to his feet. His job leading the SGC precluded his past habit of staying with an injured team-mate for hours at a time. He had only managed to sit with her sporadically. Usually Daniel or Teal'c, who had accompanied them back, took over. He glanced at Mitchell.

'I'll sit with her, sir.' Mitchell confirmed. He figured the General wasn't in the mood to give him another rule but it seemed not letting a team-mate wake up alone in the infirmary was one of them.

Jack gave a sharp nod and left to make his way to the briefing room. SG12 had come back that morning with the science team. Doctor Lee had reluctantly handed the disconnected power source over to the Jaffa but had come back babbling about sub-space and inter-dimensional power differences. Bra'tac had probably come back for Teal'c, Jack thought. No doubt with the shifting political tide back in favour of the pro-Tau'ri groups, Bra'tac wanted Teal'c back on Dakara.

Jack sighed. It had been good to have Teal'c around the last couple of days. Sam needed him; Daniel needed him; heck, who was he trying to kid; he needed him. Jack shook his head as he walked into the briefing room. Bra'tac, Teal'c and Daniel sat waiting, along with two other Jaffa that Jack had never met. On the table in front of them was a crate with an odd looking ZPM in it; it had a faint green glow instead of the usual orange colour.

'Gentlemen.' Jack said taking his seat at the head of the table. 'Sorry to keep you waiting.'

'O'Neill, I'd like to introduce Council members Byn'c and Gerek.' Bra'tac waved a hand on the two Jaffa sat with him.

Jack nodded politely. 'Nice to meet you folks.'

'We have brought news from Dakara.' Bra'tac began.

'Excellent.' Jack said forcing himself to pay attention.

'We have buried the one known as Orlin in the sacred ground at Dakara. A monument will be erected so all know we were in the presence of a Great One.'

Jack nodded with mixed emotions. He still didn't know how he felt about Orlin's sacrifice. With Sam unconscious, he somehow felt he had failed to live up to his part of the deal. 'That's a nice
thought.' He managed when he realised Bra'tac was waiting for him to speak.

Bra'tac nodded. 'We have also brought this ZPM as a gift to the Tau'ri.' He gestured at the crate. 'It is of no use to us.'

'Are you sure about this, Bra'tac?' Daniel asked.

'Daniel.' Jack warned the archaeologist.

'Jack.'

'It's rude to refuse a gift.' Jack pointed out in a friendly tone.

'We don't even know if it'll work here.' Daniel said.

'Then we'll find out.' Jack replied.

'Bra'tac,' Daniel said firmly turning to the Jaffa, 'this device could power the Ancient systems in the buried city. Are you sure you want to give that up?'

'According to your Doctor Lee, the power is almost gone.' Bra'tac said.

'And I'm sure he's right but if you kept the power on, we could access the information in the systems using the consoles in the chair room,' Daniel said excitedly, 'what we could learn could be incredible.'

'I can't believe I'm saying this,' Jack said, 'but Daniel has a point.'

'I do?'

'You do.' Jack agreed. 'The information in the Ancient systems on Dakara probably has more combined value to both our people than Earth possibly being able to use this ZPM to power our defences for a short period.'

'What do you propose?' Byn'c asked.

Jack looked at Daniel. 'What am I proposing Daniel?'

'A joint study, Jaffa and Tau'ri, for as long as the power lasts. With the data gathered shared completely between our two peoples for the benefit of both.' Daniel said quickly.

Jack gestured. 'What do you think?'

'I believe this is acceptable.' Byn'c said.

'I concur.' Gerek said.

'As do I.' Teal'c agreed.

'Then we are agreed.' Bra'tac smiled. 'We have something else to ask of you.'

'Oh?' Jack leaned forward over the table.

Byn'c cleared his throat. 'The Council would like to request the return of Major Davis and his team to assist us with the reconstruction plans for our new government and a new treaty to be drafted between the Free Jaffa and the Tau'ri which would be the first item confirmed by the new
'Making it clear to all,' Gerek said forcefully, 'that our alliance is strong and cannot be broken by those with poison in their hearts.'

'I don't see a problem with Major Davis and SG7 returning to Dakara.' Jack said. 'I'll make the arrangements.'

'And there is one last item of business.' Bra'tac said. 'The Council has discussed how we allowed Cral'k and others to achieve a position where they may have irrevocably harmed our alliance.'

Byn'c folded his hands on the table. 'There is an old Jaffa saying that trust is earned over time and lost in a blink of an eye.'

'We have something similar here on Earth.' Daniel chipped in.

'We cannot allow those who have doubts to shake our trust in each other again.' Gerek added.

'Which is why we decided to create a new position, one that we are all agreed will continue into the new government.' Bra'tac said. His eyes came to rest on his former student. 'It is an Ambassadorial position between the Free Jaffa and the Tau'ri, one where the Jaffa warrior who holds the post will live amongst the Tau'ri and fight at your side as part of your command.'

Jack glanced across at Teal'c who had stilled into total motionless.

'Teal'c,' Bra'tac said softly, 'the Council would like to offer you the position,' his eyes flickered to Jack, 'if the Tau'ri are agreed to the proposal.'

'I'm agreed.' Jack replied quickly. 'Daniel?'

'I'm agreed.' Daniel added.

'We're agreed.' Jack gestured.

'Well, my friend?' Bra'tac said his eyes returning to Teal'c. 'I'm afraid you will have to relinquish any ambitions to leading our new nation.'

'We realise you have strong support, Teal'c,' Gerek said, 'and would make a fine leader…'

'But with no fear that you wish power for its own sake, all our people will listen to you more.' Byn'ac added.

'And your place as a trusted advisor is assured.' Bra'tac added. 'The position will be yours for as long as you wish it to be. We are agreed that this is how you can best serve our people.'

'The Council affords me great honour in offering me the position.' Teal'c replied, inclining his head at the three Jaffa across the table. 'I accept,' his dark, solemn eyes caught Jack's, 'and I pledge my allegiance to you once again, O'Neill.'

'Happy to have you back, Teal'c.' Jack gave his first genuine smile since Daniel had walked down the ramp and told him Sam was missing.

Daniel slapped Teal'c's shoulder eliciting a raised eyebrow from his Jaffa friend.

The meeting ran for a while longer before the Tau'ri and their new ambassador watched the three older Jaffa enter the wormhole back to Dakara.
Jack rocked back on his heels. 'Are you sure you don't want to go with them and get your stuff, Teal'c?'

'I will return to Dakara once Colonel Carter has awakened.' Teal'c said firmly.

Jack nodded.

'Has there been any change?' Daniel asked folding his arms tightly.

Jack shook his head. 'She was still out when I was with her.'

'I don't understand. I mean, Orlin did heal her, right?' Daniel checked.

'Don't ask me, Daniel.' Jack sighed turning and starting the walk back to his office. 'I don't understand half of what went on.'

'What exactly did Orlin say to you?' Daniel asked as they started up the stairs.

'You heard him.' Jack said.

'I heard him say 'you'll have to bring her the rest of the way.'" Daniel said.

'Don't you think,' Jack said spinning back around and almost causing Daniel to go flying, 'that if I knew what that meant I would have done something already?' He continued up.

'Maybe he put it into your brain,' Daniel said, 'when he enveloped the two of you.'

'There's nothing there, Daniel.' Jack called over his shoulder as he crossed the briefing room.

'Have you tried, Jack?' Daniel asked as they followed him into his office.

'What the hell do you think? It's Carter, Daniel, of course I've tried!' It was almost a yell. Jack took a deep breath and picked up his pen.

Teal'c quickly closed the door. The rest of the SGC didn't need to hear the conversation.

Daniel folded his arms around himself. 'I'm sorry, Jack.'

'Maybe you're right.' Jack said wearily. 'Maybe I'm just too dumb to recognise that he left it in my head.' He couldn't look at his friends. 'If he did leave something he didn't exactly label it.' He sat down. 'Carolyn says she's fine. Everything works; she's breathing, her heart's beating, her brain's functioning…'

'So maybe Orlin could only heal her physically. Maybe he couldn't touch her on the spiritual, emotional plane because he made himself mortal and was no longer Ascended.' Daniel mused.

'That would make sense, Daniel Jackson.' Teal'c said standing with his hands behind his back.

'Well, the last time I looked I'm not an Ascended being either,' Jack said gesturing with the pen. 'How am I supposed to do that?'

'Orlin obviously thought you could.' Daniel murmured.

'Orlin was obviously wrong.' Jack said avoiding Daniel's eyes. 'Look, I have a stack of paperwork to do, not to mention I need to brief Hammond, Landry and the President on the new Jaffa stuff so…'
'We will leave you to complete your work, O'Neill.' Teal'c said solemnly putting a hand on Daniel's shoulder to ensure the younger man came with him.

Daniel didn't move. 'Jack.'

'Daniel.' Jack said with exaggerated patience not looking up.

'We're going to figure this out.'

Jack peeked at his friend finally and met Daniel's compassionate eyes. 'I know.' He gestured at them. 'You might want to relieve Mitchell from watching Sam. Let the kid know Teal'c's back on the team. I'll be by later.'

Daniel nodded.

Jack bent his head and started his work as they left the office. He heard the soft click of the door as it shut behind them. It stopped him writing and he threw his pen down, stuffed the heels of his hands in his eyes. 'Damn you, Orlin.' He muttered. 'You really stuffed up.' He lowered his hands.

'Perhaps he was only able to heal her physically. Maybe he couldn't touch her on the spiritual, emotional plane because he made himself mortal and was no longer Ascended.'

His friend's words haunted him. Had Daniel and Teal'c realised yet, he wondered. If Orlin had taken Jack's life and not his own, Orlin would have been able to save Sam completely. Instead, the other man had given his life and Sam was left with Jack to help her. Dumb, useless Jack who was screwing it up, he thought bitterly.

'You really should have taken me, Orlin.' He murmured.
A knock at the door brought Jack out of his thoughts and he reached for the pen again as he called for the person to enter. His eyes fell on the IOA Overseer.

'Woolsey.' He said curtly. 'What do you want?'

Woolsey frowned at the tone but entered and placed a stack of folders on Jack's desk. 'I thought you might like to know that the IOA has approved all of the new procedures, staffing levels and restructuring plans.'

Jack blinked at him. 'They have?'

'They have.' Woolsey's dark eyes glimmered behind his glasses. 'They were very impressed.'

'Well, good.' Jack said unsure what else he could say. 'Thank you.'

'I thought you would want to know straight away and I've taken the liberty of informing the President earlier.' Woolsey said.

'Thank you.' Jack said again. He waited.

There was a silence and Woolsey continued to hover.

'Was there something else?' Jack asked.

Woolsey cleared his throat. 'I was wondering if Colonel Carter's condition had improved.' He had come to have an appreciation for the brilliant scientist in the last month, not least her ability to resolve the debates between Doctor Jackson and the General. In his opinion she was quite possibly the only sane one of the three.

Jack gestured. 'There's been no change.'

'I see.' Woolsey nodded. 'Well, I'll leave you to it.' He didn't move.

Jack raised an eyebrow.

'I was wondering if it was appropriate to send some flowers?' Woolsey said. 'On behalf of the IOA, I mean, not from me personally, you understand but…'

'I'm sure Colonel Carter will appreciate flowers, Woolsey.' Jack said.

'Thank you, General.' Woolsey started to back out of the room. The door closed firmly behind him.

Jack shook his head and reached for the abandoned work; the sooner he got through it, the sooner he could go sit with Sam.

It took him almost four hours to clear his desk. He was beat when he finally took the elevator to the infirmary level. He probably should eat something, he thought even though he had no appetite. Walter had brought him a sandwich but he had left it uneaten. He headed to her room, nodding absenty at the occasional Airman or medical staff member who passed him. His heart stopped as he rounded the corner and saw Daniel and Teal'c leaning against the wall outside Sam's room; their backs to him.
He walked, half-jogged to them. 'What's happened? Has…' He stopped when Daniel gestured for him to. 'What?' His mouth was dry with anticipation.

'Carolyn's just giving her the regular check.' Daniel said hurriedly. 'She threw Teal'c and me out. That's all.'

Jack slumped against the wall and closed his eyes. He felt Daniel's hand on his shoulder although it was his other team-mate who spoke.

'Are you alright, O'Neill?' Teal'c asked quietly.

'No, Teal'c.' Jack admitted. 'I'm very definitely not alright.' He opened his eyes. 'I think I'm losing it.' His tone was conversational; the look in his eyes was deadly serious.

Daniel's hand squeezed gently and searched for something to divert the other man. 'You'll never guess who brought Sam flowers.'

Jack sighed. 'I bet I will.'

Daniel smiled confidently. 'No you won't.'

'OK, then. Ten bucks.' Jack said.

'Deal.' Daniel wasn't averse to taking Jack's money.

They shook hands.

'Woolsey.' Jack said with preamble.

Daniel opened his mouth in shock. 'How'd you know?'

'He asked me for permission, Daniel.' Jack said.

'He asked you for permission?' Daniel scowled. 'That can't be right.'

'I am the SGC commander.' Jack pointed out.

'No, you taking the bet when he asked you for permission.' Daniel said. 'That's just wrong.'

'It was a cunning strategy.' Teal'c said.

'So how did Mitchell take the news about you being back on the team?' Jack asked swiftly changing the subject.

'I believe he was very excited.' Teal'c said. 'He used the word 'cool' many times.'

Jack looked at Daniel who looked back at him with an amused smile.

'Very excited. Kept muttering it was like having the band back together.' Daniel noted.

They all turned as the door to Sam's room opened and a nurse left carrying more blood samples. Carolyn came to the doorway and motioned them all back inside. She shut the door.

'I'm guessing you all want to know the latest about her condition?' She asked.

Daniel and Jack nodded in unison.
'So…' Jack gestured for her to get on with it.

'Her physical vitals remain strong. The latest MRI shows her brain is functioning as normal. There's still nothing in her blood work to suggest a bacterial or viral cause of her unconscious state.' Carolyn sighed. 'I've taken more blood but…honestly, at this point I'm stumped. She should be conscious.'

'Carolyn, we were talking earlier and we think Orlin healed her physically but perhaps not spiritually.' Daniel said.

She nodded slowly. 'That's a possibility. As you know a lot of Eastern medicine philosophies are based on the premise that you treat the mind, body and spirit as one entity. It's possible that Orlin only healed her partially in that respect.'

'OK,' Daniel said, 'so if she's healed physically, how do we heal her spiritually?'

'That I don't know.' Carolyn said. 'Normally, the person is conscious…there are some alternative approaches we could try. Let me go and check it out.'

'Great. Thanks.' Daniel said.

Carolyn nodded and left the room, leaving the door ajar.

Daniel adjusted his glasses and pulled up a chair. Teal'c leaned against the wall by the door. They had both left the chair closest to the bed for Jack and he sank into it appreciatively. His eyes fell on an enormous arrangement of flowers on the bedside table.

'Those are from Woolsey?' Jack checked his eyes widening.

'Those are them.' Daniel confirmed.

Jack shook his head. They were a beautiful arrangement but he knew Sam liked things simpler, like the pot of violets in her lab. Only one week and two days now, he thought, and then he could buy her all the flowers she wanted himself. One week and two days. He sighed as his eyes ran over her face and wished he had the same freedom to speak to her as he had when Orlin had given them the chance to say goodbye on Dakara. He froze.

'Daniel.'

'Jack.'

Jack swallowed hard and looked over at his curious friend. 'Do you remember when you decided to ascend you kinda snatched me from the infirmary and took me to a version of the gate room?'

'Vaguely.' Daniel said.

'Was that on the spiritual plane?' Jack asked.

Daniel sat up straighter. 'Sam took you somewhere in the same way, didn't she?' He frowned as he remembered back to Dakara. 'When Orlin appeared you told everyone to lower their weapons. You already knew who he was.'

Jack nodded. 'So how do I get back there?'

'I don't know.' Daniel said frustrated. There was still a lot of his time as an Ascended being he couldn't remember.
'Are you sure you need to go back, O'Neill?' Teal'c asked. 'Perhaps Orlin said something to you there that would provide an answer to Colonel Carter's unconsciousness.'

'Teal'c's right.' Daniel said. He shoved his glasses up his nose. 'After Orlin said you would need to complete healing Sam, you asked him why and he said 'because she'll say yes', what did that mean? He had to be referring to something that you had spoken about before.'

Jack felt his heart pounding. It couldn't be that simple could it? Orlin had given up his own life because he had believed Sam would say yes to Jack's proposal. Maybe he didn't need to go back; maybe he just needed to reach her by triggering her memory of being there with him.

He wet his dry lips. 'I have an idea.' He looked at Teal'c. 'Close the door.'

Teal'c complied.

Daniel looked at him worriedly. 'Jack, what are you doing?'

'Something that will get Sam and I court-martialled if anyone else hears or sees this.' Jack muttered. He glanced around. There was no security camera in this room. Good. He didn't want to explain shutting one off.

'We could wait outside.' Daniel offered as he joined Teal'c by the closed door.

He gestured at his two friends. 'Just keep watch.'

Teal'c and Daniel both turned to face the door and Jack appreciated the gesture of giving him and Sam privacy. Some privacy. He cleared his throat and silently prayed it worked.

He leaned over the bed; one hand on her cheek, one hand stroking through her hair. He moved closer, his cheek against her cheek. 'Sam,' he whispered gently, 'you have to come back now. There's only one week and four days to go before I tell you that I love you…' he continued as he quietly repeated his words to her, '…and hope you say yes…'

She stirred and he shifted back to look in her eyes as they opened sleepily. 'Sir?'

Daniel and Teal'c spun around at the sound of her voice and Jack eased back to sit in the chair. 'Hey.' His hand was still in her hair and he could see the confusion on her face. He gently removed it. 'How're you doing, Carter?'

She frowned and suddenly seemed aware of her surroundings.

Daniel reached down and gently brushed her hand. 'Good to have you back, Sam.'

Jack nodded. 'Daniel, go get Carolyn.'

'Mitchell?' Sam asked tiredly. 'He was down.'

'He's OK. Bump on the head. Nothing serious.' Jack reassured her. He jerked his head at the door and Daniel left.

'It was Cral'k,' Sam began to explain.

'We know, Carter.' Jack said. 'We know.'

'He is dead, Colonel Carter.' Teal'c reassured her. 'He was an agent of Ba'al working to destroy the trust between the Tau'ri and the Jaffa.'
Sam focused on the Jaffa. 'Teal'c, you're here.'

'I have returned to the Tau'ri, Colonel Carter.' Teal'c's dark eyes gleamed happily at her. 'And with your permission I will rejoin you in SG1.'

'Love to have you back, Teal'c.' Sam said smiling.

Carolyn raced into the room and looked at her patient with shock. 'What happened?'

'We were…' Jack gestured and looked at Daniel.

'Talking. Just talking.' Daniel said.

'And she woke up.' Jack finished.

Carolyn looked at them sceptically and chased them back into the hall as she and the nurse began to examine Sam again, remove the machines and tubes she no longer needed.

All three of them paced anxiously outside until they were allowed back in.

'You have five minutes and then I need you all to leave her to rest.' Carolyn instructed. 'I mean it.'

'I feel fine.' Sam said. 'Better than fine.'

'Five minutes.' Carolyn reiterated before leaving them.

'So is anyone going to tell me how you guys managed to find me?' Sam said when she was alone with them.

The three men looked at each other before Jack gestured at Daniel.

'Ahh…Orlin kinda helped.' Daniel said.

'Orlin?' Sam's fingers worried at her sheet. 'My Orlin? The one from Velona?'

'That would be the one.' Jack confirmed. 'Carter, he…' he sat back down and took her hand.

'Sir?' Sam asked worriedly.

'Orlin's dead.' Jack said.

She looked him uncertainly. 'Well, he's Ascended, right? So…'

'No, Carter. You were dying.' Jack explained. 'Orlin healed you but after…he died saving your life and he wanted you to know he loved you very much.'

Flashes of memory came back to her suddenly and one lodged in her mind…

She was back in the room in Dakara. Not the real room, she understood that on some level. She was in the chair and she was alone. What had happened to Jack? He'd been here with her, holding her, talking to her…she had wanted to tell him so much but she was so weak…

'Sam.'

Her eyes fluttered up and she saw Orlin.

'Where's Jack?'
He smiled at her question sadly. 'He's with you. On the physical plane.' Orlin said. 'Sam, he asked you a question before…'

She remembered. 'I wanted to tell him I would have said yes.'

Orlin stroked her hair away from her face. 'And you will. Wait here. When you hear him, go to him.' He cupped her cheek in the palm of his hand. 'I have to leave now but I will give you all I can to help you in the coming days.'

'Where are you going?' She wondered at his sadness.

'Goodbye, Sam.'

His hand turned to energy and a bright, white light filled her vision and a warm, healing wave washed away her pain...

'Sam?' Daniel's quiet prompt wrenched her back from her memory.

'He said goodbye to me.' Sam said. 'I remember. He said goodbye to me.' She shook her head, filled with sadness.

Jack squeezed her hand. 'The Jaffa have buried him on Dakara.'

'I'd like to go back and see.' Sam said.

'When you're up to it.' Jack agreed. 'You'll have to go back anyway. Daniel talked you guys into a joint study with the Jaffa on the Ancient systems…'

'Really?' Her sad face brightened.

'And I will need to collect my belongings.' Teal'c noted.

'Team day out then.' Jack noted. 'We should leave before Carolyn comes back and kicks us out.' He gestured at the others.

Daniel leaned down to kiss her cheek before he left the room. Teal'c clasped her hand gently and followed him.

Jack squeezed the hand he held again and stood up. 'Get some rest.' He ordered.

'Yes sir. And sir?'

He was at the door when he turned back to look at her snuggling back into the pillows and a small smile playing on her lips.

'One week and four days?' Sam asked.

He flushed as he realised she remembered. He fought the urge to deny everything and, instead, he smiled jauntily. 'Actually, Carter, it's now one week and two days.' His eyes met hers. 'Count them.' He smiled as he closed the door behind him.

End of Butterflies
Storms

Sam placed the bouquet of flowers on the mound of red dirt and stepped back. Her sad blue eyes filled with fresh tears and she let them fall. There was no one else around her. Her team waited with Bra'tac and a few of the other Jaffa a respectable distance away; she had asked for privacy to say her farewell. Her gaze glanced off the simple stone marker which held only the name of the being they had buried beneath it. Orlin. Bra'tac had told her that they would eventually replace the marker with a proper monument; there had been no time to do anything fancier in the four days since her miraculous survival and Orlin's sacrifice. She brushed at the moisture on her skin and felt a wave of sadness and gratitude for the gentle Ascended being who had given her a second chance.

She pressed a hand to her chest as though to ease the ache there. She knew Orlin had loved her even though he had known she hadn't felt the same. He had known she loved Jack and that was the reason why he had given his life to save her instead of taking Jack's. Her breath caught in her throat. She had found out from Daniel how Jack had stepped forward when Orlin had told him the price of saving her was a life for a life. It scared her to realise how close they had come to losing each other when they were so close to finally having a chance to be together.

_Count them._ Jack's words resounded in her head. He had told her to count the days until he could tell her he loved her so that's what she was doing; she was counting. In seven days, Jack would cease to be her CO; if pressed she could give the time to an exact hour and minute breakdown. Neither of them had spoken about it since the moment of her awakening in the infirmary. They were back to doing what they always did; ignoring what was between them, doing their jobs, pretending they were OK with that except this time they were both aware that they were counting the hours until they could stop. She was determined she wasn't going to waste the gift Orlin had given her.

Sam brushed the last of her tears away and started back toward the group waiting for her. Her mind turned to the mission ahead; the set-up of the joint study of the Ancient systems on Dakara. Sam had been released from the infirmary the day before, Carolyn proclaiming her to be in perfect health and truthfully Sam felt healthier than she had in months, years even. She had immediately petitioned Jack for permission to return to Dakara and he had agreed. She and Daniel had spent the rest of the day making the arrangements.

The archaeologist met her half-way back to the rest of the team. 'You OK?' He should have gone with her, he thought seeing how pale she was. He was worried about her, they all were. Coming back from the dead and finding out Orlin had given his life for her…it was a lot for anyone to assimilate.

'Yeah.' Sam smiled at him briefly. 'Just…' she glanced back, 'sad.' She turned back to him. 'He was a good person.'

'He must have been.' Daniel murmured. He pushed his glasses up his nose. 'You ready for this?'

She nodded. It would be the first time she had been back inside the chamber since the explosion. 'I'm ready.'

'We could wait…'

'I said I'm ready, Daniel.' Sam said a little more sharply than she intended. She winced. 'Sorry.'
'It's OK.' Daniel shrugged away her apology.

'No, it's not.' Sam contradicted him. 'I know you're being a good friend.' She patted his arm. 'But I really am OK.'

'OK.' Daniel gestured at their waiting team-mates. 'Shall we?'

They walked the rest of the way in silence.

'Colonel Carter.' Bra'tac inclined his head.

There was deference in his eyes for her that she hadn't seen before and she repressed the urge to sigh. Apparently getting resurrected by an Ascended being was something of an honour in the eyes of the Jaffa, Bra'tac included.

'I trust everything met with your approval.' The elderly Jaffa continued.

'It's a lovely spot, Bra'tac.' Sam said with a smile. The grave was located on a steep hill overlooking the city and the Stargate. It was quiet and peaceful.

'If you are ready, we should begin our walk to the chamber. It is a long way.' Bra'tac said.

'Everybody good to go?' Sam checked.

Teal'c inclined his head.

'Yes, ma'am.' Mitchell nodded.

Sam turned back to Bra'tac. 'We're ready.'

Bra'tac and Teal'c took the lead as they started down the path back towards the city.

Sam ordered Mitchell to watch the rear with the two other Jaffa who had escorted them to the grave which allowed her and Daniel to walk together in the middle like they had back in the early days of SG1.

'It's a shame Jack couldn't come.' Daniel commented.

Sam nodded; the General had been required to stay at the SGC and continue interviewing candidates for the position of the new military commander. They were running out of time to assign someone. Not that Sam would report to them; the IOA had insisted that as the Stargate's foremost expert, she was permanently assigned to the SGC and, because under the new procedures she could overrule a superior officer in the matters relating to the operation of the Gate, she would report directly to the new head of the Homeworld office, General Landry. The IOA overseer, Woolsey, hadn't directly mentioned the incident with Bauer a few years before when her command structure had overruled her advice but it seemed like he wanted to ensure she had some protection. Daniel had commented wryly that it had taken Woolsey five minutes what had taken them years; to find a way to take Sam out of Jack's chain of command.

Sam grimaced a little. She knew whoever the new commander turned out to be they would have to find a way to work together; they would still outrank her and she knew in their place she would find it hard to stomach taking command of a squadron except for one officer of lower rank who got to overrule your commands in certain scenarios and who was always going to be permanently assigned regardless of their performance. Sam resolved that any issues would not stem from her; she would make every effort to welcome the other officer and achieve a successful working
relationship.

'What are you thinking about?' Daniel asked hearing Sam sigh.

'The new military commander.' She admitted.

'They all seemed a little formal.' Daniel commented remembering the candidates they had been introduced to before they had left for Dakara.

'I guess we've all gotten used to General O'Neill's more informal approach to military protocol.' Sam said.

'That's one way of putting it.' Daniel grinned. 'At least Jack will still be leading the SGC.'

'Yeah.'

Daniel caught the barely perceptible flicker across Sam's delicate features. 'What?'

Sam mentally cursed the fact that Daniel knew her so well. 'I'm a little worried about what the reaction of the new military commander is going to be when…' her voice trailed away again as she looked anxiously over her shoulder to check whether Mitchell was listening or not. She needn't have worried; he seemed deep in conversation with the two Jaffa.

'Oh.' Daniel's agile mind leaped ahead of Sam. 'You mean when…' he waggled his eyebrows suggestively.

Sam nodded and tried to pretend the heat on her cheeks was from the Dakara sun.

'Are you really that bothered about it?' Daniel asked. 'You won't report to them and thanks to Woolsey your position in the SGC is solid.'

'I'd like to have a good working relationship.' Sam pointed out.

'You're not going to let this stop you from being with…' It was his turn to get cautious and look back at their team-mate.

'No.' Sam said quickly. 'We've waited long enough and besides,' her expression saddened, 'Orlin gave his life because he knew who I wanted to be with.'

Daniel frowned. 'You shouldn't feel guilty about it.'

'I don't.' Sam denied. She caught Daniel's pointed gaze and sighed. 'OK, maybe a little but mostly I'm thankful,' she gestured, 'and I won't waste the gift he gave me.'

Daniel smiled, pleased at her answer.

'Things seem a lot friendlier here.' Sam commented as she looked back to check on Mitchell again. He and the two Jaffa seemed to be getting along well.

'We were talking about that while you were up at the grave.' Daniel said. 'Bra'tac was saying there has been a real turnaround in how the Tau'ri are viewed since Cral'k's allegiance to Ba'al and the extent of his dishonour has become widely known.'

'Good.' Sam said. 'I'm glad.'

Daniel glanced over at her. She hadn't talked about her experience with Cral'k and they all had
shied away from asking her. 'The Council have questioned all of his associates; they've found another three Ba'al agents.'

'Do they think they've found all of them?' Sam asked.

'Maybe.' Daniel said. 'Oh, and Bra'tac says it looks as if the Jaffa are going to adopt a democratic system of government and move on from the old ways. Major Davis and SG7 have gone back to the SGC to discuss the new treaty with the President.' He smiled. 'Teal'c's pleased.'

'He seems to be being treated a lot better.' Sam noted. There had been more deference accorded to their Jaffa friend since their return to Dakara.

'Yep.' Daniel wiped his brow. 'I'm glad they came up with the Ambassador position.'

'Me too.' Sam grinned at him. 'It's good to have him back.'

'Indeed.' Daniel quipped.

Their shared laughter had the others in their party looking at them quizzically. Sam hastily changed the subject.

'I can't believe we get to study the Ancient systems.' She said excitedly.

'I know.' Daniel said happily. 'I'm hoping there's some information in the database on why the Ancients came to Dakara, some explanation for them building the weapon.'

'I want to find out how that hybrid ZPM works.' Sam admitted. 'The readings Bill took are really interesting.'

'Inter-dimensional, right?' Daniel checked.

Sam nodded. 'Somehow, they managed to pull the power from sub-space but in a different dimension rather than our own.' She lifted her hand away from her P90 briefly. 'We've come across inter-dimensional stuff before but never a power source.'

'There was that device on P9X391, wasn't there? The one that allowed you guys to see strange creatures?' Daniel asked. He had been ascended at the time of that particular mission but he remembered reading about it in the mission reports when he had been catching up on events during his year long absence.

'That's right.' Sam murmured. 'That used some kind of specific electrical field which allowed us to access the dimension and see the creatures.'

'So you're thinking there must be some kind of electrical field that allows the ZPM to access the other dimension.' Daniel mused.

'Maybe.' Sam shook her head. 'It could be some kind of phasing technology like the giant aliens use on P7X377 with the crystal skulls.' She gave a happy sigh. 'I can only speculate until we get it connected again and run some tests on it. I'm hoping the control chair will be able to access more detailed information on its operation.'

'That's why you've brought Doctor Cooper?' Daniel asked.

Sam nodded. 'He's one of the few scientists we have assigned to the SGC who has the Ancient gene. He should be able to activate the chair.'
'When are we all going to start Doctor Beckett's gene treatment?' Daniel asked.

Sam shrugged. 'I guess that's up to Doctor Lam.'

'You two seem friendly.' Daniel commented.

'She's nice.' Sam said a little defensively.

Daniel hurried to reassure her. 'I didn't mean anything bad by it. I think it's great.'

'It is.' Sam commented. 'It's just every so often I get a weird feeling like I'm betraying Janet by liking her.' She shook her head sadly. 'Silly, huh?'

'I would think it's fairly natural. I mean, you and Janet were best friends,' Daniel said softly, 'and I guess it hits a little close with Carolyn being CMO too.'

Sam nodded.

'I'm sure Janet would be pleased you made another friend.' Daniel said lightly and was rewarded when Sam smiled if a little sadly.

'You're right.' Her eyes narrowed as they began down a familiar path and she saw the mountainside with the passage into the buried Ancient buildings ahead. She felt her shoulders knot with anxiety.

Daniel saw the tension creep across her pale face and wished there was someway he could make it easier for her. He unconsciously moved closer to her and he was pleased when Teal'c dropped back to walk on the other side of Sam.

'We are almost at our destination, Colonel Carter.' Teal'c noted quietly.

Sam nodded sharply. As they got closer, she could see the study team waiting patiently outside the passage for them. They seemed to be getting along well with the Jaffa stood with them. She followed Bra'tac as he made his way to the gathered crowd.

The Jaffa master turned back to Sam as she came to a stop behind him with Teal'c and Daniel, Mitchell and the other two Jaffa bringing up the rear. 'Would you like to rest before we proceed, Colonel Carter?'

'Thank you, Bra'tac,' Sam responded, 'but I'd like to get started.' She gestured at the study team. 'I'd like to introduce our team; you know Doctor Lee; this is Doctor Cooper,' she pointed at the small blonde man, 'and Doctor Garston.' The brunette blushed and Sam swallowed a smile as she caught the other woman's darting glance at Daniel. It looked as though someone had a crush.

Bra'tac nodded firmly. 'Good.' He motioned for the two Jaffa standing with the Tau'ri scientists to move forward. 'This is Kyrel.' An elderly Jaffa with white hair which was a startling contrast to his dark skin inclined his head. 'And his son, Tolam.' The younger Jaffa nodded at them jerkily. 'They will be the Jaffa representatives on the study.'

'I am looking forward to working with you Colonel Carter and Doctor Jackson.' Kyrel said in a deep voice that reminded Sam of Teal'c.

'We are looking forward to working with you also.' Daniel responded.

'Shall we get started?' Sam asked trying to ignore the reverential looks she was garnering from both of the Jaffa scientists.
The team started reaching for their equipment. Teal'c and Mitchell stepped forward to help them.

Bra'tac smiled. 'I will leave you. There is much work to do on the Council.'

'Thank you, Bra'tac.' Sam said.

'Shall we?' Kyrel made a wide sweeping gesture towards the passage clearly indicating for Sam to go first.

She took a deep breath and switched on the light on her P90. She stepped into the passage, grateful when Daniel walked up beside her. She was surprised to see how little damage had been done to the passage from the explosion Cral'k had set. She moved into the first chamber with a little apprehension. Memories flooded back to her. The dark and the sound of her breath as she waited for Cral'k to attack. The flash of the P90 as she defended her position. The panic at seeing the bomb. Cral'k's breath hot against her neck; his hands rough against her body as they struggled. Pain and nausea. Frantically inputting the instructions in the transportation system hoping it would save her life...

'Sam?'

Daniel's gentle prompt wrenched her from the past. She focused on the opening on the far side of the chamber absently noting that the Jaffa had obviously removed the worst of the debris and rubble from the explosion. There was evidence of its damage in the scorch marks on the walls, on the ragged remains of the console where the bomb had been planted. She walked through the inner door and into the second room. The Jaffa had already set up temporary artificial lights that flooded the space and cast strange shadows on the walls. She moved across the upper level and made her way down the stairs to the metal chair. She breathed in sharply at the sight of it.

'Let's get started.' She said pleased her voice was calm and authoritative.

Kyrel nodded. 'I believe our first course of action is to reconnect the power source and try to understand how much time we have available to us before it is completely depleted.'

'I agree.' Sam said with a ready smile. She moved to help Doctor Lee unpack the hybrid ZPM.

For a while, they all concentrated on getting the equipment unpacked and set up.

Daniel smiled at Sam's quickly hidden exasperation as Tolam practically fell over when she spoke to him directly. He could tell the Jaffa's reverence for her, all based on her experience with Orlin, irritated Sam. He leaned across a console as she came to stand next to him to murmur in her ear. 'You can't tell me you're not enjoying this a little. Come on, admit it.' He teased.

Sam shot him a look and leaned in closer to him. 'If you're not careful I'll remind Kyrel and Tolam that you used to be one of those glowy Ascended beings.' She threatened in a pleasant voice.

'OK. OK.' Daniel backed off rapidly. 'I think I have enough problems of my own.' He admitted under his breath. He darted a look at Doctor Garston who blushed at being caught staring at him.

Sam smirked. 'She's cute.'

'Hmmm.' Daniel said desperately searching for a diversion.

'I think we're ready to put the power source back.' Doctor Bill Lee called from his position on the other side of the room.
Sam rolled her eyes and mouthed 'later' at the archaeologist. She walked over to her fellow scientist. 'Why don't you go ahead and do the honours, Bill?'

Bill nodded. He removed the metal disc and pushed the power source into the empty space. He grunted a little as he pushed it into place. The chamber's own lights flickered into life.

Sam exchanged a pleased smile with Kyrel.

'Doctor Cooper.' Sam gestured at the chair in the centre of the room. 'You're on.'

The young blond man swallowed nervously and approached the chair with trepidation. He sat down but the chair didn't respond at all. Sam frowned. Daniel came to stand beside her and crossed his arms.

'Why is nothing happening?' Kyrel asked perplexed. 'I thought the technology was supposed to automatically respond to the Ancient gene?'

'Doctor Cooper?' Sam asked.

Cooper shook his head and tried the hand controls on the chair; still nothing happened. 'I don't know, Colonel. I can't explain it.'

'Maybe there's not enough power.' Bill suggested.

'Maybe.' Sam frowned. 'Or maybe the chair is broken.' She waved Cooper down as she stepped onto the platform. 'I'll take a look.' She tried not to think about the last time she had been near the chair as Doctor Cooper relinquished his place. She approached it apprehensively and did a three-sixty around the chair first to check its construction. There didn't seem to be anything physically broken. She sighed and realised she was going to have to sit down to look at the hand control panels. She tried not to feel self-conscious as she lowered herself gingerly into the chair.

The chair reacted.

It swivelled and inclined with enough speed that Sam grabbed the arms to avoid falling off it. There was a strange humming as all the consoles in the room fired into life.

What the hell was happening? Sam thought panicked. Suddenly a diagnostic appeared in a projection above her head. She swallowed and stared at it, unable to comprehend that she had conjured up the information through thought alone.

'Woah.' Mitchell took a step towards the data spinning in mid-air and gaped open-mouthed. The Jaffa and the other scientists had similar expressions.

'Um…Sam?' Daniel's voice wasn't quite steady as he looked across at her. 'What's going on?'

'I did not know you possessed the Ancient gene, Colonel Carter.' Teal'c said clasping his hands behind his back as he stepped up onto the platform to stand next to her.

Sam raised a hand weakly to gesture at the projection. 'I don't.'

Daniel crossed his arms and met her bewildered gaze across the room. 'Well, you do now.'

Sam held his gaze for a brief moment before her blue eyes moved back to the projection. How could she have gotten the Ancient gene? She hadn't had the gene therapy and she certainly hadn't set the chair off the last time she had sat in it before she had…before she had died and been
brought back to life by Orlin. She sighed deeply. 'Oh boy.'
Ba'al adjusted his heavy black Oriental robes and stared out of the window at the vista below. The pyramid on which his vessel rested was on a planet located in the furthest reaches of his domain and it was one of the few he had managed to retain control over; one that still believed in the validity of his Godship as the human slaves on the planet had not developed beyond their initial tribal existence. He scowled. There had been a time when every planet under his dominion would not have questioned his right to rule. There had been a time when it would have been unthinkable that he was reduced to hiding in the most backward part of his territory. His jaw clenched.

He knew compared with the other Goa'uld some would consider that he had done well to have survived the war with the Replicators, the Jaffa rebellion and Anubis's insane plan to obliterate all life in the galaxy and on one level he was proud of his achievement at surviving where many others had fallen. However, mere survival had never satisfied him. No, he determined, his dark eyes lit up with the white flash of an angry Goa'uld, he was Ba'al. He would not scuttle away into some dark corner and hide. It was his destiny to rule, his right, and he would not be robbed of it. He would find a way to recover the power he had lost and more.

Ba'al stroked his trim dark beard unconsciously. Breaking the union between the Tau'ri and the Free Jaffa was essential if he, if any Goa'uld, was to re-establish a foothold in the galaxy, he mused. He had planted his own loyal agents in amongst the Free Jaffa stirring up dissension against the Tau'ri, and it had been working well but a few days previously one agent, Cral'k, had revealed himself foolishly. Luckily, another agent had been able to send word and he had prudently moved to a new location as it was likely the Jaffa would try to find him to exact revenge. The Jaffa were nothing if not predictable. The move to the little backwater planet in the middle of nowhere was irritating but the extent of the damage caused by Cral'k's stupidity was infuriating. It had almost undone the previous months of work and served only to strengthen the alliance between the Tau'ri and the Jaffa.

Unfortunately most of his remaining loyal Jaffa were the same as Cral'k; young and eager, seeing only the potential for easy advancement to First Prime if successful. They had none of the intelligence or strategic ability of the Jaffa who usually held such positions but then those Jaffa had renounced their former Goa'uld masters to join the rebellion and the shol'var Teal'c. The image of the imposing Serpent Guard filled Ba'al's mind for a moment. The Jaffa had always been an exceptional tactician and a master of military strategy. The move Teal'c had used to hold Dakara after the fight with the Replicators had been nothing short of brilliant. Ba'al quietly admitted to himself that Teal'c's time with the Tau'ri had only made him better; he had become as unpredictable as the human known as O'Neill.

He stirred a little disturbed at the thought. Just as he had once thought the overthrow of the Goa'uld System Lords and the rebellion of the Jaffa to be impossible, so he had also thought no human would have the audacity to challenge him in the way O'Neill did. It galled him to realise that he had once had the human defenceless and had squandered the opportunity to kill him. He had actually killed him time and again but unfortunately, he had also brought him back from death each time with the sarcophagus as part of the torture he had inflicted on the human. It astounded Ba'al that not only had O'Neill been able to endure the torture he had without confessing all he knew but that O'Neill had escaped during the chaos and confusion of an attack from another System Lord. The human's tenacity elicited admiration no matter how reluctantly given.

Until then Ba'al had never knowingly had any interaction with the infamous Tau'ri SG1 team. He could have wished it had stayed that way. Ba'al frowned. He had never met, the other human male,
Daniel Jackson but the Goa'uld Osiris had been surprisingly admiring of the man. Her host had apparently known him intimately. Given Osiris had disappeared when attempting a plan to trick Jackson into giving away Ancient secrets, it was enough to make Ba'al consider that the man was just as dangerous as O'Neill.

He had met the only female in the team; Lieutenant Colonel Samantha Carter. The Tau'ri female was a beguiling mix of beauty, intelligence and spirit. In their one and only meeting she had also challenged him; in a different way from O'Neill but it had still been a challenge – those blue eyes of hers flashing at him and her silky voice telling him that he would tell her how to simultaneously dial all gates in the system. He had never felt the urge to take a mate – if he had a physical need, there were always plenty of female slaves to satisfy his lust – but Samantha Carter might tempt him. She would make a worthy Queen. He conjured up an image of her as he remembered her; standing across the Ancient weapon on Dakara from him.

Ba'al's hands clenched into fists. He would never have lost Dakara if not for Anubis. He breathed in deeply, forced his hands to unclench. Dakara would be his again in time. The Free Jaffa held Dakara precariously. They had lost it once to Anubis; they would lose it again. Cra'lk had been only one of many agents and though he had lost more in the aftermath he had plenty still in place. Importantly, he had not lost his most important player, a Jaffa on the High Council whose place had actually been solidified by Cra'lk's actions. He was well positioned to continue to keep Ba'al informed of all important developments.

It was how Ba'al knew that the Ancient weapon on Dakara was not destroyed although the Jaffa had told the Tau'ri and the Tau'ri sympathisers at the time that it was. He also knew about the discovery of the remains of an Ancient outpost; of the presence of the being called Orlin and of Colonel Carter's miraculous return from the dead. He knew the Tau'ri and the Jaffa were beginning a joint study of the information in the Ancient systems. It was not the time to strike, Ba'al thought carefully, no matter how much his blood heated with the desire for power. His pragmatic realism was what had kept him alive where others of his kind had ended up dead. No, it was the time to regroup in the shadows.

Ba'al turned away from the sight of the luscious green planet and paced back to his throne. He sat down with a flourish of his robes and motioned for the nubile human slave to approach with the platter of fruits. He plucked a grape from the selection and popped it in his mouth as he sent her away again. Breaking the bond between the Tau'ri and the Jaffa was still the key, he considered, and he had already initiated another plan to help sow seeds of discord between them again. He could afford to take on the Free Jaffa. The new Jaffa nation was weakened by long memories of conflict between the various tribes and struggling to form agreement on their long term future. He knew he could fight them and win; he knew their weaknesses and strengths, and importantly, he would not underestimate the likes of Teal'c again. But the Tau'ri and the Free Jaffa united were much more difficult opponents. The Tau'ri were unpredictable. They added an unknown into the battle. They had the ability to take out their enemy and save themselves with surprisingly original thinking. It was rumoured that the SG1 team had destroyed a sun to take out Apophis's fleet. Ba'al settled back in his throne. He needed to weaken the Tau'ri. All he had to do was find someway of doing that.

He sighed and his fingers drummed restlessly against the arm of the ornate chair and wondered whether he couldn't use the joint study on Dakara to his advantage. He knew from his contact that the members of SG1 would be participating in the study although O'Neill's place seemed to have been taken by a younger human male. Ba'al tapped his moustache thoughtfully. There must be a way of getting O'Neill to the planet and if there was…all of the infamous SG1 would be in one place and therefore easily targeted. Perhaps an unfortunate accident that would be blamed on the Jaffa…he smiled wickedly. He would have to speak with his agent and see what was possible.
A movement at his side had him glancing irritably at the Jaffa standing waiting patiently for his attention. 'What?'

'Apologies, my Lord, but the natives made an unusual discovery. They have brought it here.'

'What is it?' Ba'al said disinterested.

'A naked human female, my Lord.' The Jaffa bowed deeper as though the depth of his obsequiousness could prevent Ba'al's displeasure.

'Why would a naked human woman interest me?' Ba'al said impatiently and once again regretted that any Jaffa with an ounce of intelligence had been the first to desert his service and join the rebellion. 'Well?' He finally barked at the unfortunate Jaffa.

'She says she is Samantha Carter, my Lord.' The Jaffa remained in his uncomfortable bow and did not see the way Ba'al's eyes snapped to him. 'She is the Tau'ri female who is reported to be part of…'

'Yes, yes, I know who she is.' Ba'al said. He frowned. The latest report that he had indicated the Tau'ri female was back on Dakara. There was no way the female could be Samantha Carter. Unless, he mused, his agent had lied to him; had betrayed him and given away his position. This could be a trick by the Tau'ri and the Free Jaffa to kill him. He realised there was only one way to find out. 'Tell them to bring her before me.'

'Yes, my Lord.' The Jaffa backed out of the room and Ba'al surged to his feet and paced back to the window. Had he been discovered? Was this where all his planning, all his plotting ended? He touched the transportation device he wore at his wrist. No, if this was some kind of trick he had a means to escape. He turned around at the sound of the group entering the room.

Ba'al's eyes skipped past the two men escorting the human female; they were wearing the plain brown clothes of the simple natives. His attention was immediately drawn to the woman who was stood in the centre of his room in all her naked glory. His eyes travelled over the shapely legs, firm stomach and pert breasts before it arrived at her coldly amused blue gaze. It was a struggle to get past the shock but he kept his own face expressionless except for a small contemptuous smile. As far as he could tell, it was the same woman who had faced him over the Ancient weapon in Dakara; it was Colonel Carter.

Ba'al remained frozen his eyes riveted to her. But slowly details began to filter through to his stunned mind. He frowned. Something was wrong. He mentally compared the woman in his memory with the one standing before him. There was a striking similarity; same face, same form, same colouring, and that, he realised, was where the similarities ended. The woman in front of him was different. The hairstyle was just a little off and the skin was flawless with no blemishes of any kind but it was the eyes that confirmed it for him; they were empty, soulless, completely devoid of the spirit of the Samantha Carter he had met. Whoever this woman was she was not the Tau'ri female.

Despite his conclusion, Ba'al did not lower his guard. He might not have been betrayed but he had a frisson of understanding that he was not out of danger. He dismissed the two natives instructing his Jaffa to see to their reward. With a final gesture he dismissed the servants, leaving only a couple of Jaffa standing guard by the door to the throne room in place. He stayed by the window and regarded the facsimile of Colonel Carter with the same wariness he would use with a rabid animal. There was a lack of humanity about her that raised the hair on the back of his neck in atavistic warning.
'You are not Colonel Carter.' He said finally.

Her head tilted. 'I am Samantha Carter.'

'No.' Ba'al informed her. 'You are a copy.' He blatantly let his eyes travel back over her nakedness before returning to the disconcerting expressionless blue gaze. 'A lovely copy but only a copy.'

'Not a copy.' Her body blurred for a moment before it resettled and it was no longer naked but covered in a dark grey outfit that moulded itself to her contours. Ba'al took an unwilling step backwards as he realised what she was and she smiled cruelly. 'An upgrade.'

'You...you are the human form Replicator that led the Replicators against the Goa'uld.' Ba'al paled and held his position with difficulty. 'We destroyed you.'

'She destroyed me.' She corrected him bitterly and for the first time he saw emotion in her eyes; pure, undiluted hate. Her expression smoothed out. 'I was able to use the information I gathered from Daniel Jackson's mind to ascend when the energy weapon from Dakara hit my vessel. Unfortunately, the Others interfered.'

'Others?' Ba'al said. There was something strangely hypnotic about her like watching a cobra swaying before it struck.

'Those who Ascended before.' She clarified. 'They intervened when I tried to take my revenge on Colonel Carter.'

'You tried to kill her?' His brow creased in confusion.

'Using your pawn Cral'k.' She confirmed. 'He was pathetically easy to manipulate.'

'You failed.' There was thinly veiled satisfaction coating his words.

'He failed,' she shot back, 'and the Others came. They allowed one of their own to assist her in recompense for my interference and she lived.' She clasped her hands behind her back and looked at him her emotions back under control. 'They returned me to my previous form and wiped the Ancient knowledge from my mind.'

'And left you on my planet?' Ba'al asked sceptically.

'I chose this planet.' She admitted. 'I knew it was in the outer reaches of your domain and I counted on you fleeing here eventually.' Her smile widened. 'I had no idea you would be here so soon.'

'Why?' Ba'al asked suspiciously. 'Why would you come here?'

'You are in need an ally.' She tilted her head again. 'So am I.'

Ba'al stared at her nonplussed. 'You came to offer an alliance?'

She smiled coldly. 'Thanks to the weapon at Dakara the numbers of my brethren have been greatly depleted. We lost all in this galaxy and will need time to rebuild.'

'Then why would I ally with you?' Ba'al asked. He gestured at her. 'You have nothing to offer me.'

'I have all of the knowledge of Samantha Carter,' the Replicator pointed out with ruthless logic, 'and you will need my knowledge of the Tau'ri if you are to be successful in defeating them and the Free Jaffa.'
'And you would help me defeat them out of the kindness of your own heart.' Ba'al said scathingly.

'For you to reclaim what was once yours.' She said. 'The whole of your territory.'

'And you will take the rest of the galaxy.' Ba'al stroked his beard thoughtfully.

'A fair trade considering I could kill you where you stand like I have so many Goa'uld before you and rebuild my brethren from the rubble of your ship.' She threatened.

Ba'al stiffened but his mind was whirring. He didn't trust her. They were too similar in their underlying desire for power and he knew she would ultimately betray him. But, he mused, the prospect of her assistance in defeating the Tau'ri was tempting. He skirted her carefully and sat down regally in his throne. He did not believe she was aware that the machine at Dakara was still active. He had the means to destroy her once he had retaken the planet and he was aware that he was unlikely to reclaim it without her help. Without the presence of the other Replicators she was less of a threat than she had been when she waged war on the Goa'uld before.

'I accept.' He said.

'A wise decision,' she murmured with a pleased smile and saw him puff up at the blatant flattery like a peacock. She glanced out of the window at the planet and looked at the scurrying humans.

Vermin, she thought coldly. They would soon be dealt with just like the arrogant Goa'uld behind her and her human duplicate. The anger at being bested by her before still rankled. She calmed herself. Her creator Fifth had let himself be overrun with emotion and she would not make the same mistake. Her plan was working perfectly and when she had control of the weapon on Dakara she would be able to obliterate all life in the galaxy including Samantha Carter.
Jack was grumpy. He loosened the tie and yanked it from his neck. It had been a long morning of interviewing. He stripped out of the shirt and reached for his usual black t-shirt. He had got the result he wanted though; Colonel Paul Emerson had been selected. Jack knew the other officer and had served with him in Desert Storm; Hammond and Landry had both been impressed by him and Jack knew they could work well together. Paul would transfer officially in five days time, two days before the official restructure went into effect. Everything was in place; the procedures had been revised, the new military command had been chosen and in seven days he would officially be retired.

He was looking forward to it; his job wouldn't substantially change and more importantly, he could finally be with Sam. The thought of the blonde Air Force Colonel lightened his mood although he felt a twinge of regret that she and the rest of SG1 was off-world on Dakara. Maybe, he mused, with a second permanent leader assigned to the base in the shape of the military lead he would have the opportunity to accompany them on the odd off-world assignment in the future. He swapped his pants, pulled on his combat boots and headed out of the locker room and into the base. There was a stack of paperwork waiting for him on his desk. He had just exited the elevator when the sirens started. He took off at a run for the control room.

'Walter?' Jack asked as he came to a breathless halt.

'Receiving IDC, sir.' Walter confirmed. 'It's SG1, sir.'

The Sergeant's eyes met the concerned brown eyes of the General's in perfect understanding. The last time SG1 had come back unscheduled, it had been to report Colonel Carter's disappearance.

'Open the iris.' Jack ordered already on his way down to the gate room. He was at the bottom of the ramp when Sam walked through the wormhole. He breathed an inward small sigh of relief even as he registered her set face. 'Carter.' He acknowledged her as the wormhole blinked out behind her. She had returned alone.

She came to a halt in front of him. 'General.' She focused on Jack and gestured at him with her crumpled baseball cap. 'Sorry for the early return, sir.'

'What's going on, Carter?' Jack asked.

'We have a small problem, sir.' Sam said sighing.

'A problem?' Jack's eyebrows rose.

She nodded unhappily. 'I have the Ancient gene.'

Jack stared at her. 'But you don't have the Ancient gene.'

'That would be the problem, sir.' She sighed. 'Request permission to report to the infirmary, sir.'

Jack nodded slowly. 'Permission granted.'

'I think you should come with me, sir.' Sam said lowering her voice.

'Why?' Jack asked bemused. 'I already have the Ancient gene.'
'Yes.' Sam agreed. 'But according to Daniel you were also covered by Orlin's energy when he healed me. Whatever he did might have affected us both.'

'Oh.' Jack rocked back slightly on his heels. 'You go ahead, Carter. I'll join you in a minute.'

'Yes, sir.'

Jack watched her go and rubbed his hand through his grey hair as he turned and made his way back through the opposite entrance and up the stairs to Walter. 'Sergeant, rearrange my meetings for the afternoon. I'll be in the infirmary if anyone needs me urgently.'

Walter nodded his mind already leaping to the complexity of altering the General's schedule. 'Yes, sir.' He murmured although the General was already walking away.

Jack left the control room and headed to the nearest elevator. In the privacy of the small square compartment he allowed himself to worry a little. He couldn't believe that Orlin would have done anything to hurt Sam but that he had done something more than simply healing her concerned him. The elevator stopped and the doors slid open. He walked through the corridors to the main examination room. He tapped on the open door and poked his head into the room to check it was OK to enter. Sam sat on a bed alone in the room. He wandered in and she looked over, her blue eyes warming at the sight of him.

'How are you doing, Carter?' He asked sympathetically as he came to stand in front of her.

'I'm fine, sir.' Sam responded automatically.

He sighed. In Carter language that meant she wasn't fine but she would sooner chew her own arm off than admit it. 'Really.'

She smiled at the blatant disbelief. She gestured weakly. 'OK. I'm a little worried.'

'I'm sure Orlin wouldn't have done anything to hurt you.' Jack assured her.

'I know.' She sighed. 'He told me when he was saying goodbye that he was going to do all he could to help me through the coming days. I thought he was talking about his healing me but now I'm wondering…'

'What he knew that we didn't?' Jack asked dryly.

She gave a small smile. 'Something like that.'

Jack couldn't stop himself reaching out to put a hand on her shoulder. 'We'll figure it out, Carter.'

She reached up and placed her own hand over his. For a moment, they both enjoyed the comfort of the simple touch.

The sound of approaching footsteps had them turning toward the door and Sam's hand slipped away from Jack's. He gave her a small squeeze before he removed his own from her shoulder. When Carolyn entered, they were back to their previous positions; Sam on the bed with Jack stood in front of her with both his hands stuffed in the pockets of his pants.

'So what's up, Sam?' Carolyn asked as she pushed past the General to get to her patient.

'Nothing, I hope.' Sam said. 'But I seemed to have developed the Ancient gene.'

'How do you know?' Carolyn asked.
Sam explained what had happened on Dakara. Jack's own eyes widened at her description of the chair's reaction to her.

'By the sound of it, it might not be just a question of you developing the Ancient gene if Doctor Cooper had problems accessing the chair because he has the gene.' Carolyn pointed out. She sighed and shoved her hands into the wide pockets of her lab coat. 'I guess it's possible Orlin did more than heal your injuries,' she murmured, 'we've never really understood what he did or how you woke up.'

Jack shifted uncomfortably. He had no idea what Orlin had done to heal her but he knew why Sam had woken up but he couldn't admit that his declaration of love for her had been the key to her recovery without risking court-martial.

'I was thinking we should run some tests on me,' Sam suggested, 'and possibly the General too.'

Carolyn's brown eyes skipped to Jack's.

'The Colonel thinks that as I was included in Orlin's energy thing that whatever he did might have affected me too.' Jack explained.

Carolyn nodded. 'That would make sense. You were both under his control for a long time.'

Jack gestured impatiently. 'So shall we get started?'

Carolyn sighed and headed for the door. She called to her nursing staff and rattled off instructions for a battery of tests. She turned back to Jack and Sam. 'I'd get comfortable. The tests are going to take a couple of hours. You'll be free to leave once they're done.'

'Great.' Sam muttered. 'When will we get the results back?'

Carolyn sighed. 'I may not get some of the results until tomorrow morning.'

'Maybe I could head back to Dakara once we're done.' Sam's eyes flickered hopefully to Jack. He looked at Carolyn. 'What do you think, Doc?'

'I don't think that would be a good idea.' Carolyn said her brown eyes regarding Sam's unhappy expression. 'I think it would be wise to wait until we fully understand what's going on.'

'But...' Sam began.

'You heard the doctor, Carter.' Jack said firmly jumping up onto the bed behind her. 'You can head back tomorrow if everything checks out.'

'Yes, sir.' Sam said.

Jack's lips quirked at the slightly sulky tone and he settled back as Carolyn waved the nurse over. Her day of study might have been ruined but, apart from being poked by needles, his day was definitely looking up. It took almost all afternoon for the tests to be completed and both of them were hungry by the time they left the infirmary.

'Food, Carter?' Jack asked as they waited for the elevator.

'Sounds good to me, sir.' Sam said. 'Oh, I didn't get a chance to ask you earlier, how did it go with the interviews today?'
'Good. Colonel Emerson got the job.' Jack said. 'Paul's a good guy. He should fit in well.'

'When does he transfer?' Sam asked.

'In five days.' Jack said.

Sam was about to reply when the siren sounded again. They looked at each other for a split second before they both ran for the stairs.

'What now?' Jack asked as he entered the control room. A technician made way for Sam and she slipped into the chair next to Walter.

'There's an unscheduled incoming wormhole.' Walter informed him.

'Carter?'

'Receiving IDC, sir.' She hit a key on the computer and stared at the results. 'It's the Tok'ra, sir.'

Jack sighed heavily. Jacob and Selmak had been the only Tok'ra host and symbiote he had ever really gotten along with and he could quite happily live the rest of his life without seeing another Tok'ra.

'Sir, if we don't open the iris…' Sam let the rest of the sentence fall away; the General was well aware of the consequences of not opening up the protective metal barrier.

There was a moment's silence.

'Sir?' asked Walter nervously.

'OK, OK.' Jack gave in waving at the Stargate on the opposite side of the window. 'Open the iris.'

He made his way down to the gate room knowing without checking that Sam was following him. They were lined up at the bottom of the ramp when the Tok'ra stepped through the wormhole.

Jack's heart sank at the sight of Delek. Delek served on the Tok'ra High Council; his one interaction with the other Tok'ra just after the old Alpha site had been hit by Anubis hadn't left him with a good impression.

Jack stuffed his hands in his pockets and rocked back on his heels as he regarded the slim built man with blond hair and brown eyes. 'Hi Delek, long time no see. What brings you to our patch of the galaxy?'

'General O'Neill.' Delek inclined his head. 'We need to speak to you urgently.'

'Really,' said Jack with biting sarcasm, 'you didn't just stop by to say hi?' He glanced over at Sam and felt his annoyance at the Tok'ra ramp up another notch at the tight look in her face. It was the first time she had seen a Tok'ra since they had waved goodbye to the last of the visitors after her father and Selmak's death and he figured it had to be stirring up her grief all over again. He fought against the urge to throw the Tok'ra back through the Stargate.

Delek seemed to follow his gaze because he stiffened. 'Colonel Carter.' He shuffled as though nervous. 'I was saddened to hear about your father and Selmak.'

Sam swallowed the angry retort on her lips. According to her father, Delek had been amongst the most virulent of his detractors and it was unlikely the Tok'ra felt any sadness at all at his passing. She nodded coldly in acknowledgement of the meaningless platitude he had spouted.
Jack looked from the Tok'ra to Sam and back again in the tense silence. He gestured at him. 'So what exactly brings you here?'

Delek tugged on his dark brown tunic. 'I would prefer to discuss this matter in private.'

Jack rocked back and motioned at the SF. 'Why don't you show our,' he searched for a term, 'guest to the briefing room?'

He waited until the Tok'ra had left the room with the guard and stopped Sam with a light touch of her arm as she made to follow them. He lowered his voice to prevent the rest of the gate room picking up his comments. 'You OK?'

'I'm fine, sir.'

He sighed. There was that phrase again. He waved her out and followed her up the stairs.

He slipped into his seat at the head of the table and Sam sat at his right hand side opposite Delek who sat on the left. 'OK,' Jack said, as he turned to the Tok'ra after dismissing the SF, 'what's going on?'

Delek shifted under Jack's impatient gaze. 'We've recently learned something concerning the Jaffa at Dakara.'

Jack and Sam exchanged a concerned look.

'What?' Jack asked.

Delek met his eyes squarely. 'The weapon on Dakara was never destroyed.'
For a long moment there was total silence in the briefing room.

'Excuse me?' Jack asked. He spread his hands out on the table in front of him. 'I thought you said the weapon on Dakara wasn't destroyed?'

'I did.' Delek confirmed.

'But the Jaffa destroyed it.' Sam protested her alarmed blue eyes on Delek.

'Did they?' Delek challenged her. 'Are you certain of this?'

Jack scowled at him. 'Teal'c and Bra'tac wouldn't lie to us.'

'Perhaps not.' Delek admitted as he shifted in his chair. 'But can you say the same for the other Jaffa?'

Jack rubbed a hand through his grey hair; as much as he hated to admit it the Tok'ra had a point. 'How do you even know this anyway?'

'We assure you, General O'Neill,' Delek said firmly, 'our source is reliable.'

'Exactly who is your source?' Jack asked.

'We are not at liberty to reveal that information.' Delek said smoothly.

'There's a surprise.' Jack replied sarcastically. The Tok'ra's unwillingness to reveal their covert activities was one of the reasons why the treaty was currently in abeyance.

Sam frowned. 'You must have spies on Dakara.'

'We do not.' Delek rejoined quickly. 'Of that I assure you.'

'Ba'al then.' Sam said in stunned realisation.

Delek tried to maintain his expression but there was a faint flicker that told Sam she was on the right track.

'You have a spy in Ba'al's court.' She deduced. 'That's where this information came from.' She turned to the General. 'Sir, my father told us the Tok'ra had spies with Ba'al when he came to assist us during the fight with the Replicators. It's possible that Ba'al's agents on Dakara might have supplied Ba'al with this information and it was in turn passed onto the Tok'ra.'

'Is she right?' Jack asked with exaggerated patience when the Tok'ra didn't reply.

'Yes.' Delek admitted reluctantly. 'Our information did come from our operative in Ba'al's court.'

'Then you know where Ba'al is.' Sam concluded.

'I don't suppose you want to share that with us?' Jack asked bitingy.

'General O'Neill, there is a greater concern here.' Delek said impatiently. 'The machine on Dakara is dangerous.'
'We're well aware of how powerful the weapon is.' Jack retorted. 'We're the ones who used it to eliminate the Replicators.'

'Then you agree it must be destroyed.' Delek said.

'We don't even know if your information is correct yet.' Jack pointed out.

Sam nodded. 'It's also possible this is misinformation from Ba'al.'

'What do you mean?' Delek asked rudely.

'Ba'al has been trying to break the alliance between ourselves and the Free Jaffa by building up anti-Tau'ri feeling amongst the Jaffa.' Sam explained tersely. 'It could be argued that what to do with the weapon after we destroyed the Replicators created the initial tension that allowed Ba'al's agents to gain a foothold.'

'So it's possible Ba'al has planted this information so the Tok'ra would tell us, we'd go charging to Dakara making accusations,' Jack deduced 'and stirring up all the old anti-Tau'ri feeling.'

'It is not possible.' Delek stated. 'For such a plan to work, Ba'al would have to know that we have a spy within his court and…' his voice trailed away as the realisation hit him fully that Ba'al was probably aware of their spy.

'It's also possible both scenarios are correct in some way.' Sam stated. 'If the weapon was not destroyed and Ba'al was aware, he could have allowed the information to leak trying to use it to his advantage.'

'So,' Jack said rubbing his eyes tiredly, 'let me summarise; the Ancient weapon on Dakara may or may not have been destroyed and Ba'al is probably trying to play us either way.' He looked around the table. 'Is that right?'

There were nods of agreement.

Jack decided a delaying tactic was in order. 'If you'll excuse us, Delek, I think we need some time to discuss this.'

'We understand,' said Delek rising.

Jack got up and called in a couple of SFs to escort the Tok'ra down to the VIP quarters. He waited until the Tok'ra was gone before he turned to Sam. 'OK. I guess we can't just ignore this.'

Sam shook her head in agreement. 'No, sir.' She folded her hands on the top of the table. 'Even if we were inclined to, there's no way the Tok'ra will let this go unchallenged.'

'So we have to find some way of discovering whether this weapon is active without restarting the whole anti-Tau'ri thing.' Jack stated.

'Not just that, sir,' Sam said, 'but if the weapon is active we have to convince the Jaffa Council to follow through on destroying it,' she gestured vaguely, 'without restarting the whole anti-Tau'ri thing.'

'So,' said Jack, 'piece of cake.' Sam's lips lifted in a brief smile and lightened Jack's mood. 'OK, what's our plan?'

'I don't see how we can do this without upsetting the Jaffa, sir.' Sam admitted. 'I'm sure any
suggestion from us that they might have deceived us and any demand for proof that the weapon is destroyed will play into Ba'al's hands.' She gestured. 'You have to hand it to him, sir, he's manipulated the situation perfectly. Even his choice of informant was inspired; just the fact that the Tok'ra are involved is likely to make the Jaffa Council less likely to cooperate.'

'There is that.' Jack sighed. He pressed his lips together firmly. 'Well, I'm not letting that overdressed pompous no-good son-of-a…'

'Sir.' Sam cautioned him.

'Snake,' Jack continued without pausing, 'get the better of us. There has to be something that he hasn't considered.'

Sam wished Daniel and Teal'c were there. It would be good not to be the only person the General was looking to for a way out of the mess the Tok'ra had dumped on their heads. She was about to respond that she didn't think there was a way out when a thought popped into her head. She bit her lip as she turned it over.

Jack pointed his pen at her. 'I know that look. You're thinking something. What are you thinking?'

'Sir, if we assume the information is correct then Ba'al had to have been informed by one of his agents on Dakara.'

'Makes sense.' Jack said.

'Which means that it's likely one of those agents was directly involved in ensuring the weapon wasn't destroyed.' Sam continued.

'Yes.' Jack said emphatically.

'So you see where I'm going with this, sir.' Sam said.

'No.' He responded just as emphatically.

Her lips twitched and her blue eyes gleamed with amusement briefly. 'We turn the tables on Ba'al, sir.' Her head tilted. 'Rather than going in accusing the Jaffa of not destroying the weapon, we go in stating we have information that Ba'al ensured the wishes of the Jaffa Council were thwarted and the weapon was not destroyed.'

'That could work.' Jack said turning the idea over in his head. 'The Jaffa are not too fond of Ba'al at the moment; they could believe he's meddling.'

'But it would strengthen our position if we knew for certain if the weapon was destroyed or not.' Sam murmured.

'How would we do that?'

'I think we could use the chair on Dakara, sir.' Sam said. 'We know the control chairs usually access the weapon systems on a planet. It's possible the control table my Dad and I used was only constructed when the buildings were buried and I think we could access the information without the Jaffa being aware of what we were doing.' She paused. 'I know it's a risk, sir.'

'But one you think we need to take?'

She nodded.
Jack sighed. 'OK. We go back to Dakara and check out the status of the weapon with the chair and if it hasn't been destroyed we let Teal'c and Bra'tac take the information about Ba'al's interference to the Council.'

'We still might have a problem if the Jaffa Council changes its mind about destroying the weapon, sir.' Sam cautioned.

'Let's cross that bridge when we come to it, Carter.' Jack said. He thumped the table gently and stood up. 'I'd better give Hammond the good news and inform Tweedle-Dum.'

Sam bit her lip to stop from giggling. 'I could inform the Tok'ra, sir.' She said standing.

'You sure?' Jack asked his brown eyes intent on hers.

'Yes, sir.' Sam held his gaze firmly.

'OK, Carter. He's all yours.' Jack said taking the opportunity to duck out. 'I'll get the SFs to bring him back.'

'Thank you, sir.' Sam indulged in watching him stride out of the briefing room. She sighed and wandered over to the observation window to look out at the Stargate. It took a while before Delek was shown back into the room.

'Colonel Carter.' Delek's brown eyes swept over her. 'Where is General O'Neill?'

'He's briefing our chain of command.' She gestured for him to resume his seat and she updated him on the plan.

Delek leaned forward. 'You intend telling the Jaffa that Ba'al was responsible for the weapon not being destroyed?'

'If the weapon is still active, yes.' Sam said.

'And you believe you can find out if the weapon is active without alerting the Jaffa High Council?' Delek asked sceptically.

'As I explained…'

'About the chair, I know.' Delek said dismissively.

Sam's lips thinned and her blue eyes flashed dangerously. 'The control chairs are usually an integral part of the Ancient weapons systems.'

Delek frowned. 'And you really believe the Jaffa will proceed with destroying the weapon?'

'If they believe Ba'al was responsible for ensuring their previous decision to destroy it wasn't carried out, we think there is a good possibility they will proceed as they originally planned if for no other reason than to ensure Ba'al does not achieve a victory.' She sighed.

'I will accompany you to Dakara.' Delek stated presumptively.

Sam shook her head. 'With respect, Delek, if there was one thing guaranteed to get the Jaffa not to destroy the weapon, it would be the presence of the Tok'ra insisting they do and if we turn up with you, they'll be fairly annoyed with us. You would play right into Ba'al's hands.'

'This is unacceptable.' Delek said. 'I insist that I am part of the delegation.'
Sam's patience was teetering on a fine edge. 'Why are you so insistent about this?' She stared at him and he jerked his eyes away to stare at the table. She came to a sudden and startling realisation. 'You didn't come here to inform us at all, did you? You came because we're your only ticket to Dakara.' She shook her head angrily. 'You were planning to use us to get to Dakara and destroy the weapon yourselves.'

Delek's head whipped around. 'You know how powerful that weapon is. It cannot be allowed to remain active.'

'And you don't trust the Jaffa to destroy it.' Sam completed. She stood up. 'I think you should leave. I've told you what we intend to do and we have no intention of taking you to Dakara with us. Whatever you decide to do from here is up to you.'

'Trusting the Jaffa is a mistake.' Delek said furiously, getting to his feet. 'It would be better if you worked with us to destroy it.'

'The Jaffa are our allies,' Sam began heatedly.

'You were blended,' Delek interrupted her, 'you have to know that you are doing the wrong thing in trusting them over us.'

'I wasn't blended,' Sam snapped, 'I didn't have a choice about it.' Something stirred in her memories or rather Jolinar's memories buried in her subconscious.

'Jolinar died to save your life.' Delek said angrily.

'She didn't die to save me. I had someone die to save me recently and I know the difference. She only ensured I lived because it was the only way of preserving anything of herself.' Sam shot back and knew in a way that she never had before that it was the truth. For the first time ever she could access Jolinar's memories as though they were her own; the realisation would have scared her if Delek hadn't chosen to retort.

'Those memories allowed you to save your father on Netu.'

'The Tok'ra used those memories, and my desire to rescue my father, to get to Netu because you needed the information about Sokar's fleet.' Sam's hands fist and she clasped them behind her back. 'The Tok'ra were prepared to blow us all up. If it hadn't been for Teal'c we wouldn't have made it out.' She glared at him. 'And don't ever mention my father again, not after the way you accused him of…of negatively influencing Selmak and forced him to choose between us and you.' Her previously carefully hidden resentment at being deprived of her father in the last year of his life coloured the words with anger and had her wavering on the point of losing her temper.

'The actions of the Tau'ri were leading to the extinction of our race.' Delek bit out. 'You're too aggressive. We had to separate ourselves from you.'

'You didn't leave because you were worried about extinction; you left because you thought you knew better than us. You've never shown us any respect.' Sam replied heatedly. 'I won't deny that the alliance with the Tok'ra has benefited us in the past but more often than not you show up when it suits you and with a hidden agenda, like now.'

'I assure you, Colonel Carter…' Delek tried again.

'Your lack of respect for humans even extends to your hosts,' Sam continued as though he hadn't spoken, 'Selmak and others like Lantash were from the older generation of Tok'ra; those who sought a true blending and who held their hosts in high esteem. You act more like the Goa'uld
because, after all, your hosts are like us, only human and so not deserving of equal respect. The Jaffa and the Tau'ri could be your allies again if the Tok'ra weren't blinded by the same arrogance as the Goa'uld.'

'We are done here.' Delek interrupted her with exactly the arrogance she had accused him of, his brown eyes gleaming with anger. 'I do not need to explain myself to you.' He whirled away from her.

Sam's mind was suddenly flooded with the clear image of sitting in a room, young Tok'ra at her feet including Selmak, her father's symbiote. She knew instinctively she was accessing the Tok'ra's genetic memory; this was a memory of Egeria teaching. 'Am ro gel no as tek ma rel. Kal yui fre dak mel shar'el a Egeria schol.'

Delek froze at the perfect ancient Goa'uld and turned slowly to face the Air Force Colonel again.

'Your host is the other half of your Soul; respect the differences between you always.' Sam translated quietly. 'As Egeria teaches.' Her blue eyes looked at him with contempt. 'You have fallen far from Egeria's teachings. I hope you and the rest of the Tok'ra can find your way back to them.'

There was a fraught silence.

Jack slowed his step as he walked in the briefing room, taking in the flushed cheeks and bright eyes that spoke of a heated argument. 'Carter, what's going on?'

'Delek was just leaving, sir.' Sam responded. She reluctantly dropped her eye contact to look at her CO. 'I discovered that the Tok'ra were intending to use us to gain access to Dakara where they intended to destroy the weapon themselves.'

Jack sighed heavily as his brown eyes hardened. 'Why am I not surprised?' He turned to Delek. 'I believe you were just leaving?' He gestured for Delek to precede him down the stairs. A few minutes later, they all trooped into the gate room where the blue event horizon of the wormhole stood ready.

'Well, I'd say it's been a pleasure seeing you again,' began Jack, 'but I would be lying.'

Delek glowered at him. 'You're making a mistake trusting the Jaffa.'

'Don't let the iris hit your backside on the way out.' Jack retorted.

The male Tok'ra whirled and stormed up the ramp and into the wormhole. The event horizon disappeared in a flash.

Jack glanced over at Sam's pale face. 'Carter?'

Sam opened her mouth to tell him she was fine and couldn't do it. She didn't know what disturbed her more; the argument with Delek or her sudden newfound ability to access her deeply buried Tok'ra memories. She rubbed her forehead. 'Just a headache, sir.'

'Yeah, the Tok'ra always have that effect on me too.' Jack sympathised as they left the gate room.
Sam stared at the completed machine on the central workbench of her lab and glanced up at the clock. Eleven-hundred and there had been no word from Carolyn about the test results. She looked back at the machine in front of her and smiled in satisfaction. The early start that morning had been worth it. She had come across the specs for the device when she had been tidying the lab the previous evening and building it had been just the distraction she had needed. She rubbed the small of her back tiredly; all she needed to do was test it. Sam sighed and got caught off guard by a sudden yawn.

She sank onto a stool. She hadn't really slept well the previous night. She hadn't told Jack about her sudden ability to access her Tok'ra memories and she couldn't help going over her argument with the Tok'ra. She had never been able to access Jolinar's memories as she had the day before and she had definitely never been able to access the Tok'ra symbiote's genetic memory. It had actually felt like her memory. In the darkness of her quarters lying in bed, she had been able to access more. She briefly wondered why; was it to do with Orlin's healing of her? Or was it that she was finally and truly accepting what had happened to her with Jolinar?

In the immediate aftermath of her ordeal she had been convinced that Jolinar had died to save her but in hindsight and with her new ability she could see the symbiote's motives had been less than selfless. The dying Tok'ra had used the pain and confusion of the Ashrak's attack to manipulate her and ensure that Sam would think positively enough of the Tok'ra and their cause to eventually seek out them out. Sam could clearly see that Jolinar's last hope was that Sam would offer herself as a host and her memories would be passed back to another Tok'ra. She understood the desperation that had led Jolinar to her actions and after so many years couldn't bring herself to be angry with the Tok'ra, could even forgive her in a weird kind of way. As she had said to Delek, their alliance with them had brought many benefits even if the Tok'ra were apt to use them for their own purposes now and again. She definitely wouldn't have given up the additional time with her father or knowing his symbiote Selmak. It was a shame, she thought, that the younger Tok'ra were not more like the older generation.

Her hand reached out to fiddle with a screwdriver on the workbench and her eyes fell on the device sitting beside it. It had taken her less time than she had anticipated building it and she knew it would work; she felt it with her whole being. She couldn't quite help remembering how the general would build things when he had been possessed by Ancient knowledge; what if Orlin had downloaded Ancient into her head like one of the head devices the general had used twice before? What if her brain was slowly being overwritten by Ancient data?

'Carter!'

Her head snapped to the door and Jack's concerned face. She guessed he had been standing there for a while trying to get her attention. 'Sorry, sir. I was miles away.'

'I noticed.' Jack said wryly taking a couple of steps into her lab. 'Whatcha doing?'

'I was just about to test this.' Sam said pointing at the device in front of her.

Jack frowned. 'Should I ask what it is?' He peered at the small square metal box.

Sam gestured. 'You remember me telling you when we went fishing that I thought I'd come up with a counter-measure for the Ancient weapon on Dakara?'
'Yes.' Jack caught on a split second later. 'This?' He pointed at the box.

She nodded. 'It has to be hooked up to the Stargate but yes.' She took a breath. 'It works on the same principle as the cipher the Replicators use to counter-act the energy disruptor weapon you designed. Essentially, the device should create a force-shield across the Stargate like an invisible iris. It will dissipate any energy wave set to frequency spectrum that the Ancient weapon on Dakara would need to be set at in order for it destroy all life and…'

'Ah!' Jack waved his hands at the technobabble. 'Enough, Carter.'

'Sir.'

'Does it work?' He asked.

'We can test it with other frequencies using the disruptor weapon but I think so, sir.' Sam said.

Jack nodded. He stuffed his hands in his pockets. 'Are you thinking the Tok'ra were right and the Jaffa won't destroy the weapon?' He asked seriously.

'I hope they're wrong,' Sam said, 'but I was thinking it might help reassure the Jaffa that we don't have a vested interest in the decision.'

'Good thinking, Colonel.' Jack said smiling back at her. 'The Joint Chiefs signed off on the plan by the way. You'll be heading back to Dakara as soon as Carolyn gives you the green light.' He waited a beat. 'She has the test results.'

Sam took a deep breath and they made their way to the infirmary in silence. Jack rapped on Doctor Lam's door and when she called out to enter, he pushed the door open and gestured for Sam to precede him. He shut the door firmly behind him and they both took seats as the doctor greeted them with a serious expression.

Carolyn folded her hands on top of the folder that held the test results and took a deep breath. She looked at the two military officers who were waiting for her to begin speaking and focused on Jack. 'Firstly, General, I don't think you're affected but I can't say that with absolute certainty. Your test results match your previous medical results within an acceptable variance.'

Jack frowned unhappily. It didn't really matter about him; his concern had always been for Sam. His brown eyes flickered over to her. She sat upright in the uncomfortable chair, her hands clasped tightly together in her lap and her face was an expressionless mask.

Carolyn's brown eyes moved to Sam. 'Colonel, the good news is that physically you're in perfect health.' She cleared her throat. 'Unfortunately, the only thing I've been able to identify is a small change in your brain wave pattern but nothing that would cause me alarm under other circumstances. It isn't rare to see alterations after serious head injuries. Everything else seems to be in order.'

Sam looked at her perplexed. 'My DNA results?'

' Came back identical to the one I took before the incident apart from the Ancient genetic marker but there doesn't seem to be any further change.' Carolyn assured her. She held her hands out. 'If the chair is looking for something other than the gene…I can't explain it from your current test results. I could run some more tests.' She said. 'But I don't even know what I'm looking for.'

'Sir, I think the chair holds the best bet of providing us with an answer.' Sam said. 'When I return to Dakara I can use it to find out why I can access it.'
'I'm not sure returning to Dakara is a good idea.' Carolyn replied before Jack could say anything. 'I'd like to keep you on base under observation for a few days just to be sure.'

'I feel fine.' Sam said stubbornly.

Jack could see the impending argument.

'Colonel, whatever this is, could be pervasive throughout your whole body. We really don't know what the effect is.' Carolyn pointed out gently. 'We don't even know if Orlin deliberately altered you for some reason or if this was an accidental side-effect of his exchanging his life for yours.'

'Is the observation completely necessary?' Jack asked. 'We have an urgent mission for Colonel Carter on Dakara.'

Carolyn sighed. She knew Jack would back her up if she made it an order; she had learned over the last month that his primary concern was the well-being of his people. She also knew Colonel Carter knew the same thing. She leaned back in her chair. 'I won't order it.' She said. 'But,' she stressed before Sam could get too excited, 'I want you to promise me, Colonel, that if you start to exhibit any unusual behaviour or start to feel unwell in any way you'll return immediately to the SGC.'

'I promise.' Sam said quickly.

'OK.' Carolyn shrugged helplessly. 'Then I'll see you shortly for your pre-gate travel check.'

'Thanks, Doc.' Jack stood up and Sam followed him with a relieved word of thanks to the slightly disgruntled doctor. He glanced over at Sam as they made their way down the corridor to the elevator. 'You should gear up for Dakara. I'll inform the control room.'

'Actually, sir,' Sam looked at him hopefully, 'is there any chance you could come back with me?'

A grin made its way across his face. 'Missing me out in the field, Carter?'

Her lips twitched. 'I have a theory, sir.'

'Only one?' Jack punched the call button.

This time he managed to raise a small smile from her. 'I think there is a way to determine whether you were affected or not. The chair won't respond to Doctor Cooper despite his having the Ancient gene so it's unlikely that's the only trigger. However if the chair responds to you too…'

'Then we know for definite that whatever Orlin did is affecting us both.' Jack concluded.

'Yes, sir.' Sam agreed as they stepped into the elevator. 'It would only take a couple of hours.'

Jack nodded. 'I think I could manage that.' He said stuffing his hands in his pockets. He smiled at her surprise. 'Hammond's on base. He can step in and take the meetings for the rest of the day.' He said with hidden delight. 'I'll need some time to get things arranged. Why don't you inform the control room and I'll meet you in the gate room at thirteen hundred?'

'Yes, sir.' Sam said as they exited the elevator and split up to make their respective arrangements.

It was just before thirteen hundred when Sam walked into the gate room after leaving the new counter-measure with one of the base scientists to test. Jack was already there providing last minute information to Hammond, the gate spinning behind the two Generals.
'...and SG12 should be checking in this afternoon with an update on the situation on Medrona.' Jack concluded.

Hammond smiled. 'I think I can handle things here, Jack.'

'Yes, sir.' Jack grinned and put his baseball cap on. 'Ready to go, Carter?'

'Yes, sir.' Sam adjusted the position of her P90 as the gate activated and the wormhole cast them all in a pale blue light.

Hammond nodded at them. 'Good luck and Godspeed.'

Jack was smiling as he walked up the ramp with Sam beside him. They stepped through the wormhole and onto Dakara.

'Ah!' Jack breathed in deeply and put his sunglasses on. 'Just like old times.'

'Yes, sir.' Sam said amused at his evident enjoyment at being back off-world. 'It's this way.' She pointed and they began the walk away from the Stargate.

'This is great.' Jack said after a while.

'You miss it, sir?'

'Being off-world? Being shot at and chased by a bunch of angry natives? Dodging battalions of Jaffa and exchanging insults with overdressed snakes?' He said cheerfully. He looked over at her and smiled. 'Yeah I do.'

'Maybe with Colonel Emerson in place with the restructure you'll have more opportunity to accompany the team now and again like you originally intended.' Sam commented.

'The thought had occurred to me.' Jack admitted. His eyes narrowed on her. 'That's if you don't mind having your old CO tag along?'

'I'm sure we'll cope, sir.' Sam said wryly. She caught a slight flicker of something in his eyes and lifted a hand from her P90. 'You know we all still consider you part of SG1, sir.' It was said casually, almost absent-mindedly as though it was something that was taken as read, but its effect was immediate as Jack's shoulders relaxed imperceptibly. 'Just as long as you remember rule number three,' she added cheekily.

Rule number three? Jack thought blankly before his memory supplied the answer; his rules for Mitchell. Number three was 'Carter's the boss.' He grinned back at her. 'Just as long as you remember there's still six days to go yet, Colonel.' He put a little extra stress on her rank.

'I know, sir.' Sam smiled at him. 'I'm counting.'

Their eyes met and held for a long moment before they both broke the eye contact and continued to walk in a comfortable silence. They ambled down the path to the entrance to the buried Ancient buildings spotting Mitchell who was obviously keeping guard.

'Colonel Mitchell.' Jack greeted him and returned his salute.

'General O'Neill, sir.' Mitchell's blue eyes gleamed with curiosity. 'It's good to see you, sir.'

'It's good to be back.' Jack said breezily.
Sam took pity on Mitchell. 'I need the General for an experiment with the chair.'

Mitchell nodded in sudden understanding. 'Teal'c and the rest of the Jaffa are attending some meeting up at the Council building but everyone else is inside, Colonel.'

'Thanks.' Sam said.

Jack gestured at the entrance. 'Shall we, Carter?'

Sam rolled her eyes and gave a nod to Mitchell who tipped his cap at her.

She strode into the passageway with Jack just behind her. They switched the lights on their P90s simultaneously.

'Creepy.' Jack commented as they reached the blasted first chamber and followed Sam into the second chamber.

Daniel sat at one of the consoles on the upper level and glanced up as they entered. 'Hey Sam, Jack.' He did a sudden double take. 'Jack?'

'Daniel.' Jack acknowledged him cheerily.

Daniel frowned. 'What are you doing here?'

Jack sighed for effect. 'No 'pleased to see you'?'

'Well, of course I'm pleased to see you, Jack, I just want to know what you're doing here.' Daniel retorted.

'Helping Carter with one of her experiments.' Jack said.

Daniel looked at Sam questioningly and she nodded.

'I have the Ancient gene but Carolyn pointed out the chair was probably responding to something more given Doctor Cooper couldn't access it.' Sam replied. 'The rest of her tests didn't show anything else.'

'Oh.' Daniel pushed his glasses up his nose. 'Isn't that a good thing?'

'We don't know and we don't know for certain that I'm the only person affected.' Sam said. 'If the chair doesn't respond to General O'Neill then…'

'It's just you.' Daniel concluded. His frown deepened. 'Only we don't know by what.'

Sam shrugged. 'I'm hoping there's something in the Ancient system here that will give us an answer.'

'Good idea.' Daniel murmured. He waved at the room. 'We're only about ten per cent through the download. There's an incredible amount of data in the systems.' He smiled and whirled back to the console. 'I think I might have found some historical data on why they travelled to Dakara and…'

'Daniel.' Jack interrupted Daniel's report. 'I'm sure that's all very interesting but we don't have unlimited time here. Carter?'

'Right, sir.' Sam patted Daniel's arm soothingly. 'Let's get on with the experiment.' She led the way down the stairs to the chair.
Jack greeted the other scientists absently and dumped his backpack and gun on the floor.

'It just won't work for me.' Doctor Cooper complained a little aggrieved.

'Nobody's blaming you, Gary.' Sam said reassuringly. 'But outside of the Atlantis team, General O'Neill does have the most experience at operating Ancient technology.' She waved Jack up the platform to the chair.

Jack walked up slowly trying to rid himself of the image of Sam's broken and dying body sitting in it. He lowered himself into the chair and frowned. No lights or activity of any kind. He pressed his fingers into the cushiony controls. Nothing.

'Maybe you're not doing it right.' Daniel suggested.

Jack glared at him.

Daniel gestured at Jack. 'Think about switching the chair on.'

Jack looked at Sam.

'It couldn't hurt, sir.' She replied.

Jack closed his eyes and settled back into the chair. He tried to focus his mind; tried to think about switching the chair on. After a few minutes, he opened his eyes cautiously and found everyone looking at him expectantly. 'It didn't work?'

They all shook their heads.

Jack got to his feet. 'Well, my work here is done.' He waved at Sam to take his place. 'Carter.'

Sam took a deep breath and stepped up to the chair. Jack stood beside Daniel and crossed his arms as he watched her. She sat down gingerly. The chair activated.

Jack's eyebrows shot up. 'Well, it definitely likes you.'

'OK, Sam.' Daniel said stepping up onto the platform. 'Maybe there's something that will tell us why it only responds to you.'

'Sorry, Carter, but we should probably focus on our other mission first.' Jack interrupted reluctantly.

'Other mission?' Daniel asked.

Jack filled him in on the visit from the Tok'ra.

Daniel frowned. 'I'm not sure we should check if the weapon is active or not without the permission of the Jaffa. They might think we were checking up on them.'

'We are checking up on them, Daniel.' Jack said with exaggerated patience.

Daniel sighed and waved at Jack to go ahead.

'OK, Carter,' Jack said, 'whenever you're ready.'

'Think about the Ancient energy weapon. Just focus your mind.' Daniel coached enthusiastically.
Sam sighed and tried to clear her thoughts. A schematic was suddenly projected into the air.

'What is that?' Jack asked.

'It's the weapon.' Daniel supplied. 'Sam's mind jumped to this,' he waved at the detailed diagram, 'obviously.'

Sam stared at the information spinning above her and her brow creased. 'Sir, the Tok'ra were right.' She looked over at Jack worriedly. 'The weapon is active.'
'Are you sure about this, Sam?' Daniel wrinkled his nose nervously.

'I'm sure.' Sam said. She shivered. 'I think the chair was meant to control the weapon just like it controls the drones in Antarctica. It's still tied to it. I can...I can feel it inside my head.'

Jack looked back at her sharply. 'Maybe you should get out of the chair, Carter.'

'Yes, sir.' Sam focused on deactivating the chair and stepped away from it hurriedly as it righted its position. She sighed in relief.

'I'm going to take Mitchell and find Teal'c; bring him up to date so he can inform the Jaffa High Council about Ba'al's interference.' Jack said. 'You two stay here and work out how we shut that weapon off.' He pointed at the chair. 'Do not touch that.'

'So how are we supposed to find out how to disarm the weapon if we can't use the chair?' Daniel asked exasperatedly.

'I don't know, Daniel, but I don't want to take the risk of Carter accidentally destroying all life in the galaxy.' Jack said.

'The General's right, Daniel.' Sam said crossing her arms protectively. She sighed. 'Those schematics had to come from somewhere in this system, right?'

'Right.' Daniel agreed. 'But without using the chair it will be like...like finding a needle in a haystack and what about finding out what's going on with you?'

'Try another way to get the info, Daniel.' Jack's eyes glanced toward Sam. 'Sorry, Carter.'

'I understand, sir.' She said.

Jack ignored Daniel's exasperated sigh as he picked up his stuff and made his way back out of the chamber. He clipped the P90 back on as he made his way down the passageway and back out into the Dakara sunlight.

Mitchell straightened from his position by the side of the passageway. 'Sir.'

'You're with me, Mitchell.' Jack said.

'Sir?' Mitchell looked back at the entrance before he took a couple of running steps to catch up with the General.

'Do you know where this Council building is?' Jack asked as he flung his baseball cap back on over his short crop of grey hair.

'Yes, sir.'

'Well, lead the way, Mitchell.'

'Yes, sir.' Mitchell was surprised at the pace the General was setting and he almost struggled to keep up.

Jack looked over at the younger officer and smiled at the well hidden curiosity; he knew Mitchell
was too good an officer to let it get the better of him. He cleared his throat. 'You're probably wondering what's going on?'

'I'm a little curious, sir.' Mitchell admitted.

'We had a visit from the Tok'ra last night.' Jack said.

'The Tok'ra?' Mitchell frowned. 'I thought they had abandoned the alliance with us since the attack on the old Alpha site.'

'Oh they have. Rule number eight, Mitchell; never trust a Tok'ra. They always have a hidden agenda.' Jack sighed. 'They told us the weapon on Dakara is still active probably down to Ba'al's interference. Carter's just confirmed it. We're off to tell the Jaffa Council the good news.'

Mitchell grimaced. 'Let's hope they don't kill the messengers, sir.'

'Yes. Let's.' Jack muttered.

The Council session was breaking up and the leaders of the Jaffa were spilling out of the meeting chamber as they entered. Jack slowed down to a normal pace, his eyes searching for Teal'c. He saw him a moment later, almost at the same time that Teal'c caught sight of him across the crowded corridor. The two team-mates cut a swathe through the crowd to reach each other with no regard for anyone else.

'O'Neill,' Teal'c began urgently, 'Colonel Carter…'

'She's OK, T.' Jack said quickly realising the assumption the Jaffa had jumped to on seeing him. 'She's back with Daniel looking over the Ancient systems. Actually, that's kind of what I need to talk to you about.'

'O'Neill.' Bra'tac greeted him with strong forearm clasp. 'It is good to see you again.'

'Always a pleasure, Bra'tac, but I need to talk to you and Teal'c on a matter of urgency.' He glanced around at the interested looks they were garnering. 'In private.'

'Of course. This way.' Bra'tac hid his own curiosity and led the way to an ante-chamber.

Jack paused at the entrance and turned to Mitchell. 'Watch the door and make sure we're not disturbed.'

'Yes, sir.'

Jack joined the two Jaffa and closed the door. 'Sorry for the melodrama,' he waved a hand at them, 'but we had a visit from the Tok'ra last night.' He quickly filled them in on what Delek had told them; that they had received information that the Ancient weapon was not destroyed as they had been told.

Teal'c and Bra'tac exchanged a concerned look.

'That is a serious charge.' Bra'tac said.

'It's a serious problem.' Jack said without any sign of his usual humour.

'The Tok'ra are mistaken.' Bra'tac insisted huffily. 'I was present when the Council voted. The machine was to be destroyed.'
'But you didn't actually see it destroyed?' Jack checked.

Bra'tac shook his head. 'I did not. Only three of our Council members were tasked with overseeing the destruction of the weapon but...I cannot believe they would lie to the rest of the Council about this.'

'I'm sorry, Bra'tac. I didn't want to believe the Tok'ra either,' Jack sighed, 'which is why I got Carter to check.' He held Bra'tac's gaze. 'The weapon is still active.'

'Are you certain, O'Neill?' Teal'c asked.

'Teal'c, the chair in that Ancient chamber you guys found is hooked up to that damn weapon.' Jack said pointing in the vague direction of the old monument. 'Carter could tell it was working. She thought she was going to set the thing off.'

Teal'c's jaw worked furiously as he assimilated the information. 'Colonel Carter would not lie about this.' He said to a devastated Bra'tac.

'I know, old friend.' Bra'tac admitted.

'Listen, we think this was all Ba'al's doing.' Jack said waving his hand. 'Who exactly said they witnessed the destruction of the machine?'

Bra'tac sighed. 'Byn'c, Gerek and Cral'k.'

'Cral'k.' Jack repeated. 'Cral'k as in the guy who tried to kill Carter Cral'k? Ba'al's spy Cral'k?' He motioned with his hand. 'Isn't it possible Cral'k was responsible for not following through on destroying the thing?'

'You believe Cral'k was acting on Ba'al's orders to defy the wishes of the Jaffa High Council.' Bra'tac surmised.

'I do.' Jack said.

'What of Byn'c and Gerek?' Teal'c murmured.

'I cannot believe Byn'c would have lied to the Council,' Bra'tac said, 'but Gerek...he has a chequered past, hmmm?'

'He does?'

'He was the First Prime of a minor System Lord in the service of Ba'al at the time of the rebellion.' Teal'c confirmed.

'Another Ba'al connection.' Jack pointed out.

'We should inform the Council immediately.' Teal'c said.

'I agree, old friend.' Bra'tac said. 'I will see to it. O'Neill, you will stay and speak of this to the Council.' He swept out before Jack could reply.

The General turned to Teal'c ruefully. 'I guess I'm staying.'

'Indeed.'

Jack nodded. He poked his head around the door and ushered Mitchell inside.
'Sir?' Mitchell asked.

'Bra'tac's getting the Council together for a big pow-wow session which I'm guessing isn't going to be very pleasant. I need you to head back to Colonel Carter let her know what's going on and tell her that we definitely think Ba'al had something to do with the weapon not being destroyed; Cral'k was one of the few Jaffa with responsibility for destroying it.' Jack said. 'Tell her I'll be staying here for the discussion and then I plan to head back to the SGC. Teal'c will update you guys on the outcome.'

Mitchell nodded. 'Yes, sir.'

'Dismissed.' Jack confirmed and returned Mitchell's salute.

The Air Force officer was half-way back out of the door when Jack called his name stopping him in his tracks.

'Sir?' Mitchell asked.

'Remind Daniel and Carter that they are not to use that chair.' Jack said firmly. 'And Mitchell? Rule number nine is don't trust Daniel and Carter not to touch something when I've explicitly told them not to.'

Mitchell nodded and left.

'What's the betting they use the chair?' Jack sighed.

'I will not take that bet, O'Neill.'

'How do you think the Council will take all this?' Jack asked perching on the shiny wooden table.

Teal'c's eyebrow quirked upwards. 'I do not believe the Council will be pleased.' He scowled. 'It is proving most difficult to rid ourselves of Ba'al's influence.'

'There is a permanent way to deal with Ba'al.' Jack said almost lazily.

Teal'c met his eyes in complete understanding. 'Indeed.'

Bra'tac swept into the room. 'We are ready. You will come with us, O'Neill.'

Jack followed the Jaffa out of the ante-chamber and down the wide ornate corridor with its giant urns and imposing statues to the Council room. It was a circular space with two curved semi-circular tables behind which sat the various Council members. Bra'tac indicated for O'Neill to stand in the centre and took a seat. Teal'c chose to remain by Jack's side and the General was pleased at the presence of his friend.

'Bra'tac, what is the meaning of this?' Gerek stated angrily. 'It is forbidden for outsiders to address the Council.'

'I believe an exception is needed on this occasion.' Bra'tac insisted. 'General O'Neill has vital information regarding our security here at Dakara.'

'I would hear him speak.' Ilyia, the only female Jaffa on the Council, spoke up.

'As would I.' Byn'c said.

Gerek waved a large hand and pursed his lips. 'Very well. Let him speak.'
'O'Neill.' Bra'tac nodded at the Tau'ri General.

Jack found his mouth suddenly as dry as the Sahara as all the eyes of the Jaffa focused on him. 'Hey. How are you all doing?' He cleared his throat noisily and got to the purpose of his visit. 'We received some information about our favourite Goa'uld, Ba'al…'

'Where did this information come from?' Byn'c asked.

'The Tok'ra.' Jack admitted.

There was a wave of muttering around the room.

'Look,' he said talking over them, 'I'm not keen on them either but their information came from an operative in Ba'al's inner circle so could we all move on from our mutual dislike of the snakes and get to the point?'

'An excellent idea.' Gerek said leaning back and steepling his fingers in front of him.

'Ba'al arranged it so the Ancient weapon on Dakara was not destroyed.' Jack said forcefully.

'This can't be true,' gasped an elderly Jaffa.

'Cral'k was entrusted with the destruction of the weapon, was he not?' Teal'c asked.

'As was Byn'c and Gerek.' Ilyia said her green eyes flashing at the two Jaffa.

Gerek rose out of his seat angrily. 'Are you accusing me of being an agent of Ba'al?'

'I don't think I said that.' Jack turned to Teal'c. 'Did I say that he was an agent of Ba'al because I don't think I said that?'

'Hasak!' Gerek shouted.

'Gerek.' Bra'tac intervened. 'There is no doubt that there are questions to be answered by you and Byn'c. You were tasked with Cral'k in overseeing that the weapon was destroyed.'

'The weapon was destroyed.' Gerek said. 'I witnessed the explosion within the chamber holding the control table.'

'Whatever you saw was a trick.' Jack replied forcefully, stabbing a finger at him. 'That weapon is still active.'

'How do you know this?' Byn'c demanded.

Teal'c answered. 'The Ancient chamber where we found Colonel Carter after Cral'k's attempt to kill her contains a chair that controls the weapon. Colonel Carter used the chair and verified the Tok'ra's information to determine its veracity before the Tau'ri brought this to the attention of the Council.'

There was another outbreak of loud voices and a lot of comments being directed at the direction of the grey haired human standing in the centre of the room.

'Hey!' Jack yelled. 'Ba'al didn't allow this information to leak by accident. He's trying to screw things up between us with this which is why we verified the intel before we informed you. Are you going to let him win?'
There was a moment of total silence.

'O'Neill is right.' Bra'tac said. 'Ba'al knew this information would create dissent amongst us. We must unite and not allow him a victory here.'

Byn'c sighed. 'Gerek and I were obviously tricked by Cral'k.' He gestured. 'I have no excuse. Cral'k offered to arrange everything and we allowed it. After Anubis's attack,' he sighed again heavily, 'there was much to do.'

A disgruntled Gerek sat back down. 'I also have no excuse to offer.' His dark eyes glowered angrily.

Bra'tac patted Byn'c's shoulder. 'We can understand. The question is what we do now. The weapon is still active and must be destroyed.'

'Must it?' Gerek asked. He spread his hands out wide. 'Is destroying the weapon the right thing to do?'

'Oh, here we go.' Jack muttered under his breath.

'The weapon is too powerful…' Bra'tac began.

'And do we not need that power now?' Gerek said thumping the table.

'We have already made this decision, Gerek.' Byn'c argued.

'An emotional decision made in the turmoil of Anubis's attack.' Gerek insisted.

'Didn't you learn anything from that?' Jack asked unable to keep quiet. 'Anubis almost pressed the button that destroyed all life in the galaxy.'

'Well,' Gerek's dark eyes were filled with hostility as they met Jack's serious brown gaze, 'we know what the Tau'ri would like us to do.'

'Would we prefer to destroy a weapon that could take out all life in the galaxy? Yes, we would, I won't deny that.' Jack retorted. 'But actually it makes no difference to us.' He lifted a hand and smiled smugly. 'We have a counter-measure.' He watched in satisfaction as the Jaffa were shocked into silence by him for the second time.
Mitchell entered the upper level of the Ancient chamber and searched for Sam. He couldn't see her anywhere in the chamber. He patted Daniel's shoulder. 'Hey, Jackson. Where's Sam?'

'Over there.' Daniel waved vaguely in the direction of the lower level.

Mitchell skipped down the stairs and looked around. He was about to yell at Daniel again when he caught sight of a pair of Air Force issue combat boots sticking out the bottom of a console. He crouched down beside the Colonel's legs and tried to see what she was doing. Her body was halfway into a hole in the wall. 'Sam? What are you doing?'

Her head rose a millimetre. 'Hey, you're back.' She wiggled out of the work-space. 'One of the consoles has a short I was fixing it.' She said motioning back at the hole.

Mitchell nodded and reluctantly dragged his attention back to his orders. 'General O'Neill has reported the visit of the Tok'ra and the status of the Ancient weapon to Bra'tac and Teal'c.'

'How did they take it?' Sam asked clambering to her feet.

Mitchell rose with her. 'Bra'tac went off to organise an emergency Council session. Apparently Ba'al probably did have something to do with the weapon not being destroyed; Cral'k was involved.' He paused as she made a face. 'The General was planning to stay for the session and then head back to the SGC. Teal'c will update us on the outcome.'

'OK.' Sam nodded. 'Anything else?'

'Just that I should remind you and Daniel to stay away from the chair.' Mitchell said with a smile.

'Funny.' Sam said dryly.

'Can I do anything to help in here?' Mitchell asked looking around.

'You read Ancient?' Sam asked already knowing the answer.

Mitchell shook his head. 'You want me to go guard outside?'

'Sorry,' she said with an apologetic smile, 'I know it's not the most exciting duty.'

'You and Daniel do your thing and Teal'c and I back you up. I get it.' Mitchell said. 'And it's all good to me. Besides,' he continued with a wicked grin, 'on our last mission when I was doing guard duty I got zatted and knocked out; not exactly unexciting duty.'

'That isn't the norm.' Sam retorted.

He gave a look of blatant disbelief.

'Well, OK.' Sam admitted. She gave a wicked smile of her own. 'We are SG1 after all.'

'Yes, ma'am.' Mitchell agreed happily.

'Check in every hour. I want an early warning if you get zatted again.' Sam ordered as he gave her a salute and headed back up the stairs.
She sighed and headed over to Doctor Lee. 'How's it going Bill?' The scientist was examining all the information they had been able to pinpoint on the unusual power source.

The small round man scratched his beard and gestured at his laptop screen. 'I can't understand this.' He admitted. 'My Ancient is a little rusty but if I'm reading this right I think there is some kind of an energy field being used to access sub-space in another dimension a bit like the technology you came across on P9X391.' He shook his head. 'How the ZPM produces the charge to access the dimension...' he shrugged helplessly.

'Keep at it, Bill.' Sam said. 'It sounds like it might be useful information.'

She checked in with the other scientists including Kyrel and Tolam who had rejoined them before she went upstairs to sit next to Daniel. 'Anything?'

'On why the Ancients came to Dakara, yes. On how we turn the weapon off, no.' Daniel admitted. He gave a frustrated moan and leaned back in his chair to take his glasses off and rub his eyes furiously.

'OK. Well, maybe this gives us a start.' Sam said encouragingly. 'Maybe if we understand more about the context of the weapon we'll understand how it works.'

Daniel reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a ration bar. He opened it almost absent-mindedly as he waved back at the console. 'OK. From everything we and the Atlantis team have been able to work out the Ancients built the city of Atlantis on Earth but they suffered from a plague and took Atlantis to the Pegasus galaxy to escape it. Ultimately they met the Wraith and they came back after losing the war with them. Eventually, most Ancients were able to ascend or left Earth.'

'Right.' Sam agreed.

Daniel took a bite of the bar and chewed enthusiastically before he waved back at the monitor. 'This is where it gets interesting; we were wrong.'

'Wrong?' Sam's brow creased in confusion.

'Wrong.' Daniel gestured sending a spray of crumbs across the room. 'According to this, the Ancients didn't even evolve on Earth.'

Sam stared at him. 'But…'

'They came from another part of the universe trying to escape some kind of religious crusade.' He wrinkled his nose. 'Something like the Inquisition.'

Sam sighed, her blue eyes rueful. 'That would explain the lack of evolutionary evidence back on Earth for a race predating our own evolution.'

Daniel nodded and swallowed the mouthful of food he had taken while she spoke. 'They didn't even go to Earth first.'

'They came here.' Sam surmised.

'And built this outpost and some Stargates which they call Astral portals.' Daniel said waving a hand at the building around them. 'They started to explore and realised the galaxy was fairly empty and lifeless. And that's all I've got so far.' He popped the rest of the ration bar in his mouth and chewed thoughtfully.
Sam patted his arm. 'It's more than we had a couple of hours ago.'

Daniel grimaced. His blue eyes snared hers. 'You know how I told you about being in the diner talking to Oma and Anubis?'

'I remember.' Sam said quietly.

'Anubis told me that the weapon was originally intended to seed life in the galaxy not to destroy it.' He looked at her seriously. 'Could he have been telling the truth?'

Sam considered it for a moment. 'I guess.' She shifted in her seat and gestured. 'All life has an electrical current running through it; it helps keep cellular cohesion, transmits neural transmitters and generally keeps the body working. The way we think the weapon works is to send a disrupter wave through sub-space which, if set at the right frequency, will interrupt the electrical current.'

'And the interruption is enough to cause everything to lose cohesion.' Daniel concluded. 'Like with the Replicators.'

'Right. Now, theoretically, you could create a wave that somehow initiated or amplified the electrical current rather than disrupting it,' Sam said, 'but you would have to have all the building blocks that make up the chemistry of life already present.'

'So you go out sprinkle the essential ingredients, zap it all with a giant microwave and a few millennia later you have intelligent life.' Daniel muttered.

'Well it's not really a microwave but yes, you've got the general idea.' Sam frowned. 'If that is what the device was originally used for I think it was modified later to be used as a weapon.'

'That would make sense when you think about.' Daniel said crossing his arms.

'How do you mean?' Sam asked perplexed.

'Say the Ancients came here first, created the machine and seeded life – maybe they even stayed here at Dakara a while – but then there was obviously some kind of disaster and the outpost got buried. They left, found Earth, built Atlantis, everything proceeds as we think it did. Only they get back and they're worried about the Wraith following them…'

'And they decide to use the machine as a weapon.' Sam concluded. 'If the Wraith did get to this galaxy and attack in the same kind of numbers that had overwhelmed them in the Pegasus galaxy, they would be able to destroy all of them easily in one go.' She chewed her lip. 'It's possible that the Wraith would require a different disruptor setting to humans or Ancients even; our various evolutions happened in different galaxies and the weapon can be set very precisely.'

'So the Ancients come back and build the city and monuments on the surface here.' Daniel said. 'And it could explain why they tunneled back to this part of the lost buildings – they needed access to the control chair.'

'It's a great theory, Daniel,' Sam said, 'but…'

'But it doesn't help us find a way to destroy the machine. I know.' Daniel sighed.

She patted his shoulder as she got up. 'Keep at it. I'm going to help Bill with the power source.'

'OK.' Daniel was already leaning forward, his blue eyes returning to the text on the screen.
It was another three hours before Sam ordered the study team to take a break. They all spilled out into the warm Dakara sunlight for some air. The three SG1 team-mates automatically took up a guard position on the ground in front of the group of scientists who rested by the side of the mountain.

Sam turned her face up to the sun and breathed in deeply. The air in the chamber was a little stale and it was good to feel the breeze over her skin.

'I've been meaning to ask you who was the Tok'ra who visited?' Daniel asked curiously.

'Delek.'

'Oh.' Daniel smirked. 'Bet Jack was pleased.'

Sam gave a small smile. 'I can't say I was pleased to see him myself.' She gestured with her canteen. 'The Tok'ra never visit us without a hidden agenda.'

'Rule number eight.' Mitchell said sagely. 'The General told me that that was rule number eight.'

Sam rolled her eyes. 'Well, he was right. They were going to use us to get here so they could destroy the machine themselves.'

'Nice,' commented Mitchell.

'What did Jack say when he found out?' Daniel asked his eyes alight with interest.

'He told Delek not to let the iris hit his ass on his way back through the gate.' Sam grinned.

Mitchell hooted with laughter as Daniel chuckled.

'Sounds like Jack.' Daniel commented smiling. He rubbed his knees. 'So the Tok'ra have a spy in Ba'al's court.'

'A compromised spy.' Sam said. 'There's no way Ba'al didn't leak the information on the weapon purposely. He was hoping to stir up the anti-Tau'ri feeling again.'

'And using the Tok'ra as the messengers guaranteed him that the Jaffa would have reacted badly from the start.' Daniel murmured.

'Hopefully, the Jaffa will go for the idea that Ba'al interfered with the weapon being destroyed and we're only reporting his meddling rather than tying to meddle ourselves in their decision.' Sam said.

'But we do want the weapon destroyed, right?' Mitchell said.

'Right,' Sam agreed, 'but we don't want to make it appear to the Jaffa that we're trying to dictate what they do.' She sighed again. 'We're hoping the fact that we have a counter-measure will help convince them that we don't really have an interest in the outcome of their decision.' She found herself pinned by two sets of blue eyes.

Daniel found his voice first. 'We have a counter-measure?'

'Sure.' Sam lowered her canteen from her lips. 'Didn't I mention that to you guys?'

They both shook their heads.

'Oh.' Sam gestured with the canteen. 'Well, we have a counter-measure.'
'How did we get a counter-measure?' Mitchell asked bemused.

'I…er…built this morning.' Sam admitted.

'You built it this morning?' Daniel repeated. A worried look sparked in his eyes. 'Sam…'

'I designed it when we thought Anubis was going to push the button.' Sam said defensively. 'All I needed to do was refine and adjust it a little.'

'Wow.' Mitchell said. He took another sip of his water and suddenly clued into the way Daniel was frowning at Sam and the way she was avoiding the archaeologist's gaze. He looked from one to the other as he screwed the top on his canteen. He wondered at the uneasy tension between his teammates. He got to his feet. 'I'll go and…uh…check on the others.' He motioned behind him and moved away.

'Thanks, Cameron.' Sam said absently.

'Sam,' Daniel began as soon as Mitchell took a couple of steps away from them.

'Daniel, I'm fine.'

'Sam, you're the only one who can use the control chair and now you're building counter-measures to Ancient technology in the space of a morning?' Daniel argued. 'Doesn't that remind you of…?'

'How the General acted when he had the Ancient repository downloaded into his head? Yes, I know, Daniel.' Sam admitted grumpily.

'So?' Daniel pressed gesturing at her. 'Shouldn't we be calling the Asgard or something?'

'Carolyn didn't find anything wrong with me,' Sam protested, 'and I'm not speaking Ancient.'

'Yet.'

'Daniel, the General's symptoms followed a regular pattern; he began to talk in Ancient, then he began to build things and he was always going to be able to use the chair in Antarctica because he has the gene.'

Sam recited the information so fluently that Daniel realised that she must have thought about it a lot herself. 'Maybe we should stop looking for a way to switch the weapon off and start focusing on what activates the chair.' He suggested.

'I'm not the priority, Daniel.'

'Says who?' Daniel muttered.

Sam smiled. 'I appreciate the thought and if I start talking in Ancient then believe me I'll be the first back into that chair to find out what's going on.'

'Maybe we should use the chair anyway.' Daniel said. 'We're not finding much on the weapon trawling piece by piece through the system.'

'It's tempting.' Sam admitted hugging her knees to her.

'You know not using the chair wasn't really an order.' Daniel mused. 'More like a suggestion.'

'Daniel…'
'And Jack's not coming back here.' Daniel commented. 'He's going back to the SGC.'

Sam pondered it for a moment. 'It would be a lot quicker.'

They looked at each other and both swiftly got to their feet.

Sam waved at the entrance as they passed the resting scientists and Mitchell. 'We're heading back in. You guys stay out here a while longer and rest up some more.' She was gone before they could answer hurrying after Daniel down the passageway. They stood in front of the chair for a moment.

Sam crossed her arms over her chest. 'I'm having second thoughts.' She admitted. 'Maybe this isn't a good idea.'

'Come on, what's the worst that can happen?' Daniel coaxed.

'I wipe out all life in the galaxy.' Sam said dryly.

'OK, bad question.' Daniel said. He gestured at the chair. 'What if you only focus on switching the weapon off?'

'Right.' Sam took a step up to the chair.

'Hey!' Mitchell's yell had them both turning guiltily towards the upper level. His blue eyes narrowed on them suspiciously remembering the ninth rule. 'General O'Neill's on his way down the path with Teal'c.'

Sam and Daniel exchanged a concerned look and quickly took the stairs to the upper level. They all made their way back outside just in time to greet their visitors.

Jack frowned as they all came to a halt outside the mountain. He took his baseball cap off and rubbed a hand through his damp sweaty hair. 'Carter, Daniel. Any luck on finding a way to destroy the weapon?'

'No, sir.' Sam reported.

'We've barely made a dent into the information in the system, Jack.' Daniel added folding his arms. 'It could take days, months even, before we find anything useful.'

'I thought you might say that.' Jack sighed.

'What happened with the Council, sir?' Sam asked.

'The Council agreed to destroy the weapon, Colonel Carter.' Teal'c answered.

'That's good news.' Sam said.

'Indeed.' Teal'c said with satisfaction.

'They're going to blow the thing up. We just wanted to check you hadn't found another way of doing it. I've been invited to stay and watch.' Jack said cheerily. 'Want to come?'

'Thank you, sir but I have a lot to do here.' Sam said with a smile.

'Daniel?' Jack asked. 'I hear there's going to be popcorn.'

'Thanks but on balance I'd really rather not watch an Ancient artefact blown to a million pieces,
Jack. Daniel said dryly.

Jack smirked at him and his brown eyes drifted to Mitchell. 'How about you, Mitchell?'

'Me?' Mitchell asked.

'Colonel, you don't mind me borrowing the Colonel for a little while, do you?' Jack asked his chocolate eyes gleaming at Sam with amusement.

Mitchell looked hopefully at her. 'I mean if there's going to be popcorn and all…'

She rolled her eyes. 'Go. Have fun.'

Mitchell broke into a grin. 'Thanks, Sam.'

'Great.' Jack slapped his cap back on. 'We'll see you all later.' He looked back at Daniel and Sam. 'And don't use that chair; that's an order.' He smiled at their disgruntled expressions and gestured for Teal'c to lead the way to the weapon.

The Jaffa bowed to his two team-mates and led the General and Mitchell away from the mountain. It took them a little while to reach the Ancient temple that housed the weapon. The area was teeming with Jaffa.

Bra'tac hurried out to meet them. 'The bomb is set. We should get to a safe distance.'

They took up a position a sensible distance away but with a good view of the front of the doorway leading to the inner chamber which held the control table. The rest of the Council stood beside them and behind them a significant number of Jaffa had gathered to watch.

'So how are we going to blow up the weapon?' Mitchell asked.

'We will use a naquadah enhanced bomb, Colonel Mitchell.' Teal'c responded. 'It will destroy the control table from which the weapon can be accessed.'

'Cool.' Mitchell murmured.

Bra'tac pointed at the chamber suddenly. 'It is time.'

The words had barely left his lips when the ground shook below their feet and a fiery ball exploded out of the mouth of the chamber.

'Sweet.' Jack commented when the fire died away. He was already moving forward, Teal'c, Bra'tac and Mitchell close at his heels. Jack waved his arms to dissipate the black billowing cloud of smoke as he stepped through into the chamber. The darkness was suffocating and he coughed trying to get his breath. He switched on the light on his P90 and swept it around the room. Mitchell followed his example. Their beams fell on the rectangular shape in the centre as more Jaffa entered bringing with them more light to examine the space.

Jack came to a sudden halt as the smoke drifted away; Teal'c came to stand one side of him; Mitchell, the other.

'OK.' Mitchell said. 'This could be a problem.'

'Ya think?' Jack asked sarcastically.

Teal'c stared at the intact control table the bomb had failed to destroy and frowned. 'Indeed.'
Jack and Mitchell joined the Jaffa Council as they regrouped outside of the chamber.

'OK,' Jack said rubbing his hands together, 'it's time for plan B.'

'You have a plan B, O'Neill?' Bra'tac said hopefully.

'Nope,' Jack admitted, 'but it's time for one.' The Jaffa looked at him bemused as Mitchell snickered and Teal’c's brown eyes gleamed with reluctant humour.

'We could try another bomb.' Ilyia suggested.

'This is a sign.' Gerek said forcefully. 'The weapon cannot be destroyed; we should simply accept it.'

'There is always a way.' Teal'c said quietly.

'I have to admit, Teal'c, I do not see it.' Bra'tac draped his cloak over his arm and turned to look back in the direction of the weapon. 'I do not believe we have a bomb capable of destroying the weapon.'

'Maybe we do not require a bomb.' Teal'c said thoughtfully. 'There may yet be information in the systems of the Ancient outpost that will allow us to destroy the weapon another way.'

'If it can be done, Daniel and Carter will find a way to do it.' Jack's confidence in his two teammates was evident.

Byn'c sighed. 'It seems we have no other choice.'

The sound of footsteps approaching had all of them shifting to meet the messenger. The young Jaffa bowed deeply in front of Bra'tac.

'Master Bra'tac, there are Tok'ra at the Stargate. They have asked for an audience.'

There were matching stunned faces in the gathered group and Jack's expression darkened ominously.

'Tok'ra?' Gerek bristled. 'What are they doing on Dakara?'

Bra'tac looked back at his fellow Council member. 'I will go and find out.' He gestured at the chamber. 'I believe we are done here in any case. We will give the Tau'ri and our scientists working with them time to discover another way to destroy the weapon, hmmm?'

'Agreed.' Byn'c said.

'Very well.' Gerek said. He whirled away and strode off back in the direction of the Council building.

The rest of the Council followed at a more sedate pace leaving Bra'tac alone with Teal’c and the two Tau'ri visitors. There was no discussion as all of them turned towards the Stargate, Bra'tac leading the way. They could see the tableau a long time before they reached it; the Tok'ra stood in a circle of armed Jaffa just in front of the metal ring. Every Jaffa had a zat pointed at the Tok'ra and the two were sensibly standing perfectly still. Jack's annoyance at the Tok'ra for showing up rose to
new heights as he recognised one of them as Delek. Bra'tac instructed the guards to move aside and they stepped back. Delek and the other Tok'ra stayed still and waited for the small welcoming party to reach them.

'Delek.' Jack said dryly. 'What a surprise.'

'General O'Neill.' Delek gave him a short nod of greeting. 'General Hammond said we would find you here.'

Jack assimilated the news that Hammond had redirected the Tok'ra with well-hidden surprise. He turned instead to the Jaffa warriors by his side. 'You remember Teal'c? And this is Master Bra'tac.'

To Jack's surprise, Delek bowed in a show of respect.

'Master Bra'tac.' Delek said straightening. 'This is Shannon.' He gestured at the thin brown-haired man stood with him. 'He was our operative stationed with Ba'al. He returned unexpectedly yesterday while I was meeting with you. He has vital intelligence for you and the Jaffa about Ba'al.'

Bra'tac shot Jack a questioning look and Jack shrugged; he was just as confused as the elderly Jaffa.

'Perhaps we should adjourn this discussion to a more appropriate location.' Bra'tac suggested. 'Come.' He ushered them away from the Stargate.

Delek walked beside Bra'tac; Mitchell fell into step with Shannon in the middle. Jack was happier with Teal'c by his side as they brought up the rear of the group. They allowed a little distance to grow between them and the others.

'Do you think they truly bring intelligence on Ba'al, O'Neill?' Teal'c asked in a low voice.

'I don't know, Teal'c.' Jack said. 'I don't trust them. Their idea of an alliance always seemed to involve us getting shot at.' He glanced at his friend. 'What do you think?'

'I think we should see whether the information they have is of value.' Teal'c murmured clasping his hands behind his back.

They fell into a comfortable silence and followed the others into the Council building and through the wide corridors to the same ante-chamber they had used earlier.

Bra'tac sat down and pinned Delek with a hard stare. 'You will forgive our caution, Delek, but it has been my experience that the Tok'ra rarely act without self-interest. What is this information you offer us?'

Delek shifted uncomfortably. 'Ba'al is on his way to Dakara.' He didn't miss the looks of alarm exchanged by the Tau'ri and the Jaffa. 'Ba'al has managed to retain a significant fleet of ships manned by Kull warriors and he has been hiding them in the far reaches of his dominion. It is a sizable enough force to challenge your defences here. We believe he intends to take back Dakara destabilising the Free Jaffa worlds and sowing seeds of doubt about the rebellion in those who are uncertain.'

'If Ba'al were to attack Dakara, he would fail.' Teal'c said forcefully.

'Yes, he would.' Jack said.
'We believe if he took back Dakara then he would use the Ancient weapon on any planet that did not agree to fall under his rule.' Delek continued.

'And let me guess, we need to destroy the Ancient weapon ASAP.' Jack drawled leaning back in his chair with a cynical glint in his eye.

Delek flushed. 'I can understand how you might consider this information convenient…'

'Ya think?' Jack inserted.

'But we are telling the truth.' Delek insisted. 'Your long range sensors will be able to verify the movement of Ba'al's ships within the day.'

'I do not understand.' Bra'tac said. 'Why would Ba'al attack when the Jaffa alliance with the Tau'ri is still strong?'

'Perhaps he believed that his tactic of informing the Tau'ri that the Ancient weapon was active would have destroyed the alliance.' Teal'c suggested.

'No.' Shannon spoke up for the first time and shook his head. 'Ba'al has a spy on the Jaffa High Council; he knows that the Jaffa have not reacted the way that he had hoped to the Tau'ri bringing them the information about the weapon.

Teal'c stiffened and his dark eyes shot to the Tok'ra. 'Cral'k was executed for his treason.'

'Not Cral'k.' Shannon said forcefully. 'Another Jaffa. I never knew his name but I glimpsed his image once on the long-range communications device when he reported to Ba'al.'

'You'd recognise him?' Jack checked.

'Yes. I believe so.' Shannon agreed.

Jack looked at Teal'c. 'How about we pay the Council a surprise visit?'

'I agree, O'Neill.' Teal'c said.

Bra'tac gestured at the Tok'ra. 'Come.'

They all made their way out of room and down the hall to the Council chamber. Shannon was flanked by Teal'c and Bra'tac; Delek, Jack and Mitchell followed behind them.

Teal'c flung the doors of the chamber open and strode forward with Bra'tac, Shannon by their side. Jack hung back and gestured for the rest of them to do the same.

'What is the meaning of this?' Gerek demanded angrily as the Jaffa Council got to their feet at the violent interruption. 'Who is this?'

Teal'c ignored him. 'Who is the traitor who works with Ba'al?' His words effectively silenced the room.

Shannon's eyes passed over one Jaffa and then another. His eyes settled on one and he stabbed a finger in their direction. 'Him.'

Bra'tac walked slowly toward the accused, his dark eyes wide with disappointment and disbelief. 'Byn'c.'
Byn'c looked desperately for support from one side of the room and then the other. 'You cannot believe this Tok'ra. I am not a spy.' He threw his hands up. 'I refuse to listen to these foundless accusations.'

'You will stay.' Bra'tac pulled out his zat and held it on Byn'c even as Teal'c brought his own weapon to bear.

'Shol'var!' Gerek spat at Byn'c. 'We will execute you.'

'We cannot.' Teal'c interrupted. 'At least, not yet.' His eyes took in the rest of the stunned Council. 'Ba'al is on his way with a formidable army of Kull warriors to Dakara. Byn'c may have useful information.'

'I will tell you nothing.' Byn'c blustered.

'You will.' Teal'c said threateningly. He took just one step in the old Jaffa's direction. 'Why does Ba'al advance on Dakara now?' He demanded.

'It is too late you will not be able to stop him.' Byn'c said. 'My Lord Ba'al will take back what is rightfully his.'

'We will defend Dakara.' Gerek said.

'You will fail. Byn'c sneered. He cast a disparaging look at the gathered Tok'ra and Tau'ri watching the proceedings with interest. 'You have already failed to defeat the one with whom he allies now.'

Bra'tac thrust the zat at him. 'Of whom do you speak?'

Byn'c smiled. 'The human form Replicator.'

Everyone in the Council chamber was paralysed with shock at Byn'c's words and the elderly Jaffa used the moment to his advantage. He thrust one Jaffa out of his way and into Bra'tac's path. He began to reach into his robes but Gerek's large fist shot out and hit the side of his face shoving him back into open space where Teal'c was able to zat Byn'c without hitting anyone else. He fell to the floor writhing in agony but still attempting to reach into his robes. Bra'tac zatted him again and he lay still.

Gerek reached down and removed the object Byn'c had been reaching for. 'It is a vial of something.'

'May I see it?' Delek asked.

Gerek handed it over to the Tok'ra.

Delek examined it closely and handed it to Bra'tac. 'I believe it is Niquisa poison. If this vial was to break it would kill everyone in this room.'

'I have heard of this.' Bra'tac admitted. He looked down at Byn'c's body and gestured at the Jaffa guards by the door. 'Remove this from the Council chamber.'

There were a few minutes of chaos as the body was carried out and the Jaffa Council resumed their places with the Tok'ra and the Tau'ri still present.

'Is it possible?' Ilyia asked as soon as order had been re-established. 'Could the human form Replicator that led them in battle against the Goa'uld still be alive?'
Jack shrugged unhappily. 'I've learned over the last few years that anything is possible.' He sighed. 'It could be another one.' He sincerely hoped that the human form Replicator wasn't the twin of Carter. The facsimile of Sam had fooled them into helping her develop an immunity to the only effective weapon they had against the Replicators and she had coldly killed her creator without a second thought. Sam had blamed herself for the whole mess and her duplicate had done quite a number on her emotionally. The kidnapping of Daniel by the Replicator had only added to her guilt especially when she had destroyed the Replicators with the Ancient weapon and possibly killed her friend along with them. It had only been when Daniel had returned alive that Jack figured Sam had begun to find a measure of peace over the whole thing.

'If Ba'al has allied with a human form Replicator, it was not a wise choice.' Teal'c stated forcefully. 'It will not hesitate to kill him.'

'There's no doubt that the Replicator's using him.' Jack agreed.

Teal'c's brow lowered. 'Did Daniel Jackson not report that the Replicator kidnapped him in order to find the Ancient weapon here at Dakara?'

'But for what purpose?' Gerek asked.

'To destroy it.' Teal'c said. 'It was the only means by which she could be destroyed.'

'Course, she could figured out she could use it for another purpose.' Mitchell said. He shifted a little as everyone turned to look at him curiously. 'Inter-galactic domination. She could use the weapon to wipe out all other life in the galaxy.'

'Ba'al would never agree to such a plan.' Shannon argued. 'He is not a fool.'

'What if he doesn't realise the Replicator knows the weapon is active?' Jack retorted.

Gerek sighed. 'The weapon must be destroyed before Ba'al and the Replicator get here.' He said in agreement.

'How?' Ilyia asked. 'We have tried to destroy it and we have not the means.'

'You have tried to destroy the weapon already?' Delek asked.

'Yes.' Bra'tac nodded. 'Just before you arrived with a naquadah enhanced bomb. Unfortunately we were not successful.'

'The weapon is made of an indestructible material.' Teal'c confirmed.

Delek took a sharp intake of breath. 'This is unfortunate.'

'It is possible Daniel Jackson or Colonel Carter will discover the answer in the Ancient systems.' Teal'c noted.

'When will Ba'al arrive?' Jack asked Shannon.

'Within a day; two at the most.' The operative replied.

'Then we no longer have time to search for the information.' Bra'tac said.

'Sir, there's still the control chair.' Mitchell said to Jack.

The General sighed heavily. 'Yes. There's that.'
'Of course, Colonel Carter told us she believed there was a way of accessing the weapon through the control chair.' Delek stated.

'It's worth a try.' Jack said. 'Carter could either find a way to destroy it or a way of switching it off permanently.'

The Jaffa Council exchanged a series of looks before they nodded.

'We are in agreement.' Bra'tac said.

'OK,' Jack said, 'we'll head back to the Ancient chair and deal with the weapon.'

'We will begin to plan the defence of Dakara.' Bra'tac said.

'I will join you as soon as the weapon is no longer a threat.' Teal'c said.

'We will join you.' Jack corrected his friend gently. He held Bra'tac's gaze. 'The Tau'ri do everything we can to help you.'

'As will the Tok'ra.' Delek said stepping forward. 'The weapon cannot be allowed to fall into the hands of either Ba'al or the Replicators.'

Jack noticed he wasn't the only one who was startled by the Tok'ra's offer.

Bra'tac nodded slowly at both the Tau'ri and the Tok'ra. 'Our thanks to you both. Your support is greatly welcomed.'

Delek turned to Jack. 'I will stay and help with the defence strategy.'

Jack nodded and slapped his cap over his grey hair. 'Let's go.' He ordered Teal'c and Mitchell. He stopped suddenly at the door and turned back to the Jaffa Council and hovering Tok'ra. 'If this is the same human form Replicator that led the battle against the Goa'uld before, you need to know she looks exactly like Colonel Carter. Unless you see the Colonel with another member of the SG1 team, you should treat her with suspicion.'

'Understood, O'Neill.' Bra'tac said.

Jack sighed. Ba'al, Carter's Replicator double and the Tok'ra; it was turning into a really crappy day, he thought as he led his team out of the building.
The journey back to the buried Ancient buildings was made in solemn silence. Jack left Mitchell outside to guard while he and Teal'c made their way inside. Daniel and Sam were the first people he saw; they sat together at the same station the archaeologist had been using when Jack had arrived with Sam earlier.

Sam immediately looked up at their entry. She got to her feet. 'Is something wrong, sir?' She asked worried at his serious expression.

Daniel frowned and he scanned Jack and Teal'c's faces concerned. 'What's going on guys?'

'There've been a few developments.' Jack said taking off his cap and crumpling it in one hand. 'Firstly, Ba'al is on his way here.'

Daniel blinked. 'You're kidding.'

'He is not on this occasion, Daniel Jackson.' Teal'c said clasping his hands behind his back.

'He thinks his ploy with the weapon worked and we're at each other's throats,' surmised Daniel folding his arms.

'No,' Jack contradicted him, 'Byn'c already told him he'd failed with that plan.'

'Byn'c? Daniel's eyebrows shot up. 'He's a spy?'

Teal'c nodded grimly. 'He was, Daniel Jackson.'

Daniel pushed his glasses up his nose as he assimilated the tense Teal'c had used. 'I guess that explains why he was so keen to kill Cral'k. He probably thought Cral'k would reveal everything about him too.'

'You may be correct.' Teal'c admitted.

'It doesn't make sense.' Sam said confused. 'If Ba'al knows the alliance is holding, why is he attacking?'

'Oh he has a new play-mate.' Jack replied gesturing with his baseball cap.

'Who?' Daniel asked. 'I thought all the major Goa'ulds were dead.'

Jack sighed knowing he couldn't avoid telling them any longer. 'Byn'c told us it was a human form Replicator before he was killed.'

Sam paled and Daniel rocked back as though he'd been hit.

'Now, it's possible it isn't the one that looks like you.' Jack began, his eyes on Sam's tense face.

'Sir,' Sam cut in, 'she was the only human form Replicator we were aware existed at the time we used the Ancient weapon to defeat the Replicators.'

'Then how did she survive?' Jack demanded.

'I don't know.' Sam retorted not caring her tone was bordering on insubordination.
'I might.' Daniel admitted reluctantly. 'She was in my head trying to get to all the knowledge I had in my subconscious about being ascended.' He sighed. 'It's possible that she was able to save herself by ascending when the disruptor wave from the weapon hit.'

'It's possible.' Sam said thoughtfully. 'She would have had some warning from the initial destruction of the first few Replicators. Maybe it wasn't enough time to use the cipher like they did with the version of the weapons we and the Asgard were able to build but it might have been enough time for her to ascend.'

'Only the Others must have sent her back like me.' Daniel murmured. He shook his head. 'This is my fault.'

'No it's my fault.' Sam argued. 'She wouldn't even exist if it wasn't for me.'

'This is no-one's fault,' Jack said forcefully, 'and I need you both focused on finding a solution to this not blaming yourselves. Is that clear?'

'Yes, sir.' Sam said her tone overly formal in response to the sharp reprimand in the General's.

'It's a shame you just blew up the Ancient weapon.' Daniel commented with a sigh. 'We could have used it to destroy her.'

Teal'c shifted almost as though he was embarrassed. 'We did not blow the weapon up.'

'You didn't?' Daniel checked confused. 'We heard the explosion from here.'

'The bomb did not impact the weapon at all.' Teal'c informed them.

'So we can still use it.' Daniel said excitedly.

'No,' Sam shook her head, 'not without knowing the frequency the weapon would need to be set to. No doubt she's altered the frequency spectrum of the Replicators to be immune to it by now.'

'Well, what about our counter-measure?' Daniel protested gesturing at her. 'Can't we get one to all our allies?'

'We only have the one I built and it will take time to build more.' Sam pointed out.

'The fact is, Daniel, we just can't take the risk of the weapon falling into Ba'al's hands or the Replicator's.' Jack said. 'We have to destroy it.'

'How will we destroy the Replicator?' Daniel asked bemused.

'We still have the disruptor technology.' Sam answered before Jack could respond. 'All we need is the right frequency setting.'

'Have you discovered a way to destroy the weapon in the information from the Ancient systems?' Teal'c asked.

Daniel shook his head. 'We haven't even found any information on the weapon. Since we thought you were blowing it up I've been concentrating on finding out why the control chair only responds to Sam…'

'And I've been looking at the power source inter-dimensional technology with the rest of the science team.' Sam completed.
'So that's a no?' Jack summarised. He sighed and his brown eyes met Sam's apologetically. 'Carter, we need you to use the chair and discover a way to get rid of that weapon.'

Sam straightened. 'Yes, sir.'

'I thought you didn't want us to use the chair.' Daniel said.

'If you have another idea, Daniel, I'm all ears otherwise we're out of time and out of options. We'll have to take the risk of Carter destroying the galaxy.' Jack stared at the archaeologist who stepped back and waved them all down the stairs.

The rest of the science team had already stopped working during the discussion and they moved out of the way as the SG1 team made their way to the chair.

'You can do this, Carter.' Jack said reassuringly.

'Yes, sir.' Sam lowered herself into the chair.

'Focus on switching off the weapon.' Daniel coached as the chair swivelled and dipped.

Sam tried to focus her mind and had a sudden wave of sympathy for all the previous times she had encouraged the General to do the same when faced with Ancient technology; it certainly wasn't as easy as it looked. A schematic suddenly projected into the air in front of the chair.

'Daniel?' Jack asked.

The archaeologist squinted up at the tightly written information. 'OK, we have a problem.'

'I don't want to hear that.' Jack said to him.

'According to this the weapon cannot be destroyed exactly. They protected it with an impenetrable invisible force-shield that repelled everything. That's probably why your bomb didn't work. The force-shield is integrated into the weapon…' Daniel frowned. 'There's a lot of technical detail here…something about the weapon pulling its energy from sub-space…' he sighed and wrinkled his nose, 'if I'm reading this right the only way to switch it off is to interrupt the energy flow between the weapon and its power source in sub-space.'

'How do we do that?' Jack asked.

'They don't say.' Daniel said.

The schematic changed suddenly to the inter-dimension technology of the power source.

'Sam?' Daniel asked worriedly.

'Sorry,' Sam said, 'I was just thinking…'

'I know it's practically an impossibility for you but maybe you shouldn't do that while you're in the chair, Carter.' Jack said nervously.

'No, it's OK.' Daniel said waving his hands at the projection, 'I see where she's going with this.'

'You do?' Jack asked.

'Yes.'
Jack sighed impatiently. 'You want to clue the rest of us in here, Daniel?'

'Uh?' Daniel looked over at his friend and saw Jack's irritation at not knowing what was going on. 'Well,' he began, 'if we can't destroy it…'

'We can try sending it somewhere else.' Sam completed.

'Send it somewhere else?' Jack repeated.

'I think we could send it to a different dimension, sir.' Sam said.

'Oh.' Jack's eyebrows shot up. He had thought he was incapable of being surprised anymore but he'd been wrong.

'But you can't do that.' Bill said stepping forward. 'I mean we can barely identify the fact that the technology is accessing another dimension let alone use it.'

'But if Sam focuses on what she wants to do, the chair should help extrapolate the 'how' from what it knows from the system.'

'That's a big if.' Bill said with a dismissive snort.

'Is this safe, Colonel Carter?' Teal'c asked. 'Cannot the weapon still be used if it is in a different dimension?'

'Good question, T.' Jack said.

'I guess it could be used,' Sam admitted, 'but it wouldn't affect anything in this dimension and it's possible that shifting it into a different dimension would be enough to interrupt the power source and shut it down.' Her eager blue eyes returned to the General's. 'I know it sounds a bit whacky, sir.'

'Well that's never stopped us before.' Jack quipped. He sobered. 'You really think you can do this?' He checked.

'Yes, sir.' Sam confirmed, 'but we're going to have to do this now. I think if we're going to be successful, it's going to take all the remaining power. We won't have the ability to continue the study.' Or find out what was happening to her, she thought worriedly.

Jack sighed and rubbed a hand through his grey hair. His brown eyes caught on hers. She knew the same thought had occurred to him and knew before he said the words what his decision would be; he was too good a military officer for it to be anything else – if he wasn't she would never have fallen in love with him. 'Do it.' He said.

'Wait!' Daniel held up a finger. 'Just wait.' He told Sam. 'Jack, could I have a word?' He didn't wait for an answer; he was already walking out. He stopped in the ruined first chamber and switched on a flashlight.

'What's going on, Daniel?' Jack asked impatiently. 'We don't have time for this.' He was certain he was about to get a lecture about the valuable information they were about to throw away by going ahead.

'What about Sam?' Daniel said bluntly.

'What about Sam?' Jack asked taken aback.
'If we use the power up we can't access the information in the Ancient systems any longer. We may lose our opportunity to understand what's happening to her.'

'You don't think I know that, Daniel?' Jack returned swiftly.

In the darkness, Daniel missed the flicker of anxiety across Jack's face. 'Jack, she's building counter-measures for advanced alien technology in the space of a day; she can suddenly operate a chair that controls that technology but nobody else can.' He gestured back at the chamber they had just left. 'Does this in anyway sound familiar?'

'It does,' Jack admitted, 'which is why I called the Asgard when Carolyn couldn't find anything.'

'So you have to...' Daniel's brain caught up with Jack's words. 'You called the Asgard?'

Jack nodded. It was the only thing that was helping him accept his decision might prevent them from understanding what was happening to Sam.

'Oh well.' Daniel stuttered and fidgeted with his glasses to cover his confusion.

'We done here?' Jack asked mildly.

'Yeah.' Daniel nodded and peered through the torch-light at the other man as he took a step back to the others. He had underestimated his friend, he realised. 'Jack.'

Jack turned back to him.

'She'll be OK.' Daniel said comfortingly.

Jack nodded jerkily. Six days and counting, he thought. He sighed. 'Come on. We've got to send an Ancient weapon to another dimension.'

'You'd rather blow it up wouldn't you?'

'Yep.' Jack agreed as they made their way back down to the chair.

Sam looked at the pair questioningly.

'OK, let's try this.' Jack said.

'Yes, sir.' Sam glanced at the interested scientists and cleared her throat. 'Perhaps we ought to move everyone out, sir, as a precaution. I don't know what will happen in here when the power gives out.'

Jack nodded and waved at the scientists. 'Everybody out.'

There was another wait while everything was packed up and the scientists ushered outside to Mitchell's protection. Teal'c and Daniel returned to the control chair.

Sam sighed at the sight of the three of them standing beside her. 'You should all leave too.'

'Teal'c and Daniel, outside.' Jack ordered. He had no intention of leaving her alone.

Teal'c raised an eyebrow and simply adjusted his stance. His body language was clear; he wasn't moving. Jack sighed and his gaze slid to Daniel who stared back at him stubbornly.

'Right.' Jack said softly.
'Guys…' Sam began.

'We're staying, Carter.' Jack said firmly.

Sam nodded and swallowed around the lump in her throat. She closed her eyes on the image of her three team-mates. Her brow creased in concentration as she thought of the weapon; thought of the Ancient inter-dimensional technology and thought of moving the weapon into another dimension.

The ground began to shake.

Green static flowed over the consoles.

The Ancient weapon trembled as the green static travelled up from the ground and covered the control table, covered the outside of the temple where it resided. The Jaffa guarding it staggered away from it in shock and fear.

Sam's fingers clenched in the hand controls of the chair and a sharp pain shot through her head. She ignored it and focused on the weapon, on achieving her goal.

The air crackled with electricity.

A shot of green power shot out from a console; Jack tackled Daniel and the two men hit the ground as it careened through the space where they had just been standing. Teal'c crouched as more bolts crackled through the air.

The sky thundered as the temple was covered by a green net of power sending the nearby Jaffa scurrying for safety.

Sam used the last of her strength. Outside, the Ancient weapon disappeared into another dimension with a sudden crack of thunder leaving a wide open space where the temple had once stood.

Inside the Ancient chamber, Jack lurched to his feet as the room shook ominously. He dodged a falling piece of roof and threw himself across an unconscious Sam. An instant later he felt Daniel joining him and then Teal'c, all of them protecting her, as the consoles around them exploded. Suddenly, the earth stilled and the chamber was plunged into darkness.
Mitchell got back to his feet. He had ordered everyone up against the mountain wall and to keep low when the ground had begun to shake. He brushed the red dust of his green BDU pants and he peered into the entranceway back to the chamber. He clicked on his P90 light and shone it into the darkness. His heart sank at the closed-in tunnel; there was rubble blocking the way half-way down and clouds of dust still rising from the floor.

'Damn.' He muttered. He reached for his radio. 'Colonel Carter. Come in.'

Nothing.

'Sam, please respond,'

There was an eerie silence. The scientists hovered just behind him in muted anticipation.

'General O'Neill. Please come in.' Mitchell tried again.

More silence.

He took a deep breath. 'Teal'c. Do you read me buddy?'

'I read you, Colonel Mitchell.'

'Yes!' Mitchell punched the air before he radioed back, his voice vibrating with relief. 'You guys OK?'

It was the General who responded. 'Carter's got a hell of a headache but we're all OK.'

'That's good to hear, sir.' Mitchell radioed back. 'We have a small problem, General. The passageway from the chambers to the outside has suffered a cave in. We're going to have to dig you out.'

'Understood.' Jack radioed back. 'Keep us apprised of progress.'

'Yes, sir.' Mitchell said his mind already turning to the task of rescuing his team-mates. 'Don't go anywhere.'

'Funny, Mitchell.' Jack clicked off his radio and settled back against the side of the chair where he had ended up after they had untangled themselves and Sam had come to.

'We're trapped?' Daniel repeated next to him.

'I'm confident.' Sam said thinly rubbing her forehead. She was curled up in the chair nursing her headache.

'Me too.' Daniel agreed cheerfully. They had been in worse situations.

'As am I.' Teal'c agreed from the other side of the chair.

There was a comfortable silence for a moment.
'How much longer do you think we're going to be stuck here?' Jack asked.

A bright flash of light filled the chamber.

A disorientating moment later, Jack staggered as he re-materialised on the bridge of an Asgard ship. The first thing he checked for were his team-mates and his heartbeat settled as he saw Daniel, Teal'c and Sam.

'Greetings, O'Neill.' A high pitched voice informed him ahead of the appearance of its owner; a small thin grey alien with a large head and black eyes.

Jack grinned. 'Thor. It's good to see you buddy.' He leaned down to shake the alien's hand gently.

'It's good to see you again although I wish it were under better circumstances. I have bad news.' Thor said.

'About Colonel Carter?' Jack asked in trepidation his brown eyes flickering to Sam's startled blue ones.

'No,' Thor shook his head, 'I will not know until I examine her what has happened to her physiology since the encounter you described with the Ascended being.' His eyes blinked slowly at the human he considered a friend. 'I was referring to the Replicators.'

'Oh.' Jack said. 'That. Well, we know about that.'

Thor's brow creased a little although it was difficult to tell. 'You are already aware of the Replicator ship headed for Earth?'

Jack's mouth gaped open. 'No.' He admitted in an outraged voice. 'I was not aware. I was talking about the human form Replicator getting together with Ba'al.'

'The human form Replicator has allied with Ba'al?' Thor frowned. 'That might explain why she has woken her brethren.'

'Woken her brethren?' Sam asked trying to ignore the pounding in her head.

'Two days ago we picked up a signal from a remote part of our galaxy. When we investigated it our scout ship discovered a Replicator ship. We had not picked up its signal previously in that area of space. We believe the human form Replicator kept them hidden in our galaxy in an inactive state to ensure some of her brethren survived in the event that she was defeated in her battle against the Goa'uld.'

'A sensible precaution.' Teal'c noted.

'Yeah, great.' Jack said dryly. He pushed his hand through his hair. 'We need to contact Earth.'

'I have already informed General Hammond.' Thor said. 'He requested that I recover you from Dakara and bring you back to Earth with me where I will stay to assist you.'

'I cannot leave Dakara.' Teal'c said. 'It is facing an imminent attack from Ba'al.'

'That's it!' Daniel said fiercely. 'That's the plan!'

They all stared at him.

'What?' Jack asked finally wondering whether he wanted to hear the answer.
'Ba'al was trying to break our alliance with the Jaffa apart – why?' Daniel began pacing as he answered his own question. 'Because he knew that we would help the Jaffa hold Dakara. He allied with the Replicator because she offered him an alternative way of ensuring we wouldn't get involved. We'll be busy defending ourselves against the Replicators while Ba'al attacks Dakara; the Jaffa will be without our assistance just as effectively as though Ba'al had broken our alliance.' He stopped and whirled to face them.

Sam sighed. 'The attack on Earth might help Ba'al but ultimately it's personal for her.'

Jack's brown eyes focused on the blonde Air Force officer and he felt a chill work its way down his spine at the total confidence she had spoken with. 'Why?'

'Because we defeated her.' Teal'c commented thoughtfully.

Daniel pointed at the Jaffa. 'He's right. She's furious that we defeated her.' His blue eyes landed on Sam. 'More than that she knows it was Sam who defeated her.'

'How could she even know it was me at Dakara?' Sam said desperately.

Daniel had a flash of memory: Sam behind a line of Jaffa, her P90 raised and spitting bullets at the approaching mechanical bugs her Replicator double had sent to take Dakara. 'She knew you were there. She saw you through the other Replicators.'

'How do you know that?' Jack said.

'I told you at the debriefing, Jack, I was inside her head; she was inside mine.' Daniel sighed. 'All she wants is to rule the galaxy and create more Replicators. I think she's allied herself with Ba'al because it will weaken him and the Jaffa. Until her brethren get to this galaxy she doesn't have an attack force herself. With us under attack, Ba'al and the Jaffa fighting each other, all she has to do is stand back and wait for her moment to take Dakara herself.'

'OK,' Jack said, 'so we need to get back to Earth and start planning how we take her out once and for all.' He looked over at Teal'c. 'Sorry T.'

Teal'c inclined his head. 'I will need to transport down. I must stay and help hold Dakara.' He said. He clasped Jack's forearm and held it for a moment. 'I wish you well in your battle.'

'Back at ya, Teal'c.' Jack said.

Sam crossed over and gave the Jaffa a hug goodbye. Daniel did the same

Jack gestured at Thor. 'I need to talk with the Jaffa Council too.'

'I am ready, O'Neill.' Thor said waving a thin hand.

Jack stepped into the holographic circle as Teal'c disappeared from the ship. Their sudden appearance inside the Jaffa Council chamber caused a great deal of shock and there was a moment of confused noise before the Jaffa settled down again.

'Teal'c, O'Neill.' Bra'tac nodded at them relieved. 'We thought you were trapped after you had successfully destroyed the weapon.'

'Well, we haven't exactly destroyed it, we've moved it into another dimension and yes, we were stuck.' Jack confirmed. 'Fortunately, Thor, the Supreme Commander of the Asgard fleet came by and beamed us up.'
'That is indeed fortunate.' Bra'tac said trying to sound sanguine.

'Unfortunately, his reason for stopping by isn't good news.' Jack said gesturing at them, his holographic image flickering. 'There are Replicators on their way to Earth. We have to leave immediately. Obviously Ba'al and his little Replicator friend have come up with this as a way of dividing us as a force.'

'The Jaffa can defend Dakara against Ba'al without the Tau'ri.' Gerek growled across the table.

'I'm sure you can,' Jack agreed, 'but Ba'al knew it would be more difficult for him if you had an ally.' He sighed. 'We don't think they'll be able to get to the weapon but there's always a chance.'

'The Tok'ra will continue to stay and help defend Dakara with the Jaffa.' Delek said.

Jack nodded. 'We'll take care of the Replicator and make sure she doesn't get to Dakara.'

'We will miss you in the fight,' Bra'tac said sagely, 'but we each fight the enemy we know best, hmmm?'

Teal'c stepped forward turning to look at the holographic image of his friend. 'If Ba'al or the Replicator succeeds in taking Dakara all that we have fought for will be lost.' He pressed his lips together briefly. 'Good luck, O'Neill.' He raised a clenched fist across his chest in a traditional Jaffa salute.

'Good luck to you too, T.' Jack nodded at the gathered Jaffa and at the Tok'ra before he stepped out of the circle and his holographic image disappeared from the chamber.

'Thor, we still have a team-mate and other people on Dakara, do you think…?' Jack hadn't finished his sentence before there was a flash and Mitchell appeared on the ship next to Daniel.

'Woah,' said Mitchell his head swivelling wildly as he tried to get his bearings.

'The rest of your people have been transported to the cargo hold.' Thor confirmed.

'I'd better go down and explain things to them before they panic.' Daniel said gesturing at the door. 'Or start pressing buttons.'

Jack responded with an absent word of thanks as the archaeologist disappeared.

'Wow.' Mitchell said finally. 'So this is…'

'An Asgard ship.' Sam supplied. 'And this is Thor, Supreme Commander of the Asgard Fleet.'

'Pleased to meet ya.' Mitchell said with an awed smile.

'Thor, this is the new member of SG1, Lieutenant Colonel Cameron Mitchell.' Jack said introducing him properly.

'I am also pleased to meet you.' Thor said holding his hand out for Mitchell to shake.

'Do you ever get used to that transportation thing?' Mitchell asked Sam who smiled back at him sympathetically and brought him up to date on events.

'Our journey to Earth will be short.' Thor continued gesturing at Sam. 'Perhaps I can use the time to examine you.'
Sam attempted a smile. ‘Thanks, Thor.’

‘This way.’ Thor led the way off the bridge and within minutes Sam found herself encased in an Asgard medical pod. Her other team-mates hovered anxiously by the monitor where Thor had positioned himself. They were joined by Daniel a few minutes later.

‘How are the geeks doing?’ Jack asked.

‘Thrilled to be on an Asgard ship.’ Daniel replied. ‘How’s Sam?’

‘My headache's much better and my hearing is fine,’ retorted the military officer, annoyed that he had directed the question at Jack when she was lying right in front of him.

Daniel blushed. ‘Sorry, Sam.’

‘Interesting.’ Thor said.

‘What?’ Jack and Daniel asked at the same time.

Thor padded over to Sam and waved some kind of metal instrument over her. ‘I am detecting a much higher rate of synaptic activity than a normal human brain.’

‘Would this show up in her brain wave pattern?’ Jack asked thinking back to the results of Carolyn’s tests.

‘It is possible if the measuring instrument was not sensitive enough.’ Thor agreed. ‘Typically humans only use five to ten per cent of their brain; I am seeing twenty per cent coverage.’

‘Can you…uh…reset it?’ Sam asked hopefully.

‘I cannot.’ Thor said regretfully.

‘Is it harming her?’ Jack forced himself to ask the question.

‘I do not believe so. The ultimate effect is to make the brain operate at a higher rate of efficiency,’ Thor said, ‘but I have never come across this before. The Asgard were a young race when we came into contact with the Ancients. Much of their technology is still beyond even our understanding.’

‘Maybe it’s a good thing.’ Daniel suggested. ‘Maybe it speeds up your thinking and that’s why you were able to build the counter-measure.’

‘Maybe.’ Sam said noncommittally. ‘Will someone give me a hand out, please?’

Mitchell assisted her before Jack could move and he swallowed his jealousy at the easy familiarity between Sam and the younger man reminding himself again that there was no need for it.

‘Thor,’ Sam said brushing off the front of her green jacket, ‘do you still have some of the inactive Replicator blocks?’

‘I do.’ Thor confirmed.

‘We should access the Replicator network again and see if we can determine the frequency we need to set the disruptor wave to.’ Sam suggested. ‘If there is only one Replicator ship, we should be able to destroy it using your ship before it can alter its frequency.’

‘I agree.’ The small alien said solemnly.
'I'll help.' Daniel offered. 'There may be something in my head from being in hers that might help.'

Jack and Mitchell headed out to find food and check in on the scientists while Sam, Thor and Daniel worked.

'There!' Daniel pointed at a section of data.

Thor isolated it on the screen. 'It is the cipher.' He gestured at them. 'Please continue. I need to make some navigational changes. I will return shortly.'

'Good work on identifying the cipher.' Sam said. 'It took us forever last time to isolate it.'

'I recognised it.' Daniel admitted.

'You've never talked much about your experience with the Replicator.' Sam commented.

Daniel looked across at the console at her. She had her eyes fixed to the Replicator blocks under a force field and her tone had been casual but he knew it was anything but a casual question. 'I was worried it would upset you.' He admitted folding his arms.

Sam looked up at him. 'I'm sorry.'

'Why are you sorry?' Daniel asked. 'It wasn't your fault.'

'Wasn't it?' Sam asked. 'If I hadn't betrayed Fifth, she wouldn't even exist.'

'From what I understand you were following orders, Sam.' Daniel said gently. 'If you think about it, it's really all the Asgard's fault.'

'What?' she asked taken aback.

'Well, if they hadn't trapped the Replicators with a time dilation device, the Replicators wouldn't have evolved into the human form versions in our life time. You would never have met Fifth and this wouldn't have happened.'

'That's an interesting theory.' Sam said. 'So you think I should blame the Asgard?'

'I think you shouldn't blame yourself.' Daniel replied.

'I'll make you a deal.' Sam suggested. 'I won't blame myself for her if you don't blame yourself about her ascending and coming back.'

Daniel made a face but he nodded.

'Do you remember any of it?' Sam asked.

'What?'

'Well, if she was in your head digging out all the stuff you have buried about being ascended, don't you remember any of it?' Sam asked. 'I mean you obviously remember being in her head.'

Daniel shook his head. 'I don't remember much.' He sighed. 'I think they buried it all again when I came back.'

'But you remember being in her head?' Sam checked.
'I do.' Daniel said. 'Actually, there wasn't any trick to it. All the Ancient knowledge did was remind me that because we were in this weird mental link I could influence what happened there as much as she could.' He shook his head. 'I was able to receive the same information as she was and because we were one mentally I could direct the Replicators through her link with them.'

'You saved us.' Sam said.

'I couldn't hold the Replicators for long. It was too much for my brain to handle.' Daniel said sadly. 'There were so many of them.'

'If it hadn't been for you holding them up for that moment, we wouldn't have made it.' Sam said.

The ship's vibrations changed subtly.

'We're out of hyperspace.' Sam said. 'We're home.'

The next thing both of them knew they were in the briefing room of the SGC with Jack, Mitchell and a very surprised General Landry.

'It's good to see you, Jack,' Landry said recovering his composure quickly. His brown eyes moved from the General to the other three people who had just appeared in the briefing room. 'And the rest of you. I take it Teal'c stayed on Dakara?'

'Yes, sir.' Jack waved at the team to sit and they took their places at the briefing table.

'General Hammond got recalled to Washington.' Landry explained seeing the unasked question in Jack's eyes. 'I'm afraid you're stuck with me.' He smiled taking the sting out of the words and waved at Jack. 'I know you're better equipped to handle this than I am so I'll just try not to get in your way.' He finished wryly.

Jack smiled but he didn't dispute the remark. 'Thor's hiding his ship. He's going to act as the cavalry once he finds the right setting for the disruptor weapon. What have we got here, sir?'

'The base has been evacuated of all non-essential personnel.' Landry said. 'We've already sent as many people as possible to the Alpha site. Thor estimates another day before the Replicator ship arrives. Prometheus will be ready to launch in twelve hours; she'll be the first line of defence. What's the status of the Ancient weapon?' He asked. 'Were you successful in destroying it?'

'Actually Carter moved it into a different dimension, sir.' Jack corrected.

'Into a different dimension?' Landry repeated, his bushy eyebrows shooting up. He stared at Sam who tried to maintain a blasé expression. 'Is it safe?' He asked a little alarmed.

'Yes, sir.' Sam confirmed. 'We shouldn't require the counter-measure I built.'

Landry smiled at her. 'You'll be pleased to know it passed all your tests so although we don't need it, I still consider it an outstanding achievement.'

Jack winked at her proudly. 'I don't know, sir, I'm thinking the moving the weapon into a different dimension may just top creating a counter-measure to it.'

'I think I agree with you.' Landry said with a smile.

Sam pursed her lips thoughtfully. 'Sirs, I think I have an idea.'

'Don't keep us in suspense, Colonel.' Landry ordered.
'I think I could modify the counter-measure for the Ancient weapon to emit a series of static disruptor waves. It could act like an invisible iris destroying the Replicators as they try to come through the Stargate.' Sam explained. 'If I can create layers instead of one, the first could act to determine the required frequency...'

Landry waved his hand cutting off her explanation much to Jack's amusement; it was usually him. 'You can create a new counter-measure to the Replicators?'

'I think so, sir.'

'Go ahead and build it, Carter.' Jack ordered. 'Use anyone and anything you need.'

Sam nodded in confirmation. 'Has there been any news from Dakara?'

'Nothing yet.' Landry said. 'We think Ba'al and the Replicator will coordinate their attacks simultaneously.'

'Makes sense, sir.' Mitchell murmured.

'Our orders, Jack, are to hold the mountain for as long as possible to give Thor a chance to modify his weapon so he can take out all the Replicators in one shot.' Landry confirmed.

'Understood, sir.' Jack nodded. 'Mitchell, as Carter will be busy having fun with her counter-measure,' his eyes briefly flickered to hers and he was rewarded with a smile, 'I'm going to need you to organise a...'

There was a flash of light that filled the briefing room and blinded everyone at the table for a moment.

Sam's eyes snapped back to Jack; he was gone and a six-legged metal bug sat in his place.
Daniel and Sam acted almost simultaneously and Mitchell followed their lead. Chairs were pushed back as they rose from their seats and their hands reached for their weapons; the bug was shot into a number of pieces before its first leg twitch had completed.

'Isolate the pieces!' ordered Sam furiously regardless of the fact she was ordering a two-star General along with her own team and the base personnel. 'Now!' She yelled already running for the stairs and taking them two at a time into a stunned control room. She grabbed the radio and activated it. 'Thor, this is Colonel Carter, do you read me?'

'I read you, Colonel Carter.'

'The Replicator is in a cloaked ship possibly leaving Earth's orbit now. She has General O'Neill. Can you retrieve him?'

'I am scanning.' Thor replied. 'I have detected a hyper-space window. Would you like me to transport you aboard so we can follow?'

Sam opened her mouth to say yes and knew immediately that she couldn't. Thor's ship was Earth's only hope at destroying the Replicator ship; if she said yes they would leave Earth defenceless. Her whole body seemed to freeze as she came to a shattering conclusion; she couldn't go after Jack with Thor no matter how much she wanted to. Her mind was already supplying an alternative even as she answered the small grey alien. 'No.' Her throat closed on the word and she took a deep breath. There was another way...if she could convince the general. 'We need you to stay in place. You're our best opportunity for destroying the Replicator ship. There are pieces of a Replicator sitting in the briefing room. It may provide more information. '

'I am transporting it aboard now.' Thor confirmed.

'Thank you, Thor.'

'Colonel, would you like to explain what just happened?' Landry ordered his unhappiness evident in the blustering tone.

Sam unbent stiffly from her position leaning over the radio to face him; he was standing behind her in the control room. 'The Replicator took General O'Neill trying to draw the Asgard away from Earth, sir.'

'Leaving Earth open to attack from the ship we know is on the way.' Landry surmised.

'Yes, sir.' Sam confirmed placing her hands behind her back.

'How do you know that?' Landry demanded.

'Because it's what I would do, sir.' Sam said. Her gaze met his and he almost took a step back at the ice that glittered in the depths of the blue eyes. 'The Replicator was programmed with my memories and thought patterns.' She straightened. 'Sir, I'm certain she's gone to Dakara.'

'Why?' he asked bemused.

'To make a play for the weapon while Ba'al keeps the Jaffa and Tok'ra occupied.' Daniel inserted from his position near the stairs. 'If we're all busy fighting, she has a clear run at the weapon.'
'I'd like permission for SG1 to go back to Dakara, sir.' Sam stated. 'We can stop her and recover General O'Neill.'

'Isn't it possible that General O'Neill is already dead?' Landry asked bluntly.

There was total silence. Tension filled the small room and froze everyone into stillness.

Sam paled but held his gaze. 'She won't kill him.'

'I understand she killed Doctor Jackson.' Landry pointed out.

Because I'm not in love with Daniel, she thought and wondered what Landry would say if she said it out loud. She looked at the General squarely. 'She won't kill him sir.' She repeated softly but firmly. 'It's possible she believes the knowledge of the Ancient repository is still somewhere in his mind.'

'General,' Daniel stepped forward to stand at her side in a show of support, 'the Replicator is after the weapon. We have to do everything we can to stop her.'

'But the weapon is in another dimension, right?' Landry checked.

'Yes, sir,' Sam agreed, 'but it's likely that she'll probe General O'Neill's mind and there is the remote possibility that she could be the only thing capable of bringing the weapon back and…'

Landry waved his hands and she stopped. 'I'm sorry, Colonel, Doctor,' he said, 'but we have to put the safety of Earth first.'

'We are putting the safety of Earth first.' Daniel pointed out pushing his glasses up his nose furiously. 'If the Replicator gets her hands on the Ancient weapon she won't hesitate to wipe us out.'

'Sir, I have to agree with Colonel Carter and Doctor Jackson.' Mitchell said standing by Landry. 'From what I've read of the mission reports the human form Replicator is the main threat. Take her out and you're just left with the bugs. Mean but manageable.'

'Colonel Carter, from my understanding, you don't actually have any proof that the Replicator is going to Dakara; this is just a feeling, correct?' Landry asked.

'Based on my own likely strategy in this situation but yes, sir.' Sam conceded. She could already see his decision in his expressive eyes and her heart sank.

'Then she could still turn up here when the battle starts.' Landry stated.

'I think that's unlikely, sir.' Sam said her words edged with a sharp desperation. He had to let them go…he had to…there were only six days and counting…

Landry cleared his throat. 'I suggest we send a disruptor weapon to Dakara and brief the Jaffa. If she shows up there, they can take care of her. We have to concentrate on getting this base ready.'

'What about Jack?' asked Daniel softly.

'I'm sorry,' Landry said his tone and manner visibly softening, 'but I think we should consider General O'Neill our first casualty.'

'Sir, with all due respect,' Sam began her posture every inch so much the professional soldier that Daniel's own body ached to see it, 'I think you're making a mistake.'
The General bristled visibly. 'Colonel, you will concentrate on building the counter-measure you proposed. Is that clear?'

'Yes, sir.' Her tone was properly formal even if her eyes were sharp blue flints of ice. 'If you'll excuse me, I should get started.'

Landry gave into a staring contest with her for a moment before realising from the stubborn set of her face that she was more than equal to waiting him out. He nodded sharply. 'Dismissed.'

Sam turned and marched out of the control room briskly.

'Colonel Mitchell, I'll need you to organise base security.' Landry ordered. His gaze fell on Daniel. 'Doctor Jackson, you do,' he paused his military mind trying to find a task or activity suitable for an archaeologist and failing; he gestured absently, 'whatever it is you do in these circumstances.'

'She's right, you know.' Daniel said furiously. 'You're making a mistake.'

'We need to focus on Earth and General O'Neill would tell you so himself if he were here.' Landry stated calmly.

'But he's not, is he?' Daniel retorted before he spun on his heel. He headed out of the control room to the nearest elevator; Sam needed him. Well, not him, he conceded to himself, but she definitely needed someone. He was getting in the compartment when Mitchell caught up with him.

'Hey, Jackson! Wait up!' Mitchell took a running leap into the car just before the doors slid shut. He settled into a misleadingly relaxed pose beside his team-mate; hands in his pockets, his shoulders slouched. 'Are you going to check on Sam?' He asked casually.

'Planning to.' Daniel admitted.

'She's pretty pissed right now, huh?' Mitchell commented.

'She's not the only one.' Daniel muttered as he avoided Mitchell's gaze, keeping his eyes on the floor counter. He stuffed his own hands in his pockets in an unconscious mirroring of the other man's pose.

Mitchell repressed the urge to sigh. He knew there was a special bond that developed within a team that counted on each other for their very lives every single day. He could only imagine how that bond felt after eight years of working and fighting side by side but he figured there was more going on than met the eye.

Even without the rumours that circulated the base, he had already begun to suspect that there was more to Sam's relationship with General O'Neill than simply being team-mates; the General's offer to exchange his life for Sam's back on Dakara had been a rather large clue. But he'd been friends with Sam at the Academy and although their relationship had drifted into odd phone calls and Christmas cards with the pressures of assignments, he knew better than most people what her honour and duty meant to her; there was no way the Samantha Carter he knew would have an affair with her CO. But there was something going on and he wanted to know what it was, and he was done waiting for someone to clue him in, he thought impatiently. 'What's with those two?' He asked bluntly.

Daniel kept his gaze affixed elsewhere. 'Nothing.'

'Nothing.' Mitchell repeated. 'Look, Jackson, I may not be as smart as you or Sam but I'm not completely stupid.'
Daniel sighed and crossed his arms. 'We've been a team for a long time, Mitchell.' He shuffled a little.

'Hey, I've been in teams. I know what it's like to get close to the guys you work with…' Mitchell began.

'SG1 isn't like any other team.' Daniel retorted. He took a deep breath. 'We're family.'

'Look, I know I'm the new guy,' Mitchell said keeping his eyes on Daniel's tense profile, 'but I'm part of this team – this family – now too and I need to know. You guys keep me in the dark and we're going to have problems that could get one or more of us hurt.' He paused. 'Y'all going to have to start trusting me sometime, Jackson.'

Daniel wrestled with his instinctive urge to keep the secret and to be fair to the other man; he knew Mitchell had a point. He sneaked a glance at the military officer and was surprised to see him looking back at him with a stubborn resolve that reminded him suspiciously of himself. Daniel sighed. 'Nothing's ever happened between them…' he began, 'the regs…' he gestured awkwardly.

Mitchell nodded and subconsciously relaxed. That made sense to him and fitted with his own knowledge of his old friend.

'But they care about each other.' Daniel concluded.

Mitchell felt a wave of compassion for Sam. A thought occurred to him. 'So when the General retires…'

'They'll finally have a chance.' Daniel agreed.

'Dannn.' Mitchell whistled. He sighed and crossed his arms. 'This is going to be tough for her, huh? Leaving the General with the Replicator?'

'It's the wrong call not to go after the Replicator.' Daniel looked over at Mitchell. 'And you know it too.'

Mitchell accepted the comment with an easy shrug. 'I can see where Landry is coming from.'

Daniel pushed his glasses up. 'We should be focusing on going after the Replicator and recovering Jack.'

'Maybe that's what the Replicator wants.' Mitchell said idly.

Daniel's blue eyes flew to his. 'What?'

'Look, this Replicator is supposed to have all of Sam's thoughts and memories, right?'

'Yes.' Daniel agreed impatiently.

'So maybe it knew that a good way to distract us…to distract Sam was to snatch the General.' Mitchell said. He shrugged. 'Maybe she hoped we'd focus on getting him back rather than on making sure Earth had the best defence possible either by going after him or by planning some rescue attempt instead of preparing for the battle.'

Daniel struggled with the idea for a moment before he had to grudgingly concede that Mitchell might be right. The Replicator had to know how they all felt about Jack and especially how Sam felt about Jack. The Replicator could have easily tempted Sam and the rest of them into a chase
leaving Earth without Thor's help and even though the Replicator hadn't been successful at drawing them away, it had to know they would be distracted by the loss of Jack. And, Daniel realised, she had counted on one person in particular being distracted, the person who knew her best and who was most likely to defeat her again; Sam.

He frowned. Landry had been right; Earth had to be the priority; it had to be their priority and Jack wouldn't want to be rescued at the expense of the safety of the planet. But, he sighed, Landry was still wrong. They needed to go after the Replicator and stop her from getting the weapon.

'So what do you do in these situations?' Mitchell asked interrupting Daniel's musings.

Daniel looked over at him. He still felt a little aggrieved at Landry's dismissal of him. 'I usually grab a gun when we get invaded by Replicators.' He admitted wryly.

'Well, you could help me with base security or…' Mitchell let the sentence dangle.

'What?'

'Well, it seems to me that if someone's going to come up with a solution to convince General Landry Earth would be secure and he can still do the right thing…' Mitchell shrugged, 'I kinda figure it would be you.' He held the archaeologist's gaze for a moment. 'I mean, isn't that what you do best?'

The elevator slid open and Mitchell stepped out. He turned back to Daniel who stood in the compartment. He held the door with one hand to prevent it from sliding shut again. 'Are you coming?'

Daniel slowly shook his head. 'I…uh…I have to…' he waved a hand and punched a button to go back down. 'You check on Sam. I'll be there in a minute.'

Mitchell removed his hand and the door slid shut leaving Daniel oblivious to his wide grin. The archaeologist was too busy pacing the small space, his mind whirling as he tried to formulate his arguments.

He stepped out of the elevator and almost sent an Airman flying in his haste to get to the General's office. He was breathless by the time he reached the open door. His brain registered that Landry was on the phone and he stopped his hand before it could complete the knock.

Daniel took a moment to recover his breath and calm down. It seemed strange seeing Landry in Jack's office behind Jack's desk and it strengthened his resolve to make sure Jack was rescued. Landry put the phone down and Daniel immediately rapped on the door.

Landry's head whipped around to him startled. 'Doctor Jackson.'

'Can I have a minute?' Daniel said hugging his arms around him as his fierce blue gaze caught on the other man's.

The General sighed and motioned for him to enter. 'If you're here to convince me that I'm wrong…'

'I'm not.' Daniel said quickly as he stepped into the room. 'Or at least,' he admitted honestly, 'not completely wrong.' He gestured at Landry. 'You're right that Earth should be the priority and that's what Jack would want despite his own personal situation.'

'Huh.' Landry leaned forward across the desk. 'You just came to tell me that?'
'No.' Daniel pushed his glasses up his nose. 'You're still wrong about the Replicator.'

'You don't mince your words, do you, Doctor?' Landry noted.

'Yeah...' Daniel waved a hand at the other door in the direction of the briefing room. 'Sorry about before in the control room. I guess I could have handled that better.'

Landry shrugged, accepting the apology. 'I guess I could have handled it better too.' He gave a little head shake. 'I know how much General O'Neill means to you and to Colonel Carter.'

'Jack does mean a lot to us,' Daniel allowed, 'and I can't deny that we want to get him back; Jack has a rule that no-one gets left behind and he's kind of drummed that into us these last eight years.'

The General had to admire the way the younger man had reminded him of the SGC's golden rule. He gave a grunt. 'But? There is a but I take it?'

'But,' Daniel repeated with a small smile, 'the Replicator is going to Dakara and she is going after the weapon.'

'But you have no proof of that.' Landry reminded him.

'General,' Daniel said forcefully, 'the Replicator was created using Sam as a blueprint. She is our best bet of knowing what the Replicator is likely to do next. And I've been in the Replicator's head. I can tell you right now she considers Earth insignificant; she's after the galaxy.' He gestured at the military man frustrated at the apparent lack of impact his words were having on Landry. 'Both Sam and I have real experience with her. We don't need proof; we just know.'

'Is that a subtle way of pointing out to me that I don't have experience with this?' Landry said wryly.

'You admitted it yourself in the briefing room to Jack before he was...uh...beamed away.' Daniel pointed out. 'You said he had the experience and you would try not to get in the way.'

'And I'm getting in the way now?' Landry said caustically.

'I think you're doing what you think is best given you're suddenly in charge of a situation you never expected to have to handle without Jack.' Daniel said diplomatically. 'But there are other people here, besides Jack, who have experience at fighting the Replicators particularly this one.'

'And maybe I should listen to them?' Landry concluded with a rueful sigh and leaned back in his chair. He regarded the archaeologist solemnly for a long moment before he spread his hands out wide. 'OK, Doctor Jackson, I'm listening. What do you think I should do?'

Daniel gave a sigh of relief. Mitchell had been right; this was what he did best.
Sam stormed into the women's locker room. It was the one place where there were no cameras watching her and no-one would bother her. She checked it was completely empty – there were more women assigned to the SGC than ever before but still few compared with the male officers – and to be doubly sure she locked the doors. She stripped and hit the shower. It was only when she was fully under the hot stream of water that she let her façade drop; let herself contemplate the horrible and irrefutable fact: the Replicator had Jack.

She bowed her head and braced her hands against the white tiled wall as her body shook with sob after sob. *Count them.* She could hear Jack's voice as clearly as if he was standing beside her.

Six days.

There was only six days…she should have gone with Thor, she thought wretchedly. She should have gone with Thor and gotten him back. Instead she had left him with her Replicator double who was probably torturing him the same way the Replicator Fifth had tortured her…this was the reason why the regulations existed; no-one should have to decide between saving the planet and saving someone they loved.

She had been so sure Landry would have listened to her. Wrong again, Sam, she thought bitterly and swiped at her nose. And now she was stuck; ordered to work on the counter-measure while Jack was in the clutches of the enemy who was on her way to Dakara and who was undoubtedly going after the weapon.

*'You have untapped greatness inside you, Sam. But you're limited by your own fears, you play by the rules, you do what you're told and you deny yourself your own desires.'* The Replicator's words taunted her.

Well, screw that, she thought harshly. She was done playing by the rules and she was done denying how she felt about Jack. Her lips firmed. Six days. It wasn't time to stop counting. Not yet.

She switched the water off and reached for a towel. Her double was probably depending on Sam reverting to type; playing by the rules and denying her desire to go after Jack. After all, that's what she usually did. But her father had once told her she could have everything she wanted and she intended to. The more efficient mind Orlin had gifted her with was already formulating a plan; she would do the counter-measure and make sure Earth was safe but as soon as it was done, she would go after Jack herself – orders be damned.

When she left the locker room her throat felt stripped raw and her eyes were sore but her face was set in a determined calm. She walked into her lab and froze at the sight of Mitchell standing by the central workbench. She was stunned at the sight of the tray beside him; a sundae dish filled with blue jello and a mug of tea.

'Hey.' He said sticking his hands in the pockets of the blue BDU pants. 'How're you doing?'

She rubbed a hand over her face and through her hair uncaring at the way the blonde strands poked out at odd angles. 'I'm fine.'

'I thought you might want something to eat.' Mitchell settled on the stool next to her as she sat and took a spoonful of the dessert.

She swallowed the gelatinous sweet with difficulty. 'Thanks.' She managed.
Mitchell nodded. 'Daniel…uh…told me…'

Sam's blue eyes flashed back to him worriedly.

'About you and the General…' Mitchell continued determinedly.

'Cam,' she interrupted him hurriedly, 'nothing has ever…'

'I know, Sam.' Mitchell held her slightly panicked gaze. 'I know you.'

Sam sighed and smiled apologetically. 'I'm sorry. I should have told you.' She shrugged awkwardly and pushed her spoon back into the jello. 'I just didn't know how and it's not really something we all talk about much.' She paused. 'Ever, really.'

'Well, I promise I won't mention it again.' Mitchell smiled seeing how uncomfortable she was talking about it at all. 'And you should go easy on Daniel; I kinda forced him into telling me.'

She gave him a pained smile.

'Daniel's fixing it with Landry.' Mitchell said.

She looked at him sharply.

Mitchell shrugged. 'It's what he does isn't it?'

Daniel was fixing it. The thought turned over in her head and Sam felt a weight lift off her shoulders. If anyone could convince Landry, it was Daniel. Maybe she wouldn't have to risk getting court-martialed after all. She nodded at Mitchell. 'Yeah. It's what he does.'

'I'll leave you to it.' Mitchell said jumping off the stool. 'I'd better get started on base security.'

'I'd better get on with…' she waved at her workbench and the counter-measure. 'And Cam?'

'What?' He asked.

'Thanks.' She smiled ruefully.

'No problem.' Mitchell took a step towards the door and found the doorway blocked by the arrival of General Landry and Daniel.

'Good.' Landry said breezily. 'You're both here.'

Both Sam and Mitchell straightened their postures into some semblance of 'at attention' as Landry entered with Daniel moving swiftly across the room to stand by his team-mates.

'At ease, Colonels.' Landry said. His eyes landed on the blonde Air Force officer in front of him. 'Doctor Jackson has convinced me that I may have been too hasty in discounting your opinion about the Replicator's strategy, Colonel Carter.'

'Sir.' Sam sent Daniel a questioning glance and he smiled back reassuringly.

'However, I do still have to consider Earth's security as my priority.' Landry pointed out. 'So I need to ask you a question, Colonel Carter; when do you think the Replicator will make her move for the weapon at Dakara?'

'During the battle, sir.' Sam responded immediately. 'Earth will be busy with the Replicators, the
Jaffa and the Tok'ra will be busy with Ba'al; she'll have a clear run at the weapon.'

'Hmmm.' Landry glanced at the archaeologist. 'Doctor Jackson agrees with you.' He straightened a little and held her gaze. 'I'm amending your orders, Colonel. As Thor is estimating it will be tomorrow before the battle gets underway, your priority right now is building the counter-measure. However, as soon as you are done, you and Doctor Jackson will go to Dakara. You will try and find the Replicator and stop her by any means necessary.'

'Sir, what about Colonel Mitchell?'

'What about Mitchell?'

Sam and Daniel looked at each other wryly having both spoken at the same time and missed Mitchell's slightly stunned look at the way they had both spoken up for him.

'I'll need the Colonel here looking after base security.' Landry said firmly.

'With respect, sir,' Sam said firmly, 'Colonel Reynolds of SG3 has better knowledge of the base and Colonel Mitchell is a member of my team, sir. If SG1 is going on a mission, he should come with us.'

Landry sighed and looked over three sets of resolute and hopeful eyes. 'OK. Colonel Mitchell work with Colonel Reynolds and make sure he is fully briefed on all aspects of the security before you ship out to Dakara with your team.'

Mitchell had to work hard to keep the grin off his face. 'Yes, sir. Thank you, sir.'

Landry turned to leave and stopped; he turned back. 'And Colonel Carter?'

'Yes, sir?' Sam asked.

'You also have permission to recover General O'Neill,' he held up a hand, 'but only if it's possible.'

'Understood, sir.' Sam said her blue eyes sparkling with renewed hope.

'Carry on.' Landry left and wondered how Hammond and Jack had managed to cope with the astrophysicist and archaeologist for eight years; it was no wonder one man was bald and the other's hair was grey. He ran a hand through his own brown brush of hair worriedly as he headed back to the control room.

Back in the lab, Sam hugged Daniel tightly. 'Thank you.' She said when she finally released him.

Daniel adjusted his glasses and grinned at her happily. 'You should really thank Mitchell.' He admitted.

Sam looked over at the other air force officer in surprise.

Mitchell shrugged and was surprised himself when she crossed the room to envelope him in a brief hug.

'I should be the one thanking you.' He said as she took a step back.

'What for?' Sam asked.

Mitchell gestured. 'Making sure I didn't miss out on the fun.' He said grinning.
Daniel grinned back at him. 'Well, you are part of the family now.'

Mitchell felt a warm glow suffuse all the way through him.

'OK,' Sam said, 'we should get to it. The sooner we get things straight here, the sooner we can get to Dakara. Mitchell, you get to work on base security…'

'Yes, ma'am.' Mitchell snapped off a sloppy salute and left.

Sam turned to Daniel. I'm going to need you to contact Dakara and brief Teal'c. We're going to need a spacecraft, something like a cargo ship or a scout ship ready for us. And can you work with Thor and go over his sensor readings? We need to find someway of finding the Replicator's cloaked ship.'

'I'm on it.' Daniel said striding for the door. He stopped in the doorway. 'Sam?'

She looked over at him.

'Ve're going to get him back.' He said confidently.

'Damn right we will.' Sam responded. She sighed and set to work; ignored everything to focus on the counter-measure. She worked through the night and into the early hours of the morning occasionally leaving her lab to consult with Daniel and Thor via the radio. As dawn broke over the mountain there was a second device sitting next to the first on the bench. It would create a series of layered disruptor waves. When the bug hit the first wave, the device would calculate the correct frequency and modify the other layers hopefully destroying the bug. It only needed to be tested but she knew its only real test would be the instant the first metal bug came through the Stargate. She blinked at the machine tiredly.

It would protect Earth, she thought and because she figured the bugs might take to 'beaming' themselves down to the SGC once they figured the Stargate was protected she had talked with Thor and he had prepared a jamming programme for the transportation technology. A copy was already on its way to Prometheus to be uploaded in case the Replicators tried to beam on board them too. She pillowed her head on her arms resting them on the bench. She closed her eyes falling into a restless sleep.

An image on a computer screen from a MALP feed; herself looking back at her. She remembered thinking it would be easier if the copy looked less like her as stupid as that sounded. An idea to ask her copy to help them against Fifth…the mental sharing of a memory where Fifth had trained her copy to kill her team-mates; to kill Jack…the betrayal as she realised her copy had used her to kill Fifth and create an immunity to the disruptor weapon.

A dark room in her mind and her arm held firmly by the Replicator that wore her face; 'You have untapped greatness inside you, Sam. But you're limited by your own fears, you play by the rules, you do what you're told and you deny yourself your own desires.'

Jack's hand in her hair; 'Don't you dare die on me now.' His brown eyes searching hers. 'Not when there's only one week and four days before I tell you I love you, Sam and before you tell me you love me back.'

Orlin as he cupped her cheek in the palm of his hand. 'I have to leave now but I will give you all I can to help you in the coming days.' His hand turning into energy and a bright, white light filled her vision and a warm, healing wave washing away her pain…

Cold. Jack was cold on the Replicator ship and in pain but he was alive…she could feel the hard
Replicator blocks that formed the floor beneath her as though she were there with him. Fragments of thoughts...the Replicator was invading his mind...but he was resisting, fighting back...

'Don't let her win, Jack.' Sam thought hard at him. 'Not with only five days to go before you tell me you love me and I tell you I love you back...'

'Carter?' His surprised response alarmed her...how could he hear her? How could she feel him?

'Sir?' Sam suddenly felt the darkness melt away and she was stood in the Ancient chamber on Dakara next to the control chair with Jack standing opposite her. He looked around wildly and on seeing her frowned.

'It's me, sir.' Sam said.

'How do I know it's really you?' Jack asked suspiciously.

Sam opened her mouth to reply and realised she didn't have an answer. 'I don't know, sir.' She admitted. 'I'm not even sure how I got here.' She glanced at the chamber and shivered. She turned back to Jack to find him striding across the floor to her and a moment later, his arms were solidly around her.

'She would have come up with an explanation.' He explained as he hugged her to him.

She hugged him back fiercely. The chamber shook a little.

'She's trying to get in here.' Jack said letting her ease away.

'I think I can keep her out.' Sam said a little shocked at her newfound ability.

Jack gestured at the chamber. 'Orlin?'

Sam sighed. 'Orlin. I think he connected us somehow...'

'Good for Orlin.' Jack said. 'Anything you can do about the accommodation, Carter? I'm really not too fond of this place...'

'Hold on a second.' Sam's face screwed up as she concentrated.

The chamber melted away and they were sat side by side on the dock outside Jack's cabin. They both dressed in casual clothes; jeans, sweaters.

'Better.' Jack declared taking in the lake. 'Much better.' He held out a hand to Sam and was pleased when she took it. 'So while you're here...'

'It doesn't look as though she can get to you.' Sam said. She sighed and squeezed his hand. 'I'm sorry, sir. I don't know how much longer I can stay here.'

'It's OK, Sam.' Jack said quietly. His brown eyes held hers. 'I'm OK.'

Sam flushed. 'She has to be torturing you how Fifth tortured me and...'

'And I'm OK.' Jack interrupted her. 'Earth has to be the priority. Not me.'

'We have a plan.' Sam said determinedly.

'You'd better not tell me.' Jack said before she could say anything else. 'If I don't know neither will
'Yes, sir.' Sam nodded unhappily.

'You called me Jack before.' He murmured reaching out to tuck a strand of blonde hair behind her ear.

She blushed. 'I didn't realise you could hear me.' Her fingers tangled around his. 'We still have five days to go before you retire.'

'Five days.' Jack said with a sigh.

'Five days.' Sam confirmed. She felt the pull toward consciousness and her blue eyes met his in a regretful apology.

'Don't stop counting, Sam.' Jack said as he felt her slipping away.

'I won't.' She promised understanding the hidden promise that they would get out of this; that they would still have their chance to dance on his roof under the stars...

'Sam?' The hand on her shoulder had her jerking awake.

'Jack?' She said automatically.

'No, it's me, Daniel.'

She stared up into Daniel's blue eyes for a long moment without really seeing him.

'Hey.' She straightened and brushed her hands through her hair.

'Are you OK?' Daniel said worriedly.

Sam swallowed hard. 'I'm OK. I just…I had a strange dream.' She frowned. 'What time is it?'

'Eight-hundred.' Daniel said. 'We're ready. Thor's estimating we only have another six hours before the Replicator ship gets here and Dakara confirms Ba'al's fleet is holding its position as though they are waiting.'

Sam nodded. 'I'm done with the counter-measure.' She patted his arm. 'Get Mitchell. Give me a half and hour. I've got a couple of more things to do and then we'll go.'

Daniel nodded. 'We'll be there.'

Thirty minutes later, they were geared up and stood ready in the gate room as Walter dialled up Dakara.

'…Thor has everything ready, sir and Doctor Lee has the full details of how to operate the new counter-measure.' Sam said to Landry as she clipped on her P90.

'Good.' Landry nodded as the wormhole engaged and the blue puddle appeared in the centre of the metal ring. 'Proceed, Colonel.' He said. He caught her eyes. 'And good luck.' He took a couple of steps back.

'Thank you, sir.' Sam nodded and SG1 progressed up the ramp. They stopped just in front of the wormhole. She glanced across at Daniel and Mitchell. 'Ready, guys?'
'I just hope we're not too late for Jack.' Daniel said without thinking adjusting his protective vest. He looked up at Sam apologetically. 'Ah…sorry….'

'It's OK, Daniel. He's OK.' Sam said trying to reassure him. 'I don't know how to explain it but I know; he's alive.'

Daniel's eyes peered at her curiously. 'Orlin linked the two of you, didn't he? That's why he knew Jack could bring you back and that's why you feel him now.'

'Maybe.' Sam said cautiously.

'Guys I don't want to break this up but shouldn't we get going before Landry changes his mind?' Mitchell said.

Daniel and Sam looked at each other with amusement.

'OK.' She said pulled her green cap on firmly. 'Let's go save the galaxy.' And more importantly, she thought determinedly, save Jack.
The three Tau'ri members of SG1 stepped out of the wormhole and onto Dakara.

'Woah.' Mitchell held his hands up as the Jaffa guarding the gate aimed their weapons at the travellers.

'Kel ma ghe!' Teal'c stepped forward and the weapons were lowered. 'It is good to see you Colonel Carter.'

'It's good to see you too, Teal'c.' Sam greeted him with a smile. 'Is everything ready?'

'Indeed.' Teal'c bowed his head and acknowledged Daniel and Mitchell with a brief glance. 'I have organised transport for us. It is this way.'

They began walking and Sam kept stride with the Jaffa as he led the way. She was surprised to see Tok'ra and Jaffa talking and running together as they prepared for the upcoming battle. 'Delek came through on his promise.' She muttered in wonder.

'I am as surprised as you, Colonel Carter.' Teal'c said. He turned to her. 'We have been unable as yet to confirm the presence of the Replicator.'

'She's cloaked but Daniel's been working with Thor on a way to find her.' Sam said. 'We think we should be able to pinpoint where she is.'

'And you are certain she is at Dakara?' Teal'c asked.

'I know she is.' Sam said defensively.

'I believe you, Colonel Carter.' Teal'c said. His warm brown eyes held hers for a moment. 'She is no doubt after the weapon.'

'We think so.' Sam confirmed.

'We must prevent the human form Replicator from completing her mission.' Teal'c responded. He pointed out their ship and they got on board with swift efficiency.

Sam took a deep breath. 'OK, guys. Let's get this ship in the air.'

'Won't the Replicator realise we're onto her if we launch?' Mitchell said taking one of the pilot seats as Teal'c took the other.

'No.' Sam said taking her laptop out of her bag. 'I'm going to input a programme to emit false bio-readings; if she scans us we'll be four Jaffa. If we join the rest of the ships, she'll hopefully think we're just another ship joining the fight.'

'OK.' Mitchell rubbed his hands at the controls. 'So how do I fly this bird?'

'You do not.' Teal'c said firmly.

'Aw come on, Teal'c.' Mitchell turned to him with a pleading expression. 'I haven't been flying in ages.'

Teal'c looked over at the eager enthusiasm in his blue eyes and noted it was not unlike the
eagerness Daniel Jackson or Colonel Carter displayed when faced with a new puzzle. He had eight years of practice at resisting that look. He turned back to the controls and made them air-borne.

'No.'

Sam and Daniel exchanged an amused look at Mitchell's crushed look as they worked on interfacing Sam's laptop with the scout ship systems.

'OK,' Daniel said, 'if you bring up the sensor readings Thor took, we think we identified a small distortion in space that we need to look for.'

'This is going to be like finding a needle in a haystack.' Mitchell murmured coming to stand next to them.

'Not necessarily.' Sam smiled grimly. 'I know how she thinks and I know where I would be hiding.'

'And if she works out that you've come after her?' Mitchell asked.

'Then we'll check where I would hide if I thought I was searching for me.' Sam's brow creased. 'You know what I mean.' She brought up the scanning programme and tapped in the instructions as Teal'c took them into a holding position behind another Jaffa ship in orbit.

It turned into a tense wait while the scan did its work. They had almost reached the time they suspected Ba'al and the Replicators would strike, and Sam was beginning to doubt her strategy, when the computer beeped. She and Daniel got up from the floor and hurried over to it. Mitchell joined them as Teal'c kept the ship steady.

'Got you.' Sam tapped the screen. 'She's there.' She looked at Mitchell and Daniel. 'Let's gear up. I want us to be ready to move.'

'How are we going to ring through the cloak?' Mitchell asked.

'We think the anomaly is a fluctuation in the cloak.' Daniel said.

'You think?' Mitchell asked alarmed. 'You're not sure?'

'If we time it correctly we should be able to use it to get through the cloak.' Sam confirmed as they put the protective vests on over the black t-shirts and picked up the P90s. She returned to the laptop. 'OK, guys.' She said. 'Teal'c, you'll stay here and wait for us. Mitchell, Daniel, you just need to find the General and keep the rest of the Replicators away from me and my duplicate. As soon as you get him, come back here. I'll follow as soon as I've dealt with her.'

'Exactly how are you going to do that?' Mitchell asked.

'Yeah, how are you going to do that?' Daniel asked worriedly.

Sam avoided looking at them. 'Trust me. I have a plan and I don't intend letting her win.' She gestured at the rings. 'The rings will automatically activate the next time the cloak fluctuates.' She hit the enter key.

Mitchell and Daniel got into the circle and Sam joined them. The rings surrounded them and in a flash of light they were gone. They reappeared on the cargo ship the Replicator had procured from Ba'al. It was already covered in Replicator blocks giving it an empty and sterile appearance except for the one other living thing in the cargo hold; Jack.

'Cover me.' Sam ordered as she hurried over and felt for a pulse. Jack's brown eyes snapped open at
her touch and he grabbed her wrist. She tried hard not to wince at the strength of his grip and knew she would have a bruise the next day; she tried hard not to take the look of hatred in his eyes personally. 'Sir?'

The sound of her voice seemed to trigger something in his head that she was different.

'Carter?' His voice was disbelieving. His eyes narrowed on hers and searched the blue depths.

'It's me. It's really me.' She let go of her gun laying it on the ground to cup his rough cheek with her free hand. 'Five days.'

'Five days?' He asked a little absently as though he still couldn't believe she was there.

She smiled. 'I'm still counting, sir.'

His brown eyes smiled at her for a moment before he sat up abruptly letting go of her. 'So what's the plan?'

Sam was about to reply when the door slid open and the human form Replicator entered. There were bugs following her like excited puppies, the sound of their clicking filling the small room.

Daniel flinched; the last time he had seen her, she had killed him.

Mitchell blanched at the similarity to Sam.

They both backed up from the door, their P90s fixed to the Replicator, and took positions either side of their team-mates.

Sam got to her feet and faced her copy with a defiant look. 'It's over.'

The Replicator smiled. 'It is only just beginning.' The two women began circling the room like prize fighters in the ring.

Daniel reached down and helped Jack to his feet. Jack grabbed Sam's discarded P90 and joined the other two men in pointing the weapon at the Replicators.

'You won't win.' Sam said calmly.

'Ba'al has begun in his onslaught on Dakara.'

'You don't care about Ba'al. You plan for him to waste his resources keeping the Jaffa occupied while you try to get the Ancient weapon.' Sam responded. 'Just like you tried attacking Earth to keep us, keep me, out of the way.'

'My brethren are at Earth which I see you have left defenceless after all.' The Replicator smiled.

'Not defenceless.' Sam corrected.

The double regarded her coldly. 'The Asgard are no threat; I will soon have control of the ship they left there.' Her head tilted suddenly. She smiled cruelly. 'An invisible iris. Clever.' The Replicators at her feet moved angrily. 'And one whose frequency changes with each of my brethren.'

'You should give up.' Sam said. 'Thor integrated the technology into the Asgard shields. The Replicators can't board his ship.'

Her double frowned.
'You're probably realising that the Asgard are jamming your transportation systems too.' Sam said as they continued to circle almost lazily around the room.

The Replicator's face tightened with fury.

'I decided to tap into some of that greatness you told me about.' Sam taunted casually.

The face of the other woman smoothed out. 'No matter. Earth can wait. It will be destroyed when I retrieve the Ancient weapon and rid this galaxy of life.'

'I'm afraid not.' Sam said. 'I actually have a counter-measure for that too.'

'I can overcome it in time.' The Replicator responded. 'All I need is the weapon.'

'You can't have it.'

'I will have it.'

'You need to know how to get to it.' Sam baited her. 'There are only two sources for that information. The Ancient systems which you can't access because the power's gone and you don't have the knowledge to revive it.' Her blue eyes met the hard glint of an identical set across the room. 'Or me.'

'Carter.' Jack's concerned voice whipped across the room.

'And here you've delivered yourself to me.' The Replicator smiled. 'This is going to be fun.'

'Everybody else, out!' yelled Sam as the double charged straight for her. She grabbed the Replicator's raised arm as it aimed for her head and the two versions of Samantha Carter froze; the human's hand around the Replicator's arm.

Jack looked at Daniel. 'This was the plan?' He asked sarcastically.

'We didn't say it was a good plan.' Daniel muttered.

The Replicator bugs began to move in their direction and Jack fired off his weapon, Mitchell and Daniel followed suit.

'Sir, Colonel Carter ordered us to leave.' Mitchell shouted over the noise of the gunfire.

'I'm sure it says General on my uniform, Mitchell.' Jack said. 'And we're not leaving without Carter.' He allowed himself one brief anxious look at her in the grip of the Replicator before he went back to shooting the bugs.

Sam was back in the same dark room that the Replicator had taken to her the last time she had invaded her mind. The same spotlight cast the two of them in its eerie glow.

'You really do have a lack of imagination don't you?' Sam said looking around at the dark space.

'You can't really think you'll win.' The Replicator bit out. 'I'm already in your mind. I'll discover the way to bring the weapon back.'

'I'm sure you will.' Sam smiled. 'But I'm in your mind too.'

'You can't…'
'I can't what?' Sam asked. 'Control things? Guess again.'

The scene around the changed abruptly; they were standing in front of the Stargate in the SGC.

'And you accused me of having no imagination.' The Replicator sneered.

'Welcome to my turf.' Sam said her blue eyes gleaming with satisfaction. She tilted her head. 'Aren't you wondering why the Asgard haven't fired on your ship yet?'

The Replicator frowned. 'You miscalculated. I had other Replicators go through the Stargate first. The ship arrived simultaneously.'

'And because you went through the Stargate, the cipher I helped you create automatically changed the frequency rendering the disruptor weapon on Thor's ship useless.' Sam agreed cheerfully. 'I know.'

'You are distracting me.' The Replicator realised.

'You're the one who miscalculated.' Sam confided. 'I have them now; your brethren.'

Sam allowed them to see through the Replicators in the cargo ship; they were stood frozen in front of the three men who remained in the cargo hold. Sam saw her team-mates confusion at the Replicators stopping before they shrugged and began firing again. She smiled.

'I should thank you.' Sam said casually. 'For kidnapping Daniel. If you hadn't, he wouldn't have gotten into your mind and I wouldn't have known I could do this.' She smiled. 'And, of course, for ascending. If you're wondering how I'm managing to keep control in here, well, that's down to one of the Ascended beings. You must have really annoyed them for them to agree to one of their own interfering.'

The Replicator glowered at her; she could almost feel its cold logic trying to rifle through her thoughts. Sam mentally slapped her back and shook her head. 'Naughty, naughty.' She wagged a finger at the Replicator. 'Play by the rules, remember? And besides, quite honestly, I'm not sure what Orlin did so there's no point looking. Now, let's see about that cipher, shall we?' Sam asked breezily.

The scene changed to Sam's lab. She walked over to the computer monitor and brought up the code. She selected the cipher code and pressed delete. The immunity the Replicator had created with Sam's help against the disruptor weapon disappeared from all the Replicators. Sam smiled in satisfaction.

'I can recreate the code.' The Replicator said furiously.

'Not fast enough.' Sam said smugly.

Sam used the Replicator ship itself to transmit the required frequency to destroy it to Thor. She smiled sympathetically at the Replicator. 'You should brace yourself. Your brethren are about to be toast.'

'You don't have a weapon here.' The Replicator snarled feeling the instant loss of the ship thousands of light years across the galaxy. She charged across the room to Sam.

Sam grabbed its arm in a mental parody of their real position. She flung them out of the mental space and into reality...
Sam's eyes snapped open and she stared at the confusion on her duplicate's face. 'Haven't you got it yet?' She asked almost innocently as she used her control of the Replicators, within all the bugs across the galaxy, to sever the connection between their cells. They fell into inert dust. 'I am the weapon.'

Her duplicate watched in horror. Her eyes met Sam's and the Air Force Colonel saw a glint of fear before the human form Replicator disintegrated into a million inert blocks leaving Sam's hand clutching air.
Sam turned to her three team-mates and found them looking back at her with a mixture of awe and shock. She remembered they'd done the same when she'd killed the Goa'uld Seth with a ribbon device once and shuffled a little uncomfortable with their reaction. Maybe the 'I am the weapon' thing had been a little too much, she considered wryly.

'Wow.' Mitchell said as he gawped at his team leader across the rubble of Replicator blocks.

'How?' Daniel demanded bemused.

'Who cares how?' Jack started grinning. 'Nice.'

Sam felt her own lips curve upwards before a sharp pain tore through her head. She staggered. An arm went around her as the world went momentarily dark; when she opened her eyes, she was clutching onto Jack's shoulder and he was helping keep her upright.

'You OK, Carter?' Jack asked anxiously.

'Sorry, sir. Just a headache.' She rubbed at her temple and the throbbing pain there. 'I may have overdone it.'

'No such thing with a Replicator, Carter.' Jack murmured.

The ship rocked as it came under fire.

'We need to get out of here.' Jack said taking charge. 'Daniel, the rings.'

'Right.' The archaeologist jerked and made his way over to the panel on the wall. He activated them and hurried back to join his three team-mates in the circle.

They reappeared on the scout ship. Teal'c barely spared them a glance over his shoulder. He was busy flying trying to avoid the volley of fire directed at them. 'It is good to see you again, O'Neill.'

'Likewise.' Jack said leaving Sam to move behind him while Mitchell moved into the second seat. Sam and Daniel took positions behind him. 'What's going on?'

'Ba'al has attacked.' Teal'c said succinctly.

Jack rolled his eyes at the literal answer. 'How's the battle going?'

'We are losing.' Teal'c stated with disappointment. 'Ba'al will soon be able to land his troops on Dakara.'

'Any ideas?' Jack asked looking back at Sam and Daniel.

'I'm all out, sir.' Sam said her blue eyes watching the space battle in front of her with dismay.

Daniel pursed his lips. 'I might have one.' He pushed his glasses up his nose. 'Maybe we can get to Ba'al.'

'How?' Jack demanded.

'We know we…well, you,' Daniel pointed at Sam, 'killed the Replicator but he doesn't.'
'You want me to pretend to be her.' Sam deduced.

'Are you up for that, Carter?' Jack asked his brown eyes scanning her tired face.

Mitchell watched in amazement as Sam drew energy from God only knew where to nod firmly. 'It might be a way onto Ba'al's ship.' He concurred, his gaze drifting to the general.

'If we can get him to lower the shields to let Sam on board.' Jack corrected.

'We just need to give him enough of a reason to.' Daniel insisted.

Jack shifted uneasily and sighed. 'Me.'

'Sir?' Sam asked hesitantly.

'We all know Ba'al and I have history.' Jack said seriously. 'We should use it.'

'Jack…' Daniel objected his horrified blue eyes meeting his friend's at the idea.

The scout ship took a hit from a barrage by a persistent glider and the debate was suspended while they all clung onto the consoles trying to keep their balance.

'Our shields are almost gone.' Teal'c stated calmly diving past a pair of Goa'uld gliders with a skill that had Mitchell looking at him enviously.

'You have to show me how to do that.' Mitchell murmured.

'OK, time's up, kids. We'll take out Ba'al's ship with C4 when we get aboard.' Jack responded.

'That's probably rule number ten,' muttered Daniel to Mitchell. 'Always blow up the Goa'uld mother ship with C4.'

Jack glared at him and gestured at Sam. 'Make the call to Ba'al. Tell him you've brought him a present.'

Sam nodded reluctantly. She knew the General's torture at the hands of Ba'al had been one of the worst experiences of his whole time in the Stargate programme. She couldn't help admire the strength of character it took to literally face his demon. She moved to the front and opened up a channel to Ba'al. 'Ba'al. Respond. This is the Replicator.'

'What are you doing here?' Ba'al's voice reverberated in the small ship.

'My brethren are capable of dealing with Earth. I came to ensure your success here.' Sam shot back. 'And I have brought you a gift. The human known as O'Neill.'

'You have O'Neill?' Ba'al said admiringly.

'Lower your shields and I will transport aboard with him.' Sam said.

'In case you haven't noticed it is not the best time to lower my shields.' Ba'al commented dryly.

'It was a courtesy, Ba'al.' Sam said coldly. 'Lower your shields or I will lower them myself.'

There was a silence and they all held their breath wondering if Ba'al had gone for it.

Daniel looked questioningly at Sam and she shrugged; she had no idea if Ba'al would believe her
'Very well.' Ba'al said.

'He's lowered his shield.' Sam confirmed.

'Teal'c, put this thing on auto and let's go.' Jack said as they all gathered back in the centre of the rings their zats at the ready.'

They ringed onto Ba'al's ship and immediately took out the Jaffa guarding the ring room with shots of blue electricity.

'OK,' Jack said as Teal'c took up a covering position by the door, 'Mitchell, Daniel, Teal'c; plant as much as C4 as you can all over the ship, target the shield generators, weapons, engines, anything that if it gets taken out would give us an advantage. Try not to get discovered.'

'What about you and Sam?' Daniel asked.

'We're going to make our way up to the bridge and deal with Ba'al.' Jack said evenly. 'We'll meet back here and get off this ship as soon as we're done. Understood?'

They all nodded.

'OK, you guys get going. We'll cover you.' Jack jerked his head at the door. He and Sam watched them duck out of the ring room and head down the gilded corridor.

'Ready, Carter?' Jack asked.

'We might encounter less resistance if we make it appear that you're under my control, sir.' She suggested.

'Good idea.' Jack said. 'We'll leave the P90s here. Take only the zats.'

'You should know Ba'al will probably be able to tell it's me in person, sir.' Sam said. 'He'll sense the naquadah in my blood.'

'We'll worry about that when we get there.' Jack said firmly. 'Let's go kick some Goa'uld ass, shall we?'

'Yes, sir.' Sam smiled at him and gestured with her zat.

He walked out ahead of her and she followed with his zat in one hand, her own raised and pointed at him as they made their way through the corridors. They passed a Jaffa patrol who all but fell over themselves to avoid Sam.

It looked like the human form Replicator had the Jaffa scared senseless, Jack thought. He could sympathise. He didn't voice the thought knowing how Sam would react if he said it out loud. He had endured hours of torture at the hands of her duplicate. His only comfort had been in knowing he had denied her the victory she had wanted; he had never forgotten that she wasn't his Sam.

There had been one strange moment though…

He cleared his throat and kept his voice low. 'You know, Carter, when I was on the ship with the Replicator, I kinda thought you were in my head one time.'

There was a question in the statement and she nodded across at him quickly.
Jack sighed and gestured at her. 'I'm thinking this might fall under the category of unusual behaviour, Carter.'

'I'll report to the infirmary if we make it back, sir.' Sam replied wryly.

'When, Carter.' Jack corrected.

It took them some time to get to the bridge. Jack indicated the count on one hand as they entered and Sam nodded her head subtly to confirm she had understood. There were four Jaffa; one at the flight controls; one operating the weapons and two at the door. Ba'al was sat lounging on the only chair on the bridge. It was gold and throne-like. They walked a safe distance inside the room and came to a halt in front of Ba'al.

His dark eyes scanned her with confusion and realisation hit him hard and fast. 'You're not the Replicator.'

'Surprise!' yelled Jack and grabbed his zat as Sam threw it toward him. He spun and kicked out at the guard by the flight controls; he zatted the other. He ducked behind a console and fired at the other guard taking him out too.

Sam fell to her knees and zatted the two guards by the door before she dived for cover. She wasn't quick enough. Ba'al had already moved from his throne and he grabbed her roughly; the ribbon device was pointed at her head and she felt the first stirrings of pain as the orange glow hit her.

'Ba'al!' Jack yelled from his position. 'Let her go!' 

'I will kill her, O'Neill.' Ba'al said almost lazily. 'Unless you surrender immediately.'

'Don't do it, sir!' Sam managed to shout past the unremitting pain.

Jack knew he had no choice; he couldn't let Ba'al kill her. He threw down the zat and stepped out from the console. His brown eyes met Ba'al's smug gaze as he put his hands up. 'It's me you want. Let her go.'

Ba'al deactivated the ribbon device. Sam fell weakly to the floor and curled up into a foetal ball. Jack immediately stepped toward her and when Ba'al didn't object, hurried over to her side. He pulled her unresisting body into his arms cradling it gently.

The Goa'uld flounced back to the throne as more Jaffa rushed into the room. Ba'al took a moment to order them to take over the controls before he turned back to the curious sight in front of him of O'Neill holding Samantha Carter. 'Interesting.' He drawled. 'I had planned to kill you but perhaps I could have some fun first.' He smiled cruelly. 'I have always wondered what would be worse; to be tortured yourself or to watch those you care about be tortured. What do you think?'

Jack smoothed Sam's blonde hair back from her pale face and gently stroked the faint red mark that the ribbon device had left. He stared with disgust at the Goa'uld. 'I think you're a sick bastard.'

Ba'al smiled in satisfaction. 'You've lost your sense of humour, O'Neill.' He settled back in his throne. 'I do believe you might be more than a little fond of the Colonel.' He saw the barely perceptible flicker that crossed the deeply carved lines on O'Neill's face. He was right, he thought incredulously. The man was in love with the woman in his arms. 'Humans,' he sighed, 'in the end you're just as predictable as the Jaffa. What a disappointment.'

Jack felt a weapon being pressed into his hand and had to stop himself from reacting. Sam was obviously not as out of it as she was pretending. He gripped the zat and tensed. He would have to
time it right. 'It's over, Ba'al.'

The Goa'uld laughed. 'I will soon take Dakara. The Replicator will have Earth.'

'The Replicator is dead and Earth is safe.' Jack retorted.

Ba'al smiled. 'Then you have saved me the task of ridding myself of her.' He leaned back and stroked his beard. 'I will get to Earth in time.'

'You won't get to Earth.' Jack caught a movement by the door; the rest of SG1 were slipping into the room. 'It ends here.' He said and his eyes met Ba'al's with renewed confidence.

'My Lord!' Ba'al's Jaffa interrupted the exchange. 'There are two ships exiting hyperspace.'

'What ships?' Ba'al said.

The Jaffa turned to him with a visibly frightened expression. 'It's the Asgard, sir and an Earth vessel.'

Jack smirked at the Goa'uld. 'That'll be the cavalry.'

Ba'al scowled and his eyes flashed white. 'Get us out of here.' He ordered.

'Oh I don't think you're going anywhere, Ba'al, old buddy.' Jack drawled. The first of the C4 explosions rocked the ship.

'Our shields are down!' The other Jaffa yelled.

'Now!' Jack shouted as the bridge shook again; this time taking heavy fire from the Prometheus.

Teal'c and Mitchell moved and both took out one of the Jaffa with a zat. Ba'al was half-way out of his seat when Jack pointed the zat at him.

'Ahh! Ah!' Jack shook his head as Ba'al reached for his wrist. 'I wouldn't.' He stood slowly and, beside him, Sam got to her feet.

Ba'al watched as they were joined by others; a human male with brown hair and blue eyes hidden by circles of glass – the infamous Doctor Jackson, he surmised. Another human male of a similar build to Jackson stood beside him; the new guy, Ba'al thought dismissively. Finally, the shol'var Teal'c stood next to Colonel Carter. All of SG1 stood in front of him and all had weapons pointed at him. Ba'al shifted uncomfortably.

'Ba'al, Ba'al.' Jack sighed dramatically. 'You seem to have lost your sense of humour.'

Ba'al gave a tight smile as another volley of fire hit the ship. 'You have your prize, O'Neill. I will come with you without a fight.'

Jack's face creased in confusion and he waved his gun at the Goa'uld. 'I'm not taking you with us.' He looked at Sam. 'Did I say I was taking him with us? Because I don't recall saying that?'

A look of pure panic flitted across Ba'al's face before he regrouped a little. 'I am more valuable to your government alive.'

'Maybe.' Jack admitted with deadly calm. 'But I'm going to kill you anyway.' His brown eyes hardened. 'And I'm going to do it the once.' He zatted him twice.
For a long moment, they all looked at Ba'al slumped in his throne, dead.

Daniel raised his zat and fired; the body disappeared.

Jack looked over at him in surprise. The archaeologist pushed his glasses up his nose and didn't say anything. Jack had always wondered if the other man remembered how, when Daniel had been ascended, he had stayed with Jack during his torture at Ba'al's hands, kept him sane during the whole ordeal; how he had helped sow the seeds of his recovery back at the SGC. He had never asked Daniel if he remembered and Daniel had never indicated he had. The younger man finally met his eyes and the look they shared was one of total understanding. Jack felt the catch of emotion in his throat.

The console behind them exploded.

'So,' Jack said clearing his throat, 'any ideas on how we get out of here before we get blown up?'

Sam was already moving to the controls. 'If we can get a message to the Asgard or the Prometheus, we can…'

The flash of light and disorientation was familiar and much wanted. They re-materialised on the bridge of the Prometheus. In front of them Ba'al's ship exploded; a brief fireball that lit up space.

The battle was over; they had won.
Jack wondered what a difference seven weeks made. He was once again standing off to the side of a room in the middle of a reception clutching a glass of punch and he was once again wearing his dress blues pretending to listen to Daniel babble while his actual attention remained on a certain blonde Air Force officer making the rounds. But that was where the similarity with Jacob Carter's memorial reception ended.

This reception had a definite celebratory air and was taking place in the SGC commissary. The new structure of the SGC had come into effect at oh-eight-hundred that morning and in addition to the formal inauguration ceremony, there had been a round of treaty negotiations between Earth and her various alien allies. The reception was the final event in a day packed with meetings, speeches and more meetings. The mess was filled with SGC personnel, members of the IOA, the Joint Chiefs, the President and a number of their alien friends; the party had spilled out onto the corridor hours before and showed no sign of letting up. Jack briefly took a sip of his punch and glanced at the clock.

He had expected the President to have left hours before and was getting a little annoyed that Hayes hadn't yet made a move. His eyes slid to the snappily dressed leader of the Free World and took in the way he and Bra'tac were roaring with laughter at something Thor had said to them. It didn't look as though Hayes was going to move anytime soon. Jack sighed impatiently. Protocol insisted that he and every other person there remain until the President left and Jack was anxious to get away. There had been no time in the day's schedule for the discussion. In fact there had barely been time for him to pass Sam a note, like they were teenagers at school, asking her to meet him at his house that evening. Ten hours after his retirement became official and they were still stuck in the same roles they'd played for the previous eight years. He bit back a sigh of frustration.

Jack's eyes collided with Sam's blue gaze across the room. The brief sympathetic smile she was able to give him before Carolyn nudged her and she was dragged back into the conversation with the odious French IOA rep helped ease his nerves a little. And he was nervous. His belly was churning with nerves. God knew why, Jack thought. He knew she loved him. Maybe it was the sudden realisation that their chance of being together was actually, really, honest-to-God going to finally happen. He was retired. She was no longer in his chain of command. There were no regulations or rules standing in their way. If they ever got out of the reception, he thought dryly.

'Are you listening to anything I'm saying?' Daniel's exasperated tone pierced his inner musings and he wrenched his attention back to his friend.

'No.' He admitted. 'How much longer is this thing going to go on for anyway?'

'Everybody's celebrating, Jack.' Daniel reminded him. 'We did save Earth again.'

Jack took a sip of his punch to avoid answering.

'So any plans for tonight?' Daniel asked trying to keep an innocent expression.

'Funny, Daniel.' Jack snapped.

Daniel was about to tease him about his mood when he caught the well-hidden frustration and nerves simmering in his friend's brown gaze. His own blue eyes softened imperceptibly. 'It shouldn't be much longer.' He said comfortably.
'You said that an hour ago.' Jack complained.

The archaeologist searched for another subject. His eyes alighted on Delek talking with Landry. 'So, are the Tok'ra serious about reinstating the treaty?'

Jack shrugged. 'They say so.'

'I guess our relationship with the Asgard is proving to be attractive since the Tok'ra want to clone Egeria.' Daniel murmured.

'Indeed, Daniel Jackson.' Teal'c said as he and Mitchell came to stand by the archaeologist's shoulder.

Mitchell smiled at them all. 'Is it just me or is it a little freaky that they kept the body and want to clone it?'

'That's what I thought.' Jack said in agreement.

'They are a dying race otherwise.' Daniel pointed out. 'And with the Asgard helping them, they have a real chance to do it successfully.'

Jack pressed his fingers to the bridge of his nose. 'Whose idea was it for the Asgard to help them anyway?'

'I believe it was Colonel Carter's.' Teal'c said answering the question although he was very aware that Jack already knew the answer.

'Her brain is back to normal, right?' Jack checked. Sam had collapsed on the Prometheus shortly after they had transported over and Jack had insisted Thor check her out. They had discovered that her brain had reverted to normal synaptic activity. They didn't know if it was being subjected to the ribbon device or whether Orlin had always meant for the effect to be temporary. Jack frowned. They also didn't know if Orlin's link between the two of them was still there or not; Jack preferred to think it was.

Daniel sighed. 'Yes, Jack.' He replied patiently. 'Sam is back to normal.'

Or as normal as any of them were, Jack thought smiling wryly and causing Daniel and Teal'c to regard him suspiciously.

Daniel sighed and decided not to pursue it. He gestured with his punch glass. 'What she did with the Replicator though; that was impressive.'

'It was.' Jack agreed. 'I always knew Carter could take her.'

'As did I.' Teal'c said.

'I don't get how she did it.' Mitchell said.

'Well, her brain was working at a more efficient rate.' Daniel explained. 'Sam was able to control what happened when they linked mentally because her brain was able to keep up with the Replicator's. The Replicator was always linked with her brethren so Sam was linked with them too.'

Orlin's gift had provided Sam with her most formidable weapon during her battle with her Replicator duplicate – her own mind.

'I could only take control for a short time, when I did it, because I had, have, a normal human
'Rule number twelve, Mitchell,' Jack said sighing, 'never ask how around either Daniel or Carter.'

'Is that right, sir?' Sam's amused voice startled the four of them and they whirled around to find her standing just behind them.

'How's everything going out there?' Jack gestured vaguely at the rest of the room quickly diverting the conversation.

'Slowly.' Sam sighed, her eyes meeting his ruefully.

'Tell me about it.' Jack murmured. He indicated the punch bowl to his left. 'Punch?'

She was about to reply when the President appeared beside them. The two military officers snapped to attention. Jack was about to follow suit when he realised he didn't need to anymore.

'At ease, Colonels.' Hayes smiled broadly at them all and regarded them with a fond look. 'I couldn't leave without thanking you all for saving the world. Again. How many times does that make it?'

'This is the tenth occasion, Mr President.' Teal'c responded solemnly.

'Teal'c keeps count.' Jack explained seeing the President's surprise.

'I understand you've lost the speedy brain thing?' Hayes said directing his question at Sam.

She refrained from rolling her eyes at her Commander-in-Chief and nodded. 'Yes, sir.'

'I'm afraid we're back to only having Carter produce one miracle a week like normal, sir.' Jack added.

'I think we can live with that.' Hayes said smiling at her. 'Although I have to say, the Asgard are thrilled with the new Replicator counter-measure especially as they're still uncertain about whether there may be any more secreted away in their galaxy. They're so thrilled in fact that they've agreed to work with us on a new ship design.'

'That's excellent news, sir.' Sam said.

'Yes, which is why they'll be another letter of commendation added to your collection, Colonel.'

Sam's eyes lit up with delight and she looked around her equally delighted team-mates and former CO before they landed back on the President. 'Thank you, sir.'

'No, thank you.' Hayes said. His eyes moved to encompass the whole team again. 'All of you.' He sighed. 'Well, I have to be making tracks.'

Jack made to move; he was supposed to escort the President to the surface.

The President waved him back. 'Stay with your team, Jack. I have more than enough Generals accompanying me to the top.' He indicated a beaming Hammond and Landry who were waiting behind him.

'Thank you, sir. Have a good trip.' Jack said happy to see the President finally leaving.
Unfortunately as the party began to break up various people wandered over to SG1 to say goodbye to them and delayed them further. The room was almost empty before they were left alone again.

'Well, if you'll excuse me I have plans.' Sam's blue eyes caught Jack's briefly before she smiled at the rest of her team-mates. 'See you guys tomorrow.'

Jack watched her leave and checked the clock. OK, he needed to check a couple of things but after that…

'I don't know about everybody else but I could do with a workout.' Mitchell said. 'Who's up for a little one on one basketball?'

'I will join you, Colonel Mitchell.' Teal'c offered.

'Sure.' Daniel said. 'Why not?'

'I guess you have plans too, sir?' Mitchell asked politely.

Jack nodded; Daniel had explained how he had come to tell Mitchell about Jack's relationship with Sam but he was still uncomfortable with the idea of the young officer knowing. 'And I have to think of my knees.' He quipped to get over his discomfort.

'Colonel Mitchell, perhaps it would be prudent for us to secure a court.' Teal'c suggested. He placed a hand on Mitchell's shoulder. 'O'Neill.' He bowed his head.

'General.' Mitchell nodded his own farewell as the Jaffa led him away.

'Well, I'd better go and…' Daniel gestured after the disappearing Mitchell and Teal'c.

'I'll walk out with you.' Jack jerked his head in the direction of the rapidly disappearing Lieutenant Colonel and Jaffa. 'He's working out well isn't he?'

'Who? Mitchell?' Daniel nodded. 'I guess.'

'You're allowed to like him you know.' Jack said.

'I know.' Daniel smiled at his friend. 'I was telling Sam the same thing last week when she was feeling guilty about her friendship with Carolyn because of Janet.'

Jack's eyebrows rose a little at the analogy. 'I'm not dead, Daniel, and I'm not planning on going anywhere.'

'Nope, you're not.' Daniel agreed. He shrugged. 'He was the reason I managed to come up with a way to get Landry to agree to let us go after you, you know.'

'Yes, well, Hank had a difficult call.' Jack said. 'He's not used to the weird stuff that happens around here yet.'

'I'm not exactly used to seeing you be replaced by a metal bug either.' Daniel retorted sharply.

'And what was with shooting that bug dead on sight anyway?' Jack questioned. 'Didn't it occur to anyone that it might have been me?'

'You?' Daniel said taken aback.

'I might have been transformed into the bug.' Jack pointed out as they got to the elevator. 'Stranger
'Jack.' Daniel began exasperatedly before he caught a glimpse of something in the depths of Jack's brown gaze and realised with a start that Jack was poking at him because he was nervous about his upcoming discussion with Sam. He sighed. 'You're going to be alright.'

Jack stilled registering the change of topic. 'How do you know?'

'You're just going to have to trust me.' Daniel said. He slapped Jack's shoulder gently and left him by the elevator.

Jack watched Daniel amble away down the corridor. He rubbed his hand through his grey hair and made his way to his office. He figured he would be out of the base in just under half an hour which gave him plenty of time to get everything ready for Sam arriving.

He had most things prepared and waiting to go; the table had been set, the food – a simple steak and salad – was bought and in the fridge along with a cake for dessert, a bottle of wine and some beer. He'd debated candles and settled for one short stub on the table only. He was aiming for cosy but not too romantic; despite his words on Dakara he figured they were someway off a proposal. They both needed time to adjust to the change in their relationship and he had no intention of rushing Sam and screwing up.

Walter entered his office a couple of minutes after Jack. 'I have a couple of things I need you to sign, sir.'

'Thanks, Walter.' Jack took the proffered folders and glanced down at the requisition papers. He grimaced and scrawled his signature at the bottom. 'Is there anything else?'

'Nothing, sir.' Walter said taking the folders back.

'In that case, I am out of here.' Jack said happily.

The alarm sounded.

'Oh for crying out loud.' Jack muttered.

He followed Walter back down to the control room.

'Unscheduled incoming wormhole.' Walter confirmed. 'It's SG6, sir. Code red.'

'Open the iris.' Jack ordered. 'Defence team to the gate room.'

The first blast hit the wall of the gate room; the second impacted the wall just above the observation window of the control room causing all of its occupants to instinctively duck.

SG6 stumbled through the wormhole onto the ramp.

'Close it up!' Jack yelled already on his way down the stairs. 'And get a med team to the gate room.' He entered the gate room at a rush. 'Brace, what the hell happened?'

'Sorry, General.' Brace said taking off his cap and touching a hand to a wound on his head. 'Hostile natives.'

'Noted.' Jack said. 'You'd better get you and your men to the infirmary.'

'Yes, sir.' Brace nodded. 'But I think we should debrief as soon as possible, sir. We found an
Ancient artefact on the planet, sir. We think it might be an Ancient repository.'

'You mean one of those head-sucky things?' Jack said alarmed.

'Yes, sir.'

'Debrief in one hour.' He agreed reluctantly. He made his way back up the stairs to find SG1 minus Sam running into the control room.

'What's happened?' Daniel asked.

'SG6 think they've found one of those head-sucking devices the Ancients left.'

'An Ancient repository of knowledge?' Daniel translated. 'Really?'

'Really.' Jack sighed. 'Debrief is in one hour. Daniel, it would probably be useful if you could attend.'

'Sure.' Daniel frowned. 'What about you? Aren't you supposed to be…' he let his voice trail away aware of the very public arena.

'Couldn't Colonel Emerson take the debriefing, O'Neill?' Teal'c asked stepping in.

'He's already left the base.' Jack replied to Teal'c. 'Besides he's trying to get his family settled. Let's give the guy a break in his first week.'

'Sir, I'd be happy to take the briefing.' Mitchell volunteered.

Jack was pleased at the young officer's offer but he knew he couldn't accept it; it was against procedure and if the debrief was about a head-sucky thing it really needed him. 'Can't do it, Mitchell, but thanks for the offer.' He sighed heavily. 'I have to make a phone call.' He made his way back to his office and picked up the phone before any of them could protest.

'Hey.' Sam replied her voice filled with curiosity at receiving a call from him.

'Hey.' Jack answered. 'Listen, there's a situation here, SG6 just came back claiming they found some Ancient thing. I'm going to be a little late.'

'OK. Do you need me to come back to the base?' Sam asked.

'No.' Jack said firmly. 'Look everything is pretty much set up at my place and it isn't locked. Why don't you head over and I'll be with you as soon as I can? I shouldn't be more than an hour late tops.'

'Are you sure?'

'I'm sure.' He answered without hesitation. There was a slight pause and he could hear his heart pounding in his chest as he waited for her answer.

'OK. I'll see you there.'

'OK.' He sighed again; this time with relief. 'See you later.'

Sam disconnected the call and focused back on her driving. Maybe she should have offered to delay their date until the next day. Her lips twisted. She didn't want to delay it.
Count them. Counting was something she was very good at. Mentally, she had ticked off the days and when the previous day had dawned she had moved onto the hours. She had quickly realised that the schedule for the inauguration of the new structure would preclude her and Jack being alone together until the evening and she had simply added the hours to their hastily arranged date to those she was tracking and striking off. In no small way the counting had kept her sane through the incredibly long and tedious day. She couldn't remember another time when she had ever actively looked forward so much to leaving the base.

She sighed as she pulled up in front of her house. Between the Presidential delay and the events back at the base that had delayed Jack, it did feel as though the universe was conspiring against them a little. It couldn't be helped, she thought as she made her way into the house. She figured there were going to be lots of moments in their future just like the one she was experiencing. Both of them were dedicated with a strong sense of duty – if they weren't, it wouldn't have taken them eight years to get to their first date.

Her musings had taken her into the house and through into her bedroom where she decided to look on the positive side of the latest delay. With the Presidential visit lasting as long as it had, she had thought she was going to have to rush getting ready but if Jack was going to be late she could take her time. She was going to pamper herself, she decided and do the whole date routine; bubble bath, make-up, hair.

In the end she arrived at Jack's house a little panicked that she would arrive after him. She checked her watch. Ten minutes before twenty-one hundred which would be exactly an hour after their date was originally scheduled to start. Jack's truck was missing from the drive and she sighed with relief. He expected her to already be there and she hadn't wanted him to arrive before her and give him any cause to think she was having doubts. She smoothed her damp hands on her jeans as she made her way into the house.

The door was unlocked as he'd said and she smiled wryly. He was going to get robbed blind one day. Maybe she could talk him into getting the dog he'd once suggested…the thought caused her to stop uncertainly in the hallway for a moment. Pete had suggested a dog and the very thought had confirmed to her she'd didn't love him enough to marry him; with Jack getting a dog seemed…right. She pottered into the kitchen and smiled at the contents of the fridge; got nervous at the dining table set for two in the room next door. Her fingers traced over the red and white chequered table-cloth, delicate china and crystal glasses. The traditional romantic trappings had her looking at her clothes ruefully. Part of the reason she had been late leaving her own house was because of a multiple number of clothes changes. She had settled for her current outfit; jeans teamed with a leather blazer and a blue silk shirt that highlighted her eyes and made her skin look luminous.

Looking at the table setting again, she figured she could have worn the new dress she had tried on first.

She sighed and checked her watch. Five minutes. It wasn't like she expected him to turn up on the stroke of twenty-one hundred. She wandered around and switched some of the occasional lamps on in the living area before she finally sat on the sofa to wait shrugging her blazer off. There were only a couple of minutes left. She wondered at her nerves. It wasn't as though she didn't know how he felt about her. If their goodbye on some spiritual plane when she had been dying on Dakara hadn't been explicit enough, finding out that he had offered his own life to save hers might have given her a clue. She shook her head. She didn't know if the link between her and Jack that Orlin had created when he was healing her was still there or not; she couldn't feel it but she had considered that it might take one of them being in danger for it to come to the fore. She hoped it would be sometime before they tested that particular theory; they'd both been in danger enough of late.
She was actually a little relieved to have her mind back to normal whether it had been a side-effect or an intentional act by Orlin. Having the ability to defeat her Replicator duplicate had been great and she couldn't deny that it had given her a lot of personal vindication but it was good to feel like her mind was her own again. There were some benefits that remained: she could still easily access Jolinar's memories and she still had the Ancient gene. She viewed the latter as a reminder of Orlin and the sacrifice he had made for her. Besides, she considered, as she rubbed her hands on her jeans again, Carolyn had given the go ahead for SGC personnel to begin the gene therapy – every off-world member of the base would soon have the same ability she had.

The clock on the mantel chimed. It claimed it was twenty-one hundred; her watch corroborated it. She sighed and reached for the National Geographic on the coffee table. She flipped through it idly before she glanced back up at the clock. Five minutes past nine. Great, she thought exasperatedly, she'd gone from counting the minutes before to counting the ones after. Maybe a glass of wine would settle her nerves. She headed into the kitchen and reached into the refrigerator for the bottle. Her eyes caught on the beer and she had a sudden idea. She moved quickly grabbing a beer along with the leather blazer she had discarded and a few minutes later, she settled into the oversize chair on Jack's roof by his telescope and looked up at the night sky. The minutes slipped by and lulled by the alcohol and her own tiredness, Sam closed her eyes.

She was asleep when Jack found her a couple of hours later. He sighed in relief at the sight of her. The debriefing had taken longer than he had anticipated; the first delay had been down to much needed medical treatment but once the debrief got underway, SG6's archaeologist had rambled; Jack had never seen Daniel so close to lynching one of his own people. In the end they had substantiated it wasn't a head-sucky thing but it had taken way too long.

Jack had tried calling an hour before to apologise and beg Sam to stay; when she hadn't answered he'd worried that she had been upset at ostensibly being stood up and had left. His mood had been pretty dark leaving the base but it had done a miraculous one-eighty on seeing her car in front of his house. Finding her had been a challenge but seeing her curled up on his look-out chair, her blonde hair mussed by the breeze and her face smoothed in peaceful sleep made it worthwhile.

He rubbed his hands back through his own thoroughly messed up grey hair and crouched beside the armchair. He cupped her cheek and winced at the coldness. She must have been sat out a while, he thought.

'Sam?' He brushed a thumb over her cheekbone and tucked an errant curl of blonde hair back behind her ear.

Her eyes snapped open, wide and startled before they settled abruptly at the sight of him. 'You're home.'

*I am now.* The thought popped unbidden into Jack's head. 'Sorry I'm late.' He said gruffly.

'That's OK, sir.' Sam murmured as she uncurled from the chair.

'You know you don't have to call me 'sir' any longer.' Jack's lips quirked upwards in a reluctant smile.

There was a faint glimmer of nerves in her face as she registered what she'd said. 'Habit.' She admitted defensively when she regained her voice. 'You only stopped being my CO,' she checked her watch and her brow creased a little at the time, 'fifteen hours and eight minutes ago.'

'You've been counting?' Jack asked amused.
Sam shrugged a little embarrassed.

Jack felt the rest of his tension drain away. She'd been counting. 'C'mere.'

He held out a hand to her and she left the chair willingly, sliding her hand into his. He pulled her to her feet and wrapped her against him as her arms went around him and held him as equally tightly against her. He buried his face in her hair as she pressed her face into the crook of his neck. Sam breathed in the scent of him and snuggled closer.

Eventually, Jack shifted so he could see her face, his soft brown eyes meeting hers unguarded and vulnerable. 'I love you, Samantha Carter.'

'I love you back, Jack O'Neill.' Sam said simply.

Their first kiss was soft, tentative and Jack eased back as he felt her lips curving into a smile under his. He looked at her questioningly and saw the smile actually started in the blue depths of her eyes.

'We're on your roof under the stars.' She said pointedly.

He examined her expression carefully. Maybe the proposal wasn't rushing things…maybe he wasn't going to screw this up. He began to sway a little with her; a barely perceptible movement. 'And we're dancing.' His voice wasn't quite steady.

'Yes.' Sam registered with a laugh. 'We are.' She hooked her arms around his neck, her fingers stroking through the grey strands at the back of his neck.

'I don't hear you telling me how the universe works.' Jack prompted shifting his own hold to her waist.

Sam's smile widened, simple joy gleaming back at him from her blue eyes. 'I have this theory…'

Jack's eyes held hers and he was sure she was able to hear his heart it was beating that loudly. 'Marry me?'

'Yes.' There was no prevarication, hesitation or indecision. She didn't need to think about it; didn't want to make him wait; they'd both waited long enough.

Jack gave a relieved sigh and brushed his lips across Sam's. Once, twice; the third time they settled into a kiss that quickly slipped into something altogether deeper that had Jack pressing her closer and Sam burying her hands in his hair.

The happiness her father had once wished for her wrapped itself around her and Samantha Carter finally stopped counting.

fin.

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