The Quality of Mercy
by ELG

Summary

Daniel's ill treatment by the priests of Onuris causes Jack and Teal'c to forget their own compassion. Trapped on a hostile world, it becomes increasingly apparent that SG-1 is trapped within a self-fulfilling prophecy of which only they are ignorant. (Set after 'Jolinar's Memories/The Devil You Know'.)

Notes

CONTENT WARNINGS: Violence. Language. Physical and emotional cruelty to SG-1. Attempted rape of a major character. Description of a medical procedure performed upon a major character. Mention of previous minor character(s) death(s). Some romantic implications in relationship between Sam and Martouf. Plus, Jack and Daniel hold a few rather dubious conversations. Basically every member of SG-1 is traumatized and/or physically damaged in some way during the course of this story. On the upside, Daniel is naked for one scene, and SG-1 do all briefly wear pyjamas.
Chapter 1

Prologue

Colonel Jack O'Neill could feel faint vibrations from the old ship shivering through his injured leg as he breathed in deep draughts of air that smelt of metal, unwashed bodies, his own dried blood, and, most overpoweringly of all, relief. After so many hours in the noisome pit of Netu, a little honest human sweat smelt good to him right now, and even a thrumming pain in his staff-weapon seared leg just felt like fate's way of telling him the Goa'uld hadn't got them this time.

He felt he had good reason for celebration. They were all alive against all the odds. They'd completed their mission and more, and, anyway, how many men got to say they really had been to hell and back? This was definitely one for those memoirs he was never going to write that even if he did no one would ever be able to read.

The pain in his leg was lessening a little now too. Although the adrenalin of their escape had begun to ebb, the stuff he'd been given by Martouf's buddy was starting to kick in. So although he could still feel it, a wave of tingling that came in through the sole of his foot, traveled along his nerves and then flared at the wound before easing off again, it was growing fainter each time, like waves hitting a beach with less and less power as the tide receded.

O'Neill shifted, trying to get his leg more comfortable. Having first tended to Carter senior, Aldwin, the Tok'ra with the interesting bruise on his face, had given O'Neill something that he said had analgesic and restorative qualities, before wandering off a little dazedly to have another conversation with Teal'c. Teal'c really seemed to have impressed Aldwin, and not just with the power of his haymaker. O'Neill recognized the signs with a slight smile. He'd seen it so many times before.

Every now and then some other SG team asked to borrow Teal'c for a mission, and they always came back with that look on their faces; respect didn't really begin to cover it, it was more like embryonic hero-worship. O'Neill always got a kick out of how impressive Teal'c could be to the unsuspecting and then he got an extra kick because Teal'c was on his team. Now he came to think about it, people who saw Carter in action either in the field or when she got started on astrophysics tended to take a step back in amazement too, so he could get a little smug about having had the good sense to pick her for SG-1 as well. (And okay, he hadn't exactly 'picked' Carter, but nevertheless she was on his team now, and he was damned well taking the credit for it.)

As for the third member of his team, well, most of the other SG Teams didn't really 'get' Daniel. They liked him and respected him but they didn't really understand him and they seemed to be under the impression he'd be a lot of hard work to keep in one piece, and his team-leader might get a little tetchy if they allowed any harm to come to him. O'Neill couldn't think where anyone had got either of those ideas from, but as they prevented too many people putting in requests to borrow SG-1's anthropologist when they'd carelessly allowed something to happen to their own, he was quite happy for those unjustified rumors to stay in circulation.

At this moment, despite the dull ache in his injured leg and the sulfur fumes still coating the back of his throat, O'Neill was feeling particularly proud of SG-1. He was also starting to think that there were worse things than discovering he was redundant. Well, maybe not redundant, but discovering that sometimes his team could manage pretty well without him. He'd always had faith in his kids, of course, but all the same it was nice when they managed to surprise even him.
For instance he still had no idea how Teal'c had managed to outwit two gunships in a clapped-out tel'tak that could only run on half power, but the Jaffa seemed to have taken that in his stride. The same way he had taken shoving Aldwin into the cargo hold before maneuvering the ship into the exact position to save all their butts in his stride. The Tok'ra had come up with a feasible plan to blow Sokar straight to a hell that sadistic Goa'uld hadn't had custom-designed, and Aldwin had carried it out even in the teeth of Teal'c's quite formidable opposition – which, now it hadn't gotten them all killed after all, O'Neill was perfectly willing to be impressed by.

Carter had coped admirably with having a father dying in a place of eternal damnation while simultaneously juggling her own bad memories and someone else's, and had figured out a way to bust them out of jail free. No more than he'd expect of her, of course, but still nice to have it confirmed that when the chips were down his team could exceed even their ever-optimistic Colonel's expectations. Then Martouf had managed to fake out Apophis very nicely – and that boy was full of surprises because up until then O'Neill hadn't thought the Tok'ra even knew how to cry.

Even Daniel, whom O'Neill would have half-expected to crumple from the strain of seeing Carter so upset, and Carter senior so clearly dying, and O'Neill having got shot right in front of him, and having the screams of the damned resounding in his ears for all those hours, had managed to hang on in there. He'd done a pretty good patch up job on his commanding officer's leg despite the fact his commanding officer had not been in the most co-operative of moods at the time. O'Neill had an idea he might have called Daniel a very bad word when the guy was binding up his leg. Still, what the hell, it had hurt and Daniel had pulled that damned tourniquet so tight and okay...he'd done it right and O'Neill had only snapped at him because he was pissed with himself for getting shot when they really all needed to be able-bodied if they were ever going to get out of there in one piece, but then, Daniel was a smart guy, O'Neill was sure he could work that out without needing an actual apology.

O'Neill was still a little surprised that Daniel hadn't started to lose it in that Pit because injured teammates and people being tortured all around him tended to eat into Daniel like an acid spill. And then, of course, having that confrontation with Apophis certainly couldn't have been easy for him, not to mention the little detail of having hallucinogenic gloop poured down his throat so he could be made to relive an old memory.... All in all, he would have half-expected Daniel to have been brought back to them pretty much a gibbering wreck. But the guy had managed to grab that communication device somehow, had helped him out of their dungeon and kept in touch with Teal'c so that their escape could be coordinated with the split second timing it needed, and hadn't even looked like falling apart.

In fact, thinking it over, the only member of SG-1 who had made no real contribution to their escape was Colonel Jack O'Neill himself. Although he had got himself first zapped by a ribbon device, and then shot by a staff weapon, with great efficiency, and had possibly stopped Daniel from losing it by making bad jokes at inappropriate moments to shock him back to the here and now, he hadn't done a lot else.

O'Neill closed his eyes and was immediately overwhelmed by a memory of the subterranean tunnels of Netu. Already coated with sweat, and the grime starting to settle on him like flies on a corpse; the stench of what was undeniably fire and brimstone in the air, chemicals clawing at his larynx, and that sudden emergence into a cavern like a Hieronymus Bosch painting. Tiers of suffering stretching apparently up to infinity as the red dark gave way to a red light still very much the color of blood.

He wasn't expecting the Damned to be the most civilized people he'd ever encountered, that was why he'd insisted Martouf let him and Carter bring their sidearms, but even he hadn't been prepared for this. He looked up, saw how many men, and the kind of men, they were dealing with, and realized he hadn't brought enough bullets. He was very aware of Carter appearing to be the only woman who existed in this place as anything other than a disembodied scream and his heart started to sink
like an elevator going down. Then he noticed some big ugly hairy guy with a whole bunch of big
ugly hairy friends looking Daniel over like he was the dessert tray, and the elevator became a cable
car in free fall. Nothing like enough bullets and how the hell had Martouf persuaded him to come
down here without Teal'c?

He couldn't protect them. There were too many bad guys and only one of him. He didn't have
enough bullets. And he couldn't protect them.

That was the moment of realization and even now, safe on the tel'tak knowing that every one of those
denizens who'd looked at his teammates and liked what he was seeing was incinerated in the fireball
the Tok'ra had made of Netu, memories of that moment could still chill him.

When, a minute after Carter and Daniel had been thoroughly ogled, Bynarr had blasted him with
the ribbon device then ordered them to be thrown into the Pit, it had actually come as something of a
relief.

From then on it had been a series of the kind of events he liked least: people coming and taking
members of his team away, and him not being able to do a damned thing to stop it. There was one
hell of an irony about Apophis having saved Carter's life like that. O'Neill and the Snake God could
now be said to go way back and if their grudge match wasn't quite up to the one Apophis had going
with Daniel, no one could have called them the best of chums. The fact Apophis had saved one of
O'Neill's team-members from what could definitely be designated 'certain death' was something
O'Neill was really going to get a kick out of...in a few months time maybe, when the thought of how
near Carter had come to being ribboned to death by Bynarr had stopped scaring the shit out of him
quite so much.

He looked across at his so-nearly-ex-teammate then, just to reassure himself that she was indeed
alive and well. Alive anyway. He wasn't sure how well anyone could be after having to go through
what Jolinar had endured, even second-hand. And the trouble was it didn't feel second-hand when
you had one of those memory devices stuck into your brain; it felt like it was happening now and to
you. And given what kind of stuff Jolinar had been put through after her capture, that added up to a
whole lot of bad memories for Carter which she was now going to have to carry around with her as
well as her own. Like some difficult stepchild you really didn't want to take responsibility for. (And
why was that making him think of Daniel, he wondered?)

O'Neill gave his head a shake to clear it, glancing back across at Carter while trying not to seem too
anxious. She looked tired and more than a little frail. And grubby. O'Neill hadn't noticed how dirty
they all were until now and looked down at his arms in mild surprise. That certainly wasn't his usual
skin color. Well, he was giving Carter ten minutes when they got back to base then it was his and
Daniel's turn to hit the showers. Actually, knowing Carter she'd probably want to scrape some of
this gunk off their skin and stick it under a test-tube just in case Sokar had managed to synthesize
some really interesting nasty chemicals on his little hell-away-from-home. Still, it was probably just
as well O'Neill had got himself shot in the leg because at least that gave him a good reason to ask
General Hammond to stand them down for a few weeks; which would give Carter a chance to take
that vacation with her father. Although he hoped Jacob had been kidding about Alaska because
O'Neill had been there twice before and unless you were really into getting frostbite it definitely
sucked.

Aldwin had given Jacob a whole load of something restorative for Selmac before packing him off to
a bunk, and Carter and Martouf were talking quietly in the corner about things O'Neill certainly
didn't want to overhear. He'd worked out what Jolinar had done with Bynarr to get out of Netu, and
knowing how the memory device worked that meant Carter had probably experienced every detail.
Not something he wanted to think about and....
There were so many things he didn't want to think about. He'd worried a little that if by some slim chance they survived this trip, he might have childhood fears of the Hereafter awoken. The burning fiery furnace and the worm in the eye playing through his dreams the way they had when he was eight years old, and his own belief system was still influenced by some lingering remnants of his grandmother's faith. But he supposed he should always have known the hell you carried around with you would be the one there waiting for you in Sokar's life-sized mock-up.

Hell, for him, was always going to be the game of catch he'd never got to play with his son. Angry words he couldn't call back now, however many times he willed them never to have been said. He didn't know if it made it better or worse than even with that Blood of Sokar stuff inside him to cloud his mind, he'd known Charlie was dead. But he'd been prepared to bargain with his ghost, was still seeking absolution from his shade even now. He'd thought it was Sara's forgiveness he'd needed, but she had forgiven him, looked him in the eye so he could read for himself how she didn't blame him, hadn't left him because their child was dead, but only because when their child had died he hadn't allowed them to be any help to one another, and what kind of a marriage was it where you weren't allowed to help each other? And because she still loved him, she'd even forgiven him that as well. He'd always known she was way too good for him but it had taken Sara twenty years of marriage to realize she deserved better than he could offer her.

But it was only after Sara had granted him the absolution he'd thought he was seeking that O'Neill had realized the truth: that he still had that hole inside him only someone else's forgiveness could ever fill. It was then he'd realized whose forgiveness it was he'd always needed. But Charlie had never regained consciousness. Never had and never now could forgive him. And perhaps Apophis had stumbled on his enemy's Achilles' heel by chance, but he'd got it terribly right all the same. There was almost nothing Jack O'Neill wouldn't have done to obtain that longed for absolution from his dead son.

His leg was hurting again, a spiteful throb, purring and jolting in time to the tel'tak. How come the good guys always got the worst equipment? How come Sokar had ships with cloaking devices and the Tok'ra couldn't even run to one that had suspension? And…

And Daniel had been very quiet since they'd got back to the ship. Like eerily quiet. And if he was asleep – which was perfectly possible – that was fine, but if he wasn't.... O'Neill cleared his throat before saying quietly, "Daniel?"

There was a long pause before he heard that, "Yes?"

"Nothing. Just wondered if you were okay?"

"I'm okay."

Yeah, sounds like it, Daniel.

At least he knew where the guy was now. Daniel hadn't moved from where he'd put himself when they first got back; up and directly behind O'Neill where he couldn't possibly see him unless he taught his head how to revolve. But Daniel was clearly not okay because if he was he would be sitting here with him, fussing over his leg, and the only reason he wasn't sitting here with him, fussing over his leg, was because his hands were obviously shaking too much for him to want O'Neill to see them.

O'Neill sighed. Daniel being quiet was never a good sign; it meant he was thinking. And if he wasn't thinking about how terrible a place Netu was and how nearly they had all died and how all those people had died – which would be his first guess – then he was probably thinking about whatever memory Apophis had been tormenting him with when he'd questioned him.
Thinking back, O'Neill realized he must have been drifting in and out of consciousness a lot while his teammates were being interrogated. It hadn't just been the Blood of Sokar still fizzing through his veins, but also the pain and blood loss from when Apophis' thugs had decided to do a little impromptu doctoring of his injured leg. The combination of faintness and nausea kept overwhelming him and then darkness would intervene for a while. It had been very disconcerting.

Apophis' heavies would come along and drag someone away and he'd still be in the middle of worrying about them when he'd wake up from having passed out again and find that he or she had been returned – usually in slightly shabbier shape than when they'd been removed – and another of his teammates had been taken away instead. Carter had come back that first time thinking she'd condemned her father to death. Martouf had come back crying, for crying out loud, crocodile tears as it turned out, but still very unnerving. And Daniel…. He had no memory of Daniel being taken away, just a vague recollection of waking up to hear Martouf asking why, when he thought he knew the address of the Tok'ra resistance, Apophis wanted to question Daniel at all? And that was when it had clicked into place what Apophis was after: the boy. Amaunet's child, or Sha're's child, the Harsesis who he'd told Daniel they could go look for next mission out.

His guts had turned over in that moment because he'd realized Apophis had no reason to feel well-disposed towards Daniel. When Apophis was dying, Daniel had told him he'd never find the boy; and then Daniel had taunted him with Amaunet's death only a few short hours before.…..

That was the point at which he'd started to feel relieved Apophis had found the memory device on Carter. Terrible as it had been to see Charlie again and know it wasn't Charlie; even though it had been like having his heart ripped out slowly, he was still glad that this was the route Apophis had chosen to make them talk. Because O'Neill hadn't even wanted to think about what the Snake God might have done to Daniel if there hadn't been this method so invitingly to hand.

Which wasn't to say Daniel might not have preferred to be conventionally tortured. At the time when he'd been having to say 'no' to his dead son all over again, O'Neill had thought being sawn in half slowly would have had to hurt less than this; but at least when they'd shoved Daniel back into the cell with them he'd been on his feet and not bleeding. He'd looked a little dazed but then Daniel sometimes looked dazed on a good day, and none of them had come back exactly firing on all cylinders after having their brains screwed with by Apophis. Of course, the really big surprise was that Daniel had managed to grab back that communications device; a feat so sneaky that O'Neill was still impressed by it even now.

There had been no time to ask Daniel anything then because O'Neill seemed to remember all hell really had started breaking loose right after that, and he'd had to concentrate all his efforts on trying not to slow Daniel down too much as the guy helped him hop his way back to those nifty little ring things that might or might not be sending them straight to Sokar. So, there hadn't really been a moment before now in which he could say, "So, Daniel, which bad memory did you get to play with?"

Going by those fragmented murmurings from Carter and Martouf, not to mention his own experience with the Blood of Sokar, Apophis had chosen a moment of great significance between the one he was questioning and the person they loved or trusted most. So Carter had been forced to relive the moment when she'd forgiven her father for his part in her mother's death, and O'Neill had seen Charlie again, so real and so alive it was impossible to believe that this was just a figment of his imagination, that this child he missed so much was just a tool through which Apophis was hoping to destroy the Asgard. And Daniel….…..

Well, there really wasn't any need to ask the guy what Apophis had put him through because O'Neill would have laid any money it was something to do with Sha're. Apophis would have had Sha're
come and ask Daniel to tell him where her son was – just about the last thing in the world Daniel needed to hear right now. And, God, Daniel hadn't told her – or rather Apophis – had he?

"Daniel…?"

"Yes, Jack?"

Daniel sounded so weary. Not just with him – although that, too, which was a little worrying, O'Neil had used to talk to his father that way when the guy was being particularly wearing – but with everything.

"Come and talk to me."

That wasn't what he'd been intending to say at all, but it seemed to work better than a more considered statement. He heard the soft thud of Daniel's feet hitting the floor and then Daniel was crouching next to him, looking anxious. "Are you okay? Is it that Blood of Sokar stuff? Are you still getting flashbacks?"

"Are you?"

"What?" Daniel had his dazed face on again. O'Neil knew Daniel was a clever guy, but he sure didn't look it when he was wearing that expression.

"Are you getting flashbacks? You've been very quiet."

"No." Daniel folded his arms protectively across his chest, but then had to unfold them almost straight away to put his right palm back against his clearly aching cheekbone. "Are you?"

"No." O'Neil squinted in the low light, peering at Daniel's face. "Did someone hit you?"

Daniel shifted uncomfortably and there was another memory he could have done without. Did someone hit you, Charlie? Is someone bullying you? What happened to your allowance? How did your coat get torn like that? Charlie never would tell him who it was. He'd fought his own battles. And maybe O'Neil had never been a match for a really determined ten year-old but he was damned if he was going to take that kind of crap from Daniel. "Who hit you? Was it Apophis?"

"What does it matter?"

He hadn't been prepared for that response. "What?"

"Well, what are you going to do, Jack? Go back to Netu and yell at someone? They're all dead. Apophis is dead. Sokar's dead. Everyone's dead."

Sha're's dead. O'Neil moistened his cracked lips before saying carefully, "We're not, Daniel. We're all alive, thanks to you."

Daniel's turn to frown. "Thanks to me?"

"You got the communication device back. Without it we'd be dead."

"I lost the communication device, Jack."

"You didn't lose it. It was taken from you." You didn't lose Sha're, Daniel; she was taken from you.

"So now you're going to nitpick over semantics?"
"I didn’t lose you and Carter when Apophis had his goons come and grab you, I had you taken from me. It really pissed me off, but it wasn’t my fault. You see the difference?"

Daniel gave him one of those sideways looks O’Neill had learned to hate; this was the expression Daniel always wore just before he said ‘Checkmate’. "And that would be why you don’t feel bad about it at all, would it?"

O’Neill heaved his best long-suffering sigh. "Why did Apophis hit you?"

"Because he was pissed off with me because I wouldn’t tell him where the boy was. The guard hit me because I hit him."

"And you hit him because…?"

"I needed him to hit me back."

"Okay. That makes perfect sense. When they were hitting you, was it with really big clubs, maybe? The kind that cause permanent brain damage?"

Once Daniel had unwillingly made him a proper explanation in his best I-really-shouldn’t-need-to-tell-you-something-this-obvious mutter, O’Neill did agree that Daniel’s plan had made some kind of sense. Not a lot of sense, but a small amount of it. And the fact they were all now alive instead of all now dead lent an extra bit of weight to Daniel’s argument that it had actually been rather a good plan. But he did wonder why it was all Daniel’s cunning plans always seemed to involve Daniel risking his neck or getting hurt.

Daniel briefly took his hand away from his face again and O’Neill winced at the bruise coming out across the younger man’s right cheekbone. It was a dull reddish-purple at the moment but it was going to be spectacular. O’Neill was going to be hobbling around on crutches for weeks and Daniel was going to be sporting a cheekbone that looked like it had been danced on by the Bolshoi in hobnailed boots, and the one of them who had probably had the worst time, Carter, wasn’t going to have a scratch. Which didn’t mean she was going to shake this off overnight. Experiencing someone else’s torture at what must have felt like first-hand wasn’t something you probably got over in a hurry, whereas having to carry around a memory of having sex with Bynarr….

O’Neill shuddered. Every time he closed his eyes he saw his son again, and when he could wrestle that image away, he was back in that red-lit chamber with those men eyeing up Carter and Daniel and him knowing there wasn’t a damn thing he could do to stop them. And oh God, they would have made him and Martouf watch it, and it had all been too damned close….

"You okay, Jack?"

Daniel sat down next to him so they were shoulder to shoulder, the way they’d been down in that Pit, and now, as then, it was obscurely comforting. In a place like that he’d wanted Daniel under his eye, anyway, just so he knew he was safe, but it was probably the first time he’d also taken comfort from knowing that Daniel was close at hand to take care of him. He tried not to lean on Daniel too often, in case the guy couldn’t take the weight, but it seemed to have done Daniel good to have O’Neill relying on him, had given him a focus, a way to keep his mind concentrated on something other than what a terrible place they were in and what terrible things were happening all around him. O’Neill wondered if he ought to lean on Daniel a little more often from here on in.

He almost said, 'I'm fine, Daniel,' the way he always did but then decided to be honest. "I don’t suppose any of us are going to shake this one off in a hurry. Let's face it, this wasn't a fun trip.”
He looked at Daniel to check his reaction and saw how upset he looked. Okay, perhaps Daniel hadn't been ready for quite that much honesty; perhaps a bad joke would have been a better idea. Daniel said tautly, "Jack, would you mind doing me a favor?"

"For you, Daniel? Anything." He said it with a grin, trying to lighten the atmosphere a little.

"Ask me where Sha're's son is."

"What?"

"Ask me where Sha're's son is."

"But you already told me. I know where he is. Daniel, I promise you, next trip out we're going to go and take a look at…"

"Jack!"

Daniel was all scrunched up inside, he could tell now he really looked at him, like his guts were clenched into a fist, trying to will the words out of him. Why ever it was Daniel needed this from him he obviously needed it badly, and ten minutes ago.

O'Neill said quickly, "Daniel, what's the name of the place where Sha're said Amaunet took the boy? She took him to a planet, right? Tell me where it is."

Daniel swallowed. "I already told you."

O'Neill frowned at him in perplexity. Daniel was gazing at him like a dog desperate to be taken for a walk and that fist was clearly still clenched in his viscera. Okay, so Daniel obviously still wanted something from him but he couldn't tell him what, O'Neill had to guess, and he was way too old for this shit, but…. "Tell me again?" O'Neill pressed.

It was obviously the right thing to say because Daniel relaxed and said, "Kheb, Jack. Sha're said Amaunet took him to Kheb."

"Well, thanks for reminding me. Can't think how I came to forget that." O'Neill looked at him curiously, itching to ask Daniel what the hell that was all about but knowing this wasn't the right moment. "You okay now?"

Daniel nodded and put a hand back to his face. O'Neill frowned and looked up as Aldwin came back into the bay. "You got any more of that painkiller stuff?"

He'd actually wanted the medicine for Daniel, but Daniel interpreted his request as the proof O'Neill was feverish and in pain and needed the dressing on his leg changed. By the time O'Neill had argued with him unsuccessfully on all those points, been forced to drink more Tok'ra gloop, and then taught Daniel some brand new words as he was having his bandage changed, Daniel was looking a lot happier, as well as having had his vocabulary expanded, which, for a linguist, was probably always an extra bonus. O'Neill was also pleased to see an exhausted Carter had gone to sleep with her head on Martouf's shoulder, so that was two of his team in better shape than they'd been an hour before, and Teal'c was presumably happy as well, continuing to display his proficiency in flying tel'taks by taking them back to Vorash, where, hopefully, they could 'gate home and get back to the infirmary. He'd never thought he'd be glad to see the infirmary, but compared with Daniel after an Air Force First Aid refresher course, Janet Fraiser was Florence Nightingale.

"Will you stop with the fussing already, Daniel? I swear you are turning into my mother."
Daniel fastened the new bandage Aldwin had supplied with what was definitely over-finchy neatness and then sat back on his heels to look intently at his handiwork. "So Apophis is definitely dead, right?"

"Daniel, he transported up to Sokar's ship; a ship we saw get blown to pieces."

"There were transportation rings on the ship. He could have transported to Sokar's planet. He could still be alive."

O'Neill grimaced. It was difficult holding a conversation with someone who kept staring fixedly at your bandaged leg and having no expression to his voice while he was asking you if the person who had ruined his life forever was definitely dead this time. Even forty-eight hours before, he would have said, 'Trust me on this, Daniel, the guy is toast,' but for some reason he couldn't say that today.

"Well, let's look at it logically. Apophis went up to see Sokar armed with false information about the Tok'ra resistance. If Sokar bought that crock Marty sold Apophis, he may have made Apophis his representative on Netu, in which case, Apophis could have been free at the time the bomb hit Netu, and he could have made it to the transportation rings. If that happened – and presuming Sokar didn't do the same thing and really is dead – Apophis now has access to a sarcophagus and the remnants of Sokar's power base, in which case I'm sure the Tok'ra will hear about it very soon and pass it onto us. More likely, Sokar didn't believe him and was in the process of killing him when the bomb hit Netu in which case Apophis is now dead and we don't need to worry about him any more. Either way, sooner or later, I'm sure we'll find out. And if he didn't die this time, he'll die next time. But, personally, I think he's dead. I think we got him and I think he's dead."

Daniel was looking at him in surprise; clearly appreciating not being fobbed off with a platitude this time but equally clearly not too sure why he'd been given the grown-up treatment. O'Neill felt a twinge of guilt as he saw Daniel's expression. Did he usually treat him like a child then? No. Definitely not. An annoyingly smart kid brother, maybe, but not a child.

He had a sudden memory of Hadante. The four of them trapped in a prison with the scum of the galaxy prowling around on the lookout for fresh meat. There had been times when it had felt as if every eye and every erection in the place was turned in Daniel's direction. And what had O'Neill said to him? How had he clued Daniel in on their current situation and the specific danger he was in from these people? Oh, Danny…? You've got to trust me on this…. Signs of weakness are not a good thing in prison…. Well, that had been clear and straightforward, hadn't it? Oh yes, and he'd taken Daniel's glasses off. Thereby making Daniel look so much less vulnerable, of course. It had probably stopped Daniel noticing the way all those guys with hard-ons were looking at him but other than that he didn't think it had done a whole lot of good.

Daniel said, "Thank you, Jack."

"You're welcome." He answered him automatically, not even sure what Daniel was thanking him for, brain still whirring in a way which said it didn't give a damn how tired the rest of him was it wasn't going to be shutting down any time soon.

Why hadn't he told Daniel the truth on Hadante? Why hadn't it occurred to him even for one second to just tell Daniel the real reason why they had to get the hell out of that place before he and Teal'c got so tired they had to sleep and so left him undefended?

Because you don't tell children about things like that. You protect them from finding out about things like that. You want them to hang onto their innocence for as long as possible.

That wasn't fair. Daniel being innocent was something everyone acknowledged. It was part of what
made the guy special and he wasn't alone in wanting Daniel not to lose that aspect of his personality. It had nothing to do with him treating Daniel like a child. Which he didn't, in any case. And never had. After all, no one could accuse Teal'c of treating Daniel like a son substitute and Teal'c hadn't told Daniel what the guy had tried to grab him for on Hadante, had he? He'd just hauled the son-of-a-bitch off him and started squeezing his windpipe until his eyeballs popped.

No, because you'd made it clear you didn't want Daniel clued in, hadn't you?

And why the hell were those little voices in your head never on your side?

Anyway, if he had ever treated Daniel like a child, Daniel would have been sure to mention it. This was, after all, a guy who despite knowing twenty-three languages had never been able to grasp the concept of 'shut up' in any of them.

God, you never show me any respect!

And on a good day you can be a little…ignorant and condescending….

Okay. Okay. There had been the occasional complaint. But on both of those occasions Daniel had not been himself. And even then, with his brain screwed up by that damned sarcophagus or those stupid plants…. I'm going to stick around and work on this quarantine thing with plant boy here…. Okay, that had possibly been edging towards what could perhaps be called 'condescending' but the plants had been screwing with his head too. And the point was surely that even then Daniel had never actually said: 'Stop treating me like a surrogate son, Jack.'

He opened his mouth to say, "Daniel, have I ever treated you like a child?" but then closed it again. What if Daniel said yes?

When he tried to discern any year-old resentment on the younger man's still-grimy features he found Daniel oblivious of his concerns and looking across to where Carter was asleep. Daniel lowered his voice to murmur, "Do you think Sam's going to be okay?"

Sticking to his new policy of total honesty, O'Neill realized the truthful answer to that question was, 'I have no idea,' but he figured Daniel might have had enough honesty for one day and went for the kinder option instead. "She's going to be fine, Daniel. She and Jacob are going to go do some serious bonding while I'm hobbling around at home getting bored, and she is going to be fine."

Daniel took a last look at Carter then glanced back at the white bandage around O'Neill's leg as though it was some fascinating artifact in need of translating. "And are you going to be okay?"

"You already asked me that. Twice."

"You didn't answer me. Twice."

So Daniel had noticed that then? Damn. It was getting harder and harder to get things past the guy these days. "I'll let you know, Daniel," O'Neill said quietly. "I'll let you know."

***

"Jack…? Jack!"

Daniel was calling his name. They were holding Daniel down, shredding him, tearing into him; every now and then O'Neill would catch a glimpse of flesh, hear another blow, grunts of pleasure, thick laughter, while Daniel struggled desperately to no avail, screaming for help over and over, louder and louder. He was trying to get to Daniel, fighting to get loose and help him but that
damned rope around his neck was squeezing the breath from his body….

"Damnit, Jack, wake up!"

He gasped into wakefulness to find Daniel using one hand to shake him with and the other to clasp across his mouth. The palm of Daniel's hand tasted salty – like you'd expect if he'd been rubbing the heel of his hand into his eyes to stop tears. God, Daniel had been crying?

O'Neill stared intently up into Daniel's face. Daniel did look distressed, it was true, and his eyes were suspiciously bright but there were no tear tracks on his face so…O'Neill became aware of the pinched wet feel of his own skin, the sting of drying tears overlaid by new trails of dampness. Suddenly the expression in Daniel's eyes began to make sense. Daniel was overflowing with compassion, not sorrow.

The hand was taken from his mouth and the water bottle proffered instead. Daniel's hand was a little shaky O'Neill noted clinically; more surprisingly, so was his own.

Daniel said quietly, "I think you may have a fever, Jack. You keep having these…awful dreams."

O'Neill took a deep swig from the water bottle and then wiped his mouth. "I don't remember them."

Glancing up at Daniel as he handed him back the water, O'Neill read in those blue eyes that Daniel had overheard way too much; shared pain that hadn't eased O'Neill's burden one little bit but had just dumped a whole load of crap on Daniel.

Although on waking he had been vaguely aware of a jumble of images, those had gone now, all he could remember was the last one, the one he really hoped Daniel hadn't heard enough to understand, and, oh boy, looking at his expression, Daniel had both overheard and understood.

"Martouf said you should take this." Daniel was putting something in his hand, a white tablet.

O'Neill took it, washing it down with more water – was he ever going to drink enough water to wash the sulfur burn of Netu out of his lungs? Daniel moved to sit next to him so their shoulders were touching again. He spoke in a low voice: "Jack, if anything should ever…happen to me on a mission, you know it wouldn't be your fault."

"It might be my fault, Daniel. If I screwed up and took you into a situation where you got hurt or killed, that would be my fault."

He was aware of Daniel shooting him a worried sideways glance. Daniel had his arms wrapped around himself to keep the rest of the world out and some comfort in. He wondered why the hell Daniel kept using that trick when he must know damn well by now it never worked.

Daniel said quietly, "Then let's just say I wouldn't blame you. If something happens to me on a mission, whoever's 'fault' you want to think it is, I don't blame you for it. I forgive you in advance, Jack. I am offering you unconditional absolution."

He'd been begging Charlie for his forgiveness, saying he'd play catch with him, answer him anything, if Charlie would just tell him he forgave him. Daniel must have soothed him back to sleep since then. Which was when the second lot of nightmares had started, the ones back in the Pit and oh boy…he must have been calling out to Daniel, telling those men to let him go, to stop before they killed him, threatening them, pleading with them, begging them…Oh Christ, he still didn't know how much Daniel knew about that kind of stuff. Back on Hadante Daniel had been almost scarily clueless. This time he wasn't so sure. There had been a moment on Netu when he'd thought Daniel had understood the look in that ogling bastard's eyes, but he'd hoped he was mistaken.
Why? Still want him to be innocent more than you want him to be safe, O'Neill?

How would Daniel knowing what they wanted to do to him have made him any safer? Those sort of people could smell fear half a mile off. All being scared gets you in a place like that is dead.

So does being ignorant.

O'Neill moistened his cracked lips, very aware of the tears drying on his face, of the realization Daniel had been trying to stem the flow of them with his hands while pleading with him to wake up and shut up before he woke the whole damned ship. He took another sip of water but it didn't help.

Daniel spoke again, “And even as I'm giving it to you. Even as I am giving you my unconditional absolution for anything that might happen to me while I am under your 'protection,' I know it isn't going to help. Because the person you have to square it with is such a mean, grudging son-of-a-bitch, who has never cut you an inch of slack since the day you were born.”

O'Neill looked up in surprise. He had never said word one to Daniel about his father. Or was Daniel going cosmic on him here, was he talking about God?

Daniel turned and looked at him then, saying intently, “I'm talking about you, Jack. You were a wonderful father to Charlie and he loved you. He would have forgiven you in the blink of an eye and you've always known it. The person who can't forgive you for what happened to him was always called Jack O'Neill. And he's the same guy who won't give you any peace if anything happens to Sam or Teal'c or me, but we don't want him on your case because of us. We never have and we never will. We like you way more than he does and we know you'd never let any of us down. If we die then it'll be because there was nothing you could do to save us." Daniel averted his eyes then and ran a hand through his hair. He spoke so quietly O'Neill could hardly hear him. "You know the best peace you could probably give Charlie is to stop torturing the father he loved for something which was never his fault."

O'Neill wondered if there was anyone else he would have sat there and taken that from without lashing out. Even now, and even though this was Daniel, and a Daniel who was a breath away from crying just out of compassion for him, there was a part of him that wanted to hit the guy for even saying Charlie's name to him. What made it worse was that of course Daniel knew that and had known it before he ever opened his mouth and didn't even care if he hit him or not. Which was another reason, of course, why hitting Daniel wasn't an option, which made everything he'd just said that much more annoying.

O'Neill said softly, "Do you know what my last nightmare was about?"

"Yes."

"About what those guys were doing to you?"

"Yes, I got it. I expect everyone else got it, too, but it still didn't happen." Daniel reached across and took the water bottle back from him, not quite a snatch, but as close as someone like Daniel probably ever came. He gulped down a mouthful quickly.

O'Neill waited until Daniel had finished swallowing, wanting him to hear what he had to say. And not just because he wanted to punish Daniel for what he'd said about Charlie – although maybe that was part of it as well – but also because he thought it was about time they both looked this possibility in the eye. Time to start treating him like a grown-up, right? "But it could have happened."

"But it didn't!"
O'Neill reached out and grabbed him by the shoulder, digging his fingers in to make Daniel turn his head and look at him. He repeated the words carefully, "But it could have happened, Daniel."

"It still wouldn't have been your fault and I still wouldn't have blamed you for it, and I would still have wanted you to have a life afterwards."

"Even if you didn't? Even if yours ended there, like that, in that stinking pit, with a whole bunch of stinking men holding you down and...?"

"Yes, Jack. Even then. There is no way that anyone can kill me that I will blame you for it, okay? Sometimes people just die and it's nobody's fault. And I don't ever want you to wake up screaming because of me. I don't ever want to be part of the stuff you do to yourself. So, when you're totting up the list of Bad Things you have done that you deserve to suffer for, you can put any damned name on that list you like, however insane it might be, except mine. You have to promise me you'll never put my name on that list."

There was a long pause before O'Neill took the water bottle back from Daniel's hands and took another swig. "Don't die, Daniel," he said with a shrug. "Because that is the only way to keep off that list. Don't get yourself killed, or maimed, or tortured, or...whatevered and then I can't blame myself for it, can I?"

Daniel groaned and banged the back of his head gently against the embossed rim of the first tier of seating, gold hieroglyphs beating a faint tattoo onto the back of his skull. "You are such a stubborn, unreasonable son-of-a-bitch sometimes."

O'Neill shrugged. "Sorry, Daniel, nice try but this one's on you. You don't want me to wake up screaming because of you, don't give me any cause to."

"Can't we just agree that if it happens, I won't blame you and you won't blame me?"

"But I will blame you, Daniel, and I'll blame me, too, so don't let it happen and then I won't have to."

Daniel closed his eyes and shook his head. O'Neill smiled then because he didn't get to win arguments with Daniel very often but they both knew he'd won this one; which wasn't bad for a man wrestling with nightmares and fever and a staff weapon burn to his right leg. "Face it, Jackson, you are way out of your league here."

"But I'm right," Daniel protested faintly. "And we both know it."

O'Neill's smile got wider. "And since when has you being right ever made any difference to me? If I let a little detail like that start influencing me who knows where it would end?"

"Actually I was wrong once tonight," Daniel said conversationally. "You're a stubborn unreasonable son-of-a-bitch all the time."

"And you wouldn't want me any other way."

Daniel gave him a look that spoke volumes.

O'Neill shifted uncomfortably under that withering gaze. "Well, okay, maybe you would. But tough."

A proper little smile from Daniel at last. Good. He'd been thinking Daniel was never going to smile again. Daniel was dropping his head a little to try and hide it, not wanting to give O'Neill the satisfaction, but he'd seen it and he knew what it meant. Daniel was going to be okay. Carter was
going to be okay. And Apophis might have bequeathed them a whole bunch of new bad memories as
his parting gift to them, but hopefully that snake was finally dead this time, which had to help a
whole hell of a lot, right?

O'Neill said quietly, "Yes, I am, Daniel."

Daniel gave a little jolt beside him and he wondered if the guy had just been drifting off. If he'd been
keeping him up with his nightmares, he was probably tired, but still it had to be said.

"What?"

"You asked me if I was okay? Yes I am. We're all alive and I'm okay."

Daniel said drowsily, "Well, I'm really tired, Jack, so shut up and let me get some sleep, will you?"

O'Neill realized that Daniel had managed to have the last word yet again. Then a heavy weight on
his left shoulder told him Daniel had fallen asleep on him, which these days meant Daniel was
feeling either very insecure, very protective, or was just so damned tired he didn't care where he
was. Probably a mixture of all three in this instance. O'Neill looked around for a jacket to drape
around him, realized there wasn't one within snagging range and so settled for putting his arm
around his shoulders instead. Perhaps Daniel wasn't the only one feeling insecure and protective
because he found it very comforting to have the guy under his hand like that. It had to be harder to
have a nightmare about someone being dragged away from you and killed when you could feel his
breath against your neck the whole time.

When he closed his eyes, he could still see Charlie standing there with that water-pistol in his hands,
but he was damned if he was going to let Apophis hurt him with that image. His son hadn't been so
very clear in his memory in a while now. He could actually remember the way his bangs had been
cut so unevenly, that little overbite, the way he spoke, the fresh clean smell of him even, and that was
a good thing, right? Because he sure as hell didn't ever want to forget one detail of the way his son
had been. And the other stuff was just a combination of a slight fever and the after-effects of not
having been able to protect Carter and Daniel; but actually Carter and Daniel had done fine
without him, and Teal'c had done fine without him, and everything was okay. And what was more
he'd decided that he now knew the definition of a successful mission for probably the first time in his
life.

The fact they'd managed to save Carter's father, kill Apophis and blow Sokar out of the sky, well that
was just the icing on the cake; that didn't make for a successful mission. The point was that they'd
been to hell and come back from it, alive, in one piece, and pretty much the same people they'd been
when they left, and maybe it was the age he'd got to now or maybe he'd just learned to expect less
from life, but he now believed that any mission where he could check those three boxes could be
counted as a success.

It was only as he drifted back to sleep that it occurred to O'Neill that whatever good they might do or
aims they might accomplish, it also meant that any mission where he couldn't check those three
boxes, would have to be counted as a failure.

***

Part One

As the Stargate dematerialized behind him, Daniel noticed what appeared to be a building a few
hundred yards away up a short incline. There was a heavy mist rolling out from the trees which
obscured much of the surrounding landscape, but the stark lines of the structure still emerged from
wraiths of ground cloud, at once forbidding and magnetic. Cursing the mist, Daniel pulled out his binoculars. Even through the haze he could see the building was an odd mixture of pyramid and ziggurat, strongly suggestive of some cultural cross-pollination in the distant past. He adjusted the focus, trying to see if he could make out the markings on the walls but although there was clearly something inscribed upon the jointed blocks, with the mist still rolling in like a wolf pack, he couldn’t tell if they were hieroglyphs proper or a cursive derivative.

It was two months since they'd escaped from Netu. Jack's leg was so well recovered there was only a faint pinkish-fawn line on his thigh where the staff weapon had burnt its reprimand into his skin, and he no longer had even the trace of a limp. But the memory of the moment when Apophis' henchman had just turned around and blasted Jack for no real reason; could have killed him as quickly and as pointlessly as that, was still an open wound in Daniel's memory. Sam had come so close to being murdered by Bynarr, and Jack had come so close to being killed right in front of his eyes. And if it hadn't been for Teal'c's superhuman determination to get them out of there, come what may, they would all have literally burned in hellfire when Netu erupted around them. Daniel wasn't sure that he was ever going to get over that.

As Jack had only been allowed out of the infirmary on condition he was given round-the-clock help and supervision, and as Daniel had felt Sam and Teal'c both really deserved a break after their recent exertions, Daniel had volunteered to be the one to spend a month as an unpaid home help to an injured Jack O'Neill.

It had gone better than Daniel had anticipated in that neither of them had killed the other, which, given how fraying to the nerves they had both found their trip into the underworld, and how unbelievably crabby Jack was when convalescing, he thought was a minor achievement in itself. The mornings were the trickiest, but he'd found if he staggered out of bed three hours earlier than he wanted to in order to throw breakfast at the guy like he was a hungry mastiff, pretended not to hear anything Jack said for the first hour of the day, didn't read the newspaper before Jack did (Jack liked his paper uncrumpled as he remembered from when he'd first come back from Abydos), reminded himself at least once a day that inappropriate sarcasm, although annoying, hurt no one and Jack was probably in pain, and doubled his own caffeine intake from the moment he opened his eyes, they could live together reasonably well without the need for bloodshed.

Jack had threatened to throw his crutches at Daniel on the occasion when a particularly heated debate about why someone with an only half-healed burn on his right leg couldn't drive himself to a hockey game had culminated in Daniel hiding the keys to Jack's jeep. But although Jack had looked as though he meant it and Daniel had actually been getting ready to duck, Jack had settled for hopping angrily into the kitchen and opening and shutting all the drawers as loudly as possible to vent his frustration that way.

The next day Daniel had accepted the bag of chocolate walnut cookies Jack had limped down to the imported groceries store to buy him in the spirit of apology in which they were meant. Jack hardly ever actually said he was sorry, even when he'd been unspeakable, but he would indicate that he was sorry by suggesting they watch the Discovery Channel instead of ESPN, or pointing out that there was a lecture on Egyptian hieroglyphs being given by one of Daniel's old colleagues in Boston and they could fly over there and heckle him if Daniel liked.

Apart from the fact he and Jack were getting worryingly like an old married couple by the time the month was up, Daniel felt that the taking-care-of-Jack duty had gone pretty well all things considered, and had helped work off some of the debt he felt he owed him for all the taking-care-of-Daniel duty Jack had done in the past. Sam had come back from her vacation with her father looking a lot less tired and worn than when she'd left, while Jacob, thanks to Selmac, had made a complete recovery from his ordeal in Netu. The only downside to looking after Jack (apart from the
actual looking-after-Jack part of having to look after Jack which had been a downside all by itself) was that Daniel hadn't had as many opportunities as he would have liked to sit down with Sam and discuss how she was bearing up since Jolinar's memories had been tripped in her mind like a particularly nasty set of landmines. They had talked about Netu, and Jolinar, and even a little about Martouf, but Bynarr had remained undiscussed, and Daniel hadn't had the heart to ask her if she was waking up remembering the dead Goa'uld's leering face.

Looking across at Sam now as she fiddled with the panel of the DHD, speaking rapidly to Teal'c about Goa'uld technology while the Jaffa gravely nodded his head, he was reminded of his first meeting with her; how it had been like another kind of homecoming to suddenly find himself talking to someone who understood what he was saying; whose own mind could follow the ellipses his was always making and could make sense of his conclusions. It was as though after years of believing himself to be an orphaned only child, he'd suddenly discovered he had a twin sister he'd never met until now.

He wondered what the Sam who knew how it felt to be a Tok'ra thought of the Sam who'd leapt so eagerly through the Stargate that first time out and almost lost her lunch on the other side of the wormhole. He thought Sam probably had more pity than contempt for her earlier self; but for himself there were days when he thought that if you put him a room with the man he'd used to be, they wouldn't have a single thing left to say to each other.

Except, of course, they had those two things in common that would never change: absolute love for Sha're; absolute trust in Jack O'Neill. Even though Sha're was dead and unreachable; someone he had failed to save rather than someone he believed he would one day save, his love for her hadn't altered. And there was still something he could do for her; he could find her child and deliver him from the Goa'uld; protect the Harsesis from the danger his hereditary knowledge placed him in….

And, damn, he was still getting flashbacks to that Blood of Sokar stuff. He didn't know how long he'd been waiting to hear those words from Jack. Logic told him that it couldn't be more than four years, and as he hadn't really known the guy well enough to care that much about his opinion on their first meeting, it was more likely three years, at the most; but it felt like a lifetime.

All the same, he'd never thought for an instant that Apophis would know to choose that scene to try and trick him. Having overheard what Sam had said about what the Blood of Sokar did to your mind he'd been braced for a memory of Sha're, for those beautiful eyes gazing into his; that mouth he so missed whispering in his ear how much she loved him and how much she wanted to see her child again, asking him to tell her where he'd been taken, please, my Daniel, please….

But, of course, Apophis was clever, and Daniel had been given three long years to accustom himself to the idea that Sha're wasn't always Sha're, that Sha're was more often Amaunet, and Amaunet couldn't be trusted. Jack, however, could always be trusted. Jack could be trusted absolutely. Jack would never lie to him.

And then Jack had lied to him. Had asked him so nicely where the boy was that Daniel couldn't believe it at first. The conversation hadn't gone quite like this last time; something was wrong but… then he'd realized what it was: Jack was asking him what Apophis wanted to know. Jack was doing Apophis' work. Jack was lying to him….

Even though he'd known this couldn't really be Jack, how could he refuse him anything after what the man had just given him? How could he say 'no' to Jack when Jack had just told him he believed in him? Saying 'no' to Jack in that moment had felt like the hardest thing in the world.

He was still getting nightmares. Even two months later. It was ridiculous and he knew it, but a Jack who lied to him frightened him more than any Unas; a Jack he couldn't trust, who looked like Jack
and sounded like Jack, and was so much Jack in every way but told him things that weren't true; that was real horror; that was the bottom ripped out of his world.

Even now, standing on a grey-green planet fifty thousand light years from the smoldering remains of Netu, feeling the mist dampening his hair and glistening on his skin, a glimmer of that false memory could still chill him to the bone.

Daniel had just about got to the stage in his post-Netu recovery where he didn't feel he had to have one of his teammates within sight at all times or else he started panicking, but he still found himself doing a quick inventory now, just to see that, yes, there they all were, alive and well. Sam and Teal'c were still looking at the DHD with keen attention, Jack was pointedly looking at his watch and yawning because the conversation was obviously miles over his head and consequently boring him rigid, while Daniel could feel that temple tugging at his right eyeball, demanding that he turn and gave it another glance. So everything seemed to be pretty much back to normal.

And that temple really was calling to him now and he wondered if he could just go up there and take a quick look round before anyone....

The sound of the Stargate re-engaging made him glance around in shock, but to his relief he saw only that Sam appeared to be doing some kind of test dial. However, just in case they were planning to turn around and go straight home again, he thought he'd better just point out the temple to them first. "Guys?"

Sam and Teal'c were still deep in their clearly very technical discussion about the DHD. As the wormhole disengaged and disappeared for a second time, he heard Sam say, "So, okay, at least we know we can dial out, my worry is....." Mist rolling across between them muffled the rest of her sentence and remembering the DHD they had once found smashed and inoperative, Daniel felt a twinge of unease. He hurried back over to them, stumbling on the uneven ground.

He was in time to hear Teal'c say, "I concur, Major Carter. If that were the case then it would be better if we could disconnect it ourselves."

"Everything okay?"

As neither Teal'c nor Sam answered him, Daniel turned to Jack who shrugged expressively. "It seems this DHD has an extra gizmo we haven't seen before. Apparently it works fine, but Carter just isn't going to sleep at night if she can't find out what the extra component does."

"Well, sir, I'd just hate to think the Goa'uld had something we didn't."

Daniel could see that this was going to take a while. Sam was nothing if not tenacious and she clearly wasn't going to stop experimenting with the DHD until she'd cracked the mystery of the extra component, while Teal'c had the quiet persistence of water wearing its way into rock. Jack, by comparison, was obviously already cold, bored, and likely to be getting irritable any time soon. Daniel's first instinct was to just leave them to it and go have a quick look at the temple on the hillside before anyone thought up a good reason why he shouldn't. However, commonsense told him not to just head off without telling anyone, although not perhaps as loudly as curiosity was telling him that he should.

"Carter, are you going to try every possible combination on that thing?"

Daniel winced at the exasperation in Jack's voice, realizing that this was clearly one of those times where if he asked if it was all right for him to examine an ancient building of cultural significance Jack would just tell him irritably to stay put. He said tentatively, "Jack, there's a really interesting – "
"Don't want to hear it, Daniel, and whatever it is, the answer's no." Jack blew on his fingers pointedly, making Daniel wonder not for the first time why the man always wore fingerless gloves instead of the ones that actually kept his hands warm. But now would probably not be a good time to ask that question either. A supposition confirmed as Jack raised his voice to shout, "Teal'c! Carter! Just how long is this likely to take because some of us are ageing here?"

As casually as he could, and turning his head so that the mist would swallow most of his words, Daniel murmured, "Fascinating temple up on the hill there – looks like it could maybe be Mesopotamian. I'm just going to go take a look at it. Okay?" Then he backed up the hill, turning around after a few yards to hurry towards the temple.

***

Daniel pushed open the double doors tentatively and found himself in a huge echoing chamber. He took out his flashlight and tentatively shone it around the walls, the powerful beam immediately revealing an enormous statue of what was clearly a god flanked by two stone lions. The deity was depicted carrying a spear and wearing a headdress consisting of four long plumes.

Daniel murmured to himself, "Anhur, also called Onuris, derived from the Egyptian word anhuret 'he who brings the far near', also called Inhert; consort of the lioness-goddess Mehit. Let me think – yes, first attested in the Thinite region in Upper Egypt but by the Late Period associated with the delta site of Sebennytos where a temple was dedicated to Onuris-Shu by Nectanebo the Second. Sometimes associated with the Greek God Ares – interesting – does that mean we're talking one Goa'uld or two? Did the Goa'uld adapt to gain new worshippers, move in on each other's territory, or is this something to do with one host dying and being replaced? Anhur. Onuris. The champion of Egypt who hunted and slew the enemies of Ra. Called by some the Son of Ra – not good news for those of us who killed him if Anhur should drop in to see how his worshippers are doing – often portrayed as an avenger, called also the 'lord of the lance'. So – vengeful, warlike, and an ally of Ra. So far, so not so good."

He turned to look at the walls and found them pockmarked with an incalculable number of alcoves in which stood pottery jars the color of blood, most of them broken into three or more pieces. It took Daniel a moment to recognize the red clay as execration texts, pictures of bound captives inscribed with hieratic cursing rituals. Here and there were changes in the pattern – jars not yet broken, or, more disconcertingly still, texts inscribed on broken and unbroken human skulls. Fascinated and yet also a little taken aback by the number of enemies being cursed in the name of Anhur, Daniel took off his glasses, wiped them on a corner of his jacket and put them back on. He shone his torch onto the nearest skull. "Nine bows," he murmured aloud, "the figure nine representing three times three which was the plurality of pluralities thus designating the entirety of all enemies. Okay, total destruction being invoked for everyone who has ticked off Anhur ever, so we're definitely not talking about a benevolent deity here, and maybe it might be a good idea for me to leave now."

As he turned to go his eye was caught by more hieratic text inscribed upon a pillar. Daniel translated aloud, " 'May I be granted power over the waters, for I am he who crosses the sky, I am the Lion, I am the Slayer. ' That's interesting, that's from the Book of the Dead except they've cut the references to Seth and Ra. Maybe in this culture Anhur is supposed to be Ra, and I wonder if the lions here are supposed to be some kind of tribute to Anhur's mate, Mehit, or if this Goa'uld's version of the Anhur cult actually borrowed from Aker?"

As Daniel went to make his way back to the open doors he found himself face to face with men who wore lion manes for hoods, carried long spears, and had inscribed upon their foreheads the four long plumes that represented Anhur. Before Daniel could open his mouth to explain who he was, something struck him so hard that he was wrapped in darkness before he even hit the floor.
The plaintive cry of that bird of prey circling overhead gave him an unwanted reminder of P8X-873. As Teal'c and Carter worked on the DHD, O'Neill blew on his fingers and tried not to remember how light Sha're had felt in his arms as he carried her corpse back to the 'gate. Only the metal jewelry had given her weight, just as it was the only thing about her that was truly cold, truly lifeless. Her skin had still been warm. Just like Charlie had still been warm. But with Sha're there hadn't been any blood; just that hole in her midriff where the staff blast had gone right through her. At such close range that was what a staff did to a human body, but despite the terrible wound she'd still looked so beautiful. Eerily peaceful too. So calm. So lovely. And, unfortunately, so dead.

The picture which kept coming into his mind as he picked her up from the floor of Amaunet's tent and carried her out into the daylight was of Daniel, also with a dead Sha're in his arms, gaze fixed upon him with such trust, saying 'Wait for me.' On Ra's ship, Daniel had put Sha're in a sarcophagus and saved her. This time there was no sarcophagus. And perhaps, too, there was no will to bring her back. Not to this. To life as a host to that snakebitch Amaunet; someone who had just taken so much pleasure in using Sha're's hand to wield the ribbon device that had damned near killed Daniel. Daniel had passed out only a few seconds after O'Neill had entered the tent but even though he'd headed straight for him, Teal'c had still got there first.

He glanced over his shoulder to reassure himself he was still breathing and saw the younger man's chest rise and fall. Teal'c was carrying him, not in the usual fireman's lift, but the way you carried children. Perhaps that was why Daniel looked so rag-doll limp and defenseless with his seared face nestling against the Jaffa's shoulder. Teal'c had told him three times now that Daniel was going to be okay, but he sure as hell didn't look too good. He'd seen Daniel after he'd been in the grip of ribbon devices twice before, but this time the burn on his forehead and the bridge of his nose was much worse than when Klorel had tried to kill him. Which meant Amaunet must have got dangerously close to turning her host into a widow before Teal'c had made Daniel a widower.

Daniel a widower. He still couldn't take it in. All this time, all this effort, all that hope, all that belief, in Daniel's case, that sooner or later they would be bound to get Sha're back, and now it was over. He'd had such mixed feelings about her for so long. The sweet girl he'd barely met on Abydos whom Daniel loved transformed into the Goa'uld Queen who'd just stood there when Apophis knocked Daniel across the room on Chulak, before making another transition into the friend's wife who'd given birth to another man's child. An unwilling adulteress and equally unwilling murderess transformed by an alien parasite into someone who might so easily bring disaster upon them all. To O'Neill, if not to Daniel, she'd been the enemy as well as someone they needed to save. Someone he wanted to rescue for Daniel's sake yet knew if they did it would probably cost them. If they were lucky it might only cost them Daniel leaving SG-1 to go back to Abydos, but there had always been the fear a glimpse of Sha're in the distance would be the bait which lured Daniel to his death.

O'Neill stepped carefully over a Jaffa corpse as the wind tugged at Sha're long dark hair, making it lap and coil against his arm like a caress. It was perfumed and the scent of it was maddeningly sweet; a velvety contrast to the sharp tang of carbide still tainting the air. He raised her up a little higher and it was hard to believe there really wasn't a heartbeat to listen for any longer and never would be again; her face showed such extraordinary peace. He was almost grateful for the savagery of that wound. Sha're had the look of someone who could be coaxed back from this death so easily, but that staff blast carried a blistering finality. There were no more possibilities left to them now. The quest might have ended in tragedy and failure but at least it had ended, and he was grateful for the closure. He'd never thought a part of him could be consoled by the smell of burnt flesh.

As he raised her awkwardly, the sunlight glinted off her red and gold headdress, momentarily dazzling him. Amaunet's headdress with its serpent emblem. But this wasn't Amaunet. This was...
Daniel's wife. Kasuf's daughter. Skaara's sister. A citizen of Abydos by birth, and Earth by marriage, who shouldn't spend another second burdened by the weight of Apophis' love tokens. O'Neill wasn't a fanciful man but he felt certain Sha're spirit was chafing at these dead gold bands, unable to be free while they still burned her skin. He pulled off the headdress and threw it to the ground, disordering those dark coils still further. He couldn't manage the ribbon device but Carter came and helped him. She eased it off the dead woman's hand gently then removed the gold armlet as well. When O'Neill looked over his shoulder to see how Daniel was doing, he received a gentle nod of approval from Teal'c.

Despite the fact it was a weapon she could use, Carter threw away the ribbon device then very gently smoothed back Sha're's hair. He'd known she was seeing what he was seeing when she said quickly, "Maybe one of Amaunet's Jaffa might still be alive. She must have had a sarcophagus somewhere, or maybe the Tok'ra...." She trailed off as she shook his head.

"It's over, Major," he said it quietly. "She's gone."

"I know, sir, it's just...Daniel...."

He followed her anxious gaze and so saw the look on Teal'c's face. One he recognized and not just from the Cor-ai when Teal'c had practically demanded to be put to death for his past crimes. He'd seen that expression in the shaving mirror way too many times to forget.

He said, "You did the right thing, Teal'c."

"I do believe I took the only appropriate action to save the life of Daniel Jackson, and given the same circumstances I would do it again." The Jaffa raised his gaze from Daniel's burnt face and didn't attempt to hide the bleakness in his eyes. "But Sha're is still dead because of me."

O'Neill grimaced. There was no answer to that and they both knew it. So much depended on Daniel now. Absolution couldn't come for anyone but him. Daniel had demonstrated his generosity, his compassion, and his fair-mindedness so many times in the past, but maybe this would be too much for even Daniel to forgive.

Silently, they made their way across the battleground to where the Stargate was shimmering, the last of the Abydonians already escorted to safety by the other SG teams.

Tightening his grip on the dead woman in preparation for stepping into the liquid blue light, O'Neill looked back the way they'd come. Another battlefield. Another set of corpses. The dead of the SGC would receive proper burial with honors but Amaunet's Jaffa would be left to rot. There was neither the manpower nor the will to bury them. He could see the tent in which Sha're had met her death, blue and gold pennants flapping in the breeze, the corpses scattered across the sandy soil, their blood adding salt and iron to the earth. And overhead one perfect silhouette against the sun; the first of the buzzards beginning a slow circular glide as it assessed the banquet spread out beneath its wings....

"Colonel?"

O'Neill gave himself a mental shake, blinking as he found himself cold and bored in the rain of a different alien world once more. "What?"

Carter was looking up from the DHD, brow creased with concern. He wondered what the problem was with the damned technology this time but sincerely hoped she wasn't going to attempt to explain it to him because life was definitely too short.
She was looking around like she’d lost something, before turning back to him with a hint of anxiety in her eyes. "Sir, where's Daniel?"

"He's right – " O'Neill turned to where he thought the younger man was then spun full circle as he found only empty space beside him. "He was right here."

Teal'c was gazing into the mist. "There is a large building on the brow of the hill which appears to be of early Earth design. Daniel Jackson may have wished to examine it."

Turning to look at the looming temple, O'Neill said, "Yeah, and the sea may be a little on the wet side this time of year. Did anyone else hear me tell him 'No'?" He put his hand up to his earpiece and said quietly, "Daniel?" As the silence lengthened, he grimaced. "Daniel? Daniel, if you're there, answer me. Daniel? Damnit!"

He exchanged a glance with Carter who immediately tapped her own earpiece and called Daniel's name herself. She shook her head. "But if Daniel is actually inside the building, he might not be able to hear us. Some kinds of stone do block radio waves."

O'Neill gave her a humorless smile and nodded at the DHD. "Yeah. Okay, Carter, leave that for now, let's just go find him before something else does."

They headed up the hill with more resignation than annoyance. O'Neill knew Carter would be secretly sympathizing with Daniel's desire to learn about ancient civilizations, Teal'c was as imperturbable as ever, and even O'Neill himself wasn't exactly surprised the archaeologist had proven incapable of resisting the lure of yet another big block of stone with some interesting squiggles on it. There were times, though – and this was definitely one of them – when he did wonder if he should just take the direct approach with Daniel, and on the next occasion when the archaeologist did something particularly annoying or dangerous, instead of patiently explaining to him the folly of his action, he should just clout him smartly around the back of the head. After all he'd been patiently reasoning with Daniel for three years now to no noticeable effect, perhaps it was time for a change of strategy. "Anyone know if he had a weapon with him?" he enquired wearily.

"Or did he leave his sidearm on the ramp like that time when he stopped to tie his bootlace at the last minute?"

"He definitely had it with him," Carter said reassuringly.

"But whether or not it would occur to Daniel Jackson to use it if danger threatened is a different question," Teal'c put in.

"True," said O'Neill. "I've met rocking chairs with faster reflexes."

Teal'c looked at him sideways. "I meant rather that Daniel Jackson would be more inclined to try and converse with those who threatened him even if their attitude was unfriendly."

"I know. Why do you think we're hurrying?"

"I definitely think Daniel's got a lot better at looking after himself over the last couple of years, sir."

"Well, he could hardly have got much worse, really, could he, Major?"

He grimaced after he said it, feeling their disapproval radiating back at him. Okay. They never mentioned Daniel's less than razor sharp reflexes. They never mentioned the fact that he wasn't a soldier and needed a little bit of extra protection on missions. Dissing Daniel simply wasn't done on SG-1. Yeah, well, sometimes, a guy had to vent. And when Daniel scared them all silly putting himself in harm's way for no good reason was definitely one of those times.
As they reached the huge arched doorway, Teal’c glanced impassively at the sign over the lintel. "This is a temple to Onuris – a vengeful and warlike Goa’uld believed by many to be the son of Ra."

"Let’s just hope the chip off the old block isn’t home because I am frankly too cold and wet to want to tangle with any Goa’ulds today, and particularly not ones whose fathers I blew to hell with a nuclear bomb."

Carter was examining the temple with close attention, running some device that looked like a Geiger counter over the entrance. "This is a stone I’ve never seen before, sir. It contains small quantities of naqadah, some iridium, some other elements I don’t recognize which could…."

"Is it blocking our transmitters?"

She sighed resignedly at the interruption. "Yes."

"Then I’d say that was pretty conclusive evidence Daniel is in here somewhere. Let's see if we can’t retrieve him while he’s still in one piece."

Although O’Neill’s tone was deliberately easy, he had his finger poised over the trigger of his MP-5 as he pushed open the door. Seeing how dark it was, he cautiously switched on his flashlight, ready to extinguish it in an instant if anyone fired at them. The beam picked out a towering statue of what he presumed to be an Egyptian god in funny headgear, and walls stuffed with bits of broken crockery. The light from Carter and Teal’c’s flashlights was also raking the walls and floor. "Daniel?" O’Neill hissed. As there was no reply, he said more loudly, "Daniel?" He wasn't worried yet, he told himself; there was a concern, yes, just enough unnecessary anxiety inflicted upon him that the prospect of giving the archaeologist a good hard shake still had some appeal, but not yet truly worried. "Daniel!"

It was Teal’c’s beam that bounced off the broken glass and O’Neill felt the tempo of his pulse change in that instant because he knew at once what it was.

The three of them crouched by the wall in silence looking at the broken spectacles. One lens was badly cracked, the other smashed. The metal frames dangled from Teal’c’s fingers reflecting tiny streamers of light, the sidepieces looking wire thin and unexpectedly delicate in the Jaffa’s powerful hands. Teal’c said, "They appear to have been knocked across the room, breaking on impact with the wall."

O’Neill said tautly, "Pretty much what you'd expect if someone had just hit the guy who was wearing them really, really hard."

"Sir, I don't think we should jump to conclusions," Carter put in at once. But he could tell by the catch in her voice that she was arguing with him not because she disagreed with his analysis of the situation but because she wanted to go on hoping for something better for a little longer.

"I think we should find Daniel as quickly as possible." O’Neill was already on his feet and raking the walls with his flashlight, trying to think what would have attracted the archaeologist's attention first. Looking up he saw a balcony ran around the top of the temple, two stone staircases carved diagonally into the walls leading up to it. It reminded him of a tier in a theatre, suggesting somewhere from which people could view the proceedings.

He had a horrible suspicion of what kind of proceedings would have been viewed. "Spread out, let's take a look around…." He jabbed a finger at the far end of the temple, getting a nod in return from Carter, then headed in the opposite direction. He knew what he was looking for, he just really hoped he wasn’t going to find it.
A few minute's inspection, told him this wasn't going to be his lucky day. Beyond the towering statue, he found what looked suspiciously like a sacrificial altar; the metal rings in each corner of the capstone providing all the proof he needed. But he was given more anyway. Way more than he wanted. Something had stained the stone a dull red and when he looked on the floor beneath it, he saw the flagstones showed a similar rusty tinge. A discreet gutter led to a small drain. Somehow O'Neill didn't think it was for rainwater from a leaking roof tile. Bending down quickly, he put his hand to the gutter. It was dry. That was the only good news they'd had so far.

He remembered Daniel telling him about the so-called Slaughter Stone at Stonehenge in England. The one that looked as though it was stained with blood because of some kind of iron ore in the rock. He usually managed to tune Daniel out when he started telling him about ancient monuments but for some reason that explanation had stuck. Perhaps he'd been in a good mood that day and decided to humor the archaeologist, or more likely they'd just got Daniel back from the dead by the skin of his teeth and O'Neill had been ready to put up with anything, he was just so damned relieved to see him back in one piece....

O'Neill looked back at the altar, the metal rings, the gutter, the drain. The blood stains. He shivered. Definitely afraid for Daniel now, he turned to the walls, pulling out his knife and running the blade between each set of stones in the hope of tripping some kind of locking device.

When he glanced across at his teammates he saw Teal'c was trying to find anything he could turn, a hieroglyph that moved beneath his fingers, some mechanism that would persuade these planed blocks of sandstone to show them the inner door he knew must be concealed somewhere in this cavernous chamber. At the other end of the temple, Carter was doing the same thing, running her fingers over the raised symbols in the hope of finding one that would show them a door.

Having unsuccessfully searched every inch of the far wall, O'Neill joined the others. "I think these people might be into human sacrifices."

Teal'c went to examine the altar and came back looking grim. "I think you are correct, O'Neill."

When he looked at Carter he wasn't surprised to see she'd gone very pale. He was feeling pretty green around the gills himself.

She rallied before he did and her words surprised him. "That might actually be a good thing, sir."

He stared at her in disbelief. "Please, do tell me how?"

"Well, if they sacrifice trespassers to Onuris they'll have to bring Daniel back here to kill him. If they found him wandering around in here looking at the artifacts – "

"Which is so incredibly likely I think we'll just take it as read."

"Then he'll probably be condemned to death for sacrilege." She turned to look at Teal'c for confirmation and the Jaffa nodded. Carter continued with more confidence, "They'll have to prepare him for sacrifice and then bring him to the temple to be killed on the altar. As long as we stay here, we can rescue him."

"And what if they take him somewhere else completely?"

"Why would they? If they believe that Daniel offended their god they'll want their god to witness how vigilant they are about punishing unbelievers."

"I believe Major Carter is correct," Teal'c observed. "They are probably preparing Daniel Jackson for sacrifice even as we speak."
"And that involves what exactly?"

"It varies from cult to cult but usually the would-be victim is bathed, dressed in sacrificial robes, and his head shaven in readiness."

"Oh great, two members of SG-1 with no hair, how's that going to look?"

"Sir –"

"Okay, Carter, least of our worries right now, I agree." O'Neill looked at the stone staircases again. "Right, let's go over these walls again, see if we can find a way to open them."

***

They searched every inch of the temple, using knives and fingers to try and find a mechanism to make one of those massive blocks slide aside and show them the way Daniel had been taken. All of them had determinedly insisted that if anyone had brought him outside of the temple they would have noticed it, despite the mist. But as the hours rolled past without them making any progress and there being no sign of their teammate, O'Neill couldn't help wondering if perhaps Daniel was ten miles away by now, or even already dead.

He pulled off his gloves to go over the wall again, just in case the mechanism could only be triggered by bare skin, trying to will one of these impervious blocks of strange stone to yield up something. Behind him he was aware of Carter and Teal'c doing the same; Teal'c exploring every hieroglyph with a look of grim concentration on his face; Carter trying to hang onto logic and hope when despair was doing its best to distract her.

When he closed his eyes to try to feel every stone edge more clearly he saw Daniel lying on that crisp white pillow with that 'Y' shaped burn marring his face, like the mark of Cain falsely branded on an innocent. He'd spent too many hours in the infirmary waiting for Daniel to wake up over the years and by that point the place was really starting to get to him. He'd felt like a dog who'd had one too many trips to the vet and there was a part of him which just wanted to dig in his toes and never cross that threshold again. But leaving Daniel to wake up alone was marginally worse even than having to spend another mind-numbing, soul-deadening session by his bedside, so he'd pulled up a chair and borne it. Not without complaint, certainly, but borne it all the same.

He hated the antiseptic smell of the infirmary. The sound of all those damned machines bleeping as they told the nurses what Daniel's insides were doing now; his heart-rate, his oxygen level, his brain activity, his kidneys, his glucose levels, his mineral levels. Probably hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of the best equipment money could buy and not a single machine able to tell him squat about how Daniel was going to react when he woke up and found his wife was dead and Teal'c was the guy who'd killed her. O'Neill must have rehearsed a dozen different ways to tell him the bad news and in the end he hadn't needed any of them.

He thought he'd been prepared for anything. Confusion. Rage. Denial. Tears. He'd been ready to calm Daniel down, reason with him, or put his arms around him and let him sob out all his sorrow on his shoulder. What he hadn't been ready for was Daniel waking up and asking him to believe the impossible once again....

"Sir...?"

The warning hiss made him jump. O'Neill looked up to find Carter and Teal'c both listening intently, and then he heard it too. The tramp of footsteps on the ground. People approaching. Lots of people.
There were square pillars close to the walls, the space in between each one a welcome pocket of darkness and O'Neill gestured at Teal'c and Carter urgently, wanting it crystal clear. No engagement unless unavoidable. Find a shadow and blend into it. Keep within eyesight of everyone else. Stay close. Stay quiet. Stay afreakinlive, people. Pressing back against the wall, O'Neill could see Carter in the alcove to his right and Teal'c on his left, both of them trying as hard as he was to achieve invisibility.

O'Neill had his MP-5 raised in readiness as the double doors opened, spilling fading light and faded people into the temple. Hundreds of them, skin and hair color mostly middle-Eastern in appearance, although there were a few here and there with much lighter or darker hair and skin, all of them humming with the kind of suppressed excitement football crowds got before a really important game. He didn't speak the lingo but he could see the glitter in their eyes: even the air seemed electrified by the intensity of their anticipation. They were dressed in drab robes, and he could smell from a few feet away that these people didn't believe in soap and hot water. But they clearly took their pleasures seriously because they were packing the aisles here. He caught a glimpse of a lone blonde woman whose eyes were red-rimmed and shadowed. She alone seemed indifferent to the treat awaiting her. She looked the way Sara had in the weeks following Charlie's death. Existing in a waking nightmare where she operated on automatic pilot, hoping perhaps it was reality which was the dream. Someone jostled her as she went past the place where Carter was pressed into the shadows and she brushed the tip of Carter's MP-5 without even noticing she'd done so. Behind their pillars, O'Neill and Carter exchange an expressive glance. The crowd poured past their alcoves then seeped up the staircase like people finding their places in a theatre.

O'Neill winced as he realized the significance of that analogy. These people had turned up to see something. It was obviously nearly show time.

Right on cue, the stone wall on the far side of the temple from his hiding place slid back with the faintest grating noise, revealing a tunnel puddled with torchlight. MP-5 held in readiness, O'Neill wished vainly for a smoke canister to spread a little confusion when the moment came. He didn't like the idea of firing on probably unarmed priests but he liked the idea of Daniel being sacrificed to appease a vengeful Goa'uld even less. He could only hope that some way would present itself of their getting Daniel out of there without causing too much bloodshed.

As he stared intently at the place where the wall had opened up, he saw one priest with some fancy headgear followed by two priests without, and prayed for Daniel to be the next person he saw. When he was, his heart practically did a handstand with relief. That sensation stayed with him for approximately two and a half seconds before the anger set in as cold and bright as midwinter in Maine. "Damn it to hell," he said shortly.

"Oh my God," Carter breathed from the next alcove. "What have they done to him?"

Daniel still had all his hair, not to mention his own clothes, and there was just the one mark on his face presumably from the blow that had knocked his glasses across the room to smash against the wall; a bruise on his left cheekbone which was unsightly but clearly superficial. Apart from that Daniel didn't appear to have a scratch on him and yet his skin had gone past white to grey from some pain O'Neill didn't even want to guess at. Daniel seemed shocked almost to the point of death; someone at whom so much horror had been thrown that his mind had shut down. He staggered along between the priests, barely aware of his surroundings, apparently indifferent even to his imminent murder on the altar of Onuris, so stupefied by what had been done to him that death would clearly come only as a merciful release. When, at a nod from the one with the headdress, the two priests seized his arms to hold him still, Daniel didn't even seem to notice.

This was why these people had come to the temple, because they were eager to watch a blasphemer
put to death on the altar, pouring eagerly into the chamber to witness the sacrifice to their God. There were more priests coming out of the same walls that had been so unyielding to their examination earlier, their skin also white and repulsively hairless. O'Neill thought they looked like maggots who lived perpetually underground. The one O'Neill took to be the High Priest, surveyed the assembly with evident satisfaction and shouted out a lot of words in Goa'uld the last of which was 'Shokmar!'

The crowd took up the High Priest's words, cheering and shouting, "Shokmar! Shokmar!"

"I thought you said this Goa'uld's name was 'Onuris'? And what the hell happened to Daniel?" O'Neill looked behind the pillar at Teal'c to see if he could throw any light upon Daniel's condition, and blanched. He'd thought himself as angry as it was possible for any sentient being to get until he glanced at the Jaffa and saw the expression in his eyes. This was a rage he had never seen before. For a second his friend almost frightened him. "Teal'c?"

"They have used Shokmar upon Daniel Jackson." Teal'c could barely speak for his fury.

O'Neill turned to Carter for enlightenment but she was staring in horror and pity at Daniel's pathetically dazed progress across the temple.

"What's Shokmar?" O'Neill demanded.

"The worst torture yet devised by the Goa'uld. The device for inflicting Shokmar was as yet unperfected when I was in the service of Apophis but I heard it spoken of many times. It was reputed to cause nerve pain like the blast from a zatnikatel but one that could be sustained for as long as the Goa'uld wished without killing the subject. Though the victim appears outwardly unharmed, every fiber of his being is left screaming in agony." Teal'c swung up his staff weapon and primed it.

Carter jerked her head round in disbelief. "You can't mean to kill these people in cold blood?"

"My blood is anything but cold, Major Carter."

"Teal'c, these people are slaves to the Goa'uld, they don't know what they're doing."

"The priests of Onuris serve their master willingly for the wealth and power it brings them, just as they tortured one who had done them no harm for the advancement they hoped it would bring them. They are unfit to live."

"Sir?"

O'Neill wrenched his gaze away from Daniel with difficulty and saw Teal'c stride purposefully out from his alcove. Carter looked at him as Daniel had so often in the past: wanting him to make everything better without anyone getting hurt. Well, Daniel had already been hurt. And it looked like he might have been hurt so badly they were never going to get him back. Whatever Teal'c had planned for the priests who'd done this to their teammate, O'Neill didn't think he was going to want to stop him.

He said flatly, "Keep up, Major;" then followed Teal'c. And yes, Carter, I do mean with current events. When he glanced back over his shoulder to see if she was following, he saw her shoot another despairing look at Daniel as if she was hoping some miracle would have occurred to turn him back into the man they knew, before hurrying after him.

Teal'c was already advancing into the torch-lit center of the temple. As O'Neill caught up with him, Teal'c shouted, "Kree! Cravens of Onuris! You are worthy of the god you serve!"
The blast from the staff weapon hit the statue squarely in its massive chest, the stone head toppling from the broken shoulders as the body imploded beneath it with what seemed to be deliberate slowness, before shattering in several pieces on the ground. O'Neill hadn't realized the statue was holding up the ceiling until chunks of stone began to rain down around them.

Still firing with frightening calm, Teal's strode swiftly across the temple, the terrified priests scattering like flocking birds. Without their hands to hold him up, Daniel crumpled to the floor. Not even breaking stride, Teal'c dropped to one knee, hefted Daniel over his left shoulder and was back on his feet and firing again as he turned to come back, the last blast leaving the lower torso of Onuris rocking precariously on its stand.

"Teal'c!" O'Neill shouted the warning despairingly as the last of the statue crumbled and fell with a thunderous roar, the terrible object crushing several of its priests as it did so. The statue had torn a hole from the roof of the temple as it fell and the sky was visible, stones still raining down upon the worshippers of Onuris.

O'Neill flailed at the thick clouds of dust. "Teal'c!" he shouted hoarsely just as the Jaffa strode out of the chaos unscathed. A huge piece of stone rolled past him and chips of granite scattered about Carter and O'Neill like vicious hail, but Teal'c seemed indifferent to the destruction all around him. "Come, O'Neill," Teal'c said. "Let us take what remains of Daniel Jackson away from this place."

Carter hesitated again in the doorway, distress in her blue eyes. People were groaning and dying all around the chamber, the temple was a ruin, full of dust and the scent of blood. She gazed at O'Neill pleadingly. "Sir, we can't just leave them."

O'Neill looked at Daniel, slumped over Teal's broad shoulder, face so drained of color even his lips were grey. "Actually, I think we can." He followed Teal'c out into the mist.

***

As she dialed up, Carter was torn between her anxieties over Daniel – now so frighteningly still and pale over Teal'c's shoulder – and the people they'd left dead and dying in the ruined temple. She knew the Colonel couldn't really be as indifferent to the wounded as he was pretending, he was too compassionate for that. But this wasn't the first time she'd seen that shutter come down over his eyes, the one which said he was withdrawing all consideration from everyone and everything except his team. He'd done the same thing in Hadante. Horror had been happening all around them but all it had done was spur him into a more and more single-minded determination to get the four of them out of there, and to hell with everyone else. And in particular to get the four of them out of there before anything...untoward happened to Daniel.

Daniel. She hit the last symbol and waited for the blue light to flare. They'd get Daniel home. Janet would think of a way to coax him back from wherever this 'shokmar' had sent him. And as soon as Daniel was in the infirmary, was safe and being cared for, the Colonel's natural humanity would reassert itself. He would back her request for them to return to this world with a medical team to care for the wounded, she was sure of it.

It took her a few seconds to realize there was no event horizon. No 'waterspout'. No blue light. No wormhole. No way home.

"Major...?"

"I pressed the right symbols, sir," she assured him quickly, then dialed up again, each symbol lighting up as she touched it, that comforting heavy 'thunk' as the chevron was locked in place. It had taken her a while after they'd been thrown through the Antarctic gate to stop flinching in expectation...
The Colonel's voice told her all she needed to know about how frayed his nerves were: "Okay. Now put it back how it was."

She turned to look at him. "But I did, sir. It's exactly as it was when we arrived here."

"Except when we arrived here it worked." He darted a glance over his shoulder at the smoking temple. "We need to get Daniel out of here."

"I know." Carter was already pulling off the control panel to look at the crystals. "Sir, believe me, it should work."

Through what were all too plainly gritted teeth the Colonel said, "I want to believe you, Major, but the fact you're dialing and nothing's happening is starting to affect my trust."

Carter hastily checked the connections and then straightened back up; hitting the first six symbols quickly then offering a brief prayer before the last one. When she pressed the point of origin nothing happened.

The Colonel was gripping his MP-5 so tightly his knuckles were white. She could feel him willing her to make it work. And she would make it work. She had to. They needed to get off this world and get Daniel back to the infirmary. Except it should be working now and she couldn't find any immediate cause why it wasn't and what if she couldn't do it? What if it was like Antarctica and she just couldn't figure out what was wrong…?

So clearly it was as though he was standing by her shoulder, she remembered Martouf saying 'You have to.' She flinched now as she had then. It had come as such a shock when her mind was still half-wrapped in Jolinar's memories. She'd been feeling such tenderness for him, the realization of how much he and Jolinar had been in love still reverberating through her even as she recalled the sensation of their last kiss, the taste of his dry lips against hers, feeling so grateful for his silence, the tact he'd shown in not mentioning the danger which lay ahead of her…ahead of Jolinar…. So difficult not to feel affection for someone a part of her had once loved, difficult also not to feel compassion for the man who'd loved Jolinar so very much. She'd felt a sudden rush of tenderness towards Martouf in that moment and even now she didn't know if it had come from Jolinar of Melkshur or Major Samantha Carter.

And then he'd been ordering her to remember, looking at her with eyes that saw only Samantha Carter, not Jolinar, his voice so brisk and impatient. It had felt as though he'd slapped her.

"Major…?"

It was the desperation in the Colonel's voice which sharpened her mind into focus and made her perceive the obvious. She wondered how she could have failed to notice that winking red light mocking her so spitefully. As she stared at the device on the DHD whose purpose she and Teal'c had not been able to fathom, her heart sank. "Sir, someone or some thing has activated the Goa'uld device."

"What?"

She pointed to it. "It's the only thing that appears to be working."
"Well, switch it off again."

"I'm not sure I –" Her eyes widened as she saw figures beginning to appear out of the ground cloud drifting across the grey hillside behind him. "People, sir, coming down from the temple."

As Teal'c raised his staff weapon, the Colonel caught his arm. "Let's just get Daniel the hell out of sight."

A few scrubby trees and bushes so bent and gnarled it looked as though they spent their days in combat with the soil offered the only nearby cover and they ran for it, Teal'c effortlessly keeping pace with the Colonel's loping run despite the extra burden of weight he carried across his shoulder. Carter guarded their retreat, turning circles as she brought up the rear, hoping the mist would swallow them like bad memories before the wounded worshippers appeared.

As she slithered down into the undergrowth, the whip-thin twigs lashed at her face and she flinched. Thinking of that bruise on Daniel's face she dared a glance in his direction then flinched again. He looked the way her father had in Netu, chilled beyond the bone, death-white and stunned by the savagery of the pain he had been made to endure. She remembered how in the Pit Daniel had immediately taken off his jacket and given it to her for her father. How he'd looked so close to tears on their behalf: Jacob's suffering, her sorrow. When the Colonel had made some joke he'd been horrified, as though the man had tap-danced across a graveyard. She wondered if Daniel ever realized how much he needed the Colonel to make those jokes, to stop him getting so twisted up inside with the pain of others he couldn't even function.

Now she felt like she guessed he had in that moment. She would have given anything to have his pain transferred to her because anything was easier than standing there and watching him suffering. He looked so...null, as though there was barely enough of Daniel left inside for him to ever find his way back. She turned to Teal'c, trying to read something in those steady brown eyes that didn't speak of defeat. "How is he?"

"What's our situation?" the Colonel's question overlapped her own and drowned it.

Carter peered through the trailing stems of a thornbush to see a group of people gathering around the Stargate, grey silhouettes in the mist. They were all wailing and some of them were beating their breasts, crying out for what might well have been mercy.

"They don't appear to have seen us, sir, but we're cut off from the Stargate." Even saying the words chilled her. Cut off from the Stargate on any world was the one place none of them ever wanted to be.

Teal'c was about to lay Daniel down on the ground when O'Neill stopped him. "Wait, the grass is wet and we should probably try to keep him warm. I mean – he's in shock, right?" O'Neill pulled the emergency blanket from his vest and spread it out. Teal'c placed the unconscious Daniel on it as gently as though he was made of eggshell. O'Neill didn't want to see the look of sorrow on the Jaffa's face that told him there was no point in hoping, and he certainly didn't want to see Daniel like this, frail as paper, barely breathing; he could practically feel the younger man retreating further and further into himself, still trying to get away from the pain that had found its way to every cell. "Is he going to be okay?"

Teal'c's voice was grave. "I am sorry, O'Neill. I fear that very soon there will be only the husk of Daniel Jackson left to us. Shokmar destroys all those it touches and they say its flame, once ignited, goes on blazing for many hours."
"Like a third degree burn to the psyche." Carter's eyes were bright with pity and she looked very close to tears. "How could they do this?" she breathed, pulling the blanket from her own vest to place over him.

"Because they are evil," Teal'c returned flatly. He took off his jacket as he spoke and placed it under Daniel's head. "He will not return to consciousness until the pain recedes but that will not be for many hours, and by then it will be too late. His mind will have been dissolved by suffering."

He wasn't going to accept that. Daniel was not going to end up a vegetable. Daniel was going to get better. He'd got him through that sarcophagus withdrawal and he was going to get him through this. O'Neill said firmly, "Except if we can stop the pain there's got to be a good chance we can get him back fast enough to stop that stuff burning him out, right? I mean we're talking something like an electric current applied to the nervous system, aren't we? They zap every nerve in your body and they keep doing it until there's enough current inside you to keep the charge going by itself? And just the fact of being in that much pain for that amount of time, basically overloads your brain circuitry. Is that pretty much it?"

"That is correct."

"Okay. So we have to switch off the current – we have to stop the pain and let him heal."

"Even if that were possible, the trauma of undergoing Shokmar changes its victims out of all recognition. They become what you call vegetables."

"Not Daniel." O'Neill was going through his pack, desperately trying to remember what they'd brought this trip out and hoping to God he'd been given something stronger then Tylenol. "That is not going to happen to Daniel." He didn't care how many other people that damned Goa'uld device might have done for it was not going to destroy one of his team.

As Carter did the same, throwing packets and phials onto the ground in her haste to sort through her pack, she said, "Sir, I think we need to prepare ourselves for that. Even if we can stop the pain, we can't undo what was done to Daniel; we can't stop him remembering – "

And he wasn't listening to that for ten seconds so Carter might as well save her breath right now. "Yes, we can. If the only way Daniel's going to get over this is if it didn't happen, well then it didn't happen." When his fingers closed on the preloaded syringes he was looking for he could have kissed them. "Morphine."

Carter bit her lip. "It's worth a try."

"This could make a big difference," O'Neill assured them but Teal'c only sighed sadly and shook his head. He ripped open the packaging, trying not to notice the way his fingers were shaking a little because Daniel wasn't Daniel any more and maybe he was never going to be Daniel again. He wasn't going to think that way. That wasn't going to happen. The tremor in his fingers was unmistakable now. He shoved the syringe at Carter.

"You do it. You're better at it than I am." He wasn't just making excuses. He could give a morphine shot if he had to, but they were tricky and she was better at it, could depress the plunger that slow way you were supposed to without bruising the surrounding muscle. He was always worried he was going to be heavy-handed and push in too much too quickly. This had nothing to do with the way his hands were shaking.

She twisted the plunger. "How much?"
"All of it."

He saw the flash of surprise in her eyes. "Ten milligrams? That's a big dose, sir."

He held her gaze. "Do it."

"It'll take a while to inject." He watched her depress the plunger to send a tiny droplet of the precious pain relief to the end of the needle. The droplet didn't even quiver and he could only admire the steadiness of her nerves. Maybe when he was her age his fingers wouldn't have been shaking either. Teal'c was tugging down Daniel's pants for her, exposing the thigh muscle.

O'Neill winced as the needle went in, that endless second's pause as they waited to see if the blood welled up, then the measured depression of the plunger, the liquid being pushed in with agonizing slowness.

Carter's hands were still as steady as a surgeon's and he felt a rush of gratitude to her for that. "That's two milligrams."

"His vitals are fine. Keep going." He checked his watch automatically, making the calculations, trying to work out how long it would be before the pain relief kicked in and started to do some good.

He remembered the way every muscle cramped with pain as you fought to stay in exactly the same position, hands perfectly still, just that tiny pressure on the plunger. Only the way the muscle in Carter's jaw was tensing betrayed the effort it was costing her to keep the morphine administration so perfectly controlled. "Four milligrams."

He checked Daniel's vitals again. "Keep going."

A trickle of moisture ran down the side of Carter's face and for a second he was shocked, thinking it was a teardrop. Then he realized it was sweat. "Six milligrams."

"Keep going."

"Janet usually gives him six."

"Keep going, Major."

It seemed to take an eternity to reach eight milligrams, and another to reach ten, but at last he heard her sigh with relief. "Ten milligrams." He automatically checked his watch again. She withdrew the needle carefully then sat back on her heels, effortlessly reading his mind, or perhaps just having the same thoughts. "Morphine generally works pretty fast, so Daniel should be getting some relief within quarter of an hour or so." She looked at O'Neill hesitantly. "If he does come round you need to remind him who he is, Colonel. You need to keep saying his name."

He heard what lay behind that hesitancy in her voice loud and clear. All the other things O'Neill needed to do if there was to be any chance at all of their ever getting their teammate back: holding Daniel, comforting him, making him feel safe, coaxing him back from the nightmare in which he'd been trapped for so many hours. The unspoken reminder he was the only one of them Daniel might listen to at this time, that his was the only voice and the only touch which would reach him through the horror of the Shokmar. Carter obviously didn't know if he was capable of providing Daniel with that kind of care. Neither did he, if he was honest. But what he did know was that he was willing to try anything to get Daniel back again.

Teal'c pulled Daniel's pants back up, then covered him with the blanket again. O'Neill saw the Jaffa's hand rest briefly on Daniel's hair. Carter was putting the empty syringe away very carefully,
deliberately not looking at Daniel. O'Neill closed his eyes, putting a hand up to his forehead, but it didn't help, he could still see him in his mind's eye: white, and so limp. He wondered if they would be lucky. If Daniel would sleep until the morphine took effect, and then sleep away the following four hours until the next dose. And in the meantime they'd find a way to get the DHD working again, to get him home. To get them all home.

They sat there in silence, the faint sound of wailing muffled by the mist. O'Neill checked his watch again. And again. Ten minutes. Thirteen. Seventeen. How could time pass so slowly? He wanted Daniel to wake up and be himself again. He wanted him to stay asleep until he was safe. Twenty-one minutes. Twenty-four. Twenty –

Daniel jolted rather than drifted into consciousness, curling up like burning paper as he cried: "Jack! Please God help me! Jack…?"

"Daniel!" As the younger man flinched away from him in blind panic, O'Neill grabbed him, pulling Daniel into his chest and holding him close as he struggled like something snared. O'Neill said quickly, "I'm here, Daniel. I'm here." He could feel Daniel's heart pounding against his ribcage, the shudders going through him. Daniel was terrified out of his wits. O'Neill felt the anger flare up in him again, Christ, what did those sons-of bitches do to you…? But aloud he said only: "It's okay, Daniel."

Daniel was twisting his head from side to side. "No, please…Stop it…Please, don't…Jack…? Help me, Jack…!"

"Daniel, I'm here damnit!" O'Neill took the younger man's head in his hands and forced him to look at him. "I'm here. And you're safe. You're safe now, Daniel. I swear."

Daniel stared at him blankly and then began to struggle again, but pitifully, with no real hope or expectation of freeing himself. "Please…please, stop this, please… Help me, Jack. Please help me… Jack…?"

O'Neill felt the younger man's hands pushing at him feebly, fingers twisting and tugging at his uniform without any strength in them. Daniel's eyes were terrified blue blanks and whatever they were seeing it certainly wasn't Jack O'Neill.

"Christ, don't do this to me, Daniel…." O'Neill took a moment to suck in a deep breath, rallying his energies, marshalling his thoughts. This was a problem, that was all, a problem that had to be solvable. There were plenty of options here and he just needed to work his way through them until he found one that worked: coaxing, ordering, yelling, whatever it took to get Daniel back, but one way or another he was getting Daniel back.

O'Neill gripped him by the shoulders and shook him. "Daniel! You have to get through this. You have to wake up. It was just a bad dream, okay? You had a bad dream but it's over now and you're safe. Look at me, Daniel. Damnit, Daniel, I'm giving you an order here. Now you do as I tell you; focus your goddamned eyes and look at me!" He shouted the last three words and Daniel gasped with the shock of them, like someone electrified back to life on the operating table.

He stared at O'Neill with what seemed to be no glimmer of recognition, still shuddering violently. He darted a terrified glance over his shoulder as though he expected something to come for him out of the mist, then suddenly his fingers clutched at O'Neill's jacket, clinging on as though his life depended on it as he flung himself against the man's chest, apparently trying to burrow into him as though O'Neill was a dark corner in which he could hide. "Please don't...please...I don't understand...I don't know why you're doing this...please, you don't have to do this... Don't do this to me any more..."
O'Neill swallowed quickly. So Daniel had reasoned and pleaded with them? And they'd gone ahead and kept torturing him anyway? For nothing? For no goddamned reason at all? He'd thought he'd never be angrier than when those sons-of-bitches had taken Teal'c away and tortured him out of some misguided fear of demons. But at least they'd had a reason. Even if it was a really stupid reason, they'd believed in the devil, and as Sokar had been terrorizing them for a thousand years perhaps it wasn't such a dumb thing to believe in after all. But these people seemed to have done this to Daniel just for the exercise.

He collected himself with a huge effort, forcing the words out, trying to keep them gentle when he was so consumed with fury he wanted to kill with his bare hands. "It didn't happen, Daniel. It was just a really, really bad dream but it's over now. You're with us now. You're okay." O'Neill let Daniel scramble against him, hardly wincing as the younger man gripped hold of him so tightly, putting his left arm around Daniel to hold his shoulders then tentatively stroked his hair with his right hand, trying to make eye contact, trying to make the younger man see him and recognize that he was safe. "You're okay."

"I w-went to the temple – " Daniel was still convulsing with shock, teeth chattering so violently he could hardly speak. "Shouldn't have gone…to the temple....."

Resisting the urge to say Damned right you shouldn't have gone to the temple, Daniel! O'Neill tightened his grip on him, saying firmly, "You didn't go there. You didn't go to the temple. It didn't happen. Look at me, Daniel, will you please just look at me and listen to what I'm telling you?"

He couldn't get through to Daniel and he wasn't responding to his touch, it was like trying to warm marble with his hand. He hoped that if he kept saying Daniel's name often enough, the man might remember who he was, but at the moment Daniel was bearing only the most superficial resemblance to the man O'Neill knew.

Teal'c said, "Daniel Jackson, you are safe now."

"You're going to be fine, Daniel. See, we're all here with you?"

Carter couldn't tell if Daniel was even aware of her or Teal'c. He was still shuddering convulsively and clinging onto the Colonel as though the man was a life raft and Daniel someone adrift in a storm. He looked fit only for a padded cell, and as someone who had seen him in that situation once before, Carter felt she simply could not bear to watch him go through that again. She remembered him crying and hiding in the corner, and tried not to imagine what it would be like if this were to last forever, only worse this time because at least when he had been infected by Machello's virus he had recognized them. Now, although he kept twisting his head round to look over his shoulder, back towards the temple that was thankfully hidden by the mist, when his gaze passed across her there was only terror.

Daniel was one of the bravest, most stubborn, and most resilient people she'd ever met; someone who would face down Apophis when he was unarmed and on his knees in Hell. It made her feel sick inside to think how much they must have hurt Daniel to reduce him to this. She didn't even dare to look at Teal'c but when she exchanged a glance with Colonel O'Neill she realized he was thinking the same thing because the flicker of rage in his brown eyes was chilling. Then he was wresting the anger under control to concentrate on soothing Daniel.

"Daniel, no one is going to hurt you, do you understand me? No one. You're going to get through this. I am ordering you to get through this. Okay?" Colonel O'Neill cupped his palm against the younger man's face as he spoke, his touch considerably gentler than his words. He stroked his thumb against Daniel's face. "Come on, Danny, give me a sign you're still in there."
Carter’s heart twisted with sympathy for both of them. Daniel had always brought out the best in the Colonel. She knew what it would do to her commanding officer if Daniel stayed like this. Unfortunately, right now her common sense was telling her this time they really had lost a team-member for good. This time they weren’t going to be getting Daniel back. Not ever.

Still hanging onto the older man, Daniel looked back over his shoulder. "Jack…?" His throat was so sore from what must have been hours of screaming that his voice cracked and Carter closed her eyes, wishing there was some way she could make none of this have happened. If only they’d noticed that he’d gone sooner, if only they’d….

Abruptly she was back on P8X 873, ears still ringing from the gunfire, the carbine drying her throat, bodies all around her, the wounded groaning and crying out for help. SG-6 had got the Abydonians back through the Stargate but Daniel was gone. So was Teal’c. No sign of them. She hadn’t seen them go. Were they dead? God no, don’t let them be dead – She’d thrown down the mortar and leapt to her feet, fear making her hoarse: "Sir! Daniel? Teal’c?"

The Colonel had been at her side in seconds, voice soothing despite the obvious worry in his eyes. "Amaunet stole the kid. Daniel went after her." As Carter’s eyes must have betrayed her disbelief the man had let Daniel go alone, he added, "I sent Teal’c after him."

As they’d turned to go towards Amaunet’s tent, its pennants still flapping defiantly in the breeze despite the way the area was now strewn with the corpses of her Jaffa, the Colonel had looked around the battlefield, his eyes so bleak it was hard to imagine ever seeing laughter in them again. She’d seen what he was seeing but she hadn’t felt it. Amaunet’s Jaffa were the enemy. They would have killed them if they hadn’t been killed first. You did what you had to do in a situation like that, as quickly and as efficiently as possible. You didn’t enjoy it – although there was an adrenalin rush when your weapon found its target and you knew that was another ally you’d probably saved, a staff blast that might have had a teammate’s name on in which wouldn’t now be fired – but you didn’t hate it either. It was just something that came with the territory, part of the job. But as she’d followed him towards Amaunet’s tent she’d been very aware the only real difference between them was that he had seen more battlefields than she had. He’d told her once that if killing people didn’t get harder each time you had to do it, there was something wrong with you, and she’d given him her most neutral smile. The one which said she was hearing him but not necessarily agreeing with him. She didn’t expect it to get easier but she saw no reason for it to get harder either. If it was the right thing to do, it was the right thing to do the first time and the hundred and fiftieth time, which meant you squeezed the trigger the same way and you felt the same indescribable mixture of elation, adrenalin, fear, and shame, when your bullet hit its target.

And then that night on the tel’tak Martouf had pulled up the floodgates and allowed Jolinar’s memories to intermingle with her own, and in a matter of seconds she’d seen a hundred more battlefields than the Colonel had. Suddenly she’d understood exactly why he’d looked so very weary of having to witness death.

"Jack…please, help me, Jack…. Jack…."

The panic and hopelessness in Daniel’s voice made O’Neill feel sick inside. Daniel didn’t seem to be able to connect the person right in front of him with the name he was saying. He didn’t even look like Daniel. He was this white-faced wild-eyed kid who didn’t even know who O’Neill was. The realization that Daniel must have been calling out for him for all those hours while he was being tortured made O’Neill wish that he’d killed every spectator and priest in the building. This was his nightmare from Netu come back to haunt him: men holding Daniel down and hurting him while he was powerless to save him. He should have listened to his own fears; should have kept a closer eye on him, should have… He collected himself with difficulty. "I’m right here, Daniel, and so are Teal’c..."
and Carter. We're not going to leave you."

Daniel had never looked so young or so scared. "They wouldn't stop. Jack didn't come. Why didn't he come?"

O'Neill felt the knife of guilt and rage twist harder. "It didn't happen, Daniel. None of it happened. You never went to that goddamned temple; you never saw their goddamned god, and you sure as hell never got captured by those goddamned priests." O'Neill pulled Daniel's head in against his chest, wrapping his jacket around him as though he was an injured pet to shelter him in the dark warmth of it. "It was just a dream. Go to sleep, Daniel. Just close your eyes and go to sleep. You're safe now. I promise you, you're safe."

He rocked him in his arms, not even noticing he was doing so at first; it was just instinctive to try and soothe him to sleep with that comforting rhythm, just as it was instinctive to hold Daniel's head against his heart so that the beat of it would calm him. He didn't even know which one of them he was trying to convince as he murmured over and over, "You're going to be okay, believe me. You're going to be okay."

Even though every muscle in his own body seemed to be locked into the most uncomfortable position it could find, O'Neill waited until the morphine had done its work and Daniel was a dead weight in his arms before he dared move. He met Carter's sympathetic blue gaze. "Well, that wasn't the most fun I've ever had." He checked that the younger man was definitely unconscious then gently unclenched Daniel's fingers from his clothing, laying him carefully back down on the blanket, pushing Teal'c's folded jacket back under his head and covering him up once more. "I think that stuff's really kicking in now so hopefully he'll sleep for a while. I suggest we give him another shot in a couple of hours and see how it goes."

Carter shook her head. "God, I hate seeing him like this."

"He is not going to stay like this, Major. He is going to get better."

She opened her mouth to say that sometimes you couldn't make things go the way you wanted them to, that willing it wasn't enough, that there were days when you just had to face up to truths you really didn't want to, but seeing his face she didn't. She said, "Yes, sir."

The Colonel had his teeth gritted, and she could feel the impotent fury radiating from him because someone had dared to do this to one of his team, and not even to learn anything, not even for any purpose; had smashed Daniel's psyche into possibly irretrievable pieces just because they could.

She tried to find something positive to say – which she didn't find easy when someone she cared so much about had been reduced to a gibbering wreck right before her eyes – but in trying to console him did think of something that made her feel better as well. "Sir, Daniel obviously does still have his own memory as well because he remembered your name."

"Daniel Jackson remembers the name he was screaming when he was being tortured," Teal'c put in flatly. "He may not remember anything else about who that person was. His memory may now begin and end with the time of Shokmar."

The Colonel said tautly, "I don't want to hear that. And I don't believe it."

"O'Neill, I have never heard of anyone recovering from the effects of..."

"So you said. And I don't care, because Daniel is going to get over this. He is going to remember who he is and who I am and every other damn thing he ever knew. The only thing he is not going to
remember is what those sons-of-bitches did to him. Now is everyone clear on that?"

There was a moment's awkward silence while Carter and Teal'c didn't meet his eye. The Jaffa was looking at Daniel, so pale and still on the blanket, and there was a depth of rage in his gaze that Carter noticed was mirrored in Colonel O'Neill's. She knew that these were good men, men of integrity and honor, but momentarily, she also knew that Teal'c and the Colonel were capable of doing things she couldn't even imagine. She wondered if she ought to point out that the last thing Daniel would want was for people to suffer or die because of him. That it might help them to feel better but it would be a very poor memorial to the man Daniel had been to shed more blood on his behalf.

The Colonel turned to Teal'c. "I'm glad you destroyed that goddamned statue and I'm glad some of them died. I'm not proud of feeling like that, but that's still how I feel. No one has the right to do to another living creature what those people did to Daniel."

"I still don't understand why they did it." Carter bent down to look at Daniel, and was it her imagination or was there the faintest tinge of color to his skin that had not been there before? She so wanted to believe it that perhaps she was imagining something that wasn't there. "Or how they could."

Teal'c had his fists clenched, and Carter wondered just how much self-control the Jaffa was having to exert not to go back to the that temple and rip the heads off the rest of the priests with his bare hands. "Onuris would have ordered them to experiment with the power of Shokmar. To find out how much the subject can bear before his mind snaps. There will have been many such experiments; many will have suffered unimaginable torment before they died."

The Colonel dug the point of his knife into the ground and twisted it. "You know round about now I'm thinking that this Onuris has kind of outstayed his welcome in this particular astral plane. Time to send him to Goa'uld hell, maybe."

She inched over to the thornbush which provided the best cover, MP-5 at the ready. There was a mottled brown moth impaled on one of the black thorns and a dew-soaked cobweb stretching silvery strands across a gap in the greenery, a black and yellow spotted ladybug still struggling futilely in its grasp. She told herself forcefully this was just what nature did; a seething world happening beneath their notice every day, strange, alien and cruel. They weren't that damned ladybug and they going to get off this damned world. All the same, she couldn't resist reaching across and freeing the struggling insect, tearing the frail tendrils of the web as she deposited the bemused bug on a thornless leaf.

"...Heru'ur has been trying to take over the territories of Onuris for many years, but although he is in retreat, Onuris is still a powerful and well-protected Goa'uld. He has worshippers on many worlds."

"Yeah well, a judiciously placed hand grenade and he's still chopped salami."

"Sir, we have another problem." Carter grimaced apologetically as she delivered the bad news. "At the moment there are about a hundred worshippers crying in front of the Stargate and more coming all the time."

The Colonel looked at Teal'c. "Any idea what the Tupperware party's about?"
"If you mean the assembling of the worshippers then no, O'Neill, I do not."

As she turned to take another look at the stumbling wounded still emerging from the mist, Carter tried to take some comfort from the fact the ladybug, having tentatively tested its wings, had now launched itself into flight.

***

O'Neill had been watching Daniel edge back towards consciousness for the past half an hour, noting the way the rapid eye movement was turning to head twisting and moaning, getting ready to catch Daniel as soon as he awoke. To tell him the same lies. Except just this once he had no compunction about lying to Daniel, was perfectly prepared to look him straight in the eye and tell him any damned thing he thought would save his sanity. He was determined that Daniel was going to get better. Maybe Teal'c didn't believe it and maybe Carter didn't believe it, but he knew that Doctor Daniel Jackson was not going to spend the rest of his days as some vegetable locked away in a mental institute. He was going to make him get better, even if he had to drag him back to the land of the sane by the scruff of his neck.

Daniel erupted into consciousness like someone held under water gasping their way back to the surface, crying, "Jack...!"

"Right here, buddy."

O'Neill grabbed him quickly; pulling Daniel tight against his chest so he couldn't thrash about and hurt himself. Daniel clung to him again; shuddering so hard O'Neill could feel the reverberations going through both of them. He wished he could convince himself Daniel knew who he was and was taking some comfort from the contact, but he didn't believe Daniel had any idea who or even what he was other than something he could hang onto when the priests came and tried to drag him back to the torture chamber. He'd held Daniel as close and as tight as this after the man had tried to kill him in that storeroom; had come so near to losing the person he knew to the monster Shyla had made of him and had managed to get Daniel back that time; he just had to do it again, that was all.

He had a sudden remembrance of Sara giving birth, getting so wrapped around with the pain of the contractions that she'd forgotten her breathing exercises. He'd been telling her to breathe but wasn't getting through; then the midwife had blown against her cheek to remind her of the respiratory rhythm she needed to get through the pain. A second before she had been trapped by the contractions, but then she was mastering them, dealing with them.

O'Neill put his head against the younger man's face, wanting Daniel to feel him as well as hear him and see him, blowing on his cheek before speaking clearly into his ear: "It's okay, Daniel. You're okay. We're all here and no one's going to hurt you." But even now he couldn't bring himself to say something at once so arrogant and sentimental as 'I'm here.'

"So much pain.... Please, no.... Help me, Jack. Please, help me...."

Feeling Daniel shaking violently in his arms, O'Neill gently eased his head up so that their eyes met. "No pain, Daniel. Just a bad dream. See? You're not in any pain, are you?" Even as he said it, he could only hope it was true – that the morphine was doing its job.

Finally O'Neill saw a flash of something that looked like recognition in Daniel's eyes. He was still pale, scared, and trembling, but he also seemed to focus on the man who held him for the first time. "Dream...?"

O'Neill's pity for Daniel was constantly warring with his anger at what had been done to him, but he
tried to wrestle that rage from his face and voice and keep his tone brisk but kind. "A bad dream, Daniel. You had a bad dream. But we're all with you. You're not alone any more and we're not going to let anyone hurt you." And this time he did say it, knowing it was what Daniel needed to hear: "I'm not going to let anyone hurt you."

Confusion washed over Daniel's face, the unbearably vivid memories of being tortured obviously warring with the quiet conviction in O'Neill's voice. Two realities it was impossible for him to reconcile.

O'Neill forged ahead firmly. "You ate some poisonous berries and they gave you this really – bad dream." He caught Carter's eye as he said it to see if she approved, and after a fractional hesitation she nodded. O'Neill pressed. "Daniel? Do you know who you are? Can you tell me your name?"

"Just a – dream?"

"Tell me your name, Daniel. Tell me who you are?"

Just a dream? It seemed impossible and yet the man holding him said it with such certainty. His brown eyes held not a tinge of doubt. Daniel was riddled with doubt. Everything was blurred and confused. He remembered terrible pain, and yet it was true that there was no pain now. He remembered cold stone and strange men with dead white skin tying him down, directing a stream of blue light to fry every nerve in his body while he screamed and screamed for someone who didn't come. Screamed for –

He knew this face. So familiar. Jack, he thought, this is Jack. It was the most comforting word he knew and now he knew the face it went with again. This was the person he'd been screaming for. So Jack had come for him? Except Jack was saying it had never happened, that he'd never been in need of rescuing; the priests, the stone, the blue light, the terrible, inescapable pain, all just a dream. That couldn't be true, could it? And yet Jack was here and real. He could feel Jack's arm holding him, feel the warmth from his body. Not his imagination. Not something he was believing because he wanted to believe it. Or was it? Perhaps none of this was real and he was still in the temple. He shuddered at the thought.

"Come on, Daniel, concentrate. You can do this. Doctor Daniel Jackson. Remember him? I'd really like to say hello to him, so, come on, see if you can't find him in there for me."

That definitely sounded like Jack although his voice was a bit strange because of the way he had his teeth gritted as he was talking. It certainly looked like Jack too, although Daniel didn't remember him being this anxious; all strung up like a marionette. If it was Jack then something bad had happened to him recently; something to put that look in his eyes. Daniel so wanted this man to be Jack. If this was Jack then he was safe.

Whoever he was, the man was looking frustrated now, pointing two fingers at himself and saying, "Daniel, do you know who I am? Come on, you're looking right at me, now who am I? Tell me my name."

If Jack was real then perhaps the temple wasn't. But was this Jack and was he real? He was asking Daniel something. Asking him his name. Yes, he knew that, he could answer that. Daniel murmured it tentatively, a question: "Jack…?"

"Yes!" Abruptly the man was hugging him, rocking him triumphantly, scrunching a fist tightly in his hair as he pulled his face in against the rough material of his jacket. "Yes, Dannyboy. I'm right here."
'Dannyboy'. Only Jack called him that. Only Jack had ever called him that. Then this was Jack. And Jack would never lie to him so what Jack was telling him had to be the truth. The bad memories receded a little, like a tide unwilling to go out. Not real then. The temple, the terror, the dreadful, inescapable pain those white-skinned men were so deliberately inflicting on him: none of it real. But Jack was real.

He twisted his head round to look the man in the eye. Yes, that was Jack. The way Jack looked, felt, smelt, everything. Jack. He said it with more certainty this time. "Jack?"

"Yes, Daniel. Yes!" Jack squeezed him so hard Daniel gasped as the breath was crushed out of him. He could feel his ribs creaking with the strain but he felt much better, too. He knew nothing bad could happen to him as long as Jack was holding him so tightly. Jack's breath tickled his ear again, his stubble rough against Daniel's skin as he murmured, "Oh, Daniel, you gotta stop doing these things to me before you give me a goddamned heart attack."

Definitely Jack. Definitely real and definitely Jack, so the other memories were clearly just...wrong. Nightmares. Vivid and terrible, but not real. Daniel almost felt safe again but there was so much terror and pain still lapping at the edges of his memory he needed to hear again that it had never been real. Needed to hear it over and over. "A bad dream...?"

"Just a really bad dream, Daniel," Carter assured him, preparing the morphine shot as she spoke. She didn't know how the Colonel had done it but he did seem to have comforted and bullied Daniel back from the place that Shokmar had sent him. Daniel still looked scared but with relief glinting through it, like streamers of sunlight filtering into a dark wood. She saw Daniel gaze up at the man's face and there was definite recognition there now. She saw the relief in Daniel's eyes because whatever 'Jack' was telling him had to be true.

She winced, because they were lying to him, and she hated to lie to him even to save his life, but looking at the Colonel she could see that he didn't care, was perfectly happy to look Daniel right in the eye and tell him anything that would make him get over this. He was right, she knew. Not lying to Daniel was going to leave him trapped forever in the aftermath of Shokmar; lying was going to save his sanity. She repeated the lie again, trying to put as much conviction into it as she could: "You were hallucinating, Daniel. Delirious. The poison gave you some muscle cramps so you might feel a bit achy for a few days but we think it's pretty much gone from your system now. That's what gave you the bad dreams." There, she'd done it, looked him right in the eye and lied to him.

"But you are safe now, Daniel Jackson," Teal'c added. "You are with your friends again." Carter glanced at the Jaffa and saw that although he understood why they were lying to Daniel, could see the necessity, agreed with them even, he could not quite bring himself to frame the words. He would stick to the comfort the truth offered. "We are all with you."

She was more surprised than she liked to admit to see the Colonel hold out his hand for the syringe. Very relieved not to have to be the one to administer the injection for a second time, Carter handed it to him, while saying to Daniel, "This is going to stop the dream coming back, okay? It will help you sleep."

Sleep? He was very tired but he wasn't sure he wanted to go to sleep. Bad dreams. Terrible dreams. Blue light and the pain flaring. Those priests telling him to answer, answer...Too late. Jack was pulling his pants down. Why was he doing that? There was a breeze snaking across his bare skin. It was cold. He tried to tug his pants back up again, but Jack pushed his hand away. He could feel the man's fingers on his leg, a needle hurting his thigh.

"Stay still, Daniel." Jack said it gently.
It hurt. He turned his head away but it didn't stop the pain of the needle in his leg. He closed his eyes up tightly, flinching as he remembered the blue light again. Just a dream. Jack had said it wasn't real. He heard a strange little whimpering noise as the pain of the needle got worse.

"Am I doing this right?"

"Yes, sir. You're doing fine. Wait two minutes and then give him another two..."

The voices sounded very distant and the pain wasn't so bad now. He opened his eyes to see the liquid going down very slowly, and a strange fuzziness flowing into him, but it seemed to be happening a long way off and to someone else. Every now and then Jack would say a number and Sam would fuss over him. Teal'c would rumble something. Sometimes Daniel would feel fingers brush his hair, or pressing against his neck. Closing his eyes was pointless because people kept tapping him on the cheek and telling him to look up, now look over here, Daniel. A couple of times Sam dazzled him with her flashlight before she went back to having some debate about amounts with Jack.

Apparently Jack wanted to give the 'whole dose'. He was saying something about better to be safe than sorry and no way in hell did they want that pain coming back again. Sam was talking about the dangers of an overdose and saying they didn't have any Naloxone to reverse things if Daniel got into respiratory problems. Daniel had no idea what either of them were talking about as he wasn't in pain and was breathing just fine. They seemed to reach a compromise because finally Jack was taking the needle out again and giving his thigh a brisk rub, shoving the syringe at Sam, pulling Daniel's pants back up, then hauling him up by the jacket so Daniel flopped limply against his chest. He could feel Jack's warmth against his back, his arms holding him, strong fingers taking his pulse at his neck, then his wrist apparently to make doubly sure that Daniel's heart really was still beating the way it was supposed to. Sam told him he'd eaten something he shouldn't – God, Jack was going to be mad at him for doing that, he was always telling him not to – except, no – Jack wasn't mad at him, he was holding him really tightly again and didn't seem to be mad at him at all. His voice was very gentle the way it went sometimes when you least expected it. When you thought he was going to be angry with you for switching off the control on the mirror and losing the connection; or when you pointed a gun at him and....

Jack was telling him he was safe. He still didn't seem to be angry even though Daniel had obviously done something terribly wrong to put that look in Jack's eyes. Jack had been badly frightened, that was obvious, and generally when he'd had a scare he started yelling. Usually at Daniel. Daniel didn't think he could cope with being yelled at right now. Jack had such a loud yell, and that nightmare had been so vivid... Daniel shivered then reminded himself that nothing bad had really happened to him. He was suddenly very tired but this time he felt safe enough to sleep. It had just been a bad dream, and Jack and Sam and Teal'c had been with him the whole time. He hadn't been alone, after all.

He felt completely relaxed now, safe but very drowsy. Jack seemed to know that without him needing to tell him because he was lowering Daniel back down onto the blanket, saying, "Just close your eyes and go back to sleep. Everything's going to be okay. Okay?"

Yes, everything was going to be okay. Jack was here, and Sam was here, and Teal'c was here, and it had all just been a bad dream.

"Daniel? Did you hear what I said?"

Daniel gave a little start as Jack said that so sharply it penetrated even the multi-colored clouds wrapping themselves around his brain. He'd obviously forgotten to give Jack the reassurance he was looking for. Poor old Jack. Better tell him everything was going to be okay. Daniel managed to
focus on the man long enough to murmur a sleepy, "Okay, Jack," before his eyes closed.

O'Neill let out his breath slowly. His heart rate was beginning to return to normal but he didn't even want to think about where his blood pressure must be at right now. That kind of suppressed rage and stress and fear couldn't be good for the system. And when they were home and safe and Janet Fraiser had checked Daniel out and could reassure him the guy wasn't going to suffer any lasting effects from what those sons-of-bitches had done to him, he was going to take Daniel down to the gym and give him the self defense lesson to end all self defense lessons for what he'd just put them all through. But for the moment, he was just going to cover him up again, sit down beside him and take a few deep breaths.

O'Neill put the back of his hand against the Daniel's cheek to see if his skin felt any warmer. It did. "I think he's definitely coming back to us."

"You were wonderful, sir."

Unused to such unequivocal praise, O'Neill looked at Carter in surprise. Despite the ominous sound from the crying worshippers and the difficulty of their situation, there was joy shining in Carter's face. "And I really think you've saved him."

"I concur with Major Carter," Teal'c nodded. "In which case Daniel Jackson will be the first person to ever survive Shokmar unscathed." There was a hint of surprise mixed in with his approval as he added, "You have done well, O'Neill. I know of no other man who could have brought Daniel Jackson back from such an ordeal."

"Well, without that morphine all the back-rubs in the world wouldn't have done zip." O'Neill got to his feet. "Teal'c, let's you and I go take a look at the situation around the Stargate. Carter, keep an eye on Daniel and if anyone comes near – "

"No one's getting within fifty feet of him, sir."

O'Neill nodded but as he turned away his face broke into a grin and he punched Teal'c on the arm. "He knew who I was. He looked right at me and he said my name. He's going to be okay."

"No thanks to the people of this planet, O'Neill."

Looking at the Jaffa, O'Neill thought as he had so many times in the past that Teal'c was definitely a man it was a million times better to have on your side. And as this appeared to be the only dimension in which he and Teal'c weren't enemies, all he could say was that this was definitely the right dimension to be in.

***

Carter was trying to build up the courage to speak to him; O'Neill knew it. She wasn't generally hesitant about voicing her opinion so it had to be something she was pretty sure he wasn't going to want to hear. Well, no prizes for guessing what that would be.

He'd sent Teal'c off to see if he could overhear any of the words from the frenzied worshippers that might throw some light on their distress. All that wailing, gnashing of teeth and breast-beating had to be about something. Their statue getting totaled? The dead in the temple? If that was the case you'd expect them to be up there trying to help the wounded not all converging around the Stargate like they were expecting a sign from God.

Well, whatever she wanted to say to him he wasn't going to help her out. Determinedly refusing to make eye contact, O'Neill busied himself with checking Daniel's pulse and skin color. "He's looking
a lot better. Almost back to normal. In fact this probably is normal for him. How the hell did he manage to keep that fascinating pallor of his when he was living on Abydos, anyway?"

He pushed up the sleeves of Daniel's jacket; damn things were always too long in the sleeves for him. It didn't seem to matter what clothes you put Daniel in, somehow they never seemed to fit, always looked like hand-me-downs from a big brother. But right now that was a good thing because those bruises on Daniel's wrists where he'd been restrained by the priests were a dead giveaway. But thanks to the Air Force only having heard of 'large' and 'extra large' and having no truck with 'medium' with any luck Daniel wouldn't see them. If he did, O'Neil would have to tell him that he'd been thrashing around in his hallucinogenic-berry-induced delirium and he and Teal'c had been forced to restrain him. That might work.

Of course there was the blow to the head, Daniel was going to wake up feeling that, so, okay, better tell him he'd wandered off and some local had clobbered him. That would make sense and would also provide the perfect opportunity to give Daniel the 101-reasons-why-you-should-never-wander-off-on-a-mission-even-if-you-see-something-really-interesting speech. Tell Daniel...what? They hated off-worlders around here? The assailant was going to sell him into slavery? Well, no, just stick with the don't-know-why-he-hit-you-but-he-just-did story, that would probably work the best. If they got really lucky, Daniel might not remember the Shokmar at all so they could drop the poisonous berry motif and just go with the mean local who could have done anything to him if they hadn't arrived in time story. He'd like to edge away from the whole 'bad dream' thing if he could, make Daniel's torture not just something that hadn't happened for real, but that hadn't happened even in his imagination. Ideally, he wanted that whole scene completely obliterated from Daniel's memory. Damn though, if he dropped the berries, that screwed up the 'why you have bruised wrists' story. What was that nifty little homily about 'What a tangled web we weave, when first we practice to deceive'? Well, the smartass who'd thought that one up had obviously never had to coax a teammate back from the place where indescribable torture had sent him.

Okay. Daniel had wandered off – no one would have any trouble buying that – and been grabbed by a local who'd knocked him out and tied him up tightly enough to bruise his wrists. Probably a slave-dealer or something. They'd rescued him. End of story. There – simple, plausible and –

A big honkin' lie.

I don't care, he told himself savagely.

Daniel trusts you. He trusts you not to lie to him. Ever.

He trusts me to take care of him too, and that's what I'm doing. I'm making sure Daniel stays who he is. I'm making sure those bastards don't win.

And yes, he knew damned well that Carter wanted to talk and he damned well didn't want to. So, a lot of people had died, so what? They'd tortured Daniel. They could rot in hell for all he cared. No one did that to one of his team.

"Sir?"

"What, Carter?"

"You're not going to want to hear what I'm going to say."

Still not looking at her, O'Neil said easily, "Don't say it then."

"I have to. Sir, what happened in the temple – "
"Before or after they dragged Daniel in there three-quarters dead from being tortured by them for who knows how many hours?"

"I'm not defending them, Colonel. I think what they did to Daniel was literally indefensible, but I'm not sure that what we did was much better, that's all. We left people dying in there. Human beings like us."

"Not like us, Carter," said O'Neill savagely. "I mean that's the point, isn't it? If they'd been like us there wouldn't have been a problem."

"The same species, sir."

"I'll take your word for it."

"I'd just like to go and see if there's anything I can do for the survivors –"

"Negative, Major." He did look at her then. "We can't afford to split our forces at the moment. I think we've pretty well established that this is a hostile planet, and given what we did to their god these people are probably just itching for a chance to get even. If you should get captured, they'll do the same to you as they did to Daniel and we don't have any morphine left to get you back. So, no, Major, permission denied."

***

He'd been dreaming of something unpleasant. Probably of Jack not believing in him. Waking up in the infirmary with his mind full of memories so vivid it was hard to believe none of them were real, knowing Sha're was dead and the familiar ache of her absence had been painfully intensified into the now open wound of her death. But mixed in with the sorrow had been peace as well. How could there not be when she was at peace? Free of Amaunet at last. Her message safely delivered. She had died knowing he would find her son and keep him safe. She had died telling him she loved him. Now he needed to be worthy of that love…

Daniel blinked and tried to take in his surroundings. Not the infirmary anyway, that was something. The sun was setting to his right, filtering through a thornbush to leave crimson splinters in his eyes. He went to sit up and felt the blood throb alarmingly in his temples. "Jack...?" He looked around for him, easing himself up more slowly as he did so. And yes, there was Jack, looking exactly the way he had in the infirmary. Tense as an overwound watch, eyes full of anxiety but trying to conceal it. Daniel wondered what Jack was worrying about this time. As he sat up he automatically held onto the blanket that was wrapped around his shoulders but looked at it in surprise. "Uh – what happened?"

"How are you doing, buddy?"

"Good, I think." He winced as he moved and pain throbbed in his thigh.

"Does it hurt?" The taut way Jack said it seemed all out of proportion to that minor ache in his leg. Daniel must have done something more than ordinarily stupid to get Jack in such a lather. Except usually when Jack got that look in his eye it was only too obvious what the cause was as soon as Daniel woke up. Usually a whole bunch of aches and pains woke up with him, and when they didn't it was only because he was pumped full of morphine in the infirmary. This time he hardly seemed to have a scratch.

Daniel absently rubbed his thigh. "My leg aches. Did somebody step on me while I was asleep? What happened?" He looked around for Sam, wondering why she had that tense look on her face as
"No, Daniel. Nothing happened." Jack said it quickly, darting Sam a glance as he did so.

Sam's voice sounded oddly muffled. "That's right, Daniel. Nothing happened."

Daniel looked at the blanket on which he was lying, the jacket he had been given as a pillow, Teal'c wearing only a t-shirt despite the damp misty air, the other blanket so carefully draped around him. "You just all thought I really needed an afternoon nap?" He picked the jacket up and handed it to Teal'c, making it a question as he said. "Thanks –?"


"Okay, something happened. You wandered off, someone grabbed you, knocked you out and tied you up. We thought you might have concussion. Incidentally, do you want to tell me your name?"


He couldn't understand the wild flicker of relief in the other man's brown eyes but then Jack was speaking briskly, "Very good. Date of birth?"

"July 8th 1965, but –"

"Excellent, Doctor Jackson. Glad to hear you still have a few brain cells left. Now how many fingers am I holding up?"

Only after he'd made Daniel count fingers, name the last three presidents, and demanded that he said 'No', 'Yes' and 'Death to the Goa'uld!' in seven dead languages of his choice was Jack willing to pronounce him more or less fit. Daniel decided that Jack was definitely getting twitchy in his old age and clearly needed a vacation.

"Well, thanks for rescuing me...I think." Daniel frowned, trying to remember wandering off, being grabbed or being knocked out, but he was getting a big fat blank. The last thing he could remember was Jack bitching about how cold it was.

"You're welcome. Just don't do it again or I'll kill you myself."

Daniel went to smile at Jack's little joke and then saw that Jack wasn't joking. His eyes widened. "Did I screw up the mission?"

"No, Daniel, you didn't, you just got hurt – again. Plus, you scared the shit out of all of us, and it isn't like this was the first time. And –"

"Okay, I got you. And I'm sorry but I really don't remember anything. But whatever it was I did, I promise not to do it again. Except – how do you know it was my fault anyway? Maybe I was just standing there next to you while you complained about Sam and Teal'c looking at the DHD and the guy came up and grabbed me." He looked around at their surroundings for the first time and frowned. "Any particular reason why we're sitting in this –" Daniel pushed a stem of vegetation away from his face, "bramble bush?"

"That would be because the mission has been aborted but the unknown Goa'uld device on the DHD has kicked in, effectively locking out all other commands."

"Like a trip switch in a fuse box?" Daniel gratefully accepted the water bottle Teal'c put into his hand, running his tongue over his lips and wondering why the hell they felt so dry. "So – sorry to
keep asking all the obvious questions – but why are we here instead of sitting around the DHD trying to fix it – or at least watching Sam try to fix it?"

"Because half the planet's population is camped around the Stargate."

Daniel pushed back the fronds so he could see for himself. "Oh. Any idea why?"

"None whatsoever."

Daniel handed the water back to Teal'c. "Want me to go see if I can talk to them?"

"No!" They all said it at once, so vehemently he jumped.

Jack said, "Damnit, Daniel, definitely not. This time just stay where you're put and don't wander off."

Daniel felt stung by the injustice. "This time?"

"You're always wandering off. Every planet we arrive on, you wander off, that's all I'm saying, this time – don't."

Daniel thought about repeating his assertion that a) you could count the times when he had what Jack called 'wandered off' on the fingers of one hand, and that anyway there had always been a good reason for it, and that b) they had no evidence that he had wandered off on this trip, but decided to save his breath. When Jack was being this unreasonable there was really no point in arguing with him. Daniel shrugged resignedly. "Can I have my glasses?"

"They are broken." Teal'c handed them to him. "Only the frames were undamaged."

"Great, the part I can't see out of. The only thing worse than being stranded on an alien planet with no way of getting home is being stranded on an alien planet with no way of getting home and no way to get your glasses repaired."

Jack said quietly, "Daniel, take it from me, there are worse things."

Looking at Jack's shadowed eyes, Daniel felt slightly uneasy. As though things were being kept from him. But he still had all his arms and legs and no bits of him were hurting apart from that bruise on his thigh and the bang to his head so it was probably just his imagination. Jack was being a tad jumpy but that could be just the after-effects of Netu. They'd all been a little over-protective of each other since that trip and Daniel knew he'd been as guilty of that as anyone else. Also, Jack never liked any technology glitches because he couldn't repair them himself. He'd calm down in a little while, let Daniel go and talk to those people; Sam would fix the DHD; they'd all go home.

But when he looked across at Jack's haunted expression, Daniel found his optimism draining away. Something was wrong and he had a horrible feeling whatever was wrong might be his fault.

***

O'Neill got up as casually as he could and beckoned to Carter to come with him. "Let's go check out the wailing worshippers again, Major." The moment they were out of Daniel's earshot, O'Neill said, "I want to get him home and have him checked out by Doc Fraiser."

"I think he's fine, sir. Really. You did exactly the right thing. Those people did something to him that it was impossible for his mind – for anyone's mind – to deal with, but first you stopped the pain and then by telling him the torture hadn't happened you gave his subconscious a way to protect Daniel
from what had been done to him. That memory will be walled up somewhere so inaccessible in his
brain that it would probably take the deepest form of hypnosis to ever access it again. I'm not saying
some dim memories of the Shokmar won't ever resurface in his nightmares but apart from that I
really think he's going to be okay.”

"Okay as long as we can get him the hell away from this place and back home before he starts
asking too many difficult questions. As far as he's concerned he feels fine, so any minute he's
probably going to suggest we go take a looksee at that damned temple."

"Maybe we should just keep him doped up?" Carter rifled through her vest pockets. "I've got a
sedative."

"Keep who doped up?"

O'Neill jumped as Daniel appeared behind them. He was eating a granola bar that seemed to have
been in his jacket for a considerable length of time. He offered Carter a bite, which she refused with
an emphatic shake of the head. Swallowing, Daniel explained, "Actually these improve with age and
for some reason I'm really hungry. Have we got any more food?"

"Blood sugar," Carter murmured to O'Neill. "It probably dropped with the shock. I should have
thought of that."

O'Neill fished around in his own jacket and produced a PowerBar. "Here. Don't eat it all at once."

Daniel took it. "Thanks, but I was thinking more along the lines of that macaroni and cheese that
tastes like chicken?"

"Daniel, you hate that stuff," Carter put in.

"Well, it's looking good to me right now. That's how hungry I am."

O'Neill looked at him in exasperation. "All the MREs – apart from the things you didn't throw out
from the last mission which have been evolving into new life forms in your pockets – are with the
equipment, by the DHD, with the wailing worshippers. Eat the PowerBar."

"You know, those people must eat something, they probably know where to get food. If I could just
go talk to them – ?"

"No!"

Daniel's turn to jump as they both yelled at him. He stared at them in disbelief. "What is with you
today?"

Idly, O'Neill wondered how he'd managed to go three years without picking Daniel up by the scruff
of the neck and shaking him until his teeth rattled. Speaking as clearly as he could, he said, "Okay,
Daniel, listen up, because I'm just saying this the once. These are Bad People. They worship a Bad
God. They do Bad Things. If you go near them, they will hurt you. Do
not
go anywhere near them. Don't speak to them. In fact, don't even look at them. Is that understood?"

"You know, Jack, you really ought to get some treatment for that paranoia."

O'Neill turned to Carter. "Do we have any tranquillizer darts with us? Because right about now I'm
thinking we should tranq either him or me before I do something I might regret."

Daniel backed up, unwrapping the PowerBar. "Fine. I can take a hint. You don't want me to talk to
the locals. I'll just go sit back down with Teal'c and admire the – uh – mist."

Carter watched him go then shook her head. "I can't believe how back to normal he is. My nerves are still twanging like a guitar string. Great – Daniel gets tortured and the rest of us are the ones that need counseling. I swear he must be five eighths rubber ball."

"Well, I swear I'm going to start bouncing him off something in a minute if he doesn't keep his head down." Seeing her expression, O'Neill protested, "Oh come on, Major. A kid runs across six lanes of freeway the first time – you're just glad to see him make it to the other side in one piece; the second time you really don't appreciate him making you watch it all over again; by the third time you might still want him to dodge the traffic but you're also itching to give him a thick ear." O'Neill deliberately didn't meet her eye as he added quietly, "Look, Daniel may not remember it, but for the rest of my life I'm going to have live with the thought that he was calling out to me to help him while those sons of bitches were torturing him and I couldn't hear him. I didn't get there, Carter. I didn't save him."

"But, Colonel you did."

"Yeah, hours later when he was practically out of his mind. It should never have happened and if I'd ever made him realize that he has to do what he's damned well told, it wouldn't have happened. Well, it's never happening again; from now on Daniel is going to obey orders." Not wanting to discuss it further, he looked back through the binoculars. "Where are all these people coming from?"

"And why are they coming here?" Carter frowned, "It has to be something to do with that device being switched on. Maybe it's a call to arms? Maybe it's pitched at a level that we can't hear but these people can."

"Except these people look human to me."

"I'd really like to know what triggered that device." As he made no attempt to hide his thoughts, Carter said defensively, "Sir, it wasn't me."

"Of course not, Major, the fact it started working exactly six hours after you'd been fiddling about with it is obviously a complete coincidence."

Oh crap, he so knew that expression. It was the same one Daniel wore when he thought people – scratch people and make that him – were being unjust but he was just going to have to put up with it. Great. Now two of his teammates knew how to guilt-trip him.

Carter sighed in resignation. "Maybe we should concentrate on what it does."

"Given all the wailing and gnashing of teeth going on over there I'd say it's a big fat thermonuclear device and the Stargate's been locked out so that no one gets off this world alive, and those people know it." As Carter winced at his words, O'Neill looked at her. "Now is the point when you tell me that's not what it is."

"I wish I could, sir, but the truth is I just don't know."

"But you had a look at it, right? Did it look like a bomb to you?"

"Not a bomb as we know it, but with the Goa'uld technology who can tell?"

"Well, what did it look like to you?"

"I don't want to speculate with no data –"
“Just this once, Major, indulge me.”

“I thought it looked like a transmitter of some kind.”


“I just don't know, sir.”

“Jack?”

O’Neill’s turn to jump again. He wished Daniel would stop doing that. He turned around to find Daniel halfway through the PowerBar and peering through a pair of binoculars up at the hill. O’Neill gritted his teeth. “What now, Daniel, because in case you hadn't noticed we are kind of busy here?”

“Did you know there's a building up there? It seems to have smoke coming out of it.”

“Yeah, we know. It's a ruin.”

“It doesn't look ruined. It looks like it could still be in use.”

“Trust me on this, Daniel, it's a ruin. We know, we ruined it. Well, actually, Teal'c ruined it. Either way it's definitely ruined now.”

“Teal’c razed a whole temple?”

“Actually he more kind of lowered it.”

Daniel stared at him in evident disbelief before looking back through the binoculars, scanning the hillside. “But why? I mean there could have been worshippers nearby. Was anyone hurt?”

“Damnit, Daniel, don’t you ever stop asking questions? Look, I am having a really bad day here and you are really not helping.”

Daniel put down the binoculars in surprise. “I'm only asking.”

“It's a Jaffa thing, okay? The people who worship that god do bad stuff to the people who worship Apophis. Teal’c was just having a little payback.”

“That doesn't sound like Teal’c.”

With his eyes closed and a hand pressed to his throbbing head, O’Neill said through gritted teeth, “Daniel, I swear to God if you don't can it I'm going to have to kill you. I don't want to do it and I'll try to do it humanely – smother you or something – but that is definitely what's going to happen if you aren’t over there with Teal’c sitting down and shutting up in about thirty seconds flat.”

Not offended but clearly a little concerned for him, Daniel gave O’Neill a puzzled frown and as he backed away said in the soothing tone of someone humoring a madman, "Right, I'm going all the way over there to sit with Teal’c – but Jack, have you ever thought you might need a vacation?"

As soon as Daniel was out of earshot, O’Neill opened his eyes. "Carter, any chance of your people solving time travel any time soon, because I would really like there to be a way for this day not to have happened?"

She made a face. "Sir, right now, I just think we're lucky we didn't come here before we went to P7J989 or the Gamekeeper would probably have made us live this one out on a continuous loop."
Sitting down next to Teal'c, Daniel said, "Jack seems a bit edgy today. Do you think he's been overdoing things?"

Teal'c regarded him impassively, the sunset turning the gold emblem of Apophis on his forehead the color of bronze. "Colonel O'Neill has had much to try him of late. Night will fall soon and while the Stargate is surrounded by the people of this world it is impossible for either Major Carter or myself to attempt to override the Goa'uld device that is interfering with the DHD."

"See, that's exactly why I should go and talk to those people. They might know what that device actually does. They're obviously very frightened of something. If I explained to them that we might be able to help them —"

"Daniel Jackson, you must not do this."

"I just don't see what harm there is talking to them, I mean we've no evidence that they're unfriendly —"

Teal'c reached across and touched Daniel's bruised cheekbone. "Ow!" Daniel put a hand up to his face. "Fine, point taken, but I wish people would stop doing that."

Teal'c continued, "It seems likely that the device was triggered when Major Carter and myself were attempting to ascertain its function. If that is the case then we are to blame for the consequences of its activation. The attitude of the people suggests these consequences may be grave. Given those circumstances —"

"Okay, I get you. But if we're responsible for what's going to happen to these people don't we have some kind of obligation to put it right?" Daniel looked at him hopefully.

Teal'c turned away. "We owe these people nothing."

Daniel gazed at him in surprise. "Well, can you explain it to me? I mean what have they done that's so terrible?"

"They rejoice in the suffering of those who cannot defend themselves. Those who have done them no harm."

Daniel's brow creased with his effort to try to understand. "Do you mean like the arenas of ancient Rome where Christians were fed to lions and everyone came along to watch it like it was a wrestling match? They were different times and there was a different set of moral values in place. We have a very long and dishonorable history of turning out to watch our fellow men being murdered. Um, public hangings always drew a big crowd, so did witches being burnt, or adulteresses being stoned. You pick any era in history and you'll find evidence of the human race at its worst and its best. And we have done some terrible, terrible things to each other in our time, but you can't judge the whole of the twentieth century by the Holocaust, and you can't judge every man, woman and child on this planet on the evidence of — of — whatever it is you're judging them by."

"You do not understand."

"Then help me to understand?"

"I cannot." Teal'c added impassively, "You should rest now. Give your wound time to heal."

"Wound?" Daniel frowned at him in perplexity, putting a hand up to his face. "You mean this?
Teal'c, I've had worse injuries tripping over a curb. I'm perfectly okay. Now I really want to understand what it is these people have done that you think is so unforgivable."

Teal'c rose to his feet. He looked down at the archaeologist and said sternly, "Daniel Jackson, we will speak no more of this."

Feeling as though he had just been reprimanded by a usually benevolent older brother, Daniel gaped at the Jaffa, but Teal'c didn't soften. He walked over to where O'Neil and Carter were still deep in conversation and Daniel shook his head in disbelief. "What is with everyone today?"

***

Daniel had borrowed Sam's night vision goggles to observe the people gathered around the Stargate. To him they looked similar to the people of Abydos, ones whose technology had not been allowed to develop so the vast chasm between their knowledge and that of the one posing as their god would not grow any less. It still enraged him to think of all the millions the Goa'uld had abducted and enslaved over the centuries. The people of Earth had overthrown Ra and won freedom from their parasitic masters, but on countless worlds across incalculable dimensions, the Goa'uld were still disfiguring the lives of billions.

Going by the mark these people had painted on their foreheads – that distinctive high plumed headdress – he guessed the Goa'uld they served must be Anhur, the Egyptian warrior and hunter god. The name seemed oddly familiar and yet he didn't remember having researched him recently. He wondered if Teal'c had mentioned him. That blow to the head was starting to have an effect now and he remembered from past experience how concussion could do that to you; those headaches that slanted in like a stiletto when you moved too fast or thought too much about anything. The thump behind his eyes was making him feel a little odd, dreamlike and disassociated, as though something momentous had occurred which, for some peculiar reason, he couldn't remember.

"Do we have any Tylenol?" he asked of no one in particular, half expecting everyone to jump down his throat again just for speaking out loud. He didn't know why everyone else was so edgy and short-tempered today. If it had just been Jack, he would have thought no more about it, but when even Teal'c started snapping at him he couldn't help feeling that something must be wrong.

When he closed his eyes against the pain in his head, he had a strange memory of hearing Jack's heartbeat, focusing on it as though his life depended on it while his fingers clutched the man's jacket so very tightly; feeling like a child scared of the dark and this the only thing left for him to hang onto. Daniel wondered where the hell that image came from? Perhaps he had a fever. Perhaps he was getting delirious. Perhaps he was getting cross-dimensional shift to some other Daniel Jackson's flashbacks. A Daniel Jackson who was clearly a needy little son-of-a-bitch going by that memory. He wondered if he ought to toss that bone to Jack next time the guy became inexplicably irritable with him – proof positive that a Jack O'Neill in a parallel plane was having an even worse time with his archaeologist than this Jack was with his – worth a try perhaps.

Daniel opened his eyes to find Jack crouched in front of him looking disproportionately anxious. "You okay, Daniel? Have you got a temperature? Where does it hurt?"

As Jack put his hand to Daniel's forehead to test for fever, Daniel said in surprise, "It's just a headache."

"Here, drink this."

It wasn't like Jack to fuss so blatantly, but he was definitely fussing now, mixing up some unspeakable concoction and demanding that he drink it down while Teal'c and Sam clustered
around him anxiously. Sam pushed a bottle of Tylenol into his vest pocket, murmuring something about him keeping them 'just in case'. He felt like a baby surrounded by a set of particularly neurotic new parents.

"It's just a headache," Daniel repeated, bewildered by their attitude. He wondered if the others really needed a psych evaluation. Makepeace had told him more than once that his total inability to look after himself was probably giving the rest of SG-1 stomach ulcers. At the time he'd just thought Makepeace was being – well...Makepeace. He'd always thought of himself as someone who was reasonably good at looking after himself, just by a slightly different route from the one the others might have taken. Now he wondered if the marine had a point, and the strain of his lack of military skills was giving his teammates a nervous breakdown. He looked around at their anxious expressions. "Guys, really, it's a slight headache. In fact, it's not even that bad now. I think it's going."

"You'd better go lie down again."

"Jack, please, I'm fine."

Daniel was too surprised to protest when he was unceremoniously shoved down and told to stay where he was put, get some sleep, and stop arguing for crying out loud. Daniel blinked in disbelief, saying mildly, "Are you sure you're okay?"

When Jack wheeled on him in what looked very like anger, Daniel almost flinched. Jack began, "Damnit, Daniel, I am just about ready to –"

"What?" He was really unnerved now. "What is it I'm supposed to have done? What are you angry about? Why are you being so unreasonable?"

" 'Unreasonable'? Look, you wandered off, got yourself knocked out. You could have been killed because you wouldn't just do what you were told. You never do what you're damn well told!"

"Well, in the real world 'doing what you're told' isn't something you expect to still be doing much after you go through puberty. I'm not in the military. I'm not used to obeying orders. I never went through – Basic Training or whatever it is you soldier-types do – I don't expect to – Good God what happened to those people?"

Daniel sat up, staring in dismay at the people straggling down from the smoking temple, the bloodstained robes of the wounded, the unnerving limpness of those being carried, the terrible pallor of shocked faces intersected by dried trails of red. It was like the aftermath of an earthquake he'd once witnessed in Egypt; only a minor tremor according to the reports, but enough to make houses crumple into crevices, taking their inhabitants with them.

He'd felt it ripple through the site, lazy as the swish of a Nile crocodile's tail, but the epicenter had hit two miles away across the shimmering sands; the town of baked white houses and spice-scented markets from which their workers had come. He remembered running and running through the burning sand to try and reach the survivors, the diggers beside him overtaking him and every one of them knowing it would already be too late, the deed already done, the dead already dead, as the echoes faded into that moment of terrible silence before the wailing started. So much blood. It was the first time he'd ever realized how much blood there was in the human body; how terrible was the sound of people scrabbling as they suffocated while you dug and dug like a madman but knew you weren't going to reach them before the air ran out....

When a hand closed on his arm like a manacle shutting fast he couldn't work out what it was; tugging against it blindly in his automatic desire to go forward and offer these poor people what
help he could. It took him a moment to realize there was definite resistance, something physically holding him back, but he was still astonished when he turned to find that it was Jack's fingers gripping his arm so tightly his knuckles were white.

Daniel stared at him in disbelief. "Jack? We have to help these people."

He waited for Jack to sigh in exasperation and tell him that of course they had to help these people and they were going to but first they had to...something or other to do with military procedure, and he'd already decided he wasn't even going to argue it if that would get things moving faster, but instead Jack said, "No, we don't."

Daniel's eyes widened in disbelief. "What do you mean?"

"I mean we don't have to help these people."

Daniel made to pull his arm free but the fingers just tightened. Daniel winced in pained surprise; it was like having steel claws digging into his skin, what the hell was with Jack today? "Jack?"

Another tug didn't loosen his grip either and Daniel realized with a sense of shock that Jack was hurting him; holding him so tightly he was actually hurting him.

O'Neill realized it in the same instant Daniel did. Although he could have argued against helping the people who had poured into that temple to rejoice in witnessing someone blameless first paraded as a tortured husk and then butchered at the altar; could have argued that no trouble at all, the shock in Daniel's blue eyes at being hurt by him dissolved his grip like boiling water on an ice sculpture.

As O'Neill abruptly released him, Daniel continued to stare at him, not just shocked now, incredulous as well. Daniel glanced back at the people and then looked from O'Neill to Teal'c, finally taking in their impassive faces, their determinedly defiant expressions. He backed up. "I don't know what's got into you, but we have to help these people. Sam?"

She shot O'Neill a beseeching glance and he caved, shrugging helplessly, "Oh for crying out loud, go with him if you want to."

And, of course, after what had happened earlier, there was no way he was letting Daniel move more than ten feet away from him, so if Daniel was going among these damned people that meant he and Teal'c were too, but one day soon he was going to teach Daniel to obey orders. Get Mackenzie to try some of that hypnotic suggestion against a background of mood music and see if that didn't work, or play Daniel a tape while he was asleep that told him everything Jack O'Neill said should be agreed with without question. There had to be some method by which Daniel could be persuaded to do what he was damned well told. Except, of course, he didn't want Daniel to obey him without question, he wanted Daniel to use that brain of his to come up with different strategies than this Air Force Colonel could think of, but he also wanted Daniel not to keep coming up with plans that got Daniel hurt. And one day he was going to think of a method to get the benefit of the first without the disadvantage of the second. One day.

Even when the worshippers screamed and scattered like sheep surprised by a wolf as Teal'c strode amongst them, Daniel didn't manage to do the math. O'Neill knew he was going to, because although Daniel had moments of surprising denseness, he was generally way too clever for his own good. So Daniel was going to work out what these people were crying out; why they were throwing themselves on their knees in supplication or gathering up their wounded and trying to run away; but for the moment Daniel wasn't quite there yet, so the rest of them had a tiny respite in which to try and head off Daniel from colliding with a memory that could snap his mind like a frozen cobweb.

"No, it's all right. We won't hurt you.... Teal'c isn't in the service of Apophis any longer, he's a good
man...." Daniel turned to Carter and shrugged helplessly. "I can't seem to get through to anyone."

It looked like some chapter from the Bible had got up and walked. People in ragged blood-splattered robes holding up their hands in supplication to the Stargate, pleading for mercy they already knew they weren’t going to receive. The mist swallowed the stragglers, putting damp jewels in everyone’s hair, sucking color from the scene until everyone and everything came only in different shades of grey. Everywhere he looked O’Neill saw fear and suffering. These people were terrified and many of them were injured; the consequences of that moment when Teal’c had blasted the statue of Onuris so they could snatch Daniel back from his torturers revealed in every crushed limb and blood-weeping wound.

O’Neill wasn’t sure he cared. He could still feel the anger inside him and right now it didn’t feel like it was ever going to fade. Those priests had tortured Daniel for no reason, and these people would have rejoiced in watching him die even though he’d never done them even a second’s harm. It was difficult to mourn the loss of men with that mentality. Hard not to feel the universe could probably spare them. At the moment he was much more worried about Daniel managing to communicate with these guys and what the consequences would be for his presumably very fragile psyche. The last thing he wanted was for Daniel to remember one second of what those sons-of-bitches had put him through, but if he found a way to talk to these people....

Looking across at Daniel, trying so gently to persuade one of the wounded to communicate with him, O’Neill felt a fist tighten around his heart. Daniel was doing that thing of putting a hand to his chest and saying his name so invitingly while smiling in a way that would surely banish anyone’s fear. He was going to find a way to talk to one of the locals. It was what Daniel did.

Carter darted a quick glance at O’Neill. "Colonel...?"

Yes, Carter, reading you loud and clear. They were heading for inevitable disaster here and they all knew it, but what was the alternative? Daniel was a man with very clear ideas of his own, he wasn’t going to walk away from a lot of wounded people just because O’Neill told him to, but sooner or later one of these wailing locals was going to mention the word 'Shokmar' and then.... He grimaced. "I'm open to suggestions, Major."

Carter shrugged helplessly, clearly having nothing to suggest. When she looked enquiringly at the wounded, he sighed and waved a hand. Let her help them if she wanted to, at least that way she might be able to interrupt before Daniel learned something that would hurt him. With his MP-5 still tightly gripped in his arms, O’Neill watched Carter catch up with Daniel. She was trying to help him coax people back so they could help them while the injured screamed and wailed and made signs in the air to try to ward off the devils who had come to wreak their vengeance upon them.

It was getting harder and harder not to feel guilty. It was the Black Ops O’Neill who’d watched those priests get crushed beneath that fallen statue in the temple and felt hardly more than a twinge of remorse, and it was that O’Neill he wanted to be right now. He didn’t want to care that these people who would have sat there and watched Daniel have his throat cut or his heart torn out to appease their damned god, were wounded and frightened, that some of them were cradling loved ones who were dead or dying in their arms. He wanted to walk right past them all and not even give a damn.

He turned to look at Teal’c and saw the same misgivings in the Jaffa’s eyes. Daniel had no idea what this was like. Daniel might think he’d done some bad things in his time, but Daniel didn’t know what bad things were. Daniel’s bad things came under the guise of being a little thoughtless, or making an unkind remark, or having a moment’s selfish abstraction. Daniel didn’t know the kind of memories he and Teal’c had to live with every day; the stuff they’d seen and done, and not prevented, or been a part of, however unwillingly. He certainly didn’t know how it felt to think that there was a part of
yourself you’d done with forever and then find it was alive and well within you still, just waiting for a chance to taste some more blood.

He knew Teal’c had done worse than he had, because the United States Military certainly wasn’t up there with Apophis. Teal’c had served a monster so it was a fair bet to say he’d been a part of some fairly monstrous things, and now all their Halloweens were coming back to haunt them. And part of him really wanted to blame Daniel for this. And, oh Christ, don’t tell him that was a child that woman was carrying, and what kind of woman would have taken a child to see a man murdered anyway? Their fault. Keep making it their fault, the people you’d wronged, it was the only way to get through something like this. Remind yourself that child might have grown up to be a priest who tortured innocents, that these people were the enemy, all of them, actual or potential, present, past, or future. And that guy’s arm looked like it had been trapped in a meat-mincer, and there was so much blood around here. And how could anyone think with all this wailing and sobbing going on?

"O’Neill," Teal’c’s hand closed on his arm. "Are you unwell?"

He collected himself. "I’m fine. Just worried about Daniel."

"What are you intending to tell him?"

"I have no idea."

Daniel was darting from person to person, attempting to comfort them. He had his medical kit open and was trying to persuade the wounded to let him look at their injuries. Carter was doing the same thing. They had nothing like enough medical equipment for this many wounded, but they were doing their best and Daniel was getting through to them. O’Neill had been afraid of that. No one could see the compassion spilling in those blue eyes, hear the gentleness of that tone, and think Daniel was an avenger. He was kneeling in the mud beside a man who’d been trying to drag himself across the ground to get away from him, but Daniel had managed to convince him that he only wanted to help, and –

Shit, shit, shit! They were communicating. A lot of sign language and Daniel repeating words then drawing pictures on the ground but they were definitely holding a kind of conversation, working out those variations of regional pronunciation so that they could have a full and frank exchange. Other people were daring to come back, edging toward Carter and Daniel. O’Neill raised his MP-5 in readiness in case anyone started getting nasty, but these people were more like incredulous, some of them tentatively reaching out to touch Daniel’s jacket. The crying and wailing was turning into recognizable speech. Speech Daniel was trying to decipher. Speech containing the word ‘Shokmar’. Teal’c and O’Neill exchanged a glance and then started running.

"Daniel –!" O’Neill slammed on the brakes breathlessly.

Daniel held up a hand. "Just a minute, Jack." He turned back to the man. "You said 'shokmar'? I don’t know this word, what is 'shokmar'?"

But the injured man was gazing up at O’Neill and Teal’c in horror, raising his hands to ward them off. Daniel looked over his shoulder at them and sighed impatiently. "Jack, will you say something reassuring?"

O’Neill shrugged, keeping his face a careful blank. "What would be the point? They don’t speak English."

Carter came over, wiping her hands, blood spattered on her uniform from tending to someone’s wounds. "Have they told you anything, Daniel?" She kept her voice carefully non-committal.
Daniel sat back on his heels. "They keep calling Jack and Teal'c 'avengers' and they keep calling me 'one who has endured' or 'one who has survived' and then this 'shokmar' word that I don't know. I'm guessing it's something to do with 'gate travel, but I don't know why they're not applying it to all of us. I mean we're all dressed the same so I would have thought it was obvious we all got here the same way." He looked around at the Jaffa. "Teal'c, do you know this 'shokmar' word?"

Teal'c said carefully, "I doubt that it has anything to do with the Stargate. As you pointed out, that would apply to all of us."

A young woman came up, looked at Daniel and then clasped a hand to her mouth before sending up a cry of disbelief and astonishment. "Tew! Tew Setepen!"

Daniel frowned and turned to look up at her. She was beckoning frantically to others and those already clustered nearby were nodding and pointing at Daniel as well.

O'Neill said quietly to Teal'c, "Okay, what's happening now?"

"They are referring to Daniel Jackson as —"

Daniel was shaking his head in confusion. "Wait, I don't understand. The one who has been selected'? Selected for what? By whom?"

"Not the 'one who has been selected', Daniel Jackson," said Teal'c quietly. "'The Chosen One.'"

"Chosen One?"

Daniel's astonishment was only matched by O'Neill's. Then the older man's fingers tightened around his MP-5 and he pulled Teal'c a little way out of earshot, whispering rapidly: "They're calling him that because Daniel was chosen for sacrifice? Because he was supposed to die in the temple?"

"No, O'Neill. The phrase they were repeating before was 'The One Who Has Survived Shokmar'. You must remember that to survive Shokmar and emerge unscathed is impossible – or at least in these people's culture it is considered to be impossible."

Carter appeared so quietly at his elbow that O'Neill jumped when she said thoughtfully, "So, to these people, Daniel Jackson walking among them unscathed and in his right mind is like a – miracle."

"Indeed."

"Just hold on a minute. You're saying that they're calling Daniel the 'Chosen One' like we might call someone a – god or something?"

"To these people, O'Neill, Daniel Jackson walking among them unscathed is comparable with the story in your Earth Bible which tells of Lazarus and his resurrection from death."

"This day just keeps getting better and better, doesn't it?"

"Yes, but they're acting like this is a story they already know." Carter turned and looked at the people again. "I don't think Daniel just surviving Shokmar would cause this kind of reaction. They might be astounded but I think they'd also be hostile, wonder what kind of bad magic we'd used to get him back, but they're not – they're acting as if they were almost expecting this."

O'Neill looked across at his bewildered teammate, who was now surrounded by a growing group of locals who were tentatively reaching out to touch his hair or clothes. Oh great, this was like that scene on Abydos where the people had clustered around Daniel to bid him farewell. He didn't want
to think of these people like Skaara and Kasuf. These were the enemy. These were bad people who hurt good people who’d done them no harm for no reason. Those were the men he and Teal’c had left groaning and bleeding in that temple, not these.

“Jack?”

He turned round to find Daniel looking at him with one of his little frowns denting his forehead.

“Yes?” O’Neill said wearily.

“You don’t look so good.”

“Just getting too old for this.”

“What?”

Christ! Had he said that aloud? O’Neill collected himself quickly, "I mean – it's been a long, bad day, and it just seems to keep getting longer and badder.”

“That's what they're calling it too. A herew bin.” Daniel waved a hand to encompass the people still cradling their wounded, or plucking curiously at his clothes. "Which seems to be like what we might call a Dies irae or a Dies nefastus.”

“Which would be what I would call –?” O’Neill prompted.

“A really bad day, Jack.”

O’Neill closed his eyes, wishing everyone would just shut the hell up. Some of them were repeating the same thing over and over, about ten words, none of which he recognized; others had one phrase they kept saying; and at the same time ‘Shokmar’ kept being murmured but he couldn't work out which of them were whispering it, like something rustling in the grass you could never find even when you shone your flashlight right where it had been a second before. Like Mass; all those words in a language you didn’t understand which nevertheless made you think of all your sins.

God, he hadn't been to Mass in so many years, decades even. He'd been dragged along there a couple of times when staying with his grandmother and had damned near died of boredom. So how come he could still remember the scent of incense, remember the rustling of prayer books, the smoke from candles burning for the departed? The sound of words he'd never known the meaning of; just something you said and kept saying and then suddenly, one day, no longer said, and thought that you’d forgotten. Dies irae, dies illa….

O’Neill sat down on a tump of grey stone and took off his cap, running a hand through his hair to feel something familiar against his fingers. He couldn't even remember now what color his hair had been ten years ago. He couldn't remember who he’d been ten years ago. Someone with a son and blood on his hands. Now he was someone without a son and with blood on his hands, but for a while there he’d felt clean again. Had Charlie's blood washed all the other blood away? He’d felt reborn when he came back from Abydos, to nothing and no one, to an empty house and an inexplicable optimism, a hope that came from knowing there was so much more Out There than he’d ever dreamed of. Perhaps that year he’d spent looking outward had given all the sores inside himself time to heal, because the next time he’d dared to look within himself it had felt like a cleaner better place than he remembered it.

"Dies irae, dies illa,
Solvet saeclum in favilla,
Teste David cum Sibylla."
"Jack?"

O'Neill gave himself a shake and jerked his head up to find Daniel looking at him anxiously. The sun was going down behind the hill, turning the temple the color of blood, gilding Daniel's hair so he had a nimbus of red-gold around him. Damnit. He didn't want Daniel looking like a saint. Saints were only saints because they'd died a horrible death for their faith. Daniel was looking really worried now. He couldn't read his mind, could he?

"What?" O'Neill demanded roughly.

"You were speaking Latin."

"Don't be silly, Daniel. I don't know any Latin."

Daniel bit his lip, blue eyes filled with concern. "That's why I'm worried. Is it the language of the Ancients coming back? Does your head hurt? Do you know who you are?"

No, Daniel, I have no idea who I am and neither do you…. He had to start acting more like himself and quickly. Jack pulled his cap back on. "Just something from my – You never went to Mass on All Souls' Day?"

"No, I never – Wait – Dies irae, dies illa: 'That day, the day of wrath/Will turn the universe to ashes/As David foretells and the Sibyl also.' You were saying a prayer for the dead?"

O'Neill couldn't bring himself to meet the younger man's gaze. "What? I can't do that?"

"Is O'Neill unwell?"

"Daniel, is the colonel okay?"

Now Daniel was shielding him from Teal'c and Carter. He could hear him murmuring to them soothingly, "No, it's all right, it's just a tradition we have on this world, Teal'c. All Souls Day, it's the day following Halloween. It came about when a pilgrim returning from the Holy Land took refuge on an island during a storm. He met a hermit who told him that among the cliffs on the island was an opening to the infernal regions where one could see the flames ascending and hear the groans of the Damned. The pilgrim told what he'd heard and seen to Odilo of Cluny, an abbot, who appointed the day following All Hallow's Eve to be set aside for prayers for those souls in purgatory. Jack's fine. It's not the Ancients' language, it's just a – a prayer for the dead."

See, he hadn't known any of that. He hadn't even known what those words meant, he'd just known they were something you offered up for those who had sinned and were suffering. He hadn't even known if he was saying them for the people here or for himself. Maybe Daniel could tell him that as well.

"O'Neill does not generally say prayers."

"Yeah well, Jack doesn't usually have people waving their dead and dying in his face, Teal'c. Just – give him a minute."

It should have been him shielding Daniel from this; should have been Daniel sitting here with the nausea churning in his guts and O'Neill protecting him, telling Daniel it was going to be okay, everything was going to be okay. When had it happened that Daniel started protecting him? Oh yes, that was right, from the beginning. From the moment Daniel had leapt in front of him and got himself killed….
O'Neill shivered and got to his feet. "I'm fine, Daniel."

"You sure?"

They were clustering around Daniel again. If he didn't stick close to him, they were going to enfold him and carry him off, but sticking close to Daniel meant being near to them and he hated that idea. Jack set his teeth as tentative hands reached out again, some of them had wounds on them, others had bloodstains. They were clutching at the edge of Daniel's jacket, tugging at his sleeves, a few of the braver ones reaching for his hands. Daniel was murmuring soothing things to them all, trying Egyptian and English: "I don't know who you think I am, but I'm not him…. Ne ne tew setepen. Not the one chosen." Daniel looked to Teal'c for assistance. "They're speaking a variant dialect, Teal'c, and I'm having a lot of trouble with it. I'm trying to learn their vowel sounds but I'm not sure they're understanding what I'm saying."

As Teal'c came closer, the crowd gave off gasps and cries of fear. Daniel quickly reached out to touch the Jaffa on the shoulder. "Ne ne kheftey. Khenmes. Not an enemy. A friend." He patted Teal'c gently on the arm, "Khenmes." Out of the side of his mouth, Daniel murmured, "Jack, would you come over here and smile, please?"

O'Neill and Teal'c exchanged another glance and then O'Neill unwillingly took a step closer. Daniel reached across, caught him by the sleeve and towed him right into that morass of suffering and wounded, then touched him gently on the chest, saying, "Khenmes. Khenmes nefer."

"What did you just tell them I was?" O'Neill tried to repress another wave of nausea as he smelt unwashed bodies and fear much too close to him.

"Well, it's not a very exact language, and these people are speaking a variant of it I don't fully understand so I just told them you were a – a handsome friend, which is as close as I can get to saying you're a good man given the limited vocabulary I have to work with."

"'Handsome friend' is probably more accurate. I can live with that."

Daniel shot him a withering look before patting O'Neill on the chest again and addressing the ragged wounded encouragingly: "Seshmewen. Seshmewen."

O'Neill frowned as the people backed up shaking their heads. "They didn't seem to like that so much."

"I told them you were our leader. At least I hope I did."

The wounded were going back to their muttering and wailing again and O'Neill glowered. "Damnit, Daniel, these people are giving me a headache."

He saw one man with a crushed hand scrabbling pitifully at Daniel, his broken fingers pawing at Daniel's leaving a crimson trail. "Don't!" O'Neill shuddered in revulsion, and pushed the man away. "Don't get blood on him."

"Jack?" He collected himself to find Daniel staring at him in bewilderment. "Are you sure you're okay?"

Carter coming over to them saved him having to answer and he was frankly glad of the reprieve. Daniel automatically pointed at Carter and murmured soothingly, "Khenemset. Friend."

As the people began their horrible chanting again, closing back in around Daniel like waves around a rock, O'Neill pulled back out of the crowd and turned to Teal'c. "Are you getting anything they're
"They think we are not human."

O'Neill's jaw tightened. "You mean 'inhuman'?"

Teal'c raised an eyebrow. "No, O'Neill. They think we are avatars, come to avenge and protect the Chosen One from the wrath of the False God and his followers."


The wounded were all chattering at him like squirrel monkeys, waving their arms and telling him everything at once. How the hell did Daniel manage to make sense of it all? But he would, that was the problem, he would make sense of it eventually.

O'Neill had known this moment was coming and he needed a strategy to deal with it. Now. That was what he did, after all, found strategies to cope with difficult situations. That was all he did. He didn't understand how the 'gate worked that got them where they were going, and half the time he couldn't speak to the people they met when they got there. He didn't understand the mentality of the Goa'uld, or the science by which they maintained their show of divinity; but he was the leader because when a situation like this came along, he had a strategy ready with which to avert the crisis, to keep his team safe. Except he didn't. Not this time. All he had this time was the smell of blood in his nostrils, the memories of screams in his ears, and a lot of words he'd never believed in repeating in his mind like a child's lullaby playing over and over on a broken music box.

"We need to go to the temple."

Daniel was looking at him expectantly while someone's blood dried on the front of his jacket. And here was the moment when he needed to have that strategy ready. A convincing reason why Daniel shouldn't go and tend to the dead and dying he and Teal'c had left there under chunks of broken stone.

"Jack?" Daniel was getting impatient now. "There are people still trapped up there. I can't understand a lot of what they're saying because they keep saying 'tewet': that the 'tewet' brought down the other 'tewet' which I can't make any sense out of and then something about a False God. But there definitely seem to be people still trapped under the rubble so I think we need to get up there right away and see what we can do for the survivors."

"No." He didn't know where it had come from, and he'd been kind of hoping that when it arrived it might have a plausible reason accompanying it, the way hoodlums wrapped a note around a brick before they threw it through someone's window. But it was a start.

Daniel raised his eyebrows, evidently not quite trusting his ears. "I'm sorry –? Did you say...?"

"I said 'no', Daniel. And I meant it." He hardly recognized his own voice. It was a flat, dead tone he'd certainly never used to Daniel before, but at least the words were coming now. "In case you've forgotten, we're trapped on an alien planet because in the time it took to go and get you back from where you'd let yourself get taken, the DHD stopped working. Now my first priority is to secure our escape and that means we don't go anywhere or do anything until Carter and Teal'c have managed
to fix the DHD so we can get out of here."

And there had been a time, what, maybe two, certainly three years ago, when that might have done it: cold eyes, sharp tone, sound really definite, he'll flounce a bit but he'll probably cave. Not any more. This Daniel wasn't having any of it. This Daniel pursed up his mouth and then said, "That's fine, Jack. And while Sam and Teal'c are fixing the DHD, you and I can –"

"We can guard them while they work, Daniel, the way one does with one's teammates." Nasty. Below the belt. Imply that Daniel wasn't a team player. That would get to him because there had been a time when Daniel hadn't been a team player. And yes he was playing dirty but Daniel's sanity was hanging in the balance here. So was their friendship. But he could get that back as long as he went over to Daniel's place with a case of cookies, a six pack of really good beer, and did enough groveling. Told Daniel he was sorry about biting his head off but it had been his wedding anniversary or the wailing worshippers and their wounded had reminded him of something that happened back in Nicaragua or whatever. He'd throw himself on Daniel's mercy and Daniel would forgive him. What he couldn't get back with some fast talking, beer, and imported candy was Daniel's sanity if that temple took it from him a second time.

Anyone else would have probably said 'Screw you' and walked off but Daniel had an unshakeable conviction that reason worked better than either bullets or insults. He took a deep breath and then said, as reasonably as O'Neill had feared, "I understand that, Jack. But I'm sure Teal'c could guard Sam while she worked on the DHD, and in the meantime you and I could go up there and just see if there's anything we can do for the –"

"No, Daniel. That is not an option." He hated the sound of his own voice. How dead and angry it seemed. As though he didn't even like the person he was talking to. As though Daniel had never been and never would be anything other than a nuisance to him. He remembered the comforting warmth of Daniel's body against his in the tel'tak. Daniel telling O'Neill he granted him absolution for anything that might happen to him on a mission; remembered Daniel shouldering his weight in Netu. Remember him screaming your name as they tortured him and you didn't come for him. Yes. Daniel shuddering with terror and clinging to him like he was driftwood, and Daniel the last survivor from a shipwreck…. "I'm not arguing with you, Jack. You want to stay here, you go right ahead, and while you're doing it, I'm going to the temple."

"No, you're not!" He snapped it out and suddenly there was silence. No wailing, no chittering, no moaning, no crying. Hushed expectancy as the purple dusk fell around them, sucking the last of the color from the sky.

Daniel was half turned away from him but he saw the muscle in the younger man's jaw clench and tighten. Daniel didn't like arguments very much but he wasn't going to back down. He knew he was right and when Daniel knew he was right you couldn't shift him with anything less emphatic than a length of two by four around the back of the head, and even then it only worked for as long as he was unconscious. Not looking at him, Daniel said quietly but very precisely, "I'm going to the temple."

O'Neill caught Daniel by the shoulder and spun him around to face him. "If I have to lay you out I will, but you are not going up there."

Daniel stared back at him in exasperation. "There are people dying!"

"I don't care."
Daniel gritted his teeth. "You said it was Teal'c who destroyed the temple. Is that true? Did you do this when you were looking for me? Did you know there were people wounded up there and just leave them?"

"You're not going to that temple, Daniel." He said it as quietly and precisely as Daniel had done, giving each word a little more space around it than usual, like rain drops dripping into a tin mug.

"Jack, I don't even know who you are right now. I'm looking at you and I have no idea who I'm talking to."

"You're talking to someone who's not letting you go to that temple." O'Neill grabbed Daniel by the jacket and began to drag him back towards the DHD.

He was aware of Teal'c and Carter hovering and he knew their loyalties were split straight down the middle, that he couldn't rely on them to back him up here. They wanted Daniel kept safe as much as he did but he'd just crossed a line they wouldn't have. He couldn't think of any set of circumstances under which Teal'c would manhandle Daniel, and there was a big question mark over how long Teal'c would stand there and let him manhandle Daniel.

Daniel wrenched himself loose and faced him in angry confusion. "If you're going to hit me, you go right ahead. Knock me out. But when I wake up you're going to have to hit me again. And again. Because as soon as you stop hitting me I am going up there to try to help those people."

For one crowded second, O'Neill thought he could do it. His fingers tensed and his right hand formed the fist he was going to need to get this job done. He saw Daniel try not to flinch in readiness because Daniel had experienced a right hook from Jack O'Neill before and knew how much it hurt. But then O'Neill realized that whatever his hand might be doing about getting ready to hit Daniel there was no will to accompany it. Under the influence of the Touched virus he'd been capable of pounding Daniel senseless. Standing here in the mist with the sun going down and the echo of Daniel screaming his name still ringing in his ears, he just wasn't. He saw Daniel read it in his eyes, saw him sag a little in relief. Damn it – now they both knew he wasn't capable of carrying out his threat.

He wasn't quite ready to give up on his plan yet, though. O'Neill turned to his teammates, jerked a thumb at the linguist and said, "Teal'c – hit Daniel."

Teal'c raised an eyebrow and gave O'Neill a look that told him very plainly that hell would freeze over first.

O'Neill gave Carter a hopeful glance but she emphatically shook her head. "Not a chance, sir."

"You can shoot him instead if you like, I don't mind."

"No, sir."

Sighing, O'Neill let his hands fall to his sides, shrugging, defeated. "Okay, Daniel, you win. We'll all go."

The relief on his face unmistakable, Daniel just nodded. "Fine."

O'Neill had hoped they could shake off the wailing worshippers for this trip, but they all seemed to have decided that wherever Daniel went was the place they had to be. As they made their way back up the hillside towards the temple for the second time that day, SG-1 were escorted by a large group
of the indigenous population. The same group who had made that trip to the temple to watch Daniel killed, now apparently all eagerness to see him return to the place of his torture for a reason O'Neill couldn't even guess at. But he couldn't pretend they seemed to mean Daniel any harm; they were looking at him with a mixture of hope and reverence that certainly contained no hostility. They were acting as though they'd been waiting for his arrival for a long time, but if that was the case then why had they been so happy to watch him murdered earlier? No one had uttered a word of protest when Daniel had been dragged in half-dead, yet they seemed genuinely pleased by his – resurrection. Even remembering these were people from a different culture and, as Daniel was always telling him, you had to make allowances for cultural differences, he still thought their actions and reactions made no sense whatsoever.

They were still murmuring something about 'Shokmar', and calling Daniel something which even he now recognized was their version of 'The Chosen One'. Many of them were injured, of course, so were struggling painfully after SG-1, while even the more able-bodied were clearly torn between the magnetic attraction Daniel seemed to hold for them, and the fear the sight of Teal'c and O'Neill caused them. Carter, by comparison, seemed to command a tender respect. The people were gazing at her with a kind of fond wonder. The way his grandmother had used to look at that statue of the Virgin Mary in that old Catholic Church. O'Neill cleared his throat and murmured to Teal'c. "Any idea what the hell is going on around here?"

Teal'c gave him an imperturbable sideways glance. "We are accompanying Daniel Jackson to the temple of Onuris to assist in the relief of the wounded, O'Neill."

O'Neill gave him a very narrow look in return. "And that's your way of telling me – what? I shouldn't have physically laid hands on Daniel because that wasn't 'respectful' enough? Or I shouldn't have given into him and agreed to let him come back here? Which is it? Either? Both? Because I don't remember getting a lot of back-up down there from either you or Carter."

"Sir, I just don't think that yelling at Daniel –"

"I was not 'yelling' at him, okay? I may have raised my voice a fraction, but I was definitely not yelling at him. And you two do know what going back to that temple could do to him, don't you?"

"Even so, O'Neill –"

O'Neill held up a finger. "Don't 'even so' me, Teal'c. Yes, in a perfect world, I would treat Daniel with consideration at all times, I would never lay an angry hand upon him, I would never raise my voice to him, but this isn't a perfect world, and this especially isn't a perfect planet, and I'm damned certain this isn't a perfect situation. Now, I'm sorry if I got a little short with him but I think saving his life and his sanity might be just a hair more important than hurting his feelings."

Carter said quietly. "Except you did hurt his feelings, sir, and we're still going to the temple."

"Okay – you spotted the flaw in my plan."

Looking around he wondered where the torches had come from. SG-1 had their flashlights and there was something comforting about those clean slices of bluish-white light, but the locals had gone for the fire-on-a-stick approach and looked like they were off on a witch-hunt.

He caught up with Daniel; the locals moving away from him as though he and they were aligned to the same magnetic pole, leaving a path clear to his teammate. O'Neill fell into step beside Daniel and risked a sideways glance at the younger man's face.

Oh boy, O'Neill thought. That was not a happy expression. That was Daniel's best pursed-mouth-
narrowed-eyes screw-you-Jack look. At least O'Neill always thought of it as his screw-you-Jack look because he'd certainly never seen it directed at anyone else. Daniel might be slow to anger and near impossible to provoke to violence but when Daniel was cold-shouldering you, iceboxes felt warmer than his company. It had taken Daniel a while to work out that this was the best way to get to him but unfortunately over the last year or so they'd both learned that being frozen out by Daniel was definitely the thing he hated most. He'd found that out after he and Daniel had disagreed over the Harsesis child of Amaunet's when Daniel had struck him right off his conversation list and could always find a good reason to be leaving a room he was entering. Having your best friend suddenly decide that you were about as welcome in his life as a leper had not been a fun experience, and no way in hell was he going through that again.

"Daniel?"

Still the screw-you-Jack look. "Yes?" And that wasn't exactly the most inviting tone he'd ever heard either.

"I'm sorry."

Daniel darted him a wary glance, tone crisp, unforgiving: "For what?"

"Um – yelling at you, grabbing you, threatening to hit you, telling Teal'c to hit you, asking Carter to shoot you. Did I miss anything out?"

"Acting like a total maniac from the minute I woke up?"

That hurt. The circumstances were definitely mitigating and Daniel was so damned sure he was right. Suck it up, O'Neill, if you don't do it now you'll only have to do it later and he'll be even sulkier then. He sighed. "I'm sorry. I thought we'd lost you. I got scared."

That had certainly got rid of the screw-you-Jack look; now Daniel looked like he had in Netu when he'd first seen Carter's father half-dead in the corner, like the world was dissolving slowly around his ears. Daniel darted him another sideways glance, trying to read if he was sincere. He evidently decided he was because he looked even more upset. "Then I'm sorry, too. I didn't mean to scare you. I just…." Daniel bit his lip. "I didn't know who you were back there, Jack."

"I was who I used to be."

"What?"

Great now he had Daniel upset and confused. "Daniel, you have to know I did a lot of stuff before I met you that I'm not very proud of."

"I don't think you'd ever –"

"Believe it." Sometimes you had to be brutal and this was definitely one of those times. "I did some things for the United States Government that would have bought me a one-way trip to Netu even without the Rescue Carter's Father Special Package Tour. That's who I was. That means in a way it's also who I am."

"I don't believe that."

O'Neill sighed. No, Daniel wouldn't. Teal'c might have done Bad Things in the past, but he was a good guy now, and Jack was a good guy now, and they were all good guys now. "Oh, Daniel...." he sighed. Most of the time he wanted the guy to keep his innocence, but every now and then, just like on the tel'tak, he just wanted him to wise up, open his eyes, and smell the goddamned manure. "You
think you know me pretty well, don't you?"

Daniel looked at him curiously but answered with absolute confidence. "Yes."

"Well, you're wrong. Sometimes, Daniel, you don't know me at all." He couldn't help some of his previous anger with Daniel returning. This was all Daniel's stupid fault. If he hadn't wandered off none of this would have happened. He would never have been captured, or tortured, those priests and worshippers would still be alive and uninjured. All because Daniel always knew best about everything. Well, not this time. It was Daniel's fault he'd started thinking of himself as a good man again; he'd let himself believe in the image of himself reflected back at him in those curious blue eyes. Daniel could look at him with all that trust and belief until the sun turned black and shriveled in the sky, he wasn't going to convince him this time.

Daniel said conversationally, "What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

As O'Neill opened his mouth to tell him exactly what that meant, Teal'c said, "O'Neill, we are approaching the temple."

He tensed up at once. All those different gates to hell he'd never known about until now. Not just a fiery freefall to Netu in a Tok'ra sardine can. Not just the stab of pain as a Goa'uld ripped its way inside you and you knew you'd just drawn your last human breath; the gunshot that took your child's life echoing endlessly through your nightmares; memories of bodies burning, people screaming, blood pouring from wounds your bullets had made; but this: a place where they brought back the friend you'd failed to keep safe turned into something else entirely. A place where you'd left the guilty and the innocent to stew in their own blood.

"Jack? Are you okay?"

Stop asking me that, dammit, Daniel! O'Neill carefully didn't look at him. He could only get through this if he stayed mad at Daniel and it always got so much harder to stay mad at Daniel when Daniel was brimming over with compassion and concern for him. "It's nothing."

"Sir?" He turned to Carter with something like relief but her eyes were also full of anxiety. She nodded her head towards Daniel and murmured, "Do you think maybe we should…?"

"It's too late for that. We'll just have to hope that band-aid his subconscious stuck over Daniel's bad memories is still holding good." He tried to sound a lot more confident than he felt but given how unhappy Carter still looked after he'd finished speaking he guessed he hadn't been too successful. He wanted to tell her that everything was going to be okay. They'd fix these people up, she and Teal'c would dismantle the gizmo on the DHD, they'd all get the hell out of here and Daniel wouldn't suspect or remember a thing. But he couldn't. He had a very bad feeling about all of this and it was getting worse.

***
Chapter 2

Part Two

The dust was still settling in the temple. If it hadn't been night and the sun could have found its way inside, there would have been thousands of motes dancing in those light-beams. As it was, they had to view the ruins by pitiless blue-white flashlight beams and the yellow-red flames of burning torches.

"Oh my God…" Daniel breathed it softly, looking around at the broken stones, the dead, the groaning wounded still trapped underneath the rubble, the blood.

Daniel turned to look over his shoulder at O'Neill, and he knew what Daniel needed to see: reassurance that they hadn't done this; that they were as appalled as he was; that the man who had been his friend for the past three years would come back from wherever he'd been hiding and act like himself again.

O'Neill made an instant decision about the way he was going to have to play this. They were here, after all. Daniel had walked into the temple and the bad memories didn't seem to have hit him. The best way to freak him out and start him remembering was probably to go on acting as weird as he had been for the past couple of hours. Time to give Daniel back the Jack O'Neill he knew. Time to give Daniel something to do to take his mind off things as well.

Closing his hand on Daniel's sleeve, he eased him a few paces into the temple and out of the way of the crowd that had spilled in around them. "We have limited medical supplies and multiple casualties. So we need to assess the injured and make decisions about who needs it the most. If we could use the 'gate we could send back for Doc Fraiser and a medical team, but we can't, so we're going to have to do the best we can with what we've got. Why don't you try to find out if these people have some kind of Healer of their own and then you can liaise with him or her while Carter and the rest of us do what we can, okay?"

Daniel was so obviously grateful to have him back it made him feel even worse. O'Neill saw that look of relief light up his face and quickly reached across and patted Daniel on the shoulder. "You going to be okay?"

Daniel nodded, clearly making an effort but hanging in there. "Yes."

"Do they have a word for doctor or something?"

"Sewnew or Sewenwet," Daniel answered him automatically. "But the vowel sounds are different here."

"You start yelling as close as you can get to it while Teal'c and I see what we can do about shifting some of the smaller stones. Then get Carter to help you set up some kind of pulley system for moving the bigger ones." He tightened his grip on Daniel's arm, giving it a little squeeze to be sure he had his attention. "Okay, Daniel?"

"Yes." Daniel looked better already just at being given something specific to concentrate on. He turned away and started speaking rapidly in Abydonian, making a lot of hand gestures to help with the explanation.

As he nodded to Teal'c and the two of them went to start lifting stones from the injured, O'Neill was
also aware of Daniel trying to get things organized. He was surprisingly good at it, and O'Neill remembered again that Daniel hadn't actually been the college kid he'd appeared on their first meeting but a proper grown-up archaeologist who had spent years in the field. He always thought of archaeology as careful digging with little implements and brushes, but he guessed that every now and then archaeology also involved hauling great big rocks around because Daniel was issuing orders about where to place the ropes, and how to pad the ropes and how to use that ceiling support as a pulley with surprising efficiency.

The no-longer-wailing worshippers were obeying Daniel unquestioningly, working together to lift shattered blocks of stone from the dead and injured; Daniel calling soft words of encouragement to them before hurrying to assess the wounded. Seeing the torchlight gild his hair, the gentle fingers feeling so carefully across bloodstained bodies to check for signs of life, it didn't seem so insane to O'Neill that these people were perceiving his teammate as some kind of deliverer.

Carter was helping him, her short blond hair burnished to red-gold by torchlight. Even though she couldn't speak the language, her clear voice was soothing both wounded and mourners. As he watched, she turned to assist with the placing of the ropes then turned back to see to those the concerted heaving had freed from the broken slabs, compassion and competence written in every line of her body.

As O'Neill and Teal'c put their hands on a broken lump of statue, other hands tentatively came to assist them. O'Neill deliberately didn't look at the people to his right and left, just saying quietly, "Teal'c tell them one-two-three or something, will you?"

Teal'c said something O'Neill didn't understand but then at a nod to him from Teal'c they were all lifting together, grunting with exertion as they moved the broken slab from off the body it was covering. O'Neill looked down and made a face. "Jeez…" The skull had been crushed but at least this one must have died outright. A priest going by the clothing and the hairless head and skin. He was glad Daniel hadn't seen this one. He'd learned to be stoic about having to shoot serpent guards, but he still flinched from the sight of corpses when they took him unawares. And anyway, O'Neill always kept in mind the fact that Daniel was a civilian. There were some things he thought civilians shouldn't have to get used to even when they were part of a military field unit. Still not making eye contact with their nervous assistants, he murmured to Teal'c, "Tell them to find somewhere to put the dead ones. Out of sight of the wounded."

As Teal'c passed on his orders, O'Neill turned away, wiping his hands on his jacket and trying not to think about that corpse they'd just uncovered.

"Jack?"

He went before he'd thought about whether or not he wanted to. This was one of his conditioned responses now. Like the one you developed when your child was crying or having nightmares, that had you propelled out of bed and stumbling into his bedroom to comfort him before you even realized you were awake. This one seemed to be almost as deeply ingrained: Daniel called his name and he started running. Well, walking briskly if anyone was watching. But he could no more have ignored that call than stopped his heart beating just by wanting it. He would have gone if Carter or Teal'c had called him, as well, of course, but perhaps not instinctively. There would have been some rationale in that response, a moment when his brain identified the call and the likely reason for it before he started responding even if it took less than a second for him to do so. But Daniel saying his name was apparently wired straight into his feet. Somedays it was like being on a goddamned invisible string.

Daniel was crouched at the base of a block of the broken statue of Onuris. There was a bloodstained
hand visible where a puddle of torchlight fell. O'Neill tensed his jaw. Daniel shouldn't be looking at bits of bodies. Why the hell was he looking at bits of bodies anyway? A low moan gusted out from the shadow of the statue. Oh hell. Not dead. A crushed body with some breath left in it. Daniel said softly, "He's still alive. Do we have any morphine?"

The word was like a lightning bolt and O'Neill felt himself flinch. "Morphine?"

Daniel looked up at him and swallowed. "Something to stop the pain once we get this off him, Jack. His chest has been crushed. He must be in a lot of pain." He tried to say it matter-of-factly but O'Neill saw that haunted look come into Daniel's eyes which he'd seen way too much of on Netu, not to mention every battlefield he'd been forced to take him to. It was no surprise when as Daniel straightened up he wrapped his arms around his chest protectively.

It was the High Priest, O'Neill realized. He'd seen that section of the statue fall onto him. He'd assumed he'd been killed outright, but instead he'd been lying here all this time, probably in the kind of pain he didn't even want to think about. He tried to summon back some of that anger, to remind himself this was the guy who'd tortured Daniel…. He could kindle a brief spark of that all-consuming fury, but it was doused immediately by the look in Daniel's eyes.

Daniel gestured at the groaning High Priest. "Will you and Teal'c help me to get this off him?"

Before O'Neill could answer, the worshippers were clustering around Daniel, tugging at him and shaking their heads as they gestured at the injured man while repeating the same words over and over.

Frowning Daniel said, "Hum-nadj-tep? I don't…?" His face cleared. "Hem-netje-tepey? Servant-god-first. God's-servant first? Oh, right, god's First Servant – you mean he's the High Priest, yes? Of this temple?" He frowned again as they tried to pull him away, shaking their heads and making signs that even O'Neill could see spoke of danger, caution, flight.

Daniel dug in his toes, saying in the same even tone, "No, we must help this man….

He was all but overwhelmed by a chorus of rapid chattering and head shaking, hands determinedly trying to pull him away.

O'Neill turned to Teal'c for assistance. "If they don't shut up….

Teal'c strode forward, snapping out the word imperiously: "Ger!"

Silence fell at once. The Jaffa beckoned to one of those who had been the most insistent about Daniel not going near the priest while O'Neill smoothly intercepted Daniel as he went to join the discussion, saying, "Any word on that doctor? The kind of injuries that High Priest guy has we're not going to be able to treat."

His gaze straying to where Teal'c was questioning the local man, Daniel collected himself. "Um – apparently their physician was killed when the…ceiling collapsed but some of them have a little medical knowledge and they're helping with the wounded. Look, Jack, I don't really understand what happened here?"

"Daniel there's no time for explanations right now. You see about getting that pulley you've got rigged up moved to that chunk of statue and I'll check our packs, see what medical supplies we've got left. Did you have a field kit with you?"

"Yes, but I've already used most of it up. We need morphine."
"We'll do the best we can with what we've got." Seeing that Teal'c was about to come back over, O'Neill sent Daniel away with a reassuring little pat on the shoulder. "Go start on moving that pulley will you?"

"Colonel?"

He turned around to see Carter waiting to speak to him. She was also wiping her hands on her jacket.

"What's the situation, Major?"

She bit her lip. "A lot of dead and wounded, sir."

"Yeah, I got that."

"What were those people saying to Daniel?"

Teal'c heard the last question and replied gravely, "They say the High Priest of this temple does not believe in the Chosen One. He is a faithful follower of Onuris. He would betray Daniel Jackson to the Goa'uld as a false deliverer. They say Onuris is coming."

"What?" O'Neill whipped his head around to check the Jaffa wasn't just making a bad joke. "How? Why? He can't know what happened here. Can he?"

"They say he does. They say he is coming. They also say Daniel Jackson is in grave danger as long as he remains here."

O'Neill took off his cap and ran a hand through his hair. "Oh – peachy."

Carter shook her head. "Teal'c that doesn't make any sense. It must just be a superstition on these people's part."

"So I at first believed, Major Carter, but they are adamant that Onuris is coming here. That the Stargate is closed because he is coming here."

She looked around the temple as though seeking inspiration. "Well, then there must be some kind of communication device one of the priests used to talk to him. Perhaps we could adapt it and get word through to General Hammond. Tell him to send through a naqadah reactor so we can dial up the gate manually."

Teal'c shook his head. "They say it is written on the Tablet of the Prophet that when Onuris is betrayed by his own, he will come to seek revenge upon the Chosen One who has attempted to usurp him. They tell it as though it is a story they already know."

"We have got to get Daniel off this damned planet," O'Neill said through his teeth.

Carter had a hand up to her forehead. "Sir, the only way we're going to be able to do that is if we understand the technology we're dealing with here. Now, someone or something must have contacted Onuris and told him about Daniel or else he wouldn't be coming. And they must have told him very quickly because by the time we got down from the temple the DHD was already locked out."

"There's your communicator, right there," O'Neill shrugged. "You said you thought it was transmitting. It's obviously transmitting to Onuris, telling him to come deal with his rival before people stop believing in him and start believing in this…Chosen One instead."
"Believing in Daniel," Carter said quietly.

O'Neill sighed and looked across at where Daniel was motioning to the men setting up the pulley system to take up the slack. "They could do a lot worse."

Carter wiped her hand across her forehead, leaving a trail of blood as she did so. "It still doesn't make any sense. What told the device on the DHD to start transmitting? Why are these people all acting like today's events were something they already knew about? As though Daniel was someone they've been waiting for?"

"I don't know, Major."

She gave him a level look. "I think we need to find out, sir. And quickly."

"Jack?"

There was that damned string again because he was ten feet across the temple before he knew it. "You okay?"

Daniel looked up from his position kneeling on the floor by the trapped High Priest to gaze at him curiously. "Why do you keep asking me that?"

O'Neill grimaced at his own stupidity. "You had a headache."

He knew it sounded lame and Daniel clearly agreed with him because he looked around at the groaning wounded with their crushed limbs before darting O'Neill another quizzical glance, opened his mouth, closed it again, then turned his attention back to the High Priest. "Jack, I don't think he's going to last much longer if we don't get this weight off his chest. And I can't get them to get the pulley hooked up over here. I don't understand why not. They just keep shaking their heads at me."

He appreciated the way Daniel had heroically resisted telling him he ought to get a sense of proportion there. He guessed he wasn't the only one who had to keep swallowing the snide remarks. O'Neill waved an arm at Teal'c. "You want to tell these people to get the pulley moved over here?"

As Teal'c began issuing a series of orders in a sharp bark of unfamiliar Goa'uld, O'Neill became aware of Daniel murmuring quietly to the injured man. The same way he had spoken so gently to Apophis' host when that bewildered scribe was dying in their infirmary. He had the man's bloodstained hand held in his and was speaking very softly in a tongue unrecognizable from those staccato commands of Teal'c's despite the fact that O'Neill knew this was more or less the same language.

Looking over his shoulder, O'Neill saw that Daniel's 'followers' were protesting to Teal'c, pointing at the High Priest and shaking their heads. He could guess what they were saying. They had his sympathy. But there was no way in hell he was going to look Daniel in the eye again and tell him they were just going to sit this one out and let a man die. As Teal'c looked across at him questioningly, O'Neill said flatly, "Just tell them to do it. Now."

The High Priest groaned again and his hand tightened on Daniel's. He was saying something over and over. O'Neill looked at Daniel. "You getting any of that?"

"Some of it. He's saying he is a faithful servant of the one true god. That he has always served the Great Lord Onuris and always shall. That others will give succor to the false deliverer but he shall receive no mercy from his hands."

O'Neill gritted his teeth. "Sounds like a nice guy."
Daniel gave him a reproachful look. "Teal'c used to believe Apophis was a god, Jack. That doesn't mean he wasn't a good man at heart. And you told me you did some bad things when you were in Special Forces, right?"

"Right."

"Well, I do what you tell me. Does that make me culpable in what you might have done in the past?"

O'Neill regarded him levelly. "When, Daniel?"

"What?"

"When do you do what I tell you? Name me one instance – ever – where you have done what I tell you."

Daniel sighed at him impatiently and bent back over the injured priest, murmuring soft words of encouragement to him. The man began to struggle back to consciousness, eyelids flickering before he began to cough. O'Neill winced as the dark blood spattered over Daniel's hands. He jerked his head round and yelled, "Teal'c, I don't care what you have to tell them, just make them hook up the goddamned pulley!"

There was a confusion of activity, in the midst of which ropes were lashed and secured under Teal'c's direction. Then O'Neill was tugged away from the scene by the worshippers who, clearly emboldened by his concern for Daniel began to gesticulate and talk at him. As Teal'c and Carter gave out orders to the unwilling rescuers of the injured High Priest, O'Neill was pulled even further away from the fallen statue by the most insistent of them, a dozen protestors clearly telling him that the High Priest should not be saved for Daniel's sake. O'Neill held up his hands. "Look, I'm with you. I don't like the guy either. But you tell me a way to explain that to Daniel which doesn't involve reminding him of what happened here earlier."

"Jack?"

O'Neill practically leapt out of his skin as Daniel spoke right next to him. He wheeled around. "Christ, Daniel, stop creeping up on me like that!"

Daniel looked at him blankly. "Jack, you don't understand a word these people are saying to you and they don't understand a word you're saying to them. I was just offering to translate."

Before O'Neill could ask just how much Daniel had heard, more of the worshippers came forward, shouting and gesticulating and dragging with them two very frightened priests. Abruptly, O'Neill was back in that alcove, looking across the temple at the men who were pulling Daniel along between them; his teammate's skin grey with pain, eyes dulled, mind gone. His jaw tightened and he automatically raised his MP-5. Daniel had already gone forward and was asking what was wrong while the men holding the priests spoke to him rapidly.

O'Neill wasn't at all sure that he wanted Daniel to hear any of this, and hastened to interrupt, "What are they saying?"

Daniel gesticulated at him to be quiet and turned and spoke to the others rapidly in Abydonian. O'Neill thought again how soft and beguiling a language it sounded in Daniel's mouth, how harsh in that of the Goa'uld. When Daniel turned back to him he looked more bewildered than traumatized. "I don't think I'm getting what they're telling me. They keep saying these are bad priests who worship the False god and did harm to the Chosen One. And then there's a lot about that 'shokmar' word I still don't understand."

He spoke sharply to the worshippers, before turning to the priests and murmuring
something reassuring. He put his hand on O'Neill's chest as he did so and then nodded over at Teal'c and Carter before saying something else.

"What was that about?" O'Neill demanded.

"I told them they mustn't harm those men and I told the priests that we would let no harm come to them. I told them my companions were strong warriors who would protect them from unjust wrath."

"What about just wrath?"

"What?"

And there was Daniel with that dazed look on his face again. O'Neill said impatiently, "Damnit, Daniel, we have no idea what these people might have done. They could have been sacrificing everyone's first-born sons to the goddamned Goa'uld for all we know. Don't go signing me up to protect people I don't know."

"They're scared, Jack."

"Maybe they have reason to be scared. Did you ever stop and think about that? Maybe they've done really bad things and don't deserve to be protected?"

At a concerted grunt of exertion from the men manning the pulley, Daniel turned to go back to the injured High Priest, but O'Neill caught his arm and held it. "Just wait a minute."

"Why?"

O'Neill wondered how, after all the shit he'd been through, Daniel could still look as confused and trusting as a ten year-old. He didn't know any more if he found it endearing or just downright exasperating; but it did always make him want to keep the younger man safe. He met Daniel's blue gaze with a level stare of his own. "Your family has a bad track record with big stones and pulleys. Just wait over there until they've put the damn thing down again."

Daniel gave him another of those hurt looks and O'Neill sighed, giving him a very gentle push as he did so. "Daniel – just do it for me, will you?"

Jack's propulsion sent Daniel toward the center of the temple and he kept going, walking between the rows of wounded, gazing up at the walls and feeling something stirring on the edges of his memory; a vague sense of déjà vu. He tried to imagine what it would have been like when the statue was still intact. It would have dominated the chamber, the plumed headdress a pillar that held up the ceiling… and suddenly he could see it rear up so vividly that he flinched. Anhur. Onuris. Inhert. The statue was looming over him, flanked by two stone lions, carrying a spear…. Daniel found he was gazing at a space where a statue wasn't, the ceiling billowing above him, the dusty air lapping around him like a cold sea in which he could very easily drown.

He remembered the people clenching at him in the shadow of the Stargate, crying that the 'tewet' had brought down the 'tewet' as though he should understand what they were telling him. Each word given a completely different inflection and stress as though it was another word altogether; like someone saying 'a jar' and 'ajar' in the same sentence. Abruptly a possible translation for 'tewet' came to him: "Statue."

There had been no statues on Abydos, of course, which was why the word was buried so much deeper than those he'd used every day. His vocabulary had a lot of gaps still even though he and
Teal'c had been trading lessons since the Jaffa first joined their struggle against the Goa'uld: Daniel helping Teal'c to speak and write better English while Teal'c helped him to expand his vocabulary. Later they had both become advanced students: Teal'c teaching him different variants of Goa'uld while he explained the etymology of the English language to Teal'c. But his core vocabulary, those words he had spoken every day on Abydos remained much more easily accessible than the ones he had been taught later but rarely had a chance to use. He could remember swearwords Skaara had taught him after they'd tried out their unspeakable first attempt at moonshine better than many far more useful terms Teal'c had told him.

Abydonian bad language. A gust of memory, warm and welcome as the first cool gust of evening after a baking desert day. Daniel and Skaara giggling drunkenly at the way the stars were spinning as they lay out flat on top of a cold sand dune and passed their horrible homemade brew from hand to hand. Skaara teaching him the words, and Daniel repeating them, shouting them defiantly at the constellations and the lingering vapor trail that might be tiny specks of atomized Ra.

The next day, vision blurring from a hangover that felt as if it had poisoned every brain cell, he'd cut his finger chopping vegetables, tried out one of his new swearwords for size, and heard a gasp from the doorway. He'd turned to see Sha're staring at him in indignant disbelief. He'd given her a wincing apology for a smile then flinched as she advanced determinedly. The slap had been across his rump rather than the back of his head. Had he been her little brother instead of her husband he probably would have had his ear twisted in reproof, but he'd pleaded his hangover and begged for mercy. She'd had to struggle to force her face into an expression of sternness, her mouth twitching as she pointed to the floor. He'd fallen to his knees at her feet and held his hands together in a mock plea for absolution. She'd lifted her chin and tried to look implacable but when he'd bent and kissed her feet, he'd felt the giggles tremor through her. He'd kissed a trail to her ankles and then began to kiss the inside of her leg, up to her knee, along the satin warmth of her thigh….

Daniel put a hand up to his head and swallowed hard. What was the point in remembering any of that now? He'd knelt at Amaunet's feet since then, seen the cool satisfaction in her eyes as she aimed the ribbon device to cause him the maximum pain. Seen Amaunet die. Seen Sha're die. Hope die. You had to go forward. Just like Jack. One life ended, another began. This was his life now. He was part of SG-1, a member of a team, despite having no military qualifications, allowed to explore new worlds. Allowed even, through Jack's goodwill, to travel the universe in search of Sha're's son….

There was another unlooked for spasm of memory: that newborn baby kicking in his arms. A perfect human boy the Goa'uld would nevertheless hunt down and kill because of his race memory, and whom the SGC were happy for him to search out for the same reason. He'd been careful not to ask the other three what they were looking for just in case they told him it was a weapon against the Goa'uld. As long as they let him look with them he didn't care why. Just as long as no one minded that while they were searching for the Harsesis whose knowledge might help them defeat the Goa'uld, he was only trying to find his dead wife's child.

You must find the boy….

"I'm looking, Sha're, but he isn't here."

As Daniel walked towards the place where he'd imagined the statue soaring implacably, he saw the plinth and what remained of the stone lions. That was when he heard what sounded like the echo of his own voice in his mind: Anhur, also called Onuris, derived from the Egyptian word anhuret 'he who brings the far near', also called Inhert; consort of the lioness-goddess Mehit. Let me think – yes, first attested in the Thinite region in Upper Egypt but by the Late Period associated with the delta site of Sebennytos where a temple was dedicated to Onuris-Shu by Nectanebo the Second….
Just knowledge. Nothing to flinch from there. Nothing to make him feel that someone was walking over his grave. He averted his eyes from the headless lion statue, stumbled over a broken piece of stone and put out an arm to prevent himself from falling. When he grabbed hold of a pillar, he felt the inscription under his fingers. This time as he blinked and focused, the sense of doom was stronger, each word making a sound in his mind like ice water dripping slowly onto a tin plate: "'May I be granted power over the waters, for I am he who crosses the sky, I am the Lion, I am the Slayer.'"

"I know this." Daniel backed up, swallowing. "I've seen this before." He turned a slow circle, telling himself not to be stupid, of course he knew it, the inscription had been edited down from a longer one in the Book of the Dead. But why then did he think he'd said it here; exactly here; his voice striking the exact same note from these soaring stone pillars? Knew the nine bows were inscribed on those broken pieces of pottery, red clay jars, and human skulls he'd barely looked at yet? Because they're execration texts. You know what execration texts are. You're an Egyptologist. Get a grip, Daniel!

Pain lanced through his head so fast and so sharp he cried out before he could stop himself. Blue light flared. A voice snarled: "Wesheb! Wesheb!"

"Daniel…?"

The pain hit him again, a wave this time, engulfing, paralyzing, he crumpled and would have fallen to his knees except someone grabbed him and held him up. For a moment he felt like a kite tossed on a storm; the pain dragging him up into another gust while a thin string held him fastened to the earth.

"Daniel…? It's Jack. Talk to me. Daniel!"

He gasped and clutched, feeling material under his fingers; a jacket, a t-shirt; an arm went around his back, hauled him upright. "Daniel, answer me. Answer me!"

Wesheb! Wesheb!

"I don't know the answer!" He shouted it, eyes watering with the pain. "I don't know the answer!" The string snapped; he was thrown up into the darkness; swallowed by the storm.

***

It was too easy to play this part once more. Surveying the frightened people scuttling to do his will, Teal'c again experienced the power reflected upon a Jaffa because of these deluded slaves' belief the parasite he served was a god. As a Jaffa you were encouraged to see ordinary humans as cattle, and when he had fired upon the statue of Onuris, these people had meant nothing to him. His rage had been all-consuming. Because of Daniel Jackson? Because he had once again failed to keep his friend safe? Because he had been forced to murder Sha're to also murder Amaunet? Or was it a deeper rage still burning, because he too had once believed? Was his hatred for Apophis due to the evil that Goa'uld had done or because as Apophis' first prime, in his combined desire to avenge his father, and his conviction that Apophis truly was a god, Teal'c had helped him to commit some of that evil?

Like O'Neill, there were times when Teal'c did not know if he was a good man who had been forced by circumstances to do bad things; or a bad man who had fallen into good company. Sometimes he felt the restraints that kept him from cruelty were not strong enough to hold fast if temptation raised its head. Even as he rejoiced in the death of Apophis, a part of him felt cheated because the false god he had served for so many years had not been killed by his hand, while Apophis' death, if it had taken place when Netu exploded, would have been far quicker than he deserved. In the same way, had the Tok'ra sent word that Cronos had been slain in battle, he would have felt more regret than jubilation. He wanted to be the one to fire the fatal shot, to watch the light fade from those glowing
eyes; to see that arrogance freeze into a death mask of disbelief.

He could hear the whispers from the people he was ordering to help their comrades. Some saw them as delivers, others, faithful to Onuris, saw them as evil acolytes of a false god. But all obeyed his commands because of the emblem on his forehead and the staff weapon in his hand. This was the blind conformity upon which the Goa'uld depended. How could he hope to wean his fellow Jaffa from a system which invested them with so much power? Which raised them above ordinary men, gave them the ability to heal from wounds which would have killed anyone else, made them the mouthpiece of a living god? Gave them beautiful wives, healthy children, and homes which set them apart from other, apparently lesser, men? How could he persuade Jaffa so enriched by their subordination to the Goa'uld that they were in truth only slaves?

"Teal'c?"

He turned to find Major Carter at his elbow. He saw the distress in her blue eyes although she was attempting to conceal it. He wondered if she blamed him for this. If she felt he should have retrieved Daniel Jackson by some other method. If she knew that at the time he had fired his staff weapon into the statue of Onuris, it was not that he had not known it held up the roof of the temple, but that he had not cared. As he bent his head to talk to her, he realized that behind the lingering traces of her own shampoo and soap scent, she now also smelt faintly of other men's blood.

"Major Carter?"

"Teal'c, I can't understand what this woman is saying to me, but I think she might have a child trapped under the rubble. She definitely said 'sa'. That's 'son' isn't it?"

He nodded. "Indeed." The word 'son' chilled and warmed him at the same time. He could lose Ry'ac in the time it took a staff weapon to flare and fire. Could lose Ry'ac in the eyeblink it had taken O'Neill to lose his son. Or he could be one of the lucky ones who lived to see his son grow up to manhood. Live to see the flesh of his flesh bring down the false gods who had enslaved his people. Fate had decided to make Daniel Jackson a widower, and Teal'c an instrument in its hands. Whether it decided to make Teal'c a proud father or a desolate one too often now seemed to be something over which he had no control.

The woman was sitting in one of the alcoves, her blonde hair a shock after so many dark heads. She was rocking herself quietly, a cut down one cheekbone weeping tiny rubies of blood. Major Carter poured water onto a cloth and very gently bathed the woman's face, while pointing at him with her other hand. "Can you tell my friend what you told me?"

The woman lifted her head to gaze at Teal'c, and her eyes widened in mingled recognition and alarm. As he crouched down in front of her to try to lessen her fear, the words tumbled from her, the inflection strange and the grammar different from the constructions he was used to, but he could understand the sense:

"… hi…khepet…sa…sheshepen…hem-netjer… Khas'ru…shenu…"

There was much more. How her husband had fought the priests who had made their decree, and how they had killed him before her eyes. How she no longer cared if she lived or died. Let the temple fall. Let the wrath of any god and his avatars descend upon her because without her child she was ash….

"Teal'c?"

He collected himself with an effort. "A sickness came here and many died. The priests blamed those
who had not shown true faith, and decreed that an offering must be made to Onuris to appease his wrath. Her son was taken by the priests because of the color of his hair. It was ordained that he should be made one of the 'Khas'nu', the Banished Ones. He was sent from here through the rings of eternity. She says that without her husband and her son she has no reason to live. She wishes to wait here for Onuris' wrath to fall upon her so she can find the peace of death."

They exchanged a long glance and then Major Carter visibly gave herself a mental shake. Her voice was brisk, trying and failing to conceal the compassion underneath it. "Then her son isn't here and there's nothing we can do to help her. We'd better get back to the others and see if we can get that pulley working properly."

As Teal'c rose to his feet, the woman reached out and caught at his sleeve. There was the look in her eyes of one pleading for absolution. Once again the words spilled from her. He heard her out in silence and then placed his hand upon her head and smiled at her gently, telling her that it was not her fault, whatever the priests had told her. The sickness had not come from her child. Nor had Teal'c and his friends come here because of her son's banishment. Her son was not the herald of disaster the priests had spoken of. When Teal'c finished, she caught his hand and kissed at it. He felt like a hypocrite as he turned away.

Major Carter touched his arm. "What was that about?"

"Apparently it is written that the Death Child is the harbinger of all sorrows on this world. That he brings the Deliverer but he also brings destruction. I told her that Daniel Jackson was not the Deliverer and her son was therefore not the Death Child."

"Good." Major Carter nodded in relief. "She's had enough misery to contend with, poor woman."

Teal'c looked around the temple again, at the broken statue and the groaning wounded. "Except, I am almost certain that I lied."

Next to him Major Carter grimaced and he knew that she was also seeing the patterns here. The things that did not make sense. The evidence that was leading them both to an inescapable conclusion which neither one of them was yet quite ready to address. Her voice was husky with the dust in her throat. "Either way, I'm glad you did, Teal'c."

***

Daniel came around to find himself sitting huddled on the floor of the temple being rocked in someone's arms. Not his mother. Not Sha're. But someone who made him feel as safe as they had done. Someone whose right hand was resting on the back of his head, gently stroking his hair. He surfaced slowly to the sound of words he could follow like a beacon: "It's okay, Daniel…. You're okay…. It was just a bad dream…."

Jack. It was okay. He was with Jack. And Sam and Teal'c were probably nearby. He wasn't alone. He began to have an awareness of himself and his surroundings. The fingers of his right hand were clenched tight in the man's jacket; his left hand clutching at his t-shirt; the left side of his face was pressed against Jack's chest; tears had left stinging salt trails down his skin. He gasped with the shock of his return to full consciousness, feeling as if someone had been holding his head under water while he slept.

"Daniel?"

He raised his head and looked up at the so-familiar face. Idly he noticed the stubble on Jack's jaw. Jack could really do with a shave. That scar from where the Touched had tried to crack his skull
open had never really faded. It bisected his left eyebrow, a thin white line. Jack must have come
dammed close to losing an eye back then…. Jack looked scared. Jack never looked scared. Why the
hell did Jack look so scared?

There was a hand cupping the side of his face. "Daniel? Do you know who I am?"

He swallowed hard. "What just happened?"

"Tell me your name?"

"Damn it, Jack, stop stalling. What happened?"

Great, now Jack looked relieved and he was scared, because none of this was making any sense.

"You had a blackout. Must have been from that crack on the head you had earlier. Concussion's like
that sometimes."

"A blackout?" Daniel slowly opened his right hand, unclenching it from Jack's jacket. His fingertips
were white, he'd been hanging on so tightly, and those creases looked like they were never coming
out. "So why was I clinging onto you as if you were a cliff face and this floor was a – a big drop?"

"You were dizzy."

"Why were you holding me?" Daniel stared at him in confusion.

He saw Jack's gaze flicker, evade him before coming back to focus. A shrug. "You were dizzy."

"I've been dizzy before, Jack. You helped me lie down and put me in the recovery position. You
didn't rock me in your arms like I was five years old and frightened of the dark."

"You were confused, Daniel."

"I was more than…confused." And then he remembered that other memory. Clinging to Jack like a
terrified child, listening to Jack's heartbeat while he whimpered with fear. "It wasn't a dream, was it?"

"What?"

Daniel stumbled unsteadily to his feet and Jack was there in an instant, offering him a hand. Daniel
pulled away impatiently. "Something happened earlier. Something you're not telling me. I've been
here before. I remember being here. Something happened." He frowned, putting a hand up to his
aching head. "Something that scared me or hurt me so much I was…."

Again, there was that 'dream' image of himself being rocked in Jack's arms, soothed, comforted, told
to go to sleep, because everything was okay and he was safe now. He met those brown eyes, reading
in Jack's anxious expression how Jack was willing him not to remember. Didn't want him to have
access to something, which, damnit, was part of his life. He saw at once there was no point in asking
Jack what had happened because the man would never tell him, and he felt both hurt and betrayed.
"You lied to me…." He couldn't conceal the surprise in his tone. He hadn't realized he was waiting
for Jack to deny it – needing Jack to deny it – until he saw him wince. Daniel stared at him in
disbelief. "You lied to me?"

"Calm down, Daniel."

A shout of mingled exertion and triumph, made them both turn their heads. The cry of pain that
followed it reminded Daniel what was happening and he collected himself. "The High Priest." He
could hardly bring himself to look at Jack, the sting of being misled, deliberately denied access to his
own recent past, was too fresh and too painful. Determinedly looking six inches past Jack's ear, he
held out a hand. "Morphine?"

"We don't have any."

Even that sounded like a lie to him. Without another word, he turned and walked towards the crowd
clustered around their injured High Priest.

The High Priest was conscious and already waving a hand weakly, calling down imprecations
against false deliverers, warning against the wrath of the One True God, the vengeance which would
be visited upon the heads of those who denied His divinity. Daniel had thought his chest and lungs
were crushed beyond repair but the fact the man could speak suggested there might be a faint hope
for him.

Attempting to put those fragments of memory out of his mind, Daniel crouched by the injured man
and tried to soothe him. But he winced as he saw his injuries. He didn't know how the High Priest
could speak when his chest was crushed like that but there was clearly no hope for him. Just for a
second he wondered if this was how he'd looked on P3R-636 after those rocks had fallen on him, if
Jack been forced to see him like this…. He gave his head a shake, not a line of thought he wanted to
pursue right now, he was mad as hell with Jack and this time he was staying that way.

Daniel focused on the dying man lying by his knees. He wondered if he was going to have to say
last rites for him and if the ones he knew would be appropriate for someone whose ancestors had
been separated from Ancient Egypt for so many generations. The rituals would have evolved,
altered…. Then Daniel remembered those other two priests with relief; they would know the proper
words to send their High Priest on his last journey. He looked up at the crowd around the injured
man, seeking out the priests, wanting to ask them what rites would be appropriate, if there were any
words that should be said now while the man was conscious so that his soul would be lightened on
its journey. Both of them were staring between him and the High Priest and the expressions on their
faces made no sense to him, mingled guilt and fear and disbelief. As he opened his mouth to ask
them about their rituals, he saw their faces again, a blurry past image overlaying the present; these
same men looming over him, chaining his wrists and ankles to a stone table while he struggled vainly
to free himself, telling him that his blasphemy would be punished, his claim tested, that he would be
made to answer the questions they asked in the name of Onuris, the one, the true, the only god….  

Daniel shuddered and Sam started forward at once. "Daniel, are you all right?"

"Daniel Jackson? Is something wrong?"

Looking at the stone floor, at the blood trail trickling from the High Priest, Daniel ignored them to
say, "He looks bad to me. The other priests should give him whatever he needs to make his peace
with – Onuris." He put a hand to his head as the pain lanced through it again. Blue light. Pitiless. His
own voice screaming. These faces unmoved by his suffering….  

"Daniel…?"

"Keep away from me, Jack." He determinedly didn't look at him, not wanting Jack to see the hurt on
his face or the betrayal he felt.

The High Priest's eyelids fluttered and the man turned his head. His and Daniel's eyes met and then
the High Priest's widened in horror. "A'akhu! Baidu mitu!"

"What's that?" Jack demanded.
Daniel was still wincing from the hate in the High Priest's eyes. "He said I was a...damned soul."

The dying man raised a bloody hand and pointed an accusing finger at Daniel. When the man began to berate him, Daniel wished he didn't understand him, but the man's failing lungs and fading strength didn't dim the force of every savage word: You! You are the cause of this! You are the one they speak of! You are the one who brings doom upon us! You are the False Deliverer! Hear this well, for Shokmar shall yet prevail."

"Khen'ra!" Teal'c hissed it through his teeth.

"Let him speak if he wants to," Daniel swallowed hard.

"...There is but one god and he is Onuris. Even now he comes to avenge the true worshippers and punish all unbelievers. Even now he journeys here to destroy you. All suffering shall be yours. Death shall be yours. There will be no mercy shown you or those who follow you...."

Daniel turned his head away – the hate in the dying man's eyes still having the power to sear him – to look at Teal'c. "Am I the cause of this?"

"No!" It was Jack who answered but Teal'c's silence told him more than the Jack's swift reply. When he looked at Sam she wouldn't meet his gaze.

Daniel turned to face Jack, wishing he could sound as cold and clear as he wanted to, wishing he didn't feel so damned close to crying right now. "Why should I believe you?"

"Daniel, these people...."

"These people are dead and dying because of me, aren't they? They – hurt me and you destroyed their temple in payment. While they were still in it. And then you – left them...?" Even now he couldn't quite believe it, couldn't help giving Jack a look that begged him not to make it true.

The High Priest was still calling down the wrath of Onuris upon him. Praying to the one god to destroy all False Deliverers, to make the blasphemer suffer, as he deserved to suffer....

Teal'c was translating for Jack and Sam. Sam was trying to catch his eye now, to tell him it wasn't as bad as it seemed, there had been mitigating.... He didn't want to know. He couldn't look at them. He couldn't trust them. How could they have done this?

Daniel saw Jack shoot the two priests a venomous look, saying shortly, "You want to get your pal here to shut up before I decide to put him out of his misery with a bullet?"

Daniel got up and walked away, stumbling on the rubble, not even seeing where he was going. He could feel something terrible waiting in his memory, a dam about to crack. Jolinar's torture had been sitting in the back of Sam's mind all that time like a landmine no one had stepped on yet and none of them had ever realized it. He remembered jolting back to consciousness on the tel'tak to the sound of her screaming, "Shut it off! Shut it off!"

"Daniel?"

He pulled away from the man's hand impatiently. "Leave me alone."

"Damnit, Daniel!" Jack grabbed him by the shoulders, swung him around and made him face him.

He couldn't help flinching, nerves frayed, still having to fight to stop his eyes from watering with the shock of those memories. He hunched up his shoulders, trying to protect himself from Jack's gaze,
not the anger, he didn't care if Jack was angry, he hoped he was, he hoped he yelled so damned loudly the rest of the ceiling fell down, and he could yell right back, but he couldn't deal with his compassion right now. But there was the look in those brown eyes he'd been dreading, the one that told him Jack was scared to death for him. "Don't...." He looked fixedly at the floor, swallowing hard.

Jack shook him again, gently, a tiny movement, just trying to get him to look up, look at him, talk to him. "Daniel, you have to trust me."

"How can I trust you!" At least one of them was yelling. That had to help. But Daniel knew his expression would be one of reproach, not anger, that his eyes were saying: How could you? There was so much he wanted to say, like I have always trusted you, you son-of-a-bitch. Always. There has never been one millisecond from the moment we first met when I haven't trusted you, and you know that. You're the one who doesn't trust me.'

He pulled loose from Jack's grip and wrapped his arms around his chest, trying to feel and look less like a child who'd just found out his dog was dead instead of living on a farm somewhere like Daddy had promised him. There were days when he could forgive Jack anything except making him feel as if he was eight years old. "You lied to me." It sounded so pathetic. He could hear how pathetic this sounded but his belief in Jack was more than half of everything he had, it was the keystone of this new life he'd been needing to cling to so damned hard since Sha're's death, and Jack had just smashed it.

"Daniel, listen to me –" Jack was moving him away from the others, away from the High Priest who was still telling him that he would die slowly at Onuris' hands, the frightened priests trying to soothe their leader, the wounded people who kept looking to him for something he couldn't possibly give them. Moving him away from anything that might possibly hurt or upset him, steering him gently while Daniel let him do it.

Still keeping his arms firmly wrapped around his chest, Daniel said tautly, "Tell me the truth. No more lies. Don't tell me it was a bad dream or it never happened or that I wandered off and someone hit me."

"Okay, the truth." Jack had successfully steered him into an alcove now, spun him round and pushed him back against the wall, wedged him in tight where he couldn't get away. It was like being back in the damned cell again with Mackenzie's aides looming over him. Jack's voice was clear and very precise. "You did wander off. You came here. We think the priests found you looking at the temple and knocked you unconscious. Then they tortured you with some Goa'uld device. For hours. We couldn't find you. We couldn't get the damned door to open to let us into the center of the temple so we were stuck in here while they – questioned you. When they brought you out again to sacrifice you, you weren't even you any more. You didn't know who you were, who they were, who I was. Anything. Teal'c fired at the statue of their damned god to create a diversion so we could grab you back, but it was holding up the ceiling and the whole place fell down around our ears. There wasn't time to help the people here because we had to – get you back before we lost you for good. You were in a lot of pain so we gave you the morphine, that's why we don't have any left, but even so it took a long time to…. And, to be honest, given what these people had done to you, and how they were all happy to stand there and watch you be sacrificed, I didn't really give a damn whether there were people dead or dying in here or not. Neither did Teal'c. Carter did. She wanted to come back and check for survivors. I wouldn't let her. So, you want to be pissy with anyone, leave her out of it."

Daniel swallowed again, wanting to kick Jack so hard his shins bled and then kick himself just as hard, because he could read between the lines all too well here. Jack had saved him; that was what it boiled down to. He'd done something stupid, put them all through hell, and damned near died. And
against all the odds, Jack had saved him. Again. "Then it is my fault these people are dead."

Jack rolled his eyes in disbelief. "I don't think you made them torture you, Daniel. I don't think you put out an invitation for them to show up and watch your heart cut out. All you did was look around their temple. The way they chose to react to it was really up to them. You can feel bad about disobeying my order and scaring the shit out of me if you want to, but that's as far as it goes."

"Why did you lie to me?"

"Because I was afraid if you remembered what they'd done to you, you'd go like...that again. It was a terrible thing they did to you, Daniel. Why would I want you to remember it?"

"Because it happened and I had a right to know it."

"Even if remembering it destroyed you?" Jack held up his finger and thumb a needle's-width apart. "We came this close to losing you. Forever. And I am still not very happy about it. And to be honest with you I would still like to put a bullet in the High Priest and his little helpmates. And if you keep pissing me off I still might, so, don't push me, okay? I don't have your near infinite capacity for forgiveness and I feel about these people pretty much like you feel about the Goa'uld. Now does that clarify things for you a little?"

Good, Jack was angry with him again, that was better. Jack overflowing with compassion for him always got under his defenses much too damned easily. He'd lost his parents too young, that was the trouble, and he knew it, but even knowing the cause of it couldn't stop it having an effect. He'd had a two decade gap when there hadn't been anyone who cared enough to tell him all the dumb annoying things people with parents took for granted, like he should take his head out of a book and go and get some fresh air, or there was no way in hell he was going outside without a sweater on a night like this. He'd thought he'd got past needing it and then Jack had turned up and started filling all these gaps inside him he hadn't even known he had: Do up your bootlaces before you break your neck, Daniel. Keep your head down, Daniel. When did you last eat? Coffee isn't food, that doesn't count. When was the last time you ate food? How long have you been working on that damned report anyway? Well, that is way too long. You see me switching this light off? That's kind of a hint it's time to go home now. What do you mean you never learned to play softball when you were a child? What kind of weird kid were you anyway? Okay, that's the plan for this weekend then: teach Daniel how to be normal....

Another of Jack's incredibly annoying traits. Being the stepfather/older brother/best friend he'd never had. Being goddamned indispensable. They were never going to be equals. What had ever made him think they could be equals? He was going to be Jack's surrogate son forever, Sam's kid brother, Teal'c's.... Well actually, he couldn't fault Teal'c. Teal'c had always managed to make him feel safe without making him feel inadequate. Had always treated him like someone with a wisdom beyond his years who should be handled with respect. And Sam didn't really rub in the clever older sister thing at all. That was just how he felt around her sometimes, especially when she started talking astrophysics and he had no idea what she was telling him.... And even Jack probably made huge efforts not to be condescending. A few hours under Makepeace's command had taught him how tactful Jack was by comparison. So it was probably just him. But God, he would have liked not to be the one who had to be rescued for a change. The one who did the rescuing.

"Daniel...?"

Daniel collected himself. "Hmmm?"

Jack shook his head in disbelief. "Did you hear anything I just said to you? Were you even listening?"
Daniel said expressionlessly, "They tortured me. You rescued me. You didn't mean to kill these people and you only couldn't save them because you were too busy saving me. You couldn't come back here once I was awake because you didn't want me to remember what they'd done to me. And you couldn't take me home like you wanted to because the DHD wasn't working. And you've had a really bad day. And I'm sorry."

"No one is blaming you for anything that happened today."

Daniel turned and looked at the High Priest. "He is."

Jack's hands on his shoulders were unexpectedly rough. He flinched as he was pulled around to face him and winced again from the way Jack was speaking through gritted teeth. "He's a religious fanatic who believes in an alien parasite who thinks he's a god. He's someone who tortured you for hours and hours, for nothing, Daniel, for no goddamned reason at all, just because he thinks his freakin' god wanted him to. He is not someone you want to listen to."

"I'm on your list now, aren't I?" Daniel read the truth in the man's eyes. "Of the things you blame yourself for? The things you won't ever forgive yourself for? Because they tortured me and you couldn't stop it?"

Jack squeezed his shoulders before saying much more gently, "If you are then it's my decision, not yours."

Daniel gestured at the worshippers. "So, is this why they think I'm the Chosen One, because I wasn't sacrificed like I should have been?"

"You survived Shokmar."

It was such a shock to hear someone other than the four of them speaking English that Daniel couldn't help gaping at the man who had appeared at their side. He looked like all the other worshippers, slight and dark, skin dusty from the rubble, gaze and nervous smile apologetic, except that his eyes were unexpectedly a bright pale blue.

Daniel stared at him in surprise. "You understand our speech?"

"Some. Yes. They think you are the Chosen One because you survived Shokmar. It is written that only the Chosen One shall survive Shokmar."

"Written where?"

"What is 'Shokmar'?"

The man looked between them apologetically and Daniel turned to Jack who sighed and waved a hand. "Answer him."

"Shokmar is what they did to you in the temple. It made you lose yourself. But now you have found yourself again. No one else has ever done this."

"Yes, well I very much doubt that anyone else the priests…shokmared had friends who would come and rescue him who happened to have medical kits full of morphine, not to mention someone as stubborn as Jack deciding that today wasn't a good day for Daniel to go back to the padded cell after all." He felt Jack wince next to him and presumed this one had been too close for comfort. He moistened his lips. "I'm Daniel Jackson. This is Jack O'Neill. We're…." Somehow the words 'peaceful travelers' didn't seem appropriate given the havoc they had wreaked on this world. "We're explorers."
"I am khenu."

"Okay, Khenu…." Jack began.

Daniel put a hand on Jack's arm. "No, that's not a name. That's what he is. He means he's an incomer." He met the man's pale blue gaze. "You're telling us you're not from this world? You're a visitor here, like us?"

"Yes. I am a… visitor. But I am a true believer. We have awaited your coming a long time."

Very aware of Jack's raised eyebrows, Daniel said quickly, "I really think you're mixing me up with someone else. There was nothing 'miraculous' about what happened to me. I was just lucky that my friends –" Which was when he remembered what else 'tewet' meant. "Oh my God – 'tewet' – 'avatar'. You think Jack, Sam and Teal'c are… avatars?"

He would have been more surprised if Jack hadn't immediately murmured in his ear, "What's an avatar?"

"It's from a Sanskrit word, avatara, meaning 'descent'. In Hindu mythology it means the appearance on earth of a deity in a visible form. But in this context I think they're using it to mean – angels."

"Excuse me?" Jack stared at him blankly. "You're a god and we're your… angels?"

"Well, no, obviously not. But that seems to be the delusion these people are um, laboring under."

"Sir?"

Daniel turned to see Sam holding up a small grayish object. She had that look of mingled satisfaction and anxiety that told him at once she had solved a problem which had been annoying her but the answer wasn't helping them much.

"Yes, Major?"

"I found it." She put the object into Jack's hand and Daniel peered at it curiously. He'd seen a lot of Goa'uld technology over the years and there had been very little to like about any of it. This appeared to be no exception. Sam continued, "The transmitter. It was in the statue. I remembered what you said about being on Argos. How Pelops had –"

Daniel nodded. "Yes, of course. It's an obvious way for the Goa'uld to monitor the level of – devotion they're inspiring in the populace."

Sam was pointing out the circuitry to them. No doubt all those different colored crystals meant something to her but they just looked like very small Christmas tree lights to him. "This is the transmitter. I think there was some kind of beam set up within the statue, which was broken when –"

She hesitated and Daniel finished for her, " – When Teal'c fired his staff weapon into the statue of Onuris and smashed it to pieces."

He saw that quick questioning look she darted at Jack, his shrug. "I had to tell him, Carter. He was blaming himself for the whole damned mess."

"Can you not talk about me as if I'm not here?"

She bit her lip. "Daniel, we didn't want to lie to you, but we so nearly lost you….""

"I know. I know." Rub it in how damned lucky he was to be alive because Jack had worked another
miracle, dragged him back from the dead yet again. Blue light flared in his memory once more and he flinched from it. Suddenly he heard his own voice screaming 'Jack...?' Oh God, he'd been screaming for.... Did Jack know? He darted a quick glance at Jack and winced at the expression in his eyes. Damn. He knew. Daniel still had nightmares about seeing that Goa'uld go into Jack but he'd never realized until they were on the tel'tak how Jack also had nightmares about him. He wrapped his arms tight around his chest, trying to keep out the chill of all those memories.

"Onuris is coming." The local man had sunk back into the shadows when Sam appeared and Daniel had almost forgotten he was there. He gave a little jump and saw the other give him an awestruck glance. "He is coming, just as it is written."

"Yeah, where is it written?" Jack demanded.

"I wanted to talk to you about that, sir," Sam took back the transmitter and Daniel noticed her gaze flicking professionally to the newcomer, assessing the threat he offered, the soldier in her deciding it was minimal, the scientist in her visibly making a mental note to ask him questions later. "The people keep telling Teal'c things about us that haven't happened yet, which is a little disconcerting to say the least. And they weren't in the temple because they wanted to see Daniel killed. They were hoping to see him rescued."

"What?"

Daniel saw all the color drain from Jack's face and caught his arm. "Jack? Are you okay? Do you want to sit down?"

Jack shook him off angrily and held up a warning finger. "I am fine, Daniel. Don't fuss." He turned back to Sam. "Explain."

She took off her cap and ran a hand through her hair, the glow from the flickering torchlight putting rippling streaks of red into the gold. "As Teal'c and I understand it, there seem to be two separate religions on this planet. One is the original cult of Onuris, which is what one could call the 'official' religion. The other is a secret cult of followers of the...Chosen One. They call him the Deliverer because according to their holy writing he's the one who delivers them from the False God, and they've been awaiting his coming for a while now. The priests of Onuris are aware of the other cult and ruthlessly persecute any off-worlders who arrive here without authority from Onuris by torturing them and then publicly putting them to death, partly to prove that they're not the Chosen One. But it's written of the Chosen One that he would also be tortured by the priests and would appear to be 'lost to himself' but then he would miraculously be restored. That was what the people were hoping to see, and..." She sighed and waved a hand at Daniel.

Jack grimaced. "And Dannyboy fits the bill very nicely." He raised his eyebrows at Daniel. "Well, it isn't every day you get mistaken for a deity, is it? I hope you put on clean underwear this morning."

"Sir, Teal'c doesn't think it is a case of mistaken identity."

"What?"

"What?"

They both asked the question in unison. Sam shrugged. "I'm just repeating what he told me. He says that he thinks the Chosen One is Daniel."

Jack took a deep breath. "Look, I think Daniel's a wonderful human being, too, but I can't say I've ever noticed him walking on water or feeding the five thousand or parting the Red Sea or whatever"
the hell it is wannabe deities do."

"Sam, it doesn't make any sense. Teal'c knows I'm not a...god as well as you do. You must have misunderstood him."

"Daniel, who says their 'Chosen One' is a god? Onuris isn't. Apophis isn't. Thor isn't. You and I know better that anyone that sometimes a god isn't a god, he's just...."

Enlightenment hit him. "Someone in the right place at the right time."

They exchanged a long look. She nodded. "Exactly."

Daniel collected himself and turned and looked at the three priests. The High Priest was clearly fading, dying; the others were praying over him, saying some rite for the injured man Daniel didn't recognize. Odd, when that fragment from the Book of the Dead had remained so similar, and yet their rituals for preparing the soul on its way had changed so much. No funerary statue to capture the dying one's last breath, or perhaps in their confusion and fear, the lower order priests were forgetting important parts of the ritual, incapable of giving the comfort the man needed. It was instinctive to go towards them, to offer help....

Memories sliced through his mind, cold and sharp as an axe blade. Wesheb! Wesheb! The priests calling upon him to answer them, to tell him where he came from, who had sent him to deny their god, what demon he served. He'd only understood one word in ten, and hadn't understood at all from where their rage was coming, their hatred of him, their will to hurt him so badly for so long for a reason he couldn't begin to fathom. As though he had done them some great and terrible wrong. He was tugging at chains that wouldn't let him go, the blue light was coming closer. He read the malevolent satisfaction in the High Priest's eyes as the beam found his body again, seared his nerves, sent screaming white fire to every cell....

"It's okay, Daniel...it's okay.... You're safe now."

The white glare dimmed; the blackness misted into grey and then a soft contrast of torchlight and shadow as Daniel cautiously opened his eyes to find that he was on his feet this time. He knew who he was and where he was too: in the temple of Onuris, recovering from a flashback to being...shokmared by fanatical priests. That was something. Still clinging to Jack though; his face pressed into his stubble-prickly neck, smelling the fresh sweat overlaying a faint memory of aftershave. Jack's arms were around him, holding him up, one hand gently patting Daniel's back, the other stroking his hair as before. This was getting to be rather an embarrassing habit.

Daniel disentangled his fingers from their panic grip, straightened up cautiously, and put a hand up to the tingling left side of his face. He risked a glance at the older man and muttered, "If we're going to keep doing this, you really need to shave."

Jack turned Daniel's head to the side to examine it. "Great. Now you have whisker burn. That could take some explaining."

Daniel darted him another sideways look but could see not a hint of embarrassment in those brown eyes. Concern, yes; discomfort, very emphatically no. He felt an unwilling rush of gratitude towards Jack. How many men of his age and background would have taken this in their stride the way Jack did? There were times when Jack was interrupting him before he was five words into even a simplified explanation of something when Daniel really wanted to point out that hugging his ignorance to himself like a security blanket was a pretty shallow reaction to new information. But then he would remember all those unexpected depths the man had. Ones you just didn't expect to find in an Air Force colonel, never mind someone who went out of his way to present himself as
Mister Average. No way in hell, for instance, would Colonel Robert Makepeace have ever let Daniel take refuge from bad memories in his arms, even once. And, perhaps more importantly, Daniel would have pulled out all his own fingernails before he would have done so.

Daniel felt Jack's fingertips lightly touching his upper arms, a supporting grip just to steady him as he swayed a little. "That wasn't such a bad one," Jack said it as though Daniel having blackouts in his arms happened all the time. "You came round much faster that time."

"Are you okay, Daniel?"

Sam's blue eyes were full of concern and he had another flash of memory: Sam telling him he was hallucinating, delirious. He could remember the exact look on her face as she said it, the way she hadn't met his eye. She'd hated lying to him. Teal'c telling him he was with his friends again. All of them working so damned hard to get him back. Sometimes he really wondered why they bothered.

"I can't take him. I can't take him!"

It had never occurred to him until that moment he wouldn't be going to live with his grandfather. It wasn't what he wanted. He wanted his parents back, of course he did, but while you had a living relative, you knew you would at least be taken care of by someone with a few of the same references; someone who knew who you were without need for explanation. He had noticed the odd glances the women from Social Services had exchanged as they drove him to the dull brownstone building where the assessment meeting was going to take place. As much as he had presumed anything, he had presumed he would be leaving the meeting in his Grandfather's company. He'd been picturing himself in that dusty house with all its fascinating oddities. Not so different from the dusty apartment in Egypt where every flat surface was covered in artifacts. He hadn't really been listening to the conversation going on over his head, tuning it out like he'd been tuning out most things recently, sinking back into that comforting fantasy where he thought of all the ways it could be a mistake: His parents had been shipwrecked like Robinson Crusoe but had made a raft and a perfect sail and were coming home now; their plane had fallen from the sky but they were cutting their way through the green fronds of the jungle to get back to him, as indomitable and independent as he remembered them…. But then the memory would intervene. The snapping chain. The falling coverstone. The screams. The blood.

He'd been jolted back into the present to find his Grandfather on his feet, refusing to look in Daniel's direction, panic in his accented voice. "I can't. I'm not suitable. I'm not responsible. I can't look after a boy of his age. I travel all over the world. I couldn't possibly take a child with me."

It had taken Daniel a little while to make sense of what he was hearing. That he wouldn't be going home with 'Nick'. That he didn't have a home to go to. The man didn't want him. He'd gasped with the shock of it. It had never occurred to him until that instant his grandfather might not take him. He'd thought Nick would grumble a little, maybe act like Daniel's father did sometimes when there was a lot to be done, the light was fading and Daniel had got bored with waiting for them to finish what they were doing and pay attention to him. He'd sometimes felt like a nuisance they didn't want under their feet for a few hours, just while his father was busy, but not unloved even then. All abandonments until this moment had been temporary. He was still getting used to the permanence of the way in which his parents had left him behind this time. But this was deliberate. This was a choice his grandfather was making. He didn't want Daniel.

It had come to him with a terrible sense of emptiness in that moment, that no one wanted Daniel. He had ceased to be someone people gave thanks for, kissed goodnight and murmured they loved, and become a problem strangers would now have to solve.

He'd stared at his grandfather in disbelief and seen the depth of his hurt and confusion; the pain of
that revelation, reflected in the way the man flinched. Nick had said, "I am sorry…." like someone begging for absolution. "Daniel, I am sorry."

He'd gone on hoping Nick would change his mind right up until the door closed behind him, the footsteps had stopped their apologetic echo on the shiny linoleum floor. Sitting there with a chill that went so deep he felt he'd never be warm again, Daniel had realized he was now, for the first time in his life, utterly unwanted by anyone.

"Daniel…?"

He opened his eyes and found Jack looking at him with that carefully neutral expression he always used to hide near-panic-stricken concern with apparent calm.

"You okay?" The tone was conversational, but Jack's hands were curled into fists. Idly, Daniel noticed the way Jack jammed them into his pockets and rocked on his heels. "Daniel? You feeling okay?"

"I'm fine," he said it automatically. He realized he was very tired and wanted to go home. He didn't know which home, the SGC, his apartment, Abydos, or all the way back to Egypt, but somewhere that very emphatically wasn't here. He wanted to curl up in the dust, on the bloodstained stone and sleep for a week. He wanted to be back on the tel'tak with his head on Jack's shoulder and Sam where he could see her if he opened an eye, and if he craned his neck he could just see Teal'c's left elbow as the Jaffa operated the controls. Somewhere he knew they were all alive and well and couldn't be hurt.

"You kind of zoned out on me there, Danny."

'Danny'? Uh oh. Never a good sign. Jack only called him that when he was trying to soften a blow. Like when the Goa'uld you thought you were in love with apparently got burned to death in front of you, or Jack was trying to find a tactful way to tell you not to get yourself gang-raped by the scum of the galaxy, or someone slammed a door in your face one time too many and you realized how much ignorance, fear, and superstition you’d met with over the years and how damned weary of it you were. They must be in even deeper shit than he thought if Jack was calling him 'Danny'.

"I'm tired."

"You are all tired." It was the English-speaking native again. No, not a native. Someone from another planet, just like them. That placating smile. Weird eyes. He ought to ask the man's name but it felt like too much effort even to open his mouth. The nameless helpmate said, "You need food and somewhere to shelter."

"What we need is to get the damned DHD working and get the hell off this world."

Jack seemed to be talking from a long way off.

"Sir, I think Daniel needs to eat something and get some more sleep. He looks really…." So did Sam.

"You heard the man, Carter, Onuris is coming here. Now, what the hell do you think he's going to do when he gets here? And to whom? I want you and Teal'c to go and work on the DHD. I don't care what it takes, get it working, find us a way off this damned world." Jack turned his head.

"Teal'c!"

Something was hissing. He looked across at the High Priest and there was red wetness on the man's
mouth. Although Daniel knew it was where he was coughing up blood from his crushed chest it
gave the impression he had eaten something raw; ripped out Daniel's heart and swallowed it. He
looked as though he wanted to. There was still that hate burning in his dark eyes; unquenchable;
unchangeable; something he would carry with him into death: the way you looked at your murderer.
The hissing was louder. It made him think of Apophis. The serpent god of the underworld who ruled
the night. For years it had just been a name to him. A myth. Like Kheb. Kheb was a myth. Just a
place in a book where Osiris had hidden from Seth. Perhaps none of it was true. Perhaps Jack had
been right in his first reaction. Perhaps the child was gone forever and would never know Daniel had
looked for him, wanted him; that he had been loved after all. And if Apophis was really dead this
time, why was that snake still hissing so damned loudly…?

"Teal'c? You and Carter get working on that DHD. The wounded are going to have to do the best
they can to help each other and the sooner we get the 'gate open the sooner we can send back
medical assistance and – damn it to hell – Daniel!"

Why was he back in Jack's arms again anyway? He hadn't seen the blue light this time. And why
was Jack yelling his name from such a very long way away…?

***

O'Neill looked at his watch. Teal'c and Carter had been gone for two hours. Which meant Daniel
had been unconscious for two hours. Carter had said she didn't think Daniel was relapsing; his body
was still in physical shock from the trauma of shokmar – which was why when O'Neill had held him
in his arms, Daniel had been trembling faintly the whole time – and his blood sugar was low; that
was all. What he needed was rest, food, and warmth. Twelve hours sleep and he'd probably make a
full recovery. The difficulty lay in trying to provide him with twelve hours sleep when they were
trapped on an alien world, and if Carter and Teal'c couldn't fix the DHD were probably going to
have to hightail it to the hills to hide out there.

Harun, the helpful native with the Siberian husky eyes, had promised to outline the local topography
for him in case flight became unavoidable. If he couldn't quite manage a map apparently he was
willing to act as a guide. In the meantime, Harun was offering them food and shelter, and as that was
the nicest thing anyone had offered them since they'd set foot on this lousy world, O'Neill was
accepting what was on offer with thanks.

If Harun hadn't offered them his hospitality he wasn't quite sure what he would have done because
when he'd barely caught Daniel before he hit the temple floor, he'd been feeling pretty close to
despair. Daniel had been frighteningly white, limp, and chilled, the only thing proving he was still
alive that unnatural tremor vibrating through him. He and Teal'c had picked the unconscious Daniel
up between them and then realized simultaneously they had nowhere to take him. When Harun had
said, "Come with me," O'Neill had followed him without a word.

Harun's hut might be Spartan but it had given them somewhere warm and dry to lay Daniel down,
and the hot broth he'd insisted they all swallow had definitely made O'Neill feel a lot stronger than
he'd been feeling ten minutes before. He'd seen it put a spark of color back into Carter's pale cheek as
well, and even Teal'c had looked restored by it. Their situation still sucked, of course, but at least
they weren't as hungry and cold as they could have been. He just wished Daniel would wake up so
he could shovel some food down him in readiness for the strategic withdrawing they were almost
certainly going to have to be doing very soon.

***

Hear me, my Daniel….
She was lost and she was found. A corpse bled of color beneath a white sheet. Alive beside his bedside, her warm, soft hand against his cheek. She was part of the SGC. She was wrapped in a winding sheet and buried beneath a billion grains of sand. She was in bed beside him, his to touch and love again. He'd missed her body heat like a part of his own pulse; the way her hair brushed the bare skin of his chest when she kissed him. Missed the scent, feel and taste of her so very much and now he had it back again, but not to keep. Because Sha're was dead. Even as she gazed into his eyes and touched his face, she was dead. But it couldn't be the end, not like this. He had to have at least the hope of waking up beside her again, of turning his head to find her with that smile she saved just for him.

*Promise me you will save the child!*

"I promise." She was begging him as though she thought he would refuse but of course, he wouldn't refuse. She'd never asked him for anything before. Of course, he would find her child and make sure that he was safe. *I promise, Sha're, I promise.*

Except he didn't know where to look. Didn't have a single clue to follow up, and there was a whole galaxy out there full of worlds which might be Kheb. He'd never found his wife. He'd failed her when she'd been alive. Who was to say he wouldn't fail her after death as well. He knew Sha're's ghost was watching him, like Echo fading as Narcissus lost himself in his own reflection. Waiting for him to fulfill the promise he'd made her. Waiting for him to find her child so she could finally sleep in peace….

***

Teal'c read his own defeat in the blue eyes of Major Carter. They both knew there was not enough time. Once before they had examined a DHD which had failed to function and in that case they had managed to find a way to make it work without needing to repair the broken crystals. In this instance he had no doubt that given enough time, he and Major Carter could over-ride the Goa'uld transmitter and use the DHD to dial home. But he suspected they had very little time left, and nor could they be sure of the people clustering around the Stargate silently observing their actions. Some of those who had escaped from the temple undoubtedly were followers of the Chosen One who might be deemed hostile to the Goa'uld, but even they might not wish them to leave the planet, taking Daniel Jackson with them, when he was effectively their god.

They had spent some minutes transferring as many of their supplies as they could carry – something which would turn out to be a waste of time if they managed to get the DHD to work but which might save their lives if they were trapped on this world for any length of time.

"If I just understood the way the Goa'uld crystals work a little more clearly." Major Carter wiped a hand across her forehead before bending back over the DHD, her voice slightly muffled as she spoke from within the bowels of the device. "I've tried analyzing them under every piece of equipment in Cheyenne Mountain but there are irregularities in their structure which I've just never seen in any equivalent mineral on Earth."

Teal'c adjusted his flashlight so she could better see into the DHD. "Major Carter, when we were returning from Netu, the Tok'ra Aldwin told me they had recently found a far better means to remove even an unwilling Goa'uld without injuring the host."

"See, when I looked at it through a spectrograph – " Carter pulled her head out of the DHD, his non sequitur finally penetrating. She frowned and pushed her short hair back from her face with her arm. "That's good news, Teal'c. Skaara is still out there."

"But Sha're is dead." Teal'c held her gaze. Both Major Carter and Colonel O'Neill had tried to talk to
him about his act. Had reassured him of its rightness. But their words had done nothing to ease the pain inside him. Only Daniel Jackson could offer him absolution and the young scholar had done so, as unhesitatingly on waking in the infirmary as he had when his wife was still dying from Teal'c's staff weapon blast. Those words had helped to dilute the guilt he felt for his part in Sha're's death considerably, but Aldwin's words had pierced him like a dagger. "Had I only shot to wound instead of to kill -"

"Then Daniel might be dead now." Major Carter was giving him all her attention now. Gaze fixed on him, unblinking and certain. "You said it yourself, Teal'c, even one more second would probably have killed him. And by the time you reached that tent you already had no choice. Perhaps if Daniel had put a bullet straight through Amaunet's left hand the second he walked in there things might have turned out differently, but once Amaunet had him in the grip of the ribbon device there was nothing any of the rest of us could do except kill the Goa'uld who was killing him. If you hadn't done it, the Colonel would have done, and if he hadn't, I would. Daniel was too close to being dead for any of us to do anything except shoot to kill because while there was a breath left in Amaunet's body we all know she would have used it to murder him."

"But Sha're could have been saved."

"Maybe she could. Maybe in another dimension we managed to knock her on the head and take her to Cimmeria and she survived Thor's Hammer while Amaunet died. Maybe in another dimension again Sha're managed to stop Amaunet killing Daniel. But in this dimension Sha're concentrated all her energies on telling Daniel what she wanted him to do and trusted in you to save his life. Which you did. She didn't mind dying, Teal'c. She accepted it. And what's more she told him to forgive you with just about the last breath in her body. Don't you think that also means you ought to forgive yourself? If Sha're didn't blame you then who else has the right to? Even you."

Teal'c looked at the blue-grey circle of the Stargate. "Major Carter, however many times I try to tell myself I did the right thing, an innocent woman is still dead because of me. Daniel Jackson is without a wife because of me. Kasuf is without a daughter, and Skaara, should we ever find him again, is without a sister, because of me."

Major Carter leant across and put a hand on his arm, squeezing it to get his attention until he turned his head and looked at her. "And Daniel's alive because of you, Teal'c, and I'm alive, and the Colonel's alive, and so are an awful lot of other people. You may have done some bad things in your life but saving Daniel from the Goa'uld who was killing him wasn't one of them. And sometimes you need to remind yourself about all the good things you've done as well."

The clunk of the first chevron lighting up took them both by surprise. Teal'c could barely identify the sound at first, despite its familiarity, his mind still fixed on that scene inside Amaunet's tent, Daniel Jackson lying on the ground with his hand outstretched to his dead wife. But as the second chevron engaged he realized what he was hearing. "Major Carter!"

"Way ahead of you, Teal'c." She was already snatching up their packs, pushing one into his hands. "Time to get out of sight."

***

Daniel awoke to warmth, flickering shadows, the red-gold glow of nearby firelight, the smell of broth cooking in a cauldron...Abydos? Was he on Abydos? He hadn't had that flicker of hope in a while. All a dream? Sha're never stolen...? But immediately there was a pang of loss to balance the relief, because that meant Teal'c and Sam weren't real and Jack had never come back for him....

He opened his eyes and saw Jack drawing lines in the dust of the floor he was sitting on. Regret and
relief balanced each other out so that there was no discernible emotion except a vague feeling of…
rightness. This wasn't the best possible life any Daniel Jackson could have had, but it was his life and he recognized it. For the first time it sunk in how he'd almost lost it today. He'd been so busy feeling aggrieved about having his sanity handed back to him, he hadn't taken any time out to be grateful. There was a lot to be said for not being a gibbering wreck, after all.

He blinked a few times, trying to get used to the light level, and realized he was in a one room dwelling with stone and clay walls, a dirt floor, woven bedding strips, a fire on which a cooking pot was hanging. There were a number of smells, hot food, stale sweat, feet that had been in their boots too long, spices he couldn't recognize, tallow fat that carried an unsavory boar taint. He watched in fascination as Jack sketched out mountains on the floor with his forefinger, leaving a trail of jagged ridges in the dirt.

Why was Jack drawing lines in the dust? That was usually Daniel's role. He was talking to the English-speaking local and they were mapping something together. Jack was working out the lie of the land, lines of retreat, hiding-places. Places to hide him.

His brain seemed to be working much better now because he was suddenly very aware of how dangerous he had become to everyone. If they couldn't get off this world before Onuris arrived, they were never getting off. The Goa'uld would send his Jaffa to guard the gate then demand retribution against the people who had destroyed his statue and temple, murdered his High Priest and undermined his believers' faith in him. And he would want the so-called Chosen One put to death where everyone could see it done. Daniel had become as dangerous as –

As Sha're's son. He flinched from that thought because he really didn't want to hear it. It kept trying to creep up on him and tap him on the shoulder. All those questions about what the hell was he going to do with the boy if he did find him? How could he possibly keep him safe from the System Lords? How could he put not just SG-1 and not just the SGC but the entire planet at such risk because of a promise he thought he'd made to his wife? Earth might be part of the Protected Planets' Treaty but he wondered how good that safeguard would hold if Earth was harboring a child who contained all the knowledge of the Goa'uld; all their secrets; all their weaknesses….

Plenty of time to worry about that when he'd found Kheb. He'd take the boy to the Nox world – except there was no way of reaching the Nox world, of course. Give him to the Tok'ra? He wasn't sure that he trusted the Tok'ra. Not to take care of a child. They would have killed all of them to destroy Sokar. Who was to say what they might do to a baby if they thought the knowledge was within him that would help them defeat the Goa'uld. The Asgard? They would never agree to take him and even if they did they weren't human. He was a human baby. He was Sha're's baby. He had so very nearly been Daniel's baby. Give him back to Kasuf who was at least his grandfather and who would love him when that might cause the System Lords to come in ships and wipe out everyone on Abydos?

What was that old black and white movie Jack had made him watch while the man was convalescing? 'Curse of the Demon' or something. From some M.R. James story about a piece of paper with a runic inscription that would cause the death of whoever received it. You had to pass it on to someone else so the demon would come and find him instead of you. If you didn't, wherever and whoever you were, it would hunt you down and destroy you. Jack had told him the movie was a classic and he had to watch it but Daniel had forgotten the director's name three minutes after Jack had told him it. He'd just followed the story, rapitly, as transfixed as he had been by those stories of Egyptian mythology when he was a child. It was only when it was finished and Jack had hobbled into the kitchen to get them both a glass of whisky that Daniel had become aware of a growing unease. As Jack put the glass in his hand and said 'Cheers…' he'd realized Sha're's baby, the child he'd promised her he would find and protect, might as well be the piece of paper in the film. A
demon in the fog might be more spine-chilling than the System Lords, but they were real and every bit as sure. He'd dropped the glass.

"...Okay, so North is a no-go, I'm really not a swamp-lover, and impenetrable mountains don't sound like a rest-cure but they'd be a good place to hide...."

It occurred to Daniel that Jack was planning for failure. But Jack never planned for failure. Jack didn't even admit the possibility of failure existed. This was Jack-there's-always-an-or-we're-not-dead-yet-O'Neill and if reality looked like it was going to rain on his parade well reality could go chase itself and in the meantime he was going to stare fixedly at his teammates until they come up with something clever because, damnit, that was their job.

That was another thing about Jack: unwavering belief Sam and Teal'c could solve anything if they put their minds to it. The last thing Daniel remembered, Jack had been sending Sam and Teal'c off to fix the DHD and now here was Jack planning for them not being able to fix the DHD? That made no sense whatsoever.

"Hey, Daniel."

He blinked as he realized Jack had noticed he was awake and was nodding at him. "You okay?"

"Yes."

"You passed out."

"Oh."

"On me."

"Sorry." Daniel sat up and ran a hand through his hair. "I heard something hissing."

"Yeah, that would have been all the blood in your brain going AWOL. Next time you hear that noise tell me before you fall over."

"You caught me." Not a question. When had Jack ever not caught him?

"This time."

Daniel realized they were going to have different perceptions of these events forever – supposing Onuris gave them more than a few hours to mull over the day's happenings. To him this was going to be a mission where he'd wandered off, got captured, got a lot of people killed and totally traumatized Jack, but where Jack had miraculously coaxed him back to the land of the sane, then looked after him far better than he deserved while he threw a hissy fit because the man had dared to raise his voice to him. To Jack it was going to be a mission where he'd failed to keep Daniel safe from harm, failed to save him from torture, got him back by the skin of his teeth but failed to get him off the planet before he had to tell Daniel what really happened, and was now failing to keep him safe from Onuris' vengeance. This was not one they were ever going to agree on.

"Where are Sam and Teal'c?"

"Trying to fix the DHD."

And that wasn't right either. 'Trying to fix the DHD'? Surely that should be 'Fixing the DHD.' It occurred to Daniel that this mission coming after their joyride through Netu must have taken a hell of a toll on Jack's confidence. He'd sometimes found the man's illogical optimism irritating but he was
missing it now; hadn't realized what security they all took from Jack's certainty until the man started to have doubts. It didn't seem fair to say, 'Stop having doubts, Jack. That's our job!' but that was how he felt.

"You must eat." The English-speaker again, putting a bowl in his hands so like the earthenware he'd always eaten from on Abydos he felt a spasm of mingled recognition and loss. Then the man was ladling some broth into it which smelt like the stew Sha're had made him when he was recovering from fever. He'd had a lot of fevers, immunity obviously a little weakened by different water and new variants of germs to which he had less resistance than the local people. Sha're had always been so patient about nursing him back to health, tempting his sluggish appetite with special delicacies, collecting herbs to grind for cordials, spoon-feeding him medicine…. Skaara had accused her good-naturedly of wanting to turn Daniel into her child. Had told his sister it was high time she had a baby of her own so she could fuss over him and get on with scolding, neglecting, and ignoring her husband the way proper wives did. It seemed such a tragedy a woman who would have made such a wonderful mother had never got the chance to be one, even to her own son. Sha're had died not even knowing her baby's name.

"Hey…"

He looked up in surprise to find Jack sitting next to him. The man tapped his finger on the bowl in Daniel's hands. "Don't just look at it, Daniel, eat it. Please?"

That one word told Daniel all the things Jack wasn't saying about how they couldn't afford to have Daniel slowing them down or passing out every five minutes. That it seemed likely they were going to be fugitives so they were all going to need their strength. There could be no weak links in this particular chain.

"Sorry." He ate the food, quickly and mechanically, trying not to wince as some of the vegetables burnt his mouth. He felt a little sick but that was probably just hunger. Either way the broth had to be consumed.

Jack rested a hand lightly on his shoulder. "You feeling okay?"

He nodded, gaze on the pulses floating in a reddish sea of stew. "I'm fine." He swallowed quickly as his tongue was burnt again then felt the mouthful sear him all the way down to his stomach. It smelt better than it tasted, the vegetables had a bitter aftertaste and there was a faint greasiness to the gravy that spoke of old fat stock which had been reheated too many times, but he could still feel warmth and strength returning with every bite.

"I don't know what that stuff is but we all ate it and we're still breathing."

Daniel glanced up at him. "Pity about those purple blotches all over your skin though."

He saw a flicker of relief in the other man's eyes. Jack made to slap him lightly around the back of the head but even that obviously seemed too brutal to him in his sense of heightened protectiveness because the hand came back to rest on his shoulder again. "Just eat the damned food, will you?"

"Can we have home cooking on every mission from now on?"

Good. Jack was looking a lot happier. The jokes might be lame but that didn't matter. Screwed up shokmar victims clearly didn't make jokes, even bad ones. Relatively sane people did. The man shrugged. "Sure, if you want to be responsible for it."

"Uh, Jack, don't you remember you said you'd rather eat dog food than my cooking?"
The man scratched his jaw. "Well, I was feeling irritable, you wouldn't let me go and watch the game."

"You had a third degree burn on your leg." Only a couple of spoonfuls to go now, he could do this and he could keep it down.

Jack held up a finger. "See, you were so damned picky, it was just one thing after another with you. And, incidentally, you are a lousy cook, Daniel."

He swept the last spoonful into his mouth and swallowed hard. Too hot. Nasty aftertaste. He still felt sick. Didn't matter. It was now inside him and it would make him stronger. He dropped the spoon into the empty bowl triumphantly. "Actually, I'm a damned good cook, I just knew if I burnt enough packets of noodles you'd spring for take-out." He gave a little smile as he felt Jack unwinding a fraction. "And, of course, you wouldn't let me cook anything I like."

"Call me old-fashioned but I didn't feel like spending six weeks eating food that went out with Tutankhamun. Good Americans eat pizza."

"Pizza's Italian."

"Whatever."

Daniel noticed Jack look at his watch and immediately the moment of lightness evaporated. "How long have Sam and Teal'c been gone?"

The way Jack's jaw tightened told him 'too long' better than a telegram. Daniel said, "We should go find….

"They'll be fine."

There was a warning in Jack's tone, a hint of nerves a little closer to the surface than usual. Daniel recognized the situation: Jack being pulled in two different directions at once and not much enjoying the experience. Time to tread carefully or he was going to get his head bitten off. "Have you tried calling them?"

The look Jack gave him told him teaching his grandmother to suck eggs was not what Daniel should be doing right now. "I was only asking."

"Apparently the – " Jack waved a weary hand in the direction of the open doorway; a treated skin which seemed to constitute the front door flapped idly showing Daniel unfamiliar stars, "temple place blocks the signal."

"They could be in trouble. If I came with you, we could…." 

"No."

No one could have been more emphatic. It was practically a bark. Daniel moistened his lips, unsure how to proceed but very aware that Jack needed careful handling right now. "I'm just saying – "

Jack turned and looked at him. "Daniel, either they're still working on the DHD – about which you and I know squat and so can't help them – or Onuris has turned up in one hell of a snit and they're keeping their heads down. Either way you and me waltzing in there isn't going to help them any."

"What if Onuris has come through the Stargate and caught them?"
"I don't think Carter and Teal'c would just stand there while the 'gate was lighting up, do you? Just, settle down. Try to get some rest. They'll be back."

Jack sounded so much more like himself that Daniel decided not to take offence at being spoken to as though he was six. In fact, if it would stop Jack putting out the welcome mat for Mister Doubt, Daniel wasn't going to object if the man ruffled his hair, called him 'Dannyboy' and asked him if his bootlaces were tied. For the first time it occurred to Daniel that perhaps Jack wasn't a natural optimist. Perhaps it was just something he put on to make the rest of them feel better. After all, it did make them feel better even if it only united them in rolling their eyes at each other about Jack's unrealistic optimism. And some of that positive thinking did tend to stick. Even when one part of Daniel's brain was telling him Jack had no more idea how they were going to get out of here than anyone else, the way the man always hit the ground running while insisting bad stuff was not going to happen to his team, even when it was already in the process of doing so, did usually make him feel more cheerful.

Daniel wondered how Jack was doing right now. He wasn't sure how long they'd been on the planet but he reckoned the bit at the beginning where Jack had been blowing on his fingers and getting very bored while Sam and Teal'c were examining the DHD would have been the highlight of his day. It had all been downhill from then on. Thanks to Daniel.

Daniel winced and Jack said, "You okay? No more flashbacks? Headaches? Weird hissing noises?"

"I'm fine, Jack. I'm just sorry I…,"

Jack raised an eyebrow. "What?"

"It's kind of a long list. How are you anyway?"

"Bored and irritable last time I checked."

"At least one of us is back to normal then."

Jack gave him an assessing look. "You know who'll be taking care of you next time you get injured and are signed out of the infirmary, don't you, Daniel?"

"Sam or Teal'c?" he said it hopefully.

"Me. It's my duty as your C.O. and I would never shrink from it."

"I'm not actually planning to get injured ever again but if I did I'm sure Teal'c wouldn't mind. And he says meditation is a very positive tool in physical recovery."

Jack was giving him his best level stare. "When you have a snake inside you it probably is. Normal people have to drink beer and watch hockey."

"I don't like beer. Or hockey."

"Time you learned to then, isn't it?"

"Teal'c's very patient. So is Sam."

"See and that's what makes me a much better person to take care of you when you get hurt. They'd be so damned nice to you you'd probably go out and hurt yourself again just to be taken care of that well. Now, six weeks at my place –"
"Uh, Jack, when you were convalescing, I stayed at your house, remember?"

"Six weeks at my place learning how to not just like hockey but answer long and difficult questions about it while being tested on your ability to tell imported beer brands apart in blind tastings will soon teach you the merits of taking much better care of yourself. You know I'm actually quite looking forward to it, so you want to get yourself hurt again: be my guest."

Daniel scratched his jaw. "If this is your incredibly subtle reverse psychology approach to persuading me not to get caught by Onuris when he arrives, it's working."

"That's what I like about people with PhDs: they're quick."

Before Daniel had even fully identified that quiet noise as the sound of approaching footsteps, Jack was on his feet, across the hut and pressed against the wall with his MP-5 raised. Daniel stayed where he was and hoped the sight of him would distract whoever was coming for long enough that Jack could knock them out before they killed him. When the hide door was pushed back, he tensed in readiness then felt relief flood through him as Teal'c stopped just outside of the door. Without moving, the Jaffa said, "O'Neill, it is I."

Jack relaxed, lowered his gun and exhaled. "You took your time."

Daniel gazed at them hopefully as Sam and Teal'c stepped into the hut but the sag of Sam's shoulders told him at a glance what the answer to Jack's question would be even before he'd asked it.

"So…?"

"No." Teal'c's disappointment was clear in his voice.

"Is Onuris…?"

"Yes."

"Hell!"

Jack said it so savagely Daniel realized his nerves were still pretty close to the surface after all. His fault. He wrapped his arms around his chest. This really was all his fault. Why hadn't he just done what Jack asked? Why hadn't he waited like Jack had told him to? Why the hell had he ever gone to that temple in the first place? He watched Jack take off his cap and run a hand through his hair, the silver streaks looking bronze in the firelight. Jack hadn't had any grey hairs when they'd first met. Daniel always tried to tell himself it was Charlie's death that had turned Jack grey but the uncomfortable fact remained Jack hadn't had a grey hair when he'd come back to Abydos either. Not one. He remembered when they'd been in the Tok'ra tunnels after escaping from Hathor. Makepeace had thrown Daniel down the corridor, then grabbed him by the jacket again and started hauling him after him while Daniel swore a protest as too much weight was put on his injured leg. Makepeace had looked at him and shaken his head, muttering, "Christ, no wonder O'Neill's going grey, Jackson. I'm just amazed they haven't had to fit the guy for a goddamned pacemaker with you on his team."

Jack put his cap back on. "Okay, how many…?"

"A couple of hundred, sir. And there could be more arriving. He's obviously anticipating resistance and has come prepared for a fight."

Daniel thought of all those injured people in the temple. "Jack, shouldn't we –?" He broke off as Jack glared at him, those expressive brown eyes saying 'Don't even think about it!' so sharply Daniel damned near jumped.
As Daniel swallowed the end of his sentence, Jack said crisply, "The word you didn't quite get to there had better have been 'hide', Daniel."

Daniel picked his words carefully: "I was just wondering what you thought we should do next."

"Wondering? Not suggesting?"

"Definitely just wondering."

Sam had been collecting up their packs ready for departure, but now she looked up from her place by Daniel's feet, brow creased with concern. "Sir, where's Harun?"

Jack glanced around and then shrugged. "I don't know – moving in a mysterious way, I expect, or no, that would be Daniel, wouldn't it? As he's on our side, I don't really care."

Daniel winced. Jack really hated situations he wasn't in control of and they always frayed his temper faster than a razorblade through silk. Which meant any minute now he was going to start biting off more heads than a fox in a hencoop.

Sam said steadily, "Is he on our side, sir?"

"Well, he fed us and hid us and he seems very keen on Daniel being the Chosen One which I presume puts him on our side. I think I can go out on a limb and say the pissed off Goa'uld with a couple of hundred Jaffa at his heels is probably more of a threat right now."

Teal'c rumbled quietly, "These people want Daniel Jackson to deliver them from Onuris, O'Neill. They wish their prophecy to come to pass. They did not try to save Daniel Jackson from torture because according to their mythology, their Chosen One was tortured. Nor would they have averted his death because according to their mythology that was the task of his avatars. It may be that according to their mythology Daniel Jackson has to die to save them. In which case they will not try to avert that either and may even assist in his death."

Jack glared at the Jaffa. "Why?"

Sam sighed. "Teal'c's right, sir. The whole of the Christian faith is based on Jesus Christ dying to save Mankind. If he hadn't died then according to the New Testament we wouldn't have been saved. If someone had sent a copy of the Bible back to Ancient Judea via a time anomaly so the followers of Christ were waiting for him before he arrived, they still probably wouldn't have tried to save him because they needed him to die to save them. Judas would still have betrayed him because without the betrayal there could be no crucifixion, no resurrection, and effectively no salvation. You see where I'm going with this?"

"Not really, no."

Daniel looked up. "What Sam and Teal'c are saying, Jack, is that these people don't necessarily like me or want me – or my 'avatars' – to stay in one piece. They need certain events to take place to deliver them from Onuris but if nailing me to a cross is what it takes to get the job done, they'll probably be happy to supply the nails."

Sam nodded. "Exactly."

Jack narrowed his eyes. "That sucks."

"That's pretty much the way religions work, Jack. People don't worship deities without expecting to get something back: 'I'll slaughter this bull in your name if you give me a son.' It's always been a
reciprocal deal."

"See, I knew there was a good reason why I always hated the damned Church."

Daniel moistened his lips. "It helps a lot of people as well, Jack."

"Well, it never did squat for me."

"He comes."

They all started and turned to see Harun standing just inside the doorway, licking his lips nervously. "The False God comes."

"So we heard." Jack picked up his pack and Daniel hastily got to his feet. Jack nodded to the man. "So long, thanks for the meal and the place to rest, we have to go hide the – Messiah here now."

"I will hide him."

"Uh – no."

"I know a place of safety."

"Sorry, call me Mister Particular but I really didn't like what your people did to Daniel last time we let him out to play by himself, so he stays with us from now on."

Harun hesitated. "What I must show him is only for the eyes of the Chosen One."

"See, when people say stuff like that it makes me even less inclined to want to let Daniel run off and play with them. And if you've got any puppies you want to show him you're out of luck there as well."

"Jack…." The protest was faint but Daniel did still feel it should be registered. He would put up with being treated like a child when Jack was in this mood because it was just part of what made Jack – Jack, but he did want to utter a small objection about it being done in front of other people.

Jack gave him one of those glares that told him he was brooking no argument right now but Daniel retaliated by giving him another reproachful look, this time at a sideways slant and from under his eyelashes. He didn't, as Janet Fraiser had once suggested, actually practice his reproachful look in front of the bathroom mirror, but he had learned how to adjust it for maximum effectiveness and this was full beam. Jack held out for almost two seconds before wilting, sighing, then saying more reasonably, "Look – Harun, I know you're only trying to help but it's important that we stay together, so either you show us somewhere we can all hide from Onuris or else thanks for everything but we're out of here."

Sam had the door-skin held back and was peering through the gap, MP-5 at the ready. "Sir, we need to go now."

Harun looked unhappy. "It is written that only the –"

Jack held up a warning finger. "Uh-huh – read my lips – don't care – we all go or no go. Take it or leave it because in ten seconds we're all out of here and you don't ever get to see your…Chosen One again." As the man hesitated Jack raised his eyebrows, "Come on, once in a lifetime chance to watch Dannyboy totally fail to turn water into wine, going, going, very nearly gone….

"Jack…."
This time Jack was ready for him and just held up an admonishing finger without making eye contact. Daniel subsided and looked at Harun. The silence stretched. Jack shifted, moving his weight from his toes to his heels. Harun had one more second Daniel calculated and then Jack was going to be striding out of that doorway, taking the rest of them with him by sheer force of will. As Jack opened his mouth to say, "Time's up!" Harun said, "All of you then. Come with me. I will hide you from the False God."

***

The chill glitter of unfamiliar constellations as they struggled up the mountain path reminded Daniel he'd never got around to showing Ke'ra the stars. She'd wanted to see more of their world and all he'd ever shown her was the inside of grey-painted rooms. Earth would probably always be a concrete bunker to her. But perhaps, even if he'd been able to take her up to the surface, there would have been an unwillingness to share something with her he'd never got the chance to show to Sha're. He liked to think that now but perhaps he was mistaken. Infatuations were like yesterday's fire. It was so hard to remember how that heat felt once it had burned out.

They'd reached an impasse. He'd wanted Jack to believe what Sha're had told him and Jack just couldn't. He'd watched Jack struggle with it, the way he'd struggled with so many things Daniel had told him over the years, and then, with a heart sinking faster than leadshot in a lake Daniel had realized that Jack just couldn't get his head around this one. He'd been so angry with him, so sick with disappointment that after all this time, Jack couldn't take his word for it. And, okay, it sounded crazy; and okay, he couldn't prove it, and okay it probably did seem like wish fulfillment but he knew that it was true; and it should have been enough for Jack that he believed it. After all this time, and all they'd been through together, it should have been enough.

It had made him brittle as papyrus and Ke'ra had arrived in the middle of what he now looked back on as a terrible time; surrounded by people who were so desperate to help him through his grief and yet wouldn't give him the one thing he needed most. He'd felt like someone dying of thirst while his closest friends mopped his brow, held his hand, told him how sorry they were but wouldn't just reach across and hand him that damned glass of water on the windowsill. There had been a brief flame of happiness when Ke'ra had kissed him. A flicker of something that wasn't just endless grief and frustration and anger and misery because how could Jack do this to him? How could he not believe him again? And then it had all faded; the attraction to Ke'ra had died away so fast as soon as he knew she was Linea, but at least it had given him something to do, trying to get the justice for Ke'ra, who shouldn't be blamed for what the demon within her had made her do in another life, he hadn't managed to obtain for Sha're….

And then she'd gone and he was ashamed that he'd been relieved to see her go, because their flirtation now felt like a form of temporary insanity. But he'd been left there at the bottom of the ramp realizing that he couldn't go on like this; sulking like a furious teenager because no one would believe him. They were all he had and they cared about him and they were worried sick about him; and it wasn't as though they hadn't tried to believe him. So, he'd given in. At least, that was how he'd seen it at the time; a form of capitulation that nevertheless felt like the right thing to do. He'd stopped freezing Jack out – what had he been thinking, that if he shut the guy out for long enough it would somehow persuade him to believe what Daniel had told him in the infirmary? Apologized to Teal'c for being thoughtless in that meeting. Told Sam he was sorry he'd been acting so off with everyone. He had a vague recollection of being patted like he was an elderly spaniel that couldn't take more than the gentlest pressure; of being reassured that he hadn't behaved badly at all; but the sick feeling in his stomach had stayed; and he'd still been able to taste the bitterness of that disappointment because Jack couldn't just take his word for it, couldn't bring himself to trust his judgment, and obviously never, ever would.
And then the very next day Jack had walked into his office as he was looking through that box of Sha're's things and given him what he'd wanted. More than he'd ever hoped for. Just like that.

The weirdest thing was that he didn't think Jack had any idea how much it had meant to him. Jack had come to tell him that looking for Sha're's son was now an official SG-1 priority, that they were going to get out there and search for Kheb or die trying. Jack had probably thought that was the part Daniel was so pleased about; but good as that was, it was the moment when Jack had told him he believed in him that had filled that hole inside him.

Daniel stumbled on the path, momentarily disorientated by finding himself out in the starry coldness of an alien night when for a second there he'd thought he was back in the SGC. He was afraid he might have been literally sleepwalking for the last ten minutes. His concentration had certainly lapsed and it was so damned dark on this mountain he really couldn't afford to start wool-gathering. If he sprained an ankle he was going to slow everyone up. And besides, he was the one who knew about Onuris, the Egyptian god, even if Teal'c was the one who knew about Onuris the Goa'uld. He needed to get his brain working. He needed to think of a way to get them all out of the mess he had got them all into. If only he wasn't so damned tired….

Looking at the Colonel's face, Carter thought, you would never have guessed how far out of his depth he was. This was everything he hated most in one big untidy parcel: Goa'uld, Jaffa, religious fanaticism, no way off a hostile planet, and one of his team already having been injured once and still in serious peril. But other than the way he was treating Daniel as though he was six, he was hiding his anxieties quite efficiently. Although, of course, the way Daniel was just sighing resignedly and putting up with being treated as though he was six was a clear pointer to the Colonel's mood too. Carter knew her commanding officer pretty well after all this time but even she didn't pretend to know him as well as Daniel. And when Daniel decided that the Colonel needed to be cut this amount of slack, the man was clearly having an even worse time than she'd realized.

Both Teal'c and Colonel O'Neill had been adamant that Onuris would go to the temple. He might look for his rival later, but first he would go to the temple and see the destruction of his statue for himself, commune with his High Priests, and learn what had taken place. She hated to think what he would do to the wounded there and she knew Daniel shared her fears, but although they'd exchanged a glance, one look at the Colonel's face had made them both swallow what they'd been about to say.

She just hoped the woman with the sick baby had managed to get out of there in time. Her foot had been trapped under rubble which Carter had managed to clear. It was only after she'd got the woman free and bandaged her crushed foot that Carter had realized the woman was carrying an infant in her arms. Carter had held the child for a few minutes while the woman climbed awkwardly to her feet. The baby's skin had been so hot to the touch it had felt as though it was burning her hand. He'd coughed at her, too weak even to cry. She'd put her ear to his chest and heard the rasp of infection; his breathing so labored it seemed unlikely he would survive even a few hours. She'd remembered the illness the blonde woman had spoken of and reached for the antibiotics at once, saying, "He's sick. I have something that will help him –"

But the woman had snatched the infant back from her, saying, "No. It is not written."

"But I can help him." Carter held out the penicillin. "This should make his fever go away. He'll be able to breathe more easily. Please, let me –"
The woman had shaken her head, tears in her eyes as she said again, "It is not written."

As the baby coughed again, those harsh rasps sounding much too violent for such a tiny figure, Carter had felt the tears sting her own eyes. "Please, let me help him."

"No. No!" The woman had backed away. Carter hadn't been able to understand the expression on her face. Pleading mixed with guilt. As though the woman had done Carter a wrong instead of the other way around.

Thinking of all those wounded people, she opened her mouth to make a protest to the Colonel and then closed it again. The Colonel knew about the situation as well as she did. He'd made a decision. Called it as he saw it and as he was her CO and she was his 2IC, it was her job to back him up and not make his already incredibly difficult job any harder.

She could tell Daniel had also decided his first priority was not to make his best friend's task any more difficult than it already was, and she knew without needing to check with Teal'c and the Colonel they had long since decided their first priority was to keep Daniel safe and the hell away from Onuris, whatever it took. As far as Teal'c and the Colonel were concerned if Onuris killed the worshippers who had forsaken him then that was a tragedy, but one that wasn't going to influence their actions in any way whatsoever. She knew that just as she had the picture burned into her mind of those people dying under the falling rubble so the picture in Colonel O'Neill's mind was of those people craning their necks in apparent excitement to watch Daniel dragged in half-dead and damned near lost to them forever.

Harun had led them away from the dwellings now. The temple was still a looming shadow to the east, looking as though someone had torn a triangle from the sky leaving it empty of stars. Carter automatically checked to see how Daniel was doing and saw Teal'c also sending an assessing glance in his direction. The Colonel was determinedly not looking around, the way he did sometimes, as if he could make Daniel keep up and keep safe just by marching very straight and true to show him how to do it. Daniel was trying to watch his feet. He'd spent years looking up and tripping over fallen logs and tree roots but had recently discovered that looking down was also an option which meant he tripped less often but there was now a danger of him walking straight into whatever was in front of him. As the Colonel stopped to look back at the temple he became the thing right in front of Daniel.

Carter darted forward but was just too slow. She winced as Daniel murmured, "Sorry," and received a glare for his pains. He rubbed his forehead while looking at the Colonel dolefully. Carter would have been far more surprised if the Colonel had not then given him an apologetic grimace and murmured, "You okay?" Daniel nodded.

Carter noticed Harun moving ahead of them, a few paces was enough for him to melt into the darkness. "Sir…"

The Colonel caught up with the man in a few swift strides, his long legs as sure as Daniel's were uncoordinated. Daniel was alternating between looking down and looking up now, but between the darkness and his lack of glasses she wasn't sure he was doing anything more effective than making himself dizzy. She was aware of Teal'c behind them in the most dangerous position, footsteps near silent on the rocky path despite his size, ready to protect them from the staff weapon blasts of Onuris' Jaffa with his life if necessary. She wondered if he had any idea of the comfort they all took from his presence, how very alone they'd felt without him on Netu. She would have liked Teal'c to have heard the unflinching faith in the Colonel's voice when he'd said, 'Teal'c said he'd be there.' She knew with both Daniel and the Colonel their belief in Teal'c was instinctive rather than reasoned. Daniel just felt safer when Teal'c was around while the Colonel trusted his judgment in a way she
doubted he'd ever trusted any other man's. His trust in Teal'c, after all, was not compromised by it constantly fighting his need to keep him safe as it was with Daniel.

She knew he trusted her as well; unlike Daniel she wasn't riddled with irrational insecurities about how others perceived her, and she knew the Colonel had unquestioning faith in her. Of course there were times when she would have exchanged all of that unquestioning faith for one intelligent question proving he had some idea what she was talking about, but she was resigned to the unquestioning faith now. She was very well aware that both Daniel and the Colonel had no idea of the limits of her expertise. In fact they didn't seem to think there were any limits to her expertise. If it was even vaguely connected with either astrophysics or the Stargate it was just expected that she would be able to figure it out somehow. And perhaps their certainty was contagious because she felt a terrible sense of failure that she'd been unable to get the DHD working. It was like the time in Antarctica where she'd had to watch the Colonel fading while she failed him. Daniel had saved them that time. They couldn't rely on him to do it this time. They had to keep him safe.

She felt fear tighten, the beginning of panic, and forced herself to breathe evenly. They would keep him safe. The Colonel would never let any harm come to Daniel if he could prevent it. There was something in Daniel that reminded the Colonel of the son he'd lost and there was nothing he wouldn't do to keep Daniel safe. Except she knew he would have been like that with his son, as well. That there was nothing he wouldn't have done to keep Charlie safe, and Charlie was still dead.

Carter reminded herself this had been a very long and very stressful day and she was tired. Her feet slipped on the shale and she automatically reached for her flashlight then withdrew her hand again. They couldn't risk any light, of course; they weren't struggling through the shadows like this for the fun of it, but it was an eerie feeling to be hunted. Daniel stumbled in front of her and she grimaced. He'd been looking paler and more exhausted since he woke up. The rest and food had probably helped a little but it was impossible to estimate how long it would take to recover from the kind of experience he'd undergone in the temple. She thought of Jolinar's stay in Sokar's palace and shuddered.

She'd spent the last two months reminding herself that Sokar was dead. The other Goa'uld might be evil but as far as she knew none of them reveled in the suffering of others as he had done. She still had nightmares about Netu; of the moment when she'd found her father, seen for herself what Sokar's torture had done to him when the memory of Jolinar's interrogation was still reverberating through her. She'd known that if they all died in that pit it would be because of her. Daniel and the Colonel had come on that trip for her sake, not to fight Sokar, or to assist the Tok'ra, but because her father was in need of rescuing. None of them had hesitated even for an instant. They had literally gone through hell for her. It was hard to know how to thank someone for that so she hadn't tried. She knew that in any case they would have told her that was what being part of a team was about; you helped each other, whatever that might take. And she would have done the same for any of them as unhesitatingly and as wholeheartedly, but it was still something she wasn't going to forget in a hurry.

She'd woken with a jolt on the tel'tak to hear the Colonel crying out his son's name, Daniel soothing him, murmuring words too low for her to hear before saying, "Go back to sleep, Jack. Don't dream…. Don't dream…."

They all had too many nightmares now. She knew the Colonel dreamed about being a Goa'uld, the feeling as it slithered inside him, the fear of what he would do to them when it had blended with him. Teal'c had witnessed things even the Colonel had never had to contend with. She'd seen things herself that….

Carter grimaced. She hated it when that happened. Not that she hated the memories of Jolinar, they were part of her now; nothing like the way Teal'c felt about the larval Goa'uld within him. To be a
Tok'ra, however temporarily, was to have glimpsed true symbiosis, something without which you were now not properly whole. She would have fought to hold onto Jolinar's memories, even the worst ones, but she needed to keep the distinction between the dead Tok'ra's mind and her own; the things that she had lived and seen and the things which had happened only to Jolinar. So Jolinar had seen things in Sokar's palace that were seared into her mind as well now. The Colonel had all those years of Black Ops, and Teal'c had all those years of serving Apophis, and she knew how it felt to have suffered torment at the hands of torturers she had never even met.

Perhaps because their minds seemed so full of dark matter they had to wall up or at least close themselves off from to exist day by day, they had all been united in trying to keep Daniel away from horror. She had been working with him for over a year before she realized there was dark matter in Daniel's mind, too.

There was so much of the child he had once been left in Daniel that it was impossible not to care about what that child had undergone. She couldn't bear to think of an eight year-old Daniel watching his parents killed right in front of him. But she had stood by his shoulder and watched it happen. She knew what that little boy had witnessed in every detail. She knew how his parents' screams had sounded, how long the echoes of them had lasted. The exact noise those stones had made as they collapsed and crushed human bones. The way his father had tried to protect his mother. The way Daniel's mother's hair had been the exact same shade as her son's….

She sometimes wondered if the Colonel saw it as his task to try and undo all the wrongs done to Daniel by fate over the years: the dead wife, dead parents, the years of being fostered….

Carter couldn't help wondering what Daniel's foster parents had been like. He'd never spoken of them and she'd never liked to ask because it seemed such a conversational minefield. Why hadn't they adopted him? She vaguely remembered him telling her he had a grandfather alive somewhere with whom he'd had a disagreement and so didn't visit any more. Why hadn't his grandfather taken him in? Why had he let him be raised by strangers? Did Daniel have foster brothers or foster sisters or had he grown up an only child? His foster parents had clearly given him the space to develop that incredible mind, for which she could only be grateful to them, whoever they might be, but she couldn't help feeling there must have been a lot of things they'd left undone. Every time Daniel wrapped his arms around his chest, she couldn't help seeing a child no one was remembering to hug. And every time Daniel blamed himself for something that wasn't his fault she wondered who had taught him to be so insecure.

Even now, after three years, she wasn't certain he understood how much the Colonel respected his judgment. If Daniel had told the Colonel to go stick a fork in a light socket, the man would have done it at once on the understanding that Daniel must know what he was talking about. The only thing the Colonel didn't trust Daniel to do was look after himself properly, but she was never sure if Daniel had really grasped that distinction. If he'd ever realized that every time the Colonel hesitated before following through on some apparently irrational scheme of Daniel's, the hesitation was because the Colonel was having to factor in the missing part of Daniel's equation. The Colonel might not be able to understand the rest of what Daniel was telling him, but he didn't need to, he would just assume Daniel had everything right. The Colonel's job was to assess the danger to Daniel and if it was at an acceptable level, because he knew that would be the one thing Daniel had forgotten to take into account. But she knew that wasn't how Daniel read that inevitable hesitation. She'd see the hurt in Daniel's eyes, the light dim a little, the resignation or resentment show itself because as far as he was concerned this was just another proof Jack O'Neill didn't believe in him and never would. It apparently seemed natural to Daniel that people whose opinion he respected, and whose respect he needed, would not believe in him, trust him, or have any faith in his judgment.

She remembered how Daniel had blamed himself for what they'd then thought was his
schizophrenia. Apologizing for being such a 'headcase'. She'd nearly started crying right there and then because it was so unfair that Daniel should do this to himself but there didn't seem any way to undo whatever it was that caused it. She'd never quite been able to work out how someone who could make so many people do what he wanted just because he wanted it could still perceive himself as fundamentally unlovable.

Because the Colonel had access to Daniel's personal files while she didn't she'd always been wary of discussing Daniel with him in case it looked as though she was fishing for information. But once after Daniel misinterpreted something the Colonel had said, the hurt look had come into his eyes and he'd retreated, automatically wrapping his arms around his chest again, she couldn't resist murmuring to the Colonel, "You know, sometimes, when you see how Daniel's turned out, it really makes you want to hit someone, doesn't it?"

"Yeah," the Colonel was looking at the younger man in exasperation, "usually Daniel." As he marched towards the linguist she could hear him saying, "Daniel I am not saying we're not going to P3X whatever the hell it was, I'm just saying that some more information would be nice. And I am thrilled that the Huttites -"

"Hittites."

"Whatever – seem to have built an interesting pyramid –"

"Citadel."

"Whatever – there, but that doesn't mean we should just go waltzing in there without…."

Daniel and the Colonel had been having variations on that argument for three years now, both of them coming from the position that the other one was willfully misunderstanding them for no good reason either of them could think of. She suspected it might be an irreconcilable difference they were all just going to have to live with.

As she stumbled on the shale she felt a supporting hand close on her elbow and looked around in surprise. As always it was comforting to see Teal'c. She sometimes wondered if Teal'c had anything as comforting in his life as the rest of them found him. He said quietly, "You are fatigued, Major Carter."

"It's been a long day, Teal'c."

"And it is not yet over."

She glanced up at Daniel and saw he was proceeding with dogged determination, head down, feet thumping heavily on the path, the way children walked when they were very tired and should have been in bed an hour ago. And he'd had two hours more sleep than the rest of them. She had a feeling this was going to be a long night as well.

"We are here." Harun's voice was soft in the stillness.

She saw the shadow that was the Colonel turn and look round before saying pointedly: "We're halfway up a mountain in the middle of what looks suspiciously like nowhere to me."

"Jack…." It was a muted protest from Daniel. A whole speech about respecting other people's cultures and customs, not to mention showing some manners, compressed into one weary murmur.

"Daniel." The Colonel's admonishing tone took the place of a long retort about there being a time and a place for respecting other people's cultures, and this definitely not being it. The Colonel looked
interrogatively at their guide. "Harun?"

"This way." Harun walked into what appeared to be the mountain until Carter realized that he had ducked behind an overhang of rock and gone into a crevice. She waited for the Colonel to follow him and heard the man say quietly, "Watch your head, Daniel," closely followed by a sigh of resignation from Daniel, followed even more closely by a bumping sound and a stifled exclamation of pain. She ducked under the overhang and winced from the sudden flare of light as Harun held up a burning torch. The Colonel was saying, "I told you to watch your head."

Daniel rubbed his forehead and gave his CO another reproachful look. "I did."

The Colonel shook his head then turned to her and Teal'c, beckoning them on in. "Apparently these caves go a long way back into the hills and provide plenty of places to hide but if anyone's claustrophobic, now might be a good time to mention it." He looked around them all and then turned back to Daniel. "Daniel…?"

Daniel blinked at him mildly. "Jack…?"

"Didn't you once tell me all archaeologists are claustrophobic?"

"No, I once told you claustrophobia was an occupational hazard. A lot of archaeologists have had isolated panic attacks when finding themselves at the end of a long tunnel in a windowless burial chamber under several thousand tons of stone, that doesn't mean we're all claustrophobics, it just means we more regularly find ourselves in places where claustrophobia is a – reasonable response to the situation."

"Does it seem like a reasonable response to you right now?"

Daniel moistened his lips and Carter wondered how much patience Daniel had packed for this trip and how much he'd used up so far. He said conversationally, "Actually, Jack, moving after the only guy who knows his way through the catacombs seems like a reasonable response to me right now."

The Colonel gave Daniel a quelling glance but she noticed he also took off after Harun at a fair pace, allowing Daniel to slip back into step behind him. Behind her the beam from Teal'c's flashlight was throwing a bluish white patina across the dark rock. She pulled out her own flashlight and shone it onto the other side of the cavern. She couldn't recognize the rock at a glance, it was dark but not the glassy black of obsidian, the wrong texture for granite. There were red veins in it here and there, iron deposits perhaps, or some chemical they hadn't come across before. This was a different stone from that of the temple walls. She wondered if it was local. If she wanted to take Daniel's mind off things later, she would ask him about the likelihood of the stone having been imported specially for the temple's construction so he could give her one of his lectures about Common Myths About The Pyramids and Why They're All Wrong.

Daniel had told her more than once that contrary to popular misconception most of the pyramids had been built from local stone by local workforces, and Orion had played no part in their placement. Apart from the ones built by the Goa'uld, of course, which were effectively landing sites for alien spaceships.

General Hammond wasn't usually any better than the Colonel at saying 'no' to Daniel but he'd been very adamant from the beginning that Daniel could not go and look at the pyramids again in light of their new information about the Goa'uld. The general had insisted the sight of an archaeologist who had previously published theories about the pyramids being the proof of alien intervention in the cross-pollination of ancient cultures, being accompanied by US Air Force personnel to the pyramids at Giza would be just the kind of bait no self-respecting investigative reporter could resist. So Daniel
was pretty much banned from visiting Egypt for the moment, even with a false passport, a false moustache, and a false reason for being there, and he complained about it regularly. Usually, Carter had noticed with some amusement, when he was angling for something else. So, as Daniel, often mentioned, he couldn't prove which pyramids had been built by the Goa'uld and which had been constructed later as tributes to those earlier monuments, but he was pretty certain he was right about which was which and she had no reason to doubt him. But, the non-Goa'uld constructed pyramids had been made from local stone, Daniel insisted, and there was nothing very complicated about where they had been built or why. There were sound geological reasons for where they were to do with the ground being able to bear the weight of so much stone and the pyramids having a clear line of sight to the north.

He'd also told her most large monuments were built from local materials and the reason why there were no rock quarries near most of the pyramid sites was because they had been quarried out building the pyramids and anyone who said otherwise was an ass. For someone who had been laughed out of academia for his own way-out theories, Daniel was surprisingly intolerant of other people's. She had learned to like his contradictions.

She could hear the sound of water dripping but there weren't any stalactites or stalagmites so clearly not limestone –

"Major Carter, it appears to be growing warmer."

She turned to look at the Jaffa. "If it’s the same as on Earth it should be about ten degrees, Teal'c. Caves are places with a very regular temperature." She put a hand up to her throat as she spoke. It was feeling sore, a burning sensation in the back of it. Probably from all that dust they'd been inhaling in the temple.

Teal'c leant across and ran his finger up the wall then licked it speculatively. "And the water supply appears to be fresh and unpolluted."

They exchanged a glance, neither one of them needing to state aloud the obvious truth that they might be able to wait out Onuris' Jaffa in these caves, retreating further to keep out of their reach and yet be able to remain reasonably warm and have access to clean water. Food would be the only problem but she and Teal'c had salvaged what they could from the MALP in the way of MREs and they could ration themselves.

Carter became aware that Daniel was talking up ahead of them. He seemed to be telling the Colonel about the early Christians building the catacombs so as to have somewhere to bury their dead without attracting the attention of their Roman oppressors. She doubted the Colonel was finding much to interest him in the recital but that had never been known to stop Daniel yet. She and Teal'c exchanged another glance, of amusement this time, and moved after the others.

"…Yes that's fascinating, Daniel, but probably not what we need to be focusing on right now. Perhaps a little less emphasis on the history lesson and a little more emphasis on not getting dead might be appropriate here?"

Carter hoped Daniel whammied the Colonel with one of his best reproachful looks because she really felt he deserved one right now. Youch! She winced in sympathy all the same. That was a reproachful look with teeth. The Colonel grimaced. "I'm not saying what you're telling me isn't interesting, Daniel, I'm just – questioning its relevance to our current situation."

"There's a popular misconception the Christians actually lived in the catacombs – they didn't. The catacombs were a…a necropolis, not a hiding place; it would have been like camping out in a crypt; but the Christians did spend long periods of time down there painting on the walls and burying their
dead. There were thousands and thousands of bodies down there, miles of tunnels. That's a lot of excavation, a lot of people digging, a lot of funeral services, all taking place under the noses of the Romans without them even noticing, Jack, even though the Romans persecuted the Christians with as much hostility as Onuris would probably like to persecute us."

And so now at least three of them were all on the same page even if they had come at it from different directions. That was another thing she had learned to like about Daniel, the way he could surprise her even after all this time. Just when she was convinced he'd completely what the Colonel called 'wandered off to la-la land' he'd come up with the solution to a problem she hadn't even known he was aware of, or would make a suggestion that made perfect sense and none of the rest of them had thought of.

"I got you," the Colonel looked around at their surroundings with more interest. "I suppose a lick of paint, some drapes...."

"This way."

They all turned to see Harun beckoning them forward eagerly. He pointed to an arched opening in the wall and said, "This is the Cavern of the Tablet. This is what I must show the Chosen One."

***

O'Neill had never been happy around people whose mindset he couldn't understand. And religious fanatics definitely came under the category of people he could not relate to. For instance, he'd never quite been able to work out why, when most deities were supposed to be benevolent and merciful, the people who worshipped them spent so much of their time torturing and killing each other.

Of course, since coming across the Goa'uld, he'd had a whole new outlook on gods. As half the ones that had ever been worshipped on Earth now seemed to have been aliens only pretending to be gods he wasn't holding out a lot of hope for the others. While Kinsey's God Will Protect America Come What May attitude hadn't made him feel that fond even of 'God' God, never mind the ones that other cultures worshipped. He'd always felt his grandmother's Catholicism was just a habit she'd fallen into, a way of not having to think about anything too hard because some priest would do it for her; a means not to have to ever formulate her own opinion about anything because why bother when someone in a cassock could tell you what you were meant to be thinking? He knew it was in him to be like that too – hell he was in the forces, wasn't he? But he liked to think he'd got to be a Colonel in the US Air Force, not to mention team leader of SG-1, because of the initiative he'd shown rather than because he'd inherited his grandmother's ability to follow orders.

All the same, he knew his Grandmother's religion was one of the reasons he liked having Daniel around. Daniel made him think even when he didn't want to; Daniel made him question things he might otherwise not have thought about. He needed someone like Daniel to keep him asking those questions, thinking about those issues; annoying though it could be, it was also healthy and necessary. There were times when you were the man with his finger on the trigger, when you needed not to be thinking. Not about how it felt to be the enemy, or the rights and wrongs of the conflict you'd signed up for, or the moral implications of the action you were about to take; but there still always had to be a voice inside you somewhere reminding you there were lines you wouldn't cross come what may. Or at least – he had to be honest here, because those lines didn't run straight as train tracks your whole life in the services, you did things when you were twenty-eight you couldn't have done when you were eighteen and then found at thirty-eight you couldn't do again and wondered how you ever could – when you did cross them, there was a voice reminding you of the fact, making you think about what you'd done so hard you wouldn't take that step again if the same set of circumstances came up. You learned from your mistakes, yes, but sometimes other people died
because of them, so the fewer mistakes you made the better. And sometimes the more questions you asked the better as well. Otherwise, you could find yourself on the wrong side in another My Lai.

Perhaps other people had gods they could look to for guidance when tricky situations came up, but he'd never been a believer and so that route had always been denied to him. He'd spent years painfully carving out a moral code for himself he could live with and still get the job done, but it was ragged in places and he suspected some of his ethics had become a little blunted over time. That was why he needed Daniel, Teal'c, and Carter to sharpen them up for him. He believed in his companions' moral code in a way he'd never been able to believe in a lot of Latin words he didn't understand, the censor swinging slowly from side to side leaving its incense trail, and all those different colored vestments for different-colored prayers. The Catholic Church – hell, any church – had always been too intangible for him.

Morality was what Teal'c had done, taken a stand for no reason other than because he thought it was right. Given up a position of comparative wealth and power, given up his wife and son, given up everything, fired on men he'd trained, earned the undying enmity of the System Lords, because he wasn't prepared to kill a couple of hundred unarmed strangers even though his god had told him to. Morality was Carter going back down into a concrete bunker to be with that little girl who had a bomb inside her so the kid wouldn't die alone. Morality was Daniel giving last rites to Apophis' dying host even though this was the face and the body of the Goa'uld who had stolen and raped and impregnated Daniel's wife. That was a moral code he could recognize and be impressed by. That was a moral code that made people's lives better. That was a moral code you could set your watch by and know it was keeping perfect time.

What Harun was displaying though, was just faith.

O'Neill could recognize faith as well. That was also something he had in his teammates. He didn't doubt for a minute if there was anything humanly possible any one of the others could do to keep him and each other alive, they would do it. If Daniel said he could translate something, O'Neill didn't experience even a millisecond of doubt he could translate it. If a Stargate didn't work, Carter could make it work. If Teal'c said he could fly a ship he'd never so much as seen before, then Teal'c could fly it. That was what he called faith. It was not wasting your time having doubts about things you had no reason to doubt to leave yourself plenty of energy for the doubting you ought to be doing. And that brought him straight back to those questions he liked people to keep asking. Liked Daniel to keep asking in particular even when it drove him nuts.

That was also why he needed Daniel to remain untouched enough by the shittier things of life that the man still had enough inner fire left to power a conscience. The day Daniel could walk through a battlefield without flinching would be the day O'Neill knew he'd done something indefensible, allowed something to happen he should have prevented, and in the process lost something that would cost not just Daniel, but everyone in the end. From the first day he'd met him, he'd decided the world needed people like Daniel even more than it needed people like him. And when he thought about some of the things he'd done over the years it seemed as though people like him were the reason why the world needed people like Daniel. But he had been trying very hard for a long time now not to be part of the problem and to at least try to be part of the solution, and ever since he'd commanded SG-1 he'd felt like he was succeeding. Perhaps for the first time in what was a pretty long career now, he felt the US Military was allowing him to do some good for the whole planet rather than just the bit of it that spoke English and ate apple pie.

So he could understand someone believing in Daniel – he believed in Daniel himself. And he could understand someone having faith in Daniel – he had faith in Daniel himself. But he had belief and faith in Daniel because he knew the guy and had been working with him for the past three years; had seen him tested and knew he always came up true. Harun didn't know squat about Daniel except he
matched the requirements of some made-up deity the man was convinced would save him and his people from a different false god. That wasn't a faith or a belief O'Neill considered healthy. In fact he thought it was downright dangerous. Especially for Daniel.

Sighing, he looked around at their surroundings. The cavern Harun had been so eager to show them was huge. Twice the size of the 'gateroom, the single arched entrance in the long south wall only added to the cathedral feel of the place. It was made from some dark rock streaked with dull red powder, like the walls had old wounds that hadn't healed yet. Their voices echoed in here even more than the other caves although Harun's was hushed with reverence as he pulled aside a cloth to reveal the tablet set into the wall. Daniel was asking questions again. The guy never stopped asking questions. His voice was quiet and soothing but the echoes picked it up and turned it ghostly. Three caverns away it probably sounded like Daniel was already dead.

O'Neill glanced around the cavern again; the floor looked liquid, a black sea of stone; the type of floor that magnified every sound and fed it to the echoes. You'd be able to hear the clunk-clunk-clunk of metalshod Jaffa from way off, certainly, but they wouldn't be able to make an exactly silent escape themselves. Water trickling down one wall. Good if you were thirsty, less good if you didn't want to get pneumonia. He was never sure if Daniel's allergies made him a more likely candidate for chest infections than the rest of them but it seemed likely. And shock always lowered the immune system, making Daniel more susceptible to illnesses right now anyway. Pneumonia was probably what would do for most of the wounded they'd left behind in the temple. There were worse ways to go. Worse way for strangers to go anyway, a friend going that way was still going to hurt like hell.

And yes, he felt bad about those people, of course he did. Most of them were probably dead by now and it was only Daniel's current crushing sense of guilt that had stopped the guy insisting they go back there and give themselves up to save them. That was why O'Neill had jumped on him straight away before he could voice the suggestion. Sometimes that was all you could do with Daniel; the guy had an annoying habit of being right all the time, and anyway he was a lot smarter than O'Neill would ever be so he couldn't really argue with him, but sometimes he could get in first and shut him up in time. He never felt good about doing that, it was too much like kicking a puppy, but sometimes it was the only route to take. And okay, those people were probably being killed by Onuris round about now and he was sorry for that, and Daniel would be feeling lousy about it, so would Carter; he wasn't feeling too happy about it himself; but Daniel and Carter were still alive and not yet prisoners of Onuris. At the moment his main priority was keeping them that way.

O'Neill put a hand to the back of his neck and tried to crick his head into a position where it didn't send an ache all the way down his spine. He hated this damned cold, miserable, mist-drenched planet. He hated these damned caves and he particularly hated this damned cavern, but he still figured he'd better go over there and find out what Daniel and Harun were talking about.

The tablet was also black and shiny with lots of raised lettering he couldn't understand. A weird mixture of hieroglyph variants and something called cuneiform which apparently even Daniel was having a little trouble deciphering. He didn't know whether to be glad or sorry Daniel's experience in the temple had still left him with an insatiable curiosity for new variations on old languages. With Harun's torch sending shadows of flame across the inscription and Carter and Teal'c both adding circles of blue white light from their flashlights, Daniel was running his fingers across the glyphs like a blind man reading Braille, murmuring to himself as he got ready to give them the news from the faithful.

O'Neill shouldered his MP-5. "What does it say? Have you got it figured out yet?"

Daniel didn't take his gaze from the lettering. "More or less but there are still a lot of words I don't know. Basically it seems to be saying: 'The Chosen One came disguised as a' – I'm not sure about
this – 'defenseless?' No, a 'frail mortal to the temple of the False god, without any appearance of –"

"Even basic competence?" O'Neill suggested.

"…his divinity' – thank you, Jack – 'to test the faith of the priests. But the priests knew him not and
followed the tenets of the False God. They seized the Chosen One and took him to the place of' –
something like – 'the place of torment. The Chosen One feigned great suffering that he might reach
their hearts and save them from the tenets of the False God, yet this moved them not and still they did
the False God's will. They tortured the Chosen One until his mind appeared to snap asunder like a
rotten bough, and then they dragged him to the place where the False God stood in' – what? Oh I get
it – 'stood in stone', – I think they mean where the statue of the False God stood – 'there to sacrifice
him to the Cruel One. And there gathered those who would see the Chosen One put to death, those
whose eyes were blind to his – nefrew?" Daniel frowned as he tried to work out the context and
then blushed. "Um – to his um –"

O'Neill shook his head. "It says 'beauty' doesn't it? God, I hate this planet."

Carter said soothingly, "Go on, Daniel, this is fascinating. This is exactly what happened."

After a quick glance at O'Neill, Daniel continued, "Yet, with the Chosen One came his…tewet…
um, his avatars, which numbered three; and the first was more beautiful than the moon; the second,
more terrible than the sun; the third, more cunning than the wolf that hunts in winter.' " Daniel
looked over his shoulder. "I guess that's the three of you."

"Ya think?"

"The first was Compassion; the second Wrath; the third Guile. Wrath struck down the False god
with his staff of fire and the False god did split asunder like' – something or other, not sure about that
word – 'and the temple fell with a sound like thunder and first among the priests was he whom
history shall despise for all eternity; and he the False God crushed. And terrible were the woes and
lamentations of those who had come to watch the Chosen One put to death, and their blood did
overflow like the river after rain, and their bones were turned to powder, and their sufferings terrible
to behold. Yet all this did they deserve for they would have watched the Chosen One put to death
and lifted not a hand to help him.' " Daniel looked up with a frown. "This is a very judgmental text
for what's supposed to be a benevolent deity."

"Oh just get on with it, Daniel."

"Please continue, Daniel Jackson."

Daniel moistened his lips. "Okay. Right. 'And the avatars were filled with sorrow, for the Chosen
One appeared as one separated' – something like – 'separated from himself for all eternity. And
Compassion wept tears that turned to sapphires, and Wrath wept tears that turned to rubies, and Guile
wept tears that became as diamonds upon the ground to think that the Chosen One was lost to them.
Yet the Chosen One had only feigned his' – don't know this word but in the context think it must be
something like 'condition…feigned his condition…. And his avatars did raise him up again with their
love, and he was untouched, for he was the Chosen One whom no man can injure.' Wouldn't it be
nice if that were true?"

"Daniel."

'…And when the people saw the image of their False God split asunder they were loud in their
lamentations and greatly feared the coming of the False God to wreak his vengeance upon them.
They gathered at the Shenu…' Shenu…? Oh, 'Ring of Eternity' – that must be the Stargate – 'but lo
the Chosen One walked amongst them all unscathed, and spoke to them in’ – not riddles, metaphors, something like that –"

" 'Parables'?" Carter suggested.

Daniel winced. "Let's stick with metaphors. ’…spoke to them in metaphors that their weak minds could not yet grasp.' "

"I can't believe that every half-baked piece of nonsense Daniel's come out with on this stupid planet is going to be commemorated for all eternity on a…tablet thing."

"Already is commemorated for all eternity, sir," Carter reminded him. "I think there's definitely been some kind of rip in the space time continuum at some point in this planet's history."

Daniel peered myopically at the inscription. " 'But then the Chosen One and his disciples' – I'm just reading what it says here, I didn't write this stuff – '…his disciples did disagree, for Wrath and Guile were angered with those who had worshipped the False God, and Guile proclaimed that they should be left to…' can't work this out at all, but it seems to be something like '…stew in their own blood'."

"I never said that," O'Neill protested.

" 'But the Chosen One won them to his cause with his great –' look let's just skip along here, shall we? – '…and Wrath laid down his staff of fire and raised the great stone from off the body of the hem-netjer-tepey – hem-netjer-tepey? Oh right, I keep forgetting, that's the High Priest – they didn't have a religious structure on Abydos that involved an actual hierarchy, which I also found very…. Okay, Jack, I'm reading it: '…raised the great stone from the body of the High Priest though no man of mortal flesh could lift it, and the Chosen One did lay hands upon the priest who would have killed him and….' Oh great, and now I'm raising people from the dead!"

"There's just no end to your talents, is there, Dannyboy?"

"Look, this is insane," Daniel turned to Harun. "The only people who performed a miracle here were my friends. The only reason I survived this Shokmar thing was because they saved me. They are all much greater than I –"

Harun beamed and pointed to a section of the text that came much lower down. " 'And then spake the Chosen One and he told the sinners of the False God that the magic lay all with his avatars for it was they who had saved him from the horror of Shokmar, and it was they who were most worthy of praise.' "

"Do the words 'self-fulfilling prophecy' keep coming to anybody else's mind?" O'Neill enquired.

Daniel turned to Carter. "Sam, what the hell's going on here?"

"I think we're dealing with a time anomaly here. Someone from the future must have traveled back to the past, taking these tablets with them. They described a past event which in the deeper past appeared to be a prophecy."

"Except this isn't a past event, it's a present one, and it's happening now, and it is really freaking me out." Daniel ran a hand through his hair. "I don't think I should translate any more of this."

"I agree," Carter said thoughtfully. "If we read on we're going to try and change events that could be said to have already taken place."

There was a cold draught coming in through the arched doorway. O'Neill waved a hand at the back
of his neck, as though the breeze was a bat he could frighten away. He hated the way everyone's words sounded so thin and hollow in here and raised his voice to try to foil the whispering echoes. "Except they haven't taken place, Major, and if one of the things recorded here is us all getting killed I'd really like to avoid it."

"The point is, sir, that we can't avoid it. It's already happened."

O'Neill looked down at himself pointedly. "Not to me."

"Major Carter is right," Teal'c put in thoughtfully. "It is clear from these writings that the people of this planet threw off the shackles of their slavery to the Goa'uld only because of our coming to this world. If we attempt to alter events in any way, we may undo the good we could be said to have already done: Onuris may then triumph and these people remain his worshippers."

"I can live with that." O'Neill looked around at the others. "Hell of a lot of worlds out there. Seems kind of greedy not to let the Goa'uld have some of them. Is there anyone here who can't live with that?"

"Jack," Daniel sighed. "I think we're in the hands of fate here and Sam's right, we should stop reading what happens and just—"

And he could see where this was going and no way was he allowing it to go there. Time to start spelling things out for people. "And just what, Daniel? In case you've forgotten, you're not actually a god, you're an archaeologist-slash-anthropologist-slash-Egyptologist-slash-linguist-slash-major-pain in the butt who has already been caught and tortured once in the—" O'Neill checked his watch, "let me see – twenty hours we have been on this miserable planet. And if Onuris catches us he's going to kill all of us but he'll probably kill you in a particularly messy and spectacular fashion because you're now his main rival in the deity stakes. Now, although I'm starting to think that wouldn't even be such a bad thing, there's just this tiny lingering part of me that would rather not have to watch you get dismembered or buried alive or fed to wild dogs or whatever."

Daniel shrugged and held up a hand to the tablet. "You want to read this by yourself, go right ahead, but I'm not translating any more of it."

"Daniel, do you have any idea how close I am to hitting you right now?"

Teal'c took Daniel by the arm and moved him back so that the Jaffa was between Daniel and O'Neill. Daniel said reassuringly, "It's okay, Teal'c, Jack's joking."

O'Neill and Teal'c exchanged a look that was entirely sympathetic. O'Neill said, "Keep doing what you're doing, Teal'c."

Daniel said soothingly, "Jack, don't get mad."

"Too late, I already did."

Looking at Jack, Daniel could see he wasn't kidding. Jack was mad as hell with him. "I just don't want us to do the wrong thing."

"Well, you know what I want, Daniel? I want to get my team off this planet alive and, if possible, unhurt. Now, I expect the Goa'uld to make that task harder, what I don't expect is for the people whose lives I am trying to save to make that task harder. And right now I'm looking at you."

"Sir, I'm with Daniel on this. I don't think we can read what happened without changing past and future events."
Daniel appreciated Sam distracting the man because Jack looked exactly like someone who wanted to swat him hard around the back of the head, but all the same he thought she was waving a red flag at a bull right now.

Jack said tautly, "Major, I don't care if we change past and future events on a planet we're never going to visit again. This isn't Earth. This isn't us going back and ending up marrying our own grandmothers or whatever or stopping ourselves being born. This is a different world with a belief system that is based on two lies. I don't see their lives are so damned wonderful it makes any difference if their past or future gets changed anyway. And if this –" he waved a hand at the black tablet, "writing stuff tells us what happened to the 'Chosen One' and his little band of angels, and gives us the jump on Onuris I think it's a legitimate tactical advantage we ought to make use of."

Daniel decided there was a time to be conciliatory and there was a time to put his foot down. They could stay here and argue until the sun went supernova, he was not changing these people's history just to get them out of a tight situation. Sam knew more about this kind of thing than they did and she agreed with him, and so did Teal'c, that meant a majority of three to one in favor of him being right. Jack was trying to bully him into doing something they both knew to be wrong and he was damned if he was going to do it. Wrapping his arms around his chest, Daniel said firmly, "I'm not translating it."

He'd never really grasped how swift Teal'c's reflexes were, until the Jaffa shoved him behind him even faster than Jack could grab him. When he recovered his breath, Teal'c had placed a restraining hand on Jack's chest and was holding him at arm's length, the two men looking at each other without hostility. Jack said conversationally, "I have to hit Daniel, Teal'c. If I don't the top of my head is going to explode. There's going to be grey matter sprayed all over this damned cavern."

"Striking Daniel Jackson will not help, O'Neill."

"It'll make me feel a hell of a lot better."

"Even harming Daniel Jackson severely will not persuade him to translate the tablet for you."

Daniel murmured, "Um – probably better not to be put that idea in Jack's head right now, Teal'c."

Teal'c continued imperturbably, "And if Onuris' Jaffa pursue us, our chances of escape would be much higher if we were all uninjured."

Not even attempting to pretend he wasn't hiding behind the Jaffa right now, Daniel nodded. "That's a good argument, Teal'c, stick with that one."

"Sir, this really isn't achieving anything." Sam was checking her MP-5 as she spoke, jiggling a reload mechanism that was threatening to stick. "Beating up Daniel isn't going to help us get off this planet."

"No, but it would make me feel really good right now." Jack gave Daniel a blood-freezing glare but did back up. "Okay, I won't hurt him this minute but if we should ever get back to base he's dead meat."

Daniel winced at the look in his eyes – Jack really wasn't kidding on this. "Well, given how remote the chances of us getting back to base look at the moment, I guess I can live with that." Deciding he really should stop hiding behind Teal'c now, he took a tentative step forward. When Jack didn't hit him, he shuffled a bit further away from Teal'c's protection.

Teal'c said calmly, "If we successfully return to base, O'Neill, Daniel Jackson will no longer be in
danger from Onuris and you will consequently no longer be angry with him."

Jack held up a warning finger to the Jaffa. "You know your problem, Teal'c? You talk too much."
He turned on Daniel and Daniel couldn't help blanching a little from the burn in those brown eyes.
Whatever Teal'c might say, Jack was not going to get over this in a hurry. Jack said with deceptive
calm, "So, Daniel, would you like to tell us why this is not a good place to spend the rest of the
night?"

For a minute Daniel just stared at him open-mouthed because Jack never did this. He never asked
him military-type questions and expected to get a real answer. He had never once demanded that
Daniel know things soldiers knew. He just expected him to know the things an archaeologist would
know. It was one of Jack's more lovable traits. Was Jack going to ask him to take apart an MP-5,
clean it, and put it back together again, or set a line of those – explosive thingies Sam knew how to
play around with? What the hell was this about anyway?

As Jack continued to stare at him, unblinking and unrelenting, Daniel realized what this was about.
This was a reminder Jack did the military stuff and Daniel didn't; and right now Daniel's pesky ethics
were interfering with Jack's ability to keep them all safe. Which was no doubt why he was reminding
Daniel how, despite all his undoubted intelligence, Daniel knew zip about military strategy. Well,
very subtle, Jack, and didn't that tell him, but he still wasn't translating the damned tablet. So there.

"Daniel…?" Jack had his best I-can-wait-all-night expression on and Daniel supposed he should be
grateful Jack had never done this to him before. He could have had three years of Jack saying: And
what's this weapon called, Daniel? And how does that one work? Just a little reminder of what kind
of a C.O. Jack could have been. And yes, Daniel was very appreciative of Jack never having treated
him like this, and although he'd never stated it directly, he'd thought he'd made it pretty damned
obvious from the way he put up with all Jack's crap when the man was being crabby for no apparent
reason. Or all those times in the past when Jack had treated him like he was a difficult child who
needed to be humored. Not to mention the way Daniel damned near had a coronary every time Jack
got injured. But no, apparently not. Apparently Jack was feeling misunderstood and unappreciated
today and also seemed a hair away from pointing out that he was a Colonel in the Goddamned
United States Air Force and it would make a nice change if the people Under His Command
occasionally did what they were Damned Well Told.

Playing along with Jack's bruised ego seemed the best way of averting both the speech and the
temper tantrum that seemed to be looming. Sighing, Daniel looked around at the cavern. It was huge,
echoing, imposing and made him think of the Maya his grandfather had studied in Belize. Made him
remember how it was to be a child being told scary stories by Nick while his mother said indulgently,
"Really, Dad, don't you think Danny's a little young to hear….

His parents had argued after every trip to Nick's house. And it was true he'd always had nightmares
but he'd still been eager to go back. Nick had told him the Maya believed the caves were places were
ever spirits lived, where a man would be tested by demons if he dared to venture into the darkness.
All those miles and miles of caves, rainwater sculpturing the limestone into folds of rock that looked
like melted candle wax. Nick had described it to him so many times. The subterranean pools. The
bats. How he'd had to swim through the darkness in places. How he'd found abandoned cooking
pots that made it seem as though the Maya had left only days ago. And then as he went deeper and
deeper into the caves, there had been other proofs of darker rituals. An obsidian knife. A human
skull. And finally the calcified skeleton of a teenage girl who'd been ritually sacrificed by Mayan
priests….

Hearing the sound of Jack's foot tapping impatiently, Daniel collected his thoughts. A lecture on the
ancient Maya probably wasn't what Jack was looking for right now. Okay. Concentrate on this
cavern and why it wouldn't be a good place to stay the night. Well, there were striations on the walls, evidence of some iron or copper deposits in the rock. And it was quite warm. And there was water, which seemed to be fresh. And…nothing was really coming to mind and Jack was getting seriously irritable now. He really didn't want to make Jack madder than he was already but all he could think of was reasons why this would be a good place to spend the night. He was suddenly aware of Sam behind him, murmuring: "Only one entrance."

Damn, he'd known that, Jack just had him flummoxed. Daniel said quickly, "It's a trap. Only the one way in or out. So, we probably shouldn't stay here much longer…?"

"Very good." Jack shot Sam a suspicious glance but Daniel tried to look as innocent as possible and he knew Sam would be keeping her face carefully unreadable as well.

Sam said, "Daniel's right, Colonel, this isn't a good place for us to hang around."

"Ya think?"

Daniel winced again. He really didn't like pissing Jack off, whatever the guy seemed to think. He said gently, "Jack, I just really need you to…."

Jack turned on him and held up his finger. "Daniel, are you going to translate what's on that tablet or not?"

Daniel sighed but returned his gaze levelly. "Not."

"Then I don't want to hear what you have to say right now."

Jack turned away and Daniel tried not to mind quite as much as he did. Being angry would definitely have helped but he seemed to have lost the knack of being angry with Jack at the moment. Probably something to do with the little matter of the man having rescued him from insanity and certain death at the hands of the priests of Onuris. The ones Daniel had later berated him for having left to die under a pile of rubble. Something Jack would never have had to do if Daniel had done as he asked him in the first place and never gone to the temple. Perhaps those were some of the reasons he was finding it a little difficult to feel angry with Jack right now.

Looking at Daniel Jackson with his arms wrapped around his upper body as though they could shield him from enemy fire, Teal'c thought again how difficult was the relationship between the young scholar and the older warrior. They were usually so in tune with one another that when they could not agree it troubled them greatly and was even occasionally interpreted as a form of betrayal by the other. He had seen this behavior in family members before now, or married couples, where each expected the other to agree with them, even if they were wrong, simply because of their close connection.

He had observed this reaction from Daniel Jackson and O'Neill in the past when they been unable to agree on something fundamental. Last time it had been O'Neill's inability to believe in the message Sha're had transmitted to Daniel Jackson through the ribbon device; something that had spilled into the untidy matter of Daniel Jackson's brief relationship with the woman who had once been Linea. Daniel Jackson had been so unlike himself during that time that Teal'c had been gravely concerned for him, feeling unhappy if the scholar was out of his sight for more than a few minutes. He had feared the younger man might even be suicidal, although he was expressing his grief through anger and by closing himself off from the rest of them.
It had been a great relief to him – and he suspected also to Major Carter – when O'Neill had gone to see Daniel Jackson and agreed to search for the child. He suspected O'Neill had chosen his words carefully for once, for Daniel Jackson had been transformed by whatever O'Neill had said to him in that meeting. After his discussion with O'Neill even his grief had appeared to be more bearable to him and the two men had been on the best possible terms. But Teal'c sometimes wondered if O'Neill was aware of just how important was his good opinion to Daniel Jackson. Or how utterly it would destroy the younger man if he ever thought that he had lost it. There were times when he feared O'Neill was so busy telling himself how much more intelligent his companions were than himself that he forgot how necessary he was to the rest of them, and to Daniel Jackson in particular.

He did know O'Neill was aware how sensitive Daniel Jackson was, how easily his self-confidence could be crushed, how quickly he could be persuaded any set of circumstances were his fault. Teal'c had realized from the outset the young scholar needed to be treated with even more respect and consideration than a warrior. Even if he acted unwisely, or thoughtlessly, or with no apparent care for his own safety, Teal'c felt it should not be mentioned as it might do him emotional harm. Although he, O'Neill, and Major Carter had never discussed this aspect of Daniel Jackson's personality directly, he noticed that his two companions were always careful not to undermine the younger man's confidence as well.

Having grown up on Chulak where scholars served only their god, and women were never required to be warriors, he felt himself to be more aware than O'Neill of how great was the courage shown by Major Carter and Daniel Jackson. On other worlds, less was asked of people of their position and gender. Men of learning were not also expected to act as soldiers, nor were even women of the great intelligence and skill of Major Carter expected to risk their lives on the battlefield. Warriors like himself and O'Neill were expected to defend people like them, never be defended by them, and yet on several occasions now he or O'Neill had owed their lives to the bravery and intelligence of these two younger members of SG-1.

On more than one occasion he felt that O'Neill had been guilty of taking for granted Major Carter's brilliance as a scientist. Her understanding of Goa'uld technology was unparalleled in Teal'c's experience, while her skill in battle surpassed that of most of the warriors he had known. Even when she was presented with technology that was entirely new to her, she could usually make it work or understand how it was constructed, and he often felt O'Neill did not fully comprehend how hard were the tasks set for her and how well she overcame them. O'Neill was unstinting in the confidence he displayed in all of them, but his lack of understanding of their individual fields of expertise sometimes made Teal'c feel that he did not always appreciate how very fortunate he was to have two such minds as those of Major Carter and Daniel Jackson at his disposal.

He was never certain either if O'Neill realized how unusual were Daniel Jackson's talents. To meet a man who had amassed such knowledge at such a very young age had been a revelation to Teal'c. In his experience scholars were old men, men too whose interests were usually narrow, whereas Daniel Jackson's were wide-ranging. More, he was still curious about everything they encountered, had not allowed his mind to become closed-off to new experiences the way so many men had on Chulak. And there were other things about Daniel Jackson that were unique and deserved to be protected and nurtured. Teal'c knew of very few people who would have accepted as a friend the man who had been responsible for the loss of his wife, but if Daniel Jackson had ever blamed Teal'c, it had never shown in his actions, speech, or even expression, when he addressed him.

And, of course, these special qualities of Daniel Jackson made one want to keep him safe. He knew that O'Neill wanted to keep him safe as much – if not more – than any of them. His current anger only came from his feeling Daniel Jackson had once again unnecessarily exposed himself to harm and was now frustrating O'Neill's efforts to protect him. Teal'c could understand how exasperating O'Neill might find this, but he also felt O'Neill should remember it was not only Daniel Jackson's
body that was in need of their protection. His mind and spirit were equally as vulnerable to harm, and in his determination to keep the younger man physically whole, O'Neill was in danger of bruising his fragile inner self.

Teal'c first checked to ensure that Major Carter was safeguarding their retreat and then caught up with O'Neill in a few strides. He glanced at Daniel Jackson as he passed him and saw the younger man was biting his lip, gaze fixed on the back of O'Neill's head as he led the way out of the chamber, blue eyes at once pleading and a little resentful. Teal'c could almost feel Daniel Jackson willing O'Neill to understand his reasons and at least try to understand them. Teal'c did not feel this was an unreasonable wish on Daniel Jackson's part. But nor did he think it was one likely to be granted any time soon.

As he caught up with O'Neill the man said tersely, "I don't want to hear it."

"Do not want to hear what, O'Neill?"

"Why we shouldn't go around changing history. Half of the stuff on that tablet isn't even true. The little detail about Daniel being a god, for instance, and raising people from the dead. And I notice that when you were setting down your 'staff of fire' to pull rocks off the damned priests no one mentioned you were using a pulley system."

"Nevertheless, their prophecy is clearly based on fact, and we ourselves have experienced the reality of traveling to a different time. It may also have been dangerous to us to read on. Our survival on this planet may depend on our ignorance of the immediate future."

O'Neill gave him a suspicious glance. "How do you work that one out?"

"Had you known that you would be captured by Apophis if you traveled to Chulak, would you still have done so?"

O'Neill shrugged. "Probably not."

"Then I would still be First Prime of Apophis, and many more people would be dead. Sometimes to know a little of one's future and try to avoid it might be to do both oneself and others incalculable harm."

"You know, just once, I would like you and Carter to back me up instead of Daniel."

Teal'c gave O'Neill a level look. "If I thought Daniel Jackson was wrong on this matter, you can be sure I would have said so."

O'Neill opened his mouth to retort, then looked around and frowned. "Where's Harun?"

"He was... right here."

"Well, now he isn't."

They exchanged a glance and Daniel thought how tired Jack looked. He felt unbelievably tired himself, as if someone had opened a vein without him noticing, some razorblade slash to the back of his ankle which had left a blood trail all the way back to the temple for Onuris' Jaffa to follow. And he'd had a lot more sleep than the others. Not to mention all the stress he hadn't had because it wasn't his teammate who'd managed to get himself captured and tortured. There was still that hard look in Jack's eyes when the man's gaze passed over him but Daniel knew Jack too well to be fooled by it now; he could see what lay behind it and that expression showed nothing but concern for him.
He said conversationally, "You know, Jack, if Onuris does get me, you have to admit it really will be
entirely my own fault. I mean I know I ask you to work miracles just about once a month but I got us
into this one all by myself, and I really don't expect you to get us out of it."

"Yeah, that's going to be a terrific consolation when he's feeding us all to his pet alligators."

"More likely to be lions actually. His consort was the lion goddess, Mehit. Which brings us back to
the Early Christians again and…you really don't want to hear any of this right now, do you?"

Jack said evenly, "However did you guess?"

"Come…"

Daniel turned to see Harun beckoning to them impatiently. He forced a weary smile. "We thought
you'd gone."

"No, no. You must follow me. The caves are very treacherous. Men have been lost here for many
days – sometimes forever. You must stay with me."

Daniel looked over his shoulder and saw Sam moving up behind him and Teal'c falling into position
behind her. Jack, of course, was ahead of him. He was in the middle; as protected as they could keep
him. He closed his eyes and stumbled after Jack, exhaustion leadening every limb. Death was
starting to seem welcome, as at least it would give him some rest. He was getting flashes of the blue
light again, Shokmar emerging from the place in his memory where Jack had wanted it walled up
forever. Wesheb…. Wesheb…. Questions to which there never had been answers. Like the ones the
Inquisition asked or Witchfinders already determined to find you guilty of something. He kept seeing
the High Priest's face, malevolent, triumphant, overlaid by the face of that dying man suffering under
the stone. People crushed by falling stones. Such a terrible way to die. They'd told him it was quick.
A few seconds of fear followed by instantaneous death. He'd known there would have been pain,
but only an eye blink and then there would have been darkness, silence, whatever came later.

As a child he'd thought in terms of later: heaven, angels singing, something better. People had told
him his parents had gone to a better place, thinking it would console him, but it had made it sound as
though they'd chosen to leave him behind. Now he wondered if it had been instantaneous after all.
Perhaps they'd lain there dying slowly, minute by minute by minute by….

"Daniel…?"

Jack was mad with him. Mad as hell with him. He couldn't have it all ways, couldn't have Jack be
the parents he'd lost when he needed him to be and treat him with perfect equality as well. Sooner of
later he was going to have to choose what he needed Jack to be: big brother, stepfather, or friend. He
couldn't be glad of those times when Jack took him home with him, fed him, and tucked him up on
the couch to catch up on his sleep, and then resent it when the guy turned around and told him they
were doing things his way today. Sometimes Jack wasn't the only one who found their friendship
exhausting; who wondered when it had all got so – intense. Some days it seemed as though
everything Jack said to him just mattered too damned much.

"Daniel?"

Their footsteps sounded hollow, as if they were made of tin. This was a straight section of tunnel.
Good. He could close his eyes for a few paces. Listen to where Jack's feet were landing and place
his own feet where the echoes were still lying on the stone like puddles. When he opened his eyes
there was the eerie blackness of the caves, their shadows separating as they were spiked by different
points of light; Harun's torch sending up grey wisps of smoke from a hissing red flame; Jack's
flashlight dissecting the darkness in a shaft of blue light. Blue light. Wesheb….Wesheb…. Not again. The same circle over and over. A damned uroboros of memory forever swallowing its own tail.

"Daniel!"

Daniel opened his eyes and blinked. He was propped against the wall of a cavern. Jack was steadying him, hands on his upper arms holding him up but was half-turned away, speaking over his shoulder. "Look, he's out on his feet here. You said you were going to take us to a place of safety. How much further is it?"

"Sorry." Daniel pushed himself off the wall. "Sorry. Don't know why I'm so tired…. You must be even…. You look…. I'm the only one who's had any sleep…."

"Your body had a bad shock, Daniel." He saw Sam's face swim in front of him, a pale oval with two bright points of blue looking at him compassionately. "An experience like that was bound to take it out of you." Her hand felt hot against his forehead. Her voice was indistinct as she turned her head away, "Sir, he's very cold."

"I know." So quiet an admission you could hardly hear it, then Jack was saying tersely, "Look, Harun, I'm not dragging him through these damned caves for no good reason. Can Onuris' Jaffa find us here or not?"

"It would be safer if we were further in."

"Daniel's pretty much had it and none of us are going to be fit for anything if we don't get some rest soon."

"I'm going to get us all killed, aren't I?" Daniel was surprised by how calm his voice sounded when he felt so sick inside.

"Daniel Jackson…." Something soft and comforting. A silver blanket and Teal'c guiding him towards it. The floor looked very inviting. Even without the blanket it would have been something he could lie on that would hardly move at all, with the blanket it was irresistible. Then he was lying down with the cave floor lapping gently all around him. Teal'c's palm warm against his face, a brief contact. "You must rest." He always found Teal'c's voice soothing, even when the Jaffa was telling them they were going to die there was still a kind of comforting certainty to it which gave you something solid to hang onto.

Jack was questioning Harun: "You've read that damned tablet-thing, right? You know what happens? Is this a good place for us to rest for the night or should Teal'c and I pick Daniel up and carry him further into the caves? Is there a reason why we shouldn't stay here?"

Harun was a blur but when you were near-sighted you became skilled at reading body language and Harun's was full of hesitancy. The man was caught in two minds about something. Like someone experiencing doubt for the first time in a long while. Daniel could feel sleep tugging at him, something he could slip into, somewhere dark and still and comforting as death, but he needed to stay awake long enough to hear Harun's answer.

Harun spoke quietly, "It is written that Chosen One rested that night surrounded by his avatars."

"And they were okay? Nothing bad happened to him or his – avatars?"

"Sir…." Sam sounded uneasy. "He might not be comfortable sharing that knowledge with you."

"Major, I don't give a rat's ass."
"You should rest." Harun's response was soothing but not very informative. "All of you should rest. I can keep watch."

"That isn't what I asked."

Just before Daniel's eyelids pressed down, he read evasion in every blur of Harun's body. As he drifted into sleep, he realized the man was poised on the brink of lying.

O'Neill glanced across at Daniel and saw that he was asleep. It wasn't exactly sleeping peacefully, more like comatose. There were none of those little stirrings and murmurings you usually observed in someone dreaming, Daniel was just limp, white, and still. It was all O'Neill could do not to go over there and check he was still breathing. The firelight spat and glowed, smoke filtering up to find cracks in the ceiling, Daniel's pale face flickering between light and shadow as the flames danced. He suspected Daniel's nerve-endings were still vibrating faintly, his body only slowly emerging from the shock into which all those hours of pain would have put it. When he'd held Daniel earlier, he'd felt a tremor like a road being dug up four blocks away, and in the hut Harun had taken them to Daniel's hands had been too shaky to tie his laces. Carter had done it for him. Daniel hadn't even noticed. God, he just wanted to get him home. He just wanted to get all of them home.

Glancing across at Carter, he saw the bruised shadows beneath her eyes. She'd looked like this on Netu, dead on her feet but still functioning, still thinking, blue eyes huge with exhaustion but the intelligence in them undimmed. The last thing to shut down on these two was always their minds, and when they were tired she and Daniel could have been twins.

After assuring them they would be safe here, Harun had busied himself with seeing to the fire, fussing over them unobtrusively and tactfully, deferential but not obsequious. It didn't help. He couldn't really like the guy. He couldn't get past the fact these people had known and not done anything to stop it. None of this had needed to happen. People always said what a wonderful thing hindsight was, and Harun had been given it, just for these events. He'd known someone who'd never willingly hurt another human being was going to wander up to that temple to be captured and tortured for hours. He could have saved Daniel and he hadn't. He'd just – let it happen.

"Neb? Sewer? Wenem?"

"What?" O'Neill was jolted out of his reverie to find Harun tentatively offering him something in a dish. With its vermilion coloring and those bits of herbs floating on it, the stuff looked like cheap punch. He sniffed at it and then wrinkled his nose. "No, thanks."

Harun turned to Carter, speaking even more gently to her. "You should eat? Drink?"

She glanced across at him for his permission first and he shrugged, leaving it up to her. His instinct was to tell Harun where to shove his food and drink but the guy had helped them so far and Carter certainly looked like she needed the sustenance. In fact she looked a breath away from total collapse and he frowned in concern. She took the shallow dish and sipped the hot red juice gingerly. He watched her swallow the stuff down and she looked so pale in the firelight he half-expected to be able to see the dark juice showing through the thin skin of her throat. When she wiped her mouth afterwards, the drink left a red streak across the back of her hand. He blinked as the smoke stung his eyes and focused again to find her looking at him compassionately. "You should have some, sir, it's very…reviving."

"Actually I'm trying to give it up."
He saw Harun putting some twisted bread-type stuff into her hand and noticed the effort it cost her even to chew. This wasn't good. He could feel exhaustion leaching his own limbs; Daniel was out for a very long count and Carter didn't look far behind him. This was not the kind of shape they needed to be in to outwit and outflank a vengeful Goa'uld and a couple of hundred Jaffa. Only Teal'c seemed to be in reasonable condition, and even he wasn't happy. He was out prowling the corridors suspiciously. O'Neill was with him on that. If ever a place smelt like a trap to him, it was here. He would have liked every entrance and exit alarmed and defended but you couldn't set up a line of claymores in a cavern unless you wanted to bring the ceiling down on yourself when the enemy turned up.

When Harun offered him some of the bread stuff, he shook his head, pulling an MRE out of his pocket and holding it up instead. It already felt like a lifetime ago he'd given that PowerBar bar to Daniel. "No thanks. We have our own." He looked at the pouch he was holding. Carter and Teal'c had ripped half a dozen MRE pouches open and distributed the contents as evenly as they could manage it, but he just bet he'd ended up with the damned macaroni and cheese again while everyone else had the chicken with salsa or beef stew.

O'Neill looked down at the pack he was holding. Yes, macaroni and cheese, well, no way in hell was he eating that straight out of the pack, he didn't care how many times the Air Force told him this was a hot or cold option. He pushed it back into his vest pocket and felt around for something else. The next pack was a chocolate cookie. Air Force 'cookies' always tasted like a graham cracker dipped in chocolate to him but it was still better than that macaroni and cheese. He bit into it as though he liked it and discovered he was still so hungry it tasted pretty good to him.

Harun was looking at him curiously, as if he was a Rubik's cube that kept coming out wrong. He wondered if Daniel knew what a Rubik's cube was. The guy had shocking holes in his general knowledge. Could tell you the names of a whole bunch of dead Ancient Sumerian tyrants but hadn't known who Luke Skywalker was until O'Neill had made him watch all those Star Wars videos. Way too many years grave-robbing on archaeological digs in Third World countries and not enough years just hanging out getting in touch with the late twentieth century. They were almost into the twenty first century, damnit, and Daniel still spent most of his head-time in 3000 BC.

Mind you, there were compensations, like the way Daniel was with TV. Not sports, unfortunately, they seemed to leave Daniel cold however many times you explained the rules to him and the names of the teams he should be rooting for, but movies. The only other person he'd ever known who watched movies on TV like Daniel, was Charlie. Like it was simultaneously real and magic, completely absorbed in whatever story was being told. Daniel never noticed ropey special effects or wobbling scenery, the same way children never noticed, he just believed it.

It was after the business with that…crystal replica of himself that Sara had given him all of Charlie's videos. Apparently she'd started dismantling his bedroom, preparing for the fact he really never was coming back. She'd said she could never watch those movies again herself but she couldn't bear to give them away either. She'd handed them to him and then walked away. She wouldn't come in for coffee. When he'd called after her, she wouldn't look round. And as she'd backed her car out of the drive he'd seen the tears glinting on her cheeks. She'd driven off and left him with a cardboard box full of videos and the realization his marriage was finally and irrevocably over.

Up until then he'd thought they would get back together at some point. How could two people who loved each other that much and who had all that shared history not get back together at some point? But that was when he'd realized the thing that connected them so finally and irrevocably had become a dead child. All the time they'd spent together before Charlie's birth had somehow been cancelled out by the years since. At some point Charlie had obviously become the mortar which held their marriage together; their shared point of reference; the best thing about their relationship. In becoming
two people with a child they both loved, they had somehow lost the knack of being two people who just loved each other, and they couldn't get back there again. The love hadn't gone, but those two people had. They weren't who they had been and they never would be again. From here on he and Sara could only be Charlie's parents with one another, which meant they couldn't be in a room together and Charlie's ghost not be in the room with them as well. He couldn't forget when he was with Sara. And perhaps Sara couldn't forgive when she was with him.

It hadn't been very long after that he thought he'd lost Daniel too. Bubbles rising. Flames engulfing. Daniel screaming. Even now, the memory of an event which had never taken place could chill him to the core. When they'd got Daniel back from the sea there had been no question where he would be convalescing from that damned memory device. Not in the infirmary after the first night because Daniel had given him his best begging look and O'Neill hadn't been in a state to withstand it. And not Daniel's apartment because it was full of cardboard boxes. A bare, chilly place tasting of their despair. Not anywhere, in fact, where O'Neill couldn't go and reassure himself Daniel was alive at regular intervals.

As his spare room was still waiting to be reclaimed from being a storage facility, Daniel had been installed on his couch again, although this time the semi-patient had become temporarily nocturnal. Having slept through a night and a day in the infirmary recovering from Nem's memory device, Daniel couldn't get his circadian rhythms back on track straight away. The first few days the headaches has been frightening but they'd receded. Daniel had stopped getting flashbacks to 2000 BC. O'Neill had stopped flinching every time he poured himself a glass of beer and the foam frothed up too fast.

The first night he'd sat up with Daniel and they'd talked more than they'd managed since the day he'd brought Daniel back from Abydos. About Sha're. About Sara. About their shared hope of getting Skaara back. It had probably been what women would call a 'bonding' experience but back then he hadn't learned to be completely comfortable with Daniel's unconscious ability to make him spill his guts. Particularly not so soon after he'd had it brought home to him how damned much Daniel now meant to him and there was always the danger he might admit it in an unguarded moment. Couldn't have Daniel knowing he mattered to him now, could he? Christ, the guy had been considering himself unwanted and unlovable pretty much full-time since the age of eight. Well, he'd had that one year off for good behavior on Abydos when even Daniel couldn't fail to notice he was loved and needed by the entire population, but apart from that, no, Daniel knew no one could really miss him or care about him. O'Neill certainly didn't want to change that now, did he?

So he'd been uncomfortable whenever he and Daniel got to talking; always ending up giving away so much more than he intended and then regretting it later. The next day he was always twitchy. He'd surface in the morning feeling the way he did when he'd woken up to find a head on the pillow next to his he didn't recognize. He'd tried to explain that to Daniel once, an oblique apology for the mood he'd been in. Daniel had looked at him unblinkingly for a moment before saying, "I see. So you're saying having a conversation with me about anything more intimate than the weather makes you feel like you got drunk and picked up a hooker. Well, thanks for the explanation, Jack. That makes me feel a lot better."

Put like that, O'Neill had to admit, he did come across as something of a jerk. But they'd still both been looking for an excuse not to have another heart-to-heart the following night; O'Neill flicking through the god knows how many channels he now had with something approaching desperation.

That was when Charlie's videos had come to the rescue. O'Neill making himself watch them with Daniel even though he thought it might kill him to do it, but needing to see that wonder in someone's face again even more than he needed not to be reminded of everything he'd lost. In the end he hadn't watched the movies, he'd just watched Daniel watching them. So he could simultaneously be given
back another memory of the child he'd lost and give Daniel back a slice of the childhood he'd never had. And after a little while the clenched fist inside him had relaxed its grip; he'd found the grief wasn't choking him like it always had before; he could breathe through it the way Sara had breathed through the birth pangs because even though Charlie was gone at least Daniel was still here….

"You are not an – angel, are you?"

O'Neill resented being jolted out his thoughts and looked at Harun without liking. "What was your first clue?"

"Are you a great lord?"

"I'm a Colonel in the United States Air Force."

Harun was frowning, waving a hand to brush the smoke away from his face, expression intent as he tried to translate the unfamiliar words. "I do not understand this description."

"We're…." What was that phrase Daniel always used? Oh yes. "We're peaceful explorers from the Planet Earth, Harun. We boldly go where no man has gone before. We're – "

"The Colonel's a warrior, Harun." There was just the tinge of reproach in Carter's voice. Telling him he shouldn't make fun of someone who was asking an honest question. She sounded hoarse, as though she had a sore throat.

The first he knew of Teal'c's presence was when the Jaffa said, "O'Neill is what you would call an Imey-er-mesh'."

"I'm a what?" O'Neill looked up at the Jaffa and raised an eyebrow. "They have a word for a Colonel in the United States Air Force?"

"No, O'Neill." Teal'c glanced across at Daniel and O'Neill noted the way the Jaffa waited until he had seen the sleeping man's chest rise and fall, the proof that he was breathing, before turning back to answer him. "But they have a word for the General of an army."

"Oh. Promotion." O'Neill got to his feet and beckoned Teal'c over to the corner. "What's our situation?"

Teal'c glanced back at Daniel. "We appear to be at the center of a converging network of tunnels. Although this cavern contains three exits, we could still be trapped here if we were approached on several flanks simultaneously. Normally, I would not advise remaining here any longer."

O'Neill grimaced. "But Daniel's dead to the world, and Carter's not far behind him."

"One would expect the physical effects of Shokmar to be extremely debilitating. If Daniel Jackson is not permitted to recover his strength, he may suffer permanent injury."

"Yeah and if Onuris gets his hands on him, he'll definitely suffer permanent injury and of the fatal kind." But as he followed Teal'c's gaze to those ashen features; the dark eyelashes painfully vivid against the pallor of Daniel's face, O'Neill knew he couldn't wake him up for no good reason. He looked up at the Jaffa. "So you're saying, either we risk Daniel's life waking him up and moving him, or we risk Daniel's life spending the night in a place people might know we're going to be staying in?"

"Yes."
O'Neill looked at his watch and then rubbed a hand across his eyes. He was so damned tired he couldn't even trust his own judgment any more. "Okay – another two hours and then we haul out of here."

He read in the Jaffa's eyes how Teal'c didn't think he or Carter were going to be fit for anything after only two hours sleep. Glancing across at Carter he saw how her head was getting heavier and heavier. As he watched, Harun gently took the cloak from around his shoulders and wrapped it around her. There seemed to be genuine compassion in the action. Harun said something to her gently, clearly suggesting that she lay down for a little while. Carter was muttering a protest, but then allowing him to help her. He heard her say, "Just for a few minutes…." And then she was lying on her side, her MP-5 still gripped in her arms, while Harun was pulling the cloak up to cover her shoulder.

He couldn't understand that guy at all. There seemed nothing other than kindness and concern in his face whenever he looked at Carter or Daniel, but he'd still let Daniel be tortured and presumably had gone into that temple to watch Daniel dragged through it half-dead and…. Why the hell had those people been in the temple in the first place? If they knew the avatars of the Chosen One were going to turn up and destroy the place, why were they just waiting for it to happen? Why had they taken their wives there, their children there?

O'Neill patted Teal'c on the shoulder, watching the Jaffa go with the familiar mixture of relief that Teal'c was out there guarding them and loss because he liked all his team under his eye.

"You blame us."

As O'Neill sat back down by the fire, he found Harun offering him the drink again. He frowned. "What?"

"You blame us for the sufferings of the Chosen One."

Seeing the sorrow in Harun's dark eyes, O'Neill thought about denying it and then shrugged. He took the proffered dish of dark juice. "When did you know what was happening?"

"We always watch the Seb'khet. When the four of you arrived, we hoped this time the Chosen One had come." Harun nodded across to Carter, "A woman with hair of gold. A warrior carrying his staff of fire….""

"And Daniel?" He paused with the dish halfway to his lips and couldn't help bitterness twisting his voice. "You saw him head towards the temple?" Harun sighed. "Yes."

He couldn't stop his jaw clenching. "So you could have saved him? You could have warned him?"

"I wanted to." Harun looked at the fire. "When I saw how young he was – how unafraid and yet as though he had no knowledge of his own divinity."

"Daniel has no – divinity, dammit. Like I told you earlier, he's just a guy like you or me. He's just very curious about everything. And, of course, he thinks people are basically decent and can be reasoned with, despite all the evidence to the contrary he's been given over the years."

"It is written that the Chosen One's heart was full of trust, innocence, and love."

O'Neill threw back the juice and then wiped his mouth. It tasted like bad sloe gin with a tequila chaser so perhaps it would keep out the cold. He felt unbelievably tired and as old as his knees
tonight. "Well, once upon a time it probably was. Although I should think people grabbing him and
torturing him for no reason will have put a bit of fear and suspicion in there as well now." He handed
the dish back to Harun, not meeting his gaze because if he did he wasn't going to be able to conceal
how angry he was they'd let Daniel walk right past them to his fate.

"We have waited many generations for his coming. We wish to be free of the False God."

O'Neill glared at him. "Well, why the hell don't you get off your asses and fight him then? Why wait
for Daniel to come here and save you? Why don't you save yourselves?"

"We are ready to die to defeat the False God. Many of us died in the temple."

O'Neill took off his cap and ran a hand through his hair. The warmth from that red juice was
spreading through him now, comforting, beguiling. All he wanted to do was close his eyes and sleep.
He made an effort to focus. "That's another thing I don't understand. If you knew we were going to
come rescue Daniel and destroy the temple doing it, why the hell were you all there?"

Harun blinked at him in surprise. "Because so it was written. The rescue of the Chosen One was
witnessed by the multitudes. There will always be sacrifices. Those who died knew their deaths were
proof the time of salvation was at hand."

O'Neill grimaced. People who would sacrifice themselves just so a prophecy could be realized were
not going to lose any sleep over sacrificing four strangers. "Look, I don't care about your damned –
bible, Harun. I care about getting my team out of here safely. Daniel is not dying so the rest of you
can be saved."

There was a long pause in which Harun's gaze strayed to where Daniel was lying.

"I mean look at him, will you? Really look at him. He's just a guy like you and me."

"In your world, perhaps." Harun carefully avoided O'Neill's gaze as he spoke. "But in ours he is the
Chosen One."

As he opened his mouth to refute it, O'Neill realized that it was unanswerable. Exhaustion was
pressing on his eyelids. He was going to have to close his eyes even if it was only for ten minutes. He
automatically put in the earpiece in to talk to Teal'c and then remembered that none of their
communication equipment worked here. God, he hated this planet.

"You must rest now."

He glared at Harun, too tired to stay awake any longer but knowing he had to at least until Teal'c
came back. "Written, is it?"

Evidently not understanding sarcasm, Harun nodded. "Yes."

As exhaustion closed his eyes, O'Neill knew there had to be a good answer to that. As he drifted into
slumber, he was still trying to think what it could be.

***

Despite the fact there were no footfalls to hear, Teal'c sensed there was someone behind him. He
spun around, staff weapon at the ready.

Harun held up his hands, surprise and a hint of fear on his face. "It is only I."
Teal'c slowly lowered the staff weapon. "Did O'Neil send you?"

"He is asleep." Harun nodded at the tattoo on Teal'c's forehead. "What emblem is it that you wear?"

Teal'c gazed down the next corridor, checking that it was empty before returning to answer Harun's question. "It is the mark of Apophis. Another false god like your Onuris, in whose service I once was."

"Why did you leave it?"

Teal'c saw no harm in telling the man the truth, and there was a chance it might do Harun some good to hear that there were others out there who had been enslaved by false gods and yet who had managed to throw off the shackles of their oppressors. He told him of Ra first. Of the manner in which O'Neil and Daniel Jackson had managed to defeat him despite knowing nothing of his power and being handicapped by technology greatly inferior to that of the Goa'uld. He knew there was a danger he might only be adding to Daniel Jackson's godlike status in the man's eyes. But it could not be denied that O'Neil and Daniel Jackson had managed in a matter of days to incite successful rebellion on a world that had languished under Ra's tyranny for thousands of years.

He told Harun then of how the news of Ra's death had filtered out to the other System Lords and to the false god Teal'c served. The disbelief of the other Goa'uld, followed by jubilation in the case of Apophis, followed by fear. Although Ra had been Apophis' enemy of old, the Goa'uld had believed what had happened on Abydos could happen anywhere if such an uprising was allowed to go unpunished. Apophis had still harbored hopes back then of being permitted to return to the fold of the System Lords. He had hoped to overcome the hostility of Cronos and Heru'ur by proving his loyalty to their collective cause. To this end he had decided the people of Abydos, and the Tau'ri who had influenced them, must be taught the error of their ways.

Teal'c told Harun of Apophis' visit to the world of the Tau'ri, the world that was now Teal'c's home. Of his visit to Abydos. The theft of the wife of Daniel Jackson and of her brother. How Teal'c had himself selected Sha're as a possible host for Amaunet, how Daniel Jackson had offered himself as a host so as to be with his wife, how the guilt had eaten into Teal'c's guts like the venom of a poisonous snake. How O'Neil had given him a way to make amends for all the battles in which he had been on the wrong side when he had asked for Teal'c's help.

"You betrayed your god?" Harun stared at Teal'c intensely.

"Have you not also betrayed yours? You have denied Onuris to worship Daniel Jackson."

"Onuris was never my god." Harun's gaze strayed back to the chamber in which Teal'c's teammates were sleeping. "To betray a god in whom you have no belief is no sacrifice."

Looking at Harun's expression, the sorrow on his face, the tension in his body language, Teal'c felt unease stir within him again. "But you understand that the people of Abydos were not enslaved by Ra. They were enslaved by their belief that he was a god. I too was enslaved by my belief in Apophis' divinity and my desire to avenge my father's death. Only when I did as Master Bra'tac had asked of me and began to think for myself could I break free from the service of Apophis."

"Your decision was difficult," Harun observed.

"In fact it was far easier than decisions I have made in the past," Teal'c assured him. "I knew that to kill unarmed men and women was wrong and to attempt to save them was right. There were many worse choices I was forced to make while in the service of Apophis."
Harun nodded and turned back towards the chamber where the others were sleeping. As he hesitated in the doorway, he said, "You speak as it was written on the sacred tablet that the avatar Wrath would speak."

"This surprises you?" Teal'c watched the man carefully, trying to discern how he was thinking, whether he was likely to save them or betray them.

"Your words do not surprise me, no. But it was written that he spoke to the prophet." Harun looked a little dazed. "That he spoke only to the prophet." He met Teal'c's gaze. "And yet you have spoken to me. How can I prophesy what has already been foretold?"

"Because the prophecy is wrong." Teal'c said it with emphasis. "Do what you know to be right, Harun, not what is written."

Harun backed up as though Teal'c's words were sparks that might singe him. "I will do what must be done to save my people from a false god."

As Harun ducked back into the chamber where Teal'c's teammates were sleeping, the Jaffa felt that hand close around his heart again. Daniel Jackson had seemed tired to the point of near-death; there had been a fever flush to the cheek of Major Carter that had filled Teal'c with foreboding, and now it seemed that even O'Neill had given way to his exhaustion, and slept. Teal'c could not protect all of his teammates single-handed. Nor could he hope to lead them through the catacombs when there were no tracks or signs to guide him. He needed Harun to help him or else they were all surely doomed. And yet, he was now even more certain that for all his apparent kindness to them, Harun's first loyalty would always be to the prophecy Daniel Jackson had refused to translate. The one in which for all they knew, it was written that they had died so that Harun's people might be saved.

***

Hadante. Dark. Underground. Phosphorescence on those slime-running walls. Every tunnel the same. A few hours down here and you began to lose all sense of direction. Daniel in so much danger and blissfully oblivious. Every time O'Neill turned around there had been men waiting in the shadows for him to look the other way, get careless, leave Daniel unattended for the moment it would take them to grab him. Carter was under Linea's protection and astonishingly enough it seemed to be holding out, like an invisible force-field all around her. But he'd felt that shift in their interest after the woman had walked away, the echoes of her declaration still lingering; the one that left Carter out of the running of people the human flotsam could fuck with. There had been a moment when it seemed like everyone's gaze transferred itself to Daniel. O'Neill had told himself it was just his imagination. Got Teal'c to take the lead then walked out of there as casually as he could manage it. The important thing was to show no fear in a place like this. Not panicking. Definitely not panicking. Trying to act as if worrying about Carter and Daniel was the last thing on his mind, because no way was anyone going to screw with them. The idea was so ludicrous he wasn't even going to…. Damnit, Daniel, don't go last! Don't you have any sense at all? Don't you know what these...? A pause, a slight regrouping and there were Daniel and Carter where they should be, in the middle, between him and Teal'c. And no, Daniel didn't know. Daniel didn't know squat, and it was his and Teal'c's job to keep him knowing squat….

Why? He wondered again why it had seemed so important to keep Daniel ignorant. Keeping him safe was understandable, keeping him unaware of the danger he was in wasn't. So why had that been almost as high a priority with him as not letting Daniel get grabbed? Because you still thought of him as a child. Not a child. Christ, he'd known the guy's age from their first meeting and it was, what thirty? Thirty-one maybe. He couldn't remember without looking it up. Well over puberty anyway. Old enough to know about stuff like that. About stuff like….
He'd kept looking around while they were talking, feeling like someone trying to guard an orphaned baby zebra when the hyenas were hungry. Every guy prowling around just out of reach had been looking at Daniel. He'd sometimes wondered what rapists looked like and now he knew. He hated the look in their eyes, not the lust, it wasn't really lust, more like dislike and contempt combined, a slow burn that looked a little like vengeance. Wanting to punish Daniel, despising him and desiring to hurt him just for being—presentable? Untouched? Looking so clean and fresh-faced and young and innocent when they were all bloodstained and smeared with sin and defeat? O'Neill standing there poised on the brink of an abyss where they'd fuck your teammate to death if you took too long blinking. He had to get out of there, had to get Daniel out of there, get them all out of there; get them home. Get them home. Home….

"Jack?"

He wondered how many times Daniel had said his name. How many times he'd said Daniel's name. Daniel. Danny. Dannyboy. Jackson. God, it was a long time since he'd thought of Daniel as 'Jackson'. He wasn't sure he ever had really; had ever been the Jack O'Neill who called Daniel 'Jackson'. Abydos had changed him, too. You didn't go through the Stargate and come back exactly the same man. And thank Christ for that in his case. That hard-assed suicidal grief-deranged fuck-up with every emotion strapped down so tight it was a miracle he hadn't exploded like semtex left to sweat in the sun, had needed to be changed into someone else.

"O'Neill?"

"Jack, please…. Wake up. Please…?"

He found it so hard to say no to Daniel when he said 'please' to him. It was like when he owned up to something. You tried to bring them up to tell the truth, but that meant you couldn't be mad with them even if they did something wrong, as long as they owned up. Charlie breaking that window. Daniel admitting he couldn't get them home. Even though he'd said he could. No point in being mad with him. An honest mistake. And what did it matter if they stayed here anyway? What did it matter if they died here? What did it matter if everyone died now that Charlie was…? Charlie…?

"Jack…?"

Daniel?

"Jack, please, we have to go. We have to go now. They're coming. Teal'c help me with him. We need to carry him….

He could smell smoke; it slid down his throat like a goddamned Tok'ra, squeezing his lungs, stealing his breath, making him cough. Hands reaching for him, tugging at him. No way in hell was Daniel carrying him. Daniel could hardly put one foot in front of the other. There had to be a way to get these damned eyes open.

"Oh thank God! Jack, can you stand? Can you walk?"

Those damned tinny echoes. The smoke stung his eyes and he closed them again. Good, someone had put out the fire. No light to guide the bad guys to them, and that had to be Teal'c helping him up because he was on his feet in a second, swaying like a reed but more or less upright. He forced his eyes open a crack to see Teal'c letting him go so he could pick up Carter. She was limp in the Jaffa's arms, white as paper except for a fever flush on her cheekbones he really didn't like the look of, and eyelids fluttering with REM. Daniel was looping his arm around his neck, trying to take his weight. Damnit, Daniel, you take Carter, let Teal'c take me. Show some commonsense. Daniel staggering under his weight but absolutely determined. God, he was stubborn. They were all moving more or
less towards one of those exits now. Although Teal'c was advancing in a straight line whereas he and Daniel seemed to be doing a lot of unnecessary wavering from side to side. Daniel saying breathlessly into his ear, "I'm so sorry, Jack. We think Harun drugged you and Sam. Teal'c heard a noise and went to investigate. When he came back he found Harun gone and the two of you both unconscious. We think he must have gone to tell Onuris where we are. This is all my fault...."

Not your fault.

"I really thought we could trust him."

You trust everyone, Daniel.

"But then you probably think I trust everyone." A little grunt and stagger from Daniel as he tried to keep up with Teal'c. Why the hell hadn't Teal'c taken him from Daniel anyway? Because you're at least on your feet whereas Carter is out cold. A chill around his heart partially thawed by the memory of her drinking much more deeply than he had done. And women couldn't drink as much as men without getting drunk anyway, something to do with their fat-to-muscle quota or something. Whatever it was it had meant he was always the one who had to drive himself and Sara home from parties anyway, he remembered that much. So Carter was okay, she'd just had more of that funny punch stuff to drink and it would have hit her harder anyway. Another stagger from Daniel.

"God, Jack, you really need to lose some weight."

Damned nerve.

"I swear you weren't this heavy on Netu."

Yes I was, Daniel, but you weren't half-dead of exhaustion on Netu.

A bad stagger that nearly sent them both into the wall of the cavern. Great. Talk about the blind leading the blind, this was the shokmared leading the drugged. He and Daniel were definitely lurching here. A sailboat tacking against a high wind had nothing on them.

"Ow!" A painful close-up of those red lines in the black rock. Damnit to hell, Daniel, these walls are made of stone, you know!

"Sorry.... I'm sorry...." Daniel was tightening his grip on him, leaning forward as though into a blizzard. They clashed heads as he stumbled. He heard Daniel give a little whimper, and realized what an effort this was for him. It was probably all he could do to stay upright. O'Neill tried to help him but his legs felt like spaghetti, there was no strength anywhere in his body. Daniel was having to take far too much of his weight both in holding him up and moving him forward. Another stagger. "Sorry, Jack....sorry...."

Stop apologizing, Daniel. You're doing the best you can....

At least the drug was wearing off a little now. Perhaps there was a vent somewhere letting in the chill night air because he could feel his brain slowly getting up to something like normal speed. His eyelids no longer appeared to be glued shut. His larynx didn't feel as though it had been shot full of Novocain. He felt Daniel's arm around his waist supporting him, their speed increase, and suddenly he was back on Netu, one step behind the beat, flames erupting, sulfur clawing at his throat, smoke everywhere, unbearable heat, and the pain in his leg stabbing deeper with every step. His right arm around Daniel's shoulders, Daniel's left arm around his waist, both of them moving so much faster than he would have believed possible, Daniel murmuring into the communication device as they hurried towards rescue. Rescue.
O'Neill opened his eyes. The flashlight sent a zigzagging blue beam all around them. Daniel must have it attached to the front of his flak jacket to leave his hands free. He'd learned how to do that very early on. Daniel was always better at learning military procedures he could see the point of. Blue light? He'd thought the light was red? Like Hell was supposed to be. All he could hear were the hollow echoes of their footsteps, running and stumbling, magnified by the stone until they sounded like a platoon. He glanced at Daniel's face and saw it was as he remembered it, grubby, bone-white, sweat trickling down his bruised cheekbone. The bruise was on the wrong side. He hadn't been able to see the bruise on Netu. He hadn't even known there was a bruise until they were in the tel'tak. Something was wrong. "Daniel?"

Daniel tightened his grip reassuringly. "Hang in there, Jack. Teal'c thinks we need to go deeper into the caves first to shake them off."

Of course, Teal'c was with them this time. Which was good. None of them liked being separated. They all felt a little incomplete when any of them were missing. Except Teal'c not being with them on Netu was the thing that had saved their lives. Teal'c had got them out. No. Carter, Daniel, and Teal'c had got them out. She'd found the transporter beam, worked out how to use the build up of heated gases to blow the grill above their heads. Daniel had got the communication device back. Teal'c had maneuvered the tel'tak into position just in time to save their about-to-be-deep-fried butts. And he'd got himself shot in the leg with a staff weapon. Right.

He looked across at Teal'c. The zigzagging light showed him a flash of blonde hair, white-gold against Teal'c's jacket. Carter. Still unconscious. It was odd about carrying Carter and Daniel. When you picked Carter up she weighed so much less than a man it didn't feel like any burden at all but then she slowly got heavier with every step. It just took that much longer for you to notice how much your knees were protesting. Daniel had one of those weird frames where the weight didn't sit anywhere so you always over-estimated the effort it would take to pick up someone of his height and build and damned near threw him straight over your shoulder. He remembered his mother pointing out once how weight was all about distribution; had told him to pick up their pet cat then put him down and pick up a bag of sugar. The sugar had seemed three times heavier than the cat even though they'd both weighed exactly five pounds. He always figured he and Daniel probably weighed about the same but Daniel was the cat and he was the bag of sugar. Bad guys were always pushing Daniel around as if he was made of balsa wood, yet every time Daniel stood on the scales he must think how damned unfair it was they could do that to him so easily.

He stumbled, grip instinctively tightening on Daniel's shoulder, would have fallen if Daniel hadn't held him up. He heard the grunt of exertion it cost the younger man to keep hold of him. Definitely the bag of sugar. He saw Daniel grit his teeth, tighten his grip on O'Neill's arm and waist, dig into those reserves of his which experience had taught O'Neill were near-limitless, and then haul him upright, move forward, taking his CO with him. He wondered if Daniel ever thought of him as his 'CO'. Come to that, he wondered if Daniel even knew he was his CO.

"Just a bit further, Jack," Daniel panted it encouragingly. "Just until Teal'c says —"

The Jaffa stopped abruptly and held up a hand. Daniel slammed on the brakes and they came to a ragged halt, O'Neill lurching, having to put out a hand to hold himself off the wall. Daniel swallowed. "Did you hear...?"

And then they all heard it. Metal-shod feet. Jaffa. The echoes loved the clatter of them and seemed to take pleasure in magnifying them a hundred times. O'Neill said the worst word he could think of.

Teal'c said, "Indeed, O'Neill."

"What do we do now?"
As O'Neill turned to tell Daniel he didn't know, he realized the question hadn't been addressed to him. Daniel was looking expectantly at Teal'c. Despite the fact his reply would only have been not to ask him because Teal'c was leading this expedition, O'Neill was still a little put out.

Daniel twisted his head round. "I can't tell if they're coming from behind us or in front of us."

"Neither can I." O'Neill offered. Okay, it was a somewhat negative contribution to the conversation but it did remind people he was there too.

As the footsteps became louder, booming, crashing, expanding to fill every available space, O'Neill became aware of the sidearm against his thigh. He wondered if he would look back on this moment later and realize this was when he should have put the gun against Daniel's head and pulled the trigger. He thought of all the ways tyrants had of killing their enemies. Having them torn apart by wild horses. Limbs ripped out and the sockets filled with molten metal. Buried alive. Impaled on stakes. Crucified. Made to fight to death in an arena...Daniel couldn't fight. It was an alien concept to him. If you punched him he just looked at you in bewilderment and wondered why you were doing it; it didn't occur to him he could hit you back. Onuris would have the priests shokmar him again; fry his nerve endings, melt his brain, and this time O'Neill would get the fun of hearing Daniel screaming for the help he couldn't give him. Then probably get to watch Daniel's heart be cut out on that altar. A bullet was so much kinder.

"Jack? Forward or back?"

O'Neill blinked, belatedly realizing the rapid whispering noise he'd taken to be bats had been Daniel and Teal'c trying to pick a strategy. He focused on Daniel's face. That boy was seriously in need of a shower. He had masonry dust all over his skin and stank of sweat and other people's blood. He wondered what color his bruise was coming out now. It might already be at the purple stage but it was hard to see by the flashlight beam.

"Jack?"

He could see a hint of panic in those blue eyes and realized Daniel needed him to snap out of it and start making decisions again. The guy was out on his feet and hanging on his by his fingernails. O'Neill said briskly, "Forwards. Every time. Let's get to a junction. Give ourselves some options."

He saw the relief on both Teal'c and Daniel's faces. So, not so redundant after all. Life in the old.... Who the hell was he kidding? He could barely put one foot in front of the other without Daniel taking most of his weight. Teal'c was already striding down the middle of the corridor but O'Neill realized his staff-weapon was strapped to his back and his arms were full of unconscious Carter. Shouldn't she be waking up by now? Teal'c was going to have to put Carter down to use any of his weapons. The Touched had grabbed Daniel while he was trying to juggle Melosha and a machine-gun. Not to say Teal'c didn't move a hell of a lot faster than Daniel but all the same, he and Daniel should be at the front. At least he could use his free hand to fire his MP-5.

Those damned footsteps seemed to be coming from every direction at once now. He stumbled. Daniel hissed through his teeth, then doggedly hoisted him up a little higher and half-carried him, half-hauled him after Teal'c. "Not much farther now...."

O'Neill thought Daniel was saying it to give himself encouragement, but then realized Daniel was saying it to comfort him. It didn't. The truth was they had no idea how much farther they had to go. Journey's end could lie just around the next bend in the shape of a staff-weapon blast. A few more miles of being hunted through these rat-tunnels and it would probably come as a merciful release.

He blinked as the blue beam of the flashlight revealed something up ahead that wasn't just corridor. The footsteps were deafening now. Daniel had made him watch some damned dull program about
the Roman army, telling him how as a military man he ought to be interested in their maneuvers. He’d thought about retaliating by asking how someone who knew so much about tortoise formations and how many foot soldiers there were to a cohort still couldn’t strap his damned sidearm on correctly. But he did reckon a couple of thousand legionnaires wouldn’t have made more noise than these Jaffa. They definitely sounded closer.

Teal’c increased his pace, striding ahead of them in his hurry to see what the end of the corridor revealed. O’Neill forced his legs to carry more of his weight. They were still a little shaky but the drug was definitely wearing off. He looked sideways at Daniel and saw how focused he looked. He could practically see the messages Daniel was sending himself: Concentrate on Teal’c. Follow Teal’c. Help Jack. Any other communication Daniel's brain might be trying to send him about how exhausted he was or how imminent death might be, or how he wasn't in a fit state to be doing any of the things he was having to do, were clearly not getting through right now. But O’Neill had better get his strength back quickly because pretty soon he figured he was going to be carrying Daniel.

The footsteps were definitely coming from behind them now. No question. Teal’c strode out through an arched entrance in the corridor and he and Daniel were right behind him. For a second there was a sense of relief. An intersection. Crossroads. Four possible ways to take. Three possible escape routes. But then O’Neill realized how much louder the footsteps were here, magnified to the point of reverberating off the walls, like being in a subway station when a train was coming. They stood in the center of the crossroads, the passageways snaking away like bad dreams; bends in each direction concealing what was coming. The archway in front of them led into a dark chamber from which sound was definitely echoing. But there was also sound behind them, to the right, and to the left. Footsteps getting louder with every passing second. The three of them stood as close to a circle as they could get, shoulder to shoulder, Daniel looking back the way they’d come, Teal’c straight ahead, O’Neill trying to keep his eye on both the way to his right and the way in front of him.

Daniel said quietly, "They're coming from everywhere."

"Well, they knew where to come to, didn't they?" O’Neill couldn't stop the bitterness showing in his voice. They were all going to die, and Daniel was going to die horribly because of Harun's twisted faith and Daniel's damned stupid ethics. He raised his MP-5 while Teal’c began to lower Carter to the floor.

"Don't." Daniel put a hand on each of their arms. "There are too many."

"I'd rather die fighting," O'Neill told him.

"As would I," Teal’c returned.

Daniel bit his lip. "I'd rather not die at all. Think, Jack."

"Not really my department."

"Then why in their damned prophecy are you considered more cunning than the wolf that hunts in winter?"

O’Neill shrugged, fighting doubt of his own. "Propaganda."

Teal’c hesitated, but only for a moment. Slowly, he slid his staff weapon back onto his back and tightened the strap. There was a quiet emphasis in the way he bent down and picked up Carter.

Daniel said quietly, "Thank you, Teal’c."

O’Neill was so damned tired and strung out anything seemed better to him right now than going
back to that temple. Even dying here felt a whole lot more enticing than dying there. The footsteps
were deafening now, it was impossible to think with the thunder of metal in his ears. This was his
last chance to have any control over how they died. If he surrendered, they would be choiceless all
over again.

Daniel was speaking rapidly: "I don't think we're meant to die here, but that doesn't mean we won't
if you start firing. I don't think they'd have been waiting for us for all those centuries if all we did was
raze their temple and then get blasted to death in these caves. Do you?"

As the first Jaffa appeared simultaneously from every direction at once, Teal'c turned so that his
back was to the approaching staff weapons and Carter was shielded by his body. O'Neill looked at
Daniel. He could feel the guy was taut as piano wire, trembling with tension, but there was certainty
on his face. O'Neill closed his eyes then held up a hand and slowly lowered his MP-5 to the floor.
"We surrender," he said. The words tasted like ash in his mouth but none of the Jaffa was firing yet.
And this was another turnaround too: Daniel giving him the 'while there's life there's hope speech'. It
didn't seem that long ago Daniel had been that poor kid on Klorel's ship slumped defeatedly in a
_corner saying 'We're blind and we failed' and now Daniel was someone who gave

There were locals with the Jaffa. Perhaps they'd been coerced into showing Onuris' lion guards the
way through the catacombs, but he didn't think so. He thought betrayal had always been written into
this escape plan as a non-optional extra. When he looked up to meet Harun's anxious gave, the
anger flared in him and he started forward.

"You son-of-a-
"

"Jack." Daniel grabbed his arm and held it tight. "Don't."

O'Neill let himself be pulled back, aware of Daniel murmuring something soothing to him but in his
head hearing Daniel screaming his name over and over as the priests tortured him again.

Harun was looking at him beseechingly. "I had to do it."

"No, you didn't," O'Neill told him flatly. "There's a little thing called self-determination which means
you get to make your own decisions. It also means you have to take responsibility for your actions.
Like when you stab people in the back you claim to be helping."

"Let it go, Jack."

He turned to tell Daniel how you shouldn't let people get away with some things and realized this
wasn't the bleeding heart brotherhood-of-man speech this was the I'm-dog-tired-and-so-are-you-
and-what's-the-point-anyway speech. O'Neill felt a chill inside him as he saw the weary resignation
in Daniel's eyes.

As the Jaffa closed around them, pulling them away from each other, then pushing them forward to
stumble on the stone, O'Neill remembered Daniel saying 'We're peaceful travelers...' with no hope of
being listened to as the door was slammed in his face. Remembered him so emphatically not telling
the denizens of Netu that Apophis wasn't a god and they shouldn't follow him. When Daniel had
been running around trying to change the galaxy and make everyone throw off the evil yoke of the
Goa'uld and be nice to one another, he'd occasionally felt a tad – impatient with him, but now he
almost wished Daniel would be like that again. It felt like such a failure on his part to have let
Daniel's faith in humanity get eroded to the point where he wasn't even shocked that Harun had
betrayed them.

He looked across at Carter. The Jaffa had taken Teal'c's staff weapon but had obviously decided he
was so effectively handicapped by having her in his arms they might as well let him carry her and so save themselves the effort. Still no sign of her waking up and there was sweat on her forehead. He met Teal'c's gaze and saw the anxiety in those usually imperturbable brown eyes.

Daniel also shot a worried glance at their unconscious teammate, so tired even the effort of turning his head made him stumble. A Jaffa snarled something at him, grabbing him by the collar to haul him upright before shoving him forward again.

O'Neill grimaced. He could see the fever flush on Carter's cheekbones. If it was something she'd picked up from the locals she might not have any immunity. Or it could be an illness so simple one dose of antibiotics would dispose of it. But both would be equally incurable when they couldn't get to their medikits or their packs.

"Is Sam okay?" Daniel stumbled again and the Jaffa grabbed him by the hair this time, yanking him up impatiently. No way was Daniel going to be able to walk all the way back to the temple and that had to be as obvious to the lion guard pushing him along as anyone else, but the Jaffa was clearly going to put off the moment when he had to carry Daniel for as long as possible. After all, why give an exhausted man a helping hand when you can more easily keep shoving him in the back or whacking him round the head?

Teal'c murmured quietly, "Major Carter has a fever. Her temperature appears to be climbing rapidly."

As another lion guard jabbed him impatiently between the shoulder blades with a staff weapon, O'Neill said tautly, "Well, isn't that just the perfect end to a perfect day…?"

***
Chapter 3

Part Three

The Temple of Onuris was like Rome, Daniel thought: all the roads on this world led there. It was the sticky thread of the spider's web, the center of the maze, and however many times you thought you'd escaped it, you found yourself dragged back there, more shabby, scared, and exhausted than before. He could barely focus although he was aware of guards pulling and shoving him, remembered falling, being hauled up by the hair, falling again, then being cuffed around the head, shaken, slapped. Jack snarling a protest despite being so tired himself he could hardly stagger. Teal'c growling something in Goa'uld and then glowering in frustration as a zat gun was pointed not at him but at the unconscious teammate in his arms. He couldn't make it down this mountainside on his feet. He was going to have to –

Harun's arm around his waist jolted him back into sentience; the other man taking his weight, easing him forward. Daniel blinked in surprise, then turned his head to see other men going to help Jack, even when he snapped at them and shook them off, just going back and supporting him again. Daniel gave Jack a begging look; silently pleading with him to take the help they were offering him, to conserve whatever strength he could. Jack glared horribly but gave in, accepting help from the people who had betrayed them albeit with a very bad grace. Thinking of what was most likely awaiting them in that temple, Daniel had to swallow hard, before saying, "Thank you." When Harun flinched from his gratitude, refusing to meet his eye, it seemed only fitting. Daniel knew he should probably offer some reassurance that he understood the man's loyalty to that prophecy, and so his actions, but he couldn't. He could perhaps have offered absolution for his own death at Onuris' hands, but not for that of the others.

When he turned his head again to try to see how his teammates were faring, the night air ruffled his hair like a phantom hand, and he shivered.

Sam looked as she had when Jolinar had died inside her, fragile as frosted bridal wreath. But this time there were beads of sweat across her pale forehead and an ominous harshness to her breathing which Daniel recognized only too well: the sound of struggling lungs filling up with infection. As Daniel stumbled trying to look at her, to will her back to consciousness and health, he heard Jack murmur, "Teal'c?"

Teal'c shook his head. Daniel had thought he was cold before but suddenly he was shivering, every vein running with ice water. He closed his eyes and let Harun steer him through the dripping dark, listening to the echoes of their own footsteps and the metalshod thunder of the lion guards, but seeing and hearing only Sam's bleached skin, the sweat on her forehead, the laboring sound of her lungs.

The night had become even colder, and his breath was white against the darkness; every inhalation rasping his throat while overhead a million stars he didn't know the names of glittered at them indifferently. Several times he heard Jack stumble on the shale and then snap at the people helping him, but the anger was half-hearted, swamped with weariness. Defeat. He'd never heard Jack sound defeated before. Daniel was practically sleepwalking; Harun and another local who smelt of uncured goatskin, supporting him between them and guiding him over the uneven surface. Had they walked him over a cliff he would still have gone with them, and been only grateful for the long, quiet drop before he hit the ground.

But the sight of the temple penetrated the fog in his mind like a lighthouse beam. For the first time he remembered the morning properly. Gazing up at that temple from his safe place by Jack's shoulder,
the alien stone and familiar structure calling to him through the mist. Sam and Teal'c had been barely ten feet away, fiddling with the DHD, safe and well. The worst problem Jack had been faced with then was boredom and the possibility of rain dripping down the back of his neck. Daniel's curiosity had killed all of them since then, they just weren't quite dead yet.

Daniel tried to recapture that brief moment of certainty he'd felt in the catacombs. The realization that if all they had ever done on this world was arrive, be captured, and die, they would have lingered in the minds of their 'followers' no longer than the lifespan of a dragonfly. It had comforted him then. But he couldn't snatch back his belief now. Guilt was overwhelming every other emotion and each time he caught a glimpse of Jack's taut, exhausted face, or Sam's fever-ridden form in Teal'c's arms, hope died inside him.

He couldn't repress a shudder as he entered the temple for the third time in less than twenty-four hours. The towering doorway looming menacingly overhead, all black straight lines like a guillotine. On the first journey across this threshold he'd found pain, on the second carnage. This time there could only be death.

Light blazed triumphantly through the ruins, giving a liquid gloss to every stain, the heat from all those torches only amplifying the stench of spilled blood and seared flesh, but this time Daniel was having a flashback that had nothing to do with Shokmar. Standing by a litter were two Goa'uld in magnificent robes; one male, one female, both beautiful as they were pitiless. They could have been Apophis and Amaunet. How much would I remember if you chose me? Something of the host must survive…. The four plumes of the male told him this was Onuris even without the extra proof of the beard and lance, and that warrior's muscular physique. The two lions lying at the feet of the female proclaimed Onuris' mate to be Mehit. Oh wonderful, more belief systems colliding. Now he really was Daniel in the lions' den.

Everyone on the planet seemed to have been herded into the temple to watch them die. Most of the wounded had been removed; killed, Daniel suspected, although the priests were still in evidence, their hairless bodies very white in the torchlight. They had probably told the Jaffa which of the wounded to kill. And these were the men to whom he had pledged Jack's protection? Sometimes the depths of his own stupidity even surprised him. There was the sour stench of burnt skin and hair still lingering, and he imagined the Jaffa walking along those lines of wounded blasting them into oblivion. Buried in the catacombs dreaming of death, he would never have heard their screams.

Onuris turned upon them, gaze flicking dismissively across the other three before he saw Daniel – which was when his eyes glowed gold with recognition, anger, dislike, and perhaps a hint of fear. At once, he began to declaim in Goa'uld, his gaze never leaving Daniel's face.

Despite his exhaustion, Daniel recognized those words which had been so subtly altered from the Book of the Dead. The Chapter of Coming Forth Against Enemies in Khert-Neter. They seemed horribly appropriate. He automatically began to translate for the others: "I have come forth from the horizon against my enemies. I have not permitted him to escape from me. I have stretched out my hand. I have lifted up my feet. I have not permitted the enemy to be saved from me...."

"Daniel."

"...As for mine enemy, he hath been given to me, and he shall not be delivered from me. I walk with my legs. I speak with my mouth. I chase my enemy. He hath been given unto me, and he shall not be delivered from me...."

"Daniel!"

He jumped and turned to find Jack looking at him. The man said quietly, "Don't help him." Just for a
second Daniel read the marrow-deep weariness in the older man's brown eyes and then Jack was straightening up, shaking off his helpers, digging some energy out from somewhere. Jack held up a hand. "Uh – sorry – Aneurin, or whatever the hell your name is, we don't actually speak the lingo, so if that was the Welcome To My World speech, I'm afraid we just missed it."

Jack’s favorite magic trick. The one rabbit he could always pull out of the hat. A second before none of the other three had even existed for the Goa'uld, all of his attention had been focused on Daniel alone, but now Daniel was momentarily forgotten, and Jack was the one for whom his eyes were glowing with rage and dislike. Onuris said savagely, "Your insolence will not go unpunished."

"Well, Apophis was always telling me stuff like that and you know what? He's dead. Incidentally, so is Sokar. Oh yes, and Hathor. And did I mention Ra?"

"Jack…." Daniel murmured.

"The thing is, I am really tired, not to mention pissed off. Your planet sucks, by the way. I hope you know that? And I'm really not in the mood to stand around and watch anyone playing god right now, so why don't we just tell the nice people on this world the truth about how there aren't any gods and then we can get the hell out of here?"

Onuris strode forward furiously. "You miserable insect! I am their god and your god. I am the only god!"

Jack shrugged. "Now see that's exactly what Ra kept telling everyone and it was a total crock when he said it too. Didn't help him one little bit when I shoved a nuclear missile up his ass either."

Daniel blinked, some of the exhaustion lifting enough for him to think. He stared at the Goa'uld in dawning realization. "That's why you didn't quote the whole passage. You missed out the parts that mention other gods: I stand up like Horus. I sit down like Ptah. I am strong like Thoth. I am mighty like Tem. You've done what Ra did. You've told these people you're the only one."

Jack addressed the assembled people, the clandestine worshippers of the Chosen One, the faithful followers of Onuris, the lion guards massed behind their god. "These people aren't gods. They're Goa'ulds – a race of parasites who have to live inside a human host to survive. I had one of the damned things inside of me once – didn't make me a god, just gave me a hell of a headache. Teal'c here used to serve another Goa'uld – now hopefully deceased. There's thousands of them all over the universe. They're treacherous, back-stabbing, lying, cheating scum, but what they're not are gods."

A ripple of horror and disbelief went around the temple at the man's blasphemy. It occurred to Daniel that someone was translating this. Correction, Harun was translating this, and the translation was being passed on so fast it traveled like a breeze through reeds.

Daniel murmured quietly, "Jack, you're sort of taking a crowbar to their belief system here, not to mention really seriously pissing off an already pretty hostile Goa'uld."

"Their belief system needs a crowbar taken to it, and pissing this guy off is the only hope we have right now. Haven't you ever heard of attack being the best form of defense?"

As a furious Onuris raised his hand with the ribbon device already glowing, Teal'c also addressed the assembled worshippers: "O'Neill speaks the truth. I was once First Prime of Apophis. My father was First Prime of Cronos. There are as many System lords and underlords as there are stars in your night sky. The one you call a god is not even one of the System Lords, and since the death of Ra his worlds are in danger of being taken by Heru'Ur, a more powerful Goa'uld with a greater army. Even the System Lords themselves are not safe from attack, and would have been overthrown by Sokar"
had it not been for my companions and myself."

Another ripple of unease went through the listeners. A few of the Jaffa shifted uncomfortably. O'Neill knew that at least some of those lion guards most know the truth, must have fought other Jaffa who followed other so-called gods.

"They are liars and blasphemers!" Mehit pointed at Daniel accusingly. "He is the false god, the one the foolish amongst you call the Chosen One, but he is nothing. He is less than nothing. He will die slowly, and his screams will linger in the echoes for eternity."

As Daniel winced, O'Neill stepped forward and looked around the wide-eyed multitudes. "Well, she's right about one thing, Daniel isn't a god and he never claimed to be one. He's just a human being. Like me and you."

Onuris lowered his hand, surprise on his bearded face. "Then you admit he is a false god?"

"I admit he's a human being with no special powers whatsoever. But then he never claimed to be anything else. Unlike you."

Onuris smiled triumphantly. "The proofs of my divinity are written in letters of stone and in the truths of my great deeds." He waved a hand to indicate the temple, the pillars that remained all embossed with hieroglyphs detailing his divinity.

Teal'c quoted impassively: " 'Then King Darius wrote unto all people, nations, and languages, that dwell in all the earth, Peace be multiplied unto you. I make a decree that in every dominion of my kingdom men tremble and fear before the God of Daniel; for he is the living God, and steadfast for ever, and his kingdom that which shall not be destroyed, and his dominion shall be even unto the end.' "

"What?" O'Neill turned and frowned at him.

"What?" Daniel blinked.

"What words are these?" Onuris demanded.

Teal'c met the Goa'uld's gaze with cool contempt. "So it is written in the Bible of the Tau'ri. And yet it is also true that Daniel Jackson is not a god, even though their words state that he is one. Just because it is written does not make it true. But although he is not a god he is the Chosen One."

Teal'c's voice carried such calm certainty that O'Neill found himself believing it for the first time. Teal'c was right. Daniel was the Chosen One. The whole thing might be a screw up involving tears in the fabric of the space time continuum so brain-meltingly complicated he didn't even want to think about, but Daniel still was the guy in that tablet he wouldn't translate for them, which made him at least as much of a 'god' as an alien parasite in a human host.

Onuris raised his hand again. "When they have watched their Chosen One die they will know I am their only god."

"Ooh – bad move, on so many levels," O'Neill said quickly. "For one thing, the people here know what's going to happen next, whereas I'm presuming you don't – which is kind of odd, really, if you're supposed to be a god, as I always thought you guys had that omniscience thing sewed up, but anyway – for all you know, according to their legends, the Chosen One got struck down by you in the temple with the hand device. So if you zap Daniel all you're going to be doing is proving he is the Chosen One. And for another thing, killing so-called deities only makes a martyr out of them. Two thousand years ago on our world this guy turned up claiming to be the son of God. At the time
he only had a couple of hundred followers and if the Romans had just left him alone to perform the odd miracle and attend the occasional wedding, everyone would probably have forgotten all about him in no time. But no, they had to go ahead and crucify him, and what do you know, twenty centuries later, no one remembers who the Roman Gods were except for people like Daniel, while there's barely a country on the planet that doesn't have some of their population believing in Jesus Christ. And that's without even starting on Elvis and what dying did for his career."

Onuris hesitated and O'Neill just hoped the Goa'uld was getting the gist of what he and Teal'c were telling him. O'Neill added casually, "And incidentally, Ra's Jaffa already killed Daniel, so did Apophis', not to mention Apophis himself. I'm warning you, the guy takes a lot of killing."

Immediately another excited murmur went around the temple, like flame to gunpowder, a hiss of air and expectancy at this confirmation of the Chosen One's divinity.

"I will feed him to my lions," Mehit looked at Daniel with loathing. "Not that he will make them much of a meal. But when even his bones are licked clean, none then can believe him to be a god."

"Actually we have a tradition on our planet that you can't get eaten by lions if your name is Daniel," O'Neill told her airily. He nudged Daniel. "Daniel…?"

Daniel collected himself. "Um – that's sort of…true. It says in our Bible that King Darius was tricked by princes and presidents jealous of his preference for Daniel into issuing a decree which said anyone who asked a petition of any god or man except Darius himself should be cast into a den of lions. Daniel always prayed to God three times a day, which the conspirators knew, so they caught Daniel praying and took him before Darius, demanding that he condemn him. Darius did so, albeit very unwillingly, and Daniel was sealed into a den of lions. But the next morning when Darius went to the den and cried out to Daniel, Daniel answered him and assured him he was unhurt. An angel had shut the lions' mouths so they couldn't injure him because Daniel was innocent and had done no wrong."

"Then was the king exceeding glad for him, and commanded that they should take Daniel up out of the den. So Daniel was taken up out of the den and no manner of hurt was found upon him."

Although Teal'c spoke impassively O'Neill thought he detected a certain satisfaction in the Jaffa's tone.

"Making feeding people called Daniel to lions traditionally something of a non-starter on our world," O'Neill added helpfully. Daniel had told him once the Ancient Egyptians set a lot of store by names. If the Goa'uld could be convinced the name 'Daniel' had a protection against lions automatically written into it, he was all for fostering that belief. Especially when there were two hungry-looking lionesses twenty feet away from his team.

As Mehit snarled in frustration he thought she looked more than ready to rip Daniel's throat out with her teeth herself. She turned to her mate and said furiously, "Why do they yet live? Why do you permit them to stand in the temple they have desecrated and still draw breath?"

Because, snakebitch, your old man knows that killing us could make the Chosen One cult even more powerful than it is now and as he's already lost a whole bunch of planets to Heru-Ur he doesn't want to lose this one too. O'Neill watched the Goa'uld narrowly. Onuris was a warrior on a losing streak who couldn't afford to come second in any more skirmishes even with people as unimportant as them. He knew what the guy needed: a plan to discredit all of them, but Daniel in particular; a way to show how powerless and unimportant they were that they wouldn't accidentally fulfill any prophecies that might be lying around. A way to prove his way was the only way without making them into martyrs.

"It's always been a difficult question, hasn't it?" Daniel said quietly. "When is a god not a god? Do a
million people believing you to be a god make you one? Your race certainly seems to think so. But in that case, how much of a god are you if the people stop believing? Are you still a god when the million followers dwindles to a few hundred thousand? What if it dwindles to a few hundred? Or to one? Or to no one? You had to leave our world, not because we buried the gate, but because we stopped believing in you. These days you don't even occupy the place of demons in our subconscious."

"That's true actually," O'Neill shrugged. "When it comes to nightmares, you guys have all been overtaken by Freddy Kreuger and Hannibal Lector."

Daniel looked at him sideways. "Who?"

"I'll explain it to you later." *Always supposing there is a later for either of us.*

Onuris looked around at the temple. There was an expectant silence and O'Neill hoped the Goa'uld was hearing what he was hearing: the listening hush of people who had already overheard and understood too much.

O'Neill risked another look at Carter, willing her to stir. Astonishingly, it worked. Her eyelids flickered and then opened. She blinked dazedly and then focused on him. "Colonel?"

"Sam!" Daniel sprang across to her before wincing and giving him an apologetic glance. O'Neill wondered how many times he'd told Daniel not to show visible concern for one of them in front of the enemy. It had to be in double figures by now anyway. He'd given him a top-up lecture before Netu and thought Daniel had finally grasped the principal of not making any move to help a wounded or imperiled comrade when the bad guys could see you. But it now seemed to have been forgotten again and unless Onuris was very slow on the uptake he would now know that a good way to make Daniel do what he wanted was to hurt Carter. Wonderful.

Counting to ten to stop himself biting Daniel's head off, O'Neill stuck his hands in his pockets and said as casually as he could manage it, "How are you feeling, Carter?"

"Weird." She blinked again and looked up at Teal'c then turned her head to see her position. "How long was I out?"

"Hours," O'Neill told her.

Teal'c gently set her on her feet but kept an arm around her shoulders. Which turned out to be a wise precaution. She swayed and Daniel would have taken her arm if O'Neill hadn't sent him his best flesh-stripping glare. Daniel shifted awkwardly and darted a glance over at the Goa'uld. O'Neill guessed by the stricken look on Daniel's face Onuris had been watching the whole show.

Carter put a hand up to her throat, murmuring huskily, "What happened?"

"Harun drugged you and me then sold us out to Onuris' Jaffa. We're now trying to persuade the resident snakehead that turning us into martyrs would *not* be a good idea. Oh yes, and try to bear in mind that on Earth 'Daniel' means 'someone who can't be eaten by lions' because this Goa'uld's better half seems to think Dannyboy would make good cat food."

"Actually it's 'Judged by God'."

"What?" O'Neill rocked on his heels, pushing his fists deeper into his pockets as he noted how ill she looked. Her eyes were red-rimmed and there were shadows beneath them. Her breathing sounded terrible.
"That's what 'Daniel' means, sir."

O'Neill darted a glance over at Onuris. "Well, under the circumstances, I think we'll keep that to ourselves."

Carter put a hand up to her head. She still looked very pale and it was obviously costing her a great effort to stay upright even with Teal'c's steadying hand. She glanced up at the Jaffa. "You carried me all the way from those caves?"

"It was no burden," Teal'c told her.

"That's not what my bathroom scales tell me. I owe you one, Teal'c."

He inclined his head gently, keeping the arm around her shoulders to hold her upright. She frowned. "Is it me, or is it very...blurry in here?"

O'Neill and Daniel exchanged an anxious glance before Daniel said quickly, "It's the smoke and the dust, Sam. It all looks blurry to me, too."

Carter blinked and then swallowed. O'Neill could almost feel the grit in her eyes, the fish hook in her throat. Perhaps it was just flu. Flu could make you feel lousy as hell. He'd had a version of Asian flu in '85 that had sent his temperature up to a 103 and had him coughing up blood for two days but he'd still completed his mission and lived to tell the tale.

"The woman is awake, I see."

O'Neill hated the grating sound of Mehit's voice.

Carter faced her defiantly although O'Neill wasn't sure how much she could see. "I'm Major Samantha Carter of the SGC, and you would be...?"

The Goa'uld threw back her hair. It was so black it had blue lights in it and O'Neill hadn't seen so much eye make-up since he'd spent four hours waiting for a defector in a drag club in West Berlin. "I am the goddess Mehit."

Carter turned to Daniel with an enquiring expression on her face. "I don't know the name."

"She's pretty obscure. Anhur – Onuris was supposed to have brought her back from Nubia but the myth is very close to the Heliopolitan one describing Shu's pursuit of Tefnut, so I'd say they probably assumed both identities at various times. And their cult shifted around quite a lot, it started in the Thinite region of Middle Egypt but by the Late Period Onuris was being associated with the Delta site of Sebennytos, and by the Ptolemaic period he was indistinguishable from the Greek god of war, Ares."

"What – Xena's squeeze? That girl could do so much better." O'Neill sighed as he got another of those totally blank looks from Daniel. This boy had serious holes in his general knowledge which he really was going to have to help him fill in some day. He tried again, this time looking across at the two Goa'uld. "So, definitely minor league deities then?"

He hoped they'd overheard what Daniel had just said. Good. Seeing the glance they exchanged they'd definitely overheard what Daniel had just said. And unlike O'Neill, it would have made sense to them. It occurred to him for the first time that as the Goa'uld believed themselves to be gods, Daniel knowing so much about them might make them think he was a god himself, or at least someone of power. Either way they probably didn't want him talking about them as though Goa'uld like them were a dime a dozen. Watching the two Goa'uld approaching them, O'Neill said,
"Daniel…?"

"What?"

"I'd really appreciate a lecture on the Ancient Egyptian Gods." Daniel blinked at him and O'Neill was aware of Carter also staring at him in surprise. She was swaying a little with fever and Daniel was wavering with exhaustion but at least he'd got both their attention. He didn't need to look to guess Teal'c had a raised eyebrow as well. Speaking in a rapid undertone, O'Neill added, "And, Daniel, I'd like it now and I'd like at least some of it about these two."

Daniel was obviously too exhausted to work out why at the moment but he was also clearly too weary to start arguing or asking lots of questions. He slipped into lecture mode like a man putting on a favorite pair of slippers. "There's really very little known about Mehit. She was never a very popular goddess, like you said, not like Isis or Hathor, although the chapel of the spread wings in the Temple of Horus at Edfi is dedicated principally to Mehit I can't think of many others shrines that have survived…. Both Mehit and Onuris are associated with Ra, of course, and were always considered loyal to him, and were also both associated with lions. But Aker was really the major Ancient Egyptian lion-god, while the Delta site of Leontopolis – that's Tell El-Muqdam to you, Jack – was sacred to Mihos or Mysis, not Anhur. And of course Shu was also venerated in the form of a lion but most leonine deities were female…."  

O'Neill didn't bother listening to Daniel, he just let the familiar litany of information flow over him as soothingly as milk over cookies while enjoying the Goa'uld's reaction to it. They had never been back to earth, he presumed, and were baffled as to how this young man could know so much about them. And they must be able to hear those whispers as Daniel's words were translated for the benefit of their worshippers. You had to have mystery to be a god. Being told you were washed up and all but forgotten on a world that used to venerate you probably never made happy listening.

"…the most important of the lion goddesses was Sekhmet, but even her cult was eventually merged with those of Bastet and Mut. Because in one myth Sekhmet was sent by Ra to destroy mankind and very nearly succeeded, there were a lot of temples built to propitiate her and stop her wreaking vengeance on the human race a second time…."  

O'Neill realized he had pressed the right button. Daniel could literally do this in his sleep, which was just as well, because very little of Daniel still appeared to be conscious, but his brain was ticking over on automatic lecture pilot and his lips were moving, that was all that mattered. The Goa'uld were getting seriously twitchy now. They were looking more and more uncomfortable and their whispered consultation was becoming louder and more ragged.

"...But, of course, after the rise to power of the Theban rulers of the New Kingdom, the Theban triad – that's Amun, Mut, and Khons, became more important and so began to effectively 'absorb' the attributes of other deities. This merging of the gods and goddesses makes it difficult to know where one begins and one ends so it could be that Mehit is also Tefnut, making her the mother of Geb and Nut, but Tefnut was also associated with Wadjyt – as was Sekhmet – in her leonine form, although Wadjyt was originally depicted as a cobra-goddess, and it was in this form that she and the vulture goddess Nekhbet were described as the nebty who symbolized the essential duality of the Egyptian world…."  

"Enough!" Onuris snapped.

And even though he'd asked for this particular lecture that was about as much as O'Neill could take as well. He put a hand on Daniel's shoulder to stem the outpouring of information as Onuris and Mehit both strode across to confront their prisoners, the Goa'uld waving aside the lion-guards who made to accompany them with an impatient flick of the hand. O'Neill made his face a careful blank
as he and the Goa'uld stared into each other's eyes, warriors sizing up the opposition; a real Sergio Leone moment but he wasn't feeling much like Clint Eastwood today. In close-up Onuris looked around forty and one step away from a Las Vegas stage magician with his long pointed beard and that frankly ridiculous head-dress. But there was a lot of intelligence in those kohl-painted eyes and O'Neill had learned a long time ago never to underestimate an enemy.

He gave Onuris his best false smile and said, "What, you didn't find that interesting? Now, see I always find that kind of thing fascinating, and luckily Daniel can talk about dead gods for hours. There's nothing this boy doesn't know about Ancient Egyptian myths. All those gods in all their different forms no one believes in any more. Daniel can tell anyone who wants to know everything about them."

Onuris looked into O'Neill's eyes and said softly, "The one you call 'Daniel' will be silent or I will cut out his tongue."

"That won't stop people remembering what he said. The truth's out now and everyone in this temple knows Goa'uld like you and Catwoman here were all over our world like a rash a few thousand years back. All of you chasing hosts like they were going out of style. That's why you had to start taking humans through the gate, wasn't it? You needed your own supplies of hosts to give yourselves incubators for your kids and to grow your own Jaffa. And now even the universe isn't big enough for you people because you're still the same greedy, squabbling megalomaniacs you always were, and Heru-Ur is squeezing you out."

O'Neill shrugged as casually as he could. He couldn't believe they were still letting him talk but they seemed stunned. Perhaps they just weren't used to dealing with humans with this kind of attitude. "Now, this world sucks so much I'm surprised you even want it, but I figure you're like Apophis – backs against the wall and needing to hang onto every planet you've got. You kill everyone on this world who believes in the Chosen One, there won't be enough people left to scrape up an army if you need one. And, of course, if you kill the Chosen One, people are going to believe in him harder than ever."

"In time they will forget him," Mehit said furiously, eyes flashing gold again. Her gaze darted towards Daniel with contemptuous loathing. "When his bones are dust."

"You don't know that," Carter said huskily. "On our world there are a million churches in the names of saints who died ten centuries ago."

"You left their world several thousand years ago," Teal'c put in. "Yet your names are still remembered by a few of the scholars who reside there. I have seen the names of dead Goa'uld in the books of Daniel Jackson that even your race has forgotten. The people of the Tau'ri have long memories."

Although glad of the support, O'Neill didn't look away from Onuris, holding the Goa'uld's gaze. "Time is something you don't have. You need these people to stop believing in him now. Do you want to know the best way to do that?"

"Tell me," Onuris' voice dripped with sarcasm but he was still listening and Daniel was still breathing.

"Send him home. Send us all home. There's nothing like an anti-climax for disappointing people hoping for a miracle. The Chosen One turns up, gets caught, gets kicked back through the 'gate. Who the hell is going to get excited about that?"

For a moment he saw the Goa'uld hesitate and wondered if he'd managed to bluff him but then
Onuris smiled coldly. "For a human you are less stupid than one might expect."

"I'll try to take that as a compliment."

"Let no one say the god Onuris is not merciful. I will give your companion the chance to save himself from the consequences of his blasphemy."

O'Neill's jaw tightened. He had a feeling he wasn't going to like the options the Goa'uld offered Daniel. "Generous of you."

Onuris stretched out a hand and stroked a finger down the side of Daniel's face. "My priests tortured you, yes?"

Daniel met his gaze. "I don't remember."

"They used Shokmar upon you? The pain was like nothing you had ever known before. You screamed for help that did not come as the agony stole your mind."

Stolidly Daniel repeated, "I don't remember."

"They remember. They have told me everything." Onuris glanced at O'Neill. "You saved him through some technology you carry with you?"

O'Neill shrugged. "That would be telling."

Onuris gestured to the Jaffa who flanked them. "Remove their belongings." The lion guards collected up their packs and weapons and carried them over to the base of the broken statue, leaving only Daniel's vest. Onuris turned back to O'Neill with a thin smile. "This time you will not be able to save him."

He'd known this moment would come but that didn't stop the sick feeling inside him. They were going to torture Daniel in front of him. Payback for all the people he'd killed throughout the years, all the blood he'd shed, the lives he'd stolen. Somehow he'd thought Hell was as bad it got; that having survived his son dying and Netu, he could survive anything. And on the surface he'd survive this, if Onuris wanted him to. He'd stand here – no, he'd probably struggle like a madman – but essentially he'd watch while Daniel died by inches; and then he'd go back and make his report to General Hammond. Then he'd retire. Then he'd die inside. That was the extent to which he would survive.

Carter was arguing with Mehit, throwing reason at the Goa'uld despite the rawness of her throat. She sounded terrible. Every word must be like swallowing ground glass, and it wasn't making any difference. He'd seen the look of triumph in Onuris' eyes: the expression of someone who'd just hit upon a winning strategy.

"Can't you see that you're just reinforcing the prophecy by…?"

Carter had told him once the universe was full of dark matter. At the time it had made him think of the Goa'uld. Now it felt like it had all just collected inside him.

Onuris wheeled around to address the tiers of silent worshippers. "Witness the mercy of your God! Witness the power of your God! You have seen us take life from the unworthy. Now you shall see us restore it to the faithful." He nodded to Mehit and she clapped her hands.

Two Jaffa came forward carrying someone on a makeshift litter. O'Neill recognized the High Priest, still dying by degrees but not yet dead. He'd seen soldiers this badly injured in the field; the ones maimed by hand grenade, mortar or bomb blasts, so mangled inside, so far beyond repair, you
wished they'd just die.

"Oh God…." Daniel murmured, turning his head away. "He's still alive."

Mehit walked around the litter and O'Neill swore he could hear her purring as loudly as her lionesses. "You have served us well, Rahotep. Your loyalty shall not go unrewarded." She lifted her right hand and O'Neill saw the Goa'uld healing device glowing in her palm. She turned to address the worshippers in their silent tiers. "See how your goddess gives back life." She repeated the words in Goa'uld and then turned back to the High Priest. The light from the healing device reflected a glowing circle on his white hairless forehead and then played down his body, which tensed then arced in response. He cried out and Daniel flinched, then Rahotep's skin glowed gold as the healing device did its work. When Mehit stepped back she was smiling triumphantly and the High Priest was staring at his unbroken skin in disbelief. He sat up and pulled open his tunic so everyone could see how his wounds were healed.

The gasp from the worshippers made O'Neill grit his teeth. He had to admit that as parlor tricks went, bringing the mortally wounded back from the dead was an impressive one.

Onuris stepped forward, something in his hands that looked a little like a zatgun. The way Daniel flinched when he saw it told O'Neill what it was. The sick feeling was very bad now. Like someone had wrapped his intestines around a big stone before dropping them off a cliff. The Goa'uld was going to give it to the High Priest and the guy was going to take his revenge on Daniel. And he was going to have to stand here and watch it. He was aware of Teal'c tensing to spring, muscles bunching in readiness, the lion guards closing in to restrain him.

Onuris held out the Shokmar device to Daniel. "Take it."

Daniel blinked in surprise. "What?"

The Goa'uld smiled cruelly. "I am offering you this last escape. Only the priests of this temple may wield this device. If you use it upon them, they cannot use it upon you. Your choice." He turned and snapped his fingers and lion guards dragged forward the other two priests. Both of them were trembling with fear. O'Neill remembered Daniel pledging them his protection and closed his eyes.

"No." Daniel took a step back into the lion guards who were hovering in readiness. They pushed him forward again and he stumbled but glared defiantly at the Goa'uld. His voice was quiet but very sure: "I won't do it."

"Either you turn the wrath of Shokmar upon the priests of this temple or else they shall turn it upon you."

"Then they'll have to turn it upon me. I'm not doing that to anyone."

"So you do remember?"

His jaw tensed but he just shook his head.

Onuris was remorseless. "You begged them for mercy but they showed you none. For hours they tortured you and remained indifferent to your screams. Do you not want revenge for what they did to you?"

"No."

O'Neill could see where this was going and it was nowhere he liked the look of. He said abruptly, "I'll do it."
Onuris turned to look at him in surprise. "You?"

O'Neill shrugged. "Daniel's squeamish. I'm not. He has an over-active conscience. I don't. The sons of bitches tortured my teammate for hours and hours. I'm quite happy to give them a taste of their own medicine." He met Onuris' thoughtful gaze, "You want proof we're not angels? I'll give it to you. I'm a soldier, just like you. We do whatever's necessary to survive."

"Jack?"

"Shut up, Daniel." He didn't look at him, gaze never leaving Onuris' face. O'Neill held out a hand. "I'll do it."

There was only a momentary hesitation and then Onuris smiled and handed over the device. He said amusingly, "It will not work on me."

"I guessed that." O'Neill turned to face the High Priest. He said softly, "For how many hours did you torture Daniel?" As the man looked blank, he turned his head. "Daniel. Translate."

"Jack, I really don't think….

"Daniel, do as I damn well tell you!"

Daniel flinched, glared at him for making him flinch, then reluctantly murmured something to the High Priest in Goa'uld. Rahotep faced him contemptuously before turning to look at O'Neill. His answer, incomprehensible though it was to O'Neill, dripped with disdain.

"What did he say?" O'Neill turned on Daniel as he didn't answer him. "Daniel? What did he say?"

Daniel moistened his lip before murmuring unhappily, "He said: Not enough."

"Right. I would definitely say that constituted 'asking for it.'" As O'Neill raised the zatgun he was very aware of the disappointment in Carter's blue eyes, the sorrow in Daniel's, the unreadable expression on Teal'c's face. He could feel Daniel willing him not to do this; more than that, unable to believe that he would do it. There were days when he really wanted to open Daniel's eyes.

But this wasn't one of them.

As O'Neill leveled the shokmar device on the High Priest, the lion guards automatically took a step back. Giving him the second's grace he needed to pull back his arm and hurl the damned thing at the temple wall with all his strength.

He'd been afraid it might not break, but the device shattered like fine crystal, fragments splintering and some inner filament snapping in two in a way he fervently hoped was irreparable. As the pieces landed on the floor of the temple with a sound like hail there was another audible gasp from the watchers.

The backhand from Onuris stung but as he straightened back up with a hand to his face, O'Neill felt it was definitely worth it for the relief and approval in those two pairs of blue eyes.

"Good thinking, Colonel," Carter said hoarsely.

Snarling, Onuris raised his hand, ribbon device glowing and turned it upon the High Priest. As the man cried out and began to sink to his knees. Onuris said shortly. "We can bring life and we can bring death. Those who follow the false god can bring only death."
"These are people," Daniel protested. "You can't just kill them and then bring them back to life to demonstrate your powers. You don't have the right."

"I have every right." Onuris snarled it at him over his shoulder as Rahotep fell to the ground, blood trickling from his ears and barely breathing. "They are my subjects. They belong to me. Not to you."

"They don't belong to anyone," Daniel retorted. "You have no right to enslave them."

Onuris stepped back and the priest slumped at his feet. He lowered his hand. "You brought him death and we brought him life. Now we have brought him to the point of death. Can you or your – avatars bring him life?"

Daniel looked at him with loathing. "No. No, we can't, as you –"

"Yes, we can." Carter stepped forward and held out her hand. "Give me the healing device."

O'Neill knew what using the healing device had cost her last time. He'd found her passed out in the corridor after she'd used the thing to save Cronos from his injuries, and he'd banned her from using it again. If the sarcophagus sucked out part of your soul as it restored you, the healing device stole a piece of your vitality when you used it to help others. "Carter, I'm not sure that's a very –"

She faced him and he winced as he saw the fever flush to her cheeks, the shadows under her eyes. He didn't even want to guess what her temperature was right now. She said hoarsely, "Colonel, I don't think we have a choice. We're already enough of a threat to warrant killing. We have to be so much of a threat they're afraid to make us into martyrs. You know that yourself." She didn't need to add This is your strategy we're going with here, but nevertheless it was true. And if Carter could bring the High Priest back to life as effectively as Mehit had done, a lot of the Goa'uld's claim to being special was left hanging like a corpse on a gallows. If the Goa'uld could only restore life because they were gods then Carter could only restore life because she was an avatar of the Chosen One, and killing Daniel just got that much more problematic.

O'Neill bit his lip. "I know that, Carter, but if you try this and can't do it, we could lose all the ground we just made."

Mehit contemptuously slapped the healing device into Carter's hand, hissing malevolently, "You are not a goddess. You are slave stock. You are nothing."

Carter returned her gaze levelly. "Actually I'm a doctor of astrophysics and a Major in the United States Air Force. And I didn't need to steal a body from anyone else to achieve it."

She slipped the hand device onto her right hand and then walked over to where the High Priest lay on his litter, blood trickling from his mouth, shock in his eyes. Carter wondered what that did to your body being pulled from death into life and then thrown back to the brink again. She could remember looking at the readings of Daniel's body chemistry after he'd been addicted to the sarcophagus, Janet showing her the usual endorphin levels and then the deranged spike on the graph that was Daniel's current reading. Every cell out of synch and fighting its neighbors. But he'd got better. The human body was a miraculous thing and its magnetic north was always good health; that was the point it strived to get back to. All the Goa'uld technology did was help it to achieve goals it was already reaching for. She could do this. Every joint in her body was aching like a new kind of biology lesson. She now knew for certain the knee bone connected to the thighbone because she could feel the pain from her knee joint sliding along her thigh to throw a grappling iron of agony into her hip. Every drop of fluid in her spine seemed to be on fire. Movement was so painful it made her want to whimper. She could feel infection crashing through her system like a tsunami overwhelming a coastal village while her temperature climbed like the noonday sun in Nevada. Her eyesight was
blurring and her brain felt as though someone had encased it in bubblewrap.

All of which was good, she reminded herself firmly, as she stood over the High Priest and looked down at him. There was something faintly repulsive about the extreme whiteness of his skin. Something even more repulsive about his continuing willingness to torture Daniel for no reason. But he had just become the possible means of their salvation, and the fact she was so ill she could barely stand meant Jolinar's memories were far easier to access than usual. It had taken near death from starvation and exhaustion in those naqadah mines to unearth the dead Tok'ra's memories within her in the first place; they had never been as clear afterwards; just scattered fragments in dreams; until Martouf and the memory device had opened the floodgates to all the good and bad things which Jolinar had ever known or experienced.

Half-dead was a good way to be when you needed to access the sleeping memories of the Tok'ra who had died to save you. Half-dead was exactly what they all needed her to be right now. Really, Carter told herself firmly as she swayed and the High Priest blurred in and out of focus, she needed to look on this illness as a case of serendipity. She closed her eyes and let herself slip into the dream state where their identities blurred; two different-colored liquids poured into a tumbler of clear water, twining around each other like sea snakes, the real and the unreal, the human and the Tok'ra, the dead and the living. In Netu there were times when she could no longer remember who was Samantha Carter and who was Jolinar. She'd been afraid of slipping into that blended state forever. Now it hardly seemed to matter.

The light flared and she felt something torn from within her. It hadn't hurt the last time, but when she'd saved Cronos she'd been fit and well. This time she was all too aware of how much energy the hand device sucked from the healer. Energy she didn't have to give.

It was like the opposite of an orgasm, something licking up from her feet through the nerve-endings like an absence of sensation; an emptiness. She was pouring herself into the light of the hand device and it was feeding her life force to the man who had tortured Daniel to the brink of madness. She could feel herself hollowing out inside as he became stronger. It was a shock when she forced her gritty eyes open to find that she wasn't really transparent, that she couldn't yet see the bones through her skin.

She found the High Priest staring at her aghast. She couldn't recognized his expression at first. There was horror, certainly, but more than horror, there was something unexpected. She swayed and suddenly there were arms holding her up.

"Easy, Major…." The Colonel's voice was as familiar as it was comforting.

She swallowed painfully, her tonsils feeling like pool balls. "Did it work?"

"Oh, the gracious goddess Mehit is not a happy camper."

Daniel watched Jack squeeze Sam's shoulder approvingly and tried and failed not to smile. He guessed sometimes actions did speak louder than words. All his Egyptian lore, Teal'c's quotations from the Bible, and Jack's button-pushing, had won them some time certainly, but Sam raising a man from the dead with technology only a goddess was supposed to be able to use had undermined Onuris and his mate more effectively than a thousand skilful arguments.

He'd thought they might possibly see compassion in the High Priest's eyes. He found it hard to believe anyone was completely devoid of compassion. But he'd never dared even hope for doubt. Rahotep was looking between Mehit and Carter. The beautiful goddess with the lion headdress and gorgeous silken robes, and the shabby Air Force Major, swaying with fever, lips cracking, skin white with exhaustion beneath a faint dusting of dirt. Both had restored him to life. Mehit's gamble had just
paid off spectacularly for the opposition.

"Way to go Sam," he said softly.

"I'm not so sure," she nodded her head in the direction of the furious Mehit and the Goa'uld's bearded mate. There was a worrying stillness about Onuris. He reminded Daniel of a cobra in the second as it waits to strike. "They might just think we've all lived too long."

"That is possible," Teal'c admitted gravely. "They may decide the knowledge we have of the Goa'uld coupled with Major Carter's ability to use Goa'uld technology makes us too dangerous not to kill."

Onuris strode towards them and Daniel read both rage and fear in the Goa'uld's dark eyes. His gaze was fixed on Daniel and his intentions did not appear to be friendly. The lion guards seized Teal'c before he could spring to his teammate's defense. Jack stepped in front of Daniel with his hands up in a placatory manner. "Look, let's just talk about...."

But Daniel could hear what the watchers were saying. Their shock and disbelief turning to dawning doubt. And hope. They had just watched Sam save the life of the man who had tried to kill him. He could imagine how that translated into the language of prophecy. That was why she was called Compassion. She was the angel who had raised the torturer of the Chosen One from the dead. This had already been written. The people Onuris needed to worship him as a god had just seen a prophecy come true right in front of him. Fate was closing around all of them like a net.

When Onuris grabbed Jack by the shoulder of his jacket and yanked him out of the way as though he weighed less than a child, Daniel wasn't even surprised. When the Goa'uld seized him by the hair and dragged him into the center of the temple he didn't bother struggling. They'd put up a good show for the faithful anyway. Sowed a whole field of seeds of doubt. Daniel was going to die bitterly regretting the way his curiosity had condemned his friends to death, but there was at least that faint silver lining of knowing the days of Onuris' reign were probably numbered.

Onuris tightened his grip; yanking Daniel's head back cruelly.

"Ow!" Daniel said pointedly.

Still holding him, Onuris turned a slow circle, dragging Daniel after him. He raised his voice so the worshippers could hear him. "This – boy is not a god."

"I never said I was," Daniel murmured.

"His followers are not avatars."

"They never said they were either. Peaceful explorers were all we ever claimed to be."

"The one you call the Chosen One has no power of any kind and I will prove it to you. If he cannot save his own companions, how then can he save you?"

"No," Daniel said tautly. "Whatever you're planning. Don't. It's already written. Everything you do or I do or either of us tries to do. It's chiseled in stone and we can't change it. Anything you do will end up fulfilling a prophecy that proves you're not a – No...!"

He read Onuris' sudden resolution in those glowing eyes and abruptly he was in hell again. His throat was burning, his skin was burning, he could hear the groans of the dying and the shrieks of the damned, Sam's father was fading minute by minute while she had to stand there and watch it. They were coming for her and he couldn't stop them. Even Jack couldn't stop them.
"Jack – !" He yelled the warning as Onuris backhanded him to the floor. Everything slowed down. There was so much time and no time. He knew exactly what the Goa'uld was going to do and he still couldn't stop it. He'd seen this before. Already lived this moment. Onuris had snatched a staff weapon from a lion guard and the weapon's maw was opening, there was the fizz of it charging, light flaring, the roar as it fired. Sam calling out something, her voice so hoarse he couldn't make sense of the words. Teal'c shouting "O'Neil!"

Jack cried out as he crumpled, clutching his thigh; then hit the ground, face twisted in agony while his leg smoldered. He swore horribly, putting a hand up to his face as he rolled over, trying to escape the pain and not succeeding. With Daniel also lying on the ground they were at eye-level. Daniel could smell the older man's skin burning as the wound cauterized, read for himself in Jack's eyes how very much it hurt. He tried to say "I'm sorry…." but the words couldn't find a way out past the lump in his throat.

Onuris smiled and threw the staff weapon back to the lion guard, then bent and seized Daniel by the collar of his jacket, yanking him to his feet again. "I will prove you are not a god," the Goa'uld said softly. "I will set you a task a god could accomplish and you will fail. The people of this world shall witness your failure. They will see that I am the only god."

"Don't do this," Daniel said quietly. "My friends have done you no harm. Kill me if you have to, but let them go."

Onuris dragged him into the very center of the temple. He looked up and Daniel followed his gaze. As he saw the transportation rings his sense of déjà vu became stronger. Onuris raised his voice. "The woman who pretends to be a goddess is dying. The fever she was given will kill her."

There was a murmur of dismay from the watchers, a sense of them pressing forward, being halted by lion guards. Onuris seemed to sense it too. Daniel felt the Goa'uld's fingers tighten on his collar in annoyance. Onuris continued, "I will set this Chosen One a task and if he fulfils it, I will save the woman."

"What task?" said Daniel wearily.

Onuris snapped his fingers and lion guards bent and seized Jack by the arms. Daniel winced as the man's cry of pain hissed across the temple, but then his eyes widened as they dragged Jack towards him.

The Goa'uld was looking around at the listening worshippers, and in the sudden quiet before he made his next pronouncement, Daniel could hear the harsh sound of Jack's breathing as the lion guards manhandled him across the flagstones, the pain clearly catching in his throat every time his foot made contact with the floor. He looked across at Sam and saw Teal'c was having to support her with an arm around her shoulders. She looked so drained it already seemed like a miracle she was still conscious. But it sounded as though Onuris wanted more circus tricks. Daniel felt hands close on his shoulders and then he was being shown to the populace, turned in a slow circle so everyone could look upon him one last time.

"If this false god, burdened by his false avatar – who you witness can be wounded like any mortal man – manages to return to the temple he has desecrated within two nights from this one, I will spare his life and save the one you call Compassion. If he does not return, then the woman will be left to die of her fever and the shol'va will be put to death."

Daniel mustered the last of his energy. "I told you I'm not a god. We both know I can't possibly…." "Be silent!" Onuris hissed, eyes glowing gold as he wrenched Jack from the lion guards and shoved
him roughly at Daniel.

"You son-of-a –"

Daniel staggered under Jack's weight but caught him. He steadied him as well as he could, tightening his grip on his shoulder to suggest that maybe insulting the Goa'uld wasn't the best idea the man could have right now.

Jack had his teeth gritted and was looking at Onuris with both loathing and promise. "You are so dead, you know that?"

Onuris gave him a contemptuous glance before turning to address the worshippers again. "Witness the reason and justice of your deity. I am giving this false god every chance to prove his divinity and that of his avatars. If he returns by nightfall of the second day then all will be well with him and his followers. If he does not return, these two who have been left behind will pay the price for his treachery, and any of you who follow him shall join them on the funeral pyre. But fear not, when his falseness is proven, you will be given the chance to reaffirm your loyalty and love to your true god. The one god. The only god. Onuris!" His eyes glowed triumphantly but as he turned back to Daniel he hissed too softly for the worshippers to overhear, "If you dare return here, I will give you to my Jaffa."

Daniel was still wincing from the look in the Goa'uld's eyes when Mehit's taloned fingers closed on his arm and dug deep into the skin. With an effort he dragged his gaze away from Onuris' hypnotic stare to meet the loathing in her kohl-painted eyes. Her voice was soft with hatred as the torchlight picked out the links of the golden chain attached to her lionesses' collars: "And when they are done with you, I will feed your still-living remains to my pets."

"Oh, that's nice," Jack said breathlessly. "That's real classy. Tell me, what actually happens if you guys accidentally tell the truth? Does your throat close over or something?"

They were both thrown into the circle beneath the transport rings, Daniel just grabbing Jack in time to stop him falling. He held onto him tighter as the first ring fell, as light glowed. Through the descending metal circles he had his last look at Teal'c's set face, at Sam's exhausted one. The friends he couldn't possibly save, who were going to die because of him. As light engulfed them, he closed his eyes and held onto Jack as though he was all he had left in the world.

***

Teal'c's greatest fear was that they would separate him from Major Carter. Although she was fighting to stay on her feet, he knew how ill she truly was, could feel the fever emanating from her like heat rising from desert sand as her temperature climbed higher and higher. Using the healing device had greatly weakened her resistance to infection and he could almost picture the illness taking gleeful hold of her system. As the rings ascended, taking O'Neill and Daniel Jackson with them, she swayed and would have fallen if he had not caught her.

"I'm okay, Teal'c, just a little…dizzy."

She had a hand pressed to her head and was barely clinging onto consciousness. Teal'c saw the distress he felt mirrored in the eyes of Harun who was still hovering close to them. Bending his head as though to talk to Major Carter he whispered urgently to the man, "The medicine she needs is with our equipment." He had no way of telling if Harun understood what he said or would feel inclined to act on it.

The High Priest was also gazing at them. The hatred had gone from his face. So had the certainty.
Teal'c recognized the look in the man's eyes because he knew what it was to have doubt forced upon you when life would be so much easier if you could just continue to believe. Had the man not tortured Daniel Jackson, Teal'c might even have pitied him.

"Take them away." Onuris clapped his hands, and lion guards made to seize him. Teal'c shook them off contemptuously, fixing those nearest with a gaze promising what he would do to those who manhandled his companion. That expression had served him well when he was First Prime of Apophis and it made them take a step back now. He put an arm around Major Carter's shoulders and she leant against him, clearly very glad of his support. Her lips cracked as she murmured, "Is it me or is getting very hot in here, Teal'c?"

Giving the nearest Jaffa another look warning them to keep their distance, Teal'c tightened his grip on her, saying gently, "It is indeed growing somewhat warmer, Major Carter."

She managed a faint smile. "You need to practice that lying a bit more, Teal'c. I don't think you've quite got the hang of it yet."

"I will endeavor to do so," he assured her.

The over-muscled seven foot First Prime of Onuris jabbed his staff weapon at Teal'c, the Jaffa giving him a quelling glance before easing his teammate in the direction their guard had indicated. She went where he directed, clearly very much in need of his arm around her shoulders, and he steered her gently across the temple. As he drew level with Onuris, Teal'c met the other's kohl-painted gaze and said, "Heru'Ur will take this world from you and none of the System Lords will aid you against him. You might be wise to ally yourself with the Tok'ra and the Tauri –"

"I said take them away. Now!" The Goa'uld's eyes glowed gold with fury and Teal'c gave him a look of contempt.

Surrounded by lion guards but not actually bound or touched by any of them, they were marched through the concealed doorway from which a shokmared Daniel Jackson had been escorted all those hours before. The corridors were featureless rectangles lit by smoking torches, every stone block fitted perfectly against its fellows, all fashioned from the same strange black stone which had blocked their radio transmissions as easily as it had muffled Daniel Jackson's screams.

As they passed one chamber lit by the fire from a grate, Teal'c saw a form of altar with metal cuffs at each corner. Anger flared as he realized this was the room in which Daniel Jackson had been tortured. He was trying not to think of the young scholar or O'Neill, hoping the transport rings had taken them somewhere safer than here. For now his duty was clear – to endeavor to protect Major Carter in any way he could.

As they were shoved roughly into a small chamber, the door slamming closed behind them with echoing finality, he tightened his grip to stop her falling, then helped her over to the corner. Apart from some straw and a pitcher of water, the cell was empty and cold, the only illumination from distant stars, their chill light a faint glimmer through a small barred window set too high for even him to reach. He helped Major Carter to lie down on the straw as he had earlier helped Daniel Jackson lie down in the cave, wishing vainly for the emergency blanket they had been forced to leave behind in their flight from the caverns. He took off his jacket and laid it over her, the cold stinging his bare arms at once. Her eyes were closing even as she touched the ground but as she dozed off she murmured drowsily, "Don't take this the wrong way, Teal'c, but I'm glad you're here."

As she drifted into a feverish sleep, he rested a hand gently on her head, saying quietly, "So am I."

***
Despite the fire in his leg, O'Neill tried to focus on their surroundings. The rings had descended, dumped him and Daniel, and then vanished, taking light with them. In the eye blink of illumination the transport rings had cast upon the walls he'd seen only a greenish darkness. Now there was nothing to see except blackness. Straining his ears, he realized there was also nothing to hear except their own breathing – slightly accelerated, he noticed, in Daniel's case, ragged with the pain it was trying to filter out in his own. But he knew where they were. There was no magic trick involved. He knew where they were because they'd just been in the same damned surroundings and he could recognize the signs. They were in a cave. A cold, damp one. He wondered if it had any exits or if the ever-merciful Onuris had just banished them to a locked box.

"Are you okay?"

He didn't ask Daniel why he was whispering. When it was black as wet asphalt and you might as well have had your head in a sack, keeping your voice down was a sensible precaution. But this time he thought it was an unnecessary one. Years spent in Special Forces had given him a pretty good instinct for when there were people – or animals – close at hand, and the only thing he could smell right now apart from his own blood was a reminder that Doctor Daniel Jackson was in serious need of a shower.

"Jack?"

"As well as can be expected. What about you?" The stab of light was skewering and he put up a hand instinctively. "Damnit, Daniel!"

"Sorry." Daniel turned away from him, letting the beam from his flashlight cut through the shadows, turning the cave from soot-black to chill blue. The water running down the walls glistened at them coldly.

O'Neill opened his mouth to give Daniel the lecture about why you didn't give away your position to possible hostiles by flashing light about until you had ascertained…. And then thought what the hell. He'd already decided there was no one here except them. It would make more sense to praise Daniel for hanging onto his flashlight and vest rather than bawling him out for using it to check out their current situation. He followed the beam of light and saw folds of dark rock, a lot of greenish slime, and…an opening in the rock. Good. Maybe it only led into another cave but at least they weren't going to be stuck here. Daniel pointed the flashlight at the ceiling and there were the circles waiting to descend and whisk them back to the temple, but if there was a mechanism for summoning them it was very well hidden.

He'd thought those rings could only go up or down; spaceship to ground; floor to dungeon kind of deal, but now it seemed they also worked like a giant slinky, flipping you from one part of the planet to another. He wondered what happened if the power system failed halfway. Did you fall out and rematerialize, or did you never get all your bits back, and just stay a whole bunch of little swirling atoms forever? If Carter had come along for this particular ride she could have bored him senseless speculating on that very subject. Just as well he only had Daniel with him, who was as clueless as he was when it come to naqadah-powered Goa'uld whirligigs.

It occurred to O'Neill that Onuris had known what he was doing when the Goa'uld divided up his team. Teal'c and Carter both understood Goa'uld technology, could make it work, even hotwire it if they had to. Daniel could speak, write, and read the language, but he knew as little about Goa'uld equipment as O'Neill. Carter or Teal'c might have been able to get those rings to spirit them somewhere else but unless the last Goa'uld who'd used them had left an instruction manual, he and Daniel were going to be out of luck.

He and Daniel both gazed up at the rings for a moment and then met each other's gaze. O'Neill read
in Daniel's blue eyes the same rueful embarrassment he was currently feeling about always leaving this kind of thing up to Carter. Daniel sighed and dejectedly began to shine the flashlight along the walls. "There was that panel thing in Bynarr's quarters…"

"Yes." O'Neill put a hand on his arm and tilted the flashlight beam down. "Which Martouf knew how to fix to make it work without the key – thing. We don't."

"Maybe if we found it, we could figure it out."

"Not in time." O'Neill didn't say *Daniel, I've watched you change a fuse, remember?* But he hoped commonsense would reassert itself in time. Fiddling around with Goa'uld toys was not their strong suit. You had to play to your strengths in survival situations. And this was definitely a survival situation.

"I'm sorry about your leg. Actually, I'm sorry about…." Daniel looked around helplessly. "This is all my fault."

"Daniel!" Pain roughened his tone and the younger man jumped slightly. O'Neill collected himself, taking a deep breath. "Look, we don't have time for this now. What's done is done, let's just deal with it."

"I should never have –"

He grabbed him by the arm, steadying himself with a hand on Daniel's shoulder. "A: That doesn't help, and B: It's written in goddamn stone, Daniel. *It's been* written for centuries. Like Teal'c said, if we hadn't got captured on Chulak, he'd still be First Prime of Apophis, and if you hadn't gone to that temple –"

"You wouldn't have been shot in the leg, Sam wouldn't be dying of a fever, and Teal'c wouldn't be under a death sentence. Oh yes, and you and I wouldn't be stuck on an alien planet with no way of helping Sam and Teal'c. Apart from that, I think it was probably one of my better ideas."

O'Neill sighed in exasperation. "You're the one who said it. They wouldn't have been waiting for us all this time if all we did was get ourselves killed."

"We hadn't done anything…impressive back then. Now we have. You talked Onuris into sparing my life, and Sam raised the High Priest from the dead. You add that to trashing their temple and destroying the statue of Onuris, not to mention probably laying the foundations for the end of their belief in him as a god, and I think we've probably earned ourselves a place in the history books."

O'Neill looked at his teammate by the blue glare of the flashlight. Daniel had his arms wrapped around his chest – never a good sign. He also looked pale, grubby and close to despair. Whenever he went this brittle and self-hating, action needed to be taken quickly. As getting him drunk wasn't an option and as O'Neill was frankly too exhausted and in too much pain himself to want to have to compose a comforting speech, he decided sleep was probably the best solution.

"I don't know about you but I'm beat," he said conversationally. "Let's get the hell away from these rings and find somewhere to get some shut-eye. Help me, will you?"

He saw a look of mingled gratitude and anxiety flashed in his direction. Daniel obviously couldn't decide if he was so dangerously ill he didn't mind asking for help, or if he was just trying to give him something to do to make him feel better. *Too damned intense.* He could literally say he had been in marriages less complicated than this friendship. If he didn't watch every word he said to Daniel there was always a risk of hurting his feelings in some unforeseen way, and as watching every word he
said didn't exactly come naturally to him, he probably did hurt Daniel's feelings on a fairly regular basis. The saving grace being that Daniel now knew him well enough to also know he didn't mean it.

Daniel supported him carefully, helping him to hop across the cavern to the opening in the rocks although he was still tending to wave the flashlight beam around the walls instead of aiming it in the direction in which they were heading. "This feels like some kind of emergency exit to me," Daniel peered over his shoulder. "A sort of backstairs entrance. You know we usually only get to explore the area of a planet closest to the Stargate, this time we could be miles – hundreds of miles – maybe even thousands of miles from the Stargate...."

O'Neill didn't say anything. On other occasion he might have suggested they had more important things to think about but right now he was all for Daniel worrying about the intangible and the probably unprovable if it stopped him guilt-tripping.

"...which of course means we're also thousands of miles from Sam and Teal'c."

Well, that had to be the shortest holiday from a guilt-trip he'd ever known. Time to join in the conversation. "Emergency exit suggests trouble to me," he put in, trying not to let it show in his voice how much his damned leg was hurting. "Like the Goa'uld had to retreat in a hurry. Maybe they don't worship Onuris on this part of the planet. Maybe we'll find some allies here who'd be happy to help us drive out the Goa'uld." Maybe there's more than one Stargate and we can dial home and get help. Maybe the people here have invented the internal combustion engine and they'll have left us a Porsche with the keys in the ignition. Maybe the moon really is made of green cheese. What the hell, he was willing to say just about anything to make Daniel feel better at the moment. Quite apart from the other considerations, Daniel was much more useful when he was thinking positively.

Another cavern. Dripping, dark, cold, musty. He was getting seriously bored with caves. He supposed he should be grateful these were so dank and featureless; the sniff of any paintings on the walls and Daniel would never get any sleep.

Yet another cavern. And another. This was jarring the hell out of his leg, he could feel the damp getting into every piece of scar tissue he possessed, and Daniel was definitely struggling, but he was damned if he was going to lie down and go to sleep with no idea of their current situation. He needed to see the sky, needed to know if it was day or night here. The only way they could work out how far they'd traveled was if they got a glimpse of the outside world.

"Jack, for all I know we could be going around in circles, down here. Don't you think you ought to rest?"

He felt torn. Daniel was going to fall down with exhaustion if he didn't let him sleep soon but if they were to have any chance of saving Carter and Teal'c they had to know their position relative to that of their teammates. If they were ten thousand miles or ten miles away they needed to work it out. A cold breeze made him shiver. He jerked his head in that direction. "Daniel."

"What?"

"Shine the flashlight over there."

As Daniel did so, he saw an opening, a ragged fissure in the rocks, not what you could a proper doorway, but they could slip through as long as they breathed in. There was a pool between them and the way out and he flinched in anticipation before edging into it cautiously. "Jesus!"

Daniel gasped something in Abydonian that sounded like a swearword, lurching as the freezing water splashed up to his calves. "Cold. Very, very cold."
They splashed through it awkwardly, the water feeling as heavy as liquid metal against their legs and so icy O'Neill could feel shrieks of protest running up from his toes to discharge straight into the deep throbbing of his wounded leg. Whether by luck or judgment Onuris had managed to get him almost exactly in the same place as Kintar; making it all the easier to remember how it had felt being in hell.

They staggered through the freezing water, hauling themselves out stiffly and – in his case – painfully the other side. Daniel wriggled through the fissure first and then offered him a hand. It was a bit more of a squeeze for him, but he made it with some determined tugging from Daniel. They both staggered down an incline into another cave. It was bare and freezing cold, but beyond the cave mouth there was light; faint and eerie, yet recognizably pinpricks of silver in what was definitely a cloud-bruised night sky. The outside world. Points of reference. Wherever they were it was still dark, that was something. At least they hadn't been transported to the equivalent of Australia. He hobbled to the mouth of the cave and peered up at the constellations. Yes. There were some he recognized from sitting in Harun's hut and also from their climb up the hillside. The stars had changed position, but they were still there, so they were in the same hemisphere but….

Daniel watched Jack anxiously, wondering if he had any idea how ill he looked. His right pants leg had almost melted into his skin around the staff weapon blast and the surface of the wound looked shiny and crusted, like the black skin which formed over cooling lava, the redness glowing through from underneath. He felt in the pockets of his vest. He knew he didn't have much in the way of supplies because he'd searched them thoroughly earlier when he'd been so hungry, but he thought he'd come across some…Yes!

"Jack." Daniel put the two Tylenol in Jack's hand. "You have to get the weight off that leg and you really need to get some sleep."

Jack was murmuring things under his breath, peering up at the stars as he did so. He nodded in satisfaction, throwing the aspirin down his throat without even seeming to notice. "I think we're on the same continent. I'd say we're about the same distance from Teal'c and Carter as say Acapulco is from Colorado."

"What?" Daniel felt the dismay overwhelm him. He'd been trying to tell himself Onuris would have been limited in where he could send them by the existing rings. The Goa'uld might have only conquered one particular area of this planet. "We can't possibly walk that far in two days. Even if you weren't wounded –"

"It could be a lot worse, Daniel. I was afraid we might be in the equivalent of Antarctica."

Daniel shivered. "It's cold enough."

"That's because we're high up. Look."

Unwillingly, Daniel went to the mouth of the cave and looked down. There was a rustling sea of darkness beneath them which it took him a moment to realize was the top of trees. They were a long way up, so high up it made him feel breathless to think about it. He tried to snatch some oxygen and Jack's hand closed on his arm. "The air's a little thinner than you're used to, that's all. I think we're in the equivalent of Quito. That could be the local version of the Amazon rain forest down there, in which case it will get a lot warmer once we can get down lower."

Daniel looked back at the rippling canopy, then up to the implacable, unfamiliar stars. He felt chilled through every cell and his mind ached with exhaustion. He couldn't think about possibilities now. He couldn't think about anything except Jack's injured leg. He said stolidly, "You need to get the weight off that leg and let me take a look at it." He began to search through his pockets for the silver blanket that folded up so small it almost defied the laws of possibility, so used to it being to hand that it took
him three searches to realize he didn’t have it. The priests must have taken it or else he'd left it behind in the catacombs, and Jack didn't have his vest with him. For once the SGC wasn't going to be able to provide. "I don't have my blanket thingy," he offered.

Jack limped away from the cave entrance and sniffed the air. "Can't smell any bears or mountain lions so I don't think we're trespassing on anyone's den. Of course it's a little difficult smelling anything with you upwind of me."

Daniel looked at him reproachfully. "You're not exactly a can of air freshener yourself."

"Trust me on this, Daniel, you're worse." Jack took his elbow and began to steer him deeper into the cave. "Which is bad luck for me, because without the contents of my vest to hand you're my only heat source at the moment, so I guess I'm going to have to put up with you stinking like a dead elk in high summer if I don't want to die from hypothermia."

"What?" Daniel was flicking the beam from the flashlight disconsolately around the cave but all it was showing him was bare ground and cold rock walls.

Jack put a hand over the front of the flashlight. "That light is going to show up if there's anyone down there to see it and I don't know about you, but I'm not really in the mood for visitors, so point it down." As Daniel hastily lowered the beam, Jack continued quietly, "We're going to have to share body heat, Daniel, or else we're not going to make it through the night."

Daniel remembered asking Sam how weird it had been, having to cozy up with Jack in Antarctica. She'd told him the worst part was trying not to roll on his broken ribs. When pressed she'd admitted it was very weird. 'But not,' she added with the flicker of a smile, 'entirely unpleasant….' Now he realized he should have asked her something practical: like did Jack snore or kick you in his sleep.

"Okay."

"Just 'okay'?"

"The Ancient Spartans did it all the time. Actually the Ancient Spartans did a whole lot of other things to keep warm as well but you probably don't want to hear about that right now."

"However did you guess?"

Right, Jack was tired, pissy, and hurting. It hadn't been a fun day and if they didn't both get some sleep soon their chances of finding a means of getting back to the temple were going to dwindle to zero. First things first. He needed to get that wound seen to, then they needed to argue about who was going to take the first watch. Daniel sat down on the cave floor. There was a faint sprinkling of dust but it wasn't exactly a feather mattress. "Here okay?"

Jack glanced around the cave and then shrugged. "It all looks equally uncomfortable to me. Here will be dandy."

"Let me see to your leg first."

"Must you?"

Daniel gave him a look which he hoped spoke volumes then pointed at the floor. The priests had clearly rifled through the pockets of his vest because half the contents were missing and the rest had been shoved back in any which way. His fingers were so cold they fumbled clumsily before finding the pad he was looking for. He yanked it out gratefully, ignoring that groan from Jack as the man reluctantly sat down next to him and straightened his leg.
"Let me do it," Jack protested.

"No." Daniel handed Jack the flashlight so he could hold it on his leg, then began easing the burnt cloth away from the wound as carefully as he could.

"Ow!"

"Jack!"

"It hurts."

Daniel wondered how someone who was without a doubt a bona fide American hero could be such a whiner about having his wounds treated. "You're the kind of patient who drives doctors out of medicine."

"Yeah, and you're the kind of doctor who's only qualified to dig up dead people. Jesus, Daniel!"

Daniel decided to ignore him. It was the only way with Jack when he was wounded; otherwise it was impossible not to be distracted by his constant bitching. He concentrated on getting all the bits of burnt cloth out of the wound, mentally humming loudly to himself to block out the sound of Jack's swearing. When he was satisfied the wound was as clean as he could get it, he fumbled in his vest pocket for the antibiotic cream, relieved when his fingers closed on it. He squeezed a generous measure over the burn, pointedly ignored Jack's hiss of "Christ, that's cold!" then strapped a pad around the wound. Although he said it himself, he thought that was a pretty good bit of doctoring.

The way Jack examined his handiwork and offered a grudging 'Humph', suggested to Daniel that the man could find nothing to complain about. "You're welcome," he told him as he switched off the flashlight. The darkness was enveloping for a moment and then the starlight began to grow brighter as his eyes adjusted, a faint bluish glow bathing them both.

Jack beckoned to him wearily as he unzipped his jacket. "Okay, cuddle up."

"Do I look like that kind of boy?"

Jack's glare was steely. "We can do this with you conscious or unconscious: your choice."

Daniel reluctantly unzipped his own jacket, murmuring, "And yet he's single…."

Despite the kidding around, Daniel wasn't too sure how he felt about snuggling up to Jack for warmth. They'd been closer than this on Netu and it had comforted him then but there had been other people nearby on that occasion. He didn't want to overstep any boundaries and he was very aware of Jack's wounded leg, not to mention his decidedly ragged temper. If he touched that wound, Jack was going to hiss with pain and exasperation right in his ear, then probably tell him he'd rather freeze to death by himself, thank you. Daniel lay down next to Jack awkwardly, knowing he was probably coming across like an unwilling bride on the wedding night but not wanting to be the one who made the first move.

"Daniel, we have to share body heat. That means we have to be touching."

"I'm worried about your leg," he protested.

His answer was Jack impatiently pulling him against his body. He immediately felt several degrees warmer and tentatively put his arms around the man's back, the same way Jack had done – his arms around the older man's torso and under his jacket. He could feel their body heat mingling, creating a cocoon of warmth enveloping their chests, but he was afraid he might be hurting that wounded leg.
"Is this okay?"

"Well, it's not an emergency blanket but it'll do."

"Thanks a bunch."

"I know it would be warmer if we went deeper into those damned caves but I can't stick the thought of spending another night underground." Jack gave him an apologetic shrug, face grainy and ghost-lit by starlight. "I just…needed to see some stars."

"You could always hit your head on a low doorway. That usually does it for me."

"Shut up and go to sleep," Jack told him.

"No, let me take the first watch."

"There's not going to be any first watch. We're both going to sleep."

Daniel gaped at him. That was unheard of. "But, Jack…"

"Daniel, we're both dead on our feet here. If we don't get some rest we're never going to be able to help Carter and Teal'c. Now, will you please shut up and go to sleep?"

The silence stretched as Daniel tried to get comfy. He didn't want to disturb Jack but the guy was full of awkward edges tonight and between the rock floor and trying not to roll on Jack's wounded leg, and trying to find a way to stay close without being jabbed painfully by body parts….

"Will you quit it with that wriggling?" Jack muttered in annoyance.

Daniel tried again to get comfortable but it was no good there was something very hard sticking into his stomach and it hurt. He scratched his jaw. "Jack, don't take this the wrong way, but is that a gun in your pocket or are you just pleased to see me?"

Jack's sigh of exasperation warmed his right ear nicely. He could tell Jack wasn't even bothering to open his eyes, and he sounded like most of him was already asleep. He muttered drowsily, "Damnit, Daniel, like I told Carter in Antarctica, it's my sidearm….

"Uh – Jack? You don't have a sidearm." Daniel grimaced apologetically. "Don't you remember? The lion guards took all our –"

Jack rolled away from him in an instant and Daniel saw him patting himself down. Daniel cleared his throat. "I don't mind. It's just a bit disconcer –"

"Will you switch the damned flashlight on?"

Blinking in surprise, Daniel fumbled for it and then did so. As his eyes watered from the sudden brightness he saw Jack staring at something in disbelief. It took Daniel a moment to recognize what Jack was holding. "It was your sidearm."

Jack was already checking the weapon, as wide-awake now as he had been drowsy only seconds before. He ejected the clip, examined it, then jammed it back in before turning to Daniel with disbelief on his face. "How the hell –?"

Daniel's eyes widened in realization. "Harun. It had to be Harun. He must have slipped it to you. You're so used to having a gun you wouldn't have noticed the weight of it."
"Have you got yours?"

His brain was so tired it took Daniel a moment to realize what Jack was asking. As he made to pat himself down, Jack impatiently pushed his hands out of the way and did it for him, reaching into his pockets in turn. "If he gave me a weapon he ought to have given you – Yes."

Daniel shone the flashlight on the small knife in Jack's hand. "That's not mine."

"One of your 'worshippers' must have put it in your pocket while they were helping you down the mountain."

He took the knife from Jack and turned it over in his fingers. "If they gave these to us, they might have given something to Sam and Teal'c."

Immediately Jack's face was closed over and hostile again. "They're only interested in fulfilling their precious prophecy, remember, Daniel? Maybe it's written that you and me survive but Carter and Teal'c don't. The only thing we know they gave Carter is a fever. Now put the knife away and let's get some shuteye."

Daniel opened his mouth to protest and then closed it again. Jack was right. They needed their sleep. If they were too exhausted to think they were never going to be able to find a way back to the temple. He lay down gingerly next to Jack, heart sinking as he realized they were going to have to go through the awkward ritual of getting close again.

"Oh for crying out loud." Jack pulled him back into his arms and pushed Daniel's head against his chest. Warmth spread out from the older man in an instant and Daniel quickly put his arms around him in return. For the first time since they'd entered the temple and seen Onuris waiting for them he felt the sick despair lift a little. Whatever Jack might think, if Harun was willing to help them, perhaps he would also be willing to help Teal'c and Sam. On the other hand….

"Will you stop with the damned wriggling?" Jack protested. "You should bear in mind how long it's been since Kinthia."

Daniel stifled a snigger in the man's chest. "Didn't realize you were that desperate, Jack."

"Don't laugh, it tickles. And you needn't be so sure I'm kidding. If it turns out you and me are the only living things in this hemisphere you might start looking a lot better." Jack shifted their weight a little, trying to settle them into the most comfortable position before adding conversationally, "Of course, the way you smell right now, I'd say you were pretty safe."

Daniel opened his mouth to tell Jack he wasn't exactly a dozen long-stemmed roses himself at the moment then realized he was too sleepy to bother. He could hear Jack's heartbeat, strong and regular, a comforting rhythm by his right ear, the proof at least one of his teammates was still alive. They were both alive, they had found out a way out of the caves, they each had a weapon, and Sam and Teal'c might not be entirely amongst enemies back there. That was a much better situation than he'd expected them to be in an hour before. As he drifted off to sleep he felt something stirring inside him, an emotion he almost didn't recognize it was so long since he'd felt it. As the inevitable dreams pulled him into their embrace he belatedly realized what he was feeling. It was hope.

***

Samantha could smell cookies, fresh from the oven, her own recipe and Dad's favorite. She always worried when he was late. The work he did was dangerous and she'd grown up knowing there might be a day when he didn't come home; that what might be waiting for her on the doorstep in his place
would be two men in Air Force uniform she'd never seen before. Their eyes full of apology and the triumph of death over hope reflected in every one of their shining silver buttons. Baking cookies helped pass the time. It was a difficult enough task to keep her mind off the possibilities she didn't want to think about, but not so tricky she couldn't afford to woolgather a little. Her mother had taught her that one: the hundred ways you could profitably fill in those dark times when missions didn't go as scheduled, when the one you loved was overdue and the hours began to crawl as slowly as something decaying. Death was so absolute you should never let it into your heart if you could keep it out. Never believe in it until you had to. She'd thought him lost so many times, her mother had said once, but he'd always come back. You had to keep hoping. Always.

Her mother spoke with the knowledge of someone who had lost hope and been seared by it in the past. Perhaps a coward endured a hundred deaths before dying, but a serviceman's wife endured at least that many painful rehearsals of mourning before the fateful knock on the door finally came. Or never came. He might return in triumph, wearing his wounds like decorations, but she was left with the might-have-beens. However little he told her, she always knew how close he'd come. That was what she was left with the next time he went away, the knowledge he'd been so lucky in the past his ability to escape the death he kept courting surely couldn't hold out forever.

Just one of the reasons why Samantha had resolved at an early age never to marry a serviceman. Others could wait for her to come home from missions, but she was never again going to be the one waiting for that ring on the doorbell which carried the Last Post in its echoes.

It was the only thing her parents ever argued about: How could he love his work so much when it might be the thing that robbed his children of a father, his wife of a husband? Samantha hated hearing her mom get those tears in her voice. Her dad's response was always said too low for her to hear, but the sound of it would be soothing, and anyway she could guess the words. They were the ones she'd probably be giving to her husband and children in the future, when she was an astronaut blasting off to walk the red dust of Mars or circle the rings of Saturn. Her loved ones would be left behind, frail and taut with needless anxiety, so small and fragile her heart would be aching at the point of take-off even as the adrenalin also began to pump. She had never had one minute's doubt she was going to grow up to be an astronaut. It was all she'd ever wanted. As a child sitting cross-legged on the floor she'd watched Neil Armstrong step onto the grey surface of the moon on that blurry black and white TV screen and felt her heart contract with an excitement that had never really faded. That was what she was going to do. That was what she had to do…

Mom and Dad would be back any minute and they'd have the smell of baking to welcome them home. It was the cinnamon which made these cookies so special, and that little pinch of nutmeg. The problem was always keeping Mark away from them; he'd eat them when they were too hot and burn his mouth, and if he had friends over they'd move in on her cooking like locusts. As she heard the front door opening she realized she'd timed it perfectly. When she heard her father's voice the anxiety she'd been trying so hard to ignore could finally slacken its grip on her heart. He was home. Everything was fine.

"Major Carter?"

What a beautiful voice that was, quiet but resonant. She liked the way it said her name so gently and yet with such respect. It made her feel safer and gave her strength at the same time. If that voice was nearby then they could solve any problem; she just needed to remember the name of its owner.

"Major Carter? Are you awake?"

"Teal'c!" Carter opened her eyes. They felt gritty and hot. Her whole body felt hot. It was like being back on Netu, her skin was burning, her spine aching with the pain of that internal heat. Hands on
her shoulders helped her to sit up, a wooden cup was held to her cracked lips. Water. God, she was so thirsty. It hurt to swallow but she still drank eagerly then wiped her mouth. "Thanks."

For the first time she took in their surroundings and winced. Dark, cold, bare. A cell underground. Not good. Some chill blue light filtering in from somewhere to make a lattice pattern across her right boot, so there must be a window set up very high and too small to crawl through. This was definitely not good. The only consolation was the sight of Teal'c sitting beside her. She was very glad to know he was with her, his strength and calm something she could take comfort from even as she reminded herself that he was as much a prisoner as she was. Logically she should have been wishing he was anywhere but here with her – outside their prison working to rescue them all, for instance, but she couldn't help her sense of relief at seeing him, knowing he was close by. Perhaps Teal'c had saved them all on Netu by being on the tel'tak instead of at their side but that damned Pit would still have seemed a much less frightening place if he'd been with them. She winced as she swallowed, her tonsils feeling like golf balls, managing hoarsely: "Colonel O'Neill? Daniel?"

"Do you not remember?"

She looked up at Teal'c's blue-lit face and closed her eyes, memory returning despite the fire coursing down her spine. The Goa'uld in the tall headdress seizing Daniel by the hair, dragging him across the temple. The staff weapon blast. The Colonel crying out in pain. The rings ascending and taking them away. She put a hand up to her throbbing head. "Yes. I think so. Onuris used the transporter rings to send them somewhere else on the planet."

"That is correct."

"What's our situation?"

Teal'c's hand on her forehead felt cool and soothing but the anxiety in his eyes was not reassuring. She managed a faint smile. "That good, eh?"

"We are imprisoned in a dungeon within the temple of Onuris and you have a fever."

"But apart from that we have them just where we want them?" she prompted. The heat had gone now, which was good, but she was starting to feel cold. Very cold.

His smile felt like the only warmth in the room. "Just so, Major Carter." He took his hand from her forehead and gently urged her to lie back down. "You must rest. Your fever will break soon."

He said it with such confidence that it was only as she closed her gritty eyes again Carter realized he was lying. His jacket was back over her shoulders and she was glad of it. The heat was just a memory now and her teeth were chattering, the shivers running through her even though she tried so hard to relax and stop them. "Teal'c?" She hadn't meant to sound frightened but she was so cold she thought she was going to die from it. "Cold – so c-cold."

Immediately he was lying down beside her, his arms around her, his body pressed against hers, a comforting warmth against her back. As the shivering convulsed her, he stroked her hair as gently as her father had when she was sick as a child. She remembered again that Teal'c was also a father; that he must also have comforted Ry'ac in his time. "G-glad you're here, Teal'c," she said again.

"There is no danger of me leaving you, Major Carter," he said gently.

As she drifted into unconsciousness, she remembered lying beside the Colonel in Antarctica, trying to warm him with her body so that his last moments would be less bleak, lying to him so he could go into his death-sleep thinking he was with his wife. She wanted to tell Teal'c that it was all right, she
understood how hard it was to have to sit there and watch a teammate die, but the words wouldn't come, only the shivering came, wave after wave dragging her back into the chill darkness of fevered dreams.

***

Steam was rising from the jungle to warm the soles of his feet; trees taking shape again as they emerged from a milk-white mist which was already dissolving gently in the sunlight. The background music from birds and monkeys had grown from an occasional solo to a full symphony. Up in the mouth of the cave it was warm enough to dry out his socks, but not so hot it hurt his injured leg, but down there beneath the canopy the day was heating up fast.

He'd peeled back Daniel's sterile pad and checked his leg for signs of infection. Staff weapon blasts usually cauterized the wound so fast there wasn't much chance for dirt to get under the skin. He couldn't see any streaking; none of his veins seemed reddened or raised. His leg hurt all right, but it wasn't the nerve-thrumming throb of infection, it was just the way a leg felt when a piece of skin had been blasted away and a burn left in its place. It was inconvenient and painful but it didn't appear to be life threatening. As he rebandaged it, he wished the same could be said of the fever Carter had contracted.

According to his watch it was nearly mid-day where Carter and Teal'c were, more like nine a.m. for him and Daniel. After the day, and then the night Daniel had been through, he'd decided to let him rest, so the part of him that worried about that particular member of his team was relaxing at the moment. After a rough night, Daniel was sleeping more peacefully now, and when O'Neill had carefully disentangled himself from the younger man's protective grip, Daniel had no longer been trembling, the last of the shokmar reaction clearly out of his system. Judging by the howling and shrieking coming from that rain forest spread out beneath them there was plenty to eat down there and a few miles down this mountain the day was looking balmy. He was therefore reasonably confident of being able to supply Daniel with food, warmth, and shelter as and when it was needed.

He'd started the day by limping outside to survey the rainforest beneath them. His first thought was that it was a long time since he'd had to remember his jungle survival lore, although it was a pleasant surprise to find so much of it starting to come back to him. He could see a river to follow, he could see clearings, clearings suggested fallen trees which might have fruit or nuts they could eat. Had time not been a factor he would have been looking around for materials to make a bow and arrow and working out how much monkey meat they needed to mix with fruit and nuts to have a balanced diet. But as they had two days to pull off a miracle, he decided to let the normal worries about nutrition, shelter, fire and so on recede into the background while he thought about other things.

Unfortunately, the half of Jack O'Neill that worried about Carter and Teal'c was in a blind panic right now, screaming at him to do something, anything, to get Daniel up right now and get them both moving…. Except that wasn't enough this time. He'd been using compass, watch, notebook, and ballpoint pen since there had been light enough to see them by. He'd sketched the constellations he'd remembered from the night before and made a few calculations. He'd noticed where the sun came up and compared it with where it had gone down the night before. He'd done the math four times already and it had come out the same every time. They were three time zones west of the Temple of Onuris. Or, in other words, if they were in Los Angeles, Carter and Teal'c were in New York.

People probably had walked from the Pacific to the Atlantic coast; their forefathers had rolled across the land in their covered wagons over those sort of distances in their time; but he was damned sure no one had ever made the journey on foot in two days even without one of those travelers being wounded.
So although the impulse was to start stumbling east just as fast as they could, it would be futile unless they could find another and much faster means of getting where they needed to go. He still wished they'd been given access to that tablet but assuming most of what it said was true, Daniel had got plenty of credit for being…. Actually, come to think of it, what the hell had the Chosen One actually done for these people? Been young and pretty and had nice manners seemed to be about the total of it. And been miraculously resurrected from his shokmar trance by his 'angels'. The avatars seemed to have done all the real work. Teal'c had destroyed the temple in a properly Biblical fashion. Carter had demonstrated her compassion by saving the High Priest from the fate he so richly deserved. And he…. And he was supposed to be the brains of the outfit. There was a terrible irony there but he didn't feel too much like laughing right now…. 

"You okay, Jack?"

That quiet question brought him back to the present in an instant. He turned his head to see Daniel watching him curiously. He hadn't heard him wake up. He wondered how long Daniel had been lying there, assessing his mood.

O'Neill summoned up a smile. "Fine. You?"

"Fine."

"Did you sleep okay?"

"Fine. You?"

"Fine."

Well, weren't they both lying well today? Although to be fair he was never too sure if Daniel remembered the nightmares when he opened his eyes. After three years of missions together they had more than a nodding acquaintance with each other's bad dreams. In Daniel's case they usually looped between Sha're as a Goa'uld and his parents dying in front of him; but there were others, not much harder to decipher, about being left on the wrong shore, trapped in dark rooms, going home to find the house empty; various dreams of abandonment, of being unwanted and unloved. More recently there had come dreams of being locked in a padded cell and left to go insane. Dreams of the sarcophagus. Dreams of Hathor. Dreams of Apophis. Dreams of Amaunet frying his brain with the ribbon device. Dreams of him failing his dead wife, failing to find Kheb, failing to find her child. Oh yes, by now Daniel's many nightmares were practically old friends.

O'Neill had stumbled back towards consciousness thinking of Sara. In the second of confusion before he opened his eyes, he'd been in the twilight between dream-state and waking, the world that sometimes drip-fed him a memory of paradise lost: when he'd been a husband and a father, instead of divorced and childless. For a second the ghost of her warmth had lingered, he'd felt her hair against his face, could smell the faint scent of her shampoo… And then he'd opened his eyes to the chilly silver dawn of an alien world, and an unwashed and unshaven Daniel Jackson snoring gently on his chest. That had been a little disconcerting he had to admit.

"Jack?"

"What?"

Daniel was looking at him curiously. "You sure you're okay?"

"Just peachy, Daniel. In our situation, who wouldn't be?"

That was an expression he'd had a lot of practice in recognizing: Daniel deciding he needed to be
handled with kid gloves. He could practically see Daniel sending himself a little memo about tiptoeing around Jack for the next few hours or else he'd get his head bitten off. Well, if Daniel hadn't learned by now that nothing made him crabby faster than Daniel deciding he was feeling crabby when he wasn't….

"Here."

O'Neill looked down at the two Tylenol Daniel put into his hand en route for the cave entrance. Daniel stumbled blearily outside before he had a chance to thank him. He opened his mouth to call after him and then closed it again, swallowing the aspirin down with a shrug.

When he closed his eyes he saw Carter swaying on her feet with fever and exhaustion, skin so white she looked like there was no blood left in her veins, eyes red-rimmed and watering, heard her voice reduced to a husky whisper by the slivers of glass in her throat. And then he'd see her with that scrape down the side of her chilled face, nose and eyes red with the cold, no sleep in God knows how many hours as she struggled with that DHD, saying despairingly, "I should have got you out of here by now!"

He remembered the agony of that spike in his shoulder, the infection crawling through him; waiting for death, fearing it and welcoming it because nothing could be worse than the way he was feeling right now. The one bright spot in all his misery the comforting presence of Teal'c beside him. The Jaffa saying quietly, "I am here, O'Neill."

And that was where he should be right now. With his team. Helping them. Protecting them. The way they'd always helped and protected him.

Don't go there. He knew where that thought would take him. Daniel had known it too, that was why he'd taken one look at his face and got the hell out of his way. And was now staying the hell out of his way even though, unless that was the longest piss in history, he had no reason not to come back to the cave. That thought led to: This is all Daniel's fault. All Daniel's fault they were in this damned mess, that Carter was dying, Teal'c under sentence of death, and the other half of their team had been transported too far away to get back there and save them.

Except it wasn't Daniel's fault. If it was anyone's fault, it was his. He was the team leader. It was his job to keep an eye on any situation they happened to be in. He was the one who hadn't noticed the temple and hadn't given even one second's consideration to Daniel's request that he go and look at it. True, Daniel shouldn't disobey orders, but O'Neill knew him well enough by now to know that Daniel didn't really perceive the situation the same way a soldier would. He didn't think of it as obeying or disobeying orders. He thought of it more as he'd given Jack a chance to be reasonable and as the man was clearly in a pissy mood it was probably better to leave him by himself for a while until he got over it while Daniel went and did his job. He should have kept an eye on Daniel and he knew it. He should have given his request the consideration it deserved and then either accompanied him to the temple or given him a reason why he didn't want him to go and look at it right now. And yes, you would have thought by now Daniel would have learned not to wander off by himself, but you also would have thought he'd have learned to give Daniel proper explanations.

He'd thought he'd learned that lesson back on P3R233 after all; all those hours of fruitless searching for a teammate who'd been whisked off to an alternative universe, imagining him dying of radiation poisoning or mortally wounded by a Goa'uld booby-trap while O'Neill thought over and over 'I should have told him why….'

It was less than twenty-four hours since he would have given almost anything to know Daniel was alive and unhurt. Well, Daniel was alive and unhurt. Maybe he should be grateful for that. He was grateful for it, dammit. He'd thought the guy was going to be tortured to death right in front of him
and instead the only thing wrong with Daniel right now was the guilt eating into him like sulfuric acid. And the way he smelled, of course. They definitely had to do something about getting that boy cleaned up.

O'Neill clambered to his feet painfully, using the cave wall to steady himself. "Daniel?" No answer. _Christ, Daniel, don't tell me you've wandered off again! Where the hell are you? "Daniel!"

"Jack?"

If his teammate had been even six feet away from the mouth of the cave he'd be surprised because Daniel was there in a moment, looking at him with concern. _Get a grip, O'Neill._ The extent of his panic frightened him. His nerves were clearly shot to hell.

"Are you okay?" Daniel came towards him like he'd approach a stray dog that had got itself hung up on wire fencing. Wanting to help but afraid of getting bitten.

"I'm fine." That came out harsher than he'd intended and Daniel winced. O'Neill took a deep breath and rested a hand on the younger man's shoulder. "I'm fine," he said it gently this time. "I'm just worried about Teal'c and Carter, and my leg hurts." _I'm not mad at you, Daniel, I swear._

He almost said it aloud but it was too much the kind of thing you said to a child. Too much what he would have said to Charlie. Daniel was biting his lip, blue eyes full of concern. And guilt. Oh boy, lots and lots of guilt. Dreaming about your dead wife probably did that for you on a good day. On what was a bad day by anyone's standards, it probably took you right to the brink of self-loathing.

O'Neill decided to go with brisk and practical. Bring Daniel up to speed with his findings so far and try to get him focused on coming up with a solution. He wanted that brilliant mind working on ways to get them back to the temple _not_ on ways to mentally torture Daniel Jackson.

"...so that's our current situation. Any ideas?"

Daniel frowned in concentration. "Well, as there are transport rings here there might be some other signs of Goa'uld civilization in this area. Like you said last night, this feels like some kind of emergency exit, but down there —" he gestured towards the jungle, "we might find other Goa'uld technology. Transport rings we _can_ use." He gave O'Neill an apologetic shrug. "Off the top of my head I don't know what else we can do except look for other signs of human or Goa'uld life."

"Okay, that sounds like a plan to me. Let's head out."

***

Carter couldn't decide if she was awake or asleep. Hot or cold. Sinking or floating. This was the dreamscape of the fever victim. This was the world Daniel had visited when Amaunet was murdering him. This was where Jolinar's memories came from.

She still remembered how it felt to a prisoner inside her own body; trapped with what she'd believed to be a Goa'uld sharing her consciousness, reading her thoughts, controlling her actions. She'd never been so frightened of anything as she had been of Jolinar. Like hiding under the bed to evade the bogeyman and finding he had climbed under there with you. Yet nothing could have prepared her for the sensation of being blended with another's psyche, the unity of duality, a sense of such completeness that even in the midst of her fear of the Ashrak, and her despair at being treated like an enemy by the people she cared for most, there had been the wonder of that relationship. When Jolinar had died inside her, the grief had been indescribable. She had never felt lonelier than in the days afterwards, when she felt around cautiously for that other mind and realized it was truly gone.
She'd known that no one would ever know how it felt to have been blended and then lose the symbiote inside you. Colonel O'Neill and Daniel were both too hostile to the Goa'uld and too repulsed by the concept of intermingling with one to be truly sympathetic to her grief. Oh, they'd tried, certainly. She'd watched them both struggle with the concept and fail. The Colonel had tried to comprehend how losing the symbiote within her could feel like a bereavement rather than a triumph but ended up treating her reaction to the death of Jolinar as essentially irrational, as though she'd been raped and was blaming herself for it. She knew that was probably how both the Colonel and Daniel saw it – a violation of her body and psyche which had left her understandably traumatized. They had been full of sympathy because Jolinar had invaded her mind against her will, but although they had tried so hard to comprehend it, neither of them had really been able to understand why she felt such a terrible sense of loss.

It was Teal'c who'd found her sobbing inconsolably in the 'gateroom and who had told her some of the dead Tok'ra's kalesh might still exist within her. That she might be able to access it with meditation. He had tried to teach her kelno'reem, just as he had endeavored to teach it to Daniel, but although she'd struggled to attain the necessary state of tranquility, she'd never managed to reach the memories of Jolinar inside her by that route. It had taken near-death in the naqadah mines for the flashbacks to be ignited. The sight of Martouf had let loose another flood of memories and she'd realized Jolinar wasn't completely gone after all; nor completely dead because as long as Samantha Carter was alive, so was a part of Jolinar of Melkshur.

Martouf.

She knew how his lips tasted yet had never kissed him. Knew intimately and precisely how his skin felt beneath her fingertips yet had barely touched him. Knew how his passion felt, the inferno inside him no outside observer could ever have guessed existed yet she had witnessed a thousand times in their love-making. Yet they'd never made love. Had barely exchanged more than formalities.

How could she ever have a future with anyone else when there were memories embedded within her of being in love with this man? And love as Samantha Carter had never known it; four souls all intertwined; a century of passion; an intensity of feeling which even second-hand could still occasionally overwhelm her. He had unlocked more than just the floodgates to memory on that tel'tak; far too many feelings had managed to seep through as well.

She didn't know if Samantha Carter loved Martouf or not, but she did know that ever since Jolinar's memories had been awoken within her, it would be very hard for her to love anyone else. She could throw herself into a love affair, certainly, take refuge in infatuation like someone turning up the volume on a symphony to blot out that subtler and more insistent violin solo playing in her head, but she suspected that however hard she fostered them, her feelings for other men were going to burn out far more quickly than her feelings for Martouf. He was part of her legacy from Jolinar; a complicated inheritance, like a series of locked boxes left inside her which she had as yet only half-explored.

Pain thrummed through her body, white fire down her spine as the infected fluid throbbed at her spitefully. The straw could have been gravel for all the comfort it was offering her. Don't move, Sam. Keep absolutely still. As long as she didn't swallow it wouldn't hurt her throat. If she didn't breathe too deeply she wouldn't get that knife stab in her back. If she didn't flex even her little toe she wouldn't get that agonizing pain in every joint. There. All it took was absolute stillness from a body so burning with fever it kept screaming at her to twist and turn to alleviate the misery, and consciousness was almost bearable. Almost.

Think about something else. She needed to think about anything other than how sick she felt. When she painfully turned her head she saw Teal'c sitting cross-legged beside her in a state of kelno'reem, endeavoring to marshal his energies again, no doubt trying to think of a way to get them out of here.
The sunlight was gilding his profile, making him appear as though he'd been cast in bronze, the soft gleam of the golden tattoo upon his forehead so familiar and so very much a part of him it was difficult to remember it was the brand of the serpent god she was gazing at. Molten gold seared into his skin to tell the world he served a now – hopefully – dead Goa'uld. On Teal'c it seemed more like a badge of nobility than slavery. But then he was a man who could dignify everything he touched, even the emblem of Apophis. If he didn't succeed in finding an escape for them he'd go to his execution blaming himself for her death despite the fact there was no reason why he should feel responsible for keeping her safe. And as for Daniel….

Carter winced at the thought of how guilty Daniel was probably feeling. And he had a wounded and anxious-about-his-teammates Colonel O'Neill to take care of. Poor Daniel. That wasn't going to be fun. If – when, think when, Sam – they got out of this she would have to make sure he got a vacation. And not the one the Colonel kept trying to make him take – the one where Daniel would get bored out of his skull fished that lake he was always talking about in Minnesota. The fact that someone might not want to spend their vacation staring into a lake trying to catch fish who probably really didn't want to be caught, didn't seem to have occurred to the Colonel. He always mentioned it as a vacation spot for Daniel like it was the best treat he could think of. She'd once suggested that perhaps Daniel might like a holiday somewhere more like Athens, or Pompeii, or even the Land of Light so he could learn more about the Minoan culture. Perhaps the Colonel might want to go with Daniel somewhere like that and keep him company? Colonel O'Neill had looked at her as though she was insane. "This would be my leave as well as Daniel's we're talking about, Major. Why on earth would I want to spend my leave wandering around a bunch of old ruins? Anyway, the last thing Daniel needs is to be doing stuff like that in his free time. What he needs is fresh air, the great outdoors, clear blue water, and bass that grow that big…."?

She'd tried not to mind that Colonel O'Neill had never offered to take her fishing. She understood how difficult it was for a superior officer to socialize with a subordinate. Even though he went out of his way never to pull rank on anyone who didn't deserve it, the Colonel was still, when all was said and done, her superior officer. And the fact they were of different genders probably didn't help matters either. But she'd thought that after all they'd been through she was also his friend. She didn't want to go fishing on that damned lake any more than Daniel did, but all the same it would have been nice, just once, to be asked. Sometimes it felt like she was always going to be 'the girl' in this outfit.

No, it wasn't just that any more. Once upon a time she'd worried about that, but she really didn't feel her gender was a problem any longer. No, what she would have liked reassurance on now was not just that the Colonel saw her as his friend as well as his teammate, but that he still saw her as completely human despite the memories of Jolinar inside her.

In some ways Jolinar had separated her from her teammates almost as effectively as Selmak had separated her father from people like General Hammond. There was such an irony there. Of everyone she had ever known the one man she would have expected to find her relationship with a dead Tok'ra impossible to comprehend was the only one who did. While, Daniel, the person she had hoped might be able to share some of the wonder she'd felt, always flinched from it.

He had been there at once on the tel'tak when she needed him. A better brother to her than Mark had ever been or ever could be in his readiness to listen while she talked about her experience of having those memories flood her mind. She had been so glad of his sympathy and understanding then as she had been so often in the past. When she talked of the sick feeling she got when she thought of Bynarr he'd known at once what she meant. Not very surprising really. She presumed it wasn't very different from the sick feeling he got when he thought about Hathor. They'd exchanged a glance and not needed to exchange any more words as well. It was the Colonel who had made her spell it out in Martouf's hearing. There were definitely days when 'tact' wasn't exactly the Colonel's middle name.
She smiled then winced because smiling made her dry lips crack and bleed. Colonel O'Neill was someone else whose inconsistencies she'd learned to like.

Then the smile died as she thought of the look on their faces after she'd killed Seth. She'd never yet been able to control either the ribbon device or the healing device at will; both seemed to flare into life of their own accord, but nevertheless she had killed Seth, her hand and the will within her acting to send that second blast from the hand device to pile-drive the exiled Goa'uld through the concrete floor. The incredible power of it had shocked her. She had done that? She'd been left unnerved and shaken by what she was capable of, feelings not helped when she'd turned to find Daniel and the Colonel staring at her as though she was a stranger. Daniel's 'You killed him?' had certainly held no congratulation in it, and that 'Hail, Dorothy' from the Colonel had seemed to mask a whole lot of things he was trying so hard not to say, all of them to do with her damned near being a Goa'uld.

That was how he'd seen her when Machello's Goa'uld-killing inventions had been inside him, after all. Perhaps even more painful to remember, so had Janet. She'd tried to make a joke about it to Daniel afterwards and he'd been quick to understand the hurt behind her words, attempting to reassure her immediately. He'd described how he'd seen a Goa'uld going into the Colonel over that chess game they'd been playing, slither up his arm and dive in through the back of his neck, the last flick of its tail something he just had to grab even though he'd been trying so hard to pretend he was 'normal'. She'd smiled at him and pretended to feel better but the truth was it had made her feel so much worse. She knew where Daniel's hallucination came from. He'd had to stand there and watch Hathor put a Goa'uld in the Colonel. He'd made himself watch it, trying to prove to the Goa'uld who'd raped him that this wasn't hurting him, that damaging his friends wouldn't make him be her Beloved again so she might as well not bother. Carter had looked away, unable to bear the thought of watching it done. So she hadn't seen the moment when it went into Colonel O'Neill, she'd just been aware of Daniel giving that shudder of horror beside her while trying to keep his face a careful blank.

She knew Daniel had been haunted by that moment, going through the different ways he could have reacted, things he could have done, for weeks before Machello's killing device had burrowed its way under his skin, so it was hardly surprising that was what he'd seen when the hallucinations were disordering his mind. But there was a big difference between seeing a Goa'uld go into someone you cared about and someone you cared about being a Goa'uld. It was clearly a fear of Daniel's, so deeply buried it only came out when he was in the grip of psychosis, that his best friend might once again be turned into a monster while Daniel failed to save him. Equally clearly, everyone in the SGC had vivid memories of when she had appeared to be a Goa'uld, someone with terrifying strength and power, already lost to them, already the enemy. That was what Janet and the Colonel had seen when they were infected, not their friend being turned into a Goa'uld but already a Goa'uld. She wondered if in some part of themselves they would never admit to, Daniel and the Colonel were a little afraid of the woman who had once been blended with Jolinar of Melkshur, and who could kill a System Lord with literally one hand.

***

He let Daniel offer him support down the mountain, relieved to see the guy appeared a lot less frail in the sunlight. The shadows under his eyes didn't look so bad today. He wondered if Daniel really was that much fitter for what had been a fairly uncomfortable night's rest, or if it was just knowing he wasn't imminently going to be tortured to death by Onuris that was making him appear more robust to O'Neill. Either way, he looked better. Which sure as hell made O'Neill feel a lot better. He leaned on Daniel as he limped down the path and Daniel took his weight easily, so in between dreaming of Sha're, murmuring things in Abydonian, wriggling, fidgeting, dribbling into his neck, and kicking him, Daniel had obviously managed to fit in some actual sleeping as well.
"Is there any kind of Air Force procedure for what to do in the jungle?" Daniel enquired.

O'Neill looked at him in surprise. "Haven't you been on archaeological sites in the bush?"

"Not really, no. My grandfather told me about Belize but I spent most of my time in Egypt. I was in Turkey for a while, Greece, too. Let me think…. No. No rain forests."

"Well, finding a source of fresh water and then following it is usually a good idea." It didn't seem like much of a morale-booster to tell Daniel that old military adage about there being a rule of thumb about being able to either move through unfamiliar terrain or live off it but never both, so he omitted to mention that part.

"That sounds reasonable," Daniel nodded. He twisted his head around to look back up the way they'd come, squinting against the climbing sun. "It's going to get hot in a few hours."

"We'll be under the trees by then, but first –" O'Neill pointed down to the west. "Do you see what I see?"

The pool looked like something you'd pick for a holiday postcard. Water so clear he could see where the blue depths turned green from the trailing weed growing near the bottom. It was surrounded by flat stones, one much larger then the others positively inviting would-be swimmers to dive from its projecting tip. The ferny undergrowth came close enough to give a sense of privacy without overlapping the edges so closely it could hide a hungry predator.

Daniel raised an eyebrow. "Fresh drinking water?"

"Better." O'Neill tightened his grip on Daniel's elbow and began to urge him towards the limpid depths. "Somewhere you can wash."

O'Neill turned Daniel's clothes over to dry on the other side. His teammate had given them a perfunctory scrub in the pool before laying them out on the nearest flat rock, hoping the climbing sun would dry them before the presumably daily downpour arrived. They were already very nearly wearable again. O'Neill made a mental note to remind Daniel to check for scorpions, poisonous snakes, spiders, or frogs before he pulled his boxer shorts back on: there were some wounds this CO definitely drew the line at sucking.

He was still getting over that short but quite spirited argument he and Daniel had held about what one did and didn't do with water in the tropics. On approaching the pool he had duly checked for the usual signs that suggested the water was drinkable – there was plenty of green vegetation around it, there were animal tracks leading to it and leading away from it, always a good sign, and there were no animal bones. He'd then borrowed Daniel's broken glasses to channel the sun's rays to make a fire over which to boil the water. While he'd been blowing gently on a very satisfying flame, Daniel had stuck his head in the water and gulped down about a pint of the stuff before O'Neill had seen what he was doing. O'Neill had then told him why you never ever drank water from pools, damnit Daniel! Daniel had retorted that it wasn't pool water, it was river water, and anyway it tasted fine to him. And besides, in a rain forest they'd be bound to sweat like pigs and they'd dehydrate if they had to fiddle around boiling everything they drank. So there.

O'Neill had counted to ten before using the still waters of the pool as a mirror with which to shave while the water began to heat up. Despite Daniel telling him pointedly he was no bouquet garni himself, O'Neill had declined a wash in the turquoise pool. He felt his leg had endured enough excitement what with being blasted by a staff weapon, splashed by freezing cavern water, bruised by
the rock floor of the cave they'd slept in, and now warmed by the sun; getting it wet again really
didn't hold much appeal.

They had then had the argument about Daniel bathing in the pool. That one had also been brief.

"You're the one who said I stink, Jack."

"You do stink, Daniel. Which is why I think it would be a good idea for you to wash. Washing is not
the same as immersing yourself in untested water."

Already standing naked on the edge of the pool, Daniel rolled his eyes in disbelief. "We didn't test
the water on Abydos."

"This is a jungle. Do you know how many water parasites there are in jungles? Ever heard of
Bilharzia?"

Daniel's answer was to perform a perfect swallow dive into the water, before surfacing and spitting
out what looked like another pint of pool water in what O'Neill felt was deliberate provocation.

"Don't come whining to me if you get a Candiru in your urethra!" O'Neill yelled at him. "And stop
swallowing the freakin' water!"

Unfortunately, after years on digs in Egypt and then a year on Abydos, Daniel always acted as
though germs were something people made up to frighten children with and just made a face at him.
Not for the first time O'Neill thought how much easier his task would have been if it had been Daniel
struck down with the mysterious disease and Carter who'd accompanied him on this little jaunt to the
far side of the planet. Quite apart from the fact she would probably have been able to hotwire those
Goa'uld rings, she would have known about what you did and didn't do in the jungle, and if she
hadn't she would have listened to him when he damned well told her.

He automatically scanned the bush for any signs of suspicious rustling before glancing back to check
on Daniel. His teammate appeared to be reveling in the warm clean water against his skin, lying on
his back and floating dreamily across the surface of the pool, while telling him all about the cultures
the Goa'uld might appropriately have transplanted to this environment.

"...the oldest significant Mesoamerican culture and so possibly most likely candidates for
transplantation would be the Olmec whose civilization we think dates from around 1400 BC, a time
when we know the Goa'uld were definitely 'harvesting' hosts...."

O'Neill was tuning him in an out like a radio station he only half wanted to listen to; checking back
every now and then to ensure Daniel was still talking and therefore still breathing and not being
stripped clean by piranhas, suffocated by an anaconda or eaten by a jaguar, but basically leaving him
alone while he was – if not quiet – at least reasonably contented. He took out his sidearm and
checked the clip again. It definitely didn't appear to have been tampered with, suggesting whoever
had slipped it to him had been friendly. But if Harun was on their side why the hell had he sold them
down the river to Onuris? The question asked and answered itself. The prophecy. Everything came
back to that damned prophecy. Whether they lived or died might end up being totally dependent on a
thousand-year old inscription detailing events that hadn't even happened yet. It would be ironic if
Daniel ended up dead because something had been lost in translation.

"...and we know they had a number of different gods, including deities that later evolved into Tlaloc
and Quetzalcoatl, both of whom appear through Mesoamerican mythology under a variety of
different names suggesting there may have been one or two Goa'uld – or other alien entities –
resident on Earth over a significant period of...."
He felt in his pockets to assess their supply situation then went over to Daniel's vest and sorted through its contents as well. Originally Daniel's only input into the contents of his vest pockets had been to go through them with the same curiosity as a child opening a Christmas stocking, but he had since started requesting variations on the usual Air Force equipment. So as well as the extra chocolate and coffee rations there might be all kinds of other weird and wondrous things Daniel was carrying around with him. O'Neill had long since decided that as long as Daniel wasn't ditching anything essential to make room for his own stuff he was going to turn a blind eye to it.

"...and of course the Olmec, the Teotihuacans, and the Maya did all construct pyramids which, although significantly different from the Egyptian pyramids in some features do also contain some remarkable similarities to...."

O'Neill made a face as he found another squashed granola bar that had definitely seen better days, but didn't discard it. He knew from experience how difficult it could be to obtain food even from apparently lush terrain. Testing strange fruit was a slow and tedious process. Not that he would be climbing any trees with this leg to retrieve it anyway. And although he'd never actually asked Daniel what his tree-climbing skills were like he suspected they might not be up to much.

"...and we know that Hathor at least did travel from Egypt to Central America and for all we know she might have been worshipped as a goddess by both cultures...."

Daniel's vest seemed to have lost about half of its contents, possibly in the temple when the priests had taken him prisoner; whenever it had happened it was definitely weighing a little light. O'Neill delved into the first pocket. Good. Matches. Plenty of them although in his experience even plenty was never quite enough. No lighter. No magnesium firestarter. Salt tablets. Chocolate. Definitely not Air Force issue and now looking even more squashed than that granola bar, but still a good fat source. Sun screen. Something called Benadryl that was probably for Daniel's allergies. No Tetracycline, and Daniel had really been slapping on that antibiotic cream last night. They might have to ration it a little more carefully. A flare. A notebook with a page of useful gate addresses, which, going by its dog-eared appearance, Daniel had been carrying around since after their escape from Hadante. A ballpoint pen and a pencil. Some water-proofed toilet paper. No water sterilizing tablets. No potassium permanganate. No snare wire. No fish hooks. No GDO. Some bandaids, and the standard issue packet of condoms, which Daniel probably didn't even know were in his vest but would make good water bags if they lost the canteen. He doubted they were going to find another use for them on this trip.

"...Of course it's difficult to separate the Quetzalcoatl who was the enlightened leader of the Toltecs from the god Quetzalcoatl, the feathered serpent...."

"Yeah, that's always been a big problem for me, too." O'Neill tried not to roll his eyes in disbelief. He knew Daniel found this stuff fascinating but he only had to hear one of those damned unpronounceable names and his brain just didn't want to know. It was sometimes difficult to believe Daniel did this kind of thing for fun.

"...in either guise it's very difficult to imagine someone who was essentially beneficent being convincingly portrayed by a Goa'uld, but I'm definitely betting Huitzilopochtli was a Goa'uld. That was the Aztec sun god who was said to require constant nourishment with sacrificial blood taken from prisoners of war. If he wasn't continually appeased, their legend insisted the universe would be overtaken by the forces of darkness, which was why they had to keep expanding their empire to have enough victims to feed his blood lust...."

O'Neill sighed heavily. It might well turn out that some of this stuff Daniel was telling him – or attempting to tell him because he certainly wasn't listening – would turn out to be relevant. Going by
the usual information to usefulness ratio, probably about five percent of it. He needed to think about their strategy so telling Daniel to can it did have some appeal. However, hurting Daniel's feelings had no appeal whatsoever and for all he knew this was making Daniel a much happier person. O'Neill had needed to check out the constellations to know what time of day it was; maybe Daniel needed to check out his Mesoamerican cultures to see what kind of civilization they were likely to run into. You didn't keep a dog and bark yourself, so by the same criteria you didn't keep an anthropologist and not let him…anthropologize.

"...which is what makes me think it's less likely to be an Aztec civilization. At least I'm hoping so because of Xipe Totec, the vampire god, as any Goa'uld taking on that role is one we really don't want to meet. And, of course, by the time of the Spanish conquest up to 50,000 human sacrifices a year were being made to Huizilopochtli. However, the description of Quetzalcoatl being forced to depart because of the enmity of Huizilopochtli, Tlacahuepan, and Tezcatlipoca does suggest there might have been a clash between two alien cultures. If Quetzalcoatl was I don't know…an Asgard or one of Nem's race he could have been forced out due to a takeover bid made by an alliance of Goa'uld. Teal'c did tell us the Goa'uld will band together against anyone they perceive to be a common enemy so it's possible another….

Glancing back at Daniel to see if showed any signs of winding down or getting out of the water, O'Neill noticed a faint but persistent current was towing him gently to what he was thinking of as southeast. O'Neill hauled himself to his feet to explore the perimeter of the pond. Examination revealed the pool to be the result of a depression in a slow-moving stream. A steady if gentle overflow trickled over huge moss-covered stones. O'Neill judged they were probably reasonably close to the source, but they had reached this pool enough hours after dawn the water had been warmed by the sun's rays to its present acceptable temperature. He nodded in satisfaction. Not only would Daniel be much more pleasant company from here on in, they'd found their water source to follow and it was leading in pretty much the direction they had been hoping to take.

It also stood to reason that any people who the Goa'uld had brought here would have needed water to survive so by following this baby stream they stood a much better chance of finding some signs of civilization. Of course, as there seemed to be a few billion miles of rain forest in the vicinity, that civilization might not be close at hand…. O'Neill quickly dismissed that thought. Doubts weren't going to achieve anything here. Determination and optimism were definitely going to be their watchwords on this trip.

A rustling behind him, made him turn around so quickly he almost overbalanced. Damned leg. He stayed still and listened. The rustling didn't sound again but he was almost sure he sensed something or someone nearby. Keeping his gaze fixed on the place where the sound had come from and reaching for his sidearm, O'Neill said quietly, "Daniel?"

"What?"

"Time to go."

Out of the corner of his eye, O'Neill was aware of Daniel pulling himself up onto one of the flat rocks before getting to his feet, water dripping in rivulets down his naked skin. Daniel ran a hand through his hair and water droplets made tiny prisms in the sunlight. The clear water stuck to his eyelashes, trickling down his bare chest and long legs before tracing wet footprints on the warm surface of the stones. O'Neill gritted his teeth, hoping Daniel would get dressed quickly, damnit. He was all for the natives being friendly, but he wanted it to be for the right reasons. And he would have preferred it if they were both in a better position to defend themselves from any attack. Daniel might not be the best soldier in the world, but he still functioned a hell of a lot more efficiently when he was dressed.
Not looking at him and shaking out his boxer shorts before pulling them on without needing to be told, Daniel said quietly, "Company?"

"Not sure." O'Neill kept his gaze fixed on the undergrowth but nothing was moving. "Could be an animal, could be a bird, could be half the Aztec nation." It was on the tip of his tongue to say 'Get your clothes on now, Daniel,' but he bit it down. Daniel was getting dressed as fast as he could, which was admittedly at about half the speed of any other member of the SGC, but there were at least now significantly less of his teammate's assets on display. The rustling sounded again and O'Neill tightened his grip on his sidearm. He didn't want to have to kill anyone but he wasn't going to risk getting a blowpipe in the back of the neck when Carter and Teal'c needed him to be staging a rescue, not dying of curare poisoning.

As the peccary burst out of the undergrowth it took all of O'Neill's self-control not to automatically squeeze off a shot. He barely got out of the creature's way as it thundered towards the pool, jumped in and swam off. Swearing as he flexed his injured leg and tried to regain some dignity, it occurred to him that putting a bullet in that overgrown guinea pig might not have been such a bad idea, and if he and Daniel were hungry later he was going to be kicking himself. He glanced across at his teammate to see what Daniel was thinking. The younger man frowned. "I wonder what it was running from?"

O'Neill moistened his lips. "Hands up who doesn't want to hang around here to find out?"

Daniel's hand shot into the air with the speed of a born teacher's pet and despite the throbbing in his leg, O'Neill couldn't repress a smile. "Okay, Daniel: let's strategically withdraw the hell away from here….

***

Sitting beside Major Carter, Teal'c was trying to remain calm and positive but it was becoming increasingly harder. He had hoped he might have heard from Harun by now but no one had visited them to bring food or water, or – more importantly – the medicine he so desperately needed for his ill teammate. With O'Neill and Daniel Jackson beyond his reach and his protection, and Major Carter fading with every hour, Teal'c had never felt so alone.

He was sure that if he could just get to their equipment he could use the antibiotics they had left to save her. Aware that his own protection from infection had left him ignorant of the possible dangers to his companions, he had taken the time to discuss common human ailments with Janet Fraiser and their likely cures. So he was aware that a virus could not be treated with penicillin but that many other illnesses could. He believed the one currently afflicting Major Carter to be pneumonia, against which antibiotics should be effective, and he knew there was a broad-spectrum antibiotics shot among their remaining medical supplies. He also knew Major Carter needed to be kept warm, given plenty of liquids, and something to stop her temperature from spiraling ever higher. He would also have given several years of his life for something that would have stopped the pain in her spine and legs. Every time she moved – trying to escape memories of both her past and that of Jolinar of Melkshur – the action made her whimper and he would flinch in sympathy.

In the nearly three years since he had become a member of SG-1, Teal'c had learned this was the one thing he could not endure – to have to watch one of his teammate's suffering and be unable to do anything to alleviate their pain.

"Major Carter?" he said her name gently. There was not a great deal of water left but it was time she drank a little more nevertheless. By the latticed light pattern on the far wall he judged it to be late afternoon but time seemed unimportant. The deadline Onuris had set for Daniel Jackson became meaningless when Major Carter was so ill it seemed unlikely she would survive another night. He laid a hand on her forehead and her skin almost burnt his palm. This was how Ry'ac had been when
his body had been wracked by the illness O'Neill had called scarlet fever. Without the intercession of
the larval Go'auld which had once dwelt within Teal'c, Ry'ac would have died. It had almost killed
Teal'c to make his son a slave to the false gods, bound to their offspring forever for his mere survival,
but nevertheless it had saved Ry'ac's life.

There was a thought tugging at his consciousness. A possible means to save Major Carter from the
sickness destroying her. But he tried to push it away. It would not come to that. He would not take
that path. Even death –

He remembered seeing his friends shot down before his eyes by Apophis on the Nox world.
Thought of Daniel Jackson burning to death screaming for help. Of O'Neill skewered through the
shoulder by that metal spike to the wall of the 'gate room. When his friends had been hovering
perilously at the very point of death, there was nothing he would not have done to save them; to
prevent that staff weapon blast reaching Major Carter; to douse the flames devouring Daniel Jackson;
to destroy the infection killing O'Neill. The memory of their anguish in those moments still seared
him, even though in Daniel Jackson's case, there had never been any pain; never been any flames
consuming him; only the memory of his death left as a slow burn in all his teammate's memories. So,
he knew he would not be able to let Major Carter die if there was a way to save her.

But he must find a better way to save her than that.

A scuffling sound made him look up, the thin afternoon sunlight temporarily obscured by something.
Someone?

"Harun?" Teal'c called the name hopefully. He tried to make out the man's face but he was just a
silhouette, a shadow on the wall.

There was a pause before Harun answered him. "How is she?"

"Dying," Teal'c told him. "Have you the medicine I spoke of?"

"I am not sure I –"

"If you do not retrieve it quickly she will undoubtedly die."

Harun's voice was full of sorrow. "So it is written."

Although Teal'c had feared as much it still tore through him like the blast of a staff weapon to have it
confirmed. But he was rallying in seconds. "You can save her."

"It is not written that she was saved."

"I saw you put a weapon into the pocket of Colonel O'Neill. Was that written?"

There was another long pause before Harun said, "It is written that the followers of the Chosen One
gave his avatars what help they could."

"Then help us. Help Major Carter. The medicine we carried will save her. You have only to bring it
to me."

"It is written that Compassion died and was mourned by all."

Teal'c said something in his native tongue which he knew would have shocked even Bra'tac had he
overheard it. He said harshly, "Compassion already died on this world when you allowed Daniel
Jackson to enter the temple even though you knew what awaited him there. And Compassion died a
second time when you delivered myself and my companions to the Jaffa of Onuris. Major Carter, however, can still be saved."

"It is written that the Chosen One was betrayed by those who had awaited his coming. We had no choice but to deliver you to the lion guards."

"You are as much slaves to a prophecy as the priests of this temple are slaves to their false god. What difference does it make if you worship the Goa'uld or another when you are still prisoners of your own stupidity?"

"If the prophecy is never fulfilled then we shall never be free from the False God. You, of all people, must understand how important it is for us to throw off the yoke of the Goa'uld."

Teal'c felt the frustration build within him. "And if you will not save the life of Major Carter when it lies within your means to do so, you, and all your people, are not worthy of the freedom you seek."

"I have always believed freedom to be a right," Harun said quietly. "Not something that needs to be earned. It is something any human being is born deserving. Is that not so?"

Teal'c sighed, his anger abating. "It is so."

"If, by saving the life of your friend, I was to condemn every man, woman and child to slavery under the Goa'uld, would that be right?"

Teal'c wished he could look Harun in the eye and understand the importance of what he was telling him. Despite his concern the guards outside might overhear them, he raised his voice: "You cannot find freedom through fear. You are a child, Harun, clinging to your prophecy as a frightened infant clings to its mother's hand. But it is only another shackle that imprisons you. Let go of it. Drive out the Goa'uld who seek to enslave you because you know them to be false. Save the life of Major Carter because you know it to be the right thing to do. Only then will you know true freedom."

The shadow disappeared from the wall, the square of latticed light playing on the stonework to reveal a tiny lizard which ran across the surface. Teal'c closed his eyes. The sun would be sinking soon, his teammate's life ebbing as gradually yet inexorably as the light fading from the sky. There was a time when he had believed in absolutes; when the division between right and wrong had been very clear to him, perhaps because he had so often been forced to do wrong against his will. But now the boundaries between the two were blurring. He was no longer sure he had the strength to watch a friend die. Even if it was the right thing to do.

***

O'Neill had met a few mercenaries in the course of his work and as he recalled they'd all been crazier than a sack full of weasels. At the time, he'd naively presumed their personality problems had been caused by an internal struggle between their consciences and greed; thought of them as men haunted, men in denial. Men like himself. Now he was tending more towards the theory that hanging around in jungles just did that to you.

He looked around at their surroundings with ill-concealed loathing. Mountains soared in all directions, cloaked in green, their summits covered by a permanent pall of mist. They were simultaneously too high and too low; the air still a little thin for comfort yet the terrain hemming them in on all sides. The stream they were following curled and writhed like a Goa'uld in search of a host; there were only scattered glimpses of the sky. For most of the time they were surrounded by greenery dripping and rustling down the backs of their necks. The noise was constant. The yelling of howler monkeys and the screeching of birds he never got to see because the damned forest obscured
everything. Lianas trailed from every impossibly tall tree, crisscrossing each animal track they managed to find like giant cobwebs, tripping the unwary and the lame with gleeful persistence. He was getting a headache from the way the sunlight first dazzled then disappeared like a strobe light at a disco every time the trees rustled; illumination slanting through the throttling foliage to bathe a clearing in sulfurous brilliance one minute and then leaving them to stumble through cobalt gloom the next.

They needed a machete apiece, and they had a sidearm and a pocketknife. Creepers and undergrowth tore at them spitefully. Every trail they tried to follow was so narrow one or the other of them was constantly catching a foot in the encroaching undergrowth and stumbling. All the colors were too bright; the vegetation too lush; the trees too damned tall. The green vines which coiled around the tree trunks were festooned with flowers overblown before they were barely out of bud and sticky from overflowing nectar; even the buzzing of the trillion unrecognizable insects was too loud. Everything in the whole damned jungle was as garish and dangerous as a poisonous snake….

"Do you want to rest?"

Daniel propped him up against a tree and O'Neill dragged some air back into his lungs. So much for Daniel's bath. They were both dripping with sweat again, their t-shirts soaked and clinging to their skin. Still, one thing about being in a rain forest there was always a tree to lean against. Right now he couldn't think of much else it had going for it.

"There's another of those big blue butterflies."

The brilliant-colored insect fluttered past, sunlight pouring through its indigo wings, while he watched Daniel watching it in fascination. Daniel said thoughtfully, "Do you think the Goa'uld brought all the flora and fauna here when they brought the people? Because if they did, the idea of entities chosen by a deity to safeguard breeding pairs of each species could have its roots in the Goa'uld terraforming other planets to harness hosts. This could be the basis for the story of Noah's Ark, right here."

Daniel craned his neck to watch the butterfly disappear into the jungle. "You know we really ought to have a botanist and a zoologist come and take a look at this place. There could be variants here unknown on earth. There could be animals still surviving here that have become extinct on earth since the Goa'uld left. A sort of inter-galactic Madagascar."

O'Neill sighed and put a hand up to his aching head. "Daniel, you know I'm fond of you, right?"

Daniel blinked in surprise. "Right."

"So if I should – by some chance – at some point in today's travels, tell you to shut the hell up before I maim you, you'll know I don't mean anything by it, right?"

Daniel considered the point. "Um – okay, I think. Why? Are you…likely to?"

O'Neill rested the back of his head against the creeper-ridged trunk of the tree and gazed up at the shimmering canopy, splinters of sunlight finding their way through the swaying leaves to sting his eyes. Grabbing another much-needed breath, he said, "It's a definite possibility." He met Daniel's troubled gaze and grimaced. "Look, I'm just warning you in advance, I hate this freakin' jungle, I hate being on the wrong side of the planet from Carter and Teal'c, my leg hurts, and you're the only guy within yelling distance. Just – don't take it personally if I have to vent a little later."

"So you want – advance absolution for being a jerk if the urge should come upon you?"
"Yes."

Daniel looked at him for a moment and then shrugged. "Okay. Consider yourself absolved." He glanced around, obviously trying to get his bearings and equally obviously failing. "We should keep moving."

Sighing, O'Neill pushed himself off the tree trunk and put his arm around Daniel's shoulders. He hated being dependent on someone else, but he also didn't want to break that wound open again. Things festered so much faster near the equator.

"At least the air isn't so thin now we're lower," Daniel tightened his grip as the wounded man stumbled on a creeper. "And if Onuris was planning to send some Jaffa after us when no one was looking – which doesn't seem outside the bounds of possibility – they're going to have a hell of a job finding us down here. And –"

"And thank you, Pollyanna." O'Neill winced as he felt that reproachful glance laser his cheekbone. "Sorry. I just don't see how any kind of significant civilization could possibly exist in a place this. This is mud hut country. No one who lives here – supposing anyone lives here – is going to have developed any technology we can use."

"Jack, the Incan empire stretched for 3,500 miles from northern Ecuador to central Chile. These were not people who lived in mud huts. They had vast cities built of stones so perfectly cut that even hundreds of years later explorers couldn't find any gaps for a vine to get a foothold between them. The Incan city of Machu Picchu lies two thousand miles up an almost unclimbable mountain and covered more than –"

"What technology did they develop? Airplanes? Tanks? Time machines that mean we can get back to the temple before we've even left it?"

Daniel cleared his throat. "Um…no. Actually they didn't even have the wheel but –"

"No wheel?"

Daniel indicated their surroundings. "What good would it have done them to invent the wheel, Jack? Even if we found a sports car parked around the next bend in the river with the keys in the ignition, how could we drive it in this kind of terrain? People develop the skills and the technologies they need to evolve within their own culture and environment."

O'Neill held up a finger, speaking very clearly so there could be no possible room for misunderstanding. "Okay, from your knowledge of…Mesoamerican cultures tell me something which anyone likely to live in a place like this might have developed that could conceivably be of some use to us in getting back to Carter and Teal'c."

"Well, this isn't really Mesoamerican terrain, it's more like the Andes and the Amazon basin, suggesting the transplanted populace are more likely to be –" Obviously seeing the look in O'Neill's eyes, Daniel cleared his throat. "Okay. Useful stuff the Inca developed. Well, they made roads that went straight through the mountains, and they um…." Daniel sighed, closing his eyes. "Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"Jack, I don't know what you want me to say."

"If there's no hope of finding anything that will help us, what the hell are we doing here? At least in those caves we had a possible way back!"
"What choice did we have?" Daniel countered reasonably. "You said it yourself – fiddling around with Goa'uld technology is not something you or I are any good at. We could have stayed there for a month and made no progress whatsoever. We have to use the skills we have. And you know how to survive in a jungle and I know how to get information from any indigenous people or remnants of their civilization. We have to do what we can with what we've got, Jack."

O'Neill sighed. Daniel was being so patient with him, willing him not to be angry or miserable when it would be so much more useful if he could just be positive. The anger evaporated like raindrops on a hot sidewalk. He couldn't help noticing the way Daniel had said 'you know how to survive in a jungle' so confidently; it obviously not occurring to Daniel even for an instant that he might not know how to take care of them both in a jungle. You couldn't buy that kind of faith. You earned it, or you had it given to you even when you hadn't earned it, and it carried a price. And right now the price was to stop being pissy with Daniel just because he was the only person around for him to vent his frustration on at not being able to rescue the rest of his team. Suck it up, Jack.

He rested a hand lightly on Daniel's shoulder and gave it a gentle squeeze. "You're right. We do what we can with what we've got." He glanced around at their terrain again. "We... follow the river until we come to signs of civilization and we hope the Goa'uld have left us something useful. It's a good plan."

"Well, it's the only one we have right now." Daniel gave him a flicker of a smile. "So even if it sucks, we're kind of stuck with it."

***

She was trapped in this memory and she couldn't get out.

"Just tell me one day we're going to be okay.... Just tell me one day we're going to be okay."

But she'd already forgiven him. Hadn't she? Hadn't she told him it wasn't his fault? That she didn't blame him. How could she withhold her forgiveness from him when he needed it so much? Mark was wrong, he was so wrong. She'd said it herself: that his career had always mattered more to him than they did, but in her heart she'd understood. The part of her that wanted to do more than just stare into the eye of Eta Carinae, the part that wanted to walk on the surface of other worlds, couldn't fail to understand how a man could love both his work and his family. She'd tried so hard to hate him; the military; the devotion to duty which had kept him so late at work her mother had given up on him and taken a cab home; the devotion to duty which had effectively killed her mom. And for a while she'd almost succeeded. But she'd only been faking what Mark had been feeling. She couldn't hate what she could all too easily comprehend. And when he'd asked not for her forgiveness but for the promise she might one day be able to forgive him that brittle rage keeping the grief at bay, keeping him at bay, had crumpled.

Coughs tore at her, stabbing her in the back with their intensity, something that looked like blood spattering onto the hand she put up. She wiped off her palm in revulsion. Her father needed her right now. She couldn't afford to be ill.

She could have blamed him more easily for always loving her best. Although he'd tried not to play favorites, she'd always known she was the one he preferred. Knowledge carrying a heavy guilt tax. Why had he always made her his favorite child anyway? Because she was the girl? Because she was the one who was so like him despite all her efforts to deny it? For whatever reason, he had been guilty of loving her more than her brother, making her party to a crime against Mark she'd never wanted to commit.

It was so hot in here. Sulfur clawing at her throat, searing her every time she swallowed; despair
gnawing into her heart like termites in a timber yard, heat licking through her tendons, muscles turned to chewed string, those damned coughs that tore her chest and felt like someone was stabbing her in the back. Oh God, Apophis had told her he would kill her father if she wouldn't tell him the code…. The heat was too much. Dreams wrapping themselves around her mind like memories…. Waking to a different heat, brain slurring like a drunk's serenade. Daniel. So grubby. Very pale beneath the dirt. He looked different without his glasses. She thought they made him look vulnerable; a part of him which could be broken by a squeeze from one bullying hand. But now she realized he looked vulnerable without them as well; blue eyes too exposed, and because this was Daniel, every thought too exposed as well. He was telling her Apophis had lied. Her father was still alive. Oh thank God, thank…..

"They brought you back and took Jack."

Oh Daniel, don't say it like that, like you thought you'd never see me alive again and every second I was away ate into your soul like an acid spill, like it ripped out your guts when they took the Colonel and it's tearing you to pieces even now. Don't let Apophis see how much you care. Sometimes I worry all he'd need to do is hold a gun to one of our heads...The Colonel will be okay. The Colonel has to be okay because we'd all be lost without him. And no one more lost than you....

Don't tell him that. He knows we're all he has now. He doesn't need reminding. Daniel, he'll come back, you'll see. And if they take you, they'll bring you back as well because I damned well won't let them do anything else. With the Colonel out of action, I'm next in command and I will get you out of here, Daniel, I swear. I'll get us all out, somehow. Alive. In a minute. When my head stops swimming. I just need to think…

Dad?

He was calling her; she had to go to him. Had to make him hold on, somehow.

"Major Carter?"

She awoke with a gasp to find herself cradled in Teal'c's arms. There was so much comfort in that strong chest against her back. He was offering her water, brackish, almost as discolored as the stuff they'd had to drink in the naqadah mines when Daniel…

She coughed again, wincing as it hurt her in so many places, wasting the water she'd tried to swallow as it spattered onto her chest. "Daniel?" Hadn't he been there just a minute ago?

"Daniel Jackson and Colonel O'Neill are not here."

"No, Apophis took the Colonel. Daniel told me." She looked around for her father. It was so dark in here. It hadn't been that dark before. And where had all the heat gone? Her sensitized skin was flinching from the chill air, trying to evade it. "Dad?"

"Your father is not with us, Major Carter. He is with the Tok'ra."

'With the Tok'ra.' She was glad she knew what it meant or she might have thought it was the Chulakian way to say 'with the angels'. Mom was with the angels now. Except she didn't believe in angels. Never had. Nereem telling her she looked like an angel. She wondered how he was now. How Schröedinger was now. If they were happy living with the Nox…

God, it hurt so much when she coughed; it felt like someone was taking a flame-thrower to her lungs from the inside. The sand had tasted just like this in Desert Storm. The baking heat of Abydos had made her think of a war zone and she'd been taken aback by her own conditioning. Once upon a
time dunes had meant vacation time to her; a place to build sandcastles and paddle in the sea; now they seemed to signify the wreckage of a crashed 'copter, the stink of spilled gasoline in the seconds before it ignited. How the hell had that happened? How did you get back to the sandcastles again? Thinking of the look in the Colonel's eyes on P8X-873 she guessed you probably never did.

Wasn't the Colonel back yet? Daniel would be so worried. She'd better reassure him.

"Daniel?"

"Daniel Jackson is not here."

Teal'c had told her that before but she knew he was mistaken. Daniel was around here somewhere, probably huddled over in the far corner hugging himself and imagining the worst. She ought to tell him the Colonel would be fine. Everything would be fine. She'd find a way out of here. It was her fault they were in this mess; they'd let themselves be cast into hell for her sake. Maybe she'd been wrong about Bynarr, but even though their escape plan had failed, they knew where the rings were now. She was going to get them out of here.

Water. Teal'c was helping her to drink. For such a strong man his touch was so gentle, the way he was stroking her sweat-dampened hair back from her forehead, holding the wooden cup at just the right angle so she could sip without choking. Oh, although it hurt so much to swallow, that water was wonderfully cool against her burning throat. Another sip, and another. She could have drunk five times as much but she'd better pretend her thirst was assuaged. Had to leave some for the others.

"Thanks, Teal'c." Her voice was so hoarse she hardly recognized it. "Is the Colonel back yet?"

There was an odd pause before he answered her. "Not yet, Major Carter."

"Tell Daniel not to worry. Apophis wants information. We're his ticket out of here, he can't afford to kill us." There was a lot more she wanted to say but it hurt to talk. She squeezed Teal'c's hand. "I'll get us out of here. Just have to...sleep, but then I swear..., Tell Daniel..."

That memory was waiting for her, a continuous loop. Stuck in the bedroom, in her past, in her grief, with the ever-present knowledge behind it her father was dying by degrees elsewhere even as he was asking for her forgiveness here. As she drifted back into the nightmare, she remembered that Teal'c hadn't been with them on Netu. Teal'c had been on the tel'tak. They'd got it wrong somehow, slipped into an alternate universe where things hadn't happened as they should. But if that was the case. If Teal'c wasn't there to redirect the transporter beam; to whisk them away from the fireball the Tok'ra were going to make of Netu; then how could they ever get home...?

***

They made camp in a clearing. The rain had arrived, presumably on schedule, at approximately 4pm and continued for the next three hours. They had sheltered beneath something whose huge leaves had kept at least some of the downpour off them, but neither of them could exactly be described as 'dry' and O'Neill decided a fire was a necessity. It was still less than twenty-four hours since he'd been worrying about Daniel getting pneumonia after all. The wood was mostly mossy and green; everything starting to rot apparently two minutes after it hit the forest floor, but along with the smoke and the sparks it did also provide a little comforting warmth.

He'd checked around for leeches and found they were still too high up for the ground to be damp enough to harbor them, making building a shelter to keep them off the earth less of a necessity. He didn't want Daniel and himself blood-sucked and bitten all night but on the other hand sending Daniel off to cut bamboo which could split into dagger sharp fragments, or to gather barbed-tip atap...
fronds which could rip the clothes from your back and the skin from your bones, just made his hair stand on end at the prospect of the potential blinding and maiming which might result. Of course Daniel might turn out to be very dexterous at building raised platforms from the local greenery, but on the other hand he might not. O'Neill told himself the smoke from the green wood would keep off the bugs and hoped for the best.

Daniel had collected quite a haul of fruit and nuts throughout the day. He had managed to climb a couple of trees with an agility the wounded O'Neill had envied, shaking the branches so the fruit would fall – in theory for O'Neill to catch although more often they had either hit the ground or landed on his head – and usually dislodging some enormous orange centipedes at the same time; at least one of which had then had to be fished out of the back of O'Neill's neck. Daniel now laid his spoils out on the ground by the fire and turned them over curiously. "So, do you think these are safe to eat?"

O'Neill looked at him in disbelief. "You told me you recognized them."

"I thought I did. I'm not so sure now."

"Daniel it takes five hours to test whether or not a new fruit or vegetable is poisonous, that's why I told you not to bother picking anything you didn't know for sure was edible. Did you make sure everything you picked had a leaf to help with identification?"

Daniel gave him a reproachful look. "Yes. I know that." He held up a lemon-colored but orange-shaped fruit. "This looks okay, doesn't it?"

O'Neill took the proffered fruit and examined it without enthusiasm. He was pretty rusty at this and could have done with someone for company who hadn't spent most of his formative years in Egypt. It had been very enlightening to hear that camel dung burned well if you were short of fuel in hot climates but given that they were stuck in a tropical rainforest it wasn't a whole lot of help. He gazed at the fruit more closely, something tickling the back of his memory. Oval leaves in opposite pairs; reddish-yellow orange-shaped fruit…. O'Neill gazed across at Daniel and then deliberately hurled the fruit into the bushes. "That's strychnine, Daniel. Very useful if we had some rats we wanted to kill. Less useful if we don't want to die in horrible agony."

After a pause Daniel said, "I'm good at finding water in the desert."

O'Neill sighed heavily. "I should have shot that damned peccary." He looked back at the pile of food. "Okay, that looks like cashew nuts but as far as I remember you have to peel and cook them, and as a guy in my old unit I had seen near went blind steaming them, I'm going to chuck those too. That's mango, we can eat that. That looks like pawpaw, we can eat that as well, just don't get the sap in your eyes. And that's guava, we don't need to cook it and it's got plenty of Vitamin C. Or D. Vitamin something anyway that's good. There's some vegetation by the river that looked hopeful, stuff we can pull up and boil. Can't remember the names of it all but I'll recognize it when I see it…."

He gave the pep talk automatically: There were fish in the river, monkeys in the trees, edible vines, edible fruits, edible nuts, they also had chocolate and a couple of MREs so food definitely wasn't a problem just as long as they were careful and didn't make themselves sick eating anything poisonous. Yadda, yadda, yadda. Him and Daniel starving to death was not exactly their main concern at the moment. Him and Daniel being thousands of miles away from where they needed to be to save Teal'c and Carter from certain death was their main concern, and unfortunately that couldn't be solved by the successful identification of a mango.

O'Neill examined the last few fruits without enthusiasm. "They look slightly less toxic than the granola bar in your vest pocket, but other than that I wouldn't like to commit myself. Better be safe
than sorry." He tossed them into the bushes and handed Daniel a pawpaw.

As Daniel accepted the fruit, he said thoughtfully, "Jack, what were you thinking about this morning? I was watching you for ten minutes and it was like you'd gone into a trance or something."

O'Neill shrugged. "I was just thinking about your worshippers and their prophecy, and I don't think we can put a whole lot of faith in some screwed-up version of the Ten Commandments that has *me* down as the smart one."

Daniel didn't even blink. "Why not?"

"Oh come on, Daniel. I know my limitations and so do you, and I know the only member of this team who isn't likely to get an invitation from MENSA."

"You think I'm clever?"

O'Neill looked at the younger man in surprise. It wasn't like Daniel to fish for compliments. He shrugged. "Yeah. Sure."

"Good. Because I am."

The ironic little smile playing around Daniel's mouth as he said it was so endearing O'Neill couldn't help smiling as well.

"And so is Sam. And so is Teal'c. Right?"

No argument from him. "Right."

"But when you've been thinking about how smart we all are and how dumb you are by comparison, it's never occurred to you to wonder why we all do what you say?"

"Oh yeah, nothing warms my heart faster than when I say 'Daniel, we're leaving' and you say, 'In a minute, Jack, I just have to look at these squiggles first.'"

Daniel did have the grace to look discomfited. "Usually do what you say."

"Yeah, right, there's the sign of a good leader: when his team usually does what he says more or less around the time he tells them to do it."

"I thought you liked independent thought."

"I do."

"You told me once that just because I was now part of a military operation it didn't mean I had to stop thinking for myself."

"Did I? Christ, I wonder what I'd been drinking." Seeing the younger man looking crestfallen, O'Neill half-smiled. "Okay, Daniel, I get the point you're making."

Daniel pursed up his lips. "I don't think you do. I don't think you have any idea how much respect I have for your opinion. Or how impressed I am by all the stuff you know."

O'Neill raised an eyebrow. "Such as?"

"Where's north?"
Unhesitatingly, O'Neill pointed past Daniel's left shoulder back up the way they'd come. "There."

"How many Jaffa did Onuris have in the temple with him?"

"In the temple? About sixty."

"See, I didn't know if there were twenty or two hundred. What weapons were they carrying?"

"Only staff weapons. No zats. Didn't you notice?"

"No," Daniel met his gaze evenly. "I didn't need to notice because I knew you would. I didn't bother looking to see where the sun came up or went down either because I knew you would. I didn't check out our provisions. I didn't work out how much water we had or how long it would last us, or when we needed to start rationing it. I didn't check how much ammunition we'd brought. I didn't –"

"Okay, you made your point. I got you. We all do what we're best at."

"Yes, with the minor difference that we the rest of us do what we're best at and we do what you tell us. Maybe not all the time and maybe not right away, but we still do what you say at least ninety five percent of the time and given that we're all so smart you might want to take my word for it that we have a very good reason for following you, Jack. And it has a hell of a lot to do with the fact that we believe in you and we know you never let us down."

O'Neill felt his jaw tense, automatically swatting at a buzzing insect that tried to investigate his ear. This wasn't a conversation he really wanted to be having right now. Or ever. He wasn't sure how he felt about getting affirmation from Daniel. Daniel was someone you gave affirmation to, told him he hadn't screwed up, things weren't his fault, he'd done good; showed him how much you trusted his judgment, told him you believed in him. You didn't get affirmation from Daniel. Except he did, of course. He got affirmation from Daniel every day when Daniel trusted him the way Daniel did. No one had ever trusted him like Daniel except…, Except Charlie. His son had always known Dad was there, Dad was strong, brave – wrong sometimes, when he made you go to bed too early when he should let you stay up and watch the rest of the movie, or made you come home when you were playing with your friends – but apart from that Dad was generally right about most things. And the main thing was Dad would keep you safe. Always.

Always.

He heard the shot echoing and winced. When he looked across at Daniel, the younger man had that stricken expression he knew only too well, Daniel wondering what he'd done wrong this time, wondering how he'd put that look on his friend's face. O'Neill winced again and stretched out a hand. He patted Daniel gently on the shoulder. "Thanks, Daniel."

"For what?" said Daniel quietly, his whole body language tense again.

Too many mines in this field, O'Neill waved a hand. "I don't know. Lots of things."

"Scaring the shit out of you? Turning your hair gray? Stranding us in a rain forest on the wrong side of an alien planet?"

"Daniel, there may be days when I say stuff to the contrary, but there has never been a minute since you came back from Abydos when I haven't been grateful for your friendship, and I need you to know that. It'll be something for us both to hang onto the next time I feel an overpowering urge to hit you."

"Oh." Daniel looked both pleased and embarrassed O'Neill was diverted to notice; lowering his gaze
self-consciously as he automatically put some more fruit in his mouth. He couldn’t have appeared more disconcerted if O’Neill had just invited him to the High School prom. Daniel murmured, "Thank you," so low O’Neill almost couldn’t hear it, and he was reminded again just how much his opinion mattered to Daniel. It seemed so unlikely a guy this clever would give a damn what someone like him thought he forgot that important truth from time to time.

He realized he still had his hand on Daniel's shoulder and squeezed it. "We'd better get some sleep. I'll take the first watch, okay? I'll wake you in a couple of hours."

Daniel nodded and lay down next to the fire. O'Neill put his back against a tree, very aware of the rain forest rustling behind him like a hundred anacondas were slithering towards them slowly. He knew they should both be thinking positively; he should be reminding himself of everything he knew about survival in the bush, and Daniel should probably be mentally reviewing his lost Amazonian tribes again. But looking across at Daniel's face where it was so oddly illuminated by the spitting fire, he recognized that expression only too well and he knew Daniel, like himself, was thinking about Carter and Teal'c, wondering if either one of them was still alive; how long it would be before they found out what had become of them. If they ever would.

***

When he closed his eyes Teal'c saw again the Goa'uld who was murdering his friend, his fingers tightening instinctively on the staff weapon he held; the instant when it charged vibrating down the length of the staff to send a faint tremor into him. Daniel Jackson would die if he did not fire. The wife of Daniel Jackson would die if he did die. Even now his memory of the instant when the blast had ripped through Sha're still made him flinch inside. He saw the blast punch through silk and flesh and muscle and bone; saw the glowing triumph of Amaunet turn to a blank stare of surprise that a goddess could die. Saw Sha're's consciousness flicker briefly like a candle just before it was snuffed out. The decision he had made in Amaunet's tent had been the right one. He had always known it, now as then, without any doubt. But sometimes knowing you were right was not enough to alleviate guilt. Daniel Jackson would undoubtedly have died without his intervention; yet Daniel Jackson had undoubtedly suffered terribly because of it. He had saved his friend's life at the cost of his friend's grief. Killed so much hope, so many longed for possibilities, in the instant when he had chosen to send Amaunet and her host to their deaths...

It was the darkest point of the night now; clouds obscuring even the starlight, leaving only the faintest gleam by which he could keep watch over his companion. If Harun had been going to return, he would surely have done so by now.

Major Carter had times of lucidity, would awaken, ask for water which he would give her, ignoring his own thirst to ensure there was enough of the brackish fluid to replace at least some of the liquid she was losing as her temperature climbed higher and higher. They had managed to converse quite intelligently about their situation at various intervals throughout the day and night, but each time she awakened there would be that blurry transition from her fever-sleep to waking. She would look at him blankly and hardly seem to know who he was, would ask again where Colonel O'Neill and Daniel Jackson were before he would remind her of their situation and some clarity would return to her thoughts. She was beginning to dry up like a fallen leaf as the fever sucked liquid from her body, leaving all her joints inflamed so that any movement hurt her. She would be shaking with cold one minute and burning with heat the next, while the coughs were torturing her, growing stronger as she grew weaker. Soon. Perhaps very soon, he was going to have to make the hardest decision of his life.

Looking down at Major Carter as she tossed and turned in the straw, murmuring names of Tok'ra none of them had ever met, recoiling from memories of battles she had never witnessed, Teal'c felt
the familiar chill pervaded him he had felt so many times in the past. A man with one leg, balanced awkwardly on a makeshift crutch, holding out his hands to ask for death; women and children crying in the background but one child's voice louder than all the others, a child crying 'Father!' As Teal'c had once cried out as his own father was murdered before his eyes by Cronos. Now he must either play Cronos' part or many more would die.

He flinched as the memory seared him of the staff weapon blast cutting down the crippled man, the child's anguish, those tears of disbelief and horror as he threw himself upon his father's corpse. He knew O'Neill and Daniel Jackson would see this as a greater crime, but the alternative was to stand back and watch his teammate die. As he bent over the delirious woman, Teal'c decided that anything was better than letting Major Carter die. Even this.

***

Daniel was asleep. Stirring a little from time to time but apparently lulled by the sound of water rushing over stones into something approaching peaceful sleep. The old water-over-stones routine always made him want to piss, but it clearly didn't take Daniel that way, and this was the most relaxed O'Neill had seen him in a long time. Of course he was probably just dog-tired from helping O'Neill limp through the jungle for however many hours. You had to be pretty wasted not to notice the howler monkeys exercising their throat sacs, not to mention all those rustlings in the undergrowth doing their best to sound like really big snakes.

O'Neill tossed another log onto the fire. It tried to spit it back at him, choking on moss, sending up a green-tinted flame, thick with sparks and smoke. Maybe this blaze would tell the natives where they were, but it might also keep off the predators, and he had a feeling a jungle this size was bound to contain a few predators. He hadn't done battle with the System Lords for all this time to end up getting bitten by a Bushmaster or eaten by a jaguar, that was damned certain. When the smoke from the rotting wood caught at his throat, the thoughts of Carter and Teal'c he was trying to keep at bay elbowed themselves to the front of his mind. Was she still alive or had the fever killed her? Whatever that illness was it hadn't looked as though it would just burn out by itself. Without medicine she would surely…. No. Not one of his team. Not the best goddamned Air Force officer he'd ever served with. He wasn't going to lose Carter, or Teal'c, or Daniel, they were going to find a way out of this stinking jungle and….

He'd seen malaria before and it wasn't that. Not Dengue fever either. Or Yellow fever. It could be Legionnaire's disease…but no, it had come on too fast. Possibly diphtheria but she'd have been inoculated against that. Except whatever it was had probably mutated from its original earth strain and so their immunity might not hold. Which meant even if Teal'c could get hold of some antibiotics they might not work – or they might be extra efficient because the germ infecting her had never come up against penicillin before and had no defenses against it. It was probably just luck it hadn't affected the rest of them. Or else it was close to a strain doing the rounds on Abydos and Daniel had more immunity. He'd spent some time on Abydos himself, and Teal'c had Junior, of course. But Carter had only spent a couple of hours on Abydos, so perhaps that was why she'd got sick when they hadn't – or else she'd just been coughed on by someone who had it while they hadn't.

The fire sparked again and O'Neill reached across to brush a cinder from Daniel's ankle before it singed him. The younger man barely stirred and when O'Neill bent his head to see his face better by the firelight, he saw a smile tugging at Daniel's mouth.

Dreaming of Abydos no doubt. Lost happiness. The scent of your wife's hair, the feel of it brushing against your skin, her lips against yours, her fingers cupping your face, her hunger for you a gift you could never get used to however many times she told you and showed you how desirable you were
to her it still made the breath catch in your throat when you saw that look in her eyes…. Oh yeah. He could definitely relate.

Daniel had accused him of not taking his marriage to Sha're seriously, and he'd had to swallow down a retort about how Daniel hadn't seemed to be taking it that seriously himself when he was making nice with Shyla after that freakin' sarcophagus had sucked all the sense out of his head. Could have said too that maybe it was a little hard to take a marriage seriously when the groom got married without even knowing he'd done it to a woman he hadn't exchanged a word with. And that one year of being married to a chief's daughter when you were the savior of her entire world wasn't exactly the same as trying to make a go of it when you had mortgage payments to worry about; not to mention a job you couldn't talk about; long periods of separation; a teething baby; in-laws; temptations; all the usual stuff that real married couples had to deal with….

Real married couples? Maybe Daniel had a point. When it came to the long periods of separation, he guessed Daniel pretty much had him licked. Four months didn't really match up to two and a half years after all. And Daniel probably knew what coping with in-laws was like. Kasuf was a great guy but he was from a very different culture and although he'd always seemed to cut Daniel a lot of slack, he expected there had been disagreements. Kasuf was definitely of the school that believed a daughter did what her father told her while Daniel oh-so-wasn't so there had probably been the odd ideological difference there.

O'Neill shifted his position, stretching out his injured leg, resting his back against a convenient tree. One thing about being stuck in the middle of a godforsaken rainforest – always a tree around when you needed one. He estimated he'd now pissed against seven different varieties of hardwood. He'd have to try for some new species tomorrow.

Damn. His teeth had been gritted for so long his jaw was in danger of seizing up. He needed to think about something other than Carter dying of fever and Teal'c being blasted to death by lion guards. Anything had to be better than that. Almost anything anyway – He flinched at the sound of the shot echoing, he and Sara exchanging that single agonized glance, running up the stairs, opening the door, the blood, his child's face. His dead child's face.

"Sha're…"

O'Neill jerked his head up as a log cracked and spat sparks onto his boot. Had he drifted off?

"Sha're…?"

As Daniel stirred, O'Neill hauled himself painfully to his feet, using a handy liana for support, the coarse tendrils tickling his palm as he did so. He limped over to where Daniel was lying and reached down to put a hand on the back of his head. "Shshh, Daniel. Go back to sleep."

Daniel turned over and looked up at him blearily. "Isn't it my watch?"

"No."

The younger man was trying to focus on his wrist. "Yes, it is. That's three hours."

O'Neill looked at his own watch in disbelief. "Since when has twenty-five minutes equaled three hours?"

"You need your sleep." Daniel sat up and nodded his head in the direction of O'Neill's leg. "Can you imagine what Janet would say if she knew you'd been limping about on that leg all day? Don't you remember what she said when we got back from Netu?"
O'Neill folded his arms. "That isn't how keeping watch works."

"Well, it should be."

O'Neill opened his mouth to give Daniel a lecture and then closed it again. Daniel was never going to be able to wrap his mind around the whole military we-do-it-this-way-because-that's-the-way-it's-done thing. And if he was honest he didn't really want him to. He changed tack. "And I'm just fascinated to know how Fraiser's going to react to you being shokmarred. I expect that will be ten weeks of psychotherapy before she lets you out on another mission. Not to mention lots of invasive and probably quite painful tests."

Daniel darted him a sideways look. "Jack, we can't hide your leg from Janet, I mean you have a big burn hole in your pants, not to mention a pretty conspicuous wound in your leg, but…"

"But?"

"There's really no reason for her to find out about the shokmar business, is there? You know how she fusses about things like that."

Daniel's best pleading look. Oh yeah. Not bad at all, Dannyboy. Seen better, but not many and most of those from you. O'Neill raised an eyebrow. "Fusses over you getting yourself horribly tortured to the point your mind snaps under the strain of it? Yes, she's funny like that. So am I actually."

"I don't even remember it."

"I do." He hadn't meant to sound so grim but that flinch from Daniel told him he'd failed.

Daniel ran a hand through his hair. "Jack, you might as well get some sleep. I just keep having bad dreams anyway."

"And you think I won't?" O'Neill gave Daniel his best don't-bother-arguing-because-you're-not-going-to-change-my-mind hardass Colonel look. "I will wake you in two and a half hours."

And that look obviously had a little mileage left in it because Daniel was shooting him a reproachful glance but he was lying back down again. "Complete waste of time," he muttered. "I'm not going to be able to sleep anyway."

O'Neill timed it on his watch; three circular sweeps of the second hand and Daniel was dreaming of Sha're again. Sometimes they knew each other too damned well.

As he settled himself back against that convenient tree he couldn't help thinking of Carter and Teal'c. He wondered what they were dreaming of right now. He wondered if either of them was still alive to dream.

***

Teal'c sat cross-legged, his back pressed against the chill stone, seeking strength from within for the task which lay ahead. The sun was coming up slowly, a pattern of pink-tinted light playing on the wall beside his head. Soon the sunlight would glide slowly across his skin, reflecting the emblem of Apophis on his forehead. Since reading the Bible of the Tau'ri he had often wondered if the mark of Cain had been the brand of some departed First Prime of a forgotten Goa'uld. There were so many planets he had visited through the Stargate where the sight of that emblem was enough to send people running from him in fear. He had a hundred different screams in his memory; different pitches for different kinds of terror. The fear of death; of pain; of torture; of watching a loved one murdered; screams of those failing slowly with their guts unraveling or cut down so fast their shriek was sliced
off half-cried, lodged in their throats forever yet still echoing in his ears.

In a few minutes, light would spill across his chest to gild the hair of the friend dying in his arms. Her breath was labored now, each inhalation an effort sending a stab of pain to her back. It hurt her so much when she coughed, and she coughed so often. It might be pneumonia. He knew the variants and the symptoms, knew which ones needed penicillin, and which needed erythromycin or tetracycline. O'Neill had been brought back with pneumonia as well as a compound fracture to the leg, a cracked rib, and first stage hypothermia after they had found him and Major Carter in Antarctica. Teal'c had insisted on sitting by his bedside until he was sure he was out of danger.

Doctor Fraiser had ordered Daniel Jackson out of the infirmary, despite all his protests and pleading, on the grounds he looked as though he hadn't slept in a month, but she had allowed Teal'c to stay, giving him a medical book to occupy him. That was the first time he'd realized just how many diseases his teammates could contract.

He had read until evening had fallen when she had taken the book from him, expression affectionate and exasperated at the same time. "Don't worry, Teal'c. Not even Colonel O'Neill and Daniel could work their way through an entire medical encyclopedia. You don't have to concern yourself with any of these illnesses. That's my job. Just be glad you've got your symbiote."

Daniel Jackson had come back every hour, stubbornly refusing to rest until Doctor Fraiser had taken pity on him and let him lie down on a bed in the infirmary where he could see for himself his teammates really were safe and alive. He had been asleep thirty seconds after his head had hit the pillow. Teal'c had set there with the heavy book on his lap, listening to the sound of his teammates' breathing, thinking how valuable and how very vulnerable they were.

When Major Carter stirred and coughed onto the back of her hand the sputum was rust-colored, blood-tinged. She might be suffering from a form of lobar pneumonia, which penicillin should cure; penicillin which was in their packs if only Harun would –

Harun was not coming. He had to accept that now.

O'Neill had a word for what he'd been doing these past few hours: stalling. He had been stalling; but he could wait no longer. It was better if it was done while she was still asleep in any case. Teal'c moved the sleeping woman over a little, handling her so gently she barely stirred, only whispering "Dad…?" before settling back down on his chest. He pulled up his t-shirt and reached into the pouch he had seen O'Neill flinch from so many times, his fingers closing over the snake-like form of the larval Goa'uld that lived there. Although the infant Goa'uld had saved his life so often, he never lost sight of what this creature truly was: a child of Apophis. And incidentally his immune system.

Choiceless. Arris Boch had made a point of telling them when their options had narrowed close to zero, and he had now reached that place again. If he did nothing, Major Carter would surely die. If he did this, she would live, and there was a chance, given the determination of O'Neill and Daniel Jackson, and their contacts with the Tok'ra, she might be saved and made herself again. Aldwin had told him they could now remove a Goa'uld from a host without killing the host, and Teal'c believed him. Jacob Carter would never give up on his daughter, nor did he believe Martouf would ever rest until she was restored. Teal'c was only sorry he would not be there to find her, but that could not be helped now. He had been forced to make this choice so many times when serving Apophis: deciding who should live and who should die and this one was easier by far. If only one of them could survive then there was no question in Teal'c's mind it was Major Carter who deserved to live and he who deserved to die.

The larval Goa'uld was unwilling to leave the safe haven of its womb. It had been asleep, warm and comfortable inside the protective pouch of his body, and hissed a protest as he pulled it out into the
shaft of sunlight, the as yet-unpigmented epidermis twitching as the unwelcome rays touched its sensitive skin.

Tears sprang into his eyes as he laid the creature down on Major Carter's back. He hoped she would understand why he had done this; betrayed her as she slept to her darkest fear. He hoped she understood why he could not simply sit here and watch her die. As the infant Goa'uld began to snake along her uniformed back, Teal'c gently brushed the blonde hair away from the back of her neck. If there were no entry scar O'Neill and Daniel Jackson might not realize she had been changed and she could hurt or kill them if she took them unawares, but he was still very sorry for the pain this would cause her. As the Goa'uld snaked closer and closer, a tear dropped onto the soft golden hair, the sunlight making it glitter like a cobweb sparkling with dew.

***
Chapter 4

Part Four

Jolinar was screaming a warning in her mind. No, ten years of combat was screaming a warning in her mind. Something was yelling at her anyway. And loudly.

She heard that snickering hiss she hated so much, conjuring an immediate memory of that sinuous form twisting in Hathor's taloned hands, eager to embed itself in the Colonel. There was a Goa'uld near at hand. A Goa'uld making for her. Faster than thought, her hand flew to the back of her neck, and as the creature dived, she rolled, its fangs embedded in her hand. She flung it away from herself in revulsion, blood dripping from her hand.

"Major Carter!" Teal'c was grappling with her, holding her still. She hadn't seen such torment in his eyes since they had found his house razed to the ground on Chulak. "You must not fight it."

"Teal'c?" she stared at him in disbelief as he held her wrists flat to the straw-covered floor. Twisting her head round, she saw the larval Goa'uld snaking towards her. "No!"

He was speaking rapidly and despite the fever doing its best to fog her mind fear had given her a clarity she'd been missing for hours. "There is no other way. Without it you will die."

"I'd rather die!" She gazed up at him imploringly. "Don't do this to me, Teal'c. Don't make me a Goa'uld."

"It is very young. Its power to control you will be greatly diluted. You may well be able to fight it especially as you have the memories of Jolinar to assist you."

"No!" She twisted around trying to break his grip. The Goa'uld was close now, pale form bright in the sunlight, the sight of the veins pulsating beneath its transparent skin filling her with revulsion. It opened its mouth revealing a blood red maw which gaped at her hungrily. "Teal'c, please! Please!"

As it lunged at her he let go of her wrists, his hand closing around the symbiote's throat in one decisive snap of his fingers. It wriggled in his grasp as he stared down at her sorrowfully. "I have been unable to find a way out of this cell and I have not been able to persuade Harun to bring the medicine you need to survive. The fever you have is killing you. The Tok'ra would find you. They could remove the Goa'uld from your body. You would live."

"I'd rather die than live as a host to the Goa'uld." She scrambled backwards away from the squirming thing until she felt the cold stone against her back. "There has to be a better way than you dying because you don't have an immune system, and me being turned into a Goa'uld. Daniel and the Colonel will get here. We just have to hang on." Despite the fever mist blurring her mind she knew that she didn't want to be a Goa'uld despite the confusion swimming all around that thought, in the same way she could see that single shaft of sunlight cutting through the darkness of their cell. She also knew without any shadow of a doubt that she didn't want Teal'c to die.

The Goa'uld was squirming frantically now. If Teal'c didn't either put it back in his pouch or put it in her, it wasn't going to survive. It could suck oxygen from water or from a host but not from the air. She saw the conflict in Teal'c's dark eyes, torn between two possibilities that were equally hateful to him. When he met her gaze the sorrow on his face made her heart turn over. "I am sorry, Major Carter," he breathed the words as though they tortured him. "I cannot let you die."

"I'd rather die than live as a host to the Goa'uld." She scrambled backwards away from the squirming thing until she felt the cold stone against her back. "There has to be a better way than you dying because you don't have an immune system, and me being turned into a Goa'uld. Daniel and the Colonel will get here. We just have to hang on." Despite the fever mist blurring her mind she knew that she didn't want to be a Goa'uld despite the confusion swimming all around that thought, in the same way she could see that single shaft of sunlight cutting through the darkness of their cell. She also knew without any shadow of a doubt that she didn't want Teal'c to die.

The Goa'uld was squirming frantically now. If Teal'c didn't either put it back in his pouch or put it in her, it wasn't going to survive. It could suck oxygen from water or from a host but not from the air. She saw the conflict in Teal'c's dark eyes, torn between two possibilities that were equally hateful to him. When he met her gaze the sorrow on his face made her heart turn over. "I am sorry, Major Carter," he breathed the words as though they tortured him. "I cannot let you die."

"I'd rather die than live as a host to the Goa'uld." She scrambled backwards away from the squirming thing until she felt the cold stone against her back. "There has to be a better way than you dying because you don't have an immune system, and me being turned into a Goa'uld. Daniel and the Colonel will get here. We just have to hang on." Despite the fever mist blurring her mind she knew that she didn't want to be a Goa'uld despite the confusion swimming all around that thought, in the same way she could see that single shaft of sunlight cutting through the darkness of their cell. She also knew without any shadow of a doubt that she didn't want Teal'c to die.
The tears sprang into her eyes too. "You promised you wouldn't leave me! You promised!"

The distress on his face tore at her. "I would never leave you."

"Dying is leaving me, Teal'c. If you do this I'll be all alone here with a Goa'uld in my head and you'll be dead. Don't do this to either of us."

"My lord!"

Carter jerked up her head, aware that the sunlight was blocked by something but unable to make it out through her fever-blurred eyes.

"Do not make her a slave to the false gods." Harun's voice.

She blinked, trying to clear her vision, but he was still just a shadow between her and the sun.

"You leave me no choice," Teal'c retorted.

"I have asked help from the voice of the Chosen One I hear inside my mind. He tells me I should do as you ask even though it may cost us all our freedom. Here is the medicine you asked for."

Something fell from the grating to land softly on the straw. She heard Teal'c gasp something in his own tongue which sounded very like a prayer of thanks, then he was shoving the larval Goa'uld negligently back into his pouch while it hissed and spat its indignation.

It was when she saw how his hands were shaking as he tried to undo the wrapper on the penicillin that she took it from him gently. "It's okay. Let me."

He wouldn't meet her eye as he said: "You know that I did it only to save your life…."

"I know." She couldn't read the instructions on the packet but took two tablets anyway. She reached out and touched his hand. "I know."

"Can you ever trust me again?"

Her eyes widened at the husky tone. She tightened her grip on his hand. "I've always trusted you with my life, Teal'c, and I've always known you'd sacrifice yourself to save the rest of us. That's all you tried to do. And the part of me that isn't scared to death of being turned into a Goa'uld is even grateful. The rest of me might need a few days to catch up."

Teal'c nodded and it tore at her that he was prepared to accept so little. This was how he had been with Daniel after Sha're's death: ready to be hated and feeling he deserved it.

The Jaffa turned to address Harun. "It was not Daniel Jackson's voice which prompted you to bring this medicine, Harun, it was the voice of your own conscience. You do not need any god to help you do the right thing. The good already lies within you."

"You are wrong," Harun told him quietly. "Good comes from without, not within. And by my actions I may well have condemned my people to a life of slavery under the yoke of the false god."

Faintly, Carter heard the sound of his footsteps as he walked away.

Carter tried to speak, wanting to call after him and point out that there were other ways to obtain freedom than the method laid out on that tablet, but the coughs racked at her. Teal'c placed a hand on her shoulder, helping her to lie back down in the straw. "Promise me," she breathed hoarsely as he covered her with his jacket once more.
"Promise what?"

"Promise me you'll let me die if the penicillin doesn't work. Don't make me a Goa'uld, Teal'c. Promise me."

There was a long pause before he said quietly, "I promise."

***

Daniel looked at his watch again. Onuris had given them seventy-two hours to get back to the temple. Any way you calculated it they'd now used up thirty and as far as he could see all they'd done was get themselves lost.

Jack kept insisting they weren't lost, of course, because they were following the river. They had a point of reference and a means to return the way they'd come, therefore they weren't lost. But it still felt a hell of a lot like being lost to Daniel. It also still felt a hell of a lot like this was all his fault.

He glanced across at the older man, trying not to let his anxiety show as he did so but probably failing miserably. Jack was hobbling along at a pretty good speed but Daniel wished he would just let him help. He never knew where Jack got off calling him stubborn. He hadn't seen Jack looking this tired since he'd had the language of the Ancients downloaded into his brain: everything working overtime in that grizzled head of his, Stargate addresses, machinery for creating extra power, a cross-section of the DHD which was still their best reference for how that thing fitted together, while Jack's own consciousness trickled away minute by minute like grains of sand through a sieve. When Jack had come back from visiting the Asgard Daniel had been almost afraid to blink in case he vanished again or started speaking Latin. Jack had looked absolutely wrecked but so relieved to be himself again, and still taking a moment to try and comfort a very worried Daniel with his most reassuring smile. Jack had never actually said 'Thank you for everything you did for me. Thank you for believing in me when no one else did.' That wasn't Jack's style. He paid his debts in other ways. Paid them in full too. Not that Daniel had thought of it as a debt. He'd been so in hock to Jack for all the times he'd stood by him or risked his own neck or career on his behalf by that point he'd known he'd never be able to pay him back however many times he helped whisk Jack's frostbitten butt back from Antarctica just in the nick of time or interceded with General Hammond so Jack could go to a Stargate address using an eighth chevron.

"Damned bugs." Jack swatted at something irritably, lurching off-balance as he did so, and Daniel grabbed his arm to steady him.

He set him back on his feet gently. "How are you doing, Jack?"

"Peachy."

Well, Jack was never the best of company when he was hurting. If they got out of this he supposed he'd be on taking-care-of-Jack duty again. The least he could do under the circumstances but still not a prospect that was exactly inviting. Daniel winced as a fern hit him in the face then pushed it aside so Jack could limp past.

"Do you need to rest?"

"No. And stop asking me that."

He was afraid Jack might be running a fever. It was hard to tell because Jack wouldn't let Daniel examine his leg and got tetchy every time Daniel tried to see if he had a temperature; but Jack getting sick or his wound becoming infected was so much the last thing they needed right now it was...
starting to seem almost inevitable.

He knew Jack was trying his hardest to be optimistic and positive but it kept trickling away again; the fear they might be struggling pointlessly in the wrong direction overwhelming him. Daniel could definitely relate to that. Almost unconsciously they’d slipped back into the way they’d been on Netu; Jack a bit crabby but comparatively passive, leaning on him both physically and mentally, and Daniel trying to be reassuring. Except this time Jack wasn’t saying ‘We're not dead yet’; he wasn't really saying anything, he was just gazing around at the jungle like he hated it then looking at his watch and grimacing. For Daniel, even louder than the shrieking of the hyacinth-colored parrots and the alarm calls of the howler monkeys were all the things Jack wasn’t saying right now. Not just ‘This is all your damned fault, Daniel!’ but also ‘We can't possibly get there in time and we both know it.’

This little outing had come too soon after Netu, that was the trouble. There hadn't been enough of a time lapse for Jack to get his confidence back. Daniel knew that Sokar's artificial hell had been hell indeed for Jack. Separated from Teal’c; Apophis resurrected; people coming to take Sam away and there being nothing Jack could do about it. And then once Jack had been wounded things had got a whole lot worse. Then he couldn't even defend them physically. He’d been so exhausted with pain, blood loss, and the effects of the Blood of Sokar he'd pretty much been a passenger, totally dependent on the rest of them to get themselves home and take him with them. For someone like Jack that was not a good day.

Daniel had spent three years watching Jack’s confidence get eroded bit by bit. He still seemed as optimistic on the surface most days, but there wasn't the same certainty in his gaze. In the beginning Daniel knew he, Sam, and Teal’c had probably all been equally guilty of sticking Jack on a pedestal. Thinking of him as a miracle worker. Someone who could solve any problem, right any wrong. And since then Daniel had been mortally wounded and there had been nothing Jack could do except leave him behind. Sam had been turned into what they had believed at the time to be a Goa'uld while Jack hadn't been able to prevent Jolinar blending with her, or keep the Ashrak from almost killing her. And Jack had been forced to stand on the wrong side of the river bank while religious fanatics hung a rock around Teal’c's neck and drowned him right in front of them.

When they'd come back from Chulak the first time, he'd seen someone in Jack who could achieve anything. The man had been through the fire and come out the other side of it. He’d hardly been able to believe this was the closed-off suicidal military hard-ass he’d met a year before. Even then there had been something about the man that made him believe in him; an instinctive reaction to Colonel Jack O'Neill that had made no apparent sense even to him. As a civilian he’d always been a little suspicious of the military, and back then Jack had seemed military down to his Air Force issue socks. Not trusting Jack would have been logical. Feeling from the first moment they met that this was someone who needed his help; someone who mattered; someone significant; someone he could feel safe around and trust, had not.

Jack had seemed capable of achieving anything he set his mind to back then. Daniel hadn’t doubted for an instant that Jack was able to find Sha’re, defeat the Goa'uld, save the world. He’d just worried the will might not be there, and designated it his job to keep Jack on the right course. Back then he’d seen his role as primarily one of gentle shoving in the right direction. Well, nagging, wheedling, pleading, and downright sulking, had also played a part in his armory of persuasive tactics at times, but he’d mostly seen himself as the means to ease Jack into doing the right thing. It had taken a long time for him to realize there were some things Jack just couldn't do. That he wasn't superman. He made mistakes. Was unreasonable. Made poor decisions some times. Was sometimes just plain wrong.

It had come as a terrible shock to him. Was he supposed to take Jack down from his pedestal, dust him off and interact with him on a different level? Or should he just blame him for not being who
Daniel had thought he was? The latter option had been so much easier perhaps it wasn't so surprising he'd decided to choose that one. Because looking back he knew that some of the anger he'd felt towards Jack after Sha're's death had been not just because the man wouldn't believe in him, but also because Jack hadn't managed to make this all come right for him. Jack hadn't been in the right place at the right time. Jack hadn't got Sha're back.

That had been a very bitter pill to swallow at a time when fate had already been force-feeding him wormwood like it was going out of fashion.

"Daniel?"

Daniel gave himself a mental shake, bad memories of the past overcast by an awareness of the present. The jungle seeped back into his consciousness; dripping, screeching, howling and rustling a reminder of where he was now. But it was still a shock to look up and find Jack grubby, exhausted and wounded in a rainforest when he'd expected to see the man standing in a corridor of the SGC thwarting him paternally for his own damned good.

"Daniel, hang on a minute, I need to rest."

"Sorry."

Daniel hastened to help him; Jack swearing as he hopped over a trailing liana and stumbled. "This damned leg – I swear to God the next son-of-a-bitch who points a staff weapon at me...."

As Daniel propped him up against the tree he quickly put his hand on Jack's forehead. It earned him the usual glare and snapped, "Don't fuss, Daniel." But he still had to do it. The man's forehead was hot and sweaty but so was the rest of Jack right now. So was the whole of Daniel right now. But Jack didn't seem feverish. Just pissed off and hurting. Flies buzzed inquisitively around his leg and Jack swatted at them irritably. "Damned bugs."

"I wonder how Sam and Teal'c...." He hadn't meant to say it aloud. Daniel bit his lip. The question was going through his head on a continuous loop at the moment. He knew it was going through Jack's as well, but by mutual consent they weren't voicing it. He winced, "Sorry."

Jack took a deep breath and mopped his brow, catching trickles of sweat which he wiped off on his jacket. He didn't look at Daniel as he said quietly, "We're doing all we can."

"I know. I know." Daniel also avoided his gaze, turning to look at the greenish waters of the widening river. A line of large moss-covered boulders gave them stepping-stones from this bank to the next; the rocks creating half a dozen tiny waterfalls which sent up a fine spray to cool his skin. He pointed to the stones. "We could cross here if we wanted to."

"What would be the point?"

Daniel winced at the same time as Jack. That had slipped out before the older man could stop it, the utter weariness in his tone speaking volumes.

Jack said quickly, "I didn't mean –"
on one side of the stream or the other, it didn't make any kind of difference.

He wished now he'd done what Jack wanted back in that cavern. If he'd just translated the tablet at least he'd know if this was it. If he knew they failed they could give up now. He could stop dragging a wounded man through this spiteful undergrowth and let Jack get his strength back. He'd been wrong about translating that tablet like he'd been wrong so many times before. Was it any wonder Jack hadn't believed him about the Harsesis? The real mystery was why Daniel had expected him to.

Daniel put a hand up to his head and tried to remember the way Harun had responded to their questions. Maybe he hadn't read the tablet, but Harun had. So had the worshippers of the Chosen One. The people in the temple had all seemed fond of Sam. Because she was Compassion? Or because they knew she was doomed to die? Every time he closed his eyes he could hear Onuris saying: "The woman who pretends to be a goddess is dying. The fever she was given will kill her."

For a moment despair threatened to overwhelm him and then Daniel fought back. He couldn't do this. If he did, Jack would have to reassure him and Jack was definitely entitled to a few hours off from trying to make him feel better. He was the one who needed to be coming up with the good news right now. He was also the one who needed to find a way back to that temple. It was his fault Teal'c was in such danger and Sam was dying of fever and….

And that wasn't going to help anyone so he'd better cut it out right now.

Daniel looked around helplessly. He was trying not to hate this terrain; trying to feel like Hiram Bingham following in the footsteps the fleeing Incas had taken four hundred years before; but it wasn't helping. He didn't want to find a lost city, however splendid or intact. He wouldn't have cast a second glance at a route map to El Dorado right now. He just wanted to get back to the temple of Onuris in the next…. Daniel looked at his watch. The next fifteen hours.

"We can do this," he said determinedly.

He looked at Jack, trying to appear confident but probably just looking like someone in need of reassurance because Jack forced a smile for him then squeezed his shoulder again, saying very gently, "Of course we can."

As he took the wounded man's weight, stumbling a little on the uneven track, Daniel found the forest suddenly blurring all around him. For a second he thought it must be tears in his eyes and then he realized the noise around them was deafening. Rain falling.

Rain. That couldn't be right. Surely the equatorial rainfall would follow the same pattern as on earth. Surely it would fall every day at the same time? Daniel looked at his watch again but it was still stolidly telling him it was midday. Then he noticed the way the second hand wasn't moving.

"No!" he said it in dismay, shaking his wrist in annoyance.

"You okay? Did something bite you? Sting you? Let me look."

Seeing Jack's anxious face Daniel realized the man's nerves were still worn ragged; he was just hiding it better than yesterday. He said soothingly, "I'm fine, Jack. But my watch has stopped."

"Jesus, Daniel, don't do that!"

"Sorry." Daniel pulled his sleeve down over the temporarily useless watch.

Jack was muttering irritably as he limped along at a surprisingly good speed, "...place is crawling with Christ knows how many poisonous snakes and bugs and you're yelping like that...."
"I said I was – uh, Jack…?"

"…for all we know even the damned centipedes are – What?"

"Look." Daniel carefully turned the man around, trying to support his weight as he did so, and pointed.

Through the slanting curtain of rainfall they could see the other side of the river. The jungle had abruptly given way to stepped terraces, some cleared for planting, others bristling with a crop that looked very like half-grown maize. As they watched, the rain fell onto the red earth with such ferocity it ploughed up the soil like machine gun fire; the sound of the downpour hitting the maize leaves a new and welcome note in the usual jungle symphony. A green snake slithered across Daniel's boot but he only smiled wider, "I'd say that constituted signs of civilization, wouldn't you?"

***

O'Neill had to admit this terrain was slightly less annoying than the uncleared jungle. It wasn't somewhere he'd be planning to come back to for his annual leave or anything, but it was…better. And Daniel had certainly cheered up again. He'd been talking for at least an hour now without apparently needing to pause for breath. About how incredible it would be if they came across an inhabited Incan or Mayan city. How much they could learn. How they might be able to see some kind of ancient ball game actually being played.

"…Tlachtli was so popular across Central America that I'm sure it would have survived in some form. That was a kind of hockey the Maya used to play, Jack. There are the remains of ball-courts all through the ruined cities of the Yucatan and Guatemala….

"How about that: a hockey game you might actually want to watch." O'Neill sighed as his boredom with this conversation prickled up the back of his neck like an insect.

"…as far as we know, tlachtli was played with a very hard ball which had to be hit through a stone ring using a club…"

He tuned him out again. Only thing you could do with Daniel sometimes. That or kill him. The next time O'Neill tuned back in to Radio Jackson, Daniel had moved away from ball games and was talking about agriculture. With an inward groan, O'Neill realized that the ancient hockey conversation was probably as interesting as Daniel got on this subject. From now on, he was only going to get more boring.

As he picked his way through a field of waving crops, O'Neill swatted at an insect and tried not to sigh too heavily as Daniel stuck another unappetizing example of local agriculture under his nose.

"This is very similar to maize we know was cultivated in the Tehuacán Valley. It's interesting to see the way early MesoAmericans selected from natural mutations to propagate maize that gave more food per cob. We think domesticated maize probably evolved from something called teosinte which….

"Daniel…".

Nope. Daniel was not in the mood to listen. Daniel was definitely in the mood to talk.

"…of course there's much better preservation of plant remains in the dry cave sites of highland Mexico and Peru, but even in the Tehuacán Valley we're pretty sure they were eating domesticated maize by as early as 5000 BC –"

"Daniel!" O'Neill gripped his arm and squeezed it a little harder than was strictly necessary. "No one cares."

Daniel blinked at him in disbelief and spread out an arm to encompass the fields. "Don't you realize how fascinating this is?"

O'Neill wiped the sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand. "My overwhelming boredom is kind of getting in the way of my fascination at the moment."

"But, Jack, maize was of pivotal importance to the Maya, and the beheading of the Maize God by his counterparts in the underworld clearly symbolized the –"

"Daniel, can we have a little memory check? As in why we're here? What we're trying to do? How writing a paper on the agricultural habits of the people of the Andes is not what we're supposed to be doing right now?"

"Okay – okay, you're right, I'm sorry. I just – you know –"

"Just try and concentrate on one thing at a time."

Daniel nodded determinedly. "Yes. Will do." He dutifully helped O'Neill clamber over some furrows but O'Neill just knew Daniel was already wondering what kind of tools they'd used to do that fairly crappy piece of plowing. Without the trees overhead to filter it out the sun was almost unbearable. He was pouring sweat and his leg was itching and hurting simultaneously. He wondered again how he'd managed to go so many years without hitting Daniel. It was really quite a tribute to his self-control when he came to think about it. It wasn't that he actually wanted him to change. There were just days when he wanted him to be…a little less Daniel, that was all. He didn't think that was so much to ask.

"Did I ever tell you about the plant remains found at Guilá Naquitz?"

"No," O'Neill told him firmly. "And you'd better not try to if you want to keep your teeth."

Daniel darted an assessing glance in his direction. "I think maybe we should get you into the shade. You need to rest that leg."

"What I need is to find a way to get back to that freakin' temple."

There was another pause before Daniel said in a different voice. "I've been wondering if half of the reason why Onuris sent us here was as a…bribe."

O'Neill peered at him through his sunglasses. "Not following you. I remember threats. Like what you could look forward to if by some miracle you managed to get back there." He'd been wondering how Daniel felt about that little welcome committee Onuris had promised him so he wasn't sorry to have a chance to discuss it. It certainly wasn't going to stop him from going all out to get back to the temple and it didn't seem to be slowing Daniel up any either, but he would have liked some reassurance Daniel was going into this with his eyes open.

Daniel waved a hand dismissively. "He was just trying to scare me."

O'Neill sighed. Didn't work though, did it? Why? Because you don't believe anyone would ever really do anything that nasty to you? Because you don't think Onuris' Jaffa would want to? Because you think you'll be able to talk him or them out of it? Because you think I'll think of someway to stop it happening? What if I can't, Daniel?
Daniel continued thoughtfully. "No, I think this was a two-part plan: come back here and see what's waiting for you, but also look what a nice place I'm sending you to so why would you want to come back here." He waved an arm to encompass their surroundings. "I mean, look at it, Jack."

O'Neill did so blankly. "And so? I'm seeing jungle. Lots and lots of jungle. And some withered-looking crops which you had better not even think about cataloguing for me again."

Daniel gave him one of those long-suffering glances that always made O'Neill want to throw something heavy at him. I swear to God, Daniel, you give me that martyr-resigned-to-the-hideous-cross-he-has-to-bear look just once more and I am going to....

"No, Jack." And the weary resignation in that sigh was, O'Neill felt, an invitation to GBH all by itself. Daniel waved a hand to encompass their surroundings. "I mean there's food, water, shelter. You could almost call it...paradise."

O'Neill stopped where he was and took a good look at their surroundings. They were in an orchard of small trees now. He couldn't work out exactly what that fruit was but it was obvious it had been cultivated in some way. The trees were planted far enough apart that they could grow without throttling each other and the ground underneath them had been cleared in the past although it was now liberally strewn with fallen fruit. O'Neill scowled at the mercilessly blue sky through his sunglasses. "Yeah. Regular Garden of Eden." He reached up into the nearest tree and plucked one of the greenish fruit from the branches. Then he tossed it to Daniel. "Here. Have an apple."

Daniel returned his steady gaze for a moment while buffing the fruit slowly on his jacket then took a decisive bite.

O'Neill nodded, took off his cap and ran his fingers through his hair. "You know that's just one of the reasons I was never too keen on the idea of God – God. It's hard to like a guy who's against people having knowledge."

Daniel talked with his mouth full. "This from the man who keeps telling me he'll kill me if I don't shut up?"

"Now, be fair, I've been very careful to use the word 'maim'. Death was never an option."

Daniel swallowed and wiped a trickle of juice from his chin. He regarded the half-eaten fruit curiously. "I think this is definitely a –"

"Ah hah –" O'Neill held up a warning finger. "You can walk out of this orchard or you can limp out of it. Your choice."

"I was going to say 'bribe'," Daniel retorted. "And now we know there are definitely people here that makes even more sense."

O'Neill made a face. If he asked Daniel why, Daniel was going to tell him, and it would probably be a long and very boring explanation. But if he didn't he was never going to know and he had a feeling Daniel was probably right and this was important. He sighed. "Okay. Why?"

Daniel took another bite of fruit. "Onuris is perceiving me as a rival. Basically he is seeing me as another – Goa'uld. So he's judging me by his own standards. They don't have the same morality we have, after all, and despite borrowing our bodies for all these millennia I'm not sure they really understand the human psyche that well. If they did Apophis would just have held a gun to your head in Netu and told me he'd put a bullet in you if I didn't tell him what he wanted to know. But the concept of 'friendship' is, I think, completely alien to them. They make political alliances for mutual
gain; and they take mates with which to produce more Goa'uld. And it's quite conceivable they have
– or believe they have – feelings of affection for those mates. But they don't seem to have any
feelings for anyone or anything else."

O'Neill had noticed the way Daniel had gritted his teeth as he conceded the possibility that the
Goa'uld might care about their…mates. Apophis had told Daniel he loved Amaunet, and he'd
certainly shown her nothing but tenderness in those crowded moments on Abydos after Heru'ur's
departure, despite the fact she'd lost the baby he'd been hoping to use as a host, but he knew that
wasn't how Daniel wanted to perceive that relationship. "And so?" he prompted quietly.

Daniel collected himself. "Okay – so if I'm a rival wannabe deity, what would I want? What could I
be bought off with? Onuris doesn't know how much power I have on this world. You've convinced
him turning me into a martyr wouldn't be the best idea he's ever had. He needs to get rid of me but it
would be easier for all parties if I actually wanted to stay away. So he takes away what he perceives
to be my First Prime – Teal'c, and what he perceives to be my mate – Sam. Then he sends me to a
place where I can start over again. But to sweeten the pill he sends me to a part of the planet which is
a lush paradise and he gives me you for – company."

O'Neill raised an eyebrow. "Company? What exactly is my role in your little entourage, Your
Imitation Go'auldness?"

Daniel took another bite of fruit. "I never said he thought I was a Goa'uld, I said he is treating me like
a Goa'uld, in that he is assuming my motivation and desires are the same. Basically, he is presuming I
want the same things he does: a nice little kingdom to rule over and some slaves who will treat me
like a god." He held out his hands and turned a slow circle. "Here's the nice little kingdom. The
slaves are presumably around here somewhere. All I have to do is convince them I'm a god. If I can
do that I can get another mate and another First Prime, meaning I won't need to bother him again.
At least not for a few decades while I build up an army, and in the meantime my reputation on his part
of the planet is ruined anyway because I didn't get back there in time to save Sam and Teal'c.
Actually, you have to hand it to the guy, that's not a bad plan."

"And I fit into this equation – where?"

Daniel darted him an apologetic look. "Well, I presume he thinks you're my – protector and, um –
companion."

O'Neill took off his sunglasses just so Daniel couldn't fail to miss how very little he liked that
suggestion. "I liked Harun's version better. I was the brains of the outfit in that one. Being your
bodyguard cum bedwarmer is not my idea of a good job description."

"I'm just trying to imagine how he thinks I think."

"Well, imagine it silently, will you?"

As he jammed his sunglasses back on his nose, he refused to notice that reproachful look Daniel was
zinging in his direction. Yes, his temper was fraying and his tongue was consequently getting sharper
but Daniel was being incredibly annoying and deserved to get a little snapped at.

The next two hours brought clearer and clearer signs of civilization and O'Neill couldn't help feeling
a glimmer of hope flutter in his breast. Where there had once been Goa'uld there might well be the
remnants of Goa'uld technology they could use. They had found more and more raised fields of…
agricultural produce. Daniel had clearly been dying to tell him exactly what agricultural produce and
what its significance might be, but he'd sent a quelling glare in his direction every time Daniel
opened his mouth and that seemed to be holding him. Daniel was always easier to intimidate when
O'Neill was wearing sunglasses, and when he was feeling guilty and O'Neill was wearing sunglasses he was almost manageable. They walked by the very edge of the field beside a tall bank, automatically trying not to crush any of the crops, the tall maize providing at least little shelter from the sun.

"I think this might be a civilization in decline."

"What?" It was so long since Daniel had said anything that O'Neill jerked his head round in surprise.

Daniel was pulling back a creeper to reveal grey stone set into the bank. "I think we missed the crowning moment of this civilization. Skipped the Preclassic, the Classic, and the Late Classic and are now into the Terminal Classic. I think the same thing has happened to them that happened to the Maya. A gradual disintegration for reasons no one really understands."

He tugged at the creepers and O'Neill watched him struggling with them for a moment before sighing and taking the knife from Daniel's pocket. "Try using this."

Daniel looked at the knife in surprise. "Oh. Thanks." He hacked through the creepers, gradually revealing a flat round stone so large even O'Neill had to stand on tiptoe to see the topmost pictograms. Daniel cleared the face of the stone carefully, fingers brushing creeper tendrils from the cracks as gently as someone easing a scab from a half-healed wound.

O'Neill leaned against a nearby tree to take some of the weight off his leg and looked at the stone without liking. Pictograms decorated the edge of the stone in the same way the glyphs decorated the Stargate but although the 'gate glyphs had taken on a kind of familiarity even for him these were all circles and dots. He was having trouble making sense of the picture in the center but there seemed to be bones and skulls in there, and he doubted that meant anything good.

He watched Daniel still carefully clearing the stone, and remembered that all this annoying information Daniel was always inflicting on him was sometimes invaluable information they needed to save their lives. He wondered just how many times Daniel was going let him tell him to shut up then still obligingly come up with the knowledge he needed afterwards. "What is it?"

"It's an altar stone." Daniel was running his fingers over the pictograms carefully. "Very similar to one found at Tikal. These people must be descendants of the Maya."

"And its significance would be?"

Daniel pointed to what seemed to be some kind of priest in the center of the stone. "The Quiche Maya went through a period of committing human sacrifice to propitiate the gods, which is what is being depicted here. So the people brought here may have been from that era or may have followed parallel cultural lines despite their separation from the Maya left on Earth. This altar presumably dates from that time. However, the fact it's been abandoned suggests they've probably stopped committing human sacrifice."

"You hope."

"I'm definitely hoping so, yes."

"Anything that would tell you who the resident Goa'uld used to be?"

Daniel reached out and brushed some dirt from the altar stone. "Mayan hieroglyphs are very difficult to decipher. It's not just a mixed system like Egyptian hieroglyphs that uses logographs for whole words but also has symbols for syllables and vowels and so on, it also has a variety of spelling conventions –"
"Daniel…." He put just a hint of warning into that use of his name. Letting him know he was on report here and if he didn't get to the point pretty damned soon he was going to be spoken to with a singular lack of patience.

"I'm not making difficulties, Jack. There are several different ways to write the same word. If it wasn't for Yuri Knorosov –"

"Daniel! Can you read it or not?"

Daniel gave him a reproachful look, turned back to the hieroglyphs, ran his finger across them and then obligingly translated: "Okay, according to this there were two Goa'uld, working together. I'll have to ask Teal'c how often that happens but I should imagine it was pretty unusual. They seem to have adopted the roles of Hun-Came and Vukub-Came."

_I knew you could translate it if you put your mind to it, but you just had to get the damned lecture in first, didn't you?_ O'Neill swatted at a fly. "Is that good or bad?"

"Hun-Came and Vukub-Came were the lords of Xibalba, so basically these two Goa'uld seemed to have taken on the roles of the Mayan gods of the Underworld."

O'Neill grimaced. This was sounding like Sokar's second cousins to him. "Are we talking hell here?"

Daniel was still tracing the pictograms with his fingers. "Not exactly. Xibalba was the place of the dead but it wasn't necessarily a place of punishment for sin although it did contain punishment 'houses'. The word 'Xibalba' is actually derived from the root 'to fear', and from that same root you get the Maya word for phantom or ghost, so really Xibalba was the Place of the Phantoms."

"But these underworld god guys were presumably not up for any humanitarian awards?"

Daniel cleared a little more of the inscription. "On Earth they were seen more as opposers and annoyers of men. Here they seem to be a bit more of that. They're depicted as 'mighty' here and called 'slayers of the sons of Xpiyacoc' as though this is something to be celebrated by the populace. Which is interesting, as in Mayan mythology on earth Hunhun-Apu and Vukub-Hunapu are depicted as hero-gods who –"

"Daniel, I can't keep all these damned unpronounceable names straight in my head and what's more, I don't want to."

"And you know, Jack, sometimes it just isn't possible to tell you everything you might possibly need to know about a very complex four thousand year old civilization in three sentences." But as he took a last look at the altar stone, Daniel still automatically held out a hand to steady O'Neill.

As O'Neill limped along next to him he felt another twinge of conscience. Once again he was going to be very grateful for all the useful information Daniel had in that head of his. That information he would never let him share because he found it so damned boring. After a rather laden silence he said quietly, "Okay, tell me about the Maya. Tell me what we can expect." And this time he didn't say 'But give me the short version'.

Daniel helped him clamber over some fallen stones. "They created the first comprehensive writing system in Pre-Columbian America. They had an incredibly complicated calendrical system – don't worry I'm not going to explain it to you, to be honest, I have trouble with it myself – they valued chocolate so highly that it became a form of currency. They loved saunas and ball games."

"My kind of people," O'Neill put in.
Daniel darted him a look. "They were originally believed to be a peaceful theocracy, but later evidence proves the lowland Maya city-states were actually in a constant state of warfare with each other. They sought tributes and captives from other city-states and used the captives as human sacrifices in much the same way the Aztecs did, although in far smaller numbers."

"Okay. Not my kind of people."

"They built cities containing as many as fifty thousand people, usually constructed around temple groups comprising pyramids, ball courts, temples and palaces, all linked by broad causeways. They prized jade and obsidian. They tortured their prisoners by removing their fingernails – among other methods."

O'Neill grimaced. "So, when their civilization – wound down, what happened?"

"As far as we can gather they gradually left the cities, which fell into decline, and moved out into the surrounding countryside. We don't really know why."

O'Neill looked around again. "Okay, so we're hoping that's what's happened here. Breakdown of their society? Headed for the hills? Abandoned their city which will hopefully have a Stargate somewhere nearby which they've left unguarded?"

"How will a Stargate help us?" Daniel asked mildly. "You can't gate from one part of a planet to another. You just get a busy signal."

"Thank you, Daniel, the twinges in my leg on cold days do actually help me remember that. We could gate home and get reinforcements. Then gate back."

"Not if Onuris is blocking incoming as well as outgoing. We'd just end up over here again. And it's not like you could bring a jet through and fly it over to where Sam and Teal'c are."

"Look, I'm the one supplying the negativity on this trip, you stick with the relentless optimism, okay?"

Daniel moistened his lips. "Sorry. What was I thinking?"

There was a pause before O'Neill said, "How come no one is working in these fields anyway? Shouldn't they be – harvesting or whatever?"

"I've been wondering that myself. There was a lot of fruit on the ground in that orchard. I would have expected everything to be picked before now."

O'Neill nodded. "It's kind of quiet, too, isn't it?"

"You're not going to say 'too quiet', are you?"

"Remind me again why I've never hit you?"

Daniel darted him a glance. "What about when you had the Touched virus?"

"I wasn't myself then, that doesn't count."

"Okay, what about all those 'self defense' lessons you keep giving me?"

"That isn't hitting you, Daniel, that's just teaching you to keep your guard up. Completely different thing. Believe me, if I ever hit you properly you would know all about it."
Daniel reached up and plucked a bluish-colored fruit from a tree. "You hit me and I'll tell Teal'c." He swallowed the blue fruit and then stuck out a mauve-streaked tongue. "So there."

O'Neil opened his mouth to make a counter-threat and then realized there was no counter-threat. Teal'c was a game winner. He held up an admonishing finger. "That's cheating."

"No, that's winning." Daniel tossed some more of the blue fruit into his mouth. "You should try it some time."

O'Neil was nothing other than pleased when Daniel tripped over something in the undergrowth and fell flat on his face.

He stopped smirking within seconds though when Daniel gasped, shuddered and rolled over. There was panic in his voice: "Jack…"

Remembering the snake that had slithered over Daniel's boot, O'Neil felt his heart give an unpleasant lurch. "Daniel –?"

Daniel struggled to his feet and away from where he'd been lying so fast he practically threw himself into O'Neil's arms. "What's wrong?" O'Neil steadied him as well as he could while trying to take his own weight on one leg. Daniel looked bone-white and his heart was pounding so fast O'Neil could feel the reverberations going through him. "What –?" That was when the wind must have changed and the smell reached him. "What –?" That was when the wind must have changed and the smell reached him. He knew that stench all too well.

As he made to bend down and look at what Daniel had tripped over, the younger man held him back. "Don't."

O'Neil frowned at him. "Daniel, I've seen corpses before –"

"It's a child." Daniel's eyes were still too full of sorrow for him to disguise it. "A little girl."

O'Neil felt misery and rage lance through him. He'd never been able to resign himself to the death of any child, but at least most of them were buried and mourned. What kind of people left their daughter's body out in the fields to rot? He glared at Daniel as though it was his fault. "This part of their culture too? The only bury first-born sons or something?"

Daniel tugged him away, stepping over the undergrowth carefully and towing O'Neil after him. "I think I know why the fruit hasn't been harvested."

O'Neil turned to look back at the place where Daniel had tripped. "We have to bury her."

Daniel was reaching into his pockets for a wipe, and as O'Neil looked at him in surprise he wiped his fingers off carefully. "I think there may be a lot more like her. A lot more than we could ever bury."

O'Neil felt that all-too familiar sick feeling in his stomach get worse. "You mean you think the reason there's no one in the fields is because…?"

Daniel's face was bleak. "They're all dead, yes."

***

When he got stuck out on a mission he ended up reading anything sometimes. Daniel only ever had books on archaeological stuff while Carter had books on wormholes and those – string things; Teal'c was the only one who ever had anything a normal guy could read and even he never remembered to
pack a Raymond Chandler. So he'd read some weird books since they started going through the 'gate. Especially on the missions where all they did was babysit Daniel while he chipped at things, or filmed things, or dug stuff up. O'Neill had already told Hammond the next time anyone found anything that needed excavating he should send another team to hold Daniel's hand. Hammond had reminded him he'd suggested that on the last two archaeological missions and O'Neill had overruled him, saying as SG-1 couldn't go to any other planet without Daniel along for the ride they might as well go and keep an eye on him. Hammond had way too good a memory sometimes. The point was the last time they'd been stuck somewhere with nothing to do he'd had a choice between something astrophysical, some guy called Budge whose stuff Daniel was always bitching about while scribbling corrections in the margins, and a play by Jean-Paul Sartre.

A dead French philosopher had won by a nose. A short-lived victory as after a few pages of an eternal triangle in Hell's waiting room, O'Neill had tossed it and spent a far more profitable hour annoying Daniel instead. But that was when he'd read that Hell was other people. At the time he'd been skeptical; later he'd thought Sartre should have tried a few days in Netu; now he realized the guy was right, but he'd missed out one important word: Hell was other dead people.

Dead children. Dead women. Dead men. Livid corpses with the flesh gnawed off to reveal glistening shocks of bone, no eyes in their sockets; skin shrunken or bloated; colored stark white or mottled blue and green. The stink of putrefaction. Everything half-rotted by the unfeeling sunshine. He felt like putting a bandage across Daniel's eyes and leading him through it. Except he didn't want to see it either.

"I have to –" Daniel abruptly let him go and staggered over to the side of the track.

O'Neill flinched in sympathy as all the fruit Daniel had eaten was deposited an inch from his boots. He reached out and rubbed his back gently as Daniel heaved and kept on heaving long after there was nothing left in his guts. It was only that morning Daniel had been talking about how exciting it would be to find an inhabited city and O'Neill had been wishing he'd shut the hell up. Now he wished he'd been nicer about it, tried to take an interest. Daniel was probably never again going to be able to look at a Mayan artifact again without seeing bloated corpses with maggots hatching out of them.

After Daniel finally finished heaving, he said quietly, "You okay?"

"No."

He winced at the bleakness in Daniel’s voice and automatically rubbed his back again. He could see the city up ahead of them, just the way Daniel had said it would be, all temple pyramids and raised causeways, the grey stone rising out of the jungle like a myth. He peered through his field glasses but could see no one moving over there, but no corpses in sight either, and vines trailing over the causeways the same way that snake had slithered across Daniel’s boot. A ghost city. What was that Daniel had said about the 'place of the phantoms'? He wondered why when there was a city right there you moved out and lived in huts instead?

"I expect the Goa'uld told them to."

O'Neill started as Daniel read his mind apparently without difficulty then remembered that he’d been staring at the city through his binoculars, brow creased in puzzlement, and Daniel could always read him like a book. "You think so?"

Daniel wiped his mouth on the back of his hand. "Limiting our development is one of their primary objectives. A civilization with reservoirs, aqueducts, viaducts and steam baths is a civilization thinking along the lines of labor saving devices. Labor saving devices give you more time for things
other than day-to-day survival. Time to invent weaponry. Time to –"

"Start thinking for yourself?"

Daniel darted a glance at him. "People can believe in a god without necessarily abdicating all independent thought, Jack."

"Maybe they can, but you have to admit more often than not they tend not to bother." O'Neill looked around. "So you think the last Goa'uld who was here told them to leave the city and go back into the jungle. To start all over again?"

"It's a possibility. Most earth mythologies record periods when humans were cast down from previous achievements, their civilizations reborn or remade because they had become too proud or too wicked to continue in their original state. I'm presuming in the light of off-world evidence that this was the Goa'uld quelling rebellion and trying to keep their slaves from developing to the point where they became a threat. It makes a lot more sense than otherwise supposedly benevolent deities slaughtering their followers apparently just for the hell of it."

Talking archaeology seemed to have helped Daniel recover. O'Neill was relieved to see that unnerving greenish tinge fading from his skin. Daniel was still very pale but he didn't look like he was going to dry heave himself inside out.

Daniel looked around at their surroundings. "We need to check all these huts. See if there are any survivors." He glanced at O'Neill's leg. "I think you'd better wait here in the shade. I'll do it."

"Daniel…" He started to protest but Daniel glanced at him sharply.

"I can handle it. You rest your leg."

"I know you can handle it. I'm just asking if it's wise?"

Daniel moistened his lips. "Jack, whatever these people have could well be what Sam has too. I think we need to know what that is, don't we?"

He grimaced. "Yes and no. Yes, it would be good to know what killed these people, yes it would be good to know if this is what Carter has too and therefore what medicine we need to get her when we get back there, but no it wouldn't be a good idea for you catch it too. Having one teammate dying of fever isn't exactly giving me a warm glow inside, having two of you coughing up blood definitely wouldn't make my day."

"I'm pretty sure it's a form of diphtheria. Something you and I have both been inoculated against."

"So, has Carter. I've seen her vaccination mark."

Daniel blinked at him, clearly momentarily distracted. O'Neill sighed. "In Hathor's little mock-up. I was the one who had to come rescue you two, remember? You weren't exactly wrapped up warm. I saw your vaccination mark too."

Daniel continued evenly, "The difference being that you and I both spent time on Abydos and there was a variant of the diphtheria germ going around at the time of our first mission there. I'm betting you had a sore throat when you went home?"

"And I thought that was just from all that yelling at you I had to do."

"I caught it even though I was inoculated. A lot of people on Abydos had died from it in the past, but
I was only ill for a few days. That's how diphtheria works, you get people who recover from mild infections who then carry it to people who have no immunity and it kills them. Our inoculations must have given us some immunity to the Abydos strain, and the Abydos strain we got in such a mild form must have given us immunity to the diphtheria strain on this world. But the people here clearly had no immunity at all, and Sam has obviously got it pretty badly as well."

O'Neill hated it when Daniel told him things he didn't want to hear which nevertheless sounded as though they were probably true. He pulled the sidearm out of his pocket and handed it over. "Just in case."

Daniel took it without a word and headed in the direction of the first hut. O'Neill opened his mouth to call him back and then shut it again. Daniel had seen dead bodies before. Lots of times. Daniel dug up dead bodies for a living if you wanted to be brutal about it. He was wounded and Daniel wasn't; that meant Daniel was the one who got to go and look at all those other corpses who'd died in their beds. That was the way things went sometimes. Daniel was a grown-up and he deserved to be treated like one. That meant listening to his opinion. It also meant letting him do horrible things that needed to be done. It wasn't possible to protect them forever. Some days it wasn't possible to protect them at all.

O'Neill closed his eyes as he heard that gunshot again. Saw the blood. By the time he opened his eyes, Daniel had disappeared into the first hut. He leaned against the nearest tree, needing the solidity of that bark at his back. He looked up and flinched from the sunlight splintering down through the canopy. And yes, he would admit it, this rainforest was beautiful; the blue sky was beautiful; even the sun overhead making his eyes water was beautiful, but everything smelt of rotting flesh. Carter was dying. Perhaps she was already dead. Teal'c was going to be executed. There were hundreds of dead people scattered all around them, possibly carrying a disease that would kill him and Daniel, too. And for all he knew he and Daniel had been moving in the wrong direction for two days. There were some thing even really big trees couldn't make better.

All the time he was thinking he was aware of where Daniel was. First hut. Second hut. Third hut. Seventh hut. People thought being compassionate made you soft. But sometimes it made you harder than graphite. His compassion for Ke'ra had made Daniel merciless to the rest of them. His compassion for the hosts who had been taken and might be taken could make Daniel merciless to the Goa'uld who would seek to enslave others. And his compassion for the people who might still be alive in the midst of all these dead bodies, was giving Daniel the strength to go into hut after hut filled with putrefying corpses –

They came out of the trees as silently as mist rolling in from the sea. One minute he was surrounded by jungle, the next there were people. Scores of them. With weapons.

"Daniel!"

Long spears with something wrapped around them, feathers trailing from them. Probably symbolizing something terribly significant but right now all he really cared about was how sharp those damned metal points looked.

"Daniel!" O'Neill cast around for something, anything, with which to defend himself and realized there wasn't even a stone he could throw. "Daniel!"

Daniel stepped out of one of the huts and even at this distance O'Neill could tell that what Daniel had found in there had been horrible. God they must know each other scarily well, because Daniel's body language had 'dead baby' written all over it. Probably lying near to a woman who looked a little like Sha're with its face rotted off. And Christ, wasn't it time fate decided to cut them some slack?
The locals were closing in now, converging on Daniel like hyenas on a wounded antelope. Daniel was still gazing around with his mouth open. He looked young and dazed, and as if he should be anywhere but here.

"Fire the gun!" O'Neill realized he must sound angry with Daniel. Screaming at someone hoarsely sort of gave that impression.

Daniel was turning a slow circle as the feather-helmeted natives surrounded him. Some of them wore circular masks, also topped with feathers, and showing bared teeth. O'Neill got a vague impression of green feathers, gold necklaces, yellow tunics, and smooth coffee-colored skin. Most of his attention was riveted on the spears they were waving, every point turned in Daniel's direction. Hostility in every straining muscle. As he gazed at them he saw a different form in the trees, a child with paler skin and fair hair. Just for a second he thought it was Charlie; a ghost come to tell him this time he really was going to die; and then he realized the child was real; a boy with unreadable blue eyes, dressed like these people but only with them, not of them. There was a whole story here O'Neill would never know. Right now he was more worried about his own story and if they had just reached the page marked 'The End'. He wrenched his gaze back to his teammate.

"Fire into the air!" Just for once, please God let Daniel do what he told him. "Daniel!!"

Their eyes met and he saw that Daniel was at least keeping up on current events enough to be scared. That was something. Daniel pulled out the gun, the weapon looking awkward in his hand despite all those hours on the firing range. The damned things didn't belong in Daniel's hand, that was the trouble, and they never looked comfortable there. Daniel studied the human race; he didn't kill it.

O'Neill jerked his head round and realized there were people closing in on him as well. Daniel was the only help either of them had. "Daniel!"

Daniel pointed the gun in the air and fired.

As the natives fell back, O'Neill felt a surge of hope, which faded within seconds as the populace surged forward again, with redoubled purpose. There was even more determination on the faces of those not wearing masks now. As if their suspicions had just been confirmed. They were a few feet away from him now, a little more from Daniel. O'Neill yelled desperately, "Shoot one of them!"

He saw the shocked horror on Daniel's face but tried to find his gaze and hold it. "Damnit, Daniel, it's them or us!"

Clearly operating on automatic pilot, Daniel obediently raised the gun, leveled it, pointed it at a guy with a gold and green tunic and plumes rising from a helmet shaped like a jaguar's head. O'Neill felt the moment freeze; felt trapped in that instant like an insect in amber; he could see how long Daniel's fingers were as they were wrapped around that sidearm, see the pink raw flesh where Daniel had scraped off the skin from his knuckles as they struggled through the jungle. He could see the muscle clenching in Daniel's jaw; the collar of his jacket flapping in the breeze which was wafting the smell of death to everyone. He didn't know if he wanted Daniel to pull the trigger or not, he just knew that if he didn't they were both going to die. If Daniel didn't shoot someone, the last thing he ever heard would be his best friend yelling at him to kill someone. If he did, they might both still die, and the last thing Daniel saw would be look in the eyes of someone he'd just murdered.

O'Neill felt hands close in on him and attempted to push them away, trying to elbow off men with spears while standing on one leg. "Daniel!"

Daniel abruptly held up the gun and took a step back. "I can't. Jack, I can't. They're not Goa'uld. They're not Jaffa. I just –" As they closed in on Daniel, jabbing at him with their spears, their eyes
met again and Daniel said desperately, "I'm sorry."

O'Neill closed his eyes. They were all dead then. Not just him and Daniel but Carter and Teal'c as well. All because Daniel wasn't a soldier, and Daniel would know that as well as him. There was only one thing left for him to do now. He didn't believe in heaven or in hell any more, but he could still believe in absolution. From somewhere he managed to drag up the words they both needed him to say. "You did the right thing, Daniel."

The words were barely spoken before pain exploded into the side of his head; white light blazed like a supernova then faded to a spiraling black hole which sucked him into its center.

***

Teal'c sat with his back against the wall of their cell with Major Carter in his arms. She appeared to be asleep again, but he could feel the fever overheating her body while her breathing was harsh and labored. The medicine upon which he had pinned so much hope had failed both of them. Her pulse was weak; she was restless, and seemed even more confused than before about where she was and who was with her. She was slipping through his fingers even as he tightened his protective grip upon her. No Jaffa might be able to tear her from him without a fight, but death was still taking her moment by moment; a thief who did not even trouble to hide the fact that he was stealing.

He had been raised to conceal his emotions. His mother had asked that he should grow up to be worthy of the name his father had given him; to be a strong warrior; a man of great courage and integrity, as his father had been before him. His mother had loved her son unconditionally, but she had expected much of him as well. It fell upon the son to avenge the father and he had been taught that from his earliest years. It had been required of him that he should be First Prime not only because to be less would have been to fall short of the standard his father had set him, but because only as First Prime of Apophis would he have any hope of contributing to the downfall of Cronos. He had barely thought of anything else as he headed towards his goal. He had killed many men, not all of them deserving, to attain the position of First Prime. He had been rewarded with a beautiful wife, a home that befitted his rank, and the honor due to him as the first servant of a god. But he had still been a slave to a parasite.

The birth of his son had softened him in ways that he knew might prove fatal, but how could he not care more for the death of another man's child when he knew what losing his own would do to him? Doubts had followed the birth of Ry'ac as crows followed farmers throwing seed into the sillions. He had managed to hold them at bay for a time but perhaps he had always known his belief in Apophis was now an edifice that could be toppled by one well-chosen sentence. He had missed that certainty, attempting to cling to it like a drowning man trying not to go under for the last time. Cronos had murdered his father. Apophis would destroy Cronos. It was Teal'c's duty to make the death of Cronos his first priority whatever sacrifices it might cost.

But if his desire to revenge his father's death had been a sun blazing in his heart, overwhelming everything else with the ferocity of its glare, O'Neill had been a one-man eclipse. In that moment when the man had asked for his help, Teal'c had realized there were more doubts in his breast than there were stars in the night sky, and that his hatred for the 'god' he served, who had made him deny his own humanity so many times, burned only a little less brightly than his hatred for the Goa'uld who had murdered his father.

He had lost and gained everything in that instant. Lost the favor of Apophis and gained the belief of O'Neill. Lost the respect and affection of his fellow Jaffa but gained the respect and affection of the Tau'ri who were now his teammates. He had lost one cause and found another. Lost one Teal'c and found another. But he had also lost his wife and child, albeit temporarily. He had put his new cause
before them as he had put his old cause before them in the past. His mother had raised him to put duty over love and a part of him was grateful for it. Life was simpler when you knew what your priorities should be, feelings blurred certainties. But although he cared more for his teammates than he ever should have allowed himself to feel, and although he could have cared for General Hammond no more if he had been the father Cronos had stolen from him, living amongst the Tau'ri had many disadvantages.

Sometimes, for instance, it was very difficult to remember that emotions were a sign of weakness, something an enemy could use against him. Apophis had not completely grasped the human mentality yet but once he did, they would all suffer for it. Had Apophis realized on Netu how deep the friendships ran in SG-1, he would have dispensed with the memory device and tortured Teal'c's teammates by different means. The end result might have been very different. Teal'c respected O'Neill deeply but he did not entirely trust his ability to appear indifferent in the face of cruelty to either Major Carter or Daniel Jackson. Nor, if he was honest, did Teal'c trust his own ability to do so. He liked to think that he could do what was required of him in any given situation for the greater good. That he would remember all the evil the Goa'uld were capable of and strive to destroy them first, but if he was honest, that had not been his first priority on Netu. The Tok'ra, Aldwin, had remembered the importance of their mission; had kept in mind that destroying Sokar was more important than saving one's friends. Teal'c had not. Although he had told himself, he had not endangered their mission, only the lives of himself and one Tok'ra, he was afraid that he would have spared even Sokar to save his companions.

A part of himself was still the son his mother had raised, but there were other parts that were perhaps too much the father of Ry'ac, the friend of the Tau'ri, the warrior who could not bear to lose his teammates even if their sacrifice was necessary. It was a problem for all of them. He and O'Neill had never discussed it but he knew they were both growing wary of their own ability to do the right thing. They had lost too many loved ones and the loss was taking its toll. Three times now, O'Neill had thought Daniel Jackson was definitely dead and then, after a period of mourning, had him miraculously restored to him. There was nothing O'Neill did not know about the pain of such a loss. Was it likely he would court it if it was avoidable? Even if it should not necessarily be avoided? Teal'c still could not decide if the decision he had made in the tel'tak had been the right one or the wrong one. Not because of what he had done, but because of the way he had felt at the time. He had done nothing that he was aware of to endanger the Tok'ra mission to destroy Sokar in rescuing his companions. But he very much feared that even if there had been a chance his actions might have jeopardized more than his own life and that of Aldwin, Teal'c would still have done as he had.

As the door opened, Teal'c jerked his head up in surprise. He saw the lion guards briefly looming over another figure like pillars and then the smaller man in tattered robes came into the room. Teal'c registered the newcomer with relief. "Harun."

The man waited until the door closed behind him and then hurried across. "I have brought water. How – is she?"

Teal'c found it surprisingly difficult to say the words aloud. "She is dying."

"The medicine –?"

"It did not help her."

Harun crouched down beside them. He stretched out a hand to touch the unconscious woman and then drew it back. "I have brought you some water. And here –" He pulled a cloth-wrapped object from inside his robe and handed it to Teal'c. "There is bread." His blue eyes held accusation as he looked at the Jaffa. "You said that your medicine would make her well again."
Teal'c met his gaze levelly. "It has not."

"Then nothing can save her. The prophecy is true. Compassion died and was mourned by all."

Teal'c shook his head. "Nothing must happen simply because it is written."

"But the prophecy foretold the coming of the Chosen One. The prophet spoke true."

Impatiently Teal'c drew an arrow in the dirt floor. "Do you think time travels like this? It does not. Sometimes it travels like this." He drew a circle in the dust. "I have been to the past and returned to the future. The prophet who foretold the coming of Daniel Jackson to this planet doubtless traveled from your future to your past. He foretold the past and not the future, and even then he may not have said what was true, only what was necessary."

"Necessary?" Harun frowned in confusion. "I do not understand."

"For what he desired to take place. Would you have believed an avatar of your Chosen One could die of the same illness as afflicts your children had it not been written that contact with your people brought about her death?"

Harun's eyes widened. "You mean the prophet may have lied?"

"I mean your prophet wanted the people of this world to throw off the shackles of the Goa'uld. If he knew the future he would know what needed to be written to bring about the defeat of Onuris."

Harun looked horrified. "This is terrible."

"Why?" Teal'c returned. "The Goa'uld have their lies. Your prophet had his. He wrote what needed to be written, not necessarily what was true. Do you think the writing on the walls of the Temple of Onuris is true?"

"Onuris is a false god, I know the words of his followers to be lies." Harun's gaze strayed uneasily to Major Carter. Once again he stretched out a hand as if to touch her and then withdrew it again.

"Daniel Jackson is also a false god," Teal'c said it gently. "Unlike the Goa'uld he does not claim to be what he is not. But the words of his followers are still lies." He met Harun's gaze. "Powerful lies with the power to effect great changes."

"Good comes from truth!" Harun protested.

Teal'c continued to look at him unblinkingly. "Not necessarily."

Harun rose to his feet and put his hands to his ears. "I will not listen to this. You bring only confusion where once I had certainty. A man is nothing without belief."

"A man is nothing without doubt," Teal'c countered. "When I believed Apophis to be a god, when I believed my first duty was to avenge my father's death, I had no doubts, and I was wrong. How can we learn if we never question?"

"How can we live without conviction?"

"What is conviction except what remains after everything else has been rejected? You know that the Goa'uld are false gods because you have chosen to reject their lies."

"I know the Goa'uld are false gods because the Chosen One is the true god!"
Teal'c shook his head. "You know Daniel Jackson is not a god, Harun. You know Major Carter and myself are not avatars. But you believe Onuris is evil and you wish your people to be rid of him so you have chosen to believe in us instead."

"If you are not gods, what should I believe in then?" Harun retorted.

"Yourself."

Harun backed up towards the door. "If the Chosen One is not a god, he will not arrive in time."

"Daniel Jackson may not be a god but he is both intelligent and determined, and Colonel O'Neill may not be an avatar of the Chosen One but he will do everything within his power to ensure that Major Carter and myself survive. They may yet arrive in time."

"Then you do believe in them?"

"They are my friends," Teal'c stroked a hand automatically through Major Carter's hair as he said the words. "Who better to believe in?"

Harun frowned in confusion. "You do not believe in the power of prophecy and yet you echo its words."

Teal'c met his gaze unflinchingly. "I do believe in the power of prophecy. All words have power. Even when they are not true."

"I will hear no more of this." Harun banged on the door sharply. "I am done with the false avatars of the false god. Let me out."

As the door closed behind him, Major Carter stirred in Teal'c's arms. Her voice was a harsh rasp: "Teal'c…?"

"I am here, Major Carter."

She gazed up at him blearily. "Hard to…breathe…." Even managing those words seemed to cost her a great effort.

He felt despair tighten its grip on his heart but he stroked his fingers through her hair as gently as if she was Ry'ac. "Colonel O'Neill and Daniel Jackson will return soon."

"Promise…you won't…."

It was so difficult for her to speak that he hurried to reassure her. "I will not turn you into a Goa'uld, Major Carter."

"Rather…die…."

"I know. I have given you my word and I will keep it." He put his fingers to her neck and felt how swollen her throat was. Her airway was clearly getting more constricted with each passing hour and the penicillin had either come too late or was not effective against her illness. He raised her up a little, hoping that might help her breathing but as she gulped for air he saw panic flicker in her blue eyes.

"So…hard to…breathe…."

He rubbed her back automatically, hoping it might help but in his heart he knew there was nothing that he could do except sit and watch her struggle for each breathe until the swelling closed her throat completely.
"I gave you my word," he said again, not just because she needed to hear that reassurance again, but because he needed to remind himself that this time he had no choice but to sit here and watch a friend die.

***

Daniel was reading the story of the Deathchild. It was painted on the walls of the Mayan version of hell into which he and Jack had been cast; laid out clearly enough in pictures that even someone who wasn't an archaeologist could probably understand it. The Deathchild was a boy banished from his own realm by the priests of the Otherland. Found wandering on the Sacred Mountain. Given shelter, given succor. Brought death.

The white skin and plumed markings on the foreheads of the cruel priests left Daniel in no doubt these were same priests who had tortured him. They had banished the boy because it was written that he would bring about their destruction. They had killed his father before his eyes, wrenched him from his mother's protective embrace, and sent him away to carry a terrible plague to the tribe which had adopted him.

Daniel had caught just a glimpse of a fair-haired boy half-hidden in the jungle when the warriors were closing in on him. He was evidently the Deathchild. The one who had carried diphtheria to the people on this side of the planet. The priests must have used the rings to send him to the caves. He had found his way down to the jungle and been taken in by the tribe. Probably immune himself but still capable of passing on the illness he had given it to the people who had rescued him from the jungle. They had evidently had no resistance to that strain of diphtheria and the results had been devastating.

All of which made perfect sense. What made no sense at all was the fact the child Daniel had glimpsed in the jungle had appeared to be about ten, whereas these paintings were several hundred years old.

Following the story of the Deathchild to its conclusion, there were paintings showing him piloting something that looked remarkably like a death glider in a war against the people who had banished him. But his story had no end and no real beginning. He had been banished because it was written that he would bring disaster upon his people; in banishing him they had probably sowed the seeds of their own destruction. Another self-fulfilling prophecy swallowing its own half-truths. And in the meantime, a child had been torn away from his own family, and hundreds of people with no immunity to diphtheria had been exposed to it.

Daniel crossed back over to where Jack was lying to listen to the rhythmic thumping of the man's heart again. He kept checking it and it kept beating. He just wished Jack would wake up. He could wake up and yell at Daniel for not having pulled the trigger if he wanted to. Just as long as he woke up.

In the meantime, he could see why they called this place the Freezing House. His breath was a white vapor, while the constant wailing of the icy wind that blew across the chamber was making his skin crawl. Daniel rubbed his arms again, trying to keep warm. He missed his jacket and vest. The sharp drop in temperature suggested night had fallen outside, but given how far underground they seemed to be, it was hard to tell. And anyway, according to Mayan mythology, this place was always bitterly cold. He wondered where the light was coming from. Some leftover Goa'uld technology, he presumed. At least it had enabled him to examine the murals on the walls, although he was still trying to make sense of the other stories.

Given the way these people's mythology had developed and the place he and Jack had been allocated in it, he supposed he should be grateful they hadn't been offered up to the gods in the usual
way. That was twice now he'd narrowly escaped being sacrificed to an absent Goa'uld.

He glanced down at Jack again. Was the man stirring or was that just wishful thinking on his part? Time had trickled through his fingers like sand through an hourglass while Jack was lying there unconscious. He knew there were things he should be doing but he felt paralyzed until he knew if Jack was okay, and he wouldn't know that until the man woke up and talked to him.

He had tried to reason with the people who had dragged them along the causeway into the city, up into the main temple and then down into this icy chamber, pleading with them on Jack's behalf as well as his own. But they had ignored his words and hauled Jack down the stairs with his feet trailing behind him, down staircase after staircase until they reached a chamber whose walls were covered in brightly colored murals Daniel barely glimpsed before a trapdoor yawned open at their feet. He'd still been having a bad flashback to Netu as once again he and Jack were cast down into a Goa'uld version of hell.

Once they'd been thrown into this chamber and trapdoor above slammed closed and bolted, Daniel had done the best he could to make Jack comfortable, relieved to find that his limpness as he was dropped through the hole in the floor seemed to have prevented the older man from doing more than collecting a few bruises. Daniel had pulled off his vest and put it under Jack's bleeding head, listened carefully to his breathing, then put his head on his chest to check for a heartbeat and as an extra precaution – not that recent events were making him paranoid – had felt for a pulse at the man's neck. All confirmed that Jack O'Neill was alive but was probably going to wake up with one hell of a headache. Trying to remember everything he'd heard about head trauma and realizing he'd forgotten all of it, Daniel had wriggled out of his jacket and laid that over the unconscious man on the grounds that keeping him warm was bound to be a good idea. Then he had waited for Jack to wake up. And waited. And waited. In between he had tried to decipher the glyphs in the hope that they might shed some light on these people's history. Not to mention the trials he and Jack might have to face in this Goa'uld created version of yet another human hell.

He had begun with the far wall, trying to work out the timeline for when these people had been kidnapped by the Goa'uld. Some of the earlier stories were ones he recognized, but others – like their version of the Book of Popol Vuh – were so different as to be very confusing. Nor was he an expert on the complicated Mayan language or the even more complicated Mayan calendar, so wrestling with the Long Count while trying to work out if Smoking Skull was also Fire-headed Sun God or if they were two distinct underlords, had taken up a lot of his time. Going back to check that Jack was still breathing every five minutes probably hadn't helped his research much either but even allowing for the fact he was a little distracted there had been a lot of contradictions in the stories told.

It had taken him hours to identify the various glyphs being used. His Mayan had been distinctly rusty before this trip and it was only the fact he'd been taught the language so thoroughly by his grandfather when he was a child that he wasn't even further out of his depth. But once he'd managed to successfully identify the glyphs used to represent K'awiil, the snake-footed patron of kings, Chaak and Yoaat, the rain and lightning gods, K'inich, the sun god, and the local glyphs for fire, water, sky, jaguar, snake, turtle and so on, he'd found the murals and their explanatory glyphs much easier to translate. There was still the problem to cope with of the way the language had evolved over what was obviously a few thousand years; the murals becoming increasingly more colorful and complicated then beginning to degenerate again, the knack of mixing certain colors appearing to have been lost as the vivid blues and golds were replaced by earth tones of russet and cream.

There also appeared to be several stories being told at once, some overlapping others as later artists encroached upon the territory of previous ones. The Deathchild story seemed to have no connection with any of the others, but many murals depicted the adventures of Vukub-Came and Hun-Came, and these were the most brilliant and highly-colored of all. The gods of the Underworld had arrived
in a 'pillar of light', which Daniel interpreted as the ring system. They had brought with them many followers who harbored 'ch'ok Chan' in their bellies to give them the strength of 'many Hix'. Daniel had banged his head against the wall for a while trying to make sense of that one, but once he had remembered that 'Hix' was jaguar, 'Chan' could mean 'snake' as well as 'sky' and that 'ch'ok' meant 'unripe' as well as 'noble' the glyphs made a lot more sense. And having translated the story of the coming of the Goa'uld, he found he now knew several words which he could recognize in this variant of Mayan at a glance, greatly assisting in the speed of his translation.

He still wasn't sure why the Goa'uld had left because there was less emphasis on them going than the certainty of their return. This was stressed over and over again on the older murals. Although common to many mythologies, in this instance he wondered if it had more significance than that here. The Goa'uld trying to ensure that there would still be a place for them in these people's mythology when they came back.

He had been a little…disconcerted by the last wall of murals. They might be useful in helping them through Xibalba, but they were also something he would really rather Jack didn't get to see. Being an anthropologist, they didn't bother him, but he had a feeling Jack wasn't going to take the implications of those pictures well.

Jack made an inarticulate mumbling noise and Daniel leaned over him, trying to keep a rein on his anxiety and going by the sound of his voice, failing miserably. "Jack?"

"Did the right thing, Daniel…. Not your fault…. Had to die sooner or later…."

"Jack!"

Oh that was clever, yelp at him hysterically, that would really show the guy everything was okay and he could wake up in his own time.

Jack jerked his head up like a soldier sleeping on watch snapping to attention. "What?"

Daniel winced at him apologetically. "Sorry."

The man put a hand to his forehead. "Ow." He peered at his palm, squinting at it in the dim lighting but he sounded far more compos mentis than Daniel had dared hope. "Situation?"

"They think we're gods."

"So no change for you. Promotion for me." Jack glared at the blood on his hand and wiped it off on jacket lying across his chest. Then he looked down at it before glancing across at Daniel. "Damnit, Daniel, do you want to catch pneumonia?" He tossed Daniel the jacket irritably.

Daniel gave him a reproachful look as he pulled the jacket on. "You're welcome."

"If they think we're gods why are we freezing our butts off in a stinking dungeon?"

"It's not a dungeon, it's Xuxulim-ha, the Freezing House, and it has an exit." Daniel waved a hand at the doorway at the end of the room. "They think we're what in their version of Mayan mythology appear to be bad gods."

"Those underworld guys?"

"No. Hunhun-Apu and Vukub-Hunapu. Hero gods in our culture but apparently not in theirs. In this world the gods of the underworld are the good guys. We're corrupt and depraved."
"Nah, that's just a rumor put around by SG-6."

Daniel wondered why he'd been so eager for Jack to wake up. He wasn't sure how the guy managed to do this. When they were both conscious he knew damn well Jack wasn't the miracle worker he'd used to think, but somehow as soon as he was out of earshot or just out for the count, Daniel started kidding himself how much better everything would be if only Jack was around. "I told you earlier that the Goa'uld here were Hun-Came and Vukub-Came."

"I know you did. And it didn’t mean diddly to me then either." Jack put a hand up to the back of his neck and groaned as he evidently felt painful little clicks traveling all the way down his spine. "Christ, is there any bit of me that isn't bruised?"

"Jack…!"

"What?" the man retorted sitting up straighter. "I'm still waiting for you to tell me something that makes some kind of sense. Last thing I remember those guys were going to kill us. Why didn’t they?"

"They sort of have. They've cast us into the Underworld anyway. According to their mythology Hunhun-Apu and Vukub-Hunanpu were captured by the gods of Xibalba so I presume they feel they've done their part delivering us to them."

"Right." Jack shifted his bad leg to a more comfortable position, then tossed Daniel's vest to him. "Well, I never thought I'd say this but it sounds like you need to talk to me about mythology." As Daniel gaped at him in surprise, Jack waved a hand, saying encouragingly, "So these good guys – us – wandered into the Underworld and…?"

Daniel grabbed some of the air back which Jack's request had whooshed out of his lungs. "Actually, they were invited. They were playing a ballgame and the rulers of Xibalba sent them an invitation to come and play ball with them. So they went."

Jack glanced around at the walls but Daniel was relieved to see that he didn't appear to have registered the content of the murals yet. He was rather hoping he might be able to steer the man past them. "So," Jack sat up straighter. "These guys traveled to the underworld. Then what did they do?"

"Um – well – they were confused, and humiliated, then they were set an impossible task which they failed to complete, then they were killed."

"And?" Jack prompted impatiently.

"Hunhun-Apu managed to father twin sons after he was dead on an underworld princess called Xquiq. The children were called Hun-Apu and Xbalanque. They grew up to be great heroes who avenged their father and uncle's murder. Oh yes and the souls of Hunhun-Apu and Vukub-Hunanpu were translated into the skies and according to legend became the sun and the moon. So they did achieve a kind of immortality."

"Am I missing something or did the guys we're supposed to be get lured into the underworld, get killed, then basically stay dead?"

"Well…I suppose, more or less, yes."

"That sucks." Jack got to his feet and Daniel scrambled up next to him, putting out a hand to steady him. By the volume of swearing, he gathered that Jack's leg was aching and his head was pounding. Steering him past those pictures definitely seemed to be a good idea.
Daniel said quickly, "There's no reason for us to stay here. I think we try to get through the various punishment houses and see if we can find a way out. The lighting in here suggests we're getting a lot closer to Goa'uld technology so –"

Too late. Jack had seen the mural on the nearest wall. Daniel winced in anticipation but Jack seemed hypnotized. He limped over towards it as though pulled by an invisible string. "Are those guys doing what I think they're doing?"

Daniel scratched his jaw. "Probably."

"Wow." Jack appeared to be impressed rather than repelled. In fact he seemed to be downright fascinated. "You'd have to be double jointed."

Daniel hoped Jack didn't get the obvious here. There was no reason why he should, after all. He couldn't read the writing and the significance of most of the symbolism was going to be completely lost on him so he wouldn't understand the –

"This is us, isn't it?"

Daniel stared at him in disbelief. Jack had to get smart now? "What – makes you say that?"

"Well, I'd say these two could definitely be called corrupt and depraved, not to mention…." Jack put his head on one side. "Yep – pretty damned athletic. So this is us offending the gods and probably scaring the horses, right?"

"It's Hunhun-Apu and Vukub-Hunapu," Daniel told him primly. "It's not actually 'us'."

"Except they're not locals, are they?" Jack traced a finger across the mural. "Here's all the ordinary people looking like the ones who grabbed us, and here's the Goa'uld, looking like they're from a different planet, not to mention very disapproving, and here's us, looking like – us, only being much more…flexible."

Daniel looked around for a straw to clutch at. "In the pictures on Earth, Hunhun-Apu and Vukub-Hunapu are definitely Mayan."

Jack gave him a withering look. "We're not on earth. And these people definitely aren't Mayan."

"Hunhun-Apu and Vukub-Hunapu were probably rival Goa'uld in this culture. That would be why they don't look like locals."

Jack grabbed Daniel's arm and towed him over to the mural, making him look at it. Jack pointed a finger at one of the figures. "This is Hunhun-Apu, right?"

"It seems to be, yes."

"And so rubber boy here is Vukub-whatever, right?"

"Yes."

Jack's finger stabbed at the head of the younger god accusingly. "The kid has blue eyes, Daniel."

"In Mayan mythology Hunhun-Apu and Vukub-Hunapu were brothers." Daniel said it determinedly.

"That sure as hell doesn't look like a fraternal hug to me. I think we're dealing with another screw up in the space time conthingummy."
"This isn't us," Daniel insisted, voice rising a little.

Jack looked at him levelly. "Why not? Whoever went back in time and told those guys in the past all the guff that ended up on that tablet must have talked about this part of the proceedings as well."

Daniel gave him a look of exasperation. "If you and me have ever done this it seems to have slipped my mind."

"Well, you're not the Chosen One either and I'm sure as hell not an angel, but I don't remember you bitching about that." Jack limped on along the mural. "Okay, there's you and me being corrupt and depraved...still being corrupt and depraved...being seriously corrupt and depraved... Boy, but I have a lively imagination and you're just so... obliging.... Getting the invitation to go and play ball with the bad guys... accepting the invitation... taking a minute to be corrupt and depraved again - you've got to admire our energy - going down into the underworld... getting a whole load of... Why is this bit different?"

Keeping a steadying hand on Jack's elbow, Daniel followed the man's gaze to the last pictures on the wall. The dividing panels of glyphs were absent here as he'd already realized but he was more impressed than he was willing to let on that Jack had noticed. Sometimes he swore Jack was a lot smarter than he wanted anyone to know. "I'm hoping it's because it isn't necessarily true."

Jack scanned the pictures. "Are Carter and Teal'c on here?"

"I don't think so."

"You don't 'think' so?" Jack gave him a look of exasperation then glanced at his watch. "You've had hours. What were you doing while I was unconscious?"

"Jack, I had four walls of ancient Mayan text to translate. It's important that we know about timelines. When and who the people were taken through the 'gate to this planet. I was trying to work out if the Maya who were brought here were from before or after the ascendancy of Teotihuacan."

Limping along the mural, Jack said irritably, "Remind me to buy you a sense of proportion for Christmas. And why didn't you wake me up anyway?"

Daniel opened his mouth to make a retort, remembered that Jack's leg was hurting, his head was probably aching, and their current situation was all Daniel's fault, and closed it again. "I tried to wake you," he sighed it resignedly. "But you were too deeply unconscious." He didn't add how frightening that was. Jack knew how frightening that was. Jack had watched over him enough times when he was out for the count so there was no need for any explanation of what it did to you to have to wait around to find out if a friend was ever going to wake up again, or be himself if and when he did.

Jack grimaced in sympathy, already darting him a look to see whether or not he'd hurt his feelings. Daniel heroically resisted the urge to look wounded, and took the man's arm to help steady him. "Jack, if Sam has diphtheria...."

"I know." Jack's gaze was raking the murals. "Oh great, here we're dead. And there's no sign of Carter or Teal'c."

Daniel followed his gaze to the picture of the two figures lying on the floor with their head and limbs neatly severed from their torsos. They looked very small and surprised, with their wide open eyes and those pools of blood making a laterine puddle around their headless necks. He'd spent a long time looking at that picture and trying to work out whether or not it was bound to be 'true'. "As
everything else on this mural is wrong let's hope that is, too." He tightened his grip on Jack's arm. "We have to go."

Jack nodded wearily. "I know." He cast a last glance at the pictures, put his head over to one side again and then shook it in disbelief. "Do the people who drew this have any idea what kind of a strain that position would put on the knees?"

Daniel began to urge him towards the doorway. "Jack, if we're talking realism, my spine would have snapped long before your knees gave out. Now, we need to look out for booby-traps."

Jack was still gazing at the murals in fascination as Daniel steered him past them. "What?"

"This mural doesn't tell us how we end up like…that, so we need to focus on the trials faced by Hunhun-Apu and Vukub-Hunapu." It was a relief to get Jack away from the pictures and into the corridor. The passageway was bathed in a greenish light which was possibly due to phosphorescence but which Daniel suspected had been chosen by the departed Goa'uld for the same reason fairground owners used green light-bulbs in Haunted Houses: it looked creepy. As he helped Jack limp in what he hoped was the right direction, Daniel told him about the Punishment Houses of the mythological Xibalba.

Jack was ticking them off on his fingers as they passed along a corridor. "Gloom. Knives. Jaguars. Fire. Bats. Right?"

Daniel nodded. "Although according to the Book of Popol Vuh, Hunhun-Apu and Vukub-Hunapu had to follow a much more difficult path then we did before they reached Xibalba."

"Getting here wasn't exactly a rest-cure for us either."

"We passed down the steep steps – you were unconscious so you'll have to take my word for it – but there wasn't a river gushing with blood and there weren't four roads. But that doesn't mean we won't reach the council room. If you see anywhere with seated figures in it…." O'Neill sighed inwardly and let it wash over him. Daniel had already said it, after all, maybe the names were the same but the events might be completely different. They might get their asses burned on a red hot stone or they might get zatted by some Goa'uld booby-trap. A legend, which had moved so far away from the truth it thought Daniel could give the kind of oral satisfaction that wouldn't have disgraced a five hundred dollar hooker while doing a handstand, was hardly the best guide in the world as to what might lie around the next bend. Not that Daniel didn't constantly surprise him with all the stuff he knew, but if he knew how to do that, O'Neill would whistle Dixie naked in the 'gateroom while standing on one leg.

"Will you stop thinking about those damned pictures?"

It was the kind of exasperated hiss he'd only previously got from Sara. O'Neill jumped guiltily. "I wasn't," he lied defensively.

Daniel gave him a withering look. Sometimes Daniel was much too much like a difficult child and a nagging wife rolled into one.

"Well, only in that they're not much use for telling us what dangers we might have to face given their…questionable accuracy." He said it as primly as Daniel could have managed it. Hey, hanging around with the boy ought to have some benefits. Darting him a sideways glance, he was pleased to see Daniel looked both mollified and apologetic.

"That's true. But I'm presuming there will be some resemblance to the original trials faced by either
Hunhun-Apu and Vukub-Hunapu or Hun-Apu and Xbalanque…"

O'Neill groaned as he got whammied by more of those damned unpronounceable names. He decided
to tune Daniel out again and do some thinking of his own. Daniel might understand the mythology
but O'Neill understood weaponry, he also understood the way an enemy didn’t tend to change his
MO too often. This temple place they were under seemed to have been built on top of natural
catacombs and then the Goa'uld had presumably fixed the place to resemble Shiwhatsit, but there
would have been limits to how well they could rig it. Most of the Goa'uld weaponry they'd come
across so far dealt with nerve pain: zaknikatels, shock grenades, those taks the Tok'ra had, that ring
the Canon had worn which had replicated lightning, they'd all seemed to have pretty much the same
energy source.

"Did you find any mention of those other two guys on any of the pictures you saw?" As Daniel
blinked at him in confusion, O'Neill sighed in exasperation, "Hun-thingy and Shibble-ankway? The
ones who got away?"

Daniel shook his head. "No. Nothing about Xquiq or the tree where Hunhun-Apu's head was
supposed to hang. They'd incorporated some of the trials faced by Hun-Apu and Xbalanque into the
ones faced by Hunhun-Apu and Vukub-Hunapu but –"

"Daniel!" O'Neill grimaced as Daniel physically jumped. He hadn’t meant it to come out quite
that sharply. "Yes or no would do."

Daniel moistened his lips. "No."

"So the Goa'uld have rewritten these people's history a lot?"

"Yes."

"In that case, screw looking around for jaguars and bats and let's start worrying about naqadah-based
stuff that will kill us."

O'Neill was starting to see a pattern now. It wasn't a pattern he liked – he and Daniel were being
herded like cattle into a corral – but at least it made sense. Each chamber was linked by a length of
corridor with no exits except for the one at each end. Each chamber had a doorway on one side and
another doorway at the other. There was one way into each chamber and one way out of it. They
could go forward or they could retrace their steps. Sideways was not an option.

He wasn't sure how much reading of glyphs and peering at pictures he should allow Daniel to do.
Forewarned was forearmed and all that but on the other hand time was definitely a factor and from
what he remembered about diphtheria, they had nothing in their medical kit that was going to cure it
so even if Teal'c managed to talk Harun into stealing back their equipment, it wasn't going to help.
The only thing that was going to help was getting Carter back through the Stargate and into the
infirmary, soon.

He'd come across diphtheria in South America and knew more or less how it worked. As it had been
explained to him by a harassed field doctor in El Salvador, once you’d inhaled the diphtheria germs,
you got a hole in the inside of your throat, blood leaked out, germs leaked in, you felt like shit and
you got a toxin in your bloodstream that would cause multiple organ failure if you didn't get the anti-
toxin pretty damned quick. But before that happened your throat would probably swell up and close
over, blocking your airway and causing you to suffocate. Despite immunization programs, it still
killed a lot of kids every year in Third World – damn, his age was showing – Developing countries.
He'd been told the worst strain could set up shop an hour after exposure, and even the milder varieties generally showed up within three hours. There had been other factors like whether or not a person was iron deficient which the guy had insisted on telling him about at some length but he couldn't remember any way of curing the damned thing without access to the anti-toxin. Antibiotics killed the germs in the throat but they didn't stop the ones in the bloodstream from circulating, and they were the ones that were going to be working on Carter's organs round about now.

So, they needed to get through this Mayan version of hell at double speed, which meant no time for Daniel to read all the pretty pictures on the walls. On the other hand, they also needed to get through this Mayan version of hell without having all their limbs cut off, which meant they needed to have some idea what was coming up in each chamber. Finding a balance between the two was involving a lot of patience on both their parts. Daniel was having to put up with being told to find out everything they needed to know to get through the next obstacle one minute and then being told they needed to pick up the pace now, the next. And O'Neill was having to wrap up his inconsistencies in at least a modicum of tact so Daniel wouldn't completely lose it with him. They'd made their way through two chambers without any problem so far but he doubted it would continue to be this easy, and the way Daniel was getting jumpier than a cat on a hot griddle suggested he was equally afraid there was going to be something nasty round the next bend.

O'Neill looked at his watch. "Time's up."

"Jack, I –" Daniel looked at him with that now familiar mixture of exasperation and patience.

"I know." O'Neill said it with emphasis. "I'm not blind, Daniel. I can see you have an entire wall of pictowhatsits which I've let you look at for two and half minutes. But now we know what Carter has we have a timescale, and basically if we don't get there in the next couple of hours, she's dead."

"If I screw up on this, we're dead. Which means Sam and Teal'c are dead, too."

"I know. It sucks. No one should have to work under that kind of pressure." O'Neill took Daniel's arm and towed him firmly away from the wall. "But that's still the way it is."

Daniel put a hand up to his head. "Okay, I think what's up ahead should be the main chamber. The trouble is they keep crossing between the trials faced by Hunhun-Apu and Vukub-Hunapu and Hun-Apu and Xbalanque, and their version of events is unlike any other I've ever come across. I'm presuming the place we just went through was Zotziha…"

"The room with all the bat crap in it, you mean?" O'Neill looked down at his boots in disgust. He was going to have to toss them when he got back because no way in hell was he wearing footwear encrusted with bat guano again.

"The House of the Bats, yes. In which, according to the Earth Book of Popol Vuh, Hun-Apu had his head cut off by Camzotz, the Ruler of the Bats."

"How come that didn't slow him up then?"

"Um – a passing tortoise brushed against Hun-Apu's severed head and was turned into a head instead, leaving Hun-Apu no worse off than before."

"You have got to wonder what kind of drugs those guys were taking who came up with this stuff."

"Jack, the point is that we didn't encounter any problems there. I was expecting some kind of booby-trap. If the Goa'uld who ran this place haven't adhered even slightly to the existing mythology then I have no idea what we could be up against."
"Well, let's just do the best we can." O'Neill wondered if his leg was ever going to stop hurting. It was only a burn, after all, should it be throbbing like this? If he could just sit down for five minutes it might stop aching so much but this wasn't a place where you came across a lot of chairs. Bat shit on the floor and dirty pictures on the walls, yes; chairs, no.

As he stepped through the doorway of the next chamber he couldn't stop a 'Wow…' breaking out because this place was big. Five times the size of the 'gateroom, the middle section of the floor decorated with different colored flagstones in an intricate pattern, and every inch of wall space covered in pictures and squiggles. Daniel emitted a strangled little moan beside him that sounded positively pre-orgasmic and O'Neill shot him a quick look. "Danny…"

"I know." Daniel automatically took some of O'Neill's weight as he helped him limp into the chamber. "I know I can't, but oh God, Jack –"

"You really want to. I know. Another time, maybe."

"This is a once in a lifetime deal and you know it." Daniel didn't sound reproachful, just resigned. He gave himself a shake and added in a lower voice. "Those pillars in the middle of the room look as if they might have Egyptian glyphs as well as Mayan ones. I can't really see from here."

"Goa'uld technology?" O'Neill looked around the cavernous chamber and nodded. "Yeah, this feels like a good place to off your enemies." It also felt – Goa'uldy. There was that low level of hum of an energy source, and the lighting was brighter. Apart from the pillars holding up the ceiling and something in the middle that looked vaguely human-shaped the cavern seemed to be empty. Except for a large sarcophagus-shaped object by the right wall. Wishing for an MP-5, O'Neill made a beeline for it.

It was instinctive to avoid the colored floor tiles and stick to the plain stone ones. A bit like not stepping on the cracks in the sidewalk: you might know it wouldn't really break your mother's back, but you skipped over them all the same. That rule also applied to garish floor tiles when there was safe grey limestone to walk on.

As he drew closer, O'Neill realized it wasn't a sarcophagus. There was none of that nifty gold paneling the Goa'uld always went in for, this was just plain stone, but as it was the first thing he'd seen he could sit on, at least he could take a load off while Daniel read some of the walls and told them what might lie ahead –

"No!" Daniel dived across the room, yanking him away so violently he almost pulled him over.

O'Neill looked at Daniel in surprise. "What's biting you?"

Daniel was staring at him in mingled exasperation and reproach. "Don't you listen to anything I tell you?"

God, sometimes Daniel sounded so much like Sara it was positively spooky. O'Neill flailed around for an answer that wouldn't get him yelled at. "Some…times."

"I told you what happened to Hunhun-Apu and Vukub-Hunapu when they sat down in the council chamber!"

O'Neill winced then ran a hand over the stone lid. "It's not hot, Daniel. I checked." That was a lie but he'd checked now and it wasn't hot so it was as good as telling the truth.

Daniel reached into his pocket and pulled out a quarter, which he tossed onto the lid. It sizzled on contact with the stone, flickered, glowed, then vanished in a hiss of white light.
"You see?"

O'Neill grimaced apologetically. "Ouch. Good save. Thanks."

"The Goa'uld may have concentrated all their efforts into this one chamber, which is good news if we can get through it alive." Daniel turned them round to face the patterned floor, muttering, "Okay, let me think. When Hunhun-Apu and Vukub-Hunapu approached Xibalba they came to a meeting place of four roads. One road was red, another black, the third white, and the fourth yellow. The black road said 'I am the road that you must take. I am the way of the Lord.'"

"So we need to walk on the black flagstones?" O'Neill offered.

Daniel shook his head. "No, that was a lie, and according to the myth from that moment on Hunhun-Apu and Vukub-Hunapu were already beaten."

"So which road should they have taken?"

"Um – it never said."

O'Neill raised his eyes to the ceiling. "That's useful."

"But I'm presuming the white road might have been a better choice." Daniel nodded his head towards the end of the chamber. "If this is the same as in the book of Popol Vuh there should be wooden figures down there which look like Hun-Came and Vukub-Came. Hunhun-Apu and Vukub-Hunapu were fooled by them and earned themselves great mortification by addressing them as though they were real."

"So avoiding them completely might be a good idea then?" O'Neill offered.

Daniel moistened his lips. "Except, as your trained soldier's eye has probably already noticed, Jack, there's only the one way in and out of this chamber. I presume that the exit is hidden and we need to work out where it is. As those figures and the pillars behind them with the Goa'uld glyphs on them are the only thing in the room, we might as well head for them."

Smартинг a little from that 'trained soldier's eye' crack, O'Neill could nevertheless see Daniel's point. He looked at the tiled floor and groaned inwardly. Hopping from white stone to white stone was not going to be that easy. There were twice as many black slabs as white ones and the white ones were a good jump apart. "Screw this," O'Neill protested. "All these stones might be fine. Have you got another quarter?"

Daniel reached into his pocket and drew out a handful of change. "Two quarters, two nickels and a dime."

"Big spender." O'Neill took the change from him and tossed the first quarter onto one of the black squares. It glowed and then vanished. "Okay, let's skip the black stones." He threw the dime onto the white stone and nothing happened. "That's a good sign." A nickel on the yellow stone disappeared at once, but a nickel on the red flagstone stayed where it was. O'Neill nodded. "Okay, the white tiles and the red tiles are okay then."

As he made to step onto the first white one, Daniel grabbed his arm and pulled him back. "Wait." He took the last quarter from O'Neill's hand and dropped it onto the white stone. It hissed and vanished. O'Neill jumped back. "Christ!" He looked at Daniel accusingly. "What the hell?"

"The dime obviously wasn't heavy enough to activate the mechanism."
"You know I am really starting to hate the Goa'uld who built this place," O'Neill growled and hopped heavily onto the first red flagstone.

Daniel hadn't learned to play hopscotch when he was a child. In fact he hadn't learned to play hopscotch until he was nearly thirty-two years old when Sam and Janet had been teaching Cassandra how to play it in Janet's back yard and had invited him to play as well. When he'd had to confess that he didn't know the game either, they'd been as shocked as though he'd admitted to never having eaten apple pie. Trying to tell them he'd actually had a very nice childhood right up until the moment when his parents had been killed in front of him hadn't really worked. Janet and Sam had decided Daniel had been a poor deprived boy who'd never had any fun because his parents were too busy digging up things. Saying that as a child his idea of heaven had been messing around in old tombs, and he'd never minded not having other kids to play with because he'd been enjoying himself far too much had just made them exchange pitying looks over his head.

Later, Janet had let him pour hot fudge sauce all over her homemade ice cream without mentioning teeth cavities and Sam had driven over to the other side of town to buy him some of the chocolate walnut cookies he loved even though it wasn't his birthday. Later, he gathered the news about his terrible deprivation had been passed onto Jack because the man had taken him and Teal'c to a baseball game, a football game, and three different movies in a week. Teal'c had been the excuse for this plunge into popular culture but Daniel suspected he had always been intended as the true recipient of these experiences.

As he jumped onto the next red flagstone he could see the carved figures clearly. They were almost frighteningly lifelike; beautiful, arrogant, arrayed in gorgeous robes and with elaborate headdresses. They held golden spheres in their wooden hands, were seated on magnificent thrones which seemed to be made of gold and gave the impression they were looking down on him and Jack with disdain. Daniel tried to read the golden lettering behind them, and was not exactly surprised to find it was a mixture of Mayan and Goa'uld. The symbols for Hurakan, the Quiche-Maya creator of humankind, were prominent, suggesting these two had been the vassals of a much more powerful Goa'uld, possibly a System Lord. Squinting to try to read the glyphs, Daniel could make out something behind the golden thrones which seemed to relate a tale of Vukub-Came and Hun-Came killing Cabrakan and driving out Zipacna.

The colored flagstones ceased before the thrones, the rest of the chamber being paved with what appeared to be ordinary stone, and Daniel was already looking forward to being able to walk normally instead of playing hopscotch on a floor that would vaporize him if he stumbled.

"That's interesting," Daniel offered, jumping onto another flagstone. "In the Book of Popol-Vuh it was Hun-Apu and Xbalanque who defeated Cabrakan and Zipacna and they were only partially successful...." Seeing Jack had that bored look on his face again. Daniel pointed at a picture on the wall of a giant snake devouring one of the fleeing villains. "That panel might be interpreted as saying that Zipacna lost having his own people to rule and had to become an Underlord to Apophis. We could ask Teal'c about that when we see him again."

He and Jack exchanged a loaded glance. Neither one of them voiced that 'If we see him again' they were both thinking.

The two flagstones in front of the statues were both red and Daniel jumped onto the one in front of Vukub-Came just as Jack landed more awkwardly on the one in front of Hun-Came.

"What happened when Hunhun-whatsit and Rubber Boy talked to these statues?" Jack prompted.
"They were jeered and scoffed at by the lords of the Underworld."

"Well, sticks and stones –" Jack's hand abruptly shot out and his fingers closed on Daniel's arm. "What do those things in their hands look like to you?"

Daniel frowned. "Glowing spheres."

"They weren't glowing a minute ago. And they look like –"

The next thing Daniel knew he was grabbed and thrown. The floor spun beneath him, a white flag came perilously close and then something hauled him towards a painfully hard but uncolored expanse of grey stone.

He landed half on top of Jack who immediately rolled them over so Daniel was underneath before clamping his hand down across Daniel's eyes.

Even though his closed eyelids and Jack's hand Daniel sensed the light blaze all around them. He felt the percussion blast of something that felt like an explosion although there was no real noise, and then the hand was very cautiously lifted from his eyes. Senses still reeling a little he stared up at the man open-mouthed. "What just happened?"

Still lying on top of him, Jack said in a whisper: "My guess would be electrified floor plus voice activated shock grenades. Good way to mop up the opposition. You okay?"

Daniel nodded. "Think so. You?"

"You need to diet."

"Sorry." Daniel looked up at him. "Although you could lose some weight yourself, you know."

Jack glanced at the painted wall to the right of them and then hissed in exasperation. "Oh for crying out loud!"

Daniel followed his gaze and saw the now familiar representations of Hunhun-Apu and Vukub-Hunapu celebrating their escape from death with uninhibited gusto.

Jack glared at the pictures in indignation. "Damnit, I was just trying to stop him from going blind!"

Daniel grimaced. "That could be open to…misinterpretation."

"Well, talk about having your motives impugned." Jack clambered awkwardly to his feet and then held out a hand to Daniel, still glaring at the mural as he pulled him up.

"Thanks by the way," Daniel jerked a thumb in the direction of the patterned floor. "For – you know –"

"Any time." Jack was still looking at the pictures.

Daniel made a face. "Can we just move on?"

"I think this might be important."

Daniel looked at him in disbelief. Had he and Jack undergone some kind of weird body swap again? "Jack, Sam has diphtheria remember?"

Jack tapped the wall, making Daniel flinch as he dislodged a flake of red paint. "Look at this. That's
you firing the gun into the air. Well, it looks more like a zat but it could be a gun. What do the squiggles say?"

Intrigued himself now, Daniel peered over Jack's shoulder. "Um – it's about the bad gods being known by certain signs. Their coming was heralded by a great plague which swept the land. And the might of Hun-Came and Vukub-Came did not protect them, for the people were unworthy and had not kept faith with their true gods but had become no better than the…. Not sure about this, maybe the 'apes which swing among the trees'."

Jack shrugged. "Go on."

"It says Vukub-Hunapu carried a weapon which 'belched forth thunder, but the great gods Hun-Came and Vukub-Came had left spells of protection for his surviving people, for they had kept faith with their followers, although their followers had not kept faith with them, and the weapon of Vukub-Hunapu did no harm to any man, woman, or child. The people wanted to kill the evil gods but the great and mighty Hun-Came and Vukub-Came had left word that only they were able to punish Hunhun-Apu and Vukub-Hunapu as they deserved. Remembering this the people seized the evil gods and thrust them into the freezing house of Xibalba where the great and mighty Hun-Came and Vukub-Came dealt with them as they saw fit.' " He looked at Jack open-mouthed. "That's why we had to have a gun. If we hadn't fired the gun they would have killed us. When I fired the gun into the air they knew we were the bad gods they'd been waiting for and they threw us into Xuxulim-ha instead of sticking us with their spears."

Jack ran a hand through his hair. "Damned lucky you never learned to obey orders then really, isn't it? If you had we'd both be dead by now. Wonder what we need the knife for?"

"I don't know but I bet it said something about it on that tablet Harun showed us."

"Talking of which….." Jack tapped the mural again, sending another flake of paint onto the floor. "Does that look like Harun to you?"

"Don't touch it," Daniel protested.

"Why not?" Jack retorted. "Who else is going to see it except you and me?"

"It's an invaluable record of a vanished civilization."

"It's a crock, Daniel. I would never keep my boots on while doing… that to my fellow evil god, it just wouldn't be good manners. And anyway, the other stuff didn't flake off when I touched it. Why is this doing it?"

"It's probably a different kind of paint." Daniel answered him automatically, still hating the sight of that missing piece of pigment the man had just dislodged, but then it occurred to him that there might be significance there. Why should there be different layers of paint?

Jack's voice cut through his thoughts as he tapped the mural impatiently: "Does that look like Harun to you or not?"

Wincing as another flake of paint floated to the floor, Daniel followed the man's finger to the picture of the robed figure bearing a heavy tablet. The Stargate was depicted behind him, the sun and the moon blazing overhead in a sky divided between night and day. The figure had olive skin but pale blue eyes, and did look remarkably similar to Harun. "Actually, it does. But that doesn't make any sense. Unless …" He could feel the cogs in his mind turning, sifting possibilities. It was automatic to look around for Sam but she, of course, was a prisoner on the other side of the planet, probably
dying of diphtheria because of him. There was only Jack to confer with.

Jack was gazing at the mural and shaking his head. "No way in hell could Harun carry that tablet thing. It was carved into the wall and it must have weighed a couple of ton."

"No, but he could carry the knowledge of it in his head." Daniel felt that familiar mixture of excitement and foreboding that new information on missions so often brought. "If he was – say – sent back in time…?"

Jack jerked his head round so fast he almost overbalanced. "What?"

Daniel traced the pictures with his finger, deciphering the glyphs which snaked between each picture. "It says the prophet left his land by day in the third Bak'tun of the new world and came back to it by night in the second Bak'tun because the Gate of Chak Ek', being bent by the sun, had willed it so."

"And in English?"

Daniel blinked, moistening his lips. "Um – let me think, Winal is twenty days, Tun is approximate to an Earth year, K'atun is about twenty years, Bak'tun is about…four hundred years. So, Harun, bearing the knowledge of the tablet, traveled through the gate of the great Star – the Stargate – as the wormhole was 'bent by the sun'. I guess that's a poetic way of saying affected by a solar flare. And ended up on the same world four centuries years earlier."

"Well, that pretty much sucks."

"We need to stop him."

Jack stared at him. "What?"

"We have to stop Harun."

"This from the guy who wouldn't even translate the damned tablet in case it changed future events?"

There was a dangerous edge to Jack's tone not to mention a burn in those brown eyes that made Daniel take a pace backwards. He talked quickly: "But, Jack, they've been torturing people in that temple for centuries as they wait for this non-existent deliverer to arrive. If Harun never went back in time, there would never be any cult of the Chosen One and –"

"And nothing. You and Carter have already said it. You can't change any past event without affecting the future in ways you can't even guess at. We can't alter anything. We can't stop Harun going back."

"But earlier you said –"

"Earlier I wanted to use a tactical advantage to get my team out of a dangerous situation. Now, I don't want anything screwing around with things that may mean we end up dead. Because you were the Chosen One, they let you walk into the temple and get Shokmared. But if you hadn't been the Chosen One, as good little followers of Onuris they might have killed all of us the second we walked through the 'gate. Which means if Harun doesn't go back when he's supposed to, we might all end up dead. No, Daniel, I don't think so."

Daniel only realized he was staring at the man with his mouth open when Jack gave him a glare of exasperation and said, "And stop looking at me like that."
Daniel closed his mouth.

Jack pointed at the other pictures. "Okay, tell me the rest."

Daniel looked at the next panel. "Um – we did a lot of celebrating after surviving the trial of the council chamber."

"I noticed."

Daniel examined the murals, trying not to gape at the acrobatics of Hunhun-Apu and Vukub-Hunapu despite the fact Hunhun-Apu was so pointedly fair-skinned, gray-haired, brown-eyed, older and a little taller than Vukub-Hunapu, who was unmistakably fair-skinned, brown-haired, blue-eyed, younger and a little shorter than Hunhun-Apu. For the first time he was almost grateful Teal'c and Sam were on the other side of the planet because these damned murals were one part of the mission he'd really rather no one else knew about.

Jack breathing in his ear didn't help his concentration either, especially when the man said curiously, "Can you really do cartwheels?"

"No," Daniel told him forcibly. "And before you ask I can't wrap my ankles around the back of my neck either."

Jack gave him an assessing sideways glance. "Neat trick if you can do it."

"Well, I can't," Daniel told him with emphasis. "Now be quiet and let me think." He walked up and down examining the murals. There were so many painted on the wall it was difficult to make sense of them. Vukub-Came and Hun-Came were in there but they were no longer hostile to Hunhun-Apu and Vukub-Hunapu. There were trials recorded that he and Jack hadn't encountered. According to the murals they had done battle with jaguars, fire, walls of razor-sharp lances, and sword-wielding skeletons. In fact all they'd done was play hopscotch and avoided getting blinded by a shock grenade. Why would the Goa'uld build up the intelligence of its enemies? To make it look better when it eventually defeated them? But wouldn't it make more sense to just have left instructions for the populace to kill anyone who turned up? Why so much emphasis on the need to cast the rival Goa'uld into Xibalba?

He put a hand up to his head. "Okay, I think we're dealing with two different bits of propaganda here. The story left by the Goa'uld and the story Harun is presumably going to tell these people when he goes back in time."

"I got that." Jack tapped the wall again. "Harun over here. Goa'uld over there. Us in the middle."

"Which would explain why there are different kinds of paint being used."

Daniel nodded, shooting Jack another glance of surprise. He was never sure if Jack had got things he was being told or not. Jack definitely faked that dumber than a stump act when it suited him, but most of the time it was just mental laziness on his part so Daniel and Sam would do all the thinking and he didn't have to bother. "Harun's motives are obvious: he's trying to make sure his present takes place – that you and I get through Xibalba alive, get back to the temple and free Sam and Teal'c from Onuris – supposing that's what we do next."

"It sounds like a plan to me."

Daniel nodded. "Okay, but what about the Goa'uld pretending to be Vukub-Came and Hun-Came? Those original paintings didn't look as much like you and me but they clearly depicted people who weren't from around here. Bad gods who needed to be thrown into Xibalba. Why? Why would they
do that?” He stood on tiptoe to look at the higher murals. "This is very old, much older than four hundred years ago. It could be from a thousand years ago."

"What's a thousand years to a Goa'uld?” Jack shrugged.

Daniel blinked at him. "Of course, you're right. It's nothing to a Goa'uld. Even without a sarcophagus they could go from host to host…. Yes!"

Jack jumped violently. "Christ, Daniel, there could be all kinds of booby-traps in here. Don't yell like that."

Daniel grabbed him and tugged him over to the wall, pointing at the pictures of Hunhun-Apu and Vukub-Hunapu. "The Goa'uld were planning to come back. But they didn't know if they'd still be in the same hosts so they left instructions that any two non-locals who turned up carrying a weapon more technologically advanced than that of the indigenous population should be cast into Xibalba. If it's them, they're fine, they know their way through the booby-traps they've set. If it's a couple of rival Goa'uld trying to take over the place, hopefully the booby-traps will kill them. They didn't bother sticking to the Mayan mythology because they were expecting to be the only people who ever came down here. Harun used that knowledge to insert us into the mythology to make doubly sure we'd come out alive."

"Why didn't he tell us about the booby-traps when we were back in his hut?"

"Because he doesn't know about them yet." Daniel explained it patiently. "We haven’t told him about them, have we?"

"Um –" Jack appeared to be in mental pain. "What?"

"Look, if we find some little notes from Harun telling us how to get out of here, that proves we must get back and tell him what happened to us and how we escaped."

"How?" Jack countered.

"I'm hoping he's told us that."

"And if he hasn't?"

"Then we never got back to tell him how to tell us how we got out of here."

Jack put a hand up to his head. "My brain hurts."

"We can do this," Daniel told him. He looked around at the second half of the vast chamber. Apart from the murals on the walls it appeared to be featureless. The floor was made of slabs of grey limestone, there were no windows and very emphatically no doors. He turned his attention to the pillars which divided the chamber. On the far side sat the carved figures of the departed Goa'uld, contemptuously gazing out onto a sea of colored tiles. On this side there were the usual Goa'uld glyphs embossed in gold on the pillars. The mechanism to operate the door, whatever it might be, had to be hidden amongst these glyphs. Daniel approached them cautiously, having to trust to luck that this floor wasn't going to vaporize him as he was now out of small change.

Jack was limping down to the far end of the chamber, still gazing at the murals but also thumping the walls from time to time, presumably to see if he could shift some mechanism that might reveal a door. Daniel thought he was being a little optimistic there. Jack might swear by that tried and trusted method for getting his car started when it gave him trouble, but he didn't think hitting it with a wrench would be likely to kick-start this particular piece of Goa'uld technology, even supposing
they'd had a wrench to hit it with.

"Nothing down here," Jack called to him.

*You don't say.* Daniel resisted the urge to say it aloud. No doubt Jack thought he was being useful, limping around making a lot of noise while Daniel tried to find a correlation between a panel of Goa'uld symbols and a Mayan version of the Kama Sutra, but shutting up and letting him think would actually be more helpful. The glyphs weren't really helping him much. It seemed to be some kind of family tree except the relationships were all in the wrong order, but he could see the symbols for Hathor, Osiris, Ra, Seth, Heru'ur Isis, Apophis, Nepthys, Sokar, and a dozen others. What their relevance was supposed to be to his and Jack's current situation was an entirely different matter.

Ker-thud. Ker-thud. Jack's leg was obviously getting worse. Daniel tried to concentrate. So, in this mythology Vukub-Came and Hun-Came left the planet, came back as their own mortal enemies, were cast into Xibalba and survived the many trials set for them, emerging victoriously at the end in their true forms. That would work for returning Goa'uld and it was obvious why Harun would have chosen to adapt that myth to help out him and Jack. But how had he helped them? By sticking them in the local book of Popol Vuh as a pair of bad gods who had lots of unrealistically acrobatic sex? Why? What was that supposed to signify? It wasn't as if this was a Hellenic or Spartan culture in which homosexual love would be considered 'better' or 'purer' than the heterosexual kind. If it had been a variation on the Hercules and Hylas myth or else….


"I do speak English, Jack," Daniel tried not to glare at him.

"What's biting you?"

"Will you just shut up and let me think?" He wasn't going to look round and see Jack pulling a face at him because it wouldn't help his concentration. *Focus, Daniel. Think. Sam's dying. Teal'c is going to be executed. Harun must have left instructions on how to get out of here, you're just not understanding them.*

"Perhaps we're supposed to have sex?"

Daniel jumped as Jack appeared at his shoulder. How hadn't he heard him limping? He moistened his lips and looked at the man levelly. "I don't think so."

Jack shrugged and indicated the wall. "We're trying to work out what Harun told us to do to get out of here, right? Well, according to those pictures we're supposed to have lots of sex."

"How could a Goa'uld mechanism be triggered by you and me having sex?"

"Hey, I'm just trying to be helpful."

"Well, you're not being helpful."

Jack took a step back, holding up his hands in surrender. "No need to get touchy. I'm just making a suggestion."

Daniel returned his gaze unblinkingly. "Well, you go ahead and start without me. And in the meantime I'll try to come up with a solution that actually makes some kind of sense."

He pinched the bridge of his nose. He was getting a monster of a headache from having to spend so long without his glasses and he was starting to wish he had anyone but Jack with him for this trip. At
least Teal’c or Sam might actually listen when he tried to tell them about Mayan mythology. "Okay…coded texts go back almost to the birth of writing itself, so it’s probably a cryptogram. Maybe something like the Babylonian Theodicy? No, that would really involve a more sophisticated written language than pictographs. An Atbash? No, that would need an alphabet and strictly speaking we’re not dealing with an alphabet here…""

"None of these codes were that complicated, right?" Jack put in. "I mean we’re talking pretty simple people, aren’t we?"

Daniel looked at him sideways. "The Voynich manuscript was written in code in we think about A.D. 1500. It’s currently sitting in Yale University still waiting for someone to be able to decipher it. Chinese ’grass writing’, or *tshao shu*, the original shorthand, took twenty years to learn but with it a Chinese scholar managed to perfectly transcribe the entire sixteen volumes of Galen as fast as it could be read aloud to him. We have lost more knowledge than we can even imagine, Jack."

Jack patted him tentatively on the shoulder. "You’ll work it out. Take some deep breaths."

Daniel resisted the urge to glare at him. The really annoying thing was that the pat on the shoulder was making him feel better but there was no logical reason why it should. He took Jack’s advance and did some deep breathing. "Okay, well, Hebrew was very widespread. A lot of the people taken through the gate would probably understand it. Maybe the code Harun left us is a form of *temurah* but not an Atbash. Maybe the Mayan glyphs have been exchanged for something else and I just need to work out the –"

"Daniel, get real. How would he know you knew that?" Jack countered.

Daniel turned and stared at the mural again. "We know we’re not gods. And we know we’re not down here…." He tried to think of a polite way to phrase it, "You know….""

"Doin’ it?"

"Exactly." Those pictures might look like two guys giving Tiberius a run for his money but as Harun had drawn them in, they had to be a coded message only he and Jack would understand. "That’s the point, Jack. Anyone else would think this is telling the story of Hunhun-Apu and Vukub-Hunapu having lots of sex in Xibalba but we would know we hadn’t been having lots of sex in Xibalba and the pictures therefore had to mean something else."

Jack looked a little embarrassed. "Right. Obviously."

Daniel stood far enough away from the mural that the features of Hunhun-Apu and Vukub-Hunapu were blurred; and immediately he could see what he had been intended to see from the start: the paleness of the lovers’ skin forming patterns against the reddish background which it was just about possible to match up with Late Assyrian cuneiform.
The message was in fact admirably brief.

Daniel said it aloud, "'Touch only the name of the god you killed first.'" He turned to Jack with a grin on his face he couldn't suppress. "Touch only the name of the god you killed first. That must be what opens the door." He bounded back to where the pillar was and hunted around for the eye of Ra. There it was, just as he remembered it. He stretched out a hand to touch it and then hesitated. "Wait a minute. Harun would be going by what you said in the temple, right?"

Jack had limped back over to breathe down the back of his neck again. "Right."

"Can you remember if you said Ra first? Or did you start with Sokar because we killed him last? Or start with Apophis because we hate him the most? Or Hathor because of ladies first?"

Jack looked at him blankly for a moment and then said. "Ra. I said Ra first."

"Are you sure?"

Jack met his gaze. "No. But it would be logical to start with him and I'm a very logical guy."

"Of course. What was I thinking?" Mentally crossing his fingers and wishing for a lucky rabbit's foot, Daniel reached out and pressed firmly on the eye of Ra.

***

So this was what dying felt like.

Carter had never realized how she took breathing in and out for granted before. Not until now when it was such an effort to snatch each inadequate gulp of oxygen. She had her arms braced against the wall, trying to use her shoulder muscles to drag some air into her lungs and then force it out again. Her throat was closing over; air seeping like water through a sponge when once it had gusted without obstruction. She was afraid to look at her own fingernails in case they were already blue. Afraid to think about what dying this way was going to be like. How long would it take? How terrible would the panic become when even these pinpricks of oxygen couldn't get through? She tried to concentrate on anything except the fact she couldn't breathe. The texture of the stone beneath her fingertips; a reddish granite which curved beneath her hand, out of alignment with the rest of the blocks; a faint furring of moss, impossibly delicate, which would be leaving a faint green wash across her skin –

*Can't breathe! Can't breathe! Can't breathe!*

Panicking wouldn't help. Panicking would make her gasp; increase her heart rate; make her even more dizzy and nauseated than she was already. Panicking was *not* the answer. What was that Daniel had said earlier about claustrophobia being a reasonable response to certain situations? Unfortunately, panicking to the point where you frothed at the mouth seemed like a reasonable response to your throat closing over.

Teal'c was doing everything he could. He'd helped to prop her up and was rubbing her back in a futile attempt to try to help the air in and out of her starving lungs. God, she was going to suffer brain death; all that knowledge, hers and Jolinar's, lost forever. Another reminder that Teal'c was doing not everything he could, but everything she would allow him to do. Perhaps she was wrong. Perhaps she was selfish and cowardly. He could save her, if she would let him. He had more guilt to expiate than she could imagine, even with Jolinar's extra centuries of wisdom to assist her. Was she preventing Teal'c from allowing his symbiote into her brain because to do so would leave him without an immune system? Or was she just afraid her own will would be too weak to resist an immature
Goa'uld, even with the memories of Jolinar to assist her?

Which frightened her most: dying like this, or living as a host? As she gasped for another sliver of air, Carter wondered if anything could be worse than this slow suffocation. Then she thought of how this way at least it would be over within the hour, whereas as a host she would by dying every day for a thousand years. She felt her resolve return.

"Major Carter…?" There was despair in that question of Teal'c's as he rubbed her back helplessly, trying to usher air into her body that couldn't squeeze it way past the swelling in her throat.

She had no air left to speak but she could shake her head and did so, resolutely. As she tried to drag some more oxygen into her lungs, she met his gaze, trying to keep the panic hidden, trying to make him see that even this was better than the alternative.

His eyes were full of sorrow but he nodded at once. She tried to smile but her need for air was guiding every sinew now; she felt her fingernails splinter on the stone, scraping a jagged line through the moss as she gripped the wall harder, fighting for the next breath. And the next. And the next….

***

Daniel gazed around the chamber open-mouthed. He had thought the massive hallway in which the statues of the departed Goa'uld were sitting had been large and imposing, but that was a supply cupboard to Tutankhamun's tomb compared with this. As he'd pressed the eye of Ra, the far wall had slid back to reveal an echoing chamber in which the ceiling echoed overhead like a second sky. He and Jack had stumbled through a little dazedly, gazing dumbstruck at the piles of discarded technology which sprawled, towered, and interlocked in all directions. Now, the stone grated closed behind them, shutting them into the massive chamber, but the lighting hummed overhead, revealing a door in the long side-wall. One which he sincerely hoped led back to the outside world.

"Cool." Jack limped past him to gaze around the chamber in obvious satisfaction. "A Goa'uld garage sale."

Daniel hurried over to a discarded Horus guard uniform which lay next to a falcon-headed helmet; its once glowing red eyes now dulled to a blind stare.

Jack had already found a zat gun, which he aimed at the Horus guard uniform Daniel had been about to examine. "Damnit, Jack!" Daniel jumped back from the blue-lit helmet in annoyance as it fizzled alarmingly.

Jack shrugged. "We need to know if this stuff works. See any death gliders?"

"Parts of them." Clambering awkwardly over a ragged piece of metal, Daniel found half of a staff weapon and picked it up. He gazed at the snapped off shaft despondently but supposed they could hit Onuris' lion guards over the head with it if all else failed.

Jack tugged a staff weapon out from underneath a precariously balanced pile of serpent guard uniforms, barely hopping back in time as they collapsed like a house of cards in a deafening clatter, throwing up a blanket of dust as they did so.

Daniel coughed pointedly, waving aside the dust to look at him with narrowed eyes. "They must love you in supermarkets."

Jack held up the intact staff weapon in reply. "Mine's bigger than yours."

Spurred on by Jack's example, Daniel looked around for a staff weapon of his own. Jack already had
a zat shoved into his waistband, he noticed, and now a staff weapon as well. All Daniel had was his knife. Spying the tell-tale curved head of a staff, Daniel reached for the end of it and gave the weapon a gentle tug. When it didn't move, he tugged it harder and it came away with an odd cracking sound. As he pulled the end out into the light, he realized what the noise had been: there was still a skeletal hand gripping the end. He threw it away in revulsion and then collected himself, realizing that if another archaeologist had been around he would just have made a major idiot of himself. He would have rather Jack hadn't been around to see that either, but at least Jack wouldn't jeer. He gave the man an apologetic shrug. "Sorry. I just wasn't expecting….."

Jack made a face. "What do you suppose this place is anyway? Apart from a Jaffa morgue?"

Daniel looked around at the piece of serpent guard uniform, the broken staff weapons, the zats, shock grenades, the broken fins of death gliders, all tangled together like the debris of a shipwreck caught in a fishing net. "I think it's where the Goa'uld hid anything that might have given the people here an inkling they weren't gods. Anything the local populace might have been able to adapt to forward their own technological development."

Jack limped across to a corner, scrambling awkwardly over another broken death glider. "So, they dumped anything Goa'uldy in here, and then got the hell out of Dodge?"

"Looks that way." Daniel followed the older man's route through the discarded weaponry, finding more confirmation of his theory as he did so. The damaged death glider showed signs of having been blasted from the skies, the front canopy had no glass left in it, and the skeleton inside was missing a head. It was an older model, like the one Teal'c and Hammond had piloted to rescue them from Hathor's forces, the kind with wings especially curved so that the glider could fit through the Stargate. Teal'c had taken Jack as a co-pilot for a few turns above the smoldering remains of Hathor's stronghold before it had coughed itself to a standstill and buried its nose in the mud. Jack had been as disappointed as someone whose father's Porsche had developed engine trouble just before he got to take it on the freeway. He was always complaining about Area 51 not letting him and Teal'c take the longer-winged death gliders they'd salvaged after blowing up Apophis out for a test flight.

Jack shoved aside a serpent guard helmet with his foot and scrambled up to the cockpit of another glider. "One of these things has to be working."

Daniel frowned. "Why?"

The look Jack shot him over his shoulder was full of impatience. "Because we need one."

"Oh right, what was I thinking? O'Neill's Law clearly states that anything essential for a particular plan to work must inevitably become available within the necessary timeframe."

Jack pulled another Horus guard uniform out of the way and tossed into a pile of hieroglyph-inscribed scaffolding. "Works for me."

Sighing, Daniel climbed up to help him, pulling some of the scaffolding off the back to see if there was still a tail fin.

There was. There was also the armored skeleton of a dead Horus guard draped across it, which Daniel pushed away with his foot. It fell to the ground with a clatter of metal and bones that made him flinch.

Jack looked at him in surprise. "Daniel, you're a grave-robber, you do this kind of thing for fun."

"This is different."
"Why?"

"It just is."

They both climbed up it from opposite sides, Daniel standing on a twisted piece of metal to reach the cockpit while Jack scrambled up onto something that looked suspiciously like a pile of dead Jaffa. The death glider was the usual bluish brown so favored by the Goa'uld. Along with every weapon Daniel had ever encountered, it was incapable of looking innocent; like a dead shark in formaldehyde, what you remembered was its teeth. He ran a hand down its smooth surface, feeling that odd lack of friction which Sam had tried to explain to him; something about gravity, he remembered; or had that been its drive system? He wondered guiltily if he tuned out Sam when she talked math to him as often as Jack tuned him out when he talked mythology.

Daniel pulled at the cockpit, trying to get the hood to lift up. He peered through the canopy. "There's someone in there."

"Well, I seriously doubt he's still alive after all this time."

Daniel wondered if he should go on a fishing trip with Jack, after all. The prospect had never seemed very inviting in the past, but it did seem like the only way he was ever going to get an opportunity to give the man that good hard shove into a lake he deserved. He took out the knife and tried to insert the tip between the jammed canopy and the glider.

"Don't use that," Jack's hand shot out to take it from him.

"Why not?" Daniel blinked at him in surprise.

Jack pocketed it as though it was a slingshot Daniel had been caught playing with. "Because we needed the gun so we probably need the knife."

"Well, perhaps this is what we need it for?"

"And perhaps it isn't. Let me try," Jack slammed his elbow against the canopy mechanism and it slid back as smoothly as though it had never been stuck.

"Oh, the technical approach. Why didn't I think of that?" Daniel grimaced as he saw the skeleton sitting in the cockpit, his serpent guard uniform still clinging to his fleshless bones. "That could be Teal'c."

"Teal'c wasn't even born when this battle took place." Jack reached in, grabbed the skeleton by the collar of his serpent guard uniform, and yanked it out of the cockpit, tossing it onto the floor. It shattered into pieces, a dry white femur skittering across the floor.

"Jack!"

"What?"

Daniel held out an expressive hand. "This is a –"

Jack held up a warning finger. "This is not an archaeological dig, and so we are not going to bother about protecting the integrity of the damned site. And if we start talking about protecting the integrity of the damned site we're going to get smacked round the back of the head. Okay?"

Daniel shot him a reproachful look, remembered that there was no time for anything except saving Sam and Teal'c, sighed, then peered into the now vacant cockpit. It smelt musty and there didn't
seem any way of knowing if it would still have a usable fuel supply after so many centuries of neglect. "Can you fly one of these?"

"I'm a colonel in the United States Air Force, Daniel. We can fly anything." Jack's face and voice couldn't have given away less if it had been Fort Knox.

It was all he could do not to roll his eyes in disbelief. Jack was impossible when he was in this shiny-button mood. "No, but really, can you fly it? Has Teal'c shown you what the instrument panel thingamajig does? Has he…?"

Jack maneuvered himself into the cockpit, swearing as he scraped his leg on the side of the glider. "A little faith if you don't mind, Daniel. Teal'c isn't the only guy on SG-1 who can wing it with Goa'uld technology."

Daniel looked at him for a moment. "Yes, he is."

Jack jabbed an imperious finger at the far wall. "Go find me a door and then open it."

As Daniel scrambled awkwardly down from the death glider and started looking around for an exit, he hoped that Jack knew what he was talking about. The man had surprised him plenty of times in the past with both his unexpected strengths and his unexpected weaknesses. It was true, of course, that Jack was a Special Ops veteran, a man who had made colonel in the United States Air Force, and was now the team leader of SG-1. But he was also someone who couldn't divide a restaurant bill by four, three, or some days, even two, without use of a napkin, a pencil, and a lot of face pulling, so Daniel hoped that flying a death glider didn't involve too much use of math. He also hoped that the instrument panel on the death glider was self-explanatory because even after three years of friendship with Teal'c, the only Goa'uld Jack knew was 'Kree!'

Seeing the eye of Ra on the pillar, he realized those questions were all going to be answered very soon; hopefully in a way that didn't involve Jack and himself getting slammed into a Mayan temple at speed-of-light velocity. He pressed the glyph and one of the walls began to slide backwards slowly; making his eyes water from brilliant actinic shafts which revealed more dancing dust motes; the dead cells of dead Jaffa forming a graceful double helix in the sunshine. He looked over at Jack and the man beckoned to him impatiently. As he ran back to the death glider which was starting to hum with suppressed energy, Daniel glanced over his shoulder at that wall still slowly sliding to the left, letting in the light which would already have turned the color of blood on Teal'c and Sam's side of the planet.

He knew they shouldn't leave the door open. The locals would find this stash of Goa'uld technology; these weapons which never would and never could be a force for good; but it would take too long to work out how to close the wall again and he had a feeling once Jack got this thing going, just steering in the right direction was going to need all his skill. They had probably just handed the people here the means to destroy the people on Harun's side of the planet. One day the Deathchild would wander in here and find the means to fulfill his bloody destiny. But perhaps they'd also left these people the proof that the Goa'uld were not and never had been gods. And in the meantime Sam and Teal'c must be very close to death by now; the deadline almost reached.

He breathed it to himself as he scrambled up into the glider behind Jack, a spur and an apology for whatever culture shock they were leaving in their wake: " 'Sed fugit interea, fugit irreparabile tempus....'"

Jack gave him a confused look over his shoulder. "What?"

Daniel pulled the straps across his body and felt the restraints lock into place. He took a deep breath
and then pointed at the instrumental panel. "It's Virgil. It means...punch it."

Jack nodded. "Consider it punched."

A second later the G-force was slamming Daniel so far back into the padded seat he wondered if even a whole team of archaeologists would ever be able to excavate his remains from that cockpit....

***

Major Carter was losing the fight and they both knew it. Teal'c could read it in the panic in her eyes, and he knew she must be able to read it in the despair in his. The damp cell echoed to the sound of her labored breathing, her arms braced against the wall as she fought to drag a gasp of air into her lungs. Teal'c rubbed her back again helplessly, but he was watching her suffocate by slow degrees.

"Come with us."

It was odd to hear the tongue of his birth spoken again. He had trained himself to think as well as speak in the language of the Tau'ri, and sometimes it even penetrated his dreams, but this was still his first language: The language of his father, and of his father's murderer. Teal'c looked up to see the High Priest standing in the doorway, flanked by lion guards. He had been so intent on Major Carter's struggle that he had not even noticed them arrive.

"Your Chosen One has not come." The High Priest said it without inflection, and Teal'c was surprised to see no flicker of satisfaction in his gaze. "You are to be executed. The woman is to die where all can watch as she breathes her last."

Assessing the number and strength of the lion guards blocking the exit, Teal'c knew any attempt to overpower them would almost certainly fail. And besides it would avail him nothing. Even if he killed them all then carried Major Carter out of the temple, death would accompany them, and they could not outrun it. As he bent and lifted her into his arms, the dying rays of the sun turned her hair the color of copper, drew a red-gold finger down the side of her face. He saw the panic flicker in her eyes again as she struggled to drag some air into her lungs; her whole body convulsing with the effort of trying to breathe. Even in the fading light he could see her lips were turning blue.

"You have nothing to say?" the priest demanded sharply.

Was it Teal'c's imagination or was there a hint of disappointment in Rahotep's tone? He wondered if it was written that 'Wrath' had fought with the lion guards; if he was failing to live up to some false prophecy which even those who claimed not to believe in perhaps still hoped to witness. As he drew level with the High Priest, he looked him in the eye. "Whether Major Carter and myself live or die, Onuris is still a false god." He could hear the death-rattle of Major Carter's lungs, feel her shoulders bracing as she tried to snatch some air from somewhere, trying to drag it past a throat that was swollen almost closed.

"As your savior has not arrived in time, you will die."

Again there was that curious lack of satisfaction in the man's tone.

"Then we will die," Teal'c met his gaze unflinchingly. He even managed a quiet smile. "We have died before."

He didn't want to see that glimmer of surprise in the High Priest's eyes, but swept past the lion guards and carried Major Carter towards the main chamber of the temple, his head held high. Inside he could feel the anguish twisting within him like a second symbiote. He was going to have to stand and witness her death, or as she struggled for her last few breaths, she was going to have to watch him
cut down in front of her. He thought of O'Neill and Daniel Jackson's despair at being unable to reach them, even supposing they were still alive to feel anything. Onuris might have banished them to the depths of the ocean, or the center of a volcano. Teal'c would put nothing past the Goa'uld.

He could see the torches burning; the rubble swept away, the temple apparently restored to its former glory. But nothing could disguise the broken statue; the feet all that remained of what had once been a towering stone Onuris. Only the stone lions had retained any of their majesty. Teal'c could see the pale faces of the populace, the serried ranks of ragged slaves herded into tiers to witness their defeat. He hoped it was written that they died well.

As he strode through the archway into the temple, he saw that Major Carter was almost out of time. Her tongue and lips were blue, and although her chest was heaving as she tried to snatch some oxygen, he suspected that very little was now getting through. He was aware of flaming torches; Onuris and Mehit, magnificently robed, kohled eyes glowing as they turned their gaze upon them; her lionesses yawning with boredom, held on too short a chain to pace; white-skinned priests blurs of uncolor at the edge of his vision; the tell-tale gleam of fire on a blade. Perhaps he would die as his father had died; the blood of the symbiote mingled with his own: mutual enemies unwillingly torturing one another at the moment of death.

Onuris beckoned to him imperiously and Teal'c approached with his head held high. Although his gaze held that of the Goa'uld, all his senses were centered on Major Carter; her weight in his arms, her body heaving with her desperate need to breathe; the panic she was trying to conceal from him as the oxygen wouldn't come.

The Goa'uld looked at him contemptuously. "What have you to say for yourself, Jaffa?"

Although Onuris had addressed him in English, Teal'c answered him in a language everyone in the temple could understand: "You are not a god and our deaths will not make you one. Nor shall a million others." Teal'c saw no reason to disguise the contempt he felt for this parasite within a human host as his words echoed around the stone interior.

As the gasps of excitement and surprise ran through the watching populace, he realized he must just have unwittingly fulfilled another part of the prophecy.

Onuris moved close to him, his face barely an inch from Teal'c's. He whispered softly in English: "Proclaim me your god and I will save the woman."

The offer was so unexpected that Teal'c stared at him dumbfounded. He instinctively looked down at the dying teammate in his arms, hoping she hadn't heard. Perhaps he could –

Her expression showed she had. Major Carter's fingers closed on his jacket and she tugged at it determinedly then shook her head.

"Major Carter –?"

She tried to say the word but she had no breath left, but her mouth formed it with vehemence: No.

As she mouthed it at him silently, the last hope died inside him. He closed his eyes then slowly raised his head to meet Onuris' gaze as if he had never known that moment of doubt. "You are not a god, and Major Carter and myself will not proclaim you anything except a parasite."

The Goa'uld's eyes flashed gold with fury. "Then you will die!" But there was fear there. He raised his hand and then lowered it again.

Teal'c smiled mirthlessly. "Of course, if it is written that we died by your hand then you will have
only proven that the prophecy spoke true and Daniel Jackson is the Chosen One."

Onuris gritted his teeth then raised his hand with determination. Teal'c felt heat against his forehead, felt it play across his tattoo, realizing that Onuris was illuminating the brand of his rival even as he tried to display his power. The heat grew worse, began to burn into his brain. His symbiote was wriggling frantically. Major Carter was trying to say his name, blue lips opening soundlessly. Just as the pain dragging him down into darkness overwhelmed him, he thought he heard O'Neill's voice sounding from a long way away:

"Tell the fat lady to stop singing right now!"

O'Neill had taken in the scene in a second: Carter looked on her last legs and Teal'c was having his brain fried. Covert was not an option. But once they'd announced themselves they were going to be in trouble. About a hundred staff weapons to one kind of trouble. All they had on their side was a damned prophecy they hadn't read, in which they might, or might not, die.

Standing in the doorway of the temple with the night wind whipping at his hair, he reckoned he was doing a pretty good job of appearing in control of the situation. In fact the place was filled to the gunwales with people who wanted Daniel to be a god he wasn't, and lion guards who served a Goa'uld who hated him and Daniel with a passion, and they had only a staff and a zat between the pair of them and imminent death. But hell, they'd got here. Okay, it had been by the seat of their pants and some near fatal contacts with the tops of tall trees as that damned glider looped loops he'd never told it to. And, yes, that hadn't been the smoothest landing in the world, but they'd still got here. Against all likelihood and commonsense the impossible prophecy had ushered them back to the temple where it had all begun like a police escort around a presidential car. Now they just had to persuade Onuris not to kill them all over again.

The lion guards were already coming forward, staff weapons at the ready. He could see Teal'c staggering as the Goa'uld lowered his hand in disbelief, ribbon device still flaring. As he watched, Teal'c slumped against the wall and slid down it, Carter still grasped in his arms even as he passed out. At least he hoped he'd only passed out. He wouldn't have put it past Teal'c to hang onto a failing teammate even as he was dying. But whether dead or only unconscious, the Jaffa clearly wasn't in a position to give them a lot of help.

Daniel darted him a quick glance. "What do we do now?"

O'Neill limped forward. "Look like we know what we're doing."

Onuris' eyes flared with menace as his gaze fell on Daniel. "You!"

Mehit also strode forward, her fingers tightening reflexively on the chain she gripped. "You dare to return to our temple!"

O'Neill shrugged. "What? You're surprised to see us?" He patted Daniel on the shoulder, "Just call this boy Paul Atreides. For he was the Kwisatz Haderach...."

"What?" Daniel was blinking at him in confusion again. He wished Daniel would stop doing that. It really took off his godly aspect.

"Remind me to give you a normal upbringing when we get home." O'Neill limped further into the chamber, the night breeze coming in behind them like a late guest, the gust of it making the candle flames lie down as if exhausted. He darted another glance at Teal'c across the smoke and metallic
shimmer of lion guards. The Jaffa had his head bowed, and Carter was heaving convulsively in his arms. If her throat hadn't completely closed over it was clearly about to any second. "Teal'c?" When there was no reply, he gritted his teeth. "Carter?"

"They are dying." Onuris told him it with malevolent softness.

O'Neill tried to keep his face blank despite the way his guts lurched. "They're tougher than you think."

"The woman was cursed for her blasphemy. All who do not believe in me will suffer her fate."

"It's not a curse, it's diphtheria." Beside him, he was very aware of Daniel doing the same as he was: trying to walk as though he wasn't expecting to be killed any second while every tendon thrummed with tension as he waited for the inevitable staff weapon blast. Daniel addressed the populace. "It's an illness that you all carry but you're probably immune to it. The priests have already wiped out most of the population on the other side of the planet with it. We were probably supposed to get it as well—"

Onuris strode forward rapidly. "I warned you what I would do to you if you dared return here."

Daniel held up the zat gun. "We had an arrangement. Jack and I got back here within the time you gave us. Now let us take Teal'c and Sam and go."

Onuris looked contemptuously at the zat gun. "You would not dare fire upon your god."

"You're not anyone's god, least of all mine." Daniel met his gaze unflinchingly. "And: watch me."

Trying to monitor the situation between Daniel and Onuris, to assess how close to death Carter and Teal'c might be, and keep an eye on the lion guards who looked as if they might be preparing to rush him, O'Neill only caught the glimmer of Mehit's bracelets out of the corner of his eye as she let go of the chain. The lions were already bounding towards him as he belatedly caught her hissed: 'Kill him!' Before he could react, Daniel had wheeled around and fired, the zat gun enveloping the first lioness in blue light. O'Neill tried to bring up the staff weapon as the second one lunged for his throat. There was a suspended moment when he stared into angry yellow eyes, saw the red maw yawning, dagger white teeth clearly hungering for his throat. Meaty breath warmed his forearm and then blue light engulfed the big cat to send the lioness crashing unconscious to the stone floor. He staggered back, stung by the residue of the zat blast which had licked past him, and was just in time to see Onuris reach out and swipe the zat gun from Daniel's grasp. It skittered across the floor out of both of their reach as the Goa'uld's hand shot out to grab Daniel by the throat, yanking him almost off the ground. Onuris jerked his head at O'Neill angrily and said to his Jaffa. "Seize him."

As the lion guards moved purposefully towards him, O'Neill raised the staff weapon. "I don't think so." As the staff flared in readiness, he saw the Jaffa hesitate, and he hoped the look in his eyes told them how little it would bother him to blast a hole through every one of them.

O'Neill darted a quick glance at the watching crowd, trying to assess their mood. He couldn't see Harun yet but he hoped he was around somewhere. He spoke quickly to Onuris, "I thought you told us we had three nights to get back. Well – we're back. The deal was if we managed that you'd let us go, so why don't you be a mensch and stick to your side of the bargain?"

He looked at Daniel to see if the linguist could come up with a clinching argument and realized that speech was not a possibility for his teammate right now. Daniel was on tiptoe, gulping for air as Onuris squeezed his windpipe. Onuris was gazing into Daniel's eyes with loathing, snarling
savagely, "I will give you to my Jaffa. They can you enjoy you while your 'followers' watch."

"That wasn't the deal," O'Neill said it shortly. "You said you'd save Carter and let the rest of us go. Why don't you keep your damned word just for once?"

Onuris only smiled with pleasure, gaze fixed on Daniel's face. "Before they are done with you, insect, you will beg me for the mercy of death." As O'Neill aimed the staff weapon, Onuris pulled Daniel in front of his body as a shield, jerking his head at O'Neill contemptuously and snapping at his Jaffa, "Seize him now."

O'Neill swung the staff weapon and fired, his first blast taking out a Jaffa who went down at once, but there were others closing in too fast for him to get them all. He fired again, and again, but then they were on him, overwhelming him. The staff weapon was ripped from his hand, he was backhanded so hard across the face the whole temple spun out of focus, then a fist slammed into his kidneys.

Through the sea of Jaffa surrounding him, he watched Onuris hold Daniel at arm's length by the throat, then raise the hand device. The beam flared greedily, dancing on Daniel's forehead, forcing Daniel to his knees as Onuris began to fry his brain with that torturing light.

"Let him go!" Struggling desperately against the lion guards still trying to pound him into submission or unconsciousness – they didn't seem to care which came first – O'Neill saw the pain etched onto Daniel's face, his left hand gripping Onuris' wrist but without the strength to push the ribbon device away. "Teal'c!" His cry didn't even elicit a twitch from the Jaffa.

Through the blood running into his eye, O'Neill watched Onuris lift his hand and step back, satisfaction on his face as Daniel slumped to the ground, conscious but with his hands pressed to his head in pain. The Goa'uld glanced across at O'Neill then nodded to the lion guards. "Do not kill him yet. I want him to watch this one die."

"You son-of-a-bitch, we had a deal!" O'Neill struggled desperately against hands that felt as unyielding as steel bands, anger burning white hot inside him, but the apprehension knotting itself around his guts. This was Netu again. He had a staff weapon burn thrumming through his leg, disabling him, while a Goa'uld had the power of life and death over his team. Except this time it was even worse than on Netu because Teal'c wasn't on a Tok'ra tel'tak in position to rescue them; he was crumpled against the wall, unconscious, with a three-quarters dead Carter in his arms. And this time Daniel really was going to be raped right in front of him.

Through a blur of rage and pain, O'Neill snatched a glance at the Goa'uld's First Prime. Seven foot of lion guard with muscles on his muscles, and an anticipatory smile on his face. It was clear that he had received these kind of 'rewards' before.

Onuris' voice sounded fat with triumph: "Gods do not bargain with slaves. They dispose of them as they see fit."

"You made a promise, you lying piece of shit. Do you want everyone in this temple to know you don't keep your word?" He could hear the fear roughening his voice. He sounded what he was: powerless. At the crucial moment he seemed to have lost the ability to bluff. Oh God, he'd let Daniel come back here. He'd heard what the Goa'uld had threatened to do to him and he'd still let him come back. What the hell had he been thinking?

Onuris reached down and grabbed Daniel by the hair, jerking his head back. Daniel's gasp of pain echoed across the temple and O'Neill caught a glimpse of confused blue eyes; Daniel still dazed from the searing shock of the ribbon device egg-whisking his brain. Onuris gazed into Daniel's eyes, his
own glaring gold with hatred. His voice was soft but very clear. "I wish everyone to know what becomes of those who oppose my will. I wish everyone to witness how terrible is my wrath."

"We had a deal!" O'Neill tried to elbow the lion guards away, earning himself more sense-spinning blows. As a backhand cracked his skull against the wall, blackness swooped and he clung to consciousness by a fingernail, torches dissolving into spear-points of light. He could taste blood in his mouth, bile in his throat, defeat in every breath. "You double-crossing scumsucker, Onuris, let him go!"

Onuris jerked Daniel roughly to his feet by the hair, then pulled him round to show to the shocked and silent populace. "Behold your 'deliverer' now." He waved a contemptuous hand at Teal'c and then Jack. "Behold your avatars now. Witness how your true god, your only god, punishes those who blaspheme against him." He turned to meet the gaze of his mate, and O'Neill watched that smile spread across her face, the way her tongue flickered greedily across her red painted lips. It was so long since he'd seen Hathor he'd forgotten just how ugly a beautiful woman could be. Still gazing adoringly at Mehit, Onuris threw Daniel contemptuously at his First Prime. Not troubling to look at his victim or the one he had just rewarded, Onuris waved a dismissive hand. "Take him."

"No!" O'Neill slammed his right elbow into the lion guard behind him, raked his heel down the shin of another, jerked his head back in the hope of breaking someone's nose, then threw himself forward. Hands closed in his hair and dug into his flesh, while he tried to elbow, kick, wrench and bite them off him. But he knew it wasn't going to work; he wasn't going to get free; and Daniel was going to be ground into the dust, by Jaffa after Jaffa while he screamed for help that O'Neill couldn't give him.

An arm around his neck tried to throttle him into submission as the first prime backhanded Daniel across the face, sending him staggering before a meaty hand shot out to seize the front of Daniel's t-shirt, dragging him against the muscular Jaffa's chest. He saw fingers like frankfurters fasten in Daniel's hair, jerking his head back, a sly glance shot in his direction, the lion guard clearly relishing his audience, before a cruel mouth swooped and bruised.

He didn't even know what threats he was screaming as Daniel struggled desperately, trying to spit that unwanted tongue out of his mouth, to jerk his head away in disgust. O'Neill slammed his elbow into the guts of the Jaffa trying to choke him as Daniel used his knee in a way surely only Carter could have taught him. The stranglehold released enough to let O'Neill grab a mouthful of air, but Daniel's attempt at self-defense earned him only a savage backhand that sent him sprawling.

He'd never realized he knew so many threats; or how loudly and hoarsely he could yell them even when his throat was raw. As he struggled futilely against the grip of too many hands, calling down every evil upon the head of Onuris' first prime if he didn't get the hell away from Daniel right now, O'Neill's gaze met that of the Goa'uld's High Priest. The man's hairless skin looked bloodless in the flickering torchlight; robes billowing in the night breeze, the feathers painted on his forehead looking like scars. The priest must have picked up the zatgun at some point because he was holding it in his hands as though he didn’t quite know how it came to be there. As their eyes met across the bodies on the floor, Daniel trying to struggle out from beneath the crushing weight of the first prime who was slapping him around in between ripping the t-shirt from his chest, O'Neill saw the distaste wash across the High Priest's face. For the first time it occurred to him how Father O'Malley might have felt if Jehovah had arrived in his church one day and sent his angels in to the congregation to smite the ungodly. There were things in the Bible even priests probably never wanted to witness. And in any culture, this wasn't exactly a pretty sight.

He held the man's gaze. "Help us!"

The High Priest looked at him for a long moment and then slowly shook his head.
O'Neill swore savagely, and jerked his head round. "Harun!" O'Neill yelled it in desperation as the first prime tore at Daniel's belt buckle. Daniel was fighting with everything he had, blood running from his mouth from the last backhand, the cut on his cheekbone opened up by another savage blow. But O'Neill could see the panic behind Daniel's grim determination; the same panic he could hear in his own voice: "Harun! Help us!"

As more kicks and punches landed, trying to batter him into silence, he realized it was futile: if it was written that this was how they died, then this was how they would die. Teal'c bleeding internally from the ribbon device; Carter asphyxiating as her throat closed over. He'd probably be beaten to death while Daniel was passed from lion guard to lion guard.

He tried to make eye contact with someone, anyone in those freakin' stands, all standing there watching them die by inches, horror and disbelief on their faces, but not one of them making a move forward. "Help us!" he shouted. None of them moved.

"Harun!" His yell echoed around the temple so loudly he could hear the despair in it, the anguish. A sound like birds taking flight from some calamity. The first prime had undone Daniel's belt now. He pulled it from the belt loop triumphantly, making a noose with it, which he pulled over Daniel's head. Yanking it tight, he used the end of the belt to lash around Daniel's wrists, so Daniel couldn't hit him with his bound hands without choking himself.

"Teal'c!" O'Neill yelled it again but the Jaffa hadn't moved and he looked frighteningly still. Carter didn't seem to be breathing either. Anguish tore through him as he realized two of his teammates were probably already dead. And Daniel was going to be next. By bringing Daniel back here, O'Neill had gambled and lost everything.

Seeing the first prime's meaty hands close on Daniel's pants, making ready to drag them down from his hips, O'Neill screamed it again: "Harun!"

The lion guard to his left, turned and snarled something to the others a millisecond before a fist came straight for O'Neill's jaw. As he was falling he realized that snapped order in Goa'uld must have been the order to release him because the floor was coming up to meet him very fast. He landed on his bad leg; a lightning bolt of pain shooting down to his toes while his ribs screamed a protest. As he felt the blood running down his face, and saw the struggling blur on the floor which he knew to be Daniel receding like something at the wrong end of a telescope, he realized he was right on the edge of passing out again. He saw a shimmer of bare flesh, an impossible length of leg revealed to an accompanying sound of ripping cloth; a dark hand upon a pale thigh, the hiss of Mehit's satisfaction, Daniel turning his head so their eyes met. Daniel mouthing it at him desperately across the floor: Don't look, Jack. Please.

Hovering on the brink of that plunge into oblivion, O'Neill realized this time the best thing he could do for his only surviving teammate really was to pass out.

***

He had never known a pain so terrible or a darkness so deep, but more strongly than either of those things, he knew that he was needed. Far away he could feel his symbiote trying to reach him, hatred in the tendrils it stretched out to him, and need; like an enemy offering him a rope from a fast-flowing torrent. But this was a river of ice running through every vein; a searing agony which awakening would make a hundred times worse. Giving up would be so painless by comparison, but he was his father's son, and his mother's son, and he did what was right, not what was easy. Yet it felt as if he was such a long way from life, and the rope the symbiote was offering him burned with fire. Closing his mind to the pain, he set his hands to the rope and began to haul himself towards the bank…. 
"Teal'c!"

Teal'c jerked his eyes open; pain slicing through his brain like a heated blade. It took him a moment to know where he was; the air seemed full of smoke; the torchlight gliding away from itself then back again; the walls appearing to shimmer. When he blinked, his eyesight did not clear. There were moving blurs all around him, and another blur in his arms.

"Teal'c!" The voice of Daniel Jackson. The voice that had dragged him back to consciousness. "Help me!"

He could not see him, but he could hear the despair in his cry. He tried to get up but the weight of Major Carter in his arms was more than he could lift now. He was trapped by her as if by a falling log, even though he knew he could carry with her ease. He tried again, but there was no strength in his arms, or legs. His symbiote had not yet fully healed him.

"I cannot!" He shouted it into the smoke-streaked swirl of light and dark, trying to reach the blur that was his friend.

He heard Mehit laugh, harsh with anticipation and triumph; heard Onuris say 'Now they will realize their god is no better than a whore….'

Turning his head, Teal'c managed to focus on Daniel Jackson. He was the pale struggling blur lying supine on the floor, the armored bulk of Onuris' first prime, pinning him to the flagstones. He saw a muscular right arm move swiftly, heard the sound of a slap, a stifled grunt of pain, the rip of cloth, a thick chuckle of anticipation. He could smell the lion guard's eagerness from ten feet away, was aware of the other Jaffa all looking that way with more than idle curiosity. The Goa'uld would think it only fitting to condemn a rival to such a degrading death. Gritting his teeth, Teal'c tried again to lift Major Carter from his lap, but the ribbon device had stolen all his strength. "I cannot!" he repeated it desperately.

"Not your fault, Teal'c…." He heard Daniel Jackson gasp it in between some exertion, heard the panic in his voice, as well, the fear he was trying to disguise. He was clearly trying to get free but had stopped believing it was possible. He was only still fighting because the alternative was too terrible for him to contemplate.

"Harun!" Teal'c shouted it desperately into the swimming darkness. "Harun!" He heard his voice echoing around the temple, his fingers fumbling for a pulse at Major Carter's neck as he shouted for help he knew he was not going to receive. "Major Carter?" He waited for her eyelids to flicker as they had before. When he bent his head he thought he felt breath gust faintly against his cheek but then as a cold wind caressed his skin he realized it could have been a sudden breath of chill night air.

"Help them!"

Hope almost choked him, Teal'c swallowed such a lump of it at once. He jerked his head round in disbelief to see a dark blur standing in the doorway, the wavering line of a discarded staff weapon in his hand. He blinked hard and briefly the figure had an outline he could recognize: Harun.

Harun called to the people in the tiers. "Help them."

There was a frozen moment of indecision and Harun spoke again. "Help them not because they are gods or avatars, but because their deaths are something we can prevent. Help them because it is right….

Teal'c could hear Harun's voice very clearly, but behind him he could hear the whisper rustling
through the crowd, like fire on summer corn, gaining power with each gust: 'The prophecy is true! So it is written! It is written that the deliverer came to the temple carrying a staff of fire and that he spoke out against the false god. It is written that he should come from afar, and be one of us, and then be taken from us….'

Harun was still telling them that the prophecy was not what mattered. That they had done wrong when they let an innocent man be tortured in the hope of their own salvation. That they should make amends to the strangers among them who had suffered on their behalf.

But the crowd was listening to its own music, and Teal'c realized the prophecy did not matter; the truth did not matter; in the end it would not even matter why right was done, as long as it was done. If these people saved SG-1 because they believed them to be angels, or because they believed Harun to be their deliverer, they would still be saved.

Teal'c watched that mass of pale swimming circles begin to move, shuffling forwards, not fast, but with quiet determination. So many of them. So many people Onuris had herded into the temple to witness the defeat of their deliverer; a tide which definitely appeared to have turned.

"Tel'muk, Kree!" Onuris was backing up, he and Mehit pressing together as the people poured down the stairs, more bobbing faces carried on a sea of whispered prophecy.

Teal'c blinked hard, stealing another glimpse of clarity, and saw the First Prime snarl in frustration, then backhand Daniel Jackson again, clearly blaming him for this interruption. Teal'c saw the complacency on the Jaffa's face, the belief that these people were sheep to be herded slowing his reactions as he readjusted his clothing; half of his attention was still focused on the satisfaction that had just been postponed.

"Tel'muk!" The fear in Onuris' voice made the First Prime jerk his head round in surprise. Which was when he saw the people moving in on him. As the First Prime opened his mouth to issue the orders to his lion guards, Teal'c saw Daniel Jackson kick Tel'muk with everything he had, double-footed, in the groin.

Tel'muk's scream of pain and rage was like a taper to a signal beacon. The crowd erupted. Teal'c blinked again, but the scene was too blurry; he was aware of Onuris shouting orders; lion guards firing staff weapons; the smell of burning flesh, spilled blood; the sound of screams; the roar of anger; but underneath it all was that same quiet determination; that same conviction: the power of belief.

He looked back down at Major Carter, his eyesight clearing enough for him to see the greyish tone to her skin. Her lips no longer had any trace of pinkness.

"My Lord."

Teal'c looked up in surprise to find Harun bending over him anxiously.

Despite the pain, and the dead weight of Major Carter in his arms, Teal'c found a tired smile. "You are their deliverer now."

"I am not." Harun spoke rapidly. "But it is written that another avatar of the Chosen One came to the temple and bade the people save his god. I waited but when no avatar came, I took his place. I used the holy prophecy to serve my own wishes. I will be damned for this."

"Do you still not understand?" Teal'c began. "It was always you who saved –"

"Teal'c!" Daniel Jackson was on his feet, tearing at his belt buckle with his teeth, trying to get it
undone. The pale blur that was his face had dark marks on it, but at least his lips were not blue like Major Carter's.

"Is Sam…?" Daniel Jackson barely seemed aware of Harun undoing the belt around his wrists, although as soon as it was undone, he ripped it from his neck, and hurled it away with revulsion.

Teal'c was still trying to find a pulse in her neck. "I am not sure if she is still breathing."

"Jack…." Daniel Jackson turned and ran into the middle of the fighting.

"Daniel Jackson!" Teal'c tried to shout it with authority but the young man had already disappeared back into the bloody smoke of the battle.

Harun put his finger to Major Carter's neck, shaking his head. "The prophecy said Compassion died and was mourned by all."

"The prophecy said you are an avatar of the Chosen One, even though you are only a good man with a conscience. The prophecy is meaningless." Teal'c slapped her face lightly. "Major Carter?" As she did not stir, the fear in his heart so completely overwhelmed the pain he no longer even felt. She had drifted into unconsciousness so many times before in the past few days. Each time he had been able to awaken her. He was determined that she would not slip through his fingers now when help was so close at hand. He tightened his grip on her. "Major Carter!" But this time there was no response at all.

***

"Jack…?"

Daniel…?

"Jack!"

"Daniel!" O'Neill jerked his eyes open. "Get away from him, you son-of-a…!" He blinked in surprise as he found himself gazing up into those familiar anxious blue eyes. For a moment Daniel's face was a blur but then it swam back into focus. The guy had looked better. His face was bruised and cut, and there was blood trickling from his nose and mouth, but he was alive, still more or less dressed, and he wasn't being gang-raped by lion guards. That was definitely an improvement on the last time he'd seen him.

"Are you okay?" Daniel pressed.

Are you? O'Neill had learned a long time ago not to ask questions which might have answers he couldn't deal with. "I'm alive."

"Well, Teal'c's badly hurt and I think Sam might be dead." Daniel stared at O'Neill fixedly and he got the rest of the message no trouble at all: 'That was the bad news – now make it better. Do something. Help them!' Why was it that Daniel never woke him up just to hand him the newspaper and a nice hot cup of coffee? Why was it always because he needed O'Neill to make the world spin the other away again?

"Carter's not dead." He tried to get to his feet and the chamber spun alarmingly. Daniel's hand under his elbow was a welcome help. Over to his left there was the smoke and blood of a battle going on. The people seemed to have finally decided to rebel. Well better late than never but he'd get to that later. Right now he had some teammates to bring back from the dead.
"Teal'c thinks she isn't breathing."

O'Neill wondered if Daniel knew how hard he was shaking; how deeply he must be in shock. He wasn't going to ask what had happened while he'd been unconscious. If Daniel had been raped then this wasn't the time or the place to fix it. Better to get him focused on other things. They could do the therapy later. "Is her heart beating?"

"I don't know." As Daniel automatically took his weight to help him, O'Neill could feel the younger man's body reverberating against his, tremors rattling their hipbones together like a pair of tambourines. Daniel helped him limp around the outskirts of the battle, not even blinking when a lion guard was blasted with his own staff weapon right next to them, totally focused on O'Neill and his teammates. "Teal'c can't move and Sam's lips are blue."

"That's what happens with diphtheria." O'Neill kept his voice as calm and steady as he could make it. "It's fixable." God, Daniel was shaking so hard he was like someone with dengue fever. That bastard Jaffa was so dead.

"How is being dead 'fixable'?" Daniel grimaced to fight back tears of reaction. "It's my fault. This is all my fault…"

"Daniel!" He said it sharply. "Trust me on this. Teal'c's tough and Junior needs him alive, so he'll get better. As for Carter, her throat's closed over, that's why she's not getting enough oxygen, that's why her lips are blue. But we can fix it." He reached into his jacket pocket, fumbling for that knife he'd been unable to reach with those Jaffa holding his arms. He held it up, the blade glinting dully in the torchlight. "And now I know why we needed this."

As a lion guard crashed against them Daniel hit out at the man savagely. "Get off me…!" He elbowed him away and a second later they both heard the crunch of club hitting skull. Daniel flinched and turned his head away.

O'Neill tightened his grip on him. "It's okay, Daniel."

Daniel swallowed hard. "No, it's not, Jack."

"No, you're right, it's not, but it's going to be." He remembered promising Charlie that. Believing he could deliver too. Until one day something came along you couldn't fix for them; something you couldn't make right. If Daniel had been raped by that guy, let alone raped by that guy in front of a temple full of people, there was no way in hell he could ever make that right for him. But he was still going to give it his best shot.

As they reached the alcove where Harun was watching over Teal'c and Carter, he saw that they were positioned under a burning torch, which was good because he was going to need the brightest light he could get. Teal'c looked like shit, and Carter looked…dead, limp and grey-blue, only her hair had any color left. "Hey, Teal'c, buddy," he said it gently, seeing the distress in his eyes. "You hanging in there?"

"Major Carter is…."

"I know." He sank down next to Carter, felt for the pulse at her neck then ran a hand over her mouth. "Okay, I can see some chest movement but she definitely needs a little help here. Carter?" He patted her cheek lightly, then a little harder, snapping her name out harshly: "Carter!"

Her eyelids flickered, and he saw a shock of blue. She gasped, chest heaving as she struggled for air.

"Keep breathing," he told her firmly. "We're going to get you a better airway. Just keep breathing in
He glanced up at Daniel who had his arms wrapped round himself, still shivering violently. He didn't look any better in a good light. His pants had been ripped half off, his t-shirt was hanging in tatters, he had a black eye, a split lip, bruises on both cheekbones, and a livid red mark on his jaw. He looked like an identikit picture of a rape victim. O'Neill gritted his teeth. He had three team members who looked half or three-quarters dead, and he so wanted the people who'd done this to them to pay, but right now he had to reclaim his 2IC from the dead. Then he could think about payback. "Okay, Daniel, we need to get her an airway, so you sit down here --" he patted the floor encouragingly. "And you hold her head in your lap. You have to keep it still. Understood?"

Daniel sat down, still shuddering violently, although he seemed unaware of it, looking at his own hands in surprise when they were shaking too much to reach out for Carter.

"It's going to be okay, Daniel," O'Neill said as he eased Carter from Teal'c's grip and slid her across, depositing her head in the younger man's lap, taking Daniel's shaking hands in his and placing them each side of her head. He gave him an encouraging smile. "You're going to be fine. We can do this. Okay?"

Daniel nodded. "Okay."

Great. Good boy, hang in there; we're going to get through this. Except Daniel was still shaking, which meant Carter was too. She was vibrating on Daniel's lap where the tremors were going straight through him to her. It would be like trying to thread a needle in a moving vehicle.

O'Neill licked his lips. "Actually you don't need to hold her head, Daniel, just stroke her hair. Talk to her. Tell her she's going to be fine. Tell her we're going home soon."

O'Neill hoped he sounded more convincing than he felt. They had to do this because otherwise Carter was dead and he wasn't ready to lose a team member. Not this team. Not any of them. So he could do this. He'd done it before. He could do it again. On Netu everyone else had worked the magic, this time Teal'c was almost dead, Carter probably was technically dead, and Daniel was so deeply in shock he needed three warm blankets and a really big sedative. This time they all needed their CO to pull the white rabbit out of the hat. He owed them. Time to deliver.

He saw Carter gasp for air and then gasp again. No way of telling if any oxygen was getting through. The way the panic flared in her blue eyes suggested it probably wasn't. She grabbed for Daniel's hand and held onto it, their fingers interlacing tightly. But she was still conscious, still aware. That was something.

O'Neill looked at Daniel's bled-white bruised face, blue eyes huge with anxiety, then down at the knife in his hand, Carter's exposed neck, the incision he was about to make. He cleared his throat. "Daniel, why don't you tell Harun and Carter about the dead people on the other side of the planet, and the way we got out of that hell place. Remember?"

Daniel blinked at him in surprise, then dawning realization. "Oh…right."

And thank God he seemed to have pressed the right button again. Daniel was talking, good, covering fire, what he needed, that soothing Radio Jackson he liked to have playing in any room he was in even if he didn't listen to most of the words.

Taking a deep breath, O'Neill leant over Carter, felt for the notch where her collarbone met and then positioned the knife above it. He could do this, he really could. And if he didn't, Carter was dead. Gritting his teeth, O'Neill said huskily, "Sorry, Carter," then made the first slice at the base of her
throat, an inch was enough, and thank god the blade was sharp; a scalpel would have been better but
this was still pretty good.

By the way Daniel stopped talking as the blood oozed out from beneath his blade, he knew he'd seen
it, but there was only a fractional pause before Daniel went on, trying to speak calmly and quietly, to
pass on the information Harun had to have if they were ever to get to this point.

He stole a glance at those interlaced fingers. Daniel was still hanging onto Carter's hand, but Carter's
fingers were limp. When he darted a look at her face, her eyes were closed. She'd either stopped
breathing completely or else passed out from the combination of being oxygen starved and having a
knife stuck in her.

No time to waste. O'Neill swallowed hard and made a second slice, the fat layer this time. You
wouldn't think someone as slim as Carter would have this much fat between her neck and her
cartilage, Sanchez had only had… No point thinking about Sanchez now. You learned from your
mistakes, right? Medical students practiced their surgery on cadavers and Black Ops teams practiced
their surgery on each other. Okay, three slices, God but this would be so much easier with a scalpel;
he was having to push so damned hard…okay, he was looking for the white rings which would tell
him he'd reached cartilage. Of course in the diagrams they never showed you the blood seeping out,
glistening on your knife blade, running down the skin of your living friend, the one you were slicing
into without an anesthetic. The one you could kill with a slip of your fingers; the one who would die
if you didn't keep doing this despite the blood, despite the fear, despite the fact you'd always been
told you cut the throats of enemies, not friends.

There was the cartilage; white rings of it, glistening palely from under a film of blood. He blinked the
sweat out of his eyes, trying to get the blade in between so he wouldn't have to cut through it, trying
to do as little damage as possible.

He became aware of a comforting pressure on his back: Teal'c's hand offering him support and
reassurance. Daniel was telling Harun about the pictures on the walls. Oh yes, they'd been funny a
couple of hours ago. Him and Daniel getting naked and gymnastic together, something he could use
for leverage: Come fishing with me, Dannyboy, or I'll tell Teal'c and Carter about that 'cuneiform'
you translated. He should have left Daniel there. Should have left him with the four hundred year old
erotica. Gone back for him later. He'd let that son-of-a-bitch rape his friend. God, he should have
fought harder, got free somehow; his bare hands were supposed to be lethal weapons; so how come
he'd let that happen? How come he'd let that be done to Daniel right in front of him?

"Jack…?"

He looked up to find Daniel gazing at him anxiously, and realized he'd frozen. He gazed back down
at the blood trickling from Carter's throat, her collarbone was acting like a sill, funneling it off to the
sides, but a trickle was getting through to run down her breastbone. He swallowed hard, and then
pushed the knife through the narrow space between the rings of cartilage, feeling the hard-softness of
it give, yielding and firm at the same time. Salmon from the can; picking out the white pieces of spine
so Charlie wouldn't choke on them… Don't think about that now. Hang in there, Carter, don't even
think about dying on me. Keep your damned heart beating until I can get you some more air or I
swear to god I'll bust you down to second lieutenant…. The cartilage closed over his blade, helping
to hold it in place. He tried not to let his fingers tremble even though they really wanted to, fumbling
for a pen with his left hand as he did so.

"Here." The fingers that held it were visibly shaking but it was exactly what he needed. A ballpoint
casing with the inside stripped out to give him a clear tube, already bent a little in readiness. He
wondered if Daniel had done this before as well. With his hands shaking like that it wouldn't matter
if Daniel had done fifty tracheotomies before, of course, he certainly couldn't do this one, but it wouldn't surprise him if he had done some impromptu surgery in his time. Daniel had done a hell of a lot of things he probably didn't know about.

He didn't look up at Daniel. "Thanks."

"I couldn't find anything wider. It needs to be wide, right?"

"It'll do, Daniel. It's an airway. That's all she needs."

He remembered this being the tough part with Sanchez, trying to get the damned tube in there. This time he was leaving the knife in so he could lever the cartilage apart. But how come they didn't give you any retractors when they were packing your gear anyway? From now on he wanted a scalpel, retractors, a tracheotomy tube, and a goddamned bottle of whisky put in every team's pack. He wiggled the pen casing in through the incision – Christ, doctors did this kind of thing all the time? Those guys must have iron stomachs was all he could say – blood coating his fingers and the pen casing, a red slick which left crimson copies of his fingerprints on Carter's pale throat. He remembered Evans breathing down his neck last time, telling him he had to use a rotating motion to get the tube in until he'd told Evans to go and rotate on a goddamned fencepost while he figured this out. This time he tried turning it, and wiggling it from side to side, his fingers were too big for this kind of thing. Where the hell was Fraiser when he needed her? Then there was the cartilage; he could only use the flat of the blade to try to prise the rings apart or he'd cut straight through them. Right, there was a gap – he could feel it, felt it 'pop' as he punched through. Now he had to manipulate the pen casing in sideways, wish the bastard would bend some more. But that was it. It was in. There was a tube to Carter's windpipe, giving her an airway. He just hoped he'd got there in time.

For the first time he let himself see the whole picture, not just the incision he'd made, not just an area a few inches square around the wound he'd made in Carter's neck. He'd almost managed to forget this was Carter, but there she unmistakably was, skin ghost-grey, lashes stark black against that deathly pallor, lips blue, not a trace of pink to be seen, a bloody hole in the base of her neck and the plastic hollow tube of a ballpoint pen jutting out. He pushed back her upper lip to look at her gums and winced when he saw there was no pink there either. How long had he taken? How long had she been out? Had she ever stopped breathing completely, or had there always been some air getting through? Five minutes was brain death, right? How long had it taken to get the tube in? It had felt like an hour but it could have been as little as two minutes. Her heart was still beating but was her brain still working? Had he brought her back to be a vegetable? Had he even brought her back at all?

"I need some tape." He held the pen in place and looked up, surprised to see a backdrop of battle still going on behind Daniel. He hadn't even heard it while he'd been working on Carter. Incredible what you could tune out when you wanted to. That probably explained how Daniel had gone four years without learning what rank came between a colonel and a general, or that the other name for 'those explosive thingies' was 'Claymore'. He glanced at Harun. "We had a roll of it in our packs. Tape. Silvery sticky stuff...?" Harun nodded, propped the staff weapon he carried up beside Teal'c, touched him gently on the shoulder, then moved away at a run.

O'Neill looked across at Daniel who was stroking Carter's hair. "You okay?"

Daniel met his gaze. "Are you?"

O'Neill shrugged. "I've been better."

"Me too." Daniel craned his neck to see past O'Neill. "Teal'c, are you still with us?"
"You'd better be." O'Neill jerked his head round to see. "Everyone goes home from this trip. Is that understood?"

He saw Teal'c give him a slow nod, the glimmer of a smile. "Is Major Carter - ?"

"She's going to be fine, Teal'c." Daniel said it with determination. Where the hell had he learned to lie like that? As O'Neill caught Daniel's eye he read the expression, a mixture of stubbornness and pleading. Make it be true. Doing my best, Daniel, doing my best….

He looked back down at Carter but she didn't look any better. Her lips were still blue. She ought to be starting to pink up by now, didn't she?

Okay, what had he done wrong last time? He'd asked, and at first the medic guy had given him the usual guff; he hadn't done anything "wrong", it was just one of the ops where sometimes it worked, sometimes it didn't; Sanchez had been suffering from multiple gunshot wounds, yadda, yadda, yadda. Christ, there had been something, something else you could do to stop them winding up in a bodybag….

"ABC of resuscitation," he muttered it aloud, wishing he'd had a refresher course before this mission. "Okay, I know this: A is for airway, B is for breathing, C is for circulation…. So, I've got her an airway, now I need to breathe for her."

That was it. You blew into the tube to get the air moving or something. Couldn't remember now exactly what it did, but it got the good things happening faster. He could do that.

Bending his head, O'Neill blew hard into the tube. The same power you needed to blow up a balloon, that was what Fraiser said. And, yes, there was chest movement, he could see it out of the corner of his eye. Come on, pick up the pace, Major, and report for duty, right now.

"Won't that get germs into her bloodstream?"

O'Neill would have smiled if he hadn't been blowing into the plastic casing of a pen. Daniel was arguing again. That had to be a good sign. He blew again, then nodded to Daniel. "That's what antibiotics are for. Hold the pen in place a second." As Daniel did so, he reached down and squeezed her ribcage rhythmically, that was supposed to help too, and hell, right now he was willing to try anything. If someone had told him hanging upside down from the rafters while singing "The Star Spangled Banner" would have got them Carter back he would have gone for it.

"O'Neill!"

Teal'c's warning had him reacting before he'd even recognized the sound of his name: grabbing Daniel and pulling him down over Carter before shielding them both with his body. He felt the blast from the staff weapon damned near part his hair and then a second bolt went over his head. He twisted round, scared of what he might see. "Teal'c…?"

The Jaffa let the staff weapon slip from his fingers, his shoulder smoking from the blast it had just taken. "I am still alive, O'Neill."

Daniel looked at the dead lion guard Teal'c had just dispatched and then turned back to their teammate. "Oh God. Teal'c…?"

"Shit!" O'Neill cast around for their medical kit. "What is this? Kill my freakin' team day?" He pulled off his jacket, yanked his t-shirt over his head, then wrapped it around Teal'c's shoulder, pulling it tight. He touched the Jaffa's cheek. "No one dies today unless they have a note from their mother to say they're excused, you got that?"
"Our mothers are dead. We can't get notes." Daniel was stroking Carter's hair again, visibly willing her to wake up. O'Neill figured that was probably doing as much good as all his breathing into tubes and squeezing her ribcage.

O'Neill held the Jaffa's pain-filled gaze as he tied off the makeshift bandage. "Well, then neither of you is allowed to skip class." He added quietly, "And that goes for you too."

Teal'c found him a weary smile. "Understood."

O'Neill turned around and squeezed Carter's ribs again gently, then leant forward to blow into the tube a couple more times. The grey look was going from her lips now, being replaced by definite signs of pink. Some oxygen was getting through again. But had he caught it in time, or was he bringing her back to be a cabbage, that brilliant mind lost forever?

O'Neill pulled his jacket back on, a cold breeze tickling his chest hair. He glanced across at Daniel and saw how smooth his chest was by comparison. There was a lot of it on display through the unbuttoned jacket and the rips in his t-shirt. "That son-of-a-bitch Jaffa is so dead."

He hadn't realized he'd said it aloud until Daniel blinked up at him in surprise, still holding the pen in place with one hand and stroking Carter's hair with the other. "Jack…?"

O'Neill indicated the human wreckage that had been a fit, healthy, fighting unit a couple of days earlier. "No one does this to my team and gets away with it. Onuris is dead. His bitch-mate is dead. And that bastard…Tailgate is deader than tie-dye."

Daniel found him a glimmer of a smile from somewhere. "Wonder if that's in the prophecy?"

O'Neill dredged up a smile of his own. "Well, just as long as the next sentence is 'And lo, verily it came to pass' they can go right ahead and quote me."

"Well, Tel'muk is very, very dead, Jack, so that part is certainly true."

O'Neill looked up in surprise. He hadn't realized the guy was dead. "Did you…?"

Daniel shook his head. "No. The…people killed him. Very thoroughly."

He looked at Daniel's expression and grimaced. "You okay?"

"Much blood has been spilt here."

O'Neill jumped as Harun reappeared, carrying one of their packs. He looked up at the grave-faced man and nodded. "I know. Some of it's ours. Did you bring a gun?"

Harun gazed at him intently. "So you can shed more blood?"

"Some blood needs to be spilt."

"It is written that the avatars of the Chosen One spilt no more blood in the temple of the False God."

"Well, luckily, I'm not an avatar of the Chosen One, I'm just a really pissed off Air Force colonel with a grudge." O'Neill held out a hand. "Gun?"

Harun handed him a roll of tape. "This is what you asked for."

Swallowing the bad words he wanted to say, O'Neill took it from him, tearing off a strip with his teeth. As Daniel held the tube steady, he looped the tape around the tube and then stuck it to Carter's
neck; making sure he had a good length of tape but not enough to wind it all the way around her throat. The last thing Carter needed was something else interfering with her air supply. He tore off another strip and repeated the maneuver, sticking it to the other side of her neck for stability. The pinkness was unmistakable now. She was actually looking like Carter again, albeit an unconscious Carter with two pieces of adhesive tape holding a piece of tubing sticking out of her neck. But her lips were pink, and when he checked inside her mouth, so were her gums.

"Is Sam going to be okay?" Daniel murmured it to him quietly, clearly not wanting Teal'c to hear.

"She'd damned well better be." O'Neill wasn't considering the alternatives. He looked over his shoulder to where Harun was tending to Teal'c, using bandages and antiseptic a little awkwardly but with determination. Harun was talking quietly to the Jaffa, the two of them clearly communicating on some level he and Harun were never going to achieve. He glanced back to see how Carter and Daniel were doing and was reminded again that behind them the battle was still going on. There wasn't enough room for the lion guards to use their staff weapons, although shots were still being discharged, they were lousy weapons for hand to hand, and most of the blasts were hitting what remained of the ceiling. The three priests were watching from an alcove. The two lesser priests looked frightened. The High Priest was simply watchful. He was still holding the zatgun, O'Neill noticed. He wondered if it was worth going over there and taking it from him. Onuris and Mehit had retreated to the shadows and were watching with wary disdain. Their exit was blocked and the space beneath the ring mechanism was in the thick of the battle, or O'Neill figured they would probably have made a run for it by now.

O'Neill coughed as the scents of smoke, blood, and burning flesh caught at the back of his throat. When he glanced down at Carter to check on her progress she was gazing up at him in confusion. He stared at her in disbelief. "Carter…? You back with us?"

He and Daniel both bent forward at the same time, each of them trying to get a look at her face. The skull clash was painful and elicited a yelp from Daniel. "Damnit, Daniel…." He muttered it resignedly, rubbing his head. He felt a reproachful look glimmer off his cheekbone and felt a spasm of relief at that glimpse of normality.

He realized Carter was trying to say something but no sound was coming out. He waved a hand at her. "Don't try to speak. Just nod if you understand what I'm saying to you."

She nodded. Her eyes looked very large and shocked, her fingers groping across her bloodstained neck until they found the end of the tube. She held her finger over the end, pointing at her throat, and mouthed the word: "You?"

"Yes. Me. Cut that out." He covered her hand with his, gently but firmly moving it away from the pen casing. "No trying to talk, Carter, that's an order. And do not touch my handiwork."

Daniel leaned over her and O'Neill just pulled his head out of the way in time. Daniel spoke rapidly but soothingly, "Sam, you've got diphtheria. Your throat closed over which is why Jack had to do a tracheotomy, and why you can't speak. We need to get you back to the infirmary so Janet can give you the anti-toxin."

She mouthed the word anxiously: Teal'c?

Daniel darted an anxious glance over O'Neill's shoulder. "He's hurt but we think he's going to be okay."

She reached up and touched Daniel's ripped t-shirt, eyes anxious, opening her mouth to ask questions O'Neill didn't even wanted mouthed right now.
"What did I tell you about talking?" O'Neill said quickly. "Daniel, let's get her over with Teal'c, then Harun can look after them while you and I...you know." He jerked his head in the direction of the two Goa'uld watching the battle from the security of their personal shields.

Daniel gave a quick nod of comprehension and then smiled down at Carter as he took hold of her under the arms, leaving O'Neill to get her booted feet. O'Neill was relieved to see Daniel's hands weren't anything like as shaky as they picked Carter up between them and carried her the couple of paces necessary to set her down next to Teal'c.

"Major Carter...."

The way she reached out for Teal'c's hand and he immediately clasped it in his, told him that he and Daniel weren't the only ones who'd been doing some bonding in adversity.

Harun smiled down at them as he rewrapped O'Neill's bloodstained t-shirt as an extra bandage around Teal'c's damaged shoulder. He looked happy enough to start crying any minute. "This was not written."

"Most things aren't," O'Neill reminded him. "Mostly stuff just happens." O'Neill didn't know if it was his imagination or if Teal'c really was looking stronger with each passing second he realized Carter was going to make it. Except she wasn't going to make it unless he could get her back through the Stargate and into the infirmary. Which meant getting the damned Goa'uld to open up the Stargate.

"We need one of our GDOs." He spoke in a rapid undertone to Harun while jerking a thumb at the pack. "There should be one with the rest of our gear. Get Carter to nod when you find the right thing. And don't tell me it's not written, just do it."

Harun met his gaze. "We have lived with this prophecy for a long time. Even I, who came here by accident, have lived with it for many years. It is not easy for us to let it go."

O'Neill dragged his gaze away from Carter and looked at Daniel. He knew that look. Daniel was about to tell Harun all kinds of things he shouldn't. O'Neill nodded at Teal'c and Carter, touching Harun briefly on the shoulder. "Look after them, will you?" Then he took Daniel firmly by the elbow and pulled him away.

"Jack..."

"No."

"Can't we just...?"

"No." O'Neill met Daniel's troubled blue gaze sternly. "No, Daniel. We can't. If Harun doesn't go back in time, everything gets screwed up. It's already written. It's already happened. It just hasn't happened yet."

"But he helped us. We owe him."

O'Neill pulled Daniel out of the way of a lion guard who was battling with two villagers, yanking him behind a pillar. "You heard the man, he's lived with this damned prophecy for a long time. Well, soon he's going to realize that he was always the prophet. He's the guy who began it all. He's the guy in the holy tablet. He's Judas Iscariot, the Ten Commandments, and Moses all wrapped up in one. He's somebody, Daniel."

"We're all somebody." Daniel said it fiercely. "All of these people are somebody. All of these people who are dying all around us, incidentally. Why aren't we helping them?"
"Because it isn't our fight." He grabbed Daniel by the arm and pulled him out of the way of another
dangerous-looking scuffle, shoved him into another alcove, and met his gaze. "It's their fight. That's
the whole point. We don't deliver them from the false god. They save us and in saving us they
deliver themselves. Our function in this story is to be the damsel in distress tied to the railroad track."
He held out an arm, encompassing the bloody confusion of the battle. "Today they all get to be
heroes."

"And some of them get to be dead." Daniel wrapped his arms around himself.

"That's what generally happens in battles," he said evenly, holding Daniel's gaze.

Daniel swallowed, glancing around at the mayhem. "Okay, so if we're not helping these people,
what are we doing?"

"We're getting Onuris and his snake-bitch queen to switch off whatever it is that's stopping the DHD
from working."

He followed Daniel's darted glance to where the two were watching the battle, their gorgeous clothes
and kohled eyes an eerie contrast to the drab and mud-spattered robes of the native people currently
engaged in the destruction of their Jaffa. Onuris and Mehit looked watchful but not yet frightened.
O'Neill had to hand it to them; the Goa'uld certainly didn't scare easily. Their lion guards were
going slaughtered all around them but those two were still haughty, still confident.

Daniel raised an eyebrow. "They don't look very co-operative to me."

O'Neill held up the knife he'd used to do the operation on Carter as he led the way towards their
corner of the temple. "I'm hoping this might persuade them."

"They have hand devices which can knock us both across the temple." Daniel fell into step behind
him nonetheless.

"But they can't use them unless they switch off their personal shields. I get Onuris in the hand with
this and –"

"And then Mehit blasts you across the temple with her hand device." Daniel darted a glance at him.
"No, wait. I get the rest of the plan: As she lowers her defense shield, I jump her, grabbing her wrist,
then she throws me into the nearest pillar, and then she blasts you across the temple with her hand
device."

"They're not that much stronger than us." O'Neill said it with as much conviction as he could muster,
which unfortunately wasn't much.

"Yes, they are." Daniel gave him a bleak smile. "Take it from someone who went ten rounds with
Hathor, and lost."

Remembering the trashed room, and all those unmentionable bruises he'd noticed on Daniel's body in
the showers, O'Neill winced. "Okay. Then we go get the zatgun from Torquemada and –"

"Rahotep."

"Whatever. Either way we grab it and then improvise." He had his mouth open to start giving Daniel
detailed instructions on how they were going to do this when his 'imminent death' radar started
bleeping like an outraged car alarm. There was barely time to grab Daniel and throw them both to the
ground.
He swore he felt the staff weapon blast singe his hair on its way past. The next second he was squeezing his eyes closed as the blast hit the pillar right in front of them. He covered Daniel with his body, arms over his own head as debris and stone chippings spattered down on them like vicious hail. As the dust cleared a little, he ducked his head to try to get a look at Daniel's face. The younger man's eyes were closed and he was very still. "Daniel…?"

He shook him. "Daniel?"

When there was no response he ran a hand through his hair gently, rubbing Daniel's cheek with his thumb. "Danny? Come on, it was just a little bang on the head. You're Rubber Boy, remember? You can bounce back from anything. Daniel?"

The wail tore through the temple eerily.

"Tew Setepen! Tew Setepen!"

More wails followed and he could guess what they meant all too easily: the Chosen One was dead. Except he wasn't. No way in hell was Daniel going to be dead. O'Neill reached for his neck and felt a pulse. He tilted Daniel's head up and saw a trace of blood in his hair. A chipping from the pillar had obviously furrowed a line along his scalp. He followed the blood trail and found the cut, relief surging through him as he realized it wasn't too deep. Daniel was knocked out for a few minutes, that was all. O'Neill looked up to tell the wailing multitudes that their Chosen One was going to be fine, really, and was reminded again that SG-1 were just catalysts here. The lion guard who'd fired on them was being bludgeoned to death a few feet away by a crowd of true believers, and the others were moving towards Mehit and Onuris with what was unmistakably murder in their eyes.

"We need those guys alive!" O'Neill yelled. "We need to be able to use the Stargate. They're the only one who know how to –"

No one was listening to him. He might be as cunning as the wolf that hunted in winter and right hand man to their Deliverer but he was also a guy saying things they really didn't want to hear in a language they didn't understand. They were going to kill the false gods who had murdered their true god, and the fact Daniel wasn't their god, or dead, wasn't even going to slow them up.

Swearing, O'Neill got to his feet, caught Daniel under the arms and dragged him into the corner. They were about five alcoves up from Teal'c and Carter who were hopefully well out of the way of a crowd that was now flowing past this little oasis of safety like a river that had burst its banks.

"This sucks," he muttered. He grabbed a staff weapon that was kicked their way by the stampeding believers, pulling it up one handed. Wedging himself in the corner, he got Daniel positioned comfortably against him, Daniel's head lolling against his bare chest. He waved the dust aside impatiently and peered from behind the pillar. He and Daniel had a ringside seat for the last act if nothing else; it was just a pity Daniel wasn't awake to watch the show.

Onuris and Mehit were cornered, faces contorted with rage. There had been lion guards forming a wall between them and the multitudes, but those Jaffa were being remorselessly bludgeoned and dragged down. Soon the Goa'uld were only going to have their personal shields and their hand devices between them and about two hundred fifty angry locals.

"Daniel…?" O'Neill whispered it in his ear. "Wake up. Wake up and prove you're alive before Onuris gets killed and we're stuck on this freakin' shithole of a planet for the rest of our natural lives. Daniel…?"

Two of the natives were thrown past at a height of about ten feet where the Goa'uld had obviously
used their hand devices to blast them away. That meant they'd lowered their defense shields. Onuris and Mehit would only do that if they were desperate. O'Neill craned his neck to look behind the pillar and saw the Goa'uld hitting local after local with their hand devices, golden blasts of light flaring from their palms, their faces intent. But there were hundreds of people pressing in on them and if Goa'uld could sweat he reckoned those two were sweating. This was a last stand, and he didn't think they were going to make it.

Daniel nestled against his chest, like a child settling down for the night. O'Neill ran a hand through Daniel's hair automatically. "Okay, don't wake up. Lie there and take a little nap. No, really, it's fine. This place is growing on me anyway. A few more years I'm sure they'll get cable."

Daniel sighed against his bare skin, burrowing against his chest hair like it was a comforter. He guessed Daniel's subconscious had decided that Daniel had been through enough today and was closing everything down for a little while. From the point of view of saving Daniel's sanity, it was probably a good idea. From the point of view of them getting off this world, it was probably a disaster.

"Daniel, please wake up…." He hissed it between gritted teeth. "Pretty please with chocolate and whipped cream on top."

"Help us…"

For a frozen second he thought the words were addressed to him and stared across at the Goa'uld in horror. But then he saw Onuris' gaze was riveted on the next alcove to the one he and Daniel were sheltering in. He hadn't even noticed the High Priest standing there so immobile and silent, but now he realized the man was watching from the shadows, still holding the zat gun in his hand. He also realized that this conversation would never be recorded on any sacred tablet because only he and the High Priest would understand it.

Rahotep spoke quietly. "No."

Onuris' gaze flashed gold with fury. "I am your god! I command you to help us!"

"A god does not need the assistance of a priest."

"You are my High Priest. You serve me!"

O'Neill thought Onuris had a point there, quite frankly. Rahotep had spent his whole damned life in the service to this snakey son-of-a-bitch. Now the guy asked for his assistance and he said 'No'? What the hell was that about? He craned his neck to try to see Rahotep's face, but it was unreadable.

Even as Mehit blasted another two people away; as another dozen lion guards were dragged to the floor and bludgeoned only a few feet from her, Rahotep spoke clearly but quietly, his voice cutting through the clamor of battle:

"I serve the one true god, Onuris. Were you he you would cast the unbelievers down. The god I serve needs no help from me."

"I am Onuris!" The Goa'uld roared it furiously.

"Then you have no need of my assistance." There was quiet conviction in Rahotep's voice.

O'Neill couldn't really fault the guy's logic. He guessed that was probably no more than you deserved for going around saying you were omnipotent. Still seemed a little tough though, he had to admit. He whispered urgently in Daniel's ear: "It would be really good idea for you to wake up now,
Daniel stirred drowsily and then blinked up at him. He said sleepily, "Hey, Jack...."

"Hey, Daniel." He waited patiently for Daniel to notice something odd about their situation but Daniel showed every sign of going back to sleep again. He seemed to think his C.O. had nothing better to do with his time than be a nice warm pillow for him.

Daniel closed his eyes. "My head hurts."

"Onuris is about to get stiffed."

"I was dreaming about waffles again."

"That's nice. In the meantime, Onuris and Mehit are about to get torn limb from limb by the outraged multitudes because one of their Jaffa killed you."

"They killed me?" Daniel stared up at him in surprise. "We're dead?"

O'Neill exhaled, mentally counting to ten. "No. We're alive. They just made a mistake. It's probably written somewhere that you died in the temple, so they were ready to get touchy about it. You want to go tell the nice people you're not dead?"

"Okay." Daniel made to get up but then fell back on him again.

"Ow!" O'Neill glared at him. "The second we get home you are so going on a diet, Daniel."

"I command you to help us!"

They both jerked their heads round, almost clashing skulls again as they both tried to peer through the gap between the pillar and the wall. O'Neill shoved Daniel down lower and looked over the top of him. For a second his gaze met that of Onuris and he read desperation in his gold-glowing eyes. Then the Goa'uld was focusing on Rahotep, imperious, insistent: "I am your god, Onuris. I am the one, the only god. You live only to serve me. You will obey me. Help us!"

"You are a false god." Rahotep spoke expressionlessly. "The god I serve is all knowing and all powerful. He needs no help from his priests. You are a blasphemer who has taken his name in vain." Rahotep raised the zatgun and fired.

Mehit's scream of fury was cut off as the blue light enveloped her. She crumpled to the floor, oddly exotic even in defeat. Rahotep aimed the zatgun and fired on her again. With a snarl of fury, Onuris raised his hand, aiming his ribbon device at the priest. The zat blast sizzled through the dusty air, shimmering around the Goa'uld before he could fire. The second burst of blue light followed in a heartbeat.

Daniel and O'Neill gaped at one another in disbelief. Noticing that Daniel looked very dumb with his mouth open, O'Neill hastily closed his own mouth.

The crowd fell back in surprise, releasing the lion guards they were grappling with as Rahotep walked impassively towards the two Goa'uld. He stood over them for a moment, looking around the temple at the expectant faces. Then he aimed the zatgun and fired again. Onuris and Mehit shimmered like a heat haze and then vanished. Rahotep surveyed the astonished people, face unreadable. Then he began to speak in the language of the Goa'uld.

Daniel translated automatically: "This was not Onuris. Your god has not yet visited you. When he
comes he will be all-powerful and all knowing. His strength will be greater than any –’ ”

"Okay, that's enough. I can guess the rest." O'Neill helped Daniel to his feet, tuning the priest out. Daniel was still staring at the scene with his mouth open. He met O'Neill's gaze. "Do you think he truly believed they were imposters…?"

O'Neill shrugged. "I think he truly believed that a priest with no gods to worship is out of a job. He's keeping the lights on for someone who outranks any other deity on the planet, and, basically, Onuris just failed the audition."

"So nothing's changed." Daniel looked around at the dead; the lion guards and locals scattered around the room, bodies twisted, eyes open but unseeing. "Some of them will still worship Onuris, others will worship…us. Onuris is dead, and we're not gods but it doesn't make any difference? All these people died…for nothing."

"People die for nothing every day, Daniel. It's just that on the whole we don't usually have to watch it happen."

Daniel closed his eyes and waved a hand. "Place is kind of…spinning…"

O'Neill propped Daniel against the wall, darting a glance between the pillars. Rahotep was still talking, the people were still listening; some of them were nodding, others were shaking their heads and shouting protests. It was probably all very cosmic and philosophical but in the meantime he had a ribbon-devised Jaffa, a diphtheria-ridden Major, and a concussed anthropologist to get home and under the care of Janet Fraiser. "Let's try walking, shall we?"

"Okay." Daniel took a wavering pace. "Why is the floor moving?"

O'Neill just grabbed him in time, swearing as Daniel's weight put extra pressure on his leg. He used the staff weapon to lean on while putting his arm around Daniel's waist. They could do this. He would limp Daniel down to the Stargate; then help Teal'c struggle down there, then find someone to assist him with carrying Carter. Then he'd get one of the priests by the throat and make him switch off that damned device. Not a problem. One way or another he was getting his team off this damned world.

"Your friend is not a god."

O'Neill turned to find Rahotep standing there watching them. That guy was definitely creepy and he still had a zatgun in his hand. He wondered if the High Priest was going to make them disappear the way he had the two Goa'uld. "We never said he was."

"The people know that now." Rahotep nodded in satisfaction. "They awaited his coming but when he arrived he was only a man. That is because there is only one god."

Daniel moistened his lips. "You speak English. That means you understood me." He jerked his head in the direction of the inner chambers of the temple and O'Neill felt the shudder go through him. "When you were…questioning me."

"Yes." Rahotep spoke without inflection or apology.

Daniel looked around at the dead and dying and O'Neill automatically tightened his grip on him. Daniel grimaced. "You don't care, do you? Whether people live or die. Whether they suffer or are happy. All you care about is that they continue to believe. Anything that threatens that belief you destroy."
Rahotep faced him unflinchingly. "Without belief they are nothing."

O'Neill jabbed a finger at the place where Onuris and Mehit had made their last stand. "You just killed your god, you do know that, right?"

"My god is all powerful. That which I killed was not my god."

O'Neill met his gaze, reading not a hint of doubt. "What if he was? What if your god is exactly what we told you he was? An alien parasite living inside a stolen human body?"

"He is not."

Daniel sighed. "No, he's right, Jack. His god is what he wants him to be, and that isn't what he wants him to be, therefore that isn't what he is. He believes in a deity called Onuris who is all-powerful and all knowing. The creature he just killed was an alien parasite living inside a human host. Therefore he wasn't Onuris."

Rahotep nodded. "Exactly."

Daniel seemed to understand this high priest guy even though O'Neill sure as hell didn't. The young man sighed. "Then we can go? We don't threaten your belief system any more, do we? We're just the means by which you freed yourselves from the false god pretending to be your real god."

"The one who doesn't exist," O'Neill put in.

Daniel grimaced. "The one who can never disappoint you. The one who can never inconveniently show up and be less than omnipotent."

Rahotep stepped forward and lifted a chain from around his neck. A blood red crystal was blinking on the end of it. He pressed it once and the light faded. "You may leave whenever you wish."

O'Neill clenched his fists. "How long have you had that? How long have you been able to switch the DHD back on?"

Rahotep made no reply just gazing at him unblinkingly. The High Priest's morality and belief system were so far removed from his it made no difference that they could both speak English after all. O'Neill realized there could never be any communication between them. "Screw you," O'Neill said quietly. He turned away from him before the urge to punch him on the jaw became overwhelming.

Daniel was murmuring something about the Death Child avenging his father anyway and maybe it wasn't such a bad thing they'd left the doors open. He wondered if Daniel was concussed. He talked as if he was concussed a lot of the time when he wasn't, so it was often a little difficult to tell. Whatever Daniel was saying was clearly pissing off the High Priest guy anyway and as he still had a zatgun in his hand….

"Daniel…"

"I know."

O'Neill looked around the interior of the temple, at the broken statue, the missing section of the roof letting in a torn patch of night sky; the smoking bodies; the dead and the dying. Something had caught on fire outside and dense pale wisps were beginning to blow in on the night breeze to coil into his throat. The air was filled with the sound of recrimination and grief; people were crying over the dead; consoling the wounded. O'Neill set his jaw. "Well, I guess our work here is done."
"We can't just leave them," Daniel said it wretchedly.

O'Neill knew how he felt but he'd already accepted that fate was running this particular poker game and someone else was going to end up with the pot. "I think it's probably written somewhere that we do." As Daniel looked as if he might argue, he added quickly, "If Carter doesn't get the anti-toxin fast, she isn't going to make it."

That worked. Daniel was hauling him back towards Carter and Teal'c so fast he could barely keep up with him.

He snatched up another staff weapon on the way. Daniel still had his jacket even if it was looking very much worst for wear from when Tel'muk had…. Better not to think about that. Two jackets and two staff weapons made a stretcher. Concentrate on the practicalities of getting his team down to the DHD and off this damned world.

***

Samantha Carter knew she wasn't really floating. She just felt as if she was. She was almost grateful for the disorientation because it muffled the panic of having to breathe through a tube. Which was still a big improvement on not being able to breathe at all. Who would have thought Colonel O'Neill could do surgery…? People outside the services had no idea how that felt. To owe your life to another human being. To know that if it wasn't for him, or him, or her, or him, you would be dead now, cold, insentient.

"Careful with her…." That was Daniel's voice. They had made a makeshift stretcher from his and the Colonel's jackets with two staff weapons pushed through the sleeves. They had lifted her onto it in their own way – very gently in Daniel's case, matter-of-factly in the Colonel's. Even with the air rationed through the plastic casing of a ballpoint pen she'd had a little smile for the Colonel's briskness. He was usually only like that with Daniel; the whole 'I was never worried for an instant' act generally reserved for SG-1's civilian member. If he'd started wearing that mask for her as well he must be getting fond of her, too.

As they passed through the double doors, leaving the smoke and chaos of the temple behind, she looked up at Daniel's upside-down face. He looked very anxious. And very bruised. Someone had beaten him up. Presumably the same someone who had ripped his t-shirt to its current shredded state.

She put her finger over the tube, trying to get some sound to come out, even a faint rasp, but there was nothing. She had to mouth it: "Daniel, are you…?"

"No talking." The Colonel's swift response made them both jump as the cold night air cut through them. He didn't even trouble to look round. He was carrying the front end of the makeshift stretcher, still very much the USAF colonel leading his team back to the Stargate despite his heavy limp, bare torso, and the dull bruises marking his back and shoulders. Harun was helping Teal'c, the Jaffa struggling but determined to stay on his feet. He and Colonel O'Neill were both clearly having to fight to stay upright but had that 'never say die' look she recognized only too well. She tilted her head back to snatch another look at Daniel, mouthing the question at him again.

Daniel gave her an apologetic grimace. "I'm fine, Sam." He shivered with the cold and she saw the goose-bumps on his arms. She coughed as some blood got into her throat and red liquid spattered through the end of the tube. When Daniel flinched at the sight, she tried to give him a reassuring smile, but as he still looked ghost-white with anxiety she gathered her reassuring smile needed some more work. The stars seemed far away; the night sky smudged with drifts of what she thought at first were clouds, until the scent of burning reached her, and she realized this was smoke. She turned her head awkwardly and caught sight of huts burning; probably ignited by stray staff weapon blasts; the
smoke stinging her eyes. She couldn't be sure, but she thought Harun's hut was one of them. She wondered what had happened to the woman with the baby. If it had survived. If it also featured in the prophecy. As they passed a hut that was fully ablaze she saw the looming silhouette of something that looked like an enormous beast. It took her a moment to realize it was a crashed death glider, that its spilled fuel was what was setting the huts on fire. It was strange to see the smoke but not be able to smell it. She realized how much she took her senses for granted. The ability to speak, to smell. Not to mention the ability to breathe in and out without needing a tube taped into her throat.

Daniel looked odd upside down, but she felt cut off from half the methods by which she would have judged how bad it had been, whatever event had left him looking like that. She wanted to ask him how he has, to inhale the scent of his skin through the rips in his t-shirt, and smell not just sweat, but any aftermath of shock and fear. Those were emotions that left a scent on the body like aftershave. But even with only her sight to guide her, it was clear something very bad had either happened or almost happened to him. She could see it as clearly in the rigidity of Colonel O'Neill's back as she could in the bruises on Daniel's skin. Carter still had no idea how Daniel and the Colonel had made it back to the temple; where they'd been sent; what they'd had to do to return in time. She was just very grateful that they had.

She turned her head to look at Teal'c; wincing as she saw how heavily he was leaning on Harun. He needed to meditate so his symbiote could heal him properly. He gave her a weary smile but she could see it was willpower alone keeping him on his feet. No wonder Colonel O'Neill was so pissed. Onuris had basically kicked the crap out of the Colonel's team.

She tilted her head back to look at Daniel again, then darted a look at the Colonel O'Neill. She knew from past experience that the Colonel had very good hearing. She mouthed it at Daniel carefully:

Onuris?

He mouthed it back at her: Dead.

Colonel O'Neill?

He shook his head: Rahotep. The High Priest.

She looked at him in disbelief. Daniel raised his eyebrows to show that he was as surprised as she was. She realized he was pretty handicapped on the communication front having to hold her stretcher. The Colonel was always saying the best way to shut Daniel up was to tie his hands behind his back.

She began to mouth the next question: Did you and the Colonel…?

"Don't make me come back there."

Daniel's guilty start sent her sliding three inches down the stretcher. The Colonel hadn't so much as twitched a hair, but he clearly did have eyes in the back of his head. Daniel gave her an apologetic look and she winced back at him in return.

Harun was talking to Teal'c in a voice too low for her to hear. Daniel could probably have picked up the words if he'd listened, but his gaze was fixed on what lay ahead of them. Possibly the back of Colonel O'Neill's head, or the Stargate. With Daniel it could be either.

Daniel said, "Do you think that crystal thingy of Rahotep's actually…?"

"If it didn't I'm just going to keep hitting the DHD until it works." The Colonel didn't even look over his shoulder. "That's SOP, Daniel."
It occurred to Carter that the only bit of the conversation she had understood was the one currently eliciting that blank look from Daniel. She mouthed 'standard operating procedure' at him.

Daniel nodded. "Well, that's very reassuring, Jack. Thank you."

"You're welcome."

As the ground leveled out, she realized they must be very near to the Stargate now. They were reliant on the reflected glow of burning buildings here, that and the starlight the smoke was already veiling. She wondered where Daniel had lost his flashlight. If the people who found it would be able to learn something from it that might advance their technology, or if would just rust somewhere unnoticed.

"I need to carry news of the defeat of the False God to my people."

She was staring straight at Colonel O'Neill's bruised shoulders and she swore he didn't even twitch. Daniel did though. She felt the stretcher jerk underneath her. Heard his murmured apology. When she glanced up at him for an explanation, he was staring fixedly at the back of the Colonel's head, trying to will him into doing something.

She didn't think it was coincidence that the Colonel wouldn't turn around. "Okay, Harun, you go first then. We'll take the next 'gate out of here."

Carter felt a cold prickling sensation down the back of her neck. She had diphtheria and was in urgent need of the anti-toxin. Teal'c was staying upright by sheer willpower. And it looked as if Daniel had been…. Well, the rigidity of the Colonel's spinal column suggested he had more rage still left to express that could be accounted for even by what had been done to her and Teal'c. But the Colonel was letting Harun go first, just to carry the good news about Onuris to his non-believers? That didn't ring true at all.

She looked to Daniel for an explanation but his gaze was fixed on the Colonel. Still on the back of the Colonel's head to be more precise. She counted ten seconds as Harun propped Teal'c near a boulder, handed him something, then began to walk towards the Stargate. As Daniel opened his mouth in that unmistakable 'Jack' shape, Colonel O'Neill said, "No, Daniel. And you know why."

"But –"

"It's already happened. It has to happen. He went back in time. He drew the damned pictures on the damned walls. We're alive because he already did all that stuff. If he doesn't do it, everything gets screwed up."

Carter tried to twist her head round to look at the Colonel. But as he still had his back to both of them, it didn't help her much. She glanced back at Daniel who was looking utterly wretched but who wasn't saying anything or doing anything to stop Harun. He closed his eyes. "Jack, he might have a family here."

The Colonel still refused to look around. "He might have a family there. He might have met the girl of his dreams and had six kids with her. We'll never know, will we?"

They were following Harun now, Daniel stumbling over the rough ground, the Colonel limping even more heavily. As Harun began to dial, Daniel abruptly called out, "Harun!"

The Colonel spun around so fast he almost overbalanced. Her stretcher tilted alarmingly before he jerked it upright again, but his gaze was fixed on Daniel; shock and fear in his eyes rather than anger. "Daniel…?"
"I have to know he…"

"He knows." Teal'c pushed himself up off the boulder, the GDO clasped in his hand. It was obvious every movement was costing him a great effort, but his face was calm. "Daniel Jackson, Harun knows the identity of the prophet of the Chosen One. I think he has known for some time."

Carter looked across at the figure in his ragged robes standing in front of the DHD. His face was oddly lit by the reflected blaze coming from the hilltop, but she could see determination written all over it. Noticing the way Harun set his jaw as he pressed the last chevron, she realized Teal'c was right. She also realized what Daniel and the Colonel had been talking about.

As the Stargate bathed them all the reflection of its rippling blue light, Harun turned to look at them. He nodded to O'Neill who nodded back. Harun's gaze was gentle as it rested on her and she found a smile to match his, mouthing 'Good luck' and hoping he could lip-read what she was saying.

Daniel said quietly, "Harun, do you…?"

The man looked him in the eye. "I know that I need to carry the news of what has happened here to my people."

"But –"

Harun held out his hands to encompass the planet. "These people are my people now." He bowed his head to Teal'c. "Thank you."

Teal'c bowed his head in return, investing the action with that peculiar grace which made a nod from him seem more valuable than a long speech of gratitude from someone else.

Daniel still had his mouth open to make another protest as Harun glanced up at the night sky and then ran swiftly into the gate. For a second he seemed to hesitate; a silhouette against the blue; then the light closed over him and when Carter blinked he was gone. A moment later the gate shut down, leaving them momentarily dazzled by the darkness.

"How could he know when it was the right time to leave?" Daniel automatically turned to her for an explanation, then, on remembering her condition winced apologetically. "Sorry."

It was O'Neill who answered: "Faith."

"What?" Daniel stared at him in confusion and Carter had to hide another smile. Daniel looked so cute when he did that open-mouth thing. Most men just looked dumb. Daniel looked adorable. Although she didn't intend to tell him that any time soon.

O'Neill shrugged. "He's the prophet of the Chosen One, Daniel. And the prophet of the Chosen One was a guy who got sent into the past. Which means any time Harun goes through the gate has to be the right time to send him into the past because he's the prophet and that's what happened. You've really got to learn to start thinking laterally if you're going to get to grips with this self-fulfilling prophecy stuff."

Okay, now she had her mouth open as well.

Teal'c nodded at the Colonel in the manner of a pleased albeit somewhat surprised teacher whose most troublesome pupil had just unexpectedly got a passing grade. "That is correct, O'Neill."

The Colonel looked around at them all defiantly. "Now is that enough talking and can we go home now?"
Daniel shrugged. "You're the colonel, Jack."

"At last, you noticed." Colonel O'Neill nodded to Teal'c. "Can you dial it up, buddy?" He turned around, making her stretcher wobble alarmingly before he grabbed back the handle. Even in the smoky gloom she could see he also had the makings of a spectacular black eye. He looked down at her. "Just hang in there, Carter. Doc Fraiser will have you good as new in no time."

As she automatically attempted to say 'Yes, sir', he raised an eyebrow. "Want to be a Captain again, Major?"

The 'No, sir' played tantalizingly on her tongue before she swallowed it down. But she decided she definitely had a lot of talking to make up for when she had a throat that wasn't swollen closed.

As Teal'c stumbled wearily over to the DHD, Carter took one last look at the hillside. The temple was still looming there, a menacing shadow on the horizon line. She somehow doubted it was calling to Daniel's curiosity now. The flames had obviously taken hold of more huts; the smoke blurring the constellations, while the red glow on the hilltop gave the impression the sun was setting for the second time. It seemed only appropriate that it should now appear to be several hours earlier than when she had been carried into the temple to watch Teal'c all but murdered before her eyes.

Daniel said quietly: "'The dust of exploded beliefs may make a fine sunset.' Except we didn't even explode any beliefs, did we? Onuris may be dead but those people are exactly where they were when we arrived here. Nothing's changed. We didn't arrive in time to stop the priests sending that boy through the Stargate. That must have happened weeks ago. And in ten years time he'll get into the Goa'uld warehouse whose door Jack and I didn't have time to shut, and he'll find all those Goa'uld weapons. Then he'll come over here, wipe out the priests of Onuris and the followers of the Chosen One and anyone else he blames for his father's death. Hundreds of people will die for no reason. Just the same as they died today for no reason. We weren't the gods they've all been waiting for. We were always irrelevant."

Carter winced in sympathy as she read the look in his eyes. She opened her mouth to tell him that they had all done only what it had been written they would do; pawns in the chess game of a temporal paradox. That it wasn't their fault. Then remembered speaking was an impossibility and closed it again.

As they were bathed in blue light once more, she heard the Colonel speak again, using the kind of tone that would have been accompanied by a pat on the shoulder if he and Daniel hadn't been a staff weapon's length apart. "Let's go home, Daniel."

Daniel took one last look at the hillside and then nodded. As they walked towards the Stargate he said, "Of course, we don't know if we get home safely because that's the one thing Harun wouldn't know either. For all we know we get pushed off course by a solar flare as well and end up –"

"Daniel?" The Colonel seemed to be talking with great care and precision. "Let's go home…silently. In fact, why don't you lead the way?"

There was a pause before Daniel said, "We can do that."

As they pinwheeled slowly so that Daniel was the one going backwards towards the Stargate, they were still agreeing on how quiet Daniel could be. "Silence is fine with me."

"Good."

"Not a problem."
"Excellent."

Carter watched Teal'c stumble into the event horizon, then Daniel was leading the way into the shimmering blue circle. He was still telling Colonel O'Neill how silently they could go home as he stepped into the light.

***
Chapter 5

Epilogue

O'Neill looked around the isolation ward with dislike. No pictures on the walls. Nothing interesting to read. No windows, of course. In the next room, Carter and Teal'c would be enjoying the same total lack of a view, although he suspected Cassandra had probably sent some pictures which Carter would be able to see from her bed. Cassandra's pictures were fairly sophisticated things these days but O'Neill had a lingering soft spot for the early ones. Apparently she was working on something special for him, but it wasn't finished yet.

He tried to listen when Fraiser was giving him the medical info, especially when it concerned a member of his team upon whom he had been forced to perform impromptu emergency surgery, but there were days when he really wished she'd give him the short version. Still, once he'd disentangled the information from the medical-speak, he gathered he hadn't done Carter any lasting harm by sticking that knife in her throat. Fraiser had replaced his pen casing with some fancy kind of trach that let the patient talk but had promised that it would all come out as soon as the inflammation in Carter's throat was reversed. He hadn't got everything Fraiser had said because she always talked too fast when she'd had a bad scare, and he gathered that her first sight of Carter and Teal'c looking three-quarters dead had probably qualified as a very bad scare, but she seemed to have cleared out the membrane, got the antitoxin into Carter's system, then put her on an Erythromycin IV in the kind of time it usually took to knock a hockey puck through the back of the net. Carter was now apparently recovering well. Teal'c was the one giving concern. O'Neill was pretty sure Doc Fraiser was holding out on him on just how bad Teal'c was but at least he could hear for himself that Carter's 'speaking trach' was living up to its name.

O'Neill couldn't hear exactly what the two of them were saying, but he'd get the murmur of it often enough; the bass of Teal'c's few comments counter-pointing the raspy rapid fire of Carter. She sounded a little unlike herself but was still recognizably Carter. Fraiser had told him the trach had a valve thing that opened and closed to let Carter speak without her having to put her finger over the hole, but he hoped the manufacturers had made allowances for just how much talking this particular diphtheria patient wanted to do because as far as he could tell she never shut up. She might have had to go a whole twelve hours without being able to talk but she was certainly making up for it now. Apparently she thought temporal paradoxes were fascinating. That was a weird thing about scientists: complete inability to learn from their own data. Anyone who had been on their last mission who wasn't a scientist knew that what temporal paradoxes were was a major pain in the ass. He might not have a PhD in theoretical astrophysics but he'd worked that one out in no time. Carter, apparently, still had some catching up to do.

Carter and Teal'c had insisted on sharing a room. Apparently they'd got pretty agitated when Fraiser had gone to separate them and she'd relented at once. They'd obviously experienced something when Carter was dying which they needed to work through. Or maybe they'd both come so close to losing each other they just needed a little more proof they really had survived this one. They'd get over it. He'd gone through twitchy times with various teammates himself in the past. It faded after a while. Then the next crisis happened and you had nightmares about someone else. Then that one faded. Then another teammate would get him or herself half-killed, or half-Goa'uld, or lost, or stolen, or apparently wholly killed, and you were back to the nightmare you'd first thought of. For the moment Teal'c and Carter were just feeling a little anxious. Unlike Daniel and himself, of course, who were models of well adjustment.

Glancing across to see if Daniel was okay was so instinctive he'd done it before he could stop
himself. Well, okay, perhaps they were a bit over-anxious themselves, but at least he and Daniel didn't have their beds side by side, the way Carter and Teal'c apparently did. They weren't \textit{that} sappy. Their beds were opposite one another: a much less twitchy formation.

Looking past his own long grey-cotton clad legs and bare feet, O'Neill could see a Daniel Jackson in blue pajamas, propped up on the pillows, reading a book that was a little large for comfort. The combination of that oversized volume, Daniel's pjs being two sizes too big for him, his hair still sticking up a little as it dried off from his morning shower, and the pink vulnerability of the soles of his too-clean feet, made Daniel look like a child.

Unfortunately the bruises across Daniel's face made him look like a \textit{battered} child, and every time O'Neill caught a glimpse of his friend's face he found himself wincing.

The bruises weren't quite as spectacular as his own black eye, but they were still noticeable. Every time O'Neill saw them – which was every time he looked at Daniel – he thought about that conversation they were going to have to hold at some point. It wasn't easy sharing a two-bed isolation ward with your best friend when there were so many subjects neither of you wanted to talk about, which was why, after almost three days in their ward, the matter of what had been done to Daniel in that temple still remained resolutely undiscussed.

O'Neill actually thought it was totally unfair that he and Daniel were stuck in the infirmary when they only had cuts and bruises, and in his case a half-healed burn. But apparently the diphtheria germs he and Daniel might have been carrying had made them too dangerous to be transferred to the Air Force hospital. All the \textit{other} SGC patients had been transferred to the hospital so they couldn't be infected by the plague bearers that were SG-1. Fraiser kept telling him not to take it personally, but it was difficult not to feel like a leper when everyone who approached you was dressed like Dustin Hoffman in 'Outbreak'.

"That was a damned stupid film," he said aloud.

Daniel looked over the top of the book he was reading and sighed. "What now?"

"The monkey did it? Come on, that was dumb when Poe had it in the murders of the Rue whatsit. \textit{And} Kevin Spacey dies in it. He was the only good thing in it. Well, the monkey was okay. The dogs weren't too bad, and the guy who flew the helicopter – "

Daniel was wearing his most annoying blank expression. "Are you getting a temperature?"

O'Neill darted him a look of irritation. "No."

Daniel seemed to think that meant he could go back to reading his book, thereby completely failing to get the benefit of a perfectly good glare O'Neill had just sent in his direction.

O'Neill still couldn't tell if Daniel was genuinely enjoying some boring book about dead people, or if he was just trying to avoid talking about... the event they hadn't talked about.

Their room had plastic sheeting and UV lighting which people coming in had to pass through. More importantly it had a bathroom and a TV set. He'd complained about the lack of a vending machine but Fraiser hadn't even heard him. In fact Fraiser had been so worried about Carter and Teal'c when they'd all staggered back though the gate, she'd barely fussed over his leg. They'd been whisked off to their respective isolation wards at double speed. Then, while an orderly shrouded in more clothing than an astronaut had come and dressed O'Neill's leg wound, Daniel had slipped off to the shower. He'd come out ten minutes later, wrapped in a towel, with his hair all damp and tousled, and climbed straight into bed. Then he'd slept. And slept. And slept.
In the end, O'Neill had found himself doing something he hadn't since Charlie was a baby, and sneaking over there to see if he was breathing. Daniel had slept for twenty hours straight while O'Neill hadn't been able to sleep for more than thirty minutes at a time. Every time he closed his eyes he saw Carter with her lips blue; Teal'c looking so close to dead he really thought he'd lost him this time; or Daniel with that Tel'muk tearing at his clothing, pleading with O'Neill not to look. The whole team that were his responsibility fucked up every which way while he'd done nothing to stop it.

Fraiser did come in to see them every few hours to take more throat swabs for analysis, to shine penlights into their eyes, do various tests for concussion, take blood, take urine, take their temperatures, tsk-tsk over their bruises, and change their dressings. When O'Neill had complained bitterly about the stupid backless hospital gowns which sent a breeze straight up your…she'd brought them pajamas. Daniel's had been far too big for him and he'd had to roll the sleeves up on the jacket but he hadn't complained. O'Neill had decided the jacket was way too wussy to wear and just wore the pants. Daniel had buttoned his jacket all the way up so no one could see the purple bruises on his body. Some of them looked like bitemarks and O'Neill had felt sick all the way to his toes when he caught a brief glimpse. When Daniel rolled the sleeves up too far O'Neill would see the bruises on his wrists where the belt had bitten into them. Then Daniel would notice them and hastily roll his sleeves down again.

Sooner or later he knew Fraiser was going to pick a time when Daniel was in the shower and ask him what the hell had happened on that planet. They'd only been spared the debriefing because she'd banned any non-essential personnel from running the risk of contamination, but he heard Hammond coming to ask how they were a couple of times a day. The first priority had been to protect the base from the diphtheria germs they were probably carrying while getting Carter the anti-toxin, and he and Daniel as walking wounded had come a long way down a list of essentials. She'd still run herself ragged looking after them – this was Janet Fraiser after all – but they'd escaped the kind of questioning she would normally have subjected them to. Daniel was obviously hoping his bruises would have faded by the time she could give him her full attention, but as each day they just seemed to come out in brighter and more vibrant colors O'Neill had a feeling he was going to be out of luck. They'd moved past crimson and were at the spectacular mauve-and-black stage now, but it was clearly going to be a while before they faded to yellowish blue memories.

He realized Daniel wasn't the only one avoiding the issue. O'Neill had been doing a pretty good job of it himself. Probably because of a little rule he had about never asking a question unless he was prepared to hear the answer. He didn't want to know this because he couldn't fix it. For some reason knowing that made it easier to ask.

"Danny…" It came out hoarse, surprising both of them.

Daniel gave him a shocked look over his book, wary. He had his poised-for-flight expression on but there was nowhere to run to in an isolation ward. There were only so many showers a guy could take a day.

"I need to know."

Daniel blinked at him in confusion. "What?"

"You know."

"The true meaning of life? The name of the ninth Pharaoh? The square root of a hundred and twenty nine? Narrow it down for me a little."

O'Neill set his jaw. "Onuris' first prime guy. Did he…?"
"No." It was out so fast he flinched from it.

He looked at Daniel's face, trying to read him. It was very difficult to look past the bruises. Was this Daniel attempting to lie to him or Daniel telling the truth?

O'Neill cleared his throat awkwardly. "When I passed out, he was...."

"I know, but he didn't."

"If you need to...."

Daniel blinked in what was definitely exasperation. "Jack, he didn't." O'Neill must have looked as unconvinced as he felt because Daniel sighed. "He got distracted and I kicked him."

"Where?"

Daniel looked at him for a moment. "The hell away from me."

"No, I meant...."

"I know what you meant. Yes: there."

O'Neill let the relief wash through him. There was no avoidance in Daniel's eyes. The boy was telling the truth. Oh thank you, god. Oh thank you, thank you, thank you. He couldn't stop that huge grin breaking out as the relief ran through his veins with the warmth of good brandy. Aloud he said: "Good. Very, very good, Daniel. Gold star. Go to the top of the class."

"That's what Sam told me to do."

O'Neill stared at him. "Carter?"

"After we got back from Hadante. She said if some guy ever tried to...you know...I should kick his balls up through his brain. It might raise his IQ a few points, but it would also most likely slow him down considerably." Daniel gave him a pointed look. "She said you and Teal'c were probably going to get round to telling me about that some day, but as you hadn't, she thought she'd better. Given what could have happened to me on Hadante."

"Oh." O'Neill grimaced. "So, when we were in Netu, you knew those guys were...?"

"Oh yeah."

"Carter has a big mouth."

"Sam has this strange idea I'm an adult who might function more efficiently if he's given all available data. Must be the scientist in her."

O'Neill winced but Daniel didn't look mad, just resigned. He had his long-suffering martyr expression on again. O'Neill pointed a finger at him. "You know I hate it when you look like that."

"Yep." The grin was fleeting, blink and he'd have missed it but he knew Daniel too well by now.

"Remind me again why I've never hit you?"

Daniel looked him in the eye this time. "Because you're a nice guy?"

That stopped him more effectively than a punch to the solar plexus. O'Neill coughed, and then
averted his eyes. "Don't think so."
"I know so."
"You're a civilian. You don't know anything."
"Know more than you do."
"Don't."
"Do."
"Don't."
"Do too."
"I see the level of debate is as elevated as ever in here." Janet Fraiser had the long-suffering martyr look off pat as well. As she stepped through the plastic sheeting she added pointedly: "Teal'c and Sam are discussing wormhole physics in their room."
"Poor Teal'c," O'Neill retorted. "Bet he's wishing he could kel'no'reem his way outta that conversation."
"Some people do actually find one of the most fascinating astrophysical phenomenon in the universe quite interesting, Colonel."
"Some people collect stamps. Some people learn Klingon or change their name to 'James T Kirk'. And then there's the people who have a life…"
"Oh yes." Daniel looked around their isolation unit and nodded gravely. "We certainly know how to live in this part of the infirmary."
"We have interesting conversations," O'Neill protested.
"You play 'I Spy' and make fun of Daniel's pajamas," Fraiser told him wearily. "I'm only in the next room."
"Doc, he looks ten years old in them and you know it. And don't think I haven't noticed that someone picked jim-jams for Daniel that match the color of his eyes, whereas I got the first pair your orderly came to."
"At least yours fit," Daniel retorted.
"I have some nice hospital gowns you're both welcome to wear."
They both subsided at once. O'Neill plucked at the grey cotton sulkily. "These aren't so bad."
She gave him a chilly smile. "I knew you were grateful really."
"Jack's grateful on the inside." Daniel gave her one of his sweet-little-boy smiles and got a positively doting look in return.
O'Neill scowled at him. "Suck-up."

The examinations followed the usual pattern. She asked each of them how they were feeling. They told her they were fine and could they leave now. She told them they had to stay here for a few more
days. They sighed heavily at her. She sighed heavily right back. They asked to see Teal'c and Carter. She told them they couldn't. They asked how they were. She said they were going to be fine. Daniel would go very quiet when that 'going' was mentioned. Fraiser would look anxious about him. O'Neill would make a bad joke to take his mind off things while wondering how Daniel could be blaming himself for a mission he hadn't been leading; a mission that was so obviously O'Neill's fault. Then Janet would first ask them what they wanted for lunch as though there was some possibility they might get it. They'd tell her what they wanted. She'd tell them what they were having. The two never corresponded in any way.

Today as she headed back towards the door, O'Neill realized she didn't look like Dustin Hoffman this time. "No protective gear?"

She raised an eyebrow. "I see your observational skills are getting back to normal, Colonel."

"Okay, I was a little slow, but is there some…significance to this?" He held out an expressive hand.

She returned his gaze with an unreadable expression, before shaking her head. "I guess I just felt lucky." Her smile was brief but dazzling before she passed through the plastic strips, under the UV lighting, and out of the door.

He and Daniel exchanged looks of disbelief.

"We don't have diphtheria germs." Daniel blinked in realization. "We're not infected. I wonder when Janet got the results."

O'Neill scowled after her. "Probably an hour after we got back."

"So why are we stuck here?"

O'Neill looked between Daniel's bruises and his own leg. The bandage was hidden underneath the pajama trousers but the wound was still only half-healed. He and Daniel had barely gotten any sleep in days. Daniel had been tortured, and almost raped. They'd both had the crap kicked out of them by Onuris' lion guards. What better way to ensure they rested, ate, healed, and talked everything through, than to stick them in a room together and tell them they were too contagious to leave until she said so?

"You know I swear Doc Fraiser is getting sneakier." O'Neill looked at the plastic sheathing with grudging respect. "You have to admire that about her."

Daniel sighed. "Well, you are a lousy patient, so I guess Janet had a point."

"Oh, and you're not?"

Daniel looked astonished that anyone could even ask such a question. "I'm a model patient."

O'Neill raised his eyes to the ceiling and wondered what the hell was keeping it up. Didn't people get struck by lightning at least for telling those kinds of lies? He shook his head in disbelief. Daniel pointedly picked up his book again.

Darting another glance at him, O'Neill said, "Is there…stuff we should be talking about?"

"Such as?" Daniel had his wary look on again.

"You know…stuff that happened?"
"Me going to the temple when you'd told me not to and damned near getting us all killed stuff? All those people dying because of us stuff? Or do you mean you looking me in the eye and lying right at me stuff?"

O'Neill flinched from the crispness of his voice. He'd thought they'd covered that 'lying' business back in the temple, but it seemed to have just been put on the back-burner for another day. Apparently that was an even bigger no-no than he'd realized, and when Daniel got pissy he got seriously…pissy. When crossed, Daniel could be like the wife whose dinner party you'd forgotten and the child whose birthday you hadn't been home for rolled into one. "Or you could read?"

Daniel nodded. "Reading sounds good."

He watched Daniel open his book, and sighed heavily. On this showing, if Janet Fraiser was intending to keep him and Daniel in the infirmary until they talked through all the crap this mission had stirred up, she was going to be short of an isolation ward for one hell of a long time.

***

She was trying to use the healing device again, but there wasn't enough strength in her body for her to make it work. Teal'c was fading, eyes flickering as his symbiote died inside him, dragging him down with it, like the chain of an anchor caught around the ankle of a drowning man. She had to make it work. She had to. She'd done it for the High Priest, why couldn't she do it for her friend? Because it matters too much. It had mattered when she was saving Cronos, hadn't it? The whole planet hanging in the balance. And hadn't it mattered with the High Priest? All their lives in jeopardy and her needing to prove that they too had the power of gods. So, why couldn't she make it work to help Teal'c? Why…?

"Sam…?"

Carter groaned inwardly as she groped her way out of the nightmare back towards consciousness. She'd heard her father's voice as clearly as if he was standing by her bedside. Not more delirium. The anti-toxin was supposed to be working. She'd really thought she was getting better, but, no, she was obviously still trapped in that old spiral of memories. The nightmare of Netu; Bynarr's face leering at her; the stench of him in her nostrils; the hideous friction of his body exploring hers. She could only find the antidote to that memory of Jolinar's in another. Like fresh air after sulfur, she would inhale the memory of Martouf; his skin, his hair; the warmth of his lips against hers banishing the bruise of Bynarr's unwanted kiss.

"Samantha?"

Carter opened her eyes in shock. Was she going to be hearing voices for the rest of her life?

"Samantha…?" It was said gently this time. She turned her head and found herself staring at the face of the man she had just kissed in her mind.

His hair had been trimmed even shorter since the last time she'd seen him. Without the dust of Netu, it looked the color of wheat and his blue eyes were full of anxiety. Eyes like the oceans of Marnoon…. Hair the color of the sands of Abydos…. That had been his description of Rosha, Jolinar's host, but he had said it would equally well apply to her. She realized that although she had never visited Marnoon she knew what color its oceans were, and they were the color of his eyes as well. There were moments when she knew everything Jolinar had known. Including how it felt to be in love with this man. "Martouf?"

His smile lit up his face, transforming him from the unknowable Tok'ra to someone much younger
and so vulnerable. Apophis had realized how much she meant to him before she had known it herself. His voice was formal but his eyes were full of warmth. "You are feeling a little better?"

Carter felt that strange pull of something within herself towards him, like a divining rod towards water. Jolinar or Sam Carter? How would she ever know? She sat up in the bed, more than a little embarrassed to realize she was wearing pajamas in front of him, and by the raspy sound of her voice. "If you're not a hallucination, I guess I must be."

"We're real, Sam."

She jerked her head round in surprise to find another familiar face gazing at her. "Dad!"

After so many nightmares about losing him in Netu, it was wonderful to throw her arms around him and feel his hug almost crush her ribcage. She closed her eyes and breathed him in like safety. She could see her younger selves lined up in her memory like Russian dolls all hugging him in relief. She remembered the way his buttons had always felt so cold against her cheek; the texture of his dress blues chafing the skin. He'd always felt unyielding; his uniform something which kept her from feeling his warmth. Even when she was wearing the same uniform, there had just been two layers of blue serge separating their hearts. She'd joined the Air Force as much to find him as to find herself and they'd never even got close until he'd become part of someone else. Was it any wonder that she felt so much liking for the Tok'ra?

She felt his hand touch her hair and his lips briefly brush the top of her head. A reminder of how close she must have come to dying. She'd scared him this time. Well, he'd scared her enough times in the past. When she pulled back from the embrace and met his gaze, she thought ruefully of how alike they were sometimes. She always thought she was so much better than he was at being in tune with her emotions, but she knew Daniel would probably think they were two sides of the same coin. Two people so steeped in the military mindset they equated all emotion with weakness. Something they were so frightened of they shied away from any dealings with their feelings. For the first time it occurred to her that Daniel was probably the only member of SG-1 who didn't think there was anything wrong with caring as deeply about his teammates as he so obviously did. There were days when she really envied him that.

"How are you feeling?" Her father attempted to find a smile despite obviously fighting concern.

"Fine." It came out raspy and unfamiliar.

He turned to look at the figure in the next bed. "And how are you doin', Teal'c?"

The Jaffa gave him a weary smile. "I am recovering, General Carter."

Carter grimaced. She didn't believe he was recovering. Or if he was it was such a slow process that it was barely perceptible. Teal'c usually threw off injuries with no ill effects, but that was because his symbiote usually healed him; this time it had concentrated all its efforts on the process of trying to heal itself and he was looking drawn from constant pain. "His symbiote was badly injured, and it's still not recovered. I tried to make the healing device work, but I..." She wasn't going to cry in front of her father. She was a goddamned Air Force Major and she was damned well going to act like one. She grimaced herself back under control. "I couldn't make it work this time."

"Well, how about if we speed things up a little?" Her father gave her a reassuring pat on the shoulder and the belief that Teal'c was going to be okay immediately strengthened. How could he still do that? She was torn between resentment of his power to make her feel better and gratitude that he had.

When Martouf smiled at her, she was taken aback both by the way his smile transformed his face,
and by that instinctive response she had to the light in his eyes when he looked at her. But was that Jolinar or Samantha who responded? How was she ever going to know?

"This is Verashan."

The woman had been waiting by the doorway, clearly not wishing to intrude on the reunion. She was tall and dark with strong features. Carter smiled a greeting while Teal'c inclined his head in that uniquely graceful gesture of his. Verashan did not smile back but there was a brief nod of acknowledgement.

"She is a healer," Martouf explained.

"As, I understand, are you?" Verashan spoke crisply.

There was no warmth in her eyes and Carter felt a twinge of hostility. "I can use the healing device, sometimes, but I don't really have any control over it."

"Yet you healed Cronos."

There was accusation in the tone. Carter set her jaw. "Our whole planet was under threat. I didn't exactly feel I had a lot of choice."

"He is one of the most evil of all the system lords."

Carter met the Tok'ra's dark gaze unflinchingly. "I know that. He sent the Ashrak to kill Jolinar. He murdered Teal'c's father. He's not someone on my Christmas card list. He was just someone we needed alive to protect our planet. I did what I had to do. "I'm a soldier, that's what we do. You ought to know that."

Verashan was slipping on the healing device as she spoke, but her gaze flickered between Carter and Teal'c with barely veiled hostility. "But I do not have to do this."

"Then do not." It was Teal'c who spoke quietly.

Martouf murmured something to Verashan and she snapped back her answer tartly. Carter saw her father wince, then his eyes flare gold as Selmac briefly took over. "Teal'c has proven his loyalty too many times to count. He offered his own life for that of Kora. He saved all of us on Netu."

"He's a good man," Carter looked across at her friend. Teal'c looked so weary and incongruously vulnerable in those blue-striped pajamas. Seeing the clear signs of pain on his face, she turned to Verashan with a mixture of anger and pleading. "Why did you come here if you weren't prepared to help us?"

"I promised nothing," the Tok'ra returned. "I only said that I would come." She turned on Teal'c and said accusingly, "Your father was first prime of Cronos. You were first prime of Apophis. It is Jaffa such as yourself who have helped them to maintain their power."

"Exactly why I now oppose them, and hope to inspire other Jaffa to do the same."

She gestured at his abdomen. "You harbor within you a child of Apophis. It was Apophis who murdered my child. Why should I heal the offspring of my enemy to save your life?"

Martouf spoke quickly, "Teal'c has done as much to bring down Apophis as any Tok'ra. We owe him a great deal."
Teal'c met Verashan's gaze. "You owe me nothing, but I am more use to your cause alive than dead."

Carter hauled herself up in the bed and gazed at the woman imploringly. "Please, Teal'c is very valuable to us, and to your cause." As the Tok'ra's gaze didn't flicker, Carter reached across and touched his shoulder. "You obviously know how it feels to have lost people. I do too. Teal'c is my friend. I don't want to lose him as well. Please…?"

For the first time she saw a flicker of emotion cross the Tok'ra's face. Carter tightened her grip on Teal'c's shoulder, trying not to let her frustration show. If only she could have got the healing device to work. She was going to try again. They didn't need the damned Tok'ra. SG-1 could take care of its own…. As she felt the anger bubble up inside her, she realized how she sounded. Pissy and aggressive. Oh boy, she had obviously been spending way too much time with Daniel and Colonel O'Neill. When she glanced across at Teal'c he was the only one who looked calm. Perhaps when you had lived as many years as he had you had a better perspective on life and death, but although Jolinar had left a lot of useful pieces of information in her memory, the ability to deal with the death of a friend wasn't one of them.

"I will try." Abruptly Verashan raised her hand.

Carter flinched automatically as the light glowed on Teal'c's forehead, reflecting off the brand of Apophis, reminding her too vividly of Onuris almost murdering the Jaffa before her eyes. But then she saw Teal'c gasp as the light found his symbiote, his back arching as the healing light bored into him. A moment later, Verashan stepped back, her face still expressionless, while Teal'c blinked in surprise. He rested his hands across his abdomen gingerly and then nodded gravely to the Tok'ra. "Thank you."

Carter could feel that silly smile threatening to split her face in two. She couldn't stop the gratitude spilling out as she met Verashan's eye. "Yes, thank you."

The Tok'ra already looked as though a part of her regretted her action. "I hope you use the life I have restored to you well, Jaffa." She turned to Carter then and raised her hand.

Carter almost said: 'Don't bother on *my* account' but stopped herself in time. She didn't want to have a hole in her neck when it was avoidable, and although she wasn't particularly vain, opting to have an unsightly scar, when she could have unmarked flesh, just seemed silly. It was Martouf who leant forward and carefully removed the tracheotomy tube. She gasped as warmth caressed her forehead. A second later the light concentrated on the base of her throat before traveling down across her breastbone. It was a strange sensation; pain and pleasure intermingling as her cells were presumably reassembled in a new order. She felt exposed and protected at the same time; the sensations so strong she wanted them to stop, and yet there was a heat behind them that was almost addictive. She wondered wryly if this was what S&M was like. Pain as a way to reassert your own identity; your own existence. Well, she'd definitely take someone's word for it on that score as this was as close to sado-masochism as she ever wanted to get. She wondered if this was what the sarcophagus felt like too. If it had been the sensations as well the effects that Daniel had become addicted to…? When the heat was abruptly withdrawn she felt a mixture of relief and disappointment.

She snatched a breath and then coughed with the shock of it as she realized there was no hole in her neck. When she put her fingers up to the place where the incision had been made there was only unbroken skin, not even the faintest trace of a scar.

"Thank you," she said hoarsely.

Verashan nodded at her coldly, cast another disapproving glance in Teal'c's direction, then left the
room without a backwards glance. Carter had to fight hard not to make a face at her retreating figure.

"Verashan is one of the less…touchy-feely Tok'ra," Jacob observed dryly.

Martouf gave Carter a slightly apologetic grimace. "She is not yet wholly convinced that an alliance between the Tok'ra and the Tau'ri will be to our advantage, but I'm sure that she will understand the benefits of our friendship in time."

Jacob grabbed a chair and sat by Teal'c's bed. "Okay, so do you want to tell me what went down on that planet? The word is Heru'Ur is moving in on all Onuris' planets. Is he really dead or is that just wishful thinking…?"

Carter smiled, shaking her head as Teal'c began to answer her father's questions, then turned back to Martouf who was gazing anxiously at her. When he took her hand in his she didn't feel the need to ask him why he was holding it, she just tightened her grip reflexively. She opened her mouth to ask him what had happened since she'd last seen him, and then realized that she didn't need – or perhaps even want – to know. He and her father would have been risking their lives in the battle against the Goa'uld. So had she and the rest of SG-1. They had moved from being 'peaceful explorers' to being soldiers in a war against the System Lords. She wondered if Daniel had realized that yet. How he felt about a transition which to the rest of them had probably always felt like a natural progression. Perhaps, given what the Goa'uld had done to his wife, he would have no problem with perceiving himself in such a role. She wasn't sure how she wanted him to feel, but like Colonel O'Neill she suspected they would have all have lost something the day Daniel resigned himself to being a warrior rather than an explorer.

"Samantha…?" Martouf said it softly. "What are you thinking?"

*I'm thinking that you've been fighting this war for thousands of years and never once looked like winning, so why do I think it can be accomplished in my lifetime?* But she didn't say it aloud. She didn't believe it, after all. She believed that wars could be won if one applied enough intelligence and determination to the problem, and she believed in the intelligence and determination of the SGC the way the people on the planet they'd just left had believed Daniel was the Chosen One. Yet Onuris was still dead because those people had believed Daniel was a deity, and she had a lot more empirical evidence for her convictions.

She looked across at Martouf and smiled. "I'm thinking that it's good to see you again."

As he squeezed her hand in acknowledgement, she looked across at her father, still asking Teal'c about Onuris, gathering data that might help them in the battle against the Goa'uld. It wasn't so long ago that he'd looked at death's door in Netu; and it was even less time since she'd been breathing what appeared to be her last on an alien world, yet here they both were alive and comparatively well. The Carter family obviously took a lot of killing. She smiled again as she realized that was one hell of a genetic inheritance to pass onto your children.

She focused on Martouf. "Tell me something interesting."

He blinked at her in surprise. "Since the death of Sokar, the System Lords have…"

She shook her head. "Tell me something else."

He understood in an instant. She saw him glance away to collect his thoughts. When he spoke his voice was soft: "Shall I tell you about Marnoon, and the time I spent there with Jolinar?"

"Thank you, I'd like that."
As Teal'c recounted for her father the deaths of Mehit and Onuris, Martouf began to tell her about the way the sunlight played upon the water and the gulls danced on the horizon line, swooping for the silver flickerings of fish. As she blotted out Teal'c's mission report and so-easily pictured the blue depths of that alien sea, Carter realized that, despite the tang of gasoline which occasionally overwhelmed them, she hadn't lost the sandcastles after all. Along with those hidden remnants of the Tok'ra who had died to save her, they were just buried in her memory, waiting to be uncovered.

***

*Hear me, my Daniel*…

The pain was terrible but he had to ignore it and listen to her voice. None of this was real. He didn't hate Teal'c. He wouldn't abandon Jack and Sam. He would never turn his back on General Hammond. These people were his family now. Why did it seem so easy to walk away from them in his dream?

Because how could he know how terrible it would be to have done this unless she showed him how it felt? He was the only one who knew how wise Sha're was. How strong. How could he live with the loss of her? How could you walk around with a hole inside you where your heart had been?

*Promise me, you will find the boy*…

Jack knew all about loss. There was nothing Jack didn't know about the emptiness inside. You had to make sense of the past by the way you chose to live the future. That got you through the present: telling yourself it was part of a journey towards something good, and not just a journey away from something you'd lost forever. Perhaps there had been a time when Jack woke up every morning and told himself he was breathing in and out today because Charlie wanted him to. But Daniel was pretty sure Jack wanted to for himself as well these days. Daniel had to get to a point where he was living, not just to fulfill a promise he'd made to his dead wife, but because there were so many things he still wanted to do with his life.

But the pain was unbearable. The laser burning into his brain. The loss eating a hole through his heart. When she kissed him, he felt the ribbon device against his scalp, her fingers furrowing through his hair, her lips so warm and soft against his, but all the time against his skin the chill of the metal with which Amaunet would try to kill him…

Daniel woke with a gasp to the rustle of plastic sheeting. The faint purple light to his left from the UV beams was almost drowned out by the soft lamplight from the cabinet by the side of Jack's empty bed. Looking around for the man, it was a shock to find Jack gazing at him anxiously from the side of his bed. He blinked up at him in surprise. "Jack?"

Daniel grimaced. "Sorry, I woke you."

"I wasn't asleep." Jack jerked a thumb at the wall. "Carter had a nightmare about Jolinar and Bynarr two hours ago. Teal'c had a bad dream about Ry'ac an hour after that. Then you came in right on cue with Sha're ten minutes ago."

Daniel raised an eyebrow. "Wow, aren't you lucky? You get to win the 'I have the most screwed up..."
team in the SGC' award three years running. You know, they really ought to let you keep that cup this time."

The bed creaked a protest as Jack sat on it. "That's not funny."

"Oh, come on, Jack. No one else has to put up mission proposals based on what someone saw in a dream."

"Hey, we saved Teal'c's kid. We met the Tok'ra. We're going to find Sha're's son. My team delivers."

Daniel looked up at the man for a moment, noticing how little brown there was left in Jack's hair, the black eye, the bruise on his jaw, the other bruises all over his ribs. "Yes, and we're doing you so much good in the process. I can see that."

There was a pause before Jack said, "Hey, Fraiser said I could go home tomorrow as long as there's someone with me to stop me doing anything that might be remotely enjoyable."

Daniel shrugged. "That would be me then."

"You sure?"

"What are friends for?" Daniel frowned and looked around the room. "When did Janet come in?"

"When you were in the shower. For the second time." There was another laden silence before Jack said casually, "She was asking me if there was anything Doctor Mackenzie needed to know."

There were days when Jack could be ignorant, annoying, and insensitive. But there were also days when he could be so there for you it almost hurt. "What did you tell her?"

"I said I'd have to ask you, but I didn't think so."

Daniel moistened his lips then forced a smile. "I don't think so either."

Jack put a hand up to the back of his neck, rubbing it awkwardly, trying to get imaginary kinks out and in the process giving himself a very good excuse not to have to meet Daniel's eye. "As your friend I need to know you're okay."

"I'm okay."

"And as your C.O. I need to know that bastard attempting to…assault you isn't going to come around and bite us all in the ass in six months time if I cover for you and you don't get any therapy."

"Jack, a lot of people died in that temple. I don't think it's really…."

Jack held up a finger. "Daniel, don't give me the lecture. I'm aware that there were folks who got worse in that place than we did. I'm just asking you. So…?"

Daniel let the man see the truth in his eyes. "It wasn't a fun experience but it wasn't as bad as losing Sha're, or thinking I was going insane, or seeing a Goa'uld go into you, or being told everyone was dead. I got slapped around in public by someone who had…other intentions, but as he didn't get to carry them out I can deal with it. It's not a problem. Okay? I'm going to lose a lot more sleep over Harun."

There was what felt like an endless pause then Jack nodded. "Okay." He reached out and patted Daniel on the shoulder. "But get some sleep while you can, because, trust me, you're going to need it. I am going to be the patient from hell, and if I hurt myself while in your care Doc Fraiser's going
As Jack limped back to his bed, Daniel felt another of those sharp pangs of affection for the man. He wasn't quite sure when he had allowed some impossibly cranky Air Force colonel to become the keystone of his existence, but it had definitely not been one of his better ideas. He really did need to wean himself off his dependence on the SGC in general, and Jack in particular. He wasn't going to let himself dwell on the way General Hammond had become a better guardian to him than his own grandfather had ever been. Or the way Sam had become the sister he'd never had. He could give these people up any time he liked. Yeah, right.

As he burrowed back down under the blankets he said softly, "Jack?"

He didn't think it was an accident that the man switched off the lamp before he answered. "What?"

"Thanks."

There was a pause before Jack said, "Don't get mushy on me, Daniel."

Daniel grinned, relieved by the way some things about Jack just never changed. He pulled the blanket up higher. "Wouldn't dream of it."

This time as Daniel drifted into slumber, he didn't feel the ribbon device boring a hole in his brain. He was back on the tel'tak with Jack a solid warmth at his side, Teal'c where he could see him if he turned his head, and Sam safe on the other side of the ship, asleep on Martouf's shoulder. They were all grubby and exhausted, but they were alive, and Apophis was dead. Just like Onuris and Mehit were dead. And Hathor. And Sokar. And Ra. Perhaps too many of the good died every day, but the bad died too, and sometimes the good got a chance to help them on their way. Perhaps that was the path Sha're wanted him to follow now. Perhaps he needed to concentrate his energies on defeating the Goa'uld who had stolen her life, and her child.

She had shown such strength at the last; communicating with him despite all Amaunet's best efforts to defeat her. She had shown the courage to choose a battle she could win; not wasting her efforts in a futile effort to save him from Amaunet, or to hang onto her own life. She had trusted to Teal'c to save him, had let go of life for herself, and concentrated on that last act of maternal love. Perhaps it was time for him to honor her strength by finding her child, not only to keep him safe, but so that they could use the knowledge contained within him to defeat the race which had murdered his mother. Perhaps it was time Daniel Jackson stopped trying to heal the world and also chose a battle he could win....

***

Teal'c was aware of Major Carter arguing with Doctor Fraiser about the need for her to use a wheelchair to travel to the commissary. He was also aware that his symbiote was restless and disgruntled. Teal'c had no doubt his symbiote considered him no more than the vessel in which it resided; for it to be injured by a Goa'uld attempting to kill him had probably annoyed it intensely. Nor did he need to be able to see into the mind of a child of Apophis to know it would be unhappy to realize it had been saved by the charity of a Tok'ra. All in all, he doubted that his symbiote was in the best of tempers, but it was well again, and consequently so was he.

Closing his eyes he blocked out the restless wriggling in his abdomen and the impassioned arguments from Major Carter. (Clearly an argument she was never going to win meaning she was
wasting her energy unnecessarily.) He was trying to remember his dream of the night before. O'Neill had surprised him once by asking how he could tell if his dreams were his own, or if they were the result of 'Junior' whispering 'stuff' in his ear at night. There were times when O'Neill was the easiest to read of all Teal'c's teammates, and times when he was the hardest. Teal'c had explained patiently that there was no connection between the Jaffa and the symbiote except for a physical process which took place during kel'no'reem; their minds did not touch.

"But how do you know?" O'Neill had been gazing suspiciously at Teal'c's midriff. "I mean those little buggers could whisper all kinds of things in your ear and make it seem like you were doing what you wanted, and all the time you could be doing what they wanted."

That was the first time that Teal'c had realized the symbiote Hathor had put into O'Neill might well have talked to him while it was dying. Although it had clearly had neither the time nor the strength to blend with him, it could have told him the ways in which it was going to use his body to murder Major Carter and Daniel Jackson. Teal'c wondered if it made you stronger or weaker to have survived your worst fear. O'Neill had lost his child – any father's worst fear; and then he had been turned into a Goa'uld, albeit briefly and without a true blending, which was, Teal'c suspected, O'Neill's second greatest fear. Daniel Jackson had lost his parents when a child – any child's worst fear – and then lost his wife to the Goa'uld. He had been forced to confront the undeniable evidence of her rape, and then watched her murdered before his eyes. But neither O'Neill nor Daniel Jackson could be hurt through their dead loved ones ever again. Teal'c's companions might dream of the ones they had lost, but perhaps they had been made stronger by the fire they had walked through.

One of the teachings of the final challenge was that friendship could be a weakness. So could love. Apophis had used Teal'c's pride in and love for his son to send a bomb amongst the Tau'ri. While Ry'ac lived, Teal'c was vulnerable; yet should Ry'ac die, Teal'c would be so much lessened he was not sure that he would be able to find enough good within himself to offset what was already a considerable burden of hatred. He wondered if anyone had told Daniel Jackson that hatred was as much of a weakness as love or fear. He wondered if he even knew that lesson himself. He could channel his hatred of Apophis into defiant action or determination in the face of insurmountable odds, but he could not rid himself of the emotion. His hatred for the Goa'uld was as much of a part of himself now as his love for his son. While both existed in equal strength they could offset the other; if he lost one – as Daniel Jackson had lost his wife – he wondered if he would have the strength to prevent the hatred overwhelming everything else.

So, he knew his dreams of Ry'ac – even when they became nightmares – came from his own consciousness and not that of the symbiote within him. What he did not know was if he could survive the loss of his son as O'Neill had survived the loss of his, and not lose all that was best about himself in the process. O'Neill might be afraid of the darkness that dwelt within Teal'c in the shape of that wriggling symbiote, but there were times when Teal'c was far more afraid of the inner darkness which came only from his own soul.

And despite all his best efforts it was now impossible for him to block out the sounds of Major Carter protesting to Doctor Fraiser.

"Major Carter!"

He spoke more sharply than he had intended and she looked at him in surprise. "Teal'c?"

"Doctor Fraiser has differentiated between our treatment because she has experience with my symbiote healing my injuries. She has no experience with the Goa'uld healing device as a cure for diphtheria. As a scientist you should respect her need to supervise your recovery for longer than mine."
"Thank you, Teal'c," Janet Fraiser said it with just a hint of smugness before turning to Major Carter with a shrug. "Your choice, Sam. You can go to the commissary in a wheelchair, or you can stay here and I'll have breakfast brought to you."

Major Carter glowered between both of them and then sat herself in the wheelchair. "All right. But it still isn't fair."

Doctor Fraiser smiled over her head at Teal'c. "That's exactly what Colonel O'Neill said."

"On occasion life is not fair." Teal'c pulled on the robe Doctor Fraiser had provided him with and moved to take the handles of Major Carter's wheelchair.

Doctor Fraiser's smile widened. "And that's pretty much what Daniel said."

Teal'c cast an enquiring glance at her. "And O'Neill's response to that was…?"

"Not suitable for your ears, Teal'c," Doctor Fraiser assured him cheerfully.

As he wheeled a pajama-clad Major Carter towards the commissary, Teal'c could see the top of her blonde hair, the sulky slump to her robe-covered shoulders, and the restless tapping of her slippered feet where they rested on the metal flaps. She appeared atypically childlike in her robe and pajamas; while the expression on her face because she was not being permitted to walk made him think of Ry'ac when thwarted. He had to hide a smile as he saw the set look to her chin. There were times when he found himself wondering if Major Carter and Daniel Jackson were twins accidentally separated at birth, and never more so than now.

"I feel perfectly well." Major Carter tilted back her head to look at him, a mutinous set to her jaw. "I'm going to walk."

But she made no immediate move to get out of the wheelchair, again reminding Teal'c of the way Daniel Jackson tested O'Neill on missions sometimes, with his 'I could just go and take a look at that….' Sometimes he would get a sigh, a shrug of acquiescence, and O'Neill's resigned wave to the rest of them to follow the archaeologist; sometimes a firm albeit not always persuasive, 'No, you don't…. Get back here!'

Teal'c decided that as with Daniel Jackson the indirect approach might be more successful. "Major Carter, should you not be setting a better example for Colonel O'Neill?"

Major Carter had one foot outstretched to put on the ground, yet she stopped in mid-action. "But….

"He may well be causing Daniel Jackson some difficulties."

As Major Carter opened her mouth to answer him, Teal'c heard O'Neill's protests echoing back down the corridor to meet them:

"…okay to spend two days limping through a freakin' jungle but I can't walk to the commissary…!"

"It's because you spent two days limping through the jungle that Janet doesn't want you walking on it now."

"…and if my knees seize up from lack of use….

"The rest of us will be sure to hear all about it…."

"And O'Neill's response to that was…?"

"Not suitable for your ears, Teal'c," Doctor Fraiser assured him cheerfully.
Teal'c and Major Carter exchanged an amused glance. As Teal'c wheeled his teammate around the corner, he found a pajama-and-robe-clad O'Neill sitting in a wheelchair, gazing up at Daniel Jackson with suspicious eyes. "What?"

Daniel Jackson blinked at him innocently. "What?"

Teal'c observed that, like himself, Daniel Jackson was also wearing pajamas and a robe. There was a certain satisfaction in realizing that even when SG-1 were out of uniform, they still somehow managed to look like a team.

Daniel Jackson noticed them first and his face lit up in welcome. "Sam! Teal'c!"

Teal'c watched Daniel Jackson bound across to hug Major Carter, while she wrapped her arms around him tightly. "Are you really okay?" Daniel Jackson murmured it breathlessly into her hair.

"Yes, look – " she pushed him back gently and proudly indicated her unscarred neck. "You can't even see the join."

Daniel peered at her neck and made sounds of surprise and approval, before reaching across to tentatively touch Teal'c on the shoulder. "Good to see you're well again, too, Teal'c."

Teal'c did wonder how much it had cost the young man to be glad of his recovery, given their history, but there did seem to be genuine relief in Daniel Jackson's blue eyes, and for himself, he was very glad of even that slight pressure of fingers against his shoulder. He inclined his head. "Thank you, Daniel Jackson. I am relieved to see you and O'Neill are also recovered."

"Yeah, great, Teal'c can see I'm well enough to walk to get my own breakfast. How come Fraiser can't?"

Daniel Jackson sighed heavily and looked at Major Carter. "Guess who gets the fun of taking care of Jack for the next month?"

She gave him an understanding smile but was too good an officer, Teal'c noted, to make any audible noises of sympathy.

O'Neill wheeled himself backwards a few feet to peer at Major Carter's neck. "Hey, and Doc Fraiser thinks she does neat surgery."

"I never got a chance to thank you for that, Colonel."

Daniel Jackson scratched his jaw. "No, well, of course, Jack wouldn't let either of us actually speak. …"

O'Neill ignored the younger man to nod to Major Carter. "You're welcome. Just don't do it again."

"Apparently I'm now immune from that strain of diphtheria. Just like the rest of you."

"Oh, well, in that case let's go back to good old PX3-519. I mean what was not to like?"

Daniel Jackson sighed again. As he took the handles of O'Neill's wheelchair, his posture suggested to Teal'c someone who was about to begin a term of imprisonment with no prospect of release. "Please tell me you're not going to whine if they don't have any Froot Loops?"

"Oh, like you never bitch about it when they run out of waffles."

Teal'c saw Major Carter tilt her head back to look up at him again. "Let's always share isolation
wards, Teal'c."

He could not suppress his own smile. "Agreed, Major Carter."

"I bet you had the nicest ward too, with pictures on the walls, and fluffy towels, just because Fraiser likes you better than she likes me."

Teal'c wheeled Major Carter so she was level with O'Neill's wheelchair. He said expressionlessly, "As far as I am aware, O'Neill, this preference is not limited to Doctor Fraiser. In fact I would say it was unanimous throughout the SG — "

The man interrupted with a scowl. "Thank you, for your words of support, Teal'c."

"You are welcome, O'Neill."

O'Neill glanced up at him then looked at the corridor ahead of them. Teal'c followed his gaze. The grey-walled passageway was beguilingly empty. He and O'Neill exchanged a look.

O'Neill scratched his jaw, shot Teal'c a sideways glance then murmured, "Wanna race? Last one to the commissary buys the Friday night pizza?"

Teal'c felt mischief tingle within him. After so many days of being a prisoner of the benevolent tyranny of Doctor Fraiser; not to mention a prisoner of his own symbiote's inability to heal him; it felt very good to be able to stretch his legs again. It would feel even better to win a race. But.... Teal'c cast a pitying look at O'Neill. Given the difference in the weight of O'Neill and Major Carter, not to mention the difference in the strength of Daniel Jackson and himself, there could only be one victor. Was it fair to take such an easy wager? "I think not, O'Neill."

O'Neill curled his lip. "Hah. Scared, eh?"

"What?" Daniel Jackson collected himself from what had obviously been deep thought.

"We're racing Carter and Teal'c to the commissary."

Daniel Jackson blinked at him in confusion. "Why?"

"My question exactly," Major Carter put in.

"Because it's fun." O'Neill shook his head at what he evidently considered their stupidity. He jabbed a finger at Teal'c "And you are so buying the pizza come Friday night."

Major Carter bristled defensively. "With the greatest respect, sir. You might as well just give us the money right now."

"Oh, cocky."

Major Carter also looked between herself and O'Neill and then Teal'c and Daniel Jackson. "I'd say we were quietly confident, yes, Colonel."

"I resent that on Daniel's behalf," O'Neill returned defiantly.

"Why?" Daniel Jackson still looked as if the situation was running away from him a little. "Teal'c's stronger than me, Sam's lighter than you...."

"Daniel!" O'Neill held up a warning finger. "We're going to win."
"This is stupid."

O'Neill twisted his head round to look up at him in exasperation. "Didn't you ever take on stupid bets when you were at school?"

Daniel Jackson's evident bewilderment proved the truth of his reply. "No."

"Well, it's high time you did then." He glanced back at Teal'c. "On three."

Teal'c nodded and despite the absurdity of the situation he did feel a flicker of competitive spirit assert itself. He and O'Neill were friends, teammates, all-but-brothers; both would have died for the other. But they were also both what Daniel Jackson referred to, usually with a long-suffering sigh, as 'alpha males', and there were occasions when Teal'c did take a quiet satisfaction in demonstrating his superior strength to O'Neill, just as he knew O'Neill took a secret pleasure in those – rare – occasions when he managed to physically best Teal'c.

"One…." O'Neill darted him a look that told Teal'c the man was also taking this race seriously. "Two…Three!"

The wheelchair was surprisingly difficult to steer, and Teal'c found it veered from side to side as he pushed it. Major Carter felt very light to him, but the axels of the wheels were badly designed and it would have been deemed utterly unacceptable as a means of transportation by any Goa'uld. Indeed the designer of such a device would undoubtedly have been ordered thrown to wild dogs by any self-respecting System Lord. As would the designers of all supermarket carts Teal'c had as yet encountered.

Given their weight and strength advantage it seemed only fair to allow Daniel Jackson to run by the inside wall so he would have less ground to cover, but as he steered Major Carter around the first corner with ease, Teal'c realized the sharper turn was probably harder for Daniel Jackson to manage. Something proven when in Daniel Jackson's attempt to wrench the wheelchair around the bend O'Neill was nearly spilled onto the floor by the wheelchair rising sharply on two wheels. Teal'c automatically reached across to give it a push back. Daniel Jackson' smile of gratitude was turned into a flinch as both O'Neill and Major Carter shouted: "Don't help!" in unison.

Major Carter gave Teal'c an apologetic grimace, explaining, "I just really want to win." She gripped the arms of the wheelchair as Teal'c nodded and increased his pace. He could well understand her desire to beat O'Neill at something. Especially as Daniel Jackson had never been known to take any show of strength personally, so would not be upset by their defeat.

Nevertheless, it seemed unfair to simply speed away from the other two. Teal'c knew he could put on a spurt as they reached the last stretch, and if he kept only a little way ahead of Daniel Jackson and O'Neill until that point it would seem as if the race had been closer run than it had. That way the honor of all his teammates would be satisfied. It was not a word that was often spoken by the Tau'ri but Teal'c had found that it was as important to them as a concept as it was to any Jaffa.

There was only one more corner and then a straight run to the commissary. Teal'c hugged the far wall to give Daniel Jackson more room to maneuver his wheelchair and its burden around the inner wall, so busy keeping an eye on Daniel Jackson and O'Neill that he almost didn't see the danger ahead in time.

"Teal'c!"

At Major Carter's warning cry, Teal'c jerked his head round in time to see a familiar bald-headed figure directly in their path.
"Daniel Jackson!" he shouted it as he tilted the wheelchair and swung it towards the wall, grabbing Major Carter by the shoulder and pulling her back against the wheelchair so there was no danger of her being flung out.

Jerking his head round to see how his other two teammates had fared, he could only sympathize as Daniel Jackson, in a desperate attempt to avoid hitting General Hammond, also yanked his wheelchair at a right angle, but was not strong enough to prevent it from lurching violently onto two wheels, cannoning into the wall, and turning over. In the process spilling its burden in a loudly protesting heap at General Hammond's feet.

General Hammond looked between the four of them in disbelief. Major Carter and Daniel Jackson were both wincing in sympathy, while O'Neill rolled onto his back and clasped a hand to his leg, swearing horribly. After glancing down at O'Neill, General Hammond looked across at Teal'c. "Teal'c? Can you…offer some kind of explanation?"

"I am at a loss to do so, General Hammond," Teal'c admitted.

"We're very sorry, sir." Major Carter offered quickly.

Daniel Jackson scampered across to where O'Neill was, grabbed him, and hauled him up with a grunt of exertion. "Sorry, General. Jack wanted to…race."

"Ow!" O'Neill protested as he was manhandled back onto his feet.

General Hammond raised an eyebrow. "That looked like a nasty fall, Colonel. Shall I send for Doctor Fraiser?"

"No!"

O'Neill and Daniel Jackson both protested in unison.

"Jack's fine, sir, really." Daniel Jackson propped O'Neill against the wall, set the wheelchair back on its wheels, and quickly flipped down the bent-looking foot rests, making hasty hand motions to O'Neill to get into it.

O'Neill was back in the wheelchair in an instant with his feet on the rests, swiftly belting up his robe. "Like Daniel said, I'm fine, sir, really. Never better."

"All the same, Colonel O'Neill, I think perhaps I ought to inform Doctor…..

"Please, General." Daniel Jackson gripped the handles tightly. "Janet's scary when you don't do what she says."

General Hammond looked at the young man in mild reproach. "Perhaps just one of the many good reasons for doing what she says, Doctor Jackson?"

Major Carter said quickly. "Sir, we're sorry. We've just been cooped up in those isolation wards for so many days…..

"And there wasn't even anything wrong with Jack and me…..

Teal'c felt it was only fair to add his own apology and explanation. "Even I, General Hammond, have found the period of convalescence trying to be patient…..

"And it is a full moon."
As they all turned to gaze at O'Neill in disbelief, he looked back at them defiantly. "Hey, it's a reason."

General Hammond looked between them sternly. O'Neill was clutching his leg but trying to mask his obvious discomfort with a fixed smile, Daniel Jackson was shuffling his feet uncomfortably. "If you're well enough to indulge in…wheelchair races, Colonel O'Neill, I presume you're also well enough to write up your report on PX3-519?"

"Yes, sir."

"I expect it on my desk by the end of the day."

"Yes, sir."

"Doctor Jackson?"

"Yes?" Daniel Jackson jumped guiltily as the general said his name then winced in anticipation like a small boy afraid of a scolding.

Teal'c personally thought the likelihood of General Hammond ever offering Daniel Jackson more than the mildest reproach was very remote, but Daniel Jackson was clearly less sanguine.

"I will expect you to supply a report on everything you learned about the Goa'uld you encountered there."

Daniel Jackson nodded meekly.

"Teal'c, you can assist Doctor Jackson with his report, and, as I understand Major Carter and yourself were separated from Colonel O'Neill and Doctor Jackson for a significant proportion of the mission, perhaps you would like to fill in Colonel O'Neill on any events to which he was not a direct witness?"

Teal'c inclined his head. "Of course, General Hammond."

Hammond looked at Major Carter last and his expression softened. "Teal'c's already informed me about what took place after you became ill, Major, so I don't think there's any need for you to complete a report."

Her face brightened with surprise and relief. "Thank you, sir."

The general looked between them all sternly once more. "To where were you…racing?"

"The commissary," Daniel Jackson supplied.

"Well, I suggest you all proceed there at a pace that does not endanger yourselves or anyone else."

Major Carter and Colonel O'Neill exchanged winces, before both murmuring a subdued: "Yes, sir."

Teal'c and Daniel Jackson made a point of wheeling their respective burdens away from the watching general at a sedate pace. As Daniel Jackson opened his mouth to say something, O'Neill twisted round in his seat. "Don't even think about saying 'I told you so'." He glared across at his teammates. "And how come Carter doesn't have to write a report?"

"I have already informed General Hammond of what occurred on PX3-519," Teal'c explained, "and he is therefore aware that Major Carter was unwell for much of the mission."
"Well, I had a hole in my leg for half the damned mission. I still have to write a report."

"Sam was delirious or unconscious for most of the time we were on the planet," Daniel Jackson protested. "You're just pissy because we lost the race."

"We didn't lose the race," O'Neill bristled at once.

"Yes, we did. Teal'c would have won easily."

"Ah yes, 'would' being the operative word, because we'll never know, because the race was never finished."

"You are so petty when you're in the wrong."

"Oh, hello pot, meet kettle!"

"What's that supposed to mean…?"

Major Carter tilted her head back again and looked up at Teal'c. "Teal'c, that agreement about you and I always sharing isolation wards from now on? Could I have it in writing?"

Teal'c looked at her upside down face, very aware of the unbroken flesh at the base of her throat, the proof that for all Onuris' best efforts to destroy both of them, in the end he had not been able to leave even a visible scar. He smiled at her in affectionate relief. "Indeed, Major Carter."

***

The moonlight shone in through the patio doors to illuminate the picture in O'Neill's hands. He couldn't see the colors by the blue-grey light, but he could see the outlines. Four figures standing under some dark alien orb, a big stone circle behind them; each symbol meticulously sketched into its rim. The figures looked frail in the silvery light, the Stargate looming over them menacingly. Cassandra's pictures were indeed pretty sophisticated things these days, so she'd drawn in his and Carter's MP-5s just fine. The O'Neill in the picture had his gun in his right hand, leaving his left hand free to hold tight to Daniel's right one, while Carter had her gun in her left hand so she could hold onto Daniel's left hand. Teal'c was standing next to Carter, staff weapon at the ready. Those four figures looked small under the shadow of the gate and the looming sun, but with Carter and Daniel sandwiched between him and Teal'c like that, they, at least, looked pretty safe, and Daniel, despite the lack of any gun in his arms, looked safest of all.

That was the way they'd led Cassandra through the Stargate that first time, so perhaps she thought that was how they always went out on missions: all holding hands so they couldn't get separated. With him and Carter holding especially tight onto Daniel, the civilian, so he wouldn't get lost or hurt. Except Cassandra was wrong, of course. You needed two hands to hold an MP-5 properly, which didn't leave you one free to keep a grip on your teammates….

"Jack…!"

O'Neill flinched as he remembered Daniel screaming his name, struggling against his grip with no hope of ever getting free, no hope of the pain ever stopping. Carter with her lips blue-grey and her heart barely beating; of how it must have been for Teal'c to feel her slipping through his fingers minute by minute and be unable to do anything to save her.

Carter had made herself strong through training and sheer gut determination, although there must
have been steel there in the first place because you didn't get to be a Major in your thirties without something inherently special. Daniel had never really lived in the physical world, as far as O'Neill could tell. He still had a very vivid memory of Daniel just standing there, looking dumbfounded, while O'Neill punched him. The idea of hitting O'Neill back had apparently never suggested itself to Daniel even once. Ducking didn't seem to have occurred to him either. Daniel lived in his head, and a crowded and fascinating place it obviously was, but there were times when O'Neill wasn't absolutely sure all the brain neurons were wired up properly to the rest of Daniel's body.

Daniel would go without sleep and food, and torture himself with guilt if anything happened to the rest of them that he felt he should have prevented, but he had no idea how it felt to be an officer, and even less idea how it felt to be someone who had been born strong, with all the responsibilities that carried. Even Carter didn't know what a burden that was. Only he and Teal'c had been given the key to that particular box. Screw noblesse oblige: strength carried obligations too, and first among those was the obligation to keep those weaker than yourself safe from harm. He had spent all those years fighting what he hoped was a just fight to defend the innocent from those that might hurt them, and in doing so had brought into his home the means by which his son had lost his life. Could you still call yourself a defender of innocents when you'd caused the death of your own child?

He'd walked in once just as Cassandra had asked Daniel if O'Neill and Teal'c had killed people. Daniel had told her they'd all killed people. It wasn't something any of them liked to do, but sometimes when you believed in something you ended up having to do things you didn't necessarily want to do because of it. He believed the Goa'uld were evil and shouldn't be allowed to make slaves of other people, and he was prepared to kill to stop that happening if he had to.

"But you're not the same as Jack and Teal'c."

"No." Daniel moistened his lips. "I'm not a warrior. I'm a…communicator. But we've all had to do each other's jobs at times. Jack's been an ambassador, and I've been a soldier. That's just the way it goes sometimes."

"How many people have you killed?"

"Too many."

"How many is too many?"

"Any amount is too many. It's not something any of us wants to do."

"Not even Jack and Teal'c?"

"Teal'c wants to free his people. Jack...Jack just wants to keep the whole planet and everyone on it safe, especially you, and Janet, and the three of us."

Cassandra had given Daniel what O'Neill's grandmother would have termed a very 'old-fashioned' look. "Can he do that?"

"No. He can't." Daniel had been briskly matter-of-fact. "But if he's not careful, he's going to die trying." That was when he'd turned to look at O'Neill, gaze very candid, and O'Neill realized Daniel had known he was there all the time.

Grimacing at the memory, O'Neill looked back down at the picture in his hands. Yeah, okay, Daniel, you got me. I want to keep all of us safe, all the time, and maybe it is impossible, but it's also my job. And the last mission out, I didn't do it very well. Which was why we had to send out for the Tok'ra to put Carter and Teal'c back together again. And just as there are things about you which I am never
going to understand in a million years, there are things about me you are never going to understand. You think you know me? How can you when half the time I don't even know myself.

Sometimes the thing he found the most difficult about his teammates was their need for explanations; their lack of shared references. That was what happened in life, of course. You grew up with kids who lived in the same streets you lived in, knew the same people you knew, hungered after the same baseball cards, cast covert glances at the same new girl from Nevada whose blonde hair was so long when she let it out of braids she could sit on it. They were the same age as you were, and on the whole their parents were the same age that yours were too. You battled the same curfews, abided or didn't abide by the same lights out, did or didn't do the same homework. Explanations were unnecessary.

Carter and Daniel were both too young to realize the way the late Sixties had hit people of his generation. You moved away from a home-life where at least from your surface view of it, Mom baked, read magazines, tried to get her hair to look just like Jackie Kennedy's, and got excited about her latest appliance, into an entirely different universe. One where the colors were dazzling and the freedom literally took your breath away. You never even realized how many rules you'd been unconsciously abiding by until suddenly you could break them. The only thing that had ever come close to the Seventies in his experience, was stepping through the Stargate, and even then he wasn't sure that the colors in San Francisco hadn't been a little brighter.

General Hammond would recognize his childhood. They could both smile at the way the world had altered; grimace at the prejudices that had been commonplace in their youth; recognize the need for vigilance. Carter understood the military; knew how it felt to be an Air Force brat; the reason why you didn't give back talk to someone with higher rank than you, even if you thought the guy was a moron. Understood that rank was something earned, and you didn’t get too many guys with stars on their shoulders who hadn't earned it the hard way. Teal'c knew how it felt to take life; to wonder if you'd ever had the right; to kill and be afraid you were on the wrong side; to watch friends die and keep moving forward. He'd done the Jaffa equivalent of zipping someone he'd shared a drink with into a bodybag. He knew how it felt. As far as the military went, Teal'c and Carter were like the school friends who hadn't needed explanations.

But none of them had really got the flower power bit, although the Stargate and that solar flare might have filled in that era of his life for them a little. They'd got to wear the clothes, meet the people, see the psychedelic colors, hopefully they'd even got a whiff of the freedom; the sense that anything was possible then; that finally the world didn't just belong to the politicians, and the generals, that perhaps it might belong to everyone. Or maybe it had just been like a trip to the zoo for Daniel and Carter. A fun day out. Or perhaps it had just left Daniel even more confused than before as to why O'Neill had chosen to pick up a gun instead of sticking a flower in its barrel.

Daniel had never asked him why he had chosen to become part of the military, which was a relief, because he wasn't sure he could answer him, not easily anyway. He could tell him the events that had led up to it; the ones that had seemed to make it impossible for him to head in any other direction; but even now he couldn't tell him why someone who thought of himself as a freethinker and a rebel had joined an institution like the United States Air Force and immediately felt as if he'd finally found a faith he could believe in. He only knew that whenever he spent time with someone like Harry Maybourne he wondered if he'd done the wrong thing, and every time he spent time with George Hammond he knew he'd done right.

But was any of his past still relevant when the only other person who'd shared that all-important decade wasn't even a part of his life any more? He spent his days with people who only knew him as someone divorced, childless, Air Force. Did that mean the child O'Neill was no longer relevant; the hippy O'Neill; the father O'Neill. Did any of those people still matter if he was the only person who
He missed Charlie so much sometimes it hurt right to the ends of his hair. People who'd never had children didn't know how much you loved them. Some of them still thought 'love' was that hormonal rush you got in the schoolyard when Carina Kolbach let you carry her books home. They didn't know it was something that made your heart swell with so much happiness sometimes you were afraid it was going to burst. Something filled to the brim that nevertheless kept getting topped up even higher. The way you had to go back in there and look in that crib one more time, even though you'd been in there ten minutes ago, because that baby was so perfect in every possible detail. The way you had to drink in the smell of him; inhale him; the incredible joy when fingers wrapped themselves around yours; when eyes focused and finally saw you; the first time you came in and he crawled straight for you, gurgling a welcome. All those memories; all that history; all those days he should have been able to spend with his son; all those grandchildren he was never going to have now....

"Jack...?"

He was shocked by the sound of his own name. For a while he'd forgotten he wasn't alone in the house. He looked up to find Daniel swamped by a robe that looked vaguely familiar. Oh yes, he remembered it now. Aunt Rose's last Christmas present. She had always been under the impression that he took XXL in everything. She hadn't seen him in decades so probably only remembered him as the boy who'd always wanted second helpings of cake. She'd clearly decided a lot of his growth over the years would have been outwards. Even though Daniel had folded the sleeves over, he was fighting a losing battle against swathes of tartan polycotton.

"You look ridiculous."

"Your heating's gone off." Daniel belted the robe defiantly. "It's cold."

"It's four in the morning." Nevertheless he got up and crossed over to switch the heating back on.

"Can I put a light on?"

O'Neill looked around to see Daniel with his fingers outstretched towards the table lamp. He sighed in mock exasperation. "Heat. Light. What else do you want?"

Daniel switched on the light, making them both blink from the sudden brightness. Daniel was watching him warily from under his lashes. A year ago Daniel could have sheltered behind his hair as well, but there was nowhere for him to hide now his face was all exposed planes; the short hair making those expressive eyes appear even larger. "Coffee."

"Well, there's a shocker."

He was already limping towards the kitchen; another damned conditioned response; toddler Charlie asking for his bottle; adult Daniel pining for his coffee. He was sure it all fitted into the cosmic oneness of everything: a kid saw his parents crushed to death right in front of him; a father found the body of his son with a bullet in his head and blood making a mulberry pool on the carpet; but, no, it was all just hunky dory because one day that orphaned kid was going to grow up to be a waif and stray genius whom the grieving father could just tuck under his wing, and wasn't that a happy ending for everyone all round? No, it freakin' wasn't. That didn't give Daniel back his childhood; and it sure as hell didn't give him closure for having caused the death of his son. Daniel being alive and well didn't fill that Charlie-shaped hole in his life. It just filled the Daniel-shaped hole that had been in his life when he'd thought he'd lost him.
"Are you okay?"

Daniel had followed him into the kitchen, still watching him with that wary expression.

O'Neill looked down at Daniel's bare feet in exasperation. "Put something on your feet."

Daniel's toes curled up defensively but he persisted: "Are you okay?"

"No." O'Neill looked him the eye. "I'm not. Happy now? Can we drop the subject?"

Oh great, now Daniel looked as if he'd slapped him. O'Neill felt the guilt twinge like an old bullet wound. Swearing under his breath, he looked around for the washing he'd taken out of the dryer earlier. He snatched up the first pair of clean socks he came to and tossed them to him. "Put those on. The floor's cold."

Daniel wobbled precariously on one leg as he pulled the first sock on and it was automatic to reach out and steady him. O'Neill had to close his eyes as the memories overwhelmed him. Teaching Charlie to sit down before he put his socks on so he wouldn't fall over. Teaching Charlie to tie his shoelaces. Teaching Charlie to play baseball. Daniel was always talking about lost knowledge. The tragedy of that damned library at Alexandria burning to the ground. The importance of remembering the past. Well sometimes lost knowledge wasn't something that would have benefited the whole of the human race. It sure as hell didn't matter to the rest of the species that Charlie O'Neill had only learned to hit a curve ball six months before he'd died; but it had mattered to him. And now it didn't matter to anyone because that boy and his ability to hit a home run had been dead for four years. Which was why sometimes it wasn't good to remember the past. Sometimes remembering the past was the very last thing you wanted to do. What had he told himself in that damned tel'tak? That he didn't want to forget how his son looked, or sounded, or smelt? Well, maybe he'd just been lying to himself again. Because maybe he did want to forget. Maybe he wanted to climb inside the biggest whiskey bottle he could find and forget he'd ever had a son who was now dead, buried, rotting, and could never grant him absolution.

"Jack...?"

He opened his eyes to find Daniel wincing from the tightness of his grip. Yes, that was pretty much what happened. You were so busy trying to keep them safe you hurt them in the process. O'Neill released him at once and took a step back, turning to the kettle, administering a mild punishment in the shape of instant coffee granules from a jar instead of the filter stuff Daniel wanted. How come Daniel could read the body language of white-painted little naked guys who depended on plants for their mental health, but he couldn't work out that the person he was probably closest to on the whole damned planet really wanted to be left alone with his thoughts right now?

"Here." He poured boiling water into the mug, gave it a brisk stir and then shoved it at Daniel. "Coffee."

"I think we should talk."

O'Neill stared at him in disbelief. "Sorry, were we ever married? Because I'm getting a real sense of déjà vu here."

Daniel returned his gaze unblinkingly for a moment. "Well, if we were, I have to tell you the sex was very unmemorable."

He'd laughed before he could stop himself, just catching that flicker of a smile from Daniel, then shook his head and reached for the coffee beans and the grinder. He might as well have done so ten
minutes before really, it would have been a more gracious way of bowing to the inevitable.

As O’Neill slumped back onto his couch with a sigh of resignation, he wondered idly from which side of the family Daniel had inherited his stubbornness. His mother he suspected. Daniel had always seemed to him to possess the sort of indelible determination normally only displayed by women and rivers. And it was effective, which was why they were now both wide awake, sipping their freshly brewed coffee, looking at each other sideways, and preparing to have an in-depth conversation about the subject of Daniel’s choice. Daniel had even managed to nab the armchair for himself. Well wasn’t that just typical?

“Okay,” he shrugged resignedly, “let’s hear it.” What’s it going to be, Daniel? The pep talk about what a great leader I am? The reminder that we’re all alive and well, and what do you know, it’s all down to me. The trouble is, we’ve moved on, and you don’t know it. Unless you can find a way to make my son forgive me for his death, then tonight there’s really nothing to talk about.

“You lied to me.”

That came out of nowhere and took his breath away. O’Neill stared at him in disbelief, the injustice of it making him gape like a beached fish. He hadn’t said one word, not one word of reproach about Daniel going off to that temple after he’d been told not, and so starting the whole chain of events that had led to them all damned near dying. He’d figured the guy getting horribly tortured to the point where his mind snapped was more than punishment enough, and anyway, Daniel would be beating himself up about that far too much anyway. But all the same, it was very difficult not to snap back something he would later regret when he was asked to swallow that without a protest.

O’Neill took a strengthening sip of coffee. Ow, that was hot. He’d have a burn on his tongue now. How the hell could Daniel drink his when it was still scalding; the guy must have an asbestos throat. Daniel was still looking at him with reproach in his eyes. Oh yes, they were talking about the terrible thing O’Neill had done in telling a white lie to try to coax his friend back from the brink. Sometimes Daniel was lovable and sometimes, such as now, he was just damned unreasonable, spoiled, and so busy thinking about the high moral questions he lost sight of everything else. But, fine, Daniel wanted them to have this conversation; they could have this conversation. At least getting pissed off with Daniel for being such an annoying little son-of-a-bitch was less lacerating than wondering if his son would have been so keen to get his hands on his service revolver if O’Neill hadn’t always made such a big deal about guns being something Charlie was never allowed to touch.

O’Neill cleared his throat. “You wanna run that by me again?”

“You lied to me.”

“No, Daniel, I didn’t lie to you. The person I lied to wasn’t you. That was the point. The guy we got back from those priests wasn’t Daniel Jackson, it was someone else altogether. I lied to him to try to get you back again.”

“When I woke up, Jack, and asked you what had happened, you lied to me.”

O’Neill ran a hand through his greying hair. “Okay, maybe I did. But I was just trying to….” He didn't actually say that 'keep you safe', skittering away from the words at the last second. "I was afraid that if you remembered what they'd done to you, you'd go like...that again. I had to make a decision."

“Well, it was the wrong decision.”
As Daniel continued to gaze at him with a set face and betrayed eyes, O'Neill felt the exasperation increase. Made worse because somehow Daniel was managing to guilt-trip him. He was getting a hundred and fifty watt reproach from those baby blues and it was working. He was starting to believe that he'd been wrong back there, after all. Okay, he'd always known he'd been wrong back there. He knew how much Daniel trusted him. How important it was to the guy to know that whatever else happened Jack O'Neill would never lie to him. The guilt flared, spiked.

"Damnit, Daniel, I don't pretend to be infallible. You know better than anyone how often I've been wrong. I'm not God here, you know. I'm just a guy trying to do the right thing, and sometimes I get it wrong. And maybe I got it wrong this time. Maybe I should have told you the truth. I'm sorry, okay? I'm sorry for being human."

Daniel's face didn't flicker. "So, you're saying the great Jack O'Neill is fallible and human and can make mistakes like ordinary mortals?"

"Yes!"

"And I shouldn't blame you for getting it wrong from time to time?"

"Damned right."

"So, if, for instance, you forgot to take the bullets out of your gun one day, and you maybe forgot to turn the key in the lock on a desk drawer because you'd done it a hundred times before and just this once you forgot, that would be something someone who was fallible and human could be forgiven for doing, isn't it?"

All those years in Black Ops, all those years of doing damned distasteful things for the US Military, while watching for a sniper every minute of every day, and yet he hadn't noticed that deadfall. Daniel, the world's most amateur soldier, had dug the pit and walked him right into it and he hadn't seen it coming once. O'Neill felt as though someone had punched him in the solar plexus. He gasped, "What?"

"Because you're only human, right, Jack? And human beings are allowed to make mistakes. They can be forgiven for making mistakes?"

O'Neill could feel the blood beating in his veins, a faint hissing in his ears, the sea over shale, back and forth across a pebbly beach. God, don't say he was going to throw up. Abruptly, Daniel was across the room and sitting next to him, like he had in Netu, like he had on the tel'tak, Daniel's right side against his left, a comfort he could feel.

"You made a mistake, Jack. The most important thing in the world to me is my belief that I can trust you, that you will never ever lie to me, whatever the circumstances, and you did lie to me, you looked me right in the eye and you lied to me, and it really hurts; but you did it to save my life, and I forgive you. I forgive you as long as you forgive my friend because he didn't take the bullets out of his gun and he didn't turn the key on the desk drawer, because it was so long ago, and he's paid for it so very much, and he's only human and he's entitled to make mistakes. We're all entitled to make mistakes."

O'Neill pressed the heels of his hands hard against his eyes until the blackness gave way to a kaleidoscope pattern of flashing lights.

"Please, Jack," said Daniel softly. "Please…?"

Keeping his hands where they would hide anything he didn't want anyone seeing, O'Neill said,
"Damnit, Daniel…"

"You said it, Jack: you're not God and you're not infallible, and no one ever expected you to be. No one except you. So – please…?"

"All right!" O'Neill pulled his hands away angrily. He knew Daniel was right. He hated Daniel's habit of being right but he recognized when he was. "I made a mistake and my son died. But even though my son died, it was still only a mistake."

"And…?"

O'Neill snarled but then said more quietly, "And I'm only human and I'm entitled to make mistakes."

"Thank you," Daniel breathed softly.

O'Neill looked at him sideways and saw that Daniel looked as exhausted as he felt. Like they'd both just run a marathon while having someone suck the blood straight out of their veins. Part of him wanted to hug Daniel and part of him really wished he had thrown that crutch at his head when Daniel had hidden the keys to his jeep. He snatched a breath he really seemed to need. "That was always what this was about, wasn't it? You were always setting me up for this."

Daniel ran a hand through his hair and then returned his gaze. "Face it, O'Neill, you are way out of your league here. Didn't I ever tell you? People killed to get me on their debating teams in college."

"So, all that stuff about me lying to you…?"

"No, that was true." Daniel let O'Neill read the truth in his eyes. "Every word of that was true. Did you never wonder who Apophis sent to ask me where the boy was?"

"Sha're. I figured it had to be Sha're."

"He sent you. He sent the person I trusted most in the world, to whom it would be the hardest for me to say no. And I did say no to you, but it nearly killed me, and the worst thing was looking in your eyes and knowing you were lying to me. So don't ever lie to me again, Jack. However bad the truth is, I'd still rather hear it from you, because if I can't trust you, I can't trust anything."

There was a moment's silence before Daniel put his hands behind his head and shrugged. "Or if you do lie to me again and I find out about it, you'd better be prepared to do some serious groveling if you ever want me to speak to you again. Clear?"

"As crystal." O'Neill darted him a sideways look. "What kind of groveling?"

"Oh...the most humiliating kind I can think of."

"I'm not going to be able to square it with a bag of cookies then?"

"Jack, you're not going to be able to square it with a case of cookies." Daniel picked up his coffee cup then looked around. "Actually, do you have any cookies?"

"It's four in the morning," O'Neill protested.

"Well, I'm hungry."

Shaking his head, O'Neill limped towards the kitchen. "I thought you were supposed to be waiting on me?"
Daniel was already reaching for the TV remote. As he switched it on, he said over his shoulder, "Janet said I was to make sure you exercised your leg. What number is the History Channel?"

O'Neill automatically refilled the Mr. Coffee with one hand while searching in the cupboard for the cookies with the other. "I have no idea, and it doesn't matter because we're going to be watching ESPN." He said it with great emphasis in the hope that might make it more likely to happen.

Looking at the back of that shorn head as Daniel tuned out that ESPN reference with the skill of long practice, it occurred to him that he and Daniel had just the wrong age gap between them: not enough to be father and son; too big to be brothers. Nothing in common except their recent past. So perhaps it was just as well their recent past had involved living through the kind of events that bonded you together like superglue. Their relationship was like some tropical flower; superheated into existence at five times normal speed. They had met under extraordinary circumstances; they had been thrown into a life and death situation when they barely knew one another, and had come out of it a little too close for comfort.

It was disconcerting to find there was someone with whom you had nothing in common who nevertheless knew you better than anyone else on the planet. Even more disconcerting to find that you, who had never exactly been a student of human nature, suddenly knew another guy as well as you'd known your own son; could read from his body language when he was tired, hurting, pissed off, concealing something, or happy all the way to his toes. He'd never signed up to be Daniel's best friend. It had just happened. And he had no other relationship for reference. It wasn't like the friendship he'd shared with Brian Hickson back in Chicago; it wasn't like the friendship he'd had with Kawalsky; and it wasn't like the friendship he had with Carter, or Teal'c. It was a little like his relationship with Sara; a little like his relationship with Charlie; but even then, not really enough for reference. His friendship with Daniel was uncharted waters, with sharks, dangerous undercurrents, and a couple of whirlpools. You couldn't analyze it, or understand it, or catalogue it; you just lived with it. And sometimes you even remembered to be grateful for it. Now, was definitely one of those times.

As he put the cookies on a plate, he saw that Daniel was flipping through the channels, exactly the way he'd always told Charlie not to because it would ruin his eyes. O'Neill caught a glimpse of something that definitely looked like a football game but then they were seven channels past: a cheetah chasing an antelope; a couple of guys rafting down rapids; something underwater that Daniel hovered on for a second until a shark swam past and he moved on; a game show; a documentary about the FBI; a confession show with He Seduced Her Mother and Her Sister written up underneath some guy with sideburns and tattoos that Daniel skipped on from so fast O'Neill barely had time to read the caption; another blink-and-he'd-missed-it glimpse of a football game, and then his 'Hey!' of protest was lost in the crackle of atmospheric music. He saw black and white film of a smoky interior and caught a compelling glimpse of satin-covered curves.

"Hold it!" He piled the cookies onto the plate and limped in there at double speed, dumping the cookies onto Daniel's lap before reaching across to snag the remote.

"What's this?" Daniel already had a cookie in his mouth as he nodded at the screen.

Resisting the urge to say 'Don't talk with your mouth full', O'Neill turned up the volume. "Gilda. It's a classic. You have to watch it."

"Never heard of it." Daniel wiped cookie crumbs from his lap onto the floor and O'Neill wondered again how Daniel's apartment stayed so damned immaculate when he always made such a mess when he was staying at O'Neill's place.

"You'll probably never see anything hotter than Rita Hayworth in this film." He grabbed a cookie
and took a sip of his now drinkable coffee.

"Oh is that Rita Hayworth?" Daniel peered at the screen curiously. "I thought she had red hair. That woman looks blonde."

"That is red hair." O'Neill stabbed a finger at the screen. "That is glorious red hair. Can't you see that?"

"Jack, it's a black and white film."

"Not remotely relevant. What color dress is she wearing?"

Daniel gave him a sideways look. "Um…grey?"

"It's blue."

Daniel looked back at the screen. "How can you tell?"

O'Neill decided now probably wasn't the time to tell Daniel about that poster he'd had on his bedroom wall of Rita Hayworth in a dress that went from palest duck egg to darkest indigo, while the legend 'There NEVER was a woman like Gilda!' bisected the smoke from her cigarette. He opted for a lofty shrug instead. "That's the trouble with people of your generation. Never learned to identify the different shades of grey."

"Oh and…you have?"

"Oh, yes." O'Neill broke a cookie in half and let the crumbs shower onto his lap. Years ago, Daniel. Which is why I need you around to keep reminding me that sometimes things really do look better in black and white.

"Well, personally, I've always preferred a little color." But the way Daniel settled back against the cushions and put his feet on the table suggested he was ready to get engrossed in the movie.

"Feet on the floor." He said it automatically, then as Daniel sighed reproachfully and complied, realized he was now sounding like Sara. She'd never let him put his feet on the table either, just because it had a glass top and she'd always insisted one day he'd put his heels through the pane. First thing on Monday morning he was going to get Daniel to drive him somewhere he could buy a coffee table with a wooden top to it. The kind you could rest your feet on when you were wearing boots and it wouldn't even flinch.

Except he wouldn't, of course. He'd go on living with this one, and telling Daniel not to put his feet on it because the glass might break, just so he'd still have a connection to Sara and that past which no one else knew about any more.

Daniel munched his way through another cookie, now completely absorbed in the movie, tucking his sock-covered feet underneath him in that boneless way the young had, and which O'Neill could only envy these days. Did they all do yoga or something? How the hell did they get their knees to bend like that?

O'Neill looked at the two Rita Hayworths reflected in Daniel's glasses, the light from the TV screen competing with the lamplight, both combining to bathe Daniel's bruised cheekbone with a soft glow. That bruise was definitely fading. A week or so, there wouldn't be anything left to show how close that Jaffa had got.

They weren't going to forget the people who'd died on that planet. Or Harun. He knew Daniel was
still trying to make sense of how much they'd been to blame for what had gone down there; what options they'd had. For himself, he was going to be doing a lot of thinking about the different ways he could have played it, so if the same situation came up again he might be able to find a different solution to some of the problems they'd faced. He wasn't kidding himself that there weren't things they couldn't have done a lot better, but for the moment he was just going to enjoy the stuff they'd got right.

Because there was that definition of a successful mission he'd almost forgotten again. The one that said they'd succeeded if they came back alive, in one piece, and pretty much the same people they'd been when they left. He knew Daniel would be planning to give him the pep talk later, but perhaps he didn't need it now. Yes, they'd probably all made mistakes back there, but they'd survived. And maybe Jack O'Neill didn't understand the astrophysics of the wormhole they traveled through; couldn't speak the languages of the peoples they encountered when they reached the other side; and didn't understand the way the Goa'uld reasoned; but he was damned good at getting his people home alive.

As he reached across to swipe another cookie from Daniel's lap, he saw Cassie's picture laid out on the glass-topped table and it was surprising what a difference the lamplight made upon the page. He could see details now. The blue of Daniel's eyes behind his glasses. The gold gleam of Teal'c's tattoo. The camouflage shadows on Carter's forage cap. The grey of his hair. Damn it, wasn't that grey, was it? He was sure he had more brown left in it than that. He hadn't realized the O'Neill figure was smiling. The guy had a big silly grin on his face for no reason O'Neill could think of. And the alien sun looked warm but no longer threatening. Even the gate looked familiar rather than ominous. He picked it up to look at it more closely.

In fact every one of them looked happy and relaxed. All for one and one for all. And pretty formidable with it. He wasn't quite sure how Cassie had managed it but somehow she'd even drawn Cassie's picture laid out on the glass-topped table and it was surprising what a difference the lamplight made upon the page. He could see details now. The blue of Daniel's eyes behind his glasses. The gold gleam of Teal'c's tattoo. The camouflage shadows on Carter's forage cap. The grey of his hair. Damn it, wasn't that grey, was it? He was sure he had more brown left in it than that. He hadn't realized the O'Neill figure was smiling. The guy had a big silly grin on his face for no reason O'Neill could think of. And the alien sun looked warm but no longer threatening. Even the gate looked familiar rather than ominous. He picked it up to look at it more closely.

In fact every one of them looked happy and relaxed. All for one and one for all. And pretty formidable with it. He wasn't quite sure how Cassie had managed it but somehow she'd even drawn Cassie's picture laid out on the glass-topped table and it was surprising what a difference the lamplight made upon the page. He could see details now. The blue of Daniel's eyes behind his glasses. The gold gleam of Teal'c's tattoo. The camouflage shadows on Carter's forage cap. The grey of his hair. Damn it, wasn't that grey, was it? He was sure he had more brown left in it than that. He hadn't realized the O'Neill figure was smiling. The guy had a big silly grin on his face for no reason O'Neill could think of. And the alien sun looked warm but no longer threatening. Even the gate looked familiar rather than ominous. He picked it up to look at it more closely.

Come to think of it, they were a pretty formidable team. Guys like Makepeace were always telling him SG-1 got lucky a lot, and that he was particularly lucky because he'd never lost a team member, not permanently anyway; but he didn't think it was luck. He thought it had a lot to do with a combination of uniquely complementary skills combined with how damned much they all cared about and believed in each other. He and Daniel had kept struggling on through that freakin' jungle because they'd known it would be unbearable to survive themselves if Carter and Teal'c didn't; and they'd also known Carter and Teal'c would be not just relying on them but expecting them to provide a rescue. The same way they'd all believed Teal'c would find a way to get them off Netu when it was about to blow. He'd known Teal'c would keep Carter alive if he possibly could, and Carter would hang on in there with literally her last breath. And he had, and she had. He'd known Daniel would be able to translate absolutely anything any culture could throw at him. And he had. While Daniel had just expected O'Neill to get Carter back from the dead somehow. And he had. That was what they did. They went that extra mile for each other even when that extra mile sometimes involved walking barefoot over broken glass. It was still better than losing someone.

O'Neill got to his feet and picked up the picture.

"Where are you going?" Daniel clearly didn't want to drag his gaze from the screen, and as Rita Hayworth was singing 'Put the blame on Mame' O'Neill could understand why. She could take off a glove with more allure than most women could take off their underwear.

"In the kitchen. Do you want me to tell you if I go to the bathroom as well?"
Daniel wordlessly held his empty coffee mug out to him without once removing his gaze from the screen.

O'Neill took it from him. "Is this your ever so subtle way of asking for a refill?"

"Sssh," Daniel waved a hand at him in a clear 'go away and get me more coffee' motion.

O'Neill made a point of limping a little more heavily as he headed for the kitchen, but Daniel didn't even look round. He shook his head in disbelief. "You should hire yourself out as a nurse, you know. You're a natural."

He decided to make Daniel wait for his coffee while he did something more important. He rummaged in a drawer to find some of that white sticky tac stuff. He really needed to clean these drawers out some time. Work out which of these pens actually wrote. Throw away some of these damned rubber bands…. There it was.

"Jack…?"

O'Neill stuck the picture on the wall and stepped back to admire it. Yes. Perfect. Him and his team all present, correct, and with their limbs properly attached. Just the way he liked to see them.

"Jack…!"

Sighing, O'Neill sloshed some more of that Columbian roast into Daniel's mug. "You know there are no documented cases of anyone lapsing into a coffee withdrawal coma, Daniel. It really is okay to have a little blood left in your caffeine stream."

"Unless you have that in writing from Janet, I don't believe you, and you're missing a really good scene."

"Well, those of us who didn't spend our formative years digging up mummies in places with no electricity have actually seen this movie a couple of times before…."

He paused in the doorway for just a moment before he went back into the living room; the rich aroma of Daniel's coffee enveloping his senses; just wanting to take one last look at that picture of him and his team. They didn't always need to be holding hands to keep each other safe, but Cassie had the right idea, all the same. They were connected even when they were apart; even if they were in four different prisons; on four different worlds; they would still be four quarters of a single whole; still be a team.

As he limped back to the living room to give Daniel his coffee, he realized that was what Cassie had been trying to tell him. And she was right. Which was why perhaps, after all, the O'Neill in the picture had good reason to be smiling.

The End

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!