Into the Labyrinth

by ELG

Summary

After the events of 'Menace', Daniel needs some time away from the SGC, but his planned escape back into archaeology is swiftly hijacked by the USAF who believe the ancient labyrinth he wishes to excavate could hold valuable alien technology. To carry out his mission, Daniel must first face up to events buried in his subconscious for the past thirteen years.

Notes

Adult themes. Violence. Language. Drug taking. Discussion of infidelity, bisexuality, possibility of sexual abuse etc. Definitely only for adult readers.
Hierakonpolis

Angels and Mazes

Part One: Into the Labyrinth

"The gods are sparrows, I am a falcon."

Inanna, Sumerian goddess of love, war, fertility and infinite variety

I: Cheyenne Mountain

O'Neill bent and picked up one of the pieces of replicator still scattered across the corridors like something from a children's game. Nothing could have looked more harmless, little pieces of metal all interlocking perfectly to make mechanical spiders. Almost indistinguishable from the other toys in the room in which that piece of machinery which thought and acted like a human child had been living. Except human children didn't generally work only as long as their computer disks were installed, and they almost never created killer bugs they then unleashed upon an unsuspecting galaxy. Nor did they wreak havoc on the SGC.

How many times was it now that they'd been bitten in the ass by something they'd brought home because Daniel wanted to communicate with it or Carter wanted to take it apart and find out how it worked? Or, if he was honest, because he and Hammond hoped that this time they might have found the weapon that would wipe out the Goa'uld?

He stepped over to the 'contaminated waste' buckets set up everywhere in which the broken pieces of replicator were being dropped to land with a comforting 'plink' on those other pieces of metal. He peered into the depths for a minute, waiting to see if any of those pieces started twitching, trying to reform themselves, the way he'd seen them do in the past – but no, not a movement out of them this time. Without the robot controlling them they couldn't function. They'd been right on the point of breaking free from its control when it had been stopped and so had they. Now they were just pieces of metal with no ability to turn themselves back into replicators without their creator. That was Carter's theory anyway, and although Carter was as capable as any of them of getting it spectacularly wrong on occasion, this time he thought he believed her.

O'Neill reached into the bucket and prodded at the pieces. None of them retaliated in any way. He believed her, yes, but he also believed in making sure.

He'd recommended to Hammond that Area 51 didn't even get a look in, they just gave these bits of metal to Siler and he put them straight in the boiler. Melt them down and turn them into lampstands. Just make sure they couldn't ever be made replicators again. As long as there were government agents out there who thought talking with the Goa'uld was a good idea, he thought the SGC should rely only on itself. Hammond had accused him of having a bunker mentality, which O'Neill hadn't argued. There were times he did think the only people they could trust were themselves. That went for their allies on this planet and elsewhere. Not that they had many allies left who hadn't been decimated, defeated or downright destroyed. Even Thor hadn't come when they needed him this time. If Thor had come, then…

He gave himself a mental shake. No one knew better than he did the futility of pining after might-have-beens. Thor hadn't come and the situation had been resolved his way instead. His way and not Daniel's....
O'Neill had to prepare himself to step into the infirmary. Quite apart from the disinfectant smell there were too many things in here he didn't want to deal with right now. First off were the badly injured airmen attacked by replicators within the SGC, something he had hoped would never happen. The hairs were standing up on the back of O'Neill's neck at how close they'd all come to having to complete the self-destruct to wipe out the terrifying metal pests. Two airmen were still sweeping the infirmary, collecting up every tiny piece of replicator they could find. O'Neill had told them to be thorough. In fact he might have yelled it. As he'd walked out of the 'gateroom he'd needed somewhere to direct his anger and those little pieces of bug had done just fine. If he could have jumped up and down on them without losing dignity he would have done.

The other thing he really didn't want to deal with right now was Daniel.

Fraiser had confined Daniel to bed at the far end of the infirmary, but, given the replicator injuries she was having to deal with, he wasn't getting a lot of attention.

O'Neill took his time talking to the wounded airmen and asking Fraiser for a progress report on the ones who were unconscious, giving praise where it was due, being the good CO. He knew Hammond had been in as well. He and Hammond had earned the loyalty they evoked in others. He knew they were both good COs and Hammond had proved he still remembered how to be a good soldier as well. The attack on the base had been a challenge and they'd all risen to it, dealt with it, survived it. He had no problem with any of the actions he'd taken. He knew he'd done all he could do under circumstances where the base was overrun, the countdown was marching irresistibly towards zero, he had an injured man in a potential hostage situation, and the thing controlling the enemy was at large and dangerous. He'd neutralized the enemy, averted the hostage situation, stopped the replicators, saved the base. All with one well-placed bullet.

He also feared he might have irretrievably broken something in Daniel's soul in the same instant.

He was out of beds to stand beside now. There were only three empty ones, then Daniel's. He couldn't stall any longer.

He approached the bed warily, like he might approach a snared animal he wanted to help but was afraid of getting bitten by, Daniel's frustrated rage and grief as he sat in the 'gateroom with tears running down his face still as fresh in his memory as an open wound.

"Hey…"

Daniel looked up at him. "Hey."

There was no trace of the rage or grief there now. He just looked weary and distant. Not as if he was shutting O'Neill out, just as if he wasn't really here any more. He reminded O'Neill of someone, but he couldn't think who it was. There was the same grayness about him, as if he'd faded, shrunk a little, as if his body was still here but his mind was somewhere else.

That scared O'Neill more than the anger he'd been seared by earlier. He pulled up a chair. "How are you feeling?"

"Okay."

"How's the arm?"

Daniel turned his head to look at him in mild surprise. "Okay." As O'Neill evidently shifted impatiently, Daniel shrugged. Aloud he said, "It's just a broken wrist." His eyes also seemed to say: You didn't have to kill her for it.
He hadn't – he really hadn't – shot the robot because it had hurt Daniel. Twice. Deliberately. Could have cracked his skull like an egg the first time. Had broken his arm just like that, with one malicious twist of the fingers. He'd killed it because it was the only thing he could do under the circumstances that wouldn't have risked the life of everyone on the base, including Daniel.

"How's the head?"

"Fine."

O'Neill looked around for inspiration. "Looks like you might need to take a few days off. Maybe you'd like to come fishing…?"

He broke off as he saw Daniel's expression. It wasn't impatient, or angry, it was resigned, and weary, and somewhat sad. "I don't think so, Jack."

O'Neill set his jaw. "Daniel, I really think we need to talk, and this isn't the place – "

"No, it isn't." Daniel nodded. "But I don't think there's anything to say."

"Look, I did what I – "

"You did what you had to do. I know that." Daniel looked him in the eye without accusation this time, just that frightening resignation. "Now I need to do what I need to do."

O'Neill felt a chill go through him, much worse than that sharp stab of hurt when Daniel had called him a "stupid son of a bitch" in the 'gateroom. Daniel had been working so hard to get through to the robot and he'd almost succeeded. Almost found a way to keep the robot alive, stop the replicators, and save the base. Or not. They'd never know, because with an alien enemy that had already proven more than a match for the Asgard swarming all over Cheyenne Mountain and half its personnel, and the self-destruct counting down, O'Neill hadn't had any choice but to neutralize the enemy the second he got a clear shot.

"I was just…"

"I know, Jack." Daniel reached out with his good arm, and his fingers rested briefly on O'Neill's sleeve. O'Neill looked down at Daniel's hand in surprise. Daniel hardly ever touched anyone. Daniel hardly ever touched him. Daniel hardly ever touched anyone. But there had been a time when O'Neill's hand on his arm had been enough to comfort him. Now, he didn't think anyone and anything was going to banish that look from Daniel's eyes. Daniel became aware of who he was touching and snatched his hand away, the way he always did for a reason O'Neill couldn't even guess at. One day he'd have to tell Daniel that actually tactile people liked to be touched too, they could also take comfort from a hand on the arm.

He'd come in here ready to defend himself, to explain, crisply and in a way even a mule-stubborn civilian couldn't fail to understand, just why he'd had to do what he'd done, then he'd been going to tell Daniel that he understood why he was so angry. That he knew Daniel was a communicator. That no one liked the way things had gone down but, with the safety of the base at stake, there had been no other responsible decision to make. That it wasn't and never had been about him not trusting Daniel to do his job, just that in a military base in a military situation, as second in command he had to take responsibility for the lives of those people in the SGC, and that included Daniel's life and… So many other things he'd been going to say to justify his actions and prove they hadn't been a reflection on Daniel in any way at all, that there was no reason for what had happened today to harm their friendship.
But Daniel seemed to have worked it all out for himself. Or perhaps he'd just read it in the way O'Neill walked across the room. They knew each other so well that was possible.

Unfortunately it was them knowing each other so well that was scaring O'Neill now, because looking at Daniel, he was seeing someone who although quiet and calm on the outside, was broken and wounded within. Worst of all, for the first time in a very long time, he was seeing someone who needed to be where Jack O'Neill wasn't.

He almost said: "Don't go", but thought in time how needy and pathetic it would sound – as if he was clutching at Daniel's sleeve. He stayed in his chair, looking at Daniel with his face as blank as he could make it. Daniel was lying right there in a bed a few feet from him, but O'Neill could feel him slipping through his fingers, knew that even while they were still talking he was losing him irrevocably.

Daniel must have seen how he really felt despite his best efforts to disguise it because he winced and said gently, "It's not you, Jack."

O'Neill gritted his teeth. "It's what I did."

"No." Daniel shook his head. "It's just the way it is."

O'Neill stayed where he was, frozen in silence, watching as the pain killers kicked in, as Daniel's eyelashes fluttered, watched him fight slumber then succumb to it, watched him sleep. And all the time he knew this time he'd lost him so completely that maybe this time he wouldn't be getting him back.

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When the summons came to Hammond's office he knew this was it. Daniel was leaving. He didn't much care about the how and why. He just cared that it was happening and he couldn't stop it.

After two days slumped in depression waiting for the axe to fall, it was almost a relief. He decided attack was the best form of defense. If it had come to this, to the finishing line of a formal announcement, he had nothing to lose anyway.

He rocketed into Hammond's office on a propeller burst of attitude. The second he saw Hammond's unhappy face and Daniel's self-hugging body language, not to mention that crisp white letter lying on the table, he knew he'd read the situation right and should start yelling about it. Loudly.

"So, this is it? You don't like the way a mission goes down so you're going to sulk your way out of here?"

Hammond looked shocked. "Colonel O'Neill."

Daniel just sighed. "Jack..."

O'Neill shot him a look. He'd hoped to provoke some kind of angry reaction but Daniel was still looking resigned and long-suffering about it at all. And weary. Bone-deep weary. So like someone else. Someone from his past. Not military. His childhood. Damnit, it was on the edge of his memory. Looking at the shadows under Daniel's eyes, O'Neill felt all the anger get sucked straight out of him. So did the strength. He was sitting down even before Hammond pointed a finger at the chair.

He looked sideways at Daniel, not hiding the hurt. "You're going?"
"I need some time off."

That didn't sound so bad but Hammond's palpable distress suggested Daniel had asked for a lot more than a week's vacation. "How much time?"

"I don't know."

"Well, could you at least give me some kind of idea? I am your team leader."

"Not any more, Colonel." Hammond sounded like someone who needed to share the bad news to try and halve the pain of it.

"I never saw you as a quitter, Danny."

Daniel gave him a very straight look. "Don't pull the rally round the flag boys bullcrap with me, Jack. It won't work and it's beneath you." He didn't add 'And don't call me 'Danny' either' but O'Neill read it in his eyes. People had stopped calling Daniel 'Danny' in 1973 when his parents had died before his eyes. Calling him that was like stroking a cat – elicited a purr every time however much he might wish to hang onto his dignity. It was a name for emergencies and intimacies. It was also not something to be wielded like a weapon, used cynically for manipulation. That blunted its power. He read all that in Daniel's eyes as well. They were very expressive, and he and Daniel knew each other frighteningly well.

O'Neill pointed at the door. "You're ditching us because of a freakin' robot, Daniel! Why shouldn't I pull every low trick in the book?"

Daniel sighed wearily. "As I just explained to General Hammond, I'm leaving because I don't know who I am any more, and I'm no use to this facility until I find out."

"I know who you are." O'Neill put every ounce of intensity into he could find. "You're someone I want on my team. You're someone I need on my team."

There had been a time when that would have been enough to make Daniel melt. He could be seduced by kindness and affirmation back into friendship even when the links seemed to be entirely severed. But this time Daniel just looked even more weary. "Not like this. I'm no use to you like this."

O'Neill glared at him in baffled hurt because Daniel wasn't caving, which meant he was leaving, which meant he was going to be left. Again. By someone he had cared for, he had obviously somehow terribly failed. "Like what? With your arm in a sling or your head up your ass?"

"Colonel."

Hammond was glaring at him accusingly. The general was probably joining all kinds of dots in his head, thinking this was the way his 2IC always spoke to their wayward but lovable civilian and if so no wonder he was quitting.

He just wanted Daniel to get mad at him again. In the 'gateroom no one else had existed. It had been the two of them and a dead robot. He'd been hurting so much for Daniel, the guy could have spat in his eye and he wouldn't have minded, and Daniel had been ripped open with grief and anger and frustration, but god he'd been focused on him. He'd been so there. They'd been the only people in their world for a second. Now Daniel was already in a different place from him, sidling out the door with an apologetic wave.

Daniel did look him right in the eye, that was something, but the terrible resignation was still there.
The way people looked when they were exhausted with too much grief. *All this for a machine? No. Stop fighting and use what you know, O'Neill, and you know him, better than you know yourself, better than he knows himself. It must be there in his eyes, it always is.* O'Neill looked and read it right this time, slumping with defeat as he realized the truth. Not the robot then. All this for a principal. Somehow they'd frog-marched Daniel across a line he'd never wanted to cross and he had to get back on his own steam.

He saw Daniel see him get it too. There was that little nod again and the words were gentle. "I'm no use to you if I don't believe in what we're doing any more."

And now he remembered who Daniel had been reminding him of. Father O'Hanlon from the Church of the Sacred Heart. The one who'd left the priesthood after his faith had cracked like a broken bell.

He felt as if he was falling into a deep gray pit, this really was the future, and it really was unavoidable. Hammond's voice sounded as if it were coming from a long way off. "Doctor Jackson won't be leaving right away. He's putting out feelers to old colleagues but he's going to do some consultancy work for us until a place on a suitable archaeological site comes up. He'll still be here for a few more weeks."

"That's nice." O'Neill said it dully, looking down at the floor. Here in body, perhaps, but not in soul. His team was broken. It had just had lost its heart.

"Don't, Jack, please…"

He looked up to see misery in Daniel's eyes, wretched at having to witness what his leaving was doing to O'Neill. He should let him off the hook. Try to pretend this wasn't ripping his guts out, to lose him like this, to something he couldn't fight. But he couldn't. Everything hurt too much. He hurt too much and he didn't agree with it. He would never agree with anything that wrecked his team and cost him his friend. He glared at him resentfully, getting to his feet. "Go, if you have to go. But don't ask me to be a sport about it. I don't think it's right for you or for us."

He walked out before the guilt overwhelmed the anger and he had to start thinking about how much he might be to blame for this, and worst of all, whether or not Daniel might not, in fact, be right.

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Daniel wearily massaged the back of his neck. He was at the stage where he just wanted to be gone. He wanted to be a member of SG-1 again, he wanted to feel he had something to contribute again, and while he was like this, he was just walking wounded. He'd tried to explain it to Jack a couple of times now, but it was hopeless. It always was when he was saying something Jack didn't want to hear. He suspected that in his heart Jack might know exactly what he was talking about, understand more completely even than Sam or Teal'c – who had lent a far more sympathetic ear and told him they would support him whatever he chose to do even though they would miss him. But he hadn't seen that same 'click' of comprehension he had seen in their eyes that he had seen in Jack's as the man looked at him in Hammond's office. He didn't think anyone knew better than Jack just how deeply recent events had damaged him. The trouble was, he didn't think anyone was more determined than Jack was that if the right answer to any question turned out to be Daniel leaving SG-1 then Jack would always maintain it was the wrong question being asked in the first place.

In some ways he thought he was still recovering from Shifu's dream. Sometimes he still woke up streaming with sweat thinking it was true, that he'd done those terrible things. That Teal'c was dead
because of him. A million Russians were dead because of him. He loved Shifu and no doubt he'd needed the dream to stop them all making a dreadful mistake, but thanks to four years on a first contact team, not to mention the small matter of his wife having been taken by the Goa'uld, he'd already had a lot of weirdness swimming around in his brain and Shifu's little life lesson really hadn't helped.

He knew it had been a mistake to agree to try to kill the System Lords. The thing that frightened him most was that he had agreed to it. He had been so caught up in the how and why, so pressured by the knowledge that there was apparently no one else who could do what the Tok'ra felt it was necessary to be done, that he'd agreed to something he had realized mid-mission he found too morally repugnant to continue with.

Sarah's arrival had been timely in many ways. It was seeing her, a friend who had once loved him, or her outer casing at any rate, and knowing she was going to die if he completed his mission, that had brought it home to him exactly what he had signed up for here. What he was proposing to do to. That whatever hell they might be trapped in, he was still going to be the one who killed all these hosts along with the Goa'uld within them. The realization he had been in denial of, in a kind of moral fog, that by killing the other System Lords all he and Jacob would be doing would be handing power to a Goa'uld apparently bigger and badder than the rest – the scenario which in the past they had risked their lives and their liberty and willingly dived into 'hell' to avert – had meant that to continue with the mission was something that would do far more harm than good. The undoubted evil of Anubis had saved him from having to explain to Jacob why he couldn't go on with something he knew he should never have agreed to in the first place. Sarah had provided the excuse, but she had never truly been the whole reason.

Then there was Chaka. He didn't know now if he had done the right thing. He only knew that to leave those sentient beings enslaved by other sentient beings simply because one 'side' happened to be homo sapiens and the other 'side' didn't would have been wrong. That didn't mean that what Chaka and the other Unas might have ended up doing might not turn out to be equally wrong.

And then there was this latest episode. He had lied to a creature that trusted him. Tried to betray someone who had the mind, if not the body, of a human child. He had told Reese he would protect her, and he hadn't. He had failed to tell her what he had already known, that he didn't have the authority to protect anyone. He was part of a system that didn't work the way he worked, didn't necessarily even share his values. It was the communicator versus the protector all over again. Jack's first priority was always to protect, Daniel's to communicate. They'd been through this before. Did they talk to the entity or did they kill it? They'd talked and Jack had ended up having to kill a teammate. As far as Daniel was concerned, that didn't mean they had been wrong to try to communicate in the first place. One never could be wrong to try to talk to another sentient life form rather than to arbitrarily terminate its existence just because it could be dangerous. He wasn't sure about Jack. Jack might see that as a failure on his part, an error of judgment that had almost cost Sam her life. Sometimes Jack did think the ends justified the means, although Daniel did also believe that Jack believed there were immutable moral certainties that had to be clung onto, even by the tips of your bleeding fingers, whatever else was happening. It was just that Jack's moral certainties weren't always the same as his, and he was more fluid in his application of them than Daniel had at least used to be.

But Jack's moral certainties weren't the issue here. Daniel had never expected the military to think the same way he did. Well, okay, perhaps in the early days he had, but he thought there had also been a certain amount of cynicism on his part. Maybourne, the NID, Kinsey, even occasionally the President himself, had all shocked him in their time with how much lower they were willing to sink than he'd expected or how wrong-headed they might be in their approach, but he had gone into this with a certain amount of wariness. The Stargate program had been the only means for him to search
for his wife, and the Stargate program had also turned out to be the ultimate adventure for any student of lost people and lost languages. The Stargate was the conduit to civilizations that had ceased to be on this world, yet thrived beyond the stars, a means to hear dead languages spoken for the first time in millennia. The need to find Sha're had been so overwhelming that it had overridden his other concerns. Yes, he had argued for the cultural aspects of the civilizations they encountered to be explored as assiduously as the technological capacity, and they had given him what he wanted, but he'd realized very quickly that it was considered a much lesser part of their exploration. He was on a military field unit, searching for weapons to help in a battle he wasn't sure they could win without doing something that would make them as bad as the people they fought. Oma Desala had tried to show him the way that road could lead twice now, and he had heard her and believed he understood and was in agreement. But he had still found himself standing in a chamber committed to a mission that was making him act not as a communicator or an archaeologist, but as an assassin. And not even an assassin who risked his own life with the knife or the gun, as he had fought the Goa'uld in the past, but someone who used a chemical that could not hurt him but would kill their friends and enemies alike if it was ever to fall into the wrong hands. In his heart he still believed a weapon that made brave men act like cowards was a weapon that should never be used.

The Tok'ra had been desperate, he acknowledged that. Their strength had been waning for a while. The System Lords pursued them ruthlessly and had all but wiped them out. He didn't blame the Tok'ra for trying such a method to destroy the Goa'uld. He did, however, blame himself for ever agreeing to be a part of it. That was a line he should never have crossed and now he wasn't sure who he was any more, or what he believed in.

He believed in Hammond, and Jack, and Sam, and Teal'c, and their integrity, their loyalty, and their courage, but he couldn't expect their priorities to always be his priorities, their morality, his. They had different objectives, different responsibilities. He could not expect them to keep his moral clock for him. That was his job, and recently the inner compass that told him whether something was wrong or right, or should be questioned, didn't seem to have been functioning as well as in the past. It was as if there was so much white noise in his head, he couldn't hear his conscience any more, had lost himself somewhere inside himself, a missing part of who Daniel Jackson was trapped in the middle of a labyrinth whose center he had yet to find.

Daniel grimaced as he realized his coffee was cold again. He was spending a lot of time staring into space that would have been better spent finishing up the thousand and one tasks he needed to do before he handed over to someone else. Jack had first told him he'd better clear out his office then, if he was going AWOL on them, then told him quietly and without meeting his eye that of course they would keep his name on the door, keep this office for him, keep his possessions.

"I kept your stuff while you were on Abydos, didn't I? You're only going to Egypt this time. Right?"

He'd looked up to see those familiar brown eyes clouded with rejection and unhappiness, and the guilt had twisted inside him. "Egypt or somewhere like it," he'd said firmly. "Just for a few months, Jack. Just until I..." Even to Jack he couldn't say 'Just until I find myself again'. It sounded too Born Again. He wasn't waiting to be saved. He just needed to find the center of that labyrinth and everything would fall back into place.

He poured his coffee down the sink before reaching across to check his email. He had sent out feelers to every friend he had left from the past, asking for something quiet, preferably in Egypt. He didn't want to find the lost treasures of some long dead Pharaoh. Didn't need to discover Troy. He was happy to help investigate post holes, excavate an ancient rubbish tip. Help with some translation. Just somewhere out in the field with nothing to think about but the past of this world.
He'd hoped he would have heard back from John Nelson by now. As soon as Daniel sent out word that he was looking for a site to retreat to for a few months, Nelson had said he would make enquiries. He'd admitted to being in Egypt but he'd been uncharacteristically cagey when Daniel had asked him about the dig he was working on. As the days had gone by and he'd heard nothing, Daniel had begun to think there was no possibility of being able to join him. He'd picked up the phone to call his father's old friend and Daniel's sort-of godfather, Alexis Spiros, a dozen times and then thought of the explanations he'd have to make and withdrawn his hand again. He loved Alexis dearly and hoped one day he'd find the Dudael he was looking for, in reality anyway although not, he trusted, in the afterlife. To spend one's life searching for the last known resting place of a fallen angel was a dream he could relate to. Alexis was the man who had taught him Hebrew, told him the story of the Dead Sea Scrolls, read to him – probably at far too young an age – the story of the rebel angels named in the Book of Enoch, those winged footnotes in disputed Apocrypha. But Alexis was a curious man who still thought of Daniel as a boy who needed guidance. He would want a detailed explanation of where Daniel had been for the past few years and what exactly he had been doing. There would be a lecture about the papers Daniel hadn't published, the tenure he'd lost. Alexis would want assurances that Daniel had no intention of ever returning to work for the Air Force…. No, much as he cared for his godfather, Alexis was not the right man to approach in this instance. Mentally sorting through his list of past acquaintances, he once again came to the conclusion that Nelson was the only one who wouldn't make him tell him what he'd been doing since they'd last seen each other.

He knew he could probably find another dig someplace. He still had some of his old contacts, enough that he could find their phone numbers and ask a favor, and he could work with strangers if he had to. Usually one formed a good working relationship with other archaeologists very quickly, all bonded together through mutual interest and mutual enthusiasm. But when the ties that bound him to Jack, Sam, Teal'c and Hammond were so strong and so very difficult to stretch – breaking them would be an impossibility, but even stretching them was painful enough – it helped to have someone he had known as long as John Nelson and knew he could rely on to never ask awkward questions offering him a gentle bridge back to the world of ruins, dust, and dreams.

Nelson was a British archaeologist who now divided his time between New Hampshire and Egypt. A gentle scholar who, to the tangible bewilderment of almost everyone, including Nelson himself, had somehow married an heiress of great beauty and even greater determination. A kind man who had been there to shepherd him through one of his first professional digs. The fact it had ended in disaster had certainly been no fault of Nelson's. Daniel wished he could be as certain that no blame attached to himself…. Nelson wrote infrequently but at great length when he did take the trouble to communicate and was someone who had tactfully made it known in many of the darkest periods of Daniel's life that he was around, and money or a place to stay was always available if it was needed. His hair had been receding for as long as Daniel could remember, a thin hard-working man who could light up like a roman candle when he talked about a subject he loved. Someone who still had his enthusiasm and his innocence. Daniel knew that was somewhere inside himself still also, it had just become a little buried over the last few years.

Best of all, Nelson had never asked difficult questions. When he didn't hear from Daniel for over a year he hadn't worried or grown resentful. That was just the way things were. When Daniel got back in touch, that was the way things were too. When Daniel told him he couldn't tell him what he was working on, Nelson had accepted that as well. Other people wondered how quiet, unremarkable Nelson had got a wife as beautiful as Mary Silverstein, if he really deserved a woman that lovely, that funny, that clever, that good, and that rich, those four adorable children, that beautiful home in New England. Daniel wondered if Mary knew how lucky she was to have a husband so gentle, so quietly brilliant, and so kind, who loved her so unreservedly. If those four adorable children knew what a huge difference there was between having a father who was often
abroad but who one could visit simply by stepping on a plane, and having one who was dead and buried and never coming home.

The modem dialed and then dialed again. Connected. He had mail. Daniel swore if it was another internal memo he would scream…

When he clicked on his inbox, Nelson's name leapt out at him and for the first time in days his heart actually lifted.

Dear Dan,

Many apologies for the delay in getting back to you. The truth is I couldn't tell you about the dig I was working on straight away. Firstly, I had to get clearance to talk about it to anyone. And secondly, I wasn't sure that you should be told. But then Mary reminded me that you're a big boy now and it's your decision to make.

Hold onto something but we're excavating the Labyrinth again. It wasn't destroyed as we thought. I don't know why not. By rights there should be nothing left, but Daniel…it's not even dented. We've been clearing debris for the past eight months and now we're able to get back in and it doesn't seem to be scratched. No one can explain it. The damn thing went up like Vesuvius. It should be just a big hole in the ground. The pyrotechnics expert they brought in says there's some mineral in the rock that encourages combustion but inhibits corrosion. I don't think he has a clue either. All he seems to do is tap it a lot and shake his head. I know this place has some terrible associations for you but it's also the proof you were looking for thirteen years ago of the cross-pollination of ancient cultures. I know you haven't published in a while and the secrecy agreement about this place still stands, but even if you can't tell the world about it, wouldn't it be something to know you were right? There are more gods from more diverse civilizations mentioned here than on any other ancient monument. It's like a Who's Who of defunct deities…

Daniel closed his eyes, trying and failing not to remember. He could recall the excitement when they'd prized back the stone blocking the entrance. Advancing down those stairs, ignoring the warnings from the diggers that it might not be stable, wide-eyed with the wonder of it, dumbstruck by the markings on each wall, glyphs, runes, pictograms, variants he'd never seen before, variants he'd never seen before, having to touch them to see if they were real. An Aladdin's cave of mysteries, which had been hidden here unseen by any human for thousands of years. They'd thought they'd found the first unlooted tomb since Howard Carter held up his candle to illuminate the 'wonderful things' interred with King Tut. Thought they'd found another resting place for the beloved sons of dead pharaohs. But it had been so much more. It had been everything. Beside it the Rosetta Stone was a pebble on the beach, the Dead Sea Scrolls a scrapbook of unfinished crossword puzzles.

...you would be a great asset, as I'm sure you know, and this is the biggest archaeological mystery on the planet as far as I'm concerned. Forget Mohenjo-Daro. Forget Atlantis. Forget the Sphinx. There is no temple or monument anywhere that has so many different texts in so many different languages. The sheer volume and complexity of these tablets makes the head spin. Variants of old myths I've never seen anywhere before. The missing parts of so many lost tales. And all those different forms of writing. You remember what it was like? A linguist's paradise...

Then there was heat – the blast throwing him into darkness. Then the quiet of the hospital bed in Cairo, sheets as crisp as paper unexpectedly heavy against his skin, a ceiling fan turning, a beige blur he woke up to before the rest came into focus. Nelson on a chair staring at him in disbelief, then shouting that he was awake, at last, he was awake. Mary crying over him, her tears in his hair. A doctor shining a light in his eyes. Daniel asking what had happened and everyone looking at everyone else before Nelson said, with undisguised hope: "You don't remember?"
He'd closed his eyes, trying to claw it back and just for a second something had shimmered in and out of focus, darkness, tunnels, dragged, everything distorted and smeared with his own terror, but through it all a voice talking in Sumerian, telling him the Babylonian myth of Inanna's descent into the Underworld, his own culpability in that crime. Cloth ripping, a knife blade gleaming. Paralyzing fear of what was to come next… Then Rajid wrapping that blanket around him, telling him he must hurry, he must run, back to the stars, out of the mouth of hell.

"Rajid…?"

As he'd said the man's name he'd seen Nelson wince and heard Mary start crying again, and he'd known Rajid was dead. That brave old man who had known his parents and been one of his few remaining links to the past, was dead somehow because of him.

Later someone in a blue uniform with the name 'Thornton' on his chest, had shown him paper after paper in which he promised he would tell no one, publish nothing, sue no one, and told him that if he signed on the dotted line he wouldn't be blamed for the deaths or the destruction. As that was all he'd wanted, to escape what he couldn't remember, and leave behind his guilt, he'd signed and signed and signed….

It's really Alexis' dig, but he had to be airlifted to hospital after his appendix went bang. You know what that's like. He told me to tell you he blames you, he says if you wrote more often, it would never have happened. He'll be back in a few weeks but until he gets here I'm sort of in charge. He expects you to be here when he arrives so if you're planning to turn me down you'd better start working on your excuses.

There is another fly in the ointment. Given the Elamite texts, not to mention the other variants of cuneiform, I suppose it is inevitable that Darius is also here, despite everything, and as energetic, as arrogant, as absolute as ever. Apparently his medication is working although he is still convinced the US Air Force is the root of all evil. I find nodding politely makes the conversations pass so much faster than trying to reason with him these days. Mind you he has always seemed to charm the Egyptian Government into giving him anything he wants. I think they recognize that for all his faults he does care passionately about this country and this culture, and every artifact stolen from every tomb in the last four thousand years burrows under his skin like a weevil. I've seen him sit down and weep on reading accounts of objects being melted down, not because he cares about the gold but because that piece of the universal puzzle that is the past has been lost forever. That part of Darius is still intact and is still the one thing about him that reminds me of you.

Given what he did to you, I can well understand if you don't want to be here with him. I think he's safe. But I thought he was safe thirteen years ago. I really thought he was past all his old troubles although given how he came straight back to work after Anna's death I suppose we should have realized something was terribly wrong. He says he's been in therapy and knows who he is now but I don't think he remembers what he did. I know you always say you don't remember what he did either but given how close you came to… Well, anyway, he seems sane enough these days, and I hope he'll stay that way.

Mary sends you her love as always. She says you should visit more. Frankly, given that you are considerably younger and prettier than I am and even Mary is only mortal flesh and blood – although the closest thing to an angel in human form as I think you will agree – I'm very glad you stay away from Dover. What little hair I had the last time you saw me has now gone the way of the Sumerians so any 'slaphead' comments on our next meeting will be greeted with extreme hostility and resentment, especially if you still have that full head of hair I have been envying for the last ten years. Visited Rajid's grave today and it must be said Darius did him proud. It's really a tomb fit for the king of a man he was…
Daniel had to close his eyes as the grief swept through him, a chill in the blood. He'd hardly thought about Rajid for ten years. Or anything else that had happened back then. What was the point in thinking about events he didn't remember? In pining after a find that had been lost to him and everyone else in one night of horror, victim of a madman's delusions? But now he remembered Rajid fussing over him, worrying he'd been working too long, that he wasn't remembering to eat, and what would Daniel's mother say if she knew Rajid was letting him neglect himself like this…?

He was going to miss having people who worried about him. However annoying it sometimes was. He would miss that frown of concern from General Hammond, the way the man sometimes called him 'son' and Daniel felt warm all the way down to his toes. He was going to miss Sam being the over-anxious big sister, trying not to fuss, but unable to completely disguise her worry. He was going to miss the unbreachable safety that was Teal'c, and most of all he was going to miss maddening, impossible, overprotective Jack O'Neill. But if he stayed he might end up doing what he had done to Rajid: being the unwitting cause of their deaths. His judgment was faulty at the moment, instincts dulled by too many missions and not enough time to think. The same thing had happened in Egypt, when he'd allowed his reason to be blurred by a combination of curiosity, glamour and fear, by runes, and hieroglyphs, and the unquestioning certainties of someone who had turned out to be dangerously insane….

With an effort Daniel directed his attention back to Nelson's email.

...so, if you want to join us here there is a place for you and you must know how useful you would be in helping to unravel all the mysteries this place represents. You always liked a lot of questions to answer. Well, this labyrinth presents more questions than any man could find answers for in a lifetime. A linguist of your skill would be invaluable. But I can also understand if this is the last place on earth you want to be, and Darius the last man on earth you ever want to see again.

I just thought you should know this is the project I'm working on and this is the place I'd like you to be if you want to be here. If nothing else, I can promise you that if you come here you will be 'em kab hek-en-mess'.

Let me know either way.

Regards,
John

Daniel couldn't help a bittersweet smile tugging at his mouth as he read that last phrase: *em kab hek-en-mess* – in the company of friends. He had that now. That was what he would be giving up in going to Egypt.

"So what did he do?"

Daniel jumped what he was sure had to be three feet straight up in the air. He hadn't heard anyone come in. Had been lost in the world Nelson represented, hearing his voice, imagining his expressions as he typed this out. He'd been halfway back to that world, would not have been surprised to look around and already find himself in Egypt.

He wheeled around to find Jack standing behind him looking unreachable, and felt momentarily terribly exposed. How long had Jack been there, reading over his shoulder? Had he seen the comments about Darius?
"What?" He stared at him in confusion, his heart pounding unnaturally fast as he recovered from the shock. He ran a hand through his hair. "Damnit, Jack. Don't you ever knock?"

Jack just looked at him unblinking. "No. What did he do?"

"Who?"

"This Darius character?"

Daniel tried not to flinch but he guessed his rigid immobility was probably just as much of a give away. He hadn't had the dreams in so many years even though for a while after it had happened they had pursued him relentlessly like angry furies. Darius's voice rising and falling, that majestic intonation, the way a lion would speak. No wonder at Cambridge they'd nicknamed him 'Aslan'. He looked like a prophet, a king. Richard Coeur de Lion with his mane of red gold hair. Daniel's own voice, so unconvincing by comparison, trying to reason with someone incapable of understanding reason any more. Darius’s dragging him deeper into dizzying darkness…

No. That was where the memory stopped. That was the point past which it would never go. The maze lay ahead of him and at its center something too terrible to even contemplate. But he didn't remember what it was and he never would.

"Daniel?"

Daniel blinked his way back to the here and now, fighting the urge to shiver as the fragments of lost memories washed through him again. He'd almost managed to forget it had ever happened. So long ago it had practically happened to someone else.

"Nothing." He clicked off Nelson's email as he spoke so Jack couldn't read any more, pleased with how steady his voice sounded. "He didn't do anything."

He looked up to find Jack looking at him, not with the baffled anger he was expecting, but an unreadable face. Someone who wasn't baffled or angry or frustrated because he'd learned as much as he needed to know.

"Okay." Jack nodded. "See you around."

Then he was gone. As the door closed behind him, Daniel wrapped his arms around himself and shivered. So long ago, right? So long ago it didn't matter now. And he didn't remember it anyway. He doubted Darius did either. As the events of that night had been witnessed by only one person, and that one person was dead, that meant it had practically never happened. Maybe it was locked up somewhere in his subconscious. Maybe it had worn away like old lettering on sandstone. Either way it wasn't relevant because he wasn't that semi-culpable student any more. And Darius by all accounts was now more or less permanently sane.

He wondered if he would still find Darius unstable and brilliant and frightening and exciting. If the man's light still had the power to draw others to him, willing moths to his dangerous flame. If being near to him would be like standing near an active volcano and half wishing it would erupt, or if Darius on Librium was now just another middle-aged archaeology professor with yet another crackpot theory, looking for a book deal and a television tie-in.

***

Although he had no intention of ever telling Daniel, O'Neill did always knock on Carter's door. The difference being that if he wandered into Daniel's office to find the man adjusting his shorts it wouldn't bother either of them much, while if Carter was fiddling with her bra strap or something it...
would just be too disconcerting. Life was easier really if he saw Carter as genderless – not that easy with a beautiful young woman who looked and smelt as good as she did – someone who just was, in the way relatives were, a fixture who also happened to have a sex attached to them, but who wasn't defined by it. He'd tried to think of her like that in the past, then forgotten to for a while, a bad mistake that had made every one of his team, especially Carter, think the less of him and the less of her. It had certainly made him think a lot less of himself. Now Carter was back to being Carter again and he tried not to think about his period of thinking of her any other way. It was embarrassing to him and he suspected to her too. He was just relieved they could meet each other's eye again without cringing.

When she went on a date these days, he found himself less inclined to be jealous than he was to act in loco parentis, having to fight a tendency to want to know the guy's life history and particularly health records before being prepared to give his blessing. Daniel was only slightly less subtle than he was and although Carter was prepared to cut Daniel more slack than she was him, it wasn't that long since she'd given them that 'You're not my father, sir, and you're not my brother, Daniel, and if I want to date anyone I like I will do' lecture. Admittedly that had been in response to the lecture they'd given her after she'd insisted on shipping out on their cook-out to spend a weekend with a guy who in their defense had looked exactly like a Hells Angel.

Given the way guys had been dropping like flies around Carter and how emotionally raw it had left her, he and Daniel had felt they were entitled to be a little concerned. Or 'interfering' as Teal'c had called it when he'd told them that in his opinion to comment on the lawless appearance of the guy who turned up at O'Neill's house to take Carter away for the weekend would 'not be wise'.

They'd disagreed, and O'Neill had firmly beckoned Carter into his kitchen for a little talk with him and Daniel out of earshot of the tattooed and bearded gorilla on the motorbike.

Daniel had made a pretty good case for the dangers of rebound dating while still in the midst of the grieving process based on his own experiences. While O'Neill considered his own little interjection on the necessity of not getting involved with people with criminal records because of the negative impact it could have on one's promotion hopes in the Armed Forces had actually been delivered with no small degree of tact.

O'Neill had told himself afterwards that he thought the ensuing exchange was the proof that not only were he and Carter so over one another, but they had also managed to become better friends as a consequence. He figured only a friend would have bawled him out the way Carter had just done. When he stopped wincing from that rather unwarranted reminder about who the two members of SG-1 were who'd slept with the natives on missions and how it wasn't her or Teal'c, he'd probably be glad they'd managed to clear the air with that little chat. Well, that attempt at a little chat which had turned into Carter giving them the scary harpy treatment while he and Daniel flinched, tried to hide behind each other, and hoped she didn't head for the cutlery drawer.

They'd trailed after her back into his yard, chastened and subdued, to be told that quite apart from the fact they had no right to interfere in her private life whatsoever, the man on the motorbike was not in fact a Hell's Angels or a graduate of San Quentin. At which point, Teal'c looking very smug and superior, had observed that Doctor Harrison was ready to leave any time she was, Major Carter.

How were they supposed to know the guy was an astrophysicist who specialized in quantum theory? It hadn't said that anywhere on his Harley Davidson. Personally O'Neill thought astrophysicists had an obligation to look like astrophysicists and not like people called Hammer Boy Billy from Arkansas, but when he'd pointed that out, Carter had looked him and Daniel up and down in a very disconcerting way and said, "And how exactly do you think you two look?"
At the time they'd been sprawled defensively in lawn chairs in O'Neill's yard, nerve-frazzled from her lecture and needing to console themselves with beer. He'd been wearing jeans and a t-shirt and Daniel had been wearing a pair of cut offs and nothing else while his shirt dried after an accident with the beer cans O'Neill had accidentally shaken up not on purpose at all before handing them to Daniel to open. He'd got that there was probably a point Carter was making but he still wasn't sure exactly what it was. He could see that with his all over tan from that last mission to the Land of Light promoting cultural whatever it was, and endless length of leg which the somewhat skimpy nature of his cut-offs was accentuating, Daniel was looking a tad unscholarly to the uninformed observer, but Daniel had no idea how those clothes made him look and O'Neill sure as hell wasn't going to be the one to break it to him, and anyway Carter's sundress hadn't been exactly all-concealing either so she could hardly talk. And damnit, O'Neill was proud of the fact he could still get into the same jeans he'd been wearing ten years before and he didn't care if they were a little on the snug side.

He'd settled for a plaintive, "I'm off duty!"

Daniel had looked down at himself and said even more plaintively, "All archaeologists look like this."

Which had at least restored Carter's good humor. As she'd kissed Daniel on the top of the head in farewell she'd said dryly: "Daniel, if all archaeologists look the way you do right now, no sophomore without a seeing eye dog would ever major in anything else." Then she'd hugged Teal'c goodbye, pulled on a crash helmet, climbed on to the back of the Harley Davidson of the Quantum Theory Hells Angel and taken off in a roar of diesel.

So, yes, he definitely thought he and Carter were better friends these days than ever before, and the fact she felt comfortable enough with him these days to bring up every disastrous sexual encounter he'd had since she'd known him was probably a…bonding thing.

But still, wandering into her office to find her wearing only her underwear for some arcane feminine reason was not something to which he wanted to be exposed. So when he reached Carter's office, he knocked, said her name, gave her the grace of one second precisely to tell him not to come in if she didn't want him to, and then entered.

She was studying her computer screen with the kind of rapt attention Daniel usually reserved for artifacts. She was also muttering in a way disconcertingly similar to Daniel's and making rapid notes on a piece of paper.

"How can they keep things like this from…?"

"Carter…?"

At the sound of her voice she also did the guilty start he'd just witnessed from Daniel and made an ineffectual effort to block the screen with her body by swiveling around in her chair.

He gave her a long level look. "Carter…?"

She looked like a kid who'd been caught with her hand in the cookie jar and there was a definite note of resignation in her: "Sir?"

He decided to dispense with asking for an explanation and just leant over her shoulder to read what was on the screen. "You been surfing porn sites, Major?"

She rolled her eyes. "Yes, Colonel. I've been watching those all-male, all naked, Greco-Roman
wrestling bouts again."

He stared at the graphs and tables she had been examining, and then looked at her sideways. "Well, you seem to have accidentally hacked into Area 51 while you were doing it."

"Oops." As he raised an eyebrow interrogatively she looked defensive. "They won't answer my requests to share data and there's no reason for them not to. We're working on the same project. I'm having to waste time repeating experiments they've already carried out…"

He held up his hands in surrender. "You don't need to yell at me about it."

"It's a waste of my time and the SGC's money for me to replicate work that's already been done when I can just…"

"Illegally obtain their data?" he prompted.

She darted him a look, trying to work out how disapproving he was, but he could do deadpan, and, unlike Daniel, she didn't know him well enough to read his mind. Which was probably just as well on occasion. "Well… Sometimes I also think we need to make sure they're not…"

"Planning anything else that might get one of us killed?"

Relief flickered across her face. "Exactly."

He shrugged. "I have no problem with that. Especially as I don't know about it. Because I never saw this and we never had this conversation."

She nodded. "Understood."

He tapped her monitor. "If you can hack into Area 51, I figure you can find out some information for me."

"Probably. What do you want to know?"

"It's about an archaeologist called Darius something, specializes in cuneiform. He was on a dig with Daniel about thirteen years ago someplace in Egypt. Also a guy called John Nelson. Also someone called…" Noticing her lack of activity, he looked at her in exasperation. "Why aren't you writing this down?"

Carter sat back in her chair and folded her arms. "Sir, can I speak frankly?"

"Sure."

"Daniel's made his decision and I think we should respect it. He feels he needs some time away from the SGC."

He glared at her. "So?"

She returned his gaze defiantly. "Well, with the greatest respect, sir, I'm not prepared to spy on him and I don't think you should either. Professional paranoia might be appropriate when dealing with NID, but these people are archaeologists. They're no danger to him and there's no reason for us to be going behind his back trespassing into his private life or anyone else's."

He picked up a pen from her desk. "Are you done?"

"Yes."
He pulled her notepad over and wrote down the details as he said them aloud. "Darius Someone, an archaeologist who specializes in cuneiform. John Nelson, another archaeologist. Currently working on some site in Egypt. Both of them worked with Daniel on the same dig which as far as I can make out isn't in Daniel's personnel file."

"Sir, did you hear anything I just said?"

"Carter, I have a good reason for asking for these checks."

She shook her head. "I'm sorry, sir, it's not enough. You're asking me to go behind Daniel's back and check up on his friends and I won't do it."

He drew a circle around the word 'Darius’s and stabbed it with his pen. "Thirteen years ago this guy did something which put Daniel in hospital, apparently for quite a long time. This guy is going to be on the dig that Daniel is going to be flying out to on Monday. I need to know that history isn't going to repeat itself or I would be failing in my duties as Daniel's CO and as his friend."

Indecision washed across her face, but when he saw the way her fingers were already reaching for the keyboard he knew he'd won her over. "Hospital?" she echoed faintly.

"For a 'long time' apparently."

"Darius Someone?"

"Specializes in cuneiform. On a dig with Daniel and this Nelson guy in Egypt thirteen years ago."

She was already typing. Over her shoulder she said, "I'll get right on it."

He patted her on the shoulder. "I knew I could count on you, Carter."

When he left the room she was already calling up pictures and text. He just hoped she came up with something before Daniel's flight left for Egypt.

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"Some puzzles for you to start solving, Dan. These are just some of the inscriptions that have got us all stumped. Alexis is convinced that the answer to the last resting place of Azazel lies in Chamber KL6 so he told me to tell you to start there… But as he's in Cairo and I'm the one emailing you I'm sure you'll agree with me that the half-obliterated inscription under the glyphs for Nekheny is much more interesting….""
rediscovering pure archaeology as a search for the history of the lost civilizations of this world, because it was a shock on a par with a bucket of ice water being emptied down the back of his neck, to click on that third picture from Nelson and find himself staring at what were unmistakably Goa'uld symbols.

Clicking off the picture as though it was on fire, he snatched his hand away from the mouse. For an insane second he thought about pretending he hadn't seen it, that he didn't know. No one on the dig would be able to translate them, after all. Then five years of being a part of the SGC reasserted itself too strongly to ignore. He might be poised on the brink of returning to his old life as an archaeologist but at the moment he was still technically a member of this facility, and had been fighting this battle too long to just walk past.

*The only way to win is to deny it battle....*

Yes, but this wasn't just denying the battle, this was denying information to his friends which might be useful to them. What if he told no one, flew to Egypt, and the next day Sam, Teal'c or Jack were killed off world because he had failed to provide them with some information that might have saved them? What if there was information in the Labyrinth of Nekheny that might be recorded nowhere else which could help them in their battle against the Goa'uld?

He groaned inwardly. He wanted to leave this behind and become an Egyptologist again. But he couldn't because the Goa'uld hadn't just messed up his own life, they had also messed up the history of his whole world. And he was now not only an archaeologist but also someone committed to the fight against them, even if he did occasionally need a vacation from it. He couldn't stop being an unwilling foot soldier in that war even if he left the SGC.

Daniel clicked on the picture again and looked at the inscription. Then he sighed, printed it out, and walked slowly towards General Hammond's office.

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As he knocked and entered Hammond's office, Daniel saw Hammond slowly replacing the phone. The older man looked far from happy, and when Daniel darted a glance to his left there was Jack with that buttoned-down look on his face, which also told him better than an internal memo that everything in the garden was far from lovely.

"Sit down, Doctor Jackson." There was gentle regret and more than a hint of apology in Hammond's face.

Looking at the general, Daniel felt another painful twinge of guilt. It was hurting Hammond to let him leave this place, he knew that. The guilt was made worse because the man had tried so very hard to accommodate him and, after listening to his initial explanation of why he felt it necessary to go, hadn't tried to reason him out of it, or offer a single word of reproach, he'd just done all he could to give him what he wanted.

Daniel sat down, still studying Hammond's face. "Is there a problem?"

"Things just got a little complicated." Jack sounded angry. The way he always did when he couldn't vent where he wanted to vent and the frustration was building up. He'd looked and sounded just like that when he'd left Daniel crying on the floor of the 'gateroom nursing his broken arm beside the body of the dead Reese.

"Because of the Goa'uld inscription?" Daniel looked between them. He knew Jack was looking for an excuse to stop him leaving, but he wasn't going to let this be it. "Why? We knew the Goa'uld
used to be on this world. It's not so surprising we found some of their script on an ancient monument but that doesn't mean…"

"Because of the Air Force," Hammond admitted with a sigh.

Daniel blinked at him in confusion. "What?"

Jack shrugged, the anger still coming off him in waves. "Right hand not knowing what the left hand is doing kind of thing."

Daniel shook his head. "What?"

Hammond leant forward. "Doctor Jackson, it appears that the original excavation of this site was carried out under the supervision of the United States Air Force. As you know we have a good relationship with the Egyptian Government…"

He had a sudden flashback to Darius sitting in front of the campfire, swigging from a bottle of Coke heavily laced with whiskey, saying "Have you ever had resources like this available on a dig? All the equipment we need? All the time we need? And in return all we have to do is sell our souls to the US military…"

Nelson saying, "What does it matter who's funding it? We're not going to be uncovering any five thousand year old nuclear weapons the Air Force can use anyway. I seriously doubt there is anything in the labyrinth that could have any possible military use so, as that's the case, I'm all for some money that would otherwise be going to help the US Government kill people being used to further our knowledge of Predynastic Egyptian history…"

Daniel hadn't been sure where he stood on the matter but he was inclined to agree with Nelson. What did it matter where the money came from when by being used for archaeology it couldn't possibly end up having any military application? But, of course, if the USAF had known about the Goa'uld and their technology and believed the Labyrinth to have some connection to both then their funding made sense. Except they couldn't have known about the System Lords back then because no human being on Earth had known about the Goa'uld until he and Jack had stepped through the 'gate which took them to Abydos and first looked into the glowing eyes of Ra.

Daniel put a hand up to his head. "There were Goa'uld hieroglyphs on the outside of the doors. They were the first thing we saw when the coverstone was lifted. But how did the US Air Force…?"

"Naquada." Hammond sighed. "It seems that a part of the structure was exposed and preliminary mineral tests by the Egyptian Government revealed a previously unknown element. The assumption in their labs was that the stone from which the sample was taken could not be manmade after all but must be part of a meteorite. They asked for assistance from NASA on identifying the element…"

He knew enough about how these things worked now to imagine the chain of events. Everything NASA did was probably monitored by people who were aware of the SGC. SGC or at least NID scientists would have jumped on that mineral analysis in an instant as soon as they realized there was another structure in Egypt that matched the composition of the Stargate. Then the negotiations would begin. Money and weapons and no doubt considerable concessions of a diplomatic nature, and at the end of it the USAF had bought themselves the right to an archaeological dig on Egyptian soil which Egyptian archaeologists had already assessed and written off as a hoax site anyway.

Hammond nodded as if he were also a little ashamed of the way these things were done. "At the
time we were unaware of the existence of the Goa'uld. We were only aware of the fact that the Stargate was constructed from an entirely new element and that this archaeological find was made from the same material. Now, of course, our Government considers it of even more vital importance that the dig takes place under the aegis of the United States Air Force."

So much for his great escape. His way back to archaeology was turning into another mission for the SGC. "I guess there's no such thing as a get out of Cheyenne Mountain free card."

"Hey, we didn't know."

Jack's vehemence made him start a little. He looked at him in surprise and saw that Jack was bubbling with suppressed anger.

"I never thought you did."

"There's nothing on your personnel file about this dig – which was my first clue something was a little strange about it. Hammond and I had no idea it wasn't kosher until you brought in those pictures and we did some checking."

Hammond nodded. "I'm still asking questions, but the evidence so far suggests the NID funded and monitored the previous excavation as well as this one. However, on the previous occasion the details of that excavation were never passed onto this facility."

The officer who had made him sign all those papers had seemed enormous to him back then, so military it was impossible to see the human-being underneath, just a shiny blue uniform, and the wings on his breast, those colored markings that were something to do with campaigns fought and probably won in someone else's backyard. "A man called Thornton from the US Air Force came to see me in the hospital. I thought it was because I was an American citizen or because the explosives might have come from a military installation."

Hammond continued evenly, "I think we should look on this as a good thing. It means our government has been on top of the situation from the start. Any information pertaining to the Stargate that might emerge as a result of this excavation will now come directly to this facility as well as to Area 51 and you will be able to take your sabbatical from Cheyenne Mountain on full pay as you will undoubtedly be assisting in the Stargate program."

No, it meant he wasn't taking a sabbatical at all. He was just being sent on another mission for the SGC. And getting the fun of having to return to archaeology under what were effectively false pretenses. What's more he didn't get to share the truth of his findings with the other members of his profession. Whooppeee-doo.

"Nelson and the others know this is an Air Force sponsored gig, Daniel."

He'd forgotten Jack's ability to read his mind. He turned to see the man looking at him in a mixture of disapproval and pleading for him not to be difficult. But he was feeling difficult right now. He understood how Reese had felt, a five year old's mind trapped in an adult's body. Right now he knew exactly how it felt to want to throw someone at a wall.

Hammond nodded. "Yes. I presume Nelson would have told you on your arrival. This will save him having to break the news to you."

"Super." Daniel didn't even try to pretend that wasn't a false smile. This wasn't what he wanted in any way but it was also unavoidable. How could he not go when he was so obviously the best, if not the only, man for this job? Who else connected to the Stargate program could get a legitimate
invitation to this dig that would raise no suspicions whatsoever? Who else could liaise with other archaeologists while ensuring NID didn't get to grab some new and terrifying weapon without having to tell anyone else about it?

"We don't like this any more than you do." Jack was still glaring at him as if it was somehow his fault, but, looking behind the surface anger, Daniel saw the anxiety and frustration there. The way Jack looked when Daniel was getting hurt by some means that he felt was avoidable.

Hammond shuffled some papers on his desk, not meeting Daniel's eye as he added, "Given the circumstances, I feel it would be in everyone's interests if there was a visible representative of the US Air Force on the site to keep an eye on things and to ensure that both the archaeologists and the NID share anything they learn with this facility."

And because last time I worked on this dig I ended up in a coma, and you know all about that now. You probably know more about it than I do, and even if you don't yet I just bet you'll find some means to uncover it.... It was an immediate consolation to realize that this time Hammond could pull every string and call in every favor he liked, but there was no way for him to uncover information that was locked in the inaccessible regions of Daniel's psyche.

Daniel turned his head to look at Jack. "You're going to be coming with me." It wasn't a question.

Jack returned his gaze. "Can you think of anyone better?"

And if he was honest he couldn't. He remembered the Air Force officer with the shiny buttons and the unreadable face behind his mirrored sunglasses having the kind of personality that paralyzed opposition, while Darius was of the same ilk. It was going to take someone with the hide of a rhinoceros and the determination of a bulldozer to make sure this project was kept secret and the information was funneled to the right people through the right channels. But that didn't alter the fact Jack had been looking for a way to either stop him going or to muscle in on this trip from the start and this had provided him with exactly the 'in' he was looking for. So, although Daniel might have to put up with it that didn't mean he was going to pretend to be happy about it.

Daniel got to his feet. "No I can't. I can see exactly why you're the best man for this job." He looked Jack in the eye. "But that doesn't mean I have to like it.

The smile Jack gave him was downright facetious but there was vulnerability behind the unreachable exterior. Jack had never taken rejection well. "What, you don't want my company?"

Daniel didn't want to hurt him but he wasn't going to lie. "No, Jack. Just this once, I don't. I want to get the hell away from you, from the SGC, and from the Goa'uld."

"Well, I want to go fishing, not babysitting grave-robbers in Egypt. So I guess no one's getting what he wants this time out." Despite the brittle defiance, there was still a flicker of hurt in those brown eyes.

Daniel looked across at Hammond, feeling sick inside as he realized he was never going to escape this damned life however hard he tried, and now he was going to have to face his old demons with Jack having a ringside seat. "Can I go, sir? If we're leaving tomorrow morning I've got a lot to get ready."

"Of course, son." Hammond's eyes were full of concern for him. Daniel knew the general was torn between calling him back and telling him he didn't have to do this, and knowing that Daniel was the best man for this job. Just as Jack was the best man to make sure he carried out that job. It just wasn't a job he wanted to do right now.
"I'll pick you up at six-thirty a.m. Make sure you're packed and ready to go." Jack's shout followed him out into the hallway but he didn't acknowledge it, just closing Hammond's door behind him, taking extra care to shut it carefully because the urge to slam it was so strong. The frustrated anger made him want to weep all over again and his arm began to throb in its sling just to remind how much life sucked. Even knowing it was unfair couldn't stop his resentment that somehow Jack had managed to hijack his escape plan. All this time and effort to get away from everything that Jack represented only to have Jack assigned to come along and hold his hand. Whether it was Jack's fault or not, Jack had got what he wanted, and Daniel very emphatically hadn't. Right now that seemed like reason enough to not like Jack very much.

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II: Egypt

It was a long flight from Colorado Springs to Cairo. Unnecessarily long in O'Neill's opinion although not as mind-numbingly nightmarish as Daniel had wanted in the first place. Daniel had been adamant that he wanted to travel to Egypt like a 'normal person'. O'Neill had pointed out that 'normal people' had to take a three hour flight from Colorado Springs to St Louis, before taking a three hour flight to JFK where they had the sheer joy of a six hour wait before the thrill of an eighteen hour flight to Cairo, before another four hour wait before catching a flight to Aswan in the hope that they might by then still have retained enough will to live to hope that someone had arrived to pick them up to take them to the middle of nowhere dig they were heading for. Whereupon Daniel had got seriously pissy with him and yelled that he didn't care, that was how he wanted to do it.

After O'Neill had pointed out, with what patience he had left, that this was nuts and his knees couldn't take all that hanging around even if Daniel's skinny little ass could, Daniel had said that no one was forcing him to come, so there. Well, he hadn't actually said 'so there' but O'Neill had been pretty sure he'd added it mentally. Rebelling internally but knowing it was pointless arguing with Daniel when he was like this, he'd handed over the travel arrangements to Hammond, mentioning Daniel's request that it should be as non-USAF as possible and that he thought Daniel deserved first class accommodation in whatever piece of crap domestic airplane they ended up flying but that if he had to spend more than two hours waiting for a flight to anywhere he was going to kill someone, probably Daniel.

Hammond had managed a tactful compromise, which still meant they'd had to spend eighteen hours on a tourist flight to Cairo, but had cut through the pissing about getting them from Colorado to JFK. An Air Force jet had flown them into the airport an hour before departure and they'd settled themselves into the first class department with minutes to spare.

He'd hoped Daniel might be feeling a little sheepish about his earlier outburst, but if he was grateful to have been spared all that hanging around in airports he was hiding it well and looked downright mutinous when shepherded onto the jet at Colorado Springs, snatching his bag away from O'Neill when he tried to carry it for him to spare his still recovering wrist. The way Daniel winced told O'Neill better than any rebuke from him that Daniel's action had been seriously dumb, but he still hung onto his bag like grim death, utterly refusing to allow O'Neill to put it in the overhead locker for him, whereupon O'Neill had thrown in the towel, let him do what was probably permanent injury to his wrist bone if that was what he wanted, and asked the flight attendant for the biggest whiskey available.
The eighteen-hour flight to Cairo was not made any shorter by the way he and Daniel were being so polite to one another. It felt...odd to be unwanted by Daniel. It wasn't a feeling he was used to. Taken for granted, yes, resented, no. He did sympathize. Daniel had been all psyched up to get away from them for a while. He'd been planning to miss them and send them postcards, to worry about them fighting the Goa'uld without him...and then to gradually forget about them. Not completely, of course, but just the way one did on a vacation. The ordinary life receded, problems which had seemed so pressing back home just faded into the distance. That was why people went away, to escape from all that everyday stuff. At some point O'Neill had become part of the everyday stuff that Daniel needed to escape from, and here he was tagging along for the ride like an unpaid electricity bill or a leaking roof tile insisting on sunning itself on the beach right next to him.

So perhaps it was no wonder they had sat beside each other on the plane, politely passing menus back and forth, politely moving their legs aside so the other one could get out to use the bathroom, politely apologizing if they encroached upon each other's space. That was why O'Neill had insisted they were flown first class. He felt the USAF could afford it and he also felt Daniel needed to have particularly gentle handling on this trip. He was wounded, resentful, unhappy, and probably more than a little nervous about going back to a place that had damned near killed him on the last trip out. O'Neill was also going to be invading Daniel's world in a place where Daniel presumably felt most vulnerable, a walking piece of culture shock. All things about which O'Neill had been forced to remind himself with some emphasis several times on the flight over when Daniel was being so annoyingly distant to him and taking such care that even their elbows shouldn't accidentally touch.

Daniel kept himself absorbed reading through the mass of paperwork Nelson had sent him. Paperwork he conspicuously hadn't offered to have copied for O'Neill even though this was now an official SGC mission. O'Neill retaliated by reading his official briefing documents with grim determination, even though Daniel could probably have told him everything that was in them far more palatably and in half the time.

Carter hadn't been able to find out much about Darius Golding or the other archaeologists on the dig as yet, except the information that was readily available about his professional life. O'Neill had read the hastily compiled dossier she'd given him on Daniel's work colleagues on the plane only when Daniel was asleep. Although it wasn't something he necessarily wanted Daniel to know, part of being a team leader did mean being able to absorb all relevant information in a short a time as possible. So, yes, he read the mission briefings. He was just selective about the parts of them he read, and just as he knew damned well Daniel skipped everything relating to the topography of the planet and what this might mean from a military perspective, he tended to junk the science or the anthropological aspects which he didn't need to know and Carter or Daniel could give him the short version of later. Even Sherlock Holmes had been careful not to fill his mind up with information he didn't need so as to leave more room for the information he did and O'Neill felt he was just following the great man's example.

This time, however, even though Daniel had the wherewithal to give him a wonderfully in-depth briefing on all his work colleagues, he hadn't asked for it. He had a feeling Daniel's version was going to leave too much out, especially all the information that O'Neill most wanted to know. So he soldiered through it on his own, with the net result that he now knew that the British guy, John Nelson, was an expert on something called the Early Dynastic Period, while Darius Golding, the American, was a world expert on all variants of cuneiform. A Norwegian archaeologist called Inga Stark specialized in runes. Sanjay Zaheer was an expert on Indian mythology, and Hélène Bouldieu was a French-Canadian Egyptologist. Alexis Spiros, the Greek specialist on Ancient Hebrew and author of some book on the 'Atlas of the Apocrypha' which had sent O'Neill into a coma within the first two paragraphs, had been taken ill with acute intestinal problems and had had to be flown to Cairo for an emergency operation. Suspicious as he was of the NID, even O'Neill wasn't didn't believe
they had spiked some poor old grave robber's soup with ground up leopard whiskers or something just to leave room on the dig for one of the few archaeologists in the world who knew how to translate even more dead languages than Spiros. But it wasn't because he didn't think NID were capable of casually injuring someone just to further their own ends, but because he knew damned well no one from the NID had been telling him to put a bullet in that robot, and that was the main reason why Daniel was available for this dig.

What Carter had managed to come up with on Darius Golding so far was only the inquest report on his wife's death, papers published, lectures given, letters in archaeological periodicals printed, and a long list of professional qualifications, but O'Neill had brought along his laptop and intended to be sending her regular reminders until she got him the info he'd asked for. He also asked Hammond to pull some strings, pointing out that what might previously have been considered an unwarranted intrusion into Daniel's personal life, was now essential information that might be of vital importance in a mission to recover possible Goa'uld technology. The fact that as Daniel's friend it was just plain driving him nuts not to know how Daniel had ended up in hospital and if it was likely to happen again was neither here nor there.

When he looked at a photograph of Golding from some dig near Iraq in the eighties, the man couldn't have looked saner. He was imposing-looking, even magnificent in the way he stood there bare-chested in the sunlight, biceps and pectorals gleaming, holding up an inscribed slate in triumph, like Moses with the Ten Commandments. His head was thrown back, mane of red-gold hair rippling around his shoulders, a fine dusting of sand in his beard, chest hair, and on his sweat-sheened skin. Six foot four according to his file, and famous for being able to move great blocks of stone by himself. The native workers apparently revered him almost as a god. After their recent experience with K'tano, O'Neill wasn't in the mood to be impressed by that, it just rang his warning bells. But, looking at Golding, he could see not a single trace of insanity on his face, just the kind of self-confidence that bordered upon arrogance. Someone who knew his stuff and didn't suffer fools gladly, O'Neill would have said from a first glance, and he could relate to that. There was nothing there to suggest this was a man who would go frighteningly loco after the death of his wife, only that the force of his personality might be overwhelming in a small room. Golding didn't look like a bad guy, he had to admit. If anything he looked all too much like a hero. It was only when O'Neill thought about Daniel as he must have been thirteen years ago, of how vulnerable he must have been back then, physically and emotionally, how innocent and how brilliant, how knowledgeable about everything old and dusty and decayed, and how ignorant about some of the darker parts of human nature that he felt a stir of misgiving.

He remembered the long-haired Daniel of Abydos stumbling into that Goa'uld-blasted room in search of a wife who had ended up being lost forever, saying "This is all my fault…" Then he took off almost a decade of experience. Then he looked back into the eyes of a Golding who was gazing straight into the camera, holding that inscription triumphantly aloft and realized who it was that Golding reminded him of: Hercules, the demi-god of mythology. Not a bad guy, maybe, but not someone he would have handed a twenty-three year old Daniel over to for safe-keeping either.

Daniel had told Teal'c the story of Hercules one night around the campfire on some distant world, explaining all the reasons why the show Teal'c had apparently watched that night was wrong, wrong, wrong in so many of its depictions of the mythological superhero. O'Neill had been tuning a lot of it out but he did remember that despite Hercules' fifty sons, according to Daniel, Hercules and Iolaus were definitely a lot more than good friends, and Hercules had apparently spent most of his life doing good-looking young men and then mourning their passing when they were abducted by watery tarts or whatever. The other thing which had stuck vividly in his mind was Daniel telling Teal'c that Hercules had killed his own wife and sons in a fit of madness, yet he was still considered one of the good guys despite being responsible for the death of his own children. He and Daniel had exchanged a glance across the sparking fire and Daniel had faltered and changed
the subject. Carter had chipped in complaining that some woman out of mythology who'd done the same thing was always regarded as a villain, but Hercules was still regarded as a hero and why was that…? O'Neill had gone for a walk around the moonlit perimeter, trying to blot out the echo of that gunshot and all the time aware of Daniel watching him with sorrowful and guilty eyes.

Wincing at the memory, O'Neill shoved the photograph of Golding back into the folder and pushed it into his briefcase. He wasn't a briefcase kind of guy, too close to using bullet-points for his comfort, but this trip out he was the one the Air Force had wanted carrying a briefcase. Looking at Golding’s physique he just hoped that by the end of the trip he wasn't wishing that he were carrying a P90 instead.

As they touched down in Cairo, O'Neill risked a look at Daniel's pale, closed-off face and realized that whether Daniel intended it or not, he was going to end up feeling very excluded on this trip. O'Neill was someone Daniel didn't want to be with right now, and he wasn't going to be in the mood to include an Air Force colonel, even one he had literally been through hell with, in archaeological conversations when he was already resentful of being effectively turned into an Air Force spy. He had problems of his own to do with coming back to this place, and these people, which, judging by the way his knuckles were white on his luggage handles, were taking up most of his thoughts. O'Neill was more unwanted by Daniel on this trip than he had ever been before, and even though he'd thought he was prepared for it, O'Neill had to admit, it really hurt.

They arrived in Cairo at four-thirty in the afternoon. He'd thought Daniel might relax when he was back in his beloved Egypt but he just seemed more tense and quiet. So much so that it wasn't really an effort to overlook his annoying behavior. It stung a little that Daniel didn't want him here, certainly, but this wasn't Daniel 'acting out', Daniel was going into a situation that seemed to be jangling every nerve in his body and he didn't want any witnesses to it. O'Neill wished that Daniel could have found his presence comforting, but for some reasons O'Neill wasn't too sure about, O'Neill being with him was apparently just making everything worse.

He suggested they had a quick look around the city while they killed the four hours before their EgyptAir flight left for Aswan, but Daniel shook his head. "You go if you want to."

Despite the 'go away and leave me alone' body language Daniel kept consciously or unconsciously throwing in his direction, O'Neill knew him too well to be able to ignore the scared, help me, help me, body language behind it, so he stuck around, dozing fitfully in an uncomfortable airport chair, while trying to keep an eye on Daniel without appearing to do so.

The EgyptAir plane was small and felt disconcertingly light as the wind buffeted across the sands but at least this was almost the final leg of this journey from hell and both he and his knees were grateful for that. He knew that he was passing over places of great mystery and significance to Daniel. The Memphis that had nothing to do with Elvis. The Fayyum Daniel was prone to bang on about incessantly if not stopped or distracted. Thebes. Karnak and Luxor. The Valley of the Kings. They were all around here somewhere. Daniel could probably have spent a happy lifetime digging around in these old ruins now invisible in the darkness beneath them, their mournful silence drowned out by the engine noise of the plane, but the Goa'uld had found him out. He'd stumbled on the clues they'd left which other lesser archaeologists hadn't seen, and been drawn from one Abydos to another by his own curiosity and the apparently inexorable will of destiny. For all they knew the coverstone that had killed Daniel's parents had been carved to honor some departed Goa'uld. No wonder he felt he was never going to escape from the System Lords. Some days it must seem to Daniel that his life had been as distorted and disfigured by their influence as Teal'c's.
Daniel had the window seat but there was nothing to see out there in the blackness. All the same he kept his face pressed to the glass, gazing out into the nothingness with quiet desperation, as if he was searching for something he knew he was never going to find. O'Neill found it hurt to look at him, so turned away and studied the other occupant of the plane instead. Even feeling over-sized, over-fed and decidedly foreign was better than seeing that look in Daniel's eyes and feeling for the first time in a very long time that Daniel not only was taking no comfort from his presence, he didn't even know he was there.

They staggered out into the airport at Aswan at ten o'clock in the evening, punch-drunk from too many hours of traveling, inhaling dust and sand they could taste but couldn't see, the heat evaporated, just leaving a trace in the exhausted feel to the air.

O'Neill wished he'd insisted they both stayed in the Hotel Cataract like he'd wanted to, because he was beat and Daniel looked as wiped as he felt. But Daniel had insisted he just wanted to 'get there', even though that meant they would be driving through the night. Knowing there was a luxurious hotel right here in this city that he could be heading for even now and instead he was going to have to rattle through the desert for hours was making him grit his teeth in irritation. When he had to endure hardship he endured it, if not uncomplainingly, at least without too much bitching, but this felt self-inflicted to him. They could have made this journey in easy stages and even if Daniel was determined to wear a hair shirt for the duration he didn't see why he had to. O'Neill mentally resolved that even if he had to chloroform Daniel to do it, they were both going home on an Air Force jet.

He was in Daniel's territory now and he waited for Daniel to take charge the way he had on Abydos, the way he did on new worlds where they spoke old tongues that only he could understand. But Daniel looked as dazed as he felt and sick with exhaustion. Even though this place must have been more familiar to him than it was to O'Neill, Daniel looked around the airport as though he'd never seen it before, and had no idea how he came to be there.

O'Neill had his mouth open to say, "You don't have to do this" when he realized that if he said it, Daniel would bite his head off. There was nothing worse, when every nerve in your body was clearly jangling like a cymbal, than having someone else pointing out that not only had they noticed, they were going to be tactless enough to tell you they had. He closed his mouth and realized that if ever there was a mission when Daniel needed handling with kid gloves this was it, and if ever there was a time when he needed to think not once, not twice, but probably thrice, before he opened his mouth, then this was also it.

He thought it was probably a relief to both of them when that quiet but undoubtedly affectionate, "Dan…?" made them both turn around.

He'd seen Nelson's picture so he knew who this guy was. He had less hair than in the photograph, the top of his head entirely bald now, with hair only in thin half moons at the side of his head above each ear. He wore something shapeless and beige and was very thin, the outline of his skull clearly visible, but his eyes were very kind, and full of warmth as his gaze rested on Daniel.

"John…" Daniel's face crinkled into the kind of smile O'Neill hadn't seen enough of over the past five years.

"Good to see you again." Nelson reached out and shook his hand vigorously, then after a slightly embarrassed shrug, gave him a tentative hug, patting him on the shoulder awkwardly as they disengaged.
O'Neill wondered if all Brits were as crap at self-expression as this guy was or if it was just an archaeologist thing. Nelson and Daniel were staring at each other like long lost brothers, radiating happiness to see one another again, and the best they could manage was a stumbling mention of the other's name and an incredibly awkward hug. Daniel hadn't really responded to Nelson's embrace, but O'Neill knew from experience he never did. He liked being patted and hugged the way children did, seemed to take comfort from the physical contact, but it never occurred to him that he could reciprocate in any way. When Daniel had been even two years younger O'Neill hadn't felt embarrassed about grabbing him and hugging him until his ribs creaked, or ruffling his hair, and patting him on the back. There had been something childlike about Daniel that stopped it seeming an invasion of his personal space, but too much life experience had eroded his innocence and he was less...huggable now, too unmistakably an adult. Daniel had erected an invisible barrier around himself, as if he needed a force field to shelter behind while he thought far too much about far too many things. All the same, O'Neill liked to think that however prickly and grown up Daniel might become, if he hadn't seen him for ten years he would just grab him and squeeze the breath straight out of him, not pat him awkwardly on the arm while shaking his hand.

Nelson noticed O'Neill at last and held out a hand, while darting a curious look in Daniel's direction. "John Nelson. How do you do, Mister…?"

"Colonel Jack O'Neill." Daniel introduced him in a neutral tone O'Neill didn't much care for. "He's representing the United States Air Force." And nothing to do with me, seemed to be the unspoken rider.

Nelson shook his hand anyway, and his eyes were still warm. "Pleased to meet you."

"You too." O'Neill made the effort to be civil. After all Nelson was definitely one of the good guys here. "Any friend of Daniel's is a friend of mine."

Daniel darted him a quick look to see if he was being facetious, but O'Neill wasn't and Daniel knew him well enough to know that. He gave O'Neill an apologetic wince then turned back to Nelson. "Colonel O'Neill and I work together sometimes."

Colonel O'Neill? As he and Daniel followed Nelson out to the jeep, O'Neill felt himself bristle at that use of his title in a way that surprised him. There had been missions when he'd have preferred it if Daniel could be bothered to remember his rank, especially when they were trying to impress some alien culture with really big weapons. But he hadn't realized how much he took it for granted that he was 'Jack' to Daniel, what a little spot of warmth the way Daniel said his name always gave him, until he'd stopped saying it. Daniel was now the only person left in his life who called him 'Jack'. Not hearing it again was going to hurt. 'Jack' meant a whole lot of things to him, it especially meant that Daniel saw him as someone human, vulnerable, his friend, when to others he was 'O'Neill' or 'Colonel' or 'Colonel O'Neill'. There was a lot of power in names and as an anthropologist he knew Daniel knew that.

He looked at Daniel sideways. "How very formal, Doctor Jackson."

Daniel darted him a begging look he didn't at all understand. It was the standard 'Don't make a scene. Don't show me up' look he had used to get from his wife at parties on a regular basis, but with a wraparound of desperation that he couldn't really equate to the current situation. Daniel definitely seemed to want him to hide something from the other archaeologists, even Nelson, and as far as he could make out, that seemed to be the fact they were friends. That hurt so much it practically took his breath away and he was determined that the first time they were alone he was going to have this out with Daniel. After five years of watching each other's backs on missions he didn't appreciate having to pretend they were just nodding acquaintances.
Nelson was directing them towards his jeep, apologizing for the suspension, or lack of it, in advance. O'Neill heard him murmur to Daniel, "Darius wanted to come, but I told him I thought it was better if he didn't..."

Daniel's response was inaudible but O'Neill saw him flinch. The wind was unexpectedly chilly, whipping at his blue shirt, the stars very low and bright. Daniel still sounded strained as he asked: "How's Alexis?"

"Still in hospital but recovering well. Raring to get back here, and looking forward to seeing you again. Scary when it happened though. The projectile vomiting had to be seen to be believed..."

O'Neill tossed his suitcase into the back, then loaded the other bags which contained all the equipment with which the Air Force had entrusted him, but when he automatically went to take Daniel's hold-all from him Daniel hung onto it as though it was the Ark of the Covenant. "What is up with you?" O'Neill hissed at him, giving the bag a firm tug.

"Nothing." Daniel let go of the handle quickly.

O'Neill winced as his shoulder was almost pulled out of its socket. "Jesus, Daniel, how many books have you got in here?"

"I told you I could handle it." Daniel darted an anxious look at Nelson.

"I'm not saying I can't handle it. I'm saying you always pack too many books." O'Neill tossed Daniel's bag into the back along with his. "Did you bring your laptop or just your entire library?"

"Yes," Daniel said in near-desperation, giving him a full-on begging look as he did so.

Realizing that this was Daniel's most blatant Shut up! Shut up! Shut up! expression, O'Neill shut up, although this time not without a shake of the head he couldn't suppress.

It was a long and bumpy drive across the desert road, but he was almost glad of the time span. He needed this journey to adjust to being this unwanted piece of luggage Daniel was having to drag along with him. However, he did intend to reverse that process as soon as it was humanly possible, when Daniel got over his current neurosis about being associated with him, or possibly with the uniform he wore. He still wasn't quite sure what Daniel's problem was with him at the moment. He also thought this was his best, and possibly only chance, to demonstrate to Daniel that he could, in fact, learn to play nice with others, even others who were archaeologists. As he had a more than sneaking suspicion he and Darius Golding were not going to hit it off, he also thought trying to prove to the much more amenable Nelson what an all around okay guy he was might not be a bad idea. Especially as he apparently wasn't going to have Daniel as an ally once they reached the site, and might well need one when faced with a matched set of grave robbers.

He had long since learned with Daniel that the fastest way to mollify him if he was angry or win his gratitude if he wasn't angry was to ask for information from him and actually listen to the whole answer, if at all possible asking intelligent questions in the process. He didn't like to do it too often in case Daniel started to expect it of him and reverted to doing what he used to do in the old days – bouncing into O'Neill's office at any time of the day and night like Tigger on speed, bubbling over with enthusiasm about something that was to any rational person totally boring, insignificant or just plain incomprehensible. But, O'Neill could when he had to, absorb new information and respond to it with polite attention, he just chose not to most of the time.
He leant forward and said to Nelson, "So, can you tell me a little about this dig?"

Nelson gave him an amused look. "Well, as you're the official Air Force rep you're probably the only person I can talk to about it. Which is something of a relief, I have to tell you, as I'm bursting to tell someone."

"Can you fill me in on the background to the area first?"

He just knew Daniel was giving him a look of total disbelief but it was dark enough in the jeep for him to pretend he didn't know that. Nelson smiled the smile of a Jehovah's Witness finding someone who actually wanted to buy The Watchtower and plunged straight into a history lesson O'Neill didn't want but had to admit, just for once, he really needed.

"The Labyrinth is situated west of and partially underneath Kom el-Ahmar or Hierakonpolis, site of ancient Nekhen. So called because this was the site of the worship of an extremely ancient falcon god, Nekheny, about which very little is still known." Nelson tossed the words to O'Neill over his shoulder, shouting above the sound of the engine, effortlessly going into lecture mode in a way already familiar to him after five years of working with Daniel. "Although Horus was worshipped there later as well, Nekheny was an entirely separate Predynastic entity who just happened to be represented by a falcon on a site where Horus later gained ascendancy. I think the inscription on the Boston Falcon from Amunhotpe III's temple at Soleb describing Amunhotpe as being 'Beloved of Nekheny' proves that he was once a significant god or else why would a Predynastic deity still be getting a mention in the Eighteenth Dynasty?"

Seeing Nelson looking at him expectantly, O'Neill said gravely, "Why indeed?"

Apparently satisfied, Nelson nodded. "Have you seen the Boston Falcon, Colonel?"

"I'm more of a Chicago Blackhawks kind of guy..." Seeing Daniel's expression O'Neill coughed quickly. "I mean... No. Not yet."

"Well, it's fairly spectacular, I can tell you. They really did a marvelous restoration job and you can't see the join. Of course nothing could be done about the second cartouche which was lost at the time of the Atenist defacements. Damned Akenhaten and his monotheistic vandalism! But I think it's got people thinking about Nekheny again. This was clearly a significant deity in the Predynastic Egyptian pantheon and yet what do we know about him? Perhaps many of the other old falcon gods subsumed into Horus cults were originally variants of Nekheny? I think these are the kinds of questions the Labyrinth could answer, along with all the ones Daniel is interested in about... " Nelson waved a hand. "What was your thesis title again, Dan? I remember you had some very interesting things to say about the cross-pollination of ancient cultures and the age of the pyramids. I liked it anyway. I thought you made some good points."

O'Neill suspected there was a wealth of unspoken loyalty in those words and a lot of arguments held over the years with other archaeologists that Nelson didn't want Daniel to ever know about.

Daniel turned his head to look at Nelson with a flicker of his rare fond smile. "You've been out of academic circles too long. I thought everyone knew Doctor Daniel Jackson's thesis was 'Why SpaceAliens From the Planet No'Ten'Ure Built the Pyramids and Why Everything You Other Academics Thought You Knew About Ancient Egypt is Wrong Wrong Wrong, So There'."

Nelson grinned back at him. "Ah yes, how could I forget? What I don't get is how come Erik Von Daniken, Zecharia Sitchin and Graham Hancock are all coining it in and you're still wearing the same shoes you had in nineteen eighty-nine. You either need a more way out theory or a better agent. You at least need to get yourself a Forbidden Archaeology website with some fancy
"I'm working on it," Daniel assured him.

O'Neill said quietly, "How do you really feel about Daniel's theories, Doctor Nelson?"

Nelson looked over his shoulder at him before raising his chin with a hint of defiance. "Well, despite what Daniel just implied, Colonel, there was nothing unscholarly about his thesis – or his theories. All he proposed was that the pyramids were a great deal older than we had previously believed. It was those closed-minds in academia who decided Daniel was talking about little green aliens from outer space...."

O'Neill swallowed the observation that in his experience little aliens from outer space actually tended to be gray.

Nelson seemed to take his silence as criticism of Daniel's thesis because he sounded more than a little defensive as he continued: "I think what people forget is that we're all detectives in our way and we all have to follow the clues the past leaves us wherever they happen to lead us, and we shouldn't stop following them just because they lead us somewhere that runs the risk of making us look foolish. The entire history of our particular field of study is based on men of vision following hunches, and sometimes those who seemed to get it spectacularly wrong at the time have been vindicated by history. Daniel followed a set of clues and they led him to conclude that the pyramids were a lot older than the rest of us thought. Alexis has followed a set of clues and they've led him to suspect that the leader of the fallen angels mentioned in the Book of Enoch might be buried in the Labyrinth rather than Al Uli in Saudi Arabia. I've followed a set of clues and they've led me to conclude that an obscure falcon god about whom there isn't as far as I have been able to discern, a single surviving piece of mythology, was terribly significant five thousand years ago. Who's to say which of us is right? Maybe we all are. Either way, I have a great deal of respect for Daniel's integrity as an archaeologist and as a human being, and while I may not agree with his theory about the age of the pyramids I respect his right to hold it and I would defend to the death his right to express it."

When O'Neill looked at Daniel for his reaction he saw the man more upset by Nelson's loyalty than cheered by it, his emotions too raw after recent events to cope with any kind of affirmation or perhaps even basic human kindness. He managed a smile and then turned his head away, but his voice sounded suspiciously muffled as he said, "I've missed you, John."

Nelson reached out and tentatively patted his shoulder. "I've missed you too. So have the others. We're none of us convinced the Air Force really deserves you. Your gain was our loss, Colonel."

"I doubt Jack would – "

"Yes, I would agree." O'Neill interrupted Daniel firmly. "We do appreciate what we have, Nelson, even if sometimes we don't always remember to say so."

The silence stretched for a moment and then Daniel said, "You were telling Jack about the Labyrinth..."

Nelson nodded. "Of course. Well, we've only excavated a small portion of the site so far but our findings on this dig and on the dig in '89 suggest that it's big. Not as big as Hierakonpolis perhaps, but still a site of substantial size and significance. Possibly the most significant site...Well, anyway that remains to be seen but we're pretty excited about it I can tell you."

"Significant how?" O'Neill pressed. He knew why the USAF was excited about it. It had Goa'uld
writing on the walls, and where there was Goa'uld writing on the walls there could be Goa'uld technology. But he somehow doubted that was what Nelson was so hyped up about.

"Well, to put the site in context you have to think about the roots of Ancient Egyptian civilization itself. According to Manetho…"

"Who?"

"Manetho, a Graeco-Egyptian priest from Sebennytos from around 300 BC, who, along with Herodotus of Halicarnassus, the Greek historian, is one of our prime sources for ancient Egyptian history. According to him, Egyptian civilization began with the Unification of the Two Lands, namely Upper and Lower Egypt, under one king. Now the date we usually have for this is 3100 BC but there is some debate as to who this first king was. Some people argue for…"

"The Scorpion King?" He'd been determined not to be facetious, too. But having recently been dragged off to see "The Mummy Returns" by Daniel, and knowing full well before he ever got there that Daniel was going to ruin it for him in the same way he had with the first movie by complaining constantly about liberties that had been taken with Egyptian history, O'Neill just couldn't resist getting a little of his own back.

Nelson turned around to look at him in delighted surprise. "Yes. Absolutely. I had no idea you were also a scholar of Ancient Egyptian. No wonder the Air Force assigned you, Colonel. How pleasant to have someone who actually cares about this culture overseeing the dig for the spooks in Washington."

Seeing the way Nelson had lit up, O'Neill's conscience got him in a vicious armlock and ruthlessly applied pressure. He desperately hoped Daniel wouldn't drop him in it and said quickly, "I've just spent a lot of time with Daniel over the past five years. More of his enthusiasm must have rubbed off on me than I realized."

"You're absolutely right, Colonel. However, if you examine the Scorpion mace head and look at the headdress for the Scorpion King you'll see he's wearing only the hedjet or White Crown of Upper Egypt, whereas if he was indeed King of a Unified Egypt then he should also have been wearing the Red Crown of Lower Egypt as well. Of course some people have argued that the missing side of the mace head might have depicted him wearing that crown but I go with the theory that Narmer was in fact the first true King although he could also have been…"

"Jack really likes the short version." It was the most human Daniel had sounded in a while. He said it without reproach, just a little anxiety. "He doesn't need to know the history of the whole Early Dynastic period. He really just needs the relevant data. And he's going to have a lot to analyze on this mi-trip."

On any other day O'Neill would have said 'Well, how come you never give me the short version then?' but then realized that for years now Daniel must have thought that he was. That the long boring version he was giving O'Neill was evidently the summary as far as Daniel was concerned.

Daniel turned to Nelson. "Just tell him about the Labyrinth."

Nelson returned his look in surprise. "I thought you would have done that."

Daniel looked away into the darkness of the desert stretching out each side of them. Despite the sound of the engine, O'Neill was briefly aware of a silence behind it of ominous intensity, malevolent with too much age, and too much history. He imagined he could feel the same starlight that had illuminated the building of the sphinx sending cold slivers of illumination to chill the back
"No, I...I don't remember what's..." O'Neill saw the movement of his throat as Daniel swallowed quickly, his neck paledly vulnerable in the darkness. "I don't remember what's real."

O'Neill felt an overpowering urge to scoop Daniel up and take them both back to Cheyenne Mountain. To somewhere safe and modern where the sands of time couldn't bury them alive.

Nelson said quickly, "It'll come back to you when you see it, Dan. It's an incredible place. I think it asks more questions than we will find answers for in a lifetime, but such wonderful questions. It turns so much of what we know about Ancient Egyptian history on its head and for all we know it'll end up proving you right after all. There are certainly overlaps there between cults that as far as we know have never been found co-existing in anywhere else...."

His enthusiasm should have been contagious. O'Neill just knew Nelson's kind brown eyes were shining with it. Perhaps Daniel would be swept along with it in time but tonight he was just cold, and tired, and...something else, an apprehension or nervousness that was very unlike him. O'Neill couldn't do much about the apprehension or the exhaustion, but he busied himself searching for Daniel's bag, a shabby hold-all whose straps were looking threadbare, and felt inside it carefully for the rough material of his coat. His fingers found the hard edges of books, the texture of paper, the scent of leather reached him even above the petrol stink of the engine, then found the sheer plastic sheen of Daniel's laptop. Apart from that there was only thin cotton, briefs, socks, t-shirts, pants, a pair of sandals and one towel. No coat. It was at once exasperating and reassuring to realize that Daniel had managed to come out with every textbook in his library and totally inadequate clothing. He didn't even seem to have packed a sweater. The Air Force had obviously been doing his packing for too long, he'd lost the knack. No, he'd probably just always traveled with these priorities, because space was limited and if it came down to being able to translate a cartouche or avoid pneumonia, the cartouche would win out every time. Damn, but he knew that boy so well sometimes.

O'Neill unzipped his own bag and found his jacket on top. Down at the bottom he'd packed an extra sweater to lend Daniel and Daniel's camo gear in case they unlocked the vault of an ancient Goa'uld or something and they needed to go into action, he just hadn't anticipated Daniel needing the warm clothing this quickly. He'd used his and Daniel's clothes to pack the edges of one of the pieces of very expensive equipment Hammond had told him the cost of which would be docked from his wages if he lost, broke or bent it. And he'd brought his camos because they were what he was going to be wearing. His dress blues were for the initial contact. Just to let everyone know who he was and why he was here, after that they went into the suitcase and stayed there and he wore clothes he felt comfortable in. He shook out the camo jacket and draped it around Daniel's shoulders, making him jump. "It's cold."

"Jack..." It was a breathed protest, Daniel darting him a look he couldn't quite categorize. He supposed it was tactless to literally wrap him in the smothering folds of the Air Force he was trying to escape. On a symbolic and metaphorical level that had probably been what Mackenzie would call a supremely passive-aggressive action, but given the way Daniel was sitting there shivering in an open-topped jeep after a too-long flight and too-little sleep he thought that on a practical level it was a pretty good idea.

O'Neill held his gaze, not backing down on this, pulling out the hardass colonel mode that could sometimes still work on the remnants of the person Daniel had once been. "Just put it on before you get pneumonia."

Daniel pushed his arms into the sleeves reluctantly, eyes sending out *This is exactly why I didn't*
want you to come with me reproaches, but he still did it. O'Neill's fingers twitched to zip it up for him but he felt instinctively Daniel would never forgive him if he did. All brains and no sense. Daniel should have had a grandmother like O'Neill's to feed him up, scold, and fuss over him. Instead he'd had a grandfather who wouldn't take him in because it was too much trouble having to take care of an eight-year-old boy who'd just lost his parents when there were so many matters of more pressing interest out there to be investigated than the comfort of own flesh and blood. Given the way it had robbed him of his family, O'Neill supposed it was just another proof of how forgiving Daniel was that he didn't hate archaeology. Either that or it was in his blood so completely he hadn't been able to escape its lure.

Nelson looked over his shoulder at O'Neill, giving him a conspiratorial smile and a thumbs up. O'Neill was too disconcerted by being liked to respond. On the whole people didn't like him on first meetings. They tended to think he was an arrogant prick, an impression he had to admit he sometimes did a lot to encourage. Thor had liked him, but he was an alien, and Daniel had done, of course, but then Daniel didn't follow any normal rules and everyone liked Daniel so perhaps he just liked them back out of habit. The same Carter who hadn't been able to stick O'Neill at any price had gone all goopy over Daniel in ten seconds flat. Although he would only have admitted it under torture, he'd rather liked Daniel himself. There had been something very endearing about the way he just wandered into the middle of that facility and solved a puzzle those eggheads had been wrestling with for years with a mixture of apology, vagueness, and blithe self-confidence that had really tickled him. Then it occurred to him that he also liked people who liked Daniel. If people were kind to Daniel he would forgive them an awful lot. Perhaps that was the same criterion by which Nelson was judging him. He might be an unwanted spook from the Air Force but he knew a little about Egyptology and he didn't want Daniel catching pneumonia. That might be all Nelson needed to know to make the entirely erroneous assumption that O'Neill was an okay guy.

O'Neill darted another look at Daniel who wasn't zipping the jacket up the way O'Neill would have liked, but also hadn’t taken it off and thrown it at him in a rejection of both O'Neill and the military he represented. He was hovering in between in a kind of mutinous semi-acceptance with serious reservations, and as that was how Daniel had been in relation to the Air Force for the past five years, O'Neill was willing to accept that as both normal and moderately reassuring.

Ignoring Daniel he said to Nelson, "Tell me about this Hierakonpolis place. What's so significant about this Labyrinth?" Apart from the fact it seems to have driven one guy nuts and something happened to Daniel in it so terrible he refuses to remember it.

"Well, you have to understand they're two different things. God help you if you mix up our site with Hierakonpolis. The Friends of Nekhen would lynch you. Hierakonpolis 'proper', or Nekhen, as it was once called, is the largest Predynastic site still extant and still accessible, and more importantly still preserved as a unit. There are cemeteries, houses, temples, administrative buildings, rubbish dumps. Everything an archaeologist could wish for. And it's been a settlement of one kind of another for a long time. This is the place where the Narmer palette was found."

As Nelson looked at him hopefully, O'Neill grimaced. "I don't know what that is."

"Oh, well, it's an incredibly significant find, as were the Scorpion and Narmer mace heads, which were also found in the main deposit there. I can show you a picture when we get to the boarding house…"

"Boarding house?" Daniel looked up. "I thought we were staying at the site?"

"After all that traveling I thought you'd probably want a good night's sleep tonight so I've asked a friend to put you up in Isna. I didn't know you'd be bringing Colonel O'Neill though so I don't know
if there's going to be enough room…” His voice trailed off as he looked between the impeccable
gleam of O'Neill's buttons, the defensive rigidity of Daniel's shoulders.

O'Neill shrugged. "We can share. We've shared before."

The agonized How could you? look Daniel shot in his direction took O'Neill aback and he glared back at him defensively. "What?"

"Nothing." Daniel turned away.

"That's fine then." Nelson smiled in relief.

O'Neill gave Daniel another glare, even though he knew it was wasted on the back of his head. But this was ridiculous, for crying out loud. They'd been going on missions together for five years. They'd shared tents and bedrolls and slept standing up wedged against one another in freezing Goa'uld dungeons in their time. They'd seen each other naked, vomiting, incoherently drunk, unreasonably angry, and sobbing inconsolably. They knew the location of every mole, birthmark, and scar on the other man's body. Now suddenly they were supposed to act all coy and as if they'd just met? If he and Daniel had been having secret liaisons behind the storage closets then he could have understood Daniel's sudden neurotic desire for discretion but they had nothing to be discreet about. This was like some woman he'd never had an affair with asking him not to tell her husband about them and it was driving him nuts.

Nelson was telling him about the history of Hierakonpolis again but he couldn't take it all in, not after all those hours of traveling, and with the hurt and indignation at Daniel's unreasonable behavior still ruffling his temper like surf against a shore.

"…So you see it actually contains archaeological evidence which ranges from the Middle Paleolithic to the Roman period…"

The desert looked like the ocean by night, the breeze scudding across the sand to make it lap like waves, a thin mist veiling the stars. It was no wonder flight navigators had been deceived by that in the past, bailing out onto what looked like the soft embrace of the sea to smash themselves to powder on the unyielding cruelty of the sands. He was cold too, he realized, but his overcoat was in the bottom of his suitcase underneath the satellite phone and he couldn't be bothered to search for it.

"…Hierakonpolis alone, because of its unique properties, gives us wonderful glimpses into the Badarian culture, the Early Dynastic Period, the Naqada II and Naqada III culture, not to mention the foundations of Horus worship as an evolution of Nekheny cultism, always bearing in mind that Nekheny came first and…"

He was aware of Daniel twanging like a guitar string in counter time to the rhythmic bass of the engine. He felt unreachable as a stranger and yet unfortunately was so familiar to O'Neill that he was also broadcasting his feelings on a frequency O'Neill couldn't avoid picking up, a bone-deep misery that made him wonder if they had come halfway across the world on a wild goose chase for Daniel to find himself again, when what he really needed was a prescription for Prozac and some soothing music. He doubted clinical depression was going to be solved by this return to the land of Daniel's childhood, which he had already found then lost again on Abydos. Daniel was trapped in the kind of relentless unhappiness which felt like a bereavement, the sort one carried around inside when even pacing rooms provided no escape, a solid lump of misery he was slowly choking on. Perhaps Daniel's flight mechanism had been engaged to escape from himself, not O'Neill, or the SGC, and if that was the case he was carrying all his problems with him, in just as unwieldy a baggage as that hold-all filled with reference books.
"…but the Labyrinth doesn't conform to any of the earlier Hierakonpolis finds or known chronology. The Friends of Nekhen won't accept it as part of the same site and it's far enough outside the previously established perimeters of the dig that I can understand why they dispute it. From our point of view, of course, that means we can continue without interference, but it does make the Labyrinth of Nekheny the bastard changeling of Hierakonpolis that no one will acknowledge. Unfortunately, from the point of view of establishing a legitimacy for our site, as was pointed out thirteen years ago when the dig was first uncovered, there have been no finds in the 'official' site that in any way correspond to the writings in the Labyrinth….

Nelson's voice rose and fell, occasionally drowned out by the engine sound, more often rising above it like a violin solo struggling above the morass of an unsuccessful concerto. He was talking about runes now, and cuneiform, and all the other kinds of annoying squiggly writing Daniel liked to pore over with his face too close to the page long after most of the SGC had quietly packed up for the night and gone home. O'Neill didn't need to be an archaeologist to know one didn't generally find that kind of stuff carved into the walls of Egyptian tombs.

"…I don't care what the scientists say, there has to be something in the rock that's affecting the data as I can't believe the labyrinth builders could have come up with something so architecturally ambitious two and half thousand years before Imhotep's construction of the Step pyramid. But I can't believe that our labyrinth wasn't the inspiration for Amenemhet's Labyrinth which was, after all, described as the greatest wonder of the ancient world and was a huge tourist attraction in the Graeco-Roman period. For all we know Amenemhet may have insisted all references to our labyrinth were expunged from the records so that his would appear to be the greatest and the first….

O'Neill let it trickle in one ear and out of the other. This was irrelevant data, he was almost certain, and he also believed that if anything of vital importance did get mentioned, his brain would be able to separate it from all this chaff. He did get that the place was too old for the stuff inside it and the answer to that was the theory that had got Daniel laughed out of academia. The answer they'd all got much too up close and personal with over the past half a decade dodging zat blasts and staff weapon fire, not to mention the ever-present threat of a snake in the head.

"…But I don't know why they're resisting it so strongly when if you compare this to the pyramid temples of Djoser at Saqqara you see an instant correlation. Just as if you look at HK29A on the Hierakonpolis site you can't help thinking that this has to be the great shrine of the Upper Egypt crown which was later recreated at Saqqara in the 'House of the South'. The dimensions are so similar, even down to the off-center door. Now, obviously it's been recognized since Lauer that Hierakonpolis provided a tradition in which Djoser's pyramid has its roots, but what if the influence was circular? What if the 'Labyrinth' mentioned by Herodotus as the pyramid temple of Amenemhet III and which undoubtedly does follow Djoser was in fact influenced by our labyrinth at Hierakonpolis which was in itself…"

After Daniel's impassioned lecture on the way home from the movie theater he knew enough to be able to differentiate between the bald-headed bad guy in "The Mummy" called Imhotep, the architect of that wonky-looking structure Daniel had told him was called the 'Step Pyramid' who Nelson was obviously talking about here, and the Goa'uld who had sucked all those runaway Jaffa and damned near killed Teal'c a month back who was now pushing up daisies on another planet. He also knew that all the carefully worked out chronology of Egyptologists wasn't worth diddly-squat according to Daniel because the Goa'uld had screwed up all their timelines when they'd turned up to 'harvest' hosts and pretended to be gods while they were doing it.

Nelson continued blithely, "Now Hélène's theory is that the Labyrinth could be the same Men-netjeret described on the Palermo Stone, which was probably built during the reign of Nebka.
Which would give us a date of somewhere between 2686-2667 BC for the Labyrinth. But I don't agree with her there. I think 'Men-netjeret' is Gisr el-Mudir at North Saqqara, which was never finished. However, I do freely admit the Men-netjeret mention on the Palermo Stone does give us a provenance for a large stone structure possibly predating Djoser's Step Pyramid, so I'm perfectly prepared to find out that I'm wrong in thinking…"

So everything about this labyrinth was probably going to be wrong. Bad chronologically. Bad archaeologically. Just generally bad Egyptology. And archaeologists like Nelson were going to scratch their heads over it for the rest of their lives, trying to make sense of a puzzle that didn't make sense at all if you tried to fit it into the accepted but inaccurate idea of who had built all the pyramids and why, and when. Basically the Goa'uld had made it all meaningless.

Looking across at Daniel, hunched and silent in the passenger seat, O'Neill wondered if that was part of the problem here. Because if it was he had absolutely no means to fix it. He decided to rest his eyes and his brain for a little and get some of the shuteye he seriously needed. Perhaps when he woke up the desert would be more welcoming, the stars and Daniel less distant, and the problems which had driven his friend to this mysterious maze beneath the shifting sands miraculously resolved.

"Jack, we're here…"

O'Neill opened his eyes with a jolt to find the jeep steaming quietly in the darkness of a narrow street. His neck was aching painfully, and the smell of his own armpits was filling his nostrils. Nelson was struggling in through a lighted doorway ahead of him, carrying the equipment that would be docked from O'Neill's wages if it were dropped.

He rubbed his neck irritably. "Where?"

An oblong of golden light spilled out of a doorway, closely followed by a fug of cigarette smoke, chatter, laughter, and the scent of hot food that made O'Neill realize he was ravenous. It was ridiculously late and he was exhausted, but the pulse from that room was full of energy, a multi-colored cloud of it swirling out to envelop them in a spice and tobacco-scented embrace.

He swung down from the back of the jeep, knees protesting as he did so. Daniel grabbed the hold-all before he could stop him and O'Neill saw him wince as his wrist was jarred again. He wondered if it had knitted properly, that damned robot had certainly done a good job of snapping it. He felt befuddled with tiredness. All he wanted to do was be shown to a soft bed and go to sleep on it, but it sounded like a party in there.

"Nelson! Have you collected the Prodigal…?"

O'Neill was aware of strangers on the periphery of his vision, people with glasses, mugs, or half-eaten food in their hands, gesturing enthusiastically for them to come inside, all welcoming, all apparently brimming over with energy, a cacophony of different languages being spoken that Daniel could no doubt identify, but were just sounds to him. He'd known some Arabic once but it had faded from his memory like the print on old newspaper. Too long ago and too many bad associations. He couldn't remember a word now.

"Are you okay?"

Although he was glad of Daniel's concern, he couldn't help noticing Daniel had waited until Nelson was out of earshot before asking him the question.
"Fine. Are you?" As they moved towards the open doorway and the eagerly welcoming strangers he saw Daniel in the light for the first time in hours and was shocked by how unwell he looked. He seemed to have shed ten pounds since they'd left Colorado, and there was a grayish tinge to his skin. "Daniel…?"

"I'm okay." Daniel gave him a nervous smile, but there was something that looked like incipient panic in his eyes. That worried him even more than his behavior. Daniel had been fearless the whole time he'd known him, sometimes terrifyingly so. There was almost no enemy so frightening it could keep Daniel's mind from straying towards the where, how, and why, even while his life was being threatened. This was the way Daniel had looked on the video camera when Reese's pet replicator had been moving towards him.

O'Neill touched his arm. "It's late. You don't have to meet these people now."

Daniel gave him another flickering 'don't-hit-me' smile that went nowhere near the fear in his eyes. "Yes. I do."

Then he was being drawn into the warmth and clutter of the narrow building, the hold-all banging against the doorway as he went in. O'Neill saw him smiling while people patted him on the shoulder. O'Neill tripped on the uneven paving, stumbling across the threshold and into the lighted room. He felt Daniel's hand touch his arm to steady him, and then snatch it away as though O'Neill's sleeve had just burnt his fingers.

He could hear Daniel introducing him to people but the names were going in one ear and out the other, a slender Egyptian woman who smelt pleasantly of jasmine seemed to be their hostess, a middle-aged woman with short iron-gray hair and brown eyes, wearing an over-sized man's jacket with bulging pockets, who spoke English with a Nordic accent and who he recognized from her photographs as Inga Stark greeted Daniel kindly. There were others, but they were a blur. In the midst of the introductions, Nelson pointed to a cupboard that didn't close. "Your other luggage is in there, Colonel. It'll be perfectly safe."

Before O'Neill could protest that he needed to have that stuff with him, not shoved into an unlocked cupboard with the mops and buckets, Nelson had moved on.

"Daniel!"

O'Neill turned to see the archaeologist swept into an embrace by a cheerful British woman in her forties.

"Tell me you've come back to Hierakonpolis and not to that joke site of John's?" She was grinning as she said it, but her eyes were kind.

Nelson waved a hand at her. "You wait. The Labyrinth is going to turn everything we know about Ancient Egypt upside down."

An older Englishman shook his head. "It would have to turn everything upside down, inside out and back to front…if it were genuine, but it isn't."

"The carbon dating results…"

"Were inconclusive, John, and you know as well as I do the things you're finding there make no sense. It has to be a hoax…"

A small elderly Indian gentleman said, "To quote my learned colleague, Jonathan Nelson, Barbara: 'Yah phooey'. You're just eaten alive with envy because we have representations of half the core
"Your site is a fake, Sanjay! It bears no resemblance to any other archaeological site ever found anywhere and it has as much to do with Predynastic Egypt as Pop Tarts do with food…"

O'Neill tried to blot out the sound of fifteen archaeologists all talking at once in a room twelve foot by twelve foot. Someone was asking Daniel where he'd been for the past five years. Someone else was trying to tell him something that sounded totally incomprehensible about what sounded like 'pan grave' culture. Attempting to dismiss mental images of a place where woks went to die, O'Neill tried to absorb the mood of the place: cheerful, argumentative, but good-humoredly so. Energetic. Intelligent. Ideas bouncing off the walls. Above all, enthusiastic. Everyone trying to tell Daniel about what they'd been doing and why it was more interesting than what the next guy had been doing. O'Neill took in that there were two opposing teams here, the Hierakonpolis archaeologists, who evidently knew Daniel from the past and wanted him to come and sift through their apparently very exciting rubbish dumps with them, and the Labyrinth archaeologists, who also knew him from the past and wanted to bring him up to speed on all their interesting discoveries so far.

All he wanted to do was find a nice soft bed and go to sleep on it but he was a little reluctant to just butt out and leave Daniel alone with these people. Still, Daniel seemed to be happy enough. He still looked a little pale but he was smiling at people. These archaeologists were being nothing other than welcoming and kind to him and…

That was when he looked across the room and saw Darius Golding and all the hairs stood up on the back of his neck like a dog that had just seen a ghost.

The man was now fifty-four instead of forty-one, his waist was thicker than in those photographs of him standing bare-chested in a hole in the desert somewhere, smiling triumphantly at the camera. The mane of red-gold hair was streaked with gray, as was the beard. He looked like an old Hercules now, grizzled from too many combats. With only the width of a room between them there was no disguising that he was even taller than O'Neill and his shoulders were broader, his chest massive. A giant of a man, still imposing, even magnificent, yet now subtly going to seed. Even his long grayish old coat with its flapping pockets and unidentifiable stains looked like the robes of some exiled monarch.

O'Neill looked the man in the eyes and felt the crackle of hostility pass between them, like pure electricity. He tried to make his face neutral but he couldn't help it. He didn't like this guy, and, going by the expression on Golding's face, he definitely didn't like O'Neill.

"So, the wanderer returns…"

It was a voice that carried, rich and deep. He saw Daniel jump in response then go rigid, twanging like a tortured violin string being played with a piece of broken glass. When he turned his head he did it slowly, the way kids checked out their closet to see if there really was a bogeyman inside.

"Darius…" The smile Daniel forced was wary and neutral, going nowhere near his voice.

O'Neill admired the way Daniel was trying so hard not to look as if he was freaked out to Jupiter and back, but it was still very obvious to him that Daniel was freaked out, and going by Golding's expression it was obvious to him too. He didn't seem either satisfied or sorry that Daniel was reacting to him so much, just that it was no more than he'd expected.

Golding came over to where they were standing, a stately progress during which O'Neill was painfully aware of Daniel trying and failing not to look like a rabbit being hypnotized by a snake.
The other conversations didn't stop but O'Neill heard them falter, people glancing in their direction then determinedly pushing on with what they were saying even though everyone was now more interested in the interplay between Daniel and Golding than they were in their own words. Nelson's voice increased in volume, doggedly plugging on with his defense of the Labyrinth's authenticity in a determined effort, O'Neill felt, not to give Golding the awestruck silence he was hoping for, but O'Neill also caught that anxious glance he darted in Daniel's direction.

Perhaps it was difficult not to loom when you were six foot four, but O'Neill found Teal'c managed not to be intimidating to them on an everyday basis. If he thought about it logically, yes, Teal'c could put him on his ass any time he liked, and he could kill Daniel with a twist of his fingers, but it wasn't something he ever thought about because Teal'c never used his size and strength for effect. Golding was looming however. O'Neill really resented having to look up to make eye contact, not to mention the way the guy's shoulders were so much broader than his were. Fine, the guy wanted to loom, let him. As someone who had killed men with his bare hands before now, it took more than superior height and breadth to intimidate him. He returned Golding's gaze steadily as the man looked him up and down.

However confident Golding might appear, O'Neill knew the hostility towards him must also be masking some uncertainty and confusion. He didn't like the part of the equation O'Neill represented. Given the way he glanced between them, he especially didn't like the suggestion that O'Neill was connected in some way to Daniel.

Looking at O'Neill, Golding said, "Friend of yours, Daniel?"

Daniel's voice sounded a little strained. "This is Colonel Jack O'Neill of the United States Air Force."

Golding did look at Daniel then, very leonine with that slow turn of the head, his mane ruffling a little as a breeze blew in from the open door. "That isn't what I asked."

O'Neill stuck a hand out. "Darius Golding, I presume?"

Golding ignored his outstretched hand, still staring unblinkingly at Daniel who looked away first, muttering, "Colonel O'Neill is a work colleague."

The betrayal he felt at Daniel effectively denying him went right through him like a stab wound. He couldn't help that swift angry look of accusation as he pulled his hand back.

Daniel gave him a helpless look in return, begging and apologizing and excusing himself in one anguished glance. *Shut up. Don't contradict what I just said. I'm sorry. I have to.*

*No, you don't, damnit!* He had to bite down his first three retorts, but that smile of satisfaction from Golding made him feel sick as the proverbial pig.

"I thought he must be your bodyguard."

Daniel met Golding's gaze steadily, although he still looked a little pale. "Why would I need one of the those, Darius?"

Instead of answering, Golding reached out flicked Daniel's shorn hair dismissively. "Well, I suppose I can't call you 'Goldilocks' any more. What happened to the hair?"

"I decided I preferred it short."

"Any other preferences you've discovered since we last met?"
Daniel grimaced. "I'm tired from the journey. I'm going to turn in now." He managed a weak smile for the rest of the room. "Good to see you all again."

Nelson had obviously just been waiting for his cue because he was there in a second. "Good idea, Daniel. I'll show you and Colonel O'Neill where you're sleeping tonight. Tomorrow I think you should take a look around the…"

Golding's voice reached them before they were halfway to the stairs. "Where exactly is 'Colonel O'Neill' sleeping tonight?"

O'Neill saw Daniel flinch again and jumped in himself this time, giving Golding his best false smile over his shoulder. "I'm sharing with Daniel."

That did go home very satisfyingly. Golding looked like thunder but then he rallied with spite. "Don't you have regulations against that sort of thing, Colonel?"

Daniel said quickly, "It's not like that, Darius."

O'Neill resisted the urge to smack Daniel around the back of the head only with difficulty. He glared at him. Daniel gave him a Don't start look back.

Nelson said rapidly, "Well, good night, all. See you in the morning. Enjoy your rubbish tips, Barbara. Meanwhile the rest of us will be unearthing new information about Nekheny which will make you all sick with envy."

"In your dreams, John…"

As Nelson ushered them towards the narrow staircase, O'Neill muttered, "What is with you, Daniel?"

"What's with you?" Daniel retorted under his breath.

"Stop acting like we're not friends."

"Stop acting like we're married."

"Here you go."

He rather admired the way Nelson was determinedly refusing to notice any of the undercurrents going on. He wasn't going to get involved or even acknowledge that they existed, briskly turning the handle of the door and revealing a small room lit by a soft lamp and a mattress on the floor. The resolutely UnEgyptian double duvet had Spiderman on the cover. "It's not the Ritz but it's more comfortable than sleeping in a tent. The bathroom's right next door. Do you have toothpaste…?"

O'Neill let the questions wash over him, just nodding curtly, still holding Daniel's gaze. Daniel had recoiled from the sight of the mattress they were going to be sharing, even though it was plenty big enough for two, before looking at him with a mixture of defiance and apology. O'Neill rolled his eyes in disbelief. "Oh for crying out loud…" He walked into the room and tossed his bag onto the floor, saying loudly, "So, Daniel…do you want the left side of the bed or the right?"

Daniel darted a hasty look over his shoulder, muttered a thank you and good night to Nelson, then practically shoved him out of the room so he could close the door and lean against it.

O'Neill let Daniel see that he was hurt and he was disappointed, that he always thought Daniel had
more guts than this, that he was the last person on Earth he would expect to care what some guy thought about their relationship, especially as their relationship was pure as the freakin' driven snow and it wasn't as if they had anything to hide anyway.

Daniel said wearily, "You don't understand."

O'Neill unbuttoned his jacket. "So explain it to me."

"I can't." Daniel slumped wearily against the door. "It's too late and I'm too tired and you wouldn't get it anyway. And...I need to pee."

_Damnit, that's my line._ O'Neill shook his head in annoyance as Daniel slipped out of the room. He heard him futzing around in the bathroom, taking the exact amount of time it needed for O'Neill to get undressed and get into bed before he came back in again, sidling into the room warily.

O'Neill said conversationally, "As your friend and as your CO, I just think I should let you know you're handling Golding all wrong and you're pissing me off big time."

Daniel wordlessly undressed down to his t-shirt and boxers then got under the covers. The lamp was on his side and he switched off the light. Moonlight shone through the thin curtains, turning the room blue and silver with puddles of impenetrable blackness. O'Neill was abruptly too aware of the sound of the conversations going on in the room beneath them. Nelson and the other guy were still disagreeing about the merits of the carbon dating results from the Labyrinth. A woman who sounded like Inga Stark was saying something about the inscription on the west wall of one of the inner chambers.

O'Neill looked at Daniel sideways. He had become such a stranger. In the blue-lit gloom he could see the line of his temple, his cheekbone, the unnecessary thickness of his eyelashes. He didn't really look like Daniel, just some of Daniel's component parts. It was like being stuck with a Daniel from a different dimension. Only instead of the AU Carter who had wanted things from him he couldn't give, this AU Daniel wanted only to be left alone. Except this wasn't an AU Daniel, damnit, this was the guy he'd been working with for the past five years. This was the guy who was supposed to be his friend.

He tried to get back to their usual relationship, saying lightly, "Pity it's not a proper bed with springs."

Daniel clearly had to drag his thoughts back from a great distance before turning his head then blinking at him in confusion. "Why?"

"I could bounce up and down on it so it squeaked suggestively."

He'd really thought Daniel would laugh, and he needed to hear Daniel laugh, but all he said was, "That isn't funny."

"Oh, lighten up, Daniel! When did you turn into such an uptight little...?" The word 'prick' was barely swallowed down in time. "Person." When Daniel didn't answer, he shook his head in disbelief. "You've never given a rat's ass what people think about you, or me, or our friendship until now. So what's so different?"

And Daniel didn't answer, he tried again. "Is it because I killed the robot?"

Daniel went still and then shook his head. "No."

"Is it because we're in Egypt? Because you're ashamed of the fact you've been working for the Air
"You don't know what Darius is like."

Daniel sounded so white-knuckle stressed O'Neill wasn't quite sure how to proceed. He looked around the room for inspiration but the furniture was unhelpful, a chest of drawers with an old porcelain bowl on it, a mirror, a wall hanging, thin curtains which twitched restlessly in the night air. They had always been careful about each other's personal lives, and that rocket Carter had given him about interfering was still fresh in his memory. He'd been tactful about not asking Daniel about Sarah-now-Osiris unless the younger man brought her up first. He'd tried not to talk about Sha're unless Daniel mentioned her. He'd never gone prying into his personal life or asking about his ex-lovers or current lovers unless they were impacting on the SGC, but this time he really thought he needed to know what he was in the middle of. If there was a history between Daniel and any of the people here he needed to know about it, and as Daniel wasn't volunteering anything he needed to take the bull by the horns and ask. One thing about Daniel being an anthropologist meant that he was unlikely to be offended by a question that would probably have earned him a punch on the nose if he'd ever asked it of say…Makepeace, but it was still crossing a line he didn't usually cross. Being careful not to look at Daniel he said quietly, "If you used to be in a…relationship with Golding then I think that's something I need to know."

Daniel jerked his head round to give him a look of wounded betrayal that wouldn't have put an operatic heroine to shame.

O'Neill held up his hands, speaking rapidly: "Okay, not a relationship, but hey, we all do things in our twenties we maybe wouldn't do…later. You go to a party, you have too much to drink – sometimes you wake up in the wrong bed. Christ, I did things when I was twenty-one that…"

Seeing Daniel was now looking dazed as well as hurt and betrayed, and realizing he was moving rapidly towards the 'TMI' end of the conversational spectrum, he swallowed the end of his sentence. "I'm just saying he seems very…possessive." When Daniel just kept right on looking tragic, O'Neill rolled his eyes. "Look, I don't have a problem with you having slept with him, if you did. I just need to know." Another ominous silence. If there was any way Daniel could have made this more difficult, he couldn't think of it right now. O'Neill gritted his teeth. "So, did you?"

Daniel turned away, presenting him with a t-shirt clad back. "I don't know."

He felt a surge of irritation at the way Daniel was already making an embarrassing situation worse. Perhaps Daniel felt this was none of his business, but he was wrong. Sometimes there was no such thing as 'personal' and this was one of them, and he wasn't having the success of a mission compromised by Daniel going coy on him over a regrettable experiment. This was a conversation he wanted to get in and out of as swiftly as possible, a bloodless retrieval where he obtained the information he needed with the minimum of discussion or fuss. "Oh, come on, Daniel, even you aren't that absent minded. Yes or no will do."

When O'Neill touched his shoulder for emphasis, Daniel flinched so violently that he snatched his hand away, torn between annoyance and concern. He swore under his breath, acutely uncomfortable with the situation on every level. He could now understand Daniel not wanting to share a mattress with him if seeing Darius again was reminding him of some horrible drunken mistake he'd made when younger. O'Neill could definitely relate to that. It was instinctive to pat him on the arm or something to reassure him, but physical contact was clearly not a good idea under the circumstances. Daniel was already unhappy enough about them sharing a bed. He ran a hand through his hair instead, trying not to curse out loud. The last thing he really wanted to be doing right now was sitting here discussing a friend's past sex life, especially as that friend was clearly extremely unwilling to offer any information, but, given that they were on a mission and
Golding was a factor in the success or failure of that mission, he needed to have all important information available to him, and if that meant appearing crass or insensitive he was sorry. "Look, Daniel…" he tried to sound soothing rather than impatient. "Just tell me what happened."

"It was in the Labyrinth." Daniel turned his head to look at him, blue eyes bleak with misery. "I don't remember what happened."

It was O'Neill's turn to blink in confusion. He couldn't imagine any point in Daniel's life where he would have gotten drunk in the middle of a dig. He began to feel less irritated and more concerned.

"I was naked when Rajid found me. He wrapped me in a blanket. I don't know how I got like that and Rajid didn't have time to… He had a heart attack right after the explosion. I don't know what happened. I only know Darius was there too. We may have… I don't know what we did. I don't know why he took me there. I don't know what I agreed to. I don't remember."

O'Neill felt his concern ratchet up several notches. He reached out tentatively and this time did touch Daniel's shoulder but when Daniel flinched away from him a second time, he held up his hands in supplication. "Okay. Spell it out for me here. What do you think happened?"

"I don't know. I don't remember."

"Well, tell me what you do remember?"

Daniel shook his head. "I don't want to talk about it."

"Christ, Daniel," O'Neill breathed in frustration. "I didn't ask you to come on this trip."

Daniel sounded as difficult as a teenager and O'Neill had another reminder he was going to have to tread very warily.

O'Neill mentally counted to ten then said as reasonably as he could manage when the urge to shake Daniel was almost overwhelming, "I know you didn't, but I'm here now and it would be better if I knew as much as –"

"I'm tired. I'm going to sleep." Daniel turned away from him again. He pulled up the duvet and closed his eyes.

"Daniel…!" O'Neill stared at him for a moment in disbelief then banged his head down on his own pillow. After a few minutes he heard Daniel's breathing slow and become deep and even as he obviously slipped into sleep.

He realized he could still smell the food downstairs and it was still making him feel hungry. He was also so exhausted from the traveling every muscle in his body was aching, his knees twanging with particularly malicious resentment. His stomach wanted him to get up and demand sustenance while his common sense wanted nothing to do with another encounter with Golding when he was tired, out of his ground, and out of his depth. All his body wanted him to do was switch off and sleep for eight hours straight. But his mind was the winner, reserving the right to keep going round and round over what Daniel had said like a lighthouse slowly circling, as he tried and failed with each revolution of his thoughts to come up with a good reason why Daniel should ever have been found naked in a tomb with a madman.

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Daedalus was constructing the maze, stone after stone fitting together so seamlessly it was impossible to see any blocks, just a smooth wall of glassy blackness. Daniel inched closer, silently,
looking at the knots in the old man's spine, the way he moved so swiftly laying stone upon stone. In seconds the wall was up to his waist, then up to his shoulders, then high over Daniel's head, Daedalus throwing each block up onto the other so that they stuck together without a single crack between them. Daniel inched closer and closer, trying to look over his shoulder to see the plan he was working from, a white fluttering of lines and numbers. He saw the outline of a building that extended far into the distance but in the center was a square and a minotaur, not drawn, but real, shifting restlessly, waiting for the door of the inner chamber to open. In its hand was a blood-stained knife. As Daniel leaned closer, trying to see the way out, Daedalus abruptly crumpled the plan in his hand. He darted a glance over his shoulder at Daniel, eyes bright with malevolence, then tossed the parchment into the flame of a torch and tapped his temple to tell Daniel the plans were all in his head. The paper flared to a blue circle then to a fall of ash. Daedalus whispered, "You'll never get out." He snatched up the torch and ran with it, stealing the light. As Daniel tried to run after him, the walls grated and moved. The doorway vanished. Blackness descended like a curtain on an empty stage.

Alone in the darkness he began to feel his way along the walls. There were glyphs under his fingers, then runes, then cuneiform, those busy scratchings so dense against his fingertips. Although his heart was beating too fast, the panic beginning to rise, he told himself there must be an exit, the same way he'd come in. He could retrace his steps back to the daylight, back through the maze of corridors beyond which the sun and Ariadne were waiting for him. There was the doorway he had come in by and there was Ariadne holding up a ball of twine. Not Ariadne. Sha're. He saw Sha're standing in a blood-stained golden dress, her skin white with death. She said: "Go back". Behind her, flame billowed, a roar of red and gold, the heat blast unbearable. The walls grated again, a stone door dropping like a guillotine to cut off the flare of raging fire. He was alone in the darkness. Alone in the…

As the panic began to take hold, he heard the sound of someone else's breathing, someone else's heartbeat. He heard the sound of bipedal footsteps approaching, but not human feet, a great weight upon two cloven hooves. He felt the heat of another's body, heard the snort of eager breath, hunger and madness tangible in the blackness. He turned because he could do nothing else, golden eyes glowed and the knife blade flashed as it was raised then plunged towards his heart –

Daniel gasped his way into wakefulness, sitting bolt upright, heart slamming against his chest, body streaming with sweat. He groped blindly for the lamp that sat beside his bed, panic increasing as his fingers found nothing, then, as his eyes adjusted to the blue-lit gloom he remembered where he was. Not at home. Egypt. A few hours from the Labyrinth. He closed his eyes and his mind was filled with a kaleidoscope of confusion: Rajid's hand on his wrist as he was tugged towards the light, Darius holding a hand across his mouth to make him swallow that small white pill, the smell of jasmine, a knife… He flinched and the image was gone, rejected by his conscious mind so fast it had dived back into the darkness of his forgotten memories before he could snatch it back. A bloodstain on the floor. Was that a real memory or something he'd imagined? He remembered staring at it dully, a puddle of red while Rajid shouted: "What did you do?" He didn't remember what he'd done. God, what had he done…?

"Daniel…?"

Jack's question jolted him into the realization that he wasn't alone, that there was the warmth of another body only a few inches from his. He was out of bed in an instant, needing to be away from that male person beside him, acutely uncomfortable with such close proximity.

Jack was running a hand through his hair blearily, blinking the sleep from his eyes. "What's the matter? Are you okay?"
"I'm fine, Jack." He headed for the door. He heard Jack ask him again what was wrong but pretended not to hear, slipping from the room into the bathroom next door. The window was open, faint sounds blowing in from the town, the language making his heart constrict with loneliness, missing the parents who had been with him when he was a child in this land. The sink had a crack across it, a discoloration of the enamel around the edges of the crack like an old scar. He flinched from a sound in his ears like a bone cracking, a flash of blade and blood. Perhaps he was going insane again. Perhaps this wasn't a repressed memory breaking free from its moorings like a weighted corpse in the silt of the seabed after all. Perhaps this was just psychosis pure and simple. The drug had been real, he was sure of that. He could remember details. Darius had given him an acid tablet in his tent one night and he'd had a bad trip, demons coming to life in the darkness. He'd read LSD could close off parts of the mind forever, create a form of schizophrenia in the mind. Take you from Good Vibrations to a blank-eyed half-life, the flame of genius extinguished forever. Perhaps some latent drug-induced insanity was just starting to emerge. Perhaps he was going to crack up spectacularly once again and find his way back to that padded cell.

He remembered men with more muscles than compassion holding him down, the footsteps still advancing, closer and closer, the fear reaching a point where the mind locked up completely…

"Are you okay in there?"

Jack.

Daniel grimaced. So now he couldn't even go to the bathroom without an SGC escort? Darius would think they were a couple if Jack kept carrying on like this. Darius always thought everyone was screwing someone. He had such an overactive libido himself that the concept of celibacy was meaningless to him, and he'd never really worked out what friendship was either. He had colleagues whom he tolerated, he had people he had sex with, sometimes he combined the two but friendship never entered into it. He thought all men were permanently in a state of readiness for intercourse and divided the human race into those who were fuckable and those who fucked. He had always placed Daniel contemptuously in the first category, and Jack wasn't exactly helping the situation by his alpha male display of over-protectiveness downstairs. Daniel could deal with unwanted advances. They weren't a problem. He was all grown up these days and even if Jack – and to a lesser extent Sam and Teal'c – would persist in treating him as if he was twelve and unfit to be let out without a keeper, he knew how to say 'no' politely but firmly to people of either gender. But Darius had never taken rejection well and a polite refusal was going to annoy him a lot more if he thought Jack was getting something he wasn't. Jack probably thought his heterosexuality shone out like the beacon of the Pharos of Alexandria, but Darius thought gender-preference was a myth. As far as he was concerned, men screwed women when they were available and other men when they weren't, and anyone who maintained otherwise was either gay or lying. In Darius's philosophy real men not only didn't eat quiche, they didn't turn down sex when it was available unless there was something seriously lacking in their red blood count.

"I'm fine, Jack. Go back to bed." He tried to keep his voice level, to sound as unlike a man still pouring cold sweat from the aftermath of a nightmare as possible. Right now all he cared about was not having an audience to his condition of abject funk.

As he began to run water into the sink, he noticed his hand was shaking. Why? Nightmares didn't usually leave him sweating and shaking but when he plucked at his t-shirt it was sticking to his skin. What had he almost remembered? And why was he remembering it now? He'd been back to Egypt dozens of times since this dig had ended in such ignominious failure so it couldn't be the drift of the sand dunes or the cries of the faithful. Was it seeing Darius again that had triggered this…?
Like some horror movie monster, even thinking the man's name seemed to be enough to summon him. Daniel heard a door opening and prayed that it was Nelson, but the heavy tread upon the old floorboards told him all he needed to know. He was already wincing in anticipation before Darius's disdainful, "Lover's tiff?" reached him through the gap under the bathroom door. He hoped neither of them was naked. The thought of Jack and Darius standing out there in the altogether scowling at one another through a haze of testosterone while surreptitiously comparing penis size hardly bore contemplation. He made a point of splashing water on his face as loudly as possible to blot out Jack's response, but it was like listening to opera in a language he didn't understand, even through the water splashing one got the gist of it, baritone sarcasm from Jack, basso profundo innuendo from Darius. God, why hadn't Sam come with him instead? Darius would have been much too busy trying and failing to get her into bed to bother who or what Daniel was getting naked with these days.

He waited until they'd both gone back to their own rooms before he cautiously emerged from the bathroom. He couldn't deal with Darius right now. If the truth were told, he couldn't even deal with Jack right now. He kept getting millisecond flashbacks. Images that made no sense: a crocodile-headed Sobek, eyes glowing gold in the darkness, Inanna of Babylonian mythology shedding her clothing right in front of him, the sound of a shirt tearing, the scattering of buttons on a stone floor, the flash of an upraised knife. It was all too fast, too confused, and he instinctively flinched from each image before he could collect himself and snatch it back.

When he closed his mind he saw a wall, hastily assembled by his conscious mind to protect him from the past, except thirteen years of neglect had done terrible things to the mortar, and where it was starting to disintegrate, old memories were leaking through the cracks.

"Are you okay?" Jack was waiting for him in the bed, trying not to look anxious and failing. He'd switched the lamp on and there was no escaping how small the room was, how garish were the colors of the duvet.

Daniel realized that he really didn't want to share a bed with him. He didn't want to be that close to any other human being right now. If he could have done it without Jack making a big deal out of it he would have done it in the bath.

"I'm fine." Not looking at him, Daniel got under the duvet. "Can you switch the light off? I want to go to sleep." He could imagine the man was giving him a less than friendly look but still refused to make eye contact.

Jack's clipped "Sure," was sharp with hurt. He switched off the lamp.

The panic flared instinctively. Now he was alone in the dark with someone else's breathing, someone else's heartbeat, with his nightmare too fresh in his mind. To stop the panic getting worse, he had to tell himself firmly that he knew it was Jack there and no one else. Was that what the minotaur represented? A friend you couldn't trust because insanity might be sleeping in him somewhere?

"Why don't you tell me what's going on between you and Golding?"

Daniel swallowed. "Go to sleep, Jack." To soften the rejection he added a quiet "Please?" but he suspected it wasn't enough to take off the feeling of hurt, confirmation coming in the way Jack turned over without another word, his back to Daniel, the silence like a lake between them. He had to remind himself again that this was his friend, a man who had saved his life countless times, but as Daniel closed his eyes, all he could hear was another man's heart beating, another man's breathing, and when he imagined that spreading pool of silence between them it came in the color of blood.
III: Hierakonpolis

The next morning they drove to the dig in silence. There were different qualities to their silence of which Daniel was all too painfully aware. Nelson's was of the tactful variety, pretending to be absorbed in the beauty of the desert as the sun came up so as not to have to notice the way his two companions were so pointedly not talking to one another. Jack's was wounded, on his dignity because Daniel kept rejecting him and he didn't know why. Daniel's silence was because with every mile they drew closer to the Labyrinth he could feel a fear spreading through him that was so paralyzing he didn't think he could have gotten his voice to work even if he'd wanted to.

It seemed futile to try to explain to Jack that the nearer they drew to the Labyrinth, the more intense and suffocating grew his sense of claustrophobia. This morning he had woken up feeling as if he was traveling to his own premature burial, to be nailed alive in a coffin in the darkness, and the sense of impending dread was only growing stronger with each mile taking him closer and closer to the site of the Labyrinth. Going hand in hand with the horror of having to step into that maze again was the anxiety about seeing Darius Golding again, and with it the acute embarrassment of having to confront his own behavior from a decade before.

Daniel gripped the edge of the jeep tightly enough to make his fingers hurt, his wrist shrieking a protest, needing to get back to the here and now, even though the here and now was being driven towards a place that filled him with irrational terror. It was instinctive to look around for Jack, now looking even more familiar in his BDU, and to be comforted by the sight of him but then he was flinching from his own reaction. This was what Darius had always said, that he would end up emotionally dependent on some older guy he could hero-worship to make up for the gap his dead father had left in his life. Except he didn't hero-worship Jack, damnit. They were equals and friends. And Jack wasn't a father figure. Quite apart from the fact the age gap between them was less then a decade, there were times when Jack had all the emotional maturity of an eight-year-old so how could he be? They shared information, they also tuned out information. It wasn't a case of him hanging on Jack's every word and being impressed by the fact he carried a big gun.... But it would look that way to Darius because that would be the way Darius would want to see it. Not for the first time, Daniel wished he'd insisted Sam had come along for this trip instead. She would have been a better choice in almost every way. Not least because Darius would have tried to seduce her and it would have been satisfying on so many levels to watch him fail.

Daniel darted another glance at Jack and saw that he was still hurt. Even though he was wearing his sunglasses in a resolutely 'Don't screw with me, world, I'm scary' way, Daniel could pick up the little signs of wounded feelings as well because Daniel had denied their friendship in public then denied it again in private when he wouldn't tell him what was wrong. He knew he wasn't treating him well. Jack could seem overbearing sometimes but right now the man was just worried about him and exasperated by him and probably torn between wishing he could swat him and comfort him, the way Jack often was. What Jack really wanted right now from him was an explanation, and that was something Daniel couldn't give him, because there was too much confusion in his own mind for him to be able to extract any reasonable motives.

By the time they had stumbled into that crowded room filled with heat, spices, the scent of cooking food, and too many blasts from his past, he had been hyperventilating to the point where it was taking all his self-control not to throw up or pass out. Seeing Darius again had been the final straw. He'd thought he was prepared for the meeting, but when their eyes had met his mind had abruptly filled with darkness, like being smothered in black velvet. He'd known he was terribly afraid of him but he had no idea why. The room had grayed out for a moment, like stepping inside his own
migraine, white noise, zig-zagging colors fading into monochrome. After a few moments, the relative normality of the conversation had restored him, but he'd been trembling by the time Darius approached, feeling suddenly exposed by the presence of Jack by his elbow. Seeing Darius deliberately jumping to wrong conclusions had summoned a hundred contemptuous words back to sting him, and with them had come acute anxiety. He'd felt simultaneously enraged by Jack and frightened for him. The anger had won out because if Jack had just stayed in Cheyenne Mountain the way he should have done, there would have been no danger.

Memories had swirled uncomfortably, odd phrases, exchanges, that hideously awkward misunderstanding that he'd banished quickly once the tent flap had closed behind Darius once again. His head had been hurting so much by this point he'd just wanted to be unconscious. He'd stumbled towards the staircase acutely aware of both Darius observing them and the bad habit Jack had got into of treating Daniel like an extension of himself, just assuming he'd be there by his left shoulder to be chivvied and chaperoned and taken for granted. At some point while they'd been out exploring the galaxy and saving the universe he and Jack had somehow slipped into a kind of humdrum domesticity that wouldn't have seemed out of place in the suburbs. Given the grandiose and heroic nature of their work, that seemed a little unfair to him. And analyzing artifacts for lost civilizations lost some of its glamour when one of your teammates kept coming into your office because he was bored and wanted the newspaper your artifacts were wrapped in so he could attempt to do the crossword. There were couples out there with two kids, a dog, and a school run, who probably acted less married than him and Jack. It was also acutely embarrassing under the gaze of someone like Darius who wanted to join a lot of dots that did not in fact exist. Darius had never taken Daniel seriously, or if he had done, he'd hidden it well. Alexis' theory had always been that Darius felt threatened because he'd been a prodigy himself and yet Daniel's reputation had already been so impressive it had threatened to put Darius's in the shade. That he'd used any means he could to undermine Daniel's confidence in his own abilities to try prevent Daniel from overtaking him professionally. But although Daniel would have loved to believe that was true, he didn't find it very convincing.

In the letters of introduction sent by his college professor, Jordan had made what was probably the mistake of using the word 'genius' about Daniel, then when Daniel had arrived he had made the mistake of correcting a translation of Darius's and to add insult to injury being right. When dealing with someone with an ego like Darius’s that had probably been a bad idea. But Darius had never gone in for the kind of petty vindictive point-scoring colleagues like Stephen had a few years later, sitting there seething with jealousy because Professor Jordan thought Daniel was going to end up rewriting the history books but he only said that Stephen would make a living. Darius had even seemed proud of him on occasion, but he had been patronizing and his mood swings could be frightening. He could be fond and good-humored one day and then viciously scathing the next.

No one had ever said anything about the way Daniel looked until he'd arrived on that dig, but Darius hadn't been able to leave it alone. Full of sneering semi-compliments, semi-dismissals about how if their funding ran out they could always sell Goldilocks Jackson to a rich Arab. The man was as unpredictable as he was magnetic. Daniel knew that he'd been fascinated by him and Darius had told him he'd had a crush. He'd said he didn't mind, he was even flattered by it although, of course, there was nothing doing, but there was no point in Daniel denying it because that was definitely what it was. Daniel had denied it all the same and later Darius had amateur psycho-analyzed him around the campfire while sipping single malt from a Coke bottle that was fooling no one. Getting drunker and nastier as the sparks hissed into the air like angry fireflies. Pointing out that what Daniel really craved in his life was a replacement father-figure, someone with authority Daniel could rely on to protect him, comfort him, give him personal and professional affirmation through praise, and oh yes, by the way, fuck him up the ass. Alexis, always over-protective of his dead friend's son, had pretty much gone ballistic. Hélène
Bouldieu, the usually soft-spoken French-Canadian, had told Darius vehemently that he seemed to be the one with the repressed hang-ups, not Daniel, and that if Daniel were female this would be blatant sexual harassment. The others had agreed with Hélène, telling Darius in various ways and various languages to pack it in, stop embarrassing Daniel and them, and cut down on his drinking before he became too obnoxious to work with. Even the ever-tolerant Inga had lost patience with Darius that time.

Daniel had been too seared with shame to move from his place of exposure in front of the campfire heating his burning face. The trouble with Darius was that ninety percent of the time he was right. Everyone agreed on that. Nelson insisted that this didn't make any difference to the ten percent where he was wildly, occasionally even derangedly, wrong. But Daniel had been worried that someone who was ninety percent right ninety percent of the time must occasionally be a hundred percent right as well. He had argued with Darius without backing down an inch about hieroglyphs, politics, and the age of the site, but anything to do with himself, the nebulous half-formed still-evolving twenty-three year-old Daniel Jackson, was a subject of which he felt far less certain than Predynastic Egypt. Over the weeks of Darius repeatedly asserting it to be true, Daniel had come to at least half-believe that perhaps it was half-true that he had a crush on the older archaeologist. That he, along with all those women who willingly helped Darius to cheat on his long-suffering wife over the years, had succumbed to the magnetism of his personality, the sheer physical presence of the man.

"Daniel…?"

He looked up to find Nelson looking at him anxiously. "Yes?"

"Hierakonpolis."

He'd somehow missed seeing their approach to it. The largest Predynastic site still accessible to archaeologists, 144 square miles of dig, and he would have sat there lost in his own thoughts while they drove past the corner of it. As the jeep kicked up the dust in a stream behind them, he gazed at the huge site in disbelief. They'd made so much progress since he'd been there last. Nelson handed him field glasses so he could look at the site in all its glory as they drove past, raising his voice to shout over the sound of the engine.

"They've restored Djehuty's inscription, thank goodness. They managed to recover a lot of the painted decoration inside the tomb as well. Had they uncovered the funerary banquet decoration in Hormeni's tomb when you were here…?"

He'd forgotten quite how magical this place was. It was as if the same fate which had so arbitrarily destroyed whole libraries, temples, and tombs, and allowed a thousand grave sites to be ransacked across the centuries had decided to make amends here. To preserve every strata of Ancient Egyptian history on one site for archaeologists to find, to heap upon them here not the fabulous riches of Tutankhamun's tomb, but something more revealing even than Howard Carter's glittering triumph. Here there were no golden deathmasks, but there were the oldest mummies ever found in Egypt, the earliest preserved house in Egypt was here, the earliest Egyptian temple, the first industrial breweries, the first stone-cut tomb, the earliest preserved royal palace, the oldest known cult image in existence, the only tomb of the Predynastic period with painted decoration along its plastered walls, even, bizarrely, the only known elephant burial.

"Did you know Hierakonpolis has been added to the list of hundred most endangered sites? It's the fort of Khasekhemwy that's suffering the most erosion…"

He let Nelson's update wash over him, thinking about the site they were driving past. He was aware of Jack in the seat behind him, could imagine what he was seeing, an expanse of dug over
desert with only a few mounds and remains of buildings to relieve the monotony. To Jack this probably looked like nothing at all. He would have no conception that to an Egyptologist it was a bona fide wonder of the ancient world on a par with the pyramids themselves.

From the palette of Narmer in the Main Deposit, once believed to be the oldest political document in history, to the Sixth Dynasty obsidian-eyed golden falcon head found in the Temple of Horus, from late Predynastic petroglyphs to the New Kingdom tombs of Djehuty, Hormeni, and Hormose, Hierakonpolis had everything an Egyptologist could ever want or dream about – except for the hieroglyphic inscriptions Daniel had excelled at translating, and it was the lack of them which had caused his professor to suggest he joined the Labyrinth dig instead.

It was too much of a waste, his tutor had said, for someone who could read Egyptian hieroglyphs with such ease and fluidity as Daniel to spend a year of his life on a site with so few written records. The value of the work the Hierakonpolis archaeologists were doing in sifting through those layers of the past to build up the fascinating history of, not just Hierakonpolis, but Ancient Egypt itself could not be overstated, but Daniel’s skills would be underused there. The Labyrinth was rich in the written word, with hieroglyphs both familiar and strange, runes never seen before, cuneiform of many kinds, a meeting place of Babylonian, Egyptian, Indian and Icelandic mythology unlike any other, uniquely suited to someone who specialized in the study of the cross-pollination of ancient cultures and who could read a dozen ancient languages with the ease and skill most Americans only knew in their own tongue.

Much later, when Daniel had been lying in that hospital bed, waiting for the doctors to tell him he could leave, he had found himself wondering if the Labyrinth was a trap designed deliberately to capture curious people like him. A set of clues any archaeologist worth his salt just had to solve, the center of the maze calling to him, challenging him to find the way there, to the place where the Minotaur was waiting.

When he happened to glance at Jack he saw he was watching him anxiously. He’d taken off his sunglasses to polish them and the concern in his eyes was undisguised. Daniel thought about his behavior since they’d left Cheyenne Mountain and could understand why Jack was worried. He managed a watery smile and handed him the field glasses, pointing to the low red mound east of the endangered Fort. "The oldest brewery in the world. It was producing three hundred gallons a day five and half thousand years ago."

"My kind of place."

Daniel tried to let him see that he was sorry for being so neurotic, distant, and strange the day before but now the sun was shining and everything was fine. Given the half-hearted smile that was the best Jack could manage, he guessed he wasn't being too convincing.

Nelson was pointing things out to Jack. Still apparently laboring under the delusion the Air Force officer was an amateur Egyptologist and found such things interesting. "This is the most incredible site, Colonel. Well, except for the Labyrinth itself, which is more incredible again, but really this place contains evidence from almost every strata of the history of Ancient Egypt. Well before the construction of the pyramids it was one of the largest urban centers along the Nile...."

Daniel opened his mouth to point out that at least some of the pyramids were far older than Nelson thought, definitely older than anything yet found at Hierakonpolis, then closed his mouth again with a sigh. He was surprised and not a little touched to see that glance of sympathy from Jack. He was never sure if Jack even remembered it was his theory about the age of the pyramids that had seen him laughed out of academia in the first place but apparently he did.

"Over there is the tomb of Ny-ankh-Pepy, which was a tourist attraction in the New Kingdom era –
you can still see the scribbles the tourists left on the walls – but it was originally an Old Kingdom tomb for an official called Itjefy. However in the Middle Kingdom era Ny-ankh-Pepy came along, decided to have the tomb for himself and had it extensively repainted. Next to it is the tomb of Horemkhawef, the chief priest of Horus of Hierakonpolis. His funerary stele describes a visit to fetch a new cult image of Horus and of Isis…"

Daniel was sure Jack must have glazed over a long time ago. He was trying not to feel a sharp pang of loss for the life he hadn't lived. He supposed that was what this trip was about. Trying to go back to his past and undo the wrong turnings he'd taken. He'd always hated that saying about ignorance being bliss. How could anyone choose not to know when there were so many questions that could be asked, so many answers that could be found?

He'd wished so many times that he could share what he'd discovered through traveling through the Stargate with his colleagues. Tell Alexis, who had spent so much of his adult life exploring the palaces at Knossos, Phaistos, Mallia and Zakros, about the Land of Light, about the way the Minoan culture had developed on another world. Tell Inga about Cimmeria. Tell Nelson that on Abydos Ancient Egyptian was still a living, breathing, spoken language. For five years he'd been thinking no archaeologist could have a better job than him. But for the first time he could see the benefits of ignorance. Nelson didn't know about the Goa'uld, so none of these sites on earth was tainted for him by the shadow of the System Lords. He was going to spend his life looking for answers here and perhaps find a few of them while Daniel traveled to distant worlds finding answers of his own, or perhaps only finding more questions. At the end of their discoveries, Nelson could write a book on Predynastic Egypt everyone could read whereas Daniel's discoveries were going to remain classified forever. What was the point of gaining knowledge you couldn't share? What was it Ernest had said to him all those years ago, when he'd been so dazzled by the thought of that universal language he hadn't been able to think of anything else? *No prize is worth attaining if you can never share it.* He had to believe that, one day, the information they were gaining about their own pasts, and the development of those parallel cultures was going to be made public. That the knowledge would be shared. That some good would come of it. That something as incredible as the Stargate program, the means to travel from one part of the galaxy to one another, to touch the fingers of other humans like themselves whose ancestors had come from a common beginning yet diverged in such fascinating ways, would produce tangible good.

But in the meantime they were fighting a war against the System Lords which the rest of the planet couldn't know about, even though the threat, if it couldn't be averted in time, would kill them too.

"Now, the 'Fort' of Khasekhemwy itself is absolutely fascinating…"

Daniel knew all Jack could see was a few low dusty walls near to a small ruined building. To Nelson, Daniel, and the archaeologists who had made Hierakonpolis their life's work it was just one of the many things that made this place so incredible. To Jack it was a boring irrelevance that was doing nothing to keep Nelson and people like him safe from the Goa'uld.

As they drove nearer to the labyrinth site, Daniel could feel his tension growing. He kept trying to take deep breaths but failing, feeling increasingly nauseated as his stress levels rose, and he felt more and more breathless.

"We're working from the western side now. There are even more of those weird hieroglyphs we're hoping you may be able to translate, runes not quite like anything Inga's ever seen before, and a lot of cuneiform, mostly Sumerian but there are some inscriptions which seem to have Proto-Elamite characteristics…"

How was it possible to be so frightened of something he couldn't remember? He was aware of the
sunlight on his back, the landscape they were passing, the dusty ribbon of the road, the disturbed appearance of the desert where sebakh and antiquities diggers had been at work for centuries. But it was all peripheral to his realization that he could see the Labyrinth now, the low hump of it barely disturbing the surface of the desert. No surprise that it had at first been assumed it must be an Old Kingdom mastaba extending still further the boundaries of Kom el-Ahmar. He remembered his own wonder as he shone his flashlight on those first hieroglyphic inscriptions proclaiming the majesty of Ra. Then shining his flashlight on the next panel and seeing not the hieroglyphic inscription he was expecting but a runic futhark which had even less place in an Egyptian structure than the baffling wall of Sumerian cuneiform which had formed the next panel.

When he thought about that aspect of the labyrinth, it was okay. Daniel snatched a quick breath, opening his eyes to remind himself that the sun was shining, the aching desert skies streaked blue above red sands shifting gently with each gust of wind, eternal and unchanging, and that however it had come about, the labyrinth was a fascinating archaeological enigma. There may not be some tomb of a dead pharaoh to uncover, but there could be practical information about the Goa'uld which would be valuable. And either way it was filled with the kind of puzzles he had always loved to solve. There was no need to be afraid of this place. No need at all. Whatever had almost been done to him in that place, Rajid or a return of Darius’s sanity had intervened in time. The force of the explosion might have rendered him unconscious for a few weeks, but Darius’s intent had foundered somewhere before it became action. That had to be true because the doctors’ reports had all confirmed it. Whatever he might have threatened, Darius hadn't actually done him any harm, temporary or permanent. Daniel's fear was therefore irrational.

Unfortunately his fear didn't seem to know that and it was threatening to choke him with every foot they drew closer to the Labyrinth.

"We're here."

He was too aware of that anxious look Nelson darted in his direction as he put on the handbrake, making it obvious Daniel wasn't hiding his fear very well. He felt the way he had when that replicator had chirruped and climbed onto Reese's arm: paralyzing terror. The silence after the roar of the engine was dizzying. He could see the tents laid out in the same pattern as before, the cleared area where they had evidently been having their nightly campfires.

He climbed out of the jeep with difficulty, feeling gray sweat trickling down his spine, the ground not quite where he'd expected, landing flat-footed with a jolt. Absurd to be this frightened so he wasn't going to be, damn it. His tongue felt numb and there wasn't enough air left in the world, his own breathing sounded much too loud in the stillness.

He felt Jack's hand on his elbow. "You okay?"

It took a full minute for him to realize a question had been asked that required an answer then Daniel nodded, not looking at him. He didn't want anyone, even Jack, seeing the depths of his terror. It was just an archaeological site. That was all.

"The entrance is here. It's all been cleared away now and inside there's really no damage at all…"

He nodded again, saying 'Yes' whenever Nelson or Jack said anything, knowing the time it would take for the meaning of what they were saying to permeate was much too long for a reasonable conversation. He made sure he walked carefully down the slope to the entrance, following in Nelson's footsteps, his booted feet sinking into the sand in exactly the same place. Someone trying to track them wouldn't even know he'd been here.

"Daniel…” He caught a glimpse of Inga by the entrance, pushing her hair back from her face and
leaving a faint streak of dust across her forehead from her grubby fingers. She must have been
touching the runes, feeling the thin spikes of them against her skin. "Why don't you come and sit
down first? Have some coffee? I've just made a pot…"

He hoped he smiled at her. He intended to, but he walked past her without a word all the same.
What was there to say? If he couldn't do this he may as well go home now. The light was
shuttering now with each pace as the entrance to the Labyrinth loomed up, the sun above it
dazzling his eyes, then the structure cutting off the sky. Now he was in shadow, Jack was so close
he could feel his breath against his cheek. There was lighting rigged up inside, not bright but
enough to prevent the Labyrinth seeming like the mouth of hell. Just an archaeological site. His
heart was slamming against his chest and there was no air at all now. His shirt was sticking to his
skin, the lights seemed to be getting dimmer.

As he walked into the entrance hall he saw the figure of Ra painted on one panel, hieroglyphs
danced at him, very early glyphs, almost pictograms, crude yet brightly colored, praising the great
god of the sun. They could have been painted by the people of Abydos. For all he knew they had
been once. The other panel was cryptographic, written by priests, they would probably never be
able to decode that one although that wouldn't stop him trying. More hieroglyphs…no, Goa'uld
glyphs. And how great was the difference a decade made. These were translatable now.

He snatched another breath. The air was being sucked into the labyrinth past him, it was like
standing on a subway station as the train approached, a strange wind effect he'd forgotten about
until now. They'd never understood why it gusted like that, the noise it made, the way it snatched
at one’s clothing like a ghost. He turned his head and saw the panel of cuneiform underneath the
wall carving, and abruptly the last of the air disappeared and the lights dimmed faster and faster.
The tale of the Descent of Inanna inscribed in Sumerian cuneiform with illustrations of the Lady of
Heaven shedding her clothes as she descended into the darkness.

He didn't know if Darius was translating the words now or only in his memory, but suddenly all he
could hear was the man's sonorous voice and the rushing of the wind in his ears.

"To Ganzir, land of no return, Inanna daughter of Nanna was determined to go,
To the dark palace, which those who enter cannot leave,
To the house where those who enter are deprived of light,
Where dust is their food, clay their bread.
They see no light, they dwell in darkness,
They are thirsty and naked in the darkness…"

He flinched from the memories, flashes so fast they were almost subliminal: a knife blade, cloth
tearing, cord biting into his wrists, the sting of a slap across his face, and through it all the fear, like
cold glue filling his body with paralysis, insanity a black cloth wrapped across his eyes, a whisper
in his ear, a gag in his mouth, and all the time being dragged nearer and nearer to the center of the
labyrinth, the heart of absolute darkness from which there could be no escape….

He was heaving before he could stop himself. He ran for the exit and the sunlight, a hand clasped
across his mouth, barely making it outside before he vomited his breakfast into the sand, heaving
and heaving until there was nothing to expel but a thin white bile.

He leant against the wall of the labyrinth, still feeling the burn in his throat, the stench of his own
vomit filling his nostrils, eyes watering, the world spinning a little too fast for him. He became
suddenly aware that there was no hand tentatively patting his back. When he lifted his head the
world gave another lurch and he saw Jack looking at him with his most closed-off expression,
grimacing then gritting his teeth, robbed of his role as a comforter by Daniel's Greta Garbo act,
afraid of making things worse and his impotence setting the frustrated anger bubbling.

"Here."

Daniel had to turn his head carefully to focus on the blur that had loomed up on his other side. When Darius came into focus he flinched automatically, but the man was just offering a bottle of Coke.

"I don't have brandy."

Daniel hesitated then reached out and took the bottle. He risked meeting Darius’s eye as he put the bottle to his lips and for once the man wasn't gloating, he even looked a little regretful, but there was still a hint of mockery in his voice as he said: "Cheers."

Daniel drank down the whiskey-spiked coca-cola in rapid swallows, grateful to have it overlaying the bile burn at the back of his throat, the sugar and alcohol hitting him hard where he needed it. His flashbacks had already faded in the sunlight, like over-exposed photographs.

He wiped his mouth and handed back the bottle, not backing down this time, looking Darius right in the eye with all the defiance he could muster. "Cheers."

Darius wiped the top of the bottle, gaze holding his, unreadable. Impossible to say if he was full of mockery, compassion, hostility or regret as he said, "Welcome back to the Labyrinth, Daniel."

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The last thing he'd expected to feel on this trip was wanted. O'Neill had expected to be perceived by everyone, including Daniel, as an unpleasant necessity, like drains, definitely not as someone who was welcome. With the exception of Golding though, he'd discovered that archaeologists were a friendly bunch. Every one of the people on the dig was a little like Daniel, had a fragment of the enthusiasm and childlike interest in really uninteresting things that he found equally exasperating and endearing. He still had reservations. It was sweet when your kid wanted to stare into a muddy puddle in the ground for half the afternoon because there might be a frog in it, or wanted to dig up the flower borders to look for buried treasure that only existed in the form of broken pottery. He wasn't quite so convinced that it was a reasonable way for adults to behave. But as forms of adult behavior went, he had to admit that the ways of archaeologists was less irritating and certainly less destructive than that of many other kinds of people. And then there was the fact they'd all been so darned nice to him.

Except for Golding, of course. Golding really couldn't stand him, but O'Neill wasn't losing too much sleep over that. The feeling was entirely mutual.

He didn't doubt the guy was brilliant. He'd watched him translate a panel of little wedge-shaped signs in the wall that even Daniel had stumbled over, finger moving down the columns of writing, arrogantly throwing words over his shoulder for Daniel to catch and write down. But he had serious doubts about his sanity. Everyone else seemed to think that irrational mood swings, obsession with Daniel's sleeping arrangements, and heavy dependence on whiskey were just what made Golding…Golding, but O'Neill thought he looked like someone heading for a crash.

The first day, he'd had to play fifth wheel while Golding threw his weight around. He didn't know the lie of the land well enough to interfere, but he spent the day information-gathering, trying to get his bearings on the first few chambers and corridors of the labyrinth place, how the camp was set
up, where the water was, the names of the other archaeologists and enough about them to try to make them allies.

He'd got them pretty much straight in his head now. Nelson was always discussing ancient Egypt with him, and although it was annoying and boring, it was also kind of amusing too. Through a weird series of coincidences and misunderstandings O'Neill had either said the right thing at the right time or said the wrong thing but had it misinterpreted as another point of view rather than the basic ignorance it was, with the result that with no attempt made on his part to fool anyone, Nelson had it firmly fixed in his head that O'Neill was some kind of amateur enthusiast. He was the most openly protective of Daniel while making the most inept attempts to hide his anxiety but he was always gentlemanly towards and tolerant of Golding, which annoyed O'Neill who wished just for once the archaeologists would stop being so nice to the guy and just deck him. (He'd heard that the absent Alexis Spiros had decked Golding once, and was awaiting his return impatiently on that score alone.)

Sanjay Zaheer was a gentle, elderly, and very soft-spoken scholar of something to do with Indian mythology who seemed to spend most of the day staring dreamily at pictures of what looked to O'Neill suspiciously like snakes. He had beckoned O'Neill into the chamber he was investigating with the quiet pride of someone who has found something unexpectedly wonderful in the twilight of his life. He showed O'Neill a painted wall showing serpents coiling and uncoiling around the earth, and beside it on the next wall a script which he said was a very early form of some alphabet brought back from Mesopotamia by traders. In the whisper in which he habitually spoke he said that he thought this wall panel could possibly be the missing link between cuneiform and Nagari. "Or not." His smile was infectious. He was a berry brown man, hair gray, tiny, and frail as a leaf in fall. O'Neill could have picked him up with one arm. He tried not to loom over him but Doctor Zaheer was sweetly unafraid of him despite the uniform he wore, trusting that as he was a friend of Daniel's he could only be a force for good. At times as he walked among them with a gun in his sock O'Neill was less sure than the elderly Hindu that he really was a force for good.

There was a younger French-Canadian woman called Hélène Bouldieu who described herself as still in recovery over the fate of some moldering necropolis in Alexandria that had been crushed beneath the weight of a new highway, taking its secrets with it. She had the body of a child, no hips and no breasts, and had short jet black hair she cut herself one-handed with nail scissors while using the other hand to gesticulate for emphasis. She talked about the lost necropolis with the obsession of a woman over an ex-husband, admitting he was gone in one breath yet unable to move on and talk about anything else. O'Neill might have found her pining over a place full of dead bodies annoying if she hadn't been doing so in an accent he had to admit he found pretty sexy. She described crawling through half submerged, tiny passageways barely large enough for a human body to enter, with no way of knowing if there was any way of turning around or if the exit would have to be made backwards, all to excavate an old burial site in which dried corpses were left in niches in the walls. O'Neill had told her that was his idea of hell on earth. She'd shrugged in a way far more French than Canadian and said to her it was heaven and if he were very good she would perhaps let him see her sketches.

He'd given her a look of suspicion. "Would I want to see them?"

"They are special," she promised him. He'd walked away from that conversation not sure whether or not he'd just been propositioned but deciding after a few minutes with some regret that he didn't think he had after all. It seemed to be a sad truth about archaeologists that when they wanted to show you their etchings it really was so you could marvel at the pigment.

Alexis Spiros was due back in a few days, once his doctors allowed him to leave the hospital.
Alexis phoned every evening from his hospital bed, speaking very rapidly and in a combination of languages as the other archaeologists passed the phone from person to person while he asked for progress reports, suggested priorities, coaxed and encouraged and praised. It annoyed O'Neill to realize that he hadn't taken in that the absent Spiros was the leader of the excavation. Gallling though it was to admit it, he'd assumed the one in charge was Golding. He, along with everyone else, had clearly been swept along by the man's spurious air of authority and it needled him considerably.

Last, but by no means least, there was Inga Stark. He had introduced himself to her in the first few minutes while Daniel was still recovering from losing his breakfast. She'd said at once that he looked like a man who loved helping old ladies with their runes. Evidently seeing the panic in his eyes, she'd laughed and then confessed that her back ached if she had to keep bending down and she could really do with an assistant. He'd promised to help out later and had gained himself a dazzling smile of gratitude. She was very calm, very methodical, would appear to be completely bound up in her own work and paying no attention to the conversation then would drop a few words into the middle that showed she'd been following everything even while translating rune-writing.

Nelson showed him a lot of chambers of different sizes which were apparently dedicated to different ancient Egyptian gods, brilliantly colored paintings of the adored deities and hymns of praise to them in hieroglyphics daubed on every wall. Nelson talked constantly about how wonderful the Labyrinth was, like a local priest eulogizing about the Sistine Chapel. O'Neill found the place oppressive and had grown increasingly annoyed by the sound of the generator fuelling the miles of electric cable which powered the weak lemon-yellow lights. It was a little weird to be amongst all these learned types, earnestly telling him things he knew weren't true as they struggled to make sense of a crossword puzzle from which someone had removed all the essential clues. If he hadn't liked them, if they'd been arrogant about what they were telling him, he could have enjoyed his knowledge, but they were all so full of enthusiasm, and hope, wanting to know and telling him about their tentative assessments, the things that made them believe this could signify this which unfortunately for that theory was contradicted by this. They were as happy as amateur detectives with a new Agatha Christie to unravel, and to tell them about the Goa'uld, even if it hadn't been against all military protocol, would have seemed as unkind as telling them who had done it and why. And how it hadn't taken place in the drawing room with the candlestick, after all, and that map of who had been where at the time of the crime and whether or not the French windows had been locked wasn't relevant, because actually the crime had taken place in another galaxy far, far away and the body had just been dumped there down the chimney afterwards.

In the first few hours he'd been telling himself he mustn't give way to the temptation to give them clues, that it would be as dangerous to them to learn the truth as it might have been to that journalist who'd died with O'Neill's blood on his hands. By the end of the day he wasn't even thinking about the secrecy of the Stargate Program any more, he just didn't want to be the one to walk upon their dreams.

Golding had seen to it that Daniel was working with him inside a narrow chamber. He'd said they had to get past this point if they were going to work together, Daniel needed to get back on the horse and so on. O'Neill hadn't disagreed in theory but the satisfaction on Golding's face hadn't gone unnoticed by him, nor had the continuing pallor of Daniel's skin long after he'd lost his breakfast in the sand.

O'Neill had made sure he was in an adjoining chamber where he could keep at least an ear on Golding and Daniel, and had turned out to be of genuine use to Inga, whose bad back made it difficult for her to bend down. She'd found strangely smooth rune-stones scattered throughout the Labyrinth, some with markings, others without, and O'Neill had volunteered for the task of finding
and collecting the stones and helping her to collate them. He had an ulterior motive or six, of course. He felt she was someone he wanted on his side, he genuinely liked her, his back was bad enough on winter days now that he could sympathize with a fellow sufferer, but most of all, he recognized the stones at once for Asgard runes, very similar to the ones Thor had bade him use on the Belisker to activate the control panel. He felt it was definitely in the best interests of the SGC for these stones to be collected up and confiscated just in case some Asgard technology that they could activate should turn up. In the meantime he had allotted himself the task of finding the Asgard control panel which he was sure had to be hidden in these confusing corridors somewhere.

Inga had become familiar and comforting within a couple of hours. She reminded him of Katherine and was probably around the same age, although her hair was still salt and pepper, cut short and tending to stick up in endearing spikes when she absently brushed it from her forehead with the back of one dusty hand. Her oversized man's coat looked as if it had long since seen better days. It seemed to have come from the same GrungeCoats-R-Us outfitters as Golding's, and like his shapeless garment it also seemed to have pockets of bottomless depth, currently very pushed out of shape by the rune stones she kept dropping in there absently.

She was the Viking expert, someone who studied the gods the Asgard had pretended to be, or perhaps the gods who people had created for themselves from the Asgard who had visited them. It was a chicken and the egg situation he'd never really been able to unravel but, unlike Daniel, he didn't really care which had come first and didn't intend to waste any sleep over it. But the fact that she liked the Asgard, studied their myths, could understand the runes they had left upon the walls in mystical alien graffiti, made him feel warm to her from the outset. Egyptologists seemed to him to be siding with the enemy, adopting the language of the Goa'uld. Vikingologists were on the side of the good guys, even though they didn't know it. He felt more comfortable with her because of that. Even after she'd told him there was no such thing as a Vikingologist.

He liked the calm way she took him for granted, treating him as if he was a young boy rather than a grown man. There weren't very many people left these days older than him to the point where they would take that kind of resigned responsibility for him. Hammond was important to him for that as much as for his skill as a leader. There were times when even protectors needed to feel protected, when even leaders of men needed to feel the comforting glow of someone else's benevolent tyranny.

She told him with almost too much emphasis, as if she expected him to argue the point, that she was unmarried and had no children, and he'd realized that technically so was he. When he told her he was in the same position she gave him an unexpectedly searching look, as if she could read his past in his eyes, and then said, "There are worse things than being single, Colonel."

"I had a wife once. I had a son once, too. Now I don't."

She did look sorry for him but there was still reservation there. She turned back to the runes, saying quietly. "I'm sorry. You and Darius have more in common than I realized."

He'd bristled at that. Not wanting to be put into the same category as a man he already actively disliked despite the briefness of their acquaintance. "I doubt that."

"He also had a wife and son once and now he has neither." Her gaze was reproachful, a hint of disappointment there. It hung unspoken between them: You're not the only one here to suffer losses.

He realized she thought he was prone to bouts of self-pity about his single state and, after a moment's reflection, he realized she was right. There were times when he knew it made him
impatient with the losses of others. He'd lost his son, damnit, and his wife had walked out on him. He carried a hole inside himself all the time, a cavern of losses filled with the echoes of old baseball games, the angry stirrings of forgotten arguments, the tentative first steps of a toddler, the lost warmth of sunlight on a woman's hair.

Daniel had lost just about everyone he'd ever known and ever loved, and was still suffering losses, attracting them like iron filings to a magnet. Dead parents, dead wife, absent grandfather who had in any case never been around for him when he was living on the same planet, and now the loss of his wife's son whom Daniel loved but could never see and who carried inside him the memories of the creature that had taken his wife's body and raped it to give this child life. He was dependent on the whims of a glowing alien whether he ever saw that boy again. Carter had lost her mother to a car accident just at the age when she needed her most, and her father had been changed into a different species right in front of her eyes. She could never have another conversation with him without Selmac listening in. She carried the memories of a dead Tok'ra inside her, her blood was no longer entirely human, and biologically he supposed, neither was she. Teal'c's father had been murdered by Cronos, he'd been brought up in exile, physically altered forever to accommodate a system which had left him a slave to the creatures which had orphaned him. Because of the Goa'uld he had abandoned his wife, become separated from his son, been forced to kill, been forced to die.

So, yes, beside the sufferings of himself and that small group which he now thought of as an extension of himself, the misery of others did sometimes seem trivial, and perhaps he was dismissive, impatient, uncaring. But if he let himself be as receptive as Daniel was to the sufferings of strangers he could end up too scarred from other people's wounds to be able to keep going into combat. And yes, his wounds were realer to him than Golding's but that was because with each piece of scar tissue he remembered the knife going in.

"So, dubsar tur, what have you been doing with yourself these past few years? Except for acquiring mysterious Air Force bodyguards and a new haircut, that is…?"

Golding's voice from the next chamber made his hackles rise in automatic response. The Labyrinth had no echo although it felt as if it should do. Although it was technically underground, it was also technically a Goa'uld constructed piece of machinery, and walls of naquada evidently had no truck with echoes.

He didn't wait to hear Daniel's mild and untruthful response, immediately turning to Inga. "What did he just call Daniel?"

She was sketching the runes on the wall panel, meticulous in her drawing even though the panel and the surrounding walls had already been videotaped, but the swiftness of her answer told him that she too was listening in on Daniel and Golding. "It means 'junior scribe' in Babylonian. It's what Darius used to call Daniel."

He looked up at her in surprise. "You were here before?"

She seemed surprised by his surprise. "We all were. Didn't you know? I think I've dreamed of this place at least once a month every year since we were forced to leave. It's unlike anything I've ever seen."

He watched her sketch another rune sign, not a tremor in her fingers, reproducing the carving on the panel in front of her perfectly. He asked curiously, "What do you think of it?"

She looked around at the chamber. "Everyone keeps asking me that. I think the truth is, it is wrong in almost every way. It looks authentic and yet it feels utterly fake."
"Fake in what way?" he pressed.

She shook her head. "I don't know. Perhaps it's just too perfect. Or just too bizarre." She darted him a sideways look. "These runes are perfect. No anachronistic signs of any kind. No one has used the wrong kind of old Swedish or anything close to it. But it's too long an inscription and what it seems to say makes absolutely no sense. And anyway it can't be here."

"Here in the Labyrinth?" He polished another stone on his jacket.

She held out her hands. "Here in Egypt. Here where the Vikings didn't come. Who can carry news of a god except the people who worship him? Deities don't have an independent existence. They need belief and believers or else they don't exist."

O'Neill shrugged. "Hey, the panel could have been carved in Iceland or wherever, couldn't it? Then some Viking sold it and it was brought over here."

She sketched another rune carefully before laying down her pencil. "The carbon dating analysis on this site makes it thousands of years older than the Viking civilization but this panel speaks of Thor. Actually it seems to speak for Thor…."

His knees were starting to seize up but he didn't mind the boredom of helping Inga. The runes reminded him of Thor and he associated Thor with the hope of possible victory. And anyway he was just fond of the little guy.

"Your flyboy colonel doesn't look like the intellectual type to me."

Golding's voice interrupting his and Inga's pleasant tête à tête again made him grimace in annoyance.

Daniel's voice carried the hint of a tremor in it as he tried to sound unfazed and failed. "Jack's a lot smarter than he likes people to know, and anyway he has other qualities."

"Oh I bet he has. And I bet even though he never did Classical Studies in his community college he can still recognize a kinaidos when one is offering him everything on a plate."

The contempt and bitterness in Golding's voice made O'Neill half rise to his feet but Inga shook her head at him.

"It's not like that," Daniel said quietly.

O'Neill darted Inga a sideways look. "What did he just call him?"

"It's not an easy word to translate."

"Try."

"I'm not a Greek scholar."

"Inga…"

"I suppose 'catamite' is the nearest local equivalent but it's really to do with male hypocrisy. Even the Greeks didn't think it was acceptable for anyone to enjoy going underneath, and those that were reputed to do so were insulted and looked down upon."

O'Neill didn't need to be a Greek scholar either to work out that Golding wasn't telling Daniel he was someone who liked taking it up the ass as a compliment. "Remind me again why we have to
put up with that S.O.B?" he hissed at her.

She regarded him levelly. "Because he is a brilliant archaeologist and the foremost expert on cuneiform and Babylonian mythology in the world."

"The fact he's crazier than a sackful of snakes being only a mild wrinkle presumably?"

Inga drew another rune, her pencil making a perfectly straight downward line. "We prefer to think of him as eccentric."

O'Neill lowered his voice to hiss, "So, what happened back then? Did none of you notice he was going nuts?"

Inga turned and looked him in the eye for a moment. "His wife had just killed herself, Colonel. Under those circumstances people tend to cut a man a little slack."

He felt momentarily deflated. He didn't want to feel sorry for Golding. "Why did she kill herself?"

"Who can know that except Anna herself? Perhaps because he had been unfaithful one too many times. Perhaps because she wanted his attention? Because she wanted to punish him? Because she'd realized they were never going to have any more children now and she had sacrificed everything for a man who habitually cheated on her and spent most of his life on a different continent." Inga drew another rune. "Perhaps because she woke up one morning and the sun wasn't shining. Who knows why the mentally ill do the things they do?" After a pause, she added with less hostility, "It was the anniversary of the death of their child from cot death. It may have been one bad day too many. We'll never know."

O'Neill polished another rune stone carefully, using the cloth she'd given him to get the dust out of the carving. Exactly like the ones on Thor's ship. Moving carved stones around on that panel while Thor died on his dais and engine plans flashed up in front of him, incomprehensible and tedious. He'd once been the one with the loaded gun in his hand, imagining the taste of the barrel in his mouth, how easy it would be to summon oblivion and an end to this perpetual misery with one swift squeeze of the trigger. That was what he was trying not to think about – that he did know it felt to look into that particular abyss. "So, he cheated on her?"

"Constantly." Inga said the word crisply, without judgment.

"You feel sorry for him?" He couldn't help the accusation leaching in.

"Yes." Her glance at him was defiant, defending her right to pity him. "He was undoubtedly grief-stricken at her death. In his own way I think he loved her far more than either of them ever realized. He did sleep around all the time but it really was meaningless. There was never any threat to that central relationship although people sometimes fooled themselves they would be the one to win him away from her but Anna's position was inviolate. And, of course, by killing herself she ensured that it remained so for eternity. Perhaps that was the idea. It certainly gave her the last word."

For a moment he could make no sense of the coldness in her voice, the lack of sympathy for the wronged wife from a woman who could even find compassion for Golding, and then he realized what she was telling him. "You slept with Golding?"

She paused for a moment and then nodded. "Yes. A long time ago we had an affair. I mistook intensity of desire for the proof that we were meant to be together forever. I was thirty-five. He was already married. Reality caught up with both of us in the way it generally does in these things."
shadow passed over her face, an old fire never quite extinguished, a sad puff of spent smoke, and then his evident astonishment moved her to humor and she laughed. "You needn't look so amazed, Colonel. I was quite attractive when I was younger and there is only eight years between us. The same gap as there was between Eleanor of Aquitaine and Henry the Second. At least that's what I always tell myself. It sounds so much better than 'cradle-snatcher'."

"You still are very attractive. I just can't believe you'd fall for a phony like him."

"Oh, but I did," she assured him, mocking herself but with sadness behind it. "Hook, line, and the proverbial sinker. Everyone did. Darius was irresistible and no one tried very hard to resist him. But he isn't a phony. He is brilliant and he can be charming. And he has…other attributes."

He gritted his teeth. "Original good time had by all, was he?"

"Before Anna died there was a capacity for joy inside him that was very attractive. His enthusiasm was…incredible. He could make a cylinder seal appear to be the most exciting thing in the world. He loved his work and he lived life to the full. He drank too much. He took too many uppers and downers and for all I know other things as well. But he was a remarkable person. Then when she killed herself…" She shrugged. "Bitterness is a very unattractive trait. I try not to give way to it."

"Is he the reason you never married?" What a waste, he thought. What a pointless waste of a life, waiting for a man who had always loved his wife and now always would, and who anyway you've now come to despise. Or have you? Do you still love him even now? Even after what he did? What he is?

"Part of it, perhaps." She gave him an unexpectedly flirtatious smile. "But I haven't been a lonely old spinster, Colonel, I promise you."

He felt warmed by her smile, grateful to her for lightening the mood. "I believe you."

***

He and Daniel had ended up sharing a tent despite Daniel's protests. In fact he'd rather insisted on it. He and Daniel always shared tents on missions and why the heck should they change the habits of the last few years just because of Golding's weird obsessions? But Daniel hadn't liked it. He'd muttered and shuffled about, wrapped his arms around himself to keep out the imaginary chill and looked around for some other possibility until O'Neill had told him in no uncertain terms that it was the only tent they had, it was plenty big enough for two, and they were sharing it. Anyone who had a problem with that could take it up with his therapist but it was no problem of theirs. Daniel had reluctantly given in but spent the first hour sighing, and looking tragic and generally wronged until O'Neill had wanted to throw his boots at him.

"Darius will…"

"I don't care." He hissed it at him with positive venom.

Daniel flinched and looked even more tragic. "You don't understand."

"No, I don't. I don't understand for one minute why the delusions of some guy you haven't seen for thirteen years are suddenly more important than five years of friendship."

In the blue-lit darkness with the rustling flutter of the tent rippling against the ropes like a trapped dove, Daniel looked positively stricken. "It isn't like that."

"Well then, what is it like?" He was past exasperated. Fed up with being snubbed and denied while
Golding was pandered to and indulged. He was fed up with Daniel tip-toeing past Golding and turning the other cheek whenever the guy made another unsubtle crack, then snapping at him if he dared to try make light of what the guy was suggesting.

"I'm afraid for you."

The admission made no sense although it obviously cost Daniel something to say it. O'Neill shook his head in disbelief while Daniel turned his head to look at him, eyes pleading for him to be understanding. O'Neill moistened his lips. "I have a gun. And in case you haven't noticed I take an awful lot of killing."

"You don't know what Darius is like."

O'Neill stabbed a finger at him. "Hey, I'm the one who keeps telling you he isn't stable in the upper story. You're the one who keeps insisting he's a genius and we should all make allowances."

"He is a genius." Daniel propped himself up. "It would have taken me a week to translate what Darius translated this morning in a couple of hours. I'd forgotten just how good he is."

O'Neill felt the exasperation bubbling up again. He was so sick of hearing how clever Golding was. "Cuneiform isn't your specialty. Hieroglyphs are."

"Darius can translate Eblaite and Elamite cuneiform. There are only about twelve men alive today who can do that and I'm not one of them."

O'Neill exhaled. "Yes, and he can't translate Goa'uld and you can. Stop letting him undermine you."

Daniel went to sleep then, apparently to avoid continuing the conversation. He seemed to have developed the ability to drop into unconsciousness like a sloth falling off a branch. One minute he was arguing, the next he was sleeping with his mouth open, with no apparent transition between the two. O'Neill recognized the symptoms as someone living on the edge of stress, exhaustion a constant companion which could be succumbed to at any moment. He threw up his hands in defeat and went to sleep himself, dreaming of Hathor for the first time in years, breathing in her mind-altering mist, feeling her fingers on his skin, the pain as she cut a womb inside him, a rape of his body as degrading in its own way as the one she'd inflicted on Daniel, using them both for her own ends, shaping them to suit her, to breed her offspring and to carry them, modeling them both like human clay.

He'd been poised on the brink of a realization of great significance when his alarm radar went off, telling him that somewhere close by something was terribly wrong and that if he didn't wake up and fix it right now, someone was going to die.

***

The first night after a long unsettled day spent far too much in the company of Darius, Daniel dreamed of Rajid. In the dream Rajid came to him, ghost-gray and a little out of focus to stand at the foot of his sleeping bag and look as sorrowful as a winter sea. His breath made a white mist in the darkness even though the dead were cold inside as well as out.

Rajid wept when he looked at Daniel and Daniel tried to tell him that he was sorry. He knew Rajid was speaking of his mother, whom Rajid had loved, and of how he had promised her that he would always keep her son as safe as Rajid guarded his own daughter. Of how he had tried to tell the authorities in America to let Daniel come to them, that he would be safer with them, but they hadn't
listened to an old man and Daniel had been lost amongst strangers.

Then the harmattan of the Sahara, the red wind that sweeps the sand into clouds, engulfed Rajid. When the thunder and the lightning came, the rains seemed to be raining blood. Even though Daniel knew it was the red wind turned to a red rain, he still shrank from the blood-colored liquid, but it spattered all across him, hot and wet, staining his skin. When he turned his head, Rajid's white robes were red with Daniel's blood and it wasn't dust and sand that Daniel could taste, but sharp iron and salt in his mouth.

Then he was running. He could still see Rajid but he was growing fainter, and the Labyrinth was beginning to swallow him. Rajid held up a sword and a ball of twine so Daniel could find his way back from the center but Daniel couldn't reach him, the harmattan was too strong, it blew him into the darkness in a hot red mist. He knew the minotaur was waiting for him in the Labyrinth and that, without a sword, it would kill him, without his life-twine he would never find his way out again. All this time he'd hoped he might be Theseus but now he knew he was just one of the sacrificial victims, the ones without names who died screaming in the darkness from deaths too horrible to be recorded. He shivered, his limbs aching with fear, wondering why they'd had to be virgins. If all the minotaur did was eat them, those seven youths and seven maidens, why did it care if they were untouched and pure?

He was being dragged into the Labyrinth by a hand around his wrist. He tried to break the grip but it was too strong for him. He tried to reason but his voice was carried off as a captive to be swallowed by the blue-black walls. He could see strange symbols of obscure Egyptian gods he could barely recognize, the glow of arcane hieroglyphs, early and altered and strange, glowing gold, yet apparently telling his captor the right way to go.

His captor spoke in a different tongue, in the language of Sumeria, cursing the whore of Babylon, sobbing for his own sins, reciting the story of Inanna's descent. The walls watched in approval. The knife gleamed. Daniel took off his clothes, crying because reason had failed, he had no ball of twine to find his way back again, but he was also crying because he was young and afraid, and his captor had told him that he must go naked into the center of the labyrinth to receive the punishment that he deserved.

Then he was buried alive in liquid darkness, it filled his throat, it filled his eyes, he was seared and frozen and there was a blade hanging over him like the sword of Damocles. A blow smashed down onto his chest. He woke up screaming on the inside of the coffin, hammering on the top, begging them to let him out, please god let him out….

"Daniel! Wake up!"

He woke, gasping, to the creak of canvas, and to Jack shaking him by the shoulders and saying his name. He was shaken again, much too hard, jolting his eyes open, which he hadn't known were closed. He was overcome by the brightness of the stars, blinding with focus then smeared like rain, blue light poured in through the flapping opening to the tent. His eyes were stinging with salt and the loneliness was devastating. He felt as if he was being held underwater a thousand light years from home. There was a rushing sound in his ears. His chest hurt almost as much as in the dream. Something was wrong, badly wrong.

"Breathe, Daniel. Breathe!"

He gasped and inhaled, oxygen hitting him as hard as alcohol on an empty stomach. Then he was snatching breaths desperately, realizing his lungs were starved. He coughed and gasped then stared at Jack who was staring back at him, looking scared.
"Daniel…?"

Jack was holding him awkwardly at arm's length, as if he was a bomb that might go off any second. He looked ready to shake him again if he had to.

"What happened?" Daniel gasped. Now he was waking up, the dream was slipping away from him, like a winding sheet from which he was fighting his way free, but where it had touched him it left a chill that went through every layer of his skin. He wrapped his arms around himself, trying to get warm, missing Rajid like a physical pain, wanting him back, wanting them all back, his mother, his father, Sha're, everyone who had ever comforted him and made him feel safe, and who was now dead and cold.

"You stopped breathing." Only Jack could say that with accusation, as though Daniel had done it on purpose just to scare him.

Now that he wasn't having to gasp for breath he could hear the sound of Jack's heartbeat again, the way it was hammering too fast. Daniel obviously had scared him good and proper. The pain in his chest was still there and he winced from it. He put his fingers to his chest, tentatively touching a decidedly physical ache.

Jack grimaced in apology. "You stopped breathing." An explanation this time. Later the bruise would blossom there in purple and gold where Jack's fist had thumped him back into life.

"Lucky you heard me."

"I was well-trained by Charlie." Jack looked around the tent as if seeking inspiration. "Do you think it was your allergies?"

"I don't know." Daniel also examined the inside of the tent but it was just silvery-lit nylon, like the tents they used on missions. This was like too many other confused wakings. Him and Jack whispering to each other in the starlight of an alien night so as not to disturb the others, befuddled by a nightmare or awoken by one of the other's wounds calling to them in the darkness, embarrassed by their own intimacy after the moment was passed, finding themselves in too close proximity when neither of them were good at being close to others any more. Extra embarrassed because they'd been that way for minutes and neither of them had noticed until now. Determinedly not meeting Jack's eye Daniel said, "I think I may have scared myself into asphyxia."

The last time he'd been here everything had been different. Not only his hair, but also his body. He had muscles now it hadn't had then, there was a strength in his arms he hadn't had before, although he suspected that even now he would never be able to lift the lid of that nightmare coffin. It was an unpleasant shock to realize he was missing the weight of that holster strapped to his thigh. He'd become used to carrying a gun, he felt more vulnerable without it, which meant he must have become dependent on the protection it offered. The possibility of killing another to stop them from killing him. When had that happened? How had he allowed that to happen? Who was he now anyway?

"Scared yourself with what?"

"The past."

He saw Rajid's face in the dream. The man looked so sorrowful and so reproachful. He'd sacrificed himself for Daniel. Then the dream faded and the past stepped into its place. He was shuddering in the dawn light wrapped in a blanket, like someone plucked from the sea, saved from drowning but still dazed from the depths. Rajid trying to communicate with him, holding his shoulders just like
Jack was holding him now, giving him a little shake to get his full attention, snapping Daniel back into reality with a gasp of shock and fear.

Rajid had reached out to stroke his hair back from his face, his kind old eyes full of unshed tears, and Daniel knew he'd hurt him irretrievably. Looking at Rajid he'd been looking at a broken man, Daniel had gone into the darkness with Darius and come out changed forever and somehow in that process he had snapped something in Rajid's soul. Looking into Rajid's eyes, the shame had seared him, his skin felt soiled and when he pulled the blanket closer to hide his nakedness his fingers had touched tacky smears of drying blood. Afterwards in the hospital as he lay there in the sanctuary of his coma, when the nurses had sponged his grubby body clean they'd wiped off the blood and found nothing underneath it, not even the hint of a wound. The blood had belonged to someone else, someone Daniel had been standing so close to at the time their veins had spurted that he'd been covered in their lifeblood. They'd told him later that no one was missing, no child or even dog unaccounted for, but he still believed someone had died in the red night of Golding's madness. Someone no one had even looked for, or if they'd looked for, never found.

Looking into Rajid's sorrowing eyes Daniel had said desperately, "I'm sorry."

Rajid had touched his hair again, so gently and with such regret, the gnarled old fingers like velvet against his skin, then he'd leant across and touched his lips to Daniel's forehead, granting absolution for the crime that had broken Rajid's soul. He whispered softly in Egyptian, "Forgive me…"

And then he'd gone back into the Labyrinth to rescue Darius, leaving Daniel rocking in the dirt, cold and filthy and full of shame, skin prickling away from the trails of someone else's congealing blood, seeing those tears glistening forever in Rajid's disappointed eyes.

Abruptly, to his embarrassment and shock Daniel began to cry. The tears came without warning, a hot rush of salt adding extra humiliation to his misery.

"What is it? Daniel, what's wrong…?"

"Nothing. I don't know why I…" He couldn't stop the tears coming, reaction, he guessed, the flow of them hot and salt and shaming. He closed his eyes so he wouldn't have to see the bafflement and anxiety on Jack's blue-lit face, his face averted while the losses continued to cover him in cold waves.

Jack put a hand on the back of his head, guiding him into his shoulder, putting an arm around him awkwardly, embarrassed and angry and protective, what he needed right now.

Jack's voice was unexpectedly gentle. "You don't have to stay here. What do you want to do?"

"I want to go home." Daniel felt another wave of tears well up as he said it. He didn't know if he was drowning in genuine grief for people he'd loved or just abject self-pity because he'd been so scared. He was afraid he might be having a nervous breakdown.

"Where's home?" Jack pressed.

"Nowhere. There isn't any home."

Daniel felt Jack increase his grip but he couldn't tell if it was because he was fighting not to shake him again. He could feel Jack's unshaven jaw against his cheekbone where he'd ducked his head, the collar of Jack's jacket brushed against his mouth, the material faintly flavored with engine oil. His mother had been the cool palm on a fevered brow, the quiet voice in a noisy world, the one
place of safety he could always come to. Sha're had been soft and warm and soothing and sensual. Jack was all hard edges and angry corners, but he was alive and he cared and Daniel felt pathetically grateful for both of those things.

Jack whispered it hoarsely, concern and exasperation wrapped around the words in equal measure. "If you don't tell me what you want I can't help you."

Daniel pulled loose from his grip, less frightened and more embarrassed now. He wiped his eyes angrily. "I want no one to have died because of me. I want Rajid not to be dead because of me."

As the blue light was blotted out by a man-sized shadow, he ducked instinctively. Jack moved between Daniel and the shadow, voice cool as he said, "Can I help you?"

Darius looked massive in the darkness, his shoulders filling the tent flap. Just for a second Daniel saw ordinary concern in his eyes as he gazed up at him, but then his dream came back with a rush and the fear made him shudder. Darius’s eyes went cold as the starlight glittering in his hair.

"I thought you might be helping yourself, Colonel. Going by the crying, I assumed you were making it a little rougher than even our Daniel likes."

"And yet they say chivalry is dead."

Daniel felt the crackle of their hostility go over his head, venomous and pointless, blotting out the good in both of them, roughening Jack's voice so he sounded the way he had on their first mission through the 'gate, the same guy who'd said Daniel was full of shit, who would have used the bomb. And Darius was sneering now when a second before there had been anxiety in his eyes, come to comfort, not to damage.

Daniel realized he needed Darius not to hate him or blame him for what had happened in the past, which meant Darius must need that too. Perhaps they both needed absolution from the other one. But how could he forgive what he couldn't remember? He gazed up at the man hopefully but Jack and Golding were locked in enmity, daring one another to make the next move. He felt a sudden rush of impatience that made him feel a lot more like himself. Annoyed at the way he'd gibbered with fear and then cried like a child, he wiped his eyes.

"I had a bad dream," he said it almost angrily, going by the way they both jumped, startling both of them. They appeared to have forgotten he might have an opinion, reducing him to some kind of disputed territory. "Now the show's over I'd really like to get some sleep. If you two want to paw the ground could you go and do it somewhere else?"

He saw that flicker of surprise, even respect from Darius, that look of disbelieving hurt from Jack because that was all the thanks he got for comforting him and defending him?

Daniel winced and put a hand up to his head. Not looking at either of them he said as quietly and as rationally as he could manage it, "I just had a bad dream, Darius. Go back to bed."

When Darius had gone he said, "I'm sorry I woke you, Jack."

"You remembered something." There was no mistaking the accusation in Jack's voice.

"I don't remember anything." He said the lie evenly, without the trace of a tremor.

"Don't lie to me."

"I'm tired. I have to sleep." He lay down in his sleeping bag.
Jack was radiating righteous indignation in the moonlight. Daniel could practically see it emanating from him in a silvery-blue haze. He was so tired he couldn't keep his eyes open even though he wanted to. He felt as if he was sinking through the floor into the sand beneath. Perhaps it was the Labyrinth sucking him back down into its center to be swallowed whole.

"Daniel, I swear to god…"

"I'm sorry." He meant it but he was abruptly too exhausted to stay awake a moment later. As he fell asleep Jack was still telling him all the reasons why they needed to talk. The words drifted into his dreams like wisps of smoke or flickers of candlelight in the darkness before the fire was extinguished, the candles snuffed, and he was alone in his coffin once again.

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IV: The Labyrinth

Sometimes it was so quiet in the Labyrinth Daniel thought he could hear the walls remembering, a faint purr beneath the rock face of satisfied reflection. At times they felt dry and inorganic, like the inside of a microwave. In other sections where the blast had left faint scorchmarks upon the otherwise unbroken surface, the Labyrinth felt fallible, vulnerable. Then he could almost like it, when it was hollow and dripping like the inside of a well and the odd subterranean breeze ruffled his hair in a resigned caress.

Fear had become the constant background noise he wasn't going to listen to. He knew part of the power of the memory he wouldn't remember was the fact he wouldn't remember it. Anything, however horrific, when confronted, usually lost much of its horror. But the way that memory could near-paralyze him with a glimpse, a whisper, sometimes even a scent, made him fear that perhaps what had happened in the Labyrinth was something so terrible that it would be the exception that proved the rule. It could be that his mind had walled it up where it couldn't be found and then installed all those 'Danger!' 'Warning!' signs to stop him venturing there for a very good reason. Or it could be that in nineteen eighty-nine that was the worse thing which had ever happened to him, but a dozen worse things had happened since besides which that past event would pale into insignificance. It could be what had been done to him in the labyrinth (he hoped it was something done to him rather than something he had done) would seem like very small beer now if he looked it straight in the metaphorical eye. Or it could be that it could wreck his sanity and the life he had now if it ever came to the surface and he had to confront it. Reminding himself that he'd been found with barely a bruise, that he hadn't been hurt at all, whatever he'd been afraid of, didn't help when the terror was bubbling beneath the thinnest crust of repressed memory, like lava beneath a thin black concealment of cooler rock.

As someone who had lost his sanity once he didn't feel prepared to risk it. If being returned to a padded cell to gibber with terror could be avoided he was in favor of avoiding it. In the meantime there were strategies to deal with the fear – avoidance and concentration on other things. He turned down the volume of his panic as far as he could and then cranked up everything else to mask it.

In the morning he woke before everyone else. In the cool bell tower of the day, the still quiet before sunrise, he was briefly able to see everything. That was when he would remember the Egypt of his childhood. The bustle of the bazaars, the constant dust, the narrow uneven streets, the charm of cream paint flaking from a wall, old shutters faded by the burning desert heat to the grayish silver of a shipwreck. The scent of spices in his nostrils and on his tongue the aftermath of strange journeys of the tastebuds eagerly undertaken as he was offered enticing spoonfuls at stall after stall.

Egyptian cotton, so rich, cool and slippery fine, sweeter than bandages on a new graze against the
skin. His parents were always with him in his memories, he remembered the waist of his mother's patterned dress, the curious-familiar feel of his father's calluses against his own soft palm. He'd coveted those calluses like the sons of soldiers reveled in their scar tissue, the caterpillar trails of old war wounds.

And then suddenly his mind would leap back to the present and he would find himself thinking of Charlie tracing the ridged cicatrices of Jack's scars with a stubby forefinger, asking Jack to tell him how it had happened and when and, inevitably, why. Children didn't understand 'that's classified'. There must have been tears before bedtime, or perhaps just colorful lies.

Or sometimes Jack's breathing would permeate his past, reminding him that his parents were dead, his childhood over, he was here with an USAF colonel who had bizarrely become his best friend, and he was no longer what his father had been. He was nothing like the child he had once been, or even much like the Daniel Jackson who had once been dragged into the dark core of this place. Only Egypt remained eternally unscathed and unchanged. Except the labyrinth was trying to poison that as well, a piece of naquada shrapnel buried in its ancient heart which Nelson and the others were mistaking for a genuine artifact. Once upon a time he'd made that mistake as well. But even then the inconsistencies had screamed at him, insisting that he didn't deny them or try to rationalize them. He had to embrace them to understand them, not keep discarding them because with the accepted knowledge of Ancient Egypt they made no sense. This place had been the first clue that there might be a huge piece missing in their understanding of the history of Egypt. That perhaps it wasn't these clues that were wrong, it was the accepted knowledge that needed re-examination.

This Labyrinth had been the first step which had led him away from that glittering future his tutors had wished for him towards derision and ignominy and standing with his suitcases on a street corner in the pouring rain.

But where did he stop? Did he blame it for driving him out of academia and not thank it for pushing him down a road that had led to Sha're? He wished he'd had so much more time with his wife but he didn't regret the time he'd had. He wouldn't have wanted to never meet her just to spare himself the pain of having lost her. He wouldn't have wanted to give up the SCG either. He was trying the experiment now, after all, and he was miserable with it. He was also still a little taken aback by how far Jack moved out of his ground just to come with him. He was spending his days talking archaeology and wandering the subterranean caverns of a maze even though he could have asked for Davis to get this assignment instead, or some other officer from the Pentagon who could have endured the boredom of conversations he didn't understand. But Jack had chosen to volunteer himself for this assignment instead. Exasperated as he had been by Jack muscling in on this mission, Daniel was also touched by it, and in the middle of the night when the terror awoke him from another nightmare and instead of darkness and silence he woke to someone saying his name with kindness and telling him it had just been a bad dream, he was grateful too.

Daniel knew – had known for a long time now – that there was something about him that appealed to Jack's protective instincts. And that was fine. He wasn't averse to being protected. What he didn't think Jack had ever grasped was how protective Daniel felt about him. He'd seen the man at his most vulnerable too many times not to know that Jack wasn't Superman. Bullets didn't bounce off him. Nor did staff blasts or silver arrows. If you cut him, he bled, kicked him he bruised, hurt him, he felt the pain and mentioned it, usually loudly.

There were times when Jack was a dead-eyed black ops soldier who could kill men with his bare hands and who could still, even now, cause Daniel the occasional twinge of fear. But there were a lot more times when he was just his friend, a guy with bad knees and a bad back, whose ankles made a painful-sounding clicking noise if he turned too fast, a friend Daniel needed around and who, being a decade older than him, probably wouldn't be around forever. He wanted to keep Jack safe just as much as Jack wanted to keep him safe. The main difference was that Jack was a lot
more confident about his abilities to do so than Daniel was, especially against a guy who was four inches taller and a good sixty pounds heavier.

When he thought about what might happen if Golding went insane again, he'd find himself back in that initial paralysis, terrified of something his mind refused to allow him to remember. That was when he worked hard at his avoidance techniques. Luckily the Labyrinth made this strategy possible, as it was nothing if not full of distractions.

The place was vast. A maze of passageways leading into unexpected chambers in which there would be more panels of writing, more pictures on the walls, so much to be deciphered and as yet very little sense to be made from any of it. Not helped by the way only the first few chambers seemed to remain the same. After that came the maze that led to the unreachable center and it was deliberately baffling. He wasn't even convinced it was consistent. The passageways were like a series of crossroads at which gremlins regularly spun all the signposts so they would point in different directions. Whatever the cause he knew that when he moved beyond the last chamber of inscriptions to the criss-cross of corridors he would immediately lose his sense of direction. When he endeavored to go west he would end up pointing south, attempted to retrace his steps of the day before, looking for the same pictures to guide him and would hit yet another dead-end, but never the same dead-end of the day before. He had tried repeatedly to reach the center but had been thwarted every time, deposited back in some chamber he'd already explored or in a passageway with glyphs on the wall he'd never seen before. He couldn't decide if he was disappointed or relieved to have made so little progress in reaching the place he most feared.

What never altered was the sense of how vast the place was, although even that couldn't be proved as the data was inconclusive, as was the carbon dating, the thermal resonating, the mineral analysis, the everything that had been tried so far to pin down the extent of this site, who had made it and out of what. The stone out of which it had been made was a slate-blue-black color, oddly warm to the touch, as though it carried energy inside it. There was certainly naquada present, but there seemed to be other minerals as well, at least some of which were new even to the SGC scientists.

He was waiting impatiently for Sam to return from the mission on which she was accompanying SG-5 so she could give them her opinion on the labyrinth's composition. Hammond had assured them other SGC scientists were analyzing it already but he didn't trust their conclusions. He wanted Sam's. If he was honest he wanted Sam here and Teal'c as well. Yes, the tattoo would be difficult to explain, but they could get around it. This wasn't an archaeological puzzle based on this world and their history. This was something to do with the Goa'uld, and Sam's mineral analysis and Teal'c's specialist knowledge would have been invaluable. There was also the little matter of him missing them. He was embarrassed to admit it, but that was the truth. He'd been away from the SGC for one week and he was missing his friends. He wanted to go and knock on Teal'c's door and meditate with him. Sit there in the quiet of the candlelight and let the strains of the day seep out slowly through the soles of his feet the way Bra'tac had taught Teal'c and Teal'c had taught him. In those times recently he'd tried to empty his mind of everything except the memory of those Zen cones on the wall of the temple in Kheb, to try to reach that state of enlightenment and peace Teal'c was also striving for but which Daniel suspected he was a lot less likely than Teal'c to ever reach.

He wanted to call up Sam and compare notes on what they'd learned on the last mission. Tell her about his latest theories and know that she would listen even if she didn't fully understand, then return the favor as she dazzled him with astrophysics. He wanted to bitch about Jack and have her defend him, then have her bitch about Jack so that he could defend him. It was just one of many rituals that they shared and it soothed them both. These people had become his family and he missed their affection, their protection and their company.
In the past, as a confused twenty-three year old, he had struggled in vain to make sense of the place. Why were there panels telling the stories of different gods in different ancient languages, some of which have never before been found on the same continent and rarely within the same time frame? The earliest runes ever found had come from about 200 AD. The latest known hieroglyphic inscriptions dated from 394 AD. That gave a crossover at the most of less than two hundred years. There was only a tiny window in the history of linguistics in which both could co-exist, and no evidence that he knew of showing any Viking journey to North Africa to explain their presence there.

Now he knew the expansion of the Vikings had nothing to do with these runes. They were Asgard writing and they hadn't needed a longboat to get to Egypt from the icy north, just as some of these strange hieroglyphs weren't cryptographic inscriptions but the language of the Goa'uld.

Three branching corridors and two inner chambers away Daniel knew Nelson was puzzling away at an inscription about Nekheny, more informative than anything ever yet found on that elusive deity, at the same time wondering why the ruler who served under him wasn't listed on any surviving king-list and why someone who was citing Nekhen as his deity had his name within an anachronistic cartouche instead of a simple early serekh.

The other inscriptions about Nekheny had been covered up, many of them were half-erased and Hélène Bouldieu spent most of her part of the nightly phonecalls to Alexis trying to persuade him to send off for equipment that would help them see the faded writing underneath. There had been a long debate over the merits of what ultraviolet could reveal when compared with the damage it might do, a one-sided conversation in which Alexis was represented only by a vague murmur of non-conviction and caution on the other side of the phone. Daniel imagined him sitting up in his hospital bed scribbling notes while he argued with her good-naturedly before making enquiries. Hélène rhapsodized about the wonders of ultraviolet very fast in French. Just a babble of sound to Jack, Daniel knew, and even he having some trouble keeping up with her as she explained to the resolutely unscientific Alexis the difference between harmful ultraviolet radiation and the benefits of using fluorescent ultraviolet tubes to uncover what appeared to have disappeared.

"It brings back pictures that seem to have faded completely. It would be perfect for John and his half-erased inscriptions. And what century have you been living in, not to use it until now anyway?"

Daniel couldn't hear Alexis answer but he heard Hélène's laughter. "Even you have to step out of the Old Testament Age sometimes. Just tell the Air Force we can't possibly manage without them and get them to send us some at once. Not only will you be advancing the cause of archaeology, you will be making a valuable contribution to saving what remains of John's hair…"

It came as no surprise to Daniel, who knew just how persuasive Hélène could be, that even safe in a hospital bed in Cairo, Alexis had ended up giving in.

While they waited for the UV lights to arrive, Nelson had continued to work on the one inscription that was still intact, defiant and untouched, its paintwork gleaming. Nelson had told Daniel he'd dreamt about these unfamiliar hieroglyphs for years. Wondering if the story of that forgotten god was told there, in panels he had copied, in glyphs he had touched, if his life's work could be vindicated or dismissed in one blinding flash of revelation. Even when working on other digs he would keep the pictures of it handy. The Air Force had made them turn in everything, insisting all their notes counted as 'classified' but hadn't seem to realize that most of them had kept copies so they could take out the contradictions and questions of the Labyrinth from time to time and worry at them like crossword puzzle clues.
"...I'm sure this is the sign for 'Nekheny', Dan. It's similar enough that it has to be. I think this is 'hear and attend' and here I think it's saying that he has come or arrived here, something about day and night. I think it may be a boast of some kind. The people here insisting their god was mightier than all other gods, but I can't make out enough of the words.... I've been through every inscription I can find on other tombs elsewhere and there's nothing quite like this form of hieroglyphs and hardly any other mentions of Nekehny except for that one at Soleb. So either he was very local to Hierakonpolis or he was expunged from the records when some other god – probably Ra or Horus – gained ascendancy...."

How could he tell Nelson that when he talked about another god gaining ascendancy it had probably happened on another world somewhere, in battles fought by men of flesh and blood with the coiled malevolence of sleeping symbiotes in their guts? Infant Goa'uld driving them on to endure greater pain, and greater hardship because the creatures who had enslaved them could fuse their broken bones and renew their seared flesh. That those obscured inscriptions in these shadowy corridors were probably the culmination of a hundred wars of fire raining from motherships and the scream of crashing death gliders cutting through the blood-soaked air like a scythe.

He was also having to avoid too many conversations with the gentle Zaheer, who was wrestling with colored snakes in beautifully painted panels he kept wanting Daniel to look at. Zaheer had told him Daniel he believed these paintings depicted a new variation of the myths of Vasuki and Takshaka, Snake King and Queen of the *nagas* whose progeny contained a sacred jewel within their hoods. As Daniel now believed the panel to be the proof that much of the Vedic literature Zaheer held so dear was really an account of the enslavement of mankind by aliens with glowing eyes, he was trying to keep his distance.

At times the fascination of the place was so overwhelming that he could forget it was a Goa'uld building in which something terrible had once happened to him in which he was probably as guilty as the madman who had done it, which had caused the death of a gentle man he thought of as a surrogate father, and left him covered in someone else's blood.

One of the things making it harder to forget was Darius. The man was unraveling in front of his eyes in a way all too scarily reminiscent of the past, but even as he was heading for the crash, his brilliance still came in electrifying bursts. And when he was inspired he was just as dazzling as Daniel remembered. He would translate with astonishing speed and lucidity while Daniel stumbled after him, physically and intellectually, struggling to write as fast as Darius could read. The man would snap at him, urge him to keep up, damnit, he couldn't do this for long. For that hour of frenzied activity he would be as arrogant as an ancient monarch, tossing words to Daniel over his shoulder like bones to a dog, demanding to know how Daniel didn't know this when it was so obvious, for fuck's sake, what the hell had Daniel been doing with his life for the past five years to not be able to see that of course this meant what Darius was telling him it meant, was he blind as well as stupid?

His finger stabbed imperiously at the wall, while behind him his filthy old coat flapped like the wings of a giant roc. "'Ne-khen-ya-us, sunki ir-sá-ir-ra sunki sunki-ip-in-na sunki...' Translate it, Daniel! You know these signs. Don't tell me you can't read Elamite. I taught you Elamite. Here, if that's too hard for you try this one here: 'inanna nin-a-ni Ne-ken sar kissati é-a-ni mu-na-dù...'

Daniel would stumble in his wake, tracing wedges with his finger that weren't quite Elamite, Sumerian or Babylonian but a combination of the three. As he tried to decipher the texts with Darius's impatient exhortations burning his ears he would be uncomfortably reminded of the old Babylonian system of teaching where so much of the instruction and discipline of the apprentices was left to an elder student. This student, a kind of 'big brother' figure, fluctuated between a friend and a bully, and had to be propitiated with gifts and flattery if regular beatings were to be avoided.
Darius didn't actually hit him – although his hand had twitched impatiently more than once – but his tongue could strip skin and Daniel often staggered out of those frenzied sessions of translation with his self-esteem somewhere down around his ankles. But there would also be the exultation at having been forced to the very limits of his comprehension and beyond by someone who was in his chosen field an undoubted genius, feeling his mind racing to keep pace with Darius and making those leaps Darius wanted him to make, jumping from sign to sign that he recognized and gradually filling in with those wild guesses Darius demanded. Daniel had often been described as 'intuitive' by his tutors but Darius jumped without a parachute, pole-vaulted ravines, had turned inspired guesswork into a kind of glider flight which Daniel found as scary as it was exhilarating.

He couldn't explain to Golding that while such intuitive leaps were suitable for the kind of intellectual exercises archaeologists indulged in, five years on a military field unit where a wrong translation from him might lead to the death of living, breathing human beings had put a bit of a crimp in his willingness to just go ahead and guess.

Nor could he explain to an often furious Jack – who had been eavesdropping on the sessions and had taken umbrage at Darius's way of talking to Daniel – that he didn't mind being metaphorically smacked upsides the head and yelled at by Darius. It was just Darius's way, and however crushed it might leave his self-confidence, the next day he would find he could read parts of the text which had been incomprehensible to him the day before.

"It's just the way he does things," he shrugged.

Jack glared at him in exasperation. "No one has the right to talk to you like that. Even I don't talk to you like that."

"I don't mind."

"Well, you should mind!"

He'd sigh in defeat and go off to work with Nelson for a while, who was gentle and polite, and always said 'Well, that's certainly an interesting interpretation of that cartouche but I wonder if in this context it might rather be saying...' to even the most dunderheaded students however far off beam they might be.

Working with Nelson was soothing and quiet. They would sketch the panels together and translate the hieroglyphs while Nelson tried to fit what they were translating into his existing view of ancient Egyptian history and Daniel tried to work out just what the System Lords had been up to when they'd built this place. But eventually the guilt at not being able to share what he was learning would get to him, as would Nelson's increasing frustration and bewilderment at everything that didn't add up about the texts they were translating.

And through it all, Jack was being exactly what Daniel had feared that he would be – a link back to the SGC, an anchor holding him to reality, a comfort it was all too easy to rely on always being there, come rain, come shine, come Goa'uld invasion. He'd thought he wanted to cut loose from that dependence entirely, but with Darius constantly trying to undermine his confidence in himself and make him think of himself as some callow twenty-something, it was reassuring to have Jack there as a reminder that he was now thirty-six and a valued member of the SGC. Jack was also the only person with whom he could discuss his findings in any detail because he was the only one who knew about that vital missing piece called the Goa'uld. Each night they held whispered consultations by furtive flashlight, Daniel showing Jack the translations he'd done so far which he couldn't share while Jack told him about the rune-stones and his continuing search to find the panel they activated.
"So, what did you find out today?" Jack always said it with a mixture of curiosity and resignation. Half wanting to hear, half afraid of being bored.

Daniel sighed. "The names of more gods. I think things were added at different times. There are old inscriptions under the later panels. Those earlier ones are consistent as far as I can tell but they've been erased in so many places it's difficult to be certain."

"What do they say? The older panels you can read?"

"Some of them are in some kind of proto-Hebrew that Alexis might be able to translate but I can't, and the others are in an early form of Goa'uld which I'm not very familiar with. I could really do with Teal'c here." He made that plea at regular intervals.

"He's on a mission with Carter. Should be back in a few days. What do you think they say?"

"They all seem to be by a Goa'uld called Nekheny basically sticking up two fingers to the other Goa'uld. I think he may have tried to defy Ra and the others and in retaliation they've put their panels over the top of his, writing him out of history."

Jack kept playing with the rune stones he'd found in the Labyrinth. Laying them out in lines, occasionally building houses with them. Daniel wasn't even sure he knew he was doing it. He clearly should have told Inga what he and Sam had learned years ago – that one never left a valuable artifact or piece of equipment anywhere Jack could get his hands on it. Jack seemed to be doing some miniature dry-stone walling with today's batch of rune stones. "Which Goa'uld have you found references to so far?"

"Ra. Hathor."

He appreciated the look of total disgust Jack got on his face when anyone mentioned Hathor's name but didn't want him to start sounding off in case anyone heard. He continued quickly.

"Wadjet. She was a serpent goddess. So was Mertseger. I found a reference to her as well. Likewise Nehebkaw and Nehebka. They each have a panel which seems to have been written by people, not by Goa'uld. They're painted, not inscribed. And they're written in variant forms of Ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs. Also, there are mentions of the sacred serpent goddesses who formed the Ogdoad along with Nun, Amun, Kuk and Huh. They're commended as all wise, all powerful, terrible and magnificent but some of the references to their great victories aren't the same as in standard Egyptian mythology."

"So you think they're talking about the Goa'uld who took those identities, not the gods from those…Egyptian folktales?"

Daniel decided to let the 'folktales' comment go as Jack was right in other ways. "Yes. Also in Egyptian mythology the four primeval goddess of the Ogdoad are Hauhet, Kauket, Naunet and… Amaunet." He made himself say the word although it was impossible to speak the name of that goddess now without seeing his wife burning a light into his brain in the last seconds before Teal'c killed her. "They're often mentioned in the same texts, but here Naunet, Hauhet and Kauket are mentioned on separate panels as if they have no connection with one another and there's no mention of Amaunet."

"Why?"

Daniel ran a hand through his hair. "Well, as far as I can tell the only major Egyptian deities associated with serpents who aren't mentioned in this place are Apophis and Amaunet. From
which I presume they'd already been exiled because of their opposition to Ra."

"Yeah, Ra never struck me as the type to forgive and forget."

"And he must have had a lot of influence. Apophis was still trying to buy his way back into the favor of the System Lords by avenging him two years after Ra was dead."

Jack waved a hand in the direction of the Labyrinth. "So, what's it all mean?"

"I don't know. Sanjay's found some new stories about two Indian serpent gods, Vasuki and Takshaka, which he says aren't in any text he's come across before so I guess they must have been Goa'uld as well. Then there's a long inscription in Ugaritic cuneiform which Darius translated yesterday about Baal and his sister-wife Anat which bears no resemblance to any myth I've ever come across on earth. All about them transporting their adoring people from the misery of life under some unnamed tyrant to a place of plenty and safety."

"Yeah right." Jack's wrinkle-nosed disgust exactly matched Daniel's feelings on the subject. He scratched his jaw thoughtfully. "So these panels weren't written by the Goa'uld?"

"No, although I think they ordered them to be written. I think they were written by people from various diverse earth cultures transplanted to other worlds – which would explain the variants in the languages."

Jack raised an eyebrow. "Set essays for the adoring slaves?"

Daniel nodded. "'Why I Love My Wonderful God...Insert Name of Choice.' There's at least a dozen different gods mentioned here. My guess is they were the System Lords at the time Nekheny was around."

"Where do the Asgard come in?"

"I don't know." Daniel furtively began to put the rune-stones back into the bag in which they were meant to be kept, hoping Jack wouldn't notice the destruction of his wall. "They're difficult to read and Inga is having problems with them."

"What kind of problems?"

"Most runic inscriptions say things like 'Kali Olvissonr cut these runes on this stone in memory of his father Gunnleifr' or 'Óláfr met his death in Sweden on a Viking exploit'. They don't tend to be detailed legal documents, which is what this seems to be. She's translated that there are references to Thor and that he's referred to as 'Thor of the Asgard' instead of the more usual 'the god Thor' or 'wigiponar' 'Hallowed Thor'."

"'Hallowed Thor'? You have got to teach me how to say that in Asgard. Really impress the little guy next time I see him."

Daniel looked at him sideways. "He's captain of the Asgard fleet. Somehow I think it would take more than you knowing one word of Norse to impress him. But I think there's a transliteration in a very obscure old form of Goa'uld. I can't be sure yet because I haven't translated enough of it, but I've definitely found some words that correspond. If Teal'c were here to help me I could probably translate it in a couple of hours."

"Well, he isn't," Jack returned with no discernible patience. "You've got me so you'd better make the best of it."
"No offence, Jack, but you don't speak Goa'uld."

"I make a mean cup of coffee and I can polish a rune-stone when I'm handed one. Now stop bitchin' and get some sleep...."

It sounded suspicious, he knew – he and Jack murmuring to each other in the darkness each night before they slept. Darius had not been backward about voicing his theory of how they spent that last hour before the nightmares began. Every morning he would mention it again. How Daniel had better stand up to translate today because Darius doubted he'd be wanting to sit down, and what would his flower power parents think if they knew just how up close and personal he was with the military these days? Jack was being provocative, effectively giving Darius the finger by not dismissing the possibility, refusing to do as Daniel did and hurry to slam the door on that conjecture. But Jack had never had Darius come to his tent by moonlight to tell him what he would do to a guy who ever got what he hadn't....

No point in remembering that. Darius had been drunk, that was all, and drugged. He probably didn't even remember it and it would be better if Daniel forgot it too. He was trying to work with Darius despite the way the man triggered all his flight instincts. He felt they both needed this. They had to prove to the others and to themselves that they were fellow archaeologists who could work together. Otherwise what were they except doomed to be madman and victim forever?

It was ironic to remember that he'd always been better at managing the man than anyone else. He could make him laugh his way out of a temper, coax him into sitting back around the fire when he'd had some furious disagreement with Alexis or even the mild Nelson about the Labyrinth. He'd never taken being argued with well but he'd taken it better from Daniel than almost anyone else.

And he'd been so damned brilliant, making those intellectual leaps that left Daniel gasping in his wake, trailing after him trying to keep up as Darius said "This was the King's chamber. Close your eyes, Goldilocks. It's all stored in the walls. Alexis is way off beam. This place was built for a specific purpose and we're so close to finding it."

"But why runes and cuneiform and hieroglyphs?"

Darius had given him a glance of fond exasperation before reaching out to ruffle his hair, a thumb straying across his cheek as he said, "When we know that, dubsar tur, we'll know everything." Then he turned back to the panel of cuneiform, beckoning Daniel closer. "Read it to me."

Daniel shook his head. "I can't. I don't know enough of the signs."

"Yes, you do." Darius taking his hand, holding Daniel's forefinger between his and stroking it down the wedge-shaped signs. "Close your eyes and feel the words. You're a scribe from five thousand years ago and you're writing it to the dictation of your lord and master. What is he telling you? Don't just read the words. Listen for his voice."

Daniel remembered the blackness inside his own eyelids, the warmth of Darius’s hand holding his, the rough scrape of the stone against his fingertip, waiting for an image to come that didn't come, a voice he couldn't hear, the silence deepening as he smelt his own perspiration and a strange aroma, a combination of musky bitterness and jasmine. The sudden realization that he could smell the perfume of Rajid's daughter had jolted every other thought straight out of his head. Even as he looked over his shoulder for Fatima, he knew she wasn't there. The perfume was coming from Darius, intermingled with sweat and what he now realized were the scents of recent sex. He was shocked and embarrassed by his own shock. But she was from a different culture and one that didn't believe in intercourse before marriage, at least not for women. Had Darius been trying to liberate her from misogynistic double standards or riding roughshod over the beliefs of her father?
Daniel still couldn't decide when exactly one was insulting someone else's culture or standing up against oppression. But the cuneiform inscription was certainly lost to him now. He was too busy thinking about the girl who'd been like an older sister to him when he was a child, now emphatically grown up enough to be naked with Darius, wondering what Rajid would say if he ever found out, further embarrassed by his own naivety because he was also shocked that Darius really did cheat on his wife so casually and so blatantly, just as people said.

"What does it say?"

Daniel shook his head. "I can't." Her perfume was so distinctive, surely Rajid must have smelt it too. Didn't Darius know what a risk he was exposing her to? Rajid was a good man but he was also old-fashioned. Fatima was restless and clever. She wanted to go to university. Rajid wanted her to marry well and be a good wife and mother. They would never agree. The old Egypt and the new one clashing in a way that made Daniel sorry for both of them.

"You're just not trying." Darius releasing him in annoyance, exasperated and impatient. He shoved Daniel out of the way, hands rough on his shoulders. When he touched, he often left bruises, unaware of his own strength, a tactile man who bordered on being a bully. Fatima would have bruises too. Daniel blushed at the thought, an intrusion of her privacy to imagine those marks on her thighs and arms.

Darius closed his eyes and touched the wall like a safe-cracker with a new combination to crack, his fingers stroking across the cuneiform as tenderly as a lover. It was impossible and Daniel knew it but Darius could see better with his eyes closed than most men could with them open. "I bear witness to trial of my brother-enemy. I bear witness that he has transgressed. He has taken more than his due of that which we all need to survive. He has broken the treaty. He has conspired against our best interests. He shall be put to death in sight of life. We all shall witness it."

Daniel gazed at the golden-maned man in undisguised admiration. "How do you do that? Can you teach me how to do that?"

Darius reached out and tapped Daniel on the temple. "Not while you spend all your time in here and don't learn to use this..." It was an even greater shock when the man reached inside his thin cotton shirt and placed his warm callused palm against Daniel's breast. Daniel could feel his own heart beating and knew Darius must feel it too: a physical palpitation against his skin. Darius looked him in the eye and said softly, "Sometimes you have to stop thinking and start feeling. Your trouble is you read too much."

Daniel felt his heartbeat increase. Darius was too close, Fatima's perfume felt as if it was coating both of them, it blazed in the heat of Darius's sweat. As Darius looked at him and that hand stayed against his heart he felt acutely uncomfortable. "I don't..."

Rajid's exclamation made him spring back like a started deer and he cracked the back of his head on the wall. He saw the old man looking at him in shocked accusation, saw the guilty start Darius gave, and then he was sliding down the wall with the chamber graying in and out of focus.

Darius caught him before he fell. He was hoisted up onto the man's shoulder as if he weighed nothing at all and carried out into the light, set down as gently as a child in his tent, while Rajid's accusing face blurred and sharpened, blurred and sharpened. He snapped at Darius in Egyptian, demanding that he took better care, that he left Daniel to him to tend to, that he had done enough.

"He just needs to sleep it off. He'll be fine."

The guilt in Darius's eyes as he looked at Rajid was replaced by irritation as Rajid anxiously
examined the back of Daniel's head. "Leave him, he's fine! He's an adult. He can take care of himself."

Rajid's look at Darius was positively venomous. "In the ways of the world he is still a child."

Darius returned his gaze in exasperation. "Well, it's high time he grew up then."

As the tent flap closed Daniel realized his heart was still beating much too fast, and despite his embarrassment and the pain in his head he was relieved Rajid had arrived when he had. "I think I need to sleep." He didn't meet Rajid's eye.

"Do not take anything he offers you," Rajid said urgently.

Daniel had no idea how to respond to that. "I'm tired," he offered feebly. He closed his eyes and slipped straight into a guilty sleep permeated by the jasmine scent of Fatima's perfume.

***

As he walked past the various daubings, scratchings and scribblings on the walls of the Labyrinth, O'Neill thought about how much information he'd been forced to pick up that he really hadn't wanted on this particular mission. He hadn't been able to escape from all the archaeological know-how being thrown around and some of the damned stuff had stuck. So he knew that what he was walking past now was called a 'relief'. It had originally been concealed behind some other panels dedicated to the glory of Ra but they'd managed to remove those and find these other ones underneath. This was the section of the labyrinth Nelson was puzzling over, with blue-skinned bearers carrying offerings that Nelson had told him were symbols of fecundity but which looked exactly like staff weapons to O'Neill. Each carved picture was separated by a line of hieroglyphs which were apparently in a very archaic form of Ancient Egyptian. According to Nelson these panels were dedicated to an Egyptian deity called Nekheny about which almost nothing was known. According to Daniel these panels were dedicated to a deposed Goa'uld whose inscriptions the other System Lords had then attempted to wipe out with ones of their own. O'Neill's money was definitely on Daniel being right on this one.

In the next chamber was an enormous chunk of flat rock which he was damned if he was going to call a 'stele' however many times Daniel did so in his hearing. It was arched like a window in a church and had a picture on the top of four gods. Underneath were a lot of hieroglyphs going along in rows instead of up and down in columns. Daniel and Nelson had told him a lot more than he wanted to know about what it meant if something was in a cartouche or went up or down or sideways or back to front or whatever but he was determinedly expunging it all from his mind to leave enough room for the things that he needed to know. He did remember, however, that the inscription was a hymn of praise to some Egyptian gods who Teal'c had confirmed were also definitely a combination of late and current System Lords.

The next chamber up was a temple dedicated to Hathor which he tried to edge past but he was sighted by Hélène Bouldieu who dragged him in there so she could go into rhapsodies about the place again. Pulling a deeply unenthralled O'Neill from pillar to pillar, exclaiming over the richness and beauty of the colors and burbling about some temple to Isis at Philae which had been flooded when they built the Aswan Dam.

O'Neill's personal feelings on the matter were that the last thing an Uberbitch like Hathor needed dedicated to her was a big chamber full of pretty-painted pillars all telling the world how beautiful and wonderful she was.

"I never liked Hathor," he told Hélène firmly.
She had one finger to her lip contemplating the painted walls in what seemed to be such a trance of ecstasy he was starting to worry Her Late Snakeness had left some of her purple mist about the place. Then Hélène slowly drifted out of her reverie to take in what he'd just said. "Oh, because of her being sent by Ra to destroy Mankind, you mean?" Her accent was charming, he had to admit, very Juliette Binoche.

"Yeah. Among other things." It was as good a reason as any.

"You are being moralistic, no?" She looked back at the pillars. "Because she produced offspring with her father and also with her son?"

"She did?" Well, it didn't surprise him. She'd produced offspring with Daniel without so much as a by-your-leave after all.

"In the original myths she was the mother of Horus who was sired by her father, Ra, but later Isis usurped her cult and Horus was transferred to her. Horus and Hathor were also the parents of Ihy."

He mentally filed away the name of 'Ihy' as a Goa'uld he definitely didn't want to meet without a full clip of ammo.

"You prefer Isis?" She smiled at him secretively, like a cat with a mouse stashed away for later. "She is less…threatening? The loyal and loving wife to Osiris and good mother to Horus?"

He shrugged. "I always thought she was probably a bit of bitch as well."

Hélène laughed. "You are lucky you do not live in the times of Ancient Egypt. You would be put to death for blasphemy against such a dearly beloved goddess." She looked at him curiously. "Do you not like anything at all about Egyptian mythology, Colonel?"

He scratched his jaw. "I like Thor."

"You are impossible. Come and see this and be impressed. I insist on it." She caught his sleeve and tugged him towards a wall painting of someone who looked suspiciously like Ra to him fighting with an enormous snake. Above them were hundreds of squiggly golden hieroglyphs which he didn't need to be able to read to know what this was. She pointed to it. "Do you not think it is beautiful?"

O'Neill looked at it for a long moment. "It's Ra fighting with Apophis, right?"

She opened her eyes wide. "John told me you were an enthusiast but I thought he was mistaken. Yes, that is who it is."

He nodded. "See, what they don't you show you here is how many soldiers they'd have had to do the fighting. They'd be warring over territory which people would be living in – because otherwise what's the point in fighting for it unless you're going to get something from it? So there would be these places full of slaves they were fighting for so they'd get the right to have those people belonging to them like so many sheep and having to die for them if their god told them to." He looked around at the paintings. "I see lots of gods and people bringing them tributes and bowing down before them. And I see lots of dead people they're not showing here who would have been killed by Ra's…soldiers when he defeated Apophis."

Hélène increased her grip on his sleeve, looking at him in surprise. "Colonel, it is just a myth. No one died. They did not send their forces into battle against one another because they did not exist. They are just…symbols." She held out a hand to encompass the room. "Ra represents good and Apophis represents evil. It is the eternal struggle between light and darkness. It is not real. La
Tapisserie de Bayeaux is more horrible because real men died in that battle and because the Anglo-Saxons lost much of their language and culture when the invaders came. But this is just a myth. A story for children.

Nelson wandered into the chamber and the conversation without warning: "But Colonel O'Neill does make a good point about the way myth and metaphor often represented the way the geopolitical landscape was altered. The emergence of one deity over another often representing a battle fought here on the earthly plane by a king who worshipped Sobek say, overtaking a king who worshipped Amun-Ra or the like."

"Yes, but why choose to be repulsed by every depiction of what could be a symbolic representation of a battle when one can admire the artistry and love which has gone into the painting?" Hélène protested. "Is it not better to celebrate the fact this beautiful thing has survived all these millennia for us to see it now? To look upon work that was created three or four thousand years ago?"

O'Neill was still staring at the painted Ra and the painted Apophis. Behind him, Nelson and Hélène were talking philosophy now. Trying to decide if anything could be called truly untainted by the politics of the era in which it had been created. They didn't get it and he couldn't tell them. They didn't know about those millions of slaves on other worlds, those Jaffa their beloved gods would sacrifice on a whim, to make a point, to gain a naquada mine or less. If they'd known, perhaps the colors would have been less beautiful to them too.

It struck him then like a physical blow that Daniel did know. Daniel could see what they could see and what O'Neill could see. The beauty of the colors, and the wonder that this piece of artwork painted by some adoring scribe thousands of thousands of years ago had survived, but also the reality of what it represented. Jaffa like Teal'c dying in their thousands over a land dispute in which even the slaves of the winner might well have been sacrificed. Daniel would see the myth and he would also see the glowing eyes of Ra as his ribbon device tried to burn its way into his brain. He would see the symbolic serpent of Apophis, god of the underworld in all those old familiar myths, and he would also see the scorched earth of Chulak after Apophis had laid waste to loyal Jaffa and potential rebels alike just to make a point.

He could never again gaze at a wall-painting with the same look on his face Hélène was wearing now, because the System Lords had stolen that away from him at the same time they took his wife.

Nelson's hand on his shoulder made O'Neill start. The man said quietly, "Are you okay, Colonel?"

O'Neill nodded. "Fine."

When he turned to go he found Hélène contemplating him curiously, her head on one side. "Sometimes, Colonel, I think you are a man of many deep places you do not want the world to see."

He thought that sounded vaguely pornographic but decided to take it in the spirit in which it was obviously meant. "A lot of people make that mistake about me," he assured her. "Actually I'm shallow and proud of it."

Smiling, she shook her head. "I do not think this is true."

He waved as he left the chamber. "No really, trust me, it is."

***

They had been here a week now and Daniel had sunk into a routine that was almost restful. Alexis
had arrived and been embraced by Inga and Hélène, and had his hand shaken with un-concealed enthusiasm by Nelson and Zaheer. Alexis had swept Daniel into a bear hug, squeezing him so hard Daniel had felt his ribs groan a protest. But Alexis' obvious pleasure in seeing him again had made him feel warm inside. The man ruffled his hair fondly. "Little Danny Jackson – all grown up and clearly raring to help a poor old scholar with his translations. How is your Proto-Canaanite, Phoenician, and Aramaic these days?"

"Back off, Alexis. He's helping me with the hieroglyphs and those cryptographic inscriptions…."  

"And I was here first and have already asked him for help with my runes. Talking of which, let me introduce you to the best assistant I've ever known – Colonel Jack O'Neill."

Alexis and Jack had shaken hands gravely. Jack had toned down the military hardass bit and Alexis had toned down the bouncing off the walls enthusiasm and energy. Then the moment of truth could be put off no longer and Alexis and Darius had to acknowledge one another's existence. They were stiffly polite, like terriers eyeing up the opposition before a fight. In the evenings the atmosphere between them was like an imminent thunderstorm but as yet they had managed to remain civil.

Nelson had been the most visibly relieved by the arrival of Alexis, clearly glad to pass over the responsibility of maintaining civilized relations to him. Daniel wondered sadly if he and Jack were two of the burdens of leadership Nelson had been glad not to have to shoulder by himself any more. This probably was the dig from hell in many ways. They were all haunted by the ghost of Rajid, the old man's name inevitably coming up from time to time and always at the most inopportune moment when Darius was within earshot. Darius was disintegrating. Daniel wasn't exactly a model of calm himself and the presence of Jack on the site couldn't help but remind everyone that this wasn't a normal dig or else the Air Force wouldn't be interested. He knew every archaeologist working in the Labyrinth kept coming up against anomalies that set their instincts jangling. Everything they examined looked authentic yet made no sense as anything except a fake. They were torn between wonder and suspicion, fascination and mistrust. To Nelson, at least, Daniel suspected, the Labyrinth was starting to seem like a beautiful woman offering herself to him on a plate who he was afraid, under the carefully applied make-up, might turn out to be a transvestite after all.

Now Daniel looked across from his translation of the Goa'uld hieroglyphs to see Jack was still in conversation with Inga in front of the rune forms on the panel on the opposite wall. He remembered how dumbfounded he and Inga had been in the past to find these two remnants of lost cultures on not only the same continent but within the same chamber. Even on a second viewing, and knowing so much more, he had felt some of the same wonder. He and Inga had just stared at the place, drinking it in, those enigmatic inscriptions almost jostling downstrokes, when Jack had spoiled the moment by strolling in and saying, "So what do they say?"

Trying to answer that question had now taken them the best part of a week and they'd translated ten whole words. To Daniel's surprise and Jack's rather amusing pleasure, Inga considered the Air Force colonel as the best assistant she'd ever had and told everyone so. After that Jack had polished rune stones with an extra vigor while Daniel looked on in disbelief and thought of all the off-world digs in which he had tried to engage Jack's interest in the past with absolutely no success.

Over the days, he had grown more accustomed to the fact that some he sincerely hoped long-dead System Lord had put up a panel giving a translation of an agreement reached with the Asgard. He had even started to grow accustomed to the sight of Jack O'Neill sitting there cross-legged on the floor wiping the dust from polished stones while Inga sketched the panel with meticulous attention. It had never ceased to amaze him that the same Jack O'Neill who could be crass beyond all help
with women under the age of forty-five was lamb-mild and uncharacteristically flirtatious once they hit what was presumably the 'safe' age of fifty-something. Observing Jack's behavior when he was with Katherine, for instance, Daniel had often deduced that Jack's mother must be a woman of strong character and formidable intellect who had never given him quite as much attention as he would like. Given the full focus of a woman of Katherine's type, Jack positively blossomed.

Although she and Jack had had a few skirmishes over Darius, Inga was for the most part mildly amused by the Air Force colonel but seemed to like him well enough. In fact somewhat to Daniel's surprise, all the archaeologists on the site seemed to like Jack well enough. Nelson was still laboring under the delusion that Jack was a keen amateur Egyptologist but while he was alone in that belief, the other archaeologists also had time for the Air Force representative in their midst. Except for Darius of course. Darius was still insisting on treating Jack like a plague toxin.

Without looking at Jack, Inga said mildly, "I know John thinks you're keen on Egyptology, Colonel O'Neill but I'm less convinced."

He wiped off another polished stone carefully. "What was your first clue?"

"The way your eyes glazed over with boredom when he was telling you about the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World was slightly suggestive." She glanced over her shoulder at him, eyes twinkling. "Are you not enthralled by the glories of the pyramids?"

Jack shrugged. "Well, you know, when you've seen the Seven Wonders of Minnesota…"

Daniel made no attempt to hide his disbelief. "The Seven Wonders of Minnesota?"

Inga completed the line she was copying before saying calmly, "I'm sure the Kensington Runestone is one of them."

"Right, first time."

"Are the others anything to do with fish?" Daniel prompted.

Jack was giving nothing away. "Call yourself an archaeologist and you don't know what they are?"

Daniel put down his pencil. "No, I admit it. Minnesota's wonders are a closed book to me."

Jack turned to the runologist. "Inga?"

She considered the point for a moment. "I have been to Minnesota more than once to visit relatives there and I do recall a rather impressive statue of Saint Urho in Menagha."

Jack smirked. "Two points to Inga. No points to Daniel."

"'Saint Urho'?" Daniel demanded in disbelief. How could there be a saint in a place uninhabited by Christians until long after people had ceased being made saints? "I've never heard of him."

"You are unfamiliar with his cry of "Heinäsirkka, heinäsirkka, mene täältä hiitteen!"?" Inga's eyes were twinkling. Jack was trying to look innocent but only succeeding in looking smug.

Daniel managed with some difficulty to recognize the language as Finnish, although it was a long time since he'd had to speak any. He had been on a dig in the early nineties with a Finnish archaeologist who had taught him some of the language but it wasn't one he had needed much since. "Okay, let me think. 'Heinäsirkka' is 'grasshopper' and 'mene täältä hiitteen' is the politer version of what Paavo used to say when people tried to call him in the morning when he had a
hangover." (In deference to Inga's sex he didn't add that Paavo's more usual protest had been "Àitisi nai poroja!" – "Your mother copulates with reindeer!" – although he made a mental note to tell Jack that later. Jack liked collecting insults in other languages. Daniel's ability to furnish him with new and ruder curse words being, as far as he could tell the only reason Jack was ever impressed by Daniel's skills as a linguist.) "Okay so that makes...'Grasshopper, grasshopper, go away" He looked between them in bafflement. "That makes no sense."

"Saint Urho is the Finnish saint who rid ancient Finland of an insect scourge thereby saving the grape harvest." Inga began on the next line of runes, copying them with swift sure strokes.

"Grape harvest?" Daniel demanded. "In ancient Finland?"

Jack held up a hand. "Okay. You have to realize that there are two kinds of people in Minnesota: Irish and Scandinavians. And we have St Patrick's Day and they didn't have anything except a fake rune-stone…"

"It's never been proven a fake," Inga interjected mildly. "There are some very well-respected scholars who believe it's genuine."

"I bet you're not one of them," Jack looked up at her sideways.

"I'm still examining all the evidence," she returned with a maddening smile.

"Anyway…" Jack picked up another dusty stone and began to rub it on his jacket. "The Scandinavians got fed up with us making such a big deal out of St Patrick's Day and turning the beer green and running floats all over the place so they decided to have a saint's day themselves. So they invented Saint Urho, decided March 16th was Saint Urho's day and try to make everyone paint the town purple on that day."

"So one of Minnesota's Seven Wonders is a possibly fake rune-stone and the other is a definitely fake saint? Is the third one a slightly fake fish?"

Jack looked mildly affronted. "Where were you born anyway?"

"Egypt."

"Oh." Jack wrinkled his nose. "Okay, so you have the Sphinx and a few pyramids in your home country but does Egypt have a Spam Museum?"

Daniel had been in the process of taking a swig of coffee out of his flask but damned near choked on it. He coughed violently and barely had to wipe his streaming eyes before gasping out, "You're kidding?"

"He's deadly serious," Inga assured Daniel over her shoulder, still placidly sketching as she talked. "My Uncle Magnus insisted that I paid a visit to the Spam Museum last time I was in Austin. It was…most interesting. There was a very instructive film on the subject."

"About tins of pork luncheon meat?"

"Don't knock it." Jack placed the stone he'd finished polishing in the bag with the others and picked up another one. "Without Spam who's to say who would have won World War II."

Daniel held up a finger. "One of these wonders has to have something to do with fish. All Minnesota has is big lakes with big fish in them, and people like Jack and his second cousin's husband, Olaf, telling you about the big lakes with the big fish in them while you freeze to death on
a boat on one of the big lakes totally failing to catch any of the big fish that supposedly live in it. So don't tell me Minnesota has Seven Wonders and one of them isn't something to do with fish."

Jack grimaced at Inga. "Daniel's still a little bitter about the last vacation we took there."

"No, Jack, I'm still bitter about the last three vacations we took there. Especially as for the last two you told me we were going to Florida and Sam and Teal'c were coming too."

"Hey, you're thirty-six, how did I know you were serious about wanting to go to DisneyWorld?"

"I've never been there and neither has Teal'c. And it's warm in Florida."

"It also has alligators, all year round mosquitoes, and students wearing Mickey Mouse costumes – which is just plain creepy."

"At least isn't full of fish. And if you stopped insisting on taking vacations in Minnesota then Sam and Teal'c might actually want to come as well instead of always telling us Sam's car had broken down and they couldn't get there."

"Hey, there's no proof that was an excuse. They may have really wanted to come, but Carter's got that vintage Volvo, the engine's unreliable."

"She's got two working motorbikes! She can get herself to any part of the world in a day if she wants to. The only place she can never manage to get to is Minnesota. Don't you think that could be telling you something about Minnesota?"

Jack looked mutinous. "We have the world's largest twine ball."

"Admit that one of those Wonders is fish-related in some way."

There was a long pause before Jack grimaced and then shrugged in defeat. "Okay. Minnesota is also home to the Big Fish, but before you sneer I think I should point out that you don't get sixty-five-foot tiger muskies just anywhere and some of the lunkers pulled out of Lake Winnibigoshish..."

"I knew it." Daniel shook his head in disbelief. "And I just don't get it. The Tomb of Tutankhamun leaves you cold but you can get excited about a fake fish."

Inga uttered a mild expletive as the nib of her pencil broke. "I must fetch another. Don't disappear, Colonel. You're a wonderful assistant for a runologist with a bad back."

As she headed out into the daylight, Jack watched her go fondly. "Inga is one cool lady."

Daniel had to admit to himself he was very glad Jack had come. "How about that, an archaeologist you like."

"Hey," Jack twisted his head around to look at him. "You're an archaeologist I like. Sometimes. When you're not being too annoying."

Daniel couldn't completely suppress a small smile. He had his mouth open to respond when Darius’s voice cut through the cheery atmosphere with a sneer.

"Oh, did I interrupt a domestic moment? I do apologize."

He hadn't seen him and didn't know how long he'd been standing there. Daniel muttered unconvincingly, "Jack's a work colleague, Darius."
He winced as the man went past him, a blur of tawny mane and sweat-streaked safari suit, like a big game hunter stalking prey underground, but Jack didn’t so much as blink. Even though Darius had stepped out of one of the side tunnels to loom over him threateningly while he was sitting cross-legged on the floor at a decided disadvantage Jack just looked up steadily at the man before saying coolly, "Have you ever been in therapy, Golding?"

The man's smile was glassy and cold. "For years."

Jack slowly polished a stone on his jacket without breaking eye contact for even a blink. "You should ask for your money back. You were robbed."

Daniel watched Darius go with conflicting feelings of guilt, fear, and compassion. He'd seen Darius throwing those pills down his throat with increasing desperation. He needed a handful now to fire an hour of inspiration, or perhaps they were just to blank out everything else except the cuneiform beneath his fingers. Daniel knew Darius must be fighting the memories too. Perhaps he was also feeling the black tide of them lapping at the corners of his mind, threatening to break through.

"Don't do that."

He looked up to find Jack gazing at him in mingled exasperation and concern.

"Don't do what?"

"Look like you've done something wrong every time that guy makes some cheap crack."

"I don't." Daniel ran a hand through his hair, darting Jack a semi-reproachful sideways look. "Do I?"

"Yes, you do. And it's driving me nuts. And what's with the 'work colleague' crap? I thought we were friends."

Daniel recognized the hurt and anger in Jack's eyes and felt defeated by it. "I'm not being petty, Jack, of course we're friends, it's just that Darius…" He didn't know how to put it into words.

"Darius…what?"

"He'd get the wrong idea. Or…pretend to. He'd make a big deal out of… Never mind, just… It's just easier if he doesn't know we're as close as…"

Jack stabbed a finger at him accusingly. "Daniel, for crying out loud. Ever since we arrived here you've been acting like he's the jealous ex-husband and I'm the new boyfriend you don't want him to find out about. Now, given the fact that you and I don't have anything to hide, can we please stop acting like characters out of a French farce?"

Daniel couldn't help noticing – and resenting – the way Jack had switched Daniel's gender so that he got to keep his. That was pretty typical he had to admit. He also had to admit that much as it might make him wince, Jack's summing up was also a fairly accurate assessment of the way he'd been behaving. "You don't understand Darius."

"Yes, I do. He's a control freak with an ego size of the Milky Way and in the good old days you used to think the sun shone out of the…back of his head, and that was just the way he liked it. Now you're all grown up and he doesn't like that too much, and he particularly doesn't want you hero-worshipping anyone except him or God forbid, having made a life for yourself without him telling you what to think and do. But that's his problem, not yours, and it's certainly not mine."
Daniel had a horrible feeling that trapped between the opposing magnetic forces of the two irresistible objects that Jack and Darius represented he was going to get stretched thinner than spun silk before this dig was over.

Still glaring at him as if he could suppress all arguments that way, Jack tossed the stone he'd been polishing into the bag with the others, Daniel wincing as it clinked.

Jack saw the wince and positively scowled at him. "We both know Asgard technology doesn't chip."

"But Viking artifacts do and that's what Inga thinks it is." He looked after Darius, wondering how much the man remembered, things Daniel didn't? Maybe everything by now? Maybe that was why Darius was getting drunker and nastier every night and had started swallowing those pills like candy.

"Daniel, you're letting yourself get mind-fu-screwed by Golding. Stop helping him."

Daniel said breathlessly: "I might have had a crush. I remember being very impressed by how clever he was. He's a brilliant archaeologist. I remember being very…aware of him when he was nearby."

Jack was still looking at him in irritation, clearly trying to be patient yet not succeeding in any way. "Yes, because he's nuts. I'm aware of him too. I make damned sure I know where he is and that he isn't carrying a monkey wrench."

"Jack…" Daniel reproached him quietly. "Going insane isn't a fun ride for anyone."

"I'm serious."

"He's on his medication now."

"Nelson told me he was on his medication before. It didn't work too well back then. What's so different this time?"

"He had two different doctors and they gave him pills that didn't mix. Then he tried some local remedy for his migraines and that made things worse. The combination of the different medication made him hallucinate. And he was… very stressed at the time. Grieving." It was your fault she died. All your fault… Whose voice was that anyway? A memory or a projection? Had Darius ever said it? And had it been Daniel he said it to?

From the Great Above Inanna opened her ear to the Great Below… My lady abandoned heaven and earth to descend to the underworld…

Wrapped around with tears and tasting of blood the words of the old myth had a different kind of power. But he wasn't going back to the time even if they had, somehow, persuaded him to come back to this place.

The shadows looked as if someone had hung them in the corners like corpses on a gallows, sometimes they seemed to be pulsing quietly with an internal energy that flickered blue in the darkness. It was right on the edge of his memory, the knife blade and the tearing cloth. But he was afraid he already knew what it led to and he couldn't go there, couldn't cope with that level of self-disgust. He had already woken up still attached to a body that had done repulsively unclean things and been unable to escape it however many bars of soap he used to try to wash away Hathor's perfume.
"Daniel!"

He jumped as Jack rested his hands on his shoulders. Looking into Jack's eyes he realized the man was a hair's breadth away from shaking him. Daniel blinked at him in accusation. "What?"

"Stop. Helping. Him."

"I'm not."

"Yes, you are. You're trying to find a way to make what happened back then your fault. It wasn't."

"You don't know that."

Jack kept looking into his eyes for a moment and then released him. "Okay, let's try this a different way. Think back to how you were in those days and tell me honestly how it felt to you when you were with Golding. Not what he's said you were feeling, what it felt like to you."

Daniel closed his eyes and tried to remember. He recalled the man's incredible abilities with cuneiform, not just in identifying them but in understanding the mind of the scribe who had carved them there so many thousands of years before. Seeming to know so quickly what he was trying to say, making those incredible leaps of faith. Encouraging Daniel to do the same. Telling him to go with his gut, with his instinct. Saying 'What do you think it might say?' Don't look at the words. Look at the whole picture. What kind of man was he who carved it? What kind of society did he live in? What was he trying to say? Close your eyes and tell me what it says." Brilliant, bullying, and eternally unpredictable, unexpectedly generous with his time one day, abrasive and dismissive the next.

Daniel opened his eyes. "I remember feeling…admiration and respect and a little fear."

Jack nodded. "And maybe that's all it ever was."

"What?"

"Admiration and respect and a little fear. Maybe he told you there was a romantic attraction there because that's what he wanted it to be. Maybe he told you that because he wanted it, not because it was true."

Daniel felt himself close down, close off, pushing Jack away with his mind. If he'd had those powers he'd briefly experienced on Kheb he would have been shoving Jack towards the exit, away from him, stopping him sharing those thoughts. He wrapped his arms around himself. "Darius prefers women. He was always having affairs. Women couldn't keep away from him. That's why his wife…" He shook his head, not wanting to say it aloud, to lay a crime so heavy at anyone's door. "That may have been part of the reason why his wife…"

Jack threw up his hands in exasperation. "Okay have it your way. You had a crush. He's blameless. Everything that happened to you in your place was completely your own fault. I mean you were all of twenty-three-years-old and he was forty-one. He kidnapped you at knife-point and you ended up in a coma but, hey, that's not to say you weren't asking for it, is it?"

Daniel turned his head away, feeling the traitorous tears threatening again. He spoke between his teeth. "I may have gone willingly. I don't remember. I wanted to get to the center of the labyrinth and he was the one who cracked the code."

"He had a hunting knife."
He remembered the flash of the blade, the fear… Oh god the fear had been the worst part of it, that was what he was afraid of, experiencing that fear again, the paralysis, the creeping dread, being left in the dark with insanity and the glittering slice of that knife. He'd been so afraid of the knife. He would have done anything to escape it. He could remember the edge of his button against his fingertips, could remember fumbling to try to undo his shirt when the order came, stepping out of his pants, shivering and naked and terrified to the point of mindless obedience….

"Jesus, Daniel!"

He looked at Jack's anger-darkened face and took a step back. "What?"

Jack threw up his hands in defeat. "Nothing. You're just driving me insane."

Daniel shuddered. "I think that's what I did to Darius."

"You didn't do a damned thing!"

"Colonel…?"

They both jumped guiltily as Inga reappeared. She looked at Jack in mild reproach. "Shouting something more loudly does not make it more true."

He stared back at her in exasperation then jerked a thumb at Daniel. "Well, can I just deck him then? I promise I'll do it quietly."

She returned his gaze without any humor. "I think there is probably a special place in hell for people who hurt people like Daniel, Colonel."

He returned her gaze unblinkingly. "I certainly hope so."

"I think Darius believes there is too."

Jack kept right on looking at her, challenging, aware of the sympathy she was clearly trying to elicit and refusing to have anything to do with it. He said coolly, "I hope that too."

Daniel turned his head in time to hear that stifled sound and his eyes met Darius’s. He read the recognition in them, and the fear, their gaze locked, bodies frozen, then he saw Darius shudder as if from the flash of a camera and he knew Darius had remembered something else. Daniel stepped forward, trying to read the memory in Darius’s eyes and for a second he thought he glimpsed the silver flash of a blade, and then Darius was gone, striding down the corridor into another part of the maze, away from the memory, away from Daniel.

He dropped his notebook and ran after him, calling him back, but when he caught up with him by a crossroads of four identical corridors, Darius had already taken what looked like a handful of pills and was dissolving their sugar coatings on his tongue with neat whiskey from a hip flask.

Daniel moistened his lips. "Are you okay?"

Darius wiped his mouth deliberately, the amber alcohol staining the gray of his beard. His tone was matter-of-fact despite the now very obvious tremor in his right hand. "No. Are you?"

"No." Daniel looked around for inspiration. "Maybe we shouldn't have come back here." As the silence stretched between them, he asked suddenly, "Do you remember?"

Darius flinched violently. "No." He said it like someone pushing something away.
"Nothing at all?"

Darius looked him in the eye. "What I remember didn't happen."

Daniel shivered. Looking into Darius's eyes was like staring into the mouth of hell, so much horror lived in them. "Are you sure?"

"I'm not sure of anything." Darius took another swig of whiskey. "But if what I remembered was true then…" He shook his head, shuddered. "Well, let's just say you would never have come back here."

"Maybe it is true." Daniel almost said Maybe I remember it too. Except he didn't. He didn't know what he remembered, he only knew the fear he felt matched the expression in Darius's eyes far better than it matched the hospital reports. Maybe I came back because I'm too stupid to know when I'm in danger. Jack's pretty much been telling me that for years.

When Darius grabbed him and slammed him up against the wall, he only didn't cry out because the breath was knocked out of him too soon. As he gasped through a combination of shock and oxygen starvation, the man loomed over him, desperate for absolution, searching Daniel's face and not finding what he was looking for there. "Do you want it to be true?"

Daniel shuddered. "No."

Darius spoke rapidly, his mouth very close to Daniel's. "I had fantasies. I remember them. Do you want to hear them? Do you want to think they happened? Maybe they did. Maybe I did all the things I thought about doing and maybe you liked it."

"No." He swallowed hard. "You wouldn't have done that. You were never…" That bad. He broke off because the truth was he didn't know that at all, he didn’t know anything, just like Darius had always told him. Perhaps Darius had been capable of anything back then. Even that.

"Are you sure about that?" Darius continued to gaze into his eyes, wanting something Daniel couldn't give.

Daniel winced in apology, every instinct he possessed screaming at him this man was dangerous, unable to keep that from his face. "No."

Darius let him go abruptly. "That makes two of us." He reached out and smoothed the creases from Daniel's shirt wearily. "Go away before I hurt you again."

Daniel didn't know if he meant now, leave this moment and this corridor before the man slammed him against another wall, or leave Egypt before he hurt him like he had in the past. Except he hadn't hurt him in the past. The hospital reports said so.

Darius screwed on the top his hip flask as though it was the most fascinating task in the world. Then he said quietly, "Rajid was a good man. He was only trying to protect you."

Daniel blinked at him in confusion at the abrupt change of subject. "I know."

"He loved your mother. He loved you. He would never have done anything to hurt you."

Daniel touched the smooth rock of the wall, needing to feel the glassy surface against his fingers. "I know that too."

There was a pause before Darius jammed the flask back into his jacket with sudden savagery. "Are
you sleeping with O'Neill?"

"No." Daniel could feel his face closing off, the way he looked when he was lying. He couldn't even make the truth seem true today.

Darius headed towards the eastern corridor, the one Daniel hadn't explored yet, and then stopped. His voice was surprisingly matter-of-fact, as if he was discussing the weather. "If you are I'll kill him."

Daniel shivered. "I'm not. I swear I'm not." When that didn't elicit a response he added with a desperation he couldn't have explained, "Jack's a good man. Please don't hurt him."

Darius wasn't even listening to him. As he walked away his last words made even less sense than the ones that had gone before: "I owe it to Rajid."

***

Alone with Inga, O'Neill had to stop himself from running after Daniel and Golding. Only Daniel would go charging into a dark tunnel with a guy who had almost killed him once and see nothing at all unwise about doing so.

Seeing the anxiety in her eyes too, he took a chance. "Tell me what happened."

She gave herself a little shake before answering him. "What do you mean?"

"Don't stall, Inga. What happened thirteen years ago?"

"Only Darius and Daniel know what – "

" – happened in the Labyrinth. I know. But only you know what happened outside of the Labyrinth while they were in there. So what happened that you know about?" Sometimes being stern with his mother did get her to not get up on stepladders when there was no one else in the house, or to try rewiring things while they were still plugged in. He didn't have a lot of authority over her, it was true, but every now and then if he pulled out every stop of the hardass Air Force colonel act that reduced airmen to quivering jellies he could sometimes get her to listen to him, at least for a few minutes.

Inga regarded him for a moment in a 'I refuse to be bullied by you' manner, and then turned back to the runeforms, speaking over her shoulder as if that would somehow make it less of a concession.

"We're not sure how Darius and Daniel ended up in the Labyrinth. John thinks Darius kidnapped Daniel from his tent. I think it was just bad luck that Daniel was working late in the Labyrinth and Darius came across him when he was…under the influence of something or had finally cracked up over Anna. He seems to have taken Daniel into the center of the Labyrinth, although none of us know how he found his way there. We'd been trying to reach it for months without success. The real mystery is how they found the center, not what took place in there because whatever it was, it couldn't have been anything very serious." She shot him a defiant look. "I saw Daniel in hospital. I spoke to the doctors who treated him and I swear to you, he barely had a mark on him. Go and read the hospital records if you don't believe me. Whatever Darius's intentions might have been when he persuaded Daniel to – "

"'Persuaded'?' O'Neill demanded angrily. "The guy had a knife to his throat."

"Threatened' then if you must think like that, but for all anyone knows he talked Daniel into going with him willingly by offering to show Daniel the way to get to the center of the Labyrinth. Daniel
was very curious back then. And he had no reason to be frightened of Darius. He still doesn't." She threw the last words at him with defiance. "Or do you imagine that Daniel would just give in without a fight if Darius told him to do something...unpleasant? Darius is and was very strong. If he'd forced Daniel to do something he didn't want to do, he would have left bruises. Definitely. And like I said, Daniel barely had a mark on him."

O'Neill kept his face as blank as he could make it but it was difficult. His head was full of images of Golding dragging Daniel along by the hair with a knife to his throat. He couldn't help thinking that if this had been a woman they were discussing, Inga might not have insisted on bruises as proof of force. With a knife held to their throat, how many people would fight? Daniel had been so young back then and so damned innocent. He might not have known what was coming until it was too late.

But another part of his mind told him that even if Daniel had frozen, mind locked up, body rigid with shock, unable to fight, unable to even voice a protest, what he was afraid Golding had done would still have left bruises, and there hadn't been any bruises. So why wasn't he more reassured?

Inga touched the runes as if she was taking comfort from them, her fingers tracing their sharp edges as she spoke. "Rajid must have seen Darius taking Daniel into the Labyrinth and he followed them. Darius seemed to be trying to commit suicide. He had sticks of dynamite with him. He stole them from a building site. When I asked him why, he said it was because there was something evil in the labyrinth and he didn't know any other way to destroy it. Apparently he'd been having flashes of terrible 'visions' whenever he went in there for weeks but he hadn't told us. He said it was only much later that he realized the evil in the labyrinth came from him."

O'Neill grimaced again. He was not going to feel sorry for Darius Golding. The guy had damned near killed his best friend. Daniel could forgive him and Inga could forgive him if they felt they must, but he wouldn't, whatever they might say to try to make him.

Inga continued evenly, "He left the dynamite behind in a trail and Rajid followed the trail to the center. He got Daniel away from Darius and took him outside. Then he went back for Darius. He got him out just before the explosion. Daniel had gone back to try to help and they were all hit by the blast. They weren't seriously injured but Daniel was knocked out. Rajid died of a heart attack probably from the exertion and stress of getting them both clear. By the time the ambulance got there nothing could be done for him. Daniel was taken to the hospital in Cairo and I think the Air Force paid for his treatment. He was in a coma for several weeks but then he woke up and was pretty much unharmed."

Her expression was still defiant. There was an unspoken suggestion that what she was really saying was that what Golding had done wasn't that bad. Daniel hadn't really been hurt by it. He hadn't really injured him.

O'Neill felt a flicker of temper but kept it under control with an effort. She reminded him of someone whose husband was a rapist but who didn't want to admit it. Determinedly living in denial. Maybe even blaming the victim for what the person she loved had done. He said evenly, "So why was Daniel naked when Rajid found him? Why was he covered in blood?" What happened to him that was so terrifying he won't let himself remember it?

"I don't know." Inga touched the runes again, averting her gaze. She sounded suddenly frail and tired. "I try not to think about it."

He felt simultaneously sorry for her and exasperated by her because all she had to do was dislike Golding the way he did and it all became much easier to deal with. "How were the Air Force involved?"
"I would have thought you could have told me that."

He shook his head. "Different department."

She shrugged, a little angry with him in return. "They came in their uniforms with their sunglasses." The glance she shot at him made him wince as he remembered his own arrival on the dig. "They asked a lot of questions and gave us no answers of their own but I suppose in some ways we had reason to be grateful to them. They sorted things out with the Egyptian authorities. They paid for a survey to prove that our site hadn't undermined the site at Hierakonpolis. They paid for Daniel's medical treatment. They paid compensation to Rajid's family on the understanding that it wasn't an acceptance of liability. They thanked us for the work we had done and told us work would be resumed as soon as possible." She shrugged again. "And thirteen years later they even kept their word."

He nodded. "Thanks."

She put her hand on his arm. "Now can you answer my questions? Can you tell me why the Air Force is interested in an ancient Egyptian maze?" She looked at him closely. "Do you know something we don't, Colonel? Do you know why there are runes next to hieroglyphs? Cuneiform next to Phoenician? Why there are myths told here that none of us have ever heard before?"

He took a step back. "Even if I did know do you think it's likely the Air Force would let me tell you?"

"Do you believe that good people can do bad things?"

He was turning away when her question reached him so abruptly. He winced and turned back. "I know they can."

"Darius might have intended to do something terrible to Daniel in that place but whatever his intentions were it's obvious that he didn't get the chance to carry them out. He didn't succeed in… hurting Daniel, and he didn't manage to kill either of them. He was very…disturbed back then. There are things in his past he has never told even me about. I think everything caught up with him at once and Daniel just happened to be the catalyst for his…breakdown. He would never have really wanted to do him any harm." O'Neill must have looked unconvinced because she took a step forward, lowering her voice to add rapidly, "Even if it was his own guilt and confusion about perhaps experiencing…desire for Daniel, and perhaps in his confusion blaming something Anna didn't know about for her suicide, I don't think he ever really intended to do anything…sexual to Daniel."

He gave her a long level stare. "So, you're saying that just because Golding dragged Daniel into a place where no one else could find them, ordered him to take off all his clothes at knifepoint, then did something to him so terrible Daniel throws up when he's forced to even slightly confront it, I shouldn't go leaping to any wild conclusions?"

She turned away. "I think Daniel probably wasn't even Daniel to him in there. He was…symbolic. Darius himself, in his right mind, would never mean to cause Daniel harm, or anyone else for that matter."

O'Neill decided that as conversations went this one was pointless. He liked Inga too much to say what he thought about the way she was twisting herself into knots to try not to find someone in the wrong who was clearly more in the wrong than any man he'd ever seen. Daniel had been just a kid back then, full of hope and enthusiasm and trust. Golding had betrayed his trust and that seemed to O'Neill to be a crime in itself, even if it didn't leave physical marks on the skin.
Inga gave him a look of appeal. "Whatever he originally intended to do, he didn't do it. Doesn't he get any credit for that? He had Daniel at his mercy and he didn't hurt him."

He didn't say what they both knew, that if Rajid hadn't arrived in time, Daniel would have been killed in that explosion. What was the point when it obviously mattered so much to her that Golding should be just another victim here. Nodding he said only, "Thanks for your help." When he left her she was staring at the runes as though somehow they must provide a way to prove that Golding wasn't guilty after all.

***

O'Neill was still engaged on his never-ending search for the Asgard control panel when he ran into Alexis. The Greek scholar always reminded of Mister Tumnus from "The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe", a book Charlie had made O'Neill read to him countless times in the past. Alexis had the same tightly curled black hair and pointed beard, the streaks of gray in both the only hint that he was now in his late-fifties and not the forty-something he looked on first sight. He was a good head shorter than O'Neill, a bundle of terrier-like energy who tended to fall on inscriptions and worry them into submission. He was also fiercely protective of Daniel and as a consequence more than a little disapproving of O'Neill, or at least of what O'Neill did for a living and the fact that Daniel was now doing it for a living too. A couple of times in the company of Alexis O'Neill had felt uncomfortably like the ne'er-do-well son-in-law Daniel had married in haste and about whom the rest of the family were afraid he would be repenting at leisure.

Although he liked the Greek scholar on a personal level, O'Neill tried to avoid him whenever possible, finding it too difficult some days to have it brought home to him how gutted all these other archaeologist were by what Daniel had chosen to do with his life. As a part of the choice Daniel had made, and particularly as the guy who'd asked for him to be allowed to join a first contact team in the first place, there were days when O'Neill couldn't cope with hearing about the glittering academic career Alexis had thought lay ahead of Daniel, of how brilliant his parents had been, of how disappointed Daniel's father would have been if he'd known he was squandering his gifts to work for the military….

Today though, the man was unavoidable and O'Neill found himself trapped back in the same circular conversation, trying to justify Daniel's choices without being able to offer any of the real reasons why he wasn't actually wasting his life the way they all thought.

Alexis finished his usual rant and then wiped his brow. "No offence, O'Neill."

"None taken." O'Neill gritted his teeth.

"I just don't think you have any idea what the world of archaeology has lost."

"I can guess."

Alexis sighed, gazing through an open archway to look into the chamber in which Daniel was working with Golding. "If he looked happy I wouldn't mind so much but…"

"I know." O'Neill snapped it before he could stop himself then took off his forage cap and ran a hand through his hair. "Sometimes the work Daniel does for us is stuff he loves, and sometimes it isn't. Recently he's had too much of the bad stuff and not enough of the good, but I'm going to make sure that changes, I promise."

Alexis held up his hands in supplication. "It's his life. I know that. But he was so brilliant…"
"He still is."

Alexis shrugged in defeat. "I just thought by now he would be changing the face of archaeology. You know? I remember him as this amazing little kid with permanently skinned knees climbing into crypts, jabbering away to the workers in a dozen different languages, already knowing half the mythology of Egypt. I remember thinking he was going to do incredible things, be up there with Howard Carter and Champollion, with Schliemann and Evans. It's bad enough his parents never lived to see him grow up, and his son-of-a-bitch grandfather never gave him the time of day, but to know he's wasting his talents for a bunch of guys who never got over playing with their Action Men…" The Greek winced then. "Sorry, O'Neill. It's just…your world isn't our world, and I'm not convinced it should be Daniel's world either."

"Some days I'm not convinced of that either," O'Neill answered evenly, "but I figure when it's time to move on, Daniel will know."

"Promise me when it is, you'll make sure they let him go?"

O'Neill opened his mouth to make a flip response but the memory of Armin Selig's blood warming his hands was too vivid and still too raw. "I promise."

He tried to shake off the burden of that conversation but it dominated his thoughts to the point where he found himself turning circles in confusion, not recognizing any of the chambers he entered, trying to fight the panic as he kept walking along corridors he was sure he'd passed an hour before without recognizing any of them. After much too long, he hit a dead-end which he knew hadn't been there the day before, as if the walls had closed in on him like enemy Jaffa. The weak lemon lights cast more shadows than illumination while the painted eyes of unknown gods looked down on him from the walls as if they knew of every Goa'uld he'd ever killed and were planning to make him pay for it. By the time he managed to retrace his steps to a chamber he recognized his heart was beating so hard his ribs were aching, and for the first time he found himself wondering if it really was true that the walls could remember, and if so exactly how much evil was stored here.

Later, as they sat around the campfire and Golding ripped into Daniel for the third consecutive evening about how he was wasting his life and his god-given talent working for those ratfuckers in blue that were the United States Air Force, it was Alexis who told Golding to shut up and back off. Alexis who told Golding that Daniel was an adult and perfectly able to make his own decisions, and anyway, bitch about the military as Golding might, Alexis would love to hear the last time an archaeologist had saved the world.

Looking through the flickering firelight at Daniel huddled in O'Neill's borrowed coat, sipping his coffee, O'Neill thought that if only Alexis knew it, he was sitting right next to an archaeologist who had helped save the world on more than one occasion. Except that fact, like Daniel's vindication over the matter of the age of the pyramids, was something neither O'Neill nor Daniel could share.

Abruptly, O'Neill got to his feet and walked into the darkness. It was too cold away from the fire, but for a minute he couldn't stand it. They were all so damned tactful to Daniel in his hearing. Alexis had never breathed so much as a word to the man himself that suggested how bitterly disappointed he was about the career choices Daniel had made, but it still sat down with them every evening: the specter of the future they'd thought Daniel was going to have. Their adopted son, echo of their dead friends, the boy they'd all waited so impatiently to see grow up and dazzle the world, only to watch dismayed as he destroyed his own career right in front of their disbelieving eyes. Because they were good people they'd never reproached him but O'Neill could sense the intensity of their regret some days, and if he was aware of it, he was damned sure Daniel must be...
"Jack..." He turned his head to find Daniel standing in the shadows, arms wrapped around himself, breath visible in the darkness. "It's too cold. Come back to the fire."

O'Neill jerked his head at the campfire. "Don't you ever want to tell them you were right? That what you do every day is..."

Daniel reached out and touched him, stilling his moment of indiscretion. He was right, O'Neill knew, sound carried too well on this rich old air. Daniel lowered his voice to say, "I know what I do every day. I know I was right. It doesn't matter if no one else knows it."

O'Neill avoided Daniel's eye. "It matters to me."

"Jack, Alexis thinks I've screwed up my career and wrecked my life, and he's still defending my choices. He wanted me to be the greatest archaeologist the world has ever known and I'm an academic joke he has to defend every time he goes to a conference, but he still defends me. So does John. So does Inga."

O'Neill didn't tell Daniel that made it worse. He knew it did. He knew how much Daniel must want to make these people proud of him, to vindicate their loyalty to him by proving he'd been right all the time. Aloud he said, "But you've got to want to stick it to Golding sometimes."

Daniel smiled faintly. "Actually, two years ago at an international conference on the Pyramid Texts, Darius punched out one of the respectable scholars who walked out on my lecture the day Katherine found me. Sometimes it's worth failing to find out who your friends are." And for a moment, as if Daniel had willed him to, O'Neill saw reflected in Daniel's eyes not the red glow of the campfire but a silhouette of one man sobbing in another's arms in an SGC storeroom.

O'Neill sighed. "I'm sorry you can't tell them the truth. I appreciate how hard it must be for you."

"No harder than it was for Sam not to be able to tell her dying father why she couldn't take that place he'd got her with NASA. No harder than it was for you not to be able to tell Sara why that crystal alien looked just like her dead son. I don't ever take it for granted, Jack. Don't think just because I needed to get away from it for a while that it ever could or would get old for me."

O'Neill frowned. "What?"

Daniel help up his hands, nodding up at the sky and Jack raised his eyes to a tapestry of glittering constellations so vivid and so close it felt as if he could just reach out and pluck them from the sky like silver fruit.

"The Stargate. The most incredible archaeological find there has ever been and probably ever will be, and I got to live in the era when it was found, and I got to step through it onto the surface of other worlds. Don't ever think I'm not grateful, Jack. Don't ever think it's lost its magic for me. I get tired of fighting sometimes, and even more tired of failing, but I don't ever get tired of the wonder of what we do." Daniel moistened his lips. "I know how lucky I am to have been recruited to the SGC. I know how lucky I am you ever let me on your team in the first place."

O'Neill reached out and touched his hand, feeling how cold Daniel's skin was. He said intently, "If it wasn't for you I would have died on Abydos. I was the lucky one, Daniel. And don't think just because I don't tell you that every day that I don't know it."

Daniel swallowed, wrapping his arms around himself. "We'd better go back. Darius will think we're..."
"Okay." Embarrassed by how mushy he'd been, O'Neill didn't argue, scratching his jaw so as to avoid meeting Daniel's eyes as they walked back to the campfire.

Golding looked pointedly at his watch as they returned. "Just a quickie was it, Colonel?"

O'Neill gave him a mirthless smile. "What can I tell you, Golding? It's just too damned cold for foreplay."

"Jack…" Daniel gave him a warning look.

O'Neill shrugged petulantly and tossed another log on the fire but as he gave Golding another defiant look and saw the depths of the jealousy and hatred in the man's glittering eyes, he did feel that faint thrill of fear again. For a moment even the blaze couldn't warn him and he was abruptly aware of the infinite distance of the stars, his own insignificance, his lifespan one brief ripple in the sea of time.

It was a relief when Hélène got out her guitar and started to sing Joni Mitchell songs without quite hitting the high notes, giving him back the comfort of the seventies. Sometimes he needed a way back to a time when everything had still seemed possible. When his world hadn't contained the constant shadow of the Goa'uld, and somewhere on another continent a child called Daniel Jackson was climbing over the broken statues of dead pharaohs asking more questions than anyone could answer in a single lifetime…

***

When the crate arrived, Daniel and Nelson fell on the ultraviolet lights like – in Hélène's words – 'little boys with new light sabers'. They didn't care, they had been peering at faint impressions on the walls for days now, trying to see if there were colors there, if that really was a sign or just a shadow on the wall. While Alexis was still signing for them, checking the paperwork and grumbling over the cost – apparently out of habit as the Air Force was paying for them – Daniel and Nelson had already snatched up the lights and almost run back into the Labyrinth with them to try them out, not wanting to waste a second now the means was there to unravel one of the mysteries of this place. They were breathless when they reached the chamber but bubbling with excitement, yelling back along the passageway for Jack to kill the power of the generator to put out the lights.

When he obeyed, the darkness was unexpected, breathlessly impenetrable. They were abruptly so alone when a second before they had been connected to the daylight by that humming cable, the sunlight echoed by those lemon yellow lights. The air was deafeningly silent without the hum of the generator, a subterranean breeze rushing past them as if it was teasing them for their sudden moment of fear.

They fumbled with their new toys, finding the 'on' switches they both realized they should have had their thumbs on before they asked for the lights to be turned off. Then abruptly the walls were bathed in violet light, images appearing under its rays like those children's coloring books which when dabbed with water revealed beautiful pictures.

"Look!" Nelson pointed to the wall in ecstasy. "Just as we thought, behind the stele dedicated to Mertseger there's half an inscription and the symbol for Nekheny. Damn, it's in that weird dialect. Can you translate?"

Daniel squinted at it, trying to make out the words. There were so many inscriptions here for which he would have asked for Teal'c's help if the Jaffa had been available. But some he could read:
I am the last of the first ones…the true counsel of nine… I am Nekheny who will not yield…not to Ra or his followers… I will fight until the last drop of my armies’ blood… I will fight until my last breath… I will not take flight like Sokar or hide like Seth…

His heart sank. Here he was with a fellow archaeologist. They had their brand new toy and a brand new inscription to translate and he was going to have to lie because to do otherwise would give Nelson too many clues that might lead him to realize the truth about the Goa'uld. Feeling sick inside, Daniel could hardly meet the man's eye. "No. Sorry. I don't understand it either."

Nelson's disappointment was quickly concealed. He patted Daniel on the shoulder in consolation, making him feel a hundred times worse. "Never mind. At least we can see it now and there may be someone out there who understands this stuff. Let's photograph it while we can. Get Hélène to draw it for us. All my hawks always end up looking like budgerigars for some reason…"

Daniel forced a smile but he still felt sick at heart. Now, for the first time, he saw that ignorance sometimes could be bliss. He also wondered if this was why Darius drank, because he wanted to get back to a time when he didn't remember, when nothing was tainted, and everything seemed possible.

***

Ironically, when O'Neill finally found what he was looking for, he hadn't even been searching for it very hard. He'd been much more focused on trying to avoid another hour spent with Zaheer hearing about how beautiful those coiling snakes were and how exciting it was that gods from Indian mythology should be found praised here. That tests of the stone suggested it could have been Babylonian. That perhaps the Indian myths Golding was always dismissing as such latecomers compared with the Sumerians and Akkadians might in fact be just as old and have begun their days on a different continent….

So many theories put forward with so much modesty and hope, all of which he knew to be as wrong as it was possible to be. So he'd just been ducking away from another chamber full of snake pictures when he'd noticed that little alcove. It was tucked away behind a pillar, which was why he'd walked past it before, but once he shone his flashlight in there he knew he'd hit pay dirt.

It was a small dais, sloping up to a curved top on which was a line of runes. Underneath the runes was a pattern of circles and lines which no doubt Inga would spend days, possibly even years, trying to decipher, and it never occurring to her that this was a piece of Asgard technology, the rune stones shaped like neatly sliced hard-boiled eggs she'd been handing to him so carefully the mechanisms that made this baby fire up.

Looking around to make sure no one was watching him, O'Neill took a piece of chalk from his pocket and carefully drew his initials on the pillar outside. He didn't think it was a good idea for either him or Daniel to start messing around with Asgard whirligigs right now, but he also thought it was something he would much rather NID never found out about.

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The Doors of Perception

V: The Doors of Perception

Two weeks into the mission – Daniel might call it a dig but as far as he was concerned it was a 'mission' – and this was the first morning when he'd woken up before Daniel. That almost never happened off-world. He dressed silently while keeping a wary eye on his sleeping comrade. There was only the dim pearly light of pre-dawn to see by but he could make out his ghostly outline. Daniel didn't seem to be dreaming. He was too still, only the rise and fall of his chest revealing he was still alive. O'Neill didn't need the light to know that Daniel had dropped about ten pounds since coming on this dig, that living on his nerve ends was taking a toll in charcoal smudges under his eyes and a loss of color that wasn't exactly healthy at the best of times.

He had told him the day before to borrow Nelson's truck and take a day off, go drive over the desert, visit Hierakonpolis or Isna, or anywhere he could find his love of Egypt again, just get the hell away from this place for a few hours. And in case he hadn't noticed, too many days squinting at inscriptions in an underground maze was giving him the appearance of a flour weevil. The fact that Daniel was in serious danger of losing it if Daniel didn't get a day away from a Darius Golding who was unraveling in front of their eyes in a way that was clearly giving Daniel serious déjà vu hadn't been mentioned by either of them. Somewhat to both of their surprise, Daniel had taken the keys to the truck and just gone.

Golding had watched him drive off towards Hierakonpolis with a look of such acute guilt that O'Neill had felt the first pang of sympathy for the man. He knew how it felt to be a helpless onlooker to Daniel's innocence getting chipped away by life right in front of him. He felt bad enough about not having been able to protect him from that. How did it feel to be the cause of turning him twitchy as a cat on hot bricks in a place where he should have been happy as a clam? Then Golding had turned to see O'Neill watching him watching Daniel and the flash of furious loathing in his eyes had made O'Neill physically take a step backwards. Just for a second he had felt a stab of fear and then Golding had turned away with a snarl and O'Neill was left there ashamed of the way his heart was hammering at twice normal speed because a civilian had looked at him sideways, when he was a combat veteran with a revolver.

Daniel had come back later with the supplies and some color in his skin. Everyone had pretended not to notice that something in the cardboard box Golding had asked Daniel to pick up for him from Isna clinked like whiskey. Even when a plastic bag had fallen out of the box Daniel had handed him and they'd all seen the cannabis not even O'Neill had said a word….

Now he stifled a grunt as he picked up the suitcase in which the equipment he needed had been packed, a twenty-pound tug on his shoulder, and ducked out into the desert.

The sun was just starting to come up, a slow burn as the dawn set fire to the sands. He couldn't find the words to describe it but if he'd still been married to Sara he knew he would have tried. He could have sent her a postcard of the pyramids, told her he was on holiday with Daniel on a dig, that archaeologists weren't so bad when you got to know them, and sometimes in the morning when the sun came up and the world was so still it seemed to be holding its breath, he could even understand why Daniel loved the desert so much. He'd have told her how cold it was at night, the way the chill ate into your bones even when you were sitting around a campfire. How you lived in fear of the sandstorms that could bury you alive. How the light here was like nothing he'd ever seen anywhere else on earth….
And then the fact he couldn't tell her he'd ever been to any world but this one would have made him finish the postcard quickly, trying to write more firmly than usual because she'd once informed him his handwriting always wanted to tell her when he was lying to her. When he thought about Sara and about the life with her he'd lost, not just through his lack of communication at that crucial time when she, like him, had just lost her only son, but also through the years of silence that had gone before, he wondered if, even if he hadn't lost her along with Charlie, he could have kept her and SG-1. There would have been so much of his life he wouldn't have been able to tell her about. On the other hand perhaps he would have managed to keep more of a sense of balance if he'd still been married. If he'd had to go home after every mission – not hang around the SGC. If he'd had to hold proper conversations about how Charlie was getting on at school and if it was okay for Sara's friend to come and stay since the break-up of her marriage, if they could have a dog now Charlie was old enough to walk it and if he promised to try to get home on the weekends more....

If he'd still been married he wouldn't have been the one to volunteer for this mission. Make that 'insist on being allowed to go' on this mission. He wouldn't have let Daniel, Carter and Teal'c get under his skin the way he had if he'd had another life as well as this one. They would have been work colleagues. He would have managed to keep that essential distance a commanding officer needed if he wasn't going to drive himself nuts worrying about the people under his command.

Then he thought about that first mission, Daniel leaping in front of him to take that staff weapon blast, and the unbearable sense of loss and failure he'd experienced then. He'd hardly known the guy and yet it had hurt so much that the dumb long-haired geek who had so much enthusiasm left for life should be dead while he, who was as squeezed dry and used up as an empty tube of toothpaste, should still be alive. He'd still been trying somewhere to use up all that paternal love he had left for a child who was lost to him, he supposed, and some of it had spread out to encompass Skaara and Daniel. The protective instincts he'd thought were as dead and buried as the child they'd failed to protect kicking in with a vengeance as that sandstorm swirled around them and Daniel collapsed in the desert, trying to warm him and protect him, covering his eyes, holding him close, even as he was contemplating destroying an entire planet, thinking that at least it would be something if he could send Jackson, Kawalsky, and Ferretti home alive.

Okay, he was kidding himself. When Daniel had been burned alive in front of him he'd known he couldn't go on. This was the final straw and either he went the way he'd gone before, so closed off and brittle he wouldn't let himself feel while the recklessness of the wannabe suicide impaired his judgment, or he admitted losing someone else he should have kept safe had ripped out his heart and he had to stop now before it really was too late. Back then he'd still had hopes of getting back together with Sara. Even though he'd been forty he'd been naïve enough to still believe love was all you needed, just like it said in the song. He loved Sara. She loved him. They'd been wonderful together once. Surely it couldn't end here, like this, in perpetual separation? But it had. Yet even when he'd still been thinking of himself as a man who might soon be married again to the wife he'd loved, he hadn't had a lot of armor to save himself from the effect Daniel had on his protective instincts. Even if he'd still been married to Sara, even if his son had still been alive, Daniel would probably have found a way to get under his skin. It wouldn't have been the fast track straight to his paranoia Daniel had managed to take on that first mission, but it would have happened all the same.

But it would have been so different in other ways to have managed to keep the best of both worlds. To have a wife and child to go home to. To have work colleagues he wasn't ashamed to invite across his threshold and whom Sara would have liked. To throw a party and have Daniel, Carter, and Teal'c talking to his wife and her friends and know they weren't going to embarrass him or themselves, work colleagues he could be proud of and a wife who would have outshone everyone else in the room. To have a job which, after too many years of doing damned distasteful things for the US government, needed no apology or justification.
Despite the best efforts of the NID, they were trying to save not just the US of A, not just this planet, but the whole damned universe from bad guys who weren't suddenly going to morph into next year's allies. He wasn't going to turn around one day and find himself working next to a System Lord whose cousin he'd watched cheese-wired by a hired assassin working for the same people who paid his wages. From the second mission out they'd been grounded by who the good and bad guys were by having a Jaffa on their team. He knew every time he put a bullet in some Serpent Guard that he could be killing someone like Teal'c, he also knew that guy had been brainwashed into thinking he was dying for his god and that if he didn't get in first the guy was going to kill him. But he believed in this job in a way he'd never believed in anything else except Sara and Charlie. He believed there was a point to what they were doing, it was worth dying for if necessary – although he certainly hoped it wouldn't be – and that they may even succeed. So he would have had that warmth inside him to take home with him, which probably would have made him a nicer guy to be married to. He sometimes thought Sara might have missed out on the best of him and Daniel had gotten it instead. That sometimes made him want to smack Daniel hard for no very explainable reason. He suspected Daniel had the same feelings about him. He probably sat down sometimes and added up all the patience he'd used up on Jack O'Neill, all the tact and consideration and care, and thought about the people he might rather have been expending it on, like his dead parents, and his dead wife. So perhaps it was no wonder he and Daniel were sometimes as snippy with one another as a married couple with the seven-year itch.

The blood red sea was seeping closer across the sands. Soon the light was going to slice him in the eyes if he didn't get moving. He'd hear the faint sound of people praying floating out to greet him in the still morning air. Daniel would be up, shivering with the cold and needing caffeine, Nelson would be talking about what he'd discovered the day before, possibly beginning halfway through the sentence he'd fallen asleep saying the previous night. Golding would be prowling, throwing those tablets down his throat like candy, taking deeper and deeper swigs on that coke bottle which reeked of single malt, slurring his words a little, eyeing Daniel like prey and O'Neill with hatred.

O'Neill looked down at the suitcase he'd lugged out behind the tents. "Don't get sand in it" he'd been told but the how of that was something no one had bothered to explain. He had mixed feelings about gadgets at the best of times. He liked new things as long as they worked and he didn't have to read a manual to find out how to work them. (In a moment of rare irritation Carter had once told him the acronym 'RTFM' had been created specifically for people like him.) He hadn't appreciated how much he'd come to rely on Carter being the one to master the equipment until he'd been confronted by that geek, Lieutenant Frost – who they'd so unwisely let out of the basement in which they obviously usually kept him to brief O'Neill on how this particular doohickey worked.

He also hadn't realized how much Daniel and Carter spoonfed him until he'd walked into his office to find some guy with the light of the fanatic in his eyes and an unsettling smile on his face who had covered every available flat surface in the room with a piece of shiny new technology. The 'Who the hell are you?' was barely out of O'Neill's mouth before the guy started trying to explain things to him, beaming proudly at the laptop sized object he was presenting to O'Neill. He opened it to reveal a small blue screen, what looked like an ordinary phone on the left side and a series of controls in the base. "Things have moved on a little since the last time you were in the field, Colonel. This is state of the art communication in the age of the Global Area Network."

O'Neill had forgotten quite how irritating he found shiny-buttoned tech-johnnies who thought anyone over the age of twenty-eight had softening of the brain because their idea of a good time was to go out on a Friday night and have a few beers instead of staying home to play with their microchips. He'd often thought that if Carter had been a guy he would really have hated her but when he'd said so aloud, Daniel had pointed out that in an alternate universe Carter was a guy, O'Neill was a woman, and so was he, and so was Teal'c. Then O'Neill had started thinking about
what if there was a universe where he was still a guy, Carter was also a guy but Daniel was a woman. (Thinking about a female version of Teal'c was such an impossibility his mind had just baulked and run.) Would that version of O'Neill spend his time wanting to deck Carterguy for being a techno-geek and being given a coronary by Danielgirl assuming all the natives were so friendly because they practiced Zen meditation rather than because they wanted to get a better look at her breasts? He'd decided very quickly such thoughts led to insanity and had told Daniel rather sharply not to talk to him about alternate universes before breakfast or indeed ever again.

Blissfully unaware of his thoughts, the squeaky-keen Lieutenant Frost had started shoving equipment at him as if he was a kid and this was the best Christmas ever.

"This is a TH1, Colonel. It's the CODEC for the system."

"Kodak?"

"The CODEC." Lieutenant Frost looked baffled by his bafflement. "The compressor-decompressor. A satellite phone can't perform video compression. It's too microprocessor intensive. That's why you need the 'Talking Head'. Feel the weight. Only nine pounds. Amazing, eh? And a snip at $8,000."

O'Neill declined his offer to 'feel the weight' with the speed of a bachelor offered a crying baby. "Peachy."

Frost laid a laminated diagram of what looked like a circuit board on the desk in front of him and gave him an encouraging smile. "Now, just so you know how it actually works, this is where the speech CODEC or audio decoder is located. Down here is the multiplexer. This is the MPEG-4 video CODEC and this is…"

"How does it work?" O'Neill demanded.

Frost looked at him in confusion. "I'm just explaining that, Colonel."

"Just tell me what I need to know to use it. Not what I need to build a new one from scratch out of my cellphone and a car battery."

Frost looked around in confusion. He had more laminated diagrams, which he sorted through as an obvious stalling tactic as he rearranged his thoughts. "Well…essentially this is a three-part system. This is the videophone itself. It links via a standard ISDN socket to the Inmarsat GAN terminal which provides a dial up two way connection to the SGC receiver via a geostationary communications satellite. The standard GAN two channel is only 64KB but we've increased the speed to 128KB by bonding two terminals."

O'Neill's expression at this point had clearly made Frost uneasy as he'd started to speak faster and louder. "So the first part of the system is the videophone which compresses the video for transmission. To stream the video back to the SGC you have to connect the TH1 – "

"The what?"

"The videophone." Frost pointed quickly. "This part."

"Gotcha. I connect that to what?"

"To stream the video to the SGC, the TH1 – the videophone has to be connected to a satellite phone." Frost pushed forward a device about the size of a laptop computer and a tripod that looked suspiciously like an artist's easel with some baking foil wrapped around it. "We've fitted you out
with the Ottercom STORM, which is the one recommended by 7E. We have to fly these in from England but they're a bargain at under ten thousand dollars. This is what is used to actually send the signal to the satellite. It's an Inmarsat terminal – we have to have that to transmit on the Global Area Network. The flat panel on the tripod is the antenna. You hook the videophone into this GAN terminal here. The phone relays the signal via the satellite at the speed of light straight back here to the SGC where it's picked up on this little beauty here." Frost pointed to a bank of equipment in which another laptop-like device was smugly nestling. "$6,500 bucks and worth every cent. It receives and decodes the signal in as near as possible to real time. Well, there's a half second delay but it's still pretty impressive, don't you think?"

O'Neill gave him a long slow look. "Just tell me what I have to do to use it. Preferably in twenty words or less."

He and Frost looked at each other for a long moment and then Frost said, "I thought I just had."

O'Neill continued to gaze at him. "Why don't you go and find Major Carter."

Frost was already heading for the door. "Yes, Colonel. I'll do that now."

He still had feelings of what Doctor Mackenzie would no doubt have referred to as 'unresolved hostility' towards the videophone as a consequence of associating it with Frost. Sighing heavily, he looked at the notes Carter had given him. They were much more to his liking: PUT ANTENNA ON ITS STAND. He duly stood up the artist's easel thing and was pleasantly surprised when it didn't immediately topple over in the sand. OPEN CASE THAT LOOKS LIKE YOUR LAPTOP AND HAS THE HANDSET INSIDE IT. He did so. Duly noticing the keypad and phone Carter had sketched in for him. CONNECT THE INDOOR UNIT TO THE ANTENNA VIA CABLE WITH BLUE TAG. And so it continued. Walking him through each stage of putting the equipment together and color-coding all the connections for him. Lieutenant Frost had a lot to learn.

"Sir…?"

"Carter?" He tried to cover up his surprise at the realization that he had obviously put it together correctly as her face appeared on the screen.

"How are things?"

He pulled a face. "Peachy."

"How's Daniel?"

"Okay." 'Twitchy' would have been more accurate but he didn't feel ready to criticize Daniel in front of Carter. It was just one of those things he didn't do unless grossly provoked. He didn't bitch about Daniel to Carter and Carter didn't bitch about Daniel to him. He wasn't so convinced Daniel and Carter didn't bitch about him behind his back though. He'd caught the tail end of some serious eye rolling in his time. "So did NID give you anything?"

He saw a look of indecision wash over her face. "Um…yes and no."

"Major…?"

"Well, Colonel Thornton didn't return any of my calls and time was going on and you did say you needed this information quickly…"

O'Neill held up a hand. "Okay, Carter, I know that you would never think of obtaining information by hacking into the NID computer because that would just be…bad."
"Absolutely, sir." Even in the grainy picture he could see she was full of suppressed excitement and he didn't think it was because she'd just drawn Siler in the Who Has The Biggest Wrench In The SGC sweepstakes.

"So on the clear understanding that we both know you would never do that, why don't you tell me everything you've learned."

"Golding used to work for NID as a remote viewer." She gabbled it, she was so eager to get the words out.

"What?"

"He had a gift for finding buried sites and for guessing the usage of old chambers. He had something like a ninety-five percent accuracy record. He mentioned casually at a lecture he gave that some medium had told him he had a lot of latent psychic ability and perhaps he was unconsciously tapping into that. The CIA tried to recruit him but NID got there first. Did you know they had a remote viewers program as well?"

No. But it doesn't surprise me." O'Neill grimaced. He'd met a few ex-CIA remote viewers in his time. People trained by the military to harness their inherent psychic abilities to 'see' into places where military spy planes couldn't penetrate. Give them a photograph or a building or sometimes just a map reference and if they concentrated hard enough they could supposedly look right inside any building there. He didn't know if they'd just imagined the stuff they claimed to see or if it had been real but a lot of it had definitely been very disturbing. Ex-CIA remote viewers were supposed to have one of the highest percentages of heroin addiction of any group in the states. Of course NID would have wanted to get their feet under that particular table. The fact they were exploiting the emotionally and mentally vulnerable, and exposing people to Christ knew what kind of horrors wouldn't have bothered people like Maybourne any. He'd even heard of the Soviets managing to transmit infectious diseases back to remote viewers although he'd never quite worked out how they did that. It was too far into realms of hocus-pocus for him to want to think about.

"Why did Golding agree to do it?"

"They offered him a lot of money to fund a dig he wanted to excavate."

O'Neill shook his head. With those alternate universe scenarios still playing in his mind he wondered if in another dimension it was Daniel who had been recruited by the NID instead of the SGC. Daniel who was throwing back the tablets washed down with whiskey. Or maybe it was Jack O'Neill, the screwed-up psychic. Better not to think about that.

"There's more." Carter held up a file for him to see. "This is straight from NID records, Colonel. Did you know that to enhance the abilities of remote viewers NID were in the habit of handing out…"

"Hallucinogenic drugs?" O'Neill suddenly felt very old and very worn down by the crimes of a department that weren't even anything to do with him. He wasn't going to carry the can for every dirty thing the spooks at Area 51 had gotten up to over the past few decades, damnit. Things were starting to click into place and not in a pattern he cared for at all, but that didn't mean he couldn't see the colors loud and clear as a bad trip in the Seventies. "LSD or mescaline?"

Her look of surprise would have been comical if it hadn't been so insulting. What, did she think he didn't know about drug use? Which of them was the right age here? She'd been doing her physics homework while he'd been experiencing San Francisco in all its psychedelic glory.
"Both. I'm not quite sure why."

"Mescaline mellows out an acid trip. It's gentler. "Doesn't shoot you in a multi-colored rocket to shatter yourself on the ceiling the way LSD can do. "Makes you feel you're more in control. By itself Mescaline slips away too fast. You get this tiny splinter of euphoria then it's gone again. But if you mix it with LSD the acid boosts the mescaline trip. Gives you a longer smoother high."

_Makes you think you know the answer to all life's problems and your best friend is an iridescent octopus. Makes you write really bad poetry that you think is so good at the time it makes you cry for the beauty of your own genius. Makes you think you can see forever and know everything there is to know until you come around to find yourself in bed with someone whose name you don't remember. Stuff you tell yourself you'll never do again because it's ultimately bogus and sordid but which feels like the purest most sublime experience of your life at the time…. He had to admit there was a tiny part of him – the part that wasn't embarrassed by his past – that was gratified by the gobsmacked expression on his 2IC's face.

Carter cleared her throat. "I'll take your word for it, sir."

O'Neill shrugged. "So Golding was having an acid flashback when he went nuts?"

"Not exactly."

He looked over his shoulder again. "What then?"

"You know his wife killed herself?"

"Yes."

"It was because of a letter she received."

O'Neill frowned. "I read the coroner's report. It didn't mention that."

"NID may have taken it or Golding himself. NID certainly know it exists but there's no record of the contents."

"Was it from Golding?"

Carter shrugged. "She did receive a letter from him either that morning or the day before but there was another one as well. There's no record of who that one was from that I've been able to find yet."

"Keep looking. Anything else?"

Carter looked grainy in the picture, not out-of-focus, just weirdly undefined as if her lips weren't in total sync with what she was saying. "Golding was already on a lot of medication to cope with the memories from his time as a remote viewer. Then, after his wife's death, he was prescribed anti-depressants. Another doctor had already prescribed some downers to help him sleep. He was also in possession of a lot of illegal uppers. The therapist he saw before he flew back to Egypt noted that he had a lot of 'unresolved anger and guilt'."

"You don't say." He could feel his face closing down but Christ, who needed a therapist to tell them someone dying for no good reason was going to leave the survivor riddled with guilt and rage.

"Daniel's name was in Golding's case notes."
"Why?"

"Apparently Golding talked about him a lot. He'd mentioned Daniel in the last letter he sent to his wife before she killed herself. Or he thought he had anyway. He was convinced that whatever he'd said about Daniel might have triggered her suicide."

"What did he say about Daniel?"

Carter shrugged helplessly. "He didn't remember. But the therapist said she thought he had a lot of 'unresolved sexual conflicts he wasn't ready to face up to where Daniel was concerned'."

*No shit, Sherlock.* O'Neill shook his head in disbelief. How much did those gonzos get paid an hour to come out with this stuff? Thirty seconds of witnessing the way Golding looked at Daniel he could have told him he had unresolved sexual conflicts. Sighing for the stupidity of head shrinkers everywhere, he said, "Tell me everything." He glanced over the shoulder, wary of listeners. "And quickly."

As he walked back to the tents carrying his briefcases and satellite antenna, he saw movement in Golding's tent. Typical. The one guy on the dig apart from Daniel who understood how the Air Force worked and who would probably recognize a satellite phone when he saw one and he had to be the one who was awake. He was only ten feet away from the man's tent when he realized the person crouching in Golding's tent wasn't Golding at all. It was Nelson.

O'Neill promptly veered out of Nelson's eye-line, dumped the equipment behind Inga's tent and crept back towards Golding's. He grimaced as he saw what he was afraid of seeing, Nelson going through Golding's medicine kit in a way that could only be described as 'furtive'. O'Neill swore under his breath. He knew one of them was guilty. Carter's report made that crystal clear. Someone who had been on that dig in '89 – and as it was all the same people that meant it was someone on the dig in 2002 – was as guilty as Golding himself in what had been done to Daniel. And as Rajid had died of a heart attack after getting Daniel and Golding to safety, that meant they were morally if not legally guilty of murder.

He just didn't want it to be Nelson. He liked Nelson, damnit. And here was Nelson carefully resealing a package of Golding's which, he seemed to have slit open with a scalpel. He guessed being an archaeologist gave you extra dexterity because no one would ever have known that package had been opened. Or tampered with, if it had.

O'Neill cleared his throat. "Need some Tylenol?"

The way Nelson jumped about three feet in the air should have been gratifying but it just made him feel sicker. The guy was practically holding a sign over his head saying 'I am guilty'. Damn it to hell.

Nelson turned to look at him in shock. "No – that is – yes, actually. Must have run out of aspirin. Devil of a headache."

He was such a bad liar it was almost funny. The way he shoved the package as far away from himself as possible while O'Neill continued to give him a long level stare making him about the world's worst covert operative. Even Daniel could mislead the suspicious better than that.

O'Neill wordlessly handed him a bottle of Tylenol, making no attempt to disguise his disbelief.

Nelson took two and swallowed them dry then handed back the bottle. "Thanks very much,
Colonel. Appreciated."

O'Neill continued to look at him. "You're welcome."

Nelson got up and edged past him then gestured at the sky. "Best part of the day, don't you think?"

Trust a Brit to talk about the weather at the most inopportune moment. O'Neill watched him go, angry and dissatisfied. As soon as Nelson was out of sight, he bent down to take another look at Golding's medicine kit. He should jot down some of these labels. There was more stuff here than even Carter had been able to track down and she seemed to have been illegally accessing every file that existed on the man. She probably knew more of the names of the women Golding had slept with than Golding himself could remember.

O'Neill turned over the plastic pill bottles and winced. If a man's medicine cabinet was a reflection of his inner health then Golding was one truly fucked up individual. Strike up another success for the NID employee aftercare health program and psychiatric medicine in general. He'd seen dealers with less pharmaceuticals in their possession. This was like Judy Garland's overnight bag: Librium. Lithium. Timolol – was that to stop panic attacks or for the side-effects, he wondered? Dexedrine. Prozac. Valium. Benzodiazepine. The unmistakable blue diamond-shaped pills that could only be Viagra. Christ, stop taking the other crap, Golding, and you won't need the Viagra. Depixol. Heloperidol….

The sound of a footstep on the sand outside, gave him only a split-second of warning before a weight slammed into his chest and he was knocked on his ass. As he rolled over, gasping for breath, he was aware of an ominous shadow blocking out dawn's early light in a way that suggested he might not see twilight's last gleaming again.

"What the hell are you doing?"

Gazing up at a furious Golding the first thing that struck him was how big the guy was. As Golding reached down and yanked him onto his feet with one decisive jerk, O'Neill also had it brought home to him just how strong he was too. This guy was up there with Teal'c and he didn't have a snake in his gut to help him.

Golding twisted his fingers in O'Neill's shirt and yanked him up onto tiptoe so they were on eye-level. The view was very like looking into the maw of angry lion. "What do you want, Colonel?"

Despite being in such close proximity to a man who clearly hated him, seemed capable of snapping his neck with one twist of his fingers, and whose pupils were pinpricks, O'Neill gave him his best fake smile. "Just looking for some Tylenol."

"Get out."

O'Neill was hurled out into the camp, the sky cartwheeling in pearl and streaks of gold, before he hit the ground hard. He rolled, swearing as pain jarred through his right knee, and came up spitting out a mouthful of red sand. He held up a hand. "Thanks for the aspirin."

Golding's voice was very clear in the still morning air: "If I find you in here again I'll kill you." He didn't sound as if he was bluffing. He went back into his tent and let the flap close behind him.

O'Neill waited until he wasn't looking and then clambered to his feet. His knee was throbbing painfully, like a blade being dragged across the nerve. Damn, that guy was strong. When he looked around the camp to see if anyone had noticed he saw Inga watching him. He tried to smile but her eyes were cold and she went into her tent without acknowledging his greeting. He was abruptly
made aware of how chilly it was. Even a few hours before he'd felt as if he was amongst friends. Now he was unpleasantly aware that Nelson and Golding had spent a lot of the last dig having serious disagreements about the age of the site. That Inga had still been in love with Golding back then and might well have wanted him to leave his wife or even have hated him for refusing to do so. That Alexis and Golding were supposed to have clashed several times over who was in charge. That Hélène Bouldieu, although married, might have slept with Golding as well. Most women seemed to. That any one of these nice, enthusiastic archaeologists might have been partially responsible for driving mad, bad, dangerous-to-know Golding over the edge. That Golding as well as being an arrogant, sexually conflicted prick who thought he was irresistible to everyone, even Daniel, was also someone who had been screwed over by the same Government who paid O'Neill's wages, had been traumatized in the defense of his country, prescribed illegal drugs in frightening quantities that could have left permanent no-go areas in his brain, and had lost his wife to a suicide that might well have been encouraged by one of the people on this site.

Swearing under his breath and with his knee zinging spitefully, O'Neill limped painfully back to the tent he shared with Daniel, still seeing Nelson fiddling with that package with a local stamp on it, which O'Neill was almost certain had contained things chemical and illegal that might now also be deadly.

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It had been evening, the air thick with the threat of a storm, the light gray and mauve as the sun sank behind distant clouds. The cold had come in fast and they'd all clustered around the fire, singeing their knees while their backs felt as if ice crystals were forming on them. The day had been less than productive and Golding had already been drunk. Daniel had been getting those prickles up the spine which warned him the man was going to start picking on him any time soon, so busy worrying about that he hadn't taken in that it was his grandfather Inga and Alexis were arguing about until the man's name hit him like a physical blow.

"Nick just loved his work, Alexis. The same way all of us do. How can you blame him for not wanting to take on something he didn't know? And perhaps he was trying to do the best thing for Daniel, did you ever think about that? He might have felt Daniel would be much better off with two parents who would be there for him all the time, rather than one who was constantly distracted by work."

"He was a selfish bastard, Inga, and I don't know how you can defend him. His only daughter's only child and he just turns his back on him because it would inconvenience him to have to change his lifestyle a little to accommodate his own grandson?"

Inga looked suddenly close to tears. "He might have been trying to do the right thing. He might have felt he would be a very bad parent. That Daniel deserved better than he could offer. You don't know how many times he may have regretted it since. For all you know he might have wished a thousand times that he…"

She broke off, biting her lip and Nelson said quickly, "Let's just change the subject, shall we?"

But Darius had already intervened with swift savagery. He pulled off his coat and wrapped it around Inga's shoulders, snapping as he did so: "For fuck's sake, Alexis, what does it matter now anyway? What's done is done. Daniel's here and he's fine. You're the one who's always reminding us all how fucking brilliant he is so it looks as if Ballard was right to make the choice he did. If he'd stayed with Ballard he would probably have got left behind in some cave in Belize and got eaten by jaguars or Christ knows what else. Inga's right. Some people are cut out for parenthood and some aren't and the ones that aren't ought to be responsible enough to admit there are other
people out there who can do the job better than they can."

"Oh, you call abandoning your own flesh and blood 'responsible'? Ballard wasn't thinking about Daniel. He was thinking about what would have the least impact on his own selfish life..."

Daniel and Inga both got up and walked away from that conversation at the same time. He didn't know why she was so upset but he did know how much it cut into him to hear Alexis voicing his own fears about why Nick had abandoned him. The man hadn't wanted him, that was the bottom line, he'd preferred the space where Daniel wasn't. It was a shock to see the tears on Inga's cheeks. She wiped her eyes savagely with the overlong sleeves of Golding's coat before turning to him with a feeble attempt at a smile. "Are you okay, Daniel? I'm sorry we had that conversation in front of you. It was terribly insensitive of us."

Alexis' voice had reached them both then: "Daniel, I'm sorry. It's none of my business. Inga, forget what I just said. Come back to the fire both of you. It's too cold over there..."

They let themselves be coaxed back to the fire, Hélène hurrying to supply Inga with coffee, Alexis ruffling Daniel's hair in apology, pulling him in close to whisper "Sorry" in his ear as he tossed another log on the fire, Nelson tentatively patting his arm and refilling his mug from the coffeepot as soon as Hélène was done with it. Daniel managed a smile and Inga wiped her eyes again, explaining it was just her age, things upset her without warning, she hadn't meant to be so emotional, it was nothing to do with her after all. Only Darius went on glowering, still furious with Alexis for a reason Daniel couldn't guess at, and furious with Daniel as well, using Daniel as a way to get at Alexis at the first available opportunity, swigging more whiskey to fuel his anger, getting louder and more aggressive, turning his attention to Daniel and complaining about the poor assistance he was offering.

Nelson swiftly pointed out that cuneiform wasn't Daniel's specialty, if anyone should get first dibs on him as an assistant it was Nelson. Inga observed mildly that she was personally all for Daniel brushing up on his skill with runes. Alexis was equally adamant that he wanted Daniel to spend every waking moment immersed in the wonders of the Phoenician alphabet so he could help him with the ancient Hebrew. But Golding was impossible to shame. He looked at them in disbelief and annoyance, roaring out that were they stupid that they didn't realize the key inscription was the one relating to the Descent of Inanna?

"They're all key inscriptions, Darius," Daniel offered quietly. "That's what's so confusing."

Which was when Golding turned on him and verbally ripped him to pieces as a snot-nosed little no-nothing barely out of diapers who was only on the damned dig in the first place because he'd probably bent over for some shiny-buttoned hard-on in the Air Force.

Daniel was still wincing from that when Alexis laid out all Daniel's qualifications and achievements for Golding in tones of blistering contempt. "Get over the fact he's done everything you did only younger and better, Golding. Get over the fact he's going to be famous before he's thirty and you'll be lucky to get an obituary in The Times where anyone remembers a damned thing about you except what an obnoxious bastard you can be."


Alexis shrugged theatrically. "I am 'steady', John. If I wasn't I'd have mentioned the real reason he has so much pent up hostility towards our Danny." He glared up at Golding, utterly fearless despite the fact the man was almost a foot taller and at least a hundred pounds heavier. "Because it isn't Daniel's fault he's cleverer than any of us, and it sure as hell isn't his fault you keep wondering what he looks like naked."
That was when Golding said something unforgivable about Alexis' mother in Ancient Greek. Alexis responded in kind with something Daniel recognized as a reference to Golding's impotence. Whereupon Golding informed Alexis with a charming smile that Alexis' wife hadn't found that to be a problem when he'd been fucking her up the ass while Alexis was chasing little boys on Knossos. Which was when Alexis' fist had made contact with Golding's jaw.

Nelson and Daniel managed to pull them apart only with difficulty and both took stinging blows in the process. Inga was withering and furious about their immaturity. Hélène and Zaheer both threatened to pack their bags if they couldn't act like adults, and accused Golding of being impossibly anti-social. Golding called Hélène a frigid bitch whose Egyptian husband had only married her to get a Canadian visa and told Zaheer his beloved Mahabharata was a piece of shit compared with the Enuma Elish.

Daniel tried to appeal to his better nature while Nelson said, "Honestly, Golding, you really are Mister How To Win Friends and Influence People tonight, aren't you?"

"Sleep it off, you insufferable prick." Alexis snarled at him, eyes almost black with rage.

Golding snarled something back and wended an unsteady path towards his tent. Daniel had crept back to his own tent, upset by the whole scene, lip bleeding from where Golding's elbow had connected, and wondering how much he was to blame in igniting the argument.

It was so cold away from the fire he could see his breath in the gloom of the tent. He wrapped his arms around himself, pulled out his notes, and tried to concentrate on the folder of wall rubbings he'd taken over the past few weeks. He hated fights but he did appreciate the way Alexis always dived in to defend him. Alexis, like Rajid, had known his parents and had made it clear he felt in loco parentis where Daniel was concerned. If Golding tried picking on Daniel, he was going to have to get past Alexis first.

Daniel didn't want to think about Darius any more. He could never understand how someone who could be funny and even kind when they were working alone together could morph into the drunken bully who went out his way to humiliate him as soon as he had an audience in which to do so.

Switching on his flashlight, he bent over the inscription and tried to concentrate. He kept waiting for this to inscription to turn into the familiar detailing of figs, saffron and wool while hoping desperately that it would be revealed as something wonderful that added to their knowledge of… everything. He struggled on with the translation, murmuring the words to himself:

"'ne-ke-ni wa-na-ka…' don't know that sign. 'Nekheny, the king' something something 'to-no-ro-ko-ne…' something 'the oath'…something, something 'took'? Perhaps 'took for himself' 'to-so' 'so many'…looks like 'slaves'. Something. Something. Don't understand any of this then 'a-no-ko-ne…'they ordered'…"

"Goldilocks…"

He jumped as Darius’s slurred murmur reached his ear. Turning in surprise to see the man half inside his tent. "Darius?"

"Too cold to be by myself." Darius hefted his shoulder in through the narrow opening of Daniel's tent, shaking the canvas in the process.

Daniel could smell the whiskey even from a few feet away and as the man moved closer it was overpowering. Darius had that drowsy satiated look he got sometimes. He could be affectionate
when he got like this, but he was also unpredictable, and the whiskey often made him argumentative or worse.

Darius slumped against him, breath hot and alcohol stinking against his face, the weight crushing, reminding Daniel how massive he was. With Hélène, Alexis, and Zaheer he felt too tall and bulky, the typical oversized American always having to take a step backwards so it wouldn't seem as if he was taking all their sun. Besides Nelson and the tall Inga, he felt in proportion, but Darius took away everything, not just his self-confidence as an archaeologist but his claim to be regarded as an adult. Darius dwarfed him, mentally, physically, the swiftness of his comprehension, the breadth of his shoulders, the brilliance of his intellect, the solid sinew of his arms. Daniel looked down at his arms and felt ashamed of the jut of his wrist bone, the fineness of his fingers.

"So...dubsar tur...." Darius reached out and ruffled his hair, his mighty paw heavy on Daniel's head. He swigged from the Coke bottle as he spoke. "What say you and me make a night of it?"

Daniel gave him a flickering smile, acutely uneasy in such close proximity to him and yet not really sure why. The stink of whiskey was breath-taking certainly, but men got drunk all the time. Daniel had been equally drunk at various times in his life. A man could get drunk without being dangerous, even a man like Darius. "I've got a lot to do but maybe another night we could..."

Darius's fingers tightened in his hair pulling his head back. The mouth of the bottle was thrust against his lips, tilted, a hot burn of whiskey poured down his throat. He swallowed in self-defense, gulping, then coughing. Darius put a hand across his mouth, holding it there for a quelling moment before he slowly wiped Daniel's lips clean of the whiskey with the salt-flavored skin of his palm.

"All work and no play makes Danny a dull boy." He stroked his thumb down Daniel's mouth slowly before wiping the last of the spilled whiskey from his chin.

Daniel darted him a quick sideways look, aware that if he handled this wrongly things could get acutely embarrassing for both of them. If Darius was coming onto him then he needed to nip any misconceptions in the bud very quickly, but he could hardly suggest that Darius was coming onto him, however much it might seem that way, without risking insulting and angering him. He picked his words carefully, trying to keep his voice steady, "I'm tired. I'm afraid I won't be very good company tonight. Perhaps you, me and John could drive into Isna tomorrow night?"

"You disappoint me, Goldilocks..."

Daniel started as Darius put his hand on his thigh, the warmth of his hand uncomfortably noticeable through the thin material of his pants.

Darius was shaking his head in mock disappointment. "Early to bed at your age? Where's your sense of adventure? Have you stopped wanting to explore new worlds so very young?" He squeezed Daniel's thigh absently, as though he didn't even know he was doing it while Daniel swallowed hard. The embarrassment of the situation was so extreme he wished the ground would just close over him now.

"Why don't you try a couple of these? Loosen you up a little."

Darius reached into his pocket and then pushed his palm under Daniel's nose. Daniel looked down at the different sizes, shapes and colors of pills and felt his throat go dry. Not just drunk then. "No, thank you."

Darius huffed with exasperation. "At your age I would have jumped at the chance. Haven't you read Huxley? Don't you want to open the doors of perception?" He shook his head. "Don't cling to your safety rail like a vicar's wife holding onto her skirts. Let go, Daniel. Be open to the world you
live in. Be open to the possibilities of learning something new."

Daniel was very aware of himself pressing against the tent pole, out of his depth and ludicrously shocked. He was supposed to be an anthropologist and yet to Darius he knew he was probably coming across as a sanctimonious little prig, too chickenshit to take a couple of happy pills in case he lost control, scared to make that leap into the unknown in life as well as work. He'd always prided himself on being open to new experiences, new cultures, new ideas. Darius was offering him at least one new experience and possibly a lot more than that, and he was cringing away from it with all the closed-minded attitude of a Luddite faced with a spinning jenny. He said, "No, thank you," again but without conviction. He was curious. He had always been too curious.

"Feel, remember. Don't think everything to death." Darius reached up inside his shirt and Daniel started as he felt that callused palm touch his bare breast again, press against his heart. Darius’s face was very close to his. He could smell the whiskey on his breath, see the pin prick pupils of his eyes, the first few strands of silver in the dark gold of his beard, yet was half-hypnotized by the certainty in them all the same. "Don't you want to be able to read cuneiform the way I can?"

Daniel's eyes widened. "Is that how you do it?"

Darius smiled, a smile so twisted and bitter that it chilled Daniel to the heart. "Thanks to the US Air Force I can't do it any other way these days. Try it."

Years later Daniel would wonder if he actually opened his mouth or not. If Darius forced the pill between his resisting teeth or if he automatically parted his lips in blind obedience to the man's order. Either way the pill went in, his head tilted back, the burning alcohol tipped down, carrying the pill and its effects with it, into the swirling maelstrom of his bloodstream, of his brain.

When it hit, it hit so much harder than he'd expected, nothing like the occasional joint he'd smoked in college. It pinned him flat and spun him round. He was falling backwards while staying nailed to the groundsheet. The roof of the tent arched away from him and dissolved. The canvas walls shimmered and then came towards him. He could see himself a long way away, down the far end of a tunnel, illuminated by the flashlight beam he was playing on the inscription. It was the hieroglyphic inscription he hadn't been able to make sense of. Obviously cryptographic. As he watched himself, Zaheer's painted snakes came out of the inscription and coiled around his arms, wrapped themselves around his body, around his throat. He knew the snakes knew everything, but his other self was fighting them off, pulling free from them, missing the chance for the enlightenment they offered. Then he was floating high above the walls of the maze. He could look down on the geometric patterns of the corridors and realized that every one of them led to a dead end. There was no way to the center. But he could float there because he could fly now, better than an airplane, swooping and gliding like a bird. He, alone, could find his way there. He could see shapes dimly, people down below him walking in procession down the corridors. They wore extraordinary headdresses that made them look like…

He swooped lower and realized he was staring at paintings of ancient deities come to life. Ra, wearing a headdress so magnificent it put Tutankhamun's death mask to shame. Baal and his sister-consort Anat, she carrying a lance, golden serpents shimmering on their robes. Hathor dutifully following behind her father, Ra, wearing a horned headdress with a golden sun disc, and casting glances of dislike at the other goddesses. Next to her, apparently oblivious of her disdain, walked Wadjet, wearing a lioness mask above which was a disk out of which emerged a rearing cobra. Behind them walked Marduk, slayer of Tiamat, wearing a bearded golden mask which hid everything except his eyes. There were others he didn't recognize most of them wearing gorgeous clothes and elaborate headdresses. One figure in black seemed to look straight at him and he cringed from the burning eyes of someone he believed to be the ancient Persian deity Ahriman or
Angra Mainyu, the god of darkness. There was a figure who wore the robes of a Chinese king. Another who looked as if she could be Gula-Bau, the Chinese serpent goddess. There was an Egyptian cobra goddess he guessed must be Mertseger, 'She who loves silence'. Half the known serpent gods of the underworld walking beneath him while he drifted invisibly above their heads. As they entered a new corridor, Ra lifted his hand and the wall dissolved. They passed through in silence, grim and purposeful. He knew they were going to attend a trial and that the verdict would be death.

As they entered another corridor a cry arrested them. Daniel turned in mid-air to see a beautiful woman standing there alone with her hands outstretched apparently in supplication. She said, "Let me come." He couldn't hear the words exactly, the sound reached him as if he was underwater, but he saw her lips move and could guess at what she was saying.

Most of the assembled company would not even look in her direction but the one who Daniel thought could be Ahriman turned on her in disdain. "No. You come to help him."

"I come to bear witness," she retorted. "He is the last of the greatest of us. He deserves a witness."

The one in the Chinese robes turned and looked at her for a moment. His face showed no anger. He assessed her as if she were an ordinary risk, like a river that might break its banks, looking for weakness, for areas of danger. "You would trick us. You would always trick us. You have weapons."

"I have nothing." She held out her hands again.

The eyes of Ra glowed gold as he said: "We will hunt you down as we hunted down the others who would rebel against our authority. You will die as they died. Slowly."

She faced him defiantly. "Do you think I, who am not even among the System Lords, can threaten you, the great and mighty Ra? You who command the loyalty of so many? You who have destroyed all those who once ruled in your stead? Do you fear me so greatly you will not even let me bear witness to your justice?"

Ra's gaze flickered over her in contempt. "You have no armies left. You are nothing. No one fears you."

"You cannot take the body," Ahriman told her cruelly. "It is forfeit. The Asgard have ruled that his crimes must be punished by us or else we all shall suffer for his greed."

"What did he do that we all have not?"

Still Hathor and Sekhmet studiously ignored her but Marduk turned his masked head and behind the golden mask his eyes also seemed to glow gold. "He took more than his fair share. He took more than can be sustained. He wasted resources valuable to all of us. The Asgard have made their ruling. The Ancients support them. Their combined strength is greater than ours."

"You bow down before them like slaves! He took nothing of value. He took only hosts!"

The one in Chinese robes spoke quietly. "He took too many and his experiments were not permitted under the last treaty. He allied himself with the outcast ones. We will not pay for his stupidity and greed."

"You should fight them!"

Marduk said abruptly, "We do not fight wars we cannot win. We will not give up our rights to
"Then let me witness it."

She was so lovely Daniel felt breathless when he looked at her. She had huge dark eyes, and soft black hair which coiled around a crown of gold. Her body was small and rounded beneath robes which spread into celestial wings. He wished she would take flight with him.

"You have weapons." Ahriman's mistrust was undisguised.

She held out her arms like an angel about to take flight. "I have nothing."

"Then prove it," Marduk sneered.

As Daniel watched she reached up slowly and lifted off her headdress, untangling her hair from the golden crown. Then she threw it to the floor. "An act of faith which should buy me passage to the next door."

He became aware of another voice, whispering harshly in his ear: "Do you see her now, Daniel? Do you see Inanna? Do you see her as I saw her, there like a light in the darkness, faithful to the one she loves?"

Daniel opened his eyes and found that his neck had cricked painfully and the inside of the tent was swirling unpleasantly, strange undulations rippling across the canvas. His mouth felt dry and foul-tasting. Darius was leaning half across him and he could feel a pressure on his thigh from the man's hand, gripping his leg too hard. He closed his eyes again, trying to return to the maze and the gods with their glowing eyes, but they were fading like mist, when he tried to concentrate on their fleeing forms, he could only think of Darius's hand on his leg, the disturbing sensation of the man's breath against the side of his face. He opened his eyes again and this time couldn't avoid Darius's gaze. The man was stroking his leg while watching him to see his reaction. He was very close, a powerful sweat-scented bulk blocking out the starlight. He touched Daniel's mouth. Daniel flinched away. "What was that stuff?"

"Do you want some more?" Darius reached round and began to massage the back of Daniel's neck with one massive paw.

"No." Daniel swallowed hard. "I didn't like it."

"You loved it. You damned near came you were so ecstatic. What did you see?"

Daniel shivered. He felt hot and cold at the same time. Nauseated. The colors were still dissolving in the corner. He was afraid that if he turned his head too quickly he might see himself across the other side of the tent, having his neck massaged by a Darius who smelt of arousal. "What you told me to see." Now he remembered Darius had whispered in his ear the whole time, describing the headdresses, the layout of the maze, asking him how many gods he could see, what they were doing, then telling him who they were, and how they looked.

"It was real." Darius abruptly slammed him down onto the sleeping bag, pinning him supine. His eyes looked angry and clouded. "Everything you saw was real."

"It was just a hallucination," Daniel retorted, angry because it had been so incredible for those moments, to float above the ground and see everything, know everything, to step back in time and be invisible. But it had just been chemicals and the power of suggestion. Even through the cotton wool wrapped around his brain he recognized that.
"It was real. You're just closing your mind to all the possibilities, Goldilocks. You need to relax. Open up."

Darius was lying half on top of him now. He reached down and Daniel felt the man's oversized fingers brush down his thigh, squeeze it, then slip between his legs. "No." Daniel wriggled backwards.

"Don't be such a fucking girl," Darius slurred it drunkenly. He seemed almost asleep, his body pressing down on Daniel's, his mouth by his ear. "You want this. You've wanted it for weeks."

"No." Daniel tried to pull out from underneath him. "I don't. If I gave you the wrong impression, I'm sorry, but I don't want this." He could feel Darius's erection against his thigh, the dampness from the tip seeping through two layers of clothing to moisten and chill his skin. He could feel panic bubbling up and fought it desperately. He had to stay rational enough for both of them.

"That's just the drugs talking." Darius pulled him back between his legs, holding him firmly between his knees, and began to unbutton Daniel's shirt.

Daniel pushed his hands against the man's chest saying intently, "No. Darius. Don't." His heart was thumping uncomfortably fast and on the periphery of his vision multi-colored snakes were still coiling and uncoiling but he held his gaze.

Darius looked at him for a minute, then his face reddened and he slammed Daniel hard against the floor. "Make your mind up, you little pr...tease."

Lying flat on his back, shaken and more humiliated than he ever wanted anyone to know, Daniel fought to keep any tremor from his voice. "I'm sorry if I gave you the wrong idea."

Darius was still red-faced and furious. He bent over Daniel to hiss rapidly, "You think I want you? There's better ass than you on every street corner in Cairo. I was doing you a favor because you so obviously wanted me to give you what you've been begging me for these past few weeks, that's all." Darius grabbed his hair and hauled him up, jerking his head back, then putting his face very close to Daniel's.

Daniel snatched a breath, undeniably scared now. He swallowed. "I'm sorry if I offended you. I didn't mean to."

Darius pulled him in so close against his mouth Daniel could feel his harsh whiskey-flavored breath against his lips. He snatched a breath himself, trying not to gasp, saw Darius’s gaze move down Daniel's face, from his eyes to his mouth. For one frozen second Daniel thought the man was going to kiss him and then Darius abruptly let him go, snatching his hand clear from Daniel's hair as if he was diseased.

Daniel hit the ground hard, the sleeping bag barely cushioning his skull, then Darius was leaning over him, voice still harsh with rage as he spoke rapidly: "Tell me you've never slept with a man."

"I haven't." Daniel wanted to sound calm but he just couldn't. Darius was too unpredictable and too strong. Like being locked in a cell with an angry gorilla.

Darius’s eyes bored into him, furious and baffled. "Tell me you never will."

He knew he should say something adult and rational about Darius not having the right to dictate to him and at his age who was to say his sexual proclivities were set in stone…? But whatever his intellect might be telling him, with the scent of Darius’s sweat in his nostrils and the memory of his hand slipping between his legs, he felt that was a promise he could give with absolutely no
reservations whatsoever. He gabbled the words: "I never will."

Darius grabbed a handful of his shirt, twisting his fingers in it for emphasis, gaze unblinking and implacable. "If you ever bend over for any man except me I'll kill him. Do you understand?"

Daniel swallowed again, throat dry, and heart thumping so hard it hurt. The extent to which he had just infuriated and humiliated Darius was making him squirm with a mixture of acute embarrassment and nerve-twanging fear. "I understand."

Darius abruptly got up and stumbled out of the tent. Daniel raised his head, listening to him swearing savagely in Arabic as he tripped over something outside, the 'clink' of the whiskey bottle hitting the sand, the snarl as Darius snatched it back up again. Then the sounds died away as Darius moved out of earshot or went into his own tent. Daniel lay back down. His heart was still hammering and he felt as grubby as if he was one of those street walkers Darius had compared him to.

Daniel groaned and rolled over. He could still feel the damp spot on the inside of his thigh where the moisture from Darius's erection had seeped into his skin. The waves of humiliation rolled over him, playing back every excruciating second of the recent scene while his body zinged indignantly in every place where Darius's fingers had touched. The gods in his 'vision' were receding with every second. For a few moments he'd thought he could see the whole of the labyrinth, knew how to get to the center. Now it was gone, smeared away by bruising fingers and the righteous indignation of a wronged man. However it had happened it was obvious that Daniel had screwed up.

What made it worse was that he couldn't think of a single person in the world to whom he felt close enough to share what had just happened. No one he could be absolutely sure would hear him out without judging him or thinking he had done something wrong. Thinking of that he felt as hollow as an empty sarcophagus, all treasures stolen twenty centuries before. As any hope of continuing with his translation was now hopeless, he hitched his body around the worst of the whiskey spatters on the stained nylon of his sleeping bag and closed his eyes, trying to recapture the wonder of his 'vision'. But although he tried to summon them back, the ghostly gods slipped away from him, leaving him with the last flickerings of the multi-colored snakes writhing contemptuously across the canvas and the recent scene with Darius burned into his memory like a brand.

(It was only many days later, when the full details were told to him, that he realized that at the same time Darius had been groping him in drugged and drunken confusion, Darius's wife had been slashing her wrists in the bath before she slowly bled to death.)

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"Daniel…?"

Oh God no, not Golding again. Daniel flinched into wakefulness murmuring, "Please, I don't want to. It's not you, it's me…"

"Daniel."

The sharper tone and shake of his shoulder made him sit up but it was an effort to open his eyes. "I don't want to sleep with you." It came out as one gabbled word. He opened his eyes to find Jack crouching on his heels in front of him with his head on one side and an eyebrow raised.

Daniel groaned and put a hand up to his head, waiting for the sarcastic rejoinder, but Jack only said mildly, "You could at least wait for me to ask before you turn me down."
Daniel squinted up at him. "Sorry." He looked around the tent and realized this definitely wasn't the one in which he'd had his drug trip all those years ago. Time had moved on and so had he. He'd had self-defense classes since then, even if he wasn't very good at them, he did know the basics. He was thirty-six and Golding was in his fifties. And much as he hated to admit it, he also felt a lot safer with Jack around than he had back then. "Bad dream."

Jack said, "Don't think. Just answer. When you think about the Labyrinth what do you feel?"

"Fear." The word was out before he could call it back and although he was ashamed he had to admit that was honest. "Actually more like abject terror."

Jack scratched his jaw, not meeting his eye. "And when you think about Hathor? One word to describe how you feel about her?"

"Self-disgust." Daniel grimaced. "Which I guess is technically two words but…"

Jack rested a hand on his shoulder. "That's what I thought." Still determinedly not meeting Daniel's eye he said. "What do you think happened in that place?"

"I don't know." He could feel himself closing down, rigid body language. He dropped his shoulder so Jack would let go of him and Jack did.

Jack gave him a wary look then persisted quietly. "Try to remember."

"No." He gave him a small defiant smile. "I don't want to remember." And you can't make me, and neither can General Hammond.

"It's important."

Daniel smiled again, brittle and stubborn. "It’s forgotten."

Jack looked at him for a long moment, rocking slightly on his heels as he did so before enquiring conversationally, "How come you have goodwill to burn towards scaly monsters who drag you around on ropes and intend to serve you up for dinner whereas I – the soul of tact and patience – only get Mister Awkward Squad?"

Daniel wrinkled his nose. "You woke me up and didn't give me any caffeine."

"Oh and Chaka did?" Jack reached for the thermos as he spoke, unscrewing the cap in irritation. "I suppose he gave you an after dinner mint when you'd finished your roasted symbiote head as well, did he? Here, drink this."

"I can't believe you're jealous of an Unas," Daniel muttered into the plastic cup, although low enough that Jack could pretend he hadn't heard him. You're still my best friend, you big lunk. But he didn't add that. He'd heard the jokes Sam and Janet made about him and Jack carrying on like third-graders always needing reassurance that the other one really was his bestest friend.

The sun was coming up, a low red-gold sphere turning the sands to bronze. Daniel loved the way the desert rippled, the way it was never still. Grasslands waved in the breeze but the soil beneath them didn't move. Sand was inconstant and eternal. Even when the pyramids had been ground to dust by the desert zephyrs, the sand would remain, carrying with it the dust of dead pharaoh's on the morning wind.

Jack gave him a searching look. "Carter seems to think we can stop worrying about Golding. She read me your hospital report. She said it was good news. Nothing really happened. The only
injuries you had were from the explosion."

He saw white light, a shriek of pain, a fountain of blood, then blackness coming towards him like an oncoming train, the coffin lid slamming down while he gasped for air that wasn't coming. He wrapped his arms around himself, trying not to shiver and failing. "That's what they told me, too."

It hung between them in the stillness, an unspoken: So why the fuck are you so scared? Obviously because he'd thought Darius was going to do a lot of very bad things to him the man then hadn't done and the fear had remained long after the true memories had faded. He was afraid, not of what had happened, but what he'd feared was going to happen. He was afraid, in effect, of nothing at all. So why wasn't telling himself that helping to dissolve the terror?

Jack took a deep breath. "The NID want what's in the center of that labyrinth."

"What?" The coffee was revolting, lukewarm and stewed, but the scent of it was still enticing. Sam had joked about getting him coffee-scented aftershave but he actually thought it would be a good idea. He couldn't think of anything that smelt better.

"Golding's a little psychic. That's why NID recruited him as remote viewer. Apparently he was pretty good."

For a moment he thought Jack was getting 'psychotic' and 'psychic' mixed up and then the coffee separated his brain from the cobwebs his bad dream had left and he got what the man was telling him: big chunks of totally new information at which his mind baulked in disbelief. "He's what? They recruited him as what?"

Even as Jack was explaining it to him his mind was retreating from it. "Why would a government department be handing out illegal hallucinogenic drugs to its employees?"

Jack rolled his eyes. "Because the Russians did it first and we didn't want to miss out on anything they might be gaining from it."

"But LSD has long term after-effects. Giving it to civilians without explaining the possible consequences would be stupid and dangerous and utterly unethical."

"And your point is?" Jack demanded. "We're talking about the NID here. They'd give their own grandmothers PCP if they thought they'd get something out of it."

"But he's a brilliant scholar! Don't they know what kind of a mind they were tampering with?"

"One that could solve problems for them faster than anyone else. It's only luck they never recruited you." Jack shuddered as he said it and when the implications hit him Daniel felt suddenly cold as well. He looked around for his jacket and Jack handed it to him, reading his body language as effortlessly as yesterday's newspaper.

"In another universe they probably did." Daniel shoved his hands into the sleeves, the material cold against his skin. He got goosebumps where it touched him, wrapping his arms around himself to try to warm up, noticing sadly the way the SGC issue jacket was still too long for his arms. Five years in that place and they were still handing him the same size uniform as Jack's and letting him be swamped by it even though Jack was, always had been, and presumably always would be, two full inches taller than he was with a corresponding extra length of leg and arm.

"Don't say that." Jack held up a warning finger. "Don't talk to me about alternate universes. Ever. I was having nightmares about freakin' Girl Jackson cozying up to horny natives for weeks. I kept waking up screaming because of you and your parallel planes of existence."
"Technically, they're not my parallel planes of existence, they're Einstein's." Daniel blew on his fingers.

"Well, he can keep them."

"He's dead."

"As will you be if you don't stop talking about them." Jack put a hand up to his head as if it was causing him pain but his glance across at Daniel was flesh-strippingly shrewd. "What do NID want?"

Daniel stonewalled him with the skill of long practice. "You're the one who just got the report from Sam."

"You're the one who's been to the center of the labyrinth."

"I told you I don't remember."

Impasse. They looked at each other defiantly across the cooling thermos flask, a faint wisp of steam trickling over the edge.

Jack looked away first. "Someone sent a letter to Golding's wife. Carter hasn't traced who yet. The guy had an embarrassment of enemies." When that elicited no response he added, "NID said they've 'lost out twice already'. They're not prepared to miss out again." He darted Daniel a quick look. "Nothing? You don't remember anything?"

It was there. Ready to burst out like a Rousseau tiger from the jungle foliage. A place painted in fifty different shades of darkness. Unbearable pain. Unbearable cold. The stench of blood. The blade shining. Blackness closing over him like a shroud. "I don't remember anything." If he said it often enough he could make it be true.

Jack didn't trouble to hide his frustration and Daniel wondered idly how many times over the past five years life Jack had wanted to pick him up by the collar and shake him until his teeth rattled. He could sometimes remember exactly how it had felt when Jack had grabbed him by the jacket and yanked his feet right off the ground as he dragged him down that staircase. "NID aren't going to give up, Daniel. They've sent a team over here. They won't go home empty-handed unless we stop them, and I can't stop them if you won't tell me what it is they're looking for."

"They'll never get in there." Daniel was secure about that at least. "Sam said it's impervious to all kinds of scanning, including thermal. The walls of the maze are made of a substance that can't be burned by a laser or blasted with gelignite. Golding blew it up, remember, and all it did was shift some sand a little. Hardly any of the interior was touched."

"That's why they'll do what they did before." Jack was still glaring at him in exasperation. "Wind Golding up and send him in. He's the only guy who knows the combination. Except for you."

"I don't know it."

"You were with him when he went there."

The blade shining, the hand in his hair dragging him, his own voice pitifully muted in those echoless corridors pleading for Golding to think about what he was doing. Golding's voice booming like a bittern's call at dusk, telling the story of Inanna who descended into the underworld, shedding a garment at every gate.
The old hallucination flickered back into his mind. That was what he'd been dreaming of when Jack
awoke him. Gods with glowing eyes. Goa'uld. He'd seen Goa'uld. No, he hadn't seen anything.
Darius had seen and described them to him in that endless time when he'd been floating in a
drugged haze, thinking he was flying, while Golding whispered in his ear and caressed him through
the thin material of his pants….

Daniel turned his head away, cold breakers of humiliation washing over him again. But this was
important. He had to tell Jack about this even if the…other stuff was never going to be mentioned.
"Darius saw them."

"Who?"

"The Goa'uld. A group of them all heading for the center of the labyrinth for a trial, I think, and
execution. One of their own who'd transgressed in some way."

"Anubis?"

Daniel shook his head. "I don't know. I didn't see him."

"I thought you said Golding saw them?"

"He saw them and described them to me, I think. I saw what he told me to see. They looked like
wall paintings come to life. One of them was Ra, but he didn't look like the Ra we met. He looked
the way I imagined Ra would look before I met him."

Jack shrugged. "Less of the Berlin drag act and more of the old papyrus then?"

He looked at the steam coming from the flask. It had dwindled to the faintest wisp now as the early
morning chill permeated the glass-wrapped interior. "Did he have a bad flashback because of the
LSD the NID gave him when he was working for them? Is that why he did what he did?"

Jack looked at the ground for a minute and then shrugged, pretending indifference while his body
language radiated anger. "He used to be able to 'see' without the drugs. But it came and went, it
wasn't reliable. NID needed him to be able to see on demand so they persuaded him to try LSD,
then mescaline, then a whole lot of other things. With some people the drugs don't make any
difference but with Golding they worked almost every time. He could access his visions any time
he liked. All he had to do was swallow a few pills. Trouble was, after a few years of doing it that
way, he couldn't do it any other way. Without the drugs it didn't work any more. LSD isn't
addictive but the sensations can be and by that point Golding was hooked. He hated the NID and
he needed them. They'd stolen his gift and given him a chemical replacement but however much he
might hate them for taking what he'd had, even the chemical replacement was better than nothing
at all."

There was hardly any brown left in Jack's hair. The sides were silver, a delicate shade for such a
robust man. It made him look vulnerable, as did that scar bisecting his left eyebrow. Daniel wasn't
sure if that was where the Touched had clubbed him or from before then, some nameless mission
without paperwork, too highly classified to exist. Since knowing Jack and Teal'c Daniel had come
to suspect that buried inside the soul of every warrior was a poet trying to escape. And this was
another part of why he was friends with this man, because Jack had a sense of natural justice that
fell straight and true as a pendulum. The fact he disliked Golding didn't alter the fact he disliked
what the NID had done to him even more. Under all those battle scars he still had bitterness to
spare for a wrong done to an enemy.

"Poor Darius," Daniel said quietly.
"This place was supposed to be his last job for them. He hated them by then and the program was winding down anyway. They told him he only had to do this one last thing for them and he was free and clear. All he had to do was find out what this place had been. Where it came from. What it had been used for. And they gave him the chemical help to be able to do what he does…"

"So it was the NID?" Daniel wrapped his arms around himself. "They gave him the drugs that made him go…nuts."

"Not exactly." There was an odd intensity in Jack's gaze as turned to look at him. "What the NID were giving him was a mixture of LSD and mescaline. But in tests done after…what happened…they found other hallucinogenic substances in his blood stream."

Daniel blinked in confusion. "What hallucinogenic substances?"

Jack pulled his notebook out of his pocket. "A mixture of stuff. The main active ingredient was something called Mandragora officinarum."

"Mandrake? Perhaps Alexis was right about Darius having a problem with impotence."

"According to Carter it also makes you hallucinate."

"Yes. The ancient Egyptians used it for that as well. Mixed with other things it gave you an out of body experience and made you think you were flying."

"What 'other things'?" Jack enquired levelly.

"Opium poppy and Blue Lotus."

"Would that be the same as 'Papaver somniferum' and 'Nymphaea ampla'?" Jack read from the page.

"Oh, the idiot." Daniel put a hand up to his head. "You wouldn't have to be psychic to start seeing visions on that stuff. It's a miracle it didn't kill him."

"And whoever gave it to him would have known that."

"What?" He stared at him in confusion. "What do you mean?"

"There's a way you have to treat the mandrake stuff to stop it being lethal. This hadn't been treated. It should have killed him. It had some deadly alkaloid in it which should have shut down his lungs. But as the guy evidently has an abnormal constitution, it just made him crazy."

"Why would NID take such a risk if Darius was so valuable to them?"

"They didn't. It didn't come from them."

"You're saying someone other than the NID was giving Darius psychotropic drugs?"

"No, Daniel," Jack said very clearly. "What I'm saying is that someone was trying to kill him and in the process they damned near killed you too."

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He didn't know why he'd forgotten how mule-stubborn Daniel could be – he'd had enough reminders over the years. Daniel wouldn't accept that anyone had given anything to Golding even though O'Neill was absolutely certain that was what had happened in the past and could even be
happening again in the present. As Daniel kept telling him, Daniel knew these people, and none of them were murderers.

O'Neill rolled his eyes. "Look, I just saw Nelson going through Golding's drugs."

"Jack, you just went through Darius's drugs. Maybe he was doing the same thing you were and trying to see what Darius is on these days."

O'Neill had to concede Daniel had a point there. "Okay, well you said yourself Golding and Alexis had a fight."

"Yes, they did. But there's a difference between taking a swing at someone and knowingly giving him potentially lethal drugs. Alexis wouldn't do it."

"Okay. Did you know Golding and Inga once had a thing going and she hated his wife?"

By the way Daniel narrowed his eyes and wrinkled his nose he obviously hadn't known that, but his stubbornness didn't shift. "Don't believe all that 'hell hath no fury like a woman scorned' nonsense, Jack. Inga wouldn't hurt anyone."

"Hey, I like her. A lot. But she's still my top candidate for the person who sent the letter to Golding's wife that pushed her over the edge."

Daniel looked at the roof of the tent as if seeking inspiration, or possibly only patience. "Jack, as a detective, you make a good Air Force colonel."

O'Neill glared at him. "Okay, smartass, where did Golding get the drugs from? Who used to get the supplies for the dig?"

"Whoever was going into the nearest town. Or..." Daniel's brow creased in concentration as he tried to remember. "Actually, I remember the jeep broke down. There was only the one the workers used still functioning. For about a month before Darius's wife died we had to rely on supplies being brought out to us. We'd give them a list and they'd get us what we wanted."

That didn't throw him a little. He'd been hoping to hear that Alexis always got the supplies or something. Not that he disliked Alexis. He didn't. But he really liked Inga and Nelson and didn't want it to be either of them.

Daniel seemed to be effortlessly reading his thoughts. "Look, why does it have to be anyone? Darius was trying to find out what had happened in Ancient Egypt. He couldn't access his... psychic abilities without the aid of drugs, right? So, I think it would be very in character for him to decide to try to use an Ancient Egyptian method of having an out of body experience. He asked for the stuff. Someone got him the stuff but as they wouldn't have tried it themselves they would have had no way of knowing it was dangerous. He's already disturbed because of his wife's death. It sparks off some of his latent LSD paranoia. He goes temporarily...delusional. End of story. No crime."

"Carter didn't think so and neither did Fraiser. They thought the stuff was deliberately spiked."

"Well, I don't." Daniel gave him a defiant look. "Doesn't my opinion count for anything?"

O'Neill rolled his eyes again. That was a low blow and he hoped Daniel knew it. "Yes," he muttered ungraciously, "of course it does, it's just that - "

Daniel held out his hand. "Where's the satellite phone?"
"What?"

"You said you spoke to Sam. Where's the satellite phone you called her on? If Sam's back Teal'c must be too. I need help with this translation."

O'Neill looked across at the equipment and groaned. "Christ, Daniel, this stuff takes forever to put together."

"Well, why did you sneak off without telling me anyway? You knew I wanted to talk to Teal'c."

Grumbling loudly, O'Neill did nevertheless help to carry the antenna outside and then run the cable back in to the tent. He and Daniel putting equipment together took twice as long as either one of them doing it by himself but by following Carter's instructions and snapping at each other for a few minutes they did succeed in putting all the connectors into the right places.

"I'll leave you to it then, shall I?" O'Neill enquired.

Daniel held out the vacuum flask. "You could go and make some coffee." He turned back to the screen. "Hi, hello, yes, this must be working. Can I speak to Teal'c please? It's Daniel Jackson. Oh you know that because you can see me too, can't you? Okay. I'll just wait here then while you go and find him."

As O'Neill headed towards the flap of the tent he saw the stack of print-out Daniel was pulling towards himself. "Um – you do know how much this thing costs to use a minute, right?"

Daniel leafed through the papers, clearly oblivious of O'Neill, murmuring to himself, "Okay, this is the semi-erased inscription from the West Chamber I need to show him. Where was the one by the stele dedicated to Mertseger…?"

O'Neill cleared his throat. "Daniel, Hammond told me we could only use that thing for very short periods of time. As in very short periods of time. We're billed by the second, that's how expensive it is."

"Teal'c!" Daniel was already beaming into the screen. "How was the mission? Discover anything of interest?"

"You don't have time for social chit-chat." O'Neill raised his voice. "Teal'c just help him with his damned translation and talk quickly."

Daniel waved a dismissive hand in his direction. "Yeah, that's Jack. Ignore him. So did it look as if the Ancients had been there in the last few centuries or are we talking millennia…?"

Raising his eyes to heaven, O'Neill left him to it. As he went back out into the morning light, he knew his greetings to the others probably sounded false. Whatever Daniel believed, Jack O'Neill believed one of these people had tried to kill Darius Golding and although he personally wanted to kill Golding on average about six times a day, it wasn't the kind of behavior he expected from respectable archaeologists.

He saw one of the local workers had started a fire. They came in early in the morning and helped keep the dig sanitary and comfortable, lit fires, dug trenches, cooked meals. There wasn't much else to do on a dig like this, O'Neill presumed, where there was no actual 'digging' involved, just a lot of squinting at inscriptions and referring to reference books. As O'Neill put the coffee on to boil and nodded to Alexis, he thought about what might be in the center of that maze. Carter had tried searching for that information but the spoilsports at Area 51 had designated that information as too sensitive to be stored on the main computer. It was only available on floppies which meant
someone would have to physically break into the room in which they were kept, find the floppies, and decode the password protecting them before accessing the files. The other information that wasn't available was what Golding had really done to Daniel in that maze. The NID reports suggested that Golding himself didn't know. His mind had been too clouded by shock, drugs and guilt for him to be able to separate what he was afraid he might have done from what he genuinely had done, while Daniel was still opting for what O'Neill felt was voluntary amnesia. Which meant that of the two people who had been present when whatever had happened had happened, one remembered something that probably hadn't happened at all, and the other one didn't remember anything because he didn't want to.

Which from the point of view of trying to work out what the hell was in there and why NID wanted it, wasn't helpful at all.

He'd told Daniel the truth about his hospital records. Carter had certainly been reassured by them, and he supposed he should be too. Although a combination of what seemed to be shock and the muted blast from the explosion had sent Daniel into what had been translated as a 'coma', when Carter had read more of the files what the doctor had actually called Daniel's state of unconsciousness was 'a form of voluntary psychological hibernation'. And as far as physical injuries went what Inga said was true, he'd been pulled from the area with barely a scratch. There had been a couple of bruises from where he'd hit the ground after the percussion of the blast had thrown him and knocked him out, but apart from that, not a mark. Back then it hadn't been possible to run effective DNA tests on blood so none of the blood from Daniel's skin had been saved, just sponged off gently by the nurses who had tended him in hospital.

The water was as slow to heat as the sands were to warm. It was as if the desert had no memory, the heat of the day fell through it and left no trace. At this time of day it was difficult to believe that in a few short hours the air would shimmer with the reflected glare of the sun. He looked at his watch and made some calculations. Daniel would need to assimilate the information he had gained from Teal'c. Better give him some time by himself while O'Neill shaved and washed. When he returned, with any luck someone else would have made the coffee.

The water in the make-shift shower was cold but he used it anyway, gasping with the shock of it as it splashed onto his skin. When he shaved, the electric razor tugged at his bristles a little spitefully to remind him that the foils needed changing, leaving his skin raw and flinching in anticipation of aftershave he'd luckily forgotten to pack.

On his return to the campfire he looked around for the other archaeologists but Alexis had gone back to his tent and no one was coming out to get their coffee. Or they'd gotten it and then put the water back onto heat for him. Probably the latter as the pot was still moving slowly towards boiling. But none of them had wanted to wait around to talk him? He felt suddenly exposed. The enemy in their midst. A few hours ago they'd liked him, now they probably weren't so sure. It occurred to him that if they'd seen him going into Golding's tent they might think he was the one spiking his medication. Or even supplying him with hallucinogenics in the first place. They probably didn't see a lot of difference between the NID and the SGC.

Sighing, he filled the flask with coffee and carried it back towards the tent. As he walked in the first thing he saw was that the satellite link was still on and Daniel was still talking into it.

"...thanks, Teal'c. Now I have four more inscriptions here, but I think I may be able to work those out from what you've given me so far. Although perhaps I ought to…"

O'Neill looked at his watch. "Your time is way more than up, Doctor Jackson."

Daniel gave him a disbelieving look over his shoulder. "But, Jack…"
"Say thank you and goodbye, Daniel."

Looking sulky and mutinous, Daniel reluctantly complied. As he replaced the receiver, mouth open to start protesting, O'Neill leapt in first. "Do you know how much that thing costs per second?"

"No. And I don't care. My work is just as important as shooting people we don't know, and I don't see the SGC threatening to ration your bullets."

"And it's precisely because I don't want them to start rationing my bullets that I don't want you using up our entire mission budget chatting about the weather to Teal'c."

"I asked him and Sam to come out here."

"What?" O'Neill stared at him in disbelief.

Daniel gave him a defiant look in return. "We need to know what this place was to know why NID want what's in the center, right? Sam can tell us more about the chemical composition and Teal'c can help me crack the code to get into the center. Hammond's agreed. He's finding a jet to fly them out there. They'll be here tomorrow."

O'Neill moistened his lips before saying as evenly as he could, "If you just tried to remember..."

"I don't want to remember!" Daniel's eyes flashed a warning that told O'Neill to back off right now, then he collected himself, turning away to rearrange the papers he'd been using when talking to Teal'c, saying more quietly, "And I don't need to. All I need to do is translate the Goa'uld script and it should tell me how to get to the center. Then we find out what NID are looking for. We neutralize or take it for the SGC or whatever, and our mission is accomplished."

O'Neill noticed Daniel's hands were shaking on the papers he was trying to stack in order. When he said 'center' a shudder went right through him. He gritted his teeth thinking that maybe he didn't want Daniel to remember either and hospital records or no hospital records maybe too that bastard Golding should have died in the explosion he'd created.

Daniel continued to stack the papers doggedly as he spoke. "I need you to come with me tonight. I need to go into the labyrinth when no one else is around. See if I can figure out what the purpose of this place was."

Just for a minute O'Neill thought Daniel was going to admit that Golding was possibly dangerous and he needed O'Neill as a lookout. A hope dashed when Daniel finished stacking the papers and headed for the tent flap, pausing in the entrance only to add over his shoulder, "I need you to hold the flashlight for me."

As O'Neill gazed after him in disbelief, Daniel stuck his head back in and gestured vaguely in the direction of the corner of the tent. "And don't forget to bring those rune stones you keep playing with."

O'Neill waited until Daniel had disappeared out into the daylight and was out of earshot before shouting after him, "I'm not your unpaid assistant, you know!" It was annoying to reflect after a moment that actually that had probably always been his function on this trip, to hang around and make himself useful while Daniel made like an archaeologist. Not for the first time O'Neill thought that however annoying off-world missions might be, somehow the on-world ones were always worse.

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Illuminated by white haloes of flashlight instead of the weak yellow glow of the electrical lighting, the Labyrinth was mostly shadows. They hung in the corners like old raincoats no one wanted to wear any more, lay in the corners of the floor like dogs which had taken themselves off to die, they were velvety black and subtly smothering and they screamed at Daniel to remind him a madman with a knife could be hiding in every one.

He could feel himself reverberating faintly like a fly trapped in a cobweb, sending out invisible signals of distress to any passing spider. Beside him, he was uncomfortably aware of Jack trying not to notice how scared he was.

By daylight in the safety of their shared tent, going into the Labyrinth at night with no witnesses so they could work unobserved and in his case could babble aloud everything he discovered with no fear of being overheard, had seemed like an excellent idea. Here, at two a.m. with exhaustion trying to get his attention while his system jangled with nervous energy from a day-long caffeine overdose, it wasn't looking quite so clever.

The flashlight beam made a shimmering circle on the faded stelae the system lords had tried to expunge, the old hieroglyphs Nelson had been wrestling with for so long. He'd told Daniel this panel had haunted him for years. He'd take it out from time to time and worry at it like a dog with a bone. Had he been seeing them in his dreams? The words behind the other words? Even Teal'c had struggled with the extremely archaic form but he and Daniel had puzzled it out between them, brainstorming through a satellite beam, building on the inspired guesswork of Nelson who had been painstakingly puzzling at this inscription for over a decade.

"I am Nekheny, God of all. Hear me and attend only to me for I am come like morning. I am come like nightfall. I am come from the world beyond to the world below. The rivers to the underworld flow with the boats of my dead. I come with brighter vengeance than the eye of Ra. You will worship only me. You will ally yourselves with me or else you will succumb to the Shebtiu and the Edimmu who will yet return..."

He was grateful when Jack broke the silence, thumping a wall with dislike as he passed it. "I hate the Egyptian ones."

Daniel looked up at the square doorway of the cavernous chamber through which they were passing. This was the one he suspected had been painted by the people of Abydos. The one showing the eye of Ra watching over them, terrible and benevolent, seeing their crimes, protecting them from all other harm except the evil that lived within themselves. The art was simplistic, even crude, but it was recognizably in the same style as those pictures Sha're had shown him all those years ago when they had whispered to each other, speaking what was to her a forbidden language, and what, until then, he had believed to be a lost one.

The sadness flowed through him for a moment, all those possibilities gone forever. That was when sometimes it did help to cling to the thought of alternate universes. Sam had drawn it for him on a whiteboard, each infinite possibility taking place, each possible fork in the road taken and made real. The ones where he hadn't opened the 'gate again, where his insatiable curiosity had finally been outweighed by his common sense. The ones where he'd realized in time that in trying to explore a new world he could lose the one he already had. That was how he thought of it, that in other universes there were Daniel Jacksons so much wiser than he had been.

Jack's hand on his shoulder made him start. He was swinging the flashlight about in arc, the light brushing gently over vivid sandstone reds and parchment yellows, unbearably vivid blues and faience greens. "Where is it from here?"

"Left to the rune room."
They turned the corner and there it was. The Labyrinth's own Rosetta stone. The Asgard runewriting Inga was having so much trouble deciphering, and next to it, the Goa'uld transliteration Nelson hadn't been able to translate at all. Two alien languages nestling shoulder to shoulder in a place humans were never meant to see.

Daniel reached out and touched the walls. He could feel the faint pulse of the place's internal energy as a tiny buzz against his fingertips. Like every solved archaeological riddle, once the answer was known it became impossible to remember how it had ever been missed in the first place.

He reached out and took hold of Jack's restless arm, bringing the light to bear on the runes and hieroglyphs that were side-by-side, the blue-white circle overlapping them both.

"Once upon a time there was an ancient Goa'uld by the name of Nekheny. He was one of the first to harvest hosts from this world. I think he may have been the first overlord of the first council of System Lords and I think Sokar was one of his allies. While other Goa'uld thought it was technology that would make them mighty, Nekheny believed human slaves were the key to power. The more Jaffa a System Lord could muster, the greater would be his army. So he took many and then he took many more. He experimented with those he took, trying to find ways to make them stronger and more impervious to pain. He might have created giants. He might have created monsters. He might have crossed Unas and men and given our collective unconscious the memories of trolls and goblins. He seems to have allied himself with some other form of early Proto-Goa'uld, but there's only one inscription and it's hard to make out. It mentions 'outcasts of light' – fallen angels in our mythology – and the nephilim they gave birth to with human women. I think some of their experiments we probably don't want to know about.

"The Asgard objected to what he and these Proto-Goa'uld were doing and insisted that if the other System Lords didn't curb his activities they would declare war upon them. The Ancients supported the Asgard. So did the Furlings and the Nox. The Oannes wanted an end to the Goa'uld system of taking hosts. They felt a treaty wasn't enough."

"I'm with them."

Daniel thought of Nem and sighed. "The Asgard felt it was better to avoid battle if possible. That the humans would be the ones that suffered if all out war was declared. They gave the Goa'uld one last chance to clean up their act and the Goa'uld split into different factions: those who were prepared to abide by the treaty to avoid war with the Asgard, and those like Nekheny who felt any Goa'uld had the right to use humans as they liked and that war with the Asgard was preferable to any curbing of their powers.

"Great wars were fought amongst the Goa'uld and Nekheny, and those like him were forced from power. They were like the rebel angels cast out of paradise for denying the rights of men to have souls. Ironic, isn't it? If Nekheny was Lucifer, then I guess that makes Ra the equivalent of God."

He turned to find Jack looking at him curiously. The man moistened his lips. "Tell me you're reading this somewhere and it didn't just come to you in a vision or something?"

Daniel regarded him levelly. "It's written on the walls, Jack. It's scattered all over the place. All Nekheny's claims to be the first and greatest of the gods, which the other system lords came and covered up with the proof of how much they were loved by those they'd enslaved."

"Why?" Jack shook his head in confusion, getting that mutinous look he did sometimes when people tried to tell him things he wasn't sure he wanted to hear. "What were they trying to prove?"
Daniel moved Jack's arm across so the flashlight beam illuminated the runes. "That they weren't like Nekheny and Sokar, and the Ancients and the Asgard and the Nox and the Furlings shouldn't cut off their access to the humans of this world."

Jack scratched his jaw and Daniel noticed the darkening of embryonic beard there. Jack really needed to shave twice a day if he was going to look smart at midnight. By this hour not only were his eyes starting to look red-rimmed but his stubble was definitely showing. "And they bought that?"

"The Goa'uld argued that by cutting off their access to humans, the Asgard and the others would be effectively stunting their development. They said that tests had proved Homo sapiens made the best hosts for their species. To deny them such hosts was a hostile act against them. They claimed that the gross intellectual and technological inferiority of the human race made it the most natural and obvious candidate to be used by the Goa'uld as hosts, slaves, and Jaffa. They argued that by prolonging the lives of the hosts as they did and through 'adapting' humans to make them Jaffa they were actually doing them a favor. They claimed that they were doing nothing which the Asgard themselves had not done but unlike the Asgard they were making tangible improvements to the lot of the humans they 'harvested' by improving their health and lifespan by turning them into Jaffa. They showed evidence of the many bloody battles humans had fought. They cited our woeful ignorance in matters of science and medicine. They pointed to all the suffering humans inflicted upon themselves without any assistance from them and added that if outright war were declared between the Goa'uld and the other races it could only end in the destruction of their kind or of the Asgard, and what right had any other race to say they had not the right to exist."

Jack shook his head in disbelief. "What a crock! How could they believe that?"

Daniel looked at him. "Because the Goa'uld were more equal with the Asgard than we were then. They had comparative technology and a comparative longevity. We'd only just stopped banging the rocks together and our lifespan was so short that to an Asgard or a Nox we probably seemed to come and go in the blink of an eye." He sighed and crossed over to where the runes were shining softly in the dancing glow of Jack's flashlight. They seemed to glow silver under the blue-white light, like starlight, as ancient and as cold.

"The Asgard insisted that the System Lords must take action against any Goa'uld who wouldn't abide by the terms of the treaty. Those without great armies, like Seth, fled while they could. Others retreated to distant galaxies where they could hide out and gather their forces. Nekheny sent an army against Ra. There was a great battle which the Asgard observed. Ra and the other System Lords defeated Nekheny at last. Their Jaffa overwhelmed his on the ground. Their ships wiped out his fleet. They took his worlds away from him and finally they ran him to ground in his mothership." Daniel held out his hands expressively.

Jack looked confused for a moment and then got his meaning, spinning around and taking the light with him, a white beam dancing around the walls in a circle. "This is a ship?"

Daniel nodded. "It was Nekheny's mothership."

"It's huge!"

Daniel conceded the point with a shrug. "So was Apophis's. I presume Goa'uld with delusions of grandeur who want to rule the galaxy have some kind of…size thing going."

Jack shook his head in disbelief. "Well, there are dick compensators and then there are dick compensators…."
"They boarded his ship and took him prisoner. They had their human slaves praise their benevolence and magnificence in contrast to his despotism and tyranny. I doubt the work was done on the ship. I think the panels were painted on the worlds they ruled over and then brought in afterwards. They obliterated him from the panels of his own ship. Then they brought him here to the scene of his crimes and they tried him in situ. Then they passed sentence. Thor was the Asgard observer, sent to see that justice was done and to make his recommendation to the Asgard High Council. Then they buried him and his ship in the desert and left him there."

"The Goa'uld equivalent of a concrete overcoat?" Jack looked around the chamber with new understanding.

Daniel nodded. "I think so."

"So all these rooms everywhere are just like carnival floats for the Asgard, showing how much each of the Goa'uld are loved by their happy slaves?"

"More like a parents' evening at a school with a bad reputation, dragging out all the kids' artwork to show how much they've learned."

"I thought Ra banned writing?"

"Apparently back then exceptions were made if the writing was in praise of him." Daniel fully agreed with Jack's look of disgust.

Jack looked all around the walls carefully and then turned back to Daniel. "Your…vision showed the System Lords taking Nekheny to trial?"

"Darius's vision." Daniel felt his face close down, stubbornness flowing through him in preparation for the inevitable question. "But yes. I've found references in this place to Ra. Hathor. Sekhmet. Mertseger. Baal. Anat. Wadjet. Marduk. Ahriman. Gula-Bau. Vasuki and Takshaka. Yu might have been there too." He closed his eyes trying to remember and for the first time in a long time saw the woman again. "There was another one. Another Goa'uld, an ally of Nekheny." He remembered her soft black hair coiling around her golden crown, her robes that looked like wings, her lustrous eyes and perfect breasts. Then the jolts went through him, shards of memory: the knife, the tear of cloth, the subterranean breeze against his bare flesh, the hand in his hair, tugging his head back to the knife point could prick a spiteful warning at his throat.

"Do as she did."

*Trying to keep the fear from his voice. "Why?"

"Because you're going to take her place…."

He gasped, jerking his eyes open, feeling as if he'd been held under water. "Inanna."

"What?" Jack was looking at him anxiously. "Are you okay?"

Daniel nodded, snatching another breath. "The Sumerian Persephone, only she wasn't taken by Hades, she chose to go into the underworld, to the nur that was her sister Ereshkigal's domain."

"Why?"

"In the Sumerian myth? Because it was prophesied. To gain the powers that would only be hers if she made that journey."
"And the Goa'uld?"

"She said it was to bear witness. The implication was that she wanted to ensure justice was done to her mate, who was presumably Nekheny."

Jack ran a hand through his hair. "Do you believe that?"

Daniel shook his head. "No. Inanna wasn't a faithful lover. She always betrayed or fooled the men in her life. In one version of the myth, she tricked her husband Damuzi into taking her place, and she had a lot of lovers. She was known as the Protectress of Harlots. She was the original femme fatale."

"So, how does that help us?"

Daniel shrugged helplessly. "I don't know." But the memories were starting to gather at the door to his consciousness like rowdy partygoers impatient to be admitted. He could hear Darius’s voice, reciting her story, hear the bitterness of a man scorned and betrayed a well as deranged with grief. Not the patient wife they'd all assumed, the Anna who'd stayed at home. Because she was wronged they'd somehow assumed she must be guiltless herself. How could the mother of a dead child, the wife of a cheating husband be anything other than virtuous, patient, and long-suffering?

He shook his head, trying to clear the memories he didn't want. "Inanna's sister, who was the Queen of the Underworld, didn't trust her so she gave an order that she should only be permitted to pass if she was naked. As Inanna passed into the Underworld she was forced to leave an item of her clothing at every gate. First went her crown, next her earrings, then her necklace, her breast pins, her belt of birthstones, then bracelets and finally her gown." He noticed Jack peering at the walls. "What are you looking for?"

"I left a chalk mark."

He followed Jack into another chamber and finally into a niche behind a wall that seemed to have no function except to conceal what it contained. Jack shone the flashlight at the dais with a hint of pride. "That's the same thing Thor had on the Belisker."

Daniel stepped up to look at the dais curiously. The line of runes at the top had faded with age but he could still see the egg-shaped marks with lines between them which Jack had described. He gave Jack a look of enquiry and the man waved a hand. "You moved the runes around on top and...stuff lit up on the screen."

"So, if the Asgard put this ship under their control for the duration of the trial then their computer should have some kind of record of the floor-plan. Including where the center is and how to get there." Daniel tried not to let his relief become too obvious that there really did seem to be another way to reach the dark heart of this place which didn't involve him having to remember anything at all. He held out a hand for a rune stone and Jack pulled one from the bag at random. Daniel placed it on the panel. Nothing happened. He looked to Jack for enlightenment. "What am I doing wrong?"

The man took the stone from him and moved it around from place to place with no result. "There may be a special one to switch it on."

"Which one?"

"I don't know. The ones on Thor's ship were all blank whereas these have markings on them."

"Did you see any like that here?"
Jack muttered something and dug around in the bag. "I think Inga said she found a couple but I haven't collected them for her yet. We have a whole bagful I didn't think we'd need those too."

"Well, can you…" Daniel broke off as he heard something, or thought he did. "Did you hear that?"

Jack listened for a moment. "Hear what?"

"I don't know. It was sort of a – " Daniel opened and closed his hand, trying to describe it. "A sound like something moving."

"Someone?"

"No. Something. Like stone moving."

Jack pulled out his revolver, checked the ammo and then moved in front of Daniel, imperiously beckoning him behind him. Daniel always felt a stab of irritation when Jack did that but he did admit it made sense for the person with the weapon to go in front. He just didn't appreciate always getting the blond role.

"Inga said she found a few more stones in the east chamber today," Jack whispered it to him over his shoulder. "Let's try those."

"Okay." Daniel almost asked why they were whispering when everyone was asleep and even if they weren't his and Jack's business in the Labyrinth was perfectly reasonable within the eccentricity of the archaeologically inclined and curious. But then he thought about Darius and what his assumption would be about their reasons for coming here, and held his tongue. The last two days Darius had been more and more outspoken about what he imagined Daniel and Jack were doing in their tents at night. Instead of constant denial Daniel supposed it would have made more sense to point out that given the state of Jack's knees and spine it would have been a physical impossibility for them to be the tireless fornicators Darius imagined but he hadn't wanted to even engage in a conversation about the subject, afraid that if he did so it would just make Darius's delusions worse.

As they moved into one of the inner chambers, Daniel noticed that the panel he distinctly remembered translating that morning was no longer where he had last seen it. He pointed that out to Jack who said, "And so?"

"Don't you think it's odd?"

"That you have all the sense of direction of a doorknob?" Jack considered and then shrugged. "No, I'm kind of used to it now."

Daniel hit him on the arm. "It isn't just me. Everyone is having the same problem."

"Not me." Jack stepped confidently in through a doorway into a small chamber. Then he looked around at the walls and his confident visibly flickered. He turned a circle while Daniel watched from the doorway, folding his arms as he did so.

"Something wrong, Jack?"

"Okay, I admit this place is a little on the spooky side." Jack came out of the chamber and looked into the next one, and then the next, shaking his head as he did so. "Inga said she found some white stones in the East-6 chamber. Well, last time I looked that was the East-6 chamber over there." He gave Daniel an appraising look. "You do know that if this is a Goa'uld ship the control deck will be in the center?"
"If we find the Asgard stones we can access the plans to the place." That was a good avoidance answer, Daniel thought.

Jack seemed to agree with him because his gaze was unsettlingly shrewd. "NID said that what they want is in the center. Sooner or later—"

"Asgard runes." Daniel pointed quickly.

Jack gave him a suspicious glance, as though Daniel was somehow responsible for spinning the chambers around from place to place just to fox him, and then stalked into the room with great dignity, only wincing as his knees obviously twanged at him as he bent to pick up the stones, in the process revealing why Inga had left them where she'd found them. He had to holster the gun to pick up the stones while still holding onto the flashlight but held them aloft for inspection with an air of triumph, three white stones, looking like translucent hard-boiled eggs that had been sliced in half. "These are like the ones on Thor's ship."

As they followed the scudding circle of the flashlight back to the place where the dais stood, Daniel tried to make sense of what they'd learned. Darius, grief and guilt-stricken at his wife's death, strung out on too many drugs and too many days spent trying to 'see' the past leaving him haunted by the visions he'd seen reflected on the glassy black walls of the Labyrinth, and probably having LSD flashbacks to inaccessible sections of his brain, had adapted the story of Inanna's Descent to his own delusions. Inanna, the Goa'uld, had sweet-talked her way to the center of the Labyrinth for some purpose Daniel couldn't even guess at. And still in the center, NID believed, was something that would be useful to them. And a long time ago, Nekheny had been taken down these same corridors to meet his death to preserve a treaty that made it acceptable for the Goa'uld to continue to harvest hosts from this world.

Three stories. He could feel them twisting around one another like serpents. The myth that might or might not have arisen from what had been done by the Goa'uld. The actions of the System Lords all those millennia ago in this place. The delusional Darius’s own journey to the center in search of… what? Absolution? Vengeance? Why take Daniel?

Because Darius had desired him and Darius blamed those feelings for causing his wife's death? To punish Daniel for evoking that desire?

"Do as she did."

"Why?"

"Because you're going to take her place...."

Jack's voice cut through his thoughts with welcome clarity. "That Inanna Goa'uld had to be after something. If she was trying to get to where Nekheny was it was because there was something there she wanted. There had to be something in it for her." There was a long silence as Jack looked at him, as if willing him to remember then he said quietly, "What's in the center of the Labyrinth, Daniel?"

He was still trying to summon the defiance to throw back another "I don't remember" when the scent of whiskey warned him, but not quite in time.

Darius answered softly, "Death" and then Daniel was knocked to the side by a backhand he never saw. As he was falling he saw Jack's shocked face, saw him bringing up the flashlight to defend himself just a second too late....
"Daniel…?"

It was because the walls moved. Once you realized that everything was made clear. Apart from the ring of outer chambers which didn't move, you could never get where you'd been the day before because where you'd been the day before had moved. Doorways turned into dead-ends. Dead-ends turned into new corridors. Every time Darius pressed the invisible symbol it glowed gold and the walls slid back with a grating sigh.

"Daniel Jackson!"

Teal'c's imperious voice snapped him back into consciousness with a start.

"What?" Opening his eyes sent a lancing pain through his head and trying to sit up made the chamber start to cartwheel slowly while flashing lights went off in front of his eyes. He stayed where he was and closed his eyes quickly. "Ow."

"Daniel, you've cut your head. You may have concussion." He felt cool fingers on his forehead that could only be Sam's while Teal'c's hand on his shoulder provided as much comfort as support.

He risked opening his eyes again, squinting up at the familiar blurs of their worried faces. "Hi. You got here fast. Where's…" He turned his head to where Jack should have been and realized there was something seriously wrong with this picture. There was Inga looking anxious. Nelson looking anxious. Alexis, and Hélène also looking anxious. No Sanjay. No Darius. And, most of all, no Jack. He remembered that whispered "Death…" and jerked his head round, looking for his missing teammate. "Jack…?"

"O'Neill is not here."

Sickness flooded through him, like suddenly finding himself on a choppy sea after eating bad sushi, but he swallowed hard, determined not to hurl. He got no reassurance from the look on Sam's face. She winced. "We were hoping you could tell us where he is."

For answer, he grabbed Teal'c's arm and hauled himself up, digging his fingers into the sleeve of the Jaffa's jacket as the corridor spun like a carousel. When the walls swooped and shimmered he was very glad of the Jaffa's strong arms around him. He breathed in a comforting lungful of worried Teal'c as the man reproached him: "Daniel Jackson, that was not wise."

"Daniel, you must have hit that wall pretty hard and I think you have concussion. Doctor Zaheer has taken a jeep into town to get you a doctor."

Sam sounded equally reproachful and anxious but they didn't have time for her to fuss right now.

He cracked his eyes open again, letting in another agonizing slice of light. "I'll have concussion later. I'm busy now. Darius took Jack into the Labyrinth. We have to find them. Quickly." He stumbled over to the wall and ran his fingers down the edge. "I think the doorway was here somewhere. I think I remember. Damnit." He pressed the heel of his hand to his forehead. "I have to remember. Seven doors. Seven symbols Darius had to press to make them open."

"Daniel, there's no doorway here, and I'm sure Colonel O'Neill can look after himself." Alexis' voice was soothing. He rubbed Daniel's back gently, as if he was kid with colic, and with a sense of
shock Daniel realized he was still that coltish student to Alexis, so curious, impetuous and enthusiastic, his mother and father's son. Alexis was more worried about him than he was about Jack. He was the emotionally vulnerable orphan, Jack was the military guy, and anyway what Darius had almost done to Daniel in that place was unique to his relationship with Daniel and his own disturbed psyche after his wife's death. No one was going to accept how much danger Jack was in.

Daniel rested against the wall as the floor of the corridor tried to run between his feet like rapids, turning his head so the stone rested against his bruised cheekbone. He wanted to feel that pain, it was the only thing that might clear his head right now. He looked at Alexis and the other archaeologists beyond him, Sam hovering anxiously, Teal'c poised to catch him if he fell. "Darius will kill Jack. He hates him."

Alexis rubbed his back again, voice soothing. "However crazy Darius is, he's not a murderer. I think it's much more likely Colonel O'Neill will kill him."

"Rajid died of a heart attack." There was reproach in Inga's voice. "Darius didn't kill anyone."

Daniel focused on the wall in front of him. He didn't have time to argue this now, he just knew he was right. "There were symbols here somewhere. In a cartouche. You had to touch the right one."

Alexis waved a hand in front of him. "Daniel. There's nothing there. There must be a trick to getting to the center which Darius has worked out. A way of remembering the twists and turns. We'll use chalk markings and we'll map the place properly."

"It won't help and we don't have time for that anyway." Daniel looked across at Sam. "The walls move. There has to be a floor plan. A way of accessing the mechanism."

Teal'c said quietly. "Any such controls would be in the center, Daniel Jackson."

Hélène was examining the wall by Daniel with total concentration, the conversation literally happening over her head. "Ultraviolet may reveal the markings you saw, Daniel. I will fetch the lights."

"Good idea. Please hurry."

She took one look at his face and then was gone at a run, her small feet hardly making a sound on the stone floor as she sprinted.

Sam said gently, "Daniel, we need to talk. Privately." She jerked her head at the other archaeologists.

Alexis made an expressive gesture and stepped back, disapproval of the military and their inappropriate security neuroses radiating from him.

Daniel darted a glance at Sam, unwilling to leave the doorway he was going to have to get open if he was ever going to see Jack again. He spoke rapidly. "We don't have any time to waste. I have to remember how to get the doors open. Did you bring a Tok'ra memory device? Teal'c, do you know hypnotism –?" An idea occurred to him. "Did you bring any explosives?"

Sam put her hands on his shoulders and squeezed them to get his attention. "What about the Asgard console the colonel found? Do you know where it is?"

He stared at her blankly for a second before reason wriggled past the panic in his chest and blinding pain in his head. "Yes, come with me." He grabbed her sleeve and began to tug her across
the chamber.

"Daniel."

Inga intercepted him, her arms wrapped around herself. He noticed again the way the pockets of her jacket were bulging, pulled out of shape by too many years of storing things in them. Her hair was sticking up in anxiety. "You know Darius is a good man at heart."

He ignored that but the sight of her reminded him of something the pain in his head had been blurring. He felt in his pockets and then started looking around on the floor. "Did you find any of those rune stones?"

"An entire bag of them, Daniel Jackson." Teal'c proffered the bag of runes.

"White ones, sort of translucent. Jack had three of them. He was carrying them when Darius…" He looked hopefully at Inga. "Stones without markings. Paler than the others. Did you pick any up?"

"You mean these?" She reached into her pockets and produced two of them. "I picked up a couple, then my back gave out and I decided to leave the others for the colonel."

He almost snatched them from her, spinning around to back up, giving Inga, Alexis and Nelson apologetic looks as he did so. "When Hélène brings the light please try to find the markings on the walls. I know they're there. Call me as soon as you find anything but don't touch anything."

"Daniel, this is insane," Alexis protested.

"Humor me," Daniel pleaded.

Nelson said quietly. "We'll look, Dan. I promise."

Then he was trying to sprint despite the way the corridor lurched like a ship on a high sea. They were running out of time. For Jack's sake he had to be able to run. As they ran he gabbled at her all he had learned about this place.

Sam grabbed Daniel's arm as he staggered and held onto it tightly, supporting him as he wavered. He sometimes forgot how strong she was. A number of Jaffa had found to their cost that being a willowy blonde didn't mean not being able to heft heavy weights around with considerable finesse. "Slow down, Daniel."

"No time." He darted her a look, letting her see the panic he was feeling. "I know Darius will kill him. He hates Jack."

"There's nothing in any of Golding's psychiatric reports to suggest he's capable of murder or that he's dangerous to anyone…except possibly to you." As he was still gaping at her in indignant disbelief, she went on quickly, "But I think you're absolutely right about this place. It's definitely a grounded Goa'uld spaceship." She showed him a handheld device with a series of readings he couldn't focus on and which he suspected would be meaningless anyway. "The chemical analysis confirms it, but I'm also getting similar readings to the ones I took on Thor's ship."

"Would a cloaking device explain why you can't get any satellite readings or thermal imaging equipment to work?"

"Yes, but it wouldn't explain why this place is still standing." She evidently saw his look of confusion, hastening to explain. "Teal'c and I have been going over the readings from the explosion thirteen years ago and they don't make sense."
Turning his head sent a stab of white light through his brain but it was unavoidable if he was going
to look at her. "Why not?"

Sam pointed to the walls. "There's a lot of very high grade naquada present. If you combine that
with twenty-five sticks of dynamite you get an explosion that should have been fifty times greater
in magnitude than the one that was recorded here. There must be something preventing explosions
from taking hold."

"So we can't blow the doors?" He saw that look they exchanged and guessed he was probably
coming across as a little monomaniacal.

Sam said, "You want to use high explosives in an archaeological site?"

"This place isn't an archaeological site. It's a damned Goa'uld space ship and Jack's a prisoner in
it!"

He was aware of her and Teal'c exchanging another glance before the Jaffa rumbled quietly,
"Daniel Jackson, it is not unlikely that Doctor Golding's intentions towards Colonel O'Neill are the
same as were his intentions towards you?"

Daniel flinched from the implication not only of what Teal'c was saying but also that they had been
discussing what had taken place. So that was what they all thought then? Darius had kidnapped
Daniel at knifepoint to have sex with him but been prevented from doing so because Rajid had
come along in time. And Daniel's mind had closed down and denied that event because he couldn't
cope with remembering it. In which case, no, as Darius undoubtedly did not find Jack O'Neill even
remotely desirable, Jack was in no danger from Darius.

Sam said, "Daniel, we don't even know for sure he's taken the colonel to the same place he took
you."

He gritted his teeth. "He's taken him to the center of the Labyrinth. Darius has spent his whole life
buried in mythology. Every story will have told him it's always the unreachable center you have to
aim for, whether you're killing a minotaur or not."

He really needed to be sick. He felt if he could just kneel down and heave he'd feel a lot better but
he also knew that if he did that, Teal'c would refuse to let him be part of the rescue committee and
although Teal'c was loath to use his superior strength against the rest of them, when he thought it
was for their own good he just might. Daniel had no desire to be thrown over the Jaffa's strong
shoulder and carried off to be sedated like a naughty child. They needed him to save Jack. He knew
Jack was in terrible danger from Darius even if no one else did and he also knew they weren't
going to rescue him without Daniel's input.

While the corridor was still spinning and Sam was asking him if he was okay from what sounded
like an increasingly distant shore, he saw Jack's chalk mark on the wall. "There."

For a second he was sprinting in the direction of the Asgard console, then his legs were giving out.
Teal'c caught him before he'd gone two paces and held him up, taking most of his weight while
letting Daniel give at least the appearance of advancing under his own steam. Inside, the panic was
increasing, he was getting swooping flashbacks, like being dive-bombed by bats. The knife, the
darkness, the glyphs glowing gold as Darius touched them, intoning the name as he did so. And
something beyond it, the place he didn't want to get to, the thing he didn't want to remember,
except now he did, he wanted to remember everything because if he didn't he was never going to
see Jack alive again. As he stumbled, Sam caught his other arm and they held him up between
them, half-carrying him half-supporting him.
She was talking rapidly as they helped him towards the console. "My theory is that there could be a dampening field still in operation. Asgard energy, as far as I could understand it on Thor's homeworld – which was hardly at all – seemed almost limitless, so whatever powered the field could still be in operation."

"The capacity for treachery amongst the System Lords is also almost limitless," Teal'c put in. "And the Asgard would have been well aware of this."

Daniel gave his head a shake but that just made him want to throw up more. "So – to avoid any chance of sabotage, the Asgard modify Nekheny's ship and install dampening field technology which is still switched on and which smothered Darius’s dynamite thirteen years ago."

"Yes." They were at the console and Sam took the rune-stones from him, taking a deep breath before she placed the first one on the top. At once a screen appeared on the wall behind the console and the egg-shaped lines on the top of the dais lit up.

"Can you call up the plans?" Daniel pressed.

"I hope so. And there should be some kind of thermal readout that will tell us where the Colonel is." Sam was moving the stones across the different patterns. The screen flickered and then Daniel saw a graphic. Sam's relief was obvious. "That's it. There's the spec for the place." It winked off almost as soon as it came on.

Sam moved the stone off then back onto the place and it did the same thing, winked on and then off immediately.

"Did you see Jack?" Daniel demanded.

"I'm not sure." Sam moved the stones again and then shook her head. "Something must be interfering with the internal sensors."

"Perhaps the dampening field needs to be deactivated?" Teal'c suggested.

"I think it's on some kind of automatic which suggests it's responding to something. If it's on it may need to be on…"

"Nevertheless if it is interfering with the readings will it not be impossible for us to identify the location of the doors…?"

Sam was still moving stones around, getting the picture on the screen to wink up for a second before it switched off again. "I'm just wondering about the potential for a dangerous energy build-up. There seems to be a very faint energy pulse in the walls which I think has something to do with the way Goa'uld spaceships are constructed to be able to enter hyperspace. There has to be a constant output from the hull of the ship to equalize the…"

"Given the danger Daniel Jackson believes O'Neill to be in…"

"I'm just wondering if there's a way to hotwire this thing so I can get the plans and locators to work without turning off the external dampening field. Even a tiny amount of energy output over several thousand years that's been effectively smothered but not dispersed adds up to an awful lot of explosive potential. And if the residue from Golding's attempted explosion is still stored in the walls somehow…"

Daniel wrapped his arms around himself, barely resisting the urge to rock and scream like a mental patient in a strait-jacket. "Jack is going to die, Sam."
She darted him an anxious look. "Daniel, the Colonel would be the first person to tell you he's only one man. There are hundreds of people working all around this area and if this place goes up the way I think it might it will be like activating a thermonuclear bomb. I can't switch off this field until I know I have a way to contain any potential explosion within safe parameters."

Teal'c said gravely, "How may we assist you?"

"Hand me some more of those stones, Teal'c."

Daniel breathed down her neck as she moved the stones around, calling up more flickerings on the screen, while he willed her to solve the problem and now.

"Okay…" Sam moved one of the stones across the control panel. "The Asgard don't exactly supply a manual, but if I'm reading this right I think this should maintain a dampening field around the external hull even after I switch off the internal one. Organic matter – like us – will be able to pass through it, but any dangerous build up of heat will be contained."

"Does it mean we'll be able to see how to get to Jack?" Daniel knew that he sounded like a whiny child fixated on a trip to Disneyworld but he didn't care.

Sam moved another stone purposefully. "It means that even if this place goes into a meltdown so intense the walls turn into lava, the Asgard dampening field should contain the force of the blast so it turns in on itself. It won't save anyone inside the Labyrinth but it should save anyone outside. Done." She moved another stone. "And if I'm right that means we should now be able to see…"

After thirteen years, there was the maze set out in all its intricacy. More complicated than a Celtic knot, a serpentine intricacy of corridors and chambers with a clear square in the center with…

"There!" Daniel stabbed at the screen, lurching as he did so. "Jack and Darius!"

Teal'c steadied him. "It does appear to be so, and where you suggested they would be found."

They were just two red blobs on the screen in the center of the maze but he knew that was who they were. Heat sources the five thousand year old Asgard sensors were still picking up. Daniel gazed at them intently. He couldn't tell what condition Jack was in, but the fact he was still warm did mean he was still alive. Or only recently dead.

Peering at the maze surrounding that elusive center he saw there were markings showing where the hidden doors were located. "Can you open the doors from here?" Daniel pressed.

She moved the rune-stone backwards and forwards and then tried with the other one before shaking her head. "No. That's part of the Goa'uld technology, not the Asgard technology. I can see where Golding and the Colonel are and where you are to guide you to them but I can't open the doors from here. You'll have to do it."

He looked at the tangle of corridors from which she was going to have to extract the most direct route. "Are you good with mazes?"

She forced a smile. "Today is the day when we find out. Can you remember how Golding got the doors to open?"

He closed his eyes, trying to empty his mind, pull down the barrier and let the memories he'd been avoiding come. They must have been waiting because the second he opened the floodgates memory engulfed him.
A hand twisted in his hair, dragging him forward, slamming him against the wall when he tried to get away. Darius’s unreasoning savagery making the man a stranger he didn't recognize. The man grabbed his hair again, yanking his head back so hard it seemed a miracle his neck didn't snap. The point of the knife drawing a crimson line across the underside of his jaw. "Take off your right shoe. Do it now."

"Darius, please…?" He was trying to stay calm, to keep his voice soothing, the way one did with the mentally ill, but the man’s insanity was terrifying, the unreasoning hatred on his face, the way he lashed out without warning.

He did it now, backhanding him into the wall, leaving Daniel’s face stinging, his skull aching from the sharp crack against the stone. He tasted blood in his mouth. "Please…"

Darius grabbed him, slapped him again, threw him face first against the wall, pinning him to it, pulling his head back to whisper in his ear. "Take off your shoe, or I'll take off your skin inch by inch..." He reached out and touched the wall, saying: "Setesh", then the sign for Seth glowed gold beneath his fingers. The door slid back and Daniel started to untie his shoelace, fingers shaking so much he could hardly feel the leather, with no idea what he'd done to make Darius hate him the way he obviously did, but both of them knowing that when he took him to the center he was going to...""Daniel…? Daniel…!"

He came to with a gasp, finding Sam bent over him, slapping his face lightly, blue eyes filled with anxiety. "You passed out. Are you okay?"

"It's the sign for Seth," he snatched another breath. "I saw it. It's on the third panel down but it's invisible until it's touched."

"There will be other hidden signs," Teal'c warned at once. "If you touch the wrong one the door will fuse."

"I'm hoping the ultraviolet will show them to me. Then I just need to remember which is the right one. Right?" He forced a smile which he could see wasn't fooling anyone, then remembered the dynamite, Darius wedging the doors so they wouldn't slide all the way across. He reached into the bag of rune-stones and pulled out handfuls, pushing them at Teal'c and filling his own pockets. "We need these and we need to hurry."

"The Colonel had a gun. He's good at taking care of himself and Darius has no record of violence that we know of –"

"He beat the crap out of me, Sam." Daniel darted a glance at her.

She bit her lip before saying gently, "Daniel in the hospital report it said you were hardly hurt at all."

"Well, the hospital report was wrong." He put a hand up to his head. "Or my memories are wrong, in which case Jack's screwed because I'm the only one who might have even a hope of remembering how to get where he is."

Teal'c helped him up carefully and dusted him off. He nodded to Sam. "I will accompany Daniel Jackson to the center of the labyrinth."

"Daniel…! We've found it!"
As Daniel set off at a run in automatic response to Nelson's call, Teal'c effortlessly caught him, put one strong arm around his waist and moved him forward at a speed that was not quite the sprint Daniel was aiming for but was still a great deal faster than he could have managed under his own steam.

"Here." Nelson beckoned to them excitedly as they entered the chamber.

"This really is just like magic." Alexis looked at Hélène in pleased surprise. "You can clearly see the –"

"Don't touch it!" Daniel warned.

Alexis gave him a look of exasperation. "I was not damaging tomb-art when you were still teething."

"I know, I'm sorry." He rested his hands on Alexis' shoulder. "Sam says this place is dangerously unstable. The energy from the explosion thirteen years ago is still hanging around...or something. Anyway, it's not safe in here. You need to leave the labyrinth and wait for Sanjay. Make sure he doesn't come in here either. Teal'c and I will go and get Darius and Jack and we'll meet you outside."

Alexis looked as if he was about to argue but Teal'c intervened quietly, saying, "Daniel Jackson is correct, Professor Spiros. It would be advisable to wait outside until we join you there."

Daniel scanned the images hastily. More than seven. Damn. Damn. Damn. And there were ones there he barely recognized. Nine gods and goddesses. The nine System Lords deposed by Ra and his allies as they had gained ascendancy over those now almost-forgotten gods. He looked up at the Jaffa hopefully. "Teal'c, do you know these?"

The Jaffa was examining them with close attention. "That is the sign for Setesh and this is the symbol for Sokar. The others are unknown to me. They must be of great age. Even older than Ra."

"Seth. That's the one we need."

As Daniel reached out to touch it, Teal'c caught his wrist and said in a voice too low for anyone else to hear: "Daniel Jackson. I do not recognize the names of these Goa'uld. Do you?"

Daniel examined them. "I'm not sure." It was all he could do not to just slam his hand down on that sign and say Seth's name, but Teal'c was right. He had to identify all of them. The trouble was when he tried to look at them they swam in and out of focus and his mind emptied of everything except Darius intoning Ancient Sumerian. He had to concentrate. Had to identify these signs.

Teal'c was relentless. "If you do not know all of them we could become trapped in the labyrinth with no means to assist O'Neill or to escape ourselves."

"I think I know these." Nelson was crouched on his haunches examining the inscriptions with fascination. "I can't read the hieroglyphs though."

Daniel translated rapidly, "We are the true counsel. We are the true gods. All that came before were something creatures of...not sure about this..."

"Winged creatures of silt and soil," Teal'c translated impassively.

Nelson gave him a shocked look. "You're an Egyptologist as well as an Air Force officer?"
"Teal'c's…" Daniel looked up at the Jaffa and then grimaced. "He's a lot of things I really don't have time to explain right now. All good," he added hastily, seeing a vulnerable expression wash across Teal'c's usually impassive features.

Teal'c looked touched. "Thank you, Daniel Jackson."

Daniel couldn't help but respond with a smile of his own, but when he looked back at the symbols they were like the Elamite cuneiform, stubbornly refusing to make sense. The Setesh animal was there, and another one he recognized as Min. But then came a scorpion, ram, bow and arrows, serpent, baboon. But not the way they were usually drawn. Older. Stranger. More like signs out of Satanism than hieroglyphs.

"I don't know all these signs." Daniel could feel the panic start to bubble up. "The ram could be Amun but the horns are wrong, maybe Banebdjet, I'm not sure. Some of them I don't recognize. I'll have to remember the order and the names he said…" Even as he said it he knew what it was going to cost him to remember that order, like being strapped into a chair and fired into a black tunnel at the speed of light, the speed of…

"Death…"

It didn't matter. Nothing mattered except finding Jack before Darius killed him. He swallowed. "Darius said the name as he pressed the symbol. He spoke Goa'uld. He must have heard it in his vision. I suppose the scene was recorded in the walls in some way. Recorded if you're psychic anyway. I don't know how it works. But I have to remember the right order, and say the right name."

"We can do this."

He turned to Nelson in surprise to find the man positively glowing with anticipation. He patted Daniel gently on the shoulder. "Predynastic Egypt. My specialty, remember? And you're damned good at this. What does this remind you of? Because it looks like this could be an earlier Ennead than the Great Ennead of Heliopolis to me. But one I've never seen before."

"'Ennead'?" Teal'c crouched down next to them. "I am unfamiliar with this word."

"It's our term for what you would call a pesedjet, Teal'c. A grouping of nine…gods."

"Like the Linvris."

"The Great Ennead of Nekhen?" Hélène looked at Nelson in amusement. "I can see you like that idea, John."

"The Heliopolis scholars have had it their own way much too long."

Daniel wished he could convey to these people that Jack really was in serious danger. They were having an academic discussion while his friend was the prisoner of a madman. Except they didn't think Darius was a madman. They thought he was someone who was perfectly sane these days and who didn't have any access to high explosives. The fact he did have access to Jack's gun wasn't bothering them because they knew he wasn't a murderer. So why didn't Daniel know that too? He'd been there and he'd come out supposedly unscathed. So why was he so convinced that a Darius Golding in the grip of a bad enough flashback was capable of anything? The signs for those known and unknown gods were still swimming in and out of focus and the urge to hurl wasn't going away. That last flashback had left him feeling as if he'd been opened by a can opener than turned inside out, and he had to do that particular party trick another six times.
He spoke rapidly into his radio. "Sam, John's coming with us. He knows the signs I don't. We're going into the center of the Labyrinth now." He turned to Alexis and the others and held up his hands. "Go outside and wait there. If some other Air Force people turn up, don't tell them anything but don't get in their way either. And get Sanjay on his cellphone and ask him to hurry up with the ambulance. Just in case."

"Daniel…" Inga's reproach didn't even touch him. He didn't care that she was hurt on behalf of Darius, all he cared about was getting Jack out of this nightmare place alive.

Sam was still saying "Daniel, Nelson doesn't have clearance for this…." as he pressed the symbol for Seth and said "Setesh" as clearly as he could.

There was an agonizing moment when nothing happened and then the symbol glowed gold, the wall slid back, and they stepped through, into the coolly humming darkness of the labyrinth.

***

The only thing currently not making sense to Jack O'Neill in his present predicament was how the hell Daniel had ended up in that hospital bed without a scratch, because Golding in the grip of a bad flashback was strong as a mountain gorilla and as frightening as a wounded bear.

He'd come to in this chamber the first time lying supine on the floor, unceremoniously dumped where he'd been equally unceremoniously dragged. Staring up at the ceiling he saw gray stone. When he turned his head he saw square pillars, bare walls, a line of elaborate gold chairs and something that looked suspiciously like a vast stone altar. As he went to roll over, Golding's boot in his ribs hit so hard it lifted him a foot of the ground. Gasping with the pain, he rolled over, reaching for the gun in his sock, saying: "Can we talk about this?" before he realized the gun was gone, the gun was in fact in Golding's hand, swooping towards him…

Black light exploded in his brain.

The next time he woke up he was tied to a chair with blood running into his left eye, a dragging pain in his side as he breathed in, and a zig-zag pattern where his 20:20 vision ought to be.

He blinked now as the steady well and trickle of blood from the cut above his eye obscured his vision again, cautiously assessing his surroundings, still searching for those damned exits, which unfortunately didn't seem to exist. Through the painful thumping in his head, and disconcerting lines across his vision, he had worked out that he was in a stone chamber with nothing painted on the walls. It also didn't have any doors and he couldn't see any rings on the floor or ceiling suggesting the usual form of Goa'uld transportation. Making how they'd got in here a matter of some interest to him, although how he was getting out of here alive and in one piece was engaging even more of his attention at the moment. He assumed he was in the center of the Labyrinth but there was no way of telling. The throne he was sitting on was ornate, gold and generally ostentatious, even more over-the-top than the one on Cronos' ship, it was also damned uncomfortable. The ropes Golding had used to tie him to it were biting into his wrists and ankles. It was presumably when he had been tying O'Neill's bonds that Golding had found his revolver, something he was now waving about as he held a conversation with his dead wife.

At least that was whom O'Neill assumed the man was talking to. There was a lot of shouting, occasional hysterical fits of crying, and some of the conversation was taking place in what he guessed was Ancient Babylonian, so it was a little tricky to follow. But enough English was slipping through that he was still learning a lot.

Like the fact the faithful and long-suffering Anna hadn't been so faithful after all, although she had
undoubtedly suffered terribly and for a long, long time. Her suicide note had been left in a book where only her faithless husband would find it, and it had never been seen by any coroner. It had never been seen by anyone but Golding. She had spared him the humiliation of it being read out in court anyway. She didn't seem to have spared him anything else. But then he had spared her nothing either.

O'Neill had really got the dictionary definition of 'too much information' over the last half an hour or so. He knew things about the Golding marriage he really would have been a lot happier never hearing. Like the fact the death of their child had left Golding incapable of having sex with his wife. The man who had screwed his way across half a dozen landmasses had ended up incapable of getting aroused by the woman he loved. Which was no doubt part of the reason why the dead Anna had gone into so much detail about the various men who shared her bed at various times and the manner in which they had satisfied her in ways he never had.

O'Neill did believe Golding had loved her now. Perhaps that was another reason why he hadn't been able to have sex with her. She was supposed to be the one perfect woman his lust didn't smear and stain. Perhaps even before her death Golding had mentally elevated her to the state of goddess. Women in his world were things to be slept with, but his wife was not like other women, she was the sum total of all the feminine virtues in the world. The lower he sank in drink, drugs, and persistent fornication, the higher he raised her on a dais of impossible and unsustainable perfection, in the process unconsciously making the transition from dais to catafalque only a matter of time.

Losing their child hadn't hit Golding as hard as it had hit her, or that was what Golding claimed anyway. He hadn't spent as much time with the baby. He might even have resented it as an intrusion, a responsibility he hadn't wanted, perhaps a part of him had even been relieved to be freed from the oppression of parenthood. Another guilt trip for an essentially selfish man who had once had hopes of being better than he'd turned out to be. She'd been isolated in her grief, neglected by a husband whose way of coping had been to take the first flight to the Middle East on which he could book passage and go dig up a dead king's mausoleum before the inscription on his own son's tombstone had even been carved.

Half insane with grief for her dead child, Anna had sought comfort from men who found her desirable, while still being in love with the one man who apparently no longer did. They'd been locked in mutual destruction. Unable to love anyone else but incapable of finding love with one another any more. Perhaps in another universe he and Sara had done this to one another, killed one another by degrees. Golding had imagined her content in her blissful ignorance but Anna had told him in her suicide letter that she'd always known about every woman he'd ever slept with. She'd smelt their perfume in her dreams, seen their faces in her mirrors, felt the burn upon her skin when they kissed him, even felt their bellies swell from the consequences of his so carelessly scattered seed. Perhaps she had, or perhaps she'd just tortured herself with imaginary women while Golding slept with real women whose faces she had never really seen.

Then the letter had come which told her it wasn't enough that her husband had now lain with every whore in North Africa, he was stealing the virtue of innocent girls, and worst of all he was planning the seduction of even more innocent boys. The letter said it must be god that had taken her son from her because she had married a man who would force himself upon the sons of other men. That she should summon her husband home to America where he could do no more harm, could ruin no more blameless lives. That if she would not take action the writer of the letter would be forced to do so instead…

O'Neill swallowed hard, tasting blood. He knew Golding had brought him here for a reason, and unlike with Daniel it had nothing to do with wanting to see him naked. He also thought Daniel must have pulled off a miracle to keep this guy from raping or killing him thirteen years ago,
because there was no doubt that crazy as Golding was now he must have been even crazier then. The shock of her death and the greater shock of her litany of lovers would have been raw, he'd had a head full of Ancient Egyptian psychotropic drugs, was presumably having the same LSD flashbacks he seemed to be having now, and he'd believed it was his attempted seduction of Daniel – which he evidently had believed was a direct consequence of Daniel wanting to be seduced – that had triggered her suicide. He'd also presumably been seeing things, because he was seeing things now. Pointing at people that weren't there, rushing shadows, arguing with ghosts, waving dismissive arms at phantoms, watching the walls like they were big screen TVs replaying the past in vivid Technicolor. O'Neill figured that any meaningful definition of the word 'sane' could now safely be described as no longer applying to Darius Golding. So how had Daniel stopped this guy from doing him serious damage? And was there any chance he could pass the secret along to O'Neill because he had a feeling he really needed that information round about now. He guessed talking had come into it somewhere. Probably lots of talking in low soothing tones. Well, he wasn't an anthropologist, but he could still give it a shot.

Golding was crying now, running his hands through his tangled graying mane, holding the cold of the revolver against his cheek for comfort.

"Golding." It came out as a hoarse rasp, O'Neill's throat hurting when he spoke.

The man swung his head round, snarling like a lion that had just sighted a wounded deer.

O'Neill swallowed. "I'm sorry about what happened, but I really think we should go back now. Inga will be worried."

"Tell me what happened here?"

As Golding leveled the gun at him O'Neill grimaced. "You're the psychic. You tell me."

Golding's finger tightened on the trigger. "Did you sleep with Daniel?"

O'Neill decided that tempting as it might be to say 'What's it to you?' or 'That's for me to know and you to have wet dreams about', if he wanted to ever see another sunrise, the only answer to go for here was: "No. Not in the sense you mean. Absolutely not. Did I mention 'No'?"

"You're lying." Golding came towards him. "You people always lie."

O'Neill moistened his lips. He couldn't actually think of any conclusive and clinching evidence showing that he and Daniel weren't sleeping together, it wasn't the kind of thing he was genuinely required to prove. They just…weren't. Well, not in this universe anyway. And why the hell was he worrying about other universes at a time like this? Other universes didn't count and he sure as hell didn't want to get a bullet in the head because he was looking shifty about what some other Jack O'Neill might be getting up to on a Saturday night. He decided attack was the best form of defense. "What about you?"

"What?" Golding was still holding the gun on him.

O'Neill had forgotten what a cold thing the black eye of a gun barrel was when its Cyclops glare was fixed on you. He tried to keep his tone conversational. "You brought Daniel here for a reason. Was that the reason?"

"No."

No hesitation. Damn. He hadn't been that convincing. He needed to work on his plausible deniability.
"Then why did you bring him here?" He was sure he'd read somewhere that it was a good idea when dealing with maniacs with guns to keep them talking.

"Sacrifice."

He was sure it wasn't natural for someone to go that long without blinking but Golding looked as if he was never going to blink again, just staring intently at O'Neil while that gun never moved.

"Why?"

Golding kept staring at him, face never flickering. "To take her place."

O'Neil twisted his wrists against the bonds but the ropes only tightened, digging even deeper into his flesh. "Why?"

"He made me want him. She knew. She always knew. She died because of him."

The injustice of it made the anger flare inside him but tempting as it was to say 'Look, you deranged son-of-a-bitch, he didn't do a damn thing, it was your hormones every step of the way' he didn't feel his life-insurers would have advised it.

"What good would sacrificing Daniel do?" Given the way the US military had screwed him over, he thought it was definitely time to get Golding thinking about the futility of vengeance.

For the first time a flicker of emotion crossed Golding's face. "It would bring her back."

O'Neil gave his head a shake which made the zig-zagging get worse, breathing was very painful now. He waited for the gray mist in front of his eyes to clear. "How?"

Golding held out an arm to encompass the walls. "That's what it does. It's a place of sacrifice and resurrection. He died and she rose up again. I saw it."

O'Neil narrowed his eyes. "No. It's a place of trial and execution." There was sweat trickling down Golding's face and his eyes had a fixed look, as if he was seeing things that weren't really there. "What did you do to Daniel?"

Golding darted a glance at him. "I offered him as a sacrifice in exchange for her. I wanted her to know she was the one I loved. He didn't mean anything. None of them meant anything. I asked them to take him and to return her to me. I knew they had the power to do that. Inanna went naked into the underworld to her death. But she was reborn when Dumuzi took her place." He gave him a shivering smile, horror in his eyes. "She was naked when they found her. It was in the bath. The blood seeped through the floor."

O'Neil turned his head away, not wanting to see it even in his mind's eye, feeling sorry for the poor bastard who'd found her with her skin gray, and her eyes open, and the water so cold and so red. What a fucked up pair of individuals Golding and his wife had been, locked in their cycle of love and destruction. It would have been better for everyone if he'd met Inga first. He'd needed someone sane enough for two and instead he'd been drawn to a woman as unstable as he was. All that frustrated desire and self-hatred spilling out to encompass so many innocent bystanders. O'Neil hated everything about this. He was picturing fertility rituals now. Seed being spilt to bring forth life, that was the kind of crap he presumed Golding had told himself. A way found to make it for his dead wife's sake that Golding got to do what he'd wanted to do to Daniel for months anyway, only this time it wasn't seduction or even rape, it was 'sacrifice'. A scared naked Daniel forced to his knees, a hand in Daniel's hair to hold him still, the other hand to hold the gun to his head to make him open his mouth... That wouldn't leave any bruises, it would just leave an innocent boy
who'd never seen that particular degradation coming mentally scarred for life. Christ, he didn't even want to think about it because if he did he was going to have to kill Golding for sure.

Golding was still talking about either his dead wife or that Goa'uld, O'Neill couldn't tell which. He suspected they'd long since blurred into one for Golding too.

"She was the original whore of Babylon. She slept with so many men. She betrayed them all. But she came back to life again."

"Except she didn't, did she?" O'Neill swallowed as the gun was focused on him again. "She didn't come back. You performed your…ritual, but she didn't come back. So you tried to join her by killing yourself and killing Daniel too?"

Golding's face flickered, a strange movement like a cross between a smile and shrug. It took O'Neill a moment to realize it was a shudder. "The explosion wouldn't have killed Daniel."

O'Neill blinked in confusion, trying to hang on by his fingernails. "Because Rajid had already rescued him?"

Golding looked surprised that he didn't know, lifting the gun so it pointed at the ceiling instead. "Because he was already dead."

***

Daniel tried to clear his mind and focus. He'd told Nelson to think old and think bad where his Ancient Egyptian gods were concerned and the man was doing his best to help him out. Unfortunately, for some of the information they needed Daniel was on his own: such as supplying the order in which each symbol had to be pressed. His main point of reference for which door he had been at when Darius touched the symbol was what item of clothing he had been made to remove. Right shoe. Left shoe. Right sock. Left sock. Shirt. Pants. Shorts. He kept repeating to himself the three things he had to check each time: What had he been wearing by the time they reached this door? What symbol had Darius pressed? What name had he spoken? Some of these gods, even if successfully identified, had several variants on their name. It had to be the one Golding had said and no other.

The lighting, which had failed in the outer chambers, had kept its power here. The infinite properties of naquada Daniel presumed. The light they gave off was a dim greenish gold, which unfortunately for the speed of their progress provided plenty enough illumination for Nelson to be able to get thoroughly distracted by the wall paintings and reliefs all commending the greater glory of a falcon-headed god who very definitely wasn't Horus.

"What if all the ancient falcon gods that were later assimilated into Horus cults were actually variants of Nekheny?" Nelson observed excitedly while Daniel tugged at his arm like a fractious child, physically dragging him away from his examination of the walls. "He could have been a very significant god, rather than the local one we've always thought, but one who was deliberately written out of history. Not Montou perhaps, as he was Middle Kingdom, but I'm thinking Ash could be, not to mention Mekhentyirty, Anty, Hemen, of course, Sopdou…. And then there are all those different aspects of Horus which I'm now thinking might bear a closer inspection. What do you think?"

Daniel bodily hauled him away from the wall. "I'm thinking Jack is going to die if we don't get to him soon."

Despite these problems, the identification of the first two symbols had been relatively
straightforward. After the easy identification of Seth, with the aid of Hélène's magical ultraviolet light they'd then successfully named Min, the ithyphallic symbol of male potency, by his distinctive emblem of a horizontal line embellished with a central disc flanked by two hemispherical protrusions. Nelson had wanted to hold a discussion over whether or not it most closely resembled a barbed arrow, a door bolt, a bolt of lightning or a pair of fossil shells. When Daniel had remarked that to him it looked like a mouth with a meat hook through its tongue, Nelson had clearly taken that as a hint and offered no protest when Daniel had slammed his hand on the symbol while saying "Min".

"Go right," Sam's voice never wavered. "Then straight ahead." She was issuing a clear stream of instructions and Daniel needed her voice not just to guide him but also to keep the panic under control. Just as he needed Teal'c's hand on his shoulder, not only for the physical support it offered but also for the reminder that someone else was here who cared about Jack too, and who had dealt with situations like this before. He suspected Sam was more worried about him than she was about Jack. She'd asked him twice if he had double vision and every time he stumbled – which he did often as the corridors lunged at him and the double panic felt like two fists being stuffed down his throat – she seemed to know it.

"Can you see them?" Daniel demanded into his radio. "Are they moving? Can you get any kind of life-signs readings?"

"One of them is moving, the other one is still, but they're both alive. Just concentrate on what you're doing, Daniel. The Colonel will be fine."

"How is the energy build-up, Major Carter?"

"It's increasing, Teal'c. It's not dangerous yet but I wouldn't stop to buy postcards or anything...."

The walls inside the Labyrinth were covered in inscriptions praising the glory of Nekheny. Enough information to fill whole volumes. Nelson was still having to be yanked away from peering at inscriptions at regular intervals.

"Daniel, have you seen...?"

Daniel grabbed him by the arm and tugged him forward. "Jack is going to die."

"Oh, I don't think so," Nelson's tone was soothing. "I checked Darius medication only this morning and he's been taking his pills all right, I counted them. And they came from your people so I'm sure they're fine."

Sam had obviously heard that because her voice cut in quickly. "What medication was it, Doctor Nelson?"

"I'm not sure, but it had US Military stamp on it. National Intelligence and Defense, I think it was. I presume they know the best stuff to keep him on an even keel."

There was a horrible silence while Daniel felt the whole place swoop around him like a flock of hungry pterodactyls. Darius hadn't been able to find the center on his usual medication so he'd come off it and asked NID to send him something that would help him access his previous state of psychosis. He probably hadn't put it just like that but that was how they'd responded. NID didn't give a damn about Darius going insane or either Daniel or Jack getting caught in the crossfire. In fact they'd probably be glad to see the back of both of them, so if they or one of the archaeologists on the site ended up victims of Darius’s flashback that would just make a few less people on the planet who knew about the valuable Goa'uld technology NID were hoping to steal.
"I should have gone with him to Isna." Daniel put a hand up to his head. "I should have checked his damned pills."

The place swooped again, and he would have fallen if Teal'c hadn't held him up. For a second he felt too sick and weak to carry on, Teal'c's arm around him felt like the only strength he had and borrowed strength at that.

"Daniel Jackson…" There was concern and warning in Teal'c's voice. He felt that being thrown over Teal'c's shoulder and carried option was hovering dangerously.

"I'm fine."

He wasn't sure which emotion was going to strangle him first, his constant panic about what Darius could be doing to Jack or his constant terror at drawing nearer to the center of the Labyrinth. He was trying to skate on the surface of his memories, go back to the glowing symbol on the doorway but no further, but each time he would skid past to hit the darkness beyond, and the nearer they got to the center the nearer they got to the darkness beyond being the point which terrified him the most.

There was a pause before Sam continued with the instructions, trying to sound brisk and professional but sounding suspiciously like an older sister who knew her too curious brother had just found a hole in the fence outside the lion enclosure.

"Now left…. Then the second left… Then the third right… The door should be in the middle of the wall straight ahead of you… You’re standing in front of it now. Can you see anything?"

Nelson had charge of the ultraviolet light and shone it on the wall, illuminating the row of symbols. Every time Daniel saw them it was impossible not to start trying to puzzle out all of them instead of just concentrating on the one he needed. Was that Neith or Satet? Khonsu or an early manifestation of Thoth? He suspected that if he were able to peel off more of the panels and investigate the inscriptions from Nekheny further they would have invaluable information about the earliest visitations from the Goa'uld. Ra could have been a rising Goa'uld when he came to this place. He could have been the first one to see the value of human hosts. Or they may have been others before him. Nekheny seemed to be claiming to have been on Earth long before Ra but perhaps that was a lie, or they had been waiting for humans to evolve, needing larger brains and more dexterous fingers before they were useful as hosts.

"Daniel…?"

"Yes, Sam." He could see all the symbols but his mind was temporarily blank on what one came next.

Teal'c rumbled quietly, "Do you remember…?"

It was a little like deep sea diving, he presumed, closing the eyes then jumping overboard, knowing the weights would pull one down into the depths while hoping to hell the oxygen kept working. He closed his eyes and plunged.

_The floor was so cold against his bare right sole and he was shivering violently. His face ached from the bruises and when he tentatively flicked his tongue to the side or the mouth he tasted the metallic salt sting of an open cut._

"Darius, can we talk about this…?"
"Shut up!"

The man hit him again, knocking him against the wall and the corridor swooped. He was going to pass out or throw up any second.

As he started to slither down the wall, Darius grabbed him by the front of his shirt and slammed him back against the stone again. "It was your fault she died. All your fault…!"

He flinched in anticipation. "Whatever I did wrong, I'm sorry."

Golding's eyes were tiny red dots of insanity inside black pools of rage. "It's too late for sorry!" He grabbed Daniel by the hair and yanked his head back, pulling him in close before he bent to lick the blood from the side of his mouth, the shock of another man's warm tongue touching his skin making Daniel start violently. Then he stroked Daniel's hair away from the cut on his forehead and said softly, "It's too late for everything now."

Then he hit Daniel against the left side of the head so hard Daniel felt something in his ear-drum break, felt blood trickle out from his ear and run down his cheek in a warm red stream. With a singing sound in his head, Darius sounded far away and as if he was talking underwater. He couldn't make out the words spoken but he saw the symbol for the ram light up, Darius's hand slam down upon it. The wall grated back and then he was being dragged forward, into the darkness, towards the horror, the flashing blade, the terrible impact, buried alive in the blackness with no oxygen and no heartbeat –

"Daniel Jackson!"

He came to with a gasp thinking that when Teal'c shook someone they really knew they'd been shaken.

"Breathe, Daniel!" Nelson was ineffectually patting at his back and he remembered Jack's certainty, the solid thump to the chest, the warm hand rubbing his spine and shoulders, soothing him, summoning breath, insisting that he did as he was damned well told and lived.

"The ram…." Daniel gasped. "It was the sign of the ram."

"Which one?" Teal'c enquired. "There are in fact two signs for a ram on this wall."

He blinked in confusion and saw that Teal'c was telling the truth. There hadn't been on the other wall panels. There had been a scorpion. In the back of his mind he'd been trying to work out if it was Shed, Serket, Tabithet or Hededet for the past few minutes, and now it had vanished.

"That isn't fair!" he protested.

As Teal'c and Nelson looked at him in surprise, he pointed at the wall accusingly: "Where did the scorpion sign go?"

Teal'c shrugged. "It might be that the Goa'uld represented by that sign left the pesedjet you spoke of and was replaced by another."

"An evolving Ennead?" Nelson nodded sagely. "How fascinating. What's that 'Goa'uld' word mean, Teal'c? Is that an ancient word for 'god'? I'm not familiar with it."

"It is from a very old dialect," Teal'c explained smoothly. "It can be interpreted as 'god' or at least as someone or something representing a god."
The urge to be sick was almost overwhelming and the urge to scream was one he was definitely going to give way to if that door didn't open in the next ten seconds. Daniel dug his fingers into Nelson's arm. "Which god is this?" He was mentally running through ram gods, old papyrus swimming in and out of focus in his mind, wall paintings, writings, stelae and sculpture, muttering them feverishly: "Heryshef of Herakleopolis or maybe Banebdjedet of Mendes. Could be Kherty of Khem or Andjety of Abusir or Khnum of Elephantine. Why did they have so many damned ram gods?"

Nelson examined it with agonizing deliberation. "Well, if you're sure it's this ram and not the other one then it seems to be representing the now extinct *Ovis longipes palaeoaegyptiaca* species with the heavier head and wavy horns rather than the *Ovis platyura aegyptiaca* species with the curved horns, which excludes Amun. Of course, if it was Amun that would suggest the baboon was Khonsu but it obviously isn't so that doesn't help us much. Although I have seen a very similar representation of a wavy-horned ram-headed god used to depict the fusion between Osiris and Ra in the Tomb of Nefertari."

"It's definitely nothing to do with Ra or Osiris," Daniel insisted. "They were enemies of Nekheny. Later on, Osiris and Isis made their own bid for power and were exiled in their turn, but we know Osiris was an enemy of Seth, and we know Seth was an ally of Nekheny. That rules out Andjety as well. He was another ally of Osiris."

"Well, then I'd say it's between Banebdjedet or Khnum. Or possibly Heryshef, he was being worshipped from at least the first dynasty and he's on the Palermo Stone. Of course Kherty was described in the Pyramid Texts as a threat to the pharaoh, making him a bad guy and enemy of Ra if that's what we're supposed to be looking for."

Daniel shook his head. "Kherty's a possibility but not Heryshef. He's too closely associated with Ra and Osiris."

"Khnum is Early Dynastic and he had a temple at Esna after his period of worship at Elephantine, so the right era and the right area."

"I have heard Banebdjedet was the half-brother of Sokar." Teal'c was examining the picture carefully. "And that great animosity existed between them."

Daniel looked at his watch. "We don't have time for this. Jack doesn't have time for this. Okay. Let's look at it another way. There's only one ancient ram god here who was a creator god. That gives him seniority. Which means the symbol we want is..." He reached out and pressed his hand on the symbol saying loudly: "Khnum."

There was an agonizing pause before the symbol glowed gold and the wall slid back. As it did so the subterranean breeze rushed past them like the trapped spirits of the dead and Daniel got another shudder of memory. The fear was a freezing mist wrapping itself around his limbs. He couldn't go forward. The center was getting closer, the mouth of the tunnel. So fast the images blurred into one confusion he saw the blade lifted, heard the unearthly laughter of the specters who were about to claim another victim, then the blackness would swoop, the blood spray. He yanked himself out of the memory before it paralyzed him, stumbling forward into the dark passageway just as Teal'c turned from wedging the door to ask him in concern if he was unwell.

"I'm fine," he gabbled unconvincingly. "We need to hurry. Jack needs us to hurry."

He tried to run, and Teal'c put an arm around him, holding him up, helping him forward while clearly, like a lifeline of comfort thrown to him, Sam's voice came through the radio: "You're doing really well, Daniel. Just a few more doors to open. You need to go left here, then take the second
O'Neill thought he must have cracked a rib because breathing in and out was definitely a less than pleasant experience. However he thought not breathing in and out would be an even less pleasant experience and right now it was averting that possibility which was taking most of his concentration. He was, as Daniel had pointed out one memorable occasion, more of an antagonist than a diplomat. However, not getting dead in this instance definitely involved not pissing off Golding any more than he was already, so he was willing to have another stab at that diplomacy thing.

Golding was wandering up and down, muttering to himself in different languages, seeing things on the walls that O'Neill sincerely hoped weren't really there, while waving O'Neill's loaded gun around. Given a baseball bat, O'Neill would have used that first and left the logic and reason to whoever was dealing with Golding once he was wearing a wraparound jacket, however denied his first weapon of choice he decided he would have to go with Daniel's: words.

"Golding, you don't have to do this." He hoped he sounded reasonable. He was certainly trying very hard to sound reasonable. As reasonable as it was possible for him to sound when tied to a dead Goa'uld's throne in an underground chamber with no visible exits anyway. He wondered where the air was coming from then decided that was probably not a good question to ask in case he then started wondering if it was going to run out any time soon.

The man wheeled around and glared at him, pointing the gun again. "I remember it all now. It faded over the years but now I'm here... You're the ones who should pay. You're the ones who did this."

"I'm not part of the NID. I'm sorry about what they did to you but it was nothing to do with the SGC."

Golding came right over and stared into O'Neill's face out of haunted eyes. "He died because of people like you. I'm a murderer because of you."

Rajid. The guy was obviously talking about Rajid. "It was an accident." O'Neill kept his tone level. "His heart could have given out at any time."

"But he died at that time!" Golding put the gun to O'Neill's forehead, a cold circle against his skin. "With death, as with life, timing is everything."

O'Neill closed his eyes, waiting for the bullet to end his life, thinking of the truth of Golding's words, between Charlie dead sixty years too soon and Apophis alive four thousand years too long, it really was all about timing.

"You're not a murderer yet, Golding." O'Neill was astonished by how steady his voice sounded because his heart was beating so fast he was amazed it didn't rip its way out of his chest like that damned alien in the movie. "But as soon as you pull that trigger you will be."

"I killed Daniel."

O'Neill's eyes shot open. He spoke fast. "No, you didn't. You just hallucinated that you did. Like you hallucinated a lot of things."

He could feel Golding was shaking by the way the gun barrel was stuttering against his skin, could smell the man's sweat even above his own. He wondered if Golding knew how hair that trigger
was. It was designed to be handled by people who only took the safety off if they intended to use it, and knew what they were doing when they did take aim and fire, not psychotics strung out on too much medication and not enough sanity.

"I remember killing him."

The reverberation from the gun barrel was juddering through his skull, down his jaw, into his fillings, making his collarbone ache. He had never felt anything as cold against his skin as that metal circle but there wasn't a tremor in his voice.

"When they took him to the hospital he wasn't even scratched. You didn't kill anyone and you're not a murder. Not unless you pull that trigger."

Golding shuddered and then stepped back. He looked at O'Neill as if he was afraid to be alone inside his own head and his laughter was chilling. "If I killed him, I'm a murderer. If I didn't kill him, I'm insane, because I remember how it felt when his breastbone cracked."

O'Neill flinched. "It didn't happen, Golding. It was just a really bad trip."

"It was real." Golding looked around the room. "I know it was real."

O'Neill took a cautious breath. His rib definitely felt bust. "Daniel walked out of here alive and well, Golding. You didn't do a damned thing to him." He didn't know if that was true. He still suspected something grubby and sexual might have taken place but it was what Golding needed to hear right now, and it was sure as eggs were eggs that the man O'Neill had known for the past six years was neither a hallucination nor a ghost.

Golding held the gun to his face, cooling his skin with it as if it was a cloth dipped in cold water. He pointed to the other side of the chamber. "Then why is his blood on the floor?"

O'Neill looked where he was indicating and realized with a horrible sickness in his guts that the odd-shaped shadow on the floor beneath the altar wasn't a shadow at all, it was a stain, a large dark red stain which was matched, now he looked more carefully, by an ominous spattering of crimson across the far wall, as if something wet and red had spurted and sprayed in a delicate fountain of arterial fluid.

For a second O'Neill thought he was going to hurl, the sick pain in his head and the shock of the bloodstains hit him so hard it was like a punch to the solar plexus. "Oh Christ, you did kill someone." He'd only meant to think it not to say it but the words were out before he could call them back. He recovered quickly, snatching a breath. "But not him, Golding. You didn't kill Daniel." But I think you must have killed someone in front of him. Who? Rajid's daughter? Daniel had told him she and Golding had been having an affair. Had she written to Golding's wife to tell her what her husband had done and in doing so sparked off the woman's suicide? Had Golding dragged her here to have his revenge? If so where was the body? No one had been in here in the intervening thirteen years because no one except Golding knew the way.

Golding crouched down and touched the dried bloodstain, shuddering as he did so. "I remember his eyes. He didn't think I'd do it. He still trusted me. He looked up at me with such disbelief and then he gasped as the pain hit him and he realized he was already dead."

"Not Daniel, Golding." O'Neill didn't even want to hear about hallucinations concerning his friend being killed on some damned Goa'uld altar. "Someone else."

Golding wheeled around savagely. "I killed him! I killed him to bring her back. But she didn't rise
again. I did everything they did but it didn't work." He began to advance on O'Neill with an 
unnerving glitter in his eye, pointing the gun unwaveringly at his head. "But this time I'll make it 
work. This time I'll get her back."

O'Neill felt a curious remoteness sweep over him. So this was what it felt like to die. All those 
years of going on dangerous missions to other worlds and he was going to die on his own planet in 
a locked box of a labyrinth where no one would ever even find the body, shot in the head by an 
archeologist with his own damned gun. He resented being killed by an archeologist. He resented 
being killed by Golding particularly. He just generally resented being killed. Quite apart from the 
lack of future living on his part it would entail, it would also mean Daniel had damned well been 
right again. He'd said from the beginning Golding was dangerous to O'Neill.

As the man came towards him, O'Neill spoke rapidly: "Tell me what went wrong last time and 
maybe we can work out how to fix it." He was trying to wriggle free from the bonds but all he was 
doing was making the ropes cut deeper, he could feel sweat or blood trickling down from his wrists 
"You don't care. None of you people care." Golding's face was dark with too many memories, he 
waved a hand as if there was an insect buzzing around him but O'Neill suspected it was just the 
past encroaching, too much psychic noise in a scarilly overcrowded head.

"I care about what happened here." O'Neill winced as he breathed too deeply and it stabbed 
through his ribs again. "They brought Nekheny here to trial, didn't they? What happened next?"

He saw Golding jolt as if an electric current had just been run through him, flinching from the 
pictures in his head. "They killed him. They weren't allowed their technology so they used knives." 
He made a motion as if throwing a knife away. O'Neill almost heard it clatter on the stone floor. 
He almost swore he saw the blood. "They cut out his heart while he was still alive and then they 
ate it."

O'Neill flinched for the long-dead host. He didn't give a damn about the Goa'uld but that had been 
a human body they'd maimed and murdered.

"Inanna appealed to the watchers for the right to bring him back, but they said it was their job only 
to observe, not to intervene."

O'Neill thought of all the often frustrating conversations he'd had with Thor over the years. 
Sometimes that non-intervention policy really did suck but in this case he kind of felt the Asgard 
had a point. Left alive, Nekheny could have done as Sokar had and built up his forces, maybe 
proven more of a threat than all of the System Lords combined. Better to let Ra and his followers 
kill him and make it one Goa'uld less.

"She said that as she could not save him, she would join him. She snatched a blood-stained knife 
from one of the gods with the glowing eyes and she killed herself." Golding gasped with the pain of 
it, holding out his hands to an imaginary woman crumpling under the impact of an imaginary knife. 
O'Neill couldn't imagine Inanna as a living breathing woman so he mentally substituted Anck-su-
Namun topping herself for love of Imhotep and found the scene that much easier to get his head 
around.

Golding was sobbing over the loss of the beautiful faithful woman who had died for love. The guy 
might be psychic but he still had no idea. O'Neill prompted quietly, "And then?"

Golding sank slowly to the floor, running his fingers over the stone in the place where O'Neill 
presumed her blood had been. There was no trace of it now, just that ugly staining and spattering 
by the altar which was making him seriously fear for the fate of Rajid's daughter.
"Her blood covered the stones in a tide. It ran down the walls. It coated everything..." Golding was rocking in misery, using the gun to wipe the tears from his eyes. He was going to take his damned head off with it if he wasn't careful. And he'd forgotten about this place, transported back to the scene that must have greeted him when he'd gone home after his wife's death. Had they left it there like that for him? A reproach from angry neighbors wanting him to be confronted with the consequences of his actions because they'd had to see it first? And because it was his fault anyway, his constant stream of infidelities what had driven that disturbed woman to take her own life. Or had they scrubbed off every drop and he'd seen it anyway, courtesy of the psychic cinema running in his head. Just how much horror was there in Golding's mind anyway? Did he get bad flashbacks every time he entered an old tomb? Did he hear the screams of the dead every time he walked across an ancient battlefield? Were all those women just so much white noise to him? A way of blotting out the things he didn't want to hear and see? Blinding, deafening and distracting himself with the pleasures of the flesh, blotting out the stench of decay with the scent of their perfume, banishing the cold of the death with the warmth of their skin...?

O'Neill gritted his teeth. He was damned if he was going to feel sorry for this son-of-a-bitch, however screwed up he might be. Golding had brought Daniel here to do something bad to him because Daniel had been the person he'd been trying to get into bed the night his wife killed herself. And, O'Neill also suspected, because Daniel had turned him down, and one way of Golding working off his anger and humiliation had been to scare Daniel half to death in payment. You didn't need to be a psychologist to know a guy with an ego like Golding's was never going to take rejection well.

"Golding. What happened next? What happened here?"

"They put her in a coffin and they buried her."

Did he mean the Inanna-chick or his wife? "Buried her where?"

"Here." Golding glared at O'Neill as if it should have been obvious. "They buried her here. But she rose up again. She was radiant with the morning, more glorious than before. But I couldn't bring her body here because she'd left instructions to be cremated. But I knew I could save her anyway. I brought her ashes here and I scattered them on the ground and I watered them with the blood of the one who had killed her."

"She killed herself." O'Neill snatched another painful breath around the creaking of his ribs. He had a horrible feeling the broken one might have nicked his lung. His chest was starting to feel as if there was a heavy weight pressing on it. "She killed herself because the balance of her mind was disturbed and because she lost her child. Your child."

Golding waved a hand in front of his face as if a bee was buzzing around him. O'Neill suspected he might be that bee, a voice of sanity the man wasn't in the mood to hear. "I never wanted the damned child! It was her idea. I knew it would be a disaster. They always are. I told Inga the same thing when she wanted to keep it. I told her it would ruin her life. Archaeological digs are no place for children. Ballard did the right thing. Let someone bring them up who wants them – someone who doesn't have better things to do with their time."

O'Neill felt the anger flow through him again in a cool clear tide. The man was a dictionary definition of selfishness. So it wasn't enough he'd walked away when his wife was grieving – O'Neill had been guilty of that himself – he'd also got Inga to give up their child as well. No wonder she'd said she had to fight not to be bitter. Then he saw Golding slump back to the floor and the tears flow again. "How can you feel you've lost a person when you've never exchanged a word with them? They don't know anything. They don't understand anything. They just...are. But they
"Love you?" O'Neill said quietly. "Yes, they do that, don't they? Smile at you when you walk into a room. Even at three months if they see you in a mirror they'll light up and turn their heads because they've worked out you must be standing behind them. And they'll hold your finger, just the way they do in the movies, and look at you with total concentration. Like you're the most interesting thing they ever saw."

"Shut up!" Golding staggered to his feet, pulling his long bedraggled coat around himself like the mud-stained robes of a deranged King Lear. He pointed the gun at O'Neill again. "She died because of Daniel. I told her about him and she knew the things I didn't say even before she got the letter. It was his fault. That's why it had to be his blood I spilled to bring her back to life."

O'Neill mentally counted to ten. "Just tell me what happened?"

"She rose up again, still naked but magnificent." Golding matched the action to the words, stumbling to his feet, still holding the gun on O'Neill. "And she would have brought destruction upon them all."

"We're talking about the Goa'uld again now, right? She stabbed herself and they put her in the sarcophagus—"

"The watcher insisted upon it. He said that she had been convicted of no crime."

Typical Thor. His sense of fair play obviously kicked in even when a Goa'uld was involved. Personally O'Neill thought being Nekehny's main squeeze was a crime in itself but the Asgard clearly hadn't agreed. Or perhaps he'd just been thinking of the host. Sometimes Thor really reminded him of Daniel….

"So they put her in the sarcophagus and she came back to life. Then what happened?"

"That was all that mattered!" Golding insisted. "She came back to life. Inanna, the goddess of harlots, in the end was true. She died for love and was resurrected."

O'Neill thought he'd had more profitable conversations with tent pegs in his time. He wanted to say 'Just get over the big love and death stuff and tell me the politics, will you!' So Inanna the snake-bitch had loved Nekehny the snake-monster. Big freakin' deal. He also couldn't get as excited about the whole resurrection deal as Golding did, as he'd seen the sarcophagus spin cycle in action one time too many. Certainly the first time he'd seen Daniel large as life and twice as natural after watching the guy die right in front of his eyes it had been something of a shocker. But to Goa'uld he guessed being tossed into the sarcophagus for another renewal was as everyday as Daniel putting his coffee in the microwave for yet another reheat. As party tricks went it certainly didn't impress him the way it obviously had Golding.

"Yes, I got that. Then what happened? Something happened afterwards, didn't it? She had a plan I presume?"

Golding gazed around at the walls with awe despite the fact that as far as O'Neill could see there was nothing on them, they were just blank gray stone. He spoke with an ache in his voice. "She would have died for love and avenged her lover in the same moment. She rose up with a glowing circle in her hands. She said that she had lain down as Inanna but now she rose up as Tiamat. That she alone held the secrets Nekehny had entrusted to her and she would take them with her to the underworld along with the lives of those who had killed the one she loved. That this time none of them would be brought back from the kur, from the netherworld of eternal darkness."
So she'd stashed that glowing circle thing he'd briefly seen in Major Vallarin's hands in the sarcophagus at some earlier date and used it to kill herself and all the Goa'uld. Except it hadn't worked because Ra had been alive and well on Abydos several thousand years later and Marduk had finally copped it on P2X-338, not here in this place.

"What went wrong?" O'Neill tugged at his bonds again but they just bit deeper.

Golding was still looking around the walls as if reading from them. "She sent out a beam of great light. But the walls didn't catch fire as she expected them to. There was a moment when all the gods hesitated, then Marduk ran forward and snatched the circle from her. He held up his hand and a beam of light came from it, knocking her to the ground. And then he killed her." He put his hands up to his face, the revolver dangerously close to his eye, and O'Neill winced. Fond as he wasn't of Golding, he really didn't want to see the man blow his own head off right in front of him, especially as that would leave him tied to a chair either suffocating or starving while Daniel and the others tried to work out how to unlock a formula which only Golding seemed to know.

Resisting the urge to say: "It happened four thousand years ago, Golding, get over it", he asked quietly: "And what happened here thirteen years ago?"

Golding wiped his eyes wretchedly. "She didn't come back. Even though I made myself a murderer for her, she didn't return."

"Did you kill Rajid's daughter?" O'Neill pressed. He wondered where the sarcophagus was. If it might have kept her in suspended animation all this time, the way it had with Hathor. If she could still be saved.

"No!" Golding looked outraged by the suggestion. "Do you think I would kill a woman?"

"I don't know what you'd do, Golding," O'Neill returned with what he mentally admitted was more honesty than tact. "You kidnapped Daniel at knifepoint because he wouldn't sleep with you. You've been threatening to kill me for the past hour. Excuse me for not working out the finer points of your moral boundaries."

Golding stared at him for a long cold minute and then began to declaim in a language O'Neill didn't understand: "'Summa awilum in mar awilum uhtappid insu uhappadu. Summa esmet awilim istebir esmetsu isebbiru.' I believe in an eye for an eye, in a bone for a bone, O'Neill. He was guilty. It was right that he should pay. And I was guilty so it was right that I should pay. A man can avenge the honor of his daughter and do no wrong. A man who would bring back the woman he loves can kill the one who killed her and do no wrong."

"Except it didn't bring her back and Daniel wasn't guilty in the first place." O'Neill tried and failed to keep the exasperation out of his voice. "You never told the NID it was the Eye of Tiamat, did you? You just said she had a weapon of great power. And you didn't tell them Marduk took it, so they don't know it's buried under a thousand foot of rubble on another world. What they want from this place isn't here any more, is it?"

Golding came towards him at speed, the gun outstretched, not a waver of his fingers now, the look on his face of a man who has made up his mind. "They want what you people always want. The power of life and death. But I won't give it to you or to them. I won't give them anything else ever again, and if they come looking for it I'll kill them as they step through that door."

O'Neill would have held up his hands in supplication if they hadn't been tied behind his back. "Hey, you get no argument from me where the NID are concerned."
"I know they're coming." Golding put the gun to O'Neill's head and this time there was no doubt in his eyes. "An eye for an eye, Colonel. You people stole my life. That means I can steal yours and still evade Ammut, the Eater of Hearts. She who devours the souls of those who have sinned will not devour mine for you deserve this fate."

"Maybe I do." O'Neill met his gaze unflinchingly. "I don't deny I've done some damned distasteful things in my time. But I'm not a part of anything that was done to you, any more than Daniel was a part of what happened to your wife. She killed herself because you cheated on her, and Daniel never helped you do that. He was one of the few that didn't."

"Rajid wrote to her because of him!" Golding jammed the gun against O'Neill's forehead, forcing it back at an uncomfortable angle. "He wouldn't write to her for his own daughter's sake, but he did it for Daniel. He knew he was tempted."

"He was never tempted." O'Neill didn't know why he was arguing this point now, especially when there was a gun against his head, but the way Golding was still deluding himself was really pissing him off. "That's what you were really punishing him for. Christ, was he the only person to ever turn you down?"

"Shut up," Golding hissed.

"What, because I'm saying what you don't want to hear?"

Golding looked down at him with unconcealed dislike. "Because your people are getting very close now and I want to know when they open the door so I can put a bullet straight through their treacherous hearts."

***
The Center

He was being hurled towards the end of the corridor, a tunnel of black light with blinding whiteness at the end of it, unbearable pain hurtling towards him at the speed of an oncoming train; in a moment it would impact knocking breath and life from his body –

"Daniel Jackson!"

As Teal'c's voice jolted him back into consciousness and he realized the Jaffa's strong arms were the only thing holding him up, he saw the snake sign glowing gold, but the ringing in his ears muffled the sound of Darius saying its name. "Serpent!" he gasped. "It was the symbol for the serpent." He'd almost heard it, there was the faintest echo of the sound the name had made but only a sense of it. He could only hope he'd recognize it when he heard it.

He was shaking so hard with reaction he couldn't have held the flashlight if he'd needed to and he saw Nelson and Teal'c exchange a glance.

"There has to be an easier way." Nelson looked at him anxiously.

"Are you okay, Daniel?" Sam's voice crackling down the radio momentarily lost its brisk efficiency in her unmistakable concern for him. "Do you still feel sick? Do you have double-vision?" He could hear what she wasn't saying as clearly as what she was: Damnit why can't I be there with you to help out, instead of stuck here having to do the things that only I can do?

It was her worry that jolted him back into the here and now. Sam had to move the rune-stones around and read the directions and he had to translate the symbols into words that would move walls. It was what they did.

"I'm fine, Sam." He gave Teal'c a look of gratitude as the Jaffa gently set him back on his feet. But then the smile faded as he focused on the serpent symbol on the wall in front of him in dismay. It was not drawn in a way that immediately associated it with any particular snake deity and there was nothing to put it in context. He also noticed that the second ram had vanished and a jackal was there instead. Another change in the alliance, perhaps, Amun leaving and Anubis taking his place?

"Apophis," Nelson said confidently. "Oldest baddest snake god there is and sworn enemy of Ra. Bound to be him."

He was almost sure that hadn't been the word he'd heard, but it made sense that Apophis would have been associated with Nekheny and Daniel looked at the Jaffa hopefully. "Teal'c?"

Teal'c examined the symbol gravely for a moment and then shook his head. "I have never seen this symbol used to denote Apophis. Nor have I heard of him being allied with any of the...gods you have mentioned."

Daniel groaned. "I knew it couldn't be that simple."

"Mertseger?" Nelson suggested.

"On the other side." The urge to vomit wasn't receding and it didn't mix well with screaming panic and rising terror. He was torn between hammering on the walls and yelling Jack's name and crawling into a dark place and gibbering.

"Wadjet? Werethekau?"
"Wadjet was with Nekheny's accusers and she's associated with Werethekau. For all we know they could have been one and the same…god."

"Khensit?"

Daniel shook his head. "Daughter of Ra. I doubt she would side against him. Even Hather didn't oppose him openly. None from the Ogdoad are possible candidates either."

"Well, that does narrow it down a little." Nelson peered at the symbol curiously. "I know I've seen this somewhere, I just can't remember exactly where. Renenoutet…?"

"Too benevolent and too many associations with Horus and Osiris."

"Not wanting to rush you," Sam said quietly, "but we have company. NID are on their way. And the energy build-up isn't dispersing."

"How much time do you estimate that we have left, Major Carter?" Teal'c enquired.

"There should be enough time to get to the center, collect the Colonel and get out again. I just wouldn't advise spending too long looking at the scenery on the way…." Oblivious of her comment, Nelson was still gazing at the serpent emblem with his head on one side. "Buto…? No, it would have wings and be green. It doesn't look like one of the cobra ones, anyway. We do know it's an Egyptian, do we? This looks so primitive I could be Babylonian, maybe even Hurrian. What about Hedammu…?"

Daniel held up a hand. "Let's assume it's Egyptian." No, they didn't know that for sure but there were hundreds of mythologies out there and every one of them had a snake god or goddess while Jack needed them to open the door right now. He looked at the symbol again, still trying to catch that elusive echo of a name, then shook his head as nothing sounded in his memory. "Just the oldest ones, John. Say them slowly, let me see if they seem familiar."

Nelson nodded. "Okay. Nehebkaou…?"

"No, on the other side."

"Mehen?"

Daniel shook his head. "Right number of syllables I think, but the mythology is all wrong. No allies of Ra or Osiris."

"Somtous is out as well then I presume? I'm running out of candidates. Amun's cosmogonic aspect, Kematef? Irto? Oh no, you said no Ogdoad deities. I've definitely seen this somewhere before. I'm thinking Hermopolis but not Predynastic. Graeco-Roman which would be too late to be relevant, so why am I thinking of it…?" He tapped his fingers on the flashlight making the beam flicker.

Daniel could feel the panic getting a hold again. There was barely a mythology in the world that didn't contain evil serpent demons or benevolent snake gods. They could be here forever. He shot the Jaffa look of desperation. "Teal'c?"

The Jaffa slowly shook his head, regret and concern in his brown eyes. "I am sorry, Daniel Jackson. If Bra'tac were here he may be able to assist us, but these events happened long before any history of the System Lords with which I am acquainted."

"Who are the System Lords?" Nelson enquired.
"Never mind." Daniel put his hand up to his right ear, remembering the pain of it, the sticky warmth of the blood on his cheek. "I have to go back in there, try to hear what he said."

Nelson abruptly grabbed his shoulder. "Wenut!"

And just for a second he thought he heard Darius saying the word, then he shook his head. "No, she was a hare-goddess."

"Only in the Graeco-Roman period. Before that she was a serpent goddess and she's definitely Predynastic."

"Okay." He remembered Darius telling him that sometimes you just had to go with instinct and guess. Before he had time to worry about whether or not it might be wrong and paralyzed himself into a state of permanent indecision, he slammed his hand down on the sign and said: "Wenut". This time the door slid back without a murmur, as if it wondered what could possibly have taken them so long. "We have to hurry."

He tugged at Teal'c's sleeve and the Jaffa obligingly pulled Daniel's arm around his shoulders and began to lope down the corridor supporting his weight, while Nelson trailed after them, distracted by the images on the walls. For the first time Daniel realized how annoying that could be when one was in the middle of a mission. He left following Sam's clear instructions to Teal'c, closing his eyes and trying to sink back into the black pit of his own fear.

He shuddered as he felt the blade under his jaw, forcing his head back, trying to speak calmly around his rising panic, his awareness of that deadly blade cutting into his skin: "Darius, you really don't want to do this...."

"Take off your shirt. Do it now. Do it silently."

His fingers were shaking so hard he couldn't manage the buttons, barely able to feel them. After he'd fumbled incompetently for ten seconds Darius abruptly lowered the knife and he gasped with the relief of feeling that edge removed from his skin. He never saw the backhand coming, it just slammed him straight into the wall. He crumpled from the impact, an explosion of light and pain in the side of his head, then he was sliding down the unfeeling stone to end up slumped on the floor. He held up an arm to try to ward Darius off while he stumbled to find the words that would coax the man he knew back from this psychotic stranger he didn't recognize. He gazed up at Darius with blood pouring from his split lip to spatter onto his shirt, trying to sound calm when his teeth were chattering as if it was twenty below zero. "I'm sorry about your wife. I am so sorry about what happened to her but – "

"Shut up!" Darius unbuckled his belt one-handed, wrenching the leather loose.

Daniel could feel his mind and body both freezing, his attention divided between the gleam of the blade whose tip was darkened with his blood and the place where Golding's groin was leaving a damp stain against his straining trousers, but he tried to sound a lot calmer than he felt as he said quietly: "Darius, don't do this. You're better than this. You don't need to cross this line. You don't need to be this person...."

He ducked just in time as the leather cracked down, taking the force of it across his arm instead of his face. He wrapped his arms around his face and head while Darius swore at him savagely, raining imprecations in Ancient Sumerian upon him with the same ferocity with which he dealt out blows, doubling the belt to give it more weight as he beat him with it.

"Darius! Stop!" he shouted it at him while trying to protect his face, gasping with the shock of it
each time the leather cracked against his body. He knew the man didn't want to hear him, was trying to deafen himself to that tiny voice of sanity which still had to be left somewhere in his drug-addled mind telling him this was wrong, that he didn't want to do this, that he could stop himself if he wanted to.

Abruptly, the rain of blows stopped, leaving Daniel sobbing for breath as his body stung from the welts coming out in angry shock across his skin. A hand was wrapped in his hair and, as he cried out in pain, dragged him to his feet. Darius shoved him up against the wall and pressed against him, stroking Daniel's hair back from his bleeding ear before whispering into it hoarsely, "Take off your shirt. Do it now." It sounded as if he was underwater but he could make out the words even through the ringing in his head.

Nodding as he shuddered, Daniel reached up, grabbed two handfuls of his shirt and ripped, tearing the buttons loose. Then he pulled his stinging arms free of the torn cotton and dropped it on the stone floor.

"That wasn't so hard, was it?" Darius kicked his shirt away contemptuously, grabbed Daniel's wrist and slammed his hand down on the painted symbol for the –

"Jackal!" Daniel jolted back into the here and now to find himself huddled on the floor with one hand up to ward off imaginary blows.

Teal'c was crouched in front of him, distress on his face, holding out a hand to him as if he was a frightened animal. "Daniel Jackson…?"

"Daniel…?" Sam sounded beside herself while Nelson just looked shocked as hell.

Daniel looked between their faces and realized he must have been acting quite a lot of his flashback out for them. Wincing at the thought of the spectacle he must have made, he said hoarsely: "He was nuts. He didn't know what he was doing."

"What the hell did he do?" Nelson demanded.

Teal'c touched Daniel's arm so gently it was as if he knew exactly where each welt from the belt had landed. "Are you fit to continue?"

"Yes." Daniel reached out and grabbed Teal'c's arm, hauling himself up. "I'm fine. It doesn't matter what he did to me back then. All that matters is what he's doing to Jack now. Sam…?"

"He's fine, Daniel. Just keep going."

But he could hear the tension in her voice and he knew better than anyone just how dangerous Darius could be in the grip of a bad flashback. He tightened his grip on Teal'c's arm, looking around for the symbols on the wall. "It's Anubis. Let's go on."

As he reached out to touch it, Nelson caught his wrist. "Did you hear him say 'Anubis'?"

"No. My ears were…but it is, isn't it?" Daniel nodded at the jackal symbol. "And that's how they say it, not 'Inpu' or 'Anpu' or 'Yinepu' so it's 'Anubis' and we need to get a move on." He didn't understand why Nelson was quibbling over this one when it was the first easy one they'd had since Seth.

Nelson waved the torch across the symbols again. "I don't think it is a jackal. I think it's a wolf. It's more dark gray than black. And look at the outline – standing not lying. Think of the Narmer Palette."
"What?" Daniel felt his heart turn over in his chest as he realized how close he'd come to making a mistake. As he peered at the picture he felt sickness wash through him, the thumping in his head getting worse. "Oh my God, you're right. It isn't Anubis. It's Wepwawet."

Nelson patted him gently on the shoulder. "Definitely Wepwawet, but he's very like Anubis and this isn't the most precise bit of tomb painting I've ever seen. It's an easy mistake to make, Daniel."

Teal'c examined the sign. "I am not familiar with this…god."

"Wepwawet or Upuaut, the 'Opener of the Ways', the wolf-god of war and the dead. A very old god." Daniel was still feeling faint at how close he'd come to making such an error. It reminded him that he wasn't really fit for this. Stressed and concussed was not the best state to be in when trying to make split-second decisions.

"His standard is one of the ones being carried on the Narmer Palette," Nelson put in fondly. "I've always had rather a soft spot for him and Khenty-amentiu, that other neglected canine deity of Abydos. Anubis and Osiris are the ones everyone knows but they're really latecomers compared with Wepwawet and Khenty-amentiu….."

"John!" Daniel stabbed a finger at the symbol. "Just press it and say the damned name will you?"

Nelson blinked at him in surprise and then pressed the symbol cautiously saying "Wepwawet" in a slightly apologetic manner.

The wall slid into a door, Teal'c dropped a rune-stone to wedge it, and they passed through, closer to the dark heart of the Labyrinth where the Minotaur was waiting.

Daniel closed his eyes and let the Jaffa hold him up and pull him forward, let Sam's voice soothe him with her steady stream of instructions, before he took a deep breath and dived back into the past…..

"Darius, nothing you do to me is going to bring Anna back. Why don't we go back to where the others are…?"

**Darius tightened his grip in Daniel's hair, yanking his head back and putting the very tip of the knife to his throat. "You asked to come, Daniel."

And it was true. He had. Or agreed to come at any rate. Waking, bewildered, in his tent to find Darius’s hand across his mouth, the man putting a hand to his own lips in warning. Daniel gazing up at him in bleary-eyed confusion.

"I've found the way to the center. Do you want to come?" Darius’s trembling excitement should have warned him but he'd been too excited by the news.

"Yes." He'd nodded eagerly.

Darius had taken his hand from Daniel's mouth and moved back to let him get up, throwing the clothes at him. "Hurry then. There isn't much time. I can only see it for a little while."

"Shall I get John? Did you finish the translation? Was it the Inanna inscription which told you…?"

Darius’s paw across his mouth. "Be quiet, dubsar tur. Don't say a word. Just come with me and all will be revealed….

Daniel swallowed painfully, body aching from the beating Darius had administered, head still
ringing from the blow that had broken his eardrum, tasting blood, smelling sweat and what he sincerely hoped wasn't arousal. "You didn't tell me you were taking me there to...." Even now he didn't say it because a part of him couldn't quite believe Darius was going to go through with it. Things like this didn't happen to people like him. Not here in Egypt, on a dig surrounded by people he knew and trusted. Darius knew his grandfather. He knew his tutor. They were friends. It made no sense that Darius should be intending to do something...sexual to him. It was just insane. But then when he looked at Darius he saw that so was he. There was almost nothing left of the man he knew.

"Can you see them yet?" Darius twisted his fingers tighter in Daniel's hair, turning his head to make him look at the walls. "Do you see the gods?"

"In the paintings on the walls?" He was trying to hang on by his fingernails.

"No." Darius shoved him forward angrily. "Imbecile! Open your eyes."

Daniel stumbled, awkward in his bare feet and chilly without his shirt. "I don't know what you want me to see!"

Darius grabbed him by the hair again and yanked Daniel after him, dragging him along at a ruthless pace. "I want you to see what I see. You're my apprentice. You have to learn the mysteries I teach you."

"Is this supposed to be some kind of...initiation...?"

Darius yanked him into a small square chamber, throwing him carelessly against the nearest wall.

Daniel cried out as he hit the stone, flinching as Darius advanced on him, trying to keep eye contact when all his instincts were telling him to duck his head and act submissive if he wanted to keep breathing in and out. But he suspected if he did that it would just make it that much easier for Darius to stop seeing him as an equal and see him as an object, something to be used.

Darius smiled unpleasantly, looking him up and down. "Is that what you're afraid of, Goldilocks? The giving of arete? Personally, I think it would do you the world of good. Might actually make a man of you. But, no, that's not why you're here."

Daniel put a hand up to his mouth wiping off the blood, trying not to flinch even though he couldn't seem to stop shaking. "Then why am I here?"

"To pay for what you did." Darius jerked the knife at him contemptuously. "Take off your pants. You can keep your shorts until the next door."

Shivering violently but refusing to break eye contact, Daniel tried to imbue unzipping his trousers and stepping out of them with as much dignity as he could muster. For all his assurances, he didn't miss the way Darius looked him up and down before snarling in annoyance as though Daniel was deliberately tempting him. Daniel kicked his trousers away. "What is it I'm supposed to have done, Darius? And why do I have to be naked to pay for it?"

The look in Darius’s eyes as he focused on Daniel made the world go cold. Daniel realized that just because they seemed to be having a conversation, it didn't mean the other man was anything like approaching sane. The look in his eyes was nothing but psychotic, the black shark glare of something pitiless and utterly inhuman. For a moment it was like looking into the face of hell itself and then Darius was coming towards him and Daniel was pressing back against the wall saying rapidly, "I'm sorry."
The man loomed over him, an impassable wall of male sweat and anger, and this time Daniel did duck his head and look at the floor, trying to make his body language as unthreatening as he possibly could. "Whatever I did, I'm truly sorry. Please forgive me, Darius. Please…?"

Darius touched his mouth and Daniel shuddered violently before he could stop himself, the man's thumb brushed across his lips, parting them and Daniel waited to be shoved to his knees. He felt the moment twang between them like stretched piano wire when Darius thought about it, how it would feel, how much he wanted it... And then his fingers closed in Daniel's hair and he pulled his head back, looking into his eyes with remorseless intensity, as if he could laser him with his gaze alone. "She shouldn't have died."

"I'm sorry." Daniel couldn't stop the shudders of reaction going through him, but the ache in his voice wasn't just fear and he wasn't apologizing this time, just expressing his compassion, because the bottomless depths of Darius's grief did move him, even now he couldn't help pitying him.

"You're going to help me bring her back." Darius stroked his thumb across Daniel's mouth again, looking him over as he did so as if Daniel's crimes were written on his bare skin.

"I wish I could do that." Daniel swallowed. "But I can't. No one can." Darius definitely stank not just of sweat and insanity but arousal as well, his resolve hardening along with his cock in close proximity to Daniel's body.

"Yes you can. And you will. Because this is what you do." Darius took Daniel's hand and put it between his legs. "This is why she died."

Recoiling, Daniel tried to pull his hand away and Darius twisted his wrist so savagely it forced him to his knees. "Whore!"

"Darius, please!" Daniel cried out as he twisted his wrist again.

Still holding onto Daniel's arm, Darius smacked Daniel's hand against the lowest symbol and it glowed gold as he said....

"Djehuty!" Daniel gasped it in triumph as he managed to claw his way back to the present, opening his eyes to find he was clinging onto Teal'c as if the Jaffa was the last solid thing in a shifting world.

Teal'c put his arm around him to steady him, patting him gently on the back and Daniel briefly laid his head on his shoulder, needing a second to recover from being Darius’s prisoner, being back in the grip of the past.

"Thoth, eh? Are you sure?" Nelson was examining the baboon symbol with his head on one side. "I would have laid money it was Babi. He had a terrible reputation for malevolence and cruelty and dwelt in the underground. Or Hedjwer maybe. I knew it couldn't be Hapy, because of the Horus connection, but --"

Daniel reached past him and slammed his hand down on the baboon symbol, saying, "Djehuty."

The door slid open and just for a second Daniel hesitated. The next step was the one that he was most afraid to take, the one he'd been avoiding ever since Nelson had first sent him that email inviting him to join this dig. No, for longer than that. He'd been running away from this memory for thirteen years and had buried it so successfully he hadn't even known he'd forgotten it. But now he was here where Darius had always wanted him to be, outside the doors of perception, waiting to remember what he had fled into a coma to escape last time he'd been forced to confront it. The
truth Rajid hadn't arrived in time to save him from, which had literally broken that brave old man's heart.

The fear and sickness flowed through him in a chill gray tide for a moment, his veins running with lead, he felt dazed and exhausted; there was still another mental race to run and he hadn't the energy for it. Then he reminded himself that he'd suffered worse losses since then than any his past could inflict. Whatever Darius had done to him it couldn't be as bad as losing Sha're, nothing could be as bad as that except losing Jack or Sam or Teal'c. And losing Jack was exactly what he was going to do unless he got himself back to where he had been thirteen years ago in the dark heart of this malevolent maze.

"Daniel…?" He could hear all the things Sam wasn't saying in that catch in her voice. Darius was walking towards Jack. The energy was continuing to build, enraged at being held in check for so long, he could even sense it himself now, a fizzing anger sending sparks from the walls. The NID men were inside the inner core of the labyrinth now, probably only a few of those propped-open doors behind them, probably armed and, like Darius, definitely dangerous.

"Don't go back there again, Daniel." Nelson was supporting him too, holding onto his other arm as Teal'c gently but surely whisked him into the blur of deliberately confusing passageways. "We know the last symbol has to be the bow and arrows. So it's probably Sais, Seshet or Nit, and as Nit was the mother of Ra we can pretty much write her off."

"But she wasn't called the mother of Ra until later on. Before that she was a warrior goddess. And we also know she was associated with Khnum and Wapwawet so she is a possible candidate." Daniel could feel the weariness trying to drag him down but shook it off. "And we can't risk a guess. Not if we ever want to see Jack alive again."

Nelson's concern was undisguised. "But the last couple of times we damned near didn't get you back. If it hadn't been for Teal'c here…." He knew there was something much worse waiting behind the final door. The reason for the fear. The blade and the blood and the black light closing over him like a shroud. He also knew that even facing that wasn't quite as bad as losing Jack.

He held Teal'c's gaze for a second, giving him a flicker of a smile that he knew must reveal everything about his fear. "Get me back, Teal'c."

Then he closed his eyes and took the last plunge into the depths, like a deep-sea swimmer hunting for pearls on the sea-bed, searching for that elusive name….

When Daniel stumbled again, through a combination of fear, exhaustion, and his battered body closing down, Darius twisted his fingers in Daniel's long hair and began to drag him down the twisting passageway, declaiming as he did so:

"Naked and bowed low, Inanna entered the throne room.
Ereshkigal rose from her throne.
Inanna started from her throne.
The Anunna, the judges of the underworld, surrounded her.
They passed judgment against her.

Then Ereshkigal fastened on Inanna the eye of death.
She spoke against her the word of wrath.
She uttered against her the cry of guilt…."
"Darius, please!" Daniel got a toe-hold on the floor and staggered back onto his feet, grabbing the man's wrist to try to break his hold on his hair.

"Shut up!" Darius threw him against the wall, then grabbed him by the hair again as she started to slither down it. "Everyone goes to the underworld in the end but only she can return. If Dumuzi sacrifices himself for her she is saved."

"Her husband," Daniel gasped, clamping a hand around Darius’s wrist and gripping it tightly. "Not her servant, who was faithful to her. Not her son, who was her right arm and her left arm and a leader among men. She sacrificed her husband, who was worthless."

Darius yanked Daniel after him, off-balancing him so he was being dragged again, looking over his shoulder at him from eyes that burned with a terrible grief and rage. "That's what she told me. That she would have given my life a hundred times to save the life of our son. From the Great Above Inanna opened her ear to the Great Below.... My lady abandoned heaven and earth to descend to the underworld...."

"It's a myth, Darius!" Daniel dug his fingers into the man's wrist as his hair was tugged again. "It's just a myth. It has nothing to do with you or me or your wife. It's to do with the Ancient Sumerian and Babylonians need to find an anthropomorphic rationale for the changing of the seasons. Inanna never existed. She never went into the Underworld. Summer ended and winter came and then spring followed winter and it had nothing to do with Inanna descending into the Underworld...."

They were getting nearer to the end of the corridor, to the last chamber and the last door, and the last hope he had of ever getting through to this man before Darius crossed a line neither of them could ever come back from and be the same again. He spoke rapidly, trying to keep his tone soothing, not to sound scared and angry and confused, even though he was all of those things, just to sound calm and as if he truly did know what he was talking about.

"Even with the myth you're copying, there isn't a logical parallel. Inanna didn't die because her husband was unfaithful to her. It wasn't the sacrifice of her husband's lover that restored her. Why Inanna, Darius? Why her?" And why me? But he didn't add that. As a rational human being, Darius was lost to reason, but perhaps as a scholar of Sumerian he could still be reached.

Darius pulled him upright, letting Daniel snatch a ragged breath, slowly untwisting his fingers from Daniel's hair. He even looked at Daniel's hair then, stroking a few strands of it, then looked at Daniel's face as if he barely knew him, automatically licking his thumb and reaching out to wipe the blood from the side of Daniel's mouth. "Were your foster parents cruel to you?"

Daniel stared at him in confusion and then swallowed. "No. They were kind to me."

"They didn't beat you, or starve you?"

Daniel blinked in surprise. "No. They were good people."

"I told Inga social services were careful who they placed the children with. That they'd be sure to find good homes for them."

Daniel had no idea what Darius was talking about now or what this conversation was a part of, but it didn't involve Darius threatening him with a knife or an erection and he was grateful for that. Even though he thought it made him sound like a spaniel found wandering on the streets, he stuck with Darius’s terminology: "They found me a good home."
"You don’t hate Nick, do you?" Darius stroked his hair again, running his fingers through it to untangle the mats he’d made.

"No." He swallowed hard, shaking his head. "He’s the only family I have left. I would never hate him."

"You should tell him that. Tell him you forgive him."

Daniel felt sadness sweep through him. "He’s never admitted there’s anything to forgive."

Darius breathed deeply then leant his forehead against Daniel’s. He whispered, "I have to do this."

"No, you don’t." Daniel gave him a flickering smile. "You really don’t."

"I know she can be resurrected. I saw it happen."

"Inanna?" Daniel looked around at the painted corridors. "On the walls of the Labyrinth? Or saw it in a vision?"

Daniel remembered his trip after Darius had given him the pill, floating above the walls of the Labyrinth, seeing the gods with glowing eyes that Darius described to him. He swallowed, trying not to be so aware of the gleam of the knife blade, the smell of Darius’s arousal, and the fact he was only wearing his boxer shorts, that it banished every other thought. He moistened his lips, tasting blood. "She asked to go with them to the center."

"She rose up again more magnificent than before."

Daniel snatched a ragged breath and met the man’s eye, talking softly. "Why don’t we go back now, Darius? Why don’t we go back outside and tell the others about Inanna?"

"No." Darius shook his head. "We have to go through with it. It has to be tonight. It’s a full moon and it’s her birthday. She was born on this day once. She can be born again now."

Daniel had a horrible feeling he wasn't going to like the answer to this question. "How?"

Darius leant his forehead against Daniel’s again briefly, inhaling Daniel’s scent. "You have to take her place in the Underworld."

"Why not you?" Daniel shivered as he felt the man’s body weight pressing against him. He was looking for a chance to run. He was faster than Darius, he was sure.

"We have to be together. In life or death, it doesn't matter."

Daniel almost told him then that grief faded in time, it didn’t feel as if it ever would at first, but in the end it did. Small boys stopped crying themselves to sleep eventually. They went out into the sunshine again. They even forgot they were orphans. They picked up a book and the story held them, lost themselves in tales without always remembering to cry because it wasn’t their mother’s voice saying the words. The human soul renewed itself a hundred times within a single life, recovered from even the deepest wounds, and struggled on towards enlightenment, only slightly ragged from its latest scars. But for once in his life he didn’t have the words, was too scared and too exhausted to explain coherently that amongst all the other transitory things of life, grief too could sometimes be another passing phase. His tongue stumbled with weariness:
"In six months time it may matter. In six months time you may not want to have done what you're planning to do tonight."

Darius ran his fingers through Daniel's hair again as if the texture of it fascinated him. He moved back and looked Daniel over in confusion, frowning in concern. "Your lip's bleeding."

Daniel gave him a nervous smile. "It doesn't matter."

Darius licked his thumb again and gently wiped Daniel's mouth clean. "I don't want to hurt you. I just want her back. I wouldn't do this if there was another way."

"Perhaps there is another way." He swallowed. "Perhaps if we went and asked John he might know another way. He knows lots of – " As he made to dart past him, Darius hand closed on his wrist like a vice, yanking him back.

Darius searched his face in disbelief. "Were you going to run away?"

"No." Daniel shuddered. "I-I would never do that."

Darius stroked his hair back from his bruised forehead, explaining it to him reasonably and without accusation now: "Don't you know how important this is? She can come back, Daniel. She's the only one that can. They ate his heart but she died for love and was born again. It's because she died for love. She died because of love for me. There's no point in her coming back to find me dead, is there? It has to be you. You're the reason she died."

Daniel swallowed again. "Darius, I really think we should go back to where the others are. I really don't think I want you to do whatever it is you're intending to – "

The man was already marching down the corridor, dragging him after him. Daniel cried out as his already abused wrist was twisted some more. Darius didn't even seem to be trying to hurt him this time, he was just so focused on the job at hand he was barely aware of him. Daniel was necessary and possibly intending to escape so had to be hung onto tightly, but there was no animosity there any more. Darius had forgiven him for giving him a hard-on, beaten it out of both of them, transference of frustrated desire into anger, this wasn't about Daniel turning him down any more. This was about something Daniel didn't understand to do with those gods with glowing eyes. He spoke rapidly. "You said this was an evil place. Do you still think that? Is it evil? Did bad things happen here? Is that what you see when you take those pills?"

"Unspeakable things happened here, dubsar tur," Darius pulled him into a small chamber and scanned the blank wall as if trying to remember. "Terrible things. Things you'll never have to see. I shouldn't have tried to make you see them. You shouldn't have to know about things like that." He paused briefly to stroke Daniel's hair again, the same kind of absent fondness an uncle might bestow on a favorite nephew.

Daniel wondered what it was Darius was planning to do to him that was making him feel so protective and affectionate. He was treating Daniel the way a man might treat a child he knew had a terminal disease, pitying him but in one part of his mind already writing him off, seeing no future for him in this world, only the next.

"Take off your shorts, Daniel."

Daniel stared at him, shivering, trying to see any sanity in this new gentler Darius and finding less than in the vicious madman of ten minutes before. "I don't want to."

The point of the knife was pressed against his throat with a kind of regretful tenderness. "Do as I
tell you, Daniel. Don't make me hurt you."

He swallowed, his Adam’s apple scraping past the point of the knife as he did so. Darius being reasonable was frightening him even more than Darius being brutal. "Don't do this."

Darius shook his head as if Daniel was being very silly and irrational. "You have to be naked to enter the underworld. You know that. You have to go as Inanna went."

"She was killed and hung up on a meat hook, Darius. I don't want to be like Inanna."

"You want to see the center, don't you?"

And God help him, even in the midst of being so frightened he could barely speak there was a part of him that was still filled with curiosity about what lay on the other side of that wall. All this tangle of corridors, secret symbols and hidden names to stop the unworthy reaching the heart of the labyrinth, and here he was, bleeding, terrified, almost naked, and yet still wanting to know what was on the other side. He turned his head to look at the blank wall and in that moment he was lost.

Darius smiled in triumph. "I knew you wanted to come with me. I knew this was really what you wanted all along. Now take off your shorts."

Daniel sagged with defeat, closed his eyes, then pushed down his boxers and stepped out of them. Shame seared him but when he opened his eyes, Darius was matter-of-fact, looking at him but without lust, just nodding and saying, "Yes. She was beautiful too. I would never have been tempted unless you were beautiful. She’ll understand when she sees you why I was tempted even though she was always the one I loved."

"Well, fine, as long as you get that sorted out, that's really the main thing." Daniel darted him a look of disbelieving reproach. He could feel his nerves unraveling. He reckoned he was about thirty seconds away from laughing hysterically and then curling up in a corner and crying like a child.

When Darius caught him by the hair and tugged him forward, it wasn't rough, just determined. Daniel wondered numbly if that was what the sex was going to be like as well. He could feel a kind of weary acceptance coursing through him. There was no point in fighting because he couldn't win, no point in anything really except trying to mentally get as far away from his body as he could so whatever happened to it might sear him a little less. He decided to focus on the chamber, on learning the secrets of the center, on anything except what Darius might be intending to do to him in the next ten minutes.

"Nit." Darius pressed the wall and the invisible image became visible, the sign of bows and arrows briefly glowed gold before the door slid back. He looked at Daniel with quiet triumph. "The center, Daniel. I told you I’d found the way and that I’d share it with you."

He pulled Daniel into a chamber illuminated by the same faint greenish-gold light which had illuminated all the inner corridors, then pulled one of those flares from the copious pockets of his old coat and crouched to jam the door open. That was the only hope Daniel could see in them coming here, that Darius had been bothering to wedge the doors. Except now he suspected it was because he was planning to return in triumph to the surface with his resurrected wife, an Orpheus who had made a successful foray into the Underworld and reclaimed his Eurydice without a fateful backward glance.

"We should tell John." Daniel knew he was just gabbling now. He saw a flash of gold, a line of
thrones, blank walls, a stone floor, the altar oh god there was an altar, and the knife, the hypnotic gleam of the knife. There was also, even in the midst of his fear, disappointment because there was no great secret revealed here, just a plain chamber with no mysteries, no occult me given by the enchanted Enki to Inanna after all, just gray stone and blank walls. His teeth were chattering with fear, the cold from the floor burning his bare feet. He tried to pull his wrist loose but Darius just tightened his grip reflexively, not even reproaching him, just dragging him purposefully across the room.

Daniel could feel a terrible resignation seeping through him. He knew he should fight but fighting was just going to get him beaten unconscious, maybe brain damaged. This was about trying to stay intact now, holding onto the pieces of his soul Darius was trying to fragment, to stay who he was even when stripped bare, reduced to his essence by fear and nakedness, in refusing to be humiliated, in keeping his self-respect by any means possible.

But when Darius pulled him towards the altar he could feel the sight of it turning him to stone, if it touched his skin it would spread through him, contagious petrifaction and he would be fossilized forever. He’d thought his resignation had replaced his panic, but now he found they were working in harmony, his body too exhausted to fight but his mind was locked rigid in one continuous Munch-like scream. His toes curled, trying to get some purchase, but Darius was remorseless, tugging him harder. “Hurry, Daniel, the night’s almost over. It has to be while the moon has ascendancy over the stars.”

He found he was shaking so hard, speech was almost impossible, darting the man one last begging look not to do whatever horrible thing he was contemplating.

“Hurting me won’t bring her back. Please, Darius…don’t…!” He couldn’t even bring himself to articulate what he was afraid of.

“Shshh.” Darius let go of his wrist to clamp a hand across his mouth then put the knife to his throat.

Daniel shuddered as he felt the blade touching him, unable to focus on anything except the feel of that freezing steel against his bare skin.

“Lie down,” Darius breathed, jerking his head at the altar.

Shaking so hard he couldn’t have argued if he’d wanted to, Daniel found himself climbing onto the altar, sitting up awkwardly, hunched up to try to conceal his genitals. Darius caught his hair and gently eased him down flat "Sshhh"ing him again when Daniel made a last attempt to reason with him. The slab was freezing against his bare skin and he gasped with the shock of it. He could feel the chill seeping into his skin, just as he had feared, turning his bones to stone. He imagined them finding his skeleton, the powdery fragments of his clothes, a few strands of hair.

Darius was tying his ankles to the stone rings, he felt the rope biting into his skin while the stone continued to seep into his body like seawater. He felt as if he was falling backwards into a cold darkness, gradually dissolving into the stone.

Rope tightened around his right wrist and then his left one. He darted a glance at his arm to try to hang onto the last sense of reality, but even his own skin didn’t look familiar in this strange green-gold light. Was that his arm? Was this even his body? Maybe it was just a bad dream? Perhaps he was still in his tent and he’d let Darius persuade him to take another pill? Perhaps this was guilt displacement. Mind displacement. Anything that meant he wasn’t really here in the center of the labyrinth, bound naked to a stone altar with a man standing over him with a….
Knife.

The blade was hypnotic. It gleamed so coldly, colder than starlight, colder than moonlight, colder than everything but death.

Darius bent over him and touched his face. Daniel stared up at the tears glittering in the man's eyes and thought how unexpectedly noble the man looked in that moment, not mad at all, like an Arthurian knight who had struggled through terrible hardship to get his glimpse of the grail. Darius pressed his lips gently to Daniel's forehead and whispered, "Goodbye...."

Then Darius lifted the knife over his head and, as Daniel gazed at him in horrified disbelief, plunged it down –

The impact was like being hit by a truck. He screamed as the force of it slammed into him, feeling bone break as the sound of it cracked in his ears, blood spray in a warm wet fountain. And then he was plummeting backwards into darkness through a tunnel, away from a tiny circle of light, getting colder with every millisecond while somewhere close by a clock began to beat slower and slower. As if he was falling through his own body like sand through a sieve, dissolving into nothingness until he was so far away from the end of the tunnel his vision had narrowed to a pinprick of light. The clock pendulum made one last attempt to swing and faltered. And then there was only blackness and the silence as his heartbeat stopped.

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VII: The Center

He woke to the blackness of a confined space and a closed coffin lid, cold and naked and gasping for air that wasn't there, unsure as yet if he was alive or dead, with the darkness wound around him so tightly, filling his mouth and ears, wrapped around his eyes. He tried to push up the lid but made no impression as his lungs labored and strained....

Air.

Warm air being blown gently into his starved lungs. And suddenly the coffin was opening, not lifting up as he'd been trying to force it to do, but sliding to the side, letting in a dim greenish gold light, like being on the bottom of the ocean....

"How many minutes?"

Sam's voice. But not the way Sam usually sounded. Sam didn't usually cry.

"Two minutes, Colonel Carter." Perhaps Nelson thought most Air Force officers were colonels in the same way most archaeologists were doctors.

"Oh god, Teal'c. Keep trying. Where's that damned ambulance...?"

He was sinking back down to the depths. Damn. He didn't like it on the sea floor. Falling in slow motion while someone cried out to him in Arabic. Rajid this time. Funny that. He didn't think Sam and Rajid had met. Rajid was pulling him out of the coffin, surprisingly strong for such a small man, lifting Daniel as easily as if he was a child and wrapping him in a blanket. Someone was crying. Not Sam. A man. Darius. Darius was crying. So was Rajid. Sam just sounded as if she was crying. Why was everyone crying except him?

“What have I done? What have I done?”
Why was Rajid saying that? He hadn't done anything. It was Darius who had – The knife. Daniel remembered and shuddered at the same time as he realized he really needed to breathe.

"Daniel! If you don't start breathing right now I swear to God…, Teal'c just keep trying. Promise me you'll keep trying, Daniel…! Don't you dare do this on my watch! Don't make me have to tell the colonel…. Oh God, Teal'c, please get him back….

"Sam was crying and scary. In fact she sounded like the older sister from hell who was going to come after him with a baseball bat any minute. Definitely time he remembered how to inhale.

He opened his eyes to find that he was being kissed. Just like the sleeping princess in the fairy tales. Except he'd never read one where the sleeping princess was awakened by a kiss from two hundred pounds of Jaffa being coached in mouth-to-mouth over a crackling radio by a distraught Air Force major. He gasped again and realized he was breathing in and out all by himself. The look of relief on Teal'c's face told him he'd realized it too. Teal'c spoke rapidly into the radio in his breast pocket.

"Major Carter, Daniel Jackson is breathing and conscious."

"Oh thank God. Thank you, Teal'c, thank you."

"Well done, old man."

Daniel concentrated on breathing in and out for a moment as Nelson thumped Teal'c on the back triumphantly and said 'Good show' a lot as though Teal'c had just scored a six with a clear blow over the boundary and Nelson was commentating for the BBC. He'd forgotten the way Nelson always reverted to extremes of stereotypical Britishness in moments of high tension.

Sam's voice crackled through the radio again, hoarse with emotion: "Daniel. Don't ever do that again!"

"What did I do?" he protested weakly.

"You ceased breathing, Daniel Jackson." Teal'c helped him sit up, a strong arm around his shoulders. The Jaffa looked into his eyes for a long moment and briefly rested his palm against Daniel's cheek. That told Daniel more than a whole speech just how close he must have come to checking out for good.

He said breathlessly, "I'm sorry, Sam. I overshot."

"Promise me you won't do that again."

"I promise." He reached out and touched Teal'c's arm, squeezing it gently. "Thanks for getting me back."

As he struggled to get up, Nelson said, "Really, Dan, I think you should wait for the ambulance. We damned near lost you then."

"If the colonel were here he'd be ordering you to sit still and wait for the ambulance, and as second-in-command…."

Teal'c effortlessly rose to his feet, bringing Daniel with him. Daniel held the Jaffa's gaze as he was set gently on the floor. "Teal'c, I remember what happened now and Jack is in terrible danger. Trust me." He darted a glance at Nelson to show why he couldn't explain.
The Jaffa took one look at his face and then spoke rapidly into the radio: "Major Carter we are proceeding to the next door. I will guarantee the safety of Daniel Jackson."

"You better had, Teal'c." Sam's voice still sounded thick with emotion and Daniel decided that when this was over he had better buy her a very nice dinner and the biggest box of Godiva chocolates he could find. Some groveling might also be in order. Sam didn't cry easily and she didn't cry in public at all, which meant he must have frightened her good and proper. One of the few things she had in common with Jack was a marked resentment of being scared by her teammates damned near dying on her.

Daniel felt limp as seaweed, which Teal'c seemed to know without need of explanation, pulling Daniel's arm around his neck, while one strong arm went around Daniel's waist. In seconds they were moving along the corridor at speed while Sam issued their directions in her usual clear voice: "Okay, second right, now straight ahead to the end then take the left passageway, then it's the third opening on the right hand side...."

Daniel whispered rapidly to Teal'c, "I know what the NID want now and we can't let them have it. We can't give them the power of life and death."

"I understand, Daniel Jackson."

"Teal'c, as you enter the chamber, the door is midway along the left wall."

Nelson moved ahead of them, shining the ultraviolet light onto the apparently bare wall. And there were the nine signs for the Ennead of Nekhen: the symbol for Min, the Setesh animal, the plumed falcon of Nekhney, the serpent of Wenum, the ram head of Khnum, the baboon of Thoth, the wolf of Wepwewat, the hawk of Sokar, and finally the crossed arrows of Nit.

"We're coming, Jack," Daniel breathed. There was still a rushing sound in his ears and a faint hissing like serpents uncoiling from a long sleep. Experience had told him that was often the prologue to him passing out, but given what he now knew Darius to be capable of and what danger Jack was in, he felt justified in ignoring it. He reached out to touch the last symbol and said "Nit."

Nelson looked at him in surprise and then said, "Oh right, the god. I've got you."

The symbol shimmered and Daniel felt the room perform a slow revolution. It took him a second to realize it wasn't actually the floor moving in response to the ancient Goa'uld technology, but his own faintness making the place swim.

"Daniel Jackson..." Teal'c bent over him solicitously.

Daniel saw the walls slide open and Nelson step towards the gap. "John, wait! Be careful."

Nelson looked over his shoulder at him in surprise as he stepped into the chamber, "Of what?"

"Watch out!"

The cry from Jack made Nelson jerk his head around in surprise. Which meant he was looking in the direction of the man who fired the shot as the bullet drilled a perfect circle in the center of his heart. The sound of the gunshot enveloped them all just a millisecond later, a deafening percussion as violent as a blow.

"John!"

Daniel reached out to grab Nelson and the man fell back into his arms, looking up at Daniel in
astonishment as he did so. They toppled to the floor together, Daniel barely aware of Teal'c behind
him, catching him even as Daniel tightened his grip on the man in his arms. "John…"

There was disbelief in Nelson's voice as he said: "Dan, I think I've been…"

Daniel was still waiting for Nelson to say 'shot' when the blood welled from his mouth as fast as it
was already pouring from his heart.

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As the wall slid open, O'Neill shouted a warning that was muffled by the roar of the automatic.
There was a moment when he found himself gazing into the shocked face of a dying Nelson and
then the man toppled backwards, knocking Daniel into Teal'c who caught him and lowered them
both gently to the ground.

"John!" The anguish in Daniel's voice cut straight through O'Neill.

"Doctor Nelson…?"

O'Neill swore savagely as he saw the blood pouring from Nelson's heart, the grief on Daniel's face,
the look of surprise and disbelief on Nelson's face as the life drained from him. Sorrow and regret
twisted inside him and a terrible sense of failure that he, as a soldier, had failed to save this man.

Nelson murmured, "Dan…?" in confusion, while blood welled up from his mouth in a crimson
gush.

Daniel tightened his grip on him. "I'm here, John. You're going to be okay. You're going to be
fine…" But the look of anguish he shot at O'Neill told him than Daniel knew as well as he did
Nelson was a goner. Nelson looked up at him, opened his mouth as if to say something else, and
then his gaze slid into a fixed stare as, with the minimum of fuss, he gave a quiet sigh and died.

"Damnit to hell!" O'Neill would have given anything in that moment to spare Daniel that loss, and
to keep Nelson alive. There weren't so many good men in the world that he felt he could easily be
spared but he forced himself to stay focused. Golding still had a loaded gun and Daniel was still
right in the line of fire.

"Daniel, watch out."

But Golding dropped the gun as if it was burning his fingers, running across the room to throw
himself onto his knees by the dead Nelson.

"Nelson…? Oh my god, John…?"

Daniel was still holding Nelson in his arms even though the man's head had slumped quite gently
onto his shoulder now. He looked curiously peaceful for a man who'd just been shot in the heart,
like a traveler who had earned his rest, his baldness and thin skin revealing the shape of his skull
and imbuing him with something approaching beauty, like the tomb of some crusader knight taken
back to England to lie in some village church in state. Daniel touched his face, tears running down
his cheeks as he gazed at the dead man.

Teal'c kept his arms around Daniel, murmuring some words of sympathy to him in the language of
their dead loved ones. Golding's hands were stained red where he was still trying to staunch the
wound with his fingers, as if he could push Nelson's life blood back into his body. "I thought you
were the military. I never thought you'd come here…! I knew you couldn't come unless you remembered and if you remembered I thought you'd know how dangerous it was. How dangerous I was…"

A radio crackled somewhere, the words indistinguishable but the sound one of shock and fear.

Daniel looked around for O'Neil in sudden panic. "Jack? Are you okay?"

"I'm here." O'Neil spoke rapidly. "I'm fine." As Daniel focused on him, their eyes met and O'Neil shook his head helplessly. "Daniel, I'm so sorry."

The sight of him seemed to give Daniel strength. He gave his head a visible shake then gripped Golding's arm and squeezed it. "Where's the sarcophagus, Darius?"

Golding looked up, tears running down his face. "I didn't mean to! I thought he was one of those NID bastards…." He touched Nelson helplessly, feeling for a pulse in his neck he clearly knew wasn't there with bloodstained fingers.

"We still might be able to get him back. There must be a sarcophagus here somewhere. A coffin. Remember? They put Inanna in it when she killed herself. You put me in it after you…." Daniel broke off.

Golding looked at him wild-eyed, still helplessly trying to stem the flow of blood from the dead Nelson's heart. "After I killed you. That's what you were going to say, wasn't it? That's what I did. All these years I thought it was just a nightmare but it was real. I was out of my fucking mind and I put a knife in your…." He put his bloody hands up to his face. "Daniel, what have I done?"

Daniel looked to Teal'c for help and the Jaffa understood his meaning at once, moving to take the dead man from Golding's anguished grip, rising to his feet with Nelson in his arms like some comrade fallen in battle.

Golding looked at him blankly. "I don't remember."

Teal'c said gravely, "Doctor Golding. It is most important that you recollect where in the chamber the sarcophagus of Nekheny is located."

The radio crackled again and this time O'Neil thought he made out Daniel's name. He checked his own chest automatically, but he wasn't wearing his radio. It was a surprise to see the blood on his chest from his split lip.

Daniel helped Golding up, making the man focus on him, despite the tear tracks drying on his cheeks. "You put me in the sarcophagus. There must be some kind of mechanism to make it appear. We can get John back the same way you got me back, I promise. You just have to find it again."

"I'll try." Golding stumbled dazedly across the room while Teal'c followed him with the dead man in his arms.

Daniel came over to where O'Neil was, looking more ill than O'Neil thought he'd ever seen him before. "You okay?" O'Neil demanded.

Daniel nodded. "Are you?" He knelt down and started to untie the ropes around his ankles.

"I'll live." O'Neil looked around the chamber, already hating this place with a passion. "How did you find me?"
Daniel pulled the rope loose and threw it away. "I remembered how to get here." The shudder went right through him and O'Neill winced. Daniel moved behind him to attack the knot around his wrists, hissing at the way the cords had bitten into his skin. "I'm sorry you got dragged into this, Jack." He began to tug at the knots with more determination than skill.

O'Neill turned his head. "Hey, I was the one who gatecrashed your dig, remember?"

"I should never have come back here. John would still be alive if I hadn't...." He felt Daniel rest his head against the back of the throne for a second, heard his breath catch in a sob he couldn't quite suppress. He whispered so low only O'Neill could hear it: "He's got four children. And how can I tell Mary...?"

O'Neill felt the last knot pull loose and winced as the cords were gently eased from his skin. "None of this was your fault." He twisted around on the ornate throne and reached out to Daniel, holding his shoulders, making him look at him. Daniel looked at the absolute end of his resources. He tightened his grip despite the numbness of his fingers, the dull ache of his bleeding wrists. "Hey, we'll get him back, just like you told Golding. Everyone knows archaeologists are impossible to kill, right?"

Daniel wiped his eyes. "Right. Just like Air Force colonels." He gave O'Neill a flicker of a smile. "I thought you were a goner for sure this time, Jack."

O'Neill remembered the chill sensation of the gun barrel against his head and grimaced. "That makes two of us." He squeezed Daniel's arms gently. "Thanks for getting here."

"Thanks for not being dead."

"It was nothing." O'Neill looked at Daniel's exhausted, haggard countenance and couldn't decide who he wanted to kill the most, Golding or the NID. "How about when we get out of here I take you to DisneyWorld?"

"What, and deny me the chance to see the world's largest twine ball?" Daniel managed a smile. "And what about that Spam Museum?"

"Teal'c, what happened...?"

The raw fear in Carter's voice made them both start and he saw Daniel realize at the same time he did that they'd all been ignoring her crackled enquiries for what must have been at least three agonizing minutes by now.

Teal'c gave himself a visible shake before saying rapidly, "Professor Golding has shot Doctor Nelson, Major Carter, but we believe there is a sarcophagus somewhere in this chamber and are endeavoring to locate it."

"I heard the gunshot. I thought it was you or Daniel."

O'Neill completely sympathized with the guilt in her voice. There had been a fraction of a second when he'd seen Daniel's face behind Nelson and felt a tiny flicker of relief mixed in with his dismay that it hadn't been one of his team who'd taken that bullet. He got to his feet, wincing at the pins and needles in his legs, and limped over to pick up the revolver Golding had dropped.

"We are both unharmed, Major Carter, as is O'Neill."

Golding was standing in front of the blank wall with his eyes closed, his fingers barely touching the stone, as if to let some vibes from the place flow through him.
O'Neill paused to pick up the gun en route then limped over to where Teal'c was standing with the
dead Nelson in his arms. He touched the Jaffa lightly on the arm. "May I?" At the Jaffa's nod, he
reached across and plucked the radio from his chest. "Situation, Carter? Where are the NID
goons?"

"On their way, Colonel. Are you okay?"

"I'm fine."

"Daniel?"

O'Neill looked across at the younger man, who was self-hugging as he watched Golding. "He'll be
okay when we get Nelson back."

"What do you want me to do about NID? Have you discovered what they want?"

"The weapon they're after is long gone but that still leaves the sarcophagus, and I have to say I'm
not too keen on the idea of the people who thought giving Golding LSD flashbacks was a good
idea getting their sticky fingers on the means to torture someone to death, then throw them back in
the sarcophagus for another bout." He glanced back at Daniel. "On the other hand, there are times
when I'd have really liked one around the SGC."

"I think it's academic, sir. The way the energy is building up in that place I don't think we or the
NID are going to have time to salvage anything. Right now, if you all get out of there alive, you'll
be doing well."

"You are such a ray of sunshine, Carter."

"Darius…?" Daniel was visibly willing Golding to remember. Going by the way Golding was
shuddering, O'Neill guessed that remembering was exactly what he was doing right now.

Golding opened his eyes and looked across at Daniel, eyes bleak and full of pain, but unmistakably
rational. "I killed you. All these years I hoped it was a nightmare but I was always afraid it was
true. Daniel, I…"

"It doesn't matter," Daniel insisted firmly. "All that matters is where the sarcophagus is."

O'Neill decided that much later he and Daniel were going to have a possibly quite loud
conversation about all the reasons why there were some things you shouldn't let go. Like people
killing you for no good reason.

Golding had his eyes closed, shuddering as he remembered, but making himself do it, feeling his
way mentally, flinching from the impact of each presumably horrific bit of recall. If it was doing
that to Golding to remember it, what the hell had it done to Daniel at the time? "I think it was
here." Golding crossed over to the wall, closing his eyes and letting his fingers brush across the
stone as lightly as a safecracker, then he pushed and a section of the wall glowed gold.

O'Neill took two rapid steps backwards as the sarcophagus appeared from the floor, the stone
rippling like liquid as it rose up on a ornately carved dais, massive, gold and evil. With it came a
crackle of raw energy that sent blue flickers of light across the gray walls. On a sonic scale he
could sense but not quite hear, O'Neill thought he felt a low whine begin to get louder.

"Sir, the energy build-up just increased considerably."

"It's the sarcophagus." O'Neill looked at the dead Nelson in Teal’c's arms. "Can't be helped,
Major."

"I don't want to worry you, Colonel, but when you get Nelson back and head for the exit, I would advise running."

"Understood."

Golding closed his eyes, clearly tracking another elusive memory, shuddered again, then pressed a hawk symbol on the side and the lid of the sarcophagus slid back to reveal the coffin-like interior in all its luxurious gold fittings. Nekheny had clearly believed in having the stretch-limo scale of regeneration.

Teal'c wordlessly carried Nelson past them and laid him gently in the sarcophagus, the dead man's eyes still staring straight ahead in disbelief. Golding looked grief and remorse stricken but undeniably sane. The flashback seemed to have receded and left his right mind in its place. "Will it bring him back?"

"If the mechanism is still intact it should indeed do so." Teal'c pressed the symbol and the top closed over, sliding across like a great maw closing.

Daniel still looked bled white of color and O'Neill winced inwardly at the charcoal shadows under his eyes, the bruise coming out on his cheekbone. He turned on Golding angrily. "Just because that damned box can bring people back from the dead, it doesn't excuse what you did. Not today, and not thirteen years ago."

Daniel flinched as if someone had hit him and for a second O'Neill knew what it was Golding got – those flashes of other people's memories – because he swore that for that second he knew how it felt to lie on a stone altar and see the knife come down. He thought of the impact of it, the slam and slice of that blade into skin and bone, the crunch of your own chest breaking, the sensation of the heat leaving your body as your lifeblood sprayed on the walls. Daniel shuddered and when O'Neill looked across at Golding he really wanted to raise that gun and pull the trigger.

Golding seemed to know exactly what he was thinking, returning his gaze unflinchingly, no trace of insanity in his eyes now. "I know that. And if it makes you feel any better, I see it every night, O'Neill. As I turn out the light I see the look on Daniel's face as I brought the knife down. I hear his breastbone crack. I feel his blood on my skin. I remember how light his body felt in my arms as I put him in the coffin and closed the lid and waited for my wife to magically reappear even though I'd watched her body burn myself. I see it and remember it so clearly I know it has to be true. And then I remember seeing him in that hospital bed without a scratch and I know it couldn't have been true so I must still be crazy after all. I didn't know it was the sarcophagus that brought him back to life. I thought I'd been delusional and almost buried him alive when there was nothing wrong with him."

Daniel wrapped his arms around himself. "I didn't remember it, Darius. I needed to forget it and I did. You didn't do me any...permanent damage."

O'Neill looked at him in disbelief, "How is killing you not doing you any 'permanent damage'?"

"It never happened, Jack. Ask the NID. I signed the forms that said so."

Golding looked up at Daniel. "After I put you in that thing, Rajid came in and asked what I'd done. He made me open it and get you out in case you were still alive. He never meant you to get hurt. He was only trying to avenge his daughter's honor and keep you safe. He never wanted any harm to come to you. I think that was what killed him, when he realized what I'd done." He began to walk
around the sarcophagus visibly willing the golden artifact to do its work, while Teal'c kept a watchful eye on him,

"It was Rajid." As the last piece slotted into place O'Neill felt suddenly exhausted with too many old crimes. "He's the one who wrote to Golding's wife and he's the one who spiked Golding's drugs."

"I know." Daniel's voice sounded ragged and O'Neill guessed he had only worked it out a little while before himself. No wonder Daniel was twanging like an overstrung guitar.

O'Neill looked at Golding. "You asked his help in accessing your…visions and he said he could get you just the thing. The mandrake stuff was supposed to kill you, but it just made you so crazy you kidnapped Daniel."

Golding shook his head. "Rajid loved Daniel like a son. He never meant any harm to come to him. He was trying to protect him from me."

"Well, that worked."

"Jack." Daniel gave him a look of reproach.

He wasn't being tactless, damnit. He knew the old guy had meant a lot to Daniel. He knew Daniel's friend had just been shot right in front of him. He wasn't insensitive to the current situation. He also had very strong feelings about certain issues. "Hey, I just don't think archaeologists should go around killing people."

Daniel returned his gaze steadily. "Neither do I." There was so much behind his words it took O'Neill's already painful breath away. All those Jaffa Daniel had never wanted to kill, but felt he had to. Maybe he'd been having doubts for a long time. When O'Neill had doubts he tended to shout a little louder to blot them out, Daniel just went quiet. Perhaps he no longer believed in their way of fighting this war, he was just afraid the rest of them might get killed without him there to translate something vital, or they might end up at war with people Daniel could have gotten through to….

O'Neill wrapped an arm around his aching ribcage. "Shit."

"Are you okay?" Daniel's attention was torn between the sarcophagus and O'Neill.

O'Neill gazed into Daniel's worried blue eyes and wondered how they had ever got to this point anyway. "I was just wondering if I'm going through the 'gate to protect you, or you're going through the 'gate to protect me."

"We're going because it's the right thing to do and the best place to be." Daniel lifted up O'Neill's t-shirt and grimaced at what was probably a boot mark although he had no intention of looking in case it made it hurt more. Daniel was fussing enough for two anyway. "I think you may have cracked a rib. You've got a lot of bruises here."

O'Neill gently but firmly removed Daniel from examining his ribs. "Do you still believe that? About it being the right thing to do and the best place to be?"

Daniel looked back at the sarcophagus, then around at the walls, then back at O'Neill. He sighed. "Ask me if we get John back. And when I've had a shower, and some food, and some sleep. And I know you don't have a broken rib sticking in your lung."

Carter's voice crackled through on the radio. "The NID are almost with you, sir. What do you want
"Tell her to get to a safe distance." Daniel leant across to speak into the radio himself. "Sam, you've done all you can. We can find our own way back from here. Go outside and make sure Alexis and the others don't come back in looking for us...."

"Sorry, Daniel, the energy build-up must be interfering with the transmission. You're breaking up. I didn't quite catch that...."

"Sam!" He looked at the radio on O'Neill's chest in indignation. "Is the channel still open? Order her to leave."

O'Neill shrugged. "You heard her. The energy build-up is interfering with the transmission." No way was he giving Carter an order she wasn't going to obey. That would just be plain bad leadership.

He looked at the golden sarcophagus with dislike. So this was what NID were after. A weapon of power, the ability to bring people back from the dead, to live forever, to make themselves faster, stronger, healthier, and ultimately no longer themselves. Heroin was nothing beside this thing. The ultimate high for the ultimate rich and powerful few, making it the ultimate bribe. Whoever controlled the sarcophagus controlled so much more than any NID officer should, while a president who'd been through the sarcophagus a few times would declare war on anyone because he'd know himself to be invincible....

O'Neill touched the radio again. "Carter, is the energy build up going to take out the sarcophagus or do we need to plant some C4 to stop the NID getting their grubby fingers on it?"

"You back away from it right now, O'Neill, and keep your hands where I can see them."

O'Neill turned around to see a tall broad-shouldered NID agent with a gun pointing at his head. Even without the gun and the uniform he was wearing he didn't think this was a guy he would have warmed to. He looked the kind who had been MVP of everything he did. The type who others picked out as leader of men even at High School and who got to go home and fuck the Prom Queen, but coupled with the dead-eyed expression of someone who wouldn't necessarily have asked her first. O'Neill felt his hackles bristle in the same instinctive hostility he'd felt towards Golding. Given that Golding had definitely been ready willing and able to kill him less than twenty minutes earlier, he guessed that was a good warning to listen to. The other three NID agents also had their weapons drawn and the unmistakable body language of men who had no problem with pulling the trigger but they didn't ring his warning bells in the way their leader did. There was a second when O'Neill thought about reaching for the gun he held but then he looked back into the shark eyes of the man in charge and reason reasserted itself. He put his hands up, although not without a look that he hoped spoke volumes. "Good of you to drop in. What took you so long?"

As Golding started forward, Daniel grabbed his arm. "Darius, don't...."

"What do you sons of bitches want?" Golding snarled. He shook off Daniel's hand but did stay where he was.

"What we've always wanted and what you've consistently failed to deliver, Professor," the first said coolly.

O'Neill dropped his head and whispered rapidly into the radio, "Carter, if you're getting this we could really do with some backup down here." Then he was forced to break off as an NID agent approached and plucked the gun from his hand and the radio neatly from his chest. He held his
hands up higher. "And where were you guys an hour ago when I needed you?"

The leader scanned them all with unconcealed disdain. "Ah, Colonel O'Neill, Doctor Jackson, the Jaffa, and Professor Darius Golding. Four of my least favorite people all gathered in the same place. How convenient."

"The feeling's entirely mutual, Thornton," Golding made no attempt to hide his loathing and O'Neill didn't need to ask to know these two had a history going back a long time. He also didn't need to be told this was the guy who'd got Daniel to sign all those disclaimers from his hospital bed.

"Who did you kill this time, Professor?" The NID colonel gave him a look of contempt as he jerked his head at the sarcophagus. "That's a bad habit you've got there."

"You're the ones who gave him the illegal mind-altering drugs," Daniel retorted.

Thornton turned his head to look at Daniel and his smile was chilling. "Hello again, Doctor Jackson, Remember me? Now if you don't want me to beat the crap out of you before I put a bullet in your brain, shut the fuck up."

Daniel blinked in mild hurt. "It's good to see you again too, Colonel."

"Hey!" O'Neill held Thornton's gaze. "Don't talk to him like that."

Thornton smiled again. "You don't get it yet do you, O'Neill?"

"Why don't you explain it to me."

Thornton nodded at Golding. "Why don't I let our resident psychic do that?"

O'Neill looked at Golding who continued to gaze at Thornton with loathing. "We've outlived our usefulness, O'Neill, and they don't want your department to know their department has a sarcophagus. We were never supposed to walk out of here."

Thornton nodded. "Right first time, Golding. Now if only you'd been that speedy about working out how to get here, think of all the trouble we'd have been saved. Of course, I've always wondered why it was you never got one of those neat little psychic flashes when your wife was taking a bath with a razorblade."

O'Neill saw the raw pain on Golding's face darken into furious anger then as he started forward Daniel said rapidly, "Don't give him the satisfaction, Darius."

Thornton put his head on one side. "Oh that's right. He wasn't tuned into his crazy wife's psychic wavelength because he was too busy trying to get into your physical shorts. Isn't that right, Jackson?"

O'Neill didn't know what it cost him but he was proud of the way Daniel kept his voice so even. "Why don't you go and take a cocktail of LSD, Mescaline, Mandrake, Opium poppy, and Blue Lotus flower and see how clear your thinking is, Colonel."

Thornton gave him a nasty smile. "I think I'll pass but I hope you're equally forgiving when I kill you, which is going to be happening...." he looked at his watch, "Ooh any minute now."

"You can't be serious." O'Neill looked at the four NID men in disbelief, all staring back at him impassively, eyes invisible behind their sunglasses. "You're going to shoot us all just so NID
doesn’t have to share its new toy?"

"We're tired of the SGC interfering in our business. If you hadn't messed up our operation two years ago we would have an effective deterrent against the Goa'uld by now."

"Or have allied yourselves with them in order to obtain the technology to which they have access," Teal'c rumbled quietly.

Daniel shook his head. "This is insane. You're supposed to be working to protect the country from the Goa'uld. How does killing us help you do that?"

"Well, let me see." Thornton walked towards him. "O'Neill originally risked the safety of everyone on Earth lying about the true outcome of the first mission to Abydos just to cover your sorry ass, Jackson. You've repeatedly interfered with our attempts to obtain the benefits of alien technology and know-how. If it hadn't been for your totally unwarranted interference, for instance, we would have had the use of Tollan technology for the past five years. You also prevented us from obtaining the use of Eurondan weaponry. Something that would have been invaluable to us."

"The Eurondan leaders were pondscum," O'Neill could see the golden coffin gleaming at him, sleek and dangerous and magical. As if it knew how much power it had, like the king's ankus of Kipling, able to make men kill one another just by existing.

Thornton shrugged. "How they chose to run their own country is no concern of ours. They had valuable technology, which you failed to obtain due in no small part to the interference of Doctor Bleeding Heart here. In my opinion, given his questionable loyalties, the Jaffa should never have been placed in a position of trust. While you, O'Neill, by screwing up our operation to obtain alien technology have set us back at least ten years in our fight against the Goa'uld. And as I really don't think we want Golding writing his memoirs, frankly, I don't think there's a better job I could do for the defense of this planet than to put a bullet in each of you here and now."

Daniel folded his arms. "And the fact that's cold-blooded murder doesn't bother you at all?"

Thornton gave him another mirthless smile. "Please keep being the same sanctimonious little do-gooder you always seemed to be in the reports, Doctor Jackson. It will make it so much more pleasurable to put a bullet between your eyes."

"Hey!" O'Neill held up his hands. On another occasion he might have found Daniel's look of hurt indignation amusing, but whether it was something in the chamber affecting him or whether he was just naturally an amoral bastard, Thornton looked deadly serious in his irrational dislikes to him.

"Daniel's a civilian. Technically, so is Teal'c. No one is going to believe anything they say, and, given his medical record, Golding is no threat to national security either."

"But Hammond will believe them, O'Neill. And Hammond has friends in high places. Doctor Jackson will go running back to the SGC complaining about us nasty unethical soldiers taking the big bad Goa'uld technology to Area 52 and before we know it we're going to have people interfering in our business once again."

"You haven't been sticking your head in the symbiote pool, have you, Thornton?" O'Neill demanded. "Because I have to say right now I'm finding it a little difficult to see any difference between you and a Goa'uld."

Thornton gave O'Neill a long look. "Your choice, O'Neill. Do you want me to kill Jackson cleanly with a bullet or do you want me to beat him to death? I mean – it's Golding who's going down on the report as the murderer so either would be appropriate. In fact, given Golding's psychiatric
reports, there are a whole lot of things we could do to Jackson before we kill him which you might not enjoy watching."

O'Neill stared at Thornton in disbelief and then realized he'd come in at the tail end of a very long grudge match between this guy and Daniel, that Daniel, ironically, didn't even know about. He wondered if this guy had missed out on a promotion because of the screw-up of nineteen eighty-nine. Whatever the reason, Thornton was clearly a guy who could harbor resentment for his country and it was a waste of time trying to appeal to his better nature, as he didn't seem to have one. O'Neill turned to the other three NID men. "I don't believe this is what you signed up for. This has nothing to do with national security and you know it."

"Your trouble, O'Neill, is that you can't stay focused," Thornton told him over his shoulder. "We're supposed to be protecting the planet from alien invasion and you're worrying about keeping in with the Asgard. Haven't you ever noticed that our so-called 'allies' aren't sharing what they know? We've tried your way for five long years and it doesn't work. Time for you to step aside and to let the people who get things done do their jobs."

"Call me old-fashioned, but I still don't get how killing the people who are out there in the frontline fighting the Goa'uld you supposedly oppose is you 'doing your job'." Behind Thornton he could see crackles of blue light getting brighter. There was an energy pulse from the floor discharging straight into his nerve endings, making his knees throb a protest. The way all the hairs on the back of his neck were standing up told him that this was definitely not a drill.

Thornton was still looking at Daniel with dislike. "Do you know how long I had to work on Golding, holding his hand, keeping a lid on his medication, putting up with his crap, only to see it all ruined because you got in the way?"

O'Neill stepped forward holding up his hands, trying to get the attention away from Daniel and back onto him. "Daniel was kidnapped at knifepoint by a guy you'd been supplying with dangerous mind-altering drugs. Given what Golding did to Daniel, I think an apology might actually be in order here."

Thornton shrugged. "Frankly, O'Neill, I don't give a damn what Golding did or why. I care that we spent a million dollars and didn't get anything to show for it just because Jackson apparently makes for a nice piece of ass."

O'Neill saw Daniel reach out and grab Golding and Teal'c who both started forward at the same time. "Don't," Daniel said quietly, watching Thornton. "That's what he wants."

O'Neill realized in the same moment that Daniel was right. Thornton wasn't quite as able to shoot them down in cold blood as he was claiming so it would make life a lot easier for him if they could provide him with an excuse by rushing him.

"Stay put." O'Neill looked across at Teal'c. "That's an order."

"Sir," one of the other NID officers was looking extremely unhappy. "I thought our orders were to retrieve any Goa'uld artifacts without injury to any of the civilians?"

Thornton didn't look at the man. "There are no civilians in this room, Harris. Everyone here is an employee of the United States military. That makes them all legitimate targets. No one walks out of here alive. That's an order."

O'Neill heard the grate of the sarcophagus lid sliding back behind him at the same moment he saw Carter moving silently into position behind the NID officers. The paintings on the walls made for a
strange backdrop to an Air Force officer with a Beretta but he couldn't help thinking she made for a much better view than a bunch of gods with strange headdresses sailing down rafts to the underworld.

Thornton was turning his attention to the opening sarcophagus and Daniel spoke rapidly. "John doesn't work for the military, Colonel. He doesn't know a damned thing about the Goa'uld. You can't justify –"

"Shut up." Thornton pointed the gun at Daniel's head and O'Neill had to stop himself from lunging forward. He looked at Teal'c and saw the Jaffa was poised to grab Daniel and pull him out of the way, but even he wasn't faster than a speeding bullet, especially when the gun it was going to be fired from was barely a foot away from Daniel's head.

"Don't do this, Thornton," O'Neill said quietly. "They don't pay you enough for this."

"It's people like Jackson that are stopping us defending ourselves," Thornton snapped. "We're in the middle of a war. We could be invaded at any minute. We have the right to defend ourselves by any means necessary."

O'Neill saw Golding take one step backwards, then another one, inching almost imperceptibly in the direction of the sarcophagus.

Daniel darted a glance over his shoulder at the lid still sliding back with agonizing slowness. "Colonel, please, just put the gun away for one minute. I'll tell John something to get him out of here. He can go and join the others. You don't need to kill him."

"Nelson's a civilian," O'Neill added. "Your own men are telling you civilians are off limits."

"He took the Air Force funding when it was offered. That makes him part of the military."

Harris was looking at Thornton anxiously. O'Neill heard him murmur, "Sir, I don't think this is part of our mandate."

Carter was directly behind the other two NID officers who were unhappily observing the scene from the doorway. One gun, two opponents. As O'Neill watched she simultaneously jammed her M-9 and two fingers against the necks of the two officers. The way they both froze, silently, did O'Neill's heart good. In a moment she had whipped the sidearm out of the second one's hand before he'd realized it was her fingernails against his skin rather than a gun barrel. As the two men turned their heads to look at her she put a finger to her lips and then pointed at the floor. With only the briefest show of reluctance, they lay face down on the floor with their hands behind their heads. O'Neill wondered if a part of them was glad of her intervention, so that whatever happened next it wouldn't be their responsibility.

As the sarcophagus lid continued to open with agonizing slowness, Thornton leveled his sidearm on the place where Nelson was going to appear, expression utterly ruthless. O'Neill looked at Daniel's poised body language and mentally willed him with everything he had not to make a dive for that gun, because he was damned sure that when Thornton had finished cracking his skull with it, he was going to have no problem with blowing a hole through his head.

His attention torn between the sarcophagus and Daniel, O'Neill watched as Nelson slowly sat up, one hand to his head and a bewildered expression on his face.

Thornton's finger was tightening on the trigger as Carter leveled her sidearm and shouted, "Drop it, Colonel! Now!"
Thornton looked over his shoulder at her, shouted, "Harris, take her out!" then swung his automatic back to fire on the confused Egyptologist.

"Daniel, don't!" O'Neill yelled.

Daniel was diving for the gun while O'Neill was still shouting at him not to. In that agonizing split second as Thornton's attention wavered from the clear target of Nelson to the Daniel who was launching himself at him like a particularly desperate alley cat throwing itself at a pit bull, O'Neill could see exactly where the bullet was going to enter Daniel's body and how there was no way he could ever get there in time to prevent it. A gunshot roared deafeningly in the small chamber.

Worried about hitting Daniel, Carter fired a split-second after Thornton, not quite in time to stop his finger from squeezing the trigger. So many things happened in the same instant that they seemed to burn themselves on his retina while his ears were still ringing from the double percussion of those two gunshots. The puff of red and gray matter in the air which told him Carter had gone for the headshot the situation had warranted and taken out Thornton and half his skull with one perfectly placed bullet. The blur of dark muscle and determination as Teal'c dived at the same instant Daniel did, and with greater speed, precision, and weight, intercepting Daniel and wrapping himself around him so that it was Teal'c's body instead of Daniel's that the bullet found. It tore a furrow along Teal'c's side before speeding towards the place where Nelson was staring at the scene in disbelief. The simultaneous gold and gray blur of Golding throwing himself in front of Nelson.

He blinked and then there was another carousel of images. Golding slumped back against the sarcophagus, a bloody hand clasped to his shoulder, Nelson gazing at the scene of carnage all around him with open-mouthed disbelief, Thornton's body jolting as it hit the floor like a mealsack, Daniel in Teal'c's arms, the Jaffa still shielding him from a danger that wasn't there anymore, blood pouring from Teal'c's side from where the bullet had furrowed it, and most of all of Harris, the NID man who was leveling his gun to point on the back of Carter's head.

O'Neill said rapidly, "Don't do it, Captain."

Harris' finger tightened on the trigger and O'Neill had time to see the horrified look on Daniel's face, the anguish on Teal'c's, saw Carter close her eyes as she waited for the bullet to hit, and then Harris slowly eased his finger off the trigger, put the safety on and held up the gun in submission. "I'm putting this down now, Major Carter," he said quietly.

"Good choice," O'Neill told him.

Carter turned around as Harris slowly lowered the gun to the floor and then dropped it. There was barely a tremor in her voice as she said, "Thank you, Captain." Only the bead of sweat trickling down her forehead revealed how scared she'd been for that moment. But looking at Daniel's face, O'Neill guessed that Carter had just paid him back for whatever fright he'd given her earlier because he was still frozen with the horror of Harris leveling up that gun with the back of her head.

O'Neill said quickly, "Daniel – breathe!" and was relieved to see him gasp some air back into his shocked lungs. Then he was recovering enough to help roll Teal'c over and look at the bloody furrow along his side, grimacing in sympathy and reaching out to staunch the wound. "Thanks, Teal'c. I owe you another one."

"You are welcome, Daniel Jackson."

O'Neill said shortly, "You're welcome to a thick ear from me if you ever try jumping another guy with a loaded gun when I've told you not to, Daniel!"
Daniel gave him a look of shocked surprise and he guessed that he had momentarily forgotten his resolution of the past few years about always treating Daniel like an equal and a fellow adult, and not letting the toddler-approaching-a-shark-infested-paddling-pool effect Daniel occasionally had on him alter the perfect balance, trust, and mutual respect of their relationship.

"Golding, old man, I think you've been shot," Nelson observed, still sitting up in the sarcophagus in open-mouthed bewilderment, staring at a bleeding Golding.

Golding closed his eyes, one hand pressed to his shoulder, he half-laughed as he winced, the dim lighting making the blood look greenish and alien. "Well, under the circumstances I rather think that serves me right, don't you?"

O'Neill held out his hand for one of the guns Carter was holding and she gave him a sidearm. He took in her pale face and trembling hands and spoke quietly undercover of checking the clip. "It was Thornton or Nelson, Major. He didn't leave you any choice."

She nodded, still looking shaken. "I know. Thank you, sir." She went and crouched down by Teal'c, pulling out a sterile pad with fingers that barely shook. He saw Daniel saying something to her that made her nod, saw Teal'c clasp her hand briefly, and thought how lucky he was that after all they'd been through his team still knew the value of a human life, even the life of someone as intrinsically worthless as Thornton appeared to have been.

"Golding, how are you doing?" O'Neill enquired, keeping a wary eye on the NID agents as he did so.

"I'll live."

"Carter."

She tossed him a sterile dressing and he crossed over to where Golding was still trying to breathe around the pain of a bullet wound. O'Neill knew how much one of those babies hurt but he knew he was also the only person in the room apart from Golding himself who really thought the guy had it coming.

Golding his gaze and smiled through another wince, answering the expression on his face. "You get no argument from me, O'Neill."

"What happened here?" Nelson made a face at the sight of Golding's injury.

"The right guy died…eventually." O'Neill peeled the old coat back from Golding's shoulder to look at the injury. "Well, the bullet wound isn't too bad, Golding, but I'd say you're up to get ten different kinds of infection from this coat."

As Daniel helped Teal'c to his feet, Carter looked around the chamber checking some little whirligig in her hand while the blue light fizzled and crackled across the stones. "Sir, we have to leave now."

Golding was looking at Carter in uncoconcealed admiration. "You know I've been wanting someone to blow a hole in that son of a bitch's head for the past fifteen years and she did it with such…style. Is she single?"

His and Daniel's "Don't even think about it!" came out in perfect unison.

Carter gave them a look that could have stripped skin and Daniel held up a finger. "We were just saying…. I mean he is a serial adulterer with a history of mental illness and…. But we weren't
interfering. At all….” He trailed off unconvincingly.

O'Neill slapped the sterile pad on Golding's shoulder with more force than was strictly necessary and shoved his blood-stained hand over it to hold it still before looking at the other archaeologist. "You okay, Nelson?"

The man gave his head a shake. "A little confused to be honest, old man. I don't really understand why there were all those bullets flying around and while I presume there's a good reason why I woke up lying in a royal sarcophagus nothing is actually coming to mind."

"Daniel can explain later. We have to leave now." O'Neill turned to the NID men. "You've got almost no time at all to get out of here."

"What about the sarcophagus?" Harris protested.

Carter said rapidly, "Captain, this place is going to blow up any minute and anything inside the perimeter is going to be reduced to powder, including the sarcophagus, and you, if you're still here. Now can you remember the way out of here?"

Harris nodded. "Grosvenor has a photographic memory."

O'Neill pointed to the exit. "You heard Carter, kids. Move it."

The NID men set off at a speed O'Neill just knew the motley crew of people for whom he was temporarily responsible weren't going to be able to match. With Carter helping Teal'c and Daniel helping Nelson it was left to him to assist the wounded Golding. The blue light was crackling all around them now and O'Neill imagined he could feel the rage in the air. Carter could tell him all he liked it was to do with energy fields and the properties of naquada but it felt an awful lot like the ghosts of the Goa'uld who'd died in this place determined that no humans were going to escape from the fate which had greeted them here. O'Neill wondered if they were going to escape from the fate which had greeted them here. Nelson was looking very shaky from the sarcophagus and was clearly particularly bewildered by the bullet hole in his shirt, he kept poking his finger through it in confusion and then feeling across his chest for a wound that wasn't there. Golding had been shot and was clearly hurting, ditto Teal'c. Carter had just been forced to put a bullet through the brain of a fellow soldier and looked as if a stiff drink wouldn't have gone amiss. He and Daniel were both borderline concussed and generally looked like crap. At least he presumed he looked like crap because Daniel kept darting anxious glances over his shoulder at O'Neill and looking not remotely reassured by the sight of him.

He could never have remembered all these twists and turns. But Carter and Golding seemed to know the way, taking it in turns to shout out 'Right here!' or 'Second left!' at the appropriate moment. To him it just seemed like a waking nightmare, the kind of place in which he had only found himself in the past when he was trapped in a bad dream and couldn't wake up. Up ahead, Nelson was breathlessly asking for an explanation of various things and Daniel was panting back that he couldn't tell him now, but he would later. O'Neill wasn't so convinced there was going to be a later. It felt as if they were running in circles, all these lefts and rights, and little chambers that looked identical to the ones they'd just left. What if all they were doing was chasing their own tails? The build up energy was getting more and more difficult to ignore. Every hair on his skin was prickling with the electricity in the air, and the walls were starting to pulse with a louder and faster rhythm, like a heart getting ready to burst.

"Left here, and then straight ahead…." Golding murmured to him. Somehow in O'Neill helping the wounded man it had turned into the wounded man helping him, Golding's immense strength helping to keep him upright as that weight and pain in his chest got worse. He was breathless and bathed in sweat, all the too-familiar signs that he was more badly hurt than he needed to be if he
was going to get out of here alive.

"Here, O'Neil," Golding tightened the grip on him. "This is the last doorway. We're out of the center now." Golding shuddered as they passed through it and O'Neill wondered just how much he was remembering now that he'd managed to help himself to forget in the intervening thirteen years. He had a feeling there were things Golding had done to his prisoner that Daniel was never going to tell him about.

"Nearly there now, sir!" Carter shouted it back to him over his shoulder and he could tell by the edge in her voice she was worried he wasn't going to make it.

She wasn't the only one. He had a horrible feeling he was going to die here. That this was what the Labyrinth wanted and had always wanted, that half of the reason for Daniel's fear had been him all along, not just what had been done to Daniel in this place, but what he feared might be done to O'Neill here if he came along. He wondered if there was something in the walls that made even ordinary people see visions and if that was why for someone like Golding it was like declaring open season on his sixth sense. A white-heat of too much psychic information shorting out his reason circuits, his mind filled with an entire satellite network of 24 Hour Goa'uld Horror TV.

He didn't know if it was his own exhaustion, a trick of the murky lights or if some of Golding's psychic energy was leaching into him, but, as he ran, the pictures on the walls seemed to turn their heads to look at him, the jackal heads snarled, the snakes hissed, scorpions shook their stings, hawks raised their wings, and the Goa'uld turned their glowing eyes upon him. There was noise all around them, a buffet of angry energy which was rising from a whine to a roar. The weight in his chest was getting heavier and heavier and he was no longer sure if he was holding Golding up or Golding was supporting him. When he stumbled and Golding hauled him to his feet, he guessed it was definitely the latter.

"Jack…?"

He could see Daniel ahead of him, turning his head, eyes huge with worry while blue lighting sparked all around him. Just for a second O'Neill knew what it felt like to be Eurydice in the damned myths Daniel insisted on telling every night when they sat around the campfire on alien worlds and he and Teal'c exchanged fairy tales. That must have been what her last sight of Orpheus was like before she was sucked back into the darkness. He could feel an unearthly wind wrapping itself around him now, trying to pull him back into the center where Nekheny and Inanna had died. He was never going to get out of this place.

"Go!" he shouted at Daniel. "I'll catch up with you."

As Nelson stumbled and Daniel turned to help him, O'Neill felt his legs sag with exhaustion and knew he couldn't make this, it really was going to end like this, here on earth in a damned alien spaceship, with the ghosts of the dead Goa'uld cackling in his ears for all eternity.

"No you don't, O'Neill." Golding grunted with exertion as he hauled him up. "You're getting out of here alive even if I have to carry you."

Before O'Neill could remind Golding that he'd been shot, the man was hauling O'Neill's arm around his shoulder and running with him, that Herculean strength which had been such a disadvantage when the man was insane and his captor suddenly one hell of an asset.

As they ran, O'Neill saw the falcon-headed Goa'uld snatch at them angrily, heard Nekheny's death scream, saw a lion-headed goddess smile as she ripped open his chest with her taloned fingers, saw the blood run down Hathor's chin as she bit into his heart, heard Inanna's despairing cry of grief,
and then he was shaking his head to clear it and instead hearing the gunshot from the garden, seeing the look on Sara's face, then he was being hunted in the dark corridors of Ra's ship by Anubis guards who moved with the speed of serpents and struck with the force of lions, the staff weapon flared and Daniel was dead before he hit the ground.

Nekheny stepped out of the painting on the wall and stood in front of him with his arms folded, seven foot tall and with his eyes glowing gold.

"All those who disturb my tomb will die here."

As he watched, Teal'c and Carter then Daniel and Nelson ran straight through him, the dead god rippling like a curtain before turning into something unmistakably solid as they approached.

O'Neill reached for his gun but Golding breathed, "It's not there, O'Neill," before dragging him on. O'Neill flinched in readiness for the impact but then they were the through the other side of the place where the Goa'uld wasn't standing and running for the distant hole of light that was the exit.

"If it wasn't there how could you see it too?" he panted.

"I'm psychic. What's your excuse?" Golding gasped back.

He could feel the strength draining out of his body. He coughed and blood spattered on the floor, the weight on his chest was like a medicine ball now, his legs running with water where blood and bone was supposed to be. He saw Carter and Teal'c and then Daniel and Nelson pass out into the sunlight. The Labyrinth was roaring its anger at losing prey now, the walls alive with blue fire. His legs gave out and he felt himself slamming towards the floor, a singing in his ears, and then he was being hoisted up.

Golding said hoarsely, "No one else is dying because of me today, O'Neill."

"Golding, you can't…!"

Before O'Neill could finish his protest, the man threw him over his shoulder, grunting with the pain as he did so, and then began to run with him for the exit. As they ran O'Neill heard the roar of the fire, felt the heat before he saw it, and then he could see it, a red ball of rage hurtling out towards them at the speed of thought. The power of the blast hit them before the flames licked over them, propelling them out of the darkness into the sunlight. They hit the ground so hard O'Neill swore he heard Golding's ribs crack, and then a new wave of blackness wrapped itself around him and carried him into a soft velvet sea.

The last thing he heard before he sank beneath the surface was Daniel calling his name.

***

VIII: Minnesota

This time when he woke up it was to the smell of antiseptic and the crispest sheets he'd ever felt against his skin. No one was putting an oxygen mask over his face or telling him to count backwards from ten. Nor were they crying, or holding his hand or whisper-shouting at him that he'd damned well better not die or they were coming to the Underworld after him to fetch him back. They weren't shining lights in his eyes, or prodding at him either. It was daylight outside but someone had pulled the curtain half across to dim the daylight. The curtain was the color of verdigris and as the light poured through it the effect was a little like being at the bottom of the sea,
the sunlight sending a pattern dancing on the far wall in different shades of green and gold.

"Jack?"

He turned his head to find Daniel sitting up blearily on a hospital chair at the side of his bed, glasses askew, fumbling sleepily to put them on properly.

O'Neill focused on him. "I told you to go away hours ago."

"I did go away." Daniel reached for the ice chips. "Then I came back again."

Daniel had shaved and changed his clothes. He still looked as if he hadn't slept in a week, but he didn't smell of anything but soap, not only the sweat but also the fear scent had vanished too. When O'Neill looked into Daniel's eyes the rabbit-in-front-of-headlights look had gone.

"I guess that doctor was telling the truth then and I really am going to live."

Daniel gazed at him for a moment. "Talking about telling the truth – Sam and Teal'c both have a bone to pick with you for lying to them."

"I didn't lie to them." He accepted the ice chips Daniel held out to him and popped one in his mouth. He liked the way they first numbed his tongue then melted on it although he still thought they should come in different flavors.

"You had a broken rib sticking in your lung and you told them you were 'fine'."

"Am I a doctor?" O'Neill countered. "How was I supposed to know I had a broken rib?"

"You told me you were fine too."

The reproachful look was on full beam and O'Neill winced then rallied, determined he wasn't going to be guilt-tripped today. "I told you I'd live – which I have. Come to that, I don't remember you telling me you damned near died getting to me and Teal'c had to give you CPR." Carter had told him that in one of his brief forays into consciousness at the same time she'd told him that the site was secure, the explosion had been contained, and the other archaeologists were bewildered but unharmed. He distinctly remembered saying 'Good work, Major' before he sank back into sleep.

Daniel scratched his neck as a blatant displacement activity and then thrust the cup at him again. "More ice chips?"

"Did you tell the doctors about that whole having-to-be-resuscitated thing?"

Daniel wrinkled his nose. "Sam mentioned something."

O'Neill smiled smugly. "Doc Fraiser flew over, didn't she? Bet she yelled at you."

Daniel gave him another reproachful look. "She would have yelled at you, too, except you were under anesthetic at the time having major surgery."

"I thought it was her shining that penlight in my eyes last time I woke up." He tried to look at his watch then realized he wasn't wearing it. "What day is it anyway?"

"It's three days after you…you know." The damned near died was silent but O'Neill read it in his eyes anyway.

O'Neill swallowed the ice chip he was sucking. "How is everyone else?"
"John's fine. He's being discharged tomorrow. Alexis is pissed that we blew up his archaeological site when he was supposed to be delivering a paper on it in Boston in a few weeks but otherwise okay. Sanjay and Hélène are being philosophical about it. Inga has been by Darius's bedside almost the whole time – except for coming into see you a few times. She thinks you look sweet when you're asleep by the way."

He decided to ignore that. If they were going to start jeering about who got the most sappy looks directed at them while they were asleep, Daniel was toast. Even Carter could hit Defcon 7 on the Sap Scale when Daniel was in the infirmary, every nurse in Cheyenne Mountain wanted to fluff his pillows, and he couldn't stub a toe without Fraiser wanting to keep him in for an overnighter in case of complications. "Golding?"

"Touch and go for a while, but he's making a good recovery now. What's really interesting is that he said he'd been having headaches and visions to do with that place since 1989 and as soon as the Labyrinth blew up they all stopped. He said he feels better than he has in years, apart from his lacerating guilt about John and me, of course, but I hope he's going to get over that."

"I don't." O'Neill realized he was hungry. "Did anyone bring me any fruit?"

"He saved your life."

"He killed you." O'Neill met Daniel's eye, forcing him to confront it. "He killed you because you wouldn't sleep with him."

Daniel shook his head. "He killed me because his wife had just committed suicide, he was out of his mind with guilt, and that place was affecting him. I think he was possessed by the Goa'uld." He shivered. "He did things Darius wouldn't have done. The same way I did things I wouldn't have done after I went through the sarcophagus too many times."

He heard that 'did things Darius wouldn't have done' and mentally filed it away as a subject to return to when Daniel was drunk enough to let his bad experiences be coaxed from him, and hopefully exorcised. O'Neill held out his hand for more ice chips. "How many times is it you've died now? I've actually lost count."

"Oh, like you've never needed to be put through a sarcophagus." Daniel held out the cup.

He grabbed a handful of chips. "Once. And then only after I got turned into a Jaffa. Which could happen to anyone. Ask Teal'c." He took in Daniel's haggard appearance and said gently, "Why don't you get some sleep? I'm not going anywhere."

"You're right about that, Colonel." There was an ominous note to Janet Fraiser's voice, and by the way Daniel winced O'Neill gathered he'd been on the business end of a serious scolding already.

Despite the way her high heels clicked a warning on the tiled floor as she approached, O'Neill gave her his most winsome smile. "Is that my favorite doctor in the whole wide universe? My, you're looking beautiful today. Have you done something different with your hair?" He swallowed a mouthful of chips quickly in case she decided he wasn't entitled to them and took them away.

She gave him a withering look. "Don't waste your breath, Colonel, it's not going to work." When she turned to Daniel her expression softened to one of concern. "Daniel, I distinctly remember telling you to get at least eight hours sleep." She looked at her watch. "That was three hours ago."

"I'm not tired." Daniel wrapped his arms around himself.

"Daniel…." There was the usual mixture of pleading and reproach in her voice. The way Daniel
could turn scary Janet Fraiser into total mush was always educational, especially as half the time Daniel wasn't even doing it on purpose. O'Neill would have made fun of the doctor about it except for the fact that he wasn't much better than she was at staying tough when Daniel looked unhappy.

Fraiser put her hands on Daniel's arms and squeezed them gently. "Colonel O'Neill is going to be fine, I promise you. And as I believe that in a rash moment when he came out of the anesthetic you agreed to take a fishing trip with him to Minnesota, you really need to go and build up your strength for that coming ordeal."

Daniel smiled at her, his rare sweet smile, and O'Neill swore he saw her visibly wilt under the power of it. "Okay, Janet." He waved to O'Neill. "I'll see you later."

O'Neill waved back then watched him walk across the room, veering a little as his tiredness caught up with him. "He loves Minnesota, you know. Can't get enough of it. He just hides it well."

Fraiser waited until Daniel was out of the room before turning on O'Neill crossly. "You scared the hell out of Daniel, Colonel. Do you know how many hours you were in surgery?"

"I didn't do it on purpose," he protested. "At no point did I invite one of his loony-tune grave-robbing pals to take me prisoner!"

"Did you or did you not pretend to be in a sexual relationship with Daniel for the sole purpose of aggravating a man you knew to be delusional, inhumanly strong, and taking psychotropic drugs?"

There were times when Janet Fraiser really reminded him of his mom. O'Neill shifted uncomfortably under her gimlet gaze. "Not…much." As her gaze continued to laser him, he waved a hand. "Hey, he was really annoying and he had it coming."

Janet flashed a penlight in his eyes, making him wince. "This is a long list of avoidable injuries for you. I see it's not enough for you to regularly smart-mouth System Lords or go out of your way to irritate aliens with short-temperis and advanced weapons, you now have to start annoying dangerous ex-mental patients as well."

O'Neill tugged at his earlobe. "I hear he's recovering?"

"Yes, although it's a miracle he survived. The man must have the constitution of an ox."

"Nelson?"

"Confused but fine apart from that."

O'Neill thought about the sharpness of Alexis' disappointment, the hint of defiance in Nelson's voice in the jeep as he defended Daniel from O'Neill's imaginary criticism. "He's been a good friend to Daniel."

Fraiser picked up the chart from the end of his bed. "So have you."

He thought about Euronda, the look on Daniel's face as he killed the robot, a hundred little slights and hurts and moments when he'd said the wrong thing or not been paying attention, hadn't had the guts to say the kinder words because he didn't want to look sappy because after all he was a guy and guys didn't express their feelings. He felt suddenly very tired. "Sometimes."

Fraiser scanned his chart. "I've told General Hammond you both need at least two weeks off after you're released and he's agreed."
"Good." He could never work out what she was thinking from the way she read his chart. As far as he could tell professional poker players had nothing on doctors when it came to keeping their feelings hidden.

"The general told me to tell you that you did good, Colonel."

He had a horrible feeling that praise from Hammond still made him light up like a Christmas tree. His father had never been generous with praise, so from people he respected it meant a lot to him, which was why he'd tried, in the past at any rate, not to be unstinting with it to his teammates when he felt they deserved it. "He's not pissed about the sarcophagus?"

"He's glad you're alive." She put the clipboard back. "As are we all, sir."

He blinked at her in surprise.

"You nearly weren't, you know." Her tone was gentle, her eyes a little reproachful. "The doctors here saved your life. By the time I could get here it would have been too late."

He met her gaze. "Make sure Daniel gets some sleep. Sedate him if necessary. He made himself remember how it felt to die to save my life. I think under those circumstances, the least I can do in return is teach him how to fish, and that's going to take energy, determination, and perseverance on his part, so he's going to need to be fully recovered."

She smiled, clearly relieved at his display of normality. "You're all heart, Colonel."

He watched her walk away and lay back down on the pillows, feeling the crisp Egyptian cotton against his skin. He wasn't a fanciful man but he had to admit he believed that place had been out to get him, and by the sound of things had come very close to succeeding. It had been out to get Daniel too, using Golding as a convenient conduit to drip-feed insanity into the disturbed man's mind. Golding's knife to Daniel's heart had claimed his life once, and Golding's boot in his ribs had damned near claimed O'Neill's. O'Neill and Daniel were undoubtedly enemies of the Goa'uld and he couldn't help wondering if in some way the Labyrinth had known that. He'd felt a strong sense of evil when he'd been in there, Nekheny still a presence in that place in a way that Ra wasn't on Abydos. He wasn't going to put that in any report because he didn't want to sound crazy but perhaps in a few months time he might ask to have a word with Bra'tac. See if there were any myths among the Jaffa about the older Goa'uld, the System Lords that had come before Ra. If they'd had powers these more technologically advanced Goa'uld didn't, like the ability to look into the future and know this harmless-looking scholar was one day going to help bring down the most powerful System Lord in the galaxy and save the Earth from invasion. Apophis had hated Ra, but he'd hated them more because they'd killed him, and as slave stock they weren't supposed to be able to do that, they weren't supposed to do anything except what the Goa'uld told them to.

There might have been variants of Goa'uld species in the same way there were Tok'ra. The Goa'uld had been very different once, perhaps they hadn't followed in a straight line to become what they were today, and perhaps some of those offshoots were still out there somewhere. The SGC had spent the last five years realizing what a very big place the universe was and what a tiny part of it they'd explored so far. Perhaps there were clues here on earth to what could be lying out there around the next corner, the next leap into the unknown through the next new 'gate address. Perhaps, scared though they were of the System Lords, they hadn't always been scared enough.

O'Neill reached across to get the last of the ice chips and poured them into his mouth, letting the cold burn his tongue, enjoying the moisture from the ones already half-melted. He could feel exhaustion weighing on his eyelids and hoped that Daniel was succumbing to it in just the way he was about to himself. Horrible thought though it was, O'Neill felt that before too long he and
Daniel were going to have to hold a serious conversation about Ancient Egyptian mythology. But in the meantime he urgently needed to sink into a deep dreamless sleep for about the next twenty-four hours.

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The exhaustion was still prone to come over him in waves. Daniel climbed unsteadily out of the Air Force car. He'd been told twice already he wasn't going anywhere without what looked suspiciously like a minder until Hammond had satisfied himself the NID team didn't have a back-up group looking to get even with any of his team the hard way, and he didn't think it was coincidence the 'driver' he'd been given was on a physique scale a dead ringer for Teal'c. He asked the driver politely if he would mind waiting.

The driver gave him a tolerant look. "That's what I'm paid for, Doctor Jackson."

He would have much preferred to travel by himself and use the local transport, but Hammond was taking no chances. The events of the Labyrinth had left him decidedly shaken, the thought that he'd sent Daniel into danger, when he'd imagined he was keeping him safely on Earth until he'd recovered, had really upset the man. Daniel was still feeling physically groggy but he hadn't seen the harm in just going around a couple of native bazaars and getting to taste the food again, to enjoy the sunlight, and the sound of that beautiful language on his tongue and in his ears. Hammond had seen things differently. Sam and Teal'c had been dispatched to fetch him back to the hospital to be fussed over by Janet, and then scolded via satellite telephone by Hammond, the man's worried countenance even more of a reproach than his words about how irresponsible Daniel was being, and Doctor Fraiser had thought she'd made it clear to him that he wasn't yet well enough to…. He'd been packed off to his room in the hospital like a naughty child and when he'd tried to sneak off to see Jack he'd found a solid wall of Air Force sergeant outside his door saying, "Can I get you anything, Doctor Jackson?"

"I want to see Jack," he'd protested mutinously, trying to edge round him.

The man had been blandly implacable, blocking his escape and walking him back into the room by sheer weight of personality and breadth of shoulders. "Colonel O'Neill's asleep right now. Why don't you visit him in the morning?"

Swearing, Daniel had ended up showering, eating the food someone had left on his bed on a tray while he was in the shower, drinking the damned *decaff* which was all Janet was letting him have, and then sleeping for eight hours straight, just the way Hammond had told him to do. Something which still rankled.

He'd complained so much about being a prisoner that they'd reached a compromise of Sam and Teal'c agreeing to accompany him so he could visit his old haunts on condition that as soon as they thought he looked tired he had to agree to return to the hospital without arguing. Sam had later told him in exasperation that the 'without arguing' clause also covered whining, pouting, sulking, heel dragging, and generally acting like a 'difficult five year old'. As Sam almost never got angry with him, Daniel realized he was either being very annoying or her nerves were still particularly raw. Teal'c invariably backed Sam and Janet up even when they were being harpies-in-training, so, with Nelson already discharged he'd found his only real soulmate in Jack, who was as bored as he was with being imprisoned in a hospital and was willing to share his fruit baskets with him in exchange for chocolate bars and company. Bizarrely, Jack and Darius had even struck up something of an alliance over the matter of alcohol, which Darius had managed to get smuggled into the hospital despite security checks that were supposed to be tight enough to stop an NID agent or even an ashrak getting through. Darius had always had the uncanny ability to obtain whiskey on any dig in
any country however 'dry' it was supposed to be and Jack had been grudgingly forced to admit that this was a trait he could appreciate.

Luckily for both of them, Janet had been recalled to the SGC as soon as it was clear they were out of danger, or Daniel was certain she would have worked out what they were up to at once. But the other medical staff didn't have her eagle eyes or uncanny sense of smell and so far Jack and Darius had been able to work their way through two bottles of single malt without being rumbled.

Daniel often came in to find Darius and Jack engaged in strange two-handed poker games on Jack's bed, both of them still hooked up to their drips, communicating in monosyllabic grunts with one another, and surreptitiously passing the whiskey backwards and forwards. They reminded Daniel of WWI English and German soldiers playing football in No Man's Land. The second the festivities were over they would return to trying to kill one another with only mild regret, but for the moment sheer boredom had made them temporarily set aside their differences. Jack and Darius were currently playing something called 'Chicago Lowball' with rules that they seemed to have made up and which only they understood. Despite the now numerous occasions on which Daniel had been dragged into playing with them he was no wiser about what he was supposed to be trying to achieve. Every time he'd thought he'd lost he'd been handed a Snickers bar and every time he thought he'd finally accumulated a decent hand he was told 'better luck next time' and denied his sip of whiskey. He didn't like the damned whiskey anyway but it was still annoying.

Sam and Teal'c had been forced to fly back to Colorado the day before and he already missed them. Sam had hugged him a little longer than usual at the airport, eyes suspiciously bright as she told him to wrap up warm in Minnesota. Teal'c had gazed into his eyes for a long moment before gripping his shoulders gently in farewell and saying, "Daniel Jackson..." in that very intense way Teal'c had that made Daniel's name sound like something of great significance. He'd realized for the first time that they were both having problems with the fact he'd technically died before they met him and they might never have met him if it hadn't been for that sarcophagus. But that had always been the case as he'd technically died again on Abydos, but perhaps because Ra had deliberately brought him back to life whereas Darius had only done it by accident, they seemed more shaken up by his earlier trip to the wrong side of the Styx. He supposed stopping breathing right in front of Teal'c and leaving Sam with only an agonizing expanse of static and John's incoherent commentary while Teal'c tried to resuscitate him hadn't done a lot for their nerves either. For himself, he was still seeing the bullet go into Teal'c, that gun pointing at the back of Sam's head, while if Sanjay hadn't arrived when he had with the ambulance Jack would have been dead. So he was very aware of how it felt to be scared for a teammate.

The hospital felt lonely and sterile without Sam and Teal'c, and Egypt like an old love affair whose fires he could never rekindle. He was actually looking forward to Jack getting out of the hospital even though the day Jack was signed out he was sentenced to two weeks in Minnesota freezing his butt off in a fishing boat. Egypt was too melancholy for him at the moment, too beautiful and too lost to him, just like Sha're.

He made his way slowly up the hill to where the grave was, very aware of that Air Force driver watching him all the way, ready to leap out and shoot anyone who might possibly threaten him. The day was hot despite the clouds overhead and his shirt stuck to his skin. He wished he'd remembered to wear a hat. Then he saw the gravestone and forgot about everything except the man who it commemorated.

Nelson had been right about Rajid's grave. It was a magnificent headstone, carved in hieroglyphs and Arabic, facing towards Mecca, naturally, and commending his wisdom and courage, explaining that he had died saving others.
Daniel knelt beside it, his knees indenting the earth, and touched the cool stone. When he closed his eyes he remembered the younger Rajid swooping him out of the way of the danger his curiosity was constantly leading him into, never once losing his temper, despite the way the young Daniel was enough to try the patience of a saint. Being there to comfort in an instant if he skinned a knee or frightened himself getting lost in a tomb. Teaching him Arabic as he shared his food with him.

Then he remembered sitting up in the sarcophagus and Rajid reaching into him, stroking his hair back from his face, breathing, "What have I done? What have I done?" Tears running down his face.

"I thought he was dead." Darius was shaking like aspen leaves in the breeze. "Get him out of here. I'm crazy, Rajid. He isn't safe around me. I keep seeing things and I swear they're real and then they...."

Rajid helped Daniel to scrambled awkwardly out of the sarcophagus, exclaiming at the sight of him. Rajid had a blanket around his shoulders to keep out the cold, but now he tore it from his back and wrapped Daniel in it, pulling it close around him. Daniel shivered convulsively, feeling as if every atom in his body was fighting its neighbors. He stared at the blood on his chest in disbelief, flinching when Darius came near, brain locking in terror at the sight of him.

"What did you do to him?" Rajid demanded.

Darius held up his hands, tears running down his face. "I think I killed him. I don't know. Maybe he's a ghost."

"Why is he naked?"

Daniel flinched again from the anguish in the old man's voice, clinging onto the blanket while the shame and fear rippled through him.

Rajid grabbed Darius's coat. "What did you do?"

"I don't know!" Darius stepped back. "I think I...did something very bad to him. Get him away from here before this place blows up."

"Put out the fires!"

"No. It's evil. It whispers to me. It tells me to do terrible things. If there's a Satan he lives here. It has to be destroyed and I have to be destroyed too before I do anything worse."

"Come." Rajid took Daniel's arm and tugged him decisively towards the exit.

He'd run blindly because Rajid told him to, even though he felt so strange and remote from his body that he thought he might be the ghost Darius feared. After an eternity in the darkness, they emerged into the light and he collapsed on the sand, shuddering. The dawn light was pink and gold but so cold it chilled the sweat upon his skin. The breeze tugged at his blanket while he clutched it to him, gazing over his shoulder at the Labyrinth, trying to remember what had happened, how he'd got there, why he was naked, but too afraid of what the truth might be to be sure he wanted to know. He thought he remembered Darius dragging him into the darkness, and then there was something else, something terrible, pain and fear, and the knife...

"Daniel...!"

As someone shook him he gasped with shock and fear, putting up a hand to ward off a blow.
"Daniel..." There was an ache in Rajid's voice as he crouched in front of him. His eyes were full of tears and he reached out very gently to stroke Daniel's matted hair back from his face.

Daniel stared into his face and saw something broken in the old man's heart, a grief in those kind brown eyes that went so deep his soul was seared with it, whatever had been done to Daniel in there had all-but killed Rajid.

Acutely aware of his nakedness, Daniel pulled the blanket more tightly around himself, the blood on his chest sticky against his fingers.

Looking into Rajid's sorrowing eyes Daniel said desperately, "I'm sorry."

Rajid touched his hair again, so gently and with such regret, the gnarled old fingers like velvet against his skin, then he leaned across and touched his lips to Daniel's forehead, granting absolution. He whispered softly in Egyptian, "Forgive me...?"

And then he'd gone back into the Labyrinth to rescue Darius, leaving Daniel rocking in the dirt, cold and filthy and full of shame, skin prickling away from the trails of congealing blood, seeing those tears glistening forever in Rajid's disappointed eyes....

Daniel opened his eyes to find himself kneeling next to the old man's grave, feeling as if the last link to his past had been broken, and the loneliness was like the maw of the Labyrinth, about to devour him whole.

"Hey..."

He jerked his head around in surprise to see Jack standing five feet away with a bunch of flowers in his hand. He blinked at him in confusion, having to swallow the lump in his throat before he could speak. "Are you allowed out of the hospital?" His voice came out muffled.

"Would I be here if I wasn't?" Jack came over to where he was kneeling and crouched down next to him. He laid the flowers next to the grave, looked at Daniel's face and tentatively touched his back. "I'm sorry about Rajid, Daniel. I'm sorry he died and I'm sorry it was him who gave Darius the drugs that made him go crazy, but it wasn't your fault."

It was too much what he needed to hear. Too much what he needed in every way to have someone from his present turn up at the exact moment when his past seemed in danger of overwhelming him. Although he'd promised himself he was never going to cry in front of Jack again for as long as he lived, he felt the grief twist through him like a knife and then the world was blurring to a salt sting of unbearable sorrow.

"It's okay." Jack put an arm around him and pulled him in close so as the tears welled up Daniel could hide them in his neck.

"He was a good man," Daniel breathed. "He really was. It was just one moment of temptation and he gave way to it. He asked me to forgive him but I didn't know what he was asking. I didn't know what he'd done. I didn't tell him I forgave him, Jack."

Jack tightened his grip on him. "He knew you forgave him." He rubbed his back gently. "I promise you, he knew."

"I miss him." Daniel was ashamed of acting like an eight year old but feeling like he had back then, when his parents had been taken from him right in front of his eyes, missing them and Sha're and Rajid and all the possibilities life had seemed to hold when he was five years old and playing in the shadow of dead pharaohs' tombs.
"I know." Jack kept rubbing his back gently. "I miss Charlie. I miss his sense of humor. He told the best jokes, you know…? He never forgot a punch-line. I miss finding out what kind of an adult he would have made."

Daniel reluctantly disentangled himself from Jack's embrace, wiping his eyes on his sleeve. "He would have made a great adult, Jack. His father did."

"Thank you." Jack wiped his eyes as well, sitting back on his knees. There was a pause while they both composed themselves then Jack made a face. "We weren't just really sappy, were we?"

Daniel pulled out a handkerchief and blew his nose. "Of course not. We work for the Air Force."

Jack straightened his jacket, brushing off imaginary fluff. "I think even if we were really sappy it would be okay because we're both taking a lot of painkillers and everyone knows morphine does that to you."

Daniel put his handkerchief away. "I'm not on morphine, Jack."

"Oh." Jack cleared his throat. "Well, you're on anti-histamines. That counts."

"I'm on those all the time."

Jack opened his mouth and then shrugged. "Well…anyway…we work for the Air Force so that means we're not sappy, and I think that's really the clinching argument."

Daniel nodded. "Works for me." He closed his eyes for a moment, remembering his younger self trying to reason with Darius and failing so miserably, then sitting there shivering in that blanket in the chill morning air. He winced. "God, I was such a wuss in those days."

"Daniel…" Jack gave him a reproving look, visibly affronted on behalf of the person he had been. "You were twenty-three. Cut yourself a little slack. And anyway you're not like that now. You're a completely different person even from the guy I first met."

Daniel wiped the tears from his face pointedly. "Oh yeah. I'm so different now."

"Hey, I'm a lot older than you were back then and a career soldier, and Golding on a bad trip flashback scared the crap out of me."

Although he still thought the person he had been in the past had been embarrassingly wimpy and the person he'd been on this particular mission wasn't anything to write home about either, Daniel was grateful for Jack's defense of that scared naked kid he'd once been. He got up and held out a hand to the older man. "Well, maybe next time I tell you a guy is dangerous and you shouldn't provoke him you could try listening to me."

"Nag, nag, nag. You're worse than Fraiser." Jack clambered awkwardly to his feet, wincing as his broken ribs clearly twanged a warning. He looked back at the grave and then took Daniel's arm, steering him away from it. As they walked down the hill to the waiting car, Jack said quietly, "I thought it was Rajid's daughter Golding had killed until I realized it was you."

Daniel looked at him in surprise. "Fatima?"

"Yes." Jack seemed surprised by his surprise. "She seemed the obvious choice. Girl he'd got pregnant who'd maybe written to his wife – "

"Darius didn't get Fatima pregnant, and it was Rajid who wrote to his wife. And you should have
known Darius couldn't have killed her."

Jack gave him a look of exasperation. "Because he was such a morally upright guy? He was a serial adulterer, drug-addict, and borderline alcoholic who kidnapped you at knifepoint!"

Daniel grimaced. "No, you should have known Darius didn't kill Fatima because you met her the first night we were in Egypt. It was her house we stayed in. I introduced you to her. Doctor Fatima Shihata. She's an archaeologist who works on the Hierakonpolis site."

"Oh." Jack scratched his jaw. "You introduced me to lots of people. Some of the names didn't stick too well."

"I got that." Daniel looked back at the gravestone. "I wish you could have met him."

"In another universe I probably did."

Daniel looked to the west to the place where the Labyrinth had been for all those thousands of years, buried and malevolent. "In another universe it probably got us."

Jack put an arm around his shoulders. "But in this one it didn't, and that's what counts."

Daniel forced a faint smile. "The only reality of consequence, right?"

"Well, a wise man did once say that. Although if you ever tell Teal'c I called him 'wise' I will hurt you." Jack steered Daniel away from grave and the view over to where the Labyrinth was. The Air Force officer already getting out to open the passenger door for them, saluting Jack crisply as he did so. Jack returned his salute.

Daniel took a last look at the grave on the hillside and breathed softly, "I forgive you, Rajid, and I miss you, and thank you for everything you did for me. Thank you for saving my life... ."

"Okay?"

Jack rested a hand on his shoulder gently.

Daniel nodded. "Yes."

Jack winced as he got into the car, cradling his ribs as he sank back into the seat carefully. "Next stop Minnesota."


"We prefer North Star State, Daniel. Anyway, have you got something against gophers?"

"No." He sighed again. "Nor fish. Nor snow. Nor big cold wet lakes with no fish in them. Nor cabins with roofs that leak. Nor generators that make enough noise to wake the dead. Nor blankets with moss on them."

"Cool." Jack grinned at him smugly.

"You're really going to milk the fact one of my colleagues nearly killed you, aren't you?"

Jack grinned wider. "Yep."

Daniel slumped back into the seat. The interior was already hot despite the air conditioning, the plastic trying to glue itself to his skin. "Minnesota here we come." After a pause he said wearily,
"Our luggage is already in the back, isn't it?"

"Yep."

"And you discharged yourself from the hospital against the doctor's recommendation?"

"Yep." Jack looked completely unabashed. "I was bored, we were out of whiskey, and I was losing at poker."

"Are we flying in an Air Force jet?"

"Yep." There was a hint of defiance in Jack's answer as if he was expecting an argument.

Daniel gave him his best under-the-eyelashes begging look. "Can we go to Minnesota via Boston? I didn't get much chance to explain to Alexis and at least if I went and listened to his lecture...." He trailed off.

Jack gave his most martyr-like sigh in return. "Only as long as I'm not expected to attend any lectures or visit any Museums for the rest of my natural life. And I don't want to hear one whine about how cold it is in Minnesota. Ever."

Daniel held out a hand. "Deal."

Jack shook it gravely, his fingers warm against Daniel's palm. "Deal."

They drove the rest of the way to the Air Base in companionable silence.

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He never got bored with museums. He knew he had more reason than most to dislike them but they still soothed him. He supposed they were to him what cathedrals were to Christians, places stretching back into the past proving there had been others like him before him who had cared enough to collect these objects and build a place in which to house them that did justice to their significance.

He'd listened to Alexis' lecture then slipped out here to the Museum to meet Nelson. They'd spoken in the hospital, of course, but Nelson had worn the faraway look of a man still processing information, he'd been absently fond but essentially unreachable. Daniel had started to make him an explanation several times and then realized that an explanation wasn't what Nelson wanted yet, just the time and space to assimilate the inexplicable. He hadn't known what Nelson knew, what he remembered, if anything, if there was any comprehension there of how close he had come to being permanently dead. Remembering the near-fatal consequences of tripping those memory landmines in his own mind, he hadn't wanted to push anything and had ended up talking about everything except the Labyrinth itself.

A week later Alexis had demanded a proper explanation for both himself and Nelson before they flew out, insisting that they were owed that. Daniel had agreed and had obtained Hammond's permission to tell them what they wanted to know. He'd told Hammond he needed to handle this his way and the SGC needed to trust him, and Hammond had given him his approval, another reason why Daniel loved the general quite as much as he did. Hammond had also told Daniel he would be doing a follow-up call to Alexis and Nelson himself to put their minds at rest and answer any outstanding questions they might have. Daniel had been grateful for Hammond's respect for his friends and their intelligence and had promised their discretion. He'd met Alexis and Nelson in the airport over bad coffee and an intercom that threatened to perforate the eardrums, and told them the truth about the Labyrinth, about what it was, and what it so effectively wasn't. They'd taken it
surprisingly well, given him their assurances that the information would not be passed on, and then hurried to catch their flight. Daniel had known he would be receiving a follow up call from one or both of them before too long and had been only relieved when it had arrived. The Boston conference had provided the perfect excuse, and, safe in the knowledge Daniel was committed to two weeks fishing in Minnesota, Jack had been uncharacteristically obliging about getting Daniel to Boston on time.

Daniel had agreed to meet Nelson by the statue of Horus-as-Nekhen, it seemed appropriate. Daniel took a moment to walk around the statue, which had been carefully reconstructed from its broken parts, and replacements recast to fill in the gaps. It was an interesting statue of a black falcon with plumes on its head, large and impressive, but it didn't fill him with the same horror the labyrinth had done. Whatever Nekheny had left behind, none of it had been transferred to this statue which mentioned his name.

"Dan?"

He turned to find Nelson standing by the window. It was impossible to see the man again and not remember him lying dead in his arms with that bleeding hole in his heart. Daniel hurried over to him and hugged him, holding him tightly. Nelson looked embarrassed and pleased, gently patting his back before disengaging himself.

"Well, you look a lot better than the last time I saw you." He held Daniel at arm's length. "I gather O'Neill and Darius are both on the mend?"

Daniel nodded. "Both patients doing well and apparently both headed for Minnesota. Darius is going to recuperate with Inga and one of her relatives."

"Be funny if those two ended up together after all this time." Nelson began to walk around the Boston Falcon curiously. "Although I can't say that would be my first choice of a state in which to recover from major surgery. What's wrong with Hawaii?"

Daniel sighed regretfully. "Nothing from where I'm standing."

Nelson looked across at him. "I'm not going to ask you lots of difficult questions about what you told us, by the way. I've thought about it a lot over the past few weeks and I came to the conclusion that I don't think I want to know what you know." Nelson half-smiled. "Well, the truth is, I don't have your energy. Or your bloody-minded stubbornness. I really don't want to have to write papers about alien spaceships and demonic possession and defend them to my peers. Not really my style. I mean the damned place blew up so we can really say what we want about it now and I'd prefer to stick to the stuff I can make sense of, like the Ennead of Nekhen concept. Hunt around – see if I can find any more evidence of mythology linking Wenut, Wepwawet, and Nekheny."

Daniel nodded. "I think that's very wise."

"I know there's quite a lot of evidence to the contrary, but I don't think Darius is a danger to anyone any more."

"I agree."

Nelson shrugged. "I mean if you and I aren't scared of him…?"

Daniel wrapped his arms around himself to keep out a sudden chill. "I think I'll always be a little scared of him. But I think it was that place that made him do the things he did, and that place no longer exists." He darted him a sideways look. "Is Alexis still pissed with me?"
"I think you're safe enough. He's not too happy with the United States Air Force, but I think he's managed to convince himself you're blameless. You do have to remember that as far as Alexis is concerned you're still about eighteen and can do no wrong. And even if you did do something wrong it would only be because someone else was leading you astray. So although you might appear to have rather carelessly destroyed an invaluable archaeological site, he's determined to blame anyone but you. Which I'm all for, incidentally."

Daniel blinked innocently. "Me too."

Nelson half-laughed. "Just don't tell him what you really do for a living or I think he'll have a stroke. Don't tell me either. I don't want to know. Just tell me you take better care of yourself usually than you were when we were getting to the center of that damned maze."

Daniel wrinkled his nose. "Yes. I do. Believe me, John. I like my work much better when it doesn't physically injury me in any way."

"You know the really funny thing?" Nelson was still gazing at the plumed black falcon.

"What?"

"For five years now – or is it six – I've been telling our learned colleagues that just because you're working for the Air Force it doesn't mean that you're not getting the chance to do wonderful work. For all we know, I've been saying, you may have access to sites and resources the rest of us can only dream about. For all we know you might have already found Atlantis, solved the mystery of the Anazasi, touched the skeletons of the Nefilim. And you know what? I never for one minute considered the possibility it might be true." He gave Daniel another gentle smile. "Do you like your work?"

Daniel thought about Reese, about the pain of a staff weapon blast, the somber formality of a requiem for yet another dead colleague whose loved ones could never be told the truth about how he or she had died. And then he thought about the gate shimmering, that incredible tightness in his chest he got at the prospect of it, the excitement as they stepped through onto an entirely new world, the infinite possibilities of the universe only seven 'gate addresses away, and he smiled. "Yes. I love my work. Of course some days I also hate my work, but on the whole I love it."

Nelson nodded, stepping back from the statue. "Well, that's all that matters. I should have asked you that a long time ago, but the truth is I was afraid of the answer I was going to get. I think we all felt we rather abandoned you. We wanted to help but we didn't know how. By the time we heard you'd been kicked out of the university you'd vanished, and then there were rumors you were dead, and by the time we'd had it confirmed you actually were alive and well you were working for the Air Force. None of us knew if we should be happy for you or if we were being terribly neglectful not to be trying to break you out of that place."

Daniel half-smiled. "Don't believe everything you hear about the military. They do unlock the leg irons from time to time."

"Having spoken to your General Hammond I'm feeling a lot easier in my mind. He asked for my discretion rather than demanding it. He didn't bully or threaten and he was obviously very fond of you. So clearly a man of impeccable taste."

As Nelson smiled at him, Daniel felt his breath catch, the guilt stabbing him. "John, if anyone abandoned anyone, I abandoned all of you. I fell in love, first with a woman, and a way of life, and then with a job and it…consumed me a little. But I would have told you if I could."
Nelson shook his head. "It doesn't matter. Perhaps my views about the history of Ancient Egypt are illusions, but they're my illusions and they're important to me. I don't want to know what you know and, to be honest, I suspect I don't want to have seen some of the things you've seen. But whatever you're doing you seem to have good people to help you do it."

"The best people." Daniel nodded.

"At least with Colonel O'Neill you've got a fellow enthusiast to talk to."

Daniel stared for a moment and then nodded. "Absolutely."

"And your friend Teal'c is an Egyptologist as well, isn't he?"

"Yes. He's an expert on some obscure Egyptian dialects and customs."

"And Major Carter kills bad men with great efficiency and gives sterling instructions on how to administer CPR."

Daniel held up a finger. "That's just scraping the surface of Sam's talents."

"Well, she's clearly very fond of you. The poor girl was beside herself when you stopped breathing. She's very pretty too." Nelson darted him a look that was as subtle as a steamroller.

Daniel laughed. "No, John. Sam and I aren't dating, but I love her dearly and she is definitely one of the good things about my job."

"Doctor Jackson."

Such formality from Alexis was as ominous as when his father had used his whole name in the past. Daniel grimaced expressively at Nelson and then turned around slowly. Alexis was walking towards him briskly with no hint of his usual welcoming smile, his normally expressive countenance unreadable. Daniel noticed for the first time that there were hints of silver in Alexis' springy black curls, and his beard was now as much gray as black.

"Alexis." Daniel waited for the man to come up to him, not quite sure how to deal with a disapproving Alexis.

Alexis looked him up and down and then abruptly pulled him in for a hug. Daniel gasped at the strength of the embrace, getting his first inkling of how badly he'd scared the man with how close he'd come to being incinerated in the Labyrinth for the second time in his life. As he hugged him Alexis muttered a reproach in his ear in Greek which it took Daniel a moment to translate as 'scary pest boy'. The thought that Jack would probably approve of it made the title rankle no less.

As the man finally let him, Daniel protested mildly, "I'm thirty-six, Alexis."

"Don't be absurd." Alexis glanced over at the black falcon without liking. "If you're thirty-six that means I'm almost sixty and that's clearly untrue."

"My mistake."

"Alexis, you've got four grandchildren," Nelson pointed out equably.

"A man can have grandchildren before he's forty if he starts young enough and his children follow suit. Grandchildren prove nothing. Daniel being thirty-six makes me an old man, therefore he can do the decent thing and stay twenty-five forever." Alexis looked Daniel up and down. "He looks
more like twenty-five than thirty-six anyway."

"Mary would say he looks as if he needs a good meal." Nelson also looked him over critically.

Daniel shifted uncomfortably under their gaze. He'd forgotten how maiden-auntish archaeologists could be. "Good lecture," he offered. "About there being fragments of the Book of Enoch on the walls of the Labyrinth."

"Yes." Alexis narrowed his eyes. "In Proto-Canaanite. A confirmation that the Aramaic version amongst the Red Sea Scrolls was a copy of a much older document. Possibly one of the most significant finds of the last decade in the field of Ancient Hebrew Mythology. The only fly in the ointment being my having to tell everyone the site no longer actually exists as we somewhat carelessly allowed it to get blown up." Alexis glared at Daniel in mock-reproach.

"Hélène sent me a mournful little card in hospital saying that all her sites died and she thought she was cursed," Nelson observed. "Poor girl. The next place she works on had better come with a certificate guaranteeing it against having motorways built over it and unexpected spontaneous combustion."

"Sanjay is never going to get over losing his snake pictures. I've asked my wife to make him a tapestry of them from the videotape. Which, incidentally, Daniel, I told the Air Force had been destroyed in the explosion. I'm damned if I'm giving them anything after the way they vandalized the place."

Daniel winced. "Understood. Can I have a copy as well?"

Alexis looked at him for a moment. "How old are you?"

Daniel moistened his lips. "Twenty-five?"

"Good boy. I'll put a copy in the post to you. Where's O'Neill?"

Daniel sighed. "He's gone on ahead to Minnesota to make the cabin even wetter and colder and nastier than it usually is."

"Nonsense. He's avoiding me because he's scared because he damned well blew up my site."

"We didn't do it on purpose," Daniel offered. "We were just trying to find Jack and we switched off the thing that was stopping it from exploding."

"In my experience normal archaeological sites don't explode, Alexis," Nelson put in. "That's probably a clue right there that we were well shot of the place."

"That's a good attitude, Nelson."

At the sound of Jack's voice, Daniel swung around in surprise. Jack was wearing his chinos and leather jacket in what Daniel suspected was a bid to look as non-Air Force as possible which, given Alexis' current feelings towards the Air Force was probably a good idea.

"Colonel O'Neill." Alexis' tone was forbidding. "I thought you were en route for Minnesota."

Jack gave them his best shit-eating grin while radiating the kind of body language he usually reserved for General Hammond after he'd done something wrong and didn't want to get canned for it. "I was halfway to the airport when I remembered that the last time Daniel told me he'd catch up with me, he perforated his appendix just to get out of fishing, so I thought I'd better make sure he
didn't rupture a kidney or something this time."

Alexis looked at Daniel accusingly. "You've had appendicitis? Why didn't you tell me?"

"He told me," Nelson offered, then realizing that it made things worse gave Daniel an apologetic
wince.

Alexis looked outraged. "But I'm your godfather, you're supposed to tell me things like that."

"You fuss, Alexis. I don't."

"You're his godfather?" Jack seemed to think this was something he should have known.

"The humanist equivalent." Alexis shrugged. "I was the person around when his father got stinking
drink and sentimental after the baby was born so I got roped in. An obligation it becomes a little
difficult to carry out when aforementioned godchild disappears for several years at a time and
leaves no forwarding address."

He turned his head to glare at Daniel who shifted uncomfortably under his gaze. "I said I was
sorry."

"You did and you can keep right on saying it." Alexis looked Jack up and down. "Talking of abject
and groveling apologies, are you ready to apologize for destroying my site, Colonel? A site of
unparalleled significance in the annals of – "


Alexis pointed down the corridor. "I think you'll find Forbidden Archaeology lies thataway Doctor
Nelson. Do leave your career in the dustbin on your way out."

"Alexis, it was a spaceship and it's a damned good thing it blew up before we all made first-class
idiots of ourselves publishing a lot of nonsense about its provenance."

Jack turned to Daniel. "This is you being discreet, is it?"

"It was the right way to go." Daniel had no doubts about that.

"Yes, it was." Alexis gave Jack a warning look. "We're archaeologists. In case working with Daniel
for five years has somehow failed to teach you what that means, it means that makes us damned
good detectives and it also makes us incredibly stubborn about not giving up on things before
we've unraveled them. Had Daniel tried to fob us off with some cover story you people had come
up with, we would never have left this alone for the rest of our natural lives, but by telling us the
truth he has effectively killed our interest."

Jack gave his head a shake. "What?"

Alexis rolled his eyes. "I'm a serious archaeologist, O'Neill. I don't write papers about little green
men from outer space or parasitic aliens with glowing eyes. When I thought the Labyrinth had
something new to say about the ancient civilizations of this planet I was interested in what it had to
say. As it apparently didn't, I'm not. Same with John. He's interested in Predynastic Egypt, not this
B-movie science-fiction nonsense."

"Good. I think." Jack looked slightly hurt. "B-movie science-fiction nonsense?"

"I told you to let me handle it," Daniel pointed out.
Jack gave Alexis a sideways look. "You're not really pissed that we blew up the site, are you?"

"Well, if it had been what it seemed to be then, yes, I'd be furious. As it is, I'm still grieving a little for my illusions, but I suppose I'm safe to approach."

Despite the smile, Daniel saw the truth of Alexis' words. He didn't feel any sense of loss for the evil he now believed that place to have been, but he did for what he'd thought it was thirteen years ago, what it would have meant for archaeology if it really had been a temple to all those different gods from all those different cultures.

"We're sorry," Daniel said gently, and he didn't mean for blowing up the Labyrinth this time, but for not having protected Alexis from the truth.

"I'm consoling myself with the thought there are no shortage of archaeological wonders on this world and no lack of questions still in need of answers," Alexis reached across to ruffle his hair even though Daniel was taller than he was these days and carried a gun and went through the Stargate to other worlds, still his dead friend's son to Alexis, and in his own way Daniel supposed he found it as comforting as Jack did to be treated like a small boy by Inga. Alexis turned to Jack. "What time does your flight leave?"

"Soon."

Alexis beckoned to him sternly. "Then let me walk you to your car, Colonel. We can have a little chat en route."

Jack shot Daniel a 'youch' look over his shoulder then obediently walked next to Alexis, head bowed so he could hear what the man was saying to him so rapidly and with so many hand movements.

Daniel and Nelson followed them at a discreet ten paces. Nelson sighed. "Is everything we know about Ancient Egyptian history wrong, Daniel?"

Daniel shook his head. "No. There's just a little more to it than we used to think, but there always is with archaeology. We never have and never will know everything about every civilization lost to us. My job asks more questions than it answers, John. Just like we thought the Labyrinth did."

Nelson looked thoughtfully at the back of Alexis' head. "I'm not a believer in any religious faith, so for me a 'god' has always been interesting only because of what it says about the human condition. Even though I'm not an anthropologist, I still find myself asking the same questions people like Hélène do. Why do we need to believe there is something omniscient and omnipotent that watches over us? Why do we have to believe that the good will be rewarded and the guilty punished? Is it just because that's the glue that binds society together? Why be good when it's more fun to be bad unless there is some reward in the afterlife for not being bad, some retribution visited upon the evil people who seem to get away with it in this life. But what if it isn't that? What if Von Daniken was right all the time, and the reason our forefathers believed in gods from the skies was because they saw them descend? What does that tell us about the human condition? The entire basis of our society?"

"I think our belief systems would have been the same whether the Goa'uld had come here or not," Daniel reassured him. "It seems to be something we need within ourselves, as you say, a belief that our good or bad deeds don't go unnoticed. I don't think we believe in good and evil because thousands of years ago alien creatures visited us from space. I have to believe that our consciences are more than just race memories."
Nelson looked around at the museum. "I don't want the pyramids to be something our ancestors were ordered to build by spacegods, Daniel. I need them to be incredible feats of engineering through technologies designed by us even if they have since been lost by us. I need to believe that all the languages which evolved on this planet came from us, from our evolution, from our need as a species to find a means to communicate with one another, not because they were given to us by others. I have to believe we came down from the trees and learned to walk upright because we were more curious than the other animals, not because some aliens diddled with our DNA."

"I don't know the answer to that." Daniel didn't know what the Asgard had done in the past, or the Goa'uld, if some other race had encouraged the evolution of Homo sapiens because they could, but they hadn't found any evidence of it yet, and Jack had told him the Asgard had seemed to be thinking of them as possible equals. The Nox had done the same. Lya had been persuaded by Teal'c's arguments. Thor had sought Sam's help. However the human race had come about didn't invalidate what they now were, and what they now were seemed to Daniel to be incredibly resilient, creative, indomitable, and unpredictable. "But when I look at all the things we've invented and created in the millennia since I think there is plenty of confirmatory evidence that we are an extraordinary race. The Goa'uld steal what they use. They steal from the best, and one of the races they steal from is ours. But I don't believe the Goa'uld built Stonehenge and they certainly didn't write Mozart's operas or the love poetry of Hafiz, or the histories of Herodotus. We went into space without them. We developed antibiotics without them. A million tiny acts of compassion and charity and courage take place across the surface of this planet every day that no race except us has a part in."

Nelson smiled and patted his shoulder gently. "Dan, I will forbear to point out that the same could be said of acts of cruelty, indifference, and cowardice because I love your belief in the essential decency of the human spirit." He looked around the museum again. "And I'll take comfort from that, most of all, because you've been out there and seen more of humanity than I ever will, and you still believe that human beings are basically okay and can be reached by reason."

"Yes. I do believe that." Daniel thought of the bullet hitting Reese, of her falling to the ground but then he thought of Chaka risking his own life to save Daniel's then refusing to abandon his race on another world rather than returning in safety to his tribe. He thought of Nem letting him go, and Omac offering his hand, and Narim sacrificing himself for a principal and the lives of people on a different world, of Sam staying in that bunker with Cassandra, Teal'c taking Ko'ra's place to save the Tok'ra, Jack, the hardass military guy, forgiving, in the blink of an eye, a hysterical sobbing wreck in a storeroom who had just tried to kill him. "And not just human beings, John. I've found it works for other species too."

Nelson nodded. "Well, I suppose that means there must be an awful lot of evil scary bad people out there as well to balance up all the good ones but I'm hoping O'Neill does his best to keep you away from those." He looked at the still gesticulating Alexis. "I suspect he's probably getting a bit of a pep talk on that subject right now."

"Great. Jack will retaliate by making me freeze to death in a fishing boat for two weeks. I swear if the generator breaks down again this time I will kill him." Daniel looked sideways at Nelson, still getting those horrifying flashes of how the man had looked dead in his arms with blood pouring from his heart. He touched his arm. "I was thinking on the way here that what we wanted the Labyrinth to be Hierakonpolis almost is. There is something genuinely miraculous about it. All those different strata of Ancient Egyptian life preserved in one place. And that, at least, is totally authentic, totally untouched by the Goa'uld."

Nelson smiled. "I'm glad you said that. Barbara offered me a place on the dig there and I accepted. I'm sure what you do is jolly exciting but I really just want to know about everyday life in
Predynastic Egypt. I'm not really the battling with aliens type."

"You saved Jack's life." They were out into the sunlight now. Jack was putting on his sunglasses. Daniel hadn't remembered his and was forced to squint instead. "I would never have reached the center without your help."

"Oh." Nelson lit up. "I suppose I was some use. Not bad for a man who has never been able to get past level one of Tomb Raider and whose children mock his baldness."

Daniel smiled. "Not bad at all."

They shook hands while Jack watched, apparently unaware of the many admiring glances he was attracting from passersby clearly impressed by Jack's leather jacket-chinos-and-shades ensemble. Daniel reached out and pulled Nelson into an embrace, hugging the man tightly. "Bye, John."

Nelson gently disentangled him, embarrassed and pleased in equal measure. He patted Daniel on the shoulder. "Take care and don't be such a stranger." He looked at his watch. "Damn, I have to go. I promised Professor Eckhart I'd listen to his lecture." He moved away then looked over his shoulder. "Keep in touch."

"I will, I promise." Daniel watched Nelson go, still thanking whatever fate looked out for Egyptologists that the man was alive and well and walking to a lecture he didn't want to attend out of kindness to an old friend, rather than dead in a dusty tomb in the center of a grounded Goa'uld spaceship.

Alexis sighed. "I'd better drop in on Eckhart's lecture too. He never gets a full house, probably because his theories are even more out there than…." 

"Mine were?" Daniel returned.

"Trust me, yours were perfectly reasonable by comparison with his." Alexis pulled Daniel into a hug that squeezed his ribs. "Look after yourself. Be good. Look both ways before crossing the road. Always carry a clean handkerchief. Don't accept lifts from strange men." He stood back. "There, I think that's my duties as a godparent carried out. I've told O'Neill what will happen to him if anything bad happens to you, and reminded him that we Greeks originated the tragic revenge drama. Make sure you read him some Sophocles while you're staying in this cabin of his."

"Oh, he'll appreciate that." Daniel smiled. "Goodbye, Alexis. May all your sites be nonflammable."

He was still watching the man head towards the exit with brisk purposeful strides when Jack touched him on the arm. "We need to go. We're going to miss the flight."

"Oh woe," Daniel murmured.

As they walked towards the waiting taxi, Jack said conversationally, "I'm sure part of the agreement to you coming on this vacation was a 'no-whining' clause."

"I said 'oh wow' in a 'take me to that Spam Museum now' kind of way. With just a hint of 'lots of big icky lakes with no fish in them – whoopee' as well."

Jack held the door of the taxi open for him. As Daniel climbed in, he thought he heard the man murmur 'Damn, I knew there was something I'd forgotten.' As Jack sat next to him and gave the driver directions, Daniel narrowed his eyes. "What did you forget this time?"

"Nothing." Jack settled back against seat as if he didn't have a care in the world.
"Tell me you didn't forget to get the generator serviced again?"

Jack looked affronted. "Daniel, do you honestly think I'd take a sun-loving boy like you to Northern Minnesota, and not make sure the generator was working?"

Daniel looked at him for a moment. "What was I thinking?"

"I've no idea." Jack folded his arms.

Daniel cleared his throat. "You forgot, didn't you?"

"No." Jack was saying it with too much emphasis. He had to be lying.

"I just want to go on record here as telling you that if it does break down I will kill you, so if we make this trip and as a consequence you end up axed to death in your own leaky cabin, don't blame me."

"How can you not like my cabin?" Jack protested.

Daniel glowered at him. "I like hot coffee, hot showers, and electricity."

"My cabin has all those things!"

"Only when the generator is working. When the generator isn't working, it is the coldest, dampest place on earth and the reason there are no damned fish in the damned lake is because they're in the beds."

Jack shot him a reproachful look. "I bet when you were on Abydos you didn't keep bitching to Sha're that you couldn't plug in your coffee maker and you weren't going to stay unless she cranked up the generator."

Daniel gritted his teeth. "That was a different culture. You're a North American. You should supply me with the benefits of North American culture and that includes hot coffee and bedrooms where there isn't ice on the inside of the windows."

"Just think of Minnesota as a foreign country," Jack suggested. "A place with customs different than our own. A place where the people are decent hardworking folk who like to ski in the winter and fish in the summer and listen to the wolves howling at night – "

"There is no summer in Minnesota! It's winter all the year round!"

"And where they don't always have generators that work all the time, but no one minds because the air is so clear and the woods are so beautiful and the fish taste so good."  

Daniel knew that resistance was useless. Once Jack had anyone within reach of Minnesota there was never any escape. He would get that evangelical look in his eye and start talking incomprehensible thing about walleye and muskie. Better to give in gracefully. He sighed. "Yes, Jack."

Jack looked at him sideways. "You're not humoring me, are you?"

Daniel sighed again. "No, Jack." The taxi swept them past the building in which Professor Eckhart was telling a dwindling audience his theory about apparently winged fossils found in the walls of caves in Iraq, and carried them on to the airport where their plane was waiting to take them to the North Star State, land of moose, wolf, beaver, and sub-zero temperatures.
The wind that scudded across the lake seemed to know exactly where to find him. It climbed inside his borrowed coat and borrowed sweater and chilled every inch of his skin. The slight rocking of the rowboat made him lake-sick and the sky looked ominously overcast given that the snowy season was supposed to be over. All the way up in the car, people had been telling them that even in Minnesota they'd never known it so cold for this time of year, that there might be late snows, and to be sure they had plenty of fuel for the generator. Jack had told Daniel to stop looking at him like a martyr on his way to the scaffold unless he was looking to get pushed into the lake when they reached it. He'd also told him that people always said snow was on the way around here, even in summer. Daniel had responded waspishly that perhaps that was because it did snow here, even in summer, and he absolutely refused to be snowed in again so if it was going to snow he wanted to know now so they could stay in town. He was actually quite proud of the way he'd put his foot down on that matter but Jack had insisted it wasn't going to snow and they'd still ended up here with the cold and the lake and the fish that weren't biting.

Now he blew on his fingers and looked longingly at the shore and the cabin. It wasn't that Jack's cabin was a haven of comfort, but it was out of the wind that seemed to be coming straight from Siberia, and it didn't rock sickeningly from side to side, it also had books in it, something Jack had banned from his boat on the grounds that the rustling of the pages would scare the fish.

"In a movie Sam and I watched about lake-fishing there was a huge crocodile living in the lake," he offered. "It ate fishermen."

"That was in the Adirondacks," Jack assured him blandly. "Would never happen here."

"Are you sure?" Daniel thought being eaten by a giant crocodile might not be such a bad way to go if it meant he could stop being on vacation with Jack. He scanned the blue waters longingly.

"Too cold for crocodiles."

"You say that like it's a good thing."

"Ssshh," Jack warned. "You'll scare the fish."

"They scare me," Daniel retorted. It was true. The size of the fish people kept brandishing at him in this state was very disconcerting. The locals were even proud of the fact their mosquitoes looked like that bug which had tried to take over Teal'c and came in swarms of Biblical plague proportions. Minnesotans had clearly never heard the old adage about size not being everything. And he didn't trust a state which could have four seasons in a single day. "NID should have tested the Touchstone here," he observed. "Who would have noticed?"

"That's why we don't need crocodiles to separate the men from the boys," Jack returned. "We have the Minnesota winter."

"And cheese with everything."

"That's the Norwegians." Jack waved a dismissive hand. "Nothing to do with me."

"Jack, your cousin's married to a man called Olaf, who as far as I can tell has seventeen brothers also all called Olaf."

"You forgot Sven, Lars, and Ole."

Daniel looked around at the frosty woods, trying to inhale slowly so he didn't chill too much of his
lungs at the same time. As he opened his mouth, Jack said, "When I brought you here in the summer you bitched about the mosquitoes. When I brought you here in the winter you bitched about how cold it was. Now I bring you here in the spring and you're still bitching."

"That's because I don't like Minnesota."

"Don't be silly." Jack flexed his rod so the line skimmed out across the clear waters before sinking again. "No one could not like Minnesota. It's the most beautiful place on earth."

"Colonel O'Neill!"

Daniel started so violently at the sound of Darius's voice he set the boat rocking precariously. Jack who was standing up, rode out the lurching of the rowboat without a word of reproach, then darted a glance across the lake to where two figures were approaching. He waved briefly before turning back to Daniel. "Golding and Inga. They said they might drop by. You okay?"

Daniel nodded, annoyed with himself for reacting so obviously to Darius's arrival. Intellectually he was okay with the man, it was just his instincts that seemed to still have a problem.

Jack pulled in his line, sat down and picked up the oars. In a moment he was rowing strongly for shore, making it look easy as the boat scudded lightly along the surface of the blue-green water.

Their greetings were muted. Inga looked apologetic and anxious, her salt and pepper hair sticking up in agitation. Daniel saw Darius notice that he was wearing Jack's clothes, which he was, kitted out in the entire heavy coat, woolen sweater, checked shirt, and thermal trousers gear that Jack had lent him after his own clothing had proven inadequate. Darius's face momentarily darkened and then he was making an effort to rise above his initial spasm of annoyance, shaking Jack's hand and offering a cheery greeting to Daniel.

Jack made coffee on the old woodburning stove, warning Daniel quietly to watch his fingers on the mug as he handed it to him, then poured more for their visitors. They talked about neutral matters in a desultory manner for a while until Inga said abruptly, "I need to talk to Daniel. Alone."

Daniel nodded and led the way outside, sitting down on the small wooden jetty. The sun had come out from behind the clouds and the water looked beautifully blue, the rich loam of the woods filling the air. Air so rich you could bottle it, Jack always said, and today Daniel could even agree. But he still shivered as the breeze blew in across the water and did its best to climb into his clothes.

Inga reached out and took his hand. "Daniel, I wanted to apologize. I was wrong. I was so wrong, and you were right. If you'd listened to me Colonel O'Neill would be dead now. I should have paid more attention to what you were saying."

"I didn't remember what had happened myself."

She squeezed his hand. "But you knew he was in danger, and I knew that you'd been taken there by Darius in the past. I just...I wanted to believe he was a good man. I wanted to believe it so much I shut my ears and my eyes to everything else."

"You didn't know." Daniel winced at the sight of her obvious distress.

"I knew he'd kidnapped you at knifepoint. That you were naked when Rajid found you. He told me recently he had...fantasies. That for a long time he didn't know himself if he..." She shook her head. "All these years I thought I was a good judge of character and I was blind. I was dazzled. I was in love with Darius, and he was a brilliant scholar, therefore Darius was a great man and should be excused anything. That's what I thought. I thought he was worth any sacrifice because he
was this giant among pygmies who couldn't be judged by ordinary rules."

Daniel looked out across the moving water of the lake, a fish jumped sending out a spreading circle of ripples that lapped all the way to the jetty. "I think I thought that too. A part of me still does. He is a great scholar and he's not a bad person. He's had a lot of problems to contend with that most of us don't. His wife killed herself and –"

"And your parents are dead. And your career isn't what you wanted it to be. Everyone has disappointments, myself included. His wife had just lost her child and he left her to grieve alone and had an affair with me. He made me give up a baby I wanted because he didn't want his wife to find out that he'd been sleeping with someone else. He had an affair with a girl young enough to be his daughter in front of me and in front of her father. I don't even want to think about what he did to you."

She looked so distressed that Daniel rubbed her hand between his. "Inga, Darius dazzled me too. And he is a great man in his own way."

"You nearly died. Rajid did die." She put her hands up to her face, tears trickling through her fingers. "And Colonel O'Neill would have died as well, and still I was more interested in hanging on to my illusions than helping you. I know it probably didn't seem like that to you at the time, but I am very fond of him. I would never have forgiven myself if harm had come to him."

He put his arms around her. "Inga….

She cried into his neck, her gray hair unexpectedly soft against his skin. "I've spent so many years of my life being in love with Darius Golding and now I'm not sure that he was ever worth it. I gave up my child for him because I thought he was a great man and normal rules didn't apply to him. And now I have him and I'm afraid that all this time my idol had feet of clay."

Daniel held her close. She wasn't much older than his mother would have been now. He didn't know if his father had been a good man or not. Daniel had loved him and missed him dreadfully. He'd never questioned until now the possibility that his father had been anything but good. Who did with people that one loved? There was an assumption that they must somehow be worthy of the love one felt or else why would one feel it? No one wanted to believe their own instincts were unreliable. He knew, because they'd told him, that Jack and Teal’c had both done things that were what they considered to be morally unjustifiable. Yet he believed absolutely that they were good men. He cared deeply for them and they cared deeply for him, and when he looked at them he saw brave protectors who had risked their lives for those weaker than them countless times. If the widow of some soldier or Jaffa that Jack had killed came and told him that Jack was a danger to another member of her family, would he believe her? No. Never in a million years.

He spoke quietly, "Jack told me Darius reminded him of Hercules and I think he might be right. Darius risked his life to save John. He risked his life to save Jack. He had a bullet wound in his shoulder and he picked up six foot two and I don't want to think about how many pounds of Air Force officer, threw him over his shoulder, and ran with him. That's something an ordinary man couldn't do. You fell in love with a hero, Inga, and perhaps normal rules don't apply to them. Perhaps your instincts were right all the time."

She wiped her eyes fiercely. "For the first time this morning, Daniel, I woke up and I felt like a foolish old woman who had wasted her life. I thought about the twenty-seven years I haven't had my son, whoever he may be, and I thought that nothing and no one could ever make up for that."

"You could try to find him."
She sat up, reaching for a handkerchief and he wordlessly supplied one. "Why would he want anything to do with a woman who abandoned him to strangers?"

Daniel thought about Nick saying 'I am proud of you'. "Because children who've been abandoned to strangers need to know it wasn't anything they did. They need to know it wasn't their fault." He tried to find a smile but the wound too raw, he suspected it always would be. "If you won't do it for you, do it for him."

She leant across and kissed him on the cheek and he was taken aback by how much it moved him, how he could be affected so strongly by physical comfort or displays of affection. Did he still, after all this time, consider himself so fundamentally unlovable that it came as a shock every time someone gave him some affirmation that suggested he wasn't? Was he never to stop being that abandoned eight year old at heart? She straightened his collar automatically. Her question was unexpected. "Are you still afraid of him?"

He looked out across the water to catch his breath, stalling before he replied. "I don't think he's any danger to me or anyone else. That place was evil and it affected him. Now it's gone."

"You're still afraid of him." It wasn't a question this time.

He nodded, meeting her gaze. "Yes. But that's my problem. Don't make it yours."

She put her arm through his, looking out across the lake water. "It’s beautiful here, isn't it?"

"If you like being cold and wet all the time." He wrinkled his nose.

"I'll have you know I'm related to half the population of Minnesota."

He looked at her sideways. "How many of your relatives are unmarried Norwegian dairy farmers?"

She laughed. "You'll succumb in the end. Everyone does. They come to mock, and stay to get hypothermia every winter and be bitten half to death by mosquitoes every summer and wonder how they ever lived anywhere else."

"Never." Daniel promised her. "I will never succumb to Minnesota, whatever you and Jack might say."

Another fish jumped, a brief flash of silver in the sunlight, before diving back beneath the surface, sending another circle of ripples out to meet them.

Inga said unexpectedly, "I've never looked at the Kensington rune stone."

He turned his head in surprise. "You haven't?"

She shook her head. "I wanted it to be real, and I was afraid that if I examined it, I might decide it wasn't."

"You might find that it was," Daniel offered. "If you don't look at it, you'll never know."

"But what if it turns out to be a fake?"

He shrugged. "What if it turns out to be authentic?"

"Are you telling me I should try to make a life with Darius? That after all this time and all these… tears…" Inga wiped her face and then rubbed her hands off her old coat in exasperation, "I should give him another try?"
"He's a lot of things, but I don't think he's a fake." Daniel managed a dry smile. "I'm not quite sure what Darius is, to be honest, but I think he's definitely authentic."

"Unlike the Labyrinth?"
He nodded. "Very much unlike the Labyrinth."

"I asked John what that place was and he told me I didn't want to know."

He thought of the Goa'uld ripping out Nekheny's heart, Inanna dying for love, the blade descending, his own scream, his own blood. He shuddered. "He was right."

She nodded and looked back out across the lake. After a minute another fish jumped and then another, as if they wanted Daniel to know they were there where he could see them and where they would never allow themselves to be caught. For some reason he found that obscurely comforting.

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Golding was restless, keeping an eye on the window as he talked as if he wanted to know what Daniel and Inga were saying, giving only O'Neill half his attention as he explained why they were there, a story of old dreams and old digs and a folder of site reports and artifact photographs that didn't exactly get O'Neill fired up with excitement. A few half-erased inscriptions in cuneiform and the fossilized remains of what seemed to be a giant archaeopteryx wasn't enough to get his blood pumping when he was looking for a means to defeat the Goa'uld.

"Given the conclusions Eckhart came to, I just thought you should know." Golding handed the paperwork across and O'Neill turned it around in his hands, not sure quite what to make of it.

"It's more Daniel's field than mine."

Golding shrugged. "I don't think Daniel would really appreciate a little tête à tête with me at the moment, O'Neill."

O'Neill put down the fossil picture and turned the photograph of the inscription around again. "You're telling me you saw...angels?"

Golding shook his head. "Trust me, this was not a Californian Crystal Worshipping experience. I remembered a dream I had when I was on a dig in Iraq. In the dream I was on a battlefield. One army was carrying the emblem for Ra. They were people like your friend Teal'c. Golding's glance was very direct. "Ones with snake-like creatures in their bellies."

O'Neill opened his mouth to ask how he knew and then thought of the psychic thing and said nothing. You couldn't argue with a psychic even when he was in his right mind.

Golding continued evenly, "The other side were creatures with wings. They were winning." There was a pause before he added in case O'Neill might be particularly slow on the uptake, "If the ones like your friend Teal'c serve your enemy then the enemies of your enemy..."

"Could be our friend?" O'Neill turned the photograph around but it still looked upside-down to him and he'd now tried it from every angle. "What does this say exactly?"

"It's written in a strange form of cuneiform and it was found on a broken tablet. The same kind of cuneiform that was in the Labyrinth. It says it speaks for Lulal, son of Inanna, who will avenge the murderers of his mother and his father. It says she who went into the world below and did not return shall know victory at last, that her murderers will be brought low, that those who arrived
earlier shall return stronger than before and their reign will be everlasting, and he shall be their godking.' Golding tapped the photograph. "He signs it 'Lulal, son of Nekheny, son of Inanna, lord of the Raphaim and the Nefilim, seeker of the Shebtiu and the Edimmu, guardian of the winged ones who will reign eternally'."

O'Neill looked at it again. "So?"

"So, Lulal is the one who ordered the inscriptions carved in the Labyrinth detailing Inanna's descent into the Underworld." Evidently seeing O'Neill's blank expression, Golding added in exasperation. "Given the fact she died by the hand of those…aliens, didn't you wonder who had told her story?"

O'Neill blinked. "Not really, no. But I'll take your word for it, it was this Lulu guy."

There was a pause before Golding said, "What the hell does Daniel see in you, O'Neill?"

He knew he ought to say something significant about their friendship. Spell it out for Golding what they'd been through – the four of them – that what he was misreading as romantic intimacy was actually a very different kind of love. It was what you felt for people you'd lived and occasionally died with, crossed universes with, crossed dimensions with, whose deaths you'd mourned, whose reunions you'd celebrated, people you'd lost and found again so many times that they were part of you now. But he didn't want to share what Daniel was to him or what Carter and Teal'c were to him with Darius Golding. Although if Darius had only known it, there were plenty of people Daniel had slept with over the past few years who meant nothing to him compared with O'Neill, Carter, and Teal'c. Even if Golding had ever got Daniel drunk or drugged enough to seduce, he would still have lost him to the rest of SG-1, and O'Neill would still be closer to Daniel than Golding could ever dream of.

"Apart from my good looks, charm, and personality?" As Golding looked unconvinced, O'Neill tapped the photograph. "I don't see the excitement. Aren't there like a billion carvings on old bits of rock saying things about how some dead ruler is going to rise up and take over the world any minute? I've never heard of this guy, so whatever he was planning to do several thousand years ago, he obviously didn't do it. Even if he was a Goa'uld maybe he was just pissed the other Goa'uld killed his mom and dad, it doesn't mean he made good on any of these threats."

Golding sighed and shrugged. "True. But you asked if I came across anything I thought was relevant to pass it onto you, well, this could be relevant, and I've passed it onto you. Duty done."

"And I appreciate it." O'Neill didn't add that he suspected half the reason Golding had come here was because he wanted to see Daniel again, either to reassure himself the man didn't hate him or because he was still obsessed with O'Neill and Daniel's relationship and wanted to check on the sleeping arrangements.

Golding got to his feet again, crossing to the window to look out at Inga and Daniel. "We should go. The forecast is for snow tonight."

There was a silence during which O'Neill knew he should ask if they wanted to stay but the truth was, fond as he was of Inga and would have enjoyed an evening chatting to her, he didn't want Golding to stay. Particularly when he suspected most of the reason the man had come here had been to try to defeat any seduction O'Neill might have been planning. The idea that O'Neill might have brought Daniel out to his cabin and not been planning a seduction didn't seem to have occurred to Golding. Even now, all these years later, Golding clearly wasn't able to let go of his obsession where Daniel's sex-life was concerned, and, given the fact he'd told O'Neill he was determined to make a go of things with Inga and was no longer interested in anyone but her, O'Neill
didn't think that was a very positive sign for Golding's supposed reformation. "Okay," he said quietly. "I'll walk you to your car."

It was obvious Inga had been crying and the look she gave him as he and Golding came out to meet her and Daniel on the jetty would have softened a heart a lot harder than his. He swept her into a hug, calling her his favorite runologist and asking if she'd shown Golding the wonders of the Spam Museum. She hugged him back tentatively, clearly very conscious of his broken ribs, whispering, "I'm so sorry, Colonel."

"Nothing to be sorry about," he reassured her gently. "I'm booked to come and see your next lecture."

"I think my lecturing days are over." She put her hand to his cheek as if to reassure herself he was alive and well, looking suddenly a lot older and frailer than he remembered. "I'm not sure of my findings any more."

As they walked to the car, Daniel and Golding valiantly carrying on a conversation about Alexis' last lecture as their feet sank into the loamy lakeside path, O'Neill noticed the snow clouds gathering overhead just as the forecast he warned. There was still sunlight showing through but the air held that ominous coldness that spoke of several inches of the white fluffy stuff being dropped on the unsuspecting. He winced inwardly at the thought of Daniel's reaction. He was never going to hear the end of how spring in Minnesota was indistinguishable from winter in Minnesota and how next time they were going to Florida.

"Make sure you're somewhere warm and dry before night comes in," he warned Inga.

She rallied, wiping her damp cheek. "Are you teaching your grandmother to suck eggs, Colonel? I was putting snow tires on my car when you were still playing with toy dumper trucks."

"Hey, some of the time I grew up here, remember?" O'Neill protested. "I had a toy snowmobile."

He hugged her again before she got in the car, but gently this time, very aware of how small her body seemed inside that enormous coat. He remembered the way his grandmother had done that suddenly, gone from being that tall raw-boned woman to suddenly seeming half her previous size. He and Inga watched Daniel and Golding shake hands formally, Daniel grave and unmistakably adult, putting off a quiet dampening field of his own that didn't invite liberties, but kind and polite all the same. Golding didn't bluster or attempt to ruffle his hair or call him by nicknames any more, just nodding with the same politeness as he said goodbye.

"Be careful." Daniel sounded as if he meant it and O'Neill saw him looking anxiously at Inga. "The roads around here aren't too...." He rolled his eyes.

Inga and O'Neill exchanged a look. "I think he's dissing our favorite state, Inga," O'Neill observed.

"I can't imagine why." Inga kissed Daniel on the cheek, hugging him tightly, before she got into the car with tears in her eyes again. He wondered if she'd had thirteen years of guilt hit her overnight, or if it was just something about the beauty of the spring coming in, all those new colors and the trill of the birdsong making her too aware of the briefness of the human life span.

Golding met his gaze for a moment, opened his mouth as if to say something, looked at Daniel, and then settled for a gruff, "Goodbye." He drove away quickly, hardly giving Inga time to wave again before he was rounding the nearest bend and out of sight. O'Neill supposed it was a step forward of sorts that Golding had admitted, if only to himself, that he had forfeited the right to dictate what Daniel did or didn't do with his private life, but he clearly still didn't like to think that he was
making decisions which weren't being funneled through him.

O'Neill looked at Daniel and saw he was still listening to the sound of the engine whining and fading in the clear afternoon air. Coming snow always gave the air that richness, making every sound carry with extra resonance. Daniel looked cold though, shivering in his borrowed overcoat. O'Neill reached out and patted him on the arm. "Come on, let's go back inside."

As they trudged back to the cabin, Daniel looked suspiciously at the skies. "Does that look like snow to you?"

O'Neill shook his head. "No."

Daniel blew on his hands. "It's very cold."

"I told you to wear gloves."

"Why is it this cold if it isn't going to snow?"

"If it's not cold enough for the lake to freeze over, it doesn't matter," he countered.

Daniel gave him a look of disbelief. "Doesn't matter to whom?"

"The fish." As they passed the generator, O'Neill noted the unhealthy whine of its engine. There were a few puffs of blue smoke venting from it. Usually the sign of it heading for another breakdown. He looked at his watch and calculated that it would probably give up the ghost by about 3am, and that by that point there would be six inches of snow on the ground. The sky was decidedly gray now, the sun disappearing behind the cloudbank. On reflection, May would probably have been a better month for them to come here, or maybe June. He decided to spend the next couple of hours chopping a boatload of wood, then at least he could keep the stove going and Daniel supplied with coffee. If he ran out of caffeine things could get ugly, and there were a lot of sharp implements around the place.

As they reached the cabin, Daniel looked out across the lake in the direction in which Golding's car had headed. "I hope Inga's okay."

"She'll be fine," he said with more conviction than he felt.

"What did Darius want to talk to you about?"

"Fossils. Cuneiform. Angels. Apparently some guy called Eckhart delivered a paper that pretty much emptied the place and as it sounded as if he was talking complete crap, Golding thought we might be interested in what he had to say."

"Oh." Daniel looked relieved but not completely convinced.

"We didn't talk about you," O'Neill assured him. After a pause when he had intended to add something facetious about Daniel not being the center of the universe, he shrugged. "There's not a lot of common ground there." He took another look at the sky. About ten minutes before the snow came in, he reckoned. It would get very dark very fast, grayness muffling the windows. The reproachful looks and long-suffering sighs were going to be horrendous.

As they reached the door of the cabin, he looked back across the lake. The wind had picked up and was rippling the surface, the fish diving for warmth. He looked at Daniel and realized that for all his bitching, he was standing there wearing O'Neill's overcoat, in Minnesota, taking the fishing trip O'Neill had offered and he had so emphatically refused after the business with the robot.
"Daniel…?"

Daniel turned to look at him in surprise, clearly alerted by the seriousness of his tone. "What?"

O'Neill grimaced. "Before we went to Egypt you said you didn't know if you believed in what we were doing any more. Do you now?"

Daniel looked across the lake, thinking for a long moment, and then he nodded. "Yes. I believe in what we're doing."

"I know things don't always go down the way you'd like. I know the military solution isn't the one you'd always choose, and that's a good thing."

Daniel raised his eyebrows in surprise. "It is?"

"Yes, because without the alternatives you offer, we're just running around the galaxy being at war with the Goa'uld. And like you said in Egypt, the Stargate should be more than that. This Program shouldn't just be about protecting the planet, however important that is. It shouldn't just be a re-run of the Cold War in space. There are more things out there than us and the Goa'uld."

Daniel shivered. "Yes."

"This Program needs you as much as it needs me. It needs a conscience and a heart and a soul. But he couldn't say that aloud. "To be honest with you I'm getting a little like Inga. Some days I don't trust my own judgment any more. I don't think I really like the idea of making decisions that don't get bounced off you first. I need you around to tell me when I screw up. Even when it's really annoying, it's still what I need."

Daniel looked across at him, eyes full of so much warmth, O'Neill wondered how he could ever have felt unwanted, ever thought their friendship might be over. Daniel said gently, "Ditto."

O'Neill felt the relief flood through him like brandy, because that look he'd seen in the infirmary was definitely gone from Daniel's eyes now. Whatever faith it was he'd lost he'd found again in the Labyrinth, in that dark scary place where he'd died, where he'd had to confront the fact a lot of the history he'd grown up believing in and searching for didn't exist the way he'd hoped. Somehow in following the tainted trail of the System Lords he'd found the missing part of himself Golding had stolen all those years ago. Or perhaps he'd just needed to confront that buried memory before he could move on. Whatever the reason, he looked like Daniel again, the same guy who just had to touch the event horizon and who stepped through the 'gate with all that curiosity and wonder he'd been afraid for a while he might have lost forever. "So, we need to keep doing what we do, right?"

"Exploring the universe or annoying the hell out of each other?"

O'Neill looked around the now decidedly wintry looking landscape and shrugged. "Both, I guess."

Daniel took a last suspicious look at the snow-clouds gathering overhead. "Works for me."

As they headed for the cabin, Daniel said, "Are you sure it's not going to snow?"

O'Neill put an arm around his shoulders, ushering him towards the door before those first fat flakes began to fall. "Hey, even if it did, and say, the generator broke down, and we were a little marooned up here, wouldn't that just be another interesting life experience?"

Daniel looked at him sideways like a small boy who'd just been told he couldn't have a puppy after all. "No."
"Now come on, Daniel." O'Neill pushed open the door, and gently but firmly urged him inside. "Where's your spirit of adventure?" As he looked back over his shoulder he saw the first snow begin to fall on the lake, the small dry kind that often turned into a blizzard of wild wet flakes, a curtain of white covering the land. He had a feeling that Daniel was not going to forgive him for this vacation for a long time. He put on his brightest smile as he firmly closed the door behind them and started pulling the drapes across before Daniel looked out and saw what the weather was like. "I made some fresh coffee. I brought that special imported roast you like."

"Thanks." Daniel brightened up considerably. He picked up the folder Golding had left. "What's this?"

O'Neill poured him a cup of coffee before putting it back on the stove to reheat. "Fossils of angels in the rock or something. A lot of things about the Book of Enoch and some of that Forbidden Archaeology stuff Nelson and Alexis were talking about. You put your feet up and take a look at it, I'll just go and fill the oil lamps and...." Chop a lot of wood, quickly, so we don't die of hypothermia tonight when the generator dies on us. "Check on a few things. And I'll cook tonight. You've had a long day."

Daniel sat down in the armchair by the fire. "Are you sure you don't need a hand with anything? You're supposed to be taking care of your ribs."

"No, no." O'Neill pulled the door open an inch and darted a glance outside at the snowflakes. "You just take it easy. I'm determined that you're going to learn to love Minnesota – one way or another."

"Keep this up and maybe I will." Daniel relaxed into the chair, switching on the electric light so he could study the information Golding had left, something which O'Neill reckoned would keep him too absorbed to notice the weather for at least an hour. The scent of coffee was permeating the room nicely now. As O'Neill opened the door a little wider, the snow buffeted at him and he heard the whine of the generator go up another note.

He said quickly, "I think what happened in Egypt proved that this whole...friendship thing we've got going is pretty hard to dent, wouldn't you agree?"

Daniel looked at him in surprise and then his face softened. "Yes, Jack. I would."

"That's good to hear." O'Neill braced himself against the cold and then stepped outside into a flurry of swirling flakes. Looking back he could see Daniel totally absorbed in cuneiform, tracing the carvings on the photograph with one finger while murmuring to himself with all his old enthusiasm, utterly oblivious of the wintry world outside. As he closed the door gently, O'Neill found he was smiling so hard the snow blew into his mouth and dissolved softly on his tongue. Across the lake an owl called from out of the fir trees, reminding him that even though he walked the surface of other worlds for a living, here, at least, he was nowhere other than home.

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