

One Good Reason

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"Give me one good reason," Jonathan MacKensie fumed over crossed arms, "just one good reason why shouldn't I bail out on you right now."

Edgar Benedek smiled serenely, negotiating a sharp turn with no discernible reduction of speed, resulting in choking noises from his passenger as inertia sent Jonathan's neck hard against his shoulder seat belt. "The spectacular smear you'd leave on the asphalt?"

"Benedek, once and for all, my life is not a game to be played at your whim. You lied to me — to Dr. Moorhouse! Again!"

"Yeah, it's amazing how many times you guys fall for the same shtick," Benny shook his head in admiration. "Hey! Hey! Not in a fifty-mile per hour zone, okay? Give me a minute and I'll pull over so you can make your indignant exit into a ditch, all right?"

"Why do you do these things?" Jonathan muttered angrily after a moment spent glowering out the window at the passing scenery. "Why do you persist in tricking me into these situations? You know what Dr. Moorhouse will say when she hears about this. She's never forgiven you for the first time you called her pretending to be someone you weren't for the sole purpose of persuading her to send me off to join you one of your bizarre jaunts, so you have a pretty good idea how she feels about the last three times." He leveled his glare at Benny. "Why can't you just tell me the truth?"

"Oh, yeah, that would work," Benny scoffed lightly. "Just like the last time. 'Hey, Jack, got a hot lead on Big-foot, grab the video camera and meet me in Montana.' You'd have come running, I'm sure."

"I might have."

"Don't kid a kidder, pal. You'd have been running, maybe, but in the opposite direction, and you know it."

"That's not the point," Jonathan huffed. "You can't keep shanghaiing me like this. Every time you pull this stunt, you lose that much more of Dr. Moorhouse's respect."

"You say that like you really believe I have any of her respect in the first place."

Despite the light disdain in Benny's voice, Jonathan caught something more behind the words, and considered for a moment. "More than you think," he murmured.

Benny glanced at him sharply. "What did you say?"

"I said, it wouldn't kill you to treat her with a little common respect in the first place," Jonathan said instead. "As it is, last week she instructed the campus switchboard not to let any more of your calls through to the department."

"She finally got around to that after all these years, huh?"

Jonathan sighed heavily. "All right. All right, so it is all just a game to you, I've more or less accepted that although I will never condone it. But your tactics are interfering with your strategy. You're not taking into consideration how your actions now will affect the long-term."

"Long-term? Long-term what?"

Jonathan stared at him until convinced that Benny's puzzlement was sincere. "Never mind," he sighed again, shaking his head and returning to his intent study of the forested, sun-soaked landscape through which their rental car sped.

"So," Benny finally broke the long silence. "Why *didn't* you bail out?"

"The nearest hospital is twenty-five miles away," Jonathan growled.

"At the airport, bunky. The next flight back to D.C. left in two hours, that would've left plenty of time to vent and threaten my life in at least fifteen colorful and unique ways. Why didn't you leave then?"

"I should have," Jonathan muttered darkly.

"But you didn't," Benny returned in a telling sing-song. "Why'd you jump into the car with me instead?"

"That's not the point," Jonathan snapped, exasperated.

"Oh, sure it is. Unless you really expect me to believe that two overly educated eggheads can be duped by the same shtick five times in a row without ever once getting a clue. I had the 'stupid' tattoo removed from my forehead years ago, y'know."

Without taking his eyes from the road ahead, Benny seemed to know that Jonathan was staring at him; his smug smile slowly grew into a grin of sheer delight with every moment that passed in silence. "You *are* a troll," Jonathan grumbled, shaking his head.

"Yeah, but I'm the troll you extol, ain't I? Come on, admit it. You're into the game as much as I am, aren't you? Only you're playing it on a level that's not quite as honest as mine."

"Honest? *You?*"

"I'm the one who was out there and upfront about what we were doing in Montana. You, on the other hand, had to make everybody, including yourself, believe that I tricked you into it before you could just relax and get on with it. And what ended up happening?"

"You mean, besides my concussion and broken collarbone?"

"We got the scoop, Jack. *We*. That's you, me and the video camera upon which we ... correction, *you* ... got the shot seen 'round the world."

"Hardly conclusive evidence," Jonathan replied automatically, his usual defensive reaction whenever the subject of that particular film footage came up. But there was enough of a soft edge to the otherwise irritated reply to remind Benny of the exultant, almost hysterically so, anthropology professor playing the tape over and over, unable to believe that it had been his eye on the viewfinder and his hand guiding the video camera.

"Like that's the point," Benny sniffed.

"I've got a novel idea," Jonathan said after giving up on ever coming up with an effective retort. "Let's try this my way, just this once."

"I'm not sure I should be saying this, but okay, I'm game. Try what?"

"Telling me the truth before I painfully stumble upon the truth on my own. Where are we going and what are you expecting to find when we get there?"

Benny made a quick gesture with his left hand, pointing forward without releasing the steering wheel. "In the order asked: out there, and you'll be the first to know, right after I find out."

"Benedek."

"That's about the best I can do right now," he shrugged, surprising Jonathan with the amount of sincerity in his voice and gesture. "See, I got this hot lead that ... well, someone I know ... know of, I mean, by reputation ... is up to something here in the mountains."

"Define 'something.'"

"Well, that's what we're going to find out right now."

"And that's your justification for pretending not to see several extremely hard to ignore 'absolutely no trespassing by order of the U.S. Air Force Command' signs over the past five miles? You have no idea what this 'something' is, but you're barreling out into the uncharted wilderness to check it out?"

"If you knew what I know about this guy, pal, believe me, you'd understand. I hear that he's into stuff so secret that he's under orders to shoot himself if he talks to his reflection in the shaving mirror."

"How reassuring," Jonathan muttered nervously. "Precisely the sort of situation into which we should be rushing to stick our noses, of course."

"And how," Benny agreed cheerfully. "I've been after this guy for a while, Jack. He's into something big, and I mean really big. But outside of a few rumors, no one knows just how big, only that it's ... it's ... well, big."

"And your plan is to, what? Somehow persuade him to spill his guts to you using just your winning personality?"

"Nope. I'm going for the direct approach this time."

"And that is?"

"Catch him in the act," Benny grinned.

"And what sort of 'act' are you expecting to catch him in?" Jonathan persisted, running out of patience.

"My contact says that this guy is the senior officer in charge of some mysterious military maneuvers that suddenly kicked into high gear two days ago."

"Military," Jonathan groaned, unpleasant past experiences flashing evilly before his eyes. So, it *had* in fact been too much to hope that the warning signs that Benny had blithely disregarded in his charge up this mountain were a mere coincidence. Sometimes, when it came to Edgar Benedek's ulterior motives and circumstantial evidence, he wondered why he even bothered to hope for the better of all possible outcomes in the first place.

"See, the thing is, I know for a fact that this guy doesn't do military maneuvers. In fact, he was retired from the service up until a couple years ago. They brought him back in for some super-secret mega hush-hush gig. Something big."

"Something really big," Jonathan muttered sarcastically. "I believe you mentioned that already."

"They've got like fifty square miles of a national state park locked up tighter than Chelsea Clinton on a Saturday night. Kicked the nature crowd right out on their cans and nobody's saying when they're ever gonna to let 'em back in again."

"From a national park?" Despite himself, the question intrigued him. "They can't do that – can they?"

Benny gave him a wise look. "These guys can."

Jonathan's eyes widened slightly. "You mean ... *this* national park?"

"None other."

MacKensie lapsed into a silence marked by a peculiar expression of unease creasing his face. Benny spared him a few looks before curiosity got the better of him. "What?"

"This escapade has military prison written all over it," Jonathan muttered darkly.

"Brings back such fond memories, doesn't it?" Benny remarked with a grin.

Jonathan sighed heavily, resigned to his fate. "You could have least warned me to wear my hiking boots. I ruined a perfectly good pair of shoes the last time you dragged me through the woods on a...."

"Whoa." Benny sat up straighter, leaning forward to peer out the windshield. "Check this out."

Jonathan followed his gaze up the road, to a spot roughly one hundred yards straight ahead where a vehicle was sitting in just the right position to completely block further progress. "Just a guess, mind you, but I'd say someone doesn't want us to go any farther."

"Someone who's using a military jeep to get his point across, eh?" Benny chortled. "What do you say we engage our stalwart defenders of freedom in a little friendly chit-chat?"

Jonathan gritted his teeth, anticipating the approach of stern, glowering uniformed soldiers brandishing nasty-looking weapons and politely but firmly ordering them to turn back, just like every other time that Benny had driven them into this same situation with the same maniacal gleam in his eye. But as they drew closer, no one appeared in the road to challenge them. Benny slowed the car and stopped it just a few feet from the obstacle. Both men exchanged uneasy glances. They waited in silence, but there was still no movement. No belligerent shouting or prominently displayed machine guns rushed to greet them.

"There's something wrong here," Jonathan finally murmured in dread-tinged tones.

"Maybe we scored a break for once," Benny decided suddenly, opening the door and jumping out.

Jonathan caught up with him just as Benny's upper torso disappeared into the jeep. He stepped hard on his deep-seated urge to warn his Benedek off; it was a foregone conclusion that the attempt would fall on deliberately deaf ears. Suddenly, Benny popped up, a walkie-talkie unit clutched in his hand. He raised it for Jonathan to see, a fast eyebrow waggle inviting MacKensie to note something unusual about the object. What that something was be-

came apparent when a burst of static erupted from the unit, carrying with it a tinny, urgent voice demanding, "Unit 2, do you copy? I repeat, Unit 2, come in. We are moving on your position, do you copy? Unit 2, respond!"

Jonathan swallowed hard. "I think I'd just as soon not be here when that particular gentleman and his friends arrive," he said, a half-plea to Benny that he already knew to be useless, given the way that Benedek was scanning their heavily forested surroundings.

"Maybe they'll think more kindly of us if we can turn up their bad boys for them," Benny shrugged. "See anything around here that might vaguely resemble a clue?"

He jumped, startled, when Jonathan answered him with a sharp poke in the arm. Before he could react with an indignant squawk, MacKensie took off at a run up the road past the jeep, tacitly answering Benedek's question about the reason for the sudden physical assault. "Wait up!" Benny called as he paused long enough to toss the radio unit back into the jeep before dashing after the fugitive.

Jonathan had disappeared around a bend in the road obscured from Benny's sight by low-hanging tree branches; by the time Benedek caught up, he found Jonathan crouched by the side of a sprawled body dressed in military fatigues. Nearby, another soldier was crumpled against the trunk of a tree at the edge of the road, equally motionless. The low sound of a deep, ragged moan grabbed Benny's attention, directing it to yet a third soldier, who, on his knees in the middle of the road ahead, appeared to have fared better than his comrades. But not by much, given the way the unfortunate was clutching his head, rocking back and forth in physical manifestation of the pain that his piteous groans already effectively communicated.

A movement from Jonathan roused Benny from his state of gape-mouthed shock. He watched as MacKensie, grim-faced, hurried to check on the condition of the barely conscious soldier. "Hey, Jon-boy," he called, feeling his throat constrict under a strange chill of apprehension that he struggled hard to keep out of his voice. "Talk to me. Do we have a body count racking up here or what?"

"He's alive," Jonathan assured him with a nod toward the downed soldier he'd just abandoned. "Looks like a head injury. Something knocked him unconscious."

The feeling of dread increased in a surge. "Or someone, you mean?" he retorted pointedly. "You maybe want to knock off the Angel of Mercy routine until we get this situation scoped?"

Jonathan gestured impatiently. "Get on that radio and call for help!"

Given his experience with that particular tone of voice, Benny knew better than to waste time and energy pressing his point. But he still hesitated, realizing that retrieving the walkie-talkie meant moving out of the immediate line of sight of what looked entirely too much like a potentially dangerous situation.

A fierce glare from Jonathan called the question, sending him scurrying down the rise and around the bend. Diving into the jeep, he grabbed up the discarded radio unit and fumbled for the activation switch. "Hey!" he interrupted yet another demand for immediate response from the impatient, disembodied voice. "You guys out there! Pedal to the metal time! You've got men down! Bring some medics with you when you swing by to join the party!"

A burst of static met his effort. Then, "Who the hell is this?" barked from the speaker.

"Explorer Troop 385 out of Poughkeepsie, who d'ya think?" Benny snapped back. Scrambling to his feet from the half sprawl he'd ended up in as a result of his lunge into the jeep, he started back at a fast trot. "Look, I'm telling you, some of your little playmates are in trouble out here. So let's move those snappy green scooters of yours, okay? And leave the trigger-happy kids behind — we're the good guys, so try to keep that in mind when you get here."

"You are trespassing in a secured zone," the voice came back, hard and furious. "I repeat, you are trespassing in a secured zone. You are to turn back immediately. Turn back *immediately!*"

"Yeah, yeah," he grumbled, completely ignoring the command for the chicken squawking he considered it to be. To his relief, the scene before him appeared unchanged from the last time, scant moments ago, that he'd seen it. Jonathan was still crouched by the side of the distressed soldier, doing his best to discern obvious injuries.

Glancing sideways at the victim that Jonathan had already pronounced his hasty diagnosis upon, Benny made his way over to the soldier crumpled against the tree trunk. He detected respiration, steady and unforced, and there was good color in the man's slack face, which he took as good signs. "This one's out cold, too," he announced. "What do you suppose happened here, anyway?"

The expected reply never came. He straightened, looking at Jonathan in confusion. Although his question had been entirely rhetorical, it had still been designed to provoke a response from his partner. At least, that was the way it had always worked before, even if the reply was nothing more than an irritated, "I'm afraid I sent my powers of prescience to the cleaners."

"Jack?" The hairs on the back of his neck begin a strange dance. Jonathan's face was turned away from him, lowered in seeming concern over the stricken man, who, Benny noted with a touch of admiration, had quieted considerably under MacKensie's care. But the longer he watched, the more he realized that Jonathan was no longer ministering. He wasn't moving at all.

"Jonathan?" He edged closer, craning to get a look at the man's face. His first glimpse proved less than reassuring. "Hey. Doctor J." He went into a crouch by Jonathan's side, snapping his fingers briskly in front of MacKensie's eyes. "Yo. Jonathan. Jonathan! Surface, come on!"

Jonathan's blink eased Benny's growing anxiety, which only surged back when the professor turned blank eyes vaguely in Benedek's direction. Benedek's stomach twisted, realizing that what he was looking at was not a simple zone-out triggered by stress or exhaustion. There was no hint of recognition on Jonathan's expressionless face or in his curiously lifeless eyes. Benny's contorted stomach took a sickening dive to further realize that what was completely missing from his partner's face was the simple acknowledgment that Benedek actually existed in the space he presently occupied, let alone that he had a name that just wasn't coming to mind for some reason.

"Jonathan." He leaned forward, squinting intently. "Hello? Is anybody home? Hello? Hello!"

In the midst of his heightening panic, he became aware of a rumbling sound, increasing in volume, interspersed with raucous squeals of metal scraping relentlessly against metal. "Jack, come on. The cavalry's coming and we haven't baked a cake. Are you reading me? Are you hearing me? Are you *in* there?"

MacKensie's head moved vaguely, but not in response to any of Benny's increasingly agitated pleas. His unfocused eyes flickered rapidly, as though searching for something deeply hidden in the recesses of his own mind. Full-fledged panic began to tug at Benedek despite his stoic efforts to keep the distraction at bay, to keep his voice steady as he continued, in vain, to cajole a response, any response, out of the oblivious professor. A loud, rough voice shouting "Did you hear me? I said, hands up!" entirely too close to his ear jarred him into the realization that they were being swiftly surrounded by six military vehicles converging from all directions, ejecting entirely too many uniformed soldiers brandishing far too many machine guns for comfort.

"Easy, easy!" Benny locked his hands securely behind his head, assuming a well-practiced position. "We're unarmed! We're non-hostile! And believe me, we had *nothing* to do with this!"

"Shut up and don't move!"

A forest of weapon barrels pointed directly at his head reinforced the message. Benny's attention was diverted by the late arrival of another jeep, from which a passenger leaped before the vehicle had even come to a full stop. Judging from the flurry of salutes being directed his way, it was easy for Benedek to deduce that the Man in Charge was in the house.

His face was shadowed by the visor of his cap, pulled low on his forehead, but for some reason, Benny flinched under the impact of the brief glance the officer settled on him before his attention was diverted by someone's shout. "Colonel! It's Shellhammer, sir!"

The officer spun on his heel and strode off in the direction of the call, joining several other armed soldiers gathering around their fallen comrade at the side of the road. Benny watched, confused, as not one of them lowered their weapons or bothered to check the unconscious man's condition, but only stood, heads bent in close conference.

And throughout it all, Jonathan had not moved or reacted, continuing to stare ahead at something only he could see.

"You! I said, you!" one of their captors addressed Jonathan gruffly. "Are you deaf or something? I said, get your hands up!"

"He can't!" Benny cried when it seemed that the soldier was about to reinforce his demand with a physical prod. "There's something wrong with him, he ... he's sick! Can't you see that? He needs medical help!"

To his surprise, the soldier reacted violently, nearly dropping his weapon as he staggered back a few steps before regaining his balance and composure. "Colonel!" he bellowed. "Colonel, we've got a situation here!"

The Man in Charge came at a dead run, trailing several other men and women with him. The badly shaken soldier who had summoned them spoke lowly near the officer's ear, his hand movements communicating marked anxiety. Then the Colonel's head snapped up, revealing glittering eyes beneath the shadow of his visor, and the grimmest expression Benny had ever seen on a human face.

"Damn it!" the officer spat, the word set in the midst of a controlled hiss. He made a gesture so violent that it nearly unbalanced him on the upswing. "Get him out of here, *now*."

Before Benny could react, he was grabbed and roughly hauled to his feet. "Hey! Hey! Hey, hey, *hey!*" His protests as well as his struggles went ignored by the soldiers who dragged him away, and attempted to dump him bodily into a nearby jeep. With a low growl of deeply offended dignity and outright indignation, Benny thwarted their first try by bracing his foot against the door frame. When the soldiers shifted position to dislodge him, Benny used his leverage point to launch himself out of the grip of his captors. The best he could manage given his awkward starting position was to land in a sprawl on the ground instead of on his feet running as he would have hoped, but a fast look up gave him hope. The negative momentum generated by his unexpected maneuver had caused his erstwhile escorts to crash into each other, leaving them momentarily dazed. Elated by success, Benny started to scramble to his feet, fully intending to make an end run around the fatigue-clad obstacles that stood between him and the Man in Charge so that he could deliver his opinion concerning the colonel's people skills to his smarmy face and at full volume.

But he'd no more than lifted himself onto all fours before the scene he witnessed before him froze him in shock and disbelief. The circle of armed soldiers surrounding Jonathan slowly widened as the men and women responded to the colonel's gestured instructions to back away. From somewhere beneath his fatigue jacket, the senior officer produced a bizarre looking object. As he extended it away from his body, his arm twitched slightly. With an evil-sounding click and whine, the thing in his hand expanded abruptly, seeming to take on the appearance of a bristling metallic cobra rearing to strike. Those soldiers who had dawdled in their retreat hopped away quickly as the colonel raised the strange object and pointed it at Jonathan's head.

"No!"

The angry scream punched its way out of the depths of Benedek's chest, exploding at the same moment that blue, crackling light erupted from the strange device held firmly in the colonel's hand. Benny watched in horror as thin tendrils of the blue light enveloped Jonathan, maniacally swirling and snapping around his entire body. MacKensie's body jerked harshly under the onslaught for only a moment before the evil glow abruptly faded. In the sudden, total silence, Benny heard the breath leaving Jonathan's body in a deceptively gentle sigh as the man slumped to the ground.

"No!!" Benny roared.

Logic and reason disappeared in a surge of pure, red fury. With an animal growl, he sprang, struggling fiercely and mindlessly against the strong hands rudely checking his forward momentum.

The colonel's head snapped around, delivering a glare that might have stopped a lesser man's heart. "I told you to get that civilian out of here!" he bellowed.

By the time the red haze had cleared from his mind, returning him to some semblance of reason, Benny found himself nose down on the floor of the vehicle, his hands secured behind his back, someone's knee planted firmly in his back, and something cold and metallic digging into the back of his head, with no clear idea how any of it had happened.

Nearby, he heard two voices in low, heated argument. Benny was certain that the more irritated voice of the two belonged to the Man in Charge, and he seemed to be discussing Benny's fate with someone—a woman—who was only marginally less annoyed.

"I don't care," he heard the colonel insist to something that the woman was attempting to point out. "I don't care. Just *do* it."

"But, sir"

"Captain, think about it – what *choice* do we have?" There was an unexpected undertone of indecision in the gruff voice, as though he were pleading for the woman to come up with an answer.

But her response was only a resigned sigh delivered after a short, tense silence. "Yes, sir. Understood. Any suggestions for how I'm supposed to explain this to the general?"

"Just ... keep your head down, go for cover and wait for me to wrap up here," he murmured, a veiled apology. "I'll draw his fire when I get back, I promise. Go."

"Yes, sir."

The vehicle lurched, signaling the additional weight of a newcomer in the front passenger seat. To Benny's relief, the pressure eased off his kidneys. Before he had time to react, someone grabbed him by the shoulder to provide enough clearance for a blackout hood to be worked over his head and secured at the neck.

"You people can't do this!" he shouted into the muffling cloth. "I'm a United States citizen! I pay taxes! I know congressmen! I know Joint Chiefs of Staff! I know Rush Limbaugh!"

"Just relax, okay?" The woman's voice came from the front of the jeep and sounded not entirely unsympathetic. "You'll only hurt yourself if you keep squirming like that."

His retort became a pained yelp as the jeep jerked to life, throwing him hard into some protruding edge. "I'm warning you! You can't do this to me! I swear, I'll have the ACLU come down on you guys harder than Maris' bat on a fast ball. You don't know who you're messing with here!"

"You know, you're right," the voice beyond his blindfold agreed mildly. "So tell me, who *are* we messing with here?"

"I don't have to tell you people anything," he huffed. "This is kidnapping! Where are you taking me? Get this thing off me! Let me out of this jeep!"

"This entire area is posted for no trespassing, starting at least five miles back," came the unruffled reply. "Why did you ignore the warnings?"

"None of your business!"

"Well, unfortunately, that's where you're wrong," she sighed, sounding curiously regretful. "Those signs were there for a good reason. A very, very good reason."

Her non-belligerent yet darkly-colored assertion confused Benny into silence, long enough for his anger over the uncalled-for manhandling to diffuse and allow another simmering concern to surface violently. "He didn't have to shoot him! Damn you, he didn't have to shoot him! Why in the hell did he have to shoot him?"

"Calm down," the voice replied in what seemed on the surface to be an assuring tone, but in which Benny detected a clear intent to avoid the subject. "It's a long trip back and I can tell you right now, you're not going to get any questions answered until we get there, so you might as well save it."

"There? Where's there? Where are you taking me?"

"I said, save it."

Benny spluttered indignantly for a moment, but then subsided. Her last words carried enough of an imperious quality to convince him that any more attempts to provoke her would fall on indifferent ears.

But letting go of his rage proved no prelude to peace of mind. A sickness in the pit of his stomach surged up to supplant his anger, finally released from the place in which he'd tried to restrain it so that he wouldn't be overwhelmed at a time when he could least afford the distraction. He shivered under the impact of the first gasp the building pressure from within shook out of him, swallowing hard in a vain attempt to keep the next convulsion from provoking an even stronger physical response. In the blackness of the suffocating hood, he couldn't escape the image, the keening memory that simmered in the midst of the relentless onslaught. *They shot him. Those bastards shot him. No warning, no reason, not so much as a blink of an eye. They just... shot him, like they were kicking a stray dog!*

He gave up trying to fight off the rising waves of nausea and fury, reserving his efforts for suppressing any sound that might outwardly give away his inner struggle. At least it gave him one reason to be grateful for the concealing hood; it would give them no chance to infer purpose from the determined facial expression that grew grimmer and more resolute the longer he spent trussed up on the floor of a lurching jeep, staring into the black face of his own emotional turmoil. They were going to pay for this. The decision lifted his darkened heart, prompting him to mentally repeat the litany until it dispossessed all other thoughts and feeling. They were going to pay for this. All of them, every last tin-plated one of them, would have the price extracted from their smug, worthless hides. That goal, no more or less, was now his sole purpose in life, and he would spend every waking moment striving toward it. Yes. There was no room for doubt in his mind. They were going to *pay*.

It felt strange to be alone in the middle of small, quiet room, with absolutely nothing to better to do than watch others run scurry around in a state of controlled, orchestrated urgency in the chamber beyond the observation window. Doctors, nurses and technicians garbed in hazmat gear moved from bedside to bedside, from monitor to monitor, from one hurried consultation to the next, all in silent, frenetic pantomime. Colonel Jack O'Neill briefly considered turning up on the volume on the com system connecting the two rooms, but then remembered that fast-flying medical lingo gave him a headache, which was why he'd turned the sound off in the first place.

O'Neill heard the door behind him open, but didn't bother to turn around. He already had a good mental picture of the man standing in the doorway and of the scowl that was threatening to become permanently etched on the elder officer's face. Instead, he continued observing, and awaited the inevitable.

"You brought civilians into the SGC?"

O'Neill turned to face his commanding officer. "I had no choice," he said calmly, unfazed by the blazing glare Hammond had fixed on him. "They found Shellhammer before we did."

Recognizing an unassailable reason when he heard one, Hammond nodded tersely, shutting the door behind him before moving to join O'Neill at the observation window. "How could you be certain that contact was made?"

O'Neill shrugged uneasily. "Call it a gut feeling. He had 'the look.'"

"Does Dr. Fraiser concur?"

"Oh, yeah." He gestured toward the window, drawing Hammond's attention to the bed holding the supine body of Dr. Jonathan MacKensie, nearly unrecognizable under an oxygen mask and a tangled mass of monitor leads. "See that monitor, right there? Fraiser says that's the same pattern of disruption she found in all the others, only this time we're looking at this...this *thing* in progress instead of having to sift through the aftermath after the main act has already left the building."

"It's still in him, you mean."

"Yes, sir."

"Damn," Hammond muttered darkly.

"My sentiments exactly, sir. Oh, if you don't mind me asking, I think I must have missed something while I was out doing my Elmer Fudd thing. They're still in hazmat gear, but they appear to have forgotten about the helmets somewhere along the line?"

"The possibility of airborne contagion was ruled out yesterday."

"Oh." O'Neill nodded thoughtfully. "Did they rule anything in?"

"We'll cover that in debriefing," Hammond told him. "In my office, you and Captain Carter, one hour."

"Yes, sir, one hour."

"Do we have names for our two new guests?"

Only then did O'Neill remember that one of his search team had had the foresight to remove the wallet from the noisy civilian just before the recalcitrant had been hauled away by Captain Carter. He dug into his jacket pocket. "Should be something right here," he murmured as he opened the wallet to do a fast search. Suddenly, he froze, mouth falling agape. "Aw, geez!" he exploded, his fisted hand flailing the air in a desperate search for something to punch a hole in.

Hammond calmly took the opened wallet from O'Neill, ignoring the additional angry dark muttering that continued to spew from the aggravated officer. He found himself looking at a press pass, and frowned. "*The National Register*? Never heard of it."

"You obviously haven't spent much time in supermarket checkout lines, sir," O'Neill said, calming down with an effort. "There's really no kind way to put this. The *Register* is ... it's, uh ... well, for one thing, it's required reading among the 'Elvis was kidnapped by aliens' theorists."

Hammond gave him a sharp look. "He works for one of *those*?"

There was no mistaking his meaning. O'Neill nodded regretfully. "I'm afraid so, sir. One of those."

Hammond's jaw worked angrily, his glare directed into the makeshift med lab beyond. His terse nod picked out Jonathan. "Have someone on the emergency team gather his personal effects and get them to my office within the hour."

O'Neill blinked. "Decontamination procedures?"

"Also ruled out as of yesterday."

"I've got to start phoning home a little more often," O'Neill remarked under his breath. "Hey, uh, you know? I was really expecting to find Teal'c here. Which army pried him out and how many jackhammers did they have bring in to do the job?"

"I had him report to Major Crawford," Hammond informed him, with just enough of a nod of understanding to communicate the true intent of his action beyond the words of explanation. "They're attempting to document Teal'c's memories of what transpired on P3V-112."

"General..." O'Neill shook his head under the heavy weight of renewed frustration. "We've been over this and over this. None of us remember anything unusual. Nothing happened. *Nothing*. It was just a boring recon of a dead, boring planet. Boring sky, boring rocks, just ... just a complete and utter *boring* wasteland."

"And yet this boring planet of yours apparently rated the placement of a functioning Stargate," Hammond said pointedly. Watching O'Neill react with a frustrated scowl, Hammond reduced the sharpness in his tone to continue, "I'll want you and Carter to work with Crawford as well."

"Yes, sir," O'Neill replied, a weary sigh.

Hammond started to turn away, but then stopped, following O'Neill's gaze back to its destination on the far side of the isolation chamber. "Has there been any change?" he asked quietly.

"You'd know better than I would, sir." O'Neill said grimly. "I just got back from the rabbit hunt, remember?"

"The last report I received indicated that his condition has improved steadily since he emerged from the coma yesterday morning. It's too soon to tell, of course, whether a full recovery is possible, but ..."

"I'll take good news however I can get it, sir," the colonel replied somberly, the greater part of his attention elsewhere as he continued to stare at the occupied med-bed and the nurses who closely attended the occupant.

"I'll see you in my office, then. One hour." Again he stopped mid-turn. "Oh, and Colonel? Might I suggest that you use the time wisely?"

It took no more than a pointed look to remind O'Neill that he'd just returned from a forty-hour sojourn in the deep woods, far from modern conveniences as well as modern sensibilities. "Understood, sir."

"I certainly hope so," Hammond muttered as he strode from the room.

Two hours later, the debriefing ended with Hammond's directive to further interrogate the civilian brought in by Captain Carter and remanded to the detention area under heavy guard by the general's orders. But this time the questioning was to be conducted under O'Neill's supervision in the hopes of providing an edge of intimidation to facilitate Carter's so far fruitless attempts to cajole information out of the stubborn man.

"He's a tough nut," Sam told O'Neill in response to his question as they headed out of Hammond's office for the holding area. "I get the feeling that he's dealt with the military before, and I don't think any good impressions were left on either side."

"Then he'll have a file someplace, wouldn't he?"

"Already on it, sir. We should be getting a report back soon. There's one thing I really don't understand, though," Carter added, after a subtle change of expression had already alerted O'Neill to that fact.

"Only one?" he remarked dryly.

"In this particular nanosecond, anyway," she responded in kind. "A professor of Anthropology from the Georgetown Institute of Science and Technology — and a tabloid reporter. It just doesn't make a whole lot of sense to me."

"Would it to anyone?" O'Neill muttered sarcastically. "Let's hope we hear a convincing explanation real soon now. I really want to get this thing wrapped up before someone starts missing these guys."

Turning the last corner, he stopped dead to find the hallway filled with armed guards, their placement giving him no clue as to which door to approach. Seeing his confusion, Carter touched his arm and gestured with her free hand. "This one, sir."

One of the armed guards unlocked the indicated door upon their approach. Carter stood aside for O'Neill to proceed before her, his right as senior officer. As the colonel crossed the threshold, the pat speech he had his mouth opened to deliver was figuratively shoved down his throat as his body was physically propelled backward, coming to a sudden, bone-scraping halt into the corridor's far wall. It took him a dazed moment to realize that he'd just been body-slammed by a flying object about the size and shape of an enraged civilian, the same civilian who, despite being roughly hauled off by two guards, was still reaching clawed hands in the direction of Jack's throat. An attempt to

speaking brought only an undignified squawk, so he settled for a terse nod directing the guards to drag their snarling, kicking charge back into the cell.

Gathering his dignity and clearing his bruised throat, O'Neill entered the room again, pausing only to instruct a third guard posted at the door. "If he tries anything like that again, you have my permission to aim low."

He found his erstwhile attacker perched defiantly on the edge of the cot, glaring up in turn at each of the gun barrels leveled at his head. O'Neill glared at him, shaking his head in open, irritated incredulity. "You've got a real death wish, don't you, buddy?"

"Why'd you do it?" Benedek fumed. "Why'd you shoot him like that? And what in the hell did you shoot him with, anyway? Who are you people? What gives you the right—?"

"Just shut up and let the guys holding the guns ask all the questions, okay?" O'Neill snapped, out of patience.

"You don't scare me," Benny snorted.

"That's too bad, because you should be scared. This is a bad situation, and the one thing we really, *really* don't need around here right now is you making things worse."

"Worse?" Benny's face purpled. "I watch you ... *you!* ... kill an unarmed man without so much as an "Excuse me, so sorry," and *I'm* the one making things worse?"

"Kill?" O'Neill blinked, belatedly realizing that belligerent man had no context for understanding the situation as it had gone down, let alone been given any kind of explanation. "Hey, look. No one's been killed here, okay? At least, not yet, and believe me, I'm looking for any excuse right now."

The fury drained abruptly from Benny's face, leaving him pale and visibly shaken. "What did you do to him, then?" he demanded, with considerably less pugnacity this time. "How is he? Where is he?"

"We've got people looking after him," O'Neill replied evasively. "If you want to know more, you're gonna have to start answering our questions for a change. Now, who are you, and what in the hell were you doing out there?"

"Last time I checked, this was still a free country and I don't need security clearance just to go for a drive." Benny growled.

O'Neill produced the wallet from his pocket, opening it with a brisk shake of his hand to reveal the clear plastic sleeve containing Benedek's press card. "Ok, let's try this again, Mr. Edgar Benedek of *The National Register*," he said pointedly. "What were you doing out there?"

"Hey, that's my question, pal. What were *you* and your band of merry men doing out there on the mountain? Armed to the teeth, all wild-eyed with screaming paranoia...."

"Okay. Fine." O'Neill pocketed the wallet with a flourish. "Let me know when you're willing to conduct a civilized conversation. I've got more important things to do than to waste my time on you."

"Wait. Wait!"

Hand on the door handle, Jack turned his head to look back at a chastened Edgar Benedek. "You're sure he's okay?" Benny asked after a moment spent clearing his throat. "I mean, you aren't ... you wouldn't just say that."

"He's not dead," O'Neill assured him.

"It's not like I don't trust you or anything, but, uh ... well, okay, I don't trust you. I want to see for myself."

"Well, I suppose that would depend."

"Depend on what?"

"On these questions you're gonna answer for me first."

"I'll give you three."

"Three?"

"Answers to any three questions of your choice. After that, you either let me see for myself, or I take a vow of silence on the spot."

Jack's eyes pointedly swept the armed guards in the room as well as the ones posted outside the door. "Why do you persist in this delusion that you have anything you can bargain with under these circumstances?"

"If you want me to answer that, you'll have only two questions left." Benny warned.

O'Neill's promising explosion was cut short by the abrupt appearance of a young soldier in the open doorway. "Colonel O'Neill?"

Jack lifted a hand to prevent the youth from speaking further, then inclined his head, gesturing for the newcomer to speak in confidential tones. Benny strained, hearing what sounded like the word 'awake' before the colonel reacted with a start.

"I'll be right there," O'Neill told the soldier quietly, both statement of fact and tacit dismissal. The brief cast of intense concern that had come over the colonel's face disappeared into a frown directed at Benny. "And you, of course, will be right here, with the answers I want from you, when I get back."

"You're O'Neill?"

Jack blinked at him in confusion as Benny, with a look of mild chagrin for not having caught on faster, squinted at him.

"Yeah," Benedek nodded sagely. "Yeah, I shoulda known."

O'Neill waited in vain for further explanation. When all Benny did was shake his head again, as though disgusted with himself for taking so long to make a connection, Jack waggled his fingers in a mute plea to be given more to go on. "And that means what, exactly?"

"I'll mark that down for question number two. But hey, you're a busy man, don't let me keep you from more important things." With that, Benny flopped down onto the cot and exaggerated relaxing preparatory to a snooze.

Irritation nearly won the internal war being waged inside his conscience, but with a deep breath, O'Neill chose to address his more immediate concern. "Make our guest as uncomfortable as possible," he instructed the guards with a grimace as he strode from the cell. "Carter, with me."

They were nearly halfway to the infirmary before Sam decided that it was time to speak up. "I don't see that we made much progress, sir."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that," O'Neill replied easily. "I got what I came for."

"And that would be ... what?" she prodded when he offered no further explanation.

"I found his weak spot."

Sam emitted a voiceless "Ah," nodding her understanding. But a frown accompanied the gesture, provoking a frown from O'Neill when he caught it out of the corner of his eye. "What?"

"Nothing," she demurred, determining quickly that there was no way she could comfortably or effectively communicate her concern to him, at least not at this particular moment. O'Neill had already forgotten the question, muttering imprecations agitatedly under his breath when the elevator did not respond instantly to his staccato bombardment of the call button. Carter nodded to herself, suspicions confirmed. If Edgar Benedek had picked up on even a fraction of what had been going on with O'Neill's face and body language after he'd received the peremptory summons, then that went a long way toward explaining why Benedek had also given up far too easily: he now knew they had a weak spot as well.

They were greeted at the main entrance to the infirmary area by the raised hand of Dr. Janet Fraiser, still clad in a helmetless hazmat suit, and wearing a stern look that reinforced her message ten-fold. Despite knowing better, O'Neill tried to feint her out with the intention of making an end-run around her, but yielded readily when she thwarted his move with practiced ease. "Let's talk," she said, pointing imperiously in the direction of her office.

Teal'c was already waiting there, which came as no real surprise to either officer as they took seats in chairs next to him, arrayed before Fraiser's desk. "I've only got a few minutes here before I need to return to the iso-room, so let's keep this short." She eased down into her desk chair as she spoke, emitting a long, weary sigh. "He's conscious. He's lucid. He's weak. He's supposed to be resting. But he insists on speaking to someone, preferably you."

"Then why are we sitting here?" O'Neill said, a quiet challenge.

"Because he's weak. Because he's supposed to be resting. And because I still don't know what in the hell happened to him in the first place, so I'm not even sure that what we're witnessing can safely be considered a recovery

stage. His entire central nervous system has been severely compromised; in fact, it came very close to shutting down completely, several times, before we were finally able to stabilize him last night."

O'Neill blinked at the news. "The general's debriefing didn't include that bit of information," he murmured, his expression inscrutable.

"Well, you're hearing it from me now," Fraiser sighed. "The bald truth is — we almost lost him. And now — now you bring me three *more* people exhibiting symptoms we've been able to identify only as variously progressed stages of the same condition, whatever the hell that condition is, I still don't know," she ended in a dark mutter.

"Three?" O'Neill frowned, doing a mental recount. "The nosy professor guy, Shellhammer, Murray ... and Hudson?"

Fraiser shook her head. "Hudson was brought in fully alert, discounting some confusion that can be attributed to the effects of a hard blow to the head. I discharged him and placed him on temporary medical leave."

"That's it? A knock on the head? That's all that happened to him?"

She let arm drop heavily from the desk from its former position at the side of her head. "You sound disappointed, colonel."

"What does he remember?" O'Neill demanded, leaning forward urgently.

"It's not my job to interrogate patients, especially when they're flat on their backs getting their scalps sewn up," she said pointedly, rubbing her forehead. "I sent him to Major Crawford."

"Who's turned up bubkes so far, right?" O'Neill growled in disgust.

Unwilling to get caught up in that particular conversation, Fraiser gained her feet, pulling on her hazmat gloves as she did. "I'm leaving Potts in charge here while I'm in the iso-ward. She has explicit instructions to bounce the three of you out on your ears if you so much as raise my patient's blood pressure by half a millimeter, am I making myself clear here?"

"Yes, ma'am," O'Neill assured her. "Can we go now?"

Her dismissive gesture was still in progress by the time O'Neill leaped from his chair for the door. Teal'c followed on his heels, but Carter paused in the doorway to direct a sympathetic look back at the harried medical officer. Fraiser shook her head tiredly. "I'm serious, Sam. Sit on them or hit them over the head, or get Potts to fetch you a tranquilizer gun. Do whatever you have to do, but they *must* take things slowly. *Slowly*," she repeated with special emphasis.

"I'm on it," Sam promised her fervently.

The occupant of the med-bed closest to the entrance looked up as O'Neill sauntered into the room with hands pushed into his trouser pockets and his facial expression carefully composed to convey the impression that he was just wandering by and thought he'd stop by and sit a spell. Teal'c, who had very little patience or use for deceptive outward appearances, merely moved across the room to take his place at the side of the occupied bed. Sam joined him, heartened by the wan smile of greeting that the bed's occupant gave each of them in turn.

"Took you long enough to get here," Daniel Jackson said mildly, returning his attention to a notebook propped on the small table across his lap.

O'Neill chucked a thumb over his shoulder in the general direction of Fraiser's office. "Wreck on the interstate."

"You are looking well, Daniel Jackson," Teal'c rumbled, the first relaxed look on his face that either Carter or O'Neill had seen in over three days.

Jackson squinted up at him. "Who's been teaching you the fine art of polite lies, anyway? I don't look well. I look like hell. I must, because I certainly feel like hell."

"You appear much improved," Teal'c amended obligingly.

"Well, now, there you've got me," Jackson agreed ruefully.

"Fraiser said you put in a call for us?" O'Neill said when Daniel's attention once again returned to the notebook before him.

"Yeah. I need you to do a couple of things for me."

"Okay. What do you want us to do?"

"Find my glasses?" He turned up pleading eyes screwed into a squint. "I can't get anyone around here to take five minutes out of their hectic schedule to locate them for me."

"I'm sure that Teal'c would be more than happy to stress the importance of finding your glasses to the appropriate personnel. Wouldn't you, Teal'c?"

The other man inclined his head in acknowledgment and with the barest smile on his lips. "It would be my honor to facilitate your request with all due expediency."

"Just ... go easy on them, okay?" Jackson called after him as Teal'c moved away. "They mean well."

"Okay, that's one," O'Neill said, clapping his hands together in an exaggerated gesture of satisfied success. "What else?" "Tell me what happened."

Carter and O'Neill looked at each other, holding each others' eyes until a deferential nod from Sam fobbed the task off onto the colonel's shoulders. O'Neill straightened. "Okay, uh ... choose your starting point."

"P3V-112. It's the last thing I remember clearly."

O'Neill turned to address Carter. "I seem to recall the answer to that question being important somehow."

"Yes, sir," she affirmed. "We were unsure whether his condition was a direct cause of something encountered on P3V-112, or whether he was affected after our return."

He turned back to Jackson. "Have you told anyone else this?"

"Dr. Fraiser. But she was more concerned with getting my IV line straightened out than she was in answering my questions."

The notebook to which Jackson kept looking at finally caught O'Neill's attention. "Someone bring you an Etch-A-Sketch to help you pass the time?"

"I'm supposed to write down everything I remember."

"Ah. Major Crawford wastes little time, I see." He leaned forward. "It works better if you actually use a pencil to write things down, instead of expecting the words to magically appear as you stare at the paper."

"I don't remember much of anything," Jackson shrugged.

"No joke," O'Neill said, with another glance at the blank paper.

Teal'c returned, offering Daniel a sealed plastic bag. "The nursing staff offers their most sincere apologies for the delay in returning your personal property to you," he said solemnly, with enough amusement apparent in his manner to assure a nervous looking Jackson that he wasn't going to have to spend an inordinate amount of time in the near future calming down a thoroughly intimidated nursing staff.

"Thanks, Teal'c." He frowned at the bold markings on the bag, indicating that the contents were to be considered extremely hazardous. "Wow," he murmured as weakened fingers picked at the plastic in search of an opening. "Now I really can't wait to hear what happened."

"Here, let me," Carter volunteered, taking the bag from him long enough to make short work of the seal. He thanked her with a nod, then dove into the depths to rummage for his missing glasses. Locating them, he settled them on his nose with a deep sigh of relief, testing his improved vision on each of them in turn. "That's better. I feel marginally human again."

"It's always the little things," O'Neill agreed wholeheartedly.

Considerably more relaxed, Jackson leaned back against a pile of supporting pillows, undoubtedly the work of at least one attendant who'd been able to spare a few moments seeing to his comfort. "So," Jackson began, looking very much in danger of succumbing to the lure of a light doze at any moment. "Tell me a story."

"You start, and then we'll pick up where you leave off. You remember embarking for P3V-112, right?"

"Yeah," he replied slowly, carefully handling the memory behind semi-closed eyes. "I'm okay on the arrival part, too. You and Teal'c took the east side of the canyon, Carter and I the west."

"Good, good. We're on the same page so far."

Carter noted the frown forming on Jackson's face with growing concern. "Do you remember when we split up?" she urged.

The memory clicked into place, reflected in the hand he raised, forefinger extended. "Yes. You wanted to investigate farther down the canyon floor, and I wanted a closer look at some unusual geological features."

"Unusual?" O'Neill's interest picked up. "Unusual how?"

"I'm not sure I remember clearly...."

"You mentioned something about sedimentary and volcanic rock formations existing in an unusual combination?" Carter prompted him.

"Oh, yes. That was it. Thank you."

"We were scheduled to rendezvous thirty minutes later back at the Gate," she pressed carefully. "You never showed up. We had to go looking for you."

Jackson looked up at the ceiling, blinking rapidly as he struggled to sort out his thoughts. "Ok, folks, it's official. I've gone to the wall, right there. All I remember is that you left, I started sorting through some rocks and ... then I woke up in the SGC, flat on my back, with tubes sticking up my nose and ah, other places, and someone in a bubble suit was telling me I'd been out cold for nearly two and a half days."

"No one can say you don't lead an interesting life," O'Neill offered helpfully.

"So what happened?" Jackson urged with an impatient edge to his voice.

"Well, we found you, not far from where I'd left you," Carter replied, already feeling the same wave of frustration that greeted every other attempt they'd made since returning from the planet to sort out what had happened. "You looked fine, as far as we were concerned. You didn't appear to be in any kind of distress. In fact, we really had no idea that anything was, well ...wrong, not at that point. The only thing I remember thinking at the time was that you seemed unusually pre-occupied."

"Pre-occupied? How so?"

"You weren't doing a very good job of answering our questions about why you missed the rendezvous, or what you'd been doing out there for so long, or ... or for that matter, paying much attention to us at all. It was if you were in your own little world."

"Which, of course, is why it took us so long to notice that something was wrong," O'Neill interjected.

"So, when *did* 'something' become glaringly apparent enough for even you to notice?" Jackson addressed O'Neill pointedly.

With a quick grimace acknowledging that Jackson had handily gotten his own back, O'Neill considered the question. "I'd say it was about the time you took a swing at me during the mission debriefing. I might not have considered that in and of itself unusual, but you capped the show by trying to bulldoze your way past Teal'c to get out the door. If you really believed you were going to get anywhere under those circumstances, then I think it was safe to assume that, yeah, okay, that's a wrap – you were *nuts*."

Jackson blinked at him. "I'm sorry I missed all that," he murmured.

"Don't worry, we got it all on security tape," O'Neill grunted. "I'll spring for the popcorn."

"All right, so how exactly did I get from that point to intensive care?"

"Ah, no, now, don't look at Teal'c like that," O'Neill tched. "Trust me, he had you handled without breaking a sweat or musing a hair on your whacked-out head."

"We're not quite sure of the exact sequence of events," Carter interjected, sensing Jackson's growing impatience. "We believe that whatever it was that caused you to lose control in the briefing room was transmitted somehow to one of the guards who escorted you and the medical team to the infirmary. Witnesses say that the guard who was primarily responsible for restraining you for the med team appeared increasingly confused at about the same time you started calming down, well before the sedatives would have taken full effect. A few hours later, that same

guard assaulted an officer, and then collapsed. It wasn't until Dr. Fraiser examined Buettner that we discovered the same pattern of neural disruption that was detected during your examination. By that time, Major Weiss had been brought into the infirmary in restraints. Again, the same pattern of neural disruption was present. But by the time the transferal theory was formed and General Hammond ordered everyone who had come into contact with Major Weiss to report to Dr. Fraiser, Shellhammer had already gone off duty."

"Let me guess. He'd been the one in charge of restraining Major Weiss."

Carter congratulated him with a nod. "He'd left the base. The sentries on duty at the time remembered him leaving, but apparently the worst symptom he exhibited was some difficulty remembering proper check-out procedure, so it didn't raise much concern at the time. We found Shellhammer's car abandoned in the middle of the national park. It looked as though he'd ripped the upholstery apart with his bare hands. We searched for nearly two days to track him down, and by the time we did, he'd already attacked two members of the search team. This ... this condition, whatever it is, transferred from Shellhammer to Murray – but not to Hudson."

Jackson released a slow, unsteady breath. "Transferred. You said transferred. It's not an infectious agent?"

She shook her head. "The neural disruption in one victim appears to cease almost immediately as the subsequent victim is affected. As far as we've been able to determine, it's been the same scenario in all cases so far."

"Neural disruption, like ... what, exactly?"

"As though every synapse in the brain had been firing – or, more accurately, misfiring – at the same time. From all indications, it seems that the neural disruption continued for as long as the host was actively affected by this ... this whatever it is, and ceased as soon as the causal agent transfers to another host, which we now believe requires simple physical contact."

"Host?" Jackson reacted with a sharp, narrow-eyed look sideways at Carter. "You're suggesting parasitical infestation."

"Ooh, what a novel concept," O'Neill winced under the impact of a word that carried far too many emotional implications for comfort.

"The theory does fit the known parameters," she nodded. "The only problem is that we haven't been able to detect a physical signature for the suspected parasite because it's already transferred to a new host by the time we examine the previous one. That is ... until now."

"Now?" Jackson lifted his head in interest, fading back almost immediately when the effort proved taxing.

"We were able to isolate the last victim before transference could occur. Dr. Fraiser has him in the iso-room now. She's only had time to do a few preliminary tests, but thus far she's been unable to detect the physical presence of a causal agent. The only indication we have that the parasite is still active within the host is the fact that the neural disruptions are actively occurring within the host's brain. By the time we had examined the others, the damage had already been done; it was just a matter of stabilizing the debilitating effects that the disruption caused in the central nervous system."

"Keeping the body from shutting down under the strain," Jackson guessed, eyes veiled.

"Exactly," she replied with a touch of unease.

"If the parasite were energy-based in some fashion," Jackson spoke slowly. "Electrical in nature and appearance. That would mask its physical presence from our equipment, especially in the midst of massive electrical discharges occurring in the brain, certainly?"

She agreed with hands spread. "No doubt. But we have no idea how to go about separating the damage from the causal agent when both exhibit the same physical characteristics."

"Yes, that would be a problem," he agreed with a sigh. "I'm safe in assuming that the neural disruption that I personally experienced is the reason I apparently took a two and a half day vacation?"

"Among other side trips," O'Neill remarked, reacting to the sharp look that Sam shot him as though she'd punched him in the jaw.

"What about the others? Have there been, um ... casualties?"

"None so far," Carter admitted hesitantly.

His brow raised in interest as he sought her evasive gaze, considered the suddenly veiled look that dropped over Teal'c's eyes, and noticed O'Neill's signature weight shift from one foot to the other while pretending great interest in the condition of the floor. "So. How close was it?" he asked quietly.

"You know," O'Neill said in the uncomfortable silence that followed. "When you hit the tape at the end of the race – what difference does that question really make, anyway?"

Jackson nodded to himself, suspicions fully confirmed. "So you have no idea what this thing could be or where it came from, do you?"

"All we know is that it must have started back on P3V-112...."

"And, of course, that we must have brought it back with us through the Gate," O'Neill interjected. "You know, can I tell you how really old this is getting? What are we running here, an intergalactic taxi service? 'Hey, jump into my head, buddy, where can I take ya?'" He shook his head, expelling an expressive snort of disgust.

"I can always count on you for a cheerful thought, can't I?" Jackson said dryly as Carter shook her head in amused disbelief and Teal'c, as expected, reacted with only a raised eyebrow.

"You want cheerful? Help us figure this thing out." O'Neill's levity vanished as the full weight of the past three days pressed in on him. "We've got five people in iso right now, all of whom have gotten roped into this fascinating little game of tag we've been playing here and not a single signed permission slip among the lot of them. Including a civilian. Oh, yes, you heard me right. A civilian," he reiterated to the startled expression Jackson turned to him.

"Trouble," Jackson muttered under his breath.

"Oh, you haven't heard the best of it," O'Neill assured him dryly. "He came packing his own sidekick – who just happens to be a tabloid reporter."

Jackson winced, then held up a hand for mercy. "I think we'd better not go for complete overload here," he said in a voice suddenly cracking with fatigue. "Especially if anything else you have to tell me gets worse than that."

"I think that's our cue," Carter told O'Neill with a pointed look. Teal'c responded to her gesture, and she began herding both men out the door. Jackson had already sunk back onto the pillows, his face pinched and exhausted. O'Neill held back at the doorway, resisting Carter's tug on his arm. "Daniel."

"Hm?" One eyelid slid open.

"You call us if you need anything else," O'Neill said after a moment in which it appeared that he was about to say something else altogether.

"Hm." The eye closed again, a final dismissal.

Carter leaned in when O'Neill still didn't respond to her attempt to move him out of the room. "He said yes, Colonel," she told him with a smile, receiving a wan one in return along with an uncertain nod. She knew, and hoped O'Neill might realize in time, that they'd already given him the most important thing Jackson had needed from them, which had nothing to do with eyewear or explanations.

Three pairs of eyes followed O'Neill as he shuffled into the observation room for the second time that morning, dragged himself to a chair and flopped down with a weary sigh. Teal'c, seated with his hands folded on the table that had somehow appeared in the room overnight, acknowledged the colonel's return with a solemn nod. Daniel Jackson glanced up briefly, then lowered his head over the notebook upon which he was inflicting idle doodles. His condition had improved dramatically over the past ten hours, though it had still taken some persuasion to convince Dr. Fraiser to allow Jackson to rejoin his team. The compromise involved restricting Daniel to a wheelchair, which Teal'c immediately took sole responsibility for navigating despite Jackson's protests that he could the situation himself. Two plastic liquid filled bags hung off an extended hook on the back of the wheelchair, a tangle of tubes disappearing awkwardly beneath the loose cotton shirt into which Jackson had insisted upon struggling rather than remaining a moment longer than necessary clad in the more comfortable and convenient – and less dignified – hospital gown.

Next to Jackson, at the head of the table, Carter greeted O'Neill with a faintly sympathetic smile. "If I might be permitted to hazard a wild guess here, I'd say that this morning's interrogation didn't go any better than my last attempt?"

"Better? It did not go at *all*," he grunted. He snagged the Styrofoam cup from its place at Carter's elbow. "'If you're charging me with something, get me a lawyer,'" he mimicked irritably. "'If you're not charging me with anything, let me out of here, now. If all you're gonna do is stand there and flap your jaw at me again, then do us both a

huge favor and get out of my face.' Gah. Why you keep polluting perfectly good coffee with this sickening sweetener junk is beyond me."

Her smile broadened insincerely, dashing his hope that she would take the hint and offer to fetch him a fresh cup so that he wouldn't have to move his aching body in any direction. "Mr. Benedek's file arrived while you were gone," she told him, indicating a thick manila folder, jammed with faxes and printouts, on the table. "It's, ah ... it's interesting reading."

"Is it going to tell me anything I haven't already found out for myself about that smug, irritating little son of a —?"

"Probably not," she admitted, suppressing her amusement with an effort. "It does help explain why he and Dr. MacKensie ended up in the wrong place at the wrong time, however."

"Is this something I'm in any condition to hear right now?" he grouched.

"As a mood brightener, it does tend to fall a little short," she said apologetically. "Both men are actively involved with the Georgetown Institute's Paranormal Research Unit ..."

"Paranormal?" O'Neill winced painfully.

"...which was created in 1985 for the purpose of researching, well, the paranormal, obviously. Their particular definition of what can be considered appropriate research situations apparently includes the investigation of suspected UFO sightings and, ah, associated activity."

"Since we haven't had a decent UFO in these parts for at least, oh, at least a month or two, I guess that means we come under the heading of 'associated activity?'"

"We weren't exactly subtle during the search for Shellhammer," she pointed out. "People who may have already linked your name to involvement in top-secret projects would have very little trouble figuring out that something more than simple military maneuvers was happening out there."

"People such as the secret brotherhood of paranoid supermarket rag hacks," O'Neill muttered bitterly. "God, I hate those guys."

"Especially when they're right," Jackson interjected pointedly. The remark earned him sharp looks from both Carter and O'Neill, but neither felt bestirred to comment further. Their last encounter with a tabloid reporter had ended with the man's death in a traffic accident that none of them believed to be truly accidental. Jackson's observation provided an unwelcome reminder that, unless they came up with an alternative and quickly, this encounter was likely to end just as badly.

O'Neill waved his hand abruptly, signaling his determination to concentrate on more pressing concerns. "What news from the front, then?"

Carter pulled a page of notes close for reference. "Buettner is conscious and Dr. Fraiser expects she'll be able to discharge him to bed rest in a few days. Weiss is unconscious, but his condition has stabilized. Shellhammer and Murray remain comatose and are still listed as critical. They and Weiss were moved to ICU last night."

"And then there was one," O'Neill mused, staring in the direction of the observation window.

"We know it's still in there," Carter said in a subdued voice after a short, uneasy silence. "And, unfortunately, that's still about all we know. Keeping the patient heavily sedated appears to have considerably slowed down the rate of neural disruption, but very soon, that's not going to be enough. Sir, we're running out of time. We have to get that thing out of him."

"How much time does he have?"

She shrugged. "A few hours, at most."

"How sure are you about that estimate?"

"Frankly? We're all amazed that he's still alive."

O'Neill stared at her a moment, then drained the last dregs of coffee from the cup. "Next time, Captain, carefully consider the possibility that pulling your punches might be the preferred approach when dealing with a superior officer who's operating on less than two hours of sleep in the last forty-eight," he grouched, rubbing hard at his aching head.

"Sorry, sir," she murmured, ducking her head to hide her amusement.

"Answers, people," he announced into the palms of his hands as he ended his facial massage with a flourish. "We are looking for answers here."

"We should consider a return to P3V-112," Dr. Jackson suggested.

Unnerved, O'Neill nailed him with a sharp look.

"Jack, it's the logical place to—"

"Don't ... start."

Jackson blinked in stunned silence at the fierce look O'Neill held on him for a long moment before backing down with a measured exhale. "Just don't start," the colonel growled.

Carter touched Jackson's arm, long enough to grab his attention to pantomime an instruction to hold the thought until later. With a confused nod, Daniel acquiesced, turning back a composed expression to O'Neill. "Can I get you a cup of decaf, then?" he offered mildly.

"Does anyone else have something *useful* to offer?" he rebuffed Jackson pointedly, to the scientist's complete lack of surprise and mild exasperation. Carter turned her head to scratch with a pencil at a point behind her ear, a defensive tactic O'Neill irritably recognized as her way of stating her opinion in agreement with Jackson's already abruptly tabled suggestion without risking bringing the argument to the boiling point; at least, not until the colonel's temper had cooled, or all other options had been safely exhausted. He turned to Teal'c who had, predictably enough, remained silent and observant throughout. "Well? Anything?"

"I can think of nothing beyond the obvious solution."

"Obvious?" O'Neill blinked. "Obvious, like, what?"

"It would be unacceptable to you. That is why you pretend not to see it."

The colonel squinted at him, and then at Carter and Jackson. From their deliberate avoidance of his gaze, it was clear that they at least suspected the direction that Teal'c was headed and that it was, as Teal'c had already stated, an unacceptable option.

O'Neill's confusion snapped away the moment he attempted to look for the obvious beyond any internal objections that might have blocked it. "Oh, no," he said, firmly. "No, no, no, no. *Not* an option."

"Then I am sorry. I can think of nothing." Teal'c returned to his contemplative observation.

Mind racing, Carter stepped tentatively into the breach. "Perhaps ... we *should* consider the possibility."

O'Neill regarded her incredulously. "And perhaps we should consider the possibility that you are out of your *mind*?"

"We've every indication that short-term exposure to this ... this thing causes very little long-term collateral damage"

"So what are you suggesting we do? Draw up a duty roster of tag team volunteers? Have *you* considered the possibility that so far, we may have just gotten very, very lucky that we haven't added a fatality rate to the long list of consequences we've encountered dealing with this thing?"

"Yes, sir, I understand that, but"

"But?" he challenged.

"He's running out of time, sir," she said quietly, with a tired sigh.

"It's just not an option," O'Neill replied after his initial anger had safely ebbed away. "Let's get the next idea on the table."

Carter and Jackson's respective heads bowed over their notebooks once again. Only Teal'c, as observant as always, noticed the subtle change that came over the colonel's face as he fidgeted in the unwelcome silence. Irritation disappeared, one facial muscle at a time, as his gaze increasingly focused inward. Soon, his expression became a relaxed blank, completely inscrutable even to Teal'c's perceptive eyes.

"Carter."

His sudden address in the settled silence brought her head up with a snap. "Sir?" she blinked.

"Your interrogation, last night. Do you still have the transcript with you?"

"Yes, sir, I have it right" She flipped through a small stack of papers in front of her. "...here. You've read this already, haven't you?"

"I skimmed it," he said, accepting the sheaf from her and flipping immediately to the third page, as if he already knew where to find what he wanted. His words belied the action, however, as he hemmed and hawed under his breath, pretending to scan pages forward and backward before setting on the third page once more. "He's quite a storyteller, isn't he?" he remarked at last, drawing Carter's confused blink for the strangely affable quality that was obviously being levered into his tone.

"Yes, sir," she agreed warily. "I, uh ... I encouraged him as much as I could, hoping that he might eventually loosen up enough to tell us what we actually wanted to know."

"Which didn't happen, of course," he noted, non-judgmentally. "He'll tell you his whole life story given half a chance, but won't answer a direct question to save his life."

"That about sums it up, yes," she sighed.

"These two guys, they've been working together for a long time, now."

Suspecting that the question really didn't require an answer, Carter stared at him, increasingly suspicious. "Wow," O'Neill chuckled abruptly. "Buried alive, eh? Ooo, main course at a sacrificial rite, that was a close one, wasn't it? Hm."

He lapsed into silence, frustrating Carter no end. Exchanging glances with the others only brought a shrugged reply from Jackson and an equally puzzled raised eyebrow from Teal'c.

"Carter, could I borrow your pen a moment? And some paper?"

She surrendered both objects to him. As he scribbled, he remarked to no one in particular, "I just remembered something I need to bring to the general's attention. Um ... Teal'c? Could you do me a huge favor and take this to General Hammond for me? Make sure you hand-deliver it, it's important. And, uh ... wait for an answer. Please?"

Teal'c accepted the folded sheet of paper. A flicker of his eyes betrayed his awareness of the open-mouthed stares being directed at the colonel by Carter and Jackson, but he said nothing as he rose to his feet. "I shall convey your message to the General with all due haste."

"No rush, take your time," O'Neill called after him as he headed out the door.

In the silence, the colonel held out as long five full seconds before finally confronting Jackson's steady gaze. "What?"

"I'm assuming that there's some reason that you sent Teal'c on a page-boy errand that one of those first year kids outside the door could have handled just as easily?"

O'Neill shrugged diffidently. "He looked bored."

"Uh-huh." Daniel kept staring at him.

And the colonel kept ignoring him, retrieving the transcript to once again peruse its contents with exaggerated interest. "Carter?"

"Yes, sir," she replied, too quickly to believably mask the fact that she had been anticipating the address.

He tapped the paper with a forefinger. "I think I'd like to address an issue or two here with our good friend, Mr. Benedek."

"Shall I accompany you this time, sir?"

"No, no. Have him brought here. It'll save time."

"Sir?" she ventured. "Here?"

"Yes." He looked up long enough to give her a serene, insincere smile. "Here."

"Is that such a good idea?" Jackson interjected, eyes narrowed.

"I think it's about time we put our cards on the table in front of Mr. Edgar Benedek. He has a right to know what his 'nose for news' cost him, don't you think?"

"I don't agree," Jackson replied, and it was clear from her troubled expression that Carter was on his side. "I doubt General Hammond will, either."

"Noted. Carter?"

With those simple words, Daniel's objection was summarily dismissed. Reluctantly, Sam rose to her feet. "I'll escort him personally, sir."

"Jack." Daniel leaned forward the moment the door closed behind Carter, his piercing look and low voice carrying the same deadly message: he would not be dissuaded from a direct answer this time. "Tell me what in the hell you think you're doing."

With a flourish, the colonel tossed the transcript into Jackson's lap, already opened to the third page. "Call it a gut feeling."

"Gut feeling?" Daniel glanced at the small print. "You're about to commit a major breach of security, a court marital offense if I'm not mistaken, on the basis of a gut feeling?"

"It just seems to me that we haven't had a whole lot of success figuring this thing out using conventional means," he replied, tapping the side of his head meaningfully. "Maybe, just maybe, we need to use some other parts of our anatomy for a change. And if you like your IV line the way it is right now instead of, oh, say, wrapped around your neck, I'd advise you to save that comment."

"I wasn't going to say a word," Jackson murmured, studying the transcript. His frown deepened, then eased into a more reflective expression as he flipped slowly through the pages.

"Well?" the colonel prodded when at length Daniel looked up from his reading to direct an unfocused stare in the space ahead of him, a sure sign that some serious mental re-processing was underway behind the owlsh glasses. "What do you make of it?"

"I'm not sure," he admitted, shaking his head. "But I definitely have questions I'd like to ask him about this."

On cue, the door behind them opened. "Speak of the devil," O'Neill assured Jackson with a strange smile.

There was a moment at the door spent demurring to each other, but Carter prevailed over Benedek's gentlemanly instincts, directing him to enter before her. As she gave a hand signal to the armed escort to remain outside, and closed the door after them, Benny eyed the room's other two occupants with wary suspicion. "What's the catch?" he demanded of Carter. "You said you were taking me to see Jonathan."

But even as Carter took his arm to gently direct his attention to the observation window, Benny, with a sudden frown, was on the move. "Hey." He pressed against the glass to peer into the room beyond, straining to make out the features of the man lying motionless in the midst of maniacally beeping monitors. "Hey! What's going on here? You said he was okay!"

"I said he wasn't dead," O'Neill reminded him dryly.

"What in the hell did you people do to him?"

"Please, Mr. Benedek ... Benny." Carter took him firmly but gently by the arm, drawing him away from the window despite his best efforts to resist. "We would like to try to explain the situation to you"

"You'd better damn well do more than try," he huffed, craning his neck toward the window even as Carter got him settled in a chair at the table. "What did you *do* to him?"

Everyone flinched when O'Neill suddenly punched the table directly in front of Benedek. In the startled silence, Jack stuck a finger in Benny's face and growled, "He did it to himself. *You* did it to *yourselves*."

"Jack," Daniel warned sharply.

"What's wrong with Jonathan?" Benny demanded, impatient and angry.

"We aren't entirely sure," Carter admitted with an apologetic shrug.

"You! You shot him with that Buck Rogers popgun!" Benny decided suddenly, glaring furiously at O'Neill, who met the silent attack by raising an unimpressed eyebrow.

Carter grabbed the hand that Benny had used to underscore his gesture, holding it still as she told him, "No, no, I assure you, that would not have caused his present condition."

"Then what? What caused it?" He glared at O'Neill again. "*Who* caused it?"

"We don't know," the colonel told him grimly. "But there's a chance that you might."

He deflated in utter confusion. "Me? But ... what... huh?"

O'Neill took the transcript from Jackson's hands, flipping to the third page again. "You told Captain Carter here that you were having unusual dreams."

He nodded, still baffled. "What does that have to do with?"

"So tell me — what was it you found so unusual enough about these dreams of yours that you felt they bore mention?"

"I don't have to tell you anything," he said, retreating to stubborn mode.

"Okay, now, you listen to me, and you listen to me very carefully," O'Neill told him, his voice deceptively calm and reasonable as his glittering eyes promised something much more dangerous if Benedek failed to heed his words. "You idiots stumbled into something that you really shouldn't have stuck your noses into in the first place, and your pal in there is paying the price for your presumption and arrogance. Those people in there with him are trying their damndest to keep your friend alive, and believe it or not, so are we. So I suggest you lose that attitude, right now, for both your sakes."

His belligerence abruptly deflated by O'Neill's words, Benny swallowed with difficulty. "It's bad, huh?" he asked in a weak voice that failed altogether when the colonel affirmed with a grim nod.

"You ready to start cooperating now?" O'Neill asked him in a lowered voice that managed to stop just shy of sympathy for the badly shaken man.

"Yeah." He cleared his throat, rousing himself from the shock-induced haze. "Yeah, but ... why are you asking about dreams?"

"What exactly did you find so" He consulted the page before him. "quote, 'weird, and I mean really, really weird, like exceeding all known parameters of weird,' unquote?"

Another throat-clearing served to focus his attention on the question. "Uh ... well, for one thing ... I wasn't actually asleep. I mean, I was lying down — it's not like there's anything else to do in that pit you stuck me in — but I couldn't have been doing anything more than dozing, if that."

"Go on," O'Neill urged as Carter and Jackson, almost in unison, leaned forward as their interest was caught by the exchange.

Benedek's expression tightened as he sought further in his memory. "You know that feeling you get sometimes, when you wake up from a really, really vivid dream? That you're not really out of it yet? That everything you're seeing, doing, reacting to is still part of the dream?"

"Unable to 'shake it off,' as it were?" Daniel murmured, nodding his understanding.

"Yeah. Yeah. Only it's taking a helluva lot longer to shake off."

Carter reacted to Benedek's use of the present tense. "Are you saying you're still experiencing this disorientation?"

"Hell, yeah. Come to think of it, it's getting worse the longer I sit here. Geez, it ... it feels like I've got a double feature running in my head, only both movies are playing on the same screen at the same time."

In the midst of rubbing his forehead, Benny looked up to see all three occupants of the room exchanging looks. "What?" he demanded. His eyes narrowed as he watched as a silent pantomime played out, with O'Neill holding his hands, palm out, in a plea for interpretation, and both Carter and Jackson demurring with an uncertain shrugs.

"Damn it, *tell* me," Benedek spat, eyes narrowed with fury. "Tell me what happened to Jonathan."

"We don't know for certain," Carter said. "We do know that whatever is causing his current condition first came to our attention when Dr. Jackson here was affected similarly three days ago."

Daniel wagged his fingers to acknowledge the hasty introduction.

"Whoa, what does that mean? Affected? Like ... what? A disease, a virus ...?"

"We still don't know," Carter told him with a regretful, but sympathetic shrug. "After a period of increasing disorientation, he lapsed into a deep coma. We have no idea why."

"Well, pardon me, but the doc looks pretty awake to me right now. So what's the problem here?"

"We don't know why I came out of the coma any more than we can explain why I went in the first place," Jackson told him. "But we suspect" He broke off, uncertain how to proceed.

Benny wasn't about to cut him any breaks, either. "Spit it out, pal. Suspect what? From the looks of things in there, Professor Jon doesn't have much time for you to waste searching your mental thesaurus."

Jackson grimaced his discomfort, but nodded his acknowledgment of Benny's urgency. "We suspect that the causal factor isn't organic in the sense of a virus or bacterial infection. It appears that an affected person can be ... cured, for lack of a better word ... by making physical contact with another person, to whom the, ah ... well, causal factor is transmitted in full."

Benny's eyes narrowed steadily throughout Jackson's discourse as though trying to squeeze understanding out through sheer mental brute force. Suddenly, his eyes widened with the onset of understanding. "A parasitic organism, then," he decided.

Seemingly oblivious to the startled looks that the others exchanged among themselves, Benny gave the insight some new thought. "So, has this parasite thingie shown any indication of sentience?"

In the stunned silence, Carter leaned forward, eying Benny incredulously. "Excuse me?"

He favored her with a look of mild impatience. "Does it adhere to a specific behavioral pattern that could be explained by simple motor reflexes generated by a primitive central nervous system, or does it act like it has a mind of its own?"

Hand going to his forehead, Jackson emitted a sound that Carter recognized as one that generally meant something flying out of left field had knocked the legs out from under his expectations.

"Come on, come on," Benny urged, scowling. "We're running out of time here, shake it off already. Has this thing, whatever it is, exhibited any signs of sentience?"

"We haven't been able to determine that," Jackson finally took up the silent challenge that was being offered among the team. "We haven't even been able to determine a physical signature."

"But you think that it has something to do with my funky dreams, right?"

"If I'm following this, I'd say ... perhaps, everything to do," Carter offered, getting an affirming nod from Jackson.

"And all of you look like forty miles of bad road because you haven't figured out how to communicate with this thing that's sending every machine that Jonathan's hooked up to in there into maximum overdrive. Okay! It's about time you people started showing me your cards. Now, let's —"

A piercing alarm sounded from the room beyond, almost physically yanking Benny out of his chair. Horror grew on his face as hazmat-suited figures burst into the isolation chamber, one of them dragging a cart that Benedek instantly recognized. "He's crashing!" he yelled, springing at the observation to land a resounding, fisted blow on the unyielding glass.

Carter moved to his side in an attempt to calm him down and draw him away, to little effect. Grabbing the phone, O'Neill punched the extension for the isolation room, snapping "Close it down," when the phone was answered and slammed down the receiver without waiting for acknowledgment.

But the abrupt closure of a blackout curtain across the observation window failed to restore Benny to reason. Increasingly agitated, he threw himself at the connecting door between the two rooms and futilely yanked at the handle. "Open it!" he barked. "Damn it, open this door!"

"Sit down, Mr. Benedek," O'Neill commanded in a controlled bellow.

"I said, open that door, damn it!"

Only a fast dodge saved Jack's nose from the fist that came flying at him when Benedek, in full fury, lunged at him. Despite Carter and Jackson's best effort to restrain the man before he could do damage, or have damage visited

upon him by his chosen opponent, Benny latched on to the front of O'Neill's jacket, trying his best to rattle his teeth but not managing to do much more than causing him to blink in irritated surprise.

"You know, your powers of persuasion are an inspiration to us all," O'Neill told him in a low, deceptively neutral tone, seemingly unfazed by the close proximity of Benny's furious face to his.

"Open the damned door," Benny grated between clenched teeth.

"So that you can do what? Interfere with highly trained professionals who just may be the only chance that your friend has right now?"

"He's only got one chance. You know it, I know it and none of those people in there are gonna give it to him, are they?"

O'Neill challenged him silently, unyielding. "You're not going in there."

"You're not gonna stop me."

Carter caught the flash of movement a split second too late. "Colonel!"

It had seemed that Benny was about to back off when he leaned back, relaxing his death grip on O'Neill's lapels. But in the next moment, it was O'Neill backing off from the gun barrel aimed directly at his forehead, clenched in Benny's white-knuckled, determined hands. "Brilliant move," Jack nodded his mock congratulations. "You planning to shoot your way out, cowboy?"

"In," Benny snarled. "Open the door."

"I can't do that."

"I say you can."

Carter edged forward warily, contemplating her options. It seemed to her a fairly simple matter to quickly disarm an emotionally distracted civilian, especially one who was far too focused on the immediate cause of his distress to pay any attention to anyone else in the room, including her. O'Neill caught her eye over Benny's shoulder and grimaced slightly, stopping her dead in her tracks. She'd worked with the man long enough to recognize the specific message being conveyed by the brief facial contortion. Recognize it, certainly, but this time, she wasn't quite sure she understood it clearly. She communicated her question with a slight incline of her head, receiving a repeat of the original grimace in turn. Still confused, she obeyed, backing off to move to Jackson's side.

"Let me spell this out for you," O'Neill said, fixing Benny with a particularly piercing stare. "We have no idea what this thing is, only that once it checks in at the front desk, it starts disrupting the brain's neural network and syn-
copated connections ..."

"Synaptic," Carter corrected automatically. "Sir."

"What she said. We've got a total of five people who've gone to the dance with this thing so far. Three of them appear to have recovered more or less completely, like Dr. Jackson here. The other two are still out for the count. The evidence so far suggests that the damage this thing causes is ultimately self-repairing, but quite frankly, it's still all one very large, potentially dangerous question mark. Now, granted, in our particular line of work, we tend to encounter situations like this on a far too regular basis, but at least we had a pretty good idea what we were getting into when we signed on. We will not, I repeat, will not be party to deliberately exposing civilian personnel to our big honking question marks. Am I making myself clear?"

Benny pressed the gun barrel to O'Neill's nose. "Am I making *myself* clear?"

Glaring at Benny through hooded eyes, Jack's only response was a kind of disgusted click of his tongue, accompanying by a brief lip snarl. "Carter, would you care to open the door for our guest?"

"Colonel," Carter protested, alarmed. "I don't"

"I do," he said firmly, pointing at the gun that still hovered less than an inch from his face. "Tell the med team to stand aside, tell the guards to stand down, and open the door."

It was Jackson's turn to exhibit marked unease. "Jack"

"Open," Jack retorted, each word spoken with deadly emphasis, "the damned door."

Carter grabbed Jackson's shoulder, but a quick look at her colleague's face told her than he'd caught it too: another quick facial expression had passed across O'Neill's otherwise grim expression, speaking more than words could possibly convey. "Yes, sir," she said warily.

As Carter moved to comply, opening the door and leaning in to quietly address the startled med team, O'Neill continued his tense standoff with Benedek. Neither faltered in resolve, even when a strange, thin smile began on the colonel's face. "We're gonna have a long talk about this, real soon," he promised Benny in a low, meaningful tone.

Benny's eyes narrowed suspiciously, but any retort he might have made was derailed by Carter's terse, "Ready, sir."

"Stand aside, Captain," he said calmly, inviting Benny to proceed with a deceptively polite nod of his head.

She moved as directed, but pointedly sidled into the isolation room instead of away from it, for which she received a surreptitious nod of congratulations from O'Neill. Benny was past noticing the exchange; he abandoned the colonel in a heartbeat, edging through the door while cautiously brandishing the gun in his hand for all to see.

"Colonel?" The alarmed, anger-edged cry came from the only suited person who didn't begin backing away at Benny's appearance. "What's the meaning of this?"

"Don't interfere with him, Fraiser," came the calm reply from the other side of the curtained glass.

Dr. Fraiser watched Benny approach, instantly intuiting his purpose. "I can't allow this," she insisted. "Colonel!"

"Janet." Carter's voice was sharp, full of meaning. "Janet, do as the colonel says. Please."

She shook her head in helpless protest, stopped short by the appearance of Benny at her side. As she stared at him, uncertain how to react or not react, he reached for the hand she held up defensively.

"Here." He slipped the gun into her gloved hand, closing her fingers firmly over it. "Take care of this for me, okay?"

She could only stare at him in disbelief until he gently nudged her away so that he could take her place at Jonathan's side. That, and the sight of him reaching for the stricken man's strapped down arm, galvanized her. "No!" she gasped, grabbing his arm to hold him back. "You don't understand...."

"More than you think, lady," he told her quietly, calmly dislodging her grip, one finger at a time. "And the truth is, you're the one who doesn't understand, because you haven't been listening. None of you have. Just let me get on with it, okay?"

Badly confused, Fraiser looked to Carter for support or an answer. She got neither with Carter's terse head movement directing her to step away.

It briefly occurred to her that he had just handed her the deadly means to persuade him to see things her way, but by then, it was too late. Benedek was already leaning over the comatose man, his hand firmly gripping MacKensie's arm.

Recovering quickly, Fraiser captured her team's attention with a hand signal, tersely directing them to begin preparations to receive a new patient. As they scurried to comply, Fraiser looked up to see Carter approaching her, and held out the gun for the captain to take from her.

"I certainly hope you know what you're doing," Fraiser told Sam grimly.

"He seems to," Carter shrugged uneasily, with a significant look in Benny's direction. "And I think that's what worries me the most."

Fraiser moved around the med-bed, positioning herself across from Benny, who ignored her presence as he rapped lightly against the side of Jonathan's face, just below the obscuring oxygen mask. "Come out, come out, wherever you are," she heard him utter in a low singsong.

After a moment with no response from Jonathan, Benny made a disgusted sound, and shook his head. Becoming aware of Fraiser's intent scrutiny, he glanced up at her. "How long have these machines been breathing for him?" he asked, too neutrally for Fraiser to detect whether the words constituted an accusation.

"Not long," she admitted. "Two hours at most."

Benny's full attention went back to Jonathan. "Then I suppose I should be thanking you for keeping him alive."

"There was never any question we could do otherwise," she assured him.

"Maybe for you." His somber expression changed to one of exasperated confusion. "How long does it usually take this thing to make the jump, anyway?"

"Jump?" she faltered. "Oh. Yes. Ah ... well, Dr. MacKensie's condition has deteriorated far beyond that of any of the others. That may be a factor."

"Waited too long," he said under his breath, almost a wistful sigh. "Damn."

"Are you certain?" she began haltingly. "Are you certain that you're aware of the full ramifications of ... of this action?"

"I know what will happen if I don't," he told her without hesitation. "And that's all I need to know."

She lowered her eyes in respect for the depth of his resolve. "If I might make a suggestion, then. We had some success in relieving the physical side-effects by administering a strong sedative. In at least one case, it promoted brief periods of lucidity, and ... well, it seemed to markedly reduce the severity of the accompanying seizures and muscular contractions."

He considered what she was saying, still not taking his eyes off of Jonathan's unresponsive face. "Yeah. Yeah, okay. Bring it on."

She turned away to prepare a carefully measured dose, leaving Carter to observe Benny's distress, which grew more pronounced with every second that passed without a response from his friend. In a few moments, though, she detected a marked change come over the man. His breathing became shallower, his skin paler, and he blinked rapidly, as though he were fighting something behind his eyes.

"Janet," Carter said quietly, drawing the doctor's attention.

Fraiser glanced up, saw the reason for Sam's concern, and hurried through the last few steps of the hypodermic preparations. Gaining Benny's side, she placed her gloved hand on his shoulder. "Steady, now," she murmured near his ear, waiting for his shaky nod before taking his arm to prepare it for the injection.

Once administered, she carefully swabbed the injection site, then continued to hold his arm in a supportive grip, searching his ashen face with concern. "How do you feel?" she urged.

"Like ..." He flinched slightly, like a drunk surprised by a hiccup. "I feel ... like ... whoa."

The last word was a sigh expelled from his lungs as his legs buckled under him.

"Get that cot over here, stat!" Fraiser shouted, hanging on to Benny's arm to maneuver him into a less than graceful sitting position on the floor. Warned off from her instinctive move to come to Benny's aid by Fraiser's raised hand, Carter moved out of the way of the nurses and technicians who converged to help Fraiser lift a groggy Benedek onto the gurney.

Sensing her impending obsolescence, Carter returned to the observation room. There, she found that Jackson had wheeled himself to the doorway in order to observe the events transpiring in the iso-room, but the colonel was sitting on the edge of the table, staring impassively at the floor over crossed arms. As Sam closed the door behind her, Jackson remarked as he rolled the chair back to the table, "I just can't help thinking what really rotten timing it was for you to have sent Teal'c out of the way just before a civilian prisoner manages to get one up on you. And with your own gun, no less."

"Yeah," O'Neill agreed neutrally. "Rotten timing."

Carter, too tired for the game, rubbed her forehead wearily. "That was a hell of a risk you just took, sir," she sighed.

"Oh, maybe not so much as you might think," he said, extending his hand in a mute request for the return of his gun. She handed it to him, then watched as he calmly produced an ammo clip from a side pocket and snapped it into the previously unloaded automatic.

"That wasn't what I meant," she said, crossing back to her chair to slump down tiredly.

He shrugged, lifting his head to meet her gaze squarely. "Sometimes, there are just no other options."

"What now, O, Sage Philosopher?" Jackson challenged mildly.

"Now?" He made a side-to-side motion with his finger. "First, we get that curtain open again, and then we ... observe."

"We wait, you mean," Daniel clarified pointedly. "It's what we're waiting for that scares the hell out of me."

"Then get me an answer," O'Neill told him meaningfully.

"I'll tell you what scares me," Carter said as she wearily sank into the chair opposite Jackson across the table. "How do you suppose he guessed the nature of the situation so quickly?"

"I don't think it was a guess," Daniel murmured reflectively.

"Well, thanks, that thought scares me even more."

"Yeah, that was one helluva game of mental hopscotch he played out for us," O'Neill nodded.

"Perhaps we should be crediting some sort of sub-conscious psionic connection," Jackson mused.

"What does that mean?" O'Neill asked.

"Are you suggesting psychic communication?" Carter guessed.

O'Neill cocked his head quizzically. "Are you saying that you think Benedek was channeling the professor?"

"Or that the professor — more to the point, the parasite — was broadcasting psionically."

"Wouldn't others have sensed that type of indiscriminate communication?" Carter wondered aloud.

"If they were listening for it," Jackson replied with an uncertain shrug. His expression changed abruptly. "Or ... if they weren't unconsciously blocking it."

O'Neill made a sudden shushing sound, holding his hand up for silence as he listened intently. "Do I hear ... singing?"

All eyes turned to the curtained window and the closed door, beyond which could be clearly heard a lone voice in full throated song. "'Show Me The Way to Go Home?'" Jackson decided with a baffled frown.

"What in the hell—?"

Carter was on the move, opening the door between the rooms, disappearing into the inner chamber. A moment later, the curtains covering the window parted, revealing the answer to the mystery. Benedek's attendants were, to a man and woman, frozen in the midst of their preparations over him as he lay upon the gurney, staring in disbelief as their new patient sang, badly but with gusto, at the top of his lungs. Fraiser exaggerated a helpless shrug for O'Neill and Jackson's benefit.

"I didn't do anything like that, when I was, uh..." Jackson frowned. "Did I?"

"No, thank god," O'Neill muttered. "I'm gonna have to talk to Fraiser about upping his meds."

"He doesn't sound like he's suffering," Jackson pointed out.

"Maybe not, but I certainly am."

Carter had returned, joining them at the window. "This ought to prove very interesting," she offered, her face expressing marked apprehension.

"Home."

O'Neill caught the barely audible, deeply reflective mumble and challenged Jackson with a glare. "What?"

Daniel started an answer, then frowned, stopping himself. "It's ... nothing. It's crazy."

"Hello? You're the one who brought up the idea of mind-reading parasites in the first place?"

"It's just that ... well, I'm wondering if we should stop looking for patterns, which has gotten us exactly nowhere to this point, and start thinking in terms of ... symbols." Daniel's eyes flickered rapidly, a sure sign that his thinking processes had shifted into high gear. "Tell me again what I was doing and saying just before I went into coma."

"You were ... distracted at first," Carter offered, thinking hard to collect the memories of the recent past. "Uncommunicative, as though ...as though you were hardly able to recognize that we even existed let alone understand what we were saying to you. And then, just before you began displaying uncontrollable aggressive outbursts, you began responding to us again, but inappropriately. No, I mean — you'd start speaking in other languages, for no reason at all. And when you did speak in understandable English, it was ... well, quotes from classic poetry, literature. Usually not even complete, coherent sentences at all."

"Random words — or random concepts?" he prodded.

She thought for a moment. "I see what you're getting at," she nodded, eyes alight with new understanding.

"Care to share with the rest of the class?" O'Neill needed.

"Wait, wait." Carter pressed her fingers to either side of her head, as though to focus the new insight that was causing her eyes to dance in excitement. "Psionic communication. Let's go back to that idea for a minute. There's this mental image I haven't been able to shake since this whole thing started, like ... like a song you can't seem to get out of your head, you know what I mean?"

"Go on," Jackson urged, clearly understanding her on a level that was more than a shared common experience.

"It's of someone ... I think it's me, it might be someone else, I'm not sure ... in a dark place, like an attic, and I'm trapped in there. I just want to get out. And there are all these boxes around me, but I don't know what's in them. And somehow I know that there's something in these boxes that will help me get out. So I'm opening them up and rooting around, but I don't recognize any of the things I'm pulling out. I have no idea what they are, let alone what they might be used for or whether they can help me. All I do is keep searching, and I can't find anything" Her voice trailed off suddenly under the pressure of even greater insight. "I can't find anything I understand," she finished, an awe-struck whisper.

O'Neill shifted uneasily, gaining Jackson's piercing study. "And what's your persistent image?"

It seemed apparent that O'Neill wanted nothing more than to stoically claim that he was plagued by nothing of the sort, but reason finally won out. "Trying to find a briefing report," he coughed, feigning nonchalance. "I know that it's in the room somewhere and it's important, and I mean, really important, that I read it. I can't leave until I find that report and read it. But there are stacks of paper everywhere, and I can't make out a word on any of them."

Jackson nodded. "Our brains are trying to resolve low-level psionic broadcasts of concepts for which we simply have no context and therefore no intrinsic understanding. So the brain compensates by trying to force the alien images into an existing frame of reference. Do either of you remember anything specific that I said at the time?"

"You quoted Tennyson a couple of times," Carter recalled.

"Poetry. That's good."

"Good?" O'Neill said incredulously.

"Poetry is all about symbols and themes," Jackson explained. "The symbols that my brain was trying to resolve would have been reflected in the theme of the lines of poetry I was reciting. I'm sure of it. What lines?" he prodded Carter.

She scrambled after the memory. "I recognized several from 'Ulysses.' I can't recall them specifically, though, I'll have to look them up."

"Don't look at me," O'Neill demurred when Jackson glanced at him. "Maybe if you'd chimed up with 'there was an old man from Nantucket', I'd have paid more attention."

"'Ulysses,'" Jackson mused after sparing a sad shake of his head for O'Neill's benefit. "There's a lot of strong symbolism to sort through in that piece. I think we need to consult with Dr. Fraiser and her staff, see if they recall any specifics about what the others might have said or, uh ... sung."

A commotion from the room beyond caught their attention. Calling last minute instructions over her shoulder, Dr. Janet Fraiser was stalking toward the connecting door, fire in her eyes.

"I had a feeling there was going to be hell to pay," Jackson murmured ominously, "and here comes the bill collector now."

Fraiser flung open the door at the same moment that the door behind them opened with equal ferocity. "Colonel O'Neill," she said in a voice that threatened mayhem if it weren't heeded. "I would like a word with you."

"Stand down, Dr. Fraiser." Hammond's booming voice from behind them caused all to turn in that direction, O'Neill with an anticipatory grimace. "He's mine."

She acceded with a reluctant nod. "When you're finished with him, I'll take what's left," she muttered darkly.

Hammond, with Teal'c providing a silent, glowering shadow, moved into the room to confront O'Neill, who had instinctively gone to attention, staring steadfastly ahead and thereby avoiding the worst of the general's furious glare. "If it weren't enough that you sent Teal'c to my office with a cryptic message to keep him there until I heard from you, without even the courtesy of a simple explanation why, I then receive an emergency call from security telling me that a civilian escaped from your custody, threatened my people with *your* hand weapon and compromised the security of the isolation ward. Would you care to explain to me what exactly is going on here and more precisely, why in the hell you let it happen?"

O'Neill's mouth opened, then closed again, his facial muscles reflecting an inner struggle to coalesce chaos. "It was ... necessary," he said finally, an admission that seemed to surprise him as much as it angered Hammond.

"Necessary? Do you seriously expect me to believe that exposing a civilian to this situation without authorization, and then endangering the lives of two civilians as well as your own men was *necessary*? Have you lost your mind?"

"I think that may be entirely possible, sir," O'Neill said quietly.

Taken aback, Hammond stared at him for a long moment, struck by the pained expression that had taken possession of O'Neill's previously stoic face. "What are you saying?"

"Daniel, what am I saying?"

The unexpected plea brought Jackson's head up and his attention away from his racing thoughts. He found O'Neill looking at him, hopelessly confused, and the general's narrow-eyed stare going between the two men. "You haven't lost your mind," Jackson assured O'Neill before addressing Hammond. "At least, not in the conventional sense."

"Then in what sense, exactly?" Hammond challenged.

Carter took over in the silence formed by the evident confusion preventing both O'Neill or Jackson from presenting an immediate, effective response. "Sir, we've hypothesized that this entity, whatever it is, may be capable of broad-range psychic communication, but in a manner and form that is nearly completely alien to us. I think that as this entity remains in contact with human minds, it *is* learning to communicate more clearly. But we're all fighting it, unconsciously, so it's coming through only as images, waking dreams ... even intuition." She gave O'Neill a meaningful look. "Gut feeling."

"Are you suggesting that this thing can control our minds?" Hammond said, alarmed.

"No," Jackson said, his confusion snapping away. "No, that's not what it's doing."

Alerted by the odd shift of focus in Jackson's eyes, from outward to inward, as he spoke, the general approached him warily. "How can you be certain of that?"

"No one here has done anything against their will," Daniel pointed out reasonably. "Against all common sense, perhaps, and certainly against orders, but not against personal conscience. In fact, I believe that if there is any undue influence at work here, it's in the direction of ... of telling us what we need to do, and hoping that we'll listen and comprehend before it's too late."

"Too late?" Hammond eyed him sharply. "Too late for what?"

Daniel inclined his head, indicating the iso-room beyond the observation window. "For him. For ... them."

"What's going on in there?" Hammond's attention was caught by a flurry of activity in the other room, concentrated over the gurney upon which Edgar Benedek had been consigned, in the grip of what had seemed a rapidly deteriorating semi-conscious state only a few minutes before. Now it appeared that the patient had rallied enough to resist his attendants' attempts to insert an IV and attach monitor leads. Reaching over, O'Neill slapped the intercom volume switch to enhance the sound they heard only as a disjointed mumble from the open doorway, just as an alarmed Fraiser murmured a quick "Excuse me," to hurry back into the isolation chamber.

"Why has his condition progressed to the aggression stage so quickly?" Hammond wondered aloud.

He hadn't really expected an answer, and favored Daniel with a surprised look when Jackson readily offered one. "That's not aggression. That's stubbornness."

A moment's more observation revealed the truth of Jackson's statement. Benny wasn't fighting his caretakers off with anything more violent than a stiff arm, steadfastly resisting all efforts to get him to lie back, and voicing a persistent, reasonably volumed request to be unhanded. He grasped at the arms Dr. Fraiser extended to him in a futile effort to persuade him to lie down again, and clung to her as they engaged in an urgent, low-voiced argument marked by Fraiser's determined expression and Benny's equally determined head shakes.

"Permission to enter the secured area, sir."

Hammond stared at O'Neill, his surprise at the sudden request becoming full-fledged confusion to see the pensive, narrow-eyed look on the colonel's face as he continued to observe the confrontation in the chamber beyond. "Now what?" the general demanded, thoroughly exasperated. "No, wait, don't tell me, let me guess. You have a gut feeling, right?"

"He wants to tell us something," O'Neill said, with a self-conscious shrug of embarrassment for his reluctant acceptance of Hammond's prognosis. "Daniel's right, sir. We have to start listening – before it's too late."

"You're suggesting that I allow an unidentified alien entity of undetermined purpose to dictate gross violations of security protocol, potentially endangering this entire command? Give me one good reason why I should even consider it."

O'Neill lowered his eyes, unable to summon a coherent answer. Jackson spoke in the silence, startling them. "I am a part of all that I have met; Yet all experience is an arch wherethro' Gleams that untravell'd world whose margin fades For ever and for ever when I move."

"Ulysses," Carter breathed, nodding her head in understanding.

In the reflective silence that followed Jackson's words, O'Neill glanced at Teal'c and Hammond's oddly pensive expressions in turn. "Danny, boy – I have no idea what you just said, or why you said it, but ... damn. I couldn't have put it better myself."

His wry expression disappeared as he turned again to Hammond, whose narrowed eyes reflected residual irritation tempered by the same resonant chord that Jackson's quotation had apparently struck within them all. "Well, general? What is your gut telling you?" he asked quietly.

"God help us," Hammond sighed, shaking his head dolefully. "Permission granted."

Carter preceded them into the isolation room and made her way to the side of the head technician monitoring results from the only two leads that Benny had been successfully prevented from dislodging. A brief scan of the readouts and a quick consultation with the technician that ended with the man's doleful head shake darkened her already grim expression. "It's the same pattern of neural disruption that we observed in Dr. MacKensie," she informed O'Neill as he and Teal'c cautiously approached. "But it's intensified, I'd say by a factor of six, perhaps more."

"He seems to be holding his own a helluva lot better, though," the colonel pointed out with a questioning look that swept Carter and Fraiser, who was still attempting to firmly reason with a still-resistant Edgar Benedek.

Dr. Fraiser looked up sharply at the sound of O'Neill's voice. "I don't need you encouraging him. The stress on his central nervous system has also increased by the same factor. If we can't get him sedated soon"

"Fraiser." With a significant nod, he made a small hand motion, directing her to step away.

Instinctively, she began to protest, but the words faltered to an inarticulate jumble in her throat as her eyes suddenly focused on Benny, who had abruptly ceased resisting her and was now regarding her with a puzzling, serene smile. "Thanks, doc," Benedek said, his voice thin but steady. "I can take it from here. You go make sure my buddy doesn't end up deciding that those machines do a better job of breathing for him than he can do on his own, okay? He'll listen to you if you smile at him enough, I promise."

It was easy enough to decipher the struggle of emotions playing on Fraiser's face as she reluctantly released her grip on Benny's arms and backed away. Her primary instincts, to protect and defend her patient, were being firmly overridden by a conflicting instinct that told her that the best thing she could do at this moment was to do nothing. Sam reached out to touch the woman's arm in silent support, succeeding in drawing her even further away until a subtle change in O'Neill's expression informed Carter that he considered the distance sufficient.

"All right," O'Neill began, joining his hands together before him. "I suppose we're all wondering why you've called us here today."

"About time," Benedek sniffed, emitting a faintly pained sigh as he let his head fall back.

"So. We're here. We're listening. What did you want to tell us?"

For a time, Benny squinted up at the ceiling, and it was uncertain whether he was considering his answer or whether he had already forgotten what the question was. At length, he drew in another breath and held it briefly before exhaling noisily. "He's sorry."

"He?" O'Neill prompted.

"She. It. Whatever." A smile suddenly appeared on his face as he continued to stare up. "Artie."

"Artie?"

"Artie Siemens. A kid I knew, back in the old days. Spent his entire grade-school career in hopeless pursuit of a clue. A regular walking, talking, disaster area in progress. You know the type – the best of intentions, the worst of luck. Yeah, good old Artie."

"Excuse me. A couple of minutes ago, you threatened to blow my head off to get in here, just so that you could, what? Lie there and regale us with Chapter 39 of your tedious life story?"

"Hey. We can either call him Artie, or we can waste more time dancing around gender pronouns. Your call, fly-boy."

"Okay, Artie's fine, fine," O'Neill assured him quickly. "You said ... he's sorry? About what, exactly?"

"Geez." Gulping in air, Benny fought to control a tremor that rippled visibly through his body. Fraiser moved quickly to his side, a quick glance at O'Neill gaining his assurance that he wasn't going to try to stop her while also assuring O'Neill that she wasn't about to let him stop her, either. In the midst of fighting off the mild spasm, Benny didn't resist as she deftly reattached several dislodged monitor leads, then held his shoulders until the shaking finally eased. When Benny could speak again, his voice was tight with irritation. "What do *you* think, Einstein?"

He's manifesting physical symptoms that didn't develop for hours in any of the other victims," Fraiser informed them after a brief consult with a harried-looking technician. "If this accelerated rate of disruption continues, he'll be comatose within thirty minutes."

O'Neill moved in close to stand over Benedek. "You heard the doctor," the colonel told him grimly. "You've got thirty minutes before this conversation comes to an ugly end, so my suggestion is for *you* to let Artie do some fast talking."

Fraiser had reacted with dismay to see the colonel move entirely too close to Benedek without benefit of hazmat protection. She'd extended her arm across Benny's body, intending to block any attempt at physical contact. With a strangely serene smile, Benedek patted the sleeve of her hazmat suit. "As much as I'd love to see how my new pal Artie and my really good buddy the colonel would get along in that closed, half-empty brain space of his, don't worry. No one else is getting hold of this ball until I make the shot, I promise."

"Twenty-nine minutes," O'Neill growled.

Closing his eyes, Benny lifted a warning finger. "Let's get one thing straight, okay? Artie ain't exactly speaking Spanish with a bad accent here. He hasn't even grasped the concept of verbalization, so cut both of us some slack. You're just confusing the poor kid with all this noise, anyway."

"Kid?" Carter prompted, intrigued. "That's the second time you've referred to ... him ... as a juvenile?"

Without opening his eyes, Benny suddenly laughed, an effort that died weakly as he barely controlled a resulting spasm. At that same moment, O'Neill's hand flew to his forehead. "Whoa. What was that?" he asked of no one in particular, blinking hard.

Several startled exclamations rippled around the room, making it obvious that everyone within a five foot diameter of the gurney had been similarly affected. Jackson, leaning forward in his wheelchair, shook his head to clear the momentary disorientation. "My guess is, that was Artie's answer."

Benny chortled again, smugly. "He's coming through loud and clear, eh?"

"Wait. Wait. I just got socked between the eyes with a major flashback of my dad ripping me a new one, and you're telling me that it's Kreskin Jr.'s idea of an *answer*?"

Jackson eyed him patiently. "How old were you and why was he angry with you?"

Taken aback, O'Neill blinked at him. "That's none of your business," he muttered uneasily.

"My memory flash was of my foster mother just after she'd nailed me skipping class to go swimming with friends."

O'Neill blinked again. "You? Skipped school?"

"A parental authority figure, expressing anger to a disobedient child," Carter announced, clearing away the last of her own disorientation with a quick shake of her head.

"You too?" O'Neill asked, mildly curious.

"Oh, yeah," she assured him fervently. Others met O'Neill's questioning sweep of the room with affirming nods, as well as a reluctant shrug from Hammond, and a non-committal glance from Teal'c, which the colonel made a mental note to explore further at a quieter time.

"So ..." O'Neill made a revolving motion with his hand, encouraging further discourse. "What? Artie's got big trouble waiting for him when he gets home, so he wants to stay here with us, is that the message?"

"No." For a moment, Jackson seemed surprised by his own statement, his gaze focusing inward to search for the reason behind it. "No, there's more to it than that. We haven't gotten the complete picture yet ... as it were," he finished with an apologetic shrug.

"Hey!" Benny's sharp voice from the gurney startled them. "Twenty-five minutes and counting. Can we step this up a little, please?"

"You should have thought about that before you decided to show off, pal," O'Neill retorted pointedly. "Personally, I'd just as soon not get blindsided like that again, okay? So let's stow the audio-visual portion of the program for now and you just tell us what Artie wants us to know."

Benny was silent a moment, as though composing himself behind his closed eyes. Then, in an unexpectedly meek voice, he said, "He's sorry?"

"I believe we've covered that ground already," O'Neill reminded him.

"No, I mean ... he means ... he had no idea that he was causing so much trouble. Of course, technically he still doesn't understand *us*, let alone fully grasp the concept of what we would consider to be trouble, but I think I've gotten enough across to him that he's really sorry for the problems he's caused, even if he doesn't really understand what those problems are, and, well ... he still really doesn't understand all that much."

"Well, that makes all of us, doesn't it?" O'Neill muttered dryly. "Let's cut to the chase, all right? What does it ... sorry, what does Artie want from us?"

After a moment of silent reflection, Benny managed a weak shrug. "Nothing."

"Nothing?" O'Neill echoed, incredulous.

"The kid made a mistake, okay? No conspiracy, no evil intent, just an honest, spectacularly stupid mistake. He got bad information, that's all. He's never actually seen a ..." Benny's brow furrowed, reflecting his search to put words to the image behind his eyelids. "Tourist? What th—? Oh. Traveler. Right. He's never actually seen a Traveler before, he's just heard stories about them."

"Traveler?" Carter inquired, intrigued. "Who or what is a Traveler?"

"The ones who travel, whaddya think?" Benny scoffed mildly. "The old stories say that they used to come and go all the time, through the Arch."

"The Arch?" Carter's eyes widened as realization struck her. "The Arch — wherethro' gleams that untravell'd world."

"They used to tote Artie's guys around with them. It was kind of a mutual benefit thing. The lightning bugs got a vacation away from that god-awful boring rock they all live in, and the Travelers got a real kick in the head."

"Excuse me?" O'Neill squinted.

Again struggling for the right words, Benny tapped his forehead impatiently. "Enhanced brain function. Better, stronger, faster, smarter, the whole nine yards."

Jackson straightened slightly. "Artie mistook me for a Traveler," he said, words laden with dawning realization. "I remember — that unusual rock formation I was investigating, that's where he and his people live, isn't it?"

"If you can call that living," Benny sniffed. "If you can call them people."

"Were the Travelers human?" Carter wondered aloud.

"Judging from empirical evidence, I would have to say, probably not," Jackson offered. "Our brain chemistry would appear to be radically different from that of the Travelers."

"They get enlightenment, we get French-fried brains, is that what you're saying?" O'Neill offered unhelpfully.

Carter shrugged, signaling that her next words constituted a wild guess. "Perhaps – the effect is mitigated by the presence of, um" She made a quick motion indicating her neck. "You know."

Benny suddenly emitted a pained groan, but it became evident, even as Fraiser worriedly checked him, that his distress was not entirely physical. "Snakes? God, I hate snakes."

O'Neill's eyebrow shot up. "What are the chances that what he just said was nothing more than the mother of all non-sequiturs?"

"Whoa." Still overwhelmed by whatever internal image held the greater part of his attention, Benny let out a rush of air. "Artie's freaking big-time on me here. Did you have to bring up the worm guys?"

"Worm guys?" the colonel echoed with carefully forced nonchalance. "Tell us more about these ... worm guys."

"Just ... give me a minute here. Gotta get the kid to calm down" Benny broke off with a hiss, his entire body tensing under the strain of a particularly nasty convulsion.

"You must let me help you," Fraiser told him urgently as she held on to him. "Please, let me administer a stronger sedative"

He shook his head emphatically. "I said, no. It's hard enough to think as it is, I don't exactly need modern medicine giving me a hearty sendoff in the direction of la-la land right now."

"Another muscle relaxant, then. *Please*. You're not going to do anyone any good if you go into shock."

"Or if I can't move." Wincing painfully through yet another tremor, Benny shook his head again. "I appreciate the concern, doc, but I can handle this."

"No, you can't," she told him angrily. "No more than any of the others could."

"Then listen to him." Head bowed in deep exhaustion, he gulped in air as he clung to her like a desperate child. "Just listen to him, for god's sake. He's trying to tell you ... tell"

Fraiser caught him in time, preventing him from slumping off the side of the cot. Muttering angry imprecations under her breath, she eased him back, directing the nurse nearest her to help fasten the restraints.

O'Neill threw his hands up in a controlled display of intense frustration. "Trying to tell us *what*?"

"He wants to go home," Daniel announced calmly.

Turning, O'Neill eyed Jackson for a long moment. "What? No poetry?"

With a wry smile, Daniel spread his hands. "Be it ever so humble?"

"OK, just forget I said anything." He paused, frowning as he massaged his temple. "Swell. I'm stuck with ruby slippers in *my* head," he said darkly.

"We have to return the entity to P3V-112," Carter said.

"And the sooner the better," Fraiser interjected grimly. "He's going into shock, and I can't stop it. He's still conscious, but that's not going to last long. Whatever you're going to do, I suggest you do it very quickly."

O'Neill turned to look back at Hammond, a silent question that was met with a resigned shrug from the general, and a quietly sighed, "Use your own discretion, colonel. I'll support your decisions, god help me."

"How fast can you get him ready for transport?" O'Neill wanted to know.

She stepped hard on her first instinct to protest the thought of even moving her patient, let alone transporting him through the Stargate in his precarious condition. "You're taking me and a full emergency medical team with you," she said instead. "No arguments. We'll have him in the Gate Room in five minutes. Come on, people, let's get him prepped."

Daniel reached out to grasp O'Neill's sleeve as the colonel backed away to make room for the sudden burst of activity that erupted around the gurney. "I'm going with you."

"Oh, like hell you are," Jack said calmly.

"I'm going with you," Jackson insisted, unfazed by the clear threat. "You have no guarantee that he'll even be conscious by the time you get there, and I'm the only other one who would even know where to start looking."

"Nice try. I remember exactly where we found you. Well ... more or less...."

"He doesn't have time for more or less," Jackson pressed urgently.

"You said you didn't remember anything," O'Neill challenged.

"No, I do, now. It's been coming back, mostly in pieces, but I'm sure it will all return once I'm back there. You'll waste too much time trying to find the outcropping I was studying if I don't come with you."

Caught in the yawning jaws of implacable logic, O'Neill squirmed uneasily, finally giving up with a disgusted snort. "Teal'c? I'm putting you in charge of babysitting his sorry ass. If he so much as rubs his nose, I want you to pick him up bodily and throw him back through the Gate, is that understood?"

Teal'c inclined his head gracefully. "Perfectly."

Jackson eyed them in turn. "Remind me to be touched by your concern someday," he muttered under his breath.

"Carter." He summoned her with a quick hand gesture. "Help me figure out how to do this. Our reporter pal is in no condition to go through the Gate under his own power, and I seem to remember that the terrain wasn't very wheel-friendly."

"We can retract the wheels and carry the gurney like a stretcher. The place we found Daniel is less than a half klick from the gate, and we'll have the emergency medical team to help, as well as whatever backup we can persuade the general to bring with us."

"Okay, that works. What about Daniel?"

"What about him, sir?" she asked hesitantly.

"I don't see that we're gonna have much more luck with his wheelchair than with the gurney."

She looked over his shoulder, eyebrows raised. "I don't think that's going to be a problem."

Alerted, O'Neill turned quickly to find that Daniel had snagged Dr. Fraiser's attention as well as her cooperation. The woman was bent over his extended arms, removing the tube attached to his IV needle.

"You, in the chair!" O'Neill barked. "Keep your hands where I can see them and back away from the doc."

Before Jackson could voice the words that were being promised by the irritated look on his face, Fraiser spoke, not looking up as she continued her work, wrapping gauze around Daniel's arms to keep the IV needle seated and the insertion site clean and undisturbed. "I'm making you personally responsible for getting us all back here within two hours, colonel. He should be fine until then, and I'd strongly advise you to keep him that way."

With a low growl of frustration, O'Neill gestured with clawed hands held up near his head. "Would somebody mind telling me exactly *when* I started losing control of this situation?"

"Not long after I did, I imagine." Hammond moved to O'Neill's side and waited until the colonel had composed himself before continuing. "I'm sending two units with you as backup, per Carter's request."

"Begging your pardon, sir, but ... *two* units? That's a little excessive, don't you think?"

"Colonel, I haven't the vaguest idea *what* to think anymore. I have yet to hear a coherent explanation for anything that's happened here over the past few days, and as far as I can tell, no one can clearly explain to me what's happening right *now*. Until someone can rectify that situation to my satisfaction, I think that the least I can do is to err on the side of excessive caution."

"Yes, sir," O'Neill sighed.

The SG-1 team arrived in the Gate Room at nearly the same time as the medical team carried in their burdens, both laden stretcher and various mobile monitoring and medical equipment. At Fraiser's insistence, everyone designated for the emergency embarkation were issued gloves of the same material as the hazmat suits to mitigate the risk of accidental contact. With no time to fully prepare as they would for a standard mission, a hurried agreement was made that, with the exception of Carter, the SG-1 team would forgo the usual equipment, including weaponry, leaving those concerns to the backup units.

"My guess is that, like the hazmat suits, they work simply because they're non-conductive," Jackson said, a nod of his head informing O'Neill that the remark had been prompted by the colonel's puzzled inspection of the bulky gloves. "Unlike the unprotected human body, that is."

Ostensibly regarding the gloves with a disgusted frown, O'Neill stole a sideways glance at Jackson, who was being carefully helped into a fatigue jacket by Teal'c. Despite his efforts, Jack's undue interest didn't go unnoticed by Daniel, especially when Jackson emitted a soft grunt of pain at a movement made too quickly, and saw his own wince mirrored on O'Neill's face. Jackson stared at him, silently daring him to say even one word on the subject. For a moment, it seemed that the colonel might, but he addressed Teal'c instead, gesturing at his own head, then in the general direction of Edgar Benedek, whom the medical team had positioned on his stretcher at the base of the Gate ramp. "Hat?"

Teal'c nodded, moving off in search of suitable covering for the golden brand that gleamed on his high forehead. Daniel stared at O'Neill incredulously. "We're about to take this guy to another planet through the Stargate, and you're worried that he'll find out that there's something not quite Earthly about Teal'c?"

"Uh, memory check, please? This guy is a tabloid reporter. Do we remember what happens when tabloid reporters end up knowing more than they really should? The fewer memorable things we show him, the more likely we might be able to pass off what we can't avoid exposing him to as a really bad dream. Or...something."

"Or something," Jackson echoed dryly. "I stand in awe of your cunning plan."

Teal'c's return distracted O'Neill from his retort; he nodded approval as the other man adjusted the bill of his cap downward, completely obscuring the golden mark. "Okay," O'Neill announced, making a quick visual progress check of the controlled chaos around them. "Looks like this party's finally rocking. Let's see if the guest of honor will join us, shall we?"

Per Fraiser's advice, the armed units were sent through first, followed by the medical team assigned to tote equipment, ensuring that everyone and everything would be in place should the stress of transport through the wormhole cause her badly weakened patient further complications. As Carter coordinated the departures, O'Neill approached Fraiser as she, kneeling at the side of the already collapsed gurney, double-checked the IV she had successfully connected while Benedek drifted in and out of consciousness. She shot a warning look up at the colonel. "He needs his strength for whatever it is you're expecting him to do. Don't push it."

"There's something I have to get cleared up before I start feeling better about this," O'Neill told her. "I need him ... I need Artie to tell me more about the worm guys."

"I seem to remember that was the subject that pushed him over the edge just a few minutes ago," she said, torn between concern for her patient and her recognition of the reason why the information was being requested.

"As perversely reassuring as that reaction was, something a little more coherent would really be appreciated."

As she hesitated, a low moan from Benny heralded his return to consciousness. He squinted blearily at the active Stargate before him, then at each person gathered around him, his head swaying with the brief effort he made to lift it for a better look. "Whoa," he rasped, fading back onto the stretcher. "What are you guys doing in my NDE?"

"His what?" O'Neill muttered, looking around for help.

"Near-Death Experience," Jackson informed him lowly near his ear. "I imagine that the Stargate *would* resemble a tunnel filled with shining light to someone in his condition."

Carter appeared at O'Neill's side. "We've got an all-clear from Unit 1. We're ready for you, sir."

Fraiser rose, holding up a hand to forestall the colonel's attempt to address her patient. "You can ask him your questions when we get there. We're moving, now."

At her gestured command, the two designated stretcher-bearers took up their burden and began their carefully paced ascent up the ramp as Fraiser walked beside. O'Neill fell into step behind her, with Carter, Teal'c and Jackson not far behind. He heard her quiet instructions to Benedek to close his eyes and to keep them closed until she told him otherwise, and silently applauded her foresight. The last thing he saw before the stretcher and its attendants

were swallowed by the shimmering effect of the gate's event horizon was Fraiser take the hand that Benny suddenly lifted as if in alarm, not reassuring O'Neill at all as to whether the man had in fact followed doctor's orders.

The answer to that question was waiting for him on the other side. He stepped out onto the platform of the Stargate consigned by unknown builders eons ago to this planet, millions of light years from Earth, that they knew only as P3V 112, just in time to hear Benedek exclaim in an excited, albeit weakened voice. "That was incredible! That was fantastic! That was awesome! What the hell was that?"

"As far as you're concerned, a really fast elevator," O'Neill remarked with no real hope that he'd be believed. "All right, scouts. Which way to Kansas?"

"The canyon is over there," Carter reminded him, casually using the barrel of her machine gun to indicate a rift in the rim of high barren rock hills surrounding them. "I'd say we traveled together about a quarter klick in before we decided to split up."

Seeing agreement in the faces of Teal'c and Jackson, O'Neill nodded. "Carter, would you do the honors of leading the charge?"

With a nod of acknowledgment, Carter took off to lead the expedition, calling out orders that started movement among the assembled. Members of Unit 1, designated to guard the gate, took up positions on and around the gate platform while Unit 2 fanned out to provide a cordon and escort around the stretcher, its occupant and its attendants.

O'Neill managed to catch Jackson's arm, restraining him from following in the direction into which Carter had hurried off. "Not so fast, grasshopper."

"But..."

"Carter knows the way," O'Neill told him emphatically. "I need you back here."

"Damn it, Jack, I don't need a babysitter, and I don't need to be stuck with glue to the medical team, if that's what you're..."

"I need you to help me talk to this guy," the colonel overrode him firmly. "You were doing a helluva lot better job than anyone else figuring out what he and the lightning bug were trying to tell us, and my guess is that it has everything to do with the fact that you and Artie were roomies not so long ago. Am I on the right track here?"

Jackson's anger ran out of him like a deflated balloon as he considered the theory. "I believe that could be a factor, yes."

"Good. So let's talk."

With Teal'c accompanying them to ensure that Jackson kept to a non-hurried pace, they caught up to the medical team who were awkwardly trying to monitor Benedek's condition while on the move across the uneven terrain. "How's he holding up?" O'Neill greeted Fraiser as they drew even with them on the other side of the gurney, carefully out of her way.

"He's not." Fraiser's kept her eyes fixed on her difficult task, injecting something into the IV line while trying to keep up the pace of the stretcher bearers. "He's gone into shock. All bodily functions are failing rapidly."

"But he's conscious," Benny's weakened but strangely cheerful voice chimed in. "And he doesn't have any intention of kicking the bucket until the day after he's thanked the Pulitzer committee for the great honor."

"I need to know about the worm guys," O'Neill told him without preamble, making sure his level gaze and voice carried the proper weight and gravity.

"What do you need to know about the worm guys?" Benny replied calmly, as though he'd been anticipating the question.

"I need to know what Artie knows."

"He doesn't."

"Doesn't what? Doesn't know? Who the hell brought up the subject in the first place, then?"

"He doesn't know *about* them." Benny's eyes were closed, his face an alarming shade of gray. His voice weakened to the point of a bare whisper, but he persevered. "He just knows *of* them, and it ain't a pretty picture."

"Paint it for me anyway."

"I've got a great idea," Benny murmured, the last words nearly inaudible. "Why don't you ask him yourself?"

With a quiet sigh, his head suddenly lolled to the side.

"Stop!" Fraiser barked, making a gesture commanding that the stretcher be lowered to the ground. She went to her knees, leaning over Benny to check his vital signs, issuing terse, low-voiced commands to her assistants that they hastened to carry out.

As they watched Fraiser's engage in a pitched battle to ward off what her grim expression told them she already knew was inevitable, Carter arrived with a questioning look as to whether they should proceed forward, which O'Neill answered with a simple gesture to wait. She turned away briefly to issue a stand-down order, and then looked searchingly at Jackson's pensive face. "He's not going to make it, is he?" she said.

Recognizing that she'd already read the answer in his expression, Jackson didn't bother to answer. "We didn't get it figured out fast enough," he said bleakly, more to himself than to any of the others.

"We're not that far from the kid's front door," O'Neill said, his voice filled with growing exasperation. "Can't he just hop out and hoof it the rest of the way himself?"

Jackson shook his head slowly, searching his fragmented memories. "Contact. Transference requires contact."

"With what?" O'Neill turned to squint at the low, jagged cliffs marking the beginning of the canyon entrance in the near distance. "Maybe we could find it and bring it here or ... something."

Daniel leveled a look at him. "They live in a *rock*, Jack."

"Oh, great. *Now* you've got answers? Okay, answer this one, then. What happens to Artie if this guy croaks on us?"

He winced at O'Neill's crudeness. "What do you think happens?"

"So. That's it, then? If we can't magically transport him over nearly two hundred meters in the next five minutes, we lose both of them? Is that what you're saying?"

A sharp, urgent command from Fraiser to one of her harried assistants drew their attention. A brief glance sideways revealed that Benny's body had begun a marked convulsion. "Correction. Two minutes and counting," he muttered grimly.

As he watched, a strange sensation pricked along the back of his neck, and he reached up to absently scratch at the site of the minor irritation. He was still watching Fraiser's efforts over her unresponsive patient when he became aware of movement nearby, someone approaching from the side and leaning close to inform him, in a voice meant only for his ears. "I can take Artie the rest of the way," Daniel said.

No, you can't.

"No, you can't."

O'Neill stiffened. He instinctively averted his face just enough to keep anyone from noticing the look of surprise that he was unable to suppress in time. A voice, in his head. That's what he'd heard, a split second before he'd spoken. A voice had said the same thing as had just left his own mouth, but in an unfamiliar whisper and with considerably more emphasis than he'd employed.

"Jack, it's just a short distance, it won't take long at all"

No, you can't.

"No." O'Neill slowly rubbed the back of his neck, realizing that the strange pricking sensations mirrored the ghostly voice in his head. "You can't."

Still preoccupied with the strangeness in possession of his senses, it took Jack a moment to notice the small movement just within the range of his peripheral vision. Daniel's body was angled strangely, alerting O'Neill that he was trying to physically conceal something.

"Teal'c!"

Jackson squawked an indignant protest when Teal'c's large hand descended on his wrist, rendering his entire arm immobile and thereby preventing Daniel from completing the removal of one glove. A pleading look failed to make a dent in Teal'c's silent, admonishing glare. "Jack, for God's sake, we're running out of time here. Did we come all this way for nothing?"

O'Neill finally turned his head to look at him. When he finally spoke, it was a mere, definitive echo of the insistent voice in his head. "You *can't*."

Jackson blinked, unnerved by the odd light in the colonel's eyes as well as the odd emphasis he'd given the two quietly spoken words. "Can't?" he challenged cautiously. "As in, *you* won't allow it, or ... Jack? Are you okay?"

O'Neill barely heard Jackson's reaction to the obvious change that came over his face as he mentally turned inward to finally search for his invisible advisor. But Teal'c's voice yanked him back with the surge of alarm that the words speared through him: "If it is possible to do so, I would be willing to carry the entity to...."

"No!"

The force of O'Neill's objection caused Teal'c to react in open surprise, and nearly cost Daniel his balance when he flinched back, startled. It also drew the undivided attention of everyone within a twenty foot radius, and the idle chatter of bored soldiers ceased abruptly. Oblivious to the fact that he'd become the sole center of attention for everyone except the thoroughly preoccupied Fraiser and her immediate assistants, O'Neill fought to clear his vision, fogged by the explosive after-effects of the inner scream that had forced the word out of the depths of his own chest. His heart hammered furiously against his lungs, making it difficult to breathe and almost impossible to think clearly.

"Jack?" Daniel's voice seemed to come from two places; a foot or two away from his left ear, but also from a place inside O'Neill's head. Jackson's voice; no, his father's voice. No ... the voice was changing constantly, like light playing across the surface of water, refracting and reflecting in sibilant echoes. Different voices speaking the same words, most of which he couldn't hear clearly, and the rest of which made little coherent sense. Only the mental images that the sounds managed to ferret out of his subconscious to support them were clear. Daniel's external voice offering to take on the entity – that had sent a vague, man-shaped thing jumping out in front of him holding a sign that had suddenly absorbed his entire field of vision; an octagonal STOP sign on which the letters were formed of dripping blood. And Teal'c's well-intended suggestion had triggered the literal explosion of images out of the depths of his long-term memory that he only now belatedly recognized as scenes from a long-ago Western Civ class documentary, a sequence demonstrating the medieval technique of ritual disembowelment acted out in bloody, excruciating detail. But there was one prominent detail in the vivid images pummeling his brain that differed markedly from the actual memory. The shrieking victims writhing in torment behind his tightly closed eyes weren't human – they were Goa'uld.

O'Neill? Colonel? Jack? Faint voices from the outside spoke his name with gathering degrees of alarm and concern, but they were becoming a distraction. He made a sharp, sweeping gesture, hoping to shut them up so that he could concentrate. Though he was dimly aware that Jackson had edged close to him and was reaching a hand toward him, he rebuffed the gesture of concern and the attempt at contact in order to listen more closely to the other Jackson, the one who was an insistent voice in his head, trying to tell him something important.

With an angry hiss, he yanked his arm free of Daniel's second attempt, biting out the words, "Will you *please* –?" before stopping himself with an effort. He couldn't afford the distraction, not now. Not now. Not now

"Jack?" The alarm was sharp in Jackson's voice, and his eyes held the promise that he wouldn't be dissuaded by anything short of full physical force from the answer he demanded. "What's happening?"

We're running out of time. We're running out of time. The words in his head were finally something understandable. He could almost count the number of different voices whispering incessantly, and recognized several, Jackson and Benedek among them. Logically, if logic could be said to be a factor in this madness, the other voices would belong to Weiss, to Buettner, and the others. But the image that formed like a bright fog behind his eyes revealed an aching familiar face that belonged to none of them.

Charlie.

O'Neill felt his throat close under the awful sensation of his heart dropping in his suddenly constricted chest. "Aw, hell," he muttered bleakly, not realizing he'd spoken aloud until the physical presence of Daniel, his face inches from Jack's and filled with concern, intruded on his awareness. "Jack, what is it?"

For some reason even he wasn't sure of, the question surprised him as much as his own reply couched in a tone of open reproach. "You know what it is."

Relief softened Jackson's expression, his eyes reflecting faint chagrin. "Yes. Yes, I do. I just wasn't sure that you did."

"Yeah, well, that's a discussion for another time, isn't it?" Closing his eyes for a moment, O'Neill took in a couple of deep breaths to clear his head. "Gotta give the kid credit, he's a persistent little cuss."

Jackson rapped lightly on his arm, directing his attention to where Fraiser was still grimly attending to her patient. The look she briefly spared them needed no words. She was losing the battle.

We're running out of time. "Yeah, yeah, kid, I hear you," O'Neill muttered to the whispering voices in his head as he yanked off one of his gloves.

The abrupt movement caught Fraiser's attention, and her eyes widened in alarm. "Colonel?" she said, a question and a warning.

"It's all right," Jackson extended a reassuring hand, ready to intercept her if she tried to interfere. And it was clear that was exactly what she contemplated as she watched O'Neill remove the second glove, toss both aside, then drop to a crouch at the unconscious man's side. "He knows what he's doing," Daniel enjoined when she began to lean forward.

"You wish," O'Neill said under his breath, steadfastly ignoring the anxious looks on the faces of the silent group surrounding him. Bracing himself, he placed his hand on Benedek's arm.

After a moment, he looked up, puzzled, to find Fraiser's face close to his, her anxious eyes studying him closely. "I'm doing this right, aren't I?" he asked of no one in particular.

But on the last word, his body jerked under the impact of something traveling up his arm and through his body like a stick slamming a tattoo against a picket fence. He heard himself utter a small sound of surprise a moment before his entire awareness reacted of its own volition, turning inward to race after the sensation, intending to register his protest at the unheralded intrusion. But the thing suddenly swerved and curved and twisted and danced, constantly eluding his attempts to nail it long enough for study. There was just enough of a connection to what had formerly been reality for him to address the blurred, vaguely familiar faces that swam before his stressed eyes. "Never mind," he managed to say. "I found him."

"Colonel O'Neill!"

It took an annoying amount of time for the colonel to realize that the shape and number of objects within his field of vision had changed markedly, and that for some reason, the large, dark owner of the loud voice ringing in his ears appeared to be in the sky above him. He struggled for recognition, and smiled in relief when the answer finally came to him. "Teal'c! Hi."

"Jack, can you stand up?" Yet another voice that he had to fight through the fog to identify, but the question it asked diverted his attention into more confusion.

"I'm not standing up?"

"Uh, no. No, you're not."

"Then what am I doing?"

"Well, if Teal'c hadn't caught you, you'd be flat on your face on the ground," the voice replied reasonably.

"Oh. Thanks, Teal'c."

"You are welcome."

"Jack? Can you get up?"

"Sure, sure. Just as soon as I figure out which way that is."

He felt himself being lifted up, vaguely aware that a sensation felt at a short distance was probably that of his feet attempting to make firm contact with the ground, which would mean the pressure off to one side would be Teal'c holding on to him firmly. Nearby, he heard the reasonable voice say, "Was I like this?"

"Oh, much worse," another voice answered dryly.

Yet another voice spoke, admonishing, "I suggest you get him to wherever you're going, and quickly. The last thing I need right now is another patient. So step on it."

"Yes, ma'am. You heard the lady, Jack, let's go."

Someone took his other arm. "Where are we going?" O'Neill wanted to know.

"You just trust us, okay?" the other Jackson voice reassured him as the supports on either side of him prodded his strangely unresponsive body into motion.

"Okay," he agreed amiably. "You know, for some reason, I feel like singing."

"Please don't."

"I'm having a hard time remembering the words."

"Then don't try. Concentrate on walking, okay? This is really important."

"Why?"

"It just is. Come on, work with us here. That's it. One foot, then the other. That's it."

"There's something funny going on in my head."

"Truer words, Jack. Truer words," was the heavily sighed reply.

He brightened. "Hey! I remember the words now. 'There was an old man from Nantucket...'"

Carter hurried to overtake them, correcting the direction of their journey with a firm gesture, and then, without further discussion, taking the lead while dispensing terse orders that split their escort: one half of Unit 2's number to stand guard over Fraiser, her team and her patient, the other to follow at a discreet, alert distance. Carter led them to the canyon entrance and beyond, carefully negotiating the rapidly steepening incline while keeping a close eye over her shoulder on her slow-moving charges. At length, she paused to survey her surroundings, then addressed Jackson and Teal'c as they caught up to her, visibly straining under their happily disoriented burden.

"And ... and as for the bucket, Nan ... ran off with it. No, no, no, that's not right either, that's not right. Bucket, bucket, who's got the bucket?"

"Somebody kill me now," Jackson groaned, fixing Carter with a pleading look. "Are we there yet?"

"You and I split up down there." She pointed down the incline at a spot where the terrain leveled out briefly before taking a sudden twist and steeper descent. "You wanted to study something about that rock formation, there. And over there is where we found you."

Jackson followed her indications, making brief mental calculations, then settling on the rock formation, a sizable jagged depression in the canyon wall. "Well, it's obvious what got my attention," he decided. "Those glass-like veins running at unusual angles through sedimentary rock. A rare, if not impossible combination to find in nature. And ... what the hell is that?"

Carter, alerted by the marked change that had come over Jackson's face as he squinted and inclined his head, prodded, "What?" when the scientist made no further comment.

"Teal'c?" Jackson pointed with his free hand, his expression and his voice intensely troubled. "Those dark markings there, and there. Are those what I think they are?"

Teal'c's jaw tightened perceptibly as he gazed in the indicated direction. "They would appear to have been caused by concentrated staff weapon fire."

"Of course they were," Carter sighed heavily, shaking her head in faint disgust as her eyes darted about nervously, half-expecting a horde of snarling Jaffa to spring out from behind every rock.

Jackson fell silent through another long moment of study and thought. "Ah. See, there? The largest burn mark that extends to the underside of that rock shelf? The weathering pattern on the bottom part of the mark is heavier than the part protected by the shelf."

"So, that's a good indication that what happened here occurred a long time ago," Carter guessed. Jackson nodded his agreement, but her puzzlement only deepened. She extended her free hand, palm up. "So? What *did* happen here?"

"Hurt."

O'Neill's unexpected interjection caught them by surprise, which quickly became confusion when they found him staring at the blast-blackened rock, his eyes narrowed in what looked to be an expression of exquisite pain. "Hurt," he repeated, less vehemently, more fearfully. "Why ... hurt?"

Carter edged closer in concern. "Is he saying he's in pain, or?"

"No," Jackson said, his voice softened by dawning realization as he followed O'Neill's stare, focusing directly on the center of the starburst-like markings on the rock. "He's ... remembering. And for that matter, I think—so am

I." He paused to search his returning memories, and when he spoke again, his voice was subdued by the rush of revelations. "They looked like Travelers," he said slowly. "And they came here as the Travelers would, and wanted their company as the Travelers would have wanted. But..." He flinched visibly, as though struck by a deep, inner pain. At the same moment, O'Neill winced, uttering a single, irritated sound behind closed eyes.

"What is it?" Carter demanded, alarmed.

Jackson blinked rapidly, recovering with an effort. "Wow. That was an impressive visual."

Carter exchanged glances with Teal'c, belatedly realizing that the strange shiver of unreasoning anxiety that had briefly coursed through her had mirrored what looked to be a similar effect in Teal'c. "I think we only got the static," she informed Jackson. "What did you see?"

"A massacre." Jackson rubbed at his eyes with his free gloved hand. "I don't know how much of it was just references pulled from my personal memories, or how much of it actually happened, but ... it certainly does a lot to explain why Artie's so freaked about worm guys."

"Hurt," O'Neill agreed with a slow, knowing nod.

"I'm not sure I understand," Carter ventured.

"I'm not sure I do, either, not completely," Jackson admitted. "If I had to guess, and I'm sure that I do ... the Goa'uld tried to reap the same benefits of a symbiotic relationship with Artie's folks that the Travelers did. The result was an unmitigated disaster. The Goa'uld proved completely incompatible — to the point of suffering an immediate and extremely messy death on contact."

Carter lifted an eyebrow, impressed. "Wow. Way to go, fellas. My kinda guys."

Jackson eyed her, briefly distracted from tracking the elusive memories. "It wasn't done intentionally."

"Even better," she shrugged.

"Except maybe for the price they paid," he said meaningfully, regarding her steadily until she ducked her head in mild chagrin.

"The surviving Goa'uld threw a tantrum, you mean," she guessed quietly.

"A very, very big one, yes," he replied, nodding toward the black marks scoring the stone face before them.

"Hurt," O'Neill said softly, bowing his head.

"The Travelers never returned after that," Jackson said, absorbed in the memory once more. "They waited, and waited, but ... the Travelers never came back."

"My guess would be that the Goa'uld had a hand in that, too," Carter said darkly.

"Home."

The quietly spoken word fell hard in the silence, drawing three pairs of startled eyes to O'Neill who was blinking groggily at each of them in turn. "Home," he repeated, as though mildly surprised that they appeared not to have understood him in the first place.

Carter glanced at the broken, scarred rock face. "I take it that's home?" she offered tentatively.

"What's left of it, anyway," Jackson agreed. "Jack?"

Glassy eyes focused on him briefly. "Hm?"

"We're going over here now," he explained carefully as he and Teal'c once again began to guide O'Neill's faltering steps toward the rock face. "Do you know what to do?"

His answer was a non-committal grunt, but it became quickly apparent that O'Neill's interest was fixated completely on the rock face, particularly the starburst center of the dark burn markings. Several feet away, his body suddenly stiffened, resisting their efforts to prod him further. On his face was an expression of fierce concentration that utterly excluded acknowledgment of the existence of his teammates around him.

Jackson eased his grip off the colonel's arm, motioning for Teal'c to do the same, and then gesturing again for both of them to ease back. "Artie knows what to do," Daniel spoke to O'Neill's ramrod straight back as they moved away a short distance. "Listen to him. He'll tell you what to do."

As if in response, Jack's head moved slightly, seemingly a quiet acknowledgment, but perhaps no more than a reflexive twitch of strained muscles. Slowly, he lifted his hands, extending them to the center of the burn pattern etched into the rock. His fingertips brushed the surface lightly, then recoiled, trembling violently. Jackson edged in as close as he dared, angling to catch a glimpse of O'Neill's grimly set face in the shadow of the canyon wall as he ventured again, more gingerly, to explore the rock with the touch of his bare hands, but this time avoiding the black score marks entirely. Instead, he reached higher, finding the thin veins of crystalline glass and tracing them, gently, almost a fond caress. Jackson watched him in growing fascination. Carter, who had by that time also edged as close to Daniel as she dared, heard him say under his breath, in a voice of wonder, "Yes. Yes. I remember now. I remember."

She was in the midst of debating whether it was the time or place to ask the obvious question, when the question was answered for her. Under O'Neill's hands, the veins of glass meandering through the broken rock began to glow and flicker with light, reflected and refracted in prismatic flashes that danced across his rapt face in concert with the motion of his fingers, like a silent orchestra producing a brilliant symphony under the confident hand of its conductor. As Carter looked on, fascinated, she became aware of a vague feeling of sadness and of traumatic loss tugging at her every time O'Neill's hands moved to touch a different vein in the rock. It quickly became apparent to her that the intensity and duration of the nagging prods directly reflected how the thin glassy striations reacted under the colonel's deft manipulation. Some portions of the vein pattern's branches in and around the blast center had suffered extensive damage, dark and broken even as colored bands of light played around them. It was when those dead sections were probed under O'Neill's dancing fingers that the feeling of loss pulled at her the strongest.

Whatever pattern O'Neill was following eluded their understanding, but they continued to watch as the colonel intently persisted with what seemed to be a concerted search. Then, his hand came to rest on a spot on the rock wall just above and to the right of his head. For a moment, confusion marked O'Neill's face. He stared at his hand as though not quite understanding why it had stalled on him. A small sound from Jackson caught Carter's attention. He too was staring, but with an expression of dawning realization. "That's it," he said suddenly, his voice filled with subdued awe. "Right there. That's—"

The last word became a startled cry as the rock wall exploded in their faces.

For entirely too long, Jackson found himself unable to move his arm from its locked position bent across his face, belatedly protecting his light-blinded eyes. When the rush of adrenalin holding every autonomic function of his body captive finally abated, he found himself sprawled on the ground, blinking confusedly up in to the strong light of the planet's double suns. "Jack?" He scrambled to right himself, looking around frantically. "Sam? Teal'c!"

Somewhere close behind him, he heard Carter mutter in an extremely irritated tone, "What the *hell* was that?" A glance back assured him that she needed no help with her annoyed attempts to dust herself off and regain her feet. He quickly found Teal'c as well, the only one of them who seemed to have been able to remain on his feet, but whose face still retained a look of complete and utter surprise as his defensively raised arms slowly dropped to his side.

"Jack!" Daniel sprinted the distance to the fallen man's side just as Teal'c did the same, with Carter breathlessly joining them a scant moment later. To their collective relief, O'Neill responded, albeit dazedly, to Jackson's frantic prod. "Stop hitting me," he murmured, scowling.

"Was that supposed to happen?" Carter demanded, glancing back at the rock wall that appeared to show no visible evidence that it had just knocked nearly all of them right off their feet.

"As strange as this may sound, I certainly hope so," Jackson replied grimly. "Jack. Jack, did it work? Did you get Artie back where he belongs?"

The question seemed to become a point of focus for the colonel, dispelling his vague confusion like a dash of cold water. "Artie?" he echoed, staring at something only he could see. Then, abruptly, he sat bolt upright, continuing his search in all directions, as though straining to remember something vitally important.

"Are you all right, sir?" Carter ventured.

"Fine." The reply was automatic and unconvincing. His narrow-eyed stare continued to sweep the area without evident success. "Fine."

"Jack, did it work?" Daniel persisted.

O'Neill focused on him with a frown of mild confusion. Then, dismissing Daniel and everything else outside the sphere of his own internal reality, he calmly levered to his feet, taking a moment to brush himself off.

"Jack?" Daniel exchanged an uneasy glance with both Carter and an overtly concerned Teal'c. "Jack, are you okay?"

To their collective surprise, O'Neill's response was to lift a warning hand in a familiar gesture, a mildly irritated request for silence so that his concentration would remain unaffected. Unwilling to heed the warning, Jackson opened his mouth again, only to be stopped cold by a fierce, "Sh!" that O'Neill repeated three times for emphasis.

Carter laid a firm hand on Jackson's arm, a silent warning to back off. He did so, reluctantly, finding that the simple movement seemed to instantly erase his existence from O'Neill's awareness. Eyes once again narrowed and searching, O'Neill scanned the area around him once more, then turned on his heel and began striding purposefully in the direction from which they had originally arrived.

With some relief, Jackson noted that O'Neill's course was leading them directly back to the spot where Fraiser had halted the other half of their embarkation team. But that relief rapidly faded to see the eerily silent tableau that greeted their precipitous arrival. Members of the armed escort were gathered in a loose circle around the smaller group of medical personnel kneeling on the ground next to the stretcher. To a man and woman, they were silent and unmoving, gazing down with various degrees of solemnity evident in their postures and subdued faces. Dr. Fraiser, who had been frantically working over Benedek only ten minutes earlier, was now still, her hands braced against her knees in support of her slumped shoulders and heavily bowed head, her entire body assuming an eloquent attitude of dejected exhaustion. The only movement came from her two assistants, who were slowly gathering scattered medical detritus and repacking plastic carry-alls.

Fraiser looked up with a start, belatedly roused from her bleak reverie by O'Neill's sudden appearance above her. "Colonel! How—?"

Something about his odd expression alarmed her, and her eyes darted to Carter, then to Jackson and Teal'c as they made similarly abrupt and for the most part, breathless, arrivals. "Has something gone wrong?" she demanded, anticipating the answer with marked dread.

"We're, ah, still waiting for the verdict to come in on that question," Jackson replied, watching O'Neill closely as the man, still oblivious to everything and everyone else around him, gazed down at Edgar Benedek's unmoving body with strangely curious interest.

Carter caught Fraiser's eye, quietly asking the question although she already knew the answer. "Janet?"

"There's nothing more we can do," she replied, her voice heavy with regret. "I'm sorry."

"Home."

They turned at the unexpected sound of O'Neill's voice to find him holding up both hands for close, meticulous inspection. He took special interest in the free movement of his fingers, almost a precise echo of his exploration of the rock face scant minutes before. Then something caught his attention, focusing it on the body lying motionless at his feet. His forehead creased heavily under the strain of trying to force something from the depths of his brain. A single word formed uncertainly on his lips, gaining certainty and strength in the unnaturally long amount of time it took him to enunciate the sound. "Friend."

Jackson's hand found Carter's arm, giving it a tug that communicated wordlessly to her that he found something significant in the colonel's words and actions that clearly served only to utterly baffle all the other witnesses. She was considering whether to risk the distraction of wheedling, *sotto voce*, an explanation from him when O'Neill emitted a distinct grunt of satisfaction. He was smiling down at his spread fingers, each held in what seemed to be a distinctive, controlled position, precisely placed. Then, without warning, he dropped to a crouch and extended his hands over Benny. Before anyone could react or voice their confusion, he brought his hovering hands down sharply, like a master pianist striking a resounding chord against Edgar Benedek's chest.

At the moment of contact, light exploded in all directions, refracted rays in all colors of the rainbow resonating in the dazzled eyes and faces of all the observers like the notes of a perfect, though strangely inaudible, musical composition. Scattered cries of alarm and irritation followed on as most recoiled, shielding their eyes. But Jackson, responding to an inner warning, had safely averted his eyes a scant second before the light burst occurred. He alone had vision clear enough to see the immediate aftermath, while others, unsuccessfully trying to blink away light blindness, only heard it: a ragged, prolonged and desperate gulp for air into starved lungs, emitted by a suddenly alert, energized and utterly astonished Edgar Benedek.

"Colonel O'Neill?"

Leaving Fraiser and the others to react to the sudden resurrection of their previously despaired-of patient, Jackson responded to the sound of Teal'c's concerned voice, moving quickly to where both he and Carter were leaning over O'Neill's sprawled body. He was heartened by the distinctly irritable sounds of pained protest that were being issued, staccato-like, in response to Carter and Teal'c's efforts to lever the colonel into a more dignified sitting position on the ground. "Man!" O'Neill exploded, flexing his neck to relieve some obvious discomfort. "Can't those bugs get anything done without the brass band and fireworks?"

Carter glanced over her shoulder, and shook her head in wonder. "What did you do?"

"Me?" He blinked in momentary confusion. "I didn't do anything. Except, maybe ... listen."

"And a damned good job you did of that, too," Jackson confessed grudgingly.

"Yeah, who'd a'thunk it," O'Neill muttered, hauling a couple of quick, deep breaths in and out of his lungs.

"So ... are we to believe that these entities are actually capable of ... of raising the dead?" Carter ventured in careful disbelief.

"He wasn't dead," O'Neill assured her calmly. "Yet. Wouldn't have worked if he were." To her questioning look, he responded defensively. "He told me so."

"He? Do you mean Artie?"

"No," he shook his head after a moment's thought. "Artie's ... dad, I think. Maybe. Probably. He told me ... he said, ah ... 'sorry about the fuss, here's something for your trouble.' Or ... something like that. Nice guy, for a lighting bug. But that kid's headed for the mother of all time-outs, let me tell you."

Jackson emitted a short laugh, a mixture of overwhelming relief and amusement. "This going to be one hell of a debriefing," he told Carter, shaking his head. "I can't wait to hear the rest of this story."

"Colonel O'Neill?" A faintly flustered but radiantly relieved Dr. Fraiser appeared before them, studying Jack with a practiced, clinical eye. "How are you feeling?"

"Peachy," he smiled up at her.

"Peachy," she echoed, accepting the unorthodox diagnosis with a reluctant nod after getting silent assurances from the other three surrounding him. "Okay. Look, if he's ambulatory and you really think you can handle it, I'll leave him in your care for now, as long as you deliver him straight to the ICU when we return."

"ICU?" O'Neill protested, almost a childish whine. "Aw, hell, don't make me go to the ICU. I don't wanna go to the ICU."

"Like I care," she told him emphatically, flashing him a triumphant smile before turning away, moving back to tend to her original patient.

"Don't wanna go," O'Neill grumbled, scowling after her.

"Come on, Jack," Jackson urged as he and the others urged the reluctant man to his feet. "It'll be fun. We'll have ice cream. I'll bring you an Etch-A-Sketch. You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

Narrowed eyes settled on Jackson as they started back for the gate in the near distance. "As much as you'd like to die a horrible, screaming death," he promised under his breath.

"He's fine," Carter announced with relieved certainty.

"Peachy," O'Neill corrected firmly.

She hid her smile with difficulty. "Yes, sir. Peachy, sir."

"And don't you forget it." He caught his head just as it threatened to drop in exhaustion, snapping it upright defiantly as he allowed his three support systems to do most of the work in keeping him moving. "Nan took it!"

"Took what, sir?" Carter ventured, already knowing it was a mistake even before Jackson shot her a warning look.

"The bucket," he replied, as though it should have been obvious to a child.

"Who is Nan?" Teal'c inquired, ignoring Daniel's sharp look.

"The girl who took the bucket," he said, exasperated.

"Did the bucket belong to her?"

"No, no, no, it belonged to her father."

"For what purpose did she take this object that was the rightful property of her own father?"

"Somebody, *please*, kill me now," Jackson prayed under his breath.

If pressed, he would have been forced to admit that, according to his internal reckoning, mere seconds had passed from the time someone had finally fetched him a damp, cool cloth for his aching head. He probed unsuccessfully for the cloth that should have still been lying against his eyes. But it wasn't there. He opened his eyes and blinked clear his blurred vision. And he wasn't in the ICU anymore. The dozen or more people who had been milling around him were gone, along with the irritating noise level they'd been generating. Somehow, they'd all vanished and he'd been magically transported to a bed in the regular infirmary. And his clothes had been exchanged for a flimsy examination gown in the process.

"It's alive," a quiet voice greeted his cranky, grunted protest.

Reluctantly giving in to the inevitable conclusion that he must have fallen asleep despite his firm resistance to Dr. Fraiser's demands that he do just that, O'Neill also gave up trying to sit up when a wave of dizziness rewarded his effort. With an exasperated sigh, he let his too-heavy head fall back on the pillow. "Okay. How long have I been out?"

"Fifteen, maybe sixteen hours."

"Where is everybody?" he said, craning his neck for a quick look around. The room was darkened, only small overhead lights illuminating the other beds, a few of which were occupied by blanket-covered, slumbering forms. Jackson was seated in a wheelchair positioned at the bottom of the bed O'Neill found himself occupying, intently working on something propped up on his raised knees.

"Where would you expect them to be at three in the morning?" Jackson replied without lifting his head.

"Yeah? So why aren't you where I'd expect you to be at three in the morning?" he demanded suspiciously.

"Because I'm a patient, not a visitor. Remember?" He moved his arm just enough to send his IV line clattering for added emphasis.

"Oh." He settled back against the pillow again. "Okay then."

"Pardon?"

"What have I missed?"

"Our debriefing, for one. General Hammond can't wait to hear your report and frankly, neither can I."

"And that's why you're sitting here in the dark, lurking like I was a pair of front row tickets to a Grateful Dead concert?" he challenged.

"Don't flatter yourself, Jack," Daniel smiled mildly. "I couldn't sleep, so I thought I'd catch up on my notes. That's all. Really."

"Really."

"Really."

Silence fell, marked only by O'Neill's steady, unrelenting stare and Jackson's steadfast pretense that he was unaware that he was the target. A full minute passed, then two, before Daniel finally lifted his eyes from his work and blinked. "Of course, as long as you're awake"

"Ah," O'Neill emitted a quiet exclamation of triumph.

"What?"

"Nothing, nothing."

"If you don't want to"

"Want to what?"

Daniel shrugged, as if only just now giving the idea any thought. "I just thought that, as long as you were awake and I was awake"

"Uh-huh."

"That is to say, there were several questions brought up during the debriefing on which we felt strongly that you should be consulted before any decisions were made. So"

"So?"

"So, I was thinking that, you know, I could tell you what questions are on the table and we could"

"We could?"

"Discuss them."

"Discuss them." O'Neill nodded slowly.

A familiar look of mild irritation crossed Jackson's face as he reached up to scratch at the side of his nose. "Of course, if you're not up to it"

"Not up to it?" His voice rose a little higher on the indignation scale.

"I mean, you know, if you're not, ah ... quite recovered...."

"Recovered?" This time his eyebrow shot up for added emphasis.

Daniel snorted softly, giving up all pretenses that his annoyance was caused by an itchy nose. "Jack, I think your instant replay button is jammed?"

"Recovered?" Both eyebrows and his voice rose in unison. "Excuse me. Excuse me? Can we just take a moment here, just a moment, to think back on a few things that have happened over the past two years that have made it such a joy to be me? I have been half-frozen. I have been turned into a caveman. I have been Jaffa'd by a psychotic redhead, for cryin' out loud, and don't let me forget to mention shot stone-cold dead on the Nox planet. Or the fact that I've already had my brain blown up by the best, by nothing less than the Encyclopedia Galactica, unabridged. Do you seriously think a lightning bug is going to cause me any more grief than a mild headache?"

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," Daniel said, his facial expression and his voice so genuine and sincere that O'Neill knew for certain that his apology was a complete lie. "What was I thinking? I lost my head, I'm sorry, I forgot who I was talking to."

"Damn straight," O'Neill muttered, happy enough with the words if not the true sentiment behind them. He watched through half-closed eyes as Jackson, shaking his head in an expression of mild disgust, returned his attention to his work, waiting a carefully measured ten seconds before adding, under his breath. "But thanks for asking."

"You're welcome," came the immediate reply from the bowed head that kept O'Neill from reading Jackson's expression, save for a faint muscle contraction that could have been part of a quick smile.

"Okay." Jack settled his clasped hands behind his head. "What questions? Shoot."

"Well, the big one is whether to lock P3V-112 out of the dialing program, or"

"Or?"

"Go back and attempt to learn more about the indigenous life forms, particularly their history with the Goa'uld. Also we could hope to shed some light on these mysterious Travelers."

O'Neill considered the question, playing tentatively with the swirl of memories and images that Jackson's words had quietly invoked. "What do you think?"

Jackson quirked an odd smile. "You know what I think."

O'Neill flinched involuntarily. "Aw, now, don't start with that. You make it sound like you're in my head. I mean" His voice dropped slightly, subdued. "You're not, are you?"

"Am I?" Jackson smiled enigmatically.

"I said, don't start."

"Jack, I was never in your head in the first place."

"Well, it looked like you and it sure as hell sounded like you," he retorted defensively.

"It was Artie. He was using what he'd learned from me to communicate with you, so it's only natural that the mental images he evoked would resemble me."

"If you weren't in my head, then how do you know that?" O'Neill challenged suspiciously.

"I've been talking with Buettner and Weiss." Jackson nodded to indicate the far side of the infirmary and two of the snoring blanket wrapped bundles. "They had similar experiences while Artie was attempting to communicate with them."

"You mean, you were in their heads, too?"

"Apparently."

"No wonder they went nuts," O'Neill muttered under his breath.

"What was that?"

"I said, okay, then, as long as you're sure we're not doomed to end up finishing each other's sentences, or ... or something disgusting like that."

"No, nothing disgusting like that," Daniel replied mildly.

"So you got spared the Greek chorus treatment," O'Neill remarked with a rueful grimace. "Lucky. My ears are still ringing from all the noise you guys were making in there."

"I wouldn't say I was spared, exactly. Artie did manage to find ... something from my memories to use in his efforts to communicate."

"Oh? Anyone I know?"

"No one anyone knows, actually." A strange, distant smile spread across his face as he focused his eyes on his work once more. "When I was very young, I decided that I really wanted an older brother."

"I assume that this was before you figured out how that sort of thing worked," O'Neill ventured.

"Well before. My parents couldn't seem to stop laughing long enough to explain it to me, either."

"I can imagine," O'Neill muttered, his side glance at Jackson leaving him uncertain whether the comment had gone unheard or whether Daniel was cutting him some slack.

"Anyway, when it became clear to me that I wasn't going to get a brother anytime soon, I invented one."

"Dare I ask?" O'Neill said in a voice that seemed to hint that the answer in return should preferably be a 'no.'

"I expect you'd find it a rather routine 'child and imaginary friend' story. Truth is, he didn't last very long."

"I'd expect he'd have a little problem, oh, say, playing catch with you."

"Among other things. But as far as being someone I could talk to, confide in, trust ... even argue and fight like dogs, the way I imagined real brothers would, well — for the short time that he was a real person to me, having Jack around really helped me out a lot."

"Jack?" O'Neill repeated incredulously.

Daniel blinked in surprise, as though he had only just now realized the coincidence and considered it merely amusing. But there was enough hesitancy in the gesture to give O'Neill pause, leaving him unconvinced that the remark had been as spontaneous as Jackson would have him believe.

Such subterfuge required a response delivered in kind, he decided. He waited an appropriate amount of time, just long enough to make it obvious that his next words wouldn't have necessarily been his first choice, before saying, each word a carefully enunciated expression of utter disbelief: "Jack Jackson?"

A quick smile flashed on Jackson's face, with enough relief in it to assure O'Neill that he'd inferred the right hidden meaning, and had also responded correctly. "I was six years old," he said, as if that explained it all.

"Oh, well, then." He made a noisy sound of exaggerated relief. "Okay, so, you're saying ... what? Artie pulled this imaginary brother out of your brain and used it like he used you in my brain?"

Daniel nodded congratulations. "So is there any doubt why I would want to pursue the study of these entities?"

"Since when have you needed a justification?" Jack huffed dismissively.

"There is one thing I'm curious about," Daniel said guardedly, his voice and manner changing just enough to put O'Neill on full alert. "And I expect I should raise the subject now, since General Hammond intends to demand a full accounting from you first thing in the morning, so you might consider this advance warning to get your story in order before then."

"Story? What story?"

"How you allowed a civilian to gain possession of your own gun," Daniel replied evenly. "Why you were conspicuously displaying the fact that you had a gun, but mostly significantly – why you had a gun on you in the first place. You wanted us to believe it was a spur-of-the-moment thing; why, I don't know. To keep the rest of us from getting fingered as accomplices, I suppose. But the truth is, you checked that gun out of the armory on the way back from your last interrogation. What was going on there, Jack? Whose voice were you listening to when you came up with that idiotic plan?"

"Idiotic?" O'Neill flared briefly. "It worked, didn't it?"

"It wasn't my voice, was it? I mean, Artie's voice?"

"No, it wasn't anyone's voice." He waved irritably. "Okay, it was ... mine."

"Yours?"

"Teal'c was right." The confession came with some difficulty, eased somewhat by keeping his focus on the blanket-covered tips of his feet. "Tag-teaming was the obvious solution for the immediate problem, if only to give us some more time to get things figured out. But it's not like any of us could flat out ask for volunteers, not for something like that. And I couldn't afford to risk anyone on the team because I needed all of you to find an answer to the long range problem. I'm pretty sure that you ... Artie kept pushing the idea of Benedek at me until I couldn't ignore it anymore. Or maybe he just pushed me to the point of screaming dementia if I didn't get that persistent image out of my head once and for all, that's a toss-up. But I still had to be sure that it was his decision to do it, and that ... that was a way I could make sure." His brow furrowed suddenly. "Artie got to him even before he took on the little bug, didn't he? So that's how he scoped the whole parasite, sentience thing so fast, he was getting that from Artie, who must have gotten it ... from you?"

"It's an interesting theory," Jackson allowed. "And it would go a long way toward providing an explanation for my strong suspicion that Benedek knew all along that the gun was unloaded."

"You too, huh?" O'Neill lapsed briefly into reflective silence before being roused by the occurrence of a new thought. "Speaking of the devil....?"

It took a moment marked by a confused eye blink for Daniel to understand the question and accompanying hand gesture. "Oh. Fraiser has him in ICU, along with his friend. They're still on the critical list as of a few hours ago, but no codes have been called while we've been here. That can only be good news. And that, strangely enough, brings me right around to the subject of the most pressing question that was left hanging until such time as you're sufficiently recovered to chime in on the decision process."

"I bet I can guess what question that is," O'Neill say, his voice heavy with apprehension as he settled his head more comfortably in the unyielding pillow. "What are we going to do with those two guys?"

A strange noise was his answer. O'Neill looked up to see Jackson unsuccessfully trying to stifle a deep yawn. "I see our little chat has managed to cure your insomnia," he remarked dryly.

Caught, Daniel shrugged in resignation to the inevitable. "Some of us haven't been granted the luxury of fifteen hours of sleep," he pointed out as he started to move his wheelchair closer to the empty bed next to O'Neill's. "Oh. Sorry, I forgot. Carter dropped this by for you; I hope you don't mind that I borrowed it for a while."

From his lap, Daniel removed a flat rectangular object and lobbed it to O'Neill, who found himself holding and staring down at a bright red plastic Etch-A-Sketch.

"How long has Carter had this death wish, I wonder?" he murmured, squinting in the gloom at the dark scratchings on the silvery screen that undoubtedly represented Daniel's intense efforts over the course of their conversation. "Hey. What's this supposed to be, anyway?"

Daniel paused in the midst of easing himself onto his bed. "Can't you tell?" he asked, his voice heavy with exaggerated hurt.

"You really don't want me to answer that," he warned.

"It's a horse," Jackson informed him haughtily, settling back with a relieved sigh and closing his eyes.

"A horse." He squinted harder, to no avail. "Of course."

A moment spent entertaining suitable revenge scenarios passed before he thought of another question he wanted Jackson to answer. But a glance over revealed that Daniel was already past the point of no return, as the sound of soft snoring reached his ears. And to his chagrin, he realized that fifteen hours of rest had rendered him incapable of sleeping off the remaining hours until the beginning of the morning duty cycle. Grumbling his irritation, O'Neill took up the toy and scowled at it. "Ciao, Mr. Ed," he said, upending the Etch-A-Sketch and giving it a good shake. "Stand back and let an expert show you how it's really done...."

Emerging slowly from a warm, blissful sleep, Edgar Benedek rolled over with a sigh, then froze. The feel of the pillowcase and the sheets against his skin was far rougher than the satin sheets he favored at home. The bright glare against his closed eyelids precluded the possibility that it could be nighttime, and the brief thought that he might awake to find himself in another drab hotel room was brushed away by the distinct sound of someone being paged over a distant loudspeaker. That left only one possibility, and a far too familiar one at that – he was in the hospital again.

He opened one eye cautiously, reconnoitering. Nearby was another hospital bed, half hidden by a partly closed dividing curtain, but judging from the lumpy blanket on the bottom half of the bed, occupied. His attention was drawn by movement off to his right. Not daring to move, he waited as a large, dark form loomed into his field of vision, revealing it to be a blurry man shape bending sideways at the waist in order to get a clear look at Benny's half-buried face.

Benedek lifted his head and blinked his vision clear. "Well," he exclaimed mildly when recognition came with not that much of a shock. "If it isn't my favorite spook."

"Well," O'Neill replied in kind, with an insincere smile of greeting. "If it isn't Pulitzer Boy."

Pulling himself up to a sitting position, Benny exaggerated the effort to give himself time to take stock. The first thing that became glaringly apparent was that the hospital room had windows, with curtains that barely held back the full glare of daylight. "I'm not where I was," he decided aloud.

"That goes without saying," O'Neill agreed cryptically.

Another person edged gingerly into Benedek's field of view. "Hi," Daniel greeted him with a self-conscious smile.

Benny quickly scanned the room to make sure there were no more surprise visitors. "You coulda brought the good-looking one along with you, you know," he grumbled. "Her face woulda been a lot more pleasant to wake up to."

"I'll pass along the compliment," O'Neill assured him. "And forgive the insult. This time."

He looked over at the curtained window again. "Okay. I'm not inside a mountain anymore."

"A mountain?" The colonel exchanged an overtly puzzled glance with Jackson, who exaggerated a clueless shrug in turn.

"And I'm willing to bet real money that I'm not even in Colorado anymore."

"Actually, no, you're not. You're in the hospital at Andrews Air Force base."

Benny's eyebrows shot up, but before he could speak, the other bed snagged his attention again, presenting a more important concern. "Is that Jonathan?"

"Dr. MacKensie?" O'Neill nodded as though Benny should have already known. "Of course."

Without warning, Benny tore off his blanket and hopped out of bed. O'Neill and Jackson barely escaped being physically shoved aside as Benedek leapt toward the side of the other bed. "Jonathan! Hey, Jonno!" His hand hovered uncertainly for a moment, then landed on the other man's raised shoulder, shaking gently. "Jonathan!"

"What?" MacKensie started awake, blinking rapidly. "What?"

"Are you okay? No, come on, let me ... will you let me look, please?"

Irritably, Jonathan swatted at Benny's attempts to turn his head for closer inspection. "Go away. Leave me alone."

A wave of relief shivered through him, leaving him momentarily weak-kneed and light-headed. "Come on, Jocko, rise and shine. There's some figments of my imagination here to see us."

"What? Where?" Groggily, Jonathan lifted his head and peered around until his clearing vision identified O'Neill and Jackson standing nearby. "Who?"

"Dr. Daniel Jackson. Not..." He took in his drab green fatigues with a fast gesture. "...a medical doctor. I'm a scientist."

"Colonel Jack O'Neill, U.S. Air Force," O'Neill nodded in greeting.

"Air Force?" Making a concerted effort to clear his head, Jonathan grudgingly accepted Benedek's help to sit up. He looked around him in growing dread. "Hospital," he groaned, gingerly shaking his head in disgust. "Benedek? What happened this time?"

"My men found you in a restricted area during military maneuvers," O'Neill answered readily, handily forestalling Benedek's attempt to answer while lending special emphasis to the word *restricted*. "Your car must have gone off the road. Both of you were pretty banged up, I'm afraid."

Jonathan's narrowing eyes slid over to Benny accusingly. "You were driving."

But Benny wasn't listening to him; his full attention was on O'Neill, staring at him in faintly amused disbelief. "Our car ran off the road, huh?"

"Yes." O'Neill met his gaze without blinking. "It did."

"In Colorado."

On alert, O'Neill nodded warily. "Yes."

"And you guys found us, patched us up, dusted us off, and ... out of the sheer goodness of your heart, decided to ship us back to D.C."

"We're in D.C.?" Jonathan blinked, confused.

"And all before Dr. J. here had returned to the land of the conscious, no less. Nice. Very nice."

"Your tax dollars at work," O'Neill assured him calmly.

"It's really amazing, though. Jonny here must have been unconscious for, what? At least four days?"

"Five, I believe," Daniel corrected, shrugging a mild apology to the sharp look O'Neill gave him for the effort.

"Wow. Five whole days, out like a busted lightbulb, and yet there's not a scratch or bruise on the prof."

More confused, Jonathan did a quick check of his body and his mobility, his frown deepening to discover nothing more than an expected bruise surrounding the IV insertion site on his arm. "Five days?" he breathed incredulously.

"Miraculous, isn't it?" the colonel enjoined.

"Oh, there's something definitely other-worldly at work here, I agree," Benny agreed solemnly.

Jackson cleared his throat, forestalling what the storm gathering on O'Neill's face might herald. "You realize, I hope, that you're both lucky men," he told them carefully. "Very lucky, indeed. If we hadn't found you when we did, you might very well have come to a bad end."

"Yep, lucky us," Benny emitted a short, non-committal laugh that didn't disturb the serene look of challenge he kept fixed on them, a clear indication that he was fully aware of the subtle emphasis that Jackson had put on certain words. The tense silence was broken by Jonathan's under-the-breath mutter, "Five *days*?"

"And, lucky, lucky us that you came all the way from Colorado to visit us, just to make sure that we were okay," Benny pointed out, his smile broadening at the sight of O'Neill's growing discomfort. "That's so big of you. Isn't that big of them, Jonno?"

MacKensie looked up, dazed. "Huh?"

"It was the least we could do, under the circumstances," Jackson said carefully, a warning in his lowered voice. "We wanted to make certain that everything was okay."

"Looks fine on my end." Benny assured him blithely.

"Does it?" O'Neill challenged quietly. "I mean...we're not going to find some bizarre fantasy that you cooked up to explain the past four days starting back at us in the supermarket next week, are we?"

"Supermarket?" Jonathan interjected unexpectedly. He squinted at O'Neill before turning his puzzled gaze to Benny, who was making a comically exaggerated effort to look elsewhere. "But ... he hasn't written for the *Register* in over five years."

"Oh, they probably found my old press card when they were checking us for ID," Benny said, his knowing smile increasing in brilliance. "I keep it in my wallet for old time's sake."

"You're not a tabloid reporter," O'Neill said, realization and sheer irritation warring on his facial expression. "Funny. I don't seem to remember you mentioning that fact when the subject came up previously."

"Slipped my mind," Benny shrugged. "I'm a doctoral candidate at Duke, doing a little community college teaching on the side. The IDs were right behind the press pass in my wallet. You must have missed them."

Jackson's brows lifted in grudging respect in direct proportion to the level of irritation that O'Neill's face was registering. "Well, I'm impressed," Daniel murmured, nodding his approval.

"I'm sorry." Jonathan's uncertain voice drew their attention. He was staring curiously at Daniel, as though trying to summon something from the depths of his still-frazzled brain. "Have we met before?"

"I don't believe we have," he answered carefully.

"You look familiar," MacKensie persisted, deeply confused. "I mean ... actually, you *sound* very familiar. I mean ... I'm not sure what I mean."

"To my knowledge, we've never met," Daniel replied truthfully. "However, I did once have a conversation with one of your Georgetown Institute colleagues, several years ago at an Ancient Cultures seminar in Edmonton. Dr. Juliana Moorhouse, I believe. You know her, of course?"

"Yes, yes, of course. She's my department chairperson."

"A very charming, a very lovely woman," Jackson told him, his features softening with the appearance of a genuinely fond smile. "We spoke only briefly, but I expect I'd never be able to fully explain how much our conversation meant to me at that particular time in my life."

"I'd sure like for you to give that explanation a try," O'Neill, badly covering his surprise at Jackson's unexpected revelation, warned him in a voice pitched only for his ears. "And soon."

"Perhaps she mentioned you, and that's why you seem familiar to me," MacKensie decided, but it was clear that the explanation didn't suit him quite enough to clear all of the confusion still marking his face.

"Hold that thought, Jonny," Benny chimed in, a brilliant, totally insincere grin on his carefully innocent face. "Anything else we can do for you gentlemen? I know you must be busy people, after all, so we wouldn't want to hold you up from your more important work. I'm sure you've got planes to fly, guns to shoot, wars to start, that sort of thing."

O'Neill took his time answering, making sure that the pause served to lend weight to his next words. "We really can't leave here until we're sure ... and I mean, until we're *really* sure ... that everything is okay. And that it *remains* okay. I mean, we'd just hate ourselves if anything were to happen to you after all the trouble we went through to make *sure* that everything is okay."

Benny spread his hands in an overly grand gesture. "Why wouldn't everything be okay?"

"You tell me," O'Neill said, his piercing stare matching the intensity of his lowered voice.

"Jonny? Everything okay with you?" Turning back with a broad smile when MacKensie, startled, nodded mutely, he continued. "Well, everything's okay with me, too."

"You're sure."

"Never more," he said cheerfully.

Pausing again, O'Neill's body language instructed all observers to pay close attention. "Well, then. As long as you're sure." He bobbed his head to dismiss himself and Jackson. "Gentlemen."

"Hey! Flyboy!"

Benny's call stopped them at the open door. With a grimace filled with dread, O'Neill reluctantly turned back, fully expecting to be hit between the eyes by a high-flying barb. To his surprise, Benedek merely smiled, then made a sideways motion with his head to draw silent attention to the still faintly dazed and distracted Jonathan MacKensie. "Thanks," he said quietly.

The look that Jackson and O'Neill exchanged confirmed for each that the other finally understood that all Benedek's assurances to them had in fact been perfectly sincere, not contrived for effect as he seemed perversely determined to have them believe. And that the reason he was so willing to agree to their terms had nothing to do with a fear of spending the rest of his natural life in military prison as a national security risk, and everything to do with simple, honest gratitude.

Carter and Teal'c, waiting in the hallway with several other surreptitiously armed soldiers, approached as they closed the hospital door behind them. "How did it go?" she asked.

"I think it went well," Jackson assured her with a relieved smile. "Very well."

O'Neill made a quick hand signal to the two armed guards posted on either side of the door, silently instructing them to stay put. He nodded in the direction of the other soldiers. "We won't be requiring their assistance," he confirmed.

With a quick smile of vast relief, she turned away long enough to dismiss the armed guard. "And the scheduled covert surveillance, sir?"

"I think we'll let that plan proceed," O'Neill decided. "At least ... for a little while." He averted his gaze quickly from Daniel's disapproving glare. "I mean ... just to make sure. Couldn't hurt to be sure. A month or two. Tops."

Shaking his head, Jackson clapped his hand to O'Neill's shoulder. "You know what I like so much about you, Jack?" Daniel remarked as all four turned to follow the retreating guard down the corridor. "You're so gosh darn *trusting*."

Jonathan emerged from his debilitating state of confusion several seconds too late to acknowledge the departure of the two strangers whose presence he'd barely been able to register in the first place. "Why...who...what was that all about?" he begged.

Instead of answering, Benny started chuckling, settling down in a chair next to MacKensie's bedside. His genial laughter became full amusement under Jonathan's baffled stare. When it became apparent that heartfelt chortles would be the only explanation he could expect anytime soon, Jonathan went back to sorting out the bizarre, nagging questions still tangling in his brain. "I'm sure I must have met him before," he insisted, more to himself than to Benny, who met the remark with an outright snicker. "I just can't figure out when that could have been."

"Maybe in your dreams?" Benny offered, feigning offhandedness.

Between the fingers with which he was rubbing his temples, Jonathan's eyes widened. His mouth opened, closed, then opened again as the memory images, prodded out of their hiding place by Benny's casual remark, sheepishly revealed themselves to him, in a tantalizingly slow sequence. Twitching facial muscles reflected every time he grabbed hold of an image for frantic review and comparison with the next memory flash. The collected and properly arranged pieces took his breath away, which also must have reflected on his face judging from the fresh burst of chuckling that erupted from some vague point off center of his present intense focus. When he could finally speak, it still took him a disconcerting amount of time to figure out which words to use. "Benedek. We weren't in a car accident. Were we?"

"You know, I'm willing to bet that car found its way back to the rental lot without a scratch on it, probably driven in by a very polite Air Force private with a very, very good story. Better than Colonel Spook's story, I hope."

"Benedek." MacKensie swallowed in a painfully dry throat. "What happened?"

"Well, now, that's a little complicated and lot bizarre, so I need to make sure that you've got at least two beers in you before I'll consider telling the whole story to you in full."

"I don't drink beer."

"You will when I start telling you this little tale," Benny assured him fervently.

"Benedek." His voice rose warningly. "Tell me what happened."

"You tell me what you remember first."

"Him." Jonathan stared in the direction of the closed door apprehensively. "I remember him. His voice. He was trying to tell me something, but...at first I couldn't hear him, and then I couldn't understand him, and then"

"Then?" Benny encouraged when MacKensie paused to shake his head in confusion.

"And then, he kept saying the same thing, over and over again. "I am a part of all that I have met; Yet all experience is an arch wherethro'..."

"Gleams that untravell'd world whose margin fades For ever and for ever when I move," Benedek finished smugly.

Jonathan stared at him, grudgingly impressed. "You know Tennyson?"

"If I didn't before, I sure do now," Benny chuckled. "Persistent, wasn't he?"

"About a lot of things," Jonathan realized, lost among the images crowding his brain again. His expression lost most of the hard-edged scowl that had marked his efforts to retrieve the most elusive memories, as he confronted one particular certainty that left him nearly breathless in awe. "Benedek?"

The other man eyed the change that had come over the professor's face with growing interest. "What?"

"I don't know what happened, or how it happened," he said slowly, shaking his head in overt awe. "All I know is that, along with Tennyson, there's one other thing I know for certain."

"What's that?"

His eyes shifted abruptly to Benedek, appraising him in a new light. "I was dying. And you saved my life."

"Oh. That." Benedek waved dismissively. "Well, really, how could I refuse? Artie asked so nicely."

"Artie?" Jonathan blinked, uncertain as to exactly how the name resonated in his memory, though resonate strongly it did. It took him a moment to realize that the painful tension afflicting nearly every muscle in his body was caused by his unconscious desire to resist speaking, much less believing, the words that next emerged from him. "Artie ... wasn't human."

"You're getting one beer ahead of me, now," Benny warned. "Throttle down for the time being, okay?"

But the warning was too late and easily ignored in favor of the stray thoughts that were now colliding in Jonathan's brain, forming new thoughts that caused his face to go completely white. "Those men ... Air Force ... they weren't wishing us well. They were warning us, weren't they? About ... about ... Benedek, what in the *hell* did we end up on the middle of?"

"And that's for halfway through the second beer," Benny informed him cheerfully. "All you need to know right now is that I'm betting there are at least two armed guards just outside that door, and we're going to have drab olive green shadows for the next couple of months, so I'd watch whose wife you flirt with for a while."

"How can you sit there so calmly?" MacKensie tried in vain to control his panicked breathing. "You were the one who dragged me into the woods looking for some military conspiracy, and ... and for pity's sake, you found it!"

"It found us, actually, but I suppose that's splitting hairs," Benny replied airily, inspecting his fingernails with studied nonchalance.

"And you haven't called an international press conference *or* your agent?"

Benny chuckled again at the expression of utter incredulity on Jonathan's face. "Nope. Not only that, I'm not going to, either."

"Benedek—this is everything you've been searching for your entire life," MacKensie said after he found his surprise-stolen voice once more. "I don't understand. You've found it. You've been part of it, both of us have. Whatever *it* is, I'm not sure I've got that part sorted out yet. But I'm certain that you do. And now you're saying you're going to completely ignore it? *Why?*"

"Well, I could say it was because I'd rather not see Colonel Personality's smiling face anytime soon, especially not on the other side of military prison bars."

"The prospect of military prison has never bothered you before," MacKensie said doubtfully.

"Nor has it now. I just threw that in there for the benefit of those who might be interested." His voice rose on the last word, his eyes rolling around meaningfully, suggesting to Jonathan that he considered the room to be an open mike.

"Then" Jonathan gestured in helpless frustration. "Why?"

Benny lifted a finger. "One word for you. Snake."

It was as though the word had suddenly taken on physical form and rammed him in the stomach. Unreasoning terror exploded behind his eyes, blinding him and ripping his breath from his lungs. As he struggled to regain his lost balance, the images pummeled him relentlessly, one horrific, blood-soaked tableau after another.

When the worst of the assault abated, leaving him gasping for breath, he found Benny regarding him with a subdued look of concern and chagrin. "Sorry, I forgot how touchy Artie was on the subject."

"My god." His hand pressed to his aching chest, Jonathan regained his composure with an effort. "My *god*."

"It's funny," Benny said once he was sure that MacKensie was calmer and not likely to have suffered a stroke on the spot. "I spend my entire professional career convinced that the government was up to its red and white stripes in covert conspiracies and that the public had an inalienable right, pun intended, to be let in on the big secret. And then, when I finally stumble upon absolute proof that I was right all along – I suddenly realize that there really are things that people are just way better off *not* knowing."

Still dazed, MacKensie nodded slowly. "I certainly wish I were still among the oblivious, and I'm still not sure I know what that is that I ... know."

"But I'm sure that you're sure that we're both sure that some secret conspiracies have a perfect right to remain perfectly secret," Benny said meaningfully.

"Oh, yes," Jonathan agreed fervently.

A silence fell between them, as Benny appeared to become lost in thought and Jonathan brought his breathing under control. "Okay," Benny said suddenly, sighing in resignation. "That still wouldn't have stopped me."

"I wouldn't have thought so," MacKensie admitted reluctantly. "What, then?"

Benny gestured toward the door. "Because those two guys who just left here saved our butts. When they didn't have to. When it would have been a lot easier on them if they hadn't. Where outright threats fail with old hard-as-nails Benedek, a little raw gratitude can go a long way."

Jonathan regarded him with renewed respect. "Now that reason, I can believe," he said warmly.