

Warnings: Only the usual - if you don't like slash, you won't like this. A squick warning for slash people - the Sam/Jack romance does rear its ugly head in here. There's a reason for it, really!

Disclaimer: These lovely people don't belong to me even though I wish they did. Just taking them for a ride around the block...

Feedback: Please, please, please

Archiving: Fire and Ice, Penemuel's Nest, Area 52, anyone else just ask first.

Summary: A different view of Shades of Grey

A Single Star - Grey by Leviathan

There is a star that shines over Chulak known to my people as the God's Eye. Besides Apophis himself, it is the single most celebrated thing in all of Chulak's history - great deeds performed in its sight, great miracles invoked in its name. When the Goa'uld have been destroyed, my hope is that it still retains its place in my people's hearts. Many were the nights I spent contemplating it - a symbol of the mysteries of the endless void. Its pale blue light heartened me in dark hours, brought me comfort that even as it would shine for many millenia, it would not last forever. Like the Goa'uld.

But for all its beauty, it paled compared to the man who lay in my arms. He slept heavily, his breath soft against my neck, his arm thrown across my abdomen, effectively trapping my symbiote. His eyes were bruised from lack of sleep while his face was pale from it. He was exhausted from overwork, having spent nearly 2 weeks in research. 37 books lay open in "his den" as O'Neill referred to his office. He had labored hard and long to present an argument to the Tollan concerning their policy against giving the Tau'ri technology. How O'Neill managed to obtain this audience I did not know, but in 2 days we would be travelling to Tollana.

Daniel had pushed himself to his limits, ignoring his body's demands, refusing sleep, refusing food. It was his way when he was immersed in a project, no matter the fact that I believed this task to be a futile one. O'Neill insisted that this speech be completed, ignoring Daniel's condition. Usually, he was much more solicitous of Daniel's welfare. It was as if something outside himself drove him. When I enquired about this, he would only reply that the Tollan "owed us something for saving their asses".

Daniel shifted in his sleep, even as I felt him beginning to wake. Since we began sleeping together, I had noticed that he had fewer nightmares. I was touched by the implicit trust. Though it had certainly not been enough rest to completely recharge him, he seemed to be unable to sleep any longer. His lips began to nuzzle my neck sweetly.

Making love to Daniel Jackson in the morning is a wonder. It is sometimes a problem being in love with one whose major faculty is his brain. He is too conscious of my needs and my desires, at times thwarting his own in his quest to please me. However, in the mornings, before his brain can engage he will let himself only feel, let himself become completely one with the pleasure. His eyes were slits of blue that did not truly see. He lay on the bed, letting my hands

wander wherever they wanted. He gasped as he arched into my grasp, presenting himself to my touch. Only the softest of moans reached my ears as I pinched his nipples, something he enjoyed greatly.

My name became his prayer as took him into my mouth. Musky, silken, he filled my senses, even as his own seemed to fail in the pursuit of his delight. I caught a flailing hand, twining our fingers as my tongue tasted him, bringing him to completion. He lay a few moments insensate, then his mind came to the fore, eyes sharpening with the waking of his brain. He kissed me in gentle gratitude. He began to reach for me, but I stayed his hand.

"Teal'c?"

"O'Neill will be here soon to inquire as to your condition."

He rubbed his face with his hands, banishing the last of his rest. "Damn! I'm not finished yet. I've got to get back to work." He snatched up his underwear, determined to return to his office as quickly as possible. I grabbed his shirt.

"Daniel, you need to eat first."

"You sound like Janet," he sighed. He knew he would not win an argument against me.

"Dr. Frazier is within her perogative to be concerned for your health. She is well aware of your habit of foregoing nourishment and rest when you are deeply involved in a project. It does not help that O'Neill has been less than cooperative in letting you obtain the food and sleep you need."

"Jack just wants to make sure it's done on time," he grunted as he grabbed the shirt. "I have to go and get some clean clothes. I'll meet you in the showers, ok? Then we'll 'do breakfast'."

I let him go.

Our showers were short, as the locker room was occupied by SG5, preparing for a mission. Daniel greeted each of them by name while the men only nodded politely in my direction. Even after all this time, they wished to keep me at a distance, unsure of my motives, unsure of my loyalties. I contented myself with the knowledge that I had only been here a few years and it took many, many years before Apophis considered me trustworthy enough to be in his chosen circle and even more years before I became his First Prime. Daniel departed for his quarters.

Major Carter and Dr. Frazier signalled me to join them at their table. When Daniel appeared, carrying only his coffee mug, the physician's mouth compressed into a thin disapproving line. Even as she opened her mouth to let him feel her displeasure, he lay the cup down and walked

over to the queue to retrieve a more substantial breakfast. She nodded happily as he began to eat.

O'Neill joined us shortly, picking food off of Daniel's plate as he told us about the mission to Tollana. "Have you finished the speech yet, Daniel?"

Daniel flushed. "Almost, Jack. Just needs a little polishing."

O'Neill stared at Daniel, his expression nearly unreadable. There was something sad, but it was as if he was attempting to hide it under the guise of concern for this mission. Daniel didn't look at O'Neill's face at all as he attempted to explain himself needlessly. O'Neill waved his hand impatiently to silence him. "It'll be fine, Daniel. I trust you."

Daniel finished the rest of his breakfast hastily. "I'll see everyone later, ok?" He hurried from the canteen.

"Colonel O'Neill," Dr. Frazier said coldly, "that young man does not need to be harassed into working. It's more than apparent to me that you've been bullying him when he really needs to take better care of himself."

"When this mission is finished, he'll have more than enough time to relax."

"Sir," Major Carter said, "do you really think that this is going to work? I can't imagine that the Tollans are going to suddenly hand us everything we want just because Daniel's written a speech. Not to denigrate Daniel's ability, but it's one of their *laws*, Sir. I just can't imagine they'd abandon it because Daniel has a way with words."

O'Neill shrugged. "Ya never know, Carter. Weirder things have happened in the universe." With that, he left us alone.

Dr. Frazier's eyes narrowed. "You know, if I didn't know better, I'd swear he knew a whole lot more than we think."

Major Carter leaned closer to both of us. "You're not the only one. I mean, this whole mission just stinks. And that's not the only thing I've been seeing. He's been hanging around my lab a lot recently, wanting to know how well we're managing to backwards engineer various things we've found. And you know how much he likes being around the labs..."

"Not!" Dr. Frazier laughed, quickly suppressing the sound.

"O'Neill is indeed behaving strangely," I said.

Major Carter ran fingers through her hair - a nervous gesture she displayed when she was faced with a problem for which she had no answer. "Have you seen anything weird, Teal'c?"

"Not precisely. But he is not treating Daniel Jackson in a manner consistent with his past behavior."

"Do you think it's a problem, Teal'c?" Dr Frazier queried.

"I am unsure, Dr. Frazier. It concerns me because Daniel Jackson has been working himself too hard and O'Neill seems to be ignoring this in favor of whatever agenda he has in pursuing this fruitless mission."

"So, I'm not the only one who thinks this is a wild goose chase," Major Carter said triumphantly.

"No, Major Carter, I concur with your assessment; however, I do not believe that we will be able to dissuade O'Neill from attempting to complete it."

"What if we talk to General Hammond?" Dr Frazier asked quietly, making certain that no one overheard her. "He could cancel this mission."

"I don't know, Janet." Major Carter's reply was equally hushed. "I mean, the *Colonel* is the one who suggested it to him. It might look to him like we're not supporting him. I mean, he just got back from Edora. I don't know, maybe being there, he got some idea that might work, but doesn't want to share with us just in case it doesn't." She picked up her tray. "I've got to get to work. Still working on some of the naquada reactor components to suppress the power surges on the base. See you later." She walked over to the bussing station and left her tray. Dr. Frazier made her excuses and departed shortly thereafter.

When we are not engaged in an off-world assignment, my time is spent in the continuation of my physical training, the training of SGC personnel in Jaffa tactics, aiding in the translation of Goa'uld manuscripts and extensive reading of Earth documents to acquaint myself better with this world. I was engaged in the latter at the base library when Major Carter found me.

"I tried to talk Daniel into talking to the Colonel," she told me with little preamble. "He's so thick about this. He really thinks the Colonel has some plan that he's not letting us in on to grease the wheels with the Tollans."

"You should understand his viewpoint, Major Carter," I said quietly. "You, too, will not back down from a project you have devoted so much energy to complete."

She smiled abashedly. "Ok, you've got me, Teal'c. But I'd hoped that someone could talk the

Colonel out of this."

At that moment, Daniel walked in, strode impatiently up to the clerk's desk. "Did you find it?"

The young man behind the desk pushed his glasses up nervously. "Yes, sir." From a shelf underneath, he extracted a book and handed it to Daniel. At that point, Daniel's eyes met mine. Thanking the clerk absently, he took a seat at our table, leaning heavily on his elbows.

"Am I allowed to be this tired?"

"You know, Daniel, if you talked to the Colonel, we..."

He waved an impatient hand. "Sam, he's not going to hear it from me. Whatever he's got cooking, he'll never listen to *me* about cancelling it."

"Not true, he..."

"...doesn't listen to *me* when it comes to a mission. You know that, Sam. He'll trust my expertise in the field - to a point, but he wouldn't listen to me if I told him that I don't think that I'll *ever* be able to do what he wants - not in a million years. I've got to try, Sam. That's the least I can do for him." He leaned down so that his forehead rested on the book he had retrieved. We waited a few moments for a further response, only to realize that he was now snoring.

Major Carter shook her head fondly. "I'd let him snooze here, but I don't think the librarian would appreciate it."

I gently shook his shoulder. He started suddenly, eyes flying open, his glasses askew. "I just...Sorry about that, guys."

"You are coming with me, Daniel Jackson," I told him firmly. "I will walk you to your quarters." Picking up his book and grasping his elbow, I steered him out of the library and to his room. He protested the entire time, but I remained deaf to his complaints. If he really did not understand my actions, he would have pulled away from me, knowing I would not hurt him to obtain my desires. It was a measure of his exhaustion that he only offered a verbal argument.

His quarters are close to his lab, for his convenience. We left the book with its 37 fellows and I directed him to his room. Stripping out of all his clothes but his underwear, he crawled onto the bed, falling asleep so quickly that I was certain he would not remember how he came to be in his quarters. I covered him with the blanket. Since I did not know how the evening would proceed, I decided that I would use the time wisely and engage in Kel-no-reem.

From outside the General's office we heard, "He *used* me, Sam! He made me play the nice patsy, while all along he intended to steal from them! How could he do that?!" Angry did not begin to describe the foul mood Daniel was in the moment we finished our debriefing on the disastrous mission.

"Daniel, I..."

"Don't *even* defend him, Sam! He used you, too. Probably would have had you make nice with Narim if it would've helped him."

Embarrassed, the General, O'Neill and I shifted, uneasy in overhearing Daniel's anger. The dignitaries from Tollana had left with the device that O'Neill had pilfered without saying a word to any of us. I wondered if they considered us as responsible for the theft. Daniel continued to mutter angrily, stopping every so often in front of the General's door as if he meant to go inside without permission to demand an explanation. Finally O'Neill strode out, ignored us and left the room. For a moment, Daniel reached towards him, as if to stop him, but brought the hand back to his side. The fury left him.

"Daniel?" Major Carter asked him anxiously. "What's wrong?"

"Something," he said quietly. "I don't know where all this came from. Jack wouldn't do this. He...something's wrong. With Jack. Something, I don't know what. I've got to see him. Got to find out what's wrong. Something's wrong."

"Are you sure you want to do that, Daniel?"

He rubbed his hands over eyes still darkened by lack of sleep. "I've got to find out. Something's wrong and I've got to find out what it is." He strode out before any of us could voice another protest.

The General's eyes reflected a momentary sadness that bode ill for Daniel's mission. Though I chose to say nothing, I became even more concerned when the General gently told her that we would suffer no repercussions from O'Neill's theft; he had already explained the circumstances to the Tollans.

Disquieted, I retreated to my quarters. Kel-no-reem was necessary to balance the confusion and consternation I experienced with this incident. How could I name myself O'Neill's friend and been so completely unaware of this behavior? I contemplated his actions from the time he had returned to Edora. At first he had seemed distracted, disconnected. Daniel had spoken to him on a number of occasions since his return, but had been rebuffed on several of his visits. I had attempted to speak to him, but I had been distracted by O'Neill's innate ability to deflect

attention from his personal life.

O'Neill's determination to keep us away and keep us in the dark had driven the rest of SG1 to band closer together. Perhaps in our ignorance we had somehow driven him to this point? Surely we had not been supportive since his return. Then he had placed the success of this mission in Daniel's hands, knowing...

He knew.

He knew Daniel would overwork himself to make the speech work. O'Neill knew that Major Carter and I would close ranks around him in an attempt to prevent him from burning himself out. Removing myself from the immediate frustration, I could now see how O'Neill had deliberately manipulated the situation. He had wanted us off-balance.

For what reason?

No answer occurred to me. I returned to the comfort of my meditation.

Daniel did not return that day, nor the next. When I asked the General, he would only state that Daniel had called in with an ailment. I maintained my routine, fighting the disappointment I felt and the unease that O'Neill had maneuvered us in a direction to "keep us in the dark". He had wanted Daniel tired, off-balance, unobservant. He had wanted us to protect Daniel, become more concerned with his out-of-character treatment of our youngest member, than with the aberrant behavior itself. Now that I had had the time to analyze the situation, the more calculated it appeared. O'Neill knew us too well.

O'Neill's life, in many ways, was a reflection of my own. Trained as warriors from a young age, skilled in the arts of war. However, O'Neill's life had taken a turn mine would never have. He had worked as a spy. In the world of the false gods, every person has their place and their function. No Jaffa would ever lower himself to the level of a spy. Loyalty is one of the Jaffa's greatest virtues. To lie to your god, lie to your brother warriors - a Jaffa would never consider these things. The only form of life lower than a spy is a Shol'va.

The irony did not escape me.

But O'Neill had taken the role with no compunctions. He felt it the best way to serve his fellow countrymen. I could not fault him, especially after 3 years on this planet. I had never realized that freedom was such a complex matter - to be equal to all, you had to be equal to none. In all my dreams of freedom, I had never realized how precarious the balance was. To walk such a fine line that in many cases it blurred and disappeared, it was nothing as I expected. At times such as these, I wondered if, perhaps, Master Bra'tac was correct in warning me that the dream might prove to be impossible.

Daniel returned the next day, even more exhausted than when he'd left. His eyes were hollow. Even so, he smiled a little when he saw me, but the expression did not reach the dull eyes. His manner concerned me.

"Daniel, you look awful," was the first thing Major Carter told him when she caught up with us silently walking to Daniel's office.

"Gee, thanks, Sam. A good morning to you, too."

Her mouth pursed impatiently. "You know what I meant, Daniel. You should probably go see Janet."

"I'm fine, Sam."

"I don't think so. He looks sick, doesn't he, Teal'c?"

I studied him. He looked heart-sick, not physically ill. I nearly said so to Major Carter, but felt it would probably be inappropriate to do so. "Daniel Jackson looks tired, Major Carter. It would serve him better to rest than to deal with Dr. Frazier's ministrations. I will take him to his quarters. Perhaps you should bring him something to eat."

"I'm *not* 10 years old," Daniel complained. "I've already eaten, really. And as far as being tired, I could sleep for about 100 years at this point and not wake up. I just need to clean up the books out of my office. I'm sure the base librarian will thank me."

We left Major Carter in the hall, silently proceeding to Daniel's office where he picked up books, shelving many of them on his own shelves and handing me the remainder. Still without speech, we left the books in the library. After he walked out, he leaned heavily against the wall, as if it had taken all his energy to complete these simple tasks.

"Daniel?"

"I want to go to your room," he said quietly. We walked slowly to my quarters.

Bonelessly, he sank to the mat I used for Kel-no-reem. His entire carriage changed - he looked beaten, small, drained of life. His head bent over his lap. Prior to his haircut, the move would have hidden his face from me. Now, it just hid his eyes.

"Daniel?"

"Am I that much of an idiot, Teal'c?"

"You are one of the most intelligent beings I have ever met, Daniel."

He laughed harshly. "Yeah, well, you wouldn't have known it from the conversation I had with Jack. He told me...things." His head shook in denial. "I can't believe that I know so little about Jack O'Neill that he could do something like he did and believe that *crap* he spewed at us about taking technology. He *knows* that it doesn't work that way. He knows that our best hope is to unite with others against the Goa'uld.

"How could I be so wrong?"

I sat down before him, our knees touching. "O'Neill's actions are not consistent with the man we know, Daniel. There is, as the Tau'ri say, a smelly rodent."

"What kind of smelly rat?" Daniel snickered.

"I am uncertain. However, I believe that O'Neill's actions were precisely utilized to keep us off-balance, though I have been unable to ascertain for what reason he would embark on this subterfuge."

"Jack did all this on purpose?" His eyes seemed to clear as he thought the idea through. "Of course! Why else would he be such a total...?"

I raised an eyebrow. "A total what?"

His hands gently stroked my thighs. "Jack was being such an asshole. He told me that we weren't friends and never had been. I was so hurt that I just had to run. I never thought that he might not be really speaking the truth. But you're right. This was all deliberate. I'm just...I guess I'm just being a baby about this. It still hurts. Damn it!" His hands balled into fists on his own thighs. "He really knew how to play me. Am I so transparent, Teal'c? So needy?"

I cupped his chin in one hand. "You need, my Daniel. All of us need, there are no exceptions. You have not learned how to redirect or disguise it and, truthfully, I wish you never to learn to do so. It would diminish your bright spirit, my love." I leaned forward and kissed him gently.

"I'm so glad you're here. You understand this kind of stuff so much better than I do. Now, do we tell Sam?"

"I do not think that would be wise. Though she is capable of holding her feelings close, I do not believe that she could completely fool anyone should the situation call for our ignorance. I am concerned that you might..."

"Oh, I'll just over-react," Daniel smiled. "After all, a bunch of people saw how upset I was. I'll just keep playing the hurt ex-friend. I just really wish I knew what this was all about."

"As do I, Daniel."

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Colonel Makepeace was assigned as our new commander. Daniel did not like this and had told the General on the first day that he would have preferred that Major Carter take the position, but I understood that O'Neill's replacement should be an individual with more combat experience. Even though the reassignment had taken place nearly a week ago, Daniel still complained. However, he wisely did not do so in Colonel Makepeace's presence.

He was pointing out precisely what he did not like yet again as we walked towards the elevators which would take us to the canteen when I heard O'Neill's voice around the corner. I shoved Daniel into an equipment junction, out of sight. Escorted by two guards, O'Neill stopped, startled as I stepped into his path.

"You have returned, O'Neill?"

He looked well-rested. He also looked quite guarded, uneasy. "Not for long, big guy. Just some unfinished business." He shouldered a small pack on his back. Unusual. I made no comment about it, though it would, from all appearances, seem that O'Neill was expecting to be leaving by the Stargate. If he were leaving the area, he would not bring his duffel in with him. "Sorry, can't chit-chat. Gotta talk to the man from Texas." He moved around me and continued with the guards.

"Where's he going?" Daniel whispered when O'Neill was out of sight.

"Of that, I have no idea, Daniel."

General Hammond summoned us and Major Carter into his office soon after my sighting. He informed us that Colonel O'Neill was leaving the earth to retire on Edora, to keep his promise to Laira. Major Carter's reaction was only visible to us, as we knew her well. She was distressed. Daniel, playing the role he had committed to, walked out without a word. I followed him.

"Edora?" he said, when we were alone. "What's on Edora besides Laira? What's he going to do on Edora?"

"It is most probably only a stop to his final destination. He would need to give a plausible excuse to use the Stargate."

"I hate being in the dark."

"As do I, Daniel, but we..."

Major Carter approached us. "Colonel O'Neill's leaving right now. We've got to say goodbye to him at least."

Daniel's eyes grew quite cold. "Colonel Jerk doesn't need to see me. You can tell him goodbye for me." He stalked off. Had I not known that he wasn't angry at the Colonel, I would have been upset by his performance. I could only admire his ability.

"Teal'c?"

"I will accompany you, Major."

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I met Daniel in the canteen. He was picking at his lunch, pushing food around the plate in obvious disinterest. "Daniel..."

"I don't want to be this jerk anymore, Teal'c. I don't like being like this."

"Colonel O'Neill chose to do this task alone, Daniel. For whatever reason, he felt he needed to accomplish this without our help. Now that he is not here, you can relinquish your performance in part. You need not display so much vitriol."

"But he's alone. We have no idea where his final destination is. If something happens to him...I don't want him to think I hated him." His head bowed over the tray. Suddenly, his eyes blazed angrily and he smacked the tray off the table to the floor. Every eye was on us. Daniel stormed out the canteen.

"Well, I see hurricane season started early," Dr. Frazier said from behind me, picking her way over what Daniel had spilled. She began to eat mechanically, seeming to have as little appetite as Daniel, but aware of her need for nourishment. "Sam's upset. She's not only upset at this, but she's really angry at Daniel for being such an unfeeling bastard. Do you have any idea of what Daniel's problem is? I know he's been talking to you."

I measured my words carefully. "Colonel O'Neill said things to Daniel Jackson that disturbed him greatly. I will say nothing more. If you are concerned, you should ask him yourself."

For a moment, she obviously considered doing just that, but decided it would ultimately

fruitless. She sighed. "I don't like seeing the Colonel and Daniel at such odds. It just doesn't seem right. The four of you are the heart and soul of the SGC, no matter what anyone else thinks. Everything revolves around you, no matter what anyone else might say. There's a reason you're the flagship team and I just hate seeing it get torn apart."

"You are not the only one, Dr. Frazier," I said quietly as I picked up my tray and left.

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"We drew straws. I lost," Daniel told Colonel O'Neill as he walked away.

As the "wronged" members of the team, we, in the split second that the words left Daniel's mouth, decided to present a united front. Major Carter shrugged and followed Daniel, while I raised an eyebrow and joined them. For a moment, Colonel O'Neill watched us go, then snorted his disbelief.

"Very funny, people."

Daniel turned around with a twinkle in his eye. "Psyc!"

O'Neill stared at him appraisingly. "When did you figure it out?"

"Oh, we never figured it out completely," Daniel informed him. "Teal'c figured it out soon after you pulled your little traitor act. However, I can't speak for when Sam figured it out..."

She laughed. "Actually, I figured it out about the same time as you guys, but what clinched it was *you*, Daniel. Until after you left for Edora, Daniel was being a real jerk. Janet and I kinda brainstormed and figured that something had to be up and either Daniel knew what it was or Daniel had done the same thing we'd done. But we were too worried to ask about it, just in case it would have tipped yours or his hand."

O'Neill's expression faded from his lopsided smile to drawn thin lips. "You really understand, don'tcha? It pissed me off, but they didn't allow me to bring you in. They didn't trust anyone."

It was an apology, yet not. He could not completely apologize for what he had done, since he had been under orders to proceed with the subterfuge. Daniel relaxed completely, a gentle smile gracing his face.

"They ought to have given you an Oscar for that performance, Jack. If I hadn't been so upset, I might've seen it right away. It took a calmer head to make me see what was so obvious."

"Obvious?" O'Neill eyed us all carefully.

"Well, sir, it was a load of crap. You've never cared about the technology in and of itself. You've always been polite enough to ask, even if you've let them know what you think of their attitudes when they give us the 'you're too young to know' answer." Major Carter grinned at him, forgiving him completely.

I was more than prepared to place this incident behind us. I gave O'Neill a slight nod of my head to indicate that Major Carter and Daniel spoke for me as well. "Well, kiddies, since this whole debacle is behind us, why don't we blow this popstand? I hear a couple of steaks at O'Malley's calling us and I'll even be generous enough to spring for it."

We all headed to our separate quarters to dress appropriately. I had barely clothed myself in the suit jacket Colonel O'Neill had purchased for me when someone knocked. It was not Daniel's knock. I opened the door to find Colonel O'Neill leaning on the jamb. "Can I come in?"

I stepped back to admit him.

He gazed around the room in a distracted manner. Whatever he had come to say, he could not yet find the means to express himself. With a small sigh, he finally turned to me.

"I want to thank you for watching them," he said quietly. "I would've let you in on it if they'd let me tell anyone." I inclined my head, accepting the gratitude and trust he had given me. "I was worried that Daniel would take it hard. It wasn't easy being such a jerk to him."

"He was in the control room when you left," I told him.

The brown eyes flashed angrily. "What?"

"He forgave you. When I informed him that your actions were premeditated for unknown reasons, he was no longer disturbed by your behavior. However, to cover his own lack of experience in maintaining a covert facade, he chose to behave in an irrational manner. But he could not preserve his persona. I was not aware of his presence until you had departed and I turned back to leave the room. He was concerned you would die and believe that he hated you."

O'Neill leaned back against the wall. His eyes seemed haunted by the many ghosts this mission had uncovered. In our respective biologies, O'Neill and I were of an age and our experiences were similar in so many ways. We had held men's lives in our hands, had saved whom we could, sacrificed too many for our hearts to find any peace in the mere platitudes of following our superiors' wills. I knew his weariness. I knew his heart's pain. Had he truly had to sacrifice Daniel's friendship or his life, I knew that he would never forgive himself the pain he

had inflicted on Daniel's gentle soul. But his duty came first. It was as much a part of him as my honor was to myself. The altar of my existence has been stained with the blood of too many good people that I sent into slaughter, slaughtered myself or ordered to be slaughtered.

I hoped that it would never happen again, for both of their sakes' but life has no guarantees.

"Fuck," he said quietly. "I owe him big time for this one."

"He will want nothing more than your apology, O'Neill."

O'Neill patted my shoulder. "Well, at least I can buy everyone dinner." We departed for the elevators to take us to the surface. We found Daniel and Major Carter at the checkout point, waiting for us. Both of them had dressed casually, but warmly, as the night was cooler than it should be at this time of year. We squeezed into Colonel O'Neill's truck, Daniel making certain that he and I were pressed against each other as Major Carter leaned surreptitiously into Colonel O'Neill.

"A double date," Daniel said quietly in Chular.

"English, Dr. Jackson," O'Neill chided. "What did you say?"

Daniel licked his lips, looked at me from under his eyelashes and lied, "I said it's cold."

"Duh," O'Neill groaned as he pulled out of the parking space and drove to the gate to escape the base for the night. I knew we would all be staying at his house, spending the rest of the night playing team-building games and talking about anything other than the mission that had just, fortunately, ended.

The End, for now
To be continued in "A Single Star - Medley"