Circling the Nexus

by WordGeek

Summary

What if the big, honkin' space gun you've always wanted, finally fell into your lap? Everything else would be a piece of cake, right?

Be careful what you wish for.

Notes

Warning is spoiler; see end notes.
Set in late season 7; AU after Resurection. Spoilers through season 8.
Additional pairings: Mirror-Jack/Mirror-Daniel, Off-screen: Mirror-Carter/Mirror-Fraiser

See the end of the work for more notes.
Chapter Summary

A journey through a stable mirror changes everything.

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He'd lost Daniel before he'd ever had a chance to savor the having.

It hadn't been a noble choice, a martyred sacrifice in the name of enslaved people, or dying people, or people who were just having a bad day. No, he'd lost his chance to be with Daniel because he'd been a goddamned ass, but that wasn't anything new. Daniel, of all people, knew what a prick he could be, and had, up until now, always forgiven him.

Sitting in the infirmary, awaiting the all-clear to shower and report for the briefing following the mission that had turned his life upside down, Jack was finally, brutally honest with himself. When it came right down to it, all these years, his oath had just been a convenient excuse.

And maybe he was as dumb as he pretended to be, because any reasonably intelligent person should've seen it coming.

*****

Six days previously

The structure was enormous. Although they'd seen it as soon as they stepped out of the gate, it'd taken them almost an hour to reach it at a brisk walk.

What appeared to be the only building for miles around --as far as four UAVs could fly-- was made of a brushed metallic substance, cube after cube after cube of it in mind-numbing repetition, each surface appearing to be brushed to a coppery sheen one moment, and seeming nearly translucent the next. It caught the sunlight and reflected the clouds like thousands of mirrors, soaring hundreds of feet into the air.

At first glance, it reminded Jack of the pavilion they were building in downtown Chicago, all shiny and sleek. There wasn't a pane of glass in sight, and the rounded waves of metal stretched and swooped and seemed to go on forever, twisting this way and that. Sometimes it appeared as though the building was moving, but it was just a trick of the eye that registered the motion of the clouds playing across its surface. The sight of it was mesmerizing.

"It's reminiscent of the Guggenheim in Bilbao," Daniel mused as they walked.

"The hell you say?" Jack poked. Daniel'd been oddly quiet while gearing up for the mission, probably due to the whole Anna-the-hybrid drama from a few days before. Helluva thing to happen, and of course, Daniel would take it personally. Jack wished he'd been there for him. They were all just a little off, but then two weeks downtime would put a crimp in any well-oiled machine.

"Oh, um, an art museum in the Basque region of Spain, designed by the Canadian architect, Frank
Gehry, and made entirely of titanium panels. His style's considered to be an example of deconstructivism, but Gehry himself insists--"

"So you're thinkin' this Gehry fella somehow decided to retire offworld?" Jack asked, glad Daniel had taken the bait. He was already loosening up just a bit.

"Sure, Jack," Daniel agreed slowly. "It's been said by his detractors that his genius has run dry, that he's been repeating himself, so coming here and putting this up could have just been his way of getting away from all the negative press." At Jack's answering smirk, he added, "Or it could just be a really, really, cool coincidence."

Bingo, mission accomplished. "Any idea what's inside, Carter?"

"As far as I can tell, it's about the size of five city blocks. Whatever the metallic panels are made of, they're blocking any attempt to scan the inside. Emissions, energy readings, people," shrugging, she looked up from her instrument. "The material looks a lot like BMG--"

"BM...?"

Carter smiled. "BMG, sir. Bulk Metallic Glass. Both Stanford and Cal Tech have grants and are working with NASA to refine the compound mix, to address the vulnerabilities in the original formula. It's roughly twice as strong as window glass, but the problem has been that the stronger it gets, the more brittle it becomes." She appraised the structure in front of her. "If that's what it is, it looks like they've solved the brittleness issue... fascinating stuff, sir."

He barely managed to keep from rolling his eyes. "Yes, I'm sure it is, Carter. Teal'c? You ever seen anything like it?"

Teal'c craned his neck to see the very top of the building and hummed his approval. "I have not. It is quite beautiful, however."

They stopped just outside the structure, each of them reaching out a hand to touch the cool metal, and Carter let out a little huh under her breath as she studied the readout on the device she carried.

"Something?" Jack asked.

"I'm not sure, sir. These readings seem to indicate residual energy, as though from something like a staff weapon blast. As though someone shot at it, but instead of disrupting the material, it just dispersed the force. Stored it."

"Huh. That might be useful," Jack mused, as if that weren't the world's lamest understatement. "You've got no idea what it is?"

"Not a clue."

"Is this material native to this planet?" Teal'c asked, his hand still resting on the slick surface.

"That's hard to say. This stuff's clearly been refined and processed, but without knowing what the base element is --or are-- I don't really know what to scan for."

"Okay, kids..." Jack took point, and Sam and Daniel filed in after him, splitting off to either side and sweeping the room with their tac lights. Teal'c stood guard just outside.

Once they'd crossed the threshold, illumination came on from no apparent source, making it clear the structure was but one vast room. Despite its skyscraper-like appearance on the outside, there
seemed to be no subsequent floors; the ceiling was so high, their lights didn't even begin to penetrate the shadows above them. The echo of their combined footfalls in the cavernous room was impressive.

Jack straightened, snapping off his lamp, and called over his shoulder, "Come on in, Teal'c. Looks like nobody's home."

Diagonally from the entrance, at the far end of the structure, was a large, dark object, and they moved as a group in that direction. Along the way, long tables were set up in random arrangement, piled high with items that immediately caught Daniel's eye, and he split off to investigate.

Sam studied the device in her hand and frowned, coming to a standstill after a dozen steps. "That's not--"

Jack and Teal'c stopped as well. "Carter? Is that what I think it is?"

She turned to him. "Yes, sir. The same signature as a quantum mirror."

"Aw, crap, that's all we need," Jack frowned.

"Whatever race developed the mirrors apparently believed in parallel redundancy."

Daniel's ears perked up, and he spun to look where Sam was aiming her instrument. "Quantum mirror? Seriously? Tha-that's great! We've got another chance--"

"Chance for what?" Jack scowled. "Because it was such a party the last two times you went through?"

"No, you don't understand," Daniel argued, rejoining the group. "Destroying the mirror was a mistake. There's so much we can learn --once we figure out how to actually use it-- so much we can give to the other realities. We can all benefit from pooling our knowledge."

Jack scoffed, "What's to keep their bad guys from comin' into our reality, any time they want to? What if the Goa'uld get hold of the mirror? How many realities could they mess up, without even breaking a sweat? They'll be off raping and pillaging their way across the Milky Way in record numbers. I can see it now-- Goa'ulds we've already offed in this reality, all of a sudden back in the picture again. It boggles the mind!"

Carter had started slowly creeping forward with her instrument extended, and when she was about midway through the structure, the mirror suddenly shimmered to life, reflecting the interior of the room in which they were standing.

"Look out!" Jack called, weapon at the ready. "Carter," he complained, coming up to stand next to her. They'd double-teamed him again, Daniel engaging him in discussion, so Carter could sneak closer with her doohickeys. He doubted they even realized they were doing it. He felt Daniel brush past him on his way over to the Naquada slab.

"Damn it, Daniel," Jack bit off, striding after him. Reaching him less than twenty feet from the mirror, he grabbed his arm, jerking him to a stop, sliding his own body between Daniel and his intended destination. "What the hell do you think you're doing?" he bit off.

"I didn't touch anything!" Daniel insisted, showing empty palms. He nodded his head to the right, where Sam and Teal'c now stood. "Sam's the one who turned it on."

"Oh, for cryin' out loud. You two'll be the death of me yet," Jack complained.
At least he could count on Teal'c to be mature about these things... although, at that very moment, out of the corner of his eye, he caught the big guy inching toward the slab. "Hey!"

Still blocking Daniel's way with his body, Jack looked sternly from one to the other of them, saving a special glare for Teal'c. "We are absolutely, positively NOT doing anything even remotely quantum-like without checking in with the SGC first. Everybody got that?"

"O'Neiil," Teal'c pointed with one finger, eyes glued to the surface of the device, "is that not Daniel Jackson's office?"

Jack turned, noting with unease that the slab of dark gray rock now showed a desk in front of a lot of very familiar-looking, cluttered bookshelves. It looked a helluva lot like Daniel's office. His discomfort grew hackles, big, gnarly ones, when the image changed, and somebody else's Daniel shuffled into view, his nose in a book and a pencil clamped in his teeth.

The four explorers stood transfixed as Jackson sat down behind the desk and pawed through a messy pile of papers until he found one of the leather-bound volumes they all recognized, which he flipped open on top of a teetering pile of reference books. He frowned, removed the pencil, and proceeded to make notes in the journal.

"Déjà vu," Daniel whispered, staring at his double.

"At least you're alive in this one," Sam muttered. "That's new and different."

Evidently sensing their movement from the edge of his vision, Jackson glanced up, did a double take, then smiled and waved. He started to reach behind him, making four sets of hands on the other side reach for their weapons. When Jackson turned around, it was to prop a large cardboard sign against his monitor which read, 'We defeated the Goa'uld'. He didn't seem at all distressed that they were aiming most of their ordnance at him.

"Will you look at that--" Daniel murmured.

Jackson slipped the sign back, revealing the next one. 'Come on through, and we'll tell you everything.'

"Think he was expecting us?" Carter asked.

Perfect bait, Jack thought--- Daniel Jackson, peaceful explorer. "Well, that was too easy."

"Jack, let me--"

"No, Daniel. I've got a bad feeling."

Now Jackson was jabbering into his phone, holding up a 'wait' finger. Moments later, his O'Neill sauntered into frame, hands nonchalantly shoved into his pockets. They exchanged a few words while Jackson repeatedly pointed toward them, until finally O'Neill motioned for Daniel to hand over the last sign. He turned it face down and scribbled on the back. With a smirk, he held it up. 'This way to the big, honkin' space guns!'

"You have got to be kidding me," Jack muttered. How obvious could he... well, the other he, be?

"C'mon, Jack, why would they lie?" Daniel's eyes were still on the scene in the mirror. "They're us."

As they watched, Jackson dialed his phone again, never missing a beat as he continued his
conversation and at the same time relieved O'Neill of the statuette he was carelessly flipping. He tucked it into his top right hand drawer for safekeeping, mindless of the other man's annoyed pout.

"I don't make faces like that," Jack stated flatly.

"Oh, you so do." Daniel was clearly fascinated with the scene playing out before them.

Frowning, Jack fingered his weapon as he watched their doppelgangers in Jackson's office act out their familiar dance; he thought he even recognized the gizmo the other him had been juggling. "I can think of a buncha reasons why they'd lie, Daniel. None of 'em good."

Daniel's lips thinned. "We should at least try. Look, I'll go. You stay here and watch my back."

The reference grated, but he kept his cool. "No way." Daniel hadn't yet been home from being ascended for even a whole year, and they'd already had way too many close calls to suit Jack. Stromos, anyone? Just, no.

"Sir, it's plausible that one of the parallel universes has discovered a way to defeat the Goa'uld that we haven't yet," Sam said reasonably as her own double slid into the picture. She eyed the woman with the long blonde hair, which was tucked into an attractive French braid. "We should really check it out."

"Et tu, Bluto?" Jack scowled. "There's a reason Hammond ordered that thing destroyed, y'know!"

"Actually, sir, this one doesn't look exactly the same as the one we--"

"And I don't think he'd be very happy to hear we were thinking of test driving the Mach II without permission, either," Jack reasoned. "And besides," he said, scooting an accusing finger all around the cavernous room, "any of you see the hand gizmo that dials this thing laying around anywhere?"

"I have been looking, O'Neill. I have not found one."

Good ol' Teal'c. "There, y'see?" Jack craned his neck around Sam to address the big guy directly. "Thank you, Teal'c," he said smugly.

Jack glared at Carter. "How do we know it won't change channels, or close up and turn off, once we're on the other side, stranding our ass? Es. Asses."

"It would appear that my counterpart has joined the Tau'ri in this timeline as well," Teal'c observed as the large black man entered the picture. "That bodes well for their offering to be sincere."

There was a long, silent pause, while they all checked out Mirror-Teal'c. "I dunno, T," Jack sniffed, squinting at his own Teal'c, as if trying to imagine him likewise. "He's got... hair. You trust him?"

The hair in question was neatly combed back, nearly long enough to touch his collar, falling in glossy ebony ringlets.

Teal'c arched a brow and grunted softly. "That remains to be seen."

"Yeah, I'm with you, buddy," Jack muttered sourly. "Still too many unanswered questions for me."

"Jack, there's only so much we're gonna be able to find out without actually talking to them--"

In the mirror, their Jack had settled a hip on the corner of Jackson's desk, while their Carter chattered excitedly to her group. When her CO finally waved a go-ahead toward the mirror, and thus encouraged, Carter looked straight at Daniel, and her hands started moving.
"Oh, wait - Um."

Can you read this?

Daniel signed back, *Yeah, but not too fast, OK?*

Carter grinned and started again, and Daniel translated out loud. "There is no controller on your end. This is a specially-modified Quantum Mirror that only connects our universe to the... n-e-x-u-s. Nexus? Wha--? Um, uh... don't have to worry about not being able to get back to your reality whenever you're ready. This connection will stay open."

Rocking on his heels just a bit, and trying not to look smug, Daniel slid his hands into his pockets and turned to appraise Jack's surprised profile. "Huh. Guess that answers some of your questions, then." He managed to keep it down to a smirk when Jack snorted his annoyance.

"There is the matter of entropic cascade failure," Teal'c suggested.

"You'd think so, wouldn't ya?" Jack snapped. "How 'bout it, Carter?"

But Sam was still thinking about what her double had said, and didn't hear his question. "Modified how?" Sam asked out loud. When Daniel didn't immediately relay the question, she smacked him on the arm with the back of her hand.

"Oh. Um." He relayed the message, then repeated Carter's response. "We discovered how to create a dedicated line with virtually zero latency, powered by redundant control crystals the Tok'ra have helped us learn how to grow. There's more, and we're happy to share, but that's all the sign language I know." She shrugged, holding out empty hands.

Jack snorted again. "Their Tok'ra are helping them," he accused the room in general. Unlike their own, who were mostly a pain in Jack's ass. And no one had heard from Jacob since the debacle at the Alpha site.

"There may be a lot of differences between our universe and theirs, Jack," Daniel said urgently. "This may be the single greatest discovery we've ever made! An Earth free from Goa'uld oppression! They can tell us how they did it. We can't just walk away from this!"

Jack eyed him critically, thinking that walking away was just what he wanted to do; this whole thing was feeling creepier by the minute. "Ask 'em who their President is," he said quietly. Right now, in their timeline, Hayes and Kinsey were days away from being inaugurated, and no amount of beer could get that bad taste out of his mouth. If that was the case on the other side, they were outta there.

Daniel signed the question and relayed Jackson's spelled-out response. "b-a-r-a-c-k-o-b-a-m-a." Then he frowned, unable to make the letters into any recognizable name. "I don't..."

His confusion must've been evident, because Jackson scribbled on a piece of paper and then held it up "Barack Obama."

"O'Bama? What kind of Irish name is that?" Jack muttered. Anybody but Kinsey was good --great, in fact-- but this guy's first name sounded Muslim or something, and pretty unlikely as the President of the good old US of A.

"Barack Hussein Obama the Second," Teal'c reported. "In our reality, he is a liberal Democratic senator from your state of Illinois."
They all turned toward Teal'c. "How do you know that?" Sam asked with a little grin.

"I read an article in 'Who is Who in Black America'. He was listed as an influential black leader to watch, with many bipartisan achievements to his credit." He straightened his shoulders. "It does not surprise me that he has become the leader of your United States empire."

"So. Not Irish, then?"

"Leader of the free world is a long way from state senator," Daniel observed wryly, ignoring Jack's comment. He signed to his counterpart, speaking the words aloud for his friends. "What's the year?"

Jackson signed back, and Daniel translated softly. "Two thousand... six."

"They're five years ahead of us...?" Sam marveled.

"Is that even possible?" Daniel asked.

She shrugged, her expression dubious. "Evidently." Although I don't see how...

Frustrated, Daniel turned to Jack. "This is ridiculous. Let me go through, find out what they've got." He lowered his voice. "Please, Jack. This may be the turning point for our galaxy. If they already know where the lost city is--"

"The intelligence Bra'tac has received from Jaffa loyal to our cause indicates that Anubis has repaired the destruction of his laboratory, and is in search of another queen, so that he may once again produce Kull warriors by the thousands. We may not have much time."

Jack surveyed his team, registered their resolve, saw the spark in Daniel's eyes, and tried to think back to the last time he'd seen that level of excitement in his friend's face. "Carter, you and Teal'c get back to the gate, report in to Hammond, tell him we need SG-3, armed to the teeth, to guard the mirror while we all go through." His eyes slid toward Daniel and soaked up the appreciative nod.

Daniel spoke to Sam, his excitement obvious. "And have them bring Gonzales with them. He can sign for this side, and he can start cataloging this place while we're over there."

"Will do." She and Teal'c moved out.

While they were gone, Daniel sheepishly signed to Jackson, "They went for back-up."

Jackson smirked and nodded as though he'd seen that reaction before and relayed the information to his team. Grinning, Carter turned to O'Neill and gave him a fast kiss on the mouth.

"Aw, jeeze..." Jack groaned.

Then Carter turned and planted one on Daniel's lips.

"Uh oh." Daniel winced.

She flipped the mirror a grin and a wave, and then kissed her Teal'c on her way out of Jackson's office.

Jack and Daniel looked at each other for an uncomfortable beat, then they each moved away. Daniel ambled toward a long table full of artifacts, giving Jack a wide berth, with the excuse of giving them a quick once-over while they waited for Sam and Teal'c. Jack kept the mirror crew under a watchful eye.
Carter and Teal'c were back within the hour, along with a loaded SG-3 plus Gonzales. After a brief orientation with Colonel Reynolds, SG-1 was ready to go through.

"How long can we stay there before we start having those tremor thingies?" Jack asked as they got into position, he and Teal'c on the ends, Daniel and Sam in the middle.

"About 48 hours," she replied. "Forty would be safer."

"No, safer would be back at the SGC, eating pie," Jack sighed. "Okay, on three."

They reached forward in unison, expecting to appear in Jackson's office, but found themselves in a storeroom instead. Jack was instantly on the defensive, and he could feel the others in a similar state next to him.

Standing on the other side of the glowing doorway stood Jackson, hands up in a placating posture. "It's disorienting, I know," he assured them. "But you're safe. Sam's re-routed the image through about a dozen different cameras and monitors as a precaution. The force shield prevents... unfortunate accidents."

He moved his hands again, outward, welcoming. "If you'll slip those safeties back on, we can get started."

Jack considered Daniel's twin with narrowed eyes, but he could feel his Daniel relaxing beside him. "Stand down," he instructed his team.

"We take turns watching the mirror," Jackson was saying as they secured their weapons. "If it were in my office all the time, I'd never get anything done." Smiling warmly, he lowered the force shield on the door to let them through.

"And if someone unfriendly comes through, they're nicely contained, so you can deal with them," Daniel observed.

"Yeah, pretty much."

Jackson led them down familiar corridors toward the secondary armory, which made this level nineteen. He turned, walking backward a few steps as he addressed the group as a whole. "Um, listen, can I ask you guys to leave your ordnance with Sergeant Philips in the armory? We're all the good guys here, and you look loaded for bear. Especially you--" he peered around Jack until he could see Teal'c.

"I'm surprised to see that you're still carrying a staff weapon. Our Teal'c only drags his out for ceremonial occasions now."

Jackson received only an arched eyebrow in reply.

Jack registered Teal'c's reluctance to give up his weapon and opened his mouth to respond in the negative, when their host interrupted him. "You can, um, hang onto the Walther in your ankle holster, Jack, if it'll make you feel any better." The coy smile wasn't lost on any of them.

Jack forced a grin he didn't feel. "Don't mind if I do." He undid his P-90 from its lanyard and pulled the clip, then handed both over to the man on the other side of the half-door. He initialed the form on the clipboard and saw the man confirm the weapon cleared, then turn and put both into a cubby marked 'Mirror SG-1'. The rest of his team followed suit, relieving themselves of all their obvious ordnance.
"So," Jack said, rubbing his hands together in mock excitement. "Where's all the big, honkin' space guns?"

Jackson chuckled as they made their way to the elevator around the corner, then ran his card through the reader. "Jack thought you might like some refreshments before the briefing."

They all piled into the elevator, where Jackson pushed the button for the officer's mess on twenty-two. "We're setting up in the conference room up on sixteen. We usually hold these in the briefing room, but we've got three teams due in today, and the General's got the room. We can grab some fresh pie and coffee while we're waiting, though, so we've got that goin' for us."

Jack arched an eyebrow at Jackson's use of the familiar idiom, but made no comment and followed him out into the corridor, Daniel and Carter behind him, Teal'c bringing up the rear.

O'Neill was already there, in heavy negotiation with Martha, the lunch lady. When he saw SG-1 approaching, he grinned and met them halfway. Grabbing Jack's hand to shake it, he pulled him aside and waved Jackson ahead with the rest of their party.

"There's devil's food cake and cherry pie," he called out to the group, "and you can have them both a la mode, if you ask. Load up, guys, it's on me."

"Really?" Jack frowned. "My Martha has a five o'clock shadow and is a very stingy woman."

"Her birthday's March twenty-fifth, and she loves Godiva butter creams."

"Ah." Jack watched his team moving through the line behind Jackson with a slight unease, nothing he could put his finger on. "You do this a lot?"

"Yep. Now that our universe is safe, we feel it's kinda our responsibility to pay that forward, y'know?" He frowned a little as he considered, "Or maybe sideways would be more appropriate..."

"How many...?"

"I knew you'd ask, so I checked on that on the way up here. You're the twenty-third group that's come through since we set up shop."

"Sweet. So. You and Carter...?"

"...what?"

"You're, uh, together? Bumpin' uglies? Doin' the nasty--"

"With Sam? No!"

Jack couldn't read whether that was shock or horror on his double's face, which probably mirrored...
his own, just from hearing the man refer to her by her given name. His own relief that there were no inappropriate shenanigans going on was followed quickly by confusion. "Then--"

"But Danny and I've been married nearly six years," he added quietly.

That stopped him cold. "Danny?" In the other realities, O'Neill had always been hitched to some version of Carter. "You mean Daniel?" Jack couldn't help it; his eyes slid over to his Daniel, who was busy chatting up his counterpart over pie. "Jackson? Married? That's--"

"Well, we've been together for almost six. DA/DT only got repealed last year. One of Obama's first acts as President. So technically, only actually married about a year and a half, I guess." He studied Jack's face closely. "You're not surprised."

He was shocked as hell, but had it a little more under control at this point. "Not really."

"You two...?"

"Ah, no."

"Ah. I've discovered it's a good idea to bring the new Jack O'Neills up to speed privately. We don't like surprises."

"No. We sure as hell don't," Jack admitted. He was a little torqued at being referred to as the 'new' one, but eager to move the conversation to safer ground. He was impatient to get the lowdown on the big, honkin' guns and vamoose. Except... "So what's with the kissing?"


"Yeah, I hear ya. Wasn't my favorite vacation spot either."

"Rescuing me was a doomed op from the beginning; they shouldn't have even tried, but Daniel's a stubborn man and wouldn't take no for an answer. Teal'c was gravely wounded, everybody thought we'd lost him for sure that time, now that Junior's history. And Daniel... he recovered from his physical injuries pretty well, but then some of the deepest wounds don't show, y'know? Sam brought us all back. Told us she wouldn't allow any of us to give up, that she loved us and needed us." He shrugged. "Kinda a habit now, I guess."

Jack frowned. "Hammond okay with all the kissy-face?"

"We lost George last year, bless his soul. He's with his lovely Rose now."

"I'm, ah, real sorry to hear that. So who's in command now? You?"

"Hell, no!" O'Neill chuckled, confirming with a glance that the rest of the team had already been provisioned and was seated at two tables pushed together, way in the back. "That'd be Brigadier General Paul Davis. And yeah, he's fine with the kissing. C'mon, let's get some pie."

"Davis is a General?" Jack squeaked. "Paul Davis?"

"Why are you so surprised? He's always been a sharp guy."

"Yeah, yeah, he's Captain Paperwork, but he's hardly got the experience to run the front line of a combat command."

"Ah, but you forget, Grasshopper, we're not that anymore. Haven't been for nearly two years. The SGC's all about exploration and intergalactic cooperation now. Obama's taking us public soon."
They loaded two trays -- one slice of pie al la mode and coffee for O'Neill, and cake and a Coke for Jack, and no, he wasn't being ornery. "So if the Goa'uld are gone, what is it you people do, when you're not running this dog and pony show?"

O'Neill slipped his card into the reader at the cashier's station, so the woman could account for all the food both teams had gotten. "Daniel and I are the Tau'ri ambassadors to about a dozen planets. T, too, part time. He splits his time between here and Dakara. He and Raknor are Brak'tac's chief henchmen in the Free Jaffa Nation."

"They have a Nation?"

O'Neill shrugged. "Teal'c wanted to call it the 'Free Jaffa Empire Strikes Back Nation', but Bray vetoed that pretty quick. T still gets kinda snippy about it, so don't mention it, 'kay?"

"So much is different here..."

"Yeah? Let's see if I can hit a couple of high points to pique your interest. Ah... Oh! Sam finally made an honest woman of Janet, and they're expecting their first grandchild any minute." O'Neill headed for the table where the rest were enjoying their refreshments, but continued to speak over his shoulder as he walked. "Siler managed to--"

"Wait-- Sam and Janet? Together?" Jack hissed to his back.

"Yeah, sure," he tossed over his shoulder, "long time now. Where was I?"

Jack reached out for his double, to turn him so he could see the other's face. "Wait-- Fraiser's alive?"

O'Neill frowned as he set his tray down on the table. "No, you wait. Yours isn't?"

Jack set his tray down in the empty space between Daniel and Sam, uneasiness filling his gut. "No. She's not."

Suddenly, he wasn't in the mood for cake anymore. "And what the hell happened to your Janet Fraiser?" O'Neill snapped.

"We lost her, coupla months ago. P3X-666." The only planet designation he couldn't make himself forget.

"Which one was that?" O'Neill barked.

"Wells. She was hit stabilizing Airman Wells--" he expected the Twilight Zone theme to start playing any minute now.

O'Neill's voice raised in anger as he leaned across the table. "Well, of COURSE she was hit!" he shouted. "You mean to tell me you never found the sarcophagus on 749?" Clearly, he was taking the death of his friend's alternate very personally.

"Which one was THAT?" Jack shouted back.

"Hey, hey, hey," Jackson interrupted, his hand on O'Neill's arm, unobtrusively urging the older man into his seat. "Leave you guys alone for a minute, and you're puttin' on a show for the lunch crowd. Do I need to put you two in time out?"

But by then, both Jacks were nose to nose over the center of the table and drawing stares from everyone in the mess. Both Daniels just rolled their eyes and grabbed their own Jack, dragging
them out separate doors and down the corridor toward different elevators.

"I thought you weren't gonna be an ass this time?" Jackson snapped.

"They don't even have a sarcophagus, Daniel, how irresponsible is that?"

Across the room, Daniel got in close and hissed through gritted teeth, "We're their guests, Jack. Do ya think you could maybe keep from insulting them for ten minutes?"

"What're ya blaming me for? Jerkass started it!" What the hell did Daniel expect? They were never going to be friends, for chrissake.

Twenty minutes later, all eight of them convened in the level seventeen conference room, the Jacks having cooled off somewhat. Still, the Daniels made sure to seat them as far apart as possible, at opposite ends of the table.

Jackson started them off by dimming the lights and cuing up the presentation he knew by heart.

The hour went fast.

"...and that's when we found the Eye of Ra," O'Neill added as the lights came up. "Anubis had gathered up the other five eye thingies and was developing a WMD of galactic proportions, all he needed was the Ra component. With a little advance intel from Teal'c's fifth column, Carter and her technogeeks were able to use the Ra piece to short circuit him. When he pushed the button, he went boom, and took Yu and a whole mess o' minor System Lords with him."

"That's very nice for you, but that eye-thingy, as you call it, has already been destroyed in our reality," Jack replied tightly. He could've done without rubbing Daniel's nose in the whole 'destroyed Abydos' bit, but it was too late now. "And Nubi and the rest of 'em are still goin' strong."

"So... Abydos is still-um, here in yours?" Daniel asked softly, looking down at his hands.

"Nope. Whole planet's gone," O'Neill said. "Blown to smithereens. But the backlash, when Anubis targeted the pyramid where Carter had stashed the warhead, took him out too. Fortunately, we'd gotten everybody relocated by then."

Daniel's head snapped up. "You saved them? Ska'ara?"

"Yeah, he's fine," O'Neill assured them with a smile. "Three kids now, and another on the way. We sent everybody to... Carter?"

"PXY-369. It's not quite as harsh as Abydos. They really love it there." She smiled. "They're thriving."

"Oh, god," Daniel muttered brokenly. They'd managed to save everyone, and from all accounts, all he'd done while he was playing avenging angel was rain destruction down upon his adopted family. He was desperate to ask about Sha're, but he was pretty sure he didn't want to do so in a group setting like this. At lease Ska'ara was still alive here...

O'Neill apparently took note of Daniel's state and added, "The mastages were an interesting logistical problem. Stinky beasts. Not terribly coordinated, either. Too big to tranq and move, so we used the moonshine to get 'em drunk."

Jack realized what his counterpart was doing and played along. "And that helped?"

"Surprisingly, yes. They became stoic and introspective and were much more easily led up the
steps." He paused for effect. "Of course, you don't wanna be anywhere in the vicinity of the destination gate when they come through the wormhole," he stated authoritatively. "Did you know a mastage can projectile vomit about twenty five feet?" He shook his head in reflective amazement. "Talk about shock and awe."

Jack glanced around the table and watched the tension break as the mental picture of the drunken beasts made the rounds. Maybe his double wasn't a complete putz after all.

The mood sufficiently lightened, Jackson resumed the briefing. "We've, um, found that about fifty percent of the realities are in the same position as yours with respect to Abydos," Daniel said evenly. "Look, ours isn't the only way. We know that. This is just a high-level overview of how we've gotten where we are, to get things rolling. What we do next is break up into pairs and compare notes on a deeper level within each of our specialties, hoping to scope out the differences we can help you exploit in your reality when you leave here."

"Speaking of leaving," Jack said, pushing back his chair, "we've only got about thirty-seven hours left before we have to hiaka outta here to avoid those tremor jobbies."

"Actually, you've got a lot more time than that," Janet said smoothly as she moved in to take a seat beside Jack. From the corner of his eye, Jack could see his team visibly tense at her presence; it was like watching a ghost. Sam seemed most affected, although she was trying hard to hide it.

"With the help of the Asgard, we've developed a nanite which, when injected into an individual, renders his or her body just different enough on a molecular level to temporarily skirt around the entropic cascade failure problem."

Jack winced. "We've had some bad experiences with nanites, so we'll take a pass, if ya don't mind--"

"No, Colonel, you misunderstand. I injected the nanites into each member of our team, just before you came through. You've got three days before the devices naturally degrade and are expelled, before the tremors begin."

"Seriously?" Sam piped up, eyes wide. "That's remarkable."

Janet smiled. "Yep, and we can do a second round if need be, so you can stay here for a total of nearly seven days, if necessary."

"That's mighty kind of ya, ma'am," Jack said softly. It surprised him just how painful it was to sit there next to Janet's double, knowing she'd suffered the same fate as their Janet, but lived. Not that he begrudged her this life, but it only served to make him realize just how much poorer his own life was for the loss of her in his.

O'Neill stood and clapped his hands together. "Now that that's taken care of, there's the matter of hospitality. We've taken the liberty of assigning your team to space on level twenty-five, B wing, just down the corridor from our own on-base quarters. I'm sure you'll understand why we'd like you to stay on base, and to that end, topside's already been notified we have a mirror-group in house, so don't try to sneak out as us. Other than that, you're free to move at will throughout the complex." He looked down at Daniel, beside him. "Am I forgetting anything?"

"Mmmmm... I don't think so. Unless there's something you guys need before we pair up and get started?"

"Coupla minutes with my team," Jack replied steadily.
"Sure thing," O'Neill said easily. "When you're done, if you quantum counterparts will meet up with the four of us in our offices, we can get this show on the road." He gathered up his team with a glance and headed for the door.

"Where shall I meet you?" Teal'c asked his opposite as they both stood.

"I do, in fact, maintain an office here at the SGC, as I am occasionally required to transact Council business that would not be appropriate to conduct in my private quarters. It is located here on level seventeen, near O'Neill's."

"Very well."

Once the mirror folks left the room, closing the door behind them, Jack turned to perch a hip on the table as he addressed the expectant faces of his team. "Assume all conversations are being monitored. It's what I'd do. That being said, a certain amount of give and take will have to occur in order for us to get anything we can use out of this exchange, so you're all gonna have to use your own discretion." He paused, idly scratching the side of his nose, trying to find a way to word the part he really needed to say.

He cleared his throat and shifted a little uneasily as he rotated eye contact amongst the three of them. "It'd be unreasonable to assume that this'll all stay strictly business for the duration of our stay here. We've already seen they've got some whopping big differences here, and there are probably more, just as mind-boggling. I know you're curious, it's only natural, but keep your heads. They are not us. They may have made different choices along the way, and we can't even imagine what the circumstances might've been that drove those choices. We're going to have to think long and hard about which pieces of information we should share when we get back to our own reality, and which need to be deep-sixed, so we don't screw with our own grandfather thingy."

"Um, Jack...?"

Jack held up a finger and glanced at his watch. He was worried about Daniel most of all, about how he'd take it. Frankly, he was nervous as hell. "I'd like us all to touch base in the mess at 1830 hours, if you can manage to tear yourselves away, so we can see where we think we are at that point, get an idea how all this might go down and how long it's likely to take." They'd all know by that time that this reality's Jack and Daniel were married, and that Sam and Janet likewise were an item --and he wasn't sure if that last bit was guaranteed to make things more or less awkward-- and there'd be fallout to deal with, all around.

"Carter, set your watch for... T-70. Daniel, you should check in with Gonzalez, let them know we haven't been abducted by the Lollypop Guild." He forced a smile and shooed them away. "Go. Have fun, kids."

"Jack--"

"Daniel, we've been off the grid for more than an hour. Right now, Hammond's probably having puppies, and you're the only one who can tell them we're--"

"Right, got it. I'll just--"

Jack waved him on.

*****

He found the other Daniel in an office nearly identical to his own. "Hey."
"Hey." It was odd, being right up close to himself this way. He never noticed how pronounced his widow's peak was, or how large the round lenses of his glasses were, until he noticed the more oblong, rectangular shape of his alternate's eyewear. He thrust a thumb over his shoulder toward the corridor. "Can you let me into the mirror room, to check in with our people back home? Just take a minute."

"Sure. I could use a Coke, which is kinda on the way, so I'll walk with ya."

"Coke? Not coffee?"

Jackson snorted. "Jack's fault. He keeps me to three a day. Keeps telling me 'real' men take their caffeine cold."

"And you believe him?"

The other rolled his eyes and sighed as he slid his hands into his pockets. "Sometimes it's easier than arguing."

As they walked, Daniel took note of the fact that no one noticed. No one seemed to think it odd that there were two nearly identical Daniel Jacksons chattering to each other as they meandered through the corridors, as though this happened every day. Of course, for them, he supposed it did.

In the elevator, they briefly compared notes about growing up, and neither of them seemed surprised to find no discrepancies in their histories, right down to the foster families they'd had.

"If I've learned anything from all this quantum reality stuff, it's that things happen for a reason," Jackson mused. "Haven't come across a reality yet where our parents lived, for instance. Might be interesting to find a reality where they either didn't go to the museum that day, or were still out on the dig, and see how we --I-- turned out because of it."

Privately, that struck Daniel as more than a little cold to voice out loud, even though he'd occasionally wondered something similar himself, usually in between foster home placements. But they'd arrived at the safe room, so he watched his alternate punch in the code to the force shield without comment.

When the containment field wavered away, he stepped into the room and waved at the Marine on guard, who signaled Reynolds. Daniel observed the activity in his own reality through the mirror as they fetched Gonzales, who seemed to be at the far end of the cavernous building. He came jogging up moments later, grinning and signing away.

...unbelievable storehouse of antiquities from dozens of cultures I recognize, and about twice that many I've never laid eyes on before. Obviously they've been collected from all over the galaxy and brought here, but for what purpose? I've gotten video of all of it, but we really need--

Daniel smiled, recognizing a lot of himself at that age. Peter, slow down! You know ASL is just a hobby for me, right?

Gonzales looked contrite as he tried to rein in his runaway eagerness in front of his boss. Sorry, Daniel, it's all just so cool! He suddenly seemed to remember that Daniel had initiated the contact. Did you need something?

Regular check-in, Daniel reported. I need you to forward this to the SGC. Do you want to get something to take notes on?

Peter grinned. Nope. Colonel Reynolds had the MALP brought here, so you guys could have real-
time contact. You sign, and I'll relay it out loud.

Oh. That was good thinking. You need to dial it up?

Already done. General Hammond is standing by.

Oh. Okay, let's see... he noticed Gonzales's lips moving, and looked over the man's shoulder so it wouldn't distract him. We've had our first group meeting, and we're pairing up to start the in-depth stuff now. He made an off-the-cuff decision to avoid mentioning Fraiser for the time being, and continued, They use some kind of new nanite technology on the local team to make them just a little bit different from us, so they can put off the cascade tremors from three to seven days. That should give us plenty of time to get what we need from here, but you guys might want to think about rotating another team through, to give SG-3 a break. That's gotta be pretty boring, just sitting there. Daniel paused for a moment. Don Shaner has ASL, doesn't he?

Peter frowned. He does, but if it's all the same to you, Daniel, I'd really like to complete the cataloging myself. Y'know, for consistency's sake.

Daniel smiled. Yep. They were a lot alike. Okay, but I better not find out from Reynolds that you forgot to sleep or eat occasionally.

Peter grinned and gave him a thumbs up.

Daniel did his best to look stern. Tell him, Peter.

Peter's smile faded as Daniel saw his lips form the words. He only hoped it'd actually been out loud. Thank you. Does the General have anything for me?

After a slight pause to relay the question, Peter signed, Doctor Jackson, have they given you any indication of just how it is they were able to defeat the Goa'uld?

Yes, sir. Apparently, there's a --and I'm quoting, here-- 'big, honkin' space gun' pretty close to home. However, obtaining the device to do any research on how it works might be a bit tricky. I think you might want to sit on this information until we get back with all the details, sir.

Understood, Doctor Jackson, I look forward to hearing your full report. Are you in a position to check in regularly?

Is once a day sufficient, General?

Doesn't sound like there are any hostiles to worry about on your end, and everything's quiet here. Once a day should be fine.

Then I'll report back at this time every afternoon. See you tomorrow.

*****

"Let's stop in here for a minute," O'Neill said, motioning with his head down the corridor. He opened the door and stepped inside, and Jack followed him. "Spare BDUs, etcetera, in the dresser, toiletries in the bathroom. Also, no surveillance in here," he announced meaningfully.

Jack looked around the room, eying the double bed with trepidation. "This better be a single."

O'Neill closed the door quietly, then crossed his arms and leaned next to it. "It's not. Most of the quantum teams we've run into have their Jacks and Daniels paired up; we've found it's the norm.
This whole wing is Married Officer's Quarters. We're just next door."

Jack's lips thinned. "Daniel can have it, then. I'll crash in the bunkroom," he announced stiffly.

His alternate shook his head in puzzlement. "You aren't together, but you want to be; I can hear it in your voice. This is the perfect opportunity. Think of it as a pre-honeymoon--"

"Doesn't matter how I think about anything," Jack said tightly. "I have a duty."

O'Neill rolled his eyes. "Oh, please. Don't feed me the frat regs."

Jack whirled on him, tearing his eyes away from the bed he wouldn't be fucking Daniel on anytime soon. Or ever. "You took an oath!" he accused.

"I know that!" O'Neill snapped, coming up off the wall. "Don't you think I know that?" How he'd agonized before finally making the decision, before going where his heart had led him. He was more than aware of what he'd done, the choices he'd made, but at the time, it'd been the only decision he could make. He'd made peace with it, because the alternative wasn't acceptable in any way.

"The regs are clear," Jack stated rigidly. "You violated them."

"You're a fine one to preach to me about regulations, buddy," O'Neill snapped, pacing to the other side of the room.

"I haven't violated my oath."

"Oh, who are you kidding? You violate it every time you make a decision that protects him."

"He's a civilian under my command-- it's my job!"

"You're fooling yourself, or you're blind, one. You've turned him into a soldier, for cryin' out loud! You've remade him into your own image. What's his rating on the range these days? Marksman, or is he over 200?" At Jack's flinch, he added, "So. Sharpshooter then... or better?"

Jack didn't bother to deny it. "He needs those skills to survive out there."

O'Neill pulled out one of the straight backed chairs, spun it around and straddled the seat, folding his arms along the back of it. "Yeah, I know. And how does it feel to know you've killed the very things you first loved about him?"

"Quit changing the subject! You lost your integrity the first time you fucked him!"

Eyes hard as flint, his double growled dangerously, "I don't regret taking him, making him mine. And if you were smart, you'd make your move before it's too late, before someone else takes him away from you, right from under your sanctimonious nose!"

Jack turned away before that particular shade of grief could be seen in his eyes. He'd watched Daniel choose to stay with Sha're, and lived. He'd watched the women that came after --and a few men over the years-- and each time, a little piece of himself had gone cold. Then when Daniel had up and died on him, he'd known he'd lost his chance. Until Vis Uban. Only fools tempted fate, but... "It's just... not in the cards right now," he mumbled.

His double shook his head in amazement. "If you wait for it to fall into your lap, it never will be; there's always one more crisis to get through first. Danny and I? We treat each day like it could be
the last, because it could just be. Even at peace, we're only one gate disaster away from the fat lady's last aria." He appraised the other man's rigid body language, and deduced the closed mind. "You're gonna be stupid again, aren't ya. Make assumptions that people can read your mind, and know what the fuck you want but can't say, and you're gonna drive him away, just like you did Sara."

Jack turned again to face the accuser who wore his face. He'd done that and more to Daniel near the end of it; he wasn't proud of it, and he certainly didn't want it shoved in his face. "You shut your mouth! You don't know what the hell you're--"

Standing, O'Neill slammed his hand flat onto the table and yelled, "I DO know! Better than anyone! You could've stopped her from leaving you, if you'd've opened your goddamn mouth even once-- you could've saved your marriage."

"I CAN'T!" Jack was right up in his face now. "Why the hell NOT?"

"Because I wouldn't be able to stop there!" And he wouldn't. He'd open his mouth, and all kinds of flowery crap would fall out, and Daniel would probably be horrified.

O'Neill considered Jack for a long moment. "And why, exactly," he asked softly, "would that be such a bad thing?"

He didn't bother waiting to see if Jack could come up with an answer before he demanded, "You got a Cameron Mitchell on your side?"

The conversational left turn was unexpected. "Who?"

"Mitchell. Cameron. Lt. Colonel. Good lookin'. Knees that work. You got one of those?"

With an annoyed frown, Jack waved him off. "I dunno, name sounds kinda familiar. Not at the SGC, maybe a pilot out of Nellis or McMurdo..."

O'Neill nodded. "That's the one. He was at McMurdo on this side, too, 'til he transferred in to take my place on SG-1."

"Your point?"

"He was here two whole days before he made a move on Daniel."

Jack's jaw wanted to clench, but he maneuvered the instinct into a sneer. "Your Daniel encourage him?" He chuckled meanly, trying to make it seem as though it didn't concern him at all. Like watching Daniel flirt with anyone had ever been easy. "Maybe he's a little more than you can handle with your bad knees?"

But his mirror-buddy wouldn't take the bait. "As a matter of fact, I've got brand new knees now, courtesy of the Nox, thank you very much. And let's face it, every Daniel Jackson, in every reality, is sex on a stick, and you know it. He didn't have to encourage it. Mitchell saw what he wanted,
and he went after it."

"I'm not worried. McMurdo's a long way from Cheyenne Mountain."

"Ye-ah," O'Neill snorted, "but you forget-- this timeline's Mitchell is right here, and due to be back on world around lunchtime tomorrow. And you haven't even told your Daniel you're interested, have you." He wrinkled his nose into a smirk. "Don't wait till the last minute, pal. I'd go ahead and start worrying right now, if I were you."

*****

Sam was tempted to ask about the hair; no way was that much hair practical in a combat situation.

But as she approached her lab -- Carter's lab, she corrected herself-- she realized she had no idea what this universe's Sam Carter even did for a living. The French braid was still regulation, as long as she wasn't front line, but was she still even Air Force?

Sam knocked on the open door. "You ready for me?"

Carter smiled widely, as though she was really happy to be doing this, and patted the chair next to her. "Sure, come on in! You got any idea where you want to start, or should I just pull out the standard presentation?"

More nervous than she'd expected to be, Sam sat in the offered chair, tucking one leg underneath her. "I've got so many questions, I hardly know where to start."

"Let me see if I can guess at a few, see how close we are. I entered the Academy at seventeen, and flew my first combat mission over Al Amarah when I was twenty-two. I joined Stargate Command for their second trip to Abydos, holding the rank of Captain, and was promoted to Major three years later. I hit O-5 in '02, and earned my birds in 2005."

Sam was speechless. From Lt Colonel to full bird in three years? Some of the milestones were absolutely spot on, and yet others... "You're a full Colonel?" That answered the Air Force question, then.

"Last year."

"That's four years from now," she mused, frowning. She snapped out of it, realizing how that must have sounded. "For me, I mean. I've got some theories about why your reality is nearly five years ahead of ours; lemme run them by you, and you can tell me how far off I am."

Her double pushed away from the desk, covered to overflowing with colorful diagrams and printouts, so their chairs were facing each other. "Oh my god, we are the same person," she grinned. "Shoot."

*****

He'd once said that theirs was the only reality that mattered, and yet, faced with an alternate that had made the same choice he had so many years ago, Teal'c was having difficulty disregarding his doppelganger so easily.

He wanted to ask about the hair, about what had caused this version of himself to forgo the ritual hair removal that Apophis had demanded, and that Teal'c had sworn he would maintain until such time as every Goa'uld was dead. But Mirror-Teal'c lost no time getting right to the heart of what he felt was important.
"Several years ago, SG-1 discovered a weapon of immense power on Dakara."

Teal'c barely spared him an eyebrow. "There are stories amongst the Jaffa of a planet deep within Ba'al's territory fitting this description. But it is far more likely to be nothing more than a myth."

His double smiled. "You are wrong, Brother. I have seen it. Dakara has become the key to freedom for our people in this galaxy."

Against his better judgment, he was intrigued. "Really. What is the nature of this weapon?"

"It is one of such great power that it is, in fact, too dangerous to use. It is believed, by those who have read the writings concerning it, to have actually seeded all life in this galaxy. After Colonel Carter and Selmak were able to use it --with the Goa'uld Nerus' help-- to destroy the human-form Replicators, it was determined to be far too perilous to exist. The initial Jaffa Council ordered its dismantlement. A temple was subsequently erected in honor of the millions of Jaffa who perished in pursuit of the freedom we have finally won."

"You employed the help of Nerus to accomplish this?" Teal'c scoffed in disbelief.

The other Teal'c bowed his head incrementally. "I believe the Taur'i expression is, 'the lesser of two evils', and it describes the situation most accurately. Nerus wanted the Replicators stopped as badly as we. It was a temporary truce, in the face of a common and irrepressible enemy."

Teal'c found the other's easy use of Taur'i idioms to be most disconcerting. "Indeed," he murmured. This Jaffa was a talkative fellow, and Teal'c found that his manner disturbed him even more than the unnatural-looking ringlets of hair that crowned his head. "Have you any reports I could read for the full details of this battle?"

Mirror-Teal'c smiled enigmatically. "I can do better than that, Brother. I will take you there to see it for yourself."

*****

Sam and Colonel Carter had talked about the metallic structure that housed the mirror on 342, and Sam was fascinated to learn how physicists in China had solved the cracking problem in the BMG by changing the basic recipe of the mix and nearly doubling the ratio of aluminum to copper. She was looking forward to her host's offer to take her to Area51 for a demonstration of the alloy's energy-absorbing properties.

It'd apparently taken nearly a year for Sam and Felger to figure out how to 'lock' the mirror while a visiting team was there, giving off a busy signal of sorts to other realities that might dial into the Nexus. Sadly, the original mirror that Daniel had found on Mirror-233 had been destroyed in a lab accident that had claimed the lives of Doctors Lee and Felger. As a result, they'd gained painful insight into the inner workings of the device, out of which came the ability to force the dedicated line function that kept the mirror tuned to a single reality, thereby making the inter-reality briefings possible.

Sam made a mental note to check out the dedication plaque honoring their sacrifice; she'd missed seeing it when she stepped through.

In an attempt to bring the discussion around to something potentially less sad, Sam said, "I feel like I'm sitting next to a human crystal ball, since you're five years ahead of us. I'm dying to ask you questions, but I'm also kinda afraid of the answers."

Carter smiled. "No reason not to ask, since this isn't your timeline."
Sam smiled nervously, her eyes flitting to the other's left hand. "I-um, noticed your ring..."

Sam moved her fingers, causing the diamond to sparkle. "Married for almost two years now," she grinned.

Sam struggled to think how to word the next question. How did one ask about a love that invited court martial, just in the discussing of it? *What's Jack like without the uniform, or did you settle for Pete?* She decided on, "How did he ask you?" and hoped the 'who' would become clear on its own.

"He?"

Trapped now, she took the safe path. "Um, Pete." She blinked at the other woman's blank expression. "Shanahan? Isn't he--"

"Oh! I know him," Sam said, as if suddenly remembering something forgotten long ago. "Kinda goofy, big teeth, really square jaw?"

"Um, yeah..."

"He's a friend of Mark's, right?"

*Oh, god.* "Yes, he is," Sam said uneasily. "But I take it that's not who--"

"God, no," Carter said firmly. "He seems nice enough, but I can't imagine being married to him. No, Janet and I have been together since right after the Nirrti thing. 1999. We've been *married* since 2004"

Sam couldn't hide her shock. "Janet? Frasier? M-married?" There were so many thoughts running through her head, she didn't know which to think first. "But... we were friends. Good friends, but that's all. I... don't.--*didn't*-- have those kinds of feelings for her."

The other Sam was nodding. "I know, but she *did* for us. I mean, *me.* A few days after we were sure the retrovirus was gone, and Cassie was going to be all right, she broke down and told me. I was a little shocked at first, kinda like you look right now, but once I got over that and listened to my heart, it wasn't a difficult decision. We're very happy," the other woman assured her with all sincerity. "I wouldn't change a thing."

Sam felt the sting of tears, but she fought them back. This woman was with Janet, not the Colonel, like all the other realities. And not even Pete, who treated her like a queen and made her laugh. Her friend. Her *best* friend. A woman. Her mind swirled with memories, trying to suss out if it had been that way for her Janet, and she'd just never noticed.

Her Janet. *Oh my god...*  

She choked back a sob, thinking maybe she'd just never been open to the possibility because she'd been so fucking preoccupied with her infatuation over her CO. If Janet had been her destiny, her chance for love in her own reality was already lost to her; they'd buried Janet nearly two months ago. "She's dead in my reality," she said softly. "I never knew how she felt..."

"I know. I'm so very sorry for your loss," Carter said gently, as she reached for Sam's hand, holding it between her own. "I wanted to die when she was killed. We almost didn't get her back here in time for the sarcophagus to do her any good. Cassie was incredibly strong; I don't know what I'd have done without her. We kinda leaned on each other. It was a rough time."

Sam just looked at her with tears in her eyes, unable to move away from the pain, recent enough in
her own life, the agony of Janet's loss so rudely refreshed and compounded by the knowledge that her Janet had probably had the same feelings for her and never trusted her enough to express them.

And what would Sam have done if she had?

Carter leaned over and put her arms around Sam, holding her tight. "I can tell you where to find the sarcophagus," she whispered. "So you don't have to lose any more good people."

Sam held her double, accepting the comfort, and the pair sat together quietly for several long moments, until Carter's stomach growled. "Sorry," she said sheepishly, pulling away. "Guess that Jell-O was a long time ago."

That's okay." Sam sniffed and helped herself to a tissue from the box on the desk, wiping away the tears that had gotten away. "I need to meet the Colonel and the others in the mess for debriefing."

"Can I walk with you part way? I'm just gonna drop by the infirmary to check on Jan, see if she has time to join us."

It hurt, the ease with which this woman could express her relationship with her... wife? "Sure," she said as they headed down the corridor. "How long did you say you've been together?" If she could pin it all down, catalog it, try to figure out if she'd missed any clues, she hoped it might hurt less.

"Together seven years, married for two. We were actually the first couple in the SGC to take advantage of DA/DT's repeal two years ago. We went to San Diego for the ceremony and flew to Cancun for our honeymoon."

Sam swallowed hard. Seven years. "That's... wow." Carter signaled for the elevator and stepped in when it arrived. "Daniel and the Colonel stood up for us. It was really very sweet," she continued. "In fact, that was probably what pushed them over."

"What do you mean?" Sam asked just as the elevator opened two floors afterward for the mess.

"Well, they got married less than six months later," Carter grinned, punching the button to go back up to the infirmary. " Doesn't seem like a coincidence to me. See ya in a few."

Sam stood stunned while the elevator doors closed in front of her, people skirting around her stalled form, oblivious to her dismay. Eventually, the sounds around her, of perfectly normal activity, indicating that the world had not stopped spinning, caused her to snap out of it. She turned to make her way to the mess, burdened now with information she wished she'd never asked for.

The rest of her team was already seated at the table in the back, deep in discussion, looking perfectly normal, as if nothing at all in the world of their understanding had changed. She grabbed a tray and placed a few items on it that she didn't really want and checked out --their tabs courtesy of the host team-- and joined the others, while the revelations Colonel Carter had thrown at her were still rolling around uncomfortably in her brain.

She sat next to Daniel and across from the Colonel, who were both listening intently as Teal'c related information about some place called Dakara. She made a great show of eating, hoping no one would notice that she wasn't participating in the discussion she couldn't have tracked if her life had depended on it.

"Carter, you okay?" the Colonel asked gently during a lull in the conversation. "Everything go all right with your twin?"

She swallowed a bite of sandwich with some difficulty, then bought some extra time sipping her
soda to help wash it down. "For the most part, yes, sir. I'd like to speak with you in private, though, if I could."

_Figured she'd be first,_ Jack thought dryly. Might as well get it all out in the open now, so he could start working on damage control while they were still on this side of the mirror. He didn't even try to hold back the sigh of resignation. "Just spit it out, Carter."

"Sir, I really think--"

"Okay, I'll help you out," he said, settling his elbows on the table. "This reality repealed DA/DT, and O'Neill and Jackson are married to each other. Likewise their Carter and Fraiser. That about cover it?"

She blinked, her jaw dropping open. "You don't seem surprised by any of it," she accused softly.

He saw the hope in her eyes die, and it filled him with shame that he hadn't been man enough to let her down easy years ago. "Well, the Fraiser thing was a little off the wall, didn't see that comin'..." he said sadly.

Sam just stared at him, while the sounds of conversation and clinking silverware faded into nothing around them. Her gut twisted with forbidden information she hadn't had time to process, as years of assumptions were doused with cold water, right before her eyes.

"Sir, I don't--" _understand-- believe you-- care--_ She shook that from her head and tried again. "It doesn't--" _matter-- make sense-- mean you can't love me--_ She gritted her teeth, gooseflesh rippling across her scalp as her mouth turned dry, and she tried one last time. "I mean, are you--" _sure?-- gay?-- lying?_

She had so many questions, as he'd known she would, which must have been why he wouldn't agree to meet with her privately. For the first time in the nearly eight years since she'd met him, she looked at him and labeled him _coward._

Jack knew there wasn't any way past the immolation of his carefully constructed image, except through it. From her anguished expression, he was pretty sure she'd ultimately be the one to decide his fate. Or perhaps she and Daniel together, if he'd been wrong about Daniel's feelings all this time.

"Something you feel you need to _ask,_ Major?" Jack interrupted sharply. It was an admission, he knew that, just as he knew that the guilt from the accusation of betrayal that now stained her face, would haunt him to his dying day. But he'd already decided he wouldn't try to bluff his way through this.

Suddenly, Sam was very conscious of Daniel beside her, and Teal'c watching quietly across from him, as the host SG-1 plus Janet all filed noisily into the mess, oblivious to the fact that her world had just been turned upside down. What had all that crap been about, after the Zatarc fiasco, if Jack wasn't interested? She'd always assumed that eventually he'd retire, and she'd give him another chance at fatherhood. It had honestly never occurred to her he might not want that.

_How stupid did she feel?_

She glanced at Daniel. His jaw was rigid, but he had eyes only for the Colonel, which she couldn't read as either confirmation or condemnation. "No, sir," she finally answered. She lowered her gaze to her plate, to the sandwich she no longer had the stomach for, and folded her hands in her lap. "Nothing I need to ask."
"Good," Jack said lightly, as he resolutely avoided looking directly at anyone. "That's settled, then. You're on your own tonight, kids. Reconvene here for Froot Loops at 0700." He stood and walked away, without a backward glance.

Swallowing hard, Sam forced herself to look at Daniel. His expression was hard and unreadable as he stared at his own tray. It was a train wreck, all of it, but she hadn't created it, any more than she could let it go now that she was in the middle of it. He was a civilian, so she could ask him. "Are you...?"

He wiped his mouth, wadding up and tossing the napkin on top of his unfinished meal with no small about of disgust, resolutely keeping his eyes down. "Am I what? Surprised? In love with him? Sorry as hell I insisted on coming here? Yes," he snapped, shoving his chair back roughly. "Yes, on all counts. Across the board."

He left by the same door Jack had, just as the host team swarmed into the open chairs around her, sweeping her genially into their conversation, as if nothing at all were wrong. As she watched Daniel leave the mess, with his rigidly straight back and angry, purposeful gait, she couldn't decide if he was more likely to punch the Colonel out or hug him.

As Daniel strode from the crowded mess hall, he wondered at the irony of having to cross into an alternate reality in order to find out if he'd been just been imagining things all these years. This reality's Jack and Daniel were married, but then Jack had been either married or engaged to Sam in at least two others. The jury was still out as to which side of the Kinsey scale his Jack got into bed on. And at this point, it was impossible to tell if Jack were disgusted by their doubles' intimacy, or envious of it.

He tried the men's room around the corner first, boldly pushing the door open. He'd waited for this day for most of the last seven years; dread and anticipation warred for supremacy in the pit of his stomach. Only one of the three stalls was occupied. "Jack?"

The sound of flushing, accompanied by a tired-sounding, "Yeah," and then the stall door opened. Daniel closed the door to the corridor and locked it. "Hey," he said gently. He stayed where he was, still as a statue, as though making first contact with a frightened alien. *We come in peace.*

Jack hated that Daniel felt he had to do that.

Jack washed and dried his hands, not even bothering to try for the slam-dunk with the used paper towel. He crossed to the far wall to lean, arms folded across his chest, in an attempt to still the pounding of his heart.

This is where his future would be decided, in a men's room deep in Cheyenne mountain, in some other reality than his own. How fucking tragic.

Daniel's knees seemed like a safe place to rest his gaze. "They've been together for six years," he announced.

With a shrug, Daniel started slowly toward him. "Apparently, they're allowed to be."

Jack nodded at the anthropologically tolerant answer, which gave him absolutely nothing to go on as to how Daniel might feel about the whole thing personally, as in the two of them, live and in person. *God!* If he was wrong, this would be awkward for the rest of forever...

"Only allowed since last year. When they started, it was just the same as--" *As what? You and I? How presumptuous was that? Too late, his lips clamped shut, and he looked away, down toward*
his feet, in lieu of finishing the thought out loud.

Daniel stopped his forward progression at the halfway point, leaning a hip on the edge of the counter near the center basin, hands folded casually in front of himself. "The same as... you and I?" he asked with enviably calm.

His mouth as dry as the desert, Jack's eyes darted over to briefly meet Daniel's. When had Daniel gotten so good at masking his emotions? *Maybe after all the years you used them to beat him with,* his conscience supplied. Jack couldn't see a way out of this, not with his dignity in tact. He had to give Daniel something to go on; it wasn't fair to expect him to cross the distance Jack had created between them, all by himself.

"I was never sure if it was really there, or if it was all in my own head," he admitted softly, the acoustics of the bathroom working together with his nervousness to make it sound as though he'd made the proclamation through a megaphone.

He managed to maintain eye contact, even though Daniel was giving him no visible encouragement. He tried to swallow his apprehension, but the lack of saliva aborted the attempt with a painful spasm. "I wanted to believe that someday, we might find a... common ground." He winced at the corniness of it, and added, "But I'd spent so many years not really even being very nice to you... and then you were... gone."

Tiny crinkles appeared at the corners of Daniel's eyes as he replied knowingly, "When I came back and started remembering stuff, I wondered if I was imagining the angry vibe from before. Couldn't figure out what I could've done to justify what I was recalling. But the more I thought about it, I realized that it made perfect sense, all the months of sharp words, the gradual shutting down of the friendship... It's a completely reasonable fear response... when an historically straight male realizes he's started to think sexually about another man."

Jack grimaced and glanced away. "Busted."

The crinkles bloomed into a coy smile, and Daniel sighed audibly. "It's about damned time."

Jack's gaze snapped up to join to Daniel's, and upon finding the welcoming warmth, his heart filled with relief, the corner of his mouth turning up with a nervous twitch that wanted to be a smile, but didn't have the legs. So many years he'd waited, watching Daniel search for his wife and then mourn her, all the while wanting, yearning, desperately afraid of being found out for being the cad he was. Angry at being continually faced with what he couldn't have, because doing his duty for Uncle Sam always seemed more important. Pushing Daniel away in self defense, because he couldn't take it another minute, until finally they weren't even friends anymore, and somehow that hurt less. He'd been a real bastard.

"Daniel, I--"

"I don't expect anything," he said softly.

Heart still pounding painfully, Jack's eyes met Daniel's across the small space that still separated them. He willed his voice to be steady. "You should. You deserve to." He deserved to have someone who could love him openly.

Daniel shook his head. "Don't do this, Jack. Don't measure us by them."

Us. *God, how many years he'd wanted there to be an 'us'?* "How can I NOT?" Jack snapped. "He took a chance." Suddenly irrationally angry at himself and the world, he gestured toward the door,
and to the greater SGC beyond. "He didn't make *his* Daniel wait."

"You never asked me to wait."

"Only because I was too much of a fucking coward to even *talk* to you about it!"

"You didn't need to," Daniel argued reasonably, straightening his posture a bit and leaning back on his arms. "We've just been having an extremely long, chaste courtship, that's all."

Rolling his eyes, Jack snorted. "Is that what they're calling it these days?"

Daniel smiled again and held up his hand, counting off the fingers. "Hockey. Chess. The occasional Jell-O wrestling match. Breakfast at the base. Charred steak off your grill. It all felt like dates to me."

"Aw, Danny..." Jack looked away, trying to gather up his anguish about so many wasted years, before it swamped both of them. He couldn't understand why Daniel was being so unreasonably reasonable, so patient. He didn't deserve it; he was no prize, and he knew it.

"I think you're worth it," Daniel said quietly, as if reading his mind. "Let it go."

"You deserve better," Jack muttered to his shoes.

"Maybe." Daniel came up off the counter and closed the distance between them, stopping just inside the edge of Jack's personal space, forcing him to look up, capturing his gaze when he finally did.

For a moment, Jack thought Daniel would bring his arms up to hug him, to pull him close, until there was no more distance between them and the awful ache inside of him would finally ease. He felt his heart stop, poised between one beat and the next, waiting for it, both terrified and desperate, but Daniel just slipped his hands into his pockets and continued to appraise him earnestly.

"And maybe, after everything we've done for the planet, we deserve to have each other."

Daniel's voice was low and husky with what could've been arousal. Jack thought the unusually rough sound of it might just push him over the edge. As it was, there seemed to be electricity pingering between them, threatening to singe the hair from Jack's arms, while the lust he saw in Daniel's eyes stripped him bare.

*Dear god, turn it off! You should come with some kind of warning...*

"Do I wish things could be different?" Daniel asked rhetorically in a voice just above a whisper. "Hell, yes. Do I think about what it'll be like someday, when I can finally get you alone, put my hands and my mouth all over you? Sure I do. Why do you think I take so many cold showers?"

"But coming here, learning what they've done differently, finding the big, honkin' space gun you've always wanted... this could make the difference for our reality, Jack. *For us.* Because if what we learn here gives us a head start on neutralizing the Goa'uld, then we can both quit the SGC and start fucking our brains out."

Jack just looked at him, trying to follow the quietly impassioned plea, understanding, finally, that Daniel was okay with it, that he wanted it too, even though they'd never been able to discuss it. Apparently, Daniel had been thinking about it --about *them*-- for a long time.

"Well," Jack cleared his throat and tried for arch flippancy, "that's quite the mental image, there,
Doctor Jackson.

Daniel's eyes twinkled. "If you think I have a way with words," he smirked with a waggle of his eyebrows, "wait till you see what I can do with my tongue."

The sudden zing in between Jack's balls, just at the thought of Daniel's tongue anywhere in his vicinity, caused an unfortunately sharp intake of breath, which he attempted to cover. "That's just the point, Daniel, you shouldn't have to wait--"

"But I understand why you do," he said firmly. "I'm not looking for just sex; I can get that anywhere. If we do this, I'm gonna want it all. You, all of you, all to myself, every day. If you think you might want that, too, then say the word. I've got no problem waiting for you."

Jack's face was heating up, blushing as he considered what Daniel was offering: everything Jack had ever fantasized about and --from the look of it-- delights beyond imagining. The scrutiny and promise coming from those intense blue eyes... he could almost feel the caress of those scorching looks, as they skittered across Daniel's features. "Consider the word given," he managed to whisper, his throat dry beyond all reason.

Daniel smiled, as predatory a look as Jack had ever seen, leaving him instantly hard. "I've waited this long, not even knowing for sure you wanted me. I don't intend to let you slip through my fingers at this point, not now that I know I can have you. I'm not going anywhere," Daniel assured him.

"Now. Stop beating yourself up about what they have that we don't, and let's get to work."

****

"Yeah, we put some of Daniel's old stuff out there in the shiny building, just to keep visitors interested during the times the mirror's giving off a busy signal." The sounds of the mess hall seemed to die down to nothing, almost as though in anticipation of the impending storm from O'Neill's throwaway line.

From the other side of the table, his husband dropped his fork. "Wait. My stuff? You put my stuff out there where anybody could take it?" Jackson sputtered. "Which stuff? Who said you could take my stuff?"

"Not any of the important stuff," O'Neill assured his mate, "just some leftover, y'know, Capodimonte and broken bits of--"

"Leftover? Leftover?" Jackson squawked, pushing his plate away in disgust. "Do you even know what Capodimonte is? And how dare you call the relics of ancient civilizations, which I've spent my life studying and collecting, mere Capodimonte! Who said you had the right--"

"We needed something to catch people's eye," O'Neill explained reasonably as he gathered his tray and stood. "Only another you would even know what half that cr-- stuff is. Besides, wasn't that covered in the 'for richer or poorer' clause?" He frowned, deep in thought as he strode across the room and shoved his tray down the clearing line. He turned and regarded the man coming up behind him. "Or was it the part about 'all my other-worldly goods'...?"

Jackson's eyes narrowed as he plunked down his own dirty tray. "How 'bout we put your autographed Wayne Gretzky hockey stick out there as bait, huh? Or maybe your Verdi collection? You won't miss Aida, I'm sure. I know I sure as hell won't--"

O'Neill had the grace to at least look concerned. "Hey, now, no need to get all petty and spiteful--"
"Oh, you wanna see petty and spiteful?" Jackson asked, hands planted firmly on his hips.

"Boys!" Janet said, insinuating herself in between them. "Settle this at home, huh?" She looked so petite, sandwiched in between the two tall, seething men, it would've seemed ludicrous, except for the fact that at her words, both of them backed down and stepped away. "Thank you," she said a tad smugly.

She flashed her wife a winning smile. "Coming, Sam?"

The mirror team filed out of the mess, leaving Sam and Teal'c alone at the table.

"It distresses you to see them behaving as a couple," Teal'c surmised.

Sam sucked the rest of her soda dry, wishing for something stronger. She wasn't sure which couple he was referring to, and she realized sadly that it didn't really matter; both revelations had hit her hard. She sighed heavily. "Yeah, Teal'c, I guess it does."

"I, too, miss Doctor Fraiser in our reality. It is gratifying to know that she leads a full and happy life here in this one. Particularly since it means Cassandra has two parents who love her."

Sam nodded. "I know, and I agree with you. It's just... this reality is so different from the others. It honestly never occurred to me to think of Janet as anything other than a friend. Maybe that's because I was so focused--" She bit her lip and looked away, letting the unvoiced thought die. She hoped Teal'c would allow it to drop.

"You expected that your counterpart would be linked romantically with O'Neill's in this reality, as she has been in both of the others we have experienced."

Sam winced. "Pretty dumb, huh?" She rested her cheek on her palm, pushing her uneaten potato chips into the puddle of dill pickle juice on her plate.

"It was not an unreasonable assumption, given the previous occurrences. But what of Pete Shanahan?"

Embarrassed, Sam buried her face in her hands. "Oh, god, I know, Teal'c. I know. I'm not real proud of myself right now, okay? And yeah, watching this version of Daniel and the Colonel verbally sparring the way ours do, but knowing these guys are together together... I can't help but notice the similarities, and frankly, I really don't want to know that they--" The images came unbidden, as graphic as any porn flick, leaving her feeling rather queasy. "Arrgh! I just need to get a grip, that's all."

Teal'c nodded, satisfied that she had started to find her footing. "It would be well to remember that for all we may ultimately derive from this place, ours is truly the only reality of consequence."

*****

Daniel closed the door to the quarters he'd been assigned, grateful to finally be alone. He'd spent the last twenty minutes hard and leaking, trying to project an air of calm and in control, hoping Jack wouldn't notice, wouldn't smell him, and he'd barely gotten away before he'd blown it. In more ways than one.

He'd pushed the limits of Jack's personal space and managed not to grab hold of him, only by sliding his hands into his pockets at the last minute, to quell the temptation to take the other man into his arms. Even now, he ached to hold him close, to breathe him in, to feel the heat of his body all along his own, but he knew if he did it once, if his control slipped, he'd never be able to let go.
He stripped down and climbed into the shower, not waiting for the water to warm up, grinding his teeth at the icy blast and letting it sluice the length of his overheated body, once again draining away the need and desire. He knew it'd be difficult, now that they'd talked and confessed their mutual feelings, to go back to being only friends, but he was determined not to make Jack feel pressured by his own salacious needs.

And god, he did need him. Seeing the other pair together, not hesitant to touch, even the mundane, casual contact, because here, it was allowed, accepted, and not considered a condemnable activity. It would never be that easy in their reality, even once Jack was free of the military, not unless they moved to Canada or Europe. As he washed the rest of his body, he briefly considered the possibility of moving offworld...

He heard it as soon as he turned off the shower. Moaning. Not loud, but the timbre of the voice was unmistakable. Toweling his hair, he stepped out of the bathroom and glanced around the VIP room, confirming he was alone. That could only mean that his room was adjacent to the one shared by his counterpart and his... husband. And the moaning was undoubtedly--

He squeezed his eyes shut, trying to block it out, but it happened again, a deeply felt, needy groan that caused the hair on his arms to tingle and his cock to lengthen. Again.

Listening was agony, knowing what they were doing, certain that the sounds he was hearing were coming from Jack-- not his Jack, true, but it scarcely made any difference, their vocal cords were probably shaped identically, and he was sure the two men would sound the same when someone applied just the right pressure with a tongue or a well-lubed finger...

For a moment, with his own heartbeat thundering in his ears, and his dick hard between his legs, he was tempted to listen and play along with the soundtrack of their love. They'd all been assured that their rooms were completely private and free of surveillance. Who would know if he closed his eyes and listened, and pretended it was his hand or tongue or cock that was eliciting the lustful sounds in the next room?

But it was that thought that stopped him cold. Not that it was dishonest, or that he was intruding on the other couple's privacy, or even that in some strange way, it was almost like he'd be cheating on Jack, but that the first time he made Jack come, he wanted it to be real and unspoiled by the sounds of a stand-in he could barely tear himself away from.

Daniel did an immediate one-eighty and got back into the shower.

*****

"I love it when the others visit," Daniel said, snuffling his face into his husband's exposed crotch.

"Who are you kidding? You love the nanites."

That was true, too. The nanites seemed to heighten the sexual experience, making each touch, each lick, just that much more titillating, pushing the sensation higher, and a little bit further away at the same time. But it was more than that; Daniel loved knowing the other set was able to hear them making love.

"That, too," Daniel said, shoving his nose up under Jack's balls to take a deep breath of his scent. His voice was muffled by the heavy sac across his face, but it was too warm and musky in there for him to really care, so he filled his lungs with it, rubbed his face with it, filled his mouth with the intimate flavor of Jack's skin.
He slurped one of Jack's balls into his mouth, rolling it around with his tongue, spurred on by the needy groans he was making. He pulled away, stretching, stretching, listening for the gasp that told him far enough, let go then released it with a wet plop. "And I also love fucking you here on base, making you lose it where they can hear us."

Holding his legs up, Jack sighed as he felt Daniel's tongue moving away from his balls, now patiently bathing his perineum. "You're an exhibitionist, Danny, it's as simple as that," he groaned. He opened his legs wider, hoping Daniel's questing tongue would move even lower.

Daniel chuckled filthily as he settled in between Jack's legs, his scent all around him now, making him hard, making him want to do things, his mind filling with thoughts of three-ways, and sucking one Jack off as another fucked him so very deeply, the other Daniel only able to watch while he had his way with both of them... "Did you ask this one?"

Jack arched his back, following the disappearing sensation. "Huh? Oh. Sorta. No go."

Daniel stopped what he was doing long enough to surface from under the covers and frown. "Jack...?"

"No, really," Jack growled, rolling his eyes. It was clear this evening's entertainment wasn't going to proceed until Daniel got his answers. "They're not together. I don't think this Jack's even talked to his Daniel about what he feels or what he wants. So your lurid little fantasy is gonna hafta wait."

Truth was, he'd thought it was going to be kind of hot the one chance they'd had to try it, watching some other version of himself fuck his husband's mouth while he'd drilled into him from behind. He'd gotten off, but afterward... it hadn't been a good time.

Jack waved his hand in the general vicinity of his groin and addressed the man with the bed hair currently between his lifted legs. "Weren't you doing something important just now?"

Daniel frowned in mock confusion. "I forget. Must've lost my place."

Humming, Jack gently shoved Daniel's head back toward his dick and rocked his hips forward. "Right around in there somewhere..."

"Here?" Daniel asked, cupping Jack's balls, pulling them down and away from his body. He watched Jack arch his back as he started rubbing the thumb of his other hand across Jack's hole. "Or in here...?" Daniel watched Jack writhe on the bed, groaning pathetically, and smiled. "I wanna lick you here..." he whispered.

"God, yeah, do it, push it in..."

*****

The next morning, Jack was the first of his team in the mess, probably because he'd slept in the bunk room which was just around the corner. He slid a tray onto the rail and loaded up with two single-serving boxes of Froot Loops, a carton of milk, a bowl and a spoon, then fixed himself a cup of coffee. He took a swig, so he'd know how many shovelfuls of sugar to put in, and was surprised to find really decent brew. He grabbed a single packet of sugar and two creams, and paused long enough to let the cashier tally his order for O'Neill's tab.

In the back, he took a seat at the same table they'd used the night before and waited for his team. Carter was first, selecting two cartons of orange juice and playing out a nearly identical coffee scenario to Jack's own before she headed for the table.

"Goin' for that all-liquid diet Daniel's so fond of, I see," Jack mused as he watched both Daniel and
Teal’c enter the mess at the same time from different doors.

"Yes, sir." She took the seat beside him.

Bending her head down a little, she said softly, "I'd like to apologize for last night, if I may--"

"Aht! Hold that thought," he replied, nodding toward the rest of their team, still in line. "And besides, if anybody should apologize, Major, it's me," he added. "I've been... out of line and in denial for a lot of years, and I know I've--" he winced, looking down into his coffee, struggling to get the words out "--probably hurt you, something I deeply regret. It's to your credit that throughout all my idiocy, you kept your head. I appreciate your grace more than you know, and... I owe you."

He found the courage to lift his eyes, meeting her gaze. "Big time."

Her features softened, if not into a smile, then something just as gentle. "I contributed to the idiocy, sir. Let's call it a lesson learned. On both sides."

The evening before hadn't been stellar in any respect. After dinner, Janet and Colonel Carter had come to her room to tell her about her dad. Colonel Carter's dad. Seems that Selmak had fallen into a coma during the Dakara mission with SG-1, and Jacob had died with her a short time later. The Colonel hoped that with enough notice, Sam's own father could be saved from the same fate.

Sam was finding that this mission definitely had a higher than usual emotional quotient than most.

When Daniel and Teal’c had filled their trays --Daniel's with three mugs of coffee, and Teal’c's with two of everything but coffee-- they checked out and headed for the table, where they settled in across from Jack and Sam. They had the place nearly to themselves for the moment.

"Good morning, campers! Everybody sleep well?"

"Indeed I did, O'Neill," Teal’c replied as he began to peel one of the pair of grapefruits on his tray, the pink citrus dwarfed by his meaty brown hands. Across from Sam, Daniel merely grunted into his cup.

Jack smiled. "Okay, listen up. You too, coffee boy. We're going to dispense with the usual command structure --such as it is-- for the next few minutes. Things are pretty different here, and that's throwing us all for a loop. I'm instituting a temporary state of democracy for the duration of breakfast every morning we're here, for the purpose of figuring out how to assimilate all the information and what the changes might mean."

Daniel looked up and frowned. "What're you getting at?" His voice sounded rough, even to his own ears. Lack of sleep would do that to you.

"I think we have to distance ourselves a little bit, so we don't take things personally while we're learning what the mirror-team has to offer. We have to be thinking about which parts not to pass on to General Hammond."

"You have my word, sir, I won't--"

"Don't want it," Jack said, shaking his head firmly. "I'm looking for honest appraisals of the situation at hand, to see if any of the tangential elements are even relevant. Maybe the fact that O'Neill and Jackson are married here is the reason something else changed, and ultimately put them in a position to off the Goa'uld. If so, then it's pertinent."

"You're suggesting we find out where our paths diverged from our mirror selves?" Sam asked. "That somehow, that might tell us what we've done wrong?"
"No. I'm explaining this badly," Jack said, frustrated. It was pretty clear in his head, but it wasn't coming out right. "Let me give you an example. Hammond's dead in this reality, and Major Davis is --god help me-- the General in command of this facility."

"You're kidding," Sam frowned.

"Nope. Hammond passed away from a massive heart attack last year. Now, is that fact relevant to what has to change in our reality, in order for us to destroy the Goa'uld? Or is it just a burst of static that's really neither here nor there?"

Suddenly awake, Daniel said, "We're not qualified --certainly I'm not-- to make that kind of judgment. That's a matter for someone else to decide."

"Who?" Jack asked. "The NID?"

"What? No!"

"The Pentagon, then?"

"Damn it, Jack--"

"Daniel, we're a front line team. We make choices like this all the time-- life and death on the battlefield. I think we're capable of deciding how to selectively edit our reports, leaving out the parts that might cause more harm than good. We tell the Pentagon that Davis is in and Hammond is out, don't you think they're gonna use that to get rid of George, like they've been trying to do since forever?"

"Certainly, you and Daniel being a couple doesn't have to be reported," Sam said quietly.

Jack sighed. He was touched by her apparent defense of them, particularly in light of her initial reaction to the information, but he needed to set her straight. "Let me be clear, for the record; O'Neill and Jackson are a couple. Daniel and I aren't, and never have been."

Sam met his eyes, hearing what he didn't say, and just nodded, wisely deciding to keep her mouth shut this time. Her eyes darted to Daniel, who seemed to have gotten interested in his coffee once again.

"You're not just talking about reports, are you." Daniel didn't look up. "You're talking about manipulating events deliberately."

"Look what happened to you that first time," Jack replied easily. "You tried to convince Kinsey that the Goa'uld were coming, and he didn't believe you."

"None of you did."

"My point exactly."

"Are you suggesting that General Hammond must die, in order for our reality to be free of the Goa'uld?" Teal'c asked.

"Not at all." Jack shook his head. "We don't have anywhere near enough data to make a statement like that."

"You're referring to the Hitler paradox," Daniel muttered. He glanced up at Jack and added, "You do know that game never ends well, don't you?"
"Don't put words in my mouth. All I'm saying is that we need to keep our eyes and ears open. Stay alert, so we recognize the key element, if and when we run across it."

"What makes you think one of us is the key?" Daniel asked. "It could be something happening on the other side of the planet, for all we know."

"It could. And maybe we won't find one, single, defining factor. Maybe all we'll go home with is the location of a big, honkin' space gun, and that alone might do it. Just stay sharp; we'll talk about the differences as we run across them, and then we'll decide together what has to happen. That way, there's some built-in objectivity, and no single person has all the responsibility."

Sam cleared her throat. "I-uh, think I know where the point of divergence was for Colonel Carter and me."

"She's a Colonel already?"

"Well, they are five years ahead of us, sir." She'd thought about it long into the night, and she was sure she knew the night her double and Janet got together. Cassie had been so sick, and Janet had held the Goa'uld at gunpoint, surprising all of them. Three days later, Cassie was out on a date with Dominick, and Janet invited Sam over for dinner, to celebrate, she said.

Their conversation had started off centered around SG-1's latest mission, and then veered off wildly after that, touching on everything from movies to old beaus. Sam couldn't remember the conversation verbatim, from two and half years before, but she had a vague recollection of the wine flowing freely, and the two of them collapsing into giggles at one point, very close together on the couch. Now she'd never know if that hug had just been two friends who'd had a little too much to drink, or if it'd been a pass she'd been too blind to see.

She hurt inside, thinking about Janet perceiving it as rejection and soldiering on, resigned to being only friends, when inside she felt so much more. Sam couldn't help but wonder if they'd been romantically involved with each other, if things might've somehow gone differently on 666.

"They apparently got together right after the whole Nirrti experience," she said quietly, "and they've been married for two years."

Jack nodded and reached out for her hand, squeezing it, thinking that if the other Carter was tactile enough to go around kissing all of them on the mouth, maybe his Carter would appreciate a friendly touch. Strangely, now that he'd been outted with his team, it seemed easier to indulge his natural urge to touch them all. "O'Neill mentioned a grandchild soon?"

Surprised by the contact itself, Sam wasn't ready for this new revelation, and was too late to hide her surprised gasp. "I--I didn't know about that." She was only recently giving the idea of having kids herself occasional thought, and not really in a serious way; she couldn't even wrap her mind around potential grandchildren. She clasped his hand hard, hoping to forestall the threatened tears.

In the conversational lull that followed, she realized that the mess had begun to fill up with people wanting to grab a quick bite before their shift. She longed for the floor to open up and swallow her, anything to get out from under the curious stares of her team.

As if reading her mind, Teal'c began to gather the detritus of his meal. "I am, as yet, unaware of the divergence point between myself and Master Teal'c," he said with all due seriousness, giving the elder Jaffa the respect of the title, "as we have not divulged information of such a personal nature. If you think it relevant, however, I shall endeavor to broach the subject with him during our journey this day."
"Where you off to?" Sam asked, releasing Jack's hand with a final grateful squeeze.

"We depart for the temple at Dakara within the hour. I am told we shall return tomorrow in the late morning, due to planetary time differences."

"Have a blast, T," Jack said with a smile. "Don't do anything I wouldn't do."

Teal'c paused, tray in hand, and opened his mouth to ask, but Daniel beat him to it. "At your own peril, Teal'c," he warned.

Teal'c paused for a moment, as if considering it, then grunted softly. "Hmmm... I concur." As he walked off, he passed three quarters of the SG-1 mirror team, inclining his head in acknowledgment, on his way to joining his double in the gateroom.

As O'Neill approached the table, tray laden with oatmeal so stiff, the spoon stood straight up in the bowl, Jack called out, "Hey, when do I get to see some of these fancy weapons you promised me?"

Grinning at the man across from him, O'Neill set his tray down next to Daniel and rubbed his hands together. "My favorite subject. The Chair."

Jack frowned. "The what? You mean to tell me the big, honkin' space gun... is a chair?"

"Not just any chair, pal, it's the recliner o' doom! Fires these little glowy things that devastate the hell outta whatever you're thinking about. It only works if you've got the Ancient gene, which you have, by the way. Blew Ba'al-baby's armada right outta the sky," he announced smugly.

"Gene? Ancient, ya say."

While Jack sipped his coffee, O'Neill described the air battle over the colonnade on P3X-439, being strafed by death gliders, and his decision to take the download once again, just so that Ba'al couldn't get his smarmy hands on it. He went on to describe SG-1's frantic flight in search of the power supply on a volcanically unstable planet, only to find that the place they were looking for was under the ice in Antarctica in the first place.

Jack frowned at the anti-climactic ending. "Been there. Done that. Don't remember seeing any fancy furniture. You, Carter?"

"No sir," she agreed with a smile. "A distinct lack of the amenities, as I recall."

"That's because the weapons platform is just down the street a bit from where you and Carter landed," O'Neill explained. "That, and a little more than a mile straight down, actually. Needed a set of rings to burn through the ice the first time, but we've fixed the place up since then, a few curtains, some throw rugs. A real elevator--"

"Be sure you tell him how you were nearly dead by the time the space battle was over," Jackson snapped as he and Colonel Sam joined them.

"It worked out," O'Neill shrugged, pulling his tray out of the way to make room for Jackson to sit on the other side of him.

"You were in an Ancient stasis pod for fifty-six days, old man," Jackson snapped, "and if we hadn't finally been able to get in touch with the Asgard to suck the database back out, you'd be there still."

"Why do you always--"
"Maybe I don't appreciate almost becoming a widower again," he snapped. "Ever think of that?"

Knife and fork in hand, he started cutting up his waffles a little more aggressively that was perhaps necessary.

O'Neill slipped his hand beneath the table and squeezed his spouse's thigh. "Hey."

"Don't try to suck up."

"Why? Is it working?"

Jack watched his counterpart interact with the man who looked so much like his own Daniel, and fought down the longing in his gut. Colonel Sam, to his right, paid them no mind and dug into her scrambled eggs like this kind of scene happened every day. But Jack was well aware of his Carter watching the display with interest. It was taking an extraordinary amount of effort not to check out how his own Daniel was taking his double's sudden change in mood.

He cleared his throat to facilitate a change in subject. "So, if you tell us where it is, I won't need to get my head sucked again?" He raised the 'Aht!' finger when it looked like his quantum counterpart was going to take the bait and make a tacky remark.

O'Neill simply sighed. "Should do."

Jack nodded, and then frowned. "But if I don't take the download, how am I gonna know how to work the chair?"

O'Neill waved away the concern. "It's easy, I'll show ya. We can go after breakfast if you want."

He shoved a huge wad of oatmeal into his mouth and moved it around, washing it down with a slug of coffee.


"Sure. The little gray guys outfitted the Prometheus with that spiffy beam-thingy they do so well. We'll be back here by lunch time, following which, my team has a meeting with the General." He leaned across the table to whisper conspiratorially. "Oh, and I hear tell, Martha's making peach pie today."

"Mmmmm, peach..." Jack crooned in reply.

"How can you make a wholesome dessert sound so utterly filthy?" Daniel asked, barely suppressing a smile.

Jack put on an air of great aplomb and announced, "Talent." Neither of the Carters could completely suppress their giggles, allowing him to follow through with his patented, down-the-nose glare.

"So," O'Neill started. He'd finally finished with his breakfast and was starting to commune with his coffee, his left hand still planted firmly on his husband's right thigh. "What are you Sams up to today?"

Colonel Carter looked at Jack and then past him, gathering her double into the conversation with her eyes. "If it's all right with you, I'd like to take Sam to Area 51."

"What do you have there that we don't?" he replied.

"Well, we have the original prototype of the Colonel's Replicator-buster," she offered brightly.
Jack raised an eyebrow at his double, mouthing the words.

"Hey, you don't like it, you can name yours whatever you want." O'Neill shrugged. "Still takes out those Kieron thingies--"

"Pathways," both Sams said in unison.

"--pathways that hold the bugs together, and that's pretty nifty, if I do say so myself." He didn't quite stick his tongue out, but there was definitely defensive pique in the air.

"We also have a couple of virtual reality chairs from the Gamekeeper's planet. We've run across a couple of bugs in the program, but once we get those straightened out, we plan to use them for training simulations. I wanted to pick Sam's brain, see if she had any ideas we hadn't thought of."

"And you were going to show me how you grow the bulk metal glass that houses the mirror," Sam reminded her. "The energy-disbursing properties alone--"

"Right!"

Jack looked from one woman to the other on either side of him, taking in their beaming, happy faces and deadpanned, "Oooohh. Sounds thrilling."

"It does to me, sir," Sam said eagerly. "They constructed it specifically to withstand anything. So it couldn't be lost, like Heliopolis."

"Good thinking. Off with you, then." He made shooing motions at them. "Have fun. Don't--"

She put a hand on his shoulder reassuringly. "I won't, sir."

Pouty, Jack looked back at the three who remained. "No respect, I tell ya."

"Or maybe you need some new material," Daniel offered.

"I don't get out much," he admitted with a shrug.

"Well, then you're definitely due for a field trip," O'Neill announced, getting up from the table to follow his silent and sullen mate to the tray return.

Jack finished the last of his coffee and gathered up his own stuff. "You got your own field trip?" he asked Daniel as the other couple walked away. "Or you wanna tag along to see this 'recliner of doom'?" He rolled his eyes along with the air quotes, which about covered his commentary about the whole idea.

Daniel glanced toward their doubles, where O'Neill was running his hand up and down Jackson's arm as they waited by the door. The touch spoke of the intimacy he'd heard played out in the room next door several times the night before. He turned away when it looked like they might be leaning in for a kiss; after everything he'd inadvertently heard the night before, he had no desire to watch them in action.

"Um, looks like we aren't going with you guys," Daniel postulated from witnessing their goodbye scene. He stood and pushed in his chair, watching Jack looking over his shoulder at them with undisguised want in his eyes, and it was all he could do not to take Jack into his arms. "Jack," he whispered.

Jack tore his eyes away, trying to tamp down on the sense of desperation roiling around in his gut.
He recovered quickly, milliseconds, but not before Daniel saw it. "Yeah."

Daniel swallowed hard, pushing down the feelings that swelled up within him at seeing that look in Jack's eyes. When swallowing didn't work, he cleared his throat. "I'm-uh, gonna head on down to the locker room for a quick shower, and then I guess I'll pick Jackson's brain until you guys get back."

Jack nodded and headed for the door, but Daniel found he didn't want him to leave, not now, maybe not ever.

"Hey-" he gripped Jack's bicep, feeling it bunch and contract under his hand. He deliberately didn't release it when their eyes met, hoping he could make the other man see that he wanted this just as badly. Neither tried to deny the hunger they both felt. "Don't go getting yourself all stasis-ized, okay?" Daniel said softly. "I don't wanna lose you, not now that we're this close."

"You got that right," Jack growled in agreement.

*****

The ice cold shower had helped. Daniel dried off and wriggled into his briefs and BDUs, then sat on the bench to pull on his socks, thinking he should've showered in his quarters. He was still early for his meeting with his double, and with the other's husband on the way to Antarctica, he probably had time for a quick session with his right hand, without benefit of background effects from next door. If he didn't relieve some of this pressure soon--

Suddenly, there was a hand inside the back of his pants, a long, knowledgeable finger heading for his crease.

Without thinking, Daniel reached up with both hands, grabbed the owner of the finger by the back of his neck and yanked him over his shoulder, sending him crashing into the metal lockers to land with a startled grunt at his feet.

"What the FUCK?"

"What'd you think you were doing?" Daniel demanded, scowling as he stood over his assailant.

The man held his chin, working it carefully as he eased himself to a sitting position, leaning against the lockers. He did a long, slow pan up Daniel's body, not being shy about pausing with his hungry gaze leveled at his open fly. "Look, Sunshine, if you're feelin' a mite peckish, ya just need to let me know. Ya don't need to haul off 'n throw me around the room."

Daniel buttoned his fly and grabbed his shirt. "I'm not your 'Sunshine', Ace," he said, shrugging into it. He finished tucking and fastened his belt, without ever taking his eyes off the other man.

Ace peered up at him through squinty eyes while he continued to work his jaw. "Aw, crap. You'd be one of those Mirror Jackson's, wouldn't ya?"

Daniel reached into the locker for the rest of his uniform. "I would be, yes. And you are...?"

Sitting cross-legged now, he grinned and tossed off a sloppy salute. "Lt. Colonel Cameron Mitchell, at your service."

Daniel appraised him slowly as he slipped the over shirt on. "Hmmm... yes, well, I'm not in need of stud service today, Ace, so you can just run on along and... shoot something, all right?" He closed the locker and tossed his wet towel into the canvas bin near the door.
"Damned if you're not snootier than most, aren't ya." The guy gave him a knowing grin.

The tilt of Daniel's head was an automatic gesture. "Possibly." He headed for the door, anxious to be gone.

Smirking, Mitchell called after him, "Be sure and lemme know if ya change your mind."

Hand on the door lever, Daniel turned just a bit, so he could give Mitchell his full attention. "I won't," he said firmly. "You're not my type."

He headed directly for Jackson's office, mulling over what had happened and what it could mean. In the end, he decided to play it cool regarding Mitchell, despite his simmering anger.

More than an hour later, the two Daniels had finished comparing notes about their lives before the stargate program, and moved respectfully onto the issue of Sha're--her abduction, the birth of her child, and her eventual death, all sadly the same in both of their realities. So far, it seemed their experiences had been, as far as they could tell, mirrors of one another.

They took a break to stretch their legs and brew up a second pot of coffee.

"I thought you took your caffeine cold," Daniel asked with a tiny frown as he watched the other man dump some fragrant beans into a small grinder.

His double shrugged through the whirring of the motor, inhaling the aroma of the freshly ground beans, a delicate cloud of mocha and--coconut?--blooming between them. 'Jack calls it 'yuppie crack'. Figured I could indulge while he's demo-ing the chair. You gonna tell on me?"

"For sneaking coffee? Nah. Man's got a right to a harmless vice." He watched as the other Daniel, the older one, he reminded himself, dumped the grounds into a filter and poured a pot full of water in the top of the machine. He settled the empty pot to receive the brew and then leaned against the bookcase, deliberately mirroring Daniel's current arms-folded position.

"So... you and your Jack aren't together?"

"Nah."

He pursed his lips as if in thought. "Is it a problem for you, that we are?"

Daniel shrugged. "A little envious, maybe." The four simple words were followed by an immediate pang in his gut. Maybe more than a little, if he were honest with himself.

"So do something about it," Jackson urged. "Make a move. Jack loves it when I go alpha on him and--"

Daniel groaned and closed his eyes. "I did not need to know that."

His double snorted his amusement. "Sure ya did. He especially loves it when I take his--"

Daniel covered his ears with both hands, eyes still stubbornly closed. "Stop talking!" he said loudly.

"What the hell are you waiting for?" Jackson chuckled, knowing Daniel could still hear him. "Not like you to be shy. Believe me, I know."

Stalling, in the hopes of getting his temper under control, Daniel circled around the desk to plop back into a chair. "Oh, I don't know, the whole military thing maybe?" he replied tersely. "How'd
you get around the no-frat regs, anyway?"

"We weren't a front-line team anymore, no chain of command. We're diplomats, now, remember?"

"Ah, right." His eyes widened at the thought of Jack O'Neill-- any Jack O'Neill as a diplomat...

Jackson waved it off and busied himself with the coffee. "You know you could seduce him, right? Make him not care about any of that."

"Is that what you did?"

"Oh, he wanted it. Do you for one minute think that I could make Jack O'Neill do something he didn't really want to do?"

Daniel canted his head, his eyebrows knit in thought. "Y'know, I'm a little confused about something. Had an unusual run-in this morning in the locker room with a flyboy named Cameron Mitchell. He seemed to think I was someone named 'Sunshine'."

His double sniffed, not really trying to hide his smile. "Ye-ah... that was over a long time ago. Before Jack."

"Really," he said doubtfully. "His hand was pretty anxious to be down the back of my pants a couple of hours ago. Didn't feel so terribly 'over' to me." Daniel waited quietly while the other man considered him carefully.

Finally he smirked and wiggled his eyebrows in a really ridiculous way Daniel hoped to god he'd never imitated. "Mitchell's a pretty hard habit to give up."

Daniel sighed, unsurprised disappointment filling his belly as he shook his head. "Yeah, that's what I figured," he replied unhappily. "You're married-- doesn't that mean anything to you?"

Suddenly defensive, the other scowled. "Are you preaching to me? The same Daniel Jackson who fucked his way through half the Bruins soccer team sophomore year?"

Daniel frowned. "Hyperbole much? It was three guys."

"At the same time!" Jackson reminded him meanly. "And they were brothers."

"What's your point? We were all willing, and none of us was married. I hadn't taken any vows--"

"My point is, you're a hypocrite, and this isn't any of your business."

"Maybe not," Daniel grimaced sadly, "but it kinda feels like it is."

After finally getting onto the same page with Jack, and with the promise of a relationship right around the corner, it was disquieting to find out that things between this Jack and Daniel weren't quite as idyllic as they'd first appeared. The whole thing made him a little sick to his stomach.

He wondered if O'Neill knew.

*****

Jack was standing in O'Neill's office one second, shrugging into a gray fleece jacket, and the next, he was standing right beside a wire-framed freight elevator, apparently underneath more than a mile of solid ice.
The crew in the immediate vicinity came to an unhurried 'at ease', and after O'Neill introduced them, they each went about their business without a second glance. Here, as in the SGC, it was apparently completely normal for personnel to interact with a matched pair of Colonels, distinguishable only by the color of their coats and the degree of gray in their hair.

As they proceeded around the facility, Jack was glad for the jacket, cramming his hands down deep into the plush pockets as he suppressed a shudder that had little to do with the cold. He didn't have great memories of either time he'd been on the continent.

"We keep a skeleton crew here, just to keep the place lived in, in case we need to power everything up in a hurry," O'Neill said over his shoulder. Jack followed him as he walked through underground arches that opened into high-ceiling spaces. Inside each icy chamber was a well-lit DRASH shelter, shaped much like a Quonset hut, but made of a double layer of Xytex, in order to protect the equipment from the extreme cold. It also made sense to insulate the frozen infrastructure from the warmer climate the people and various types of technology required. In the corner of each room, Jack spotted a naquada generator, providing clean, stink-free power.

"At any one time, we've got a handful of personnel," O'Neill continued, "two pair of Marines, just for the heavy lifting, and-- Ralph? Where are ya? Oh, there ya are. Didn't see ya under the table there. Colonel Jack O'Neill, visiting, Major Ralph Jennings. He kinda runs the place."

Jennings set down the box he was holding and nodded to O'Neill, while offering his hand to Jack. "Welcome to Antarctica, sir."

"Love what you've done with the place," Jack said approvingly.

"I assume you're here for a live fire test?" Jennings asked.

"Haven't a clue, Major," Jack said lightly as he casually looked the place over. It was covered in chicken scratch that would make Daniel's teeth itch to get a hold of. "I'm just following the old guy around."

"Hey," O'Neill complained with a frown, "practice your shtick somewhere else, this is my gig."

He turned to Jennings. "Everything ready?"

"Yes, sir. All three exhaust portals are set for drone recall."

"Exxxcellent," O'Neill murmured with a jerk of his head toward the corridor. "Let's go." As they passed through the long, icy hallway, he explained, "Like I said before, the chair uses a mental interface which only links up to someone with the Ancient gene--"

"Watch who you're calling ancient, buddy. You're older than me."

"Ancient. Capital 'A'. And you're about outta mileage with the senior citizen rap, if ya don't mind my sayin' so."

They arrived at a large, cavernous room with an even higher-domed icy ceiling. Front and center was an ornate-bordering-on-gaudy LazyBoy on its own small platform.

"It's a chair," Jack deadpanned.

"Of course it is. Clear your mind and have a seat."

"You first."
"Oh, for cryin' out loud," O'Neill said, rolling his eyes. "Y'know, I said we'd be back by lunchtime, but that presumes that you cooperate a little bit. Think you can do that?"

He shoved past Jack and sat, which caused the dais to light up, and then pushed down with his butt, and the chair itself lit up as the unit tilted back. "Watch and learn." Immediately, a hologram of the solar system filled the air over them.

"Holy crap..."

"And this?" The image of a city skyline, as lacy as a crystal snowflake and populated with beautiful spires that seemed to reach up into the heavens, sparkled overhead.

Jack leaned back, struggling to get all of it into his field of vision at once. It seemed to fill the room, pulsing with life. He had the notion living city, but had no rational basis for understanding what the phrase meant. "Cool. What the hell is it?"

"Haven't figured that out yet," O'Neill stated simply. He lowered the foot of the chair, and the light went off. He got up and swept into a low bow. "Next."

Jack approached the chair cautiously. They'd discussed the whole 'thinking the drones out' concept while they were waiting for their ride, and it all seemed pretty wacky to him. He hated all this sci-fi crap.

Standing just close enough to touch the armrests, Jack cautiously poked the gummy touchpad with the tip of one finger.

O'Neill rolled his eyes. "Will you just sit?"

"Don't rush me," Jack scowled. "I'm gettin' to it." He walked completely around the chair once, bending to check the underside, then a second time, scanning the ceiling over it. Then he poked the jiggly parts again, for good measure. It was all just reasonable command caution, and not at all designed to piss off his counterpart.

When Jack's ass finally connected with the seat of the chair, it behaved just as it had for O'Neill, lighting up, tilting back. Under his palms, the gelatinous controls quivered, seeking direction. It was creepy.

"The HUD's in your mind, unless you choose to project it out here," O'Neill reminded him. "Think what you want, and the chair will retrieve the relevant records from the database. Imagine the idea of stored, directable, energy drones, like glowing baby squid, ready to do your bidding. See the planet from space."

Jack closed his eyes, and it all came into focus. "Ship..."

"Yeah, that's Prometheus," O'Neill said softly. "Now kill it."

"What!?"

"You have to think the drones to launch. Let the adrenaline surge from the fear response drive them. This is a live fire demonstration; it has to be that way, or you wouldn't feel the connection with the drones strongly enough to control them. The system is set to launch at your command, and then recall them prior to impact with the ship."

"You're taking a big chance, fella," Jack warned.
O'Neill shook his head. "Sitting in this chair is like having an extra sense. You gotta trust the system to respond to your thoughts. We've taken every precaution. This is a live fire drill for Prometheus too. If any of the drones pass the pre-set limit, they'll take 'em out. You gotta relax, though, or your trajectory'll be way off. Now let the chair talk to you. Shut up and listen! That ship's attacking your planet--DO something!"

Suddenly, Jack's hands began moving, manipulating the unfamiliar controls, and although he was pretty sure there was no sound in the chamber, he could hear the whine of missiles zipping through the atmosphere, intent on destroying the invader in near space.

It was as though the chair was telling him what he could do, urging him to act, offering him glowy-squid on a platter. The hand controls seemed to change the menu of options, but the decision FIRE-FIRE-FIRE came from his brain, powered by his gut. In his mind, he could see golden lights pour out of the exhaust tubes in a steady, radiant stream, guided strictly by his will and enfolding Prometheus in glowy illumination, which looked like so many Christmas lights.

In the end, he didn't know how many he'd set off, or how many it should take to destroy a ship the size of Prometheus, because none of the drones connected with it, most veering away at the last minute and heading back to base.

"He's moving away."

"Follow him. These things have amazing range."

As Prometheus ambled away --he'd never seen it from space before, was that a butt-ugly ship, or what?-- Jack continued the barrage, just to see how far they'd go.

"Hey, watch the inventory," O'Neill complained. "These things don't grow on trees y'know. See how many drones you've used, how many you have left. Keep an eye on their weapons banks, then when they shoot, you can intercept--"

"I see it," Jack said tightly. He thought a drone at the energy beam, and it exploded instantly.

"Jesus, that's-- breaking orbit now. He's on the run."

Jack launched a pair of drones, circled the swiftly moving craft with them on an 'XY' axis, then launched a single to form the 'Z' axis, just to see if he could, leaving the three of them spinning like a model of an atom around the craft.

"Very good. Now watch the spares coming back home, replenishing the armory. Poke around in there. See what else you can bring up."

Jack could see the twinkling blue jewel that was Earth, hanging in the black velvet of space, as though he were in an Al'kesh, looking down upon it. But it was more. He could see the heat from people, the sparse areas near the poles, and deserts that held few inhabitants, in drastic comparison to the tight knots of humanity in the more densely populated urban areas.

He could also see the chair he was sitting in, glowing golden beneath the ice, and the trail of drones heading away, straight for the ship, which was now powering hyperdrive engines, in order to spirit away the seventy-four bodies aboard to safety.

"Can I target just the hyperdrive, the weapons platform? Leave the ship and people intact?"

"Could, I suppose. Why would you want to?"

"Dunno. Disable first, ask questions later?"
"Yeah, that's enough crazy talk," O'Neill snapped. "Bring the drones home, and let's close it up."

Jack thought them all home and pushed the chair upright, blinking his eyes open reluctantly.

"What'd ya think?"

"Headache. A little nauseous."

"Yeah, that's typical."

Jack groaned and pressed his temples with both thumbs. "Just what I need, a squid hangover."

"Think the lights down." It became instantly dark, and from the other room, they could hear Jennings complain wearily, "Every damn time."

Jack thought them back up a little in the chair room, and 'bright enough to sear retinas' in the back room, where Jennings was. He smiled at the pained squeak that resulted.

"Well, that was a little like the sixties, wasn't it?" Jack asked, levering up from the chair.

O'Neill snorted, and led the way to the DRASH that served as a break room. He grabbed two bottles of water off the counter and tossed one to Jack. "Drink this. You're just dehydrated. You'll feel better in an hour or so."

They sat at the table and drank. "We've got about twenty guys with the gene who can operate the chair with varying degrees of success, but only Shep and I've had any real battle time."

"You took out Ba'al?" At O'Neill's nod, Jack added, "Who else?"

"Some lunkhead named Camulus came buzzing around last year, trying to make a name for himself. Lotsa big talk, kinky little leather kilt, but it was all bluster. Shep took him out without breaking a sweat.

"Shep?"

"Major John Shepherd. We had him stationed in McMurdo when we started the screening, but he's at Edwards now. The climate seems to suit him a little better there." He tapped the inside of his arm. "He and I wear transponders, so Prometheus can find us and get us here at a moment's notice, otherwise we periodically rotate those identified as having the gene through here, following their initial training, just to keep it manned."

"Everybody else stationed here is just support?"

"Yeah."

"No linguists to study all that writing in there?"

O'Neill pursed his lips and shook his head.

"Huh, I'm kinda surprised you're able to keep Daniel outta here."

"He wasn't kidding about the whole, 'frozen in the Ancient's pod' thingy-- he hates this place. Gets pissy every time I have to come here," O'Neill said seriously. "I have a secret stash of dark roast Colombian I use to buy myself out of the funk my coming here seems to send him into."

"He does seem just a little bit more high strung than mine," Jack observed quietly. He'd noticed
how Jackson had gone from normal to livid in the space of a heartbeat during breakfast.

"Yeah," O'Neill allowed, as he peeled the label off his water bottle. "Too much time in the sarcophagus may have made him a little...

"Paranoid?"

"Maybe a little."

"Nuts?"

"Hey! There's nothing wrong with his brain. He's still twice as smart as you and I put together, pal."

"But he's just a little... flaky."

"Yeah, just like piecrust. We about done here?"

"Whatever you say. What was it you said powered this rig?"

"Zero point module. We got this one at a planet called Proclarush Taonas, but don't ask me to spell it. C'mon, I'll show ya where it goes."

*****

Jack brandished the chessboard. "Why does it feel like you're avoiding me?" He'd been back from his Antarctic adventure for more than an hour, looking for Daniel in all the usual places. He'd finally tracked him to his quarters, the one O'Neill had intended them to share.

Daniel backed into his room, folding his arms across his chest, as Jack came in and closed the door behind him. "Um, maybe because I am?"

"And why would that be?"

Daniel finished his stroll around the room, keeping the table between them, and blew out a strained breath, trying to relax. Holding onto the back of the chair, he leaned on it, shoulders hunched, his eyes trained on just the tabletop and the papers it held and not on the chessboard Jack had just set down on top of them.

"I used to… fantasize about what your lips would feel like, what your--" he swallowed hard, his mouth dry as sand, his heartbeat pounding in his ears. "What you’d... taste like." He frowned, trying to keep his voice level, gripping the chair tightly, so it could anchor him, so his empty hands were kept busy. "But what would get me off the hardest was," Jack underneath him, straining against each thrust as he powered into him, needing it, craving it, crying out his name-- "imagining what you'd sound like when you came."

Daniel closed his eyes. The goddamn aftershave --was that earthy fragrance really a product from a bottle, or god, just the regular scent of his skin?-- it got him every damn time. He could feel his dick lengthening as Jack's 'it's been a long day' aroma filled his lungs. Not offensive, but warm and unique, recognized. Loved. He wanted nothing more than to bury his face in Jack's neck, his groin, and breathe him in...

"I-um… I could hear them through the wall last night. Him. I heard him come."

In his pockets, Jack's hands curled into fists. Goddamn bastards set this up. But his face betrayed nothing. "That wasn't me," he said levelly. I don't make noise, haven't for a lotta years...
Daniel looked up then, his eyes focusing on Jack's mouth and he could imagine himself coming around the table to take the other man into his arms, feeling those lips first hand, as he claimed Jack for their first kiss... and the second, and the third, tasting him for real, and not just in his imagination. Not stopping. Never stopping.

He'd wanted Jack from the first. Five years of agonized craving, followed by uncomfortable distance, and then glowiness, and finally confusion and resignation. Now that he knew for sure it was mutual, it was so much more difficult to step back. He was so hard, he could feel his pulse beating an impatient rhythm between his legs. From the corner of his eye, he saw Jack reach out for him, and that jarred him out of his trance. "Don't!"

"Daniel, I--"

He turned away with a strangled-sounding laugh. "You really need to go, Jack, I can't... this is too hard."

"Was that some kind of bad pun?" Daniel's over the shoulder glare assured him it was not. Jack was flattered as hell, but leaving was the last thing he wanted to do at this moment. He looked around the room, the one that was supposed to have been theirs together, and winced. He shouldn't be here, alone with Daniel, with so much need between them. Walking away felt wrong, but he didn't know what to do, how to fix things so they could work together easily again. "I don't want to go," he said softly.

Daniel slid his hands into his pockets, hoping to obscure the evidence of his arousal as he turned to face Jack, trying for normal. "Yeah," he agreed with a forced smile. "It doesn't help to know it's legal here. It's all just too tempting."

"Legal doesn't solve the problem. I'm still your CO, and we're still on a mission." Who was he trying to convince?

"I know all that. I'm counting in my head all the time now. How fast can we turn it around when we get back? How many more missions before we can be together--"

"We don't have to wait." It was out of his mouth and into the charged air between them before his brain had even registered the fact that his lips had formed the words. Daniel's eyes went wide and met his suddenly, and Jack was nearly knocked over with the force of the desire he saw there, making him hard almost instantly. He figured he could probably come just from hearing Daniel breathe his name at this point.

Committed now, Jack finished the thought. "No one has to know."

Daniel looked at him, gauging his response, his offer, and judged it to be genuine, if a little foolhardy. "You'll know," Daniel whispered sadly. "I don't want us to be some dirty little secret, Jack, something you have to hide or be ashamed of, or grow to resent me for. This is too important to me. You're too important. When we finally do this, I'm going to want everyone to know you're mine."

He moved away towards the bathroom, pausing with one hand on the doorjamb. He spoke softly, his eyes not quite meeting Jack's, afraid to see the clutching want that would mirror his own. "In the meantime, how about you keep your damned aftershave on the other side of the room, so I don't feel this perpetual need to ravish you, huh? And if you'll excuse me, I'm gonna go have myself another cold shower before lunch. Lock up on your way out. I could be some time."

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They always sat across from each other, with the safety of a table between them. It was mirror-day 2, dinnertime, and Martha had made blueberry crumb cobbler for dessert. Jack was tempted to ask her to come back with them.

"I kinda feel like we're the Waltons, here," he muttered to his double, who'd again selected a seat across from him and next to Daniel.

"Yeah? Well, you can be John-Boy, then, since you're so much younger than me. How's that?" he smirked.

Jack made a face, but resisted the urge to stick out his tongue. Addressing Daniel, he asked, "Have you found your point of divergence yet?"

Daniel shook his head and swallowed the bite of chicken he'd been chewing. "Not yet. We've still got the last three or four years to go, though, so..."

Mirror Daniel took the same seat he'd had at breakfast and sat beside his spouse, while the two Sams both sat to Jack's right, thoroughly engrossed in a discussion about their day at Area 51, complete with Rodney McKay anecdotes.

On a hunch, Jack directed his next question to his double. "Out of curiosity, did you go to a planet called Kelowna?"

O'Neill rolled his eyes. "Oh yeah. Bastards had the whole 'might makes right' thing goin' on. Built a bomb they'd enhanced with something called Naquadria, to intimidate the rest of the planet. Daniel tried to talk some sense into the boneheads, but the damned thing went off right as that Jonas fella was showing him around. Then this fool shoots the window out and shuts the damned thing down all by himself. Cooked his goose but good."

"Jack--"

"Don't 'Jack' me, Daniel," O'Neill snarled under his breath to the man next to him. "This is no different than the headsucker thingy, and you know it. It's the same goddamn issue, isn't it."

"To use your words, it all worked out okay, didn't it?"

"That's not the point--!"

Daniel leaned around O'Neill in order to ask his double, "You got the radiation poisoning?"

"Oh, yeah. It was bad."

"Then...?"

Jackson patted O'Neill on the back and grinned. "Conan here went after a sarcophagus."

"I was almost too late..."

"It worked out," Jackson repeated.

"Yeah, for us. We sent Kelowna humanitarian aid for a while, but one day, after about six months, their gate wouldn't open anymore."

Jack nudged his Carter who was the Sam sitting next to him. "That was the difference? That Daniel didn't die?"
"You died?" Jackson asked, the shock apparent on his face.

Daniel bobbed his head a little, eyes fixed on his plate. "Mostly."

"And you LET him?" O'Neill glared at Jack.

"I was under orders not to go after the sarcophagus!"

"Didn't stop me!"

"I'm. Not. YOU!" he bellowed back. And as far as Jack could see, O'Neill wasn't doing such a hot job taking care of his Daniel, if the sarc was the cause of all the extra flakiness.

"Shut up, both of you," Jackson snapped, elbowing O'Neill in the ribs. O'Neill grunted out loud, as he was pushed forward so his husband could see around him to Daniel. "So how did you--"

"You're both missing the point, sirs," Sam interjected calmly. "He was with them that whole year that ours was gone, working on translating the tablet we found in the secret room on Abydos. That's why they've found the lost city already."

"No, huh-uh," Jackson said, forgetting his earlier train of thought "That tablet just led us on a wild goose chase to some obscure planet with meaningless ruins and some scattered nomadic tribes. We found the headsucker colonnade completely by accident, and that eventually got us to the ancient weapons platform, just as Ba'al came calling."

"The download also gave me the healing mojo that saved Bra'tac's ass," O'Neill said, gesturing the string of events out. "But then, if you don't have to grab the ship with the Jaffa double agent, you won't need to save the old coot, because he won't be mortally wounded in the first place."

Jack simply looked at O'Neill, squinching up his face in confusion. "What?"


"Ayiana?" Sam offered the table in general.

"That's her," Carter and Jackson said together.

"Yeah, her. That healing thingy got sucked out with the rest of the database, but it sure came in handy that one time."

"Sounds like we're still gonna need a scout ship to burn through more than a mile of ice, to even get down to the chair," Jack said.

"True. But if you already know which Jaffa's the turncoat, you can take him out before he becomes a problem," O'Neill said with finality.

Frowning, Sam said, "Wait. Colonnade. SG-2. Whereabouts was this?"

Carter spoke up. "P3X-439, why?"

Sam shook her head. Something was lodged in the back of her mind, but she couldn't quite grab onto it. "Maybe nothing, I dunno."

The lost conversational thread surfaced suddenly in Jackson's brain, and he nearly choked on his soda. "So how'd you get to be un-dead, if you don't have a sarcophagus on your side?"
Daniel glanced over at Jack, who, after a moment, nodded. "You remember Oma Desala from Kheb?" he asked quietly.

"Ye-ah," Jackson replied cautiously.

"Well... as I lay dying, she appeared to me, to my subconscious. She offered to help me ascend."

Eyes wide as saucers, the mirror-Sam spoke up. "Like Orlin?"

Daniel nodded. "Yes." Looking at the stunned faces that were all staring at him, he frowned. "You mean in all the times you've done this, you've never run across a version where I've ascended?"

"Never," Jackson said, his eyes riveted to Daniel's face. He scooted his chair back and stood, bringing his Coke with him to sit in the empty chair on Daniel's other side. "How'd it work?" he asked eagerly "Can anyone do it?"

O'Neill frowned at his husband, cold tendrils of fear snaking around his gut. "Now, hold on just a minute there--"

"Hush, Jack," Jackson said distractedly. Eyes still on Daniel, he added impatiently, "Go on. Start at the beginning."

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Chapter 2: Uncounted Cost - The price of trust betrayed and hope destroyed.
Uncounted Cost

Chapter Summary

The price of trust betrayed and hope destroyed.

Lunch had broken up pretty quickly after Daniel dropped his ascension bomb. When he walked in on them half an hour later, the mirror versions of himself and Sam were heavily involved in a game of 'rock, paper, scissors'. He stood there in the doorway of Jackson's office --where the nameplate indicated that he had not taken O'Neill's name-- and watched while they tied three times, expressions as serious as could be. On the fourth go, Daniel was 'rock' and Sam was 'scissors'.

"Arrrrgh!" she growled.

Jackson looked triumphant. "YES! Look, you can have a turn once I pick his brain, okay? Then I'll keep Jack out of your hair, while you get all the physics down."

"Why do I have to keep him busy?" Carter fairly pouted as Jackson turned her by the shoulders and started gently steering her out of his office.

"Because you know how Jack gets with stuff like this; Teal'c won't be back until late tomorrow morning, and that's cutting it too close." He scooted her past Daniel, who moved aside so Jackson could finish evicting her. He gave her a peck on the cheek and said, "Two hours, I promise!"

He turned to Daniel, rubbing his hands together, eyes nearly wild with excitement. "So, how exactly does one 'release' their burdens?" he asked, closing the door.

Carter frowned at the closed door, then shook her head and headed for O'Neill's office. By the time she'd made it down there, she was just in time to see that Jack had beaten her to it. "You got a minute?" she heard him ask. He must've received an affirmative answer, because as she watched, O'Neill's door closed, and she knew she was off the hook.

Grinning, she did an immediate about-face and headed for her lab, where she knew her double would be waiting for her. This ascension thing sounded very cool, and she was pretty sure there was a lot the Major could tell her while she waited for her turn with Daniel.

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"I was on my way to Daniel's office to make sure he doesn't do something stupid, but I can spare ya a few minutes," O'Neill replied, motioning for Jack to close the door. "You think of somethin'?"

Jack looked around the room uneasily, taking small comfort in the fact that his double's in-box was piled nearly as high as his own. He really hated having these heart-to-heart talks with what amounted to himself. "I dunno, maybe. What-uh, what happened after you brought him back from Kelowna?"

O'Neill gestured for Jack to take a seat in the chair on the other side of the desk, then leaned back, running his hands through his hair. "Probably the same as you. He gave me the speech, described how he was gonna die. He told me his life wasn't any more important than anyone else's, and I guess I just snapped. Told him he was more important to me than anybody, and I was damned if I
was gonna just sit by and let him die."

Jack's belly turned cold; these were not words he could imagine himself being able to say out loud, unless... "Were you-ah... together at that point?"

"Nope."

Jack let out his breath. "Yeah. That was the turning point between you and me, then. I did just sit there and watch him die. Sat with him even when he was strung so far out on morphine he didn't know I was there. I even--" Jack scrubbed at his face and then clamped both hands behind his neck. "Fuck." He leaned forward, elbows on his knees, just hoping that the pounding of his own heart didn't make him either throw up or pass out.

Even now, even after Daniel was back, healthy and whole, the helplessness, the utter devastation he'd felt watching Daniel describe his own imminent, grisly, death threatened to swamp him.

"What?"

Muffled, unwilling, he muttered, "I helped him. I fucking helped him."

O'Neill scowled at the top of Jack's head. "Helped him? How?"

Jack spoke to the floor, happy not to see the reproach he knew he'd see in O'Neill's eyes. "He asked me to tell Jacob to stop trying to heal him, and I did. I let him go with Oma. I damn near pushed him out the fucking gate!"

O'Neill regarded Jack for a long, silent moment before he spoke. "Without the sarcophagus, he was already dead, wasn't he. You didn't really have a choice."

"I know that!" Jack snarled, snapping back upright in the chair. "I wanted to get it, I had a team standing by, but Hammond told me to stand down!"

"I got the same order," O'Neill stated simply, interlocking his fingers across his belly.

Jack was gnashing his teeth now. "But you did it; you made the choice to go against orders." Had he spent so many years trying to keep his growing attachment to Daniel under wraps that he hadn't been capable of making the humanitarian choice, when it bit him in the ass?

O'Neill shrugged. "I don't know what to tell you. As you're so fond of telling me, I'm not you."

"I acknowledged the order to his face, then went right behind his back, lied to the men I took with me, telling them we had a go, then stormed Nirrti's compound. I'm lucky Hammond didn't lock out my iris code; he probably would have, except doing that would've condemned my men as well. Blew my career all to hell, bringing that box back.

"Six men died on that op. We could only carry three of them back with us; sent 'em through the
sarcophagus in between Daniel's sessions. The fucking box ran night and day for more than a week. It brought two of them all the way back, but we'd waited too long for the third one... Reynolds was a good man. They were all good men. And I essentially sacrificed them all for Danny."

Jack watched the subdued way O'Neill talked about how it had all gone down, wondering if he was hearing regret in his voice. "How many SGC personnel have received benefit from having the sarcophagus on the premises since then? In hindsight, wasn't it a sound decision?"

Pursing his lips, O'Neill shook his head. "I wasn't making a sound decision at the time. I was making an emotional one, and I knew it. The only reason they let me stay on is the whole saving the world thing. It's PR, that's all. They need Danny, and he needs me. Once they bring the program public, all bets are off."

Jack found himself hating the man just a little less than before he'd walked in the room, but he struggled not to let it show. "How bad off is he?"

It didn't look as through O'Neill was going to answer. He merely sniffed and shook his head, his gaze directed into the middle distance over Jack's shoulder. "Shouldn't come as any real surprise to you that he's got an addictive personality to begin with. Look how long it took to get him free of the sarc addiction the first time. And the armbands? The Light Palace?" O'Neill shrugged. "He was ripe for it. Left him with some... issues. Raging insecurity, a smidge of paranoia, unpredictable temper. And that was before the Stromos thing, which just made everything about ten times worse. Nothing disabling, he's still the best linguist we have, but there's no doubt he's been in the box too many times. I seem to be a calming influence, for some reason."

"The bickering," Jack said, suddenly understanding.

"Ye-ah," O'Neill blew out a breath. "Let's him vent. Centers him. And every couple of months, Walter finds us a nice, peaceful planet with no people and lots of ruins, where we're pulled for an 'archeological mission' for a week or so, and he gets to play in the dirt to his heart's content."

The air quotes hadn't been necessary; Jack got the sarcasm. "I'm sorry."

"Hey, I wouldn't change a thing, even if I could. I couldn't have done what you did. Watch him die. Let him go. Not the way he'd wormed himself in under my skin after all those years."

They sat quietly for a long, heavy minute before Jack asked softly, "How'd it happen? The two of you."

O'Neill studied him for a moment before he replied, "He needed a lot of time in the box. It doesn't come with instructions, y'know, you just kinda hope it knows what it's doing. He was in it forty times in six months; we know better now, how it works, how to head off some of the side effects. How much time to give it between sessions, that's key."

He pointed a warning finger. "Make sure you get with Fraiser before you leave, so she can give you the chart she's worked up. Daniel was our guinea pig... no one should have to go through that if they don't have to."

He cleared his throat and concentrated on picking at a cuticle on his thumb, leaving Jack the opportunity to watch his face as he talked. "The-uh, mood swings were pretty gruesome at first. More than once, he tried to-uh..." He winced, waved it away, then scrubbed his hand across his face, shaking the memory out of his head. "We watched him more carefully after that. He blamed
me, of course. Said he had nothing to live for, that I should've let him die."

Jack made it a point not to notice his double's voice breaking on that last word. He'd given his Daniel a reason to live; that's why he'd sold out his oath.

Jack thought back on his vigil in Daniel's room, his body nearly indistinguishable underneath about a mile of gauze that had held its shape for a second, even after his body was nothing but light. Even then, with the certainty that Daniel was going to die within hours, maybe minutes, Jack hadn't been able to voice his true feelings, what he'd tried so hard to hide, so no one would ever suspect.

Jack had allowed Daniel to die believing Jack hated him, just so his oath could stay clean. It was one thing to know that, deep down inside where the knee-jerk yes sirs lived, but it was quite another to let it up into his fore-brain, where he'd have to look at it all the time.

"Couldn't let him think that," O'Neill continued. "Had to tell him the truth, how I'd felt all those years, right from the first. Took me hours to convince him I was sincere and not just blowin' smoke up his ass. We'd only been together a week when they found that chick buried under the ice, and then we all got sick. Daniel was a mess, screaming and yelling that I wasn't allowed to leave him. He begged me to take the Tok'ra up on their kind and generous offer. He said he'd take a snake too, so we could both..." he clamped his mouth shut on the rest of it, lips thinning, nostrils flaring with the effort at control, then cleared his throat again. "He said if I was determined to die, then he was just as happy to be together that way..."

Jackson was one messed up puppy, Jack realized. High-functioning or not, he was a primed landmine ready to go off. And if this universe's Jack O'Neill was all that was standing in the way of him self-destructing, god help them all.

"Then the Tok'ra 'couldn't find' " --more air quotes-- "another host, and the next thing ya know, I'm a guest at Chez Ba'al. Apparently, I was there at his tender mercies for more than a month, before they figured out where I was being held. I lost track of how many times I died.

"And lemme tell you something--" The warning finger came out again, and Jack made a mental note not to do that anymore, because it was damned irritating when it was aimed at you. "--fighting, when you know you have a sarcophagus on hand, makes you reckless and stupid. Teal'c nearly died. Sam was smarter. Daniel's physical injuries were less severe, just enough to need the box again, but it was too soon. Brought everything up to the surface. Problem was, I wasn't in any shape to play nursemaid, so Sam was stuck trying to handle him.

"My addiction wasn't too bad, because I'd been dead or close to it, most every time they'd dumped me in there, so there wasn't the danger of the sarc trying to improve a healthy body. But the nightmares..."

Jack remembered the nightmares; he didn't need to hear about O'Neill's. Silence fell again in the tiny office, while Jack wished he'd kept his stupid suspicions to himself.

When O'Neill spoke again, his voice was rough with evidence of emotions Jack would rather not have seen. "There's a DNR on Danny's file now that overrides even my say as his husband. They're afraid of what he'll become, if the box gets him even one more time. They won't allow him anything but conventional medicine from here on out. Not even the Tok'ra are allowed to touch him."

Jack allowed himself a moment as he felt the weight of what this universe's Jack O'Neill had to handle on a daily basis. "Gives 'do not resuscitate' a whole new meaning, doesn't it," he said softly.
Head cocked to one side, O'Neill studied him, looking every day of the five extra years he carried. "It isn't perfect, but we do the best we can. We're happy for the most part. I get to hold him while he sleeps." The question remained unsaid, but still, the thought hung between them-- *What d'you got?*

Jack nodded and left for the bunkroom. What could he say to that?

*****

"He says he doesn't remember any of it," Carter said reasonably, setting her full coffee mug on the corner of Jackson's desk. The only light in the room was the desk lamp, the overheads sacrificed to a short night with too little sleep.

Jackson rubbed at his eyes, then replaced his glasses. "He may not even realize that he does, Sam. That's what the Tok'ra are for. Didja call Martouf?"

"I did, but it's not like he's Earth's own personal Tok'ra, Daniel. We can't act like he's on retainer. He isn't always able to come right away every time we call."

Jackson frowned. "How long?"

"Four or five days."

"Damn it!" His hand slammed down on the desk, causing Carter's coffee to slosh dangerously, nearly to the point of spilling. "This is their last day here, they've got to go back in less than thirty hours. Why the hell don't we have our own set of those memory-things, anyway?"

"It just wasn't meant to be," she said in her most reasonable tone. "Come with me to get some breakfast. I hear Martha's making the harvest grain and nut waffles you love so much."

"I'm not hungry, and don't give me that 'not meant to be' crap. We're talking about the knowledge of the Ancients, Sam. It's in his head, but he doesn't care enough to--"

O'Neill approached Daniel's dimly-lit lab with some trepidation; the light level was always a dead giveaway to his mood, and today the space was poorly lit. "What's goin' on?"

"Jack! Jack-- you've got to make them stay until Martouf can get here, or--or maybe you and I could go back to their reality, and he and his Jack could stay here, just until Martouf comes, or we could try a third round of nanites--"

"Whoa! What's with the musical chairs? We've given them pretty much everything we've got. What do they need to stay for?"

Jackson rolled his eyes and deliberately slowed his speech. "So the Tok'ra can help Daniel access his memories from being ascended." The *duh* was richly implied. When Jack didn't immediately concede, Daniel expounded in an unnaturally casual manner, "It's unusual, when we come across a group that's done something we haven't. I'm curious, is that wrong?" He gave the sentence a little flip on the end. *Nothing to see here.*

"Mmm'not sure yet," O'Neill said warily, eyes narrowing.

"Oh, for chrissake, Jack, lighten up." Daniel scowled, moving to refill his coffee cup.

With a nod of his head, O'Neill motioned for Carter to ease out from under the conversation. He'd seen Daniel get like this a couple of times, and it wasn't pretty. He moved to Daniel's right, keeping
his attention to cover her retreat to the left. By the time O'Neill had completed his slow circle, Carter had made her escape, and he was back at the door to Daniel's office. He closed it without fanfare. "So. What do you have in mind? Exactly."

Jackson let out a long, patience-strained breath. "He's spent time with these... people. Beings. Whatever. For all intents and purposes, he was --maybe still is, I dunno-- one of them. Do you remember Kheb? Don't you think Oma Desala would make a mighty fine ally to have?"

O'Neill remembered how she'd toasted those Jaffa. She'd seemed a little high strung, to him, as women went. "Maybe..."

"So..." Jackson said with a casual shrug, "I just think we should find out as much as we can about his time there before we meet her, that's all."

"Meet. Her."

"Y'know, Jack, I'm really not in the mood for the dense Colonel act," Jackson snapped, taking his seat behind the desk again. "Yes, meet her. I don't know that she'll really be that open to the idea of a séance, y'know? So we'll have to approach her on her own terms."

"Which are?"

"GOD! You annoy the piss outta me when you act this way!" His hands were moving, fluttering, picking things up and setting them down for no real purpose, a sure sign of dangerous escalation.

O'Neill knew he needed to try hard to sound calm and low-key, since it looked like Daniel was on at least his second cup of coffee and had gotten a couple of caffeine-laden Cokes from the machines up top, not the caffeine-free ones he made sure were in the units in the mess. The crash, when it came, was going to be horrific.

"Daniel, I'm just trying to follow you. If you've got a plan, let's hear it."

Daniel took a deep drink of his coffee, marshaling his forces, striving for calm, then set the cup down with elaborate care as he met his husband's eyes. "All kidding aside, Jack, this could be the perfect thing for us."

"Wait. Us?"

Once again, the short-lived tranquility evaporated in the blink of an eye. "I'm not stupid, Jack." Daniel slapped both hands flat on the desk and leaped to his feet. "Don't you think I know how fucked up I am? If I take the Xanax like I'm supposed to, I'm nearly comatose, and if I don't, I jump all over everyone's shit. I can't be fixed with pharmaceuticals, and if I go into the box one more time, I won't come out sane. I don't wanna live this way anymore!"

He came around the desk and moved right into his husband's space, cupping his cheeks gently, speaking softly, earnestly, his coffee-scented breath puffing sourly right against Jack's face. "I wanna be normal again, Jack. Baby, please... let me try this."

And there it was.

Daniel thought he could kill himself and get ascended by Oma, and then somehow trick her into descending him, free of the hold the sarcophagus had on him. And if it didn't work-- when it didn't work-- Jack would lose him forever. He hadn't trusted any of this glowy shit the first time around, and he sure as hell wasn't gonna trust Daniel's goofy plan to it now.
He'd never be able to take his eyes off him, not even for a second, not as long as Daniel thought this was in any way a viable plan. For the first time, Jack saw a definite downside to the sharing of information with the mirror realities.

"Ascension isn't a magic reset button, y'know," he said, snatching Daniel's hands off his face, gripping them tightly in his own. "And there's no guarantee this Oma-person will come for you like she did for him."

"Why wouldn't she? We're the same person."

"You're NOT the same, not since Kelowna! And I can't even believe we're HAVING this conversation!"

Daniel used their joined hands to maneuver them closer together. "The ascension part sounds easy. If I can just get him to tell me how he descended again--"

"He doesn't know how! He doesn't know for sure why he's not still ascended in the first place. His Jack thinks it's 'cause he broke the rules, but they're just guessing!" Jack grabbed Daniel by the shoulders and pulled him in, hugging him hard, spitting the words into his neck with all the vehemence he could muster. "Just NO! Promise me you won't do this. Don't leave me."

Jackson's arms came up around him, returning the desperate embrace. "I'm not leaving you! I'll be back-- he came back!"

O'Neill's heart was pounding so hard, he knew Daniel had to be feeling it. "That was a fluke. He got damned lucky."

Daniel pulled away just enough to search Jack's face, his whispers couchèd in an intensity that terrified O'Neill. "When I'm well, and whole, you'll be glad I did this."

Jack's teeth ground together as he gripped Daniel's biceps with trembling hands. "I'm not telling you again; they're not together; they don't have what we have. He wasn't giving up anything to go with her. You're giving up everything we've ever been to each other. You don't get to do that!"

"Jack, baby--"

Oh, god - why wasn't he listening? "NO, Daniel! You're fucking with shit you don't understand, and we're gonna lose it all. I can't-- I won't let you do it. You're mine, and we're together, and that's all that matters, do you hear me?"

*****

It was their last breakfast on Mirror-World, and Jack was enjoying some of the fluffiest waffles he'd ever had in his life. He was going to need to have a few words with his own bearded Martha when they got back.

Teal'c was regaling them all with tales of his field trip with Hairy Teal'c, to the temple at Dakara, and the mysterious and mostly-too-dangerous-to-use weapon thereupon. Jack would never have thought it possible for the big guy to wax poetic about watching the sunrise over free Dakara.

According to Teal'c, they'd had a governing Council at first, but that had gone bad, thanks to someone named Gerak and his treasonous delusions of grandeur. They were a democracy now, under Bra'tac's tutelage, and happily working through the birth pangs that went along with peace and freedom.
Sam had a list of a half-dozen goodies she'd heard about or seen at Area51 and was looking forward to the simulations her double had promised to run for them, at the final briefing after lunch. Her immediate plans included a short hop to the classified hanger at Peterson, to do a hands-on with the scout ship the head-sucked O'Neill had modified to get them to Taonas and then Antarctica. Since Jack wouldn't be taking the download, all the modifications would be hers to make.

Waffles all sadly consumed, Jack pushed his plate away and folded his arms on the table, surveying his team. "So," he said, "we've all gotten armfuls of weapons and tech to take to the folks back home. More than any single mission we've had to date."

"Since you asked," Daniel yawned tiredly, "I vote we tell Hammond everything and let him decide what to pass up the food chain."

"Way to steal my thunder, Daniel," Jack sulked with a frown.

Unrepentant, Daniel put his head down on his crossed arms. "Sorry. I'm just ready to head home to my own bed." Continuing to speak into the well of his loosely folded arms, he mumbled, "I seem to be the glaring exception to the 'armloads of goodies' rule. I haven't gotten a single thing." Except exhaustion and a nearly non-stop boner from listening to Jackson and O'Neill's nightly escapades. They were the original Energizer bunnies, and Daniel was desperately in need of some alone time with his right hand, somewhere that didn't have their symphony of love as background music.

"Au contraire, mon archeologeest," Jack smirked in the corniest quasi-French accent he could muster. "You've got plenty of stuff. You just don't know it yet."

Daniel peered at Jack with one disinterested eye. "What the hell have you been smoking?"

Jack waggled his eyebrows over the top the rim of his coffee cup. "There's a boatload of that wacky writing you like, all over the Antarctica base," he said simply, setting the mug down.

Daniel frowned and lifted his head completely, although his arms remained where they were, in case his head suddenly became too heavy to support again. "There is? But Daniel didn't--"

"I know he didn't. I'm not sure if you've noticed, but he's got an issue or three. One of 'em is, he hates that place. Won't go down there."

"Well, to be fair, his Jack did almost die down there."

"The point is, he hasn't even looked at it. It's virgin stuff." Jack arched his eyebrow and ran through it again. "Ancient scribbles, Daniel. Never been translated. Just waiting for your keen eye--"

His earlier exhaustion a thing of the past, Daniel was now clear-eyed and interested. He cleared his throat, jerking a thumb over his shoulder. "You think we have time for me to pop on down there, before we head back?"

"I think you should grab your camera and go find out."

"Right," he said, scooting his chair back hurriedly. "I'm outta here..."

Smiling at Daniel's retreating form as he dashed out of the mess with great alacrity, dodging personnel and tables, Sam turned back to her team. "If we're voting, sir, I'm with Daniel about telling the General. All the technology Colonel Carter's told me about is so valuable, I wouldn't trust myself to be able to pick and choose."
Jack had been pretty sure that's how it was going to go down, and strangely enough, he was nearly okay with the inevitable discomfort that would come from the disclosure that Jackson and O'Neill were married. "T? You wanna make it unanimous?"

"I have spoken with those who witnessed first hand the one and only time the weapon at Dakara was used, and the terrible devastation it wrought upon all forms of Replicators. While the destructive potential of the weapon is considerable, and it must be used with great caution and diligent oversight, it would be a terrible injustice to allow it to lie fallow, while their evil continues to ravage the galaxy."

"So that's a 'yes'?"

"That is a 'yes', O'Neill. " He'd keep the rest of what he learned at Dakara to himself, until such time as he could discuss it with Bra'tac. Gerak was a powerful Jaffa in his reality as well, and they would have to engineer his death as quickly and quietly as possible, if they were to avoid the thousands of casualties that had resulted from the civil war Gerak had caused here in this one.

His time with Master Teal'c had also shown him the point of divergence between them. Her name was Ka'lel. In his own reality, she was Ishta's second in command, but in this reality, she was a member of their First Congress, and the woman Teal'c had taken as his wife. At this moment, she was heavy with child, Tealc's only heir since Rya'c's death in the uprising Gerak and Se'tak staged three years before.

He had much to information to process.

"If I am not needed further, I should like to retire to Master Teal'c's quarters. He has remained on Dakara and said that I may view his collection of entertainment discs."

"We're all supposed to converge on the briefing room at 1230 hours for the final pow-wow and to receive all our lovely parting gifts," Jack said. "But you're all free till then. Whatcha watchin'?"

As he rose and pushed in his chair, Teal'c replied, "It is a program produced in the United Kingdom of this world. I believe it is called 'Torchwood'. It is said their Weevils are most likely based on the carnivorous creatures which inhabit the third planet in the Chulak system."

Jack looked at Sam, who just shrugged. "Yeah, me neither," Jack agreed. "Have fun."

After Teal'c bowed and left, he considered Sam carefully. "How you doin' with everything?"

She blew out a breath and started gathering the remains of her meal, careful not to meet his eyes. "Better. It was all just such a shock. I guess you get used to living in a certain mindset, and unless something happens to jolt you out of it, that's where you stay. If our Janet were still alive..." She let the thought drop, confident that her CO would understand, but neither harass, nor pursue. "I really haven't had a lot of time to digest it all yet, I've been so busy just trying to keep up with everything Colonel Carter's been showing me."

"Like doctoring the Al'kesh," Jack suggested, catching the oblique reference.

She glanced at her watch. "Oh my god, I'm late!"

Jack waved her away. "Drive carefully."

Alone, more or less, he collected up the forgotten napkins and a couple of spoons, piling them all on his tray, then shoved it into the return lane. He glanced at his own watch and determined he had a little more than an hour to kill before his meeting with Paul Davis. He groaned inwardly. General
Paul Davis. He was unsuccessful at suppressing a shudder.

He swiped the elevator with his borrowed card and headed on his way to the bunkroom, so he could change back into his own BDUs. He was sure he'd seen something there that looked like it might be a fancy Play Station.

*****

Out in the corridor, O'Neill quietly closed Jackson's lab door behind him, hoping that it was safe to leave him. He'd held his husband tightly, terrified to let go, afraid Daniel's desperation would lure him into making a fatal mistake before he could convince him the idea was totally whacked. He'd murmured soothing sounds into his neck, words that had no meaning beyond, stay with me, you're safe here, I need you.

They'd held each other, and he'd allowed the press of their bodies to make the suggestion, knowing Daniel would succumb to it, since he was always ready to do it where they weren't supposed to. In the dim glow of the lamp, and blocked from the intruding eye of the camera by their intertwined bodies, he'd slipped a hand in between them and into Jackson's pants.

At least he'd sleep for a little while now.

At the end of the hall, he caught sight of Daniel rounding the corner, purposefully headed his way. He moved to intercept him as far away from Jackson's office as possible. "Migraine," he whispered, nodding back at the door.

"Something I can help ya with?" he asked as he continued to smoothly guide them away from the area and back down the hall from whence Daniel had come.

"Actually, I was looking for you, to see if there was time for me to take a real quick tour of the writing at the Antarctic base with my camera." He waved the tiny camcorder as if to prove he was packed and ready to go. "Just in and out, and I'll study the footage when I get back to the other side."

"Yeah, we can probably swing that. You really think there's anything useful there?"

Daniel shrugged. "Won't know till I see it."

"Fair enough."

They took the elevator down and were at O'Neill's office door in under two minutes flat. He grabbed the comm from his desk and signaled the Prometheus. "Hey, Len, this is O'Neill. Can we trouble you for a lift?"

"Sure, Jack. How many, and where you headed?"

O'Neill tossed Daniel a gray jacket from the coat tree behind the door and grabbed the green one for himself. "Two for the Antarctica base, please, and don't spare the hor--"

"--ses."

Daniel hadn't even had time to get his second arm through the sleeve of the borrowed coat before he was standing in a room seemingly made of ice. As he pulled the jacket closer around him, his Jack's scent wafted up from the collar, infusing Daniel with a disconcerting warmth. Apparently this had been the same coat Jack had used when he'd accompanied O'Neill there the day before. Interesting that O'Neill apparently didn't use the same aftershave.
"Those Asgard beams are a trip, aren't they?" O'Neill said, shaking off the whammy-feel as he zipped up his own fleece. He stuck out one thumb, indicating an area to their left. "Most of the chicken scratch is in here." He started off down a corridor, trusting that Daniel would follow.

Entranced, Daniel trailed along, filming every wall of the chair room from floor to ceiling, including the chair too, just because it looked cool. O'Neill provided background chatter he couldn't be bothered to make sense of, his mind already pulling words out of the text he was filming. Colony. Plague. Temporal. Evacuate.

And what looked like part of a gate address.

When he'd filmed all the text, he used the remaining battery life to shoot the outside of what looked to be the mechanical systems themselves; it wasn't the guts of anything, but he thought it might give Sam a starting point.

By the time the battery went completely dead, O'Neill was off in an adjoining room, talking quietly with someone else. When they saw Daniel approach, the other man left. "You do go off into a world of your own, don't ya?" he said with a fond smile.

Daniel shrugged sheepishly. "I guess. Fault in the model?"

"Not so much anymore, I'm afraid." O'Neill pointed to the coffeemaker. "Help yourself."

Daniel filled a cup with the thick brew and chugged some additives into it, then came to sit beside O'Neill. He found it interesting to note that being this close to Jack's double didn't make his heart thump the way it did whenever he was in his own Jack's immediate vicinity. But that didn't mean he couldn't feel sorry for the way Jackson was treating him.

"No, I suppose not, since he hasn't jumped on any of what's here, and that's just..." Daniel shook his head, not really understanding the other Daniel's apparent disinterest. "I think he might have an issue or three," he finished quietly, unconsciously using Jack's words to describe his alternate.

"Oh, y'think?"

"Yeah, I do, actually."

Using his most gentle voice, Daniel tried to outline Jackson's problems as he saw them, drawing from their shared past, touching on the reasons for the feelings of inadequacy he often experienced himself, and how they might be driving his double's actions today.

He wanted to help the two of them find their way back to each other. If he could shed some light on Jackson's history and thought processes, maybe he could keep their relationship from doing a crash and burn. He knew himself well enough to know that Jackson had deep misgivings about his ability to sustain a relationship, and that he'd probably already started to emotionally check out of his marriage, rather than fail at another one. The thing with Mitchell was most likely just the first step toward the inevitable.

Daniel wasn't sure why he felt this desperation to keep them together, maybe because they'd been the catalyst for his long overdue heart to heart with Jack, and he felt he owed them. To that end, he was careful not to mention Cameron Mitchell.

O'Neill listened patiently for several minutes without saying a word, as Daniel talked about what he suspected were the causes of Jackson's insecurities. When he paused for breath, O'Neill reached out and cupped Daniel's jaw with a gentle hand.
"I know about Mitchell," he admitted softly.

"Y-you do?" Daniel swallowed hard. Under the circumstances, he didn't know why O'Neill was being so calm, almost... resigned about it. His whole demeanor radiated sad acceptance.

O'Neill dropped his hand, then curled it around his now cold, empty mug. "Yeah. Once upon a time, Daniel wanted to be with me of his own free will." He shrugged, studiously examining the sludge in the bottom of the cup. "But now..."

"He does," Daniel insisted urgently. "And he still would, believe me, except for how damaged he is because of the sarcophagus. Our background doesn't make for the healthiest of ids to begin with, and when you add the paranoia the Goa'uld tech heaps on top, he's foundering, looking anywhere and everywhere for self-validation."

After a long moment, tiny frown lines appeared between O'Neill's brows, and he confessed quietly, "I don't know what I did... or didn't do... to make him go out on me like that. It's just..."

Daniel winced. Every Jack O'Neill Daniel had ever met was an intensely proud, private man. How desperate must this one be for a sympathetic ear, to admit his husband's betrayal aloud to someone else? Daniel hurt for this man's pain, and to know his double was doing it deliberately made him feel somehow responsible.

"It probably wasn't you," Daniel whispered gently. "Monogamy-um, doesn't really come naturally to him. He loves you, trust me on that, but at this point, with this level of insecurity, he can't handle the free will; it's a curse."

O'Neill frowned. "You saying he can't say no?"

"I'm saying he doesn't believe he's good enough that both of you could possibly want him," Daniel replied. "He's afraid to say no to either of you, to risk being alone again." Daniel studied the other man, watched the fleeting glimpse of misery skitter across his expression before it was carefully covered up. "I'm guessing the fling with Mitchell happened after he used the sarcophagus for the radiation?"

O'Neill nodded. "Long after. I've known about it since it started. When I first found out, I was furious, didn't want to have anything more to do with him." He dropped his eyes and gave a little snort. "That lasted about two hours. Might as well try to stop breathing," he grumbled.

"When I cooled off a little, I kept trying to figure out what I'd done wrong, what he needed that I wasn't giving him. Had a little too much to drink one night while he was 'working' and went online. I ordered a ..." He shook his head in embarrassment, and looked away. "I ordered a cage thing, a... chastity device. I figured since he couldn't keep it in his pants, I'd make it so he couldn't use it at all." His lips formed a thin, angry line. "I was angry and hurt and desperate. But I couldn't go through with it, so I stuck the damned thing in the back of a drawer. I want a lover, a husband. Not... property."

Daniel's eyes widened. "No, no, that's perfect! That'll work! If you remove his free will, you'll not only be reaffirming your commitment to him, but also showing that you care enough to stop him, before his behavior gets any more self-destructive. It'll finally give him some much needed peace." It felt odd to be giving so much personal information to a near stranger about someone who was, essentially, himself.

O'Neill raised an interested eyebrow. "Would you wear one?"
"For fun? Sure. But I'm done playing around; I've sown all the wild oats I plan to sow. I'll never give Jack a reason to need me to wear one for real. When he and I finally do get together, it'll be for keeps."

"Yeah," O'Neill grunted, looking away. "Jack'd eat his own arm before he admits it, but he needs that."

This didn't really surprise Daniel, since he'd surmised as much. "I've waited for him too long to ever take it lightly." He leaned forward across the table and covered O'Neill's hand with his own, his eyes burning with intensity. "I won't ever betray him. You have my word."

"Well, isn't this fucking cozy. You don't want your own Jack, but you'll try to take mine?"

Daniel and O'Neill looked up to see Jackson stepping into the break room. It was hard to say which of them was more surprised to see him.

"Danny...?" O'Neill rose, taking two steps closer to where his husband stood in the doorway of the place he'd vowed to never visit again. "You okay? What're you doing here?"

Jackson was not a happy camper. His voice full of vitriol, he spat at O'Neill, "Interesting scheme. You jerk me into a coma, so you can come down here, to the armpit of the world," hatred blazed from his eyes, all directed at Daniel, "and make out with him?"

"What're you talkin' about?"

Jackson folded his arms across his chest, his furious gaze still trained on Daniel. "Looks like you're trying to trade me in on a younger model."

Daniel stayed quiet, watching O'Neill's jaw clench as he came to a decision. "Is that what you're doing with Mitchell?" he asked tightly. "Trading me in?"

The question, delivered in such a steady, unemotional tone, worked like a dose of ice cold water on Jackson's rage. "That's--" The double-take was classic, as the power in the room shifted instantly. "Um, w-what?"

"Because you're not clever, y'know. I've known you were fucking him since the beginning. The first time was in the Best Western across from the airport, wasn't it." Even now, the pain of knowing his spouse had been intimate with someone else --that he even wanted to be-- made him sick to his stomach.

Jackson's face drained of all color, and it was then that Daniel noticed he wasn't wearing the fleece jacket which seemed to be standard issue for all visitors to the frozen base. Jackson had started trembling, whether from anxiety or the chilly temperature or both, he couldn't be sure.

"You know...? Then why didn't you--"

"Why didn't I kill the bastard?" O'Neill's stomach roiled with rage, held tightly in check by his disappointment in the man he'd married. He stepped forward, right into Jackson's space, hands curled into fists at his side. "I could have. I wanted to. They'd never have found the body," he added grimly.

"Or I could've had him transferred to the Beta site, out from under foot, where you couldn't get to him. I didn't, because I loved you, and you wanted him." O'Neill didn't quite succeed in keeping the break out of his voice. "And because if it wasn't him, it just would have been someone else," he whispered hoarsely.
"Besides, I don't think you have it in you to be faithful, Daniel." He'd been holding on to the accusation quietly, almost protectively, afraid to rock the boat, but now it felt good to get it out into the open.

Jackson was speechless, and for a split second, his eyes met Daniel's once more.

"Was it worth it?" Daniel asked him softly.

"Shut up!" Jackson snapped, then turned to O'Neill and started backpedaling furiously.

"Jack, I can explain--!"

O'Neill slid his hands into his pockets, frowning sadly, anger burned out with his long-overdue venting. "You can explain why you betrayed the vows we made to each other? Save it, Daniel," he said wearily.

Jackson approached him tentatively, as if anticipating a physical response, hands moving to touch, but not daring to, pulling them back, only to abortively reach out again, expecting to be rebuffed, or worse. "It wasn't betrayal, not really! I don't love him, I swear. It's just sex, Jack, it doesn't mean anything."

"I'm sorry you think that," O'Neill said quietly before heading toward the anteroom, "because it sure as hell sticks in my craw.

"We're done here," he said loudly over his shoulder to the room at large. "We have a briefing to get to."

Jackson glared at Daniel as they both followed O'Neill out of the room. "This is your fault," he hissed. "You and your nauseatingly bourgeois attitude."

"Maybe. But I'd like to think what Jack and I have is about more than just sex. It's called respect."

"It's called nothing," Jackson spat hatefully, "because neither of you has the balls to do anything about it!"

As they got into a loose cluster in the center of the open room, Jack scowled. "Oh, lay offa Daniel; he didn't tell me a damned thing I didn't already know."

He pulled the comm unit from his pocket. "Len, three to beam--"

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Jack figured this was probably the strangest meeting he'd ever had, stranger, even, than meeting himself. He remembered when a freshly-minted Major Paul Davis had been part of the debriefing following the black hole incident, all enthusiastic and by-the-book. He'd never lost that eager puppy attitude, even years later, while they were getting ready to ditch Anubis' ship in the icy North Pacific.

And now, on this side of the mirror, he was General Eager Puppy, and with his shiny teeth and dimpled jaw, he was the perfect face for taking the program public. Who wouldn't trust this earnest, regulation officer with guiding a program of important scientific investigation and peaceful exploration?

The bastard hadn't even had the decency to start going gray yet.
Davis welcomed Jack into his office with a boyish grin and a hearty handshake. "Colonel O'Neill, I'm glad to finally meet you. I was afraid I'd be tied up until after you'd had to leave." He indicated his guest chair with a sweep of one arm. "Sit. Please."

Jack did, trying not to slouch, to remember to keep his posture respectful, because in a freakish way, this man was his superior officer. "Thank you, sir."

"I try to touch base with the commander of each team that comes through here as soon as they cross over, but I had to leave for Washington right after you arrived."

"This dog and pony show must get really old for you guys. Sir," he amended quickly.

"Actually, we're getting ready for the biggest dog and pony show ever. Terran Stargate Operations --as they've decided we'll now be called-- has finally agreed to July fourth, 2006, as the date we go public with the existence of the stargate. We've got a little over five months to cover our bases."

"Fourth of July? A little heavy on the symbolism, don't ya think?"

Davis bobbed his head. "There were those who wanted the sixth hour of the sixth day of the sixth month of '06, but that date had it's own problems.

"It's good you arrived when you did. We're going to have to suspend mirror operations for the immediate future, in order to concentrate on managing the going public. In fact, you're the last group who's going to be able to come through, possibly for the next 12-18 months, depending on how things shake out."

"And the next group that stumbles onto your shiny outpost...?"

"Will get a busy signal for a while."

"So. Good timing on our part, then?"

"Extremely."

"Well, On behalf of Major General George Hammond" --Jack had noticed Davis' single star, and told himself he didn't begrudge him for it-- "and my SGC --our whole reality, I guess-- I'd like to say thanks for all the tips. If even half of them pan out, it'll give us a tremendous advantage. It should make the boys in the Pentagon very happy."

"Well, thank you for saying so, and you're more than welcome. I certainly understand your trepidation regarding some of the technology you've seen here. I hope your power structure doesn't balk at letting you bring them to fulfillment."

"But in all honesty, we don't do it for the Pentagons of the multi-verse. We do it for you, the men and women on the front lines. You risk your lives every day, trying to secure a lasting peace, and you deserve to see your hard work come to fruition. The SGC should be an exploratory arm of Earth's cooperative governments, and anything we can do to enable that, we're more than willing to do."

*****

When the beam released them, O'Neill shed his jacket and handed it to Jackson to put on, then shrugged into the blue over-shirt he'd tossed onto the back of his office chair. All of this was done with zero eye contact between them, Jackson slipping into the warmed jacket and falling into step behind O'Neill and out of the room without a word.
Following suit, Daniel hung his fleece on the tree and brought up the rear, catching up just as the elevator doors opened to admit them. The two-floor trip was made in stony silence.

They nearly ran into Cameron Mitchell coming around the corner out of the control room.

"Hey, Sunshine!" Mitchell said with a grin.

O'Neill kept silent, his jaw rigid, and never missed a step.

Jackson barreled past Mitchell's cherubic face, eyes forward, still in step. "Fuck off, Mitchell," he spat under his breath.

Daniel followed O'Neill and Jackson as they took the spiral steps two at a time, finding a pair of Sams, and his Teal'c already waiting in the briefing room. Through the glass window, they could see that Jack was just finishing his meeting with General Davis.

Over Jack's shoulder, Paul noted the new arrivals and stood, knowing that with his own Teal'c still at Dakara awaiting the birth of his child, this completed the sets. Slipping into his jacket, he said, "I see the rest of your team's arrived. Shall we?"

Davis stepped into the briefing room ahead of Jack, and with a gentle 'at ease' toward the Sams and O'Neill, who all stood respectfully, he shook first Daniel's hand, then Sam's, and then bowed to Teal'c, beaming widely at them all. "I hope you've had a productive visit."

"I don't know how we can ever repay you, sir," Sam enthused. "This is more than we could've dreamed of."

"All we ask is that you pay it forward, however you can," Davis said earnestly. "That's all any of us can do, look out for each other."

Harriman had slipped in unobtrusively, waiting for a break in the conversation. "Excuse me, General. You need to leave for your 1530 meeting with the head of the United Nations. Prometheus is standing by for transport."

"Thank you, Walter," he said with a smile. Harriman nodded and started to retreat as quietly as he'd come.

"I don't know what I'd do without him," Paul said to the room at large.

"I'm sorry I have to leave so quickly, but safe journey back, SG-1." He turned and caught up to the Master Sergeant, clasping his shoulder just before they passed through his office door.

Jack thought to himself that maybe he'd better stop underestimating his own Paul Davis. Just in case.

Everyone had already taken their seats, with the exception of Daniel, who was fixing a pair of coffees. He set one down in front of his counterpart, then took a seat across the table, receiving a glare from Jackson for his trouble.

Jack could feel the noticeable rift between the Daniel's. He wished he had a moment to find out the cause, but there was no time for that; Sam and her double were already down to business.

"Can we come back?" Sam asked Carter. "Let you know how it went down? Maybe give you a heads up on whatever we find in our reality that you might not already have?"
Carter shook her head. "No. The odds of the mirror landing on precisely the same 2 realities again are astronomically small. Right now, the only thing holding the door open between them is you. For you to ever return, someone from your reality would have to stay here. But as long as they did, no other realities could get through. We're not sure how the--"

Teal'c was sitting on Sam's left, watching the two women with an impassive expression. But there was movement underneath that placid surface, like an engine left on idle, and if Jack didn't know better, he'd have said he was itching to book on home. He wondered which part of this trip through Oz had gotten him going.

The glarefest to his left had ceased, but only because Jackson had shoved away the cup Daniel had given him, and gotten up to fix his own. Beside him, Jack could feel Daniel tensing, as if for a fight. At the end of the table, O'Neill was ignoring the Daniels and seemed inordinately interested in the Carter-a-thon across the room. It was all very surreal.

Jack was tempted to call the room to some kind of order, but was more interested in why O'Neill didn't. This was his show, after all. Deciding to let the current situation play out for a little while longer, he tried to monitor the geek-spew to his right, while keeping the corner of his eye peeled on his left for whatever was keeping Daniel so keyed up.

"So I've brought simulations for the VR chairs, but like I said, they're a work in progress. I'd also like to show you the schematics that depict how we grew the BMG structure on 342. After that, I can give you the raw data and all the calculations in a dozen formats, everything from Tok'ra crystals, to Tollan datapads, to good, old fashioned paper. A lot of the mirror teams use the same kind of--"

"God, no..."

The gasp was so soft that Jack wasn't sure he'd really heard anything. But next to him, he felt every muscle in Daniel's legs contract, as though he were on the verge of jumping up and running away. He tracked his gaze to Jackson, who stood at the coffee station, idly stirring a mug with one of those flimsy plastic straws, while he flirted shamelessly with the SF on duty nearby.

He wasn't Jack's problem --this wasn't his Daniel-- but that didn't mean he could watch and remain unaffected by it. The pit of his stomach felt queasy, and his teeth started grinding, less because of the flirting, and more for the fact that O'Neill was letting it go on unchallenged, right under his nose.

A glance to his right showed that the Carters were completely oblivious to everything around them. Sam's eyes were huge, like she'd just gotten every geek's fondest wish for Christmas. "Yeah, sure. I'd love to see both simulations running side by side, but you'll need a second terminal for that, and I don't think we've got time--"

Carter frowned. "Why would I need a second screen? I can run them both here, and then give you a readout of the comparison--"

"That'll cause a Blue Screen of Death, for sure, and probably lock up the mainframe besides."

"A what? A blue...what?"

"Blue Screen of Death," Sam repeated. "You've never heard it called that? It's that annoying blue message that Uncle Bill throws up on the screen whenever you try to use more than fifty percent of your processor's power at any given time, with more than one operation running."
"Uncle Bill...?"

"Gates," Sam scowled. "Bill Gates. You know, the computer mogul? The wizard of Windows?"

Then it clicked for Carter. "Oh, wait! I think I remember a couple of the other realities mentioning him. Micro something. Soft, maybe?"

It was then that everyone's attention was forcibly drawn to Jack's side of the table, as Daniel shoved back his chair and closed the distance to the coffee station in four long strides.

His angry whisper was more air than sound, but his lips were fairly readable at that distance. "---ter with you? ---nally get it now ---ver actually committed --im, have y--?"

"Hello? Married?"

"--- ried with dick on the side--"

Then it wasn't whispering anymore, and all eyes were glued to the scene. "Who the fuck do you think you are, to judge me?" Jackson fairly shouted.

"I am you, remember?" Daniel bit off. "We've lived the same life, up to a point. The difference between us is that I grew up and left the slut behind."

Jackson's smirk turned to collect the attention of those in the room, then swung back to land on Daniel. "And you expect us to believe that Pretty Boy's been celibate and pure, waiting for his knight in shining armor, ever since grad school?"

Daniel frowned. "No one calls me that anymore; that's why I cut the hair. And to answer your question, no, I haven't been celibate since grad school, just since I descended. And yeah, I'm waiting for Jack, and I'm not ashamed of that."

Hearing that affirmation made so boldly, almost proudly, Jackson seemed to lose a lot of the bravado.

"You're afraid, aren't you," Daniel challenged, but at a lower volume.

The room was completely silent, everyone's attention riveted to the two identical Dr. Jacksons, and the drama unfolding between them.

"You're afraid Jack's going to leave you, now that he knows about Mitchell. You're terrified to commit yourself to one person, because if they leave --if he dumps you-- you'll have nothing again, and you're pretty sure you don't have what it takes to survive another big loss. If you can convince yourself you don't need him, that you're happier playing the field, then his leaving you --which you've all but guaranteed by your actions-- won't hurt as much."

Jackson raised his chin defiantly, but no one could miss the waver in his voice. "You get that doctorate in psychology?" He sniffed dismissively and ground out, "You don't know what the fuck you're talking about."

"Yeah," Daniel murmured, sadness couching his words, "I do." He took a step closer, and this time his voice was almost inaudible to their listeners across the room. "I know exactly how you feel. I understand the emptiness you have inside, the fear that someone's going to find out it's all an act, that you're not worthy. I get it, I really do.

"But it's time to let that go. You have a chance for something wonderful with him, but you're
fucking it all up with your insecurity. You have to be brave one more time… trust him. Give him everything, and you won't be sorry." Daniel glanced back at O'Neill, sitting open-mouthed at the briefing table, looking as though he'd been shot through the heart. "He won't hurt you."

Somewhere in the middle of Daniel's little speech, Jackson lost his battle with his emotions, and a silent stream of tears started to run down his cheek as his head dropped to his chest in surrender.

Daniel moved in and gathered him up into his arms, tucking the other man's face into his neck. Surprisingly, Jackson's arms came up around him, hands closed tightly into fists against his back, as if he couldn't allow himself to touch fully, as his shoulders shook with silent sobs.

Jack could tell that Daniel was still whispering to his double, but he couldn't see his lips clearly the way they were turned, and so had no idea if they were actually words, or merely inarticulate reassurances designed to calm. Movement in the foreground caught Jack's eye and he saw O'Neill get up and go to the pair, his expression unreadable. Standing close behind his husband, he laid a gentle hand on the middle of his back, and Jack saw a flicker of sadness cross his features. He didn't move further, waiting.

Jack was on his feet and moving toward the group before he'd even thought about whether or not he should. He stood at right angles to O'Neill, mirroring the position of his hand on his own Daniel's back and lending his unspoken support.

All at once, Jackson turned into O'Neill's embrace, leaving Daniel with empty arms, and Jack with a dilemma.

Daniel looked shattered by the close encounter with his past, and the urge to take him into his own arms was nearly overwhelming. The expression on Daniel's face, after having laid himself bare that way, was painful to see, and all Jack wanted was to hold him close and hug the pain away.

But he didn't. He couldn't. Now that they'd acknowledged the feelings between them --in front of Sam and Teal'c, no less-- there was no such thing as an innocent hug, couldn't be again, until Jack's retirement was a done deal. He knew that by the end of the day, they'd be on record with Hammond about the relationships on this side of the mirror, raising the question of whether or not he and Daniel were also a couple. He knew he'd have to be squeaky clean until he could put in his papers, and they'd even have to lay low for a while after that. There could be no appearance of impropriety that might trigger an investigation to determine whether or not they'd indulged before Jack was actually free to do so.

And so he stood there, helplessly clasping Daniel's shoulder, because that was all he could do.

Daniel watched Jackson and O'Neill's desperate clinch, saw the exchanged whispers, and knew they'd be all right. To his right, Jack stood close enough for his damned aftershave to be a problem, the heat of his hand burning Daniel's skin right through his clothes. He noticed that Jack's eyes were carefully cast downward, allowing the men as much privacy as possible for this most public of breakdowns.

How he longed to be held that way.

Daniel took a deep breath, carefully ignoring the shuddering way it came out. He nodded quickly, a signal to Jack that he was all right, but as he released Daniel's shoulder, Jack's hand slipped up for a quick squeeze of the back of his neck before the connection between them ended.

Daniel's gaze was immediately drawn to Jack's face, startled by the action, and then further stunned by the love he saw reflected in his eyes. "Jack..." he whispered.
"Yeah." Jack shoved his hand into his pocket, then make a wide circuit around the still-embracing couple and toward the SF, whose only crime was being the target of Jackson's attention.

"You're dismissed, son."

Looking as if he were going to question the order, the airman glanced over to where O'Neill was moving toward Davis's office, with Jackson in tow.

"Wait down in the control room then," Jack suggested quietly. "Go ahead, I'll clear it with O'Neill."

The SF nodded sharply with a quiet, "Yes, sir," then headed down the steps to the lower level, leaving Jack's team, plus Colonel Carter, alone in the briefing room.

In Davis' office, O'Neill could be seen perched on the edge of the General's desk, talking to Jackson, who sat facing him in the chair, chin dropped down on his chest.

As Jack cleared his throat and approached the pair of Carters, Sam moved her hand, which had been resting on Carter's forearm as if holding her in place, back into her own lap, folded quietly with its mate.

Jack settled beside them, picking up the conversation as if nothing at all unusual had happened. "So," he said, cleverly changing the subject. "We gonna get to see that Blue Screen of Death thingy before we go?"

Sam smiled and picked up the redirect. "No, sir. But I think we've just stumbled onto the real point of divergence between our realities."

"Not Martha's killer cobbler?"

"Nothing that delicious, sir." Sam smiled. "It seems that Bill Gates never rose to power in this reality. There's no such thing as Microsoft here. Everything's open source, technology isn't the enemy, and they've had completely cooperative, collaborative development for more than a quarter century, instead of an innovation-stifling mega-monopoly."


Carter watched Sam's explanations with interest.

"The fact that there weren't any strictures placed on development, meant that anyone was free to develop and enhance the system. That's allowed them to be ready to utilize and merge all the Goa'uld tech as soon as it came into their hands, instead of trying to shoehorn it into a rigid set of allowable parameters."

Jack's frown deepened. "So... no spinning off out of control in a glider because of Snaky's recall-code?"

Colonel Carter looked confused, but Sam shook her head. "No, sir."

"Seriously? That would've been enough to do it?"

"Yes, sir. Even without the defensive chair in Antarctica, they were ahead of us technologically. More than enough."

Jack was stunned. "Wait. You're tellin' me that Bill Gates, wealthiest man on the planet, is the reason we're not further ahead in the war against the Goa'uld?"
"It would seem so, sir."

Jack straightened, his expression thoughtful as he gazed through the briefing room window to the stargate below. "So. We take him out, and life's good. Yes?"

Biting back a smile, Sam replied, "Um, you'll have to run that one by the General, sir."

*****

Colonel Carter had given Sam a Tollan datapad, with all the calculations she'd need to upgrade the scout ship, as well as the gate addresses of all the discoveries they'd learned about in the last two and a half days. Janet had given Jack a kiss on the cheek and a printed copy of the sarcophagus handbook. Daniel had a camera with a dead battery and thirty minutes worth of Ancient writing he was dying to start translating. And Teal'c... well, the big guy wasn't talking, and Jack knew that couldn't be good.

After changing and gathering up their packs from the guest quarters, they headed down to the armory to pick up their weapons.

Hands stuffed into his pockets, O'Neill stood next to Jack, watching their guests gear up. "Remember, don't go to Tegalus; they're batshit crazy there. I'd give Colson Industries a pass, too; he's a bit mouthy. And you got the thing I gave you on the Trust moles at Area 51, yeah?"

"I got it, for cryin' out loud."

"And when you get in touch with the Asgard--"

"Be sure to tell them the time dilation thingy is getting ready to go bad. I got it, Dad. Really."

O'Neill sighed deeply. "Well, this was one for the books."

"How so?"

"Not often one of the mirror teams surprises us," O'Neill replied quietly.

"Ah. The ascending thing? Glad to oblige."

O'Neill snorted. Like handing a lit firecracker to a two year old. He'd have to watch Daniel like a hawk every minute. But he felt the insight he now had into Daniel's mind more than made up for that little inconvenience. "I dunno, maybe we can pull it out. Your Daniel gave me some stuff to think about."

Jack winced in sympathy. "He's doin' that to me all the time."

"Don't take it for granted, pal. That's what it's all about."

Weapons retrieved, they formed a lazy column of twos in the deserted corridor as they made their way to the mirror-room, saying their goodbyes. Deep in conversation, the Daniel's had fallen half a league behind the Jack's, and the Sam's were behind them, likewise engaged, with Teal'c silently bringing up the rear.

"Ya get kinda used to it, y'know? Being with someone. Not being--" O'Neill stopped, strongly suspecting that terminal embarrassment lay down that train of thought. He cleared his throat, the universal subject-changer and spoke softly. "Stake your claim and stake it clear. My mistake was trying to keep it under the radar. The secrecy worked against me, made him doubt us. Take my
"advice; if you want him, you'll have to make damn sure everybody knows he's yours."

"Yeah... I don't really see that happening, not as long as we're both in the program."

At the mirror room, O'Neill pulled up short and frowned. "You want I should write you a note?"

"And say what?" Jack smirked at O'Neill, glad there weren't any SFs within earshot. "That having regular sex with my civilian consultant is the key to saving the world?"

O'Neill patted down his pockets, finally pulling a pen out of the one on his right thigh. He clicked the ballpoint open a few times and said, "Sounds about right. You got some paper?"

Jack grunted and held out his hand, and O'Neill shook it with a wry smile. "Good luck," the older man said.

Jack looked past him to where the Daniels were hugging. "Yeah. You too." He cleared his throat and spoke up so everyone could hear.

"SG-1... move out."

Sam and Teal'c came forward to the doorway into the mirror room, but Daniel kept talking quietly to Jackson, holding up a single finger in Jack's direction so he could finish his thought.

Squinting, Jack shifted his weight to his right leg, propping his folded hands across the butt of his P-90. In a stage whisper, he turned to his 2iC and asked, "How many minutes we got left, before those tremor thingies start?"

"Any time now, sir," Sam replied with a grin.

Daniel slowly joined them by walking backward, his animated conversation with Jackson continuing unabated as the other followed along behind him. "It's a gate address, I'm pretty sure of that. Part of one, anyway..."

When he got close enough, Jack crooked a finger in one of the loops on the back of Daniel's pack and started assisting the momentum toward the mirror, causing Daniel to speed up so he wouldn't trip over his own feet.

"Jack!" he snarled.

"Time to go home, Daniel, before we all turn into vibrating pumpkins."

"That's just-- I was talking, do you mind?"

"Yes, actually, I do. It's a command thing. It works like this: I give an order, and the people I'm in charge of and responsible for do as I ask. Usually right away. Some of them even salute. You should try it sometime, just for the novelty alone."

"Maybe if you weren't always so--"

"So? So what? Oh, I know, maybe we can try some close order drills when we get back," Jack suggested, turning Daniel to face the mirror and giving him a little shove. "That sounds like fun, doesn't it? And the more I think about it, the more I find the thought of you saluting me amusing..."

Jackson settled next to O'Neill, unconsciously mirroring his hands-in-the-pockets stance as they watched Jack teasing Daniel, and Daniel tossing it all back. "We used to be like that," he said
"Where did it go?"

"It didn't go anywhere," O'Neill said sadly. "You were just too busy fooling around with Mitchell to play."

Jackson winced. "I know that I've hurt you--"

"Oh, y'think?"

Ignoring the other team's friendly sniping as they jockeyed for position near the mirror's surface, Jackson turned to his husband and whispered, "Why do you stay?"

O'Neill pursed his lips, but kept watching the other team arranging themselves, as well as those that waited for them on the other side. They weren't even his people, but O'Neill could see by the way Jack held his shoulders that there was something he didn't like about what he saw over there.

But that wasn't his problem. Daniel was.

"I've always known I couldn't have all of you," he answered softly, pushing through a voice that broke just a bit. "I guess I used to be willing to settle for what I could get."

Jackson swallowed hard and looked down. "I'm so sorry, Jack."

Jack tilted his head, looking at him quizzically. "That's the really sad thing. I know you probably are."

"I don't--" Daniel whispered urgently under his breath, eyes still downcast. "I don't understand why I even do it. It's not that you aren't enough for me, 'cause you are. I can't explain why I seem to need to--"

O'Neill tossed off a casual salute at the departing team, who'd just passed through the porthole into their own dimension and turned to wave. "Wave goodbye to the nice people, Daniel."

When the mirror blinked off, he turned to his husband and said, "I know what you need, but we can't talk about it here. Truth was, he didn't want to talk about it at all, anywhere, ever, but it wasn't like he had a choice. This had escalated to a tipping point and it would be decided tonight. He started down the hall toward the locker room, knowing Daniel would follow.

"See ya in two days, Carter." O'Neill waved at her before she slipped into the elevator.

He and Daniel changed quickly and headed topside, silently moving together like the well-oiled machine they used to be. They didn't speak until they were in O'Neill's truck and on the way home, off base for the first time in three days.

O'Neill pulled out of his parking space and headed for the security gate, more bone-deep weary than was justified after three days stuck in meetings.

"You need me to fight for you, don't you. To make you feel wanted, validated."

Daniel stayed quiet, keeping his eyes trained on the passing scenery, so Jack couldn't see his face. He was surprised at the way his gut roiled in shame-- not a feeling he'd ever had much time for, and yet, shame it clearly was.

Fucking Mitchell had been a spectacularly selfish and stupid thing to do. The sex hadn't even really been that good. The first time, in that dingy motel, there'd been some heat, but more from the
danger of potential discovery, imagining Jack catching him with his cock in Mitchell's mouth, or even better, ass wantonly in the air with Mitchell's dick buried deep inside him. Feeling Jack's anger, his fury, his... possessiveness...god.

Then when Jack seemed not to have noticed, hadn't done anything about it, Daniel had gotten more and more brazen about where he'd screw Mitchell. Mitchell'd kidded him about him getting off on the danger of it. Daniel finally understood now; it hadn't been the danger of possibly getting found out that had done it for him; he'd really wanted to get caught.

How sick was that?

"I guess I've never been demonstrative enough for you, have I," O'Neil mused out loud. "Maybe there should've been flowers on your desk every morning, PDA in the corridors, the whole nine yards."

They'd lost so much to the damned sarcophagus; he was bound and determined he wasn't going to lose what they had left, just because of Daniel's Goa'uld-enhanced insecurity. He'd be damned if he'd give him up, after all they'd been through. He'd salvage what he could, and they'd make do, whatever it took.

Daniel sighed guiltily, looking down at his lap. "I don't need all that. Maybe you should just have 'property of Jack O'Neill' tattooed on my forehead."

Jack grunted. "I'm less concerned that other people know, than about convincing you. You seem to need help remembering that you're taken, off the market, out of circulation."

Daniel turned to look at Jack then, just as they pulled up into the driveway. "I thought you didn't like rings." Back when they got married, they'd talked about wearing wedding bands, something to mark the change from lovers to spouses, but Jack hadn't ever warmed to the idea.

Jack parked the truck and shut off the engine. "I'm thinking of something a little more heavy-duty than a gold ring."

Daniel's eyes narrowed as he followed Jack to the front door. "Like what? Platinum?"

*Here we go.* "No, like a chastity device," Jack replied over his shoulder, as easily as if they'd been discussing what to have for dinner.

Daniel snorted as he closed and locked the door, a grin spreading over his face. "That's--" He couldn't miss the stiff line of Jack's back, and a frisson of fear scuttled up his spine, his smile fading quickly.

"Okay, you're kidding, right?"

"Nope." Jack shucked off his coat, tossing it onto the chair by the door, then headed down the hall to their bedroom.

Daniel followed him, stopping just inside the room with his arms casually folded across his chest, a completely artificial smirk of amusement carefully arranged on his face. "So. You're gonna put my dick in some kind of little contraption? That could be fun..."

Jack went to his dresser and opened the bottom drawer, reaching under the clothes and all the way in the back. "More than that. Cage in the front because you can't keep it in your pants, and because I know what a bottom slut you can be, a locking leather harness for a plug in the back. You will have no sexual contact or pleasure without my permission."
The amusement factor evaporated instantly. "What makes you think I'd even put it on?" Daniel asked incredulously.

"Because that's the deal, Daniel," Jack said tightly as he stood up, a black plastic bag clutched in his fist. "I won't stand for you tom catting all over the base, fluttering your eyelashes and wriggling your ass, humiliating me any more than you already have. You're mine, and you'll wear the chastity rig because I say so." He held it out.

Daniel lost no time snatching it out of his hands to look inside. He pulled out a leather harness with three small brass locks around the waist, attached to a clear curving tube of plastic which sported a fourth lock. He turned the device sideways to look down into the tube, finding that the plastic ring at the top was lined with tiny jagged teeth. He ran his finger across one and found them to be smooth, but rigid.

"This is ridiculous. What if I get hard?" he demanded angrily.

Jack took a seat on the corner of the neatly-made bed, and started to remove his shoes and socks. He shrugged casually. "It'll hurt. You'll learn not to."

Daniel waved the thick blue butt plug. "And how am I supposed to take a dump with this fuckin' tree trunk up my ass?" He tossed the entire device toward the bed.

Jack caught it, maintaining the outward appearance of calm, even though his heart was about to pound its way out of his chest. He finished slipping out of his shirt as casually as he could, as if Daniel's capitulation was a given. He knew this had the potential to go so wrong, so fast... but he'd started down this road, and now he had to finish it, one way or the other, even if it drove Daniel straight into Mitchell's bed permanently.

"Simple. You ask permission, and I'll unlock it. Doc Frasier will keep the spare key, in case I'm not around, or if there's an emergency."

"Janet?" The look of shock wasn't faked. "God, Jack! Permission? To use the bathroom? And what about in the locker room? Am I supposed to shower with that on? Everyone will see me wearing that thing...!"

Standing, Jack's expression hardened, and he closed the distance between them, holding the unit in front of him. "Yep, they'll see it and know exactly what it is. And they'll be able to figure out why you're wearing it, too. I find I'm really all right with that. With people knowing you fucked around on me, and I've put a stop to it."

He slid his hand behind his husband's neck and yanked him in close. "You're mine, Daniel, and I protect what's mine." He punctuated the statement with a bruising kiss that skewed Daniel's glasses.

Daniel tried hard to keep his anger wrapped around him, at the indignity of what Jack was suggesting, but that declaration settled in the base of his spine and lit a fire there, the vicious kiss inflaming a badly-timed pulse of desire.

When Jack released him, he pulled off his glasses, grinding the heel of one hand into his left eye as he watched Jack fiddle with the plastic contraption and proceed to thread both tiny brass keys onto his dog tag chain for safekeeping.

Daniel stood rooted to the spot, watching Jack handle the device, slipping the locks into his pocket as he opened them, so his hands would be free to manipulate the chain.

Jack wasn't kidding. He really meant to do this, to put a restraint system on his body, so Daniel
couldn't mess around with anyone else ever again. He'd pushed too hard, and now Jack had decided to take matters into his own hands. Daniel'd been wrong, though. Jack hadn't been indifferent to his indiscretions; he'd known about Mitchell from the beginning and hated it, until it was finally too much. But instead of divorcing him, throwing him away, Jack had decided he was worth keeping, and worth keeping safe.

He knew Jack wouldn't do it if he didn't love him; he also knew he really didn't deserve that kind of loyalty.

Daniel swallowed hard, uncaring if it showed his fear. Jack knew him, knew all about him, like no one else ever had. He couldn't pretend he wasn't bothered by this, that he was willing --able-- to walk away from the situation they were now in. He was floored that Jack loved him enough go through all this; it was terrifying to be known that well.

"You're a real bastard, you know that?" he whispered, pulse pounding in his ears in a mixture of fear and sick excitement.

"That isn't news," Jack shot back in a dangerous voice. He slipped his tags back on over his head, the keys jangling against the slip of metal like a tiny tolling bell. "I look at it this way-- as long as you're wearing this, I don't have to start killing people."

He separated the components, slipping the leather belt over his forearm, then pulling the locking ring away from the curved plastic tube. "Strip down, Daniel, let's get you all locked up, nice and safe. Then you can make a pit stop before we settle this tree trunk inside you, and after that, we'll think about dinner."

"Jack..." Daniel's eyes were filling with tears.

Jack's resolve might've faltered just then, but the other Daniel's voice whispered in his mind, he needs this... and he clenched his teeth with renewed purpose instead.

He yanked Daniel close, until their foreheads touched, and demanded in a whisper that sounded harsh even to his own ears, "Do you want this?"

Daniel's only answer was a sharp intake of breath and a puff of mostly air with very little sound and then the tears spilled silently. He stood with Jack's angry brown eyes boring into him mere inches away, knowing this was the moment when everything in his life changed. He heard the Mirror Daniel's voice in his head... Give him everything, and you won't be sorry...

He imagined wearing the device every day to work at the SGC. Whether giving a briefing on offworld culture to a roomful of Marines, or just sitting in his office doing translations, he'd be wearing the device Jack had given him. It'd be like Jack was cupping him, filling him, every hour of every day, right there with him, always. This was as binding as their marriage vows were supposed to have been, and Daniel knew if he didn't agree to do this, he'd lose Jack forever.

He imagined Jack facing down Mitchell in the locker room, locking the door for privacy, because dear god, he was sick but he wasn't an exhibitionist, stripping Daniel down completely, showing Mitchell that Daniel belonged to Jack in every way.

And if Daniel was very lucky, maybe Jack would make Mitchell watch while he unlocked the device and proved how much he still loved him.

It'd been so long since he'd felt at home in his own skin that he no longer knew who he was. This gift from Jack gave him an identity. A place to belong. Certainty. Calm.
The Daniel Jackson who'd come through their mirror had none of his neuroses, none of his fear and far fewer of his uncertainties. And he'd been right about too damned much. But his coming to their reality had been the turning point; he no longer felt as though he were spinning out of control. Jack had claimed him, and Daniel knew everything would be all right from here on out. For him, this wouldn't be about bondage, but about salvation.

Tears streaming down his face, he finally uttered a shuddering, "Yes. I want it," and started to strip.

It broke Jack's heart to have their relationship --their marriage-- reduced to this. But he'd learned over the last six years to adapt what he wanted for them to what Daniel needed to get by. And if taking away his freedom of choice gave him the peace he required, then so be it. They'd find a way to be happy.

Explaining this arrangement to the next Jack O'Neill would be tricky...

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Jack returned O'Neill's salute on the other side of the mirror, taking note of the look of desperation on Jackson's face beside him. That boy was a handful, all right.

The mirror went dark as soon as they stepped away, and Jack turned to address SG-2, who were all standing around an already packed up FRED.

"Going somewhere, Coburn?"

"Good thing you're back, sir. We were authorized to stay here until your check-in time, but not a moment later."

"Where's Reynolds?"

"SG-3 was called back yesterday evening."

"What's going down?"

"I'm just a Major, sir. Those kinds of questions are above my pay grade."

"Yeah, I got that," Jack said. "Well, never mind, we're done here."

He turned to his own team. "Let's head on home and see what's what."

They made their way back to the gate without delay, Gonzalez chattering eagerly to Daniel the whole way about all the treasures he'd cataloged.

About halfway there, Carter caught Jack's eye. Silently, he acknowledged that she had something to tell him, but shook his head for her to wait.

They sent the FRED through first, and then Jack waved SG-2 on ahead, finally patting the still-jabbering Gonzalez on the shoulder to get his attention. "Breathe, pal, they're just rocks." He aimed the excited young man toward the wormhole.

When it was down to just the for of them, he asked, "What is it, Carter?" He knew they only had moments before the wormhole shut down; he hoped she'd be quick.

"I just realized why P3X-439 sounded so familiar-- SG-3 was scheduled for preliminary recon there yesterday."
"It would appear we are too late," Teal'c said.

"Yeah, have we got timing, or what," Jack muttered gloomily. He moved up the steps, herding his team ahead of him. "Let's hold everything close to the vest, until I can find out what's goin' on, okay?"

On the other side, Hammond met them in the gateroom, just like always. There was nothing in his demeanor that would've set off any alarms. "Welcome back, SG-1."

"Good to be back, sir!" Jack replied happily. "Had a great time on MirrorWorld, General. Daniel took lots of pictures of his trip. And I ate some really good blueberry cobbler. Carter here got to talk to the other Carter about all kinds of techno doohickies. And Teal'c... well, Teal'c...." Jack looked the big guy over, but nothing specific immediately came to him. "Teal'c had fun, too." He looked back up at the General. "Anyway, wait till you see the cool souvenirs we brought back."

Hammond smiled. "I look forward to hearing all about it. Report to medical. We'll debrief in two hours."

As they made their way to the infirmary, Jack said quietly, "Something's up. Something big. After a three-day mission, he'd have let us get a good night's sleep and debrief us in the morning if everything were copasetic."

"What do you want to do?" Carter asked for the rest of them.

"I'm gonna pull rank, get checked out first, then see if I can wrangle a few minutes off the record with Hammond, while you guys finish up." Jack never went ahead of his team, even when the mission was a milk run, and everyone was fine, but Brightman probably hadn't been there long enough to notice how out of character it'd be for Jack to be the first one in.

An hour and a half later, pronounced medically sound, showered, and dressed in clean fatigues, Jack tapped a knuckle on Hammond's office door jam.

The General waved him in. "Close the door, Colonel."

Jack did, his hackles rising even further as he settled easily into the visitor's chair. "Did we miss anything, sir?"

"As a matter of fact you did. The Presidential inauguration was yesterday afternoon. We received orders to stand down at 0900 this morning. I've already started recalling all offworld teams."

Jack's nerves calmed somewhat; it was always the not knowing that pissed him off. "What's goin' on?"

"Officially, this is just to give Hayes a chance to ramp up."

"And unofficially?"

"I'm sure Kinsey's behind it. Scuttlebutt says we're being shut down to offworld missions until the NID can get one of their own men in here." He shook his head wearily. "I've got a bad feeling about this one, Jack."

Jack glanced around the office, biting the inside of his cheek. "Yeah, me too. Your-ah office is clean, right?"

"Ran the sweep while you were in the infirmary."
Jack smiled. Old George was sharp. "Sweet. Can you debrief SG-1 in here, General?"

"I'd planned on it. Have you really got something, Jack?"

"Oh, yes, sir. And don't think the irony of the timing's lost on me, but we've come back with everything you've ever dreamed of, and a couple of things Kinsey and the NID should never even get wind of. Particularly with what we now know about Kinsey."

Hammond let out a deep breath, shaking his head. If Jack hadn't known better, he'd have said the General was choked up. "I'd never dared to hope I'd actually live to see it, truth be told. It seemed we were destined to be one step behind indefinitely."

Jack thought about the Mirror-Hammond dropping in the traces while waiting for the breakthrough, and he hoped like hell theirs could hang on a little longer, at least until they got all the mirror-tech in place. Quality time with his granddaughters was just around the corner.

"Yes, sir. We hit the jackpot this time, and that's not an exaggeration."

Hammond reached for the phone and dialed the infirmary. "Have SG-1 report to my office, after all three of them have been checked out."

The knock on the door came as Jack was finishing up his tale about Mirror-Kinsey's fall from power. SG-1 came in and made themselves comfortable, Daniel settling one hip on the credenza, leaving the other chair for Sam, while Teal'c stood at Jaffa parade rest to Jack's left.

His team settled around him, Jack opened it up. "The big news is they found another repository of the Ancients, and we're pretty sure it's the same gate address as SG-3's current mission."

"They reported in an hour ago that they'd found a colonnade tens of meters high," George confirmed, "but they couldn't be certain it contained the same device you found six years ago."

"I'm willing to bet it is, sir," Jack said. "In the mirror reality, Ba'al's fleet found it within hours of SG-1 gating in, and the subsequent engagement scorched a third of the planet. There were no casualties other than O'Neill, who went ahead and had his head sucked--again--before they blew it up, so Ba'al wouldn't get his snaky hands on it. When his brain started to go Ancient, he souped up a scout ship, and SG-1 traveled to..."

"Proclarush Taonas," Daniel supplied without hesitation.

"Yeah, that," Jack said, waving a hand in Daniel's direction. "Volcano Planet. Not good for much, except it has this humongous Duracell ya need to power the fancy chair in Antarctica that shoots glowy things out into space. According to O'Neill, Ba'al was toast." They all looked at him.

"What?"

Carter turned to Hammond. "I have the specs for all the technology, sir. The Colonel's Duracell is called a Zero Point Module, and the glowy things are drones that seem to be energy--"

"I think I get the picture." Hammond held up his hand. "And if it is the same planet SG-3's on this afternoon, we probably don't have a lot of time to go into the details at this point."

"With respect to that," Carter nodded, "they gave us a Tollan datapad, loaded up with all the information necessary to obtain the scout ship and modify it, so it can make the trip to the Colonel's 'Volcano Planet' in hours, instead of days," Carter reported. "The good news is, since Colonel O'Neill won't have to take the download, we're not under the time constraints the mirror
team was with regard to removing the information from his mind. Also, I have the schematics that will allow me to modify the Asgard communication device, so we can reach them in their home galaxy of Hala."

"If Colonel O'Neill hasn't taken the download, why would we need to contact them?"

"Because we can solve their Replicator problem," Sam replied. At Hammond's surprised look, she continued, "By the time they got O'Neill thawed out, the human-form Replicators had escaped from the time dilation device and were headed straight for the Asgard's neutronium-rich planet. While he still held the Ancient knowledge in his head, O'Neill fashioned a hand-held disruptor weapon that separates the Chiron pathways that give the replicator blocks cohesion. Their Asgard used it as a model to develop a similar weapon in satellite form on a planetary scale."

"Hopefully, in exchange for the blueprints for that nifty toy, our little gray guys will agree to outfit the Prometheus with beaming technology and hyperdrive engines," Jack added. "Once we establish the Antarctic outpost, we can use the beaming technology to get us there at a moment's notice. The whole planet's protected, sir, 24/7."

Hammond looked stunned in the face of this news. "That's remarkable, Jack."

"There is also the matter of locating a Major John Shepherd, is there not?" Teal'c asked. "Does he not also possess the gene?"

Sam nodded. "The mirror team determined that Shepherd has the same Ancient gene Colonel O'Neill has, which allows only them to operate the haptic interface which runs the chair."

"Haptic?"

"Touch. It senses whether or not the individual sitting in the chair has the pertinent gene, and if not, it's just a chair. It can't be used by random people, only people whose lineage goes back to that earlier form of humans."

"Turns out I'm a freak, sir," Jack announced proudly.

"No one's perfect, Colonel."

"Yes, sir." Jack beamed. "Thank you, sir."

Hammond turned to Sam. "Any idea where we can find this Major John Shepherd?"

"We have reason to believe he may be stationed at McMurdo," Sam replied. "Once we do a little testing on both him and Colonel O'Neill, we can begin screening the rest of the armed services for others found to have the gene, in order to have a pool of personnel to train and have on stand-by."

"There's also quite a lot of writing in Antarctica, General," Daniel said, eager to get in his two cents worth. "I haven't had time to really dig into it yet, but I'm fairly certain there was at least part of a gate address there. I feel there's a good chance the Ancients left a forwarding address."

"My god..."

"Yeah," Daniel smiled, pleased that Hammond had followed his train of thought. "Think of the possibilities."

Jack had been studying Teal'c's face for several minutes, waiting for him to bring up the whole Dakara business. But since he hadn't, he figured a little nudge wouldn't go amiss. "T? You wanna
Teal’c’s gaze slid sideways, as though he was contemplating whether or not to reply. After a moment, he said, "It is true, General Hammond. In the Mirror Reality we have just visited, my people are free, and have been so for several years. This is due in large part to the discovery of the planet Dakara, long thought to be a myth among my people. That it actually exists --and can be taken from Ba'al-- will be seen as a sign in which all Jaffa can believe. Our freedom, at last, is within our grasp."

"Tell him about the weapon," Sam prodded.

Teal'c raised an elegant brow. "I have been assured that it is too dangerous to use, else all life in the galaxy be wiped out. Care will have to be taken to dismantle it thoroughly, with as little damage to the surrounding temple as possible."

"We may never need to use the weapon," Jack said. "If we get the information to Thor in time, and he gets the Replicators stopped in Hala, SG-1 won't be hanging around for Fifth to replicate, which is what brought them to the Milky Way in the first place."

Teal'c inclined his head. "That is my concern."

Jack blinked. "You've lost me."

Daniel spoke up. "You're worried that even if you and Bra'tac help us find the Ancient Chair weapon and get it working, so Earth's protected, we won't help you find Dakara."

"Indeed. It would be likely that your government would see no benefit in involving your planet in a campaign of this nature, once your immediate concerns have been addressed."

Hammond pursed his lips. "I wish I could give you ironclad assurance that won't happen, Teal'c," he said gravely. "Unfortunately, at this moment, my hold on this office is tenuous at best. Whoever assumes this post after me may not understand or care about the incredible sacrifice and contribution you've made to the effort of keeping Earth safe over the last seven years."

Hammond's intercom buzzed, and he tapped the button. "Yes, Sergeant?"

Harriman's voice came through loud and clear. "I've got Colonel Reynolds, sir. He'd like to know if SG-1's coming through to check out the colonnade, or if you want them to sit tight and set up camp."

"Patch him through, Walter." Hammond's gaze flickered up to meet Jack's, transferring the question to him.

"Tell him to blow it and get the hell home, sir. We don't need it."

Daniel groaned, pinching the bridge of his nose.

"Daniel?"

"Tell me again why there isn't a civilian scientist on every SG team."

"You want pictures," Jack surmised with a wince.

Daniel's expression said, 'Well, duh', but what he said was, "Please?"

Walter's voice said, "Go ahead, sir, you have Colonel Reynolds."
"Colonel, do any of your team happen to have a camera with them?" Hammond asked.

"A camera, sir?" Reynolds asked, obviously confused. "Stand by." After a moment, where he apparently polled his team, "No, sir. Sorry."

"Can he describe it?" Daniel sighed.

"Colonel, I have SG-1 with me now. Dr. Jackson would like you to describe what you see."

"Affirmative. The artifact stands roughly forty five meters high. It was probably originally the figure of a man, seated on a throne. The head and neck and most of one leg are gone. It's more than a statue, but less than a building. There's a small tunnel or corridor underneath the seat of the throne, with a large, roundish object imbedded in the wall, about head-height. The center opens if it's triggered by proximity. It's filled with flashing, colored lights, but nothing else."

It was Jack's turn to groan theatrically.

"If no one on his team happens to have the Ancient gene, General, that's all they'll get," Sam assured him quietly. "It only responds to someone like Colonel O'Neill."

"Does that sound like the same thing the mirror team found?" Hammond asked the room at large.

"Sounds like the pictures their Daniel showed me," Daniel confirmed. "I just wish..." He shook his head sadly as he made a silent vow to start campaigning for a camcorder in every team's away kit, as soon as they were done with the whole Antarctica thing. He'd buy them himself if he had to.

"Very well." Hammond said. "Colonel Reynolds, your orders are to destroy the circular device and get off that planet as soon as possible."

"Affirmative. Reynolds out."

Hammond closed the connection and folded his hands on the desk. "Any idea what our timetable is?"

Sam spoke up. "Colonel Carter said Ba'al's fleet arrived while SG-1 was confirming SG-3's find. There were approximately twenty-four hours between SG-3's initial discovery of the colonnade and the firefight."

"One day is a damned narrow lead, Colonel O'Neill."

"It's better than what the mirror guys had," Jack said, "but don't we have a bigger problem, sir?"

"You let me worry about that, Colonel." Hammond addressed the room. "So, what's the first step?"

"I must contact Bra'tac and procure a scout ship," Teal'c said gravely. He had the name and description of the traitor in the other reality; disposing of him would not prove to be a difficulty. But convincing Bra'tac to act, based on events which had happened in a mirror universe, was not something he was looking forward to at all.

"It'll take me a couple of hours to get all the stuff together we're going to need," Sam volunteered. "Generator, hazmat gear, about a mile of cable--"

"I have to collect some references, and then I can give you a hand pulling it together," Daniel offered.

"You'll all need to leave at the same time, I'm afraid," Hammond said quietly. "I won't be able to
open a second wormhole."

Jack understood then that Hammond was buying them this chance with his career. "Six hours enough time, Carter?"

"Make it three," Hammond countered.

"I can do some of the work on the way there," Sam said. "Three hours should be fine."

"Teal'c, Daniel, get together whatever you're personally going to need for this adventure, then report to Carter's lab as grunt labor," Jack ordered, "I'll bring the General up to speed on the various personnel issues and catch up to you."

They'd all gotten up to leave, but paused at the door as one, and Daniel said, "You want us to--"

Jack shook his head. "I've got it."

"Personnel issues, Jack?" Hammond asked after the door had closed behind them. "I take it there were some things about the mirror reality that were a little different from our own, such as Major Carter's promotion to Colonel?"

"Yes, sir, that's one. Janet Fraiser's another. She's alive. They brought her body back from 666 in enough time to use their sarcophagus."

"The one I wouldn't let you go after when Doctor Jackson had radiation sickness? Is this where I get my 'I told you so?'" he asked wryly.

"No, sir, not really. It's a dangerous contraption, no doubt about it. Their Daniel didn't die from the radiation poisoning, but he's plenty messed up in other ways."

"So I take it you're not advocating we go after one?"

"No, sir, actually I am. I talked with their O'Neill at length, and I think I know where they went wrong. They lost three men, just because they couldn't carry the bodies back. I figure if we take a team of six men each with one of those spiffy anti-grav units they showed Carter, we can bring the sarcophagus back, along with any 'temporary casualties' there might be, and fix 'em up here at home good as new. Doc Fraiser gave me a kind of users' manual she developed, so we don't get stupid with it. And we won't have to lose any more good people."

"You think it's worth the risk?"

"Yes, sir, I do. I'd like to go after it, soon as we get this whole Antarctica shindig squared away."

He hesitated, and sighed deeply. "There's really no tactful way to put this, sir, but Jacob Carter's gonna need it in a few months. Now I don't know if he'd use it, but I know he won't have a choice, if we don't have one. And... there's a good chance you've got an undiagnosed heart condition."

Hammond's sad smile was filled with irony. "Not undiagnosed, Jack, only ignored." He opened the top drawer of his desk and pulled out an amber prescription bottle. "Doctor Brightman diagnosed it the day before yesterday. Gave me a lecture on stress and a bottle of blood pressure medication, which I promptly threw into this drawer. I can't afford to be half as drowsy as that's probably going to make me." He tilted his head. "What made you think, just because the other Hammond had a heart condition, I'd be likely to have one too?"

Jack cleared his throat nervously. "Because the similarities between their SG-1 and ours were pretty dead on, sir," he said softly, trying to keep his nerves from showing. "They're-ah, five years
ahead of us, and their government repealed DA/DT a year or so ago, which left the door open for--"

"I'm going to stop you right there, Colonel."

Jack swallowed hard, the baring of his soul poised on the tip of his tongue. "Sir?" he choked out.

"I don't need to know any more, and your mission's in jeopardy if you're not out of here in three hours." His gaze softened just a little. "There'll be time to go over all of the various personnel discrepancies during the debriefing afterward. After you've saved the planet, one more time."

Jack was surprised to find that he was more than a little disappointed at not being allowed to out himself. "Yes, sir," he said softly, mentally crawling back into the closet he was pretty sure he wanted no more part of.

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The sounds coming out of Daniel's office were disturbing. Muttered snarling, punctuated by rhythmic thumping. Jack approached the open doorway cautiously, peering one eye around the corner.

Daniel was rifling through his bookcases, pulling a book out by the spine, glancing at it, muttering, then slamming the book home again. The stack of books on his desk teetered dangerously.

Jack wandered into the office, eying the pile with dismay. "What's goin' on?"

"I can't find my Anglo-Norman phonology reference," Daniel said, cramming another volume back into the bookcase.

"Sounds like a real spine tingler," Jack replied blandly. "One of your people have it?"

"Nope," --pull-- "I checked," --slam. Jack watched him sift through three more books, each time jamming the book back into its spot a little harder than the last. "I think I must've," --pull-- "left it at home," slam. "DAMN it!"

"I'm-uh, not sure that's a problem, exactly," Jack said, sliding his hands into his pockets. "I was gonna slip on by the house to change the tape in my VCR. You can come with, and we can swing by your place while we're out and pick up the missing book." He shrugged. "Easy."

Three large tomes in each hand, Daniel stopped cold. "You sure?"

"Yeah." He waved a hand toward the teetering tower of reference materials and old journals. "You think you're really gonna need all this?"

"I don't know!" Daniel said tightly as he began stuffing them into a backpack. "Maybe if I'd known about the writing in Antarctica earlier, I'd have had time to work on it there. As it is--"

"Okay, okay, don't bust a gusset," Jack said soothingly. "Give me that one, and I'll take it down to Carter's lab, then I'll call Hammond and tell him we're ISO the missing book."

Jack hefted the pack Daniel had just finished loading and grunted under his breath, "Jesus, Daniel, this gives new meaning to the term heavy reading." He settled the bag over one shoulder, as Daniel retrieved a second pack and started cramming the rest of the books into it. "Meet ya in the locker room in ten."

Later, as they changed into civilian clothes for the first time in four days, Jack let himself notice
how many people --of both genders-- checked Daniel out, both in the locker room and during the
trip up top. He wondered if that had always been the case, or if it was just that he was more
sensitive to it now. He hated to think of himself as the jealous type. But he couldn't completely
discount the possibility, either.

"You want me to drive?" Daniel asked as they approached the parking lot.

"You know the rules, Desert-boy; when it snows, I drive."

They headed down the mountain, and the silence as they drove gave Jack time to think. "You can
be mostly clueless sometimes, y'know."

"What d'ya mean?"

The corner of Jack's mouth curled in a smile. "There were a couple of women, and at least one
Marine checking you out back there." If push came to shove, Jack realized Daniel could have pretty
much anyone he wanted, anytime. The fact that he wanted Jack was perhaps making him a little
smug.

Daniel shrugged and resumed staring out the window between the moving wiper blades. "The
absent-minded professor routine usually works. It seems to cut down on the number of actual
offers, anyway."

Jack blinked and shot a quick glance at his passenger, thinking he might actually have caught
Daniel bragging. But his expression hadn't shifted one iota. "You know you're being scoped out?"
he asked, undisguised surprise coloring his question.

"Well, yeah, I'm not stupid," Daniel said, glancing over at Jack and then back to the road. "Or
blind. But I certainly don't encourage them the way Mirror-Daniel did. Does. Whatever. That was
just..." He shook his head in disbelief. "Out of hand."

Jack chewed on that all the way home, trying to wrap his head around the fact that Daniel
apparently wasn't as clueless as Jack had always thought. He wasn't sure how to feel about that.

When they pulled into his driveway, he said, "You mind staying here? I wanna leave the engine
running."

"That's fine, go ahead," Daniel said, opening up the book he'd brought with him. He set a pad of
Post-Its on the dashboard and started paging through the volume, prepared to slap one on every
couple of pages, wherever there was a passage he thought he might need.

In the house, Jack swapped the tape in the VCR for a fresh one and quickly checked the settings.

As he made a cursory tour of his home, making sure everything seemed secure, visions of Jackson
slinking up to the SF ran through his mind, his brain twisting the image into his Daniel actually
noticing the stir he caused half-dressed in the locker room and points beyond. It made him
supremely uncomfortable, and he shook his head to dismiss the visuals.

But he couldn't get what the other Daniel had said out of his mind, hard as he tried, and it slipped
out of his mouth pretty much the minute they were on the road again. "So. Pretty Boy, huh?"

"Yeah," Daniel said distractedly, still scanning through pages of the book and marking passages
with the little yellow stickies. "My-um," he waved a finger at himself, "hair was even longer than
when you met me. I mean, I never wore makeup or anything, and I never went to sex clubs or
bathhouses." He gazed through the window into the distance, frowning, as he considered the holes
in his post-descension memory. "At least I don't remember doing any of those things..."

Jack didn't know whether to be relieved or horrified that neither of those possibilities had even occurred to him. He started wracking his brain to flush out other scary things he might've overlooked, but which apparently needed to be asked.

"... but I had been known to occasionally frequent the Kerckhoff lounge in pretty minimal attire, on occasion. He smiled, remembering. "The coffeehouse around the corner had this small stage, and they used to host these jazz ensembles every Monday night. You could hear the music from the lounge while you studied." Daniel slipped the rest of the sticky note pad into the back of the book and closed it, tucking it onto the seat between them, so he could watch the road again. "Or if you waited until the third set, later in the evening, you could sneak in the back of the coffeehouse and... y'know, whatever."

Whatever? "Minimal attire?" Jack asked dubiously. "Like what?"

"Not to class, Jack," he said offhandedly. "After. There was this one Luau Night, I remember. Someone dared me to wear nothing but a sarong, and--"

"A sarong?" Jack squeaked.

"Easy access," he explained with a relaxed shrug. "One tug, and you're completely nude. Got a couple of spontaneous blowjobs, when the student advisers were otherwise... occupied."

Jack imagined a painfully young and slender Daniel, casually tugging open the sarong, displaying himself to anyone --everyone-- his package bare and soft and inviting. Turning the heads of interested students of both genders.

"Orgies, then?" Jack asked facetiously. The images in his head made his stomach turn, and he could barely get the words out. He was hoping against hope for a negative response--

"Only on weekends. I was on a scholarship."

Jack's gut clenched as his hands tightened on the steering wheel as the unwelcome images poured into his brain, images of Daniel, long, silky hair flowing, sidling up to someone --Jack's evil mind helpfully conjured up the captain of the football team for this-- opening his sarong, offering his body to anyone who'd blow him.

"The long hair was popular with the girls, because they usually wanted to play with it. The boys just liked to wrap--" Daniel stopped, finally noticing Jack's discomfort. He was pretty confused by that, since all of this was old news.

"I had a very active sex life in college," he said simply. "Call it what you will, the fact is, during my freshman and sophomore years, I'd fuck pretty much anyone that had a heartbeat. It just wasn't a big deal." He couldn't miss the way Jack's jaw rippled as he ground his teeth. "That had to have been in my personnel file, Jack," he added softly. "You can't tell me you're surprised."

Jack swallowed hard, hoping his voice wouldn't betray how badly devastated he felt by this revelation. How could he have been so stupid? Daniel wasn't naïve; his experience out in the world so far overshadowed his own, it wasn't even funny. "I read your file before the first trip out, and haven't had a reason to look at it since. And besides, reading it isn't in any way the same as hearing you recite it out loud like this. Not to mention the fact that it didn't really mean anything to me PERSONALLY at that point." He only became aware that he'd been practically shouting once he stopped, and the ensuing silence became deafening.
"Don't tell me this actually makes a difference?" Daniel asked, shock and dread filling his belly.

"I don't know, were any of these 'sarong' hook-ups serious?"

"No," Daniel assured him quickly, firmly convinced that's what Jack was worried about. "I actively stayed away from all of that. Anytime someone tried to get close, I'd get out. Nothing heavy, no strings, just having a good time. When it stopped being fun, I moved on. Sha're was my first actual 'relationship'."

And look how well that turned out, Jack thought miserably. Stranded on Abydos, unable to get away... was that why he'd unburied the gate? Had he gotten bored with the pickings? Didn't bode well for a more-than-middle-aged colonel with bad knees, did it?

And where was he supposed to stand while Daniel's orgy was going on all around him?

Even in the dim light, Daniel could see Jack's thinned lips, the angry set of his jaw, and he knew for sure he'd said the exact wrong thing. "Oh, god..." he whispered in shocked realization. "This really matters to you, doesn't it."

Jack shrugged, as though it wasn't a big deal one way or the other, but his voice was icy. "Seems to be a pattern, Daniel. I'd be lying if I said it didn't concern me."

Daniel was dumfounded. His past was apparently going to be an issue, but then so were the actions of someone else, someone who only looked like him. "So wait," he said, turning sideways so he could face Jack's profile. "Let me get this clear in my head. You think because I was easy in school, and he," Daniel paused for effect, "he cheats on his Jack, that it's a given, and I'm gonna cheat on you? That about it?"

"Daniel--"

"God!" he yelled. "We haven't even had our first kiss yet, and already you're sure I'll be unfaithful!"

"That's not it!"

"Then WHAT? You're so busy worrying about him, you're forgetting what you feel for me. Stop thinking, Jack, you're killing us!"

"I'm not doing anything!" Jack was angry. Fucking furious. "And we're not talkin' about him, here, so leave him out of it. You said Sha're was your first relationship, and you couldn't even manage to--"

The buzzing of Jack's cell phone cut off whatever he might've said next. "Goddamnit." Teeth grinding, he pulled it from his pocket.

"O'Neill," he snapped. He listened to the cryptic words for a minute, then said, "We're on our way back in, sir. ETA twenty." He slipped the phone back into his pocket as he pulled up to the curb in front of Daniel's house.

Looking straight ahead, Jack reported, "Hammond just got word from a friend in the White House that it's going down now. The timetable needs to be moved up; we have to leave within the hour." He debated calling Carter, but decided against it. No telling who might be listening.

As Daniel reached for the door handle, he said, "This isn't over."
"As far as I'm concerned, it never started," Jack replied quietly, eyes rigidly forward.

Daniel's heart skipped a beat. "Wait-- we need to discuss this!"

"No time. And there's nothing to discuss anyway. The notion of you and me, together? It was a stupid idea from the get-go. I don't know what the hell I was thinking."

Daniel sat rock still and regarded him, but Jack refused to meet his eyes. "Fine," he finally said tightly, even though his heart was threatening to pound its way out of his chest.

He got out of the truck, slamming the door a mite harder than necessary, and strode through the soft powdery snow on his walkway, as though there was absolutely nothing wrong. He opened the front door with shaking hands, not even bothering to remove his keys from the lock, and leaving the door partially ajar.

Down the hall in his study, he found the book, right where he'd thought it would be, and thus located, Daniel spent the next thirty seconds leaning both hands on the desk, head hunched down between his shoulders while he gave himself permission to freak out. A low sob escaped from somewhere deep in his chest, along with a few angry tears, as he slumped there and let it happen. So much hope, their whole future together, gone in an instant, immolated by Jack's inability to deal with the teenage indiscretions in Daniel's past.

And that's what it was, the past. He had no interest in living that kind of lifestyle again, but that didn't seem to matter to Jack. He'd apparently been expecting someone not quite so... experienced. Mirror-Daniel had done such a great job of pedaling himself, apparently that was all Jack could see now, every time he looked at him. He'd given Daniel no opportunity to explain, but really, why should he even have to?

Straightening up, Daniel scrubbed at his eyes under his glasses, took a couple of deep breaths to pull himself together, and headed out of the house with the book tucked under one arm. He relocked the front door on automatic, pocketing his keys as he reached for the truck's door handle.

They drove in silence for a few long, cold minutes, until, unable to stand the silence a moment longer, Daniel tested the waters, to see if Jack had somehow snapped out of it. "I guess it's good we got this all out in the open before we messed up your career, isn't it." Every cell in his body screamed for Jack to roll his eyes and tell him to stop being so dramatic.

"Yeah, I guess." There was no getting around the fact that, for all intents and purposes, Daniel was the butt of an over-used limerick: There once was a boy from Nantucket... Daniel's stomach turned over. Not being melodramatic then; Jack really wanted to end it. "Wow, god... How could it have gone so wrong, so fast? Was there a way to salvage any of it? They'd waited so long before they'd even dared talk about how they both felt, and he wanted so much to take what they had to the next level. How fucking ironic that the subject had only come up because of their mirror selves being married, and now, it was all gone, shattered because his own double couldn't keep it in his pants.

He cleared his throat, praying his voice wouldn't break, hoping against hope that the friendship wasn't gone as well. "You gonna be able to work with me on this Antarctica thing?" Just how bad do you hate me right now?
"It's not like there's a choice. Besides, nothing's really changed. We caught it in time." I should've known this was all too good to be true.

Keep it on the mission, O'Neill. It's all about the mission, no personal feelings here... "So, now that you have this book, that's everything for you, right? You're ready to go?"

The hard edge to Jack's voice was Daniel's answer; the friendship was gone too. "Yeah, I'm ready." You've just stepped on my heart, is all.

Jack knew it'd be tense between them for a while, that was for sure. But once they both forgot how close they'd come to actually... to finally...

Fuck.

Who the hell was he trying to kid? He'd do this Antarctic thing because they apparently couldn't do it without this stupid Ancient gene of his, and because they couldn't find Shepherd in time, but then, he vowed to himself, that'd be it. His papers would be in, and he'd be out. He wouldn't be able to face reporting for duty every day, watching the entire world –Marines and lunch ladies, for cryin' out loud-- eyeing Daniel up. Who knew? Maybe the day would come when, out of desperation, or maybe just out of spite, Daniel wouldn't be the clueless Professor. Jack couldn't be in the vicinity when the sarong dropped.

Yeah, he could do this. Couple of days, tops. Then, goodbye Daniel, hello, fish-less lake. "We'll head straight for Carter's lab after we change, see what kind of help she needs, then get this show on the road."

Jack's tone betrayed no trace of anything other than business as usual, as if it wasn't really bothering him one way or another. Daniel turned his face toward the side window, in case he wasn't able to stop the new tears he felt scorching the backs of his eyeballs. At least this way, Jack probably wouldn't see them if they did fall. "Yep. On the road." I hope to hell this tech is worth the price we've just paid for it.

*****

Chapter 3: We Save the World. It's What We Do - Once more without feelings.
Once more without feelings.

"How long until we get to Volcano World?"

"Actually, sir, according to Colonel Carter, there's no evidence of volcanoes, active or otherwise, on the planet. Just endless oceans of molten lava."

Jack was sure she kept calling her mirror double by her rank as some kind of dig, and it was starting to piss him off. "Okay then, how long until we get to Lava World?" he asked tightly.

She smiled. "Once I make the upgrades to the engines, I estimate six hours there, another six back."


"Um," Daniel said, raising a finger. "Both of my packs--"


Well, although Jack had obviously decided not to love him, at least he wasn't going to allow him to starve. He supposed that was something.

"What's this?" Jack asked, toeing a rather large case on the floor.

"That's a Naquada generator," Sam said. "I thought we might need it."

"You're gonna need to prioritize, Carter. We can only take what the four of us can wear or carry. And we leave," he checked his watch, "in twenty minutes."

"But I thought--"

"Things are moving just a bit more quickly than we'd originally hoped, and we have to get moving. What do you need the three of us to do to finish it up?"

In the end, Jack fashioned a strap, so Teal'c could carry the generator across his back, just under his fully-loaded pack. He looked quite the sight, decked out in his Jaffa robes, with all that Tau'ri gadgetry strapped to him.

Jack carried his own rucksack and one of Daniel's, while Daniel carried the rest of the world's collection of Ancient writings and reference materials, as well as all of their hazmat suits.

Carter... was in the bathroom. A couple of minutes elapsed before she rushed back into her lab, breathless from the run. She started slipping into her own gear.

"Carter?" Jack was irritated at the world in general and felt free to let his pique show.
"You really want to know, sir?"

Jack thought about it, processed it, did some quick mental calculations regarding the current Gregorian date and lunar cycles, and concluded, that no, he really didn't want to know what had taken her so long in the bathroom.

Checking to see that everything that had been piled by the door was either on someone's back or in their hands, Jack figured they were about as ready as they'd ever be.

If the corridors were a little quieter than normal, he chalked it up to the late hour. That the gate room was utterly devoid of personnel, even at 2230, was kind of hard to miss. A glance over his shoulder showed that the only profile visible in the control room was Hammond's, and a chill ran through Jack's spine at the implications of that.

Hammond started the dialing sequence, but saw no reason to intone each chevron's achievement. What was important, now that he'd committed to this course of action, was it's timely completion. It was to be his final act as commander of the SGC.

He'd gotten word that a civilian named Elizabeth Weir and Senator --now VP-- Robert Kinsey were on their way from Washington, D.C., and he had no doubt that he'd be taken into custody the moment they arrived.

Sam saw the empty control room and was immediately suspicious, looking around to finally notice they were alone in the embarkation room. "Sir, what's Gen--"

"Not now, Carter," Jack said sharply. "We've got a mission to complete. Eyes front."

As one, they turned to face the gate.

Once the final chevron engaged, Hammond opened the com into the gate room. "SG-1... godspeed."

Jack turned and snapped off a smart salute. Instead of the standard thank you, Jack said solemnly, "You too, sir."

Without another backward glance from any of the team members, they strode up the ramp, their boots clanging on the heavy metal grid-work, and they stepped through the event horizon.

Once they'd cleared the dais on the other side, Jack set down the heavy stuff he'd been carrying and looked around. Judging by the long shadows, it was late afternoon. He hadn't had reason to come to the Land of Light in the last couple of years, but it was Teal'c's second home. Bra'tac maintained a residence there, where Rya'c often stayed. It also served as a resting place between skirmishes, where they could contact the SGC, if the need arose.

Jack was glad to see they'd moved the gate out of the dark side and into the clearing nearest the palace. He was about to order them there, so they could find out if Big Hat Guy knew where Bra'tac was, when Daniel asked quietly, "What's goin' on, Jack?"

As his three team members gathered around him, curious and concerned, Jack sighed, pulling off his cap and ruffling his hair thoroughly before slipping it back on. No reason not to tell them, now that it was a done deal.

"Hammond received orders this morning to recall all off world teams and shut down the gate until further notice."
Carter's eyes grew wide. "Orders from...?"

"The President. Hammond thinks they're sending someone from the NID to take over SGC operations."

"They can't do that," Sam protested.

"Oh, yes, they can. Major. Hammond probably just scuttled his career by helping us gate out. That's why the control room and the gate room were cleared, so no one else could be implicated. He's noble like that."

There followed a long moment of silence before anyone spoke.

"He offered to resign, when Teal'c was stuck in the gate buffer," Sam said quietly. "He told me it might buy an hour to figure out how to help Teal'c, rather than let the mission go forward like Simmons wanted, knowing what would happen if that wormhole engaged. He was willing to do that for an hour."

"No," Jack said. "Not for an hour. For a friend."

Daniel sighed. "He's got a frightening amount of faith in us," he observed wryly.

"Yeah," Jack replied. "So let's not let the man down, shall we?" He stooped to pick up the heavy cases he'd been carrying and started for the village that surrounded the palace.

After about ten minutes of walking two-by-two in silence, Teal'c said, "Bra'tac's shelter is in this direction." He veered off to the left, and the rest of them followed down a narrow street lined with small, simple abodes. Smoke curled from the chimneys, the smells emanating from the homes indicating it was near mealtime.

Teal'c stopped suddenly, turning to his companions. "It would be wise not to mention that Bra'tac of the Mirror Reality leads the free Jaffa there, lest he think we are all mad."

"No sense swelling the old guy's ego any more than we have to," Jack agreed.

From across the street came a booming voice. "Teal'c!" Within several long strides, Bra'tac was standing with them. "Old friend!"

Teal'c set his parcels down, and they grasped arms, exchanging wide smiles of greeting.

"What brings you to the Land of Light? Rya'c is not here. He is on Chulak, training with Rak'nor."

"We have not come to visit, old man."

Bra'tac's expression suddenly changed to one of concern. "Have you heard, then?"

"Heard what?" Jack butted in.

"I have just arrived myself. I had planned to take a small bit of time to eat a meal with Leedora, and then send word to the Tau'ri that Anubis has gathered the full force of his fleet. He is to reach Earth within three days."

"Anubis?" Jack asked. "Not Ba'al?"

"Ba'al's fleet is no match for Anubis," Bra'tac snorted dismissively.
"It makes sense, sir," Sam said. "Their Anubis was destroyed in the battle over Abydos a year ago. It could've taken Ba'al a year to amass enough firepower to be that kind of threat to Earth."

"I do not understand." Bra'tac frowned. "Their Ba'al?"

"Is there somewhere we can set all this stuff down and talk?" Daniel asked.

"Of course. My shelter is close by."

They walked for a few minutes, amused at the number of people who greeted both Teal'c and Bra'tac by name.

No fire was laid in the grate of Bra'tac's home, since he hadn't been there in some time, but everything was neat and clean in the small living area, where they found a table and several chairs. Everyone was grateful to lay down their gear and take a seat.

Teal'c wasted no time in delivering his message. "You and I must visit the resistance on Chulak. There, we will contact a Jaffa named Ronan, who will allow us to use his scout ship to defend the Tau'ri from Anubis."

Bra'tac's expression was wary as he studied Teal'c closely. "I know of his father, but I have never met the son. How is it that you have heard of him?"

Bra'tac listened quietly as Sam and Teal'c briefly explained their visit to the mirror reality, carefully leaving out the part where Bra'tac himself was head of the free Jaffa nation.

"I see," was all the comment he had.

"You're not buyin' this whole mirror thing, are ya?" Jack asked from the chair in the corner.

"I would not, if it were only you who were selling it," Bra'tac replied tersely over his shoulder. "However, I trust Teal'c."

"I have seen it, Master," Teal'c said quietly, almost reverently. "Our people are free."

After a moment, a smile broke out on the weathered face, and he clapped Teal'c hard on the shoulders. "Then that is what I shall purchase!"

Uncomfortable with the pair of beaming Jaffa, Jack leaned over to Daniel and loudly whispered, "When this is all over, you need to offer the Jaffa an 'English Idioms 101' class."

Daniel folded his arms across his chest and regarded the warriors in front of him. "I think they're doing just fine without it." The more he thought about Jack and his bigoted attitude back on Earth, the more his anger was starting to edge out the grief.

*****

They all enjoyed the hospitality of Leedora and her husband, who served them a hearty meal of rice stew, and then Teal'c and Bra'tac left on their quest for a ship, leaving Sam, Jack, and Daniel to wait for them at Bra'tac's dwelling.

Sam pulled most of her pack apart and completed the modifications necessary to the Asgard com unit, using the Tollan datapad.

Jack used that to make his appeal for the upgrades to the Prometheus, in exchange for the plans for the Replicator Disruptor Sam had already fed into it. They had no way of knowing whether or not
the message was even getting through, since it couldn't be a real-time conversation. They figured they'd try again, once they were in orbit around Taonas.

With time to kill, Sam busied herself working out the calibrations of the Naquada generator outputs. With the receiving rings covered in ice, there would be nothing to trigger the energy exchange necessary to power them. The Naquada reactor could power the rings, even without the receiving set, but the trick would be to keep them running long enough that they'd melt through the nearly three miles of ice covering the floor unit, without flooding the outpost and potentially the rest of the planet. If she could superheat just the inside of the rings, hopefully the ice on the outside edge would re-freeze quickly enough in the cold air to keep...

"She doesn't know anyone else is around when she gets like that, does she," Jack observed.

Daniel grunted and turned away. The act Jack was putting on was starting to grate. Pretending that everything was normal and civilized between them, as though the last few hours hadn't seen Daniel's heart go up in flames.

"She's learned the very valuable skill of blocking you out, in order to get her work done. Don't take it personally." He pulled the radio from his vest and pocketed it, then dropped the vest by the door with the rest of their gear.

"I'm going to go say hi to Tuplo and Melosha. Call me when Teal'c checks in."

And just like that, Jack was alone. Mostly. He figured Daniel's reaction was predictable; after all, he'd come pretty close to snapping up Jack O'Neill. Probably the only reason Daniel'd been interested in the first place was because he'd been off-limits, he thought sourly. A personal challenge to make the Colonel break, to bag the trophy. It was only natural he'd be annoyed because Jack had come to his senses in the nick of time and wouldn't be waving his legs in the air anytime soon.

Jack also wasn't surprised that Daniel probably still had a thing for his caveman girlfriend, either; after all, he'd apparently fuck anybody. Not that Jack had any reason to care anymore.

Left to his own devices, Jack took a nap.

*****

Dressed in the class A's he kept in his on-base quarters for just this kind of emergency, Hammond waited in his office, finishing up some requisitions that had been sitting in his in box since that morning. No sense leaving loose ends. He hadn't even tried to pack up his office, since he was sure they wouldn't let him take anything with him, not even his personal effects.

He buzzed Walter, who lost no time appearing at the door.

"Yes, sir?"

"Will you see to the packing up of my office, Sergeant? Once they've given you clearance to do so, collect only my personal effects, pictures and the like, and take care of them for me. I'll send for them, if I can."

The technician looked pained. "Sir, maybe they'll understand why you did it--"

"I doubt that very much, son. Treason doesn't lend itself to explanations."
"I wish you'd have let me help you, sir."

Hammond smiled sadly. "I needed to keep you clear, so there'd be someone I trust left here to keep an eye out for them. To run interference for them if they need it."

Harriman straightened, solemnly accepting the mantle of responsibility the General had laid upon his shoulders. "Yes, sir, I'll keep the light on for them."

"That's all I can ask, Sergeant. I know you'll do the right thing."

Kinsey breezed in not twenty minutes later, mad enough to spit nails, and trailing a pair of stoic secret service agents and a tall, dark-haired woman, who looked more than a little lost in the face of his nonstop rhetoric.

George listened quietly -- Kinsey was the VP, after all -- but offered neither excuse nor explanation for his actions. He waited out Kinsey's blathering, and when the pompous ass turned away to give instructions to the SFs who would escort him out of the mountain, George greeted the woman who had accompanied him.

"Sorry we're meeting under these circumstances, Doctor Weir. Doctor Jackson's spoken very highly of you in the past."

A little stunned, she shook his hand. "He has? I don't believe we've ever met."

"I don't think you have. But we're a seat-of-the-pants operation, Doctor. Many of us have been pressed into service with duties for which we never received training. For instance, Doctor Jackson has authored most of our treaties with off-world sentient beings over the last seven years, and he's often made it a point to credit you, mentioning that he's referenced your work heavily."

"I'm... honored. I guess. To be honest, this all still seems pretty outlandish to me. I keep expecting to wake up and find out I've been pranked in a really big and nasty way."

She smiled, and George found himself starting to like her.

"If you'll forgive me, General Hammond, why'd you allow the SG-1 team to leave the planet, over the express orders of the President?"

George regarded her wryly. "The President doesn't have all the information, Doctor Weir."

His admonitions to the agents complete, Kinsey caught the tail end of Hammond's reply and snorted meanly, his trademark fire and brimstone bubbling just under the surface. "That's your story? I doubt that'll fly very far, General. The President wants to speak with you personally. If it were up to me, you'd have a one-way ticket to Leavenworth," he sneered. "You and SG-1 have spent the last seven years pretending the SGC was your own, private plaything, and just look where it's gotten us."

Without waiting for an answer, he addressed one of the SFs. "Escort the General to Peterson Field, Major, and hand him over personally to the security detail waiting there. Remember, he's under arrest for high treason, and therefore your prisoner; you do not take orders from him."

*****

Teal'c remembered the vivid description Master Teal'c of the Mirror Reality had given of Bra'tac's beating at Ronan's hands, and how only the healing power of the Ancients, which O'Neill possessed, had saved him from his fatal wounds. Therefore, once he and Bra'tac were in control of
the ship, Teal'c had no qualms whatsoever about using his Zat three times, to eradicate the traitor forever. Now that he had a plan, no one and nothing would stand in the way of his people's freedom.

*****

Bra'tac stayed with the cloaked ship, while Teal'c gated back to P3X-797. He didn't bother to take the time to change out of his robes, but just helped the others pack up.

The fact that Jack and Daniel said nothing at all to one another as they walked back to the gate was masked by Sam's exuberant chattering to Daniel about the things she'd learned while fiddling with the reactor.

Gear battened down, they left Chulakian airspace within the hour, bound for Taonas. Their six-hour countdown had started.

Leaving Bra'tac and Teal'c to fly the ship, Sam's first order of business was to execute the upgrades to the engines --performed not with tools and gauges, but by the quick blast of a Zat, of all unlikely methods-- which sped things up considerably. Then she began her work, linking the modified reactor to the transport rings.

Meanwhile, Jack and Daniel kept their distance from each other on opposite sides of the cargo hold. Daniel sat in one corner, surrounded by books, his attention firmly in the head space of the language of the Ancients, while Jack sat in another corner attempting to raise Thor again, and trying not to keep glancing at Daniel.

Easier said than done.

Green jacket discarded and one booted foot resting up on one of Carter's mysterious crates, Daniel's t-shirt sleeves were tight across his biceps --not as noticeably as Teal'c's, but getting there. The shirt was obviously two sizes too small, because the tiny points of his nipples were plainly visible from all the way across the cargo bay. His BDUs were so snug, Jack could see the swell of his package piled up along one thigh; he'd dressed to the right today...

Oh, fuck, Jack groaned internally. What was wrong with him? How could he still notice Daniel this way, still want him, after finding out that so many people had already had him like that? Indiscriminate, meaningless rutting with people whose names he probably hadn't even known, their hands and mouths and dicks all over him-- in him--

Damn it.

He'd had his life all planned out, but it was dizzying how fast it'd all gone to hell. It was the third week in January, with only the Antarctica business between them and the rest of their lives. They could've gotten together as soon as they had the souvenirs squared away-- find the Duracell, get that Sheppard guy on board with the chair, and he and Daniel could've been screwing like bunnies by Valentine's Day. Now it was all gone. Every bit of it. Ruined.

Stepping back a little from the initial shock he'd felt as he'd listened to Daniel's easy recitation of his youthful sexual exploits, Jack could now see that a lot of what had bothered him about hearing it was that he'd been intimidated by the vastness and variety of Daniel's experience. Not that he'd ever admit it. Daniel was obviously just as into women as men, and completely comfortable in his own skin, if regularly engaging in semi-public sex was the criteria for something like that. Compared to Daniel, Jack's sexual history read like something pathetically insignificant and blindingly vanilla, and he'd been in college in the seventies, for cryin' out loud.
Oh, yes, his feelings of sexual inadequacy apparently ran quite deep, thanks to Daniel. Jack was mildly grateful he hadn't realized what a loser he was in that department until he was practically fifty-two, with a good part of his life already --thankfully-- over.

Another part of his freak-out centered around the fact that he really had known about Daniel's past. It was a testament to just how fucked up he'd been eight years ago, that he hadn't remembered the specific details in his file until the moment Daniel had mentioned it. What Jack had recalled from that first trip to Abydos was that the geek had been completely clueless about having acquired himself a wife, but he had bravery in spades: those had been the only two impressions of Daniel Jackson Jack had taken with him when he'd left the young bridegroom on another planet.

He'd seemed just as clueless when Jack went back to get him a year later. The passion with which he'd spent the next three and a half years searching for his abducted wife had only reinforced the innocent, dedicated, heterosexual image, which Jack had apparently created and cultivated all in his own mind.

Which actually explained everything, Jack realized. He couldn't possibly be in love with Daniel, because the real Daniel Jackson liked to play the field, sometimes with an audience. And that ran counter to Jack's mental image of a shy Daniel Jackson-- the one whom Jack had expected would easily turn the expansive love and singular devotion he'd formerly had for Sha're toward him, after which they'd live happily and hornily ever after.

And oh, dear god, were they there yet? All this thinking was obviously killing his brain.

*****

After the Colonel had offered to help her 'fiddle' with the rings for the third time, Sam lost not only her concentration, but her patience, and tracked Daniel down in the small bathroom near the rear of the ship.

She tapped on the door. "Daniel, get out here and play with him," she hissed as loudly as she dared.

"I can't hear you over the engines, but I'll be out in a minute!" he called out. Interesting design, he mused, putting the facilities right next to the engine section without benefit of any of the noise-dampening insulation which muted the roar from the main compartment. Must've been an afterthought. He turned the page of his book and kept reading.

This time she knocked more loudly and spoke up even more, not caring much who heard her. "Not in a minute, right now! He's bored and driving me crazy. I've got Teal'c watching him at the moment, but even he's about ready to strap the Colonel into one of the escape pods!"

"Sam, I said, I'll be out in a minute."

He'd heard her the first time, but really had no desire to appease Jack's boredom. It used to be fun; they'd play cards, or flick a ball back and forth, or he'd make fun of Jack's yo-yo abilities, just to kill time. But half of that had been mutual flirting, and Daniel was pretty sure that wasn't part of their friendship anymore; come to think of it, he wasn't certain there even was a friendship now. He'd always hated the no-frat regs, but he had to admit he was starting to see there was a damned good reason for them.

He wondered if he could keep on hiding in the bathroom, until they got to LavaWorld...

*****

It was damned hot down there. They'd changed into their hazmat suits, just like the mirror team
had done, and ringed down into the protected room.

Jack didn't bother to play with the chair, because they already knew they were headed back to Earth. Instead, he went straight to the compartment that held the ZPM, retrieved it and passed it off to Sam to carefully tuck into her pack.

They were back up in the ship within minutes and immediately took off for Earth.

With Bra'tac at the controls, Jack tried the Asgard device one last time, but after that, there was nothing for SG-1 to do during the six hour trip back. They got the sleeping bags out, and the four of them each staked out a piece of cargo hold floor and tried the best they could to rest.

*****

The journey to Washington, DC, was an awkward one. George was personally acquainted with both of the pilots and at least one of the SFs assigned to guard him, and he felt bad for their obvious discomfort.

Once at the White House, he was escorted in to see his old friend Henry Hayes, who wasted no time getting to the point. "Why'd you do it, George-- throw away your distinguished career, your pension, your freedom?"

He'd been ready for the question from the moment SG-1 had told him they'd found a way to protect the planet. Mister President, SG-1 has saved Earth more times than I can count. On their last mission, they discovered technology that will finally protect this planet from an invasion from space. I felt I had to let them make the attempt. A charge of treason seemed to pale, in comparison to what would be lost if they weren't allowed to try."

Hayes frowned. "I've been reading their mission reports, George. You're placing a lot of faith in a team of people who've messed up as many times as they've saved us. There are some who'd say we wouldn't need saving at all, if this stargate thing hadn't been turned on in the first place."

Hammond smiled patiently. He knew exactly who was pitching that agenda: Kinsey, with Richard Woolsey's help. But he'd had seven years --almost eight now-- to learn to expect the unimaginable, to make friends with the unlikely, and to embrace the unknown. And in the case of SG-1, to never say something was impossible.

"With all due respect, Mister President, that's naïve thinking. The Goa'uld have ships, big ones, with mighty powerful weapons. Earth is considered the 'First World' to this race of aliens. Hundreds of planets have been seeded from human beings taken from our planet. The Goa'uld have always known about us. It's always been just a matter of time before they'd come back, either to destroy us or enslave us. And according to SG-1, our time's up."

Hayes motioned Hammond to the couch in front of him, as he settled a hip on the corner of his desk and cautiously regarded his friend. "What've you got, George?"

*****

Daniel had learned early on to try to sleep whenever the opportunity presented itself; you never knew what was around the next corner, and it made sense to be rested. He'd never been able to apply that philosophy on Earth, though; at home, he still worked around the clock, because he'd learned to follow his hunches where they led, and he was most often happily surprised where he ended up. So as he lay there on the hard cargo bay floor, he had every intention of sleeping, but the noises coming from beside him were not to be ignored.
He rolled over to find Sam curled up on her side, facing him and weeping softly.

"Hey, what's the matter?" he whispered. He reached out and took her hand in his, and she squeezed it, biting her lip.

The matter was, she'd done all the fixing and upgrading and calibrating there was to be done, and now there was nothing to do but think. About her dad. About Janet.

"I loved Janet. I know I did."

He recognized soul searching when he heard it. "But not 'that way'?

"I don't know!" she answered softly, her anguish finally able to pour out. "I never had a chance to, a reason to even imagine it. I wish she'd told me... sometimes I'm so angry with her, for keeping it to herself--"

"And then you feel guilty for being mad."

She nodded sadly. "I feel so stupid. Now, I'll never know--" She bit her lip again, trying to staunch the flow of sadness, but it was too big, the pain of losing Janet too fresh to just push away. This was mourning of a whole different kind. A lost chance.

Daniel scooched closer and pulled her against him. She buried her face in his chest as he wrapped himself around her, keeping her safe within the cocoon of his arms, stroking her back to try to be of some comfort.

After a time, the silent sobs stopped, and she tilted her head up, eyes shiny and red. "It's lucky you and the Colonel found each other in time," she murmured stuffily.

"Yeah, I don't-- I mean, we're not--"

"It's pretty obvious you and the Colonel are attracted to one another, Daniel," she said softly. "I'm happy it's going to work out for you both."

Daniel thought about what a mixed blessing it had been to find out about their mirror counterparts, but how in the long run, it really hadn't helped him get his heart's desire after all. Some dreams just weren't meant to be.

"Not really, Sam," he sighed softly to the top of her head. "It was a double-edged sword at best. We-um, decided to scrap the whole idea. It wouldn't have worked out anyway. We'd only drive each other nuts."

He glanced up to find Jack glaring at him from his sleeping bag on the other side of the cargo hold, lips pressed together in disapproval. Daniel wasn't sure if it was because he'd heard what Daniel had just said, or if he just didn't like him holding Sam.

Well, whatever the problem was, it was tough, because Sam was his friend, and she needed to be held. It'd been a long time since anyone had cried on him, and it felt good to be needed that way. He tightened his hold on her, watching as Jack's eyes narrowed dangerously just before he rolled over, presenting Daniel his back.

It wasn't too long before Daniel felt Sam relax in his arms, and he knew she was finally asleep. Sleep never came for him, though. He lay resting his eyes, stroking Sam's hair and wishing it was Jack he was holding.
But he knew that would only have worked if he'd never gotten his memories back, the ones from his college years, anyway. Plus if Jack had ever remembered having read his file, or ever had reason to read it again, Daniel knew it would've broken them up at that point anyway.

If he'd only he'd have kept his damned mouth shut...

He had a hard time believing that Jack was so puritanical, and yet, he'd witnessed the destruction of their fledgling relationship right there in the front seat of Jack's truck, just days away from finally being able to act on what he'd felt the moment Jack had walked into his tent on Vis Uban, with his silver hair and his skinny ass and his sexy hands.

But there was no point dwelling on 'what might have been', particularly this close to a mission where they were probably all going to die anyway.

*****

The small crowd of the President's most trusted advisers listened helplessly as one after another, all three ships in the Nimitz battle group were turned into fireballs. The engagement had taken less than five minutes.

In response, anti-aircraft jets were instantly scrambled, but their instruments could find no targets. Whoever was responsible for the destruction appeared to be well out of range, waiting for them to make the next move.

Kinsey seethed on the expensively-upholstered couch. He was angry beyond measure that Hammond was not only free, after all of Kinsey's hard work to ensure just the opposite, but apparently, he was in favor. Robert pushed hard to have Prometheus launch quickly and retaliate decisively. The sooner this problem could be taken care of, the sooner he could get back to convincing the President that George Hammond couldn't be trusted.

But, in his irritatingly quiet Texan way, Hammond balked at his suggestion to launch now, and Hayes bought it, squashing that avenue of vindication.

Kinsey knew he'd need to find a way to turn this situation to his advantage, and fast, before his own position became untenable.

*****

Jack had a lot of time to gnash his teeth in the dark, pretending to be asleep. He spent most of it fuming about Carter. Didn't matter that he had no say about either of their private lives, and had, in point of fact, urged both of them to get a real life many times over the years. The truth was, watching Daniel hold her that way did something unpleasant to Jack's insides, for reasons he didn't understand and wasn't really in the mood to analyze.

He hadn't been able to hear what they were whispering about, but watching Daniel stroke her hair as she tucked her face into his neck had made his blood boil; it'd been all Jack could do not to jump up and forcibly rip them apart. He'd finally had to turn away.

An hour later, when he couldn't stand laying on his left side any longer and rolled quietly onto his back, a glance to his right found both Daniel and Carter asleep, limbs intertwined, making Jack wonder just how close they really were. If they'd done this before. If they'd ever--

It made her reaction to finding out about the mirror Jack and Daniel a lot more understandable. It'd also lit his guts on fire all over again.
He set his jaw and rolled back over to his left side again, stubbornly refusing to react to the searing pain in his hip, and trying to flush the image of the two of them from his mind.

*****

Two hours after the battleships had been destroyed without warning, there came an uninvited visitor to the White House. A momentary flickering of the lights was the only advance notice they had before the hologram of Anubis appeared in the Oval Office. Acting on their training and instinct, the Secret Service folk shot up the place good before they all realized the image was simply a transmission, and that they were in no imminent danger from it.

Henry Hayes was as calm as he could be, considering that this was still his first week as President of the United States, and he'd just discovered he was living deep inside the third act of an episode of Twilight Zone, with a plot twist in the fourth act still to come.

He dealt with the over-the-top bad guy with tongue planted firmly in cheek, until the high-tech villain faded away.

He played it light in front of the people who were counting on him to be the leader they thought they'd elected, but inside, he was good and scared. His mama hadn't raised no dummy.

*****

In order to sneak in underneath the armada that was stationed around the planet in high orbit, Teal'c dropped the scout ship out of hyperspace as close to the Earth's atmosphere as he dared. There was a bit of wrestling involved in order to slow the ship down so that they wouldn't crash into the ice of Antarctica, but it was well within his abilities to do so.

Once he'd leveled off, Sam gave him the coordinates they'd gotten from the mirror reality; they were nearly identical to those of the complex she and Colonel O'Neill had stumbled upon early on in the program, but much further down.

"Using Colonel Carter's notes, I've modified the matter stream transmitter according to Mirror O'Neill's specifications, in order to bore a hole in the ice," she reported to no one in particular. "We should be able to cut through it in just a couple of minutes, once we get into position."

"I estimate twenty-one minutes until we reach those coordinates," Teal'c replied.

*****

Jumper's announcement that some thirty-odd enemy ships had just taken up station-keeping in low earth orbit was delivered with all the calm and aplomb one could hope for in the midst of a crisis of unheard of proportions. Hayes made a mental note to give the man a raise, if they lived.

"I guess they didn't buy it," he said with a shrug.

Kinsey started clucking about going to the Alpha site, and Hayes was having a hard time restraining the urge to punch him in his sanctimonious nose. He was pretty sure he wasn't the only one in the room having to fight that same urge. "You go, Bob. I'm staying."

Kinsey was out the door almost before the echo of the words had died out.

All of Hayes' other advisers announced they were staying, much to his relief, and he decided maybe they needed a new level of combat pay across the board, perhaps, Twilight Zone Pay.
Hayes turned to Hammond. "God knows, George, you deserve the right to go," adding with a grin, "or at least the opportunity to tell me, 'I told ya so'."

The General smiled ruefully, but declined both offers.

"Good. If you'll accept it, I have another job for you."

At that moment, Robert Kinsey was having a rather heated exchange with the Secret Service detail assigned to Marine One, the Presidential helicopter, concerning authorization codes. Apparently, Kinsey was using an old one.

At almost the same moment, the lead agent was receiving orders in his earpiece from his superior in the Oval Office, to hold the chopper for Major General Hammond, with a destination of Bolling AFB in Anacostia, six minutes away by air. This was accompanied by a *valid* auth code.

The agent was also instructed to escort the Vice President back to his own office and to make him comfortable there for the time being. As the agent was conveying this information to the blustering Kinsey, George Hammond strode across the South Lawn and straight up the aircraft's steps without so much as a sideways glance.

George used the six minute travel time to contact the SGC. He wasn't surprised that Walter was still manning the control room, even though it was many hours after his shift should've been over. Since Doctor Weir was on the phone with the President, Walter briefed him.

"Sir, SG-1 has just entered the solar system, destination Antarctica. ETA, thirty minutes. They've asked for the Prometheus to watch their six."

Hammond confirmed he was borrowing the President's F-302 and would be touching down at Area51 in just under twenty minutes. "Walter, contact Nellis and put Blue Squadron on alert."

"Already done, sir. Colonel Max Kirkland is performing the pre-flight on Prometheus, and Colonel Cameron Mitchell is standing by with Blue Squadron." Hammond smiled.

Back in the Oval Office, President Hayes was going over his prepared statement with something akin to frustrated awe. How was he supposed to tell the nation *the world*—that the sci-fi shows were right, that they weren't alone in the universe, certainly, and that a lot of the others out there weren't all as benevolent as Mister Spock?

Moments before he was to begin, Frank Maynard confirmed that nearly all global satellite communication capability had been lost. "So much for my speech," Henry muttered.

*****

The F-302 needed only a tiny piece of the many miles of available runway Area51 had to offer. The 2,400 mile flight had taken just under sixteen minutes, from takeoff inside DC's no-fly zone to touchdown in Nevada, none the worse for the Mach 6 trip, thanks to the inertial dampeners.

George took the elevator down fifteen stories underneath the desert floor, to the underground hangar where Prometheus was docked. An airman met him at the bottom with a flight suit and escorted him to the on-board gear up room to change. Under his feet, George could feel the shuddering in the deck, telling him the ship was idling, and the pre-flight was finished.

Five minutes later, Hammond strode onto the bridge and acknowledged Colonel Kirkland with a quick nod. "Let's get this bird in the air."
They were approaching the southern pole less than ten minutes later.

****

Bra'tac slipped into the pilot’s seat as Teal'c vacated it, tracking the ships which approached from all directions. They would be under siege in less than thirty seconds. To have come this far, have gone through so much, only to be stopped when they were this close... Bra'tac had had more than a hundred years to become used to this kind of crushing disappointment, but it was never easy.

Sam fired up the matter stream transmitter, pleased when it seemed to be functioning as her double had said it would. Goa'uld ships were coming up from behind them, being met by the squadron of shiny F-302s she could see coming directly at them.

They were badly outnumbered and outgunned, and there was no way to know if they could hold off the assortment of Al'kesh and Death Gliders that were screaming toward them, long enough for the modified rings to finish boring a hole in the ice below. All they needed was a few more minutes...

As the hole began to open up, Sam gathered her vest and her weapon, and turned to head for the ring room, but stopped when she heard Hammond's voice over the radio.

"SG-1, this is Hammond on the Prometheus. Do you read?"

A glance out the window confirmed that the huge ship had slipped into position over them, shielding their much smaller craft from the onslaught of weapons fire from Anubis' Al'kesh.

"Yes, sir, it's good to see you!"

As she ended the communication, she could hear the muted sounds of Daniel and the Colonel sniping at one another in the aft ring room.

Teeth grinding in barely leashed fury, Daniel crammed his arm into his jacket, then reached around for the other sleeve.

"I cannot believe this! What the hell's the matter with you? Sam and I are friends, for godsake!"

"Looked like more than that to me, Daniel, and let's face it, you've got something of a reputation," Jack hissed, shaking out his own crumpled jacket that he'd used as a pillow all night.

"You, of all people, holding my past against me," Daniel barked. "Oh, that's rich."

"My past is pretty vanilla, compared to yours, Bucko," Jack sputtered under his breath as he shoved into his own jacket.

"Vanilla?" Daniel choked out, somewhere between amused and outraged, and no longer even trying to speak quietly. He shrugged into his vest and clipped a P-90 onto its lanyard, oblivious to the fact that Sam and Teal'c had entered the room. "You're a trained killer, Jack--"

"Do we have time for this?" Sam snapped at the two of them as she slid into her own vest and took her place inside the rings.

"I find it fascinating that the number of people I've been with in a loving way is somehow more damning than the number of lives he's taken," Daniel replied. He flicked the safety off his weapon and spun on his heel so he was facing outward within the circle of the transporter, his back to Teal'c. "Let's just get this done."
Time in the rings was never actually perceived on an intellectual level as *passing*, and yet, this trip seemed to be taking much too long on whatever level of understanding Jack had to work with. When the rings finally retracted, the feeling of displacement was much more pronounced than usual.

The first thing he noticed as he looked around the room was that it had the same layout as the orangish one on Taonas, and yet the same bluish hue that O'Neill's Antarctic base had. Jack could see the beginnings of the populated base he'd seen in Mirror-World in the roughly hewn interior. A couple of those fabric-covered Quonset huts to make the auxiliary areas warm enough to be habitable, and they'd be in business.

Jack lagged behind, letting the other three, who were fully armed, scan the room, in case the place wasn't as empty as they'd been led to expect. As they cautiously made their way toward the chair, he paused by the stasis chamber, identical to the one where his double had been stored for fifty-six days while their Asgard had been sought to save him. Jack stuck his tongue out at it.

He moved on, his angry confrontation with Daniel still ringing in his ears. He was a soldier, for cryin' out loud; he didn't 'take lives', he followed orders. Daniel was just some damned fucking hippie liberal, who didn't know the score. Soldiers weren't paid to think or moralize, they were paid to act. To take out the threat. To protect the damned fucking hippie liberals of the world from the bad guys, so it'd be safe for them to walk around half naked, offering their bodies to everyone with a heartbeat.

*Bastard.*

*****

As soon as the ring transmission completed its cycle, Bra'tac moved the ship away from the exposed hole in the ice. He settled in between the walls of a distant crevasse to wait out the rest of the battle; attempting to leave orbit while it was still raging would have been an act of sheer stupidity.

He watched as the large Earth ship, piloted by Hammond of Texas, also slid away, gaining altitude and speed as it bravely rose up into the deadly hail of enemy weapons fire.

*****

They confirmed the room was clear, and Sam moved to the platform of the control chair, intent on replacing the spent ZPM as quickly as possible. The hatch wouldn't open for her, but Jack was one step behind her and waved his hand over the panel; it slid open without a touch, just as it had on Taonas.

As she clicked the clunky device into place, her thoughts raced about the wonder of a technology that responded innately to a specific human being. How did the sensors work? What would happen if it malfunctioned? How would she be able to fix it, if it wouldn't come alive for her? What other scientific marvels were hidden in this place? What kind of beings were the Ancients, that they could devise the technology in the first place? What else was possible?

The minute the unit sensed the charged ZPM, the dais lit up. Sam thought she could hear a faint hum underneath the sounds of three sets of boots shuffling on the ice, but she couldn't be sure. She replaced the cover on the unit and stuffed the old ZPM into her pack for later study, but quickly abandoned it the moment the rings activated and a pair of Super Soldiers materialized inside them.
Taking up defensive positions behind the twin pillars closest to the transport device, she and Teal'c opened fire, while dodging the enemy's advancing energy weapons. Daniel held position behind the next pillar back, in the same room as the chair Jack had just settled into, as a secondary line of defense.

The entire chair lit up from within when Jack's ass connected with the seat. When he pushed back, his legs lifted into a very recliner-like position, as if he were settling into the fourth quarter of a dull game he didn't mind falling asleep to.

And nothing else happened.

The sound of automatic weapons fire --standard rounds, interspersed with phased bursts from the Kull disruptor units affixed atop their P-90s, filled the room. The sharp whine of the Super Soldier's energy weapons echoed back. As the first set of black-clad soldiers continued advancing toward the chair, the rings came down again, depositing a second pair.

The Tok'ra-designed weapons were working on the bad guys, but it was slow going, requiring a dozen shots to bring each soldier down. The one Sam had been focusing on finally fell, much too close for her liking, and the one behind him stepped right over the body without pausing, before finally succumbing to her and Daniel's combined efforts.

Teal'c was holding his own with the first guy on his half of the room, but didn't see the one behind him aiming his wrist-mounted weapon off to the side. The shot ricocheted off the sleep chamber, and the force of it impacted Teal'c's shoulder, knocking him on his ass with a bitten back groan of pain.

"Teal'c's been hit!" Sam screamed, taking aim at the soldier whose shot had felled him.

The floor was littered with their bodies, like so many scorched cockroaches. Another pair ringed down, slicing in half the one who'd collapsed back across the rings after receiving a lethal blow.

Teal'c was just trying to scramble to his feet, with Daniel and Sam doing their best to cover him, while Jack... a glance over Daniel's shoulder showed that the Colonel continued to just sit there, appearing for all the world to be in some kind of trance.

Daniel fired off a burst as he ran to Teal'c's pillar, stepping in front of him and continuing to discharge his weapon until that soldier was down. Immediately, the rings revealed a newly deposited pair, giving him a new target.

The new one on Daniel's side stumbled over one of its fallen brethren, leaving Daniel a clear shot to dispatch him with a steady burst of disruptor fire.

Sam's fell soon as well, and in the first moments of silence since the Super Soldiers had started to arrive, she called out, "Teal'c!"

Daniel helped Teal'c to stand, then lean against the pillar as he caught his breath. He studiously ignored the scorched wound on his bicep as he reached for his weapon, which Daniel had retrieved from the floor. "I am able to function, Daniel Jackson," Teal'c rumbled roughly.

Just as the rings activated again, Daniel fell back to his previous position, running interference for whatever Jack was supposed to be doing.

As he briefly glanced back at him from where he was crouching, he could see that the chair had turned, leaving Jack in profile. His eyes were tightly closed, his fingers moving against the spongy hand controls, but nothing seemed to be happening.
Daniel was getting concerned. They were on their own, buried at the bottom of a mile of ice, with a finite amount of ammunition-- and how long had Sam said the charges lasted on these disruptors? They were battling a tenacious enemy of potentially infinite numbers, and relying on unknown, untested tech. Anubis' arrival was imminent, if it hadn't already happened, and if Teal'c was cut down, or their disruptors all ran dry, the soldiers would keep coming, blasting them away like so much plaque off a dirty tooth. Then Anubis would have the weapon of the Ancients, and Earth would be enslaved, or worse. As far as Daniel could see, they were literally in a world of hurt.

With Sam and Teal'c on top of the situation for the moment, Daniel pulled a block of C-4 from a pocket in his vest and stuck a timer on it, then slapped it onto the back of the chair. While he was close enough for Jack to hear him over the racket, he ground out, "Anytime now!"

Frustrated beyond belief, Jack gnashed his teeth. It wasn't working. He was in the fuckin' chair, and it'd seemed to recognize him when he'd settled his ass into it, lighting up just the way it had during the test on Mirror-World. But he wasn't able to find the goddamned drones, and he couldn't remember how to call them up.

Stupidly, all he could think about was his anger at Daniel. His crushing disappointment that it wasn't going to work out for them after all, had been pushed aside by the fear that Daniel's accusation about being a glorified killer was entirely justified, because Jack's hands were that dirty.

But there was no time for any of that now, goddamn it, he had to think; he had to do something, to get them out of this mess.

"Let go of your conscious self, O'Neill," Teal'c shouted between bursts of firing. "You must let yourself act on instinct. Stretch out with your feelings-- trust them!"

"You heard the man!" Daniel yelled, squeezing off a shot at one of the black-suited soldiers. "Stop thinking!"

And this suggestion, from the biggest thinker Jack had ever met, no less. "I'm trying!" he snapped. But Teal'c's folksy Jedi wisdom wasn't cutting it. Jack wracked his brain, trying desperately to remember what O'Neill had told him to do, after have a seat and clear your mind.

"Sir, my disruptor's down to forty-five percent!" Sam called out, just as another pair of enemy soldiers materialized. The moment they moved off the platform, another set came down behind them.

"JACK!" Daniel yelled. "We're losing ground here! I've rigged the chair to blow. If you can't get it to work, we've got to destroy this outpost. We can't let Anubis have this technology! Give me the word."

Suddenly furious that Daniel, of all of them, would be forced to make that decision --and since when was giving up ever an option?-- Jack clenched his jaw, his eyes screwed shut and his frown deepening as he reached desperately for the memory of O'Neill's instructions. Think what you want, and the chair retrieves the relevant records from the database.

So, not feeling, then. Thinking.

Imagine the idea of stored, direct-able energy drones. See the planet from space.

Jack concentrated hard, and sure enough, EARTH FROM SPACE appeared in his mind, along with more ships than he could count, both in orbit and engaged in a firefight right over his head.
You have to feel the connection with the drones. Let the adrenaline surge from your fear response drive them.

Bingo. GET RID OF THESE SONSOFBITCHES.
Suddenly, a terrible rumble shook the room, and Daniel had to grab onto the wall for support. Frost rained down around the pillars, as if the whole thing was going to come crashing down upon them. If he hadn't been way too busy, between the firefight and watching Jack, to really notice it, he might've been even more concerned.

Harsh lighting suddenly switched on from somewhere, but it hurt to look into it, so he stopped trying to find its source. It seemed to center on Jack, making Daniel wonder if this was the other half of the interface finally responding.

There was a buzzing sound, like a cell phone vibrating against a metal table, getting louder and then louder still, and then a hole opened up in the floor, in the space between Daniel's pillar and Jack's chair, as bright yellow things filled the air, tentacles waving behind them as they zipped frantically around the room.

The team ducked, while Daniel frantically yelled, "NOT IN HERE!"

You gotta relax, or your trajectory'll be way off.

Jack focused hard. TAKE OUT THE ENEMY SOLDIERS IN THIS ROOM.

Swarms of golden objects swept around the small space, coalescing into a single wave, dispatching the troops with whom SG-1 was currently engaged. First they cold-cocked each of them from every direction at once, neutralizing their ability to direct the energy pulse, then they seemed to melt the beings themselves, from the inside out.

Within moments, the enemy had completely disappeared, as did the two units just then ringing in. Immediately, the golden wave that Jack had released swirled throughout the chamber, somehow eliminating the debris of all the fallen Super Soldiers. They then began to shoot right up through the hole the rings had made, until they were out of sight.

The sudden silence in the room, the cessation of chaos, was crushing.

Cautiously, Sam and Teal'c joined Daniel as he gingerly made his way around the chasm in the floor from which the drones had erupted. Since nothing more poured forth from the hole, it was possible it was over.

They gathered around the chair. The light, wherever it was coming from, was unrelenting, bathing Jack in it its harsh glow. His eyes were still tightly closed.

Daniel was forced to assume that the --creatures? Were they sentient?-- were somehow exiting the outpost from another place, in order to take care of the ships high above them, in the same manner they'd dispatched the Super Soldiers. He held up his hand, indicating to the others to be silent and not disturb Jack's concentration.

To his left, Sam kept looking over her shoulder, as if dreading the sound of the rings activating again, her weapon ready to go if they did. To his right, Teal'c was obviously hurting from his wound, but kept vigilant watch over the chair room, his eyes trained into the darkness of the unexplored portion off to one side.

All Daniel could do was stare at Jack and think how beautiful he looked. Off world, in dank tents
that always smelled like army boots, during hours filled with surreptitious longing that he'd tried to keep under wraps, he'd watched Jack sleep. It occurred to him that somewhere in the days since first arriving on Mirror-World and encountering headlong the knowledge that his desire was returned, he'd already started picturing them growing old together. Damn it. How fucking naïve.

He was angry and hurt and bitterly disappointed, and more pissed off at Jack's close-mindedness than he could ever remember being, and yet, none of that changed the pathetically simple fact that he was desperately in love with the man.

He was irritated with himself for not pressing the point back on Mirror-World. If he'd only yielded when Jack had offered, instead of taking the moral high road, worried about sullying Jack's military honor, not wanting him to be ashamed for craving what his oath wouldn't allow. If he'd just taken him, overwhelmed him with the experience, the feel of being with another man, Jack would've had a taste of how wonderful they could be together, how flawlessly Daniel was sure their bodies would mesh, how aggravatingly perfect they were for each other. And then maybe, just maybe, all the rest of it wouldn't have made any difference.

But none of that mattered, now. Jack was so beautiful, sitting there defending them, protecting them, defeating the bad guys. And apparently now forever completely beyond Daniel's reach, simply because of the choices Daniel'd made back in college.

In that moment, Daniel knew he'd have to leave the team. He couldn't bear to be around Jack anymore, not with his heart crowded with ruined dreams.

*****

Jack needed data. **ENEMY SHIPS, HOW MANY? WEAPONS? LIFE SIGNS?**

O'Neill had been spectacularly unhelpful when Jack had asked about how to target just the weapons and engines, in order to spare the crew, and so he didn't know what to do with the data the chair was giving him. And it probably couldn't answer the real question, which was, how dangerous was Anubis all by himself, even if all the ships could be disabled?

The fact he was even thinking about trying to be selective in his attack of the ships was all Daniel's fault, his influence. And since Jack couldn't parse the information, he knew Daniel was going to blame him for all the dead Jaffa that would result. But he figured it didn't much matter what Daniel thought of him at this point; at least he'd be alive to hate him. Jack would do anything, kill anyone, in order to protect his kids-- didn't Daniel get that?

The delay caused by all this thinking had let the Goa'uld get in a whole lot more damage to Prometheus; if he was understanding the intel correctly, she'd taken enough damage to collapse her shields. She was changing course now, heading straight for the mother ship, and Jack knew for certain that she was going to ram it.

**MORE. FASTER. DESTROY.**

The speed of the drones increased dramatically, his fear for the safety of those on board the Earth ship launching thousands of them. Half that number was probably all that would've been necessary, but hey, he was new at this. He watched the drones swerve around Prometheus without touching it, then head unerringly for the enemy vessels.

**DESTROYDESTROYDESTROY.**

In less than a minute, the mother ship was good and decimated, and the rest of the ships in the
Goa'uld fleet went up in somewhat less spectacular fireballs. He felt bad for the Jaffa, but at least it'd been quick for them.

Remembering one of O'Neill's warnings, Jack let a handful of the drones spin around the debris that regularly orbited the planet, remnants of a fledgling space program. He destroyed it all, just in case the freaky, half-ascended snakehead hadn't completely blown with the ship. After that, he issued the recall command for the rest.

He tarried, watching the unused drones make their way unhurriedly back to the base. He let his vision shorten, tunnel, until he saw the room they were in --PROPUGNACULUM-- and his team, standing around him, keeping watch over him, concern lining their faces. Carter, worn to a frazzle but still alert, ready to take on all comers, Teal'c, wounded and in obvious pain but stoic, because that's who he was. And Daniel.

The way Daniel was looking at him, desperately sad, resigned, along with a dozen other emotions Jack couldn't read. The love that shone through all of it. Daniel loved him, Jack could feel it, could see it on his face, in the protective way he stood there, letting the others share in watching over him, but not close enough to touch.

Daniel didn't want to share him. Jack couldn't see into his heart or mind, but he didn't need to--what he felt was plain in his unguarded expression, because he didn't know he was being observed.

Daniel adored him.

Sure enough, when Jack cracked open his eyes, Daniel's countenance instantly changed, shutting closed, undoubtedly a self-protection mechanism, to guard against the hurtful things he expected Jack to say. The hateful things he'd already said.

Jack wanted to take him into his arms and squeeze him and hold him and tell him it was okay. He wanted to bring back the look.

"We clear?" Daniel asked, suddenly all business.

The headache was remarkable. He thought, LIGHTS DOWN, and immediately, the beam overhead blinked out, ambient illumination coming up all around the walls. He sat up, pushing the footrest down, wincing at the way his stomach roiled at the abrupt change in pitch. It was so much worse than after the short test drive he'd taken with O'Neill.

"Yeah," he croaked, wishing to hell he'd brought some water. He cleared his throat and added, "We're clear."

Daniel reached out, Jack hoped to touch him, to help him out of the chair, maybe more, but no, his hand never connected, just snaked around behind him for the block of C-4 he'd set earlier.

Daniel yanked the timer out and put each object in a different pocket of his vest. "Anubis couldn't be allowed to get hold of this," he replied to Jack's glare. "You'd have done the same thing."

"Yeah." Jack scowled, remembering O'Neill's accusation that Jack had killed everything innocent and good in his own Daniel, by turning him into a soldier. "Yeah, I would. But it looks wrong on you."

"Whatever. Look, I don't know how much time we have before--"

"SG-1, this is Hammond. We are confirming the threat has been eliminated, and we're in position to ring you aboard."
Sam reached for her radio, frowning at Daniel's frantic hand waving.

"Yes, sir, we copy. We... need a couple of minutes to get our stuff together."

Daniel nodded, relieved she'd gotten the message. Now, all he had to do was talk really fast.

"Acknowledged. We'll ring down a security team first. Hammond out."

The moment the comm went quiet, Daniel started in on Jack. "We have to go to Dakara right away. It won't happen unless you force the issue, because you're the one with leverage. Right now, you're the only person we know of who can work that chair; that makes you irreplaceable. As soon as they find that other guy --Shepherd?-- your value drops by half."

His headache was so bad, Jack was actually trying to get the Ancient tech to fix it. He figured it couldn't hurt, right? HEADACHE GONE. MAKE NO PAIN. He was getting desperate. KNOCK ME THE HELL OUT. Nothing. Nada.

Still perched on the edge of the chair, he squinted up at Daniel, the pale light still too much for his photosensitive eyes. "So? You figure you're gonna extort the President of the United States into letting us go to Dakara?" He swallowed down the wave of nausea that threatened to engulf him.

"In the last seven years, if I've learned anything, it's all about 'what have you done for me lately'. They're grateful today; it's possible he won't even take your call tomorrow."

Jack frowned. "Hammond?"

"No. Hammond's your friend. Hayes is the one with the power." Daniel tried hard to keep his frustration in check and not grind his teeth. "He may not authorize it immediately, because he simply doesn't get that it's all part of the same issue, but you've got to make him understand that it's integral to the bigger picture. Plus there's a time element-- the longer it takes us to get there, the less chance we have of being completely successful."

Daniel cocked his head, jutting his chin just so. "What it comes down to is this: how much of a contribution do you feel Teal'c's made in the last seven years? If the answer's 'not so much', then just let it go--"

Headache or not, Jack leapt to his feet. "Okay, that's enough! I'll just never get tired of you tryin' to manipulate me!"

Daniel stood nose to nose with him. "Yeah? Well, that was the last time, 'cause after Dakara, I'm outta here."

It probably wasn't necessary to shout, since they were only about one inch from each other, but it felt good, so Jack did it anyway. "That won't be necessary, because I'm RETIRING!"

"Remind me to give you a quarter when we get home, so you can call someone who actually CARES!"

Teal'c and Sam had both drawn a breath to call for a stop to the bickering, but just at that moment, the rings activated. A three-man, armed security detail materialized, with full survival packs and half a dozen cases of supplies between them.

Without another word, Daniel turned on his heel and strode around the hole in the ice toward the rings, snagging his pack along the way, with Jack hot on his heels. The security team offloaded their gear just as Daniel stepped onto the platform.
Sam grabbed both her pack and Teal'c's and shot him a look as they followed. "What was all that about?" she asked softly.

"I am unsure," Teal'c replied sternly under his breath. "They are behaving like children."

Moments later, they were met in the ring room aboard the Prometheus by George Hammond in a flight suit. He was beaming.

"Congratulations, SG-1. You'll be glad to know you're not facing any charges from your unauthorized use of the gate, and for that matter, neither am I."

"New digs, sir?" Jack asked, forcing a smile through the worsening headache.

Hammond looked down at his uniform. "You mean this old thing?" His eyes were sparkling. "As a matter of fact, this was just for the occasion. There wasn't time to get into too many of the particulars today, but apparently the President's got some kind of quasi-cabinet post in mind for me."

Jack smiled. "Well, then!" He offered his hand. "My hearty congratulations and most sincere condolences, sir."

"Thank you, Jack." George chuckled, shaking on it.

A voice came over the comm unit on the bulkhead behind them. "I have the President for you, sir."

George pushed the button opening the voice channel. "Hammond here."

Hayes's face came up on the tiny screen. "Nice Job, George. I don't know how we'll ever be able to repay you."

George smiled and jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "Thank you, sir, but the bulk of the credit goes to SG-1."

"Mister President?" Daniel interjected, coming up behind the General's right shoulder. "Um, this is Daniel Jackson. I actually have a few thoughts about that, if you have a quick minute?"

Jack quashed the urge to roll his eyes. He had to give Daniel credit, his balls were humongous.

The screen split, and the tech's face appeared in the left half of the screen, scaling Hayes's image down accordingly. "Sorry to interrupt, sirs, but the scout ship is breaking orbit."

Teal'c stepped forward with a small head bow. "That would be Master Bra'tac. He will take the ship to Tupelo's planet, where he will gate to Chulak to tell the resistance of our great victory this day; Anubis is finally dead."

Hammond spoke up. "Let him pass, Lieutenant, with our thanks. And set a course for Area51 with all due speed. We need to get this bird off the radar."

When the Lieutenant signed off, Hayes's image filled the screen once again. "George, I'm curious about what Doctor Jackson has to say. Your ship has a briefing room, I believe? Can we continue this conversation there in, say, ten minutes?"

"Yes, Mister President."
On the way there, Jack snagged a passing airman. Using his arms spread out to his sides, Jack indicated immense volume as he asked, "Can you find about a gallon of water and a bottle of Advil and bring 'em to the conference room, please?" The airman scurried off to comply.

While all the appropriate connections were made to allow face to face communication, Sam dug through their packs until she found a first aid kit, then set about cleaning Teal'c's wound.

"How'd you get yourself hit, Teal'c?" Jack asked.

"I was a large black target in a small white room," he deadpanned.

"I see," Jack blinked.

They were all seated by the time the President walked into frame on one screen, with Elizabeth Weir, sitting at George's old desk, filling another.

Hayes introduced her to the group, saying, "I believe you all had already 'left the building' by the time Doctor Weir came on board."

"I'm sorry to be meeting under these odd conditions," Weir said earnestly.

"But we are meeting," Daniel replied with a generous smile. "Earth is still both safe and free."

"Well said, Doctor Jackson." Hayes smiled. "You had some thoughts you wanted to share with me?"

Daniel looked to Jack, who gave him an 'oh, by all means, after you' motion. Daniel cleared his throat. "Our work isn't finished, sir. This was just the first part of the intel we received during our last mission."

He looked to his left, where Sam was seated, and asked, "What was it Thor told you? This was but one small victory?" Without giving her a chance to reply to what was clearly a rhetorical question, Daniel continued, "I'm not sure how thorough your briefing has been concerning SG-1's most recent mission, sir, but it's really important that you let us finish what we've started. The intel we've received concerning a planet called Dakara is extremely time sensitive, and we must act on it immediately--"

"What's the hurry, son? We're not under attack any more. You got the villain with the bad wardrobe and the funny voice."

Before Daniel could reply, Teal'c spoke up. "The System Lord Ba'al remains. He already has a broad power base, almost equal to that of Anubis, and with the vacuum created by the destruction of Anubis' fleet, Ba'al will become even stronger. Those Jaffa who were once loyal to Anubis but were not destroyed with him will be assimilated and will broaden his sphere of influence and control even further."

"Mister President," Daniel said, picking up Teal'c's thread, "every time we pick off one system Lord, another arises to take his place, using the armies they take over from the Goa'uld that was just vanquished, like a giant game of Risk. The vacuum's always been the problem, and we've never been in a position to know who was the most likely runner-up to fill it in order to deliver sanctions. This time's different. We have intelligence concerning where and how to take Ba'al down, but the lifespan of this information is very short; if we let him get his bearings, we'll lose the edge we have. Ba'al was Anubis' right hand man, and as such--"

"You've had dealings with this particular Goa'uld before, haven't you, Doctor Jackson?" Weir
"It's true that Ba'al doesn't care for SG-1 much, and there's no love lost on this side of it either. But if we don't act now, you can rest assured that Ba'al will discover Earth's coordinates pretty quickly. It would benefit the Tau'ri, as well as the Jaffa, to take him out swiftly. If we can defeat him so soon after Anubis has been destroyed, the ripple effect on the Jaffa who aren't already part of the resistance will be staggering - it can go a long way toward overcoming centuries of brainwashing.

"If we can show them it can be done, that these are parasites that can be killed and NOT omnipotent gods, they can do the rest themselves. We can help them free their entire culture. Helping the Jaffa now will earn us millions of valuable allies in the future. It makes sense to perform a prophylactic strike while we have the best chance of succeeding. The longer this mission is delayed, the greater the probability of collateral damage on a --literally-- galactic scale."

Jack was blasted away by Daniel's speech, as much for the language as the sheer, stark, Patton-like delivery. It was horrifying to hear the words come out of Daniel's mouth.

"It is imperative that we demonstrate that Ba'al is not invincible," Teal'c said into the ensuing silence. "We must leave immediately, before this is no longer the case."

"Since --Teal'c, is it?" Hayes asked. "I've read some fascinating things about you. I wish we had more time to get to know one another. Because you're not from our planet, we can't prevent you from leaving, if you choose to do so, with our deepest thanks for your help. Although from the looks of it, you should probably visit the infirmary before you go anywhere. But the fact remains, Colonel O'Neill seems to be the only one who knows how to run the weapon in Antarctica, so I'm afraid right at the moment, he's irreplaceable."

Recognizing the sound of an audience drawing to a close, Daniel dug in his heels. "That's kind of my point, sir. Dakara is another Ancient outpost, just like Antarctica, and it, too, may have a weapon similar to the one Jack just used to defend our world--"

Jack took one of the eight bottles of water the airman set in front of him and drained it, hoping the action covered the rolling of his eyes. Daniel was laying it on a bit thick, even for him. He paused in the drinking long enough to shake out five of the little brown ibuprofen tablets and pop them in his mouth, chasing them with another bottle of water. The headache was still going strong, but the water at least made him feel human again.

From the sound of it, Daniel was ramping up for a long-winded discourse, stressing every other word, and Jack knew from experience that he was just minutes away from the point where yelling would seem like a good way to get his point across.

"...and perhaps while we're there, we'll find additional drones to replenish the supply that was depleted today, so we'll be ready for any future attacks--"

"Yes!" Jack interjected sharply. "Mustn't get caught with our drones down."

He ignored Daniel's heated glare. "Mister President? Have you been able to locate a Major John Shepherd? He's apparently got the same gizmo I do and should be able to work the weapon, with a few minutes of training."

Hayes turned to someone off-camera to refer the question. "I'm told he's stationed at McMurdo, which conveniently seems to be just around the corner from the newly commissioned Antarctic Base," he said with a somewhat smug smile.
Sam's ears perked up. "With respect, Mister President, you should probably get him to Nellis as soon as you can. It seems the long way around, but at this point, there's no way to get Major Shepherd into the Ancient outpost without ringing him down from Prometheus. If and when the Asgard come through with their beaming technology, that'll be a different story, but--"

Elizabeth Weir raised a finger. "Excuse me for interrupting, but about an hour ago, we received an audio transmission from someone claiming to be an Asgard named Thor. He asked for Colonel O'Neill and said to convey his gratitude for the--" she rummaged through the papers on her desk and selected one, reading from it, "the…replicator disruptor? He went on to say that their home world was safe, and that once they were certain their enemy was vanquished from all of the Asgard colonies, they would be most pleased to assist the Tau'ri with the technology they have requested."

In the silent room, Jack's voice seemed to ring out. "Sweet."

Hayes addressed Hammond with a wry grin. "Looks like I have a lot more reading to do to catch up with things. George, would you take care of getting Major Shepherd to Nellis and then oversee his training on the-- do we have a name for this weapon yet?"

Jack spoke up. "It's a chair, sir."

Hayes blinked. "A chair."

Jack squared his shoulders and shot the president a proud grin. "Yes, sir. Big ol' honkin' La-Z-Boy." The President of the United States burst out laughing, and Jack was pretty sure he could see steam coming out of Daniel's ears.

"The La-Z-Boy of Doom?" Hayes chuckled, shaking his head at the absurdity of the last several hours. Hell, the entirety of his first two days in office.

"I'm sorry," said Daniel with exaggerated patience he clearly didn't feel, "but Teal'c nearly gave his life today. Can we please get back to the--"

"An excellent point. Doctor Jackson. In fact, all of you look as though you could use a couple of days off."

"There's more you and I need to discuss, George, before I can authorize the mission Doctor Jackson's proposing. The minute you get that thing parked, jump on the 302 and get back here as soon as you can. Now that the com satellites are back online, I've got the permanent member nations of the U.N. Security Council burning up the phone lines, wanting the scoop on all the activity in orbit today, and this 'meteor shower' cover's not going to hold any of them for very long."

"Thank you again, SG-1, for your diligent efforts to contain the off world threat today. I'll be in touch about the other mission presently." His screen went dark.

Weir spoke up. "Teal'c, I believe it is? Do you need medical attention, prior to the standard post-mission evaluation here at the SGC?"

Teal'c raised an annoyed eyebrow. "I do not."

"Very well. SG-1, there's a military transport standing by at Nellis that will bring you to Peterson. General, it seems that other travel arrangements have been made for you. I'm anxious to sit down with you, when things quiet down some, to find out a little more about--" she shrugged, clasping her hands together on her --Hammond's-- desk, "well, the state of the planet, I guess." She smiled ingratiatingly.
Hammond smiled as well. He still wasn't sure at this point where he fell on the org chart, but it never hurt to be polite, regardless of where he stood in relation to Doctor Weir. After all, it wasn't her fault he'd lost that command. "I look forward to it, Doctor."

"SG-1, I'll see you in a few hours." She reached across the desk, and her screen went dark as well.

Jack groaned to the room in general at the prospect of the three hour flight ahead. "We really need a ring room at the SGC." His head was killing him, and he wasn't looking forward to trying to take a nap on a lumpy cushion in the back of some cold, drafty--

Just then, an airman poked his head in the door, and seeing both screens dark, announced, "We're in final approach to the landing bay, General."

"Thank you, Airman."

They all stood and started to make their way toward the corridor. Jack snagged the last two unopened bottles of water, tucked one in a side pocket, and opened the other. He'd need to find the head pretty soon. He fell into step with Hammond, aware that his team had fallen into place several paces behind them.

Teal'c came up on Daniel's right, silent and strong, his wound seeming not to trouble him. "I am grateful for what you tried to do for my people, Daniel Jackson."

Daniel sighed, as much for the stark sound of defeat in Teal'c voice as the words themselves. "Don't give up hope, Teal'c. I'm not done fighting yet."

He kept an eye on Jack and the General talking ahead of them, trying to judge how much time he had before Hammond split off for his own flight, formulating a plan, trying to find the fewest number of words he could use to convey to him the urgency of the situation.

The unnecessary delay, when a fast response was so obviously critical, was painfully reminiscent of Hammond's "you're in no position to make demands" comment, back when Daniel had wanted to go screaming off to Chulak looking for Sha're, the moment he'd hit the gate ramp nearly eight years ago. To this day, he often woke up in a cold sweat, begging for another chance to plead his case more eloquently, in a less confrontational way. Another chance to get it right.

The lights in the corridors of the ship were about a kajillian candlepower more than Jack could tolerate comfortably. The water had helped some, but it hadn't come fast enough, and the Advil were just sloshing around in his stomach, refusing to dissolve. He walked in step with Hammond, closing his right eye entirely against the reflected glare off the bulkhead, squinting the tiniest little bit through his left, just enough to keep from running into anything, as they maneuvered around the disembarking crew.

"So what's the deal with Weir?" Jack asked.

"To tell you the truth, things've happened pretty fast the last few hours, Jack. I'm not altogether sure about any of it. For the moment, it looks like Doctor Weir will command the SGC--"

"That's nuts!"

"Maybe not. If the battle between the Goa'uld fleet and your fancy shooting can't be explained away by natural phenomena, then the lid's just been blown wide open on the whole Stargate Project. If that's the case, it makes sense to put as un-warlike a face on it as possible, and that's not going to be my ugly mug."
"Actually, I've grown quite fond of your mug over the years, General. But more to the point, she doesn't have a clue. And where does that leave you, may I ask?"

Hammond chuckled. "Apparently, I get to run interference with the Joint Chiefs, among other things. Apart from that, I don't even know where my office is going to be yet."

Jack grinned. "Bet it'll be a sweet little E-ring setup, with a great view of the National Mall."

"I'm just glad it all worked out, and we're all not in the brig," Hammond stated wryly.

"You took a big chance backing us, sir."

"As I told the President, sometimes you have to go with your gut, even if it means disregarding the book. You and SG-1 have never let me down when it counted."

"Thank you, sir." Jack beamed. "Hey! You could always command the Prometheus..."

Hammond shook his head. "No, thanks. Space is for younger men, Jack. Speaking of which, I need to find Colonel--"

Daniel saw the break in the conversation he'd been looking for and jogged ahead of Sam and Teal'c until he caught up to Hammond. "Sir, you have to make the President understand how time-critical this is. Word travels fast out there. Once Ba'al knows the coast is clear, he won't waste any time making his move. And from his perspective, it would make sense if the next move was here."

Hammond turned to Jack. "Do we know what the status of the weapon is?"

Jack winced. "Best guess, sir? I used up about half the arsenal. Unless those things are down there under the ice right now, reproducing like bunnies, we can do this again, at this level of intensity, maybe once more."

Daniel shrugged the shoulder his pack was on and caught Jack's eye, hoping they were still in synch enough to make this work. "If Ba'al sends twice as many ships..."

"Then we're screwed," Jack replied seriously, "and not in a fun way."

"Let me talk with the President," Hammond said tightly. "I'll be in touch." He flagged down Colonel Kirkland and finished the walk to the lift in step with him.

"I know why I don't like Ba'al," Jack said softly, pulling Daniel aside with a tilt of his head, "but what's your excuse?"

Daniel looked away, down the corridor Hammond had disappeared into, and shoved his hands into his pockets. Jack had picked up the thread he'd left dangling and delivered the closing line perfectly, but their physical positioning had then left him free to corner Daniel against the bulkhead.

"I just don't want to leave the job half done, that's all," he muttered.

"Who says you hafta leave?" Jack shrugged.

"Because I told you, I can't stay--" Daniel snapped.

Of all of it, standing here this close to Jack, with the knowledge that it was over before it had ever started screaming out of every single pore, it was more than he could bear. The possibility he'd only started to understand in the jungles of Honduras had blossomed in the men's room on Mirror
World, until it was real and palpable, inflaming his soul, even as it promised to complete him. He'd told himself to be patient, that they were on the same page, finally, and it was only a matter of tying up loose ends, and they'd be together in mere weeks.

And now it wasn't going to be weeks, it wasn't going to be ever, and he just couldn't live among the ashes of the dream that had gone up in smoke less than twenty-four hours later, in the front seat of Jack's truck.

And this wasn't the time or place to have that particular breakdown.

"I can't... be here anymore," he ground out through clenched teeth. "With Hammond gone to DC, you're needed here more than ever. Weir is policy, but she's a civilian; she doesn't have a clue what it's like out there, what needs to be done. You'll have to balance that with your experience."

"Why don't you do it?"

"Because I'm not military."

"Coulda fooled me."

"Don't be insulting."

"Wasn't me. Blame O'Neill. And he wasn't wrong, the bastard. Did you hear yourself back there? 'Deliver sanctions'? 'Prophylactic strike'? 'Collateral damage'? For cryin' out loud, where'd you get that shit?"

"Unlike you, Jack, I actually listen in briefings."

Jack's lips thinned. "Oh... you really know how to pick your moments, don't ya," he growled. With a final glare, he pushed away from the bulkhead to follow the crowd toward the exit, rubbing at his sore forehead. Christ, his head hurt...

Teal'c trailed behind him, but Sam stayed out of the strike zone and hung back with Daniel until the Colonel was gone.

"What's with him?"

"Aw, damn it." Daniel blew out an aggravated breath and slumped against the wall, in a vain effort to calm his pounding heart. This was another reason he couldn't stay with the program anymore; his fury was making him shake all over. "He saw you and I sleeping together on the scout ship," he muttered.

"What?" Sam blinked, unsure of what Daniel was saying. "That doesn't make any sense, Daniel. We've been a team for nearly eight years, and we've all been in close quarters before." She frowned. "Wait. Does he think I'm trying to come between you, because--"

Daniel shook his head firmly. "It was over with us before it started, Sam. You didn't have anything to do with it-- that's all on Jack and me," he assured her bitterly. "And the fact that I'm not perfect."

He pushed off the bulkhead and strode down the same corridor Hammond had used, furious with Jack, but more annoyed at himself for letting Jack get to him this way.

He took a left and then a right and found himself in the middle of a busy intersection, completely lost. That wasn't really surprising, considering he'd never set foot on the ship in his life. Without even slowing, he did an about face to head back to where he thought he'd left Sam and ran
headlong into a crew member, knocking him on his ass.

"I'm sorry. Um, are you okay?" he asked, reaching down to help the guy up.

"I'll live," he muttered, taking Daniel's hand.

On the way to vertical, he caught sight of Daniel's lack of flight suit and then the patch on his sleeve. "You're SG-1?"

And that's when Daniel recognized him. "Ah, yeah," he said, fingerling his pack.

The man stuck out his hand, and Daniel took it reflexively.

"Lt. Colonel Cam Mitchell, Blue Squadron."

"Blue...? Oh, the 302s. Right. Thanks for, um," Daniel jerked his thumb behind him. "Back there."

"You bet." Mitchell's grin was blinding. "My pleasure. You lookin' for the way offa this tub?"

Daniel's gaze swept the intersection, hoping for a clue about which way to head. "Ah, yeah, I seem to have gotten a little turned around."

Mitchell jerked his head down one of the three identical corridors. "This way. The hatch was built extra wide for emergency boarding in mind. It just looks like a continuation of the corridor, when actually, it's part of the landing bay. It's easy to get mixed up."

Daniel told himself he was accompanying Mitchell as an expedient way to get the hell off the ship, so he carefully tried to follow his friendly chatter as they walked, because it was the polite thing to do, being careful not to seem like he was coming on to him.

"That was some weird shit back there," Mitchell said excitedly. "What were those yellow things?"

"Uh, actually, I don't know what their real name is. I haven't had time to even start the translations..."

"Well, how'd you get 'em to do all that--"

"Actually, that was Jack--Colonel O'Neill. He's the, uh... genius behind the energy drones."

"Energy. Drones."

"Well, don't quote me," Daniel smirked. "Like I said, I haven't--"

"Started the translations," Mitchell repeated with a grin. "Whatever that is."

Daniel snorted at Mitchell's down-home dumb act, just a hairsbreadth from the one Jack had perfected. "Well, until I do, it's a better placeholder name than *glowy alien squids*, don't y'think?"

Mitchell laughed a deep, full-throated belly laugh, and Daniel couldn't help chuckling at the way he found it so amusing.

It was *that* rare sound that caught Jack's attention on the other side of the deck as he stood in front of the surface elevator signing them out. His eyes fixed on Daniel, then followed his gaze till it landed on Mitchell, and ice cold recognition filled his gut.

Jack had just *thought* his headache was bad.
He'd used up all his restraint back on the scout ship, just barely managing not to rip Carter off Daniel, and now there was this horn dog flyboy-- one with perfect knees, according to O'Neill-- sniffing after Jack's archeologist, and it was really more than he could take.

*MINE.* Didn't matter that it made no sense; this wasn't about logic. This was about a gut-level response that defied reason. It had become so deeply rooted in the three days since they'd shared the admission about their mutual attraction, just *thinking* about stepping back from it felt huge and impossible. Intellectually, Jack knew he was out of line. But emotionally, his gut flipped over and twisted in a knot, every time he thought about Daniel with someone else.

He clenched his jaw, in a valiant effort to gather the anger and then dismiss it, and managed to force a tight smile. The way forward was painfully clear. His judgment was shot, his objectivity gone. He had an urgent date with some separation papers. The SGC needed Daniel a hell of a lot more than it needed a washed up old Colonel with dodgy knees; if one of them had to leave, it wouldn't be Daniel.

All that was left to do was convince his gut to set them both free.

"*Doctor Jackson,*" he announced loudly over the din, not caring that fifty pairs of eyes had just turned his way, "*your chariot awaits.*"

Daniel's head snapped around at the unexpected sound of Jack's voice using his honorific, and he could feel the knee-jerk 'guilty' written all over his face in response to the expression on Jack's.

"Um. Yeah."

He started to make his way across the bustling corridor but was stopped by Mitchell's offered hand.

"*Real nice meetin' ya.*"

"Oh. Yes," Daniel agreed distractedly, shaking it perfunctorily and not letting on that he noticed the extra caress Mitchell's thumb made against his. "And, um, thanks again for the help back there."

Mitchell winked with a grin. "Anytime."

Daniel strode into the elevator, passing Jack without a word, determined not to give him the satisfaction of saying anything.

Jack smacked the sign-out clipboard onto the chest of the Lieutenant standing nearest him, then held off the other crew members waiting to exit the craft, using his best command look. "*Take the next one.*" He got in after Daniel.

Eyes front, Daniel's mouth stayed resolutely shut for the space of about three seconds. Nevertheless, even though it didn't really matter anymore, or maybe because of that, he needed Jack to know that it wasn't how it'd looked with Mitchell.

"I got turned around. He showed me the right corridor. If it wasn't for him, I'd still be--"

"That's not--"

"I'm just sayin--"

"That's *Mitchell,*" Jack snapped. He forcibly relaxed the clenched fists at his sides. More calmly, he said, "*The other place... he and Jackson*--"
"I know."

Jack's head swung around, but he didn't say anything.

Daniel couldn't bear to meet his eyes. Feeling Jack's hurt and accusing gaze burning into the side of his face was bad enough.

"I ran into him there. He thought I --"

"Never mind," Jack said, trying to mean it as he turned back to face front. "None of my business." He busied himself watching the numbers flash by, so he wouldn't look at Daniel. He'd forgotten how deep this hole was. "Just be careful." He meant that part.

As the elevator slowed to a stop, Daniel tried not to notice that it felt as though Jack was handing him off to Mitchell. He swallowed the aching disappointment that Jack could so easily dismiss him, the resulting sadness of the situation fully supplanting his earlier anger. "Yeah."

*****

The C-20 was a nice surprise. Jack had been expecting they'd get assigned whatever was handy, antique and clunky basic transportation. That they were pulling Nellis' one and only Gulfstream off the line, just to shuttle them to Peterson, showed that the President appreciated their efforts, in a way few other things could, right up there with the 'not being in the brig' part.

The sweet ride also meant their three hour travel time would be cut in half.

He realized, as his team boarded ahead of him, packs in hand, that like a mother dog, he knew all his kids by their scent. Not the artificially clean fragrance they each had at the start of a mission -- Carter's citrus-y stuff, Teal'c's base soap, Daniel's spicy thing-- but the way they smelled after the mission was over. Those aromas reassured Jack; they were something he'd earned, like a job well done for bringing them all home.

None of them had had the opportunity to shower since Mirror World, so they were each just wearing skin that'd been on a human body a little too long inside the same clothes. Not quite funky, but not daisy fresh, either. Once the carefully understated lemon scent faded, Carter's natural scent was strongly feminine. Not unpleasantly so, but noticeable enough to make Jack keep her in the middle whenever they were off world. He didn't think she'd ever noticed him protecting her that way, because after seven years, he wasn't singing soprano yet, so it seemed he'd managed to pull that one off.

After a couple of long days, the Big Guy usually smelled like grilled onions, the way Daniel smelled like coffee, the scent just seeming to ooze from his pores. Right after they'd all recovered from being cavemen, Teal'c'd been introduced to a genuine Philly cheese steak, piled high with the works; ever since then, he'd eaten grilled onions with everything.

Jack swung into place right after Daniel, letting the aroma of warm, slightly used archeologist spill over him as they climbed the steps. He smelled like everything safe and familiar in Jack's life-- like seven years minus one of shared tents and evenings of pizza and hockey, or like the sleeping bag Jack'd snagged from Daniel's office after the Kelowna thing, when he knew Daniel wouldn't be needing it anymore. The accumulated aroma trapped in the artificial fibers had probably kept Jack sane during that long year Daniel had been off in Happy Glowy Land. He hadn't needed to use it since Daniel had come back to them, because SG-1's mission rotation put him in a tent with Daniel every week. But back then, sliding into Daniel's bag had been the only way he'd gotten any sleep at all.
He supposed he'd need it again in a couple of weeks, once he hung up his birds for good.

Jack dropped into the seat in the front and strapped himself in, sitting sideways so he could rest his head against the bulkhead and check on his team as they settled, and the sleek jet took to the sky.

Teal’c had taken up one bench seat all by himself on the other side of the aisle. His eyes were closed, but Jack was pretty sure he wasn't meditating. In the old days, Junior would've had him fixed up already. Now that he was only human like the rest of them, Jack could tell there was real discomfort there that he was trying to disavow by sheer, stubborn concentration alone.

Sam had taken the seat just in front of him, staring out the window during take off and for a few minutes afterward. She was now dozing, her forehead resting on the glass, her arms holding herself tightly, much like Daniel's arms had embraced her on the scout ship the night before.

And Daniel had taken the last seat on his side, as far away from Jack as he could get and still be on the same aircraft. He'd apparently snagged a couple of sheets of printer paper and a Stic pen before they'd left the hangar, and now he was busily scribbling away, head bent to the task of getting his thoughts down on paper.

Jack sighed sadly and closed his eyes, pretty sure those thoughts were for the version of Mitchell that Daniel had just met. He hoped to god Daniel would hold off with his little assignation, at least until Jack was off the base...

He knew he shouldn't care about who Daniel took up with, whether it was Carter or some obnoxious flyboy who was too cocky for his own good in two universes. But he didn't know how to shut off the feelings that had just started to surface, ones he’d buried for longer than he cared to remember and then stupidly indulged on Mirror World. Seeing the others married. Finding out that Daniel was interested. And then, the ugly revelation in the truck. *God,* he was pathetic.

He knew his smartest move at this point would be to steer clear of Daniel until this was over, one way or another. He'd give Hayes a couple of days to get on board with the Dakara thing --if Hammond couldn't talk him around in that time, it couldn't be done-- and then he'd book. It'd take him that long just to get the paperwork filled out.

That decided, he shifted around so he was sitting in the seat correctly, then hunched down until his aching head was comfortably pillowed on the headrest. With any luck, he'd sleep for the rest of the ninety minute flight.

*****

Heart lighter than it had been for many years, Bra'tac piloted the scout ship back to the Land of Light, setting it down in a copse of trees not far from the city and within sight of the stargate. He engaged the cloak and strapped the remote to his wrist. Gathering his bag and staff weapon, he set off on his journey to Chulak and the resistance cell there, eager to spread the word of Anubis' stunning defeat.

*****

Fifteen hours ago, George Hammond had been on his way to Washington to face the President of the United States and a charge of treason. Now, he was on his way back to the same White House, following a space battle he'd been mere moments from losing, wearing a flight suit that was two sizes too small.

As the F-302 touched down at Bolling, he heaved a deep sigh. Just like his first day on the job with
the stargate program, he'd once again been pulled back from the brink of obscurity by circumstances too dire to ignore. He knew from experience that when things got this hairy, there was no telling what direction his life would take in the next five minutes. He closed his eyes and let his head fall back against the headrest as the pilot taxied into the hangar, arranging his thoughts for his meeting with the President.

"Welcome back, General," the fresh-faced airman greeted him as he pushed the gantry toward the cockpit opening. "There's a car standing by to take you to the Hay-Adams, and I have strict instructions from Sergeant Harriman to make sure you get settled in with enough time to get a few hours of sleep before your 0930 meeting with the President."

George was more than a little surprised; the Hay-Adams was where Presidential guests stayed. "Thank you, son," he replied. "You know what? I'd kill for a Dr. Pepper right about now."

The young man gestured toward the tarmac, where a shiny black Chevy Suburban sat idling. "Yes, sir. There's a chilled six pack of Diet Dr. Pepper in your car."

"Diet?" George smiled wryly as he followed the young officer toward his ride. "Walter's doing, I presume?"

"Sergeant Harriman was very firm, sir."

"What's your name, son?"

"Staff Sergeant Mel Halvarin, sir. I'll be your aide while you're here in DC, until such time as you're able to select your own staff."

George nodded. "I appreciate the help, Sergeant."

Staff. He'd need to get a handle on his new job description during his meeting with the President; there hadn't been a lot of time to get into the particulars with Anubis breathing down their necks. But he had no delusions about the amount of politics involved, either; this was war on a whole different battlefield. He wondered if Walter would be interested in making the move into the political arena with him.

Irony being what it was, the seven mile trip through DC's late rush hour traffic, en-route to the hotel across from the White House, took longer than his F-302 flight from Nevada had. But it gave him time to decompress a little, and that was in itself a blessing.

George thought maybe they needed a ring platform here in DC too and made a mental note to find out what was involved from Major Carter and then run the idea by the President.

At the hotel, Halvarin held out his hand for the garment bag George had snagged from Nellis and draped it over his arm, completely obscuring the remainder of the six-pack beneath it. George smiled yet again, wondering if that was his own idea or Walter's instruction.

As George unlocked the room, he said, "Would you be so kind as to hang that up, son? I can't meet the President in this." He indicated the flight suit. He hadn't brought anything but the uniform on his back; hadn't thought he'd need much, in custody.

"No, sir. If you'd like to slip into the complimentary robe behind the door, I'd be most happy to have all your things cleaned and pressed."

"That's not--"
The Sergeant actually looked pained. "Sergeant Harriman was very firm, sir."

George shook his head and headed for the bathroom. When he came out, skivvies rolled up into the flight suit, he said, "Far be it for me to go against the good Sergeant's wishes."

"Thank you, sir," Halvarin said, looking relieved as he hurried away on his errand.

George felt ten times better once he'd showered. He called down for room service, hoping Walter hadn't gotten to them too. Fortunately, they didn't bat an eye at his order of a BLT and a piece of devil's food cake, so it appeared Walter's influence didn't extend to the kitchen of the Hay-Adams, which suited the General just fine.

While he waited for his meal --dinner, he supposed-- he dialed up his daughter's house, and Tessa answered the phone. He played Grandpa for a few minutes, and then managed to hold off most of his daughter's questions for the time being. He said goodbye when his food arrived.

Alone again, he lifted the sliver dome to find not his calorie-laden BLT and devil's food cake, but a glass of bluish skim milk, a turkey sandwich on whole wheat, and a very small chocolate chip cookie. The fact that this struck him as uproariously funny told him he was far too tired to be meeting with anyone, let alone the leader of the free world.

After devouring the sandwich and milk, he stretched out on the bed, figuring he'd eat the cookie when they woke him up. He fell asleep, confident that Walter would send someone to do so at the appropriate time.

*****

Doctor Elizabeth Weir met SG-1 where the NORAD elevator deposited them onto Level One of the SGC.

"You all look beat down to your sock tops," she observed gently as she walked them around the corner to the elevator that would take them down the rest of the way.

"It's been a helluva couple of days," Jack agreed with a wince as they filed into the next car. Feeling every moment of his age, he leaned back into one corner and closed his eyes. He needed real sleep, in a real bed, real bad.

"Well, you'll need to file reports eventually, but I'm not looking for anything until after you've all had at least ten hours of rest."

She leaned around Sam to address the top of Daniel's bowed head as the floors clicked by, taking them deeper into the mountain. "Doctor Jackson? I'm particularly intrigued by the Ancient forwarding address you mentioned to General Hammond, but tomorrow will be plenty soon enough to discuss that."

He looked up at her, forehead scrunched in concern. "I'm hoping that by tomorrow, we'll have the go ahead from the President for the mission to Dakara," he replied with grim determination. "This really can't afford to wait."

"I'll let you know as soon as I hear anything." Weir nodded earnestly.

"Now I want you to report to the infirmary and then go home," she added as the doors opened on level twenty-one. "You each deserve a little down time, after everything you've been through."

Daniel shook his head, not even trying to rein in his aggravation. "When you get the word, you'll
find me in my quarters here on base," he said tightly. He strode away toward the infirmary, without waiting for the others.

As he watched the other man disappear down the corridor, Jack decided he wasn't going to apologize for Daniel's attitude and curt behavior; annoying as it was, in Jack's opinion, Daniel wasn't wrong.

Jack shared a glance with Carter and Teal'c, then said to Weir, "In the interest of thinking positively, I believe we'll all be bunking here on base, waiting for word from on high."

Weir only nodded. This group of people obviously had their own dynamic, and she didn't have enough information about what made them tick to be able to influence it in any but the most basic of ways.

*****

Being first in the exam room had its benefits; Daniel was discharged and then first into the showers. He was already dressed before Jack finished in the infirmary and showed up in the locker room. They passed each other without a word or a glance, and as Daniel made his way toward his quarters, he told himself it was just as well.

His quarters, Daniel realized belatedly, were nearly identical to those he'd stayed in on Mirror-World. Laying on the bed in the dark, trying to sleep, only succeeded in reminding him of the sounds the other Jack and Daniel had made as they'd indulged in each other. The memories, visceral and bitter, served to drive home the hard fact of the missed opportunity, once so close to his grasp, and the pathetically empty personal life he was left with, in the wake of everything that had happened in the last few days.

In the eleven months since he'd been back with the team, he'd turned down every overture of friendship (or more) made in his direction. He'd not sought out any level of companionship, outside of team nights at Jack's house.

Saving himself. He actually snorted in derision as he lay there in the dark. Such a childish notion, embarrassing for someone his age, particularly when the one you were saving yourself for didn't give a flying shit and never would.

How stupid did he feel now, having admitted that to his double in a conference room full of people?

Fuck it. He gave up on the idea of sleep, after less than an hour in the attempt. He got dressed, and headed to his office and a pot of fresh coffee.

Weir's comment about the possible gate address in Antarctica got him thinking that he might be able to parlay his translating abilities into action on the Dakara front, if Hammond's efforts failed. Steaming cup in hand, he started uploading the film footage of the Antarctic outpost to his hard drive.

*****

After being cleared by the infirmary staff, Carter went directly to her quarters without a word to anyone. Vowing to do her best not to dream about blind choices and chances lost, she fell into an exhausted sleep.

*****
Jack walked by his quarters, passing Daniel's and studiously *not* listening for telltale snoring behind the door. There wasn't any. Either Daniel was reading, or he wasn't even in there.

Hand stalled on the doorknob of his own room, Jack turned on his heel and headed for the mess, to see what kind of goodies might be waiting for a man in need of empty calories.

Teal'c was there, seated in the center of one of the long tables that ran along the side of the room, surrounded by plates piled high with food. A thick steak, medium rare and smothered in grilled onions lay bleeding off to one side, while he proceeded to heavily salt a mound of steamed vegetables. A tray piled high with desserts waited front and center, where Teal'c could keep an eye on them as he ate his meal.

Looking over the dessert selections, Jack held up a small plastic plate that held what was probably supposed to be a slice of apple pie, examining it closely. It had a standard issue cardboard crust and slices of overcooked apple, helplessly suspended in a stasis of opaque paste. He sniffed at it, but it had no aroma at all. Wincing, he set it down on his tray and went over to fill a mug with coffee that even smelled burned.

He joined Teal'c. "Having a little snack, T?"

He was met with a sardonically cocked eyebrow as Teal'c finished chewing his bite. "I do not find your 'meals ready to eat' to be entirely satisfying, O'Neill."

"MREs are just supposed to keep you alive." He eyed the lonely, sad piece of pie on his own tray. "No one promised you'd be happy about it."

Teal'c grunted at the truth of that as he made three spears of broccoli disappear in one bite. After he finished chewing, he regarded Jack with a steady gaze and said, "Should you not be with Daniel Jackson at this time, in order to begin your personal relationship?"

"Shhhh!," Jack snapped, nervously glancing around to see who might've been within ear shot of that little gem. "And no," he whispered, taking a stab at his pie, "there's not gonna be one."

"I do not understand." Teal'c set his fork down and laced his fingers, indicating that he was more interested in the conversation than in the food in front of him.

Jack glared at him, trying mightily to ignore the weird flutters in his gut. "Gettin' a little personal, there, don't ya think?"

"I do not."

Jack found the determination Teal'c was showing toward this one particular subject, over and above his interest in the bounty before him, frankly unnerving. He shrugged, knowing there was no way he was getting out of answering, short of leaving the room, and even that was iffy. Keeping his eyes down, he dug into his plastic pie and fantasized that it was a piece of Mirror Martha's flaky cobbler.

"We discovered that we aren't really all that compatible after all," he muttered as he crammed the starchy blob into his mouth.

"In what way?"

"Now *that's* goin' too far," Jack protested through his mouthful of pastry mush.

"It is, in fact, not far enough," Teal'c declared ominously. "You and Daniel Jackson have flitted
about one another for many years. The affection you share is obvious to all who would but take the
time to see it. It is time to finally put out."

Jack blinked. Flitted about? Put out? Hairy Mirror Teal'c had apparently had quite an effect on his
own T-man, for him to be stringing together so many words at one time. And really, 'name that
cliché' much?

"Flitted? Ah, that's... probably... danced. As is, 'danced around each other'." Jack cleared his throat.
"And the, ah, other one's probably 'put up or shut up'." He cleared his throat again. "I think."

"I do not agree. You must both be willing to put out, if this is to be a successful warrior's bond."

"Who said--"

"It is time to cease circling the complaint."

"The... what?" Jack couldn't even begin to guess at that one, it was so badly mangled.

"You must not dally. I would advise you most urgently to slap while the metal is burning."

"Oh!" he raised a finger. "I've got that one. It's supposed to be 'strike wh--"

Teal'c assumed an imperious bearing and leaned forward over his mountain of veggies, declaring in
a rich baritone whisper, "You and Daniel Jackson must celebrate the moments of your lives."

Jack winced. "Where are you getting this crap?" Fuck, he could feel his headache coming back.

"O'Neill," Teal'c intoned more loudly.

Jack was sure they had an audience now, and that was all he needed to make his life complete.

"It is imperative that you collect as much of the gusto--"

Jack was done with the Jaffa version of ad agency pop psychology. "Okay, enough!" He set his
coffee mug down with enough force to cause half the contents to slosh out onto the table.

More softly, now that he'd finally broken through what Major Carter called 'the Colonel's snarky
brand of humor', Teal'c continued, "I am unaware of what has transpired between you since
returning from the Mirror Reality, but it is plainly obvious that Daniel Jackson cares for you,
O'Neill."

"He doesn't!" Jack ground out under his breath. "That's the damned problem! Daniel wouldn't
know how to commit to one person if his life fuckin' depended on it!"

With that, he got up, shoving back his chair, and stormed out of the mess. He set off at a brisk pace
toward his quarters and the thick pile of separation papers that stood between him and freedom
from this torment.

*****

Bra'tac left the tent Rak'nor was using as a base of command. The reports coming in from spies
situated on Tartarus were better than he could have hoped for. He would need to delay long enough
to speak to Hammond of Texas, so that the forces of the Tau'ri could also be mobilized. Then he
would retrieve the scout ship from the Land of Light and immediately set out for Dakara.

*****
The rhythms of an underground base were always unreliable. Every eight hours, shifts changed, people started work, others went home. The terms 'breakfast', 'lunch', 'dinner' --even 'today' and 'tonight'-- held little meaning, particularly when you'd been awake for twenty-some hours straight.

Sam was awake because she was finished sleeping, not because it was any particular time of day. Without windows, it scarcely mattered. On her way to the mess, she stopped beside the Colonel's door. Hearing sounds from within, she knocked.

The door opened, and a ragged-looking O'Neill peered at her with bleary eyes. "Carter? What's wrong?"

"Nothing, sir, can I come in? It's about my dad."

"Ah, yeah. Sure," he said, stepping back to let her in. "Any dad of yours is a, ah..." He frowned, as if he'd forgotten where the punch line was. "...your dad. I guess." He motioned to the small table and chairs in the corner and then vigorously ruffled his hands through his hair, hoping that would help him wake up.

He gathered up the all the papers he'd spread out across the surface of the table and stuffed them into a manila folder off to the side. "What's up?" he asked as he settled across from her.

"I've been thinking about what we learned on the other side. As you know, Dad was part of the Dakara mission, and Selmak's help was invaluable."

"I'm with ya."

"Well, I'm a little concerned. I'm not getting a warm and fuzzy that Hayes will authorize the mission, which means I won't get a chance to tell him about Selmak dying sometime this year. I'm pretty sure Elizabeth Weir isn't going to let me get a message to him, even on compassionate grounds, especially with intelligence gleaned from a mirror reality."

"No, you're probably right." He should've thought of this hours ago, had a plan in place. This not sleeping shit was for the birds.

"Are you okay with my telling him?"

"What? Hell, yes, of course! Jacob's a good friend, and regardless of what that maggot Kinsey thinks, one of Earth's most valuable allies." He vaguely waved his hand about. "Even if he does have a... snake in his head."

As Carter raised a frighteningly Teal'c-like eyebrow in reply, he shrugged. "Even if they do let us go after the sarcophagus, you know he won't use it." He rubbed the back of his neck, where the greatest amount of pain was currently centered, and wondered if enough time had elapsed to take some more pills for the damn headache.

"Yeah, he can be stubborn all on his own, even without Tok'ra philosophy added to the mix," she said wryly.

"What do you need me to do?" It was pretty damned obvious her head was clearer than his was at the moment.

"Well, I was thinking a little diversion, just enough to keep Weir occupied..."
"You're sure Doctor Weir authorized this?" Harriman asked skeptically.

"Would I be doing it if she hadn't?" Sam answered brightly.

Harriman hesitated, peering up at her with shrewd, steel gray eyes.

Seeing the challenge forming there, Sam shrugged as casually as she could. "It's a message to my Dad. Tomorrow's his birthday, and SG-1 might be away by then on the mission the President's considering--"

Apparently making his decision, Walter slid away from his console. "I see. I'll just..." he jabbed one thumb in the direction behind him, "gonna go grab a cup of coffee. I won't be a minute."

"Okay."

"No, really," he said with all due seriousness, "not even a minute."

"That's plenty, Walter. Thanks."

"Yes, ma'am," he muttered reluctantly.

He ducked away, silently counting off the seconds in his mind. General Hammond's words echoed there. I know you'll do the right thing, Walter. He hoped he was.

*****

"You get through?" Jack asked.

"We'll know in a couple of hours, I hope."

"Good deal. You wanna grab a bite?"

She shrugged. "I could eat."

As they walked down the corridor to the elevator, it was clear there were a lot of subdued people in the mountain, wondering what had happened with Hammond and Weir. There were rumors flying around that would need to be addressed sooner rather than later-- that issue had been the thrust of Jack's diversion with Weir. He knew for a fact that people gave you their best, if they weren't kept in the dark. He thought of it as the 'Tollan Sting Principal'; it'd been a lesson hard learned.

They got their food and settled into a table in a corner, where Jack could keep his back to the wall and watch the doors. SG-1’s table.

He watched Carter pick at her mystery casserole. "Not as good as theirs, is it?"

Pulled out of her musings, she said, "What?"

He pointed at her plate. "The chow. It's lousy."

Sam sort of smiled, wrinkling her nose. "Yeah, it kinda is. According to Colonel Carter, all it took was for O'Neill to pay Martha a few compliments--"

"And ply her with chocolate!" Jack finished indignantly.

She smiled. "Pretty reasonable price for edible food, I'd say."
He reached into his pocket and peeled off a couple of twenties, slapping them on the table between them. "Have at it, Carter. I'm not really in the mood to woo her."

"I don't think wooing's required. Just friendly interest."

"Yeah, well, be my guest. I don't really have a long term stake in the Cheyenne Mountain Food Service anyway."

"Sir?"

He sighed and pushed his plate away, settling his folded arms on the table. "You might as well know; if this mission's a go, I'm outta here right after. And if it's not, I'm outta here right now. Just about done with the paperwork, as a matter of fact."

She wasn't surprised. "Because of Daniel."

"No." He used one thumbnail to pick at the edging on the tablecloth. "Because of me. I'm too old for this crap anymore, Carter--"

"Bullshit," she said quietly. When his gaze snapped up to meet her eyes, she added, "Sir."

The insubordination was lost in the realization that half his team was now lecturing him about his love life, or lack thereof. "Oh, god, not you, too," he groaned.

"It's none of my business--"

"No, Carter, it's really not."

"--except when I seem to be involved," she snapped, "like now."

"I don't see--"

She set her cup down and regarded him seriously, and pitched her voice low, so it wouldn't carry beyond their table. "On the ship, after Taonas. I was upset about Janet. I know you expect us all to keep our personal lives separate from what we do, but I couldn't hide in my work anymore, and it all kind of came crashing down on me..."

"Daniel held me while I cried it out," she finished defiantly, her eyes shiny with unshed tears. "He and I are good friends, and I'm glad he was there for me." When no comment was immediately forthcoming from the other side of the table, she added, "Don't you ever need that? Just for a little while?"

"Whatever else happens or doesn't, he's your friend too, you know. And you'd be a fool to let that go." Several long beats passed before she added, rather unnecessarily at this point, "Sir."

When he still kept his trap shut, just sitting there staring at her, she pushed away from the table, and he didn't try to stop her.

He had no way of knowing what Daniel had told the others, but if they didn't know the two of them had planned to become involved, and now weren't, why was he getting the 'stop being an asshole' lecture from half his team?

*****

He awoke to an insistent buzzing. Decades of training made him instantly alert, and he reached for the phone. "Hammond."
"Good morning, General Hammond," Walter's voice rang out cheerfully from the other end of the line. "I hope you had a good rest."

"Wasn't long enough, son, but thanks for the thought. I appreciate all you've done to get things organized around here."

"Yes, sir. Anything I can do to be of help."

"What's the word on transferring John Shepherd to Nellis?"

"He left McMurdo two hours ago, sir. He's expected at Nellis this time tomorrow, barring unforeseen delays."

"Excellent, I'll let the President know."

"Yes, sir. Anything else?"

He and Walter had been together eight years. He resisted the urge to tell him, don't be ridiculous, if I'd wanted anything else, you'd have thought of it already. What he said was, "Now that you mention it, Walter, thanks for helping me stick to my diet."

"I don't--"

"No, of course you don't."

There was a long pause, and a sigh, and George thought for sure he could hear Walter blushing. "My pleasure, sir."

*****

"OFFWORLD ACTIVATION."

"It's a Tok'ra IDC," Walter announced over his shoulder as Doctor Weir came into the control room. "Jacob Carter."

"Open the iris, Sergeant."

Jacob strode confidently down the ramp without a second glance at any of the artillery pointed at him. His gaze was aimed at the control room and the lack of a George Hammond standing prominently in it.

"Sergeant, is my daughter on base?"

"Yes, sir," Harriman responded. "Paging her now."

"By all means, Sergeant," Elizabeth said icily behind him. "Page the Major."

He turned slightly, and saw her standing with her arms folded loosely across her chest. "I--"

She shook her head and started down the stairs to the gate room to greet their guest. They were talking quietly when Sam dashed into the gate room.

"Dad!"

"Hey, kiddo," he said, enfolding her in his arms. "How ya doin'?"
"I've missed you," she said tightly, aware that if the mirror future came to pass, she'd be losing him soon. She was determined not to cry in the gate room.

She slipped her arm into his and addressed Weir with a wide grin. "Sometimes a girl just needs her dad."

Weir nodded with a rigid smile as Sam turned to Jacob and said, "Come on, I'll buy you a cup of coffee."

Elizabeth Weir watched them leave, and then returned stiffly to the control room to have a discussion with Sergeant Harriman.

But the good Sergeant, it seemed, had made himself scarce and left one of the other gate techs at the helm.

*****

"Okay, so... wait," Jacob said tiredly, holding his forehead with the hand that wasn't currently being clutched in Sam's. "Let me see if I have the gist of it."

"Shhh," she urged, glancing around the mess. "Keep your voice down."

"SG-1 went to a different reality through a kind of Quantum Mirror," he whispered. "Stayed there for three days? They gave you all kinds of juicy information about missions they'd had that had turned up useful technology on their side, and then they sent you home, no charge?"

"Yeah, that about sums it up."

He frowned thoughtfully. "Does this have anything to do with Anubis?"

"Yep. Ancient weapons platform under the ice of Antarctica. They told us where to find it, and how to power it up, and how to use it. Only in their reality, Anubis was destroyed over Abydos last year, and it was Ba'al who came in ships over Antarctica."

Jacob nodded absently as he looked away, lost in thought. "That explains a lot," he muttered.

"But that's not why I called you," she said, squeezing his hand to get his attention back.

He turned to look at her, and grinned. "Sometimes a girl just needs her dad?" Sam just rolled her eyes. "Do you know how many decades I've waited to hear you say that?"

"Be serious," she frowned. "I didn't exactly have permission to contact you."

"Yeah, what's with the wicked witch of Cheyenne mountain?"

"She's not wicked, Dad, just by the book, and things have gotten a little shaken up around here. The whole program's on hold."

"I noticed. Where's George?"

"He commanded Prometheus and watched our backs, while Colonel O'Neill used the Ancient weapon. Now the General's on his way back to the White House to talk with the President about Dakara, and we're waiting to hear whether or not the proposed mission is a go."

Jacob scowled, all attempt at humor gone. "No, it's too dangerous. I forbid it."
Her eyes opened wide, but then realized if he was that adamant, it meant he knew something. And besides, she was a Major, and he wasn't a General anymore, so how exactly was he going to forbid anything?

"What do you know about Dakara?" she pressed.

Lips pursed, he said, "Dakara belongs to Ba'al, and it's an incredibly fortified base that you have no chance at all of penetrating."

"We did all right on Tartarus last year," she reminded him defensively.

"That's no vacation spot either right now."

"Could you be a little more cryptic, please?" she snarked. "I nearly understood you."

Jacob wiped his mouth with a napkin and pushed his coffee away, folding his arms across his chest. "All you need to understand is that it's Off. Limits."

She'd had enough of this kind of 'because I said so' discussions with her father over the years, that she was well acquainted with the process. She sat back in her chair with the casual air of someone who couldn't be intimidated. Sometimes that worked. "Well, according to the mirror reality, you're a part of the Dakara mission, so you might as well give up trying to bully me."

He frowned, his annoyance abundantly clear. "Sammy, things are pretty unstable in that quadrant of space right now, and--"

And that did it. Whenever he called her Sammy, she became the little girl whose mother had just been killed, and she turned into a simpering ball of need. She hated it. Worse, she hated knowing he knew just where all her buttons were.

"He's dying, you know," she interrupted softly, feeling the tears burning the backs of her eyeballs.

"What? Who's dying?"

"Selmak."

His expression betrayed his shock, as perhaps an internal query to the symbiote in question went out, but she barreled on ahead, hoping she could convince him before she turned into a blubbery mess. It was short and sweet, but she managed to keep her tears at bay, and ultimately, he agreed to go to the infirmary, just to relieve her mind. Diagnosing Selmak was going to be a little more complicated.

*****

Chapter 4: Blood Toast - What do you give the Jaffa who has everything?
"OFFWORLD ACTIVATION."

Elizabeth Weir came down the steps into the control room, unsurprised to see Sergeant Harriman once again seated at his console. She made a mental note to find out for sure what time his shift ended. Did the man ever go home?

"Who is it, Sergeant?"

"Jaffa IDC, ma'am. It's Master Bra'tac."

"Open the iris, please."

Bra'tac took two steps onto the ramp and stopped at the sound of cocking weapons. He looked up to the window of the control room and called out, "Where is Hammond of Texas?"

Elizabeth laid a hand on Harriman's shoulder and said softly, "I've got this one."

"Oh, yes, ma'am." Walter swallowed hard, watching with trepidation as she descended the steps toward the gate room.

Elizabeth extended her hand and smiled graciously. "I'm Doctor Elizabeth Weir, Master Bra'tac. It's so good to meet you. I've read so many wonderful things about you!"

Eyes narrowed, Bra'tac glanced at her hand, then back up at her face, then back to her outstretched hand, but he made no move to take it.

"Has Hammond of Texas fallen in battle?"

Elizabeth continued to exude warmth and welcome as she clasped her hands in front of her. "No, not at all. He's meeting with one of our highest ranking political leaders at the moment. Allow me to assist you however I can."

Bra'tac squared his shoulders. "I must speak with him immediately."

Walter watched the exchange below him as it grew more and more tense, until he couldn't sit by any longer. He opened the intercom. "Excuse me, Doctor Weir, would you like me to page Colonel O'Neill to the gate room?"

Simultaneously, both Weir and Bra'tac turned to the window and called out, "YES!" Then they returned to glaring distrustfully at one another. They were still glaring when Jack rushed into the room some minutes later, buttoning his jacket.

"Hey, ya old coot! To what do we owe the honor?"

"I have just come from Chulak. Is there somewhere we may speak, O'Neill, without this--" He gave
Weir a head to toe evaluation that didn't end well. "... female present?"

"Hey, Walter," Jack called out, "can you page SG-1 to the briefing room?"

If Harriman noticed Weir's stiff body language, he gave no sign of it. "Right away, Colonel."

A moment later, his voice came over the intercom, "SG-1 to the briefing room immediately. SG-1 to the briefing room."

Hands in his pockets, Jack gestured with a tilt of his head toward the door he'd just come through, and Bra'tac silently fell into step beside him. By the time they made their way up to the briefing room, Doctor Weir was already seated in Hammond's old chair, looking calm and composed. Jack stifled a grin.

"Come right in, gentlemen, I'm sure SG-1 will be along shortly." Her smile was impeccable, just as if none of the stress in the gate room only moments before had ever occurred.

Bra'tac was almost seething as he stood behind a chair near the middle of the table.

"Can I get you anything, Bra'tac? Water, coffee?" Jack asked blithely. Under his breath, he added, "Hemlock?"

Without taking his eyes off Weir, Bra'tac replied stiffly, "I will have some water, with thanks."

Jack poured it, and then fixed himself a cup of coffee, just to have something to do until the others arrived.

Fortunately, Teal'c walked in at that moment, and strode over to Bra'tac, reaching for his forearm. He inclined his head in greeting. "Tek ma te, Master."

Bra'tac returned the salutation, and they sat together.

Jack set the water in front of Bra'tac and took the seat immediately to his right and Weir's left. It wasn't his choice so much as the fact that Jack thought Hammond would've wanted him to shield her from the fallout of her own stupidity, at least for a little while.

Carter and her dad came in next, talking together quietly, and Jack took notice of her suspiciously red nose. Nevertheless, they sat at the far end of the table next to one another, so it couldn't have gone too badly. Jack wondered if they'd discussed the other Carter and her... spouse.

"Are you here as a representative of the Tok'ra, or in your capacity as Major Carter's father?" Weir asked with a pointed smile.

"I'm both," Jacob said with a thousand megawatt grin that belied no irritation and brooked no argument.

"He's a two-star General, retired," Jack snapped under his breath. "I think he's cleared for the briefing." He was reconsidering his earlier concern to protect her. The woman had single-handedly insulted two of their most important allies inside of ten minutes; it didn't bode well for her tenure there.

He turned to Sam. "Carter, give Daniel's office a call, willya? Let's get this show on the road."

The tense silence continued through the call, relieved only by Sam and Jacob's quiet exchange about Mark's kids, much to Elizabeth's discomfiture.
A long couple of minutes later, Daniel came striding into the briefing room, a thick folder in his hand. "Sorry, I was caught up in something." He filled a cup with coffee and took the seat across from Jack, to Weir's right.

Weir watched Daniel get settled and commented airily, "It seems this meeting was called by Master Bra'tac." She turned to him now with her most earnest and understanding expression.

"What can Stargate Command do for you?"

Bra'tac turned to address Jack directly, ignoring Weir entirely. "I have come from Chulak, where I have apprised the leaders of the rebellion of the fall of Anubis, and while there, have learned that Tartarus is in a state of chaos." He nodded to Jacob. "The Tok'ra know this to be true."

Jacob nodded reluctantly. "It's true, the place is a madhouse right now, and that's all due to you, Jack. The minute you offed Anubis, thousands upon thousands of Kull warriors lost their primary command directive."

With a modest smile, Jack waved dismissively. "Happy to help out, no charge."

"From all reports," Jacob continued, mostly for Weir's benefit, "Super Soldier production is still shut down, as a result of our little visit there six months ago. Apparently, they haven't found another queen, so they haven't been able to make any more of the buggers."

"Super soldiers?" Weir asked.

"Also known as Kull warriors," Sam explained. "Creatures in impenetrable black armor, more automaton than either human or Goa'uld, and nearly impossible to kill."

"According to our intelligence," Jacob added, "when Anubis wasn't able to make any more, he started working on a way to hard wire the ability to control them into his mind somehow. Quality instead of quantity, able to be directed with nothing more than a fleeting thought. Near as we can figure, the instant Anubis ceased to exist, all the Kull warriors went wacko. Random, directionless motion, firing into thin air--"

"Taking each other out?" Jack chimed in hopefully.

"We should be so lucky," Jacob replied. "They've turned the whole complex into a carnival shooting gallery. Thanks to the symbiotes, they've got inexhaustible power reserves. It's not worth your life to go there right now."

"Is that where Ba'al is?" Daniel asked calmly, his gaze intently concentrated in front of him, as he squared the edges of the papers inside the folder.

"Yeah. He's trying to figure out how to get them all reprogrammed to respond to him."

Daniel pushed the folder toward the empty chair next to him and folded his hands together on the table as he gathered the others up with a slowly sweeping gaze. "Then it's worth it for us to go there immediately. We need to prevent Ba'al from harnessing the unstoppable power of tens of thousands of Kull warriors," he said gravely. His eyes landed squarely on Jack. "Don't you agree?"

Before Jack could answer, Jacob stated flatly, "It's suicide."

"Not if we are well-prepared," Bra'tac said firmly. All eyes in the room focused on him. "Thousands of rebel Jaffa have already begun to descend upon Tartarus, to make use of the confusion in order to defeat Ba'al once and for all. The fleet will arrive there within the day."
"How many ships do we have at our disposal?" Teal'c asked solemnly.

"Five Ha'taks, thirty Al'kesh, and ten squadrons of gliders," Bra'tac reported, his eyes sparkling with determination.

Teal'c nodded thoughtfully. "It may, in fact, not be suicide; it is possible we might even succeed."

"How's Dakara fit into all this?" Jack asked. "If my good buddy Ba'al's on Tartarus, why bother with Dakara?"

"His vast forces are split between those two locations," Bra'tac stated.

"Only those two?"

"A smattering of others, but not in sufficient enough numbers to make any difference," he replied. "Once Ba'al is dead, the troops he has stationed at Dakara to guard it will capitulate."

"What if they don't surrender?" Weir asked, her voice tightly laced with concern.

"Those who do not will be killed," Teal'c reported evenly.

Weir paled, aghast at the implication. "These are your own people you're speaking of?" she asked.

"They are."

"They've undergone generations of psychological programming to believe the Goa'uld are gods," Daniel explained.

"Those who wish to join us will be welcomed," Teal'c assured her gravely. "Those who do not--"

"Will be killed," she finished, horrified nearly beyond speech. "I can't sanction genocide."

"Then you'll be condemning not only the Jaffa, but the rest of the galaxy, to death or eternal slavery, Elizabeth," Daniel said quietly. He'd used her first name intentionally, to make what he had to say personal. That's where he'd gone wrong with Hammond all those years ago; he hadn't made it personal, hadn't made him feel it in his gut.

"That's all the Goa'uld will tolerate," he continued. "Those who refuse to serve them are killed, and not mercifully. The physically beautiful ones are turned into hosts and forced to face a near eternity as passive observers to their own lives, condemned to endure every atrocity the Goa'uld commits against others, using the hosts' own hands and bodies.

"I was like you once," Daniel said, holding her captive with his quiet voice, unchallenged by the others at the table. "Naïve, unprepared for the enormity of what's out there. Beauty and wonder, yes, but also unimaginable horror." His voice became even softer as he added, "This isn't a case of humanity thinking itself superior, Elizabeth. Ba'al has to be stopped, at all costs, or countless hundreds of billions of people will pay for our indecision today, with their lives. Their very souls."

Jack's gut twisted, hearing Daniel talk about the innocent, inexperienced man he wasn't anymore, as if he were speaking of someone dear to him who had passed away. He wasn't far off. Jack missed that man too, all the more for the part he'd played in his demise.

His gaze flickered over to Weir, who still seemed mesmerized by Daniel's voice and his words, as if under a spell. Perhaps she was.

The room held it's collective breath while they waited to see if Daniel had won her over or not.
"This isn't a decision I feel qualified to make," she finally said, almost apologetically.

Daniel's lips quirked up a fraction into a sad smile. "No," he agreed. "You're not."

The weight that settled over the room was palpable, and seeing the horror of it in her expression reminded Jack of how innocent they'd all been years ago when this started.

"Do you know how to get in touch with Hammond?" he asked quietly.

She managed to pull her eyes away from Daniel long enough to nod in Jack's direction, and without a word, she headed into her office. She returned moments later with a slip of paper, which she handed to Daniel.

He retrieved the speaker phone from the desk in the corner and slid it into the middle of the conference table. He dialed the number and handed the paper back to her.

Sitting as still as statues, they all listened as the phone rang.

After three rings, "Hammond."

"Good afternoon, General, this is Elizabeth Weir. SG-1, Master Bra'tac, and Jacob Carter are here with me."

"Sounds like a full house. What do you have, Doctor Weir?"

"I'll let Colonel O'Neill bring you up to speed, General," she said, wisely relinquishing the floor to Jack with a nod of her chin.

Jack leaned forward onto his folded arms and spoke in the direction of the speaker box. "General, we have confirmation of the condition of Tartarus and Dakara, from both Jacob and Bra'tac; it's just like the mirror guys said it'd be, except it's Ba'al, and not the other snake, Nehru, which isn't really too surprising when you think about it--"

"Nerus," Daniel corrected automatically under his breath.

"Whatever," Jack said dismissively. "Bra'tac says the resistance has a fleet large enough to get the job done and is already en route to Tartarus. All we need's a go from the White House to join the fray."

"I happen to be on the way there for a meeting in just a couple of minutes. I'll brief the President. Go ahead and gear up, and I'll be in touch within the hour."

"Affirmative. Oh, and sir? When we get back, I'm gonna want to talk with you some more about that Bill Gates guy--"

"Denied again, Colonel. Let it go, that's an order. Hammond out."

"Yes, sir." Jack frowned peevishly at the speaker on the table.

When the tone indicated the line had gone dead, he glanced around to find all eyes upon him, and he shrugged, clearing his throat. "Okay, people, we've done all we can do at this point. You heard the man-- if we're doing this, what do we need?"

Daniel left without comment, presumably to pack some books, and then some more books.

Carter started reeling off items on her way out the door, trusting that someone was paying
attention; Jack sent Jacob and a confused Bra'tac after her to take care of that.

Then he and Teal'c headed for the armory, where they checked out enough munitions to outfit a small army, which Jack supposed they were.

Forty minutes later, they'd put together everything they could think they'd need, and then some. It was piled up in the corner of the gate room, where Siler had been charged with getting it all onto only one FRED.

Jackets and vests had been piled on chairs around the conference table in the briefing room, and even Daniel had returned without prompting. There was nothing to do now but sit around and wait for the phone call.

"They're not gonna let you off Bill Gates, Jack," Daniel said absently as he squinted through a small loupe to study a still photo he'd made from the Antarctica footage.

"Well they should," Jack snapped, tossing his pencil onto the pad he'd been doodling on. They needed to get a move on, or he was going to go nuts. "If it weren't for him, we'd've beaten the Goa'uld on our own a coupla years ago. And besides, at a bare minimum, somebody's gotta pay for that Millennium Edition crap."

"I'll second that," Sam said quietly as she passed behind him with an extra large styrofoam cup.

"Don't encourage him," Daniel mumbled.

"Still," she said as she finished circling the table to take her seat beside Daniel, "when I think that Microsoft wouldn't even be in the picture, if Gary Kidall had made it to that first meeting with IBM the way he did in the mirror reality..." She shook her head in disbelief at the tiny divergence which had made all the difference. "Microsoft has had a stranglehold on innovation since it's inception. What other changes might there have been --globally-- if Bill Gates hadn't been able to take advantage of that missed meeting back in 1980?"

"Are you kidding? As souped up as that cargo ship is, we'll be there in next to no time. Besides," she said with a suppressed grin, "I'm not the one with the record in the bathroom. Sir."

"That reminds me," Daniel muttered. He slipped his glasses back on and headed for the desk in the corner. He opened the comm line to the gateroom and said, "Um, Sergeant Siler? Can you double check the MREs for contraband, please?"

Siler's voice came back, "Already done, Doctor Jackson. No chili or burritos."

"Thank you," Daniel replied airily.

"Very funny," Jack snarled.

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The door to the Oval Office opened before Hammond had even been waiting a whole minute, and Henry Hayes emerged, his face split with a wide grin. "There's the man of the hour!"
George smiled, taking Hayes's offered hand. "No, sir, Mister President. That would be SG-1."

Hayes closed the door, gesturing to the sofa closest to the door, and they sat opposite one another across a cherry coffee table.

"SG-1 has done some amazing things, and I'm happy to give them full credit for all of them. But I'm willing to bet it would've all gone down very differently up there without George Hammond's influence, right from the very beginning."

"I've tried to do my part."

"Perfect segue, George." Hayes grinned slyly. "Thank you."

They'd been friends for a long time; this was not a new tactic. "Why do I feel as though I've just walked into the lions' den?" Hammond said wryly.

"You have. I want to talk to you about that job I mentioned the other day. My god, was that only yesterday?" he asked rhetorically as he glanced around his new office. "Time flies when you're in a planet-wide sci-fi crisis, I guess. I should probably try to get used to that..."

"Anyway, it's an enormous responsibility, a thankless job you'll never get any credit for, and the biggest headache on the planet."

"That's quite the marketing spiel, Mister President."

Hayes shrugged. "I'm trying to be straight with you. I figure it's the least I can do, since I won't accept 'no, thank you' for an answer. What do you think of the name, 'Homeworld Security'?"

"Sir--"

"Don't 'sir' me, George." Hayes frowned. "As long as you wear the Air Force's uniform, you're mine, and the truth is, I need you in that spot. This country needs you-- your planet needs you. You're the only man who could possibly do it."

"Excuse me, Mister President, but I don't even know what you're proposing. What exactly is your vision for something called 'Homeworld Security'?"

"It's everything you've been doing for the last seven years, with more pay and less red tape, since you'll be calling the shots. I'm proposing that you run it all, but from here in DC, where you and I can get together regularly. Your area of responsibility will include Weir at the SGC, the Alpha site, the Prometheus, and the F-302's at Groom Lake, bringing the new Antarctic base online, all of it."

For half a heartbeat, Hammond's mouth dropped open in shock, before he covered for the lapse and closed it. "That's..."

"Enormous?"

"In a word, sir, yes."

"That's exactly the word I was looking for." Hayes beamed, as though the job offer had just been accepted.

"Look, George, let's be brutally honest. Weir's background in negotiation and diplomacy, as well as her ability to pick up languages quickly, makes her eminently qualified for the position she holds. Eventually. But in the last twenty hours, I've come to understand that the picture is so much bigger
than what I first assumed after reading the mission reports. That was never more clear to me than when I was standing toe-to-hologram with that Anubis fellow, right here in my office.

"She'll be perfect for bringing the program public, when it's time to do that, but in the meantime, she's going to need competent backup and a significant ramping-up period. She'll need someone she can rely on, to help her make the really tough decisions."

George smiled, allowing a hint of victory to color it. "Thank you for the segue, Mister President." He saw Hayes roll his eyes, but didn't pause to let him get a word in edgewise.

"I learned just before coming here, that there've been some developments at the SGC..." He did his best to quickly summarize the briefing Jack had given him as he was in traffic on his way to the meeting. "... so whichever nations end up comprising this oversight committee you're considering, Mister President, it'll look a darn sight better for us if we don't have to rush right in there next week, trying to explain another imminent threat we could have prevented.

"And it will never be easier to act; once this committee's in place, getting agreements from eleven separate nations will be a study in gridlock." George leaned forward, forearms resting on his knees to convey the urgency of the situation to his friend, seated on the opposing couch. "It'll make the United Nations Security Council look like Romper Room.

"Pretty face or not, when word gets out that we've been keeping the Stargate Program under wraps all this time," Hammond continued, "first there's going to be panic, then there's going to be worldwide rancor. How much better would it be, if we could present the program to the world as a completely successful one? Show them a galaxy at peace, thanks to our efforts over the last seven years? A lot of good men and women have died during that time, and what better memorial to them, than for their families and the world to know their sacrifice wasn't in vain?"

Hayes studied George for a long, silent moment, then leaned over to the phone on the coffee table and buzzed his secretary. "Beth, would you come in here and get this video contraption going for me, please?"

Moments later, halfway across the country, one of the techs at the SGC was making the President very unhappy.

"No picture?" Hayes repeated. He was sure the tone of his voice conveyed his disappointment to the dark screen on the desk in front of him, and hopefully the person on the other end of the line as well.

"No, Mister President, I'm sorry," the technician's voice replied. "Sergeant Siler was pulled away from the videoconferencing installation for another critical project. Would you like everyone to move into Doctor Weir's office, in order to utilize the existing video link, or will the audio capability in the briefing room be sufficient?"

Hayes pursed his lips in annoyance. "No sense cramming everyone into one small office, Sergeant. Audio will be fine. Can you patch me through?"

"Certainly, sir. Just one moment, please."

Hayes whispered to George beside him. "You know, I was really getting used to the whole Star Trek-ish video link thing--"

"Good afternoon, Mister President. This is Elizabeth Weir."

"Doctor Weir, I understand you've got some company with you. I'd hoped to be able to have a face-
to-face meeting, but I understand Sergeant Siler had other duties to attend to."

Weir glared at Jack, obviously considering giving him up for ordering Siler to pack the FRED. Ultimately, she elected a gentler course of action and arched a you owe me big time eyebrow in his specific direction.

"Yes, sir, he was pulled in order to investigate a report of... potentially toxic substances in the gateroom." She was gratified when O'Neill had the grace to look sheepish. "That's been taken care of, sir. I'll make sure that establishing the video link in the briefing room is the Sergeant's very next project."

"I'd appreciate that, Doctor. Please introduce your guests."

"It would be my pleasure, Mister President. Master Bra'tac of the Jaffa has brought us word of unrest that seems to be the direct result of the recent activity in Antarctica, and General Jacob Carter joins us from the Tok'ra High Council."

"Jake, you old son of a gun," Hayes said jovially. "How the hell are ya?"

Jacob grinned. "Never better, Mister President. Congratulations on the new job."

"Thank you. There's a lot you and I have to catch up on, old friend. My place, once things have settled down?"

"I'll look forward to it, sir."

"Let's get down to business, shall we? General Hammond and I have discussed the fact that the current situation seems to match the intelligence SG-I brought back from the-- what did you call it again, George?"

Hammond's voice was slightly muffled, as though he was not as near the speaker. "The mirror reality, Mister President."

"Right."

"If I might jump in, Mister President?" Elizabeth asked.

"Go ahead, Doctor."

"I know I'm in the minority here, in that --with the possible exception of Doctor Jackson-- I'm the only person in the discussion who isn't a member of a military. But I don't think I'd be doing the job you asked me to do, if I didn't at least try to be the voice of reason to whoever will listen."

When no one interjected, she continued, "It's been my experience that the best way to stop the proliferation of weapons is to try and end the need for them. If we examine the mandate for the Stargate Program, it seems that this country's history of manifest destiny has continued out to the rest of the galaxy, completely in secret from the entire planet."

She paused for a breath in the starkly silent room. She didn't hold out a lot of hope they'd see things her way, but she had to give it a shot. "Instead of going in with guns blazing, what about negotiating with this Ba'al person?"

Everyone in the room simply stared at her. It was Bra'tac who finally said what they were probably all thinking. "The Goa'uld do not negotiate. They murder, torture and enslave."
"The really cranky ones kill you over and over again," Jack offered with more than a touch of cynicism.

"Your suggestion is an honorable one, Doctor Weir," Daniel said, "but in my experience, not practical. As I said on board the Prometheus, we must strike first and fast and decisively. Only then will Earth and the rest of this galaxy be safe."

"Doctor Jackson, I have more than 280 million constituents to consider, a little more than half of whom actually voted for me, plus the added burden of a global population without a clue. I'm essentially acting on behalf of people who never even had a chance not to vote for me. On the one hand, I have you, a seasoned, professional archeologist, offering me military strategy against an alien threat, something that hasn't happened before in the history of EVER. If I base my decisions solely on your wishes, doesn't that make you pretty much identical to these Goold you keep warning me about?"

"I actually hadn't thought of it that way," Daniel replied thoughtfully.

"I know, Doctor. Evaluating the pros and cons is a big part of my job. That's all I'm asking," Hayes pleaded. "Give me the time to do my job."

"That's not up to me, Mister President," Daniel said evenly. "That's up to the Goa'uld. None of us will get a chance to try to explain 'pros and cons' to him, when he brings his fleet here to enslave us."

Jack winced at the dripping sarcasm. "What Daniel means, sir, is that due to the nature of what the SGC is, and the kinds of issues we come up against every day, you need to give us some latitude to act in the moment, because that's the reality here-- life and death decisions that turn in the blink of an eye--"

"I don't need you to interpret for me," Daniel snapped.

"Yeah, apparently you do," Jack growled right back.

"You guys both know this is still my first week, right?"

"Ah, yes, sir, but this is just another day at the office for SG-1," Jack offered with a withering glare across the table at Daniel.

"Ba'al will come here," Daniel insisted, his annoyance at Jack's interference quite clear to those in the room and probably on the other end of the phone line as well.

"Daniel, he may not know what Anubis was after, or even where he went," Sam said reasonably, trying to dial back the intensity a bit. "The Goa'uld aren't known for sharing and keeping each other in the loop."

"Indeed they are not," Teal'c agreed. "They are known for placing spies in one another's ranks, which achieves the same result, if I understand the idiom correctly."

Excited, sensing vindication just around the corner, Daniel jumped on it. "Anubis might've sent word. When it started going badly, when he knew he was going to be destroyed, would he have gotten off a message?"

"Not likely," Jack said tightly.

Daniel addressed Teal'c again, effectively cutting Jack out of the discussion. "One of his people?
The spy, perhaps."

"Perhaps," Teal'c allowed. "There is also the matter of the weapon," he added, looking straight at Jack, while playing his only real card.

"Weapon?" Hayes interjected.

Jack screwed up his face. He'd really been hoping to soft pedal this particular issue. "Yes, sir," he replied reluctantly. "On Dakara. Something about... destroying all life in the galaxy, or some such thing."

"That's--"

"Yeah, I know, sounds bad, huh?" Jack agreed. "Don't worry, sir, we've got the crack team of Carter and Carter on it. They'll have that baby dismantled and safe as... safe things... before you can even blink an eye."

Sam's eyes grew wide, and her dad patted her hand reassuringly. "Oh?"

"Yeahsureyabetcha. They've blown up a sun, for cryin' out loud, there's nothing these two -- technically three, I guess-- can't do. It's all under control, sir. You can trust SG-1."

There was a long silence from the speaker phone, and then Hayes asked, "Jake, what's your opinion about all this, from your unique perspective?"

Jacob leaned forward toward the speaker in the center of the table and laced his fingers together. "Mister President, with all due respect to Doctor Weir, if you send a team of negotiators to Ba'al's stronghold, you'll never see them again. They'll be tortured for information and then disposed of. Danny's right, unfortunately. As dangerous as this scheme is, I don't think you can afford to not pursue it."

Another pause while Hayes digested the comments. "Colonel O'Neill, I gather you're on board with Doctor Jackson's 'dangerous scheme'? That this is our best chance to get rid of the major players, once and for all?"

Jack bristled at the President's assertion that the mission was Daniel's, except that he couldn't deny that Daniel had been its most outspoken proponent from the start, and how messed up was that? Grudgingly, he replied, "Yes I do, sir."

"Do you concur, George?"

"Yes, Mister President, I do."

There was another long pause while Hayes finished examining all the angles. "I don't mean to be a negative Nellie, Colonel, but how quickly can you train John Shepherd on the use of the chair in case --god forbid-- something goes wrong during the mission? Let's face it, if you're out of the picture, Earth is left high and dry."

Jack shrugged. "Not a problem, sir. I'll have Walter track him down before we go. Easy enough to verbally give him the nuts and bolts."

Hayes sat hunched forward on the edge of the sofa, forearms resting across his knees, hands
clasped loosely between them. This was, no doubt, the most difficult decision he'd had to make in his short career as President. So far, he seemed to be making globally-impacting life or death decisions at the rate of one every couple of hours, and he hadn't even tried to balance the federal budget yet. No wonder George was bald.

He took a deep sigh and let it out slowly. "Then it sounds like you have a go for Dakara, Colonel O'Neill."

George leaned forward as well to contribute his two cents. "Godspeed, SG-1"

"Thank you, sirs."

Hayes closed the connection and leaned back against the sofa. "Are they always like that?"

George didn't even pretend to not know who he was taking about. "No. Usually you can't tell where one leaves off and the other begins. But I believe their mission to the mirror reality may have caused some discord between them."

"Will it hamper the mission?"

George frowned. "Over the last seven years, I've seen SG-1 triumph under impossible odds, Mister President, due in large part to the relationship between those two men. They offset each other in ways that balance the best of what both of them bring to the table. I have to believe they'll pull it off this time as well, that they won't let whatever's happened in the other reality affect them here in this one."

"I hope to god you're right, George. We have a lot riding on them."

*****

All of SG-1 were sliding into their jackets as Jack looked around, rubbing his hands together, and asked, "Do we have a plan?"

"Kill Ba'al." Jacob grinned.

Jack blinked and thought about it for a moment, then said, "Elegant in its simplicity."

The intercom crackled to life. "Colonel O'Neill, I have Major Sheppard on the line."

Jack turned and poked the comm. "Thanks, Walter, you're a peach."

He grabbed the receiver. "Sheppard? This is O'Neill--" He frowned. "Yes, as a matter of fact, I do know why the hell you're being transferred, Major. Now listen up--"

Weir approached Jacob, her arms folded across her chest. "The plan?" she said softly. "Rather light on the details, don't you think?"

"We find the details only serve to worry Jack," Jacob confided quietly. "We like to keep that kind of stress to a minimum, if at all possible."

Jack hung up the phone and narrowing his eyes, wagged a finger in Jacob's direction. "I heard that."

"I see," Weir said.

"You do?" Jack and Jacob said together.
Looking between the two of them, Weir forced a tight smile. "Not really."

****

Gating through to the Land of Light took mere moments, but it took nearly an hour for Bra'tac to bring the ship in from its hiding place, and then for the six of them to transfer the gear off the FRED. They sent the slowly lumbering machine back through the gate, and took Tuplo's good wishes with them for safety in their flight and success in their mission.

Teal’c took the controls and set a course for Chulak, with Sam flying shotgun. Behind them, Jacob and Bra'tac talked in quiet tones of the upcoming battle.

"This will not be a quick journey," Bra'tac stated. "We would be more comfortable in the rear compartment."

"I really didn't want to spend the entire trip sitting in the refrigerated section," Jacob groaned, nodding his head toward the back. Whatever feud Jack and Daniel were in the middle of was going to suck them all in eventually, if they didn't work it out between them soon. Seeing that Bra'tac didn't get the reference, he capitulated. "Yeah, okay, fine."

Daniel had just finished sorting through the pile of hastily-stowed gear in order to find his pack, when Bra'tac came sweeping into the aft section, his cape furling behind him, followed by Jacob. He watched as they settled into the nook he'd been planning to hole up in, the one on the opposite side of the hold from Jack.

With a sigh, he knelt nearer to Jack than he'd have liked, and opened the rucksack, sorting through the photographs he'd made of the Ancient writing at the Antarctic base. He'd brought the pictures, not because he expected to find any kind of insight regarding the writing, but because he knew that even at the ship's increased speed, it was going to take the better part of a day to get to Chulak and then Tartarus and Dakara after that, and that was a damn long time to try to avoid someone in such a confined space, especially without props.

Daniel glanced at Jack from the corner of his eye with equal parts anger and longing. Jack had been jovial and amusing, in a juvenile 'are we there yet?' kind of way while they'd been transferring the cargo, but now he'd evidently used up all his quips, because, crossword in hand and sprawled nearby on a stack of sleeping pads, he'd turned silent and sullen.

Daniel didn't deserve the treatment Jack'd been giving him-- it seemed like a total condemnation of Daniel's very existence. It'd struck Daniel as abusive and belittling and arrogant in the extreme. That Jack thought he had the right to make that kind of judgment about Daniel's value and worth as a person, based solely upon choices he'd made as a teenager, was mind-boggling.

Equally as confusing, was the fact that the anger and hurt --however justified-- did little to dissuade him from the yearning he'd felt for the man for so long, a need so deep and omnipresent, it made him ache.

He knew he could never learn to un-feel the feelings, the prickly love/hate that had drawn him to Jack in the first place, infuriating man that he was. It'd taken years to shape the relationship they had, dying and living, and all the stupid crap in between. It'd all been under control, until they'd walked through that damned mirror and found a Jack and Daniel who'd found the courage to take a chance on each other.

If only they'd decided to turn back, instead of going forward. If only Daniel hadn't followed his Jack into the men's room there. If only...
But that way lay madness, the systematic unraveling of a life, event by event, until each occasion was stripped clean of its ability to hurt, or to cause embarrassment or pain. How was he supposed to fall out of love with Jack? Now that Jack was forever lost to him, how could he fill the spaces in his life and heart, the ones Jack had always filled, spaces that had been pried open with the promise of more and always and together?

Filling the empty places with someone else seemed a reasonable course of action, logically speaking, but who else could even come close to encompassing the bizarre combination of what he and Jack were to each other? Part brother, part father figure, part dashing matinee idol-- there was only one Jack O'Neill --two l's-- and he was now a part of Daniel's past.

He simply needed to move on. The sooner he flushed Jack out of his system, the sooner he could get on with his life and find somebody new.

Sam's laughter rang out from the front of the ship, and for half a second, Daniel thought, huh. Such an obvious choice. She was smart and beautiful, and he cared for her. They were both hurting; they'd both seen things at the mirror world they'd never be able to replicate here in their reality. But could he ever feel enough for her? And could either of them ever get past the knowledge that they were both settling for second best? He shook the idea loose. It was pretty arrogant to think she might feel anything for him. Besides, she had Pete--

Jack suddenly looked up then, completely taking him by surprise, and Daniel realized he'd been staring at Jack full-on. He blurted out the first thing that occurred to him. "So how much back-pedaling did you have to do with Hammond?" he asked softly.

Jack was startled that Daniel was even speaking to him, after their little disagreement on the President's conference call, and his brain farted. "Back-pedaling about what?"

"About the fact that the other Jack and Daniel were not only involved, but actually m--" At Jack's guilty expression, Daniel sat back on his heels with a heavy heart and guessed, "You didn't tell him, did you."

Finally with the program, Jack gathered himself up to a fully sitting position, sputtering in a low whisper, "I wanted to! I tried! But he cut me off before I could--"

"Save it, Jack," Daniel said bitterly. He didn't know why he felt so let down. After all, it scarcely mattered anymore. Except that Jack's briefing of Hammond had happened before the debacle in his truck, when things had still been on track for them to be together. Or at least that's what he'd thought. But now it seemed that Jack had never intended to tell Hammond about their doubles. Or about them.

Shaking his head, Daniel added softly, "That's just great. No wonder you were so willing to flush us at the first sign of trouble. You had zero investment." It was worse than a betrayal; it was denial, and that hurt a lot. "Doesn't matter now anyway, does it," he said tersely. "Probably for the best."

Before Jack could reply, Daniel gathered up his photographs, journal, and pen and headed for the front of the ship, in a valiant effort to put as much distance between him and Jack as possible. His only solace was knowing this would be their final mission together, and soon he'd be out from under the heartbreaking torment of having to face the man every day.

Jack watched Daniel stalk away, fighting the urge to run after him, yell at him that he was way off base with his grossly inaccurate and unfair theories.
Except that, of course, that he wasn't.

As soon as the accusatory words were out of Daniel's mouth, Jack knew he'd hit on the truth of it. If he'd already been out to Hammond, already committed to the idea of him and Daniel as a couple because someone else knew besides the two of them, he would've had a reason to fight harder to get over his initial reaction to Daniel's little trip down memory lane. But they'd been on a deadline to gate out, and Jack's mental pictures of a wildly wanton teenaged Daniel Jackson participating in quasi-public sex, with anyone who showed an interest, had tripped him up good. It was just easier to give up and stop thinking about it as an option.

Just as he'd done with Sara, when Charlie died, it was easier to close up and run away, than to fight for what was his.

And the ironic thing was that finding out Daniel had slept around 15 or 20 years earlier hadn't caused Jack to love him any less; it'd just made him feel... outgunned.

*****

"I wish I could be more specific," Sam said.

She and Jacob were sitting together in the aft section, in order to give Teal'c and Bra'tac a chance to do go through their part of the plan one last time. Daniel was dozing in the far corner with his back to them, and the Colonel had wandered to the front of the ship some time ago.

"I don't have a detailed time line, and things have happened so fast since we got back. In the mirror reality, Selmak died right after the Dakara mission, but it was in the late summer, months from now," she said softly.

This was distressing to hear, for a lot of reasons Jacob didn't really want to go into with his daughter at the moment. "'Y'know, you can't just go down to the corner store and pick up a new symbiote, Sam. There simply aren't that many Tok'ra to go around. You have to be prepared for the possibility--"

"No," she said stubbornly. "I'm not ready to let you go. There has to be a way."

He smiled, cupping her cheek. He owed the Tok'ra a lot, not the least of which was his relationship with his grown daughter, but now he only hoped there'd be time to put what he'd learned from that into practice. "Is it selfish of me to say that's kinda nice to hear?"

She pulled away from his mollifying hand, determined to pursue this. "This sounds so cold, but couldn't Selmak just... leave you, while he still has the energy to do it without releasing the toxins? I mean, you wouldn't be Tok'ra anymore, but you'd be alive."

Jacob frowned. "That is cold, Sam. Selmak saved my life. I should've died five years ago."

"I know, it's just..." she blew out a breath and regrouped. "I was hoping if I got back here in time, gave you some warning that it was likely to happen, there'd be a way to do something to make events occur differently somehow."

"This mirror reality really did a number on you, didn't it?" he observed. "You can tell me, I've got clearance." The smile he put on the words did little to reassure her.

Sam smiled back, but her heart wasn't in it. She thought about telling him all of it; about how it felt to watch her double kiss Janet like a loving partner, that Cassie was the daughter they'd both raised, and that she was having a child of her own. But she hadn't really had time to process all of it
herself, to figure out how she felt about everything, or where she wanted to go from here.

"Let's just say, I had a glimpse of one possible future, and now I have some decisions to make. I'm forty-two, Dad, it's about time I figured out if the Air Force is enough for me."

"Something you want to tell me?"

"Not yet. Still thinking."

"Fair enough." He cleared his throat nervously. "I didn't really want to say anything yet, but in light of these developments..." he sighed deeply and pushed on. "The, uh, Tok'ra, as a race, are dying, Sam. We've had no queen since Egeria, and we've lost a lot of our number in the war with the Goa'uld."

"None of that's a secret," she said. "What aren't you saying?"

He shrugged and looked away awkwardly. "That we've had to take some pretty drastic steps, in order to preserve even a fraction of what we --they-- are."

"Dad?"

Jacob blew out a tense breath. "There are only a few thousand of us left. In order to preserve our culture, we're going to have to start reproducing sexually."

"Oh my god, that's..." she was stunned, there was no other word for it. "Harcecis. Are you--"

"Yeah, I know. It's not a perfect plan, by any means, but it's that or let ourselves die out through attrition. We can't pass on one hundred percent of our genetic memory, but we can try to preserve the essence of what we are."

"And... that means you--" she was surprised at how little she wanted to actually be having this conversation. She winced. "They'd be my sibling? Mine and Mark's?" She could feel the grimace on her own heated face, and she struggled to control it with limited success.

"Siblings, probably," he sighed with regrettable stress on the plural. "We'd be attempting to rebuild an entire race, y'know."

"What?" she choked out.

Jacob closed his eyes briefly before continuing. "Oh, there's more. There's a three to one ratio of female hosts to male hosts."

Sam tried to stifle her gasp. "Three? Wives?"

"Yeah." He winced, glad Daniel still looked to be asleep.

"At your age?" The moment it was past her lips, she regretted it and clapped a hand over her mouth, wishing she could call it back.

"Hey!" he frowned, adding in a gruff whisper, "That's enough, young lady. Do you think I wanted to talk about my sex life with my little girl?"

"Sorry," she said, failing to hide her amusement over his offended discomfiture. "A harem. You've got a harem!"

"It's a polygamous familial cluster," he admonished sternly under his breath. "They've been
working on this for a while. One of the problems has always been trying to establish colonies separate enough to remain healthy from disease, once all the symbiotes are gone, yet close enough together for defense. It's a fact of life that the war with the Goa'uld keeps us on the move almost constantly. If we can bring them down with this mission, the Tok'ra can finally settle and put down roots for the first time in centuries. Then comes the task of actually making it work..."

He was grimly serious, and she realized he wasn't nearly as okay with this as he was trying to appear. She could feel her cheeks flushing with sympathetic embarrassment for him. "I-I don't know what to say."

"The less the better, please," he grumbled.

*****

Seven hours and two MREs after taking off from the Land of Light, they were orbiting Chulak, and Jack was trying to avert domestic violence. From what he could ascertain, it seemed that Rya'c --staging a little teenage rebellion of his own-- had already shipped out with the rebel fleet bound for Tartar Sauce, intending to take out Ba'al's Super Soldier factory all by his big, bad self.

Based on Teal'c's looming posture and very vocal displeasure, Jack gathered no one had seen fit to mention this little detail to the big guy. He couldn't blame Teal'c for being pissed off.

"He is no different than you were at his age," Bra'tac admonished in a more than parental tone. "He is a man, Teal'c, a warrior. And he fights for his people. To further the cause you yourself began!" he thundered. "You have no right to deny him his place in our victory!"

Teal'c firmly believed Rya'c would be killed, fulfilling the prophecy from the Mirror Reality, and he was in no way interested in taking that chance. "He is my SON!" he roared through clenched teeth. "The risk is too great--"

"The risk is no different for us all," Bra'tac said heavily, dark eyes glittering as he looked around the tiny ship at their small group. "There is a chance we shall all die this day. But our cause is just, and circumstances have never been more in our favor. Millions of our brothers are counting on each of us to do our part. If we are to die... then we die free."

Jack winced. He'd never been fond of the whole Klingon 'today is a good day to die' routine.

Bra'tac thrust out his arm defiantly. There was a long, silent moment during which Jack wasn't entirely sure Teal'c wasn't gonna take a swing at the old guy. Judging by the look on his face -- mouth down-turned, nostrils flaring-- Teal'c wasn't sure until the last minute either. Eventually, Teal'c grabbed his forearm, snarling, "You will not die this day, old man, and neither will Rya'c. I will make certain of it."

With a friendly sneer, Bra'tac grunted, "And who will watch out for you, eh, Teal'c?"

The proximity alarm sounded just then, letting them know their ride was waiting. There was a shuffling of weaponry onto the ring platform, and then Teal'c and Bra'tac ringed aboard the Ha'tak that waited off their starboard bow. Once its passengers were received, it immediately opened a hyperspace window and vanished, to join up with the rest of the fleet bound for Tartarus.

Jack rubbed his hands together and surveyed the three remaining members of their party. "Okay. Who's up for a hand of gin?"

"Love to," Jacob said. "God knows the Tok'ra aren't much for fun and games. But I have a wardrobe fitting in about twenty minutes."
"Wardrobe, ya say?"

"Well, I can't exactly impersonate Enki dressed in my Tok'ra suedes, now, can I."

"Who?" Jack asked, looking straight at Daniel for the translation. "Inky?"

"Enki, also known as E-engura, meaning 'house of the subterranean waters'." Daniel's lip curled as he continued, "He was the god of wisdom and magic, god of life and replenishment, lord of--"

"I'm afraid we're going to have to skip the history lesson, Danny, sorry," Jacob said hurriedly. He turned to Sam. "You wanna give me a hand?"

She followed him into the cargo hold, to gather up the items he'd be taking with him.

"We're monitoring all the usual comm channels, but we're going to maintain radio silence if at all possible," Sam said, helping him drag the crates into the center of the rings. "Good. Wouldn't do for my lowly escort to be mouthing off, as if he were the Great and Powerful Oz, now would it." He grinned as his daughter gave him a hug and stepped back to send the rings to the waiting Al'kesh off their port side.

Jack glanced down the corridor from Jake to Carter and then back to Daniel, who sat smirking in the copilot's seat. "What didn't he want us to know about good ol' Inky?"

Daniel cleared his throat quietly. Sam's muted outburst had awakened him, and before he could fall back asleep, he'd heard a little more than he'd really wanted to, but Jack didn't need to know that. "Enki was also the lord of the waters and lord of semen. He was generally thought to have been responsible for fertilizing the earth itself."

Jack's eyebrows rose. "Oh, really?" he murmured. "Interesting persona to choose."

Sam slid into the pilot's seat and maneuvered the scout ship into the corresponding escort position, relative to the other Tel'tak.

"What'd I miss?" she asked over her shoulder, glancing between them.

Daniel looked expectantly towards Jack, leaving it to him to repeat it for Sam's benefit, if he chose.

"Just checking," Jack said seriously. "Dakara wasn't the place where I spent several charming weeks enjoying Ba'al's luxurious hospitality, was it?" He looked pointedly at Daniel.

"How should I know?" He twirled one forefinger next to his head, pointing somewhere towards the heavens. "Glowy, remember?"

Jack couldn't have said why Daniel's flippant answer saddened him.

"No, sir," Sam replied, eyes front and oblivious to the tension behind her. "Ba'al's fortress was in another sector of space entirely. That's a target for the secondary wave."

"Ah. So, Dakara it is then." He shoved his hands into his pockets. "We there yet?"

*****

It wasn't their job to attack Dakara, and they didn't really want to arrive before Bra'tac's throng.
rushed the Super Soldier factory, so they set an easy pace, using only the sub-lights. Once Tartarus was secured, Teal'c would send a signal, and SG-1 would make their presence known to the forces holding Dakara.

With any luck, the Tartarus contingent, comprised of the bulk of rebel Jaffa troops, would be victorious in their quest to off Ba'al and turn his Jaffa to the good side. With the best part of Ba'al's forces deployed at Tartarus, Dakara had only a token presence, comparatively, the majority of which the rebellion's underground sources had determined, lay in the small cadre of ships currently in orbit around the planet.

SG-1 plus Jacob --in the guise of Enki, one of the handful of remaining System Lords, and loyal to Ba'al-- were to travel leisurely to Dakara, ready to take command of Ba'al's forces there, once they got word that Ba'al had been defeated.

The real Enki had been ritually immolated just hours before. This left only Nyx and Yu.

Teal'c had made friends with Yu's first Prime, Oshu, during the fight with Anubis over Kelowna. Oshu was a member of the underground politically, but still fiercely loyal to the Jade Emperor, who had been his master since he was a boy. If they were successful this day, Teal'c would contact Oshu with the news first, allowing him the time and opportunity to give his master an honorable death, before the word went out that the Goa'uld had fallen. He would leave Nyx to suffer at the hands of her own Jaffa, several of whom were known to him. Hers would not be a quick demise.

*****

The rebels came out of hyperdrive shooting. The automated defenses which ringed Tartarus couldn't stand up to the raging onslaught of weapons brought to bear from the Jaffa fleet. Neither Anubis nor Ba'al had foreseen an enemy so well-equipped and so determined.

The comm on board Teal'c's ha'tak screamed with Ba'al's displeasure, the symbiote's deeply modulated voice filling the pel'tak. "What is the meaning of this?"

Teal'c reached toward the comm unit to reply, but Bra'tac silenced him with a look.

"My Lord," another voice on the comm line nervously stuttered, "Mado'k was manning the shielding console and appears to be mortally wounded! I am Loc'ar, my Lord, your humble and obedient servant."

Teal'c's eyes widened. He mouthed Rya'c? to Bra'tac, who grinned in confirmation.

"I have no interest in what you are called, and I care nothing for dead slaves. Get those defenses repaired!"

"Yes, my Lord, right away!"

At a station to Teal'c's left, a young warrior he judged to be no older than Rya'c, worked feverishly to triangulate Ba'al's location in the sprawling complex on the planet's surface. In the seconds that Rya'c had bought them, Tora'c had been able to locate the Goa'uld's position to within a few meters. "Got it!" he trumpeted gleefully.

Bra'tac's jaw squared with determination as he considered the young man. "Very well. You will send us to the closest ring room to that location, without delay." His eyes swept the soldiers assembled there with a level, determined gaze.

"Rak'nor, Cha'ra, and Yat'yir, you will accompany Teal'c and myself in the first assault. Maz'rai,
you will select four warriors and follow in the second."

Turning, they strode as one off the command deck toward the ring room.

In their wake, the words, *in case we do not succeed* hung heavily in the air. Their only hope lay in Tora'c's ability to block any further transmissions into or out of Ba'al's private chamber.

*****

The battle to take Ba'al's throne room wasn't as bloody as it could've been. More than half the Jaffa they encountered on their way there from the ring room gave the password in time not to get zatted, and then turned to help them, doubling the rebel's numbers. It was gratifying to see.

With the rest of their number waiting in the corridor behind him, Teal'c kicked open the door to the room at the end of the long corridor and rolled two stun grenades across the floor, then ducked back into the corridor for the few seconds it took to take effect.

Certain any Jaffa attending Ba'al would've fallen to the grenades, Teal'c surged inside, prepared to do battle with one or more super soldiers, in case their intelligence had been wrong. But he found himself alone, face to face with a smirking Ba'al. the edges of his personal shield sparkling in the light from the braziers.

Ba'al took his time coming to his feet, folding his arms across his chest in a show of supreme disinterest.

"Well, well, well," the Goa'uld intoned. "I wished to see who had the audacity and temerity to penetrate my defenses. I'm not surprised that it is you, *sholva*. Amusing as this is, however, I really must take my leave."

Teal'c didn't respond. Instead, he leveled his staff at the smirking Goa'uld and fired, knowing that the staff energy would ineffectually bounce off Ba'al's personal shield. He continued to fire, careful to keep his eyes trained only on the false god, so as not to give away Bra'tac's presence behind him.

He watched as Ba'al tripped the transport circuit and was gratified at Ba'al's shocked expression when he wasn't immediately whisked away. He could tell the moment Bra'tac's thin blade pierced Ba'al's back and then twisted up inside his chest cavity, by the thin line of blood which appeared at the corner of his mouth...

*****

"Crap," Sam muttered.

Daniel's head swiveled from the reference he was reading. "What's wrong?"

"We're entering the Dakaran system."

"It's too soon," Jack stated tersely, coming to his feet. "Crap."

"I already said that sir," Sam said tightly.

The comm crackled to life and spewed forth static-y Goa'uld.

"Who goes there?" Daniel translated, eyes glued to the console.

"*Who goes there?*" Jack mimicked with a disbelieving frown as he set about checking his weapon.
"Shhh!" Daniel and Sam hissed simultaneously.

There was more gibberish, and then Jack heard the name Enki.

"Inky, that's Jake, right?" Jack said behind them as he secured a zat holster to his left thigh.

"I am Enki, System Lord for this --I dunno, quadrant / area / system. Stand down your weapons. I intend to board your vessel."

"What?" Jack said, his lips pressed together tightly. "I don't remember any boarding being mentioned in the 'plan'."

"He's improvising, because we're early," Sam whispered over her shoulder.

"Shut UP!" Daniel ordered, his eyes closed tightly, as if he could block out all the offending chatter that way.

He murmured the translation under his breath, "Lord Ba'al commands an inspection of your lazy asses... Quit wasting my time, stupid infidels... I'll have you all put to death for your...something, something... sassy backtalk..."

Daniel was obviously paraphrasing, which Jack hated. "Goa'uld posturing, yadda, yadda, yadda," he muttered, clipping his P90 to its lanyard. The plan hadn't included Jacob actually leaving the safety of the Jaffa-held Al'kesh, not until after the big reveal. Jack had no idea if he'd be able to stall until they got the word. If they got the word.

There was silence in the scout ship for many long seconds, and then Sam said, "Rings activated. He's on board the Goa'uld ship."

"Shit," mumbled Jack.

"My feelings exactly, sir."

*****

Ba'al spun angrily, growling deep in his throat as he twisted his body in a useless attempt to pull out the offending blade now lodged deep in his back. He came to rest facing a grinning Bra'tac. As recognition hit, his personal shield flickered off with the interruption of his concentration.

"YOU!"

Eyes wide in disbelief, Ba'al continued to futilely push the buttons on his hand device, furious to find that neither his shield nor his transport device worked any longer.

"You will cease this treachery this instant," he demanded, his voice filling the room. "I am your GOD!"

Without breaking eye contact, Bra'tac pulled his katana from its sheath. "You are no god," he said simply as he advanced on the Goa'uld, malevolent intent dripping from his every word as the now-impotent coward retreated in front of him.

"For all the hundreds of thousands of your innocent victims, but especially for Doracn'l, I will now end your miserable life."

And with one great, two-handed swipe of the punishing blade, he easily separated Ba'al's head from his torso.
The body crumpled to the floor like a soggy sack of river stones. The head—with open mouth and wide, surprised eyes—left its perch with a wet, reluctant sound and rolled with the force of the thrust, coming to rest at Teal'c's feet, leaving a slimy trail all the way back to the splatter where it had originally fallen and bounced.

There was blood everywhere.

The two Jaffa stood, still braced in fighting stance and panting hard, seemingly mesmerized by the gore, as well as the apparent simplicity of the act itself, as if the truth of it hadn't quite sunk in— it was done. Finally. Ba'al was dead.

Moments --hours?-- later, Teal'c released his held breath, startled by the thrumming adrenaline pulse in his ears. There were sounds of men fighting in the corridor outside. Rak'nor and the others had been charged with engaging those loyal to Ba'al, preventing their access to the throne room, giving him and Bra'tac time to accomplish the deed.

He pushed open the big, golden doors he didn't remember closing, to find bodies strewn on the floor of the corridor and the scent of discharged naquada hanging heavily on the air. Rak'nor's shoulder was scorched, the wound cauterized around the threads of his clothing, yet he fought on, outnumbered, keeping the others at bay through 'sheer cussedness', as O'Neill would've called it. Rak'nor was a brave warrior.

"ENOUGH!" Teal'c bellowed from the doorway. In the sudden silence, he added, "There need be no more killing this day. Brothers, put down your weapons. Ba'al is dead! We are all finally free!"

Behind him, Bra'tac came out of Ba'al's chamber, covered in as much blood as Teal'c was. "Behold!" He held Ba'al's head aloft, so all could see.

There was a hushed stillness, and then one of those who had been fighting moved forward, his staff weapon aimed straight at Teal'c's chest.

"It is a trick!" he proclaimed. "Gods cannot die. He has simply taken another host!"

"It is no trick," Bra'tac assured them. "Come. See for yourselves, the symbiote still cowers within." He continued to hold the dripping head by a handful of the jet black hair, while Ba'al's Jaffa surrounded him. "His body lies there. Do with it what you will, but the head is mine. I claim it."

As the Jaffa moved into the throne room to inspect the corpse, Bra'tac joined Teal'c and Rak'nor. "Come, friends," he said in a voice rich with emotion, "let us share in this historic occasion. We shall taste the blood of our vanquished enemy, and let it strengthen us for the many challenges we will soon face. The Jaffa are a nation without a home; we must make Dakara our destiny."

Bra'tac's lips were already smudged a deep red; he'd apparently started without them.

Both men came as bidden and reached out a hand to catch some of oozing gore and bring it to their lips. Rak'nor moved with some uncertainty, his gaze locked on Teal'c, following his lead, if a little reluctantly.

Teal'c grinned. "This is a great day, my brothers, one we have waited for, for many long years. Victory tastes very sweet."

All three men partook of the grisly toast, licking their fingers clean of the lifeblood of their vanquished foe. Teal'c had a fleeting wish to have experienced Apophis' demise as intimately.

Casually, he turned toward Rak'nor and observed, "You are injured."
Rak'nor scrubbed his mouth on his forearm and shrugged off Teal'c's concern. "Mine is of no more concern than yours," he observed with a jut of his chin to where Teal'c's previous wound was bleeding through the bandage Major Carter had placed upon it. "It is nothing. A scar to brag about around the campfire.

"Shall I instruct Tora'c to release the protection over the throne room?"

"Do so," Teal'c instructed. "It is time to spread the word. A new day has dawned, one in which all Jaffa are brothers. Together, we must learn what it means to work together for the betterment of us all. We must put our petty disputes to rest."

Rak'nor delivered the message to Tora'c as they made their way to the rings.

Rounding a corner, they came to a dead stop, faced with six armed Jaffa. Smile wide, Bra'tac held Ba'al's head high for all to see, as Teal'c and Rak'nor bracketed him, aiming their staff weapons at the crowd.

"Ba'al has fallen," Teal'c declared in a tone that brooked no arguments. "Throw down your weapons, or I will kill you where you stand."

Cautiously, Bra'tac emerged from between the other two. "Come. See for yourselves," he bid the others quietly, for he knew that men driven by fear would sometimes act unwisely. What they had done this day would change every Jaffa's way of life, for the better, yes, but the unknown was no less fearsome to them than the evil they were accustomed to. "Ba'al is truly dead. We need live in fear no more."

From the middle of the phalanx, one Jaffa warily stepped closer to examine the still-dripping head. A look of supreme awe settled over his features as he beheld the three men responsible for this unlikely and amazing feat. In a single movement, he powered down his weapon and dropped to one knee, head bowed. "Master," he said reverently. "What is your name, that I may honor you?"

As one, the five Jaffa standing behind him disarmed and knelt as well.

"Do not bow to me," Bra'tac said sternly. "What we have done this day we did for all our people, so that no man must bow to another again. Go now, and tell everyone what you have seen."

Several of the Jaffa scattered, following the command, but the first kneeling man rose and met Bra'tac's eyes. "My name is Cor'ak, and I pledge my allegiance to you and this holy cause. How may I be of service?"

Bra'tac's frown resolved into a knowing nod. "Come. We may meet others of Ba'al's Jaffa who require such convincing."

As they made their way to the ring room with their prize, a dozen other rebel teams advanced into the massive complex, setting enough explosives to demolish the entire Super Soldier facility. The word spread via all open comm channels that the destruction of the compound was imminent, and that rescue ships were standing by to ring aboard any stranded Jaffa who were interested in freedom.

Once aboard the Ha'tak, Teal'c contacted Oshu. He told his friend that the reign of the Jade Emperor had come to a close. Oshu was very grateful for the call and wished Teal'c well. As he awaited the jump to hyperspace, Teal'c had time to wonder if Oshu meant to accompany Yu on his final journey.

*****
Jack stood behind the pilot's seat, senselessly hovering, but finding it to be a refreshing break from the pointless pacing he'd been doing for the last thirty minutes.

"Jacob's been gone for half an hour, Carter," he said. "I'm willing to try to bust him outta there, but we're a little outnumbered, not to mention outgunned; we'll have a fight on our hands. It'll make it a helluva lot worse if he's got it under control. What's your gut tell you?"

Not taking her eyes from the readouts in front of her, she sighed heavily and ran a hand through her hair. "He may be perfectly fine. I was hoping we'd have heard from Teal'c by now."

He squeezed her shoulder. "Yeah, me too."

"I think we have to trust that he can pull it off," she said uncertainly. There wasn't quite a question mark at the end.

Just then, the comm crackled to life, and with it, a video transmission as well. "Jaffa Kree!" in Teal'c's booming baritone.

In the co-pilot's seat. Daniel straightened. "Hear me!" he translated over Teal'c's voice. "The system lord Ba'al breathes no more! He has been slain by Master Bra'tac of Chulak - behold!"

The viewpoint shifted, and the screen showed Bra'tac, his tunic and face stained with blood, and surrounded by dozens of smug looking Jaffa. He was holding up Ba'al's gory head, for all to see.

"The Goa'uld are no more!" Bra'tac bellowed.

Jack winced. Bra'tac's eyes were wide, and he was grinning like a loon. "He look a little crazed to anyone else?"

"His woman," Daniel said softly, translation forgotten for the moment. He'd overheard Bra'tac and Teal'c talking earlier, and he understood Bra'tac's position.

At one time, Daniel had wanted to slay Apophis with his bare hands, for what he'd done to Sha're. But fate had intervened, in the form of Apophis' host, a simple temple scribe. Daniel had managed to push the rage down, to move past it, and he'd finally found a shred of compassion that would let him help to ease the dying man into the next life. He'd been so close to losing his soul that day...

Both Jack and Sam were looking at him, waiting for more. He mentally edited out most of the really personal stuff before he added, "Bra'tac's woman was killed, pretty horrifically, many, many years ago. My guess is, he's waited all this time, hoping for a chance to somehow avenge her." He shrugged and turned back to watching Bra'tac speak to the masses about his victory. "Give him his moment."

Watching Daniel's pensive face, Jack thought maybe his friend could understand Bra'tac's pain better than anyone. Jack still felt the sharp sting of guilt, every time he thought about the promise he'd failed to keep so many years ago, to help Daniel find his wife. And when they'd finally found her --dying by Teal'c's hand, no less, and how's that for irony for ya-- Jack had known Daniel would need some kind of closure. He'd wanted so badly to give it to him, but the fucking snake had been pretty hard to kill, and by the time it'd finally, really happened, there'd been precious little satisfaction to be had.

Daniel carried that open wound with him every day. And Jack felt responsible.

During Bra'tac's impassioned speech, the snake, having lost its life support system, finally slithered out of the ragged opening in the host's neck and landed on the floor with a sticky plop. Unfazed,
Teal'c zatted it twice before it could slither away, then bent to retrieve the stringy corpse, holding it up next to Ba'al's head.

Daniel continued to translate. "... and I bring it to the holy city of Dakara, so that all Jaffa within the sound of my voice may know that with the deaths of Anubis, and now Ba'al, we are finally free! Go out and spread the word, my brothers and sisters, that this is the hour of our deliverance! Today, we write our own destiny!"

The crowd on Teal'c's ship roared their hearty approval.

By the time the speech ended, Jack was wired as tight as a top. "Carter, you got that ring-back device? If they bought Jacob's Goa'uld act, he could be in real tro--"

Just then the rings in the back activated. Jack spun, P-90 leveled, Daniel beside him half a heartbeat later with his Beretta drawn.

"Carter, get ready--"

"On it!"

As the rings retracted, Jacob yelled, "It's just me!" as he lay curled into a ball on the floor, head tucked into his arms.

"Punch it, Sam, we've got him!" Daniel yelled, and the ship lurched, nearly dropping him where he stood.

"For cryin' out loud, Jacob, you might've at least called first," Jack groused, flipping the safety back on his weapon and thrusting a hand down for the man to grab.

"Yeah, sorry for dropping by unannounced, but I was beginning to feel my welcome wearing out."

"In that outfit, I'm not surprised," Jack mused with a frown. "I'm not sure velvet and lace is such a good look on you."

"I'd have to agree." Jacob yanked off the enormous, ruffled collar. "Itchy, too."

He turned to Daniel. "Don't suppose you've got a spare set of BDUs on ya?"

*****

Sam managed to keep them out of sight and firing range, tucked behind the Dakaran moons, while the upheaval on board Ba'al's ship was resolved.

As Bra'tac's Ha'tak entered the Dakaran system, Teal'c checked in, confirming that the portion of Ba'al's forces in orbit around the planet had been made to capitulate, and following some 'crew adjustments', were now considered 'friendly territory'. He had no way of knowing how many Jaffa were on the planet's surface, or what their affiliation might be --or what they might be persuaded to be-- which, while not surprising, Jack found less than ideal.

Teal'c agreed. He estimated the casualties in the operation as a whole to have been under thirty percent. He was most gratified; it was a reasonable price for a people's freedom from generations of slavery. The Free Jaffa fleet had not been as lucky; barely a dozen ships were still serviceable. Most had not survived the onslaught of the automated defenses orbiting Tartarus. More would need to be procured, and quickly, if they were to attempt to form any kind of rudimentary government instead of setting upon one another. There was a long road ahead.
As soon as their ship was in orbit around the planet, Bra'tac, Teal'c and Rak'nor planned to gate to
the surface with an armed contingent of loyal comrades. Their intention was to sift friend from foe
with regard to the Jaffa holding the temple, under the guise of arranging a suitable display of the
remains of the deposed god. It was hoped their arrival would be showy enough to draw the guards
away from the temple, until SG-1 could complete the decommissioning of the weapon, just in case
they couldn't be turned to the cause.

The three of them arrived on the planet's surface, startling the Jaffa standing watch there. They
found themselves in the ruins of an amphitheater situated at the base of a statue so immense, the
top of it was hidden by low, thin clouds. It was an amazing sight.

Still gripping Ba'al's head by the hair, Bra'tac motioned to one of the more intact of the smaller
structures, midway around the rough circle to the right, and loudly instructed Teal'c to fashion a
throne suitable for a false god.

With a knowing smile, Teal'c contacted the ship and had them send Jaffa and supplies to make it
so.

Meanwhile, the curious guards came to watch and hear a legend in the making, about the day the
reign of the Goa'uld ended.

While Teal'c and Bra'tac continued to perform in the center ring, the rest of SG-1 and Jacob set up
the transport remote and landed the scout ship in one of the deep gullies behind the statue. There
was no telling where the ring platform was located, and they had no wish to wind up in unsecured
territory, especially before the weapon had been neutralized.

It wasn't a terribly long hike over mostly even ground, and they encountered no Jaffa along the
way.

Once there at the foot of the statue, Daniel leaned way back, trying to see the entire structure.
"Well, I didn't get a real good look at the figure as we were landing, but it does kind of resemble
the one Jackson described to me, that housed the repository where O'Neill got his head sucked. The
archway itself is definitely of Ancient design--"

"You wanna get your butt inside, please," Jack snapped, hauling Daniel into the covered area by
the loop on the back of his vest, "before one of those 'not sure I'm really on your side yet' Jaffas
gets a peek at us?"

Daniel shook him off and glared at him. "That's a fairly annoying habit you've developed there,
Jack, especially since you're the one who's so fond of gathering intel. Has it occurred to you that I
can't do my job without my own kind of intel?"

"As long as your intel doesn't get us killed, you can gather all you want."

"Fine."

"FINE!"

"Just shut up and let me--"

"GUYS!" Sam interjected loudly. "I think I found some writing over here."

And thank god she'd interrupted, because she wasn't sure what else would've gotten through their
loud, teeth-clenched, chest-to-chest bickering.
She remembered Colonel Carter telling her about the wall, and the difficulty she and her father had in translating it without Daniel's help, but then she'd mentioned that Selmak and her father had both died almost immediately following the Dakara mission. After that, Sam hadn't been able to focus on anything else, not even about how to get inside.

She flipped through the datapad again, but there was no hint at all, just nothing.

She felt so stupid, letting her emotions get the better of her that way.

"Ohhh," Daniel breathed. Argument already forgotten, he left Jack stewing and moved past Sam to peer at the alien writing, not even noticing her discomfiture. "This is an extremely old dialect."

He turned to Jacob. "Can Selmak read this?"

Jacob's head dipped, and Selmak spoke in his grating Tok'ra voice. "Of course, but it makes no sense." He frowned. "Three days to the chicken...?"

"I hadn't gotten that far," Daniel muttered, moving to the part of the wall where Selmak was standing. "Chicken?" He studied the characters, his head tilted, then reached out and felt them. "Yeah, you're right; it says chicken. Three days to the... chicken. What d'ya know..."

"You doubt me?" Selmak sounded mildly amused.

"No, no, of course not." Daniel waved distractedly. "But the reference to poultry makes no sense whatsoever. I-It's not even a complete sentence. Now if it'd said, um..." he moved a little to the left, bending over almost double as he pointed to another phrase. "Here, see? Um... wind shall blow and the ground shake and the world will be recreated in three days--"

"Daniel! That's it!" Sam interrupted excitedly, a spark of memory coming from the sight of him nearly standing on his head.

Jack moseyed over to keep watch over them. "What's goin' on?" No answer was forthcoming, but he was used to being tuned out while his team scientists did their thing, so he didn't mind being ignored. For the moment. While they did their job, he did his, occasionally glancing over his shoulder to check for any possible activity in the courtyard.

Sam joined Daniel and her father at the wall, running her hands along the difficult-to-see seams.

"It's the circles, see? Here." She pointed. "And here. I think they're meant to be turned, until the phrases they spell out make sense, like a kind of combination lock!"

Daniel straightened up, only narrowly missing stepping on Jack's toes as he took a couple of big steps back, in an effort to take in the wall in its entirety. "A code," he murmured, his eyes finally registering the circles of stone amid the blocky text. "Huh. Good job, Sam." He gave her a big smile.

"Yeah, good job, Carter." Jack wanted in on the fun, even if he didn't know what the fun was exactly. "What's goin' on?" he repeated, but again was ignored.

Sam shrugged, not really over her feeling of being stupid yet. "Let's try to figure out which ones to rotate, before we pass out the congratulations, huh? This theory may not hold up."

"It will hold up," Selmak said, moving in front of another of the discs and pointing. "Rotate this one to this position."
Sam turned the disc until Selmak indicated they should stop.

Daniel read, "Midday. the sun is high in the sky." He nodded toward Jacob. "Okay. One down, and four to go?"

They continued to make adjustments, until at last a brisk wind arose and the ground started shaking. They ducked out of the way as showers of grit rained down from a stone structure that hadn't seen use in millennia, the code wall rising up into the ceiling, revealing a much larger room.

Braced against the outer doorway by himself, Jack bit off, "Look sharp," as the others moved to join him, huddling away from the falling debris in the center of the chamber.

He risked a quick peek at the construction Bra'tac was overseeing in the amphitheater and was grateful that none of the Jaffa were paying them any mind. They were all still standing around listening to the old geezer rewind the victory speech, while brandishing Ba'al's rotting head.

Jack turned to address the others who'd moved further back into the room once the transformation was complete. "Strangely enough," he said to their backs, "no one outside seems to have noticed your little magic trick, but I'm pretty sure that won't last. Think we could hurry it up a little?"

He was resoundingly ignored. Yet again.

Daniel, Sam and Jacob were gathered around some kind of table, one that hadn't been there a minute ago, intently studying the chicken scratch that covered it. It made Jack itchy to have them so far away, with so much rock in between him and them. How'd they know that wall wasn't going to slam shut again, if they pushed something they shouldn't? On the other hand, if he went over there and joined them, he'd feel pretty exposed, leaving their six unprotected from all the 'maybe-on-our-side-and-maybe-not' Jaffa in the courtyard. He was torn, annoyed and antsy, but his only real choice was to stay by the door and watch their six, so that's what he did.

"This is amazing," Sam said, looking around the inner room that had been revealed when the wall retracted. "This chamber must be pretty well shielded, it wasn't detected with any of the ship's sensors."

"Oh, god, I recognize this," Daniel breathed, looking at the table. Mirror-Daniel hadn't been able to tell him what the thing looked like, since he hadn't gone with them to Dakara. He'd been barfing his guts out with the flu when the Replicators had attacked the SGC. "It looks like Malikai's time machine..." He ran the tips of his fingers down the beveled edge of the carved stone blocks, and a screen behind him flickered on. He spun around, muttering, "Uh-oops?"

Sam dropped to the floor and slid halfway under the control table, trying to access the main hatch. "Probably rigged so it'd come on when it sensed someone was in the room. It's not the time machine," she assured him. "It's a control panel used to calibrate the weapon, the way Malikai's controlled Groundhog Day." She grunted, squeezing even further underneath.

"Daniel, kick my pack over here, will ya?"

Daniel gently toed her kit toward her so she could reach it, his eyes never leaving the screen with its rolling text.

"I don't suppose those are the dismantling instructions?" Sam asked hopefully as she rooted around in her pack for something she could use to pry off the cover, in order to access the machinery inside.

Following Selmak's head dip, releasing control to Jacob, he said, "No such luck, Sam."
Daniel chimed in, "Um, energy wave... basic molecular elements... Sam?"

"Yeah, that sounds like it," she agreed. This part, she remembered clearly.

Daniel backed away with a smile and one last touch of the rough carving. "Okay, you guys are up."

Sam grumbled, "Great."

Clearly out of his element, Daniel retreated to the archway to join Jack. "On your left," Daniel said softly, so he wouldn't startle Jack, in the unlikely event he hadn't heard him coming up behind him.

"Are we done here?" Jack asked somewhat irritably.

"We're in. I'm done. The rest is up to them."

He took up a position like Jack's, behind the cover of the arch, but pointed his M-5 in the opposite direction, doubling the coverage.

There was so much he wanted to study about this place; it made him sad that in all likelihood, no one would ever bother to try to understand the site's history, the real purpose of the weapon, what the Ancients had in mind when they built it, who the damned statue was supposed to represent--

Jack made no attempt to hide his bad temper. "Tell me again why we aren't just zatting it out of existence?"

After eight years, Daniel was used to having his train of thought derailed. "Um-crystals, I think. The scout ship's so souped up, it's burning through them double time." He shrugged. "Or something."

With a snort, Jack turned and strode over to the inner hatchway, palming the grip of his holstered zat as he went. "Carter, you've got exactly three minutes to do whatever you're gonna do, and then I'm zatting it," he ordered.

Before the echo of his words died away, the entire complex started lighting up, one panel at a time, until the room was bathed in an eerie blue light. The undercurrent hum indicated that all the machinery --whatever it was-- was up and fully running.

"What the hell?" Jack breathed, looking around the room and drawing his zat at the same time. The area was a lot bigger than it'd appeared at first, now that it was lit, and the fact that the machinery --whatever the hell it was-- seemed to be idling, was probably not a good sign.

"It's ancient tech," Daniel said through gritted teeth, his hands reflexively tightening on the weapon in his arms. "Of course it's responding to your gene. Stop it, or you're gonna give us away!" He alternated looking back over his shoulder at the crowd in the amphitheater and glaring at the man standing with his mouth open at the doorway of the apparently cavernous room. "JACK!"

"Love to," Jack ground out, spinning around to face him and spreading his arms. "Any ideas?"

Daniel managed to keep from rolling his eyes. Just. "How'd you make the chair work?"

"Thought the commands."

"Then stop thinking!"

"And just how do I do that, smart ass?"
In two strides, Daniel had Jack backed up to the wall, his shoulders thudding painfully against the roughhewn stone, his ball cap falling unnoticed to the dusty floor. Daniel thrust his hips against him, aggressively shoving his butt that last couple of inches, until there was no room between them, and nowhere for Jack to go, because he was good and pinned. Then Daniel covered him with his own body, leaned all his weight on him, and took his mouth. Jack immediately opened up, granting him admittance, probably as a reflex from having the wind knocked out of him.

The act wasn't subtle and teasing, and it didn't ask permission. It wasn't a question. It wasn't even really a kiss. Jack's mouth was hot and forbidden and not given freely. Daniel pulled every shred of loving emotion he could out of it, until nothing existed between them but lust, and raw, angry need.

Daniel registered things in passing that he wouldn't have had the presence of mind to notice, had he been emotionally invested in what he was doing. Jack's P-90 was in the way. His own weapon was digging into his ribs, and his groin was uncomfortably mashed up against some kind of bulky crap Jack had jammed in one of his pockets, maybe a yoyo and a pack of gum.

Some long-buried instinct brought one of his thighs up between Jack's legs, spreading them, insinuating himself into Jack's most personal space. Feeling Jack's soft package, hanging between tightly corded thighs, made Daniel's cock jump, hitting a kink he'd forgotten he'd even had. Suckling a soft dick --the moments before it got hard were always the sweetest, feeling it begin to grow and fill his mouth-- and he groaned into Jack's mouth with remembered lust.

Jack's tongue was rough and dry, and there was a metallic taste to it, as if he'd been chewing the inside of his cheek, as he sometimes did. Blood. It made Daniel come fully hard, as he clutched Jack's head without care, fingertips registering the silky hair as he gripped his skull, plundering Jack's mouth. Taking, possessing. Owning.

In that first blinding second, there had been only one thought in Daniel's mind: to knock Jack's concentration off kilter, so the Ancient tech would turn off. But now that he was in--

--IN--

Knowing it would be the only time, ever. Aware that he was topping Jack in front of witnesses. And with Jack's awareness coming back online, and every muscle tensing in the body beneath his, ready to throw him off --knowing this was against Jack's will-- was all such a fucking turn on, Daniel could've come right there, without very much effort at all.

When the tech had begun coming alive all around her, Sam had started to struggle out from under the console. Now finally emerging and clambering to her feet, she saw her father staring at something with wide eyes, his jaw hanging open.

She turned to follow his gaze, took one glance, and said, "Yeah. Never mind them. We'll talk later."

She grabbed her M-5 off the top of the console and ran towards the doorway leading outside. "Right now, can you please just work with me? Get that hatch open, however you have to."

She quickly scanned the amphitheater, noting gratefully that all the Jaffa still seemed to be hanging around the spot where Bra'tac was holding court, playing up to the audience, braying in Goa'uld of their glorious victory. The crowd was entranced, and no one was paying the slightest bit of attention to the goings on inside the temple.

Just then, the lights went off, and the tech seemed to go to sleep. "We're clear, sir," she said, loud enough for both Daniel and the Colonel to hear.
Hearing that seemed to snap them out of it.

Jack shoved Daniel away, panting, "What the hell was that...?"

Daniel stumbled, righted himself, and wiped his mouth on his jacket sleeve. "Your stupid gene. I just short-circuited your brain for a minute." He made a pointed glance at Jack's groin, where the evidence was pretty hard to ignore. Or just plain hard. "Seems to have worked," he added smugly.

"Don't ever do that again!" Jack growled as he used the back of his hand to wipe Daniel's spit off his face.

"Oh, don't worry, I won't!" Daniel assured him with a bitter laugh.

To say Jack was disconcerted by the what? --kiss? attack? Ancient first aid?-- was an understatement. Never in his life, with any woman at her most assertive, had he ever felt anything like what had flushed through him just now. A feeling of willing helplessness had slammed into him in the instant the force of Daniel's body smashed him back against the stone wall. Knowing that all Daniel's voluminous experience was behind it, and that --short of seriously injuring him-- all Jack could really do was hold on for the ride.

He could still feel Daniel's fingers digging into his biceps, the press of the hard planes of his body -livingbreathingwarm-- the weight and the insistence of it holding him down. His tongue, the taste of him, when it strip-searched his mouth, the gut punch of feeling a hard cock jamming into his thigh.

He'd only ever been on the passive side once in his life, two days before they pulled him out of Iraq. He remembered very well his responses then: fear, rage, unbridled fury at the violation. But this thing with Daniel hadn't been like that at all; instead, it'd set off warm, throbbing, unrelenting need, which Jack found infinitely more disturbing.

Even with the absolute clarity of a moment frozen in time, he couldn't really understand exactly what was going on in his own insides, and that made him feel off balance, which just pissed him off. He was so hard, he wasn't sure he could even walk, the way his dick was trapped down by his thigh. The brush of his standard issue boxers across the head was nearly more that he could stand.

With a last glare, Daniel stalked off down a dimly-lit corridor, examining the banks and banks of now-cold controls, while Jack scooped up his cap and adjusted himself surreptitiously.

"Found the ring platform," Daniel stated haughtily over his shoulder.

Jacob managed to get his mouth closed, but he could barely tear his eyes away from either of them, even though the show seemed to be over. "How far d'you think he would have been willing to go, to get Jack to stop thinking?" he whispered to Sam, who had taken to kicking at the hatch.

With the second blow, it hissed open, revealing a rainbow of beautiful, fully charged crystals, arranged in gleaming racks. "You really want an answer to that question?"

He winced. "Come to think of it, not on your life."

Sam gingerly began removing various sized crystals and sliding them into her pack, amid wads of socks and extra t-shirts for cushioning. She rummaged around in her tool kit to see if she could find something to remove each rack in its entirety; no telling when they might come in handy.

She glanced up at her father, who was still watching after the Colonel and Daniel as they moved further away from them.
"The O'Neill and Jackson we met in the mirror universe were, um... married."

"To each other?" he squeaked.

He glanced back down the hallway and shook his head. "Actually, that doesn't really seem all that far-fetched, now that I think about it..."

He knelt down to give Sam a hand with loading up the crystals, wondering when in hell his new life was ever going to stop amazing him.

Jack and Daniel were now about as far as Jack was willing to let them get from the rest of the team. "This is far enough," he warned, following Daniel at a safe distance.

Just then, bright lighting came up, and panels started to flash and blink again.

"Damn it."

"Think it off," Daniel suggested offhandedly, not slowing in his exploration of the facility.

He skimmed as much of the text as he could, knowing Jack was going to call a halt to his exploring, unless he could find something to catch his interest. Jack must have taken his suggestion about the tech, because soon, the consoles slept once again.

And suddenly, there it was. Daniel's heart sped up. "They have ships," he announced, squinting at a large block of text.

He pulled out his flashlight just as an overhead light snapped on. He flickered a look over his shoulder at Jack, who shrugged. "Thanks," Daniel muttered, putting his flashlight away.

Jack's headache was back, big time. Brain tricks, who knew? He pulled off his hat and rubbed at his forehead, then plowed his hand through his hair. It didn't help. "Who has ships? Where?" He settled the cap back on his head and finished off his water.

Oh, yeah, he had Jack's attention now. "The Ancients. And I think we're right on top of them. Here, think at this," he said, pointing to a panel along the wall.

Jack came over to join him, bringing the scent of his damned sweat and his aftershave with him in an advance cloud that settled over Daniel like a teasing blanket. "Think at this? Do I do requests?"

"Yes, you do," Daniel bit off with some annoyance, heaving an irritated sigh. He still had the taste of Jack's mouth on his tongue, and he wanted more; his body, his blood was primed for it. He shoved down his need and thrust his hands into his pockets, to keep from reaching out for the other man, from running his hands along his shoulders, gripping the back of his neck, pulling him in--

Then there was the problem of the hard-on which hadn't diminished at all, thanks to the pheromone cloud, and was now thrumming in time with his every heartbeat, burrowing into said pocket, wanting to be petted. He yanked his hands out of his pants like he'd been stung and folded his arms securely across his chest, then sighed again, an internal plea for calm.

"This could be important, Jack. Think 'on' or 'start' or 'go', or 'open, sesame', or--"

"I get it!" Jack frowned, addressing the panel. Nothing happened.

"Okay, try touching it, then."

"Oh, because touching things never gets us into trouble," Jack muttered under his breath.
He reached out gingerly with the index finger on his left hand, the right still gripping his weapon. He closed his eyes, laid his hand flat on the console, and thought OPEN UP. Nearby, a panel slid up into the ceiling, triggering interior lights beyond it to come on, revealing what looked for all intents and purposes like a landing bay the size of the one that housed Prometheus.

"Oh, cool."

Daniel moved toward the opening as if to go inside. At Jack's "Aht!" he stopped dead in his tracks and stepped aside, so Jack could enter first.

Weapon at the ready, Jack slipped into the cavernous space, and the lights brightened. Daniel followed him in, weapon up, sweeping the room to the other side.

Once Jack was satisfied there was no threat, he pinged Carter on the radio. "You guys about done? Carter...?"

Just then, Sam strode into the landing bay, followed by her father. She carried a pack on her back and another in her arms, both bulging with crystals in their racks, and Jacob was carrying a large rectangular cube balanced on one shoulder.

"Right here, sir," she replied. "We've stripped the console clean of useable components and turned the inner workings to slag. The weapon's completely dead in the water. Just another fancy monument now."

"Sweet."

He nodded at Jacob, eying what he was carrying. "Souvenir, Jake?"

The elder Carter shrugged with his free shoulder. "Sam thought Daniel might like it. Something about scribbles."

Sam adjusted the strap on the pack she wore, giving a little shimmy to settle it more comfortably on her back. "He's got to be frustrated, leaving all this behind," she explained. "I figure this might..."

"I get it. I'm sure he'll appreciate the thought. And good job, guys, way to keep up the rep."

Jack waved his free hand in the direction from which the Carters had just come. "You see the rings we passed back there? Get on up to the ship and make the repairs you need to. Then sit tight behind one of the moons, til we get the all-clear from Teal'c, just in case. Daniel and I'll check these out. We'll be along shortly."

"These...?" Sam looked around the cavernous space, noticing for the first time the rows of gunmetal gray cylinders stacked in concentric rings around the perimeter of the room. There was a dark shadow in the center of the dimly-lit room which brightened when Daniel walked up to it, displaying more levels of storage as far down as she could see.

"Daniel thinks they're ships," Jack said. "Ancient ships. Ships for Ancients. Whatever. We'll stay in touch by radio."

When Sam looked doubtful, he followed her gaze across the expansive room to see Daniel strolling between the ships, taking it all in. Jack squeezed her shoulder. "It's under control. Really."

"Yes, sir." She turned and headed back down the hall toward the rings, with Jacob a step behind her.
Daniel wandered further into the hangar, following the writing. He reached out to run his fingertips along the block script, as if reading Braille—what an amazing treasure house of Ancient culture and technology—and the floor lit up, revealing an untold number of layers to the structure, shelves, really, each holding more of the objects he was pretty sure were aircraft of some kind.

Jack appeared just behind his right shoulder. "So. Ships, ya say." He peered into what seemed to be a hole that had a transparent covering over it, and tried to count the rings. As far as the eye could see, small cylindrical craft were stacked one atop the other, past where the lights could penetrate the darkness.

Daniel grunted and moved away. He was more in control now, but that would change the minute he got another whiff of Jack's musky aroma.

"There are several hundred here." He pointed. "This silo goes down hundreds of meters. From what I can deduce from the sparse signage, there're seven of these underground silos in different locations on the planet surface, presumably with as many ships."

Jack whistled, enjoying the echo. "This the factory, y'think?" In reaction to his interest, the machinery started to hum to life again.

Daniel sent him a sidelong glance, with an arched brow that clearly offered his services, if he needed his brain fried again.

Jack frowned, looking down to concentrate. "I've got it."

As the screens went dark and the lights dimmed, Daniel nodded and moved on to a long lever in the floor near the center of the structure. "It doesn't say, one way or the other, I'm afraid. This might just be a local hangar. But from what I can tell, this," he reached out to touch the lever gingerly with one finger, "should be the mechanism to get one of them up here to look at." He pulled it back and sure enough, the clear covering dissolved and the ship closest to the top of the chamber floated up through the hole and settled silently onto the deck in front of them.

Jack watched through narrowed eyes. "How come it let you do that?"

"I wasn't sure it would," Daniel replied evenly. "But presumably, not everyone who lived and worked on Dakara had the gene. The general workers, the motor pool, essentially, would need to be able to manipulate the craft to some degree." He glanced over his shoulder—a query, answered with a shrug—and they went to investigate.

When they got within about ten feet of it, the hatch went up, and the running lights came on.

"That you or me?" Jack asked with a sidelong glance.

"You'll notice my hands never left my pockets."

They circled the craft once, then entered through the open hatch in what seemed to be the aft end. They gingerly examined the interior, working their way up to the front of the tiny ship, whereupon Jack merely stared at the pilot's station.

"Have a seat," Daniel suggested.

"You."

Daniel sighed and plopped into the shotgun chair. Predictably, nothing happened. He unhooked his weapon from its lanyard and set it on the floor beside him. "If I'm right, you're the only one who's
going to be able to fly this thing, but I'm betting your ass has to actually be in the chair to do it."

Frowning, Jack unclipped his own weapon and set it on the console beside him, where he could get to it quickly, then lowered himself cautiously into the seat. The cockpit controls lit up like a Christmas tree, and a HUD flickered into view on the windshield in front of him. Beneath his feet, he could feel the ship thrumming, although his ears weren't sharp enough to pick up the sound of the engine.

"That was fun," Daniel said softly. He looked over at Jack and was surprised to see him sitting stiffly, hands in his lap, just studying the readouts.

"Humor me for a second." Daniel wondered how much of the Ancient script Jack was actually able to read. "Stop threat-assessing this. Quit trying to guess how it all works off your gene, and just accept that it does."

Jack grunted but said nothing.

"Clear your mind. Relax and imagine 'hover'."

Jack must have done just that, because in moments, they were floating roughly three meters off the deck, perfectly still.

Not wanting to jar his concentration, Daniel asked softly, "Can you maneuver left or right?"

Jack did more than that; he caused the craft to make a slow 360 degree circle in place, coming to rest just where they'd started. His hands went to the controls, as though it were any other aircraft. "Fly," he whispered under his breath, and then they were airborne and slipping gracefully through a previously invisible hatch in the ceiling, out into the late afternoon sunshine.

Daniel relaxed back into his seat and gazed through the window at the passing scenery as he watched Jack from the corner of his eye. He'd started loosening up as he gradually came into synch with it, man and machine, never more unified, a thing of beauty.

Jack put the small ship through its paces, trying out the various controls. He confirmed that it was indeed space worthy by taking it up into a pretty steep climb and then dropping it back down with the speed of a roller coaster.

"Watch yourself," Jack whispered just before putting the craft through an extended barrel roll.

"Whoa!" Daniel ground out, gripping the arms of his seat, expecting to get tossed. It hadn't been necessary, as he'd never felt pulled or jarred at any point. Some internal workings only Sam could explain probably compensated for the sudden shifts in gravity.

After they'd been flying for several minutes, Daniel asked, "Are there weapons?"

The question obviously piqued Jack's interest, because the HUD shifted instantly, making that information available.

Daniel was going to ask another question, but one look at Jack, and he changed his mind. "Can you set us down in that clearing up ahead?" he asked softly.

Jack complied without comment, and once the ship was down, he let out his held breath.

"God, why didn't you say something? This is killing you--"
Jack dropped his hands into his lap and frowned as he allowed his head to fall back against the headrest, his eyes sliding shut. "Just a headache."

"Just a headache?" Daniel dug around in his vest pocket and pulled out a package of tissues, which he slapped into Jack's hands. "Your nose is bleeding."

The fact that Jack seemed surprised by that scared Daniel more than anything else.

He got up, shrugging out of his own vest and jacket, and snagged three envelopes of Tylenol from the side pocket before piling the bulky items in the seat. "Here, take these." He opened the packages and plopped the drugs into Jack's free hand.

He stood behind the pilot's seat and jiggled the loop on the back of Jack's vest. "And take this off, so I can try and loosen you up."

"I don't need--"

"The hell you don't! I can recognize a blinding migraine a mile away; I've had enough of them."

"And I sure as hell can't fly this stupid thing. It's a long damn walk back to that temple and the rings, and frankly, I don't relish the thought of having to carry your heavy, unconscious, sorry ass all the way there. So shut up, and let me see if I can take the edge off the pain, so you can get us back."

Grumbling at the annoyingly incontrovertible logic, Jack swallowed the pills dry, thinking at least it would give his stomach a break from the Advil, coughing and gagging when they got stuck in his dry throat. Daniel handed him his water, and Jack gratefully took some. "Thanks. Water helps the--" he pointed to his head.

"Keep it," Daniel said. "And take off your jacket."

"I'm fine--"

"That's supposed to be my line."

"I don't need--"

"Look, I promise I won't kiss you again, all right? I won't molest you any further than I already have. You have my word, Jack, not that I expect that to mean much to you anymore."

Jack glared at him over his shoulder, or at least tried to, before his stiff neck stopped that motion cold. With a long-suffering sigh, he leaned forward and stripped off his vest and jacket, letting both fall to the floor of the cabin.

Instantly, Daniel's hands were on him, blessedly cool against his neck, his fingertips searching out the column of knotted muscles, until he found one he wanted to isolate. They were silent, both of them, until Daniel shifted position and touched on the source of the tension and really started to dig strong fingers into his neck, making Jack groan.

"I think you were concentrating too much," Daniel theorized, "trying to keep your mind from interacting organically with the ship the way the Ancients intended. Probably all that special ops training. I don't think you're supposed to have to work at it so deliberately. You're trying so hard, it's probably jacking up your blood pressure, which can't be good for your heart."

"Lift your arm this way, so I can get in underneath this big bunch..." Daniel grasped Jack's right
elbow and brought it back perpendicular to his head, so a different set of muscles was prominent, and set to work on those.

"OW! OwowOW!"

"This would be easier if you were laying down," Daniel announced with a deep sigh. "C'mon. Let's move this out there in the grass."

"Not secure."

"Oh, for chrissake, it seems to be pretty uninhabited here. I think we'll be okay." Daniel grabbed his weapon and headed for the rear of the ship without waiting for Jack to reply, knowing Jack wouldn't let him go out there by himself.

Sure enough, by the time he reached the door controls, Jack had pushed in front of him, zat in hand. Daniel waited, biting back a smile, until Jack had taken a visual sweep of the surrounding area before stepping off the lowered ramp.

The area was idyllic. Towering trees resembling furry evergreens announced the edge of the forest that surrounded the glade they'd set down in. There was a completely cloudless sky, and it looked as though they might have another hour of daylight left.

Daniel really hoped the Jaffa could make their home here. He wondered if Teal'c would want to stay, too, maybe settle down with Ishta, now that they'd finally won the war. He deserved to live above ground for a change.

A glance toward Jack confirmed that his nose had stopped bleeding. He'd lowered the zat, satisfied they weren't in any immediate danger.

"Here." Daniel pointed at a random spot at his feet. "Take off your shirt and put it under your forehead." He was tempted to dig around in his pack for the tube of sunscreen he carried, to alleviate the drag of skin on skin, but under the circumstances, he figured that would probably just spook Jack.

Jack dropped to all fours and stretched out on his belly, setting the zat within easy reach. "I'll just lie like this," he said, folding his arms underneath his head.

"No, that bunches up your shoulders, which is why I wanted to lay you out here." Jack pushed up on one arm and glared at him, causing Daniel to roll his eyes. "Poor choice of words, I'm sorry. Will you please just cooperate? I can't believe you feel threatened by me."

"After that stunt you pulled in the temple?"

Frowning, Daniel planted his hands on his hips. "I took a chance that I could catch you off guard long enough to shut down the Ancient tech, and it worked."

Jack's expression turned frosty. "It won't work a second time."

"No. I don't imagine it will." Daniel told himself he didn't regret stealing the kiss; after all they'd promised each other back in the mirror reality, all of which Jack had subsequently rescinded, it was merely his due. But that didn't stop either the guilt for having taken what wasn't freely given or -- god help him-- enjoying the aggressive taking of it.

And it hadn't in any way quenched his longing for more.
With narrowed eyes conveying a warning, Jack rolled onto his butt and peeled off his t-shirt, then settled on his belly again, with the shirt under his forehead, arms back to his sides. The grass had turned out to be moss-like, and its cool, velvety softness felt good against Jack's bare skin. "Where will--"

"I can get the best leverage if I straddle your hips; is that going to be a problem?"

After a pause, Jack muttered, "I'll let you know." He tensed when he felt Daniel's knees on either side of his waist, followed by some of his weight settling across his ass. He could picture how they must look, and he had to fight down an instinctive response to buck him off. But he concentrated on staying calm, and five minutes into the massage, Jack had forgotten all about his initial wariness as he just let himself float on the incredible lessening of tension in his body, for the first time in days.

Daniel's hands were warm now from the friction of their skin, strong and knowledgeable as they worked the kinks out of his neck and shoulders. His hands traveled across one shoulder and down an arm, fingers and thumbs digging into Jack's triceps until the entire limb felt like jelly. This magic was repeated on the other arm, and then Daniel started in on his back. It was as if Daniel could see which parts of his body had been unnaturally clenched in order to direct the Ancient tech. He was able to fine tune the massage to target those areas, relaxing Jack and reducing the pounding in his head.

"My god, you are so fucking good at that," he mumbled gratefully into the moss.

Daniel smiled as he dug into the right lat with both hands. "So I've been told."

He was so thoroughly engrossed by the specifics of the massage, pressing and releasing pressure points, that although he noticed Jack tensing beneath his hands, he didn't give it any thought until the cold voice demanded he stop. "Get off, Daniel. Now."

"Just let me finish th--" The rest was lost in the scuffle.

One minute Daniel was working his way down Jack's right lat toward his waist, and the next he'd landed on the ground hard, the wind knocked out of him. Blinking and trying to drag in a desperate breath, his eyes focused on Jack looming over him, panting with fury.

"What the hell's the matter with you?" Daniel gasped, dragging in air to fill his tortured lungs. Jack had both of Daniel's arms pinned high over his head, and his dog tags had swung to a stop above him. The odor of his sweat had overpowered the scent of his aftershave, but was no less stimulating to Daniel as he lay trapped beneath him.

"Did you seduce the kids back in college that way?" Jack rasped through grinding teeth. "Huh? Massages your specialty? Start with their neck and back, and then move into their pants? Once you had them all hot and bothered, did you lie down like this for 'em? Spread your legs--"

"Get the fuck OFF me!" Daniel barked, trying to wriggle free.

Jack tightened his hold of Daniel's hands, spreading himself the length of his body, trapping his legs with his own, so that Daniel had no point of leverage to escape or to try to buck him off. That left him bearing all of Jack's weight, but Jack figured he was probably used to having men lay on top of him. Couple of times a night, most likely. Orgies on the weekends. Two and three at a time, sucking and fucking in every combination, activities that were so far beyond Jack's knowledge and experience, he knew his imagination probably paled in comparison to the life Daniel had actually lived.
Nothing at all like the Daniel Jackson he'd fallen in love with somewhere along the way.

"How many?" Jack demanded, his face right over Daniel's now, his sour breath bathing Daniel's face, tags pooled at Daniel's throat.

"Let me GO!"

"Soon as you tell me. How. Many. Men."

"Why do you even CARE?" Daniel roared, still gasping for air. He could feel Jack's erection digging into his groin, and he wondered if Jack would take out his fury on him that way. Then he had to question if he'd be able to stop him, if he tried it. "None of your goddamned business!"

"HOW MANY?" Jack bellowed, adrenaline-fueled rage making his heart pound.

"I never counted, you stupid sonofabitch!" They glared at each other, and Daniel decided to go for the whole enchilada. "LOTS! Okay? That make you happy? LOTS!"

God, Jack was so pissed off, he could barely see. All the anger and disappointment of the last few days, held in, bottled up, was working its way out of his system now, with the object of that fury right underneath him. "Anyone who wanted a quick fuck, I suppose. A convenient hole--"

"Isn't that all you were ever interested in, Jack?" Daniel accused bitterly. "No responsibility, no inconvenient, embarrassing relationship you'd have to explain to people. To your boss?" His pulse was pounding in his ears, making him wonder what Jack would do if he finally passed out from lack of oxygen. "That's why you didn't tell Hammond about us, 'cause all you really wanted was a quick fuck in a warm, tight hole? Just needed to satisfy your curiosity, did you?"

"That's not what I wanted, you idiot! That's not ever what I wanted! I've wanted you from the very beginning, and sex wasn't even part of it until after you came back! But that was before I knew the real you, apparently. It seems that's all you know how to do, isn't it. Rut and fuck!"

"How dare you presume to judge me!" Daniel growled, once again struggling mightily to yank his arms free. "To know what it was like for me back then. I was a kid! I was young and pretty, and that got me what I needed--"

"Men. Sex--"

"Companionship!" Daniel corrected. "Someone I could pretend to belong to. Company for an hour, long enough for me to forget for a little while that there wasn't another living soul on the planet who gave a good shit whether I lived or died!"

As Daniel spat those livid words at him, Jack just stared down at him, his panting, jaw-clenching fury grudgingly giving way to grim understanding.

"Yes, I fucked men," Daniel taunted in a low voice, working as much salt into the wound as he possibly could, "I fucked a lot of them. And I let them fuck me. It was hot and nasty and fun. I liked it. And that's the problem right there, isn't it? That I'm dirty. Tainted. Defiled. Because back then, I'd let anyone with a hard dick have me."

Fuck it all to hell, he'd never hated anyone as much as he hated Jack O'Neill right now, and he put every ounce of loathing he could muster into his voice. "You stupid, ignorant prick. It doesn't matter to you that all of that was more than twenty years ago. That I haven't been with anyone since I descended, because that's not the kind of life I even want anymore!"
Silent and immobile, Jack continued to stare and lean his full weight into him.

Daniel was still so very angry, not even so much from being held down like that, or the agonizing pressure against his ribs, but by the way Jack had been treating him since that day in the truck. Jack had broken his heart, and Daniel had tried to contain the pain and disappointment, tried to work around it for the sake of the mission, with limited success, but now it had broken free and lay between them like a dying thing.

"It doesn't matter to you one bit that I was saving myself for you, does it," he demanded. "The whole reason you dumped me is 'cause I didn't live up to some arbitrarily set Jack O'Neill purity standard when I was still a kid. Well, fuck you!"

Jack continued to stare down at him, paralyzed by his own stupidity and arrogance. ...not the kind of life I want anymore... Daniel hadn't been flaunting his past, rubbing Jack's face in it. He'd merely disclosed it when asked. Jack's own insecurities had done the rest. Blown it up all out of proportion.

"Get off me," Daniel ground out. "Now."

Jack got a knee under him and lifted off. He released Daniel's hands last, and came to rest on his butt, off to the side and well out of striking distance.

Daniel rolled to his feet and stood glaring down at Jack. "Feel better getting all that off your chest?" he bit off angrily. "Get all your questions answered?"

Jack sat on the cool moss, still shirtless, folded arms balanced across one upturned knee. He let his head drop forward, just so he wouldn't have to look Daniel in the eye. He'd been storing this rage and hurt for days, until it had nearly eaten a hole in his stomach lining. Blaming Daniel for the actions of his double, because obviously, if he was a slut in that universe, he was the same here, right? By Daniel's own admission, he'd been free with his body; it'd looked like a slam dunk from all the available evidence. He'd jumped to the conclusion, and Hammond's call had interrupted them before they could finish having it out, before Daniel could explain.

Instead, they saved the world, and lost each other.

It'd taken two long days of anger and disappointment and hard feelings before he'd finally snapped, only to hear what he should've figured out on his own. Daniel Jackson had been a lonely kid, years younger than his classmates, and he'd found a way to fit in. He'd essentially traded his body for friendship and a sense of belonging. To keep from being alone. Daniel had reported it so matter-of-factly that day in his truck, Jack had assumed it'd meant nothing to him either at the time, or now, decades later. That it hadn't touched him. Jack had assumed it'd all been just a lark, a game, and that Daniel wasn't capable of having a serious relationship, because all he was interested in was the next dick.

And he'd angrily concluded that if vast sexual experience and an eagerness to have multiple partners was the way to Daniel Jackson's heart, Jack O'Neill flat out didn't have what it took.

Jack had spent the last two days condemning Daniel for all of that, and making them both miserable in the process. Regret and shame and sadness filled his belly, knowing he'd torpedoed the relationship himself. He hadn't asked questions; he'd made accusations. He'd been an idiot of the highest order, and lost the best thing that'd almost ever happened to him, pushed it away - no, that was wrong, Jack had actively killed it dead. He deserved to have lost it, lost Daniel, because there was no way, not after the way he'd treated Daniel, that he could ever forgive him, ever feel anything for him but resentment. No fucking way.
"Yeah," Jack finally replied grimly. "All answered."

"Good," Daniel snapped. Jack had been hard, and he'd not made any effort to conceal his arousal as he'd held Daniel down. He wanted to ask, So, was it good for you? What he said was, "Help me find my glasses."

Jack got to his feet and found them, undamaged, and handed them over, still unable to meet his eyes. He shrugged into his shirt, turning his back to Daniel to tuck it in. He was just buttoning up his fly when the radio in his pocket chirped.

Abandoning the belt, he pulled out the radio and said, "Yeah, Carter, go ahead."

"Scout ship's good to go, and Teal'c just gave us the all clear. There's apparently a celebration in the courtyard, and we're invited."

He took a deep breath and let it out before he responded. "Yeah, fine. We're on the other side of the planet, but this bird moves fast. About twenty minutes out, I'd say. Go on down, and we'll meet you there."

"Roger that."

Behind him, Daniel asked, "How'd you know that? That we're on the other side of the planet?"

Grimly, Jack pocketed the radio and finished doing up his belt. "I don't know how to shut it off," he said. "The last HUD we pulled up... it's like it's still in my head."

"Like the ship's part of you now."

Jack grimaced, ashamed by Daniel's ability to compartmentalize, to be able to speak to him civilly, even after the raging fiasco of the last fifteen minutes. "Yeah." Christ, his head hurt.

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Jack completed his check of the console in the temple, pleased when it didn't respond to his presence, then made his way into the courtyard, where a bonfire filled the stone circle in the center of the amphitheater, flames reaching five meters into the air. Its heat drove back the first twenty rows of spectators, like a circus show featuring man-eating lions. There were thousands of Jaffa, enough to fill nearly half the stadium. The light of the fire in the settling dusk of this newly-freed planet was a spectacular backdrop to Bra'tac's impassioned oratory. Not surprisingly, though, it was in Goa'uld, so Jack didn't get word of it.

He could see Carter and Jacob about halfway up the tiered seating that was cut into the rocky hillside, heads together as though he was translating for her.

All the way at the top and off to one side, Daniel sat on one end, all by himself. They weren't going to talk about it; Jack knew that. They couldn't. Jack had essentially assaulted a member of his team, the SGC's most highly-ranked civilian consultant. Didn't matter that Daniel had assaulted --kissed-- him first. As a Colonel in the US Air Force, for cryin' out loud, he should've had better control.

The whole subject was a minefield, and only a real fool would open his mouth.

"This seat taken?" Jack couldn't tell if Daniel could actually see him, because of the glare of the bonfire in the lenses of his glasses, but he tried to look hopeful, just in case.

Daniel glanced up at him, and then pointedly swept his gaze around at all the empty seats around
them, rows and rows and rows of them. Finally he muttered, "Suit yourself," and turned his attention back toward the makeshift podium that had been erected next to the pointy stick on which Ba'al's head currently teetered.

It was pretty chilly, even as cold shoulders went, but Jack knew he deserved no better. He sat, careful not to get close enough to touch, figuring Daniel probably had had enough of being up close and personal with Jack O'Neill for one day.

Nothing that had happened over the last three days had changed how Jack'd grown to feel about Daniel during the preceding eight years. He'd fallen in love with the man, long before it'd been appropriate to do so, and even the shocking revelations about Daniel's past hadn't changed that. He'd had a chance to have something wonderful with Daniel, had his fingers on the brass ring, but his own self-doubt had made him fuck it all up.

Now he was certain he'd never get Daniel back, not after the way he'd treated him, and that hurt on a whole lot of levels he wasn't going to poke at until he was safely behind his own closed door, whiskey in hand. Daniel was better off without him, anyway. But he owed it to him, and to the years they'd been friends, to try to at least apologize for being more of an ass than usual.

Jack cleared his throat, but it didn't budge the lump of crow that was firmly lodged there. "When we were on Mirror World, and... ah, then again back there earlier today, you said you hadn't... ah, that you'd..."

"Saved myself for you?" Daniel sighed tiredly. He really didn't want to get into this. His hold on his emotions was paper thin after the day-- hell, the week-- they'd had, and he wasn't sure he had the stamina left to withstand another all-out argument. He felt absolutely drained.

"Yeah, that," Jack murmured, looking down at the dirt between his boots.

He snagged a nearby twig and started drawing aimless squares in the dry soil, because it seemed easier than having to hold actual eye contact with someone who'd seen him at his worst. There was a long, strained pause between them; it was starting to look as if Daniel was planning to ignore him, not that Jack could blame him. He should probably count himself lucky that Daniel didn't just deck him.

Below them, the Jaffa looked like they were taking turns congratulating themselves on their victory and plotting the rapid overthrow of the small pockets of Goa'uld that remained. He was glad for them. One small step for Jaffa-kind...

Jack had let the silence drag on as long as he could stand and was trying to figure out an exit strategy, when Daniel finally spoke up.

"It sounds melodramatic, I know, but it's what I thought Jackson would understand, given his... preferences," Daniel said, referring to his mirror double. He finally turned his head and let his gaze sweep over Jack's abject form. "And it happens to be true, you know. I was saving myself for you."

Daniel was sure this wasn't going to stop hurting for a very long time, but the scene between them in the field had felt almost cathartic after it was over. So he decided to just let the rest of it out; maybe then, he'd be able to walk away with some hope of getting past it. Eventually.

He took a breath and plowed on, keeping his gaze directed toward the activity down below. "After Jonas went back to Kelowna, and things quieted down a little, some of my memories started coming back." He closed his eyes, and it was as if he was watching a movie of someone else's life. "I remembered being one of the youngest freshmen on campus, and how scared and lonely I was."

How badly I wanted to fit in.

"On the surface, it works," he continued, "in theory anyway. It's 'free love' and do whatever feels good. But in the end, it's empty and very unfulfilling. It gets pretty fucking lonely when you don't even know their names. It's not even companionship, really, just lonely people who choose to be lonely together.

"I decided a long time ago, that wasn't the kind of life I wanted anymore. Maybe I'm not as desperate for friendship as I was when I was fifteen, I don't know. Maybe it's because I've been too busy saving the world to really notice I have no personal life to speak of, but--"

"You've had offers since you've been back," Jack countered, finally attempting to look Daniel in the eye. "In the locker room the other day--"

"Yes, I've had offers," Daniel snapped, glaring at the man beside him. "That's not the point! I realized I'd gotten a second chance, and I wasn't interested in wasting it on just that. Mindless, unconnected sex with people I had no feelings for, always waking up alone... And none of those offers held the promise of what I'd already set my sights on-- on who I'd already set my sights on," he amended. "I had wanted to try to build a life with you, Jack," he muttered intensely. "Don't you get that yet?"

Jack had no idea how to respond to that type of declaration, not in any kind of real way. His heart wanted to warm to it; it was what he'd wanted for a long damned time. But his brain helpfully reminded him he'd fucked it all up with his assumptions and accusations and boorish behavior. Nothing left for him now but years and years of regret for what he'd foolishly thrown away.

"For which you should no doubt have your head examined," he finally replied, voice heavy with emotion.

Daniel rolled his eyes and turned his attention back to the speeches. "At this point, I'm inclined to agree with you."

Jack frowned and swallowed hard. "How long were you gonna wait for me to get my head outta my ass?" he asked softly.

Daniel leaned forward, resting his forearms on his knees, hands clasped loosely between. He continued to watch the action below, making the pretense of trying to follow what was going on, his responses just throwaway comments over his shoulder. "I guess I figured if I flirted with you long enough, you'd eventually take notice."

Jack glanced out across the darkened evening, taking in the blood-stained heroes of a revolution, giving their inaugural pep talk. It was important. Galactic, even. But to him, it wasn't as important as this, trying to make peace between them.

"I noticed, Daniel. But I couldn't let myself think it was anything but friendly jibes. I wasn't allowed to believe it could ever be more."

"Yeah, well, it was more," Daniel said tightly, gaze firmly centered on the activity below. "It was an audition. It was, 'check it out, Jack, I'm worth switching teams for'."

*Crap.* Could he feel any worse about all this? "You were putting yourself on the line," Jack guessed sadly.

"Every single day," Daniel said. "Since that very first time, when you called me a cheap date, I thought you might... be interested. I was willing to trade myself, to get you to help me find Sha're."
"I helped you anyway," Jack said quickly. It seemed important to get that on the record.

"I know," Daniel whispered, almost too softly for Jack to hear. "I figured out later that's part of what made me fall in love with you."

Stunned beyond words, Jack just sat, open-mouthed, staring at the side of Daniel's head.

Down on the floor, it was Teal'c's turn to speechify, and his deep baritone filled the open air auditorium with the rich sound of freedom. He mentioned Bra'tac's name frequently, no doubt urging the still-assembling masses to choose him as their leader.

But none of it could hold a candle to the drama unfolding in front of Jack, up in the nosebleed section.

Daniel loved him? Was in love with him? Had been, anyway, before Jack had royally screwed it up. He hadn't been looking for a quick trophy at all...

The feeling of utter devastation left in the wake of that revelation was total, leaving Jack winded, as if he'd been running, his eyes stinging with unshed tears. The full force of what he'd lost hit him hard, like a physical blow, and he had to clench his teeth to hold a grunt inside. Gutted.

Daniel had essentially courted him for years, waiting patiently through all Jack's various bouts of stupidity and disrespect, and within days of acknowledging their mutual feelings, Jack had panicked at the first sign of trouble. And what had he done with all of Daniel's trust and devotion? Ground it to dust under the heels of his size elevens.

Fuck. Just, fuck.

Daniel would never take him back, not after what Jack had done, the things he'd said, and he didn't blame him a bit. He wouldn't embarrass either of them by asking for forgiveness, either; he didn't deserve it. But out of respect for Daniel, for the friendship they used to have, he had to at least try to apologize.

Jack sighed deeply and cleared his throat, playing for a little time. "I just...uh, want to say... need to say, I'm sorry for back there. In the clearing. I probably went a little--" Insane. Bat-shit wacko. Two fries short of a Happy Meal.

Christ, what a sorry excuse for a man he was. He let out a breath and looked away, trying to find a way to explain the crushing disappointment he'd felt, when he'd found out the guy he'd put up on a shining pedestal of goodness and innocence wasn't that after all.

But even if he could find those words, they wouldn't be able to touch the feeling of abject stupidity he'd experienced an hour ago, out in the middle of a mossy field on the new Jaffa homeworld, when he'd finally understood that Daniel wasn't the soulless heathen he'd made him out to be, that he was really only human after all.

"I made a mistake, Daniel," he said as solemnly and sincerely as he could manage. "A bunch of 'em. And I'm sorry as hell."

Abandoning the pretense of listening to the litany below, in favor of trying to gather what Jack was really saying, he turned halfway toward him. Apologies were rare beasts, when dealing with Jack O'Neill, and so far, this made two 'I'm sorrys' and an 'I made a mistake', all in the same minute and a half; it was nearly unprecedented.

Daniel's expression lost some of its anger, but the sadness remained. "If I'd known, all those years
ago," he said softly, "if I'd had any inkling at all that someday that dumbass, juvenile shit I got up to in school would cost me... this. *You.*" He looked away again, not really seeing anything, but just needing the break from the intensity between them. He shook his head and grunted. "Should've kept my stupid mouth shut."

Jack heard the sound of sucking disappointment in Daniel's voice, and pain flared in Jack's gut, knowing he'd put it there. He bowed his head in shame and regret. If only they'd had the time to talk it out in the truck... If only he hadn't been such a bigot. If only Daniel still loved him. He'd happily beg for another chance. He'd do *anything* Daniel asked, whatever it took. But Jack could see that any love there'd once been was clearly dead now, killed by Jack's own hand, no less.

"I'm an ass, Daniel. Ignore me."

"I usually do, but..."

"Why break with tradition?"

"Whatever. I'm tired of fighting with you."

"That's what the ignoring's for."

Daniel absently rubbed his hands together, embarrassed that the banter had fallen flat. "Look, you should probably know, I wasn't kidding back on the Prometheus; I'm leaving as soon as we get back."

"What?" Jack's own double-take might've been amusing, if Daniel's words hadn't just caused his heart to stop. "Why?"

Daniel sighed deeply, mostly in an attempt to sidestep the emotional waver he felt building in his throat. *God,* he was tired. "Because as arrogant and bigoted as you are, and as angry as I am about the way you've been treating me..." *I'm still in love with you.* He couldn't say it, couldn't risk what was left of his heart. "It just hurts too fucking much to be around you."

So there it was, Jack thought, blunt and to the point, like having all the oxygen sucked right out of the air. Or like a bullet to the brain, which might've been kinder.

Based on the cheer that went up all around them, the entertainment in ring one had wrapped up. As the crowd began to leave their seats, Daniel stood and brushed the grit off his pants, a prelude to making his way down the steps, in order to join the throngs who were congratulating Teal'c and Bra'tac like groupies.

Jack got up too, watching the spectators stream toward the amphitheater floor, but his thoughts were wholly engaged with the man at his side. He felt as if he was on the precipice of something. It was ending, and it was wrong, and worse, it was completely out of his hands. He could feel it slipping away, and he couldn't think of a damned thing to do to stop it. He wanted to say more, apologize better, make sure Daniel really got it, but he didn't know if that was truly for Daniel's benefit, or just a pathetic attempt to assuage his own guilt.

"You should stick around," he said lamely. "They need you way more than they need me."

"No, uh-uh, they'll need *you* to train pilots on all the Ancient tech. And besides, I don't have anything left to give, Jack. I'm done." He turned then and looked directly at Jack. "Can we just agree to stay out of each other's way until we get back? And then I swear, you'll never have to look at me again. I'll be out of your hair for good."
Not for good, Jack thought miserably as he watched Daniel navigate the huge stone steps ahead of him. Forever.

*****

Teal'c had told Bra'tac he would do no speaking, that the older man was much more suited to matters of that nature. And yet, when his master yielded the floor to him, he'd spoken until his voice was hoarse. Telling of the dead, false god Apophis, and the horrific chain of events which set in motion his alliance with the inexperienced but fearless warriors of the Tau'ri, their foolhardy bravery in the face of superior weaponry, and their belief and commitment to freedom that had led to the destruction of so many powerful Goa'uld in recent years. He told of the death of Anubis, mere days before, at the hands of O'Neill, and the weapon of the Ancients, and he told of the Tok'ra and their wish for peace.

Teal'c was not an orator, and he did not yearn for the sound of his own voice, as some did. But he had seen and done things in his years with the Tau'ri that needed to be spoken of, and so he did. He did it for the faces of his brothers gathered before him, so clearly in need of guidance and hope. Although he doubted that his words were as eloquent as his teacher's, he could do no less than try.

There was still much to do to unite their peoples. Generations of mistrust and antagonism between the different factions would not lend itself to easy resolutions. They were newly free, and barely that, and Teal'c had no desire to repeat the mistakes of his mirror world double. They would need a simple system of government, and quickly, before others more charismatic than he, or those who carried agendas of their own, could bring it all down around them.

He was gratified that Rya'c had sustained only a minor injury in today's battles, a small gash along the side of his face. He was receiving medical treatment in the antechamber of the temple, where some had set up a makeshift hospital with supplies from every ship in orbit and on the ground. Teal'c was very thankful for many things-- that his son had not met the same fate as his mirror counterpart, for the sacrifice of countless thousands of others in his lifetime who had made this day possible, and that he and his son should be alive to see it. There had been many times, in years past, when he had not thought it would be so. He vowed that the sacrifices of all who came before him would not be in vain.

As he spoke, he thought of Ka'lel of the Mirror Reality, more soft-spoken, and yet no less strong-willed than Ishta, her belly large with his double's progeny. He had not gotten to know Ka'lel in his own reality; his dealings had all been with Ishta, who was fiery and driven and hard, because of the life she had been forced to lead, the only life she knew, which had changed her in ways that could not be undone. This was not a concern that had to be imminently addressed, however. If the Hak'tyl chose to send Ka'lel to Dakara as their representative, Teal'c would deal with it at that time.

A more immediate concern was the threat that Gerak and Se'tak posed to their fledgling democracy. He knew O'Neill would call it a 'Jaffa revenge thing', but in Teal'c's mind, the plan to permanently remove them from the picture was a well-considered tactical decision. The Jaffa had made great strides to arrive at this place in their history, poised to achieve great things for their people. After coming so far, if they were to lose this chance, due to the power-hungry whims of a few, it would dishonor all who had given their lives in the fight. Teal'c elected to keep this judgment to himself for now.

The crowd parted as Daniel Jackson came into view, followed by O'Neill. Teal'c bowed respectfully to his Tau'ri brothers. He was deeply grateful for SG-1's help, and that of Jacob Carter of the Tok'ra and Tau'ri, for without their assistance, Teal'c knew, this day would not have been possible.
Once they cleared the milling crowd, Jack shoved his hands into his pockets, wrinkling his nose as he studied Ba'al's severed head. "He's never looked better," he proclaimed to no one in particular.

Daniel reached out for Teal'c's arm, and then they hugged, clapping each other on the back. "Congratulations, Teal'c," Daniel said sincerely.

"It is truly a glorious day," Teal'c agreed with as big a smile as Daniel had ever seen.

"I'm guessing you'll be wanting to stay, help straighten things out?"

"There is much work to do," he said. "My time with Brother Teal'c of the Mirror Reality afforded me an insight on several grave pitholes we must seek to avoid during this time."

"Pit...? Potholes, maybe? Or pitfalls," Daniel tried to work out, under his breath. He took in Teal'c's perplexed frown and smiled. "Y'know what? You've got a new planet, and a free people; I think you should be able to have it be pitholes if you want."

Finished admiring the decapitated head of his nemesis, Jack wandered into the conversation just in time to be confused. "Pitholes?" He glanced from one of them to the other and back again, looking for understanding.

Having no patience for Jack's typical games, Daniel ignored him and spoke to Teal'c. "At the top of your list of things to do should be checking out the underground silo tucked into a corner of the temple. There are hundreds and hundreds of Ancient JackShips stored there," he suggested seriously.

"JackShips?" Jack frowned, looking between them. "Can we speak my language for a little while?"

Daniel shrugged. "I don't really know what else to call them, especially since at the moment, no one else seems to be able to fly them."

He turned back to Teal'c. "You should give it a try, though, run all your people through testing it. Have them sit in it one at a time, and see if anything lights up. You never know."

"They have a cloaking capability and a sweet little HUD," Jack interjected without a trace of humor. "The Tau'rī will be very interested in getting their hands on a fleet of 'em, and would gladly trade Tretonin and other cool things for them," he suggested. "I'm hoping there might be more of those glowy little drone thingies stored around here somewhere, too. We didn't take time to look, but we'd be interested in trading for those, too, if ya come across any."

"You're gonna need a lot of stuff," he added, "and we'd like to help ya get set up. Ambassador Teal'c," he finished with a smirk. He jerked a thumb over his shoulder in the direction they'd parked the JackShip. "Okay if we take the one, just to whet their appetite back home?"

Smiling in spite of the ache in his heart, Daniel watched Jack handle the impromptu negotiations with no small amount of pride.

"Consider it poor payment for your invaluable help in freeing my people, O'Neil," Teal'c bowed. "Songs will be sung in your honor."

"Songs?" Jack asked, perking up.

"Vanquisher of Anubis."

Jack's eyebrows rose, a tiny, amused smile quirking the corner of his mouth as he looked to Daniel. "Vanquisher?"

"Loose translation."

"Ah. Well," he replied modestly, "maybe co-vanquisher."

"Assistant," Daniel helpfully supplied.

"Enforcer," Jack countered.

"The Undersecretary of Goa'uld Banishment," Daniel proclaimed.

"In a word," Jack decided regally. The banter felt empty, because it was all for show, for the team. He played along, because it was expected, but there was no warmth in it.

"Indeed," Teal'c agreed with an arched brow.

"Two ells, don't forget," Jack reminded him seriously as he took in Teal'c's tolerant expression. Then he pulled him into a hug, culminating with a hearty back slap. "You gonna hang here for a while?" he asked, stepping back.

"I am. Word of Bra'tac's accomplishment is spreading quickly, and it would be wise to set out a framework for organization, before the immediate jubilation wears off, and the petty squabbles begin."

"Good idea," Daniel agreed.

"Carter!" Jack called out, scanning the noisy crowd around them.

She surfaced nearby, Jacob in tow. "Sir?"

"Give Teal'c your GDO, will ya? That way he'll be able to phone home."

She unfastened it from her wrist and handed it over with a hug. "Don't be a stranger," she said huskily.

Teal'c scooped her up easily, her feet clearing the ground as he returned her embrace with enthusiasm. "Indeed I will not," he rumbled. He needed to remain with his people at this time of upheaval, and yet he was surprised how strong the pull was to return to Earth with SG-1. Somehow, in the middle of the battle he'd never thought they could actually win, these people had become his family.

He was greatly torn.

Teal'c set Major Carter down, and as she pulled away, she was smiling. "That was-- wow!" There was color in her cheeks. More quietly, she added, "The weapon's been dismantled, but the temple and its writings were left undisturbed."

Teal'c nodded his understanding. He knew there were some who would be angered by relinquishing such a formidable weapon. But he and Bra'tac had decided together that it was too dangerous to be left in the hands of those who were unused to self-determination, and that if it became a divisive issue, then Bra'tac would step back and let Teal'c take the blame alone.
"I will tell them of the weapon that the temple once contained, and the terrible power it wrought, as conveyed to me by Brother Teal'c of the Mirror Reality." He bowed his head just a little. "Once SG-1 has safely left orbit."

"Take it easy, Teal'c," Jacob said, stepping up to offer his hand. Teal'c returned the gesture and bowed, but they didn't hug. "You've really got your hands full," Jacob added.

"Of this I am aware," Teal'c agreed. "I am grateful to you, Jacob of the Tau'ri, and Selmak of the Tok'ra, for your assistance in defeating Ba'al; rest assured all will know of your contribution to our freedom. You will always be most welcome here. Let this be a glorious day for both our peoples."

Another scout ship landed in the field beyond the amphitheater to thunderous cheers, and Teal'c bowed once again and bade them farewell, in order to greet the newcomers with Bra'tac.

Sam and Jacob broke off as well, speaking quietly together in the bustling confusion. "Can you come back with us? We'll take some time and visit with Mark and the kids."

"I really can't, Sam. If you're right about Selmak only having a few months to live, and if the healers can't fix it, there are some things he needs to get accomplished before then, y'know what I mean?"

Sam scrunched up her face.

Jacob read the grimace in his daughter's expression and said, "This doesn't change anything-- you know I'll always love your mother with all my heart."

"Oh, I know that, Dad," she assured him hurriedly. "I mean, c'mon, I'm forty-two years old, and my father's leaving to get three women pregnant. Just... ewww."

He grinned. "Y'know, I'm less concerned with the idea of being the vehicle for a race to survive, however changed, than I am with the sheer mechanics of trying to make a polygamous relationship work. I wasn't all that great at making just the one operate smoothly," he confessed.

"Suggestion?" At his tentative nod, she added, "Stick to being the stud service, and let the women run the house."

Jacob's belly laugh rang out. "Excellent advice, from my daughter..." he groaned, grinning from ear to ear and pulling her into a hug.

Next to him, as Daniel smiled warmly watching Carter and her dad talk, Jack was filled with a rush of longing, overwhelmed with Daniel's inner and outer beauty, and his capacity for love.

_God, Daniel, I was such a fucking idiot. Can we try again?_ 

Suddenly, Daniel was looking straight at him. "Did you say something?"

"I..." Jack wasn't even aware he'd spoken aloud.

"Sounded like you said, 'god, Daniel..." He frowned. "Was I mistaken?"

Daniel's straightforward expression was open, almost eager, and Jack wanted to say something, he really did, but his brain automatically went for the punch line, and he had to bite it back. For once, amusing and sardonic wasn't what was needed here. They were standing in the middle of Jaffa chaos, surrounded by shrunken heads and bloody prophets, and he'd been given an opening, a way to start the long road back, but Jack's mouth chose that time to not cooperate. "I--"
And then Jacob hailed him and the moment was gone forever. "Hey, Jack?"

God damn it. Carter and Jacob were heading their way. Jack cleared his throat and said softly to Daniel, "It'll keep."

He forced a smile in the Carters' direction. "Yeah, Jacob?"

"Mind if I take the scout ship?"

"Got a hot date?" Jack smirked.

"Well, as a matter of fact..." Jacob started. He stopped abruptly when Sam's elbow connected with his side. "Ooof!"

Jack figured he'd ask Carter later what all that was about. "Not a problem, Jake, we've got this sweet little ride sitting right over there. You're more than welcome to take home last year's model."

*****

Chapter 5: Life and Death - Forgiveness and hope
Jack felt a little like he was in the lost episode of Leave it to Beaver as he and Carter and Daniel waved at the retreating shape of Jacob's scout ship, bound for whatever rock the Tok'ra were calling home these days. After the ship lifted up and dipped its wings in farewell, he surveyed the gear piled around them on the ground.

"So. This everything?"

"Yes, sir," Carter said tiredly, looking kind of maudlin around the edges. "This is it."

Jack clapped his hands together, then rubbed them briskly. "Ennaway. Give me a hand getting this stuff into the new ship, and then you guys gate on back to the Land of Light. Use BigHatGuy's GDO to call Hammond, and--"

"Tuplo," Daniel interjected with a distracted frown as he shrugged into his pack. "How long have we known him, and you're still calling him BigHatGuy?"

"Whatever. Let Hammond know I'm bringing the little--" Jack flapped his hand at the craft in front of them.


"Yeah, whatever." Jack scowled at the fact that Daniel knew him so well he could fill in Jack's blanks without breaking a sweat, and at the throbbing headache that was preventing him from achieving the smooth exit he'd hoped for. "Let 'em know I'm taking it straight to Peterson--"

"No, that's a bad idea," Daniel announced easily.

Jack huffed his annoyance, letting out a long-suffering sigh as he rubbed the tip of a thumb across his forehead. "You're steppin' all over my briefing, Daniel."

Daniel seemed monumentally unconcerned by this as he folded his arms across his chest. "Unless I'm very much mistaken --and I'm not-- you've still got a monster headache."

Jack's jaw tightened, and his hand dropped to his side. Only Daniel Jackson could find compassion for someone who'd treated him as badly as Jack had. "Yeah, so?" he snapped.

Carter reached for her thigh pocket. "I've got some--"

Jack waved her off. "Already had a double dose of Tylenol, thanks, Carter. And I can't afford to take anything stronger, if I really am the only one of us who can fly this thing."

"So," Daniel summarized, "we all go together. If it gets bad, we pull over, and I work on your neck some more. Simple."
"I'm dying to see the inside of the ship, sir!" Sam added, brightening up considerably.

Jack just rolled his eyes. "Oh, for cryin' out loud..." he muttered under his breath as he stalked toward the ship. Double-teamed again.

*****

"Y'know, I'll bet the ship itself would fit through the gate," Sam mused from the copilot's seat. She'd been a little disappointed, but not really surprised that the controls hadn't responded to her, but then seemed to forget all about it as she got wrapped up in speculation about the design before they'd even cleared Dakaran airspace. "I mean, why else would it be this particular shape?"

"Yeah? And how, exactly, does the stopping part go, so I don't fly us right into the briefing room window?"

She shrugged. "It must have some kind of inertial dampeners that would sense it's emergence through the event horizon, and lock down the forward thrust."

"Y'think so?"

"Most likely," she nodded. "It makes sense."

"You willing to bet our lives on that--?"

"Well..."

"--when it'd be so much simpler to just set her down gently at Peterson?"

After a pause, Carter began a litany of technobabble and conjecture regarding the Ancients and their probable ship design, making Jack's head throb in double time. "Carter," he groaned, "this is astrophysicist-speak for 'are we there yet', isn't it?"

"Sir?" she said, her eyes wide with innocence.

"Go," he said, shooing her toward the back of the ship. "Check the glove compartment for the operator's manual or something, but for gods sake, please stop drilling what's left of my brain with long, confusing words."


She slid out of the copilot's seat, just as Daniel dropped into the one behind the Colonel, hands folded in his lap and a butter-wouldn't-melt-in-his-mouth-expression. "Are we there yet?" he asked as Sam passed him.

"Very funny," Jack snarled. He let the controls go, allowing his hands to drop to his side, and the craft downshifted smoothly. "I don't suppose you've found the head, Carter," he called out.

"Not sure there is one," she replied, head and shoulders inside the starboard bulkhead in the rear compartment. "Should've used the facilities before we left, sir."

"Don't make me come back there," Jack warned. "I'm pretty sure that was insubordination," he added for Daniel's benefit. He stood and stretched left and then right, and then twisted at the hips.

Daniel was aware of Jack's every movement in ways that weren't even reasonable under the present circumstances. "No, seriously. How long before we get home?"
"Yeah, if you wouldn't mind."

"Crap. "No problem. Sit back down, and--" But Jack was already pulling his t-shirt out of his pants.

"Um..."

"Here in the middle, okay?" Jack asked, taking a seat on the floor between the four forward seats.

"I--"

"I'm a little ripe here, Carter," Jack warned, stripping off his shirt. "Better stay upwind, if ya can."

"Duly noted, sir," she replied, continuing to explore the back, opening all the cabinets and poking around. When she found a panel overhead and removed the hatch, finding a nest of wires and couplings, she squealed with joy.

Smiling, Jack shook his head and then assumed the same position he had on the planet, on his stomach, with his t-shirt bunched up beneath his forehead, and his arms down by his sides.

Daniel was flustered. Considering the way the massage on the planet had ended, he was very surprised Jack was opting for an encore. "I could've..." he pointed over his shoulder toward the command chair.

"You didn't need to--"

Leaning up on one arm and deliberately meeting Daniel's eyes, Jack told him quietly, "I trust you," then lay back down.

"Kinda on the inside of the left shoulder blade," he mumbled into the deck.

The admission of trust was startling, leaving Daniel more than a little confused, since it'd seemed as though they'd burned through what little they still had between them on Dakara. He frowned, taking a look into the aft section where Sam was standing on his pack full of books, her entire upper torso inside some kind of panel, completely oblivious to them.

He considered whether he could somehow kneel on Jack's left side and still get the job done, but the spacing of the seats made that impossible. So, decision made, he reluctantly settled onto his knees, straddling Jack's hips. He rubbed his hands together to warm them, wishing he had some light oil to smooth the friction, then began with the deltoids first, digging and probing, once he had the correct angle. He was careful not to rest any of his weight on Jack's body, and he tried hard not to enjoy the feel of Jack's skin under his hands, warm and pliant over the tight muscles beneath.

After a couple of minutes, Jack started moaning under his breath.

"Stop that," Daniel whispered.
"Stop what?"

"That."

"What that?"

"The pornographic sound track," Daniel hissed under his breath. "You'll give Sam the wrong idea."

"I don't know what you're talking about--OW!"

"I think that's got it," Daniel announced, louder than was strictly necessary. He stood and offered Jack a hand up.

Reluctantly, Jack rolled onto his back and took the offered assistance. "But--"

"You're fine," Daniel declared pointedly as he yanked Jack up. "And I'm getting hungry. Take us home, Dad."

*****

Daniel was in the co-pilot's seat beside him, just getting ready to notify the SGC that they were in the neighborhood, when it happened. There was crackling and popping like the fourth of July over the Washington Monument, followed by showers of sparks flying from the starboard console, sending out an energy arc so bright, it whitened out Jack's vision for a split second.

A gurgling yelp, followed by a sickening thump, and Jack knew before his sight completely cleared what he would see when he turned. Daniel had been thrown clear of his seat and was lying head-first up against the corner of the bulkhead that separated the forward compartment from the aft.

Jack released the controls and bellowed, "Carter!" before lurching toward his friend, his heart in his mouth. "Daniel's down!"

Falling to his knees, one hand went immediately to Daniel's chest, the other cupped the side of his neck, waiting interminable moments for Carter to get there and start her medic gig. "Console blew, arced hot. Don't know what he touched--" Reluctantly, Jack pulled his hands away, so she could get to him, and steadfastly refused to consider the evidence in front of him.

Electrical injuries were always bad, but Sam's first glance took in the awkward angle of Daniel's head in relation to the rest of his body, and she knew instinctively, even before her fingers touched him to feel for a pulse, that he was dead. He'd landed on his side, the back of his head touching his spine, his neck stretched out grotesquely, like a deer who'd been hit by a car and left lying on the side of the road.

"Oh, my god... his neck," she gasped. Her shaking hand confirmed no pulse, and her other hand on his sternum verified that he wasn't breathing. Her eyes filled with tears. "He's--"

"Don't say it!" Jack snapped. "He's not. He can't be."

"He is," she insisted with a choked-off sob. "Daniel's dead, sir."

"NO!" It didn't make sense; it wouldn't gel. It couldn't possibly have happened. He wasn't kneeling here looking at Daniel's corpse, not again. "No, no, NO!"

"His neck must've broken when he slammed into the bulkhead," she cried, weeping full on now.
She sat back heavily on her butt and continued to bawl softly as she clutched Daniel's hand. There'd been so much anguish these last few days, so much fear for her Dad and so much guilt about Janet, that her control was gone. It was all just too much.

"Daniel..."

"NO!" Jack repeated through tightly clenched teeth. "He's not dead; I won't allow it!" He checked Daniel's pulse and respiration for himself, and watched Daniel's neck flop unnaturally to the side. Jack'd broken enough necks in his time; he knew exactly what it felt like when they weren't connected anymore.

Just like Daniel's.

Jack's belly went cold. He was terrified that somehow, he'd unknowingly made some kind of stupid brain fart, which the goddamned Ancient ship had mistaken for a command, causing the console to blow and sending his friend flying. Was there some kind of code book of thought-commands? How the fuck could he get his hands on one before he blew them all to Kingdom come?

Supporting his head, Jack lifted Daniel to him, careful not to notice the wide-open, staring eyes. He cradled him gently with trembling hands, burrowing his face in Daniel's still-warm neck as he drew in a desperate, ragged breath.

*Nonono. This couldn't possibly be happening. He hadn't just killed Daniel with his thoughts...* In the back of his mind, Jack figured Daniel couldn't turn into a ball of glowy light, if Jack held onto him tightly enough.

*Carter was weeping beside him, and Daniel was heavy in his arms, and think, damn it, think--*

Body still curled around Daniel, he ground out, "You find any medical equipment on this tub?"

"Like what?" Sam asked, her voice small and trembling, as if it was coming from very far away. "His neck's broken, no medical equipment can fix th--"

"We have to DO something, Carter! I can't just let him go--"

"Wait! Wait!," she said, sitting up straighter, her teary eyes wide and desperate. "O'Neill did it! He did something for Bra'tac, remember? When he was injured... he healed him somehow!"

O'Neill had mentioned healing Bra'tac, but hadn't expounded upon it. Jack wished like hell he'd demanded the specifics, but they'd all just assumed the ability was gone, once the database had been removed from O'Neill's mind.

"I didn't take the download, I don't know how!"

"Maybe you don't need the download, just the gene!" she begged him. "It can't be any different from working the chair in Antarctica, or this ship. If there's a chance at all, you have to try!"

The language of war had always come easily to him, but not so much the words for peace or gentleness or love. Even with Sara, that had always taken a lot of effort. The only exception to that rule had been his little boy; for Charlie, the loving talk had flowed from day one, until that day, nine years later, when all Jack's loving words hadn't been enough to stop the inevitable. After that, he'd been sure Charlie's death had dried up all the tender words for good.

But unless O'Neill had been lying through his fucking teeth, words were all that was going to fix this. Another goddamned unacceptable situation he couldn't live with. He only hoped O'Neill hadn't
been stretching the truth about having the healing mojo in the first place. He wouldn't put it past him.

Gently, he lay Daniel back out on the floor, and ignoring Carter's whimpering, he tore at Daniel's t-shirt, causing it to split from the hem up. The neckline stubbornly refused to tear, but it would have to do. Jack put his ear to Daniel's bare chest, but he heard nothing, no breathing, no body sounds; he couldn't feel his chest rising and expanding as his lungs filled. His body was beginning to cool.

Grimly, he closed his eyes and placed his hand on the center of Daniel's chest, and pretended he was working the La-Z-Boy in Antarctica.

YOU CAN'T DIE.

Nothing.

BEAT. START. GO, DAMMIT. WORK. ON. BEGIN...

Still nothing. But then, Carter had said his heart wasn't the issue, it was his neck. Eyes still closed, he bowed his head, and concentrated on visualizing an intact structure --neck bone connected to the backbone-- and all the tiny pieces of the puzzle that made up the miracle of the human body. With this image firmly in mind, he superimposed a heart, jump-starting it. Pumping blood and oxygen throughout Daniel's body, making him live, bringing him back. He wasn't going to give up again, he'd do this as long as it took. He'd stood by and watched his friend die two years before and had done NOTHING. He'd let Oma have him without a fight.

Not this time.

CONTACT. ENGAGE. COMMENCE. RESUME. LIVEDAMNYOU, YOU DO NOT GET TO PUNCH OUT ON ME, IS THAT CLEAR?

He wondered if maybe it would only work if the person on the receiving end of the command actually wanted it to, in which case, he was fucked, because lately he hadn't really given Daniel much of a reason to want to hang around. Maybe he'd just up and left for GlowyLand as soon as the arc hit him, because it was easier than having to deal with Jack and his arrogance. Maybe Daniel'd decided it wasn't even worth trying any more.

COME BACK. PLEASE - DON'T DO THIS, DON'T LEAVE ME AGAIN...

Jack knew that was conceited of him, to think that Daniel cared enough about what was left between them to make a decision on whether or not to go on living because of it. But what else did he have? Jack's mind was racing, throwing everything he could think out there, hoping one would catch.

...I WAS WRONG. I'M SORRY. I LOVE YOU. FORGIVE ME.

He'd never know which one did the trick, but all of a sudden, Daniel's whole body spasmed; all four limbs stiffened at once as he arched his back, dragging in a huge chestful of air, his mouth fixed in a silent scream of agony, his face contorted in an expression of terror. As conscious thought started to come back online, his eyes began to dart around as he continued to gasp for breath after breath.

"What happened?" he choked, looking straight at Jack.

"Dead," Jack replied, his voice cracking with relief. He was shaking so badly, he was afraid to
move. *It worked. I don't know why, or how, but it worked, he's back. Thank you, thank you...* "You were dead."

In a raspy voice, Daniel replied, "What, again?" It seemed as though he could *taste* Jack's fear. Glancing from Jack's face to his own chest, where Jack's fingers still rested, trembling and hot, Daniel lifted his own arm, still shaky and uncoordinated with unspent electrical charge, and dropped his hand over Jack's.

"Not," he whispered. "Not dead."

Daniel was deeply sore, every muscle in his body had contracted forcefully all at once, and he ached everywhere. Despite that, the expression on Jack's face was such that Daniel could barely resist the urge to pull the older man down and wrap his arms around him, hold him, reassure him. Thank him.


As he turned away, Daniel didn't miss the way Jack dragged an arm across his eyes.

"My god, Daniel, you're..."

Daniel coughed. "What happened?" he asked her.

"You DIED again, you sonofabitch!" Jack snapped from the command chair.

He got the ship going, at twice the speed it had been moving before, pushing it to the limits his Ancient mojo told him were hard and fast. He was still shaking badly, and gripped onto the sticks even harder to compensate.

Sam helped Daniel scoot back, so he could lean up against the bulkhead. "Tell me," he asked again.

"I don't know," Sam said, wiping her leaking nose on her sleeve. "I was in the back when it happened. The Colonel said there were sparks from the console. I don't know what you were doing when it happened, or how you ended up all the way over here. But he's right, you were dead. No life signs at all."

"Then how..."

She considered him carefully, then glanced toward the Colonel. "You don't remember anything?" she asked quietly.

Shivering, he shook his head tiredly. "No. I'm thirsty, and I just wanna sleep."

"Probably not a good idea," she cautioned, slipping out of her jacket and draping it over him. She reached into her pack and handed him the water. "Not too fast."

Daniel took a large sip and held it in his mouth for a few moments before he swallowed it. "Do I have a concussion?"

"I don't think so, but--"

"Then lemme sleep."

She helped Daniel get situated on one of the benches in the aft compartment, and he fell asleep almost immediately. She stayed with him for a few minutes, keeping watch, just listening to him
breathe, and then joined the Colonel up front.

"Sir, about what happened--"

"It's simple, Carter. You messed up."

Her eyes widened. "No sir, I did not. He was really dead, and you know it."

Tight-lipped, Jack jerked his head over his right shoulder, "He look dead to you?"

Jaw set, Sam grabbed Jack's hand in hers and held it up. "It's you! You did it. The healing ability of the Ancients. Bra'tac was mortally wounded, and O'Neil heeled him. Your ability must be stronger than his somehow, since Daniel was completely d--"

"I don't buy that crap," Jack said, jerking his hand back, eyes forward. "No sane person would."

Stubbornly, she raised her chin. "Buy it or not, sir, he was dead, you touched him...or something...and now he's alive again."

Jack snorted. "Yeah, well, if that's in the report, we're all three gonna be spending a lot of time enjoying the hospitality of the NID. They just love unexplained, mystical powers." He cut his eyes over to her. "We'll be entering orbit in about twenty minutes, so we'd better get our stories straight. What's it gonna be, Major?"

****

Sam checked out the panel that had zapped Daniel and couldn't find anything obviously wrong with it. Gingerly, she located the comm device from among the unfamiliar controls and used it to hail the SGC. When Walter responded, she told him they were in final approach to Earth, and to notify NORAD that they weren't some foreign bogie that needed to be shot down. She also requested and received clearance to the top secret hangar at Peterson, as well as transport up to the mountain for debriefing.

Ten minutes later, they were on the ground, safely tucked away in a guarded hangar.

Daniel awoke when the ship shuddered to a stop. Even without his glasses, he could tell that up front, Jack and Sam were having a heated debate, although trying hard to keep it quiet. Curious, he made his way forward on shaky legs.

"It's not like you to let me sleep through a briefing," Daniel grunted as he dropped heavily into the chair behind Jack. He'd zipped his jacket up to his chin, since his shirt was in shreds, but he was still feeling chilled. He folded his arms tightly across his chest, in an effort to stifle the trembling, wishing desperately that he were already standing underneath a hot shower.

When neither of the others seemed willing to break their staring contest, he ventured, "Um, anybody find my glasses?"

Sam reached around to the seat behind her to grab her tac vest, then pulled them out of the top pocket. "Here you go, Daniel," she said. "How're you feeling?"

"Startlingly not dead," he said almost cheerfully as he adjusted the frames on his face. "Who do I have to thank for that?"

Jack sighed as he wearily scrubbed a hand across his forehead and swiveled the seat sideways. Throbbing headache aside, he felt completely drained, as though he'd just come back from a twenty
mile run in the rain, followed by two hundred fingertip pushups. He would really have preferred not to have this conversation. At all. Ever. But like it or not, he knew he needed Daniel's buy-in on this, if they were going to pull it off successfully.

"We're heading into the debrief, soon as you're cleared from medical, I'd guess," he said tightly. "For the record, it was Carter's stellar CPR skills that brought you back."

"Yeah?" Daniel glanced toward Sam, who was careful not to meet his eyes. Her rigidly held jaw told him there was something more going on. "Why don't I believe you?" he asked quietly.

"It's better this way," Jack said firmly. He wouldn't look Daniel in the eye either, and that set off all kinds of alarms in his head.

"Sam?"

"He's right, Daniel," she said reluctantly. "The NID would have a field day--"

"Carter."

"Sir?" she bit off, challenge in her eyes.

Jack returned her glare, and it spoke volumes. Daniel didn't know exactly what was going on, but he figured, since it seemed to pretty heavily involve him, he probably should have a clue.

"Okaaay. We're covering something up? That's fine. Happy to go along. Probably. But you've got to let me in on it, or no deal." When neither of them responded, he leveled his gaze at Jack. "Okay, I'll start. I felt something as I was coming back, while you were touching me--"

Startled, Jack finally met his gaze. "You said you didn't remember anything."

"I didn't, right away," Daniel said with a shrug, "but I'm starting to now." He appraised Jack's carefully schooled features, the clenched jaw; whatever it was he didn't want to talk about was pretty big.

"I could taste how afraid you were for me, Jack," he said softly. "I felt you speaking to me. Do you have any idea how weird this feels?" he asked. "The input's all messed up, and it's freaking me the hell out. Talk to me, please. Help me make sense of it."

Jack's eyes dropped as a tiny frown formed between his brows.

"Nope. Can't do it."

Jack looked away, his eyes catching movement in the hangar through the forward view-screen, and frowning at the Lieutenant striding purposely toward them. *Would've been really convenient if this buggy had tinted windows...* He was only marginally surprised when the windshield suddenly became opaque. He shook his head just a bit. He hadn't even made that thought very deliberately, but the ship just seemed to know what he wanted almost before he did. And that confused him all the more, considering what it had done to Daniel. He really needed to locate a copy of Ancient Thought Commands 101...

WHERE'S THE GODDAMNED MANUAL FOR THIS TUB?

He was completely unsurprised when no user's manual appeared on the HUD. *Fucking Ancients.*

"Jack..."
He turned back to meet Daniel's eyes, expecting to see them flashing ice blue, with the determined set to his jaw that Jack always thought of as Daniel's 'bulldog look'. He was disarmed to find liquid pooled in the corners of his eyes instead.

That look killed him, always had. Like Reese all over again.

"It wasn't--" How was Jack supposed to explain this to him? He hadn't even had time to assimilate for himself what had transpired between them during the touch; it sure as hell wasn't something he was ready to speculate about out loud, much less in front of Carter.

"I don't understand what happened," he admitted honestly, "so I'm pretty sure I can't explain it. But you have to let it go, because if the NID gets wind of any of it..." At Daniel's continued expectant look, Jack frowned. "We don't have time for this," he begged in a whisper. "They're going to be banging down the door any minute."

"Then you'd better talk fast," Daniel insisted quietly. There was something here. Something important. If he let it go, told Jack he was okay with it staying 'in the room', he'd never find out what happened.

"Daniel..."

"Your neck was broken," Sam said softly.

"Carter--!"

"He has the right to know, sir," she said firmly. Jack was her superior officer, and the Air Force had trained being argumentative out of her, and she didn't challenge him, not ever; that was more Daniel's style. But things had taken a quantum turn on MirrorWorld and nothing would ever be the same for any of them again.

The Colonel looked more shocked than angry, but it didn't really matter at this point. Sam had a boatload of leave coming to her, and she intended to take it, official reprimand or not. Whether or not that leave was permanent remained to be seen.

Ignoring her CO's tight-lipped glare, she addressed Daniel directly. "I didn't see it, but my guess is that you broke your neck when the panel arced and tossed you head first across the cabin into the bulkhead. When I got to you, you had no heartbeat and zero respiration. Even with a fully equipped medical facility and a team of trauma specialists, there wouldn't have been any way to save you. You were already dead when your body came to rest."

Daniel heard her words, but it took a long moment before they resolved into anything that made sense. Jack had told him he'd died again, but Daniel had assumed his heart had stopped beating for some short period of time, long enough to claim the technicality. But a broken neck was just about as dead as dead could be; not a simple matter to knit together all those smashed vertebrae, restring the miles of nerves that would likely have come undone.

But regardless of how it was technically possible, why would Jack have even wanted to heal him? He'd made it perfectly clear that he was ashamed and repulsed by everything Daniel was. How much easier just to let nature take its course, than to have the constant reminder of a dishonorable temptation?

He looked over at Jack, trying to understand the expression on his face, part drop it, that's an order, and part I need you to get this, don't make me say it. What was he supposed to say? 'Thanks' seemed so entirely inadequate.
"You touched me," he whispered in awe. "Gave me back my life somehow..."

Jack had to force himself to look away from the plea in Daniel's eyes, for it left him open and bleeding. He wanted to just shrug it off, maybe toss out a Doctor Frankenstein joke, but his mouth was too dry and wouldn't work. He swallowed hard, but it didn't really help.

Daniel wasn't going to let it go; that much was obvious. He cleared his throat, found some spit. "I don't understand what hap--" His eyebrows clenched in frustration, pissed at the waver in his voice, betraying him beyond his ability to deny. "I don't know how it worked. Why it worked. It just did. Can't we we let it go at that?"

Sam reached out to take Daniel's hand in hers, to give Jack a moment. "The Colonel's right, Daniel. If they knew he could bring the dead back to life... Can you imagine? We just don't need to go there, any of us. At a minimum, the two of you would be lab rats for the rest of your lives."

*Bring the dead back to life...* Sam made it sound so simple, so uncomplicated. But it sure didn't feel that way to Daniel, not deep inside, where he could still feel the shadow of Jack's resolve, demanding that he follow. It was sore there, bruised, as though Jack had wrestled Daniel's id back into the wrecked shell of his body by the sheer force of his will.

He had so many questions, so many jumbled up feelings. He hadn't wanted to cry this badly in a lot of years, as though the buildup of stress and untamed emotion currently coming to a boil inside him were looking for escape. It felt like shards of glass, all sharp and jagged, and he knew it would kill him again on its way to freedom, if he didn't hold on very tightly. He took a deep breath and let it out, tried for calm. What could he do that wouldn't be met with disdain or inappropriate levity? How could he thank Jack, say what needed to be said without embarrassing them all?

"O'Neill thought his ability to heal was sucked out with the database," Daniel said, taking the easy --cowardly-- way out. "He probably doesn't know it still works. That he can bring back dead things."

"And we have no way to tell him," Sam replied. "The window's closed now."

Jack's common sense told him they'd already been there too long, and that just because he couldn't see them didn't mean there were probably several SFs circling the craft, looking for a way in. "I don't think he'd want to know," Jack said quietly; he sure as hell didn't. Too many questions he couldn't let himself think about. *Charlie...*  

"It's a horrible responsibility," Daniel agreed grimly.

"Remember making me watch *Pet Sematary* with you?" he asked Sam. "The things that come back have no soul--"

"That was just a stupid horror movie, Daniel."

"Maybe. Can you test for that though? The presence of a soul? I mean, if I even had any left after the number of times I've been in a sarcophagus--"

"Don't worry about that," Jack muttered, eyes down.

"Why?" Daniel asked. When Jack just shrugged, he tried again. "Jack?"

"Because when I was..." he looked at Daniel, his gaze settling over him like a coverlet, taking in the living, breathing body of his friend, *who wasn't dead anymore*, and Jack didn't give a shit why it had worked; he was just grateful that it had. "Because I touched it," he whispered.
The admission hung in the air like a gossamer web, supported by nothing but sunlight.

"SG-1, do you copy?"

Jack couldn't tear his eyes away from Daniel now, just as he'd known he wouldn't be able to, as he reached for his radio. "Yeah, we're here," he croaked. He cleared his throat to bring his Colonel face back online. "Lookin' for the door release now. Stand by."

He let go of the switch and asked Daniel, "We good?"

Open-mouthed, Daniel continued to stare into Jack's eyes, as if he could get to the truth of all of this, unravel the mystery, if only he concentrated hard enough.

"I'll just..." Sam said by way of excusing herself. She made her way to the rear of the craft and easily located the control. She activated it, but nothing happened. "Sir? Are you keeping the outside hatchway sealed?"

Jack held up his hand in a 'hold' signal, waiting for Daniel to decide if he was willing to go along with the story, or if he was going to keep pushing. "Daniel?"

"Yeah," Daniel replied, his voice rough. Had Jack's eyes always been that brown? "We're good."

Jack nodded his understanding and thought the door open. "Try it now, Carter."

He stood with a grunt and offered Daniel his hand.

Daniel looked at it, then his gaze raked up to meet Jack's eyes. He extended his own hand, grasping the cool, dry fingers through which his life force had somehow returned.

Jack pulled, and with a tilt of his head toward the hatch, said, "Let's get this debriefing on the road, shall we?" and Daniel saw his expression shutter closed.

While Jack stopped to speak with the duty officer, Sam guided Daniel toward a waiting van, as an airman secured their gear in the back. "I know you said it's over between you," Sam murmured, once they were seated in the back, "but the Colonel didn't sound just now like he was very 'over it' to me."

"Over?" Daniel snorted. He slumped further down into the seat. "It never had a chance to start."

She kept her voice down, so the driver standing outside the vehicle waiting for Jack couldn't overhear them. "Be that as it may, while you were... dead... this time, I watched him. He was terrified, Daniel. I've never seen true fear in his eyes before."

She'd been trying to remember a time in the last seven years when she'd seen Jack O'Neill so panicked, and she'd come up with nothing. No Goa'uld or Replicator or Unas had ever put that frightened glitch into his voice, or that expression on his face.

"He's holding it together, better than I could under these circumstances, but underneath that 'just another mission' act he's giving us, he's just barely holding on."

Daniel grunted and pulled his jacket tighter around him. "If you ask me, it's knowing he's got this freaky new superpower that's got him spooked."

Sam shook her head. "It's more than that," she insisted quietly. "Whatever he experienced when he was trying to bring you back, I could tell--"
She needed him to believe her, but she didn't want to break a confidence to the Colonel, even one he didn't know about. "I heard what he said," she admitted reluctantly. "I was wrong. I'm sorry. I love you. Forgive me. "He'd die if he knew he'd voiced it all out loud, so you can't let on that you know--"

She huffed in annoyance at Daniel's mulish expression. "He's desperately in love with you, Daniel," she insisted.

"I wish," Daniel muttered sadly. He turned away from her to lean his forehead against the cool, deeply tinted window. His head was throbbing, and his body ached, and he was nearly asleep on his feet. Jack had brought him back, but Daniel would be a fool to think it meant anything more than just not leaving a man behind.

"He's only in love with the idea of me, Sam-- the Daniel that lives in his head, the one who's innocent and pure as the driven snow. And I haven't been that for a long damn time."

She watched as the duty officer and the Colonel concluded their head-to-head and approached the van. "Mmm. I don't think it's that simple. There's more there, Daniel, but you're gonna have to dig for it. You know how he is-- he won't surrender peacefully."

*****

Apparently, surviving a near-death experience did nothing for one's ability to concentrate. As he lay on the infirmary table, while Doctor Poor-Substitute-for-Janet-Fraiser poked at him and conducted her tests and blathered on, all he could think about was what Sam had said. She seemed sincere in her belief about Jack's devotion towards him, but then she hadn't seen the guy leaning over him just a few hours before the incident in the JackShip, pinning him down, seething with fury. What she was postulating just didn't seem possible.

With effort, Daniel tuned back in to the doctor's prattling. "... and for someone who's had a serious electrical shock, you're in remarkable condition. I can't find an entry or exit wound anywhere on your body, and there doesn't appear to be any thermal injury at all."

"Healthy living," Daniel replied with a smile and a double sweep of his lashes. Doctor Brightman looked dubious instead of enchanted, though, so he was afraid he might've overdone it.

"Be that as may," she said slowly. "I'd like to keep you overnight for observation." She started to scribble something to that effect on his chart.

"Um? No?" Daniel sat up, doing his level best to look with-it, and not at all electrocuted, even though the sudden movement made his head spin. It was a tough sell; he felt fried, in every sense of the word. "Observation? Based on what medical criteria, may I ask?"

She arched an eyebrow at his challenge as she looked up from her notes. "Your body sustained a massive electrical shock, from an alien mechanism that we don't fully understand at this point. The fact that you bear absolutely no physical signs that this event even occurred is something of a mystery as well. Honestly? I'm expecting an imminent systemic collapse of epic proportions. Therefore, we'll file this one under 'better safe than sorry'." She snapped his file shut with a loud click. "And you need to lie back down."

"Ah, how about, 'healthy until proven infirm' instead?" he countered with a wide smile, tuning out her ongoing objections.

Ignoring her hiss of disapproval, he swung his legs over the side of the bed, got gingerly to his feet,
and reached for the pants that he'd thrown over the chair when he'd come in. He ignored her as she moved to stand in front of him, sternly rattling off medical jargon and reminding him that he should be grateful to even be alive.

She didn't know the half of it.

He yanked his pants up in a hurry, stripped off his hospital gown and shrugged back into his t-shirt, leaving it untucked. "I'll just--" he interrupted, pointing over his shoulder toward the door.

"Doctor Jackson, in my medical opinion--"

"It's Daniel," he said earnestly, stooping to snag his boots, socks spilling out the top. "And they're holding up the briefing for me, but I think they'd all appreciate it if I grabbed a quick shower first.

"Fate of the world," he said with a shrug and a roll of his eyes, "you know how it is."

He'd been waylaid by her insistent attempt to find a reason to hold him overnight, and the rest of the team had cleared out nearly an hour before. He needed to track down Jack before they all met around the conference table, so he could thank him without causing him terminal embarrassment.

She'd set the clipboard down on the exam table and now planted her hands on her hips. "It would be irresponsible of me in the extreme, to allow you to leave without a suitable observation period. I really must insist. I'll call an orderly if nec--"

Janet would've known to have the orderly standing by; she would never have fallen for this maneuver. Daniel missed her fiercely at times like this.

He signaled a thumbs-up as he backed out of the infirmary, the doc still sputtering indignantly as she followed him.

"Don't trouble yourself, I'm fine, honest. I'm frighteningly familiar with the whole--" he waved his free hand, "--dying thing. Ask anyone. You get used to it after a while. Handful of Tylenol, I'll be good as new, you'll see," he assured her as he fumbled for the doorknob behind him. He opened it and flashed her a dimpled smile, which made her stop in her tracks. "See you later," he said rhetorically, then slipped out and closed the door behind him.

She didn't immediately follow him out into the hall, but neither did he hang around to see if she'd make good on her orderly threat. Maybe that smile had been just enough.

*****

Jack had never seen the shower area in the SG-1 locker room so filled with steam, not even that time they all came back from the Planet of the Mud People, and that one had required utensils to get off the layers of goop...

There looked to be only one occupant using the facilities, and a quick glance confirmed it was the missing Doctor Jackson, recently escaped from the clutches of the infirmary. Jack retreated to the dressing area, but not before he'd seen everything.

Daniel was standing with both hands braced against the tiled wall, as if he were asleep on his feet, head hanging down between his outstretched arms, letting the spray pound the back of his neck, water running in rivulets along the contours of his back and his heavily muscled legs. The way the light had been hitting him, he looked like he'd been carved from a chunk of alabaster. Daniel hadn't been this well developed eight years ago --or even two years ago-- but they'd all put in an amazing number of miles, running for their lives, and those things changed a person. In more ways than
I figured out later that's part of what made me fall in love with you.

This confirmed it; Jack absolutely was as dumb as he pretended to be, because Daniel had loved him, and Jack had sent him packing.

He'd probably fallen for Daniel the first damn day he'd set eyes on him. Spent the next year on his roof letting his recollections get fuzzy about the man's more irritating habits and turning him into some kind of a saint. Recalled to active duty to explore the galaxy and meet the Goa'uld, life became really interesting after Daniel's wife got snaked --it somehow continued to feel dishonest even thinking her name, considering he'd been mooning after her husband all that time-- and suddenly the saint with the deep blue eyes had become a martyr to his dead wife, and Jack was so fucking in love, he couldn't see straight, no pun intended.

But then, before he could find his balls and finally say something, Daniel had taken his swan dive into a nuclear bomb, forcing Jack to spend each and every day of the next fifteen months finding a reason not to eat his gun... today.

Then, of course, had come the miraculous reprieve, which was apparently totally wasted on Jack's thick skull, because clearly, he never fucking learned. Not eight months after finding Daniel tucked away on some forgotten vagabond planet, it was the Patty Duke Show all over again, with identical twin cousins, and Jack was falling all over himself in order to tell Daniel --whom he now knew was on the same goddamn page-- to shove it.

What the fuck had he been thinking?

Too little, too late, obviously. He was a goddamned moron.

Jack turned and slammed a locker closed with all due frustration, bellowing, "Daniel! Briefing!"

He heard the water shut off, and Daniel's echoed sigh, "Right there."

Jack paced in front of the lockers, the wet smell of the steamy room bringing back fleeting images stolen over the years, assembled like a stop-action peep show.

Daniel toweling his hair dry, skimming the towel over his chest and belly, down to his package, lifting it, getting into the creases, the same for the other leg, just raising a little on his toes to get the towel in there good. Swing the towel around to his back for a cursory swipe there then down between his cheeks and then arms and finally legs, tucking it around his waist for the walk into the locker room...

Just like Jack had pretended not to see him do a thousand times before.

"I'm glad you're here," Daniel said, coming into the locker area, but not meeting Jack's eyes, "I wanted to--"

"Yeah, 'bout that." Jack had no plans to do any soul-baring here at the mountain, none whatsofuckingever. "Get a move on, will ya? Weir sent me to find you, and Brightman's on your tail. I'm gonna hit the head."

With that, he retreated into the other half of the room, so he could hide in one of the stalls. He delayed, imagining Daniel getting dressed piece by piece, tossing his towel into the bin, finding his glasses, reaching for his boots. When he figured Daniel had had time to get decent, he flushed and washed up.
Except that Daniel hadn't followed the script; he was still barefoot and bare-chested and only then zipping up his jeans, when Jack came back into the room. *Crap.*

Daniel turned from the locker, glasses in hand. "We need to talk."

"Daniel." Jack sighed, looking everywhere but at the broad chest, nipples, and well-defined arms in front of him. "This isn't the time or the place."

"No. It's not," Daniel agreed, settling the frames on his face. "But it's all the time we have. Just these few moments." He slipped his arms into the soft gray shirt but didn't bother to button it. He leveled an expectant gaze right at Jack as he sat down on the bench with a tired sigh.

Jack shook his head and murmured, "What do you want me to say?"

"I don't want you--" Daniel dipped his head and frowned. "Back on Dakara, I... said things, hoping to hurt you, because of how much you'd hurt me. That was petty, and I just want you to know, I regret that, and I'm sorry."

Jack knew for a fact that this little confession was going to kill him right where he stood, unless he could get Daniel to shut the fuck up, *right the fuck now.* "Daniel--"

But Daniel was determined to get this said. "What you did. Bringing me back..." he winced and looked away. "I'm not sure I should thank you for that, I mean, seriously--"

"Oh, Daniel, for crissake... not this again..." Come on, what the fuck was it about bathrooms that made people spill their guts? Somebody save him from having any more of his pathetic life played out in vivid, embarrassing detail inside tiny, tile-walled rooms that reeked of disinfectant.

Daniel barked a distinctly unamused laugh as he barreled past Jack's attempt to interrupt. "You brought me back, but to what? I mean, it's all..." His eyebrows bunched, and he cleared his throat, obviously grabbing for some control.

"Anyway," he resolutely continued, "it was a brave and selfless thing to do, not knowing how it worked. I mean, it could've dragged you down, too--"

"Daniel--"

"--and I just wanted you to know that I really did... I really *do*... I *do* love you, Jack." His voice broke. "Don't ever doubt that."

"Daniel--"

"Don't." Daniel held up one finger, eyes stubbornly sliding closed as he continued to ignore Jack's attempts to derail him. "Just let me fin--"

In two and a half strides, Jack was there, right inside Daniel's personal space, grabbing him by shoulders still over-warm from the shower and pulling him up to his feet until they were practically touching noses.

"No more talking!" he whispered harshly. "Just shut the fuck up, *right now.*"

He'd do it if he had to; he'd clamp his hand over Daniel's mouth before his lips could form the *but* that Jack heard coming. There was a *but* hovering around there, he could feel it, and he had to prevent that word from ever making it out of Daniel's mouth at all costs, because that was a sound he'd hear echoing in his head for the rest of forever. The *but* that comprised every reason Jack
O'Neill wasn't good enough for Daniel Jackson. Wouldn't ever be.

*No. Don't say it, just don't-- god, he was right...*

"Who was right?"

Had he said that out loud? *Fuck.*

"O'Neill," he rasped.

Jack had already said too much to be sensible and safe or even sane, but when had that ever stopped Daniel? Damn the man, he'd dig and poke and push until he got everything. Might as well have it out here, get it over with, better than somewhere with cameras.

"He said I'd drive you away, just like--" Jack snapped his mouth shut, grinding his teeth to keep the words inside. Too late, though, because he could see that Daniel had clearly heard what he'd almost said. *Just like I did Sara...*

As if suddenly aware that he'd been grabbing on to Daniel, he released his shoulders, and his left hand dropped obediently to his side.

The right one seemed to have a mind of its own, however, about taking a turn up around Daniel's neck, probably intending to cup its warmth, feel the brush of tiny hairs above the collar, and pull him in for a kiss-- all of it seemed as necessary as breathing. Like an observer at his own funeral, Jack watched in sick fascination for long, interminable seconds as his disloyal appendage started its ill-fated and unapproved journey, before his brain finally kicked in and ordered the hand withdrawn, just in the nick of time.

"The old bastard was right..." Jack whispered thickly in the wake of that regret-filled, aborted caress.

He didn't know what to do. If Daniel had been a woman, he'd have dropped to one knee right there and begged for the forgiveness he didn't deserve. But then women, in his experience, were prone to making emotional decisions against their better judgment. How many times had Sara forgiven him, when he hadn't been worthy of it? All but that last one. Daniel was stronger than that. He was stronger than anyone Jack'd ever met.

Jack straightened up, pulling back into himself without stepping away. "I always knew I wasn't good enough for you," he admitted softly, the words forcing themselves out of his heart and through his lips. "When you told me about all the others, I knew someone like me could never measure up to that kind of life. I said a lot of things that were unkind, too. I just wish--"

A knock at the door shocked Jack out of his trance, reminding him where he was, how it looked, standing there with Daniel in a deserted locker room this way. He stepped back to the bank of lockers on the other side of the room before the door opened cautiously.

"Colonel O'Neill?" It was Walter, poking just his head around the door. *Doctor Weir wants to know if you've--"

"Tell her I found Dr. Jackson." Hands stuffed into his pockets, Jack's eyes never left Daniel's as he added with a calm he didn't feel, "We'll be there in a minute, Walter."

"Yes, sir." Harriman let the door close quietly.

"I screwed up," Jack admitted, as though they hadn't been interrupted, as though Daniel hadn't
opened his mouth to interject something the minute the door was closed again. "I know I'm hopelessly archaic-- I get it. But it would never have worked. I know I could never be enough for you, and the first time I saw you with someone else, I'd lose it; I know I would. I couldn't share you, like he shared Jackson-- I'd kill them, simple as that. Anyone else who touched you. But yeah, it doesn't change the fact that I--"

Another knock, but this time, Walter didn't open the door. "Sir," he said, his voice just barely carrying through the thick door. "I know you're going to bust me down to Airman for this, but Doctor Weir called to tell me to tell you the President's on the line for you."

Jack allowed his chin to drop to his chest in defeat and let out a resigned sigh. "Thanks, Walter," he called through the door, then turned to leave.

"Jack, my god, don't go--"

Jack opened the door, then looked back over his shoulder and met Daniel's huge, surprised eyes. "I have to do this," he said sadly. "Just... for what it's worth, I'm sorry, okay? Really... really sorry..."

The door closed behind him with a resounding thunk.

Daniel sat down heavily on the bench. Not enough? Confused didn't even begin to describe him. Why would Jack think he'd insist on having multiple partners? That wasn't what Daniel had been looking for at all. Hadn't he told Jack he'd wanted to build a life with him? Hadn't he said he was tired of the anonymous sex with people he didn't know or care about? Hadn't he assured Jack he'd never cheat on him--?

Oh.

With a rush of understanding, Daniel remembered he'd told O'Neill that, not Jack. All this time, Jack had been thinking Daniel was looking for some kind of open or poly relationship, because of the past he'd so blithely described in Jack's truck, to his everlasting regret. Nothing heavy, no strings, just having a good time. When it stopped being fun, I moved on. The fact that Jackson-- married-- still behaved that way supported Jack's belief that Daniel's intentions were more along the lines of a casual buddy fuck arrangement. That, and the fact that Daniel had never explicitly said otherwise.

Jack'd eat his own arm before he admits it, but he needs that reassurance.

Daniel hung his head. They'd been fools. Both of them.

*****

"I spoke with Doctor Brightman a short while ago," Elizabeth Weir said to Sam as she came into the conference room. "Doctor Jackson has more or less released himself from the infirmary."

Sam smiled as she tiredly sank into a chair. "Daniel is always anxious to escape that place, and I don't think he's slept much in the last forty-eight hours, so he probably wants to get home before he crashes."

"Yes," Elizabeth said drolly. "Doctor Brightman said he'd mentioned wanting to take a shower, but--" she checked her watch pointedly, "that was more than thirty minutes ago. When he didn't respond to the base intercom, I contacted Colonel O'Neill, asked him to find Doctor Jackson, and invited them both to join us here at their earliest convenience."

"I see."
"When I didn't hear from him, I thought to send Sergeant Harriman to track them both down, only to find that --after manning his post for the last twenty hours straight-- Sergeant Harriman had finally gone off-duty. The person who replaced him offered to contact him via radio, surprisingly enough, so I was able to pass on the message that the President is currently on hold for Colonel O'Neill in my office."

Sam didn't know the woman all that well, but she seemed a little rigid to be in charge of the SGC, where the extraordinary happened every single day. Sort of the way General Hammond had been at the beginning.

"Oh. Well--"

"The President of the United States," Elizabeth stressed. "On hold. That was ten minutes ago, and as of this moment, I've not heard from any of them." She sighed and folded her hands on the table in front of her, leaning forward intently.

"This place... these people... it's like herding cats," she said with a tight smile. "If some of them aren't back here in the next five minutes, you and I shall have to storm the locker room--"

As Sam was left to wonder if Weir had been attempting levity, they both caught sight of movement in the office beyond; it was Harriman, bustling in with the Colonel right behind him. Slouching easily, hands in pockets, Jack stood there, waiting for Harriman to complete the connection, as though none of the events of the past several hours had even happened.

When Elizabeth saw Harriman hand O'Neill the red phone, she relaxed a little. "Well. Speak of the devil. Two out of three..."

She acknowledged the Sergeant's thumbs-up with a neutral wave, and watched him disappear through her office door into the corridor.

Turning back to Sam, she asked, "Tell me again why everyone doesn't carry some kind of communication device when you're here inside the SGC?"

"It's never been an issue before," Sam assured her quickly. "We're all just really--"

"Tired, yes, I can see that," Weir agreed with an understanding smile. "And it's no wonder, two strenuous missions virtually back-to-back; SG-1 has definitely earned time off. And since we've been given the order to stand down operations until further notice, everyone will have plenty of time to rest and get their bearings before we move forward."

Sam sat stiffly, only half-wondering what that meant, more interested in getting the briefing over with, so she could go home to her own bed. She felt absolutely drained.

"Communication issues aside, this is a fascinating place to work," Weir said, making small talk while they waited for the Colonel to finish speaking with the President. "And a very interesting cast of characters to get used to."

"Master Bra'tac, for instance," she said, lacing her fingers together. "Are all Jaffa so..."

"Sexist?" Sam smiled at the nod of agreement. "Yeah, pretty much."

"He seems to take you seriously, at least," Weir countered. "I noticed he didn't refer to you as female."

"He did at first," Sam laughed. "I had to prove myself in battle, before he'd treat me like one of the
guys."

"I see." She smiled tightly. "Well, I'm not particularly anxious to be 'one of the guys', but a little respect would be nice."

"Being considered one of the guys is actually a pretty big compliment from him," Sam explained. "It's the way their culture is. And believe me, it was definitely a challenge to get used to at first," she admitted.

"It doesn't seem that Teal'c is that way."

Sam smiled enigmatically, remembering their earliest missions together. "More than you know."

"Hmmm... speaking of tall, dark and brooding, you said he chose to stay behind on Dakara?"

"Yes. Daniel says he has a democracy to birth."

Elizabeth raised an eyebrow and leaned forward. "I can't wait to hear about that."

"Hear about what?" Jack asked, taking his usual place to Hammond's left. Weir's, now, and how very wrong was that? Didn't need to get used to it, he told himself, he wasn't going to be there that long.

He looked across the table to Carter and then back at Weir. "What memo did I miss this time?"

"The one about Teal'c turning politician," Sam replied with an easy smile. She loved Jack O'Neill, she did. The skilled and deadly parts, and the goofy ones too. But it wasn't the in love kind, and she wasn't the in love kind, and she wasn't certain that Pete was the answer either, but she wasn't going to make any hasty decisions she might regret later.

"Teal'c will kick ass as a politician," Jack assured her, settling back into his chair.

"Teal’c is a statesman," Daniel corrected him as he walked into the conference room and took the empty seat between Sam and Elizabeth, coffee already in hand. "And you made him Ambassador to Earth."

Jack preened across from him. "I did, didn't I."

"You--?" Elizabeth started, sitting up very straight now.

"Very sharp negotiating on your part, may I just say," Daniel continued, as if Weir wasn't even there. "Offering them Tretonin and food, as well as engineering and agricultural support, in exchange for more JackShips and any energy drones they come across, once they finally get a chance to see what they've got in those underground bunkers."

Jack narrowed his eyes. "Did I do all that?" Not exactly the way he remembered it, but then his headache had been pretty bad...

"You most certainly did," Daniel insisted. "Very shrewd, Jack." He took a slurp of his coffee, keeping eye contact with him over the rim of the cup. "My hat's off to you. You had the Free Jaffa eating out of your hand."

"Jack-- what? Ships, plural?" Elizabeth felt as though she were watching a tennis match without a program. And really, shouldn't she have been in on any negotiations that had taken place?

"I don't know why you keep calling them that," Jack frowned, happy to engage with Daniel in lieu
of Weir, even if he didn't understand why Daniel was being so accessible and... animated. Almost... happy. Unless maybe Daniel was thinking about forgiving him?

"It only makes sense to call them that, because right now, you're the only one we're sure can fly the damn things," Daniel replied firmly. "And once the powers that be get a look at what they can do, they're going to want as many as they can get their greedy little hands on. Have you got a better name for them? I mean, The O'Neill Bullet is a little clunky, as names go, don't you think?"

Jack assumed an air of abstract puzzlement, as if he might actually be considering the moniker, when in reality, he was trying to figure out what the hell Daniel was playing at. This was not the same man he'd left in the locker room fifteen minutes ago. He hadn't dared hope that Daniel would ever be able to see his way clear to being friends again after everything that had gone down between them. So then why all the easy banter now?

"I was thinking they should be called GateShips," Sam suggested with some excitement. "Because unless I'm way off base here, those craft were built to go through a stargate. That almost has to mean gates in space, actually in orbit. It's a fascinating idea."

"Doesn't matter what you call 'em." Jack waved a dismissive hand at both of them. "The Air Force'll come along and give it an MDS designation before the week's out. You mark my words."

Daniel sighed deeply. "That's okay. You'll still be the only one she'll roll over and purr for," he stated airily. "That craft loves you."

Jack smiled stiffly, trying to get a handle on what the hell Daniel was trying to accomplish by making him out to be some kind of master trader, and not only that, but indispensable to boot. Was he trying to scuttle Jack's plan to retire? Didn't matter, the ink was already dry on that particular stage of his life.

"Yeah, well..." He got up and headed for the table in the back. "That's just 'cause I'm so very loveable." He poured himself a glass of water from the thermal pitcher.

"You feeling any better, Daniel?" Sam asked, eyeing his clothing. The fact that he was already in his street clothes probably meant he was serious about resigning. She very nearly envied him.

"Hmm? Oh, yeah," he replied softly. "I just had to figure out some things. Misunderstandings, meaning of life stuff, y'know."

Sam nudged his foot with hers, glancing toward the Colonel's back when Daniel looked her way, reading the unspoken question in her eyes.

"Mmmm, maybe," he murmured.

His gaze flickered up and caught Jack's as he resumed his seat, before he smiled sheepishly in Elizabeth's direction. "Anyway, I'm sorry I'm late. The shower felt so good, I guess I lost track of time."

"That's quite all right, Doctor Jackson," she said with an answering grin. "Now that we're all here, if it's all right with all of you, the sooner we start the debriefing, the sooner you can all get some much needed rest. I'm not sure how this is usually is done, but if you can take it more or less chronologically, I'll try to keep up."

*****

An hour later, they were finished with the high-level briefing, written reports to follow.
"Well, that was breathtaking," Elizabeth said, setting her pen down on her open journal. She wore a wide smile and a gleam in her eye as she considered the people around the table. "It must be hard to believe, after all your hard work and sacrifice for the last seven years, that it's finally over. You've done something wonderful here, even if most of the rest of the planet isn't aware of it."

"There's always more that can be done," Jack observed with uncharacteristic seriousness. "Part of the intelligence we received from MirrorWorld was the location of a sarcophagus. The other guys were able to make use of it, once they got the hang of how it works, and they haven't suffered some of the losses we've had because of it."

Elizabeth nodded her understanding at the mention of the word sarcophagus. "General Hammond has shared with me that he's pitched the idea to Hayes, along with your recommendations concerning limiting the... temporary loss of life. But unfortunately, uncertainties regarding its acquisition aside, the President has serious reservations about the device's dangers in general, based on all previous reports, and in our ability to secure it from NID in particular."

Her expression seemed genuinely regretful, and Jack didn't sense a competing agenda. "I'm not really surprised," he said sadly. "Doc Fraiser was probably the one person who could've kept it safe and used properly, and we lost her about two months back. Sure wish we'd had one then."

Daniel and Sam added their solemn agreement and then Daniel addressed Weir. "Speaking of the NID, though, what part will Kinsey play in all of this?" Jackson had told him that in their reality, the VP had been taken as a host, escaped captivity, and was subsequently believed killed when Prometheus destroyed the Al'kesh he'd transported onto. It was probably too much to hope for here.

Weir rolled her shoulder noncommittally. "All I know unofficially is that Kinsey has stepped down, but I'm pretty sure that's not common knowledge. I haven't really had an opportunity to find out all the juicy details."

Jack cleared his throat. "Hayes just told me he'll announce Kinsey's resignation to the country, as soon as he can vet a replacement. He won't ever be in a position to hurt the SGC or its people again."

"That's something, at least," Sam quietly interjected.

"I do have a few bits of news you all might like to hear," Elizabeth told them with a sly smile. "We had a visit from Thor shortly after you left. He came in the Asgard ship, The Daniel Jackson."

"The wha--" Daniel sputtered, sitting up straighter.

"Thor made you a ship!" Jack crowed, while Sam beamed and joined in with applause.

Daniel's self-conscious frown was nearly overcome by the grins of his friends. Jackson hadn't mentioned it, but then maybe their Asgard hadn't honored him in that way. Embarrassed that the idea tickled him so much, he flashed Sam a put-on scowl that she completely ignored.

"The hyperdrive and beaming tech you asked for, as well as a--," she consulted her notes, "matter replicator, as a special bonus, have been installed in Prometheus, and in the Daedalus at Area 51."

"Well, I'll be damned," Jack said fondly. "I gather the Replicator Buster worked. Wish I'd've been here to thank the little guy."

"I did my best to represent Earth's gratitude, Colonel," she told him with a grin, "but I understand
that Thor has a special affection for you."

"Yeah, he and I go way back."

"Jack keeps trying to get Thor to go fishing with him," Daniel explained, addressing Elizabeth, but his eyes only on Jack.

"That's because you keep turning me down!"

"You asked me exactly once!" Daniel exclaimed with mock indignation.

"While I was on bed rest, recovering from an appendectomy!"

"A true fisherman is undaunted by such trivialities," Jack sniffed haughtily. Okay, he wasn't imagining it. He'd been the recipient of more intense, unbridled Daniel Jackson eye contact in the last hour than-- ever. There were parts of the briefing that had actually gotten him hard, just from the intense scrutiny Daniel was heaping upon him. He'd been trying not to get his hopes up, but there was clearly something going on in Daniel's million-dollar brain, because he seemed to be broadcasting on all channels.

At least Jack hoped he was reading it right...

Weir cleared her throat. "Asgard aside, I know you're all probably wondering what's next for the SGC," she said almost giddily, "and I've been giving that some thought while you were gone. The fact that -- thanks to you -- Earth isn't standing on the brink of interplanetary war for a change, leaves open a lot of possibilities for peaceful exploration."

She addressed Sam with a knowing expression. "Major Carter, following your leave, you'll be overseeing the calibration of all the Asgard instrumentation, as well as accompanying both shakedown cruises." Weir's beaming face faltered when Sam failed to even crack a smile. "Major? I take it this wouldn't be a welcome assignment?"

Sam's forehead wrinkled as she stared down at the clenched hands in her lap for a split second; she worked hard at bringing her expression neutral by the time she looked up again. She hadn't thought it would be this hard to leave. "Actually? It sounds like a great assignment, it's just...

Daniel reached out underneath the table and took her hand in his, giving it a gentle squeeze.

"I've got a lot of accumulated leave I'd like to use. Kind of a leave of absence, to see if maybe there's a life out there for me. I want to try being a civilian for a while, see if I can learn to be any good at it." Sam nodded her head a little.

With all due respect, Doctor, that doesn't really change anything. I've been thinking about it for a while now, and I feel it's time to take a break. I need some time to decompress from all of this."

"I see." She cocked her head to the side and narrowed her eyes. "How long do you think you'll need?"

Sam's clutch on Daniel's hand tightened. "Six months. Effective immediately."

"Oh, my," Weir exclaimed softly. After a long, silent moment, she added, "General Hammond was
certain this project would be right up your alley. And getting that beaming technology up and running is a huge priority of his, with regard to the Antarctic Defense Platform." She smiled ruefully. "I certainly wish there were two of you."

"Well, you might give Doctor Rodney McKay a call," Sam suggested with a twinkle in her eye. "He's currently tormenting the R&D people at Area 51, I believe."

"He's not as smart as you," Jack stated authoritatively.

"Not by half," Daniel added sincerely.

Both comments startled her, and tears stung the backs of her eyes. "Thanks, guys," she said softly to both of them. She gave Daniel's hand another squeeze.

If Elizabeth noticed the informal way Sam referred to her CO, she gave no such indication, but noted the recommendation in her notebook without comment.

"I've already approved her leave request," Jack said evenly. "It's sitting on your desk."

"I see." Her smile was tight, striving to be understanding. "Thank you, Colonel, and thank you, Major, for the referral. It is my sincere hope that once you've had a chance to recover from your ordeal, you'll consider returning to us. The SGC will sorely miss your unique contributions."

Sighing deeply, she folded her hands in front of her and turned toward Daniel. "Perhaps I'll have better luck with you, Doctor Jackson. I've been looking at the notes you left concerning the chair room in Antarctica, and I can't tell you how excited I am. There's an awful lot of text there; how many of your staff did you say can read Ancient?"

"Just Enrique and Suzanne at the moment, beside myself."

"Well, we'll need to get several more ramped up as soon as possible," she said with a sense of urgency. "That site is so rich with possibilities, and now that we're not in crisis mode, we can take the time to do it right. We can also return to some of the cultures SG teams have visited in the past -- I'm sure you have a list of recommendations in that regard-- to take the time to really explore all the new peoples we can learn from and help. I have a lot of ideas I can't wait to discuss with you!"

Her grin was wide and her enthusiasm contagious, and it would've normally been difficult not to get caught up in it, except for the fact that Daniel's life lay elsewhere now, he hoped.

"No ma'am, not me," he said gently.

She looked at Daniel, then past him to Sam, wondering if these two defections were in some way related.

"But we have the opportunity, finally, and there's so much work to do," she said, her tone incredulous, as though she couldn't imagine that for the second time in a handful of minutes, she was falling short in motivating the people she was responsible for. Clearly, there was something, some factor, at work here that she had no understanding of.

"I know exactly how much there will be to do," Daniel said evenly. "You'll have to expand the anthro and linguistics departments, to at least double their current size, and that screening and hiring alone will take six months of twelve-hour days, not to mention the travel and bullshit involved."

He handed her a sheaf of notes and photos. "This is all I was able to get done on the ship before..."
Anyway, god knows how long it'll take to make any sense out of Antarctica, once you can make the place habitable, but I'm just not interested. I'm sorry." He pointed with a finger. "My resignation is on the top there."

She was distressed and poorly able to cover it. Daniel Jackson was the foremost expert on the Ancient language on the planet, and if she didn't have him, she had nothing. What were the chances two trainees could decipher the mysteries that surrounded the Ancient Defense Platform?

"I don't understand. Isn't this everything you've worked for all this time? Nearly every mission report of yours over the last seven years has ended with an imperative recommendation to return to the planet for further exploration and analysis. Here you have a chance to do that-- all the exploring your heart desires, with none of the military concerns that have stopped you in the past."

Daniel's wince was accompanied by an ironic grunt as he absently rubbed at the back of his neck. "Yeah, I know, I can be a bit of a broken record at times. "And those recommendations all stand. The wealth of knowledge to be gained, the insight into human cultures, seeded by the Ancients and kidnapped by the Goa'uld, is incalculable. But I've learned in the last seven years that there are more important things in life than just understanding the universe. What was the whole point of risking our lives week in, week out, fighting to keep Earth free, if we never get to enjoy the fruits of our labors?"

"And frankly, arguing with the Pentagon about headcount funding isn't how I want to spend the rest of my life," he added firmly, his gaze shifting to rest upon Jack.

Now Weir looked devastated, and she was unable or unwilling to conceal it. "Colonel O'Neill, I could use a little help here. This is critical work, which Doctor Jackson and Major Carter are uniquely suited for, and I seem unable to influence them. Do you hold any powers of persuasion over the members of your team?"

"I doubt it," he said from his easy slouch, hands folded across his middle as he appraised Daniel sharply.

He was sure now. Something had happened in the locker room after he'd left, something important, because Daniel's gaze was white-hot and aimed straight at him.

"I've been after these two to get a life for years, and it's just now sunk in that it might be a good idea."

"Kids," he mused with a shrug, as the corners of his mouth turned up in a smile he didn't really want to hide. He turned his gaze on Weir. "What're ya gonna do?"

Elizabeth sighed, deciding to escalate the Carter and Jackson issues up the food chain, to see if any pressure could be brought to bear from Washington.

"What will you do now?" she asked Daniel with strained interest. "See the sights of your own planet for a change, immerse yourself in a somewhat less exotic foreign culture?"

"Nothing could be further from my mind," Daniel said, shaking his head. "I've traveled around the world since I was born, never staying in one place very long, never letting myself get close to anyone. It's been an incredibly lonely life. I'm ready to settle down in one place. Put down roots, in a very conventional sense."

Daniel felt Sam squeeze his hand in encouragement, and it calmed his erratically beating heart. He sensed they were running out of briefing, and he still wasn't sure Jack was getting the message. He
had no guarantee he would even talk to him, once the meeting was over.

"Are you hoping to settle down with that special someone?" Weir smiled, glancing at Sam. If she could figure out what his weakness was, she might be able to exploit it. If they were each other's Achilles' heel, so much the better.

Not really registering Weir's assumption, because of his own preoccupation, Daniel replied quietly, "I had a chance to do that, to be with someone, but I may have blown it. It's too early to tell."

Through being subtle, he shifted his gaze straight to Jack again, doing his best to push all his hopes into the eye contact. He didn't have the luxury of time to do this, to make Jack understand that they'd both been working off bad assumptions, and that he desperately wanted to try again, this time with all their cards on the table. But he couldn't ambush him. This had to be Jack's move. All Daniel could do was signal his willingness to try again.

"Well, I hope you find everything you're looking for, Doctor Jackson. And the same request holds for you; if you find after a while that you miss the excitement, you'll always have a place here."

She turned to Jack and tried not to look as if she was fighting a battle she had no way to win. "Well. It looks like I'm oh for two here, but I won't let that deter me." Her smile was more wary than warm.

"From your briefing, it seems that there will be a great need for your services to further our understanding of the JackShips, as well as the Ancient Defense Platform in Antarctica. How do you feel about assisting with that endeavor?"

Jack tore his eyes away from Daniel with some difficulty. "Don't you have John Sheppard for that?"

"Major Sheppard is currently stationed at Nellis, while we await the build-out of the Antarctic base and the calibration of the beaming tech. He's responsible for manning the ADP for the moment.

"At your recommendation, we've located a Dr. Carson Beckett, and he's busy ramping up the screening program you brought back from the Mirror Reality. So far, he's identified thirteen individuals from among the US armed forces who possess the Ancient gene. There will, of course, need to be some kind of training for these people in the use of the Ancient technology--"

"Safety is a definite concern," Jack said seriously. He leaned forward to tap a strident finger against the table. "Technology that's thought-driven scares the crap outta me, pardon my French. I nearly got Daniel killed on the way back here, and I don't have a clue what I did --what I thought-- wrong. I left strict instructions with the Duty Officer at Peterson to keep everyone out of the hangar, on pain of court martial. No telling what would happen if a gene carrier happened to walk by the craft, or worse, touch it."

Weir was nodding. "All the more reason for you to take on a major role in developing the training necessary to make sure it's used safely," she said earnestly. "I spoke with the President this morning; he and General Hammond are so pleased with the last couple of missions you've commanded, you're in line for your own promotion! General Hammond has drawn up a very detailed plan which looks very workable to me, whereby you and I will share joint command of the Stargate program."

Jack glanced across the table at Daniel, blue eyes intent on seeing the inside of Jack's very being. "Y'know... thirty years ago, maybe even five years ago, the whole promotion thing was definitely on my list."
He turned his gaze back on Weir. "But no one has the kind of career I've had, or do the kinds of things I've done, and expect them to reward that with a star."

"Nevertheless. You saved Earth, Colonel. And Dakara. That's worth something. That's practically a 'write your own ticket'."

Jack slowly shook his head. "Nope. SG-1, all of us together, did that, not me. They were the best. They made me look good, made me better than I was. I've got no desire whatsoever to be The Man, or to spend my days thinking about some wonky Ancient tech."

This was going all wrong; she could feel it. She was losing him, too. "You can't turn down the promotion, Colonel; it'd be career suicide. Even I know that much about the military."

"I can retire," he said firmly. "Permanently, this time."

His hands were steady as he handed Weir his papers, but that didn't accurately reflect the state of his gut. "This is your set; I had Walter email copies to both Hammond and Hayes on the way up here. Consider me officially out to pasture."

Elizabeth was clearly stunned as she looked back and forth from the forms in her hand to Jack's earnest expression, then to the remainder of SG-1. Ex-SG-1...

"Really," he assured her quietly. "This is not a drill."

"Well. I'm trying not to feel mutinied. It seems I've been assuming I could count on the same level of loyalty and commitment that you've all given General Hammond for seven years. You're not back two whole hours, and I'm suddenly without the flagship team. This won't look good on my job record, I can tell you that."

"It's nothing personal, Elizabeth," Daniel said gently. "We've been doing this a long time. It's brought us together into something that's more family than team, which I've personally been grateful for more often than not. But it's also taken a lot out of us. None of us has a private life to speak of, and we've all lost people we loved. We're tired. We need a break. Sam deserves to find out if she can make a relationship work with that goofy cop who follows her around like a lovesick puppy--"

Sam punched him in the arm, using the hand that wasn't still clenched in his.

"Ow!"

"Lovesick puppy?" she tried to look insulted and stern, but it was difficult, with the blush she felt rising in her cheeks, and the smirk that wanted to answer his.

"You think he's not?" Daniel asked with a laugh. "Have you seen him?"

"Kids," Jack said in mock warning. "Play nice, or I'll have to separate you." This feeling was the best part of the last seven years. And it all centered around Daniel, as it always had.

Daniel was watching him again, and the look... god, it reached out and grabbed his balls.

An invitation, maybe? Forgiveness, at least.

Love was probably too much to hope for...

"Maybe it's time to let the next generation of peaceful explorers take a whack at it," Sam was
saying. "The last class of cadets looked pretty sharp."

"Made me feel old," Jack replied, remembering the graduation they'd attended.

"The job's aged all of us," Daniel offered with a sigh. "It'll be good just getting a normal circadian rhythm back."

Elizabeth sighed deeply, realizing she'd lost, utterly. "And what about you, Colonel? What will you do?"

Jack understood that it could all go horribly wrong in the next few minutes. If he'd misread the signals, and Daniel was simply drawing him out, just so he could expose him, throw it all back in his face... it'd be payback time, and well-deserved.

He knew Daniel had a vindictive streak in him; he'd felt its sting after the time Daniel'd gone ten rounds with the sarcophagus, and Jack had found himself on the wrong end of his gun. Daniel usually saved his wrath for whatever Goa'uld was currently pissing him off, but Jack had no doubt that he'd earned that kind of ranking, given his behavior these last few days.

But Jack also knew that if there was even a chance this was legit, then anything less than putting himself out there wouldn't be enough to even the score between them. For all the years Daniel had put himself on the line, waiting and hoping, leaving himself open to potential ridicule and disgust, in fear of receiving pretty much everything Jack had thrown at him in the front seat of his truck just last week. Not to mention, he thought with no small amount of self-recrimination, the spectacular matinee in a mossy field on Dakara...

Jack had a helluva lot to atone for, and this was only a tiny step.

He drew a deep, calming breath, feeling three pair of eyes weighing on him as he opened his mouth to address Weir's question.

"Ever since this wacky adventure began eight years ago, with that big round thing down there and a geek with too much hair and a bad case of allergies, my place has been by his side." He nodded across the table toward Daniel, then switched the focus of his comment there. "I lost my way for a while, and lately I've been about seven kinds of ass--"

"Eight," Daniel corrected quietly, gaze steady and searching.

Jack smiled. "Eight," he agreed with a tilt of his head. "But if that spot's still available, and if he'll have me, then that's where I'd like to be."

A slow smile spread across Daniel's face as he realized that Jack had gotten the message after all. Their problems weren't solved by any means, but they had a chance now.

"That place has always had your name on it," he stated softly.

Sam gripped his hand extra hard, and he acknowledged her joy with a glance and a squeeze before he released hers.

Grinning, Jack got up, scooaching the chair back as he did so. He slipped his hands into the pockets of his BDUs and gestured with a nod of his head toward the door.

"After you, Doctor Jackson."

Daniel got to his feet and gathered his things, meeting Jack's smiling eyes with a smirk of his own.
"Oh no, Colonel O'Neill. Age before beauty. I insist."

Jack shook his head slowly, letting the joy of possibilities fill him as he made his way around the table. "Don't give me that 'age before beauty' crap. We started out this thing with me watching your six, we're going out with me watching your six." He gestured toward the door with an expansive arm wave. "Run along, PhD-Boy. Try not to touch anything on the way out--"

Daniel started moving, arguing over his shoulder the entire way. "What is it with you suddenly and me touching things? This is a completely unfair reputation I seem to have acquired somewhere, that I totally don't deserve."

"Do so."

"Do not. Jack, name me three times--"

Elizabeth's mouth dropped open as she watched them bicker their way out of the briefing room.

She blinked at Sam. "What just happened?"

Sam's grin widened as she wiped away a few tears, happy for her friends. "The inevitable, I think."

*****

Daniel collected a few personal items from his office, then met Jack at the topside checkpoint to sign out. They were both wearing the street clothes they'd had on at the start of the mission, the day eight years of friendship had self-destructed. He shook off the unpleasant déjà-vu moment.

It felt odd, leaving the mountain in the middle of the day, as though they were playing hooky. He squinted at the glare of the cloudless sun gleaming off the sea of chrome, too lazy to get his sunglasses out of his briefcase.

"You-ah, got the message," he said casually as they walked across the lot to the truck.

Jack grinned. "Loud and clear, with the looks you were giving me." His step was light, as if his whole life had turned around.

Daniel shrugged. "I've never been any good at being subtle, you know that."

"That's okay," Jack said as he popped the locks. "I've been known to be a bit on the thick-headed side sometimes, so the direct approach is usually more reliable anyway."

They settled into the truck, Daniel slouching down into the corner and lowering the visor to block out the sun as Jack took the switchbacks on the way down the mountain with his usual caution.

They didn't talk, each man lost in his own post-mission adrenaline low tide. Daniel was fatigued like never before, a deep, soul-wearing tired that longed for dark and the comfort of a bed.

Jack --who still considered himself on duty, because he hadn't gotten them home yet-- took the turn onto Academy Drive with the tail-end of the light and tried to remember what he had at home in the way of food. Probably nothing edible.

They spoke together. "We ne--" "How--"

Daniel sighed. "Um, can you stop over there?" He pointed.

"What? Now?"
"Yeah, just… pull over. We need to talk, and I don't want to try to have this conversation in your truck." He spared a quick glance to his left and caught Jack's eye.

"Right," Jack said, noting the tightly pursed lips and understanding the reference; neither one of them had great memories of the last time they'd been in Jack's truck.

He signaled and turned off Academy and into Palmer Park. Charlie's Little League had played there. "There's a larger pavilion around that bend or--"

"Here's fine," Daniel said, indicating the parking lot and small shelter. Two families were just gathering up the remains of their picnic and heading across the grass to the baseball diamond beyond. It was still plenty cold, but there apparently had been a few warm, sunny days while they'd been off-world, because the only snow left on the ground was in dirty piles, pushed into the corners of the parking lot.

Jack parked and shut off the engine, locking it up after Daniel closed his door.

"Some reason we're doin' this in the open? House is only about twenty minutes from here."

"Yeah, but this is neutral territory," Daniel said, taking a seat at one of the picnic tables.

"Ah." Jack took the spot opposite him, offset by about six inches. Easy enough to keep an eye on their surroundings over the other guy's shoulder, without it looking as if that's exactly what they were doing.

Squinting against the bright sun outside the edges of the shelter roof, Daniel folded his arms across his chest, then leaned his elbows onto the table.

"I need to understand the shape of this," he said. "I'm retired as of now. Is there--"

"A waiting period?" Jack read his mind, because that's what they did after eight years. "I don't care if there is. It'd be prudent not to be too flagrant about things in public, but I don't think Hayes will come after me. He needs me as backup for the chair, at least for a little while."

"So…?"

Jack shrugged, then mimicked Daniel's position, their elbows nearly touching. "I'm free now."

Daniel just stared at Jack, not seeing anything but his own reflection in the mirrored surface of his shades. "Do you know how long I..." he swallowed hard and looked away, mouth desert-dry that they were even talking about it, what they might be able to have. They were close. It might even work this time, but there had to be ground rules.

He cleared his throat. "I think we need to be as up front with each other as possible, so there're no more misunderstandings," he said firmly. "I can't go through something like that again, Jack."

Jack winced, finding the top of the splintered table fascinating. "Yeah, I was pretty stupid."

"We agree on that. But I wasn't without blame either. We were both stupid, and we very nearly lost everything." He closed his eyes, almost in physical pain.

Jack leaned, nudging Daniel's elbow with his own. "Hey. I can't guarantee not to be seven kinds of ass in the future, but--"

Jack smiled. "We'll do the best we can."

Daniel nodded. "But we need to make sure we're both looking for the same things in this, so there's no guesswork."

Jack recognized the beginnings of a briefing when he heard one, and he waved his hand in a 'be my guest' gesture. He wasn't really in any position to be making demands.

"Can you... can you take off your sunglasses?"

Jack didn't need to ask why. He complied, hanging them out of a pocket by one ear piece and giving Daniel his full attention.

"I'm in love with you," Daniel said quietly, letting himself fall into the warm, brown eyes. "I want you like I've never wanted anyone in my life ever, and if you don't think that's more than a little frightening, you've very much mistaken. You weren't wrong before; I have a suck-ass history of long-term relationships, but I like to think that I've learned from that, and I'm willing to put the effort into making this work. I want us to be a couple, equal in all things, and I want us to be completely exclusive. Forever. Whatever it takes."

Jack's heart was pounding, nervous and eager for what lay ahead, and terrified by how close he'd come to throwing it away. He was being presented with a second chance, and he had no intention of fucking up with his own petty inadequacies. "Ditto."

"Jack--"

"I'm tryin' to be expedient here. We want the same stuff. Exclusive. Forever. Right now."

He tapped the table with an insistent forefinger.

Daniel smiled and scanned the perimeter with amused eyes. "That last one's not in my power to grant you, unfortunately. I'm so wiped out, I know I wouldn't be able to do right by you; I'll probably pass out at the first sight of a pillow. And I still feel guilty about our first kiss being so..."

"So?"

"So. Y'know." Daniel shrugged uncomfortably, glancing away.

"Forceful? Commanding?"

"Angry. Violent."

He frowned, ashamed. "I can do better."

"Better?"


"Huh."

"Jack?"

"Yeah?"

"S'there...?"

"No, uh-uh." Jack cleared his throat. "I'm good."

"Uh-huh..."
"Look, I don't have any preconceived notions about any of this. Blank slate here, remember? Not like you have a lot to live up to, y'know?"

"I know," Daniel said softly. "And I also know what a gift that is, believe me. That's why I want us to take our time. Take it easy. Get to know each other gently. We have our whole lives ahead of us."

"Got no problem with any of that."

"Good" Daniel said with a relieved air. "So how about you drop me at my house, and we can get a good rest, and maybe go out to dinner tomorrow--"

He winced. "That I have a problem with."

Daniel's shoulders slumped, and his eyes drifted shut. "I'm exhausted, Jack, I can barely keep my eyes open. These last few days--"

"Six."

"Six?" Daniel blinked.

"We stepped out onto Shiny Buiding Planet six days ago."

Daniel stared in disbelief. "Is that all? It seems like a month. A lifetime."

Jack agreed. It had been the most densely-packed, most emotionally and physically draining mission he could remember in a long, damned time, and he had the dull headache to prove it.

"I don't have any expectations, just so you know," he said softly.

"Well, I do," Daniel nearly snapped. "I've fantasized about being with you for nearly a decade, and I want to do it right. I have plans," he added sternly.

Jack knew Daniel was tired, and that he was on edge. Another reason to take it slow. "Plans are good," he agreed. "I'm as fond of plans as the next guy. But you may have noticed over the last seven or eight years how often Plan A gets sidelined."

Daniel opened his mouth to interject. "Aht!" Jack silenced the objection with a finger. "That's why there's plan W. For when Plan A through Plan Whatever all bite the big one, you just keep moving."

"You'll get no arguments from me about taking our time. None. But we do it together. I'm not going to change my mind about this --about us-- but you can't be sure of that, and I won't have you sitting alone in your house wondering if I'm at my place freaking out. We can go to your place instead if you want, but we're together, wherever it is, for as long as it takes for me to earn back your trust."

Daniel was taken aback by Jack's speech, and the firm resolve he saw in his eyes, and he knew his shock showed on his face. "Thank you," he whispered.

Jack nodded curtly. "Problem solved?"

"Ah, yeah. It is. I guess I can take the guest room tonight--" he started to get up, but Jack stilled him with a hand on his forearm.

"Uh-uh, you're not hearing me. Same room. Same bed. Our bed. We'll just sleep."
This time, Daniel was ready for the uncharacteristically touching words and filed them in his heart without pause. "Hah. If only I were a good enough man to lie next to you in a real bed and not need more than that now. Your aftershave alone--"

"Daniel, I don't wear aftershave," Jack said, exasperation lifting his words louder than was probably prudent. "Unless you count that Mennen stuff..."

"Oh my god," Daniel muttered, eyes wide, "this is so bad. That's all you? All these years? I'm doomed."

"You're punchy," Jack countered with an arched brow. "And you were electrocuted a couple of hours ago; I hear that takes a lot out of a guy." He considered him fondly. "Danny, relax," he said softly. "Whole lives, remember?"

"Yes, absolutely. But I want our first time to be special, Jack. Memorable. This is the kind of thing you really can't rush through."

"I get that, and I appreciate it, believe me. And it'll be beautiful, all of it. You know I'm already so hard just sittin' here talkin' about it, that I'm not sure I'm gonna be able to walk, right?"

Daniel shook his head in wonder. Maybe he was a little punchy. "You're no less socially insensitive than I am, how can you be saying all the right things? Who are you, and what have you done with my Jack O'Neill?"

"Your Jack O'Neill wants to take you home and put you to bed. Right now. Just sleep, that's all. We won't even stop for munchies first."

Smiling, Daniel shook his head in awe at the wonders of a universe that had landed him in this place, at this moment. "Come on."

"Finally," Jack said, slipping his shades back on. "Where to?"

"Your house."

"Un-uh. Our house now."

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The sound of the deadbolt clicking home seemed loud in the otherwise silent home, but no sooner had the noise faded than Daniel had closed the space between them. "Let's go," he whispered against Jack's lips, nipping with his teeth and nudging Jack's nose with his own.

"Just sleeping, right?" Jack croaked, wanting the lips, wanting it all, not sure what to do with his hands. Daniel hummed and brushed their lips together more firmly. "Daniel?"

"Not sure I'm really up to any more talking today, but I've gotten a second wind, and I'm too wired to sleep," Daniel said softly, cupping Jack's warm neck with a large, cool hand. "Come here."

"But--"

"Compromise," Daniel breathed, slipping his other hand underneath Jack's arm to settle, fingers splayed across the small of his back, pulling him close. "Trust me," he added, leaning gently against him until Jack's butt connected with the door. He continued to lean, letting Jack gradually come to bear his full weight as he continued to nuzzle playfully at Jack's mouth.
"Always," Jack replied thickly, hands lighting finally on Daniel's hips, holding him firmly now, eyes closing as their lips and bodies met. Waiting for it.

But the kiss was nothing like the one on Dakara. Daniel's lips were soft and warm and dry, and there was zero appearance of tongue. Jack remembered the way Daniel had taken him in the temple, how his tongue had pushed in, demanding immediate submission, his hips shoving him back against the wall of the chamber, Daniel's hardness driving into his own. It had been coarse and rough, and Jack had gotten so hard, he'd nearly passed out from the sudden blood loss to his brain.

He missed sparring with Daniel's tongue, and mourned its absence with a desolate whine.

Concerned, Daniel pulled back. "Jack?"

This wasn't what they'd agreed to. They'd agreed to wait. Tonight was just for sleeping. If Daniel was gonna change the plan, he was all for that, but he was already too far gone for gentle. "Damn it, Daniel," he rasped, "quit fucking teasing me."

Daniel searched his face, eyes darkening at the demand. Jack felt the fingers on the back of his neck move up into his hair, then clench, slowly drawing the hair strands tight until his scalp tingled. With something that might have been a whimper, he let his head fall back to the wall, baring his throat as Daniel's grip continued to tighten.

Then Daniel's clever tongue was on his neck, tasting him, teeth scraping, testing for purchase against the stubble, his breath harsh beneath Jack's ear. He heard the growling litany, desperate words of need and possession and every one of them went straight to his dick.

"...fucking mine, you hear me? God damn it, Jack, I didn't want to get into this tonight. My control's shot, and I'm gonna hurt you--"

"I need this as bad as you do. Just do it--"

Panting, Daniel forced himself away, blood pounding in his ears. "No," he ground out, out of breath and half blind with need. "Not up against the door, not the first time."

He grabbed Jack by the wrist and towed him down the hall toward the bedroom. "Shoes," he ordered, leaving Jack by the dresser as he continued on to the windows to close the shades.

Jack obediently toed out of his loafers, then kicked them under the chair and stripped off his socks. When he glanced up, Daniel was already nude, sans glasses, and very, very hard.

"Oh, Christ..." Jack murmured. He swallowed, his throat painfully dry.

Even seven years of shared showers couldn't prepare him for the sight of Daniel's erect cock. It wasn't quite straight, rather it curved gently to the right, the head broad and wide, peeking out from the generous foreskin. He allowed himself to look as Daniel approached him, to admire the size of it as it moved, swaying in front of him, eager to feel the shape of it in his hand.

Daniel reached for him, unbuttoning Jack's shirt with quick, deliberate fingers, letting the material slide from his shoulders to fall unnoticed to the floor. Keeping his gaze locked firmly with Jack's wary eyes, he opened the belt by feel, and lowered the zipper. "Get out of these."

Jack did, then shucked his boxers, and found himself with an armful of warm, naked man. He wrapped his arms around him, eyes tightly shut, brain in sensory overload as he rested his chin on
his friend's shoulder, and his body registered the acres of naked skin all around him.

"Daniel," he whispered brokenly. He knew Daniel had to be feeling his pounding heartbeat against his own bare chest, and he damned his body's betrayal of his nervousness.

"I'm here," Daniel said, pulling away with a gentle stroke to Jack's cheek. "Go lie down." He steered Jack toward the bed, then closed the door and turned out the light.

"I wanted to look," Jack complained, leaning up on his elbows in the dim light.

"We can have show and tell in the morning," Daniel said as he dropped down to one knee on the end of the bed. "You'll thank me in ten minutes, when you're too wiped out to get up and turn it off." He made a deliberate effort to soften his voice. "This moving too fast for you?"

"Not fast enough. I'm gonna blow any minute here."

Daniel smiled and ran his hand up Jack's calf. "You just be sure my mouth's on you before you decide to come, okay?"

"You don't have to do that."

"Oh, yeah, I do. It's important to me," he said, knee-walking up the bed a little. He regarded Jack carefully in the sliver of late afternoon light that made it into the room around the drawn shades. He was coiled tight with nervous uncertainty, and that helped Daniel ratchet his own desire back a bit.

"Y'know, in a way, this is my first time too," Daniel said, moving closer, letting Jack look his fill, loving the feel of Jack's eyes raking over his body. "Making love with a man I care about, am deeply in love with." Eye to eye now, Daniel lowered himself onto a forearm and knee beside Jack, gradually letting him take a little of his weight but not covering him completely, careful not to overwhelm him.

"This is for keeps, you and I," he whispered, kissing him tenderly as their bodies molded together. "Never, ever letting you go..." The kiss deepened, and Jack's tongue happily wrestled with Daniel's.

There might've been a moan to commemorate that.

Jack's arms went around Daniel's broad shoulders and pulled him down more fully, an explosion of sensation different from the press of their clothed bodies by the front door, and more exquisite than the quick hug a few minutes before. This embrace had warmth and weight and intent, and was laced with the forbidden. The body in his arms was angular and heavy, the legs entwined with his own were hairy and densely muscular. Daniel's rigid dick poked him in the belly, his warm sac an intimate moving fullness across his own groin. Jack groaned into the kiss and arched up to get closer, to get more friction. There was no doubt he was in bed with a man, and more turned on than he could remember being in a long, damned time.

Daniel ended the kiss, but unerringly found the pulse point in Jack's neck and began to worry it again with his teeth.

Jack offered it up gladly, cupping Daniel's head to him as encouragement. "God, Daniel..." Daniel growled in response to the plea, prompting Jack to reach down with his free hand to grab a handful of Daniel's ass and squeeze it unmercifully. "You're killing me. Don't ever stop."

Daniel released Jack's neck and laid an erratic path across his shoulders and chest, pausing when
he came across a pointed nipple surrounded by silvering chest hair. He took it into his mouth, suckling gently, and when no feedback was forthcoming, he bit it sharply. Jack's body arched, and his needy groan went straight to Daniel's dick.

Smiling at this new-found knowledge, Daniel continued to move down Jack's body, using broad swipes of his tongue to map the way. "I'm going to suck you," he promised breathlessly. "Make you come, swallow you down." With a lick to Jack's hipbone, he paused and looked up, unsurprised to find Jack watching him back. "I've never wanted that intimacy before now."

"What about you?" Jack asked as Daniel spread his knees apart and insinuated himself in between them.

"Don't worry about me," Daniel replied, pushing his face into Jack's groin with a deeply needy groan, lifting his testicles with his nose. "I'm right where I want to be."

Jack's fists were working the sheet hard, clenching and releasing rhythmically as a distraction from the feel of Daniel's face between his legs. "Ah, for cryin' out loud, Daniel, I'm not sure how long I can hold off," he panted. It'd been a long time since he'd had real, live, interactive sex, more years than he cared to admit. He squeezed one off every once in a while in a strictly maintenance capacity, when he couldn't get to sleep, but he never tried to make it more than that; he'd just never had an interest in making a production out of it, not when he could close his eyes, change his grip and be done in about five minutes.

But kissing, well, that was something you couldn't really counterfeit. And boy, could Daniel kiss. It wasn't surprising that Daniel was kissing him there, either, he supposed, and he was damned good at that, too. He let his head fall back to the pillow and clenched his teeth against the need to cry out when Daniel sucked one of his nuts into his mouth. He tugged it a little, then let it gradually slip out with a wet pop, and only then did Jack trust himself to breathe.

"Vocal feedback is good, Jack," Daniel insisted softly, lips against the taut skin of Jack's scrotum. Jack could feel the warm breath and the vibration of each syllable. "And it cuts down on the awkward, 'what kinds of things do you like' discussion."


Daniel hummed wickedly and used long, wet licks of his broad, knowledgeable tongue on his sac. "When we're both more rested, I'm going to want to take my time down here. Explore every single inch of you in slow, mouthwatering detail..."

"Oh, god..." Jack complained.

Daniel inhaled and hummed again, rubbing his cheek along Jack's shaft. "Mmmm, you smell so good." He turned his head and noisily slurped at the slit with nimble lips as his fingers strummed Jack's balls.

"Daniel..." Jack warned, his voice strained to the limit.

"You close?"

"Y'think?"

Shifting up onto an elbow, Daniel grasped Jack at the root and slid his mouth down over the head, then applied his tongue along the bottom as he slowly pulled off, the suction causing Jack to pant in earnest. He teased the tiny bundle of nerves at the base of the head with the tip of his tongue,
and felt Jack's cock twitch from the intensity of the stimulation, even as Jack emitted a high-pitched whine that was both warning and plea. He slid Jack's cock deeply into his mouth and pulled off with covered teeth. After the third such stroke, Jack convulsed, his abs tightening as his dick swelled, a prelude to the spill.

Daniel waited, making smaller, consistent movements, his own anticipation bringing him close to the edge as well. When the first splash of semen hit his tongue, he groaned at the bitter flavor of the seed, so distinctively different from the taste of his own.

His hips began thrusting of their own accord against the rumpled sheets, bowing to his over-stimulated body's instinctive need to orgasm. He came spectacularly, moaning and writhing as Jack filled his mouth. He continued to tongue him gently as he began to soften, and stopped entirely when Jack's hand stroked his hair.

When the rushing sound in his ears began to fade, Jack breathlessly exclaimed, "Huh. And here I thought all that talk of celestial choirs was just bunk..."

With a final kiss to the head of Jack's penis, Daniel chuckled and made his way back up the bed on shaky limbs.

"My god," he said, flopping down heavily on the free pillow. "I had no idea you were such a sap. With kids and dogs, yes, but--"

"Not with macho archeologists?" Daniel turned his head and their eyes met. "You've always been my weakness, don't you know that?" Jack said softly. "I've been just barely holding on for the last eight years, trying to keep that little fact from being too obvious to the rest of the universe. I don't see any reason not to enjoy it, now that I finally can. Unless it bothers you..."

"God, no. Not at all," Daniel said seriously, turning onto his side and resting a palm on Jack's cheek. "It's just going to take some getting used to." Jack's expression still looked uncertain, though, and so Daniel smiled and delivered a gentle, loving kiss to his mouth.

On a hunch, he lifted Jack's arm and edged closer, laying his head on his shoulder and a bent leg over his thigh. He pulled the damp sheet up over them and snuggled in. "This okay?" he asked.

Heart full to overflowing, Jack's arm enfolded Daniel's warmth and hugged him close. He didn't trust himself to speak.

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Chapter 6: The Color of Happily Ever After is Vague and Changeable - It's your call.


The Color of Happily Ever After is Vague and Changeable

Chapter Summary

It's your call.

Epilog - Three months later

Daniel talked during sex. Couldn't get him to shut up. Filthy, arousing, deeply moving murmurings that ripped Jack in half and had him spewing come like a teenager. Jack was sure he'd been proposed to at least once.

But afterward, when Jack was filled with all the eloquence of the well-laid, when he was actually inclined to wax poetic --or at least sappy, and who the hell wanted to be sappy all alone?-- all Daniel wanted to do was sleep. Immediately.

Bastard.

In the weeks following their mutual retirement, Daniel sold his house and moved his personal things into Jack's larger home, donating the extra furniture to charity. They shared the housework, the yard work, and the cooking, the latter occasionally evolving into something very messy that invariably ended in equally sticky sex.

Daniel signed up with a small local company to tutor languages part time, and Jack coached Little League on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons. Daniel went along, if he didn't have a student, and always attended their games on Saturday mornings to cheer them on.

They dressed up and went out to dinner and a movie most Friday nights and took golf lessons together during the week. Daniel took up jogging. Jack played with pottery. There were never PDAs, but they made absolutely no attempt to hide the fact that they were a couple.

And at home, there was a lot of show and tell, and Jack was deliriously happy.

He learned the fine art of blowing a man, and that being able to deliver that kind of exquisite torture was incredibly empowering. Managing to keep Daniel on the edge and begging for release, his cock hard and leaking, straining for attention, while Jack tongued his sac with infinite care and patience, carefully applying gentle suction to each smooth testicle in turn, was a skill he was proud to have learned. He was eager to practice and refine his technique with just the barest excuse or provocation, much to Daniel’s continuing delight.

It wasn't all that different from going down on a woman, Jack found, obvious topographical differences aside. Through trial and error, you found out where their 'spot' was and then touched on it only occasionally while you worked maddeningly around it until the very end.

Daniel's spot was where Jack's was, along the bottom and just under the head, but since he was uncut, it was usually covered by his foreskin. When Jack skimmed it back, it exposed delicate pleats of skin, and he learned pretty fast that direct pressure there killed him. But he'd also found that tickling the left side of the pleats with broad swipes of his tongue was what got Daniel off the hardest. Jack loved knowing that about him. It was an intimate, proprietary piece of information
that made Jack smug to think about.

It'd been shaky the first couple of times, hard to get used to the feel of Daniel's seed on his tongue, much less swallowing. But Jack paid attention when Daniel went down on him, because his enthusiasm for the act was both inspiring and arousing, and he always seemed eager for the swallowing part. Curious how to get around the 'ew' factor, Jack'd waited until Daniel was just nodding off to sleep then asked him why he got off on it. The groggy answer startled him.

"It's the part of you that's only mine," Daniel'd mumbled against his chest.

Which seemed perfectly obvious on closer inspection; after that, Jack had increasingly fewer problems drinking him down.

And when he finally allowed Daniel to come, body gleaming with a fine sheen of sweat earned in the ardent pursuit of pleasure... Jack, oh god please... breath held until the sensations grew too large to contain or ignore, erupting helplessly uh-uhhh... semen expelled with a groan of blessed relief. Afterward, eyes closed, breath rasping, Daniel would kiss him, and in those precious moments before he finally checked out, Jack could taste his love and gratitude in every sloppy sigh.

It nearly brought Jack to tears, whenever he thought how close they'd come to losing it all.

But there was something still out there, something they hadn't done, and Jack was finished being patient about it. They were good together. The comfortable, happy, forever kind of good. Jack thought it was about time for Daniel to put out.

When he heard Daniel's shower turn off, he slid the sandwiches he'd just prepared into the refrigerator and made his way to their bedroom, where he found Daniel already in a pair of jeans and yanking a shirt out of a drawer, glasses safely on the dresser.

Without a word, Jack plucked the shirt out of his hands and push-walked him to the wall.

"You're holding back on me," he accused, mouth on Daniel's neck, hand on his crotch.

"Well pardon me for wanting lunch first," he chuckled, brazenly stretching his neck out for more attention. He grabbed Jack's ass and pulled him closer, encouraging the weight holding him to the wall, "and for wanting to drag it out for a few minutes."

"Not a few minutes. One hundred and two days."

"That's--" Daniel frowned, "really unfair making me do math while you're sucking on my neck." He ran his nails up into Jack's scalp, loving the growl that produced in his lover. "Are you saying we're having a... three months and some anniversary? Don't you think that's a little--"

"If you say girlie," Jack glared, "I may have to spank you."

"Excessive," Daniel countered innocently, liking the feel of Jack's body pressing tightly up against him as he went back to mouthing his throat. "I was going to say excessive. But I tell you what. I'll go out and get you some flowers after lunch, okay?"

"Uh-uh. Got something else in mind."

"Yeah?" Daniel smiled, waggling his eyebrows a little. "Wha--"

Done being patient."
Daniel didn't even pretend to misunderstand. "I thought we'd work up to that," he said levelly.
"We have been. I'm there."
"Jack, it's--"
"Complicated, yes, I know, so you've said." He counted off on the fingers that weren't gripping Daniel's package. "Lube. Stretching. More lube. Penetration. That about sum up the 'complicated'?"
"You've--"
"Been poking around the internet, yes. Dial-up sucks, by the way, but I think I get the gist."
He got right up in Daniel's face and tasted his lips a little, not exactly a full kiss, something closer to aggravating than satisfying. "You wanna guess what I was doing while you were out running this morning?"
"Surfing for gay porn?" Daniel smirked, wriggling his hips a little.
"Uh-uh. Took a shower. Cleaned myself out for you."
Daniel's smirk disappeared in the face of Jack's boast. Based solely on vague comments made in a prison on Hadante, he'd always assumed Jack wouldn't want that, that he'd insist on only topping. "Oh, fuck," he breathed.
Jack grinned. "Now you're catching on. Think you're up to gettin' complicated?"
Daniel watched him for a long moment, gauging his seriousness through narrowed eyes, wondering why Jack was being deliberately provocative; this was almost a dare. On a hunch, he spun them, shoving Jack up against the wall, hands over his head, and nailed him with a thrust of his hips.
"You don't really get the complicated part, Jack," he said dangerously. "Up to now, we've been making love. Hand jobs and blow jobs and frottage are all gentle and nonthreatening. That's not what you're asking for. When I fuck you, it will hurt. I'll be careful, so you don't tear, but it'll feel like my cock is slicing you open, no matter how slow I manage to take it. When you voluntarily take another man's dick into your body, let him fill you with his come, that's about as gay as it gets. No going back from that."
Jack didn't even try to escape the hold; that wasn't what this was about. He appreciated the out, but he didn't want it. "Never going back," Jack said, heart pounding at the reenactment of the Dakara incident. "You're what I want. All of you."
Continuing to hold Jack's body with his own, Daniel remembered Jackson's boast, Jack loves it when I go alpha on him, and he figured maybe there were similarities between the two universes after all. Still, there was reality, and then there was reality, and even in the most loving relationships, anal sex didn't involve puppies and rainbows. He couldn't risk what they had on any more assumptions.
"We've never talked--"
"And we're not gonna," Jack said firmly, shifting his hands a bit in Daniel's grip to bring him back to the matter at hand. "Got nothing to do with us. With this."
Their faces mere inches away, Daniel's gaze bored into Jack's, searching for some sign of fear or indecision, but he found none. Obviously, Jack was looking for something more dynamic than what they'd been engaging in thus far; not necessarily rough, but something a little more... powerful. He'd have to trust that Jack understood his own limitations, and offer him a way to change his mind without losing face along the way.

He dropped Jack's wrists and unfastened his baggy cargo shorts, letting them fall to the floor. He was surprised there were no cotton boxers in his way when he reached for Jack's dick, but schooled his features not to show it. He gripped Jack's package in one hand and the back of his neck with the other as he took Jack's mouth in a bruising kiss, then whispered, "You sure this is what you want?"

"I'm sure," Jack said hoarsely when Daniel released his mouth. "I want you to fuck me."

Jack was already hard in Daniel's hand. Daniel knew that would change.

Daniel stripped off Jack's shirt, leaving him naked, then steered him toward the low chair by the dresser as he stepped out of his own jeans. "Suck me," he said standing between his knees. He cradled Jack's head in his hands and thrust gently into his mouth while he allowed himself to enjoy Jack's service. Letting his head fall back and his eyes close, he ran a hand across his own bare chest, stopping to give each nipple a hard twist. He felt his dick twitch in response both times, causing Jack to gag a little with the sudden change in girth.

"That's it," he said softly. "Take it all. Get me good and hard."

Jack tongued him eagerly, bringing the partially erect organ up to full mast, holding the foreskin back to get at the frenulum, making Daniel hiss from the sharp stimulation.

"That's so good," Daniel said, and kissed him, bending down only a little so Jack would have to crane his neck up to reach. "I love tasting myself on you," he smiled.

"Backatcha," Jack said a little breathlessly.

"You ready?"

"Past ready."

"Let's get you on your knees, then," Daniel replied with a nod of his head as he stroked himself idly and watched Jack arrange himself near the foot of the bed.

Other than some pretty extensive rimming, they'd only done very limited ass-play up to this point; one liberally lubed finger rubbing Jack's hole, exploring his depths, finding his prostate. Daniel would have preferred to expand upon that a lot more before tackling the big event, slender toys and such, maybe started with Jack doing him. But as many times as Daniel had suggested either of those scenarios, Jack had always managed to change the subject.

He was a stubborn man and he knew what he wanted.

Daniel stood back to consider him. "Oh, Jack... if you could see what I see. Your legs spread, your hole still hiding from me. Your bag... my god, how luscious does that look, hanging free that way?" He stroked it with the backs of his knuckles, then turned his hand, cupping the weight of it.

"I wonder if you'd let me shave you sometime? Smooth as a baby's bottom, like mine. You'd be surprised how much more sensitive they are when they're free of hair. Still, you look good enough to eat, don't you?"
Daniel's voice, his words..."Oh, god, Danny," he breathed. He loved this part.

Daniel knelt behind him on the floor and inhaled deeply, then rubbed his stubbly face against one furred cheek. "It means a lot that you'd get yourself ready for me," he whispered. "Clean musk is the most potent aphrodisiac known to man."

He centered a hand on each globe of Jack's ass and pulled them apart gently, exposing his hole to the air, registering the tiny gasp Jack made as he blew gently across it. With the broadest part of his tongue, he licked over the opening, eliciting a deep, needy groan from Jack. "Delicious," he proclaimed, going back for more, each lap less gentle than the last.

Before long, Daniel was growling, and Jack was moaning and pushing back on Daniel's tongue, causing his heavy scrotum to swing with the motion. Daniel scooped it up so he could capture the tightened sac in his mouth, worrying it with his tongue, exerting just a slight suction as he lightly milked his rigid penis with gentle, teasing fingers.

Jack was out of his mind with lust when Daniel abruptly released him. He was so close to the edge, the loss of contact was killing, and he remained rigidly kneeling in place and breathing hard, just trying to get his control back.

He became aware of Daniel off to the side, rummaging in the nightstand drawer for the lube, and then coming to stand close. At this angle, his dick seemed enormous, and loomed threateningly, a single drop of pre cum glistening at the slit. Jack could smell his arousal, felt the dark, coiling need it stirred within him.

"Still want this inside you?"

Jack leaned, and with a deep sigh of satisfaction, took the organ into his mouth. He held it on his tongue reverently as he breathed through his nose, swallowing convulsively. His heart thrummed with joy hearing Daniel's appreciative groan.

"I don't need to fuck you, Jack," Daniel said, his voice richly resonant with unmistakable desire as he stroked Jack's shoulder with loving fingers. "I'd be very happy to use your mouth."

Jack pulled off, placing a gentle kiss on the bare head of his dick as he met his concerned gaze. "I need this," he replied softly, hoping Daniel wouldn't question it further. "Just do it. Please."

He could never tell Jack no. He tipped his face up with a finger under his chin and bent to kiss him, whispering, "I love you so much." Then he moved behind him, running a hand along his side down to his rump, maintaining contact like you would with a frightened horse. "I'll go real slow, okay?"

He applied the lube generously, to both his index finger and Jack's hole, and pushed in slowly, pressing down, down, until he was in deep. Before long, Jack was mewling and pushing back eagerly for what he knew was coming.

Finger still inside, he knelt, grasping Jack's package, bringing his nearly unyielding dick back between his legs, so he could place his mouth over it. Humming as he held the cock still on his tongue, he turned his hand, stroking in and out with his finger, knowing that the extremely exposed position would make Jack climax quickly.

"No--" Jack gasped, leaning away, trying to extricate his cock from Daniel's mouth. "Don't make me come this way. I want--"

"Let me do this first," Daniel said reasonably, finger still slowly caressing him inside. "You'll be more relaxed once you come, more open. There'll be a little less pain."
"No, please--"

"Jack. I don't wanna hurt you--"

"Daniel..."

He couldn't miss the hitch in Jack's voice. He read the reluctant pleading of a man who'd been trained to never allow himself to appear vulnerable, and yet who, Daniel was beginning to learn, seemed to occasionally need the kind of release only submission to another could bring. This wasn't something he'd had a lot of experience with up to this point, but he'd do anything it took to give Jack whatever he needed.

So with a gentle tug, Daniel let go of Jack's cock and stood. He withdrew his index finger and replaced it with the middle two, already slicked up. Keeping his left palm on Jack's hip, he moved his fingers slowly but steadily, until they were sheathed completely inside his body.

"Feel the stretch?" Daniel deliberately stayed away from Jack's gland as he rubbed his back in gentle circles. "This is two fingers. I'm a little more than twice this big."

He could feel Jack's rectum spasming around him, the sweat beginning to form in the small of his back, the tremors running through his frame. Fear. Daniel faltered, reluctant to push him past what he was really ready for.

"This has been a good first step, Jack. Maybe tomorrow we can--"

"Uh-uh, I can take more."

Daniel didn't ask him if he was sure, but withdrew part way and slid the pinky in beside the other two fingers, curling his index finger toward his palm. He reached down with the other hand and wasn't surprised to find that Jack had gone soft.

"Uh, god..." Jack panted, lowering himself onto his forearms, head hanging down, ass still prominently displayed. He knew how he must look. Only for Daniel would he even have attempted this.

"Let me stop," Daniel begged quietly, fingers stilling. Knowing that he was causing pain to someone he loved, his own erection was waning. "Penetration isn't for everybody, you know. There's no shame in changing your mind. Fucking isn't some mandatory brass ring for all homosexual relationships. You won't disappoint me if you decide this isn't what you want--"

"Don't you dare," Jack complained breathlessly, "leave me hanging this way. Not now."

Daniel leaned closer, brushing his cheek across Jack's spine. "You know I won't leave you hanging," he whispered. "I love bringing you off with my mouth. Let's just... call this done, okay? Please?"

Jack's ass muscles clamped down on his fingers, as if forbidding him to leave. "More," he demanded tightly. "Here. Don't make me beg."

Daniel's jaw clenched, and suddenly, he got it. Jack'd known this was going to be bad going into it; he needed for Daniel to take charge of it --of him-- and just get it done. To make him take it.

It wasn't even about the fucking.

"Your ass won't take me as easily as your mouth does, Jack," he warned as he slowly pulled his
fingers out.

Gently pressing down on Jack's shoulders forced his ass higher, and he nudged Jack's legs wide with a raised knee. Tucking all four slippery fingers tight, he inched just the tips of them into Jack's reddened opening.

"You'll feel the burn for real now," he stated simply. "Pretty badly at first. It'll help if you clench deliberately and then bear down. I'll move forward on the release. Ready?"

Jack clenched as instructed and then opened, feeling Daniel's hand taking up the tiny space his internal stretching had just made. This pattern was repeated half a dozen more times at more or less regular intervals until Jack thought he'd die from the fire in his ass. He bit his lip against the pain.

With a little more than the first knuckle inside, Daniel breathed, "That's it, Jack, take my hand..."

Jack's breath was unsteady, strained due to the unrelenting agony. "Yeah, so far, I'm not seeing the attraction, though," he panted. "Do ya think you could find--"

Daniel rotated his wrist, nudging Jack's prostate with the pad of his longest finger. "This?"

"Ohfuckyeah," Jack gasped, his back bowing under the stimulation. The resulting spasm allowed Daniel to sink inside another fraction of an inch. "Jesus. Do that again--"

Daniel made sure to bump it again as he removed his hand, wiping the lube off on his dick then kneeling up behind him on the bed. Grasping hold of Jack's hips, Daniel slid smoothly into his slackened hole, burying himself nearly to the hilt with little resistance. Now that they were this far along, he knew the best thing for Jack would be to hurry and get to the good part.

"Ohhh..." Daniel's eyes closed as he savored the feeling of the tight passage hugging his cock. He took a moment to rein in his own need, so he could wait until Jack was ready for him to begin thrusting.

But dear god, it was good... Beyond just the sheer physical sensation of being surrounded and held deep, the heat, Jack's pulse, this single, exquisite, crystalline moment, frozen in time, layered with the soul-deep satisfaction of the complete joining of their bodies.

Slowly, he leaned over, draping himself along the gentle curve of Jack's back, until his lips connected with his neck. "Ease down," Daniel whispered, "your knees have to be killing you." He encouraged Jack to lower his hips so that he was prone on the bed, Daniel settling himself in behind him.

With a groan as his dick made contact with the cool sheets, Jack obeyed, surprised that the cock inside him was less of an issue than Daniel's fingers had been. He was full, nearly uncomfortably so, but the burn had morphed into a warm, insistent need. Daniel's legs lay outside his own, but their hips were nicely stacked up, and Jack loved that the weight of it felt so right.

Daniel was balanced on forearms placed on either side of Jack's shoulders, covering him, boxing him in completely, enfolding him in warmth and safety and care.

Jack strained to hear the whispered words behind him, "...baby, love you so much. So fucking mine, you've always belonged to me. Promise... take care of you, give you whatever you need... always, always, always..."

Gentle words of love and devotion and trust. Filled, held, and serenaded with loving words, Jack didn't ever want to move. He clenched, dragging a needy groan from Daniel's throat.
"Let me enjoy it for a minute, will ya?" Daniel begged from behind him. "I never in a million years thought you'd want something like this."

"I'd want it a whole lot more if you'd get busy back there and do your job."

"My... job..."

"Isn't it your job to keep me sexually happy?" Jack asked, craning his neck around.

"I don't remember seeing a job description of any kind," Daniel replied archly.

"Well, seeing as how you're apparently watching my six at the moment, seems to me you're in charge of making the fireworks happen," Jack announced. He folded his arms beneath his head like a pillow and closed his eyes with a sigh. "So whenever you're ready."

Daniel blinked. Bitching at him one moment and ordering him around the next. It was like being in the field again. "And what will you be doing?"

"Presumably, lying right here and becoming increasingly happy."

Daniel struggled not to smile. "I see."

"C'mon, do your stuff." Jack clenched around him again.

"Don't DO that!" Daniel hissed. "Trying to stay in control here."


With an exasperated grunt, Daniel began to undulate against him, his cock gliding more than thrusting into the slippery channel, the angle causing the ridge of his dick to slide past Jack's prostate on each withdrawal stroke, making Jack whimper continuously. This position was the gentlest one he knew, because the angle left room for only the most shallow penetration, and made up for it with a greater amount of skin contact.

"Ohhh god, you feel so good..." Daniel murmured into the back of Jack's neck. He mouthed the area, nipping the salty skin with gentle teeth.

"Fuck!" Jack gasped. "Right there-- do that again!"

"That?" Daniel asked coyly. He circled his hips and came at it from a different angle. "Or that?"

"Both!" Jack groaned. "Oh god, don't stop!" The feelings were amazing, full and needy and getting more insistent. His dick was bent back between his legs, and he could feel Daniel's sac rubbing against his with every achingly slow thrust. He was just a couple of tugs short of coming; he wanted to, needed to, was desperate to, but couldn't get his hand underneath him to work his own dick.

When Jack started to struggle, Daniel tensed, not moving. "Hurt?"

"NO!," Jack stated emphatically trying to arch up under the heavy man. "God, no, and if you stop, I will kill you. I just need... I can't reach--"

Suddenly getting that Jack needed more then prostate stimulation in order to come, Daniel cooed, "Hey, shhh, not a problem." He withdrew all the way and backed off a little so that Jack could shift around. "Now you're open, we can do it a different way."
"Didn't mind the other way," he grumbled, rolling over onto his back. "I just went down wrong and couldn't reach anything." Jack lifted his legs, holding them back as far as he could. Offering. Ordering, maybe. "Well? What're ya waitin' for?"

Daniel's mouth hung open, the image of Jack O'Neill on his back with his legs in the air, pulled back to expose his reddened hole, slack and slippery with lube, forever seared into his brain. He ground his teeth and gave his balls a sharp tug, wincing as he did so. "Could you possibly look any more wanton?" he growled.

"Well, yes. But I'd probably need a feather boa to do it right--"

The mental image made Daniel chuckle, which made getting lined up to get back into Jack's hole a bit of a challenge. Up on his knees and holding Jack's legs, he shuffled closer, still grinning with amusement.

"You think you could focus, please?" Jack sniped, but there was no heat in it.

"Sure, Jack," Daniel said pleasantly, thrusting into his ass with a snap of his hips. "This focused enough for you?"

The move rocked Jack back onto his shoulders, making him howl. "Ye-ah, that!" He started panting, eyes firmly closed.

Daniel held Jack's calves, spreading him open as he delivered another thrust of similar power and then another, and that's when Jack started chanting, "Yes, yes, yes, yes..." in time with each one.

He scooped his balls up out of the way with one hand, so Daniel could get in deeper, and grabbed his dick with the other. He was nearly bent double, but he couldn't manage to care. Daniel was finally fucking him, and it was way better than any of the porn clips he'd found on the internet.

Using Jack's legs as leverage, Daniel continued to forcefully drive into him. Lips pressed into a firm line of concentration, he asked, "This what you wanted?"

"God, yeah. This position has definite advantages," Jack observed. This was what he'd been after, all right. Not the penetration itself. He'd had no idea he'd actually enjoy it, and the truth of the matter was, it'd hurt like crap at first, and he'd been pretty terrified at several crucial points.

But this was the payoff, Daniel, being this way with him. Strong, determined, insistent. Undeniably male.

And Jack could admit it in the privacy of his own thoughts-- *experienced*. The colorful history that had made Jack feel so inadequate in comparison was erotic to contemplate, now that he knew Daniel was his.

As Daniel'd talked him through the painstaking process of opening him up, Jack had imagined Daniel's vast array of partners, each adding to the wealth of knowledge he brought to their bed, skills he was using for Jack's benefit now, and to take his own pleasure in Jack's body. Daniel knew what he was doing, because he'd fucked a lot of men; the great part about that was that Jack knew he'd be the last man Daniel ever touched this way.

Jack took a long, firm pull on his cock, now fully hard again and leaking. "Ohhh... yeah, that's got it. Think you can find it, turned around like this?"

"Unless you moved it in the last thirty seconds."
"I thought you were the straight man here?"

"As it happens, not so straight," Daniel observed, thrusting home, tagging his gland over and over. "How's that?"


Daniel resumed thrusting, angling for Jack's prostate; he didn't think either one of them were very far off. "You're so beautiful spread open for me this way," Daniel whispered. "So deep inside you now..."

"Ohhh, fuuuuuck..." Jack groaned at his words, eyes closed as Daniel continued to stroke into his body. He clenched, loving the feel of Daniel's big dick in his ass, then smiled at the pained sound which emanated from his lover as a result. Daniel had known how good this would be, and he'd held off, not wanting to ask Jack for something he might be reluctant to give. He'd have to give him hell for that later, when it was Jack's turn to top.

The sounds Jack was making were deeply resonant and dripped with sex. Daniel was hard-pressed to stay focused on his task. He arched into another thrust, careful not to push in too deep. "You feel so fucking good all around my cock," he panted. "I'm not sure how long I can--"

"Don't hold back," Jack said. "I'm ready now. Waitin' on you."

"You first," Daniel urged, thrusting up high inside now. "I wanna feel you come..."

His gaze nailed to Daniel's, Jack tightened his grip and let go. His shoulders came up off the bed, his mouth open, breath coming in low, growling pants as his climax began.

Daniel continued to move as Jack's orgasm claimed him, the rippling in Jack's channel threatening to send him over the edge as well. He ground his teeth, waiting for Jack to finish, until the last splash of jizz hit his chest.

When he'd finally sunk back into the bed, panting, arms weak and flung out to the side, Daniel took a moment to feel smug for reducing the bad-ass Colonel to the equivalent of a blissed-out rag doll, then took more measured strokes so that he could catch his breath and enjoy a slow build up for his own climax.

"I've wanted you this way since the first moment I ever saw you," he whispered, thrusting slowly. "So many dreams about you, about us. Sometimes I can't believe we're finally..." his voice broke, eyes stinging with wonder and gratitude. He winced, the pleasure so intense and encompassing as to be nearly painful. He stroked Jack's calf, bringing it up to rest against his chest and turning his face into the warmth, rubbing the warm, hairy skin against his cheek. "I love you so much..."

He felt Jack's warm palm settle heavily on his hip, a gentle squeeze of agreement.

He was grateful Jack had pressed the issue, so that they'd both had the opportunity to be together this way, but that didn't necessarily mean it would ever happen again. He wanted to stop right here, to freeze this moment in time and make it last forever, just in case... But he could feel his orgasm sweeping up behind him, and now that Jack had come, there was no way he could hold off any longer. He bit his lip, and let it overtake him.

He wanted to be careful with Jack, but it had been so long, and his body was taut with arousal and wired with lust and all he knew was the snug warmth that welcomed him, and the staggering need to bury himself as deeply as possible inside his lover's body. A connection unlike any other,
leaving part of himself inside another human being. He'd only ever done that with Sha're.

Satiated, Jack watched as Daniel panted through clenched teeth, each breath bottoming out into a low growl, his abs clenched with the controlled effort of each thrust. But he was so far away in this position; the only parts of them touching were Daniel's hands gripping his calves and the place where they joined. He ran his hands along both of Daniel's thighs, just to increase the skin contact, and found him slick with sweat from the exertion of the fucking.

Daniel's face betrayed the onset of his orgasm-- eyes closed, head falling back as he succumbed to the power of it, his hips jerking now with sharp little thrusts powered from the small of his back as he milked it for all it was worth.

After the surge crested, he released Jack's legs and fell forward onto his arms, filling him up, his penis lurching forcefully as it slid through the passage now slippery with his semen. He took another couple of lazy thrusts just for the novel experience of doing it raw. The pleasure was so exquisite, it took his breath away. He rode out the aftershocks, head hanging down, breathing irregular, heart pounding, the blood rushing into his ears, his upper lip going numb.

"You gonna live?" Jack murmured quietly, reaching out to cup his cheek.

"Oh, god yeah. That was..." Words utterly failed him. *Christ.* There was so much they needed to talk about, so much he wanted to understand in order to give Jack what he apparently needed. But he just didn't have the brain power at the moment to even start a discussion like that.

He bent closer, taking Jack's mouth in a tender kiss instead. "You okay?" he whispered. "Did I hurt you?"

Jack smiled and let his eyes fall closed. The orgasm had been just as good as any other way they'd learned to love one another. But the words and the acts which had led up to this one were filling his head and his heart with stuff that had never been there before, stuff he didn't really understand, but that had finally started to soothe the dark need in his belly. He hadn't known that would happen when he'd started this, but something had notched into place today that he hadn't even been consciously aware had been missing.

He just hoped like hell Daniel wasn't going to make him talk about it.


"That's my line." Daniel reached for a small towel from the nightstand and used it to wipe off Jack's chest, then slid it around the back of him to catch the drips as he pulled slowly out.

"I thought for sure I was going to pass out," Daniel said, chuckling weakly. "I don't ever remember coming that hard in my life--" He abruptly stopped talking, when Jack let out a low rumbling snore and rolled over onto his side.

"Jack?" he whispered. "Are you--" he leaned over to look, and sure enough, Jack was sound asleep. "Well, damn."

He dragged the towel across his own groin, then tossed it in the direction of the hamper. Settling in behind Jack, he pulled the covers over them and snaked his arm across Jack's middle. A little nap sounded like just the thing, actually. Talking could wait.

*****

There'd been an unspoken agreement between the three of them, that after seven years spent living
in each other's pockets, this new phase of their lives would be taken a day at a time. A kind of social moratorium while they sorted out relationships, and settled into something that resembled real life. But when Sam called a few days after their three-month unofficial anniversary and asked if she could come over, Jack insisted they grill to celebrate.

He and Daniel worked side by side in the kitchen, getting the accompaniments ready, while the steak marinated and the grill warmed up.

"Bet she's gone back to work at the mountain already," Jack said as he checked on the macaroni and cheese bubbling in the oven.

"No way," Daniel replied. "She was really looking forward to seeing if she and Pete could make a go of it." He paused, considering the scallions he was slicing. "Unless..."

"Unless?"

"Well, unless they asked her to come back for a really quick project, something that wouldn't tie her down for too long." Dumping the onions into a large bowl of mixed greens, he shoved it into the refrigerator next to the pitcher of dressing. "Glitch with a piece of equipment or something."

"Nah, she missed the excitement," Jack insisted. He took a slurp of his beer. "The danger."

"Un-uh, that's more your shtick." Daniel folded his arms across his chest. "But yeah, her gizmos, maybe."

"Gizmos then. Take the bet?" Jack challenged with a ridiculous wiggle of his eyebrows.

"Not much of a bet, if I win either way, is it?" Daniel smirked, pressing him firmly back into the counter for a deeply sensual kiss, snaking one hand down inside the front of Jack's jeans.

Gasping at Daniel's cold fingers, Jack complained, "Christ, Daniel, way to cause unnatural shrinkage, there."

But when the cool, insistent digits found their way behind Jack's balls, he started to get with the program and kneaded Daniel's butt as he whispered into the kiss, "If you don't let me put that steak on, we'll have to call out for pizza."

"Hmmm..." Daniel considered, nibbling at the corner of Jack's mouth. "Eating steak or eating Jack..."

"And then you get to explain to Carter why the scrumptious London Broil I promised her is still raw," Jack added smugly.

Reluctantly, Daniel released him, shooing him out to the grill with a swat on the rear. "You promised to call her Sam, remember?" he called after him.

"Yeah, that'll happen."

When the doorbell rang a few minutes later, they were both surprised to find not only Sam, but George Hammond, dressed in civvies and beaming at them, merriment and warmth twinkling in his eyes.

"I asked Major Carter not to tell you. I wanted it to be a surprise."

"It worked, sir." Jack smiled, reaching to shake his hand. "We're flabbergasted. Take your coats?"
"Thank you, Jack."

"You look great!" Daniel wrapped Sam up in a hug, simultaneously reaching around her to shake the General's hand.

"Thanks, so do you. Good to see you haven't killed each other," she added into his ear, pitched just loud enough for Daniel's hearing, making him cough to cover his snort of amusement.

Pleasantries were exchanged and libations poured. No one asked about Pete.

"We're about twenty minutes away from the juiciest London Broil you'll get on this side of the Rockies," Jack announced, perching on the arm of the couch next to Daniel.

Smirking at Sam, he gleefully rubbed his hands together. "Plenty of time for you to drop the bomb."

"Bomb, sir?" she asked innocently.

"Hey!" Jack said with contrived indignation. "I've been practicing not calling you Carter, ever since yesterday. You need to drop the sir."


Chuckling, George replied, "It's not much of a bomb, really, as bombs go..."

Jack turned to Daniel and announced smugly, "I think this means I win."

"Will you let the man finish?" Daniel admonished.

"I'm just sayin'."

"Go ahead, sir," Daniel insisted.

Hammond sighed. "I'm just asking a couple of favors of some old friends, Jack."

Jack opened his mouth to reply, but Daniel elbowed him in the side. "Wait, will you?"

Jack winced, far more dramatically than was strictly warranted. "A favor, sir?" he gasped in a strained voice.

Hammond smiled at their hijinks. "Before I start, I'll tell you what I told Major Carter yesterday. Although both of your security clearances have lapsed, the President has waived the requirement, due to the nature of the discussion we're about to have."

"Oh, that doesn't make me nervous at all, sir," Jack stated with a tiny grimace that accompanied the cold chill now filling his gut. Truth was, he was plenty apprehensive, and comedy was a poorer shield than it had ever been.

"I'm real glad, Jack, because they think they've found Atlantis."

"They?"

"Doctors Weir and Douglas."
Daniel smiled. "They found the rest of the gate address?" he guessed.

"Eight chevrons," Sam confirmed. "Probably somewhere in Pegasus, as near as I can figure it. It's a dwarf galaxy in the local group. I'll know more tomorrow, when I can take a look at the most recent charts."

Daniel shook his head in wonderment. "Wow. That's..."

Jack didn't miss the fact that Daniel was now sitting on the edge of the couch. Jack's hackles were up, big time, but his few months of retirement hadn't dulled his ability to mask his discomfort. "And the favors, sir?" he asked lightly.

"We've asked Major Carter to come back to help us pinpoint the location. And I personally would feel a whole lot better if you, Doctor Jackson, would double-check the accuracy of their translations."

Hammond turned to Jack. "And we'd like to ask you to confirm Major Shepherd's estimation of the Ancient Defense Platform with respect to ordnance and the potency of the ZPM. There have been some concerns that the US is unintentionally in grave violation of the Antarctica Treaty because of the ADP."

Jack's gut response was to tell him flat-out no. There was no way this was going to end well, and he wanted no part of it. He and Daniel were happy, completely, fucking deliriously so, and how dare these two come in here and put a torch to his life this way, after everything? After all the years it'd taken him and Daniel to get onto the same page and into the same bed. "And...?" Jack prompted sharply, eyes narrowing.

"There is no 'and!'," Hammond promised. "We need an honest evaluation of the efficacy of this mission, considering the extraordinary cost, and I've got too many years behind me, of SG-1 watching our backs, to make do with the untried second string. Not for something this important."

Jack just stared at Hammond, while the room went silent, and a thousand permutations of just how badly this could go wrong ran through his mind. Happily-ever-after didn't figure into any of them, and he could feel his control slipping. He tried hard to keep his temper from flaring, but his teeth were grinding together, and he couldn't seem to relax his jaw. "Sir, I--"

"Um, Jack?" Daniel interrupted softly. "Shouldn't you check the--"

Attention briefly broken, Jack took a deep breath, grateful for the reprieve. "Ah, yeah. Excuse me," he said, making his escape to the deck.

After the door closed behind him, Hammond stood. "Give us a few minutes."

To Daniel, the softly delivered request felt just like the order it probably was.

*****

"Something stinks, sir," Jack snapped without bothering to turn around to confirm the identity of the person joining him on the deck, "and for once, it isn't my cooking."

Hammond took up a spot behind Jack and to his left, his back to the glass door he'd just come through. He clasped his hands behind him and tried to keep his manner friendly and nonthreatening.
"Hank Landry's in charge of the SGC, now that Weir's been pulled for the Ancient outpost. I didn't pick him; he wouldn't have been my choice. He's rigid. Old school. A little... hard line, if you ask me. Sort of like I was, eight years ago. He hasn't been there long enough to understand that what we do brings people closer than any other type of service. It's just the nature of the beast."

He pursed his lips and relaxed them, feeling the tension gathering in his shoulders anyway. "His memo landed on my desk at Homeworld yesterday afternoon, demanding you be recalled to active duty for this.

"Just between you and me, I suspect he has another agenda, in addition to his rather public feelings concerning DA/DT. I convinced the President to table the request, at least until I could speak with you."

He stepped closer, so they were side by side in the gathering dusk, the smoky smell of grilling meat wafting in the gentle breeze. "It isn't as bad as it sounds, Jack. With the Asgard beaming tech operational, it's an afternoon, two at the outside. Landry's lobbying hard, but it doesn't have to go that way. That's why I'm here, so it doesn't come to that."

Hands in his pockets balled into tight fists of fragile control, Jack considered Hammond's words. He should've resigned his damned commission after he'd retired; commissary and BX privileges weren't worth this.

As if he were standing watch offworld, his eyes scanned the hedge along the edge of their property and then the slender line of bright blue underneath the rapidly descending evening. He'd never missed the feeling of a weapon in his arms more keenly. He and Daniel were under attack, plain and simple. Made no difference he was standing in their back yard, and the assault was coming from Washington.

"Before Dakara," Jack said quietly, "when I was trying to tell you about the personnel discrepancies in the other universe, and you stopped me... you knew, didn't you, sir?"

"About you and Doctor Jackson? I had a hunch, Jack, that's all."

"Because...?"

"Nothing overt," he hurried to assure him. "But I thought I could see in the two of you..." He chuckled a little. "Don't take this the wrong way, Jack, but you reminded me of my wife and me, when we were first married. Even when you vehemently disagreed with one another about something, you retained a deep connection, shared sensibilities, if you will. Over these last few years, I can't tell you how much I came to rely on the way your differing viewpoints managed to give me a well-rounded picture of any situation.

"You've always been two halves of the same whole, Jack, and that was especially clear when Doctor Jackson came back from being ascended. Even when he wasn't sure who he was, it was clear he knew you, knew he belonged with you."

"That's--" Disturbing. Jack didn't know what to say to that. I'm sorry? Thanks for noticing? We'll name our first kid after you? He wondered if it had been that obvious to anyone else.

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly, feeling the anguish, still there underneath the thin veneer of calm. "Nothing ever happened, sir," he stated firmly to the grill's cover, tracing the edge of the wooden handle with one finger. "Hell, we never even acknowledged it to each other, before Mirror-World. And then afterward... I got stupid. Almost lost him. Twice. It's important to me that you know--" He paused then and swallowed hard. "I never touched him that way, before the ink
was dry on the paperwork. You have my word."

"I never doubted it, Jack," George said quietly.

Jack turned toward him now and met his concerned gaze full-on, his heart pounding painfully in
his chest, jaw tight and unyielding. "But you should also know that's not the case now. We've been
together for three months, and I've touched him plenty. I won't give him up."

They'd recall him over his dead body. He knew people who'd help them disappear; they could be
out of Colorado before first light, multiple layers of camouflage between this identity and the next.
He'd had a dozen escape routes mapped out by the time Hammond followed him outside. He'd
lose some time explaining to Daniel about the necessity of running--the man was nothing, if not a
question machine-- but he was certain he'd come around, once he understood that if the Air Force
got Jack again, the two of them were finished.

Hammond nodded his understanding. "I know, Jack. I'm not asking you to give him up."

"Aren't you?" It came out a bit more brusquely than was probably polite.

"No," he said gently. "Just a favor, that's all it is. Unless of course, you want more..."

*****

"I feel like I should apologize for Jack," Daniel said quietly to Sam.

It was still light enough that he could see the rigid, unyielding line of Jack's back, as he seemed to
stand guard over the grill. It bespoke of barely a concealed rage that Daniel didn't quite understand.
Hammond's request had sounded like little enough; he couldn't imagine what Jack could be reading
into it.

"I don't know what he's so strung out about."

"I imagine it was a shock for him, finding the General on his doorstep," Sam said. "But he was
pretty firm, when he came to see me yesterday, that he didn't want to give you guys a heads up."

Daniel nodded, still watching the two men out on the deck. "Jack would've found an excuse to say
no to the meeting," he said with certainty.

"And then we wouldn't be here, getting ready to enjoy the juiciest London Broil this side of the
Rockies."

Grinning, she patted him on the arm, partly as reassurance, and partly just to get his attention.
"Have you been losing your mind with all the peace and quiet of retirement?"

Peeling his eyes away from the scene in their back yard, he returned the smile, realizing just how
much he'd missed working with her every day.

"Well, I've learned I'm terrible at golf," he offered wryly. He grabbed the wine bottle and refilled
her glass and then his own. "And that Jack likes to think he's helping me with that. And you're a
fine one to talk, anyway."

He cocked his head to the side. "So how about I put my foot in my mouth, while we're alone for
the moment, and ask about Pete?"

She sighed and flashed him what might have been a grimace. "Pete's fine. We're just... taking it
easy. He was really gung-ho about the leave of absence thing. Started calling realtors and making plans and--"

"And he asked you to marry him, didn't he."

She frowned. "How'd you know that?"

He took another sip of his wine and shrugged. "Explains why you're so spooked."

"Yeah," she said softly, grateful that Daniel understood. "I guess I'm just really not ready to settle down yet, you know? It's like screaming along for seven years at one seventy-five, and then suddenly slamming on the brakes. Apparently I needed some deceleration time, between fighting the bad guys and the white picket fence, and I was just feeling a little--"

"Hemmed in?"

"Exactly. So we're still friends, still seeing each other, but we're both dating other people too. We'll see where it takes us. Where we are in a year or so."

"That's good," he said honestly. "Don't close any doors, and let yourself have some fun and sow some wild oats, before you settle down."

"That's probably all it is," she agreed. She found she was a little reluctant to tell him she was also dating a woman, in case Chey turned out to be some kind of rebound phase Sam was going through, after having met her counterpart in the other reality. They were still pretty new.

"Oh, by the way, Teal'c sent word through Siler that Bra'tac's firmly seated as head of the council, and that outlying groups of Jaffa are sending representatives to Dakara every day. He estimates they're almost a hundred thousand strong already. I'm going to see if I can contact him for some specifics, once I get to the mountain tomorrow."

"That's great. Say hi for Jack and me. And ask him if he's been able to look--"

The sliding door opened as Jack came in bearing a large platter of meat, followed by General Hammond.

"Dinner is served!" Jack said expansively as he swept into the house and up the steps to the dining room.

Surprised, Daniel looked at Sam as if to say, check out that turnaround. Neither man was carrying an air of anger, so Daniel was hopeful that Hammond had been able to reassure Jack in some way that would allow their first official dinner party to proceed amicably.

As they joined the others, Daniel remembered his interrupted train of thought. "Oh, hey, Sam, did Teal'c say anything about finding drones in the underground bunkers?" He put the macaroni and cheese on the table, handed her a basket of rolls and the pitcher of dressing, and then went to retrieve the bowl of salad from the refrigerator.

Sam trailed along behind him. "Siler didn't mention it, but I'll ask."

"Yeah, good. Y'know, since the place was full of Ancient tech, there might even be a loose--"

"ZPM!" she said excitedly. "Of course! And I can probably rig something for Prometheus to use, to scan for the energy signature from orbit!"
"See," Jack beamed at Hammond as he started to slice the hunk of meat into thin, juicy slabs, "what two great minds in the same room can think of together?"

*****

"So let me get this straight," Jack said over the remains of their dinner, "the chair's out of juice?"

"Not at the moment, no," Sam replied, fingering the stem of her wine glass. "It's still got whatever you said it had after Anubis. But as you know, gating to another galaxy takes a tremendous amount of power. According to all the simulations McKay's run, just opening the wormhole to Pegasus will completely deplete our ZPM."

"And it's a one-way trip? You're sure?"

"Unless there happens to be a fully charged ZPM at the other end, yes," George answered. "But you can bet your ass we're checking Dakara first, thanks to the two of you."

"And if there's not another one somewhere, Earth's left defenseless," Jack stated flatly, looking at the faces around the table in disbelief. "And this is a good idea-- why?"

"Because Earth is safer now than it's ever been," Daniel offered, pushing his plate away. "Thanks mostly to the Mirror Reality, we're Replicator-free, there are no Goa'uld left to speak of, we're armed with two enormous battleships, complete with spiffy Asgard toys, not to mention the little JackShip. We're finally in a position to be able to explore, for knowledge, for cultural alliances-- Jack, these are the Ancients! This isn't just some other civilization we're talking about. These are the gate builders. The potential wealth of knowledge and technology we might encounter there outweighs anything we've come across since we stepped through the stargate."

George and Sam were silent as the two of them debated, but Jack responded incredulously, "You can't honestly expect that after all this time, there's any hope of actually meeting them?"

"Who knows? But isn't just the possibility reason enough to go?" Daniel implored. "The benefit to humanity is far greater than any potential risk there might be."

"Says the man who used to die for a living," Jack said grimly.

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Guests gone, table cleared, Daniel poked his head into the kitchen. "I'm gonna hit the shower. You need a hand with anything?"

"Almost done," Jack replied as he slotted another plate in the rack. "Save me some hot water."

He wiped down the counters and turned on the dishwasher, then set about locking up and shutting off the lights.

He headed directly for the bathroom, where he stripped off his clothes and left them in a heap on top of Daniel's own discarded pile. He stuck a gob of Crest on his toothbrush and started taking out the frustration of the evening on his enamel.

"Not sure we can claim our first official dinner party as a resounding success," Daniel said from behind the shower curtain.

Jack shrugged as he pulled the brush out of his mouth to spit. "The steak was good. Mac and cheese was a little dry."
"I'm not talking about the food," Daniel said, "and you know it. Sam and the General practically ran out of here, the minute dinner was over."

Yeah, Daniel was peeved; his voice was several decibels louder than it needed to be to be heard over the sound of the running water.

"Told ya we should've had pie for dessert, 'stead of cake," Jack said petulantly once he'd rinsed. Daniel stepped out of the shower to grab a towel, leaving the water running. "I'm not talking about that either--"

He glared at Jack as he brushed past him. "What is wrong with you?"

"You made a pretty good case for them," Jack said with an offhand ease he didn't feel as he stepped into the shower and drew the curtain. "For going, I mean. Not sure it really matters what state the chair's in."

"They need to go, Jack. This is important."

Jack began to wash with trembling hands, his belly full of nervous dread. "If anybody goes, it should be you." It was true, but that didn't mean it didn't make him sick to his stomach to have to say it.

"Yeah, like that'll happen," Daniel muttered.

He hung up his towel and scooped up both sets of dirty clothes from the floor, stuffing them into the hamper.

"Wait--" he spun around, staring at the shower curtain as if he could see the man behind it. "Is that what all this is about? Jack, I'm not going anywhere. I made a commitment to you, and I take that very seriously."

Jack took a moment to selfishly let the statement settle into his heart before he replied. "That was before another galaxy opened up, Daniel," he said reasonably, rinsing the shampoo from his hair. "No way you could've known that would happen."

Daniel pulled the shower curtain open with an angry snap. "It doesn't matter. You're my life now. I can't leave you. And I won't."

Jack wiped the water out of his eyes and scowled at the degree of insulted pique he saw in Daniel's bare gaze, giving back some of his own. He had no desire to be Daniel's ball and chain, ever, and if that was the case, he'd cut the chain himself --right here, right now. "And exactly how long will it take, before you start to resent me for keeping you from your destiny?"

"How long will it take before you finally believe that you're the most important thing to me? My destiny," he made little air quotes between them, "is right here, with you. Period. This is not a conversation that even needs to happen. I'll help Hammond with the translation, because he's my friend, and he asked for my help. If this is real, they need to go, and I support that wholeheartedly, but I have absolutely no desire to trade you for Atlantis. None. Are we clear on this?"

Relief started to filter into his soul as Jack turned off the shower and slicked the water from his hair. "Clear."

"Good." Daniel stalked into the bedroom and yanked the covers back, dropping down heavily on top of them.
Jack dried off and then gave them a little breathing room, taking the time to straighten the bathroom and hanging the bathmat over the curtain rod so it could dry, before finally turning off the fan and the light.

He paused in the doorway for a few moments, waiting for some of his vision to come back before he started to move through the room. "Daniel?"

"Jack?" he sighed tiredly.

"Keep talking so I can find you."

"So much drama with you. You want a light?"

"Depends." Jack reached out with one searching hand. "This your foot?"

"No, Jack, I'm just real happy to see you."

Jack crawled up the bed from the bottom, tongue darting out to lick shower-warmed skin as he went. He could see a little now, just the outline of Daniel's form as he lay stretched out with his arms over his head, trying to vent the heat leftover from the shower. As Jack's tongue found his instep, the back of a knee, a rib, a nipple, Daniel's legs gradually fell open in invitation.

When Jack got up close, he suckled an earlobe, and received a contented sigh in return.

"What if... it wasn't... a trade?" Jack whispered as he nibbled. "What if... we could both go?"

Daniel's arms came around Jack's shoulders as he stretched his neck out as enticement. "Mmm..." he hummed, palming the back of Jack's head, guiding his attentions just so. "In the first place, no one's asked me to actually go anywhere. You either, for that matter."

"That never used to stop you," he murmured against Daniel's collarbone, settling in between his legs as though he belonged there. Which he did.

"Back in the old days, you'd bully your way in, anywhere you thought you were needed. Make a case for being allowed to go. You even nagged your way onto my team. Three times, in fact."

"Three--?"

Jack balanced on one elbow, held up a hand, and counted off on his fingers. "Abydos the first time, Chulak the first time, and Kelowna the second time."

Point made, he went back to his oral explorations.

Daniel considered that explanation as Jack tongued his skin, decided he was right, and then dismissed the entire argument. "Besides, that was before. Before you, before us. It's all different now."

Jack pulled back to frown at him. "How so?"

Stubbornly, Daniel firmly guided him back down where he belonged. "Because I'm in love with you, that's how so," he whispered against Jack's lips. "So shut up and kiss me."

Jack loved it when Daniel got pushy. He surrendered his mouth, so Daniel could plunder it thoroughly. When he finally broke away to breathe, Jack panted, "In the interest of, ah, full disclosure, Weir asked."

"Weir asked?" Daniel repeated blandly, as if he couldn't make sense of it. "For me?"
"Yep."

"But..."

"She wants you," Jack said, lifting up his hips and resettling his dick more comfortably right next to Daniel's. "Your translating abilities, your tendency to think outside the box, your astoundingly effective nagging-ness, whatever. Probably your body, too, but she's shit outta luck there, 'cause that's mine. The point is, she'll put up with me tagging along," Jack lightly kissed one side of Daniel's mouth, and then the other, "in order to get you."

"That's crazy. Wait, nagging-ness? Is that even a word?"

"You tell me; you're the linguist. Anyway, to Weir, I'm apparently nothing but a big, dumb Ancient gene."

"Well, yes, but you're my big dumb Ancient gene," Daniel muttered absently, patting Jack affectionately on the ass. When Jack didn't have an immediate witty comeback, the patting stalled. "Wait. You're serious?"

"As a heart attack. That's why Hammond was here." Jack cleared his throat in embarrassment. "He'd have, ah, asked you himself, but I'd just finished making an ass of myself, and I don't think he wanted to risk an encore." He planted another light kiss on his lover's mouth and then drew back to wait. "It's up to you."

Jack still couldn't see a whole lot, but he could tell Daniel was blinking. "Pegasus is up to me? You're giving me a galaxy?"

Jack snorted. "The whole fuckin' stargate was your idea, Daniel. I'm not giving you anything you didn't work your butt off for."

"What about our house? Our golf lessons? Our Little League kids?"

Jack would never get tired of hearing Daniel say anything preceded by the word 'our'. "Well, hypothetically, I've got a buddy who'll rent the house out for us, oversee it. It'll be here when we get back. The kids'll get a new coach; kids are resilient that way. And we both know you just humor me with the golf thing."

Daniel sputtered indignantly. "I do not--"

"Aht!" Jack said, punctuating it with a gentle bite to Daniel's neck. "Don't lie."

After a beat, Daniel changed the subject completely. "It could be dangerous."

"Or the Ancients could be running the Pegasus arm of Club Med." Jack's voice took on a dreamy tone. "Mmmm, just think of it-- space golf, alien marlin fishing, massages on the beach, and one of those cute little paper umbrellas in every frosty mug of beer."

"Or they might've all died off," Daniel said earnestly. "Plague, remember? There might be nobody left to put the umbrella in your beer."

Jack shrugged. "We'll take our own then."

"Might be no beer at all," Daniel warned darkly.

"We'll still have the umbrellas," Jack replied reasonably. "We'll learn how to make our own brew. I
can be the Atlantis bartender-- hypothetically, of course."

"Of course," Daniel muttered, but then grew serious, pulling Jack more snugly against him, his foot curling around Jack's calf, protectively, possessively, aware that Jack's dick was firming up in response. Daniel ran his hands from Jack's shoulders down his sides, until they grabbed onto his ass and squeezed.

"No," Daniel said decisively. "We've waited so long to be together openly. I don't want to lose that. I don't want to have to start sneaking around and sleeping alone. This-- what we have-- is too important to me to risk losing any of it to stupid military regs. I won't let anyone take you away from me."

Jack felt his heart clutch in some kind of slippery mixture of fealty and gratitude. He thrilled to the touch of Daniel's hands, the feel of his bare skin against his, warm and yielding, but his words shot straight to Jack's soul. How could he have doubted Daniel's feelings for him? Obviously, he was an idiot.

Jack cleared the emotion from his throat. "No sneaking around," he promised. "I made it very clear to Hammond that-- still talkin' hypothetically, here-- I wouldn't go in as military. I'd be the Senior ATA adviser. Whatever the fuck that is." He added offhandedly, "Probably doesn't pay as well as the Director of Linguistics position he has in mind for you. Barely pocket money, really."

Daniel stroked Jack's cheek with his thumb, and Jack could feel him going rigid beneath him. "Guess I'd have to help with that, wouldn't I," he whispered thickly. "Hypothetically speaking."

Jack had no words for why the idea appealed to him so viscerally. He suspected he shouldn't examine it too closely. Grinning, he nudged Daniel's nose with his own and said, "I'd make it very worth your while."

But Daniel was still serious, still wary of the enormity of the 'hypothetical' discussion they were having. "Truth is, we've got no idea at all what we'd be facing. What kinds of danger or hardship we might encounter there."

Jack frowned down at Daniel with fond exasperation and then rolled them, so Daniel was on top. "And this is different from the last nearly eight years of our lives, how?"

"I--"

With both hands, Jack pulled Daniel's head down and planted a noisy kiss on his surprised mouth. "This isn't complicated, Daniel. You want it, we go. You don't, we stay. Your call."

Daniel stared down at him, and Jack was glad his vision had cleared enough so he would always remember the predatory smirk which bloomed on Daniel's face just before he took Jack's mouth in a deep and dirty kiss.

END

Aug 20, 2010

End Notes
Warning: partner betrayal.
Credit to Brad Wright and Robert C. Cooper for smidgens of dialog along the way.
Great gobs of gratitude to Jude for the groovy alpha and beta on this Beast. All remaining mistakes are my own, because I'm just that stubborn.
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