The Sun On The Horizon, Book Three - N'Has'y

by Caprice

Summary

Escaping his kidnapper, Daniel falls amongst friends. As he searches for a Stargate he begins to heal, both mentally and physically. Meanwhile, the expanded SG-1 are closing in on his trail.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes
Phoenix Fallen

The gentle, rhythmic motion of the caravan worked in tandem with the soft, scented breezes playing through the open windows, creating an atmosphere that was completely conducive to the inspiration of creativity that was sought by the occupant. Such a shame then that it was inspiring exactly nothing.

Sabire sighed in disgust, and for the tenth time that hour sought to concentrate his wandering mind on the search for those few strains of melody he had awoken with that morning: such sweet, wandering snatches of a tune that held the promise of one of his best pieces of music yet. Alas, as seemed typical of his muse these past few months, the more he tried to hold onto the notes the more they fled, leaving nothing but a mocking echo of lost opportunity. Well, no more. He would sit here, ensconced in huge cushions in his favourite room and capture those notes if he had to reach into his own brain and wring them out himself.

Da dala, da, da da…

Mmm, smells like Mother Jacuna is baking her potted rolls again.

Dee da de, da, da dada…

Dear little Porsephala must be nearly at the end of her time. Hope it’s a girl, the Mother know she doesn’t need another bratty boy at her feet.

Oh, do be quiet. La lala, de dum do…

Maybe it’s time to take another lover. Perhaps the fulfilment of the body’s need will revive these ailing brain cells. Hmm, whom should we try? Anala has come of age, and her father is engaged with business in the towns most days.

Dum dum da, de daa, da do……

No, somehow the unbridled passion of youth does not appeal at the moment. Perhaps Kinkala? She is now officially separated from Shanti. She might appreciate some comfort in my arms. So might Shanti. He’s a nice boy. Ooh, a gathering of three? I could work to bring them back together. Sabire - Matrimonial Consultant! No price is too great to bring true love to those who need it. And I get a little slice of the action at the same time.

‘Gahhh!’ Sabire cried out in frustration and flung a cushion across the room. ‘It is no use; I will give up pretending to be a musician. I shall go dig in the potted gardens and be a farmer. At least that way I can eat what I create.’

Sabire rose to his feet, fully intending to seek out the farmers’ caravans, only to be thrown back to his knees as the ’van shuddered to a sudden halt, the alarm of a young boy’s voice ringing out through the communal comm system.

‘Gramire, Gransire! Everyone! Look - look at the skies. Something falls, something falls!’ The high tenor of the boy’s voice was filled with horror and amazement.

Sabire flung himself through the doorway to the little balcony at the rear of his home. Spread out on all sides, the caravans of the Clan were halted in their course; people poured from each one to mingle on the sands and the van rooftops, to gaze and point with bewilderment at the spectacle in the sky. Sabire dropped down to the ground, tracking the pointing fingers around him to fix high in the dark
blue sky. There, slightly to the left of their position an object fell towards them: blazing sheets of flame surrounded the front end; a trail of vapour and debris followed in its wake. Horrified questions rose all around him.

‘What manner of thing is it?’

‘Is it a rock from the Deep, perhaps?’

‘No, it seems too smooth-sided to be a rock. It could be a made thing.’

‘Oh, dear Mother, it is not an air-transport, is it? The people… the poor people,’ one of the women cried out.

As others took up the cry a louder voice rang out, strong with certain knowledge. Binish the Learner stood above them on the roof of his van, telescope pressed to his eye. ‘It is not an air-transporter. It is too far up in the atmosphere for one of our ‘porters to ever reach such a height. It is a made object though. I would say it is a vehicle of some kind, and it has come from the Deep. It seems large enough to transport people, too.’

An awed hush fell over the community, then the questions began to rise once more.

‘Where did it come from?’

‘What kind of people do you think are on it?’

‘Gramire, Gransire, what can we do?’ This last was directed to the matriarch and patriarch of the community who moved among their family, similarly captivated by the disaster unfolding above them.

Gramire patted the child who asked the question. ‘I fear there is nothing we can do for them until it hits the ground, little one,’ she said sadly.

‘Hope it doesn’t hit us,’ offered old Trettish the Pots.

Talk petered out as those on the ground watched the fall of the vessel. The flare of flame caused by friction with the atmosphere died away as it fell inexorably closer to the surface of the planet. As if in slow motion the vessel seemed to almost be floating in the air, then without warning a piece broke away from the main hull. It seemed to be thrown a short distance away from the larger vessel, and then it too continued to fall at a slightly slower rate than its parent.

Long seconds passed as they strained to track the flight of the two objects. Then with a sudden sideways jerk, a puff of smoke and debris erupted from the larger vessel. The watchers gasped as some of the debris caught the smaller object and spun it around in its course. The two vessels continued to plummet down; a loud groaning whistle filled the air as they fell to their doom.

A quick flurry of movement caught Sabire’s eye and he turned to see Haranith the Healer dragging her assistant towards her home, her shouted instructions drowned out by the ever-increasing roar of the vessels’ passage through the atmosphere. Debris was now freely pouring from the larger vessel, creating a trail more than three times its length behind it. Many pieces battered the smaller object as it continued towards its fate. Sabire thought he could see faint puffs of white smoke coming from one side of it.

‘It should impact over the rise, that way,’ bellowed out Binish the Learner, pointing to a group of low hills off to their left.
The announcement galvanised the onlookers into action. Gransire motioned to Chanla who had been in control of the lead van. ‘Bring the caravan around, Chanla. Be ready to move the moment the crash has settled,’ he yelled. ‘All of you with bikes and peds get them out and be ready to go. There may be people who need our help.’

The Clan scattered, eager to do something that may be of use. Before they could get too far though, a cry rang out from those still watching the falling vessels. Sabire turned back and watched open-mouthed.

In the few seconds he had looked away from them, the two vessels had grown significantly in size as they neared the end of their terrifying flight. The large vessel was enormous now - nearly the length of ten vans lined up end to end. The smaller piece that had broken off seemed only big enough to hold a couple of men, yet it appeared more formed and smooth than one would expect a piece of wreckage to be.

With frightening speed the larger vessel was suddenly right here. A thunderous BOOM supplanted the shrieking noise of its passage as it impacted finally with the ground. The watchers cried out in horror, then amazement as the vessel rose from a cloud of dust and sand, bounced off the hard earth to rise high into the air before the nose tilted downwards once more. It thundered into the ground; another massive shower of dust and debris rose, and yet again the vehicle bounced into the air. This time its trajectory was halved in height and it crashed down into the baked earth once more, then continued on to bounce and slide its way across the ground.

Astonished that the vessel remained mostly intact throughout every impact and bounce, Sabire watched its progress. A full minute after the first impact, the piece that had splintered from the main body plunged to the earth, white smoke pouring from the leading end. It seemed almost to be slowing down as it approached. As if imitating the thunderous impact of the main vessel, the little one ploughed into the ground, skidded along and flipped back into the air before slamming down to roll over and over, finally coming to a rest half buried in a slight rise of earth.

Stunned, he stood entranced by the cloud of dust, smoke and debris drifting into the sky. A sudden shout from Gramire galvanised everyone into action and in moments he had leapt onto his ‘ped, joining the dozens of riders streaking across the desert. Behind, the caravan turned as one and followed. Sabire gunned the engine, the desire to help, and the hope that someone had survived to need that help, filling his heart.

Sabire tucked his legs in tighter to the sides of his three-wheeled ‘ped and gunned the engine to its limits. The little machine responded with a burst of speed, propelling him over the rocky ground with barely a whisper of sound from its solar-powered engines; the cushion of air under the ‘ped made the journey completely smooth. For some reason he headed towards the site where the smaller piece of wreckage had landed. The majority of the Clan were headed for the large vessel, yet there was something about the way the little splinter had vainly seemed to be trying to correct its course and slow the rate of descent that told Sabire it was more than broken hull plating. It could have been an escape pod – and that meant someone may be inside.

The ‘ped soared up over the rise and skidded to a stop. Sabire stared in wonder at the broken wreckage: golden in colour, the curved decorative top half buried in a mound of earth. Hissing white steam wreathed the battered shape. One completely missing panel showed a dimly-lit interior. It most
definitely was a pod, big enough to carry a person. Gingerly he dismounted and walked over, eyes
scanning the scatter of broken parts for any sign of life. He reached the pod and put out a tentative
hand, only to snatch it back from the heat radiating off the surface. The interior was empty. Sabire
straightened up and looked further afield.

There! Some fifty paces from the pod lay a body. His heart clenched in shock. There really was a
person right here in front of him who had come from… where? Another planet? It must surely be.
The body in question suddenly gave a shudder and twitched, jolting him out of his reverie. Sabire
clambered past the wrecked pod and moved in a staggering run towards the person on the ground.

As he neared he slowed, not wanting to frighten the survivor. The person lay face down, legs twisted
under, hands clenched up around the face and making slight scrabbling motions. The slim body was
clothed in a style Sabire had never seen before: close-fitting pants and short jacket of a rich purple
colour, heavily embroidered even on the back of the jacket and down the legs. A pair of long boots
of the same shade encased the feet – one of which was scrabbling futilely at the ground, the other
ominously still and even Sabire’s limited medical knowledge told him the leg was badly broken. The
person’s torso was twisted uncomfortably. Sabire knelt gently by their side and placed a hand on
a shoulder, hoping to stop the person from causing any further hurt to themselves.

The effect was instant and startling. The body froze, then twisted under his touch to lay face up.
Sabire had only a second to take in the fact that the person seemed to be a male, before he registered
the hands sweeping up to clench defensively in front of the man’s face. Regretting having caused the
poor man further fear, Sabire backed up a few inches and held his own hands up to show he meant
no harm. The man made no sound. He merely lay there breathing in large panicked huffs, mouth
moving in a silent litany.

‘Be not afraid, my friend, I wish to help you,’ Sabire murmured gently. He lowered his hands but
made no further movements towards the man.

Whether his words or his manner made some sense to the man, he seemed to relax somewhat, his
eyes darting over Sabire and on to the other members of the community gathering behind him.

‘Penard’s Drake! Look at that!’ the breaking falsetto of one of the young boys squeaked behind
Sabire.

‘Is it an alien? Does it have horns? Look at the colour of it!’ bellowed another.

‘Have some sense, all of you and be quiet.’ Sabire turned to glare at the gathering of seven teenagers
piled up behind him. ‘He is a person, not an “it” and he is hurt. Teni, run and fetch Haranith. Quickly
now.’

Teni, a smart, quick-thinking girl, nodded and raced away towards the caravan.

Mokla, another of the young boys spoke up. ‘Sabire, is he not ill? Look at his skin. I’ve never seen
anyone look like that before.’

‘And the eyes, look at the eyes. The colour of the sky, Sabire. That’s not natural!’ added another
frightened voice.

Sabire glared at them and turned back to the man on the ground, this time properly taking in the pale
skin on the face and hands. No one had skin this colour, not even those from the far southern cities or
the other countries over the seas. Everyone was some varying shade of his own rich black skin
colour. And the eyes – a brilliant, piercing blue. Like the man had brought a piece of the sky down
with him as he fell. Those eyes were now studying him; intelligence lay behind them even as they
squinted and contracted with the pain the man must be feeling.

‘Can you understand me?’ Sabire asked softly.

The blue eyes followed his lips, the pale mouth moved in a silent mimic of his words, yet no sound issued forth. Sabire wondered if the man had injured his throat. As if reading his mind, the man brought his hands up to his throat and made a waving motion across it, then pointed to his mouth and shook his head. Was he unable to speak? Before Sabire could lean forward to investigate one of the youngsters behind him grabbed his shoulder, a hand snaking past his face to point shakily at the injured man’s hands.

‘Sabire, Sabire, look at his hands! They are bound. Is he a criminal?’ Beni gasped in horror.

There, half hidden under the long sleeves of the man’s clothing was the bright metal of bindings around both wrists.

The cry was taken up by all of them, certain they were about to be murdered where they stood by this helpless, hurting man. The man seemed to realise the cause of their distress and lowered his hands to his stomach. Unable to convey his motives or needs properly he lay still, eyes drifting shut as another grimace of pain swept over his face.

Sabire rose and ushered the youngsters away from the man.

‘I know you are all a little frightened by what has happened here. However, this man is hurt and in pain. Whatever the reason for him being in chains – he may be a prisoner, a captive, even a criminal - he cannot hurt anyone. Yes, he looks very different from us, but he needs our help. We will find out what has happened and how he came to be here.’ Sabire looked around at the trusting faces gazing at him. ‘I think he has an honest face and I think we have nothing to fear from this man. Now, let us see if we can make him more comfortable until Haranith comes. Yes?’

The group nodded reluctantly and shuffled back towards the stricken man, making sure to keep well behind the towering bulk of Sabire.

Sabire pulled off the flowing, flowered cloak he wore and draped it over the man’s body. Young Mokla offered his shirt as a makeshift pillow and Sabire smiled at him as he accepted the gift. Gently he lifted the man’s head and placed the shirt beneath it. The blue eyes fluttered open and a pained smile of gratitude shone up through a face made grimy with dirt, sweat and a small trickle of blood from his temple.

Despite his own misgivings, Sabire gently stroked his fingers along the man’s cheek, a small touch of comfort to one who seemed so in need. He wondered about this man who looked so alien to them and yet responded with very human mannerisms. He had a feeling that, for good or ill, this man’s arrival on their planet – his deliverance at their very feet – was a sign that all their lives were about to change.

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Haranith arrived soon after. Her characteristic happy disposition was replaced with a grim, efficient manner. Shooing the youngsters away, she dropped to her knees by her patient, hands already pulling instruments from her medical case. One deeply scrutinising look at the hurt man and she drew back in surprise.
‘He is different from the others,’ she announced.

‘Different? How be they different?’ butted in one of the teenagers.

Haranith kept her gaze on the pale man before her, but answered the question. ‘There were many occupants of the vessel, all male. Their colouring was mixed, yet none like this. All bore a brand on their foreheads. All wore what Gransire called armour. They are also all dead.’

She reached down to gently touch the man’s hands. ‘This one is so fair, so different.’ She peered closely at his body, assessing and gathering information. ‘He is unbranded. And those eyes…’ She trailed off in wonder, then shook her head and began to examine the man properly.

While her instruments efficiently recorded pulse, temperature and dozens of other life signs beyond Sabire’s comprehension, the healer busied herself with a gentle search for injuries over the man’s body, all the while calling out comments to the rapt audience behind her.

‘His heart and major organs are in the correct positions. Body temperature and pulse indicate he is indeed human. The skin colour seems to be normal for him, there are no signs of fever or illness that would cause such bleaching of the skin. I am assuming he is male…’ She broke off as her questing fingers were suddenly batted away by the patient whose cheeks had turned an interesting shade of red. Sabire grimaced in sympathy. ‘Yes, he is male. Even if his body mass is significantly less than the average for one of the People.’

A loud beeping erupted from one of the machines and Haranith turned her attention to it. ‘The left leg is shattered. This will require much work to heal properly.’

Sabire leant down to speak softly in the healer’s ear. ‘He must be in great pain, although he has not said a word yet. Can you not give him something to ease his suffering, Haranith?’

‘Certainly I shall, but I must know as much about his body as I can before introducing something into it. He may have a deadly reaction to the simplest of pain reducers. This will take time, I fear.’

‘Oh. I did not know this could happen,’ Sabire replied. The signs of constant torment on the man’s face were beginning to wear on his own nerves.

‘You say he has not spoken? Has he cried out, moaned, anything?’

‘No, Haranith. Not a sound has passed his lips. It is quite unnerving.’

Haranith leaned forward and gently urged her patient to open his mouth. Soft probing fingers and the light from her small hand light revealed no obstructions in his mouth or throat. The pained gusts of air whistling from his lungs indicated his breathing was unimpeded. Frowning, Haranith ran her fingers over his jaw and down his neck. Gently she unfastened the high collar of the man’s clothing, fumbling at first with the unfamiliar closings. As the material parted Haranith sank back on her knees in astonishment, staring at the gleaming piece of silver embedded into the skin over the voice box.

Edging forward Sabire peered closely at the object, noting the thin tendrils that ran directly into the skin and the tiny flashing blue lights in the centre. Haranith leaned over her patient. She pointed to the object, then to his mouth and shook her head questioningly.

The blue eyes blinked slowly in silent confirmation. A small tilt of his head indicated Haranith’s assumption was correct. The silver device was preventing him from speaking.

‘By The Mother, what manner of person would deliberately deny this man his voice? Even a criminal is allowed to speak in his defence. Well, it is coming off… just as soon as I can work out
Haranith squeezed the suffering man’s hand, conveying her compassion. With an effort she tore her gaze from the bizarre device and set about testing the man’s tolerance to the pain reducer. Swiftly, she made small injections of different drugs into the back of his right hand.

‘Sabire, would you send someone to fetch a buggy and trailer, please? We will take him to the caravan as soon as I can relieve his pain.’

Sabire sent a couple of willing volunteers off in search of transport. Turning back to their visitor from the stars, he settled himself on the ground at the man’s side and gently took his left hand. Immediately the elegant, pale fingers closed around his own strong, black fingers and convulsively gripped them as another wave of pain swept the man’s body.

Silence surrounded the three on the ground, broken by the injured man’s gasping breaths as he tried to breathe through the pain sweeping up his nerves from his broken leg. In the distance, shouts and calls drifted on the breeze from the others of the caravan as they clambered in and over the wreckage.

A short time passed. Haranith checked the results of her tests on the patient’s hand. Sabire could see none of the patches injected were showing a reaction and the man’s life signs had not altered in any appreciable manner; in fact he was managing to control his breathing in measured pants to help with the pain.

Satisfied, Haranith filled an injector with a medium amount of pain-reducer and injected it into the thigh muscles of the broken leg. The doctor kept a close watch on her monitors and within a few minutes was relieved to note indications that the man’s pain was lessening and no reaction to the drug was occurring. Haranith smiled down at her patient, brushing the sweat soaked hair back from his forehead. A faint smile graced his lips and his eyes fluttered half-closed with relief.

Ten minutes later, with no small amount of hushed advice from the gathering crowd, the injured man was strapped securely to a carry-bed mounted on one of the buggy trailers, his leg immobilised in a temporary cast. He was still conscious, although seeming to drift off occasionally. Haranith had refused to give him a full dose of pain-reducers without having access to her complete array of equipment. Gently the buggy moved off, proceeding at walking pace towards the caravan, the throng of quietly excited people moving with it as honour guard.

Sabire strode next to the trailer, his hand still gripped tightly by the visitor, both of them seeking and receiving reassurance from the other.

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Daniel found himself fading in and out of awareness, brief snatches coming to him from many people around him: the tall, smiling man constantly at his side; the warm hand holding his own cold, shaking hand; some kind of open vehicle that he had been placed on with gentle care. The doctor’s face swam in and out of focus; gentle touches to his face, throat and chest told him she was continuing to monitor him. There were still pulses of pain from his left leg, but they were muted and far less than what he had experienced before. He could handle it for now.

Rolling his head to one side, Daniel focused blearily on the figures around him. They all seemed very tall, even the children, and all their skin tones were varying shades of rich black. That would
account for the wide-eyed stares from pretty much everyone. Was it possible people of his skin colouring were rare in this part of the world? Whichever world this happened to be. They were definitely human though, and that suggested Earth ancestry and hopefully a Stargate somewhere.

The clothing was gorgeous too – many different styles; robes, pants, skirts, revealing and covering, brightly coloured patterns, florals, some all in one basic colour. The short glimpse Daniel had managed of the vehicle pulling the platform he lay on was of a sleek, technologically developed machine, something of a cross between Sam’s motorcycle and a jet-ski.

A gap in the crowd around him gave Daniel his first look at the crashed Al’kesh. Jumbled, broken pieces lay scattered everywhere; small pockets of smoke rose in places. People were crawling all over the wreckage and Daniel gave silent thanks that the naquada engine system gave off no lethal radiation. To one side he caught sight of a line of bodies, laid out and covered respectfully. With a sudden jolt, Daniel realised he had given no thought to the Jaffa. It seemed from the attitude of the people around him that he was the only one receiving medical treatment. Saddened at yet more senseless deaths, Daniel was still relieved that these good people would be spared the potential violence of the Jaffa.

A sharp, high-pitched voice rose over the general hum of conversation around him. Daniel forced his eyes open once more and saw a short figure in bright red pants, a young boy, running towards them, excitedly waving an object found in the crash. As the child came closer, Daniel saw to his horror that the he was waving a zat gun - a zat that was primed and ready to fire into the child’s body from the way it was being held.

Daniel tightened his grip on the tall man’s hand, yanking urgently to gain his attention. The man stopped and after one glimpse at the look on Daniel’s face, he called for the convoy to halt. Daniel raised his bound hands and gestured towards the child, shaking his head and trying silently to convey the danger the boy was in.

The tall man called the child over and after a confirming glance at Daniel, gently asked the child to hand over the gun. Reluctantly but obediently, he gave up his prize. Daniel winced as the little hands passed over the firing trigger.

Daniel held his hands up, silently asking for the weapon. He was taking a big leap of faith here. These people really seemed willing to help him and he hoped they would not interpret his actions as hostile. None of the people he had seen so far had borne the tattoo of a System Lord. Their curiosity about the fallen vessel and their lack of fear at the sight of a Goa’uld weapon were telling Daniel that perhaps this world had no current contact with the Goa’uld. It was just a guess, based on very little empirical evidence and one, which by extrapolation did not bode well for his hopes of a Stargate. Still, he had to show them the danger of this weapon.

The tall man presented the zat to Daniel. Hushed, the crowd around him shuffled back from the litter where Daniel lay. Shakily, Daniel propped himself up on his left elbow, feeling for the first time a bone deep pain pulsing in his right elbow. The zat wavered in his trembling hands. Daniel gripped it tighter and sighted on a piece of dry branch lying on the ground. He glanced up at the interested faces. Certain he had their attention, Daniel squeezed the trigger once. The familiar whine and blue flash of electricity brought a startled gasp from his audience. Making sure everyone was still standing well clear, he squeezed the trigger once more. The branch burst into flame and the crowd began to mutter amongst themselves. Daniel looked up at the tall man, trying to communicate that there was more to come.

A sharp word from the man stilled the crowd and Daniel pressed the trigger for a third time. The branch sizzled briefly with the charge then fizzled into nothingness, the only remains a drift of smoke
curling up from the ground.

A brief moment of shocked silence hung over the crowd, then as Daniel returned the weapon to safe status and slumped back down to the litter, a burst of chatter broke over his head. Daniel found the tall man staring at him, a mix of awe and respect in his eyes. Daniel passed the weapon to him, hoping that the warning would be heeded. The tall man nodded at him, understanding showing clearly on his face. Turning towards the crash site the man called out in a clear strident voice, calling back all those still scrambling amongst the ruin.

Daniel closed his eyes; the stream of chatter flowing above his head merged into a jumbled cacophony that defied understanding. Lethargy crept over his body and the assorted aches and pains warred with each other until his mind was floating far apart from his consciousness. Dimly, he felt the vehicle he was laying on move forward once more and as a soft hand brushed his forehead he gave in to the demands of his stressed body, and sank gently into sleep.

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A sudden jolt brought Daniel awake once more, feeling as if he had only just closed his eyes. Disoriented, faces and bright flashes of colour swooped past him at odd angles. He took a deep breath and focused on the concerned face of the tall man who had been at his side since discovering him by the crashed pod. The litter he lay upon was hoisted up into the air, which explained the odd floating feeling. Daniel caught a brief glimpse of what appeared to be brightly coloured walls before the many hands on his stretcher funnelled him head-first through a doorway and into a dim, pleasant smelling room.

The tall man appeared once more, giving directions to the helpers in quiet tones. Daniel was lowered gently to a wide, soft bed, then raised once more by caring hands as the stretcher was whisked away, before settling finally into the bed’s embrace. People shuffled out of the room leaving only the doctor, a young stringy man and the tall man hovering in the background.

The doctor moved to sit beside him on the bed, her hand taking the pulse in his wrist. Satisfied with the result she looked Daniel in the eyes. ‘Haranith,’ she said, slapping one hand to her breast. ‘Haranith.’

Daniel had to smile; some things never changed, including the instinctual methods humans came up with for identifying themselves. At least he presumed it was her name. The doctor confirmed the thought as she turned to the young man at the foot of the bed and announced, ‘Pana.’ Waving a hand at the tall man standing in the shadows, ‘Sabire,’ completed the introductions.

Frustrated yet again that he could not give his name in return, Daniel settled for a little wave at his helpers. Haranith grinned at him, then swiftly settled down to work. She and Pana began to unload an array of medical equipment from bags and boxes that had been delivered as Daniel was settled. A quiet word sent the tall man, Sabire, to sit on the other side of the bed next to Daniel where he touched Daniel’s bound wrists, silently asking permission to examine them.

Daniel nodded and watched as Sabire looked carefully at the binders from every angle. The gleaming, seamless metal and small, electronic locking mechanism brought a speculative look to the man’s eyes. Looking over at Daniel those same eyes crinkled in a grin. Sabire winked at Daniel, then stood up and walked out of the room. Daniel could hear him talking quietly with someone outside.
Daniel Jackson, intergalactic explorer extraordinaire as Jack sometimes called him, ever the one to make quick, instinctive judgements about people he had just met, decided that he liked this tall, unassuming man. Indeed, the few people he had interacted with so far were giving him a good solid feeling of comfort and safety. After so many weeks of living by his wits in the hotbed of intrigue and deception that was Ba’al’s palace, Daniel found himself rapidly relaxing. He may not be home, not by a long shot, but for the moment the imminent threat of torture, death or possession was gone. He could live with that.

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Haranith moved back to his side and Daniel forced his attention back to her. She held up what looked like a small television screen. Illuminated on the screen was a representation of the bones in his left leg. He stared at it, appalled. Even without the few compassionate words she used, he could clearly understand the damage himself: down near the ankle his tibia was cracked clean in half, the broken shards pressing dangerously close to the skin; the fibula had suffered two complete breaks and a hairline fracture ran halfway up toward his knee. This would take not just weeks, but months to heal. He glanced up at the doctor. She smiled at him, encouraging and supportive, as if this kind of break happened all the time. He could not shake the dread that was building like lead in his chest. Without modern intensive medical care the leg could easily not heal properly. He could be crippled for the rest of his life.

He slumped back in the pillows, unable to look Haranith in the face as she checked his pulse and temperature. I suppose they’ll dump me in a hospital somewhere. If they have hospitals. If they don’t…. Blearily, he tried to remember what he’d seen outside. A lot of bare, sandy earth, blue sky, lots of people. No buildings taller than the home he’d been taken to. A small town or village, probably. They clearly didn’t know a Zat when they saw one, so the likelihood of the Goa’uld being here is small. They seem quite amazed by me… have they met anyone from another planet before? Oh—crap. They don’t even have a Stargate. No, that wasn’t a necessary assumption. If someone had crash-landed anywhere remote on Earth, the locals wouldn’t have known they could send the survivor home via Stargate. Still, have to find out.

He caught Haranith’s wrist and mimed the motion of writing. She blinked at him in surprise, then nodded and rummaged in her bags. Produced a bound book and a thin pencil-like object, made of tightly layered fibres with a core of a hard blue substance. She flipped the book to an empty page and presented them to him. Daniel smiled his thanks. Holding the book up on his chest, he thought rapidly, then drew a rough sketch of a Stargate, embellished with a number of address symbols underneath. Finished, he showed it to her.

Haranith looked carefully at the drawing. Her face showed her interest… and complete lack of recognition. She glanced at him, saw the fervent hope that he couldn’t hide, and studied it again. Finally she shook her head. ‘Na’nay.’

Na’nay. No. Daniel sank back, trying to stave off disappointment with reason. She’s just one person. Others may know of it. Keep trying. Hang on… Na’nay? He blinked. She’d used the same word used by the Abydonians for ‘no’. Was it possible? She shook her head, an almost universally used expression of the negative. It couldn’t be coincidence, could it?

His speculation was interrupted as Sabire returned with a woman, only a few inches shorter but pleasantly plump and dressed in brilliant green pants and top. Sabire spoke rapidly to Haranith who nodded agreement, then returned to her examination of Daniel’s leg. Sabire and the newcomer knelt by the side of the bed, drawing his attention away from the equipment Haranith was laying out.
'Banira,' the new woman said. She smiled and patted her breast. 'Banira.'

Daniel nodded acknowledgement and was rewarded with a fast-paced stream of dialogue, none of which he found familiar. He felt his brows draw together in frustration. Banira cut herself off and instead reached out to his bound hands. She touched the manacles. 'Pashi?'

*Pashi …* Perhaps *Par shati*, to ask permission? A thrill of understanding ran through him. The word was close to the Abydonian version, similar enough if one allowed for the cultural diversity that would naturally occur over thousands of years’ separation from their joint roots. He grinned. A flutter of hope took roost in his heart. He nodded and offered up his hands.

Banira produced a case of fine metal tools and set to work on the binders. Daniel watched her, approving of the concentration on her face. It was a welcome distraction from his leg: there was an undercurrent of pain seeping through his bones, bearable but it spoke volumes about the severity of his injury.

There was a sharp click and suddenly his left wrist was free. His arm slid woodenly off his belly and made him wince as the returned movement set off a chain of new aches. Moments later his right wrist was also released. Daniel caught Banira’s hand and squeezed it in thanks. She dimpled and smiled bashfully at him, then packed her tools away and made way for Haranith’s helper who tended his abraded wrists with a cloth that made his skin sting. After another rapid exchange between Sabire and Haranith, Banira leant over and hesitantly opened Daniel’s collar to peer at the silencer. He raised his chin and stared at the ceiling; he found it covered in a delicate metal fretwork behind which moved a pattern of lights undulating through the spectrum. Fascinated, he lost himself in its beauty until a hand on his arm brought him back.

Banira shook her head, face filled with regret. Daniel nodded. As he’d suspected, the electronics of the silencer would be far harder to circumvent than the mechanical binders. He settled back in the pillows, mind buzzing with exhaustion. The pain from his leg settled into a muted but steady pulse through his body. He closed his eyes and tried to ignore the quiet discussion of the doctors, the tread of people coming and going, and the more distant sounds of people outside.

Soon he could only hear Haranith and Banira, and felt their gentle, assured touch as they removed his torn clothing to examine the rest of his injuries. Eyes barely slitted open, he let them help him sit up and remove Ba’al’s jacket and shirt. He leant against Haranith’s solid shoulder while she rubbed something into the bruises he could feel were beginning to bloom over his back, shoulders, arms – everywhere. A pleasant scent reminiscent of lavender and eucalyptus enveloped his senses and helped lull him further toward sleep.

Finished, they laid him back and covered his body with warm blankets. He drifted for a while. His world shank to a cosy cocoon where he felt safe – hidden from the strange, distorted images which lurked at the edge of consciousness: Ba’al’s goatee-clad face; Astarte, wild and enticing; stone eyes peering down from Eshmun’s statue, his perfect form entwined with stone snakes which dripped with blood that ran unceasing down his legs to mix with the water in the wide, bloody river; Skaara was somewhere – behind him – he could hear him yelling, ‘Na’nay, na’nay, Danyel!’

His eyes flinched open. Haranith was leaning over him, concern swiftly melding into a reassuring smile. She brought into his view a model of human leg bones. Unable to even try to decipher her words, Daniel followed her gestures. She indicated where the breaks on his bones were and how, using a kind of semi-flexible patch, she would set the bones. She peered at him intently and he did his best to signal understanding and permission. Satisfied, Haranith brought a glass of water to his lips; he drained the glass in one go and sagged back. She brushed his forehead and returned to the foot of the bed.
Gradually, Daniel felt the pain from his leg subside and as it vanished completely he lost the grip it had given him on consciousness. Ponderously, his eyes closed, but once, twice he dragged them open and tried to concentrate on something, anything to avoid the miasma of dreams he could feel lurking in wait for him.

Sabire returned. Silently he sat at Daniel’s side; understanding brown eyes twinkled. He took Daniel’s hand. Grateful, even a little desperate for some comfort, Daniel let himself fade away.

~*~

The last fiery rays of daylight glinted off the shattered vessel from the Deep, giving it an even greater alien cast. Sabire stood at the unofficial boundary between the scattered debris and the Clan’s evening camp. Behind him their homes were aligned into the usual eight-sided pattern. Meals were being cooked, children bathed: normal evening activities but without the customary sounds of people happy and at peace.

An extraordinary event had happened today. Everyone was talking about the changes that loomed before them now. Nothing would ever be quite the same again, and whether those changes would be ill or fair, trepidation – mixed with a large amount of excitement – filled his heart.

He looked away from the mangled, exotic ship to the line of covered bodies laid respectfully in a group. Although many, Binish the Learner in particular, had wanted to examine the wreck, Gransire and Gramire had declared it off limits after the search for life had concluded. No knowing what harmful gases or substances were leaking inside it.

Seven people had died today. One had survived. Such luck the man must possess, to fall not just from the sky but from the cold darkness of the Deep itself, and live. Sabire smiled. This was a man well blessed and he could only be the harbinger of auspicious times to the Clan, and to the planet of N’Has’y. Of this he was sure.

Somi came to stand at his side. ‘An amazing day, Sabire. I don’t know what will come of this.’

‘Great things, my friend.’ Sabire gazed at the sun’s final grasp at the sky. It slid below the horizon in a fanfare of brilliant orange streaks. ‘Unforseen, perhaps unwanted, but certainly great things.’

‘We’ll see.’ Somi handed him a small drawstring bag. ‘I think this belongs to… him. The survivor. They found it near that capsule he was in.’

It was held closed by woven threads of gold fibres, made of the same heavy purple embroidered fabric as the clothes the stranger wore. Sabire opened it and withdrew a delicate construction of metal and glass. Two curved arms opened on tiny hinges either side of the round glass pieces. He turned them in his hands and peered through the glass, squinting as the view turned blurry.

‘It is an eye lens, such as Trettish uses.’

‘It has no handle.’ Somi stared at him from the other side of the glass.

Sabire blinked and found his eyes beginning to ache. ‘I believe they hang on the face.’ He gingerly slid the arrangement onto his face and with a few fumblings, hooked the curved arms over his ears. Everything beyond went blurry and he staggered, his balance completely thrown out. All he could see of Somi was a bright pink tongue and a white cage of teeth in the indistinctness of his face. His
friend laughed and steadied him.

‘Our visitor must have unusual eyes.’ Among the Clan only the elderly needed an eye lens, and not all even then.

‘Perhaps the colour of his eyes caused a weakness in his sight,’ Somi suggested, trying the thing on for a brief time. ‘Ech, I could not live with that.’

‘We shall return it to him.’ Sabire tucked it in its dusty bag.

They stood in silence for a time, their faces warmed by the glow of the death-watch fires set around the bodies. Finally, Sabire turned his back on the dead and gazed out at the desert, the hills and gullies of the land highlighted and shadowed by the bright crown of stars which arced from horizon to horizon.

‘I thought I knew my place in this world, Somi,’ he said quietly. ‘We grew up in a good, stable clan. We have our people around us, our friends. We make a betrothal one day, and the cycle repeats itself.’

‘I made a betrothal, my friend,’ laughed Somi. ‘You—you will spread your favours wide and freely.’

‘Well… yes. I have my music, my art to occupy my mind and feed my soul. I thought that should be all I desired.’

‘But now…?’

‘Now? Now there is more. Now there are people who walk among the stars.’

‘Not literally. Unless they have no need for breath?’

Sabire snorted. ‘You know what I mean. People live on another planet. Maybe many planets. There must be more than one, else why would they have need of a vessel to traverse the Deep?’

‘But are they people we want to meet? The dead all wore clothing that would protect them from assault. They carried weapons, Sabire! You saw what that bent thing did – it obliterated the stick.’ Somi paced forward, his agitation growing. ‘They bound the blue-eyed one, denied him his voice; that can’t be the work of people with good intentions.’

‘No. But consider the blue-eyed man. His clothes were beautiful, crafted with care. He showed only gratitude to us, warned us of possible danger. I’m sure he recognised one of our words too.’

‘How could he know our words?’

‘It is a puzzle that I look forward to solving. He is the key, Somi. The first step in our new future—and I want to be a part of it.’

~*~

Few people found the peace of sleep that night. After Somi had departed for his pregnant wife’s arms, Sabire paced slowly around the fringe of the camp. Many caravans showed a gleam of light in a window or on a rooftop; subdued murmurings told of those sitting up, held awake by the extraordinary day. He paused near the watch fires once more: now collapsing into coals, their light
guiding the souls of the dead to their reward in the Fields.

I hope they find their way. Sabire shivered, imagining lost alien souls haunting N’Has’y for eternity.

A shuttered light burned in the bedroom of his own home. Haranith continued to keep watch over their pale guest. Sabire wandered closer, reluctant to intrude on the injured man’s hard-won rest. He climbed the back steps, pulled an old blanket out of a storage box on the rear gallery and wound his way up the narrow spiral staircase to the flat roof. Halfway up, he paused at a window. Inside, the open bedroom door allowed him to view their guest. Now deeply asleep, the man was caught in a dream: his hands twitched and expressions flitted across his face, expressions that spoke of fear, pain and alarm.

Haranith moved across Sabire’s line of sight. She bent over her patient; with soothing words and touch she eased his distress. The stranger subsided into stillness. Sabire climbed thoughtfully on up to his rooftop garden. He settled in the squashy, form-fitting seat, wrapped the blanket around his shoulders and waited to see what the morning would bring.

~*~

Cloud covered the dawn sky; it drained the sun of its heat and left the land shrouded in grey half-light. The Clan gathered in a circle surrounding the open graves; a respectful hush stilled their voices. Everyone was present, barring Methny who was confined to Haranith’s van while still contagious, and the fallen stranger, asleep in Sabire’s bed.

With the care and respect due any member of the Clan, the seven bodies were lowered into the welcoming earth: their strange, tattooed faces and fearsome armour now hidden beneath tightly wrapped shrouds. While the grave was filled in, Lilya raised her face to the skies and sang, a sweet, sombre dirge that bade the departed an unimpeded journey.

The final tones of Lilya’s voice echoed bell-like in the crisp air. Sabire nodded appreciatively, and reflected that perhaps his efforts at composing had not entirely been a waste.

People began to drift away back to the caravan, muted conversations rose, breakfasts contemplated, the inquisitive called away from the wreck. A small kerfuffle on the far side of the grave made Sabire turn back. In amongst the stones piled ready to be built into a cairn, something was wriggling.

‘Mama, look!’ Lilya’s seven-year-old, Donat was pointing, eyes wide.

‘Don’t go near it!’ His mother slapped his hand and dragged him back.

‘Ma… it’s only a worm.’

‘A very large worm.’ Binish the Learner inched closer. ‘And not one of this world, I believe.’

Sabire edged closer as the parents dragged their children back. Binish pulled a spare sock from his pocket, reached out and gingerly picked up the creature. It was a dull pink colour, almost opaque in parts, nearly a semi-cubit long with beady black eyes. It struggled feebly, mouth opening to emit a harsh squeak.

‘Perhaps some kind of rodent from the ship?’ he asked. ‘It’s probably harmless.’ He peered at the tiny fangs. ‘Or possibly not. What should we do with it? It doesn’t look like it can survive in our
Gransire stared at it, then said, ‘We will show our guest. He may know it.’ He led the way back to Sabire’s van, where after confirming with Haranith that their guest was awake, he, Binish, Sabire and a number of interested parties trooped inside.

The pale stranger was leaning against a pile of pillows, looking drawn and tired. The curtains had been pulled back and Sabire wondered if he had watched the burial.

The visitors shuffled around the bedside, quietly respectful, some stared at him curiously. Sabire nudged Binish into speaking.

‘Uh, how do I ask him what it is if he can’t understand me?’

‘I think he does know some of our words,’ Sabire nodded encouragingly at his guest. ‘But you could use signs—or just show him.’

‘Oh. Yes. Of course. Here.’ He withdrew the creature from his pocket and thrust it toward the man on the bed.

The reaction was nothing they expected. The blue eyes widened in alarm, and he jerked reflexively backward. His hands and one good knee came up, warding, tensing his whole body as if to throw himself off the bed. Pain creased his face as his injured leg rocked in the antigrav cradle. Horrified eyes turned to Sabire and for a moment, Sabire saw uncertainty there, then a hard determination closed it away. He shook his head, mouth clearly forming the word, Na’nay.

Sabire gripped Binish’s arm, preventing him from moving any closer. ‘He knows this creature.’

‘And fears it,’ added Gransire.

‘What could he fear from a little worm?’ Binish asked over the murmuring of the others.

‘I don’t know, but his fear was for himself: unlike when Shani picked up the weapon. Then, he was concerned only for the child.’

‘Binish, remove this from our guest’s presence. We will not have him discomforted.’ Gransire turned to leave.

Seeing them withdraw and about to take the creature with them, the stranger suddenly leant forward, shaking his head and gesturing at Binish.

‘Wait! He wants it.’

‘First he’s afraid, now he wants it?’ Binish halted uncertainly. ‘Which is it?’

The stranger reached out, imploring.

‘Let him have it,’ Gransire said.

Gingerly, their guest took the creature, careful to hold it tightly behind the head. As soon as it changed hands the body of the worm thrashed violently, and it squealed.

Teeth bared in a curious mix of disgust and hate, the stranger looked at it, then gazed up at the people surrounding him. His expression turned apologetic. He grasped the wriggling body in his other hand, and in a spray of bright, alien, blue blood, ripped the creature in two.
Gusts of wind ripped across the airfield’s surface. They created mini-tornadoes of dust that flung themselves in Jack’s face before dancing away into the air, taunting his earth-bound helplessness. He spat out a mouthful of grit and resumed his afternoon trudge back to the most recent addition to the SGC’s space fleet.

Jack sourly regarded the misshapen and patched exterior. Technically it was Jacob’s ship but not even the Tok’ra would want such a clapped out excuse for a vessel as this thing. He didn’t care – as long as it did its job getting them to Tsydon and back.

His easy, ground-eating stroll took him past the other ships held waiting for clearance to head for Tsydon. Only seventeen now: four had given up and sought out other markets for their goods. News about what was going on out there was sparse, but Jacob had returned three days earlier with reports that another Goa’uld had launched an attack on Ba’al’s homeworld. Why, it was unclear, but rumours abounded that it was someone in Anubis’ camp and that none of the current crop of System Lords had ever been known to take on such a powerful opponent as Ba’al before. Jack dipped his head away from another blast of hot, dusty wind and turned away from the desolate, stranded ships to walk down the side of the SS Spacemonkey.

Captain Roberts, perched on the boarding ramp, greeted him. ‘All quiet, Jack.’

‘Good to hear, Martin.’ He thumped up the ramp, still uncomfortable with the use of personal names, despite the need to maintain their cover as off-world traders. Twenty-some years in the Force bred a powerful habit to overcome.

In the dim, still smelly interior he found Teal’c and Beechworth putting the finishing touches to their evening meal. ‘Jacob back yet?’ He plonked himself down on a supply crate and stretched his legs out.

‘He’s sent his report to the Tok’ra but he’s gone with Aris to get some more fresh fruit and vegetables,’ Carter replied, not looking up from the dismembered gizmo on the deck before her.

‘Aris “knows” a guy,’ Ferretti added.

‘I’ll just bet he does.’ Jack accepted a bowl of something hot and spicy from Teal’c. He gave it an experimental sniff. ‘Dare I ask?’

‘It is bonetha, a favourite of the people of Abydos,’ Teal’c supplied with a mysterious smile.

Jack blinked and pinned him with an expectant stare.

Lieutenant Beechworth handed him a warm flatbread. ‘Doc Jackson showed me how to make it when we were on that mission to P2Z-158.’
‘P2…?’ Bad enough to try and distinguish one planet from another, but to expect a guy to remember them by designation...

‘Daniel was seconded to SG-2, sir,’ Carter said without looking up. ‘The planet was an abandoned outpost of Ra’s.’

He frowned, still not getting it.

‘Black hole, sir.’

‘Ah.’ He dunked the bread in the stew and shoveled a generous amount in his mouth. ‘Mmm. What else did Daniel share, Sandy?’

‘Oh. Well, he told us some tales about Abydos, sir—Jack—si—er, about his life there and all.’

‘Really?’ Carter and Teal’c echoed Jack’s surprise. Daniel was usually quite reticent about his time on Abydos.

‘The planet we were on had some similarities to Abydos. It stirred some memories for him.’ Roberts joined the dinner gathering and glanced at Jack with a twinkle in his eye. ‘Actually, most of his stories were about other people—you in particular, sir.’

_Uh oh._ ‘Me?’ He completely failed to keep the sharpness out of his voice. ‘Why don’t you run a few of those by us, now. Help pass the time.’

‘Er…’ Beechworth stared at the deck plates, chewing thoughtfully on her lip. ‘Well, the doc did say the city’s kids latched onto you pretty quickly. Followed you round, imitated everything you did.’ Encouraged by Jack’s smile he went on. ‘They couldn’t get you to eat that lizard creature they served up.’

‘I have a delicate stomach.’

‘Yes, sir. What else—yeah, they were all so amazed when you showed them the Jaffa were just men, not the gods they’d always thought. Oh, and that you saved the doc’s life in a sandstorm.’

_Kinda made up for getting him killed… Whoa there—_

‘You saved Daniel in a sandstorm, sir?’ Carter piped up.

‘Uh huh, well, he was exhausted. I just covered the both of us till Skaara and his kids found us.’ Jack pinned Beechworth with a hard stare. ‘Daniel said I showed the Abydonians the face of the Jaffa?’

‘Yeah, he said it was the pivotal moment in the rebellion. Kasuf realised they’d been lied to for centuries. The people rose up against Ra and attacked the pyramid. If you hadn’t done that there wouldn’t have been a rebellion at all.’

The rest of the crew were staring at him in admiration, which jarred even more with the warning bells now clamouring in his head.

‘Way to go, sir.’

‘An honourable action, O’Neill.’

‘Yeah, Teal’c, it was.’ Jack frowned up at his friend. ‘Except it wasn’t my action. It was Daniel’s. Daniel was the one who hit the switch on the Jaffa’s helmet. Daniel was the one who convinced Kasuf that their god was false. It wasn’t me. It was Daniel.’
‘Maybe he was just trying to deflect attention away from himself,’ suggested Carter.

‘I don’t think so, ma’am,’ Beechworth said. ‘The doc clearly said it was the colonel.’

‘Why would Daniel Jackson alter the facts?’ Teal’c asked.


‘Sorry, sir,’ Beechworth began. ‘I didn’t mean to…’

‘I’m glad you did mention it, Lieutenant.’ Jack glanced at Carter, then Teal’c. ‘Something’s not right.’ With Daniel was the unspoken worry.

‘What did he say in his report, sir?’ Carter asked.

‘He didn’t file a report – he stayed on Abydos, remember?’

‘Yes, but later, when he did come home. Didn’t he file a post-mission report then?’

Jack thought hard. Those first few months of the SGC had been chaotic: getting Daniel settled, officially alive again, in the midst of his grief, at the same time they were establishing frontline and support teams, sorting out the data from the Abydos cartouche and making first contact with new worlds… ‘He filed hundreds of reports. Damned if I know if he did a retrospective on Abydos. It was sealed from us… gone…’

‘Perhaps he just got confused,’ offered Ferretti.

‘And yet, Daniel Jackson remembered the event clearly. It was only the role he played that has become unclear,’ Teal’c rumbled.

‘That’s what’s got me concerned, Teal’c,’ Jack said. ‘He remembered what happened, but he’s got it all muddled…’ He trailed off at the sound of voices outside.

The sound of people clomping into the ship preceded Jacob, looking tired and disgruntled. ‘Evening all. I hope that’s dinner I smell.’

‘Abydonian Jambalaya, Jacob,’ said Beechworth from the tiny cooking facilities. ‘With a few native ingredients to liven it up.’

‘Washed down with a fine ale from my own private stock,’ announced Aris Boch, appearing behind Jacob with an armload of bottles.

Jack nodded to them both. ‘Still no clearance to depart,’ he told them. He sent a glance at the others, warning them the subject of Daniel and Abydos was closed while Boch was around.

His expanded team settled on the assortment of blankets, old chairs and mattresses that now decorated the ancient ship. Wreaths of fragrant herbs dangled from cargo hooks in the ceiling, fighting vainly to conceal the pervasive stench of the ship’s nether regions and the tart chemicals Carter had used to clean it.

‘How’d it go with the Tok’ra, Dad?’

Jacob looked at his daughter with a grimace. ‘They want me back—tried to convince me that an operative of lower rank could take this mission, that I should be used for more important tasks.’ He took in the indignant expressions around him with a complacent smile. ‘I told ‘em to shove it. I told them Daniel Jackson is possibly the most important person on either side of the Tau’ri/Tok’ra
alliance, and he deserves all the help we can give him.’

‘Oh, Dad.’ Carter reached over and hugged her father.

Jack, too, found himself a little choked up. ‘Thank you, Jacob.’

Jacob winked and held out his bowl. ‘Any chance of dinner?’

~*~

Day 12.

Stuck on Gaidhlig.

Still.

Departure controllers singularly unhelpful. “The blockade will lift when the blockade lifts.”

Another two ship crews gave up and left in search of other markets.

Soon may have to revise cover story to justify us wanting to trade only on Tsydon.

Boch has taken Teal’c, Roberts and Beechworth on a recce for information. He continues to profess repentance.

I do not, and will not, trust him.

Ever.

We’re due another check-in today. Bairnsdale can go. Cannot risk getting into a situation with The Big Wick and being ordered to abandon.

WILL NOT return without Dirt Boy.

Have developed a desire to keep a diary.

Apparently.
Jack leaned back in the battered recliner he’d dragged out into the sun. Behind him the ship squatted like a deformed toad. Smelt like one too.

On the far side of the landing field a wild assortment of cargo tramps, passenger carriers and shuttles zipped in and out of the bustle of warehouses and terminals. One particularly sleek plane hummed over his head. He watched it go, envying its occupants’ ability to move. He pulled his cap off and scratched his head.

*Bet that’s a sweet bird to fly.*

Daydreams filled his head: he pictured himself in command of that swift little ship, rocketing from planet to planet; making exotic trades with a wild variety of natives. Old customers would great him like family, buxom daughters would sob when he departed. *Need Daniel to smooth the negotiations. Teal'c to do his 'I shall squash you like a bug if you do not comply' shtick. Carter could keep the ship ticking over. That’d be a great life. Welcomed in every tavern – no snakes – no unending war… One day.*

Jack shook himself out of his reverie. ‘Bairnsdale! Time to go.’

Booted feet thudded down the ramp. Jack was curious to see Carter next to Bairnsdale, the two women tall and assured, no doubt armed to the hilt beneath their long duster coats.

‘S—Jack. I’d like to go too. There are a couple of things in my office I think would be useful.’ She cut off his already-forming protest. ‘I’ll be quick. In and out. Ten minutes, tops.’

‘What kind of “things”?’

She hesitated. ‘Be quicker to show you…’

Considering the amount of gear she’d crammed into the packs she’d brought, he wondered there was anything left in her office. ‘G’head.’

They moved off.

‘Don’t be late for supper. Teal’c’s cooking and you know how he hates his food getting cold.’ *Don’t get into anything with Hammond.* ‘And bring some donuts!’

~*~

Evening came quickly. The planet’s diurnal cycle was eighteen hours long. Human stomachs still used to Earth time demanded their evening meal end up in the middle of the night. Since the team was on staggered watch shifts, it didn’t much matter.

Talk resumed over coffee and Carter’s donuts. With a cheeky grin, she’d presented two boxes, swiped from the officer’s ready room. Now she was sitting in a corner fiddling with a laptop.

Jack pinned Teal’c with an expectant look. ‘Find out anything today?’

Teal’c opened his mouth but Boch beat him to the punch. ‘As it happens, O’Neill, we did. There’s a lot of talk about the attack on Ba’al’s home world. People are speculating who’s behind it.’
‘Several sources claim Zipacna is responsible,’ Teal’c interjected smoothly.

‘Zippy?’ Jack grimaced as the image of the skirt-wearing, produce-adorned Goa’uld sprang to mind. ‘He wouldn’t have the balls,’ he said bluntly.

‘In the past, no,’ said Jacob. ‘But the Tok’ra have been gathering intel lately that suggests Zipacna has aligned himself with Anubis. If Anubis really does have the ordnance that Osiris was suggesting at the Summit, then Zipacna would be confident enough to attack someone like Ba’al.’

Jack grimaced. ‘Things are changing. The balance of power is shifting – in flux, at least. Minor Goa’uld becoming more powerful, challenge and counter challenge. No doubt double-crosses galore.’

Boch looked up from his meal. ‘There is a lot of talk in certain circles about Anubis, how there’s a frantic scramble among the Goa’uld to either align with him or secure other allegiances in preparation to making a stand against him.’

‘And Daniel’s in the middle of it all.’

‘Where does Yu stand?’ Ferretti asked.

‘He stands apart,’ replied Jacob. ‘As he’s always done. He’s never courted partnership with other System Lords, nor has he stood against them. He holds his own territory and has the fleet and armies to defend them.’

‘Why did Ba’al take the doc to Yu?’ Bairnsdale asked. ‘He kept him hidden for so long and then suddenly he’s showing him off, where everyone could see.’

‘Bargaining power,’ Boch said. ‘Ba’al wanted something from Yu and he needed Yu to know Doctor Jackson was under his control.’

‘Which leads back to why Ba’al needs Daniel,’ finished Ferretti.

‘I wonder…’ Boch began. ‘A couple of months ago I heard rumours of a secret group working within the Goa’uld, some of them may even be System Lords.’

‘As did the Linvris?’ Teal’c asked.

‘You’ve heard of the Linvris?’ Boch sounded impressed. ‘Yes, much like the Linvris.’

‘And just who is in this secret group?’ Jack finished his second donut and poured a coffee for himself and Jacob.

‘No idea, O’Neill. It’s secret. All I know is it’s a small group and they came together some time in the last year.’

‘Perhaps they have aligned themselves in response to the threat posed by Anubis.’ Teal’c chewed thoughtfully on his fourth donut. Jack weighed his chances of scoring another. Damn.

Boch nodded.

‘Jacob?’ Jack looked the general.

‘News to us, Jack. But I’ll make a point of asking at my next check-in.’

Bairnsdale leaned forward, excitement in her voice. ‘If Ba’al is part of this group, maybe he was
trying to persuade Yu to join. He could have been using Doc Jackson as an example of his ‘superiority’ over the Tau’ri?'

The others joined in with various opinions. Jack tuned out, focused instead on his 2IC: sitting at the back, her meal ignored as she typed furiously on her laptop. He rose and snuck up behind her.

‘Watch’a doin’?'

Her flinch was as good as an admission of guilt. She recovered, entered a final string of code and cleared the screen before looking up at him, defiant and determined.

‘Sir—I’m worried about Daniel’s memory. I thought I could use the time here to review his mission reports and just check if there are any inconsistencies.’

Jack processed. Blinked. ‘You mean you’ve got his mission reports? Here? Are you nuts?’

Conversation behind them stilled. Carter flushed, but didn’t look away. ‘Sir, they’re triple encoded, protected by retinal scan and thirty-digit passwords. Any unauthorised attempt to access the reports will ignite the thermite I’ve placed inside the laptop.’

He kept the hard stare on her for a full twenty seconds. ‘You wired your laptop?’

‘Well—er—it’s not my usual one—it’s a spare—uh—yes, sir.’

He couldn’t help the stare melting into a grin. ‘Sweet. So. Find anything?’ Protocol be damned. Hammond would flip if he found out, but if anything could help them find Daniel, he’d sign off on it. He plunked himself next to her.

Carter blew out a sigh of relief. ‘I’ve just started looking, sir. He did file a report on his time on Abydos, though.’

‘Bring it up.’

The document glowed white on the screen, headed by the SGC logo and admonishments of *Eyes Only – Top Secret*. Jack settled down to read.

**MISSION REPORT:**

Offworld expedition to the Planet Abydos, 8 July, 1996.

Including personal recollections of the culture, language and social structure of the Abydonian people.

Daniel Jackson, MA, PhD, PhD, PhD.

Jack glanced at the page count: 379. Oy. ‘Ferretti, put some more coffee on, will you? Make it strong.’ This was gonna take a while.
As it turned out, Daniel’s mission report ran for only two pages, and was sparsely, tersely detailed. Jack went through it once, then again. Daniel’s simply worded statements brought a wealth of images flooding Jack’s memory: pyramid; saw the mine; met the chief; stayed to dinner; caught by Ra; Kasuf led the uprising… No mention of Jack getting him killed in Ra’s throne room, or Daniel trying to persuade him not to kill them all.

It was perfunctory – a summation of events that had happened eighteen months prior to the telling. Following the main report was a much more expansive, carefully detailed, even loving report on every aspect of the Abydonian way of life. Jack skimmed it and made a promise to read it with the attention it deserved as soon as time allowed. He looked at the long list of mission reports; viewed like that he was actually impressed with the huge number of missions his team had completed. Finding any inconsistencies was going to keep Carter busy for a while.

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When Jack woke next morning – to an already bright, hot day – she was still sitting cross-legged on her mattress, laptop burning brightly in front of her. She had it hooked up to a small naquada generator. He grinned at the thought of what kind of energiser bunny that thing could be.

‘Morning, sir.’ Bairnsdale handed him coffee. ‘Ship is secure. Sandy and General—Jacob have gone to the shipping office for an update.’

‘Thanks, Joyce.’ Getting his people to drop the formal titles was an uphill battle.

‘Pleasure… Jack.’

‘Sam? Carter!’ When she finally looked up there was a puzzlement etched in her tired face. ‘You been at that all night?’

‘Yes, sir. I’ve found other inconsistencies in Daniel’s reports.’

‘Really?’ Jack felt a cold shock sweep over him. He really hadn’t expected her to find anything. Hadn’t wanted there to be anything to find.

‘Only little things; nothing that affected the mission or our safety. But, there’s something else. I’ve been checking the logs of who accessed Daniel’s reports.’

‘Why?’

‘I noticed something odd.’

He sculled his coffee and crawled over to her. ‘How odd?’

‘I’m not sure. It’s probably none of my business.’

‘Spill it, Carter.’

She flipped the screen back to the report list and highlighted a line of dates and names, all of which were the same: Colonel J. O’Neill, 24 October 1997.
‘What is that?’

‘Access logs. Sir, you accessed all of Daniel’s reports from the beginning of the program to the mission in which Nem took Daniel captive. I just wondered what you were looking for.’

‘No, I didn’t.’

‘Uh, yes, you did.’ She pointed at the accusing screen.

‘Did not.’

‘Sir—’

‘Carter, I haven’t read any of these files since Daniel originally sent them to me.’

‘But, your access code was used.’

‘Someone else must have…’ He trailed off as the flat rejection of that idea widened her eyes. Yeah, like he gave his authorisation code to anyone.

‘When was that?’

‘24 October… Oh, no.’

‘What?’

‘Sir, that was the day Hathor arrived and took control—’

*Of the base and all the men, including me.* ‘You mean, she—I—’

‘You weren’t yourself, sir.’ She sounded apologetic.

Sickened, he slumped back against the cold metal wall. Hathor had used him to plunder Daniel’s mission reports. She’d gained all sorts of sensitive intel on the planets they’d visited. *Never gonna be free of that cow.*

‘Just Daniel’s reports?’

‘Well, I’ve only checked Daniel’s. We can investigate further when we get back to the SGC.’

‘Must be how she got so much information on the base.’ It was a question that had never properly been answered. ‘It’s too late now, but we’d better check the rest of the base archives when we get back. What?’

Another frown was forming on her forehead. ‘If Hathor had accessed our reports, even just Daniel’s, why did she go through that charade with the memory scanner when she took us prisoner?’

‘Why indeed. And it was a charade, wasn’t it? None of the intel we gave up was worth a damn.’

‘None of this makes sense, sir. The more we investigate, the more questions we have.’

‘Perhaps Hathor sought to correlate your recollections with the written accounts in the mission reports.’ Teal’c spoke up from the shadowy corner where he’d been kel’no’reeming.

Jack felt as if he were slowly sinking in quicksand. ‘Why?’ he asked. Again.

‘To verify the accuracy of the reports?’ mused Carter.
‘Or to verify the accuracy of the memory recall device,’ Teal’c said.

Jack’s brain finally kicked in and latched on to the vital word. ‘Memories. Everything keeps coming back to memories. Daniel said Ba’al was searching his memories, too.’

‘Hathor was pretty interested in what happened to Ra. She could have wanted more detail about the uprising on Abydos. Daniel’s report was pretty sketchy – maybe that’s why she used the memory device on us.’

Jack grimaced. ‘Why is it every overdressed popinjay of an alien wants to futz with Daniel’s head?’

‘He has received more attention than one would assume to be usual,’ Teal’c commented.

‘What’s usual about someone channel-surfing through your past?’

‘Or playing your worst experiences over and over in 3-D?’

‘Or searching for a wife who’s been dead for thousands of years. He was fuzzy for days after we got him back from Nem.’

‘Or being subjected to a Goa’uld hand jewel three times.’ Teal’c’s voice was filled with anger. ‘I have not known even the strongest Jaffa to survive such an attack even once.’

‘Four times,’ Ferretti piped up. He, Bairnsdale and Roberts were sprawled on their bedding, listening intently to SG-1’s conversation.

Jack pinned the major with a hard stare. ‘I’ll say – for the tenth time today – what?’

Sam and Teal’c were likewise surprised. ‘Lou, Daniel’s been attacked with the ribbon device three times, not four,’ Carter said.

‘Not according to the doc.’ He frowned at the flat denial coming back at him. ‘Okay, when you and Doc Fraiser and Daniel came back from Egypt, I picked you up at the airport, remember? Daniel wasn’t feeling well so I drove him home while you went on to the base.’

Carter nodded and Jack remembered his own frustration at the delays caused by domestic flights that had foiled his and Teal’c’s attempts to reach their team.

‘Well, by the time we reached his apartment, Daniel was really unwell – balance was shot, headache, blurred vision, you name it. He said Amonet zapping him for the third time might have been the end of the cycle, but now that Osiris had got him he was afraid there were more System Lords lining up in the future. Bad things come in threes, you see.’

‘He must have been confused,’ Carter said dismissively.

‘Possibly he was – then. But the next day I called by with his Jeep. He’d left it at the mountain. He was feeling better, still headachy and tired but compos mentis, you know? He said getting drilled by those ribbon devices was the worst and four times was just ridiculous. He said if I saw another Goa’uld coming at him with one I had his permission to shoot them. Which was kind of a joke, but that’s how I remember what he said. Four times.’

Jack felt a shiver creep over him. He glanced swiftly at Teal’c and Carter. ‘Klorel got him on the Ha’tok.’

‘Osiris did it in Egypt,’ added Carter.
‘Amonet attacked Daniel Jackson…’ Teal’c broke off, still discomfited by the action he’d then been forced into.

‘That’s three. When else has Daniel mixed it with a System Lord, and we didn’t… what—notice?’

‘He didn’t name the perp, Jack. Sorry, I thought you knew,’ Ferretti said.

Teal’c and Carter were looking as appalled and confused as Jack felt. He was silent, every encounter SG-1 had made with a System Lord or even a Goa’uld raced through his head like a fast forwarded montage of bad movies.

Apophis—no.

Multiple dudes on Chulak—no.

Klorel—check.

Chronos—no.

Nirrti—no.

Yu—no.

Sokar—no.

Osiris—check.

Amonet—check.

Hathor… Daniel had spent a lot of time with The Cow. Had she violated his mind as well as his body? And then there was the Goa’uld Mardi Gras. The thing – well, one thing – he’d hated about that whole set-up was that Daniel had been alone in amidst a swarm of Goa’uld, his only backup out of reach on a Tel’tak. Osiris had nearly filleted him, Yu had nearly… what else had happened? But, no – Mardi Gras had been a whole year after the Egypt debacle. So that left…

‘Perhaps Hathor attacked Daniel Jackson at the SGC,’ Teal’c said quietly.

‘He was pretty out of it when we found him.’ Carter said the words reluctantly, as if invading Daniel’s privacy somehow.

‘And yet there was no mark upon Daniel Jackson’s skin, as such attacks invariably produce.’

‘There is another possibility, Jack.’ Ferretti leaned forward, his expression intent. ‘The doc spent time as a prisoner of Ra, remember? He thought he’d coerced Daniel into killing us outside the pyramid. Maybe that was the first time?’

‘Could be, Lou. He never really went into what happened with Ra.’

‘Would it be in the report he filed, sir?’

‘There’s nothing in his official report about being ribboned. The rest of the document is about Abydonian culture. He never mentioned it either, not to me, anyway. That’s the problem, Carter. If something happened to him, something that’s causing consequences now, we need to know about it.’

Jack glared out the open door at the rows of stalled traders. If it had been Hathor who’d ribboned Daniel, well there was no real way of finding out. But, if it had been Ra…
He got to his feet and ferreted through a crate of his gear. Sunglasses, GDO, canteen. ‘Carter, keep
digging through Daniel’s reports. Concentrate on the times he was ribboned and both times we met
Hathor. Teal’c, keep an eye on the kids and fill in Jacob when he gets back.’ He shoved a handful of
power bars into his jacket pockets. ‘Lou, fancy a walk?’

Ferretti gave him the standard infantryman’s groan, even as he got to his feet. He grabbed his own
gear, and was halfway to the door before Teal’c could arch an eyebrow. ‘How far are we going?’
Lou asked.

A thin smile tugged Jack’s mouth. ‘From here to the ‘gate. And, depending if Skaara’s at the
pyramid or not, from the ‘gate to Nagada.’

‘You are going to Abydos, O’Neill?’ Teal’c enquired.

‘We’ll be back – six hours, tops.’ Jack swept his gaze over their astonished faces. ‘Don’t leave
without us.’

Jack slapped Lou on the shoulder and took off at a steady jog, headed for the Stargate.

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They didn’t have to wait to use the Stargate and in a timeless sweep of molecules they stepped onto
the Land of the Light. Jack made straight for the DHD and began dialling Abydos as soon as the
wormhole disengaged.

~ Taurus ~

Ferretti stood facing the dark forest. ‘Y’know they really should rename this place.’

~ Serpens Caput ~

‘Land of the Not-So-Light?’

~ Capricorn ~


~ Monoceros ~

‘Land of It ’s-Really-Much-Lighter-Somewhere-Else.’

~ Sagittarius ~

‘Half and Half Land.’

~ Orion ~

Jack grinned and punched the final, point of origin, chevron. The Stargate blew out the excess
energy generated by the wormhole and settled into inviting blue ripples. Jack punched the SGC’s
code into the GDO. ‘Light’s green – let’s go!’

Six long strides and a deep exhalation carried him through, and then he was blinking in dim gloom
and inhaling warm dry air scented with sweaty bodies, mastage dung fires and enticing food.
Ferretti sniffed loudly. ‘Man, that brings back some memories. I swear, I’m gonna retire here. Bring the wife, get a little mud brick place. Heaven.’

It sounded like a good plan to Jack too, but he didn’t let himself dwell on the future. Noting with pride the ‘gate sentries had taken cover behind reinforced bunkers, he waved at their cautiously emerging figures.

‘Colonel Jack O’Neill – Earth!’ he announced. Behind them a metallic rasp echoed as the iris slid shut over the ‘gate.

‘O’Near!’

‘Hey, kids.’ He recognised a couple of original members of Skaara’s crew. More people emerged from behind pillars and out of bolt holes, and quickly swamped the two of them in hugs.

‘Welcome, O’Near, Ferretti!’ Nabeh grinned at them. He saluted, nearly as crisply as a fresh recruit. Jack zipped a salute back at him. ‘Nabeh, nice to see you. Everything okay here?’

‘Our peace is undisturbed, Colonel Jack. Since Dan’yer brought us the eye-riss we have not been visited by the false gods.’

‘That’s good to hear.’ Lou glanced appreciatively at the young soldiers, and Jack knew what was running through his mind: their little army of boys was all grown up now.

Jack nodded, steeling himself for the delivery of their bad news. Daniel was honoured like no other among the Abydonians – no matter how much he protested. After the near-miss with Amonet and the final loss of Sha’re and her baby, Daniel had implemented a trade system for the Abydonian people. In return for small, regular shipments of naquada ore, the SGC had installed an iris over the ‘gate and furnished the Abydonians with sufficient radios and weapons to protect themselves.

‘Where is Dan’yer, O’Near? He did not come?’ A young woman, barely eighteen, looked hopefully past him.

‘He’s not with us this time. Is Skaara here?’

‘Skaara is working in the food-lands,’ another said, voice filled with incredulity. ‘He spends much time there. He says he enjoys it!’

Fondness twitched Jack’s mouth. Another part of Earth’s payment for the ore was tools and seeds for market gardens – enough to feed the growing city – along with solar-driven irrigation pumps and ploughs adapted for smelly mastages.

‘We need to speak with him. Can—’

‘I will escort you,’ Nabeh jumped in. ‘Akil, you are in charge of the guard.’ He sprinted off to the doorway and poised there impatiently.

Lou and Jack bade quick farewells and hurried after Nabeh, through the twisting dark passages of the pyramid, along the sun-dappled rows of the Hypostyle Hall, and out into the blazing sunlight. A momentary pause for sunglasses, then they were striding down the ramp, following their guide across the golden sands of Abydos. By the time they crested the first dune they were both sweating freely.

Lou gave Jack an ironic grin. ‘Next trade shipment needs to have some dune buggies.’
‘Good idea.’ Jack sucked in a lungful of dry air. It tasted both alien and familiar, and he savoured it. The fine sand gradually made its way into his boots as they slogged up the ever-changing dunes, sliding down into the more accessible gullies. He felt faintly ridiculous wearing jeans and a Minnesota Wild shirt, but at least they were far better than the off-world alien leathers the mission had started out in. His hands kept reaching to steady his P90, but it was stashed back on their ship. There’d been no need to bring it – large weapons would have drawn attention on Gaidhlig - and there were ordnance dumps here on Abydos if needed. Still, he felt exposed with just a zat in his pocket.

After half an hour they passed the mine workers’ rest tent, now substantially better equipped and significantly less occupied.

Nabeh pointed at a small party of workers heading to the mine for the afternoon shift. ‘My brother Sanna says the mine is a much better place to work since Dan’yer made it safe, but I am happy to be a militia guard. That place is evil. It nearly killed me when I was a child.’ He scowled hatefully at the distant forbidding gouge in the land.

‘There been any accidents since mining started up again?’ Ferretti asked.

‘No one has died, not even fallen off a ladder. The Earth engin-eers are very strict. Sanna says they are too cautious sometimes, and they would get more ore the old fashioned way, but I think it is better nobody dies retrieving the false god’s rocks.’

‘Much better,’ Jack murmured.

They could see tiny solar-driven diggers working at the base of the black scar in the rock. Above, abandoned ladders hung high on the walls, a constant reminder of the threat of death that had been a way of life for every Abydonian living under Ra’s iron rule: how one slip could – and so often had – sent a man, woman or child plunging hundreds of metres to the mine floor.

Another half hour brought them to the crest of the last and biggest dune.

‘Home sweet home,’ Ferretti breathed.

There, gilded bronze in the slanting rays of the sun, Nagada sat waiting for them. Jack couldn’t help smiling. It was a beautiful place, filled with good people. Ferretti’s comment about retirement filtered through his mind, a tempting even foreseeable goal. But, first things first.

They began their final descent, sliding three feet with every step. The city looked much the same: strong walls ready to rebuff the fierce dust storms. But now there was an addition. Jack had expected it, but seeing the actual thing was still surprising. Another wall, half the height of the main wall extended two hundred metres out and ran horizontally along the full width of the city, broken only by a guard tower and gate in the centre. Green tips of trees could be seen amid large cloth shade sails.

Walking through this entrance was like stepping into a new world. The scouring dryness of the air was replaced by moist earthy scents; green life surrounded their senses. The temperature dropped by noticeable degrees, and water tinkled and splashed in the background.

‘Oh, my.’ Jack felt a jaw-dropping grin develop on his face. Look what you did, Daniel.

To either side of the causeway leading into the city, rows of crops, fruit trees and raised vegetable beds stretched the length of the city walls. Foot-high corn rows marched along the stone wall, young citrus trees already bore their first fruit; broccoli, carrots, radishes, peas, dozens of Earth-derived
crops interspersed with the few native Abydonian plants that grew edible produce… everywhere they looked plants were blooming strongly.

‘Hey, the bore’s working well.’ Ferretti grinned. ‘No pun intended.’ Lou detoured to examine the artesian bore he’d helped install a year ago. Solar-powered pumps brought water up from deep underground and fed it into wells and irrigation pipes all over the garden. It was a little odd to see pvc piping next to home-made hemp ropes, tough Kevlar shade sails over a mastage pulling a single-furrow plough, but damn, didn’t the results speak for themselves?

Daniel had kept Jack and the team up to date with the developments on Abydos, but it had been months since he’d been able to personally visit; SG-1’s crippling mission schedule kept them moving constantly. You need to see this, buddy. In fact, when we bring you home, I think a little R&R leave here will be top of my recommendations. Jack wandered through a grove of olive trees and spotted a familiar figure, ass up in a bed of cabbages.

‘Yo! Skaara!’

Skaara jerked upright, face creasing into a huge smile. ‘O’Near!’ He dropped his tools and jogged over.

Jack folded the kid into a bear hug and didn’t let go for a long time. ‘Told you to call me Jack,’ he muttered into those Rastafarian ringlets.

‘Jack. It is good to see you. We did not expect your visit.’

‘You look well, Skaara.’ He did look good: skin shining and tanned, he’d put on a little weight too. Much better than the thin, pale kid they’d brought home from Tollana.

‘I am very well, Jack. I am a farmer! I spend my days battling insects and desert lizards. Do you like our garden? We have followed the instructions of Dan’yer and his gardeners, and now we are giving food to the people. Soon, we will have enough for everybody, all year round.’

‘Sure beats yaphetta bread and gruel, I guess.’ The staple subsistence diet of the Abydonians had been one of the more subtle methods employed by Ra to keep control.

‘I have much to show you, Jack. And Dan’yer. Is that him?’

‘No, that’s Ferretti. Lou!’

Ferretti answered his summons and received a hug from Skaara.

‘Did Dan’yer not come?’

Jack opened his mouth but was drowned out by a peal of horns from overhead. Startled, he looked up to the watch towers over the main gate. The platform was packed with people, hanging over the railing waving at them. Two youngsters were blowing so enthusiastically into the enormous horns their feet left the platform with every gust.

‘Think our cover’s blown, Colonel,’ Lou yelled.

Jack swept his cap off and waved back. All along the wall heads were appearing over ramparts or at windows and balconies. Cheers and ululating calls of greeting showered down on them as the news of their arrival spread.

‘We’d better go pay our respects to Kasuf.’
Thin brown fingers closed over his arm, steely strength masked by the gentle grip. ‘Jack.’ Skaara stared up at him. ‘Where is my brother?’

Jack replied quietly, his words carrying under the noise overhead. ‘Daniel’s been taken captive. By Ba’al. We need your help, Skaara.’

~*~

Skaara led them through the twisting streets of the city. It was slow progress. Everyone wanted to see them, shake their hand or touch their head. Jack never really liked the whole ‘returning hero’ thing, but it gave him a little extra time to put his thoughts together. Finally they were ushered over one last rope and wood bridge, and through the low door of Kasuf’s home to exchange bows and greetings with the head man.

Kasuf regarded them with his usual expression of tempered suspicion. His gaze swept past them, found only his son and townsfolk and returned to Jack, questions already forming.

‘O'Neill, Ferretti. You are welcome in my home. Sit.’ Kasuf sat in his own carved chair and indicated the padded benches along one wall.

Jack and Lou sat, Skaara perched on a cushion at their feet, and as many people as possible squeezed into the doorway and open windows. A couple of young women, cousins of Skaara if Jack’s memory held, served tea laced with pungent native bush mint. After the customary first sip, Jack set his cup down and regarded Kasuf. He looked well, hardly changed from the first time they had met. He held the grief of his only daughter’s death hidden from public view.

‘Kasuf, I’m sorry to bring bad news. Daniel has been captured by the Goa'uld.’

Shock rippled through the onlookers. Kasuf stilled the murmuring with a raised hand. ‘Is my Good Son now a false god?’ His hand settled protectively on Skaara’s shoulder.

‘No,’ Jack said, a little too forcefully. ‘Not unless it’s happened in the last few weeks. He was kidnapped on Earth. A couple of weeks ago we found out it was Ba'al who had him.’

Kasuf peered intently at him. ‘How long has my Good Son been imprisoned by this Ba'al?’

Ferretti shifted uneasily on his seat. Jack straightened and said evenly, ‘Daniel’s been missing for fifteen weeks now.’ Tallied like that it hurt even more. ‘For a lot of that time we thought he was still on Earth. A couple of weeks ago we found out it was Ba'al who had him.’

Kasuf dismissed his apology. ‘What does this false god want from my Good Son?’

‘Well, that’s part of why we’re here,’ Ferretti said. ‘We were hoping Skaara could answer a few questions we have.’

Kasuf gave a short nod and prodded Skaara’s shoulder. ‘You will go with them. Find my Good Son Daniel as he found you, and return him to his home.’

‘Oh, actually…’
‘We didn’t mean…’ Jack and Lou spoke and trailed off, both realising that while they had no wish to put Skaara in harm’s way he was a uniquely valuable resource that could help them infiltrate the Goa’uld.

Skaara leapt to his feet, determination shining fiercely in his face. ‘I am ready to leave, O’Near.’

‘And I!’

‘Me—I will come!’

‘Me—me—’ Several of Skaara’s young cohorts, veterans of the uprising, pushed their way through the press of bodies and more could be heard outside, taking up the call to join the rescue party.

‘Whoa, wait. Much as we appreciate the offers we don’t have a lot of room on the Space… uhm, our ship.’ Jack watched Skaara rummage in a chest and pull out a travel cloak and his MP5. He slung the rifle over his shoulder and in a heartbeat transformed from amiable young farmer to seasoned warrior. Jack didn’t know whether to feel proud or immensely sad.

‘Tobay, Seni, come with me.’ Skaara gave his father a short respectful bow and headed for the door. ‘Janeth, the seedlings must be planted before the full moon. Mala, there are grubs on the grapefruit trees…’ His voice faded as he vanished through the crowd.

Jack shared a bemused glance with Lou.

‘Thought we were just gonna ask some questions?’

He shrugged helplessly. *That was the plan.*

‘O’Neill.’ Kasuf’s sharp voice demanded attention. ‘Find my Good Son Daniel and bring him home.’

‘We will, Kasuf. I promise.’

Dismissing them, Kasuf nodded once. Jack headed for the door. The spectators parted for them, but Kasuf’s voice reached out with a pleading demand. ‘Take care of my child.’

Jack met the head man’s stare. ‘On my life, Kasuf, I’ll bring them both home.’

~*~

It was slow progress back to the Stargate. News of their mission had spread through the entire city; people crowded the walkways above and the streets around them to wish them well. Everywhere Jack could hear ‘Dan’yer’ in the swell of chatter. Cousins, aunts, uncles of Skaara and Sha’re – Daniel’s family – pressed close, stopping them again and again to wish them well or push gifts into their hands. Ferretti was already loaded with a sack full of food. Jack handed over the pile of flatbread and cauldron of stew he’d just received, when a tiny woman, no more than five feet high, grabbed his hand.

‘Dan’yer… safe.’ She thrust a small sack into his hands, its pungent, crinkling contents had to be medicinal herbs. ‘He safe us. Colonel Jack safe Dan’yer.’ She added a rapid stream of Abydonian.

Jack leaned over and squeezed her hand. ‘I will. And thank you.’
He pushed on, shaking hands, receiving gifts, waving at familiar faces. Oddly, this expectation that he would return Daniel to his home – homes – wasn’t weighing him down. Instead he was buoyed by their sure belief that of course he would find their wayward son. All around he could hear English mixed into the Abydonian calls of advice being shouted from all sides. Daniel’s influence on his adopted home rained down on Jack, and he knew that he only had to ask and he would have an army, raised in an instant, ready to fight for the freedom of an unassuming archaeologist.

A middle-aged man, the kids’ uncle, thrust a pile of thick robes into Jack’s arms as he finally got to the main gate. A young girl, looking – for a heart-stopping moment – the image of Sha’re, reached up on tiptoes and placed a cloth-wrapped bundle on top of the stack in his arms: something sweet by the smell of it.

‘Thank you.’ He smiled at her, and with difficulty pulled himself away and caught up to Skaara who was giving his gardeners rapid-fire instructions. Ferretti staggered up, a walking quartermaster’s store. Tobay and Seni took some of the load, and the group followed Skaara out the garden gate, sped on their way with a melodious sending from the well-wishers crowding the balconies and ramparts. Jack could see Kasuf in his distinctive red robes, standing alone on his balcony, grim and unmoving.

~*~

‘Skaara, you’re sure about this? We really just came to ask you some questions. It could be dangerous when we get to Ba’al’s homeworld.’ He’d never intended to remove Skaara from the safety of Abydos. The boy had a lifetime of suffering already, but there was no denying his insight into the Goa’uld mindset was unique and could prove invaluable when they went undercover on Ba’al’s homeworld.

The look Skaara gave him reminded Jack this was no longer the kid who had been impressed with his lighter. There was a world-weary maturity in this young man that spoke of experiences not known to many a seasoned soldier.

‘Dan’yer is my brother. I will not leave him in the hands of the demons. Sha’uri will not let me rest if I do.’ His gaze went over Jack’s shoulder to the city’s burial grounds.

Jack felt a little shiver. If anyone was going to come back as an avenging angel, it was Daniel’s fiery wife. He smiled at Skaara’s use of her maiden name. Okay, then.

‘Well, we’ve been trying to work out what Ba’al wants with Daniel. He hasn’t stuck a snake in him so far. Daniel managed to get a message to us, and three weeks ago the Tok’ra filmed Ba’al taking Daniel on some kind of state visit to Yu.’

‘Ba’al took Dan’yer to Yu’s homeworld?’ Skaara sounded surprised.

‘Yeah. He was veiled and done up like some kind of harem… worker, but there’s no hiding Daniel’s eyes. We think he was drugged though.’

A scowl creased Skaara’s face as he led the climb up the first dune, and he did not speak until he reached the crest. ‘Ba’al is well known for his scheming. Many times he would undermine Apophis’ plans. He would often be ahead of Apophis, already in possession of a resource or piece of technology sought by my demon’s father. Then he would declare surprise at Apophis’ desire for the
item in question and offer to sell it, always at a price much greater than its worth.’ A thin smile spread across his face. ‘Ba'al vexed Apophis greatly.’

Skaara continued down the slope but Jack and Lou both paused for a final look back at Nagada. Dusk was falling gently over the city, burnishing it in rose-coloured light. It was a city at peace: hard-won and long overdue. Reluctantly, Jack and Lou turned away and hurried after the youngsters.

‘So he’s a schemer,’ Lou said. ‘Would he use Daniel in one of these schemes? He hasn’t made a ransom demand.’

‘In the message Daniel got to us, Skaara,’ Jack added, ‘he said Ba’al was searching his memories. He had something like the memory recall machine the Tok’ra use.’

‘I know of this machine. Apophis sent Klorel to bargain for it, but Ba’al would not sell. He valued it highly because of the effort taken to steal it from the Tok’ra.’

‘Say what?’ Lou managed to sputter while Jack’s brain just hiccuped in disbelief. ‘That thing Ba’al is torturing Daniel with is Aunt Bertha’s machine?’

Skaara blinked. ‘Your aunt also has a mind sifting device?’

‘Oh, no, that’s just a nickname for one of the, ah… Tok’ra.’ Ferretti refused to meet Jack’s gaze.

‘Remind me to have a word with Jacob,’ Jack muttered.

Skaara continued. ‘It was well-known among the Goa’uld that Ba’al had stolen an important machine from the Tok’ra. It caused much laughter amongst the System Lords particularly because it was the second time such technology had been removed from the Tok’ra.’

‘Hathor,’ Jack spat the name. ‘She used it on us. And we didn’t question for a moment when the Tok’ra turned up and used it… on us.’

Lou grimaced. ‘Starting to feel like a guinea pig, Jack?’

‘Oh, yeah. Okay, so this memory technology was developed by the Tok’ra and stolen by the Goa’uld. Daniel said Ba’al’s version was way more powerful. He also said this machine was bringing up memories from Amonet and Osiris.’

Skaara whirled around so fast his braided hair hit him in the face. He slid a few feet down the dune as he stared up at Jack. ‘How could Dan’yer possess the memories of Amonet and Osiris?’ The alarm on his face seemed to Jack an over-reaction to the news.

‘Uh, well, we’re guessing that happened when they attacked him with the ribbon thing. He didn’t say what the memories were, but that’s the only thing they have in common concerning Daniel.’ *Apart from both hosts being someone he loved.*

The information served to increase Skaara’s anxiety. ‘Amonet attacked Dan’yer with the Ninvan’etak, the hand ribbon? When?’

‘It was the day Sha’re died. I thought you knew, Skaara. Amonet damn near killed him with that thing. Sha’re managed to slip Daniel a message about her son through the connection. I guess something from Amonet filtered through as well.’

‘And Osiris? Did Osiris attack Dan’yer the same way?’
‘Yeah. Osiris bolted to an abandoned temple, on Earth. Carter, Fraiser and Daniel tried to stop her. She threw Carter and Fraiser against a wall and drilled Daniel with the ribbon. He said she wanted to know where Isis was. He managed to stab her with a drug and she took off in a Tel’tak.’

Tobay and Seni’s eyes were saucered, amazed by all the talk of false gods in such familiar terms. In contrast, Skaara was troubled. He resumed their trek with long, swift strides.

Jack caught him up, determined to find some answers to what felt like an ever-growing pile of questions.

‘This is why I wanted to talk to you. We think Daniel’s memories are being affected by these attacks…’ Jack gave him a run-down of everything they’d concluded so far. He took a long swig from his canteen, his mouth dry from all this talking, and the suns’ heat was still merciless despite being just an afterglow on the horizon.

Skaara didn’t slacken his pace; he strode across the Abydonian sands with determined purpose, face scrunched in a scowl. After ten minutes of concentrated thought he finally spoke. ‘There is something wrong, Jack. In the time I was a prisoner of the demon Klorel, he was careful not to give me access to his own knowledge, but now and then some things would concern him so greatly that I could ‘hear’ his thoughts.

‘After the failed attack on Earth, he was desperate to conceal from Apophis that he had failed to kill Dan’yer with the Ninvan’etak. I thought it was his pride that he could not admit a failure, but… there was something more behind his fear. I—’ He spat in frustration. ‘I will endeavour to remember.’

‘And Daniel? Did he ever tell you about what happened to him when Ra had him captive on his ship?’

Skaara looked at Jack, face filled with surprise. ‘Dan’yer was attacked by the false one when he revived Sha’uri in the sarcophagus. The false one used the Ninvan’etak on Dan’yer but they fell into the ring transporter and escaped.’

The image of Daniel and Sha’re being deposited in the ‘gate room next to the headless Anubis guard flashed clearly across Jack’s mind. There’d been so much going on he hadn’t questioned what had happened, how Daniel had retrieved Catherine’s necklace from Ra. He’d seemed okay. They’d partied, then Jack, Lou and Charlie had gone home.

‘Ra did ribbon Daniel. He was the fourth. Or, technically, the first.’

‘After you returned home, Jack, Dan’yer fell ill. He suffered greatly from fever and such headaches that he cried out with the pain. Sha’uri… she feared he would die. She nursed him for three days, gave him the leaves of the minjou grass. When Dan’yer recovered he never spoke of it again.’

~*~

The rest of the journey was made in silence. Both Jack and Skaara had much to think through. Finally they were striding up the ramp and into the Hypostyle hall, its cool shadows a welcome relief from the suns. Without pause they went down to the ‘gate room. Skaara spoke briefly with the lads on guard duty while Jack dialled up Gaidhlig. The ‘gate whooshed into life and with a final farewell, Jack led the group into the wormhole.
They emerged into a late evening where it had already been raining for some time. The downpour washed away the sand and heat of Abydos. Ferretti took point, sloshing through puddles toward the main street. Tobay and Seni murmured quietly, excited and amazed by their first journey to a new world.

So deep in thought was Jack, he jumped when a figure detached from the shadows of the central fountain.

‘Jack? Lou?’ It was Jacob.

‘Way to give a guy a coronary,’ Jack growled.

‘Sorry, but I’ve been standing in the rain for hours.’ Jacob fell into step with them. ‘The ban’s been lifted. We’re cleared for Tsydon. We can go as soon as you’re ready.’
Silence Of The Heart

Chapter Summary

Daniel begins to recover from his injuries and starts to face what was done to him on Tsydon.

Blue blood dripped from his hands, congealed in sticky blue pools on the crisp sheet. Daniel dropped the sundered carcass, unable to meet the gaze of the good people standing at his bedside.

_They’ll think I’m mad. Killed a helpless animal. They brought me into their homes and the first thing I do is kill… Have to tell them. Show them…_

His leg pounded with pain, protesting his sudden movements. He hadn’t expected to have a Goa’uld, of all things, thrust at him. He sagged into the pillows, exhaustion eating at the last of his strength. There – a pencil and blank-paged book sat on the table near the bed. He lurched for it, but was intercepted by strong, gentle hands.

Haranith was there, kind eyes filled with concern. She wiped at his hands, cleaned the blood with deft touches and counted his thundering pulse. He indicated the book and she brought it to him. Daniel tuned out her ministrations to his leg, and paused, staring at the blank page. Words were no help; even if his preliminary assumption was correct that the language they spoke was a derivative of Ancient Egyptian, their written script must have evolved separately from that on Earth. Abydos only had the phonetic-based language he’d made up after the revolution. Likewise, the lost culture on P2Z-158 had left no trace of a written language. Unless, were hieroglyphs still used here? Rapidly he drew the glyphs for danger… and thrust the pad at Haranith. She studied it carefully, but showed no recognition of the symbols. So… stick figures it was.

He sketched a group of human figures: a happy adult, with a big smile; children and others nearby. Then a Goa’uld: immature like the one now removed from his bed. No need to complicate matters with the differences between immature and mature symbiotes. He lifted the pad as his sheet was whisked away. Next, the human: hands and face twisted in alarm with the Goa’uld poised to enter his neck. Then the symbiote was gone, the human’s eyes starred in agony. The final sketch showed the possessed human slaying the children. Crude, but he hoped it would convey the message.

The doctor settled a fresh sheet and blanket over him. Daniel handed her the drawings and watched anxiously as she went through the sequence. Doubt flickered over her face. Daniel tucked her arm, made her look at him. He mimed the snake attacking his own neck, his face changing from an exaggerated smile to a snarl and reached out as if to strangle her. His forehead creased in his effort to will her to understand. She mimed something wiggling then patted her chest. Daniel nodded and clapped his hands. He glanced around to see if the others understood, only to realise they had departed unnoticed.

Haranith stared at him, comprehension and alarm darkening her expression. Gently, she pushed him to lay back and tucked him in, then picked up the book and moved quickly from the room. Relief swept Daniel to a much needed sleep.
Sleep was about the only thing he was capable of for the next indeterminate number of days. His body – weakened from months of stress, infrequent meals and drugs, plus the shock of the crash and injury to his leg – decided it had suffered enough and would take no part in proceedings for the foreseeable future, thank you very much.

He woke when urged to, ate hot soup, and was barely able to tend to basic bodily needs before succumbing once again. Several times he woke to Haranith pricking one of his fingers. She seemed worried about his blood, but that was far outside his ability to be concerned and he subsided into sleep again.

Finally one day he woke while Haranith and her helper – what was his name? – were sponging him clean. He let them finish that and a swift change of the sheets around him. When they were done he was surprised to find himself still awake. Even better, his mind appeared to actually be working.

He let his gaze travel around the room. Bright daylight filtered in through the curtain giving everything a warm, golden appearance. The bedroom was spacious but not large, despite the truly enormous bed he was occupying. It could easily accommodate three of the rangy natives. The textiles used in the sheets, blankets, curtains and decorative panels on the walls were finely milled and intricately woven, which suggested a high degree of technology existed on this planet. Lamps of engraved glass hung from ceiling chains and several potted plants climbed up the walls to entwine over the window architrave.

The assistant removed the laundry from the room while Haranith, her fussing over his leg complete, drew up a chair and sat by his side.

Hello. His silent greeting made her smile.

‘Nethur,’ she replied. Her careful pronunciation let him savour the words, rolling them over his muted tongue, to search for any clue to their meaning. Hints hung tantalisingly out of reach, but promised understanding. One day.

Haranith held up the latest blood sample she had taken from him. ‘Bydoth.’ She picked up a glass of water and held it next to the sample. ‘Latha.’ She held the two together and indicated his body, her concern plain to see.

Blood like water. Images flashed across his mind: flickering lights; sharp pain; red-hued faces pressing close; blood dripping, pooling around his feet, pouring away into the night.

A cool hand on his arm snapped him back to the present. Daniel looked down at his wrist, turned it over and found, like a bizarre confirmation that a nightmare was true, a pale pink scar blemishing the skin. He looked at his left wrist and found a matching scar there too. Shaking off Haranith’s grip he flung the bedclothes aside. A paired set of scars shone on his upper thighs, right over the femoral arteries.

It was real. All real. Of course it was…

He rubbed at the scars, wishing fervently they had merely been a product of his dreams.

They really did it. Stood me on that cliff and bled me dry… and— No.
Humiliation heated his cheeks. He stared at his body, unable to look at Haranith’s kind face, even though she could not – would not – know of the other offering he’d been forced to give.

His fingers scratched at the scars. No wonder I’m anaemic. The sarcophagus was set too low to replace all that blood in such a short time. How… inconvenient. Hysteria threatened to take over, but he shook his head and forced himself to focus on the more recent damage his body had suffered.

Wow. A truly impressive collection of bruises mottled his skin, from toes to… yep, even his hair hurt. Many had bloomed and were now fading into ugly purple and yellow patches, but his right elbow still held a nasty ache. And his leg: wrappings covered it from shin to foot and over that a translucent cast, peppered with tiny air holes, held the broken remains together. He touched the cast, impressed by the absence of weight and the thinness of the shell.

Bet Janet would love that.

Daniel sagged back into his pillows, retrieving the blankets and some sort of modesty. His hand brushed something cold at his waist.

Oh, jeez.

The enormous ruby Ba'al had hung on him was still dangling from his navel, giving him the appearance of a particularly expensive prostitute. Face twisted with loathing he clawed at it, suddenly desperate to get it off. Then Haranith’s deft fingers, so dark against his pale skin, stilled his own and freed the jewel. What she did with it, he didn’t see or care.

After a while, enticing scents of hot food brought him away from his rather desperate attempt to sleep, and he opened his eyes.

The young assistant had returned bearing a tray loaded with food. His stomach gurgled loudly, making the two healers laugh. They propped him up and he attacked the food with as much grace as possible. He couldn’t remember the last decent meal he’d had – apart from Haranith’s soups – and it tasted amazing. Warm herbed rolls, a pot of lentil stew and one of vegetables in a purple tomato-type sauce, boiled eggs, fried slabs of something under rich gravy: it all vanished with indecent savour.

A long time later he was still sitting, staring at the refracted light in the engraved lamps, his mind turning in infuriating circles. The middle finger of his right hand traced the scar on his leg, the too-smooth skin an accusation under his fingertip. Snatches of images flickered through his brain: the noisy colour of Ba’al’s courtesans and concubines; Astarte, sanity buried in lust for her long dead child; the effigy of Eshmun sailing out into the darkness of the sea; Goa’uld in the pool, snakes in the grass, Ba’al pinning him to the floor…

Daniel closed his eyes. He reached almost desperately for sleep, but it eluded him. Mechanically, his finger rubbed and rubbed. Had he died? It took less than three minutes to bleed to death from a severed femoral artery – field first-aid 101. They’d cut both, and the veins in his wrists. The blood had poured from him, down into the water, the sacred river rushing over the cliff into the pool, splashing on the legs and hands of people exalting in his life’s blood, his life… draining away like so much waste… His hand shook. He clenched it into a fist, thumped it on the mattress. Cold washed over him. He was fraying, coming apart piece by piece, hair by hair, thought by thought.
No. I won’t let you win. You can’t have me. I belong to me, not you, you rancid reptile.

He sucked in air through gritted teeth. Get a grip, Danny. Losing it here.

He closed his eyes, pictured Teal’c sitting cross-legged in his room, candles holding back the dark with their warm glow. Centre your mind. Banish despair. Reject anger. Find the silence within your heart and embrace it.

Slowly the anger and confusion faded. His breathing evened and Daniel lost himself in the peace of his silence.

Å

Haranith emerged from Sabire’s home confident her patient would recover from his physical wounds, but greatly disturbed about the cause of some of those injuries. His anaemia indicated major blood loss, yet it had not occurred in the crash.

Those scars – so perfectly situated. Were they self inflicted?

Possible, but in her heart she thought not. The man’s distress at discovering them spoke of a trauma so great it appeared to have been pushed from his memory. And the jewel… She drew it from her pocket. Sunlight caught in its facets, as if it had a life of its own. Truly a precious thing, yet it held no attraction to the man. For days she and Pana had wondered about it, assuming it was a personal decoration or symbol of his wealth or status among his people, yet when he realised it was there he seemed repulsed by it, and had come near to tearing his flesh in his clumsy attempt to remove it. Very curious.

There was another problem: a person needed a name. Denied his own, the Clan were busy making up their own for him. Lostling, Ashen, with the most popular Pyt Xur or Sky Fallen, were circulating through the groups of people who appeared to be spending their days standing about speculating, gossiping and plain making up stories about their guest. No, the man needed his own name and for them to discover that he had to be freed from the vile device silencing him.

Haranith slipped the jewel back into her pocket, dodged the inquisitive gossipers descending on her and aimed for the elders’ home. She trotted up the steps, clanged the brass bell to announce her presence and entered the dim, comfortable house. The entrance hall led into the large day room where Gransire and Gramire, elders and leaders of the Kendasai Clan, conducted the Clan’s business in their gentle, informal manner.

‘Haranith! Be welcome.’ Gramire greeted her with a hug and pressed a cup of hot tea into her hands. ‘Sit, dear.’

‘How fares your patient?’ Gransire enquired. Finish the Learner and Mother Jacuna, already ensconced with tea and cakes, leaned forward eagerly.

A sip of the fragrant tea warmed her spirit and set her a little more at ease. ‘He sleeps well. His body begins to heal. He has eaten his first solid food today and I’m sure will welcome another meal in a short time. His strength returns slowly. I will have him start to move around tomorrow.’ Haranith frowned into her cup. ‘I worry, though. He suffered an… injury, before the crash of the vessel from the stars. Some time ago, judging by the scar tissue. Four cuts, on wrists and thighs, over the major arteries. His red blood cell count is so low he must have endured a major loss of blood. I believe
another person inflicted this harm upon him.’

Over Gramire’s horrified gasp, Gransire asked quietly, ‘The same ones who bound him and stole his voice?’

‘Impossible for us to know, but it would be a likely assumption. They cannot be good people – harbouring those parasites, treating this good man so vilely.’

The story of the worm’s death and the visitor’s graphic illustration of the danger it posed had spread throughout the Clan like a southerly wind change.

‘How can you know he is a good man?’ Binish demanded. ‘He may be the same as those who held him captive—worse, even.’

Haranith nibbled her second tiny cake. ‘He may be, but I think not. His manner is gentle. He listens with great care to our words. He makes no violent move and appreciates all we do for him.’

‘Apart from ripping the creature apart.’

‘Apart from that,’ she conceded. ‘I will believe the best of him until proven otherwise.’

‘A person denied his voice cannot defend himself,’ Gramire said. ‘We must discover a way to free his voice – then we shall hear his tale.’

The next few days saw Daniel rapidly regain his strength. After his first all too short hobble around Sabire’s bedroom, which left him dizzy and panting, he swiftly graduated to cautious steps around the house, balanced on a beautiful pair of hand-carved wooden crutches. A young man, introduced as Shanti, had shyly presented them to him, tentatively touched Daniel’s proffered hand, and fled with a huge grin on his face.

The lightness of the cast helped his hesitant steps. He couldn’t guess at the material it was made from, but it had none of the heaviness of plaster. One more thing to ask about.

The home was interesting. Oblong in shape, its main feature was a large room, bordered by floor to ceiling windows and furnished with comfy-looking chairs, piles of enormous cushions, rugs and potted plants. Musical instruments of all sorts hung from the walls and roof and were dotted around the room. A mini waterfall tinkled down one glass wall beside a standing keyboard instrument that immediately piqued Daniel’s interest.

Even better, a few days earlier Binish – the man who had thrust the Goa’uld at him – had presented him with a brightly coloured electronic box which detailed their beautiful, decorative script. He lost himself completely, discovering the intricacies of what proved to be an abjad, with additional phonetic complements to differentiate homophones. He copied the characters with painstaking accuracy until he reached a firm recognition of them. Then he progressed through the learning tool, identifying simple objects with their names, practicing their correct spelling and sounding out their pronunciation in his head. The language appeared to have no gender and he couldn’t wait to plunge into the syntax and morphology. Absorbed, the bed strewn with paper covered in carefully drawn script, he’d spent hours running through the basic lexicon. A thrill of discovery had run through him; by the end of the first day he had confirmed that while the inhabitants had developed their own
unique writing system, with a high probability it was rooted in Protodynastic cursive Hieratic, the spoken language had its origins in the Egyptian-based Napatan dialect of Earth’s Ancient Nubia.

The discovery was welcome and firm evidence their ancestors had been transplanted. He was certain that somehow, someone had brought these people’s ancestors from Ancient Nubia.

‘Xanam?’ Sabire’s deep voice brought Daniel out of his musings. Following the very human need to call another by a name, any name, Sabire had chosen their word for friend. ‘Day fades, food comes.’

Well, it was a rough translation, but he got the drift. A glance outside confirmed the sun was low over the horizon. It must be dinner time.

Sabire beckoned him to the outer door. Heartily sick of eating in bed, Daniel carefully picked his way out. He took his first step outside—and stopped, astonished at the sight around him.

How many times… Never assume. In the immortal words of Jack O’Neill, D’oh.

Considering his only glimpse of the home he’d been in had come while being funnelled head-first through the door, and that the homes next door had been so close, he’d never realised… They were mobile. The whole ‘village’ was supported by inflated wheels. The homes ranged in size: some smaller than the apartment he’d been evicted from the day before he met Catherine, to elegant double-storied constructions that looked as if they would never possibly move. Many sprouted gardens on their roofs; he caught glimpses of a number of goats grazing under and in small trees. Some caravans were linked to smaller homes by covered walkways. Shade sails leaned at different angles and every one of them were brightly painted in murals or sweeping geometric designs.

Daniel glanced around. He stood on a small porch on Sabire’s home, a narrow stairway led up and Sabire himself stood at the bottom of four steps leading to the ground.

Ah. This could be a problem.

An excited shout made him look past Sabire. People were emerging from their homes, staring at him with keen interest.

Great, an audience. He peglegged across to the steps. One small step for the Earthman.

‘Ii!’ Sabire held out his hands, ready and willing to lift him down.

Not wanting to fall on his face in front of so many people, Daniel swallowed his pride and nodded.

Sabire’s strong arms wrapped around his waist and instantly others were there to take the crutches. Daniel was set gently on the ground and supported while he got the crutches sorted. He looked up to nod his thanks and realised exactly how tall the man was – easily well over seven feet tall. Indeed, all the people crowding around were taller, women, even some of the children.

He felt even more out of place. The borrowed clothes fit him well, some of the many that appeared in the bedroom each day: gifts from these kind people. A loose over-shirt and pants coloured in hand-dyed reds made him blend a little in the riot of colours around him, but he was the lone pale figure in this crowd of rich black. A sudden spark of understanding hit him: in all his travels he had rarely come across a population of one single ethnicity. Most people encountered on other planets had been a blending of the races transplanted by the Goa’uld. Abydos had been an exception. Now, here was another.

The villagers kept a respectful distance as he limped slowly along. Over-curious children were restrained and the whole party gradually delivered him to a central dining area: a crackling bonfire
warded off the evening chill for the seats set around a large circle. From the homes, men and women brought out platters and pots full of steaming food. Family groups settled as Daniel was ushered to a chair next to the elder leaders. Haranith appeared and arranged his leg in the weightless field of the… whatever it was that had kept his leg from touching the bed.

Daniel sank into the big cushioned chair with a sigh. The short hobble felt like he’d run a race. Amazing how quickly you could lose your fitness when you were stuck in a bed for a week. Then again, he’d had a few other things to cope with before that.

He focused and nodded to the community’s elders. The matriarch, Gramire, Sabire had called her, leaned over and patted his arm. He smiled back at her enquiring expression, then Haranith was back, a large bowl of food in her hands. Settling back, he savoured the meal and absorbed his surroundings.

Folk sat around the large circle, eating, talking, moving from one group to another or calling loudly to someone across the way. Children sat with parents, escaping to play and were hauled back to finish their dinner. Men and women gossiped freely, some flirted, some laughed, some spoke with serious intent. Most, at one time or another, cast a glance in his direction and, if he met their gaze, returned his regard with a smile or a nod.

Three youngsters, long limbs still padded with baby fat, wandered close and stood staring at him, mouths agape with unabashed curiosity. Daniel waved at them and was pleased to see them wave back, then they dashed off to tell their families.

Haranith removed his empty bowl – a beautiful hand-turned pottery piece – and it was replaced with a deep oval plate by a middle-aged lady who watched him tentatively. Daniel nodded his thanks to her.

She beamed. ‘Jacuna’, she said, patting her ample bosom. ‘Jaa-coo-naa’.

The loss of his voice cut deeply, once again. But, he did have a limited vocabulary gleaned from the teaching module. He leaned toward Jacuna and carefully mouthed, ‘Son-day’, their word of thanks, if he hadn’t mangled the pronunciation.

‘Sond-ai? Sondaye!’ she sang out loudly, adding an extra syllable to the suffix. ‘Sondaye!’ Enchanted, she grabbed his hand and pumped it enthusiastically. As she returned to her place, she spread the news to everyone she passed, producing a fresh round of admiring or thoughtful looks.

Inordinately pleased, Daniel tucked in to the cheese and dried fruit on his plate. But the flush of success quickly faded. There had to be some way to remove Ba’al’s silencer. He needed his voice; he needed to communicate with those around him. There was so much to ask them, tell them, learn from them and while he was confident of learning their written language, his main medium was speech. This was not some long-dead language hiding clues of a vanished people. It was a living, vital key to his understanding of his rescuers, and could seriously influence his chances of one day going home.

Frustration had his fingers clawing at the thing before reason could catch up. Pain lanced through his throat and set him coughing in silent, heaving gasps.

A hand slipped into his and he gripped it a little desperately. Haranith knelt next to him, rubbing his back, murmuring a soothing litany. When his breathing finally eased, he looked up and was met by a circle of concerned faces. He managed a feeble smile.

Across the dinner circle a shout went up. A middle-aged man jumped to his feet, urged on by those around him. As the man trotted toward where Daniel sat, a ripple of rumours spread from his
companions, out to either side and around the circle, leaping from person to person with such speed that the gossip chain reached Sabire, sitting next to Daniel, at the same moment its instigator reached them.

Beni halted in front of the elders and the Sky-Fallen, his sudden inspiration having carried him to the strange one’s feet before he could think properly. Now he halted, awe swallowing his unformed words. Truly, the sky lived in the man’s eyes. The blue shone like beacons and gave the shockingly bleached skin a saving grace of life. Beside the Sky-Fallen, Haranith pointedly cleared her throat.

*Oh.* He was gaping at their guest like an unmannered babe. Beni straightened up and pressed his palm to his heart in respect for Gramire and Gransire. He repeated the gesture to the Sky-Fallen, and to Haranith for good measure.

‘I… I have an idea, honoured ones. For the—the Sky-Fallen. To free his voice. I have a friend.’

Gramire gave him an encouraging smile. ‘Friends are great blessings, Beni. What could this friend do for our guest?’

‘Yes. Ah. She is greatly skilled with electronic devices. She once helped develop the processors that drive the peds. She might be able to…’ He trailed off as his eyes were drawn to the glint of silver on the Sky-Fallen’s throat. ‘To help our guest retrieve his speech. She lives in Faransi.’

He backed up a few paces, his gaze darting uncertainly between the Sky-Fallen and the elders.

Daniel hadn’t been able to follow much of what the man had said, but from the looks now coming his way, it had to be about him. There was a flurry of conversation around him, then Haranith took over and sharply questioned the man. Finally satisfied, she nodded to the elders and everybody seemed pleased.

*Well, glad that’s been sorted out.* He raised an enquiring eyebrow at Sabire as the decision sent a ripple back around the circle.

‘Pyt Xur’. Sabire embellished his speech with exaggerated flourishes. ‘Go’, he pointed out into the encroaching darkness. ‘House’, or was that *gathering*… *town!* ‘Mend’… Sabire slapped his hand to his throat, then pulled it away and let off a loud yodel, then gestured at Daniel’s silencer.

*Go to a town and get this removed?* His fingers rubbed the cold metal and he looked at the others for confirmation. They watched him with a mix of hope and encouragement. Slowly, he nodded. *Anything to get it off.* He looked up at Beni and smiled, more grateful than he was able to express.
Daniel's voice is returned to him, and a whole new world of worries opens up.

The next day dawned under rolling grey clouds and a chill wind. Haranith had visited early and spent an extended time examining Daniel’s leg and overall fitness. When she released him he had been presented with an enormous hot breakfast, followed by an assisted wash and dressed in several layers of clothes. No bright colours this time. Instead, his pants, tunic, over-vest and long coat were dyed in graduating shades of green. One brown boot and a sock over his cast, matched with brown gloves and scarf finished off the ensemble.

*I look like a tree*, he mused, pushing down a secret pleasure with the effect.

When he made his way outside he found the expedition members gathered around a group of small vehicles: they looked like a cross between jet skis and the small ATVs Jack had been trying to get Hammond to invest in – a lifetime ago. Some were single seaters, some double with cargo trays in the rear. They sat on long skids and hummed quietly with a promise of power.

*Sam would love these.*

Sabire hoisted him down the steps and led him to a sleek machine with a long padded seat. Much fussing, balancing and helpful hands got him astride it with Sabire settled behind him, his long arms and legs easily reaching past Daniel to the controls. The anti-gravity support was fixed to the front stirrup, and with his broken leg securely ensconced he settled back, surprisingly comfortable.

Seven other vehicles were mounted: Haranith; Gramire; Gransire; Beni, the one whose idea this was; Pana, Haranith’s assistant, and two mature ladies, Ayshal and Lilya. Sabire patted him on the shoulder and gunned the engine. It purred in a powerful, contained manner and then they were moving, gliding gently over the ground, waved off by a large number of the Clan, children yelling and keeping pace.

The skid under them seemed to ride on a cushion of air and absorbed any bumps from the ground as they manoeuvred between the homes and out into open terrain. Their noisy escort tripped into a laughing heap, the other riders formed up around them and they picked up speed. The caravan and the broken remains of Ba'al’s Al’kesh were soon left behind.

With the wind in his hair, the landscape opening out before him, the quick, easy motion of the vehicle under him: suddenly Daniel felt free again. He drew in a lungful of cool air laden with a natural tang, and he would have let loose a yell of pure delight if he could. He leaned forward, balancing his body to the motion of the bike as it curved around a small hill. Beyond, a sweep of rolling hills stretched away to the horizon. The land was lightly dusted with green vegetation and
defined by ribbons of darker green where trees followed the course of small streams.

Daniel absorbed everything he could as they sped along: the unfamiliar bushes with tall spikes of purply-red flowers, the huge sleek brown bird circling high above them, the odd metallic scent rising from a patch of glistening minerals, exposed on one of the hillsides. Sabire would now and then point out a feature of interest, his explanation torn from Daniel’s hearing by the whistle of the wind.

Without a watch it was easy to lose track of time, but after what felt like a couple of hours their speed decreased and the sleek vehicles eased to a halt under the shade of a spindly group of trees. Daniel sat up, realising he’d slouched back to lean on Sabire during the journey. They remained sitting while the others walked over to them.

Haranith checked his leg, which was still resting comfortably in its cradle. She offered him one of the tiny pain pills he’d been taking – less regularly than a week ago – but he was grateful to wash it down with some water.

Ayshal unloaded several cloth-wrapped bundles from the panniers on her bike and shared out cold vegetable slices, boiled eggs and spicy flatbreads, washed down with warm wine that had a definite kick to it.

When lunch was finished, Gransire stepped over to him. ‘Sky-Fallen,’ something ‘town’ something something… The rest escaped Daniel, but the gesture toward one last rise indicated they were near their objective. Gransire shook out a fold of material and made to drape it over Daniel’s head.

He flinched back, cracked his skull on Sabire’s chin, eyes going wide as an image of Ba’al leering through a veil of beadwork blotted out the kind face of his host. Strong hands on his shoulders and a babble of voices brought him back.


Gransire had retreated, looking profoundly apologetic. Haranith took the cloth from him and knelt by Daniel’s side. ‘Pyt Xur, peace.’ She took his hand, drew off the soft glove and laid his hand against her own fine-boned hand. She touched his skin. ‘Bedesh,’ she said, then indicated her own dark skin, sweeping an arm out to include not only the others in their group but those in the city beyond. Then she pressed his hand in hers and held a finger to her lips in a classic shh gesture.

I really am the only white person here. And they want to hide me? He nodded his understanding. Until he could communicate properly it probably was best to keep his identity hidden from the wider population.

Haranith nodded and let him slide his glove back on. She gently draped the cloth over his head and fastened the long tail across his face. It was fine enough to allow him to breath freely and also to see. She patted his shoulder and moved back to her vehicle. As the others followed, Daniel fiddled with the veil and fought off the feeling that he was once again a captive.

Jeez. Have a little faith. They’re trying to help. No way were they taking him to a base full of Jaffa who were just itching to hand him back to Ba’al. Get a grip, Jackson.

Sabire reached past him and pressed the bike’s starter button. Daniel fought down one final twinge of dread, straightened up and decided to face what was coming with an open mind.

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They moved off in double file, winding around a series of dips and gullies before straightening out onto a flat, well-paved road. The roadway was in good condition: tidy and bordered by flowering bushes. It was wide enough to accommodate two of the large travelling homes side by side. Daniel noted with interest that traffic moving toward them – an eclectic mix of multiple-user bikes, enclosed vehicles that looked to be hauling goods, and open carts drawn by small, bulky animals with flamboyant brown stripes – all pulled aside to allow right of way to Daniel’s group and others heading in the same direction. He studied the animals as they passed: placid enough but with a stubborn air about them that promised trouble to the inexperienced handler.

A flutter of excitement ran through him as he caught his first glimpse of the town. Surrounded by fields of green crops, fruit trees, and grazing herds of what looked like antelopes, homes quickly became visible. In ones and twos, then bunched closer together, most appeared to be constructed of mud brick, designed with flair and a passion to be unique. Some single storied homes wound in complicated patterns through lush gardens, others supported a garden on their roofs. Others rose two, three, even four stories high, with balconies jutting out in unexpected places, whole walls leant at uneasy angles and looked as if a slight breeze would collapse them, but obviously they had survived for many years.

Daniel found himself grinning under his head cloth. Every home was decorated in a wacky, individual way. A riot of flowers arced up over one home, another blazed in bright blobs of geometric colour. Another bore ten-foot high images of what had to be its inhabitants. The residents themselves were as tall, slender and dark as those from the caravan, and wore a wide variety of bright clothing. They traversed the streets or tended their homes with cheerful enthusiasm. It was a picture of a peaceful, secure society and did a lot to calm his nerves.

The residential streets eventually led into a spiral road which hosted the business part of town. The bikes wound along for several turns before slowing and coasting to a halt opposite open parkland that occupied the centre of the town. Sabire killed the engine and tapped Daniel’s shoulder. He looked at their destination with bemusement. The builder must have had a thing for circles. Every door and window was round, even the chimney was circular. It looked like an oversized Hobbit’s house, and the front windows were crammed with a fascinating array of spinning, pulsating, wheezing and smoking… toys.

Daniel stared up at Sabire. *You’ve brought me to a toymaker?*

Sabire read his uneasiness and grinned. ‘Be at ease, Sky-Fallen. All will be wonderful.’

*We’ll see about that.* He let Haranith free his leg from the support and help him to stand. Several passers-by glanced curiously at the shrouded, injured figure surrounded by taller companions, but they merely nodded politely and moved along.

While Lilya, Pana and Ayshal headed off on their own errands, Daniel was escorted into the shop, led by Gransire and Gramire. Gramire and Beni cornered the shop owner and began to talk quietly to her. Daniel followed Sabire along the rows of display cabinets, trying not to knock anything with his crutches, marvelling at the intricately worked mechanical toys. Some were clearly animated vehicles or animals, but others hid their purpose well and sat on their shelves, humming or puffing inscrutably. After a few minutes, Gramire beckoned and they followed the shop owner into a workroom crammed with the makings of her toys.

‘Sky-Fallen,’ Gramire said. ‘Here to you, stands Pilletta.’ She indicated the stout, friendly-looking woman of middle age.
Daniel waved hello, which she returned, gazing curiously at him.

Beni stepped forward and spoke rapidly to Pilletta. Daniel caught the words ‘silence’ and ‘promise’. She responded solemnly and placed her hand over her bosom as a sign of her good faith. Then, all eyes turned expectantly to Daniel. Gramire gave him an encouraging nod.

_Here goes_. He pulled his gloves off, noting the frown that formed on Pilletta’s face. With precise movements, he unwound the head cloth, baring first his eyes, then his entire face and head. He resettled the glasses on his nose and looked squarely at the astonished toymaker.

Her mouth formed a perfect O as she studied him intently: his eyes, face, hands, broken leg and back to his face again. She processed this unique vision for several moments then gave a decisive nod that reminded Daniel of Ernest – staring at the first humans he’d seen in fifty years. Then she smiled a wide, welcoming smile, and stepped closer.

‘Greet the day, honoured one.’

Beni and Haranith both began explaining Daniel’s predicament. He balanced himself on his good leg and loosened his coat, exposing the silver silencer on his throat.

Pilletta immediately lost any shyness she’d had over his appearance and got right in his face for a good look at the bane of his existence. Daniel angled his chin up and held his breath. She studied it for a long minute, then darted over to a workbench. In a flash she was back, eyes enormous behind magnifying lenses, and wielded a series of electronic gadgets at him. Daniel caught Sabire’s concerned look and waggled his eyebrows at him. If Pilletta was anything like Sam, she’d study the silencer for ages before even touching it.

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What felt like hours later, Daniel had progressed from standing under a bright light to sitting under more bright lights, to now laying on a workbench under a barrage of small but powerful beams directed at his throat.

What’s the collective noun for lights? A spot? An illume. A dazzle...

Pilletta had erected a small screen to shield his eyes. He tried not to fidget. Sliding his gaze to the side he could see his escort propped, sitting and lounging on any available surface, drinking tea and commenting, or possibly making wagers, on each new piece of gear Pilletta brought to the task. Haranith had occasionally interrupted to give him water and check his health.

Daniel blinked and stifled a yawn. He was well past his afternoon nap time. He let his eyes drift shut, but they quickly sprang open again as Pilletta let out a satisfied grunt. She looked down at him and brandished a thin tool, which had many dangling appendages and a purpose that completely escaped him.

‘Sky-Fallen,’ she said, a determined gleam in her eye. ‘…happen …stop …talk.’

He chewed his lip thoughtfully, missing the crucial words but her expression filled in the blanks. She thought she could do it and was asking his permission.

The others gathered around, a tall forest of kind faces. Haranith looked concerned, but then she
mostly did when dealing with him.

No contest, really. I have to try. The only other way to get it off is to go back to Ba'al and that’s not gonna happen. He turned back to Pilletta and nodded.

With a gravity Daniel deeply appreciated, the toymaker directed the others to places around the workbench and to take hold of his limbs with gentle but firm grips. Haranith stood at his head, monitors beeping and a bag full of equipment open next to her.

Pilletta leaned in, held up three fingers, then two, then one.

A low vibration seeped into his throat, running along his nerves with a subsonic disquiet. It made his molars ache and his heart fluttered out of rhythm, just enough to throw his breathing out. He inhaled twice, exhaled once, tried to concentrate on the hands supporting him instead of the weird feeling in his skin. It tickled, then felt like ice cubes. Rapidly it turned to a burning sensation. Pilletta gave a steady commentary but he couldn’t grasp any of it. He dragged in a breath, determined to endure as long as possible—anything to be finally free of Ba’al, to be himself again instead of a victim—

Pain lanced through his throat, closing his airway. Instinct took over. He fought the hands holding him down, body twisting, legs kicking out, as his lungs burned and his mouth gaped for air.

Voices were shouting. A fierce final zing of pain and suddenly air was racing into his lungs again. Daniel threw his head back and breathed, long deep breaths until his thundering heart slowed and his brain’s higher reasoning asserted itself over primal fear.

He breathed and coughed, coughed again, and realised that the coughs were vibrating sound from his voice box. He blinked and did another experimental cough.

Eureka!

Pilletta laughed and held the deactivated silencer in front of him, its filaments dangling like broken legs. Relief swept Daniel like a cold shower. Haranith sat him up and gave him a drink of water.

‘Thank you.’

The words came automatically, but the surprise of hearing his voice again made him pause. It sounded old and scratchy, a remnant of the past. ‘Oh. Hi!’ He grinned at Haranith, at Pilletta, and Sabire, Beni, everyone. ‘Hello!’

Whoops. Wrong language.

‘Nethur!’

‘Nethur.’ They all spoke at once and broke into delighted laughs.

‘Daniel, ant’w ren iw Daniel.’

This brought a chorus of ‘Ahh’s. Gransire stepped up and said, ‘Gransire Adjeta Molane Farola.’ He bowed formally, then made way for the others to do the same.

Once introduced to a string of names, Daniel inclined his head and returned the formality. ‘Doctor Daniel Jackson, born of planet Earth.’ He took Pilletta’s hand. ‘Thank you for the gift of my voice, Pilletta.’ And, oh, wow, didn’t it feel good to speak again. He felt like a little boy who’d been banished from the grown-ups’ room and was finally allowed back into civilised company.
‘Daaniel sounds like the air spirits, and resembles the earth spirits. Truly he is a blessed one. I will hold your secret in my heart.’ Pilletta pressed his hand solemnly to her breast.

Immensely grateful, Daniel sagged a little as the day’s exertion swiftly caught up with him.

‘Daaniel?’ Haranith tentatively took his pulse. His name sounded strange in their native accent: the first syllable stretched, the whole thing melodious and warming.

He mustered a smile and let her help him to his feet. She concealed him under the head cloth and Pilletta ushered them out of the shop, where they found Ayshal, Lilya and Pana waiting for them. Daniel wavered a bit as the cooling afternoon air surrounded them. Once settled on the bike he shamelessly leaned back into Sabire’s solid support. His leg was twanged with pain from too much movement and stimulation after so many days’ stillness in bed.

‘Home, Pyt Xur,’ Sabire said in his ear. ‘Daaniel,’ he added, sounding immensely pleased.

Daniel twisted around and looked up at his host. ‘Sabire, my thanks for your house and your shelter.’ His tired brain groped for the right words. ‘I am obligated to you.’

Sabire nodded gravely, then broke into a cheeky grin. ‘My generosity is unbounded and lauded by all. Of course, being custodian of the Sky-Fallen has done wonders for my allure. I have many moonlight appointments awaiting me.’ He winked, and gunned the engine.

Settling back, Daniel found a grin slowly forming. ‘I’m a date magnet? Huh.’ He cast his eyes over the pretty parklands as the little convoy retraced its path. It was too much to hope to find a Stargate sitting slap in the middle of the first town he visited.

There’ll be one. Has to be. The ancestors of these people were transplanted from Earth. There will be some remnant or sign of a Stargate. Unless... they were brought here by ship.

He closed off that line of thought and concentrated on the questions he would now be able to ask, until the motion of the vehicle sent him off to sleep.

When Daniel woke the next morning, squinting into the sun seeping through the curtains, it took several minutes for the previous day’s events to catch up with him. He rubbed his throat, marvelling at the absence of Ba'al’s control over him.

‘Take that, you tin-plated despot with delusions of godhood,’ he muttered, then smiled at the sound of his voice. Now he felt more like himself, the communicator able to meet any situation and deal with it with the full range of his abilities.

Funny how Ba'al had chosen to linguistically disable him. He’d never seen or heard of the silencer being used by a Goa'uld before.

Or did he create it just for me? A chill crawled over him at the thought of Ba'al knowing him so well. But then, he did know me; a lot of my history. Somehow he’s researched me, talked to people who know me. Sarah – Osiris – yes, but he knows more...

‘Whatever. It’s done and over. I just need to find the Stargate.’ He rolled over and started, surprised
to find Sabire sitting silently at the foot of the bed.

‘Hi! Sorry. Nethur, Sabire.’

‘Greet the dawn, Daaniel. I sincerely desire that the remnants of your leg have survived the ministrations of that harridan Haranith and it gives you no pain this day.’

‘Ahh, yup. Pretty much.’ Actually, he did feel good: well rested and only a low niggle of pain from his leg. ‘I hope the day finds you well, too.’

‘I am most exceptional, my friend. It is good to hear your voice. You have a most pleasing tone.’

‘It’s good to be able to talk again.’ Daniel eased himself up and leant back on the pillows.

‘First, I must feed you!’ Sabire jumped up and left the room, his voice trailing behind. ‘Mother Jacuna has provided a morning feast. Of course, she made enough to feed six of the Clan. I confess I took a small sample – just to ensure it was of suitable quality for our honoured guest…’ He reappeared with a tray groaning under mounds of food. ‘But you will not tell her that, will you, my guest? She will berate me fiercely and accuse me of starving the injured, you being so small and fragile as you are.’ He plopped the tray on Daniel’s lap and blinked at him imploringly.

It took him a moment to catch up, his translation-on-the-fly skills a little rusty. ‘I’m not fragile, Sabire, and I’m certainly not small. Well, not among my people, but I guess compared to…’ He trailed off as a teasing grin seeped through Sabire’s mock concern.

‘Ah. That was humour. I’d better eat this before I fade to nothing.’ He smiled at his host, then applied himself to the enticing food.

Sabire perched on the bed, fidgeted, glanced out the window, at Daniel then around the room. ‘Not meaning to intrude in the personal story of my guest, but I am wondering, as is every member of the Clan, how your journey brought you here, Daaniel.’

Daniel nodded and swallowed. He’d been pondering how to tell these good folk that they weren’t alone in the universe, that other races of humanity lived, travelled, fought and explored the planets of this galaxy and had done so for millennia. And how do you tell them about the Goa’uld? Or their own history on Earth?

Start at the beginning.

‘First, Sabire, do you know of an object like this?’ He took the sketch he’d done days ago from the bedside table. ‘It is very tall, hollow in the middle, made of extremely hard stone, with seven jewels on the outer track, and these carvings embedded on the inner ring.’

‘Everyone in the Clan has discussed this drawing since you first showed us. Nobody has seen its like. Even Binish who used to teach in the biggest school of Kemet, the First City to the east.’ Sabire looked at him carefully. ‘It is important to our guest, yes?’

‘Yes, yes it is,’ he answered ruefully. Sabire waited patiently for him to continue.

‘We call it a Stargate. We have one on my homeworld, Earth.’

‘Earth…’ Sabire echoed, savouring the word with wonder, his eyes alight with the idea of another planet where people lived.

‘There are many Stargates on many planets.’ Daniel waved his hand at the ceiling.
Sabire followed the gesture and remained staring, lost in thought for many minutes.

Daniel chose his words carefully, not wanting to overload the man with too many world-changing ideas. ‘My friends and I use the Stargate to explore these worlds.’

Carefully, Sabire asked, ‘Do people live on these worlds? People like us?’

‘Yes. Many planets are inhabited, and despite their very different cultures, they are very like you and I.’

Sabire processed for a moment, then frowned. ‘But, you did not come to us through your Stargate, Daaniel. Unless…’ His eyes widened. ‘It drops you from the Celestial like that all the time?’

‘No,’ Daniel replied quickly. ‘To travel through the Stargate is to merely step from one world to another, like walking through a door.’ He glanced out the window, the wrecked Al'kesh obscured by another caravan. ‘We travelled on that ship through the dark of space for many days. Sabire, you must know that for all the good, peaceful people living on other planets, there are also some who are evil, who bring only harm and destruction to others. I did not come here of my free will. I was a prisoner of those who now lie under the soil of N’Has’y. They call themselves Goa'uld.’ He gave the noun its proper pronunciation, instead of the contemptuous mangling he normally employed. He studied his host’s face for any sign of recognition. There was none.

Sabire sat thoughtfully for long, quiet minutes. Then he nodded and smiled. ‘When first I looked upon you, Daaniel, I knew you were a good person. Small and sickly, perhaps,’ he grinned, ‘but an honest person. Tonight, at the gathering time you must tell the Clan your story. And we in turn must combine all our knowledge to find N’Has’y’s Stargate. If all those other planets have one, then we shall have one too. I would like very much to see some of these worlds of yours. Are there many pretty lasses and lads? You will have to introduce me…’

Daniel laughed. ‘My friend Sam is pretty. Her hair is the colour of that lamp.’ He pointed to a gold glass shade on one wall.

‘Oh, such wonders! You must have many lovers on these planets?’

‘Well, no… well, a couple… no—but, I did meet my wife on the first planet we went to.’

Interested as Sabire was in Daniel’s love-life he insisted Daniel hold his stories back until the whole Clan could share in the telling. They spent the next few hours scanning every history book, literature collection and computer database they could access for any kind of a reference to a Stargate.

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There was nothing.

Well, not nothing, but just not what he needed right now. The first thing he’d discovered was the name the civilisation here identified themselves with: M’djay. And the First City, where the central government was situated, was Kemyt, the word an almost direct descendant of the Egyptian word for the fertile shores of the Nile: kmt.

Hours later, drooping from exhaustion, Daniel rubbed his aching eyes, still blearily focused on the circular monitor that connected to the planet’s version of the internet. He was deep in the archive of
the Institute of Public History, the main historical archive based in Kemyt. The excitement of finding the meticulous library records dating back six thousand years had slowly dulled. He couldn’t fault the record keeping of the M’djay: it was comprehensive, exacting and as far as he could tell, complete. No gaping holes caused by wars, fires, natural disasters – the record was intact from the day the M’djay were deposited on the planet, named it N’Has’y and took up living and thriving in peace. The vastness of the records was staggering and he couldn’t help a spark of envy: what was known of Earth’s history was but the tip of an iceberg that could never be retrieved.

The only thing missing was the name of the person, or being, who had brought the M’djay ancestors away from Earth to safety here. It had been erased from history.

He did find a well established mythology that the humans on N’Has’y arrived in a ‘great migration’ thousands of years earlier. The specifics were long buried and distorted by time and the telling. The origin of the migration varied from beyond the hills to over vast seas seething with deadly serpents. Nowhere was there mention of a ring or even a spaceship. One record mentioned standing water, and Daniel marked it for closer study. Turning to religious beliefs brought even less information; in fact there was none. For the first time in his anthropological career, Daniel was faced with a staunchly atheist society.

‘Nobody believes in any kind of higher being, someone all-seeing, all-knowing, who watches over the fate of the people?’

‘No…’ Sabire blinked at him, obviously surprised. He glanced over his shoulder. ‘You say that there are beings who watch us?’

‘Well, they’re not actually real. Most ‘gods’ are the product of myth or a society’s desire to place the ultimate responsibility for good and evil in the hands of an unseen power.’

‘Why?’ Sabire was genuinely intrigued. ‘Do these beings come to you and help you in difficult times?’

‘Not really. It’s more the belief in their existence that helps people. The gods don’t actually exist.’

*Might leave the Goa’uld pretension to god-hood for another time.*

While Sabire pondered that odd idea, Daniel kept flipping through the books lent by Binish. A gorgeous glossy tome on astronomy immediately captured his attention. On the first page was a star constellation, vaguely resembling a winged bird. It bore a label, a name in the curling N’hasy script. Carefully, Daniel translated the word.

*Ah.*

He reached for his notes and checked his translation. Could it be?

‘Sabire, do you know this?’

The big man needed only a brief glance at the picture. ‘That is Weril. He hangs in the eastern sky. We are too far north to see him here, but he is visible over the city of Kemyt .’

Daniel watched Sabire intently, a familiar shiver working through him: he was on the verge of discovering something important. ‘Weril? It’s a well-known constellation?

‘He is known in our tales. He is the guardian, the one who protects newborns, who guides the way of lost travellers, watches over the animals and draws snakes away from their prey.’

‘Draws… Well, that’s fitting.’
'Do you know of Weril on your world, Daaniel?'

He ran his fingertips over the picture, trying not to jump to conclusions, but it was difficult. He thought about the way word pronunciation could shift over time. Weril—Werool—Merool—Merul… He was right about this – he had to be.

‘On my planet, Earth, many, many years in the past, in a country called Nubia —’ Daniel paused, rolled the word around his tongue, stretched the vowel, flattened the consonants. ‘Which in their language is pronounced N’Haas…’ He gave a mental sigh. ‘Uh, anyway, one of the gods they worshipped, a minor god really, but the son of a much loved goddess who held primary importance in the pantheon, his name was Merul. The iconography is different here. On earth he was identified by symbolic ram’s horns or a sun disk.’ But in the world of the Goa’uld that would have identified him too closely with Ra. If Merul wasn’t one of Ra’s allies, he could well have taken up the icon of his mother. ‘He was the son of Aset.’

Daniel searched Sabire’s face for recognition of the names, but was disappointed. ‘Aset was also known as Isis.’

‘So many names for each person. How confusing.’

‘Yes, it can be. Their stories are even more tangled. Aset, or Isis, was wife and sister of Asar, otherwise known as Osiris. She adopted Anubis, the child of her sister Nephthys, who tricked Osiris into conceiving the child. There was also their brother Set, who was jealous of Osiris and eventually murdered him. Horus, the child of Osiris and Isis wanted revenge on Set but at the last moment Isis stood between them, refusing to let her son slay her brother. It is said that, in his fury, Horus raped his mother, thus conceiving Merul. By all accounts Merul was a caring god, and followed in his mother’s path by guarding those who worshipped he and his mother.’ Daniel refocused on Sabire’s outraged expression. ‘Uh, it was all a long time ago.’

‘I believe I am grateful these gods have not visited us here on N’Has’y.’ Sabire sagged back, a deep frown of disapproval creasing his forehead. ‘You say that our Weril in the Celestial is named after your mythic ‘god’ Merul?’

Daniel nodded. ‘Yes, yes I do. I think it’s possible that Merul brought your ancestors here to N’Has’y, possibly to protect them from the Goa’uld who were enslaving humans on Earth.’

‘Protecting them from the snakes?’ Sabire pieced the story together perceptively. ‘The same snakes who journey in the body, like those we buried?’

‘The same. The Goa’uld took on the personalities of many of the mythological gods on Earth. It’s hard to know where the myths end and the real stories of Goa’uld atrocities start.’

‘If the snakes are evil as you have said, why would one wish to protect our ancestors?’

‘Well, there are some who will only reside in a willing host. They do not seek power for themselves and stand against the evil ones. They call themselves Tok’ra.’

Sabire stared thoughtfully at Daniel. ‘I believe you must also tell this tale to the Clan tonight. For now, let us keep searching for your Stargate.’

For most of the day, apart from lunch, a nap and numerous visits from neighbours bearing gifts and undisguised curiosity, Daniel and Sabire searched every archive and book for a sign of a gate, DHD, monument, ruin, anything that was connected to the origins of these people on N’Has’y.

There was nothing.
As always, the night was sparkling. The inky black depths of space swept from horizon to horizon and showcased the glittering jewels of the galaxy to perfection. With what now seemed to be comfortable ease, Daniel had relaxed back into the solid support of his chair. With Sabire at his side and surrounded by the friendly chatter of the Clan and the heat of the fire, he found himself drifting, eyes searching the stars above for two little pinpricks that he knew of as home. Earth, Abydos, either would bring great comfort just to know where they were, that he was looking in the right direction when his thoughts fled homeward.

The absence of conversation brought his attention back to the planet he was sitting on. People were beginning to gather cups and dishes, some making noises about turning to their beds. Too tired and peaceful to move, Daniel slid his gaze around the gathering - and found Gransire watching him with inscrutable contemplation. Daniel quirked his eyebrows, silently inviting comment.

‘Would you tell us, Daaniel, your tale?’

All eyes turned to Daniel.

Slowly, with Sabire filling in the words he’d yet to learn, Daniel told them the story of the Stargate, of the Goa’uld, both on Earth and throughout the galaxy, and his theory that the N’Has’y ancestors had been brought here for their protection. His audience listened raptly, eyes wide, with little comment. He had the feeling they would be discussing this for weeks to come.

Finished, he slumped back into his seat and savoured the hot tea Jacuna poured for him.

Gramire leant forward, her faded brown eyes pinning him intently. ‘And what of you, Daaniel, our Sky-Fallen? How did your journey bring you to us?’

He took a long swallow of tea. A memory flashed by: standing chilled and defeated in the pouring rain, his life stalled, the future a yawning black hole ready to swallow him. And then a car pulled up… That story could wait for another telling.

‘I was taken, against my will, from Earth by a Goa’uld named Ba’al. He is a powerful System Lord, ranked highest among the Goa’uld. He had me taken to his homeworld, tried to secure my cooperation with tales of peace between our people. I wanted to believe him, but knew he was dangerous, deceptive. Ultimately he revealed his intentions to use knowledge he thinks I possess to gain greater control over all the peoples of the galaxy. Ba’al was attacked by another Goa’uld and he sent me away on his great ship. But it was damaged in the fight. We fled in the smaller Al’kesh…’

Many heads turned to the indistinct outline beyond the camp. ‘It too was damaged, and finally crashed here.’

Gransire nodded to himself and straightened in his blankets. Murmurs rose around the circle. Daniel stifled a yawn and shifted position, his leg beginning to throb in protest at the long day. Hoping to be excused he looked up and found the two elders studying him.

‘Daaniel, if we may ask?’ Gransire said mildly. ‘Will the Goa’uld Ba’al be looking for his captive? Will he try to reclaim you?’

Cold washed through Daniel’s body. He blinked, mouth open for an answer that would not come.
Such simple words, plainly asked. And they sucked all the air out of his lungs. Chills swept from his scalp to race down his spine. The warmth of the night was gone, there was only cold and darkness and a small pinprick of light from the fire far, far away.

_Stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid._

His ankle twitched of its own accord sending a stab of pain up his leg. He’d been so relieved at being free, congratulating himself at escaping the insanity of Ba’al and his court. He had lost himself in these people and their way of life, in the hope of going home. The lure of a new language, a new culture, a mystery to be solved and of having people interested in him and his story had been enough to swamp his good sense and allow any fears about Ba’al to be buried. He just hadn’t thought. But of course it would not end with the burial of the Jaffa from the Al’kesh. Ba’al had made it patently clear that the knowledge he was after was of enormous value. He would not just write Daniel off as killed in action without proof. Nor would the anonymous members of his little cabal.

_‘They’ll come, in ships, and wipe you out.’_

There were no Nox here to protect N’has’y. Visions of the carnage wrought by death gliders strafing Nagada filled his head. He looked at the people around him. Beautiful, beautiful people.

_‘I was a beautiful child…’_ Kendra. Even she had died for meeting Daniel Jackson. How many had died on Tsydon, victims of Zipacna’s deadly search for him?

_This can’t happen again. These people have never known war and you’ve brought it to them._

He squeezed his eyes shut for a moment, then looked up at Gransire and Gramire, at the children and mothers and fathers, families and friends around him.

The curse of Daniel Jackson was about to be visited upon these innocents. Bleakly, he turned back to Gransire: unknowingly awaiting the news of his death sentence.

_‘Yes, Gransire. I think it quite likely Ba’al will be looking everywhere for me. It’s only a matter of time before he comes here. I’m—’_ His voice caught. He coughed and, considering what was about to come down upon them, said the most inadequate of words.

_‘I’m sorry.’_

Gransire cocked his head to one side, and Daniel felt naked under his perceptive gaze.

_‘I think it will not be an easy thing, to find their captive, if they come.’_

The people laughed in approval and dispersed to bed. Daniel barely felt Sabire hoisting him to his feet. He wondered if he would ever feel anything again. Except for fear.
One Last Thing (To Do)

Chapter Notes

Note: Some readers who are sensitive to certain subjects may wish to read the warning at the bottom of the page, but be advised it does contain spoilers.

The stars were all wrong.

For the third morning in a row, Daniel sat wrapped in the warmth of a thick blanket, ensconced in the funky form-fitting furniture on the roof of Sabire’s home.

The day after Gransire’s innocent, world-shifting question, the Clan had packed up and resumed their original course toward a far-off town where they were expected for a celebration-come-gathering several weeks hence. They left behind seven lonely graves, a shattered alien space ship and the last physical connection Daniel had with Ba’al. The mental ties however, stretched thin, taut and ever-reaching.

While his bruises faded, strained muscles relented and his broken bones hurt just a little less each day, Daniel felt out of sorts. His bodily rhythm was off-kilter. Sleep claimed him in the bright afternoons, sometimes releasing him for the evening meal, sometimes not. And then he’d wake in the wee small hours, as the first bird calls carolled up from the scrubby flora. Restless, unable to sleep anymore, and not wanting to disturb Sabire – whom he’d insisted share the enormous bed when he’d realised the man was sleeping on the cushions in the main room – Daniel had cautiously made his way outside and peglegged up the staircase to the roof.

With so much to think about, he found the cold star-bright darkness perfect inducement to sit and gaze blankly at the heavens, letting his mind and soul enjoy a brief peace from the worries that would plague him the rest of the day.

He wriggled further into the chair, still getting a kick out of how it moulded to his body shape without feeling like it was swallowing him. He remained staring at the sky. Unfamiliar star clusters were slowly moved along by the planet’s rotation. Try as he might to resolve them into the shapes of his home skies – both Earth and Abydos – this new astral plane remained a stranger to him.

He wondered what myths had been created for these stars by the people of N’Has’y. *Sabire may know. He’s quite a font of unusual tales.* Daniel remembered nights spent with Jack, up on his roof, peering through the telescope and attempting to spot the star around which orbited the planet they had most recently visited. It was something they did less frequently these days, as workloads ate into their free time. That first year, especially when Daniel was staying with Jack: that had been a special time, when Jack’s tales of how the stars had earned their names – some surprisingly accurate, others outrageously fictional – had become a comfort of memories. Their remembrance brought a warm feeling of belonging and attachment that a grieving and lost beginner explorer had desperately craved. Now, just as lost, Daniel wrapped himself in the warmth of Jack’s stories and picked out a star that may be, if you didn’t think about it too hard, might be… Earth’s sun.

‘Wonder what the others are doing?’ he muttered. ‘Still looking for me? Probably been pushed back onto the mission rota by now.’ Neither alternative was very appealing. He hated the thought of his
teammates fruitlessly searching planet after planet for him, yet picturing them giving up – or being forced to give up – and get back to their jobs left him cold. He pictured himself strolling back through Earth’s ‘gate – GDO lockouts aside – being met by cheering SFs, astonished teams, gob smacked general. Jack would come up with another embarrassing nickname for him: Spacemonkey had taken years to live down. There’d be a brass band, maybe. Pie, for sure.

A stupid smile pulled at his lips.

‘Boy, do I have a story to tell you guys.’

And then what? The smile faltered. Ba’al wasn’t likely to give up. His whole plan – galactic domination or whatever it was – apparently rested on the information he thought Daniel possessed.

‘He won’t give up. He won’t stop till he finds me. He might come here, find a whole new source of hosts for his Jaffa, plunder the planet of its resources while he’s at it. And if I’m not here, if I get back home, there’s nothing to stop him coming after me. He’s already broken the Asgard treaty. He’ll send more bounty hunters – I won’t be able to go anywhere without being on guard – if General Hammond even let’s me leave the mountain. Or… Ba’al will come in Ha’taks. Why not? It’s so important to him. Then what… track the Stargate, sit in orbit over the mountain and demand they hand me over? Why not just destroy a few cities first, then ask.’

A yawning well of despair hovered at the back of his consciousness. The situation would never end, not until Ba’al had what he wanted. No miraculous homecoming would end this, the most bizarre stage of an admittedly odd life. For a moment he allowed himself to picture the rest of his life: the Goa’uld would inevitably catch up to him, take him back to Tsydon, then having been emptied of the vital, unknowable knowledge Ba’al would present him to Astarte, a plaything to be pawed and ravaged, to be made a demi-god for a susceptible people, his life-span warped by the soul-stealing sarcophagus, until one day he would become host to the fertile offspring, conceived with his own DNA, to live forever a dead man. His team, his friends, would never know what had become of him.

I suppose my message never reached them.

‘Daaniel?’

He flinched, eyes opening to see Sabire at the head of the stairs, outlined by the rising sun.

‘Greet the dawn, Sabire.’ Daniel managed a weak smile. He shivered and had to consciously push away his dark thoughts.

‘I have a pot of scampy warming,’ Sabire offered, tactfully not questioning why Daniel sought the chill solitude of the roof each morning.

This time Daniel’s smile was full and genuine. ‘Just what I need. Help me up?’

Thoroughly warmed by the scampy, a spiced, fermented fruit drink whose alcoholic content left his head buzzing, Daniel followed Sabire out to join the Clan for breakfast. Negotiating the steps down from the caravan proved to be unusually difficult, so Sabire offered his services for a piggy-back ride, then proceeded to carry Daniel all the way to the circle and carefully deposit him in his chair.

Ayshal met them. The tall, friendly woman had assigned herself the task of feeding Daniel breakfast – winning out over what he suspected was earnest competition.

‘Greet the dawn, honoured Daaniel.’
‘Live the day, Ayshal,’ he replied. He smiled up at her and settled into the cushioned wooden seat that had quickly become his. As soon as he looked up she placed a bowl of hot vegetables and rich gravy in his hands. ‘Thank you. Wow, that smells great.’

She dimpled with pleasure, then snaked a hand out behind her and caught Sabire by the ear as he hovered over her bubbling pot.

‘Ayee, you will cripple me with your talons, dearest,’ he squeaked. ‘I fade from hunger and can only be revived by the exquisite bouquet of your creation.’

Daniel grinned into his food. This scene was played out every morning. Ayshal delighted in tormenting Sabire: some kind of retribution for a past disagreement in their teenage years.

‘Fade from hunger…,’ she snorted. ‘You think I do not see you, skulking from my pot to Jinya’s, to Kinkala’s to Jacuna’s, pleading imminent death at each. You eat more than any other person in the Clan, Sabire.’ She gave him a withering glare. ‘A waste of food, if you regard my opinion.’

Sabire threw a wink at Daniel, then turned on the charm. ‘Ah, my beautiful, enraged Aysh—I only sample the others’ pitiful offerings to remind myself how superior are the concoctions of your talented hands. There is no finer food amongst the Kendasai, in the region, or I suspect even on this continent.’

She smiled sweetly. ‘I’ll tell Jinya you think her cooking pitiful.’

The good humour washed from Sabire’s face. Bottom lip quivering with only partial theatrics, he folded his long legs and sat at her feet. ‘I promise to stay faithful to your cooking pot, Aysh and to sing its praises to all who will listen.’ He batted his eyelashes at her. Daniel chuckled softly.

Ayshal frowned, sure she’d lost that round somehow. She dumped the remains of the food into Sabire’s bowl then thrust the pot at him. ‘Less singing and more cleaning will earn my favour.’

They bickered through the meal and the dismantling of camp. Sabire finally escaped by assisting Daniel, almost carrying him again, back to his bright home. Still feeling awake and reasonably alert, Daniel elected to sit in the main room rather than head back to bed as he had most days. He levered himself down into a vast, squashy chair.

Sabire hovered anxiously until he was settled, then turned to a panel of artfully painted silk. He slid it aside, revealing the controls that operated the caravan. A pressed button engaged the engine, which was so quiet only the glowing indicator showed it was active.

‘Can you move the mode on its independence?’ He winced, certain his still-limited vocabulary picked the occasional wrong word.

Sabire nodded. ‘Certainly. We may travel anywhere we please, alone or in company with another or many others. However, it is much more pleasurable to allow another to direct your path.’ He flipped several switches, tapped in a code and cranked a small wheel on the panel. A confirmation light glowed in response.

On cue, a young voice filtered through the speaker hidden somewhere in the ceiling. ‘Greet the day, Kendasasi. Chanla steers your passage this day. All vehicles are presented for travel. Off we go!’

With barely a hint of motion the home rose on its air cushion. Movement caused him to look up at the skylight and his mouth dropped open as two tall, slim poles rose up out of small bollards on the roof. Sails emerged from inside the poles and unfurled in the morning air, large blue slices of the sky that embraced the breeze and stirred the house into motion. Daniel watched fascinated as the homes
around them lifted and moved forward, all held to exactly the same cruising speed: no faster than a
person could jog. They trundled along in an unformed bunch, sophisticated proximity detectors
keeping each home well separated from the next.

Through the windows he could see the Clan going about their daily lives: tending roof-top gardens,
washing clothes or children, cooking, cleaning, learning or crafting. Sabire went off for a long soak
in the bath, then returned to settle opposite Daniel, behind an intricate, spindly musical instrument.
The soft harp-like melody washed over them, and soon sent Daniel to sleep.

Everything was white. Long curtains hung before huge open windows, stirred by a breeze laden with
the scent of unfamiliar flora, sharp and strangely bitter. Other scents drifted up from pots warmed by
glowing coals, combining in a numbing fog that left his brain floating apart from his body. He stared
at his hand, resting on the white cloth covering his legs. Didn’t look like his. The hand or the leg.

With an effort he looked away, dazzled by shards of light gleaming from hundreds of jewels that
bordered the floor-to-ceiling mirror. Didn’t look like him, either. Hair shaggy and disarrayed in a
style he’d not worn for three years. That was the old Daniel. The innocent, the gullible. The one who
still clung to the hope of rescue and redemption.

Something passed between himself—and himself. Bare, muscled flesh bade his gaze to follow.
Another of “them”, the silent servants. They never came too near but they unnerved him all the time.
The alien tattooed over the hip, reaching up over belly and chest, mouth agape, ready to strike…
that’s what confounded him, horrified him. It belonged inside, hidden behind the pretence of being
human, not glorified in ink and skin.

He looked away past golden bowls filled with food, diamond goblets sparkling with wine, the serene
girl tinkling music from a lyre in the corner. He strove to remember why he was here, where here
was, when she would return… His fingers brushed cold silk. Copper and gold fabric crumpled in his
hand, discarded in the mussed sheets he was sitting on…

The tinkling music was still in his ears when he jerked and woke. Sabire was still playing his
instrument, the melody mingling with the resonant music of his dream. Or was it memory? It seemed
too detailed, too familiar to have been conjured. He knew the answer lay within reach, but he turned
away from it. There were problems enough, here, now.

Lunchtime was a picnic in the shade of tall fern trees that sheltered in a little stream-fed gully. Daniel
sat, ate, answered when spoken to, but he couldn’t engage with anyone as he normally would. He
felt a wall was erecting itself between himself and those around him.

Moving among these cheery, chatty folk, he felt so isolated, as if there were a spotlight beaming
down on him, aimed by Ba’al from his palatial comfort on Tsydon, and it illumined him as The Target,
The Resource, The Bringer of Doom. Worse, he felt exposed, had to keep aborting a furtive look to
check his flies were closed – not that the soft pants gifted by Jacuna even had flies. He felt like he’d
been cut open, all his inner secrets, torments and desires left to lie in the glare of others’ scrutiny, to
wither and die unprotected and alone.

Like a turtle, he was withdrawing into a defensive shell, protecting his own frayed soul and the
Kendasai from contact with him. He sought the comfort of bed in the afternoon, but sleep eluded
him. He lay staring out at the passing scenery as the thoughts in his head swirled slower and slower, gradually thinning out to one simple, inexorable decision. Once defined, it would not leave him alone. He turned it around, looked at it from every angle. Considered everything that had come before, everything that would follow in the pass of time.

It would, perhaps, be enough.

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The days rode by in a dazzling stretch of unending ochre sand dunes. Glorious green oases were plentiful, following the course of an ancient river bed. Stops were frequently made to explore each oasis, the children vying to be the first to show ‘Daaniel’ something new. Tiny bright-blue birds flitting through the grasses at the water’s edge, or four-foot long reptiles with a heritage as ancient as the sand were proudly discovered and named to him.

Daniel’s linguistic lessons continued steadily, an exchange of words and meanings as profound as any he had experienced before. His concentrated intonation and Sabire’s joyful bass repetition hanging on the breeze amid the shush of sails and swish of air over sand were the only sign of their home’s passing. And yet there was little joy finding room in Daniel’s heart. It was increasingly becoming a cold thing, pumping ever slower under the weight of dread seeping into him. He tried to hide it, stayed in bed just that little bit later each day and found excuses for more time alone. Sabire’s concerned glances slid off him, deflected by the growing certainty that the death and destruction that seemed to follow his footsteps for the last five years was about to once again catch up to him.

Anwylyd. Anwylyd, help me.

Sha’re was close these days. He never feared loneliness with her near and she was here with him in these dunes and barren stretches. He saw her in the smiling faces of the young women who came to offer food and clothes and books to the poor stranger who was - to their thinking - trapped with that artless bounder Sabire who would let the injured Daaniel starve to death. Her voice was in the sands blowing through the furled sails at night. He found her giggle in little Teana, looking so like the child that could have been. At night she was lying next to him, so real he could feel the gentle curve of her hip under his hand. Her presence was as vital as breathing to him. She knew he was making a decision and that he could not be alone to make it.

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In the stillness of the sixth night after Gransire had brought reality back to Daniel, he reached his decision.

Twilight crept into the corners of the room, cast freakish shadows through the towering rock formation they had camped beside. Never before had he so keenly missed Jack’s presence. He could only hope for understanding.

Keeping the essence of Sha’re as close to him as another living skin, Daniel slid from the bed,
cautiously supporting his ankle. Three feet away on the other side of the bed, Sabire twitched but did not awaken. Using the crutches as a brace, Daniel pulled himself upright, hobbled to the robe-stand and opened the curtain. So many beautiful clothes, all gifts given with unselfish pride. Hand tailored, hand embroidered or just favourites presented with delight. Such good people these. He selected a plain, deep red wrap – endearingly the same shade Sha’re had worn on their wedding night – simply slipped on and tied at the waist.

Moving as quietly as one could with a wooden appendage, he went into Sabire’s den. At the desk he wrote the note he had composed fifty times in his head during the last few nights. No hesitation now, the words laid themselves out succinctly. That done, Daniel gathered the only other thing he needed, and stole to the rear door.

_Dammit._ He’d told himself he wasn’t to do this, but at the moment of action it was easier thought than done. He looked over his shoulder at the shadowy outline of Sabire, still slumbering peacefully. Regret that would stay with him for the rest of his life clutched in cold, painful fingers around his heart.

_Move now, Danny._

He was out the door, dot and carrying down the steps, mind going blank and depending on automation. He shuffled quietly through the camp. It was a beautiful night. Stars twinkled overhead in the clear, dark sky. A soft breeze brushed his face. It stirred the leaves on the siddoc trees under which the caravan was parked. Here and there a yellow glow of light seeped out from a home, an occasional open window gave him a glimpse of Dhani washing dishes, Trettish drying herbs, Radha rocking her fretful baby. By the rear of Sandosh’s van the darkness gave way to a spotlight illuminating he and Frani, discussing the disassembled pedder they lay under. Brief snatches of normal, peaceful lives. They beckoned to Daniel, tried to draw him in, dissuade him from his path. He turned away. Refusal of this haven was the hardest thing he’d ever done.

Out into the open, rocky ground, he headed steadily towards the pathway through the boulders, and the steep but not impossible climb to the highest one in the jumbled pile.

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Surprised faces watched him go, then their owners’ attention returned to the illicit feast being consumed under old Fahri’s house.

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The moon was near to dipping under the horizon by the time Daniel made his careful way around the final bend in the path and found himself at the summit of the rocks. Below in the distance, the camp sat in darkness, only a couple of lit windows gave away its location. Daniel felt rather surprised: the rocks had not seemed so far away from the ground. Turning away, he oriented himself by the moon and found a flattish boulder that he could sit on and stretch out his aching leg.

The moon slid away, gone to hide from the sun. Dark settled all about him. Night creatures skittered through the rocks, heading for their own shelter from the sun. Silence wrapped around Daniel as the world paused, gathering for the transition from night to day. An almost imperceptible lightening in the far distant sky directly in front of him told Daniel he had selected the correct spot to greet the dawn.

He waited.

Really, there was no need to wait; his course was decided. In his heart however, there remained
certain things to be considered. And he would like to feel the sun’s rays on his face. One last time.

He shifted his rump a little, the night-time cold of the rock seeping through the robe. He pulled out the knife appropriated from Sabire’s kitchen and laid it at his side, not even glancing at it. The note left for Sabire asked for their understanding. To accept that the only way to prevent Ba’al’s scouring of N’Has’y was for him to find Daniel’s body with the Jaffa, to end, for once and for all the Goa’uld’s hold over him, to thwart the plans that would only ever bring misery and death to so many people on so many planets. Not even a sarcophagus could bring a decomposing body back to life. Daniel’s thanks for the care the Kendasai had shown him would ever be inadequate.

The not-darkness was a little brighter now.

The prayer came to his mind, unbidden but now welcome.

O Benu,

Bird Who Rises from the Flames.

I call upon thee

Protect me from all ills that approach from the east.

O Benu, Keeper of the Eternal Fire

Protect me from all ills that approach from the south.

Phoenix, Guardian of the Sacred Persea Tree

Protect me from all ills that approach from the west.

Sun Bird of the Rising Disc

Protect me from all ills that approach from the north.

O Benu, Sacred to the Sun God

Remain at all times about me.

Nefer-Benu-Tchafu-Nes, Nefer-Benu-Tchafu-Nes.

Beautiful Bird of Burning Flames

When I cannot hear, lead me.

O Benu, Divine and Most Holy Bird

When I cannot see, show me the way.

Benu, Who Comes Forth From the Ashes

Let me recognize and seize the opportunities that I am granted.

O Benu, Lord of Heliopolis, City of the Sun
Let thy hand work through me.

Guide me to my path of destiny.

Grant me now thy power.

Nefer-Benu-Tchafu-Nes, Nefer-Benu-Tchafu-Nes.

The Phoenix prayer, uttered over the graves of his parents so long ago, as fresh in his memory as the day his mother had taught it to him.

A grey band was definitely visible now, picking out the horizon. One by one the stars faded, giving ground before the relentless approach of the day.

He thought of his friends on Earth, their faces coming to him so clearly: Sam, alight with excitement as another little piece of the universe unfolded before her; Teal’c, his gravitas and proud bearing taking a beating as he absorbed another gem of Tau’ri life; Jack, brown eyes twinkling, malapropisms flowing, his relaxed alertness never ceasing. Daniel smiled at them, amazed anew at how three seasoned, professional soldiers had accepted his first stumbling efforts to be one of them, never criticising him for his shortcomings, always ready to teach and guide, at the same time coming to appreciate and even value his own knowledge and skills. They were the very best that friends could be.

Nick – out there with the Giant Aliens. Odd, how the Stargate had brought them back together, yet separated them forever. Grandpa.

A warm sliver of orange shimmered up over the horizon, tendrils of light sneaking up into the clouds. Memories were returning to him, random and vibrant. The promise of sunrise took him back home, his second home, where he and Skaara had joined the other young men in night hunts on Abydos, wearily making their way back to Nagada as the sun resumed its journey across the sky. The memories skipped forward and Daniel smiled, seeing Skaara’s face alight with pleasure as he returned to his father’s embrace, finally free of Klorel. Now, that had been a party. Kasuf had been so happy, so… drunk. Daniel had found his own loss had made the moment that much sweeter. Kasuf was a father to him as he had never thought possible. To welcome a stranger such as Daniel himself into the family’s embrace, to accept the myriad of oddities that Daniel kept coming up with, was beyond generous. To make perfectly clear to Daniel that he was a member of the family for life, even after losing Sha’re and her child… the recollection brought a fierce lump to his throat. Soundlessly, Daniel whispered his thanks to his Good Father.

The sun was halfway over the horizon now, settling into a deep, brilliant yellow.

‘Do you remember, Anwylyd, when we would wrap ourselves up in each other’s warmth, listening to the wind of the winter storms. We would go stand in the sentry tower and watched the dawn break through the clouds.’

She was so close now, he could see her cheeky smile, her beautiful eyes, her bright pixie face filled with love. The first morning breezes carried the scent of her thick, fresh hair. Almost, he could hear her laughing.

What now filled his soul was not grief, or despair, or anger. All that was gone. He was content,
cleansed of the burdens that had rested so heavily upon his heart. It was time to move on.

Wait for me.

The sun popped fully up over the threshold of night, spreading new light across the land. Daniel loosened the tie of his robe, letting it fall from his shoulders. The crisp dawn air bit at his bare chest and back.

The knife was in his hand, held up in front of his face. He examined it carefully – razor sharp on both sides, long and coldly efficient. Jack was beside him now, his clear, direct instructions on angle and thrust almost audible. One quick movement would do the job. Daniel was grateful for the knowledge, grateful he’d not had to do this to another person.

‘Thanks, Jack.’

The sun floated higher; the knife bisected it.

It was time.

He barely heard the footstep behind him. His focus held on the knife, on the next path his soul would take. On seeing his beloved again.

A moment passed. His hand stayed, firm and resolved, yet he knew his solitude had been intruded upon. He turned the knife, catching shards of sunlight on the blade.

‘I cannot know the pain of separation from those you love, from your home, from your world.’ Sabire’s rich voice came from behind.

Daniel said nothing. Mind and heart were empty, sealed up, locked away for the duration.

‘I know a little of the pain your decision brings you, Daaniel. I do know nobody should die alone. I… I offer my poor self as witness. Or just company.’

A flicker of thought teased at Daniel’s mind. He kept his eyes on the sun, inching ever upward.

‘F… forgive my intrusion, my friend, but I would have you know I respect your choice and… should you choose to… stay, I will respect that also.’

A tiny frown creased his forehead. Why would he stay? He’d been through all that. It was over. ‘I won’t be the cause of your downfall.’ The words slipped out, past the emptiness that had shrunk, just a little.

‘Such a thing would be intolerable.’

Yes. The emptiness widened its hold again. Sabire and his world retreated.

‘However, it would be no easy victory, for this little worm.’
Frustration opened a wedge in the emptiness.

‘You don’t know what he’s like.’

‘No. Nor does he know what he will face, should he dare come here. It will not be so easy, I think, for him.’

‘You can’t say that. He’s relentless. The only way to protect you is to remove what he wants from his grasp.’

‘Perhaps. But perhaps this is our time, Daaniel. Our time to leave our nest and walk amongst the stars, to stand with our brothers and sisters, and stomp on these worms who cause so much heartache.’

Curiosity widened the wedge. Thoughts began to tick over his brain once again. ‘You don’t have a Stargate.’

‘No. True. Then we shall have to build a starship and fly through the Deep to visit our lost kin. It should be quite a lot of fun.’

‘Sabire…’ Daniel sighed, only partly annoyed that the peace in his heart was slipping away from him.

‘You brought us the stars, Daaniel. Whether you stay to show us the way, or follow your own journey, we will always be grateful to our Sky Fallen.’

*Damn.* Sha’re was fading from him, slipping back into the netherworld, leaving him with a caress of love. He knew then the moment had passed, that he would have to endure more time on this side of life before they could be reunited. One day…

‘Wait for me,’ he whispered.

Carefully, he laid the knife on the cold rock. He looked up at the gold-hued dawn sky.

The sun had left the horizon.

Some time passed before he could pull his robe back over his shoulders. Sabire helped him to his foot and crutch. For a long minute they stood, not looking at the other, their hands clasped tightly.

Getting down the rocky outcrop was more difficult than coming up had been. By the time they rounded the final bend the sun was well into its daily passage.

Daniel settled his crutches in the stony soil and hopped over the last obstacle. Sabire wasn’t moving, just standing there.

‘What’s up?’ He peered around him. ‘Oh—’

They were all there. The *whole* Clan. From elders to babies, they sat on the ground at the base of the rock formation, silent, watchful, respect for his choices written clear on their faces.

For an instant he felt undone, not worthy of such regard, then it was gone, replaced by an overwhelming surge of amazement and gratitude.
Slowly he hobbled down to them. They stood and formed a corridor for him to pass, their faces grave, eyes twinkling with emotion. He moved through them, each reaching out to stroke his arm, a gesture of love, of belonging.

His soul uplifted to a place he’d never thought he would visit again, Daniel went home.

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Two days later as breakfast came to a noisy close, the adults of the Clan seated themselves around Daniel’s chair. Wary, he looked to the elders. ‘Gramire, Gransire?’

Gramire patted his hand fondly. ‘We have been discussion what our next course will be, Daaniel.’

‘I thought we were headed for Tweepet town. There was a festival…?’

‘The Harvest Burn, yes. But, we have a better idea.’

‘We are going to Kemyt City, Daaniel,’ Trettish broke in.

‘Kemyt? But that’s clear across the continent, isn’t it?’ He knew it was – he’d studied the maps enough.

‘We believe Kemyt to be the best place to search for signs of your Stargate,’ Daaniel,’ said Jacuna.

‘But…’ It was so far away, well off their annual route.

‘What is the point of having movable homes if one does not use them to discover new places?’ Beni asked.

Gramire nodded. ‘Many years have passed since we travelled to the First City. It will be good for all of us. And just possibly we will find some way to help you contact your home, Daaniel. At the least, we can present you to the Council of Elders, tell them who you are and why you are among us. We can’t ask you to hide from everyone for all your days.’

‘I don’t know what to say.’ He looked around at the excited, beaming faces. Maybe there was a chance. Being in the city founded by Merul he might find some trace of technology he could use to communicate across the distance of space.

A small fire of hope kindled in his chest, warming away the ice of solitude that had formed ever since he’d been snatched from Earth.

‘Thank you.’

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Chapter End Notes
CONTENT WARNING: This chapter deals with a character contemplating suicide.

Anwylyd is the Welsh word for darling.

The Phoenix prayer is taken from the book 'Egyptian Birth Signs' by Storm Constantine, published by Thorsons.
In The Footsteps of Doctor Jackson

Chapter Summary

Meanwhile, back on Tsydon...

The SS Spacemonkey lurched gamely through the blackness of space. Her engines pounded with a kind of desperation interspersed by the occasional hiccup of misfiring pistons – or whatever the part was that kept throwing off-balance anyone foolish enough to be standing.

Jack looked at the spreading stain of coffee now decorating Ferretti’s shirt. ‘Sorry, Lou.’ He set the empty cup back in the crockery crate. Seeing it was Carter’s brew, he didn’t go back for a refill.

Lou wandered off to change his shirt – again – and Jack flopped down on the piles of bedding that served as seats in the ‘day’ hours. He puled out the little journal he’d become quite attached to.

Day seventeen.

Fourth day in space. Jacob estimates two more before we reach Tsydon.

Am waiting (desperately) for Teal’c to come on KP duty. Damn, that man makes good coffee.

Trying to keep thoughts of Daniel at bay. Difficult.

Sit rep: we know Ba’al wants something he thinks is in Daniel’s head.

Skaara believes it may have something to do with the hand device and confirmed Ra was one of the four Goa’uld to torture Daniel. (Long may they all burn in snake hell.)

Ferretti and his kids are putting together disguises for us. Boch keeps insisting he’ll be recognised and will stay on the ship once we land.

In a pig’s eye he will.

The plan is to sell our cargo then move into the city and conduct a full recon under the cover of looking for new cargo. Boch says the city is miles from the spaceport so we’ll embed, establish a base, see what we can scare up.

Been a long time since I did an undercover extraction.
Jack shoved the book back in his coat pocket. Coffee would be a while yet – T was deep in meditation with Skaara and Jacob, the three of them grouped around a candle stuck to the deck plating. The ship twitched and shuddered, Jack had a fleeting impression of them flying sideways, then it smoothed out again. Probably something to do with the frantic pounding filtering up from the ship’s bowels; Carter hard at work.

Tobay and Seni were sitting quietly on their bedding, now and then glancing at the meditation group with respectful awe. Seni also held a journal, in which he carefully recorded his thoughts and daily doings. Daniel had taught the boy to write, both in Abydonian and English, and Seni had proven so talented he was now the official scribe in Nagada, responsible for recording all the births, deaths, marriages, divorces and anything else worthy of note in the daily lives of the Abydonian people.

Ferretti and his crew were in the next compartment. That left Aris Boch, taking his turn at the steering wheel.

He got up and moved silently into the cockpit. Boch was staring out at the black beyond.

‘How’s it going?’ Jack asked, standing one foot behind the pilot’s seat. A thin smile brushed his lips as Boch flinched, ever so slightly.

‘O’Neill, this is the worst ship I’ve ever flown. If we don’t blow up before we crash land it’ll be purely because that Major Carter of yours has worked some miracle again. If you’re here to relieve me, I’ll go get some of that fantastic coffee drink.’

‘Only an off-worlder would think Carter’s coffee was drinkable.’ Jack rested his foot on the side of the pilot’s chair and leaned in, blocking Boch’s escape. ‘I think it’s time you and I had a little chat.’

‘You never struck me as the chatty type.’ The hunter’s cheery bravado was a pale imitation of its former glory.

‘Tell me about the bounty.’

‘There’s a lot of bounties, O’Neill. After all, I’m a bounty hunter. I chase bounties for a living. People are setting bounties on other people all the time.’

‘You know what I mean,’ Jack hissed in his ear. ‘Two years ago you told Daniel he was worth a day’s rations. Now – you infiltrate Earth to snatch him for Ba’al. What changed? Why did you lie to him?’

Boch made a face, never taking his eyes from the emptiness in front of him. ‘I didn’t lie.’ He actually managed to sound affronted. ‘I may not have been particularly clear about the context of what I told the good doctor.’

‘Boch…,’ Jack warned, his fist clenched on the seat headrest.

‘C’mon, O’Neill. If you were a bounty hunter, even the Greatest Living Bounty Hunter, would you tell your target how much he was worth? I told him he was worth a day’s rations… I just omitted the rest.’
‘Which was?’

‘A day’s rations…,’ he squirmed and coughed. ‘A day’s rations for the entire sector.’

‘Sector? What sector? Don’t jerk me around, Boch.’

‘Fifteen planets, O’Neill.’ Boch turned and glared up at Jack. ‘The entire rations for fifteen planets. That’s big, O’Neill. Very big. You think I’m going to tell him he’s got a price like that on his head, when I’m letting him go? I have some professional pride.’

‘So you let him go – passed up such a huge bounty. Why? That’s not the action of a professional hunter, Boch.’

‘Yeah, well, my heart wasn’t in it. Once I got to know him, there was no way I was going to hand him over to that particular Goa’uld.’

‘What’s so bad, about Sokar, compared to the rest of them?’

‘Oh, it wasn’t Sokar. He was part of the consortium who set the bounty for the four of you, but the big price on Doctor Jackson – that was separate.’

‘Spit it out.’

Boch shrugged and spat a gob of saliva onto the floor. ‘Hathor. She set the extra price just for Doctor Jackson. I tell you, O’Neill, she’s one crazy Goa’uld. No way was I gonna deliver an innocent like Doctor J into her hands.’

_Hathor._ Obsessed with Daniel from the moment she clapped eyes on him. She was the one Goa’uld he’d backed away from, the only one he didn’t bait or try to shoot on sight. She made Daniel retreat, mentally and physically, and for that Jack hated her, more even than for her physical abuses.

Jack caught Boch studying him in their reflection on the windscreen. Blanking his expression, he said, ‘Hathor’s dead. I had the honour myself. And your morals seem to stretch only so far. You sold Daniel to Ba’al because the price was right.’

‘We’ve been over this, O’Neill. I said I was sorry. I’m helping you find Doctor Jackson, and quite possibly compromising my reputation and my life in the process. What more do you want?’

What did he want? He wanted Daniel home, safe, grubbing in the dirt on some abandoned planet where Jack could watch over him, and bitch about how much his feet hurt. Barring that… he wanted to know what Daniel was experiencing out there, each day. Was he scared? Lonely? Being tortured? Turned into a zombie controlled by some snake?

‘Tell me what you did to Daniel. Drugged him? Tied him up? What? We found the warehouse where you held him before you left Earth.’

‘C’mon O’Neill. How’s that going to help anything?’

‘Humour me.’

Boch stared out at the darkness, avoiding Jack’s piercing stare. He was quiet for a long time, then finally relented. ‘It was Ba’al’s instruction. Had to be done his way, no argument. Daniel was given the Jonita drug. It immobilises, slows the body’s systems to one-twentieth of normal. Like they’re experiencing the passage of time really slowly. It used to be taken for interplanetary travel, before hyperspeed engines. Only drawback is the person stays conscious the whole time. The journey took
three of your weeks.’

The silence of the cockpit pressed down on them, thick and oppressive, as Jack fought to contain the explosion building inside him. ‘I oughta kill you. Right here. Right now.’

Boch’s eyes hardened. ‘It’s a rough universe, O’Neill. You come out here, away from your safe little planet, stir things up, start shooting Goa’uld, upset the balance of power; you have to expect that one day somebody is going to come after you guys.’

The anger in him died down a little. Jack straightened up, annoyed that Boch was right. There was no point in stirring up animosity between them. With an effort he pulled his focus back. ‘So Ba’al put out a separate bounty on Daniel. How long ago?’

‘Well, that’s the curious thing. Ba’al didn’t lodge a new bounty with the Guild Masters, he just increased the reward set by Hathor and changed the conditions of the Hunt – demanded Doctor J be delivered to him instead of Hathor. Certainly not the usual way of doing business, I can tell you. Even with the increased bounty, very few Hunters were willing to risk taking up the job.’

‘And Ba’al gave no indication of what he wanted Daniel for, what he was going to do to him?’

‘You know he didn’t, O’Neill.’ Was that sympathy on Boch’s face?

Jack saw Teal’c standing in the doorway, two cups of coffee in hand, loathing and contempt for Boch on his face. ‘Shift’s over, Boch. Go.’

Boch went.

Jack settled down into the co-pilot’s seat, sipped the coffee and watched Teal’c futz with the controls. From the room beyond came the smell of dinner cooking, the murmur of conversation, an occasional laugh. Jack let his tired brain fall into neutral and enjoy the companionable silence with Teal’c.

Tobay woke him from a half-doze with a bowl full of steaming soup. ‘Oh, man, thanks Tobay.’ He sniffed, picked out a couple of Abydonian scents and grinned. Teal’c was already tucking into his, but there was a change in the man’s silence.

‘T? What’s on your mind?’ Jack swallowed another mouthful.

Teal’c paused, contemplated his bowl, then said the three words Jack would have least expected. ‘Daniel Jackson’s hair.’

Jack opened his mouth. Closed it. Frowned at his food. Nodded slowly.

‘Yeah. Never did come up with a proper explanation for that.’

Someone cleared their throat behind them. In the view screen’s reflection, Jack saw Ferretti leaning in the doorway, eating, his team and the rest of the crew nearby.

‘Everyone on base had theories about Daniel’s new hair cut after we got you back from Hathor. Not that anyone ever voiced them near Daniel,’ he added hastily. ‘They have too much respect for him. But it did create a lot of speculation. Daniel was obviously self-conscious about it.’

‘Yeah.’ Jack sighed. The first few days after their rescue had been tough: Daniel feeling like a walking exhibit: he didn’t need reminding it had been done against his will, that the bitch had toyed
with him like some pet poodle. Eventually he’d had it shorn even shorter, and a little more of the old Daniel had been lost forever.

Teal‘c was contemplating his empty bowl, tensely avoiding Jack’s gaze.

‘You’ve got a theory.’

Teal‘c glanced at him, quirked an eyebrow in confirmation. ‘First, O’Neill, I would assert that never once have I observed any abnormal or detrimental behaviour from Daniel Jackson, and I have maintained close observation of him ever since our return from Hathor’s base. Nor did Doctor Fraiser discover anything of concern in her examinations of Daniel Jackson.’

Jack kept his face blank, his heart pounding just that little bit faster. The rest of the crew were in the cockpit now, silently leaning or sitting.

‘I believe Daniel Jackson’s hair was not cut. Rather, it was regrown.’ Teal‘c’s words fell with quiet damnation.

‘Regrown…’ She shaved his head? ‘Why?’

‘I suspect some type of invasive investigation was performed.’

‘But hair can’t grow that fast,’ Carter spoke up.

‘The sarcophagus can restore hair, as it does skin, blood, bone and organs.’

Silence filled the space around them, so deeply Jack could imagine the chirping of crickets.

‘Oh, no.’ Sam slid down the wall to sit on the floor.

‘We were gone… she had us for over twenty days before we woke up to what was going on,’ Jack murmured.

‘I only remember two interrogation sessions,’ Carter added.

‘The information we gave up was old, pointless—’

‘Daniel was in another part of the complex, away from us.’

‘There were no guards on us when we woke, just a technician.’

‘Hathor followed us, listened to us, hidden by the stealth device…’

‘She scanned us, practiced on us? Then worked on Daniel?’ Jack stared at Teal‘c, thoughts bumping together like dodgem cars. An answer finally spat itself out. ‘We were the guinea pigs. The whole point of taking us was to get at Daniel. She had the Tok’ra’s mind sifter, refined it on us, then used it on him—before or after she…?’ Cut his head open?

His soup threatened to make a reappearance. ‘Did she implant something? No, at least not anything we could trace. Doc Fraiser checked. Remove something?’

Sam’s horrified reaction did nothing to ease his gut. ‘No, no, we’d have noticed. Teal‘c, you’ve been watching him. He’s been fine, unchanged.’

‘Jack!’ Jacob’s firm voice broke through. ‘I’m not an expert on the memory scanning technology, but I believe it can function both externally and internally. Hathor may have tried an internal scan on
Danny if the external scan didn’t reveal what she was looking for.’

‘And then put him in the sarcophagus to cover up the evidence?’

‘It might account for how out of it Daniel was when we woke him up, sir.’ Sam’s brow furrowed as she thought back. ‘He really was having trouble focussing, particularly when she… put that Goa’uld… in you…’

Jack didn’t want to dwell on that particular memory, but it rushed back all the same: Carter and Daniel standing to the side of the cryo pod, Daniel’s face curiously blank as the red-headed witch leaned in for the kill… ‘So, then we killed Hathor, blew her base, end of story. Except Ba’al appears to have taken up where she left off. The two of them were connected somehow.’

‘Sir—’

‘Don’t say it.’

‘What if…’

‘Carter.’

‘But you know it’s a possibility. We’ve all known.’

‘And we could not do anything about it so we have not mentioned the possibility near Daniel Jackson,’ the Jaffa of Reason chimed in.

‘But, now, with Teal’c’s suspicions—’

‘Yeah, don’t think I haven’t lost sleep over it a few thousand times.’

‘Uh, you want to let the rest of the class in on the secret?’ Jacob was staring at the three of them in turn.

Jack scowled and stared at the empty black beyond the ship. Finally, he spoke, and somehow the possibility that he had so long denied became that much more plausible as he voiced it. ‘Hathor’s Jaffa. If there were any left, they could have dug her out of the freezer and popped her in the microwave. And now Teal’c’s pretty much confirmed she had a sarcophagus.’

It was too ugly to contemplate and didn’t help with their current mission. Jack filed the information in a small dark space in his brain and slammed the door shut on it.

Another day and a half and the SS Spacemonkey lurched and wheezed itself to the outer boundary of Ba’al’s solar system. They reduced speed and cruised in past gas giants, an asteroid cluster and roaming moons, some or all of which, Boch informed them, were bristling with defence and surveillance equipment.

Everyone assumed their disguises, either leather or worn linen. Carter and Beechworth took perverse delight in applying Boch’s new identity, turning the tall, broad hunter into a stooped, wrinkled old woman.

‘What is that smell, Major?’ Boch gagged and tried to remove a vial Carter had slipped into his dress pocket.

She slapped his hand. ‘Leave it. It generates a particular “old lady” smell, somewhat amplified.’
Guaranteed to keep people at a distance. You don’t want Ba’al to recognise you, do you?’

‘No. I don’t want to smell like this, either.’ He screwed his nose up, making his warty, wrinkly makeup even more unattractive.

Jack shared a grin with Sam. ‘Where’s Skaara? Can’t have Ba’al recognising Klorel’s former host.’

‘In the bathroom, sir.’

He tapped on the bathroom door, then keyed it open. ‘Ska—’

His voice failed. Skaara smiled up at him, Tobay and Seni behind, their hands holding sharp knives and fistfuls of severed hair – Skaara’s Rastafarian rat-tails – his head shorn down to a number one buzz cut. Jack wouldn’t have recognised Skaara if he hadn’t been wearing the same clothes he’d had on ten minutes ago.

‘The demon Ba’al will not know me, Jack. I can not put Dan’yer in danger because I cling to the hair of my youth.’

‘Not just youth.’ Skaara’s distinctive hair was his status symbol; it announced him as son and successor to the headman of Nagada.

‘It is a small thing, easily given, but I will risk losing honour at home to free my brother.’

Skaara, Prince of Abydos, stood proud, determined, and Jack saluted him with a tip of his head.

‘Let’s go.’

Boch gave them the intel they needed. Jacob talked them down through outer boundary checks, flight paths, cargo clearances, inspections and finally berthing fees. When the Spacemonkey’s engines finally coughed down to silence, the crew stood ready, subtly armed and itching to move.

The hatch creaked open and allowed in a flood of strange-scented fresh air. Jacob led the way, “supporting” Boch who guided him to the Trader’s Guild. In short order their cargo of dye was sold, off-loaded and replaced with a crateful of clinking credits.

‘Even made a profit,’ Jacob said ruefully, as he and Boch emerged from the Emporium and joined the others in the Mercantile Hall. Hundreds of people moved around them: men and women engaged in business, selling cargoes, making deals, restocking supplies for the outbound journeys. Tiny offices lined the fringes of the hall, and the rest of the space was crammed with rows of stalls, booths and groupings of seats where deals were done in a brisk, quiet manner. Skylights showed a sunny blue-green sky, occasionally blotted out by a vessel departing the landing field outside.

‘Where to?’ Jack asked. He itched to get out of here. Line-of-sight was at best eight metres. Too many angles from which the enemy could come at them. Too many people who were unknown, harbouring who-knew-what intentions, their noise swallowed any of the little tell-tales announcing they had been discovered that he would otherwise rely on. He was anxious to move, to get on with the mission and pick up Daniel’s trail.

Boch indicated a fancy set of doors at the far end of the hall. ‘Transport hub. Takes us directly to the city.’ He shuffled off, Jacob and Teal’c solicitously lending their support. Both of them carried a small Tok’ra-made shield, which emitted a field that inhibited a Goa’uld or Jaffa from sensing the presence of Selmac or Junior. Jack followed, his extended team trailing along, gawping like tourists
at the galactic variety of people and goods.

So far they had only seen a couple of Jaffa, chatting in an alcove kiosk that served steaming drinks. The lack of visible sentries, patrols of soldiers or any of the expected heavy-handed policing made him even more uneasy. He followed Teal'c’s hat – a light head-cloth that covered most of his forehead and weirdly fitted right in with the mishmash of clothing styles around them.

People flowed through the ornate entrance to the transport hub, and here, finally, were the expected guards. Two of Ba'al’s Jaffa were stationed to either side of the open doors, with more at different areas within, all alert but not viewing the Spacemonkey’s party with undue suspicion.

Jacob purchased tickets, presented their paperwork and stated their intention of seeking both recreation and new commerce in the city. They were issued passes allowing access to Tsydon for four days, along with a stern warning that overstaying would be strictly and ruthlessly discouraged.

The queue for departing travellers took them along a twisting corridor, through a refreshment hall – complete with huge statue of Ba’al – and suddenly out onto an open-air platform.

‘How long do we wait for the train?’ Ferretti muttered.

‘There’s no waiting on Lord Ba'al’s homeworld,’ Boch said in a horrible falsetto.

A second later a glass-enclosed vehicle swept up and halted soundlessly in front of them. They entered and settled in the cushioned seats, the two spare seats filled by a couple of women with sacks of shopping. The door slid down from the roof and was closed in a flash, then they were moving, picking up speed quickly with only a bare hint of g-force.

‘So, Dad,’ said Sam. ‘Er…, Mother. How long does it take to get to the city?’

Boch glared at her and refused to answer.

‘I’m told we’ll be there in time for lunch, honey,’ Jacob replied, a twinkle in his eye.

Conversation was limited with natives so close. Jack contented himself with getting his first good look at Ba'al’s homeworld.

Green fields flanked both sides of the single rail their carriage ran on. Grain crops alternated with fallow fields, orchards and produce crops. Many were filled with people, harvesting. It looked like summer was on the wane here, the seasons turning to cooler conditions. He blinked and focused on the workers as they shrank into the distance; were those wagons floating?

Looking back to the distant spaceport, he could see a ship taking off. Elsewhere the skies were quite empty. A probable hundred klicks to the right a range of mountains rose high and imposing, snow capping their peaks.

‘It is a very beautiful land.’ Tobay knelt on the seat next to Jack, nose pressed to the glass. ‘Their wells must be vast and deep.’

Jack smiled at him. Settling back, eyes half-closed, he counted the minutes as they sped toward Daniel.

‘This is not what I expected,’ Roberts muttered.
‘Ditto,’ Bairnsdale said.

They were all trying to not stare, to look casual and blend in but it was difficult. The train deposited them at the main terminal, and returned the way it had come. The line continued on a short way then vanished into a tunnel in the hillside. Jack casually scoped the four guards at the tunnel entrance: this must be the route to Ba'al’s palace Boch had told them about. He kept turning, being the tourist, taking in the sights as they made their way into the city.

This was the complete opposite of the spaceport’s modern tech-filled efficiency. Narrow paths and laneways twisted through hills covered with trees and rustic houses. People walked: there were no mechanical transports, only hand carts. Several times the group wandered up a path and found themselves in a small square, fronted by homes and cottage industries.

‘No, not this one. Two more hills, then turn right.’ Boch stomped back to the main trail, tired of waiting for the Tau’ri to finish gawping at someone making pots or bread.

Jack ushered his team after their grumpy guide. A Jaffa, of all people, had politely provided them with a map and directions to the lodging district where they could rent a home to stay in. They were all surprised by Ba’al’s Tsydon. The lack of cowed, oppressed people, and of threatening Jaffa, was downright unsettling.

*Boch needs to work on his briefings.*

This place was no Chulak. The people were well-housed, well-fed, living their lives apparently for themselves, instead of for their god.

They passed through a small marketplace. Jacob and Carter paused to buy pastries, milk and pots of cheese for their lunch. Jack ambled past one house, its front window open wide to display a collection of embroideries. A woman leant out and called, ‘We have new workings of our beloved Eshmun. Come, see our fine quality.’

Jack smiled a ‘no’ and kept moving. Somehow he doubted Hammond would want a wall hanging souvenir.

‘Who’s this beloved Eshmun?’ he asked Boch.

‘No idea.’

Jack gave him a hard don’t-bullshit-me stare.

‘Really. There are some things I don’t know, *Jack.*’ He pushed ahead again, the dress he was trapped into making him shuffle at best speed.

Finally they entered a larger square, halfway down the hill. A central grassy area opened up before them, surrounded by wood and plastered homes on two sides, the far end a little wooded area backed by a natural rock wall. Scaffolding covered the rear of the houses facing into the main thoroughfare, where a number of people were engaged in painting a huge mural.

Boch secured a house for them. It was a large wooden structure, situated at the far end of the square. A central door and shuttered windows offered a choice of escape routes, while concealing the occupants from prying eyes. Vines clung to the walls over the second story up to the roof: useful for a sudden exit but the flowers might be an allergen hazard for Daniel. Jack made his appraisal in seconds, and nodded approval. After a thorough search of its two floors, Jack gave the okay and everyone slumped with relief. He drew the curtain over the window looking out on the square, and went to the back of the room where Beechworth, the kids and Carter were staring out a panoramic
window.

‘Whoa.’

The land dipped away before them, offering a clear view of the rest of the homes winding down to a huge fort at one end of a wide bay. Buildings were dotted all around the harbour to a thick breakwater on the far side. Imposing itself over everything was a beautiful stone castle, joined to the land by a long causeway.

‘That would be Ba’al’s house,’ Beechworth said.

‘At a guess.’

‘It’s beautiful,’ Carter murmured.

*Impenetrable, inaccessible…*

‘Colonel Jack, what *is* that?’ Seni whispered. Eyes wide, he pointed at the twinkling blue sea.

‘That, Seni, is water. Lots of water.’ He grinned at Seni and Tobay, remembering that this was their first off-world trip. Even Skaara looked impressed. ‘And that,’ he pointed to an elegant wooden clipper ship, appearing from behind the castle, ‘is a sailing ship. Son of a sea serpent…’ Their excited exclamations touched his heart, and for a moment he was transported back four years, shadowing Daniel as he ventured out into the galaxy, seeing the wonders it had to offer for the first time. Lately the wonder had dimmed a bit, but in truth, watching Daniel soak up the first impression of a new planet, a new culture or people never had gotten old. Damn, he missed it now, though.

‘Tell you what, when we’ve got Daniel back we’ll take you guys to see some of Earth’s oceans.’ Back to work, now. He turned to the rest of the team. ‘Let’s get to it. We need to spread out, get as much intel from the locals as possible. We need to know Jaffa numbers, where’s the most likely place they’d be holding a prisoner. Freshen up, get some food and get moving. Meet back here at sunset.’

They split into four teams of three and moved out into the city. Jack, Lou and Boch headed down the hill, aiming to get as close to the castle as possible and begin plans to infiltrate it. The others drifted through the square, then dispersed.

Teal’c, Beechworth and Tobay wandered into one of the marketplaces, this one specialising in textiles and clothing. They strolled from stall to stall, listening to the conversations of the people around them. Most chatter was the same as could be heard in any marketplace on any planet from Earth to Chulak: the weather, the price of goods on offer, the exchange of gossip between neighbours and families.

For the fourth time that morning, Teal’c heard the name “Eshmun” uttered in conversation nearby. Curious, he casually turned and watched two women, excitedly examining a bolt of cloth one had just purchased. Thrilled with the material they went on their way, still talking animatedly. Teal’c’s gaze followed them and came to rest on a cloth merchant across the street, her stall of fine fabric curiously unattended.

‘Fair morn to you, traveller,’ she greeted as he wandered close.

‘Good morn, merchant. Your wares are of exceptional quality.’ He was no expert on material but Teal’c could tell the fine weaves, intricate designs and rich threads spoke of the maker’s great skill.
‘My thanks, master.’ She sighed and mustered a smile as three young ladies went past, their baskets bulging with another seller’s fabric. ‘I can offer you a good price this day – a third of the usual cost.’

Teal’c fingered a sheath of red silk, astonishingly smooth against his fingers. ‘I wonder more purchasers are not availing themselves of your fine silks, madam.’ They were incredibly beautiful, yet the shoppers were going elsewhere.

‘Ah, well, one cannot blame the good folk for wanting to purchase that which our fair Eshmun himself sampled.’ The lady shrugged and glanced wistfully past Teal’c’s right shoulder. ‘Of course, it does not put food on my table.’

‘To what do you refer?’ Tobay and Lt Beechworth joined him, uttering admiring noises at the display.

Encouraged, the shop seller said, ‘Tiniall of Shadac Lane had the good fortune to sell a cloth to the Adon.’

Adon – another name they were hearing mentioned a lot.

‘Surely that was before he revealed himself as our Lord Eshmun, Risen once more…” She trailed off reverently. ‘That he Rose wearing Tiniall’s fabric – well, it is no wonder others wish to purchase as he did.’ She pointed and they turned to see a laneway behind them, down which a crowd of people could be seen gathered around another fabric seller’s shop. ‘Truth be told, I bought a little piece myself.’ Shaking a square of orange material out of her pocket, she pressed it to her heart, then refolded and tucked it away.

Another Goa’uld, Teal’c thought, disappointed. The description of revealing and rising was odd but most likely had nothing to do with Daniel Jackson. He nearly turned away, but paused. If they purchased nothing their cover as traders would be suspect. Perhaps a gift for Doctor and Cassie Fraiser.

Teal’c, clutching a wrapped length of the red silk, Tobay likewise bearing a gift for his mother, moved on.

Jack and Lou continued to stroll casually along the beach promenade, each with one arm supporting the Aged Widow Boch, who shuffled along between them.

Better make that Aged Spinster Boch…

They kept far enough away from the fort to avoid suspicion, but their slow pace allowed ample time to scope the causeway leading to the castle, and the people coming and going. There were guards all along the fort, at both ends of the causeway and at a station halfway along. The soldiers didn’t look like Jaffa, but the swords glinting at their sides would be as effective as a zat at stopping intruders. Anyone seeking entrance to the citadel was challenged at least three times.

Not good. Access from the sea would be even less likely: the smooth, creamy stone walls rose from the water, unbroken by parapet or window for hundreds of feet. Damn.

Jack halted. Now well past the castle, the path headed up to a coastal track winding through the vegetation into the hills.

‘C’mon Auntie. Let’s go get some fish for supper.’ They turned around and strolled back. Boch’s fingers dug into his arm in protest. Jack glared at him, then met Lou’s glance. Getting into Ba’al’s
The warm afternoon sun slanted into Sam’s eyes, making her squint and turn away from the street’s busy shoppers and passers-by.

‘I could get to like this stuff.’ Sandy Beechworth took a long swig of the cold cider they had been served. ‘Very quickly. Ahh…’

They sat with Seni at an outdoor café, ostensibly watching the townsfolk go by and actually eavesdropping on the conversations around them. The café’s many tables were full, both locals and offworld traders relaxing in the late afternoon sun. The gossip they had so far heard touched on a pair of traders’ plans for their next voyage, a couple of off-hand comments about the attack that had closed Tsydon’s airspace – which curiously none of the locals seemed too bothered about – a couple of older ladies excitedly discussing ‘The Return’, whatever that was, and a young couple announcing to her parents an impending baby.

‘We are truly blessed by The Gift, mama!’ The young woman was nearly in tears.

Sam smiled and switched her focus. Two tables over a couple sat smiling at each other.

‘Tell me again, Gapen, about… about the Adon. You saw him many times in our Lord’s home?’ The woman inched her hand across the table and twinned her fingers with her date’s.

Awk, young love. Sam kept her gaze on the street and listened. They’d overheard a lot of people talking about someone called Adon and another person called Eshmun. It might be nothing, but she wanted to get more intel on them. Sandy was also listening in – he too had picked up the oft-mentioned names.

Pride and a little bit of puffed up importance swelled the man’s voice. ‘Indeed, Neryn, I was so honoured. A beautiful soul, thoughtful and caring he is.’

The woman sighed dramatically.

Gapen leaned close, eager to impress her. ‘But fiery too. Once, he and our Lord disagreed and Adon let his views be known. Even in temper he is magnificent, our Beloved Eshmun.’

Sam frowned.

So the Adon and this Eshmun are the same person?

The woman finally stopped twittering and said breathlessly, ‘I received the Blessing, Gapen. I was there at Eshmun’s Gift.’

‘Oh, Neryn!’ The guy actually clutched her hand to his heart. ‘As was I. Both of us, Blessed…’

They stared into each other’s eyes for long enough for Sam to roll her eyes and look away, then they were up and trotting off down the road, hand in hand.

Sandy cleared his throat, smothering a snort. Between them, Skaara looked up from the fruit dessert he’d been slowly devouring. ‘If the people of this world honour their… god,’ he said softly, forcing the word out with distaste, ‘why do they hold another in such esteem? He who once ruled us would not have allowed such devotion of another.’
‘Good point.’ Sam picked up her shopping basket, suddenly uneasy. ‘There’s something going on here. Something we’re missing. C’mon.’

They’d barely risen when a commotion further down the street caught the attention of everyone near by. A group of men and women, all young, very pretty and dressed in revealing colourful silks appeared from the trees of a park halfway up the street. Squealing and laughing, they were caught up in a game of tag. They spilled into the road, dashing behind market stalls, hiding behind people or improbable cover before dashing away. The townsfolk smiled at them with tolerance. Sam noted no one seemed annoyed or put out by the exuberant behaviour. As the group surged closer she caught the eye of the café’s owner.

‘Uh, sir, I wonder who all these happy people are?’

‘Heh, they are the Companions, dear lady,’ he replied, grinning at them.

‘Companions?’

‘Yes, yes, the Courtesans and Concubines of our Lord Ba’al. Are they not joyful?’

‘Oh, yes, very.’ These people were Ba’al’s lovers? All of them? Wow.

The owner went back to work. The Companions moved down the street in a flutter of silks. Deep in her soul Sam felt a tingle… She glanced at Skaara: his face set like stone, desperately hiding the loathing he suddenly felt.

‘They are Goa’uld,’ he whispered. ‘All of them.’ Fingers clenched white on his shopping basket, he turned away.

Sam joined Sandy, watching the game dance along the street. As one caught another they would shout their name, then rush after another to catch. A slim man wrapped his arms around a girl and shouted, ‘Arsay!’ She wriggled free, then another girl caught the man by the waist, hugged him with a giggle and yelled his name: ‘Jackson!’

Cold washed over Sam like a bucket of ice water. Involuntarily, she stepped forward. Beechworth caught her arm, halting the move. The look on his face said he’d heard it too.

As the man danced away with the girl, Sam stared intently at him. Curly blond hair, slender build, a large ruby flashing in the sun at his throat – definitely not Daniel. But the name. It couldn’t possibly be a coincidence. A Goa’uld named Jackson.

Jack sat in the gathering twilight, the peace of night closing around their rented home soothing the churn of thoughts in his head. He stretched his legs; the curved wooden seat placed under the front windows was surprisingly comfortable. He let his gaze rest on the painters at the far end of the square. One section of their mural complete, they were dismantling the scaffolding.

Day Twenty.

A Goa’uld named Jackson. What were the chances? Carter and Skaara were adamant – one of a bunch of Goa’uld – Ba’al’s lovers for crying out loud – was named Jackson.
We have proof, at last, over and above just Boch’s word, that Daniel has been here.

Scoped the palace today. Infiltration will not be easy. Only one way in and it’s heavily guarded. Will have to affect a covert insertion somehow. Pity we can’t call up a C32B.

Teal’c’s team report a lot of local chat about some new god. Seems to go against form for Ba’al to share the limelight. It’s now a high priority to gather more intel on this ‘god’.

Jack blew out a breath and checked the square for the umpteenth time: finally! Jacob, Seni and Roberts were making their way across the grass. Way overdue, and there was urgency in their movements. Jack flipped the journal shut and went to meet them.

Intercepting them halfway across the square, he searched them for injuries, Jaffa on their trail – they brought nothing with them but an unmistakeable air of concern. And some bulging shopping bags.

‘Boys. Nice of you to join us. Been doing some retail therapy?’

‘Jack, you’re not going to believe what we found,’ Jacob said quietly.

Jack quirked an eyebrow at him. ‘Oh, I think at this stage I’ll believe anything.’ His focus drifted beyond them to a small group of people gathering to admire the now-revealed mural.

‘We went through the trades district,’ Jacob said. ‘Bakers, potters, woodworkers, you know the thing. There was a lot of talk. I mean, every second person, Jack. All going on about someone called Eshmun. Seems to be a new god or something.’

‘Yeah, Carter and Teal’c’s groups found the same thing.’ There were soft spotlights illuminating the three panels of the mural. The first looked like some kind of wild party, people dancing everywhere and something floating out to sea at the bottom of the picture.

‘Well, we got to the craft market, Jack and there was stuff everywhere. All the sellers had this memorabilia…’

The second panel showed someone standing in a river, naked, red flowers floating in the water around them, people on the banks reaching out, bowing down, two people – man and woman – slightly apart, highlighted by radiant crowns. Jack stared at the figure in the water – a man… and the hair on the back of his neck shivered upright.

‘…plates, mugs, throw pillows, wind chimes, statues, even a full-on stained glass window…’

The third panel was clearly the causeway to Ba’al’s palace, crowded with happy people throwing flowers, waving handkerchiefs, greeting – or farewelling – three people: the man and woman from the previous panel, holy glows in place, standing possessively either side of the man from the river.

As far away as he was from the mural, as indistinct the now full twilight made the features of the man in the picture, Jack knew. With every fibre of his soul he knew.

‘…all depicting this new god of theirs.’ Jacob’s voice was low and urgent, but failed to tear Jack’s
attention away from the face of his quarry, of his lost, best friend.

‘Jack—it’s Daniel.’

‘Son of a fucking bitch.’ The words hissed out of him, and he was striding toward the mural, not knowing or caring if the others followed.

Dawn came early to the forested hills of Tsydon, but Jack was already awake, heavy-eyed from very little sleep. He sat at the upstairs bay window, staring at the indistinct shapes on the mural: slowly resolving into form as the sun’s first rays touched it with golden light. The team had talked long in the dark of night, trying to reason why a Goa’uld would elevate a mere human, a captive human, to godlike idolatry. The first answer, the most obvious and most sickening: Daniel had been snaked.

They had examined every inch of the mural, lit by flashlights, pouring over every little detail for as long as they dared, yet each depiction of Daniel differed from that of Ba’al and what had to be his queen, Astarte. The two known Goa’uld were haloed in gold light – Daniel was not. Did the painters know the difference between Goa’uld and human? Who knew?

If he hadn’t been snaked, and for a reasonable amount of his captivity they knew he hadn’t been because he’d been himself during that visit to Yu and also when he’d made and sent the message, if Daniel was still free from possession, then what would Ba’al possibly hope to gain by passing Daniel off as another god?

Jack, Lou and Boch had heard little of this new god on their recce yesterday, but the others reported that the cafes and markets had buzzed with talk of the ‘returned Eshmun’. Carter and Teal’c in particular had been chagrined at disregarding what had turned out to be vital evidence. “Daniel Jackson would not have ignored such evidence;” Teal’c had declared, blunt and precise as usual.

Coughs and mutters from the bedrooms beyond announced the waking of his expanded team. Jack turned away from the image of Daniel in the river, decision made. The planned infiltration of the palace was on hold. They’d been operating on false assumptions: that Daniel would be a bound captive in some torture chamber in the bowels of Ba’al’s stronghold. He may be so held now, but there was so much they didn’t know.

They needed intel. A lot of it.

He stopped at the table where Jacob’s souvenir collection was laid out. Daniel’s image smiled up at him from a dozen different icons. On impulse, Jack picked up a disc of crystal, engraved with Daniel’s face, suspended from a silver chain. Without thinking too hard, he clipped the chain around his neck, the weight of the crystal settling nicely where his dog tags usually resided. He’d felt kinda naked without them.

All day the four teams swept the city of Tsydon, from the fishmongers by the bay to the farmers on the outskirts of the residential areas. Shoppers, sellers, crafters and passers-by were engaged in casual chats, and slowly the team built a picture of the new god of Tsydon.

At midday they converged on a grassy rest stop, grateful for the shady respite from the hot sun and the cold water tinkling in a stone fountain. Quietly they compiled their gathered stories.
'So he first appeared on this Eshmun night,' Jack said, after Beechworth, Roberts and Carter all recounted the same story.

‘In the company of the gods,’ added Skaara. He cast a quick glance over his shoulder, ensuring they were still alone before twisting his mouth in distaste. ‘Ba’al and Astarte. But several people we spoke to all said ‘The Adon’ kept himself apart from the revelry and refused all invitations.

‘Invitations?’

‘From what we’ve heard, Jack, it was a city-wide orgy. Goa’uld, Jaffa, humans – all together,’ Bairnsdale said. The expression on her face said she was still coming to grips with the idea.

‘I pity Dan’yer,’ Tobay muttered.

There was silent agreement from the rest of the team.

‘Okay, the second picture in the mural was something going on in a river. People I talked to went on about a resurrection, a return. Full of enthusiasm but light on the detail. How can someone return to a place they’ve never been to before?’

‘They seem to be confusing or equating Daniel with a god called Eshmun,’ Sandy added. ‘We don’t have the full story yet, but there seems to be a long-held belief that Eshmun would return one day.’

‘And Ba’al has promoted Daniel Jackson in the role of this god.’ Teal’c’s baritone rumbled his disapproval through the little glade.

‘Which brings us back to why.’ Jack removed the straw hat he’d bought in the market and scratched his head vigorously.

‘I think we should try the temples next,’ Carter offered.

Jack turned his attention to the glimmer of white marble, shining through the trees, high on the hill.

‘We might be able to find out more about Eshmun,’ agreed Sandy.

Jack nodded and climbed to his feet. ‘Split up. Meet up with Lou’s team at the house – 1630.’ Tonight they would start planning their infiltration of Ba’al’s castle. With every second that ticked by, with every new piece of information they gleaned of what had befallen Daniel on this planet, a sense of urgency that resided in his gut – ever since that day in New York – wound tighter and tighter. Daniel was here. There were getting closer.

The temples were another surprise. The his and hers monuments Jack accepted readily but the third one… Above the Goa’uld temples? Teal’c was looking as stunned as Jack had ever seen him. Jacob likewise.

‘Not in Kansas anymore, Jack,’ he muttered, as they strolled across the grass.

Five years they’d been fighting the Goa’uld and never once had they seen one snake place another, human or otherwise, in a position of higher importance. Ba’al had to gain something by creating an uber-god, but what that might be, Jack could not imagine.

Seni and Tobay had entered Astarte’s temple, and all too soon scurried back into daylight. They were both… blushing.
'That is not a place where decent men should go.' Seni cast a look back at the ornate entrance, awe and temptation mingling on his young face.

Beechworth grinned. ‘I’m not a decent man. Coming Sam?’

Carter accepted the challenge and the two disappeared into the portico’s shadow.

Jack turned to Teal'c and Jacob. ‘Check your gizmos are working.’

They both nodded, confirmed the little Tok’ra gadgets they carried were operating.

‘Let’s go pay our respects to Ba’al.’

They were out in the sunshine again, ten minutes later.

‘Well, that was boring.’ Jack kept his voice down as they moved through the clusters of people wandering the gardens.

‘Not much talk of Eshmun in there,’ Jacob said.

‘No Ba’al either. Just priests not doing much.’ Jack spied out a path running behind the temples.

‘Third time lucky.’

Only ten metres along the path they were stopped by two of the oddly dressed Jaffa.

‘We regret, good travellers, the Temple of Eshmun is closed to all this day. Our Lady Astarte is in residence,’ one announced.

Jack stared past them but could see only a hint of bright marble through the trees. ‘We were hoping to see the… god… Eshmun, before we ship out again.’

The guard rolled his eyes and favoured him with a condescending smile. ‘The Lord Eshmun will not rise for many cycles yet. You may return on the new dawn and leave an offering for him.’ She made a shooing motion and stared at them until they retraced their steps to the main temple precinct.

Hot, tired and disgruntled, the team straggled back to their house in the gathering twilight. They’d regrouped with Sam and Sandy in the food market. Jack couldn’t wait to hear what they’d discovered in Astarte’s temple. Carter wouldn’t look at her father or any of them for that matter, and Beechworth looked—stunned. And way too pleased with himself.

Moving into the square where their house was situated, Jack glanced up to the mural. The artists were packing up their brushes and tools, the fourth panel now etched out in charcoal, waiting to be brought to life with colour. A final ray of sun slanted across the grass and gleamed on the black sketches.

Jack stumbled to a halt, captivated, horror spreading through his nerves like a wildfire. Dimly aware the others were clustered around him, he stared at the drawing, willing it to be something, anything other than what it was.

Perched on a cliff above a river filled with ecstatic worshippers, Ba’al and Astarte supported a limp form between them, streams of blood flowing from the body down to the people below. Everyone was cheering, praying, baying for blood…
Above the pounding of his own blood – roaring in his brain as if searching for a way out, for a way to help that limp body so obviously in need – Jack could hear thin, stifled moans of anguish, Carter crying, Skaara swearing Abydonian words of vengeance.

Jack gazed on the death of Daniel, and felt as if his own life had reached its terminal point.
A day in the life of a travelling archaeologist.

Morning.

Well, almost. A pre-dawn lightening of the horizon heralded another scorching day. The lights blazing around the clan’s caravans parked along the river bank cast long, eerie shadows before Daniel as he ambled through the tall palms and scattered clumps of thigh-high grasses. His path took him away from camp, along a dried-up creek running into the main river body.

Methodically, he picked his way through clear ground, avoiding tangled debris from long-past floods that lay in wait to snarl his feet. Weeks of practice had perfected his dot-and-carry motion with Putai’s elegantly carved wooden crutch, and it got him over most kinds of terrain. Haranith had presented him with a new, lighter cast for his ankle only a week ago. The heavy moulded cast that had been the bane of his life for the last seven weeks was thankfully a memory, and Daniel relished his new independence. No more piggy-back rides, thanks very much. Although he had the sneaking suspicion that Sabire enjoyed giving them more than he let on; his new friend’s kindness was matched only by his ability to show off.

The deep sands of the desert ahead were going to prove difficult. Daniel suspected he would be experiencing a lot of the Sendai desert from the stability of the rooftop garden on Sabire’s caravan.

With the bustle of the camp fading into the background, Daniel drifted to a halt at the edge of the oasis, his weight balanced between his right foot and the smooth, familiar plane of the crutch. A dry, gusty breeze lifted his hair, long strands playing in the air. He stared unseeing at the silvered edge of the horizon, mind empty for long unmeasured minutes.

A flash of movement caught his eye and he peered down to locate the source. There, emerging from the underside of a chinoso leaf, an insect unfurled from its nightly sleep. Brilliant red wings streaked with iridescent purple and green flashed at him as the first rays of the sun spread over the landscape. Daniel blinked, transfixed by the little creature. It was startling, beautiful, and foreign. He’d never seen anything like it on earth. It was other-worldly. Other… world…. But, of course, he was not on… Earth.

Earth.

Dizzying vertigo hit him. The palm trees tilted, the ground slid away from his feet. Fiery dawn rays scoured his eyes, breath clotted in his mouth, ears filled with a deep thumping rush. He could not tear his eyes away from those alien wings as they rose up into the dawn sky.

Not Earth’s sky.

I’m not on Earth.

Images tangled and jostled in his mind, so many different planets, so alien in their similarities. Jack’s face swam through his memories, laughing and bitching about planets full of trees. Dear, dear Mri
Sha’re was *buried* on another planet. He spent his life walking on *other planets*.

*That’s not normal. It can’t be normal.*

Unreality consumed him as the insect darted away into the air.

A sharp pain in his butt brought Daniel back to reality.

*Sitting on another planet. Makes all the difference.* He shook his head clear and groped around for the crutch, finding it half trapped under his body from his impromptu fall.

‘Daaniel!’ Heavy footsteps pounded towards him. ‘Daaniel?’

Daniel looked up and squinted at Sabire’s anxious face as he skidded to a halt, brilliant yellow wrap flapping around his long legs.

‘Are you well, Daaniel?’

‘Uhm, yeah. Think so.’ Daniel looked around, taking in the rocky ground he was sprawled on, the crowns of the palm trees now becoming discernable in the growing light, the vibrant streaks of purple-red light arching across the sky. Just another morning, like so many before. Sunrise on N’Has’y. There were worse places he could be.

Pushing aside the sharp, familiar pang of loss and separation, he smiled up at Sabire. ‘Just a bit dizzy,’ he muttered. He held out his hands and let Sabire hoist him to his one working foot.

Seeing Daniel settled on his support, Sabire drew himself up to his full seven foot, two inch height and appraised Daniel.

‘Gransire is wise to call a rest today. The journey ahead will be taxing for us all.’ A brilliant white smile split his ebony face. ‘Perhaps you should take an afternoon nap each day – with the other little ones.’

Daniel pretended offence but could not stop a grin slipping out. This gentle, generous man was a constant tease and a continual source of comfort and support. That even children in their early teens were taller than Daniel was a never-ending amusement to Sabire.

‘Just for that you can re-tank your own water next time.’ Daniel scowled at him, nonetheless accepting the rebuke for doing too much the previous day.

They strolled back toward the clan’s homes, scattered along the banks of the oasis. The caravans rested on their sturdy, well tended skids, solar sails furled like a colony of metallic flowers awaiting the sun’s blessing. The frenetic activity of the previous day had been so satisfying. Finally he was able to take an active part in the life of the clan: replenishing vital stores, repairing the beautiful vans and preparing for the long desert journey ahead, Daniel felt he had been able to repay a small piece of his debt to Sabire and the clan at large. So good to not be a burden to care for, to feed, to hide.

‘I have to admit, I’m really looking forward to seeing the desert, Sabire.’

‘You must tell us how it is different from your Abydos and Earth, my friend,’ Sabire replied.

‘Well, it’s a different colour to begin with.’ Daniel gazed past Sabire at the first dunes on the far side of the river, their deep, burnt orange ochre becoming more apparent in the brightening dawn.
They wandered into the communal eating area, accepting and tossing back greetings. Daniel found his hands full of a steaming bowl of vegetables and spicy grains, Ayshal’s face peering into his.

‘Eat while this is hot Daaniel, then you will have another serving. When you have eaten that you can have some of Jinya’s stewed peecin fruit. Put some colour in your face,’ she declared.

Daniel grinned at her. ‘You know, I’m not going to get much more colour in me than I already have, Aysh. No matter how much I eat.’

Ayshal hooted with laughter, her beautiful face crinkling in delight. Without looking behind her she snaked an arm out and slapped Sabire’s hand, which was edging toward her bubbling stew pot.

‘You, you wastrel, may go find your own food.’

Daniel subsided onto ‘his’ seat, which was set in the honour place of the eating circle, crutch balanced by the chair’s arm, his face wreathed in the aromatic spicy scents of his breakfast. Sabire’s wheedling and Aysh’s giggling denials wrapped around him, settling his mind with comforting familiarity and dispelling the remnants of his pre-dawn dislocation.

Most of the clan were now at breakfast, a chattering, laughing jumble of people. Small children ran amongst the elders clustered around a table spread with maps, nodding gravely as they double-checked routes soon to be taken across the desert. Unavoidable security checks on the planet’s air transport ruled out the quickest way to Kemyt City. Instead, they had embarked upon a journey that could take more than four months. Already twenty-nine days along, they were heading into an area little traversed, and far from the regular migration routes.

They were a generous group of people who were disrupting their daily lives in an effort to find a way home for him, and Daniel once again marvelled at his fortune to have literally fallen amongst them.

The group around the table dispersed, discussing last minute repairs and arrangements. Gransire strode back to his seat near Daniel. From a box by the side of the seat he produced a large copper bell and rang it loudly to capture everyone’s attention.

Beaming at the sea of expectant faces, he cleared his throat. ‘Our journey to Kemyt City across the Sendai Desert will be a long and trying one. Everybody has worked hard to prepare and we are very proud of you all. We leave at dawn tomorrow. Young ones—’ He glared at a group of shuffling five and six year olds. ‘Take heed of your parents. Do not wander away from the caravan or you will be swallowed up by the sands, never to be found again.’

As Gransire said this he let his gaze roam over all those assembled and included a good hard stare at Daniel.

Daniel batted his eyelashes back at Gransire in one of his better sweet and innocent looks.

Gransire looked away, fighting to hide a grin on his weathered face. ‘As a reward, I think today we can indulge in a round of Ketet,’ he concluded.

Cheering erupted all through those present and suddenly people were on the move, stuffing down their food, clearing away pots and dishes and chairs with astonishing speed.

Daniel found himself suddenly besieged by most of the children, all clamouring for his attention.

‘Daaniel, Daaniel, will you be on our team?’

‘Daaniel, be with us, play with us…. ’
Ayshal pushed through the milling, bleating children, pulling them away before they set Daniel in the dirt.

‘Away with you all. Silly ones. How do you expect Daaniel to run when he can hardly walk yet? Away with you!’

She deftly exchanged Daniel’s empty bowl for one brimming with stewed fruits.

‘What exactly is Ketet, Aysh?’ he asked, quite bemused at the sight of everyone vanishing into their caravans and emerging scant moments later, their voluminous bright clothing replaced by sleek and equally bright body-hugging shorts and tops.

‘It is wonderful fun. Everyone plays who can stand on two legs.’ With a crash, she tossed the last of her pots into her nearby van and threw herself after them. Still talking, her voice floated out to him.

‘There are two teams, one ball. The teams chase the ball towards the goal, one team tries to stop the ball from reaching the goal, and the other team tries to stop them stopping the ball. If a goal is scored everyone turns around and goes for the other goal.’

Ayshal emerged from her caravan, her elegant towering frame moulded into bright green shorts and what looked to Daniel like one of Sam’s sports bras. Not that Sam had fluorescent green bras – did she?

1. ‘I’m a bit past being the ball these days, but Ketet is such fun. It keeps the body zinging for days after.’

‘Being the ball?’ Daniel slurped up the remains of his fruit and watched the bowl vanish into the depths of her van.

‘Usually that is for the younger ones,’ she replied. ‘Oh, dear. That man…’ She broke off in amused astonishment as Sabire dashed from his van toward them, resplendent in a hot pink and purple polka dot ensemble. He slid to a halt in front of Daniel and held out his arms, proudly displaying his attire.

‘Do I not hold you in awe with my stunning choice in clothing?’ Sabire demanded.

Daniel ruthlessly squashed a sudden longing for chocolate pudding and strawberry sauce.

‘Something like that,’ he laughed.

‘I have a wonderful idea – Daaniel, you can be one of the goals!’ Sabire helped Daniel to his feet then proceeded to drape him in a brilliant blue robe. ‘This is so you will be seen.’

‘Sabire, I’m the only white person on this planet. I’m not too hard to spot, you know.’ Daniel stared down at the electric blue folds floating around his body. ‘And what exactly does being a goal entail?’

Sabire flashed his beautiful white smile.

Daniel fought down a surge of trepidation and tried to look taller than he felt.

Half an hour later, Daniel reflected that being a goal was not such a trying thing. He was comfortably ensconced in a chair under a sun awning, drinks and food chilling in a cooler, with eleven-year-old Teni, who was recovering from a bout illness – too many of Jinya’s sweetened nut bars – at his side.
A huge flat area on the far side of the river had been designated the playing field; Daniel at one end, the opposite goal almost a kilometre and a half away. In the centre the two teams jostled. How anyone knew which team they were on was quite beyond his comprehension. Every single member of the clan was out there, apart from a small group of injured or infirm that was seated up on the caravan roofs, doing double duty as lookouts for trouble and minders of the youngest.

A great cheer rose from the players and they were off, surging in a brilliantly hued pack after the ‘ball’ – twenty year old Chanla. Daniel could just make him out, sprinting ahead of the pack as one team attempted to bring him down and were tackled by the other team.

Bodies tangled and thumped into the ground: male, female, young, old. No quarter was given or expected. They ran all out in the rising heat of the day, crunching into each other and the earth with delighted abandon, springing up and pelting on again.

After half an hour the melee had reached the other goal. Daniel watched, wincing as the ‘ball’ threw himself at Safia who was the goal, flattening them both in a cloud of dust. Chanla leapt up, crowing in delight and mirroring the celebration by both teams around him.

‘That’s how they score a goal?’ Daniel started eyeing the distance to the vans, wondering if he could make sanctuary in time as the players began to surge back in their direction.

‘Don’t worry, Daaniel. Haranith said she would personally vivisect anyone who does more than touch your hand. And I’ll protect you.’ Teni beamed at him, her skinny adolescent body already nearly the same height as he.

Daniel reached over and patted her hand. ‘Thank you, Teni. That makes me feel much better,’ he said. I think.

The pack of players was scrumming closer, the ‘ball’ darting ahead, the rules still no clearer to Daniel – if they existed at all. He could make out Sabire in his polka-dotted glory launch a flying tackle at Ayshal, both of them disappearing in a cloud of dust. He memorised the details, such as they were, to pass on to Jack and Teal’c when he got home. Jack loved any kind of game and Daniel had a feeling he would throw himself headfirst into this one. Teal’c too would find it appealing, and if Daniel could organise a small group from the SGC teams he had a feeling his reserved friend would revel in it.

Picturing Teal’c taking Jack down in a bone-crunching tackle brought a huge smile to his face.

It took another thirty minutes for the game to make its thumping, thudding and crunching way near to Daniel’s goal. With some thought of preserving his little oasis, he pushed himself to his feet and walked a few metres out to meet the onslaught. Chanla-The-Ball suddenly shot out of the pack and sprinted toward him, several bodies being tackled out of his path. It was impossible to tell who was who now; faces were caked in a sweaty, dusty ochre.

Haranith’s voice rose above the grunting, gasping calls of the players.

‘Remember, if anyone harms Daaniel I will have your guts on my wall!’

Daniel’s too frequent visits to the healer’s van had him believing the threat.

A last minute charge by three teenagers and staid old Trettish the gardener left the way open for Chanla to pick up speed and hurtle straight at Daniel. At the last second he braked and skidded to a halt two inches in front of Daniel’s nose. With gentle reverence Chanla took Daniel’s hand and squeezed it lightly, his powering lungs blowing gusts of warm air in Daniel’s face.
‘Ketet!’ The triumphant team took up the shout and swept Chanla up in a victory dance. Someone yelled out and they were off once more.

Daniel sank back into his chair, oddly exhausted by everyone else’s activity. They were all streaming toward the far goal again, seemingly unaffected by the now-baking heat or the odd injury gained along the way.

Teni grinned at him. ‘They keep going till they drop, Daaniel. We have a few more hours yet.’ She gazed calculatingly at the pack. ‘I think I’ll go see if Jinya’s tea cakes are ready.’ With the boundless energy of youth, she leapt onto their little skid bike and sped off to the vans.

Silence settled in Daniel’s little part of the world, the muffled cries of the game overlaid by the chirping of a hidden insect nearby. He soon found himself drowsing in the comforting morning heat. He thought about writing in his journal, but it was much more pleasurable to drift for awhile, for once free of his demons: his near constant worry about finding a Stargate, about returning home, about Ba’al and his troops tracking down this planet and plundering these gentle, defenceless people in their search for him.

Time drifted along slowly until he was brought awake by a huge roar from the far end of the field. He peered through Sabire’s spyglass. Another goal to whichever team it was. He was beginning to think the players were swapping teams. To one side of the celebrating players another scrum was developing into a laughing free-for-all. As he watched, Sabire’s polka-dotted backside disappeared under Gramire’s athletic charge. Age certainly had fewer limits on N’Has’y. He chuckled to himself; there was at least a week’s worth of teasing in store for Sabire – letting himself be downed by an eighty-year-old.

Daniel looked over to those on the vans, noting Teni had climbed up to get a better view of the fun. Suddenly, he turned his head to the left, to the first dunes of the desert rising some fifty metres away. Something had caught his eye: a glint of sun reflecting off… what? He shoved himself to his feet to gain a better view. There shouldn’t be anything out there; the desert was uninhabited by all but the smallest hardy rodents. People very rarely traversed it, unless, like themselves, they did not want to be found or noticed.

He peered intently at the spot, almost convinced he was imagining things when the top of the dune seemed to explode. Sand showered out in all directions as a powerful one-person pedder shot out of its cover and was gunned down the side of the dune. Daniel froze in surprise, watching as, one by one, four more solar-powered desert racers crested the dune and sped down. Having been thoroughly indoctrinated by the young people of the clan in all manner of pedders, skids and every other version of desert sail boat, Daniel realised these souped-up machines were more than likely belonging to Skanders: desert pirates who preyed on lone travellers and small groups, stripping everything of value and leaving the people for dead.

But why would they dare attack such a large caravan as this?

They must have something specific in mind….

‘Oh, crap.’

He was out here alone, defenceless, unable to run. Teni had the skid. The Skanders were headed right for him.
Word must have spread in the last town after they reprovisioned. The clan was headed into the desert and no-one did that unless they had something to hide.

And here he was, a white skinned person on a planet of ebony. So obviously out of place, and therefore valuable.

Desperately, Daniel looked around. The scrum finally over, the game was lurching back in his direction, but they were still a kilometre away. The lookouts on the vans had been distracted by the fight and had not yet noticed the intruders.

Daniel limped out from under the awning’s shade, yelling and waving hand and crutch at the vans, all too aware it made him more of a target, but he was going to need help quickly. The roar of the pedders’ engines grew louder in his ears with every second.

There – finally someone on the vans had turned toward him. He watched as heads turned, arms pointed and within seconds the alarm bell was ringing out, loudly calling everyone to come. As those on the vans began to leap down and search for weapons and skids – all neatly packed away for the journey – Daniel turned and saw his adopted people abandoning the game, stretching out into a dead run to get to him.

They had to be exhausted and were so far away. Daniel knew who would win this race.

He ducked back under the awning, folded his precious glasses and tucked them into the cooler for safekeeping. He looked around. He had a chair, a cooler, a crutch and a stretch of canvas.

‘Where’s McGuyver when I need him?’ he muttered.

He tucked the crutch up under his left armpit and grasped the folding wooden chair with both hands. He knelt his injured left leg on the cooler, braced himself with the right leg, sucked in a deep breath and looked up to meet the enemy.

The first Skander in the line shooting toward him was a vicious-looking individual, wearing some sort of home-made metal armour. Mere feet away now, Daniel saw the man’s shock as he took in the colour of Daniel’s skin, confirming what they had seen from a distance. Daniel took advantage of the momentary distraction and swung the chair into the man’s face with all his might. He was rewarded with a loud squawk from the man as he followed the chair over his handlebars and landed in a rolling heap in the dirt. The pedder spun away, out of control and too far off for Daniel to grab it.

Hastily, Daniel snagged up his crutch in a solid two-handed batter’s grip, swung and connected with the upraised arm of the second Skander – a grim, gap-toothed woman. The unmistakable crack of bone breaking was followed by a hoarse cry, the woman’s pedder lurched wide and away, collected one of the awning poles and ripped it free.

Daniel barely had time to straighten and catch his balance before attempting a wild back-handed swing at another attacker. The man ducked, snatched at the crutch and pulled, the motion of his pedder enough to overbalance Daniel and pull him face-first into the sandy dust.

He had been months away from the SGC but the instinct came as naturally as breathing: twist, hit the ground with his shoulder and roll up to meet the next attack, suck in a breath and try to rise above the stab of pain as his cast thumped into the ground.

The fourth pedder was too close, right on top of him as he rose up on knees tangled in Sabire’s ridiculous beacon of a robe. The pedder swerved slightly, and hit Daniel’s right shoulder with
numbing force. He was spun back into the dirt, and before he could move a pair of knees landed squarely on his back, driving out the air in his lungs in a horrible, gagging ‘Ooof’.

Rough hands wrenched his scrambling arms behind his back, elbows and wrists were swiftly tied with thin cords. Through the clouds of dust, Daniel could see a couple of the Skanders’ pedders flash past his line of sight. The roar of their engines drowned out any sounds from beyond; help was undoubtedly on the way but there was no way to know how long before it arrived.

Another vehicle stopped in front of him, hands latched on to his arms and robe and he was hauled up and thrown over the knees of the rider.

Daniel grimaced as something on the vehicle drove into his stomach, depriving him of another precious breath. A huge hand clamped down on his neck, holding him in place as the pedder began to pick up speed.

Desperation hit him now, mixed with a good dose of anger. He’d had his fill of being treated like a piece of baggage on Ba’al’s Tsydon, and he’d be damned if he let a pack of unwashed louts do the same here.

With a wriggle and a shimmy of his hips, Daniel slid forward a few inches, then a few more as his captor endeavoured to hold him and manoeuvre the vehicle at the same time. Another shimmy, and his shoulders were well over the man’s legs. He gave a mighty heave, arched his back and brought his legs up. Gravity did the rest: his cast impacted agonisingly with the man’s head and Daniel found himself face first in the sand again.

He half-rolled to one side as two more pedders swept past him, grasping hands narrowly missed him. A piercing falsetto war cry split the air nearby. Daniel barely had time to look up before flattening his face into the ground once more, the spectacle of young Teni launching from her speeding skid to wrap herself around one of the dismounted Skanders imprinted on his retinas. Her skid ploughed through the chaos and ran straight over him before taking out another of the awning poles, and brought the canvas fluttering down over his body.

Silence descended momentarily. Away to one side, one of the Skanders cried out in pain. Further away, two of the pedders sped off into the dunes – and there, in the distance, the sound of many, very angry people approaching rapidly.

Daniel coughed out a lungful of dust and tried to move, appalled that he was lying there while a child battled his attackers.

The noise outside his canvas cocoon rose and suddenly the awning was thrown back. Daniel looked up through blinding shafts of sunlight at the sea of dusty black legs and brilliantly coloured shorts that surged around him. Everyone was talking at once, calling his name, yelling at each other not to move him, for Haranith to come quickly, for someone to get a knife to these cords – quickly for pity’s sake. The bonds were cut and Daniel sagged onto the ground, a moan of relief slipping through parched lips.

‘Daaniel? Can you speak? Are you in pain?’ Haranith was there, speaking gently to him over the whirr and beep of her med-scanner.

‘You tell me, ‘Ranith,’ he croaked.

‘Nothing broken, thank the gods. However, you will be one big bruise tomorrow.’ Her hands gently
traced the path of Teni’s skid runner down his back.

Daniel jerked up, wildly peering through legs. ‘Oh, jeez. Teni, where is she? Is she alright?’

Those around him took up the call and seconds later Teni flopped in the sand by his side, a big grin on her face.

‘Teni, sweetie, thank you. Are you okay?’ Daniel reached out and gently took her hand, barely registering Haranith shooting his butt full of painkillers.

‘I’m fine Daaniel. It was great! Did you see me? I got ahead of everyone and I crashed the skid into the Skanders and I leaped on that really ugly one and I bit him and he tasted really, really bad, like he hadn’t had a bath in months, and then the others caught up and chased them away and they’re gone now but I hate them ’cause they hurt you and tried to take you away, and do you think they’ll come back again?’ The last question came out in a hopeful sounding gasp.

Daniel smiled at her, patting her hand. ‘I hope they don’t come back, sweetie. But you saved me and I’m so grateful.’

Teni looked ready to burst with pride.

Gentle hands rolled Daniel over onto a stretcher, and he gazed blearily up at Sabire’s concerned face.

‘Hi.’

‘Hello, Daaniel.’

‘Did’ja get the bad guys?’

‘They have all fled like the rodents they are. They will not return,’ Sabire added fiercely.

‘Ah. S’good. Didn’t we do this already?’ Echoes of their first meeting floated through Daniel’s mind as he was carefully lifted and moved toward the caravan.

‘Rest, Daaniel. You are safe now.’ Sabire’s large warm hand cradled Daniel’s face.

Daniel smiled sleepily and touched Sabire’s hand. ‘I always am with you, my friend.’

Sunset came early to this part of the land. Vibrant golden beams streaked the sky, gilding the tops of the sand dunes beyond the oasis. A gentle hum of powerful engines filled the evening, combined with the song of small grass birds flittering around the skids of the caravans.

Everything was packed and ready to go. Little trace remained of their stay here and what there was would soon be covered by the blowing sand.

After the attack on Daniel, the clan’s smaller vehicles had been unpacked and the People had roamed out in all directions, hunting the Skanders who had dared try to take their guest from them. Nothing remained to be found. Like the rodents they took their name from, the pirates had disappeared into their holes. All that was left for the clan was to be vigilant and to slide away into the darkness tonight, hoping the increasing winds would hide their trail.

Inside Sabire’s caravan, Daniel drowsed on the bed, mulling over the recent visit from Gransire, Gramire and the other elders. They had offered sincere apologies for leaving him exposed to danger. Daniel had accepted the apologies, fully aware that a denial of fault would be an even greater insult
to the clan’s integrity.

The van rose with a small jolt up on its air-cushions and began to glide off in formation with the rest of the caravan. They were headed into a dangerous, secluded land and Daniel could only hope that no-one else was put at risk for his sake.

At the end of this journey lay the golden city of Kemyt. There hopefully too, was his Stargate, not only a way home but also the way to the stars for his saviours.

The caravan glided up over the first sand dune and vanished into the depths of the night.
Wind battered Daniel’s face, errant grains of sand scored his cheeks, his hair whipped across his glasses and flailed his ears. He couldn’t hear much, talk even less: every sound he made was snatched away and flung far behind. His body bounced and jarred, collecting bruises with every passing moment – and he loved it all. He gunned the ‘ped harder, careened over a grassy hillock and soared down the other side, inertial dampers taking the landing in their stride. The smile etched on his face widened even further. Ahead and to the side other ‘pedders flanked him, racing home to the caravan with the setting sun warming their backs.

A shout of laughter escaped his lips, and was left hanging in the air behind him. Something inside him sighed and settled. Happiness, or was it contentment? Either way, he suddenly felt free: he’d finally loosed the chains of captivity and torment, responsibility and injury. Now was the time to live in the moment, to live for himself. Now, life seemed to stretch out ahead of him, instead of crowding noisily up behind him demanding accountability.

Time for some fun.

Daniel dodged the brilliant little machine around a clump of scrutin bush, almost accidentally sending a spray of sand in the pursuing Sabire’s face. Sabire slowed for a vital second and Daniel forged into the lead. To the right, Safia surged close, her brightly braided hair streaming over her shoulders. She glanced over at Daniel, winked and shot ahead.

No you don’t!

He coaxed a last burst of speed from the game little machine, angled around a dust-filled depression and raced for home, hard on Safia’s heels with eight other pedders close behind him. Ahead, the caravan came into sharp relief, etched by the afternoon sun against the deep blue sky. Safia seemed to fly across the final stretch and skidded to a halt. Defeated and grinning like a maniac, Daniel throttled back. The others closed up around him and they completed the journey together.

The caravan had halted for the night around one of the familiar oases, shade creeping across the arid soil from the bounty of tall palms growing around the fathomless depths of icy cold water. The ‘pedders moved sedately between the colourful vans, then split off towards their homes with a smile and wave.

Day 48 – The Sendai Desert

Went ‘ped racing again today. For the first time I rode my own machine. Haranith replaced the cast with an even lighter one this morning and is pleased with the level of healing so far. I’m delighted. I can walk with much greater ease. Pain is almost negligible unless I do something stupid. The cast will be with me for a long while yet, but these days it is more a part of me, instead of me being an appendage of the cast. And I can fend off Sabire’s offers of piggyback rides with more honesty. I don’t want to be ungracious, but I do suspect an element of showmanship in the way he carts me around the campsite.

Nearly won the race today. Safia won. Again. Suspect she’s turbo charged her ‘ped somehow. Well,
there’s always tomorrow.

Three days since the Skanders’ attack. Someone must have seen me in Danyk Town when we stopped for supplies. Sabire said the Skanders are opportunists, ready to make a quick profit on anything they can beg, borrow or steal. They’re outlaw nomads, a very small number who live outside the Clans. I just hope my appearance in Kemyt City does not cause an even bigger upset.

Gransire estimates a journey of sixty-seven days will see us through the desert and down the Shems river to Kemyt City. We could have done it in hours by air, but the elders rejected that because of the strict identity regulations for air travel. I’d be spotted in an instant. That in itself may not be so terrible a thing, but we have no way of knowing if Ba’al has found this planet yet. Until I know for sure there is no Stargate here – and surely the city founded by the revered Weril/Merul, near-mythic god and almost certain Goa’uld / Tok’ra saviour of the M’djay ancestors, has to be the most likely place for it – then I will reveal myself to the elder council, and hope my ‘arrival’ is not too disruptive for the culture. Shouldn’t be any more difficult than telling the Abydonians their entire belief system was a lie and their lord and master nothing more than a snake inside a boy.

Easy.

Oy, as Jack would say.

Jinya has claimed my dinner tonight. Stew and dumplings – yes!

And then there is Campfire. For weeks now I have listened to the life-stories of my fellow travellers. They give of themselves so readily, without expectation of a return gift. But, tonight, I think it’s time. I’ve always felt completely welcomed by the Clan. They demand nothing of me. All the more reason for me to give my own life-story to them.

Tonight – I think I’m ready.

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Dumpling stew, brewed cider, sweet-nut crumble and warm spiced mead: utterly satisfied, Daniel settled back in the lounging cushions. Dishes were stacked away, little ones put to bed. Adults and older children chatted softly around the darkening coals of the great fire.

Gramire looked up and around at her extended family. ‘Who will give us a story, this night?’

Amidst the general clearing of throats and whispered encouragements, Daniel tentatively raised his hand. ‘Uh…’

Thrilled silence spread around the circle quicker than a rumour of Sabire’s latest conquest.

‘I’d, um, well, that is to say, if it’s of pleasure to my good hosts, I would give the tale of Daniel Jackson. Er…’ He trailed off, embarrassed.

Gramire leaned forward and nodded to him. ‘We would be honoured to hear our Daaniel’s tale.’

All eyes were turned toward him. Suddenly, the expected nervousness and trepidation faded away.
There were no enemies here. He stared into the glowing coals, and began.

‘Daniel Jackson is my name. Hear my story.

‘I was born on the banks of a great river, in a land of plenty, surrounded by desert sands. A land which bears its history proudly, for all to gaze upon and wonder. My mother and father were children of another land, and so I belonged to both. They studied the stories of my birth-land, Egypt, and taught me to speak its words, to read its history.

‘I grew up and learned much. We were happy there. Then my parents travelled back to their homeland to share what they had discovered. I walked the soil of my second home for the first time. It was a strange place, frightening, exciting, but I was happy because mama and dad were there.

‘And then suddenly they were gone. Crushed by the stone temple brought from our first home. I was alone in this new land. It was not a happy time, but I kept the stories, told me by my parents, close in my heart and knew they smiled down on me from the Elysian fields.

‘When I left the home of the good family who cared for me, I continued the work my parents had started…’ He trailed off, suddenly assailed by a memory of that day at the museum with Sam: Merrie Stern chasing after them, revealing the existence of his father’s lost journals. He’d never had the chance to pick them up, and now probably would never get to know what they contained. She’d said they were from 1973, hadn’t she? The year the family had moved back to the US, the year everything changed. Why had his father left the journals in Egypt? They’d brought so much with them they’d filled half the hold of the ship. Merrie… she’d said his father had asked her grandfather to safeguard the journals until he returned to Egypt. But, as far as he could remember they had planned to stay in the US with the exhibition for at least five years. What could the journals possibly contain that would prevent them being taken to America?

Daniel shook his head and came back to the present. Oh. Oops. He’d been staring into space with his mouth open. Really have to stop doing that. He gave his audience a sheepish grin and launched back into the story.

‘I found friends, a lover, lost them again. At a lonely point in my life, chance—as it ever seems to—brought to me a lady named Catherine. Catherine asked for my help to open a doorway, a gate that had been buried for many generations. It was called a Stargate, and it opened the way to the stars.

‘We went through the Gate: a group of warriors, a man named Jack, and myself. We walked onto a planet, far, far away from home. It was called Abydos. We found a city full of people; lovely, friendly people who welcomed us. Theirs was a hard life. Their god demanded they toil in a huge mine to provide him with the ore he needed. They worked all day and had little time to themselves.’

The words wrapped around him, bringing him flashes of memory: warm spice-scented winds ruffling the canvas of the workers’ rest-tent, the stench of the mastage that dogged his footsteps, the awesome sight of the towering mud-brick walls of Nagada, the sparkling hazel eyes of his wife-to-be…

‘That night, the god Ra arrived. He was displeased with us and struck out at the Abydonians, hurting and killing many. We said this was not right, a god should love, not slay his people. We said to the people of Abydos that he was not a god, he was false. The Abydonians—’ A hand reaching down, pressing a trigger on the helmet of a fallen warrior… it was Jack revealing the human beneath the Horus helmet… yet it was his own hand…

‘The Abydonians rose up and cast Ra out. They rejected the false god and he came no more to harm them. Jack and his soldiers went home. I stayed on Abydos, my third home. I married a beautiful girl, Sha’re, and we were very happy.
‘A full year and two seasons passed. I studied the writing left behind by the false god, and taught the Abydonians to read and write the language of their ancestors. They taught me many things. I was in love, and loved in return.’ The smile that touched his lips was genuine, the grief that had weighted those memories now dulled to regret with the passage of the years.

Around the circle the Clan sat enthralled by his story, firelight flickering in their eyes as they journeyed with him to another desert world.

‘One day, the Stargate opened again, and Jack returned. A false god had come to Earth, my first home. As I showed Jack my discovery of Stargate addresses for thousands of planets, a false god came to Abydos and stole my Sha’re and Skaara, our brother. Though it grieved me greatly to leave, I journeyed back to Earth and began to search for my family.’ Murmurs of sympathy rose from the listeners. Daniel found the dull red of the coals beginning to blur.

‘My journeys have been long, strange, exciting, terrifying. Filled with sadness, and happiness. We met good people, like Tupelo and the people of the Land of the Light, who have taken in many others lost or driven from their homes. We sat on a mountaintop and watched the Lolani people perform the Dawn Rising: flying on silk wings in the thermal currents over a bubbling lake of hot mud. We joined the Adorea people of Marana on a rare conjunction of their three moons and surfed the enormous tides in amazing crystal boats. The demon who possessed my wife, Sha’re, stole many of our people from Abydos. Jack and my fellow teammates from the SGC tracked her down and rescued the captives. I saw Sha’re and went to her, but the demon attacked me and was killing me.’ The glow of the campfire blurred into the beam of the hand-device, Sha’re’s eyes glowing, then fading, her lips whispering ‘I love you, Daniel’. He coughed, cleared his throat. ‘My warrior-brother Teal’c had to shoot at her to save me. My beloved died. She is free of the demon Goa’uld. She sleeps wrapped in the warm sands of Abydos, now.’

He kept his eyes on the coals, the silent empathy around him just as warming as the fire. ‘We’ve met many other good people: Lya from the Nox; the Tollan; the Tok’ra; Martouf and Selmak, Narim, Bra’tac, Thor of the Asgard. My brother Skaara fell amongst the Tollan, a good people who regarded the law most highly. They invited us to argue for Skaara’s freedom from the Goa’uld who possessed him. We won, and we celebrated long and mightily.’

He went on, his tales wrapping around the gathering, words floating up into the clear night sky. He told them the tale of Ba’al, Astarte, and his strange capture—leaving out some of the more bizarre elements—and the wave of Fate’s hand that brought me here, to my fourth home.’

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‘Daaniel?’

‘Yes, Shanti?’

The young man paused, his fine henna brush poised over Daniel’s right arm. The intricate patterns he’d created swirled up from his wrist, drifting like a clutch of delicate seed heads, tiny twin-winged craft caught on an imaginary breeze, up past his elbow to circle his bicep.

‘You searched many years for your love, did you not?’

Daniel let his gaze wander over the camp’s evening bustle. More active than normal, they were
setting up for a rest day tomorrow. Celebrations were in preparation for Sebu day, which required a rolling all-day feast, dancing and personal decorations: gold-hued henna-like designs painted on as much of one’s body as was decent to bare. Shanti had won the scrum to decorate Daniel, although half the Clan were gathered around, critiquing his work.

The dye, made by Safia from plants grown on the rooftop gardens shone brightly on every Clan member’s limbs, child to adult, all bore decorations declaring their individuality. On Daniel, the dye was less eye-catching, but Shanti had mixed in another pigment and was producing a stunning shimmering effect.

Daniel watched as a little flying insect emerged from Shanti’s skilled hand. Sitting in the shade of the awning over Sabire’s home, and lulled to a half-doze by the brush strokes on his skin, he took some time to answer Shanti’s question. Behind his lidded eyes he could see himself doing this with Sha’re—painting her golden skin with images or words, secret little messages declaring his love, their happiness.

“Yes, Shanti. My search was long.”

“She is greatly honoured by your dedication.”

A faint smile dimpled the corners of his mouth. “Thank you.”

“Will you join with another, Daaniel?” a young woman—Anala—asked from the gathered watchers.

“Perhaps. Yes, I hope so. One day.’ A day he could not envisage at the moment, but could still be possible, in the future.

He kept silent during the rest of the session. When Shanti was done Daniel stood, arms spread and displayed himself. Clad in an open sleeveless tunic and very loose pants that were split to mid-thigh, his arms, chest, leg, and cast were decorated in tiny insects darting among the floating seed pods. Higher and higher they went up his body, thinning out until a lone almost-butterfly settled on the side of his neck.

Murmurs of approval rippled through the audience. Both Daniel and Shanti took a bow.

Å

Shouts of laughter and discovery drifted on the still-cool morning breeze. The early morning start had brought them to Masima Oasis just in time for… elevenses as Daniel termed it, applying a British term to the all-in gossip and tea session that the Clan indulged in every day. If they were on the move it took place over the open intercom, but when a suitable rest stop presented itself, they were parked and unpacking kettles and cake quicker than a guy could blink.

This oasis was a tiny stream meandering between enormous boulders, weathered beasts from a long ago age, cracked and blasted to expose fossilised shells and animals. Everyone was having a ball crawling around the rocks. Daniel’s own path took him out of sight of the vans, drawn on by tracks made by some type of small reptile. Sabire ambled behind him, singing snatches of songs he’d composed. With the last elegant notes echoing off the rocky surrounds, Sabire caught up to him.

“Sing me a song from your world, Daaniel.”
‘Sing?’ A faint thrill of alarm ran through him as the last time he’d sung came to mind. *Not many rowboats out here.*

‘Your Earth does have songs?’ Sabire peered at him with comic concern.

‘Yes, of course. I’m just not much of a singer. I can play music on an instrument similar to your harpishone, but songs…’ He knew a few Ancient Egyptian ones, more as poems really. There was that album he’d been fond of while he worked on his second thesis, though.

‘*Hello darkness, my old friend. I’ve come to talk with you again*…’ Simon and Garfunkle’s song rose into the air of a whole new planet and followed Daniel and Sabire as they meandered around the rocks. Daniel sang a line in English and then tried to translate it - not always successfully. By the end of the song they were both laughing. ‘Ow!’ His foot jarred on the uneven ground, making him wince.

‘Are you well, Daniel?’

‘Oh, yeah, I’m okay. Just overdid it a little. Leg’s hurting a bit.’

‘Here – I will take you on my back and return to camp’

‘Oh, no, I can make it Sabire.’

‘You are tired and in pain. I will carry you.’

‘Sabire, I don’t need to be carted around like a child.’

‘Did I say you were a child? You are a grown man, of significant height and weight.’ A look of cunning crept into his eyes. ‘Will you deny me the opportunity to impress the lads and lasses with my incredible strength and unassuming concern for my friend?’

‘Oh, well when you put it like that, how can I refuse? And, unassuming? In your dreams big guy.’

‘Sit up on that rock and pull your robes up. Your singing is bad enough without you sounding like a castrated fehkah.’

‘Oh really? Just for that, here’s another.’ He launched into *He Ain’t Heavy*, trying to translate as he went, then somehow found himself segueing into *Bridge over Troubled Water*. ‘Er, whoops, that’s not right. Wrong song. Oh, shut up.’

Â

‘Daaniel.’

This night, where the leaping flames of the bonfire barely drove back the numbing cold of the desert night, and all the youngsters were already tucked warmly in bed, this night it was Gramire who addressed him, intent to question clear in her eyes.

‘Gramire, yes.’

‘You have told us of the ancestors who made their home here, of the old home in Newbeea?’ He nodded at her careful pronunciation. He had indeed told to them his theory that whichever Goa’uld
had settled this planet had taken people from Ancient Nubia, that great land south of Egypt through which the mighty Nile flowed; that they were a race of warriors and craftspeople, kings and slaves alike.

‘Some of us have been discussing these ancestors.’ She fixed him with her intent gaze. Past her, he could see heads nodding: her ‘tantesh’ group, practitioners of a kind of martial arts/recitation exercise that held him astonished every time he watched them; their advanced age and athleticism not the only causes for admiration.

‘We wonder,’ her voice snapped his attention back to her, ‘if any of the ancestors’ folk were left behind, on your Earth?’

‘Left…?’

‘Are there those on Earth who would claim kinship with us?’

‘Ah, well.’ Deep breath. ‘Er…’

‘If there are ancestor-kin we would wish to know how they fare, for possibly we will one day meet them.’

_Oh boy. Of all the races they could be descended from_— Maybe he should have guarded what he’d said. Or just kept his trap shut. Hammond would have kittens.

Expectant faces ringed him, the flickering shadow from the firelight gave the impression that others lurked in the black beyond, listening. Well, he’d told the truth so far. He would not lie now.

‘Yes, Gramire. There are still people on Earth descended from the Nubians your ancestors may be related to.’

A pleased murmur ran around the circle.

‘How do they fare? Their land has always been coveted by others for its gold and sadly many have invaded and oppressed the Nubians in their quest for it. There has been war and unrest for centuries between the different races of the north and south. And the tribes of the north who pray to a different god from those in the south rule unfairly and repress the rights of the southerners. They have raided their homes, taking children to use as slaves or soldiers. The country has been locked in brutal, devastating war for many years. Famine has also plagued them.

‘In recent times, there is a new gold – oil, a resource from far under the land itself, which has brought the greedy and ruthless from many different lands to plunder and dispossess the people. The land is called Sudan now. Energy hungry nations such as China, and quite possibly my own, conduct unlawful dealings there, ‘buying’ the right to drill for the oil in villages but many times the money is never given to the villagers and they are left with wells and land poisoned by oil leaking from poorly maintained equipment.

‘Your ancestor-kin are driven from their homes, robbed of their cattle, their lands… They do not fare well.’

Shame kept his head bowed. Ridiculous to admit that, while his own country reaped the benefit of civilised living and interplanetary travel, there were still people on Earth committing genocide, racial cleansing, whatever the current term was for mass murder.

‘Well.’ Gramire’s strong voice cut the heavy shocked silence. ‘When we have found your Stargate, Daaniel, we shall travel to your Earth and invite our ancestor-kin to come home with us. We have
Nods of agreement sealed the decision. The circle broke, people headed to their beds. Daniel watched them go, admiration, trepidation and foreboding making his head spin. Hammond really would have kittens.

The last couple of hours’ travel had brought a new variant of the unending sea of sand. Travelling along a valley between two of the highest dunes, Daniel and Sabire – sitting up on the roof, the two of them shaded under a polka-dotted sun umbrella – saw the first stunted bush pass by. Then there was another. Then wiry tufts of grass. Then an actual tree: bent and blasted by the sandy wind and only four feet high, but a tree all the same. Soon the ochre sands were filtered with green and birds were swooping over their heads, flicking an inspecting eye over the caravan before darting away, following the same course the humans were on.

Distracted, Daniel lost another game of Senet to Sabire. He glared ruefully at Sabire and declined a fourth game.

‘I’ll have to teach you something I can win at.’ He fingered his pawn, stuck on the House of Re-Atoum, carved with exquisite skill by Somi.

Sabire yawned into a full-bodied stretch. ‘Indeed. I believe there are soon to be interesting things to view.’ He stood and leaned out over the prow of the house. ‘Hah! I am correct, as always. Look there, Daaniel.’ Pointing a long arm ahead he indicated past the lead vans to a glimmer of blue.

Daniel levered himself out of his chair and clomped forward. ‘Another oasis?’

‘I believe not. We approach something greater…. Yes, there, just past Tretish’s van. Do you see, Daaniel?’

He squinted in the general direction, slanting afternoon sun and months-out-of-date optical prescription not helping. It looked like a long band of green where the dunes sloped down, and behind that a sparkle of water, much more than the trickling streams usual in the oases they had previously passed.

‘A river?’

‘The river. Shems. The mother of us all. Our pathway to Kemyt.’

A grin worked its way across Daniel’s lips. Twenty minutes later the Caravan emerged from the dunes at a natural ford. Daniel gaped in delight at the dark green waters, almost a mile wide and flanked by marshes on both sides. With a shout that echoed through every home, Shanti took the lead van straight into the water without pause.

‘But…’

His protest faded as the house bobbed in the water, the desert skids folding over and converting into pontoons. One by one, the Clan’s home followed suit. Sails unfurled from flagpoles-come-masts, and they were sailing, pushed by wind and current.
'This is so neat.'

The caravan headed downriver, bound for Kemyt City.

Day 87

Sailing is such a peaceful mode of travel. I've only ever sailed twice before, once on the Nile taking my parents to their rest, and once with Jack, Teal'c and Sam, back in our first year of exploration, across the Mermer with the Biklik people to visit the Temple of the Departed. The Nile trip was exciting, scary and sad; the Mermer fascinating—in between storms. Note: never get between Sam and a sick bag.

This river, though, is Haven itself. It's crowned with flights of birds, teeming with uncountable fish, and water lizards five feet long. We're flowing sedately along with no sense of urgency at all. There are rafts of papyrus drifting along with us: genuine papyrus that must have its origins in the Nubian Nile. Magic.

The words trailed off. Daniel watched once again the rippling water beyond the window. Deep emerald green, a colour he’d never seen in any Earth river, it was hypnotic and soothing. Train of thought parked at the station, he settled back in the huge chaise, pen dangling from one hand, the other idly rubbing the itch of healing bones in his leg.

There was something different about travelling on water. The usual sounds of movement replaced by slurps and splashes. More than that, there was a feeling of ease, unhurriedness, or was it just freedom, that you didn’t get on land. Being a nomad in the vast deserts had a certain kind of charm to it, but a traveller on Shems was close to heaven.

A thought made his brow wrinkle up. A river nomad. That's what I could be. Spend my days floating along with the papyrus. I could paint or draw, earn my keep. Maybe build a little house of my own. Although, the Clan might not stay here...

The idea that he might separate from the Clan, find himself alone, sent a chill down his back, swiftly followed by surprise. When had he become so attached to his rescuers that their presence in his life felt as necessary as had the previous three families he’d loved and lost? It was a nice revelation. Surprising. Scary, but nice. Less nice was the realisation he may never travel through the Stargate again, that his days as an explorer were over. Then again, you have a whole new planet here to explore. For many people that would be a lifetime’s occupation. When had one world become too small for him? When those he cared about were no longer on it...

Well, that longing would fade in time. It usually did. And there were worse places he could be.
The river widened as they moved along it, stretching out of sight from bank to bank. The caravan sailed sedately along, pace dictated by the winds and the steady current. Normal daily life continued amongst the Clan, unaltered by the presence of so much water – apart from the odd overly exuberant child going overboard. Sabire assured Daniel that swimming was taught to everyone, almost from the day of birth. They swam and dove like seals and refused to leave Daniel behind. Before the first day was out, he was floating in the river, supported by a translucent shell-like river-lounge.

On the second week the desert dunes shrunk, gradually giving way to sparse grasslands and the occasional cluster of cultivated fields. Semi-nomadic families waved to them from homes along the water’s edge.

At night the caravans came together, lashed to each other to form one large floating village. Anchored in calm bends, the Clan gathered on the rooftops for dinner, story times and the odd party.

It was the middle of the third week, when Daniel was engaged in his new-found passion: paragliding. Soaring 100 feet above the river, the silence of the air loud in his ears, he spotted the outskirts of the city of Kemyt.

Rising like an upthrust jaw of razor-filled teeth stood a row of monuments: sharp-sided mini pyramids, tombs mirroring those still standing in the Nubian desert of Sudan. These however, were no isolated clutch of ten or so. Here they arced around from the banks of the river in a single line, marching off to vanish into the distance. An astonishing, defining boundary to the city beyond.

A whoop from off to his left pulled Daniel’s attention away. ‘Daaniel! We arrive! Kemyt City! We have come!’ Somi, dangling from a gaudy yellow glider, waved and jiggled with excitement.

A thrill ran through his bones, hanging here in the warm air, water stretching out below his feet, green landscape beyond, Daniel felt the city pulling him in, beckoning with a promise to fulfil hopes he had all but given up on.

Kemyt was sprawled over a delta, formed in a great bend of the mighty Shems which curled away to the west. Smaller streams were channelled into canals where barges ladened with goods ploughed along the waters. It took three hours to make their way along a smaller arm of the river, up an increasingly crowded riverfront to the public berthing parks on a large spit of land near the centre of the city. Small, nimble water taxis darted between the heavier vessels, delivering people to piers all along the elegantly treed boulevards that lines both banks of the river. Daniel had returned to the van, the exhilaration of the glider leaving his blood singing with anticipation.

He stared through the windows, barely listening to the chatter of Jacuna, Sabire, Haranith and Lilya behind him. The architecture of Kemyt was even more bizarre than in Faransi. Angles, curves and colours warred with every conceivable type of building material. Houses leaned on each other, sheds, barns, warehouses and shops made their presence known in unexpected places. He drank in every new sight possible: watching the way the people interacted, craning to make out the cargoes on passing barges, striving to catch the varying dialects of the traders, shoppers and passers-by.

Once again he was swathed in robes and veil: his only-white-man-on-the-planet-going-outdoors outfit. Keen to avoid possible culture shock, the plan was to seek council with the Amhyt Clan Elders, the governing body on N’Has’y, introduce Daniel, his history and predicament, then slowly
let word filter out to the populace that they were no longer alone in the universe.

A hubbub at the door announced unexpected visitors. Daniel and Sabire, along with the others had been getting ready to depart, but there, marching through the door with broad smiles and welcoming arms were five men and women, their bearing announcing them as quite important.

Sabire meeped in surprise. ‘The Amhyt!’

And there goes that plan. Daniel edged back as Gramire and Gransire greeted their guests. His veil slipped and he quickly held it up over his face.

Introductions and greetings made, eyes began to turn in his direction. Feeling exposed he shuffled back, bumping up against the harpishone. He ducked his head, shielding eyes that would easily give him away.

‘This person is known to us?’ A clearly interested voice cut through the conversations.

Daniel glanced at Sabire, resisting the urge to greet the woman staring his way.

‘Ah. Yes. That is, well, I’m not… uh, perhaps… tea! Shall you take tea in my humble home, Elder Constile?’ Sabire edged between Daniel and the woman, but she moved him aside with ease.

‘Such pale hands.’

Oh. Daniel looked at the hand in front of his face: no gloves, dark henna swirling over white skin. He looked over to his own elders and received a resigned nod.

Gramire stepped forward. ‘Elder Constile, honoured Elders, we came to Kemyt to seek your wisdom. Chance has brought you to us. A gift of great value,’ she smiled at Daniel, ‘has fallen among us. We would make known to you Daaniel, Daaniel Jaaksun, a person of good intent, from the land of Eart, a planet far in the sparkling night sky.’

Even though he’d known this moment was coming, it was too soon. Unprepared, but seeing no way out with everyone looking at him, Daniel rested one hip against the harpishone, let the veil fall and pulled off the head covering. This was so different from all the other first encounters he’d experienced. He wasn’t a traveller, an explorer, he hadn’t come from ‘over the hills’ or ‘beyond the Great Circle’. He didn’t have an escape-wormhole at his back if things went pear-shaped, he didn’t have an over-armed, over-protective team at his back either. Anxiety speared him: if the Elders were horrified by him, recoiled at his presence, would the Clan stand by their own people and reject him? Cast him out? Attack him, even? To lose their support now, the loss was unimaginable, and yet the possibility twisted his heart.

Should have taken the path to Sha’re… The thought flashed through his head in seconds. He jumped as a large warm hand landed softly on his shoulder.

‘Daaniel is as born to the Clan Kendasai.’ Sabire, his rich, deep voice full of pride and possessiveness.

His moment of panic curled in shame and died. Daniel looked up and met the gaze of the Elders, saw astonishment, curiosity, amazement and delight. No horror, no running screaming at his alien presence. He inclined his head. ‘Nethur. Greet the day, my Elders.’ His oddly accented words sent a thrill through the visitors, and they inched closer.

‘Going to need more than tea,’ muttered Sabire above him.
The telling – and retelling – and questioning of Daniel’s story took hours. With a meal and two rounds of tea and three of drinks that set Daniel gasping, the Elders were getting accustomed to this world-changing stranger in their midst. The missing Stargate and the truth behind their founding mythologies were scrutinised in depth.

‘No more tea, good host.’ Koma, a tall—very, very tall—gently spoken man with greying temples, stood up. ‘We must spread this wonderful news to our Clans, and root out this magical Gate of Stars.’

‘Now?’ bleated Daniel, taken aback once again. It was twilight now. He’d thought they’d take at least this evening to get used to the new situation.

‘Such amazing possibilities await us all, good Daaniel. You have given us a past unknown to us and a future unimagined. We must find the Great Gateway.’

‘Now. Oh, boy.’

Everyone was on their feet, already heading outside where most of the Clan had been anxiously clustered for hours. Beyond, the city streets and canals teemed with people moving through the gathering glow of street lights.

Haranith leaned down to peer into his face. ‘Are you well, Daaniel? I will not permit them to drag you off if you are lacking in energy.’

‘No, thank you, Haranith. I’m up to this. I think.’ He flicked a smile at her and heaved himself up. A quick, relatively speaking, trip to relieve himself, and he stepped outside into the cooling night air. With Sabire and Haranith flanking him, Gramire and Gransire in front, the Elders leading them and the entire Clan surrounding them all in a defiantly cheerful mood, Daniel limped out into the streets.

It didn’t take long. A few quick words from one Elder or another to a passer-by, strolling shoppers noticing the person at the centre of the group, the news spread almost visibly. Like a snowball rolling downhill, tendrils of people attached to the moving crowd, swelling its size which in turn drew more people. All above the chatter and laughter, Daniel could hear words such as ‘stranger’ ‘visitor’ and ‘sky-fallen’ tossed up into the air, to fall down and spread out even further in ripples of wonder.

Folks came out of homes and shops, somehow spotting him through the forest of tall bodies around him. He gripped his walking stick tightly, trying with everything he had to look friendly and unthreatening, to smile and nod at everyone whose eye met his. At least the blended tone of all the voices sounded friendly. He’d been in crowds that had turned ugly and the mood here was vastly different to those.

The tide of humans flowed through the city streets, widening and contracting against the meandering garden fences and shopfronts. Then they were under a sharply angled archway, waving to people.
clustered along it, and they spread out into an open square filled with garden beds, what looked like fruit trees and bordered by at least ten imposing buildings.

Elder Constile turned to face them. ‘Here we may find your answers, Sky Fallen Daaniel Jaaksun. The Marshal of Sciences, the Institute of Public History, the Archives of Sed and the Library of Thoth. Surely, within these walls lay our answers.’ She turned to a young woman who had joined the group some time ago. ‘Mheme, go wake the curators, have them open the doors. We have much to seek.’

Daniel took in the multi-storeyed, many windowed buildings, each as large as the British Museum. ‘This might take some time,’ he called to Sabire over the noise. A surge of anticipation ran through him, and he followed their guides into the imposing Archives.

Å

It was a circus. A loud, rambunctious, friendly, fascinating circus. Daniel’s stamina had started to ebb before they’d made it out of the Archive building. Someone produced a smaller version of a ped and, embarrassed but grateful, he’d allowed himself to be wheeled along echoing slate-lined corridors, stopping frequently to talk with the archivists. Then it had been the Marshal of Sciences which contained not only earth and mechanical but medical and biological sciences. Moving into the Institute of Public History they’d added a bevy of journalists to the entourage, complete with cameras and microphones and booms, reporters taking every moment he wasn’t talking to an elder, archivist, scientist or curator to pepper him with questions. In each building they’d been treated to a substantial meal – that it was the middle of the night was no impediment to hospitality. The night sky was fading with the dawn rising as they entered the Library of Thoth.

*Thoth?* He blinked with surprise and made a note in his tired brain to ask one of the librarians the source of that name. Despite, or perhaps because of the overwhelming amount of information he’d adsorbed in the last ten hours, Daniel couldn’t help a growing feeling of discouragement. The Archives and Institute held an astonishingly comprehensive collection; records of deeds, discoveries, explorations, personal biographies and state records that stretched right back to the founding of the colony by Weril, aka Merul. Barring the odd natural disaster, nothing had prevented the collection and preservation of the history of N’Has’y.

A pang of regret ran through him for all the books, libraries, even whole cities lost on Earth because of human conflict. Now, as daylight faded the electric lamps in the round foyer of the library, he felt himself drooping with weariness. A hand clasped his shoulder and Haranith loudly declared, ‘We have seen all we can see for this time. Our Daaniel must rest.’

‘I’m okay…’ he protested, way too feebly. She clucked her tongue and took charge of his wheels, moving him toward the arched entry way through the surging crowd. Sabire, Chanla, Jacuna and Kinkala formed a wedge ahead of them to clear the path. Daniel leaned back in his seat, drinking in the stacks that pin-wheeled out in all directions from this circular hub, rising for four floors above them. His near future would involve a lot of reading, for sure.

There was a logjam at the entrance; one of the sound crew’s booms caught on another’s and in pulling it free the operator smacked it against the plastered arched entry. To the outraged cries of the head librarian, a chunk of plaster broke loose and dropped off, and plopped neatly into Daniel’s lap as he passed underneath. He caught it, and offered it up to the librarian with an apologetic grimace.
The hubbub around him quietened, the glare of lights dimmed. All he could see was the inner side of the plaster, held aloft in his hand. The librarian reached for it. He withdrew it, cradling it to his body. A stupid smile spread over his face – the one Jack said made him look like he’d wandered out of a special needs school. He touched the indented pattern with his fingertips, just to make sure. Yes. It was real. As familiar as Braille to a blind man, a pattern he’d seen every day of his SGC life.

‘Hello,’ he muttered in English. ‘Strange it should be you. But, maybe not. You’ve always shown me the way when I was lost.’

Two points at the top, two at the bottom, connected concave lines joined in the centre: Orion. It had opened the way to the stars for him so long ago. Now, here it was, guiding him home again.

He looked up. There it was. Dull grey metal gleaming in the reflected light, the glyph that had imprinted in the plaster revealed for all to see. He stared at it for uncounted time, then his bubble of silence burst and the surrounding noise washed over him. People calling his name, the librarian angrily protesting her damaged doorway, dozens of voices chattering at once: he ignored them all. He was out of the chair, clambering awkwardly onto the seat, trying to reach up. As he rose above the crowd he got a proper look at the archway: ten feet across, perfectly circular – it had to be. The chair rolled under him and he teetered. To a collective gasp he overbalanced and fell into Sabire’s arms.

‘Daaniel? What are you doing?’

‘Have you no regard for yourself?’ Haranith bawled in his ear.

‘Look what you have done to my door!’

‘Six hundred years old is that arch. Get out, vandals!’

‘The foreigner has gone strange, I fear…’

Daniel yelled into Sabire’s ear. ‘Lift me up, Sabire, please. I need to see.’

Excitement coursed through him, certain he was right; just as certain his hopes would be dashed.

Strong arms grasped his waist and hoisted him up, another pair lending support. He rose up to the apex of the archway. Tentatively he touched the grey metal, that strange coolness that somehow hummed with life of its own. He broke off another chunk of plaster. Dozens of overlaying coats of paint had evened out the groove of the inner track, obliterated the glyph, and yes, the chevron with its ruby crystal still embedded.

Perhaps it was chance, or fate, that someone in the past had thought it a good foundation for an archway and placed it here, just waiting for the right person to come along and discover it all over again.

Daniel looked down at a sea of faces staring up at him.

‘It’s your Stargate.’
Dawn on Tsydon was an hour or more away.

Dark stillness penetrated the house. In one of the rooms someone muttered in their sleep. Jack padded along the corridor in his socks, cold metal retrieved from several pieces of luggage weighing his pockets and hands. He moved downstairs, not waking those who had finally found sleep only a couple of hours earlier.

He sat in the front room’s window seat, moonlight glinting off the weapon as he assembled it. They’d talked for hours: talked, argued, grieved, denied, reasoned. Daniel couldn’t be dead, pictorial evidence aside. It made no sense for Ba’al to take such a huge, expensive risk in kidnapping Daniel just to use him in some ceremonial sacrifice. If it had been Daniel up on that cliff, well, he had to still be alive. It was a sham. Artistic licence. Something…

Of them all, Skaara was most adamant Daniel was still breathing. ‘Ba’al is Goa’uld, O’Near. Like all of them, he fears age, deterioration, death. They break the laws of nature to defy the turn of time. He will have a sarcophagus.’

He’d known that. They all had. Hearing it said though, put an even worse chill on his heart. Was it better to have Daniel still alive, possibly suffering, than to know he’d been ritually slaughtered and sealed in that soul destroying box so he could rise, healthy but just a little less Daniel than he’d been before? Were they planning more ceremonies? A weekly highlight for the good folks of Tsydon? Come see the innocent guy bleed to death. Popcorn and tee shirts at reasonable prices.

Not gonna happen.

The sniper rifle snapped together with satisfyingly solid clicks. Jack checked his ammo, slung the rifle, pulled on his boots.

The team had tossed over many plans, last night. Daniel was most likely in Ba’al’s castle. They would split up and infiltrate in four groups, best cover would be with the stream of locals delivering fresh food in the morning. His extended team were primed and ready, honed to maximum alertness and spoiling for a fight.

But first, Jack was going to have a little chat.

With Ba’al.

He strode through the sleeping town, another shadow in the pre-dawn depths of darkness. He passed under the mural, didn’t look up. Taking the winding path up the hillside, Jack was guided by the
white marble tombs, three pale beacons squatting under the moon like poisonous toads.

There were the odd sentries patrolling, easily avoided. He moved with the narrowed focus of so long ago, put aside but never forgotten. Glide silently from rock to paver to grass, duck down in the cover of whatever was nearest, pull the shadows over him to become one of them; rise, move on.

The twin temples were unguarded. Sleeping priests were draped on the floor of Ba’al’s, priestesses and their customers scattered around the niches in Astarte’s. Jack gave them only a cursory look; his goal lay higher. There were guards still on the path. Jack left them unconscious in the shrubbery.

The Temple of Eshmun glowed with light, a living thing in the void of night. He sidled through the main entrance, hugging pillars and pot plants. Lanterns hung in the trees and balanced in grottos over ponds and tinkling fountains. Jack prowled down one of the pathways, zat primed and ready. At the rear of the temple a brighter glow illumined another chamber. A woman’s voice, soft and sad, could just be heard.

Sidling up to the entrance, Jack peered inside. It was small, twenty feet square, crammed with greenery. A glass dome etched pale shadows over the gleaming gold sarcophagus in the centre, and the woman draped over it. She was singing soft words in some language Daniel would probably know, her tone filled with both longing and comfort. She stretched over the box, hands caressing the etchings. Soon her whole body was on top, writhing with undisguised passion. A squirm of distaste ran through Jack.

Her song came to an end. She planted an open-mouthed kiss on the lid, right above where an occupant’s head would be, then slid off muttering, endearments presumably. Could be recipes for all he knew, but… no. She was just about screwing the box, and in a get-up that left nothing hidden. She was a dark-haired beauty for sure, but she left him cold and he didn’t need Sam’s snakey-sense to know this was a Goa’uld, most likely the one portrayed in the mural, at Daniel’s side, as he died.

His gun was up and sighted on her cranium without thought. Clear shot. Nice and neat. It needed – begged – to be done. But not yet. Not until they had Daniel. He satisfied himself with envisioning a direct hit to the snake’s brain, and let her trail out the far door, flesh jiggling, still singing some kind of lullaby.

When the sound of her song had faded, he counted to 200, then slipped from cover to stand by the sarcophagus. Without hesitation, he hit the red control jewel. The great golden wings eased open. Jack side-stepped as they spread, all senses alert. Nothing stirred in the temple beyond. The seductive inner glow of the sarcophagus bathed the room behind him. Fighting trepidation, Jack turned and looked down, ready to accept whatever condition Daniel was in.

Or not.

At all.

The thing was empty.

Momentarily confused, Jack peered over the box to look at the other side, then spun to search the entire room, in case his slippery archaeologist had nipped out unseen in the second or two Jack hadn’t been looking. Nothing. No one outside the box. He ran his hand over the thrumming insides: no one inside either. Not even a hidden panel or false bottom.

But… the way that Goa’uld had carried on, practically humping the damned box, she’d been convinced someone was in there. And if Daniel wasn’t healing in the sarcophagus, where was he? Maybe—no. Not going there. Daniel was alive, somewhere. And someone was playing tricks. He
had a good idea who.

The hair on the back of his neck suddenly rose. Behind him, from the temple doorway came the sound of a throat being deliberately cleared.

It was early morning, barely an hour after sunrise. Everyone in the house was awake, gear packed, weapons checked, disguises refreshed and in place. Tobay and Beechworth had fixed breakfast and they had all eaten, not out of hunger but necessity to keep bodies and minds functioning and focussed on their task.

Sam sat in the front room’s window seat, eating mechanically, waiting for the colonel’s familiar form to appear in the square. His gear stood neatly packed in the hall, a note told them to prepare but hold for his return. Time and again her gaze was drawn back to the mural, its beautifully rendered images emerging from the dawn gloom in horrific detail.

Her heart turned over, and she wrenched her eyes away. Daniel. Best friend, confidant, co-conspirator, other half of the twinned mind that so many times had astounded her with the intuitive leaps of logic and understanding that came when the two of them were firing ideas off each other. Desperately she reached for that military-trained emotional barrier. There was a time and place for grief, and it wasn’t here or now.

‘Honey?’ Jacob stood behind her, coffee in hand, understanding and shared emotion in his eyes. The one person she couldn’t hold out against.

‘Oh, dad.’ She made to reach for the cup, ended up with her face buried in his shirt. His arms enveloped her and she let his strength flow into her. Just for a few minutes she’d lean on him. That would be enough to see her through this mission. To find Daniel and bring him home.

Jack turned slowly, bringing the gun up to his side, finger on the trigger, in the same movement. A man stood in the doorway, framed by trailing vines, a speculative look on his face. Tall, dark, goatee, close-fitting jacket and pants in deep purple, thigh-high boots polished to a mirror finish in the same purple shade: this was undoubtedly a Goa’uld. The Goa’uld. Jack knew him from Jacob’s intel pictures. Now he could add another name to the list of snakey despots he’d met in the flesh. Goody.

‘Ba’al.’

The Goa’uld smiled and lent nonchalantly on the doorjamb. ‘Jack O’Neill. Colonel Jack O’Neill. Forgive Us. One should always honour one’s guests with their correct appellations.’

So much for covert insertions. A dozen things sprang to his lips, demanding to be asked. He bit down hard on the most desperate one. ‘Lovely place you have here. Shame about all the snakes.’

The smile – and Jack hated it already – grew wider. ‘We are pleased you admire Our home. We
would be honoured to give you and your companions a guided tour.’

‘We’ll pass, thanks all the same.’

Silence stretched between them as each sized up the other.

‘Perhaps you would enjoy a trip on one of Our sailing ships? They are quite exhilarating.’ The Goa'uld’s eyes never left Jack’s, checking him out, judging him, searching for weaknesses. ‘Or would a tour of Our art museum be to your liking? We are told you particularly favour the work of Our mural artists.’

The smile turned sly and Jack had to exercise monumental restraint in not plugging the bastard full of holes. ‘Okay. Cut the crap. You know why I’m here.’

‘To sample the delights of a life lived under Our protection?’

‘No.’

‘A pity.’

‘Yeah, it’ll be top of my list of regrets when I die. Why did you kidnap Daniel Jackson?’

‘Kidnap is such a harsh word. Sometimes, certain things can only be accomplished by a specific person. We required Daniel’s assistance.’

‘So you snatch him off a protected planet?’ Jack rested his hip against the sarcophagus, and nestled the gun firmly against his body. He had a feeling this was going to be a long conversation.

‘We felt he would not have accepted an open invitation.’

‘Ya think? Word’s out, you know. The Asgard have been advised and even now are cooking up an appropriate punishment for you.’ He kept his features impassive: his best poker face. Messages had gone out to the Asgard as soon as they’d realised a Goa’uld had snatched Daniel, but so far no reply had come back. He tried not to feel too disappointed in the little grey guy. ‘Something involving a small dark jar,’ he embellished, hoping to make the snake squirm.

Ba’al merely crooked an eyebrow at him.

‘What was so important, anyway?’

Ba’al straightened up and stepped into the room. He prowled slowly around the sarcophagus, halting at its head to close the lid panels. Jack kept a bead on him the whole time.

‘The specifics are too lengthy to discuss here, but We are working on a plan for peace. Daniel’s knowledge and experience was vital to its achievement.’

‘Peace? With whom?’

‘With Our fellow system lords. We grow tired of the pointless squabbles that waste lives and resources.’

Jack blinked and had to fight down a laugh. A Goa’uld who wanted peace and needed Daniel’s help to get it. Yeah, right.

‘You do not believe Us?’ Ba’al pouted and sat on the sarcophagus with a heavy sigh. ‘No body ever believes Us.’
‘I wonder why that is. Oh, wait, probably because you’re a no-good, lying, cheating, scheming snake in the grass.’

Irritation flickered over Ba'al’s face. ‘We will not stay here and be insulted. You asked for explanations, We have given them. You seek retribution for Our having appropriated Daniel? We shall offer full blood price: the weight of Daniel in gold and gems. Custom also dictates We give up our flocks of goats, but they will not all fit into that peculiar craft you arrived in.’

Gold, gems and goats? What was he on about? Jack held onto the comment that he was ready to let fly, and took a good look at the Goa'uld. Ba'al was sitting on the sarcophagus – a sarcophagus he knew was empty because he’d shown no surprise when Jack first saw him. Yet the lady Goa'uld seemed convinced someone was in it, unless she really had a thing for sarcs… Ba'al was staring back at him now, a frown forming.

‘You do not know…’ Ba'al started.

‘… where Daniel is,’ finished Jack.

‘You’ve *lost* him?’ Jack yelled. He was into full-on loud mode now, heedless of who heard him.

‘We did not—’

‘How could you *lose* him?’

‘We are not responsible—’

‘After all you went through to take him, hiring Boch of all people—’

‘…for what occurs during—’

‘…risking the wrath of the Asgard—’

‘…an armed engagement.’

‘What armed engagement?’ Jack took a breath and glared.

Ba'al glared back. ‘Another Goa'uld attacked Our city. Our home!’ He jumped to his feet and started pacing. ‘Such outrage. Such gall. Anubis has never possessed subtlety, but to attack Us on Our home planet… He will suffer greatly.’

‘Yeah, yeah. Skip to the part where you lost Daniel.’

‘Anubis sent Zipacna.’ Ba'al spat the name contemptuously.

Jack didn’t bother holding back a snort. ‘Carmen Miranda attacked you?’

Ba'al looked at him. ‘Daniel called him that. The he explained the name.’ A fleeting grin almost made the guy look human. Almost.

‘Zipacna had many ships at his disposal. We wished to secure Daniel’s safety, so We revived him and despatched him to Our fastest Ha’tak. They should have been safe.’ His face darkened. ‘We suspect betrayal. The Ha’tak was disabled. My guard took Daniel and escaped in an Al’kesh. The cover fighters were destroyed, the Al’kesh lost. We continue to search. Its last communication said they were attempting landfall, but the locator was corrupted and We do not know where. We blame Ourselves.’
‘I blame yourselves too,’ Jack sniped. Unbelievable. All the time and effort and hopes to get here only to find the bastard had lost Daniel. Anything could have happened to him.

Jack slumped down on the sarcophagus, for once at a complete loss. Where do we go now? Daniel’s out there, still. We thought we were so close… He scratched his head furiously. Ba'al could be lying. At the least Jack could still shoot him. His head came up, so did his weapon. The sight light fixed squarely on the Goa'uld’s throat.

Ba'al just stood there, looking at him.

‘Guess that’s it, then.’ Jack flipped the selector to rapid fire.

‘We would thank you, Jack O'Neill.’

‘What?’

‘We watched you observing Our Lady Astarte. You were tempted to end her life. You did not. So We thank you.’

Jack pursed his lips. ‘Yeah, well, she’s not all there, is she?’

‘Where?’

‘In the head.’ Jack tapped his forehead.

‘She is a wonder, and the light of Our life. Her uniqueness is her endearment, but also sometimes her undoing.’

‘Right. Why did she think Daniel was in the box?’

‘She was with Us when We placed him in there.’

‘Oh, yes. About that. Just where in Daniel’s special assistance was it necessary to murder him? How does that get you universal peace?’

Ba'al looked affronted. ‘Murder? We did no such thing.’

‘I saw the drawings. The whole town is talking about it. You didn’t need his help. You just used him for some sicko ceremony.’ He lifted the gun and prepared to fire.

Ba'al raised a hand. ‘We will explain, O'Neill. Something, I might point out, We never normally do. You Tau'ri…’ He walked back to the sarcophagus and sat down, Jack’s tell-tale keeping him company all the way.

‘We did indeed enlist Daniel's assistance in Our plan. Progress was made. An ally was secured. In his time here, Daniel was admired by many for his intelligence, his good nature, and his great beauty.’

Jack winced. No way was he passing this intel on to the SGC, specially not to Daniel.

‘Unfortunately, We did not plan on Our Lady finding a place for Daniel in her heart. She became obsessed with him. She confused him with her lost child, and eventually was convinced Daniel was him.’

‘This Eshmun we keep hearing about?’
‘Indeed so. We did Our best to keep them separate, but Our Lady is ever forceful. She insisted that as Eshmun had returned we must begin the Baneem ritual. The getting of a fertile sonspring,’ he added, at Jack’s questioning look.

‘So Eshmun was her son and she wanted a snakey one too? Wait, that means Eshmun was a whatch’am’callit—Harcesis?’

‘Just so.’

‘Thought you guys outlawed those.’

‘We did. Madness and bloodshed are the only attributes of the harcesis.’ Ba'al stared down at his boots. He looked to be speaking from painful experience.

‘And yet you were gonna do it again?’

‘No, O'Neill. Never would We experience such anguish again. We let Astarte believe Daniel was Eshmun returned in the hope it would make her happy. Happiness did not stay long. Soon it turned to desperation; her desire to have her progeny living once more has taken her away from Us. She demanded the Baneem ritual, and We complied, but know this, O'Neill, for We have not spoken of it to another soul: the progeny from Our coupling will never take a host, never draw a free breath. It will incubate for its term – some 200 of your years – then it will sadly expire. We will mourn it. That will be the end of its story. Our Lady will ever wait the day of its birth, never knowing the centuries that pass by. Likewise, she will await the return of Daniel, not aware he will never rise from this sarcophagus.’

Jack processed that for a bit. ‘So, the wife’s insane. I get that. What I don’t get is why you killed Daniel. You stuck him up on a cliff and bled him dry. Why?’ The amount of effort it was taking to stay calm was huge. Daniel would be proud.

‘We did not kill Daniel. We saved his life.’ Ba'al raised a hand, forestalling Jack’s outrage. ‘The Baneem ritual demands the code of life from the intended host be included in the coupling process.’ He paused to ensure Jack understood.

‘Eww.’

‘The code of life must be obtained from the fluid that lies upon the spine of the intended host. This ensures the progeny is fertile and vital.’

‘Wait… what, spinal fluid? So why did—’ Hathor rape Daniel? ‘I’ve heard you need the sperm of the host species.’

Ba’al seemed impressed with Jack’s knowledge of snake biology. ‘It is so when producing infertile offspring. These will become Our Jaffa and underlings, bred to do Our bidding. But when a System Lord wishes to produce a fertile progeny, one who will rise to power at the side of his sire, then We must source the Code from the spine of the intended host. Unfortunately, this must be retrieved by Us both in Our natural state, and the bites leave traces of our saliva in the host. This is most poisonous to humans. If We had not drained Daniel’s blood and placed him in the sarcophagus, he would surely have died a painful, maddening death.’

‘For crying out loud, don’t sit there and tell me you helped Daniel. You’re responsible for him being here in the first place, for letting that nutso wife of yours fall for him. You did not help him out.’ Jack got to his feet. ‘And I see no reason not to shoot you now.’

Ba'al stood, grave but unperturbed by the weapon he faced. ‘You are correct in all you say, O'Neill. I
can but offer you this. By finding Daniel and completing my peace plan, I can remove all threats to Daniel’s life. Anubis will continue to seek him. We must end the threat Anubis and others like him pose to all life in the galaxy.’

‘Daniel is not yours to use, Ba’al. He’s not coming back here. End of story.’

‘Well, we shall see who finds him first, yes?’ Ba’al turned the charm on full force. ‘We give you Our word, O’Neill, on three things. Our Lady will not use Daniel as host for the progeny – that is as much for her protection as his. We will finalise Our peace plans with Daniel’s help. He will be free to return to his home and live unmolested by Us or any other Goa’uld. As will you. You may leave Our planet, at your leisure.’

With that, Ba’al walked out, Jack’s gun sight followed the whole way, only the safety of the rest of his extended team stopped him from pulling the trigger. As he passed under the doorway, Jack called after him.

‘Oh, we’re going alright, but I guarantee you this, Ba’al: you’ll never use Daniel for your own purposes again.’

‘Here he comes.’

Tobay called out from the upper story windows where he’d kept watch all morning for the colonel’s return. He trotted down the stairs to join the rest as they gathered in the foyer. Expectant looks were exchanged as they geared up, all ready to move on the plan they had spent the past two hours constructing.

After an interminable last few moments, the door opened and O’Neill walked in. Brought up short by the welcome committee, he gave them a thin smile. ‘Hi, honey, I’m home.’

Over a chorus of ‘Sir’s and ‘O’Neer’s, Jacob stepped forward and offered him a steaming coffee. ‘Where’ve you been, Jack?’

‘Thanks, Jacob.’ O’Neill handed his weapon off to Teal’c and sat down on a carved wooden chest. He closed his eyes and inhaled the aroma for a bit, then drank it down.

‘Sir, we’ve been working on a plan to find Daniel,’ Sam offered. ‘We think it’s a good one. He must be in Ba’al’s castle, so we thought we’d have one team go in under disguises, and another take a boat up to the back wall and insert under cover of the night. We—’

‘That won’t be necessary, Major.’ I’m sure it’s a great plan, but Daniel’s not in the castle. He’s not on this planet, even.’ He grimaced at their shocked faces. ‘Any breakfast left? I’ve got some things to tell you all.’

He filled his belly with leftover bean stew and honey pie as he detailed his encounters with both Astarte and Ba’al. Sounds of daily life drifted in from outside, surreally peaceful and normal. If Jack hadn’t spent the dawn hours chatting with a Goa’uld, he could easily imagine they were on any friendly planet he could name. Daniel would be out there in the marketplace, getting diverted from
his chore as provender by all the local artisans and their wares. Girls, women, hell, even some of the boys would be trying to catch his eye. Wonder what he thought of this place?

‘I don’t believe him,’ Ferretti insisted, again. ‘Seriously, Jack – you gonna swallow that BS? He spun you a line. I say Daniel is here and Ba’al is just waiting to mow us down or shoot us out of the sky the second we try to leave.’

‘I don’t want to believe any Goa’uld, Lou. But this time I think we have to. He could have zapped me with that ribbon thing anytime, but he didn’t so much as twitch.’

‘And if he’s known we were here he would have attacked us whenever he wanted,’ Sam added.

Teal’c looked at Jack from the hallway entrance where he stood, feet braced, arms crossed, an immovable barrier should someone unwisely try to come through the front door. ‘Among the Goa’uld, Ba’al is known to hold true to his word. It is one of his few qualities.’

‘Teal’c speaks truly,’ added Skaara. ‘I worry though for my brother. If Dan’yel has escaped Ba’al, he will not rest until Dan’yel is returned to him.’

Jack nodded. ‘Which is, I think, one of the reasons he’s not detaining us. He’s hoping we’ll lead him to Daniel.’

‘The Spacemonkey,’ Beechworth said thoughtfully.

‘Gonna have to go on a bug hunt,’ Sam concluded.

‘Selmak?’ Skaara turned to Jacob. ‘When I was in the Tok’ra’s care I heard some of the intelligence reports from your operatives. Would they not have information on this battle that separated Dan’yel from Ba’al’s men?’

Selmak nodded Jacob’s head, then cast a cautious glance around the room. ‘In case the walls have ears, as Jacob would say, perhaps we should depart?’

Jack couldn’t help a smile as Seni and Tobay stared askance at the walls. ‘Time we got out of here. Pack it up. Teal’c, you and Lou go scout out our route to the transport, see if there are any hidden surprises.’

Teal’c inclined his head, and left with Ferretti in tow.

The return trip to the spaceport was fraught but uneventful. They moved unhindered from their house, passed under the dreadful artwork and wound their way up through the city streets. Life went on around them, and they moved unchallenged past the markets. The Jaffa sentries were visible at the “train” station, but not one even made eye contact with them.

They were the only passengers on the train car, and all breathed easier when they were racing away from Ba’al’s home toward the spaceport. Conversation was limited to remarks about the weather: pleasant, the food: delicious… and little else.

Jack sat at the front of the carriage, the speeding landscape a blur of green and gold. His gut and his head told him he’d made the right choice. If Ba’al still had Daniel he would not have hesitated in getting rid of them. The Goa’uld certainly had not needed to divulge as much as he had. Was he hiding things? Undoubtedly. Equally, Jack knew Ba’al had told the truth.
He glanced over at the three Abydonians; Seni and Tobay determined not to miss anything on this strange green world, and Skaara, the same age but so much older, just as interested in the farmlands they moved through.

‘Hey, Skaara.’

The kid swivelled round to look at him, then without bidding, came and sat next to him.

‘Tell me about Klorel.’

Skaara looked at him, then stared out the window. ‘What would you know, Jack?’

‘He was Apophis’ son, right?’

‘Yes.’

‘Apophis’ heir, though technically he wouldn’t take his place because Apophis was “immortal”.’

‘But he did die.’ More than two years on, and the loathing was unconcealed in Skaara’s voice.

‘That he did. So, what makes a system lord Goa'uld different? There’s only a few dozen of those, so we’ve been told, but hundreds of regular Goa'uld. Why would a system lord elevate one like Klorel?’

‘Klorel was to take his place at his sire’s side, to expand the territory ruled over by Apophis. To… produce more Jaffa and strengthen their blood.’ Jack could see the distaste on Skaara’s face, reflected in the carriage window.

‘Blood? We’d call it genes, I guess. The it’s true that only Goa'uld who are system lords can produce offspring?’

‘That is so. Reproduction is regulated most closely. Those born to a certain sire are bound by their blood to serve only him. It is why, when one system lord overthrows another, all his progeny – Jaffa and Goa'uld alike – are put to death. Their fealty cannot be trusted, otherwise.’

Jack frowned, thinking back to a fake SGC and a redheaded bitch who had a whole slew of assorted Jaffa. ‘Hathor had Jaffa she’d liberated from Apophis, Heru’ur, who knows who else.’

‘Most likely she removed the original Goa'uld or symbiotes and replaced them with her own progeny.’

‘And producing a fertile offspring is way more difficult than popping out the infertile ones?’

Skaara peered intently at Jack, then his gaze travelled back, past the carriage they sat in to the city behind them. His face clouded in anger and he muttered a very bad Abydonian word.

‘Apophis was too eager for Klorel to rise. He rushed the incubation, implanted him just hours after the procreation, instead of leaving it to mature first. We spent many months in the sarcophagus, and still it was weak. I fought it many times.’

Jack reached out and squeezed his shoulder.

‘This is what Ba'al intends for Dan’yer?’

‘He said he wouldn’t, that the whole thing was for show, to appease Ashtar. That the offspring would be unstable and he’d destroy it before it matured.’
'They most often are incapable of reason. But I will see Ba'al dead before I accept his word as truth.'

'I'm with you there, buddy.'

The spaceport was even busier than when they had arrived. Keeping his team together, Jack detoured into a fresh food market to replenish their supplies, then headed straight for the ship. No one followed them, but he felt eyes on his back all the way to where Spacemonkey hunkered in its decaying glory. Only, it didn’t seem as decrepit as when they’d left it.

‘Is it me or does the old girl have her sparkle back?’ Bairnsdale asked, as their collective progress slowed.

Gone was the grime of decades of unforgiving use, scratches and dents that had mostly been filled with grunge had been cleaned up, beaten out and the whole of her skin polished to an eye-searing shine. The port landing strut no longer bent at the knee, the front viewport shone like crystal, sensors and vanes all over the hull had been straightened and repaired. Even though they’d left nothing of value in the ship, Jack found his hand resting on his pocketed weapon. The hatches appeared to be sealed, but then, the locks hadn’t been all that good anyway.

‘What the hell?’ Jacob, quizzical.

‘How rude!’ Boch, affronted.

‘Is that a new navigational scanner?’ Skaara, eager.

‘Oh, boy, I hope they replaced that disposal system.’ Carter: very, very wistful.

Jack bent an eyebrow at her.

‘Er, well, um, I mean… Ba'al did this?’ she stammered.

Two figures emerged from the shady underbelly of the ship. Jack stepped forward as his crew spread out around him, subtle clicks of arming weapons lost under his fakely cheerful call. ‘Why hi there, fellas. Care to explain why our ship looks like it just came outta the Ikea catalogue?’

The men, one willowy thin, the other a lean muscly type that spoke of honed strength, stopped and bowed. Their fine, flimsy garments fluttered in the light breeze.

‘Our Lord’s blessings upon you, good travellers,’ the leader spoke up, his voice soft and cheerful. ‘I am Helel, Companion of the Court of our Lord Ba'al. This is Jackson, newest Concubine of our Lord Ba'al.’

Silence closed around Jack’s brain, so intense he swore he heard crickets chirping.

‘Beg pardon?’

Not entirely sure of Jack’s meaning, the man touched his own chest with an elegantly ringed hand. ‘I am called Helel. He,’ he brushed his friend’s arm, ‘is named Jackson. We greet you all in the name of our Lord Ba'al.’
‘Jack O’Neill,’ he replied, while his brain went into overload. *I am not looking at a Goa’uld called Jackson. No way.* For these two undoubtedly were part of Ba’al’s coterie, identified by Carter as all Goa’uld. Every snake he’d ever met had some fancy, mostly mythological ancient handle. They weren’t called Bob, Carole, Ted or Alice, and they were most emphatically not called Jackson. *Daniel, what the hell happened here?*

His silent stare unnerved the pretty Goa’uld enough that he broke eye contact and addressed the rest of the group. ‘Our Lord bade us greet you. At His command we have seen to the restoration and replenishment of your vessel. We trust you will forgive our entering it without permission; our Lord wished our improvements to be a surprise for you.’ He smiled tentatively, clearly anxious for their approval.

Jack held his gaze for another uncomfortable minute, then a slow smile crept across his face. ‘That’s mighty nice of Ba’al. Why don’t you show my friends just what you’ve done for us, Helel?’

The slender Goa’uld might appear like an Italian gigolo, but there was also a keen intelligence in his eyes. He sent an assessing stare back at Jack before inclining his head and leading half the team up the spanky clean gangplank.

The other Goa’uld waited, hands complacently folded behind his back. This one was a fighter, perfectly at ease: confident of his own abilities, not just bolstered by the might of Ba’al.

‘So. Jackson.’ Jack ambled over to him. They almost met eye to eye. ‘Unusual name for a Goa’uld.’

No expression altered the smooth features. ‘One I bear with great pride,’ he said.

‘Uh huh. Your mom and dad come up with that, did they?’

Finally, a frown creased the unlined face. ‘If your meaning is, did those who sired and birthed me give this as my name, then I regret good sir, you are in error. I am named Jackson by my Lord Ba’al’s beneficence.

‘Ba’al named you Jackson.’

‘Indeed he did, sir.’

‘And why would he do that? What’s wrong with your own name?’ Jack could feel his temper beginning to stir. Bad enough Ba’al took Daniel for nefarious purposes, but to steal his name as well and hand it out to the first muscle-bound, overdressed, well, underdressed, fancy pants, toy-boy—

‘Cu’Chulainn.’ Teal’c suddenly spoke up. He came up to them and prowled around the Goa’uld, examining “Jackson” with a searing gaze. ‘First Prime of Morrigan. Victor of the Battle of Tsander’s Rift. Rumoured to be Morrigan’s lover and architect of many successful campaigns. Your name,’ Teal’c leaned in and breathed in the man’s face, ‘is Cu’Chulainn.’

The Goa’uld’s eyes widened in recognition. ‘Master Teal’c. Tec’matae. We met in battle, on the Plains of Anjou.’

Teal’c inclined his head. ‘A hard fought battle. There were no victors that day.’

‘Indeed. Morrigan was incensed at Ra’s interference. I bore the scars of her anger for many months.’

‘Apophis in his fury slaughtered fifty of his—my—Jaffa.’ Teal’c added softly.

Cu’Chulainn – Jack was not going to call him Jackson – was looking almost whimsical.
‘Happy days! So, how’d you end up here, with Ba'al?’

‘Morrigan and Ba'al fought. Morrigan was defeated. Ba'al claimed me as part of his victor’s spoils. My Lord discarded my former identity and named me Prize – a title I have born with honour these past few seasons.’

‘Yet now you bear another’s name. The name that belongs to he who is our chel’ma.’

_Warrior brother._ Nice one, T.

Teal'c’s voice dropped into the lowest register possible. Jack could almost feel the vibrations from his throat, something Teal'c did only when he was feeling really dangerous.

‘Daniel is of your clan?’ C’Chu looked pleased and not at all intimidated by Teal'c. ‘I had heard rumours that you had renounced, Apophis’ service, Teal'c. A brave move. That you stand with Daniel, I am pleased. He is an honourable soul, and kind too. He gave my lowly status equal regard to that of the rest of Ba'al’s Court. I—I am glad he has you to guide his way.’

The Goa'uld – or was he a Jaffa still? Jack wasn’t sure and didn’t really care – caught the impatience in their eyes and kept talking. ‘My Lord Ba'al felt the time had arrived to gift me with a name of his choosing, so he named me Jackson, respecting his guest whose integrity so impressed us all. I am most honoured.’

‘Where is Daniel Jackson?’ Teal'c was inches from the guy’s face.

‘I know not, Teal'c. My Lord said he sent Daniel to safety when Zipacna laid siege to Tsydon. He has not returned.’

Teal'c held his glare for long moments, then relaxed and stepped back. ‘He speaks the truth. Tec’matae, Jackson. May you ever honour he whose name you bear.’

With that, Teal'c spun on his heel and stomped up the boarding ramp.

Jack pursed his lips, and bounced on his toes. ‘Right, then.’

Carter emerged with the other Goa'uld and gave him the all-clear nod.

‘We’ll be off.’

‘Our Lord’s blessings for a fair journey,’ said the wispy Helel.

‘Right. Fine. Whatever.’ Jack turned away and ushered the rest of the team into the ship. ‘All aboard.’

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It smelt nice. Fruity. _Spacemonkey_ had been cleaned from her bilges to her rafters. Jack preferred the stink.

‘T, fire it up. Take us out-system then drop and hold. We’ve got some housekeeping to do.’

Boch paused in pulling off his disguise. ‘This ship has to be the cleanest in the galaxy, O'Neill.’
'Oh, I’m sure there’s a few bugs lurking about somewhere. I hate creepy crawlies.’ Jack braced his feet as the thrusters fired up.

Boch shrugged and turned to the viewscreen. As Teal’c received clearance to lift off, another ship blasted off from the other side of the landing field. Boch watched it disappear up into the sky, then he wandered off, wig in hand.

_Spacemonkey_ gathered her power and pushed up into the heavens. Jack plopped into the co-pilot’s seat and watched the planet dwindle into the dark of space. Here he was leaving Ba’al’s homeworld – unbelievably in one piece, incredibly without Daniel. He’d taken a Goa’uld’s word, on one thing at least. Daniel was gone, lost to Ba’al, lost to them all.

Somewhere out there he was waiting for Jack to find him.

Find him, he would.
Catherine Langford put the finishing touches to the birthday cake and slid it into the picnic hamper. Silver goblets and a bottle of sparkling wine finished off Ernest’s birthday lunch.

‘Ernest, are you ready? Did you find the blanket?’ she called.

He appeared in the hallway, dressed for Colorado’s chill autumn. ‘Ready,’ he said, sparse as ever with words.

‘Well, good. Off we go then.’

He took the basket, she picked up the car keys, and they were ready for another birthday picnic: an enjoyable habit they’d practiced since their marriage six years ago. Regrettably, this time it was just the two of them. Last time, Catherine’s birthday, had been celebrated with Daniel, Jack, Sam, Teal’c and George. But this year… she sighed. Daniel was lost amongst the stars, Jack, Teal’c and Sam had been offworld months now, searching for him, and George had declined the invitation – although he had sent a lovely hamper.

Ernest opened the front door and jumped at the sight of a young woman marching up the path toward them. Uncomfortable with strangers since his return to Earth, he stepped aside and let Catherine greet the visitor.

‘Doctor Langford, Doctor Littlefield? I’m Merrie Stern. I met you at your presentation in New York last year. I do apologise for disturbing you both at home.’ She pushed unruly black curls out of her eyes and smiled at them.

‘How do you do, is it Ms Stern?’

‘Professor, actually. I teach at UCLA. I believe Doctor Daniel Jackson is an acquaintance of yours?’

‘Daniel? Yes, he is – a very good friend. In fact, we think of him as a son.’

‘I need to get something to him. I’m going to Peru on a dig for the next year, and I really must hand these journals to him before I go, but I can’t seem to contact him anywhere. His phone and mail are all forwarded to a rather unhelpful Air Force man.’ She paused for breath. ‘Do you know where Daniel is?’

‘Daniel is away,’ Catherine said, the truth making her throat tight. ‘He’s not been able to give us a date when he will return.’

‘I see.’ Professor Stern looked down at the carry bag she held. ‘Doctor Jackson spoke so highly of you both in New York, and I daren’t leave these at home in case he returns before I do and thinks I’ve absconded with them.’

Catherine ushered her inside and they followed her into the sitting room.
'These journals belonged to Doctor Jackson’s father. I wonder—could I impose and ask you and Doctor Littlefield to safe-guard them for Doctor Jackson?’

‘Why of course, Professor Stern.’ Catherine accepted the bag with reverence. ‘I know how deeply Daniel will treasure these. We’ll give them to him as soon as he comes home.’

‘Oh, thank you, that will be a weight off my mind. I must run, now. Thank you both, so much.’

They waved her off then returned to their study where Catherine locked the journals in their fire-proof safe.

‘There’s a nice picnic spot on the road to Cheyenne Mountain,’ Ernest said.

Catherine smiled and hugged her husband. ‘How clever you are, my dear.’

SECOND STAR TO THE RIGHT

SS SPACEMONKEY

They parked Spacemonkey out in the empty black of space, far from anywhere. For two hours they crawled into every nook and cranny, pried up removable panels and those that weren’t, gathering a bewildering array of trackers, listening and recording bugs. The Carters rigged up a controlled EMP to sweep the outer hull of any foreign attachments out of their reach. Aris Boch proved himself useful with a number of gadgets that let them track any alien devices, both passive and those transmitting a signal.

Jack dropped his fifth tracker into the collection bucket. Teal'c pulled his zat and vaporised the lot of them.

‘I believe that’s all there is to find, O'Neill,’ Boch said.

‘EMP worked too, sir,’ Carter said. She had globs of engine grease in her hair and a satisfied look on her face. ‘We should be clear.’

‘Good job. Go get cleaned up. Teal'c, let’s get moving.’

‘To which destination, O'Neill?’ Teal'c slid into the pilot’s chair, and warmed up the big red control ball.

‘Back to Abydos.’ Jack looked at his motley crew. ‘We're not giving up. We’ll have a rethink, contact Hammond, come up with the next step.’

‘Now we know a bit more about this attack on Ba'al,’ Jacob said, ‘I’ll contact the Tok’ra, see if they tracked the battle were Daniel was lost.’

Boch cleared his throat noisily.

‘Something on your mind?’ Jack pinned him with a glare.
'There was a ship, took off just before we did.'

‘Yes, there was.’ Jack hadn’t missed it, but Boch actually mentioning it surprised him.

‘It was a bounty hunter. Cirian Kacha. She’s good. Not as good as me, mind you, but competent.’

‘Ba’al’s put another bounty on Daniel?’ Jack ground his molars. Last thing he needed was a pack of hired guns on Daniel’s trail.

‘Cirian is more a specialised tracker. She doesn’t usually go for the general hunts.’ Boch braced himself as Spacemonkey shifted into hyperspace. ‘Smooth. Ba’al’s engineers know what they’re doing. She’s a lone operator, O’Neill. And she owes me a favour. Maybe I can get her on our side.’

‘Maybe.’ Jack wasn’t going to hold his breath on that.

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N’HAS’Y

KEMYT CITY

‘Hold!’

The shout had barely left Daniel’s lips before it was taken up and repeated through the ranks of workers surrounding him. He hobble-hopped past the crews straining on the guide ropes – twenty men and women apiece – and knelt awkwardly on the newly constructed plinth.

Twenty-seven days of meetings, arguments, planning, drawing up drafts, assembling workers, overseeing the construction of the plinth, and removal of the Stargate from the library wall – barely a brick dislodged, he was proud to say – with heavy haulage equipment drawn in from upriver, sleepless nights spent imagining every possible contingency alternating with crushing moments of doubt about whether he should even try to connect the ‘gate to the galactic network, interspersed with odd moments of sheer panic that Ba’al would turn up right now before they could dial out for help, sprinkled with surprised pauses when he realised just what it was he and the enthusiastic N’Hasians were doing…

It all came down to this moment.

The Stargate hung from the elegant crane erected in the square, surrounded by the academic and archival buildings. Daniel’s euphoria at discovering the Stargate in the library’s wall had barely faded since that early morning. When the Elder Council realised he hadn’t gone nuts, and Daniel had dissuaded them from firing it up then and there – and probably punching a matching hole in the other side of the building – everyone eagerly set to the task.

Scientists and engineers of all persuasion had flocked to offer their knowledge and to absorb whatever Daniel could impart to them. He’d been apprehensive in those first chaotic days that he’d lose touch with his Clan, but that had swiftly faded; they were all here and had been with him every step of the way. Unrealised talents – on Daniel’s part – were discovered. Trettish the gardener was a former engineer, Safia held qualifications in physics, Ayshal a talented astronomer.
While a group of clever people worked on a way to power the Stargate, based on Daniel’s somewhat limited knowledge, and curators and scholars from many disciplines searched for the DHD, Daniel worked in the square. The library structure was inspected, reinforced, then the Stargate was painstakingly removed. Every day, as more and more Clans arrived from far-country towns or nomadic paths, Daniel and his Clan constructed a rather beautiful stand from a granite-like stone of incredible strength, to bear the ‘gate. All the while, Sabire was nearby, often serenading everyone with his music. It was a nice way to work.

And now, here they were. A metre separated the gleaming Stargate from its new home. Daniel raised one hand, lowered it fractionally. The ‘gate dipped down. One centimetre at a time, it descended into its cradle.

‘A little more,’ he muttered, eyes darting from one side of the monolith to the other. The measurements ensured the 7th and 8th chevrons would not be swallowed by the cradle, but he had to be up close, to be sure. A slip, a cracked jewel and it would all be over. ‘A little more.’

Trettish and chief engineer Reiner flanked him, measuring, calling instructions. The many hundreds of onlookers fell silent.

Ten centimetres. He reached up, cupped his hand over the inner track.

Five centimetres. The wind picked up, pushing the ‘gate out of alignment by three millimetres. The guide rope foreman called out, directing the hands to haul in or slack off.

Three centimetres. Back on course.

Two centimetres. Steady.

One centimetre. Daniel curled his fingers inside the ring.

Zero. It slid home; the outer ring disappeared into the brace until the inner track was even with the top of the platform. The Stargate settled with a ground-deep thud. Done.

Perfectly supported, the ring sat solid and sure, as if it had always been there.

Daniel let out a shaky breath, swamped in a sudden rush of emotion. *Home, home, home.* He wanted to leap up and throw himself through the wormhole. That quickly faded in a rush of guilt. Belatedly, he realised people were cheering and ringing bells in a multi-toned celebration. The sounds blended and lifted up into the air, a joyous day to be remembered by all.

He pushed himself upright. ‘Well done, everyone. Now for the hard part.’

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STRAIGHT ON TILL MORNING

*SS SPACEMONKEY*

The trip back to Abydos took days. They homed in on the pyramid and made planetfall in Nagada’s
early evening. Skaara, under Teal'c’s tutelage, brought them in over the dunes toward the city, waggling the wings to show the watch guard on Nagada’s gates there was nothing to fear. Cutting a wide arc around the city – he was not going to bury his market garden under piles of back-washed sand – Skaara settled the ship on the east side of the city.

‘Thank you, Teal'c, for teaching me the ways of this vessel.’

‘You are most welcome, Skaara. You are an adept pupil.’ Teal'c bowed his head.

Skaara grinned and joined Seni and Tobay. They raced down the ramp, waving at the militia who were pouring out of the east gate. Jack hung back as the others left. Teal'c and Carter stayed with him, watching the reunion out on the sand.

‘We’ll find him, sir.’

‘Indeed.’ Teal'c sounded even more confident than Carter.

Jack shook off the gloom lurking in the back of his mind. ‘Yes. We will.’ He looked at them, really looked. Confidence, hope, determination; neither of them were about to give up on their teammate. Even though they still had no idea where Daniel was, the information they’d managed to uncover brought him closer to them, if in spirit only.

‘Y’know.’ Jack picked up his pack and headed out into the warm, spice-scented night air. ‘I’m thinking we send Hammond some of Skaara’s aunt’s preserved toja berries. Keep him sweet. And off our backs…’

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N’HAS’Y

KEMYT CITY

One thing Daniel really liked about the Elder Council was they made decisions really quickly. Need to half demolish the national library to extract an alien gateway to other planets? Sure, how big a crane do you need? Need to engineer from scratch a power source to supply said alien gateway? How many people would you like? There were no committees, no costing proposals, no bickering over who owned/controlled/paid for anything. The Stargate was as much a part of N’Has’y as the land, the rivers or the air – therefore ownership and use belonged to everyone.

Kinsey would never get a job here. Daniel glanced admiringly at the Elders as they walked reverently around the Stargate, heads of a very long line of people come to inspect this fascinating new addition to their daily lives. The only person not entirely pleased with Daniel’s discovery had been Vanesh, head librarian of the library which now sported an enormous hole in its side. He glanced over at the scaffolding propping up what had turned out to be a load-bearing wall, and the workers swarming around it. Which reminded him, he had to talk to her about that name. Library of Thoth, indeed.

‘It is an object of great beauty, Daaniel.’ Sabire stood next to him, surveying the ‘gate with satisfaction. ‘It gleams as if newly made, and not a thing lost, found, moved and made a part of a
building for so many hundreds of seasons.’

‘That’s the naquada, the mineral it’s made from. Hardest and most durable element we’ve ever found.’

‘When I touched it, it felt like a living thing.’

‘Yes, they’re all like that. Buried in the wall it felt cold, but once we got it out here in the sun, it… came alive almost.’ Daniel paused. ‘Something I’ve never really considered before. I wonder if the Gatebuilders incorporated some kind of photovoltaic system in the ‘gates. Must remember to ask Sam.’

‘She of the hair of gold. I look forward to meeting her, Daaniel. And all your Earthy friends.’

Daniel looked down at his feet, suddenly overwhelmed. ‘I can’t believe this is actually happening, Sabire. I’ve been disconnected from everything I knew for so long, and then the Clan and you made me so welcome. I felt like I belonged here. And now, everything is changing again. I hope—you don’t think I’m abandoning you, that I used your hospitality just to fill in a gap until I could leave?’

Sabire gave a mighty snort of disbelief. ‘Pah! Never have you used any of us, my little pale friend. The land of your birth is in your blood all your life, no matter where one journeys. Never regret leaving, never regret returning: this, my mother told me. And, as she also told me, she is always right.’

Daniel nodded. ‘Mothers usually are.’ He looked up at his friend. ‘I haven’t actually asked, Sabire, but will you come with me, visit the land of my birth and the land of my heart?’ Taking Sabire to Abydos would be much easier than trying to get him out of Cheyenne Mountain.

Sabire puffed his chest out and straightened to his full height. Sombrely, he accepted. ‘Daaniel, you give me the greatest honour. To place my humble feet upon your home lands will be the proudest moment of my life. May I bring my music with me? I would serenade your folk with our most appealing songs.’ His expression suddenly crumpled. ‘They do appreciate song, do they not? They—they do not all sing… like you?’

‘Well, like most cultures we appreciate… Hey!’ Daniel thwacked him on the arm as Sabire cracked up laughing.

‘My apologies. I accept your invitation with much anticipation.’ A genuinely serious frown creased his forehead. ‘I do wonder, though, which words to use in greeting to your good people. We would not wish an unwisely spoken word to offend.’

‘Well, the translation function of the Stargate will affect you, once you pass through it. It generally doesn’t take long to establish a usable lexicon in travellers. But, until that happens I can coach you in a few standard greetings, ones that are acceptable to both the military and civilians on Earth, and there are some fascinating Abydonian customs…’

He pulled out his journal and began jotting notes. ‘I can write out some guidelines. Anyone who comes with us will need to know some words, and a few customs, although the SGC is used to offworld visitors, but it would help so that they don’t take us by surprise. Abydos has fewer formalities that could cause problems, well, as long as they don’t try to marry you off to one of Kasuf’s nieces, that is. Uh, I don’t know who else will be coming with us. Does the Elder Council decide, or should I invite people?’ He lifted his eyes from the journal and stared unseeing at the space in the centre of the Stargate. ‘Oh, geez.’
‘Daaniel?’

‘I’m going home,’ he said. Sudden constriction in his throat choked the words to a whisper. ‘Everything could have changed. Jack, Teal’c, Sam…’ Could be dead. Worse, they might have replaced him, and just got on with life without him. ‘Ba’al or Anubis might have attacked Earth. There might not be anything to go back to.’

Sabire laid a large comforting hand on his shoulder. ‘You think too wildly, Daaniel. What has happened is unchangeable. What stands before us will be a grand adventure. Do not encourage disaster by giving it voice.’

‘Que sera, sera,’ Daniel murmured. ‘You’re right. And we won’t go anywhere unless we get the ‘gate working.’ He ran his eye over the Stargate: now solidly anchored in the plinth, N’Hasian scientists swarming around it connecting up the power conduits they had been working tirelessly to construct. He’d given them everything he knew about powering a Stargate without a DHD, from lightning to Kera’s fusion fronds, to the enormous jumper leads the SGC used.

Ingeniously, they’d come up with their own version: more durable than the one-trip only lightning / frond attempts, less draining than the first SGC power-ups, which had browned out half of Colorado. The groove carved into the plinth contained a well of super-conductive fluid. When charged from a large generator nearby, it would power the entire Stargate. Hopefully. They’d soon know.

He looked up, around the square: at the beautiful, outlandish buildings; the groups of people working around the Stargate; the Elder Council seated under the shady trees, deep in discussion; at the Kendasai making their way through the crowd barriers bearing lunch and great pride at being hailed the Clan of Daaniel of Eart; and at the crowd happily camped out behind the barriers, fully equipped with deck chairs, sun umbrellas, coolers full of food, watching everything they did with unabashed enthusiasm. Some saw him look their way and waved and cheered. He grinned and waved back, causing a mini-riot as everyone waved, hooted and rang bells at him.

Daniel sighed. He stood at an all-too familiar crossroad, faced with leaving one life to start – or resume – another. This time it’ll be different. I won’t abandon them. He reaffirmed the decision he had gradually realised on the long journey through N’Has’y’s sands. Unless he could return to this world he would not leave, and he would not let any of the N’Hasians take a one-way trip either. He knew what it was to be cut off from the land of your birth, or heart, and he would not let anyone else endure such pain.

Which brought them to their biggest problem. He and Sabire walked over to the Elder Council, who rose and invited them to sit. Daniel sank gratefully into a chair, his leg aching from the hours of hobbling around the Stargate.

‘The work proceeds well, Daaniel?’ asked Elder Constile.

‘Yes, the Stargate sits in the plinth as if it has always belonged there. Everyone involved is to be commended.’

‘Can we use it now, Daaniel?’ asked Elder Koma.

‘Uh, well, we probably can, once the science team complete their tests.’ He looked at the earnest faces around him. ‘But there is one thing we need before anyone can step through the Stargate.’ He knew there had been a lot of discussion about the worlds at the other end of the Stargate, and that exploration parties had been forming all over the city.

‘Continue, Daaniel,’ Gramire nodded encouragingly.
‘In order to connect the Stargate here to a ‘gate on another world, we need the address of that world: six glyphs for the destination and the point of origin glyph.’

‘These are the addresses you have given us?’ Elder Constile gestured with her copy of the list he’d written out for them, all worlds the SGC had established as safe and friendly.

‘That’s correct. However, we cannot leave N’Has’y without discovering the address for this world. Without it, no one will be able to return.’

That caused a murmur of concern.

‘Where is the address to this world, Daaniel?’ Gransire asked.

‘I don’t know. We have a list, actually two lists, of addresses on Earth. Our exploration follows the process of picking an address, checking if the world is viable, then going through and matching the world to the address. We’ve only ever had to search for an address twice – and those were both recorded on very old historical artefacts. I’ve asked Librarian Lotha and Archivist Mheme to search for such an artefact, but they have not as yet found anything.’

‘Is there no other place an address will be recorded?’

‘There is. Every Stargate is supported by a machine, what we call the Dial Home Device, which engages an address into the Stargate’s technology and activates the wormhole. We’ve found that each DHD bears the address of that world, allowing the occupants to travel away from – and back to – their world.’

Sam had made that discovery, years ago when she’d dived into the inner workings of the DHD on their second mission. They’d later theorised that Ra must have travelled the galaxy at some point, stopping at worlds with a Stargate and recording the address, thus amassing the enormous repository he’d found in the Abydos Cartouche Room.

‘But, we have not found the device you described, Daaniel.’

‘No, but we have a clue, a very good one. Each Stargate bears one symbol unique to the world it sits upon. All we need to do is find the address ending with N’Has’y’s symbol. And I know where to look.’

Night fell swiftly and completely on Abydos. It was too dangerous to make the trip through shifting dunes to the pyramid until dawn returned the suns to the sky. With no disturbances reported, SG-1 and 2 settled down in guest quarters for dinner and some welcome rest. Kasuf listened intently to everything Jack and Skaara told him, one hand resting on his son’s arm.

‘This Ba’al – he is false, as was the shatal Ra?’
‘Yes, father. He is Goa’uld.’ Skaara sat cross-legged near the hearth fire. ‘He uses Dan’yer for his own purpose, but now has lost Dan’yer out amongst the stars.’

‘We’ll keep looking, Kasuf.’ Jack stretched his legs out, soaking up the warmth in Kasuf’s home. Outside, in the open pathways between buildings, the desert night was crisply cold.

Kasuf nodded. ‘When you find my Good Son, you will bring him here, to his home.’ To Kasuf, Earth would never be Daniel’s true home.

‘Sure will.’ Jack caught Skaara’s eye and winked. A roar of laughers drifted out of a house nearby: Ferretti and the others unwinding. ‘Think I’ll catch some sleep. Night.’

Sleep was short-lived, and after an hour of lying awake listening to the mastages mumbling softly to themselves in a bier down the street, Jack rose and dressed. The sounds of the city surrounded him: a baby fretting, someone who sounded like Skaara crying out in a dream, a couple making noisy, giggling love.

He wandered through the city. Up on the ramparts, the night guard kept watch, for sandstorms more than anything these days. He strolled along the narrow streets, up and down mud-brick stairs, over hemp and wooden bridges. He really did love this place. There were no expectations here, just be fair, be happy. In the very rare moments when he thought of retirement, he fantasised living here. Daniel would, the moment he left the SGC. And Lou had all but put his house on the market.

_The SGC Retirement Home. Kick back and grow old disgracefully._ He hopped across a creaking bridge and up onto the ramparts, to find himself at the rear of the city. Dawn was just breaking over the hills far to the south. Jack watched as crags and gullies took shape in the growing light, still mysterious and promising interesting times for any willing explorer. The Abydonians had not ventured too far yet, from their home, apart from the long-range hunting parties that ventured out each cool season. _Bet Daniel would enjoy exploring up there._ Suddenly, he felt tired. Tired of fighting an unstoppable enemy, tired of losing friends and good soldiers, tired of battling the very people who should support them unquestioningly. _Maybe it is time to retire. But, not quite yet._

‘Jack.’ Skaara’s soft call announced his presence.

‘Hey, kido.’

‘The desert is beautiful in the dawn light.’

‘Yeah. What do you say we take Daniel on an exploration of those mountains? Could be fun.’

Skaara cocked his head. ‘You would leave the comfort of the city to sleep on the ground, be burned to a husk by the sun, freeze your man-ness off at night?’

‘Sure! It’ll be great. We do it all the time on Earth.’

‘Your race is very strange.’ He shook his head, still an odd sight without the long braids. ‘I have told Dan’yer this many times.’

‘Yeah, but you love us.’

‘That I do.’

Jack grinned, but it quickly faded. ‘I don’t know where to look for him now,’ he admitted. ‘How do
you find one man in a whole galaxy?’

‘I have thought on this, Jack. Klorel had few dealings with Ba'al, but there were two places of neutrality where system lords would meet. Perhaps we will find something there.’

‘It’s worth a try. We’ll have some breakfast, if the others ever wake up, then go talk to Hammond.’ With some kind of a positive plan to present to the general, hopefully they would avoid orders to return to Earth, orders Jack had no intention of following.

N’HAS’Y

KEMYT CITY

Daniel couldn’t remember ever being this nervous, not even at his wedding, which technically had been their second wedding because he’d sort of missed the first one…

He stood thirty feet from the Stargate, flanking the scientists who monitored the generator and power conductors snaking over to the plinth. To one side stood Sabire, unusually sombre or perhaps too excited to talk. To his left stood Gramire and Gransire, Gramire clutching Daniel’s hand with a death grip. Behind them stood the Elder Council and the Kendasai. Behind them – probably half the planet’s population by now had jammed themselves into every available window, rooftop, tree and spaces in between to watch the first moment of interplanetary contact.

‘Here goes.’ He nodded to the two diallers, Shanti and Kinkala, winners of the lottery to be the first to spin the inner ring.

Shanti and Kinkala pushed and pulled respectively. The ring moved easily, as if it had never lain dormant for centuries. The glyphs sailed past the topmost chevron – the dialling engagement chevron – until Auriga appeared.

‘Hold!’ Daniel called.

There was a second’s pause then the lower left chevron clunked up and down, its crystal glowed red: confirmed.

‘Okay. Next.’

Majestically, the inner ring circled again and again as one by one each glyph in Earth’s address was locked into place. Finally, the last, the unique symbol that looked like a curly capital M, was locked into the top chevron.

Heartbeat pounding madly in his ears, Daniel called out. ‘That’s it. Clear the area. Remember – no one move until I say. The wormhole will vaporise anything and anyone in its path.’

Shanti and Kinkala scuttled past them, huge grins on their faces. Warning whistles rang out from the scientists. Daniel checked three times that everyone was stationary and well clear of the washback
zone, then nodded to Binish. ‘Release the power burst.’

Equivalent to pressing the centre crystal on a DHD, they released a measured surge of power into the plinth well. Energy flooded into the Stargate.

Gramire and Sabire gripped him so hard he’d have bruises tomorrow.

Daniel stopped breathing.

With a grinding, whooshing explosion, a wormhole formed in the centre of the Stargate. Excess energy boiled out toward them, then was sucked backwards before settling down into a beautiful blue pond, casually rippling.

The air crackled with ozone. Every hair on Daniel’s body was standing upright. He opened his mouth, gasped a breath.

They’re still there. A viable wormhole connected N’Has’y to Earth. Their Stargate was still there; chances were the SGC and the rest of the planet was too. Unconsciously, he inched forward. The need to just go, run, throw himself into that cold blue embrace was frightening. And get splattered on the iris, if you do. There was a long way to go yet.

‘Well, that worked!’ he said brightly. He waved to the engineers set up behind a battery of radio equipment. His hand was shaking. He tucked it into his pocket and limped over to them.

‘We are broadcasting on the first frequency, Daaniel,’ said the chief operator, Elash.

‘Thank you.’ He cleared his throat. Switched to English. ‘This is Doctor Daniel Jackson, calling SGC niner. Come in please…’

EARTH

SGC, COLORADO SPRINGS

‘Unscheduled off-world activation.’

Master Sergeant Natasha Sullivan’s voice followed the alarm blaring through the mid-morning bustle of the SGC. The Gateroom blast doors rumbled shut and the frontline defence team took up their positions, weapons at the ready.

Hammond walked into the briefing room and stared down at the Stargate. The iris remained firmly closed. He waited another moment, frowned, then moved briskly down the stairs into the control room.

‘What do we have, sergeant?’

‘Um, nothing, sir.’ Sullivan puzzled over the unresponsive instruments in front of her. ‘We’re not picking up any IDC, no video or audio transmissions either.’
`Who do we have off-world, currently?`

`SG-7 is on a trade negotiation with SG-9, they’re due back tomorrow. SG-11, SG-15, SG-8 and SG-5 all left on missions yesterday and all have reported in on schedule. They’re not due back till tomorrow and Friday. SG-18 and SG-17 are due in this evening; all their reports so far have not indicated trouble. That just leaves SG-1 and SG-2.’ Who could be anywhere and in any kind of trouble.

George let out a thoughtful sigh. If any of his people were in trouble and had no access to their GDOs they wouldn’t bother trying to dial home. They had half a dozen safe sites established on other planets, where a team in trouble could either gate to and use the buried supplies while waiting to contact home, or merely use as a turnaround point and gate out to another safe hole or friendly planet, or even the Alpha Site, depending on who was on their heels. Odds then were it wasn’t one of their own.

‘Could be a random dialler.’ A lot of people lived on planets with Stargates. It might be someone doing some cold-calling and got lucky. Or someone who had Earth’s address.

‘We haven’t registered any impact on the iris, general.’ Technician Batey called from the rear monitors.

The hiss of open radio channels filled the room. After ten minutes people began shifting restlessly. The guards in the Gateroom didn’t relax, George was pleased to see.

The minutes ticked by. The wormhole stayed active, blue light leaked around the edges of the iris, reflected off the back wall.

‘Coming up to 38 minutes, sir.’

Exactly on the 38 minute mark, the wormhole collapsed. The guards stood at ease. George grunted. Odd, but he’d take an odd occurrence over one that ended in blood and destruction any day.

‘Log it, sergeant.’

‘Yes, sir.’

George headed back upstairs, the incident filed in the curious basket in his brain. He had seven reports to sign off on before 17 and 18 came home that afternoon.

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N’HAS’Y
KEMYT CITY
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Daniel tried not to let disappointment take a hold. Finding the exact frequency, or any frequency that matched those used on Earth, with completely alien equipment, was going to take time. Still, he’d hoped.
‘Daaniel! Come, sit in the shade and take some tea.’ Ayshal ushered him away from the radio banks set up under an awning that looked like a circus tent. He followed her over to the grassy garden in the centre of the square where most of the Clan had settled. Chairs, lounges and cushions were grouped under the trees. Heavenly scents rose from tables piled with food. He accepted a steaming cup of tea and a jellied bun.

‘How long will it take to talk to your family, Daaniel?’ Teni skipped up to him, and sat cross-legged in the grass at his feet.

‘I don’t know, Teni. The radios here are very different to what we have on Earth. We have to find the wavelength that matches what we use at home, then a frequency that someone on the other end is listening to.’ Without an SGC issue radio, he was fumbling in the etheric dark. Sam could have matched up the radio waves in a heartbeat. For a selfish moment he wished she’d been brought with him. But, no. Soon – very soon – they’d see each other again.

‘Why don’t you try again?’ she asked, mouth full of Jacuna’s pastries.

‘We will, in a little while. You see, a lot of other people use the Stargate on Earth, and while we’re connected to it nobody else can be. So we’ll wait an hour between each try.’

Teni cocked her head and nodded. ‘That is fair. Do you think I could come with you, Daaniel? I would wish to see a new world. I’m sure mother will say yes,’ she rushed on, batting her eyes for good measure.

He chuckled. ‘Probably. Once we make sure it is safe.’ He could talk Kasuf and Skaara into accepting some tourist parties. Having the N’Hasians interact with the Abydonians would do both cultures some good. Possibly, even encourage some of his adopted people to venture off-world themselves. After what had happened to Sha’re and Skaara, no one had even attempted to explore away from their planet.

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EARTH

SGC, LEVEL 28, CONTROL ROOM

The Stargate came alive twice more, in a pattern of every 52 minutes after the last connection disengaged.

Each time the caller remained mute and unknown. By the third time, Hammond authorised an attempt at contact from their end.

Off-rota SG teams wandered in and out of the control room, offering opinions or suggestions.

From the mystery caller, there was no reply.

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ABYDOS

NAGADA

Jack and Skaara strolled around Nagada’s ramparts together in the warming dawn sun. He’d never really appreciated just how large the city was, but from up here he could see the thousands of homes crammed within the outer walls. People were already moving through streets threaded haphazardly between the homes. Smoke from dung cooking fires drifted lazily past the upper stories, and caught, wraith-like in the hemp rope bridges. Mastages grumbled and farted as they were tended and made ready for the day’s work.

They ended up on the high guard towers over the main gates when the first sun was already well up over the horizon. The militia on guard acknowledged them both, and one rang the huge signal bell, announcing the end of night and start of a peaceful day. Jack peered down, watching the gates as they were opened to allow the workers out into the market gardens. Two familiar figures stood by the furthest gate, trading greetings with the passers-by.

‘Morning, kids.’

Teal’c and Carter looked up. ‘Morning, sir. Sleep well?’ Carter replied.

‘So-so.’ He swung onto the ladder and climbed down. ‘I’m going to go report in.’

‘We shall accompany you, O’Neill.’ Teal’c inclined his head in greeting.

Jack thought about telling them to stay and rest while they could, but he accepted the offered company gratefully. He knew they were getting very near the day when Hammond would order them home. They’d already been gone from the SGC far longer than he had either wanted or expected to be granted the leeway for. The rest of the team leaders were doing their best to cover SG-1 and 2’s missions, but eventually the bean counters would start to complain in earnest and Hammond would have to order them home. He’d send Ferretti and his kids – unwillingly, for sure – but Jack was really dreading the day when he faced the choice of obeying orders to give up the hunt, or not… He knew in his heart which way he’d go.

He pulled his cap out of his pocket and slapped it on, added sunglasses, and headed out through the gardens. Carter and Teal’c fell in behind him, chatting amiably with Skaara about the progress of his crops. The trek to the pyramid would take a good hour: more than enough time to formulate an argument for Hammond.

By the time they made the ramp at the base of the pyramid, the first sun had been joined by the second, and both were giving the members of SG-1 a good roasting. Jack flapped his shirt against his damp skin and pushed determinedly up the ramp. The dark coolness inside swallowed them like a welcoming embrace.

Through the columned Hypostyle Hall, their footsteps echoed around them, awakening memories of another, desperate time: sudden, deadly fighting around the enormous pillars, of an eager boy daring to stand up against everything he’d been taught, a spunky girl fighting for a love she’d barely realised, of a gutsy, stubborn young man determined to save everyone because it was right…
The Stargate stood where it always had, silent and looking innocent of the power it actually held. The four militia members on guard duty greeted them cheerily and gathered to watch with interest as Jack punched in the coordinates for Earth. The wormhole refused to engage. The chevrons powered down with the familiar whine of a busy signal.

Jack frowned and checked his watch – kept faithfully to Mountain Standard Time. It was 1138 hours. SGC routine generally kept team departures and arrivals to early morning and late afternoon, thus keeping the ‘gate clear for emergencies.

‘We’ll give it a few minutes and try again.’

N'HAS’Y

KEMYT CITY

Daniel was getting hoarse. Sabire and others had offered to take over, but he held out for the moment, wanting, needing to make that first contact himself.

They’d cycled into yet another bandwidth on the fourth dial-in. A few minutes of teeth grinding static poured from the huge speakers, then with a sudden blare that made everyone jump, music drowned out Daniel’s voice. He turned, thinking someone in the crowd had lost interest and started their own entertainment.

…point me, in the direction of, Albuquerque…

A man’s light tenor rose above the voices of those around him. Daniel kept turning until he was staring at the speakers. I want to get home, help me get home… He stared as if the speakers had morphed into a floppy-haired, bell-bottomed 1970s pop idol. The song ended and launched into The Beatles’ Rain.

‘Oh, god, that’s… er… that’s a radio!’ He blinked at the radio technicians who were looking dubious. ‘Well, obviously, it’s a radio. I mean it’s Earth radio, a commercial broadcast. It must be, I don’t know, FM or AM bandwidth, and I don’t know what the equivalent here is, but we’re getting closer! I think…’

‘Do you wish to attempt contact with these singing persons, Daaniel?’

‘Oh, no, it’s a recording, they’re not singing live.’ And breaking into a commercial radio frequency would kind of blow the whole secret military program thing. He peered over the technician’s shoulder. ‘If I remember my old radio, there’s AM, FM, then short wave bands aren’t too far away.’ He broke off, willing the song to end. Finally it did, and the announcer came on, prattling through a couple of ads and special deals.

‘Okay, it’s a great day outside, the temperature’s hitting 77 degrees, and no rain in sight. This one’s for all you lovers, on KACL 104.3 FM…’

‘Yes! Cycle lower on this frequency, and you should get into the shortwave band.’ Daniel clutched
the back the chair. The music faded out, others rose and fell as they passed through different stations, until static filled the air again, but this time it was streaked with howls and squeals. Daniel grabbed the microphone and began calling again. ‘This is Doctor Daniel Jackson…’

No response.

They changed frequency and tried again.

And again.

And again.

‘This is Doctor Daniel Jackson, calling SGC niner, does anybody hear me?’

A voice, deep and full of disapproving authority leaped out of the speakers at him. ‘Be advised, this frequency is reserved for military use. Please discontinue your call, AORC NORAD, over.’

‘Wait! Mayday, mayday!’ Daniel blurted the first thing that came to mind, rising from some long forgotten conversation with Jack. Nobody in authority was allowed to ignore a Mayday call. ‘I’m trying to reach General George Hammond, US Air Force, commanding Project Green Book.’ He’d never had cause to use the SGC’s code name before, but surprisingly, it came to his tongue when he needed it.

‘State the nature of your mayday.’ The man’s voice was so clear, he could be just feet away.

‘My name’s Daniel Jackson. I’m a civilian consultant, seconded to the Air Force. I’m ‘in country’, separated from my unit and behind enemy lines.’ He cringed a little, knowing he sounded like a John Wayne movie character. ‘I’ve been trying frequencies at random. Please, please don’t disconnect me. I need to speak to anyone from the SGC. If you’re at NORAD, you should know where it is. Please, sir, I need your help.’

There was a horrible beat of silence. Then the man was back, a sliver of sympathy softening the military tone. ‘Very well, Doctor Jackson. Hold your line open.’ There was a background mutter of voices, feet walking away…

Someone pushed him into a chair. A glass of water appeared in the hand not clutching the microphone. He drank it all in one gulp.

A minute passed. The voice returned, startling him even though he’d been straining to hear it. ‘Doctor Jackson?’

‘I’m here! Yes!’

‘We’ve been advised General Hammond will talk to you. He’s on his way. Can you wait?’

‘Oh, thank you, thank you, yes, I’ll wait. What’s your name, by the way?’

‘Uh, you can call me Doug.’ Probably those monitoring reserved frequencies didn’t give out their full name and rank.

‘Thank you, Doug. You don’t know what this means to me.’

‘Hope you get home okay.’

‘So do I,’ he whispered.
‘The general is here. Handing you over.’

‘Hello?’ Daniel’s voice was croaking, his throat tight with a dozen emotions.

‘This is General Hammond.’ The familiar gruff voice reached across the galaxy and wrapped him in the familiar comfort of home.

‘Sir?’ He cleared his throat, tried again. ‘General—’

‘Doctor Jackson? Daniel?’ George’s voice rose from disbelief to delight in three simple words.

‘Yes, sir. It’s me.’ Daniel gasped.

The hiss of the short wave radio went dead as the Stargate reached its 38 minute window and snapped off.

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N’HAS’Y
KEMYT CITY, STARGATE SQUARE

‘No! No, no, no, no! Ow!’ Daniel leapt off his chair, jigging up and down in utter frustration. Pain spiked through his leg, forcing calm. ‘Don’t lose that frequency!’

‘It is noted and held, Daaniel.’

‘Daaniel, those people you spoke to – that was your Clan?’ The Elder Council had rushed over, behind them everyone was on their feet, craning to hear.

‘Not my Clan, exactly. Well, I guess the general is. Yes, they were.’ He turned away from more questions and called out to the ‘gate diallers. ‘Kinkala, Shanti, please dial again.’

The couple leapt at the ring and began the slow haul. Daniel felt completely surreal. George. He’d been talking to George Hammond. In Cheyenne Mountain. On Earth. Clutching the microphone like a lifebuoy, he counted the engaged chevrons; five, six, seven. Shanti and Kinkala dived aside, the activation surge went zapping along the conduits… and the Stargate whined, powering down, the chevrons winked out. Every face in the square turned to look at him.

Of all the luck. At this exact moment…

‘Busy signal.’

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ABYDOS
This was getting ridiculous. Three failed dial-ins. He’d held off for an hour, then and tried again. And got another busy signal.

‘The Tau’ri Stargate may be under attack, O’Neill,’ Teal’c said with inscrutable calm.

‘Busy for over 38 minutes would suggest something extraordinary is going on, sir.’ Carter was sitting on the steps at the side of the Stargate, thoughtfully fingering her P-90. ‘An attack, or mass-evacuation from somewhere off-world. Or they’re evaccing the base…’ She finally looked up and caught his pointed glare. ‘Or they could be doing maintenance on the ‘gate…’

No way was the SGC under attack without him there to help. Not gonna happen. Jack stabbed the DHD with two fingers, punching in Earth’s address yet again, and mashed the centre crystal.

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EARTH

SGC, LEVEL 0, FINAL BASE CHECKPOINT

The news had spread like wildfire. Through the corridors, labs, offices, ready rooms, gyms, armouries, quartermaster’s stores, up to the mess and living quarters: as General Hammond had run up to NORAD, the word spread close behind him. Daniel Jackson had made contact.

Bill Lee had just returned to base with Nyan after a quick trip to town for some reference works and lunch. They could feel the buzz in the air as they signed in and joined three others at the elevators by Checkpoint Alpha.

‘Corporal, what’s going on?’

Corporal Harris favoured them with a grin. ‘General Hammond just blew through here like his tail was on fire. Word is, Doctor Jackson has made contact.’

‘You’re kidding!’

‘No, sir. Looks like the Doctors here picked the right time to drop by.’

Bill finally looked at the others as they moved into the elevator. ‘Doctor Langford, Doctor Littlefield! How nice to see you again.’

‘Doctor Lee, Nyan.’ Catherine Langford smiled at them both. ‘The corporal has kindly offered to escort us to the briefing room.

Bill and Nyan tagged along, changing elevators and passing security stations all the way down to level 27. Every hall and office they passed they saw people standing by doorways, gossip and speculation filling the air with an excited hum.
The briefing room was already crowded with SG teams and Daniel’s staff. Bill saw the doctors to a seat and edged closer to the open intercom on the table, where they could hear what was happening in the control room below.

‘Unscheduled off-world activation.’

The Stargate lit up and spun, the iris swirled shut.

Everyone held their breath.

‘Receiving IDC,’ Sergeant Sullivan announced. ‘SG-1 confirmed. Opening the iris.’

A sigh of disappointment ran through the room.

‘SGC niner, this is SG-1 niner, come in.’ The familiar voice of Jack O’Neill echoed up the stairs.

There were a few mutterings amongst the members of SG-3.

‘SG-1, this is the SGC, we read you, colonel.’

‘Let me talk to Hammond. And what’s going on over there? We’ve been getting busy signals for hours.’

‘Yes, sir. There’s no cause for alarm, sir. Patching you through to General Hammond.’

‘Hammond.’ The general was curt, but those who knew him could hear the excitement behind those words.

‘O’Neill, sir. We’re back on Abydos. All personnel safe and accounted for. Regret to inform you we were unable to extract Daniel.’

‘Jack—’

‘He was gone by the time we got to Ba’al’s planet, but we have a couple of ideas where to look next.’

‘Jack, it’s—’

‘We’re not giving up, sir. I don’t care what the JCS say—’

‘Colonel!’

‘Sir?’

‘Jack,’ Hammond’s tone gentled. ‘The reason you kept getting a busy signal is Doctor Jackson was attempting to contact us. And he finally did.’

Silence filled the channel from Abydos. For a moment.

‘What?’

‘I talked to Daniel, colonel. He’s alive.’

‘Daniel? He contacted you? Where is he? Is he still being held by Ba’al’s Jaffa? What are his coordinates.’

‘Colonel, one thing at a time. I didn’t get any details. The connection timed out. We were expecting
him to redial when you called in.’

‘Oh, for—I’m coming through.’

‘Negative, colonel. I want you to hold on Abydos. You may be in a better position to reach Doctor Jackson from there. Stand by, I’ll contact you as soon as we hear from Daniel again.’

‘I… yes, sir. And—tell him…’

‘I will, Jack.’

‘Abydos out.’

N'HAS’Y

KEMYT CITY, STARGATE SQUARE

They waited ten nail-biting minutes, then dialled again, and this time the wormhole connected. Through the crackle of static, Daniel called out. ‘Daniel Jackson calling General Hammond.’

‘Hammond here, Daniel. I—how are you, son?’

‘General! I’m fine, I’m alive, free… It’s so good to hear your voice, sir. How is everyone? Sam – is Sam okay?’ His last glimpse of her, she’d been unconscious on the ground.

‘Major Carter is fine, son. Colonel O’Neill and Teal’c too. They’ve been hunting for you all over.’

‘Really?’ His knees were getting wobbly for some reason. He sank into his chair.

‘They haven’t stopped since the day you were taken, Daniel. In fact, I just talked to Jack.’

‘Jack… Is he there, can I talk to him?’

‘He’s off-world at the moment.’

‘Oh, on a mission?’

‘It’s a long story. First, tell me where you are, what’s your situation? Can you talk freely?’

‘Yes, yes I can, general. I escaped Ba’al’s Jaffa, so to speak. I’m on a planet called N'Has'ya, with good, good people. I’d give you the code for not being under duress, but I can’t for the life of me remember it.’

‘That’s all right. I’d like you to dial into the Alpha Site, Doctor. I’ll have SG-3 meet you there and they can bring you home.’

‘Uh, yeah, I can’t do that, sir, not just yet.’

Hammond’s cool voice held a thread of tension. ‘Why is that?’
‘Sir, the planet I’m on… the people have had no contact with anyone off-world since they were transplanted from Earth millennia ago. I only found their Stargate by accident. I’m concerned that Ba’al might track me here. They’d be defenceless against him. We haven’t found the DHD, so I have no idea what this planet’s address is. If I leave, I won’t be able to come back. And,’ he dragged in a breath. He looked up at the sea of rapt faces around him, hanging on every incomprehensible word he said. ‘They want to come with me. They want to explore the galaxy too.’

‘I see. Exactly how much do they know?’

Daniel could picture the disapproving frown settling on Hammond’s brow.

‘About the SGC; nothing, sir. About their own history, the Goa’uld who transplanted their ancestors, the Goa’uld in general, other planets and cultures; everything I could tell them.’ He rushed on before the general’s natural inclination for reprimand took over. ‘Sir, they had an Al’kesh full of dead Jaffa and symbiotes crash down on top of them. They nursed me back to health. They saved my life, in more ways than I can say. They’ve given up their normal lives to help me get home. I owe them, sir. And, I think you’ll find we have a very valuable new ally.’

It took him a moment to recognise the sound coming out the speakers was Hammond’s gruff chuckle. ‘You’ve been working your magic again, Daniel?’

‘Uh, I guess so, sir. Sorry. No, no I’m not. It’s the least I can do. Sir, wait till you meet them. They’re good people.’ Please… He didn’t want to use bribery, but he’d decided long ago that he wouldn’t leave N’Has’y shut off from the galaxy.

‘Alright. What can we do, Doctor?’

Daniel grinned. George really was a softy under all that brass. ‘I have the Point of Origin. We just need to find an address with a matching denominator. It must be on the Abydos collection, I know I’ve seen it before. Once you find it, you dial us up and—’ I can come home. His hands filled in the last words for him.

‘Okay, hold on a moment, I’ll have a line connected to the control room — I’m still up in NORAD.’

‘Yes, sir.’ As he pulled out his journal, Daniel glanced up, taking in the concerned faces hovering over him. Of course, they hadn’t understood any of that.

He switched languages. ‘It’s okay. Everyone at home is fine. They are going to look for N’Has’y’s address.’ Brilliant smiles lit up in response.

‘Doctor Jackson? You’re on relay to the control room.’ A woman’s voice came through the speakers.

‘Oh, hi everyone!’

A cacophony of calls, cheers and whistles nearly blew out the speakers. Daniel blinked; a sheepish smile crept across his face. ‘Guess we have an audience. Uh, okay, I’ve lost track of the time, so before the wormhole closes we need to find a gate address with a PoO denominator that looks like a capital letter M, with a curl on the right downward stroke. I know I’ve seen it before, it has to be in the database.’


‘We’ll get looking, Daniel,’ Hammond replied. ‘Give us an hour, if we haven’t contacted you by then, dial us up and we’ll discuss our options.’
‘Yes, sir. Thank you, thank you all. I—I’m looking forward to seeing you.’

‘Likewise, Doctor. Hammond out.’

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EARTH

SGC, LEVEL 18, ARCHEO/ANTHRO/LINGUISTICS LABS

Pippa Mahoney cursed under her breath and scrolled back to the beginning of the Stargate address directory. Recruited to the Anthro/Archeo department by Doctor Jackson himself, she’d been assigned the task of maintaining the address book to the stars. The Abydos collection, Colonel O’Neill’s Ancient’s address list, and every other set collected over the last six years was here, at her fingertips. If Doctor J thought the address to the planet he was on was in her database, it had to be. Except, it wasn’t. Nyan and the rest of their team were looking too, every computer in their two labs was burning bright with scrolling glyphs. People kept poking their heads in the doors, checking their progress. She ignored the latest group of soldiers, airmen, whatever, and began again.

Ten minutes later, Pippa reached the end of the list again. She twisted around to look at the others. ‘Anything?’

Dejected shrugs and shaken heads were the reply.

‘I don’t understand,’ Nyan said. ‘If Daniel recognised the denominator, then the address should be here.’

‘But it’s not,’ she agreed. She felt awful. They’d let Daniel down, just when they should have been able to help him.

‘I’ll go tell General Hammond.’ Nyan straightened his shoulders and marched off.

Å

N’HAS’Y

KEMYT CITY, STARGATE SQUARE

Daniel knew something had gone wrong. He allowed the SGC half an hour to locate the address. With Pippa and Nyan on the job they should have found it within ten minutes. Roughly 45 minutes had passed since he’d signed off with Hammond. They should have made contact by now.

‘Daaniel, you must eat.’ Jacuna jostled his elbow, bringing him back to his cooling bowl of stew.
‘Sorry, my mind is wandering.’ He chewed slowly, thinking hard.

Jacuna topped up his bowl. ‘I will not have the Eart folk think we have not fed you.’

No dial-in meant no address. Therefore, he hadn’t seen it in the database. Where else had he been that he might have seen a gate address? Tsydon? No—in all the decorations and Goa’uld scribing he’d seen there, none had been a gate symbol or address. Yu’s palace? Not likely. He’d been drugged out of his brain through most of that fun time. Boch’s ship? No. Not in his office at the base. His last translations had been an excruciatingly detailed genealogy of the lost rulers of P8R-33K. Their last mission had been to P6Z-294: where they’d gained a wealth of trade and technology and friendship, but no new addresses to the Stargate system. He smiled, remembering the overly happy Nandians. Eyeing his tall Clan, he made a mental note to introduce them both. Before that mission there had been a string of unproductive and sometimes rancorous missions, none of which had yielded anything useful.

He really had to concentrate now, gone from Earth months… was it a year or more? Mission after mission played through his memory. Oh—Abydos. He’d spent two weeks’ leave with Kasuf and Skaara, setting up the market gardens. Daniel closed his eyes, certain he was on the right trail. The last day he’d spent with Skaara and the town’s young people, exploring a passageway in the pyramid. They’d discovered it weeks earlier after a particularly energetic dust storm had shifted the sands piled up around its base. After much crawling and coughing through a dark, dry stone tunnel they’d emerged in the Cartouche Room.

Closing his eyes, he put himself back in that dusty place. Back up—there—a side tunnel had branched off the one they’d crawled through. Flickering torches had revealed a dead end, and… yes! Compact walls covered in cartouches, address cartouches. They hadn’t stayed to investigate because Nabeh was becoming allergic to the dust. He’d said to Skaara he’d come back on his next visit—nearly two years ago now. On his return to the SGC he’d omitted the find from his report to the general. Kasuf and his people had only their naquada to trade with; the SGC had plenty of addresses as yet unexplored, and he hadn’t wanted the NID getting wind of new addresses in the climate of suspicion and intrigue that had festered around the SGC at that time.

Daniel pictured that little alcove; images dancing in the flickering light, stars locked unmoving on the ceiling, one incongruously bare wall, cartouches framing the surprisingly brightly coloured pictures of Ra… Got you. He opened his eyes and found Sabire and half the Clan eyeing him dubiously.

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EARTH

SGC, LEVEL 28, CONTROL ROOM

‘We’re all set, general.’ Siler, Doctor Lee and a group of technicians had wrestled the bulky short-wave transceiver into the control room and set it up in 40 minutes flat.

Hammond moved through the crowd of off-duty, some on-duty, and just plain curious personnel in the briefing room and trotted down the stairs. He should have sent them back to their posts, but nothing vital would go unmanned. It was a testament to Doctor Jackson that so many, including
those who had actively searched for him, now waited to see him come home.

‘52 minutes, general.’ Sergeant Sullivan reported. Right on cue, the Stargate clunked to life. The alarms rang out and Hammond had them quickly silenced. If anyone on this base wasn’t alert to what was going on, they weren’t needed in its defence.

The short-wave radio crackled to life. ‘Daniel Jackson calling SGC niner, over.’

‘This is General Hammond, Doctor Jackson. I regret we’ve been unable to locate the address you requested.’

‘Ah, yes, general. I’ve been giving that some thought—’

‘Time to come home, son.’ Movement in the Gateroom caught his eye. Colonel Reynolds and SG-3, geared up and ready to ship out. ‘SG-3 is ready to depart to the Alpha Site. They’ll meet you there, and when Doctor Abrams has checked you out, they’ll bring you home.’ That would give him time to pull SG-1 in and have them here for the big return.

The doctor’s familiar soft voice echoed around the room. ‘Er, ah, well, I can’t do that, general, sorry.’ Daniel rushed his words together. ‘But I know where the address is, I’m positive.’

‘Daniel the address is not one we’ve got on record. Maybe one day we’ll come across it and you can reinitiate contact with the folk there, but for now, you need to come home.’

‘No, sir.’ Months of imprisonment and who knew what kind of treatment hadn’t erased that stubbornness George knew so well. ‘What I need is to not let a world of peaceful people lay vulnerable to Ba’al. He’ll track me here one day, I’m sure of it. Anyway, that’s beside the point. I know where I saw the N’Has’y point of origin glyph. It’s on Abydos. Last time I was there Skaara and I explored a passageway in the pyramid. There was a side tunnel, painted with praises to Ra, and I know I saw that symbol in a cartouche on the wall there.’

Hammond frowned. ‘I don’t remember you mentioning that discovery when you returned from Abydos.’

‘Oh? Really? I was sure I did. Anyway, can you get someone to contact Skaara? I could dial there myself but I’ll have the same problem trying to raise their radio frequency. Sir.’

When the good doctor finally drew breath, George couldn’t help shaking his head. Some people never changed.

‘Sir?’ Daniel was sounding cautious and worried now.

‘It’s okay, Doctor Jackson. I was just remembering the cosmic karma that seems to follow wherever you go.’

‘Um…’

‘Daniel, Colonel O’Neill, SG-1, SG-2 and Jacob Carter are currently with Skaara on Abydos. I’ll contact them immediately and have them look for this address.’

‘Really?’ Daniel squeaked. He cleared his throat. ‘I mean, uh, thank you, sir.’

‘All going well, SG-1 will contact you in a few hours. If you don’t hear from them, call us here in… four hours. Will that suit your hosts, Doctor?’
‘Yes, they’re most accommodating, sir, and very eager to meet you.’

‘As I am to meet and thank them. We’ll talk to you soon, son.’

‘Thank you, general. Goodbye.’

George rubbed his now very bald head. ‘Dial up Abydos, Sergeant. See if Colonel O’Neill is nearby.’

ABYDOS
PYRAMID OF THE DEAD FALSE GOD

Jack stared at the Stargate with an intensity that had already scared off everyone except Teal’c, Sam and Skaara. Sam had relayed back to Nagada Hammond’s news that not only was their lost boy okay but attempting to come home. Within an hour the rest of their crew: SG-2, Seni, Tobay, Jacob, even Boch, along with Kasuf and dozens of aunts, uncles, cousins and friends of Daniel’s extended family had arrived. They’d crowded around him, demanding every detail, but what he knew fitted in one sentence and they’d drifted away, eventually breaking out the teapots and cookers outside in the Hypostyle Hall.

He actually jumped when the chevrons lit up. The militia took up position flanking the Stargate. Teal’c and Carter took up position flanking him. He was wound too tight to speak to them. As soon as the wormhole engaged the relay radio kicked in.

‘SGC niner to SG-1 niner, receiving?’

Jack was hovering over the radio, hand on the transmit button. ‘SG-1 niner, receiving you. Have you got him?’

‘Colonel, it’s General Hammond. We’ve had a couple more conversations with Doctor Jackson. He’s… delaying gating to the Alpha Site until the address for the planet he’s on can be found.’

‘What? General, I don’t understand. Is he being coerced?’

‘We’re ninety percent sure he is not under duress. He says he’s been well cared for, but is worried Ba’al will track him down and seek retribution on those who sheltered him.’

‘Well, tell him to get the hell out of there!’

‘I did try, Jack,’ Hammond replied drolly. ‘He insists he will not leave this planet cut off from the gate system.’

‘Ugh.’ Jack buried his face in his hands and paced away from the radio. ‘Daniel… it’s never easy with you.’

‘Sir, this Major Carter. What can we do to help?’
‘As it turns out, major, everything. Doctor Jackson says the address for this planet is one he saw inscribed on a wall in a passageway in that very pyramid you’re standing in.’

‘It is.’ She blinked. ‘It’s not in our database at the SGC?’

‘Believe me, we’ve looked, major.’

‘Did he happen to mention which particular passageway?’ Jack leant over her shoulder and asked in his most polite voice.

‘One he explored with Skaara on the last day of his last visit.’

‘Skaara!’ Jack bellowed.

Skaara appeared from behind Teal'c who massaged his ear and glared at Jack.

‘Oh, there you are. Do you know what Daniel’s talking about?’

‘I do, Jack.’

‘Doctor Jackson said he saw cartouches carved into the walls of a side passage – one you didn’t go into fully,’ added Hammond.

Skaara was nodding, an excited gleam in his eye. ‘Yes, I know the place, General Hammond.’

‘Very well. The one we want ends with a denominator shaped like a capital M with curls at each end.’

‘We’re on it, sir.’ Jack was two feet away before the next sentence formed. ‘Do you want us to call back when we have it?’

‘I think for the sake of expediency, colonel, you could send a MALP through to Doctor Jackson’s planet and if you’re satisfied, go on through. We couldn’t do much more from here and we’ve still got teams due in this evening. I’m sending SG-3 to the Alpha Site as backup. If Daniel contacts us and hasn’t heard from you, I’ll order him to the Alpha Site.’

‘Good luck with that, sir! O’Neill out,’ he yelled as he sped out of the gate room.

‘You, too, colonel.’ Hammond’s voice chased them on their way.

‘Skaara, which way?’

‘Here!’

Skaara darted past him and led the charge up through the Hypostyle Hall, and out into blinding daylight. Instead of going down the ramp, he skidded left and raced around the walkway fronting the pyramid. Jack was a step behind, trailing his team and everyone else like a comet. He’d thought the walkway ended at the corner of the pyramid, but Skaara turned left again onto stone pavement that had previously been buried under sand drifts. Twenty feet along, he slid to a halt. Skaara was on his knees, peering into an opening no more than two feet square.

‘You’re kidding me,’ he growled. ‘Carter, light.’ She always had a led light on her, even in civvies.

She slapped one into his hand and turned on a second. ‘How far in is it?’
‘Not far, we shall be there by middle day.’ Skaara said.

‘Yikes, a real knee-killer. I’ll go, sir.’

Jack nodded and handed the light to Skaara.

‘I shall wait with you, O’Neill,’ declared Teal’c, kinda obviously – he’d never fit in that little hole.

‘Keep your radio on. If you get into trouble we’ll send the kids in after you.’

She grinned and dived in, swiftly swallowed by the darkness.

‘We shall emerge in the Room of Cartouches, Jack.’ Skaara flashed a smile and crawled in after Carter.

Leaving Seni and Tobay to monitor the entrance, Jack led the way back, down the ramp and around to the Cartouche Room entrance, formerly concealed under the ramp at the pyramid’s base.

SG-2, who had never been in that room before, made admiring noises and spread out to investigate. Jack scuffed his feet through the drifts of sand in the entrance. The interior was cool, and still held that awe-inspiring, mysterious air it had when they had first followed Daniel into it, so many lifetimes ago.

Jacob whistled. ‘This is where you got all those gate addresses. Nice work.’

‘Daniel’s work,’ Jack said, a little too pointedly. He shadowed Boch, strolling along the walls.

‘Daniel found it, that first year. Recorded them all, one by one, crammed into the only journal he’d had.’

‘Incredible.’

‘Indeed.’ Teal’c stood by one of the Horus statues, matching it in the intimidation stakes. He also kept Boch under close scrutiny. ‘I have known no other Goa’uld to amass such a collection of Stargate addresses.’

‘Guess that’s why Ra was head honcho. Or maybe he was just a hoarder.’

‘You tried dialling all these, O’Neill?’ asked Boch.

‘Not all. Some are duds, some not your nicest vacation spot.’

‘Must have found some useful trading partners out there. Care to share?’

Jack glared at him. ‘How ’bout we ask Daniel when he comes home?’ Forgiveness – from Jack at least – was still a long way off.

Boch looked like he was going to push, then shrugged and wandered along the back wall, exuding a fakely casual air.

Jack looked at Kasuf, standing near the centre brazier, studying the statues with interest. He did admire the man, only six, nearly seven years out of a lifetime of slavery. He no longer feared the mystical vengeance of his ‘god’. The wrenching loss of his children – all three of them, now – had filled the Headman of Nagada with tempered steel.

‘Kasuf? Any idea where this tunnel Skaara found comes out?’
‘Skaara said he and Dan’yer emerged from the feet of the beast-god.’

Jack raised his eyebrows and scanned the room. Horus statues ringed the large chamber. He started with the closest one, checking them all for trapdoors, openings, anything. One of a pair on the east wall had scuffmarks on the dusty floor by the stone feet of the statue. He knelt, peered into the narrow space behind. A trick of the light made the wall seem unbroken, but Jack could feel a definite movement of air. He switched on his flashlight and found himself staring at a two-foot square hole set four feet up from the floor.

He filled his lungs, and bellowed. ‘Skaara! Carter? Can you hear me?’

ABYDOS
RA’S OLD ESCAPE TUNNEL IN THE GUTS OF THE PYRAMID OF THE DEAD FALSE GOD

The tunnel was just as dusty as it had been when Skaara had followed Dan’yer along it, one and a half seasons ago. In front of him, Sam sneezed.

‘The air isn’t as stale as I expected,’ she said.

‘Dan’yer said this tunnel is linked to airshafts. Here is one.’ He aimed the light at a gap in the roof, no more than a hand-span across.

Sam sat down and wriggled around. She held her hand up to the hole. ‘I can feel the breeze. Wow. So what was the purpose of a tunnel like this?’

Skaara indicated for her to continue moving. The floor dipped down, the passageway drawing them into the foundations of the pyramid. Because it leads from the Cartouche Room to the outside, Dan’yer thought Ra may have planned to use it to escape if he faced another rebellion and was denied access to his Ha’tak.’

‘That sounds like Goa’uld planning.’

The angle of the floor became steeper, making their hands-and-knees progress quite precarious.

‘Dan’yer intended to come back and search for more tunnels, but his work on your world occupies all of his time. And I grew used to working in the gardens.’ He caught his breath as he lost purchase on a pile of loose gravel and slid into Sam. ‘I do not like these places,’ he added darkly.

A gasp and a slither of stones sent Sam slipping away from him. ‘Can’t say I do either. You’re sure this comes out in the Cartouche Room? I don’t want to try turning around in here.’

‘I am sure, Sam. Here is the first corner.’

Sam directed the light around the bend, found the passage clear and moved on.

‘There is one more turning, then the side passage is a short distance further.’
'You know, Skaara, I wonder why Daniel didn’t record those addresses when you found them the first time. It’s not like him to leave a discovery like that. He never mentioned finding them to us, either.’

Skaara shuffled on, trying to ignore the way the weight of the pyramid pressing down upon him. Eventually, he replied. ‘Dan’yer said Ra had hidden those addresses for a reason. Until he knew why, he did not wish to reveal them to your leaders. He feared there were some people who might mis-use them.’

‘NID. He had good reason to be cautious. There were some shady things going on a couple of years ago.’

‘We will take only the address Dan’yer asked for.’ He followed Sam around the second turning. ‘It is for Dan’yer to decide if the others are to be recorded.’

‘Fine by me. We’ve got enough addresses in our database to keep us busy for years, anyway.’

Finally the bright beams of light they carried revealed a dark opening on one side of the wall.

‘We are here.’

The second passage was free of debris. They inched inside, the opening even lower than the tunnel. Sam moved cautiously, but without complaint. Skaara could see why Dan’yer loved to travel the stars with her.

The low roof lasted only the length of a man’s body, then it opened up into a chamber, still narrow but high enough to permit even O’Neill to stand unbent.

Sam stood and rubbed her knees. ‘This is unexpected.’

The light danced over the stone walls, illuminating the intricate painted carvings that covered the floor and walls, and arced over the domed ceiling. The far wall – only an outstretched arm’s length wide – was the only space not decorated.

‘This is Ra,’ Skaara said. Everywhere the false god was portrayed, striding over subjugated people, being praised by others, raining destruction on enemies. Always, he had the sun’s rays emanating from his body, as if to say he ruled even over the stars themselves.

‘Modest, wasn’t he?’ Sam’s comment made him laugh.

‘The addresses are here.’ He leant back and looked up at the painted stars arcing over their heads. Between the bands of stylised stars, seven cartouches each held a set of Stargate glyphs.

‘There!’ Sam leaned close as she looked up. ‘That’s a capital M. It has to be the one he described.’ She played her light over the others, checking them all twice. ‘It’s the only one it could be.’

Skaara pointed his light on the address while she copied it into a small book.

‘We’ve got it,’ she whispered excitedly. They traded a look and both smiled.

‘Dan’yer.’ Skaara could feel his brother coming closer to him with every breath.

‘Here we come!’ Sam finished. ‘Let’s go.’

‘Wait.’ He hesitated. Much as he did not wish to look, this had disturbed his rest many nights since he and Dan’yer had been here last. ‘There is writing. In Goa’uld. I did not want to read it when we
came before. It was too soon after…’ The echoes of the evil Klorel had rung in his head for many moon cycles. To read the writings of any Goa'uld had been more than he could bear, but just as often he had wondered.

He turned to the blank far wall. He caught up the end of his robe and wiped away the concealing dust. Three words in the script of the false gods could just be seen in the centre of the stone.

‘Can you read it?’ Sam asked softly.

‘Yes. *Kekwy sesesh amduat*. The dying sun brings release from the secret chamber.’

They glanced at each other. Skaara dug into his carry pouch, retrieving the one thing he had carried with him all the days of his captivity, driving Klorel insane with his inability to rid Skaara of it.

‘Here.’ Sam handed him her sunglasses. He held the lighter up behind the glasses and flicked the flame to life. Muted light danced over the bare stone, catching on a tiny reflecting stone set in the heart of the wall.

A deep rumbling shook the small room. Dust and sand cascaded over them. They drew back, ready to flee.

‘Wait.’ He grabbed her arm. A door slowly opened in the wall. Narrow, a man would have to step in sideways. The rumbling ceased. Confident the pyramid would not crush them, they leaned their heads in and peered into the darkness.


Skaara whistled. Surely these were the riches of Ra, hidden so well from his former slaves.

‘Wonderful things,’ Sam said reverently. She glanced up at him. ‘Let’s leave this for Daniel.’

‘Yes.’

They withdrew and the door rumbled shut. Excited, mind whirling with wonder at the hidden chamber, Skaara led Sam out into the tunnel. Whatever was there would wait. Finding his brother came first.

The path down to the cartouche room was shorter than what they had already travelled, and spurred on by their success and unexpected find, they did not have to crawl for long before Skaara saw a flicker of light heralding the end of the tunnel. He could feel the fresher air on his face, when a great noise thundered down on them.

‘Skaara, Carter! Where the hell are you?’

Sam muttered something behind him. Skaara reached the end and looked out at the back of the Horus figure. ‘Dan’yer is correct,’ he said mildly. ‘You are very loud, Jack.’

‘Holy creepin’ crawlies!’ Jack jumped back, startled, banged his elbow on the wall and swore.

Skaara slithered head first out of the opening and reached back to help Sam.

‘Did you get it?’ demanded Jack.

‘We did.’ He beamed triumphantly.
Sam waved her little book.

‘Well, what are we waiting for?’

Å

N’HAS’Y
KEMYT CITY

Daniel sat watching the stars wheel across the night sky. Crocus had set below the horizon and the Tree of Giving was nearing the apex of its path. It must be middle-night, later even. The party atmosphere over in the audience had barely diminished, but Daniel found it increasingly difficult to respond to the conversations around him. Ayshal, Jacuna and Safia kept up a steady thread of chat, while Sabire played a low, soothing song on a small instrument, brushing the wooden striker against metal keys. Gramire and Gransire drowsed in lounge chairs a short distance away.

He tried to imagine what he would say to Jack, Sam and Teal’c when he saw them again. Only the most inane greetings came to mind. Had they changed much in the time they’d been apart? Had he? Worryingly, he knew he had. He still felt like himself: Daniel Jackson, the guy who lived on Earth, had family on Abydos, friends on many other planets. He still had his knowledge: languages and histories garnered over an extraordinarily varied lifetime. Yet, somehow he felt separate from all that. It belonged to another Daniel, one he’d met through an alternate universe mirror.

Idly, he traced a pattern on his cast, over an itch in his healing bones. It was Ba’al. The gigantic thorn in the garden of his life. Everything he tried picturing himself doing once he stepped through the gate was quantified by a coda: if Ba’al doesn’t come looking for him again. There was a solution. He knew it. He knew he’d find it. Between dreams and memories, there was an answer waiting to be uncovered, the key to defeating Ba’al’s ambitions.

Daniel ran his fingers through his hair, shoulder-length now and held off his face by intricate joined braids Teni had done just yesterday. Had Skaara found the address? He could picture it clearly now, in the dusty little chamber above those beautiful paintings. He’d never told Hammond about it – it had been hard enough getting a fair trade out of the SGC and those who pulled its strings for the Abydonian naquada. It never hurt to have a little something else to bargain with. And then there was whatever was hidden behind the door in the blank wall that Skaara hadn’t wanted to talk about.

A loud clunk echoed from the middle of the square. Daniel’s heart stopped beating, then pounded erratically. Another clunk. He scrambled to his feet, Sabire already up and reaching to steady him. A third clunk… he stared at the Stargate, though truly he’d never taken his eyes off it. Four chevrons blazed red in the darkness.

‘Get clear! Everyone, get away from the Stargate.’

Anyone remotely near the Stargate drew back.

The fifth chevron lit. All over the square, people were getting to their feet, murmurs grew, merged, became a thrill of anticipation.
Six chevrons engaged.

*Please.* Daniel clutched Sabire’s arm.

The Stargate gushed to life, an active connection formed between their location, and where…?

The event horizon stabilised.

They waited.

Waited…

Something poked through. Six feet off the ground, dull grey metal. Slowly it inched through: a long metal arm – attached to… a MALP.

A strange sob of breath escaped his lips. He let go of Sabire and hobbled toward it. That familiar, oh blessedly familiar sound filled his ears as the MALP fully materialised and rolled across the plinth. Daniel ran, or as near as he could run with his leg cast. The probe arm swung in an arc, camera mounted on its end blinking: recording.

*I’m here, I’m here,* he wanted to yell, but his voice was gone, choked off with emotion that took him by surprise.

Slowly, the camera was swinging back, still not covering him. He scrabbled up the ramp, slipped, skidded back, felt Sabire catch him and boost him forward. There was noise everywhere, but there was only one thing he wanted to hear.

‘*SG-1 niner calling Daniel Jackson. Do you read? Over.*’

‘Yes! God, yes, I’m here, it’s me.’ Daniel flung himself at the MALP, searching stupidly for the radio. ‘Geez, where is it. I’m here, can you hear me?’ He grabbed the probe arm and stared at the camera lens.

‘*Daniel?’* 

‘*Jack?’* 

‘*Daniel!*’

‘Jack…’ He was laughing, sobbing, barely able to pronounce one word.

‘*Well, I can see his nose.*’ Jack’s words were muffled, then more clearly came, ‘*You wanna back up a little, buddy? Wave hi to the gang!*’

Sabire shoved his walking stick into his hand. Daniel lurched back, wiped the wet trails on his face and tried for a smile.

‘*There he is,*’ Jack crowed. ‘*Hey, Danny.*’

‘*Hey, Jack.*’

Whatever Jack said next was drowned by a cavalcade of shouts. ‘*Dan’yer!*’ ‘*Daniel!*’ ‘*Doc!*’ ‘*Daniel Jackson.*’ ‘*Good Son…*’ ‘*Doctor J!*’

‘*Who’s with you?*’ he croaked.
‘Oh, friends, family, the usual. We’d, ah, like to come through, if the natives aren’t restless.’

Daniel snorted. ‘They’re perfectly friendly, Jack. Very eager to meet you.’ His voice faded off to a whisper. ‘So am I.’ He cleared his throat. ‘In fact, one of them is right here. He’d like to say hello.’ He nodded encouragingly to Sabire.

Sabire drew himself up, then bent down to camera level. White teeth gleaming in a huge smile, he gathered a lungful of air and shouted the alien words he’d been practising so diligently.

‘Greetings, Earthlings!’

The sound of Jack’s laughter was music to Daniel’s ears. Two simple words that told Jack there was no threat here.

There was a slithery, slurping noise, and there he was: tall, lanky frame, silver hair, sardonic smile, P-90 and tac vest incongruously over jeans and his best fishing shirt. He paused for a moment, eyes raking over the square and the hundreds of gaping onlookers.

‘We come in peace. Take me to your leader!’ Those brown eyes finally landed on Daniel. And stayed.

The cane fell from Daniel’s hand. He took three staggering steps and fell into Jack’s arms. Those arms closed around him, enveloping him in scents of gun oil, Old Spice, and home.
The Circle Closes

Chapter Summary

Old friends come together, and enemies meet in the middle.

‘What?’

Daniel’s warm breath tickled Jack’s ear. Jack hugged him tighter, quite intent on squeezing the stuffing out of his friend.

‘Nothing. Didn’t say a thing.’

‘You called me something.’

‘Nope. Not me.’

‘Did.’

‘Didn’t.’

Sheesh, what was it with his self-control? One little reunion with a long-lost Daniel and you get foot-in-mouth again. At least no-one else had heard that name. It’d taken months for Lou to stop teasing him about Spacemonkey.

‘Busted.’

Jack could feel the joy in Daniel’s voice. Neither of them looked to be letting go any time soon, either. And that was okay. He used their clinch to surreptitiously check Daniel out.

‘Love the hair.’

Daniel felt thinner, but not underweight. There was more lean muscle on his bones now. And he was holding himself strangely, listing to the left by a fraction.

‘It’s what everyone is wearing this year,’ Daniel mumbled.

‘You’re hurt.’

Jack eased Daniel back so he could see his face: tanned, healthy skin, hair looking fairer than usual, eyes shimmering behind his – surprise there – glasses.


‘Broken?’

‘More like shattered,’ Daniel said thoughtfully. ‘Bumpy landing in a damaged escape pod. Haranith says three more weeks and she’ll take the cast off.’

‘But you’re okay?’
‘I am now.’ That rare, sweet smile seemed permanently etched on his face.

‘Daniel?’

That querulous voice did not belong to his tough as guts 2IC.

‘Sam!’

Daniel launched himself out of Jack’s arms and nearly bowled Carter over. To the accompaniment of many ‘I thought you were dead’, ‘I was so worried’ and mutual ‘I’m sorry I couldn’t protect you’, Jack took his first good look at the natives.

‘Whoa-ho!’

From the small group standing nearby, to the large gathering a short distance away in what looked like a garden or park, to the thousands gathered around the perimeter of a pretty huge square; these people were tall.

‘Hey, Teal’c – looks like you’re not the big man in town anymore.’

Teal’c didn’t reply. He was busy smothering Daniel in a bear hug. Fair enough.

Jack stepped over to the MALP. ‘O’Neill to Kasuf, do you read me?’

‘It is I, O’Near.’

Jack had his mouth open, ready to reassure Kasuf all was well, but Daniel lurched into him, fumbling for the microphone control.

‘Kasuf? Good Father…’ And rattled off a stream of Abydonian.

Kasuf eventually got a few words in. Jack heard Skaara’s name mentioned, which made Daniel whip around so fast Jack automatically steadied him.

‘Skaara!’

Daniel threw himself at his little brother, nearly knocking them both to the ground.

‘Looks like he’s okay, Kasuf.’ Jack turned back to the MALP. ‘We’ll bring him home soon.’

‘I await my sons, O’Near. Fare you all good journey.’

‘O’Neill out.’

Jack cut the transmission and the wormhole shut down, leaving them in a pool of pink-toned artificial light from lamp posts scattered all over the square. Daniel had moved on to Jacob, Lou, Roberts, Beechworth, Bairnsdale, then Seni and Tobay, hugging everyone in turn.

‘Guess I’ll do the introductions, then.’

He walked over to the man who had peered at him through the MALP vid-pickup.

‘Jack O’Neill. Greetings.’

The man – he had to be way over seven feet tall – bowed and flashed a bright white smile.

‘Greetings, Jaack. I am known to be Sabire of the Clan Kendasai, the Clan of Daaniel of Eart.’
‘Pleased to meet you.’

Carter and Teal’c edged closer, tearing their gaze away from their Lost Boy with difficulty.

‘This is Major Sam Carter, and Master Teal’c.’

‘Ooh, Sam of the Golden Hair. Daaniel has told us much about you, but he neglected to describe your beauty in the proper manner. I am Sabire. Let me serve your every whim and desire.’

The cheeky grin that came with that sentence had Jack smothering a laugh.

‘Uh, oh, thanks. Nice to meet you to.’ Carter offered her hand only to have it smothered in kisses.

‘Slick, Carter,’ Jack muttered.

‘And Teal’c: bravest of the mighty warriors.’ Sabire stuck his hand out in a tentative greeting.

‘Daaniel tells us this is a correct greeting method, and that I may judge your strength of soul and heart by grasping you and shaking you heartily.’

Teal’c crooked an eyebrow and offered his own hand. ‘Indeed. Kel sha, Sabire of the Clan Kendasai.’

The two shook hands like it was an Olympic event. Sabire’s grin grew even wider.

‘We know much of you all from Daaniel’s words. He does you great honour in his regard. I see you are worthy of him.’

‘Swell. Thanks.’ Jack looked at the earnest group of people gathering around them. ‘How about we go say hi to the folks?’

Daniel couldn’t remember ever being so exhausted; his face ached from smiling non-stop. Jack, Sam, Teal’c and everyone had been introduced to Gramire, Gransire, the Elder Council, every adult of Clan Kendasai and any junior members still awake – most of them. Then they had gone further afield, talking to the scientists working on the Gate, and the academics from all the buildings surrounding the square. Ferretti and his team were now making their way along the crowd barriers, greeting as many of the eager spectators as they could and being swamped in a polite but persistent wave of locals eager to touch and see them.

He sat in his chair near the central campfire, watching with bemusement as Skaara and Sabire got to know each other. Despite the two foot height difference they were establishing the beginnings of a beautiful friendship, based he suspected as they both glanced over, on shared stories about him. He still couldn’t get over Skaara’s hair.

Sam, Teal’c and Jack particularly had not ventured too far from him, despite the growing party atmosphere in the square. Jack turned around, caught Daniel watching him. A half-smile creased his face and he excused himself from the Elders he was talking to. He snagged a stool and sat down next to Daniel.

‘Nice hair.’
The teasing glint in Jack’s eye sent a pang through Daniel; suddenly faced with that which he’d been missing so much for so long.

‘Thanks. Teni is the champion of braiding.’

He pointed her out, still stubbornly awake and making animated first contact with Tobay.

Jack’s eyebrows did a waggle.

‘Pretty. Tall. Very tall.’ He sent a sidelong glance at Daniel. ‘You didn’t get married again, did you?’

Daniel’s mouth fell open, words lost in a rush of outrage.

‘Hey, it happens.’ Jack shrugged, unrepentant. ‘Usually to you.’

‘No, Jack.’ He ground the words out. ‘Not married.’

‘Huh. Just thought… you know.’

Daniel pinned him with his best Jack-slaying stare. ‘She’s twelve.’

That shut him up. Almost.

‘D’oh.’

He couldn’t help the smile that crept back. ‘What happened to your hair?’

‘Whaddya mean what happened to my hair?’

‘Nothing. Just—’ He waved a finger in the region of Jack’s silvered temples.

‘All down to you, buddy.’

‘Sorry.’ He strove to sound contrite, but it was hard to conceal the guilty pleasure.

‘Anyway.’ Jack leant back, remembered he was on a stool, pulled his legs under him, then stretched them out again. ‘We got your message.’

Daniel stared at him blankly.

‘You know, the Tok’ra relay picked it up and they actually passed it on to us. You looked like you were in the shower or something. Anyway, however you managed it, we were damned relieved to see it.’

‘Oh, right, yes. Wow, you actually got it?’

In a rush of recollection he was back in his room on Tsydon, turning Ba’al’s betrayal into the slimmest hope. ‘The recorder… well, it’s a long story. Ba’al was not pleased.’

He pushed away the memories before they took hold and forced a smile for Jack.

There was a dangerous glitter in Jack’s eyes. He wasn’t fooled by Daniel’s bravado.

‘Ah, yes. Ba’al. Had a little chat with old Ba’al, not so long ago.’

‘Wha—er… what? You did what?’
Sam and Teal'c wandered up and settled on the ground in front of them, but Daniel kept staring at Jack.

‘We paid a visit to Tsydon, looking for you.’

‘You did.’

‘Turns out, you weren’t there.’

‘I wasn’t.’

‘Met some nice folks, though.’

‘Oh?’

‘Met some nutcases, too.’

‘Uh…’

‘Daniel, we’ve been on your trail for months,’ Sam said. ‘Once we saw you with Ba'al in Yu’s palace, we’ve been working to get onto Tsydon to find you. Unfortunately, because of the Goa’uld attack, we were unable to get there before you were taken off-world.’

He stared at her, embarrassment heated his face. ‘You saw me? Dressed like that?’

‘We saw only a brief glimpse of you, Daniel Jackson.’ Teal’c’s voice was low and soft. ‘A Tok’ra operative filmed the meeting between Yu and Ba'al. We were fortunate to see your face when you were sitting by Ba'al, nothing more.’

‘Oh.’

Teal’c’s explanation was a little too detailed, but Daniel was happy to move on.

‘You actually went to Tsydon? And he let you leave?’

‘That we did.’ Jack’s mood changed like a cold front sweeping in over a seaside holiday. ‘There I was, all ready to put the snakey bastard down, and I ended up having a chat with him.’ Jack leant close. ‘He’s looking for you.’

The cold front swallowed Daniel whole, bringing to the fore everything he’d wrestled with every day of his stay on N'Has'y.

Sam slipped her hand into his and he hung on tightly.

He talked until there was nothing left in him. From being tied down on the warehouse floor in New York, to discovering the Stargate here on N'Has'y. From Boch to Astarte, Eshmun to Prize, Tsydon’s public celebrations to the Goa’uld’s private ceremonies, from Yu to the Companions, and every flavour of Ba'al in between. He surged on, past those last dreadful days, not sparing himself or his listeners. Once he started, Daniel couldn’t stop the words. The whole grizzly story poured out of him, along with the fears and conjectures that had been circling his brain for so long.

Barely pausing to down the hot drink Ayshal offered them, he kept going, through the space battle, the crash and his slow recovery, to the soul-healing journey across the sands of N'Has'y.
Eventually he trailed off, hoarse, head pounding but definitely lighter in spirit for sharing his burdens with his team. Dawn was spearing the sky with mauve shards of light. Words had emptied out of him and he had nothing left to say. Sam’s fingers were wrapped fiercely around his and he felt like an old saggy house, propped up by the strength of Jack and Teal’c on either side.

Jack was quiet for a long time, staring at the colours racing across the sky. Finally he turned back to Daniel, the twinkle returning to his eyes.

‘Houseboats, you say? I’d like to see those.’

Daniel would have happily led everyone down to the dock to show off the Clan’s homes, but Haranith, backed up by Ayshal, Jinya and Sabire, insisted that staying awake for twenty hours was more than enough and he was to take himself to the rest tent or be carried.

He considered protesting, for oh, at least ten seconds, then capitulated.

‘I’ll just take a quick…’ He gestured vaguely at the orange sides of the sleeping tent. The last word eluded him. ‘Um.’

‘C’mon.’ Sam pulled him upright. He leaned into her, buried his face in her hair and inhaled that familiar scent. She squeezed him tight for long, wonderful moments.

‘Daniel?’

He flinched and opened his eyes. ‘M’awake.’

‘Uh huh.’ Jack took his arm, Sam the other and they guided him somewhere. Then there was muted light, soft pillows and blessed sleep.

It was a day and a half before they even started for the harbour. He’d slept 18 hours straight. Chagrined, he’d stumbled outside to find life had gone along smoothly without him. The crowd around the square was even more densely packed and apparently still celebrating.

The Tau’ri / Abydonian contingent was well established with quarters in matching paisley-patterned tents. Diplomatic and scientific discussions were well underway, and a subtle guard set up around the Stargate. Daniel saw that, frowned, and opened his mouth to protest that guests had no right to appropriate other people’s Stargates.

Jack unfolded himself from a lounging seat and said, ‘Incoming. Not outgoing.’

He thought that through. ‘Oh.’ Then he grinned. Jack and he were still on the same frequency. ‘Is there any food?’

‘I dunno. You missed breakfast, and ‘tea time’ and lunch, and another tea time and dinner and supper
and breakfast… I tell you, Daniel, Teal’c is in hog heaven.’

The grin on his face grew wider as he spotted Jinya, bearing down on him with an armload of plates and bowls. ‘So was I, Jack.’

‘You sure fell on your feet here, Daniel.’

‘Pardon the pun.’ He settled into his chair and attacked the food with indecent gusto. ‘What’s been happening?’

Jack sat opposite and began sneaking tidbits off his bowl. ‘We’ve contacted Hammond. We have a 72 hour mission window, with option for extension. He’s happy to follow your recommendation in establishing a relationship with the M’djay people. Carter’s off talking with some scientists, Skaara and the kids are comparing language dichotomies with a bunch of scholars from the academy. Lou and Roberts are pow-wowing with the Elder Council, and Teal’c is on his fourth breakfast.’

‘Comparing language dichotomies?’

‘Apparently.’

Daniel shook his head. ‘This all feels so unreal. Every day here I’ve been focussed on getting home, and now…’

‘Here we are.’

‘Here you are.’

‘And you’re coming home.’

‘And I’m going home.’ He and Jack stared at each other. ‘Huh. Hey, did anyone feed my fish?’

‘We did better than that. Teal’c moved into your place.’

‘He did?’

‘Oh yeah. We used it as our mission control to coordinate the search. When we got the lead to Boch and Ba’al, Teal’c asked that lady on 2 to look after your fish.’

Daniel gazed down at his empty bowl. ‘Thanks Jack. Thanks for not giving up on me.’

‘Well, the mission rota was getting a bit same-old, same-old, you know.’ Jack scrubbed a hand through his hair. ‘Hey, how about we go see those houseboats of yours. Sabire’s been telling me all about them. I may get one for my retirement.’

Daniel snorted. He rose. ‘You’ll never retire.’

‘Once I get you back where you belong, I might just do it.’

‘I don’t know where I belong anymore.’ The words had left his mouth before he realised how true they were.

‘You belong where I know you’re safe and out of harm’s way,’ Jack said. ‘Now, that may be Earth, Abydos, here or somewhere else. Once you decide and I’ve scouted it up the whazoo, there you’ll be.’

Daniel walked next to Jack, heading toward the main Kendasai tent.
A couple of hours later saw them at the eye of a cheery whirlpool of onlookers, touring the piers, looking over Sabire’s home and out towards the rest of the caravan moored in the marshy edges of the opposite bank.

Daniel was up on Sabire’s roof, para-kite in one hand. He’d described the flight to Skaara and wanted to show him the kite.

‘Teal’c?’ He called down to the Jaffa still resolutely on solid ground. ‘Have you seen Skaara?’

‘I have not, Daniel Jackson. Not for some time.’ Teal’c glanced out over the crowd.

‘He was here a few minutes ago.’ He clumped down the steps, the greater height of the roof no advantage in finding his brother.

‘Ayshal?’ Have you seen my brother, Skaara?’ He waved a hand around shoulder-height, indicating the shorter Abydonian.

‘Na’nay, Daaniel. I too seek Jinya. She was bringing tea for the Elders, but has not returned.’

‘That’s odd. Teni! Have you seen Skaara? Or Jinya?’

Teni turned to face him, her young face still alight with excitement. ‘I have not, Daaniel—’

There was a searing burst of light, a sensation of rapid upward movement and Teni was gone. A smell of burnt ozone floated over Daniel. He went cold all over.

‘No, no, no. Jack! Teal’c!’

Cries rose up all around him. The para-kite fell from his grip. Staring down at the dock he met Teal’c’s grim gaze.

‘Asgard transportation beam,’ Teal’c boomed. Zat gun in hand, he keyed his radio and began barking alerts.

Daniel made for the stairs, nearly tripping in his haste. On the landing he ran straight into Sabire.

‘Daaniel, what happens here? Teni has been spirited away before our eyes. What manner of fiend can do this?’

‘Fiend? The biggest fiend of all, Sabire.’ He could hear his words echoing in his head. His ears seemed to be plugged with cotton wool. He pushed past Sabire, stumbled down the steps and onto the pier.

Jack shoved his way through the milling crowd, Sam at his heels.

‘Teal’c! You’re sure? An Asgard beam?’
‘I am, O'Neill. Daniel Jackson witnessed it as well.’

‘He’s here, Jack,’ Daniel said woodenly. ‘He’s found me.’

‘If it was him, why take a kid? Why not you?’

‘He’s Ba’al.’ The simple truth. Then his blood turned even colder. ‘Skaara, Jinya—’

Jack’s face paled, then hardened with fury. He grabbed his radio.

‘Ferretti! Code red. We have hostile Goa’uld in orbit. Dial the gate – Theta site. Keep it open and defend at all costs.’

Jack reached out and grabbed a fistful of Daniel’s tunic. ‘We’re out of here. Teal’c, take point. Carter, cover us.’

‘Wait, what? We can’t go, Jack!’

Daniel found himself hauled along in Jack’s wake as he ploughed a path through the crowd. He tried to pull out of Jack’s grip.

‘He’s after you, Daniel. We get you out of his sights. That’s my mission.’

‘I don’t care. Jack, please—he’s got Teni. She’s a child. If he’s taken others… He’s got Skaara.’

‘Not for long,’ growled Jack. He forged on, relentlessly dragging Daniel off the pier, through the docks, heading towards the square and the Stargate.

There was chaos all around. He could hear Lou confirming the Stargate was engaged and the exit point was clear. Behind them, Sabire was calling for him, echoed by Haranith, Gramire and Gransire. Daniel twisted, tried to break Jack’s grip.

‘I can’t abandon them. Dammit Jack, stop.’

A flash of light streaked down from the sky, 50 yards to their left. People screamed and scattered. Jack increased their pace.

Another beam of light filled the air, this time rising from ground level. It soared above the brightly coloured waterside shops, expanded and thickened, coalescing into the shape of a man.

‘Vocume,’ Teal’c called out.

Their pace slowed as they looked up.

Ba’al stared down at them. Dressed all in black, he peered at the gathered people with mild interest. He gestured and the picture widened, revealing a cluster of people behind him, among them Haranith, Jinya possessively clutching Teni, and Skaara – a trickle of blood on his face, hands bound behind him.

Daniel heard Teni’s mother cry out. He forced himself to stare up at the image, waiting for the words he dreaded.

Ba’al smiled. ‘Hello, people of the M’djay. We are Ba’al, a traveller of the black roads of space. We hope our appearance in this manner has not caused you distress. We seek our friend, lost to us in the confusion of war. We are anxious to ensure his well being. Do you know our friend, dear M’djay? He is a little different from your good selves, smaller, lighter in colouring; he is an intelligent and
compassionate man. His name is Daniel.’

Daniel felt his cheeks burn as a hundred faces turned to stare at him. Jack’s hand tightened on his tunic and he started tugging Daniel on, muttering instructions to Lou over the radio.

‘Daaniel!’ Sabire shoved his way through the throng to reach them.

Daniel grabbed him, trying to anchor himself against Jack.

‘Sabire, get everyone away, tell them to scatter in every direction. Ba’al might start firing weapons at any moment.’

‘He can do that? From a vision of himself?’

‘No, good sir.’ Ba’al’s voice boomed down on them. ‘We would not unleash our considerable arsenal on unarmed innocents who have no means of defence – or retaliation. We are not a monster. We would never rain wholesale slaughter on such attractive men and women. And children, beautiful children. We treasure beauty. We would keep it close to us, that we may always admire it.’

Ba’al strolled over to the hostages and caressed Teni’s face. In the background could be heard a stream of Abydonian: vicious invective from Skaara.

‘We ask only that you help us find our friend, Daniel. We expect to see him in twenty minutes. That will give him time enough for farewells.’

Ba’al’s eyes met Daniel’s. He grinned, then the Vocume picture collapsed and vanished.

Daniel stood at the centre of a vortex, quiet, surreal, swamped in the worst fears he’d fought for months. Jack was shouting, so was Sam. They were trying to get him moving, but he was rooted to the spot: a pillar of salt in a sea of confusion. He bowed his head. A laugh escaped, small and slightly hysterical.

‘Daniel!’ A warm, calloused hand tapped his cheek. ‘We gotta go.’

He looked up into Jack’s soulful eyes.

‘Yes, you do.’

Jack narrowed his eyes. ‘Oh, no you don’t. You’re not playing martyr, not now. You’re coming home. We’ll find a way to get those people back.’

‘Those people’?”

He pursed his lips, bizarrely amused. ‘Haranith cared for me every day. Jinya fed me, clothed me. Teni save me from sand pirates, all by herself. She’d make a good host, don’t you think, Jack? They all would. Strong and healthy, they could stand years of abuse.’ He grabbed Jack’s shirt and hauled him close. ‘I will not leave Skaara in the hands of another Goa’uld. Do you want to tell Kasuf he’s a prisoner again?’

‘If I have to.’ Jack’s face was hard, that closed-off single-minded stubbornness that Daniel hated.
‘You won’t have to.’

Jack reared back, then jabbed him hard in the chest. ‘No—no way are you going to hand yourself over to that maniac.’

Daniel wrapped his hand around Jack’s. ‘I don’t want to. Believe me, I don’t want to. But I think this has always been inevitable. It’s the only way to be free of him.’

Jack glared at him for the longest time. ‘I won’t stand here and watch you throw your life away, Daniel.’

‘I don’t have a choice, Jack.’

‘Yes, you do.’

Daniel shook his head. Sadness swamped him. Disappointing Jack always cut him to the core.

‘Fine. Take care of yourself.’

Jack turned away and disappeared into the crowd.

‘Jack?’

Stung, he looked at Sam and Teal’c, afraid he would find the same rejection.

Sam was angry and upset, but she reached out and hugged him fiercely.

‘I don’t know what to say,’ she whispered.

‘I’m sorry.’

‘This is not your fault, understand? We’ll find you, Daniel. Don’t give up on us—or the colonel.’

‘Love you, Sam.’

‘Love you too.’ She planted a wet kiss on his cheek and pulled away.

Teal’c stood next to her, resolutely hiding his anguish. He grasped Daniel’s forearm. ‘Fight well, my warrior-brother. May you walk in the light of the true gods.’

‘Look after Sam, and Jack, for me.’

‘Indeed. I shall. We will meet again soon, Daniel Jackson.’

Daniel hugged him, the lumps and bumps of Teal’c’s armaments pressing into this skin. He turned away to find his Clan were all around them.

‘Daaniel – this is the snake-man who has tormented you for so long?’ Sabire’s elegant hands were pressed together in anxious knots.

‘It is, Sabire. Ba’al. He’s found me.’

Daniel swept his gaze over those around him; faces he’d come to know and respect and cherish. Gramire, Grandsire, Ayshal, Chanla, Tretish… so many. ‘You have all been so good to me. Given me a home, cared for me, brought me back to life.’ His throat was closing up. ‘I will see you all again. I promise.’
He reached for Sabire’s hand and was swept into an embrace.

‘My brave, pale little brother,’ Sabire murmured. ‘We shall meet again soon.’

Daniel nodded. He stepped back, a lone figure surrounded by faces stricken with grief, buoyed by love.

He tilted his face to the sky.

‘Ba’al – come and get me.’

Brilliant light washed over him and N’Has’y was gone.

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The metallic tang of filtered air was so different to the warm, life-laden breezes he’d grown accustomed to. It was the first thing that hit him as the transport beam faded. Dully-lit golden walls closed in on him. Heart pounding irregularly, Daniel firmed his grip on his walking stick, and stared straight at his nemesis.

Ba’al wore that same self-satisfied smirk that had graced his features for much of Daniel’s stay on Tsydon. Flanked by Jaffa, he smiled and extended his arms welcomingly.

‘Daniel! We are so pleased to see you again. We searched so long and in so many dreadful places, and here you are, living with these lovely people. Had We not detected the traces of naquada from the wreck of Our poor Jaffa’s vessel, We may have passed this little planet by. Such interesting people We found. We hope you have enjoyed your stay.’

Daniel ignored him, looking beyond the Goa’uld to his friends clustered together under armed guard.

In Abydonian he said, ‘Brother of mine, are you well?’

Skaara nodded. ‘This pile of mastage dung tried to touch the child. I changed his mind.’

‘Such language.’ Ba’al tutted at Skaara. ‘Ever the fiery one. Klorel would never have won out over you. But, in my defence, she is such a pretty child.’

Daniel moved four steps away from the transport platform.

‘Skaara, Haranith, everyone, get over here on the platform.’ He fixed his attention on Ba’al. ‘You’re all leaving, now.’

‘Oh, so soon? They could stay, dear Daniel. We have plenty of room.’

‘They’re going, Ba’al. You want me, here I am. But that’s all you get.’

Ba’al studied him for a moment. ‘Oh, very well.’ He gestured. The guards released Skaara and moved aside.

Cautiously, the group of hostages gathered on the transport platform. Daniel looked at them briefly, unable to dwell too long on the people he’d come to care for so deeply.
‘Dan’yer.’

He nodded brusquely at Skaara, and then they were gone in a flare of light.

‘Pity. They seemed so nice, apart from the Abydonian. Still, we can always bring them back – if you get lonely, dear Daniel.’

‘No, Ba’al, you won’t. You’ll stay away from this planet. You’ll leave here and never return. None of your ships, your Jaffa or anyone working in your name will ever come here.’

‘The future is always so fluid. One can never say what will happen.’

‘You can. You will. Here in front of your men, Ba’al, you’ll give your word – as a god – that this planet and its people will be untouchable by you or any other Goa’uld. You always say you are bound by your word. You’ll give it to me now.’

‘And why do you think We would do that?’

‘Because I have what you want. I am what you need to complete your plans. And if I detonate this you’ll never get it.’

He raised his right hand from the concealing fold of his tunic, and displayed the grenade he had lifted from Teal’c’s belt.

‘A primitive explosive, crude, very effective. Not even a sarcophagus could put my head back together if it goes off.’

He held the grenade next to his ear and flicked the pin out. It fell tinkling to the floor.

Ba’al glared at him. The Jaffa brought their weapons to bear on Daniel, but the Goa’uld waved them off. He sighed theatrically.

‘Very well. We certainly do not want your troublesome brother back. And We have enough planets with many people who adore Us. We do not need these whom you have undoubtedly taught to be as difficult as you are.’

‘Swear it.’

‘Oh, We do bring these troubles upon Our poor head. Very Well. I, Ba’al, Most High Priest and Master, The Eternal One, Lord of the Gods, Storm God, Bringer of Rain, God of the Sun, Conqueror of Warriors, Mightiest-Most High-Supreme-Powerful-Puissant God, Master of the Earth, Rider on the Clouds, give here in the presence of Our trusted warriors, Our word that the planet N’Has’y and all who live upon it shall for ever be protected. No System Lord, Goa’uld, Jaffa or agent thereof will bring harm to this planet and its people. Upon the honour of Ba’al it shall be so.’

Ba’al gave a short bow to Daniel. ‘Satisfied?’

‘Yes.’

His hand was sweaty and fine tremors were shaking his body. He knew Ba’al’s pride would never let him renege on his sworn promise. His friends were safe. It was as much as he had hoped for.

Daniel bent, picked up the pin and secured the grenade. Leaving it on the floor, he straightened, and prepared to face his fate.

‘Such dramatics. You do make life so interesting, Daniel.’
Ba’al walked with him to the chamber door.

‘And whatever have you done to your leg? You really must learn to care better for yourself.’

The door hissed open. Ba’al’s next words caught in his throat.

The hallway beyond was littered with stunned and semiconscious Jaffa, bodies trailing down to the door that led to the Stargate chamber.

Standing in the middle of the corridor, arms crossed casually over his weapon, a feral grin on his face, and several tears in his best fishing shirt, stood the last person Daniel would have expected to see.

‘Jack?’

End Notes

My thanks to my betas Lex and Denny for their work on this series.

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