A. W. O. L.

by Greysgate

Summary

Jack decides to leave the team for personal reasons, and accidentally asks Carter on a date. The result of that error has a devastating effect on Daniel.
Jack paced the floor in front of his fireplace, head down, thoughts swirling around a single subject: Daniel Jackson.

For years, Jack had struggled to put distance between them, and succeeded so well, Daniel was almost a stranger by the time Kelowna happened. Since his return to the mortal plane, Jack had been cool toward him, tormented by the dreams and fantasies that plagued him, waking or sleeping. Fantasies that often occurred during masturbation that left Jack feeling dirty and guilty as hell… while at the same time, the most arousing inspiration he’d ever experienced.

He was pretty sure he wasn’t gay. He’d never been attracted to another man in his life, but this erotic compulsion regarding Daniel was growing more intense by the day. Now Jack wasn’t so sure about his sexual orientation, and he was terrified he was going to slip and say something or look at Daniel in such a way that he would tip the other man off. If that happened, Jack had no idea how open-minded his friend would be, or what he might do. It was easy to imagine the younger man putting even more distance between them, possibly even requesting a transfer to another team. Then he wouldn’t have to deal with a lovesick C.O. mooning over him, when he should have been concentrating on missions.

“Jeez, I’ve got it bad,” he moaned, rubbing at his eyes with the heels of his hands.

Jack knew he had to do something, because he couldn’t let things continue as they were. Weeks had gone by while he’d examined his options, weighing the pros and cons of a multitude of different ideas. He was worn out with thinking about it.

He knew Daniel belonged on SG-1; that was a given. It was the SGC’s flagship team, and Daniel was the best at what he did. Daniel was absolutely irreplaceable in Jack’s estimation, and he knew General Hammond agreed. If Jack stepped aside and let another top-notch officer take the helm of SG-1, the team could go on without Colonel O’Neill. It would be better for everyone if he just stepped down before he made an ass of himself – or even worse – got Daniel killed.

If anybody ever found out he had a thing for Daniel, he might get a dishonorable discharge and his pension might disappear. So far, it was all just a fantasy. He couldn’t get in trouble for his private thoughts, and as long as they remained private, he’d be okay. That meant taking himself away from constant temptation somehow.

Getting a transfer off the team and into something else at the SGC or maybe a teaching post at the Academy would be the best thing for him, and for the team. He was getting too old anyway, and Hammond might buy that excuse. Jack would leave it to the General to decide what to do with him; in the meantime, he’d be relieved not to see Daniel every day.

It was going to hurt the team initially, of course. He would discuss it with each of them individually and make sure there was a future for their separate friendships outside the boundaries of Team. Talking to Daniel would be the hardest thing, because Jack would have to throw up some kind of smoke screen and distract the younger man, or Jack would end up spilling his guts all over the floor.

Jack didn’t think Daniel was attracted to men, but then no one would ever guess Colonel O’Neill had a thing for his linguist, either. Jack had seen plenty of evidence of Daniel’s sexual preferences through the years, though they had never actually talked about their sex lives – or lack thereof – so Jack couldn’t really be sure. Still, Daniel had a talent for landing hot women without the slightest effort, all the while totally unaware of how very doable he really was. As far as Jack knew, he had
never given a second glance to any man in that way.

_Doable._

That word echoed inside Jack’s skull as he stopped pacing. He put his hands over his ears, as if he might shut out the reverberations, but it only got louder, more insistent, with pictures added.

_Daniel smiling. Daniel with a rare, raspy laugh. Daniel in his face, arguing some point, full of passion and articulate as hell. Daniel stripping off in the locker room to take a shower, unaware of Jack’s eyes, roaming over every curve and hollow, every ridge of pliable muscle and hard bone of Daniel’s body._

Daniel was just fucking beautiful, and he didn’t seem to have a clue, but there was far more to Jack’s attraction to him than just the pretty package. The man was so brilliant it was scary sometimes. He might not be great in the soldier department, but he more than made up for any military shortcomings in sheer determination. His loyalty was unquestionable, yet he never let Jack get away with a fucking thing, ever, snarking right back at him and giving as good as he got.

In fact, those verbal sparring matches were one of the things that made Jack all hot and bothered. Whenever they got into it, Jack wanted nothing more than to tear Daniel’s clothes off and fuck him senseless. Just thinking about it turned him on.

With a growl, Jack hurried upstairs, turned on the hot water in the shower and shucked off his clothes. He adjusted the temperature to tolerable warmth and got in, squeezing his eyes shut and remembering. His cock was already stiff and aching. He clapsed it with rough fingers, pumping himself savagely, shamed by his desire but unwilling to quench it.

_He imagined Daniel there with him, pushing him up against the tiled wall of the shower, kissing him hard, feeling him struggle and try to push Jack away. They fought naked under the steamy spray until Jack pinned him, thrusting his rock-hard dick into Daniel’s firm, smooth belly. Daniel slowly stopped fighting, his arms closing around Jack’s shoulders while Jack suckled hungrily on his neck._

_Jack’s hands caught at Daniel’s hardening cock. He drew on it expertly until Daniel cried out and spewed come between their slippery, wet bodies. And then, in Jack’s fantasy, he watched Daniel drop to his knees and take Jack’s dick in his mouth, both of them moaning and whimpering with need until Jack couldn’t hold back, filling his mouth with spurt after spurt of hot come while his fingers gripped Daniel’s wet hair, pulling at it, thrusting into his mouth, savage in his need._

“Daniel,” Jack whispered roughly. “God, yes…”

He came, his ass cheeks cramping with the spasms. Slumping back against the wall, Jack panted until he caught his breath. He looked down at himself, at the fading erection lowering its head between his legs.

Gritting his teeth, he slammed his palms against the wall and cursed out loud. Then he bowed his head beneath the water, the sudden flash of anger gone and shame welling up in its place. He wanted to weep, but as usual, he couldn’t.

He shut the water off and pulled a towel off the rack, bringing it to his face and burying it there for a moment as he struggled to contain his ever-present desire for his male teammate.

“Tomorrow,” he promised himself. _Tomorrow for sure._ Enough was enough. “I’m done.”
Teal’c watched the man he’d traded allegiances for, strolling the base’s training grounds with his head down, fear in his eyes.

“What troubles you, O’Neill?” he asked gently.

Jack looked over at his old friend as they walked. “I guess it’s time I told you, T. I’ve made a hard decision. I’m retiring from the field,” Jack announced flatly. “It’s time. Hammond has a place for me in Administration, helping him with paperwork and management.

“We’ll still see each other a lot. Still do things together. I mean, we’re friends. I don’t wanna lose that.”

“You have no worries in that regard, O’Neill. I will always count you as my friend. But I do not think you are not too old to continue fighting,” Teal’c counseled. “You are still fit and strong, and a skilled warrior. You are needed in the field. What is it that causes the fear I see in your eyes?”

Jack leveled him with a frank gaze then. Teal’c could be damned intuitive when he wanted. “I can’t… I made a decision, T. It’s time for me to move on. Change things. I have to do this. For a lot of reasons.”

Teal’c stopped walking beside his former commander. “Your reasons are personal,” he guessed. Shooting an equally penetrating gaze back at the younger man, he added sagely, “Because your emotions are too deeply tied to us. Is that not so, O’Neill? Do you consider yourself a liability because you care too much?”

Jack looked up at the horizon, squinting in the bright sunshine. “Something like that… and don’t tell Daniel or Carter, T. I want to do it myself. This should come from me.”

“You will not fail us,” the Jaffa assured him, placing his hand gently on the man’s shoulder. “This is not a cause for fear. It should be a cause for celebration.”

“Then we’ll have to celebrate on our own time, T. I’m just done. I’ll talk to you later, okay?” He peeled off and hurried away, heading at a brisk pace back toward the tunnel entrance to the mountain.

Teal’c shook his head as he watched his retreating back. O’Neill was overwrought, that much was evident. He was making rash decisions in order to escape his own heart, but that was the one thing from which no one could ever run away. In time, Teal’c hoped he would see the truth and accept the love that was waiting for him so patiently.

All O’Neill had to do was be available, and as long as he didn’t retire and leave the base or the city, Teal’c felt sure that love would be able to find his friend.

Minutes later, Jack stood in doorway of Sam’s lab, hands limp at his sides, shoulders slumped, head cocked as he tried to make some sense of his thoughts. His mind was a jumble, at war with his heart, and he had no idea what he was doing.

For a few moments, he watched the woman at the bench, clear shield in place over her face, so deep in some experiment she hadn’t even heard him come into the room.

“Carter?” His voice sounded strangled and weak. He cleared his throat.
His mind was on autopilot, choosing tactical options without conscious effort.

She glanced up at his address, all big blue eyes, startled that he had suddenly appeared in her lab. “Oh, sir! Sorry, I didn’t hear—“

His mouth was so dry he couldn’t even swallow. He tried to speak a couple of times, but no sound came out. “Carter. I’m transferring off the team,” he blurted finally.

She stepped off her stool, peeled the shield off her face, whipped off her gloves and left the items on the bench top. “What?! Why? Are you all right, sir?”

His hands fluttered through the air, one clutching the back of his neck for a moment, then scrubbing through his hair, then darting out in search of something else to say. All he could see was the concern in her face as she took a step toward him. He knew how much she cared about him, and how he had patently ignored it all those years. He cared about her, too, just not in a romantic way.

“Carter, would you like to date me?” He snapped his mouth shut, eyes wide like a deer caught in headlights. Oh shit! Where had that come from? He couldn’t very well take it back now. He didn’t know what to do with his hands, so he shoved them deep into the pockets of his blue fatigues.

At his unexpected question, she came to a dead stop, her mouth hanging open, eyes mirroring Jack’s own shocked expression. “Uh…” She shifted from one foot to the other, her experiment now totally forgotten. She glanced away, nervously smoothing a hand through her hair. Her eyes were uncertain as she raised them to his. “Is this a joke, sir?” she finally asked. “Because if it is, it’s not very funny.”

The damage was done. He might as well go with the flow. Obviously some part of him thought this was a good idea. “No, Carter. No joke. Date. You and me. Dinner and a movie, if that’s still how it’s done these days.” He frowned. “It is, isn’t it?”

“Well, I – I guess… if you’re not my C.O. anymore… uh…” She flashed a hesitant smile and straightened her shoulders. “Yes, sir. I think I’d like that very much. What did you have in mind?”

Jack remembered the few times he’d kissed her, how willing she had seemed, and he knew it would probably be easy to get her into the sack. Unbidden, an image of him fucking her in the dark in his bed rose up in his mind, and his stomach clenched. He didn’t want that. He didn’t want her.

He wanted Daniel.

 Couldn’t have Daniel. Ever.

Get over him, O’Neill! he ordered himself. Do something else. Get your head back into the man/woman line of thinking. Date Carter. Spend time with her. Kiss her again and again until you can’t remember who Daniel is.

Shut him out, except in passing.

He felt sick.

“It’s been a while… uh… Sam. I’m not sure I remember how.”

She gave him a fond smile. “Would you like me to pick a movie or restaurant? Those are usually good places to start.”
“Yeah. Sure. Whatever.” He cast his gaze on the floor, wondering if he was going to be able to keep from throwing up.

“When?”

His head came up. A chill skittered across his jaws and into his hairline at the nape of his neck. His hair stood on end. God, he was such a fucking mess! “What?”

“When would you like to go out?”

“T-tomorrow. N-night. Tomorrow night. Yeah. Does that sound good?” His mouth was dry and his voice cracked till he almost sounded like he’d been snaked.

She nodded, smiling at him warmly, almost maternally, he thought.

*Maternally?*

Jeez, he might as well be dating his *mother*, for cryin’ out loud…

“Tomorrow night. Seventeen hundred, you pick me up at my place, and dress sort of… nice casual. Polo shirt and khakis. Something like that. Okay?”

“Okay. Thanks, Car—Sam.” He had to get the fuck out of there. “Talktoyoulater!” he called over his shoulder as he beat feet.

He took two steps down the corridor to get out of her direct line of vision and then broke into a dead run as if the devil himself were after him.

Jack bolted into the nearest restroom and slammed into a stall, panting and heaving over the toilet, saliva filling his mouth and running freely over his lips. His face was contorted with misery as he heaved, the bitter taste of bile in his throat and on the back of his tongue. He knew he’d feel better if he *could* throw up, but all he could do was gag and retch.

Finally he managed to swallow a couple of times, still panting, and the wave of nausea passed. He struggled to tamp down the panic and pull himself together.

He pulled off a strip of toilet paper to wipe his face and mouth, then blew his nose on it and tossed it with a flush. When he was sure he had stopped drooling, he staggered over to a sink and washed his face, rinsing his mouth over and over, swallowing a mouthful of water to get rid of the vile taste in his mouth. He was shocked by his image in the mirror over the sink. He looked like a regiment of Jaffa had been chasing him.

What had he done? What had he fucking *done*? He was committed now, couldn’t go back, couldn’t have Daniel, couldn’t… *couldn’t have Daniel.*

He decided to go to his office to chill a little and pull himself together before he talked to the last member of his team.

For that, he was sure he’d need a skin of stainless steel and a heart of solid stone. Then again, Daniel might be all for Jack having an easier schedule and a chance to have a real life. Maybe he’d be happy Sam was the first woman in what might be a long line of ladies on his dating card.

He’d let everyone think he was lovin’ and leavin’ ‘em, and no one would suspect where his heart really wanted to go.
Jack felt like such a heel, a profoundly sorry excuse for a man. So much for honesty. So much for dealing with reality. How had *this* shit happened?

Maybe he should just retire and move to Minnesota, and save everyone the trouble of wondering what the hell was going on with Jack O’Neill. Hell, he didn’t know what was going on with him; why should anyone else?

He straightened and stepped out of the bathroom, doing a double-take at the sign on the door proclaiming, “WOMEN.” He frowned, glaring at the sign on his way by. That was just fucking perfect.

He stormed down the corridor, the look on his face making people dodge out of his way in a hurry.

Daniel slowed down as he neared the door to Jack’s office. He’d heard the rumors, of course. Word traveled fast in a community as tightly knit as the SGC. Teal’c was the first Jack told in person, then Sam. Hours later, the scuttlebutt had hit Daniel’s office but there was still no sign of Jack. Daniel had gotten an email just a few minutes earlier, requesting him to come to Jack’s office ASAP.

The younger man was hurt that Jack had waited so long. He was also angry that he’d heard the news through the grapevine, rather than when the others had been told. The fact that Jack hadn’t made his announcement to them as a group had to be significant, but Daniel was too afraid to try to second-guess the man. For all that they seemed to be able to tap into each other’s brains at times, mostly they couldn’t begin to guess what the other was thinking. Daniel figured that Jack’s physical condition had to be a factor. With all the injuries they’d suffered over the last eight years, it was a wonder the man was in such reasonably good shape.

Daniel came to a dead stop in the corridor outside Jack’s office and stared at his boots. He leaned against the cool wall with one hand, trying to sublimate the sexual attraction that threatened to rear its head yet again. That would be the worst thing *ever*, if he let it slip that he cared for his commanding officer as way more than just a friend. He felt sure Jack would bolt, and was afraid he’d never want to lay eyes on Daniel again.

He had to tread carefully in Jack’s presence if he wanted to keep the other man in his life.

“Just friends,” he reminded himself in a barely audible whisper. He crammed his true feelings down into the shadows in his soul, took a deep breath and sauntered into Jack’s office, a half smile pasted on his lips. “You wanted to see me, Jack?”

O’Neill sat behind his desk, apparently up to his eyeballs in paperwork. “Yeah. Have a seat,” he said crisply, not looking up from the document he was signing. That done, he closed the folder, slipped it into the courier envelope and tied it closed before dropping it in the routing tray on the corner of his desk. Finally, he made eye contact with his visitor, his expression unreadable, eyes flat.

This felt official. Impersonal. *Cold.* Jack had seemed that way toward him a lot since Daniel had descended, but this felt different. *Final,* somehow; a door being closed and locked.

“Daniel.”

“Jack.”

He cleared his throat and dropped his gaze to his desk. “I suppose you’ve heard already.”
“That you’re stepping down from SG-1? Yes.” Daniel waited. His heart thudded in squishy beats in his ears. His mouth dried up. “What I’d like to know is… why the hell didn’t you tell me yourself?”

“I wanted this to be more personal than it’s been,” Jack announced softly, not looking up from his desk. “I’m sorry you had to hear about it through the grapevine. I just didn’t want to tell all of you in a group. It didn’t seem… appropriate.”

Daniel wriggled in his seat. So this was something more personal than it seemed. He tried to stay calm, but his Jack radar was going on overload. This was important, something he felt rather than saw, because Jack wasn’t giving anything away. Nada. Zip. Zilch. Face made of stone.

“You know that the military frowns on. Um. Certain relationships,” said Jack cautiously.

Daniel’s heart flip-flopped. He sat very still, not even breathing for a moment. “Yes.”

“You also know that Carter, T and you are very important to me. Like family.” Jack sighed and glanced at the next folder on top of the stack to his left. He absent-mindedly drew it down in front of him.

“Yes.” Daniel leaned forward in his chair, elbows on knees, hands clasped together. He fleetingly thought about praying. It’s okay, Jack. Just say it. You can tell me anything. Best friends, right? He willed Jack to come out with the truth, whatever that truth was.

Jack’s eyes moved all over his desk, never lifting his gaze to regard the face of the man looking at him so intently. “It’s not that easy, Daniel,” said Jack hesitantly. “I don’t want anybody to get hurt here. I don’t want anyone thinking I’ve played favorites, because I really don’t think I ever have.”

“You’ve been pretty even handed with all of us,” Daniel agreed, though he knew that Jack let him get away with damn near anything short of letting himself get hurt. He swallowed hard. Did that mean anything? Was that what Jack was trying to tell him? That Daniel was special to him?

Oh, God, please, yes! Daniel thought.

“I can’t—“ Jack stopped, cleared his throat nervously, and started to speak again. “Because of my position as team leader, I can’t have a relationship with anyone on my team. It’s time I stepped aside anyway, but I’ve been alone for years, ever since I drove Sara away. I don’t want to be alone anymore. I need to do something about that, before the chance slips away.”

Daniel felt his throat constricting. He was trying not to get excited, but he felt sure that Jack was talking about him. About them. He squirmed in his seat. “You’re loved, Jack. I’m glad you’re finally taking notice.”

Releasing a big sigh, Jack finally raised his eyes to meet Daniel’s. There was no joy at hearing that remark.

Suddenly, shockingly, Daniel saw with crystal clarity that Jack was afraid. He was grieving.

Daniel couldn’t bear to hear what he feared Jack would say next. He sat back in his chair and swallowed hard. He wanted to shove his fingers in his ears and hum loudly, like a child who refuses to hear anything anymore.

“I’m glad you understand, Daniel,” said Jack thickly, “because Carter… Samantha’s not gonna wait for me forever.”

Oh, God, no! His heart stopped beating, freezing in Daniel’s chest. His throat closed up. He
couldn’t speak. *Understand?* Jack thought he *understood?* Sam? Sam and Jack? Oh, God, no. Not *that.* Oh, God…

“We’ve been dancing around each other for years, and it’s time I admitted there’s an attraction and did something about it.” Jack’s gaze dropped down to his papers.

It occurred to Daniel that Jack was expecting some kind of positive response here. He struggled through the agony slicing his soul to ribbons and straightened in his chair. He flexed a polite smile, aware that it was quavering but unable to make his lips totally comply with his mental instructions. The lump in his throat vanished beneath an acid wave of despair that washed through him, leaving him hollow inside.

“I’m happy for you,” he heard himself say blandly. “For both of you.”

Moving on automatic pilot, he pushed himself out of the chair and stood up. He had to get out of there.

Jack didn’t look at him, didn’t see Daniel dying right in front of him. “You’re sure you’re okay with this?”

Daniel let a bitter chuckle slip out and shook his head at himself. He had known all along, had seen the signs and ignored them for years. The looks passing between Sam and Jack, the way they smiled at each other when they thought no one else was looking. They were in love, and it wouldn’t be long now before she’d be in Jack’s bed, if she hadn’t already been there.

“Sure, Jack,” he lied. “I wish you both the best. I hope you’ll be very happy together.”

Jack’s gaze shot up to his for a second before Daniel turned away. There was a flicker of *What the fuck?* in those brown eyes, but Jack didn’t call him on it. Daniel stuffed his hands into his pockets and wandered out of the office, turning left by instinct, not paying the slightest attention to where he was going.

A few minutes later, it startled him to see the door to his quarters loom up in front of him. It seemed tilted somehow, the proportions off. The whole world looked a little off-kilter, in fact.

Daniel withdrew his pass card from his pants pocket, slid it through the reader, and pushed into his room. The door closed behind him and he locked it. He went to sit down on the side of his bed.

He bowed his head, tossing his glasses aside on the bedspread, and buried his face in his hands. The pain in his heart was intensely physical, as real as if someone was slicing into him with a scalpel, doing surgery without benefit of anesthesia.

Daniel struggled to breathe, gasping as hot tears poured down his cheeks. His body shook as he struggled to get control of himself, trying to gather his fragmented wits. In spite of himself, the anguish exploded within him. He turned himself face down onto the covers, letting the bed absorb his agonized cries, body shuddering and bucking with ragged sobs that no one else would ever hear.

He cried Jack’s name over and over into his pillow, the only word he could utter. It hadn’t mattered that he knew he’d never be able to touch Jack like he wanted, as long as he had known Jack would be there, by his side, in his life every day. He could bear anything as long as he could be near the man he loved so deeply, so desperately. Not even being able to see Jack every day? Well, that was more than he could stand. Jack was his life, and now his life was over.

Anger surged up, hot and throbbing, demanding his attention. He was furious with himself, with the military establishment and their stupid rules, with Jack, and with life in general. On top of all that, he
felt like the worst kind of naïve fool.

Ruthlessly, as agonized minutes passed, he gathered his pain, disappointment, and self-pity and shoved them violently away, down into some deep, dark corner of his soul. He was sure he couldn’t feel such pain and continue to live, so he buried it as deeply as he could, in a place where he wouldn’t be tormented by it so readily.

Finally he lay stunned in the pulsating silence. The emotional storm died quickly, burned out like a white-hot brand shoved into icy water. Cold, hard reality checks had a way of doing that to a person. For a moment or two, he just lay face up on the bed, blinking, his mind a total blank, face slack.

“Gone,” he whispered, his hopes, dreams and fantasies revolving around the man he loved fading into dust. “All gone. Forever.”

He sat up, and mercifully, everything had gone numb. There was no longer any pain, no joy, no sadness, nothing. Daniel rose mechanically, taking his glasses with him, and went into his tiny bathroom. He washed his face and his glasses, which he replaced on his face, and brushed his teeth.

Leaving his quarters to return to his office, he sat down at his desk and started to work. Hours later, he glanced at the clock, surprised to find it was the wee hours of morning. Daniel shrugged and kept working.

Every hour passed at his desk was one more during which he didn’t have to be aware of the depth of his loneliness, or the knowledge that it would never end. This was his destiny, being alone. He might as well start to learn to be comfortable with it.

Jack tried to remember what he was supposed to do on a date as he arrived home after his first day in Administration, but none of that seemed to fit with Carter. There should be lots of small talk, he supposed. Not about work, because they would be in public. What did Carter like besides science and math? If he ever knew, he couldn’t remember.

Plants, he thought. She once said she talked to her plants. That was an odd enough comment that he remembered it. Still, he was pretty sure guys didn’t buy girls potted plants when they went on dates. Flowers, maybe. But that just seemed… wrong. Too romantic. Too feminine for a strong, independent and wholly feminist woman like Carter. He’d go empty-handed.

He pulled on the first thing that came out of the closet. Navy Polo shirt, tan khakis, docksiders. He dressed without caring what he looked like, threw on a leather jacket over the top and drove to Carter’s house in his truck, listening to NPR on the way over. His favorite opera was on, and when he parked in her driveway, he let the engine idle and kept listening, letting the music take him away.

Finally, it occurred to him that he was just delaying the inevitable, and he shut off the truck and got out.

Carter had apparently heard him drive up and came out to meet him as he approached her porch. “Everything okay?” she asked, concern in her eyes. “Stage fright?”

“Something like that,” he answered vaguely. “You ready?”

“Yeah. Just let me get my purse.”

Carter with a purse. That thought blew Jack’s mind. She really was a woman somewhere underneath
the soldier and scientist. She owned a purse, for cryin’ out loud!

He stayed on the sidewalk and watched her walk away. She was wearing a long, ankle length white skirt with something frilly around the hem and sandals on her feet. Her blouse was pink and girly, and when she came back toward him with a small bag over her shoulder, he noticed the blouse had a low cut neck, showing off her cleavage.

Her choice of shirt practically screamed, “Look at my tits!” and he thought that was a pretty low and sneaky thing for a girl to do to a guy on a first date. What was worse was that he had fallen for it, and he wasn’t even interested.

Jack forced a smile and dragged his eyes up from her boobs. She had seen him looking, and was pleased. She had wanted him to look. What did that mean? Did she expect him to touch, too? Was she planning on hopping into the sack when he dropped her off that night? Because that was so not happening. He didn’t want to get naked with Carter.

“So where would you like us to go?” he asked politely.

“Early movie, late dinner,” she told him with a smile. “I thought that would give you a chance to get comfortable being with me in an off-duty situation before we started the small talk.”

“Good thinking,” he agreed. He’d be spared any conversation for a couple of hours. That was a relief. Putting dinner last meant they could eat and go home, where he could beg off with being tired as a good excuse to keep from going any further.

She stopped on the sidewalk as she neared him, tiptoed up and gave him a quick, gentle little peck on the lips.

He wiped them instantly, and was mortified that she saw him do it. He needed a quick recovery. He tried to give her his best goofy grin. “Hey, am I still wearing pink lipstick?” he asked in what he hoped was light banter mode.

She stepped back up to him and grazed her thumb across his lower lip, removing all trace of her lip gloss. She looked a little shell-shocked, uncertain. “Sorry. I guess we should save that for later, huh?”

His stomach cramped. His jaws clenched shut, and he followed her down the sidewalk to the driveway, circling around to the driver’s door. Through the glass, he saw that she was opening the door and climbing in, and he could hear the ghost of his mother’s teenage admonitions echoing in his memory.

“Uh, I should’ve opened your door for you, right?” he asked as they settled into their seats and he put on his seatbelt. “Do guys still do that these days?”

“They do, but it’s not necessary,” she responded with a twinkle in her eyes. “You know I’m fully capable of opening my own doors, and it’s okay to let me if you’re not comfortable with it.” Her eyes twinkled. “But it would be a nice touch. Gentlemanly.” She reached to put on her seatbelt.

He started up the truck and looked at her, his insides growing cold. “I’m sorry, Carter. I just… For seven years, I’ve done my damnedest not to see you as a woman and give you any special treatment, and it’s a hard habit to break. I’ll work on it.”

She ignored that. “You could start by calling me Sam. We need to break out of the roles we’re used to filling, Jack, if we’re really going to do this.”
He sighed and started to back the truck out into the street. “I’m tryin’. Old dogs and new tricks, you know?”

Sam told him which theater they would be attending, and turned down the radio so they could talk on the way.

That irritated him instantly, but he didn’t turn it back up. “So, what kind of music do you like?” He kept his eyes on the road and the traffic, avoiding looking at her when possible.

“I love classical, but opera’s really not my thing. Would you mind if I turned it off?” She gestured to the radio.

“Sure.” He reached to poke at the knob on the radio, leaving the truck filled with a sudden silence. He pretended to check the traffic in the left lane so he could glower in private for an instant.

“My favorite, though, is early rock ‘n’ roll. Fifties and sixties stuff. There was something so innocent about that era, and it shows in the music.”

“God, that stuff makes me gag!” he blurted without thinking.

Oh, crap! He glanced at her, and saw that she was just the slightest bit crestfallen. “I grew up in that era, you know,” he told her. “I heard all that when it was fresh and new. And believe me, we were anything but innocent.”

They lapsed into small talk about music, and when they arrived at the theater and parked, Jack thought he should probably hold her hand or something while they were waiting in line to get tickets. “What are we seeing, anyway?” he asked, doing the obligatory clutch.

“The Matrix sequel. The trailers look incredible.”

“That’s sci-fi, isn’t it?” Jack was sure Carter should know how he felt about science fiction. This was so not going well. For him, at least.

She looked a little startled. “I thought you saw the first one with Teal’c?”

“No, that must have been that other Colonel O’Neil, the one with one ‘L’.” He specifically did not tell her again that he didn’t care for science fiction movies. He’d sit through anything as long as he didn’t have to do anything with Carter, like chitchat. “It was popular, right?”

Her cheeks were turning pink, and she was starting to get that deer-in-the-headlights look in her eyes again. “Yeah, the summer’s biggest movie last year,” she told him. “This one promises to blow that one out of the water, but if you haven’t seen the first one, this one won’t make much sense. Would you like to see something else?”

She glanced away quickly at the marquee.

“No, no, that’s all right. If I don’t get it, you can explain it to me at dinner afterward,” he assured her placidly.

As long as Carter did most of the talking, and all he had to do was ask a question here and there, he thought he could make it through this date without crashing and burning. This whole idea had been a colossal mistake and in the future, he thought he should probably fumble along with someone else who didn’t know him so well.

Then again, strangers wouldn’t be as forgiving of his faux pas as someone who knew him as well as
Carter. He sighed and paid for the tickets as they got to the cashier’s window. If he were going to have a chance of dragging his heart back to any woman, it would be her.

All he could think about was Daniel as they juggled the popcorn and drinks he’d bought and they took their seats in the theater. Daniel would be at the base, working his butt off on some translation or other. He needed to get out more, have some fun, get a life. Maybe Jack should ask him if he wanted to—

As the lights went down and the previews started to roll, Jack imagined sitting in this same theater with Daniel.

_He’d be leaning over in the dark, whispering something in Jack’s ear. Jack would reach over without looking for the popcorn, his hand inadvertently landing on Daniel’s thigh. He would look over at his friend for a reaction, and Daniel would smile, giving him that look through his eyelashes that always made Jack’s breath catch. Then Daniel’s hand would reach over and smooth along Jack’s thigh as he smiled…_

His heart filled his throat. He couldn’t breathe for a moment. Didn’t have any spit to swallow it back down. He lifted his Coke and took a sip through the straw, nearly choking himself to get it down again. He did not want to be there, or anywhere else, with Carter.

He wanted Daniel, who seemed to always understand what he was thinking or feeling, without a word passing between them. Daniel, whom he loved beyond all reason. Beautiful, unique, precious Daniel. Jack’s mouth was dry with emotion and need. He gave himself a mental shake.

_Concentrate on Carter, he told himself. You’re here with her. Daniel’s just your friend. That’s all he’ll ever be. Get the hell over it, starting right now!_

He turned his head and looked for the popcorn bag she held, making sure of his aim before he reached for the puffed kernels. His heart awash with grief, he munched silently on the popcorn and swallowed it down with Coke, mourning in silence while the movie played. When it was over, he barely remembered what he’d seen on the screen.

“Well, what did you think?” Carter asked him as they rose and shuffled their way out of the theater with the crowd.

“I think I need to pee,” he shot back, neatly changing the subject. “That was a damn long movie, Car—Sam.”

She chuckled. “I’ll meet you in the lobby, Jack. I gotta go, too.”

He gave her a little smile and headed for the restroom, looking ahead to the rest of the evening… and the future of their relationship, whatever that future was.

There was no way he could ever sleep with her, so what kind of “future” could they possibly have? If he tried, he was sure there would be some embarrassment in the works. Either he’d be unable to get it up and be completely mortified, or he’d be thinking about Daniel and scared to death he’d call out the wrong name in the middle of things. He couldn’t do that with her, not until he was sure he’d gotten his head screwed on straight and found a way to wipe Daniel out of his heart. The way he felt right then, that would be taking a while.

The urinals were all in use, so he stepped into the first available stall in the men’s room, unzipped and took aim.

The sounds coming from the next stall were unmistakable and pulled his head around. If he hadn’t
been so attuned, he might not have heard anything at all because there were a lot of background
oises: guys in other stalls and at the urinals doing their business; guys washing their hands and
talking to their buds who had come into the restroom with them, noisy hand dryers roaring full blast,
stall doors banging closed, latches being slid into place, all overlaid with impossibly loud elevator
music. He had to really listen to hear it, but zeroing in on the sounds, he was sure there were a
couple of guys in the next stall having sex.

Soft, soft panting. Wet sounds of kissing and bodily suction. Gently smothered grunts and whimpers.

Jack stood there with his dick in his hand, listening. He felt himself growing hard and instinctively
stroked himself. He closed his eyes, imagining himself and Daniel, afraid of getting caught, but so
gone on each other they couldn’t wait to get home.

“Love you,” he heard one of them whisper, and then a stifled, breathy moan, rhythmic and fading
into soft pants. “So beautiful, babe. So mine.”

“Love you, baby,” said the other. “Gonna suck you off now.”

Jack listened, leaning his shoulder hard into the wall separating him from the men in the next stall.
He pulled on himself, visualizing Daniel and him together, feeling the love and uncoiling desire
rising up inside him until he suddenly came with a gasp. He barely got his left hand up in time to
catch the spew, thick wads of come dribbling onto his right fist and clinging to his left palm.

He stood there, knees locked, eyes dribbling, listening to the lovers, and wishing. He was lost. What
the fuck was he gonna do?

Blinking back tears, he reached for the toilet paper and cleaned himself, tossing everything into the
water before he flushed. Hands shaking as he zipped up, he took a moment to collect himself before
stepping out to wash his hands. He was thorough about it, desperate to make sure there was no scent
of semen left on him when he went out to Carter.

One by one, he noticed the two men come out of the stall. One was tall and dark, about his age, and
the other was younger and fair, with big green eyes and a full beard. The older guy dressed like he
had money. He wore expensively tailored clothes and Italian leather shoes, while the younger
seemed to be more into radical modern fashion. Love and joy sparkled in their eyes as they smiled at
each other and chatted about the movie they’d just seen.

*Another odd couple,* Jack mused to himself. *Opposites attract.*

He sighed.

*Except in my case, I’m the only one in love.*

He finished and walked behind the men at the sinks to get to the hand dryer. Stealing a final glance at
the lovers, he saw them exchange a look that bespoke far more than just a quick fuck in the men’s
room. His heart ached as he turned away, hands stuffed into his trouser pockets, head down in
thought.

Carter was waiting for him. “What took you so long?”

*I was jerking off and thinking about making love to Daniel.*

“There was a lot of action in the men’s room,” he answered flatly. “Had to wait my turn. Anyplace
in particular you’d like to eat?”
“How about Don Carlo’s? I know you like Mexican.”

“Sounds good.” He kept his hands in his pockets as they walked back to his truck.

“Jack, are you all right? You seem awfully distant.”

_Busted!_

“Just got a lot on my mind, uh, Sam. Working administration is a far cry from what I was doing. It feels like a big step down, even though I know it’s not. Keeping our part of the base in order is important, but I’m just tired, I guess. Been stressed about getting into the groove of things at the new assignment.” He sighed and hoped his feelings didn’t show on his face.

This time he remembered to open her door for her first but didn’t help her inside. As he settled behind the steering wheel, he was aware that she was studying him. “What?”

“This is what you wanted, isn’t it?” she asked with concern in her face. “I mean, I know you’re still in pretty good shape, but you needed to be doing something less physical, for your knees, right?”

For a moment he thought she’d been talking about the dating thing, and he’d almost laughed out loud. “Yeah, I needed to step down before I got somebody killed. I can do administration, take some of the load off Hammond, even if I don’t like it much. This’ll work for me, way better than first contact.”

“Good. I know Hammond is damned glad to have you there. And you’ll get used to the new post eventually.” She smiled at him again.

He smiled back politely. She was smiling at him an awful lot. He switched on the ignition but didn’t change gears right away to back out of the parking space. “Look, Sam… This isn’t easy for me. Don’t… Please don’t expect much from me in the beginning. I’ll… I’ll need to take it slow. Really slow.”

She smiled again. Her eyes were kind and warm. “Okay, Jack. Let’s go eat. I’m starved.”

He made it through the dinner with a sense of relief, chatting in code about work-related things. She led him into a more personal area by asking questions about his background, his family, his personal interests, and he reciprocated, learning a thing or two about Samantha Carter.

He appreciated her generosity and patience in showing him the ropes. He really had been out of the dating scene for far too long, and except for the occasional brush with a few alien women, Jack had had virtually no sexual release in almost a decade, other than with his own right hand.

Now, since Daniel had returned from the dead, Jack felt like he had gotten his wires crossed. If anyone could help him straighten things out – no pun intended – it would be Sam Carter. She was not only his teammate, she was also his friend, and he trusted and cared for her. She was a beautiful, smart woman who deserved the best he could give her.

Which, unfortunately, wasn’t much, at the moment.

Jack left the truck’s engine idling as he walked her to her door, vaguely remembering doing the same thing with Sara when they’d been giddy, horny teenagers, desperately in love with each other. That all seemed like a dream now, barely a thread of reality running through that whole relationship. Part of him still loved Sara and always would, but it was long past time to move on and put her behind him at last.
“I had a nice time,” said Carter congenially.

“Me, too,” Jack agreed. It had been nice. If he hadn’t been so gone on Daniel, he might even have had fun.

“We should probably try this again soon,” she suggested. “The more we go out together, the more relaxed we’ll learn to be with each other. Would that be okay?”

He couldn’t get his hands out of his trouser pockets or make his voice work. He just nodded his acquiescence. It wouldn’t be right to tell her he wasn’t sure if dating was a good idea, because he knew he hadn’t given it enough time.

His heart was dead sure, though.

Carter reached up and kissed him on the mouth, lightly at first. Then she reached around the back of his neck and brought him down to her, really kissing him, tongue and all, and he let her. He wanted to respond, to put his arms around her and do more than just stand there like a post, and part of him did. Part of him did respond, simply because he was a man who had been through a long, dry spell and the potential for any sexual encounter made his dick sit up and take notice. But instead of Carter’s kisses, Jack’s mind automatically went to his fantasies of Daniel.

He kept his hands in his pockets.

Sam pulled away at last, not meeting his eyes. She looked a little embarrassed and slowly pulled her arms from around his neck. He straightened, painfully aware that she had noticed he hadn’t really kissed her back.

She looked up at him with uncertainty in her eyes.

“I just need some time,” he promised in a low voice, as much to himself as to her. “Okay? Take it slow with me. I’m kind of a mess right now.”

“Of course,” she answered, reassurance in her expression. She hurried through a goodnight and went into her house.

Jack walked back to his truck, his lips warm and slightly swollen. Not only had there been no fireworks, there had barely even been an ember. He climbed up into the truck and started it up, waiting for a car to pass by before he pulled out.

“Yeah, you need time, O’Neill, you big shit,” he mumbled to himself. “About a hundred years oughtta do it.”

He backed into the street and headed for home, the last of the opera filling up the cab with its tragic melody.

All he could think about was Daniel, wondering what it would be like to kiss a big, hard, stubbly horny guy.

He thought Daniel would be great with his mouth. Predictably, now Jack had a response. And it was, again predictably, a lot more than just an ember.

Teal’c had followed DanielJackson from O’Neill’s office immediately after the Colonel made his
personal announcement about leaving the team. Daniel Jackson hadn’t taken notice that there was now a Jaffa on his tail.

Over the course of the next three days, Teal’c watched over the scholar, checking on his whereabouts every few hours. Daniel didn’t eat. He didn’t go for coffee. He slept at his desk, but not in his bed. The emptiness in his eyes was disturbing, but Teal’c did not discuss that with anyone.

He listened patiently to Major Carter tell him excitedly about her dates with O’Neill. She seemed happy, contented with the change in their relationship. Every day they did something together after work – drinks or running small errands together – and she was only too happy to chat with Teal’c about what they did or funny things O’Neill said to her.

She didn’t seem to notice that Daniel Jackson seemed to be chained to his desk, avoiding all chance of casual interaction with any of them.

On the morning of the fourth day, a pre-mission briefing was held, which also served to introduce Colonel Edwards as their new commanding officer. Daniel Jackson was quiet until called upon for his portion of the briefing, which he presented smoothly, with perfect professionalism.

Late in the afternoon, when they were suited up and standing in the embarkation room, O’Neill came to see them off, shifting nervously from foot to foot, glancing between Major Carter and Daniel Jackson, who spared him only a brief glance and then began checking the pockets of his vest.

The two men shook hands briefly, but Daniel Jackson could not get through the wormhole quickly enough. Teal’c was hard pressed to keep up with him as they walked toward the distant village, and Colonel Edwards had to call him back several times to keep the scholar from outdistancing the rest of the team.

Major Carter seemed startled by Daniel Jackson’s apparent enthusiasm to meet these aliens. She also seemed to be missing the truth behind his behavior, but it was not Teal’c’s place to illuminate her.

The mission went well, without violence, and in two days they returned to the SGC base unscathed. O’Neill was there to meet them, relief in their return apparent in his eyes as soon as he saw Daniel Jackson alive and well.

As always, he kept up his professional reserve, giving Major Carter only a polite nod and a faint smile to acknowledge his personal relationship with her. After his initial assessing glance at the linguist, he didn’t look at the man again. Teal’c saw that Daniel missed that first look, his eyes connecting only after O’Neill had turned away to look at Major Carter.

Teal’c knew about the Tau’ri military regulations, of course. He knew O’Neill had chosen to deny his feelings for Daniel Jackson and sought instead to take what comfort he could get from Major Carter, but he did not understand this behavior. It was not his place to speak to any of them, because his opinion would change nothing.

All he could do was offer his silent support to all of his friends, and hope that whatever gods were watching could help them all to face the truth they each tried so desperately not to see.

For three weeks Jack and Sam had seen each other almost every night she wasn’t off world. They’d gone out to dinner, to movies or hockey games. She had cooked for him a couple of times at her house and he had reciprocated at his. Afterward, there had been some cuddling and kissing, but he always put the brakes on rather than let things go further between them.
While he had been interested enough and kissed her back now – not like that first time at her door, when Jack had seemed to be made of wood – he’d been careful to keep his hands to himself, and it had been more than obvious that he wasn’t tempted to go any farther with her. While their dates had always ended with her aroused, frustrated and unfulfilled, she was pretty sure he hadn’t been having the same problem. Whatever had been going on with Jack, she just wasn’t lighting his fire.

Sam Carter had been around the block enough times that she knew when a guy wasn’t turned on, no matter how good a show he put on for her. Whatever Jack’s reason for asking her out in the first place had been, lust certainly wasn’t it. The sexual fantasies she’d had about the man were not about to materialize.

At first, she had put his behavior down to nervousness, then to respect for her, but over time she had come to see the real reason he wasn’t letting the relationship between them advance toward intimacy.

That night was no different. Jack was present with her physically, but as always, his mind and heart were somewhere else. Sam stared at Jack, watching him eat his steak, oblivious to her scrutiny.

“…so I thought about dyeing my hair pink, because, you know, that’s the fashion these days,” Sam said casually as she scooped up the last forkful of her baked potato, “and then I decided I’d have one of those sex change operations. Thought I’d try out being a man for a while. You know, do the whole macho thing.”

Jack continued to stare at the steak on his plate, mindlessly chewing, his expression patently blank. “That’s good, Sam,” he replied with a pleasant note in his voice.

He wasn’t interested in her, and the statement she’d just made, wildly fictional and geared specifically to get a reaction from him, had proved that indelibly.

“You’re not listening to me, are you, Jack?” she asked quietly.

The change in her tone of voice registered, and he finally made eye contact. “Of course, I was,” he insisted gently.

“Then what did I just say?”

His mouth opened and closed reflexively while he shifted in his seat. Then he turned his gaze back to his plate and stabbed another piece of meat.

“Okay, I’m busted. My mind was wandering, and it’s too little to be left out alone. Sorry, Car—Sam. It won’t happen again.” His voice was soft, mournful. Guilty.

She reached out and put her hand over his, dragging his attention back to her face. She sighed. Part of her felt sad that this relationship wasn’t working out, but another part of her was relieved. They really were too different to have made a serious go of it, but he was so charming when he wanted to be and so attractive, she’d never quite given up the fantasy of having him.

Until now. A great weight seemed to lift off her, and she smiled at him. “Look, Jack, I don’t think this is working between us. I think we’re just meant to be friends. We do that pretty well, don’t you think?”

Alarm filled his eyes. “Don’t give up on me so soon,” he pleaded. “I can do better. I’ll pay attention —“

“It’s not that, Jack,” she returned gently, shaking her head. “Your heart’s not in this. It hasn’t been
since the day you transferred off the team. I think we were both fooling ourselves that this could work, but you knew it wouldn't. That's why you don't want to sleep with me. Isn't it?"

His fingers tangled nervously around her hand and squeezed, holding on to what wasn't really there. He had trouble meeting her eyes. “No, I can—We'll do it, Sam. I was just taking plenty of time, being sure—"

She shook her head, worried by the desperation she saw in him now. “No, you didn’t want to hurt me, did you? And you knew this was coming,” she argued patiently. “You’ve been distracted and distant the whole time we’ve been together. I don’t know what it is that’s bothering you, Jack, but… maybe you need some time alone to think about that. Get your head together and figure out what your heart really wants… because it isn’t me.”

Without waiting for more denial, she got up from the restaurant table, reached into her jeans pocket for some cash and laid it on the table. She stepped around to him, leaned down and kissed him on the cheek.

“We’re still friends, Jack,” she said as she squeezed his shoulder, looking down at him. He was turned slightly away from her in shame, his face red and lips pressed tightly together, eyes downcast. “If you need to talk, you know where to find me.”

She headed for the door, crossing the dining room without looking back, and asked the hostess to call a taxi to take her home.

Daniel put drops in his eyes to get the red out, too aware that he looked terrible from another sleepless night. He screwed the cap on the eye drops, slipped his glasses on and headed down the hall to SG-1’s locker room for a shower. That done, he opened his locker, glancing about the room to make sure he was alone before he opened it all the way.

For three weeks he’d stood on the sidelines while Jack and Sam dated. He couldn’t sleep in his own bed because he would invariably fall into a crying jag or jerk off to fantasies of himself and Jack that made him feel even more miserable and utterly disloyal to both of his friends. He cared for both of them and wanted them to be happy, but he couldn’t stand by and see them falling deeper in love. He had realized two weeks into their relationship that he simply couldn’t stand by and watch any longer. It was tearing him apart inside, and he was losing the ability to deal with the pain. He was exhausted, depressed, and angry with himself, with the military, and with fate.

He had to leave the SGC, only there was nowhere else for him to go, nowhere they couldn’t hunt him down and bring him back, unless…

A week earlier, an idea had exploded fully formed into his mind. Daniel had wrestled with it from the first moment it had popped into his head, but he’d finally come to a decision. It had taken the better part of that week to put the research he’d need together and do all the prep, but it was finally complete.

He had tried to keep himself busy with work, waiting for the right moment to act, but it had become clear that no matter what he tried, he would never be able to handle watching Sam and Jack as lovers.

He couldn’t go back to the academic world, and he couldn’t stay at the SGC. That left only one option: continue doing what he did best… just not on Earth. Doing it right took planning, and he had
started that as soon as he’d made his decision to leave.

Now, barely three weeks into Sam and Jack’s relationship, Daniel was ready to go.

It was a relief that Jack no longer called him or stopped by his office just to chat, as he once had. Jack had always invited him out with the rest of the team on some social outing or other, but Daniel had politely declined over and over, citing a heavier workload as an excuse until finally Jack had seemed to get the message and had stopped coming by to see him.

He’d done the same thing with Sam, agreeing to the occasional lunch in the commissary just to keep up appearances. As long as Jack wasn’t in attendance, he was fine and enjoyed himself with her, except when she talked about her love life. Sam alone wasn’t the problem, and he’d managed to almost completely avoid Jack.

Daniel just couldn’t deal with seeing Sam and Jack together, right in front of him. It was like a knife twisting deep in his guts. Invariably, whenever the newly reformed SG-1 had embarked on or returned from a mission, Jack had always found some excuse to be there, seemingly looking for forgiveness from Daniel but obviously also seeking a reconnection with Sam. As much as he tried, Daniel couldn’t miss the joy on Sam’s face when she looked at Jack. A blind man could have seen it. She was in love with him, and the knife of that knowledge was always there, twisting and stabbing, causing Daniel a pain so keenly felt it left him gasping for breath.

Whenever Daniel had closed his eyes to sleep, he saw Sam and Jack together in Jack’s bed, a sweaty tangle of arms and legs, dark curves of flesh silvered by moonlight, undulating to the tune of passionate sighs and whispers. He had imagined how difficult it was for Sam and Jack to keep their hands off each other at work and wondered if they stole moments to slip into supply closets for kisses and groping.

He realized he was torturing himself but couldn’t stop, not even when he changed the fantasy so that it was *himself* and Jack in bed or in the supply closets. He loved Jack O’Neill, but Jack didn’t love him. Jack couldn’t love Daniel because he was a man, yet Daniel couldn’t let the fantasy go. He pictured himself with Jack, naked and vulnerable in the dark of his bedroom. The scene would always end with Daniel jerking off, in desperate need of affection, tears of frustration and self-loathing pouring down his cheeks.

His behavior made him ill, tore his shattered soul to ribbons. He was in so much pain, he could barely walk, barely think. *So much for stuffing his feelings.* That obviously had not worked.

He couldn’t go on like that. It was killing him, and he knew it.

The only thing left for him to do was run away, as far and as fast as he could, where no one would ever be able to find him. He had a whole galaxy of destinations to choose from and thousands of open doors through which he could disappear.

For the first time in his life, he thought he understood some of what Jack had felt on that first mission to Abydos. Part of him knew this plan was sheer lunacy, a fine madness with little chance of a positive outcome. He smiled as he thought about that assessment. Yeah, he was a little crazy. Maybe even a lot.

Did he want to die? He didn’t think so, but couldn’t be completely sure. He didn’t want to eat his loaded Beretta, but he was aware that the risk of death through this plan was very real. He wouldn’t try to fool himself about that. The thought of ending his pain had its attraction, so maybe he was more than a little mad, but his plan also had the potential for significant achievement. That hope, however slim, seemed viable enough that he clung to it tenaciously and continued his preparations in
With grim determination, he checked his private stock of supplies hidden away in his locker, ready and waiting. He had extra blank journals and pens, batteries for his comm unit and laptop, printouts with the 'gate coordinates he’d chosen tucked neatly between the pages of the journals, all set and ready to go.

That done, he dressed and headed for his office, where he worked diligently on the material for the next mission briefing, then spent his last few hours before dawn writing the letters he would leave behind.

By morning, his vest and backpack had been repacked with all his most necessary supplies and the letters, sealed in individual envelopes. He was bone tired and hungry for the first time in weeks.

After a big breakfast in the commissary, he stopped by his room to make sure all that remained of his personal possessions were properly boxed up for removal or disposal. With a lump in his throat, he glanced at the photographs face down in the box by the nightstand.

He hadn’t intended to take anyone with him, but he couldn’t leave Jack behind completely. He opened the frames and took out one photograph of the team, one of himself and Jack with their heads bent over a chess board, and another that Daniel had taken of Jack in the field, on the first day he’d admitted to himself that he loved the man.

Daniel ran his thumb alongside the curve of that lean cheek, his eyes wandering over Jack’s image, taking in the smooth, tanned skin, the flinty expression, the attitude of Jack’s posture. He took a few moments to savor the photo, not missing the way Jack’s clothes draped his hard body, clinging to his groin, just under his low-slung utility belt. He could even tell that Jack had been dressing to the right that day. With that P-90 slung on its strap around his neck, hand caressing it as he always did, Jack was the hottest thing Daniel had ever seen.

He frowned as he became aware of his own arousal, the heat of it spreading low in his belly. How he wanted Jack! How he loved him.

Finally he tore his eyes away from the photo and quickly tucked it away, slipping it between the pages of one of his journals with the other pictures to protect them as he traveled. He knew he would never regret bringing Jack along with him in this small way.

This trip, he’d be carrying an extra ten pounds of gear in addition to what he usually carried, unbeknownst to the rest of his team. Even in spite of the extra weight, for what he had planned, he’d be traveling light. He wondered just how far those few survival supplies would take him. None of that could be helped. He’d made his plan, and he was sticking to it. All that remained was seeing it through.

Taking one last slow look around, Daniel turned off the lights and locked up his quarters, then hurried off to the briefing room for his last words as an employee of the SGC.

---

**PX4-701**

“All right, everybody,” Colonel Edwards called, “you know the drill. No apparent hostiles, but that’s never a sure thing. Heads up, eyes open.” He glanced at his chronometer. “Ten klicks to the temple, and we’ll have the rest of the day to check this place out for anything useful. Move out.”
SG-1 moved away from the Stargate at a steady pace, heading for the ruins mapped out days earlier by the UAV.

“That’s nice to see,” observed Sam as she fell into step beside Daniel. Edwards was several steps ahead of them, behind Teal’c, who was on point.

“What?” Daniel asked, glancing over at her.

“You’re smiling,” she told him happily. “I haven’t seen that on your face in a while. Have you finally slipped out of the funk you’ve been in?”

“I’ve just been busy,” he told her with a shrug. “Had a lot on my mind.”

“Whatever. It’s good to see you in a better mood, anyway. You seem like you’re really looking forward to digging around in this new temple.”

He just looked at her. Suddenly, part of him began to regret what he was about to do. “I care about you, Sam,” he blurted. “You know that, right?”

Her face went slack with shock, and she stopped walking. “Yeah, I know.” She grabbed his sleeve and pulled him to a stop, facing her. “Are you okay, Daniel?”

He reached out and impulsively hugged her, feeling her arms come up around him in response. “I’m fine,” he answered quietly. “Since when does something have to be wrong with me to tell you that I’m fond of you?”

She slid back in his embrace and blinked at him, suspicion written all over her features. “It doesn’t, you just… You don’t usually say stuff like that unless you’re drunk and maudlin.”

Daniel chuckled and blushed slightly. “Yeah, well, maybe that ought to change.” He sobered and grasped her hand, aware that his fingers were cold against her warm, soft skin. “I’ve come to some decisions lately, and I wanted the people closest to me to be certain how I feel about them. Whenever we walk through that ‘gate, we don’t have a guarantee that we’ll be coming home. We don’t always have the chance to say the words, and I wanted to say them to you,” he smiled, filled with genuine warmth, “when I wasn’t drunk and maudlin.”

She frowned at him, a little suspicious, still reeling from his uncharacteristic expression of emotion.

“You’ve been a great friend to me, Sam. Like a sister. I want you to know how much I treasure that.” He took her by the arm and tugged her after the others. “C’mon. Edwards will give us both hell for falling behind. Mustn’t keep our Colonels waiting.”

That thought brought Jack prominently to mind. He turned away, keeping his eyes on the trail and hurrying her along through the tall grass. He could feel her eyeing him, her busy brain at work trying to figure out what was up with him. She’d probably figure it out eventually, but by then it would be too late.

Daniel watched Teal’c disappear ahead of them over the crest of a hill. He picked up his pace under the heavy weight of his pack in an effort to catch up with the Colonel.

An hour later, they stood at their destination, on the steps of a temple. In short order, everyone fell into their assigned duties, Daniel scouting the interior, Edwards setting up camp, Teal’c scouting the perimeter, Carter taking mineral samples.

Daniel assured Edwards that the temple was structurally sound, and that he’d be occupied with
studying it for a good many hours. He stepped into the shady interior, unobserved, and immediately slipped away out the back door.

As fast as he could, he made his way directly back to the Stargate. He dropped his backpack and utility vest on the ground and hastily started undressing, always checking the horizon for signs of pursuit or alien attention.

From his pack, he withdrew his blue robes and soft boots from Vis Uban and quickly put them on. Then he took the folded shoulder satchel out of his pack and stowed everything in it that he had brought for this trip.

That done, he folded his BDUs and left them beneath his military-issue boots. On top of the bundle of clothing, he placed his pistol and zat. Last of all, he took out the four letters he’d written, removed the GDO from his forearm and strapped it around the letters to keep them from blowing away.

As last, he stepped up to the DHD, opened one of the journals to his list, picked a set of coordinates at random and started pressing the keys. His heart was thumping in his chest. He had reached the point of no return now.

The wormhole engaged and he walked up to the event horizon, remembering the first time he’d stood there so many years ago, not at all certain what really lay on the other side. With that same feeling of wonder in his heart, he let his fingers play with the rippling surface, marveling at how cool it was, like sticking one’s hand in water, but without the sensation of breaking a surface.

He smiled wistfully, tears gathering in his eyes, fully aware that he might be flattened against solid rock, emerge into unbreathable air or meet some other form of quick death once he reached the other side.

This was his own personal form of Russian roulette, a little game he had chosen to play with himself in the interest of science.

“Goodbye, Jack,” he said softly, the vibrations of his voice and the current of his breath making little ripples in the surface of the event horizon. “I love you, and I always will.”

He closed his eyes and immersed his face in the watery depths, then took a step and pushed his body inside.

Sunset was a little over an hour away. Sam stood up to stretch, relieving the ache in her lower back. She had been squatting or kneeling for hours, collecting mineral and plant samples and running the survey equipment they had brought with them. Teal’c had been assisting her while Colonel Edwards had kept watch over them and the rest of the camp, just outside the front of the temple. He seemed to be a man who did things strictly by the book, a far different personality than Colonel O’Neill had been in command, but she respected him.

He had served with Daniel and Teal’c before, when the Unas tribe had attacked a derelict naquadah mine, so Edwards knew something about the team linguist’s worth to the SGC. She knew Jack had already given Edwards the run-down on his people before handing them over, but didn’t know how the new Colonel would feel about the opinion of a man dating his former 2IC. This was his first mission with her, and she wanted to impress him with her capabilities. She felt she had to prove herself to him, and the only way she could do that was to be competent, efficient and way better at what she did than any man he’d ever commanded.
Sam Carter was always up to that task.

“Dinnertime soon,” Edwards called, his head swiveling around to peer into the darkened interior of the temple. “Who’s doing the honors tonight?”

Sam grinned at Teal’c and gave him a wink. “I believe it’s your turn, sir,” she returned, packing up the last of the equipment and heading back to camp from down slope. “I’ll go get Daniel.” She set her sample case aside, stretched again, and strolled into the shady interior of the ancient building.

“Daniel!” she called. The small foyer gave way to a large room, the roof of which was supported by dozens of tall columns. When no answer came to her summons, she took out her flashlight and switched it on, heading deeper into the interior.

A dark chamber at the back of the room lay behind a raised altar. She stepped inside, shining her torch on the floor and following Daniel’s dusty footprints through the small room into a hallway that led still deeper into the building. She passed storage rooms that looked like they would have been treasure troves for the archaeologist, but the footprints went steadily past them, finally exiting at the back of the building.

Frowning, she followed the tracks as best she could, but the ground turned rocky and she quickly lost the trail. Head up, she glanced around the sloping landscape covered in trees and called her teammate again, using her radio first to try to raise him, then to apprise her new C.O. that their teammate was missing when Daniel didn’t respond. She circled around the side of the temple, still calling his name, eventually making her way back upslope to the camp.

Panting, she made eye contact with the Colonel. “I can’t find him, sir! His footprints went out the back, and then I lost the trail.”

Edwards was tense, eyes scanning the tree line all around the temple clearing, already preparing to start the search. He jogged toward the temple. “Show me, Carter. Teal’c, let’s see where our archaeologist went.”

The Jaffa was already running ahead of him, flashlight out as he disappeared into the temple gloom.

“There is no sign that Daniel Jackson was taken by others,” Teal’c reported as twilight descended. “His tracks lead toward the Stargate.”

All of them were panting now, following the tracks as fast as Teal’c could read them.

“Where could he be going?” asked Sam, intuition nagging at her. This felt bad. Really bad. She had eyes only for her Jaffa teammate, whose grim expression spoke of the same fear.

“All right, people,” called Edwards, coming to a stop. “I need info to make a decision here. You two know Daniel way better than I do. Do we go back to camp and wait for him to return, start looking again at dawn, or do we break camp, gather our supplies and head back to the Stargate now?”

Sam’s heart was thudding in her chest, and not just from their hurried pace. She eyed Teal’c, who nodded in silent agreement. “We’ll travel faster if we go straight to the ‘gate, sir. Daniel’s life is far more important than the equipment we leave behind at camp.”

Edwards nodded, his expression grim. “To the ‘gate, then. Teal’c if those tracks veer away, stay on ‘em.”

The trio continued on the trail of the missing man as the shadows deepened and sunlight began to fail.
“O’Neill’s gonna kill me,” the Colonel muttered under his breath. “This is like losing the freakin’ Hope Diamond in the woods.” He clenched his teeth. “Jack told me to watch him. Christ!”

Carter just glanced at him, seeing more than just concern for his own hide in the man’s face. He might not know Daniel well, but he was obviously aware how valuable Doctor Jackson was to the program… and what a good man he was, as well.

“We’ll find him, sir,” she assured her C.O. “This isn’t like Daniel, to just disappear without a reason.”

Teal’c’s eyes left the tracks for a moment, fixing her with an eloquently sad gaze that sent a chill up her spine. The big man seemed all too certain that Daniel had gone. That thought terrified her. She started to jog, and Teal’c also picked up the pace.

Finally the Stargate loomed up in the distance, a mere speck at first. It sat on a flat, rocky plain strewn with a multitude of pebbles, low hills covered with scrub grasses arching up on either side of it. The terrain was hard and small clods of dirt crunched underfoot, but Teal’c had no trouble following the trail of footprints, barely visible to Sam.

“His tracks lead directly back to the Stargate,” Teal’c announced, gesturing forward with his staff weapon. “They are several hours old, but there were no other tracks with his, so it is not likely that he was taken prisoner.”

“Then he’s gone,” Edwards declared, frowning at the shadowy landscape. “I don’t see any other alternative here, Major.”

“Daniel wouldn’t just leave, sir!” Sam assured him, a note of desperation creeping into her voice. She shook her head and ran her hand through her hair. “He wouldn’t walk away without telling one of us. This isn’t like him.” She shifted on her feet, her face looking like she’d eaten a bad MRE.

“Spill it, Carter,” ordered Edwards, reading her discomfort accurately.

“He wasn’t acting right on the way here,” she added uncertainly. “I don’t know how else to describe it. I got the feeling he was… maybe saying goodbye.”

Anger swelled inside Edwards and cut deep ravines into his face. “Let’s get to the ‘gate,” he rasped. “Double time.”

They spotted Daniel’s things that had been left behind long before they got there. Edwards arrived cursing. “Mission aborted!” he snarled. “Everybody back to base.”

He turned to Teal’c. “Can you confirm that Daniel hasn’t gone anywhere else on the planet; that he left through the Stargate?”

Teal’c scanned the ground and read the tracks, following them up to the steps. He nodded, catching his breath. “Yes, Colonel Edwards. He is not here. The trail did not divert from the most direct path back to the Stargate, and disappears into it.”

Sam squatted down to retrieve the neat pile of Daniel’s clothes, boots and gear. She was shaking when she stood, her stomach tied in knots, tears misting her eyes. She swallowed hard as she made eye contact with Teal’c, then her commanding officer.

“Sir, look -- he didn’t take his GDO with him.” She handed over the device. “He knows he can never come home without it,” she murmured, her voice betraying her fear and worry about her friend. Her gaze dropped to the bundle in her hands. “Oh, Daniel! What have you done?”
Edwards immediately snatched up the GDO wrapped around the packet of letters. He yanked them out of the Velcro straps and quickly read the names on each envelope.

“I believe,” said Teal’c huskily, “that was DanielJackson’s objective, MajorCarter. He does not intend to go home again. Ever.”

“But why?” she asked softly. “We’re his family. He loves us.”

Edwards was steaming as he held up the packet of letters. “This ought to tell us something. Let’s get back to base and report to General Hammond.”

“What do you mean, he disappeared?” demanded Hammond through the PA system, eyeing each one of them as they stood looking up at him in the control booth. “How long has he been gone? Where the hell did he go?”

“You weren’t watching him?” rasped Jack, his voice deadly quiet as he stepped closer to the Colonel at the foot of the ramp. Fists clenched, he kept them stiffly at his sides, getting up in the other commander’s face, seething but controlled, conscious of every eye trained on them in the ‘gate room and upstairs in the control booth. “I told you, Edwards, you have to keep an eye on him every minute! You were in command, for cryin’ out loud! Daniel gets so wrapped up in those chicken scratches, he forgets he’s on another planet, and you have to—“

“He was planning this!” Edwards snarled back, waving the envelopes in Jack’s face. “These have computer generated labels on ‘em. He wasn’t carrying a printer in his backpack, which indicates previous preparation. He didn’t sit down to write these in the temple, Jack. He printed ‘em out here on the base and took them with him, so knock it off.”

Jack stared at the envelopes, recognizing the truth of Edwards’ assessment. A sick feeling spread from his stomach all through him, leaving him light headed and weak.

“You’re right,” mumbled Jack. “Anything Daniel decided to do, he’d find a way to do it. Only obeyed orders if he agreed with ‘em. Even if I’d been there, this same thing could’ve happened. I could never make Daniel do anything he didn’t want to do either, and this sort of crap is why I have all these white hairs in my head.”

Jack sighed, feeling helpless and deflated. The little shit always did exactly what he pleased and was wily as a goddamned weasel. Daniel with an agenda was a man to be reckoned with, and he could be fucking sneaky when he wanted. Jack had seen that happen often enough, no matter who pretended to command the archaeologist.

Now Daniel had gone off on his own somewhere, most likely under some alien influence, and Jack was terrified that, without his GDO, Daniel couldn’t get home.

“Sorry, Edwards,” Jack offered earnestly. He stepped aside and nodded toward the door. “Let’s go up to the briefing room. Maybe what’s in those letters will help us figure out where he’s gone.”

Jack accompanied the remainder of SG-1 out into the corridor and turned right, heading for the stairs.

When everyone arrived at the table, and had taken a seat, Edwards spoke softly, his brown eyes still flashing with anger and frustration. “General Hammond, as of fourteen hundred hours, I want Doctor Jackson logged as absent without leave, sir.”


“He’s not military,” Carter reminded him stiffly as she eased into her chair. “He can’t be AWOL, sir.”

“Then find a charge that can be applied to our civilian consultant, and nail it to the wall for when we find him,” Edwards shot back. He handed the letters to the General, who passed them out, one by one, to their named recipients. Edwards sat down, glowering at the table while he waited.

Jack held onto his envelope, looking at it, dreading opening it. His heart was in his throat. How the hell had this happened?

Hammond’s opened his letter and briefly scanned the contents, a muscle twitching in his jaw. With an exasperated sigh, he threw the paper down on the table and fixed a baleful stare on the others seated with him. “It seems the good doctor thought he might resign from his post while on a mission,” announced the General coolly.

“What did he say?” asked Edwards.

The General picked up the letter again. “‘Dear Sir, You have been an excellent administrator, compassionate toward all who serve under you. I appreciate that greatly, but I have come to a point in my life where I can no longer maintain my position at the SGC. Unfortunately, with my background, I can also no longer return to an academic position at any university. This limits my options severely, so I have taken a course of action which I hope will continue to be of use to researchers and academics within the auspices of Stargate Command.

To that end, I hereby officially tender my resignation as a member of SG-1, in the hopes that I may be of continued support in the field. I apologize for leaving without proper notice, but this was my only option. It has been my honor to work with you, sir, and I wish you and your family my best.

Sincerely,

Dr. Daniel Jackson’”

He glanced up at the others around the table, an undercurrent of worry etched into his expression. “I’m sorry, ladies and gentlemen, but this is unprofessional conduct and I won’t accept his resignation. Do any of you have any idea what prompted Doctor Jackson to act in such an irresponsible, irrational manner?”

All eyes turned to Carter as she started reading aloud. “‘I’m sorry for doing this to you, Sam, because I know you’ll be hurt. Please understand that it was nothing you did or said. I just couldn’t stay where I was anymore, living half a life. I thought about leaving the SGC, but I couldn’t go back to an academic position and teach what I know to be lies. There was no future for me on Earth, but out here maybe I can still be useful to those who matter most in my universe. I care deeply for you and hope that one day you’ll be able to forgive me for what I’ve done.

Affectionately, Daniel.’”

Everyone turned to Teal’c. The big man was frowning. A muscle twitched in his jaw and his eyes were grim. “He said much the same thing in his letter to me,” the Jaffa announced, then folded the letter and tucked it into the pocket of his BDU trousers.

“Colonel O’Neill?”

Swallowing hard, Jack opened his letter and started to read, privately, not out loud.

Dear Jack,
I’m sorry to have walked out with our friendship in such a mess, but I didn’t see that I had much of a choice. For weeks now, I’ve watched you and Sam getting on with your love affair, sure that every day, when she came to work, she’d be announcing your engagement. I’m beginning to wonder what’s taking you so long to propose. You two have danced around each other for most of a decade, so it surprises me to see that you’re taking things this slowly. You really shouldn’t keep her waiting, you know. You’ve both put it off long enough, so go for it. Marry her and have the life you’ve wanted. Just don’t expect to see me at your wedding. That’s something I can’t watch, because you see… I’m in love with you, Jack. I have been for years. I never said anything because I didn’t want to lose your friendship, and I was pretty certain that confession would have built a wall between us that would never have come down.

I thought I could handle seeing you two together. I genuinely want both of you to be happy, but day by day, watching you growing closer is killing me. It’s hard to survive the death of dreams. It’s one thing to hope and fantasize that maybe one day magic pixie dust will make everything you wanted fall right into your lap, and something else altogether to know with concrete certainty that your dreams are gone forever.

I’m sorry to have left everyone in what must look like such a cold, unfeeling way, but you have to understand, Jack, there’s not a whole lot left that I can feel or do anymore. I can’t stay on Earth. The only place left for me is out here.

I love you, my friend. Please don’t hate me for the way I feel about you. I’d never have said anything if I could’ve kept it to myself. This isn’t your fault. It’s mine, because I couldn’t control my heart. I’m sorry.

Maybe somewhere out here I’ll be able to find the peace I could never have among my own people. And meanwhile, I wish you and Sam all the best. I really do.

In friendship,

Daniel

“Jack?” asked Sam worriedly.

“Ah, Jeez,” he moaned. He closed his eyes and folded up the letter by feel. “He’s not running away. He’s gone in search of… peace.”

Jack stuck the letter inside the jacket pocket of his fatigues and leaned the heels of his hands against his eyes. Hot tears pricked the back of his eyes, and he swallowed, trying to get some semblance of a grip. He’d been so stupid and short-sighted. Both of them had.

“DanielJackson is seeking death,” Teal’c interpreted for him. He rose and stepped over to Jack’s side, putting his hand on his friend’s shoulder.

Jack let his hands drop from his face. He hung his head and looked at his own lap, unable to meet anyone’s eyes. Teal’c words had stabbed him in the heart. Daniel…

“What?” asked Sam and Hammond simultaneously. Edward sat up stiffly in his chair, his mouth falling open in shock.

Teal’c raised his eyes to Carter’s. “He believes he has lost his reason for living, GeneralHammond, and has gone in search of an honorable way to end his life… and therefore, his pain… while serving the interests of the Tau’ri.”
Hammond gaped. “I’m sorry, but I just don’t get it! Doctor Jackson has been functioning perfectly well since he returned to us. Nothing has happened to warrant this kind of emotional—“

“But it has, sir,” Carter interrupted. Jack was aware of her gaze and lifted his head to meet it. He could see the meaning in her wide eyes. There were tears standing there, but they disappeared with a slow, measured blink.

She knew. He could see it in her face. He wanted to tell her to be quiet, not to say anything, to protect Daniel, but she spoke before he could get the words out.

“Daniel was in love with me,” she stated certainly, nodding at Jack. “I see that now.”

He recognized the lie for exactly what it was. Carter was protecting Daniel... and him, as well. She loved and cared about them both, and Jack was hit in the pit of his stomach with the sudden knowledge of it. He didn’t deserve such loyalty and devotion. Not after what he had done, both to her and to Daniel. He hoped she could see the gratitude in his eyes.

She gave him a tiny little smile that told him she understood.

“When Jack and I started dating, it must have been more than he could bear.”

She turned her attention to the General. “I didn’t know it was affecting him that way. I knew something was wrong, but I wouldn’t have guessed his feelings for me went so deeply.” She sighed. “Daniel wore his passions on his sleeve, except when it came to the things that really mattered to him, sir. His heart he kept well hidden.”

“But not protected,” Teal’c added sagely. “He loves them both and wishes them joy, but could no longer stand aside, tormented by what he believed they had found with each other.” He fixed Jack with a knowing gaze. “Had he but known the truth…”

Sam eyed the General. “Jack and I called it quits last night, sir. We realized we’re just friends, and that’s where our relationship needs to stay.”

“Christ!” hissed Edwards under his breath. “We’ve come to this. Days of Our Lives at the SGC.” He shook his head and leaned on his elbows on the table, head down.

Jack ignored him, like he would a bothersome fly. He fixed Hammond with his gaze. “Daniel’s not in his right mind,” growled Jack. He took a deep breath and let it out, summoning up his strength, putting on his armor, becoming the soldier again. “He needs help, sir, not punishment. I’m asking you not to judge him until we have all the facts. Until we have him safely home. Please, sir. This is Daniel Jackson we’re talking about.”

Hammond’s concern was obvious, but he had a duty to deal with as well. The General was well aware how this team felt about each other. “I’ll take extenuating circumstances into consideration, Colonel O’Neill, but he’s still got to be found and then answer to what he’s done here. Anybody got any ideas where we should start looking? It’s a damn big galaxy out there.”

Carter sat down, staring at the black and red table, thinking. “Colonel Edwards is right about Daniel planning this disappearing act. He didn’t act rashly, so there have to be some clues he’s left behind, however inadvertently. I’m sure he may have tried to cover his tracks, but he doesn’t know as much about computers as I do. He must have recorded some ‘gate addresses to places he’d want to go.”

“Get on it,” Hammond ordered. “Make it a priority.”

He looked at Jack and Teal’c. “You two, search his quarters and his office and see if you can find
anything there. Call me when you’ve got any leads.”

“What can I do?” asked Edwards, arms crossed over his chest. “I’ll help however I can. Doctor Jackson’s a good man… and admittedly we all can get a little messed up at times in this job.”

Hammond eyed him for a moment. “I appreciate the offer, Colonel Edwards. We’ll undoubtedly need all the help we can get with this one. Since you don’t know Doctor Jackson as well as the rest of his teammates, we’ll put you back out into the field. Take a replacement team back to continue the mission on PX4-701 and see if you might find any additional clues to Doctor Jackson’s aberrant behavior, and/or where he went.”

He turned back to those clustered around the table. “Until we have proof otherwise, I’m considering the possibility that our chief archaeologist may be operating under an alien influence. If we find that’s the case, we owe it to him to offer him whatever help we can. I’ve seen far too many instances where the unusual behavior of SGC personnel is misinterpreted at the outset, and has an underlying cause that absolves them of any blame. In this case, I don’t want to act rashly. Let’s bring Doctor Jackson home, people, and sort this thing out from there. Dismissed.”

Jack rose, tugging his fatigue jacket down into place. He watched Edwards walk out alone and waited until he was gone before turning away from the table. He fell into step alongside Sam and Teal’c as they left the briefing room. They headed for the elevator in silence. Once the car doors closed on them, Jack punched the appropriate buttons for Daniel’s quarters and office.

“Thank you, Carter,” said Jack quietly, turning to glance at her.

“I swear I didn’t know,” she returned sorrowfully. “Not until I saw that look on your face as you read his letter.” She touched his sleeve. “Are you okay?”

His throat tightened, making his words sound thick and coarse. He spoke to his boots. “No, Carter, I’m not. I’ve made the biggest mistake of my entire life, and it may well have cost Daniel his.”

“We will find him, O’Neill,” assured Teal’c. “He will have left us a trail to follow. I believe he wishes to be found.” He paused. “I also believe he wishes for you to be the one to find him.”

Jack took a deep breath and raised his eyes to the lighted floor indicator above the door. “Only I can’t be the one to do that, Teal’c. I’m not available for field work anymore.”

Teal’c smiled smugly, one eyebrow arching in defiance. “Except for Search And Rescue missions, where your field experience may well be called upon to save lives.”

Jack raised an eyebrow at Carter.

She smiled at him, the fire of determination glinting in her eyes like blue steel. She nodded. “If Daniel’s under an alien influence, that sounds like SAR to me.”

Sagging back against the elevator wall with relief, he rubbed his face a moment, then nodded, unable to form his mouth into an acknowledging grin, his heart too heavy with grief and fear. “Which it very well may be, Major. Let’s keep that in mind.”

The doors opened on the 25th floor, and Jack stepped out alone, headed for Daniel’s quarters to begin his search for breadcrumbs. Once again his team, or what was left of it, had come up with a workable plan. Hammond would undoubtedly agree to him being allowed to conduct the search for Daniel. It was way too soon to hope they’d find him, but at least Jack didn’t have to sit on his hands and wait for someone to bring him news.
“Not bad for a week’s work,” said Daniel aloud. He had taken to speaking his thoughts just to hear the sound of a human voice, comforting himself somehow. He’d never been afraid of being alone and had spent a lot of solitary time at digs, working entire chambers in silence for days at a time.

The lack of companionship this time was almost refreshing, a relief from the constant suffering he had endured back at the base. He hoped that, in time, the desperate need he felt for Jack would fade into a fond remembrance, something he could tolerate. At the moment, that seemed like an impossible goal, the pain still sharp and ever-present. Only when he was submerged in deep thought could he find any respite at all.

Daniel glanced around the deserted landscape on his way back to the Stargate, his notes on the ruins wedged between two fingers, stuck into the journal tucked under his arm. “You got lucky, Jackson. No bullet in the chamber this time.”

He sneezed, his head aching and sinuses clogged because of his ever-present allergies, but there was no help for that. All these planets he was visiting were Earth-like and the damned tree and grass pollen greeted him almost wherever he went. He had chosen to save his medication for when it got really bad. The stuffiness was still at tolerable levels, more annoying than anything else.

He took a drink from his canteen, tipped all the way upside down into his mouth, draining the last of the water. That was it for of his supplies, which meant he couldn’t put off the next trip. He needed to visit someplace where he could find a safe supply of food and water. He was rarely hungry anymore, but thirst was a constant companion and he knew better than to ignore it. He had a limited supply of water purification tablets in his satchel but wanted to keep those for emergencies.

Making a quick decision, he checked the listing of ‘gate addresses in his journal and then dialed Vis Uban.

Upon his unexpected arrival, everyone there was surprised to see him. He was made welcome and spent a few days resting and eating, entertaining the nomads with tales of his travels. He had brought a few items to trade for supplies, replenished his food and water, then took his leave alone.

His next stop was another planet on his list of those already visited by the SGC. These were many places that had much to offer in the way of research, but in which Jack or some other military team leader had seen no military value, and so they had been abandoned without sufficient study.

Daniel planned to revisit each one, taking his time working the digs and gleaning as much information as he could from them. Without his reference library, he would be hampered in how much he might actually understand. The best he could do would be to fully gather all the data from each site, then leave it somewhere for a team from the SGC to collect. He could deliver his notes and preliminary analyses randomly and had even made a list of possible drop-off sites.

There were civilizations with whom the Tau’ri had already made alliances, of course, where no regular troops were kept, like the Land of Light and the Unas mines where he and Chaka had made the treaty for raw naquadah.

Daniel had made friends all over the galaxy with people who would welcome him among them, as either visitor or permanent resident. Also on that list were many places where the SGC visited often enough that he couldn’t risk going there. He had a long list of places to see. The only place he never could go to was the one place he truly wanted to be: back home, with the man he loved.

*Jack had Sam.* He was happy with her, Daniel believed.
A great swell of pain choked him, not unexpected but still unwelcome. He did what he usually did and stuffed down the sharp emotions. This had become an almost constant struggle, very much a part of his everyday life.

As he contemplated where he should go, he glanced down at his list and turned to one of the unknowns. With trembling fingers, he began to press the keys to a place no one from the SGC had yet been, where no MALP had explored and sent back data.

When the wormhole stabilized, Daniel swallowed down his heart along with his fear and walked with his head up and eyes open, right into the watery surface. Moments later, the ‘gate shut down and was silent.

Sam’s initial report had been about a lot of technical backtracking through computers that Jack didn’t understand, and when she had finished and looked at her notes, what he had absorbed sounded hopeless.

“There’s got to be something,” Jack snapped, rubbing at the back of his neck. He, Carter, Teal’c and the General sat around the briefing table, discussing the status of the search for their missing man.

Carter eyed him, waiting for him to calm down. “There is, sir,” she said quietly. “I’ve checked through all the files Daniel had sent to print during that three weeks before he left. I’ve also recovered all the files he deleted from his computer and the server. I printed them all out, and Teal’c and I have been going over them. We’ve read through his recent journal entries – or rather, we tried to, but he seems to have written some entries in a code or language the academic department hasn’t been able to translate. We have some direction already.”

“Well, why didn’t you say so in the beginning, Carter? Let’s hear it.” Jack sat back in his chair and glared at her, arms crossed over his chest. He was consumed with frustration.

“We believe DanielJackson would not deliberately dial out to a planet that could not sustain his life, so those worlds have been crossed off the list,” announced Teal’c.

“The ones we’re more concerned about are the unexplored addresses,” added Carter. “If we cross off those on the Abydos cartouche which are potentially under Goa’uld control and just concentrate on those from the Ancients’ database, that still leaves hundreds of potential places for him to visit.”

Jack heaved a heavy sigh and laid his arms on the table, head down. This was starting to look hopeless.

Hammond, sitting thoughtfully at the head of the table, met Carter’s eyes. “What about places we’ve already been? What’s the likelihood Doctor Jackson would return to some of those worlds?”

“For some, very high,” she answered, nodding and glancing at her list. “The supplies he carried with him must be gone by now, so he’d have to forage for his own food on the worlds he visits. We’ve had some unpleasant experiences with Daniel’s allergies, so it’s not likely he’d do that.”

“He’s still gotta eat,” Jack argued dispiritedly. “Though he forgets to do that a lot when he’s working.” Daniel needed a keeper. He needed his team and family around him. Without them, his lack of concern for his own welfare would undoubtedly create health problems for him in short order.

“Which means he would be more likely to return to known worlds to trade for supplies,” said Teal’c.
“We have made many friends in our travels. Daniel Jackson is well liked on those planets.”

Hammond’s lips pressed together, his brow wrinkled in deep thought. He raised hopeless eyes to the trio at the table and sighed. “It sounds to me like there are far too many places for Doctor Jackson to go, people. I hate to bring it up, but I’m beginning to think this search would expend far too much in the way of man-hours, with only a slender chance of success, if any.”

Jack leaned forward on his elbows, alarmed at the General’s apparent readiness to end the search so soon. “You can’t call it off yet, sir. We’ve only just gotten started! Daniel’s been gone a week, and we haven’t even been out looking for him yet. Please, sir, just give us a little more time!”

Hammond’s blue eyes narrowed thoughtfully. “Very well, Colonel. Not including prep time, I’ll give you three field trips to search for him. If you haven’t found him by the end of that third mission, the search will be officially concluded. Meanwhile, if Doctor Jackson should be encountered at any point by any SGC team, he will be apprehended and brought back for questioning and a complete medical and psychological examination. If deemed necessary, charges will be filed, and he will be incarcerated. I, for one, hope that step isn’t necessary, but it is something we need to consider as a very real possibility.”

“Unauthorized incoming wormhole!” announced Davis over the PA system.

Everyone rose and hurried to the control room. All eyes were fixed on the iris as light splashed out of the narrow opening between the gate and its shield. No IDC code was forthcoming, so no order was given to open the iris. A sickening splat sounded and a moment later the wormhole disengaged.

All of them exhaled forcefully and one by one they turned away.

All but Jack.

He barely heard Hammond officially dismiss everyone, his gaze still fixed on the closed iris.

A frightening thought arose in his mind, unbidden. What if that had been Daniel?

He started to sweat. His stomach lurched. He left the control room at a run, heading down the corridor to a nearby lavatory. He made it there just in time to throw up in a sink.

It took another minute or two before he could catch his breath and splash water on his face. When he looked in the mirror, he was white as a sheet.

If I had only told him how I felt, he thought. And now, if I just knew where to look. Jeez, this is all my fault!

Hanging onto the cold porcelain with one hand to help keep him upright, Jack rinsed out his mouth and then carefully washed out the mess he’d made of the sink.

He leaned his face against the wall, eyes closed, barely able to remain standing. He was trembling, tears gathering in the corners of his eyes.

“I’m sorry, Daniel,” he whispered. “If I could just see you again, just tell you…” His voice hitched.

He straightened up, looking down into the sink rather than at his guilty reflection. “I swear to God, I’ll make it right with you. Just be where I can find you, Danny. I’m not as smart as you are. I can’t find you unless you show me the way.”

Someone came in, and Jack went immediately out without a glance at the man.
He climbed the stairs to the briefing room and gathered up his notes, and then he stopped by Carter’s lab. He saw that she and Teal’c were already busy with Daniel’s printouts. He left them undisturbed, unaware that he had even looked in on them, and returned to his office.

As he walked, he reflected that he was useless in that sort of investigation. He’d been through Daniel’s carefully packed things and had discovered that as far as he could tell, Daniel had taken nothing of his personal items except for three photographs, not including the one of his beloved Sha’re.

This time, if he felt Daniel slip away in the shadowed depths of his soul, Jack knew he wouldn’t be long behind him. Daniel had saved his life far too many times to count. Jack remembered all too well what it was like living in a universe without Daniel in it. It had been a dark, cold, unfriendly place, like a cave where sunlight never reached, and it wasn’t a place he wanted to be ever again.

They just had to find Daniel. Jack’s life depended on it.

---

**P9X-666**

The planet had been explored by SG-14 six months earlier and had been logged into the “Who Cares?” pile. It was hot and sticky, a dense jungle pockmarked with swamps. There were lots of biting insects, some nasty little crustaceans skittering around under nearly every leaf, and a city ruin halfway through the process of sinking into the muck.

Jack remembered how excited Daniel had been when he’d seen the photographs of this godforsaken place. He had holed up in his office for two days, digging through all his books for references. He’d finally given Jack and Hammond a passionate discourse on some Samoan legend about a ‘tree of many branches.’ The only truly important piece of architecture discovered there was a plinth, each of its four sides inscribed with the languages of the Four Races, on which the legend was inscribed. Once the plinth had been translated, its cryptic message had been filed away and forgotten.

Apparently, Daniel’s interest in it had never waned.

SG-1 stepped out onto the fertile hummock of land sticking up out of the uneven jungle, Doctor Bill Lee filling in for their missing archaeologist. Jack had accepted him on the team on the basis of Daniel’s former estimation of the man as a competent field archaeologist and linguist. Jack didn’t trust Lee to watch his six for a minute. The guy was no soldier, but then, he didn’t have to be. Jack shepherded the academic in the field like the bodyguard he was, and trusted Lee to give his best in his own area of expertise.

Jack’s lip curled as he felt the blast of humid heat, and seconds after the wormhole disengaged behind them, he slapped a bug against the side of his neck and ordered everyone down the trail toward the city ruins.

“Colonel,” called Carter, stepping over to the DHD. “I don’t think we need to go there.” She smiled up at him and lifted a plastic Ziploc bag up high where he could see it. “There’s a piece of folded paper sealed up inside this baggie here.”

The package had been sitting on the DHD keypad, tied to a rock with a piece of dried vine.

He ambled over to the DHD as she opened the bag. Carter pulled the piece of paper out and unfolded it. “Paydirt! It’s a note in Daniel’s handwriting, addressed to the Tau’ri SGC. This planet
was a good call, sir.” She was beaming.

“Thank God!” Jack murmured, looking over her shoulder. Lee and Teal’c crowded close, excited to read the message, too. “What’s it say?”

She tossed the rock away and tucked the baggie inside her vest as she began to read. “It’s just notes on the plinth,” she told him, her eyes scanning quickly across the page.

Everyone gathered around her, reading over her shoulders.

_The Tree of Many Branches is a vivid analogy to what we know has happened to the human race, transplanted all over the galaxy by the Goa’uld. The Samoan legend described on this plinth indicates that part of the sacred tree, from which all human life sprang, was broken down, causing some people to become disruptive and violent. Sadness and sorrow became companions for all after that._

_What is interesting in this passage is the tantalizing sentence at the end, which has heretofore given us a great deal of perplexity as to its meaning. The passage reads, ‘When the young begin to grow wise, they seek among the missing for that which will make them whole.’ On the surface, this seems self-explanatory. Finding those who are missing makes a tribe whole. I cannot help but believe that there is something far more weighty in this text, a prod to make us think, or perhaps, a test to determine our worthiness._

_The Asgard have done that on Cimmeria and possibly on other worlds under their protection. Solving a series of riddles earned us an audience with Thor and showed us to be growing in wisdom. The Nox have called us young. I believe the introductory phrase of this passage is a direct identifier of their audience; i.e., humanity. The second phrase is instruction, to seek among the missing, with the intended reward, wholeness, given at the end._

_We are to seek among the missing._

_Who or what are the missing?_

--DJ

“Perplexity? That’s from Daniel, all right.” Jack shook his head. “Carter, how old is the note? When did he write this?”

“There’s no way to tell that from the note, Colonel,” answered Doctor Lee, straightening up. “Especially since it’s been sealed away from the elements, and thank God Daniel had the presence of mind to bring these Ziploc bags. We wouldn’t have been able to read this at all if it stayed here in this climate, unprotected, for very long.”

“Daniel thinks of everything,” Jack shot back quickly.

He glanced around at the surrounding terrain and spied footprints, clear as day, filled with puddles of water in the spongy ground, leading away from and then back to the Stargate. “Can you tell how long ago he was here from the tracks, Teal’c?”

“They are several days old,” confirmed the Jaffa, squatting near the DHD’s base to examine the ground. “DanielJackson arrived and went straight to the city, that way. Three days ago, he returned and left through the Stargate.”
“Are you sure he left?” Jack was studying the tracks now, too, wishing he could read them as well as his teammate.

“Indeed.”

“He’s alive!” announced Jack with a note of relief. “There’s still a chance we can find him.”

Carter’s expression was grim but determined, and she nodded her head.

“What’s that under his initials?” asked Doctor Lee, leaning closer to Carter and pointing to what looked like a damaged spot on the paper. He adjusted his glasses, which were fogging up in the moist heat.

“I can’t tell.” Sam brought the page closer to her face, squinting at the scuffed, torn place at the bottom, smudged with dirt. She rubbed at the spot with her fingertip.

“It is the glyph of Orion, as shown on the DHD,” said Teal’c.

“That was on the photos of the plinth,” Doctor Lee told them. “I remember that from when Daniel and I were studying it.”

He swatted at an insect on his arm and dodged when a swarm of them came after him. “Do we need to stay here any longer, Colonel?” He danced away from the swarm, arms flailing about his head to ward them off.

Jack stared down at the DHD. “Redial,” he murmured quietly to himself.

Carter shot a startled glance his way. “What?”

“I said, redial,” he repeated, glancing up at her. “It’s too bad we can’t just call up the last ‘gate address dialed on this thing, like you can do with your phone. You make a call and talk to someone, then remember after you hang up something else you wanted to say. You hit redial and the phone automatically calls back the same number without you having to dial it back, key by key. It’d save time.”

She blinked. Her eyes widened. She smiled broadly. “Sir, you’ve just given me a great idea!”

He cocked his head and looked at her, his brows twitched together in confusion. “I did?”

“If we can do it with our phones, maybe we can do it with the DHDs!”

“We can?”

“I just have to figure out how. We’ve already interfaced with them before. We know the ‘gate itself holds incoming matter patterns in a buffer. Maybe, if we can find another planet where Daniel’s been, we can hook up to the DHD before we dial out and retrieve the last outgoing address dialed. It could work, sir, but I’m going to need to spend some time off world with a DHD to test my theory. Your theory, Sir.”

“Good work, Carter,” he said cheerfully. “We’re a helluva team, aren’t we?”

She was beaming. Her whole face was aglow. “Yes, we are. And I promise I’ll work on this every minute I can, until we find him.”

Jack glanced at Teal’c, who was also smiling and nodding his head. Even Lee was grinning like a fool, just as Jack was himself.
As of three days earlier, Daniel had been alive and now they had a breakthrough that just might locate him the next time they got lucky and discovered a place where he’d been.

“Then let’s go home, kids. We gotta discuss our theory with General Hammond.” He stepped away from the group still huddled close at the DHD, heading for the gate. “Dial us home, Carter. Time’s a wastin’.”

For the first time in what felt like forever, Jack had some real hope. Daniel was alive, he just knew it, and every step they took brought them closer together. If it was the last thing he ever did, he was going to put his arms around Daniel Jackson, kiss the shit out of him, and make sure he knew Jack O’Neill loved him.

He headed for the stable wormhole with a smile on his face and a bounce in his step as he followed his team home, watching their six, as always.

---

“Seek among the missing,” Daniel pondered aloud.

He pulled up the hood of his robe to shield his head from the bright sun and traded his regular glasses for his shades. His satchel was full of supplies again. It was heavy and he was thankful for the weight of it, but it didn’t make trekking across the dunes any easier. At least his allergies weren’t bothering him here.

The white column he’d seen in the distance seemed more like a mirage now, because he didn’t appear to be growing any closer to it. Doggedly he walked on, making a beeline for the pale tower.

The bright daytime sun began to set, but true night never fell because the sky was lit by a second more distant sun that gave everything a lavender glow and deep purple shadows, rising on the opposite horizon as the daytime sun.

Idly he thought how much Sam would enjoy some stellar research on that world, with its unusual double star system. The thought of her spiked a pang of homesickness through him, which he shoved aside in favor of contemplation of the research he was doing.

After what felt like a walk of many miles, he reached the object. It was a huge piece of carved stone in the shape of a great tree, maybe fifty feet high. Most of the limbs had broken off it and were scattered in pieces in the sand all around him. On the trunk of the tree, Daniel saw another legend carved; this one about Pandora’s Box.

The analogy was similar to that of the Samoan legend on the jungle planet he’d visited earlier, that of a great tragedy having been loosed upon humanity, and the hope that followed as a gift from the gods. This tale was also inscribed in the languages of the Four Races, with a new teaser at the bottom.

Revealing one’s true self can only be accomplished by those worthy of trust.

Carved right under that intriguing Zen passage was the hourglass-shaped symbol from the Stargate.

Daniel stared at it. His eyes widened in understanding.

“Oh, my God!” he whispered in fascinated awe.

He sat down at the base of the tree and pulled out his journal with the ‘gate coordinates in it. By the
wan lavender nightlight, he scanned the list for gate addresses featuring those two symbols, the
hourglass and the archer, Orion had been his first key to solving the mystery of the Stargate eight
years back. He made a pencil mark beside each one that featured both symbols, regardless of order,
searching until his eyes grew heavy and forced him to take some rest.

When he awakened, he ate some of the flatbread and hard milled cheese he’d acquired from his latest
supply run, even though his appetite had still not returned. He hacked off a piece of the cheese and
chewed it thoughtfully along with the bread, which he washed down with some water. He took a
multivitamin tablet to help guard against malnutrition, and then went back to work.

For two days he searched through his lists, writing down every possible combination he could find.
Checking back over the notes he’d jotted down beside each one of the planets already explored, he
found another entry beside the coordinates for a planet visited years earlier. That had been another
site where the languages of the Four Races had been found, with insufficient research done.

Daniel all but ran back to the ‘gate, nearly ready to collapse from exhaustion by the time he got
there. The daytime sun was setting on that world, leaving it lit by the nighttime sun millions of miles
away.

Needing to rest before he left, he nestled down in the sand, his robes pulled over his face to shield
himself from blowing grit, and slept until he was refreshed. Then he rose, shook the sand out of his
clothes, took a swig of water and dialed the DHD.

Hammond glanced down at his report. “On your recommendation, Major Carter, we’ve started
investigating planets on Doctor Jackson’s list rather than hitting them in the orderly fashion which
has been our protocol for the past seven years. We’re sending MALPs through and checking for
footprints, and we’ve had a little luck with that.”

Colonel Edwards got up and poured himself a cup of coffee, then sat down again between Teal’c
and Hammond, facing Carter and Jack across the table.

The General picked up the remote control and aimed it at the television set up on a cart near the far
end of the table. All eyes went to the picture as the videotape started to play.

Jack let out the breath he felt he’d been holding for days. “Hallelujah!” he whispered, smiling. His
stomach unclenched as a wave of relief spread through him.

On the television screen was a very clear picture of a startled, scruffy, exhausted-looking Daniel
Jackson, running for the DHD and madly pressing keys to dial out, then disappearing through the
wormhole.

“It appears that our MALP caught him just as he was returning from whatever he’d been
investigating on that planet,” announced the General, “but at least we know he’s still alive and
apparently in good health. That’s something.”

Jack loosed a sigh of relief. “Yes, sir. I’d like to check out that planet and see what he left for us this
time.”

“And it would give me an opportunity to start working on the redial program for the DHDs,” added
Carter. “I’ll need access to a DHD for the duration of the research, and that planet seems a pretty safe
bet. I mean, we’ve been there before, and there were no hostile aliens—”

“There are, however, many fierce wild animals, Major Carter,” Teal’c reminded her. “You will need
sufficient protection while you are working on the DHD.”
“We already have the ‘gate coordinates that Doctor Jackson dialed from that planet, Major,” Hammond told her. “The MALP was able to get around to view the DHD before the ‘gate shut down, and we determined the dialing order from the movements of his hands.”

Colonel Edwards spoke up. “A MALP has been sent to the address he dialed, and it appears to be an uninhabited desert world. It also showed that Daniel’s tracks in the sand went straight to the DHD, where he apparently dialed out again. Unfortunately, he beat the MALP’s arrival, so we have no idea where he went from there.”

“Then we can use the first planet as confirmation of the last address dialed, to see if my program works when directly interfaced with the DHD.” She waited hopefully, eyes on the General.

Hammond studied her. His calculating gaze shifted to Teal’c and finally to Jack. “People, I want very much to give Doctor Jackson the benefit of the doubt here. He does appear to be carrying out the directives of the SGC and continuing to research and explore. He’s leaving us documentation on what he finds. I know his heart is in the right place here, but…”

He sighed heavily. “…one of the places he’s been was previously unexplored. It hadn’t even been MALPed yet. By going through the Stargate blind to that location… Colonel O’Neill, I’ve become very concerned for his health as well as his sanity. If we don’t get to him soon, I’m afraid we may very well lose him.”

Jack nodded, his mouth pressed together in a grim line. “Yes, sir. I know. I hate to say it, but I agree.”

Hammond bowed his head over his notes. “All right, Major Carter. We’ll take PX4-631 as your research and testing ground. Colonel O’Neill, you’ll accompany SG-1 and Doctor Lee to the planet to supervise any potential retrieval missions, should Major Carter’s efforts prove successful. I have the feeling that Doctor Jackson would be more likely to return willingly if you, Major Carter and Teal’c are among those we send to bring him home.”

“Thank you, sir,” said Jack. “I’m sure you’re right.”

“You have a go, SG-1. Dismissed.”

Jack pulled his notes together and went with his former teammates directly to his office and closed the door. He dropped his notebook binder on the desk, pivoted on his heel and hugged Sam and Teal’c both.

“He’s alive!” he whispered against Carter’s neck. “Thank God.”

“Yes,” rumbled Teal’c, patting him on the back supportively. “Perhaps we may find him yet.”

They pulled back from their group hug and stood looking at one another. “Then what?” asked Sam worriedly. “He’s still in big trouble.”

“We’ll find a way out of that somehow,” Jack assured them. “Just getting him back is the important thing. Keeping him safe. The rest of it… we’ll deal.”

Sam nodded grimly. “I can be ready to go in an hour. I just need to stop by my lab and load some data into my laptop.”

“I am ready now,” Teal’c announced.

“No, you’re gonna be gathering up a cartload of equipment for me,” Carter returned with a slight
smile.

“I’ll help,” offered Jack. “Just tell us what you need and consider it done. Let’s go bring Daniel home.” Jack held his hand out, palm down, in the space between the three of them. “One for all…”

Carter laid hers down on top of his and when they both looked at Teal’c, he covered their hands with his.

“…and all for one,” finished the Jaffa. He arched an eyebrow at Jack. “Did you think I did not know the tale of the Three Musketeers, O’Neill?”

“Teal’c, I’m beginning to think there’s not a whole helluva lot about Earth culture you don’t know anymore. I guess you’re a homeboy now.”

Teal’c’s smile was quite smug. “Indeed.”

Carter smiled and led the way out of the office, rattling off a list of things she wanted them to gather while she downloaded files to her laptop for the mission. Jack dutifully wrote them all down on a notepad he’s snatched from his desk for that purpose, intent on not missing a thing. Finally, it was time to find the fourth Musketeer.

“So close,” sighed Daniel. He lay back against the soft bed and stared up at the ceiling, still thinking.

This was one of the rooms in the former post-Averium dormitory on the planet Orban, where children like Merrin had once been housed after having their knowledge removed, along with large portions of their thinking capacity. That practice was no longer used, favoring time-intensive learning in traditional schools instead of the barbaric Averium. Most of the post-Averium Urrone children were now living with their families rather than in the dormitories, so Daniel had privacy there.

The room he had been given had simple earthen walls, a small cot and table, a door and a window, but not much else.

He looked out the window at the unfamiliar stars, visible from his cot, and thought about his day with the Orbanians. In addition to a fresh change of clothes, he’d gotten his robes cleaned and replenished his supplies.

They had welcomed him back fondly and he’d managed to bargain with them for food, shelter and a naquadah-enhanced power supply for his laptop that he hoped would keep it going for about a year. He had traded them information on another ancient Goa’uld site they’d unearthed, along with an artifact he’d found off-world relating to Chalchiutlicue, their former Goa’uld goddess. Daniel thought he’d come out ahead with the deal.

When he’d finished that, Daniel had had a chat with one of their genius kids who excelled at math. He was careful in exactly how he phrased things, writing down obscure symbols rather than actually using the glyphs from the Stargate. When he’d finished that conversation, he had returned to his borrowed room and finished the calculations necessary to determine whether or not his theory was correct.

It was, and he was dizzy with his success. The euphoria was hastily pushed away in favor of still more calculations, and finally he had his list narrowed down and the glyphs arranged in order. He had a map, of sorts, and when he left, he was sure that at least one of the paths would lead to the Lost City.
He tried to sleep, but his mind was so involved in the other questions relating to his quest that he couldn’t. In all, he had found three pieces of the puzzle, two of them in plain sight among the findings the SGC had discarded; the third on a world they had yet to explore. If he just had all the pieces…

Daniel sighed and sat up. He leaned against the wall and recalled the latest teaser.

*Peace comes in silence and introspection to one who travels alone, yet is never lonely.*

It sounded good on the surface, but it was a state of human existence to *always* be alone, except for those hosting symbiotes or other alien consciousnesses.

That was what Daniel had told his friends he was doing, going out to find peace, and in a way, he wasn’t alone. He had his memories of Sha’rē, Skaara, Kasuf, Jack, Sam and Teal’c to take with him. Loneliness, however, was a constant pain, present even when he had been in their midst.

“Oh, Jack,” he whispered, leaning back against the wall behind his borrowed cot. He opened his journal and took out his photo of Colonel O’Neill, every inch the soldier, scanning the landscape for danger, his face lined with care from so many years of carrying the responsibility for too many lives. Jack was a handsome man despite the scars and gray hair, now fast moving toward silver. Those intense brown eyes were haunting and that mouth – that wisecracking, irreverent mouth –

Daniel groaned, his body responding immediately to his thoughts about Jack. He untied the drawstring around the waist of his pants and reached inside for his erection, then thought better of possibly soiling his clothes and took them off. Naked and aching for release, he lay on his side on the cot and stroked himself, imagining a willing Jack as his lover, staring at that photograph propped up near his face.

As he sought release, already feeling the heat of his orgasm uncoiling in his belly, his mind returned to his favorite fantasy of having Jack there in the bed with him. He always imagined that Jack would be rough and wild, enthusiastic and demanding, and Daniel was always his willing partner.

He rose up to his knees, picturing himself inside his lover. He took the picture into his left hand and held it to his chest to protect it, head thrown back, thrusting into his fist, pretending he was pounding into that lean, manly body.

“Jack,” he panted. “God, I love you…”

The images of his fantasy pushed Daniel to a fever pitch, and he came with a violent jerk, Jack’s name a wild cry of unbridled passion bursting out of his throat. He knelt there on all fours on the cot, panting as he recovered. He put the photograph of Jack on his pillow and let his mind drift over the vision of a gloriously naked Jack spread out on the bed before him.

Jack was so handsome, so strong, so damnably charming. He could also be a pain in the ass and a smart-mouthed, bossy know-it-all. He was almost unbearable sometimes… and Daniel loved him for *all* of that, and more.

Again, the unbidden memory of reality came rushing back to him. *He was all of that, but unfortunately, he was also with Sam.*

The unwanted vision of Jack and Sam together in bed seared Daniel’s mind, and he sucked in a breath, eyes squeezing closed to shut it out, but that didn’t help.

He sat on the edge of his narrow bed, stomach cramping, mouth dry, body shaking with shame and revulsion. He was disgusted with himself for continuing to moon over something he could never
have. He had tried to give up that fantasy and berated himself for indulging in it yet again. He knew that as long as he gave into it, he would never be able to get a handle on his emotions regarding Jack.

So far, he hadn’t made much progress in putting Jack on the back burner of his life. If anything, the heat had seemed to increase, and it was searing him. He wanted desperately to start getting some perspective on things, and he knew this sort of behavior wasn’t helping.

Daniel hurried to dress and packed up his things.

In the dead of night, he walked briskly to the Orbanian gate and dialed his destination. As soon as he arrived on that uninhabited world, he dialed the coordinates of the next place on his list. He knew the Orbanians would observe where he went, and if they gave that information to anyone from the SGC, he wanted to make sure it was a dead-end.

He stepped out into bright sunshine on this next underappreciated world, chose his spot, and sat down to work on the next part of his project.

The sun felt good on Jack’s back, but his knees ached and begged him to take a break. He scanned the horizon, wary for any signs of movement, a fraction of his attention on the woman sitting near the partially disassembled DHD. Having the DHD unavailable set his personal DEFCON system to Level 3, because it meant there could be no quick escape for his people if they came under siege.

“How’s it goin’, Carter?” he asked, just needing to hear the sound of a human voice.

“Making progress, sir,” she replied automatically, her gaze shifting between the screen on her laptop and a copy of the schematics he had drawn up years earlier, while under the influence of the Ancients’ database that had been downloaded into his brain.

“Good. That’s good.” He lapsed back into silence, giving her space to do her work. Finally, he sat down on a nearby rock, groaning at the relief from standing. He sighed. He really was getting too old for this sort of thing and shouldn’t be in the field even for this badly disguised Search And Rescue mission.

Carter set her laptop aside and got down on her knees, peering into the guts of the DHD. She tweaked a couple of things and picked up her laptop again. Her fingers clicked over the keys, but she glanced over at Jack with curious eyes.

“Did Daniel know how you felt?” she asked him boldly.

“I thought the rule was ‘don’t ask, don’t tell.’” He eyed her unhappily.

“I’d never tell any of your personal secrets, Jack,” she reminded him. “Like what happened to Alar. That never went into my official report, and I think you know why.” She looked him in the eye and gave him a sympathetic smile. “It’s okay to talk to me, if you want. I care about both of you.”

She turned to face him fully, fixing him with her blue-eyed gaze. “So. For what it’s worth, I think Daniel deserves to know. Do you plan on telling him, when we find him?”

Jack clenched his teeth, flexing and relaxing his jaws as he wrestled with himself over whether or not to answer her question. He knew he could trust her. His military career could have ended badly if she had revealed all the details of what he’d done on Euronda. Daniel had been right to question
whether or not they were selling their souls to the devil by signing a treaty with those bigots. Jack had used one of the Eurondan drones to escort “The Breeders” into the Eurondan city and turn them loose, then taken his team out of there, warning the Eurondan leader not to follow them, yet knowing he would. As soon as SG-1 was all on the ramp at the base, Jack had ordered the iris closed. Alar had splattered against it and Carter never said a word. Neither had Daniel or Teal’c, and Jack was sure that all of them had heard the alien die.

“If we find him,” Jack returned mournfully, dodging the question for the moment.

He looked down at his boots and angrily kicked a pebble away from the base of the boulder on which he sat. “I’m why he left, Carter. I swear to God, I didn’t know he was in love with me. I never… told him how I felt about him, either. I can be such a schmuck! If I’d only known… but I didn’t.”

He didn’t think he could feel any lower than he did at that moment. “I feel like this whole thing happened because I’m such a damned coward. I couldn’t face him when I realized how I felt. God, Sam, we never should’ve lost him like this! I broke his heart and didn’t even know it till he was gone.”

She nodded. “That’s kind of what I thought. He didn’t seem to have time for either one of us, right after we started dating. I thought after he first disappeared that he was in love with me, but as I read his letter, I realized he’d have said something, done something to show me how he felt. Only he didn’t, so that could only mean the reason he was hurting so much was that he couldn’t say anything to the one he cared for most. When you were reading his letter to you, I finally understood what a tragedy this was. I have to believe that, if you’d known, you’d have retired to be with him.”

He nodded, his throat too tight to speak.

“So,” she said again. “You are going to come clean with him when we find him, right, Jack?”

He nodded at her, mute with grief and longing. When they found him, God willing.

Her hands on the keyboard were still. “Jack, if there’s anything I can do to help…” Her eyes were full of grief and sorrow.

Jack dropped his gaze down to her laptop, then flicked back to her face. “Help us find him,” he said softly, his voice thick with pain.

“Doing my best,” she returned with a sad, hopeful smile. “We’ll find him, Colonel. We’ll find a way to bring him home.” She dropped her gaze to her keyboard again. Her fingers started clicking on the keys, her concentration squarely fixed on the project at hand.

She did not see Jack O’Neill stand and put his back to her, or the tears that formed in his eyes. For a long time he didn’t blink, afraid it would make them fall. In time, they evaporated away and he turned his attention back to the tree line, watching for the wild beasts that populated this alien world, putting his team at risk.

Jack was good at risk management. His people would be safe under his watch. Yet as he scanned the landscape, the words of Daniel’s letter scrolled through his heart.

*I’m in love with you. I have been for years.*

Oh, God, if only he had known.
Daniel’s heart was pounding in his chest. His hands were shaking so hard, he could barely hold his journal, his eyes moving over the glyphs he had drawn on the page. An invitation had been extended a millennia ago, and he had deciphered it at last! The only thing he wasn’t sure of was the order of alignment. He’d argued with himself for days, going back and forth over all the clues. He’d finally decided to try them out one by one. He’d already been through six variations, and this was the seventh on the list.

If it worked… If it were the right one…

He let out his pent-up breath in a whoosh. Maybe he was putting too much hope into the riddle. He had no idea who or what would be waiting at the end of this particular yellow brick road. The people who had written those inscriptions were long dead, and their civilization might well be, too.

He wondered if maybe it were time to go back and faced the music. He’d probably get some jail time out of it. Jack might never speak to him again. He was pretty sure he could count on Sam and Teal’c for continued friendship and support, and maybe, if he were still alive when he finished his sentence, the SGC might even allow him to come back and work a strictly academic position. His skills were needed, and he had put the program on its feet. Surely that would earn him some kind of a second chance.

He could hope, anyway.

At least in prison he wouldn’t have to see Jack and Sam together.

He smiled and shook his head, laughing at himself. He could be dialing out to a dead world, or into solid rock. Every time he opened a wormhole to one of the coordinates on his handwritten list, he knew it could be his last act.

If he survived to explore this new unlisted world, he’d see what lay on the other side and give his choices some thought. With no GDO, the only way for him to get home anyway would be to ‘gate to an allied world where he knew SGC people visited regularly and wait for them to find him. He might wait a long time before making that choice, and there was still so much left for him to do.

Daniel depressed the keys, waited for the wormhole to engage, and walked boldly through it without even blinking.

SG-1 returned to the base after three weeks, on orders of General Hammond. Even with regular progress reports, his expectation of results steadily diminished until he felt he had no choice but to call the team back.

Jack returned to desk duty in administration while SG-1 – now with Colonel Edwards and Doctor Lee filling out the roster – went back into the field rotation.

A month passed with Carter staying late at the base almost every night when she wasn’t off world, working on the redial program. Whenever she thought she might have the answer, she scheduled another off-world test, usually at the Alpha Site. Every time she came back with her head down and her shoulders sagging, and Jack didn’t have to ask how it had gone.

What hope he’d had began to wane until it vanished almost completely. To his great chagrin, Jack gradually started to force himself to accept the fact that he would never see Daniel again.
His stubbornness, fear and inability to communicate had taken the man he loved from him, when a simple word or touch would have opened the door to... Jack couldn't even imagine what it might have been like with Daniel. No one had ever understood him as Daniel had. Even though the two men had rarely seen eye to eye on anything, their friendship had always been spirited, with an element of acceptance that few of Jack's other relationships had shared.

A kind of emotional winter descended upon his life. The calendar page read “June,” but Earth was a cold, bleak place for Jack. The lawn around his house withered up in the dry heat because he forgot to water it. Every night he sat on the roof with his telescope, as he had that first year after his return from Abydos, stargazing and wondering where Daniel might be.

Even that early in their relationship, there had been something about Daniel that had been hard to let go. Jack had sought out the tiny star that was the Abydos sun in the night sky, symbolically watching over Daniel from afar, since Jack couldn't be with him in person. Back then, it had been respect and reluctant appreciation that had driven him to search the night sky for his friend, but now...

Now, it was love, well tinged with a last vestige of desperation, hanging on tooth and nail to a ghost of hope. Every night, he would descend from his personal observatory only when weariness forced him down, after having nursed a few bottles of beer. He would fall face first into his bed, hoping for dreamless sleep. Every morning, even on the weekends, he would return to the base and go to his office, wading through whatever work needed to be done, just to keep busy.

Just as he was coming on duty on the first day of July, the elevator opened its doors as the klaxons went off to announce an incoming wormhole. Jack punched the button for the lowest level, hurrying toward the ‘gate room.

Carter came through alone, smudged with smoke and calling for support. She exchanged a look with him, her blue eyes bright and sparkling, in sharp contrast to her expression of concern and obvious signs that all had not gone well off world.

Something fluttered in Jack’s chest.

Carter turned her gaze up to the control booth and General Hammond’s worried face. “Sir, we need medical support and SAR. Doctor Lee’s been taken hostage by the aliens on P4X-22Y.”

“Upstairs for a briefing, ASAP,” Hammond ordered from above. “You, too, Colonel O’Neill. We’ll need your expertise on this one.”

Twenty minutes later, Jack was suiting up with the Search And Rescue team. He was first out the door and leading the way to the ‘gate room.

Carter stopped him in the hallway and pulled him through an open door. “I need a word, sir, before we leave,” she told him.

Jack turned to the men – fifteen of the SGC’s best, hand-picked by Hammond himself – and gestured them ahead of him to the ‘gate room. Major Coburn, their usual commander, gave him a grim nod and led the unit down the corridor. They were armed to the teeth, wearing Kevlar vests and helmets, fire in their eyes and intent on carrying out their mission: bringing home one of their own.

Out of sight of the team, Sam pressed a piece of paper in a plastic baggie into Jack’s hand. He slipped it into his pants pocket without looking at it. This had to be from Daniel. Who else left notes in Ziploc bags? His eyes asked the question his mouth could not.

“Daniel’s handwriting,” she whispered. “Addressed to you personally. For afterward. I found it on
the DHD on 22Y.”

He nodded curtly. “Thanks.” The sudden lump in his throat cut off any other words he might say.

She tiptoed up to kiss his cheek. “I didn’t read it. Nobody else even saw it.”

He grabbed her face with both hands and planted one on her, right on the lips. “Thank God,” he breathed, his heart thumping in his chest again. “Sam, I…”

Carter smiled, her eyes alight with hope for her two friends. “I know, sir. Bring him back to us. Tell him we all love him and miss him, will you? And good luck.”

She stepped around him and hurried down the corridor, strapping on her helmet and checking her weapons.

After taking just a moment for a hard swallow, Jack was hot on her heels, P-90 in his grip and determination in his eyes.

In the ‘gate room, he glanced up into the booth for a nod from Hammond to begin, then glanced at the SAR team’s commander.

Major Coburn’s arm moved in a circular sweep, his hand pointing to the stable event horizon. “Let’s go!” he called to them, and the men began to move out through the wormhole.

Jack ran through the ‘gate after the last man and started evasive procedures as soon as he hit the other side, his mind on the mission, his heart in his pocket with that slip of paper.

Daniel stepped out of the Stargate, glad to be back in his own personal paradise. It had been a narrow escape, just barely avoiding clashing with SG-1’s arrival on the planet he’d just left. He had stood at the DHD, hand raised over the first key, when the ‘gate had started its spin to receive an incoming wormhole. He’d quickly covered his tracks and ducked out of sight. When the team had gone off to begin their mission and were well out of earshot, he’d dialed his new home and left the message for Sam, knowing she or one of the others would find it and take it to Jack.

What had happened after that was anybody’s guess, but he was sure it wouldn’t take the SGC long to respond. This would probably be his last day on this world, among his new friends. His time with them had brought him a kind of peace he hadn’t known for years. He didn’t look forward to leaving, especially since he believed what awaited him on the other side was most likely going to be a long, difficult debriefing followed by a lengthy stay in a jail cell.

He might as well enjoy what little time he had left.

With a sad smile on his face, he waved to his little friends. Apparently the alien animals that were native to that planet were curious about the sounds the ‘gate made. They came running every time it was activated. That was how he had found them the first time he had arrived there, all gathered near the base of the Stargate, sitting upright on their furry haunches, big, bright eyes looking up expectantly.

At first, he had just stared at the creatures, not wanting to startle them. There must have been twenty or thirty of them, pleasant looking little furry creatures that were simply adorable, completely non-threatening and insatiably curious about him.
They all ranged between two and three feet high, had big eyes in a variety of colors and vaguely resembled giant long legged chinchillas. Delicate whiskers swept out from their upper lips. Thick drapes of shaggy fur covered most of their paws. They didn’t seem to have a standard color pattern among them, ranging in all shades from black to white to brown, including a grayish blue. Some were plain and some marked with stripes, spots or additional colors. No two were alike.

He had given them a little wave and said, “Hello,” and they had all turned to one another, vocalizing excitedly. As near as he could tell, it wasn’t language per se, just a collection of screeches, growls, chattering and whistles. With Daniel’s first step toward them, the chattering had immediately ceased, every head turning back toward him, ears curiously pricked up in his direction.

The creatures had quickly grown bored and some had started grooming themselves; others had trotted off not far away to find shade or something to eat. Even from their first contact, they hadn’t seemed afraid of him in the least. He had wandered cautiously among them, looking at them with just as much fascination as they had eyed him. After that, they had accompanied him everywhere as he wandered, taking in the Edenesque beauty of the landscape.

He had taken his time forming his opinion about whether or not these creatures were intelligent. After a few hours of observation, he’d decided that they were entirely simple creatures, perhaps a little more highly evolved on the social scale than rabbits, but still animals. Cute, furry little alien animals, completely harmless and without fear.

No insects had assaulted or annoyed him on that world. The weather had been pleasant, and although there were trees and flowers and lots of grass everywhere, his allergies hadn’t bothered him at all. He had played with the cute little animals and been charmed by them, but they were not why he had come, and so he didn’t allow himself to be too distracted by them.

After choosing a place to make himself a camp, he had begun exploring. In time, Daniel had discovered the place he had come to call his home, about two klicks away from the Stargate. The building – if one could truly call it that – was arranged on multilevel terraces rising up from a central paved square. There were no walls at all, just tall pale green columns shaped like water lilies with thick stems, stretching up twenty feet high to many-petaled flower caps at the top in shades of pastel pinks, yellows and white. Different rooms in the building were spaced apart from each other by changes in height, connected by stone paths, steps or terraces. Every room had a spectacular open-air view of the surrounding countryside, more of a well-manicured garden than a wild, natural habitat, yet there were no signs of any people who might have ever lived there.

Daniel had explored the place fully and then settled in, deciding to use it as his camp for further explorations. The rooms were bare minimum for survival, but it was all he needed. He had a place to sleep, a place to keep himself clean, and a place to have his meals.

His large bedroom was situated on the farthest end of the house, perched on top of a hill overlooking the beautiful countryside. The bed was huge and round, occupying the center of the room.

On a small promontory jutting out from the farthest end of the room stood a small Japanese style fire pit, where he did his cooking. The climate was mild enough that he didn’t really need fire for heat, but he preferred the fish he caught and the eggs for which he foraged cooked rather than raw. After some experimentations, Daniel managed to make himself some cooking implements out of native clay. The little fireplace became his kitchen, allowing him a pleasant view while he had his meals.

The bathroom cleaned itself. It had taken him a little time to figure out what the room’s function actually was, since there was no recognizable toilet or sink for washing. The bathtub was a big tip-off, however, and he had wasted no time using it to get himself clean.
He’d had to rescue his clothes and supplies from the critters’ inquisitive paws, but once he had his things put safely away, their activities began to illuminate him to the other functions of that marvelous room.

In that beautiful place, a sense of peace settled over him, and for a time he had found himself fulfilled with his simple, life-sustaining chores. By watching the animals’ daily habits, he had learned what plants were safe to eat. Surprised to discover they were omnivorous, they had also showed him where to fish and where to find eggs to eat, though they were not exactly hunters. Life had been easy enough there, but it required work, albeit simple tasks like fishing and foraging.

For a few hours each day, Daniel had wandered, just enjoying the breathtaking scenery and the companionship of his unquestioning, simple little friends. He had begun to give them names, even teaching them tricks like “fetch” and “roll over.”

The loneliness that had burdened him like a lead blanket for so many years had finally begun to lighten. But still there were times when his mind would return, as it always did, to thoughts of the man he loved.

Jack would like this place. He would enjoy these furry companions. But would he want Daniel there, knowing how he felt?

They had been friends for a long time, but Jack was career military and dating another officer. A female officer. The answer to that question had to be a resounding ‘no.’ Jack would want Daniel as far away from him as he could get. And so Daniel became committed to his solitude.

Sometimes Daniel let his grief out, allowing the tears he had kept under wraps for so long to run free. Invariably, one of the little fuzzies would nuzzle its way into his lap and lick his face clean of tears. It would purr and chatter at him, all big eyes, leaning into his chest, inviting him to hold it closer, often making him chuckle at its obvious affection for him. Invariably, he would feel better and his mood would lift.

He started talking to them, knowing they didn’t understand a word but needing to hear the sound of a human voice, even if it was just his own. He missed having someone to talk to, someone to share ideas with, someone with whom he could enjoy the simple pleasure of human contact, only that was no longer something he could have.

He told his furry friends about Jack, about his life, and why he had run away. With a heavy heart, he talked about his choices, and why he had done the things he had. They never offered their counsel because they were only cute animals, but he could cuddle them when he needed to be held and it helped a little.

Eventually, he went back to his journals and exploring, looking for some other evidence – besides his new home – that would tell him more about whoever had built that amazing structure.

This place had to be an important find; maybe not as high on the list as the Lost City would have been, but still pretty well up there. More importantly, he owed it to the SGC to share the information about the unlisted coordinates. He would let them look at the other places where he’d been and see if they could find what he’d so obviously missed. He couldn’t fully explore all of the worlds he’d seen, and a UAV could cover a lot more territory much faster than a single man on foot.

Daniel knew this discovery wasn’t something he could keep to himself. He would have to share it with the Tau’ri. That most likely meant giving himself up. Gradually, he realized that it was a chance he had to take.
So he had written the note, giving whoever found it the coordinates to his new home. He had addressed it to Jack, in the hopes that he might be among those who came to collect him, and begged his forgiveness. If Jack didn’t come, he’d know their friendship was lost forever. Then again, if Jack was the first one through the ‘gate with murder in his eyes…

Daniel had no idea how O’Neill would really feel about all this. Still, his decision had been made, the note had been written and left where it would be discovered relatively soon. Now all Daniel could do was wait. He’d resigned himself to his fate, whatever it was.

He picked up the little gray pet that was his favorite. The animal’s soft coat with its lighter underside reminded him of Jack’s hair, so he had taken to calling it Jack. Having nothing better to do, he went for a walk in the woods, telling aloud the story of Pandora’s Box as he scratched the little guy’s soft fur. Around his feet, eight or ten more of his little friends scampered. Wherever he went on that alien world, it seemed he was never truly alone.

Within hours of the arrival of his team, Jack scanned the camp. The perimeter had been secured, Lee had been rescued, everyone had been accounted for, and the medical staff was in the process of doing triage for the wounded. No one was watching the ‘gate, though it was in sight of the camp. His duty had been properly discharged, and soon everyone on the various teams would be going home through the Stargate.

His conscience was clear.

Jack took off the black ball cap that had replaced his helmet when the threat was over and camp was made. He wiped the sweat off his brow and adjusted the strap on his P-90 over his shoulder. After resettling the cap on his head, he reached into his pocket and casually began to stroll toward the Stargate as he unfolded the letter from Daniel.

The weight from his backpack was an annoyance, but he had supplies in there that might be necessary, depending on what was in the note. He was armed and prepared for anything. As he started to read, he was aware of a flare of hope in his heart.

Jack,

I’ve made an important discovery. We’ve been picking up clues and ignoring them, but they’re out there. So far, I’ve discovered four of them and calculated the rest.

There are ‘gate coordinates that aren’t on either the Abydos cartouche or those you entered in the database from the Ancients. Think of them as unlisted numbers on a telephone service. The numbers are there, but you can’t dial them if you don’t already know the number. I’ve come up with seven so far. If you tell Sam, I’m sure she can figure out the rest of them.

This is big, Jack. I’m sure the Lost City is one of these unlisted numbers, so you should get Sam to work on it soon.

There’s something here I think you should see. I’d like to show it to you personally, though I’ll understand if you don’t want to see me again. It would be nice if you’d come alone, because the invitation I’ve deciphered was issued specifically to lone travelers, and I think it’s important to respond that way.

I’ll explain more when you get here… if you come at all. If this doesn’t get to you, if you decide you can’t come or if Hammond sends troops instead, I’ll understand. I don’t want to go back, but if the
SFs come for me, I won’t put up a fight.

I know I did this to myself, made some bad decisions, but I think it turned out okay in the end. If I have to go back and I end up in prison, I should do fine. The things you’ve taught me over the years will help with that.

I hope you will want to come see this place I’ve found. I think it’s like a Minnesota in space.

Hopefully, too, after you get a look at it, and we see each other again, you will be able to forgive me for running out on you like I did. I hope also that some part of you still cares about me, even a little. I long for that, but I know better than to expect it. I’m sorry I let you down, and if you come, I promise to keep everything on a professional level.

In friendship,

Daniel

Jack clutched the simple piece of paper to his chest, his heart in his throat. There were glyphs down the right side of the page, the address of the place where he would finally find Daniel. It felt like a miracle.

He carefully studied the glyphs. Nonchalantly, he walked up to the DHD, glancing back over his shoulder at the camp. Everyone seemed busy with caring for the wounded, some almost ready to be transported back to the base.

They would be leaving this planet soon, and then Jack would lose his chance to catch up to Daniel. He would be duty-bound to turn over the letter with his location on it to General Hammond, who would no doubt send Jack and a couple of SG teams to fetch their wayward chief archaeologist.

Jack knew what he had to do.

Without any more thought, he quickly punched in the address, keeping an eye on the camp behind him. They were coming now, some of them on the run. The wormhole stabilized, and Jack ran through it at full speed.

It disengaged moments afterward, and he was alone.

Almost.

On the other side, he found the most beautiful place he’d ever seen outside of his home state. It was sunny, the sky a crisp azure blue, and the earth was covered with a soft carpet of dark green moss. Tall trees with many colored leaves were everywhere, casting dappled shadows on the ground. The air was fresh and crisp and clean, and Jack filled his lungs with it.

He remembered what Daniel had called the place. It even smelled like Minnesota.

Standing in a small crowd a little distance away was a flock of little animals, all looking at him curiously. They must have come in response to the noise of the Stargate, because some were still arriving. Jack watched them sit up on their haunches and stare at him.

He stared back. They didn’t make any threatening moves, so he turned to the reason he had come to that world in the first place, still keeping a wary eye on the critters.
Jack dropped his gaze to the ground and clearly saw the footprints from Daniel’s soft boots. Two sets of tracks went out from the ‘gate, and one returned. He followed the outgoing prints until the sets of tracks diverged, then backtracked to the ‘gate and followed the incoming tracks, hoping those would lead him directly to Daniel’s camp.

The creatures trotted along with him in a loose group, some disappearing ahead of him into the trees. Jack kept an eye on the closest ones, always wary, automatically doing a continuous threat assessment of the entire area as his training and experience demanded. Gradually, all of them dispersed into the underbrush, and Jack turned his attention fully on his pursuit, gaze on the turf.

Daniel’s tracks disappeared on a wide patch of rocky ground and Jack returned to the previous trails, picking one and following it until it, too, disappeared. Frustration levels rising, he tried the third and lost it, too. He needed Teal’c, who could track damn near anything, but he couldn’t risk going back for the big guy.

For over an hour, he circled and hunted through the landscape, looking for any sign of where Daniel had gone. Just when Jack decided he’d gone on a wild goose chase, that Daniel had given up waiting to be discovered on this unlisted world and gone somewhere else, the sound of a familiar voice wafted to Jack on the breeze stirring the leaves on the trees.

At the sound of Daniel’s voice, so familiar, so longed for, so long unheard, Jack froze.

“Daniel!” he whispered. He couldn’t believe he was so close to being reunited with him. He listened carefully for a few seconds to assure himself of the right direction, then moved forward through the trees, his footsteps muffled by the soft carpet of moss underneath his boots.

Between the trunks, he caught a glimpse of movement, something taller than the little beasties, and the sight set Jack’s heart beating in his throat, thundering in his ears. He couldn’t swallow, his mouth gone suddenly bone dry. Adrenaline shot through his body, making him shaky. Time seem to slow down. Joy warred with fear, anger, grief and desire until he didn’t know what he felt anymore.

He could hear Daniel’s voice clearly now, but he couldn’t understand what he was saying exactly. It didn’t matter. Jack hurried closer, listening to the gentle pattern of Daniel’s words, weighted with pleasant affection.

A pang of irrational jealousy shot through Jack. He slung his P-90 out of the way of his stride, holding it with one hand at his side, the strap securely around his neck. He took off, crashing through the underbrush now at almost a dead run.

He emerged into a grassy clearing, spotting Daniel smack dab in the middle of a flock of the little thigh-high mouse-bunny looking things. He even had a gray one in his arms, and he glanced up from its face as he heard the intrusion.

Daniel’s eyes widened as he stared at the man running at him full tilt. Fear was written all over him at the sight of the oncoming freight train that was a single-minded, mightily pissed off Jack O’Neill.

The younger man squatted just low enough for the creature to leap free of his arms and run away with all the other mousie-bunnies, and then Daniel bolted right after them.

Running away from Jack.

“Damn it, Daniel!” he yelled in warning, pushing his legs for more speed. “Get back here!”

“I’m sorry!” he shouted over his shoulder. “Jack, calm down!” He glanced, wild-eyed, over his shoulder, then snapped his head around and ran faster. His voice dropped in volume, but floated
easily back over his shoulder to his pursuer. “Crap! I’m in for it now.”

All the terrible fear and frustration Jack had felt over the last three months lit a fire under him. He poured on speed he didn’t know he had, closing the gap between himself and his fleeing quarry, until Jack could almost touch the blue robes flying out behind the man. Gritting his teeth, he demanded still more of his body, and he finally flung himself at Daniel, catching him about the hips and tackling him.

When they hit the ground, Daniel was still moving, crawling across the mossy earth, rolling and bucking, trying to get out of Jack’s grasp. Jack dragged himself along, climbing up Daniel’s body using his robes for hand-holds until he pinned the other man to the ground. Grabbing Daniel’s shoulder, he half lifted himself just enough that he could turn the man over onto his back and squash him flat again. He lay gasping against Daniel’s heaving chest.

“Don’t hit me!” Daniel panted, hands up to protect his face. “Please, Jack, just listen—“

“You dumb fuck!” roared Jack, his voice breaking with the maelstrom of emotion flooding him. “You will never walk away from me again without talking to me, do you hear me, Daniel Jackson?”

“Jack, I—“

“Do you have any idea how much trouble you’re in, God damn it?” he demanded hotly, slithering upward a little more, pinning Daniel flat on his back. Jack grasped a handful of robe, just in case he managed to get away, and held down Daniel’s legs with his own. “Or what kind of hell you put me through?”

Jack couldn’t even see him. All the impotent rage, all the worry and terror he’d felt surged up in him. He struck out at Daniel, his fist connecting with Daniel’s jaw. At that angle, with his body all but flattened against the other man, the upward punch didn’t have much power behind it, just enough to make a point. It hurt his hand, though. “Ow!” Jack shook his hand, knuckles smarting.

“Waitwaitwaitwaitwait!” Daniel cried, squeezing his eyes shut and crossing his arms over his head. “I’m sorry, Jack! Please just listen to me!”

Breath burning in his lungs, Jack felt the fight go right out of him at the sound of Daniel’s desperate, terrified apology. He gripped the blue robes with both hands and pushed his body upright, straddling Daniel’s hips.

“You…” Jack gasped, fighting to catch his breath. “…stupid.” He panted through his mouth, gritting his teeth. “…sonofabitch!” He took a couple of noisy breaths. Jack picked Daniel’s shoulders up off the ground by his robes and shook him against the dirt, rattling Daniel’s teeth. Daniel’s hands came up, pushing against Jack’s shoulders, holding him back. “Jack, stop!”

“You shoulda… told me, God damn you…” His eyes bored into Daniel’s with an intensity that he hoped Daniel would find both intimidating and illuminating. He was desperate to communicate his relief, anger and love all in the same space of time.

“So you could beat me up for making a pass at you and have me thrown off the team?” growled Daniel sullenly, shoving back against Jack’s shoulders, teeth bared in frustrated anger. “No, thanks, Jack.”

“All this time wasted, Danny,” gasped Jack, his fingers tightening on the cloth. “We coulda…“
He closed his mouth, desperately searching for some spit to coat his throat so he could say his piece, breath burning in his throat and lungs. He was getting way too old for playing chase.

“But I haven’t wasted my time!” Daniel argued back, hands pawing for purchase against Jack’s shoulders, keeping him at arm’s length. “I’ve found some amazing things, Jack! If you’ll just listen —“

Jack ignored his words. At the moment, he didn’t give a flying fuck what Daniel had discovered anywhere. Finally, he managed to swallow and catch his breath a little. “We coulda… been screwing our brains out, Daniel! Stubborn little shit.”

“I’ve got so much to tell you— whahwhahwhat?” His last words ran together as what Jack had just said registered on his brain. “Screwing? Us? You? Me? Screwing? Jack?!?”

His eyes were wide, and he didn’t look like he was breathing.

Jack nodded, light headed now from the run and a little dizzy with emotion and the nearness of the man he loved. Now was no time to pass out, however.

He studied those startled blue eyes, his gaze traveling across that high forehead and square jaw, that fine nose and a hot mouth that just begged to be kissed… to the dark bruise forming on Daniel’s jaw where Jack had punched him. He reached out, and Daniel stiff-armed him and tensed beneath his butt, evidently expecting another punch.

Jack’s long fingers traced gently over the swelling. “Aw, Daniel. I’m sorry, I—“ His voice caught, running out of spit again. After a couple of false starts, Jack leaned down and gave Daniel a quick, dry peck on the bruise. “I didn’t mean to hit ya, Danny. I’ve been a fucking mess. Went a little crazy there. I’m sorry,” he said again.

He patted at Daniel’s chest, smoothing out the robes and then messing them up again with more aimless patting. Finally he took his hands up, giving a final approving pat to the air above the robes. He was so damned embarrassed and hurt and thrilled he didn’t know what to do with himself. He settled his hands on his thighs and risked another glance at Daniel’s face.

The man was frowning at him now. “Jack? Are you all right?”

It took a couple of breaths for everything to register, that he was sitting on Daniel, looking down into that face he thought he’d never see again; that Daniel was alive and apparently well on this unlisted world; and that Daniel loved him.

A huge grin broke out over his face and he nodded. “Oh, yeah. I’m good. Got everything I need…” He patted Daniel’s chest again. “…right here.”

“You mean…” Daniel was still frowning, obviously still trying to process everything.

“I’m in love with you, too, genius,” he snapped, breath moving back toward normal. He didn’t think he could stand up, though, so he kept his seat. Daniel was warm and comfy, and even though Jack’s knees were begging for a break, he didn’t want to move.

He waited for the smile, but it wasn’t coming quite yet.

Daniel frowned even deeper. “Then what the hell was all that with Sam? You wanted to show me how much you loved me by sleeping with the woman who’s the closest thing to a sister I’ll ever have?”
He pushed at Jack, trying to get him off, but Jack wasn’t budging. “Move it, O’Neill. I want up.”

“Not till were done here,” Jack told him, some of his relieved good humor fading a little. “Look, Daniel, I didn’t know how you felt about me. I thought you liked women. Hell, you had ‘em lining up for you on practically every planet we’ve visited over the past eight years! You had to beat ‘em off with a stick. Teal’c was your personal bodyguard, for cryin’ out loud! How was I supposed to know you’d ever love me?”

Daniel held up his right hand, sticking up one finger for each name he called out. “Sha’re, Hathor, who doesn’t really count because… well, just because. And Melocia in the Land of Light, Princess Shyla and Ke’ra, who I’ve always been sorry about, but she was a rebound affair, and I wasn’t exactly thinking straight at the time. That’s four women in eight years; five if you count Hathor, which you really shouldn’t. Not exactly lining up, Jack.

“All you had to do was tell me you had feelings for me, and I’d have been all over you like white on a polar bear.”

“That’s white on rice,” Jack corrected bemusedly. “Get your clichés straight, Daniel.”

He relaxed against the moss. “I like polar bears better than rice, and some rice is brown. So, polar bears.”

Daniel stuck his tongue out at Jack, his frown diminishing rapidly. “And why are you changing the subject, Jack? Pay attention! I had no idea how you felt, either.” Daniel shrugged and gave him a little grin, looking at him through his eyelashes. “I guess we were both pretty stupid, huh?”

“Shit scared, more like it,” said Jack.

He hesitated, terribly ashamed of how he had reacted. His fingers danced nervously over Daniel’s jaw again. “I’m sorry. About a lot of things. I should’ve talked to you, Daniel. I’m just not good at that.” He sighed. “And I know you’re not either. You can talk about any subject under the sun except what’s going on inside your head. I guess it took something as drastic as losing each other to force the words out of both of us, huh?”

“Yeah.” Daniel cleared his throat. He lifted one hand and covered the one Jack still had against his chest. “What about Sam? Is she okay?”

Jack nodded. “Oh, she’s fine, but Jeez, Daniel, I was such a mess, trying to deal with how I felt about you. That’s why I left the team. I was so afraid I’d be too busy lookin’ at you to look after you properly. I was afraid I’d get you killed, so I took the responsibility for your life and gave it to someone I thought was more capable. Edwards is a good man.”

He hesitated, needing to explain, to let his friend know all of the truth he hadn’t stayed behind to witness. “I need you to know, I never touched Carter, Daniel. We never… We didn’t. I just couldn’t. Not with her, when I knew I wanted you. I couldn’t do that to her.”

Daniel smiled with relief and nodded, his hand was so warm, his fingers curling around Jack’s. It felt so right. Jack held on for dear life.

“I thought… Actually I guess I wasn’t thinking very much, really,” Jack continued. “I was kinda moving on autopilot, doing what I hoped was the right thing. I guess I figured, if I got involved with a woman, I could push you out of my heart, but that so didn’t work. Carter figured it out first and pulled my head outta my ass. Then you disappeared and I…I kinda went a little nuts. She and I broke up the day you left.”
Jack directed his gaze at Daniel’s chest, fingers tooling around in the loose cloth of his robes, making little swirly designs, pretending they were important.

“Oh?” Daniel tried to sit up, pushing at the ground with his elbows until he could prop himself up on them.

“Yeah.” Jack looked at the patterns in the blue cloth, embarrassed to admit what he’d been through. He couldn’t meet Daniel’s eyes, remembering his misery during those days. “Whenever an unauthorized wormhole came through, I’d run to the control booth. If I heard something splat, I’d go to the nearest bathroom and throw up. Honest to God. I thought it might be you, trying to come home to me.”

“Oh, Jack, I’m so sorry!” Daniel’s voice was soft and filled with remorse. He reached up with one grimy hand and cradled Jack’s face in it. “I didn’t know… Jack, I love you. I never wanted to hurt you! God. If I’d had any idea you wanted me, this never would’ve happened.”

He leaned up on one elbow. “We’ve both been through so much, been so incredibly stupid. Can you forgive me?”

“Did that when I got your letter. Think you can forgive me for my greater than normal stupidity?”

“You’re not stupid, Jack,” Daniel assured him. “I never bought that act for a second, and of course I forgive you.” He smiled warmly. “You love me. That wipes the slate clean. We can start over now.”

Jack took Daniel’s face in both hands and started to lean down for a kiss. Then he stopped and straightened. A slow smile spread across his mouth. He felt as if the sun was rising inside his body, filling him with welcome warmth and joy. “If we’re gonna do this, Daniel, we’re gonna do it right.”

He leaned slowly down over Daniel’s face, placing his hands on the moss beside Daniel’s head. Eyes locked, noses an inch apart, Jack growled at him. “I’m gonna kiss you, DanielJackson. Every inch of you. Gonna make love to you, too.”

Daniel’s eyes widened. “Oh!” His voice was a strained soprano squeak. He quivered. He wriggled. He groaned in surrender. His tongue darted out to wet his lips.

He felt Daniel’s dick swelling beneath his butt. Jack leaned closer, brushing his dry lips against Daniel’s left cheek, not in a kiss, just a slow, sensual caress. Their noses brushed slightly in passing, and then Jack smoothed his lips across Daniel’s right cheek as he spoke, his voice low and commanding.

“And I’m gonna like it. So are you. Gonna want to do it a lot. Hope that’s what you want, too.”

He pulled back a little and met Daniel’s heated gaze. Those blue eyes were hypnotized, staring without blinking. Daniel’s cock was hard under him and Jack had to fight not to rub himself against that swollen shaft.

“Soon,” Jack promised fervently, reveling in that heated blue gaze. “That sound like a plan?”

Daniel struggled to swallow, incapable of words. Eyes wide, he nodded and finally managed to blink, as all his mental gears started to turn again after the shock of Jack’s proposition.

Jack grunted with the effort it took to get to his feet. He stepped away a little as Daniel got up, brushing himself off.
Jack’s knees ached. His legs were still wobbly from the run. In spite of all that, he didn’t think he’d ever felt better in his life. Daniel was alive, and he loved Jack O’Neill. They were together. That was enough.

He glanced at Daniel and saw the younger man looking at him shyly. He was obviously excited, horny, shivering and scared, just like Jack was himself.

“What did you have in mind?” asked Daniel as he straightened up, looking Jack in the eye.

“Mmmmm, Daaaaannnniel,” replied Jack in Simpson’s-esque fashion. He waggled his eyebrows and grinned, then took a step toward him to start showing him what he had in mind.

He tripped over something that hadn’t been there a moment earlier, or at least he hadn’t noticed it in his lust-fogged condition. The stumble jerked his mind back to his surroundings, reminding him that something else besides Daniel Jackson and himself existed in the universe. He glanced down at the furry critter now protectively hugging Daniel’s calf.

“Ah, Daniel… these your pets?”

“My friends. They’ve kind of adopted me. Rarely let me out of their sight.”

Jack studied the creatures, just now venturing back out into view, creeping hesitantly toward them, looking like they might bolt at any second, wary but curious about this new stranger among them.

“I saw a pack of ‘em when I came out of the ‘gate. They’re cute,” he ventured hesitantly, eyeing the little gray one clutching Daniel’s leg so possessively. “Do they bite?”

“Well, they haven’t bitten me, so I think they’re friendly,” Daniel assured him. “Just treat them like you would a dog and they’ll probably like you.”

“I like dogs.”

“I know.”

Jack bent down and held out one hand, knuckles outward, for one of the creatures to sniff. A white one with black tiger stripes inched closer, giving Jack a good look.

It was about three feet tall, built like a cross between a long-legged rabbit and a giant fluffy mouse, with a short bushy tail and small leaf-shaped ears, now pricked up toward them in curiosity. It had big blue eyes, marking it as a nocturnal species, even though they were obviously out and about during the day. Cuffs of long, thick fur draped over their paws, masking all but the tips of the toes.

“C’mere, little fella,” Jack coaxed gently. “I won’t hurt you.”

“Um, they just saw you pound me, Jack,” Daniel reminded him gently, fingertips touching the bruise on the underside of his jaw. “They might be a little hesitant to see you as a friend just yet.”

The creature sniffed his hand, never taking its eyes off his face, inching closer.

“She’s pretty. I like the tiger stripes.” When Alpha cautiously moved into range, Jack brushed his hand against her soft fur and smiled. He eased his fingers along her cheek and then the side of her neck, starting to scratch gently. The animal leaned into his skilled touch and he smiled. Soon he was
scrubbing her back and shoulders and the others were losing their fear and coming closer.

Daniel started pointing. “That brown one with the white spots is Beta. The blond is Delta, the black and white spotted one is Theta. The shy one in the back, that’s Omega, and the gray one attached to my leg, here, is... um... Jack.”

Craning his neck to look up at his soon-to-be-lover, Jack grinned. Daniel had left himself wide open for a tease. “You just had to, didn’t ya?”

“Well, I—”

“You and your Greek alphabets,” Jack carped, giving the mousie-bunny a final pat and straightening up to make eye contact, unable to wipe off his smile. “Ya couldn’t do the military alphabet. Had to be Greek.”

Suddenly Jack realized something about Daniel was different. He sobered. “Where are your glasses? Didja lose ‘em?”

With a slight blush, Daniel cleared his throat and nodded toward the animals, drawing Jack’s attention back to the little faces peering up at them curiously. “My new friends stole them and my shades while I was sleeping a few nights ago. They’re probably broken. I’ve been getting along without them.”

Daniel smiled, dimples flaring. He chuckled a little. When he spoke again, his voice was lower, sexier, full of promise. “So just what did you have in mind, Jack? How do you want to get started?”

Jack took a step closer, almost reaching to embrace Daniel, and stopped himself, fingers flexing at his sides. “I wanna just get naked and lay you down and fuck the daylights out of you right now, Daniel,” he growled huskily, “but I’ve never been with a man before. And I want our first time to be special. In a bed. With candles. Flowers. Music. Champagne. I want us both to be clean and sparkly. I want it to mean something. It’s for the rest of our lives, and we only get to be virgins once.”

He hesitated, a sudden possibility coming to mind. “I’m assuming you’ve never done this with a man before. Have you?”

Daniel shook his head, eyes glittering. “Never wanted a man. Not till you. Only you.”

God, the way Daniel was looking at him, it was a wonder Jack’s clothes didn’t catch fire. Those amazing eyes of his were black with desire, only a sliver of blue left around the huge pupils. With his peripheral vision, Jack saw the tent pole still standing out beneath Daniel’s robes and began to salivate. His heart pounded in his chest. Everything else in the universe dropped away again, leaving Daniel standing in a halo of white light. Daniel was all that existed for Jack; all that mattered.

“I never figured you for such a romantic,” whispered Daniel. He swallowed hard.

“Maybe it’s just the company I keep that brings it out in me,” Jack whispered back.

“I don’t have any candles or champagne, Jack.”

“Doesn’t matter.” He was sweating. His lower abdomen felt full, his dick already starting to fill. By sheer force of will, he backed off the arousal, keeping himself in check. “Let’s go to your camp, Daniel.” He reached out and caught the man’s hand, lacing his fingers through his soon-to-be-lover’s.

A look of wonder passed over Daniel’s face. “I’m taking you to my home, Jack. You’re not gonna
believe the house where I’m living. I just know you’re going to love it.”

“As long as you’re there,” Jack assured him, “it’ll be perfect.”

For a few steps, Daniel walked slightly bent over, eyes on the ground, obviously struggling with his own arousal until he got it under control.

Jack could hardly keep his eyes off his companion, barely glancing at the path to be sure of his step, distracted now and then by the mousie-bunnies running beside them, chattering now like a flock of birds or noisy squirrels.

They seemed like happy little animals. Jack decided he liked them. He glanced around and tried to remember their names as they traveled together through the trees, holding Daniel’s hand as they walked. Daniel went over them again for him, pointing each one out and telling him a little about what their personalities were like.

As always, Daniel was doing his job off-world, being Doctor Jackson.

Jack loved that about him, that he was always the scholar. He wondered idly if Daniel would be as skilled in bed. Jack looked forward to finding out.

The two men emerged from the woods into a broad paved square with little garden plots scattered here and there. Not far away, fluted columns that looked like giant water lilies stretched upward… and became transparent, disappearing as they reached the height far above them where a ceiling should be. Jack stared in wonder as they passed beneath the first rows. Nothing but blue sky stretched above their heads, yet the interior was shaded.

“Wow,” he breathed appreciatively. “This is some house you got here, Daniel.”

“There’s no telling how long it’s been here,” the younger man observed. “The materials aren’t affected by weather. They can’t be damaged. As far as I can tell, they’re eternal.”

“Is there a roof up there?” Jack was craning his neck, looking for some kind of seam, shift or shimmer that would indicate the actual top of the columns, but they just faded into blue sky.

“Yes. It rains every three days like clockwork, just enough to water the vegetation. It’s amazing to watch the water droplets hit the surface of the roof and slide down. The only time you can see the whole structure is when it’s raining. It’s beautiful, Jack.”

“I got that already.” There was a sense of wonder about the place, something that made him want to lower his voice and speak in hushed tones. He felt Daniel squeeze his hand and made eye contact.

Daniel was radiant with happiness. There was so much love in his eyes it made sweet pain resonate in Jack’s heart. “I’m either dead, dreaming or delirious,” Jack murmured. “This is just too damn good to be true.”

“I was just thinking that same thing.” Daniel sighed with a happy smile.

“The bath is in here.” He led the way to a small room covered, both walls and floor, in blue tiles that looked like lapis lazuli, veined with streaks of gold. In the center of the room was a small rectangular pool with a seat built onto one of the long sides and wide steps at either end. “That’s the bathtub,” he confirmed. “Fresh water flows through it constantly, always at the same perfect temperature.”

At the far end of the room a small waterfall poured into a little pool. Daniel pointed at it. “That’s the toilet. I didn’t figure that out until I saw these little guys using it for one. Constantly cleans itself, so
the water’s always pure.” He moved around to the far side of the tub and grasped the sash on his robe. “Do you want to bathe separately, or together?”

Jack looked at Daniel. The younger man seemed suddenly shy, his chin dipped down, glancing up at Jack nervously. “Separately. Save the revelation for later. Where will you be, and where do I go when I’m finished?”

Jack wanted to touch him, to hold him and tell him not to be afraid, but he was scared himself. He had no idea how to treat this big, strong man he’d fallen so hard for, but he would learn. Daniel would help teach him – they would teach each other – and Jack couldn’t wait for class to get started. They were both terrified, both turned on, both desperately trying to contain themselves until the right moment arrived.

“When you’re done, come through here,” Daniel directed, leading Jack along to show him the way. The bathing plaza gave way to a terrace dotted with more gardens and columns, ending in a circular platform with what appeared to be a very large, neatly made round bed. It was covered in some sort of dark blue velvety material spangled with silvery threads that shimmered like stars against a night sky. “This is where we sleep.”

“We?”

Daniel chuckled and ducked his head, glancing up at Jack from beneath his lashes. “I’ve been sharing a bed with the tribe for a while now. This is where they sleep, and I sleep with them.”

Jack’s eyebrows darted downward as his chin tipped up and he looked askance at Daniel. “Uh, they’re not gonna get in bed with us when we’re… you know…”

“I hope not, but I don’t know. They stay up for a few hours after the sun goes down, but by morning they’re usually tucked up all around me.” He shrugged, growing suddenly somber. “It’s helped with the loneliness.”

His smile disappeared. He looked away, turning his myopic eyes to the beautiful vista stretching out on all sides from the bedchamber.

“Daniel.”

Jack had seen the haunted look in those eyes just before Daniel turned away. They were shadowed with the pain he’d suffered during their long separation. “I’m here now, Danny. You’re not alone anymore.”

Daniel turned to him and smiled softly. He nodded. The pain was still there, but fading quickly.

Jack wanted to wipe it out of his memory forever. “I’ll be back soon,” Jack promised, and returned to the bathroom.

He undressed quickly and left his clothes in a pile. When he started to get into the water, one of the little animals ran past the far side of the tub. Jack remembered Daniel had said the critters had stolen his glasses, so maybe they were into thievery, little pack rats who liked shiny and unusual things. He didn’t want them to run off with his weapons and possibly hurt themselves, so he looked around for safe hiding place. He spotted a carving high up on one of the columns. He hung the P-90’s strap on that, added his belt with the zat holster, and hoped they’d be out of reach up there. His knife he took with him to the tub, along with his utility vest.

Checking the temperature of the water with his toe, he found it suitably warm and stepped into the thigh-deep water with a sigh. He lowered himself into the water with a grateful sigh, submerging
even his head for a moment to get himself wet all over.

From his vest, resting within reach on the blue tiles beside the tub, Jack fetched a packet of biodegradable liquid soap and scrubbed himself down thoroughly, hair and all, paying special attention to his nether regions. Then he submerged himself in the warm water for a good rinse.

Last of all he shaved with the liquid soap and the blade of his knife, doing it by feel as he had hundreds of times in the field.

He tried not to think about anything, just moving by instinct. When he was thoroughly clean, he climbed out of the tub, tucked his knife out of reach with the other weapons, and looked around for a suitable towel-like object, figuring his T-shirt would have to do.

As he stood there, a jet of warm air began to blow on him from above. He smiled to himself, delighted with this place that seemed to have all the conveniences without the ugly machines that cluttered up the view. He ran his fingers through his hair until it was silky and dry, pulled a comb from his pack and ran it over his head by habit, since no mirror was handy.

Slipping back into his boxers in case some other human made an unexpected appearance, he brushed his teeth over the bathtub. Jack glanced about for a sink or other potable water source where he could rinse the brush. Hesitantly, he examined the toilet waterfall, which Daniel had said was a fountain of fresh water. He still wasn’t sure about just how fresh it was until one of the little fuzzies came up and got a drink from it.

“Thank you,” he said brightly as the little creature scampered off. He rinsed his toothbrush with confidence.

He bundled up his clothes and gear, took his weaponry down and followed the terraced path back to the bedroom.

Daniel wasn’t there. Jack stowed his gear, making sure he found another peg to keep his weapons out of reach, and sat down on the velvet bedspread to try it out. The mattress beneath was soft and molded to his butt perfectly. He pulled back the thick, heavy cover and found beneath it sheets made of the softest cloth Jack had ever felt, in a shade of pale blue just the color of Daniel’s eyes. Dozens of pillows in shades of blues, whites and greens were scattered everywhere on the bed. Turning down the covers, Jack slipped beneath them and took off his boxers, dropping them on the floor beside the bed.

Exciting images scrolled through his mind, making him remember that he wasn’t quite prepared for Daniel’s return. He got up and picked through his backpack, fetching the tiny bottle of hand lotion he always carried for use on cold, wintry planets to keep his hands from chapping.

He lay back against the bed to wait. Putting his hands behind his head, he quickly began to doze in the warmth and comfort.

Just as he was dropping off to sleep, one of the mousie-bunnies jumped up onto the bed with a squeak. Jack shot bold upright. Covers went flying, and the critter did, too, leaping off the bed with a shriek. As Jack watched it, his heart pounding from the surprise, he saw it cowering on the floor. Its eyes were wide, its black-furred body trembling, ears laid back flat against its skull, making its big green eyes look huge.

“Hey, I’m sorry, little girl,” Jack apologized once he’d gathered his wits. “Your name’s Omega, right? You just surprised me, is all. I didn’t know you were even there.”
He sat up and reached out to it slowly, knuckles out, and managed to get a scrub going. That seemed to calm the animal down, and soon it had its eyes drifting closed in pleasure, a soft, rumbling purr echoing deep in its throat.

“There you go. See? We’re friends. Just don’t jump up on the bed like that anymore.” He bent down a little closer, and its eyes opened wider, staring at him warily. “Why don’t you go tell all your little buddies to take a hike for a while, huh? Daniel and I… we wanna be alone tonight. Okay, cutie?”

The animal cocked its head at him, and when he stopped scratching, it scampered away.

A moment later Daniel returned from his bath, his blue robes neatly folded and modestly held in front of his crotch. He was smiling shyly.

Jack turned around from where he was sitting on the edge of the bed to look, feasting his eyes on the sight of a gloriously naked Daniel Jackson.

Daniel laid his clothes aside and just stood there, letting Jack look at him in the golden afternoon sunshine passing through the invisible roof.


The words thundered through Jack’s head with a sound like waves crashing against the rocky shore, but he couldn’t say them. Jack was dry-mothed, unable to swallow, and found he’d forgotten how to talk. He wasn’t sure he could move, either.

The man was an Adonis, Michelangelo’s David, in the flesh. And all his.

“Stand up,” Daniel urged gently. “I want to see you, Jack. All of you. I’ve dreamed about you for so long.” His breath hitched and he swallowed hard, eyes filled with longing and need.

Moving on instinct, Jack threw off the covers and stood up, the big bed between them. Heat filled his belly and his dick was swelling, standing out from his body until it was so stiff it hurt. He watched Daniel’s eyes travel all over him, looking at the gray hair and the scars, the muscles covered with flesh that was just starting to soften with time. This was all the ugliness that Jack saw in the mirror every day, only now he could see that Daniel was looking at him through the eyes of love. Daniel’s expression was filled with joy and delight.

What a gift that was! That look alone was priceless. Jack would fight hordes of aliens, travel across a hundred galaxies, brave any terror, just to see it again. What few doubts he still had fell away in that instant, and he was reborn in the nimbus of that silent benediction.

“First touch,” announced Jack.

He wanted to look sexy as he walked around the bed, but with his dick bobbing in the breeze, he thought it was probably impossible. He looked down at himself and grinned, catching the waving shaft and pulling it up close to his body as he closed the distance between them. He stopped inches away and let his cock go gradually, making sure he didn’t inadvertently touch Daniel with it. He didn’t want that to be their first touch as lovers.

Daniel moved first, his right hand settling like a warm blanket over Jack’s heart. With a sense of incredible rightness, Jack placed his hand on Daniel’s chest, shocked by the texture of his smooth, hairless skin, the warmth of it, and the feel of those manly muscles beneath. He’d never felt anything like that, and it was powerfully arousing.

“First kiss,” said Daniel in a low voice. He smiled a little, shyly. “Technically, though, you’ve kissed
me a couple of times before.” His voice softened with wonder. “I think that’s why I started falling in love with you, actually. That you could be so macho and charming and still feel secure enough to kiss me, to hold me when I needed it. I don’t normally let people in, Jack. But I did with you. All the way in, down to the core.”

Jack nodded. In that moment, Jack was so gone, so crazy in love, he found that his fear had vanished, leaving only heat and joy behind. He was certain he had never experienced this with anyone before, and hoped that what he saw in Daniel’s eyes was evidence that his lover felt the same.

With infinite tenderness, Jack leaned down, close enough to feel the warmth of Daniel’s breath on his lips. His eyes drifted closed, and he just stayed there, inhaling the scent of Daniel’s mouth, feeling the heat of his body and breath. Jack was aching at the sweetness of being so close, so intimate with this man, at long last. He savored it.

At last, their lips touched, trembling and soft, slowly parting as they glided together, sealing soul to soul. Tongues reached out hesitantly, seeking each other by feel, caressing tenderly, peace filling them both up to overflowing.

Jack felt Daniel trembling. He wanted more, suddenly starving, but wasn’t sure if Daniel was ready for that. He pulled back, reluctantly separating them, and opened his eyes.

“First real kiss,” he murmured softly, his hands coming up to reverently cradle Daniel’s face.

“I love you,” Daniel whispered, his eyes searching his lover’s. “I wish I had better words for it, Jack, because that’s so not good enough. ‘I love you.’ People say that every day but this…”

He put his hand over his own heart, gazing up into Jack’s eyes. “This isn’t every day. This is once in a lifetime. Maybe once in a hundred lifetimes. And I’ve waited so long to tell you.”

“I know,” said Jack. “Me, too.” He stepped into Daniel’s space, taking him in his arms. His hands stroked up into Daniel’s hair, lighter now from so much time in the sun. Jack tilted his head back to look at him, to fill his eyes and heart with the vision of that beloved face.

Something flicked on in Daniel’s eyes, a hot coal roaring into flaming life. “Anything you want, Jack,” he whispered. “I’ll do anything you want.” His arms went around Jack possessively, hands holding him, fingers exploring his skin.

“I want us to make love, now, here, in this perfect place,” Jack told him with quiet intensity.

He suddenly became painfully aware of Daniel’s hard dick wedged between their bellies, right alongside his own. He glanced down between them, easing back a little to revel in the sight of this first intimacy, and Daniel looked, too.

When Jack raised his eyes to Daniel’s face again, meeting his eyes, he saw the hunger there, the passion just waiting to be shared. Jack ran his hands down onto the curve of Daniel’s ass and then he curled his hips under a little, thrusting slowly against Daniel’s belly. He was rewarded with the sight of those gorgeous eyes closing. Daniel’s head tipped back and a soft little gusted groan slipping out from between his lips.


Jack descended on him then like a starving man, devouring Daniel’s mouth and tongue, hands rubbing, squeezing and probing every swell and cleft he could reach. His skin was on fire, his stomach quivering with butterflies the size of B-52s. Somehow he and Daniel ended up on the bed,
rolling around on each other, each seeking dominance.

Finally, Jack lay back and let Daniel take the top. In all Jack’s fantasies, Daniel had been the one penetrated, but in the split second Jack had made that decision, he knew he wanted to experience this first time the other way. He wanted to give himself completely to this wonderful man, to satisfy Daniel’s fantasies and show him without benefit of words how much he was loved.

Daniel raised up above him, looking down uncertainly in his eyes. “What now, Jack? What do you want me to do?” he asked breathlessly.

A slow, blissful grin stretched across Jack’s face. “Beats the hell outta me. I want to do it all, right now, but I think we need to take it slow, take our time. This is all shiny and brand new. Let’s enjoy it.”

“But… I mean… Who’s gonna do what to whom? I think we should at least have a general idea before we get started.”

Wordlessly, Jack reached over and handed Daniel the lotion. “I want you inside me.”

Daniel’s eyes widened. His mouth opened and closed reflexively. Words were a struggle to push out. “I—Jack, are you sure?”

Still grinning, Jack nodded. “Do you know what to do?”

“In general, yes. Specifically… I’m sure we’ll figure it out.” A pleased smile flashed across his face and was gone, the love softly glowing in its wake brighter than the sun. “Jack, I…” He shrugged. “You know.”

“Yeah,” Jack agreed. “Me, too. Let’s fly, Daniel.” He clasped his hands behind his head, drew up his knees and spread his legs wide, prepared for Daniel to have his way with him.

“We might crash and burn, you know.”

“Yep. Could be terrible. We might do it all wrong.” He was still grinning. His cheeks hurt from it. “I’ll bet we love it even if we mess up.”

Jack had never been happier in his life.

Daniel lay half on top of him, propped up on his right elbow. He gazed lovingly down at Jack, his eyes caressing every part of his lover’s body. Shyly, he looked into Jack’s eyes, a dirty, flirty little grin tweaking the corners of his mouth and sparkling in his eyes. “Can I touch?”

“Oh, please do.”

Contrary to what he was expecting, Daniel didn’t just grab Jack’s cock. His left hand pressed lightly on Jack’s belly, fingertips twirling in the hair there, moving gradually lower, then stroking to one side, tracing over the sensitive crease between belly and thigh. Jack twitched a little, stifling a laugh, which made Daniel’s smile widen.

“God, you’re fucking gorgeous, Danny,” he breathed appreciatively. Pulling one hand from behind his head, Jack stroked his lover’s hair, longer now than he’d seen it in a while. “I love to see you smile.” He sighed contentedly and Daniel stopped his tender explorations to look into his eyes.

He came in for another kiss, languid, wet and hot, leaving Jack breathless and utterly stupid, unable to manage cognitive thought for a second. He’d been right about the linguist’s mouth. God, could
“Mmmm,” said the younger man. “I’m loving what I see, Jack. Just getting to look at you like this
and not have to steal glances… I can’t tell you how wonderful that is to me. I’d be satisfied with just
that.” He chuckled a little, under his breath. “Well, maybe not. Got important stuff to do here, so stop
interrupting.”

“Oh, sorry,” said Jack with a trace of sarcasm. “Don’t let me get in your way, there, Daniel. Please
continue, oh mighty explorer.”

Daniel scooted down a little and did just that.

His work-roughened palm slid along Jack’s thigh, down almost to his knee, then back upward along
the inside of his leg. Eyes full of wonder as he watched his hand’s progress, Daniel’s fingers trailed
over Jack’s balls, drawing a gasp of pleasure from the man. Gently, Daniel caressed Jack’s shaft with
his palm, smoothing his hand all the way to the tip, then back down to the base.

Jack held his breath, heart hammering in his chest. Those light touches were sending him into orbit.
He fought to maintain control, gasping as Daniel smiled into his eyes. The feel of Daniel’s hand on
his cock was almost more than he could bear.

“I’ve never touched another man’s dick before,” Daniel murmured happily. “Feels good.” He
wrapped his fingers around the hot, satiny skin of Jack’s erection. Then he leaned down and licked
it, tasting the bead of clear fluid weeping at the top of it.

Jack arched off the bed, the sudden pleasure shocking him. He went off like a rocket, spurting thick
globs of semen on Daniel’s chin and throat, his own chest and face. He closed his eyes and panted as
the intensity ebbed. Eventually he relaxed his white-knuckled grip on the bedspread.

“Oh!” he gasped, breathing hard as he melted back against the bed. “Over before it got started. Holy
shit!”

A wide-eyed Daniel looked up at his lover, startled for a moment, then a sly grin sliding over his lips.
“Look what I did,” he crowed softly. His tongue swept out and artfully curled around to clean off a
spot on his chin. He wiped off the rest with his fingers, sucking the viscous fluid off his digits with a
groan of naughty delight.

Mortified, Jack felt his face heat up and knew he was blushing. “Jeez, Danny, I haven’t been that
quick on the draw since I was sixteen! Damn, what you do to me. One lick, and I’m toast.”

Daniel gave Jack a wink and then turned back to the object of his affection and swallowed it whole.
He came up coughing a second later.

There’s plenty for everyone. Although… if you wait another minute or two, it’ll be snack-sized.”

Daniel laughed. Honest to God laughed. He sat up and looked down at Jack, shook his head and lay
down beside him. “You are priceless, Jonathan Frances O’Neill.”

For a moment, Jack couldn’t move. Especially since the next thing Daniel did was to lick him clean,
working his way down Jack’s body, covering every inch of skin with licks, nibbles that sent Jack
through the invisible roof and kisses that brought him back down to the bed again.

“Jesusfuck, you’re good!” he groaned.
Daniel’s teeth scraped him in sensitive places. His tongue did a crazy little dance all over Jack’s relaxed shaft that left him breathless and dizzy and brought his sleeping cock quickly back to wakefulness. Daniel’s hands squeezed and stroked all over his belly, legs and balls, setting Jack on fire with need.

He cried out when Daniel slipped a lotion-slick finger inside him and that uncertain probing melted Jack’s heart into a puddle of tenderness. Daniel was trying so hard, and it felt good, it really did, but it was so unlike anything Jack had ever done with anyone that it was a little strange, too.

He felt Daniel catch his right leg with his heel and pull it under him. He humped against Jack’s battered old knee while Daniel sucked his lover’s cock. The sounds he was making proved how into it Daniel was, but Jack was nowhere close to coming again. His initial tension had been relieved by that spectacular orgasm and the newness of these strange sensations just weren’t blowing his mind. They were nice, but different.

It was, however, great fun and wonderfully endearing. He was enjoying watching his lover explore and discover and was interested to see what Daniel would do next.

“Are you ready?” Daniel asked, panting against Jack’s dick.

“I don’t know,” Jack answered honestly. “Wanna try it and see?”

“Oh.” Daniel sat up on his knees, still straddling Jack’s leg. “Um, how?”

“Oh.” Jack frowned. “Should I turn over? Get on my knees?”

“I want to see your face. Can we…?”

Jack pulled his leg out from under his lover and hoisted both long limbs in the air with a grin. “Go for it, big guy.”

Daniel slicked himself up with lotion, then wedged himself between Jack’s thighs. Daniel took great care not to smoosh Jack’s dick or balls too much. One hand on his cock, Daniel probed blindly for Jack’s anus.

“Is that it?” he asked finally. “Am I in?”

“Woooo!” Jack crowed. He chuckled. “Nope, you went right up my crack, big guy. Try again.”

He did. On the second attempt he scored, and Jack felt his body instantly clamp down in resistance to the entry.


Jack’s hands gripped the velvety bedspread. “Tryin’, Danny,” he ground out. It took concentration and effort to make the unwilling ring of muscle submit, and he sucked in a breath at the heat radiating from his lover’s subsequent invasion. “Christ, that fucking hurts!”

Daniel froze, his face the picture of panic. “Should I pull out?”

One look at him, and Jack knew he was going to have to be more careful what he said, or this was going to be a woefully failed experiment.

“No, Daniel. It’s okay. It’ll be all right in a minute. Just… just kiss me or somethin’.”

“I’m sorry I’m so lost here, Jack,” he whispered, blushing. “I wanted our first time to be good. Earth
moving, all that kind of thing. I’m just screwing it up.”

Jack took Daniel’s face in his hands and demanded eye contact. “You’re just screwing me, Danny,” he growled, “and I’m loving it, because you’re loving me. I don’t expect you to be an expert the first time. Maybe it’s something I’m not doing, y’know? We’ll figure it out eventually.”

He pulled Daniel down into a scorching kiss and both men began to relax. Jack forgot about everything, his body melting into blissful closeness with the man he loved. He concentrated on Daniel’s lips against his, Daniel’s tongue in his mouth, caressing his and driving him wild. Daniel was fantastic with his mouth, a great kisser, and Jack soon found himself shacking with need.

As Jack was able to relax, he felt Daniel’s cock sliding deeper, filling him up. The pain he had felt faded into a pleasure that was unlike anything he’d ever experienced.

Daniel’s hands caressed his face, his body, spanned the bulge of his biceps and squeezed, testing his strength. Then they were rocking together, Daniel’s thrusts rhythmic and sure. Their mouths drew apart, eyes opening to regard each other in that moment of ultimate intimacy. Jack had never seen anything more beautiful than Daniel’s face in that moment.

Daniel reared up to his knees and pulled Jack’s hips higher, resting his buttocks against Daniel’s thighs. Instinctively, Jack put his heels on Daniel’s shoulders, driving himself deeper on his lover’s cock, and gasped at the pleasure of it. Daniel caught Jack’s dick in a fierce, lotion-slicked grip and slid up and down the shaft, coaxing him closer to bliss. Jack had never been held like that, handled with such knowledge or strength. It seemed as if Daniel knew exactly how to touch him, how to love him as no one else ever could.

Daniel whispered his name, his eyes half closed and glittering black with passion. Jack’s heart lurched. The other man was inside him, loving him, pouring his soul into that mystical connection they shared. Jack could feel it, completely enveloped in Daniel, filled to bursting and overflowing with love such as he had never known, never would have believed existed.

“Come for me, Jack,” breathed Daniel. “I’m close, but I want to feel you come first.” He plunged deeper, changed the angle a little, and Jack sucked in a startled breath.

Lightning flashed behind his eyes, and he shouted a moan of shocked ecstasy. The pleasure-pain struck with each thrust, and Jack knew Daniel was doing something damned right. He couldn’t hold on, didn’t want to hold on, wouldn’t last much longer. He closed his eyes, throwing back his head, arching his back off the bed and grunting soft breaths of unbridled ecstasy. He couldn’t form words, couldn’t speak, lost in the grip of another blinding orgasm.

He gripped the covers as the first spasm hit, Daniel’s hand around his cock, sliding and squeezing, hot semen shooting onto his chest and face and dribbling over Daniel’s fist. His whole body shook with the force of the climax and just as it began to ebb, he opened his eyes to see the vision of Daniel with his head thrown back, eyes closed, mouth open in wordless wonder as he came. Jack felt it, every twitch and swell of Daniel’s dick inside him, and smiled.

Yes, he told himself. I can do this for the rest of my life.

Daniel’s eyes opened a moment later and tears trickled down his cheeks. He looked down at Jack and blinked, struggling to focus on his lover’s face. “Wow,” he whispered shakily. “Are you okay? Did I hurt you? My God, Jack! You are incredible.”

Jack grinned. “You did goooooood, Danny. Can’t wait for round two.” Gingerly, he took his heels off Daniel’s shoulders and rested his feet flat on the bed with a satisfied sigh.
Carefully, Daniel lay down on him and, after a moment, his shrinking cock slipped out. “I’m a little scared about that, Jack. I mean, you carry a P-90, you know. That sucker could make hamburger out of my ass.”

With a chuckle, Jack folded his arms around his lover. “Your weapon may be a tad shorter in muzzle length, but it’s got a bigger bore. You got yourself a mini cannon, there, lover.”

Daniel’s expression was instantly serious. “I did hurt you, didn’t I? Let me see.” He started to sit up, but Jack caught him and pulled him down beside him on the bed, chuckling and holding onto him.

“I’m fine, Danny. You will be, too.”

He wrapped his arms around Daniel and rolled them over so that he could be on top. He kissed Daniel. “I feel fucking great! Never felt like this before. Never. You did that. Sent me into space twice! Better than the fourth of July.”

He descended for another kiss, and Daniel’s hands came up to hold him and gently stroke over his body. The calm after the storm was deliciously wonderful. Eventually Jack sprawled half on the bed and half on top of Daniel and snuggled down with a sigh, his face tucked into the crook of Daniel’s neck.

They drowsed a little like that, and just as he was slipping into sleep, Jack wondered privately how soon they’d be able to do it again.

_On to AWOL Part II_
Jack finally finds Daniel, but the archaeologist is working on a riddle he has to solve before he goes home.

IF he goes home at all.

The sun was sinking low over the trees when Jack roused from his brief nap and found Daniel’s arms still around him. He flopped over onto his back, looking up at the darkening sky through the invisible roof.

“That’s a helluva skylight, Daniel,” he murmured appreciatively.

Daniel sighed with contentment, still remembering what they had done together. “It sure is.” He turned his head to look at Jack. “So. You think this could work between us?”

Jack rose up on one elbow, looking down at his lover. He lifted his free hand and began tracing Daniel’s face with his fingers. Daniel basked in that look of wonder and love and smiled.

With a wicked grin, Jack answered, “I think it’s gonna be so good we’ll be fucking like bunnies every chance we get. We just might starve to death, Daniel. Love has negative calories, y’know.”

Daniel grinned, looking up at Jack through his eyelashes, blue eyes sparkling with mischief. “You know, food is plentiful here, but you have to work for it. Fish to catch in the lake, berries to pick…”

Jack stiffened, all attention, eyes going wide. “Fish? There are fish? As in, for fishing?”

“Yes, and I’ll leave you to that duty. You do the hunting, I’ll do the gathering, because I already know what to eat and what to leave alone.”

“By watching what the mousie-bunnies ate, no doubt.”

“They’re not mousie-bunnies, Jack,” Daniel corrected gently.

“Well, what are they, then? Alien mousie-bunnies. We are now officially living in a Disney cartoon.”

“An X-rated Disney cartoon,” Daniel teased happily. He grinned, blown away by the fact that he and Jack O’Neill had just made love together. He didn’t want to move, just lie there and look up into that loving face forever.

Jack toyed with Daniel’s hair fondly, combing his fingers through it, then smoothing it back from his beautiful face. When he spoke, his voice was low and sexy, purring with desire. “You realize you fucked me today, don’t you?”

Daniel nodded, his smile broadening. “Wanna do it again, too.”

“Am I gonna get to fuck you, too?” He slipped one hand between Daniel’s legs, dragging his
fingertips over the cleft between his cheeks, then stuffed his fingers beneath his butt, squeezing greedily. “I’ve been watching your six for way too long and jackin’ off dreaming about it. Gotta get me a piece of that beautiful ass of yours, Danny.”

Daniel grinned rakishly. “It’s all yours, Jack. Just as soon as you can get it up again.” He started to rise off the bed.

“Well, speak of the devil,” said Jack in mock surprise as his dick showed signs of resurrecting. He looked around. “Where’d that lotion go?”

Daniel held up the tube, grinning. “What say we have a bath first? I’m kinda sticky.”

“Better take it with us just in case the liquid soap doesn’t work,” Jack chuckled, and casually got off the bed, catching up to his lover and lacing their fingers together as they walked toward the bathroom. “You know, you’re too cute for your own damn good. I have the feeling I’m gonna be so whipped…”

They sauntered to the bathroom, Daniel envisioning himself balls-deep in Jack, up against one of the columns, in the bathtub, on the bed, in the woods… Potential for lovemaking was all around them in their own personal Garden of Eden, filled with fluffy little harmless alien critters.

“What’s up with them?” asked Jack, nodding at a pair of them apparently grooming each other.

“They got fleas?”

Daniel cleared his throat and pulled his gaze away. “Um, no… that’s foreplay. Don’t look, Jack. Give them their privacy.”

“They’re in the hall, for cryin’ out loud,” Jack observed with a trace of amusement. He sidled closer and lowered his voice conspiratorially. “That was your little Jack Rabbit, right?”

“Yes.”

“Who’s the blonde?”

“Delta.”

“And they’re both guys, right? Not that I meant to look, but it was kinda obvious. I mean, they’re dressed in the fur God gave ‘em, so it was all kinda… hanging out there.”

Daniel tried to stifle a small smile. “Yes, they’re a mated pair. As far as I can tell, they’re exclusive to each other.”


“I already had him named before I found out they were a couple. He answers to Delta, and I don’t want to confuse him.” Daniel stepped down into the tub and started washing, his back to Jack. He felt suddenly shy as he heard the other man splash into the tub behind him. He fell silent, knowing Jack was looking at him.

“First touch. First kiss… Last love,” Jack whispered, standing just behind his lover. He put his hands on Daniel’s shoulders, stroking his wet palms slowly down Daniel’s back. His lips brushed the base of Daniel’s neck with a silent kiss.

The sweet tenderness of that declaration took Daniel by the heart, and he turned around to face his
beloved. “Last love,” he echoed, nodding his head. “It’s never been like this before. Not for me.” He put his arms around Jack’s shoulders and tilted his head, angling for a kiss.

“Yeah. Me, too,” admitted Jack huskily. “I mean, I’ve been in love before. Hell, so have you.” His brown eyes were filled with liquid passion. “But my God, Danny…” Jack’s fingers touched his cheek. They were trembling. “Everything else I’ve ever felt pales in comparison.”

Jack kissed him again, his tongue mapping the inside of Daniel’s mouth, running his hands down over Daniel’s back and then the smooth, wet curve of his ass. Holding Daniel close, Jack suckled on his lover’s neck, licking and nipping at his flesh until a small groan welled up from his chest.

Daniel was wide open at that moment, filled with total surrender. Jack could do anything he wanted with him. Anything.

Jack lifted his head and looked down into Daniel’s eyes. His voice was deep, soft, low and rumbling, as intoxicating as his whiskey-colored eyes. “Gonna do you now, Daniel. Gonna fuck you in the tub. Do you want me?”

Daniel’s heart jumped in his chest, clogging his throat for an instant as Jack’s voice sent shivers of excitement all through him. He swallowed it down and nodded, scared and excited and drowning in the love he felt for this man. Remembering how Jack tasted, how wonderful it felt when he came, how delightfully messy and surprising it was to have him go off like that… because of how Jack felt about Daniel. Because he was in love.

Jack swooped in for a deep, bruising, hungry kiss, and Daniel was carried away with the reality of what he was about to do. What they were about to do together. Another first time.

Daniel licked his lips as Jack pulled away. He took the soap packet Jack handed him and began to wash himself in anticipation, unable to look away from his lover’s face.

“Let me do that,” suggested Jack coyly, slipping his hands in between Daniel’s as they worked up a lather around his stiffening cock.

Jack was good with his hands. Daniel stared at those intoxicating eyes, unable to muster the slightest control. He was going to come in Jack’s hands and couldn’t stop it, didn’t want to. His mouth was hanging open but he couldn’t speak, couldn’t warn Jack, but somehow he already knew.

He moved in close, his nose touching Daniel’s, his lips slightly parted, sharing each shallow breath. “Do it,” he whispered. “Come for me, Daniel.”

The sound of his name catapulted him over the edge. Daniel’s knees gave out, and he started to fall back in the water but one strong hand let go of its prize and reached around him, catching him and pulling him hard up against Jack’s chest. Weakly, barely able to make his body obey him, Daniel threw an arm around Jack’s shoulders and held on, still spurting and feeling like he was going down for the last time.

“Oh… my… Gooooooodddd…” Daniel groaned.

Jack hauled a boneless Daniel through the water to a sloped seat halfway across the tub. He sat down and turned Daniel around, pulling him up onto his lap with Daniel’s back against his chest. Water came halfway up Jack’s thighs. Daniel sat on his wet skin with little waves sloshing up around them.

Daniel felt that home-grown P-90 sticking into his back and stuttered a little as he tried to catch his breath. He was scared, but he trusted Jack implicitly.
Daniel felt Jack’s breath gusting against his neck and shoulder. He felt his lover’s mood in the reverent touch of Jack’s hands on his body. Jack had one arm around his ribs, holding him close. The other came up out of the water, sluicing a little of it over Daniel’s shoulder and chest. Jack’s hand was gentle as it caressed him, sliding up his neck to cradle his face. He leaned into it, needing that touch, needing Jack.

He closed his eyes, using just his skin to tell him what was happening. He leaned back against Jack and felt the warm water squeeze up between them. He let his head fall back on Jack’s shoulder and lifted his arms, reaching up and back to grasp his lover, stroking what he could reach. Water splashed up onto Daniel as they moved and touched, each motion slow and graceful, languid and loving. They were in no hurry, just enjoying the wonderful closeness.

“You have no idea how I see you, Daniel,” Jack whispered in his ear. His right hand cupped Daniel’s chest, clasping him close, massaging to feel that hard-muscled chest. Knowing fingers slipped downward and tweaked Daniel’s nipple. He gasped at the sudden, intensely erotic sensation. No one had ever touched him there, like that, and he wanted more.

Daniel’s spent cock reacted, slowly arousing to that marvelous touch. He didn’t speak, just listened to Jack’s love-words. This was a side of the man Daniel had never seen, and he was breathless in anticipation of the revelation he was getting.

“You fascinate me,” Jack growled softly into Daniel’s hair. “So fucking brilliant. So strong, yet so unaware of that strength.” His left hand stroked down from Daniel’s ribs to his thigh. Fingers dug into his flesh, holding on tight. “All that leashed power, just waiting to spring loose. One day, Daniel, I want you to use it on me. Want you to hold me down and show me who’s boss. I wanna see it in your eyes, that you own me... like I own you.”

“Oh, God,” groaned Daniel. He was well and truly aroused now, those words working their sexy magic on his imagination.

Jack’s hand released his grip on Daniel’s thigh and caressed its way to his dick. “Gonna make you come again, Danny,” he rasped. He stroked Daniel’s erection, his hand wet and warm. “Real slow, real easy.”

Daniel nodded, unable to think of a single word, his hands greedy for contact and trembling as they stroked Jack’s hair and shoulder. Jack’s grip was gentle on his cock, his wet palm sliding slowly up and down, fingers exploring the shape of Daniel’s erection, learning every inch of him. Daniel moaned as Jack’s other hand slipped beneath him, gently exploring the curve of his buttocks, seeking and finding his entrance.

He leaned forward from the hips, giving Jack more access. Jack’s fingertip swirled gently around that tight ring of muscle, sending shivers of pleasure all through Daniel. He spread his legs wider as he sat on Jack’s lap, desperate for more from his lover. Holding onto Jack’s thighs, he felt Jack’s grip tighten, one finger rubbing just under the head of Daniel’s cock. The sensation was incredibly erotic, making Daniel twitch and moan.

“Please,” Daniel begged, and instantly one finger broached him. So slow, so gentle, so patient. Jack was driving him mad with need. “More,” whispered Daniel roughly, his whole body shaking now.

Jack’s finger pushed deeper, all the way in.

“Oooohhhhhaaaahhhhh,” Daniel moaned. “Yes. Yes. Jack!” He leaned forward, hands reaching out to grasp the far side of the tub, hips rolled back to expose more of his ass to his lover, water lapping around his thighs. Jack let go of his dick, Daniel’s posture keeping it from him now.
Jack slipped a second finger inside. Daniel gasped at that and abruptly Jack withdrew. A moment later, both soap-slicked fingers returned and slowly penetrated Daniel, stretching and probing him, heightening his arousal until he thought he would explode with need. “More!” he demanded. “God, Jack, please!”

He couldn’t think, couldn’t feel anything but that terrible need to be filled, to have Jack inside him, all of him, all the way.

“Daniel, just wait—"

He wailed with anguish and reached behind him, fishing blindly for Jack’s cock. “Can’t!” He’d forgotten how to open his eyes. All he knew was that devastating hunger that could only be fed with one thing. “Fuck me!”

Jack’s hand pushed his away. One of Jack’s arms reached around Daniel’s waist to hold him in place; the other hand took aim and as soon as Daniel felt Jack’s cock touch him there, he drove himself backward, impaling himself on it. He was so ready, there was no resistance at all. Daniel threw his head back and cried out with joy, his body shuddering at the blissful sensation.

“Jack,” he groaned, holding onto the side of the tub and trembling, unable to move except to lower his head. “Jack.” He panted, trying to gain some sort of control.

“Are you all right?” Jack murmured breathlessly, a trace of alarm in his voice. “God, Daniel, that had to hurt! You went too fast.”


Jack’s hands were stroking him now, loving him gently, quieting him down. “I love you, Daniel,” he breathed. “I never imagined it could be like this. So beautiful. My Daniel. All mine.” Jack’s hands gathered him possessively, pulling him gently back against his chest.

Daniel reclined against him, shaking with joy impossible to contain. Never in his life had he felt so loved as he did in than in that moment in Jack’s arms. He couldn’t stop quivering and felt hot tears seeping down his face. He wanted to tell Jack how much he loved him, but he couldn’t. There were no words to convey the depth of his feelings.

He felt cheated by the languages he had so loved all his life, let down in the most crucial moment by his greatest passion… until now. Until Jack.

“Shhhh,” said Jack, reaching up to wipe the tears from his face. “I know, Daniel. It’s all right. I’m with you. We’re together now. That’s all that matters.”

Daniel nodded, Jack’s words and voice and hands easing his pain, healing him, chasing away all the monsters that had lived inside him, letting in the light.

“Love you, Daniel,” he whispered. Jack’s arms released him and beneath him he felt Jack gather himself to rise. Daniel leaned forward again, catching the side of the tub and standing with Jack, leaning over as their bodies rose out of the water, still joined. Daniel stepped forward slightly to lean his upper body on the rim and Jack gave a little push, delving deeper.


Jack’s hands gripped his hips, those long fingers massaging his skin for a moment, greedy as they
explored along his pelvic bones, seeking the best purchase. Daniel felt Jack’s hips roll back to pull his body away and the absence of his warmth left an ache behind. Then suddenly Jack was pounding against his buttocks, his ass quickly stretched and filled, taking his breath away, bringing his head up.

Daniel nodded, telling Jack without words that he was okay, to keep going. Jack was slow and gentle at first, wanting to give Daniel’s body time to adjust to him, but Daniel wanted the sensation, the heat and speed, the rhythm to match his thundering heartbeat, the feel of Jack’s strength conquering him. Faster and harder Jack thrust, their bodies crashing together with solid thuds until Daniel’s every breath was a gasp or groan of pleasure. Jack rotated his hips, making long, screwing motions as he thrust into him, changing the angle and the rhythm of his strokes until he found Daniel’s sweet spot, hitting it every time to a chorus of soft, keening cries.

Jack was artful with his dick, skillful and creative, now drawing great roars of delight from Daniel. Daniel’s hands were useless, just holding him up out of the water, so Jack reached around him, took Daniel’s cock in his grasp and worked it, squeezing and sliding fiercely until he had pushed Daniel past his limits, and he came with a wild cry, jets of semen shooting down into the water.

“Yes,” whispered Daniel when he could speak again. Jack was still slamming into him, holding onto his hips again now and growling like a wild man as he careened toward climax. Daniel smiled, lifting his head, eyes closed, imagining how they must look together.

Jack was fucking him, and he loved it.

“Daniel!” he gasped. “Gonna…” He jerked into Daniel from behind, his cock pulsing with waves of ecstasy. “…come…”

Daniel felt it, the swelling, pulsing, stiffening of his lover’s cock satisfying him completely. He smiled, panting to catch his breath. “Wow,” he whispered.

Jack’s hands caressed him from his hips to his waist as Jack lay over his back and held on, arms wrapping fiercely around him. “You okay, Danny? I didn’t hurt you?”

“Never felt better,” Daniel assured his lover.

“Wow.” Jack collapsed bonelessly on him, one arm dangling limply in the water. He placed a kiss in mid-pant on Daniel’s shoulder. “I will never be the same after this.”

Jack slid off and fell back onto the tub seat with a big splash.

For a moment, Daniel just stood where he was, relishing the feel of his well-used ass. When he thought he could stand upright without his knees collapsing under him, he straightened and turned around, joining Jack on the seat. He couldn’t stop grinning.

Jack stared at him, his brown eyes hooded and filled with wonder and love. “Wow, Daniel. That is sooooo different from being with a woman,” he purred. “Better. Tighter. Hotter. We shoulda been doing this years ago!”

Daniel slipped off the bench and backed onto the steps, submerging in the water until only his head was above the surface. Jack joined him and Daniel reached around him, one hand stroking through Jack’s hair, the other around his shoulders. He grinned at Jack, feeling quite smug. “Liked that, did you?”

Jack just nodded, his gaze riveted to Daniel’s mouth.
“You are all man, Jack. Wow.” He chuckled and shook his head a little. “I would never have thought being with another guy could be that good.”

“Backatcha, Daniel. You like it hard and rough, huh?”

“I guess so. Didn’t know that till… you.”

Jack kissed him, slow and sweet, his hand on Daniel’s cheek. “You know, I thought you’d be all sweet-talkin’ in a couple dozen languages when you made love. Your vocabulary seems to drop to about five words. God, Jack, more, fuck and pleaseeessse. Which doesn’t include the sundry assorted grunts and groans. Some linguist you are, Doctor Jackson.”

Daniel was so busy watching Jack’s mouth and feeling that velvet voice roll over his skin that he barely caught the tease. “And who’d have thought that Colonel Hardass O’Neill was such a romantic poet? You hardly shut up the whole time you were fucking me, all those pretty, sexy words…”

“Uh uh,” Jack corrected pleasantly, his head shaking slowly from side to side. “I was making love to you. There’s a difference, you know.”

Warmth started as a sunny glow in Daniel’s heart and quickly filled the rest of him. “Yeah, I know, Jack. It’ll never be just fucking with us.” His happy smile widened, flexing into dimple territory. “But I do like to hear you talk dirty. Turns me on.”

“Me, too. There’s just something about hearing such a nasty word come out of your mouth, aimed at me. It’s like lighting a bottle rocket in my dick. Boom!”

“Well, as long as there’s no collateral damage and parts of you don’t fall off, that’s a good thing,” Daniel teased back. “Come on. All this fucking has made me hungry. We’ll spend an hour trying to find something to eat, and then it’ll be dark.”

“We could have a picnic in bed with MREs instead,” Jack suggested. “I brought your favorite. Dessert and coffee, too.”

Daniel tackled him with a kiss, dunking him completely in the tub. They both came up spluttering and wiping water out of their eyes. “Coffee! God, I’ve missed that. Where is it, in your pack?” He was washed, dried, and on his way to the bedroom before Jack could gather his wits and follow him out of the tub.

By the time Jack reached the bedroom, Daniel had a small fire lit in a tiny open hearth a short distance from the foot of the bed, and water heating in the collapsible coffee pot he’d filched from Jack’s pack. Daniel looked up and growled with happy passion, “Coffeeeee!”

Jack just shook his head, still smiling. “Do you always run around the place in your birthday suit, Daniel?” Jack sat down on the foot of the bed and drew the covers over his lap. “Somebody might see you.”

“The only somebodies here wear fur and sleep with me, and they’ve seen me naked when I bathe,” Daniel shot back playfully. “No signs of human habitation, Jack. Not now, not ever. I’ll bet we’re the first humans to come here.”

“Works for me.” Jack just watched Daniel make a cup of coffee and drink it, eyes closing in caffeinated bliss. “I guess you’re not planning on sleeping tonight, huh?”

Daniel eyed him with wickedness romping through his brain. “Nope. Wanna fuck all night, Jack. I’ve finally got you here with me, and I’m not wasting a moment of it.”
As darkness descended, they gorged themselves on Jack’s MREs and retired to the bed to indulge in each other some more. Eventually, Jack drifted off to sleep in Daniel’s arms and one by one the little aliens appeared to climb up onto the bed, choose their spots, and retire for the night.

Daniel lay awake for a long time, listening to Jack’s soft, quiet breathing, his face aching from all the smiling he’d done, his ass still throbbing from another thorough fucking. He was well and truly worn out, and thought he must be the luckiest man on this or any other world, because he was loved by one Jack O’Neill.

Jack had awakened tangled up in Daniel’s sleepy embrace, both of them surrounded by mousie-bunnies all snoozing heavily, curled up in little groups or sprawled out on the big bed.

A little later, he watched Daniel emerge from the bathroom. “You’re awfully quiet this morning,” observed Jack.

Jack saw dark circles under his lover’s eyes and realized Daniel hadn’t gotten much rest, probably from the caffeine he’d ingested right before bed, but somehow Daniel’s expression told Jack there was more to his mood than stimulants and insufficient rest. And unfortunately, he noticed that Daniel wasn’t smiling anymore.

He came over to the bed but didn’t get back in it. Instead, he picked up his blue trousers and began to put them on, dressing for the day. Then he wandered out onto the little balcony and pretended to look out at the view.

“Jack,” he said softly.

Jack sat up, still eyeing Daniel, who was looking intently at the horizon. Now there was pain etched into his fine features. “Are you going to take me back?”

Jack didn’t know how to answer that. If it meant putting Daniel in prison for running away, he’d never do that. He’d die before giving any information on Daniel’s whereabouts to anyone on any world. If Daniel wanted to stay there, he’d be safe for the rest of his life.

It took a moment to speak past the constriction of his throat. “I have to go back, Daniel. I have responsibilities. I have to answer for my actions.”

“You could stay here with me.”

“I’d be AWOL. Hell, I’m already AWOL. But no one knows where you are but me, and I won’t divulge that secret to anyone.”

“So… you’re going back.”

“I have to. You know that, Daniel.”

He turned, his eyes full of tears and pain. “Stay,” he pleaded. “I love you. I need you.” His chin quivered, and he struggled to blink his eyes clear. “I was playing ‘gate roulette till I found this place and curiosity got the better of me. Stay, Jack! Please. For me. I’ve never asked you to do anything, just for me. I’m asking you for this.”

“Oh, Daniel. You know Carter will figure it out eventually,” he reminded Daniel, emotion choking him. “She’s working on a program to connect a laptop to the DHDs to ferret out the last address
dialed. When she gets that going, the SGC will be able to follow us anywhere we go. We’d always be running, and way too soon, they’d catch us. I can’t stay, Daniel… but I can leave, and tell them I didn’t find you, and keep them away from you for a little longer.”

Daniel turned away, putting his back to Jack, arms wrapped around his ribs, hugging himself like he used to do when he needed comfort.

“I’m so sorry, Danny.”

Jack saw him shrug a little, hopelessness written in his wilted posture.

Angry with himself, with fate, the military, the stupid way life turns out sometimes, Jack flung the covers back and rose, stomping back to the bathroom without bothering to dress. He was a man of honor, of duty, of high moral standards, and he hated that he’d had to burst Daniel’s bubble like that.

He went through his morning ablutions and returned to the bedroom still angry. He had wanted more time to enjoy Daniel before he had to deliver the bad news, but Jack knew he’d already been away too long. He stood at the entrance to the room, just to one side of the bed, wearing only his boxers and pants.

Daniel remained where Jack had left him, leaning against one of the columns separating the cooking hearth from the rest of the bedroom. He was turned partly away, looking out over the stunning view of the countryside. Just as Jack was about to call to him, he saw his lover wipe away a tear and straighten up, bravely trying to hide his pain.

He turned around then, startled to see that Jack had returned and caught him crying. He glanced at the floor for a moment, then made an attempt to smile, pain still radiating from his eyes. “Time to go find our breakfast,” Daniel said with mock brightness. “They don’t serve it here, you know. We have to go out and find it. Get dressed and meet me at the front garden.”

In that instant, Jack made his decision. There was no way Jack could leave Daniel behind. He also could not ask Daniel to go home with him. If this was where Daniel wanted to be, Jack’s place was at his side, in his arms, in his bed. He couldn’t take Daniel with him, so there was only one other option. Jack couldn’t leave the man he loved more than life behind, because he was certain it would kill them both.

If he stayed, it would be a betrayal of all he had held dear his entire life: honor, duty, country… and the fate of the entire human race. But right now his first loyalty had to be to Daniel.

Suddenly his decision was crystal clear in his mind. It had been made seemingly without effort, without conscious thought, and without a trace of guilt. He felt free, filled up with peace. He felt himself relax, as if a burden had been lifted from him.

“Daniel,” he murmured. “Wait up.” He reached out and caught Daniel by the arm as he started to go past and pulled him to a stop. Jack looked into those azure eyes, so full of pain and love and hopelessness. All Jack wanted now was to take that pain and hopelessness away forever. That was the only thing that mattered anymore.

“I’ll stay,” he whispered. “For you.”

For a moment, Daniel didn’t move. His lips parted slightly, his breathing shallower and faster. “Oh, Jack,” he whispered, “Do you mean it?” Tears filled his eyes and spilled over, saying eloquently what words could not.

Jack reached out and took him into his arms. He let his body offer the comfort he knew Daniel
needed. “Whatever happens, Daniel, whatever comes, I’ll never leave you. I didn’t come all this way to lose you again. We will always be together. My word of honor on that.”

**Three Days Later**

“Holy shit!”

Daniel glanced up from his journal, watching Jack backing out of the lake, dressed in nothing but his boxers, the sapling in his hands bent nearly double. The line stretching from it disappeared into the water and from the swirls around it Daniel could tell it was a big one. He grinned broadly as he laid the book aside and stood up, making his way down the grassy slope to the riverbank.

“Daniel, look! I caught a fish! A real fish! I caught it!” Jack’s eyes were on the water, his voice filled with unabashed enthusiasm. He dragged the big fish onto the bank, its skin glistening in the sunlight in a multitude of shades of blue-green iridescence. Jack pulled tight on the line until he could hoist the fish up into the air, his whole face gleaming with pride, a huge grin splitting his face from ear to ear.

“Yes, you did, Jack. So now you can kill it, clean it and skin it. We’ll carve off what we need and give the rest to the kids. They prefer sashimi to cooked.”

Daniel eased away, looking down at the alien fish. He wouldn’t tell Jack that he’d been catching fish on that planet for quite a while now. That would take all the wind out of his lover’s sails, and Daniel wanted Jack to enjoy his prowess.

“They eat meat?” asked Jack, glancing around to locate the ever-present furry crowd.

Little Jack was having a nap beside where Daniel had been writing and Omega, the shy black one, was in the process of climbing down from her perch in the tree on the bank where she had been keeping Jack company. “Hey, c’mere, Meg.”

She came scampering up, sat up on her hind legs and sniffed at the fish. Her expression brightened. She reached up with one paw and made a grab for it.

“You want some? Be patient. I’ll give you some in a minute, little girl.” Jack trotted over to where he’d left his pants, pulled out his knife and made quick work of the fish. He sliced off a piece from the side and tossed it to her.

She caught it in her paws and gobbled it up greedily.

Daniel stared down at her, a sudden frisson of insight skittering up his spine. He squatted down and
reached out, getting her attention before he touched her, asking permission with his hands. She didn’t flinch or move away. “Hey,” he murmured to her. “Let me see you for a minute.” Deftly he grasped one of her front legs and lifted it, then smoothed the thick furry “cuffs” away from her paw.

“What’samatter, Daniel?” Jack called. “You went kinda pale, there.” He ambled closer, bringing the cleaned carcass with him. “You okay?”

“Look at this, Jack,” Daniel breathed. He showed Jack the delicate little foreleg resting in his palm. Gracing the end of it was a small, slender, perfectly formed little six-fingered hand, opposable thumb and all. Beneath the tassel of fur, only the fingers had showed, which was why Daniel had never noticed the fact that they were equipped with the wonder of this fabulous biological tool.

“So?”

“They have hands, Jack.” Daniel was hardly breathing.

He raised his gaze up to look into Omega’s bright green eyes, blinking innocently back at him. For a moment he just stared, weighing what he knew against what he thought he knew. He sat down on the grass, staggered by the implications of that one deep piece of genetic diversity. On Earth, raccoons had opposable thumbs. So did opossums and primates, but they were all still animals. Just like these wonderful creatures. Or were they?

Daniel gazed into those guileless green eyes and saw nothing to indicate they were more than they appeared: beautiful little innocents that spent their lives playing, eating and enjoying each other. Nothing he had seen during his weeks on their world prompted the flash of intuition niggling for attention in the back of his mind. Maybe it was just because he wanted them to be something more, something important.

Only they weren’t. He let the intuition settle quietly into his subconscious and forgot about it. Omega climbed up into his lap and snuggled down, cuddling up into a little ball of warm black fur.

“What an amazing people,” he whispered, his hands stroking her gently.

“People?” Jack’s brows twitched together.

Daniel looked up at him. “We’ve been so busy with each other the past few days that we haven’t really had a chance to talk about what I’ve been discovering since I left a few months ago.” A strange sense of inevitability settled over him, but this wasn’t the time to share everything with Jack. Not yet.

He had to confirm his suspicions first.

“How would you feel about exploring this place a little more?” asked Daniel cautiously. “See what there is to see in our private paradise?”

Jack’s expression softened, love shining from his face. “As long as we’re together, I’ll go anywhere you want.”

That brought a lump to Daniel’s throat and tears to his eyes. “I know that,” he said softly. “Even to hell.”

“Already been there, ‘member?” asked Jack, grinning. “Didn’t like the décor, the air conditioning didn’t work, and the company left a lot to be desired, so we left.” He glanced around them. “This is muuuuch better.”
He leaned in for a quick kiss. “C’mon, Danny. I gotta go make dinner. We can talk about the trip on the way home.”

He got up to put his pants back on, picked up the fish fillets and tucked them into a net bag Daniel had made, along with the rest of their harvest – an assortment of fruits, vegetables and eggs that they would enjoy with their dinner of fish. Jack ran the sturdier end of the fishing pole through it, hoisted it over his shoulder, and shoved it back a bit so it wouldn’t drip on him as they walked. He fell into step beside Daniel, who still carried a sleeping Omega in his arms, his journal tucked under one arm.

Jack squatted down and scrubbed the back of Little Jack’s neck, easing the critter to wakefulness, and told him they were leaving. The little grey beastie got up, stretching and flicking his short, fluffy tail wildly, fell into step beside them, yawning and rubbing at his eyes.

Jack smiled at Daniel. “Aren’t they cute? And so cuddly. Like a pack of two year olds. They love to be held and petted, don’t they?”

“Yeah,” agreed Daniel quietly. “They’re adorable.”

He looked up at the late afternoon sky. “It’s going to rain tonight. You won’t believe how beautiful our home is when it’s raining.”

He glanced at Jack, walking along beside him, and saw that Jack was staring at him. “Not as beautiful as you are when you come,” Jack breathed huskily. “Or when you look at me… like that.”

Desire shot through Daniel and made his heart ache. “I want to make love tonight,” he whispered back. “All night long.”

Jack’s free hand snaked out and smoothed over Daniel’s ass, giving him a squeeze and then slipping inside the waistband of his blue pants at the small of his back. “Yeah, me, too. I can’t seem to get enough of you, Danny.”

There was worship in Jack’s eyes, and Daniel knew he meant every word. Here, in this place, for the first time, Daniel was beginning to see the real Jack O’Neill: boisterous and playful, horny and exquisitely sexy, tender and deeply committed. On this alien world they were totally free to live without anything hidden from each other, and what Daniel saw in him was breathtakingly beautiful. Loving Jack was far more fulfilling than he’d ever envisioned, far more satisfying than he believed he deserved.

Jack crowded close to him on purpose, bumping shoulders as they walked, just to be touching him. Daniel had to keep an eye on the uneven ground as they walked, but as much as possible he and Jack just looked at each other, grinning like the fools in love that they were. He would’ve loved to be holding Jack’s hand, but his were full of furry love at the moment, so he contented himself with the view, and Jack’s constant need to be touching him somewhere.

As the house came into view, Daniel remembered the shape of the invisible roof as he’d seen it the last time it rained. Over the bedroom was a fluted dome with a spiral cap. Over the cooking hearth it spread out like a sloping fan, joined to the base of the bedroom’s dome. The bathroom ceiling was mostly flat, allowing a splendid view of the rainwater pooling up directly above the bathtub. Once he had lain in the tub looking up at it, watching the raindrops fill the long, rectangular area, and then he’d looked at the surface shimmering with additional falling drops from the underside as he lay below it. It had reminded him of the event horizon of the Stargate, once it stabilized and waited for something to break its surface.

He wanted to show that to Jack, but the thought of that flat roof atop those high columns brought
something else to mind as well. “I think I know now where I should look for the city I thought would be here,” Daniel mentioned quietly, “To be sure, I’m going to climb up on the roof while it’s raining and see if I can see it.”

“Okay, but why?” Jack looked a little concerned. “The roof is not a good place to be during a storm.”

“Don’t worry. There’s never any thunder or lightning,” Daniel assured him. “The weather is precisely controlled, always temperate, with just enough rain to keep everything growing properly.”

“It’s controlled?” Jack seemed surprised by that assumption. “How do you know?”

Daniel glanced up at the clouds gathering overhead. “The shower will start at precisely six PM, by my watch. It will rain for exactly twelve hours at a measured rate. Then the clouds will fade, and in three more days, it will rain again. Nature doesn’t have that sort of schedule, Jack. There’s a weather control device on this planet somewhere.”

“Like on Medrona?”

“Maybe more complicated than that one.”

Jack stopped walking. “Why do I get the feeling there’s something important that you’re not telling me?”

“I’ll tell you when it’s time.”

“Damn it, Daniel…” Jack frowned at the ground as they walked back to the house. “I don’t like being kept out of the loop, here. I’m not gonna go tell anybody your secrets, you know.”

“Jack, I just need some more time to think. I’ve got ideas coming at me left and right, and I need time to make sense of it all.” He looked at Jack worriedly, wishing he could hold his hand. “Trust me?”

Jack’s gaze was steady and sure. “You know I do.”

Daniel gave him an uncertain smile, wishing he could be more certain of the places his imagination was taking him. He needed to give Jack that reassurance; needed it himself, but it wasn’t there. All he had were annoying little nibbles at his subconscious, telling him that something was coming, that he was on the trail to something big.

Omega awoke with a sigh in Daniel’s arms and yawned. He looked down into her mouth, getting his first really good look at her teeth. They were omnivore’s teeth, very much like those in his own mouth, but with smaller incisors and more prominent canines. She stretched and stood up in his grasp, draping herself over his shoulder, and returned to her nap.

He patted her back, stroking her soft, glistening fur, while he ruminated on those passages left on the markers by the Four Races.

*When the young begin to grow wise, they seek among the missing for that which will make them whole.*

He had done that. So had Jack. That journey had led them to this paradise.

*Peace comes in silence and introspection to one who travels alone, yet is never lonely.*

He had found a sort of peace on that planet, a sense of rightness and belonging that he had found
nowhere else. Even as upset about Jack as he had been when he’d first arrived, he’d always had the
sense he was meant to be there. Since the other solitary traveler, Jack O’Neill, had arrived, there was
no more loneliness for either of them.

*Revealing one’s true self can only be accomplished by those worthy of trust.*

Here, in this place, he and Jack had both begun to live without pretense, taking down the walls they
had built up around themselves on Earth. Did that make Daniel worthy of trust, now that he was
revealing who he really was to Jack? Daniel trusted Jack implicitly and always had.

He was sure there was something he was missing, something the other markers would tell him once
he found them all. The message, he felt, was important.

Those little teasers Daniel had found salted away on different worlds, written in the languages of the
Four Races, were part of a bigger riddle, one he had yet to solve. Somewhere on that world, he
believed he would find all six of the markers, along with the glyphs that formed the address of this
unlisted world. That was the invitation that the Four Races had left behind them, the instructions for
the curious travelers passing through the Stargate system that was intended to bring them to that
paradise.

If that was so, if he was reading everything correctly, then this place might be *far* more important
than the Lost City.

He just had to be sure, to clarify and order his thoughts, before he could talk to Jack about any of it.

Daniel put the idea out of mind for the moment, his thoughts turned back to Jack and to the
wonderful fish he had caught that they would share for their dinner. Jack was so proud of the thing,
and it would make Daniel happy to eat it with him.

In short order, the fish was cooked, saved from being burned at the last moment when Daniel had the
presence of mind to tear himself out of Jack’s arms long enough to check on it as it sizzled over the
fire.

They ate it with relish, feeding each other with their fingers and sharing a laugh. Jack insisted on
cleaning up after they finished eating, so Daniel headed for the bathroom to wash up just as the first
drops of rain began to fall.

He rose and climbed the columns as the drizzle grew into a steady shower, using the pattern of water
trickling over the invisible roof of the building to find his hand- and foot-holds, gingerly testing the
invisible surface to make sure it would hold him.

When he reached the flat top over the bathroom, he stood and walked carefully over its chilly,
slippery surface, looking out at the horizon for signs of additional structures, possibly also made
visible by the rain. Even with his myopic vision he could see it, the huge shape off to the northwest
towering above the trees.

“It’s a city,” said Jack from behind him, just arriving on top of the structure.

Daniel nodded, his throat too tight to talk.

“Big one,” Jack added. “The Lost City, maybe? Can you see it, Daniel?”

He pushed past the constriction in his throat, his voice sounding unnaturally thin to him. “I don’t
know, Jack. Maybe. We’ll have to go there and find out.”
He turned to Jack, a clear invitation in his eyes. He grasped Jack’s upper arm and stepped closer, careful of his footing on the slippery roof. “Let’s go back down and make love, Jack. All night long, remember?” He hoped his need, and not his fear, was showing.

Jack nodded, his expression serious, patient, adoring.

They turned together and made their way back down the columns and into the bathroom, stripped off their wet clothes and left them draped beneath the shelter of the roof to air dry. After a bath, they stood beneath the dryer, running their hands over each other’s bodies, holding each other close as the warm air blew down on them and warmed them up as it dried them off.

Daniel felt the comfort of Jack’s lips on his shoulder, at the base of his neck, moving up to his ear and jaw, making his way slowly to Daniel’s mouth. He ran his fingers through Jack’s short, silver hair as they kissed, slow dancing in the shower of heated air to the rhythm of their pounding heartbeats.

Daniel sighed and moaned into Jack’s mouth, lost in the feel of Jack’s hands against his skin, touching him everywhere, carding through his hair as it dried. He wanted this to go on forever.

“Let’s go to bed, Jack,” he said huskily, easing away and catching Jack’s hand in his.

Jack nodded, towed along in his wake. Daniel let go of his hand when they were almost there and walked faster, arranging himself on the bed before Jack arrived. His heart was pounding and his whole body was quivering with anticipation.

Then he remembered it was raining and looked up at the ornate roof, made visible now by the water. He watched the water droplets land on the transparent structure and drizzle down to highlight the shape of the dome with its fluted ribs. It sparkled like it was made of stars glinting rainbows in the light of the setting sun, just peeking out from beneath the high clouds.

He realized Jack was looking at it, too, standing beside the bed now, dry and fresh and naked, mesmerized by the incredible sight. Light and color were dancing above them like living things, casting rainbows all over the room and everything in it. The sight was so beautiful it brought a lump to Daniel’s throat, because Jack was also awash in starlight and rainbows. He sparkled as if he’d been sprinkled with… magic pixie dust.

Daniel just stared at him. Jack met his eyes and Daniel knew he was thinking the exact same thing.

“Magic pixie dust,” said Jack, a note of wonder in his voice. “Your letter, remember?”

It’s one thing to hope and fantasize that maybe one day magic pixie dust will make everything you wanted fall right into your lap, and something else all together to know with concrete certainty that your dreams are gone forever.

“Are we dreaming?” asked Daniel breathlessly.

Jack crawled onto the bed and settled over him with feline grace. “If we are,” he murmured in a purring whisper, “I hope we never wake up.”

His lips brushed Daniel’s, and Daniel just lay there, letting Jack do whatever he wanted with him. There were no kisses now, just that sexy mouth stroking over his face, his neck, his ears. A gust of warm breath in his ear made him shiver down to his toes. Jack slipped his arms beneath Daniel and held him and, for the first time in as far back as he could remember, Daniel felt safe and whole. He felt loved, cherished, completed.
He was in awe.

Jack lifted his head and looked down into his face as Daniel embraced his lover’s waist with his legs, holding onto him tightly. This was a moment of pure, fulfilled love, untainted by passion. It was intoxicating.

Irish whiskey, Daniel thought, looking up at those liquid brown eyes. Fireworks. Pixie dust. The stuff of dreams. His fingers traced over Jack’s high cheekbones, threading into his hair.

“I’m flying,” he said simply, lost in Jack’s eyes.

Jack nodded, unable to speak. His left hand settled on Daniel’s face, holding him for a moment, worshipping Daniel with his eyes. Jack kissed him then, his lips settling as tenderly as falling snow. They moved as one, ocean and shore, wind and leaves, their bodies in perfect harmony.

Hands caressed smooth skin and firm muscle, exploring, memorizing each curve and hollow. Daniel’s feet skinned over Jack’s calves as he released Jack from his embrace, lowering his long legs. Daniel rubbed the inside of his thighs against the outside of Jack’s and felt his cock filling. Jack lifted his lower body onto his knees for a moment, allowing both their stiffening erections to spring up so he could lower himself again with them pinned between their bellies.

There was no breathless passion this time, no urgent need demanding to be satisfied. Daniel could do this with Jack for hours, maybe all night as he’d wanted. A gentle sweetness flowed all through him, a sense of peace and rightness beyond anything he’d ever experienced.

Daniel lay with his eyes open as Jack’s mouth moved down his throat and lower, making his way with delicious slowness down Daniel’s body. He stared up at the rain, aware of everything, his senses on overload. The fresh-scented cool air provided sharp contrast to Jack’s warm male musk. The patter of raindrops on the leaves and ground outside were the only sound other than their deep, sighing breath and moans. Daniel savored the taste of his lover in his mouth, that unique flavor that was Jack O’Neill’s alone.

Cool air made him tingle in the wake of Jack’s kisses, making gooseflesh rise and Daniel’s skin tighten. Jack moved steadily, slowly down Daniel’s body, keeping him covered as he tasted and explored. Daniel groaned as Jack’s lips slid along his cock, Daniel’s hands instinctively reaching for Jack’s hair, losing his fingers in the silky stuff. His body undulated on the bed beneath Jack’s gentle, sure touch and when he could manage, Daniel lifted his head and watched as Jack loved him.

This was the first time Jack had gone down on him, and it was beautiful. Wonder lit up Jack’s face, and he smiled as his tongue slipped out for a taste of pre-come, glistening at the tip of Daniel’s dick. Jack looked happy. He was obviously enjoying himself and the way his eyes closed when he took the head in his mouth left no doubt in Daniel’s mind that he loved doing this with him.

Daniel curled up, rising on one elbow so he could reach Jack’s head and shoulders better. He caressed and stroked Jack’s warm skin, his heart in his throat, so in love, so in awe, so rich in everything that mattered. Useless words choked him, and he pushed them away, emptying his mind and letting his heart pour out the love he felt for this man, filling the room without walls.

His orgasm was gentle and unhurried. He watched Jack drink it down, greedy for all of it.

When the last spasm passed, Daniel reclined against the bed, and Jack covered him again, face to face, his hard cock pressing into Daniel’s belly. Jack rocked into him, thrusting between them as he reached for Daniel’s hands. He laced their fingers together and pushed their hands up beside Daniel’s head on the bed.
Jack’s eyes were filled with awe as he watched the wondrous sparkles play over Daniel’s face, over their bodies. Questions and assurances passed silently between them, asked and answered in their eyes. Daniel could feel Jack’s body tensing, and knew he would be coming soon. He squeezed Jack’s hands, and he nodded at him, telling him yes, that Daniel wanted this, wanted to see the pleasure and watch it course through him.

Closing his eyes, Jack hitched a breath and jerked, his body curling up as he thrust hard against Daniel’s abdomen. Daniel felt every pulse, every spasm, and sensed the tension flowing out of Jack’s body along with his seed. The sounds of Jack’s softly panted groans were a symphony Daniel would remember forever.

He studied Jack’s face, sated and peaceful, so full of love and wonder and quiet joy. It was the most beautiful sight Daniel had ever seen, and suddenly he couldn’t bear to see it any longer. He disentangled his fingers from Jack’s and threw his arms around his lover’s neck, pulling Jack down into a fierce, desperate embrace. He began to weep openly, unable to staunch his emotions.

Pixie dust, he told himself. We had the pixie dust. Maybe it’ll be enough.

Jack’s arms slipped around him, and he began to rock him slowly, whispering in his ear and kissing his hair. “Shhh, it’s okay, babe. I’m here. It’s okay.” He rose up a little and looked down at Daniel, pulling one hand out from beneath him to touch his face. “I’ll always be here. Don’t worry.”

His thumbs stroked slowly over Daniel’s temples, wiping away the tears with incredible gentleness. Jack looked helpless and a little sad, aching to fix whatever was wrong with the man he loved. He seemed to be searching for the right words to say to make it all better, and failing because he didn’t know what was wrong.

Most of the sunlight had faded now. There was just a little glimmer remaining, sparkling silver among the falling droplets, making the roof look like it was made of a multitude of tiny stars. Jack’s face was in shadow, barely visible now, lit only with the flickering reflections of the star-rain. The moment was burned into Daniel’s mind, something never to be forgotten, always fresh and radiant whenever he traveled back in his memory to this moment in time.

Daniel kissed him, giving him a reassuring look, telling Jack without words that he was all right. Carefully untangling himself, Jack moved off him and retreated to the bathroom. He returned moments later with Daniel’s bandana, damp and warm with water from the tub. With exquisite care he washed Daniel clean, and then he cleaned himself, tossing the cloth onto the floor to deal with later.

Jack reclined on the bed again, lying close at Daniel’s side, his head propped up on one hand, the other reverently exploring the curves of Daniel’s face with his fingertips.

“Are you okay?” he asked uncertainly.

Daniel nodded, unwilling to commit to a verbal answer. “Let’s rest for a little while, okay?” Daniel suggested huskily. “When you’re ready later, we can make love again. Wake me if I fall asleep?”

Jack shook his head. “Not ready to rest just yet.” For a long time he just stared at Daniel, his free hand and his gaze exploring his body in the starlight. “I can’t get enough of you, Daniel.”

Finally, they pulled down the sheets and blanket and got covered up against the evening chill, Jack’s head on Daniel’s shoulder, arms and legs wrapped possessively around him.

As the hours passed, they made love twice more before Jack crashed for the night, too exhausted to
move. Daniel closed his eyes and tried to sleep, but found it elusive. Occasionally he opened his eyes to view the rain on the roof by starlight or the deep shadowy curves of Jack’s body as he dreamed.

As always, the little aliens came to bed with them very late, arranging themselves in bunches all over the bed, everywhere except between the lovers.

Daniel wondered how he was going to tell the man he loved that, if it turned out he was right, they were going to have to leave their idyllic paradise and return to the cold reality of their homeworld and whatever punishments that awaited them both. He had asked Jack to stay and by agreeing to that request, Daniel had destroyed Jack’s career and possibly his life. Because he had stayed, Jack was AWOL. When they returned, there was a good possibility that they’d be sent to separate prisons to pay for their dereliction of duty and breach of contract.

Love and duty often demanded a heavy price. When the time came, when he was more certain of the intuitions brewing in his mind, he would share them with Jack. Together they would face whatever the future held. Daniel just hoped this night and the few they might have remaining would be enough to keep them looking toward the future, to a time when they could be together without fear.

With a final kiss to the top of Jack’s head, he snuggled his cheek against the silver mane, and closed his eyes. Tomorrow. Tomorrow they would talk and make a plan. Jack would be with him always, and somehow, they would find a way to make everything all right.

Sleep, when it came, was a welcome respite.

The next morning, Jack awoke wearing a warm fur collar. Without opening his eyes, he grasped the short, fluffy tail and moved it, cracking open one eye to take note of the animal’s position beneath his chin. It was Alpha, her little head tucked up against his neck, her body curled up in a ball against his chest, tail curled over his neck until he had moved it. She twitched it across her as soon as he touched it, covering her face with the plume without ever waking up.

Smiling to himself, he carefully began to turn over, moving Alpha aside, searching behind him for his lover. He found that Daniel wasn’t in the bed. Instead, the critters had moved into the warm spot he had left behind, and Jack had slept through it all.

“Daniel?” he called.

There was no answer. He rose, doing his best not to disturb the little beasties, but they simply ignored his movement and slumbered on. He fetched his boxers off the floor and slipped them on, took a couple of soap packets from his vest and padded up the terrace toward the bathroom.

Jack came to an abrupt halt in the doorway. Daniel was just getting out of the tub, his back to Jack, water sluicing off his body as he came up the steps. For a moment, Daniel stood still, seemingly lost in thought, naked, wet and beautiful.

Jack let his gaze rove over that gorgeous body, thinking that Daniel was Adonis personified. He took note of all the scars, of the slabs of muscle down his back, the healthy curve of his buttocks, the swell of his thighs tapering down to flaring calves.

As he continued to watch, Daniel half turned and headed for the dryer, lifting his face up to the warm jet of air, eyes closed and rubbing himself dry in the gentle breeze. Jack appreciated the broad shoulders and bulging biceps, but as he watched he began to notice something that hadn’t really
registered earlier. He could see Daniel’s ribs a little too clearly. His muscles seemed bulging and cut because he didn’t have much body fat left.

Thinking back, he realized Daniel had gotten full awfully fast whenever they ate. His stomach had to have been shrinking. It was entirely possible that Daniel had gone hungry a lot before he arrived on that planet. Food was plentiful there, he’d said, but Jack wondered if his lover had actually been eating much of it or been wasting away in mourning instead.

That was going to have to change.

Jack wished he had more coffee just then. And chocolate. Definitely chocolate, for Daniel to enjoy.

Then another alarming thought struck him. What if Daniel were sick? Was that why he’d been so emotional the previous night when they’d made love, because he was sick, and he knew it? Was that why he wasn’t eating much? Jack knew Daniel would never tell him if he were. He’d hold it back, thinking he was sparing Jack that pain.

His throat tightened. Without making a sound, he padded over to the dryer and stood still, waiting for Daniel to finish and open his eyes. He saw that delicious mouth quirk upward in a pouty little smirk.

“Morning, Jack,” said Daniel in a sexy growl.

“How’d you know I was here?” he asked, pushing his boxers off his lean hips and letting them drop. He pitched the soap packets over by the tub, where they’d be in easy reach in the water.

“You smell like sex,” he rumbled, lowering his chin and opening his eyes. “You smell like me.”

Jack looked down at his rising hard-on. “Look what you do to me, Daniel,” he observed in a low voice, and then stepped closer to sweep in for a taste of those lips.

Passion flared between them, and they kissed as they made their way down into the water. Daniel’s hands were all over Jack, pushing, pulling, stroking and squeezing. Jack held on, unwilling to let him go even to change positions, nuzzling his neck and nibbling along his shoulder. The raw power he felt in Daniel’s arms intoxicated him. Heat pounded in his veins, throbbing like drumbeats in his ears.

Daniel’s hands, slick now with soap, slipped all over his erection, caressing his shaft, massaging his balls. His knees threatened to give way as Daniel drove him backward, catching him as he stumbled against the steps and lowering him in the water until he was seated on the topmost step. He felt utterly powerless, as if Daniel were in complete control of his body.


Jack groaned in response. He felt Daniel’s teeth then, scraping against the sensitive skin of his throat. He tipped his head back to give Daniel better access. The sensation set him on fire, burned away his senses.

“Mark me, Daniel,” he whispered hoarsely, his hands lost in long, silky hair.

“What?” Daniel tilted his head back, to look into Jack’s eyes.

“Mark me,” he growled. “Do it. Someplace where I can see it. Please. I want it. Need it.”

“God, Jack!”
Jack groaned at the rough edge of desperation in Daniel’s voice. “Do it,” he insisted again.

He felt Daniel’s teeth scraping him, no longer gently. Daniel’s hands cupped beneath the water and scooped it up to dump on Jack’s crotch, rinsing away the soapsuds. Daniel’s hot mouth trailed across Jack’s chest, choosing a spot near his right nipple. Daniel sucked hard, and it hurt just enough to send tiny bolts of lightning directly to Jack’s dick.

When that mark had been made, Daniel trailed gentle kisses lower down to his belly, just near the base of his cock, right above the thatch of salt and pepper pubic hair.

Jack curled up on the tiles and looked down at him, watched while Daniel made the suction bruise, his lover’s hands working his freshly rinsed cock harder. Then Daniel’s mouth was in motion again, wet heat trailing over his balls, that hot velvet tongue laving up the underside of Jack’s dripping shaft. Daniel swallowed his cock, descending on it like a starving man while Jack watched in erotic fascination.

Daniel pulled back a little, changing the angle of Jack’s dick with his hands, gazing up to see Jack watching him, never stopping what he was doing. His azure eyes were blazing with love and need and some terrible unspoken pain that tore at Jack.

“Daniel,” he pleaded. “Tell me. I need to know.”

With a groan and a small shake of his head, Daniel closed his eyes and redoubled his efforts, drawing Jack’s attention back to his groin. He held Daniel’s face, his hands caressing his beautiful sun-bleached hair, as fair now as it had been on Abydos. He looked down and saw the bruises Daniel had made, the need in his eyes, and immediately pitched headlong into ecstasy.

Daniel moaned as he swallowed every drop.

Jack collapsed back against the tile floor with a grunt of surrender and lay still, desperately trying to catch his breath. He was light-headed now, incapable of coherent thought in the wake of his orgasm.

Daniel reached for the soap packet and squeezed out a little more, bending to kiss and nibble Jack’s belly and chest while slipping one soapy finger gently into his ass. Jack laid himself back against the steps, legs spread, arms stretched out on the flat rim of the tub, head pitched back. He was wide open to whatever Daniel had planned for them.

Soon Daniel’s amazing mouth closed on Jack’s throat, suckling gently, his tongue scorching and wet against his flesh. His teeth closed again, grazing his collarbone, moving downward. Jack could hardly catch his breath now, each exhalation leaving with a groan. “Fuhhh…” he panted, trying desperately to tell Daniel what he wanted, but his lover was already way ahead of him.

Daniel’s hands slid under his butt, lifting him up in the buoyant water. He slid inside him easily, Jack’s body already stretched and lubricated from the previous night. Jack wrapped his legs around Daniel’s back, trying to pull him closer, delirious with the sensation of Daniel inside him. The pounding pushed him steadily up the steps until he was lying on his back on the stone tiles with Daniel kneeling on the steps, still half in the water.

“Need you,” Jack panted, pulling at his lover.

“You’ve got me,” Daniel promised, thrusting harder, deeper, gazing down into his eyes. “Always. Forever.”

“On me. Want you on top of me.”

Jack stared at him as the heat of Daniel’s orgasm filled him, watching the pleasure and pain on Daniel’s face. He looked like he was going to cry, but then he opened his eyes and forced a smile. Jack could see that he was afraid, and that his heart was breaking.

”Jesus, Danny, what is it?” he begged. He reached out one hand to touch Daniel’s cheek. Daniel just shook his head, mouth pulled into a grimace of pain. “Love you, Jack,” he whispered in a shaky voice. Daniel bent over to kiss him, devouring Jack’s mouth in desperation.

Jack held him, his body slipping back down into the warm water with his lover. For a long time he just sat there on the steps, his arms around Daniel, comforting him with contact, not wanting to push when Daniel obviously didn’t want to talk about whatever was bothering him, but needing to understand.

Eventually Daniel stopped kissing him. Foreheads touching, Daniel’s eyes closed, catching his breath, they snuggled their faces together.

“I want to know about whatever it is you’re keeping from me,” he told Daniel, carefully keeping his voice neutral. “I know it’s something important… but I’ll wait till you’re ready to tell me.”

“I’m sorry. I will,” Daniel promised. “Just give me a little more time, Jack.” He pulled back and made eye contact, checking to make sure Jack wasn’t angry with him for holding back. He was comforted when he was silently assured all was well between them.

Jack didn’t move when Daniel splashed out of the tub and returned to drying off, this time humming a little tune Jack couldn’t identify.

“Singing, are we?” he mused. Very carefully, he eased himself back into the tub to finish getting himself clean. Parts of him were already quite sparkly.

“Mmmmm. A Josh Groban tune. Remember When It Rained.”

“Rained last night, just like you said it would.”

Daniel rolled his eyes and sighed.

“Most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen,” Jack declared in an embarrassed whisper.

Smiling as the memory slipped through his mind, Daniel nodded and slanted a cat-like gaze Jack’s way. “Yes. You were.”

Jack eyed him for a moment, then he submerged himself to get himself wet all over. Coming up out of the water, he shook himself like a wet dog. He squeezed out the last of the soap in the opened packet and started scrubbing, starting with his hair and then his armpits.

Daniel didn’t stop rubbing himself dry until he was finished, then left to put on his freshly laundered robes without responding to Jack’s gentle inquiry into Daniel’s all too apparent distress.

“Dressing up today?” asked Jack, eyeing his partner, who was fully dressed for the first time in days.

“You should, too. We might meet some interesting people in that city.”
“Okay, but I didn’t do my laundry last night. I guess I should have. Got any aftershave on ya?”

Daniel stopped dressing. He looked down at Jack in the tub. “Um…” One hand reached up and stroked over his chin. “Speaking of shaving, have you shaved since you’ve been here?”

He opened his mouth to make a smart remark, then closed it again as realization struck. “Just the first day, came to think of it. Not since then. Have you?”

“I arrived here over a month ago and shaved a couple of times afterward. Then I decided I should save my knife blade for utility purposes. I figured shaving would be a luxury I couldn’t afford.”

His eyes were wide as he looked around the elegant bathroom with its tall columns instead of walls and that amazing invisible roof. “Come to think of it, I haven’t shaved since that last time, weeks ago. Haven’t needed to. I’m apparently no longer growing facial hair.”

Jack smoothed a hand over his own cheek. “Yup. Soft as a baby’s butt. No five o’clock shadow at all. Huh. Wonder why?” He frowned over that thought for a moment, then went back to happily splashing in the water.

A sleepy-eyed Omega wandered into the room and sat down on the side of the tub with a great yawn. Without warning, she tipped over into the water, swam around a little, then climbed out on the steps behind Jack and trotted over to the dryer, which came on while she sat motionless in the warm breeze, eyes closed, apparently sleeping herself dry.

When Jack finished watching her, he dunked himself again to rinse the last of the soap from his hair and body. He staggered out of the tub and straddled Omega, who promptly moved out of the way so Jack wouldn’t drip on her freshly dried fur.

“Um, Jack…”

“Daniel?” He tipped his head down so the warm draft wouldn’t dry out his eyes as quickly, and risked a glance at his lover. Daniel was staring at him, eyes as round as saucers. “What’s the matter?”

“Your hair.”

“Wish I had some shampoo. Our soap’s almost all gone, too.” He closed his eyes and fluffed up his hair as the warm air blew over it. “And we’re almost out of that hand lotion, Daniel. I don’t know what we’re gonna use for lube when it’s gone.”

“Jack,” Daniel called insistently. “Your hair. It’s turning dark again.”

Jack’s eyes flew open, vanity fully engaged. He looked down at his chest, which three days earlier had been almost totally gray. Now it and his crotch were both peppered with dark brown hair, mixed in with far less of the silver.

“Mirror! I need a mirror, Daniel, quick!”

“Sorry, don’t have one,” said the younger man with a grin. “Just trust me on that. You look almost
like you did the first time I saw you in the mountain. Ten years younger and pretty damned hot, if I may say so.”

A light bulb went on in Jack’s head. He bent his knees and gave a couple of test squats. He bent backward a little, looking for the old familiar aches and pains, but they, too, were gone. He grinned at Daniel. “We really have died and gone to heaven, haven’t we, Daniel?”

Eyes wide with wonder, Daniel gazed around him, turning in a big circle. “I don’t know, Jack. I don’t think so, but…” Finally, he stopped turning and made eye contact. “Hurry up and get dressed. We’ve got some research to do.”

“Breakfast? We’re all out of MREs. I might have a Powerbar left, if Little Jack hasn’t found where I hid it yet. He loves those things.”

“We’ll eat on the way,” Daniel promised. “We’ll be walking through the funnel cake patch on the way there. I’ve explored a little way in every direction from here, but didn’t find anything of note till last night. I was going to take it up again, but—”

“The what patch?” Jack was already hurrying into his boxers and walking back to the bedroom with Daniel to finish dressing.

“Wait and see.”

Daniel’s smile was as mysterious and filled with secrets as Mona Lisa’s.

The bushes were thick and lush, just about waist high on the men. Broad, heart-shaped leaves spread out from a central trunk, and here and there long spikes shot out of the trunk bearing clusters of golden globes, slightly transparent except for the single large seed attached to the stem. Daniel picked one of the globes, stuck it into his mouth, stem and all, and bit down on the fruit, pulling the stem and seed out and tossing it far away.

Clear juice flowed out of his mouth and over his chin, and he wiped it away on his sleeve.

“That’s how you eat them,” he told Jack. “They taste just like funnel cakes, sort of cherry tomato consistency, but kind of oily and rich and sweet. Toss the seed as far as you can, to spread the growth of the plants.”

Jack heard the excited chatter of the “tribe” as Daniel called the mousie-bunnies, all helping themselves to the juicy fruits.

He pulled one off and tried it, and his tongue knew a brand new kind of bliss. He groaned and reached for another and another. While wiping the juice off his chin, he had a thought. He looked at his hand and rubbed the clear juice on his fingers together.

A big grin spread over his face. “Daniel, I think we just found our lube.”

A startled laugh burst out of the other man. “Jeez, Jack, you’re right! This should work perfectly. I wonder how long these are in season? We’ll harvest some on the way home and try it out.”

“If the kids don’t eat ‘em all up first.” He smiled warmly at the critters grazing their way through the patch. “They sure are fun little beasties, aren’t they?”
“You like them a lot, don’t you?” asked Daniel warmly. He reached out and took Jack’s hand, lacing their fingers together.

“You should talk, Doctor Dances With Mousie-Bunnies.” Jack shot him a grin that hid absolutely nothing of how he felt. “I’m in love with this place, Daniel. Don’t wanna leave, not ever. I’m thinking of naming the planet… New Minnesota.”

“There aren’t any loons.” Daniel was looking at him from under those lashes that were such a sin, the tiniest little teasing smile on his lips. He looked terribly kissable, so Jack did.

“Mmmmm,” Jack said to the inside of Daniel’s mouth. He smacked his lips happily as he drew away. “Now, what the hell were we talking about? I can’t seem to remember my own name at the moment.”


Jack looked down around his thighs at the furry heads bobbing out from under leaves. A pair scampered past, apparently arguing over a particularly big bunch of funnel cake fruit that one of them had found, screeching like angry squirrels. One of them started pelting the other with the fruit, which exploded on contact, and the two ended up wrestling in the grass. When that appeared to be turning into another kind of groping all together, Jack took Daniel by the arm and got him started on their walk again.

“Oh, I don’t know, Daniel. They look pretty loony to me. As in Looney Toons.”

For a long time Daniel didn’t say anything, just walked with his gaze moving thoughtfully from one furry animal to another.

“Penny for your thoughts?” asked Jack, reaching into his pockets. “Damn, I left all my money back at the base. D’you take credit?”

Daniel’s eyes were saucers again. That seemed to be happening a lot lately. “Um, Jack… Did you notice what Theta and Chi were doing back there?”

“Makin’ more mousie-bunnies?” Jack couldn’t help the grin. He’d seen several of the critters couple up, stealing off for a little privacy – just like Theta and Chi did at that moment – whenever things got serious. Little Jack and Delta were a particularly affectionate couple. They disappeared a lot.

“Yeeessss, but that’s not… They were, um, doing it face to face.”

“So they like missionary. So do we.” Jack patted Daniel’s butt affectionately. “Among the many and varied other positions listed in the Gay Kama Sutra. Which I intend to work on re-creating here, since there’s no handy reference library.”

Daniel just stared at him, wide-eyed.

“The wheels are turning, but I don’t hear any squeaking,” Jack observed, teasing lightly. “You gonna tell me what’s goin’ on in that big honkin’ brain of yours?”

“Still putting all the pieces together, Jack. I could be wrong.”

“And I could be elected the new Soviet Premier.”

“The USSR no longer exists, or hadn’t you heard?”
“My point exactly. Trust your instincts, Danny-boy. I do.” He leaned over and kissed Daniel on the cheek.

They walked together in silence for a while, Jack falling back into soldier mode, scanning all around them and threat-assessing. He hadn’t seen any fearsome wild animals or hostile natives, but it was a big planet and they’d only seen one tiny part of it. He had his P-90 handy and warm, ready for action if necessary.

Near midday, they came to what must have been a road at one time, now completely overgrown with a soft green carpet of moss, thriving in the bright sunshine. The little creatures walked right onto it, keeping in a loose group all around them, as if they already knew where the humans were going.

Toward mid-afternoon, the lane seemed to disappear into a foggy patch of woods. Just outside it stood two smooth stone plinths, two obelisks and two tall white stone trees, one on each side of the road. They looked newly made, but apparently were identical to the ones Daniel had seen on other worlds.

He walked up to them in wonder, running his hands over the surfaces, fingering the carved characters in the stone.

“If these were made at the same time as the others I found on those other planets, Jack, they must be thousands of years old,” he mused. “It’s funny, because they look brand new.”

“What do they say?” Jack sidled up beside his lover, recognizing the lettering on that particular face as Ancients’ Latin.

“I’ve seen these four structures before,” Daniel stated certainly, pointing to one tree, both plinths and one obelisk. He read the final passages on each one aloud to Jack. “These others may take me a little while to translate.”

Jack glanced at the Latin on one of the untranslated ones. “‘All is revealed in the light, but those who live in darkness remain blind.’ Is this the origin of fortune cookies, Daniel?”

“Wow. I knew you learned the language back during the time loop thing,” Daniel observed with an amazed twitch of his eyebrows, “but I didn’t know you learned it that well. I’m impressed.”

“I’m just full of surprises, Daniel. Just like you. Want me to read you the others?” Jack felt pretty damn smug at that moment and was sure it showed on his face.

Daniel stood and gestured toward the next carving. “Go for it, big guy.”

Jack cocked his head and moved to the other stone tree. “‘Sorrow opens unknown doors, where hope may be found.’ And the last one over there…” He sighed as he sauntered over to the final obelisk. “Truth reveals itself only when one has stopped looking for it and sees with the eyes of joy.’ Very Zen, all of them. So what do they mean?”

“Let me look at the order a minute.”

Jack waited for way longer than a minute, and his empty stomach was protesting. He examined the scenery and saw that the little mousie-bunnies had flopped down all around them in the sun. Some were curled up together in a cozy pile, others seeking shady places nearer the trees for their well-earned nap. Jack was surprised they had all accompanied him and Daniel this far, but apparently wherever they went, the fuzzy kids did, too.

He would have liked to take a nap, but they were on an alien world and there was no telling who or
what was in that fog-shrouded city. So he did what he’d been doing for most of the last decade. He watched over the linguist, keeping him safe and letting him work.

While he waited, Jack daydreamed about what they would eventually do there on that paradise planet. Daniel would need something to keep his mind occupied, so they’d probably explore it all, eventually. Jack was a simple man with simple needs, and he could be happy just fishing, foraging and fucking until he was too old to do anything but remember what it was like to jump Danny’s lovely bones.

That would be a good life for him, and all he needed.

His eyes caressed the shape of his lover, the unconsciously elegant drape of robes over his body, the graceful way he moved as he paced from one sculpture to the other, and the intensity in those beautiful blue eyes as they read…

“Daniel?”

“Hmm?”

“Can you read those things all right?”

The answer was distracted, like he was shrugging off an annoying mosquito, dismissing him with a wave of one hand. “Just fine, Jack.” After a beat, Daniel’s head came up. He made eye contact, obviously surprised. “Oh! I can see just fine. Without my glasses. Jack, what the hell’s going on?”

“Beats me.” He shrugged. “It seems to be all good stuff, though.” He smoothed a hand over his hair and wished he could see it.

“We’re undergoing some kind of change,” Daniel observed, his eyes haunted now. “Without our permission. I’m not so sure that’s a good thing, Jack. What other changes might be going on that we don’t know about yet?”

Jack’s eyebrows lifted. “Well, why don’t you figure out your puzzle, and then we’ll go into the invisible city and see if we can find some answers there. Get to work while we wait for the fog to clear.”

Daniel nodded and turned uneasily back to the carvings. Finally, he heaved a heavy sigh. “We should probably scout around for something to eat and take a break. I’ve tried to make some sense of the messages, but I guess I’m just not getting it.”

Jack squatted down and jiggled Alpha’s shoulder, waking up the soundly sleeping female. “Hey, princess, where does a guy go for lunch around here? We’re hungry.”

The mousie-bunny lifted her head and glanced around, as if noticing for the first time that they weren’t in their usual neighborhood. She got to her feet and pushed up onto her haunches, scanning the landscape through half-closed eyes, squinting into the brightness of the late afternoon sun. After a moment, she seemed to finish waking up. Her ears perked up, and with eyes wide and blinking, she looked up at Jack.

“Hungry,” he repeated and sniffed his sleeve where he’d rubbed funnel cake berry juice, then held it under her nose. Her own belly growled and she glanced down at it, then up at him, all innocence. “Yeah, hungry. Where’s the food?”

Alpha got up and padded off toward the trees just to the north. Not only were there were more of the berry bushes there, the rest of the tribe climbed up into the trees and tossed down some interesting
looking nuts. They had pliable green shells that peeled right off, once the men learned how to open them properly.

Alpha presented Daniel with a root she’d dug up, showed him how to peel it, and he gave it a test crunch. It tasted like carrot, though it was white instead of orange. As she found more, Daniel pulled them up for her, sharing them with Jack and the others. For most of an hour they foraged among the trees, then ambled slowly back to the mossy road and the sculptures.

“The only order of alignment possible is the one for the coordinates for this planet,” stated Daniel certainly, walking up and down between the statues. “And the first passage is obviously an invitation. So is the second, both clues to look among the recorded ‘gate addresses and figure out which ones are missing.”

“Unlisted numbers,” said Jack with a shake of his head. “I guess they wanted whoever found them to be really interested in figuring out the Big Picture.”

Daniel nodded, still pacing. “Anyone traveling to just a few planets would never put this whole puzzle together, so the message was directed at those who had the intention of going to all of them, exploring every place the Ancients went to set up their Stargates.”

“An intergalactic game of Clue,” agreed Jack. “Colonel Mustard in the library with the candlestick. A great cosmic whodunit. That’s pretty cool, when you think about it.” He grinned.

“The second passage is the one that throws me,” Daniel went on. “‘Sorrow opens unknown doors, where hope may be found.’ I mean, I know I felt pretty grim when I deserted my position, but I don’t think this could have been directed at me, specifically. They would’ve had to have been fortune tellers to know I’d use their clues to find my way here.”

Jack pondered that. He thought about himself and his own sorrow that had drawn him along in Daniel’s footsteps and agreed. This wasn’t just about two lovesick men on a journey to find each other. It was about something much bigger.

“The Big Picture,” he said, excitement notching up in his body. “Daniel, why did we go through the Stargate in the first place?”

“Revealing one’s true self,” that could be about the whole journey we’ve been on, Jack. We’ve been tested, every time we passed through a ‘gate. We’ve put our compassion as well as our prejudices on display for anyone who’s watching. Our journeys have shown what kind of people the Tau’ri are, what we value and what we disdain, revealing who we are over and over again, with every mission.”

“Ouch,” said Jack, making a face. “Not always pretty, but hopefully we’re worth saving as a species. Ya think?”
“That’s not our judgment call,” Daniel shot back excitedly. “The rest of the passage tells what they’re looking for. If we show our true selves as we go through the ‘gates, we’re worthy of trust.”

“Oy.” Jack frowned. “Then that would apply to the snakeheads, too. Not likin’ this, Daniel.”

His gaze dropped to the next carving. “That one talks about ‘one who travels alone, yet is never lonely.’ Sounds like Goa’uld and host, to me.”

Daniel shook his head, his whole body quivering with excitement. “No, no, the next one cancels that out! Look. ‘Truth reveals itself only when one has stopped looking for it and sees with the eyes of joy.’ What host of a Goa’uld could possibly be at peace with what the snakes do to them? How could they see with eyes of joy, when the host is a prisoner in a life of eternal horror?”

“Okay, I’ll buy that, but there could be one or two.”

“Big Picture, Jack.” Daniel put his hands on Jack’s shoulders. “Think in terms of the whole human race.”

He tried, frowning and trying to pull all the pieces together, but it was beyond him. This was Daniel Jackson territory, thinking way outside the box. “I guess I don’t get it. Tell me what it means, Daniel.”

The younger man pointed to the first inscription.

*When the young begin to grow wise, they seek among the missing for that which will make them whole.*

“Look for the unlisted numbers in the phone book,” Daniel translated, smiling now, “and you’ll find what you need there.”

He stepped to the second statue, looking down at it. He pointed again.

*Sorrow opens unknown doors, where hope may be found.*

“Tragedy will force you to travel through the Stargates in search of hope… and help.”

At the next inscription, they read, *Revealing one’s true self can only be accomplished by those worthy of trust.*

“Show us who you really are. Let us know we can trust you.” He chuckled, shaking his head in wonder, eyes gleaming and dancing with joy as he moved to the next one.

*Peace comes in silence and introspection to one who travels alone, yet is never lonely.*

“This message is for those few who can solve the riddle; those who carry the fate of their people with them on this journey, seeking peace.”

Jack felt a thrill of excitement quivering in him. He always loved it when Daniel did this stuff. It was better than watching David Copperfield make the Statue of Liberty disappear, and every bit as magical.

*All is revealed in the light, but those who live in darkness remain blind.*

Daniel’s wild joy faded somewhat, his expression growing more sober, but the undercurrent of happiness was still there. “If you’re smart enough to figure out that this is where you’re supposed to be, you still won’t see what’s right in front of you unless your heart is in the right place.”
“So folks like the snakes, they’re the ones who live in darkness, right?”

Daniel nodded. “If one of the Goa’uld had come here, he wouldn’t have seen what we have. He might have been interested in the technology, but not the people who created it. He’d have come away with nothing, because he wouldn’t have been able to figure out the final part of the mystery.”

*Truth reveals itself only when one has stopped looking for it and sees with the eyes of joy.*

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly as he met Jack’s gaze. He spoke rapidly, his words tumbling over one another in his excitement. “We stopped looking, Jack. We were happy together, and that’s when I realized… that’s what these people wanted to see.”

He cocked his head and smiled, blinking at Jack, willing him to understand. “Don’t you see? They wanted to see us, the real us, without artifice, no political posturing. Not using lies or deception just because we coveted what they might give us. They wanted to see us without those masks, and then judge us on that honest revelation.” He dropped his gaze to his feet, his face coloring with embarrassment.

He closed his eyes. “Oh, crap.” The full impact of the puzzle hit Daniel’s consciousness like a naquadah bomb.

Jack cocked his head. “They who? What crap?”

“The people who put these messages out there around the galaxy in the first place, Jack.”

He looked up into his lover’s eyes with a smile, but there was grief blossoming in those beautiful baby blues now. Daniel turned away and stared down at the last inscription.

Jack saw tears standing in Daniel’s eyes. He had felt the subtle shift away from joy, felt it echoing in his own soul and knew that whatever this was, it would carry a heavy price. He swallowed hard and nodded, indicating that he was ready to hear the truth now, and Daniel should explain the rest.

“I think the people who built this place have been with us from the first moment we stepped through the Stargate.” As he spoke, Daniel waved his hands around to indicate their personal space.

Daniel squatted down and looked into Alpha’s endearing little face. He extended his hand toward her with a smile. “Hello. My name is Daniel Jackson. It is my very great honor to present myself as a representative of the Tau’ri… to the Furlings. We’ve been looking for you for a long time.”

Jack’s mouth dropped open in shock.

For the first time, Alpha smiled, her white teeth gleaming, big eyes half closed with pleasure. In perfect, very slightly accented English, she replied, “Greetings, Daniel. We welcome you to our homeworld. Your progress has been remarkable for a race still so very young.”

She placed her hand in his and stroked his palm with hers. “I am called Shi’a’ush but you may continue to call me Alpha, if you wish.”

Jack’s was aware that he couldn’t seem to close his mouth. For a moment, he couldn’t even breathe. His head whipped around, looking from face to face, all of the little aliens looking back at Daniel and him. They all seemed rather pleased with themselves, exhibiting almost human smiles, nodding in agreement with everything Daniel had said.

“Holy shit!” he breathed. “Furlings? Damn, I was right! They are little furry people.”
Daniel hadn’t been there to hear that comment, made back a year ago when Daniel had been ascended. Jonas had been with the team then, and Jack had told him that’s what he thought Furlings were simply because of the name. Furlings. Little furry people. It had made perfect quirky sense to him at the time, and now he felt vindicated in his assumption.

Daniel didn’t seem to be listening anyway. And Jack still didn’t understand why he seemed so upset. This was good news. Great news. They'd found the Furlings!

“Danny?”

Daniel stroked the back of Alpha’s hand with his thumb, then released her and stood up.

He turned to face Jack, his eyes full of pain. “We have a little bit left to do here, but… you understand what this means, don’t you, Jack?”

“Right now I don’t think I’m capable of thinking straight. I’ve been sleepin’ with a pack of Furlings for three days, for cryin’ out loud! Not to mention walking around buck nekkid and doin’ the nasty with you while everybody’s been watching. Jeez, Daniel!” He rubbed his hand over his blushing face, now totally mortified.

“Oh, that’s nothing,” Daniel shot back with a trace of sarcasm. “My first few weeks here I was teaching them to fetch and roll over.”

Jack chuckled and shook his head in wonder. Both men just stared at the innocent little faces all turned up to them, waiting expectantly. Even Daniel smiled a little, still embarrassed, but able to find the humor in his all too human arrogance.

Clearing his throat, Daniel glanced down at some of the others all clustering about them now. “Stop thinking about you and me for a minute, Jack,” he said gently. “This means we have to go back to Earth, whether we want to or not. We have to tell them what we’ve found.”

Shock slammed into the pit of Jack’s stomach. His eyes shot up to meet Daniel’s. Daniel was right, of course, as he usually was about stuff. Jack felt himself crumbling inside. Now he understood why Daniel had seemed so sad off and on for the last few days.

He nodded. “Yeah. You’re right. We do.”

His gaze dropped back to the happy little faces surrounding them. He gave them a tight smile and a little wave. “Nice to meet you folks. Any of you ever heard of the Goa’uld? They’re the sorrow that brought us out here, looking for help and hope.”

“Please. Come into the city with us,” suggested Alpha, reaching up to take Daniel’s hand. “We will talk about a solution to your problem.”

They turned and headed down the mossy lane between the sculptures. After a walk of a few minutes, they approached the city and the fog began to clear.

The tall towers and buildings the men had seen the previous afternoon, highlighted by falling rain, were completely invisible until they stepped inside a large entry port disguised to look like a natural rock outcropping.

Furlings went ahead of them and came in behind them, escorting the humans into the city that was now apparently solidifying out of thin air. All around them, Furlings traveled in small groups through the beautifully landscaped urban area, some rushing past in little flying machines, others towing carts that seemed to float above the uneven ground on some kind of anti-gravity bed.
There were no streets or sidewalks, just uneven footpaths skillfully woven into the natural features of the land. Everything had a slightly wild look to it, as if the buildings had grown straight out of the ground. They were like huge trees and flowering plants that had been hollowed out for living space, but Jack could tell they weren’t natural structures. The buildings, like the lovely house in which he and Daniel now lived, had been built by these clever creatures padding leisurely around his knees.

Alpha led them along an intricate foot bridge and then into a beautiful blue building surrounded by water. It looked like it was made of contained columns of ocean. Jack looked closely at one of the tall poles and was startled to see a school of tiny fish swimming around inside it. He paused long enough to poke the column with a finger and his digit passed through the invisible barrier, right into the liquid on the other side.

He pulled his finger back out in wonder, glistening wet at the tip, and saw that the hole his finger had made was now leaking. Daniel caught his arm and hauled him away before he could confess to his crime, but when he glanced back at the column, the leak had sealed completely.

“Wow,” he breathed.

Glancing at Daniel, he asked, “Did you see that?”

“Don’t touch anything, Jack,” he growled quietly under his breath.

Soon they entered a large domed chamber with rounded aquarium walls. They were presented to a small group of Furlings all of whom were wearing wide, bejeweled collars of golden metal over their shoulders.

“These must be the folks in charge,” Jack whispered to his companion. “I think you’re on, Daniel.”

Alpha stood on all fours in front of them, lowered her ears, and bowed her head. She addressed the council in that curious animal screeching and growling that the mousie-bunnies had always used around them and eventually perked up and stepped aside, glancing up at Daniel.

“Um, I’m not sure what the protocols are here,” admitted Daniel, looking to Alpha for instruction. “Should I crouch on hands and knees and bow my head, too?”

All the Furlings laughed, a happy chittering sound.

“We expect you to act like humans, not Furlings,” said one of the jeweled elders in a high-pitched lilting voice. She was light gray, nearly white, with a few dark hairs mixed in, giving her a silvery sheen.

“Shi’a’ush has kept us informed of your progress, and we have observed much of your behavior. We are delighted that you have correctly deciphered our invitation and stand ready to assist you in bringing back joy to your people. I am Zia, First Mother of the Furling family.”

“First mother?” asked Daniel.

“Wonder what behaviors they found most interesting,” Jack murmured in Daniel’s ear.

Daniel batted Jack’s arm with his elbow to warn him to be quiet.

“Uh, I’m Daniel Jackson and this is Colonel Jack O’Neill of the Tau’ri. Earth.”

“And you are a mated pair, yes?” asked Zia with interest.
Jack and Daniel exchanged a glance. Jack’s chin tipped up. He turned back to her and stated proudly, “Yes. Yes we are.” He put his arm around Daniel’s waist possessively and sidled a little closer. Daniel put his hand over Jack’s at his side, and they both smiled at Zia.

“This is good. We approve.” Zia bowed her head briefly in acknowledgment. “We see our race as one family,” she explained. “Only those who are experienced parents may make choices for the rest. We believe that only those who have raised young, and who are well adjusted and happy, have the understanding necessary to make good choices for the larger family.”

“On our world, we call this government,” said Daniel. He took a few moments to explain briefly about the many nations of earth, pointing out the great successes and tragedies of the human race in an impassioned and unbiased speech.

“Compared to older races such as yourselves, the Nox and the Asgard, we’re still young as a people,” he told them. “But we feel that we deserve a chance to live and grow, to choose our own destiny. The Goa’uld pose a threat to that future. Twice already they’ve tried to destroy us, and we know they’re planning to try yet again. Will you please help us?”

Alpha looked up at him. “What of the Asgard? Have they not come to your aid?”

“Oh, yeah,” Jack answered for him. “Thor’s been by a few times, but they’ve got troubles of their own and can’t always come when we call.”

“And the Nox?” asked Zia, a trace of displeasure in her expression. “Do they still stand firmly in the middle of everything?”

“As neutral as can be,” said Jack. “They like us fine, though. Then again, I guess they kinda like everybody.” He shrugged.

Alpha and Zia exchange a glance. The First Mother cocked her head and gave Daniel a long, assessing look. “What of the Ancients? Surely you have found them in your travels.”

Jack’s eyes went to Daniel’s face and watched as his mouth drew up, pressed firmly closed. Daniel looked distinctly uncomfortable. Then he lowered his gaze to the floor.

“Daniel was an Ancient for a little while,” answered Jack, his voice husky with emotion. He tightened his arm around Daniel and drew him closer to his side. “Now that he’s back with us, they’ve apparently left the building and don’t care who plays with their toys. A Goa’uld named Anubis has been using ‘em on us. Then when Daniel tried to stop him, the Ancients tossed him off his fluffy white cloud. At least, that’s what we’ve figured out. They sent him back missing a few things. Like his memory, even including who the hell he was.” The note of anger in Jack’s voice was plain.

“Anubis ascended and the Ancients decided he didn’t belong, only they didn’t quite clean up all their mess when they kicked him out of the club,” Daniel added, his voice even, neutral, non-judgmental as always. “So now Anubis has knowledge of the Ancients’ technology and the Ancients themselves are turning a blind eye to what he’s doing. They seem to have taken an even firmer neutral stance than the Nox. It’s forbidden to interfere in things happening on the mortal plane.”

Zia cocked her head. “And for helping others, you were cast out?”

“Apparently. I don’t remember any of it. Jack and my other friends have told me most of what they experienced with me during the time I was ascended. Everything else is… gone.”

“Anubis destroyed a whole planet full of peaceful people,” growled Jack. “The Abydonians were
like family to Daniel. His late wife was one of them.” Jack slipped his hand up to rub Daniel’s back, offering the comfort of his touch.

“Please excuse us while we speak in our native tongue for a few moments,” Zia said with a little bow to the two men.

The Furling council began to talk excitedly among themselves. Alpha and her group joined in the spirited discussion. There was much gesticulating at the humans, their talk obviously centering around them. The only understandable words the aliens spoke were the men’s names.

“Bet that’s one language you’ll never learn to speak,” Jack teased. He tightened his arm around Daniel’s shoulders and held him close.

Daniel turned his head and glanced at him, a faint glint of humor in his eyes.

Jack wasn’t sure if that look meant, You got that right, or Stand back and watch me. Given his lover’s linguistic skill, he wouldn’t put it past Daniel to have it mastered in a few weeks. Hearing sounds like that coming out of Daniel’s mouth would be a hoot.

The chattering ceased abruptly. Alpha gestured for the men to sit, and soft cushions were brought for them. They hunkered down on the floor, and the Furling council gathered close around them.

“Tell us of the Goa’uld, and what they have done that has brought your people such sorrow,” asked Zia.

Alpha climbed into Daniel’s lap as he began to tell the long tale, starting at the beginning with Ra and Apophis and ending with Anubis. As he talked, he began to stroke Alpha’s soft fur. Jack rubbed Daniel’s back and encouraged him to lean against him. At times, Daniel could barely talk, tears streaming down his face. Sometimes rage swelled within him and his body tensed, rock-hard. By the time he finished, he was leaning heavily on Jack’s shoulder, completely wrung out.

When he grew silent, the Furlings began to talk among themselves again, this time calmly, the gravity of their unintelligible conversation obvious in their tone of voice, rhythm of speech and body language.

Jack slipped his arms around Daniel as they waited and pulled him close, turning to face him a little. Daniel laid his head on Jack’s shoulder, forehead pressed warmly against his neck.

“I’m tired, Jack,” Daniel whispered, closing his eyes. “I didn’t sleep much last night.”

“Sssh. I know.” He kissed Daniel’s temple. “Was this what you didn’t want to talk about? Going home?”

Daniel nodded beneath Jack’s chin. “You’re in trouble now, because of me. If you’d gone back that first day—”

Jack smiled. “Then I’d have missed the rain.” He hugged Daniel close. “I love you, Daniel. That’s all that matters.”

“Love you, too, Jack.”

He continued to hold Daniel, running his hand up and down Daniel’s arm, his cheek pressed against Daniel’s hair. Jack held him as he rested, waiting for the Furlings to make their decision on the worthiness of humanity, a decision that he now understood hinged entirely on what the aliens knew of only these two human beings. He hoped they valued the same things. Daniel was his family. He
had sacrificed his career to stay with him. If the Furlings prized duty over love, they were in trouble. If they prized love over all else…

Silence fell in the council chamber, and Daniel straightened up to listen.

Zia came closer and put one tiny hand on Daniel’s knee. “We do not know what help we may offer,” she told him quietly, “but we will give what we can. What will you do when you return to your world, Daniel?”

“That depends. Do you want our people to know how to find you?” he asked her.

“We are open to communication, yes.”

“Then Jack and I will go back to Earth and report our findings. Our organization will send ambassadors to negotiate allied status with you, and—“

“No. We believe that we already have our ambassadors,” Zia corrected. “You and Jack have earned our trust. We know you will honor that trust and tell us only truth.”

“That’s not the way it works on Earth,” Jack told her. “Our government will choose—“

“We have chosen,” insisted Zia firmly, “and we are not on Earth now.”

Jack looked at Daniel. “Well, that’s an option. If they wanna be stubborn about it, who are we to deny them?”

Daniel didn’t quite risk a smile. He just nodded, a tiny glimmer of hope in his eyes.

“Ah, what exactly are we talkin’ here, Mom?” asked Jack pleasantly. “What kind of job offer is this? ‘Cause I gotta tell you, I’ve tried doing the diplomat thing before, and I’m not very good at it. I say what I think, and that tends to get me in trouble.”

Zia cocked her head. “Are you fond of us, Jack O’Neill?” She blinked at him innocently, all big green eyes.

“Oh, you folks have me wrapped around your little paws, honey,” he told her honestly.

“Hands, Jack. They have hands and fingers,” Daniel reminded him quietly. “And opposable thumbs. And don’t call her honey.”

Jack chuckled. “You’re right up there with dogs, in my book,” Jack added fondly, “And that’s a compliment. Of all the aliens we’ve met so far, nobody’s gotten that high a rating from me yet. Youbetcha, Mom. I like you Furlings a lot.”

Daniel groaned and wiped a hand across his face, mortified. “Dogs?” he whispered under his breath.

“You would not wish us to be taken advantage of or harmed?” asked Zia.

Jack stiffened. “No way. You’re like family to me.” He glanced at Daniel and believed his lover shared that feeling. “To us.”

Zia’s eyes half closed in pleasure, and she smiled indulgently. “Then you have all the qualifications necessary to stand between our peoples. You will be present at all official negotiations, and you will listen. You will judge your people’s words and tell us if they are being deceitful. You will protect us from their baseness and greed. Then you can educate us so that we may learn these behaviors for
later times, when perhaps you cannot always be present.”

She looked at Daniel. “Long ago, our people were the animals you thought us to be when you first arrived here. We fought many wars and brought great harm to each other, but over the millennia, we gradually moved away from our baser instincts. There is still conflict among us, but we have ways of handling it now that causes harm to no one. We are a happy people, and we are more innocent now because we have forgotten much about evil. You still struggle with it, but we have seen in your character that you do your best to make the right choices, no matter how difficult they may be.”


Daniel’s eyes glistened as he smiled and nodded. “Not an easy choice.”

“And now we go home and answer for that.”

Jack turned to Zia and said soberly, “We may not be able to come back, ma’am. We’ve broken some pretty important regulations back home, for the sake of our love.”

“If your people wish our help, they will allow us our choice of ambassadors,” Zia told him confidently. “We will accept no others, and the matter is not open to negotiation.”

“So we’ll be slaving over hot conference tables all day, huh?” asked Jack, warming to the idea. “What about fishing and foraging?”

Daniel cleared his throat nervously. His cheeks flushed slightly, hoping he wouldn’t mention the third F-word.

Jack glanced at his partner, eyebrows raised. “Well, we’ve gotta eat, Daniel.”

“All your needs will be provided for you here in the city,” Zia assured him. “These of our people with whom you have spent your time will look after you. You will share their home and want for nothing. You will be honored among our kind, as if you were Furlings yourselves.”

“Can I still go fishing sometimes?” asked Jack hopefully, his voice very soft. “Just for fun?”

“Whenever you like,” replied Zia with a fond smile. “Negotiations need not take place in a building or over a table. Actually, we prefer the outdoors and have crafted our homes and necessary buildings to keep nature at hand.”

Grinning broadly, Jack turned to Daniel. “What do you think?”

“Works for me, Jack.” He sighed, sagging slightly with relief. “As long as we can get things worked out at the SGC. We might not even be able to get home again. Your IDC may be locked out by now. Have you thought about that?”

Jack shook his head. “Hammond may be pissed off at me, but he knows I’d die before I’d endanger Earth. I’m sure my code’s still valid, Daniel. Don’t worry about it.”

He looked at the First Mother. “Looks like you got yourself a couple of ambassadors, Mom. Thanks for the job offer. It just might come in handy… if we’re able to come back.”

“When you return,” she went on, “there will be another issue that needs addressing.”

“Which is?”

The First Mother glanced between them. “A formal commitment between you. Official recognition
of your mated status. It must be confirmed under Furling law. We cannot allow you to live together without this.” Her fur fluffed out briefly. “We turned a blind eye when you thought us innocent animals, but now that you know who and what we are, you must follow our protocol. We have examples to set for our young, you know.”

For a moment, Jack was speechless. He stared at Daniel, whose eyes were twinkling as a slow smile spread over his face.

“I don’t see a shotgun around anywhere, but it doesn’t sound like we have a choice.”

“Married? To you?” Jack frowned, thinking about that. He’d always thought of marriage as strictly between men and women, but apparently the Furlings had no gender bias. If a pair of any sex coupled up, they got married. End of story. He looked up into Daniel’s expectant eyes and thought about that for a moment.

*Married* to Daniel Jackson. Mated for life. “I can do that,” he said slowly, nodding his head and smiling softly.

“Yeah. Me, too,” agreed Daniel with a bright, beaming smile that could have lit up New York City for a month.

Zia nodded. “Jack has declared among witnesses that you are a mated pair. Therefore, a formal commitment must follow. You cannot assist in raising your *keecha* young if there is no bond.” The Furling word was a screech in the middle of the elegantly spoken English.

“What is that… that thing you said?” asked Jack, “and what young are we talkin’ about, here? Daniel and I can’t have children.”

Alpha rocked back against Daniel’s chest and patted her slightly rounded belly. “The *keecha* are what you call your ‘tribe,’” she explained. “Those of us who have lived with you and shown you our world and our ways since you arrived. Some of us will soon have young, and you will be expected to help care for them as part of the tribe.”

“How do you tell who belongs to whom?” asked Daniel, glancing around at the tribe. “I mean, I know Delta and Little Jack are paired, and Theta and Chi, but who’s your mate?”

“I have none,” she assured him. “These are the young of the ones you call Delta and Little Jack. When they are born, they will be primary parents. They have nothing of me in them other than a place to grow.”

“Well, I’ll be damned!” breathed Jack. He turned around and held out his arms to the little Furling guys. “C’mere, boys! You’re gonna be daddies! How cool is that?”

He smiled as he watched Jack snuggle the two male Furlings into his lap. “I’m not gonna ask how you accomplished offspring from two males,” Daniel said with a note of wonder in his voice, “but our science hasn’t gotten nearly that far. I have no doubt there’s a whole lot we can learn from you. Not the least of which is how you deal with aggression and base behaviors.”

Jack reached over and rubbed Alpha’s belly. “When are you due, princess?”

“Not for many seasons yet,” she told him. “We grow slowly, as do our young.”

Shaking his head, unable to stop grinning, Jack looked up at Daniel. “Talk about an embarrassment of riches…” He leaned over and gave his lover a quick, gentle kiss on the lips. “What an adventure this is gonna be, Daniel! We’re gonna get married and be ambassadors to the Furlings! And maybe
we’ll even be able to have kids together. Damn.”

“All of that sounds great, Jack, but remember, Hammond could still throw us both in jail,” Daniel reminded him soberly.

“Do not worry,” Zia said confidently.

Jack reached out and cautiously began to scrub Zia’s shoulders. Her dark eyes began to close in pleasure, and she started purring. “Hey, Mom, got any cool gadgets we could take back with us for a demonstration of what you guys can offer our government? If you get ‘em excited about somethin’ they want, they just might go for your proposition.”

“Cool gadgets?” asked Alpha.

“Technology,” Daniel clarified, rubbing her belly absently. “Like whatever you use to make the roof invisible on our house.”

“A cloaking device!” crowed Jack. “That’d make Washington drool, all right. All over their fancy carpets.”

Zia leaned so heavily against Jack’s hand that when he started waving it about as he spoke, she fell over.

He reached down to the fallen Furling, who was now lying prone on the floor, and resumed scratching. She let him, her eyes completely closing. “Sorry about that, Mom. You can tell me when to stop.”

“Next season would be good,” Zia returned happily.

Jack grinned and started using both hands. “Your wish is my command. Consider us yours, Little Mama.”

She opened one big green eye and just stared at him. Then she smiled.

Jack stood in the clearing, watching the clouds gathering for the evening rain. He was sad that he’d miss it tonight, but he had the memories of two other rainy evenings to comfort him.

The night before, he and Daniel had said goodbye in bed, neither of them sleeping, not much being said with words. They had let their bodies do any necessary talking.

That morning Jack had been sore all over. Daniel had marked him everywhere and now Jack’s body was feathered with small reddish bruises, little souvenirs of their lovemaking to take with him. He smiled smugly to himself as he remembered, feeling the dull ache in his ass, a reminder of how Daniel had repeatedly taken him. He belonged to Daniel Jackson now, and he was complete.

“Ready?” asked Daniel from the DHD. He had just finished dialing Earth, and as they waited for the wormhole to stabilize, he strolled over and took Jack’s hands, looking deeply into his eyes.

“As I’ll ever be,” Jack returned, still smiling.

He glanced down around his feet and took note of the ever-present tribe, now including the elegant Zia, still wearing the wide golden collar, studded with jewels, the sign of her station. He gave her a wink. “Take care of Daniel for me and keep him out of trouble, okay, Mom?”
She chuckled. “Yes, my son. I shall.”

Jack smiled at his lover and let go of his hand, reaching up to touch his cheek fondly. Daniel met his gaze steadily. “This was worth it,” Jack whispered. “All of it.”

Daniel nodded, smiling. “Yes, it was.”

Jack leaned in for a kiss, brief but hot, and straightened to look in Daniel’s eyes. “I’ll see you soon,” he promised. “Everything’s gonna be okay. Remember that… and that I love you.”

Daniel nodded as they exchanged a last look. “Bye, Jack,” he whispered.

Jack turned away, looking at the GDO strapped to his wrist. He entered the code and confidently walked through the Stargate.

The moment he stepped onto the ramp at the SGC base, he put up his hands, lacing his fingers together, and pressed his palms against the back of his head.

The SFs on duty in the gate room already had their weapons poised and aimed right at him. He raised his eyes to the control room window, meeting General Hammond’s fierce gaze.

“Colonel O’Neill,” boomed Hammond through the PA. “You are under arrest for being absent without leave. You will surrender your weapons and be escorted to the briefing room immediately.”

The General’s blue eyes were hot with anger, but there was relief in his face as well.

At least one of his prodigal sons had come home safely.

The wormhole whooshed closed, leaving the ‘gate room in a sudden silence.

Jack stood still at the foot of the ramp, letting the SFs remove his weapons. He went with his escorts up the winding stairs to the briefing room and sat down in one of the chairs, hands casually folded on the table. The SFs positioned themselves behind his chair, out of his sight, but not out of mind.

“Nice to see you again, sir,” Jack said evenly.

Hammond was in full glower now. “Just where the hell have you been for the last week, Colonel?” he demanded hotly.

Jack’s eyebrows skittered up his forehead. “It was either Minnesota or Heaven. I get the two mixed up sometimes.” He smiled wistfully.

The General’s voice was deadly soft now. “This is no time for levity, son. You’re in deep, here.”

“I went to find Daniel, sir,” Jack admitted soberly. “I found one of his journal pages on that planet where Doctor Lee was kidnapped. It was addressed to me and had ‘gate coordinates on it, so I went there to check it out.”

“That’s not how things work around here, or have you forgotten what chain of command means?”

With a somber glance at the table, Jack raised his eyes back to his commander’s, hoping for understanding. “I was worried about him, sir. I didn’t want to waste a moment. I… I needed to know that he was still alive, that he was okay.”

Some of the wind went out of Hammond’s sails, and he sighed. “I know that, Colonel,” he returned gently, his voice and eyes full of understanding. “You want to tell me why you didn’t bring him back with you? I take it he is all right?” His eyes flicked upward, to the top of Jack’s head. “And what the
“Daniel’s fine,” Jack assured him right away, one hand reaching up to touch his dark hair self-consciously. He’d forgotten about that little detail. “At least, he was fine, once he got over me deck ing him for running off in the first place.”

He cleared his throat, checking to see that his addendum got the appropriate approval from his C.O. Which it did. “Ah, it’s a long story, sir. Mind if I get some water?”

Hammond waved a hand at him for permission.

“And do you really think you need me under guard? Some of what I’m gonna tell you… well, it’s confidential.”

The General glanced up at the SFs and gave them a nod of dismissal.

Jack didn’t have to look back to know when they left. He knew exactly how long it took to get to the stairs and out of earshot of the briefing table.

“It would be wise to cut Daniel some slack about his leaving, sir,” he began cautiously, rising from his chair. “He really didn’t have his head on straight when he left. He was… kinda like when he resigned that time he was strung out on the sarcophagus. About three fries short of a Happy Meal. He’s okay now, though.”

“Because you told him that you and Major Carter are no longer an item?” Hammond guessed.

“Something like that.”

Jack stepped away from his chair, stumbled, and caught himself before falling. “Oooo, sorry! Sorry. Excuse me.”

He straightened up and walked slowly toward the sideboard, careful with each step. He poured himself some water and slowly brought it back to the table.

“Anyway, he was in a pretty bad way when he left. He’d almost lost the will to live. He was so upset he wasn’t completely rational anymore. He was… willfully taking the chance that each new address he dialed might get him killed. Only luck or fate or God was with him, because he kept hitting good numbers. Then he found something.”

“The Lost City?”

“Nope.” Jack grinned. He sipped his water. “But I think we may have a bigger clue where to look now, because of Daniel’s research.”

“Go on.”

Jack reached into his pocket and pulled out a wrinkled, folded sheet of paper from Daniel’s journal and slid it across the table. “There are unlisted numbers in the Stargate system, not on the Abydos cartouche or in the Ancients’ database. Daniel figured ‘em out.”

Hammond’s eyes widened as he looked at the paper. “That’s excellent news. We’ll have to make these surveys first priority.”

“There’s more to it than that, sir.” Jack waited until he had the older man’s full attention. “Daniel made this discovery because he didn’t think we’d done enough study at some of the places we’d
already been. Turns out, he was right.”

With a thoughtful look, Hammond nodded. “I’m not surprised. He usually is.”

“Yeah. Well, we shoulda listened. He went back to those places, did some exploring and figured out those addresses. Then he went and checked ‘em out, but didn’t get very far. The Lost City could still be on any of those worlds… except for one. That’s the one where I found Daniel.”

“And you didn’t bring him back with you because…?”

“I need to know what will happen to him, when he comes back. I need to know if what he’s offered, what is literally on the table here, is worth letting him off the hook for his irrational behavior.”

There it was. The deal was out in the open. Some of it, anyway. All of it that he could talk about.

Hammond’s eyes narrowed. “Colonel… Jack. The stresses in this organization are admittedly high, but we simply cannot allow one of our civilian employees who happens to get the short end of the stick in a personal relationship just high-tail it through the Stargate—“

“He was playing ‘gate roulette, sir,” Jack reminded him, his heart twisting up at the memory. “He wasn’t just jealous. He was devastated, in ways I can’t begin to describe to you.” A pang of remembered pain shot through him and a sudden warmth covered his hand on the table. He tightened his fingers in response.

“I understand that, but there have to be disciplinary actions taken here. If Doctor Jackson was not under any alien influence when he left PX4-701, then he must be punished. Now, please tell me which coordinates, and I’ll send a team to pick him up.”

Jack sat back in his chair. “I’m afraid I can’t do that, sir.”

“Yes, you can and you will. You don’t have a choice here, Jack. Your own career is hanging in the balance. I can understand you being gone for a few hours, but once you ascertained that Doctor Jackson was safe, the appropriate action was to have returned to base with him, or returned and given us the coordinates so we could retrieve him.”

“There were extenuating circumstances, which I am not yet at liberty to discuss,” Jack told him flatly. “And I must tell you, sir, that it would be a grave error to throw either one of us into a cell at this point.”

“And why is that, Colonel?” Hammond’s patience was starting to wear thin.

“Because, during the course of our absence, we encountered a very powerful race of aliens, and it seems…” He cleared his throat nervously, one eyebrow arching upward in embarrassment. He took a quick drink of his water. “…well, apparently, I opened my mouth and stuck my foot in it, sir.”

“I’m not surprised.”

Jack’s mouth snapped closed. He frowned a little. Then he got over having his self-deprecating comment too readily accepted and went on. “Ah, while we were on the planet, I apparently… Well… the aliens… they own us now. Daniel and me.”

“What?” Hammond’s voice hit tenor range. “Colonel O’Neill, you are a free American citizen and an officer in the United States Air Force first and foremost, and therefore the property of Uncle Sam, until such time that you are officially retired from my command! Have you forgotten that entirely? Have you lost your mind? And exactly what aliens are we talking about here?”
“The Furlings, sir, and I’m here to work out that little detail of my retirement. Daniel and I have been accepted as ambassadors, and they apparently don’t want anybody else in that spot. Something about trust issues.”

“The Furlings?!” Hammond stood up. His face went beet red. He was obviously shocked and unhappy. There were little blue daggers flying out of his eyes, aimed right at Jack. “Colonel, I think it’s time you spent a little time cooling your heels. I need a moment to pull myself together, here.”

“Could I take a shower and change clothes first? I’ve been wearin’ these… or rather, not wearin’ these BDUs… for a week now.”

“Permission granted, but you will do so under guard. Dismissed.”

Jack stood up. He straightened his BDU jacket and himself. “Ah, sir, I really think you should reconsider that jail cell thing. It wouldn’t go over well with our new alien allies. Sir.”

Hammond was already stomping off toward his office. “You can explain it to me when I send for you again, Colonel.”

Two SFs met him at the base of the stairs and escorted him to the elevator. As he approached the car, Jack said, “Hang back and wait for me here, kids.”

The Marine sergeant who was walking to his left glanced at him. “We can’t do that, sir. General’s orders.”

Keeping his eyes straight ahead, Jack said, “I wasn’t talkin’ to you, Sarge.” He stepped into the car with his two guards, faced front with a grin and watched the doors close on the apparently empty hallway.

Half an hour later, he was showered and clean and dressed in fresh fatigues. Hammond’s summons was quick, barely giving Jack time to lie down on the bunk in his cell before he was headed back to the briefing room, where Sam and Teal’c were now also in attendance.

Jack gave them each a little smile, then chose the chair at the far end of the table… after pulling all the empty side chairs out and away from the table.

“Welcome home, sir,” said Sam, watching him like she thought he had taken leave of his senses. “Uh… what are you doing?”

“It’s okay, Carter. I know what I’m doing here, even though it doesn’t look like it.” He sat down and grinned at Teal’c. “You guys are not gonna believe what happened…” He caught sight of the General’s eyes and fell silent, his grin slowly fading.

George watched him in silence. “Colonel O’Neill, I really want to give both you and Doctor Jackson the benefit of the doubt, here,” he intoned, “but I have discipline and morale to keep up as well. If I let either of you go without punishment, I’m setting myself up for a great deal of trouble with personnel in the future. I need to set an example—”

“Sorry for interrupting, sir, but Daniel is the example,” Jack reminded him. “Let’s not lose sight of that. Nobody in the history of this command has done more, worked harder, or given more of himself to the work being done here. Daniel had his priorities straight, and as much as he wanted to quit, tried really hard to do that, he couldn’t. He left here working for the SGC, and continued to do so while he was gone. We owe him, sir. I’m asking you to take into account that Daniel’s been punished enough. He did more of that to himself than any jail cell ever could.”
Hammond’s mouth pressed into a firm line. Jack could see him swaying, wanting very much to forgive and forget, especially for Daniel. Sam and Teal’c were hopeful, but remained quiet.

“What about you?” he asked quietly. “You were AWOL, Colonel. You know how the military feels about that.”

Jack shook his head. “I was doing my job, too, sir. Search And Rescue. Protecting my teammate. Negotiating with alien governments. Securing valuable treaties. I may have left without direct orders, but I wasn’t entirely off the clock, either. Except when I was sleeping, of course, and…”

He glanced down at the table, thinking about making love to Daniel, but that wasn’t something on the list he could mention. “…and fishing. I caught a fish!” He grinned, but it faded fast. He shrugged. “Well, we had to eat, too. Survival stuff. We were on our own for three days before we made it to the Furling city.”

Hammond stared at him, thinking hard. “I need more information, Jack. Help me out here. I don’t have enough to base a decision on yet.”

Taking that as a positive sign, Jack launched into a condensed tale of Daniel’s search for clues, the mystery of the Furling riddle, and how Daniel had solved it. He gave a sanitized version of his and Daniel’s meeting, mentioned that they had talked and worked out their problems without giving any details and that, as they foraged and discussed Daniel’s findings, they were being observed without their knowledge. This unmasked behavior, he told the General, was what won the Furlings over and convinced them that humans had some interesting qualities and deserved a chance at survival.

“That’s why they want us, sir. Daniel and I,” Jack explained. “We’d already shown them our true selves, before we even realized we had an audience. Any other ambassadors who come through the ’gate could have other agendas. They might be prone to deceit.”

Jack’s eyes rolled slowly up to Hammond’s, then to the video camera aimed at him to record the official debriefing. “Just imagine if certain politicians we know were appointed to an off-world ambassadorial post, and you’ll see what I’m getting at here.”

“How do we know the Furlings have anything we want, or that they’ll even cooperate?” Hammond asked him. “The Asgard have certainly taken our side against the Goa’uld, but they haven’t been much help to us because of the Replicator issues. And the Nox are decidedly neutral.”

Jack sat back in his chair, a smug grin creeping over his mouth. “Oh, trust me, sir. They’ve got good stuff, and they’re willing to let us have it. Notice, I didn’t say ‘trade for,’ I said ‘have.’ There will be some stipulations about supervising us and stuff, of course. They don’t want us little kids to hurt ourselves playing with their cool toys.”

Warmth filled him as he recalled his first look at Furling families. “They’re a very parental race, and they’ve chosen to adopt the Tau’ri. Help us along as we evolve.”

Hammond tapped his pen on his tablet thoughtfully. His loose posture suggested that he was inclined to take the offer being made, but he needed a little something more to push him over the edge. Jack thought he had just the thing.

He glanced at his teammates and winked. “Sir? Would we be interested in a cloaking device for the Prometheus? For a jet fighter or a death glider?”

Carter jumped in her seat. “No kidding?”

Interest gleamed in Hammond’s steely blue eyes. “Yes, Colonel, you know we would.”
“How about personal ones so our people could infiltrate Goa’uld strongholds?”

“We could make great use of such devices, O’Neill,” Teal’c returned.

“That has distinct possibilities. Do the Furlings have these devices?”

Jack cleared his throat. “Before I answer that, sir, I’ll need your decision. Are Daniel and I off the hook, if we come through with an alliance with the Furlings that will give us needed technology to fight the Goa’uld?”

He got up while he waited for the answer, went to the sideboard, and poured a glass of water. Stepping carefully, he went to the end of the table and set the glass down near the General’s elbow.

“I hope you understand, sir, that this is a matter of dropping the little insignificant stuff in favor of taking hold of the very big, powerful hand being held out to us. This is another test of our worthiness, and I’d like very much for us to pass it.”

He returned to his chair and sat down.

Jack knew what had happened to George Hammond’s only son. He’d been a military casualty in a war no one ever heard about. He was also aware that the General treated everyone under his command like family. Jack knew exactly how important that was.

“Think of Daniel and I as your sons, sir, and treat us accordingly. That’s what the Furlings want to see.” Warmth touched his hand on the table, and he smiled, not daring to glance toward its source, for he would see nothing there.

Emotion flared behind those cool blue eyes and Hammond looked down at his notes. His voice was very soft when he spoke. “I’ve always done that, Jack. With all of SG-1.”

“I know, sir,” said Jack gently.

“I’ll find a way to work it out, Colonel,” Hammond told him with a sigh of resignation. “I may have to take some heat for it, but if we can offer the Pentagon these cloaking devices and if they work—”

“I’ll take that as a yes,” Jack cut in. “How would you like a demonstration of that cool new cloaking toy?”

“That would be interesting, I’ll admit.”

“Yes!” Carter cheered excitedly. “The Furlings, sir! Wow, when do we meet them?”

Jack held out a hand to her, palm out. “Calm down, Carter.” He glanced over his shoulder. “Wanna send the SFs away, sir?”

Hammond gave them the nod, and the guards near the stairwells left the room.

With a sigh, Jack stood up at the end of the table. “Okay, Mom. Show’s over. You do the negotiating from here.”

“Mom?” asked the General.

“Family is everything among the Furlings,” Jack explained. “Their leader is called the First Mother.” He glanced at the empty chair to his left. “Daniel?”

He saw his lover take shape and solidify in seconds. Immediately afterward, Furlings began to
appear in the same manner, filling the chairs, some on the table, others perched on the stair railing and a few seated on the sideboard. The room seemed to get smaller as more and more of them began to appear until several of their tribe, including the First Mother, were visible.

“Holy Hannah!” Carter breathed, her gaze darting around the room and landing finally on the face of her missing teammate. “Daniel, thank God!” She reached out and delightedly hugged the man sitting in the chair next to hers.

Teal’c just looked incredibly smug and pleased, hardly surprised at all.

“Is that everybody?” Jack asked his partner.

“I think so,” Daniel replied, counting heads. “Nine… ten. Yes, all those who came with us are here.”

Hammond’s eyes were nearly bugging out at first, his mouth in a little round ‘o’ of surprise, but by the time the last member had made its appearance, he was rapidly gathering his wits about him again.

He reached for the glass of water Jack had poured him earlier and took a gulp. “Well.” He sat back in his chair. “Did I pass the test?”

Zia sat directly in front of him on the conference table. “We are pleased, General Hammond,” she told him placidly. “Your mercy and wisdom have earned your people our aid. We look forward to helping you keep your children safe.”

“General Hammond, meet Zia, the First Mother of the Furlings,” Jack announced. “I just call her Mom.”

He grinned and reached inside his fatigue jacket. He pulled out two envelopes and handed them to the Furling nearest him, who passed it to the next, all the way up to the general. “Those are official resignation letters for Daniel and me. We’ve been invited to go live with the Furlings—”

“Not exactly,” Daniel cut in. He faced the General. “Um, Jack got us adopted. We belong to Zia now. We’re her children.”

Hammond grinned in spite of himself and shook his head in wonder. “How the hell did you do that, Jack?”

“Open mouth, insert foot,” quipped Daniel. “He has a talent for it.”

“It was a point of Furling law, of which I was ignorant when I said what I did. I had no idea…”

“‘Consider us yours,’ was what he told her,” Daniel clarified. “She agreed to the bargain. When they explained what had just happened, we were understandably a little startled. Apparently, Jack and I are Furlings now.”

Hammond bent his head over his notes, trying unsuccessfully not to laugh. His shoulders quivered. He shook his head as a wide grin broke out of hiding, then he finally gave in and chuckled. He took the resignation papers and looked up at the men with a mixture of acceptance, relief, and good humor.

Daniel rose from his chair and strolled up beside Zia. He began stroking her head, which she apparently appreciated. “The reason Jack was dancing so carefully around telling you everything up front is because you couldn’t know that you’d be putting a Furling citizen in jail, since that might skew your decision. They have very strict rules about how much can be revealed and when the
information can come out.”

Sam reached out toward Alpha, who raised her arms in welcome and allowed herself to be picked up. She settled into Sam’s lap for a cuddle and scratch. Carter was beaming, and so was the Furling.

Hammond couldn’t stop smiling. “Resignations accepted, gentlemen. We’ll need to have more detailed information, especially from you, Doctor Jackson. And since you two are the only ambassadors acceptable to the Furlings, we’ll have quite a bit of dancing to do ourselves in Washington, getting the administration to accept this edict from our alien friends.”

“Um, it would probably be best for the deciding parties to come here, rather than try to send us there,” suggested Daniel. He picked up Zia and cuddled her under his chin, cradling her in the crook of one arm. He continued to scratch the back of her neck and shoulders with his other hand as he talked.

“Well then, they go with us everywhere,” added Jack. “Part of that family thing. They even sleep with us, all of us in one great big bed.” He shot a glance at Daniel and smiled. “Course, there was only the one bed in Daniel’s house.”

He cleared his throat. “One more thing, sir. Since I’m no longer in the military, I can also tell you that Daniel and I will be getting married when we get back to New Minnesota. Shotgun wedding, so to speak.”

Carter’s mouth dropped open. “Whoa. That was fast.”

“Another point of Furling law, of which we were ignorant until Jack opened his mouth,” Daniel explained, blushing. “Jack has such a way with words.”

Hammond sat back in his chair, his face pensive. He glanced from one to the other, studying their expressions. “So the two of you are…?”

“In love,” Daniel agreed, shooting a warm gaze at his lover. “That was why I couldn’t stay, sir.”

“Everything makes perfect sense now, son.” Hammond didn’t seem a bit surprised. “While I had my suspicions, you know I couldn’t ask.”

“And I couldn’t tell,” Jack replied. “Until now.”

Teal’c was smiling broadly, nodding in agreement. “Congratulations to you both,” he offered warmly. “I believe you will be very happy together.”

One of the Furlings sat down in front of him on the table, and he hesitantly began petting it.

Carter stood, holding Alpha with one arm, and hugged Jack, then gave Daniel a kiss on the cheek. “Are we invited to…ah…New Minnesota? For the wedding?”

“Everybody’s invited,” Jack assured her.

“You’ve got some fun coming up with the unlisted ‘gate addresses, Carter. And wait till you see Furlingville!”

“That’s not the name of their city, Jack,” Daniel corrected.

“I can’t say the name of their city, Daniel,” Jack shot back, nonplussed.

“Sounds like an interesting week you’ve had, Jack.” The General looked up at Zia, who was resting
contentedly in Daniel’s embrace. “Who speaks for the Furlings, ma’am?”

Daniel put her down on the table and she composed herself regally, looking eye to eye with Hammond. “I do, as First Mother.”

George asked a few questions, and then began the standard ally dialogue with Zia. In less than half an hour, she had the General wrapped around her little paw, his eyes sparkling with pure pleasure as he talked to her. Jack watched in total awe as he saw George smiling, leaning on his hand and eventually stroking her soft fur.

Hammond was a goner.

While they chatted, Jack, Daniel, Sam and Teal’c amused themselves with the other Furlings, answering their questions quietly in the background, keeping order… or at least making an attempt. It was like having a meeting with a room full of toddlers. The Furlings were into everything.

Jack dutifully cleaned up the spilled water and coffee on the sideboard while Daniel tried to keep everyone corralled in the briefing room. Sam was charmed right out of her mind with a lap full of Furlings. Teal’c contented himself with scratching Little Jack and Delta, who were cuddled up on the table in front of him.

Finally, with preliminary negotiations out of the way, the General invited everyone for a tour of the base and a meal at the commissary. Everywhere they went, people smiled when they saw the aliens with their big, curious eyes and cute little faces.

Just a routine day at SGC…

As they sat down to eat, surrounded by their Furling family, Jack reached over and took Daniel’s hand in full view of everyone, drawing those blue eyes to his face with that innocent, loving touch.

“I think it’s gonna be okay,” he whispered quietly.

Daniel smiled and nodded. “Furlings to the rescue, huh?”

Six days later

Daniel looked into Jack’s eyes and couldn’t see anything else. Part of his mind registered that they were surrounded by Furlings and a handful of friends and dignitaries from Earth, but none of that mattered. They were about to be bonded for life, and all it took was a modest show of intended intimacy before witnesses.

Jack was dressed in a black silk Henley shirt and charcoal gray dress slacks. Daniel had chosen a white jersey turtleneck that fit his upper body like a glove. His pants were a dark navy, belted at the waist with matching navy leather belt sporting a decorative gold clasp. Both of them were barbered to perfection.

They now also wore the wide gold collars studded with dark blue and red jewels, marking them as Furling dignitaries. The collars extended from the base of their necks across their shoulders and then from the bottom of their collarbones to halfway down their chests.

The signal was given by the Furling officiating at their wedding. They had been instructed in Furling mating rituals and had consulted with Zia to come up with a ceremony that would fulfill both Furling
law and human tradition.

With an intense look, they faced each other and clasped hands.

“Daniel, I choose you to be my mate, now and always,” Jack breathed softly.

Daniel’s heart melted. “Last love,” he agreed quietly, remembering the first day they were together. “I choose you to be my mate, Jack. Now and always.”

He lifted his lips to kiss Jack, tasting his husband, tracing his face with his fingers, holding him close with his other hand. Jack’s hands slipped around Daniel’s waist. He pressed against Daniel, pushing him gently down onto the cushioned seat where they would finish pledging their vows to each other, Furling style.

Jack’s body lay half across his, pinning him down, and for a moment both of them forgot where they were. Jack’s hand smoothed down Daniel’s side, caressing his thigh possessively as his tongue invaded Daniel’s mouth. Daniel groaned deep in his throat, and Jack leaned over him a little more, his hand slipping beneath Daniel’s thigh, pulling it upward until Daniel’s leg was wrapped around his waist.

Furling tradition required an obvious clinch, something that announced intention of intimacy, and that ought to do it. Nothing too overtly sexual, but definitely heading that way. Daniel’s hard-on was eagerly pressing into Jack’s belly and it was only by some miracle that Daniel’s presence of mind returned in time to keep things from going much too far.

“Mmm!” cried Daniel into Jack’s mouth, his eyes popping open. He sat up and broke the kiss, leaving Jack startled for a moment as he nervously straightened his clothes and fought to quell his growing erection. Daniel’s face felt hot enough to cook an egg, and he shot a sideways glance at his new husband, realizing at a glance that Jack had intended to do that in front of everyone. He was still cool as a cucumber, perfectly in control, and Daniel was anything but.

Jack grinned at him, then looked at the Furling presiding over them. “On Earth, it’s a custom for folks getting married to exchange rings,” he said. He reached into his trouser pocket and pulled out a small box, which he opened.

Daniel’s eyes went wide. “Jack, when did you have time to do this?”

He gazed at the matching rings. They were platinum bands, channel set with small square cut diamonds and other colored gemstones all the way around. The stones formed a sparkling rainbow: a clear white diamond next to a pale pink one, a ruby beside a fire opal with a brilliant orange hue, then a canary yellow diamond, a pale peridot, an emerald, a light blue topaz beside a sapphire, an amethyst and a rare translucent black diamond. The colored stones repeated in reverse order around the rings, making a perfectly ordered spectrum beginning and ending with the single white diamond.

“Pixie dust,” Jack whispered, lifting out one of the bands and placing it on Daniel’s left ring finger. “Magic, Daniel.” He lifted Daniel’s hand and placed a kiss on the ring.

Daniel blinked away tears as he slipped the matching band onto Jack’s left hand. “With this ring I thee wed, Jack O’Neill. What did I ever do to deserve you?” he breathed with a tremulous smile. He brought Jack’s hand to his lips and placed a kiss on his ring, too.

Jack smiled back and took him in his arms again. “You’re Daniel Jackson,” he said simply. “You love me with all my faults, and that’s enough.” He kissed Daniel gently, his gaze never leaving Daniel’s eyes, and the humans in the audience laughed and applauded.
“I do,” agreed Daniel as they eased apart.

The Furling pronounced them a bonded pair in his native tongue, and when he finished screeching, the newlyweds got up from the cushions and turned to greet their guests.

A celebration was held afterward which included a tour of the city for all the off-world guests, an informal banquet attended by the Furling council members and a traditional Furling celebration that involved the newlyweds cuddling a great many Furling babies and watching the children for their parents, with the assistance of their human friends.

As the day waned, and the Furling guests began to return to their homes, Jack and Daniel walked their guests to their quarters, leaving only Sam and Teal’c to keep them company.

“So when do we get to see that honeymoon house you told us about?” asked Carter, linking arms with Daniel as they walked.

Daniel smiled. “You sure you want to see our little love nest?” he teased.

“I have heard much of this place from O’Neill,” Teal’c intoned. “I would like very much to see the building with the invisible roof and no walls.”

“All right,” Jack said. “We can take you there before dark.”

They first returned to their new city residence – Zia’s home, big enough to house their entire tribe in one wing – and climbed up the stairs to the roof.

A vehicle that the Furlings had had made especially for them, human-sized and with the capacity to carry their Furling tribe plus a few, stood waiting. Carter and Teal’c both sat with Furlings in their laps on the short trip back to the guest house near the Stargate, while Jack did the flying.

On the way, he and Jack described how wonderful their life had been among the Furlings. They now felt liberated and fulfilled.

Both Sam and Teal’c were happy for them and promised to visit as often as they could.

Daniel suggested a sabbatical for Sam at the Furling science center so she could help inform the Tau’ri government what the aliens could offer.

Jack mentioned to Teal’c that the Furlings would need an advisor on the Goa’uld, in order to help create strategies for the united campaign just getting under way.

Both said they would think about the offers, but Daniel could see they were definitely interested.

When they arrived, they took their former teammates on a tour of the small house, settling down in the bedroom to talk about old times and their respective future plans. Sam expressed an interest in staying the night in the guesthouse, and Teal’c offered to keep her company.

Jack shot Daniel a look and grinned. The whole time they visited, Daniel was aware of Jack, how close to him he sat, how often they touched each other. Steadily Daniel’s hunger for him grew until he couldn’t keep his eyes off the man beside him.

“It’ll be raining soon,” Daniel announced, glancing up at the overcast sky before turning his eyes back to his new husband. “We should be heading home now.”

He got up and pulled Sam into a hug, then patted Teal’c on the shoulder as Jack eased up behind
him. “We’ll be back in the morning. You sure you guys will be okay here… um… you know…” He glanced down at the bed.

“It’s not like we haven’t shared a bed before, Daniel,” she reminded him, then apparently realized how that sounded. She blushed. “Um… in the field. You know. Uh…” She looked nervously up at Teal’c.

He beamed down at her, a warm smile on his lips and gentle humor glinting in his dark eyes. “We will be fine, DanielJackson.” He gave his former teammate a regal nod.

Sam looked outside at the new group of Furlings decorating the nearby landscape. “So this is our tribe? Or are some my escorts and some Teal’c’s? How do you tell who belongs to whom?”

Jack stepped closer to Daniel and slipped his arm around his husband’s waist, hugging him and resting his chin on Daniel’s shoulder. “Just leave it to the Furlings to decide. If you and T go to different places, you’ll see how they divvy themselves up. Somehow, they always know who to follow.” He grinned. “It’s kinda fun, living in a pack.”

He tipped his head back and howled like a wolf, coming down grinning.

Sam was apparently enjoying his jovial mood and chuckled. “It was a beautiful wedding, guys. Interesting custom, having you make out in front of the audience to stake your public claim on each other.”

“I do not believe I have ever seen DanielJackson quite that shade of red before, O’Neill,” observed Teal’c with a smug grin, a single eyebrow arching up his forehead.

Daniel cleared his throat and blushed again, forcing an embarrassed smile.

“At least they’re gonna let us finish up in private,” Jack said with a satisfied leer. He nibbled at the base of Daniel’s neck.

“Later,” Daniel whispered to him. Daniel’s heartbeat speeded up. He started sweating and his insides were quivering. He was going home to be with his new husband on their wedding night, only minutes away.

Carter chuckled at them and shook her head. “The General didn’t seem too surprised about the two of you. Too bad he couldn’t be here today. I’d have loved to see the look on his face, watching you two grope each other.”

“It was a sacred ceremony,” Daniel insisted with a sniff.

Jack sighed. “Personally, I’m relieved he couldn’t come. I don’t think I’d have been able to suck face in front of him. That would’ve been like doing it in front of my dad, for cryin’ out loud!”

“George is a smart man,” agreed Daniel, patting Jack’s arms around him. “He probably had it figured out a long time before you and I did.”

“I was also aware of your feelings for one another,” admitted Teal’c, “but it was not my place to point it out to either of you. That was a journey you both had to undertake yourselves.”

“And look where it led,” finished Daniel.

Sam took his hand and squeezed it. “I think we’ve got a real chance against the Goa’uld now, Daniel, thanks to you. We’ll miss you at the SGC.”
“I’ll still be here if you need me,” he promised.

“Me, too!” Jack looked a little hurt. “I’m newer now. Good knees, great hair. I can do stuff, too!”

“Um, no more Search And Rescue missions, Jack, unless you intend to take me and the tribe off-world with you. We’re a package deal now, remember?” Daniel’s free hand slipped behind him to cradle one of Jack’s butt cheeks through his pants.

“Oh. Yeah. I forgot about that. Oh, well. I’ll be needed here, I’m sure. Ambassador stuff, you know. And fishing.”

Daniel smiled and glanced at him over his shoulder. “I’ll be needing you every day.”

“And every night,” he teased, waggling his eyebrows at his new husband.

Sam chuckled and waved them away. “Okay, you two, get a room. G’night, guys. See you in the morning.”

She and Teal’c watched as Daniel and Jack walked away with their personal group of Furlings to the human-sized hovercraft parked on the tiled plaza. It took a while for everyone to get in and seated, the human Furlings up front at the controls. Jack had proven, as always, to be an able pilot and loved getting a chance to fly the speedy Furling vehicle.

“Do you think they know?” asked Daniel as Jack powered up the craft and piloted it up and away.

“What, that they belong together?” Jack reached over to grab Daniel’s hand for a second. “Not yet.” A soft, warm smile slid over his lips. “Maybe they’ll figure that out when it rains.”

Daniel nodded, looking down at his wedding ring. “Pixie dust, fireworks and dreams.” He looked behind him at the thirty furry faces gazing innocently back at him. “Anybody back there named Cupid?”

Thirty smiles winked back at him, but no one claimed the name.

“So, the rings, Jack,” asked Daniel, studying Jack’s profile. “How’d you do this? We never left the base. Couldn’t, with Furlings in tow.”

“Carter,” said Jack simply. “I gave her my old wedding ring so she could size this one, told her what I wanted, and she had ‘em made for us. I guessed at your size. Figured our fingers were about the same size.” He glanced down at Daniel’s hand, then up at his face. “Close?”

“Perfect,” Daniel assured him with a smile, giving the ring a twirl and watching it sparkle and throw rainbow specks of light all over the interior of the craft. “I love it, Jack. It was a wonderful surprise, and you couldn’t have given me a better gift.”

Jack glanced at him with a smile. He was feeling pretty pleased with himself.

A few minutes later, Jack set them down on the roof of their new house, and everybody went their separate ways.

Daniel took Jack’s hand as they went downstairs, leading him into the bedroom. “Privacy,” he called to the room, then gave a high-pitched little screech. Instantly the transparent walls went opaque, only the ceiling remaining invisible.

With a chuckle, Jack turned to him. “So you’re learning Furling now?”
Daniel grinned. “Working on it, but the pronunciation’s a bitch.”

The first drops of rain began to fall, delineating the structure of the roof, built into shapes that would enhance the prismatic effect of sunlight on the raindrops.

“This is our wedding night, Jack. Are we dreaming again?” asked Daniel. He embraced Jack around his shoulders and began to dance him slowly backward toward the bed. He unfastened Jack’s golden collar and dropped it carefully on the floor. His own followed a moment later.

“Yeah, I think we are,” murmured Jack, his arms slipping around Daniel’s waist. He grasped the soft sides of the turtleneck Daniel was wearing and lifted it, Daniel’s arms raising to allow Jack to remove it. He unfastened Daniel’s belt, his dark eyes sparkling with desire.

Daniel realized this was the first time Jack had undressed him, and it made him feel incredibly vulnerable and precious. Jack was unwrapping his wedding gift. They were married now.

*Married.*


“And maybe not even then,” added Jack. He glanced upward as the sound of the first drops of rain on the roof sounded. A slow smile dawned, and he met Daniel’s eyes. “Let’s go up on the roof for a minute.”

“In the rain?”

“Yeah. In the rain.” He started to step away, tugging on Daniel’s hand. “C’mon.”

Daniel meant to grab for his discarded shirt, but Jack saw what he was doing and tugged more insistently. “Leave it,” he ordered gently. “We won’t be out that long.” He unbuttoned his own shirt as they headed for the door and tossed it behind him onto the floor on his way toward the bedroom door.

Daniel sighed and straightened, letting Jack lead him back up the stairs. The roof became opaque as they arrived outside. Rain was already falling steadily, a gentle shower coming straight down. Jack strolled slowly to the northernmost corner and stood looking out over the city.

“It looks more like a forest than a city, doesn’t it?” There was a note of wonder in Jack’s voice.

“Yeah. It’s beautiful.” Daniel sidled up beside his husband and let his right hand settle into the small of Jack’s back. He loved that spot. Loved kissing it, touching it, watching it when Jack walked in front of him. God, he was such a beautiful man, so carelessly sexy, such a charming rascal. No wonder Daniel had fallen in love with him. Who wouldn’t, after living in his radiance every day?

“So are you, Jack,” he breathed at him. “Beautiful.”

Jack turned to look at him, putting his back to the city. He reached out to touch Daniel’s face with his fingertips, a look of awe in his eyes. “Luck o’ the Irish in full bloom, here, Danny,” he murmured. “I must be the luckiest man in the whole fucking universe.”

Daniel held Jack’s rain-spangled face in his hands, amazed at how much younger his partner looked now with his thatch of unruly dark brown hair now plastered to his head. He was more handsome than ever, and Daniel’s eyes couldn’t get enough of looking at him. “God, how I love you,” he breathed. “I want everyone to know that, Jack! I want everyone to know how much you mean to me.”
He kissed Jack hard, forcing his mouth open, exploring boldly with his tongue. His hands moved down to Jack’s belt, undoing it and his pants and pushing them downward. His recent discovery that Jack preferred to go commando beneath his clothes was a huge turn-on. Daniel dropped to his knees on the hard surface of the rooftop balcony to take Jack’s awakening cock in his mouth, rough and needy, his hands squeezing and teasing Jack’s dripping balls.

“Daniel,” he called raggedly, “people can see us. We’re on the roof, for cryin’ out loud.”

“Mmmm,” Daniel replied, aching now with the force of his desire for Jack. He felt Jack’s hands on his face, in his hair, carding through the wet strands and combing them back from his face… so he could watch his husband swallow him whole.

“Let ‘em watch,” growled Jack, no longer caring if they had an audience. “Love me, Danny. Nobody else has ever loved me like you do.”

Daniel adored how he tasted. He sucked and licked all over Jack’s wet belly and thighs, delighted when Jack grasped his erection and pushed it hungrily back into his mouth. He loved it when Jack took control like that, but he also loved dominating him, commanding him to their mutual pleasure.

“Wanna fuck you, Daniel,” he whispered darkly. “Wanna be inside you and then I want you to fuck me… in the rain, on the roof, where anybody can see us if they look.”

The thought was erotic, but the hard surface of the roof under his knees was a harsh reality. Daniel pulled back and stood up. “Bed, Jack. Now.”

Jack’s breathing was harsh and shallow. He was intoxicated, losing the capacity to think. He nodded and followed Daniel back down the stairs, holding onto his pants with one hand.

When they hit the bedroom door, sodden clothes went flying and both of them dived onto the bed and each other. Wet flesh slapped against wet flesh. Muscles bunched and strained. They wrestled, both demanding, assured of their equal strength and power.

Jack lunged for the small pot of lube sitting open on the nightstand, dug his fingers into it and quickly slapped some on his cock. He scooped Daniel’s buttocks up with both hands and lifted, acquired his target and sank in, hard and deep and fast.

Daniel cried out, his body tensing, and Jack just held his position, waiting for Daniel to give him the word to move. He could see tears standing in Daniel’s eyes for a moment, saw the grimace pulling at his mouth. He was suddenly worried that he’d been too aggressive.

“Sorry, baby,” he whispered. “Are you okay?”

Daniel shook his head. “‘s good,” he assured Jack. Daniel reached out and placed his hand on Jack’s cheek and gazed deeply into his eyes. “My husband, my love,” he murmured.

The look in Jack’s eyes, his desperate need to be inside Daniel, was worth the minor pain of such a rushed entry. Daniel’s ass was on fire, throbbing with shock… and he loved it. “Fuck me,” he ground out between clenched teeth.

Jack started to thrust, withdrawing in one smooth jerk and slamming back inside.

“Oh!” groaned Daniel. “God, yes!” He couldn’t look away from those eyes, staring back at him, into him, into his soul. Jack’s hands cupped his buttocks, holding him up off the bed, ramming into him. Jack’s arms and chest bulged with muscle, sweat dripping off his chin as his cock pistonued into Daniel’s ass.

It was beautiful; Jack was gorgeous, and Daniel wasn’t sure he could restrain his orgasm. He was close, so close. “Jack, I’m gonna—“

“No!” he roared. “Not yet! Please, Danny, hold on, h-hold on…” His eyes closed. His head tipped forward, body curled over his lover as he grunted with each spasm of his climax.

Daniel grasped his own cock, squeezing hard at the base to scabble for a little control. When Jack relaxed, he slowly lowered Daniel to the bed, pulled out and rolled onto his back. He reached into the pot for more lube and slicked up his own ass, then spread his legs for his husband.

Panting and desperate, Daniel had scrambled to his knees as soon as Jack left him. Eagerly Daniel knelt over him, one finger teasing at the tightly puckered ring of Jack’s anus. Daniel’s hands were shaking, but he didn’t want to hurt his mate. He had to take his time and prepare him first.

Daniel wasn’t sure he was going to make it.

“Fuck me,” Jack ordered.

“Can’t. Not yet.”

“Close?”

Daniel only nodded, no longer able to speak.

Jack reached out and grabbed him by the upper arms, his fingers closing like a vise on the limbs. He pulled Daniel down on top of him. “Do it. Take me. I want you to come inside me. I want to watch you do to me what I just did to you. I want to know what you felt when I was fucking you.”

“Oh, God…” Daniel was helpless in the face of that abandon. He reached between them and guided himself home, then pushed hard.

Jack yelped and arched off the bed. Daniel pushed up to his knees, looking down at him, kneeling perfectly still, trembling with fear that he’d been too rough. He panted, trying to catch his breath, to calm down a little.

After a few moments, Jack nodded, his eyes gleaming with undimmed passion. “I’m all right. Do it,” he whispered roughly.

The look on Jack’s face was the hottest thing Daniel had ever seen. He lifted Jack’s lean hips off the bed, kneeling between his legs, and pounded his love with the unbridled force of his passionate thrusts. Jack’s eyes closed. His back arched. He moaned and clutched at the bedcovers, growing louder and louder until he was shouting and writhing on the bed.

“God, yes! Danny, fuck, so good, yes!”

“Jack,” Daniel warned, his body tensing up, balls tightening. “Gonna…”

His orgasm hit like a sledgehammer, dropping him on top of Jack. For a few moments, he couldn’t move except to struggle for breath. Finally, what strength he did have flowed out of him and left him in a boneless heap on top of his lover. His husband.

“Whoa,” said Jack as his breathing began to slow a little. “That was…”

“Yeah,” Daniel agreed. “Think I’m just gonna… stay here a while.”
When he could manage, he lifted his head off Jack’s shoulder and shifted his body back so Jack could stretch out a little. He propped himself up on his elbows and looked down into that ruggedly handsome face.

Jack looked happy, sated, at peace. He looked like a man besotted. His fingers came up to touch Daniel’s cheek, and Daniel leaned into that reverent touch. “I love you, Daniel Jackson,” said Jack softly. “It still stuns me that I’m so fucking crazy about another man. You’ve ruined me for anyone else. You know that, don’t you?”

Daniel just grinned at him and nodded. He felt the same way and was in awe of the power of their emotions. There was a rightness about it, though, that brought him peace such as he had never believed possible.

Jack sobered, his smile all but disappearing. “Think about this before you answer, okay?” He took a deep breath and let it out slowly, his fingers playing with Daniel’s hair. “Do you picture yourself here in twenty years, still happy with me?”

Daniel’s heart warmed, and he smiled at Jack. “Twenty, thirty, forty… However many years we have left, Jack. I’m not going anywhere. I can’t imagine ever being without you. Not after this,” he admitted, his heart overflowing with love. “We’ve got an incredibly interesting race hosting us, stargates to go through and a whole galaxy to explore if we want. I have more than I ever dreamed I’d find. And even if I got bored living with the Furlings – which I doubt is even possible – there’s just something about Jack O’Neill that I can only describe with one word.”

“And that is?”

Daniel lifted his body onto elbows and knees and eased upward a little so he could reach Jack’s mouth for a sweet, gentle kiss.

“Home... You’re where I belong, Jack. Forever and ever, amen.”

Jack nodded. “Can’t go AWOL from that,” he murmured wisely. “The one thing you can never leave behind is your own heart.”

Nodding, Daniel glanced at his favorite photograph of Jack, the one he’d taken with him when he left Earth for what he believed was the last time, now back in its frame and sitting on their nightstand.

His gaze moved back to the man lying so happily beneath him. He smiled, looking forward to the rest of his life, because they would never again be alone.

FIN

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!