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The Long Walk

by Annejackdanny

Summary

Stranded off world with a newly downsized Daniel, Jack has to find a way home and face some of his - and Daniel's - demons from the past

Notes

This story is kid-fic, featuring a partly aware four/five year old 'shrunken' Little Daniel who used to be in a relationship with Jack - please be aware there is NO underage in this story, none, zilch, nada. Any and all slash elements will only be between Jack and ADULT Daniel.

However, there's agnst in here and violence and OC character death, also bad language, but also lots of h/c and fluffy kid-fic stuffs :)

I want to thank Ren, Danielle, Rponda and darcy for hand-holding and betaing this story.
"Looks like Kansas to me." Jack O'Neill shrugged as he passed the FRED and the MALP, absently patting the metallic surfaces of the expensive equipment. He put on his sunglasses, to shield his eyes from the bright light of the midday sun, and walked over to Daniel, who was reading some obscure inscriptions on a large stone obelisk near the gate.

"That the 'Welcome to Kansas' sign?"

Daniel Jackson frowned and moved his lips silently to a text only he was able to read and understand. Then he mumbled, "No, actually it's more the 'Welcome, Nirrti, whom we worship and treasure, who gives us youth and strength' sign."

"Yadda?"

The younger man heaved a silent sigh. "Yeah. That."

"O-kay." Jack rubbed his hands and turned to face their company, Doctor Ginger Menkins. The slender brunette looked around in awe for a moment, her gray eyes sparkling with amazement as she descended the stony steps by the gate to join them.

"I never imagined other planets would be so Earth-like," she said.

Daniel gave her an encouraging smile and explained, "It's not unusual. Lots of them are."

"Yes, theoretically I know. But still... like Major Carter pointed out at the briefing, it looks like North America."


"You don't sound happy about that, Colonel," Menkins observed.

Daniel shrugged. "Jack doesn't like trees. Yet, he spends all his vacation somewhere in the Minnesota wilderness at a cabin, fishing in a pond with no fish."

"Aht! That's different. There are no Jaffa in my Minnesota woods," Jack replied as they steered the FRED down a winding path leading them over a wide meadow into the woods.

Jack waited for the snarky remark he'd expect from Daniel, but it never came. His archaeologist just walked on and ignored him.

O'Neill tried to recall what Carter had told them about Kansas planet, as he had nicknamed it right after he had seen the first pics the MALP had sent through. At the briefing Carter had provided them with all the information they needed. They were to investigate several ruins near the gate where Nirrti had once resided. She had abandoned this world a long time ago for unknown reasons.
On a first contact mission SG-2 had come across some doohickey that made the scientists at the SGC drool. Area 51 had gotten wind of it, and that's why they were dragging Doctor Menkins along.

This mission was giving O'Neill a headache. He felt his jaw twitch at the memory of the briefing. Even Daniel had been on the same page with him. Which wasn't the case often lately.

Hammond hadn't been a happy camper either, when he'd clued them in about their orders...

... The picture on the screen in the briefing room switched to show the inside of a building, and they were looking at something that resembled a shower. At least, to Jack, it did. There was something installed in the wall that looked like a shower head and underneath he could make out two buttons, a green one and a red one.

"We assume this is technology used by Nirrti. But the civilian consultant of SG-2 wasn't able to read all the instructions, or get it to work," Carter said.

"Your mission is to investigate this device further and figure out if you are able to make it work. If you can, uninstall it, bring it through. If that's not possible, destroy it," General Hammond informed them.

"Destroy it? Why?" Doctor Menkins interrupted, bewildered. She brushed a strand of mouse-brown hair out of her face.

"If we aren't able to obtain the device, nobody else should. We are aware it might be a very dangerous piece of technology." Hammond didn't even blink as he returned Menkins's stare.

"But maybe we should set up a long-term laboratory there and get a team of scientists on the planet to study it further," the woman argued.

"I'm afraid it's a budget issue, Doctor Menkins. I'm not authorized to decide whether or not we can afford to send a group of scientists through long-term. But I'm holding that thought in consideration," Hammond said.

"What exactly are we looking at?" Jack asked, wanting to stay focused on their mission.

"We don't know for sure yet," Daniel said. "SG-2's anthropologist assumes it alters DNA. But the Goa'uld writings weren't familiar to him, so he's not sure. We think its purpose was to help Nirrti create the perfect host."


"Yes, but it'll be even more nasty if it falls into the wrong hands. Besides, maybe we can learn something from technology like that," Carter piped up, scientific glee in her eyes.

"We should blow up whatever we find there," Jack grumbled. "Playing around with DNA is a big one."

"Jack's right," Daniel said, his voice laced with concern.

Well, hello, that was a shocker. "I am?" Jack raised an eyebrow.

Daniel shrugged. "Yes. It's dangerous. Even you should be able to figure that out."

"Oh, thank you, Daniel. Shall we celebrate?"
A few weeks ago Daniel would’ve said sure and asked if Jack was going to buy dinner. Today, all Jack got was a blue pair of rolling eyes and an annoyed, "No, thanks."

Jack shrugged and listened to Hammond, who explained that if it was safe to bring Nirrti's toy home, it was going to Area 51. That's where Menkins had come from. According to her file, she had the rank of Captain, but preferred to be called Doctor. She was an expert in DNA analysis.

Doctor Menkins gathered her notes and raked a hand through her mousy hair, which left her looking like a tousled bird. "Ethical concerns are a very good thing. But sometimes we have to jump into cold water if we want to be successful in science. I'm sure Major Carter agrees with me. I can't see any ethical reasons that would prevent us from studying this device, even if we can't bring it home."

Carter looked uncomfortable when she replied, "I don't think we can ignore ethics when it comes to science. But yes...an off-world laboratory would be a possibility." With a look at Hammond, she added, "That's not up to me, of course, sir."

"And unfortunately it's not up to me either, Major - Doctor Menkins... We have to wait and see the results of SG-1’s investigation. Based on that, I can make a request to allow further studies. I can't just set up a laboratory without approval from upstairs," Hammond ended the debate.

They were dismissed with the order to be ready to depart in two hours.

When Menkins had left the briefing room, Jack leaned back in his chair and gazed at the ceiling for a moment. "Why do we have to take her with us again, sir?"

Hammond smothered a smile, but Jack could see it lingering at the corners of his mouth. What? It had been a serious question. Well, almost. He knew he had no choice in this.

"I know how you feel about taking somebody with you who has no experience with gate travel, Colonel. But this planet doesn't appear to be dangerous, and Doctor Menkins is an expert in her field. Since we can't bring this technology home easily, we don't have another choice. Major Carter will assist her."

"Yes, sir," Carter said. "Janet knows Doctor Menkins's work and suggested I read a few of her articles. She's really good at what she does."

"So are you, Major," Jack argued.

Carter gave him a smile. "Thank you, sir. But I'm a quantum physicist. Doctor Menkins is a professor of genetics. Her expertise is DNS and DNA research. So, I'll figure out how it works - what makes it tick. And she'll figure out what it does. She's really good."

"Yeah. She just looks like the perfect geek. Even her hair fits," Jack grumbled.

"Sir?" Carter frowned.

"She looks like a..." Jack waved his hands over his head and shrugged.

"I know what you mean, sir." There was a chuckle in her voice as she rushed out.

Teal’c raised an eyebrow. "I am certain the phrase you were looking for was ‘like a slaughtered chicken.’"

Jack gaped at him, and Daniel mumbled, "Plucked... um... it's plucked chicken. She looks like a
plucked chicken... though I think she looks more like a plucked mouse.”

"You don't pluck mice, Daniel," Jack grumbled.

Doctor Jackson pushed up his glasses and left the room, waving a hand back at them. "Whatever!"

Jack and the big guy walked down the stairway from the briefing room together. "Did you and DanielJackson not resolve your disagreements yet, O'Neill?"

"Yeah, well. You know me and Daniel. We never do, really," O'Neill joked it off as they headed down the corridor towards the elevator.

"I have the impression it is a different matter this time. I would be very displeased if your disagreements affect the way SG-1 functions. You should talk to DanielJackson," the Jaffa said solemnly. "And apologize for whatever harm you have inflicted on him."

Jack stopped in the middle of the hall while Teal'c walked on stoically. "Hey! Who said it's me who has to apologize for anything?"

When Teal'c didn't stop walking, Jack hurried and caught up with him at the elevator. "He screwed up on the Enkaran planet..."

"In fact, he did not. It was DanielJackson's actions that saved both the Enkarans and the Gadmeer from being destroyed."

"Yes. And he almost died!"

"Do we not always risk our lives on missions? DanielJackson made a choice, and it turned out to be the right one." Teal'c turned, his dark, deep eyes, looking right into Jack's soul as he added softly, "Do not underestimate him, O'Neill. He is not a child."

Jack almost laughed at that. No. Daniel wasn't a child. Definitely not. Yet... "He behaves like one sometimes. He doesn't listen, and I can't rely on him to follow my lead. If he gets better ideas, he's off doing his thing, without checking back with me!" He sounded defensive and didn't like it one bit. "After four years of being out there, he should know how the chain of command works." It was lame. Jack knew it, and that fueled his anger even more.

"Maybe it is you who needs to listen more closely, O'Neill. Or maybe this matter is not of work-related issues. Perhaps you and DanielJackson should search for the resolution elsewhere," Teal'c said as they stepped into the elevator.

Jack didn't want to go there. Yet, he heard himself ask, "What's it about then?"

"It is not I with whom you should be speaking, O'Neill," Teal'c replied.

Jack barely kept himself from banging his head against the control panel of the elevator. He so wanted to get out of here. He stared at the doors and let out a sigh of relief when they opened. "I'll see you later, T," he said as nonchalantly as he could and fled down the corridor towards... somewhere Teal'c wouldn't go. Like an empty storage room...

Instead, he found himself walking into Daniel's office. When did he press the button for this level?

Jack gazed around the room. Daniel wasn't here. Only his rocks and papers everywhere. Oh, and books, of course. Old ones, new ones... his computer screen blinked, telling him he had mail. O'Neill wondered why he felt like an intruder. He had spent more time in this office than in his own, and
once upon a time it had felt like home.

He inhaled the smell of books, coffee and old stones.

Then he swiftly spun around and walked out, trying not to think how close the big fella had been to the truth, with what he said in the elevator.

***

Much can happen at the SGC in two hours. Teal'c got an emergency call from Bra'tac regarding the Jaffa rebellion, and Carter's assistance was needed by the Asgard, who were currently working on a weapon against those ugly repli-bugs. So it was just Jack and Daniel who met Doctor Menkins in the gate room.

Jack didn't feel good about this. He hated to have his team split, and the Asgard were way too close to the Replicators for his liking. But Thor had assured Hammond that SG-1's 2IC wouldn't get anywhere close to the enemy and that she should be back in the next 12 hours.

From Thor's mouth to God's ear then.

They were going to set up camp and take a first look at the DNA machine. Jack had requested to postpone the mission until Carter was back. Daniel had argued he could use the time working on the alien text, so that he'd have translated most of it by the time Carter would join them. Which meant Carter could go to work right away without having to wait for Daniel to translate. Unfortunately, it made sense to Jack, and Hammond had agreed.

If Carter got hold up, the SGC was going to send someone else with the know-how to assist them. Still, Jack didn't feel good about it. If he'd had Teal'c with him at least, he'd feel a whole lot better...

...Daniel talked quietly to Doctor Menkins as they walked through the forest, following the FRED with their camping gear piled on. Jack zoned them out, his eyes skimming the dense forest surrounding them.

Yep, trees.

Pine trees, to be specific.

Jack had a foreshadowing of a very boring mission with trees, doohickeys, ramblings, and nothing for him to do but walk perimeters, keep watch, and eat MRE's. Maybe he could annoy Daniel a little. But even that wasn't as much fun as it used to be. Daniel didn't want to be annoyed anymore. He didn't even want to annoy Jack back.

Don't fuss about it, he snarled at himself. You were the one who wanted him to back off. Now you got your wish, so live with it.

They reached the ruins half an hour later. Once they had set up camp and perimeters, Daniel and Menkins wanted to go and play.

They crossed through a small group of pines and came out into a small clearing. The playground contained three old stone buildings, mostly semi-derelict, covered with some sort of ivy. The ruin in the middle, a high tower, seemed to be in the best condition. Daniel wandered around it while Menkins hurried inside, once Jack had checked to make sure there weren't any nasty surprises waiting for them in there. No people, no animals. Just cool air, semi-darkness and the smell of old
Daniel Jackson's happy place.

Said Daniel Jackson returned from his walk around the tower. "There are no writings on the outside of the building. It's made from limestone. Not that you want to know any of this..." He passed Jack and slipped through the small high door.

As it turned out, it was now Menkins's happy place, too. The two scientists were already rambling on about the writings they had found on the inside walls. Daniel said he was familiar with the particular Goa'uld dialect, even though it wasn't used very often. This tower had been a worship gathering place for the slaves.

"Nirrti promised them... a life to live over again? What does that mean?" Daniel mumbled to himself.

Menkins wandered along the walls. "There," she called out, "I found the device."

When O'Neill and Daniel reached her, she had climbed a high pedestal, huge enough for several humans to stand on. There were those two buttons in the wall Jack had seen on the pictures. Before Menkins could reach for them, he ordered her not to touch anything. He wasn't taking any chances.

The woman turned and brushed a strand of brown hair out of her face. "If I don't touch it, I can't see if it works," she complained, her voice suspiciously whiny.

"Don't waste your breath," Daniel muttered. "He won't listen."

God, were all scientists like that?

"It's Major Carter's job to figure out how it works," Jack reminded her, ignoring his bratty archaeologist.


"And what are we supposed to do until she gets here?" Menkins asked, annoyed.

"It's useless," Daniel went on, wandering around, letting his flashlight illuminate the walls.

"Doctor Jackson can translate the writings and you can take notes... or whatever. Just stay away from the buttons," Jack ordered, trying not to grind his teeth.

Daniel gave him a dirty look. "Do you really think I should even dare go near it to read the text, Jack?"

"Yes, Daniel. Actually, I ordered you to. Reading. Not touching."

Giving a soft snort, Daniel joined Menkins on the pedestal and focused his flashlight on the writings above the two buttons. Jack watched the two of them for a moment. When the wall didn't swallow them and no white light beamed them away, he decided to stand guard outside. "Hey, you guys do your thing in here. I'll be outside. And Daniel – you don't touch those buttons."

Ignoring the incoherent mumbling from Daniel, Jack went out and walked around the cone-shaped building. Sometimes dealing with Daniel was like trying to reason with a puberty-driven teenager. Daniel was always just a tad too curious and alien-friendly. But it wasn't really that. Jack knew that his archaeologist was good at his job. Brilliant even. Following Doctor Jackson's train of thought wasn't always the easiest way to go, but it was often worth it. Nope, Jack wouldn't complain about
anybody on his team when it came to the job.

But Daniel was stubborn and strong-headed. It wasn't easy to lead him. Frankly, Daniel was probably the only lower-in-rank-than-Jack person at the SGC without any qualms of disobeying Jack's orders - and getting away with it. Mostly. O'Neill didn't like that. But he had learned to live with it, and more importantly, had learned to trust Daniel. Because Daniel was special. And Daniel had saved his life back on Abydos. Daniel had taught him to think outside the box. Had taught him to be human again. It meant a lot. Daniel meant a lot. For more reasons than Jack was willing to admit, even to himself.

Lately it had gotten out of hand though. What had happened on the Enkaran planet had been the last straw that broke the camel's back.

Jack gritted his teeth as he remembered how close he had come to losing Daniel - again - during that mission. He had almost blown him up along with the Gadmeer ship, for cryin' out loud. Daniel was too important to put his life on the line like that. Jack O'Neill's life was too guilt-driven already to load more of that crap on his shoulders. No way was he going to kill Daniel Jackson - or any other member of his team. But especially not Daniel. Not even for a noble act like saving the population of a whole planet.

And yet... he would have done it.

For exactly that noble act. Because it was the right thing to do. Because Doctor-fucking-Jackson wouldn't have wanted it any other way. And Jack was trained to put the job first. Had to put the job first. Otherwise he'd be compromised. But it would have killed Jack along with Daniel. Would have killed parts of Jack he sometimes believed weren't even there anymore. And O'Neill would have hated himself for the rest of his life for doing it.

Of course Daniel didn't die. Got his head out of the sling as he always did. He'd made a deal between the Gadmeer and the Enkarans. Jackson had saved the day, again. The Enkarans had moved to their original home world, and the Gadmeer ship had continued terra-forming the planet.

Jack had been proud. And pissed.

Proud because Daniel had saved the day again. And holy crap, was he ever good at what he did.

Yet, Jack had been mad as hell. For far more than just the fact that Daniel had risked his life again and went against Jack's orders...

Things had been wrong between them for some time before the Enkaran mission.

Jack knew he should have put his foot down awhile ago. When they'd returned home from Enkara, he'd vowed to himself to talk some sense into Daniel, for god's sake. Despite all the crap that had had happened between them, they still had to work together. They couldn't take it out into the field with them. So, at the next best opportunity, he had forced Daniel to talk to him.

Okay, Daniel hadn't talked. Jack had talked. Well, yelled. He had yelled a lot. Some of the things he had said he was sorry for later. But mostly the yelling had been good, and the guilt in Daniel's eyes had been even better.

Oh, Mister I-am-rescuing-the-universe-even-if-I-die hadn't apologize or anything. No way. Daniel had listened to Jack's yelling and pacing and more yelling and then he'd just said he believed he had done the right thing and that Jack knew it, too.

But there had been guilt nevertheless, and on a very nasty level Jack had wanted to see that guilt. He
had wanted to punish Daniel.

For making Jack worry, for getting under Jack's skin so much, for making Jack almost kill him...

Jack had wanted to beat the crap out of him.

But of course he didn't. So he had hurt Daniel with words, drove them in like knives and hated himself for doing it.

Later that evening, Daniel had quietly walked out of Jack's house, and O'Neill had gotten drunk very fast while he'd tried not to think about the sadness in Daniel's eyes or the fact that things had gotten even worse.

They both tried to keep their problems low-key at the mountain. They were still talking to each other at lunch with Sam and T. Of course, they still worked together and when it came down to it, still trusted each other with their lives.

Sometimes they even bickered and bitched. Except it wasn't fun anymore because it got nasty a lot more often than usual. O'Neill knew T and Carter had noticed the tension between them, but hadn't said anything - until today.

Hell, T was right. It wasn't good for the team dynamic. Jack should talk to Daniel again about what had happened on Enkara.

*Nah, Jack thought gloomily, it's not that. T is right. It goes far deeper than that. But hell, Daniel can't pull stunts like that just because he's mad at me.*

Jack wasn't good at talking about all that emotional crap. But it was the emotional crap they needed to talk about. Not Enkara. Not Daniel's stubbornness and insubordination. Or Jack's need to protect him even though he knew it wasn't always possible.

While he mulled all that over, O'Neill watched the sun set and the blue sky change into orange. It was quite a sight. He breathed in the smell of summer, trees, and the rich humus under his boots. There was grass, but the place around the buildings was stamped earth. Jack saw a pale crescent moon looming in the sky.

After he had circled the buildings twice, it was starting to get dark. Pulling off his sunglasses, because he wouldn't need them anymore, Jack walked back into the tower.

"Hey, kids. Let's head back to camp. It's getting dark," O'Neill told them as he was strolling across the hall. He didn't want to be in or around the ruins in the dark. Too much potential for somebody to hide and ambush them. He hadn't seen anybody in the area so far. That didn't mean nobody was there. He opted for being careful.

Daniel and Menkins were sitting on the pedestal, Daniel scribbling symbols into his journal while Menkins was holding the flashlight for him.

"I translated part of it," Daniel reported without looking up. "The writings say Nirrti chose people out of the midst of the worshipers and made them live their whole lives over again. She took the new ones... uh - at least that's what I think it says – with her and let them live in her palace on the other side of the mountains... umm... it doesn't say how the machine works. I have to read more of it and I also want to video tape the walls and investigate the other buildings."

"Not tonight though. Let's get some dinner, and then we'll have to go back to the gate do our check in," Jack ordered, giving Daniel and Menkins an extra glare before they could start arguing with him.
"Jack..." Daniel started.

"No." He spun around and marched out of the tower. It didn't take long for his persistent archaeologist to reach him and fall into step with him.

"We could come back after we’ve checked in. We have lights, and there's no potential danger looming anywhere. I might have most of it translated before Sam gets here..."

"Daniel..."

"Jack..."

"It will still be here in the morning. That thingy doesn't look like something you can carry away in a backpack. Hammond gave us three days. Besides, it's already dark and I'm hungry," Jack snapped.

"Fine," Doctor Jackson snapped right back.

***

Neither Daniel nor Menkins talked much during dinner. Jack didn't try to lighten the mood with one of his bad jokes like he used to in earlier days. It didn't work anymore. Nowadays, if Daniel Jackson had snapped, he was giving O'Neill the cold shoulder.

After dinner they returned to the gate and reported home. The night was pitch black by now, and the moon didn't give much light. Carter was still with the Asgard, but it looked like she was going to be back on schedule to join them. They exchanged the usual reports and first impressions of the area before they were dismissed with the order to check in at oh nine hundred.

Back at camp, Menkins said her goodnight. She would take last watch and Daniel first. Jack sat down next to the younger man and poured himself coffee. "I still think we should just blow the place up," Jack muttered as he slapped his cap onto his head. With a sideways glance at Daniel, he added, "We really should celebrate the fact we agree on this. Doesn't happen too often lately."

"Yeah." Daniel gazed into his own coffee cup. The fire light reflected in his glasses.

"Hey, you sound pissed about that. Not happy we're on the same page for once?" Jack asked sarcastically.

Daniel didn't look at him, but his voice had lost all the anger from earlier when he replied, "No. Actually, I'd like it if we were on the same page more often. But that's not up to me." He got up and brushed some grass from his pants. "I'm walking perimeters. Good night, Jack." With that, Daniel vanished into the dark.

Jack fiddled with the band of his sunglasses and looked up at the alien night sky. They had to fix this somehow. As soon as they were home, he would get Daniel over for dinner and talk some sense into him. Heck, he'd even apologize for some of the things he had thrown at Daniel that night after the Enkaran mission. First of all, he had to convince Daniel to come over, of course.

Jack missed spending his downtime with Daniel. They'd been good together. Nice chess games, nice dinners, watching TV, and sometimes they'd got drunk. Daniel had helped him in the yard, and Jack had helped Daniel refurbish his place when he had came back from the dead.... or from when they all had thought he had died on Nem's planet. Okay, that had happened once. Not the dead thing. But they had only given up on his apartment once.

Did he really miss hanging out with his archaeologist that much? Yeah, well, maybe. Not because
there wasn't anybody else to hang out with. He liked playing cards with Lou or going to watch jello-wrestling with Teal'c. Team nights were swell, too. But being just with Daniel had been special. They'd clicked. Even when they'd been mad at each other they were still friends.

Carter once said they were like an old married couple.

Crap.

Maybe they were too much alike on some levels and too different on others. They each cared for the other, but weren't able to really talk about their own feelings. They both were as stubborn as mules, not willing to yield an inch.

But they had also understood each other without too many words. Sometimes when Daniel had come over for hockey and pizza on Fridays, their usual comfortable non-talking would turn into actual talking about missions gone wrong, failures and guilt trips. It hadn't happened often. But it had happened. Sometimes it had been Jack who spilled his guts, and at other times it was Daniel. And the other one was quiet and listened. Sometimes they hugged, and sometimes they just sat there, staring into the fire or out into the garden. It was what they did. And it was good. Comfy.

Had been anyway.

Until they had screwed up their friendship. It had all been Daniel's fault, of course. Daniel with his lonely blue eyes and those long legs. Not to mention his ass. Daniel had the most gorgeous six Jack had ever watched. And he'd taken his eyeful at almost every opportunity. It had always been enough. Watching him. Being Daniel's friend had been worth much more than throwing it all away for sex or getting a rejection.

O'Neill had never intended to really do anything about it. He couldn't. Had never even tried to find out if his best buddy felt the same...

...It came totally out of the blue when Daniel confessed to Jack that he liked him. Liked him a whole lot more than he was supposed to... And he had given Jack that special Daniel smile. That shy smile which showed Daniel's dimples and reached his eyes. The one that was really rare. Jack sat there and gazed at the pink tip of Daniel's tongue as it came out and licked those full lips nervously. He reached out a hand and slid off Daniel's glasses to see those eyes better.

Then Daniel blanched and stumbled out of the living room.

Jack went after him, to the bathroom, and handed Daniel a washcloth after he was done tossing his dinner. Daniel brushed his teeth, and Jack made a note to self to get a new toothbrush.

It was oh-so-much of a cliché, it almost hurt. Jack helping Daniel to get settled on the bed in the spare room, Daniel apologizing over and over again as he pulled O'Neill down with him and they landed in a heap on the bed covers. Daniel blushed and did that lip-licking thing again while spluttering, "Uh... sorry... ."

Jack told him it was okay, and then Daniel kissed him.

It was a sloppy kiss on the corner of Jack's mouth because the guy wasn't able to aim anymore. But Jack had a few beers himself and his guard was down... so he helped Daniel to aim better and get his tongue where it should be when kissing properly...

Daniel could kiss.
Jack had seen it once on Abydos when Shau're had kissed her Dan’iel goodbye. And he had wondered where the kid had learned to kiss like that. Had wondered for almost five years now...

*It was pure bliss.*

*Earth shatteringly hot...*

...They had stumbled into this whole relationship thing without giving a damn about regs, DADT, or anything else. Heaven, or whatever one would call it, had lasted seven days... then downtime had been over and with getting back to real life, reality had crashed down.

And there Jack had ended it. Not right away. But a couple of weeks later.

Jack poured the rest of his coffee into the fire and stood. Stretching his muscles, he decided it would be best to call it a night. He entered the tent he still shared with Daniel, pulled off his boots and cap, and crawled into his sleeping bag. While he was lying in the dark, he made a vow to himself. As soon as they were home, they'd have a nice, long talk. Yep. He missed Daniel. Being with Daniel. Being good with Daniel.

There had to be a way to get back to the friendship they had shared, if nothing else.

TBC with *Ch 2 Thoughts and Conversations*
The next day proved Jack's bad premonition right. Carter was stuck with the Asgard for at least another day, due to complications with the new weapon. Hammond explained the replicators had attacked another Asgard-protected world. Thor's ship, however, was out of enemy range so they were safe. For now.

It didn't make Jack feel better.

After breakfast Daniel was back to translating the writings, puzzling over the meanings of phrases and old wordings. Menkins helped him write them down and put some of the translated text into the right scientific context.

"Um, okay... I think, I basically know what happened here and what this thing does," Daniel told Jack over lunch, squinting at his notes as he continued. "According to what Doctor Menkins and I have figured out, this device will make people younger. It is a rejuvenation device. Nirrti chose two people out of the crowd, usually a man and a woman, then used the device to alter their DNA. The writings say she took them away with the falling rings... I figured that's a ... a ring transporter... and made them live their lives over again in her palace on the other side of the mountains, wherever that is. The legend goes that they were given a better place to live and were provided with sharpened senses ... I'm not sure what that means. Probably that the chosen ones had better eyesight and hearing... but it's not explained here. Um, that's it."

"She made these people believe these DNA experiments were something good and would help the chosen ones to gain great strength and a wonderful new life," Menkins bottom-lined it.

"Sounds creepy," Jack muttered, dipping a finger in the hot tomato soup to get an imaginary hair out, and then flicking the drops off. It was an old habit and had annoyed Sara to no end.

Menkins took a sip from her soup and gazed into the fire. "Sometimes people just need to believe things are coming from a god, to take the fear from them. Nirrti's motives may be questionable, but it was her way to convince these people to help her with her experiments without having to scare them."

Jack put down his soup. "Excuse me?"

"We fear everything we don't know. It's a human weakness."

Daniel's eyebrows climbed over the rim of his glasses. "I don't think anybody has the right to manipulate people like that. Not for experiments, not for religion. I'm aware it's done all the time, everywhere; politics, entertainment, TV...parents manipulate their kids, the military manipulates its soldiers, sending them into wars for faked causes..."

Jack just shrugged when Daniel paused. He couldn't disagree on that. It was done everywhere, all over the world. On almost every other world, too.

"... but there's a line. Nirrti posed as a goddess to make these people obey her."
Menkins didn't reply to that. She took a deep breath. "I don't think we can take the device with us. It's anchored into the wall. It would be better to figure out how it works. We can probably build a new one at home if I can find the power source for it. There should be a crystal I can remove and take with me."

"Nobody will touch that device until Carter gets here," Jack clarified, wondering if he had to confine Menkins to camp until his 2IC arrived. He glanced at Daniel, but for once Doctor Jackson didn't seem to be looking for a fight.

Daniel just said, "The writings tell about how graceful and wonderful Nirrti is and how she's able to heal. She often chose the sick and old ones. There's no indication on how young the people ended up to be when the Rejuvenation process was done."


"She tried to turn them into advanced beings. The perfect host." Daniel dug into his beef and mashed potato MRE. "We have to report the existence of that palace. Maybe we'll find out the results of her experimenting when we go there."


"But imagine what this could mean? Rejuvenation! Diseases could be healed! Physical handicaps from birth... like blindness... corrected? Changing DNA codes and rejuvenating humans might lead to so many wonderful possibilities. I don't even know where to start..." Menkins was on a roll, rambling on about a medical evolution, discoveries in physics.

Jack and Daniel exchanged a glance, and O'Neill could see his own worries mirrored in the blue eyes. Same page here again. Nice. "Menkins," Jack interrupted her finally. "Slow down there, will ya? Don't you think messing with Mother Nature's recipes is a bad idea?"

"That depends on how you're going to use the knowledge. If it helps mankind evolve..."

"Things can go wrong. Formulas fall into wrong hands. Scientists lose sight of the big picture," Daniel said quietly, his face scrunched up in concern.

"Yeah. What he says," Jack agreed. When Menkins didn't argue with that, he put his bowl down and looked at his watch. "All right. Daniel, check out the other buildings. See if you can find anything about that palace. We have to report in six hours so let's get started."

Three hours later, Jack was walking perimeters again, bored out of his skull. For a while he had accompanied Daniel, who searched the other buildings. But after being ignored, he had gone outside again. When his radio crackled, Jack responded grumpily.

It was Daniel. "I found more writings in one of the other buildings. According to this, there's a second Stargate on this planet, Jack. I also found the location of Nirrti's palace. There's a map with a compass and a pictogram of the sun... it should be south from here. Behind the woods and some mountains, if I got the pictures right. There are carved X's. I think they might be villages along the way."

"Good work, Daniel."

There was a pause and then a quiet, "Thanks. I'll see if I can get more of it. The symbols are very old and partly illegible. You should come and take a look."
A moment later O'Neill was with Daniel, looking at the map engraved in one of the walls.

With a little sketchy guess about what the symbols meant, they were finally able to figure out a general direction. Jack agreed about the carved X's being villages. According to Daniel, this map was very old and some of the villages might not exist anymore.

"The map most likely dates back to the time when Nirrti was still here, which would have been hundreds of years ago. I guess there's a pass through the mountain. There, on the other side..."

"Looks like a city," Jack said, touching a number of lines and squiggles that might resemble streets and houses. It was the only location not marked as an X.

"Yeah. I assume it's the palace. And see this?" Daniel tapped on a familiar symbol near the city.

"That's the other gate," Jack said and snatched his own hand away when Daniel's fingers accidentally brushed his.

"Yeah, and according to the writings in the tower, there should be a ring transporter somewhere around here."

Jack scratched his head. "I'll look for it."

***

They found the rings close to the altar in the tower. But the controls were broken, and without Carter's help they couldn't fix them. It wasn't a problem though. Carter was going to join them as soon as her job with the Asgard was done. She'd zap it together in no time.

Jack spent the afternoon doing nothing but sitting in the sun and walking around the ruins to make sure nobody was spying on them. But it was all quiet and peaceful. Obviously the village people didn't come here anymore since Nirrti had abandoned them.

For once, this seemed to be a milk run concerning enemies, and Jack was almost positive they weren't going to get captured and tortured this time.

That evening when they dialed home, Jack considered asking for his yo-yo, but figured it wouldn't go over well. He talked to Hammond for a few minutes after the others had made their reports. Menkins and Daniel had walked away to look at the "Welcome Nirrti" sign again and Daniel explained something to the other scientist.

"Jack, Colonel Simmons arrived here this morning," the general let him know. There was no emotion in his voice, but Jack got the hint.

"Really? I'm happy I'm not there. And I guess that goes both ways," he answered flippantly.

George Hammond didn't laugh. "How is Doctor Menkins doing?"

"She and Daniel get along swell. She's itching to take apart the machine herself," Jack answered, keeping an eye on the two of them standing a couple yards away, still looking at the stone obelisk.

"Will she be a problem, Colonel?" Hammond asked.

“No, sir."

“Good. Don't lose her,” the general said quietly.
O'Neill quirked an eyebrow. Message received. "I won't, sir."

"Good. I'll hear from you at oh nine hundred tomorrow. Hammond out."

Jack turned the MALP off as the gate shut down.

***

That night, when O'Neill ended his watch, he woke Menkins for hers and retreated back to his tent. Instead of going to sleep, though, he sat near the entrance and watched the woman as she took her place at the fire. She poured herself coffee. O'Neill felt his jaw twitch at the thought of missing sleep for the rest of the night. He'd have to tell Daniel tomorrow so they could take turns. Menkins drank her coffee and poked at the fire with a stick.

When there was movement behind him, he looked back over his shoulder at Daniel. Jack couldn't see him in the dark, but he heard him sitting up.

Jack hissed, "Don't turn the light on, Daniel."

"Wha... what's going on?" Daniel whispered back.

Jack's eyes didn't leave Menkins, who put down her coffee mug and shouldered her gun. When she had left the fire to walk perimeters, he answered, "Hammond thinks she might be NID."

"What? Why?" Daniel sounded wide awake now as he joined Jack by the entrance.

"Simmons arrived on base today. Don't know much. Hammond couldn't talk freely. Let me know to keep an eye on her."

"Okay. And were you actually going to tell me about that?" Daniel said in a low voice.

Jack peered through the small slit in the tent door. "Of course I was. In fact, I need your help to figure out what she's up to."

There was a snort. "You need my help?"

Jack sighed. "Don't start, Daniel. I'll follow her. You go through her pack. See if you find any hint of what she's up to."

"What happened to... and I quote," Daniel cleared his throat, "'you won't do one single step alone as long as you continue to act like a five year old.' ... Or, oh, wait; didn't you tell me I wasn't able to do teamwork because I always want to go things my way? Or that I'm..."

Jack groaned and cut him off. "Look, Daniel... I said some nasty things back there, and we're going to talk about it. But not now."

"Right. Like we always talk about things when one of us screws up."

"Yeah, well, since it's always you who's screwing up..." Jack stopped in mid-sentence as he realized he had done it again. Lashed out at Daniel without thinking. He bit his tongue, but it was too late.

He opened his mouth to apologize, but Daniel replied coldly, "Not much to talk about then. I'm getting the picture. Maybe I should request a transfer to another team when we get home."

Almost forgetting to keep his voice down, Jack huffed, "What?"
God, did they have to have this conversation now? Of all moments...

"I'm giving up. I don't know what makes you think I can’t reach your expectations, but obviously nothing I can do will change your mind. So why bother to stay on SG-1?" Daniel said, his voice like ice.

Jack opened his mouth to give Daniel all the reasons why he was needed on SG-1, but snapped it shut without saying anything. Instead he left the tent and followed the scientist into the woods. Melting into the darkness, he kept his mind and eyes firmly focused on the woman in front of him. The fact that Jack was only able to see her because she had a flashlight didn't exactly brighten his mood. He had to be damn careful not to stumble over tree roots or make too much noise. The frigging blackness made it nearly impossible to walk without being heard.

Whatever Menkins was up to, she wasn’t doing it tonight. She just circled the camp like a good soldier and then sat back down at the fire. O'Neill reached the back of her tent to see if Daniel was still there, but he wasn't. When he returned to their own tent, the archaeologist was sitting on his sleeping bag, taking off his boots again to get some more sleep. He shook his head to let Jack know he hadn't found anything.

Maybe Hammond had been wrong. Then again she had to be careful. If Jack had gotten the hints right and she was working for the NID, she was probably here to collect knowledge about the DNA machine and figure out if it was worth stealing.

O'Neill pursed his lips and wondered if somebody else at the NID – namely Simmons – was continuing Maybourne’s dirty work of leading units to steal technology. Maybourne, Makepeace and their team were all locked up, waiting for their sentences. Their “base” had been disabled by the Asgard and there hadn't been any other incidents involving stolen technology. But that didn't mean some other rat bastard weren't going to try again. So Menkins was probably here to check the DNA toy out, and they'd send a team later to get it or re-engineer it.

Jack watched Daniel as he lay down and went back to sleep. Or pretended to.

Later, when Menkins had walked her final perimeters for the night and Jack was back from tailing her once more, Daniel got ready for his own watch.

"The NID would drool over a device like this one. Altering DNA. Like she said, it would be a major breakthrough. It could be used to build weapons or change genetic codes. Breeding advanced humans," he mumbled as he put his jacket on.

Jack stretched out on his sleeping bag and gazed up at the tent's ceiling. "I don't want you to leave the team, Daniel."

There was silence for so long, Jack thought he wasn't going to get an answer. Then there was a very quiet, "Why?"

"I'm used to you, I guess." It was meant as a joke, and Daniel knew that, right?

"I see. Then you'll get used to somebody else."

Or not.

Jack slapped a hand over his face and rubbed his tired eyes. "Look. Can we talk about this when we get home?"

"Okay. Even though I don't know what's to talk about. You made your point about what you think
of my place on this team very clear. Loudly. Unless you have an unexpected change of mind, I’m not sure I really want to talk about it," Daniel let him know, tying his boots.

"You almost died on that friggin’ ship," Jack blurted out. "I'm sorry I was a little ticked!"

"You know I was right in the end. You could have waited and heard me out before you pulled the trigger. You knew I might have been on that ship." There was no accusation in Daniel’s voice. He sounded almost gentle. "You asked me to give you another choice, Jack."

"Yeah. Remind me never to do that again," Jack growled.

Daniel didn’t answer him.

"Dammit, Daniel. You know as well as I do that this isn't about the Enkarans," Jack huffed. "At least not in the first place. You can't pull stunts like that just because you're mad at me."

"I didn't. I did what I thought was best for everyone. Do you really believe I'd jeopardize a mission because you walked out on me? I'm sorry to break it to you, Jack, but you're not that good," Daniel's voice cut through the darkness of their tent.

"The hell it was just about the mission. You didn't even check back with me to let me know you were going back to the ship again. You let me have Carter set up that bomb... What were you trying to do? Fucking kill yourself?"

"Would you have let me go?"

Jack rubbed his hands over his face again. "That's not the point..."

"What is the point then?"

"You risking your life," Jack accused him. "You can't make it always right for everybody..." He knew it was useless. They’d had this basic discussion countless times before.

"Didn't you just say this wasn't about the Enkarans?" Daniel asked.

Jack bore his eyes into the darkness, but couldn't see the other man's face. "Didn't you just say it was? Because I'm not that good? And you don't even know how good I am, by the way." He didn't mean to belittle their argument by cracking a bad joke. But Daniel’s comment had hurt. And this was how Jack dealt with crap that hurt or caught him off balance.

"Well, it's not my fault I won't find out, is it?"

"Fuck off, Daniel," Jack spat.

"And a good night to you, Jack.” With that, Daniel left the tent.

Jack was lying awake, cursing himself for letting Daniel getting under his skin. Again.

He cursed under his breath. Letting Daniel off the team wasn't an option. They needed Daniel.

He and Daniel just had to get over their personal issues. Jack needed to get a grip as much as Daniel. He wasn't going to jeopardize SG-1 because of this. It was his responsibility to keep his head clear and to focus.

Jack knew that, on the whole, this whole mess was his fault, and his alone. He should never have let Daniel in. Never should’ve let himself compromise. He knew better than that.
Daniel never went for casual. And yeah, Daniel deserved a guy who could give him... something. Something more than Jack was. He deserved better. A decent guy who could give Daniel... whatever he needed. And Jack couldn't be that guy.

Jack had been alone for years. It was too hard to get used to having a lover again. Little things like sharing a bed for the night, waking up with each other... and then having to drive in apart, pretending they had slept at their own places... Sometimes it had been too much risk and too much of a hassle.

Jack thought their breakup had started with those little things when they had to go back to work. Questions like; who were they going to tell? Daniel wanted to tell Sam and T, Jack didn't. Not because he didn't trust them. He just didn't want two more people in a position to be compromised.

Then they had argued about the rules. No touching each other at work? Or just being careful how and where to touch? Still sharing a tent off world, or not? Nothing was going to happen between them off world anyway, but... Those little things had built up into major arguments. Jack had wanted to be careful, Daniel had wanted to be able to come out at least to their closest friends.

And there had been more. Daniel had wanted permanent, happily-ever-after... Jack had no friggin' idea what he wanted.

Then the shit had started to hit the fan. Big time.

And so, Jack had eventually ended it. Ended it before it had really begun.

They had kissed. Kissed and necked and blown each other. They had spent down time together in bed, trying various incredible ways to get each other off. But they hadn't done the deed. They had still been exploring each other. Penetration was something neither Jack nor Daniel had done before, so it was a biggie. They'd decided to take it slow.

Now Daniel was never going to find out how good Jack really was, and vice versa.

Maybe it was for the better though.

Jack should have told Daniel what Sara had thrown his way the day he had come home from Abydos and found his stuff on the doorstep. ‘I love you, Jack O’Neill, but you aren't willing to give more than bits and pieces of yourself... You're shutting me out. I have to end this. I can't live like this. You don't even want to work this out with me. He was my son, too, Jack. We both lost him. But you are pushing me away as well.’

Yep, he was a real screw-up when it came to relationships. Should have warned Daniel about that.

TBC with Ch 3, It never rains but it pours
The next day, heavy reddish and black clouds covered the sun and a strong wind was blowing. The temperature had dropped a few degrees. They secured the tents and had a quick breakfast, then headed for the gate, only to get the same message as yesterday.

Carter was still gone, Simmons was still on base, Hammond was still worried, but didn't order SG-1 home, yet. Their standing orders remained for Daniel and Menkins to continue research and for Jack to stay bored. And no, there was no reason to worry about Major Carter. She had reported to Earth on schedule and was just not done yet. Teal'c was still on Chulak, doing whatever Jaffa warriors did to organize rebellions against false gods.

Swell.

Later that morning, the Doctor found the doohickey’s power source by accident. Or so she said. It was hidden under the pedestal beneath a panel. Inside were two large blue crystals with several wires attached to them. “I only brushed the pedestal with my boot and it swung open.” Menkins shrugged.

"Step aside," Jack ordered, aiming his P90 at the device, just in case.

When nothing happened, he lowered his weapon and glared at Menkins. "Don't touch it. We don't want this thing to shrink us, Doctor."

Then he spun around to face Daniel, who raised his eyebrows in return. “No touching here. I'm good.”

“Yeah, well... Let's keep it that way,” Jack said, irritated.

“Just saying.”

“Excuse me,” Menkins interrupted, "Daniel, can you translate what's written on the bottom of the panel? It might be some sort of instruction manual." As she held her flashlight into the opening, she looked like one of those insane professors out of a B-movie with the disheveled hair hanging around her head and that gleam of excitement in her gray eyes.

Daniel crouched next to her. "Yes. I think what you'll have to do is change the crystals’ positions...turn them around, upside down... That should power the device up."

"Just don't get any ideas here. Nobody is going to test this thing. Period. Close that panel right now, Doctor,” Jack snarled. It was one thing for Daniel to be snippy, but there was no way O'Neill was going to allow any insubordination on this.

Raising his hands in a calming gesture, Daniel stepped away from the device, but Menkins seemed to be frozen in place, one hand in mid-air, hovering over the crystals.

“That's a direct order, Doctor,” Jack said, voice deadly quiet.
“Yes, sir,” Menkins muttered and closed the panel.

“Let's go have lunch,” Jack snapped.

***

Lunch was quiet. Daniel was engrossed in the notes he had taken and Menkins – for lack of a better word – was sulking. O'Neill SO missed his Jaffa and 2IC. Missions like this were usually good for some team bonding, and besides, Carter would have been able to keep their guest happy.

In order to keep Menkins away from the machine, Jack made them explore the woods around the ruins in the afternoon. They hiked a trail leading away from camp. Menkins didn't complain, but her body language didn't leave any doubt about her bad mood.

“She's a little obsessed, don'tcha think?” Jack muttered when Daniel fell into step with him. Menkins was wandering ahead of them, keeping her distance.

Daniel shrugged. “She's just very focused.”

“You're focused, Daniel. She's ... scary.”

“She's a scientist. And while I don't agree with her views about experimenting with DNA structure, I know how she feels right now. Having the opportunity to... to figure out something so advanced and not being able to because of security issues and orders must be hard,” Daniel mused quietly.

“Well, like it or not, security is what I am very focused on. Patience is a virtue, my friend,” Jack pointed out.

Daniel frowned. “I'm not saying she's right. All I'm saying is that I've been in her shoes before and understand why she's mad. Besides, you should know by now that I don't act out of impatience when we disagree in the field.”

“No. You don't.” Jack had to give him that.

Daniel acted out of compassion, because he thought it was the right thing to do, because Jack was an ass at times, or because the military SOP seemed ineffective. “But she does. She's itching to just play with her toy without any thoughts of caution about what she might trigger with it. And I'm not going to let her.”

“I know,” Daniel said simply, and for the first time in the last couple of weeks, there was something like mutual understanding between them as they walked further into the forest.

The forest turned out to be just that; a forest. Not much different from Earth. Lots of green trees and mossy ground, little mosquito-like bugs trying to settle on hands and faces, and once they spotted a creature similar to a squirrel scurrying under a tree trunk. When they left the woods an hour later, the ruins lay before them.

Jack was about to lead them back to camp when the rain started. It didn't just start with a dribble. It poured down like buckets of water the moment it began. They took shelter in the tower as quickly as possible, but it was too late; they were already soaking wet by the time they got there.

“Wow,” Daniel mumbled as he pulled off his wet bandanna to wring it out. “That was fast. If I remember right, we might be stuck here for a while. Something about the weather changes in the reports of SG-2.”
“Heavy rains,” Jack recalled. “They said it's never just small showers. When it rains, it pours. Comes with thunder and lightning and can last a couple of hours, if not a day or two.”

They removed their wet jackets and settled on a stone step beneath the altar.

“Heavy rains,” Jack recalled. “They said it's never just small showers. When it rains, it pours. Comes with thunder and lightning and can last a couple of hours, if not a day or two.”

“They said it's never just small showers. When it rains, it pours. Comes with thunder and lightning and can last a couple of hours, if not a day or two.”

“Anybody got snacks?” Jack asked after a few minutes of silence. Daniel handed him a power bar from his jacket. Jack smirked. He knew it. Daniel always had a power bar with him. To bribe Abydonian beasts, Unas or cranky colonels.

“I'm not hungry,” Menkins said. She sat a few feet away from them, gazing out into the rain.

Jack took the bar and broke it into half. He offered one of the pieces to Daniel, who shook his head, but smiled. Shrugging, Jack munched his half and tucked the other one back into its wrapper for later.

An hour went by and growling thunder joined the rain. Here and there, they heard a crash whenever a lightning bolt hit a tree.

Jack alternated between pacing the tower and standing at the entrance to watch the acts of nature. It was quite spectacular. Menkins seemed to be asleep and Daniel wandered around, trying to read more of the texts on the walls.

Jack caught himself wishing he was alone with Daniel. This was the perfect opportunity to talk. They weren’t arguing for a change, and they were probably stuck here for a couple more hours. Jack stared at a wall of water as he stood by the entrance, but not too close, to avoid being sprayed by the rain. It was dark outside. Not the pitch blackness of night, but the huge amounts of clouds only let little light through.

The whooshing sound of pouring water had a calming effect as Jack leaned against the wall and continued to watch the rain. When a lightning bolt hit a tree close to the ruins, a flash of white light blinded him for a split second, and he stumbled backwards.

“Whoa! Daniel, did you see...” Jack started, and then whipped around at a clicking sound and Daniel’s warning voice.

“Jack!”

He jerked his gun up, but froze in place. The wall across the room, where the machine was installed, blinked and glowed in several colors. Red, blue, white... purple... warm soft lighting pulsed across the wall and mingled with the blinking green button. It was a beautiful illumination with beams of light floating across the tower. There was glitter in those lights, too, all sparkling and bright. It reminded Jack of fireworks he had seen on Independence Day... when he had still celebrated it... before he had stopped celebrating most holidays...

The colors began dancing in front of his eyes... Jack had no idea how long he was standing there until he realized it was kind hypnotizing him...

He too a huge afford to jerk his eyes away and was immediately attacked by nausea and a nails-in-the-head kind of headache. Groaning, he let go of his P90 as he dropped like a stone to the ground, clutching his upset stomach, close to tossing his lunch. The lights were scurrying over him, catching his eye again...

Fom far away, he heard a noise, and then the lights turned into a blue beam before darkness engulfed him.
When O'Neill reached the surface of consciousness, he thought his head was going to explode. Rubbing his temples, he blinked and tried to make sense of the rushing sound and the growling that seemed to be everywhere.

Rain. And thunder.

Jack realized he was still inside the tower, leaning against the old altar. Cursing under his breath, he turned his head to take a look at the device on the wall. It was dark. No glowing buttons or crystals and no light show.

How long had he been out of it? Hell, he felt like someone had zatted him.

"Colonel? Colonel O'Neill?"

Menkins appeared in front of him. She was soaking wet, her hair hanging around her face, BDUs clinging to her body.

"Thank god, you're awake. How're you feeling?"

"Hangover. You?"

"I... I managed to look away, sir. Can you get up?"

As she helped him stand, the room started to dance and spin in front of Jack's hurting eyes. Everything hurt. His tongue felt like cotton wool, and when he was finally back on his feet, he swayed for a moment. "What happened?"

Where was Daniel?

"It all happened so fast. Apparently Daniel opened the panel and switched the crystals around. Then he must have touched the green button. I was asleep. The device worked! Now he's missing. He ran out into the rain. I searched for him, but couldn't find him. Then I came back here to see if you were still unconscious."

He heard the thunder crash, and a moment later a lightning bolt hit something outside. Menkins tugged at his arm. "Colonel! I have a flashlight. It's dark outside."

Realizing his jacket was almost dry, Jack put it on.

"You've been unconscious for a while," she told him.

No, really? Jack winced when he turned his head to look at her. God, that hurt like a bitch. "How long?"

"I'm not sure. My watch stopped working. We have to find Daniel."

When they left the tower, Jack wiped a hand over his face to get rid of the water pouring down on him. In a matter of seconds, he was soaking wet again, the rain dripping from the rim of his cap. He grabbed Menkins's arm and yelled over the running water, "Are you telling me, Daniel used that thing?!"

"Yes!" Menkins yelled back. "And it worked! It rejuvenated him!"

"What?!" Jack couldn't say anything else as another lighting bolt came down. He dragged her with
him into one of the other buildings. They hadn't looked at this one too closely yet, since it didn't seem to have any writings or technology. It was empty except for a huge statue standing in an alcove at the back wall.

"I think the lights made him do it, sir." Menkins sighed as she wrung out her dripping hair. "He walked up there all of a sudden, and pressed the button. It... It shrank him, sir. And then he... well, he ran. I followed him, but lost sight of him in the rain."

Somehow this story sounded a little off, but Jack was too busy trying to clear his head, to put his finger on it, yet.

"Okay. Bottom line this for me. Shrunk? Rejuvenated? Meaning... ?" Jack had already put two and two together, and what he got out of it was so not good. Nope. Not good at all. But he needed to hear it from her. She had to spell it out for him because he didn't believe it.

Didn't WANT to believe it.

Menkins let the beam of her flashlight wander through the room. "He is a child now, sir. I have no idea how small or old. All I could see was that he... he changed."

Oh, for cryin' out loud.

Jack ripped the flashlight out of Menkins’s trembling hands. When the beam of light hit the floor, he saw small wet footprints in the dust.

Very small.

"There." O'Neill followed the wet prints until they stopped at the alcove. As far as Jack could see in the gloomy darkness, the statue of Nirrti took up most of the alcove's space.

When he let the light wander over the statue, he heard some rustling behind it.

"Daniel?"

The beam of his light scurried over a pair of bare feet.

Crap. Those feet looked tiny.

"Daniel, you in there?"

There was sniffling and more rustling.

"All right. I want you to come out so we can go back into the tower to fix this," Jack said, trying for calm.

"Can't fix it."

That didn't sound like Daniel. That voice was too high, too light. Jack swallowed down a pang of panic. "Yes, we can. Get out. Now." He knew he wasn't doing this very well. He should probably calm down first. Taking a deep breath, he added, "You can't stay in there forever, Daniel."

"I'm nekkid," the tiny voice blurted out. "The doo-hick-ey took all my clothes 'way."

Oh, joy. This day was getting better and better...

"I've seen you naked before, Daniel. Get your... get out of there. I hope you have extra BDUs in
“your back pack,” Jack said, weary.

As a small shadow reluctantly crawled out from under the stony Nirrti and stood in front of him, Jack felt the hand holding the flashlight start to shake.

He tightened his grip around the light as he and the child stared at each other. “Aw, crap.”

A little voice whispered, "I didn't mean to screw up again, Jack." And then the tyke burst out into tears and covered his face with tiny hands. “Don't be mad, please, I'm sorry.”

O'Neill blinked, then crouched in front of the... of Daniel... and touched his bare shoulders tentatively. “Daniel?”

Immediately Daniel leaped forward, and two short arms encircled his neck, squeezing with surprising strength, as a teary face was pressed into Jack's shoulder.

Without thinking any further, he cradled Daniel into his arms and stood. Rubbing the trembling bare back, he walked over to the entrance, where he sat down on the cold ground. Jack mumbled something to the crying little boy, his mind still in some sort of shock. Later, he couldn't remember what he had said or how long they sat there. But eventually the heartbreaking sobs subsided and the hitched breathing calmed.

Outside, the rain had subsided, too, and the darkness was fading. Far away, thunder continued to rumble.

Menkins, who sat next to them, said in amazement, "Oh, look at him. He's... really small."

When the grip around Jack's neck became lax and Daniel's head lolled on his shoulder, Jack carefully shifted him in a more comfortable position and looked down at the sleeping kid.

In the returning daylight falling through the entrance, he saw the traces of tears on Daniel's dusty cheeks. Jack carefully wiped the wetness away with his thumb, noticing how soft his skin felt. He'd have to make the kid take a bath later. Hiding in that alcove had covered his whole body with a layer of dust.

Giving him a once-over, O'Neill assumed Daniel was around five... maybe. Could be four. Something around that anyway. There was still baby fat here and there though, so maybe four...

Jack blinked. No, wait. Daniel was thirty-seven.

He would just put this... child back under that doohickey and press the other button. And as soon as Daniel was big again, Jack was going give him a piece of his mind for touching one of Nirrti's toys. If this was another one of Doctor Jackson's “let's see what we can do today to piss the colonel off” games, Daniel had really gotten them into trouble this time. Jack didn't even try to imagine how to explain this one to Hammond if the device wasn't going to work a second time.

Okay, better do it now while he was still asleep.

Cradling the pliant body close, Jack got up with a groan as his knees and back protested. "Let's go and switch him back," he told Menkins.

She sounded worried. "Oh. Well, that's not possible, I'm afraid."

Jack froze. "There are two buttons, right? Green shrinks him, red..."
"We don't know that for sure. The writings didn't say anything about this. And you surely don't want to put him there and just press the other button. What if it shrinks him even more? Besides, the machine shut down. I took a look at it. The crystals are burned."

Without a word, Jack brushed past her and crossed the clearing. He entered the tower and then stood there, the sleeping child in his arms, glaring at the dark device. The panel was still open, and inside were the two crystals.

Burned. Melted.

“Crap,” Jack hissed.

“I told you they were destroyed,” Menkins, who had followed him, said.

Daniel started to shiver, and it didn't help that Jack's jacket and shirt were wet. The kid was damp and cold. "I need to get some dry clothes on him," he decided finally. A shrunk Daniel was bad enough. A shrunk Daniel with a cold and a fever was even worse. "Let's get back to camp and take care of him."

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They walked in silence through a falling drizzle. It was warmer now, but the sky looked like orange poison. Lightning zipped down in the distance over the woods. Low, growling thunder accompanied them to the tents. At least it wasn't dark anymore and the wind had abated.

The kid woke up just when Jack had put him into the sleeping bag. He blinked drowsily at Jack, who started to rub Daniel's arms, body and legs with his hands until the little boy didn't feel so cold anymore. Soon after, Daniel curled up and was out like a light again. Jack sat down beside him, one hand absently brushing through the blond mob of hair.

He knew he should get Daniel to the gate and dial home ASAP. But the kid had been so cold and scared that Jack opted for letting him rest a little for the time being.

Looking down at the sleeping child, a thought crossed Jack's mind, but he dismissed it with a shake of his head. This was definitely Daniel. Not a clone, not a fake. He just knew.

Menkins's report on how it had happened was a little sketchy, but Jack knew he wouldn't find adult Daniel's body somewhere in the ruins. Of course, the machine could have created a clone and sent adult Daniel somewhere – to the palace maybe. But Jack's gut told him that this child was Daniel. And Jack opted for listening to his gut on this one.

God. What a mess.

If they didn't get the shrinking machine to work...

As he pondered the whole magnitude of what that meant, Jack cursed inwardly. If they didn't figure out how to reverse this, they'd have to find another way. Who would be able to help Daniel get back his normal age and size?

The Asgard maybe. They were very advanced and probably had the technology. The Tok'ra... nah, forget about the Tok'ra. They never really helped. They only made things worse instead. The Nox came to mind... Jack sighed and rubbed a hand over his face, feeling the first stubble on his chin.

Still mulling the situation over, he stripped out of his own wet BDU's and changed into dry ones.
Thirty minutes later Daniel stirred and yawned widely, showing tiny little teeth. Jack, who was watching him, couldn't help but smile at the sight. When two blue eyes gazed up at him a moment later, his smile brightened. Boy, those were the biggest blues Jack had ever seen in his life. Maybe it was the little face that made them look even bigger than they used to be on adult Daniel.

"Daniel?"

"Jack?" came the shy answer. Daniel pulled his arms out of the depths of the sleeping bag and looked at his hands for a very long time. Then tiny fingers pulled down the zipper and Daniel sat up to examine himself. When he was done, he squinted at Jack. "Uh..."

Jack felt his eyebrows climb to new heights. "Uh? That's all? Just... 'uh'?"

Again, Daniel looked down at himself for a moment, taking in the short arms, short legs, tiny toes and tiny... everything. "It's wrong," he mumbled. "I'm wrong."


"Where's my stuff?"

"Uh, your clothes were gone when the machine shrank you."

To Jack's surprise, mini-Daniel pulled up his shoulders and ducked his head like a turtle, as he replied meekly, "I didn't mean to. I don't know how it happened. But there was a zap an' sparks an' I think I broke it. Please, don't be mad..."

O'Neill took a deep breath. He cupped Daniel's face with his hand and made him look up again. God, how impossibly little the kid was. "Hey, hey, easy, buddy. We'll sort this out when you're big again, okay?"

Daniel looked at him, eyes big as saucers. "You're not going to yell at me?"

"No, I won't. Do you remember anything?"

Daniel chewed on his lower lip. "I 'member we were waiting for the rain to stop. I think I must've tripped or touched something. Dunno. The lights went on, and there was humming. Like bees. Lotsa bees. Did you see all those colors, Jack? I got dizzy. Then... then there was a blue blast and an explosion with sparks. The lights an' the humming stopped."

O'Neill forced a smile on his face. "We'll get help, Daniel. As soon as you feel up to it, we'll dial home and get all the smart guys here to fix the device. To fix you."

Daniel hung his head again. “And then you're going to yell at me, right?“

Jack shook his head, unable to hold his grudge for one more second at this sight of misery. “Nope. No yelling. Promise."

For the first time, a shy smile appeared on Daniel's young face and Jack returned it, feeling awkwardly touched. He ruffled the blond hair and kept his voice light when he asked, "Are there dry clothes in your pack?"

Daniel played with the zipper of his sleeping bag. "They won't fit."

Jack grabbed Daniel's pack and retrieved a black tee. "You have to wear something." He pulled the shirt over Daniel's head, and the kid held up his arms to help. When he crawled out of the sleeping
bag and stood, the shirt reached down to his ankles. Jack pulled the hem up and made a knot at Daniel's hip. Now it only reached to his calves right under his knees. "How's that?"

The collar was still way too wide, but that couldn't be helped. It kept slipping down Daniel's left shoulder and the boy kept pulling it up again.

"Better. Don't wanna be nekkid in front of Doctor Menkins." Daniel blushed.

"Right." O'Neill gazed at the small boy in front of him, but turned his head away when Daniel's eyes clouded again.

"I feel very little," he informed Jack sadly. "How old am I?"

"Uh, I dunno." Jack made a vague gesture with his hand. "Five? Of course, Janet has to confirm that."

That was an overstatement. But he couldn't say Four. He just couldn't. Five was bad enough. He couldn't look into Daniel's eyes as he said it. The best thing he could do was change the subject. "Hey, I'm hungry. How about you?"

Jack grabbed for his wet pants and pulled the half-eaten power bar out. But it looked less than appealing. "Maybe we better get you a sandwich, huh?"

Daniel shrugged, but followed obediently when Jack left the tent.

The rain had stopped, but they couldn't start a fire with the wet wood, so Jack got sandwiches from their stock of Air Force food supplies. He handed one to Daniel, but the tyke didn't pay attention to it. He stared up at the orange sky where the lightning still zapped down in zigzags on the horizon.

"Impressive, eh?" Jack followed Daniel's eyes. "That's how you find out you're not in Kansas anymore even though it looks like you are."

When Daniel didn't respond and still gazed at the phenomenon with huge eyes, O'Neill was hit by the clue bus. He put a hand on the back of Daniel's neck and gently squeezed. "Hey, you know it's just thunder and lightning, right? Off-world nature. You remember, don't you?"


A particularly loud rumbling made him jump, grab for Jack's leg and hide behind it.

O-kay. The colonel reached around and picked mini-Daniel up. "Hey, why don't you eat your sandwich inside? And then we'll go to the gate and dial home. We're going to size you up in no time. Like this." Jack snapped his fingers.

Daniel let out a sigh as he snuggled against Jack's chest. "Okay."

Just as they were about to go back inside, Doctor Menkins was leaving her tent. She, too, wore a fresh uniform and her hair was almost dry. She flashed a smile at Daniel and came over to join them.

When she reached out to touch the boy, he shied away from her and placed his forehead against Jack's shoulder.

"Hey, Danny," Menkins greeted him cheerfully. "Are you feeling better?"

Daniel didn't respond, and Jack answered for him. "He's a little upset. We'll eat something and then dial home. I want every available geek here to figure that device out. I think we have to return to
base first so Fraiser can check him out while the machine gets fixed. And we need a power source to
get it working again."

"Of course. I'm ready when you are, Colonel." Menkins let her eyes linger on Daniel for a moment
longer. "What a beautiful child he is," she said in awe.

"Yeah." Jack jiggled Daniel from one arm to the other. Hopefully not for too long though, he
thought. They needed Daniel at the SGC. And even though he seemed to remember everything, he
wouldn't be able to do his job anymore, if he had to stay like this.

Jack refused to think of all the long-term consequences for Daniel personally if they couldn't reverse
this.

Back in the tent, Jack put him down on the sleeping bag. Daniel seemed to relax and started eating
his sandwich with great appetite.

"Thifsgood," he mumbled, both cheeks full of bread, spitting crumbs Jack's way.

"Eww. Don't speak with your mouth full," Jack chided, swiping one of the crumbs from his knee.

"Soweet." "Daniel...

Daniel chewed and swallowed, then wiped his mouth with his arm, smearing peanut butter on the
black sleeve of his tee. Jack sighed, pulled a tissue out of his pants pocket and wiped Daniel’s mouth
and sleeve with it.

When that was done, he asked, "How ya feelin'?"

That got him a shy smile. "Not hungry anymore." "Sweet. So how about we go and dial home now? Let Fraiser take a look at you while the smart
guys fix up the shrink thing?"

Daniel lowered his head and tugged at the hem of his oversized shirt. "Jack? Do I have to? Go back
to base?"

Jack looked down at the boy with his short arms and legs, sticking out of the too-big tee. There were
miniature toes on small dirty feet and short chubby hands and fingers. He had seen the motherly
gleam in Menkins's eyes and could imagine how the whole staff of the infirmary, including Janet,
was going melt in a puddle of goo at the sight of this Daniel. Heck, not even Carter would be able to
resist him.

Jack O'Neill definitely couldn't.

But they had to go through with it. So he said, "I'm sorry, Daniel, but I'm afraid there's no way
around it."

At the kid’s crestfallen expression, Jack added, "But tell ya what? I won't leave you, okay? I'll be
there with you all the way. And if they start annoying you too much, I'll put on the bad colonel face
and scare them off."

That lured a giggle out of the little fella. "Won't scare Janet."

"Uh, nooo. But Janet's a tough girl. She'll get over your looks fast." Jack grinned.
The smile left Daniel's face as he gazed at Jack for a moment. "Jack?"

"Daniel?"

"You'll really stay with me? All the time?"

"Yep. And if they need me out of the way for some tests, I'll be right in the hall or next room." Jack didn't like the doubt he saw in Daniel's eyes. Where was that coming from? He was always there when Daniel woke up in the infirmary. Even after they'd split up. It was what he did. It was like breathing. What made Daniel think Jack would leave him now?

"Promise," he added sincerely.

"What if you have to go to a briefing?" Daniel worried.

"Then I'll try to delay it. Or, I'll let you know where I am and be back as fast as I can, okay?"

With that, the kid seemed to be satisfied.

Jack decided not to pack anything yet. He wanted to get their orders before he broke camp. Maybe Hammond would send a team of physicists right away, or Carter was back and could come through. In that case, they might have the device fixed faster.

Daniel reached for Jack's hand when Menkins joined them outside, and together they started the walk towards the gate. When they left the meadows, Jack picked Daniel up and carried him since he didn't have shoes to wear and the path through the woods wasn't made for bare feet.

Daniel hid his face against Jack's neck whenever a loud thunder boomed and even covered his ears with his hands. When they finally came in sight of the gate, Daniel whispered into Jack's ear, "I want to go through the gate by myself, Jack."

Jack set Daniel down on the mossy ground. It was safe enough for the kid to walk on his own here. No stones or tree roots to make him trip or hurt his feet. Holding Jack's hand in a tight grip, Daniel walked on, eyes fixed on the looming gate.

But when they reached the DHD, he suddenly stopped and was back to hugging Jack's leg. Jack tried to pull Daniel away, but the kid was glued to him like a burr.

"Daniel, it's just the gate..." Jack started, but bit down on his lip. Daniel was a lot shorter than he used to be. Even though it seemed as though his memories were intact, he was acting just like a little kid right now. He might be scared of just about everything, being so much smaller and looking at it all from another perspective.

Jack patted his head. "Okay. I'll carry you then."

A wild head shake was the answer. "They'll think I'm a baby," Daniel sobbed.

"Then take my hand again. We'll go together."

"Don't wanna," Daniel whined, clutching Jack's knee. "Janet can come here and bring... stuff... to... ex-mine me." Jack's knee was squeezed some more. "Don't wanna go through..."

"'s okay. I'll be right here, buddy." Jack managed to pry the kid off his leg and then picked him up.

But the munchkin started to wriggle and squirm in his grip, screaming at the top of his lungs. "Jaaaack! Don't wanna gooooo!"
Sure that he had just gone deaf in his right ear, Jack grimaced and tightened his arms around the kid. “All right, that's enough! Hold it, Daniel... Daniel, will you stop...”

“Noooo!” Big fat tears started streaming down the outraged little face, and the wriggling became even more frantic. “Pleezz... don’t make me... they’ll all see... seee me like... this.“

“Aw, Danny...” Jack sighed as it hit him.

The gate room was going to be full of people who'd all stare at Daniel. Probably point guns at him. Daniel wasn't just scared about going through the gate. He was mortified. He was four, for crying out loud. Four or five – and fully aware of who he had been just a few hours ago.

Jack started rocking Daniel, one hand cupping the back of his head. “Sssh... I know, I know... easy, big guy. I'll talk to Hammond before we go through, okay? So he knows and won't ask too many questions before we take you to the infirmary.”

He wanted to promise Daniel the general would clear the gate room, but he knew that wasn't going to happen.

“N... n... no,” Daniel cried, but with much less intensity. His arms closed around Jack's neck and nearly strangled him as they stepped closer to the gate again.

“We need to go home, Danny. To fix you. It'll be all over soon,” Jack coaxed. “Just hold on to me. I won't let you go.”

Jack switched the MALP on and then turned to the DHD, jiggling Daniel on his hip as he reached for his GDO. As the gate began to spin, he realized Menkins had already punched in the address.

Frowning at the glowing symbols on the DHD, Jack muttered, “What the hell...”

Wherever she wanted them to go, that wasn't the address for home.

"Step back from the DHD, Colonel! Slowly."

He turned and looked at the P90 pointed at him.

So Hammond had been right. And Jack had let his guard down because he'd been distracted by Daniel.

"What do you want, Menkins?” he asked, annoyed.

"Step away from the DHD." The barrel of the P90 followed Jack's every step as he slowly backed off. "Stay there where I can see you. And keep both hands on the boy. I don't want you to try something funny, Colonel."

"What's in it for you, Menkins?” Jack inquired.

"Oh, the opportunity to experiment! Research!"

"And how are you going to do that without the device?"

Menkins gazed at him with a triumphant smile. Overhead, the thunder kept rolling and lightning struck some trees nearby. "Oh, we don't need the device, O'Neill. I have to admit it would be great to have it. But we have something better. Daniel here will be my guinea pig. His DNA structures were changed, and I'll experiment on him. One day I'll be able to create the perfect human being myself. Unlike whatever Nirrti was creating, mine will not be used for evil!"
Jack absently stroked Daniel’s head. "You really want that? You said you want to change the world, Menkins. Make it better? Get real! They'll create a super soldier or a weapon. And that's about it. No noble intentions for the greater good of humanity."

For a moment, doubt flickered across her face, but was immediately replaced by that insane, almost dreamy smile again. "I have a treaty. It was my only condition when the NID asked me to work for them. Colonel Simmons himself vouched for the compliance. I will make a difference. A far bigger difference than the Stargate program will ever make. A difference for Earth."

"Simmons," Jack snorted, "vouched? It'd be funny if it wasn't so stupid. You're not getting away with this!"

"Simmons will make sure nothing is going to happen to me, Colonel. When they come looking for you, they won't find anyone. We will vanish, and the NID will cover my actions. We will be missing without a trace."

"Carter will track the gate address you're dialing to," Jack told her acidly.

"Even so. They won't find us."

Jack's eyes narrowed. If what she said was true... Menkins nodded as though she had read his thoughts. "Yes, Colonel. There was more than one off-world base. What you destroyed when you arrested Colonel Maybourne’s unit was only one piece of a well-functioning network. The organization has many more ways to get their hands on technology."

With a loud kawoosh, the wormhole opened. More thunder crashed. Daniel let out a high-pitched scream, burying his face even further into Jack's neck.

"Think, Menkins," Jack yelled. "They're using you! And you're playing right into their hands!"

"Once I bring them the child, they’ll let me work with him. They’ve provided money and a free hand in my research and projects! The NID helped me when the government didn't. Because they are all too scared to try something new!"

The P90 was waved at them, directing them toward the wormhole. "Move, Colonel! I'd like to leave you here, but I can't risk you dialing Earth for help!"

Jack's voice remained calm, even though he had to yell against the thunder. "I don't think so, Menkins. You want Daniel? You want him alive for your nasty little DNA games? You come and get him." Slowly, his calloused hand rubbing Daniel's trembling back, he started walking backwards.

"Stop! Stop or I will shoot you both!"

"No, you won't. You need him. But you'll have to come get him, Doctor!"

He knew it was risky. She could change her mind, deciding to kill them both instead... but she was obsessed with her desire to succeed and she needed Daniel to reach her goal. So he had to poker play the odds here...

They had a fair chance of getting away once they reached the woods.

More thunder crashed. Then a lightning bolt struck the gate, followed by another one. Chevrons started to glow as a large jolt of blue light surged out of the event horizon.

Menkins screamed.
Jack turned, pressed Daniel to him, and ran.

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Once they had vanished into the depths of the trees, he stopped to hide himself and the kid in the bushes.

Daniel was very still.

Jack looked back at the gate.

It stood dark and looming against the sky. The orange color was beginning to unnerve him big time. It looked sick. Jack knew those were thunderstorm clouds and once the weather changed, so would the color of the sky. But it just wasn't natural. He fingered his binoculars from his vest and, holding Daniel close with one arm, searched the place around the gate for Menkins's body.

"Crap," he hissed when his eyes caught the DHD. The power dome in the middle was broken, and the whole thing looked burned.

No sign of Menkins.

Well, if the jolt had hit her, there probably wasn't much left of her anyway.

Jack sat back on his heels and carefully tried to pry Daniel loose from his body. "Daniel? Daniel, look at me. Hey, buddy, you okay?"

Daniel raised his head, and Jack didn't like how wide his eyes were, how vacant.

He jiggled him a little. "Talk to me, Danny," he crooned. "C'mon. Let me hear you say something, huh? How about; hey, Jack, you can run real fast for a guy your age?"

Daniel blinked a few times and let go of Jack. He didn't resist when Jack sat him on the mossy ground beside him. "Doctor Menkins ran very fast, too," he finally whispered.

"How'd you..." Then it dawned on him. Daniel must have seen what had happened over Jack's shoulder while they'd been running. "She ran? Where to?"

Daniel gave a tiny shrug. "away from the gate."

"Okay. Away to where...? Into the woods, like we did? Or the other direction?"

"To camp," Daniel said. Then he looked at Jack, and his lower lip started trembling. "I 'member now. She made me push the button, Jack. She zatted you when the light was on. She had glasses to cover her eyes from the lights. She said she’d zat you twice if I didn’t. ‘m sorry. And she zatted the red button so we can't fix me now. When I woke up, I ran... but I didn't ’member things right. My head was all foggy, and then you came, and I thought you were angry... "

Jack felt his own throat tighten. He wanted to hug and hold this small Daniel as long as he needed it, wanted to give him reassurance. But all he could do right now was cup the kid's face and brush away the tears with his thumb. There was no time.

They couldn't stay here.

"Daniel, it's okay. Sssh, okay. I'm not angry anymore. It's not your fault, you hear me? We have to leave now. If Menkins is still after us, we can't stay. Listen. I'd like you to ride on my back. Can you do that? Holding onto me so I have my hands free?"
Daniel wiped away more tears and nodded.

"Okay. Up you go. Hold on as tight as you can. But if you can't hold on any longer, tell me so I can take you down and carry you up front again. I don't wanna lose you." Jack helped Daniel get comfortable on his back. This way he had both his hands for the weapon.

They didn't use the path. Instead Jack moved between the pine trees, telling Daniel to keep his head down so he won't hurt himself on branches and needles. He tried not to make too much noise as he made his way through the underbrush. The humus, covered with pine needles, swallowed his steps and the almost black tree trunks shielded them so they were getting close to camp without being seen by Menkins.

"Jack," Daniel whispered loudly into his ear. "Are we going back to camp?"

"Yeah. We need a couple of things. Quiet now," Jack whispered back urgently. He patted Daniel's foot to take the edge off his words.

"I can do that," Daniel let him know. "I can be very quiet."

"I know, Danny."

"You taught me hand signs."

"Yeah, I did. Daniel, could you be quiet - now?" Jack could see the tents through the dense trees. He ducked, and carefully helped Daniel to climb from his back.

"I remember all of them," Daniel proudly said, holding up one hand.

Jack suppressed a groan and knelt on the soft ground. "Daniel, shut up!"

That did it. Daniel lay down beside Jack and didn't say anything else.

When Jack was sure there was no more sound coming from the short stuff, he managed to crawl closer to camp. He pulled his binoculars out again and searched the place for signs of Menkins.

There was a movement at one of the tents, and Jack watched her come out. She was carrying her weapon and he wondered what she was up to.

The gate was history. With the DHD damaged like that, they wouldn't be able to dial out. They had been due to check back in this evening. If they didn't call in on schedule, Hammond would try contacting them. So they had to stay close to the gate and hope it was just the DHD that was crushed and not the gate itself. The SGC could send technicians through to fix it. Since Jack had drawn the plan of a DHD to save Carter and her team from being melted on another planet, they should be able to repair it. All thanks to the good old Ancients and their depositories.

He wondered if Menkins, too, expected to be contacted from the planet she was supposed to take Daniel to. Or maybe she was going to take her chances and find the other gate on this planet. In that case, she might still want to kidnap the boy and take him with her.

Well, that was going to happen over Jack's dead body.

However, she seemed to be nuts enough to try and travel across an unknown world with a four year old.

He needed Menkins tied up so she wouldn't be a problem anymore.
O'Neill put his P90 down and got the zat from his belt. Licking his dry lips, he turned to the child. "Daniel, I have to zat Menkins. But she's too far away. So we need to make her come over..."

"I know what to do," Daniel interrupted and jumped up. "Trust me, Jack?"

"Whoa, wait a minute... Whatcha doing?" He caught hold of the big t-shirt, keeping the boy in place. "She wants me bad. I'll make her come over so you can zat her," the boy said as he tried to wriggle out of Jack's grip.

Jack was thinking of throwing his knife to get her attention and hoping she'd notice and come close enough to be in zat range. And that was exactly what was going to happen. "No, Daniel. I want you to hide behind those large trees. They'll cover you. I'll lure her over here and zat her."

He wanted Daniel out of the line of fire just in case Menkins saw him and used her gun.

Daniel blinked at him, then said, "I understand."

Jack nodded and let go of his shirt. "Now scoot. And don't move before I tell you to."

Daniel crawled away from him... and then was up on his feet and running. Jack leaped forward to snatch him back, but the kid squeezed himself through a bush and made his way towards the camp, waving his arms and calling out, "Doctor Menkins, Doctor Menkins, I losted Jack! You gotta help me find him! Doctor Menkins!"

O'Neill covered his eyes with his hand for a moment and prayed for strength. This guy was going to be the death of him. Menkins stood and stared over at them as Daniel stopped running in the middle of the clearing.

Jack held his breath as she aimed the P90 at Daniel.

"Are you alone, Danny?" she called.

"Uh-huh! Jack's losted!"

"Why don't you come over so we can talk, sweetie?"

"Noooo, hurt my ankle. Hurts bad!" There was definitely a whine there.

"What happened to the colonel?!" Menkins came slowly closer, gun firmly aimed at the kid.

"I dunno. He just left. After the lightning."

Menkins started walking a little faster now. "He left you?"

"Losted me. Carried me and losted me," Daniel let her know. "My ankle hurts!"

Jack bit his lip, torn between shooting her and risking a miss, or letting her come close enough to have her in zat range for sure.

*Just a little closer. Come on, Menkins. Move it.* God, he would SO have a talk with this version of Daniel Jackson.

Menkins stopped walking. "I don't believe he left you just like that," she yelled.

Jack's eyes were fixed on the small figure in the black t-shirt standing proud and making himself bait
for this mad woman, who still couldn't decide if it was a trap or not. His jaw clenched until it hurt as he slowly raised the zat and waited...

Daniel stood frozen for a moment, then his head lolled back and he fell to the ground with a low thud. Jack's first impulse was to leave his cover and get him. But then he saw Menkins coming closer, still hesitating.

When the blue beam zipped out of the woods and hit the Doctor, she dropped her gun immediately and went down with a gurgling yell. Jack left the bushes and rushed past Daniel, who sat up that moment. Jack picked up her gun, yanked the still unconscious woman up and threw her over his shoulder.

"How was I, Jack?" a tiny voice asked behind him.

Instead of answering, Jack grabbed Daniel by his shirt, picked him up and wedged him under his left arm.

When they reached camp, he put Daniel down first and pointed at their tent. Without a word, the kid hurried inside.

O'Neill placed Menkins near the fire pit. Once he had disarmed her of her handgun and knife, he searched her pack for restraints. They all carried them in case they had to take prisoners for some reason. A moment later the good Doctor was tied up and would stay where she was for the time being.

That done, he took her vest and weapons and entered his tent where he was greeted by a very subdued Daniel sitting on his sleeping bag.

Jack threw the vest aside and made sure the weapons were secured before he put them down, too.

"I just wanted to help," Daniel said meekly.

Jack looked down at him and, for a moment, his anger got the better of him.

He grabbed Daniel’s arms and roughly dragged him over to where Menkins's gun was lying on the ground. "Look at it, Daniel! Does this ring any bells?! Do you realize what you just did?" He gave him a light shake to get his point across.

"She wanted me alive!"

"Oh, yeah? And what makes you believe she's thinking straight?! She's nuts! She might have changed her mind now that she's stuck here!"

"I. I... didn't..." Now the tears started. Big drops, hanging in the corners of his wide eyes before trickling down his cheeks.

"What? Think? Of course you didn't! You never do. You always have to throw yourself in headfirst, believing everybody will listen to you if you just have the right words at hand! She wanted to use you for DNA experiments, for cryin' out loud!"

"But you said it yourself. She wanted me alive. She wouldn't kill me 'cause she needed me," Daniel sobbed in his new little voice. "You said it... you... And I just wanted to help."

Jack released him and turned away, the anger falling from him at once. He couldn't stand those tears nor those saucer-like blue eyes gazing up at him.
Hurt. And scared.

"I'll see if Menkins is awake yet. You stay put," he croaked and fled.

Once outside, he took several deep breaths and looked over at the Doctor, who was lying on her side, glaring at him. "What are you going to do with me, O'Neill?" she spat.

"Hand you over," he said curtly.

"To whom?"

"They'll dial in and look for us. They'll send help."

"You had to run with him. You couldn't just do what I told you to do. If you would have, we would've been gone through the gate before the lightning hit."

He gave her a disdainful glare. "Happy to take the blame here. At least nobody is going to use Daniel for some sick experiments."

Menkins snorted. "But you won't be able to help him either, right? The brilliant Doctor Jackson reduced to a four year old kid. This is a good one. I know my experiments weren't the only reason why the NID wanted me to take him."

O'Neill knelt beside the woman, who gave him a wolfish smile, her eyes filled with cold hatred. He had no idea how she had been able to act so relatively normal before. But now she seemed to be losing it real fast. He almost felt sorry for her. Almost. "What are you talking about, Menkins?"

She bore her gray eyes into Jack's. He had thought the gleam he had seen before, when she'd called Daniel a beautiful child, had been motherly. Now he knew it was the sick, euphoric look of a scientist, about to examine a rat.

A rat. That's what Daniel was to her. Nothing more.

"Spill," he snapped. "What else did they want?"

"They want him out of the way. And they wanted to probe his mind to see how much of that intelligence is still there. If adults can be transformed into little kids without losing their knowledge and memories, they could be trained into valuable spies. Plus, he's a troublemaker. All of you from SG-1 are. No other SG team is running into so many opportunities to get new technology or allies - and jeopardizing it because of some moral opposition of Doctor Jackson's. But taking away your voice, your conscience will crush the whole team. Isn't that right, O'Neill?"

Jack felt like she had struck him. All blood seemed to leave his face as he realized how right she was. Daniel was their weakest link. And also their strongest link. Daniel was the soul of SG-1.

Oh, Jack had known it before. It had just never hit home that hard. And it was one of the many, many reasons why Jack needed Daniel to stay alive. Not the most important one. Not for Jack, at least, but one of them.

Daniel was special. He was needed. And Jack had to make sure the kid survived.

The kid...

Damn.

He stood, not even registering the creaking knees, and left Menkins where she was.
Daniel was curled up on his sleeping bag, his arms clamped around his body in a self-hug. He didn't react in any way when Jack sat down next to him and pulled his cap off his head. Jack placed it on the ground and rubbed through his spiky hair. He had no idea how to deal with this. Just treat Daniel like a four year old?

But he wasn't, was he?

Oh, but Jack had seen him behaving like one ever since it had happened, right?

O'Neill had no idea what was going on in that cute little head. Daniel Jackson's mind had been a very scary place before. But now it was... It was like Jack had to get to know him all over again. Yet, he was still Daniel-ish. If this child had the knowledge and the memories of adult Daniel and acted emotionally like a four year old...

Okay, Jack wouldn't go there. Not right now.

Right now, none of this was important anyway. Jack was responsible for Daniel's distress. He had scared and probably hurt him. So he should get over the creeps this whole situation was giving him and do something.

But it was Daniel who broke the silence.

Like he did so often.

"What I did was stoopid, wasn't it?"

Gawd, he sounded so sad. So subdued. Daniel was quick to feel guilty, always had been, even for things that weren't really his fault. But hearing him say it in this vulnerable light voice was different on so many levels.

Wrong. It was all wrong.

"It was very dangerous," Jack said finally. "You know that, don't you?"

A tiny nod. "I was thinking she wouldn' shoot me if she wanted me for NDA 'xperiments. Forgot about the broken gate."

"DNA, Daniel. It's... " Jack shook his head and sighed. "I'm sorry I scared you."

"I know what it is. It's short for Deoxyribonucleic acid. It's a nucleic acid, normally in form of a double helix which contains the genetic instructions specifying the biological development of all cellular life forms," Daniel rattled down.

Jack blinked. "Yes. It is. I think."

"I know this because as an anthropologist and achologist, I worked with NDA too. It collects mutations over time, which are passed from parents to children. It has information about processes that have occurred in the past." Daniel went into lecture mode. He even forgot the self-hugging, which was a good thing, as he started using his hands to underline what he was saying. Yes, definitely Daniel there. "If NDA s'quences from different species are compared, their family trees can be used to study the evolution of these species. If NDA s'quences within a species are compared, the population genes can show us the history of particular populations. This can be used in studies..."
"Whoa... hold it, Daniel. That's... " Jack tried to take in the still-extant knowledge versus the
mispronounced words like anthropologist and archaeologist or the repeated use of NDA. And then
again he had said Deoxyribo... or whatever, without even stumbling over it.

Daniel's shoulders slumped, and he looked down, mumbling. "TMI, I know. Sorry."

"No, no, that's okay. Just... You still know all that stuff, right?" Jack tried to get his head around that,
among other things.

Menkins knows a lot more 'bout it than I do."

Jack grimaced at that as he looked down at his mini-archaeologist and asked, "What about all the
languages you speak?"

Daniel shrugged. "I can still speak them, I guess."

"Yeah? Okay. Say something in... German? Like; Jack, I'm mad at you because you hurt me and I
want you to apologize or I'll kick your butt from here to Netu?"

There was a small smile tugging at the corners of Daniel's full mouth now. "Really?"

"I wanna hear you say it," Jack prompted gently.

"Jack, ich bin böse auf dich weil du mir weh getan hast und mich angebrüllt. Uuuund... ich will das

"I'm sorry," Jack answered in the same tone.

"I could've said somethin' different," Daniel warned.

"Nah, I trust you." Jack shrugged.

"No, you don't."

"Of course I do." With his life. Every day they were out there. Disagreements and arguments didn't
change that. Not even a screwed-up relationship.

Daniel chewed on his lower lip, and the smile disappeared. "Even if you had, you don't now. I'm
little. Can't watch your six anymore."

"You will again. We'll fix this," O'Neill heard himself say.

There was still the possibility of help from home. In a couple of days, the NDA... DNA machine
might be fixed and Daniel would be back to normal. Even with those crystals destroyed... there had
to be another way to power up the machine, right? Carter had to find one.

"Jack?"

"Yeah?"

"Are you still angry?" Daniel's voice was trembling again and he seemed to make himself as small as
he could.

Jack closed his eyes for a second, mentally kicking himself for his outburst earlier. He hadn't handled
this whole mess very sensitively.
Reaching out and carefully roaming a hand through Daniel's short blond hair, he was relieved when the little boy didn't flinch away from the touch. "I'm not angry with you, Daniel."

"Were." But he leaned into the touch when Jack's hand cupped his face.

"I'm sorry I hurt you," Jack said. "Hey, I think I need a big hug. How about you?"

Daniel leaped forward and hugged Jack, strangling his neck. Jack embraced the small boy and held him like he was something breakable. Even though Daniel didn't seem scared anymore, Jack was very aware that he had lost his temper and forgotten that Daniel wasn't thirty-seven anymore. He would make sure it never happened again.

When Daniel sat in his lap and snuggled in, O'Neill had to admit it felt good. He had almost forgotten how it was to have a little boy in his arms, even though it was a very strange and very dirty little boy. He bent down and, without thinking, kissed the top of Daniel's head.

"I was scared Menkins was going to shoot you, Daniel. We both have to remember that you are not ... big anymore. She's lost it. I thought you'd recognize that."

"You said she..."

"Yeah, I know. And she wanted you alive. But you can never trust maniacs like her. She could've changed her mind in a heartbeat."

"Oh," came the soft reply, accompanied by the famous Daniel Jackson frown that still looked the same, even on this little one.

"How about we talk about all this later, huh? It's been a pretty long day, and we have to go back and see if they're trying to contact us. Best thing would be to gear up and move camp to the gate so we're there when they call."

"What if they don't?"

"We'll think of something," Jack said with more confidence than he felt.

"'kay," little Daniel finally agreed. Then he hopped off Jack's lap and started to roll up his sleeping bag. At least, he tried. He just couldn't get his small fingers to work the way they used to when he had been big.

Jack let him fumble with it while he was packing away his own. Then he gently took the baggy thing from Daniel and rolled it up. Daniel put the straps around it and then started to stuff things into his backpack.

They loaded the FRED, and O'Neill let Daniel ride on his shoulders as they moved everything to the gate. Menkins walked along, her arms tied behind her back.

When Jack had everything settled, Daniel was sleeping on top of his sleeping bag in the tent. The whole process which had transformed his body seemed to tire him out easily and it had been a stressful day.

It was warm again, but humid. A light fog hovered over the meadows. Jack put in the last stake for Menkins's tent and wiped the sweat off his neck. In between setting up the tents, he'd given her some water from her canteen and offered her some food which she had refused. He let her sit in the
shadow of her own tent without letting her inside. He wanted to keep an eye on her.

After a closer look at the DHD, he saw his suspicions confirmed.

It was burned.

The night came fast, and the sky went pitch black like before. Jack wondered why it was so much
darker here than on Earth. Not that he really cared anyway. It just was.

Daniel had macaroni and cheese for dinner. Jack knew he should have made the little boy take a bath
because he was still dirty. There was a small, shallow river nearby, but the kid couldn't go alone, and
Jack had been busy moving camp.

O'Neill sat at the fire, sipping coffee that was strong enough to keep him awake as long as possible.
There was nobody else left to take watch. And while he was relatively sure nobody was sneaking
around in this area, there was still the issue of Menkins. Sure, she was tied up like a Christmas gift,
but still...

He stared at the gate.

Nobody dialed in.

Or maybe they had tried and couldn't get through. Jack suspected the latter.

The gate was dead. Crashed. Wrecked.

Peachy.

TBC with Ch 4, Purplesplashes and a Decision
The next morning came bright and early.

Jack had Menkins's hands tied in front of her so she could eat breakfast. He also had his gun next to him so she wasn't getting any ideas. They had sandwiches and the Air Force's excuse for coffee. Daniel settled for water and didn't even ask for coffee, which Jack thought was interesting. He checked his watch and figured the usual time for them to call home had been half an hour ago.

Nobody had checked in on them.

He had the sinking feeling nobody ever would.

After breakfast, Jack turned to Daniel. "What do you think about a bath in that little river over there? You look like a mole."

"'kay!" Daniel jumped up, ready to run.

Jack snatched him by the collar of his tee and pointed at the tents. "Whoa... wait a minute! Towel? Soap?"

"Oh. Yeah. Forgot." The kid traipsed over to their tent and returned a moment later, carrying a towel and a tube of multipurpose soap from his pack.

Jack made Menkins accompany them and found a spot near the shore, where she could kneel and wash her face. She struggled a little with her tied hands, but there was no way in hell Jack was going to tie her loose just yet. He knew he had to do it sometime, though, to make sure the blood circulation in her hands wasn't cut off.

When she was done with freshening up, Jack told Daniel to stay put and wait for him. He made Menkins sit under a nearby tree and tied her ankles with another restraint he retrieved from his pants pocket.

Then he turned back to Daniel, who had wandered off along the shore and was climbing an old tree trunk crossing the river. Cursing under his breath, Jack left Menkins where she was and, a moment later, snatched Daniel up by his tee and settled him on his hip.

“Jack! I saw two butterflies!” Daniel exclaimed as Jack carried him to the sandy spot at the shore. “Though I'm sure they aren't called butterflies here.”

“Daniel...”

“Do you think they have another name? 'cuz we're not on Earth? They were pretty...”

Jack sat down on a flat stone with Daniel on his knees. He patted the kid's shoulder to get his attention and when Daniel looked at him, he said, “I'm sure they were very pretty, Daniel. But when
I tell you to stay put, I want you to stay there and not wander off, okay?"

"I didn't wander off. I was just..."

"I told you to stay right here," Jack repeated firmly.

Daniel scrunched up his face and sniffed. "Sorry."

Sensing an imminent meltdown, Jack quickly hugged the tyke and said more gently, "I know. Let's take a look at that river, shall we? The water seems shallow enough, so you can go in on your own if you like. But you have to take your shirt off."

"'kay," Daniel said in a subdued tone as he slid down from Jack's lap and pulled the shirt over his head. He carefully tiptoed into the cool water, leaving shirt and towel next to Jack on the grass. There were stones on the bottom of the stream, but not too many, so Jack wasn't worried about Daniel hurting himself.

Daniel stood in the middle of the river and watched the water playing around his legs. "Jack! There are little fish in here!"

Fascinated by the tiny purple fish, the kid bent over to gaze into the water, butt sticking out.

O'Neill felt the hair on his neck rise. He hadn't seen any fish when he'd first checked the water. However, SG-2 had assured them there weren't any venomous animals. The wildlife was very similar to Earth; nothing fancy.

Jack pulled off his boots and socks, rolled up his pant legs and stepped into the water to take a look at the fish himself. They looked like brown trout, only purple and much smaller. They didn't seem to be interested in little Daniel's toes or legs.

"Can I catch some? Do we have a bucket?" Daniel looked up with hopeful eyes.

"Um, no. I don't think we have a bucket."

"One of the containers we collect samples in, then?"

"Daniel... why don't you just wash up for now? I think the trout love to be free and swim where ever they want," Jack tried.

That made sense to any version of Daniel. "Oh. Yes, you're right. Jack? How do you know these are trout?"

Jack scratched his head. "I don't. They just look like trout. Mini-trout."

"But maybe they have their own name... Like... purplesplashes?" Daniel sat down on his bottom and yelped, then giggled, when the cold water splashed against his belly.

"Purplesplashes it is." Jack grinned.

"They have tiny blue spots," Daniel informed him as he tried to catch one with his hands.

"Oh? So maybe they're called purplebluespotsplashes?"

"Nah, that's too long," the kid decided. "And they prob'ly have a more scient... ifical name. But I like purplesplashes."
Jack watched him for a moment and tried to ignore the warm feeling inside at the sight of this youngster sitting in the river. Fun and cozy as it was, they had to find a way to reverse this, and soon.

Still, he was a cute kid, this Daniel.

"Hey, wash your face," Jack said as he sat on a stone that jutted out of the river. "But don't drink the water, okay?"

"I know, Jack. I can't drink it 'cause we don' know if it's clean or not," Daniel said, giving him an indignant look. He splashed water onto his face but after he had done that twice, he suddenly stopped and bent over until his nose almost touched the water. "I can see little stones. They're pretty." He reached down with one hand and scooped up a flat stone which he showed Jack. "See?"

"Very pretty," Jack confirmed.

Daniel's face and hands looked clean now, as did his legs and everything up to his belly. But his upper body had still traces of dirt.

"Why don't you lay down in the water?" Jack suggested.

Daniel immediately stretched out, now that his body had adjusted to the coolness. Jack remembered how Charlie had never been bothered with cold water as long as he was allowed to have fun in it. He had loved to swim and play in the pond at the cabin. Daniel, on the other hand, felt cold much more easily. Must have something to do with his early childhood years in Egypt. He was a desert rat. Jack guessed the temperature on Abydos must have been just right for him.

Now, however, it didn't seem to bother him much either.

Jack called him out a moment later and started applying the blue liquid soap to the kid's body, automatically falling back into his paternal pattern as he made sure Daniel was soaped up properly. The kid wrinkled his nose at the smell of the soap. No roses. But it was better than the no-rinse stuff they had used in earlier years. This soap was neutral and could be used for dishes as well. It wasn't toxic and wouldn't leave any residue in the water.

"Okay. Go rinse," Jack instructed and watched Daniel bounce back into the river, washing the soap off his body, muttering about the "yucky stuff" under his breath.

When Daniel announced he was done, Jack checked for leftover soap. When he confirmed the kid was properly scrubbed and looked shiny as a new penny, Daniel asked if he could play in the water for a while longer and went back to looking for stones and fishies with a squeal once he got permission to do so.

Yep, he was a cute kid.

When Jack realized a while later that Daniel was starting to shiver a little, he wrapped him into the towel and rubbed him dry. Snuggled into the towel, Daniel then sat next to Jack on the warm grass and wriggled his mini-toes. "I look funny, don't I?"

"Well, you act funny too," thought Jack, but aloud he said, "Nah. Just smaller."

"Will I grow up? I mean... all the way up again? Janet isn't here to check me out. So we don't know, right? What if I stay like this forever." Daniel paused as if trying to remember something and then smiled again. "Oh, no. It says they were allowed to live their lives over again. That means I'll grow up, right?"
"I think so, yes," Jack answered thoughtfully, feeling a cold hand grabbing for his guts. Growing all the way up? Not if he could prevent it. There had to be something on this planet to reverse what Menkins had done to Daniel.

"Oh, good. Forgot about that." Daniel wriggled his toes again, then stretched his legs as long as he could and compared them to Jack's long legs. "You're reeeaaaaal big, Jack."

"Ya think?" He looked down at their legs. His own, long and in green BDU pants, and Daniel’s, short and bare.

Jack realized he was running out of options.

He'd have to travel this planet on foot with a nutso scientist in handcuffs and a four year old kid that didn't even have proper clothing. A kid that, only yesterday, had been Daniel Jackson. A grown up guy, three PhDs and Jack's friend and ex-lover. Maybe ex-friend, too. Daniel, who now was a munchkin, scared of lightning and thunder, but still brave or insane enough to throw himself into the line of fire to help Jack capture Ma'am Frankenstein. Daniel, who knew what DNA was and how to speak twenty-something languages, but who wanted to chase little fish in a river and couldn't say archaeologist...

God, help them.

As if he had read Jack's thoughts, Daniel said suddenly, "They aren't coming to help us, are they?"

Jack put an arm around the small shoulders and hugged him to his side. "I'm afraid not. Looks like the gate is crashed." Letting out a sigh, he decided to go with the truth. There was no point in lying to Daniel, big or little. "There's something else. You remember the crystals that made the machine work?"

"Uh-huh. They were blue. Maybe if we can repair the red button, we could..."

"Daniel. I'm sorry. The crystals are burned. Without help from home, we won't be able to fix it," Jack said softly, bracing himself for tears and being strangled again by those short strong arms.

But Daniel just sat there and seemed to digest this bit of information.

Jack cleared his throat. "I thought if they'd get through to us, Carter'd be able to...you know...zap it together again without the crystals." He really had hoped for that. Carter was a miracle worker, after all.

But that had been before he realized nobody was able to contact them here.

"We shouldn't play around in the water or sit here. Maybe they came through already. And we're not there," Daniel said quietly.

Jack shook his head. "We've been there yesterday and all night. Nobody dialed in. And if they were here now, they'd call us over radio." Jack wasn't sure if the kid understood the whole tragedy of their situation.

Daniel didn't react at all. He looked down at his legs again. Jack patted the small arm. "You're right, though. We should go. Don't want to leave Menkins alone under her tree for too long."

Jack waited until Daniel had put his shirt back on. He took the towel, reached for Daniel's hand and they walked back, picking up the Doctor on their way.
The little hand in his own felt nice. It was definitely something Jack could get used to again. And since he didn’t have a choice at the moment, he should probably go with the flow. At least this new Daniel didn’t seem to be mad at him anymore, which was an upside to the whole mess.

***

Back at camp, Menkins asked Jack for something to drink. He handed her the canteen, and she gulped down some water.

"We have to watch our stock of water treatment tablets," Jack told her as he put it away again.

She didn’t reply to that. But when Jack had settled down next to Daniel by the fire, she spoke again, "You have to untie me, O'Neill, I need to..."

He looked at Daniel, who was flipping through the pages of his journal, gnawing on a pen. Last time Menkins had to follow her call of nature, Daniel had still been asleep. "Hey, Danny. The Doc and I have to go for a minute. Can you stay here and wait till we're back?"

"Where you goin'?" Daniel watched Menkins warily.

"Just taking a leak. We'll be right back," Jack told him.

"Ewww. Women can't pee while standing."

"Um, no, apparently not. So you stay here and don't move. If you need anything, you wait till we're back. I can see you from over there, and I want you to stay right here," Jack said as he helped the Doctor roughly to her feet.

"'kay," Daniel said and went back to reading in his journal.

Jack grabbed his zat and pointed it at Menkins. If he had to shoot her, the zat would be the least nasty choice. One-handed, he took off the restraints around her ankles and with a last look at Daniel, told her to move.

They didn't walk far. Behind a few bushes near the river, Jack waved the zat at her to take care of business. He managed to keep an eye on Daniel from here and make sure Menkins couldn't pull stunts. She was struggling a bit since her hands were still tied in front of her, but O'Neill was sure she'd cope, so he just ignored her.

When she was done, he immediately led her back.

Daniel looked up from his book as they returned. Jack told Menkins to walk around for a few minutes. "Where I can see you," he added. He'd like to keep her tied up all the time, but knew that, if she was restrained for another day and night, she wouldn't be fit to walk when they were going to leave tomorrow.

Daniel tugged at Jack's arm when he sat down next to the kid. "I didn't move from this spot," he exclaimed, pride in his voice.

"You did good, Daniel." Jack smiled, ruffling his hair. After a moment of thought, he asked, "What do you remember about this planet? From the things Carter told us before we got here?"
To his surprise, Daniel patted his journal and said, 'I'm just reading the notes I took. 'Cuz I know we're going to look for the second gate now, right? Sam said it's like Earth, sorta. The weather's good 'cept if it's not... um..." Daniel flipped through the pages and read, "In the summers the temps can reach up to 90 degrees. Now it's spring, so it won't be more than 80. It's mostly sunny. Thunderstorms come not too often... " He looked up and grimaced. "I don' like those...," then continued. "Thunderstorms are more in the second half of summer. Mostly woods and mountains, lotsa water like big lakes, rivers and springs. There are no venomous animals as far as SG-2 observed. But bear-like creatures and wolf-like animals, too. Birds, small wildcats. Mammals mostly..."

"You wrote all that down?"

"Sure I did. I often do. Knowing the enviroment..."


"'s what I said. Knowing that helps me understand cultures better an' get used to their way of living. I do lots of research for every planet we visit," Daniel told him solemnly.

Of course, Jack knew that. And secretly he'd always kept track of the planet information, too, if for different reasons than Daniel. Knowing their surroundings meant being prepared for potential dangers. He just filtered out the information he needed from the whole flood of Carter and Daniel's "travel guide to other planets" and left the rest to his very capable teammates. He relied on them to answer his questions at once if he needed fast intel.

"It's like doing puzzles," Daniel told him. "You put it together piece by piece. Tell me where you live an' I tell you who you are."

He really sounded so much like himself that Jack had to smile. He needed to figure out how this new Daniel's mind worked, though. How did he switch from Daniel Jackson into Daniel the kid? Or maybe he didn't switch between the two of them. Maybe the shrink machine had created a complete new personality? One that contained Daniel’s knowledge, but took away his adult persona. So he was what... a child genius?

He was able to read, apparently. And access adult Daniel’s knowledge.

Menkins's voice brought Jack out of his musings. "What are you going to do now, Colonel? Carry us both over to the other gate?"

"Shut up, Menkins."

Daniel watched them with wide eyes and moved closer to Jack, whispering, "Do we have to carry her, Jack?"

"No. She can walk by herself," Jack assured him. He’d have to free her feet and hands for the journey, at least while they were walking. He couldn't afford for her to fall and injure herself because her hands were tied. And he needed her to carry some of the gear.

"When are we going to search for the other gate?" Daniel asked.

"We'll break camp tomorrow morning. Remember the map we found?"

Daniel nodded. “It's south across these woods and over the mountains.”

“Yes. First we have to find the next village, get some decent clothes for you.”
“We sure could use GPS,” Daniel said, scrunching his face up in worry.

“Well, we have a general direction. It’s not much, but it'll have to do for now.”

Menkins didn't look happy. "How long do you think we’ll need to find that gate?"

Jack poured himself another cup of coffee and handed Daniel a power bar, which he unwrapped and munched right away. "Could take a couple of weeks. Depends on how fast we make it through these woods. If we find a path or road, our chances are much better."

"What about him? He'll slow us down."

"I'll take care of Daniel."

He had to admit Menkins had a point. The boy was going to slow them down. Even more so because he didn't have shoes or clothing that fit. Not to mention that a four or five year old couldn't walk for hours anyway. So Jack didn't kid himself about the fact that he would carry the munchkin a lot. Being slowed down wasn't their biggest problem right now, though.

A child, even with the memories of Doctor Daniel Jackson, needed regular meals and a safe place to sleep. What if he got sick? What if there were some nasty after-effects of the shrink device?

Well, first of all, Daniel needed shoes and clothes. It was very warm, but there might be thorn bushes or poison ivy in those woods, which required some protection.

Shortly after Jack had put the restraints back on Menkins, Daniel seemed to become sleepy again. Jack took him into the tent where he’d be out of the midday sun for a while. It was too warm to let Daniel crawl in the bag, so Jack made him lay on top of it.

"You comfy, kid?" he asked as he knelt and patted Daniel's face.

"Yes, I'm good," Daniel said, subdued.

Jack was starting to worry about Daniel's fatigue. He tried to remember how much sleep Charlie had needed when he was four, but couldn't come up with the answer. Jack had been away from home a lot during the first few years of Charlie's life. He had been able to stay with his family for longer periods of time when his boy had been older.

And then time had played against them.

Not liking where this train of thought was leading him, Jack focused on the present situation. He hoped it was due to the whole transforming process that Daniel was sleepy so often. And that the effect would wear off soon. He looked healthy. Not skinny and not pale. Just right. Jack placed a hand on Daniel's forehead. Didn't feel hot either. He mentally reviewed the contents of their first aid kit. With normal infections like the flu or fever, they could deal. Jack knew how to handle those things from when Charlie had been sick.

O'Neill wiped a hand over the back of his neck. Thinking of Charlie was so not good. Daniel didn't look like Charlie. Charlie's hair had been darker and he had the brown O'Neill eyes while Daniel was fair haired and blue eyed.

"Sleep tight, Danny," Jack whispered.

Daniel smiled and closed his eyes. O'Neill waited until the kid was in slumberland before he left the tent.
Menkins was lying on her side, back towards the tents. Maybe she was asleep, too, maybe not. Jack checked her restraints and then carried all their backpacks out and emptied them on the ground. He lined everything up and made a mental list of what they had and what they needed. They'd have to leave one backpack behind since Daniel wasn't able to carry it anymore.

Jack looked over at the FRED, briefly considering to take it with them. They could transport all the food rations, tools and tents on it. But he dismissed the thought. He probably had to leave it behind if the landscape became too rough. It was better to just take what they could carry in their packs right away and leave the large equipment behind.

He rationed their food and medical supplies. He couldn't take all the food pouches with them, so he had to select what was most needed. He managed to get a rather large stack of MRE's into Menkins’s backpack. Water treatment tablets had high priority. Same with the med kits.

He wanted to take both tents and all three sleeping bags. Menkins would have to carry two sleeping bags because Jack would be carrying Daniel, along with his own bag, pack and tent. After more consideration, Jack also decided to take some of the cooking supplies with them. Next to two folding cups and cooking mugs went silverware and two plates. Jack also took a couple of chemical ration heaters just in case they couldn’t find firewood up in the mountains.

He put Daniel's journals into his pack along with the pens. Jack had to leave his own two paper bags behind and the crosswords he always took with him when they were on longer missions. He was about to put aside Daniel's bag of instant coffee - according to Doctor Jackson, even ordinary instant coffee was better than the usual coffee the military provided - but then thought better of it and squeezed it into his own pack. He also took their toothbrushes and other toiletries, minus Daniel's razor and the extra pair of glasses. They didn't fit anymore anyway.

Jack found a bag with crumbled chocolate walnut cookies in Daniel’s pack, which he put away for him. Sam must have given them to him. She was always doing little things like that for Daniel, like a big sister.

Once Jack was done with packing, he reached for the set of extra clothes he had found in Daniel's pack. Fortunately this wasn’t an emergency mission, and therefore they had their full equipment with them and not just the essential stuff.

When Daniel appeared in the opening of the tent, hair sticking out in all directions and his face still sleepy, Jack greeted him with a smile. Daniel crawled out and sat down next to him. He watched for a moment, a frown on his face, before he asked, "Are those my things?"

"Yep. Get up so I can measure your legs." When Daniel complied, Jack held the BDU pants up to the boy's body and nodded. He had cut them off at the knees. "That should work."

He hemmed the cut-off edges generously with black thread to make sure they wouldn't fray out.

"Are they for me? I didn't know you could sew, Jack. Do you think they'll fit? But they'll fall down. They're too big," Daniel wondered.

"We'll take care of that."

"Where'd you learn to sew, Jack?"

"Long time ago. You learn things like that in the military. Pull the tee off so I can see if the pants fit."

"Oooh," Daniel drawled from somewhere inside the t-shirt as he pulled it over his head. "Yes. I forgot. I never had to use the sewing kit we have in our packs." He picked up the small waterproof
bag and peered inside. It contained scissors, thread, thimble and even buttons and snaps.

Jack looked at his handiwork and decided it would do. He grabbed the BDU nylon belt. "Okay, put them on," he instructed.

Daniel stuck his short legs into the cut-offs and hitched them up, pulling at the waistband.

"I have to eat a whole lot to fit in these," he said, amazed.

"Oh, yeah," Jack chuckled as he wriggled the belt through the loops while Daniel tried to crane his neck far enough to follow the belt with his eyes. Since he couldn't bring his head around 180, he started to turn and twist his whole upper body.

Amused at the antics of his little buddy, Jack grinned. "Hey, hold still. You got ants in your pants?"

He had to hold Daniel in place with one hand and accidentally let go of the pants. They immediately slid down over Daniel's butt and landed in a heap on the ground. "Okay, step out. I'll check for the ants," Jack said dryly.

Daniel giggled, stepped out of them and watched as Jack slid the belt into the loops and told him to try them again. This time Jack held on to the waistband as he buckled the belt and pulled it tight enough so the pants didn't hitch anymore. Jack wound the loose end of the belt around Daniel's waist and stuck it into one of the belt loops. The waistband of the BDUs almost reached the little boy's chest while the belt was sitting on his belly. He looked like a dwarf in too-big clothes.

Jack sighed.

Daniel looked down at himself and sighed too, the giggling gone. He sadly fiddled with his pants.

"They still feel so big."

"I know, Daniel. But right now it's all I can do."

"I can just stay nekkid." The kid shrugged. "It's warm."

Obviously being naked in front of Menkins wasn't an issue anymore for some reason. Jack wondered if the clothes were really that uncomfortable or if Daniel had forgotten to be embarrassed about running around in his birthday suit.

"I know it is. But we'll have to wander through the forest, and you know it's better to wear clothes. There might be thorns and insects," Jack told him.

"I know. We have to find the other gate," Daniel mumbled.

"That's right, bud. So until we find a village where we can get clothes that fit better, you have to live with these. Sorry. Give me your tee so I can fix that too."

O'Neill quickly took the shirt and hemmed it shorter. Daniel put it on again and spun around so Jack could examine him. He shook his head at the little figure in the baggy clothes, but said, "You look great, Danny."

"Liar," Daniel said. Then he spotted Jack's canteen and picked it up. It was almost empty. "Jack, do you want me to fill this up again for you? I can do that. I'll just go over to the little river and fill it. I'll be careful that no fish get into it."

O'Neill looked over at the spring and decided he'd be able to see the tyke from here. He nodded.
"Sure. Go ahead, but come right back afterward, okay?"

"'kay, Jack." Daniel happily grabbed the canteen and scampered off. Jack watched him as he stood
in the water and dipped the canteen in. Of course his pants' legs got wet in the process, but Jack
decided it was warm enough and they'd dry quickly enough.

A moment later Daniel returned and handed the filled canteen over with a shy smile. "Is it full
enough? There are no fish in it. I looked."

"Sweet. Thanks." Jack put the water treatment tablet in it.

"I can do that all the time. I can help collecting firewood. And rolling out sleeping bags. I'm little
now, but I can take care of myself. I learned how to do that. I can fire a zat and read every writing
you need me to," the kid told Jack, drawing circles in the dirt with his bare toes.

O'Neill felt his throat going tight and had to clear it before he replied, "Sure you can. You're still you,
right?"

"Yes. I'm still me."

"Just shorter."

"A little."

"Doesn't show much."

That made Daniel giggle for a bit before they fell silent again. Jack knew it wasn't true. It already
showed that Daniel wasn't the same. He seemed to know everything he'd known before, but he
definitely had four year old antics and seemed surprisingly less freaked about his downsizing than he
should be. Aside from the crying when Jack had first found him, he was unnaturally calm. Sad at

Maybe the other shoe would drop, maybe not.

Jack thought the Daniel he knew would never just sit here and accept what had happened to him.
Not so quickly. Daniel Jackson would try to make the impossible possible and turn every stone, read
every line on the walls, dug in every hole to find the answer on how to reverse this.

Maybe Daniel had really accepted the machine didn't work anymore. Still, he wasn't even interested
in going back to the ruins and looking at the thing to make sure he hadn't missed anything. Not that
there was anything to miss.

The doohickey was dead, kaput, broken, done with.

This reminded Jack of the map. He knew Daniel had videotaped it, but they needed it on paper, too,
in case the batteries of the cam was going to give up on them. Daniel scribbled everything down in
his journal, so there might be a drawing already.

Jack absently pulled out Daniel's journal from his pack.

"Why do you have my journal?" the little boy wanted to know, a pout on his face. "It's mine. I don't
want you to read it."

Jack handed it over to him, cringing. "I wasn't going to. Sorry. Did you make a drawing of the map
we saw? The one that showed where the gate is?"
Daniel stared at him for a moment, then blinked. He opened his journal and started to skim through the pages. "I would, wouldn' I?"

"Yeah, I guess." Jack watched him search for it, the frown deepening as each page was turned. "Look towards the end," he suggested. "Must be one of your last entries."

"Oh! Yes, that's smart." Daniel flipped through the pages faster and finally, triumphantly held it up to Jack. "Got it! See? I knew I copied it."

But he hadn't known.

Jack felt cold in the warm sun. Daniel hadn't remembered right away if he had drawn a copy of the map.

Not letting his concern show, Jack said, "Nice. Can I have the page, Daniel? I can put it into my vest. That way I'll have it at hand and we won't get lost."

Daniel hugged his journal to his chest for a moment, but then nodded slowly and handed it back to Jack, who carefully took the page out. Then he got an idea. "Hey, Daniel, could you do me a favor? Could you draw it into your journal again? Just in case I'll lose the page?"

"Sure."

Jack handed back the journal, the map he'd torn out, and a pen. Eagerly Daniel flipped his journal open. Without any hesitation, he started to scribble away, tongue sticking out and his face wrinkled in concentration.

Jack watched, wondering if the kid could still do this. The drawing didn't look nearly as accurate as the one Daniel had done before the incident, but Jack figured it had to do with motor skill problems rather than an inability to copy it.

But it was, nevertheless, the map with all the X's and the mountains.


"Really? Doesn't it look clumsy?" Doubtful, Daniel compared the two pictures.

"Your hands are much smaller than they used to be. You did good."

The bright smile that appeared on Daniel's face warmed and hurt Jack all the same. He squeezed Daniel's neck once more before he put the journal in his pack and pocketed the map in his vest.

TBC with: Ch 5, And we'e walking
Early the next morning, even before the sun had risen, the three stranded people were on their way through the forest. When dawn turned into light and the comfortable warmth of the night changed into the heat of a new day, they had already walked a couple of miles.

Menkins had stopped complaining about the two sleeping bags and heavy backpack some time ago. Walking and ranting was obviously taking too much energy out of her.

Jack, who kept his eyes on her and one hand on the zat attached to his belt, had Daniel sitting on his left hip, one arm securely under the kid's butt to hold him in place. Daniel's right hand was playing with the chain of Jack's dog tags around his neck while his head rested against Jack's shoulder. He was swinging his dirty bare feet lazily, and his left thumb was planted in his mouth even though he didn't really suck on it.

They were hiking a small path through high pine trees. It was hot, and mosquito-like insects hummed around their heads. On the upside, the insects didn't bite. They were just annoying because they settled down everywhere. On arms, necks, faces. But unlike their Earth counterparts, these bugs didn't drink blood; it was the sweat they were after. They just sat there until they were shooed off. Daniel, who'd been barely awake when they'd left camp, was surprisingly quiet.

Jack didn't complain about the hair on his neck being ripped out occasionally while the kid absently played and jerked at his tags. When he wasn't doing that, his fingers stroked through Jack's sweaty hair and tried to curl the very short strands around them.

But other than that, the munchkin was quiet and still drowsy. The forest woke slowly around them. Birds started singing somewhere in the deeper tangled woods. The sun sent her rays through the roof of pine trees, letting the light dance over the ground and the trunks. The humus and the huge layer of pine needles beneath their feet made walking comfortable enough.

Daniel yawned and smacked his lips. He rubbed his nose on Jack's shirt and then sneezed. Jack clamped down worried thoughts about allergies and hoped it was just a sneeze, nothing more.

"Hey, Danny, you okay?"

"Uh-huh. Jack?"

"Yeah?"

"Are we there yet?"

"Sorry, bud. We have to walk for a very long time, remember?"

"Oh, yeah. Finding the gate." Daniel ripped a few more little hairs out as he plucked at the tags again. He looked down at his feet and said, "I can walk for a while, Jack."

"Aw, I don't know. You'll hurt your feet." He shifted him from one arm to the other. Daniel's foot and knee kicked against his pack several times. O'Neill had no idea how the kid could be so still.
Being carried like this for a long time must be uncomfortable. He couldn't blame Daniel for wanting
to walk on his own. Jack's arms could use the break too.

"I'll be careful. I promise," Daniel said, sounding a little more awake now. "You'll get tired. I'm
heavy." After a moment of thinking, he added, "I won't wander off."

O'Neill raised an eyebrow and teased, "You won't wander off? I'm shocked."

Sincere blue eyes looked up at him. "I know you don' like me wandering off. I promise."

Jack let out a sigh. Who in Netu could resist those eyes and a Daniel Jackson actually promising not
to wander off? "Menkins, over here," he barked and stopped walking.

The woman turned and scowled at him. Her face and arms were covered with sweat and dust.

He got the restraints out of his pants pocket and grabbed her wrist when she was near enough. "I
don't want you to get any ideas."

Jack was relatively sure the Doc wasn't going to snatch Daniel and tried running. But since she was
insane, Jack wasn't taking any chances. He put Daniel on his feet and tied Menkins's hands in front
of her. "Watch your step. I don't want to have to carry you, too," he warned her.

"Why are you tying me up, O'Neill? As if I would run away with luggage like this!" With disgust,
she looked back over her shoulder at the heavy gear.

"Just as long as the kid is walking on his own," he assured her, giving her a little push to get her
moving again.

Cursing and kicking at the shrubs, the Doctor marched on.

Daniel took a few careful steps and then decided the ground was okay. He walked alongside Jack,
who had slowed his pace to watch his littlest archaeologist.

"My feet don't hurt at all," Daniel informed him happily after a moment. At first he stayed very close
to Jack and even held his hand. But when they had walked on for a while, he let go of it.

Obviously much more awake, Daniel started to walk like a stork, pulling his knees up as high as
possible. Then he changed his pace and started walking zigzagging in front of Jack. He hopped over
the higher shrubs and giggled when the leaves tickled the soles of his feet.

"This is fun," he informed Jack, who couldn't help smiling at the kid's antics.

When he started to circle trees and came too close to Menkins, Jack called him back. "Remember
what you said about not wandering off, Daniel?"

"I didn't. Wandering off means going somewhere you don't see me. You could see me all the time,"
Daniel lectured.

Jack decided his arms had rested enough, and he snatched the munchkin up around his middle after
he had circled another tree.

"Jaa-aack," came the expected whine as Daniel wriggled in his grip.

Planting Daniel firmly back on his hip, O'Neill said, "Aht! Enough. You can run around more later
when we take a break."
"Keep letting him walk and we won't get anywhere anytime soon," the woman walking in front of them muttered.

"Mind your own business," Jack told her.

"Sad as it is, this is my own business," she griped back.

"Yeah? Why are you so eager to get to the gate anyway? You're not going to have a welcome party, ya know." Jack moved Daniel a little so he was sitting more comfortably. The kid stopped wriggling and whining all of a sudden. His hand went back to tugging at Jack's tags, and he stared down at his baggy, calf-length pants.

"At least it will get me away from this planet - and you," Menkins replied with annoyance. "The famous SG-1 leader and his whiny little brat. Fits even better now."

"Hey! You better stop that if you want me to untie your hands," he snapped.

She turned, holding her arms out. Once he had freed her, she rubbed her wrists, giving Jack a filthy look. "Well, maybe he wasn't your little brat after all. Maybe he was your little boy toy. There are countless rumors about why the infamous Colonel O'Neill doesn't get his job done properly because he lets his civilian consultant talk him into everything."

O'Neill's arm tightened around the small figure he was carrying. He didn't even think about going down on her level and asking where she had heard that. He didn't have to. He knew the rumors about him and Daniel were all over the place. Yet, he suddenly wondered how Menkins could have known about those rumors. She had worked at Area 51 until a few days ago. So here was the one-million-dollar question.

Who was spreading rumors from the base to Nevada?

Oh, Jack knew about the assumptions people on base had jumped to. Long before those "rumors" had actually become facts. Jack and Daniel had never paid much attention to the gossip until it had turned a tad more serious one evening.

Jack remembered what Lou had said in the shower that night...

... That half the base thought Jack was doing Carter and the other half had money in the pool about Daniel being the lucky one.

Jack barely managed not to punch the grin from his friend's face. He knew Lou had meant it as a joke and maybe as a hidden warning - out of concern, nothing else. So Jack just continued to soap himself up and asked if nobody thought he was capable of doing them both.

Lou laughed at that, but then he must have seen something in Jack's eyes that made him stop.

"Hey, how about I come over tonight? I'll bring the beer," his old friend said later, while they got dressed, and Jack agreed.

Daniel was staying on base for a research night so he wouldn't be around anyway.

Lou brought the beer and a bag of rumors.
Some of them Jack had heard before, some of them were new... but most of them had to do with Jack nailing Daniel to the bed at every available opportunity.

"I thought you should know about this. You're the second in command of the base. And SG-1 is the most worshiped and most envied team. There are rumors about everybody. But SG-1 has a more popular status," Lou finished, sipping his beer.

"I know." The colonel stood by his large living room window and stared out into his garden, his fingers clenching hard around the beer bottle. "I got the best. They deserve respect. Not worship, rumors or jealousy. They're doing their jobs like everybody else. It's not their fault that they're doing it right."

He turned and glared at Feretti. "If any of that rubbish ever hurts one of them - no matter whom, heads are gonna roll."

Lou nodded. "That's why I'm here. You guys are off world all the time. You might not realize what's going on around here. The kid catches eyes even though he doesn't seem to know that. Half the base loves him and the other half... you know..." Lou trailed off, staring at his beer. "They think he's a geek, and they also think he's gay."

"Daniel is a big boy. Besides, they're saying that about all the geeks from the archaeological department." Jack snorted.

"Yeah, but Jackson's on SG-1 under your command. Like I said... your team has high ratings in the rumor mill."

"And? So? Therefore?"

"Everybody knows how you two goof around with each other. And that he can make you do what he wants."

"He's got the right reasons. He's taught me a thing or two. Would do some people good if they could think outside the box like he does," Jack answered, remembering Abydos. Remembering the most important turning point in his life. Remembering Kheb... Chaka... recalling all the times Daniel had been right.

They could joke and blame Jack for having a soft spot for Doctor Jackson. Maybe he did. Yet, he had never regretted listening to Daniel every once in a while. He didn't like to lose. But he was able to admit there was a better way than his when he had to. At least, with Daniel he was. Sometimes. Not even Daniel knew how highly Jack respected him, despite the fact that they fought like dogs and cats so often.

"I understand what you're talking about. I was there with you on Abydos. I saw that kid work miracles. But those who don't know him like we do..."

"Who?" Jack spat, anger suddenly flaring up. "I want names, Feretti."

"Can't give you names. Marines. The tough guys. Though they're only the tip of the iceberg, if you get my drift."

O'Neil snorted again. "Daniel is more man than some of those jarheads."

"I know that."

He spun around. "Do you have any idea what he's gone through since Abydos? He's been through
more crap than you can even imagine! Four years, Lou. And he’s lost it all. Not just his wife. Or the dream of a peaceful happy life along with her. It's much more. And don't you dare claim that you know him. You know squat."

Every time they went out there and lost a battle, every time Daniel had to discover the universe didn’t always work the way it should, he was losing a little bit more of that wide-eyed wonder, his explorer nature. And maybe some day the incredibly brilliant mind with the most passionate empathic and diplomatic streak would resign. Would stop wondering and searching for goodness in everybody. Would maybe only see the evil of the snakeheads and the greed in people who were fighting senseless wars. Would lose his confidence in what was right and wrong. Daniel wasn’t a black and white person. But the colors of his world weren’t as gray as Jack's either.

They were multi-hued, bright.

Despite the loss of his parents and his childhood in foster care and all his other not-so-happy encounters with life, Daniel had somehow managed to keep the spark alive that made him the sensitive person he was. He had opened the door to heaven. But instead of exploring all the wonders and new worlds, Daniel had found himself in the midst of a war. Fighting the evil out there had become a more important goal than studying and playing in his sandbox. A goal that had been forced on him by the capture and death of his wife.

And by the missions SG-1 had to accomplish.

Jack knew this. And as much as he had wanted Daniel to fit in better and become just a tad more military so he could defend himself and learn the difference between the good guys and the bad guys - with every year that went by and with every little adjustment Daniel made, O'Neill secretly worried about what would become of Daniel in another four years. Or ten.

He'd never tell him that though.

Daniel had to change. Part of him had to. So he was going to survive. Jack needed him to focus on his own safety. Daniel was capable of watching their sixes by now. But he was still much too careless when it came to himself. He’d put his own life on the line to help people out there who, in Jack's eyes, didn't always seem to care or deserve it.

Lou put his beer down and gazed at Jack for a long time. "You do love him, don't you?"

Jack gave him a blank stare. "He's a member of my team. He's my friend. And he's damn good at what he does."

"Right," Lou said and stood. "I'm not worried about you or your career, Jack. You're a tough bastard. But I'm a friend of DJ's too. Just keep an eye on him, okay? He's far too important to get beaten up by a bunch of braindead idiots. Whether those rumors are true or not."

O’Neill didn’t bat an eye as Feretti left. After the door had closed behind Lou with a low click, Jack gazed out into his garden, wondering what had given it away.

He was special ops trained. He knew how to hide his feelings to the extent where people thought he had no heart. Why was it so obvious to some people? How had Daniel slipped through Jack's defenses like that in the first place? Why had he let Daniel come so close...

...Thinking back, Jack wondered if it had been that evening when it dawned on him that he probably
would have to end this relationship. Not just because of some stupid rumors. Jack had been in the military far too long to get scared by some butt heads, who thought they knew everything.

It was Lou coming out to warn him that had worried Jack.

Feretti seldom took life too seriously. He usually joked problems off and was an easygoing guy. He also was loyal and wouldn't have confronted O'Neill with that crap if it wasn't serious.

Jack felt his jaw clench as he thought back to that evening. He and Daniel had been together for two or three weeks by then, and already dark shadows had loomed on the horizon. Because Jack had to take Lou's warning seriously.

He had discussed it with Daniel later, but his lover had made him promise not to try and figure out who those homophobes were.

"They aren't worth it, Jack," he had said. "They're just scum, and the more we - or you - react to it, the more reason they have to believe they're right."

Of course they had argued. It was what they did. Jack had wanted Daniel to be careful and keep his eyes open. Daniel had said he was old enough to do so without Jack hovering over him like a mother hen. Basically, it had been the same old argument in a new dress. And it had ended with Daniel being frustrated about the whole military-in-the-box-thinking all over again.

Finally they had dropped it, both brooding and mad at each other without really having a reason. Jack had felt like Daniel was blaming him personally for the regs and the complications that came with them. Daniel had said that wasn't true and he knew what was at stake. That they couldn't come out because the program needed them. He had said he understood, but he didn't have to like it.

Jack shook himself out of his memories. There was nothing he could do about it now.

The sun was moving higher, and the forest didn't provide much coolness anymore. It was hot, even with the shade of the many trees. Those mosquitoes had grown into a pain despite the fact they didn't bite. They kept coming in clouds, sitting on faces and every other spot of bare sweat-soaked skin they could find. Jack was constantly shooing them off Daniel's head.

When they crossed a little river with fresh-looking water, he decided to take a break.

They discovered a nice place where the river's shore was sandy with big flat stones to sit on. Jack made Daniel wash his face, hands and feet before he handed him two of the chocolate walnut cookies. They didn't look very good, the chocolate chips melted from the heat and the rest merely crumbs from being squashed between everything else in the pack. But the kid wolfed them down hungrily and drank half a canteen of water afterward. When he patted his full, stuck-out belly, a bubbling sound emerged.

"It's from all the water I drank." Daniel grinned and patted it some more to hear the bubbling again. "This never happened when I was big." He burped and slapped his hands over his mouth, then giggled. "Whoops."

"It's because your belly is much smaller and can't take all that water at once. You could keep a goldfish in there now," Jack teased as he watched the boy splash through the shallow water.

"You're silly, Jack," Daniel said, but giggled nevertheless. "Can I measure the trees?"

"Measure the...?" Jack raised an eyebrow.
"Yes, like this." Daniel climbed out of the water and walked over to a nearby tree. He wrapped his short arms around the trunk and tried to make his fingers touch each other. Then he turned to Jack and hugged him around his middle. "That tree was bigger than you," Daniel informed him.

"Ah."

"I'll try to measure another one." Daniel scampered off and hugged more trees. He wasn't able to hug most of them.

"I really wonder what advances there were in the kids Nirrti made," Menkins said, shaking her head. Jack, who had filled Daniel's canteen and was putting a treatment tablet into it, paused in his task. "What?"

"I mean, look at him. He's just a kid. I expected the device to do something extraordinary to him. How would you train a child like that to do special ops work or be a spy and write reports? I think her experiments were a failure." There was disappointment and annoyance in the woman's voice. "If I had him in my lab, I could probably figure out what she missed."

Jack threw a flat stone into the water and imagined it was the Doctor's head when it hit another stone with a loud clunk. "What happened to making the world a better place? You said you did this to help humanity, not to help create little spies."

She pressed her lips into a thin line while she pulled off her boots and socks to hold her feet into the water. "It was what I wanted. But yes, the NID needed him for their own goals. I had to compromise. There was no other way to get an allowance to do the experiments on a living human."

"You made a pact with the devil," O'Neill spat. "You must have lost it some time ago, Menkins."

Instead of answering him, she looked at her left foot and cursed under her breath. "Those military boots are good for nothing. I have my first blister already."

"Might be because you're not trained very well." O'Neill snorted. "Guess you don't walk much while working in those labs at Area 51 or figuring out the technology the NID is stealing from other worlds. Who's your mole, Menkins? You can't do this kind of stuff without someone on a SG team picking the items up somewhere and taking them to Earth."

"You won't get information out of me. Why should I tell you anything?"

"Because cooperation might do you some good in trial," Jack suggested. Not that he really wanted her to get off easy. She was a dangerous person, and the thought of what she might have accomplished, with the "help" of little Daniel, gave him the creeps. Above all, Jack's main concern was Daniel himself and what she had done to him. What had happened to Daniel was her fault and hers alone. If they couldn't change the kid back, she would consider herself happy to be in jail by then.

Out of his reach.

Sensing he wouldn't get any further with the conversation, Jack let it drop. He started to call out to remind Daniel not to get out of sight when he spotted him standing hunched over something on the ground.

"What've you got there, Daniel?" he asked as he heaved himself from the rock and walked over to the tyke.
"Oh, I think they’re termites, sorta. They’re building a city under that tree. Look? They’re comin’ and goin’ through that hole between the roots," Daniel told him excitedly, pointing at a caravan of finger-thick red insects which looked like termites or large ants. They were busy, busy carrying little branches, leaves and pine needles through the hole at the bottom of the tree. They were also scurrying over Daniel’s bare feet and up his legs.

Jack picked him up and brushed the termites off him.

"Jack! I was watching them," Daniel complained, wriggling in Jack's grip as he was carried over to the riverside.

"Yeah, and they were trying to carry you with them. Stop fussing. Did they bite you anywhere?" Jack sat down on a stone with Danny on his lap to look at his legs and feet.

"No, they didn'! They were just buildin' somethin'!!"

"So why are there red marks on your feet then, huh?" Jack brushed a finger over what looked like bites all over Daniel's feet and calves. They were slightly swollen with rings around the bites.

"There're not," Daniel argued. Then he stared down at his feet and grimaced. Seeing the marks for real apparently made him feel them as well. He started to wriggle again and whined, "Ow. Ow, it's yucky. Jack, it itches! I didn' feel them biting me! It itches!"

Menkins let out a malicious laugh and shook her head. "I wouldn't believe it if I didn't see it with my own eyes. Advanced human! This is a joke!"

Ignoring her, Jack picked Daniel up and set him into the cool water. "Just wait a second. It's going to be better."

As soon as his legs were wet and cool, Daniel stopped yelling. Instead, tears ran down his face while he stood silently and hung his head.

"Hey, hey, it's okay," Jack soothed. "Does it still itch?"

Daniel sniffed loudly and shook his head. Jack rummaged through his pants pockets and took out a not-so-clean hanky. "Blow."

Daniel blew his nose three times and then said, "Is not hurtin' anymore. Can we go now?"

"I want to put aloe vera gel on them first. Should help against the swelling."

Jack sat Daniel on one of the flat stones and dug a gel tube from his pack. Daniel gritted his teeth while Jack carefully treated the bites and looked between the tiny toes for more. But he couldn't find any. The ones on Daniel's shins weren't so bad, but he put gel on them too.

When that was done, they geared up and continued on their way.

Daniel was quiet again, his thumb lodged in his mouth and his head resting against Jack's shoulder. O'Neill knew he should be relieved the kid was relatively calm and not causing too much trouble. That he stayed on Jack’s arm and didn’t insist on running around all the time. Jack didn’t have to put up with a talking marathon either.

It didn’t seem right, though. He couldn’t imagine Daniel being so quiet as a kid.

He suddenly felt bad for taking Danny's subdued behavior for granted because it suited him well. He
suspected it didn't have anything to do with being calm or tired. Something was up with the tyke. And it wasn't the aftershocks of what had happened to him. Jack had noticed the kid was scared of Menkins, and her ugly comments didn't help either.

He looked down at the bowed head. "Daniel? What's up?"

"Nothin'," was the mumbled answer. Daniel had his chin pressed to his chest.

"Are your feet still itching?"

"No."

Jack looked at them and reached out with the hand that wasn't holding the kid. He took Daniel's right foot and examined it. The bite marks, which had been an angry red while Daniel had been standing in the river, were already fading. They had subsided to little pink spots, looking like freckles.

"Wow," O'Neill mumbled as he stroked his thumb over the skin.

Daniel shrugged. "Wasn't bad," he said. "I'm not a baby."

"No, you're not. And look, the bites are almost gone."

At that, Daniel perked up a bit. "That's good, right? I mean, if they go away, the termites weren't venomous, and I won't get sick, right?"

Blue eyes looked up at Jack worriedly. He gently squeezed Daniel's leg. "Nope. You won't get sick. You have to watch where you're walking though. Remember you’re not wearing shoes."

“I know. I just...” Daniel bit down on his lip.


Satisfied when a grin appeared on the young face, Jack tickled him some more until the grin turned into a giggle.

“There. That's better. Stop worrying, Daniel. You're fine. The bites just itched."

“They could've been dangerous, though,” the kid said quietly. “I should know those things, right, Jack?”

_Oyeah, you should_, Jack thought, but said, “Don't sweat it too much. I'll take care of you. Maybe it's because you're so much younger now. It's not your fault.”

Daniel didn't say anything for a while. He was sucking on his thumb and Jack let him, knowing it gave him some comfort. He looked like he was thinking about something real hard. Jack recognized that frown from adult Daniel.

As they continued walking through the woods, the scenery didn't change much. Yellow mushrooms covered the areas around the pine trees now, and O'Neill wondered if they were edible. They didn't look very trustworthy, but on an alien planet you never knew. Could be a delicacy of some sort. He'd seen people eating spiders and scorpions in the Iraqi desert, telling him it was a great meal. When he had made his escape from prison, he'd had the opportunity to try them himself.

It was no wonder Jack hated any kind of bug with a passion.

“Jack?” Oh. Someone was done with the thinking.
“Daniel?”

“When I was big, I sometimes didn' care about dangerous things, even when I knew they were dangerous,” Daniel stated.

“That's right. There was a good reason for that mostly, though.” Except for the times when the reason was only good enough for Daniel and not acceptable from Jack's point of view. But he wasn't going to tell the little boy that.

Daniel didn't say anything else. He just lay his head back on Jack's shoulder. O'Neill really worried about this unusual behavior. He remembered how agile and even cheerful Daniel had been yesterday while taking his bath. At least, for a while.

If he'd be dealing with Daniel Jackson, the guy, Jack would've guessed he felt either guilty about something or was mulling over a complicated problem.

With this kid-sized version, Jack wasn't sure what to make of it.

A moment later Daniel started to squirm and told Jack he had to pee. “Now, Jack, now.”

So O'Neill called at Menkins to a stop as he let the kid down. He hurriedly tied her hands together and followed Daniel behind a tree to help him with the too-baggy pants which turned out to be a difficult task.

Daniel was jumping from one foot to the other and insisted on doing it himself. But his little fingers weren't able to handle the big buttons, and the opening of the pants wasn't exactly where it should be.

Jack finally placed his hands on Daniel's shoulders and crouched in front of him so they were at eye level. “Daniel, hold it! Stand still just for a second, will ya?”

“ButbutIreallyhavetopee...”

“Let me help.”

“Hooow...” Daniel whined, still fumbling with buttons.

Jack unsnapped the belt and pulled the pants down. “Step out of them,” he ordered, biting back a laugh, despite the urgency of the situation. He didn’t want to add to the kid’s misery.

Reluctantly, Daniel stepped out of his pants, and Jack snatched them up and out of the way right in time before the kid couldn't hold it any longer.

Daniel let out a sigh of relief and forgot being mortified for a moment. When he was done, he let Jack help him put the pants back on.

“We better let you sleep without pants so you won't have to worry about them at nights,” O'Neill said, still trying not to grin.

Daniel blushed and nodded.

***

They had to set up camp before it turned dark. Knowing how quickly dusk would fall Jack looked for a suitable place relatively early. When they crossed the river again – at least, O'Neill assumed it was the same river where they’d had their break earlier - he decided to stay there.
Menkins put up her own tent and silently wolfed down her MRE. She glared at Daniel in between bites, and the kid moved as close to Jack as possible without climbing into his lap.

When Jack was done with his own meal, he wordlessly picked Daniel up and settled him between his legs. The boy immediately leaned back against him and finished his dinner, yawning widely all the time.

“What are you yawning about? You didn't even have to walk on your own most of the time.” Menkins snorted.

Jack felt Daniel stiffen. He put an arm around the kid and rubbed his chest. “Hold your breath, Menkins. Leave the kid alone.”

She threw her empty mug aside and got up. O'Neill's free hand grabbed for his gun. “Where do you think you're going?”

“To sleep,” she hissed.

“Sure you are. Right after I've tied you up again.” He patted Daniel's head and told him to stay put before he rose, pulling the restraints out of his jacket.

After he had “tucked” her in, he returned to Daniel, who was drinking from his water canteen.

“Don't drink too much, or you'll have to go in the middle of the night,” he reminded the kid. “Your bladder is small now, remember?”

“Okay. Jack, can you come inside and stay with me 'til I'm 'sleep?”

“Yeahsureyabetcha,” he quipped, holding out his hand for Daniel. Once inside the tent, he helped Daniel out of his pants and into the sleeping bag. It was still warm, but Jack figured little kids cooled down easily when asleep for a long time, so he just left the zipper open.

Daniel curled up and snuggled in the thick fabric, his small fingers anchored to Jack's hand. “Night, Jack.”

“Night, Daniel. Don't let the bed bugs bite you.”

He waited until the grip around his hand loosened and the kid's breathing became deep and even before he left the tent.

***

When O'Neil lay down on his own sleeping bag later, Daniel hadn't stirred once. Grateful for the boy's undisturbed slumber, Jack was looking forward to a few hours of sleep. Menkins wasn't going anywhere, tied up as she was, and without her boots and socks. She had cursed and hissed when he’d told her to take them off. But there was no chance in hell he would leave her alone for the night without making sure she stayed put.

He listened to the noises from outside, the low wind in the trees and the call of an owl from somewhere. At least, it sounded like an owl. He wondered what lay ahead of them. If this planet really was as friendly and comfy as it looked from here. Jack didn't fool himself into believing this world to be really like Kansas. If they got lucky, all they’d have to deal with were some exotic animals and plants, dangerous or not

SG-2 had covered a wide area in their initial survey. They had stayed on this planet for a few weeks.
But they hadn't gone as far as Jack and Daniel were going to go. They had mostly stayed at the next village and around the ruins. O'Neill wondered what the folks of this planet were like. According to the reports, they were mostly trappers, farmers and fishermen.

Jack must have fallen asleep over his thoughts because he was ripped back into awareness by the cries of a child. He jerked upright, his hand reaching for his gun, when he realized it was Daniel.

Daniel, who was little and probably had a nightmare.

Jack put his gun down and rolled over to the kid, who was curled up, his face pressed into the sleeping bag. His whole body was trembling with suppressed sobs.

Jack put a tentative hand on Daniel's back. "Ssh, hey, Daniel, it's me, Jack. You're having a nightmare, bud. Come on, wake up."

Daniel tensed and froze as Jack started rubbing his back. "Daniel?"

"I'm sorry," came the whispered answer. "Sorry... I didn't mean to."

"It's okay. I know you didn't mean to touch that button, Danny. It's okay. Wasn't your fault," Jack soothed him, taking a stab in the dark, hoping he was right about the cause of Daniel's nightmare.

"You'll be mad at me," Daniel continued as if he hadn't heard Jack. "But I didn't mean to, it just hap...p...pened."

He picked the small body up and cradled him in his arms. "Nono, Danny. I'm not mad. I told you. It's not your..." He stopped when he felt the wetness in his lap where Daniel was sitting. He reached out with one hand to feel the fabric of Daniel's sleeping bag and couldn't suppress a long suffering, "Oy."

"Sorry," Daniel repeated meekly and tried to free himself from Jack's arms. "I'll go and clean it up. I can wash the sleeping bag in the river. Sorry for getting you wet...."

Jack grabbed Daniel before he could wriggle away. "Now, wait a minute. I'm coming with you. Take the flashlight. It's next to my bag," He let go of the kid and watched as Danny fetched the light. "Good. I'll take the sleeping bag and a towel. You light the way."

Before they went down to the river, Jack checked on their prisoner, who was snoring softly.

Once they had reached the shore, Jack instructed Daniel to hold the light while he wet the lower part of the sleeping bag. He hoped it would dry in the warm night air before morning. They had to use soap sparingly so he hoped the clear water would do to clean the urine out since it was fresh. He wondered what to do if Daniel made a habit of wetting in, though.

When he was done with the sleeping bag, he spread it out on the shore, then took over the flashlight. "Come into the water and clean yourself up."

"It's cold."

"It's been warm all day. The water isn't any colder than before. And you don't want to be sticky, do you?"

Daniel pondered this for a moment and then complied. Once in the water, he said, relieved, "It's not cold at all, Jack."
"See, told ya so."

Jack realized too late that the tyke was still wearing the shirt and neither of them had thought about taking it off. So when Daniel knelt in the shallow water to wash himself, he got the tee all wet. Then again, the shirt probably needed cleaning, too, anyway.

"I just hope it'll all be dry by morning." Jack muttered as he pulled the shirt over Daniel’s head and wrapped him into the towel.

Back at camp, Jack spread the sleeping bag and Daniel's shirt over the stable branches of a tree and then ushered the boy back into the tent.

"You can use my sleeping bag. I have to keep watch now," Jack said.

"Can I...," Daniel started but then ducked his head and crawled into the sleeping bag.

"What, Daniel?" Jack pulled the zipper up and hoped there wasn't going to be another accident tonight.

"Nothin'. I'm sorry I wet it."

"It's okay. Maybe you were too tired to realize you had to go."

"No. I... I knew I had to go. But I didn' know where the light was and... and..."

Jack almost didn't hear him because his voice was so low. "Why didn't you wake me?" he asked, puzzled.

"Didn' want to," Daniel whispered. "You said not to drink too much, but it was too late, and when I had to go, I thought you'd be angry..."

"Well, next time you wake me. I don't mind, okay?" Jack ruffled the tuft of blond hair that was sticking out of the sleeping bag.

"'kay." He closed his eyes and, a minute later, was asleep.

Jack sighed, grabbed his cap and headed out for watch. He kept the fire going and brewed himself a coffee. He wasn't aware how much time had passed as he was sipping from his cup, thinking about how to approach the village they were probably going to reach tomorrow.

He almost missed the low footsteps behind him.

Jack placed a hand on his P90 and waited.

There was another step.

A branch snapped.

Jack jerked up his gun, spun around...

...and almost knocked the little boy over with its barrel.

“Daniel, for crying out loud!”

Daniel started stumbling backwards, both short arms stretched out in a warding gesture. "Don' shoot... I'll go, I'll go..."
Jack lowered the weapon and grabbed for the kid before he could run back to the tent. He pulled Daniel close and settled him into his lap. Putting both arms around the child, he said, “Easy, Daniel. I won't shoot you. You caught me by surprise here...”

“You... you... pointed your gun at me,” Daniel spluttered.

“You sneaked up on me, kiddo. We have a prisoner, remember? And we’re off world. Next time you want something, just come out and call, okay?”

Daniel sniffled but nodded.

Jack tightened his arms around his little friend and rocked him until he relaxed. After another moment of silence, Daniel buried his head into Jack's shirt, and his short arms went around Jack's neck again, squeezing. “Sowee.”

“Nonono, stop that. Just takes awhile for us to get used to.” Rubbing Danny's back, Jack tried to figure out how to convince him that everything was all right. “Hey, I know this whole mess isn't fun. And you're scared of Menkins,” he whispered to the child in his arms.

“Am not scared,” Daniel whispered back into Jack's ear.

“Right. You don't like her very much then. So you stay away from her, and I'll make sure she doesn't... annoy you.”

“I know you will,” Daniel said, his voice as low and shy as before.

“Good. What's bothering you so much then? I told you I'm not angry you had an accident, right? I know it's embarrassing for you, but I won't tell anyone, so...”

“It's nothin'.”

“Daniel.” Jack sighed. “I can't help you if you don’t tell me what's wrong. I can't change things back, but I'm here for you, okay?”

Daniel sniffled some more and then blurted out, “I won't slow you down. I promise. I'm good. I 'member lots of things. I'm not useless. I'll try harder not to forget anythin'...” Now the tears started to flow, along with heartbreaking sobs.

“Aw, Daniel... don't...”

“I know you haveta carry me lots, but I'm just too little to walk as fast as you, an' I don' wanna make you mad 'cuz I'm little now an'...”

Jack listened to the rambling, grateful for the darkness that hid the moisture in his own eyes. “Danny, you're not useless. Don't listen to her. You're not slowing us down, and I won't be mad at you because you're little and can't do things like you did before.”

“Menkins said I'm not... not advanced. I'm just a... kid. But that's... not true. I was big. I'm trying to still be big. I try not to... be a baby. I won' play anymore, and I'll help you read the map and fill your canteen, and I won' eat too much so I won' get too heavy,” Daniel went on, his voice pleading and shivering with the fear of being... what?

Left behind?

Jack pried him loose and held him a few inches away so he could look at him. “Daniel, listen to me...”
No one gets left behind. You do know that, right? Especially not you, kiddo. I don't mind carrying you.”

He blinked a few times. “You don't?”

“No. I thought you knew that.”

“But... but... Jack, I don' know what to do. I'm just so... little now. We're off world. What if we get ambushed or something happens to you... or I get into trouble... what if...”

“Ssssh, I'll take care of you, buddy. I told you I will.” He ran his hands up and down Daniel's arms, trying to comfort him as well as he could. Jack knew how to calm little kids. He had done it with his own and Cassie. All this time, he'd been trying to figure out how to treat this new Daniel. Had wondered where the line was between the four year old and the man he had been just two days ago.

Suddenly this didn't feel weird anymore. Things fell into place as he realized at that very moment, all he had to do was give this little boy what he needed most. What all little kids needed the most.

Someone to be there and reassure him that things were going to be okay.

“I'll help you, Danny,” he softly said. “I'm here for you. Always.”

“You have to remind me of stuff, Jack,” Daniel whispered. “When I'm stoopid or forget...“

“You're little now, not stupid. I'm sorry I didn't realize how hard this is for you,” Jack said when the kid buried his face into his shirt once more.

“But I forget everythin'. Like to look where I'm going or not to drink too much... or not to sneak up on you... or...”

“I'll remind you. And whatever you forgot, you'll learn again,” Jack soothed.

Daniel hiccuped a few times, but finally calmed down.

“You can stay here with me for tonight if you want,” Jack offered.

“You can tell you a secret?” Daniel asked shyly.

“I want you to go back to sleep now, okay? Tomorrow we'll talk about some rules so you won't have to guess about anything.” Feeling more secure of himself now, Jack figured that Daniel needed structure to know how to live like this without fearing rejection and how to deal with new situations.

“Oh, but some of them are actually cool,” Jack promised. He grabbed his jacket which was lying next to him and covered the naked child with it. “Like you can play when we're taking breaks. And I don't want you to starve just because you think you're too heavy. And you have to wake me, no matter how late it is, when you have to go pee or when you're having nightmares - or whatever. And Daniel...”

“Yeah?”

"Never, ever, think I'm angry if you want a hug or want to be carried, okay?"

"Uh, but it's stoopid. I shouldn't..."

"Aht. It's not stupid, and yes, you should. It's a body thing. Little bodies need to be cuddled and hugged or carried if they feel like it. It's like..." Jack pretended to think very hard and then came up with, "... breathing, actually. You can't do anything about it."

Daniel tilted his head and looked like he was trying to determine if Jack was yanking his chain. “Those are nice rules,” the little boy finally decided, and a moment later he was fast asleep.

O'Neill gazed into the orange flames of the fire, the smell of smoke and burning wood mingling with the ever-present scent of pine trees and the rich earth. He felt the weight of the child in his arms, and he knew this journey was going to be long and difficult.

TBC with Ch 6 The Village
Thanks to the warmth, Daniel's shirt was dry the next morning. The sleeping bag was still a little damp, but it would do.

“Oh, let me guess. Little genius wet his bed.” Menkins snorted as she watched Jack roll the sleeping bag together. She was sitting at the fire, holding a cup of coffee in her still-tied hands. “And by the way... you make a lousy coffee, O'Neill.”

Daniel, who was hovering near Jack, balled his hands into fists and blushed angrily. O'Neill patted his shoulder. “Just ignore her, buddy. She's talking crap.”

They settled on the other side of the fire and Jack handed Daniel his breakfast, porridge with sugar. It wasn't very good because it was made with water instead of milk, but that's what you got when living on military rations. Daniel was used to it and hadn't complained – yet.

Menkins eyed them for a moment. “I'm just saying. I don't understand what Nirrti wanted to accomplish with this.”

“You got other things to worry about. For example, how long you’ll be in jail.” Jack didn't say “before they execute you”. He wasn't sure if Daniel remembered the sentence for treason, and he didn't want to scare the kid even more. Menkins was already giving Daniel the heebie jeebies.

The Doctor glared at them. Daniel had moved close, and Jack put one arm protectively around him. But suddenly the kid piped up, “I don' like the death sentence 'cuz I don' think we have the right to kill, not even criminals like you. But that's what's gonna happen to you. You made me little and want to 'xperiment on me. I'm glad Jack stopped you.”

“We. We stopped her,” Jack corrected.

Daniel tipped his head back and smiled. “Yes. We.”

Menkins lifted her coffee mug, and for a moment Jack thought she would throw it at them. He was on his feet in a flash. Grabbing Daniel and pulling him out of the line, he snarled at the woman, “Don't even think about it!”

She tipped the mug over, and the rest of her coffee dripped into the fire. “Getting a little nervous, Colonel, are we?”

O'Neill glared at her and hugged Daniel close to him. “Hey, you okay?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Come on. Let's get your things together.”

While the kid put his journal and pen back into Jack's pack, he asked, “Jack, why is she so mean? It's not my fault that the lightening hit the gate. She wanted me little, too.”

“I think she's just mad because we stopped her from taking you away. Now she's stuck here with us,
and that's why she's angry."

“Maybe if we talk to her and 'spain why it's bad what she did, she'll understand. Playing with NDA is a big deal. I 'member...’’ Daniel frowned and, after a moment of thinking, continued, “The NID wants to create a new human, right? Or shrink other grown ups. And she's helping them. But maybe she really wanted something else. Like... helping humans not to get sick anymore. She said that's what she wanted.”

Oy, this was heavy stuff too early in the morning.

Jack put on his cap and closed his pack while he tried to come up with an answer that would satisfy this new version of Daniel Jackson. Finally he said, “You know, she might have some pretty good ideas about how to help the world. But she chose the wrong way to get there. She hurt you and tried to use you for her experiments. You didn't agree to that, and that's where the line is.”

Daniel sat back on his heels and chewed on his bottom lip. “You mean, even if she meant good, she did wrong 'cuz she didn't think of bigger consequences. Maybe nobody ever told her? We have each other for that.”

Jack gave Daniel a puzzled look, not sure what the tyke was talking about.

“I mean...” Daniel began again, “we tell each other 'bout consequences all the time. Like, when I tell you not to shoot at people and find another way. Or when you tell me not to touch things and not to be too trusting with everybody?”

Oh, yeah. Too bad it hadn't worked out most of the time. They had stopped listening to each other awhile back. But Jack didn't mention that.

Instead he said, “I think she knows about the consequences. She just doesn't care. She didn't try to find other ways. And you tried to talk to her, remember? The night before you got littled.” Jack wasn't sure he liked where this was going. If Daniel started feeling sorry for Menkins, Jack would have to listen to his reasons about it, and in the end he'd have to tell the kid frankly that no matter how sorry Daniel felt for the woman, they wouldn't let her go.

But Daniel just heaved a big sigh and said, “Sometimes it's very hard to make the right choices, Jack.”

“I know, bud. Sometimes there's not just one right choice either,” he replied, aware that they weren't talking about the Menkins anymore. But he didn't want to discuss their personal problems until Daniel was an adult again. So he continued, “But Menkins was wrong there right from the start. You know that, right?”

Daniel nodded and held up his arms so Jack could put the shirt back on him. Once Jack had freed Menkins from her restraints, they broke camp. Daniel helped by pulling out the tent stakes and putting them into the packs.

***

Trees, trees, trees and even more trees later, the forest finally thinned out. The meadows became wider. Small green bushes and colorful wild flowers in all shapes and sizes began to replace the pine trees.

Daniel got excited, and Jack let him down after he had placed his own cap on the kid's head to protect him from the burning sun. The cap was a little too big even after Jack adjusted the size. But Daniel just pushed it back on his head whenever it fell into his face.
Jack allowed him to run through the grass as long as he stayed nearby. While he and Menkins walked on a small path, Daniel wandered among the flowers, ah-ing and oh-ing about their beauty.

“Jack, Jack... what’s this one called? Look, it's red and blue... you think it's a rose?”

“I don’t know. Watch the thorns,” he warned mildly.

“It doesn’t have thorns. Oh, it probably has its own name, like... wild thornless rose... or...” There was a thud, and Daniel was gone.

Oy. What now?

Jack was about to leave the path and look for him, when the blond head came up again, hair tousled and smudged on the nose. Picking up the cap and putting back it on his head, Daniel giggled. “Oops, I fell in a hole. Ooooh, Jack! There are white lilies... they look like lilies...” And off he went, hopping through the grass.

They hiked up a small hill, and there was the first village on the map.

Jack called the kid, and Daniel showed up at his side immediately, his hand latching onto O'Neill's pant leg when he spotted the wooden houses in the distance. Jack got his binoculars out and observed the small community.

Smoke drifted up from a few chimneys. Jack noticed a square place in the center of ten to fifteen cabins. Several wooden wagons led by horse-like animals stood around a well in the middle.

“Looks like a quiet little village,” Jack muttered. “And I don't see any churches with tied-up women or animals for sacrifice, either.”

“Ja-ack... SG-2 didn' say anything about odd religious rites. An' there's no Unas here.”

Without looking down at him, O'Neill knew Daniel was rolling those big blue eyes in annoyance. It almost made him chuckle. He handed Daniel the binoculars and let him take a look. “Does this look familiar to you?”

He looked through the glasses and then pouted. “All I can see is grass and dirt.”

“Oh? Here, let me help...” Jack crouched next to Danny and adjusted the glasses, guiding his hands so he held it right. “There ya go.”

“Yes, thank you. The houses look like North American settler. They are smaller than real ranch houses, though.”

“They're built like my cabin,” Jack observed.

“Uh-huh. Look at that... those animals look like horses...” Daniel handed back the glasses and started walking towards the village, pulled in like a magnet.

O'Neill snatched him up by the waistband of his pants before he could start running. “Whoa, hold your horses, peaceful explorer.” He settled him on his hip, and Daniel sighed.

“Look at it this way. You're getting a ride, and you'll see everything much better from here,” Jack tried to cheer him up.

“Can I talk to them?”
“We'll see.”

He secured Menkins's hands again and walked close to her as they continued on their way “If you so much as take a wrong step, I'll shoot you. You got that?”

She hissed, “Right now all I want is some fresh water and maybe a bed.”

“Behave, and you can have both,” he told her.

The woman really looked beat. She was pale and dirty with a light sunburn on her neck. Menkins had started to limp this morning, bothered by her blisters. She had dark rings under her eyes from too little sleep. Maybe her not-so-rosy future was getting to her. Or maybe it just wasn't easy to sleep well with tied hands and feet. Jack suspected both.

So if they found a room for the night and a place to refresh themselves, he wasn't going to deny her that.

Jack didn't feel so peachy either. His arms seemed twice as long as usual, from carrying the munchkin so much. But he was used to hiking long distances, and years of training had taught him to ignore his own bad smell and the dirt covering his clothes and skin. He didn't like it, but if there was no way around it, he lived with it.

Of course, his main concern was Daniel. The kid needed a bath and new clothes, if possible. And a hot meal that didn't contain military rations. Shoes would be nice. He didn't really seem to need them, though. Jack had checked the termite bites this morning and found them gone. Although he hadn’t expected any real injuries, Jack was surprised that there were no scratches or blisters on the soles of Daniel's feet which would normally have occurred when a child was running around barefooted through a forest or wading in a river. There was nothing on Daniel's feet except dirt.

Maybe Nirrti's toy had done something to Daniel, after all – aside from shrinking him. He didn't seem to be aware of it, though, and Jack didn't mention it. As long as Daniel was of no interest to Menkins, Jack was relatively sure she was going to leave him alone. Apparently, she was disappointed by the outcome of the experiment so far.

“Jack, can you let me down?” Daniel asked when they reached the first houses. “There're kids playing, and I'd like to talk to them.”

Two boys about Daniel's current age were running around in front of a cabin, hitting a ball with long sticks. They were dressed in leather pants and white shirts. When they noticed the newcomers, they stopped playing and looked at them with curiosity.

Daniel began to wriggle, but Jack held him in place. “Not yet, Daniel. We'll have to find a chief or some leader first, to let them know we come in peace and all that. You remember how it works, right?” He smiled at the kids and noticed one of them running away, probably telling someone about the strangers in town.

A few minutes later, they reached the center of the village.

Jack noticed a rental stable, a smithy and a couple of open tents that looked like stores, offering meat, fruits and vegetables. Women in large leather aprons were yelling at passing people, promising the best meat or freshest fruit.

Jack watched several men bargain over prices and other women who carried bags as they walked from tent to tent, comparing the food and picking some to buy.
Aside from the tents, there were more houses. A larger one had a sign on it that said “Gather Place”, and Daniel whispered to Jack that it might be the town hall or something similar.

There was even a bar that looked like an old saloon.

“Oooh, Jack! Look, it's like old Wild West TV shows,” Daniel piped up.

“What do you know about old Wild West shows?” Jack wondered, trying to remember if Daniel had ever watched one in Jack’s company.

“You like ‘em,” Daniel simply said. “Like the one with John Wayne we watched.”

Ah. So he was talking about “Rio Bravo”. They had rented the movie once, and Jack had mellowed in old memories about watching that movie with his dad at the cinema...

Daniel had stared at him and then burst into laughter. “You watched old Wild West movies at the theater with your dad?”

“Well, it wasn't old then,” Jack had muttered.

“Oh, of course. I forgot how old you really are,” Daniel had teased.

Jack had thrown popcorn at Daniel and told him nobody was making jokes about his age or the quality of classics like John Wayne movies.

“That wasn't an old TV show,” Jack muttered now. “It was John Wayne. The Duke. It's classic western.”


“So what? You love old things. Old rocks, old chicken scratches, dead people...” Jack tickled Daniel's belly, causing him to laugh. O'Neill decided he liked that sound very much and was going to make sure to hear it as often as possible in the future.

Daniel suddenly craned his neck and plastered a sloppy kiss on Jack's stubbly cheek. “I love you, Jack.”

When Jack found his voice, which seemed stuck somewhere in his throat, he returned the kiss to Daniel's not-so-clean hair and grinned. “See? I'm old, too. Now I'm even older than before, compared to you.”

Next to them, Menkins let out an annoyed huff, but they just ignored her.

Jack was about to check out the other buildings when he spotted two elderly men approaching them. They wore simple clothing; leather pants and shirts in different shades of brown. Those two didn't look too overjoyed, as far as Jack could tell. He tightened his arm around the kid and casually adjusted his P90, so it was pointing at Menkins.

One of the men peered suspiciously at them with icy blue eyes under bushy white brows. “You're strangers.”

“Yes. We came through the...” Jack started but was interrupted by a little voice.

“We are peaceful explorers from a planet called Earth. We came through the Stargate. Others like us must have been here before. You don't have to be afraid... I'm Daniel, that's Jack and that's Doctor Menkins. She's our prisoner, though.”
Jack smiled at the dumbfounded expression on the two guys' faces and said, “Yeah. That covers it pretty much.”

“Is this your son?” the man asked, not even a shadow of a smile cornering his mouth.

“Yes,” Jack said.

“No,” Daniel said at the same time. “I'm...”

“Adopted,” Jack took over hastily again. He squeezed Daniel's leg, hoping he would get the hint and be quiet for a moment.

“Did you bring him with you through the gate?” the other guy asked, his eyes narrowing.

“Yep. He came with us.”

“Isn't it very dangerous to bring a child to other worlds?”

“Oh, where I go, he goes,” O'Neill answered.

Menkins opened her mouth, and Jack very subtly patted the barrel of his P90 as he continued, “We won't bother you for long. If you could provide us with a room for the night and maybe a place to refresh ourselves...”

“And can you pay for your requests?” guy number one inquired.

“We could trade,” Jack offered. “Or help you folks out with something. Work for a day... anything?”

“Ashura needs help with her roof,” the second man said. “She has room for them.”

“What about her? You say she's a prisoner. We have a prison house. But she'll have to work in the fields if she stays there. She'll get food and water and a bed.”

Jack nodded and decided to take a look at that prison house. The men backed off and talked between themselves for a moment before they motioned for O'Neill to follow.

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The prison house turned out to be a solid stone building with iron bars in the windows and heavy doors. Three other prisoners were held in separated cells. Jack was told a doctor would treat Menkins's blisters when she complained she wasn't able to work in the fields.

Kereah, who held the rank of town elder – one of the guys who had talked to them before – assured her there were other jobs she could do.

To Jack's concerns that she might try to escape if left alone and untied, Kereah promised him that she wouldn't leave the prison house if she wasn't working in the fields. “We take good care of our prisoners until their process of guilt completes,” he said in his gruff voice. “I will bring you to Ashura now.”

When they knocked at the door of one of the homes around the market place, they were greeted by a motherly woman who immediately fell in love with Daniel, but was bewildered by his dirty baggy clothes and matted hair. Ignoring Jack completely, she threw her hands together over her head and ushered them inside.

“My, what are you bringing me here, Kereah?” she huffed, her eyes melting with concern and
warmth at the sight of the little boy. “You must be starving, lil’ one. And look what you’re wearing! Where did you find him?”

They entered a very clean kitchen with a large wooden table in the middle of the room. Ashura scurried to a shelf, pulling out pots and pans so fast that Jack couldn’t even get a word in.

Kereah grumbled, “They came through the gate. Like the ones who were here before. The child is this man’s son. So he says.”

“His son! Look how dirty he is! And these clothes! Poor lil’ one. Do you like egg cakes? Yes? With sweet syrup? Do you like milk, too?” With a not-so-motherly glance at Jack, she muttered, “Sit him down there.”

“Thanks, ma’am. I’m really…” Jack started but didn’t get any further before he was interrupted.

“You want egg cake, too?”

“Uh, if it’s not too much trouble. This is Daniel, and I’m…”

“Daniel is your name, lil’ one?” Ashura purred as she ran back and forth through her kitchen, throwing eggs, milk and flour into a bowl. “What a beautiful name. You have to eat as much as you can and then take a bath. I will see if I can find some old clothes from Jasper. Jasper was my son, you know. Oh, yes, he was a beautiful child, my Jasper. He was just as cute and blond as you are now, lil’ one.” She got out a large wooden spoon and stirred the mixture in the bowl with fast, efficient moves.

“He,” Kereah said, nodding in Jack’s direction, “will help you with your roof. They need a bed for the night.”

“I have a bed for the child. If he repairs the roof, he can sleep in the barn,” Ashura told Kereah.

“That’s for you to decide.” The old man shrugged and left the house without another word.

“Listen, Mrs. Ashura. Daniel and I are very grateful for…” Jack started again.

She cut him off, “I wouldn’t take you in at all if it weren’t for this child. You should be ashamed of yourself, letting him run around like this. What kind of father are you, carrying a weapon and dragging a child to another world? This is no way to treat a little boy.”

O’Neill, who had sat down with Daniel on his lap, frowned and wondered if she was going let him finish a sentence. Before he could explain anything further, Daniel piped up, “If Jack has to sleep in the barn, so will I.” With that, he leaned back against Jack and crossed his short arms over his chest.


“I’m stayin’ where you stay,” Daniel insisted. “You said we don’t sep’rate.”

Jack smiled. “That’s right.”

Ashura turned and stood there, hands on hips as she considered it. Then she continued to stir the egg cake dough. “You can both stay in the house,” she said finally, sounding a little more friendly. “But I don’t want this weapon in my house. You have to leave it in the barn, Mister…”

“His name is Jack,” Daniel let her know. “He carried me all the way ‘cause I don’t have shoes an’ am
too little to walk that much. Don't be angry with him. It's not his fault that I'm dirty and I lost my
clothes on the way.”

Smart kid, Jack thought. Aloud he said, “It's very kind of you to let us stay for the night. But I really
need my weapon...”

“Not in my house. If you want to stay in the house, it stays in the barn. Otherwise, I am happy to let
the lil' one stay in here, but not you!” Ashura lit a fire in a large oven, using a bellows to make it burn
faster.

“Jack,” Daniel whispered loudly, giving him a stern look, “you don' need your gun here. She's a
very nice woman.”

“Oh, I'm sure she is, but you know I don't like to give my stuff away,” Jack muttered back.

“She won't do anything mean to me,” Daniel said in a gentle voice.

“I know that, kiddo...”

“Your son is right, Mister Jack. How could I do anything to such a precious child? Look at him. He's
just as cute as my Jasper was. Just like him. You don't have to worry,” Ashura assured him from the
oven, where she was filling a giant pan with the dough. The realization that Jack was concerned
about Daniel's safety and well-being seemed to calm her.

“See?” Blue eyes looked up at him trustingly, and O'Neill sighed.

“You can hide it under Jasper's tool bank, and we will lock the barn tonight,” Ashura said.

Jack wasn't comfortable with this solution. He still had his knife and both his and Daniel's hand guns,
but... “I'm sorry, ma'am. But I'd rather have it near me. You'll just have to trust me.”

“Jack!” Daniel poked his elbow into Jack's belly.

“Daniel,” Jack said, glowering.

“Jaa-aack... we are guests in her house,” Daniel lectured him, frown firmly in place.

“I don't want anybody break into the barn and steal it. People might get hurt.”

“Who'd want to steal it?”

“Well, I don't know! But I'm not leaving it. Now stop it, will ya?” Jack felt a headache coming on.
Arguing with this little fella wasn't any easier than arguing with the grown up version.

Ashura, who had watched them from her place at the oven, nodded. “I can see your point, Mister
Jack. I will trust you. But please be careful so it does not explode in the house. I have never seen
such a weapon before.”

“Thank you. I'll secure it. There's no danger.”

Daniel crossed his arms over his skinny chest and sulked, muttering something under his breath that
Jack chose not to hear.

A moment later, a delicious smell emerged from the oven and in response, Daniel's belly growled.
The egg cakes turned out to be pancakes, only thicker and with a syrup that was even sweeter than
maple syrup.
Daniel managed almost three of them once he’d stopped sulking. When he was done eating, he was stuffed so much, the egg cakes were almost coming out of his ears. Jack, who had passed after the second one, hoped the kid wouldn't throw up later.

With a loud burp, Daniel finally shoved his plate away, covering his mouth with one hand. “Sorry. That was very good, Mrs. Ashura.”

“Call me Ashu, lil' one. That's what all lil' ones around here call me. I am happy you liked them. Now you should take a bath.” With a look at Jack, she dryly said, “You could use one as well when you're done with the roof, Mister Jack.” She started to heave a large pot onto the oven.

O'Neill got up and took it out of her hands.

“Where do you want me to get the water?” he asked as he put the pot on the oven.

“THERE'S a well behind the house;” she replied and wiped her hands on her apron.

Daniel hopped from his chair and followed Jack outside. In the back of the yard was a small barn and a few fat chickens, with red feathers and long green tails, were scratching in the sandy ground.

They found the well and a pail to retrieve the water. It was tied to a rope, hanging from a wooden frame built on the stone rim. Jack let Daniel help throw the pail into the well where it landed with a dull splash. Jack pulled the full pail up, untied it and carried it inside to fill the pot on the oven.

“I have a large tub in the other room. You will have to carry the pot once the water boils. I will get towels for you and see if I can find some clothes for Daniel,” the woman said, even offering a smile.

The wooden tub was in a smaller room behind the kitchen. There was soap and a large ceramic washing bowl. Jack also spotted a small mirror hanging on the wall above it.

He went to get another bucket of water, longing for his shower at home.

When he stepped out of the house, he nearly had a heart attack.

Daniel had somehow managed to climb the stone well and was kneeling on the edge, staring down into the water. He had grasped the rope with one hand, his other arm slung around a wooden post.

O'Neill bit his lip to suppress a yell. He didn't want to startle the kid. He crept up on him and a moment later, securely closed his arms around the small body. Looking over Daniel's head, he tried not to imagine how far down the water was.

“Jack!” Daniel yelped. “I can't see myself in the water! It's too dark!”

Jack set Daniel on his feet and mentally counted down from ten before he was able to let out the breath he’d been holding without starting to yell. He crouched in front of the kid and took his hands. “Daniel...”

“Jack?”

“Do you know what you just did?”

“Uh-huh. I tried to look at myself ’cuz I wanted to know what I look like now. But the water's too dark and too deep,” Daniel rattled on, sounding a little disappointed. Then he seemed to notice something was wrong. He tilted his head and looked worried. “What, Jack? Why are you so pale?”

“You climbed the well,” Jack said, dumbfounded, “to look at yourself?”
“Yes. You can see your reflection in water like when you look in a mirror, right? I tried to do it at the river, but the water wasn't still so I couldn't see myself very good,” Daniel told him, totally unaware of the danger he put himself in.

“And why couldn't you see yourself in the well, Daniel?” Jack prompted, feeling his heartbeat settle back to normal.

“The water was too deep down, and it was dark,” Daniel said, puzzled. “I just told you...”

“What do you think might have happened if you lost your balance and fell down into that deep, dark water?”

Daniel looked at him blankly for a second, but then his eyes grew big, and a soft “Oooh!” left his mouth.

“Well?”

“I could've drowned 'cuz there's no way out. And you weren' here to hold me if I fell. I'm sorry,” a very meek Daniel mumbled, gazing at his bare feet.

O'Neall looked at the sight of misery in front of him and rubbed his thumbs over the back of Daniel's hands. “Daniel, we have to figure out how to deal with things like this. I can't be everywhere at once, and I need to trust you to think before you act.”

“I kn...ow. I didn' meant to scare you,” Daniel sniffled.

Jack sighed.

Daniel was four.

Of course, he didn't think he might fall into the well when he'd climbed it. He'd just thought it was a great idea to look into the water. “I know you didn't. Come on. Let's get that bath ready for you.”

There were a few more sniffles and a tiny nod. Jack filled the pail again and carried it into the house. Daniel followed him like a shadow and watched as Jack filled the tub. In the meantime, the water on the oven was boiling, and Ashura had provided thick towels, made of a fabric Jack had never seen before. But they looked and felt very soft.

She had put fresh clothes for Daniel into the bedroom next to the bath. Jack thanked her and closed the curtain hanging from the door frame. Although the front and back doors were made of thick wood, the other doorways in the house had only leather curtains.

When Jack was satisfied with the temperature of the water, he helped Daniel undress. When the little boy had climbed into the tub, Jack handed him the bar of soap and made sure Daniel scrubbed himself properly. He helped with the ears and hair, expecting complaints about soap getting into Daniel's eyes. But the tyke sat perfectly still and just squeezed his eyes tightly shut when Jack rinsed his hair.

Once he was clean and wrapped in one of the thick towels, Jack picked him up and said, “I wanna show you something.”

“A surprise?”

“I want you to meet somebody.” Jack smiled and stepped in front of the bathroom mirror that hung too high for the kid to see himself while standing on the floor. “Daniel – say hi to Daniel.”
Danny gazed into the mirror for a long moment, studying his face. “Look, Jack. My eyes are still blue... uh, I mean, of course they are... But they are so big. And my ears... did you see how tiny they're now? Oh, and my hair's so blond. I'm sure I looked like this when I was little first time,” he said in amazement, touching his nose and forehead with his fingertips.

“You know we have pocket mirrors in the packs with our shaving stuff. Why didn't you just ask me to...” Jack began, but stopped when he saw the boy’s crestfallen expression.

“I forgot 'bout the mirrors,” Daniel said, bewildered. “Jack, I'm forgetting so much. Will I forget everything? Will I lose all my memories?”

Daniel's arm tightened around Jack's neck, and the colonel sensed a panic coming up. He turned away from the mirror and carried Daniel into the bedroom, where he sat on the bed with the child in his lap.

“I don't know, Danny,” he said while he used a corner of the towel to dry those little ears and neck. “Look. We just have to go with the flow. There's nothing we can do. But we'll deal with it.”

“Uh-huh,” Daniel mumbled, blushing. "I'll try not to be too much trouble.”

“I know you will. I'm not sure how much you remember and how easily you forget things. I think you don't really know yourself, right?”

Daniel blushed even harder and shook his head.

“It's not your fault,” Jack assured him. “You can't control it. But I think we need some rules. You don't like them, I don't like them – but what do you think will happen if you wander off and get lost in the woods? Or you climb something – like the well -and get hurt?”

The kid chewed on his bottom lip and mumbled, “I told you I'm sorry 'bout the well. I didn' fell in though. Besides, I had my hand real tight 'round the rope.”

“No, Daniel. You know that's not true. Think again.”

Daniel sighed. “If something happens to me, it's bad 'cuz Janet’s not here. And if I get losted, you haveta find me, and if you don', I'll get very scared,” he said, head down.

“That's right. And I'll get scared, too, because I don't want to lose you.”

“Don' like to scare you,” the kid admitted. “But sometimes you don’t listen to me, and then I have to do something.”

Jack knew he couldn't afford to discuss and argue every little rule with Daniel. He would have his hands full, trying to keep an eye on both the kid and Menkins. But he knew how adult Daniel had reacted to orders that didn’t make sense to him. So Jack wouldn't get anywhere with just expecting obedience, not even from this mini version. He needed the kid to understand that he wasn't just ordering him around.

If he could get the kid to agree to some ground rules, Jack might be able to call Daniel on it when he broke them.

“I know I don’t always listen, but neither do you,” Jack began, gauging Daniel's reaction carefully. “Besides... you're little now, and you want my help to deal with it, right?”

Daniel frowned and chewed on his bottom lip. Finally a tiny nod answered Jack's question.
“Let's see. I want you to tell me what you can do so you won't get lost,” Jack said.

“Not wandering off, staying where you tell me to, and if I haveta wait for you somewhere, not moving from the spot,” came the reluctant answer.

“That's right. In return, I'll always let you know where I'm going if you have to stay somewhere without me for a moment. And I won't leave you alone unless it's really necessary.”

Daniel perked up. “So we both get rules, right?”

“Oh, yeah. And don't forget the hugging rule and that you're supposed to wake me at nights if you need something. And that I'll carry you whenever you're tired,” Jack assured him, watching with relief as the frown left Daniel's face. “You think you can remember those rules?”

Daniel nodded solemnly. “I can be good. You'll see.”

“Okay. One more – if you see something really cool and want to touch it, or take a closer look at it, whatcha gonna do?”

“Ask you if I can, and if you say no, not doin' it.”

“Yep, that's it. And if you're ever not sure about something, you can always ask me. If I tell you to stay back from something or let me carry you...”

“I won’t run away or ask stupid questions.” Daniel sighed.

“You can ask questions anytime after you’ve done what I told you,” Jack said. “Especially in a dangerous situation. And I think that's enough for now. I know it sounds like a lot of rules, but it's not. You just have to work with me here, buddy.”

Daniel put his thumb into his mouth and squinted up at Jack, the worried expression returning. “What if I get into trouble, Jack? An' what if I get into trouble without meaning to, 'cuz I forget... like when I climbed on the well?”

Now this was the real tricky part. O'Neill hoped Daniel would understand if he made it understandable for him. “You'll have to start listening to me,” he started quietly. “I can't help you to remember things or to be careful if you don't listen to me.”

Daniel said around his thumb, “I won' like this, right?”

“Maybe not always,” Jack agreed. “I don't expect you to remember the rules all the time, but I want you to try. If you forget, I'll remind you – once. But if you still don't listen to me or throw tantrums, there'll be consequences. Always. It doesn't mean I'm mad at you. It just means you did something wrong, and I'm helping you remember not to do it again.”

Mini-Daniel Jackson sucked on his thumb and looked like he was having a silent discussion with himself. Then he pulled the thumb out and wiped it on his towel. He looked up at Jack with round, amazed eyes. “You wanna be my dad.”

Jack opened his mouth to deny it when the kid continued, “You can be my dad. But only until I'm big again. When I'm big again, you're...” Daniel stopped and looked puzzled, as if trying to remember Jack's role in his life when he'd been a man.

O'Neill didn't want to go there.... No way. So he said, “Let's talk about that when you're big again, and just go with the flow as long as you're... little.”
Daniel shrugged. “Kay.” He leaned his head against Jack’s chest and yawned again.

“I’ll wait until you’re asleep. Then I’ll go and work on the roof. When you wake up, you can come out into the yard. Otherwise, I don’t want you to leave the house, understood? No sneaking out and no exploring on your own.” When a little pout appeared, Jack had an idea. He brushed back the bangs from Danny’s forehead and added, “Tell you what. When I’m done with the roof, I’ll take you on a walk, and you can see if you find some kids to play with or anything else you want to look at.”

“Oh, really?” Daniel asked, but his excitement was short-lived. “What if I forget and get into trouble, Jack?”

Settling Daniel into the huge bed and pulling the covers over him, Jack replied, “Well, I guess then you’ll have to stay in the house for the rest of our time here, and there’ll be no exploring at all. Sound fair?”

“Sounds yucky,” Daniel said and snuggled into the pillow. “J’ck?”

”Mh?”

“What’s a boy toy?”

Crap. “Uh... What?”

“Doctor Menkins said I was your boy toy before. I wasn’t a boy before. I was all grown up, right?” Daniel knitted his eyebrows as he mulled this over.

“Sure you were, Daniel. All grown up.” Very grown up indeed and not Jack’s boy toy at all.

“Was she just being mean again?” Daniel’s eyes had already dropped closed.

“Yeah, just being mean,” Jack whispered and kissed the still-furrowed brow. “Sleep tight, kiddo.”

***

Ashura’s roof was in bad shape. Jack spent the greater part of the afternoon sawing wooden planks and hammering them to the roof frame. Two hours after Jack had started, Daniel came out of the house, wearing a beige shirt and knee-length leather pants. Proudly, he turned around to let Jack take a look at him.

“Ashura helped me put them on,” he yelled up at him. “Do I look good?”

“You look great,” Jack called down, giving him a thumbs-up.

“Can I help?” Daniel tipped his head back as far as possible and almost fell on his butt when he lost his balance. “I could hold the planks for you. I can climb the ladder...”

“Ah, I don’t know, Danny. There’s not much space up here. When I come down to saw some more, you can hold the planks if you like,” Jack hurried to say before the tyke could start climbing.

The last thing Jack needed was a four year old scrambling around on the roof.

“Kay,” Daniel answered and sat down, his back against the stony well, to watch the chickens. Jack went back to his work, checking on the kid from time to time.

Awhile later, Danny picked up pieces of chicken feed and made the birds follow him around the well, throwing little portions of corn to the ground. Three chicken waddled after him, clucking and
nodding their heads. They didn't seem aggressive, so Jack let the kid have his fun.

“Jack! Look! They follow me like doggies! They like the red corn the best,” Daniel called.

“I see it, buddy,” he said, wiping sweat from his forehead. The afternoon sun burned down on him as he hammered in the last few planks to the roof and then climbed down the ladder.

Daniel was at Jack's side the moment he picked up the saw, asking what he could do to help. Jack showed him where to hold the wooden planks so he stood far enough away from the saw. The wood was very smooth, without splinters. Daniel closed both hands around the edges of the plank and Jack started sawing.

He was ready to climb the ladder again when Ashura entered the yard, carrying a tray with two large glasses, filled with a yellow liquid. She was still wearing the large apron, and there were two red spots on her full cheeks. The heat seemed to be getting to her, too.

“I thought you might like something to drink. Oh, lil' one. Don't you go too close to the saw. It's very dangerous,” she huffed, breathing heavily as she placed the tray on the rim of the well.

“I know the saw is dangerous,” Daniel said a little indignantly, but reached out for the glass of lemonade when she handed it to him.

“This is citron lemonade. Homemade from an old recipe that the mother of my mother has taught me.”

“Thank you.” He took a sip and then started to drink in large gulps.

Jack took his own glass and laughed. “Looks like you've been up there doing all the work, huh?”

“I'm thirsty. An' it's good.” Daniel shrugged. “An' I like the bubbling sound coming from my belly.”

When Ashura laughed at that, he told her, “Jack said I can keep a goldfish in my belly when it's so full. But he's just being silly.”

The woman turned and looked at her roof. “You're doing a fine job there, Mister. I wish you could stay a few days. I have more work to do. Since my Jasper is gone and I'm older, life isn't getting easier,” she said with a shake of her head.

Daniel immediately tugged at Jack's arm. “Oh, we can stay, can't we? Please? Just a few days? I'd love to 'splore the village and make new friends, Jack.”

O'Neill rubbed a hand through his sweaty hair. Oh, peachy. Just what he needed. Pleading kiddie eyes and an elderly woman in need of help. “No, Daniel. We can't stay.” To Ashura, he apologized, “I'm sorry, ma'am. I'd like to help you out some more, but we really need to get on our way tomorrow.”

“Oh, I didn't expect you to stay, Mister Jack. You have to take this beautiful child home.” A shadow fell over her round, friendly face. “I just wish my Jasper would find his way home, too. But I don't think I will ever see him again.” She shook her head. “Oh, just ignore me. I'm a foolish old woman. But it's been so long since I had a little boy around. Or any other guests for the night. Once, this house was full of life and laughter.”

“What happened?” Daniel asked.

“He left this village many summers ago with the young woman he loved,” Ashura said. “I haven't
heard from them since. I only hope he is happy and was able to save her.”

“Save her?” Jack raised an eyebrow.

“She was sick,” Ashura mumbled.

“I'm sorry,” Daniel said softly.

She straightened and waved it off. “Ach, there's no need to cry those old tears again. If you allow, I would like to take Daniel with me to the kitchen. He can help me prepare the evening meal.”


Seeing Jack's hesitation at letting the tyke out of his sight, Ashura assured him that she was going to watch over him like a hawk. “I raised a little boy myself. He will be as good as gold.”

“You remember what I said about leaving the house?” Jack asked Daniel while he stacked the wooden planks into the leather harness Ashura had given him. It was a very useful tool. He could put it on his back like a rucksack and carry up ten of the shorter wooden planks while having both hands free for the ladder.

“I won' go ’sploring on my own,” the tyke promised.

“Don't worry. He won't leave my side.” Ashura took the boy's hand, and together they walked back inside.

***

An hour later Jack nailed down the last plank. Stretching his back, he surveyed his handiwork one last time before making his way down the ladder.

A spicy smell from the house made Jack’s mouth water. Daniel had popped out every once in a while to give Jack a report on what he was doing.

Apparently Daniel had washed vegetables, stirred some sauce and put sugar on fruits that looked like apples, but were called greens, “’cuz they’re so green.” The last time Daniel had informed Jack about his doings, he had set the table. He also let Jack know that Ashura had put a fresh pot of water on the oven for Jack’s bath.

O'Neill went to prepare his bath and was soon shrugging out of his clothes in a hurry. Getting clean was a bliss. He enjoyed the feeling of soap on his skin and hoped it wouldn't be too long before he could take a proper bath again. They were going to wash themselves in rivers or lakes, which was fine. But there was nothing like a hot bath.

After he had shaved, he returned to the bedroom, towel wrapped around his waist. He was glad for the extra pair of BDU's and shirt in his pack. The clothes smelled a little musty, but they were clean and dry.

Dinner was delicious. Ashura served a large pan of spicy vegetables and fruits. There were also potatoes and a creamy sauce. Over the last couple of years, Jack had tried lots of different alien meals. Some were really crappy, others surprisingly nice. Ever since his odd encounter with a wedding cake that had had the side effect of making him age within days, he had been careful with alien food for a while. But they didn't always have a choice about eating the native foods or spending the night in alien villages.
As far as Jack was concerned, SG-1 should stay on their own as much as possible and not mingle with the natives too much. But thanks to one Doctor Jackson, who insisted on showing some trust and learning about new cultures and making more allies, O'Neill had to work to overcome his natural instinct to not trust complete strangers. Over the years, he’d learned to listen to his gut feeling. And to Daniel.

Ashura was safe, and Jack believed the village itself was no threat to them either.

He watched his little archaeologist chat with Ashura about the names of the fruits and vegetables, if she had always lived in the village – which was called Firsttown because it had been the first town built after the first people had come through the gate – and if she remembered where her ancestors had come from.

The woman told them how her ancestors had originated on a faraway world until Nirrti brought them here to work in the naquadah mines. When the mines had gone dry, she had left. Ashura didn't mention Nirrti's experiments or any religious rituals, and curiously Daniel didn't ask.

After dinner, the kid helped put the dishes away. When Jack asked Ashura if she needed help with cleaning up, she just laughed and shooed them off. ‘The lil' one told me you are going on a stroll through the village. I think it's very important to him.”

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So awhile later, Jack was wandering around the small village, a four year old bouncing with him, wanting to look at everything at once. First they explored the market place with its tents. Daniel tried to talk to almost everyone. But unlike Ashura, none of the other villagers wanted to chat with the little boy. The men especially were very curt and turned their backs on them. When Daniel wanted to go into the saloon, Jack drew the line.

“Do you think kids aren' allowed in the bar, Jack?”

“That's what I think, kiddo.”

“But you don' know, right?” Daniel started to walk backwards. “We can ask them.”

"I don't think so." He took Daniel's hand and steered him towards the smithy where a burly, gloomy-looking guy worked on horseshoes. Daniel was fascinated by the anvil and the flying sparks whenever the man let the hammer crash down on the glowing shoe. When the kid stepped too close, Jack took his hand and pulled him back. "Careful with the fire, Danny."

The blacksmith glared at them, and Daniel took refuge behind Jack's leg, without letting go of his hand.

"What is it you want?" the guy growled.

"Looking for fishing hooks," Jack said.

"Pay?"

"How about a trade? I have a knife to offer."

The blacksmith frowned as he considered it. "What kind of knife?"

Jack shrugged and pulled it out of his belt. He had taken Menkins's and Daniel's knife, so he could afford to lose one of the three. The man set his hammer and the horseshoe aside, took the knife and
turned it over in his large callused hands, which were black from soot. "It is a good knife," he finally grumbled. "You can have six hooks for it. And lines, too. Have no rods though."

"Show me."

When the blacksmith went into the back of the building, Daniel came out from his hiding place and tugged at Jack's pants. "Will you show me how to fish, Jack?"

Jack smiled down at his little friend. “Sure, why not?” For the first time, he thought they might have some fun on their way.

The blacksmith returned and handed Jack the fishing hooks and lines in exchange for the knife. Daniel hid behind Jack's leg again until the giant man was out of sight. After pocketing the hooks and lines, Jack took Daniel's hand, and they continued their walk.

When they reached wooden benches placed along a large stone well, they sat down to watch the women as they began to close their tents. A few birds picked for food on the cobbled pavement. Body pressed to the ground, a fat red - Jack called it a cat even though the long tail was missing - sneaked up on one of the birds. With silent movements, the cat crept near enough to jump and attack. Of course, the little bird wasn't dumb and fluttered away just in time. The cat growled and vanished under a horse wagon.

Daniel had seen it, too, and jumped from the bench. "Look! The birdy 'scaped the cat... Oh, I have to ask Ashu what they're called here!"

"Yep. It got lucky."


"She's just hungry, Daniel. She needs to eat."

Without another word, Daniel climbed into Jack's lap, and they stayed on the bench a little longer to enjoy the early evening sun. It was when they were walking again that Jack noticed the change in Daniel's behavior.

The endless chatter had stopped, and the enthusiastic bouncing had quieted into normal walking. Daniel seemed deep in thought. Jack playfully knuckled the blond head. “Hey, what's up, bud?"

When the tyke started to drag his feet like walking was suddenly an impossible task, Jack stopped and scooped Daniel up. Before he could bury his face against Jack's neck, he put one finger under the small chin and gently made Daniel look up. “Daniel?"

“Do we have to eat little birds too, Jack?" Troubled blue eyes searched Jack's.

Jack needed a moment to make the connection between the question and what they had observed earlier. “Well... we'll fish and try to eat berries and other edible fruits but..."

“The MREs won't last forever,” Daniel said sadly. “We have to walk for a long time, right?"

Jack brushed the bangs out of Danny's face. Right now, he wished the boy wasn't aware of these things. “We'll do it like the Indians. We only take what we really need, okay?"

Daniel's bottom lip started quivering, and tears formed in the corners of his eyes. "I don't wanna eat little animals. I know it's silly 'cuz fish are animals, too. And I know we haveta eat somethin' when
we're hungry, like the cat does. I just don' like it."

"I'm sorry, bud. I'm afraid there's nothing we can do about it long-term," Jack explained as he wiped away Daniel's tears with the knuckles of his right hand. "You do know that animals kill other animals to eat. Hunting may be our only choice at times."

Daniel never had had issues with eating meat before. Jack wondered where this new attitude had come from.

After a few more sniffles, Daniel nodded and pushed back to look at his older friend. "Okay." Then he cocked his head and asked if they could walk some more.

"Sure. What do you think about riding?" Jack put the little flyweight on his shoulders and grabbed hold of his legs.

“Oh, I like it. I can see eve-ry-thing,” Daniel cheered, temporarily forgetting his almost-broken heart.

God bless four year olds and their short attention span.

They walked past a few homes, built similar to Ashura's house. Daniel pointed out everything to Jack. Little puppies playing in the dirt, funny-looking fruits on high trees, geese-like birds circling the sky. When they reached the fields, the sun was fading and they had to return if they didn't want to end up trying to find their way back in the dark.

“Do you think they gave up on machines and electricity after Nirrti left or that they never were that advanced in the first place?” Jack wondered.

It was natural for him to ask Daniel. Daniel was usually the one who knew things like that or had at least a theory about them. Even now, only a half-pint, he never stopped thinking. And what was still there from big Daniel had probably thought about that cultural stuff as well. It was what Daniel did.

“Ashura said they believe in simple life. She said nobody had come through the gate for almost a century before SG-2 showed up. They don't go to the ruins or the gate anymore 'cuz the myth says the place is evil. Not the gate, but the ruins and such,” Daniel said while he played with Jack’s hair.

Jack replied thoughtfully, “She also said her son left the village. Did she tell you why?” He was sure Daniel had bombarded her with questions while Jack was working on the roof.

“She misses him,” Daniel said sadly. “She told me he looked just like me when he was little. I asked her why he left, but she said I'm too little to understand.”

Oy. Of course she did. Danny-boy was just a “lil' one” to Ashura. Maybe she was right, though. O'Neill still didn't know how much the kid could handle. He seemed pretty sensitive and got upset easily. But at the same time, he was still Daniel.

Jack rubbed Daniel's legs. “Let's go back.”

“But I haven't seen everything, yet,” Daniel objected, plucking some more at Jack's hair.

“It'll be dark soon. You know how fast dusk goes by.”

“Just a little longer, Jack? Just one minute? Please?” Daniel gently patted Jack's head, and the colonel couldn't smother a smile.

If he didn't watch it, he'd end up being wrapped around the munchkin's finger all too soon.
They wandered along the field surrounding the village, and Daniel mused about the crops and tried to find an adequate name for the horse-like animals.

The sun was an orange ball, ready to set, when they returned to Ashura’s little house.

Ashura greeted them at the front door.

“Kereah was here to let you know that your prisoner is well and you can pick her up around first light, before the workers will leave for the fields.” She put a hand on Daniel's head and smiled down at him. “You had a good time?”

“Yes!” Daniel beamed as they followed her into the kitchen where several lamps brought enough light to make the room comfy.

Water was boiling in a kettle on the oven. Ashura placed three mugs and a little sugar bowl on the table. “I made a hot herbal drink. I always take it before going to bed.”

When Jack looked suspiciously at the steaming mug, the woman assured him, “It has no side effects. It's just dried and pressed herbal leaves in hot water. You can drink it with sweet or beewax.”

Daniel sniffed at his mug. “It's tea, Jack.”

“It's from a flower in my yard. I showed it to Daniel when you were on the roof.”

“She has lotsa herbs in her yard, Jack. I drew some of them into my journal and will try to find them later, when we’re on our way.”

Jack sniffed at his own steaming tea. “Smells like chamomile.”

“Chamomile has many healing uses. In Ancient Egypt, it was dedicated to the gods and used for medicine. You can also wash your hair with it,” Daniel shared absently. He sipped the tea, then grimaced and reached for the sugar pot.

“Our worlds don't seem so different.” Ashu smiled. “I have never been to another world. We don't use the gate ourselves. We had visitors here while Nirrti ruled. But that was a long time ago, and none of us were born then.” Then she addressed Jack with a tinge of worry in her voice. “Daniel told me you are traveling to the second Stargate. It is a very long and dangerous way. Why can't you return through the gate which is by the ruins?”

“It was hit by a lightning bolt,” Jack said, wondering what else Daniel had told their friendly host. He probably should remind the kid not to give away anything about the shrinking device or Nirrti's experiments.

Jack was torn between the need to ask further questions and to prevent them from being thrown out. One never knew how people were going to react when confronted with old Goa'uld legends. And Daniel needed a little normality right now. They both did. Jack longed for a night of undisturbed sleep without having to keep watch or staying half-awake because of their prisoner.

On the other hand, information about the second gate and background of Nirrti’s doings might help them. Jack wanted to know if there was any knowledge about what had happened to the chosen ones after Nirrti shrank them and took them with her through the rings.

Ashura nodded slowly. “Of course. Then you have to find the other Stargate. Jasper used to go to the temple ruins a lot. He told me there is another gate somewhere. I don't think anybody from our village has ever been near the other gate. It is a long way, and only the bravest traders are bold
enough to cross the mountains. We have heard from people of faraway villages, though, that it is possible to cross them.”

“Was your son a scientist?” Daniel asked.

Jack sat back and decided not to interfere for now. Daniel was the negotiation boy, and he seemed comfortable with it, even in his new form. He figured Ashura wasn't going to be offended by a kid asking innocent questions. If Daniel ventured into difficult territory, Jack could easily step in.

“Oh, no, lil' one. Jasper was a field worker, but he was very smart. He read a lot and was interested in the old ways and beliefs. It was not appreciated very much among our elders, who say it is best to let the past stay in the past.” Ashura smiled sadly, holding her mug in both hands. “He was obsessed with the myth of Nirrti. Whenever he could, he went to the ruins and tried to read the old writings on the temple walls.”

“We're searching for signs of Nirrti, too,” Daniel chimed in.

“It is not a tale for a little boy. Nirrti was not a good goddess, even though she did good occasionally.”

“We were studying the ruins and the writings. Nirrti changed people. Then she took them to a palace on the other side of the mountains. We were able to read most of what was written there, and it didn't say what happened to them, once they reached the palace.”

Jack tensed and waited for the woman's reaction.

Ashura blinked and shook her head. “Yes. That's what Jasper told me. But it is just a legend. It says she changed people into children to heal them. From time to time, she picked some of the oldest or sickest and took them with her. She said she was healing them, but nobody ever saw them again. We believe today that she must have killed them because they weren't able to work the mines and fields anymore. She was a cruel goddess. Why would she suddenly do something noble like that? And why did nobody ever see those chosen ones again? What would she do with all those children?”

“We believe she changed their DNA in an attempt to make them perfect.”

“What is... DNA?” Ashura asked, puzzled.

“It's...” Daniel licked his lips, “it has something to do with genes. Humans are made of genetic information that’s passed on from parents to children. For example, if you had bad eyesight from birth, your child might have the same handicap because it inherited that genetic information from you. When DNA is changed, the genes change.”

Ashura nodded. “I think I understand. You are a very smart boy.”

Daniel coughed and continued, “After she had changed their DNA, Nirrti took the chosen ones to her palace to... I don't know... maybe resize them. Then she probably took them away through the Stargate.”

Something was different.

Jack couldn't put his finger on it at first. Then he realized that Daniel had stopped the kiddie-talk. He had pronounced everything right, hadn't left off end of words, and he said DNA.

Adult Daniel was back. Like a ghost, he seemed to have taken over the child's body.
Jack gaped at him. It was like when Daniel had rattled out information about the DNA science or his notes about this planet. “Hey,” he muttered, “where have you been?”

“I'm always here, Jack.” Daniel frowned.

“Yeah, right,” Jack grumbled. “What happened to NDA?”

“'s what I said. DNA,” Daniel muttered, chewing on his bottom lip. He hopped from his chair and climbed into Jack's lap. With a contented sigh, he leaned back against Jack and continued, “Nirrti made me little, too. Her machine did anyway... I was big a couple of days ago.”

Ashura shook her head. "No. No, that can't be true..." Her eyes grew big in the lamplight O'Neill sighed inwardly, wondering if they were going to be banned from the village now.

But the elderly woman didn't start yelling that they were evil. When she spoke, her voice was merely a whisper, “You are a shrunk one? You really are? Then it is true. All my Jasper said is true. Nirrti did make children.”

"Yeah, but she didn't do it to help your people," Jack clarified. "She had her own agenda which was not... good."

"She experimented on people," Daniel added.

"We hope we can change Daniel back at the palace,” Jack said after a long pause.

"I wish you luck, lil' one,” Ashu whispered.

“I don't think we have another choice,” Jack said quietly.

“Jack will take care of me,” Daniel told the upset woman, his voice calm and sure. “It's what he does.”

“I am certain of that, Daniel. Jasper took all of his studies with him when he left, so I can't help you more.”

“Where did he go?” Jack asked. “You mentioned he had a girl with him.”

“Oh, yes. Shanera. She was the light of his life, but she was very sick. Nobody could help her, and they said she would die within the summer. She got weaker and weaker. It is a common sickness here. Every few springs, some of us become sick and die. Mostly young men and women or the very old. Jasper believed those people were suffering from a sickness Nirrti brought. And that they would survive if they used Nirrti's machines. Nobody believed him, of course. The sickness has always been here. There was no cure, and the goddess was gone. So nobody could help them without the magic of the goddess.”

“They believe nobody but Nirrti could use the device,” Daniel mumbled.

Ashura nodded. “We don't worship her anymore, but our ancestors were her slaves, and she proved her magic to them. Nobody wants to have anything to do with the old myth.”

“This might come as a little shock to you, Ashura, but Nirrti is not a goddess,” Jack said carefully.

“What he's trying to say is that everybody can use the technology of Nirrti,” Daniel added.

“That is what Jasper said. He believed if he took Shanera to the ruins, he could heal her and anyone else,” Ashura said breathlessly. “They left one day and never returned. I asked Kereah to send
groups of seekers, but he refused to send anybody near the ruins. I went there myself...” her voice was barely audible now, “but all I found were the ruins and the Stargate.”

Daniel hopped from Jack’s lap and went to Ashu. His short arms didn't reach around her body when he tried to hug her middle. “We'll try to find out what happened to Jasper.”

Oy.

Jack would've liked to be asked about his opinion about that one. Then again, this was Daniel, sooo...

Ashu picked the tyke up and pressed him to her massive bosom. “Oh, lil' one. You have a golden heart. I will always remember what a good little boy you are. You must have been a remarkable man.”

Jack knew he should interfere and tell her they couldn't make any promises, but he kept his mouth shut. He had once lost a child and recognized the pain in her eyes when she looked at him over Daniel's head.

What the heck. They'd probably pass through other villages, and it couldn't hurt to keep their eyes and ears open.

Daniel made a few muffled noises, and when she released him, he slipped down and vanished under the table. A second later, he came out on Jack's side and climbed into his lap as fast as he could. O'Neill grinned. Oh, he would have a blast teasing Daniel with this one – later after they had switched him back.

Daniel wriggled into a comfortable position, poking his elbows into Jack's ribs and stomach as he did so. Once he was satisfied, he smacked his lips, yawned and had fallen asleep in a heartbeat.

Ashura smiled. “Oh, it is so late. You should both rest. I will have breakfast ready in the morning.”

Jack had a few more questions of a practical nature. Like, was there some sort of road they could use, a direct way to the next village on the map?

“Only if you want to take a longer route. There is a muddy road, made for the wagons and carrier beasts. But it takes longer by foot. If you use the small paths in the woods, you'll get there much faster. For the wagon road, we had to go around a few lakes and find areas where the rivers are small and cross able so it takes many turns and twists.”

They talked about several things while Danny slept peacefully. Jack caught himself stroking through Danny’s hair while Ashu answered his questions as well as she could.

Much later, O'Neill thanked her for everything she had done and shifted the little boy in his arms as he made his way to the bedroom they shared for the night. Ashu informed him that she had taken Jack's dirty clothes and washed them while they had been on their walk. “I hope you don't mind. They'll be dry in the morning.”

“That's very nice. Thank you.” He settled Daniel into the bed and watched Ashura leave, pulling the leather curtain closed behind her. She had left them a small lamp on the table in the corner. Still, it was very dark. Jack got out of his pants, turned the lamp off and lay down next to the kid. Danny automatically plastered himself against him.

Putting an arm around the small body, he stared into the darkness.
Sleep didn't come as he reviewed everything Ashura had told him and tried to estimate how long they would need until they'd reach the next village. Three days, four if they had to take several breaks. Okay, so four days, top. He hoped Menkins wouldn't pull any stunts and that they’d have a jail in the other village, too, so he could lock her up again for a day and a night.

Jack hoped Danny wasn't going to withdraw again when the Doctor was around. He had relaxed and become more animated since they’d arrived in the village.

Still mulling things over in his head, Jack finally fell asleep.

TBC with Ch 7 Fever
Jack rose at dawn, an orange stripe at the horizon announcing the new day as he looked out the window.

He dressed and traipsed into the bathroom where he washed up and brushed his teeth with the no-rinse toothpaste they carried around in their packs. Longing thoughts of his own bathroom and bed crossed his mind as he scrubbed his fingers through his short graying hair.

When he was done, he went to wake the little boy. Daniel grumbled, yawned and buried his head under the pillow.

“Rise and shine, Danny boy. The sun's out, and I think I smell something good from the kitchen,” Jack coaxed, rubbing Daniel's back.

“Wha'saht?” Daniel snuffled from under the pillow.

Jack tickled his ribs. “Mmmh, breakfast, I guess. Come on, rub the dream sand out of your eyes.”

Finally Daniel crawled out from under the pillow, knuckling his eyes and yawning. “I don' know how to wake up,” he muttered. “I needed coffee when I was big. But don' think I like coffee anymore. Now I'll always be sleepy.”

Okay. Obviously they were back to little Daniel speech.

“Nah. You'll wake up without coffee.” Jack grinned as he waited for Daniel to stop rubbing his eyes. The kid blinked a couple of times, still looking like he would fall asleep again any minute.

“I think somebody needs to have his face washed with cold water,” Jack teased. “I hear it's a good substitute for coffee.”

“Ja-ack...” Daniel's voice was muffled when he tried to pull the shirt over his head and got tangled in it. Jack helped and then handed him his new pants. “Don't need cold water. It's yucky,” Daniel muttered as he dressed. Jack had to tie the leather straps on the pants for him.

“Don't you know how to tie knots anymore?" he wondered.

Daniel shrugged, then pointed at a pair of small leather shoes and exclaimed, “Look. There's shoes, too!” He slipped into them, but they were a little too big. “Oh, that's fine, I can walk barefoot.”

“Or maybe Ashura has some socks to go with them. That should work,” Jack said. He was grateful for the shoes and hoped they'd fit, after all. That way, Daniel would be able to walk more often on his own.

They left the bedroom and entered the kitchen where the elderly woman was busy at the oven. “Morning, lil' one,” she greeted Daniel and turned to give him a warm smile. “Did you sleep well? I
have milk flakes for you. Sit and eat as much as you can.”

Daniel thanked her and hopped on a chair. He eyed the steaming bowl she handed him and sniffed at it. “Jack, it's porridge. It smells like honey.”

After they had finished their breakfast, Ashu handed Jack his dry clothes, and he started packing.

When everything was ready, they said their thanks and goodbyes to Ashura. Before Daniel could hide behind Jack, she had grabbed him and pressed him to her bosom again. She hugged the breath out of the little tyke, and Jack wondered if he'd have to rescue him.

When she let go of Daniel, his face was flushed red, and his hair stuck out in all directions.

Ashura wished them luck and handed Daniel a little leather bag with one shoulder strap. “This was once Jasper's rucksack. I put some bread and dried meat into it. It shouldn't be too heavy for you to carry, lil' one.”

“Oooh, thank you, Ashu! Look, Jack! I have my own pack now! I'll carry it by myself all the way,” Daniel announced proudly.

Jack didn't have the heart to remind the tyke that he was the one who would now have to carry Daniel and his new little bag. He'd deal.

O'Neill shouldered his backpack with the attached tent and sleeping bag. Then he put his cap on Daniel's head. Now the kid looked like Huckleberry Finn.

When they picked Menkins up at the prison house, the woman looked better than the previous day, but was sullen and uncommunicative. She started walking ahead of them once O'Neill had tied her hands together in front of her. He would take the restraints off as soon as they had left the village far enough behind.

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Daniel strolled alongside Jack, and since he was staying close by, O'Neill let him walk on his own and didn't take his hand.

They passed fields and watched groups of men and women on their way to work.

An hour later they topped a little hill, and before them lay the woods.

Pine trees.

And more pine trees.

“This is getting old,” Jack muttered, but was glad for a few hours of shade. It took awhile for the heat to reach the forest.

Whenever Jack wasn't carrying him, Daniel skipped and ran along the path. When he got out of sight, Jack called him back, and the kid complied. They walked like this for another hour or longer until Danny slowed down and finally stayed on the path next to Jack.

Realizing Daniel was tired, O'Neill picked him up. When he settled him on his hip, Jack noticed the kid had lost his new shoes.

“Danny, where are your shoes?” he wondered.
“Uhh...” Looking down sheepishly at his dirty feet, Danny said, “Losted 'em.”

“Yeah, I can see that.” Jack stopped and called Menkins to a halt. “Do you know where you 'lost' them?”

Danny shook his head and refused to look at him. “Just losted them. They were yucky an' too big. An' the socks were itchy.”

Right. The socks Ashura had given Daniel to wear were gone, too.

“Great. We could have used the shoes later when we have to cross the mountains.” Jack sighed wearily. “Now we have to see if we can get a new pair somewhere.”

“You could've told me that.” Daniel pouted. “I didn' know I’d need them later.”

“What? Now it's my fault? How about you tell me the shoes are yucky next time, before you just throw them away? I would've tied them to my pack,” Jack scolded.

“Oh,” Daniel mumbled, and his thumb wandered into his mouth. They started walking again, Menkins muttering under her breath.

Awhile later, the munchkin craned his neck and whispered, “Am I in trouble 'bout the shoes?”

Jack pushed his cap out of Danny's face and shook his head. “There's not much we can do about it now. But I don't want you to just throw anything away, okay? First, it's not right to leave our trash all over the woods, and second, if you throw something away we might need later, that's bad.”

“'kay. I'm sorry.”

“I know.” Jack hugged him close.

Danny was soon chatting away about some squirrels he spotted on a branch, the different colors of the little flowers covering the ground, or anything else that caught his attention. Then he tipped his head back and tried to get a glimpse of the blue sky through the high trees and tangled branches.

Menkins was silent, brooding. O'Neill glared at her bowed head as she marched ahead of them. It was good that she was quiet. Daniel seemed to forget she was there. But Jack had to be careful not to forget it as well. Maybe she was working something out in her mind, biding her time until his attention slipped. Well, that wasn't going to happen.

He had untied her hands once they left the village area, and told her from time to time to keep them at her sides where he could see them.

“Jack, look! These are shineberries! Ashu showed them to me when we made dinner. They are red and have those little white spots. They're yummy! Can I pick some, please?”

He let the kid down to pick berries, knowing they were safe. He had asked their friendly host for a little flora lesson himself the other night. "Hey, Daniel. Put them in one of the sample containers,” Jack told the kid as he took off his pack and got one of the boxes out.

"Oh, cool!” Daniel grabbed the container and started picking berries.

They walked at a slower pace with the kid skipping alongside the path doing his "job”. Jack was looking for a spring or a river. He didn't want to take a break without the opportunity to get water. Daniel had drunk most of his canteen’s contents already.
"Jack, Jack, I think I found a salamander. Lookit!" Danny had put the container down and emerged from the bushes with a yellow and orange striped animal on his hand. It was almost as long as his palm and stared at Jack with green amphibian eyes. A black tongue flitted out languidly.

"Isn’ it beautiful?" Daniel asked with bright eyes.

"Yeah. Might also be venomous. Put it down, please," Jack groused, his fingers itching to shoot the little creature. He’d feel much more sure of himself if confronted with Earth wildlife. Ashu had warned him about venomous snakes that mostly lived between tree roots but would come out to sunbathe during the day.

So much for SG-2’s reassurance that there were no venomous animals on the planet. Then again, most wildlife – even if potential dangerous – kept out of human’s way.

Ashu hadn't said anything about dangerous salamanders. Still, Jack opted for being careful.

Daniel shrugged and turned to get his container. He bent to set the salamander in the shrubs, then continued berry-picking.

Not long after, they reached a small lake with a spring coming out of the woods. O'Neill had been told the lake water wasn't always drinkable because of the heat. It was good for swimming and cooking, but not for drinking without heating it. Springs and rivers, Ashura had said, were without danger.

They portioned Daniel's berries into three piles. Menkins took hers silently and ate them all at once. She then lay down on her back and closed her eyes.

The berries were sweet and left their tongues prickling slightly. Daniel ate as many as he could, and Jack gave him some of his own as well. They sat on the uneven mossy ground not far from the lake, watching a flock of medium-large birds napping on the water. They had flown away, startled by the humans’ arrival, but then returned one by one and settled down again.

"Do you think those are ducks?" Daniel asked.

"Well, their necks are black and longer than a duck's neck. So I'd say they're geese," Jack assumed. “Or whatever they’re called here.”

"Longneck ducks," Daniel decided.

"They're lunch," Menkins muttered.

Jack wanted to zat her. Right now. “Shut up, Menkins.”

Daniel looked at Jack, as if to make sure he was sitting right next to him, before he balled his hands into fists and turned to Menkins. “We don't eat them! We have MREs, and we can eat berries and plants or fruits!”

“And how do you think we’ll be able to pick berries and fruits in those mountains we have to cross?” She was still lying on her back, not even looking at Daniel.

“Jack promised,” Daniel simply said. “Right, Jack?”

“I promised we won't take any more than we need. Like the Indians – remember?” Jack corrected carefully. “We don't even know what those mountains are like. So there's no need to dwell on that. Doctor Menkins here is just fretting.”
Daniel seemed to consider this for a minute, then nodded. “Okay. Jack? Can I have my journal?”

“Sure.” Jack opened his pack and handed Daniel his notebook and a pencil.

For the next ten minutes, Jack watched the kid scribble in his book. Daniel drew sketches of flowers and wrote notes alongside them.

“Are those the flowers from Ashu's garden?” Jack asked, curious.

“Yes. They were pretty,” Daniel said absently. The tip of his tongue stuck out because he was concentrating so hard. “I can’t 'member all their names. But I know what they look like and what they do.”

“What they do?”

“Yes. They heal. Or you can eat them.” Daniel stopped writing and showed Jack a picture of a plant with triangular leaves. “This one you can cook like spinach. Ashu 'splained it all to me.”

“So you remember their purpose and what they look like but not what they're called? Sounds like me.” Jack grinned. “Need to know.”

Daniel frowned and gazed down at his notes. “Guess so. And I haveta write it all down now 'cuz I might forget.”

Jack got the hint and stopped interrupting him. He was itching to hit the road again, but figured it was better to let the midday heat pass.

Later, Daniel refilled the water canteens at the spring, and when the sun had moved on, they geared up again.

Daniel wanted to be carried so they made good progress for a while.

Menkins continued the silent treatment, and Daniel dozed on and off. Aside from singing birds and a light breeze rustling in the trees, the only sounds were their breaths and the dampened thuds of their boots on the soft layer of pine needles that covered the ground.

Jack tried to ignore his taut neck muscles and the straps of his heavy backpack digging into his shoulders, even through vest and jacket. It was damn hot, too, and he wished he could pull the vest and jacket off. But he still had to carry them, so he was better off wearing them. Sweat trickled down his brow and burned in his eyes.

Daniel seemed to way tons more than this morning and Jack guessed he'd be a lot bulkier by the time they arrived at the second gate. Carrying the kid and all the gear was a great substitute for a workout. He stopped for a moment to jiggle Daniel onto his other arm when a yellow and orange striped head popped out of Daniel's shirt.

“Crap!” Jack almost dropped the kid as the salamander let out a low hiss and climbed out of Daniel's shirt, then scurried over Daniel's arm to Jack's shoulder and into the collar of his jacket. It felt cool and smooth on Jack’s neck, and he could have sworn he felt the animal's tongue on his skin. Goosebumps crawled over his neck and down his spine.

“Daniel!”

He was about to put Daniel down and throw off his gear to get rid of the jacket and that... thing... when Daniel's hand reached into Jack's collar and the salamander was carefully removed.
Holding it in his hand, Daniel mumbled, “Oh, sorry, Jack. I thought he was sleeping. He likes to travel in my shirt.”

Jack placed Daniel on his feet and pointed to a spot beside the path. “I told you to put it down where you found it. Now release it over there.”

“But he likes it in my shirt,” Daniel insisted.

“Well, he'll have to find somebody else's shirt to travel in,” Jack said, ignoring the whiny edge to the kid's voice.

“It's not dangerous.”

“Put it down, Daniel. Now.”

“Why?” Daniel looked up at him with a stubborn frown. The way his blue eyes challenged Jack, demanding a rational reason why Mr. Salamander couldn't travel along with them, almost made him cave.

It was so Daniel.

Jack tried to ignore the sting at the painful memories of adult Daniel. His irritation with little Daniel was replaced by something else. Something that hurt and cut straight to his heart, proving to him that he still had one after all.

Gently taking Daniel's arm, Jack said, “Look at him, Daniel. Don't you think he'd like to decide for himself where he wants to go?”

“He feels safe with me,” Daniel said.

“I'm sure he does. But he's not yours. You have to let it go so it can bask in the sunlight, find a mate... fun things like that.”

Daniel brushed a tender fingertip over the animal's head, and Jack tried not to cringe when Mr. Salamander's tongue came out again, along with the hissing sound.

“Oh,” Daniel whispered. He walked a few feet away and put the amphibian on a rotten tree trunk. The salamander sat there for a moment, his yellow-orange stripes shining brightly in the sun. Then he hurried down the trunk and vanished under it.

“Bye,” Daniel said softly.

Jack held out his hand for the tyke. “C'me on. You can walk for a while if you want.”

Daniel nodded, but after only a few minutes, he had slowed so much that Jack picked him up again.

“Hey, you okay?”

“I'm hot. An' tired.”

“Just a little while longer. You can look out for a spring or a river.”

Daniel didn't respond and started playing with the chain of Jack's tags.

“We'll turn in early today. If I read the map right and from what Ashu said, we'll leave the woods soon. There'll be grassland for a while without much shade. We better go to bed early and break camp right after dawn.”
If the nights weren’t so dark, he’d probably risk crossing the grasslands after dusk to avoid the heat. But as things were, Jack had little choice but to walk during the day. They had flash lights and one extra pack of batteries, but he doubted it was enough to light the way and keep an eye on their prisoner.

By the time Jack spotted a small river crossing their trail, Daniel had fallen asleep.

They left the path and followed the river upstream until it became a larger stream. Soon they found a small clearing, a perfect place to set up tents and make a fire.

Yawning, Daniel trudged wearily after Jack to collect firewood. They had left Menkins tied up at camp.

Usually Daniel loved to help, so Jack was a little puzzled to see his mini-archaeologist so tired and subdued. Then again, he was probably still sulking because he had to release his salamander friend. However, Daniel dutifully picked up a pile of thin branches and carried them to the fireside while Jack collected the heavier wood. They gathered enough wood to put some aside to use in the morning.

When Jack had the fire going and was sifting through their stock of MRE’s, Daniel sat down next to him. “What’s to eat, Jack?”

“We have macaroni with vegetables that tastes like chicken... chicken that tastes like... chicken... oh, and we have meat loaf with noodles... that tastes like...?”

“Chicken.” Daniel giggled, then yawned.

“You're today’s winner. Your prize is to choose the meal.”

“Don' know,” Daniel said, rubbing his eyes with both fists.

“All right. I'll make you a deal. Just for tonight... if you agree to eat the dessert, you're allowed to have half of my macaroni with veggies beforehand,” Jack stage-whispered.

Daniel knitted his eyebrows in concentration as he repeated that word-for-word in his head. “Jaaaack,” he complained finally.

“What? Is that an offer or not?” Jack raised both eyebrows. “Apple pie and macaroni with veggies! Just for you and just for tonight.”

“Can I have crackers?”

“Just crackers? No chicken-tasting macaroni or apple pie?” Jack opened the brown pouch with mac and vegetable – at least, that's what it said on the label – and poured the pre-cooked and moistened food into the cooking mugs.

He placed the mugs between the stones surrounding the fire pit. The stones were hot from the fire and would help to heat the food. If they had a bigger pot, they could've heated the pouches in water. But they had enough to carry so Jack had left the larger cooking gear at the gate campsite.

Of course, all MREs could be “enjoyed” without heating. It was just gross to eat them cold.

“Crackers and cheese,” Daniel said. He blinked and rubbed at his eyes again.

Jack took a closer look at the kid. “What's wrong with your eyes, bud?”
“Dunno. They itch,” Daniel said. “I'm tired.”

Reeling him in for inspection, Jack cupped Daniel's face to look into his eyes. “Lemme see. Little red. When did the itching start?”

“Just now.” Daniel yawned.

“It's probably some allergic reaction,” Jack mumbled. To be on the safe side, he pressed his lips to Daniel's forehead in the age-old way to feel for a fever. “You're a little warm.”

“I'm fine, Jack. Just itchy eyes.”

Jack placed a hand on Daniel's forehead and then on the back of his neck. “Still warm though.”

“It is warm. Everywhere. All the time,” Daniel muttered.

Jack stirred the macaroni in the two mugs one last time before he went to rummage in his backpack for the medical kit.

Daniel gave Jack the hairy eyeball when he returned with a thermometer strip in hand. “I'm not sick, Jack. Just tired. Can I go to sleep?”

Jack sat down again and pulled Daniel close. “What about crackers with cheese?” He settled the kid on his back so that Daniel's head was resting against Jack's knee. Then he carefully attached the strip to his brow. “This won't take long. Just hold still for a sec, okay?”

“Jaaack...”

“Daniel... stop wriggling.... there ya go. All done.” Jack looked at the colored box on the strip, which showed the temperature. “99 degrees. O-kay. Not too bad.”

But not too good either. Jack pulled the strip off and looked down into the slightly red-rimmed and glassy eyes. Worried eyes, too. “Am I sick, Jack? Will it slow us down?”

Jack cast a warning glance at Menkins, who sat a few feet away. But she just grimaced and didn't make any nasty remarks.

“You're not slowing us down, Daniel. You have a little fever. Nothing serious.” At least, that was what Jack hoped. Probably the heat, the long march, the stress of being downsized... could be a lot of things. Kids easily reacted with fever or tummy ache to stressful situations.

Could also be Daniel's allergies acting up. He was probably showing the symptoms of hay fever or the beginnings of a sinus infection. Jack knew from experience that Daniel would sometimes forget his meds and end up with sinusitis.

Well, d'oh. He couldn't just give the kid antihistamines for an adult. At least, not the prescription Daniel used to take. Jack had looked at the meds in Daniel's pack and they clearly said they weren't for kids. Though if this was an allergy, Jack might have to try giving him a very low dose anyway. He tried to remember what he knew about Daniel's allergies...

“Does your nose feel clogged, Daniel? Sore throat? Headache?”

“No, just itchy eyes. My head doesn't hurt, and my nose is fine.”

“All right.” Jack handed him the box with crackers. “Eat at least a few of these, okay? And I want you to drink some more water.”
“I’m not sick,” Daniel whined as he rolled away from Jack and scrambled to his feet. “And I’m not hungry anymore.” With that, he ran into the tent.

When Jack followed a moment later, water canteen and med kit under his arm, Jack found Daniel curled up like a little ball in his sleeping bag. Kneeling next to him, Jack placed one hand on a small shoulder. “Daniel?”

“Wanna sleep,” came the muffled answer.

“Okay, all right. Just a sip of water, buddy. Come on. Do it for me?”

Reluctantly Daniel uncurled and accepted the canteen. He took a few gulps and then curled up again. Within a blink of an eye, the little boy was fast asleep. Jack felt Daniel’s head once more, but it didn’t seem much warmer.

After Jack had handed Menkins her macaroni, he ate without tasting the food, gazing into the fire. He tried to focus on the here and now. After all, he was trained to survive and keep his people safe.

But Daniel was four.

And probably sick.

For crying out loud... Jack threw a branch into the fire and watched the flares spark.

*What do we have, what do we need?*

They had Tylenol, which he could give Daniel in a low dose. Antibiotics... those were tricky since he had no idea how to reduce them for the kid. Then there was Daniel's personal stuff. His antihistamines, nasal spray and eye drops. Jack figured he could use the nasal spray on Daniel, if he needed it. He wasn't sure about the eye drops. If it was an allergic reaction... If it was a virus, all he had were the Tylenol and the antibiotics.

If it was a side effect of the downsizing...

Jack put his half-eaten meal down and went back into the tent to check on the little guy.

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The sight that greeted him made him curse. He rushed to the kid, who was still in the same position, curled up in his sleeping bag. There were two red spots on his cheeks now, and his hair was damp from sweat.

“Daniel?” Jack whispered as he took the kid by his shoulders. “Hey, buddy. I need you to wake up for a second, okay?”

Daniel stirred and opened glassy eyes. “Jack? Why you so blurry?”

Jack scooped him up and placed his cool hand on the hot forehead. “Sssh, it's just the fever. You hurt anywhere?”

A tiny nod, then, “My head...” After a pause, “My arms... an' legs... an' eyes.”

Jack quickly measured Daniel's temperature and wasn't surprised to see the fever had climbed to 102 degrees.

Crap!
“Okay. Let me help you up... here's some water...” Jack held the canteen to Daniel's lips and watched with relief as the tyke began to drink without a fuss. Jack let him take a few sips, then pulled the canteen away. “Good, Danny. Very good. You can have more, but you have to take meds with it...” Jack acted on autopilot as he lowered Daniel and snatched the Tylenol from the med kit. He used his knife to cut the pill into four pieces, then filled one of the foldable cups with water.

He supported Daniel’s head. “I have something for the fever and pain here, Danny.”

Jack took the small piece of pill on his second finger and brushed his thumb against the kid's lips. When Daniel automatically opened his mouth, Jack gently inserted the Tylenol.

“It's bitter, but you know the taste, right?” he soothed when Daniel grimaced and tried to turn his head away. Keeping him still with one hand on his cheek, Jack put a little pressure on Daniel's tongue, with his finger, to hold the pill in place until it started to dissolve. Then he pulled his finger out and held the cup to Daniel's lips. “Drink, Danny. Yeah, that's great. Easy... O-kay... there you go.” When he was sure the kid had swallowed the pill with enough water, Jack settled him down.

“I'll be right back. Have to check on Menkins,” Jack said and patted Daniel's face.

Daniel instantly started to whimper and held his arms out for Jack. “Don' go 'way...”

“I won't. I'll be back in a flash.”

“Nooo...” Tears started to form in his eyes. “Don' go 'way.”

Jack bit his lip and crawled to the tent's entrance to peer out at their prisoner. She was sitting by the fire, her hands tied. But her feet were still free. She could walk around and look for something to cut through her restraints.

Jack went back to the kid and took his hands. They were ice cold. “Look, Danny. I have to go out and tie her up again. You understand that, right? When I get back, I'll stay with you.” As an afterthought, he added, “You wanna play a little game?”

Daniel blinked and wiped at his face. He seemed more awake now. “Is it a fun game?”

“Oh, I think it is. Can you say out loud every Egyptian god you know? Bet I'm back before you reach... let's say... fifteen?”

Daniel frowned, but began, “Ra, Horus...”

Jack gave him the thumbs-up and hurried out. Menkins was still sitting beside the fire. It looked like she hadn't moved. Her cooking mug sat on the ground next to her. She didn't say anything when Jack put the restraints around her ankles and then tied her hands and feet together in front of her. That way she could sit or lie on her side but not move around too much.

“If there's an emergency, call,” he told her curtly. She just glared at him, her mouth a tight white line.

Daniel was still reciting gods when Jack returned.

“Isis, Osiris, Apophis...”

“So, how far'd you come?”

Daniel rubbed his eyes again. “Dunno. Forgot to count.”

Jack stretched out next to the kid's bedding, and Daniel immediately crawled into his arms and
snuggled against him. He was shivering now, and a quick peck to his forehead got Jack worried even more. The Tylenol didn't seem to be helping yet.

“Hey, buddy. How ya feelin’?”


“Funny, huh? What's funny?”


“Oy. You gonna be sick?”

“No, just... funny.” Daniel took Jack's hand and placed it on his chest. “In here.”

For a moment, O'Neill wasn't sure what the kid meant. Then he felt Daniel's little heart flutter and beat like a jackhammer. Even for a little kid, it seemed to be going way too fast. Of course, there was the fever... kids’ hearts sped up during fevers, right? For crying out loud... He had been a dad once. He should know this stuff. He'd been home several times when Charlie was sick...

Though Charlie had never been sick off world and Charlie had never been downsized...

Jack did the only thing he was good at. He rocked Daniel the way he had done with Charlie when he had a nightmare or hurt himself. Finally the shivering stopped, and as Jack rubbed his hand over Daniel's back in soothing circles, the heartbeat seemed to slow a bit. But he was still radiating heat.

Five minutes later Daniel had fallen asleep again.

Jack checked his watch. It would be safe to give Daniel another piece of Tylenol in an hour. He decided to hold off on the antibiotics. Hell, he had no idea what he was dealing with here.

For all he knew, antibiotics could help Daniel – or make him worse.

When it seemed the kid wasn't going to stir anytime soon, Jack searched through the medical kit. He found a box of alcohol wipes and quickly undressed Daniel without waking him. Then he started to rub the small body with the wipes. It was supposed to cool him. Jack hoped it would work or at least keep the fever from climbing higher. Daniel didn't wake up, but his breathing quickened, and at one point he made little mewling sounds and tossed his head from left to right.

“Easy, Danny... sssh... I've got you...” Jack mumbled as he placed one of the alcohol wipes on Daniel's forehead. ”You'll feel better soon. Don'tcha worry, big guy.”

The tissues seemed to dry instantly on the hot skin. Daniel was still burning up from inside. After repeating the treatment twice, Jack put the shirt back on Daniel before he placed two squeezable cold packs under Daniel's armpits, cursing the fact that they didn't have more than those two.

He placed his BDU jacket over the sleeping kid so he was lightly covered, but not overly warm. Jack made sure that Daniel was sleeping relatively calmly and then left the tent.

Menkins was lying on her side. When he walked past her, heading toward the river with both cooking mugs, she raised her head. “What’s wrong with him?”

“None of your business,” Jack answered curtly without slowing down.

He dumped the remaining macaroni, rinsed the mugs and filled them with cold water. He collected empty sample containers and filled them as well. He worked fast and kept his mind on the task at
hand as he went through their packs to find more vessels he could fill with water. When that was done, Jack placed his collection of containers, mugs and pouches next to the fire.

When he entered the tent again, Daniel was moving restlessly, moaning and whimpering in his sleep. Jack noticed how hot it was in the tent. The air seemed stuffy. The tents warmed up fast in the sun.

“Jack?” Daniel mumbled. “Whas going on?”

“You're sick. Do you still hurt?” Jack fished for the water canteen. “You need to drink some more.”

Daniel shook his head.

“Don't make me order you,” Jack joked weakly as he held the bottle to Daniel's lips. “Come on, bud. Humor me.”

Daniel swallowed a little bit of water, then shook his head again.

“You can do better. I need you to work with me here, Danny boy,” Jack coaxed.

“Not thirsty,” Daniel whispered.

“I know, I know. But we want to get this fever down, right? I need you to lead me to the other Stargate.”

“Faster without me.”

Jack placed a hand on Daniel's feverish cheek. “Stop saying that, will ya? We'll get you there, and we'll fix you. I want you to believe me, okay? You. Are. Not. Slowing. Us. Down.”

Troubled blue eyes gazed at him. “Am I doin' good, Jack?”

“Yeah,” Jack said, his voice trembling just a bit. “You're doing good. Damn good.”

Daniel smiled.

Then sleep took over again.

Jack managed to get another piece of Tylenol into Daniel without waking him. Later he carried Daniel outside and put him on top of a sleeping bag. He checked the temperature of the water inside the containers, satisfied that the sun had done its job of warming it slightly.

Jack took Daniel's shirt off, dipped a washcloth into the water and wiped him down. He was going to need more of the alcohol wipes later, if necessary. But first, he wanted to try water. He had to think long-term, and there was only one box of wipes. They could come in handy for disinfecting wounds or insect bites.

When Daniel felt a bit cooler to the touch, Jack dressed him and covered his short legs with the sleeping bag. He decided to stay outside. It was very warm, but the trees gave enough shade, and the air was much better than in the tent.

At one point, Daniel woke up and cried Jack's name.

“I'm here,” Jack said, taking Daniel's hot little hand in his.

“No tea, just water. But it's good.” Jack gave him more to drink before he took the canteen and refilled it. Then he sat down next to the sleeping child and waited.

The fever didn't break.

Jack placed a soaked towel on Daniel's head and put the cool packs back under his arms.

The fever didn't break.

He untied Menkins for a while so she could relieve herself and eat crackers with cheese.

The fever didn't break.

Dusk came, and Jack watched the sunlight vanish. When the incredible blue sky turned into orange, it looked like it was on fire.

Like Daniel.

Coaxing and crooning, Jack tried to get more water into the kid with little success.

When it was completely dark, he got his flashlight and carried Daniel back inside. Then Jack sent Menkins to her tent and tied her up again, leaving a canteen with her.

He gave Daniel the third piece of Tylenol with more water, and the kid swallowed but didn't open his eyes.

Jack wet the towel again and placed it back on the kid's forehead.

He settled down next to Daniel and waited.

The fever would break during the night.

Or not.

When Daniel stirred, Jack squeezed his shoulder to calm him. Daniel rolled on his side and whispered something.

“Hey, Danny,” Jack whispered back, searching for the flashlight in the dark. He had to see Daniel’s face.

“Flowers, Jack,” Daniel said suddenly, his voice clear and cheerful. “Pretty flowers. You see them?” His eyes were like deep, dark lakes in the ghostly white face as the light illuminated him. He reached for Jack with both arms, and Jack hugged him close, feeling the heat waves coming off the little body.

“What kind of flowers?” Jack asked as a cold hand touched his heart.

“Yellow and red... “

“Yeah? Where, Danny?”

“Under the trees. Like carpets... all over...”

Jack buried his face in the soft blond hair and took a deep breath. “Pick one for me?”

Daniel didn’t say anything for so long that Jack thought he had fallen asleep again.
He tried to calm himself.

High fevers caused hallucinations. Walking through an imaginary field of flowers was probably the best thing Daniel could do right now. He was better off not knowing how sick he was...

Daniel jerked awake again. “Scared.”

“You'll be all right, kiddo,” Jack said softly, ignoring the knot in his guts and the lump in his throat.

“No... You scared...”

_Oh, yeah, you can say that again, kiddo_, Jack thought. “No, I'm not. It's all right.”

“At I going to die, Jack?”

“No one's going to die, Daniel. You just feel very bad right now. Go back to sleep, buddy. I'll be right here.” He rubbed Daniel's back. His hand didn't shake, and his voice was all confidence, all calm.

Jack had no idea how he managed to keep up the act.

“’s not your fault,” Daniel whispered, and his arms crept around O'Neill's neck as he buried his face in the Colonel's shirt. “'s never your fault, Jack.” Then he went limp in O'Neill's arms.

“Daniel?” Jack squeaked. Yes, he squeaked... He jerked upright, put Daniel on his back and felt his pulse. It was still there but very weak and fluttering. A quick check with the temp strip...

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“No,” Jack whispered. “No way. Not again.” ...

The first time Daniel had died, he wasn't even dead for real. Some scary-looking underwater alien had messed with all of SG-1's minds to make them believe Daniel had died in a fire. Nem had needed Daniel for the search of his wife or family or whatever.

They had had a memorial service. Jack had been standing in the gate room and said all those nice things about Doctor Jackson, feeling the numbness again. He had known that feeling. It was an old buddy of Jack's; had showed up for the first time when Charlie died.

They had gotten rid of Daniel's apartment. At his wake in Jack's house, Jack had had lost it a little... okay maybe not just a little... and smashed the General's car window with his hockey stick.

It had been a close call, but Nem had spit Daniel out again, and they'd returned home safe...

...”I'll go get some sleep.”

“Ah, home. Yeah, about that apartment…”

“Oh, you didn't!”

“The, um, day after the memorial service.”

“Sam? The memorial service?”
"The colonel said some really nice things."

"He...he did. He did?"...

...The next time Daniel had really died, on Klorel's ship, Jack had been too focused on saving the rest of his team and Bra'tac and Earth – by blowing up the ship - to allow himself to feel anything but anger. Anger was good. It helped him focus and override the pain. There had been a painful moment... when Daniel had been on the floor, leaning against the wall...

..."I'll be dead anyway. Just get out of here!"

"I am not leaving you here, Daniel."

"Get out of here! You're just going to blow up with the other ship anyway. What difference does it make? Go! Just go! I'll stay—and watch your back."...

...Jack remembered looking at him, touching his bloody face, brushing his thumb over Daniel's cheek and feeling like screaming and cursing the fucking Goa'uld and the whole blasted universe.

He had stomped it down.

Had stomped it down and left Daniel behind.

The mission had to come first. He had a responsibility to save Earth... when all he had wanted was to not leave Daniel alone to die.

Later, when it had looked like they weren't going to make it... when they'd been stuck in those death gliders hanging in orbit around Earth... Jack had thought that at least this would be a way worth dying. Daniel would've loved the view with his sense for beauty and wonder.

Jack had looked at the planet that was his home world and thought that at least he wouldn't have to live with another failure in his life.

He had had lost people before. He was military, and when he had to, he killed to live or to save the lives of his people. Every life he took left a scar somewhere inside him. But the ghosts of those who were his friends, his family, his son... Those were the ones that haunted him.

After they'd been rescued, Daniel had been there... just there with that smile on his face and the twinkle in his eyes... Jack had hugged the stuffing out of the kid and embarrassed them both in front of everyone in the gate room without giving a damn about it.

He knew the ghosts were still going to haunt him, but Daniel’s wasn't one of them. Because Daniel was right there. Alive. His spacemonkey.

Jack had vowed then he was going to make sure Daniel never became one of his ghosts.

The next time Daniel had died, he'd managed to get them all imprisoned by that bitch Princess Shyla.
It had been a rat hole, the food was lousy and the Goa'uld weren't even real Goa'uld. Once Jack had gotten over his anger – Daniel had, after all, just tried to save her life – they'd figured out how to get out of there. There had been some ruckus, and a troop of wannabe-Jaffa fired their staffs at them. A blast had hit the rocks above Daniel’s head, sending them cascading on him.

Jack hadn’t been fast enough to reach him in time. He had forgotten that Daniel was still chained and unable to move – that had been Jack’s mistake, making a move before all of his team were in a position to run.

Shyla had stuck Daniel in a sarcophagus. He'd come back a little nutso and got worse later, but they’d figured it out, and a few weeks after that, they had their boy back. A little ruffled, but okay.

There had been more close calls. For all of them. But Jack had gotten too close to Daniel a long time before he had died that first time. And he had had a hard time not letting his overprotective streak for Daniel get in the way of his ability to lead his team.

Daniel was like his... no, not his kid. Charlie had been his kid. There was no other son in Jack's life. Yet, Daniel had come close to something like family. Even closer than Carter and Teal'c on a level Jack didn’t really understood.

It just was, and Jack didn't dwell on the why or how.

But like he hadn't been able to save Charlie, Jack seemed unable to keep Daniel safe. No matter what he did or how closely he watched his six, Daniel slipped through his hands like water.

Jack realized he had been compromised a long time before he and Daniel had become lovers. They were linked to each other since that first mission to Abydos.

And somewhere down the line, Jack O'Neill’s affection and feelings had gotten in the way. Which was why he had broken up with Daniel in the end. Aside from the fact that Daniel was better off without Jack, it had been the right decision. Jack was a leader, and his team had to come first. A relationship between Jack and Daniel wasn’t good for the team or their work.

And neither of them was in a position to leave the SGC or SG-1. They were the flagship team. Jack had to see the bigger picture, and having his civilian consultant in his bed was not part of it. Period.

Yet, he couldn't change the way he... felt.

It wouldn't go away.

Even his outward attitude of being an ass who couldn't care less about Daniel's feelings or Daniel's work or Daniel's ... anything hadn’t helped O'Neill to get a grip. He might have fooled Daniel, though. So Daniel had stayed away, backed off, whatever.

It was for his own good on a whole lot of levels Jack wouldn't spell out for him.

Of course, now everything was upside down.

Daniel was little.

And Jack was about to lose him again.

TBC with ch 8 Ding Dong the Witch is Dead
Chapter 8

Ding Dong the Witch is Dead

Most of the alcohol wipes were spent, and the cool packs were back on Daniel's body.

Jack couldn't make him drink anymore. Daniel was in a deep fevered sleep, breathing shallowly, tossing and turning on his sleeping bag, refusing to swallow the water.

He had considered putting him directly into the stream, even though he was pretty sure applying really cold water to a febrile body wasn't reced in the medical books because the shock might be too great, especially for such a small body. But he was running out of options here...

Finally, O'Neill burst into Menkins's tent and shook her awake. “Hey! You're an biologist, right? You're a doctor.”

She blinked, blinded by his flashlight, and nodded.

“He's had a fever for hours, and nothing I do brings it down. Any ideas what's going on? Something to do with the shrinking?”

"Why would I care?"

“Because I am holding a gun in my hand? I'm a desperate man, Menkins,” Jack said in a deadly voice. The fact that he had sought her out should give away HOW desperate he really was.

She pushed herself up into a sitting position. “I don't know. It could be a side effect. Maybe his cells are changing. Might be a retrovirus.”

“Right. What's that do?”

“Overides DNA to replicate. We know it as a virus, whose primary characteristic is, through the process of reverse transcriptase, to synthesize a copy of DNA from its own RNA, using it as a template. The viral DNA will integrate into a host cell chromosome, where it becomes known as a provirus. Then, one of two things happens: the viral DNA can remain latent, replicating whenever the host cell replicates, or it can begin transcription on its own and produce many new viruses, infecting nearby cells. Finally, the virus can also convert the host cell into a tumor cell. HIV is caused by a retrovirus. But in this case, I don’t think that’s what's happening.”

Jack waved the gun at her. “Go on.”

“If it is a retrovirus, it's created by Nirrti. Either way, I believe what's happening to Daniel is part of the transformation. You can't just change an adult into a child without any side effects. And the rejuvenation was probably the beginning of a longer process. We don't know what happened to the 'chosen ones' after Nirrti took them to her palace.” Menkins shrugged.

“So this... virus is like a step forward. That what you’re saying?”
“Maybe. Either it's a step all the children went through, or it's a side effect which only occurs if the children aren't sent to the palace to undergo further adjustments. I cannot tell without my lab.” She cocked her head. “Untie me, Colonel.”

“Now why would I do that?”

“So I can take a look at him.”

They glared at each other in the hard light of the flashlight. Menkins outstretched her hands. “I might be able to help.”

“How?” Jack gripped his gun more tightly.

“Colonel, as you said, you're a desperate man. I'll take a blood sample. There should be a small device in my medical kit. It looks like a syringe or more like a pen. It's a quick tester for various viruses. All we need is one drop of Daniel’s blood.”

Jack reached for his knife. “Can it detect a retrovirus? And if it is one, what do I do?”

“This device has been modified especially for my work. I was going to draw a blood sample and analyze it right after the downsizing, but the brat kept running away and you came around too quickly,” Menkins muttered. “Yes, it will be able to detect a retrovirus.”

“What if it is one?”

“Then we can't treat him,” she said. “Not here. But there's a slim chance it's not a retro. It might be a normal virus which the tester will determine as well. You may be able to treat that with antibiotics.”

Jack opened her pack and searched the med kit for the blood tester. He finally found it hidden in the bag with a syringe. It was a gray small object and looked like a cross between a pen and an injector.

He shoved it into his pants pocket before cutting Menkins's restraints. Aiming his gun at her, he ordered her to stand. “Get any ideas and I'll shoot you.”

As they stepped outside, the first signs of daybreak had begun to lift the dense blackness of night.

Daniel was asleep, his shirt had dried on his body. He had stopped sweating, but Jack wasn't sure it was a good sign. He probably was so dehydrated that there was no fluid left in him.

Jack made Menkins sit on his own sleeping bag.

“Okay. Here we go. What do you need?”

She reached for the tester, but Jack shook his head. “You're not touching him. Tell me what to do.”

“Pull the tester apart and cut his thumb with the lancet. Then touch the blood with the tip of the sampler. The blood will flow up into the sampler tip. Then you put it back together and lock the sampler in the lower housing. That's it. Blood and diluent will flow together in the strip filter. Takes fifteen minutes until you get a result. There will be two lines. If only the lower line appears, it's not a retrovirus. If both lines appear, the result is positive. There was a portable lab with my equipment for further analyzes, but 'you' left it at the gate.”

Jack took the small object apart and found the lancet attached to the upper part. He bent over Daniel and took his left hand. “This won't hurt much, Daniel. Just a tiny sting,” he mumbled to the child, not knowing if Daniel even realized what was going on around him.
Jack put the tiny thumb between his own fingers and carefully held it. He was about to make the cut when, out of the corner of his eye, he saw Menkins coming.

O'Neill tried to block her, but she had the advantage of surprise.

A fist hit his right cheekbone, and only his fast reflexes made him throw himself sideways so he wouldn't squash Daniel underneath him. It was a miracle the tent didn't collapse on them.

Jack turned as he heard Menkins's harsh breath and the click of his gun being unlocked.

“Stay where you are, or I'll kill the boy. Not that it makes any difference,” she snarled.

Then the flashlight went out, and he heard her moving. Jack knew this was his chance to deck her, but he couldn't risk her firing the gun in the tent and accidentally hitting Daniel. It was still too dark to see properly without the light.

He heard the tent flaps rustle.

“Menkins!” Jack yelled. “Where do you think you're going?!”

Somewhere next to him, Daniel started crying, high-pitched and distressed wails.

Jack crawled to the tent door. Daniel's cries plucked at his heart strings, but he had to stop Menkins. She had his gun. He stumbled out of the tent, glad for dawn.

The sky had turned into dark gray.

And there he saw her, only an outline, a shadow.

But it was enough?

With a few steps, he was behind her, and a split second later they were rolling over the grass. Fists landed on various body parts, and finally he managed to knee her in the stomach. Menkins let out an incoherent yell as she went flying off Jack, landing on her back.

Daniel's cries echoed loudly in Jack's ears.

Menkins had lost the gun when Jack jumped her. But she recovered quickly, came to her knees and drew a knife.

Jack briefly wondered how she had gotten her hands on a knife, then remembered cutting Daniel's meds with one of his two knives. He must've left it in the tent instead of putting it back in his belt...

Crap.

The wails from the tent had stopped.

He took a step back, then sidestepped and threw himself at the gun. Grabbing it and rolling over his shoulder, he aimed and yelled, "Menkins, stop!"

She raised the hand with the knife, ready to throw, her eyes unnaturally wild in the first silver light of day. “It's all your damn fault, O'Neill. You'll lose your precious Daniel anyway. You ruined everything for me. It's only fair that he dies now.”

“You're sick, Menkins! Put the damn knife down! It doesn't have to go like this!”
“You won’t even be there when he dies because you'll die first,” she snapped.

“I'll shoot you,” he said, detached and cold, as the sky above them turned orange.

Her face twisted into a smile, which gave Jack the creeps, as she looked at something behind his back. “Maybe you can still die together...”

She leaped forward, the knife high over her head.

Jack fired.

***

Birds flew up from the trees in droves.

Three yells, one of death, one of anger and one of fear, echoed through the woods.

Then all was quiet and still.

The birds settled back on the trees, a few feet away.

Jack gazed at the lifeless body. The impact of the shot had thrown Menkins backwards. She was lying at the foot of a tree.

It was light now, the orange fading, the sky turning into a brilliant blue, chasing the night away.

Jack turned in slow motion, still holding his gun in both hands... and there was Daniel.

O'Neill opened his mouth, but no words came out as his eyes locked with the deep dark blue ones staring back at him. He lowered the gun, secured it and let it slip from his fingers. It hit the ground with a low thump. Jack went to his knees, extending his hands toward the frozen little figure in front of him, an almost pleading gesture.

“Daniel...”

Daniel took a step back, his eyes still locked with Jack's, his lips moving silently.

“Daniel, don't...”

Daniel spun around and, on wobbly legs, tumbled away from Jack, into the forest.

Jack sucked in a sharp breath and followed, leaving Menkins and his gun behind in the clearing.

It didn't take long before he caught up with the kid. Daniel was more tottering than running, but he was still on his feet.

“Daniel... Danny...” Jack scooped him up into his arms, expecting the kid to scream or attack him. Instead, Daniel went stiff like a pole when Jack hugged him close. “I'm sorry you had to see that,” he whispered to the unresponsive child. “God, I'm so sorry... She was going to attack us. She... Daniel, please...”

He leaned against a tree and slid to the ground, cradling Daniel to him, still feeling the heat from the feverish body through their layers of clothing. “Come on, Daniel...” Jack crooned, rubbing his back. “It's over now. Talk to me... say something... anything...” He looked down at the bowed head and stiff body. “God, Daniel...”
Then Jack froze as he noticed their surroundings.

They were sitting against a large tree among lots of other large trees. But around them, the whole ground was covered in little yellow and red blooms.

“Flowers, Jack... Pretty flowers. You see them?”

“Yellow and red... “

“Under the trees. Like carpets... all over...”

“What the...” Jack loosened his grip around Daniel and reached out to pick one of the yellow blooms. He held it to his nose and sniffed the strong scent.

“Tea... Lemon... “

Jack rubbed the leaves between two fingers and sniffed again.

Lemon.

“Are those the flowers from Ashu's garden?”

“Yes. I can't remember all their names. But I know what they look like and what they do.”

“What they do?”

“Yes. They heal. Or you can eat them.”

“So you remember what their purpose is and what they look like but not what they're called? Sounds like me. Need to know.”

“Daniel,” Jack said, nudging the still-silent child, “will these flowers help you get rid of the fever?”

Daniel raised his head and looked at him, then at the flower in Jack's hand. He relaxed slightly and nodded.

“Okay. I promise we'll talk about what just happened. Later. First we have to make some tea.” Jack struggled to get to his feet with Daniel in his arms. He hurried back to camp, cupping the back of Daniel's head with one hand, pressing the boy's face against his shoulder so Daniel didn't have to look at Menkins's body when they entered the clearing.

Jack grabbed a cooking mug and, without putting Daniel down, trotted back to the carpet of flowers. Settling Daniel under a tree, Jack picked whole flowers with leaves, stems and roots, until the mug was filled.

Back at camp, he took Daniel into their tent and rummaged through his pack until he found the kid's journal. “I'm sorry, I have to read in it...” Jack began to apologize, when small hands reached for it.

“You gonna help me with this?”

Daniel nodded and when Jack handed him the book, flipped through the pages until he found what he was looking for. Then he gave it back to Jack.

“Right. They're called zitronas,” Jack read aloud. “Steep their blooms and leaves in hot water, then drink. Tea needs to have a yellow color. That's it?”
Daniel's head bobbed up and down.

“First we need water,” Jack said with more confidence than he felt. “You think you can wait here by yourself?”

Daniel shook his head.

“Okay, grasshopper. Come on.”

Once outside, Jack picked him up again, and Daniel buried his face in Jack's neck. He got fresh water from the river, jiggling Daniel on his hip with one arm because two small fists were clutching his t-shirt in a death-grip.

It wasn't easy, but Jack managed.

“I'll start the fire again, so we can heat the water,” Jack explained on their way back to camp. “And I have to put you down for that, bud.”

When they were back at the clearing, Daniel squeezed his eyes shut but didn't protest when Jack settled him on the grass. Daniel covered his eyes with his hands, so he didn't have to look at Menkins.

Jack had to take care of her body. But not now. Now he needed this tea for Daniel. Jack was glad the kid was walking and interacting again. But he was still feverish, his eyes were still glassy, and the two red splotches were still on his pale face.

This wasn't over yet.

Jack worked fast, putting the remaining wood into the ashes and lighting it up. He crouched in front of the fire pit and blew until the first flames licked at the dry branches.

Once the fire was going, Jack placed the container with the water between two stones so it could heat. The flowers were in the cooking mug beside him. As he plucked the roots and stems off them, Jack realized that Daniel had removed his hands from his face and was now gazing across the small fire to Menkins. From here, she looked like she was taking a nap, propped up against the tree. If there wasn't that bloody, little hole in her chest...

Jack paused and watched him. “Daniel?”

“She's gone,” Daniel said in a raspy voice.

“Yeah.”

“She was very angry.”

Jack bit his lip and continued ripping roots and stems from the flowers. 

Sure, she was angry, kiddo, Jack thought. We ruined her plans, and then she was stuck with us. She almost killed me, and she wanted you dead too. Pretty angry, yeah. Of course, you have to feel sorry for her. You're probably mad at me for shooting her. Crap. Just like it had been when he was still... big.

Jack looked up when he heard some rustling next to him. Daniel was crawling backwards, away from him, his eyes huge and scared.

“Daniel?”
“You're mad,” Daniel said fearfully.

“Hey, hey... I'm not mad,” Jack soothed, holding out a hand to the kid. “C'mere. It's okay.”

“Yes, you are.” But he stopped and cocked his head, blinking at Jack with his slightly red-rimmed eyes. “You were. Just now. Now...”

“No, I'm not...” Jack snapped his mouth shut. What exactly was going on here? Swallowing the soothing nonsense he was about to utter, Jack cleared his throat and continued. “I was angry with her, not with you. She... she tried to hurt you, Daniel.”

And how the heck do you know what I am feeling? But he didn't say that out loud. Instead, he asked, “You wanna help with this?”

Daniel came back to sit next to Jack. He took a flower and very carefully stripped it of stem and roots.

When the water started to boil, Jack put the blooms and leaves into it, stirred with one of their spoons, then let it steep until the tea had a bright yellow color. The smell of lemon was very intense now. Jack fished the blooms and leaves out and blew over the hot beverage a few times before he handed it to Daniel.

“Careful. It's still hot.”

Daniel sipped at the tea and grimaced. “I don' like it.”

“You said it'll help.”

“Uh-huh.” He took another sip, grimaced again, but bravely drank more.

“That's my boy,” Jack praised.

Immediately Daniel's face lit up, and he swallowed more of the tea. Jack felt oddly touched. He had noticed how much this version of Daniel seemed to need reassurance and how every word of encouragement and approval made his eyes sparkle.

When Daniel had finished the tea, he leaned against Jack's side and closed his eyes. “Tired.”

Jack picked him up and cradled him, watching the small boy relax instantly as he fell asleep. He wondered if this was really going to work. The medkit was in the tent, so once Daniel’s sleep had deepened, Jack settled him on the warm grass and went to get the thermometer strip. He also pulled Daniel's sleeping bag outside so the kid wouldn't have to sleep in the hot, narrow tent.

The air was warm but fresh, and it wasn't as humid as it had been the first day after the rain.

Daniel’s fever was still 101... way too high... but not the terrifying 105 anymore. Jack wondered if Daniel's manipulated DNA gave his body the ability to endure higher temperatures. Charlie had never had a fever over 101 degrees. Anything over that would have sent them rushing to the ER. Of course, there was no ER on Kansas planet, so Jack didn't have any choice but to work with what he had.

Well, he had been desperate enough to ask Menkins for help.

Little good it had done them.

Jack left the kid for a moment to move Menkins's body behind the trees so she wouldn't be in sight
when Daniel woke up.

***

It was a long day.

Jack made new tea three times before he ran out of flowers. Daniel drank, in short periods of being awake, then fell back to sleep. He was sweating a lot again, and Jack had to wipe him down with a wet cloth several times. He changed Daniel out of the sweat-soaked shirt from Ashu into his old black BDU tee. Later, when the new shirt had dried, he changed him back into it.

He'd have to wash both shirts once Daniel was better.

In between, Jack broke down Menkins's tent and wrapped her body in it, then hid it behind the trees again.

When the sun stood low in its glorious orange behind the trees, Daniel finally felt cooler under Jack's hand, and the sweating had stopped. He was now curled on top of his bag, sleeping peacefully, making little snuffling sounds.

Jack smiled tiredly as he munchen on a handful of crackers for dinner. He remembered how he had sometimes woken up at nights when they'd shared a tent off world or when Daniel used to stay over at Jack's place... how he would wake up and listen to Daniel sleeping. Jack knew the sounds of sleeping Daniel so well.

The way he snuffled from time to time, or mumbled.

Jack had liked listening to adult Daniel's sleeping noises. How he'd smacked his lips or gave those contented little sighs just before plastering himself against Jack in the early morning hours.

Jack lay down next to the sleeping child and gazed into the evening sky. He'd have to carry Daniel back into the tent soon. It would be dark in another hour...

... He woke up to warm lips planting feather-light kisses to the base of his neck and a nose nuzzling his hair. There was just that split second where he stiffened and his semi-conscious mind let the alarms go off, then he relaxed and craned his neck a little to give Daniel more access, more skin to nibble on.

“Hey,” Daniel murmured in his ear.

“Mmh,” Jack mumbled as he pushed back lazily into Daniel, who was warm and solid... and interested. “Wha's up?”

“Can't sleep.”

“Why?”

“Because.” Daniel’s teeth nipped his earlobe. “Thinking... you know... about... stuff.”

“Yeah?” Jack reached back and pulled Daniel's arm over his own body, to kiss the fingertips. Then he placed Daniel's hand on his chest, and Daniel stroked through Jack's chest hair, gently tweaking a nipple.
“Yeah.”

Jack waited for more, and when Daniel didn’t say anything else but stopped the nipping and stroking, he rolled onto his back to look at his lover in the semi-darkness of the room. He couldn’t see Daniel’s eyes, but the way he lowered his head made Jack cringe.

He hated meaning-of-life stuff in the middle of the night.

“Daniel?”

“Uh, yeah... sorry I woke you. Just... just go back to sleep, okay?”

And Jack wanted to. He really did. Because talks that started like this were usually making him uncomfortable and even more so when it was this early. The sun wasn't even up yet.

“Well, you can't just wake me, make me horny and then tell me to go back to sleep,” Jack grumbled, against his better judgment.

“Sorry.” Daniel pulled back, and the solid warm body was gone.

“Aht, c'me back here.” Jack reached for him and pulled him close. Now it was him, plastered against Daniel’s back. “What's wrong?”

After a moment, Daniel turned over so they were face to face, noses touching. “Do you think we're getting too close to each other or anything? I mean, this... me, you... this... thing...”


“Do you?” Jack asked back, only because he didn't know what else to say. Answering a question with a question was always a good stalling tactic.

Daniel licked his lips. “I... I don't know. Are we? I mean... I'm not very good with this whole relationship... um... It was never something that worked out for me very well.”

“Daniel, it’s been four weeks. Don'tcha think we should just enjoy it and see how it turns out?” Jack asked wearily.

He didn't want to discuss their relationship. Because once they began to analyze and discuss, Jack would have to deal with his own issues. And he really didn't want that. Daniel felt so good, here, next to Jack. Right where he belonged. At nights and in the early morning hours when they were in bed together, everything seemed so easy, the problems so far away.

Jack wanted to keep it that way.

However, Daniel wasn't on his wavelength...

“Yes, yes, we should. But four weeks... that's not like just dating anymore. Or a one-night stand, right? That's more like... being together like...” Daniel left the sentence hanging in the air.

Jack raised an eyebrow. “Like?”

“You're not helping here,” Daniel huffed.

“Helping with what?” Jack asked, frowning. “Look. I think it's a bit early to analyze the whole...”

“Right.” Daniel sighed. “I guess all I want to know is if you're still okay with this. I'm aware we’re
both taking a huge risk in being together...”

Jack placed a finger under Daniel's chin and lifted his face. He captured his lover's lips in a gentle kiss, which soon turned into something more passionate. Daniel opened his mouth, and their tongues started a playful battle. When they broke for air, Jack whispered, “That okay enough for ya?”

“You know, every time I start talking about us, you... Mmmpf...”

Jack kissed him again, more forcefully, one hand firmly on Daniel's skull to hold him in place.

“Things can be talked to death...” Jack said when they parted. He put a finger on Daniel's bottom lip and playfully pulled it down. Daniel's tongue came out to flick at the finger, before he drew back and shook his head.

“You're stalling.”

“And? So? Therefore?”

“Jack...”

Oh, for crying out loud. Jack fell back on the bed. Covering his eyes with his right arm, he sighed. “Daniel, what do you want from me?”

“I want to know where I stand,” he said quietly.

What the... “What do you mean, where you stand? Daniel, so help me, sometimes you're worse than my wife...”

Oh, shit.

Daniel was out of bed and picking up his clothes so fast, Jack didn’t even have time to blink. He followed as Daniel bolted out of the room and down the hall.

“Daniel...”

“Don't,” Daniel snapped, his voice cold and hard, as he marched down into the living room and started putting on his pants.

Jack caught Daniel's shirt before he could pull it over his head. “Crap, Daniel...”

Daniel didn't let go of his shirt. “I'll drive in early. It's too late to go home now.”

“I'll make you coffee,” Jack offered, hating the pleading tinge in his voice.

“No. Thanks, but no.”

“I didn't mean... that.”

“Yes, you did.”

“No, I didn't.” They were still both holding onto Daniel's shirt, and Jack pulled at it, reeling Daniel in until they were standing very close. “Let me make you coffee... please?”

Daniel took a deep breath. “You've been drawing back from me, Jack. Ever since downtime was over, you...”
“Coffee, Daniel.”

“If you ever compare me to your wife again, I’m out of here.”

“I know.” Jack could see the battle between giving in or kicking Jack’s ass from here to Chulak in Daniel’s eyes. “Toast?”

Daniel snatched the shirt out of Jack's hand and put it on. Then he brushed past Jack and walked into the kitchen. Huffing a breath of relief, Jack followed him and filled the coffee maker. While the machine did its gargling and hissing, Jack leaned against the kitchen counter, crossing his arms over his chest.

“I'm sorry,” he said.

Daniel cocked his head and gave him a long look. He knew how hard it was for Jack to apologize. His voice had lost its edge when he said, “I know.”

“Look, I'm not good with words, and you know it.”

“I know.”

“I've been alone a long time...”

“So have I. We're probably both a little burned.” Daniel sighed.

“I'm not backing off. It's just...”

“...not so easy, yeah. I get it. It isn't for me either. Guess that was what I was trying to tell you.”

“Yeah.” Jack scratched his chest hair, suddenly feeling a little too naked. “I guess I should get dressed.”

When he returned, wearing his old sweats and a tee, Daniel had placed mugs on the table. Jack got the pot and filled them. He snatched the milk from the fridge and sat down opposite Daniel.

He tried to figure out if the crisis was over or just postponed until later. Figuring he had to say something more, Jack muttered, “We have to keep it low-key at the mountain, Daniel.”

“Jack... Do you think I'm an idiot? I'm your subordinate. I'm on your team. You can't do it with me anymore than you could do it with Sam, even if I'm a civilian. I 'know' we have to keep it low-key. I know what's at stake. This isn't about me wanting more attention or whining for a coming out on the whole.”

“Then 'what' is it?”

“You're overreacting. You're avoiding me like I'm contagious or something. We never have lunch anymore, unless it's all four of us. We never work out in the gym together anymore. When was the last time you stopped by my office to annoy me and fiddle with my rocks?”

“Artifacts,” Jack said with a smirk.

Daniel snorted.

“You always tell me to get out when I fiddle with your rocks.”

“Yes, I know. It's what I do. And it's never kept you from coming back and doing it anyway.”
Jack scrubbed a hand through his hair. “There's lots of paperwork lately with all those missions...”

“Jack, this is me you're talking to.” Daniel snarled. “That paperwork excuse is so lame.”

“All right, all right!” Jack huffed. “You know what it's like. They gossip at the mountain. Remember when Lou was here to warn me? I got a little worried.”

“We've been over this,” Daniel sighed, frustration in his voice. “They've always talked about us, they always will. They talk about you and Sam, too. Just because it's true now doesn't mean anybody knows about us. Since when do you care about rumors anyway?”

I don't want anybody to hurt you. “I'm just being careful.”

“It's like you're two different people. You act like you barely know me at the mountain, and when we're alone, you're suddenly back to being yourself.”

Jack cringed. “Look, I'm sorry. Lou was pretty serious, and I think it's better if we keep it a little... down for a while. It's nothing to do with you and me, okay?”

A long silence hung between them. Heavy and uncomfortable. Finally Daniel pushed his chair away and stood. “Okay.”

Jack let out a sigh of relief. “Sweet. You want some toast now?”

“Sure.” Daniel shrugged.

They had breakfast and then showered together and made up for the argument. But even as Jack lost himself in the sensation of pleasuring Daniel with his many talents in tongue action, he had felt the foreshadowing of something bad creeping up on them....

... Jack woke to something tugging at his shirt. He bolted upright, instantly awake. It was already dark, but the fire was still strong. Daniel looked down at him, his face orange in the firelight. “I feel better,” he informed Jack.

Jack slapped both hands over his face and groaned. “I'm sorry I fell asleep.”

“'s okay. I slept, too. Are you going to bury Doctor Menkins, Jack?”

The question had come out of the blue, and Jack needed a moment to think about it. He hadn't decided what to do with Menkins's body. His only worry had been for Daniel. Menkins was dead, and as far as Jack was concerned, he'd just leave her behind the trees to rot. There wasn't a high possibility that someone would find her out here.

“We should bury her,” Daniel said solemnly.

“We don't even have a shovel.” Jack sighed.

“Bury her. It's the right thing to do.” Daniel was very insistent. “What if animals start eating her, Jack? That's just gross. What if animals eat parts of her and get sick... what if...”

“Okay, okay. I'll think of something. Calm down,” Jack cut him off. Animals biting off chunks of Menkins's body really was a gross visual. And he was too tired to have a fight with a four year old who was just recovering from a deadly illness. “Let's talk about it in the morning.”
Daniel leaned against him. “Jack? I'm hungry.”

“Are you now? That's a good sign, I'd say.” Jack didn't smother the bright grin as the bitter memories of his dream slowly lost its edge.

“Can I have something that tastes like chicken?”

“Yeah, sure, yeah, betcha. But first...” He placed a hand on Daniel's brow.

The heat was gone. Daniel's skin was smooth and cool under Jack's hand.

Not even slightly warm anymore.

“I'm okay now,” Daniel said, frowning. “No more yucky tea.”

“No,” Jack said, voice trembling, as he pulled the tyke into his arms and hugged the stuffing out of him. “No more yucky tea.” He buried his face in Daniel's matted hair and squeezed his damp eyes tightly shut as he thanked every god who might listen to prayers of old, irreligious Colonels that his little Daniel was still alive. “We have to remember the recipe, though.”

Daniel wriggled and, when Jack loosened his hold around him, pushed back a little, his hands resting on Jack's shoulders. “You're crying.”

“Nah, I think I got something in my eyes,” Jack whispered hoarsely.

“I just had a little fever.” Daniel tilted his head and added, “I didn't die this time.”

Jack blinked to clear his vision. “You think as long as you don't die, it's nothing to worry about?”

Daniel shrugged. Then he threw his arms around Jack's neck and did the sumo thing again. “I know. I'm happy I didn't die, too.”

Jack choked and laughed and felt his eyes water again. “You can't just leave me here. How am I supposed to get to the Stargate without you, Daniel?”

The kid giggled. “You'd have to show how smart you really are.”

“Ouch.”

TBC w Ch 9 A Bed of Flowers
The next morning came way too early for Jack. He hadn't had a very peaceful night. Every once in a while, he had bolted out of an exhausting sleep, reaching out to feel Daniel's head for fever. His had body wanted nothing more than to crash and sleep for twelve hours or more, but his mind didn't seem to really believe the crisis was over.

Daniel, however, had slept through the night and was still in slumberland when Jack went for a short wash at the river and to collect new firewood. He also found some very long, thick sticks near their campsite.

He had the fire going and was pondering whether or not to start working on Menkins's grave while Daniel was still asleep when the kid showed up in the tent entrance.

His short blond hair was ruffled, and his eyes were still half-closed as he came over to where Jack sat beside the fire. Daniel slumped down next to him, and Jack did the temperature check, kissing him on the forehead.

All normal.

“Morning, camper. Sleep well?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Want some breakfast? The menu offers turkey sandwich or strawberry jam sandwich... water from our freshest natural spring and, oh... the apple pie from yesterday.”

“Apple pie,” Daniel yawned.

Jack had coffee and the rest of the crackers while Daniel enjoyed his apple pie. It was sunny again, the sky an incredible blue.

“Pfack?” Daniel mumbled between two bites of apple pie.

“Daniel, chew, swallow,” Jack chided mildly.

After doing as he was told, Daniel repeated, “Jack?”

“Daniel?”

“Where's Doctor Menkins?”

Jack flicked an imaginary hair out of his coffee mug. He wondered whether Daniel didn't remember that she was dead or if he was asking where her body was. “She’s...”

“Did you bury her already?”

Okay, so that answered that issue. “Not yet. I... uh... have to do that soon, though. You can stay in the tent. I'll bury her right here in the clearing.”
Daniel put the rest of his pie down and wiped a hand over his mouth. “Can we bury her in the flowers by the trees? Or we could burn her body. It's a custom in many cultures to lay out the body and then burn it,” Daniel suggested.

“It’s too dangerous. With all these trees, it's most likely we’d get ourselves a forest fire,” Jack replied, wondering if he should have this conversation with a four year old. “I was thinking of using a digging stick. The soil should be pretty easy to dig in.”

“Lots of ancient cultures used digging sticks,” Daniel confirmed.

“Yeah, I bet.” Jack pointed at the heavy, long sticks lying next to the fire. “You think those will do?”

“You need a foot plow,” Daniel said after examining the wood.

“Ah. And how do I make a foot plow?”

“It can be a strong branch that you put your foot on,” Daniel explained eagerly. “It’s like using a shovel.”

“Good thinking, bud. But I'm not sure the pine wood is hard enough for that, even if we harden it in the fire. It might break. Though what passes for pine here is a lot harder than what we have on Earth.”

Daniel watched him as he prepared the digging stick with his knife, whittling a point at the end.

“Where’d you learn how to do that, Jack?”

“Basic survival training.”

“Oh. Like when you made the bows and arrows on the Nox planet?”

“Yep.”

“Can I try it, too?”

“Nope.”

Daniel sighed. “You always worry 'bout me, Jack. I knew how to use a knife before.”

“Yes, you did. But your fingers are much shorter now, and I'm not sure if you remember correctly,” Jack said without pausing in his work.

“You said you'd help me to 'member if I forgot.”

“I did. But you'll just have to leave the sharp stuff to me for now. It's not worth losing a finger, don'tcha think?”

Daniel sulked for a while, but when Jack had finished the stick and asked him to take a look at it, the kid was all expert. “It looks cool, Jack. Very sharp. Now you haveta make it hard, so it won't break, right?”

“Right. You can do that, actually. Hold the stick over the blaze, but watch it. We don't want it to catch fire.”

The fire wasn’t very strong anymore, and Jack figured it was safe to let Daniel hold the soon-to-be digging stick.
“Am I doing it right? Are you going to make one for me, too?” Daniel watched the stick like a hawk while he fired off his questions. “And can we bury her with the flowers?”

“Oy,” Jack sighed. “Daniel, I'd rather you get some more rest and take it easy today. How about you write something in your journal or…”

“I feel fine. And I want to help,” Daniel insisted stubbornly. “I know 'bout dead people. I'm an anthrologist. I'm not afraid of her.” Then he looked up at Jack, a sincere expression in those two orbs of blue. “Not anymore, Jack. She's gone now. I felt her pain when you shot her. And how angry she was before that. I was scared. But not anymore.”

They really had to talk about this feeling stuff, Jack decided, as he guided Daniel's hand a little so the stick wasn't going to catch fire. “I don't want you to dig, though.” When Daniel opened his mouth to protest, Jack raised a finger. “Aht. No buts. You've been sick, and it's getting hot. I have to bury her now so she won't be out in the sun for too long.”

Daniel sighed again but nodded.

***

The soil was very loose, and the stick worked well under the circumstances. Yet, the sun was high in the air when Jack finally worked out how to do this best. He was able to throw off bigger chunks of soil with the stick, but it wasn't a perfect substitute for a shovel. So after a lot of under-his-breath cursing, getting dirty and sweaty, he finally used the largest sample container they had to shovel out earth.

It was a joke.

A bad one.

How on Earth had all those ancient cultures buried their dead without a shovel? Not all of them had built tombs or cremated the bodies, right? Though, thinking of tombs... how the hell had they been able to build those... oh, yeah. Probably all Goa'uldy-made. Well, Jack could have used a staff weapon right now. His own gun couldn’t shoot big honkin' holes into the ground. The zat only blackened the area, but didn't generate any holes.

A phaser would be cool, too.

Daniel was busy picking flowers and putting them into various other vessels like cooking mugs and more sample containers. Daniel also ratted off burial rituals he remembered. Of the Ancient Greeks, Egyptians... Even though Jack zoned him out, he was sure the kid mangled a few of those cultures in his explanation marathon.

Frankly, he had no idea how long he had spent digging with only a few breaks for getting water and preparing something to eat for the kid. But somewhere down the line, Jack had excavated a hole deep enough to put the tent-wrapped body into and cover it with soil and rocks. It wasn't great, and it probably wouldn't hold off wild animals for long, but it was at least a grave.

As he heaved the tent-wrapped body into it, Daniel came running from the tree he had been napping under just a few minutes ago. Silently he picked up the bloom-filled mugs and threw the yellow and red flowers into the grave. They drifted down and settled on the tent canvas like paint droplets.

“If she was Indian... I forgot which tribe... we'd haveta put a stone on her head,” Daniel whispered.

“Why?” Jack leaned heavily on his digging stick and tried to figure out what hurt more. Knees or
He thought it might be his back.

“To make sure her soul won’t escape through her mouth and spread evil. Cuz she was a bad woman.”

“You said she's gone now,” Jack reminded him.

“Yes. That's good.” With that, Daniel turned and walked back to the tree. He sat down, pulled his knees up to his chest and wrapped his arms around them.

Jack looked at the open grave, trying to feel something, anything... but all he felt was a tinge of relief that she wouldn't be scaring Daniel any longer. There was a lot less to worry about, now that he didn't have to keep an eye on her anymore. It wasn't a good feeling, but she had it coming, and Jack refused to feel guilty over killing her. The only thing he felt guilty about was that Daniel had to watch him shoot her...

He put the stick down and joined Daniel. The afternoon sun, filtered by the massive trees, painted the grass and flowers golden.

“Hey,” he said. “You okay, kiddo?”

“When can we leave here, Jack?”

“Well, maybe we can try to hike a little tomorrow. But not too far.” He didn't want Daniel to have a relapse.

“You're still worried 'bout me,” Daniel mumbled, almost accusingly. “I'm fine.”

“Yeah, I've heard that one before. I'll stay on the safe side,” he replied dryly.

Out of the blue, Daniel mumbled, “I felt her death. She hurt lots. But she was still angry.” When he looked at Jack, his eyes were way too old for the young face. “I feel bad, Jack. I don't know why she was so angry. If I knew, I could've helped her, maybe make it go 'way.”

“I don't think so, Danny. I know you always want to... make the world a better place...”

“She said she wanted that, too. But she hated everyone an' everything. She was very dark inside. An' very cold.” Daniel hugged himself and shivered.

“I don't think there's anything you could've done, kid. Not even if you’d known her real motivation.”

Daniel's eyebrows knitted in concentration. “I know what motivation is... right?”

“To understand why people do what they're doing. Motivation is what drives us... makes us sometimes do things only we understand. It's... kinda complicated. But you always believe there's good in everyone and everything. You once said you believe that understanding people's motivation is often the first step to helping people.”

“An' that's a bad thing?” Daniel asked, then added. “You said... before... I never know when to back off. What's that mean?”

Jack closed his eyes for a brief moment. Things like that, Daniel remembered.

“It's not a bad thing,” he said firmly. “It's just that sometimes the good in others is buried too deep to reach. Even for you. Menkins wasn't able to...” Jack paused and licked his dry lips, tasting salty sweat. For some reason, it was easier to talk to this incarnation of Daniel. “She didn't know how to
listen, Daniel. You usually bring out the best in people. But she didn't hear you.”

Like I don't hear you sometimes, Jack thought bitterly. Because I, too, am angry too often or let myself be led by my so-called military bravery. Or arrogance. Or worry.

“There's nothing more you could've done, Daniel. She was probably angry for a very long time.”

“About what, Jack? Why?” The desperate need to understand and get to the bottom of this mystery was so Daniel.

“I don't know. About life not being fair to her? Maybe she wanted power or justice for something. Who knows when it started? She lost it. Went totally... wacko. Remember when you and I first met? I was very angry then, too. I wanted to blow up Abydos along with myself.”

“But you didn't.”

“No. I made another choice because a good friend offered it to me...”

“Give me another choice, Daniel”....

“You wanted me to give you another choice”...

The situation with the Enkarans was yelling loudly in Jack's head... and then other voices, later at his house, cutting where Jack knew it would hurt the most... Both him and Daniel...

“Damn, you never know when to back off, do you?”

Crap. Focus on the present, O'Neill. There's no need to dwell.

“Maybe Doctor Menkins never had friends,” Daniel suggested, still sad.

“She sure never had a friend like you.” Jack smiled, pulling him in for a sideways hug.

Daniel leaned his head against Jack's soiled shirt and sniffed. “You stink.”

“Well, backatcha. You don't smell like roses either.” He snorted and looked up into the green treetops and the sunrays. “I have to close the grave. Then we'll take a bath.”

At that, Daniel perked up. “In the river? You too?”

“You bet.”

***

The river wasn't deep, and its bottom was sandy.

There were no purplebluespotsplashies... or whatever Daniel had called them. They got rid of their clothes, and Jack thought he'd never welcomed cold water more. They splashed and squealed, then soaped each other up, and Daniel had fun sticking his fingers in Jack's ears to make sure they got cleaned properly.

“Hey, you want me to have holes in my ears?” Jack laughed at one point as he jerked Daniel away from him and sat him on his butt in the water, which made the little man chortle and screech. “You stick your little fingers in there again, and you can shake hands in the middle of my brain.”

“Eeeewwww...”
“Let me wash your hair, little frog.”

“I'm not a frog!”

“Sure ya are.” Jack squeezed soap into his hands and rubbed Daniel's head. “Now you're at least a clean frog.”

Daniel let out some loud croaks while Jack rinsed his hair. Then he protested just as loudly when Jack hoisted him under one arm, carried him out of the water and started to wrap him in the towel.

“Noo... Not yet, Jack! It's so much fun! Can't we stay longer?”

“Not today. I'm still not sure where that fever had come from, and I don't want you to catch a cold,” he said as he dried Daniel gently, before using the same towel on himself. Of course, it was already wet, and Jack was once more grateful for the planet's warmth as they sauntered back to their little camp.

Jack put on his extra BDU pants, the pair Ashu had washed. But Daniel didn't have a clean shirt anymore, so Jack gave him his own spare shirt. It was even larger than Daniel's old grown up shirt.

After dinner, consisting of MRE soup for Jack and chicken with mashed potatoes for Daniel, they went back to the river and washed their towel and clothes. After a moment of thought Jack decided his socks needed to be cleaned as well, and for some reason Daniel thought that was hilarious.

They hung the wet clothes over the lower branches of a tree to dry and made themselves comfortable by the smoldering fire. Daniel yawned a lot, and Jack was tired, too. His arms felt twice as heavy as they used to be.

Damn digging stick.

He gazed over the clearing, and his eyes caught a glimpse of yellow and red through the trees on the other side. Oh, yeah, they'd be gone tomorrow. He really wasn't too keen on staying any longer at this place, so near Menkins's dead body.

His thoughts wandered back to the previous days.

*I wouldn't have been able to save Daniel,* Jack thought, and a cold hand clutched his heart. *If Daniel hadn't remembered the flowers and if I hadn't stumbled over them... he'd probably be much worse now, if not...*

When a warm, solid, little body climbed between Jack's outstretched legs and snuggled against him, smelling like sun and grass, he tousled the blond hair and smiled down at him.

Daniel tipped his head back and looked up at Jack. “You always save me, Jack. Even if you can’t, I know you'll always try. It's what you do.”

*Oh, yeah, about that... *“Are you reading my thoughts, Daniel?”

He shrugged. “No.”

“O-kay. Then what are you doing? Because it feels like you're reading my mind lately.”

“Just feelings,” Daniel explained, still gazing up at Jack. “They're coming off you like elec... electicy, and they give me goose bumps, and my tummy hurts a little if they're bad.”

“You said you felt Menkins's pain... and you knew when I was scared while you had that fever.”
“Uh-huh. You were, weren't you?”

“Oh, yeah,” Jack said quietly. “Did it start then? With the fever?”

Daniel frowned. “It was there a little after I... since I'm... short. It's more now.”

“You feel what I feel... all the time?” Jack asked, slightly perturbed by this new development.

“Nuh-huh. Just sometimes.” Daniel yawned again and wriggled around until he was comfortably plastered against Jack. ”I like what you feel now.”


“You're happy.”

And that he was.

TBC with ch 10 Being little is Fun
Chapter 10

Being Little is Fun

They were down to one backpack. Jack decided to leave most of Menkins's gear behind. There was only so much he could carry, after all. He ripped the remaining MRE pouches open and left the plastic cases as well, packing only the soft packs of food. The contents of the MRE packages were much easier to carry that way.

After some consideration, he decided to lose their tent as well. It wasn't an easy decision, but he had to keep in mind that they'd have to cross the mountains at some point. The less he had to carry, the faster they could move. It wouldn't be a problem to build shelters for the night. Jack had three astrofoils with him. Those emergency thermal blankets could be folded into tiny little packages and would come in handy.

He found a couple more restraints and used them to tie their water canteens to his pack instead of putting them inside. Jack stuffed the med and sewing kits, their extra clothes, more ammo clips for his P90 and Daniel's hand-gun into his pack. He'd wear his weapons and the knives on his body, and Daniel could keep his journal and pens in the little rucksack Ashu had given him. They had eaten the bread for breakfast that morning, and the dried meat didn't take much space so the journal should fit.

Jack still felt like a pack animal when he lifted his pack tentatively to see how heavy it was.

They didn't cover much distance that day because Jack wanted Daniel to take it easy. However, without talking about it, they both felt a lot better once they had left the place behind. It held too many dark memories and seemed to "smell" of sickness and death, no matter how brightly the sun was shining and how colorful the yellow and red flowers near the clearing were.

O'Neill kept a close eye on the kid as they wandered through the forest. From time to time, they crossed grassy meadows with blooming wildflowers, and Daniel walked along for quite a while before he allowed Jack to carry him again.

When Jack did scoop him up, Daniel’s right arm instantly sneaked around the back of Jack's neck, and his fingers gripped the chain of the dog tags. Without the tent tied to the pack, Daniel had a little more space for his right leg, which was behind Jack's back as he rode on Jack's hip, his butt settled into the crook of Jack's left arm.

Daniel was swinging his legs, and his dirty little foot gently, but constantly, kicked Jack's pack. Sighing, he told the kid to keep his legs still every once in a while, and Daniel said, “Okay, Jack.”

He would manage to keep his legs still for about five minutes before he started to absently swing them again in tune with Jack's steps. After the fourth reminder, Jack growled at Daniel that he'd tie him on top of his pack instead of carrying him if he didn't keep his legs still.

Daniel giggled at that, but tried to obey for a while.

They walked on, and Jack was thankful for the shade the trees provided. It was still very hot, but at least the sun didn't burn down on their heads as long as a rooftop of branches and foliage protected them.
Once they left the forest, they wouldn't be able to travel several hours in a row. It would take them awhile to reach the mountains. Peachy. They weren't exactly fast right now. Daniel needed lots of breaks, and even though he never complained and either walked or was carried, Jack didn't kid himself.

Compared to their hiking speed when they had both been big, their current pace was more like a turtle walk.

Well, they probably...

Jack was ripped out of his musings when Daniel started to wriggle, twisting and turning his body from left to right.

“Daniel,” Jack said wearily, “do you have to go...?”

“What? Nooo... “

“Then stop bouncing, please.”

“Sorry, Jack. I was trying to catch a flutterby,” Daniel stated as he settled back into his original position.

“A flutterby?” Jack raised his eyebrows.

“Yes. It's a butterfly, actually. But maybe they're called flutterbys here? Who knows? This is another world, after all,” the kid answered seriously.

“Right. Oh, Daniel?”

“Yes, Jack?”

He grabbed the munchkin and swung him down to his feet again. “Time to walk some more, Doctor Jackson.”

Giggling, Daniel skipped off like a foal.

Jack followed at a slower pace, silently cursing his sore shoulders and the sweat trickling down his neck and back. Yet, he found himself smiling brightly at the jaunty antics of his downsized friend. There was no indication that only the previous night Daniel had been close to death.

Life was good.

***

They found another small river and a place to camp. It was only early afternoon, but Jack felt it was the right time to settle down. He set up a shelter for the night, using his large survival blanket as a substitute for a poncho. Jack had learned to build shelters from ponchos and parachutes during his basic survival training.

The blanket would do the job just fine.

Jack found two trees and tied their only rope between them.

Daniel was all excited about the shelter-building and recited what he remembered from his own experiences and knowledge.
“We could build a much larger shelter, you know, Jack? There's lots of ways to build 'em. If we had a hole in the ground, we could build a sniper hole and cover it with loads of wood an' leaves. Or we could build a debris shelter... 'Course we won't need one of those. It's so warm, and it doesn't get cold at nights. We just need it in case it rains, right, Jack?”

“You got it in one, buddy. Now, do you remember what we have to do next?”

“Make a mattress! So the ground is soft, and we can put our sleeping bags on it.”

“That's right. And what do we need?”

Daniel thought about this a moment, then exclaimed, “Pine needles!”

“Right again. But first we have to dust and sweep a little.”

“I knooow! We haveta clean the ground so we won't lie on icky stones and sticks tonight. Can I do it, Jack? Can I?”

“Sure. I'll get you a broom.”

Daniel's brow furrowed in confusion. “Jaaack... there's no broom here!”

“Ah, but there is.” Smirking at his skeptical little fella, Jack got out his knife and walked over to a nearby scrub. He cut a twig full of sprigs and leaves and handed it to Daniel. “There you go.”

Daniel took it and made a tentative sweep, brushing away the loose debris. “Cool!”

While Daniel was “sweeping” Jack went to the small stream and collected several large rocks. He used some to set up a fire pit and put the others aside for later usage on the “tent” he was going to build.

After Jack had approved and praised Daniel's cleaning skills, they collected pine needles and sprigs, spreading them out on the ground.

Under Daniel’s watchful eyes, Jack finally threw the survival blanket over the rope. Instead of using sticks for poles, he placed the rocks on the corners of the blanket. Jack knew that once he poked the flimsy material, it would tear and be of no use anymore.

“Way cool,” Daniel commented. “An’ 'cuz it's a heat blanket, it'll keep us warm and dry even if it rains.”

Remembering the heavy rains, lightning and thunder they had experienced the day Daniel had gotten shrunk, Jack hoped the woods would keep some of the rain at bay if the weather was going to change. The thermal blanket shelter probably kept them dry as long as there were no harsh winds.

Jack went inside, rolled out the sleeping bags next to each other, then came out again and unpacked what they needed for the remainder of the day before placing his pack inside the shelter at one of the openings. “All set,” he said when he was done. “Wanna take a look inside, Danny boy?”

Daniel crawled in and out of the improvised tent, making lots of “ooh” and “awww” comments.

Their next goal was firewood, a chore they had down to a nice routine. Jack collected the heavy branches while Daniel carried small twigs and sprigs.

Once they had stored extra firewood under a tangled bush to keep it dry if it rained, they settled down at their pit. Jack started a small fire to drive off the mosquito-like insects. Even though they
didn't bite, they were annoying little buggers.

“I asked Ashu what they're called here,” Daniel informed Jack. “And you know what? They're just bugs.”

“Go figure.” Jack grinned as he handed Daniel a sandwich with turkey and cheese. He promised him a Tootsie Roll if he managed to eat most of it. Daniel seemed hungry, though, and munched his sandwich without a fuss. Afterward, he enjoyed his Tootsie Roll and offered half to Jack, who thanked him, but declined the offer. He knew how much Daniel loved all things sweet, and it made Jack feel good to see the kid so happy over a simple candy bar.

Daniel spent the afternoon playing at the small stream while Jack sat on a large, flat rock and watched him search for colorful pebbles or try to catch little brown frogs. The river was too small to catch any decent fish, so Jack just put his feet in the cool water and listened to Daniel's chatter as he was talking to the frogs he had caught, before he set them free again.

Later the little explorer scribbled in his journal, and Jack was lying next to him in the soft moss watching the clouds drift by. After the dramatic events of the last few days, they both needed some relaxing time, and Jack was more than happy to indulge.

He felt battered and stiff, and his body thanked him for the break. He wriggled his bare toes in the warm sunlight and put his folded BDU jacket under his head as a pillow. Closing his eyes, Jack allowed himself to doze a little, just enough to relax without falling asleep.

Maybe Daniel would be occupied with his journal for a while...

“Jack?”

“Mmh?”

“I like being little.”

He dragged his eyes open and turned his head to blink at the boy who sat cross-legged, gnawing on his pen, his blue eyes gazing dreamily at Jack.

“You do?”

“Yep. It's hard sometimes 'cuz I'm so small. But I have fun. I didn't have fun when I was big. Not so much fun. I never collected pebbles or caught frogs. Or rode on your shoulders.”

“Well... you riding on my shoulders would've looked a bit odd, don'tcha think?”

Daniel rolled his eyes. “Ja-ack. I was just figuraty speaking.”

“Figuratively,” Jack corrected him absently, then rubbed a hand over his face and yawned. “I knew you were.”

“Jack? Why didn't I have any fun when I was big?” A frown appeared on the little face.

“You did have fun. Just... a different kind of fun.”

The frown deepened. “What kind of fun?”

There went Jack's semi-nap...

“Uh... well,... you loved going through the gate. Hooking up with foreign people. Doing your
cultural thing. Socializing. You liked to socialize with all kinds of alien... people. And you liked rocks... artifacts. You liked to analyze them. And writings. You liked to decipher glyphs...” Jack trailed off, the vivid memories of Daniel - the grown up Daniel - cutting through him like a knife stab, taking his breath away. Then another thought popped into his mind, and he sat up straight. “Daniel? You still remember all those things, right? From when you were big? What you liked to do...”

“Sure.” Daniel shrugged, but there was a flicker of something like confusion in his eyes. Then it was gone, and he asked, “But that was work. What fun did I have when I didn't work, Jack?”

“You used to read a lot...” Jack started, then paused and reached over to tap a finger on Daniel's blond head. “No. You tell me,” he said quietly. “What do you remember?”

Daniel pulled in his bottom lip to chew on it. After a moment of silence, he lowered his head and started plucking at tufts of grass with one hand. “I hurt,” he whispered. “I 'member hurting a lot. I 'member liking coffee. And chocolate. And I know I loved my books. And watching movies. Wine. I liked wine. But I 'member hurting the most. When they took Sha're an' when she was dead. An' when you an' I fought...”

Oh, crap. That wasn't what Jack wanted to hear. He put a tentative hand on the kid's shoulder. “Danny... “

“First, I hurted when my mom and dad died,” Daniel continued, his voice very quiet. “And when I was taken 'way from people I liked to live with. Jack... do you think some of them would’ve wanted to keep me?”

“Sure,” Jack said, equally as quiet. “I'm sure lots of people wanted to keep you, kiddo.”

“The lady from the Social Services said no one ever would. I was hard to place.” Daniel looked up, his eyes searching Jack's. “Would you have kepted me, Jack?”

Swallowing the lump forming in his throat, Jack reached for Daniel. “C'mere.” He pulled him onto his lap, hugging him tightly. “I would have kept you, Daniel.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.” But it was an easy promise to make, knowing it was water under the bridge. Jack bit his lip, and while he rubbed Daniel's back to comfort him, he silently asked for forgiveness to whoever might be listening. Because he probably would have screwed up raising a Daniel Jackson even more than he had screwed up with his own kid.

Remembering that Daniel was sensitive to moods now, he pushed his own dark thoughts back and focused on the present. Right now he would keep Daniel. And he would keep him safe and sound.

Daniel relaxed instantly and snuggled against Jack. “I liked museums,” he suddenly said. “And Egypt. And playing the piano.”

“That's right.” Jack smiled, glad for the change of subject.

“Jack?”

“Daniel?”

“I'm hungry.”
“Well, it's almost time for dinner. Let's dig through the 'tastes-like-chicken-menu', shall we?”

They had pork with gravy and a lumpy mass that was labeled as mashed potatoes. Jack did a quick count of the MRE they still had. Later, when Daniel was tucked away in his sleeping bag, he pulled out the hand-drawn map. He tried to estimate how long it would take them to reach the mountains. At their current pace, it could be weeks. Jack saw no chance of moving faster, though.

He tapped his finger on a marked X that marked a village. Ashu had confirmed there was another village on their way, and if they continued south, they probably wouldn't miss it. However, the map was a little sketchy. All Jack knew for sure was that they were heading in the right direction, toward those mountains.

Either way, it was time to extend their menu.

TBC with ch 11 Indian Prayers
Indian Prayers and the Tantrum

Chapter 11

Indian Prayers and the Tantrum

It was at the break of dawn when Jack crawled out of their shelter, rubbing his tired eyes and stretching his muscles. Daniel was still fast asleep, and Jack hoped he would stay that way for at least two or three hours longer.

The night hadn't been too peachy. The constant crinkling and rustling of the astro-foil blanket in the light breeze had kept Jack awake. When he'd finally fallen asleep, Daniel woke up screaming and crying from a nightmare, and then they'd both been awake, listening to the crinkling and rustling together until they had fallen into an exhausted sleep again.

A debris shelter sounded far more comfortable to Jack.

He was taking care of his bladder, still half dozing, when the sound of flapping wings woke him enough to look up.

A rather large bird landed on a tree nearby. It was golden with a white neck and a sharp, pointed beak. The bird cocked its head, and peered down at Jack with black beady eyes.

Suppressing a whistle, Jack adjusted his pants and slowly made his retreat, keeping an eye on his soon-to-be breakfast.

Yep. Breakfast was going to be a feast.

Heck, Jack hadn't had a decent piece of fresh meat in ages. Aside from what Ashura had cooked for them, all they'd eaten the last couple of days were MRE and some berries. He was in bad need of some real food.

Back at the shelter, Jack made sure Daniel was still in slumberland. He placed the kid's radio next to his sleeping bag, so Daniel could call him when he woke up. Jack shrugged into his vest where his own radio was attached and picked up his P90. He adjusted it to single shot, and after a last look at the sleeping kid, Jack quietly crept back to where he had seen the bird.

It was still there, picking at the tree's bark. Jack licked his lips in concentration, hid behind another tree, aimed... and when the loud shot erupted the air, the bird fell. It never knew what hit it. Which was the best way to hunt. There was no pleasure or passion in it for Jack. Just the need to get food and survive.

“Gotcha,” Jack muttered as he secured the gun and stepped out from behind his tree.

He picked up the dead bird and headed back to the campsite.

All was quiet there, and Jack paused briefly on his way to the stream, wondering why the shot hadn't woken the kid. He felt a slight flutter in the pit of his stomach.

What if the fever was back?

Placing the bird on one of the large rocks at the shore, O'Neill jogged back to their tent and peered inside. All he could make out was a lump in Daniel's sleeping bag. Not even a tuft of blond hair was
“Daniel?” Jack kept his voice low so he wouldn’t upset the tyke.

There was no answer.

Spidey senses tingling, Jack crawled in and put a hand on what appeared to be a shoulder. “Daniel? You awake?”

Still no answer, but the shoulder was trembling.

“Hey, Daniel…” Jack unzipped the sleeping bag and looked down at the little ball that was Daniel. He’d have to literally uncurl the child in order to feel his head for fever.

“Dan…” Jack stopped when he saw tears trickling down Daniel's face.

He had his hands over his ears and his eyes tightly shut, his breath hitching.

“You should have last night you should have last night she can't be back you should...” Daniel started to chant.

“Please please... you should...”

Oh, crap.

Gathering the boy into his arms, Jack rocked him and mumbled soothing words into his ear.

“It's okay, Danny. She didn't come back. Sssh, I didn't have to shoot her again. It's okay... you hear me? It's all right. I've got ya,” Jack crooned, relieved when the frantic chanting subsided and Daniel began crying freely, clutching his small fists into Jack's vest.

“Oh, that's better. Nothing happened. You're safe.”

A moment later, the tears stopped, and Daniel looked up at Jack with glistening blue eyes. “I had a nightmare,” he whispered. “About her. And then I woke up an' you were gone an' then I heard the shot. I know you shot somethin' with the P90. I know how it sounds. I was scared. I thought...” Daniel trailed off and then blushed and buried his face in the crook of Jack's arm, mumbling something Jack couldn't make out.

But he didn't have to. He was pretty sure the wetness he had felt at the front of Daniel's too big t-shirt was the source of his embarrassment.

“It's okay,” Jack whispered again, tousling the wispy blond hair. “You were scared. It's no big deal. Come on. Let's take care of it.”

But they sat there for another long moment, Jack brushing his long fingers through Daniel's hair and rubbing circles on his back with the other hand.

Finally Daniel pushed back and crawled out of the shelter. Jack grabbed the kid's sleeping bag, soap and towel and followed.

Opposed to his earlier panic, Daniel was subdued and silent as Jack stripped off his damp shirt. He washed the shirt in the river and turned the sleeping bag inside out before he cleaned it as well.

After he had hung everything in the trees, Jack returned to the stream where Daniel was washing himself.

“What did you shoot?” Daniel asked quietly when he was dry again.
“Uh...”

Daniel's gaze followed Jack's to the bird still lying on a rock nearby. The boy's mouth formed a silent “Oh.”

Jack braced himself for another outburst of tears and the accusation of being a cold-blooded animal slayer.

Oy.

The last time Jack had felt like a bastard over killing an animal had been when Charlie was little and had watched Jack fish – and actually catch some. Jack wasn't immune to the knowledge that every killing meant a life lost, animal or human. On the contrary; every human life he'd taking kept haunting him, became one of his ghosts to occasionally torment him. Even maniacs like Menkins were going to make their way back into Jack's nightmares eventually. However, Jack was more pragmatic about the need to kill animals for food. He remembered explaining to Charlie that the meat and fish from the supermarket had once been animals, too. And that the only difference between catching a fish for dinner instead of going to Walmart and buying one was that the Walmart fish was already frozen and prepared.

However, there was something about kids caring for every living creature and grieving when it had to die. Something innocent and powerful.

Neither Jack nor adult Daniel had ever stopped caring. Or grieving. They had become more realistic about it. Maybe Jack was a tad more detached than Daniel, forced through years on the job.

And yeah, Daniel had liked meat as an adult. But Jack knew that Daniel had been aware then that the “meat” had a life and a death. Especially since he had lived on a planet where people had hunted to survive.

But Daniel was little now.

And Jack suspected he was losing... if not part of his memories, then his adult perspective on things. Jack still couldn't grasp how exactly this Daniel's mind worked. He coped pretty well with being a kid again. And for a four year old, Daniel was very understanding and reasonable, hence the memories and knowledge of the thirty-something years under his belt.

But sometimes he reacted and acted like a little boy.

Daniel walked slowly over to the bird and knelt beside it. “It's a pretty bird,” he said, his voice oddly detached. When he turned to look at Jack, he was very pale, his eyes huge. “Do I have to watch you prepare it?”

“No, of course not,” Jack hastened to say. “Why don’t you go back to the tent? Once you're dressed again, you can get my sleeping bag and lay it out on the moss to air it.”

“Okay,” Daniel mumbled, and without another look at Jack or the dead animal, he toddled off.

With a heavy sigh, O'Neill started the bloody work of preparing the bird.

***

Later, Jack built a spit from pieces of wood and hung the bird over the fire. By this time, Daniel had put out Jack's sleeping bag, and he had also dressed in the shirt and pants Ashu had given him.
Now he was sitting a few feet away, again scribbling in his journal. Jack wondered if he wrote down their daily routine.

Jack turned the spit so the bird would be roasted equally on all sides and not catch fire or burn. Soon the smell of grilled meat wafted through the clearing, and despite his worries about the still-silent child, Jack felt his stomach growl and his mouth water at the sight and smell.

Daniel closed his journal and came over to stand beside Jack.

“Hey.” Jack smiled as he looked up at the tyke.

“Why do you like shooting at things so much, Jack?” The question wasn't asked in an accusing manner and there was no resentment in Daniel's voice. Which, to Jack, was far more disturbing.

“I don't like shooting at things, Daniel,” Jack replied carefully. “It's just ... sometimes I have to.”

“Why?”

“Because... there are times when you have to defend yourself. And there are times when you have to hunt for food.”

“You like guns,” Daniel stated, still in that detached quiet voice.

“Well, I...” He turned the spit once more, then looked at Daniel again. “I like to be able to defend myself. And those who are under my command. My friends. Carrying a gun makes me feel safe. But you know that, Daniel.”

“You killed Doctor Menkins,” Daniel said, chewing on his bottom lip, apparently processing several things at once.

“Yes, I did. She tried to kill us, Daniel. Try to remember... sometimes it's either us or the other person who gets killed. It's a mean concept, but there it is.”

“I know. It's just... “ The chewing became more frantic, and Daniel wrinkled his forehead. “It seems so wrong. She was very still and white. And there was blood. I have seen it before. Dead people. I never liked it, Jack.”

Jack reached for Daniel, and to his relief the kid sat next to him and leaned against Jack's arm which came around his shoulders.

“It reminded me of what you are. What we are. What we did... had to do sometimes... I don' like it,” Daniel said. “I don' like that we hurted people. I don' like that we killed people before. I don' like that you killed the bird.”

“But we saved people too, Daniel. Come on, you know that. We only use our guns if we don't have a choice. You of all people did the most good out there. You even saved two civilizations on the Enkaran planet.”

“You didn' like me doing it. You wanted to blow the ship up,” Daniel said, lowering his head. “You said I was being stubborn and not a team player and just wanted to get my way... “

Jack took a deep breath and figured now was as good a time as ever to say this. “I was wrong. I was wrong, and I'm sorry I yelled at you and said all those mean things. You did good, Daniel. You risked your neck, and I was very mad at you for doing that. But...” he turned and put a hand under Daniel's chin, lifting the child's head so he could look him in the eyes, “...you did the right thing.
You gave me another choice, and you figured out a way to keep both the Enkarans and the Gadmeer safe.”

“Really?” The tinge of doubt in the kid's voice cut deep.

“Really.” Jack didn't point out that Daniel could have talked it through with him before beaming to the ship. Or that Daniel was always going to piss him off when he’d risk his life for the greater good, even though Jack might have done the same. Once Daniel got resized, Jack knew they'd be crashing into each other again because Daniel would throw himself headfirst into the fire, if he had to, and Jack would try to protect him, try to keep him alive and get his sorry ass out of whatever mess he’d put himself into in order to save the team. Or the planet. Jack knew he'd yell and he'd curse because it was going to happen again and again.

They just had to learn to live with it, sort it out, and move on.

Once Daniel turned big again, Jack would try harder to understand him. No, make that, try harder to give Daniel credit when he was right and to admit he did understand Daniel. To show affection where it was due. Jack knew it wouldn’t be easy and probably not always possible. But he'd try. He'd try to be Daniel's best friend again as much as his commanding officer.

IF Daniel ever got big again.

“You’re sad,” Daniel said. He reached up and patted Jack's stubby cheek.

“Just a little,” Jack answered softly. “It'll be okay in a minute.”

They sat in silence for a while, Jack turning the bird slowly. He had sprinkled it with salt and pepper from one of the MRE packs, and if he'd had some oil or butter to spread on the meat, it would have been perfect.

Well, you can't have everything.

“Jack?”

“Daniel?”

“I'm not sure I want to eat from the bird,” Daniel said in a small voice. “I know it's stupid. I know you shot him 'cuz we need food 'cuz the MRE won't last forever.”

“And you did eat meat back home. And the animals they'd hunted on Abydos,” Jack reminded him gently, then added, “But it's okay. I won't make you eat it. Not this time.”

Jack cursed himself for being such a fool. After what had happened with Menkins, he should have known the kid was probably going to have some post-traumatic issues. So he should have talked to him, given him the choice to come along and – most importantly – not left him without a clue while he shot a damn bird.

Daniel let out a relieved sigh. “Thank you.”

After rummaging in their food rations for a moment, Jack found the sealed white bread and the package of jam. Opening both and spreading the jam over the bread, Jack explained, “I'm sorry the shot scared you, Daniel. But you need to understand that we'll have to hunt sometimes to stretch the MRE. Especially if we can't find edible fruits. So sooner or later, you'll have to eat what I can provide.”
“I know that. Big me knows that.”

“Good. Little you has to get used to it, I guess, huh?”

Daniel nodded and started munching his bread.

“And remember – we only take what we need. Like the Indians. Tell me about the Indians, Danny,” Jack said, mostly to distract the kid out of the solemn mood.

“Most Native American tribes believe everything on Earth is \textit{wakan} – sacred in the language of the Lakota. If they take from Mother Earth, they thank her for what they take,” Daniel began, then suddenly paused.

Jack poked at the bird with a wooden splint to see how it felt. It needed a little more time. He was about to turn the spit again when he realized that Daniel had stopped talking. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” Daniel mumbled absently. Then he tugged at Jack’s arm. “Jack? If we say a thank you prayer to the elements and the animals, I won’t haveta feel bad anymore, right? About eating the bird?”

Biting his lip to suppress a chuckle, Jack said, “Yeah. I think so. Why?”

“I know just the words. It’s an thanksgiving prayer.”

“O-kay. We can do that before we eat.”

Once the bird was roasted properly and Jack had carved it, he cut small pieces from the tender breast meat for Daniel so he could eat them with his hands once they’d cooled.

Daniel filled their canteens with fresh water, and Jack served another slice of white bread with the meat.

When they were ready to eat, Jack nudged his little fella. “Okay. Bring it on.”

Daniel bowed his head and began, “I pray to the Four-legged Peoples, the Swimming Peoples, the Crawling Peoples, and to the Star Peoples. I pray to ALL who give us food, clothing, medicine, dwellings, and designs. To say thank you for the life you give us.”

Daniel looked up again and smiled. “Now we can eat.”

“Nice,” Jack said, and as he dug in, enjoying the first fresh meat in what seemed a very long time, he really felt grateful.

***

The clothes and sleeping bag dried relatively fast in the warmth, but they still lost half a day. When they were finally on their way, Jack noticed how the pine trees were thinning out.

Daniel skipped ahead, his tears and fears forgotten as he chased after flutterbys and spotted squirrel-like creatures in the trees – he still had to come up with an alternate name for those.

Instead of the scrub and moss, they were soon surrounded by tall grass, gently waving in a light breeze. The sky was incredibly blue, and the sun stood high and bright.

Then the trees stopped altogether, and Jack gazed at the wide, seemingly endless grassland in front of him. Far away, barely visible to the naked eye, was the outline of mountains.
There was no trail to make out. There hadn't been a real path in the woods either, but walking on the moss and pine needles had been easy, and they had no problems finding their way around bushes and scrub.

The grass was a whole different story. It reached Jack's waist, which meant it was higher than the tyke, who stood next to him, eyes big as saucers. Jack could see and hear the wheels spinning in the blond head.

“Ooooh, Jaaack,” Daniel verbalized his amazement. “It's like an ocean of grass! An’ there's no way through it!”

“Oh, yeah,” Jack muttered, wondering if a machete shouldn't be part of the basic field gear.

“Isn' it cool?”

“Ya think?”

“Oh, yes!” Daniel stepped forward and parted the grass with both hands to stick his head into the jungle of green.

Jack gently grabbed his collar and pulled him back. “Aht, young man. Not so fast.”


“And you know that – how?” Jack raised an eyebrow as he looked down at the kid. “Let's take a look at the compass and the map to see if we can walk around it.”

“I can feel it,” Daniel explained, but stopped squirming.

“Yeah, well, let's just try to stay on the safe side, okay?” Jack let go of Daniel and pulled out the compass and map. After studying the map again, he let out a low, “Oy.”

According to the hand-drawn map, the grass was pretty much everywhere between the mountains and the forest they had just come through. The drawing didn't show what lay left or right of the grasslands.

However, there should have been a village somewhere between Firsttown and the grass. But Jack hadn't seen any signs of civilization since leaving Ashu's house.

Which could only mean one thing. They had lost their way. But somehow they were still heading in the right direction.

Jack took his binoculars from his vest and let his eyes wander to the horizon. “Yep,” he said, “there they are. The mountains. And they're huge.”

“Can I look? Please? Let me see?” Daniel bounced up and down, tugging at Jack's elbow until he finally picked the tyke up, handed him the binoculars and helped adjust it so Daniel could see the mountains, clear and crisp.

“That's a looong walk, right, Jack?”

“You bet. But we'll make it,” Jack said with way more confidence than he felt, hoping Daniel wouldn't pick up on that.

But Daniel seemed to be too busy looking through the binoculars to notice Jack's false optimism. “There's lotsa flowers in the grass,” he observed.
“Nice. Now let's do this. I want you to stay right here on my arm for now, okay?” Jack took the binoculars from Daniel's hands and pocketed them.

“But...”

“You'll see much better from up here, grasshopper. And you're barefoot. The grass might cut your feet,” Jack explained.

“Won't.” Daniel scowled, squinting down at his dirty feet.

“Will,” Jack replied absently, giving in to their usual banter on auto-pilot, as he hitched Daniel a little higher and stepped into the waving grass, cautiously looking for any danger.

“Nu-huh. Let me down. My feet are fine! I wanna see the flowers an' what's on the ground,” Daniel complained as he started squirming and wriggling. “member the ant bites? They wented away real fast!”

Jack had to give him that. The ant bites had vanished quickly, and he had noticed that Daniel's feet didn't have any cuts or scratches at all. Jack made him wash his feet every day. Twice. And aside from the layers of dirt from walking through the forest, he never had any blisters or other small injuries. It was like his skin had become unbreakable.

Jack figured he'd better change tactics.

“Fine. Maybe it won't cut your feet. You'll still stay right here for now. When I'm sure it's not dangerous in here, I'll let you walk.”

“I told you it's not dangerous!”

“I told you to stay put. And keep still,” Jack said firmly as he tightened his arm around Daniel.

“You never trust me! You always think I can't take care of myself, and you never listen to meeee,” Daniel whined, his hand jerking at the chain of Jack's dog tags, causing him to wince.

“Daniel!”

“Let me gooo!”

“No.” Jack gritted his teeth in the effort to stay calm as Daniel continued to wriggle.

Ignoring the outraged wails of protest, Jack finally hoisted him under his arm. That way Daniel could kick his legs all he wanted without causing any harm. Jack caught the waving arms and little fists in his right hand and held them at bay. Seeing that Daniel wasn't calming down on his own, Jack turned around and swiftly marched back the way they had come.

“All right. Let's try this again,” Jack said when he stepped out of the grass. “We won't go anywhere until you've calmed down.” He turned Daniel around so he could put both arms around him, and held him close to his body. Then he leaned his back against a tree to support the weight of the heavy back pack.

“Noo-ooo...” Daniel howled. “Let meeeee...”

“I'll let you go when you calm down.” Jack repeated firmly. He should put his gear down to get a better handle on the kid, but he would need both hands to do so. He knew that the minute he let go of the tyke, Daniel would run straight for the grass and vanish in there. So Jack held on and received
some unpleasant kicks.

“Daniel, stop it!”

“Nooooooo-ooooo!”

When his leg got another swift kick from a bare little foot, Jack tightened one arm around the little monster and pulled his other hand away. When Daniel kicked him again, Jack smacked his thigh.

Instantly Daniel's cries reached new heights. “Youuuu smacked meee!”

“You kicked me,” Jack said, raising his voice just enough to make himself heard over Daniel's crescendo of wails.

Jack decided that today was SO not his day

Daniel, who was running out of steam, probably felt the same. His frantic kicks and squirms finally lost their strength, and the wailing subsided into sobs and hiccups.

“Are you done now?” Jack loosened his arms a little, and when Daniel didn't start fighting again, he said, “I'm going to put you down. Don't run off. Got that?”

When there was no answer, Jack gave him a gentle shake. “Answer me, Daniel.”

“I don' like you an'more.” Daniel hiccupped.

“That's not the answer to my question,” Jack said.

Sniffling, the kid finally nodded. “Won' run.”

“Good.” Jack let Daniel down carefully. The kid slumped on his butt and rubbed his eyes while Jack shrugged off his pack and leaned it against the tree.

He sat down next to Daniel, and for a minute they were both too exhausted and bewildered to say anything.

“So,” Jack finally said. “What just happened here?”

Daniel looked at him with a “how stupid can you get?” expression on his tear-streaked face. “I am mad at you. Very, very, very, very mad,” he informed Jack and sniffed again. “VERY mad.”

“I got that much,” Jack answered dryly, rubbing his temples. “Feel better now?”

“Yes,” Daniel said. “Will you let me walk?”

“I will let you walk,” Jack replied and, when Daniel jumped up, raised a finger and continued, “if you let me check the area first. There might be swamps or other nasty surprises in this jungle of grass. I'm not taking any chances.”

“You are very stubborn, Jack.” Daniel sighed.

“I get that a lot. Listen up, grasshopper. You have two choices. Go with the flow, and you'll get your wish at one point if things turn out okay. Start fussing again, and we'll stay here as long as it takes you to make the right choice.”

“Not fussing,” Daniel mumbled.
“Good enough.” Jack stood and geared up.

Daniel reluctantly held out his arms, and Jack settled him back on his hip. He pulled off his cap and placed it on Daniel’s head to protect him from the sun.

“I don't need a cap,” Daniel commented.

“Yes, you do.”

“I don'...”


Daniel considered this for a moment, then leaned against Jack's shoulder and placed his thumb into his mouth. “It's okay, Jack. You don' haveta throw a fit.”

This left the colonel speechless, for once, and they waded into the ocean of grass.

***

It was hot.

Jack plowed his way through the grass and wildflowers, not paying attention to the myriad of colors surrounding them. The everlasting sound of crickets seemed to increase with every passing minute. Daniel had walked ahead for a while once Jack had determined there was nothing here other than grass. But exhausted from his tantrum, he'd asked to be carried again and had fallen asleep in Jack's arms. He was nothing more than dead weight now.

Grass, weeds and flowers were everywhere.

Butterflies flitted above the flowers, and the sun was burning from an endless, cloudless sky.

Jack wiped his face, grimacing at the sticky layer of sweat and pollen covering his skin. From this day on, he'd not only hate trees but flowers as well.

Yep, he hated flowers. And grass. And butterflies. And the sun. And the sky.

A look at his watch told him they’d been wandering in the frigging grass for almost three hours. Jack had used his binoculars every once in a while. The mountains, of course, hadn't moved any closer.

How the hell was the kid able to sleep like this? Slumped against Jack, Daniel's head bobbed up and down with every step Jack took. The cap had fallen over Daniel's eyes, and Jack had given up adjusting it long ago.

“Crap,” O'Neill hissed. They had to take a break. His gut instinct was telling him to walk on, covering as much distance as possible, to leave this part of the planet behind.

There was no stream or river here.

No shade and no possibilities for building an easy shelter.

But he had to save his strength. They had to rest, drink and eat. One of the worst mistakes would be to walk himself into exhaustion.

Jack stopped where he was and shook Daniel awake, then sat him down on the ground. He dragged
off his pack and looked around.

Grass.

Oh, yeah.

They rested for thirty minutes, Daniel snuggled close to Jack despite the heat, while they both drank some water and ate a power bar. Suddenly remembering he had one of Daniel's bandannas in his pack, Jack pulled it out and tied it around the blond head, glad to get his cap back. The sun was getting to him as well.

When it was time to go, Daniel was wide awake, and Jack let him walk on his own after the repeat of a stern lecture about staying by his side all the time. If Jack lost the kid in this grassland, he'd probably spend hours trying to find him again.

Daniel didn't balk, apparently realizing that Jack was tired and generally in a no-nonsense mood.

So they moved on.

***

Daniel was picking flowers, carrying a huge bunch of them in his short arms.

Jack was amazed at the stamina of this child.

Daniel Jackson, the mini version, was hiking beside him without complaint. He had stopped ah-ing and oh-ing at the flowers, the flutterbys and the bugs he kept finding on the ground or sitting on the blades of grass. He had also stopped skipping and whistling. But he still was still walking on, carrying his bunch of flowers, a palette of blue, red, white and yellow blossoms.

Jack's suspicion that the shrink machine had done something else to his friend than just kid-size him was becoming more and more a certainty. There was no way in Netu a normal four or five year old could hike this many miles. Plus, there was the insensitivity of Daniel's skin and his new ability to read moods.

And there was something else.

Daniel's allergies were all gone. Adult Daniel would have had puffy eyes and a running nose in the midst of all this grass and flowers. Antihistamines or not. Kid-Daniel could stick his nose in a bunch of flowers and not even sneeze.

None of this was alarming. Yet. On the contrary – currently, it was a major relief.

Once they had had one more rest Jack started looking for a good place to stay the night. Not that there was any difference in the landscape.

***

O'Neill chopped the grass with his knife, once they had settled on a place, using the cut grass to build them a rather comfortable bed on the ground before he spread the sleeping bags out.

If he'd had a shovel, he'd been digging a shelter. But with only a cooking mug to do the job, Jack had given up on the idea at once. He just hoped it wasn't going to rain. So far they'd been really lucky, weather-wise. Jack wondered how long the luck stayed with them, though.

On the other hand, if it rained he wouldn't have to dig for water.
Jack used the cooking mug to dig for groundwater, and Daniel helped by shoveling away the rich black earth with his hands. The soil was very loose, and even though they had to throw away pebbles, it didn't take them long to find water and dig out a rather large hole.

After a moment of thinking, Jack rummaged in his pack for one of their sample containers. Made for soil or plant samples, it was big enough to hold approximately 250 ml of water. With Daniel's help, another smaller container and one of the coffee filters Jack had packed along with the coffee, they were able to scoop up enough water to fill their canteens. It just took some time to filter it.

It would've been much easier to boil the water once it was filtered. But Jack didn't dare light a fire with all that high grass surrounding them. Once their canteens were filled, Jack added water treatment tablets, and the water problem was solved for now.

While Jack put out crackers and cheese for dinner, Daniel started to sort through his flowers and began comparing them to the notes and sketches in his journal, all the while muttering to himself.

After dinner, they went through their daily routine of washing their faces and feet at their “mini watering hole” which was rather difficult because the groundwater wasn't as clear and clean as the stream water. Their towel was soon soiled from both the dust of their skin and the muddy water. But Jack was determined to keep their sleeping bags as clean as possible. He checked their feet for blisters and cuts, ignoring Daniel's mutters that Jack should know by now he didn't have any injuries.

When Jack ruffled and combed through Daniel's hair, something else he did every day, he said, “We have to cut your hair, buddy. It'll be easier to keep clean.”

“Why do we have to keep it clean? It gets dirty all the time anyway,” Daniel said, trying to pull his head away from Jack's hands.

Usually Jack would coax Daniel into trying to remember these things himself. He had discovered that prompting the kid to recall memories was a good way to find out if Daniel was losing them or not. And it helped Daniel to remind himself who he was.

Today, however, Jack was just beat, and so he answered, “We have to keep it clean so no bugs settle in there. Or lice. Therefore, we'll cut it tomorrow morning.”

“What 'bout your hair?”

“Mine is way shorter than yours in the first place. When it grows too much, I'm going to cut it, too,” Jack explained, holding Daniel in place with one hand on his shoulder while he continued to examine the blond head. It was good that Daniel was so blond now. Much easier to find lice or other bugs.

“Jack, who's checking your hair for lice?” Daniel wriggled away again and tried to turn to look at Jack.

“I told you, my hair's a lot shorter than yours. But that's why we keep our hair clean as much as possible. And comb it.”

“Lice go into clean hair, too,” Daniel muttered.

“But they don't have as much fun and space to place their eggs in very short hair.” Jack sighed, using Daniel's comb now. “And we don't know what kind of bugs might want to crawl into your hair on this world.”

“Or yours,” Daniel insisted.
Realizing the kid had a point, Jack said, “You can check me once I'm done with yours. Now keep still. I'm almost finished. See? Nothing there.”

Daniel jumped up and stood behind Jack, who sat on the ground and handed Daniel his own comb. For a moment Jack felt little fingers scrabbling on his head and fluffing up his hair. Then...

“Jack?”

“Yes, Daniel?”

“Is it right that lice look like ants? I 'member they look like ants. An' they're gray or brown and flat?”

Feeling a little perturbed, Jack felt his head starting to itch at once. “Yess, they do. Daniel...?”

“You don' have lice then,” Daniel said.

What the heck was taking him so long to check? Jack's hair was short. It was gray and short and maybe a little grimy from all the pollen and sweat of today's walk.

“Daniel?”

“Hold still. I'm almost done. Jack... do you think that lice eggs look like tiny white beads?”

“Yes, Daniel, I do,” Jack said weakly.

“Oh. You don' have eggs either.”

“For crying out loud...” Jack jerked his head away and scrubbed both hands through his hair.

Daniel plopped down next to him and patted his knee. “Poor Jack. You sure are cranky today. You should go to bed early.”

Jack couldn't agree more.

TBC with ch 12 The Grassand
It was still dark when something woke O'Neill up. He lay silently, listening to the noises of the night, but couldn't hear anything out of the ordinary.

Daniel was plastered to his side, his head buried under Jack's left armpit. Groaning, Jack turned on his back to find a more comfortable position to sleep. He put his arm around the curled-up child and gazed into the black night sky. In the far distance, he could see a few stars, but that was it. The night breeze swished through the high grass, making it whistle and rustle. Earlier that night, Daniel had woken up and mumbled something about hungry animals.

Jack had stayed awake for a while then, listening to the night. The everlasting chirping of the crickets and the grass moving in the wind was all he’d been able to hear, though. No howls or other indications that they were surrounded by wild animals.

Daniel had settled eventually, telling Jack that the animals weren't near them.

Jack had patted the kid's back and said that was a good thing.

Then he'd been lying there, wondering if Daniel really could “feel” danger as he had insisted that morning. Were his senses improving to the point where he could feel, not only Jack's mood, but also the presence of other life forms close to them, and if those life forms were friends or foes? Predators or harmless creatures? He recalled Daniel telling him the salamander had felt safe with him....

Holy buckets.

But Daniel was four... five maybe... so O'Neill had to be careful to make the difference between what was real and what was the kid’s overactive imagination.

*You never trusted me... You never listened to me...*

Jack knew it wasn't true. He'd trusted and listened to Daniel more often than his own training and experience were comfortable with. And it had often turned out to be a good idea to listen to Daniel.

Then why did he feel like Daniel's outburst yesterday had hit so close to the truth?

Jack tried to follow this train of thought, but sleep carried him away before he came to a conclusion.

***

After a small breakfast, Jack got the scissors from the hygiene kit and cut Daniel's hair until it was as short as his own. He had expected the kid to put up a fight about it, but Daniel was all chatty and cheerful this morning and didn't care much whether his hair was short or long.

Jack put the bandanna around Daniel’s head, even though the sun wasn’t too high by the time they’d geared up.

Daniel skipped over tufts of shorter grass and plowed through the high grass like a lawn mower, arms outstretched to his sides.
The scenery didn't change much.
Grass, flowers, no path, and the mountains were still a world away.

Daniel became thirsty, then hungry, then had to pee and then was bored. He never complained about
the long walks or said he couldn't go on anymore. But his attention span was shorter now.

So they played.
Twenty questions.
I spy.

Though after spying several colored flowers, the grass, the sky and different parts of their clothes,
they got bored and went back to playing twenty questions.

***

Later, when Jack was carrying the tyke again, Daniel tugged at his shirt.

"Jack?"

"Yeah?"

"Don't you know a song to sing?"

"A song?"

"Yeah."

"I know a song, sure. Row, row, row your boat. Remember that one?"

"Urgo made us sing it," Daniel remembered. He giggled. "Urgo was funny!"

"Ah, you say that now. But back then, you didn't think he was quite that funny," Jack mused.

Daniel thought about that for a minute, then shrugged. "I was big then."

"Yep."

Daniel began to sing "Row, row, row your boat" loudly and out of tune, right into Jack's ear.

Figuring it couldn't get any worse, Jack jumped in and bounced Daniel up and down with every
"Merrily, merrily, merrily..." which had the tyke giggling and cheering.

***

As the day wore on and the sun moved higher, their enthusiasm for playing games or singing
dropped. They had lunch and hiked on. The afternoon went by with walking, resting, more walking,
and was generally a blur to Jack, who did his best to stay optimistic, calm and unfazed by the
frigging grass.

Daniel, who was resting his head on Jack's shoulder, started patting and rubbing Jack's neck. "I'm
sorry you're not feeling well," he mumbled.

Tightening his arm around the tyke, Jack pressed a kiss to the dusty, bandanna-covered head.
"Thanks, kiddo. The green is getting on my nerves a bit."

“But there's lotsa flowers in the green, too,” Daniel pointed out, then sighed. “That doesn't help, huh?”

“The flowers get a little boring, too.” Jack sighed back.

“Jack? What do you miss mostly? From home?”

“Oy... a shower, I think. Cold beer. My bed.”

“I miss Sam,” Daniel said. “And Teal’c.”

Ouch.

“I miss them, too,” Jack answered softly.

“You think they miss us too?”

“Oh, yeah.” They were probably worried, frustrated and frantically trying to get the gate to work. Jack wondered briefly if their allies had been informed and asked for help. He hoped – not for the first time – Carter had gotten home safely from her meeting with Thor. Then he wondered if she was working through the night to figure out how to help them. Crap. He hoped Janet made her sleep and eat once in a while. She could get as bad as Daniel when she was engrossed in her work or puzzling over a problem to solve a crisis.

“Jack? Do you think they'll even rec'gnize me like this?” Worry laced Daniel's voice, and troubled eyes looked up at him. “Do you think they'll even like me?”

“Oh, but we hope we can up-size you before we go home. Remember? We're trying to find a castle with a 'fix-it' device that has your name on it,” Jack said.

“Yes, but... but what if it's broken? What if we haveta get Sam here to fix the fix-it device?”

“Well… Let me look at you... hmm... you got two arms, two legs, the baby blues, button nose and,” he poked Daniel's tummy, “pot belly... you're the right size to be carried around... little dirty maybe... what's not to like, huh?” Jack tickled Daniel's belly again and smiled at the giggles it caused.

“I miss chocolate,” Daniel went on. “And I should miss coffee, but I don't.”

“That's a shocker, eh?”

“Ah-huh. I miss books.”

“I miss the Simpsons.”

“Chinese food.”

“Ditto.”

“My office and my fish.”

“Uh... the commissary? They have a mean apple pie.”

“'m going to buy you a real big cake when we're home again,” Daniel promised, patting Jack's neck some more.

“Sweet.” Jack grinned. “I'm going to get you all the brands of chocolate you like. Then we can eat it
all until we're stuffed.”

“Deal.” Daniel sniggered.

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After the evening’s water digging and filtering process, they had dinner, which contained bread and cold macaroni. The cold macaroni were yucky, but Daniel ate it with bravery. They both grimaced at their meal, then looked at each other and said, “Ewww” together and laughed.

Later, Daniel yawned and rubbed his eyes.

“Time for bed, bud,” Jack decided and patted Daniel's sleeping bag.

Daniel was already in his big black tee and had washed himself as well as possible. Tiredly he crawled into the bag, and Jack zipped it up.

“You know what's cool?” Daniel mumbled as he snuggled into the soft material. “Our toothpaste is almost gone.”

“And? So? Therefore?”

“I hate the taste of it. ‘specially now when we can't rinse properly.”

“We'll find other ways to brush our teeth,” Jack promised Daniel with a smirk.

“Shoot,” Daniel muttered.

“It's important to keep yourself clean and healthy, because...” Jack started and then raised his eyebrow at Daniel.

“Because there's no doctor to go to in case of toothache or other pains. So we haveta make sure we take care of ourselves as good as we can,” Daniel rattled off.

“That's right. Now stop whining. You don't want rotten teeth,” Jack said, ruffling Daniel's hair, secretly missing the usual length of it.

“Jack? You're a good daddy, you know? Even though you do the yucky stuff. Like making me brush my teeth and wash my feet. It's what daddies do, I s'pose.”

Jack bent down and let himself be embraced by two short arms. Daniel gave a sloppy kiss to Jack's cheek, and Jack pressed his lips to the boy’s forehead. “Yeah. Sleep tight, Danny. Don't let the bed bugs bite ya.”

He sat next to the sleeping child, watching his peaceful features until it turned dark and the day’s heat subsided a little.

But it never really cooled down.

Rubbing his eyes, Jack listened to the waving grass and the crickets.

God, he hated crickets.

And he used to like them at home.

But here, there had to be myriads of them. Their singing grew even louder at nights. Jack had seen
them; they looked just like their Earth relatives. Daniel had considered several ideas for native-names for them and finally came up with cricks or crickies. Jack's suggestion to just call them Jiminy Crickets had confused Daniel, and Jack had to tell him the story of Pinocchio.

If Daniel had become a kid back on Earth, Jack would have shown him Disney movies, bought him Legos and kiddie-books. Okay, not kiddie-books. Archaeology for young people or something like that. Computer games.

He'd make sure Daniel would try everything he had missed out on in his first childhood. And he was certain that Daniel would have loved it. This version of Daniel Jackson was as curious and enthusiastic as his adult self.

If they weren't able to change Daniel back...

Daniel thought he was a good daddy.

Daniel was wrong on oh-so-many levels.

He hadn't been a good dad. And he probably wasn't a good friend, either... And as a life partner, he royally sucked.

Jack hadn't been a good dad the first time around. Sure, Charlie had adored him, oh, yeah. Jack knew it. His kid had worshiped the ground Jack walked on. It wasn't enough, though. He'd screwed up and left his loaded gun unlocked in the house.

It had been his gun. In their house.

Afterwards, Jack hadn't been able to support his wife. He'd withdrawn and left her alone with her grief. Jack O'Neill had walked out to blow himself up, along with his self-pity and a whole planet. What a way to go.

But look here, friends and neighbors... there had been the possibility of second chances, and Jack had gotten his in the form of Daniel Jackson, who'd kicked his ass in more than one way and made him reconsider. Had made him want to live again. Had made him carry on, save the people of Abydos and blow up the bad guy instead.

Oh, yeah. It had felt good to be back.

And for a few years, things had gone well. Jack had gotten his life back on track, even though Sara had left him.

Daniel, Carter and T had been there instead, and they'd grown close very fast. And the job had some upsides as well. He was good at it, too. They said he was a good leader. A strong leader. The truth was, he was only as good as the team surrounding him. They were the best. They'd be the best with or without him.

They were saying all kinds of things about him at the SGC. Jack O'Neill was a hard-assed bastard, a tough guy. He killed in cold blood, and he had a weird sense of humor. Jack was well aware of his ability to make people jump and turn the other way or stand at attention with just the right glare. He was known for being overprotective and territorial when it came to his own team.

Maybe he was all of the above. Yet, despite all the demons haunting him, Jack had allowed himself to become more human, allowed Daniel to dig his way through the layers of military bravado, guilt and detachment that Jack had built around himself after Charlie’s death.
But not even Jack's reputation could prevent people from whispering bullshit behind his back, from spreading rumors peppered with sordid false details.

Nobody ever dared to touch him. He'd never been ganged up on in the showers or at home.

Cowardly bastards found other ways to get to him.

Two days after Feretti had come to Jack's house that one night, Lou had cracked his head when he'd slipped in the SGC showers. He'd been out of the infirmary the very same day, sporting a few stitches and a gauze bandage. It hadn't been serious.

Just a warning. Someone had called Jack to make sure he understood that.

Some time later, Jack had discovered by accident that Daniel had been on the receiving end of some “pranks” lately. Like finding woman's underwear in his locker.

Daniel had let it slip one evening after he had a glass of wine too many. Which, in Daniel's case, wasn't a lot of glasses. He had shrugged it off as idiocy and told Jack not to get all tied up over it...

...“The more we react to it, the more encouraged they are going to feel. These guys are just some homophobic idiots who fear their own sexuality so much that they have to lash out at everyone who's not the norm. It's just another military thing I don't understand,” Daniel said. “Then again it's not just a military thing of course. You'll find these ignorant intolerant people everywhere.”

Jack heard the barely suppressed bitterness in his friend's voice.

The military and Daniel would never really become friends. No matter how well he adjusted. Daniel adapted to save their lives out there and to get the job done. Not because the military had grown on him.

Jack wondered occasionally how he fit into Daniel's life. After all, he represented much of what the military stood for.

“I value Jack O'Neill. You're the one I have this relationship with. Not the colonel,” Daniel said that same night after admitting he had been bullied.

“But I am the colonel,” Jack argued. “I don't just leave him at the front door when I get home.”

“I know that. Still there's so much more to you than just the colonel.”

“So how does that work, Daniel? Your life is full of the military. You work at one of the most classified military bases in the US. You might be a civilian, but you're on the Air Force pay roll, and you work by military rules. Well... mostly anyway.”

“It's the price I'm paying for being able to do my work. For having this amazing opportunity to be out there, see other planets, meet foreign cultures.” Daniel smiled.

“Is it a high price?” Jack asked out of curiosity.

“No,” Daniel whispered as his arms wrapped around Jack's body. “Not too high. And not all the military does is bad. Not everyone working for the military is a homophobe or enjoys killing and war. The military, on the whole, supports the US policies and vice versa. And there are things I don't
like nor support in the military or the politics. I guess it's all a matter of compromises."

Jack didn't tell Daniel the real cause for Lou's “slip” in the shower. He just told him to be careful, and he tried to hammer into him that they should keep their relationship low-key at the mountain. Rumors were like a flash-in-the-pan. They burned hot and high for a time, and then more interesting things happened, and the talks around the water cooler changed.

Not this time.

Jack tried to figure out the identities of the assholes who called him in the middle of the night to tell him what he probably did with both, Carter and his civilian team member. O'Neill wanted names, and he wanted to spill blood and break bones. So he pulled a few strings, called in a few debts and hoped for names.

But everywhere Jack went, he ran into dead ends. One of his sources seemed to sympathize with the wrong side, so the scum buckets paid Jack a visit...

...They had been careful, though.

Waited until Jack had had a week of leave while Daniel had been off world with another team. Jack had come home from grocery shopping to see his front door standing open.

Nobody had been hidden in the house to try and beat the crap out of him.

But they had done a good job trashing his place.

Jack stretched out next to Daniel on his own sleeping bag, trying to block the disgusting memories. But sleep didn't come. He remembered how his first impulse had been to call the mountain and get a team for investigation and fingerprints. He'd been close to calling Hammond.

Screw “Don't ask, don't tell.”

But then Jack had found Daniel's ripped clothes in his bedroom, and as he'd stood there, staring at them, his cell had beeped.

The guy who'd called Jack on his cell, while he was still standing in his bedroom with Daniel's torn clothes on the bed, had told him in every sickening detail what they were going to do to his queer lover if Jack didn't stop that relationship...

... “Why don't you come over and try to beat me up, asshole?” Jack said through gritted teeth. He was ready to kill the first person coming through his front door.

“You're one of the best, O'Neill. It'd be a shame to see you dead.”

“Try me.”

“End it, Colonel.”

“Yeah. I'm going to end it. I'm going to end you,” Jack said, his voice as deadly as a weapon.
“Talk to your CO, and you'll figure out that the chain of command doesn't end at Hammond's desk. You're way smarter than you let people believe. You know there are people who'd love to have a barbecue with you and the queer. Look around your house, Colonel."

Jack heard the click as the caller disconnected.

In the end, he didn't call the mountain. He just cleaned up and threw the trash away.

Hammond was a fair man, a good leader. He'd understand. O'Neill knew this with the same intuition that told him he wouldn't find any fingerprints in his house other than his own and Daniel's.

He had no evidence. These people were good. They trashed his house... so what? Tough crap. They could have been anybody. Burglars, junkies...

They hadn't taken anything, though. They just vandalized.

And finally... Yep, chain of command didn't end with Hammond. The general could be understanding and tolerant all he wanted. It wasn't his call anymore if the word got out to other places.

When Jack was done, he sat on his bed, holding Daniel's torn shirt in his hands.

They had ripped clothes, some books and other things that belonged to Daniel to shreds.

Not one single thing that belonged to Jack.

Things had been yanked out of cupboards, both their toothbrushes were stuck into the toilet, and there was other stuff thrown on the floor everywhere.

Yet, none of Jack's things had been broken or sliced.

Only Daniel's.

TBC with ch 13 Cupcake and Tears
Their third day in the hell of grass began with a jolt for Jack when Daniel shook him awake before dawn.

“Jack, Jack... there's something watching us,” Daniel whispered urgently into his ear.

“Shh... lay down,” Jack hissed, instantly awake and his gun ready at hand. It was something drilled into him; he did it without thinking. “Don't move.”

His other hand crept to the flashlight, lying next to his sleeping bag, but froze in mid-air when he heard a low growl. Jack listened to every sound... The rustling grass, the crickets... whoa... the crickets had stopped. There was only... silence.

He didn't move a muscle, and to his relief the kid didn't either. For how long they stayed like that, Jack couldn't tell. Since he couldn't see anything, all his other senses were on alert. It seemed that whatever was observing them, was doing the same thing.

Waiting.

Assessing.

Jack's ears picked up a crackle.

With a quick move of his hand, he grabbed for the flashlight, relieved when his fingers closed around it immediately.

He clicked it on as Daniel squeaked, “It's coming!”

The light was dead. Batteries had probably lost power.

Hearing the animal’s approach, Jack let go of the light and raised his gun.

A shot erupted in the darkness, and a heavy body hit the ground.

Daniel let out another squeak, but didn't move.

Jack stayed in his position, gun raised, for another couple of minutes, waiting. But the creature didn't move.

Slowly, Jack reached next to himself and fingered Daniel's flashlight out of his pack. Clicking it on, he searched the ground until the beam of light hit a fox-like creature. It wasn't very tall, but sturdy with scrubby long hair, pointed ears, a long muzzle and beady eyes. Its legs were short, but strong, and his tail was long and bushy. Jack couldn't make out its color in the light of his lamp, but he bet it was brownish mixed with some gray.

“What is it, Jack?” Daniel's small voice came out of the darkness.
“A mammal. Looks like a fox.”

“Oh...” Daniel sounded sad, but not too upset. “Can I look at it?”

“Yes, but don't touch it. It might carry all kinds of diseases,” Jack warned.

“I know. Fleas and worms and stuff.”

Daniel scrambled out of his sleeping bag and went to look at the animal. “It was very hungry,” he said. “I could feel it. There was nothin' else. Just hunger. It scared me.”

“Well, there's probably not much to hunt around here. It probably was without food for a while.”

Jack wondered why there weren't more animals around. For the last two days, they had seen bugs and butterflies. Some birds circling the sky. But no rabbits, squirrels or any other creature. There had been plenty of mammals in the forest. Out here, it seemed pretty deserted despite the grass and flowers everywhere.

Or maybe most animals who lived here were nocturnal...

Daniel went back to his sleeping bag. He sat on it, pulled his knees to his chest and put his arms around his legs.

“Daniel? You okay?” Jack settled next to him, already bracing himself for another round of tears and serious talks.

But Daniel just sighed. “Yes. It was going to attack us. I could feel it, too...” He trailed off and paused before he asked, “Jack, do you think I could learn how to read feelings right?”

“What do you mean?”

“I dunno. To understand why you feel what you feel. Or the animal. An' maybe I could learn what to do to make the bad feelings go away.”

“Daniel, you can't make everyone's bad feelings go away.”

“I know that, Jack. But it would be cool if I could make your bad feelings go 'way. You'd be happy more often then.”

Jack switched off the flashlight, partly to save batteries and partly so Daniel couldn't see his face. This was Daniel Jackson, pure and simple. The man had always wanted to make a difference for others though he never put himself in the center of attention. The kid was no different.

Daniel wanted Jack to be happy.

Big Daniel had wanted them both to be happy. He had tried to give Jack as much of himself as he could. Which was probably more than he had ever given to anybody else.

And Jack had pushed him away.

No matter what his reasons and no matter how hard he tried to tell himself that Daniel was better off without him.

Jack had screwed it.

Nothing new there.
“Why don't you try and get another hour of sleep, buddy?”

“Are you thinking of me when I was still big? Is that why you're so sad sometimes... and angry?”

“Daniel... we have a long way to go, and it's not even light yet. Lay down again.” Jack gently, but firmly, pushed the boy down and helped him stick his legs back into the sleeping bag.

“Sorry,” Daniel whispered. “Good night, Jack.”

“It's okay, grasshopper.” Jack brushed a hand through the short hair and patted Daniel's face in the dark.

The damn crickets started to chirp again.

***

Before Daniel woke up later that morning, Jack put layers of grass over the animal he had shot. It had red-brown hair and looked pretty harmless by daylight. More like a dog than a fox. But Jack didn't let himself be fooled by that. The critter had short but sharp teeth and claws.

It was the first mammal of this kind Jack had seen on the planet. He wondered if they lived in packs or alone. If they lived in a pack, this one had probably gotten separated from his buddies for some reason. He hoped they wouldn't run into a hungry bunch of these creatures.

Daniel was a little subdued during breakfast, but he didn't ask to see the dead mammal. By the time they geared up, he was back to his normal talkative self.

They hadn't gone far when Jack stopped and held up a hand to silence Daniel. He had heard something. Daniel, who had obviously heard it too, grabbed for Jack's other hand.

It was a high-pitched wail. And it did sound suspiciously like a ...

Daniel let go of Jack's hand and moved forward so fast that he almost managed to slip away before Jack could get hold of his little backpack. “Daaanielll...”

“But Jaaack, it's a...”

“Not so fast. I'll take a look at it first.”

But Daniel had wriggled himself out of his backpack's straps and slipped away from Jack. Now, he knelt in the high grass a few feet away, crooning at whatever he had found.

Peachy.

Just what they needed.

“Don't touch it,” Jack snapped.


Jack opened his mouth to tell Daniel that they couldn't do anything for this puppy and that its mommy would probably be here soon and rip them a new one for getting too close to her baby.

But he never said it.

He bent over Daniel to take a look at the critter and instantly knew that its mommy wouldn't be
coming back.

The “puppy” had black beady eyes, and its hair was as long and red-brown as its mother’s. It had a tiny bushy tail and the long muzzle. And it wasn't much bigger than one of their sample containers.

Daniel took it into his arms and cradled it to his chest, stroking through its hair and patting its head and back. “Shh, I've got ya. You're safe. Don’ be afraid. I'm here,” Daniel whispered to the tiny bundle, instinctively using Jack's repertoire of comforting words.

Oh, for crying out loud...

“I'm sorry Jack shot your mommy. He didn't mean to. Your mommy tried to attack us,” Daniel told the puppy, who had stopped wailing and merely yipped a little now.

“Daniel,” Jack said, not really sure what else to say.

“Jack?” Big blue eyes looked up at him.

“I told you not to touch it,” Jack said weakly, then held out his hands. “Give it to me.”

Daniel wrinkled his forehead and cradled the critter even closer to himself. “You're not going to hurt it, right? You're not going to shoot it, too? Or break its neck?”

Jack knew he should give this orphan puppy a fast and merciful death. Because he couldn't be so cruel to just leave it here to starve. And they couldn't take it with them either.

“I won't hurt it. I just want to take a look at it,” he said, wishing he had something to bang his head on.

“You promise?”

“Yes, Daniel.” Jack took the puppy carefully from Daniel. It fit into both his hands and weighed close to nothing. Its hair was soft and didn't look as scrubby as its mother’s. It sniffed a few times and then started nipping at Jack's thumb. “What are you, hm? Boy or girl?” Jack mumbled, turning the puppy around to take a look.

“It likes you,” Daniel observed.

“It's a she.” Jack sighed. He handed the puppy back to Daniel where she made herself comfortable in his arms again.

Like she belonged there.

“Daniel, we don't even know what it eats. It probably needs milk. Frankly, I have no idea how to take care of it,” Jack said, shaking his head.

“I'll take care of her. I feel what she needs. She’s hungry. We have instant milk, right? For the coffee? It's in the MRE. We don't need it. I can feed her. I'll carry her, too. She's so tiny, look?”

“Oh, you'll carry it, huh? And who'll carry both of you when you can't walk anymore? And we don't know if the instant milk will make it sick,” Jack said as he shrugged off his gear and started searching for the instant milk powder.

“Jack, you shot her mommy!”

“I didn't know it...she... was a mommy!” Jack was whining, so what? He had every reason to whine!
Daniel cocked his head and gazed at Jack for a second. Then he smiled, and his eyes twinkled. “You feel bad 'bout shooting her mommy. You won' feel so bad anymore if you help this puppy, Jack.”

What had he thought about kids and innocence lately? Manipulative little brat, that's what Daniel was. Whoever had given him the ability to read people's feelings should be shot.

Jack jerked out a mug and a spoon, filled the mug with water from his canteen and some of the milk powder. He stirred until it turned into a white glob. He refused to give away any more water than necessary. Either the puppy toodk it or left it.

“Come here,” Jack told Daniel gruffly. When the boy complied, Jack showed him how to hold the puppy on his lap and stick his finger into the food so the critter could suck it off. It took awhile for the puppy to get it, but once she had figured it out, she happily sucked the pap from Daniel's fingers until the mug was empty.

Then she burped softly, and her eyes dropped closed.

Yep, just like a baby.

It reminded Jack of the dog he had had when he was a boy.

“Let's move on,” Jack said, getting ready to leave. “And just so we're clear on this, Daniel. We'll reach a village in a week or so, and we'll leave the puppy there. I'm not taking it with me over the mountains.”

At least, Jack hoped they were headed the right direction to reach one of the few X marks on the map.

With that, he walked on, avoiding another look from those blue eyes.

Daniel said, “Okay, Jack,” and followed, his precious bundle settled in his arms.

***

Chattering to the puppy, Daniel soon walked ahead of Jack. The little thing kept yipping back, just like they were having a real conversation.

Ten minutes into this, Jack caught himself being amused by the two.

Not that he'd admit it. He kept his scowl firmly in place, reminding himself that the milk powder wasn't going to forever and that taking this puppy with them was a really bad idea.

He also realized that – again – he was the victim of Daniel's persuasive charm. It seemed to happen no matter how old the guy was. Jack only hoped that Daniel Jackson never really found out how easily Jack was compromised by his friend's compassion how deeply he had wormed his way into the colonel's heart.

Daniel put the wriggling puppy down, and it hopped and skipped around the boy's feet.

Maybe it would run away and decide to find other relatives. Get lost. Fall down a ravine – not that there were any ravines around here.

When they rested, Daniel fed the critter again, telling her that Jack wasn't a mean person at all. “He just hasta get used to you, you know. Then he'll love you.”

Oy.
After her meal, the pup was tired and fell asleep instantly in Daniel's lap. Jack gave the kid some water to drink, and they sat in the grass, both watching the tiny thing. Of course, Jack didn't really watch. There was just nothing else to look at.

Aside from grass and flowers and bugs.

When they were ready to leave, the puppy was still asleep.

“Looks like you have to carry it from here,” Jack said. “I'm not waiting another hour or so until it wakes up.”

“She's not heavy. I told you I'll take care of her,” Daniel replied, somewhat snippy.

“I'm just saying. Let's go.”

They walked on in silence. For approximately half an hour, Daniel carried his precious burden without much trouble.

Like Daniel, the puppy seemed to slumber just fine while being carried.

However, as time went on, Jack tried to ignore the way Daniel's steps became more slurred and how he hung his head. The animal seemed to droop in Daniel's arms, and he started to shift it around.

“Jack? Shouln' she wake up by now? How long will she sleep?”

“Well, I don't know. Puppies need lots of sleep, just like human babies. Depends on how old it is, I guess.”

“And she's not a dog, right?”

“Nope. But looks close.”

Daniel sighed and hitched the puppy up again. She gave a little snuff and sniff, and her ears twitched.

Jack waited a few more minutes before he sighed. “Why don't you give the Cupcake a little nudge to wake her?”

Daniel stopped and squinted up at Jack, sweat and pollen dust covering his tired face. “Are you sure? Maybe she's still tired.”

“Give it a try.”

Daniel gently poked the puppy, and it took all of Jack's willpower not to just take over and put her down on the ground. Finally Daniel came to that conclusion himself, and with some gentle encouraging words, he placed her on the grass.

She opened one eye, yawned, curled up and fell asleep again at Daniel's bare feet.

“Jaaaack,” Daniel whined. “What 'm I supposed to do with her?”

Jack walked on, rolling his eyes in annoyance at the pair. “Well, I guess you’ll have to carry her until she wakes up or leave her there,” he said as he passed the kid. “Either way, we have to go.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Jack saw Daniel pick up the puppy and walk on, grim-faced.
He wasn't backing down. If Daniel wanted to take his new friend with them, he'd better learn to take care of it right away. Jack wasn't going to carry...

“You know, it'd be good if you'd wake up soon and walk like we do!” Daniel muttered loudly, then added, “Or Jack will make me leave you here an' you'll find no food an' your mommy's dead an' you'll be dead soon, too…”

Sticking his fingers in his ears and singing loudly sounded like a great idea right now.

“...he just thinks pragmatically. You know what pragmatic is? No, 'course not, you're just a baby. Jack thinks that if you don' keep up with us, we won't reach the mountains ever. And we have to reach them so I can get big again and we can go home…”

If Daniel thought his mumbling and muttering was going to make Jack yield, he was wrong. Jack gritted his teeth, slowed his pace, but didn't stop walking.

It was when the muttering stopped and didn't start anew that he finally turned to look at the little boy and his new friend. Jack saw Daniel swallow and blink away tears.

“Jack? Jack, do you think maybe she's sick? She isn't moving at all... She's like a sack of potatoes.”

“Oh, for…” Jack reached out and scooped up the tiny creature. Placing a hand on the little belly and chest, he felt a strong heartbeat. “She's all right. Maybe she's used to be carried around by her mom while she sleeps. I don't know.” He looked at Daniel and back at the critter, then settled her into the crook of his arm. She barely woke up during the exchange. Only opened her black eyes once, yawned widely and settled down again.

“Thank you, Jack.” Daniel sighed.

“Can't have you die from exhaustion, now can I?”

If the situation were different, Jack would have let Daniel stew awhile longer before taking over the puppy. However, he was worried about dehydration and didn't want Daniel to power himself out too fast. The kid was way stronger than a kid his age usually was. He was willing to walk long distances on his short legs, but even this new improved Daniel couldn't go on much longer when exhausted and without enough water and shade.

The lack of fresh water was making it difficult to fill their canteens during the day. The puppy didn't help either. So they'd have to rest more often to save their strength. And that was slowing them down.

It was a bitch.

A short while later, her royal highness rose and demanded to run ahead again.

***

When they rested and ate lunch, Daniel tried to feed the puppy some of his cold beef. She sniffed, took a tentative lick and decided she liked what was on the menu. Daniel scooped up little bits of the meat with gravy and fed it to the dog.

“See, Jack? She doesn't just eat milk. She can eat from the MRE too!”

“That's what I was afraid of,” Jack muttered. “And you're not feeding your lunch to her, understood?”
“She’s so tiny. She doesn’t need much,” Daniel reminded Jack.

“Not much but often. So stop it.”

Daniel chewed on his bottom lip and glared for a moment before he turned his attention back to his new playmate.

Jack wondered how old exactly the critter was. It was hard to tell. If she was a dog, he’d say 18 weeks, tops. She was very little, though. Then again, her mom hadn’t been all that big either. And he had no idea what species this animal belonged to. Could resemble a dog. Or a fox. Or something entirely different. Jack watched Daniel pat and cuddle her and finally came to the conclusion that she looked a little like a Pomeranian. Only her muzzle was longer and her ears, a little too large. The tail, while bushy, wasn’t up and sat over her back. It resembled the tail of a fox, red and white at its end.

Jack made Daniel take a nap after lunch, ignoring his own restlessness and the pressure to wander on in favor of the rational decision to take it slow.

As they continued through the grassland, Jack carrying Daniel, he noticed that there were large areas of short grass in between now. It made walking much easier. Jack also recognized animal droppings on the ground here and there.

The puppy skipped ahead, then turned and ran in large circles around Jack before she started off again to take the lead.

Daniel, who was playing with Jack’s dog tag chain again, suddenly stopped and patted Jack’s neck. “Look! Over there!”

Following the kid’s outstretched arm to the right, Jack saw a herd of large cattle-like animals in the distance. They were stampeding, and for a disturbing moment he feared they might come toward them. But to his relief, they hustled away in the other direction.

He wasn’t exactly keen on being stomped into the ground by giant cows.

Yet, Jack felt his mood rising a notch. It wasn’t much, but it was a change of scenery. One should be grateful for little things. He hoped they’d find a lake or a river soon. Where there were animals, there should be water.

The puppy wanted the cows gone, too. She started running around like an Energizer bunny, yipping and growling at the distant animals.

“Cupcake, stop that,” Daniel called out. “You’ll just let ‘em know we’re here an’ then they’ll come back and trample us.”

“Cupcake?” Jack raised an eyebrow and smothered a chuckle.

“Yes. You named her, ‘member?”

“I did?”

“You did. You said I should make the Cupcake walk. ‘sides, do you always haveta think about cake, Jack?”

“I like cake.” He shrugged.

“Then you like Cupcake too,” Daniel said in a matter-of-fact way.
“Mmmmmmaybe,” Jack drawled.

Daniel patted his neck. “Jack?”

“Yes, Daniel?”

“Will you be cross with me all the time now?”

What's a guy gonna say to that? “No, I won't. I'm just worried, that's all.”

Daniel hung his head as his other hand fiddled with Jack's vest pocket. “I'm sorry. I know you are. I'm not being very grown up, am I?”

“You're just being you,” Jack said. “In a downsized kinda way... sort of.”

“Don't you feel sorry for Cupcake? Don't you think we have to try and save her?”

“Yes, I do feel sorry for her. But Daniel... we need to be realistic here. We barely have enough water to keep us from becoming dehydrated in this heat. And unless something changes soon, we'll have to take more rests and dig for more water just for us. Same with our food. Rations are going to shrink over the next couple of weeks. And she's still a baby. She'll slow us down... “

“But we can't just leave her behind, Jack. No one gets left behind. It's not her fault you shot her mother.”

“I know, Daniel. We'll try. But if it comes down to it, we have to save ourselves first. You got that?”

Daniel sniffed and sighed, then nodded. “Think so.”

Jack tightened his arm around the tyke and hoped for better times.

***

At first, Jack thought his eyes were tricking him late that afternoon. But what looked like a reflection of light turned out to be a large surface of water, glistening in the sun, surrounded by short grass and...

“Trees. Sweet,” Jack said. He hadn't been that happy to see trees in a very long time.

The trees weren't high, but stood together in groups, which meant shade and wood. They could make a fire and build a shelter.

They could probably fish.

Daniel was skipping ahead, Cupcake galloping after him, and Jack felt his own steps becoming wider and faster. The gear, which had seemed to weigh a couple of tons the last couple of hours, suddenly didn't hinder him anymore.

Distances were a funny thing when you're able to see real far. Everything seemed much closer than it really was. So it didn't surprise Jack when they needed another hour to reach the shore of what turned out to be an enormous lake.

Daniel, who hadn't complained or whined about the walking up to that point had tugged at Jack's hand for the last thirty minutes, repeating the age-old mantra of children. “Are we there yet? How far is it? Are we there yet?”
Jack couldn't blame him at all.

Now they were standing and gazing at the lake and the many birds floating on the surface or flying close above the water, diving for fish.

Cupcake ran for a drink and then threw herself into the lake. She paddled towards the first group of gray birds, yipping at them until they flew off and settled down somewhere else.

Daniel dropped his backpack and started to pull his shirt over his head.

Realizing what the tyke was up to, Jack caught hold of his arm before he could step out of his pants. “Whoa, slow down there, grasshopper.”

“Jaack, I'm hot and sweaty, and there's water!”

“I know that, and I'm as sweaty and hot as you are. But we have to check it out first.”

Sighing, Daniel rolled his eyes. “I knowww. It's dangerous to jump into unknown water. I wasn't going to jump, Jack. I was going to be careful.”

“Careful and you just don't go well together. Let's find shade first, drop our stuff and then we’ll go investigating, okay?”

Jack let Daniel do his duty of filling their canteens with the crystal-clear water, then motioned for him to get a move on. Grumbling under his breath, Daniel picked up his pack and shirt and followed Jack to a group of trees and a couple of large rocks. Cupcake came back from her bath and showered Daniel with water droplets as she shook herself dry.

“How come she can take a bath and I can't?” Daniel whined.

“You can take a bath as soon as we put our gear away.”

“I'll be dried out by then!”

“For crying out loud, Daniel...”

“I'll be dehydranted!”

“What?”

“de-hy-dran-ted!”

“You mean dehydrated?” Jack checked out the flat boulders behind the trees. He hoped to find smaller stones to set up their fire pit. He was about to ask Daniel to look for firewood when the kid suddenly whispered, “Jack, there's some...”

A sharp hiss made Jack freeze on the spot.

“...thing behind the stones,” Daniel ended his sentence.

Jack was with his back to Daniel, so he couldn't see where exactly he was. “Don't move,” he said.

“It's scared,” Daniel said, his voice closer to Jack's left now.

“Stand. Still.”
A yellow triangular head appeared between two of the boulders in front of Jack. Its body followed a moment later, yellow with white spots.

Probably the size of a rattlesnake.

And not matching Ashu’s description of snakes.

It curled up a few feet away from him.

Jack felt sweat trickling down his temple.

He had no stick, no stone to throw at the snake.

And he wasn’t close enough to give it a well-aimed kick.

In slow motion, he flexed his fingers and let his hand creep towards his knife...

The snake raised its head, and Jack could see the eyes fixed on his every move.

His hand slowly closed around the knife’s handle.

If he missed...

If he wasn’t fast enough...

Out of the blue, Daniel emerged at Jack's left, his arms outstretched, holding a long stick in both hands.

Cupcake started growling.

The snake gave an irritated hiss and turned towards the child.

Jack jerked out his knife just as Daniel stepped forward, poking the stick at the snake. “Get off! Go away! We won't hurt you! Go away! Ssssh... off!”

“Daniel, get back!” Jack barked, reaching out to grab the kid and push him aside.

But the damn puppy jumped in as well, coming to the rescue, barking and stomping its feet, snapping at the reptile’s twitching head.

The snake hissed once more, turned and slithered off with lightning speed, zipping back to where it had come from.

Jack moved fast, knife still in hand, to look behind the rock. But the snake was gone.

And the puppy bounded after it, determined to scare it off with high-pitched short barks.

Jack put his knife away, wiped his brow and slowly turned to face the kid, who dropped the stick and gazed back at him.

“Daniel…” Jack said flatly.

“Uh-oh... You're not happy,” Daniel mumbled.

“I'm not happy,” Jack agreed, barely keeping himself from yelling.

Daniel blinked. “But why? The snake's gone. It was just taking a sun bath, and you startled it.”
Mentally counting to ten, Jack glanced in the direction where the snake had escaped before he crouched in front of Daniel and took his hands. “Do you remember when you distracted Menkins? And climbed the well at Ashu's house?”

Daniel frowned and nodded. “Yes, but...”

“Do you also remember the little chat we had after you climbed the well?”

“Ah-huh.”

“I want you to listen to me. You just put yourself in great danger – again.”

“Cupcake and me made the snake leave,” Daniel interrupted proudly.

“Yes, you did. But it could have attacked and bitten you, Daniel.”

“But it didn't.”

“Yeah, well, that's not the point here. You will not throw yourself into dangerous situations like this. Period. I was about to throw my knife...”

“You would've killed it!”

“Daniel, I'm sorry, but when it comes down to the choice between you being bitten by a snake or killing it, then I'll kill it! I didn't have a stick at hand...”

“But I did!”

“Daniel!” Jack started counting again, this time to twenty.

Daniel, however, yanked his hands away and crossed his arms over his chest, his eyes shooting daggers at Jack. “Why can't you just acknowledge once that I did something right? Even if it didn't fit into your point of view! I knew the snake wouldn't attack me. I knew it was there even before you did! I was right, and it left! What's the big deal here?”

“The big deal is that you won't listen to...” Jack began but was interrupted by Daniel.

“I'll tell you what your problem is! You always think you have to be the one in charge, and you always think everything's about you! But it's not!”

“Daniel...?” Jack was stunned. Gone was the kiddie talk and the four year old innocence from the angry little person in front of him.

“Even if it had bitten me, it wouldn't have been your fault, Jack. You can't be responsible for every choice I make!”

Oh, now, wait a minute here... “I am damn well responsible for you, Daniel. Just in case you have forgotten that one little detail – you're currently four and...”

“Five! I'm at least five!” The irritated expression on Daniel's face, the one he always got when Jack managed to distract him from the original topic was so much adult Daniel...

“Fine. Five. Not much of a difference there, don't ya think?”

“All I'm asking is that you trust me. Despite what you feel right now, I might even be useful at this age.”
“Hey! I didn’t say I don’t trust you! That doesn’t mean you can play the hero while you’re barely 3 feet tall!”

“You just don’t get it, do you?” Daniel turned and stomped off.

Cupcake seemed to pop out of nowhere and followed the tyke.

Jack needed a moment to recover from his confusion about the change of attitude. When he realized that the spot where Daniel had stood was empty now, he shook himself out of it and went after him.

He left everything at the boulder and walked into the group of trees, knowing the kid couldn’t have gotten far in just the blink of an eye. Sure enough, he spotted the small figure marching with furious strides through the scrub, a bouncing Cupcake in tow.

“Daniel, come back here,” Jack snapped.

“Leave me alone, Jack!” Daniel yelled back and started running.

“Where the hell do you think you’re going?! Can we please talk about this?” Jack hollered, changing to a jog and catching up with his wanna-be-AWOL-deserter.

“You never want to talk. You just want to tell me what to do!”

Maybe it was the never-ending heat or the exhaustion. Maybe it was the unresolved trash they were carrying around from when Daniel had been big. Maybe a mixture of all that.

When Jack grabbed Daniel and put an arm around him to pick him up, the kid started howling like a banshee and bit him, sharp little milk teeth boring into the back of Jack’s hand. Letting out a yell of surprise and pain, Jack snatched his arm back and stared at the red marks on his skin.

Without further ado, he decided it was time for some attitude adjustment.

***

Twenty minutes later, Jack dragged a bunch of long sprigs over to their new campsite. He was sweating like a pig, and every muscle in his body screamed for a bath in the lake and a long period of sleep. But building a shelter was first priority and had to be done before dark. He could take a bath tomorrow if he didn’t make it tonight.

Jack was building a debris shelter, using one sturdy tree as a post and the trunk of a dead tree as a pole he had wedged in the crotch of his “post” tree. Now he was using dead wood and branches he had cut from younger trees as a framework for some kind of roof to lean against his pole tree. Later he was going to thatch it with leaves and grass, as well as he could, to waterproof it.

“Hey, give that back,” Jack growled at Cupcake who was trying to run away with smaller twigs.

The little critter jumped around Jack, all four paws leaving the ground, uttering these high-pitched little barks.

“No, I’m not gonna play, and neither is Daniel. So get outta here,” Jack told the puppy, shaking his head at its antics. Finally she left and scurried towards the water.

Jack placed another piece of dead wood in its place and rammed it into the black rich earth. Then he turned and peeked at the small figure sitting on the flat surface of the boulder, arms wrenched around himself, head down, gazing at his dirty feet.
He wasn't sure if Daniel was the sight of misery or anger. The kid hadn't spoken a word since the
smacks he had received for the bite, before Jack had carried him back here and planted his ass on the
rock, telling him not to move.

And to think about his actions.

Either way, Jack decided the little brat had spent enough time sitting on his rock. Actually, he was
amazed Daniel hadn't come down from it much earlier. Twenty minutes was a very long time for
such a little kid. He dimly remembered how five-minute timeouts had been like torture for Charlie
when he had been that age. Then again, Daniel was one of the most stubborn people Jack knew –
aside from himself. Daniel had probably been sitting there sulking all this time instead of reflecting.

Putting him down for a nap would probably have been the wiser decision in the first place.

He approached Daniel quietly and crouched in front of him so he was able to look up into his face.
Boy, the kid needed a bath, too. Jack could see where the tears had left traces.

“Hey,” Jack said.

Daniel scowled and turned his head away.

Deciding that one of them had to be the peacemaker here, Jack rubbed a hand over his sunburned
neck and muttered, “Look. I'm sorry I smacked your six, okay? You kinda had it coming, though.
Don't bite the hand that feeds you and all that...” He knew his attempt at a joke had failed when
Daniel's self-hugging arms tightened around his torso.

Jack thought he'd feel a hell of a lot better if he at least knew which version of Daniel he was dealing
with now. The kid or the... more aware persona of said kid.

“Daniel, talk to me, please?”

The tyke gave a watery sigh and wiped an arm over his face.

They were both grimy, tired and hot.

And something in Jack gave way. He gently took Daniel's skinny shoulders and pulled him off the
boulder and into his arms. He heavily sat on the grass, holding the dirty little guy close, ignoring the
rigidness of a body that only seemed to consist of pointy elbows and knees.

Finally Daniel melted into Jack's hug and became pliant as he snuggled against him. His arms
sneaked around Jack's neck, his face buried in Jack's shoulder.

When Daniel spoke, his voice was very small and muffled by Jack's shirt. But he wasn't crying.
“There's a part in me that's still angry with you. I don't really understand why. Some things are like a
fog, an' I can't 'member them anymore. But that other me... the bigger me... does 'member. And he's
hurted.”

“Yeah, I know,” Jack whispered. It's me who hurt that part of you, he thought with bitter self-
reproach. He hugged Daniel more tightly and burrowed his face into the short dusty hair.

“He's angry with you 'cuz you won't believe that I feel things. He says you always wanna be the
boss an' you'll never see him... me as an equal. An' you'll never take me serious now 'cuz I'm five
and you think I'm just a baby,” Daniel said sadly.

“Are you... are you talking with that other part of you, Daniel? In your head?” Jack had to know.
Were there two people living inside this mini-Daniel? But the other Daniel – the “bigger part” as Daniel called it - had only really surfaced a couple of times and wasn't very prominent otherwise.


“Okay,” Jack soothed. “‘s okay, Danny. I know.”

“Are we still friends, Jack?”

“What? Aw, Daniel, of course we are.”

“An’ my daddy? You still wanna be my daddy too?”

Jack thought something in him was going to crash or erupt. Probably his heart. It gave a painful sharp thud, and he had to take a gasping breath and close his eyes.

“Daniel, I'll be anything for you you want me to be,” he managed, his voice on the verge of breaking. And suddenly the words were just there. All the things Jack had never been able to say. It was so easy with this child, so natural. “I'll always be your friend, buddy. No matter what happens. It's one thing that'll never change. I'm trying to protect you, kiddo. Can't have anything happen to you. And you know me... I get a little cranky when you put yourself in danger.” He stroked his large palm up and down Daniel's scrawny back.

“I'm sorry I bited you.”

"I'll live,” Jack said, continuing to rub Daniel's back. “I love you, Daniel. I'm just bad at telling you... which isn't an excuse, I know. I'll try to get better at it.”

He felt like he had a lot more to say, to explain and to apologize for. Mostly to Big Daniel. But it had to wait. Hopefully he would get the chance once they found the palace and the other Stargate.

If there was no fixing the doohickey...

“I want you to know this, Daniel. If we can't reverse this, if you have to stay little... I'll take you home with me. If that's what you want.”

Daniel pushed away from Jack and gazed at him with brilliant blue eyes, shining brighter than ever in the dirty face. “Really? You won't send me away?”

The doubt he saw all over Daniel's face was far beyond the skepticism of a child. It probably went back to bitterly learned lessons in foster care and ongoing disappointments in his adult life. Jack knew what part he played in the cause for Daniel's disbelief.

“Not gonna happen. Nothing's going to keep us apart.” It was a promise Jack wasn't going to break. He'd make this work. Jack wasn't sure why things felt different to him all of a sudden. Or why he thought he'd be able to raise another child – and do it right this time. But right now, exhausted and covered with layers of dirt and sweat, he had a moment of clarity. He had brought them this far, and he wouldn't screw this up.

He'd bring Daniel home, safe and sound. One way or another.

Maybe, just maybe, some people were allowed to have third chances.
“Jack?” Daniel wiped his nose on Jack's shirt, which didn't make any difference, really. “I'm hungry. And tired. And hot.”

“Yeah, me too. Come on. Let's take care of all that.” He stood, picked Daniel up and carried him the few feet to their half-finished shelter.

***

After a quick snack and drink, Jack finished the shelter and gathered firewood while Daniel napped, curled up on top of his sleeping bag. Later, when the shadows became longer, Jack woke him, and they wandered down to the lake to clean themselves in the shallow water. They were both too tired to really appreciate the fresh cool water and washed up rather quickly. There would still be time to take a proper, long bath in the morning.

It was almost dark when they sat by the small fire Jack had made from loose wood and dry grass. The burning grass smelled sweeter than the logs and kindling they had used in the forest. Since Jack had to watch out for flying sparks, he kept the fire as small as possible.

But they had set up the fire pit far enough from the shelter, and it was shielded from the light breeze by the flat rocks.

Daniel rubbed his belly and sighed. “I like warm food so much better.”

“Yep.” Jack grinned. After three days of cold macaroni and crackers with cheese, he even welcomed the MRE pork with gravy and rice – as long as it was hot.

“Today wasn't a nice day,” Daniel said sadly.

“Not all of it was bad,” Jack answered. “You found Cupcake.”

“You don't even like Cupcake,” Daniel mumbled. “An' you're prob'ly right. She'll slow us down.”

The little fox-dog was asleep, curled up next to the kid, stuffed with at least half of what was supposed to be Daniel's dinner.

“She'll be fine,” Jack said softly. “She's lucky. She has a great caretaker.”

Daniel beamed at him and then patted his knee. “Jack? Do we have to leave her in the village?”

“We'll see,” Jack replied noncommittally, aware that even yielding an inch probably meant he'd already lost this argument. But then, he had lost it right from the start when he had allowed Daniel to take the critter with them.

He pushed one of the logs further into the fire. “What do you think, buddy? We could stay here a couple of days. Wash our clothes, fish, relax for a bit?”

“Go swimming?” Daniel perked up.

“Go swimming,” Jack agreed. “Not alone though.”

“Only when you're with me.” Daniel nodded. There was nothing resentful about the way he said it. All the need to fight seemed to be gone.

Jack ruffled his hair. “It'll be fun.”
TBC with ch 14 Memory Lane
While Daniel slept dreamless and peacefully through the night, Jack was haunted by nightmares. He needed the sleep as much as the kid, but he kept dreaming of Daniel’s various deaths and woke several times.

At dawn Jack gave up and crawled out of their shelter. He lit a fire and made coffee. He drank it black and strong, enjoying the sunset over the lake while he sat there, scratching the three-day stubble on his cheeks and chin.

He mulled over yesterday’s events, re-living Daniel's outburst and the accusations. Jack knew Daniel had carried a lot of unresolved anger over from his adult life. He idly wondered if Daniel had gotten it out of his system with that tantrum or if there was more lying beneath the surface.

Jack gazed gloomily into the fire.

He had made some real bad choices regarding Daniel back home. And yeah, Jack knew he liked being in control. Which was probably why Daniel got under his skin so much. Daniel kept him on his toes, and every so often managed to make the best-laid plans go wrong with one of his brilliant ideas. But Jack never realized Daniel had felt patronized that much. Especially since he never seemed to let himself be patronized in the first place. If Daniel felt the need to go against standing orders, he fought him all the way, not backing down.

It had all been manageable until their break up, though.

Until Jack had broke up with Daniel...

... Daniel had returned from his mission, and Jack knew he'd want to come over and stay the night with him. God, Jack wanted to spend the night with Daniel, too. He had missed him. But at the same time, he was dreading the moment Daniel would be ready to go home after his physical, shower, debriefing and a detour to his office.

Jack sensed trouble. He had replaced some of Daniel's personal belongings like the toothbrush, his black and gray boxers from Wal-Mart, and several t-shirts. But buying new stuff didn't mean Jack would get away without an explanation as to why so many of Daniel's clothes and some of his books had gone into trash.

Somehow, the time went by too fast that day. He had been fretting over how to tell Daniel without having the younger man explode like a nuke and do something he'd probably regret.

Once they were in the truck on their way home, Jack decided to grab the bull by the horns.

“Something happened while you were gone,” he said while they stopped at a red light.

Daniel had his head back and his eyes closed. He was exhausted, and it probably wasn't a good idea to make him deal with this crap right now. But Jack knew the questions would start the moment
Daniel wanted to brush his teeth or change into his comfortable sweats and shirt.


“The house was ransacked.”

There was at least half a minute of silence. Then, “What?!”

“Yep. Took some clothes, some books, toothbrushes...”

“They... they took our toothbrushes?” Daniel blinked rapidly, and his mouth hung slightly open.

Jack shrugged. “Maybe they were trying to start their own household?”

“Oh, my god. Are you okay, Jack? Were you home?”

“I'm good. And no, wasn't home. They wouldn't have gotten far if I was,” he said with a snort.

“This isn't funny.”

“Nope. But this is why I have an alarm system now.”

He had installed it two days after the “burglary”.

They reached home soon after, and he changed the subject, determined to distract Daniel from seeking more information about the incident. And it worked. Shoving his sex-deprived archaeologist against the wall and trying to suck his tonsils out always worked.

Daniel laughed when they kissed, and his laughter bubbled over Jack's tongue and down through his whole body. He closed his eyes and spread his hands on either side of Daniel's face, his thumbs brushing over the familiar skin, pushing up the glasses, tracing the dark eyebrows.

That afternoon Jack almost told him...

Almost...

How much he loved Daniel.

God, yeah, he loved Daniel.

He loved him so much, it hurt.

The intensity of the feeling scared the crap out of him, and he hated the way it made him vulnerable. Hated how he craved every smile, every look, every touch. Sometimes it got so bad that he hated Daniel with as much passion as he loved him.

It didn’t make sense.

They spent some time at that wall, and then they spent some time on the hall floor until they made their way into the bedroom where they spent the evening, getting reacquainted with each others’ bodies.

They hadn’t gone the whole way yet. Jack had some experience with touching, sucking and groping. Buddy-stuff he had learned on missions, in tents, way back when he was young and everyone had to scratch an itch here and there. But that was about it.
However, he and Daniel had many pleasant ways to show their affection for each other. They'd do the deed when they were both ready.

Much later that night, Jack held Daniel in his arms and felt his lover's heartbeat against his own chest. He felt Daniel's skin cooling off as he listened to the even breathing from the sleeping man.

Daniel was home.

Safe and sound.

As much as Jack loved his job and going off world, he felt best when they all made it home alive and in one piece. He knew that, with the Goa’uld out there, every feeling of safety was false. There was no such thing as a safe place anymore. They might come in ships. They might try to come through the gate.

Earth itself wasn’t a safe haven either. Jack had seen too many disgusting things during his special ops time. Too many political fires that could blow up anytime.

Yet, he had never envisioned one of his “kids” being harmed on Earth. Not even with the NID breathing down their necks occasionally. For SG-1, the danger was out there. Not here. Earth meant home, and home meant safe.

Now someone was trying to destroy that feeling of safety.

And if Jack didn’t find them and nail their asses, they’d go on with their perverted little game.

They'd hurt Daniel.

O’Neill couldn’t be around Daniel 24/7. How the hell was he supposed to protect him?

He’d have to talk to him soon. And Jack knew the last thing Daniel wanted was protection. Daniel was very capable of taking care of himself and fighting his own fights.

Which was part of the problem. Those guys weren’t just some homophobes who thought it was fun to beat up queers.

They’d never know when those bastards would come down on them.

His cell beeped and made him jerk upright in bed. Daniel slid down, mumbled something incoherent, turned away from Jack and pulled his pillow over his head.

Jack took the phone and left the room. Maybe it was the mountain... but of course, there was no caller ID... It was three in the morning.

He didn’t want to answer the call. But part of him hoped to recognize a voice or that the caller might make a mistake, giving away vital information about his identity.

For a while he just listened to the litany of insults and vulgarities as he stood in his cold kitchen, staring out the window into the dark garden.

“Are you done yet?” Jack asked in his most bored voice, faking a yawn.

“One more thing. Be careful who goes off world with Doctor Jackson. If it’s not SG-1, he might have an accident.”

“Oh, please. That’s such a pathetic cliché...”
... Jack brewed himself another mug of coffee. Daniel was still sound asleep. The sun rose, turning the sky into a gigantic ocean of fire. It was pretty amazing and would be over in just a few minutes. The sun rose and went very fast.

When he felt something wet and cold nudging his arm, Jack looked down at Cupcake who had just crawled out of the shelter. The little puppy licked Jack's hand and then jumped backwards as though she was afraid.

Since he was alone with the critter and wouldn't give Daniel any blackmail material, Jack made some soothing noises and held out his hand to the animal. Cupcake cocked her shaggy head and crept closer until she was able to nip at Jack's finger.

“You have to wait for breakfast. Better yet, go and catch your own,” Jack teased. “What are you anyway, eh? A dog or a rat?”

Cupcake barked and happily jumped right into Jack's lap. She apparently liked being talked to and didn't care much about the words.

“Whoa. Don't forget - I don't even like you.” Jack grinned. “You're just a flea shelter, and I bet you have smelly breath.” He started to scratch behind her tiny pointed ears while his mind wandering back in time once more...

...The burglary topic came up again the next morning in the kitchen.

Daniel, whose breakfast consisted of a cup of coffee, frowned at the unfamiliar mug he was holding between his hands. “Don't tell me – they took my favorite mug, too?”

“Nope. I broke it when I unloaded the dishwasher,” Jack lied glibly.

Daniel frowned at the mug, then shrugged and took a sip. “So,” he said a few minutes later when he was visibly more awake. “What did they find out?”

“What did who find out?”

“About the burglars. You called in a team to check for fingerprints, right? I mean, it could've been the NID looking for something.”

Oh, shit.

“We don't have anything of interest to the NID here.” Jack shrugged. “And why would the NID take your toothbrush? To collect saliva samples and make a clone?”

Daniel's eyes grew wide as he obviously considered this possibility. then he shook his head and growled, “Jack...”

“See? Not the NID. Just some scum.”

“You didn't call the mountain? You didn't even call the police?”
“Daniel...”

“Jack?”

There was no way around it. Jack knew he couldn't satisfy Daniel with a couple of lies about why he hadn't called the mountain or the police. He was already into it too deep. If he started making up a story, Daniel would smell it like a dog with a bone.

So Jack said, “No, I didn't call anybody. You want waffles?”

“What?”

“Waffles? Syrup?”

“No, I mean... why?”

“Because it's breakfast...”

“Jack!”

“What?” He had to do something so he started making waffles, throwing the ingredients into a bowl.

He didn't look at Daniel, but he could feel the glare in the back of his neck, and the silence grew longer by the minute. Jack began stirring the batter and finally turned around, bowl and spoon in hand, to face his lover.

“Look... they only took clothes, toothbrushes, a few books... nothing valuable.”

“It makes no sense,” Daniel interrupted. “Even if they were just junkies searching for something to sell. They didn't take any medals, money, silverware?”

“Nope.”

Daniel scrubbed a hand through his hair and sighed. “Oh, I get it. Calling the mountain would have been a bad idea. It's a little hard to explain why there's so much of my stuff at your house.”

Jack paused in the stirring. He had been about to spill the beans and give Daniel the whole dirty truth. Now he just took the way out Daniel had unconsciously provided.

“Yeah.”

Jack busied himself with the waffles and changed the subject.

He knew he couldn't put it off long. Daniel had to know what was going on. Yet Jack wanted to find out who was behind the attacks and phone calls first. If he could nail those rats, Daniel wouldn’t have to be bothered with all this crap.

He hated the thought of Daniel getting hurt, physically or emotionally. And no matter how tough the guy was, there was a vulnerable side in Daniel that would feel hurt and attacked by these scum buckets.

Daniel had had enough crap in his life without being harassed by men he probably worked with. Men he had probably gone off world with... Men he had trusted with his life.

It was sickening.
Around noon Jack was in the commissary, reading and signing reports so he could get them off to Hammond. But he wasn't able to focus as his mind mulled over the mess he was in. Taking a bite from his apple pie without tasting anything, he glared at various officers seated at tables around him, eating or having a coffee.

Could be anybody.

No, he decided. Not anybody. The way they had combed through the house and left their marks and were observing them, Jack knew they had to be in his own league.

“I need to talk to you.”

Blinking, Jack looked up into Daniel's blazing blue eyes and the angrily set chin.

“Whoa. Where's the fire?”

“My office. Now.” With that, Daniel turned and stalked out, his whole body vibrating with controlled anger.

Jack stood slowly, gathering his reports, shooting daggers at everyone who dared to look his direction as he made his way to the door.

Oh, this was going to be bad.

“Do you have any idea where this might have come from?” Daniel waved a hand at something lying on his desk as soon as Jack had closed the door behind himself.

Jack went over and peered at the piece of cloth, his blood running cold when he recognized it as one of Daniel's shirts that had been shredded to pieces.

“How did this get here?” Jack asked quietly. He spotted an open white cardboard gift box and a pile of crumpled tissue paper.

“It was here when I returned from Sam's lab. There's no note. It's one of the shirts that was stolen, right?”

Jack had dumped all the trash in his can the same night the vandalism had happened. He should have burned it.

“Right,” Jack said flatly. “We need to talk.”

“You think?”

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“Why didn't you tell me?” was the first question out of Daniel's mouth after they had moved to Jack's office and Jack had told him what really happened at his house.

Choosing Jack's office for a personal talk was their best option since most people knew he didn't spend much time there. So it was most likely not bugged - Jack checked anyway though - the security cams didn't catch audio, so it was a relatively safe place for their conversation.

“I was going to tell you,” Jack said, playing with a pen he found on his desk. The whole room felt unfamiliar to him. He only came here for serious paperwork and otherwise preferred to spend time in either Daniel's office or Carter's lab, annoying his teammates or chilling out and plundering their stash of cookies, chocolate and coffee.
Jack wasn’t sure why his office was so appalling to him. He’d just never gotten around to making it more comfortable.

“When?” Daniel pierced him, eyes narrowed behind the glasses. “When were you going to tell me?”

“I’ve been trying to figure out who these homophobes were for the last couple of...”

“What? Days? How long has this been going on, Jack? What else happened?”

“Daniel...”

“No, come on. Tell me. This concerns me as much as it concerns you.”

“Weeks,” Jack said vaguely.

“I see.” Daniel tapped his index finger against his lips and seemed to process the news. Then he bent forward, placing his arms on Jack’s desk. “What did you say was the reason for not telling me?”

“All right, you can stop that,” Jack snapped.

“What?”

“That! I screwed up. I'm sorry. I should've told you a long time ago, but I didn't. Because I was thinking that maybe I'd be able to deal with it before it got too ugly.”

“Jack, why do you always feel like you have to protect me?” Daniel sighed in exasperation.

“It's what I do!”

“Well, here's news for you. I'm out of kindergarten, and I grew up a long time ago. I can take care of myself despite what you may think. And I'm sick and tired of you playing the military guy... my dad... or whatever it is you think you have to do.”

Jack snorted. “Daniel, I'm hardly your dad.”

“Then stop acting like you are! Because it's annoying.”

They fell silent, Jack fiddling with his pen, Daniel sitting back, shoulders slumped, hugging himself. The torn shirt lay between them on Jack’s desk, taunting them.

“We have to end this,” Jack heard himself say finally.

Daniel's head shot up. “What?”

“There's too much at stake.”

“Jack... what are you saying?”

“It's over.” He felt his own words pierce through him like spears, felt his gut cramp into tight knots as he watched the various emotions cross Daniel's face. Shock, hurt, anger... but the worst was the resignation that finally settled on the younger man’s features and into his dark blue eyes.

“I guess this is right up your alley, right? An easy way out.” Daniel's voice oozed bitterness, and he pushed his chair away with force as he stood.
Jack glared at him, anger overlapping his own pain. “What? You think this is easy for me? Those guys are fucking serious, Daniel! They won't back off, and they won't let us get away with being together…”

“Maybe not. But you had issues right from the start. So it probably plays into your hands.”

“This isn’t about me,” Jack said. “We need you. The SGC needs you. Look, we bumbled into this like kids thinking with their dicks. I'm not sure we can keep it up long-term. You're too important to the program. SG-1 is too important. I'm not going to risk the team – or any member of the team – in favor of a relationship.”

Daniel bit his lip and shook his head. “You just can't admit that it's you who has a problem with commitment in the first place, right? Look…” His eyes met Jack's again. “We're supposed to be partners. It's bad enough that you can't treat me like an equal on the team. But whatever it is that makes you think I still need babysitting…”

“That's not true, and you know it,” Jack snapped. “But as your commanding officer, I have to make sure you don't get your ass kicked on every single trip through that gate!”

“...at least outside of the job, you could have a little faith in me. I'm sure we can do something about these hooligans if we work together. We can talk to Hammond. He'll back us up. If push comes to shove, I'll quit,” Daniel continued as if Jack hadn't spoken.

Jack slammed his pen on the table and got up, starting to pace.

“Daniel, those hooligans are class A bastards. They won't leave us alone. They can destroy both our lives. And, hey... You're my best friend. I trust you with my life. You want commitment? Hell, I put my job, my life, on the line for you. I'm going to jail if they ever figure us out!”

For a moment, the silence hovered between them like poison slowly contaminating the air.

“You're right. We knew that when we started this, though. But I'm beginning to think you're not sure I'm worth trying to make this relationship work. And maybe I'm not. After all, I've never had much luck with relationships before. I'm not sure why I thought that has changed now.” Daniel's pain was all over his face, all over the place, his eyes bearing a mixture of hurt and defeat.

Jack couldn't stand seeing him like that. He wanted to cross the room, grab Daniel and just hold him. Be there. Tell him it was okay.

But it wasn't.

God, maybe Daniel was right. Maybe Jack hadn't been ready to go through with this in the first place.

“Daniel, this isn’t your fault,” Jack said. “We have responsibilities. Like it or not, this is the fucking military, and we have a job to do. It's not worth the sex. We're better off keeping it out of the bed.”

“Now you're not even able to call it anything but sex. And you're right. If what we had was just about sex, it's not worth it.”

“You'll get hurt. And I won't be able to...”

“Why do you think everything has to be about you, Jack? If it was just about those bastards, I'd chose to stick to ‘us’. But apparently you’ve made up your mind, so I'll just…” Daniel jerked his thumb over his shoulder at the door.
“Daniel...”

“Let's hope the attacks stop and nobody gets hurt now they got their wish.”

Jack knew he was making all the wrong moves, giving all the wrong signals. He just couldn't help it as he stood there, frozen...

And he let Daniel go.

With that, Jack blew his second chance to find some happiness in his life.

On the other hand, he had come to the conclusion that Daniel was right. Jack had a problem with commitment, and therefore Daniel was better off without him.

Because Daniel deserved someone better.

Someone sensitive and understanding. A guy or a woman who could value the many gifts Daniel had to share, educationally and emotionally. Daniel needed someone to have candlelight dinners with. Someone who accompanied him to museums without being bored, loved wine as much as he did, found satisfaction in books and considered history an adventure.

Someone who didn't rub him the wrong way every so often. Someone who wasn't military and found pleasure in hockey games and The Simpsons or the occasional crossword.

Someone totally different from everything Jack was.

Daniel had been wrong about one thing, though. It wasn't him who wasn't worth the hassle this relationship had brought them.

It was Jack.

Jack wasn't worth Daniel getting beaten up or having his career destroyed. Jack, who couldn't say “I love you” to Daniel if his life depended on it.

Jack, who wasn't ready to give in to these deep, scary feelings he had for Daniel. Because he might not be able to live up to them....

... Once they had gone their separate ways outside the mountain, Jack had tried to continue the investigation into who had been after them. But he'd been warned off from whoever was behind the attacks and calls, with very clear indications on what might happen to Doctor Jackson, should O'Neill continue to dig.

Eventually, Jack had stopped looking for them, and the calls had stopped.

He had caught himself driving through the Springs many nights, driven out by worry and guilt. But no matter how often he'd parked near Daniel's apartment building, observing the street and entrance in the darkness, he'd never caught anybody tailing his ex-lover and ex-friend.

And the more time had gone by, the more Jack and Daniel had become estranged from each other, building up all that crap between them that made them fight over everything and say and do things they both didn't mean.

Until Daniel had gotten shrunk...
And here they were, alone on Kansas Planet.

TBC with ch 15 Finding Fishies
It was light now, the sky blue and cloudless. Jack heard the birds making small talk to each other out on the lake. It was a much better sound than the crickets.

He was busy cutting the dried meat Ashu had given them into small strips, when Daniel came out, rubbing his sleepy eyes and yawning widely.

“Good morning, camper,” Jack greeted him. “Want to give me a hand here after breakfast?”

Daniel nodded and yawned again. They took a short refreshing bath at the lake and returned to oatmeal and toast for breakfast. Cupcake was fed with more instant milk glop. It turned out she also liked oatmeal.

Afterward, Jack continued to fasten the dried meat to the hooks he had traded for at the village. Daniel went to play with Cupcake nearby.

Jack considered how to continue their journey after a few days of rest. If they continued walking along the lake, they wouldn’t have to worry about water, and there were more and more trees further down the shore, as far as he could see from here. It wasn’t a real forest like the one they had crossed before. But large groups of trees within the grassland would provide them with shade and wood.

What worried him a little was the fact the lake wasn't on their map. So he had no idea if they would reach the other villages marked on it. And they'd probably lose lots of time by hiking around the lake. It was huge, and Jack wasn’t sure exactly how big it was. He’d seen the faint outline of the other shore right underneath the mountains through his binoculars yesterday. To their left and right, the water stretched out for miles, and it was difficult to estimate how long they’d have to walk to circumvent it.

Or where they would come out on the other side of those mountains. They had probably missed their destination by a long shot...

Realizing there was no other way than moving on, Jack decided to give them three days to gather strength and rest. Once they'd reached the other side of the lake, there would be another period of rest. The hike through those mountains wasn't going to be a piece of cake.

Jack spotted Daniel's small figure between the trees as he rolled on the ground, the little barker on top of him. He was glad the kid was having so much fun. Maybe keeping the critter hadn't been such a bad idea after all.

After he had finished attaching the hooks to the lines, he took his knife to cut some slender but sturdy branches which would work well as fishing rods. Passing the roughhousing playmates in his search for the perfect tree, Jack suddenly wished he had... But wait a minute... he did have...

He returned to camp quickly and rummaged through his pack until he found Daniel's video camera. There was a chance that, although it had been switched off, the batteries were dead. But when Jack turned it on, he found the camera was still working.

He snuck back between the trees and pointed the camera at Daniel and Cupcake, who were still
squealing and barking, arms, legs and paws tangled in a ball on the grass.

He remembered banning precious moments like this. He’d recorded his son's life, but left those tapes behind at Sara's place. He had never asked for any of them, only taking a few pics, some of Charlie's sports medals and a baseball. That was it.

Maybe he'd work up the courage to visit Sara someday and ask for those tapes...

Maybe.

“Jack! What are you doing?” Daniel jumped up and bounded over, out of breath but with sparkling eyes.

“Collecting blackmail material,” Jack quipped. “Everyone back home's gonna love to see you like this.”

He turned the cam off and waved it at Daniel, who rolled his eyes. “I know you're just joking!”

“I know you know.” Jack laughed and pocketed the little camera in his BDU pants. “Now, come on and help me catch some fish.”

“Cupcake, come on!” Daniel yelled, then turned back to Jack, “She's so much fun, Jack! I'm glad I found her! Aren't you at least a little bit glad, too?”

“A little bit,” Jack teased, spreading thumb and forefinger apart as widely as possible.

Daniel cocked his head and stated, “That's not just a little bit, Jack.”

“No, I guess not,” he chuckled. “You know what? Let's declare the time we're here our vacation. I think we deserve it, big time,” Jack said. “Chill out, have fun... there'll still be chores, of course. But let's only do the stuff we really have to.”

“Yessss!” Daniel skipped along as Jack continued searching for fishing rods. “An' we won't have to walk an' I can play with Cupcake and swim and sleep long... Jack?”

“Daniel?”

“Are you going to play with me? Is it okay that we play? Or we could invent new songs to sing when we haveta go again? Do you think it's stoopid 'cuz I'm s'posed to be grown up?”

“Whoa...” Jack placed a hand on top of Daniel's head to stop him from yakking on. “Rule number one – you're never too old to play. And yep, I might know a song or two for us to sing when we walk on.”

“Did you sing with Charlie?”

“Yeah. We used to go camping, and we used to sing all those silly songs around the fire... and tell stories.”

Daniel's eyes grew big. “You know stories?”

“Hey, what do you think? Of course I know stories. I'm the world's bestest story teller from here to Neverland,” Jack bragged.

“Neverland's just a story, too,” Daniel said.
“Yeah, but it's a good one.”

“Can you tell me a story sometime, Jack?” A small hand shoved itself into his, and Jack looked down into hopeful blue eyes.

“Yeah sure, yabetcha,” he said, giving the boy's hand a gentle squeeze.

***

Once they had collected suitable branches for fishing rods, they gathered their hooks and lines and wandered to the lake. Jack thoughtfully scanned the shore and wondered where the fish might love to hang out the most around here.

“Say, Daniel... you think you could find the fish for us?” he asked in a spur-of-the-moment thought.

“How?” Daniel wondered.

“Well, maybe you could feel their...” Jack whirled his hands, “...presence?” He had no idea how accurate Daniel's ability to “feel” things was. But he figured it wouldn't hurt to give it a try. “Can you feel the differences between... let's say, the birds and,” he spotted the puppy digging in the grass nearby, “Cupcake?”

“Oooh,” Daniel exclaimed. “You really believe me now?”

“Well, I... yeah. I do believe you. I never said I didn't,” Jack said, wincing a little.

“Did too.”

“Daniel...”

“You never took me serious.”

Oh, please, not again... Jack put a finger under Daniel's chin and lifted his head. “Didn't I take you seriously when you woke me up to tell me there was an animal nearby the other night? When Cupcake's mother tried to attack us?”

“Yes, sure, but...”

“Now, we had a little argument about the snake because you could have been bitten...” He shushed Daniel by gently placing his thumb over the boy’s lips as he started to backtalk again. “Ah! I'm still not entirely sure how far your new senses have developed. So, we'll figure it out.”

To Jack's relief, the scowl vanished instantly and was replaced by an eager nod. “Okay. I'll try with the fishes. I haveta concentrate. You haveta be very quiet, Jack.”

Jack made a zipping motion over his mouth and waved at Daniel to do his thing.

Daniel stood very still, facing the lake. He didn't move for several minutes. Jack placed the fishing gear on the ground and picked up Cupcake to keep his hands occupied.

“The birds feel different than the fish,” Daniel announced finally. “The fish feel more dull... do you think it's 'cuz they're underwater?”

“Probably,” Jack replied vaguely, having no idea what else to say.

“There's lotsa fishies in the lake. They probably won't mind if we take some,” Daniel said.
Jack doubted that the fishies concerned would really approve of being caught and served for lunch. But he kept his mouth shut, yielding to the kiddie-logic. “Can you feel where they are?”

He felt a little uncomfortable, watching the tyke wander along the shore with this serious, inwardly focused expression on his face. Jack followed close behind, back and forth a few feet, peering into the crystal clear water.

And only a few minutes later, he could see them.

A large swarm of trout-like fish, similar to those they had seen in the river on their first day after Daniel’s downsizing, swam by. These, however, were much bigger.

Daniel stopped and pointed at them.

“Nice,” Jack praised, and they settled down to fish, each holding a rod. Cupcake curled up beside Daniel and napped.

For a while, it was only the occasional cackles of the birds, the water and them. Jack was wearing his cap and Daniel, his bandanna, so the sun didn’t bother them too much. The water’s glistening surface seemed endless. Far away, Jack could see the mountains...

“Jack?”

“How big is this lake?”

“I don’t know, buddy. It’s big.”

“Is not on the map, right?”

“No, it’s not.” Either, the lake hadn’t been here when Nirrti resided on this planet. Or they had lost their way completely, and the map didn’t cover this area since it was only an excerpt.

“Jack?”

“Yes, Daniel?”

“Do we have to walk ’round the lake to get to the mountains?”

“Well, I think we have to, don’t you?” Jack rubbed his chin, vowing to shave as soon as they caught their lunch.

“You could build a log raft.”

“Ya think?” Jack gazed over the mirror-like surface. “I’ve never built a raft before...”

“But you could,” Daniel insisted.

“Well, thanks for the confidence but...”

“You’ll think of somethin’.”

“I will?”

“Yep. Cuz you can if you want to.”
Jack suppressed a chuckle at the determination in Daniel's voice. “O-kay. If you say so.”

But their conversation had the right effect on Jack. He gave the raft idea some serious thought.

They needed dead wood. Jack tried to remember what he knew about raft-building. Wasn't much. However, he could improvise and see how it went. If they found suitable wood.

“Jack! Jack, I got one!” Daniel's shout made him react fast. He rammed his own rod as deeply into the ground as possible, then helped the kid to reel in his line. Together, they pulled out a rather large trout. Jack turned his back to Daniel, quickly pulled the hook out of the fish's mouth and whacked it with a flat stone.

Awhile later, they carried “home” two large trout, and while Daniel played with Cupcake, Jack prepared them. He wasn't sure how they were going to taste or rather, how he'd be able to make them taste good. Despite his fishing skills, he really wasn't a fish-eater, merely fishing for the relaxation. Everyone knew by now there were no fish in his pond.

Daniel, however, could cook...

Jack looked at the trout thoughtfully. He had buried all the icky guts and fish bones behind the boulder, and now the fish were headless and ready to be cooked.

“Hey, Daniel!” he yelled.

Daniel's blond head popped up between two bushes.

“You want to help with lunch?”

Daniel came over and glanced at the fish. He frowned. “Do we have bacon?”

“Maybe in the MRE's.”

“Onions?”

“Nope.”

“Salt? Pepper?”

Jack nodded to both.

“You could sprinkle 'em with salt an' pepper and stuff them with bacon, I guess. A pan would be good.”

“No pan. I could poke a stick through them and roast them over the fire,” Jack suggested. “Like we did with the bird.”

“'kay. Jack? Can Cupcake and I go to the water an' look for pretty stones?”

He was about to refuse but bit his tongue in time, remembering Daniel's accusations from yesterday. Jack sighed inwardly. He'd be able to see Daniel at the shore, and the water was very shallow.

“Don't go into the water any further than to your ankles,” he said. “And stay right where I can see you. No wandering off, you got that?”

Daniel shuffled his feet and, for a moment, looked like he was going to protest. But he, too, seemed to remember yesterday. He nodded. “I promise.”
“Have fun.” Jack watched the tyke and his tiny fox-dog scamper off.

He stuffed the fish with bacon and sprinkled it with salt and pepper, put them on a long stick and slowly roasted them over the fire while he kept his eyes on the kid.

Daniel splashed through the water and threw sticks for Cupcake who chased after them. Then he wandered from left to right for a bit, bending down every once in a while to pick up stones and look at them. A few times, he returned to show Jack a new colorful stone he had found, or he'd wave to Jack from the water and Jack would wave back.

When their lunch was almost done, Jack noticed that Daniel had moved down the shore and was a lot further away than he had been five minutes ago. Jack stood and called out for him to come back, satisfied when the kid complied at once.

Daniel strolled back and plopped down next to Jack. “I'm sorry,” he said sheepishly even before Jack said anything.

“Keep in mind to watch your surroundings. Especially when near water,” Jack scolded mildly.

“Yes, sir,” Daniel replied sincerely.

Jack raised his eyebrows. He didn't think he'd ever heard Daniel call him “sir”. It somehow didn't feel right. Deciding to let it go with this, he ruffled the tyke's hair. "Let's eat.”

Daniel said his thank you prayer for the “water-people” and Jack blew over Daniel's fish to cool it off a bit before he handed it to the hungry boy.

“Slowly,” he warned. “You'll burn that chatty little mouth of yours.”

“'t'll dilithith,” Daniel mumbled around his mouthful of fish. Under Jack's stern look, he chewed faster, swallowed, and repeated, “It's dilcous... dili... dilicious.”

“Your recipe.” Jack grinned, though he felt a little concerned. Not the first time over the last couple of days, he noticed how Daniel's speech was becoming more and more kid-like. Sometimes more, sometimes less. There was no real pattern to it. Sometimes the tyke almost talked like adult Daniel and then slip back into little-Daniel speech and attitude.

“Jack?”

“I'm fine,” he automatically replied, recognizing the way Daniel said his name as a sign that he had picked up on Jack's worries. “Just...” he thought for a ploy to explain his feelings, “…wondering how long it'll take us to reach another village. But it's not really a problem.”

They ate their lunch, both giving pieces of fish to Cupcake. Afterward, Jack insisted on naps for little archaeologists and puppies, shooving them both off into the shade of their shelter. Once Daniel and Cupcake were fast asleep, Jack went down to the water and shaved. There was still plenty of shaving cream since he could use Daniel's as well. It felt good to have a clean-shaven face.

When he was done, Jack ambled back to camp and gathered their clothes and the non-biodegradable soap. He spent the next hour scrubbing their shirts, underwear, towels, his pants and socks. Everything was filthy from dust and sweat. Jack even washed his cap and Daniel's bandanna.

He was just spreading everything over the boulder or hanging it in the trees when Daniel and Cupcake rose, ready for some fun in the water.
So off to swim they went.

The bottom of the lake was covered with pebbles at first, but eased out into sand soon. The ground sloped downward gradually, so there was no immediate danger. Jack had learned from Ashura that there were no poisonous or dangerous creatures in most streams or lakes. However, it was always a tricky thing to relax in an unknown environment.

And that snake came to mind...

Daniel assured him that he hadn't felt any danger near the lake.

And to his own surprise, Jack believed him.

Just like that.

***

Jack O'Neill hadn't had so much fun in ages. He played the monster from the black lagoon, was an attacking u-boat and then a raft to carry Daniel over the ocean. Soon, roles were reversed, and Daniel was the monster, chasing Jack and diving to pinch his legs or hanging around his neck like a little snake.

The geese-like birds living on the lake eyed them suspiciously but soon figured that the screeching, cheerful two-legged creatures weren't a threat. The little four-legged ball of fur was something different, though. Barking wildly, she would make a run toward them every once in a while.

When the colonel and the kid were tired and looked like prunes from all the water, they washed their hair, and Jack soaped them both up, making Daniel giggle as he tickled his belly and ribs while scrubbing him thoroughly.

“I haven' been this clean in days,” Daniel squealed when they were ready to head back to camp. “I'm all shiny!”

“You sure are. Feels good, eh?”

“Uh-huh!”

Scooping the naked child up and into his arms, Jack walked them back. He noticed how healthy his small sidekick looked, despite the skinniness of his body. All tanned and his hair sun-bleached. The blue eyes seemed even brighter now.

Jack had a sunburned neck.

Daniel hadn't had a sunburn once.

Jack had made sure they both had sunblock on their faces and arms all the time. But still... Daniel was a fair-haired child, and his skin had been pale when he had been shrunk.

Jack refused to consider what might be going on inside this little body or mind, caused by whatever the device had done to Daniel. He was sure Fraiser would keep Daniel in the infirmary forever to make lots of tests.

He could only measure Daniel's well-being by what he saw now.

Daniel looked great.
TBC with ch 16 A Beautiful Day
Daniel spent this day buck-naked, running in and out of the water, playing with Cupcake or helping Jack with the cooking and other chores. He looked a little like baby Tarzan. Or that kid from the Jungle Book – aside from the fair hair and the blue eyes.

Jack remembered Charlie at four.

Charlie used to love running around in his trunks as the sprinkler was on in the lawn or when the wading pool was set up on hot days. Sometimes Jack had hosed him down on the warm summer evenings when he watered the plants, getting himself wet in the process.

Daniel didn't have trunks, so he made like a jaybird. But the images were still similar.

Jack remembered squeals of laughter, and for the first time in years, those memories hurt a little less, were less bitter. Jack smiled at the memories of Charlie's first tries at baseball and how they had practiced playing catch or pitching.

They used to have lemonade afterward, always sneaking some more sugar into it than Sara approved. Charlie used to stand watch while Jack snuck in, using his special ops skills to retrieve the sugar and maybe a cookie or two. He'd always suspected that Sara had known what they were up to and turned a blind eye.

Jack wished they had a ball to play with as he watched Daniel trying to walk on his hands.

Charlie had tried walking on his hands, too.

Daniel jumped forward, head first, came down on his hands, short legs wiggling up in the air for about a second before he tumbled over and landed on the grass with a loud “Omph!”

Charlie had tried again and again...

Daniel did the same.

Maybe it was a little boy thing, Jack mused at Daniel's new attempt. He managed a class A rollover, feet and butt in the air.

“Watch me, Jack!” Daniel yelled. “I can do it now!”

“Watch me, Daddy! I can do it! You'll see...”

“I'm watching,” Jack yelled back, for a split second seeing two little boys doing their stunts on the grass.

Then he sat, open-mouthed, staring at Daniel walking on his hands.

One, two, three, four, five steps... before toppling over.

“Did you see? Jack? Did you?” Daniel jumped up and tried again.
One, two, three, four, five, six... down he went.

"Whoa," Jack said, flabbergasted, when the tyke did it again, going for ten steps. "Not bad."

Five minutes later, Daniel was able to walk on his hands and jump back to his feet without falling down. He ran over to Jack and plopped down in his lap, a little breathless. "Did you see what I did?"

"I did," Jack said. "Looks like you can walk on your hands now when your feet get tired."

Daniel thought this was hilarious. When he had stopped laughing, he said, "I never was that strong as a kid. I think. I was bad at sports, too."

"Well, you made up for it as an adult. All that running around, trying to escape the bad guys..."

"Yes, but I feel different now. Lotsa different." Daniel frowned. "Each day a little bit."

Jack felt a flutter in the pit of his gut. "Different...how?"

"Strong-er, bet-ter..."

Despite the tinge of worry, Jack had to snort at that. "Bet-ter, eh?"

Daniel giggled. "Harlan was funny, right, Jack? Not as funny as Urgo... but he was a funny little man. He made clones of us. And they were bet-ter, too."

"Oh, yeah. Funny," Jack said, his sarcasm going right over Daniel's head.

"I bet he was very lonely before he made us. All alone in that dark ugly place," the kid went on, his amusement gone for the moment. Then he started giggling again. "I bet the bet-ter you is very cranky 'cuz he has to stay with him."

Jack snorted again. "You bet he is."

"But it makes Harlan happy." Daniel shrugged.

"So, Daniel..." Jack steered the topic back to its origin. "You said you're feeling a little different every day. How so?"

"Not sure. I can feel the differences between animals now. How the fishies feel and how the birds feel. An' Cupcake. An' I feel like I can climb very high trees, and just now I walked on my hands. Can I climb high trees, Jack? I won't fall down..."

"We'll see about that..." Jack stood and took Daniel's hand. "Come on. I wanna try something else."

They went back to camp, and Jack pointed at one of the heavy stones around their fire pit. It wasn't too heavy for a grown man to carry. But a small child shouldn't be able to lift it just like that.

"Can you pick that one up?"

Daniel bit his lip as he pulled at the stone, using both hands. Jack watched the muscles on his skinny arms tense. He wasn't able to lift it, but the stone definitely moved a few inches before Daniel dropped it. "Sowee. Can't."

"That's fine, Danny. I just wanted to check."

Daniel cocked his head and blinked. "It's not a bad thing, right, Jack? It's not... You won't get mad
'cause this is happenin' to me? I really don't mean to...

Jack shook his head. “Not getting mad. But, Daniel, if you feel more changes or if you find out anything else you can do – something you couldn't do before – let me know, please?”

“‘kay.”

***

There was fish again, this time for dinner, and Jack was glad the kid wasn't picky with food. Not that the fish tasted bad. It had the typical trout taste, and with some salt and the bacon, it made for a nice meal. But there were no veggies or potatoes with it. No salad or other side dishes. So after tomorrow, it was probably going to get a bit boring.

Fish, however, was very nutritious, and as long as Daniel ate it, Jack would serve it.

When Daniel was snuggled up against him as they watched the sun go down over the water, the kid asked, ”Can you tell me a story, Jack?”

“Sure. Lemme think...” Jack tapped a finger to his chin as he searched his mind for a good one. “Oh, I know...”

“A story from home,” Daniel said.

“From home?”

“Yeah. With Sam and Teal'c in it. And you and big me. And Janet.”

“Oh... o-kay...”

”Not a sad story though,” Daniel said. “A funny story.”

Jack thought about that for a while and then put his arm around Daniel and began, “Well, there was that day when I had a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day...”

“But isn't that a sad story?”

“Nah. I don't think so. See, I went to sleep with gum in my mouth, and when I woke up the next morning, it was all stuck in my hair.”

”Eeeew.” Daniel wrinkled his nose. “It's silly to go to bed with gum in your mouth, Jack.”

“Yeah, well... That wasn't the worst thing. When I got out of bed, I tripped over my shoes, and when I tried to wash that gum outta my hair, I accidentally spilled water all over me. So, I could tell it was going to be a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day.”

“Did you get the gum out?”

“Nope. Had to wear it all day, sticking to me like glue. And you know what? When I came to work, they had pick-your-favorite-cereal-box day at the commissary. And that was way cool. Guess what happened? Right. Carter found a Corvette Sting Ray car kit in her cereal box, and T found a Junior Undercover Agent code ring in his, but in my breakfast cereal box, all I found were...?”

“Fruit Loops.” Daniel giggled.

“Exactly. I pondered moving to Chulak.”
“Jack? What was in my cereal box?”

“Oooh... pyramid-shaped Lego blocks.”

“Kewl.”

“Oh, yeah. In the briefing later, Carter got to sit in my favorite chair – beside you. Teal'c got to sit in my other favorite chair – on your right side. I had to sit between Kinsey and Simmons. I said if I didn't get a seat near you, I was going to throw up all over Kinsey's new suit. No one even answered. I could tell it was going to be a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day. Oh, and you know what happened next? We went through the gate, and there were good-looking alien... bunnies. Yep, they were all snuggly, and I really wanted to have one. But nooo... They liked you best, hopped on your lap and let you feed them chocolate.”

“Awww.” Daniel placed both hands over his mouth, giggling even more.

“See, I'm the colonel. I should get the first and best treatment, right?” Jack poked Daniel's belly. “Right?”

“Nooooo,” Daniel squealed.

“I get no respect. Well, off we went with the bunnies, and they wanted us to show what we were good at. So they loved Carter's technobabble, Teal'c's strength and the way you talked and crooned at them. Me? I wasn't smart enough and my hair was too gray and me juggling carrots was boring. Oh, and me singing 'Hi Ho, Hi Ho' was too loud. And then I really knew it was going to be a...”

“...terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day.”

“Yep. It got worse. You feeling sorry for me yet?”

“Nooooo...”

Jack sighed, rolled his eyes dramatically and gave Daniel his own version of the puppy dog look. “Oh, but you should. Because later, Teal'c said I wasn't his best friend anymore 'cause one of the bunnies was far nicer than me and that you were far more civilized than me. And Carter was way prettier than me. So I was just chopped liver. And I said to Teal'c, ‘I hope the next time you get a double-decker strawberry ice-cream cone, the ice cream falls off the cone and lands on Chulak.’”

Daniel was laughing so hard by now that he was hiccupping and holding his sides. “You're so silly, Jack!”

“Yeah? Listen up. When we built camp and had our MRE, there were two cupcakes in Carter's lunch bag, and you got a Hershey bar with almonds, and Teal'c had a piece of jelly roll that had little coconut sprinkles on top. Guess who had no dessert in his MRE?”

“My, my, Jack. What a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day!”

“You bet. That's what it was. Because when we got home, Janet looked into my mouth and found a cavity. ‘Just stay here and I'll fix it,’ said Dr. Fraiser. ‘Nope,’ I said. ‘I'm going to move to Chulak.’ When I came by your office later, you said I couldn't play with the rocks, but I forgot. You also said to watch out for the books on your desk, and I was careful as could be - except for my elbow. Then you said not to play with the tablets that have the chicken scratches on them... but I think I broke one. You said, ‘Please go away... ’”

“It was a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day.” Daniel snorted.
Jack nodded. “I got home and the beer was warm and there was no food left in my fridge. My hockey team lost the game, and when I went into the bathtub, I got soap in my eyes, and my favorite plastic boat broke into two. And then I remembered I forgot to do laundry and had no PJ's left to wear...”

“Jack... and then you called me, right?”

“I did?”

“Yeah. You called me and you whined and I came over and we had pizza an' I brought you a new plastic boat and you said it had been a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day. And I huggled you.”

Grinning, Jack fell back on the ground when Daniel's short arms squeezed his neck and the little face was pressed against his. “Yep, you did. And you said some days are like that. Even on Chulak.”

They sat up again, and Daniel said, “I know that story. One of my foster moms used to read it to us. Of course, it's different.”

“What? You don't believe it's a true story? I'm hurt, Daniel,” Jack teased.

“Jaaaack.”

“Whaaat?”

Laughing, Daniel crawled into Jack's lap and made himself comfortable there. “Tell me 'nother one.”

“Okay. There was a little boy who had to go to bed. And the moon and the stars sung him a lullaby to give him sweet dreams.”


Sighing, Jack cradled Daniel into his arms. Telling the home-version of the bad day story probably hadn't been such a good idea, after all. “I know, buddy. Me too.”

“I 'member how the stars looked at home.”

“We'll be home one day, Daniel.”

“Can we go to your roof and watch the stars then, Jack?”

“Yes. We can do whatever you want when we're home,” Jack whispered.

“Sweet,” Daniel said – and fell asleep.

TBC with ch 17 Charlie
The next day Jack and Daniel watched a herd of the cattle-like animals arrive at the lake. Jack was a little worried at first, but the kid assured him that the cattle wouldn't come near them. And they kept their distance from the campsite. They huddled together, shielding their young from the heat and potential enemies. If they went to drink, they went as a bunch. Jack and Daniel observed them taking baths in the water, too.

They were brown with square white spots and curled horns. Their hair was short, but their tails resembled the tails of horses rather than cows, which disturbed the cattle image a little. The most distinguishing difference between cattle and these animals, however, was the size. They were huge and bulky, even larger than buffalo.

In the afternoon Daniel sat on the boulder next to their shelter, watching them through Jack's binoculars. Of course, his little explorer wanted to get close and friendly with them, but Jack had drawn the line there, no matter how harmless those cattle looked. There were 10 of them. If they panicked for any reason, they'd still be faster than Daniel on his short legs – or even Jack. Daniel had been satisfied with the binoculars after a moment of consideration.

“Jack? You think they might give milk? They have udders just like real cows.”

“I won't get near enough to try it. And neither will you,” Jack said, shaking his head at the pout appearing on the young face. “We've been through this, right?”

”Yeah, yeah... was just wondering.”

“Didn't they have cattle like this in Ashu's village?”

“Yes, but they looked different. Smaller.”

“Well, there was milk...” Jack began but was interrupted when sharp little teeth tugged at his pants. “Daniel, you need to teach your little pest here some manners,” he muttered, plucking Cupcake from his leg and holding the puppy by her neck fur. After giving her a little shake and telling her “No!” loudly, Jack put her down.

“Cupcake, stop it,” Daniel scolded, taking his eyes from the cattle long enough to give his puppy a stern look.

Cupcake barked and turned her back on them. She stalked off and started to dig a hole instead.

“I think they're friendly creatures,” Daniel said after a while as he put the binoculars down and hopped from the boulder. “If I...”

Jack, who was searching his backpack for tears or holes to repair, paused in what he was doing and looked over at the peacefully grazing cattle, then back at the kid. “If you... what?”

“If I could talk to them and tell them we'd love to have some milk...” Daniel mumbled, blushing. “I know how that sounds. You don't haveta laugh at me.”
Jack shook his head. “Not laughing here.” And he wasn't. Considering all the little signs of Daniel's new abilities, Jack wouldn't be surprised if the tyke started to communicate with cattle or Cupcake.

“If I could talk to them...” Daniel flopped down onto his belly and placed his chin in his hands, gazing at the cold fire pit. “...would you let me?”

Jack didn't miss the challenging note in Daniel's voice, not really aggressive but undoubtedly there. He took his time with an answer, pulling at his pack's straps to see if they were still good to hold all the weight they had to carry. Finally he said, “If I was sure you could talk to animals, I'd let you have a chat with them.”

Surprised blue eyes turned to him. “Really?”

“Yep.”

“Wow,” Daniel mumbled.

Jack put his backpack aside. “But you know, if you're trying to make me believe you can go over there and ask those cattle for a glass of milk - and you're just making it up so I'll let you do it...”

“Jack, I won't go and 'ask' them for milk. I'd talk to them... with my mind.” Daniel chewed on his lip, searching for words, and Jack kept quiet, waiting for whatever the tyke came up with. “I mean... if they can send their feelings to me... maybe I can do it too? Like a phone?”

“I understand you just pick those feelings up without anybody sending them,” Jack said.

“Yes, sure, but... but what if I could send mine so they know I don' wanna harm them?”


“We could try.”

“No.”

“Jack...”

“Daniel.”

“It's just a try...”

“It's too dangerous. If it doesn't work, we'll have them on our backs.”

“Or they'll run the other way,” Daniel said. “You could give a warning shot. That'll scare 'em off...”

“Well, I won't take my chances, if you don't mind,” Jack said and, when Daniel opened his mouth again, raised a finger. ”Ah, ah... prove to me you can really do then and we'll talk.”

Daniel rolled over to sit and glare at him. “Jack! How can I prove it to you if you won't let me try?”

Jack pointed at Cupcake, who was sleeping next to her freshly dug hole, obviously exhausted from the task. “Practice with her.”

“She doesn't count! She already knows I won't do anything bad to her.”

“Daniel -” Jack tried very hard not to sound annoyed. Well, not too annoyed anyway. “Do you really think you can talk... send your intentions... whatever... to those cattle? And don't just say yes. Think
about it. You think you can do it, or you just want to think you can do it?"

The kid rubbed his nose and glared. And glared some more. Finally he pulled his shoulders up to his ears and mumbled, “I dunno.”

“Take your time. Go inside, sit down and think. When you're done, I'll listen.”

And sure as hell, those lips started to tremble and pout, and those eyes filled with tears. “You're bein' mean...”

“I trust you to think it through and be honest with me. I'm taking you seriously – but I expect you to do the same. See my point, Daniel, and I might be willing to see yours.” He pointed at their cozy little shelter.

Sniffing, Daniel stood and toddled off, dragging his feet like he was going to be executed.

Shaking his head, Jack watched him crawl inside before he went back to his backpack inspection, hoping he’d done the right thing. Crap, it really was a fine line to walk with this mix of big and little Daniel. It was almost like handling explosives.

Daniel was a stubborn little guy, and he stayed inside for quite some time.

After Jack had inspected their gear and started the fire he made dinner, hoping the smell of fish combined with MRE rice would lure the tyke out. He had cut the fish into small pieces and cooked it with the rice, hoping it would taste as good as roasted trout.

Jack was halfway through with his own portion before it finally did the trick.

Daniel stuck his head out the entrance. “Can I have dinner?”

“Sure. You want it here or in there?”

Cupcake, who had patiently been sitting next to Jack, waiting for her piece of fish, now bounced over to Daniel and licked his face.

“Ewww,” said Daniel.

Jack couldn't stop himself from laughing at the bouncy thing as she tried to repeat the licking while Daniel scurried out of the shelter and jumped to his feet to escape the little red tongue. “It tickles!” He came over, and Jack handed him his dinner.

For a while, they ate in silence. Then Daniel muttered, “I don' know if I really can talk to the cattle.”

When Jack didn't answer, he continued, “But it would be cool.”

“And maybe one day you can do it,” Jack said quietly.

“But how do I know if I don' try? An' I can't try with Cupcake. She loves everythin' I'm doing. She thinks I'm her mommy. I'd have to be sure I can somehow communicate. An' I can't read thoughts.”

“I think if you really can communicate with animals, you'll just know it. Here...” Jack reached over and placed a hand on Daniel's chest. “And here.” He patted his head. “Like you knew there was no danger in the grass. And that the cattle are friendly animals. Or that there was a snake between the boulders and fish in the lake.”

Daniel's eyes grew big. “You really really really do believe me now, don’t you?”
“Yes, Daniel, I do. But you have to cut me some slack. I still have to make sure nothing happens to you. Me believing and trusting you doesn't mean we don't have to be cautious and think about the consequences of our actions. We have to pick our risks, buddy.”

Glancing over at the herd of cattle, Daniel sighed. “They are real big, right?”

“Oh, yeah.”

“An’ a glass of milk isn't worth getting squashed beneath ’em.”

“Nope, don't think so.” Jack hid his smile behind a spoonful of dinner.

***

Jack told Daniel a bedtime story, choosing one he remembered reading to Charlie countless times. To his amazement, Daniel enjoyed Winnie the Pooh as much as Charlie had at that age. It was almost scary how much of a little boy Daniel had become in some ways.

Jack finished his story with the poem Pooh had invented after he and Piglet met Tigger for the first time. And he was quite proud of himself for remembering all the right words.

“What shall we do about poor little Tigger?
If he never eats nothing, he'll never get bigger.
He doesn't like honey and acorns and thistles
Because of the taste and because of the bristles.
And all the good things which an animal likes
Have the wrong sort of swallow or too many spikes.”

“He sure is picky,” Daniel chimed in. “I'm not that picky.”

“Nope, but then you're not a little Tigger.” Jack grinned and continued, “‘He's quite big enough anyhow,’ said Piglet. Pooh was thoughtful when he heard this and murmured to himself, ‘But whatever his weight in pounds, shillings, and ounces, He always seems bigger because of his bounces.’”

“I can bounce like Tigger,” Daniel declared. “Lookit!” He scampered out of Jack's arms and began bouncing around the fire like Tigger. The late evening sun made his shadow grow and dance on the grass and the boulders.

Once Daniel had done the Tigger bounce, he plopped down again and asked for more of the story. “Where did they go? Did they go home?”

“Let me think... Tigger had been bouncing in front of them all this time, turning round every now and then to ask, ‘Is this the right way?’- and then they came in sight of Kanga's house, and there was Christopher Robin. Tigger rushed up to him. ‘Oh, there you are, Tigger!’ said Christopher Robin. ‘I knew you'd be somewhere.’ ‘I've been finding things in the Forest,’ said Tigger importantly. ‘I've found a Pooh and a Piglet and an Eeyore, but I can't find any breakfast!’”

“He'd like some of my fish.” Daniel grinned.

“Oh, yeah.”

“I really like you telling me stories,” the tyke said. “An' I'm glad it doesn't make you too sad. Wouldn' want you to tell me stories if it made you sad. 'cuz of Charlie.”
Jack poked at the dying fire with a stick, watching the sparks fly. “Daniel... I'd rather not talk about Charlie right now.”

“I don't like talking 'bout my mommy's and daddy's deaths. I know they don' want me to be sad all the time though. An' Sha're doesn't want me to be sad all the time. They won' ever come back, no matter how sad I am. But I'll never forget them.”

“I know.” Jack's calloused hand ruffled the hair of the small child his friend had become.

“An' Charlie, too, will never come back,” Daniel whispered, leaning into Jack's hand. “He wouldn’t want you to be so sad either.”

“It's different with Charlie.”

“How?”

“It just is...” After all these years, Jack still couldn't stop blaming himself. Even when he was able to forget. The guilt and the loss were always there. It wasn't something he couldn't live with anymore. But it never went away either. Jack had come to peace with the fact that Charlie was gone. Sort of. But it would always be him who had, if not literally, pulled the trigger of the gun that put the bullet through Charlie's body...

His gun.

Loaded.

In his house.

And Jack could deal with it as long as he wasn't forced to dig and pull it out of the closet where it was buried.

“Jack?” Daniel tugged at his arm.

It was one of the things Daniel was good at. Digging. Brushing off layers of earth and rubble until he held his goal in his sensitive hands, looking at it with curiosity and analyzing it with care and gentleness.

“You know how it happened.” Jack shrugged, not wanting Daniel to dig any further.

“Charlie took the gun,” Daniel said. “He went into your office and took the gun and played with it. He knew he wasn't s'pposed to go into your office alone.”

“Daniel...”

“He made a wrong choice.”

“I left the gun there. Unlocked. Loaded. He was just a kid,” Jack said, gazing into the flames in front of him.

“And you can never go back and undo it.”

“No.”

“But sometimes you wish you could. Like I sometimes wish I could save my mommy and daddy,” Daniel said, placing his hand in Jack’s.
“Yeah.” Jack brushed his thumb over the back of Daniel's hand. “Sometimes...” he began, then paused, searching for words that always seemed to be so hard to find. He wondered briefly how Daniel managed to find them. Daniel was always capable of words. He didn't always choose to speak the words, but they were inside him, for sure. Jack often drew a blank when he tried to express his... feelings... verbally. He touched and hugged, used his hands and body to show affection, anger, grief and whatever else there was. Thinking about it, he realized the only thing he put easily into words was humor, even if it was bad or inappropriate sarcasm.

Anything but deep, meaningful feelings.

He gazed down at their hands and swallowed hard. "Sometimes I'm... worried... because I think about what happened to Charlie and I don't want it to happen again. Not to someone so close... and now that you've become little, it's kinda...” It was like all those memories about being a father had come back. The bad ones, but the good ones as well. The responsibility he’d always felt toward Daniel seemed to weigh twice as heavy now that he was a kid. At the same time, this little guy had grown on Jack as much as the adult Daniel had. The love he felt for the kid was totally different than the love he had felt for the man.

But it was equally as strong.

Daniel looked up at him in the fading daylight. “I'm sorry, Jack. I didn't understand how hard this is for you... that I'm little...”

“No, that's not it. Don't ever think that. See, there'll always be a part in me that's sad about what happened to Charlie and how it happened. It's... in here.” Jack took Daniel's hand and placed it over his heart. “Like your sadness for your mommy and daddy is always a part of you. There's nothing you or I can do about it. But it's okay. And yes, I like telling you stories and stuff. I haven't done that in a long time, and... I guess I missed doing it.”

Daniel thought about this, his lower lip sucked in and his eyebrows knitted, just like the adult Daniel would look as he was mulling something over. Then he said, “Jack? Do you 'member the quanum mirror?”

“Quantum mirror. Yes, I do.”

“Do you think Charlie is still alive somewhere else? Or my mommy and daddy are?”

Oy.

“Maybe, yeah.”

“Isn't that a nice thought?” Daniel smiled up at him, and when Jack nodded, he asked, “Can you tell me 'bout Charlie, Jack?”

Jack squeezed Daniel's hand and kissed the top of his head. “Maybe another time, okay?”

“Tomorrow?”

He hesitated to make any promises, but then, following an inner impulse, he nodded. “Tomorrow. Now it's beddy-bye.”

Yawning, Daniel gave a nod. “Cupcake's already sleepin',”

Jack tucked his little guy in, and in the fast-fading daylight, he watched the boy and the shaggy ball of fur sleep, cuddled together. Cupcake yipped in her dreams, snuggled up to Daniel's sleeping bag.
He was curled around her, giving her a natural nest.

Jack went outside and sat down by the fire, gazing across the lake in the approaching darkness. He thought about his son, who would have been a teenager. For the first time, he tried to imagine what Charlie would look like now. He’d had Jack's eyes and Sara's face. Ever since Charlie’s death he'd been ten in Jack's mind, and he'd never wondered what his son would have been like at 16 or older.

There had been no need to dwell.

But suddenly Jack wondered if there were universes... through that quantum mirror... where Charlie was alive and had grown up... becoming the captain of his baseball team... dating girls...or guys... who knew?

He caught himself smiling. Yes, it was a nice thought.

TBC with ch 18 Climbing Trees
“Count my steps,” Daniel yelled as he walked in front of Jack.

“One, two, three... careful there... four, five, six... seven, eight, nine, ten... eleven, twelve... whoa, you all right, buddy?”

Jumping up and rubbing his butt, Daniel nodded and flipped back on his hands again. “I slipped on the grass.”

“Watch where you’re going.” Jack laughed as Daniel almost toppled over again when he had to sidestep a log.

Cupcake was running around the kid, barking and jumping as though she wanted to walk on her forepaws as well. Jack thought it highly amusing how the critter bounced like a little ball when she got excited.

“Jack, look!” Daniel jumped back to his feet, made a rollover and landed on his hands, then was back on his feet again. “It's so easy! I feel like I can twist my body any way I want to!”

“Yeah, just don’t overdo it. I’m not sure I can unknot you if you tie yourself up with your own limbs.” Jack snorted.

Laughing, Daniel skipped ahead.

They had left their camp early this morning and made good progress so far, staying in the shade of trees by the water. Daniel seemed full of energy, and although it was going on lunch time, he hadn't run out of steam yet. Jack noticed he’d had to carry Daniel less often since the fever.

They took a break at a nice spot by the lake where the trees came to the shore. It was comfy to sit in their shade and cool their feet in the water while they ate sandwiches and a handful of shineberries Daniel had picked along the way.

When they were done eating, Daniel asked, “Jack? Can I climb one of those trees?”

Jack squinted up at the high trees. Instead of the pine trees, these were full of large green and reddish leaves. They had a dark bark and strong branches. “If you promise not to go too high.”

“Promise. Only halfway.”

“Deal.”

O'Neill knew Daniel wanted to test out his new strength and flexibility, which was necessary so they both could estimate his limits and figure out how Daniel's new abilities were developing.

Jack didn't have to like it, though.

With narrowed eyes, he watched the little bug climb one of the trees like a monkey, his hands and feet securely finding even the tiniest holes or knobs in the bark to hold or step on. When he reached the first thick branches, Daniel swung himself upwards and settled in a crotch.
“Jack, this is so cool! You should come up here!”

“Ya think? I'll save my strength just in case I have to come up and get you down,” he called.

“I won't get scared,” Daniel assured him, swinging his legs. “I bet I can climb to the top!”

Oh, yeah, Jack thought, I bet you can. “Remember, we have a deal, buddy? Halfway up.”

“Oh, don' worry, Jack. It's easy! You'll see!” Daniel didn't wait for Jack to reply. He made his way upwards, scampering from branch to branch until he vanished among the large leaves, quickly crossing the agreed-upon height and climbing further up.

“Oh, for cryin' out... Daniel!!” Jack yelled, already shrugging out of his vest so he'd be able to climb the tree and get the kid down by his ears.

“Jaaack,” Daniel called from somewhere above. “It's so cool! I can go from one tree to the other! They're so close!”

Alarmed, Jack took a few steps back and watched in horror as Daniel crawled out on a thick branch, near the top of the tree, his arm reaching for a similar branch hanging over from another tree.

“Almost there,” Daniel said from approximately 20 feet above the ground.

And ever so slowly, he got to his feet, arms outstretched to his sides. He stood, both feet curled around the bark of the branch, his hands grasping for some of the leaves to steady himself.

“Daniel...” Jack croaked, his throat dry and tight. “Don't move... I'm coming up now...” And when he had him down, safe and sound, he'd tan his hide.

“Nooo... if you climb up, it'll sway,” Daniel said lightheartedly. “Coming down now.”

Then he jumped.

Jack’s heart jumped to his throat.

Daniel's arms closed around the branch of the other tree. He swung his legs up and for a moment, hung there like a koala bear before he worked his way to the tree trunk, little by little. Once there, Daniel scurried up until he was sitting in a crotch again.

“That was fun,” he yelled.

“Down,” Jack barked. “Now!”

Daniel started to clamber down the tree while Jack tried to pick up his scattered wits.

Once Daniel was on one of the lower branches, but still out of O'Neill's reach, he stopped and looked down at Jack. “I'm sorry I scared you,” he said sheepishly.

“Just... get down here!”

“You know I didn' wanna scare you on purpose. I knew I wasn't gonna fall down,” Daniel reminded him.

Jack yanked his cap from his head and scrubbed a hand through his hair. He'd be white by the time they reached the other Stargate. Or bald.
“You could give a guy a warning before playing Tarzan,” he huffed. “And what happened to ‘I promise only halfway up’?”

“I'm sowee,” Daniel offered.

“Right. Now get your little behind down here ASAP.”

“You not gonna smack me, are you?”

“I haven't decided yet,” Jack growled. “Don't make me come and get you.”

Daniel looked a little worried, and it took him a lot longer to climb down the last few feet. He had barely reached the ground when Jack picked him up, hoisted the wriggling brat under his arm and carried him to where they had been sitting at the shore. Settling on one of the rocks, he plunked Daniel over his knees, face down.

“Give me one reason why I shouldn't smack your reckless butt.”

“I said I was sooorrrrry...” Daniel whined.

“We had a clear deal on how far you would go up that tree, Doctor Jackson!”

”But, Jaaack...” Daniel screeched as he continued to squirm.

“Promise me you won’t pull stunts like that again. Ever,” Jack snapped, holding the little bug in place, one hand at his collar and the other on the small of his back, ready to carry out his threat if he didn't get the right responses.

“Yes, yes, I promise!”

“I don't care how high you can climb or how sure you are you won't fall. If we agree on something, you'll stick to it.”

“I will!”

“If you ever act that recklessly again, you'll end up with a very sore butt – if you don't break your scrawny neck first. You got that?”

“Yeees...” Daniel squeaked.

Jack roughly pulled him to his feet. “You stay right next to me for the rest of the day, young man. And I want you to try and put yourself in my shoes... read my feelings now and remember what we discussed last night. About picking our risks and being careful. I can't mend broken bones out here, dammit. Get that into your stubborn skull!”

Daniel swallowed hard and hung his head.

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They continued walking in brooding silence, Jack feeling his adrenaline level coming down finally. Daniel toddled along, not moving ahead or staying behind. Even Cupcake picked a much slower pace.

To his own dismay, Jack started to feel sorry for coming down on the kid so harshly.

He couldn't completely suppress the amazement at how his little fella had used that tree like a jungle
gym. Like a duck took to water.

Damn, Jack had probably underestimated the kid again... maybe Daniel really knew what he was
doing and where his own limits were... maybe not.

He needed time to get used to crap like this. Who knew? Maybe Daniel didn't have just unbreakable
skin... maybe he also had unbreakable bones, too? But Jack sure as hell wasn't going to watch the
kid break his neck to find out... Right now, he wished for Fraiser and her MRIs and any other tests
she could do with the boy.

He decided they had to get over these issues before they climbed the mountains. He needed to rely
on Daniel to stick to agreements. But he also needed to know what exactly the tyke was capable of
and what Jack could expect him to handle.

Maybe he had to learn not to let the little body fool him all the time. He kept seeing a little kid, but
Daniel was so much more, no matter how kid-like he appeared.

A small hand latched onto his pants and tugged.

When he stopped walking and looked down, Daniel raised his arms in a silent request to be picked
up. He complied, and Daniel leaned his head against Jack's shoulder, his arm sneaking around Jack's
neck.

"I'm not 'fraid of heights anymore," Daniel mumbled after another period of silence.

"I noticed that," Jack replied dryly. He remembered adult Daniel's discomfort with heights. He'd
never let it slow him down, but he had mentioned it on a few occasions.

"I forgotted about not climbing up to the top. It was so much fun."

"I reminded you."

"I know." Daniel buried his face in the hollow of Jack's neck.

"Well, it happened, no harm was done, and you've been warned about the consequences for next
time." Jack jiggled Daniel until he raised his head and their eyes locked. "Peace?"

"Peace." Daniel sighed in relief and slung both arms around Jack's neck to squeeze. "I hate when we
fight, Jack."

Jack hugged him close and patted his arm. "Me too. Sucks big time."

"Though we foughted a lot more when I was big," Daniel said thoughtfully.

"Yeah." And they'd work on that once Daniel was big again.

"A lot longer, too."

"Oh, yeah."

"It's stoopid," the kid decided. "I love you a whole lot, Jack. We shouldn't fight."

"Even people who love each other fight sometimes," Jack said with a smile. "And by the way... I
love you a whole lot, too."

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True to his word, Jack didn't let Daniel climb any more trees, run ahead or fall behind for the rest of the day. Either he walked right next to Jack or was carried. Jack gave him credit for swallowing his penalty without sulking too much.

Once they had settled down for the night, shelter built and fire pit set up, Jack managed to shoot a small weasel-like animal and roasted it over the fire. Daniel, who apparently had gotten over his issues with hunted food, said his thank you prayer and sniffed approvingly.

The meat turned out to be salty and fatty, but not bad. It was enough to still their hunger, but not enough to feed Cupcake as well.

“You eat your dinner and give the critter some more milk glob,” Jack ordered, ignoring Daniel's scowled protest. “There's barely enough meat for us, and you need it more than Cupcake. Especially with all that energy you have now.”

Daniel complied, if somewhat sullenly, and the critter didn't mind the glob at all.

Later, when they had washed up and brushed their teeth, Daniel changed into his sleeping shirt and asked Jack for a story. “Or don' I get one today?” he added worriedly.

“I didn't say you wouldn't get a story, did I?”

“Nu-huh, but...”

“C'mere.” Jack patted the space between his legs, and Daniel snuggled in, sighing contentedly.

“You promised me to tell me 'bout Charlie,” the tyke reminded Jack.

“I did, didn't I? What do you want to know?”

“Did Charlie ever climb trees?”

“Sure he did. All boys do, right?”


“Oh, yeah. Lots of trees.”

“Did you ever fall? Did Charlie?”

“Yep and yep,” Jack said. “Most boys fall down a tree at least once, I guess. Charlie loved climbing trees in the park. But they weren't nearly as high as the one you climbed today.”

“Oh,” Daniel mumbled. “'m sorry I climbed up so high an' jumped over.”

“I don't want you to break your neck, kiddo,” Jack said, shaking his head. “But I guess we'll have to figure out what else you can do and where your limits are. Just promise me never to pull stunts like that again.”

“I won't. I promise,” Daniel said, his voice unusually subdued.

“I didn't expect you to suddenly be able to... do what you did today,” Jack explained. “You have to give me a warning before you... try new stuff.”

“Kay.”
They sat in silence for a moment, then Jack nudged Daniel. “Let's not dwell. You want to hear a story about Charlie climbing trees?”

Daniel shook his head. “Don' wanna hear anything about climbing trees, I think.”

Jack thought for a moment and began, “When Charlie was about eight, we went into the woods together. He wanted to learn how to build a shelter so he could show his friends.”

“Like the ones we build?”

“Yep, just like the ones we build. From wood and grass. So we went out into the forest and built a shelter. It took us awhile, but when we were done, it was quite a nice hut...”

And while Jack told Daniel how they had built that shelter and how it had started to rain so they had to stay inside the whole afternoon until it was dark, he remembered many details of that day. How the forest had smelled like wet leaves and how they had told each other jokes and how Charlie had confessed a few mishaps at school when Jack had shared a few tales of his own rather wild youth. He recalled many Saturdays and Sundays he had spent with his son, doing buddy stuff like playing football or basketball. Their bond had been strong, and he had tried to make up as much as possible for the times his job took him away from home.

Maybe, Jack mused, he hadn't been such a bad father at all. Not on all levels anyway.

For some reason, Charlie had thought being in the military was close to being god. Jack had tried hard to shut the military part out of his family life and forbid his son to play war games. Maybe it had been the wrong thing to do. Maybe Charlie would still be alive if his wish to just once hold a gun in his hands, and if Jack’s military job hadn’t been such a magical mystery for the kid.

Jack had stopped wondering about those things a long time ago, but having a kid again seemed to be dragging everything back to the surface.

Jack O'Neill hadn't been the smartest dad or the most perfect dad in the world. He hadn't been the most skillful dad or the funniest dad. Nor the most patient dad.

He wasn't any of that now, either.

But maybe it was just all about trying one's best anyway.

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Knives and Log Rafts

Chapter 19

Knives and Log Rafts

Jack held Daniel's hand as they marched down a path over short grass. They let their arms swing in unison with their loud out-of-tune voices, Jack singing first and Daniel being his echo.

“The other day... I met a bear... A great big bear... Oh, way out there...”

Then they would go on together, as loud as could be, “The other day I met a bear, a great big bear, oh, way out there.”

Jack lifted the kid from the ground and swung him around in a circle before setting him down again as they went on, “He looked at me... I looked at him... He sized up me... I sized up him...”

“He looked at me, I looked at him, He sized up me, I sized up him.”

Again Daniel's feet left the ground, and he laughed while trying to keep up as Jack's echo. “So he says to me... Why don't you run... 'Cause I see you ain't... Got any gun...”

They repeated the refrain together and then switched, Daniel singing first, “So I says to him... That's a good idea... So come on, feet... Let's up and flee...”

“And so I ran... Away from there... But right behind... Me came that bear...”

“What's the bear do?” Jack swung Daniel up again, ignoring how his arm was becoming a little tired.

Daniel roared and growled in between giggles.

“The bear giggles?” Jack shook his head. “What a funny bear...”

“Jaaack, next verse...”

“Alrighty... Up ahead of me... I saw a tree... A great big tree... Oh glory be!... The lowest branch... Was ten feet up... So I'd have to jump... And trust my luck...”

After Daniel had finished his echo of the last line, he tugged at Jack's hand. “Jack? Can I try climbing another tree later? Please? I promise not to go any higher than we agree on. An' I won't do any stoopid stuff...”

“We'll see,” Jack said. “First we'll have to find a place to start a fire and have lunch.”

“'kay... Jack? Can I pick shineberries again? There's lots of bushes over there.”

“Go ahead and pick our dessert.” Jack shooed him off. “And don't eat all of them alone, you hear me?”

They had been hiking for three hours, the lake still to their right. Daniel seemed to be less and less in need of longer breaks each day. They had rested once to drink something and feed the critter with crackers. It turned out Cupcake ate everything she was fed without getting sick, which was a good
thing. If the puppy wasn't skipping ahead and around them, either Daniel or Jack carried her while she slept.

Ahead of them was a large group of trees, and O'Neill decided they'd have lunch there. When they reached the trees, Daniel handed Jack a handful of berries. They were a little squashed, and the kid's hands were sticky from the juice, but they were still good. Daniel skipped off again to the lake's shore, washing his hands and looking for fishies, or stones, or whatever.

They found a nice spot to rest, and Jack put his gear down, rolling his aching shoulders with relief. “Can you sense any fish nearby?”

Daniel stood still for a moment, concentrated and then shook his head. “No fish.” Then he cocked his head as if he was listening to something and whispered, “There are other animals, though.”

“Where?”

Daniel pointed into the trees. “Over there.”

Jack pursed his lips. “You sure?”

“Yes. Same one we ate yesterday, I think. I don' like how they feel. They eat other animals’ babies an' eggs.” Daniel frowned.

Jack wondered if that was why Daniel didn't mind eating them. But he’d better not question it. “You wanna stay here or come along?”

“Stay here.”

“Don't...”

“I'll just sit here. Promise.” Daniel said, flopping on his butt next to Jack's pack.

“Good enough for me.” Jack nodded and turned to go in the direction Daniel had pointed out.

He walked through scrub and had to climb over some logs, looking for the weasels. They lived in trees, so Jack kept his eyes upwards, his gun ready and his senses on alert.

Daniel was really getting good at this.

Jack spotted a pair of them, scurrying down a trunk. Their coat was almost black, unlike their Earth relatives who were mostly brown with white chest fur. At least, the ones Jack was familiar with.

He waited until the two weasels had settled down at bottom of the tree, looking for food beneath the roots. Lifting his gun, Jack suddenly froze as he spotted something between the trees a few feet away.

“What the...,” he whispered, and their lunch was forgotten. The weasels were getting lucky today. Jack hurried back to where Daniel was sitting on the ground, cuddling Cupcake.

“I didn't wander off,” Daniel greeted him, pride in his voice.

“Yeah, thanks for obeying me.” Jack snorted, knuckling the blond head playfully.

“You're welcome,” Daniel said gracefully.
“Hey, kiddo, can you sense any people around here? Aside from me? You think you can pick up if somebody's close to us?”

Daniel's blue eyes grew big. “Did you see someone?”

“No, but there's a house not far from here,” Jack explained. “And I'm wondering if its owner is anywhere close.”

The kid shook his head. “I can't feel anybody, Jack. Can we go? Look at the house?”

After a moment of consideration, Jack hid their backpack under some scrub just in case they had to do a fast retreat. He took Daniel's hand, and together they approached the house.

It was hidden between the trees, as though it was ducking away from curious eyes. Once they had come closer, Daniel whispered that nobody was in or around the cabin. It was built from logs, and grass grew on the roof. Looking through his binoculars, Jack could make out a stone chimney and dark window holes without glass. The door was split in two, dangling on its hinges. In front of the house was a stump, probably used to chop wood. The fencing around a small acre of land was rotten as well.

“Looks deserted,” Jack agreed with Daniel.

“'s what I said.”

“The fact that nobody's around now doesn't have to mean it's deserted,” Jack said.

“It feels deserted to me.”

“What, now you can pick up the feeling of places too?”

“Maybe I can.”

“Maybe you can,” Jack said wearily, shaking his head. “Come on. Let's get a closer look.”

The little cabin had two rooms, a simple bedspread and a cold fireplace. It looked like nobody had lived there for quite some time. Dust and cobwebs were covering everything. Daniel found a little purple spider and let it wander up and down his arm.

Jack could do trusting.

Yep.

Daniel said the spider was harmless.

Fine.

He suppressed the urge to grab it, throw it away and stomp on it.

He really hated bugs.

Taking a deep breath, Jack watched with relief when his kid got tired observing the spider and placed it on a window sill. The little creature scrabbled out of the house as fast as possible, which probably saved its life.
The house wasn’t in too bad shape even tho the wall logs on the outside were partly rotten. The loam-covered walls had cracks, but the roof seemed to be intact, and the chimney was free of scrub and dead animals, which meant they could use the fireplace. They found an empty shelf, an old table, three chairs and a closet.

“Nice,” Jack drawled when he opened the closet, not believing his luck. “Eh, Daniel, look what I found?” He pulled out several old, but usable tools and placed them on the table.

“Cool,” Daniel exclaimed. “A stone ax! A hammer! That's great stuff!” He let his hands wander over the hammer’s stone head. “It's very old,” he said. “Well-used. The stone and the handle are very smooth from lotsa holding and hammering.”

Jack carefully sat on one of the chairs, half-expecting it to crash finding himself flat on his ass. But the chair was holding, and Jack put the ax on the table to examine it. “I’d have to sharpen it somehow,” he mumbled.

“You can use a stone to do that,” Daniel suggested, climbing up the other chair and kneeling on it. “What you need the ax for, Jack?”

“Well, some wise guy suggested I should build a log raft.”

“Ooooh... you gonna try?”

“I’ll try,” Jack confirmed. “Need your help, though.”

“What can I do?”

“First off, I’d like a page from your journal and a pen to make a sketch or two. We need to stick our heads together and think of how to build it so we won't drown as soon as we set it on water. I know a lot about planes and fighter jets, but I've never built a raft.”

“You could build a plane instead,” Daniel suggested and giggled when Jack rolled his eyes.

“Who am I? MacGyver?”

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Once they had carried all their gear into the house, Jack made a “broom” for Daniel so he could start sweeping. The kid loved to help and was so engrossed in his work that he dispersed a lot of dust in the process. He got covered in dirt and cobwebs, but he was occupied, and Jack left him to his fun.

He checked the yard and found some trees bearing apple-like fruits. He remembered Daniel had called them “greens”. Jack picked a handful and put them into his cap. He found a field that had probably once been corn or grain, but was now lying idle with only a few plants left between earth and stones. There was a well with a broken bucket, and when Jack took a brief look, he spotted rotten leaves and chunks of wood at the bottom. They’d just have to take their water from the lake then.

After he had made his way around the cabin, finding nothing but scrub and grass, Jack went back inside where Daniel was still whirling his “broom”. Cupcake jumped around, trying to bite into the twigs and leaves.

“Hey, Cinderella,” Jack greeted him and feigned a cough. “You might consider sweeping the dirt out the door instead of spreading it all over the place.”
“I'm not dumb. And I'm not Cinderella! Unless you're the bad stepmom,” Daniel muttered. “I do sweep it out the door. But it doesn' stop settlin' everywhere.”


Daniel gave him a cheeky grin. “Okay, you're not that baaad.”

“I'm kinda troubled about the mom-part,” Jack growled.

“Mother–hen,” Daniel said and started clucking like a chicken.

“Oh, you little...” Jack made a leap for the kid, who threw away his broom and ran out the door, giggling.

Jack followed suit, pretending to search for the tyke outside, looking behind bushes and trees, ignoring the suppressed giggles coming from the opposite direction. “Just you wait,” he muttered. “I'll find you, and then I'm gonna tickle you until you scream for mercy.” He turned this way and that, scratching his head. “Oh, Daniel, where are you? I'm going to dunk you in the lake. You need a bath anyway, you know...”

Daniel jumped out from behind Jack with a loud “Boooo!!!”

“Oh, geez, Daniel!” Jack rolled his eyes and put a hand over his heart. “You got me with your special ops skills!”

“I'm better than you are!” Daniel squealed and ran off again.

“Nobody's better than me,” Jack yelled, storming after him.

“Is tooo...”

“Is NOT!” Jack snatched Daniel around his middle. Throwing the short stuff over his shoulder, he let out a triumphant, “Woohoo!”

Like that, he headed to the lake.

“'s not fair!” Daniel pounded Jack's back with his small fists. “You're BIG, an' I'm LITTLE!” But all the while, he was laughing so hard, he was barely able to get the words out.

Jack stopped near the shore and started spinning on the spot until they were both dizzy and Daniel screeched he was going to throw up right now if Jack didn't stop.

When they collapsed on the grass, both a little breathless, Daniel was holding his sides and belly. “It hurts from laughing! I never hurt from laughing before!”

“Wait till I dunk you in the lake.” Jack grinned.

“You won't.”

“Will.”

“I'm still wearing my clothes!”

“Well, get rid of ’em.” Jack shrugged, starting to pull off his boots and socks.

“Oh... oh, last one undressed is a rotten egg.” Daniel was naked in a blink of an eye, and a moment
later they were chasing each other down to the water. After a short check of the depth, they went swimming, both grateful for the refreshing cold while the sun shone high on the sky.

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After their bath, they realized they had forgotten the towel at the cabin, but being alone and far away from any civilization had its upside so they just settled on some flat stones, letting the sun do the work.

“The mountains are closer,” Daniel observed, looking across the water.

“Yeah. We're halfway around the lake now. We're still going to save a lot of time if we manage to build a raft,” Jack mused.

“They look scary,” Daniel mumbled. The mountains were dark and high. Jack had looked through his binoculars this morning and seen snow glistening on the tops.

“We'll find a way through,” he said.

Daniel leaned his damp head against Jack's elbow. “I know.”

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In the afternoon the two friends were sitting at the table in the cabin, Daniel watching Jack trying to draw a building plan for a raft. Jack started a sketch, then crossed it out and started a new one.

“I once tried to build a raft,” Daniel said out of the blue.

“You did? When?”

“Um, it was more a sand raft, not for water.”

“What?”

“I wanted to build it with Skaara on Abydos,” Daniel mumbled. “It was s'posed to help transport burdens over the dunes. You'd haveta pull it up the dune an' then slide down the other side. Like a...”

“A sled?”

“Uh-huh. We wanned to tie it behind the beasts... but it didn' work out 'cuz there wasn't enough wood on Abydos to make it.”

“Right,” Jack muttered. “But how'd you plan to build it?”

Daniel thought about it for a moment and then hung his head. “I don't 'member.”


Daniel doodled on the page for a moment and then tentatively drew something that looked like a log. He glanced up at Jack, who gave him an encouraging nod. “Okay. That's a start.”

What finally came out of it was the joint effort of Daniel remembering the construction and Jack putting in some math on the length of the logs and where to put what.

When they were done, Jack nodded. “Yep, we can work with this, I guess.”
“Really?”

“Oh, yeah. The tricky part is to cut the wood and haul everything down to the shore and then put it together.”

“Can’t ya take apart the house? It has logs,” Daniel observed.

Jack pursed his lips, thinking it through for a moment. “Good thinking, bud, but I don’t know how good that wood is. This house was built a long time ago and some of the wall logs are rotten. I guess I have to look for better wood. You gonna help?”

Daniel looked at him with sparkling eyes. “Let's do this!”

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Jack sharpened the ax while Daniel made a list of what they needed.

“Ten logs or timber... Twelve feet. Wow, Jack. You haveta chop whole trees! Four shorter logs about seven feet long. Ropes... Jack? We only have one rope. It won't be enough.”

“We'll think of something, buddy.”

“We could use clothes,” Daniel said.

“Possibly. What else?”

“The ax an’ a knife.”

“Check.”

Daniel put his pen and journal down and toddled over to where Jack was working. He reached out for the ax blade. “Is it sharp yet?”

“Ah! Hands off the ax,” Jack warned. “It's almost done. How about you look around for something we could use as twine?”

“Like what?”

Jack paused in what he was doing and wiped his brow. “Fibrous bark, maybe? And we need some brushwood. But don't try to drag anything over here. Just look for good places where I can find stuff.”

“I can take your knife...” Daniel trailed off as their eyes met, and he shrugged. “Guess not.”

Watching the tyke running off, Jack called after him not to go too far which was answered by a wave of one short arm. Cupcake accompanied Daniel, and Jack went back to sharpening the ax with a stone.

When he was done, he raised the stone blade to take a look at it and whistled at how sharp it looked. Daniel had assured him he’d be able to chop trees with this, and Jack had doubted it. But then again, people must have chopped wood centuries ago, so this ax would do just fine.

It was late afternoon by the time Jack had chopped four trees. Sweat trickled down his back and brow, and he had sharpened the ax twice in between. The trees’ bark was hard and unbending. Once the ax was through the thick bark, it became a little easier.
Daniel sat on one of the fallen trunks, legs pulled up to his chest, chin resting on his knees.

“Jaaack... I wanna do something, too. I found loads of scrub to cover the raft. Can't I cut it for you? I'll be careful! You know I can't cut myself.”

Kicking at the fallen tree to make sure it was cut off its stump properly, Jack put the ax down and wiped his sweaty face with his arm. “I don't know that for sure. You might still be able to cut off one of your fingers.”

“We won't find out if we don't try,” Daniel argued, the Jackson-frown developing on his little face.

“You want to try to cut off your fingers?” Jack's eyebrows wandered upwards.

“Nooo...” Daniel whined, but couldn't suppress a grin. “I wanna see if I can still handle a knife.” He held up his hands in front of his face and wiggled his fingers. “Oh, they are so small,” he mumbled.

“And the knife is so big,” Jack said as he sat on the log next to Daniel, pulling his knife from its pouch at his belt.

They both gazed at the sharp blade and long handle, made for large hands to hold and work with. Daniel slowly reached for it, and Jack gently placed it in the boy's hands, hoping the kid wouldn't run with it.

He had to be confident Daniel knew what he was doing. Or at least, he had to allow the kid to work out his new skills.

They had to start somewhere.

Jack tried not to think about the tree incident.

Daniel held the knife and weighed it in his hands. “It's heavy.”

“Look, I wouldn't be fretting over this if it was a Swiss army knife. Something small. But I'm not sure this one is the right size for you,” Jack explained, trying to sound reasonable rather than patronizing.

Daniel turned it over and over. “I just wanna be able to help,” he whispered. “An' I feel like I can.”

“You sure?” Jack gazed down at the sad little boy, aware of how important it always was for Daniel to be part of something. To make a difference where he could. There was no defiance in the kid's eyes when they met Jack's.

“Yes. But I won' try if you are too worried about it.”

“You remember the basics on how to handle a knife safely?”

Daniel nodded. “Never run with it, always cut 'way from your body and keep hands on handle. Never pass it with blade first.”

“What else?”

Daniel thought for a moment. “Always put back in pouch when not using it. Don't leave it on the ground.”

“Try to close your hand around the handle. You have to be able to use it one-handed to cut scrubs.”
Daniel had to stretch his fingers, but he managed to hold it. “It was lots easier when I was big,” he commented.

“Yeah, I bet.” Jack took the knife from Daniel. “Now – get up...” Daniel complied, and Jack handed the knife back to him. “Take it and move it around – slowly. Get a feeling for it. Try to balance it out... you remember where the tang is?”

“Uh-huh. Here.” Daniel brushed his thumb along the part of the knife where the blade extended into the handle. “It’s what gives the knife balance.”

“Right. Okay... careful now...” Jack stood and positioned himself behind Daniel. “Try to remember your combat training with the knife. Simple moves.”

“I just want to cut scrubs, not fight,” Daniel wondered.

“I know that. But you have to get comfortable with it first. You just said yourself it feels different now. Your knife should be like an extension of your arm and hand. Especially large knives. If you are clumsy with it, you might cut off limbs instead of scrub... or at least, rip your clothes apart.”

“Oh... yes.”

“Concentrate,” Jack ordered.

Daniel moved the knife slowly, holding the blade away from his body. His first actions were clumsy, like he wasn’t sure what exactly to do with the weapon. Jack steadied him with his hands on the small shoulders, telling him quietly to hold his arms higher and keep the knife steady as much as he could.

“I can do this,” Daniel said. “I have to remember...”

“It’s all in there,” Jack encouraged.

Daniel made a few moves he recalled, stabbing the air, doing sidesteps and moving forwards, then backwards.

Jack followed his every move, trying to stay in tune with Daniel’s much smaller steps.

They continued like this for a while, Daniel becoming more and more secure in coordinating the large knife with his tiny hands. Jack would guide Daniel’s arm here and there, place a hand to his elbow to help him keep the balance.

“I think I can handle it now,” Daniel said when they were taking a break.

“Want to try and throw?” Jack had to give the kid credit. He had done a lot better than expected.

“Can I?” Daniel’s eyes grew big.

“Well, if you get wet, you might as well go swimming.” Jack told him. “It’s too late to continue working on the raft today, anyway.”

So they practiced throwing the knife, and by the time Jack ended the lesson, Daniel could aim and throw quite well. His brain remembered all the right moves. All he had to do was will this smaller body into adjusting and complying.

“Can I try to whittle after dinner, Jack? Please? Just until it’s time for bed?” Daniel bounced up and down like his Cupcake as they returned to the cabin, Jack’s knife securely back at his belt.
“If there’s enough daylight left, maybe,” Jack said.

But after dinner it was dark, and Daniel was too tired to whittle. After some coaxing and the promise to let him work with the knife tomorrow, the tyke finally settled down to sleep on one of the bedspreads.

It was nice to have a real roof over their heads for a change. Jack made a fire in the fireplace so they had enough light after sundown. Their dinner had been some of the “greens” Jack had picked earlier and another MRE since he hadn't been able to shoot or fish anything today. Cupcake had gotten her share of chicken with pasta. She really didn't eat much, but Jack hoped she'd be able to find her own food sometime soon.

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Recruit Training

Chapter 20

Recruit Training

The next day they rose early, had a quick breakfast and went right to their task. Daniel led Jack to the
scrubs he thought were good to cover the raft. He had also found a twine-like ivy plant which
wouldn’t tear easily.

Jack supervised Daniel's cutting skills for some time before he felt confident enough to leave him to
it. He still had visions of cut-off fingers or bleeding stab wounds in small legs or worse. But as
Daniel managed to cut the ivy twine without a problem, Jack went back to chopping trees with an
anxious heart and endless horrible scenarios crossing his mind.

He had left the knife's pouch with the kid, hammering it into him to always put the knife in it when
he wasn't using it.

Giving in to let Daniel using the knife was one of the hardest decisions Jack had to make on this
journey so far. All his instincts were screaming no way. But there was another little voice in him
wondering what might happen if Daniel got his hands on the weapon without Jack's knowledge... if
Daniel wanted to prove he was capable of handling a knife whether Jack allowed it or not...

Like Charlie, who had just wanted to hold Jack's gun...

Jack chopped down another two trees, letting out a relieved breath each time he spotted his kid
trotting over with more ivy twine or twigs to put them on a pile. The tree chopping was going better
today, probably because Jack had gotten used to handling the ax, so he didn't need nearly as much
time to chop trees as yesterday.

“I'm fine,” Daniel kept telling him. “All fingers here!” And he'd wriggle his hands and laugh.

Jack stomped down the memory on how carelessly Daniel had climbed the tree two days ago. He
wouldn't be that reckless with a weapon. Daniel wasn't Charlie. Daniel respected weapons. He knew
what they were capable of. His big part knew how to handle a knife. Jack had seen it with his own
eyes...

But there could be an accident... no matter how careful the kid was...

A loud, pain-filled wail disrupted the quiet morning.

Jack threw away the ax and run.

God dammit.

Served him right for leaving a little kid with a combat knife...

Would he ever learn?

Heart thrumming in his ears, he skidded down a small ravine and slumped to his knees beside
Daniel, who was crying and clutching his left thigh. There was blood on his cut-off BDU pants.

Oh god.
“Jaaack... oh, Jack!” Daniel wailed. “I'm sorry, I'm sorry... I didn' do anything wrong... I swear, I didn'... it jus' slipped!”

“Okay... shh, 's okay. Lay down.” Hands shaking, Jack pushed Daniel onto his back and pulled his hands away from the stab.

Forcing himself to look at it... to get a grip...

Then his training kicked in, and he pushed all emotions aside while he examined the wound.

With relief, Jack saw that the knife hadn't hit a major artery. While there was lots of blood, it wasn't flowing fast enough for that.

The knife must have slipped from the kid's hands and poked his leg as it fell.

“Daniel, listen to me. It's not bad, but it's bleeding.” He took one of Daniel's hands and placed it on the cut. “Press here for a moment.”

Daniel sniffed and, probably remembering his many injuries, pressed down on the stab.

“Oh, okay. That should cover it. You stay here. Don't move. I'll get the med kit.” Jack brushed a hand over Daniel's head to calm him. “It's gonna be all right.”

Daniel nodded, his little face pale, eyes big as saucers.

Jack stormed back to the cabin. He jerked the med kit from the shelf and dashed back, cursing himself for being such a fool.

When he returned, Daniel was sitting upright, gazing at his leg, no longer pressing on the wound.

“Heh, I told you not to move...” Jack said breathlessly, crouching next to him.

“But, Jack... lookit,” the kid whispered.

“What the f...” Jack trailed off as they both stared at Daniel's leg. The bleeding had stopped and the blood around the small jab was already beginning to clot. Jack retrieved the scissors from the med kit and cut Daniel's blood-soaked pants around the stab. Then they watched as the wound started to close slowly, and all that was left in the end was a long patch of scab.

Jack got out the alcohol wipes and cleaned off the clotted blood from around the wound. “Holy crap,” he mumbled.

“It didn't even hurt so much,” Daniel said, bewildered. “I was more worried 'bout you being mad at me.”

“How's it now?”

“Stings a little.”

Jack scooped Daniel up and carried him to the cabin where he stripped off his ruined pants and sat him on the table to take another look at the wound.

It hadn't changed.

“So Nirrti did succeed after all,” Daniel whispered. “She maded a perfect host.”
“She sure pushed it up a notch, at least,” Jack agreed, helping Daniel into his leather pants.

Daniel looked at him with those brilliant blue eyes. “Jack... I don' think I'm done yet.”

The room suddenly seemed cold despite the heat, and Jack sat heavily on one of the chairs. “What do you mean?”

“There's more to come. I don't think it's the end. I'm not completed.” Daniel's eyes filled with tears. “Jack... you're not scared of me, right? You don' think I'm a freak? You'll still take me to the palace, right? Why are you so upset? Jack?”

“I...” He shook his head and held out his arms to Daniel. “Come here, buddy.” When Daniel reluctantly skid from the table and into Jack's arms, he continued, “I'm upset because Nirrti did this to you. Right now, I'm pretty mad at her.”

“But... it's good my leg healed so fast,” Daniel objected shyly.

“Yeah, it's a good thing under these circumstance. I still think she had no right to change people to make them... hosts. Even if they're perfect hosts.”

Daniel sniffed. “I'm a little scared, too, now, Jack. What'll become of me? What if I change into somethin'... icky?”

“Icky?” Jack couldn't help but smile at Daniel's lingual slip.

Daniel shrugged. “Icky. You know. Like...” He furrowed his brows, thinking hard and then coming up with, “Spiderman?”

“Well, he can climb houses.” Jack shrugged. “Would help with those mountains.” Seeing he couldn't joke off Daniel's uneasiness, though, he cuddled the child to him and patted his back. “You won’t turn into something icky, Daniel. Not you. It's all a matter of perspective. We'll fix it. Whatever happens, we'll fix it.”

“What if we can't?” Daniel whispered. “What if we can't and I don’t just stay little but... but... different, too?”

“You know, if I learned something over the years we went through the gate, it's this...” Jack turned Daniel on his lap so he was facing him. “Different isn't always bad-different. You know that, don't ya? You're the one pointing it out to me all the time.”

Daniel gave a tiny nod.

“We'll deal with things as they come. Now we have to build a raft. So let's get a move on,” Jack said briskly, hoping the change of subject would do the trick.

Daniel perked up at that, and they went down to the water where Jack cleaned the blood off the BDUs as well as possible. He didn't want wild animals to be attracted to the smell of blood. He'd sew the cut later.

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Once all the trunks were chopped into roughly twelve foot long logs, Daniel helped ripping off branches and twigs. Jack watched him handling the knife, cringing at the sight of small hands grabbing spiky twigs without care. Knowing now the kid wouldn't seriously hurt himself, he didn't say anything and just helped with the thicker branches. While Daniel seemed to be more flexible and
had this fast-healing, almost unbreakable skin, he hadn't developed unnatural strength yet. At least, not to the point of pulling dead tree trunks or cutting arm-thick branches.

Yet.

They were taking a break at lunchtime, and while they had more greens and MRE sandwiches, they talked about baked potatoes, hamburgers and steaks. Daniel sighed at the memory of ice cream and chocolate, and Jack thought it was amusing that he missed Starbucks more than Daniel did.

When they’d finished eating and feeding Cupcake, Jack told Daniel to take a nap.

“But I'm not tired,” came the instant reply, along with a pout.

“Humor me. Cupcake’s already curled up on your sleeping bag. You may as well join her,” Jack prompted gently.

“But I wanned to help with the raft...”

“And you will. I won't have it finished until tomorrow anyway,” Jack promised. “Besides, you'll need all your strength for later.”

Daniel eyed him suspiciously. “Why? What are we doing?”

“Ah, it's for me to know and for you to find out. After your nap.” Jack grinned.

“Jaaack,” Daniel whined. “It's no fair to have secrets and send me to bed!”

But eventually the tyke toddled off, all the time muttering to himself that he used to be big and never took naps then and how he didn’t like this part of being little and how he never would be able to sleep and how Jack needed a nap as well since he was so old...

Chuckling at the grumbles, Jack helped Daniel out of his pants and tucked him in, promising to go to bed early since he wasn't taking a nap. Daniel frowned and nodded, then yawned. Jack sat with him for a while, brushing his fingers through the short spikes of blond hair in a calming manner.

It didn't take long for Daniel to fall asleep.

Jack made sure the boy was sleeping peacefully with Cupcake next to him before he left the cabin.

Looking at logs and timbers scattering the ground, Jack walked among them, fleshing out the idea he had earlier, in more details.

Being in the military, O'Neill had seen, completed and built obstacle courses of all kinds. He had trained recruits, on and off world. Daniel was a very small soldier, but he could use some challenges and a safe “playground”.

Building an obstacle course and letting Daniel play in it meant delaying their traveling for at least another couple of days. But Jack figured it was the safest way to get both of them used to Daniel's new abilities and figure out what exactly the kid was capable of. Besides, it would take a day or two for Jack to accomplish the raft log anyway. So the kid would be occupied and hopefully learn to control his strength and skills.

He rubbed the whiskers on his chin and remembered the stuff he had learned so many years ago. After some thought, he selected an area and started to work.

There was a natural ditch he could use for some jumping exercises and some trees that weren't too
high for climbing. For everything else, Jack moved logs and poles and a couple of rocks around.

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Two hours later, Jack looked with satisfaction at his accomplishment. He took a drink from his water canteen and plucked at his sweat-drenched t-shirt. When he heard a low rustle and crinkle from behind one of the chopped trees, he spun around.

Spotting a blond head that didn't hide fast enough, he shook his head and called, “You might as well come out, you little bug.”

Daniel's head appeared behind the trunk, slowly followed by his shoulders and arms. “Told you I wasn't tired,” he said, rubbing his eyes.

“Could’ve fooled me.” Jack snorted, then sobered and said, “Let me look at your leg, please.”

Daniel toddled over, eyes still sleepy, to let Jack examine the stab.

“Well, I'll be damned,” Jack muttered at the sight of a neat scar that seemed weeks old. “Does it still sting?”

“Nu-huh,” Daniel replied absently and patted Jack's arm. “Jack? What we goin' to do with all that stuff?”

“Well, look at it. What does it remind you of?”

Daniel gazed at the rope tied to the trees, the logs lined up in a row, the trunks serving as beams and a little wall of rocks. “I know!” he finally exclaimed. “It's an obstacle course!”

“Obstacle. And yeah, it is.”

“For me?” Daniel's eyes grew wide. “You did this for me? Jack? Really?”

Jack almost lost his balance when a small living missile slammed against him at full force, arms and legs clamping around his body. “This is SO cool, Jack! When can I try it? Right now? Is it like for the recruits?”

“Whoa...” Laughing, Jack pried the arms from his legs and picked the tyke up.

“Put your pants on first. Then go ahead and try it out, recruit. Show me your style.”

Daniel was flying back to the house and returned in no time, dressed in his leather pants. He approached the obstacles built in a circle, including the small ditch Jack had found. “Where do I start, Jack? What do I do with what?”

“Well, usually in recruit training, there's a start and an end. But you can just go ahead and start wherever you want. The wall is for jumping only. It's loose rocks, and if you climb it, it may all tumble down.”

“But it's just a tiny wall. I can't really climb it.” Daniel grinned.

“Well, it's not for sitting on, either,” Jack instructed. “Everything else is multipurpose. You can balance on the beams, but you can also crawl underneath them. You can jump from log to log, but you can also run around them. The ditch over there is for jumping too. And we'll get to the trees and the rope later.”
Jack hadn't been able to do much with the resources he had. Otherwise he would have built a
climbing net and other objects for Daniel to work with. But without nails or anything he could use as
a net, the logs and rocks would have to do. He wanted to know how fast and how often the kid
could complete the course before he got tired. He had tried to estimate the heights and distances
between obstacles to fit a small child, but he had also seen to it that the course wasn't too easy.

Hey, MacGyver would probably be proud of him.

He also had a challenge in mind for later.

As he watched the little boy stroll around the course and then climb the beams to balance on them,
Jack hoped he had built everything securely enough to hold the kid's weight. He had cut the logs so
the beams sat solidly on them. It should be okay for a small person to walk on.

It turned out that Daniel accomplished the obstacle course faster than a speeding bullet. Jack didn't
have to stop time to see how fast the kid had become and how gracefully he jumped from log to log,
balanced on the beams, jumped over the wall and the ditch... or crawled underneath the beams and
zigzagged around the logs at high speed without even touching them.

Daniel was so engrossed in his playing that he just waved dismissively at Jack when he announced
he'd work some more on the raft.

Jack kept an eye on Daniel while he used the ax to split some of the fallen trees into shorter logs and
cut them into three-sided wood pieces.

Later, Jack sat in the shade, drinking water and watching Daniel. There were two hearts beating in
his chest. He wanted to continue their journey as soon as possible. The sooner they crossed those
mountains, the better. On the other hand, Daniel had to learn to handle his new abilities so he
wouldn't injure or kill himself just because he thought he could do everything.

And the heat made it impossible for Jack to work on the raft any faster. He had to take care of
himself as much as he had to take care of Daniel. And he wasn't getting any younger.

Jack was hurting. His back, his arms and legs – everything constantly ached from the long marches
and the heavy gear. He realized that he needed the longer periods of rest more than Daniel.

Which was kinda scary.

“Jack! Jack, look!” The excited yell pulled him out of his gloomy thoughts, and Jack looked over at
Daniel, shaking his head in amazement at the sight.

Daniel was using the wooden beam to walk on his hands. Very slowly he crept forward, his fingers
curling around the bark, his legs swaying in the air. His shirt had slipped out of his pants and fell
down over his head.

With a squeak, Daniel toppled sideways and landed on the ground.

“Hey, you okay, buddy?” Jack jogged over, but Daniel was already back on his feet, rubbing his
head.

“I'm fine.” He grinned.

Jack felt Daniel's head for a bump but couldn't find one. “You got a hard skull there,” he joked as he
helped Daniel adjust his shirt. “So... wanna try something new?”
“Sure! What is it?”

Jack had put Daniel's bandanna in his pants pocket. Now he showed it to the kid. “I'd like to blindfold you and let you do the course again. You think you can do that?”

Daniel nodded eagerly, and Jack covered his eyes with the bandanna. “I'll guide you to the tasks and stay right next to you,” Jack told Daniel as he tied the cloth.

“Okay. Oh, I really can't see anything!”

“That's the idea. I'll take your hand, and you let me lead. Where do you want to start?”

“The beam,” Daniel decided, and Jack turned him around, steering him towards it. “You tell me when you're ready, and I'll let go of your hand.”

He helped Daniel climb the log and stand on the beam. “It's a funny feeling in my belly. I didn't realize the beam sways when I'm on it. Did you know that it sways?” Daniel licked his lips and grimaced as the bandanna slid down over his nose. Jack shoved it back in place.

“These are the things you realize when your eyes are closed and you have to depend on your other senses,” Jack replied. “Now concentrate.”

“I can do it,” Daniel said firmly and started walking forward with wide strides. He took two steps and let go of Jack's hand.

He managed five more steps before he slipped.

Jack caught him as he fell. Daniel tried a second, third and fourth time but didn't manage to balance the whole long way over the beam. Jack didn't say anything, just helped Daniel back up and let him do it again.

“Why doesn't it work?” Daniel finally whined, slumping down on the ground and jerking the bandanna from his head. “I really tried!”

“Your sense of balance is different when your eyes are closed,” Jack explained. “You have to find a new way to stay steady. Therefore, you have to take it slow. Test it out.”

“Can you do it?” Daniel asked.

“Oy. It's been a long time since I tried this,” Jack said. “And this beam won't hold my weight.”

“But you learned it too? When you were in military school?”

“Yep. And in Special Ops training, they had us walk on a diving platform blindfolded and jump into a pool. We also got to do martial arts lessons blindfolded.”

“Wow,” Daniel said and held the bandanna out to Jack. “I'll try again.”

“Remember that fast isn't always the best way to do it. And don't become arrogant because you have a few upgrades now,” Jack lectured as he helped Daniel onto the beam again.

This time Daniel held Jack's hand until he had crossed the whole length. They practiced that way for a while. Daniel became more and more confident, only gripping Jack's little finger and finally letting go completely.

Once the kid had figured it out, he learned with amazing speed. By sundown, Daniel was able to
skip from log to log blindfolded and managed to jump the ditch. Only the wall was giving him trouble. It wasn't high, barely reaching the boy's thighs. But Daniel said he was afraid to run into it and would stop running before he could jump.

Jack told him not to stress over it. “You can try again tomorrow. It's time for dinner anyway.”

“But I'm not hungry,” Daniel said. “I can do more!”

“Ah, but you have to learn when to stop and not overdo it, short stuff. Besides, I need your skills in finding something to eat,” Jack said.

“We haven't even climbed the ropes and trees yet,” Daniel pointed out.

“Tomorrow.”

“Now!”

“Daniel.”

“Jack.”

Sighing, Jack took the bandanna out of Daniel's hands. “Look, Superman. I'm tired and hungry. And I'd like to get us some dinner before it gets dark. Cut me some slack here, okay?”

Instantly the scowl eased out, and Daniel latched onto Jack's hand. “Why didn' you say so? We can stop if you're tired. Or you can go an' eat while I do some more.”

“I'd like your company during dinner,” Jack said.

“Oh. Okay. There're fish,” Daniel said.

“Let's get our rods then.” Jack hoisted Daniel onto his hip, and they went to go fishing.

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Despite his insistence that he wasn't hungry or tired, Daniel gulped down his trout with appetite and dropped into his sleeping bag shortly after dinner, not even wanting a story. When Jack zipped up the sleeping bag, his eyes settled on Daniel's stab wound.

It was gone.

TBC with ch 21 A Busy Day
Daniel went to play in his obstacle course right after breakfast while Jack continued working on the raft.

He cut dovetail notches, about one foot and a half away from each end of the twelve foot logs. Later, he hauled the logs down to the shore and lined them next to each other, so the notches were all on the same height. He slid the smaller logs through the inverted notches to connect the long logs. That was where Daniel's ivy twine came in. Jack used the twine to tie the crosspieces in place.

“Jaaack, I want to climb the tree now!” Daniel was running towards him, waving his bandanna. “Maybe I can do that blindfolded too!” He came to an abrupt halt in front of the raft, and his mouth formed a perfect “Oh”.

“What do you think?” Jack waved at what he had accomplished.

“I didn' help you,” Daniel mumbled, his shoulders slumped. “I'm sorry.”

“Oh, but you did. You cut the ivy and found all the brushwood to cover the raft. And you had more important things to do while I was chopping and cutting,” Jack said. “And of course, you came up with the whole idea in the first place.”

Daniel cocked his head. “You didn' like most of my ideas when I was big,” he said out of the blue. Ouch.

“Hey, that's not true, and you know it,” Jack said. “I gave in to more of your ideas than I probably would with anybody else’s.”

“But you didn' like it.”

Jack opened his mouth, then closed it again and sat down on the soon-to-be raft. “Not always, no,” he admitted quietly.

“Why?” Daniel asked, more curious than accusing.

“Sometimes I didn't think it'd work your way,” Jack said, gazing at the distant mountains. “I was wrong about that a lot.”

“An' then you were mad 'cuz I was right and you weren't.”

“It's not that simple, Daniel.” Jack sighed. But maybe there was a grain of truth in the kid’s words. Was he really that petty?

When was the last time he had acknowledged Daniel's contribution to the team, told him that he had done good and was the one who'd saved the day? When was the last time Jack had apologized for being a prick instead of going with Daniel's plan of action right away? When was the last time he had actually welcomed one of Daniel's suggestions without making some nasty remark about it first?
Certainly not since they had split up.

And before that? Jack's teasing and sarcasm might have been a little less sharp and his overprotective act, a little less aggressive... but while he hadn't had a problem telling Carter or Teal'c they'd done a good job, he'd become reluctant in giving Daniel the same praise. He had done it in the beginning, and he wasn't exactly sure when or why he'd stopped.

Which was ironic since he'd certainly given Daniel much more space and slack than he'd allow Carter. If she would have thrown half of the crap at him Daniel had at times, he'd have dressed her down faster than she could've blinked.

Maybe that was part of the problem, Jack thought. Carter wasn't shy about expressing her opinion, which he appreciated, especially since she was way smarter than he was. And she was the techie gal, the know-how-miracle worker. But she knew her place and time. Daniel kept egging on Jack's way of thinking all the time, stomping down fences and forcing Jack to change his perspective and let his military training go to hell.

Daniel had questioned Jack's authority on more than one occasion. But aside from that, they had – at some point - pulled each other into a stubborn power play. Jack was as much at fault as Daniel in trying to force his own opinion on the other man. And Jack had tried to pull rank on Daniel just because he'd been pissed at him on several occasions while Daniel had refused to be ordered around or to take a step back.

They had lost sight of what really counted to the point that whenever one of them opened his mouth, the other got defensive right away.

And the whole team had suffered because of it.

“Jack?”

“What?” he asked absently.

“I didn' mean to make you sad again,” Daniel whispered. “I promise not to remind you of before anymore.”

“It isn't your fault,” Jack assured him, gently squeezing Daniel’s nape. “Don't worry about it. C'me on. Let's tackle that tree.”

They reached the sturdy trees where Jack had tied the rope. He instructed Daniel to climb one tree and use the rope to reach the second tree. “Try the simplest method first,” he said. “You don't have to walk on it.”

Daniel clambered up the tree like a monkey and a moment later, hung upside down on the rope, hands and knees around it.

“How's this, Jack?”

“Very good. Take it slow until you know you can do it,” Jack said, watching uneasily while the kid crept along the rope, approximately 15 feet above the ground.

When Daniel reached the other side, Jack held his breath as Daniel hung there, contemplating how to continue. After a moment the kid started to swing until he had enough speed to pull his body up and, in a whirl of arms and legs, managed to scramble from the rope to the tree.

Sitting in a crotch, he grinned down at Jack. “I'm here!”
“Nice,” Jack exclaimed. “Can you manage going back?”

“Sure.”

Daniel made his way back the same style. On his next try, using his arms only, he got that one down pat as well. After a round of pleading with Jack, he got his wish and was blindfolded before climbing the tree.

Jack was confident now, trusting in his kid’s strength, and therefore, Daniel didn't try to walk on the rope or jump down from the tree.

When they were done with the exercise, Jack was sure Daniel COULD climb that tree and do tree-hopping at 20 feet above the ground, blindfolded and with his hands tied behind his back.

He wasn't going to suggest that, though.

He wasn't going to stop worrying about the tyke either.

But he had to admit that he felt a lot more confident about the whole mountain climbing thing.

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After lunch Jack worked on two poles which would serve as steering poles while Daniel tried to teach his little puppy how to run zigzags in the obstacle course. Jack heard the child's laughter and Cupcake’s high-pitched barks echoing through the woods. He smiled and thought how much he enjoyed the sound.

He'd miss this Daniel once he was big again.

But dammit, there were so many things Jack had to sort out with adult Daniel. He needed him back. He'd be happy to take the tyke in and be his dad if there was no way to fix him. But as long as there was a chance, he wanted his annoying pain-in-the-neck friend back.

He didn't dare wish for more than friendship. But friendship, they could do.

Once the poles were ready, Jack untied his rope from the climbing trees and used it to tie the last logs together. He wondered if he should put the raft to water for a first test. To see if it floated. But while he’d be able to shove and push it into the lake, he wasn't sure how to get it out again without a rope to pull it up the shore. A sandy beach would have made it much easier. But there were only flat stones, and even though the embankment wasn't steep, it was still going to be a load of work to get the raft to the water, not to mention pulling it back up the shore.

They’d have to wait till morning to see if it worked.

If the raft sank, though, they were in trouble.

Scratching his nape, Jack wondered how to fix that heavy thing if it didn't float.

He groaned and decided to cross that bridge if he came to it.

Right now, a six-foot-tall archaeologist would come in pretty handy, Jack thought with a snort.

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They picked more greens and shineberries later that afternoon, and Jack hunted down one of the geese-like birds. He cut the meat into fillets and put the legs aside for dinner. Daniel told him to
squash the shineberries, cook them with some water and marinate the fillet pieces with it.

Jack tried that, and they discovered the red berries becoming jelly once they were cooked with water. Jack spread it over the fillet pieces as instructed and put the meat on a spit to roast for dinner.

It was delicious.

“That's the best dinner I've had in ages,” he complimented Daniel, who was digging in after his usual thank-you prayer.

It had become a ritual they never skipped whenever they had meat, and Jack had gotten so used to it that he said the prayer along with Daniel.

That evening they were both in an odd mood. It seemed hotter than usual, and even the darkness hadn't brought coolness. Cupcake was restlessly running in and out of the cabin, and Daniel didn't want to sleep, even though he admitted he was tired.

“I just don' wanna,” he repeated when Jack tried to coax him into lying down. “I'm hot an' thirsty.”

Jack gave him water.

“My sleeping bag smells funny,” Daniel stalled.

“It probably needs to be aired out,” Jack said.

“Can we go swimming?”

“It's too dark. We won't see a thing.”

“We have a flashlight.”

“We can't go swimming with a flashlight. And we need to save batteries,” Jack muttered, a little irritated. “Look, I'm hot and uncomfortable, too. But we have to leave early, so we should sleep.”

“I think it'll rain soon.” Daniel sighed.

“Yeah. Feels like a thunderstorm's coming up.” Jack knew the feeling from home. The air seemed electric and the heat had become unbearable. He hoped it was going to happen tonight and would be over in the morning or around lunchtime. He really didn't want to end up in a storm while crossing the lake.

However, he didn't want to wait several more days for a storm to come and go, either.

“I'm scared of the lightning,” Daniel mumbled.

“I'm right here with you, bud.”

They cuddled up together on the bedspread, and Daniel asked for another story. Jack had told him one an hour ago, so he said, “Try to sleep now.”

“Can't.”

“Can't or won't?”

Jack felt Daniel shrug against him.
Tightening his arms around the kid, he started to rock him a little, ignoring the sweat running down his spine. Body warmth was a gross thing when they were already so hot. “What's going on, spacemonkey?”

“I don' wanna cross the mountains,” Daniel whispered. “They're dark and high an' dangerous.”

“We'll be together and beat them,” Jack whispered back. “You and me.”

“You and me,” Daniel repeated.

“Yeahsureyabetcha.”

“What if I have bad dreams ‘bout them? I had one the other night.”

“You did? Why didn't you wake me?”

Daniel shrugged again.

Jack thought for a minute, then said in a conspiratorial voice, “I have a secret spell against nightmares.” He hadn't thought of it until now, but it had always worked for him when he'd been a kid. And for his son. So maybe it would do its magic for Daniel as well. “When Charlie was little, he used to have bad dreams about monsters and creepy shadows in his closet. We chased them away with the magic words my grandma always used when we had bad dreams. Jinxed 'em right out of our house.”

“Was your grandma a witch?” Daniel asked with amazement.

“Well, she was a bit into myths and Celtic rites. But I don't know where this one came from. I remember her using it with me and my brother, and I used it to get rid of Charlie's nightmares.”

“How?”

They sat up and across each other on the bedspread. Jack held out his hands to Daniel, who took them. He hoped he'd remember all the words. It had been years since he'd even thought about his grandma's nightmare spell.

“The Moon is my friend, who's listening to me, bringing the beauty into my dreams. The stars are here, forever to shine, bringing peace of mind. When I close my eyes, they won't be gone, keeping me safe till the dawn. Now you repeat it.”

“Jack, you know a lot of stuff when you put your mind to it,” Daniel said in awe, then repeated the nightmare spell in a very solemn voice.

“Lie down again and think of something nice to dream about,” Jack said after they had repeated the verse twice.

They settled back to sleep, and Daniel snuggled in again. “Is it just for little kids? Or would it work for your nightmares too?”

“I haven't done it in a long time. Maybe it works for adults and little adults as well,” Jack said softly.

A moment later they had fallen asleep.

TBC with ch 22 Crossing Water
O'Neill couldn't believe his luck when they were putting the raft to water and it didn't sink. His spirits went even higher when they had stored all their gear on it and it was still floating.

Once they had set sail, so to speak, Jack pushed them off the shore and into deeper water, using the steering pole. Once the raft reached the deeper part of the lake, moving became much easier.

Cupcake waddled from one end of the raft to the other, trying to stick her long muzzle into the water. Then she'd jump backwards, barking wildly when her nose got wet.

The brooding heat and a developing headache were the only things getting on Jack's nerves. Despite the heat, he was wearing his jacket and vest. He was so used to wearing them while they traveled, so he didn't have to put them into the pack, that he simply hadn't thought of taking them off. He had put his P90 down, though, because he needed enough moving space to work with the poles.

The sky had still been cloudless that morning, so he'd decided to cross the lake rather than wait for a thunderstorm.

However, he had noticed the dark clouds building up at the far horizon a few minutes ago. He hoped they would reach the other shore before the rain reached them. Either way, there was no possibility of turning around now.

Jack looked over to Daniel, who was lying flat on his belly, gazing into the water.


“Don't let them bite your nose off,” Jack said, only half in jest, as he peered down into the water at his end of the raft. Dark, long bodies lurked in the deepness. From what Jack could see, they seemed to resemble eels.

As they moved on, large fish were the least of his worries, though. He watched his steering pole getting shorter and shorter as the water became deeper and deeper.

The ground he’d been pushing against had suddenly plunged away without warning.

Shielding his eyes from the sun, Jack looked back at where they had come from.

More clouds... moving fast...

On his other side, the mountains were getting closer.

Dark and gloomy.

“Can I have your binoculars, please?” Daniel asked, coming over to stand beside Jack.

Jack took them off his neck and handed them to the kid, who held them to his eyes.
“There's the trail,” Daniel suddenly said.

“Where?” Jack took the glasses from Daniel and checked. “Yeah. There's a trail. Guess we'll just take that then.”

“I've seen it awhile ago but wasn't sure,” Daniel said. “I'm hungry.”

“There's cold meat left from the bird. In your backpack,” Jack said absently, still scanning the mountains. “Give Cupcake some of mine. I'm not hungry.”

“Thanks, Jack!” Daniel got the food out and sat next to his little friend.

Jack gazed at the massive rocks. He could see the snow high at the tops, glistening in the sunlight. They weren't near enough to see any houses or roads with the naked eye, but...

Jack frowned.

He picked up his binoculars and looked through them.

There was the trail he and Daniel had seen a minute ago.

Lowering the binoculars, Jack narrowed his eyes as he tried to find it again, without success.

Thinking fast, he suddenly remembered something else... Last night when he had held out his hands to Daniel so they could do the “bad dream spell”, Daniel had taken Jack's without hesitation.

It had been pitch black in the house.

“Daniel? Will you come over here for a minute, please?”

The kid and Cupcake had just finished their shared meal. Licking the fat from his fingers, Daniel approached him. “What, Jack?”

“I'm just curious about something,” Jack said. “You can see the trail over there without the binoculars, right?”

Daniel blinked. “Yeah. Can't you?”

“Not yet, nope. Daniel... last night... were you able to see me in the dark? Because I can't see a thing at night on this planet...”

“Oooh...” Daniel drawled. “I didn' think of that.” His brow furrowed. “I didn't even realize I can see in the dark. It just happened.”

“Did it happen just like that, or did it start slowly?”

Daniel shrugged. “I dunno. Don't even know when it started.”

“That's okay, buddy. How about your hearing? Your hearing improved too?”

A firm head shake was the answer. “No, not yet.”

“O-kay,” Jack said. “Does that mean you know it will improve eventually or just that it might?”

“Dunno.” Daniel shrugged again.

“Just tell me if it does, please?”
“’kay.” Daniel joined Cupcake and sat down next to her.

Jack tried to reach the ground with his steering pole again without success. They were still drifting in the right direction though.

His kid was transforming into Superman.

If they weren't able to fix him, they probably should just settle down on this world and change Daniel's name to Clark Kent, Jack thought with humorless sarcasm. He remembered how Daniel had said he wasn't completed yet.

Jack felt himself shudder.

If he ever got his hands on that Nirrti bitch again...

They had covered approximately half the lake when Jack could reach the ground again with the steering poles. He began to push them forwards as best as he could.

Then Daniel reported that some of the twine plants were dissipating.

“There's some white stuff coming out of them,” he yelled over to Jack. “An' they're falling apart!”

Cursing under his breath, Jack lay the pole on deck and went to investigate the damage. Some of the strong ivy twine was fraying, emitting a milky liquid as it dissolved.

“You and Cupcake come over to the side where we tied the rope. It's safer for now,” Jack ordered, wishing he had oars and rudders to move them faster instead of just pushing with the pole.

He continued steering, wishing he had the rest of his team here to help.

At their back, the dark clouds had reached the lake and were drifting closer.

By the time the water started seeping through the brushwood, the sky above them had turned gloomy, the low grumble of rolling thunder was heard in the distance.

Jack wondered if it would make sense to jump in and push the frigging thing. But he dismissed the idea immediately. He'd hardly be able to push the heavy raft any faster than they were already moving. There was water trickling through the emerging breaches where the twine had loosened or dissipated.

If they lost the smaller logs, the whole raft was going to break apart.

“Daniel, we might have to swim the rest of the way eventually,” Jack told his sidekick, who was standing next to him, Cupcake in his arms.

“It's not that far anymore,” Daniel observed.

No, it wasn't. Jack would still have to somehow rescue their gear, though. Biting his lip in frustration, he stared at the shore, willing for it to come closer as he dug the steering pole into the ground, whirling up water, mud and weeds.

There was a clonk, and the first log floated away from them.

Almost at the same time, the rain started, along with a gust of wind.

“Oh, swell,” Jack muttered.
There was a nasty ripping sound, and more logs drifted away.

Ivy that dissolved in water.

Who would've known?

It had seemed so perfect.

Jack hated alien environments.

He tried to estimate the distance to the shore while he still pushed them forward, determined to make as much progress as possible.

But there was no way around it. They were losing the raft. And fast.

Daniel was kneeling on what was left of their deck, Cupcake pressed to him, held in place with both arms. “What are we gonna do now, Jack?”

“It'll break apart soon,” he replied. “You have to get ready to go into the water. Put Cupcake down, lie flat on your belly and hold on to the log. But if it tumbles over, you have to let go of it. I'll be right here, watching your six. We'll be fine.”

“I can swim,” Daniel said, not letting go of the puppy.

“I know you can, but you'll be faster like that, using a log as a kickboard.”

“An' what about Cupcake?”

“She can swim on her own or sit on the log,” Jack said. “Just get ready, okay?”

Reluctantly, Daniel put the puppy down, and that was when the raft gave a final lurch and broke apart, logs floating everywhere. As they went into the water, Daniel’s log turned over, and Jack grabbed his arm to pull him away from the danger of being squashed between two logs.

Jack reached for his pack with his free hand, but one of the other timbers crashed hard into his shoulder. He had to let go of Daniel and swallowed water as he sank, then struggled to the surface, and smacked his head on another piece of wood.

For a moment Jack became disorientated as pain was shooting through his skull, adding to the ache in his shoulder. He went underwater again, slightly dizzy.

Gritting his teeth, he shot upwards, taking large gulps of air when he reached the surface, relieved when the spinning in his head stopped.

“Jack!!!”

“Fine,” Jack yelled back, struggling to keep his head above the water and avoid more timbers hitting him.

The lake wasn't smooth anymore. Rain and thunder had brought wind, and while the waves weren't very strong, the lake had turned into a giant whirlpool, pulling at Jack's legs and making the scattered raft pieces dance and spin around them.

The pack was floating away from him, already sinking.

“You hurtin'!”
“Try to grab the log there.” Jack coughed and pushed the small body towards a piece of wood. But Daniel's hands weren't large enough to hold on to it.

“Cupcake!” Daniel yelled suddenly. “Where's Cupcake? I can feel her, but I can't see her! She's scared! She'll drown!”

“No, she won't,” Jack snapped, pulling Daniel close and wrapping an arm around his middle. “She's just startled, that's all. Stop kicking me, Daniel! You'll drown us both!”

“Lemme swim! I can swim!”

But with all that wood floating around them, Jack was afraid one might hit Daniel's head if he let go of the tyke. However, he didn't have the energy nor the time to explain this to the kid, so he just tightened his arm around him as he paddled to find a log to hold on to.

“She's over there! Cupcake! Here!” Daniel wriggled and slipped out of Jack's grip, getting away to rescue his baby critter.

Yelling his name, Jack reached out but missed when Daniel shot off, diving under one of the logs to avoid a collision. Jack swam after him, pushing away chunks of wood with arms and hands.

And there was the tiny puppy, trying with all her might to climb one of the shorter pieces of wood without success. Why the critter didn't just swim was beyond Jack. He had seen her swim. She was drenched and yipping sadly as Daniel reached and embraced her.

Kicking water, Jack managed to grab one of the timbers, without making it roll and bury him beneath it. “Climb on the log,” he ordered in between spluttering water. “I'll push you.”

“Jack, Jack...” Daniel held Cupcake out to him, and Jack took her and placed her on the wood where she scrambled and swayed to keep her balance. He then roughly shoved at Daniel until he was lying over the log as well.

“Stay up there! I need you to guide me! Can't see a thing,” Jack yelled as he slowly moved them through the water. The rain was falling like a curtain, and the sky was gloomy and dark. Jack felt the pain from his shoulder spread down his back with every swim stroke.

The rain was running over his face, and he blinked it away whenever his head wasn't underwater.

He realized they had left the remaining parts of the raft behind. But the rain was too dense to really see anything but the shore’s outline.

“Jack,” Daniel yelled over the rushing water. “I can see where to go!”

“Where?!”

“Just ahead! It's not far!”

Then Jack felt his soaked and heavy boots scrape over rocks. Spewing water and scrambling to find footing on the ground, he managed to stand. He was still holding the log with one arm, the water rising to his chin.

Only a few more feet.

“There's sand,” Daniel yelled, his voice high-pitched in the falling rain. Thunder crashed, notably closer than before.
They had to get out of the water before the lightning struck.

Jack had no idea how he made it, but eventually the water only came to his waist, then his thighs and then his knees. Staggering forward, he reached for Daniel's hand as the kid jumped from the log, Cupcake wedged under one arm.

“Jack! Are you okay? Jack?!”

A blinding light raced across the dark sky, and for a moment everything flashed white.

The jagged mass of rocks hovering above them looked like sharp teeth, ready to bite down and rip them to pieces.

“Move,” Jack barked. “Get out of the water!”

And they were running.

Around them, lightning and thunder were racing and crashing across the sky.

At one point, Jack snatched Daniel up and, ignoring his high-pitched screams, stormed forward with a strength he didn't think he still had.

They collapsed in a heap on the wet sand.

But only for a moment.

Jack dragged himself upright again and tried to make out their surroundings. All he could see was the downpour of water.

He gave the kid a gentle shake. “Daniel! See anything?”

“We lost her again,” Daniel wailed.

“She'll be back! We need to find shelter!” This time Jack's shake was a little more prompting. “Now!”

Looking around, Daniel finally pointed at something, somewhere in the distance.

Heaving himself to his feet, Jack grasped Daniel's hand and let him lead the way.

What they found was a large, overhanging ledge. They huddled under it together.

Dropping to his knees, Jack started coughing and spitting out water.

“Are you 'kay, Jack?”

“Yeah, I'm... okay. You?” He sat on his heels and reached out trembling hands to reel the boy in for a hug and examination.

But Daniel backed away.

“I haveta look for Cupcake, Jack!”

“No, you don't. She'll be fine,” he croaked, then coughed again.

“She's... I don' know where she is! I can't feel her, Jack! I losted her in the waters!”
“We'll find her,” he said. “Just not now. Not in this mess. She'll probably crawl into a hole and wait till it’s over.”

“She's gone, she's gone, I haveta find her,” Daniel yelled over the rushing rain.

“Sssh, she's not drowned, Danny. She'll be okay,” Jack said as he rocked the little boy and rubbed his shivering back.

“But I can't feel her an'more!”

“We'll find her. Come on now, calm down, Danny.” Jack leaned against the solid rock and closed his eyes for a moment.

They had far more serious problems than Cupcake’s disappearance.

“I need to find her,” Daniel cried but didn't push away from Jack, obviously too scared of the thunder and lightning.

“We will as soon as the lightning stops,” he promised. “Daniel, we... we lost our pack.”

Daniel froze and raised his head. “Jack?”

“I lost our pack. Our gear. It's gone,” he said flatly. “I'm sorry, kiddo.”

They looked at each other in the light of another flash, and Jack knew Daniel understood. He might be a little kid in many ways, but there was that part in him that just knew what it meant.

“It's all gone?” Daniel asked, wiping wetness from his cheeks.

“Yeah.”

“Maybe it'll be washed up to the shore.”

“I don't think so, buddy. It was a heavy pack, and with both sleeping bags soaked full of water...”

“Oh,” Daniel whispered and then simply burrowed his head once more against Jack's wet shoulder, his arms around Jack's neck.

For a while they just sat there, Jack holding Daniel and staring at the rain and lightning. He listened to the wind and the crashes when a bolt hit a tree or whatever.

It was like that day when Daniel had been shrunk.

Jack couldn't believe only close to three weeks had passed since he had found Daniel behind Nirrti's statue. It felt like a lifetime ago.

“Lost my pack, too.” Daniel's little voice got him out of his brooding.

“I know,” Jack said with a sigh.

Jack had expected the raft to either float or sink right away. He didn't think the frigging twine would dissolve in water, causing the raft to break apart so far out on the lake. He didn't expect the weather to change that fast either.
The sky had been cloudless this morning.

O'Neill had underestimated nature, and now they were paying the price.

Gritting his teeth in self-directed anger, he wished he had packed an emergency kit.

Yeah, right. And where would he have put it? With the knives, the zat and Daniel's handgun tied to his belt and leg holster, there hadn't been enough space to attach something else. And even if he had put something together into Daniel's small rucksack, it would still be lost.

All the “should haves, would haves, could haves” in the world weren't going to keep them safe now.

Groaning, Jack shifted to find a more comfortable position. He didn't like the way his shoulder screamed murder at him. His head was hurting, too.


“It's nothing,” he lied.

“It's not nothin',” Daniel said, worried.

“I'll live, buddy.”

Biting his tongue, Jack leaned his head against the rock and wondered whether he was just bruised or had sprained something seriously.

“Hey, Daniel, are you cold?” He plucked at the kid's wet shirt. “Come here. We can't do anything right now but wait.” Daniel let himself pulled into Jack's embrace once more.

They were both wet and shivering, even though it was still warm. But they shared what little body heat they could and sat snuggled against each other beneath their ledge.

The rushing water finally lulled Jack in a light doze.

***

A faint sound woke him.

He blinked into the light, glimpsing at orange sky and the still-troubled lake.

The rain and thunder had stopped.

His head was still pounding, though.

Jack moved his numb ass and barely suppressed a howl of pain, remembering his bruised – or worse – shoulder.

Something was wrong.

Daniel...

There was no Daniel...

“Dan...” He paused to clear his throat and then tried again, more loudly. “Daniel?!”

There was no answer.
Hell, that's what he got for falling asleep.

“Daniel!” Jack yelled. “Where are ya?!”

He struggled to stand, cursing a blue streak in the process as pain shot up his back like hot liquid. Once he was leaning against the rock wall, nausea hit him. Breathing heavily against it, Jack felt sweat trickling down his neck and running into his damp shirt. He felt dizzy, and his knees buckled, threatening to give out.


When he heard again the sound that had woken him, Jack pushed off the rock wall and took a tentative step.

Pressing his knuckles into his eye sockets, he willed the dizziness to subside, and after several deep breaths, he seemed to be over the urge to throw up.

What he heard were the muffled mutterings of a child.

“Daniel, where are you?” he called again, relieved that, if he took it slowly, he could walk.

He heard running footsteps, and then Daniel came into view, his face tear-streaked and his eyes blazing with anger. “Jack,” he cried out. “You're hurt! You can't walk 'round! You need to rest! An' I tried to light a fire and it won' work and I know I did everything right. I collected wood an' I'm trying and trying but it's not working... an' Cupcake is still missing and I'm hungry and...” Daniel stopped before Jack, sniffed loudly and wiped some snot from his nose with his dirty, damp shirtsleeve. “I'm really so so so MAD!”

“Easy, big guy, easy,” Jack said, planting a hand on Daniel's head, partly to calm him and partly to steady himself. “Did you find any dry wood?”

“I found a dead tree trunk, and there were some dry branches underneath.”

“Good job,” Jack said as they walked slowly to where Daniel had built a surprisingly neat teepee fire from kindling. “What went wrong?”

Daniel grimaced and picked up two sticks. “I tried to use one of the sticks as a spindle to rub on the other one. I got sparks a few times but couldn' blow 'em on the tinder. They always went out right away.”

“What'd you use as tinder?”

“Bark from a tree.” Daniel pointed at a heap on the ground. “Um, I took your knife,” he added, a little sheepishly.

“That's okay. Let's do this together.” Jack took the stick, and Daniel knelt in front of the tinder. Carefully, trying to ignore the pain, O'Neill crouched and finally went down on his knees so he could blow on the sparks Daniel created with the sticks.

Starting a fire like this was a tricky thing. It took another three tries until the tinder finally burned strong enough to light the firewood base.

They sat in a valley covered with dead fallen trees and shrub, at the foot of a massive rock wall. Jack could see the lake and a sandy beach nearby. The sky glowed in a poisonous orange, just as it had on the day when the Stargate had been hit by the lightning. In the far distance, bolts still raced across the
horizon.

Everything was dipped into this unnatural orange–yellow light.

It was warming up again, a humid sticky heat.

Jack asked Daniel to go to the ledge to retrieve his jacket and vest. When the kid returned, dragging both clothes with him, almost tripping over the green BDU jacket, Jack realized once again how little his friend was.

And how brave.

Jack got rid of his shoes and socks, wringing the latter out and grimacing at the smell and the wetness. His pants and shirt were already beginning to dry on his body, and when he motioned Daniel over to feel his clothes, he found them still damp but not too wet anymore.

If they were lucky, the heat would prevent them from catching colds.

Daniel laid out Jack's jacket and vest near the fire but not too close so they wouldn't catch flames.

The P90 was lost to the water. That he'd worn his vest and jacket had been nothing more than coincidence.

So what remained was ammo for a P90 they didn't have anymore and the radio, which was useless since there was no one to contact on this planet. But there was ammo for Daniel's hand gun, the gun itself and his knife... and the zat. And Jack's GDO. If they found the other gate, the GDO was the most important thing they needed so they wouldn't go home only to end up being squashed by the iris.

The binoculars and sunglasses were still dangling around Jack's neck, surprisingly undamaged.

His cap was gone as well. Somehow, that generated a stupid somberness. Jack had liked his cap. It had survived many a mission with him.

They sat by their fire in gloomy silence, their clothes drying on their bodies.

Finally Daniel lifted his head and looked at him. “You still hurting, Jack?”

‘Yeah. You think you can take a look at it? I got hit by a log... or two.”

Daniel stepped behind Jack and pulled up his shirt. The log had banged into Jack's right shoulder, and it felt pretty sore. Small hands brushed over his skin. “It's a large bruise,” Daniel reported quietly. “Already black and blue. And swollen. But there's no blood.”

Hissing as Daniel's fingers put some pressure on the tender area, Jack turned his head. “Whatcha doing? Trying to kill me?”

“I remember this.” Daniel said in an oddly detached voice. “I got bruised often. When I was big. And we learned how to examine bruises on missions.”

“Ya...gad, stop that, will you,” Jack groused.

“It's a bruise, not broken,” Daniel said, then added, “I think.”

“Ya think?”
“Ah-huh.”

“I think...” Jack moaned as he carefully moved his right arm and shoulder, “...you're right.”

“Needs ice.”

“No can do.” Jack sighed.

“You could take a bath in the cold water.”

“Daniel, I already was in the water for quite some time. So it's probably cooled enough,” Jack said. A bruise would pass in a couple of days, with or without more water.

An ice pack would be the real deal.

Then Daniel's hands wandered to Jack's head, and again he had to bite his tongue to keep from yelling. A grunt escaped him, and he jerked away.

“There's a large bump,” Daniel informed him.

“So I feel.” Jack groaned.

“You fell asleep,” Daniel said, sitting next to Jack again. “Are you feelin' sick?”

“Little bit.” His head felt foggy and sore, but the nausea was gone. Something about Daniel asking if he felt sick seemed wrong, but Jack couldn't grasp it. He was dog-tired.

They fell silent again, and Jack watched the kid brood.

“Hey,” he asked gently, “still no sign of Cupcake?”

Daniel shook his head and wiped his eyes. “I looked,” he whispered, swallowing hard. “I looked everywhere an' I called...”

Jack frowned. “What do you mean you looked everywhere? How long was I asleep?”

Daniel shrugged. “Dunno. It stopped raining while you slept. I looked for Cupcake and then tried to make the fire.”

Checking his watch, Jack tried to do the math and figured that he must have slept for a while. But he couldn't be sure how long exactly, since he hadn't looked at his watch when the raft fell apart. He’d had better things to do then.

It was eighteen hundred Earth time.

As if on cue, his stomach started to growl.

“We need food,” he stated. “I need your help, Daniel.” Jack scrambled to his feet again. “I need you to tell me where I might find something to hunt.”

Daniel looked at him blankly. “I can't feel anythin' anymore. Since we came here, there's nothing. 'm just tired. I couldn't sleep. You were so wet and so was I an' I was so worried 'bout Cupcake. I'm sorry, Jack.” He hung his head and gazed at the fire.

“It's okay. I'll think of something.” Jack stalked to the dead tree trunk and settled down on it. “Do you remember some of the plants from Ashu's garden? Some we can eat? I know you drew them in
your journal, and that's gone. But...” He looked around at the scrub and bushes. “There's plenty of green stuff around here.”

“I don' know,” Daniel said sadly.

Jack decided there and then that he didn't have to eat and he wouldn't force the exhausted kid to eat anything either. What Daniel needed more right now was sleep. There didn't seem to be any immediate danger. And even if there was, Jack could hardly pull some great fighting stunts. He was sure the rain wouldn't come back, so he crouched and grabbed some more of the dead branches underneath the tree trunk to add them to the fire.

“You better get some sleep,” he said and, ignoring his protesting back, eased down next to the boy. “You want me to tell you a story?”

“No,” Daniel mumbled but allowed Jack to put his arm around him. “You have a concussion, right, Jack?”

“Yeah, looks like it.”

“You haveta try an’ stay awake then. I shouldn' have let you sleep before. I'm sorry. I was just so worried 'bout Cupcake, I didn't think about concussions.” Daniel's voice became tearful again, which was another sign of how drained the little guy must be.

“It's okay. I'll cope. You, on the other hand, need to rest.”

“I can't...”

“Yes, you can, Daniel. I have a theory why you can't feel things anymore. Want me to share?”

A nod was the only answer.

“Once you're rested and you've slept, you'll be able to feel again. And tomorrow we'll go looking for Cupcake together. I need you, Danny-boy. And the puppy needs you, too. So you have to take care of yourself and sleep now, okay?”

Daniel didn't say anything for a long time. Jack thought the tyke had already fallen asleep when he felt a small hand pat his stubbly cheek. “Thanks, Jack. An' I'm glad we didn't drown.”

Oh, yeah. That was a big upside.

TBC with ch 22 Nightly Thoughts and Daily Chores
Unfamiliar noises echoing from the mountains were giving him goosebumps. Jack couldn't decide if the inhuman howls sounded more like a wolf or the screams of a large bird. Whatever it was, it didn't sound very friendly.

For all he knew, there might be fire-spitting dragons awaiting them in those mountains.

This was, after all, not Kansas.

In the little light the fire provided, Jack collected some more wood from the dead tree trunk and piled it up. There wasn't much else he could do in the dark, and he knew he shouldn't move around too much with a concussion.

His head still hurt where the log had hit, but the dizziness had subsided. Rolling his shoulder blades every time he became too sleepy helped him stay awake.

He tried to imagine what T and Carter were doing. Was there a time difference between here and Earth? There almost always was. Jack tried to remember, but came up with nothing and shrugged it off. He wondered whether Hammond had declared them MIA yet or if there were allies on their way to rescue them. Jack knew Carter and Teal'c would still try to find a way to reach them, no matter what.

No one was left behind.

Not if there was the smallest chance left.

Then there was the issue of Simmons being on base.

Menkins had worked for Simmons.

She had said there was whole net of scientists and military personnel working with stolen technology, experimenting with god only knew what.

How many NID agents and even SGC personnel were really involved...?

If it was a network and not just one underground group, someone had to be pulling the strings. A bunch of corrupt NID guys weren't enough to pull off such a large organization and keep it a secret.

Menkins had also said she'd be able to experiment in her own lab and that she didn't care if she was a traitor on Earth. As long as she could do her good for science. And she had tried to kidnap Danny to another planet.

Even if that had been an in-between stop to get somewhere else, Menkins had been on her way to a large base equipped well enough to experiment on humans.

So maybe they had managed to build an off-world base with a huge lab and the ability to coordinate illegal operations from there.

Providing they had a hell of a lot of money... and a ship to move the big equipment from Earth to
another planet. Or the possibility of using the Russians’ gate... One didn't build a base out of nothing. They needed people who could back-engineer technology, units which stayed off world permanently and went on missions to steal technology, and security to guard all those bases.

Communicating with off-world teams from Earth wasn't an issue. Jack was sure they had more of those Goa'uld long-range communication balls Maybourne had used to contact his team when he had offered Jack a job.

Jack wondered how much more advanced this other base was compared to the one he had seen while he'd been undercover and working for Maybourne.

Who on Earth would be able and willing to donate the money for all that? Who was paranoid and arrogant enough to think that, instead of making allies, Earth’s best option to fight the Goa'uld was gathering technology from all over the galaxy to build their own defense system...

Kinsey?

Could be.

Kinsey hated the Stargate program with a passion and never got tired of pointing out that the whole concept of gate travel was evil and against God and country. But Kinsey might collaborate with the devil to... what? Save Earth for his grandkids? Hardly. To get power, yes. If the Goa'uld were going to attack Earth, how cool would it be for the good Senator if he came up with his special forces to save the planet from harm? If his name was on the paychecks of those brave men and women? It'd make Kinsey President for sure.

Provided Kinsey's defense troops and Earth survived a Goa'uld attack.

Rubbing his temples, Jack shook his head.

All speculation and no evidence. With Menkins gone, he had no real proof of any illegal off-world bases or organizations.

Unless he got Simmons to talk.

Oh, wouldn't that be peachy? Jack felt his lips twitch into a nasty grin. Oh, yeah. He knew a few ways to get the Colonel to sing. Soprano even.

Something else kept nagging at the back of his mind.

Menkins had known about him and Daniel. If not known, she at least suspected. But Jack had a gut feeling that she'd not just suspected.

Now wasn't that interesting?

Menkins had come from Area 51 and, before joining Jack and Daniel on their mission, had never worked at the SGC.

How the hell had she known?

Jack couldn't believe his relationship with Daniel was such hot news that it'd travel from Colorado Springs to Nevada just like that.

So she must have had overheard some of the rumors while she was on base.

Or she'd talked to someone who visited the base from time to time and, for some reason, was
interested in the daily gossip around the watercooler.

Jack had no idea if Menkins had friends at the SGC. The only one he knew she talked to was Simmons. And Simmons was hardly interested in SGC gossip.

Unless... Unless it served his own agenda.

Aside from Kinsey, Maybourne and Simmons were probably the ones who'd love to have a barbecue with SG-1. Jack had exposed Maybourne and his people as traitors, and that might have pissed Simmons off as well.

Now throw the three of them together... get some friends of Makepeace from the SGC in the mix – guys who probably thought Makepeace’s actions had been right and wanted revenge...

Had they tried to destroy SG-1 by driving a wedge between Jack and Daniel – fueling the rumors on base and getting Jack by his biggest weakness – his need to protect Daniel? Driving them apart was probably just a game, a sick way to hurt Jack for bringing Maybourne and his stooges down. The real plan had been to lure them to this godforsaken planet and use the shrink machine on Daniel.

SG-2...

Lou was 2IC on SG-2, and their commander had been replaced a couple of months ago by Major Warren, who had been 2IC on SG-3 before.

Makepeace's team.

SG-2, the first-contact team for this planet, had strongly suggested SG-1 should take a look at the device.

And it had been Simmons's order to get an expert from Area 51 in to accompany them.

Jack's head started hurting again.

Was Lou in on this shit?

No way.

Lou probably knew “something” was going on and had tried to warn him. But neither Jack nor Daniel had really listened.

So they had been set up.

The fact that Carter was stuck with the Asgard had put a wrench in their plans, though. She would've given Menkins all the know-how she still needed about the DNA toy.

Jack was sure Simmons had shown up on base because he'd wanted to know where his missing scientist was. They had probably expected her for quite some time while she'd been stuck with just O'Neill and Daniel on the planet, waiting for Carter to arrive.

And when Carter didn't join them and Menkins hadn't been able to make contact with anybody of her unit, she had probably panicked and forced Daniel to use the device to get at least part of the plan done.

Jack remembered what Menkins had told him.

*If adults could be transformed into little kids without losing their knowledge and memories, they*
could be trained to be valuable spies. Plus, he's a troublemaker. All of you from SG-1 are. No other SG team runs into so many opportunities to get new technology or allies - and jeopardizes it because of some ethical aspects Doctor Jackson comes up with. But taking away your voice, your conscience would have crushed the whole team. Isn't that right, O'Neill?'

Oh, yeah.

Well, Simmons had most likely left the SGC by now, seeing his “shrink-the-archaeologist” mission had apparently failed. He was probably glad nobody had come back, though. If Jack and Daniel didn't make it home, Simmons would still have achieved his goal to destroy SG-1.

For as long as Hammond needed to find replacements for Jack and Daniel.

But they'd never be the same. SG-1 had this special something. They had this sense of family and three... well, four... Musketeer thing going on. At least, it had been that way before Jack had become a jerk and Daniel had been mad at him 24/7.

So in a sick way, Simmons had gotten just what he wanted.

“That rat bastard,” Jack hissed as hot rage surged through him.

Daniel twitched in his sleep, uncurled, rolled to his other side and let out a low whimper.

Settling a hand on the restless boy's arm, Jack willed himself to calm down.

Looked like the kid had gotten his supernatural senses back.

***

Somewhere before dawn Jack had fallen into a light doze, spooned behind the kid. When something wet and raw lapped his face, he jerked awake. Regretting the move immediately as his shoulder exploded in pain, he grunted. His good arm shot out and grabbed blindly into the darkness, his hand closing around something...

Furry.

A high-pitched squeak was followed by a loud, overjoyed yell, and then Jack was knocked over and found himself flat on his back, Daniel and the critter on top of him, barking and yelling.

“Cupcake! Cupcake! Jack, it's Cupcake! She's back! You're back! Oh, I'm so glad you're back! Jack! Jack, she's back!”

Cupcake let out a series of howls, barks and yips, alternately licking Jack's and Daniel's faces. Despite the first sliver of light lining the horizon, it was still too dark to see where the puppy ended and the kid began.

All Jack knew for sure was that they were killing him.

“Daniel...” he moaned. “I'm very happy for ya, kiddo, but...” Shoving the two happiest creatures in the world off his chest, he groaned as he sat up.

The puppy continued its concert of yips and yaps as it jumped around Daniel, who laughed and squealed in delight.

Oh, Jack knew he should probably be unnerved by the reunion, knowing they'd have enough trouble getting themselves some decent food, now that their gear was gone.
Instead, he found himself relieved, and when, in the first light of the day, the critter jumped into his lap, Jack gave her a big cuddle and tousled the long hair on her head, knowing he had a huge, sappy smile on his face.

Jack had been right.

Once rested and reunited with his little puppy, Daniel's “feelings” were restored.

They strolled down to the lake after dawn, and Daniel led Jack to the fish.

The tricky thing was to catch them without hook, line and sinker. The water was very shallow, and they had to wade into the lake until it reached Jack's knees before Daniel located any fish.

They were both too hungry to spend hours building fish traps. And while Jack could make a hook from wood, he still had to find a line. So that was a no go.

Left the option of hand fishing.

They stood very still, watching the fish. These looked like the eel creatures Jack had spotted in the deep water. Only, they were much smaller and seemed to swim right beneath the water surface.

Probably young ones.

“Okay,” Jack whispered, mentally preparing himself for the pain any sudden move would bring his shoulder. “I'll grab one... On three. One, two...”

Daniel suddenly vanished head-first into the water, and when he came up, he was holding one of the squirming, tail-swishing eels in both hands, screeching at Jack to take it. “Now, now, it's sliiiip’ry!”

“Holy buckets,” Jack mouthed as he took over the fish and quickly used his knife to cut its spinal cord.

He tried not to think about its similarities with a certain snake–like species. These were fish, no doubt about that. They had a flat head with no fangs. Eels.

“Do we need ‘nother one?”

“I can do it. You don't have to...” Jack began but trailed off when Daniel did it again and came up with another eel.

“Okay, that'll do,” Jack said, flabbergasted.

“Good.” With that, Daniel turned and walked out of the water.

They returned to their fire in silence, and Jack built a spit and prepared the fish. There was no salt or pepper available anymore, but he was grateful they'd be able to fill their stomachs with something.

Once the fish were roasting over the fire, Jack called Daniel to join him. The tyke had climbed the dead tree trunk and was balancing on it. Now he hopped down and sat next to Jack, gazing into the flames.

“Look, Daniel... you don't have to hunt,” Jack began carefully.

“But I can do it. It's easy,” Daniel mumbled.

“So I saw.” Jack turned the spit. Fat dripped into the fire, making it hiss. The smell was promising.
“An’ if I can do it, I should.”

“No. Not if you don't feel up to it,” Jack said. “I can get us food. It might take a bit longer maybe... but I don't want you to do something you don't feel is right for you.”

“But I eat 'em. I can catch 'em, too, then.” Daniel sighed.

“Well... there's that,” Jack agreed. “I'm just saying you don't have to, okay? I'll be fine, and I can do the hunting.”

This generated a smile. “Okay.”

“And don't forget. We only take...”

“...what we need,” Daniel finished the sentence, his smile increasing. “I know.”

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Breakfast had been edible, and with a full stomach, they felt their spirits lift momentarily. Jack decided to spend the day where they were. His encounter with the raft had taught him once again not to rush forward too fast, even if his instincts were pushing him.

His head was better, but his shoulder still gave him fits. Daniel confirmed that the bruise was turning purple.

After a moment of thinking, Jack took off his shirt and went to the shore, soaking it in the cold water. With Daniel's help, he slung it around the bruised area and tied it under his armpit. It was neither comfortable nor the most effective way to treat it. But it was cool and alleviated the pain for the moment.

Jack looked at Cupcake, who had been sleeping for hours. She woke briefly and wolfed down some pieces of fish, then dropped to the ground again. He wondered where she had been. Probably searching for them. Her fur was dirty, and she had a few minor scratches, nothing to worry about.

“She's okay, right?” Jack asked Daniel, who stroked through her shaggy hair.

“She's just tired,” the kid replied, tenderness lacing his voice. “She's still a baby.”

Jack kinda envied the little creature.

“We need to work on a few things,” he told Daniel. “First we have to find a way to collect water. We need some sort of bowl.”

“We could use wood,” Daniel suggested.

“Yes. Let's look for wood I can carve into a bowl. It has to be dry and without parasites.”

They walked around a bit, picking up chunks of wood, and Jack chose a few to work with. When he sat down with his knife, he instructed Daniel, “I want you to concentrate on plants. Try to remember what Ashu taught you and see if you can find anything we can eat. Just in case we don't get any more fish.”

“Jack?”

“Daniel?”
“I won' ever eat fish again when we're home.” Daniel sighed and grimaced.

“I know what you mean.” Jack sighed in return. Fish was good and nutritious. But too much good and nutritious just was... too much of the good and nutritious.

Daniel toddled off, and Jack tried his luck at making a bowl. He had learned all this stuff many, many years ago, and while he knew how it worked, it took him awhile to cut and carve until he had something that resembled a bowl – if you were generous with the term bowl. It was still just a chunk of wood with a hole in the middle.

Jack tried to make the hole bigger, and when he was done, he was rather pleased with himself. Encouraged by his success, he carved another one, thinking it was a little like pumpkin carving on Halloween.

By the time Daniel returned, Jack had carved two bowls and two eating sticks. Realizing that Daniel had been gone for some time and Jack hadn't seen him once in between, he was about to question the kid about where he had been. But since he was here now, safe and sound, Jack shrugged it off and asked, “What've you got?”

“I found more of the ivy we used for the raft,” Daniel reported. “An' found shineberries and greens. And there's some bushes I recognize from Ashu's garden with leaves you can cook as soup.” The kid had shineberry juice all around his mouth, and he handed Jack a handful as well.

Well, it was better than nothing, Jack thought, as he thanked him and ate the berries. It was an acceptable substitute for something to drink at least.

He worked on carving two holes into the larger bowl, the one that looked more like a pot. His shoulder was bitching at him by now, but he gritted his teeth and went on with it while Daniel braided some of the ivy twine into a strong cord.

“I'm thirsty,” Daniel said, licking his dry lips.

“Me too. I'm working as fast as I can,” Jack replied.

“Can't we just drink the lake water? It's not poisoned. It's good and fresh,” Daniel whined.

“I'd rather cook it first, kiddo. Better safe than sorry.”

“But...”

“Are you positive that the water's drinkable, Daniel?”

“Nooo, but...”

“I'm sorry you're thirsty, and I'll be as fast as I can, okay?”

But in the end, he needed even more time than he thought. Getting the fire started again and hanging the filled bowl on the spit, high enough so it wouldn't burn but low enough so the water would boil, wasn't easy. Finally, he soaked the whole bowl with water so the flames couldn't harm the wood.

The result was a lot of smoke, and by the time the damn water had boiled, they were both cranky and very thirsty.

And Jack hadn't even figured out how to find and carry water with them once they were in the mountains. He hoped they would find waterfalls and springs.
“Can I drink now?” Daniel reached for the wooden vessel with both hands.

“Not yet. It's hot,” Jack warned.

“I'm thirsty!”

“So am I.” He started to blow over it and finally poured it from one bowl into the other to cool it faster.

When they were able to drink it, it was still warm and tasted “yucky,” as Daniel pointed out.

And it really was.

“It's water, and it's safe to drink now. Stop whining.”

“I'm not whining.”

“Sure you are. Not that I blame you. It just won't change anything.”

“Am not.”

“Are too.”

“Not. An' I'm still thirsty,” Daniel said and ran off towards the shore.

“Daniel! Stop! Right there!”

He didn't stop but slowed down and turned, walking backwards. “It's stupid to drink warm water when it’s so hot outside already!”

“You know how this works. And Ashu told us not to drink water from lakes untreated,” Jack said, following him. “Look... I know this sucks big time. But neither you nor I can change it. Our gear is gone, and that means no more treatment tablets.”

“I won't get sick.”

They locked eyes for a long moment, and finally Jack waved him away wearily, accepting the kid’s word.

Daniel knelt at the shore, greedily slurping the fresh cool water. Jack licked his lips and felt very sorry for himself as he grimaced at his own water ration.

“What now?” Daniel asked when he returned.

“We'll nap.”

“Jaaaaack...”

“Humor me. Cupcake has been sleeping almost nonstop since she came back. She's saving energy, that's for sure. Must've had a rough night.”

“I'm not tired!”

“Don't push it, kiddo.”

All three of them slept in the small debris shelter they had built. When they woke up, the afternoon sun was burning down, and Jack was actually grateful for the lukewarm water he had prepared
earlier.

Daniel was quiet and brooding, and Jack worried about their inability to carry water with them.

Then again, what choice was there? They couldn't stay at this lake forever. He had changed his shoulder bandage several times during the day, and it seemed to bother him a little less by evening.

They investigated the area around their beach and discovered that they couldn't hike this side of the lake's shore. The rock face fell right down into the water to their left, and where the beach ended on their right, they found only rubble and dead trees with no way to get through.

So the only way to go was up the mountains. Jack hoped they'd find a village further up, but he wouldn't hold his breath. Either way, their main goal was survival.

Neither of them was in the mood for a story that night, but Daniel snuggled against Jack as they watched the sun go down.

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Evil Mountains

Chapter 24

Evil Mountains

They found the trail they had seen from the lake surprisingly fast. It was actually a small canyon with rock faces to either side, which provided some shade at least. But the stones and rubble they had to walk on weren't as comfortable as the soft forest or grass they were used to.

Jack was grateful for Daniel's improved skin as they hiked uphill.

Water was trickling down a small rill between the stones. Jack assumed it was rainwater. It didn't look like much, but in the worst case, they'd be able to drink from it.

He had rolled their new bowls, eating tools and a couple of greens into his jacket and slung it around his good shoulder like a rucksack, twined together with the ivy plant.

Jack had no idea if they'd have to rock climb at some point. Neither did he know if the ropes he and Daniel had knotted from that dubious ivy plant would hold them both for any length of time. Daniel had done some practice climbing, and the rope seemed strong enough for the kid at least.

Since they didn't have any chalk or gloves, real climbing would still be a problem. Well, for Jack, it would be. Daniel would probably just grab his rope and climb it without getting burns on his hands.

For a long time, they hiked with little conversation, the black rock face getting on Jack's nerves. Daniel occupied himself with Cupcake, carrying her or throwing small sticks for her to chase after. But even the child's play seemed subdued.

It was the stillness, Jack thought. Or the black rocks surrounding them. Maybe both.

But the stillness really unnerved him.

It was not completely still, though. A light breeze, bringing hot air instead of coolness, generated a dry sound like sandpaper on stone when rubble or sand rippled down the rocks. But there were no animals, no singing birds or crickets to be heard. It was as if they had left all life behind at the lake.

Now all they needed were the sun-bleached bones from other lonesome wanderers and vultures circling in the sky.

This imagination was so not helpful.

With only the sun as a compass, Jack had to make sure they were heading in the general direction of the Stargate’s location.

South.

But they had already left the course on the map.

He felt more and more like Robinson Crusoe.

Then there was the matter of Daniel being so quiet.

Something was going on in that little blond head, and Jack had been too exhausted and caught up in
his own worries to get to the bottom of it yet.
The kid wasn't sulking, nor did he seem to be angry.
He was just quiet.
Brooding.

“Hey, Daniel,” Jack called. “You wanna play something?”

“No, thanks, Jack.”

“Want to take a break?”

“Nu-huh. I'm fine.” Daniel stopped and looked at him. “Your shoulder hurts.”

“I'll live.”

“We can rest,” he offered, but Jack noticed the blue eyes anxiously scurrying over the crags and rocks.

“No, it's fine,” he assured Daniel.

An hour later they paused, and Jack watched Cupcake drink from the trickle of water, wondering if it was safe to try.

He knew the consequences of drinking bad water would be diarrhea and fever. But the consequences of dehydration were equally as devastating.

In the end, it was a no-win scenario.

He had to drink.

It would take hours to collect enough water in their wooden pot, build a fire with the small shrubs growing here and there between the stones, and then heat the water to make it safe for drinking.

There were two rules Jack knew about water. The first was that a stream cleans itself in 30 feet of flowing over rocks and sands. The second, less scientific one, was "If the cow's around the bend, the water's fit to drink." Well, Cupcake wasn't a cow, and Jack was rather suspicious about that second rule.

However, the rainwater was coming down the mountain.

So they knelt and drank as best as they could, Daniel stilling his thirst a lot faster than Jack since he was so much smaller now. Jack spat out a lot of sand, feeling like a dog lapping up water.

Then they chewed on some plants Daniel declared good for eating, saving the greens for the evening. The leaves had a mint taste and the kid said, according to Ashu, they also made good tea.

O'Neill noticed Daniel constantly scanning the rocks while they rested and shared their meager meal.

Right. That was enough.

He gently pulled the boy close and put his arm around him. “What's going on, grasshopper?”

“Nothing,” Daniel said, leaning against Jack.
“You're not the only one who can read feelings around here.”

“That's not true.”

“Well, no. But I know you, my little worrywart. And something tells me you're worked up about something. So?”

“It's just these mountains,” Daniel mumbled. “They scare me. They're dark an' ugly.”

“That they are,” Jack agreed, absently rocking the kid a little. “How do they feel to you?”


“How does evil feel?”

“Gloomy. An' dark. Um... like you have a knot in your belly. An' cold. It's a little like fear or when you're sad. Just loads more stronger and colder. I dunno how to tell you better. It's like standing in a dark, cold room and not daring to move cuz you think there's a spider crawling up your spine. Or a Goa'uld.”

“Oy.” Jack shuddered.

“Cupcake and you don't like the mountains either.”

“Nope, we don't.” As if on cue, the critter tried to crawl into Daniel's lap, and Jack scooped her up with one hand, holding both of them close to him for a moment longer. “Would it make you feel better if I carried you for a while?”

“No, it'd just hurt your shoulder.” Daniel sighed.

“Take my hand then.”

“It's easier to walk alone. We haveta watch our steps.”

“I'll watch our steps.” Jack kissed the dusty blond head, and they scrambled up and continued hiking, hand in hand.

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When the canyon became more and more steep, Jack had to let go of Daniel's hand again, and while the kid climbed and skipped like a mountain goat, Jack had to watch his footing. They climbed over large boulders and crags, and Jack ripped his BDU pants on a bush with nasty thorns.

He had the sinking feeling that things were going to get a lot worse, though, before they'd get better. The rocks were shaped like uneven stairs with huge steps. The ugly thorn bushes growing in between seemed to have a liking for Jack's pants and ankles. Jack had to lift the little guy here and there, but otherwise Daniel was perfectly fine clambering over the rocks on his own.

Daniel called out to him a couple of times. “There's a snake, watch out.” Or “Ants, Jack... there's lots of green ants crawling all 'round here.”

The realization that there was actually life in these mountains seemed to calm the kid, and when he spotted a groundhog-like animal, he became a little more animated, sharing with Jack that he felt others beneath some stones. “Maybe even babies!”
They squatted inside a crevice to escape the midday heat and managed to sleep for a while, Daniel curled up in Jack's arm and Cupcake curled somewhere around Daniel's leg.

One should think, in a heat like this, they'd sleep as far away from each other as possible. But the somberness created by their hostile environment drew them even closer together.

Once they were awake again, they had to look for water, and fast. The trickle from the rain had disappeared some time ago.

Jack told Daniel to stay in the shade while he did some simple climbing to look for small holes, ditches or clefts where there might still be rainwater.

What he finally found was a crease in a ledge with slowly dripping water. It was actually easy to drink. One just had to open their mouth, and it dribbled right in. Jack tested it, found it to be good and called Daniel and Cupcake to drink. It was a bit tricky getting the puppy to understand what was expected of her. But once the first water droplets hit her nose, she licked the wetness off, and Jack held her for a moment so she could get more. Then he put her down, and she licked up what had trickled to the ground.

Jack wished they could hike in the darkness. It became much cooler once the sun had set. The light breeze dried their sweat, and for the first time in days, Jack felt less hot.

They slowly worked their way up and finally, when the day turned into night, reached a rim.

The sight that met them was beautiful and devastating at the same time.

Before them lay a bizarre landscape of black and gray ragged rocks, stony valleys and high cliffs. The setting sun sent her orange light and dark shadows into the creases, caves and under the rims of the fissured rock faces.

It was a scary sight, and Jack felt Daniel's hand creep into his as they were standing there, feeling little and meaningless at this display of monumentality.

“There has to be water somewhere down there,” Jack croaked, licking his chapped lips.

And he had thought the grasslands were bad.

Patting Daniel's shoulder, he said, “We need to sleep, buddy.”

“Scared,” Daniel whispered and hugged Jack's leg, burying his face into the pants.

Ignoring his bruised shoulder, Jack picked him up and hugged him close. “Sssh... It'll be all right.”

“You don't believe that,” Daniel sniffed. “I wanna go home, Jack. I don't wanna stay here.”

“We'll go home, kiddo,” Jack said. “I'll take you home, Daniel. Trust me?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. Good. No tears then, right?” Jack jiggled him a little. “You have to keep the moisture inside.”

“'kay,” Daniel said, not really convinced.

“We'll be fine.” Jack carried him away from the rim, finding a ledge for them to cower under. They ate their remaining greens and then Daniel fell asleep at Jack's feet.
When the night became colder, he unwrapped his jacket and put it around the shivering child. For the first time in ages, Jack remembered what it was like to feel chilly.

He dozed, but thirst and his aching body kept him from falling into real sleep.

So Jack O'Neill watched over Daniel's sleep.

As the night moved on, Jack wished he had collected some tinder to light a small fire. The cold, at first a nice change compared to the usual heat, made him shiver. He rubbed his arms to keep himself warm. His jacket was wrapped around the sleeping child, and Jack didn't even think of removing it.

He was about to doze off again when a predatory scream echoed through the mountains. It was the same caw he had heard the night before.

Daniel started fidgeting in his sleep, and Jack stilled him with a steady hand on a small shoulder.

He narrowed his eyes, trying to see something, anything, in the blackness of the alien sky.

But all he could do was listen to the wind scraping over hard rocks and the inhuman screams from an invisible creature.

When he felt something pressing against his knee, Jack settled the frightened puppy in his lap, stroking through the shaggy fur.

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They both knew there wasn't anything left to eat.

Jack cut some brush and bundled it, tying it together with their wooden bowls into his jacket. If he got lucky and shot a groundhog, they could light a fire and eat.

Water was their first priority, though.

They hiked along the rim, searching the stone valley beneath them for water and a way down. Jack knew Daniel would see any visible water source much earlier, but he still kept looking through his binoculars.

There were animals in these mountains, for crying out loud.

They had to drink, too.

Jack carried Cupcake, who was sleeping a lot. It didn't cross his mind to leave her behind. Not anymore. As much as he had wished the critter to disappear in the beginning, she was part of his family now.

Noon came, and they settled down to rest.

Daniel fell asleep and Jack, too, had a short restless nap.

He woke up when Daniel shook his shoulder and called his name.

“What?” he croaked, rubbing his dry eyes, blinking into the glaring afternoon light.

“I know the way,” Daniel informed him, his eyes wide with... what? Fear? Realization? Jack wasn't sure what he saw in the kid's face. Daniel looked like someone who had just found all his answers to life and the universe – but wasn’t sure if he liked them.

“What?” Jack repeated.

“I know where to go,” Daniel said slowly, his dirty face scrunched in concentration. “It's like a golden beam of light in my head... showing me the way.”

“Right,” Jack mumbled. “Will that golden path show us water?”

“Dunno. But it's the right way to go. Come on, Jack.” Daniel pulled at his hand and waited impatiently until his older – approximately a hundred years older, from the way he felt right now – friend scrambled to his feet and grabbed their bundle.

“Comin'.”

Daniel scooped up Cupcake and walked off, leaving Jack to follow in his wake.

“Hey! Slow down, grasshopper!” Shaking his head, Jack forced himself to move faster than a turtle, until his tired bones and stiff limbs obeyed him again.
They found a steep path downwards, and as O'Neill followed his little mountain goat over sharp-edged cliffs and fissured rocks, he wondered how mushy his brain had become that he let a four year old lead him through a hell like this without even questioning him.

But here he was, climbing and skidding, carefully picking his steps, while Daniel seemed to know these mountains like the backyard of Jack's house.

Daniel, who seemed to have lost his fears all of a sudden.

On a wide plateau, Jack sat down and called it a rest.

“But we have to go on,” Daniel insisted.

“Where to?” Jack asked, wiping sweat from his brow and flicking it away. “Where are we going, Daniel?”

A shrug.

“Talk to me, buddy.” Jack sighed.

“The Stargate,” Daniel replied, but it was more a question than a statement. “Where the palace is.”

“O-kay. How far is it?”

“Dunno.”

“Daniel, we need water. Do you think you can find water? With your new cool senses?” Jack was grabbing for straws, but it was the only thing he could think of.

The kid cocked his head and looked at Jack like he was seeing him for the first time. There was a detached curiosity in the blue eyes, and Jack felt a cold shudder run down his spine. Something was going on here. And he didn't like it one bit.

“Danny?”

“What?”

“Water?”

“Oh. Yeah. I don't know. I can try,” Daniel said slowly. Then he sat down, cross-legged, and closed his eyes.

Jack waited.

He cradled Cupcake to him, scratched her ears and sadly rubbed over her skinny body. She was just a baby, and the lack of food and water already showed.

When Daniel stood, Jack was fighting fatigue. But he grabbed his bundle and the critter and followed the kid further down the mountain until they had reached the next plateau.

Crouching, Daniel picked up a small stone and sniffed it like a dog.

There, Jack thought, bemused. This should be Cupcake’s job, right? But he guessed the puppy was too small to find water and food on her own. She probably was dependent on her mom – or in this case, Jack and Daniel – until she matured on her own. And she was weak already.
Daniel tossed the stone to the ground and looked up at Jack. “There is water. But not here. We have to go down.”

“Down,” Jack echoed.

And down they went.

***

Approximately halfway to the canyon's bottom, Jack tripped and almost lost his footing. Cursing and dropping Cupcake, he latched onto the fissured rock surface, feeling the sharp edge cut his hands. But he regained his balance and then stood, breathing hard, waiting for the tremors in his legs to stop.

Cupcake plastered herself against his leg, yipping unhappily.

Daniel gazed at them, then blinked and rushed back the short distance he had been ahead. Scooping up his puppy, he looked at Jack with wide eyes. “Jack?!”

“Fine,” Jack huffed.

Daniel reached out a hand and placed it in his. “You need rest,” he whispered. “I'm sorry.”

“Right. I need rest. It should be you who needs... ah, never mind.” Jack groaned and slumped down on his ass right where he stood. “This sucks big time,” he growled, glaring at his blistered hands. “Wanna share where I can get your skin?”

Daniel sat next to him, hugging Cupcake, his head bowed and shoulders hunched. “It's happening,” he mumbled. “I'm changing again, Jack. An' I don' like it.”

*Neither do I,* Jack thought. “What's going on?”

“Dunno. Something.”

“Daniel, that's not helpful.”

“I know.”

“You still scared?” Because Jack was.

A tiny nod was the answer, then a head shake and then, “Sometimes.”

“C'mere.” Jack put a heavy arm around the small shoulders and pulled him close. “What's with the water? Can you smell it? Or sense it? Because I gotta tell you, we'll be really screwed if we don't find any. And soon.” There was no point in lying to the kid. He knew anyway.

Daniel stretched out his legs and wriggled his bare, dirty feet. “There's a lake down there. Way down. I haveta go there, Jack. But it's still far.”

“How far?”

“A few days.”

Crap.

“I think I can sense water,” Daniel said out of the blue. “I am drawn to water.”
“Drawn?”

“The water's callin' me.”

O-kay. This was weird. Even more weird than all the other weird stuff going on.

“Because we need it so badly?”

“Nooo, it's like... I haveta go to the water to be completed.”

“And what if you don't go there? What if you just refuse to get completed?” Jack felt like an army of ants was running down his spine.

“I'll die,” Daniel whispered.

When hell freezes over, Jack thought grimly. The fresh anger gave him strength to get to his feet. “Let's just try to find water to drink first.”

What they found was another small trickle of rainwater that had collected in a natural ditch. They drank as much as they could, and Jack decided they'd stay the night here so they'd have more water in the morning.

O'Neill tried to get the tinder to burn, using two sharp-edged stones as a lighter. But the constant wind made it impossible, so he gave up.

Daniel refused to take Jack's jacket. “You need it more than I do. I'm not freezing anymore,” he said quietly, his eyes inheriting that dreamy, faraway look again.

Jack suddenly noticed that Daniel didn't seem to be thirsty anymore, either.

They argued for a few minutes, and finally Jack took the jacket to shut the tyke up and get him to sleep.

Once Daniel's breathing had become even and deep, he gently placed the jacket over the small body and leaned against the rock wall. He tried to get some much-needed sleep and controlled his breathing to relax his body. It wasn't easy. Jack wasn't a patient man, and it had always taken lots of willpower to let go of control and relax enough to sleep in a hostile or survival situation. His instinct to protect and to be on guard was too strong to be ignored just like that. He knew his body needed rest so it could function and wouldn't fail him. That was what his training dictated. But it never had been an easy goal when there was nobody else to take watch. Jack dozed. He had learned to doze where he stood to get at least a minimum of rest. But now, even that was difficult because of all the body parts that hurt.

Yet, he must have fallen asleep for some time because he was jerked into awareness by the screams of the unknown animal, which haunted the mountains by night.

Shivering in the chill air, Jack listened and was relieved when the creature seemed to be further away from them than the previous night.

He settled back again and tried to get some more sleep, when Daniel suddenly started tossing and turning, soft whimpers escaping him.

Jack placed a hand on the child, as he had done the previous night, to calm him. The screams of the animal had stopped, but Daniel worked himself into a full-blown nightmare panic.
“Sssh, Daniel.” Jack picked the boy up and cradled him in his arms, rocking and whispering soothing nonsense. Suddenly he felt the kid stiffen, and then a high-pitched wail erupted out of him. “Jaaack!”

“I'm here, I'm here. You're safe, kiddo. It's okay, I'm here.”

“Don't lemme go into the water, Jack... promise me... don' lemme go into the water... the water's bad... pwease, don't...” Daniel cried, squirming and wriggling in Jack's hold until he could bury his face into Jack's t-shirt, sobbing and shivering.

“Okay,” Jack whispered. “I won't. It's okay. Nothing's gonna happen to you, buddy. I promise.” He felt the cold grabbing his heart and hoped desperately he could live up to his promise.

And somewhere above the mountains, that creature, cloaked by the darkness, screamed like it was taunting Jack.

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The Worst of Times

Chapter 26

The Worst of Times

Leaving their small water source behind was hard. However, they couldn't stay there.

Jack made the kid and the puppy drink and slaked his own thirst. Daniel, who had been hollow-cheeked and whose eyes had been sunken the previous day, seemed to have recovered amazingly overnight. He looked fresh and rested and drank much less than Jack wanted him to.

“I don't need anymore. You haveta drink it,” he told Jack in a stern voice, which would've been cute if Jack wasn't so worried.

After making sure the kid drank a little more, Jack finally bundled his jacket, and they moved on.

The times of singing and playing games to make their hiking more entertaining seemed far away. The little kid who had once wandered along with Jack, so full of chatter and life, had changed into a quiet, detached boy.

He still seemed to sense Jack's feelings and Cupcake's needs. He insisted on breaks whenever Jack felt like he'd drop dead where he walked any minute. Daniel knew when the puppy was going to whine, even before she started. He scooped her up to carry her or asked Jack to please pick her up then.

But as the day moved on, Jack realized more and more that Daniel had stopped angsting While Daniel had been worried for his friend and puppy before, he just acknowledged Jack's exhaustion and Cupcake’s weakness now, and tried to slow down. Daniel himself was less and less affected by the heat, the lack of water and the steep ravines they climbed and skidded down.

He was changing and he was changing fast.

His face closed more and more. The blue eyes, once so open and vulnerable, now held this dreamy expression, like Daniel was faraway in his mind and his body was functioning on autopilot.

Like a puppet.

Guided on invisible threads.

Nirrti's threads.

Jack balled his hands into fists and regretted the movement immediately because his palms were still sore.

Daniel didn't even turn around when Jack hissed a curse.

Three days ago the kid would've been at his side, fretting over Jack being hurt and feeling pain.

On a more rational level, Jack actually welcomed Daniel's newest changes as they helped the kid to go through this part of their journey unharmed. O'Neill had to admit he'd had no idea how to keep the boy from dehydration in their current situation. Yet, he felt angry and frustrated for being so helpless. And the knowledge it wasn't him but the alien shrink-machine that was helping Daniel to
adapt and survive, made O'Neill sick.

The bottom of the canyon came closer, and Jack could see small bushes and cacti covering the ground. It gave him hope because where there were plants, there had to be water.

Looking through his binoculars, Jack also spotted a small path leading through the massive rock face on the opposite side of the valley. Maybe once they'd walked through there, they'd reach a river or a waterfall.

He could dream, right?

“Are we getting closer, yet?” he asked Daniel.

“Yes. Don't be afraid. You can drink soon,” the kid said absently.

“Daniel...” Jack began, wiping sweat from his brow and scrubbing a hand through the stubble on his chin and cheeks.

“Soon,” Daniel said and walked faster.

They had covered the worst part of the trek down. But Jack was past any feelings of relief. All he felt was the numb ache everywhere and the nagging thirst making his gut clench and his throat dry. The thirst even had outranked the hunger.

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Once they reached the first cactus, Jack pulled out his knife and cut the cactus into half, carefully avoiding the spikes as he carved out big chunks of the flesh. Handing a piece to Daniel, he said, “It has fluids. Eat.”

“Thanks,” Daniel said and nibbled at his piece while Jack sucked and bit into his own, savoring every drop running down his sore throat. He carved out another piece and pressed liquid out like a lemon, trickling the milky fluid into his palm and letting Cupcake lick it off.

“Good girl,” he coaxed her. “Come on, baby. This'll make ya feel better.”

The puppy slobbered the cactus milk, and Jack went for more until her eyes dropped closed and she fell asleep.

Daniel stood a few feet away and gazed over the deserted valley.

“We're taking a break,” Jack decided and sat in what little shade the cactus provided. “And Daniel... we need to talk.”

“About what?” Daniel mumbled.

“About what's happening to you.”

That got his attention. He spun and stared at Jack through narrowed eyes, the dreamy gaze replaced by careful alertness. “I told you I don't know what's happ'ning to me.”

“Okay,” Jack said. “I believe you.” But he stood and went over to Daniel. Taking him by the shoulders, Jack lowered his gaze to the small serious face. “I still think you shouldn't shut me out.”

“I'm not shutting you out,” Daniel said, blinking. ”I...”
“Talk to me, buddy,” Jack almost pleaded. “I need you to stay with me, okay? Don't let Nirrti or her shrink-toy get control over you. I need you here. And I need you to be yourself, Daniel.”

Now it was confusion that met Jack's gaze. “I try,” Daniel mumbled. “But it's strong. It makes me strong, too. An' I need to be strong, right? Need to be strong and help us through the evil mountains.”

“It makes you strong,” Jack agreed carefully. “But what else does it do to you? How do you feel?” He gently tightened his grip on the bony shoulders, suddenly sure the physical connection grounded Daniel. “Do you remember telling me about the water?”

Daniel nodded. “The water's callin' me. Need to go there.”

“You told me not to let you go into the water. Any idea why?”

Shaking his head, Daniel tried to turn his head away, but Jack released his right shoulder and grabbed his chin in a gentle but firm grip. “Daniel.”

“I... I'm not sure. I keep thinkin' 'bout the water an' dreaming 'bout it. But it scares me, too.”

“Why? What's going to happen in that water?”

“Dunno. It's deep an' dark an' cold.” Daniel shuddered. But at least he sounded more like himself now, and when Jack let go of his chin, Daniel took his hand and traced the cuts on his palms. “I'm sorry I can't heal you, Jack. I hate feelin' you hurt an' I can't do anything 'bout it.”

“It's just a scratch,” Jack said, aware they both knew his hands were the least of his problems.

“It's not too far now,” Daniel whispered.

“Okay.”

“You'll get help,” Daniel assured him, and then his arms came around Jack's body. “I love you, Jack.”

“I love you too, Danny,” Jack said as he hugged him back. “We'll fix you.”

***

They walked past bushes and cacti while the sun was setting. Jack had cut more of the cactus so they had an evening meal and fluids. He fed the milk to Cupcake, and the puppy was much more agile now, trotting next to Daniel, who had fallen into silence again.

The cramps started just as they found a ditch to sleep in.

It was half-covered by a large thorny bush, and they had to duck under it and lie flat on their backs to avoid being stung. But Jack didn't want them to be exposed to the night-creature. And since they were crossing the canyon, there weren't any ledges to hide under.

Daniel, who was lying next to him, raised his head as Jack grimaced at the first wave of pain hitting his gut.

“You're sick.”

“Shouldn't have ordered cactus milk.” Jack snorted.
Then he had to leave their shelter fast, feeling Daniel's worried eyes follow him.

O'Neill managed to get rid of his footwear and pants before he'd ruin them, and he didn't put them back on that night. He spent most of the following hours emptying his bowels behind a large cactus, trying not to get poked by it or falling flat on his ass into his own crap.

The darkness didn't help either, and the stench would have made him hurl had there been anything left to hurl. Instead, he dry-retched, and his sore throat hurt even worse. Jack tried not to think about how vulnerable he was right now and just forced himself to get through this mess somehow.

So much for trying to beat dehydration.

His gut felt like liquid fire, and he knew he was running a fever when he started to either sweat or shiver with cold as time went on. When he wasn't crouched behind some cactus or bush, he tried to escape his own mess without losing the direction to the shelter.

At one point, he realized Daniel had managed to light a fire, probably with stones and the many bushes surrounding them.

Gratefully keeping his eyes on the yellow-orange light, Jack struggled through his ordeal. Finally the pain eased off, and he crawled more than walked to where he had dropped his clothes.

He found his underwear next to his pants and used them to clean himself up as well as possible before he ditched them. He staggered to the spot where he had dropped his pants and managed to put them back on.

When Jack reached the fire, he dropped on the ground next to it like a fallen tree and tried to fight sleep, but his body had given out, and not even the knowledge that he was exposed to the screaming hunter could make him move one more muscle.

He came to as little hands stroked and patted his cheeks and Daniel's voice reached him through a fog of dizziness. The first things Jack felt were his pounding head and the still-bruised shoulder.


Whoa, the night still wasn't over...

Jack tried to sit up but slumped back down. His head had decided moving fast was a bad idea.

“Jack, open your mouth.” Something was shoved between his lips, and he spit it out, turning his head away.

“Nonono, you havta eat,” Daniel insisted. And again he felt something bitter and slippery pressed against his mouth.

Jack forced himself to open up and chew the leaves Daniel forced into him. His stomach revolted, and he started to heave, but continued to chew and then swallowed, which almost caused him to throw up.

“Good, good. You havta eat 'em. Ashu showed these to me, telling me they help with nausea.”

If Daniel said so, Jack trusted him.

***
When he reached consciousness again, the fire was almost out and Daniel was curled up next to Jack, one hand latched onto his like an anchor.

Jack felt slightly better, and this time he was able to sit up, massaging his skull with one hand.

“Oy,” he groaned to no one in particular. “Tough crap.”

Carefully extracting his hand from Daniel’s, Jack picked up a pile of the leaves. He couldn’t make out their color in the little light the fire gave, but as he sniffed them, he knew they were the ones Daniel had fed him. Tentatively Jack took a few into his mouth and chewed.

He hoped they would help him to get rid of the lingering sick feeling.

Jack longed for a bath and a shave, hating the way he reeked like sweat and dirt. He still had the sharp odor of his own shit in his nose, too.

He wanted to put his boots on but couldn’t find them in the pitch-black darkness of the night. He’d have to look for them in the morning.

He was trying to decide if he should let the fire die and get them back into their shelter, when the now-familiar screams echoed through the canyon.

Close.

Too close.

Jack shook Daniel awake and told him to crawl back into the ditch. There was no time to put out the fire properly. Jack hit his big toe on a large stone, so he picked it up and threw it onto the burning tinder, hoping it would kill the flames.

Pushing Daniel forwards, Jack heard the flapping of what seemed to be huge wings. The following screech was even closer.

They scrambled down into their ditch beneath the thorn bush. Jack wasn’t sure if it was the right decision, but at least they were out of sight.

He could hear and feel the rush of air as the creature circled the night sky above them.

The next scream was triumphant, and Jack knew it was coming down...

“Cupcake,” Daniel yelled, and like a slippery eel, he managed to crawl out from under the bush before Jack could get a secure hold of him.

“No! Daniel, get back here!” He followed the kid, feeling a thorn ripping his t-shirt along his back and cutting deep into his flesh.

Jack didn’t care. He scrambled after Daniel, who was somewhere in the darkness...

“Leave her alone!!!” Daniel screamed, outraged, and in the first silver light of day, Jack could make out the little boy throwing stones at a giant...

ˈɡeɪnt... ˈɡeɪnt...

O’Neill stopped dead in his tracks, gaping at what appeared to be a mix between a raptor and a huge
parrot, with a sharp bowed beak and huge claws. It was as large as O'Neill, and while Jack wasn't able to see more than its outline, the monster seemed to have feathers and widely spread wings.

It was holding something between its murderous claws.

Something squirming and squeaking...

“Daniel,” Jack yelled again. He searched the ground frantically for a stone, found one and threw it at the bird.

Monster Bird screamed indignantly and taxed Jack with its golden intense eyes.

There was a flash of light in those eyes.

A horrible familiar glow.

“Dan...,” Jack croaked, running over to the boy. But without warning, his legs gave out, and a cold numbness spread through his body, paralyzing him completely.

He couldn't move.

Helpless, he had to watch the scene unfolding in before him, not even able to crook a finger.

All he could do was yell at the boy to run.

“It has Cupcake,” Daniel cried, throwing another stone.

“Get away from there! You can't do anything for her!” Jack barked.

The Goa'uld-bird opened its beak and let out a sound between a cawing and metal screeching on metal. It turned its head to look at Jack, but only for a second. When Daniel threw another stone, it released Cupcake and moved its massive body between Jack and the boy.

Daniel didn't make a sound, and only Jack's yells echoed loudly from the mountains when the creature's claws closed around the small figure and carried him away.

“You bastard,” Jack howled as he was lying there on his back, not feeling the deep cuts from the thorn bush or the bruise in his shoulder anymore. He stared at the silver sky, bleary-eyed, as the large shadow of a Goa'uld-possessed raptor bird soared higher and higher and finally vanished beyond the other end of the canyon. “You son of a bitch...”

But his outraged screams stayed unanswered.

After a while, a deadly silence settled over him.

The sun crawled over the mountain's buckle like an orange spider, sending her morning rays over the hard, fissured landscape of rocks. The night chill was immediately replaced by the heat.

Despite his knowledge that it was useless, he continued to search the sky, trying to estimate where that thing had taken Daniel.

Over the other rim of the canyon.

And then God knew where.

He tried to move his numb body without success.
Jack closed his eyes, white lights dancing behind his lids. His tongue felt like cotton wool, like something that had crawled into his mouth and died there.

Hot anger surged through him, soon replaced by a tired resignation.

All these days they had managed to survive...

Three weeks of struggling...

In the end, they had lost the fight. All the bravery and courage of that little boy, all the ways Jack knew to protect them and make their travel safe...

Pointless.

Some time later he opened his eyes and blinked into a merciless sun.

Jack's biggest regret was that he'd never be able to talk to Big Daniel again.

That he didn't get the chance to tell Big Daniel how much he meant to Jack. Always had. Always would.

Sweat trickled down his brow and into his eyes though he still felt numb. He managed to raise his head, staring down the length of his outstretched body, like it was something foreign.

He lay back and tried to swallow his own saliva. His throat was dry and sore. Jack felt a single tear run down his sunburned face before gentle darkness carried him away.

TBC with ch 27 Jasp and Shan
When Jack opened his eyes, he was still surrounded by darkness. Not the blackness of the alien
night, but the gentle darkness of a room where the light wasn't lit and the curtains were closed.

It was cool, too.

Jack licked bruised, chapped lips.

He blinked and blinked, trying to see properly.

There was a flicker of light somewhere.

Stripes of dimmed light on a wall.

He moved a leg, then the other one, then an arm. Hot pain was shooting through his body, but he
welcomed it with relief.

He heard a voice whispering, and the smooth surface of a bowl was pressed to his lips.

Water.

Jack wanted to drink and swallow greedily, but the bowl was removed after just a few sips, and he
growled, a sound so guttural, he wondered if it had really come from his own mouth.

“More later,” the female voice soothed as a cool hand settled on his forehead.

He managed to speak; at least he hoped he wasn't just imagining it. “Where?”

“You're safe here,” she said. “You must rest.”

“Daniel? Where's Daniel?” Jack asked, but his lips moved without sound, and he felt himself
slipping away into darkness.

***

O'Neill had no sense of time as he drifted in and out of consciousness. The only thing he relied on
was the gentle voice talking to him during the short periods when he was awake.

His caregiver, a young woman from what he could tell by hearing her voice, stilled his thirst and
washed his face with cool cloths.

Every single part of his body hurt, even his teeth.

But finally... Jack had no idea whether it was morning or noon or how much time had passed since
he’d gotten here - however he’d gotten here - finally, when he opened his eyes again, he felt more
awake and less sick.

Rubbing his face with trembling hands, he sat up carefully and, when the room stopped spinning,
looked around.
He fingered his clothes and found that he was dressed in a leather shirt. When he lifted the fur blankets, his legs were bare and clean, and it briefly crossed his mind that the woman must have bathed or washed him.

The room was furnished simply.

A bed, a washing bowl on a small table and a wooden chair.

The sunlight filtering through the closed window drapes were drawing stripes of light on the opposite loam wall.

When he heard footsteps outside the door, Jack pulled his blanket back over his legs and waited.

The woman entered the room. “You are awake,” she said, a smile crossing her face.

“You saved me,” he replied, his voice still raspy. “Thanks.”

“Jasp found you. Up in the mountains. He brought you home.” She sat on the chair next to the bed and handed him a bowl.

Jack took it with trembling hands and drank. The water was cool and fresh, and he appreciated every drop. “Thank you,” he said again and she smiled.

When he was done, he handed over the bowl, and she placed it on the floor. Then she laid her small hand on his forehead, and though the room was dimly lit, he saw the smile widen on her face. “The fever is gone. Now you can eat if you wish.”

“Eat,” Jack mumbled, not sure if he was up to it.

“My husband is out, hunting longeears. He will return soon. I will let fresh air in. Your eyes shouldn't be bothered by the sun anymore.” With that, she stood and crossed the room to remove the drapes from the window. Light flooded the chamber.

Once Jack's eyes had adjusted to the brightness, he studied her. She was around twenty, with long dark hair and sparkling green eyes. She was wearing a leather shirt and pants and Indian-style leather slippers.

He remembered Daniel's Indian prayers, and like a Big Bang, Jack's memories returned.

“You... husband?”

“Jasp.” She nodded.

“He found me...”

“He was collecting cacti and leaves for me. He doesn't want me to go into the mountains, so he always brings home what I need. He found you and tied you to our carrier beast. You were very sick. The poison thorns cut your back.”

Jack remembered how he had felt the thorns rip his shirt and back.

“Jasp needed two days to bring you home. And you slept for three days while I treated you.”

O'Neill closed his eyes as a wave of despair washed over him.

At least five days had passed since Daniel had been taken by the monster bird.
He had foggy memories of being tied to a horse-like animal, how someone had wiped away sweat from his head, and he remembered a voice telling him he was safe and going to live.

“Can I see your husband?”

“When he is home, yes. You need to sleep. The poison of the thorns is very strong. You almost did not survive.”

She pushed him gently down on his pillow, and he realized how exhausted he was.

“Daniel...” he said, against his hopes. “There was a boy with me. A little boy.”

“I am sorry,” she replied. “There was no boy. Jasp only brought you.” But he saw her heart-shaped face pale and her cat-like eyes widen.

With a last tug to his blankets, she turned and hurried out.

Only then, Jack realized he didn't even knew her name.

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Jasp returned home before sundown; a middle-aged man, only a couple years younger than O’Neill. His long curly brown hair, held together by a leather rope, reached his back and didn't match the masculine, angular face with the sharp blue eyes and the strong chin. He was tanned from the sun, and a couple of scars on his muscular arms showed that he was used to living in the wilderness.

“You were very lucky. If we still worshiped a god, I would say she loves you,” he greeted Jack. The deep voice reminded him a little of Teal'c.

“Oh, she doesn't exactly love me,” Jack said, suppressing a snort.

“So you have heard of Nirrti then?” There was caution in the other man's voice, and his eyes narrowed.

“Oh, yeah.” There was no point in lying.

The woman entered and placed a bowl of thick soup on the chair next to Jack's bed. She kept her eyes lowered and avoided his gaze as she mumbled, “It's cactus soup. It'll help you to gain strength.”

The memory of what the cactus had done to his stomach made Jack grimace. “I tried the cactus. It didn't go over well.”

“You ate it without cooking?”

When he confirmed that, she pointed at the bowl. “It has to be cooked. Or it will make you sick.”

“Thanks.” Jack sighed.

She raised her head and exchanged a long look with her husband before she left the room.

Jack took the bowl and started to eat while the man sat on the chair and watched him.

“This is good,” Jack mumbled after a moment. Cooked and served as a soup, the cactus was sweet, yet sour.

“My wife will be happy to hear this.”
“Your wife... what's her name?”

“Shanera. I call her Shan.”

“Jack,” Jack said. “O'Neill, two ll’s.”

“Jack O'Neill, two ll’s... I talked to Shan when I came home.” Again, the blue eyes narrowed. “She said you were looking for a boy.”

“I am.”

“You took that boy with you over the mountains?”

“I did.”

“For what reason?”

They studied each other, neither able to stare the other down. Finally Jasp took a deep breath. “I need to know where you're come from. And who this boy was.”

“Where am I? And are there other people around?” Jack asked in return, his voice as calm as Jasp's.

“Answer my questions first, and I will decide if I am willing to answer yours.”

“I don't think so.” Jack wasn't going to give away vital information about himself or Daniel without knowing where he was. And even though he believed he knew who these two were, he had seen the glowy eyes of the monster bird.

Where there was one, there might be more.

“Your life was almost lost, and Shan sensed great sadness in you. You kept saying a name over and over again. I believe it is the boy's name.”

“You know anything about that creature in those mountains?” Jack asked, his eyes not leaving Jasp's face.

“Yes. He is known as Nirrti's sentinel. He is very old. Legend says he guards the mountains and brings home the children if they become lost.”

“You saying he's... it's hundreds of years old?”

“Yes. We believe he has inherited the same creature Nirrti had inside.”

Jack wasn't sure how long a Goa'uld survived in a life form that wasn't human. But he probably didn't want to know anyway. He had seen the eyes, and that was proof enough.

“Bringing home the children if they get lost... what does that mean?”

“It means what I said,” Jasp answered curtly. “Where do you come from, Jack O'Neill with two ll's?”

“Ah, just call me Jack,” he muttered as he continued to eat.

“Jack,” Jasp echoed.

They fell silent as Jack ended his meal and then gazed down at the wooden bowl, not unlike the one
he had carved before they had entered those godforsaken mountains. He tried to decide how much he could trust these two. “What do you know about that creature... not the bird, but the one that lives inside him?”

“It is evil,” Jasp said, and there was so much disgust and fear in his voice that Jack didn't need any more proof. He wasn't as sensitive as his little Daniel, yet he was sure this couple weren't snaked or in any way working for a snake head.

He looked hard at Jasp. “They're called Goa'uld. They come from another planet, and they take people as hosts. They look like snakes with ugly heads, four fangs and little wings. If one of these snakes enters a human body, the host has no choice but to obey the parasite. And yes, it's evil.”

“I have never met a human possessed by such a... Gould. But there are writings on the walls of the palace. Shan and I were able to translate some of them. They say the gods came from far and had the power of magic. But they needed special, chosen ones as their vessels so they would be able to communicate with us. Once a human had been chosen to be a god, he left the planet to move between the stars. The first recognition of a god was when their eyes...”

“They glow,” Jack said.

“Yes. Every slave knew it was the sign of the goddess. I think it is a sign that a human is possessed by one of those... Goulds.”

“You're right.”

Jasp bent forward until his face was very close to Jack's. “You have to tell me where you come from. And about the boy. I assure you, you are safe. It is just the two of us here. Everyone else died a long time ago or left with the goddess.”

Before Jack could answer, Shan returned and took the bowl from him. She gave Jasp a disapproving look. “He must rest now. He is still weak.”

“He knows about the creatures that possessed Nirrti and the sentinel. He knows Nirrti was not a god,” Jasp told her.

She nodded. “He brought a boy here. At first, I was afraid he brought him to give him to the water so he would be made a god. But I sense he is not from this world. He comes from far.” Her green eyes bore into O'Neill's face. “His soul is wounded.”

“Is that true? Did you come through the door to the stars?”

“We call it the Stargate.”

“Nobody has come through the door to the stars in centuries,” Jasp wondered.

“Things change,” Jack replied.

“The door to the stars...” Jasp mumbled. “I lived in a village not too far from such a doorway. Are you dealers? Did you go to the villages near the... Stargate?”

“We’re scientists,” Jack said. “Well... a few of us are. We tried to figure out one of Nirrti's toys.”

“Toys?” Jasp frowned. “The machines of Nirrti aren't toys. They are powerful and dangerous.”

“It's just an expression.” Jack rubbed his temple as his headache began to spread, and against his
will, he felt his eyes dropping close.

“He needs to sleep,” Shan insisted, quiet authority in her voice.

“If they are scientists, they probably explored the same machines we did before we left home,” Jasp said, ignoring his wife for the moment.

Jack tried to stay awake, but felt he couldn’t. He wondered if Shan had given him something to sleep with the cacti soup.

***

He was able to get out of bed and leave his room the next morning. He had slept from sundown till sunup without disturbance, and Jack felt better than the day before. Shan helped him up and walked closely behind him as he took his first wobbly steps.

The chamber he had been in for the last couple of days was part of a little house with a family room, not unlike Ashu's house. He saw a large table and two chairs, a stove and oven, a few shelves filled with tools and food, blankets and something that looked like a spear.

“It is a simple home, but it is ours,” Shan told Jack when he sat heavily down at the table, declining her offer to help.

“It's a great place,” Jack said. And it was. Compared to the ledges he’d been sleeping under, this was a palace. For the first time since they had crossed the big lake, Jack felt semi-rested and clean.

Through the open door he saw a path leading down a hill, rocks and bushes to either side of it.

Shan gave him tea which she had steeped earlier. It was bitter, but she insisted it would help him get well soon.

“I want to show you something,” she said, a little smile curling her lips.

She left the house and soon returned, carrying a bundle in her arms. When she handed it over to Jack, a familiar yip yip greeted him. With trembling hands, Jack opened the blanket, and Cupcake's beady eyes gazed up at him. The critter was bedraggled, and several bandages covered her body. She smelled of a bitter tincture, and she was hardly more than fur and bones.

“Hey,” Jack whispered, brushing a finger over her head.

“Jasp found her lying on top of you. She has lost a lot of blood, but I believe she will live.”

“She was Daniel's... she's Daniel's.”

“It's a wild dog. They are very rare and sought-after for their fur,” Shan said. “It is said that their fur can ease the old people’s pain of bones.”

“We never saw another one after we found her,” Jack muttered.

“They live with their mothers, who carry them until they are fit to live on their own. Once they have matured, they only meet for mating.”

Jack just kept stroking Cupcake’s dirty fur, feeling the small heart beating under his fingertips.

“You are restless,” Shan said.
“You can feel that, right? That's how you knew I'm not from here. You know what I feel.”

“Yes.”

*Like Daniel*, Jack thought, and for a moment the pain over his loss made him speechless, and he felt his hands still on the puppy's body.

“Your soul is hurt,” Shan whispered. He remembered she had said that the day before.

“Yeah,” Jack admitted flatly.

He had learned not to argue with those who were able to “feel.”

“The boy. You lost the boy.”

When he didn't answer, Shan placed a hand on his arm with just enough pressure to make him look into her green eyes. “Daniel. That was the boy's name.”

O'Neill felt his throat tighten, but his eyes stayed dry as he gave a nod.

“That Daniel… Is a rejuvenated one. Like me.”

***

That night they sat around the table in Jasp and Shan’s home while Jack told his story. Jasp and his young woman were deeply moved when Jack said that Ashu had a good life but was missing her son.

Jasper said, his voice thick with emotion, “I am glad she is well. I wish there was a way to let her know we are alive.”

“Well, you could try to cross the mountains,” Jack said.

Shanera lowered her eyes and quietly left the table to put more wood into the oven. The fire didn't light up the whole room, but it was enough so they could see each others’ faces and the bowls with the strong herbal soup Shan had served earlier.

Jack raised an eyebrow. “What's going on?”

“We cannot leave this place.” Jasp sighed, bitterness lacing his voice. “Do you not think we would rather live among our people than stay here on our own? If there was a possibility to go home, we would have left long ago.”

“I'm sorry to hear that,” Jack replied. “Why can't you leave?”

“Because of Nirrti's sentinel,” Jasp said. “He recognizes Shan as a chosen child. It will catch her and return her... to the palace.”

Shan explained, “You said that your boy, Daniel, changed once he was shrunk. He had the fever, too.”

“Yeah.”

“I was very sick once. It's a common disease among our people, called spring fever. Jasp took me to the temple ruins. I used the device and became well again, but younger. The rings took us to the palace after I became a little girl. When we arrived there, it was deserted. The temples and quarters
were inhabited by animals, high grass and ivy plants. Jasper found a chamber that was still good to live in, and we settled down there. We had brought hunting spears and tools and clothes so we didn't have to fear hunger. There was a spring, so we had water as well. Then, one day, the fever returned, and we thought I was to die. Jasper searched the palace ruins for writings or devices to cure me, but in the end he had to rely on healing plants we knew from home. We had no way of knowing if they would help. At home, only in weak cases of the fever, the plants cure. Most people die from it.”

“Flowers,” Jack said.

“Yes. There were not many of them here, but it was enough to make tea,” Jasper said. “Shan became well again, and then she changed in the same way your boy did.”

“She can sense other people's feelings, is stronger and faster than you, and she can't hurt herself because her skin is somehow... unbreakable,” Jack wrapped up.

“Her bones break, but only if she is severely injured. She once fell down a ravine. I would have died from the fall, but she only broke an arm, and it healed fast. One day Shan said she knew what to do to be… completed. That she had to go to the water. She suddenly became... cold and quiet. She did not talk to me anymore, and she kept going to the lake, gazing into the water for hours. But then she would return home and say it was not time yet. I tried to keep her away from the lake. It is not a good place, but she would not listen.”

“I had nightmares,” Shan said. “About the lake and the... things in there. The water was calling me, but I didn't want to go there. Yet, I had to. It was like an evil spell.”

Jack felt cold all of a sudden. Things were slowly starting to fall together but, god, he hoped he was wrong...

It was Jasper who picked up the conversation. “We tried to use the rings and return home when we found out we could not return Shan to a woman at the palace. But the rings did not work from here. I found a panel with buttons to press, but nothing happened. One day I decided to leave and return home. Shanea was still a little girl, but she was strong and healthy, and with her abilities she was ready for the long journey. We had managed to tame two of the beasts that lived around here and make them our carrier animals, so we packed up one morning and left. There is a way through the mountains, a trail for travelers. Though nobody tries to cross them anymore because of the sentinel.”

“We lost our way and missed that trail. Ashu told us about it. We used another route,” Jack chimed in.

“I knew there was a village not far, once we had made it through the mountains. It is the smallest known village. That was our first destination,” Jasper said, then looked at Shanera to continue.

She brushed a long strand of hair out of her face and looked down at her bowl of soup. “I did not want to leave, and at the same time there was nothing I wanted more. The first day, all went well. But then came the night, and the bird started hunting. It was searching for me. And before the night was over, it had taken me and carried me back to the palace.”

Jasp told Jack how they had tried to leave again several times over the next weeks, but each and every time, the creature hunted them down. It had almost managed to kill Jasper twice, but never hurt the girl. “It was immune to my spear. It just shook it off and attacked again. Stones, sticks, nothing could hurt the beast. And it always returned Shan. We left the palace and settled down as far away as the creature allowed. Here, I built this house from loam and stones of the ruins.”

“We have never returned to the palace,” Shan whispered. “It is evil. Everything there is evil.”
"Shan can't go close to the palace because once the water is calling her again, she is lost to me. Sometimes it still calls her, and then I have to... make sure she can't leave the house."

'Like on full moons or something?' Jack waved impatiently when they started to ask what a full moon is. "What I meant was, is there a pattern to it? When the water's calling her. Does it happen every... I don't know... few weeks?"

She shook her head. "No. Sometimes it does not happen in a long time, and then the water tries to call me for several days. There is no pattern."

O'Neill got up and stretched his still-sore muscles. He had heard enough. "I have to go to that palace."

"You can't," Jasper said. "The sentinel will kill you."

"I think it took my kid there." Shanera said urgently. "The bird will guard the palace and its area if he brought your boy there. It sleeps at daytime."

Jack had to admit she had a point. "I can't see anything at nights anyway," he said, frustration lacing his voice.

"You cannot see in the dark?" Jasper seemed puzzled by this.

"Not in this pitch blackness you call night here," Jack muttered.

"Your eyes are not used to it. I can see quite well. Not as well as Shanera but enough to move around. However, several sunrises have passed since I brought you here. You had to recover. Your boy might have gone into the water already."

"The water... what happens in that water?" Jack had a pretty good idea, but he wanted to hold on to the slight hope that he was wrong.

"I do not know," Shan said. "But it has to be something evil. When I stood there, it was as if many voices talked to me in a foreign language. I understood what they said then. They always told me it was not time yet. And I had to go home which I was grateful and angry about all at once. Maybe your boy is not completed either and has to wait. It is your only chance."

"I will bring you to the palace at first light," Jasper said.

Jack spent long sleepless hours in his room, cursing the moonless night and praying to a god he didn't believe in, that Daniel was still alive – and still himself.

TBC with ch 28 Children of the Goddess
Chapter 28

Children of the Goddess

Jack found his knife, Daniel's handgun and the ammo on the table in his room when he dressed at sunrise. Shan had given him pants and shoes, made from the same soft leather as his shirt. The pants were too big. Jack knew he had lost a lot of weight over the last three weeks. He’d had to pull his BDU belt tighter some time ago. These pants had a belt as well, a braided cord with loose straps hanging down from it. Jack realized he could tie his knife to the belt. He tucked the gun into the waistband, then shoved the clip of ammo in the chest pocket of his shirt.

Silently he entered the larger room of the house. Shanera and Jasper were nowhere to be seen, but a fire was going in the oven and water bubbled in a pot on the stone stove.

Jack went outside and looked out over the valley beneath him. Far away he could see the ruins of what must have been the palace. Even when he heard footsteps, Jack didn't turn.

“If we are going to find your boy, we will find him there.”

“I know.”

“Shan will stay here and tend to the wounds of your wild dog. Have we not returned in four days, she will come after us.”

“Good.” Jack was relieved. If the young woman was as stubborn as Daniel, she wouldn't have agreed to stay behind. But it was good someone remained at the house. Jack was sure Shan could locate them if she was forced to follow. He only hoped she would be strong enough to resist the “call of the water”.

“She is a strong woman,” Jasper said, as if he had read Jack's mind. “She has fought the call for years, whenever it reaches her.”

After a quick breakfast of dried meat with cactus soup, Shan gave them two pouches with water and food. They also took two blankets for the night. The couple kissed and hugged each other, and Jack left them to it and checked on Cupcake, who was still weak but happy to see him. “I'll bring Daniel back,” he told her as he scratched behind her pointed ears. “You just hang in there so you'll be fine when we return.”

She licked his hands and yipped approvingly.

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Riding was a nice change from the endless walking. The carrier beasts were horses with short black hair and bushy gray tails. Their heads were bulky, and their bodies, brawny and sturdy. O'Neill was grateful for the ride because he still felt unfit to walk hours and hours. Not that he wouldn't have tried if he had to. But this was much more comfortable.

“There is something I have to tell you,” Jasper said once they had been riding in silence for an hour. “There is a sealed chamber near the palace. I have never told Shanera about it, but I believe that the children need to go there to become completed. She searched for such a place while under the influence of the beings in the water. But she never found it.”
“Why? What's in there?”

“I don't know. I could never unlock the door. And when Shan became so detached and obsessed with the water... I decided not to try again. But all these years she has waited to become completed and it has never happened. Whatever is in the water always tells her she is not ready.”

“How old was she after she got shrunk?”

“We guessed that she was near mid-childhood.” When Jack looked at him blankly, Jasp explained, “She must have been nine summers old. Mid-childhood is after ten summers. Then she will slowly enter adulthood and the age of marriage. It is common to marry when a woman has seen fifteen summers.”

“And now she's what... twenty?”

“Twenty-one summers.”

Jack did the math and slowly nodded. “So you’ve been here for twelve years... summers... . And she grew up normally... aside from the changes we talked about?”

“Yes. We moved into this house seven summers ago. It took us some time to find a place far enough from the lake so that the call of the water wasn't too strong and where the sentinel didn't hunt us. It looks like there is some kind of border the children can't cross. If they stay inside those borders, the sentinel will leave them alone.”

“Daniel felt the water's call as soon as we entered the mountains,” Jack said thoughtfully. “It got stronger the further we went. But it was always there in his subconscious. He was afraid of the mountains before we crossed the lake on the other side.”

“The rings brought us here. I am not sure how far the call would have reached for Shan. But it is less urgent where we live now.”

Jack patted the bulky neck of his horse, which found its way securely between thorn bushes and boulders. Something occurred to him, and he mulled it over for a while, finally looking at Jasp, who was riding next to him. “You raised her,” he said. “And then you... became her mate?”

“I was her mate before,” Jasp replied calmly. “When she became a girl, I took the place of a guardian, yes. But she did remember everything. She was not like a real child. When her time came, we moved back to what we had been.”

Jack didn't say anything further. Daniel was four. If Jack had to raise him, there was no way they would just “move back to what they had been.” Which, literally speaking, wasn't exactly what you would call happily ever after anyway.

If they were able to change him to his adult self somehow...

First, they had to find him.

Alive.

“The device did not always make people the same age. That's what I found out by reading the walls and tablets I found at the palace. Sometimes it changes them into very little children; sometimes they are older. I never found out what the reasons are,” Jasp explained. “I could never get a grasp of the whole language, only parts of it. It is Nirrti's language, and I found it hard to learn. Shan was not a big help because she cannot read the language either. She could only understand what the water was
telling her.”

They moved closer to the palace, and Jack could make out ruinous towers, chambers and yards, enclosed by stone walls. Like most of the rocks, the palace was made of black stone.

It looked like a dark castle of Sleeping Beauty, the midday sun dipping it into a false peaceful light. Gnarly trees and bushes had encountered the ground; thick green ivy was crawling around pillars and up the walls. There was no wind. The whole scenery was silent and still, almost like a painting.

Yet, Jack felt the gloom hovering above the area like a thick blanket.

There was something here. Something old and evil.

He shook his head, reminding himself to focus on what he saw, not what he felt.

The lake, according to Jasper, was behind the palace grounds. The two men maneuvered the horses through the ruins until they reached a wide, cobbled road. Grass and scrub was growing between the black cobblestones, but it was easier for the animals to walk on.

“The grounds are large. Slaves built it for Nirrti. I believe there was a large slave colony here, and there are mines in the mountains where they worked as well.”

Naquadah mines, Jack thought.

They reached a large courtyard, enclosed by buildings with arches and four towers at each corner. One of the larger towers had several smaller towers attached. It reminded Jack of something Islamic or Hindu. He tried to remember Nirrti's Earth history, but all he came up with was that she used to be the goddess of destruction or death in India.

Jack noticed weathered scratchings on high obelisks in the middle of the courtyard, and Jasp explained that, from what he had been able to decipher, they were lists of training activities the children had to accomplish daily.

“There is a training field beyond the lake. One can still see circles for fights and race tracks,” Jasper said. “Climbing towers and areas for steeplechases, too.”

Jack imagined how groups of Jaffa might have trained the little super-hosts until their bodies were able to use the improved senses to full capacity.

Obviously, Nirrti wanted her perfect hosts fit and able to defend themselves.

After all, he had done something similar with Daniel, if for different reasons.

“Where is that chamber you told me about?” Jack asked Jasp when they had crossed the courtyard and dismounted. They tied the horses to iron rings embedded in a stone wall.

“It is not far from here. Should we look for your child at the water first, though?”

“No. If Daniel is alive and able to walk around, he might have found that chamber.” Daniel was drawn to mystical and historical secrets like moth to light, and Jack relied on the kid's habit of finding just the right spot to get into trouble.

They bundled up food bags and blankets, and Jasper waved at Jack to follow him.

They entered a world of small, narrow alleys between derelict houses and pavilions.
It was an entire city, and Jack wondered briefly how many people had lived here and served Nirrti’s insane experiments or worked in the mines. He wondered what had happened to all those children who had been brought here to become the perfect host. Since there was no such thing as a hoc’taur out there, Jack assumed that the experiment had failed.

Did they all die? Or did she send them into the mines to work there when she discovered they weren’t as perfect as she expected them to be? And where did she fail? As far as Jack could see, Daniel would make a perfect host.

Crap.

Deeper and deeper, they merged into the net of streets and buildings, sometimes rubble or bushes blocking their way, causing them to climb or crouch. But Jasper seemed sure of himself, and Jack tried to stomp down his impatience and worries.

Finally they reached a round pavilion with many carvings and ugly statues on its roof. Jack recognized some of them as serpent guards and one of them as Nirrti, who was standing in the middle of the roof, holding her hands over the heads of little stone children, seated at her feet.

It was disgusting.

Suddenly he remembered Ra.

Ra, who had surrounded himself with young boys...

Maybe Nirrti's shrinking program wasn't originally her idea, after all. Ra had probably looked for the perfect host as well, aside from whatever pleasure he'd gotten out of those kids.

Jack felt the cold anger wash over him again, making his blood boil. It was a good fuel for his desperate hope, a motor that kept him from giving up. He wasn't ready or willing to accept Daniel's death, or worse. Because giving up meant that, in a perverted twisted way, Nirrti had won. And there was no way in frigging Netu Jack would let her.

He hurried around the pavilion, growling with frustration when there was no door or window.

“I told you it was sealed,” Jasper said apologetically.

“Well, Daniel would get in,” Jack muttered.

“He would? How? I tried for years.”

“He is just good with this stuff. And he can read Goa'uld.”

“But...” Jasper shook his head. “How can he read the language of the goddess? It hasn't been used in hundreds of summers.”

“Not on this planet, maybe. Where I come from, the Goa'uld are very much alive, and we've been fighting them for years,” Jack said. “Daniel is a linguist. Someone who studies languages. He's also a ...” Jack searched for a word that explained the term archaeologist. “...he studies history.”

“He is a seeker then,” Jasper said. “A seeker of ancient knowledge.”

“Yeah. That covers it, I guess.” Jack knocked against the solid stone wall. “You sure that sentinel sleeps during the day?”

“Yes. At nights, it is safe to stay in one of the buildings. It never attacked us as long as we stayed in
the house during dark. And Shan was able to move around in the streets as well. It only tracked her and brought her back here if we left the valley and tried to cross the mountains.”

O'Neill gazed at the sun, figuring they had approximately two or three hours of sunlight left.

He circled the building once more, using the barrel of Daniel's gun to tap the walls for cavities, hidden doors, whatever.

He was halfway around it when he froze.

There was an answering knock from inside.

Or probably his ears were tricking him...

Holding his breath, Jack began to tap a short message, then waited.

The answer was low, but when he pressed his ear to the wall, he heard it repeated several times.

It was a simple tap-code, used by the military to recognize each other as friend or foe.

“Gotcha,” Jack whispered.

“What is it?” Jasper watched with narrowed eyes. “What are you doing?”

“He's in there.” Jack used the barrel of the gun again and tapped once, then paused and tapped four times, then paused again, tapped once, once again, paused, tapped three, three, paused, five, four...

D-A-N-N-Y

It wasn't SOP, but Jack figured if it was Daniel, he would react to something familiar best.

A moment later the answer came... Five taps, four taps, pause, one tap, five taps, pause, four taps, three taps.

Y-E-S

Jack tapped the answer fast and then waited, holding his breath again.

There was a cracking sound and the walls seemed to tremble.

He grabbed Jasper's arm and pulled him away from the building.

Together they watched as a dark opening appeared to their left, becoming wider and wider until it was large enough to let a man through.

Then nothing happened.

Jack had his gun ready and silently moved to the entrance, positioning himself next to it, pressed flat against the wall.

It could be a trap, after all, and he wasn't going to walk in there without caution.

Minutes, which only were seconds in real time, went by before a small familiar voice called from inside, “Jack? Jack, is that you?”

Closing his eyes as relief washed over him like warm summer rain, he swallowed once before he was able to answer. “It's me, Daniel. Why don't you come out of there?”
“Can't.”

The relief was replaced by suspicion again. “Why not?”

“Locked myself in,” came the answer.

“It could be a trap,” Jasper said urgently.

“I know that,” Jack hissed. Louder, he asked, “Daniel? Locked in where?”

“In here. So I can't get out. I am completed now, Jack. The water calls me.”

Oh, peachy.

When Jack turned his head to the left to peer inside the entrance, he could see burning torches hanging attached to the walls and candles lit in the background somewhere.

“You stay here, I'll go in. I'll call you when it's safe,” he told Jasper, who just nodded.

Jack moved through the entrance and quickly stepped inside to melt with the shadows of the wall where the torchlight didn't reach.

The pavilion consisted of a small round room with an altar in the background, where all those candle's flames flickered in the air, illuminating a large stone pictograph of Nirrti as she was shown in Earth mythology. Jack had seen that image in one of Daniel's PPP’s when they first had the “pleasure” to hear about Nirrti on Cassandra's planet.

In the middle of the room was a device that looked similar to the shrinking machine they had found in the temple ruins near the other Stargate. Like a giant shower.

And there, sitting cross-legged on the smooth black stone paved floor, was Daniel.

“I'm alone. There's nobody here,” Daniel said.

Jack tucked his gun into the waistband of his pants and, aware that he was making himself vulnerable to anybody who might be hiding in one of the many deep shadows, went over and crouched in front of the boy.

“Hey, kiddo.” He reached out a hand, but Daniel shook his head.

“Don't. It's a force field. You'll get hurt.”

Snatching his hand back, Jack just looked at Daniel.

Daniel's eyes settled on him, wide and too old for the young face. Otherwise, he sat there, motionless, and his voice was detached, vacant. “Jack.”

“What happened?”

“I'm completed.”

“How?”

“I used the DNA resequencer.”

“Of course you did.” Jack sighed.
“I had no choice,” Daniel replied without emotion.

“Right. How’s that work?”

“The tablets and wall writings I read, say that the resequencer changes DNA to complete the process of turning the children into a *hoc’taur*, the perfect host. Once it’s done, they have to go to the lake to be chosen.”

“There are Goa’uld in that lake, right?” Jack felt the hairs on his neck rising.

“Yes. Nirrti is a queen. She spawned her young on this planet.”

“She... what? F... Daniel, are you sure?”

“Yes.”

They gazed at each other, held apart by an invisible barrier.

Jack wished he could do something, anything, to change that mask-like expression. “So you locked yourself in here...”

“I can do stuff. Light torches and candles. Like when we were at Kheb. Only now it's really me, not Oma deSalla. I turned on the force field in this room,” Daniel said absently.

“But you can't get it down again?”

Daniel shook his head. “I think it’s a specially designed field. The children were kept here after they used the resequencer until it was time, and then a guard or Nirrti herself let them out.”

“But you could open the door to the pavilion.”

Daniel nodded. “Yes.” He stayed where he was, and neither his voice nor the blankness on his face changed when he said, “Nirrta, the sentinel, dropped me in a large courtyard...”

“Been there.”

“...and I found writings on obelisks. They weren't important. Daily instructions for the chosen ones. But I wandered through the palace grounds and found more. The writings led me here, and I found the prints to press for the door. Now that I'm completed, I can open it with my mind.”

“But not the force field?” Jack raised an eyebrow. He took his gun and reached out with it until the force field bristled and became visible as a yellow energy barrier for as long as his gun touched it.

“Maybe... if I tried real hard, I could. But I chose not to. I don't want to go to the lake.”

“Good choice.” Jack said. “Listen... I brought a friend. He'll help us to get out of here and find the gate.”

Daniel shook his head. “I can't leave. If I don't get a symbiote, I'll die. My body and my mind need the symbiote to maintain their new powers and changed DNA. And I won't give in to it, so I'll stay in here.”

“You're wrong about that, buddy. Remember what Ashu told us about her son? Jasper? I found him. And the woman he took with him. She's alive. Grew up on her own without having a snake in her head. You won't die, Daniel.” After a pause, he asked, “The Goa’uld... You hear them talking to you? In your head.”
“Yes. Like hundreds of voices hissing and mumbling. If I get out of here, I'll follow the call. My will to fight it is getting weaker and weaker each day.”

“They are Goa'ulds, Daniel. They want you to believe you'll die if you don't go into the water. They're making you think you don't have a choice, but that's not true.”

“I'm completed. I either need a symbiote, or I'll die,” Daniel repeated like a parrot.

For crying out loud...

“Jasper,” Jack called his companion, who hurried to his side immediately.

Daniel and Jasper gazed at each other in silence for a moment. Then Shan's husband said in awe, “You are Daniel. A rejuvenated one.”

“Yes. You are Jasper, Ashu's son.”

Jack wished Daniel would stop talking in such an articulated manner. The kiddie-speech had fit the little guy much better.

“I am. And my wife, Shanera, is well and alive. Jack told you the truth. You will not die without a creature in your head. All the gods tell are lies and evil.”

“Wait a minute...” Jack looked hard at Daniel. “Why can't you sense that we're telling the truth? Did the doohickey take away your feeling-radar?”

Daniel blinked. “I know you're convinced you're telling me the truth. But I do know it's not.”

Cursing under his breath, Jack realized the kid probably had a point. Shan never got completed, but Daniel had used the DNA sequencer. So maybe he really HAD to go and get snaked. But hell would freeze over before Jack allowed him to be taken as a host. He'd keep Daniel away from the lake until help arrived from home. There had to be another way to help him. Under no circumstances was Daniel going into the water.

With a frustrated sigh, Jack turned to Jasper, who was examining the walls next to the open door. “How far is it from here to the Stargate?”

“We have to wait till sunrise. The sentinel will leave Daniel alone, but hunt us if we go outside at night. This is fascinating. They wrote down the whole completion process. I do not understand the physical and mathematical process, but it is all here.” Jasper stepped into the shadows, mumbling that he had to study the walls further.

“Sam will know how it works,” Daniel said.

“Okay. Here's the plan. We'll stay till sunrise, and then Jasper and I find the gate and dial home.”

Daniel didn't respond. Nor did he move.

“I think I found an opening button,” Jasper called from somewhere in the dark. “It's a glowing red hand print in the wall behind this pillar.”

“If you open it, I'll leave,” Daniel said.

“I won't let you.” Jack returned the cold, blank stare with steady calm. A calm he didn't feel.

“You won't have a choice.”
The torches and candles flickered and then died.

For a moment blackness engulfed them before each torch and candle was lit again.

Raising an eyebrow, Jack said, “And that's gonna stop me from holding you here... how?”

“I don't want to hurt you,” Daniel explained, taking several steps back until he reached the altar. The candlelight was reflected on his face, making it appear less childlike and more like...

Jack had seen “The Omen”.

Daniel looked like the kid from that movie.

“You won't.”

“Will.”

“Daniel, listen to me,” Jack said. “Don't let those snakes win. You gotta fight it! Aren't you hungry? We brought food with us. Nice... cactus bread.”

“Don't shut down the force field. I'll sleep now. When the sun is up, go and get help. The call isn't that strong at daytime,” Daniel replied in his detached voice and lay down at the bottom of the altar.

Like a sacrifice.

O'Neill contemplated going in so he could stay with Danny. But the thought of Jasper being the only one outside the force field wasn't exactly reassuring. He wouldn't let himself be locked in there with Daniel, being dependent on Jasper to let them out. He didn't know the guy well enough to trust him that far. Besides, something could happen to Jasper, and then what?

He drew in a sharp breath and settled down next to the force field, keeping an eye on the kid inside. Daniel appeared to be asleep, curled up, his back to Jack.

“Daniel?”

No reply.

“I'll be right here, okay? Not going anywhere.” When there was still no reaction from the tyke, Jack said softly, “Sleep tight, bud.”

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Some time later, Jack snapped his eyes open, instantly alert, not sure what woke him.

It was completely dark in the chamber, no light coming from the torches or candles anymore. A cold wind brushed through the open entrance of the pavilion.

“Daniel?” Jack hissed, already on his feet, gun in hand, even though it was useless since he couldn't see a frigging thing. “Jasp?”

“Do not move,” a hollow voice warned him out of the darkness. “The child must reach the water.”

Crap.

“Jasper! It's me, Jack! Where's Daniel?!”
“He has convinced me to open the field. He will be chosen by his master soon.”

Double crap.

“Listen to me! I don't know what he told you... but we have to find him before he...” Jack had moved around in the dark and bumped into something... someone. He grabbed for Jasper’s shirt, giving him a rough shake. “Where is he?!”

“We can't follow young Daniel. The sentinel will attack,” Jasper replied like a man in trance.

“Help me!” Jack shook him harder. He'd have hit him if he could have seen his face.

“I can't.”

Pushing the man away, Jack tried to find the entrance or the walls of the pavilion. He followed the whiff of air, and finally his hands touched rough stone. Carefully feeling around the wall, Jack found one of the torches and heaved it out of its handle.

Now what?

“You can't help him,” Jasper said dreamily.

“The hell I can't.”

“It is his fate.”

“No, it's not. Did you allow Shan to go to the water? Would you ever give up on her?!’” Jack could hear his own harsh breaths. Why did very word, every sound, seem so much louder when it was dark and you couldn't see? He heard a rustling of clothes next to him and closed his hands tighter around the torch, ready to hit Jasper over the head if he tried something stupid.

“He promised to explain all the writings once he returns. He speaks the language of the gods. Even when he wasn't a child, he could speak it. He told me.”

“He studied them,” Jack snapped. “He's been tortured, imprisoned and taunted by the Goa'uld often enough to know the language. I told you, he...”

“He said he will help Shanera so she won't hear the call of the water anymore.”

“Yeah. By bringing her down here, too.”

Jack fumbled around in the dark, trying to find a stone, anything, to spark a fire so he could light the torch.

“I never believed in the old goddess,” Jasper mumbled.

“No. You didn't. And you shouldn't start now,” Jack snarled. “I need light!”

“The sentinel will see the light.”

Realizing there was no point in trying to light the torch, Jack said, frustrated, “Jasper, you have to get your act together! I need you to guide me to the lake.”

“But young Daniel...”

“Young Daniel needs our assistance.” Jack was sure Jasper wasn't a threat. Just brainwashed by a
little brat with super powers.

“He told me to stay.”

“Think of Shanera,” Jack barked. “Think how she struggles to keep away from the evil lake. You really want Daniel to go there? After all those years you fought to keep her away from it?”

“I love my wife,” Jasper murmured. “I don't want anything happen to her.”

“And I love Daniel. He's not meant to be a god. He's just a guy who was forced into this mess by a mad woman who wanted to shrink him.”

“He did not use the shrinking device in free will?” Jasper was very close. Jack could hear and feel his breath, which smelled like cactus bread and a little sour.

“No, he didn't.”

There was silence, and Jack decided to try his own luck against all odds. Using the torch like a blind man’s cane, he worked his way to the entrance.

Once he had left the pavilion, he paused, trying to figure out where he had to go. Hell, it was darker than a night on new moon at home. They had practiced seeing in the dark, moving around blindfolded, in Special Ops training.

Taking a deep breath, he forced himself to calm down and move slowly, shuffling forward as he kept both feet on the ground. He focused on his hearing.

Footsteps.

Jasper was following him.

Jack waited, the torch ready to strike.

“I will lead you.”

Jack relaxed his arms. “Let's go.”

He had no choice but to believe Jasper would lead him in the right direction and not try to kill him on the way for whatever reason. Clutching the other man's elbow with one hand, O'Neill went along, hating to be dependent like this. But he knew if he wanted to reach that damn lake anytime soon, this was his best option.

He had no idea how long they stumbled through the darkness, only accompanied by Jasper's curt orders to turn in this or that direction or a warning not to fall over a boulder.

Suddenly Jasper stopped walking, and Jack ran into him. “Hey!”

“We are almost there,” Jasper said.

And now Jack could see it too.

Not far from them was an illumination, a pool of light.

“Go,” he ordered tersely.

And so they continued.
The lake's surface shimmered in an orange light, reminding Jack of his Minnesota pond at sunset.

“Why's it glowing?”

“I do not know,” Jasper said. “It just does. Only at nights, though. The water is black by day.”

They stepped closer, but Jack pulled Jasper back when they were getting too close to the shore.

“Careful there. They have a habit of jumping you and entering through your throat.”

“No. They only take the chosen children. Never a lower being like us.”

“Just... careful, okay? These guys have been without hosts for a long time. They might not be so picky anymore.” Jack winced and took a step back as the smooth water surface began to ripple and splash.

Glad he was able to see again, Jack took lead.

“There is a ceremonial place not far from here. I always assumed the children were led into the water there. It was where Shanera stood and listened to the voices,” Jasper said, sounding more like himself now.

They reached the place only moments later. Burning torches hung from high obelisks at the four corners.

Jack saw a small figure standing alone in the middle of the place, where the four beams from the torches met, forming a circle of light.

He was about to tell Jasper they had to move closer when the sentinel’s aggressive scream erupted in the air, and the giant creature appeared above their heads, its shadow dimming the torchlight.

“Run! Behind the obelisks!” Jack yelled and started moving, jerking out Daniel’s handgun. Before he cowered behind the huge obelisk, he fired at the creature as it came down. With a screech of pain, the sentinel changed course and gained height. It was now circling in the sky, just in reach of the torch lights. A dark, plump body with large wings.

“Jasper,” Jack yelled. “You okay?”

“I am well!” The other man emerged from the darkness and crouched next to Jack.

“Look... I need you to watch my six... give me cover. Can you use this?” He reloaded Daniel's gun and handed it over to him.

“I have never...”

“One of us has to distract that thing. I'll go and grab the kid,” Jack said impatiently. “The bird is hit, but I guess its Goa’uld keeps it from dying.”

“The... The sentinel is powerful and strong. I have never been able to hurt it before,” Jasper said. “This weapon gave him pain.” There was no fear in the other man's voice. Only amazement and... hope. “If this weapon can give him pain, it may be able to kill him.”

“Yeah. Probably. For now, all you have to do is keep him off me or the kid.”

“I will get the child. You will use this weapon,” Jasper decided.
“No.”

“It is our only chance. You are trained to use this weapon while I only know how to use a spear. I am free of the child's spell. I will return with him here.”

Biting his lip, Jack realized the guy was right. He gave a terse nod and said, “Don't let him talk you into anything. Carry him if necessary.”

Jack watched as Jasper scurried off, then took a deep breath and gave a warning shot to get the beast's attention. With an angry scream, it moved its head from left to right, looking for him.

Jack ran from his cover, waving both arms, yelling, “Hey! I'm here! Come get me, you son of a bitch!”

It attacked immediately, claws outstretched, glowy eyes fixated on its victim.

O'Neill waited, weapon in both hands.

When he could see its dirty gullet through the open beak, he fired.

Once.

Twice.

Still it was moving, screaming...

Jack ran backwards, firing at the eyes.

He missed one, but hit the other.

There was a warm rain of blood as the screams became gargled and the inhuman left eye flashed gold once more before it went dark.

O'Neill had to throw himself on the ground and roll away to avoid being hit by the heavy body.

For a second Jack felt like he was in a vacuum. It seemed deadly silent around him after the outraged screams of the sentinel and the gunfire had stopped. Then there was a new sound, jerking him back into the here and now.

The high-pitched squeals of the snake that had lived in the sentinel's body and was now writhing on the ground. Fighting his disgust at the smell and looks of this dead giant predator, O'Neill stepped closer to the bird.

Just as the heavily damaged snake hissed at him and tried to get ready to jump, he grimaced in disgust, raised the gun and fired.

With a last painful screech, the Goa'uld died.

O'Neill didn't stop.

He fired until the gun was empty.

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A Reunion

Chapter 29

A Reunion

“Let me go.”

“Nope. Not gonna happen.”

“I will die if you don't let me go into the water.”

Jack shook his head. “No, you won't.”

The cold, hard stare from the child's blue eyes bore into O'Neill's, and he thought he'd never forget this look on Daniel's beautiful little face for the rest of his life.

Loathing, yet detached.

Jasper had tied the kid to a stone pole with his belt, and seeing Danny like this was more painful than most of what Jack had endured on this planet.

“I am sorry. He was not willing to leave the ceremonial place,” the native man had told Jack, his face grim. “I had to restrain him so he would not go into the water.”

It was almost sunrise, but the torches were still burning. Jack knew Daniel had done that with his mind, and he wondered briefly if the kid would be able to free himself if he really wanted to.

He wasn't going to give him any ideas, though.

“The sentinel is dead,” he said. “We can go home.”

“The sentinel was one of the oldest beings on this planet,” Daniel explained. “It was Nirrrta. Its Goa'uld was, actually. Nirrrta was the masculine aspect of Nirrti, and her husband. He protected the offspring and their future hosts.”

“That thing...” Jack began.

“Had once been a highly decorated System Lord,” Daniel replied.

“What happened?”

“Nirrti had forced him to take the bird as a host when his humanoid host died.”

“Tough crap. Not that I care one way or the other...” Jack tried not to look at Daniel's eyes – the eyes of a stranger - or his tied hands. “Look, we've been through this before. You won't die. If you give me your word that you'll stay with us, we'll go and get Cupcake and then make a beeline for the gate.”

“Cupcake,” Daniel said thoughtfully. “She's alive.”

“Yep. And waiting for you,” Jack coaxed. “You can take her home if you want. I bet she'd like to stay with you.”
Daniel blinked. “Home.”

“Remember home?” Jack saw his chance and knelt in front of the tot. “You know... Sam, Teal'c... the SGC... Home.”

“You'll take me home?” There was still doubt, but slowly Daniel's gaze lost the unnatural coldness. “The Goa'uld say I have to die and you can't save me. Only they can.”

“They’re lying bastards. You know that. Come on... Daniel, think.”

“They are very loud,” the kid mumbled, then raised his head. “I will not go with you. You hurt me. You didn't want me anymore!”

“Daniel...”

“You never loved me. You left me.”

“I lied,” Jack said, his own voice thick with regret and guilt.

“You are lying now.”

“No. And you know I'm not. You can feel it.”

There had to be some way for Jack to get through to him...

Suddenly remembering how touching had grounded Daniel while they'd crossed the mountains, Jack quickly untied him. As soon as the kid was free, he tried to break to one side and dodge Jack. But O'Neill was ready for him. He closed both arms around the skinny but incredibly strong body.

Daniel fought.

Jack held on, taking every kick and every punch from little feet and fists stoically, feeling like he deserved each one of them. Daniel didn’t curse or vocalize any words. He didn't even scream or cry. He just lashed out at Jack, and the only sounds from him were harsh breaths and occasional growls.

The torches went out, and the obelisks began to vibrate and sway as Daniel's fight against the arms that were holding him became more and more frantic. Jack heard the torch holders break. The torches tumbled down from the obelisks and crashed on the paved ground.

The lake turned into a whirlpool as god knew how many Goa'uld began to surface and dive again, feeling their victim’s rage. Wind ripped at Jack's hair and clothes. Something seemed to be trying to tear Daniel away from him, pulling him toward the water.

Jack had no idea how long this continued before he felt Daniel slow down.

The wind stopped, and the lake became quiet again. They were both breathing hard, and Daniel started to choke out snatchy sobs.

Jack released the child and grabbed his arms instead. “Daniel, listen to me!”

Daniel's hands balled into fists again.

“That's enough!” Jack shouted.

The blue eyes in front of Jack had changed from detached to bewildered. Big as saucers, they stared at him as Daniel's chest heaved with every hitching breath he took.
“Fight them,” Jack said harshly, giving Daniel a shake. “Fight them and listen to me!”

“I... I...” Daniel sobbed.

“You have every right to be mad at me, and we'll sort this out. But not now. Not here!”

A light touch to his shoulder made him look at Jasper, who was standing next to them, pale but grim-faced. “He will respond better if we leave this place, Jack.”

It was light now, the sun just rising.

Jack turned back to Daniel, who stared at him blankly, his mouth slightly open.

“For crying out...” He groaned as he rose to his feet and scooped the kid up, settling him on his hips as he had done so often these past couple of weeks. “Let's go.”

“I need...” Daniel said.

“You're right here where you belong. There's nothing else you need,” Jack told him briskly as they marched away from the lake and its snakes, leaving the ceremonial place and the dead Nirrta behind.

Daniel hung in Jack's arms like a sack of flour while they headed through the alleys of the city surrounding the palace ruins.

Once they were back with the horses, Jack seated a subdued Daniel in front of him, and like that, they left the palace and its dark secrets.

***

When they reached the homestead, Shanera came running out the door as soon as she sensed their arrival.

Jack dismounted and swung Daniel down from his horse. The boy walked away without a word and sat on a boulder near the house.

Leaving Jasper and his wife to greet and talk to each other, Jack followed the kid. He stopped a few steps behind him, not sure how to deal with this new, “completed” Daniel.

“You're not going to run, are you?”

“Jack...” There was the first crack in the expressionless face as Daniel turned his head to look at him. “I didn' think you'd come,” he mumbled. “The Goa'uld said nobody was going to come for me. That I was theirs.”

“I always do, don't I?”

Somehow, that did the trick. A single tear appeared in Daniel's left eye and ran down his cheek. “I'm evil now, Jack. I allowed the Goa'uld to make me use the NDA resequencer.”

“DNA,” Jack said, unable to suppress a flicker of hope at the lingual slip. “And you're not evil, Danny. Everything's going to be okay. We'll call home, and Sam will help us fix you.”

“Are you sure?” Daniel looked up to him, in his eyes still full of doubt.

But at least they were his eyes, not those of a stranger.
“About the going home part? Yes. About the fixing part? No. But you know me. Trying to be Mister Positive.”

“I won't hear the Goa'uld anymore when we're home,” Daniel whispered, lowering his head. “I feel bad. For wanting to go to them. And for using the NDA resequencer. I wasn' strong 'nuff to fight it. You were gone an' I thought you were...”

“I'm here. And you're here. And we'll work it out.”

“An' if I haveta stay little...”

“I'll take you home, retire and be a dad again. I told ya I would never leave you again, right?”

It seemed to cost Daniel all his willpower when he stood and raised his arms to Jack.

As soon as their fingertips brushed, Jack pulled the tyke close until he had the small hands firmly clasped in his own. He felt Daniel struggle and pull back for a moment, like he was tied to an elastic band. But finally his little friend stumbled forward, and Jack scooped him up and cradled him close.

“That's better,” Jack said when Daniel's arms sneaked around his neck, squeezing it in the familiar strangling grip. “Much better.”

“I waited for you an' waited an' waited. I was all alone.”

”I needed some time to get back on track,” Jack whispered. “I'm sorry.”

“You were very sick.”

“I'm fine now.” He cupped the back of Daniel's head with his large hand. “Just peachy, dandy. Come on, let's visit Cupcake.”

Cupcake was happy to see Daniel and wouldn’t leave his side again. She was limping and still had a bandage around one of her legs and in the middle of her body. But she was in much better shape than she'd been when Jack had left her.

When they finally sat down to have a hot meal of meat and bread, Jack listened to Daniel's clear young voice saying the Indian prayer. And he thought that if, for some reason, they had to stay on Kansas planet, he didn't need anything else in the world than this.

Today Daniel ended his prayer with the words, “To the Star Peoples, Grandfather Sun, Grandmother Moon, I give thanks for their lighting our way in times of darkness. To all these Peoples, I give thanks for all the gifts and help I get in my life each and every day.”

***

After lunch, Daniel took a nap. Curled up with Cupcake in the bed where Jack had been nursed by Shanera, he fell into an exhausted deep sleep. Jack sat with him for a long time before he returned to the couple.

Jasper and his wife were in the other room, holding hands over the table. “We will return to my mother, now that the sentinel is dead,” Jasper said.

“We can have a family,” Shanera chimed in, a rosy color covering her cheeks. “I will have children. I never dared to raise them out here. We barely have enough to eat for us, and it is not a lovely spot to live.”
“So once we are sure you have returned home safely, we will pack our things and leave as well,” Jasper said.

Well, Jack thought, how’s that for a happy ending? “You guys will have a handful of kids and make your mom very happy,” he told Jasper, clapping his shoulder.

They decided to travel to the Stargate the next day. Jack asked Jasper for a way to avoid the palace grounds and the lake. Together they discussed a possible route so the Goa'uld voices wouldn’t torment Daniel too much.

Daniel's sleep was without nightmares, and when he woke up in the late afternoon, he looked rested, and the color had returned to his face. Shanera showed them a spring with a small waterfall near the house, and Jack helped Daniel to take a “shower” before he indulged in the same treatment.

It was almost like before they had crossed the mountains. Daniel observed that there were no fishies here, but he had fun running around under the fall, and while he didn't make those joyful squeals Jack knew from other baths, Daniel still laughed and let out the little boy to play. It made Jack relax and hope that the alluring voices of the snakes had lost their effect on the tyke for the time being.

Later, when they were clean and dressed again, they sat on a boulder near the homestead, looking down into the valley.

“I lost my journal,” Daniel said. “When the raft sank.”

“I'm sorry.”

“I wrote everything in it we did. We had fun.”

“That we did.”

“Jack? Can you tell me the story of the no good, horrible, bad day again?”

“Sure.” He paused to remember how exactly he had started it. “There was that day when I woke up with my gum stuck in my hair... If you think that was bad, listen up. When I got out of bed this morning, I tripped over my shoes, and when I tried to wash that gum outta my hair, I accidentally spilled water all over me. So, I could tell it was to be a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day. Had the dang gum stuck to me like glue. When I came to work, they had pick-your-favorite-cereal-box-day at the commissary. And that was way cool. But guess what happened? Right. Carter...” Jack, who had let his eyes wander over the landscape as he was trying to recall all the right gags, blinked.

“Carter,” he said stupidly.

Daniel was already on his feet, running down the path, waving his arms and yelling, “Sam, Teal'c, Sam, Teal'c!”

The blond woman and the tall, dark-skinned warrior stopped on the path and looked at each other, then at the little kid. Carter pulled out her “Aunty Sam” smile, the one she reserved for kids, alien or not, and said, “Hi. Do I know you?”

Daniel stopped bouncing down the path and froze, like a statue, his back stiff and tense. Then he slowly turned and pleadingly looked at Jack for help.

Neither Carter nor Teal'c had seen Jack yet, but when he stood and joined the tyke, the Major gasped, and her eyes turned as big as Daniel's sometimes did. “Colonel!”
“Carter,” he said. “T…” Jack stopped and waited for them to disappear like an illusion. After all these weeks, it seemed surreal to see them again.

Daniel returned to him, suddenly shy, hiding behind his leg.

“It is good to see you, O’Neill,” Teal’c said, bowing his head, a smile tugging at his full lips, his golden tattoo blinking in the sunlight.

Carter stepped forward, and for a moment he thought she might hug him. But she just held out her hands, then cradled her P90 with them, blushed, and finally a megawatt smile appeared on her face. “Yeah. It's damn good to see you – Sir.”

“Yeah,” Jack said awkwardly, “likewise.” Then he added, “What took you so long?” But he couldn’t smother a grin at the sight of his teammates as the realization finally hit.

They were here.

They were real.

There was a tug at his leg and a tiny voice, muttering, “Told you they wouldn' rec’gnize me.”

Pulling the tyke out from behind him and scooping him up, Jack said, “They don't know, remember? We have to explain things to them.” Daniel buried his face against Jack's shoulder.

Carter took a step closer. “Sir…?” They exchanged a look, and he nodded as shock and understanding dawned on her face. “That's... Daniel?”

“It is good to see you as well, DanielJackson,” Teal’c said, his voice unusually soft.

Daniel turned and looked at them. “I'm still me. Just a little shorter. Jack says it doesn' show much.”

***

Once the greetings and introductions with Jasp and Shan were over, the newly reunited SG-1 exchanged reports. Jack didn't even lose his patience with Carter's lengthy, exhausting explanations about why the gate didn't work anymore since the lightning had hit it.

It was just too good to hear her voice.

In short terms; the SGC had tried, without success, to get through to them when nobody called in. Gate technicians had run diagnostics and drew a blank, while Carter had been stuck with the Asgard for another week.

“I thought you could detect if there’s a second Stargate on a planet because the wormhole automatically jumps from one to the other,” Jack threw in at one point, hoping he remembered that right.

“Yes, but in this case, that didn't happen. I have no explanation for it; maybe it had something to do with lingering energy from the lightning that had hit the gate. But we didn't get any openings. It was just dead. There was no way of knowing if you were still alive or what had happened.”

“So how did you find us?”

“The Asgard,” Teal’c said. “They were of great assistance.”

“Actually, I asked Thor for help. I figured he owed us since I was able to help them with their
weapon problems. It turned out he knows this world, and he knew there was a second gate. And he could also provide us with the gate address – after some research in their database.”

“Bless his little cotton socks.” Jack grinned, and Carter snorted.

“I do not believe that Thor is wearing socks,” Teal’c said, and Daniel giggled.

“We sent an UAV through this gate a week ago, but didn’t come up with much. Something is interfering with the transmission and it was also night,” Carter explained. “Then the UAV was hit by something and went down.”

“Maybe Nirra hit it,” Daniel piped up. He was perched on Teal’c’s knee, telling him all about Cupcake and how they had found her. Now he paid attention to the main conversation. “He’s Nirrti’s hubby.”

“Hubby?” Carter’s eyebrows wandered up.

“Don’t ask,” Jack muttered. “We’ll tell you all about it later. So you’re on this planet for how long?”

“Couple of days. Couldn’t get a radio signal or find any other signs of you. But we found a lake full of Goa’uld and a deserted city with a huge palace that belonged to Nirrti,” Carter said. “It’s interesting. The lake is like a giant breeding tub. The water sends out electrical shocks to the prim’tas. It’s like they’re living in a giant Jaffa pouch. Only they’re all fully matured. I think they’ve been waiting for hosts for a very long time.”

Jack grimaced and glanced apologetically at Teal’c, who didn’t take any offense.

“That’s why the water glows,” Daniel said. “The glow feeds them. It’s only visible at nights, though.”

“Indeed,” the Jaffa replied.

“So,” Carter said, taking a bite from Shan’s delicious bread, “how’ve you been? And what happened to Daniel?”

“Oh, well...” Jack said. “It’s a long story. I’ll keep the long version for my report and the briefing...” He gave her a short version, but it still took most of the evening to answer all their questions, and Daniel had to share some stories, too, like the dramatic sinking of the log raft and how Jack had built that obstacle course for him.

By the time they were done with dinner and had exchanged all the news and vital information, Daniel had wandered from Teal’c’s knees to Carter’s. She hugged the little guy close, and Jack saw moisture in her eyes.

“That DNA resequencer... I’d like you to take a look at it,” Jack said. “It might be able to change Daniel back.”

“I’ll do what I can. I’d like to contact the SGC and ask for assistance, though. DNA really isn’t my field of expertise,” she replied, and he nodded.

That was when Daniel suddenly said, “You don’t have to, Sam.”

“But, Daniel... we might be able to make you an adult again,” she said, puzzled.

The kid beamed at them and announced, “It’s okay. I wanna stay like this. It’s fun.” Oblivious to the
dead silence that followed, Daniel continued, “Jack said he'll be my dad, and we'll do loads of fun stuff together.”

“But, Daniel...” Carter began anew.

Teal'c didn't say anything, but his left eyebrow took an upwards curve.

O'Neill shook his head at his 2IC, mouthing, “Later.” Out loud, he said, “First we have to figure out if it's even possible to fix you. Then you can decide. How's that sound?”


Jack stood and held out his hand to Daniel. “I think it's time for bed, buddy.”

The kid said good night to everyone and picked up his puppy.

Once Daniel was tucked into bed, Cupcake snuggled up to his chest, Jack sat on the edge of the bed.

“So, you made up your mind about staying little?”

“Yes. Ain't you happy, too?” Daniel grinned at him expectantly. But when Jack didn't answer right away, the grin slowly faltered, and intense blue eyes were directed at him. “You... you're not happy. Why? Why you being sad again? I thought you wouldn't be sad anymore if I...”

“Daniel, if you really want to stay like this, then that's it. But have you stopped and thought about this really well? What about those... extra senses? And the fire lighting? What else can you do that we don't know about? Frasier's going to keep you in the infirmary for tests...”

“I don't have to do anything. I can control it,” Daniel said sincerely. “You don't haveta worry about me, Jack. I'll be a normal kid. I haven’t done anything strange since we returned from the palace.”

That was true, Jack realized. Scrubbing a hand through his hair, he said, “Okay. But what about your work? Your friends? Going off world? There'll be a lot of things you won't be able to do anymore. If there's a chance to fix you...”

For a short frightening moment, Jack was sure Daniel would jump to assumptions and think Jack was trying to chicken out of his promise. But they shared a long look, and he hoped Daniel could sense that he had other reasons.

“You love kids,” Daniel stated slowly. “I don’t understand...”

“I love kids. I love you,” Jack agreed. “I just... look, big you and I had a really rough time before this happened, and I'd like to... sort things out with him. And he's needed at the SGC, too.”

“You like me so much better like this,” Daniel blurted out. “You'll just get mad at me when I'm big again 'cuz I can't be the way you want me to be. We'll fight and argue an' you'll... you'll leave me again one day. You won't if I'm little.”

“I won't leave you again, period,” Jack said. “Okay, let me get this straight – a lot of people at the SGC need your expertise and your many talents and skills. Carter needs her science twin back, and Teal'c, his good friend. But I... need you, Daniel.”

Jack took the tiny hand in his and squeezed it. “Think about it, okay? Big you and I have a lot to talk about.”
Daniel looked at him blankly.

His head lolled to the left as his eyes rolled upwards, showing only white.

Jack yelled for Carter.

TBC with ch 30 Home
Chapter 30

Daniel slept.

Jack became reacquainted with hot showers and food that had no cactus in it.

Daniel slept.

Jack sat at his bedside, listening to the familiar sounds of the infirmary, wondering about the difference between the recycled, clean and well-tempered air inside the mountain and the fresh air and heat of Kansas planet.

Daniel slept.

Briefings came and went all day... Jack had already forgotten how exactly the DNA resequencer worked – not that he had understood it in the first place. The only important thing to him was that Carter had been able to adjust it to “fix Daniel” mode.

SG-1 had speculated about what might have gone wrong with Nirrti's hok'taur experiment. In the end, Carter suggested the Goa'uld hadn't been able to keep the changed bodies and brains functioning.

Teal'c agreed, saying the blending had probably failed.

Jack didn't care one way or the other. Daniel had morphed back into a grown up, and that was all that mattered.

Daniel slept.

Hammond had sent teams to blow up the Goa'uld lake and another team to make sure Jasper and Shanera reached their village without trouble.

Daniel slept.

Fraiser explained that Daniel wasn't in a coma, that he should wake up but his newly grown body probably needed the sleep to adjust.

Sixteen hours since they had come back.

And Daniel was still asleep.

Jack had been released from the infirmary rather quickly, with orders to eat and rest. He was underweight, a little sore and bruised. Nothing that couldn't be fixed with a bed, hot meals and muscle relaxants or cool creams. Janet had to wait for the results of some blood tests, but she had no objection to him staying in his base quarters.

But Jack didn't leave.

While he was sitting at Daniel's bed, watching the familiar features of his friend, the long lashes resting against his cheeks, the short dark blond hair mussed from some restless tossing, the full lips
and whiskers on his face... the slight crease between his eyebrows, like Daniel was frowning even in his current state... While Jack was sitting there, watching him sleep, he tried to compare Daniel with the boy he had been such a short while ago.

A blond little guy with bright blue eyes, bare feet and dusty clothes.

Jack could still see Daniel bouncing along with him, chattering away, playing with Cupcake or walking on his hands. He remembered how he had carried the child through the forest at first, mile after mile, torn between cursing the weight and being grateful for the company and the way Daniel had made him smile even when there wasn't much to smile about...

He had known it was probably borrowed time he spent with little Daniel. He had wanted big Daniel back, had hoped to fix his downsized friend.

Yet, Jack's heart gave a painful lurch at the realization that he had won and lost at the same time.

Lost another child.

He reached out and touched Daniel's face lightly, fingertips just brushing over the other man's temple.

_Wake up, dammit._

“Colonel.” Janet's low voice pulled him out of his thoughts. “You need sleep. You've been sitting here for hours.”

“I slept between my shower and the first debrief.”

“For how long? An hour? Two? You won't help Daniel if you collapse next to his bed. Sleep and come back when you're rested. And had breakfast.”

Rubbing his tired eyes, Jack stood and looked down at Sleeping Beauty. He placed a hand on Daniel's shoulder. “Now would be a great time to wake up, buddy,” he said. When nothing happened except the short quickening of Daniel's pulse, shown on the monitor, Jack added, “A great time, Daniel. Come on.”

Fraiser sighed. “I'll call you the minute he opens his eyes, Jack.”

“Even if I've just left,” Jack warned her. “Even if I've only been gone five minutes.”

“Yes, Colonel,” Janet said with endless patience, “even then.”

***

Jack went to bed in his base quarters. Wondering if the beds had always been this comfortable, he lay awake, staring at the ceiling, remembering little Daniel's still face as they had rushed him back into the palace on one of the horses, Carter taking the second one.

It was like a blur.

The long way to that dreaded pavilion with the unconscious kid... Then Carter studying the DNA thingy while Jack had felt Daniel's fluttering pulse and worried his ass off...

Finally Carter had returned to the horses and made a dash to the gate to get help.

By the time Teal'c had arrived by foot, Jack had been ready to shoot somebody.
O'Neill thought he'd never been so happy to see Fraiser and the doctor she brought with her, another expert in DNA analysis.

Together they had figured it out while all he could do was pace, curse, pace some more and pat Daniel's cheek. He had looked so incredibly small on the gurney, with that oxygen mask to help him breathe.

Daniel had been right.

Fraiser had been pale and her voice unusually small when she told him that Daniel was going to die if they weren't able to change him back to an adult. “Without a symbiote, his body and mind won't be able to survive the changes he’s had to undergo.” Stoically, Jack had listened to her explanations about how Daniel’s brain was using over 80 percent of its capacity ...

Like Daniel had pointed out, the difference between Shanera and him was that Shan had never become completed. So she had to live with the occasional urge to walk into that lake, but she never was in life-threatening danger as long as she kept staying away from the water.

Daniel, of course, had used the resequencer.

The night had been halfway over when Carter had given the word and they'd put the kid under the device.

Watching the creepy transformation of Daniel's body as he rapidly grew up again would be fodder for future nightmares. Even though the whole process hadn't taken very long.

While Jack relived those last hours on Kansas planet, he finally fell asleep, and the memories chased him into his dreams and became mixed with other sequences. Menkins aiming her knife at Daniel, the loud gunfire and her body hitting the ground. Daniel tossing and turning during his fever, red and yellow flowers everywhere... He dreamed of Simmons, who was laughing at Jack hysterically as he destroyed Daniel's journals and said they weren't needed anymore... because Daniel was a lab rat... and then Jack dreamed that he was going to kill Simmons, even if it meant court martial.

He woke up two hours later, drenched in sweat and with a headache.

Daniel was still asleep when Jack dragged his tired body into the infirmary, carrying a mug of coffee.

Fraiser, who stood at Daniel's bed, fiddling with his IV line, looked at him with piercing eyes.

“Colonel, what are you doing back here?”

“I slept.” He slumped down on his chair, wondering briefly if it'd have an imprint of his ass by the time Sleeping Beauty would rise and shine.

“Daniel isn't in any immediate danger. He is sleeping, supervised and taken care of,” Janet said.

“I'm not leaving.”

“Colonel, you are of no use to him if you don't get some much-needed rest and food.”

“I'll eat, I'll shower, I'll sleep. That's what you’ve told me to do, and I do it. In between, I'm not leaving.”

“Colonel... Jack...”

He scrubbed a hand over his face. His clean-shaven face. “Doc... You don't understand. I promised
not to leave him again. Ever.”

He had to be here when Daniel opened his eyes.

Janet's face softened as she gave a sigh and a nod. “Very well. I will turn a blind eye for a little while longer. But if Daniel isn't awake by dinnertime, I want you to return to your quarters and sleep. For at least six hours. Understood?”

“Sure,” he said, and she sighed again because they both knew he wouldn't.

Daniel had been washed and combed. His face looked pale and waxen in the infirmary’s artificial light. Where was that healthy tan he had gotten during their time on the planet?

“Hey.” Jack nudged the sleeping man, “I promised to buy you every brand of coffee and chocolate you want, remember? Here's the deal – wake up now and I'll stick to it. Stay like this and you'll get squat.”

Daniel's pulse quickened for a moment at the touch of Jack's hand on his shoulder and his voice, but then settled again.

Well, Daniel had never reacted well to threats or blackmail.

When Teal'c joined him later, Jack was reading a sports journal, pretending to catch up on all the hockey games he had missed. Not that he'd missed many. It had only been four weeks. Even though it felt like a lifetime to him.

Teal'c set a tray with lunch on Daniel's bedside table before he pulled up a second chair.

“Thanks,” Jack said, slowly chewing his chicken and savoring the mashed potatoes.

Four weeks of MRE, fish and cactus food made you appreciate any commissary meal you got. One would think Jack's appetite had left him at the new drama that occurred when Daniel didn't wake up after the resizing. But after Janet's very serious threat of hooking him to a feeding tube, Jack had given in to regular meals, and to his amazement his body craved all sorts of food.

No fish, though. They'd had plenty of that.

He had to be careful not to overdo it. Janet had given a strict diet plan for the next couple of weeks, containing protein, fat and sugar in the right amounts for his body to handle.

“O'Neill,” Teal'c said, “were you able to overcome the obstacles in your friendship to DanielJackson while you were on the planet?”

“Some,” Jack said. “There's stuff you don't discuss with a four year old.”

“I agree.”

“We got along swell. Mostly.”

Teal'c raised an inquiring eyebrow, but this time Jack didn't feel defensive. He shrugged. “He was a kid in many ways – with Daniel's sense for trouble.”

“You brought him home safely, once again.”

“I tried.” Jack grimaced. “Well, he's alive and he's...” He waved a hand over Daniel's body. “...apparently grown up, so...”
“He did not wish to be returned to his old self,” Teal’c said thoughtfully. “Maybe this is the reason why DanielJackson does not wake up.”

“Fraiser said his body needs to recover from the fast resizing, what with the hormones and rapid growth of organs and bones,” Jack said.

God, he hoped Daniel wasn't in some kind of denial slumber.

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“All his organs are functioning normally, and his blood tests were without growth hormones this morning,” Fraiser reported that night when Carter, Teal’c and Jack were all gathered around Daniel's bed.

“So what? Somebody's kissing him awake?” Jack stuffed his hands into the pockets of his blue BDU pants.

“How about you, sir?” Carter said, then turned slightly red and spluttered, ”I mean... that didn't come out right, sorry.”

Janet grinned and turned away, blushing as well.

Jack forced his body to relax, only allowing his eyebrows to raise as he glared at his 2IC and the blushing little Doctor. At least his jaw hadn't hit the floor.

Teal’c’s lips twitched suspiciously, but when Jack looked at him again, the Jaffa was his stoic self, hands clasped behind his back, gaze fixed on Daniel, who slowly opened his eyes and blinked at them in confusion...

“DanielJackson is awake,” Teal’c informed them.

“Ow,” DanielJackson mumbled, “what hit me?”

“Daniel!” Carter rushed to his side, grabbing his hand.

“Welcome back.” Janet smiled but then got businesslike, taking his pulse, scribbling something on his bed chart, adjusting monitors. “How are you feeling?”

“Chewed up, spit out,” Daniel murmured and smacked his lips.

“You have all the time to recover,” Janet assured him.

Jack had gone for ice chips. He knew the drill. Willing Carter to step aside with just a look, he moved to Daniel's head and gently placed one chip between his lips. “Hey, Sleepy Head. It's about time.”

Daniel swallowed the cool moisture as the ice chip melted on his lips.

Blue clouded eyes held on to Jack's. “Thanks for bringing me home.”

“I said I would, didn't I?” He gave Daniel another chip. “So. Headache?”

“Ya,” he croaked.

“How bad?”
“Pretty bad.”

“Hey, I was just going to kiss you awake,” Jack quipped.

“Bad timing then,” Daniel said, a weak smile crossing his face.

“I'm glad the security cams don't do voice recording,” Janet remarked with a wink before she shooed all of SG-1 out of her infirmary so her patient could be prodded and poked until he needed more rest.

TBC with ch 31 The old Argument
“Whatever you left in your fridge before Kansas planet was pretty much dead... or alive again, depending on how you look at it.” Jack led Daniel into his apartment two weeks later. “I threw all the junk out.”

“Thanks,” Daniel said, then frowned. “Wait. I cleared out my fridge before we left. I do it every time we go off world.”

“Take a look,” Jack said, struggling to keep Cupcake from jumping out of his arms before the apartment door was closed behind them.

The critter had spent a week in quarantine on base to make sure she was free of any diseases, fleas, worms and whatever else an alien wild dog might carry around in its fur or body. There was no vet at the SGC, so Cupcake had to stay with a bunch of geeks who studied alien fauna. Poor little thing had to live in isolation, and she wasn’t happy about it, but at least her injuries had healed, and she was only limping a little.

Once she had gotten a clean bill of health, Jack had taken her home where she stayed with him until Daniel was released from the infirmary today. The reunion of those two had been fun to watch. Cupcake, who came to the mountain with Jack to pick Daniel up, had only hesitated a moment at the sight of her former little friend.

Jack had put her down in the locker room when Daniel changed into his civvies. He'd called her, his voice soft and low, his hand outstretched. Cupcake must have recognized Daniel's smell or something in his voice. She'd taken one sniff of Daniel's hand and jumped his lap like a little rubber ball. Jack was sure her high pitched cheerful barks had been heard on the surface.

He'd miss the little lady, regardless of the many accidents she’d had in the house and the holes in his couch where she had sharpened her claws.

“Why would I take a look if you cleaned out the fridge anyway? Not that I think it needed to be cleaned out...”

“Daniel...”

“Jack?”

“Just,” he let the dog down, took his friend's shoulder and steered him towards his kitchen, “go.”

“Fine. If you insist.” Daniel opened the door to his fridge, peered inside and then did a double take. “Wow!”

“Surprise,” Jack said, smug grin all over his face as he watched Daniel study his fridge's contents.

“Hershey’s... Cadbury... you even got German and Swiss chocolate! Milk chocolate, dark chocolate, pralines.” Daniel pulled out bars of chocolate, boxes of praline truffles and three Toblerone chocolates. “Thanks, Jack. I don't know what to say...”
“The coffee stash is in the upper cupboards,” Jack said.

“Mmmh, Lindor truffles. Did you say coffee?”

“Yep.”

Later they sat in Daniel's living room, each having a mug of hot, expensive-smelling - and tasting – gourmet coffee, and an open box of chocolate on the table. Cupcake was tripping on her hind paws, doing a little jig, while she gazed at the two men.

“You spoiled her,” Daniel observed.

“Who, me? Watch this,” Jack said as he reached into the pocket of his jeans and pulled out a doggie treat. Holding the little biscuit high over Cupcake’s head, he said, “Get it!”

Cupcake jumped, all four paws leaving the ground, and caught the biscuit with her teeth. After chewing and swallowing it, she rolled on her back and stuck out all four paws so Jack could scratch her belly.

“Great.” Daniel grinned. “Did you get her housebroken, too?”

“Uh... we're working on it,” Jack muttered.

Daniel had opened the balcony door to let in the fresh air. The afternoon sun dipped the overstuffed living room in a warm light, showing the layers of dust on the countless artifacts and the piano. “I need to dust.”

“You need to take it easy.”

“I'm fine. Janet let me out of her holy halls. That means I'm fine, right?”

“Yeah. But you have to recover from all the prodding and poking.”

“It wasn't that bad. They soon found out that they couldn't find out anything and let me be. I'll be back to work after the weekend.”

“Light duty,” Jack corrected.

“I'm sure Janet would have signed me fit if you weren't still on light duty. She takes it as an excuse to make me stay at the mountain until you're back to full time,” Daniel said mildly.

“Just rub it in, why don'tcha?” Jack glared into his coffee.

It was true though. He had been to a checkup two days ago, and Janet had nagged about his shoulder and knees, then told him he couldn't go back to work full time until he had gained more weight. Apparently, there were still slight traces of the thorn bush's poison in his body. Not enough to keep him in the infirmary or make him stay home, but enough so she wouldn’t give him a clean bill of health.

Daniel, on the other hand, had been fully restored by the DNA thingy, and once his body had recovered from the shock of the fast growth, he seemed to have bounced back just fine. So even though he had to stay in the infirmary two whole weeks under observation, he was better off, on the whole, than Jack.

It wasn't as if Jack really felt bad. He was used to his shot knees and the twinges in his back, and the shoulder didn't give him trouble anymore.
He might be old, but he wasn't THAT old.

“I'm sorry,” Daniel said softly.

“I'll live.” Jack shrugged.

“No, I'm really... You've been through a lot because of me and I shouldn't...”

“Hey, stop that. No guilt trips.”

“Right.”

But it was there, all over his face and in his eyes. Daniel never let things go just like that. He mulled them over and over, going through all the what-ifs and wondering how much of whatever happened was his fault.

It was a pain.

“I should have seen it coming. Menkins was insane. I should have been more careful around her,” Daniel said bitterly.

“That's crap. I should have seen it coming, too. I let her zat me, for crying out loud. Look... None of what happened on Kansas planet was your fault, so can it,” Jack said gruffly, knowing it wouldn't keep Daniel from fretting for a while. But at least he had tried. He hadn't tried to convince Daniel that something wasn't his fault for a long time before Kansas planet. “If you want to blame someone, blame me. I was so busy bitching at you and feeling sorry for myself that I didn't see the signs.”

As a commander, he had been crappy these last few weeks before Daniel got littled.

As a friend, he had failed even more.

Daniel placed his mug on the table, and when his steady gaze met Jack's, a tentative smile appeared.

“Um... maybe we can agree that we both haven't been exactly... mature lately. Um... before... you know, I got... shrunk.”

“I can do that,” Jack said.

“We probably should talk to Sam and Teal'c.”

“As in apologize?”

“Ye-ah. For constantly being at each others’ throats and almost ruining the team,” Daniel agreed.

“Oy.” Jack sighed, then nodded. “Right. Did you know they knew all along?”

“I suspected. I told you it wouldn't be a big deal for them.”

“Didn't want them to be compromised,” Jack said before he could stop himself.

And here they were back into the old argument.

“Neither Sam nor Teal'c would feel compromised,” Daniel said, a shadow falling over his face.

“That's not the point, Daniel,” Jack snapped.

Exhaling deeply, probably struggling for calm, Daniel said, “I know you tried to protect me and Sam
and Teal'c. But we're all grown up and can take care of ourselves. Or of each other.”

“Daniel...”

“I think we should just drop it,” Daniel said curtly. “There's no point in starting this all over.”

And there it was again. The hurt resignation Jack didn’t want to hear or see from Daniel anymore. Arguments from what seemed years ago, but had just been a few months prior to the downsizing, floated back into Jack's head and Daniel's voice...

“It's bad enough that you can't treat me like an equal on the team. But whatever it is that makes you think I still need babysitting... at least outside of the job you could have a little faith in me.”

“But I am beginning to think you're not sure I'm worth trying to make this relationship work. And maybe I'm not.”

And later, when they had been fighting over the snake on the planet, the kid's sad words, tumbling through Jack's mind like a ghostly echo...

“He's angry with you 'cuz you won't believe that I feel things. He says you always just wanna be the boss an' you'll never see him... me as an ecall. An' you'll never take me serious now 'cuz I'm just five and you think I'm just a baby...”

Daniel had proved to Jack again and again that he had long since stopped being a weak link of the team. Even as a little kid, he had been way ahead of O'Neill in some ways. And Jack wasn't just thinking about the ”gifts” Nirrti had given him.

SG-1’s soul and conscience, that's what Menkins had called Daniel.

And that was exactly what Daniel was.

He probably was Jack's soul and conscience, too.

Body and heart.

That's what they were.

Jack led them through that gate, making sure the job got done. He was the annoying mother hen type of guy, watching over his kids like a hawk. Possessive, they had called him at times. Carter was their mind, bright and brilliant, juggling physics and math like Jack juggled balls. Teal'c was their shield. Combined with Jack's overprotective streak, Teal'c was like a big honkin' reliable shield, ready to squash everybody or anything that threatened to harm SG-1.

And holding them all together, in the middle, was Daniel.

The four forces of SG-1.

If Jack would've had a little more faith in the people he called his family, he'd have spared himself and Daniel a lot of the crap they had waded through.

“You're right,” Jack said flatly. “About Carter and Teal'c.”

Daniel just gazed at Jack expectantly, his eyebrows rising in mild disbelief. “I’m right?”

“Yeah. And if I hadn't been such an ass, I'd have known it. I should have told you. All of you. Those
guys, Daniel... they were special ops. I couldn't nail them. They were ahead of me – they knew with whom you'd go off world when you weren't with us. Shit, they ransacked the house and they only tore your stuff to shreds. They didn't touch any of mine. They knew which toothbrush was yours. What does that tell you?"

Daniel pondered this, let it sink in. “You were scared,” he finally said. It wasn't a question. “For us. Not just for me, but for all of us.”

“Yeah,” Jack said. “Gave me the creeps. I had no control, Daniel. I didn't know what they'd do next or to whom.” After a pause, he mumbled, “You were right. I hate when I'm not... in charge of things.”

“That's not always a bad thing. You're good at being in charge,” Daniel said softly. “You just don't have to deal with everything alone. We're capable and right there with you.”

“Says the guy who never asks for help even if his head is about to fall off,” Jack snorted with mild sarcasm.

“I guess I never realized before how much alike we really are, while we're so different in many other ways,” Daniel mused. Then he fixed Jack with an intense look. “So... you breaking up with me wasn't just an easy way out of a relationship?”

Jack closed his eyes for a moment. If he was going with the truth, he might as well go all the damn way. “At the time it felt... like the right thing to do. Breaking up saved us a hell of a lot of trouble. Or so I thought.” When no response came from the younger man, he added, “Teal'c chewed me out before we left for Kansas planet. Basically, he told me to get my head out of my ass and sort things out with you.”

“Were you going to...?”

“Tried. Wanted to... invite you over for dinner. Make things right again between us. Then you got zapped and...” Jack trailed off and felt his jaw twitch. “Changed my plans a little.”

“Yeah.” They both reached for the box of chocolate, their fingers brushing. Jack snatched his hand away, and Daniel looked at him, ignoring the sudden move.. “So... what about now?”

“Now?”

“The invitation to dinner. Does it still stand?”

Jack leaned back on the couch, gazing at Daniel's ceiling as if he could find the answer there.

Of course he couldn't.

Daniel was shifting around their time on Kansas planet as if it was an taboo zone. He had written his report and had been debriefed as soon as Janet had given green light. He'd stated all the facts and remembered everything clearly, from the moment he'd gotten shrunk to the moment he'd collapsed at Shan's house.

But until now they had avoided discussing the subject when they were alone. They had shared pragmatic stuff. Like how good it felt to shower again and shave. Had remarked on the luxury of comfy beds, TV and computers. And they agreed that the fall temps were so much more appealing than the ongoing heat.

But on the whole, Daniel didn't talk about Kansas planet, and so far Jack hadn't pushed the issue.
“You want me to take you out?” Jack asked carefully, feeling the hairs on the back of his neck rise. He wasn't freaked out by the idea. Just...

... a little, maybe.

Sure, he had joked about kissing Daniel awake without even thinking about it. Without considering what he felt for him now.

He still had no idea.

He was glad to have him back. That was the only thing Jack knew for sure. That, and that he missed the little guy.

“Well, we can't pretend nothing happened before the incident, but... “

“We can't pretend nothing happened between the incident and now either,” Jack cut him off. “Daniel... I think we both need a little time before talking dates and... stuff.”

“Um... that's okay. Wanna play chess?” Daniel stood and became busy, setting up the board.

“Sure. There's beer in your fridge, too,” Jack said.

“Does Janet approve of beer?”

“She didn't say anything specific about not drinking beer.”

“Oh, okay.” Daniel sauntered out and returned with a bottle for Jack. “I'll remind you of this when you gripe at me for drinking coffee while I'm still on meds.”

“I'm not on meds,” Jack objected. “That's different.”

“Isn't.”

“Is too.”

“Nope.”

“Daniel.”

“Jack.”

“Your move.”

TBC with ch 32 Colonel Simmons No Good, Horrible, Bad Day
SG-1 was on a mission.

They didn't have to go through the gate, and instead of his P90 Jack only carried a small handgun – just in case – and the BDU were replaced by casual jeans and a sweatshirt. Daniel was in jeans and shirt. Not plaid though. Plain navy blue was his color of the day. Jack thought the shirt brought out Daniel's blue eyes perfectly, but kept quiet about it.

Carter looked very businesslike in her blue slacks and white blouse while Teal'c was sporting a woolen cap and black chinos and a gray shirt.

They all wore leather jackets.

Sunglasses, too.

Yep, casual, but cool.

They fit nicely in the modern air-conditioned office where the cute blond secretary made them wait.

“What can I do for you, Colonel O'Neill? Or in other words – what brings the whole famous SG-1 into my corner of the world?”
Jack resisted the urge to wipe the smooth smile off the other man's face. “Oh, we'd like to have a little chit and chat with you, Simmons,” he said, a menacing smile frozen on his own face. “Carter?”

She stepped forward and placed a thick folder on Simmons's desk. “These are the copies of Colonel O'Neill's and Doctor Jackson's reports about what happened on P35-X49.”

Simmons didn't even blink. He was a tough bastard. Jack had to give him that. Most of the cowards he interrogated earlier this week had broken down rather fast, especially those questioned by Teal'c.

“We had a little run-in with Doctor Menkins on Kansas planet,” Jack began.

“Which is P35-X49,” Daniel interrupted.

“I know about the incident. I see that you’ve had a growth sport, Doctor Jackson,” Simmons said.

“Oh, yeah. One day they're little kids, and whaddaya know – suddenly they're all grown up,” Jack replied with mock melancholy.

“We did a little research about Doctor Menkins,” Carter said. “You know the drill. SOP. Because she downsized Doctor Jackson and took him hostage.”

“Doctor Menkins came to the SGC under your personal orders,” Daniel said coldly. “Oh, and she was on classified missions – also by your order – a lot. According to Area 51, she was away for long periods of times. That's interesting, especially if you keep in mind that she obviously vanished from the face of the Earth during those times. No known location of Doctor Menkins for months in between. Now we know she can't go off world without using the gate. So... where might she have been instead? Some secret military base, even more secure than the SGC? Or... some illegal facility, let's say... at the end of the world? Or maybe the NID has a ship. Like a Tok'ra scout ship... who knows?”

“I don't know what you're talking about, Doctor Jackson. Please enlighten me,” Simmons said, baring his teeth as he continued to smile.

“I think you do, Colonel Simmons.” Teal'c's deep voice cut through the room like a staff blast.

“There's enough material in these reports to court martial you, Colonel.” Carter sniped. “Doctor Menkins acted on your orders when she downsized Doctor Jackson and tried to escape with him to another planet.”

“That's interesting. You don't seriously believe that anybody will listen to these outrageous, false accusations, Major Carter.” Simmons gave an arrogant little snort.

Jack felt a hand on his arm and met Daniel's blazing eyes. They looked at each other, and as Jack gritted his teeth, Daniel shook his head slightly.

Just one punch, Jack thought. Just one.

But he kept quiet, only bouncing on the balls of his feet a little, to get rid of the tension.

“In fact, Colonel Simmons,” Carter replied snidely, “a lot of people have already listened to these outrageous accusations.”

Jack smirked at the slight tremble in Simmons’s hands even though the slip merely lasted for a moment. The colonel, who was seated behind his desk, grabbed a pen and played with it. “Is that so?”
“Indeed.” Teal'c glowered.

“And why are you here in civilian clothes? I didn't get the invitation to a hearing, nor do I see guards with you,” Simmons said glibly.

“Graciousness,” Jack snarled.

Simmons let out a nervous little laugh. “I beg your pardon?”

“General Hammond passed on a lot of the evidence to higher places. But you are right. There isn't enough to get you into a trial. Yet.” Daniel said. “We're holding things back. Because we'd like you to do us a favor.”

Simmons' eyebrow wandered upwards, and he pressed a button on his phone. “Miss Turner? Our guests would like to leave...”

“Menkins talked,” Jack snapped. “So did Warren when we questioned him. You know? Major Warren, commander of SG-2? Ring a bell? You were Maybourne’s successor after he got arrested.”

“...in a minute,” Simmons corrected himself, “Bring us some coffee, please. Thank you.”

“Nice save,” Carter sneered and continued, pointing at the folder on the desk, “You'll also find reports of interrogations with several officers... former officers of the SGC. Said officers were arrested yesterday and will be court-martialed for treason. General Hammond is in possession of the original records of those questionings, carried out by Colonel O'Neill and Teal'c. The records haven't left his office – yet.”

“We know the addresses of several worlds with rogue bases such as the one Colonel Maybourne commanded,” Teal'c said. “The interrogations of Major Warren and his accomplices were very successful.”

“Menkins was supposed to meet one of your units on another planet,” Daniel said. “With me as her guinea pig.”

Simmons leaned back in his chair, put the pen down and folded his arms over his chest. “Menkins is dead. It's a waste of good material. She was one of the most promising scientists at Area 51. You are lucky, Colonel O'Neill, that the circumstances of her death were so clear. Even though we have only yours and Doctor Jackson's word on it.”

“Oh, she was good, you could say that,” Daniel replied.

“She was a little too sure of herself, though. Gave away vital information on the network of illegal off world bases. The rest wasn't too hard to figure out,” Jack said in a conversational tone. “We just had to ask the right questions to the right people after we came home.”

Simmons opened his mouth when his secretary entered and placed a tray with steaming mugs of coffee on the small conference table in a corner of the room. With an indignant look at SG-1, she left and closed the door behind her.

The smile vanished from Simmons's face. He leaned forward, placing his palms on the polished mahogany surface of his desk. “What do you want, O'Neill?”

“I'll come to that later,” Jack said, grinning. His turn to bare his teeth. “We nailed everyone who was on your payroll, Simmons. As we speak, several other NID agents are being interrogated. I'd say there'll be a barbecue at the end of this fine day.”
“Maybourne was an idiot to try and recruit you,” Simmons spat. “I told him it would come back to bite him. The SGC is a sore thumb, a pool of nepotism. Hammond is blinded by his favoritism of his so-called flagship team. While all SG-1 does is get into trouble. And you—” His hand shot forward, a well manicured finger pointing at Daniel. “You are the worst of all. Always Mister Nice Guy. Mister Ethical. Throwing obstacles wherever you can to stop missions from being successful. At the same time, you let your commanding officer fuck you on a daily basis. If that isn't a joke, I don't know what is.”

“You see anyone laughing around here?” Jack asked.

“I'd be careful with false accusations if I were you, Simmons,” Carter said.

“There is nothing to tell, no matter how loudly you will ask,” Teal'c growled.

“All of you are compromised. We should make a clean sweep of that base,” Simmons continued, anger and loathing lacing his voice.

“Too bad the President doesn't see it that way,” Daniel said.

“The President...” Simmons started.

“Hey, the President is a buddy of mine. Did you know he invited me fishing once?”

Daniel turned to Jack. “He did?”

“Yes. Twice. Was off world though.”

“This is ridiculous. Well, we'll see how much the President really likes you. No one wants a queer for a hero,” Simmons said. “It doesn't look good, not even when it's Colonel O'Neill of the famous SG-1. And once you're gone, we will find adequate officers who are not afraid to take whatever risks are necessary to defend this planet, regardless of what some natives might think or feel about it. Menkins might have failed with the mission. But one way or the other, I will get rid of you, O'Neill. I know a lot of people who would love to see you disgraced and in jail.”

“Have you talked to Kinsey lately?” Daniel asked cynically.

“If Menkins would have succeeded, we not only would've gotten rid of you two, but we also would've had a way of moving genetic technology forward. You are always so eager to help civilizations to gain knowledge and fight for their own rights, Doctor Jackson. Why is it that you don't value the same for your own planet? You would have made a huge contribution in helping Earth to overcome genetic failures and to build a new generation of children who would become soldiers able to defend this planet.”

“How did you know about the machine in the first place?” Carter asked.

“One of our off world teams investigated the planet a few weeks before SG-2 went there. We keep track of your mission schedules so we're way ahead of you.”

Jack couldn't believe his luck. The man was so busy gloating that he lost all caution and told them exactly what they needed to know. “Then you contacted Warren so he could lead his team right to the device and recommend for us to go and check it out,” he prompted.

Simmons just looked smug.

“But Menkins didn't know how the machine worked. She seemed a little anxious because Sam didn't
“Come with us,” Daniel wondered. “If you knew all about the device, why didn't you brief her on it?”

“Oh, she knew how it worked. She was waiting for the right time,” Jack said as realization hit him. “Carter and Teal'c not being there played right into her hands. That way, she only had to deal with two of us. When she had us right where she wanted, she acted. It was a lot of good timing and luck... which then turned into a lot of bad luck – for her.”

Little droplets of sweat appeared on Simmons's temples. Not so much gloating anymore.

“She let herself being caught by you and an insignificant little kid.”

“A super host little kid,” Jack snarled. “Listen up, bucko. Doctor Jackson may be a lot of things. But he is never insignificant, you got that? That kid had more guts at any time than you'll ever have.”

Simmons sneered. “Get out of my office.”

O'Neill turned to Carter and gave her a nod. She and Teal'c left quietly. Daniel closed the door behind them, leaning against it.

Simmons glared at them. “What?”

Jack held up a hand. “Patience...”

When his cell rung, he answered it, listened for a moment and then said, “Okay. Thanks, Carter. Give us five before sending them in.” Flipping his phone shut and pocketing it, Jack placed his hands on Simmons's desk and leaned forward into the other colonel's personal space.

“They're waiting for you outside, Simmons. Thanks for that little confession speech you gave us. It filled in the blanks just nicely. And now that Carter has carried her little bug out with her, we can have some privacy.”

“You won't get away with this, O'Neill!”

“Oh, but I did. Warren already gave us enough to nail your ass for being Maybourne’s successor. Feretti was on your black list as well because he came out and tried to warn me when he smelled a rat. He'll be happy to testify against you. We arrested Warren and two other officers. Turned out you not only let them continue Makepeace's work, you also made Warren find some guys to trash my house. Friends of Makepeace and Tobias, who thought I had no right to put an end to the little illegal game Maybourne was playing.”

“There's no evidence for that. And not even you would be stupid enough to bring the subject of homosexuality into the courtroom,” Simmons said. “So even if they arrest me, I'll tell them what you and your...” he shot a disgusted look at Daniel “…lover do at your house. I can't wait to see their expressions when they find out what Colonel O'Neill really is. A queer. A faggot. Lower than...”

Daniel was fast.

Before Jack could say anything, Daniel had crossed the room, grabbed Simmons by the lapel of his expensive suit jacket and pulled him out of his comfy leather chair. Swinging the colonel around like a puppet and slamming him against his mahogany bookshelf, Daniel was ready to beat the crap out of him.

“I'll have you court-martialed for assaulting a superior officer,” Simmons hissed, probably feeling a little breathless in Daniel's grip.
Everything in Jack cheered Daniel on to land a few punches.

But he wasn't stupid.

Outraged, yes. Mad as hell, yes.

But not stupid.

And neither was Daniel.

“I won't give you any reason to accuse me of anything,” Daniel said. “I feel sorry for you, Simmons. If Jack is lower than dirt, you are the scum in a scum bucket. Actually, I can't even find any words to describe how low I think you are. And I'm a linguist.” He gave the man a single shove against the bookshelf and then released him, grimacing as if he had seen a particularly disgusting insect.

Simmons wasn't able to leave the spot at his bookshelf because now Jack had moved into Daniel's place.

He didn't even touch the man, just stood very close to him.

Frank Simmons and Jack exchanged a long look, and Colonel O'Neill granted Simmons a glimpse into the dark side of his soul. The side he usually kept locked up, even from himself most of the time. It wasn't a pretty side and probably as dark as the nights on Kansas planet.

Simmons blanched.

Jack said quietly, “I don't ever want to get a call from you or any of your friends again. Neither will any other members of my team. If you so much as mention mine or Daniel's name in context with your accusations – ever – or if you even think of repeating any of what you called us, in court or anywhere, you're going to wish they'd fried you before I reached you. Before anyone of SG-1 reached you.”

“You're threatening me, Colonel?” Simmons hissed, but Jack was close enough to see what he wanted to see in the other man's eyes.

He could smell it, too.

Fear.

“Let me think about it... Yep, I just did.”

“I have friends in high places...”

“So does he,” Daniel said from behind Jack. “President, remember?”

Jack reached out and, with a smirk at the way Simmons tried to jerk back and slammed into the bookshelf again, adjusted the colonel's tie. “Oh, by the way... if you think you have nothing to lose and try to play dirty after all? Nobody will back you up on this. Not even Kinsey. He has a few dead bodies we know about as well. He won't mess with his good press reputation either. So he won't get involved with gay bashing in court.”

“Or with his involvement in illegal bases, off world or otherwise,” Daniel jumped in.

“What do you know about Kinsey?” Simmons whispered.

“Enough,” Daniel replied. It was a lie, a shot into the dark. But if possible, Simmons paled even
“Nobody knew he’s behind this. How...”

“We have our sources,” Jack said.

“But you don't have evidence,” Simmons said.

“Well,” Jack took a step back, “if you play nice, cooperate and all, they might let you live at least. Maybe you have some goods to share.”

Simmons didn't answer, but when they came to arrest him and all rights were read and all questions were asked, he gave a slight nod in Jack’s direction before he was led out of his office.

SG-1 left the building, leaving mugs of cold coffee and a confused secretary behind.

TBC with ch 33 Off World - and epilogue
“Now this really, royally sucks,” Jack said, glaring at the falling rain through the tent flap.

“It's just rain.” Daniel shrugged.

“I'm not talking about the rain. I'm talking about being stranded off world. Again. With you. Again.”

“There's an upside to it,” Daniel said. He was outstretched on his sleeping bag, gazing at the tent ceiling.

“And that would be – what?”

“I'm not downsized, dead or injured...”

“Yet.”

“There's no insane scientist with us, and Sam is working on the problem. Well, she will be as soon as the rain stops.”

Jack clicked his radio. “Carter?”

“It's still raining, sir. Of course, if you want me to dismantle the DHD while it’s still pouring...”

He closed his eyes in desperation. “No. Sorry. Stay put until it stops. You okay over there?”

“We're fine. No water leaks yet,” she replied. “Teal'c is kel'no'reeming, and I have a book.”

“Right. At least the tents keep the water outside.”

“Yes, sir. I'm sure we'll have the problem fixed in no time once it stops raining,” she said, her voice reassuring even through the radio.

“I have all the confidence in you, Major. O'Neil out.”

Jack lay down on his own sleeping bag and joined Daniel in the ceiling-gazing.

Well, at least there was nothing odd on this planet for Daniel to touch. Not in their area anyway. Just rocks, trees and no ruins. The natives were so native that even Daniel couldn’t make out whether they were Earth-related or not. Jack thought they looked a little like the Playdoh people Charlie used to make. Simply structured faces, plump bodies with sturdy arms and legs. The color of their skin was kinda orange, and they lived in caves.

They were nice people though, not aggressive like the Unas, just very shy.

SG-1 had spent three days on this world, making first contact. Daniel was communicating with hands and feet, having a field day with discovering a whole new race while Carter and Teal'c looked for naquadah and other useful resources. Jack had let his kids play, enjoyed the wilderness and even went fishing with one of the Playdoh guys, who'd showed him the best place at a river.
Once the other man had left him, Jack had sat on the shore, looking over the rippling water, and thought how part of him missed Kansas planet.

Not the Goa'uld or the creepy mountains. Or Daniel's cold, detached eyes towards the end.

But the wilderness, the fishing and the walking. The baths in lakes and rivers, the morning sun when he woke up in one of their self-made shelters. The smell of summer and the laughing, chattering little boy at his side.

The stories Jack had told at campfires.

The feeling of the little hand in his own when they wandered through the woods and the fun they had playing “Twenty Guesses” and “I Spy”.

Shaking his head, Jack thought how funny it was that he seemed to forget the heat, the sweat, the dirt and mosquito bugs. The crickets and the grassland or how he had shot Menkins and buried her among those yellow and red flowers. It was a mechanism of the mind to filter out all the gross stuff and leave the good memories in the end.

Cupcake was one of the good memories. The critter had settled in with Daniel just fine, eating his socks, sleeping in his bed and playing with his artifacts. When Daniel was at the mountain or off world, she was watched by his elderly neighbor who took her out to the park and spoiled her rotten with all sorts of treats.

The puppy had even learned to walk on a leash, and the accidents in the house had gotten remarkably less, too.

Jack was glad the mini dog had adapted so well. On the other hand, he wondered if being wild and free would have been the life she would have chosen for herself, if she could.

“Jack...?” Daniel's voice got him out of his thoughts. The rain was still dripping, and a wet patch had emerged at the left corner of the tent roof.

“Daniel?”

*Can you tell me a story, Jack?*

“Can I ask you something?”

“Sure. What is it?” The pause that followed was so long that Jack raised his head and looked over at Daniel, who mirrored his own pose, lying on his back, arms crossed under his head. “Daniel?”

“Would you have let me choose? If I hadn't collapsed. Would you have let me stay little?”

_You like me so much better like this... You'll just get mad at me when I'm big again 'cuz I can't be the way you want me to be. We'll fight and argue an' you'll... you'll leave me again one day. You won't if I'm little._

“If that really was what you wanted, yes.”

“I did.”

“No, you didn't.” Jack realized that now was the time to talk, whether he liked it or not. Fixing his gaze at the wet patch on the ceiling, he continued, “You thought I'd leave you once you were big again. And I won't.”
“Not now. But what about in a couple of weeks or months from now? When the whole... effect of the incident wears off? When we crash into each other again about some differing opinion? Because I don't think either of us can really change.”

“We'll deal. We always do,” Jack said.

“What about us? I mean... are we just... friends now?”

“We're not 'just' friends, Daniel.”

“No, I guess not. We've never been 'just' friends.” There was a smile in Daniel's voice, and Jack didn't have to turn his head to look. He knew Daniel's face when he smiled. The little dimples and the way his eyes twinkled.

The steady drip, drip of the rain calmed Jack, but it also reminded him of the rain on Kansas planet. When they had sat in that temple, waiting for it to stop. And later when Jack had held a shivering little kid in his arms, wondering how the hell Daniel had gotten himself into this new fine mess...

“This must be hard for you,” Daniel said. “A lot harder than it is for me. You really loved that kid, didn't you?”

“Yeah.” And yes, he missed the kid. Because the kid had taught him to let go of some of his grief about Charlie. Had reminded him how much he had loved being a dad. But the kid had been Daniel, not Charlie. And while Charlie was gone, Daniel was here. Just differently.

“Sorry. If I hadn't lost consciousness...”

“But you did. And as much as I loved the kid, I'm glad you're back. I missed you.”

And he had. Pain in the neck and all, Daniel was one of the very few real friends Jack had. Aside from Teal'c and Carter, Daniel was the one who knew him best. If Jack ever needed someone to kick his own butt, he could rely on Daniel to do it. If Jack needed someone to verbally spare and bitch with, it was Daniel who picked up on it and gave as good as he got. If Jack needed someone to hug and mother hen, it was Daniel who got the attention because Daniel needed to be hugged and mother henned, whether he liked it or not. And if Jack needed to whine or be silly, Daniel rolled his eyes at the right places or joined him in the silliness.

“You say that now.” Daniel snorted. “Wait until I got us into trouble again.”

“I'll even say it then. After I've wrung your neck.”

“That's touching.” Daniel grinned.

“You know me. I'm Mister Sensitive.” Jack grinned, too. But he didn't feel like grinning really. Because he knew there was a lot he should tell Daniel. Verbalize it just once, even though Daniel probably knew by now how Jack really felt.

And again, the words didn't come across his lips.

Why had it been so much easier to talk to the kid?

“So...” He heard Daniel change position and out of the corner of his eye, saw him lying on his side now, watching Jack. “What does that make me now? A son with a growth spurt?”

“Nope. Not really.”
Jack had done some soul searching in that matter. And he had to admit that part of him would probably always feel responsible for Daniel. Because he was the kid of the team in some ways. But a much larger part in Jack didn't want to be a “father” to adult Daniel. This Daniel had grown up a long time ago and had had his own father. Even if a huge part of their relationship was about caring and family, they had ventured on from being friends to being lovers, and the physical attraction to Daniel, the man, was still there. No doubt about it.

Yet, Jack couldn't forget the child his former lover had been. A child Jack would've taken home and raised as his son.

In a way, it was like they were two different people. This Daniel and the little one. Yet, so alike in their personalities.

Oy.

Messed up. That's what he felt about Daniel now.

But...

"It's still just you who stumbled into one of your adventures and, thankfully, returned without dying.”

He turned and mirrored Daniel's position, looking at him for the first time since they had started talking. “I hate the dying part. That's really annoying.”

“Yeah. I know. Me too.”

They fell silent again. It was still raining. Jack knew if he wanted to say something deep and meaningful, now was the time. If the rain stopped, Carter would start repairing the DHD, they would have MRE dinner and then go home to briefings and physical checkup. And for some reason, Jack felt like Daniel would stop talking about Kansas planet once they were back on Earth.

But before he could come up with something, Daniel said, “You were the best father to me since I lost my own. That's... I wanted to... thanks.”

“You would've done the same for me.” Jack shrugged. “Looks like I'm better at being a dad than being a friend. Or lover. Though, considering what happened to Charlie, I've never been too great at that, either.”

“We talked about Charlie,” Daniel said softly. “It's not your fault. It was an accident. A tragic, horrible accident. But an accident.”

“So was the death of your parents. Doesn't make it easier.”

“No. Funny how we both got a second chance there for a while, huh? You in being a dad and me being a son. I've been thinking about this, Jack. I think I... feel better about some things now.”

“Like what?”

“Like... I grew up believing no one in the whole world would ever love me as much as my mom and dad did. No matter how hard I'd try to behave. No matter how hard others might try to love me. My foster care time wasn't all bad, Jack. But mostly I felt cut off from everybody. Like there was an invisible wall between me and the rest of the world. A wall I never could break through.” Daniel smiled awkwardly. “That's... a little odd to talk about... However, you crashed through that wall a long time ago. Because you believed in me. Even when you were fighting it tooth and nail. Even when you wanted to smack me upside the head. Even when you gritted your teeth and steam was coming out your ears – you still trusted me. I never realized that. I always just saw how you seemed
to fight me every step of the way. I didn't want to see...”

“What?”

“That we're so much alike. That we both have these commitment problems. It's not just you, Jack. We're both bad at trusting people, even friends, when it comes to making ourselves vulnerable.”

”There's that...” Jack sighed.

“Looking back at Kansas planet now, I remember how you struggled. How hard you tried to overcome all these trust issues between us. And you did. Some part in you learned to trust me again even though I was that kid... You made me feel safe. And loved.”

“I don't make things easy for you,” Jack admitted tentatively. “I'm not exactly... sensitive most of the time.”

“And I'm not the easiest to work with. Once I've focused and zeroed in on something, I sometimes forget to see things from where you stand. I always thought it was just your military mindset that gets you mad at me when I don't agree with standing orders.”

“It is. But not always.”

“I know that. I think I understand you a lot better now.”

“I'm trying to keep you safe. All of you.”

“I know.”

“I'm not very good at showing it. And I shouldn't care this much either. It can affect command decisions. But there it is.”

“I think the caring is what makes us special,” Daniel said.

“Yeah. Makes us vulnerable too, though.”

“If it really comes down to it, none of us would allow himself to be compromised. We've proved that often enough.”

“Simmons got very close to getting his wish,” Jack said, feeling his jaw twitch in anger. He still regretted that he hadn't been able to beat some sense into the bastard.

“Hammond is backing us up. If you would've talked to him right away...”

“I screwed that one up pretty bad,” Jack muttered, embarrassed. “But it's tricky with 'Don't ask, don't tell' even when you have a superior like Hammond. They threatened to go to higher places. I didn't want anybody to get into trouble because of this.”

“This?” Daniel inquired, eyebrows raised.

“Personal feelings... I meant it when I said the program needs you and that we can't put ourselves over the job.”

“You were right about that.” A shadow settled on Daniel's face, and he let himself fall on his back again.

Jack did the same, realizing that the wet patch at the tent roof had grown.
“There'll always be talk,” he said after a while. “There always has been, and there always will be. About us... you and me. Me and Carter. Wonder if there's talk about Carter and Teal'c?”

“Maybe we're having orgies.” Daniel snorted softly.

“Oh, yeah. With drugs and alcohol en masse.”

“You think Junior likes being in the mix?”

“Daniel, that's just too gross to even think about.” Jack grunted.

Daniel laughed, a dirty suggestive little sound. “I bet he... it... knows what goes where.”

Jack grabbed his cap and slapped Daniel with it. “You have some sick imagination, Doctor Jackson.”

“Hey, stop that!” Daniel seized Jack's arm and tried to wrestle the cap away from him. Daniel's other hand searched for the bandanna. Jack managed to jerk his cap out of Daniel's reach and then slapped him again over the head.

“You were such an angel at four,” Jack told him. “Look what a dirty mind you have as an adult.”

“Five.”

“Whatever!”

“Yeah? I remember you saying something about being bald by the time I was big again.” Daniel shoved Jack away from him and then held up his bandanna, the olive fabric dangling from his fingers. “See this? Slap me again, and I'm going to tie you up, Flyboy.”

“Whoa, Danny... I don't think so,” Jack shouted and was on top of his squirming, laughing archaeologist in a flash, grabbing his wrists and pressing him to the ground with his full weight. Never taking his gaze from Daniel's sparkling blue eyes, Jack pulled the bandanna out of Daniel's hands. “I like the basic idea, though.”

“I thought you might.” Daniel huffed, bumping into Jack.

He felt Daniel's breath on his face, realizing how close they were. “Daniel...”

“Jack?” Daniel blinked, trying for innocent and failing miserably.

“I'll get back to the topic,” Jack said, voice husky. “When we're home. My place. ASAP.”

“Is that my invitation to dinner?”

Jack's radio crackled, and Carter's voice said, “Sir, Daniel? The rain has stopped. I think I figured out the problem.”

Jack acknowledged and reluctantly left Daniel's warm body.

**Epilogue**

**Oneness**

Jack checked the menu, then his watch and glared at the front door.
Daniel was late.

Of course he was. He was almost always late.

Eight weeks ago, Daniel had been a four – or five – year old munchkin and Jack had considered thoughts of adoption and retirement. Four weeks ago, Jack had still wondered whether he should call Daniel “Son” and give him some fatherly scoldings instead of just kicking his butt back through the gate if they were cross with each other. Which they almost never were anymore now that Daniel was back to normal. They had returned to their usual routine of bickering and rolling their eyes at each other. But the overly aggressive touch was gone from their verbal sparring, and neither missed it.

Last week they had been stuck off world in the rain, and things had moved forward.

A lot.

Now Jack was... what?

Nervous?

Oh, yeah.

His last checkup had been peachy, his weight back to normal again, his knees and back not bitching any more than usual. It was easy to get back into the routine of briefings, missions, paperwork, Fruit Loops in the mornings and pizza in the evenings.

Sometimes Jack wished he hadn't lost the video cam with the footage of a little Daniel playing with Cupcake.

Or Daniel's journal which he had scribbled in all the time.

But he didn't dwell, and maybe it was better that way.

There was Cupcake to remind him of the tyke and the good and crappy times they’d had.

The critter had actually grown a bit and enjoyed being a doggie just fine.

Jack looked at his watch again.

It was Friday.

The Friday night routine with Daniel was something he had missed a lot before the downsizing. And they hadn’t got back into it since coming home from Kansas planet.

Even though they had seen each other outside of work here and there.

Things were fine between them.

Dandy, in fact.

Dammit, where was he? If he thought this was funny or seductive, Jack had news for him.

He started pacing the hallway, stopped at the mirror, adjusted his blue shirt and glared at himself. Had his hair been that gray before Kansas planet? His face, that angular? Had he been that old?

Crap.
Daniel was all long legs, blue eyes and great biceps. He'd probably realized how old exactly Jack was. And how shot. Bad knees, bad back and all those scars.

Okay, Jack thought, now you're being ridiculous. Daniel knows all those scars, has seen them a lot. But Daniel was so... young. Right, maybe Jack was having second thoughts about this, after all.

Shit, he had been at a point where he was committed to raising the kid.

But now that Daniel was big again, he was very much the guy Jack had fallen for so many years ago.

The more time went by, the more it seemed like their time on Kansas planet was a dream sequence outside of real life. And Jack knew that didn't make sense and would make his head hurt if he thought too deeply about it.

Last week on the planet of Playdoh-people, Daniel had been seductive and masculine... Any thoughts about adoption and retirement had flown out of Jack's window in a flash. Thinking about it now, he decided being off world was the only reason he hadn't jumped Daniel right there and then.

Still, the whole situation was messing with Jack's head, and he didn't like it.

And why was Jack having so many more problems with it than Daniel? Daniel, who had wanted to stay little so Jack would take him home and be his dad?

“For crying out loud,” he huffed and stormed into his kitchen to get himself a beer.

“Sorry I'm late,” Daniel called from the hall, and the fast tripping of little feet announced Cupcake’s arrival, too.

Jack realized he'd never asked Daniel to give him back his spare key. Neither had Daniel asked Jack to return the key to the apartment.

“Well, it's about time,” Jack yelled back. “Want a beer?”

“Uh, no. You have wine?”

Of course he had wine. “Don't know. Let me check.”

“It's okay. I'll take a beer.”

Jack opened the bottle of red wine he had bought last week and poured a glass while Daniel sauntered in, dropping his leather jacket onto one of the kitchen chairs. “Hey.”

“Hey.” Jack handed him the wine, then picked up the puppy and cuddled her while he got his nose licked.

“Thanks.” Daniel smiled as he whirled the red liquid in the glass.

Jack put Cupcake down, got his beer, and they raised glass and bottle. “Cheers.”

“To us,” Daniel said quietly.

Jack watched him take a sip and close his eyes for a moment. “Mmh. This is good. What's for dinner?”

“Pizza.” Jack shrugged, pointing at the menu on the fridge.
“You promised to wine and dine me. And all you can come up with is pizza takeout?”

“Actually, I recall promising to tie you up. You said something about dinner.”

Why on Earth did he say things like this? Jack thought the moment the words had left his mouth. Just a minute ago, he had been wondering if this was a good idea...

“Sorry,” Daniel said, a mischievous gleam in his eyes. “No dinner, no dessert. Oh, speaking of which... I brought cake. Chocolate cake with icing and all.”

“What kind of icing?”

“Caramel.” Daniel took the menu from the fridge and looked it over, then ordered Hawaiian pizza with extra cheese.

***

Later, after the empty pizza boxes had been put away and the chocolate cake with caramel icing was reduced to two sad-looking pieces on the plate, Jack and Daniel slouched on the couch, stuffed and lazy. There was a fire going, and the dog was curled up in front of it, fast asleep.

“If you invite me again next Friday, I'll bring another cake,” Daniel said. “Promised you lots of cake, remember?”

“Oh, yeah. Pie's good, too.”

“Apple pie?”

“Deal.”

Daniel stretched his legs in front of him. “Jack?”

“Yeah?”

“Are you going to tie me up or not?”

“You brought the bandanna?” Jack asked. He had his head against the back of the couch, his eyes closed, feeling too content and full of cake and pizza to move or do anything else.

“ Took it home with me. Cupcake chewed on it. Had to leave it.” Daniel yawned.

“Oy.”

“Maybe next week. I could get a new one.”

Jack cracked one eye open when Daniel leaned heavily against him and then lay down, his head coming to rest in Jack's lap. “Hey,” he said, gazing down at the familiar face.

“Hey,” Daniel whispered. “You remember the Indian prayers?”

Jack cupped Daniel's unshaven face with his hand, brushing his thumb over Daniel’s temple. “Yeah.”

For a while Daniel kept silent, and Jack's thumb continued to tenderly caress his face, feeling the familiar arousal slowly increasing. Daniel's stubble felt good, so did his skin. Jack breathed in the scent of shampoo, fresh and spicy.
“They had prayers for everything. Saying thanks, calling the spirits... love prayers,” Daniel said finally.

“Sounds sappy.” Jack smiled down at Daniel, fingers carding through his hair.

“If I stay here tonight, will you dump me out tomorrow?”

“No,” Jack said. Not tomorrow, not the day after, not ever.

“Are you sure?”

“I'm sure.” Because this was right. This was the way it should be. Should have been a long time ago.

“I'm still trying to figure out if you... if this is going to be some kind of honeymoon until real life gets to us again. We won't change who we are. What if we get into each others’ way again?”

“We'll deal with it,” Jack said, like he had said the last time they'd talked about it. Then he added, “If I have to, I'll quit.” He had mulled this over for some time, and it seemed so easy to say now.

Once Jack had made this choice, he felt like a rock had fallen from his shoulders.

Daniel shot up so fast, he almost hit Jack's chin with his head. “What?”

“If you want me... this... and they give us crap over it, I'll quit.”

“Jack... that's huge. You said the SGC...”

“Needs you. You and Carter and T.”

“You are the leader of SG-1, Jack. The SGC needs you as much as they need Sam and Teal'c... We won't function the way we do without you.”

“What? You saying you like my leadership skills?” Jack snorted softly.

“Well, I'm used to you.” Daniel shrugged. “And I trained you well.”

“Smart ass.”

“You can’t quit. You said it yourself. We can’t put a relationship over the job.”

“And I won't. Unless I have to. If push comes to shove and I'm not able to look scary enough to hold them at bay anymore, if they make me choose, that's it. I'm sure they won't, but I'm just saying. So you know it.”

“But... Why?”

“Why? Oh, I don't know... I'm an old grouch in the military, and there's this great-looking, youngish, fit guy who seems to have no problem with old and scarred. You think I'd throw that away? No chance.” Jack grinned.

“Wait a minute... what happened to 'it's not worth the sex’?”

“The sex isn't worth it,” Jack said. “But you are.”

“Oh, that's deep.” Daniel smiled. “Meaning of life stuff.”

“Hey, this is me talking feelings,” Jack growled. “You better appreciate it, book-boy.”
Daniel rolled his eyes, but the smile stayed as he got up and left the room. Jack followed suit.

***

Nights on Earth were different than on Kansas planet.

While it was dark in his bedroom, the moon sent enough light through the window that Jack could make out Daniel's features next to him. Plastering himself to his lover's back, Jack burrowed his nose in Daniel's neck, inhaling the smell of shampoo, sweat and sex coming from both their bodies.

Mingled. Joined. Finally.

Jack was sated, though a little sore, and he knew Daniel felt the same. Or would, if he was awake. He listened to the deep, even breaths and smiled.

This was how it was supposed to be.

Putting an arm around the sleeping man, Jack settled his chin on Daniel's shoulder and kissed his ear lightly.

“Mmh?” Daniel mumbled.

“Love you,” Jack whispered, still feeling a little awkward saying it out loud. He had tried it for the first time when they had made love earlier, and Daniel’s expression had blown him away. Jack had never seen so much... devotion in anybody’s eyes. Never so much love.

Daniel was his.

He was Daniel’s.

Together they were completed.

“L've ya too,” Daniel mumbled. With a contented sigh, he went back to sleep.

Jack nuzzled Daniel's neck, remembering his lover's whispered words as he'd told Jack another Indian prayer.

Oneness as light to banish the darkness

Oneness as comfort when pain has come

Oneness as shelter from raging storm

There is no chill of night, there is nothing more to fear

For we are one.

fin

A/N: I found the “Thank You Prayer” Daniel says before every meal on this site:
http://audreysblog.yuku.com/topic/404

The “Oneness” Prayer comes from here:

http://www.spiritisup.com/boundasonehw.html

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!