All Her Colors

by MissAnnThropic

Summary

The Air Force could tell him not to touch her, but it couldn’t tell him not to love her.

Notes

General Warning: I will not tag to your satisfaction. I think tagging is out of control, and I will not tag a fic to the point of spoiling what happens in a fic. I’m an old-school reader who believes the story should be able to surprise you. If that’s a deal-breaker for you, turn back now.

Cross-posting: I do not consent to have my fics posted to other websites (such a Goodreads).
Chapter 1

There’s not much about Carter he’s allowed to notice – regulations being what they are. But he figures there’s no real harm that he notices her colors.

********

Jack O’Neill didn’t have the first clue what Carter was rambling on about, though it wasn’t out of sheer disinterest on his part the way it normally was with Daniel’s briefings. With Carter, Jack found himself quickly left in her metaphorical dust when the subject veered toward science.

But damn, she was smart.

Lesser men might be intimidated by a brilliant woman on their team – a woman who ran intellectual circles around them. Not Jack O’Neill. He took pride in his major’s intelligence, boasted of her cerebral asset to the team as if he’d had anything to do with it. He liked to pretend he’d never tried to spurn her from joining his team on the grounds she was a ‘geek’ and he had a problem with their ilk.

Besides, that generalization didn’t hold up anymore. For one, Jack would have to admit that Daniel Jackson, geek extraordinaire, was his best friend. Special ops, career military Jack O’Neill’s closest friend was a peace-loving (his zeal to fight the Goa’uld notwithstanding), polyglot archaeologist. Oh, how times – and Jack O’Neill – had changed.

So ultimately, Carter had been right. He did like her once he got to know her. Actually, he was right. Fair to say he adored her.

Not that he could say as much. The Air Force fraternization regulations strongly discouraged his even thinking it. All he was really allowed to do was watch her, but at least he had the excuse of ‘friend’ and ‘commanding officer’ to excuse his attentiveness.

Major Carter was standing in front of the white board explaining to General Hammond why they should visit P4X-whatever on the grounds it was a unique opportunity to study planetary conditions of a world that was… something. Jack wasn’t sure if she hadn’t gotten to that part yet or if she had and it flew right over his head. It could easily have been either one. He didn’t let that kind of thing bother him anymore, not after so long on a team with Carter’s geek-babble sailing right over his head so often.

The general, bless him, looked like he was trying to act like he was following Carter’s train of thought. The man was to be commended for trying. A for effort.

Long ago, Jack had found it better to just trust Carter implicitly on all matters science-related and only step in when a situation turned hostile. She could serve the US Air Force and Stargate Command with her brain; Jack would do his part with his P-90.

As far as mission briefings based on the merits of their scientific value were concerned, Jack was content to watch Carter in her element, radiant like a gemstone in sunlight. Gold and pearl and azure standing there in blue BDUs with smears of red dry-erase marker ink on her hands.

“The planet,” Carter drew a small circle on the line of an already-present oblong oval, “is one of very few worlds that we’ve been able to observe from Earth, and using the transit method of detecting planets by tracking its orbital path across the face of its sun, we concluded it had a very long ‘year’,” Carter lifted her hands to do the air quotes. Jack smirked. She’d definitely picked up that habit from
him.

General Hammond looked like he was fighting to keep his eyes from glazing over.

“But!” Carter held up a finger with the same hand holding the dry-erase marker, her expression bright with excitement, “according to astronomical observations SG-9 made on their last mission to P63-645, we realized we were completely wrong about this planetary system. What we thought was a complete year on this planet is actually alternate years as seen from Earth.”

“I see,” Hammond droned in a tone that said he most certainly didn’t.

Jack spared a look across the table at Daniel. The archaeologist was intently looking between his briefing notes and Carter, his brow furrowed in concentration. Despite their expertise being in different areas, their inherent nerdiness was a common denominator between the two, and Daniel could usually follow Carter longer and farther than either he or Teal’c could.

Of course, eventually even Daniel got thrown off the cart as Carter careened into the roughshod world of astrophysics, but so far Daniel looked like he was holding on for dear life.

“And that’s significant,” Daniel prompted, nodding when Carter looked his way.

“Well, yes,” Carter said. She made a hasty gesture that communicated she needed to back up, that she’d clearly left out something pertinent. “You see, this system has three suns – it’s a trinary star system.”

Jack briefly entertained the notion of jumping to his feet and yelling ‘no way!’, just because it would shake up the briefing and because Carter clearly expected her news to be shocking to someone.

“I thought the presence of more than one sun in any given system was actually pretty typical,” Daniel countered politely. “Aren’t most star systems in the galaxy binary star systems?”

Carter’s face lit up even more to realize Daniel had actually retained one of her mid-mission lectures. “That’s right, and just the fact that this system has three isn’t all that remarkable.”

“But…” Jack prodded, waving Carter on with a ‘while we’re young, Major’ gesture when she looked his way.

“But our calculations of available gate addresses, taking into account the adjustments for planetary and stellar drift, of course, show that one of the planets with a Stargate listed on the Abydos cartouche is on a planet within this trinary system. This planet,” she jabbed at the little red dot she’d drawn on the oblong orbit on the white board.

“And how is that significant?” Hammond asked.

“That is significant in itself, sir.” When the announcement didn’t seem to move the room to awe, Carter hastened to add, “Now, near as we can tell, most Stargates were placed on planets with one or two stars at most. Until now, we haven’t encountered a planet with a Stargate on it within a trinary system.”

“Any idea why that is?” Hammond questioned.

Carter looked baffled and fascinated all at the same time as she shook her head and shrugged. “We don’t know, sir. Maybe the conditions on a planet in a trinary system were unsuited to the race of Ancients who originally built the Stargates, or maybe timing travel to a planet while having to take into consideration its movement between three near suns was too risky. Or it could be that competing
gravity from three stars made establishing a wormhole to a planet within a trinary system too difficult for regular interstellar travel.”

“Which begs the question,” Jack began in his ‘reining in the scientists’ voice, “why you want to go to this one.” Sounded awfully dangerous for the sake of an astrophysicist’s curiosity. Even if that astrophysicist was Carter.

“Well, sir, this system has a Stargate. And if it does in defiance of all the reasons the Ancients typically had for avoiding putting Stargates on other planets within trinary star systems… well, there must be a good reason that made it worth the risks in this case. Plus,” Carter turned back to the board and added more ovals and solids dots to represent orbits and suns. The drawing was sloppy, messy in her eagerness to get to the point (and Carter’s notorious lack of artistic ability). “Remember what I said about our Earth-based observations only recording every other year of orbital behavior for this planet?”

Vaguely.

Carter lifted the marker off the board, scratched at an itch on her nose, and turned to address the room at large again. Jack’s mouth twitched in a smile. When she’d scratched her nose, she’d left a red smudge on the bridge of it, sweeping down to just under her right eye.

“SG-9’s temporary observatory was in a position that gave it a back-end view of this star system, at least from an Earth perspective – positions in space being relative, of course.” She looked amused by her own pun, but ploughed on when nobody else appreciated the witticism. “SG-9 recorded a planet of identical size and speed tracking across the sun nearest to P63-645, which would be farthest from Earth, at a time that would put it exactly one year after our observations of the planet we see from this side.”

General Hammond sighed, a sure indication he was reaching the end of his patience.

Carter noticed the cue and hurried to finish, “General, we think this planet is shared by two suns. Something about its orbit, the gravitational forces exerted by the two suns in tandem, we believe this planet is ‘jumping’ suns every year, swinging into orbit A one year, then being grabbed into orbit B the next.”

“Red Rover, Red Rover, send Pluto right over?” Jack offered.

Carter’s mouth tightened as she tried not to overtly smile, though her eyes still did. Jack felt inordinately proud of that glimmer in her eyes.

Hammond looked unimpressed.

Almost forlorn, Carter continued, “General, this might not seem all that remarkable, but I assure you it is. The odds of a planetary body doing this, swapping suns every orbit, it’s…”

“Let me guess,” Jack quipped, teasing in the bottom layers of his tone, “astronomical?”

Carter cast him a fleeting look of sparkling humor, even though he’d effectively stolen her thunder on one of her favorite jokes. Jack let a half-smile slip at the glaring red mark on her face, pretending it was a smile for the joke he’d hijacked.

“Is that safe?” Daniel asked, wiping at his own face with exaggerated movements. “I mean, how can a planet that does that be habitable?”

“Do we, in fact, know that it is habitable?” Teal’c asked.
“Well, there’s a Stargate on it,” Daniel turned his hands over in a ‘so there’s that’ gesture. “From what we’ve seen, the Ancients weren’t in the habit of putting Stargates on dead rocks.”

“Could not the planet have once been capable of sustaining life but be unable to do so any longer?”

“It’s possible, Teal’c,” Carter answered, regaining control of the briefing, “but our research into the planet so far suggests it theoretically can support life. In fact, I’d be surprised if it didn’t.”

“So…” Daniel gestured for Sam to get back to his original question and wiped at his cheek deliberately, “how can a planet like that be habitable?”

Carter looked pleasantly perplexed by the question, practically salivating at the puzzle this planet posed (and also utterly oblivious to Daniel’s pantomime hint about the mark on her face). “From what we can tell, this system has very few planets or satellites in it. In fact, this planet is the only one large enough to even be observable from Earth – we didn’t know it had any smaller bodies until SG-9’s observations. So even though this planet is in the farthest orbit of either sun, it’s not so far from what we call the ‘Goldilocks Zone’ for either star that life would be contraindicated. But I would imagine there are periods of deep winter, maybe even micro ice ages, when the planet escapes one sun’s gravity and gets grabbed by the other.”

“So, are we talking core samples?” Daniel asked, again rubbing at his nose meaningfully.

Carter nodded eagerly. “I’d like to take some geological equipment and take a drilling of the planet surface and look for signs that this planet is doing just that… going through mini ice ages every year.” She directed her next words at Hammond. “Because if it is, sir, and life does survive on this planet, it could provide us with useful information about how living organisms survive deep cold. There are species on Earth that live in polar environments that have amazing adaptations to survive subzero temperatures for long periods – certain microscopic organisms and even some insects and reptiles that literally freeze and then revive when they thaw out – but those species are so dissimilar from humans that the mechanisms and adaptations aren’t all that applicable to people. However, if there are mammals on this world and they have similar adaptations to survive extreme cold, that could benefit the field of cryogenics here on Earth. It may even have medical applications – hypothermic conditions have been proven to keep humans in a state almost suspended animation until resuscitated, but not without the risk of tissue damage from the cold. By studying lifeforms on this planet, we might find a way to induce hypothermic rescue stasis without the side effects of frostbite and gangrene.”

“There’s also the question why the Ancients put a gate on this world in the first place,” Daniel chimed in, giving up on cluing Carter in about the mark on her face and turning to address the general. “I mean, if it’s such a pain in the ass to put Stargates in trinary star systems, well… it has to mean something that they did here, right?” He looked over at Jack and Teal’c in turn, expression open and child-like.

It was Daniel trying to get his way. Jack pointed a finger at him. “You’re hoping to find more meaning of life stuff on this planet, aren’t you?”

Daniel didn’t even look abashed to get called out on it. “If the Ancients thought this planet was extraordinary and worthy of special exceptions, it’s not too strange to think they might have held it in some high regard. Maybe it has ceremonial significance, and what better place to build something, a monument or a temple, that would reflect that?”

Jack knew he was outnumbered. Even if it was the military and SG-1 was not a democracy, when both of his scientists were champing at the bit, it was pretty much useless to fight them.
Jack looked helplessly at Hammond, who was gamely trying not to laugh in Jack’s face.

“Major,” Hammond turned to Carter, “you said gating to a world that was moving between so many stars could be dangerous – that it might even be why Stargates aren’t put on worlds like this in the first place – are you certain you can safely gate to this planet?”

Carter nodded eagerly. “Yes, sir. Between SG-9’s data and ours, we can calculate when a clear path opens up between Earth and P4X-103.” Her expression flickered. “However…”

“I knew it,” Jack grumbled. “Here we go.”

“No, sir, we can absolutely safely time a trip through the gate to P4X-103… it’s just that the next window to safely travel to the planet is in two days… and the next window to gate safely back isn’t for another week after that.”

Jack raised his eyebrows. “So we gate there and we’re stuck for a week, is that what you’re saying?”

Carter looked distraught at the tone Jack had taken. “Yes, sir. The third star in the system is here,” she added a third solid dot on the board, creating an obtuse triangle, “and Earth is here,” she drew another dot off-center of the trio of stars. “Essentially, this third star ‘blocks’ our view of the planet for a week, until it reappears on the other side of this tertiary sun.”

“I don’t like being cut off from Earth, Major,” Jack pointed out bluntly.

Carter nodded somberly. “I know, sir, but I think this might be worth the risk. In my opinion, the unique nature of this planet in several respects warrants further investigation.”

“General,” Daniel chimed in, “if it’s possible this planet had any kind of importance to the Ancients, we can’t afford not to check it out.”

Mood soured, Jack looked toward General Hammond to make the final call. When the general looked his way, Jack gave a fatalistic ‘your call, I just follow orders’ hand wave.

Hammond nodded. “Very well. Major, if you can convince me your calculations on the days and times when it is safe to gate to this planet are correct, SG-1 has a go.”

Jack fought back a scowl. Sometimes he still hated scientists… even his own. But Hammond gave the order, so Jack would do his job. This time, it looked like it was going to be babysitting two overeager eggheads. Usually, it was the three of them babysitting Daniel while he lost his shit over some rock with squiggly writing on it or a primitive native looking for dinner or a friend (or both). But other missions (like this one seemed to be shaping up to be), Carter was almost just as bad, and it left Jack and Teal’c looking after the children.

Unfortunately, Carter and Daniel had both figured out how to get back on Jack’s good side at warp speed years ago. He wouldn’t even get to pull the grumpy CO card for long before they’d buffalo him into a better mood. And everyone knew it.

And as much as he liked to bitch and moan about his nerds going nuts over some artifact or doohickey or what have you, their wonder at the universe and passion for their work was also part of what Jack liked about each of them. It was hard to hold genuine joy against someone.

Especially when it made them shine so brightly, like it did Carter.

Oh well.
When Hammond dismissed the team and returned to his office, Jack stood and approached Carter. She was practically bouncing on the balls of her feet, eager to rush off and double-check her calculations before presenting them to Hammond. When she saw Jack walking toward her, she valiantly stayed put.

“Sir.”

“Carter. I can’t help but wonder if, in your obvious enthusiasm for this mission, you really made a proper risk assessment. So I’m going to ask… you sure about this?” After all, he didn’t understand half of what she’d talked about during the briefing – he had only his trust in her. And if she said that she had considered the risks objectively and seriously and still considered the mission worthwhile, well… that was that. He trusted her.

And she knew that.

Carter beamed. With the general out of sight, she didn’t try to rein in her ‘obvious enthusiasm’ or curb her friendly camaraderie with the colonel. “Colonel, the chance to stand on a world that’s part of a trinary star system is quite literally a once in a lifetime opportunity. Pardon my boldness, sir, but how are you not excited?”

“I try to limit my excitement to the Stanley cup finals and firefights with the Goa’uld. Stress thing, you know? It’s not healthy to be too excitable. Have you ever seen a mellow Chihuahua? I don’t think so.” Carter pressed her lips together to hold back a chuckle. “Well, to answer your question, yes, sir, I’ve carefully considered the potential risks involved with this mission. I know a lot of criterion have to be met to even make gating to this planet possible, but the sheer volume of knowledge we could gain from visiting this world is too good to pass up.”

Jack was listening to Carter talk while staring at the red smudge on her face, vivid against her fair skin and a bright contrast to the blue in her eye. When the temptation became too great, he reached up toward her face.

Carter’s voice faltered mid-sentence when she saw him reaching a hand toward her, but testament to their comfort and trust as a team, she didn’t flinch away. Instead, she froze uncertainly and her brow furrowed in confusion. Jack swiped at the red ink with his index finger (thrilling privately at the chance to touch her face, a privilege he so rarely got) and pulled it back to show her the color he’d rubbed off. “Got a little something on you, Carter.”

Carter’s eyes widened and she groaned in embarrassment. “Oh, god… how long was that there?” Jack smiled and wiped the ink off on his pant leg.

“Just since you started talking about the planet switching suns,” Daniel said from his place at the table where he was collecting his notes.

“Why didn’t one of you tell me?” Carter groused, rubbing stubbornly at the mark.

“I believe Daniel Jackson was attempting to do so in gestures,” Teal’c intoned with warm amusement in his voice.

Carter huffed and narrowed her eyes at Daniel and Teal’c… she probably wanted to give Jack the stink-eye, too, but chain of command and military propriety meant she excluded him. “Next time say
something! For crying out loud, don’t let me brief the general with marker on my face!”

Jack smiled involuntarily at his usual catch-phrase slipping out of Carter’s mouth. It was a small, illicit pleasure, and he would hoard it jealously.

“Did I get it all?” Carter looked up at him, leaning in and turning her head slightly to give him a better view. It gave Jack a rare excuse to stare at Carter close-up, and he let his eyes linger longer than necessary under the guise of checking for marker ink.

“Yeah, you got it.”

“Thanks. Sir.” The noted pause between words was his clue that she was irked at him, though she couldn’t show it.

It shouldn’t delight Jack so much when he could rile Carter up, but god did it. It was so much fun to watch her struggle to contain some acerbic comment when Jack annoyed her. He wondered, if their ranks didn’t exist, what Sam Carter would do in such a situation. Would she swear? Give him a playful shove? Rip him apart verbally? Try to exact retribution with some complex prank? He could imagine so many reactions on her part, he would probably adore each and every one, but sadly he’d never get to see Carter really unleash.

Mores the pity.

As Jack strolled out of the briefing room, he overhead Carter speaking to Daniel… to whom she felt no great need to censor herself. “Thanks a lot, Daniel. Would you have said anything if someone drew a dick and balls on my face?”

Jack didn’t hear Daniel’s flustered, indignant response because he was too busy laughing.

Yeah, he legitimately kind of adored his second-in-command.

********

Lucky for Carter, Jack continued to adore her even when he wanted to tear her a new one.

The week on P4X-103 wasn’t the worst week Jack had ever had, but he’d also been an Iraqi POW, so that really wasn’t saying much. His measure of what constituted a bad time stretched all the way to the seventh circle of Hell. In any case, the week on P4X-103 was easily in the top five of shitty weeks for Jack O’Neill.

And it had started out so well… as most snafus do.

Performing their due diligence, initial recon (via MALP) of P4X-103 looked promising. Atmospheric readings showed breathable air, the video footage showed a mossy-green world as far as the eye could see, there was an intact DHD near the Stargate, and in the distance what looked like a structure or building of some sort.

Daniel was practically knocking his teammates out of the way to get up the gate ramp. If Jack hadn’t grabbed Daniel back by the handle on his tac vest, he really thought the archaeologist would have done a cannonball through the event horizon in his haste.

Carter wasn’t a whole lot better, but at least she followed orders and heeded Jack’s stern look when she attempted to ease past the two men in the gate room while they performed their version of a perturbed father restraining his unruly toddler in a toy store.
Just to make a point, Jack let Teal’c go first.

P4X-103 had been kind of squirrely from the word go, though it was not quite anything Jack could put his finger on. It didn’t have that creepy ‘enemies hiding in the trees’ feeling to it… mostly because there were no trees. In fact, there was no vegetation much taller than a hip-high bush. It reminded Jack of pictures of farmland in Ireland: very verdant, very green, very hilly, and very close-cropped.

Though cultivation and agriculture weren’t the reasons that P4X-103 was so trim. The plant life was wild and patchy and thick. It made Jack feel like he was walking on the bottom of an aquarium in need of a thorough cleaning.

Since Carter had to set up her drilling equipment for taking samples (while Daniel practically did the pee-pee dance of impatience, wistfully eyeing the distant structure), Jack spent a lot more time looking at the ground than he normally would. The surface of P4X-103 was spider webbed with fissures and cracks. Jack would have compared it to a drought-stricken lake bed, but it was far too lush with greenery to be cracked from lack of moisture.

He noticed Carter frown meaningfully at the series of cracks they had to work around, and in hindsight he should have pounced on that. But he didn’t. He blamed Daniel’s increasingly likely escape attempts for distracting him.

But it planted the seed of unease in Jack’s gut that he damn well knew he should have heeded. He had two scientists practically vibrating with excitement, and he let that influence him. He ignored his instinct because Daniel and Carter were so keen on this mission, and there were no actual signs of danger.

He swore it was the last time he’d ignore that sixth sense, even if it did make him the asshole CO pulling them out for no god damn reason. Better to deal with two pissed scientists than suffer the consequences if he didn’t.

Or to have his team suffer them.

As it turned out, their arrival was in late evening on P4X-103, so by the time Carter had taken the samples she wanted, it was starting to get dark. Daniel, fit to burst, wanted to press on with flashlights.

Jack refused.

“Negative. No point stumbling around in the dark in unknown territory. We’ll head out at first light.”

“But, Jack…”

“Set up base, campers.” Teal’c and Carter nodded and began to go through the familiar motions of setting up their camp for the night. They would normally find some kind of cover, just in case hostiles were in the area, but P4X-103 offered a big fat goose egg in the way of cover. Instead, they’d have to make camp near the Stargate. Not ideal, but obviously the best they’d be able to do.

Daniel opened his mouth to protest.

“Zip it,” Jack cut him off.

Daniel pouted.

“And so help me, Daniel, if you even think of sneaking off in the middle of the night I will zip-tie
your hand to my ankle.”

From the corner of his eye, Jack saw Carter fight back a smile.

“That’s insulting,” Daniel groused.

“I’m not joking. You want to see that building so badly, you can just drag my ass the whole way.”

Daniel looked like he was actually considering it.

“Ah!” Jack snapped, finger raised in warning. He could never decide if handling Daniel was more like minding a small child or training a dog.

Daniel’s shoulders drooped. “Fine. But we’re not even tired. It’s like two in the afternoon back on Earth.”

He did have a point there.

“Hazards of gate travel,” Carter chimed in, gamely taking Jack’s side to try and subdue Daniel.

But P4X-103 didn’t give a damn what time it was on Earth in Colorado Springs.

Nights on P4X-103 turned out to be spectacular. There wasn’t a damn thing available to make a decent fire, and they’d yet to find any signs of civilization beyond that one lonely building in the distance, so the night sky was unimpeached by light pollution. The sister stars of P4X-103’s current sun were bright points in a sky already bejeweled with alien constellations. A rich blue swath cut through the sky, arching down toward the horizon like a cerulean ribbon.

“It’s just a different view of the Milky Way,” Carter explained. “Although technically speaking, the Milky Way isn’t a formation in itself, like say an asteroid belt or a nebula, rather it’s the diffuse light of distant stars that are too far to be seen clearly.”

“Could Earth be one of them?” Daniel asked, clearly putting aside his bitterness of earlier.

Jack took a seat next to Carter, letting the darkness be his excuse to sit closer than he normally did. His knee came to rest against her thigh, a reassuring point of contact in the dark of night. The stars of P4X-103’s solar system were bright enough to make out faces, but details like the blue of Carter’s eyes were lost.

Carter was shaking her head. “Remember I told you in the briefing this system is among the few in the Stargate network observable from Earth?”

“Right,” Daniel plucked at the mossy vegetation next to his sleeping bag. “If we can clearly see this sun from Earth, we can clearly see Earth’s sun from here.”

Carter nodded again, dragging her pack up behind her and leaning back against it. The repositioning took Carter’s leg away from Jack’s knee, to his chagrin. When she’d gotten as comfortable as she was likely to, he felt her leg move back to rest against his knee.

Jack allowed a small smile, trusting the night to hide it. Carter had feelings for Jack the Air Force would not like, same as he had feelings for her. It made it a little easier to endure the Tantalus-like nature of their friendship to know it was a curse they bore together.

“Do you know which star is ours?” Jack asked.

Carter tipped her head back further, starlight painting her throat and highlighting her cheekbones.
Jack had never wanted to dance his fingertips over skin so badly in his life.

“I could probably figure it out. I know P4X-103’s relative position to Earth, although getting my bearings with completely different constellations would be tricky. I think Orion’s belt stars should still be more or less in alignment from this angle, so if I could find them…” She sat up eagerly. “If I got out some of my equipment, I could…”

“And have you staying up all hours on a school night?” Jack scolded. “Nothing doing, Major.”

“Yes, sir,” Carter answered with a quick grin, the scant light putting a hazy glow on her teeth.

Teal’c, keeping one ear on their conversation while listening and watching the night for attackers, spoke. “There is no moon.”

Carter’s smile vanished and a shadow squatted between her eyebrows. “Ah, no… it wasn’t likely there would be. I imagine switching orbits between two suns like it does would cause the contending gravities to tear a moon to pieces.”

And that was the second hint of not all being well in the land of P4X-103 that Jack should have paid closer attention to.

********

The building seen in the distance from the Stargate was tall, maybe the tallest thing on P4X-103 at roughly four stories high. It looked almost like a castle tower missing the rest of the castle. A circular structure spearing into the sky.

That the material the tower was made from was the exact same gray mineral as the Stargate confirmed it was built by the Ancients before they even got inside.

Daniel was in geek heaven. While it was pretty obvious the contents of the building had been taken when the builders left the site, there were still panels upon panels on the walls of the Ancient language.

“Jack!” Daniel breathed in wonder, gaping at the floor-to-ceiling writings.

“Pace yourself, Daniel.” Jack put a hand on his friend’s shoulder. “We’ve got a week here.”

‘Whether we want it or not,’ he thought sourly.

“We should look for anything that might give us an idea what this place is,” Daniel said. “If this is a memorial or historical marker there could be some kind of identification, like a commemoration plaque.”

“Why do you say memorial?” Carter asked, turning to look at him from examining a string of block letters on the wall.

Daniel shrugged. “I don’t know, a hunch? It’s out in the middle of nowhere, no town or city nearby, so it clearly wasn’t part of an active community. A place to visit, but not tied to everyday function for the residents. A memorial or monument would make sense, wouldn’t it?”

Carter frowned. “I don’t know… that set-up sounds more like an observatory to me. You know, like the way we put astronomy observatories in the desert to escape light pollution from population centers.”

Daniel nodded thoughtfully. “Possibly. It could be anything, really. We should explore this place top
“Right,” Jack sighed. “Everyone look around. Keep your radio channel open, check in every ten. And nobody stick their head into anything!”

While Daniel took pictures and video of the writings on the ground floor, Jack, Carter, and Teal’c made their way to the winding stairwell to search the other floors.

Teal’c took the second floor and Jack peeled off at the third.

It was pretty boring for being part of an Ancient tower on an alien world. Jack figured he’d found personal quarters, though with all the tenants gone (and taking their belongings with them) it was just a series of empty rooms, uniform in shape and layout as they fanned around a circular corridor wrapped around the stairwell.

“Colonel,” Carter’s voice came, scratchy through the radio.

“Go ahead.”

“I’m on the top floor. You should come see this.”

He found Carter standing in front of a window in what looked like a lab with long tables, vast space, and a few pieces of equipment left behind (by virtue of being built into the walls) that Jack was not going to get his head near for all the tea in China.

“What have you got, Carter?” Jack asked, heading toward his 2IC and giving one Ancient device a wary eye.

His second was a play of saturated hues in the midmorning light spilling through the window. Even olive drab looked vibrant on her. Carter sure could make BDUs look good.

She pointed out the window. “There’s an ocean, sir.”

He looked. She was right. From the vantage point of the top floor, he could see the coast and the expanse of water beyond. He was surprised they hadn’t smelled the sea for being so close to it, but at ground level the algae-like smell of the pervasive moss plant was pretty overpowering. Like sticking one’s head in a stock tank.

There was also not a hint of civilization, even from the elevated view.

“I think this was a scientific observatory, sir,” Carter said.

“You might be right about that.” He looked around at all the equipment. “Any idea what any of this… stuff… does?”

Carter, usually not one to be daunted by any technology, went wide-eyed. “Sir… I couldn’t even begin to guess what any of this does. We have time, so I’ll give it my best try, but so far we’ve not had a lot of luck understanding Ancient technology.” She gave him a rueful look. “Best you don’t expect too much, sir.”

“Major, I’ll be happy if we can all get out of here with our brains unscrambled. See what you can make of this, but use extreme caution.”

“Yes, sir.” She paused. “You know, sir… it might be helpful if you looked through this equipment with me.” She gave him a careful look, a mixture of concern and caution and a little bit of awe.
“Ancient technology does respond favorably to you.”

“Favorably isn’t quite the word I’d use,” Jack grumbled.

“Right, of course not, sir.” Carter looked around at the hodge podge of advanced alien technology and bit her lip. Longing and wanting and pining were naked in her face.

It really drove home the point why the fraternization regulations existed, because Jack crumbled at the sight of her wanting something so badly. Something he could give her, and really it was like he didn’t have a choice in the matter.

“Fine, whatever. I’ll touch anything you want me to touch, see if it’ll light this place up like a Christmas tree, but I swear to god, Carter, if I go home speaking Ancient…”

“Extreme caution, sir, remember?”

“Yeah, right.” Because scientists were so good at adhering to ‘extreme caution’ when a discovery was at their fingertips.

Carter was not the only one who tried to recruit Jack for his proven sensitivity to crap left behind by the Ancients. Carter’s use of Jack as the molester of all things Ancient had not turned on any of the machines upstairs (which was fine by Jack), but his tenure as a guinea pig was far from over.

“Jack, could you take a look at this?”

“I don’t read Ancient, Daniel!” Jack snapped. He was sure it was the one hundredth time he’d said that in the last two days. They’d spent two days in the tower, camping on the foyer floor, and Daniel had been like a squirrel on cocaine for the entire two days. Jack didn’t even know if the linguist slept anymore – he gave up trying to enforce a bedtime for Daniel when disobeying that order was as easy as rolling over and aiming a flashlight.

“Could you just look at it?” Daniel pleaded, caressing a carving on the wall like it had heard Jack bark and needed to be reassured.

“Between you and Carter, I feel like a circus monkey,” Jack growled as he marched over to Daniel’s side and gave a perfunctory glance at the mark Daniel was fondling. “Nope, not a clue.”

“You didn’t even try.”

Jack gave Daniel a dirty look.

“Why don’t you try touching it?” Daniel suggested.

“Because I have touched, fondled, pet, jiggled, jimmed, held, and caressed every damn inch of this place by now! For crying out loud, I’ve had lovers I didn’t know as well as this building!”

A strangled snort from the direction of the door hauled Jack’s attention to Carter, standing just outside and taking some kind of reading of the sun with a handheld device. She was trying not to openly laugh, hiding behind her sunglasses, but the press of her lips and the flush in her cheeks gave her away.

So, yeah… she was thinking about what he did to his lovers with his hands. Good to know.

“Jack,” Daniel sighed in exasperation and reached up under his glasses to pinch the bridge of his
nose. As if Jack were being the unreasonable one! “The Ancients clearly took everything important with them except what couldn’t be taken.” Daniel gestured at the writing on the walls. “This is all we have!”

“And if I knew how to read this crap, I would gladly tell you,” Jack countered, though his tone cast doubt on the ‘gladly’ part. “But – and I cannot stress this enough – I don’t read Ancient.”

Daniel looked aggrieved.

“You are the linguistic expert on this team, are you not, Daniel Jackson?” Teal’c jumped into the conversation, as ever a voice of calm. “Is there anything that you have been able to decipher with your vast knowledge on the subject of languages?”

How Daniel, communication expert, did not see the ego stroke for what it was baffled Jack, but he was just glad it derailed Daniel. Just like that, he perked up and turned to face Teal’c. “Actually, I think this part here,” he strode to a different section of the wall, “is some kind of calendar. I don’t know what they were tracking, but there are three distinct events that they seemed to be chronicling. These symbols recur throughout the ‘year’… of course, I have no idea what they symbolize. All I can tell is that whatever they were tracking, they were frequent occurrences. Two seemed to be correlated. These two symbols appear together many times.” Daniel threw up his hands in defeat. “I just don’t know what they were making marks of.”

Jack was so utterly, monumentally bored he actually started to sway on his feet, like his brain was contemplating complete shutdown to avoid the conversation.

Then he realized he wasn’t swaying, the ground was.

Just as he realized what was happening, the to and fro rocking became stronger, turning into a violent shudder.

Shit.

Earthquake.

Daniel was thrown into the wall he had been studying so fondly.

“Daniel Jackson!” Teal’c staggered over to him and pressed Daniel to the wall with his massive Jaffa body, shielding the archaeologist should the ceiling start to come down. Jack could see Daniel peeking out from beneath Teal’c’s bracing arm, reduced to something small and fragile in the large man’s protection.

So one member of his team was safeguarded. His attention turned toward the other.

“Carter!” Jack struggled toward the entrance with the major just beyond it.

It was strange how quiet the earthquake was. On Earth, Jack associated seismic events with the sound of destruction, buildings shaking apart, car alarms going off, and loose objects crashing to the ground. There were none of those noises on P4X-103 as the planet shuddered. There was a nearly subsonic rumble that Jack could feel in his bones more than hear in his ears, but otherwise the only sounds were those made by him and his team.

It was eerie. Like they were bugs being shaken in a jar.

The ground heaved strongly, causing Jack’s right leg to torque, and his knee gave out with a sickening crack. Cursing, Jack went down in a heap on the hard naquadah floor. He looked up at
Carter and saw her eyes blown wide, locked on him from the other side of the door as her shape rattled in jerky, jumping focus.

Sam dropped to her knees deliberately and crawled into the doorway. She reached for him just as Jack dragged himself toward her, and they met in a frantic grab of hands. Together, they hauled Jack into the doorway, where Jack roughly folded Carter into his lap and draped his upper body over her. Carter struggled at first, no doubt intent on doing the very same thing to protect him, but Jack pinned her between his chest and thighs tightly, giving her no chance to squirm free.

They rode out the earthquake (was it even an *earth*quake if they weren’t on Earth?) like that, Teal’c plastered to Daniel against the wall and Carter trapped in a Jack taco.

Eventually, the shaking subsided. Then it stopped.

For a few seconds, none of them moved. When Jack finally popped his head up, he scanned his surroundings for signs of damage. Remarkably, there was none. There were no trees outside to uproot, and inside the building had remained intact.

Teal’c was doing the same thing Jack was, assessing the situation and obviously just as amazed that there was no rubble to contend with after the strength of the quake.

Jack became acutely conscious of Carter’s weight in his lap, the heat and solid presence of her, her breathing causing the arms he still had draped over her to rise and fall.

He was also very aware of the fiery agony in his knee, and that Carter’s weight on it was not helping.

“You okay, Carter?” Jack sat back, taking his weight off her.

Carter sat up immediately. “Yes, sir. Your knee…”

Jack winced and touched his right leg. “Crap… hope this won’t mean surgery again.” He looked over toward Daniel and Teal’c. “You guys okay?”

“We are unharmed,” Teal’c reported as he pushed slowly away from the wall, releasing Daniel like a baby bird scurrying out from underneath its mother.

“Well, that was fun,” Daniel said sarcastically as he spun to survey the wall of Ancient writing, arms opened wide and hands touching the carvings like he wanted to be sure they were undamaged.

*Geeks.*

Jack tried to shift positions and his knee burned. Jack swore under his breath.

Carter started to reach for his leg (to do what, Jack had no idea, she wasn’t that kind of doctor) when a low, loud beeping sounded from upstairs.

Everyone froze and looked at one another.

It seemed to be coming from the lab, where they had *thought* all the equipment was dead. Apparently not. Something was working now, and it sounded like a strange bell.

Or an alarm.

Carter jumped up and dashed for the stairwell.
“Carter!” Jack struggled to his feet, hissing when his right knee protested taking any weight. It was only by sheer bullheadedness that Jack soldiered on and limped quickly toward the stairs to follow Carter. How he was going to get up the stairs was a problem he’d tackle once he made it that far.

Teal’c and Daniel met him at the first step, and his need to get up to the fourth floor ASAP outweighed his pride. He let Teal’c and Daniel move to either side of him without a word. He slung his arms over both men’s shoulders, and they all but carried him up the stairs.

Carter was standing in the lab in front of a wall-mounted machine that was the source of the deafening toll. Lights on the panel were flashing, and the room was fairly shaking with the force of the alarm.

“What is it?” Jack yelled over the deafening alarm. Teal’c passed supporting Jack duty on to Daniel and slipped away to check the rest of the room for anything else that might have activated.

“I don’t know, sir!”

“O’Neill!” Teal’c bellowed from the window.

The rest of SG-1 made their way to Teal’c’s side and saw what he had.

“Oh, shit.”

A tidal wave was racing in from the sea, monstrous and swelling as it hurtled toward them, eating up ground and swallowing the world in its path.

“Can we make it to the gate?” Daniel squeaked.

“We can’t gate home,” Carter said. “Our next window doesn’t open for another four days!”

Crap, crap, crap.

“Teal’c!” Jack grabbed the man’s arm tightly. “Get down to the first floor and grab as much of our gear as you can. That lower level’s going to flood. Go!”

Teal’c nodded and bolted down the stairs.

“I’ll help!” Daniel all but threw Jack at Carter and rushed after Teal’c.

Jack hobbled and hopped to try and retain his dignity (and his balance), but Carter still ended up catching him. She tucked up under his left arm and pulled him tight against her in a heartbeat, leaving him no choice really but to let her support him. Rather than fight her, he curled his arm protectively around her shoulders and took weight off his right leg, listing toward Carter to let her fill in where his bum leg was shirking its duties.

He stared out the window at the tsunami crashing over the land, eating up distance at breakneck speed. Even if it was within their window to return home, there was no way they could reach the gate before the waves did. Not even if Jack’s knee had been ship-shape. They couldn’t outrun the water.

“Will this building withstand that?” Jack asked, nodding at the sea surging closer.

“I believe it will, sir. Naquadah’s pretty tough stuff. It survived the earthquake unscathed.”

“Let’s hope you’re right, Major.”
Daniel and Teal’c came stumbling up the stairs laden with all their gear, sans their sleeping bags that had been too cumbersome to carry and too time-consuming to roll up (but really, as far as survival went, losing sleeping bags was not a disaster).

“When we were on the ground floor, the main door began to close on its own,” Teal’c reported while Daniel was stacking Carter’s pack and his own next to a table.

“The building’s probably wired into sensors that detected the earthquake,” Carter said, “which obviously ‘woke up’ the building from the dormant state it’s been in so far. It must have triggered the alarm, which in turn activated the door to keep out the floodwaters.”

“The two ‘events’ on the calendar they were tracking,” Daniel mused aloud in wonder.

Carter gave a grim nod.

“Well, seeing as how this building is thousands of years old, I’m not going to bet my life that the door will hold,” Jack said drolly.

Daniel rifled through the packs until he found the first aid kit, leaping up with it and running over to Jack and Carter.

Only to stop and stare, horror-struck, out the window as the water roared toward the tower.

It made no sense, but Jack reached out to the wall and braced himself.

The water crashed into the tower like the whole of the sea had been thrown at it. The structure rocked, trembled ominously like an aftershock, the weight of the water around it a crushing pressure they could feel in their ears, in their bones.

Everyone held their breath, waiting to see if the tower would come crashing down.

It didn’t.

Everyone exhaled.

The water swirled angry and fast around the base of the tower, clawing and leaping at the walls, but the naquadah held, an artificial mountain in the water’s path.

Of course, given enough time, even mountains succumbed to the relentless power of water. They just had to hope they hadn’t shown up just when the mountain decided to crumble.

Carter leaned out the window to peer down at the raging rapids around the tower until Jack grabbed her collar and yanked her back. She gave him a contrite look when he gave her his overprotective CO scowl.

The blaring alarm fell silent and the auditory void was immediately filled by the sound of surging water.

“Jack,” Daniel prompted gently, “we should take care of your knee.”

Because they were in for a wait. All they had to do was make it through the next four days, find a way to the Stargate in the middle of a flood, and gate home.

Sure, no sweat.

********
The waters swirled ferociously around the base of the tower for a day while the planet was gripped by aftershocks from the earthquake. Jack felt his stomach knot every time the floor swayed underneath them… he felt like a fishing bobber, every time waiting for the monster below to yank them down. He also hated being on the fourth floor of the tower when the ground was unstable, like they were inviting the tower breaking in half and sending them all plummeting to their deaths, but he wasn’t keen on drowning, either. Teal’c had ventured down the stairs and said the water had not invaded the building, but just because it hadn’t yet didn’t mean it wouldn’t.

“We should be all right, sir,” Carter insisted. “I think this building was designed specifically for this purpose. I’m fairly certain now this observatory was built to study this exact phenomenon.”

That’s when something Carter had said earlier rushed into the forefront of Jack’s mind.

“This planet has no moon,” he said, tone dangerous.

Carter ducked her head. “No, sir.”

Jack narrowed his eyes. “Major, did you know this planet was unstable?”

“Know, sir? No, sir.”

He was not letting her off the hook for being cute, much as he loved a well-bandied word. “But you suspected.”

She winced. “It’s a matter of science, sir. The way this planet switches which star it orbits… that would have to have planetary consequences. Gravitational forces would be extreme.”

Jack was furious. “Major Carter, care to tell me why you didn’t mention this in the briefing before Hammond gave us the green light for this mission?”

Carter looked panicked, like a teenager caught sneaking back into the house after midnight. “Colonel, sir, we had every reason to believe that the Ancients would have been able to stabilize this planet, otherwise why bother with a Stargate? What’s the point of putting a gate on a world constantly trying to tear itself apart?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Jack said acidly, “maybe the Ancients had the same insouciant curiosity that you do?”

Carter blinked in surprise, like that possibility had genuinely not occurred to her. Then she had to forcibly stop herself from looking delighted that she shared a personality trait with the advanced species.

“Had, Carter,” Jack stressed. “The Ancients are dead, so don’t be so proud of yourself for having the same crazy streak.”

Carter hunched her shoulders, chastised.

“Well, I don’t think all the Ancients died here,” Daniel chimed in. At Jack’s withering glare, Daniel mumbled. “If that makes any difference, which I suppose it doesn’t.”

Jack’s ire was not tempered in the least by the conversation.

Carter sagged dejectedly.

“For what it’s worth,” Daniel continued, “I’m sure the Ancients could have easily stabilized this
planet if they wanted to. If they could build Stargates, I imagine countering the gravity tug-of-war between two stars would have been well within their power.”

“So why didn’t they?” Jack demanded.

“Well... they wouldn’t if their whole purpose for putting an observatory here was to study it, would they?”

“Great, so we gated to an Ancient science experiment.” Jack gave Carter another skewering look. Which might have been a little unfair to Carter, Jack knew, but his team was trapped and he was hurt. Grouchy Jack O’Neill was the only option on the menu.

“Everything I told Hammond was true, sir,” Carter said in her own defense. “The chance to study a world like this is one in a trillion, and the things we could learn from such a rare planet are beyond value.” She gestured at the building around them to illustrate her point. “If we had more time and knew more about Ancient technology or their language,” she shot Daniel an apologetic look, “we might learn ways to build structures on Earth that are better able to withstand earthquakes.”

“Well, that’s not going to happen, is it, Carter?” Jack snarled.

“No, sir.”

“In fact, fair to say we’ll be lucky if we get out of here alive, agreed?”

“Yes, sir.” Carter took the dressing down with grace, he’d give her that.

Daniel shifted away from the argument sullenly, like a kid forced to watch his parents fight. Although honestly, Daniel and Carter were more like siblings, the mischief-prone science twins turning Jack’s hair gray.

Carter got up, crossed the room, and hunkered down against the wall next to Teal’c, blatantly going to him for safety. Jack was too mad to care. Even if it was all speculation, Carter damn well should have mentioned the chance this planet was trying to come apart at the seams.

********

It was three more ugly days of waiting with Carter walking on eggshells around the colonel, Daniel keeping quiet when his efforts to keep the peace failed, and Teal’c diligently remaining neutral (no doubt because he agreed with Jack but was also determined to be a comforting presence for Carter).

During their second night trapped on the top floor of the tower, Carter suggested that they could gate to another world from P4X-103 and from there safely gate home, but the idea came too late, because the water was still at least hip high and the current rushing back toward the sea too dangerous to risk. Their best bet, now that they were in this mess, was to wait for their original window for safe return home and hope the situation calmed down by then.

Which it did. The waters receded and the aftershocks eased, though by the time they were facing a return trek to the gate they were still contending with both.

The only upside was that the forced downtime had given Jack’s knee some time to heal. Though it still hurt like a bitch, he was confident he could at least limp his way to the gate without one of his teammates (namely, Teal’c) having to carry him.

When they reached their window, they packed up and headed downstairs. The door at the ground level was still tightly shut, still gamely keeping out the floodwaters, but potentially posing a huge
problem. They had to actually get out of the tower.

It was, in fact, the only time during the whole mission that Jack’s ‘knack’ for Ancient technology made a damn bit of difference. Everyone on the team went to the walls flanking the door and ran their hands over the glyphs carved into the naquadah. Now that the building was ‘awake’, Daniel swore up and down there had to be a control for it somewhere. If they couldn’t genius their way into reading it, they’d just have to luck their way into finding it.

Whether Jack was the only one who hit on the door release or the others had and only Jack’s touch activated it would be a matter of debate his nerds would no doubt ponder later, but in any case a mark under Jack’s hand lit up and the door swept open.

Water spilled in, curling like so many snakes around their feet and seeking to fill every available inch of the ground floor in an instant. It rushed in frantically, spilling through the doorway until it crashed against the walls and rolled over itself. In the end, it stopped midway between the floor and their knees.

“Let’s move out!” Jack ordered.

The trudge to the gate was miserable. Carter may have been right about the planet being prone to ice ages, because the sea water was freezing, and after a while their feet were numb. Add to that the fact that running in water was difficult as hell, slow-going, and wreaking havoc on Jack’s bad knee. The proliferation of cracks in the ground they’d seen upon arrival (and easily avoided on their first hike) were now hidden beneath about a foot of water and causing everyone to stumble and trip. Jack hissed every time his right leg came down wrong on the broken terrain. His teammates kept casting him worried looks, checking their pace, but Jack gave them an angry look and ordered, “Get to the gate!” He didn’t need them slowing down on account of him. He’d tough it out and keep up or he’d fall behind, but he wasn’t going to put his team at risk on this shithole of a planet a minute longer than necessary.

They made it to the gate. They dialed home. They even punched in the GDO code once the wormhole established before the second major earthquake hit.

The water at their feet danced with surface tremors as the ground beneath rumbled and shook. Any hope it was just another fading aftershock from the first quake was dashed when the shaking quickly intensified, growing in strength until it easily rivaled the first earthquake.

“Let’s go!” Jack yelled and stumbled forward, trying to herd his team toward the Stargate.

Daniel and Teal’c were a few feet away to Jack’s right. Carter was directly in front of Jack, propelled by her commanding officer’s hand between her shoulder blades. They were all fighting through water and tremors to reach the Stargate’s raised platform which seemed to taunt them with the promise of safety, so close and yet so far.

A squawk and a splash had Jack twisting to look toward his guys, his balance canting dangerously and his knee threatening to give out at the unstable motion. Jack staggered and flailed and looked toward what had been the source of the distressed noise.

Daniel was in the water, trying to get back to his feet but pointedly not using both of his arms. Teal’c, braced with legs wide for stability and using his staff weapon for balance like a cane, reached down with one hand and lifted the archaeologist up. Daniel was dripping wet and cradling his left arm to his body.

“Daniel!”
“Oh god, I think it’s broken!” Daniel called back to the unspoken question.

“Teal’c, get him home!” Jack barked and turned back toward Carter just in time to see it happen.

The ground gave a mighty heave and Carter went sprawling forward, cracking her head on the base of the Stargate platform. The sound of skull and stone connecting was gut-wrenching and Jack didn’t know the urge to vomit could hit so suddenly. She slumped down the stone and ended up wedged awkwardly against the base of the gate, twisted in such a way that her head never went underwater.

“Carter!” Jack yelled and lunged for her. His knee buckled painfully under him at the sudden movement, twinging in that distinct burn of deep tissue and muscle injury, but he ignored it and scrambled the few feet separating him from Carter. He hauled her over on to her back.

He was struck by the colors. Dazed blue eyes, brilliant in the sunlight even with mismatched pupils. Her skin pallid from the cold and wan from shock. Her hair soft yellow-gold in the sun with a bright streak of crimson where the cut at her temple was bleeding freely.

His brain latched on to that detail, the gold and red.

“Sir,” Carter stammered groggily, in turns weakly pushing at him, splashing in the water at her side, and grabbing on to him in the uncoordinated dance of a head injury. She was visibly struggling with the extra weight attached to her back, not coordinated enough to deal with her own mass, let alone dead weight, so Jack unclipped her pack and tossed it one-handed onto the platform.

Then Jack pulled Carter into him and cradled her head to his chest, not in the expectation that it would help but because he was scared to think how bad she could be hurt and he needed to hold her. Moments like these were the only times he could. He wanted to always, but he only let himself when injury was involved.

He contemplated the chances he could carry her to the gate, but his knee was pulsating fire, and he had enough experience with knee injuries to know what he could and could not do on them. It killed him to admit it, but if he tried to carry her right now he would just drop her.

Continuing to hold Carter close, he looked up and saw Teal’c had manhandled Daniel onto the gate platform and shoved him through the event horizon none too gently, quickly followed by his staff weapon and pack, both tossed through like cheap luggage.

Carter was squirming against him, one arm locked around his back as if to hold on, the other shoving at his stomach to win some freedom. “Jack?”

Jack’s stomach dropped. She was out of it if she was calling him by his name on a mission.

“Teal’c, a little help!” Jack called out.

The Jaffa was at their side in an instant. The tremors were finally dying down and it was no trouble to pass Carter off to Teal’c. The Jaffa hefted Carter into his arms like she were a child, like the effort was nothing at all for him, and strode toward the gate with his precious cargo.

Jack climbed painfully to his feet and limped toward the gate. He grabbed Carter’s pack on the way, and that added weight alone was almost too much for him. His knee was a white-hot center of pain. What he’d really like to do was ditch the pack and just go home, but if he left Carter’s samples behind she would have a fit when she was better.

Because she was going to be fine. He wouldn’t stand for anything else.
Jack made sure Teal’c and Carter were through the Stargate before he stepped after them and left behind the hell that was P4X-103.

********

Within hours of being home, Janet Frasier and her staff had SG-1 patched up, drugged up, and tucked away in three infirmary beds, and Jack was too grateful to even do his usual complaining. His knee was propped up on a pillow with packs of ice all around it, sucking the fiery heat out of the injury. When the inflammation was under control, Fraiser would be able to make a better assessment of the extent of the damage. That plus the pain medication were doing wonders. Not to mention the happy sedative he’d received to let him sleep through the worse of it.

He was fading fast, but he would not lose consciousness until he had an update on his team.

“Colonel,” Janet sighed in annoyance when she approached his bed. “Will you stop fighting the sedative and go to sleep?”

It was a common complaint with the infirmary staff. Jack was notorious for not staying sedated like he should.

Although this time, honestly, he was ready to go to Lala Land. He just needed to know if the others were okay.


Janet’s face softened. “Daniel fractured his left radius. We set it and put a cast on him. It was a clean break, so he should heal without any trouble. It will just be an inconvenience for about six weeks. Lucky he’s right-handed.” She smiled warmly.

Jack gave a weak nod. “Carter?”

“She has a concussion and she needed five stitches, but she’s going to be fine too.” When Jack visibly relaxed, Janet reassured him, “I promise, it looked worse than it was; you know how head injuries bleed. She’ll have one hell of a headache for a while, but she’s going to be fine, sir.” Janet reached out and gently laid her hand on his arm. “Everyone’s okay, Colonel. You can go to sleep.”

So he did.

*******

Jack woke to muffled voices. He blinked his eyes open slowly and took a moment to get his bearings. Infirmary. His internal clock said it was early morning, and the low lights and minimal staff supported that conclusion.

Gradually, his memories of the last few days crept back through the drug-induced haze of his brain.

Then the voices came again, low-pitched and obviously taking care not to wake him. He knew those voices. He woke to them off-world so often that they had penetrated his psyche, calmed him before his reflexes even had a chance to jump at the thought they might be a threat.

Carter and Daniel.

When they’d reported to the doctor yesterday, the infirmary staff had separated them to better focus on treating each individual, so Jack hadn’t seen either of his injured teammates since they were brought in. That fact suddenly was not sitting well with Jack O’Neill. The last time he’d seen his
friends, Daniel was soaked and cradling a broken arm and Carter was dazed and bleeding.

Time to do something about that.

No doubt triggering psychic alarms in Janet Fraiser’s brain wherever she was, Jack sat up and carefully swung his legs over the side of the gurney. His knee was tender as all get out, but the swelling was down and it felt much better than it had on the planet (where all they’d had in the way of medical intervention was aspirin and a wrap bandage). He wouldn’t be surprised if he got the news there was some serious damage or maybe even surgery in his near future (hardly his first knee-injury rodeo), but he was confident he could at least gimp his ass over to his teammates.

Which was exactly what he did, though he was grateful no one was witness to the spectacle.

Jack swished aside the curtain separating him from the next bed and found Carter propped up in her bed with Daniel perched on the edge of it on the far side of her, his broken arm resting in his lap. They both looked up at him, surprised, and Jack took immense pride that even crippled his stealth abilities were working.

Carter had a blood-spotted white square of gauze taped to her right temple, the skin around the bandage mottled an ugly purple and blue. The dark colors were a sharp contrast to everything light about Carter, from her fair skin to her blonde hair.

They were all dressed in blue hospital scrubs, making them look like they were having the shittiest pajama party ever.

“Daniel,” Jack chided as he subtly took a hop-step forward and braced himself on the back of a visitor’s chair, evidence Teal’c had stopped by. “What are you doing pestering Carter? Pretty sure she needs her rest.”

“I’m fine, sir,” Carter insisted. “I asked Daniel to keep me company. I was bored.”

“And you didn’t expect me to make Sam go to my bed, did you?” Daniel asked, the perennial wiseass.

Jack bit back the knee-jerk (ha) response to say something about preferring Carter in his bed (damn the pain meds for making him loopy) and studied them both closely. All joking aside, he asked, “You two all right?”

Daniel brandished his plaster-encased left forearm and said, “I was right, it’s broken.” He shrugged. “All things considered, could have been worse.”

Carter nodded gingerly. “My head hurts, but Janet said I’ll be fine.” She eyed Jack and the way he was holding onto the chair for support. She shifted closer to Daniel and patted the empty side of her bed.

Since he had injury and medication to excuse his behavior, he limped over and perched on the edge of the bed opposite Daniel with Carter sandwiched between them. He stretched out his right leg as much as he could and propped himself on his left arm, hand planted on the thin mattress next to Carter’s hip.

Carter’s eyes flicked toward his hand and she oh-so-casually dropped her left hand down to her side, letting it come to rest between Jack’s wrist and his hip. Her thumb reached out and brushed against the inside of his wrist deliberately.

Jack’s heart did a fair imitation of P4X-103.
These stolen moments were not nearly enough, but they were all they had. The only proof he had that Carter felt the same unprofessional attraction he did. He gave her a blink-and-you-miss-it smile, one Carter echoed, then the moment was past. Except she continued to periodically graze her thumb along the soft underside of his wrist, because they were positioned in such a way that the gesture was hidden from prying eyes, and anyway Daniel was there to chaperon. No one would think anything untoward was happening. Besides, they’d all had the week from hell, and what monster would begrudge them a little reassurance and physical comfort?

“I was just telling Daniel how sorry I am about all this,” Carter said lowly.

Jack sighed. He’d been so angry before, but now that everyone was home and they were all going to be fine it was too much work to stay mad. “Carter…”

“We really did believe the Ancients had conquered any instability on P4X-103. We were sure the presence of a Stargate meant it was safe.”

“Yeah, well, I think you and your nest of eggheads in the science department give those Ancients too much credit,” Jack answered. “You know they weren’t gods, right? No more than the Goa’uld are?”

Carter blushed, the pink flooding her pale cheeks and giving a strange background to the dark bruises. “I guess I do see them as godlike in a way. Through the lens of science, of course. I mean, any race that could build the Stargate system…”

“You’re gob smacked, I get it, but they weren’t infallible. Maybe keep that in mind from now on?”

Carter’s thumb came to rest against his pulse point and she looked up at him. “You’re not still mad?”

“I’ll only be mad if you don’t learn something from this, does that sound fair?”

Carter nodded and her thumb started moving again. “Yes, sir.”

“Guess we know who the favorite is,” Daniel grumbled playfully. “I never get a pass after I screw up.”

“That’s because you never learn from your mistakes,” Jack countered.

“Trying to do the right thing is never a mistake,” Daniel argued.

Jack groaned and gestured at Daniel with his free hand. “See? Look at what I have to deal with.”

Daniel gave Jack a petulant look.

Carter smiled and overtly, unselﬁconsciously, reached up and touched Daniel’s bicep with her right hand. Jack kind of hated all the reasons Carter could be so free with Daniel where she couldn’t be with him. “It’s okay, Daniel. You know we need your optimism to balance out the colonel’s doom and gloom.”

“Doom and gloom!?” Jack squawked. “What, because I don’t believe the world is full of puppies and rainbows, suddenly I’m a curmudgeon?”

“I’m pretty sure I remember you yelling at me to get off your lawn once,” Daniel teased.

“That’s because you were trying to put in a birdfeeder without asking me!”

“Who doesn’t like birds?”
“People who don’t get their jollies cleaning bird shit off their truck every morning?”

Carter giggled. It totally derailed Jack’s train of thought. Basically any time Carter giggled, it brought his world to a halt. It was why he told her to quit it every time she giggled – it completely knocked him on his ass, and floundering for words was not a good look on an Air Force colonel.

Luckily (or not), Janet chose that moment to interrupt.

“And just what is going on here?” she asked sternly, giving all three of them a piercing look. “I believe I ordered all three of you to rest.” She looked reprovingly at Jack. “Colonel, I know you didn’t walk over here.”

“Umm…” Jack scratched at the back of his neck. “Technically, I don’t know that it would qualify as ‘walking’.”

Janet sighed. “Why is it SG-1 never lets me do my job? Do I have to put the three of you in private rooms?”

Why did that sound so much like a time-out?

Daniel gave her the puppy-dog eyes.

“Please, Janet,” Carter cajoled sweetly. “We’ve had a terrible week, and now that we’re home, safe and almost-sound, we just want to celebrate cheating death together.”

He could actually see Janet give in seconds before she spoke. “Fine. But I want you in a wheelchair with your leg properly supported, Colonel.” Jack opened his mouth to protest when Janet cut him off, “It’s either a wheelchair at Sam’s bedside or you get back in your own bed. Which is it going to be?”

Knowing when to concede a battle, Jack nodded. “Wheelchair.”

“Good. Daniel, I’ll be releasing you later today and I won’t restrict your visiting hours, but if you become a nuisance…”

“I won’t, I promise!”

“Right.” She sounded dubious. But also resigned to her most frequent and troublesome patients. “I’ll be right back with that wheelchair.” She left them with a shake of her head.

Jack sat up and pulled his left hand back, trailing his fingers ‘accidentally’ over Carter’s hand in the process. Her fingers caught at his briefly and let him go without fanfare. It still had an uplifting effect on his mood. “Hey, think we could get Teal’c to smuggle some cake in here?”

“And blue jello?” Carter asked hopefully.

“I could go for some ice cream,” Daniel said.

“Really?” Jack asked incredulously. “After hiking through miles of icy water, you want ice cream?”

“It’s Sam’s fault! She kept talking about ice ages…”

Carter smiled and it did just as much for Jack’s well-being as Janet’s drugs.
Chapter 2

*His world contains a lot of Air Force blue and olive drab, and while she caparisons herself in the hues of his adult life (camouflaging herself as something that he should, by all rights, not even notice), so much of her color shines through.*

********

Colonel O’Neill was inarguably the leader of his team. He took their counsel when appropriate – he’d be an idiot not to with two certified geniuses on SG-1 and a former First Prime (a walking treasure trove of knowledge on the Goa’uld) at his disposal – but at the end of the day his word was law. Jack called the shots.

So it was surprising just how often he was coerced into things by his subordinates.

A point that was never more beautifully illustrated than when he stood holding his front door open for Samantha Carter.

It was a lovely Saturday in Colorado Springs, and to celebrate everyone’s return to active duty after weeks of medical leave to allow all the broken members of SG-1 to heal, Carter and Daniel had hatched the idea to have a party. Naturally, they volunteered Jack to host it.

Without consulting Jack.

Not that he actually minded having the team over, but it would have been nice if he’d had the chance to offer his home before Carter and Daniel commandeered it. Which they only did, of course, because they knew he’d say yes.

At some point in their time together as SG-1, Jack’s house had become their gathering place. It made the most sense. Daniel’s apartment was horribly cluttered with artifacts, Teal’c lived at Cheyenne Mountain, and Carter’s house was… well, Jack would never tell Carter this, but her house didn’t feel like *Carter*. Which was ridiculous, because she *lived* there, but it was still true.

Hence, therefore, to wit, Casa O’Neill became their hang out spot in perpetuity, and it seemed Jack had very little say in the matter.

Jack allowed himself a smile. Sometimes being on SG-1 was like being married, and as long as Carter was part of that team to which he was hitched then Jack was good with that.

It meant he was guaranteed more sights like the one before him – Major Carter in a baby blue blouse and knee-length black skirt walking toward his house with a box in her arms. She noticed Jack was already at the door waiting and smiled.

“Can I give you a hand, Carter?”

“No thank you, sir, I’ve got it. Besides, Janet would *kill me* if she found out I let you do any heavy lifting with your knee.”

With a dazzling smile, all pearly whites, pink lips, and sparkling blue eyes, she weaved past him into the foyer and made a beeline for his kitchen. Jack shut the door behind her and moseyed along in her wake, strangely happy about how well she knew his home.

Sam put the box down on his kitchen counter and turned to him. “Honestly, sir, how is it?”

“All right, maybe not good as new, but probably as good as it’s going to get. But what can you expect after a torn meniscus and arthroscopic surgery at my age, right?”

Carter looked instantly worried, the brilliance of her presence dimming in the shadows of concern. It was a peek into a room where they could be more, where they didn’t have to stop at surface pleasantries, where Jack’s medical status would be as much her business as it was his.

It was thrilling and gut-wrenching all at once, and Jack was never sure if he hated it or loved it when those cracks showed and he saw that alternate reality they might have had in another life.

“Relax, Carter,” Jack touched her upper arm because it was his house and the Air Force couldn’t possibly begrudge him this. “Doc Frasier cleared me.”

For a second, Carter held on to her almost spouse-like worry, then she shook it off determinedly and smirked. “I kind of thought maybe you’d bribed her to sign off on your evaluation.”

“Nothing doing. If there is a bribe in this universe that works on ol’ Doc Frasier, I haven’t found it yet.”

Carter bit back a cheeky smile.

Jack narrowed his eyes at her. “You know what it is, don’t you? All right, Major, spill!”

“Sorry, sir. That would violate the Women’s Solidarity Confidentiality Agreement.”

Jack snorted, not at all surprised by Carter’s loyalty to Janet Fraiser, and peeked into the box Carter had brought over. It was a strange collection of items that was so very them, so perfectly Jack and Sam. There was a case of his favorite beer, a small boxed cake from the local bakery Jack loved, an assortment of tools she’d borrowed from him, a book on astrophysics, and a yo-yo.

Jack plucked out the beers to put in the refrigerator. “What’s with the book? Don’t tell me this party was all a scam to get us to start a book club.”

Carter grinned and pulled out the book. “No, sir. This is my most basic book on astrophysics and wormhole theory. Since you like to blindside me with questions, I thought I could leave it here. Then the next time you give me a pop quiz, I can go to this instead of telling you to imagine an apple.”

Jack turned to her, eyebrow raised. “You want to leave one of your books here?”

“If that’s all right, sir.”

It wasn’t her toothbrush or a drawer in his dresser, but it was the closest they would get. “By all means. You know where the bookcase is.” He waved toward the hallway and Carter cheerfully went off to add her book to his collection.

Unable to help himself, Jack was fetching the yo-yo from the box when he heard his front door open and a familiar, “Helloooo?” sound forth.

“In here!” Jack called to Daniel.

Daniel, with Teal’c in a Murray-hat a step behind him, came into the kitchen with a box of his own. “Sorry we’re late, I wanted to stop at this Greek restaurant and pick up some gyros and baklava.”

“You know we’re ordering pizza, don’t you?” Jack asked.
"I know, I know, but I thought we could add a little variety to our diet. Then I got to talking to the lady who owns the place —"

"In Greek, naturally."

"Naturally." Daniel put the box down, shaking out the arm that had been in a cast only a day ago, and pushed his glasses further up his nose. "Then I kind of lost track of time. I’d probably still be there if Teal’c hadn’t nudged me."

"Hey, guys," Carter said as she came around the corner from the direction of Jack’s bedroom (sadly, only because his ‘office’ where he had his bookcase was across the hall from his bedroom). She gave Teal’c a hug and kissed Daniel on the cheek.

Jack tried to pretend he didn’t feel burning jealousy that the lack of military rank between her and the rest of SG-1 meant she could hug and kiss them on off hours when the most he got was a friendly ‘hello, sir’. Even when they were out of uniform, the uniform stood between them.

"Hey, Sam," Daniel answered. "Any word yet on where our first mission back is going to be?"

"All right, that’s it," Jack blurted in exasperation, "you two should both make an appointment with MacKenzie."

When Carter and Daniel both gave him bewildered looks, Jack rolled his eyes, "Don’t you think it’s strange that we’re having a party to celebrate returning to work? People don’t celebrate going to work, they celebrate getting leave from work."

Daniel countered, "Most people don’t love their job."

Jack looked askance at Carter. She linked her arm with Daniel’s and bumped him with her shoulder. Jack ached to feel that touch, to be that casual with her, but watching her shed even the top layer of Major Carter and let Sam shine through was a gift. "I have to agree with Daniel."


Sam smiled impishly. "You love it as much as we do, sir, admit it."

He certainly loved parts of it he thought as he watched Carter.

"And besides, it’s not like you two haven’t been working this whole time," Jack pointed out. And it was true. Carter and Daniel were hot commodities at the SGC, and while Jack tended to guard them possessively (otherwise, they would literally work themselves into the ground), with the team on stand-down, they were seen as fair game. Even injured, their value as consultants on various projects meant they were constantly being farmed out to other teams. Carter had already been on several off-world missions with other teams (which gave Jack ulcers) because her concussion took the least time to heal. When she wasn’t on other planets, she was holed up in her lab up to her ears in experiments or conferring with the other base eggheads on the mysteries of the universe. Even Daniel had finagled his way on to a couple of off-world excursions, broken arm and all, with teams on established digs that he’d managed to convince General Hammond and Doctor Fraiser were completely safe.

Hell, even Teal’c got to see a little action with different teams.

All Jack’s stand-down time seemed to consist of was catching up on paperwork.

Carter left Daniel’s side to approach Jack, plucking the yo-yo from his hands and flipping it over to
peel back a sticker. Underneath was a picture of the Simpsons: Marge, Lisa, and Maggie in the center like they were posing for a family portrait and along the curved edge Homer chasing Bart.

“Sweet,” Jack crooned.

Carter gave the yo-yo back to Jack with a proud little smile, and up close he could see her pale hair tousled like she’d driven over with the windows down and combed her fingers through to try and tame it. The blue of her blouse accentuated the blue in her eyes, finding the lighter flecks and igniting them. Her lips were a shade richer than normal, probably a tinted chapstick.

It was easy to lose himself looking at her; she was some mystical combination of Icarus and Medusa for him. He dare not look too long or he’d be lost, fallen for her in ways he couldn’t come back from.

“It’s fun to moonlight on other teams now and then,” Carter said, “but SG-1 is home.”

Jack gave her a warm look. “Damn right, Major.”

********

While the plan had initially been to order pizza and watch a movie, SG-1 ended up doing neither. The gyros Daniel brought looked so good that everyone opted to go for them instead of pizza rather than in addition to. Since wraps didn’t really feel like a complete meal on their own, Jack unearthed the necessary items in his fridge to make a salad, and Carter pulled out the half bottle of wine she’d left in Jack’s fridge on the last team night. It wasn’t really the kind of meal to eat from their laps in the living room, so they had to clear the dining room table off, but when it was all said and done, it was actually a pretty nice (dare Jack say grown-up) evening.

After dessert (Teal’c and Daniel had the baklava, Jack and Carter the cake), the members of Jack’s team kind of… diffused throughout the house. It was a sign of the level of comfort and familiarity SG-1 had with each other that they could just exist in the same space at Jack’s house without having to be entertained. Jack didn’t feel like he had to attend to them, and everyone on SG-1 knew the boundaries in Jack’s house without needing to ask.

Daniel sat down on the couch and flipped through channels on Jack’s television until he found a documentary on the Aztecs.

Teal’c asked Jack to explain his many framed medals and patches over his fireplace – some Jack could talk about, some he couldn’t (and sometimes the reason he couldn’t talk about a commendation was because of national security, but sometimes it wasn’t).

When dusk began to fall, Carter refilled her wine glass and went out on Jack’s deck.

The pull was too much for Jack, and eventually he excused himself and slipped out onto the deck with her.

Carter was sitting in one of the deck chairs, ankles crossed and head tipped back to take in the sky. Sunset was splashing color on her like a painting, rose and marigold and magenta on the planes of her face and blushing richly on the column of her throat. She held her wine glass against her thigh with one hand, fingers grazing over the glass mindlessly and drawing his attention to her hands. Jack had always liked her hands, with unpainted nails and a callus on her trigger finger.

“This a private party?” he asked to announce his presence.

She looked over at him with a gentle smile. It was her soft smile, the smile she only turned loose when she and Jack were alone. Really, it was her most dangerous smile. He could be made to do
things, fly to the brink of insanity, for that smile.

“It’s your house, sir. Pull up a chair.”

Jack dragged a second chair close to Carter’s. When he turned to sit, the motion made his knee twinge and he winced.

Carter saw it. She waited until he’d settled in, arms of their deck chairs nearly touching, before she said, “Sir, are you sure you’re all right?”

Jack sighed and massaged his right knee. “I’m getting old, Carter.”

Carter’s eyes widened at the bald honesty. She blinked at him, clearly not sure how to respond.

Something about the intimacy of the moment got to him, and he just talked. “Fraiser told me that, barring anything catastrophic happening to me on a mission, my knees will probably be what end my career as part of an SG unit.”

There was a conspicuous lack of sound from Carter, not even her breathing, until she exhaled and said lowly, “I didn’t realize the injury on P4X-103 was that severe.”

“It wasn’t, but these knees have been through hell.” Jack had a tiny flashback to his days in the Iraqi prison. “Quite literally.” Then he shrugged. “Between hockey when I was younger, parachuting in the Special Forces, and being on an off-world team… something was eventually going to give out, and I can’t say I’m surprised it’s my knees.” Honestly, given all the hell his body had been through, he was probably lucky it was just his knees (although he wasn’t completely ready to discount back problems becoming a contender in the future).

Carter stared down at her wine glass. The fan of her dark lashes hid the colors of her eyes and stood out heavy against the paleness of her cheeks. There was a furrow in her brow adding a darker shade to her smooth complexion. Maybe she had never really considered the day when her commanding officer couldn’t do the job anymore. Intellectually, she had to know it was bound to happen, but the conversation had clearly ripped away the amorphous ‘someday’ quality to it and put it firmly in the real world.

“Don’t look so glum, Carter,” Jack rapped his knuckles on the arm of her chair. “I’m not completely used up yet. Still a few more missions left in this old bird.”

Carter nodded distractedly and glanced over at him. Apprehension now filled her face, an unwelcome contrast to the upbeat mood of the evening. “Have you ever thought about what you’d do after?”

“You mean when I can’t be on an SG team anymore?” he asked and held out his hand.

She nodded and passed him her wine glass.

He took a sip and swirled the dark liquid around a bit. “Retire, probably.” He hated paperwork too much to resign himself to that shit full-time.

Carter wordlessly asked for her wine back, taking a small sip before offering it to him again. “Would you move up to Minnesota?”

Jack took a slow drink and wondered what Carter was really asking, if this was that conversation they kept not having, and if she really wanted to go there tonight. “I don’t know. I’m kind of attached to certain things Colorado has to offer.” He looked carefully over at Carter.
She was watching him closely, the gathering dusk going from orange and pink to purple and indigo on her face and in her hair. She bit her bottom lip and stared at the glass in his hand, maybe just to have a safe place to settle her gaze. “Are there things you’d want to do in retirement you can’t do now?”

Jack’s eyebrows rose. Her tone left no doubt in his mind what she was actually asking. It surprised him, to say the least, but if Carter was counting on him to retreat first, she was in for a surprise of her own. “You know there are.”

Carter’s eyes jumped up to meet his, peacock blue in the encroaching night, and she held his gaze a long time. Jack just waited to see what she’d do, if she wanted to open this Pandora’s Box. Or would it be a Schrodinger’s box? If they both knew what was in it, would talking about it make it any harder?

“You’ll probably be on SG-1 for a few more years,” she finally said at length, voice oddly distant. “That’s a long time. A lot can change in two or three years.”

That hit like a kick in the gut, Jack would be honest. It was one thing to suspect Carter would find someone better, but it was another thing to find out she thought that, too.

Something in his face must have betrayed his thoughts, because her eyes widened and she hastened to say, “I meant you might change your mind.”

Well, that was the dumbest thing Samantha Carter had ever said.

“I’m not that fickle, Carter,” he countered, handing back her wine glass. “I pride myself on being loyal.” The word he’d really wanted to use was ‘faithful’, but that felt like a step too far.

Carter grimaced. “Loyalty’s not… You shouldn’t limit yourself out of loyalty. It’s not fair to you.”

With a grunt, Jack sat up and turned sideways to face her, balanced on the edge of his seat as he plucked the wine glass from her hand, set it down on the deck between their chairs, and looked directly at Carter. “Are we doing this?”

Carter gave him a look like a spooked deer.

“We can either have this conversation or we can talk about something else. Up to you.”

Carter studied him warily. Jack was almost certain she would take the out he’d given her. It was how they did this dance. The fact that she didn’t immediately made his heart beat double-time. He secretly lived on the hope, the slim chance, that one day they wouldn’t shy away from each other.

They sat there watching each other tensely in the gathering dark, a veritable game of chicken that they had played far too often. The contest seemed to last an eternity.

“We probably shouldn’t be talking about this, anyway,” Carter finally said, always the voice of reason.

“No, probably not.”

“We shouldn’t be making promises.”

Jack looked closely at her. “And are we?”

“We can’t.”
“Right.” Jack ran a hand through his hair in frustration then turned to sit back in his chair. The stars were coming out above them, bejeweling the heavens with familiar constellations that offered comfort. Jack appreciated the ones he knew even more after seeing so many alien skies.

Quietly, Carter moved. She dropped her arm onto the arm of his deck chair, palm up in silent invitation.

It felt like the taste of that forbidden fruit when Jack took her hand, threading his fingers through hers.

Was it the wine that let them dare this much? Quite likely. In the end, Jack didn’t care why Carter gave him her hand. He would hold on to it as long as he could.

She squeezed tightly. “Not a promise.”

“Nope,” he agreed. It wasn’t a promise. And he got it. A promise would be almost as bad as outright sleeping together. With a promise they would be bonded, bound, given over to each other in every way but physical.

The Air Force probably wouldn’t give a rat’s ass about technicalities if Jack thought of Carter as his and as himself as hers.

Yeah, a promise was as dangerous as anything they could do.

Carter always was the smart one.

But damn did it still hurt to have even that denied them.

They remained like that for a moment, sitting side by side, holding hands, and looking up at the stars. It felt like they’d catapulted right over dating and were treacherously nestled in a well-worn relationship. It felt like ‘old married couple’.

Carter took an unsteady breath, clinging to his hand tightly. “Talk about something else.” Her voice was cracking at the request, like she needed to stop thinking about it before it tore her apart.

“Okay.” Jack cast about in his head for anything. “Well, actually, there’s something that’s been bugging me for years, and I’ve never really known how to bring it up. I was worried you’d get mad if I said anything, and feel free to tell me to mind my own business when you hear it.”

She glanced over at him, curious.

Jack nodded his chin down at her clothes. “Your civvies.”

Carter looked down at her blouse and skirt. “What about them?”

“I don’t get them. Half the time your civilian clothes make sense. They seem like you. The stuff you wear when you go for a motorcycle ride, regular jeans and t-shirts – that seems like Carter. I can see you going to a store and buying those. But the rest of the time…” he shook his head, “it doesn’t seem like you. Don’t get me wrong, you look nice in a dress, but you don’t really look like you were the one picking out your clothes.”

Jack was braced for indignation. After all, what did he know about women’s fashion? Instead, Carter threw back her head and laughed. Jack startled at the sound, then he just kind of basked in it. He watched Carter greedily, cursing the darkness for denying him the crinkles at the corners of her eyes, the brightness of her teeth, the little pinch in her nose, the pretty blush that swept over her features
when she laughed too hard.

When Carter got herself under control, she wiped at her eyes and replied, “Actually, you’re absolutely right. A lot of my civilian clothes aren’t things I picked out.”

“Wait, what? Then where the hell do they come from? You got a clothes fairy paying you visits?”

“Well, kind of. Aunt Susan.”

“Aunt Susan,” Jack repeated dumbly.

Carter nodded. “My dad’s older sister had three boys, and don’t get me wrong, she loves them to death, but she always wanted a girl. Since I was a baby, she’s bought me girly clothes to fill that void in her own life from never having a daughter. Still does it to this day. Every Christmas, birthday, special occasion, sometimes for no reason at all, I get a new outfit from Aunt Susan. Her taste and mine differ, to say the least.”

“And you just… wear them?”

Carter used her free hand to cover her face in embarrassment. Jack couldn’t help but wonder if she was bright red from the tips of her ears down to her chest. “Truth is… I hate shopping. And when I get clothes from Aunt Susan, I use it as an excuse to not do it because, well, I do have clothes. Maybe not what I’d pick for myself, but… honestly, I feel like I spend the majority of my time in BDUs anyway, so it’s just easier to wear whatever’s in my closet.”

“Wow… so you’re just lazy when it comes to clothes.”

“Now you know my dark secret.”

Jack snorted. “Carter, if that’s as dark as your secrets get, that is weak.”

She chuckled. “I’ll try to do better, sir.”

So they were back to the ‘sir’ part of the evening. Probably just as well. They’d played with fire too much this evening already.

It was hard, but Jack let go of Carter’s hand and pulled away. Carter sighed audibly, like she objected but she understood, and folded her hands in her lap. Wisely, neither of them reached for the wine abandoned on the deck.

“Nice night,” she said after a minute of silence.

“Yeah.”

For all the frustration the night had wrought, for all the things they weren’t able to say, he meant it. Any time spent with Carter was a good time in his book.

*******

“Unscheduled off-world activation!”

There was something Pavlovian about the way SG-1 raced for the control room whenever that alarm sounded. No matter where they were or what they were doing, the announcement of an unknown traveler turned every member of SG-1 into a runner.

It was probably a good thing more teams didn’t have the same response SG-1 did, or the control
room would get awfully damn crowded.

Jack was kind of annoyed that he was the last one of his team to get there, suggesting his knee was slowing him down more than he’d like to admit.

“Who is it?” he asked as he came up behind Carter. Daniel and Teal’c were doing their best to straddle the line between ‘out of the way’ and ‘able to see all the action’.

“Receiving the Tok’ra’s IDC, sir,” Walter reported.

“Open the iris,” Jack ordered and made for the door, apprehension churning in his gut. Nine times out of ten, visits from the Tok’ra led to nothing good. Jack was really hoping his team could at least get in their first mission back on rotation before the galactic shit hit the fan and they had to save the planet. *Again.*

Carter was right behind him as he strode into the gate room with his loins duly girded.

The Tok’ra who stepped through the Stargate untangled some of the knots in his stomach.

“Dad!” Carter moved around Jack to greet her father.

“Hello, Sam.” Jacob hugged his daughter then pulled back enough to give her a onceover. Once a parent, always a parent.

“Hey, Dad,” Jack said cheekily when he came to a halt at the foot of the ramp, hands stuffed into his pants pockets.

“Jack,” Jacob returned with that soft sigh of mixed fondness and exasperation – strangely enough, the tone Jacob always seem to take with Jack O’Neill. Jack had never really figured it out, but he didn’t think it was necessarily bad.

“What brings you to Earth?” Sam asked, hand curled around her father’s elbow like he was a gentleman escorting her to a ball.

“Please don’t say another snake is on its way to destroy the planet,” Jack whined. “I’m really not feeling up to saving the world today.”

“Should the universe wait for you to be in a better mood?” Jacob asked archly.

“Yeah, that’d be nice.”

Jacob looked like it was a supreme act of willpower (or intervention by Selmac) that kept him from rolling his eyes. Jack glanced up toward the control room and saw Daniel and Teal’c watching them like hawks, waiting for any hint that it was go time.

At that moment, General Hammond walked into the gate room. “Jacob… good to see you.”

“Good to see you too, George.”

“I suppose it’s too much to hope that this is a social call,” Hammond said warily.

Jacob smiled. “Actually, for once, it is. I managed to finagle myself three days’ leave from the Tok’ra and thought I might spend some quality time with my daughter.” He looked toward Sam and patted the hand she had on his arm.

Joy was quickly followed by disappointment in Carter’s face. “Oh… gee, Dad, I’d love that… but
SG-1 just got put back on rotation after six weeks’ medical leave. We were scheduled to go on a mission tomorrow morning.” Carter looked downright dejected.

Jack didn’t blame Hammond for caving. “Considering how impossible it is to get your leave to coincide with Jacob’s, I think we can give the mission tomorrow to SG-7. It’s been six weeks… what’s three more days?”

“Thank you, sir!” Carter turned to her father eagerly. “Come on, Dad.”

Hammond and Jack made a hole for Jacob and Carter to pass between them. As he was moving past him, Jacob reached out and touched Jack’s arm briefly. It was cue enough for Jack (while throwing Hammond a baffled look) to turn and follow the father/daughter pair as they moved into the bowels of the base.

“Medical leave?” Jacob asked. Ah. At least Jack knew now why Jacob had dragged him along… to be held responsible for anything that may have happened to his daughter. “Who was hurt?”

“Pretty much everyone,” Carter answered. “Teal’c got out unscathed, but Daniel broke his arm, I got a concussion, and Colonel O’Neill tore up his knee and had to have surgery.”

Jacob threw a questioning look over his shoulder at Jack.

“We were stuck on a planet for a week in the middle of earthquake and tsunami season.” He scratched idly at his nose. “Shockingly, not as nice as the brochures made it sound.”

“But you’re all okay?” Jacob asked, looking again at Carter.

Carter started to agree, but she hesitated and glanced back at Jack. There was uncertainty and worry in her eyes. Jack knew it was because of the conversation they’d had on his deck. He probably shouldn’t have told her about Fraiser’s predictions about the inglorious end to his field career (and that’s if he was lucky).

The hesitation and meaningful look back at her CO caught Jacob’s attention. He half-turned while walking to look back at him. “Jack? Are you all right?”

“Oh yeah, sure.” When Carter remained conspicuously silent on the matter, Jack waved it off. “Carter worries too much.”

“Sir…”

“Major.” There was a tiny bite to the word. “You know Fraiser wouldn’t have cleared me for gate travel if I wasn’t as good as I’m going to get.”

He’d chosen his words poorly and he knew it right away. Carter looked pained and Jacob gave him a thoughtful look.

“Anyway,” Jack put a hand on Jacob’s shoulder, “why are we talking about me? How you been, Jacob?”

Jacob pursed his lips. “Stressed.”

“Tough month?”

Jacob looked at Jack, then over at Carter. “Sounds like it was a doozy for all of us.” There was sharpness to the lines of Jacob’s face that made Jack feel like things were worse than the Tok’ra was
letting on.

Jack slid a covert look Carter’s direction, and for a nanosecond he saw a somber set to her features. Then she plastered on a smile. “You know what me and the guys like to do when we’ve had a stressful week?” At Jacob’s head tilt, Carter said, “O’Malley’s.”

Jack snorted. It was actually their second choice, but Jack didn’t really think Carter was going to invite Jacob to a team night at his house. His team was brazen, but not rude. Besides, they just did a team night at his house, and people said variety was the spice of life.

Jacob chuckled. “O’Malley’s, huh?”

“Sure… good food, a few beers, some pool. It’s guaranteed to cheer you up.”


Carter startled. Jack knew how she felt. He stammered, “Oh, uh… no, that’s okay, I wouldn’t want to be a third wheel during Carter family time.”

“Nonsense. Bring Daniel and Teal’c along, then I’m the one fifth-wheeling.”

A team night out on the town with Carter’s dad tagging along? He wasn’t sure if that sounded like a great idea or a terrible one.

At a loss as to how he should proceed, Jack looked past Jacob to his second-in-command. She still looked surprised by the turn of events, but then she smiled. “Sounds like fun to me, sir. I’m sure Daniel and Teal’c would be interested.”

And, in fact, they were.

********

O’Malley’s had a great atmosphere… just dark enough to be homey but not so dark as to feel skeevy. It was in a nice part of town, so the clientele tended to be washed and disinclined to engage in drunken disorderly conduct. When Jack had been married, Sara said O’Malley’s was a pub where women felt safe.

Not that there was a snowball’s chance in hell of that being an issue for Jack’s female teammate tonight. Carter could break no fewer than five bones in a man before he could say ‘astrophysicist’, Jack could kill a man bare-handed, Teal’c was a walking deterrent to sexual predation, and Jacob Carter had the super-strength of a human plus one. And even before it got to any of that, Daniel was a masterful negotiator.

Carter clearly knew she was safer than the Crown Jewels, because she was more relaxed than Jack had seen her in a long time. She was at the pool tables with Daniel, explaining the physics of trick shots. They’d both had a few, and Jack could see the flush on Carter’s cheeks all the way from his spot at their table.

“So, Jack…” Jacob began, leaning across the table toward him.

Talk about a boner-killer. “Yes, Jacob?”
“What’s going on?”

Jack took a swallow of his beer to stall. “What do you mean?”

“Sam seems worried about you.” He eyed Jack closely. “Is there a reason to be worried?”

“It’s nothing.”

Jacob continued to watch him expectantly.

“I told Carter something Fraiser told me, and I shouldn’t have.”

Despite the color being off, for a moment Jack saw Carter-like concern in his eyes. “Are you sick?”

“No, it’s…” Jack gave up and leaned his elbows on the table. “Fraiser said I won’t get much more mileage out of these knees before I’m grounded.” He shrugged. “Not that it was news to me.” He downs another swallow of beer.

Jacob mulled that over quietly, casting a look toward the pool tables. “I can see how that would upset her. Sam’s attached to you.”

“Uh…”

“As a team member, of course.”

“Right, of course.”

Jacob gave him a knowing look.

Jack took a gulp of beer to wash down the panic.

“How much longer are we talking here?” Jacob asked.

“Don’t know. Guess we’ll know when my knee blows out. Probably smack dab in the middle of a firefight, knowing my luck.”

“And that’s what it would take to stop you, wouldn’t it?” Jacob sounded… irritated by that? Though Jack couldn’t fathom why. “You know, Jack… maybe you should think beyond your value as a ‘traveler’.” Damn those classified conversations in public places.

“Not actually sure I have any,” Jack quipped.

“Don’t be an idiot.”

“Hate to break it to you, Jacob, but with the company I keep that’s all I can be.”

“She doesn’t think so.”

Jack went perfectly still, suddenly very worried about the direction of the conversation. He glanced surreptitiously toward Teal’c standing watch over Carter and Daniel, wondering how he could discreetly signal the Jaffa for help.

After a long, tense silence, Jacob shook his head. “You’re good to her.”

“Well, yeah.” Why wouldn’t he be? She was Carter.

“You’re good for her.”
That made Jack suck in a breath. He snatched up his beer and guzzled… no way he could do this sober.

Jacob shook his head. “I’m just saying there’s a purpose for you beyond your job. You better not throw your life away on some damn fool mission because you think it’s the only thing you’re good for.”

Jack had literally no idea what to do with that. Since when did Carter’s dad give him pep talks about being around for her after his gate days were over? He had no idea Jacob had noticed the degree of ‘inappropriate attachment’ between him and Carter, and the conversation had him a little panicked that if Jacob knew, what if he’d talked to Hammond about it? The two men were friends; surely they talked.

While he was busy frantically thinking about how to do damage control, Jacob said, “Sam doesn’t need much to make her happy, and I’ll admit I don’t fully understand the things that do, but I want her to have everything that does. Everything. Even if some of those things she has to wait for. Do you catch my meaning, son?”

Jack sat back abruptly. “Whoa, uh, Jacob, look…” he began to stammer, ready to trot out the patented ‘Carter and I are just friends and coworkers’ story, but one look at Jacob Carter’s face and Jack knew it was pointless. The man wasn’t wrong, he was just too observant for their own good. And for whatever reason, tonight he was done pretending he didn’t see it.

Jacob’s eyebrows merely twitched expectantly.

For a moment, it was heady. Jacob was giving them his blessing. It felt like winning a war.

Then reality crashed down around Jack. “It doesn’t matter.”

The look in Jacob’s eyes was bitter disappointment. “How can it not matter?”

Jack slumped and took two deep swallows of beer. “Because I couldn’t let her go out there without me. No one else will do what I would to keep her safe. And if I threw in the towel to… if I walked away and something happened to her out there… I couldn’t live with that. I need to be out there for as long as I can.”

“Even if you break down on a mission? Even if it gets you killed?”

“If it saved Carter, it would be worth it.”

It was Jacob’s turn to sit back, staring in amazement at Jack. It seemed even with all of Jacob’s suspicions about Jack and his daughter, he hadn’t known until that moment just how enormous this thing between them was. Because it damn well shouldn’t be anything. They were in the same chain of command. He was Carter’s commanding officer.

Jack drained the last of his beer and slammed the empty mug down with a hiss. He definitely needed another one after this conversation.

“I don’t think our drinks are strong enough for this,” Jacob muttered and he finally took another sip of his beer.

Jack snorted agreement.

When Jacob spoke next, it was strangely gentle. “Thank you.”
It was hardly anything Jack needed to be thanked for. “They’re my team.” But the way he said it, he clearly meant ‘family’.

Jacob nodded slowly, a new measure of respect for Jack O’Neill in his bearing. Then he started to smile. “You know, things might not end that way.”

“Good chance they will.”

“But they might not. And if they don’t…”

Jack looked toward the pool tables and saw Carter heading toward him, eagerness in her expression. When their eyes caught she grinned, and Jack felt an unlikely future not full of blood and death glint at him from the end of a very dark, gruesome tunnel. It might not have much chance of coming true, but it was hope. Maybe enough to keep him going.

“Yeah,” Jack said wistfully.

Carter stopped at their table and sidled up next to Jack, sliding her hand onto his shoulder in a way that toed the line between friendly and intimate. It wouldn’t take much, sometimes just a moment of indulgence, for Jack to imagine they were more. He’d be lying if he said he never daydreamed about it, especially when they had these moments. It made Jack think of other Jacks in other realities that had more than just the fantasy of Samantha Carter. Those lucky bastards.

“Sir, I need your help. I bet Daniel twenty bucks I could teach you the butterfly.” She paused a moment to take in her CO and her father. An instant of indecision and hesitation flickered across her face, eclipsing the rosy cheer for a heartbeat. “Am I interrupting?”

“No, not at all.” Jacob waved them away. “He’s all yours, sweetie.”

Jack liked the sound of that.

Carter reached down to take Jack’s hand and tug him toward the pool table where Daniel was waiting. Jack couldn’t say he disliked the effect alcohol had on their boundaries, since this was the second time within a week he’d gotten to hold her hand. It really was the little things in life. “Please, sir. Daniel is doubting the absolute power of physics!”

“The devil you say!” Jack gasped. “Well, let’s put him in his place.”

Carter practically hauled him out of his seat. Instead of releasing his hand when he was on his feet, she secured it in her own, either worried he’d make an escape attempt or using that excuse to keep his hand.

Before allowing himself to be whisked away, Jack looked down at Jacob – mostly to gauge his reaction to Carter’s actions. Part of Jack was still expecting wrath, either as a father or as an Air Force general, but surprisingly Jacob looked okay with it. So Jack pressed his luck. “Be right back, Dad.”

Jacob looked up at him and nodded. Then Jack was being led to the pool tables by a fair beauty in black pants, a black and red blouse, and a black leather jacket.

********

A few interesting facts about an inebriated SG-1: Teal’c never was, Daniel was a goofy drunk, Jack was a friendly drunk, and Carter was a flirty drunk.
The last two in conjunction were fire and gasoline. And frankly, Jack was having the kind of night when he wanted to watch the world burn.

He’d let himself get much tipsier than he normally would on a team night out. He blamed his talk with Jacob for that. Because even on their down time, Jack was watching out for his team, which meant he kept a tight rein on his alcohol consumption. But tonight, between Teal’c and Jacob for protection, Jack felt like he could loosen the reins a little.

And boy, were they loose.

“That’s not fair!” Daniel pouted when Carter sunk a ball in the corner pocket after jumping two. “You’re drunk, how are you still good at this?!”

“I’m not drunk,” Carter sashayed around the table to line up her next shot, hips moving too much for Jack’s blood pressure. “I’m comfortably lubricated.” Then she started giggling.

“No giggling!” Jack protested. He could only take so much. He was only human!

Carter cast him a heated glance and leaned over to ready her next shot. Jack openly stared at her ass. How her father, now perched on a stool right next to Jack near the pool tables, wasn’t tearing his head off was a mystery.

With a quick move of her stick, Carter banked the cue ball off three walls and started a chain reaction of balls colliding that ended with four more finding homes in pockets.

Game won.

Daniel actually stomped his foot. “Stop using witchcraft!”

Carter stood up laughing and set her stick down. “Using what?”

“Primitive cultures often see science as witchcraft, and this,” he gestured emphatically at the pool table, “is why! Get away from me with your sorcery!”

“Daniel,” Jack chided as he stood and started to approach the pair. Likewise, Teal’c started to approach Daniel. “Take it easy, it’s just a game.” He eyeballed the archaeologist. “No more beer for you.”

“Daniel Jackson,” Teal’c touched Daniel’s shoulder gently. “Perhaps you would join me in the custom of my people. It entails drinking a copious amount of water.”

Daniel nodded feebly, “Yeah, okay,” and let Teal’c take him to the bar for some water.

Carter turned to Jack with laughter and light fighting to break free from her.

“You broke him,” Jack chuckled as his arm reached out and curled around her shoulders. He was sure he didn’t mean to, but somehow his traitorous body pulled her into him. Carter fit against him easily, too well, her hands coming to rest on his sides. “You broke our linguist.”

Carter began to shake with laughter, forehead pressed to his shoulder.

“What’s so funny?” Jack asked with a smile.

“All hail science!” she crowed.

Jack pressed his cheek against her temple. “Hail Dorothy.”
They swayed in place together, moved like one organism, and Jack was having a hard time remembering why he had to let go. She fit perfectly against him. He’d made up his mind, he wasn’t letting her go.

“Nice playing, Sam,” Jacob praised.

And just like that they were peeling apart, becoming two creatures again, and Carter leaned away to look toward her father. “He doubted me.”

“And he knows better,” Jack assured, lowering his arm from her shoulders regretfully. “I’m sure it’s the alcohol talking. You know Danny can’t hold his liquor.”

Carter gave a silly nod and hooked Jack’s elbow with a hand in order to pull him along with her to the tiny table where her father sat. Jacob was looking between the two of them with something strangely content in his eyes.

Jack was too buzzed to analyze it.

“Well, as fun as this has been,” Jacob got to his feet, “I think it’s time for me to call it a night.”

“But it’s early!” Carter protested.

“And I’m, like, two thousand years old.” He said it like a playful exaggeration, though present company knew it was not. Even if Jacob wasn’t over a thousand years old, his symbiote certainly was.

“All right,” Carter surrendered. “I’ll drive you home.”

“Oh, I don’t think so, Sam.” Jacob’s tone made it sound like Carter was all of ten years old. “You’re in no shape to be driving.”

Carter looked on the brink of indignation at her father’s words until she glanced over at Jack… who was standing so close to her they could have kissed, though neither of them had noticed until that moment. They both blinked, surprised by their proximity, and her face scrunched. “Yeah, you might be right about that.”

Jacob leaned in to kiss her on the cheek. “I’ll just call a cab.”

“No, here, take my car. I’ll meet you at home.” Carter started searching for her jacket.

Jack spotted it folded on a stool. He grabbed it and turned to hand it to Carter when something about the way the light fell on her made him pay closer attention to her blouse. Scarlet and ebony twisting together in illogical patterns, twining down her arms like rivers of passion until they ended in… flowy three-quarters sleeves?

“Your jacket, Carter.”

“Oh! Thank you, sir.”

“You bet.” He flicked a dangling sleeve with his fingers and smirked. “Aunt Susan did good this time.”

Jacob’s head popped up, eyebrows high, but Carter just smiled. “She has her moments, sir.”

“Interesting,” Jacob muttered. Then he took Carter’s car keys. “You sure you’ll be able to get home all right if I leave without you?”
“I’ll be fine, Dad. The guys will take care of me.”

Her blind faith in him (and Daniel and Teal’c, of course) was a powerful elixir. Jack stood proud.

“Yeah, I know,” Jacob said. Then he started weaving his way through the crowd toward the door.

Jack suddenly had a thought. “Dad!” he called out.

Jacob turned back to him.

“Hangover late breakfast slash early lunch is usually at my place. I know you won’t be hungover, but you’re still invited.”

Jacob nodded. “Thanks, Jack.” Then he left.

Jack turned back to Carter and found himself mesmerized. She was still standing way too close, head tipped slightly to one side like she was thinking. Her complexion was happily rosy from the evening of drinks, eyes simultaneously unfocused and sharp. The low lighting of the restaurant had turned her hair the color of butterscotch and wheat. A faint pink line on her right temple was all that was left of the wound that had nearly stopped his heart six weeks ago.

A misplaced shade, a harsh beige in the pasa doble of her blouse, was snared in the collar of her shirt. He peered at the tan sliver, caught amid black and red material with her fair skin between, and realized it was part of a peanut shell. He hadn’t seen Carter eating them, but she could have picked it up leaning down over the pool table.

Just drunk enough to not care, Jack reached up and picked the shell off her shirt, fiercely aware of the warmth of her bosom a mere inch from his hand.

“Sir?” Carter asked, her attention thoroughly on something in the distance.

“Hmm?”

“Isn’t that your ex-wife?”

Reflex had Jack turning his head to look in the direction Carter was before he could even think. Sure enough, Sara (formerly O’Neill) was sitting at a booth with two other women that Jack didn’t recognize. Sara was blatantly watching Jack and Carter by the pool tables rather than talking to her friends. She looked kind of sucker-punched. When she met his eyes from across the room, she looked like grieving. Not the most intense grieving he’d ever seen in her (the world did not hold anything anymore that could move her to that), but a magnitude of grief nonetheless.

He realized suddenly how it must look from Sara’s point of view. He’d been practically hugging Carter just a moment ago. He’d called someone ‘Dad’. He looked like he had everything that he actually wanted yet didn’t truly possess. He looked happily in love.

How looks could be deceiving.

“Sir?”

When Jack looked at her, Carter was studying him carefully, all traces of the giggling flirt gone. She tipped her head toward Sara. “Do you want to go talk to her?”

He wasn’t sure how Carter had intended that. As in he should talk to her to say hello? Or that he should go explain to her that this wasn’t what it looked like? But even if it was what it looked like, it
would not be adulterous for Jack to be with someone else.

Of course, that might be true morally and legally, but Jack’s heart still felt a tug of betrayal for Sara to see him with another woman. And from the look on her face, she did feel a little betrayed, despite all reason. Ending a marriage was not as simple as signing their names to a decree.

Jack hesitated and looked again at Sara. She was still watching them, though she’d managed to school her features to reveal less of what she was thinking and feeling. Once upon a time, Jack could see through all her masks. He would have known no matter how many walls Sara threw up what was going on with her. Now he looked at her and couldn’t read her.

And yet when Carter’s eyes flickered in the field, Jack knew exactly what it meant.

It was strange to mourn and celebrate the changes in his life at the same time.

“Not really,” Jack said lowly. And it was both true and not, but opting not to go over and talk to her was probably the wise decision. Imbibing had already nearly gotten him in trouble two or three times tonight.

Carter studied Jack a moment, then she nodded and took a half-step away from him. The distance felt like a maw, a chasm forming between them, but Jack was kind of grateful his ex-wife wouldn’t have to watch them standing together so closely anymore.

“Jack… Jack!” Daniel was heading his way from the bar, a water bottle in his hand and Teal’c in his wake.

Daniel didn’t stop at Jack’s side so much as slump against him, slinging one arm over his shoulders and canting his head onto Jack’s shoulder. “Can we go home? I don’t feel so good.”

“Well, I wonder why,” Jack drawled even as he folded his arm against Daniel’s back and cupped the nape of the younger man’s neck in his hand. Daniel leaned into him more, solicitous of touch like an abandoned puppy. Jack lifted his other hand to feel Daniel’s forehead.

“Is Daniel Jackson ill?” Teal’c asked.

“Yeah, you bet,” Jack replied. “But I think this is all down to bad choices.”

“And witchcraft,” Daniel muttered.

“And witchcraft,” Jack conceded, giving Carter a wink.

Carter frowned at Daniel in sisterly concern. “Guess the party’s over.” She looked toward the front door. “Damn… if Dad had waited five more minutes, I could have ridden home with him.”

“Why don’t you all crash at my place?” Jack offered. He reached into his pocket for his truck keys. “Teal’c can drive us, although it’s going to be a tight squeeze.” His libido thought traitorously that someone might have to sit on someone else’s lap.

It wouldn’t be the first time the whole team had stayed the night at his house. Daniel took the spare bedroom (it was kind of his, anyway, a weird truth in Jack’s life he didn’t care to examine too closely), Carter either shared with Daniel or curled up on the couch, and Teal’c kel’no’reemed in the recliner (how Carter slept with him in the room doing that baffled Jack, but nevertheless she did).

Carter’s eyes went wide. “Sir… I don’t think I should spend the night at your house when my father’s in town. Staying at my house. He’s going to wake up in the morning and notice I’m not
there, and I hate to say it, sir, but he’s probably going to know exactly where I am.” She blushed bright red, ducking her head to try and hide behind her golden fringe.

Jack looked down at Carter, cataloguing the prism of her, the colors and the contours, and he smiled. After his conversation with her father, Jack had a sneaking suspicion that Jacob wouldn’t mind.

But of course Carter was right. In their world, appearances mattered. Sometimes, they were all that mattered.

“All right, we’ll drop you off and the three of us can head back to my place.”

Daniel groaned dramatically.

Carter fought a smile. “Maybe we should drop Daniel off at your place first and then take me home? That is if you and Teal’c don’t mind the extra driving, sir.”

“I don’t mind,” Jack assured, “do you mind, Teal’c?”

“I do not.”

“All right then.”

“Can we go now?” Daniel cajoled. “I want to go home.”

It said a lot about Jack’s team that when Daniel was drunk, ‘home’ meant Jack’s house. And the fact that Jack knew that probably meant Carter wasn’t the only member of his team that Jack was too close to.

“Yeah, Danny, we’re going.” He nudged Daniel toward the door.

As they headed toward the exit, Teal’c in the lead clearing a path with his intimidating presence and Jack guiding his young friend from behind with a hand on his shoulder, Jack cast one last look toward Sara. She watched him warily, expression a cauldron of curiosity and heartache.

He smiled and raised two fingers in a wave.

Sara blinked in surprise, like he had violated the rules of their encounter, then she smiled faintly back.

Carter came up next to him and lightly fisted her hand in his shirt between his shoulder blades. If he were wearing a tac vest, she would have gone for the handle. It was oddly not the most intimate they had been that evening, despite appearances. It was how his team kept themselves grounded off-world if they felt off kilter, the team becoming four living touchstones. They were closing ranks, getting Daniel home, being SG-1.

But it wouldn’t look that way to Sara.

But Jack realized that, generally speaking, Sara was half-right in her assumptions.

He was happy. As happy as he had any right to be, at least, and happier than he probably deserved.

*******

They sandwiched Carter and Daniel into the middle of the truck’s bench seat, with Teal’c behind the wheel and Jack against the passenger side door. It was not designed to seat four adults across; Jack felt like they were playing sardines and the arm rest was digging into his ribs.
Not that Carter or Daniel seemed to mind. Almost as soon as they got in the truck, Daniel slumped toward Teal’c and fell asleep against his shoulder. His glasses were askew and a light snore filled the cab.

Carter lasted a little longer than Daniel, but not much. And since Daniel had gone left, she went right. Jack felt his chest ache when Carter gradually leaned against him and her head slowly came to rest against his shoulder. Her body was angled to be able to fit in the middle with Daniel, and her right arm ended up draped across Jack’s lap, palm up and fingers slightly curled. Jack stared at the street lights crawling up her arm as they passed, her soft skin alternately porcelain and shadowed.

All he could think of doing was sliding his hand over her skin. He wanted to take her hand in his for the duration of the trip, the way they’d held hands on his deck when there had been no witnesses. He wanted to see the contrast of her fair skin and his tan fingers.

He wanted a lot of things, but right now he would settle for drawing her hand into his own. He wanted it so intensely he ended up staring down at her hand to the exclusion of all else, as if he could will her to make the move that would twine their hands together.

The truck hit a bump and Carter shifted, her left hand flopping right on top of his crotch.

“Oookay,” he gave a muffled, manly yelp and hurriedly moved both of Carter’s hands out of his lap and into her own. It was absolutely necessary to keep Jack from developing an embarrassing problem in front of his entire team, but it also felt distinctly like the situation had worsened rather than improved.

For a second he held his hands between them like a protective barrier, like Carter would try to do it again. Without waking, Carter snuggled down closer to Jack, her arms tucked politely to herself. When he was confident she wasn’t going to reach for his goods again, he dropped his hands down into his lap and exhaled deeply.

She would undoubtedly be the death of him.

If Teal’c was wise to any of it, he didn’t let on. Jack kind of loved Teal’c.

When they got to Jack’s house, Teal’c turned off the truck, removed the keys, and whispered to Jack, “I will take Daniel Jackson inside and return to take Major Carter home.”

“We’ll be waiting,” Jack whispered back, Carter still out like a light against him.

When Teal’c started dragging Daniel toward the open driver’s side door, the archaeologist woke up just enough to stumble out of the truck and walk with Teal’c toward Jack’s house.

“Sir?” Carter mumbled groggily. The second she realized she was sleeping on him, she jerked back. “Sorry, sir.”

“No harm done, Major.” Although, actually yes. He already missed her body heat pressed against his side. “We’re at my house. Teal’c’s taking Daniel inside, then we’ll drop you off.”

Carter yawned and nodded, wiping at her eyes and pawing absently at her hair. She had something resembling bedhead from her nap against his shoulder and she looked like a blonde hedgehog. Jack knew he shouldn’t think it was adorable, but there were a lot of things he shouldn’t think about his 2IC. He did anyway.

They sat in comfortable silence until Teal’c came back, got in the truck, and started driving toward Carter’s house. The rest of the trip, Carter sat equidistance between Jack and Teal’c, her hands in her
lap and an occasional yawn escaping.

When they pulled up outside Carter’s house, Teal’c shut off the truck and Jack held out his hand for his keys. “I got this, T.”

Teal’c nodded and handed Jack’s keys to him.

The lights were out in Carter’s house but for the porch light Jacob had left on. When they got to her front door, Jack started flipping through his keyring to find his key to Carter’s house. It was right next to his key to Daniel’s apartment. Another sign SG-1 was probably already wildly inappropriately close, even if no one was sleeping with anyone else. They all had keys to each other’s homes.

When Jack found his key to her front door, he stopped before sliding it in the lock.

“Sir?” Carter asked.

Jack looked askance at her, debating saying anything. She looked exhausted, like the evening had piled on to her in heaps within the last half hour. The solitary porch light fell softly in her colors, bleeding the edges from her spiked hair and leaving behind a sense of airy lightness. There were dark circles under her eyes, imitation bruises from their night of excess, but there was no tint of green in her fair skin and her lips were blush instead of ashen white.

He’d say this for Samantha Carter, she could hold her liquor. Daniel’s night had not ended so pleasantly. Nor was his aftermath so easy on the eye.

“Is your dad all right, Carter?”

“What do you mean?”

Jack looked at the front door in indecision, not sure how to explain his concern without spilling all the beans. If Jacob chose to have a similar conversation with Carter, that was his business, but Jack didn’t particularly want to recount his chat with Jacob. Because it had been a small kindness and a great heartache. It was harder to not have Carter when he knew Jacob would be fine with it. He settled on saying, “He and I had kind of a strange conversation tonight.”

Carter’s eyes widened. “Oh no, what did he say?” There was dread and mortification in her voice. Jack had to smile, because she must think Jacob had warned the colonel to stay away from his daughter. She certainly didn’t imagine it could have been the exact opposite.

“Nothing bad, I promise, just… not a conversation I thought I’d ever have with your father, that’s for sure. Which is why I’m asking if he’s okay.”

Carter sighed. “His and Mom’s anniversary would have been two days ago.”

“Oh.”

She nodded glumly. “I think that’s why he worked so hard to get leave for a visit. It’s why I suggested going to O’Malley’s, too.” She looked up at him sheepishly and shrugged. “Better to go out where there are distractions than sit at home missing her.”

“Crap, Carter… I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay, sir.” She glanced toward the door, clearly thinking about the man within. “Her birthday’s hard for me. And the day she… this one doesn’t hurt all that much more than any normal day for me.
But Dad…”

“Yeah, I get it.” And it also shed some light on the strangely intimate conversation Jacob had with Jack. The man was thinking about his late wife. And from there, he’d thought about his daughter’s prospects for a chance for that kind of happiness. Apparently he wanted her to have that so badly he’d settle for her getting it from Jack O’Neill.

“Sir, really, if he said anything…”

“Relax. It really wasn’t anything bad. He just… your dad loves you, you know.” Enough to accept that she could give her heart to an irreverent, damaged old colonel like Jack.

“Yeah, I know.” Carter smiled. “Thank you for this evening, sir.”

Jack quirked an eyebrow at her. “Not sure I deserve thanks, but yeah, sure, you betcha.”

Carter huffed out a breath of laughter, eyes dropping to her shoes. Then she looked up at him through her eyelashes, a warm smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. In a split second, there was something charged in the air between them, crackling in Jack’s chest like nerves and anticipation. Suddenly, it felt like he was dropping her off at home after a date. His instincts told him to kiss her goodnight.

Carter’s lips parted in wordless surprise when it hit her, too. Both of them blindsides by could-have-beens in another life.

“Two nights in one week,” Jack mused tensely. “You know, we should probably stop letting this happen.” It was wonderful and horrible all at the same time.

“Probably,” she agreed, eyes moving between his eyes and his mouth like her mind and her heart were in fervent disagreement on the matter.

Jack knew the feeling. Truth was, the Air Force could tell him not to touch her, but it couldn’t tell him not to love her. No power in the universe could rule the heart so absolutely.

A look like longing and heartache washed across Carter’s face and she physically backed away from him, forcing distance between them that fit there like a pebble fit inside a shoe. “Well, sir… I should head in.”

“Right, of course.” Jack quickly unlocked her door and stepped aside to let her pass. “Good night, Carter. See you tomorrow?”

“Yes, sir, we’ll be there. Good night, sir,” she said with gentleness, the only parting gift she could bestow on him.

She slipped inside her house quietly and shut the door, leaving Jack standing on her porch alone late at night and wondering why every alternate reality they had ever encountered their Jack and Sam had been together, so what had they done wrong this time?

But it was worth it. He had to believe that. Maybe they didn’t have each other in this reality, but they had Daniel and Teal’c and Jacob. From what they’d seen, the other realities had not been so lucky.

What was the price of their happily-ever-after compared to that?
Chapter 3

His past contains a multiplicity of shadows. Dark recesses that he’s terrified to peek inside, even though he already knows what lurks there. He’s scared shitless of his own memories. His humor masks a lot, shit nobody at the SGC really, truly knows about.

Except Daniel. Daniel’s seen him at his darkest, he’s met that version of Jack O’Neill, and somehow the archaeologist still speaks to him. There is mettle in Daniel Jackson that the entire world underestimates, Jack thinks. Because anyone who can see the Jack O’Neill who’d been a heartbeat away from putting a bullet through his own brain and still want to befriend that monstrosity is stronger than he lets on.

Jack’s glad Carter has never known that side of him, because while Daniel can step into Hell and find a lifelong friend among the demons, Carter’s different. She’s too radiant for shadows; surely if she saw the darkness of his soul, she would be brought to ruin by its touch. She’s just so colorful. Something so spectacled would drown in his black; he can picture her kaleidoscope beauty trapped in the La Brea pits of his subconscious.

********

Jack’s boot came up off the embarkation ramp on Earth and came back down millions of miles from home. Just another day at the office. His team formed up around him as they strode through the event horizon on his heels.

They all stood rooted to the spot for a split second to adjust.

Carter and her eggheads may have recalibrated the Stargate so it no longer felt like strolling through a blizzard in their birthday suits, but that didn’t mean there weren’t still adjustments between the two environments. A lot of variables changed in an instant from gate room to alien planet. Temperature, elevation, atmosphere, brightness, terrain.

Jack cracked his jaw to pop his ears, wiggled his finger in one that still felt stuffy, and squinted through his sunglasses at their surroundings.

“Oiy,” he groaned when he saw in the distance the familiar shape of a pyramid. After enough tangles with the Goa’uld, Jack had an immediate hatred for the sight of pyramids.

“Oooo,” Daniel actually cooed and started forward, like the damn thing was calling to him.

“Ah!” Jack barked and grabbed the handle of Daniel’s tac vest to snatch him back.

“Jack! We need to take a closer look.”

“And naturally the best way to go about that is to just stroll right up the driveway?” Not waiting for an answer, Jack turned to Teal’c and nodded for the Jaffa to take point. “Teal’c, keep an eye out for any clue who we’re dealing with.”

Teal’c nodded grimly and set off down the path leading from the gate in the direction of the pyramid.

“How is this not walking right up the driveway?” Daniel grumbled but followed in Teal’c’s wake, ducking Jack’s beady look in the process.

Carter came up alongside Jack and eyed the pyramid. “I don’t see any signs of gliders or
motherships, and there weren’t any guards on the gate. Maybe it’s abandoned.”

“We can only hope. Move out, Major.”

“Yes, sir.”

The flora on PR7-418 was scruffy at best. Unlike many of the worlds they visited that were lush with pine trees, PR7-418 had a preponderance of scrub brush and scraggly, wiry trees that suggested the place was a hellhole in the summer. But it wasn’t a desert, so there was that. Jack hated sandy planets – he felt like he was digging souvenir sand out of his crevices for weeks.

Teal’c was prowling in the lead like a hunting dog tracking game. Honestly, Jack trusted no one else with the task as much as he trusted Teal’c. He could see the Jaffa walking lightly, senses tuned for any hint that they were not alone. The large man was deceptively agile for his size, and relentless when danger loomed.

Daniel was a few steps behind him, and Jack had to give the guy credit – he was almost just as stealthy as Teal’c. That had been a hard-won victory. Jack remembered Daniel on that first Abydos mission, bumbling and sneezing his way to overthrowing a god. Even with the downfall of Ra under his belt, there had been times when Jack doubted Daniel would ever make much of a soldier. But the archaeologist surprised him and did just that. He didn’t look the part, he certainly had the other teams (and their snide team leaders) at the SGC fooled, but Daniel Jackson was a fine field operative. Jack half suspected Daniel disguised his skill off-world in the SGC because he got a kick out of watching military types (like Jack used to be) boggle when he morphed into a half-decent soldier when occasion called for it. Of course, when the occasion didn’t call for it, Daniel was a right pain in the ass.

Carter was about half a dozen steps behind Daniel, roughly four ahead of Jack. She was scanning the ‘forest’ attentively, keeping an eye out for threats but also looking for hints of technology that only she would recognize for what they were. Her hands were holding her P-90 in relaxed readiness, index finger laid flat along the trigger guard and thumb hooked into the stock notch. She made walking with a weapon look as second-nature as most women would look carrying a purse.

Their green BDUs weren’t very good camouflage in the yellow-green distressed tones of PR7-418’s plant life, although the desert camo wouldn’t have been any better. They stuck out, and it made Jack edgy.

Up ahead, Teal’c jerked to a stop and raised a fist.

As one, Daniel, Carter, and Jack froze. They all strained to see or hear what Teal’c had. Jack and Carter were gripping their P-90s, poised at the ready to take aim, and Daniel’s right hand drifted to the holstered handgun in his thigh holster.

A twang and zing registered in Jack’s hindbrain as a stringed weapon even as Teal’c lunged toward Daniel. Daniel was knocked back a few steps by the large man just as Teal’c flashed his arm out and caught an arrow with his bare hand.

If Jack wasn’t so pissed about his team being under attack, he would have congratulated Teal’c on being a badass.

As it was, Jack lifted his weapon in preparation for a fight. Carter went to one knee, giving Jack a clear shot over her while she took aim at the trees, ready for trouble. They were prepared to defend themselves, but they would be hesitant to fire. Whoever was out there was using something akin to a bow and arrow, and if that was the most advanced weaponry they had, it would feel like a slaughter
to plow down a bunch of primitives with automatic weapons when they were basically throwing pointy sticks.

Of course, enough pointy sticks against three guns and one staff weapon…

“Hello!” Daniel called out past Teal’c’s shoulder. “We mean you no harm! We’re peaceful travelers! Please, don’t be afraid! Come out.”

Jack rolled his eyes. One of these days, he was going to shoot Daniel himself.

But, as usual, it worked. No more arrows flew and there was a rustle in the scrub brush trees ahead of them. Two men emerged wearing animal-hide pants and long-sleeve shirts (no doubt protection from the thorny shrubs abound). The one Jack determined to be the leader had a burn scar that had reduced one ear to a mess of flesh. The other man looked like he could give Teal’c a run for his money in an arm-wrestling contest. Neither one looked friendly.

Which didn’t stop Daniel.

“Hi, hello… my name is Daniel Jackson.”

The leader gave Daniel a condescending look and turned his eyes to Teal’c. “You’re their leader?”

Jack shouldered his way to the front. “That would be me. And you are?”

The man gave Jack a critical onceover, and Jack’s hackles rose. He might not be a genius the way Carter or Daniel were, but he had a good instinct for dangerous people, and this guy was hitting all his buttons.

“I am Rath the Godslayer.” He gestured to his large companion. “My first, Ogar.” He looked at Teal’c with a hateful glower. “This one serves the gods.”

“I serve no false gods,” Teal’c answered curtly.

Daniel held up his hands to try and regain control of the talks. “No, this is Teal’c, he fights the Goa’uld alongside us. This is Colonel Jack O’Neill. And this is Major Carter.” Carter had stepped up alongside Jack, Teal’c close on her other side, and lifted her chin, half greeting, half defiance.

Rath scrutinized each member of SG-1 with a scowl of distaste, then he settled a challenging look on Jack. Jack glared right back. He knew this guy’s type on sight. He might not know the cultural ins and outs the way Daniel would, but he knew how these kind of guys ticked. It was a lot of posturing and displays of dominance, and he couldn’t back down if he wanted to keep his team safe.

“Your first is a Jaffa?” he spat. “You would take the leavings of a god?”

Teal’c stiffened. Jack placed his hand on the dark man’s arm to steady him. Rath watched how the large warrior obeyed Jack’s simple touch.

“I wouldn’t put it that way,” Jack said evenly. “Teal’c’s one of the finest men I’ve ever met. Hell of a fighter, too. If I were you, I’d be careful how you speak to him.”

Rath narrowed his eyes at that, then he gave Teal’c another shrew look, especially Teal’c’s weapon. “He bears a lightning stick.”

“You mean his staff weapon?” Daniel asked. “Yes, he does.”

“He’s quite proficient with it, too,” Carter added proudly.
Rath gave Carter a withering look then he quickly turned his attention to Jack. “Keep your wife quiet.”

“Excuse me?” Carter asked sharply, at the same time Daniel tried to stammer, “Oh, no, Sam’s not –”

“Daniel,” Jack warned lowly, ordering the linguist to shut up with just the tone of his voice.

Daniel’s mouth hung agape for a second, stumped, then understanding lit in his eyes and he nodded.

“Sir,” Carter whispered, agitated and annoyed.

“Easy, Major,” Jack said softly.

Carter huffed but dutifully kept her thoughts to herself.

“Your family is insolent, Jack O’Neill,” Rath noted with derision.

“Yeah, I like them that way,” Jack countered. “So, what’s your story, Garth? Godslayer, you say?”

Rath smirked proudly. “Our people were once slaves of a great and powerful god until I rose up against his power and defeated him. I killed the god. Because of me, my people live free of the yoke of the wicked one. Now I am ruler of this land.”

Jack looked around at the landscape that smacked of north central Texas. Not much to brag about.

“Really?” Daniel asked. “Which god? What was his name?”

Rath looked incensed and still refused to converse with anyone but Jack. “First your wife, and now your son? Your kin embarrass you, Jack O’Neill.”

Daniel’s eyes went wide. Jack just found it slightly offensive. Yeah, he’d gone gray in the last few years, but he hardly thought he looked old enough to be Daniel’s father. Yeah, he’d gone gray in the last few years, but he hardly thought he looked old enough to be Daniel’s father. “I’d like to know the answer to his question. This god you slayed… he have a name?”

“Sobek.”

“The god of the Nile; the crocodile god,” Daniel blurted.

Rath shot Daniel a fierce look. It reeked of impending violence as far as Jack was concerned.

“Daniel,” Jack beckoned Daniel closer, not liking how he, Teal’c, and Carter were clustered together with Daniel seemingly so far from reach. He got a bad vibe off this Rath guy, and he’d feel better if Daniel were behind someone a little less trusting.

After years of working together, Daniel knew when Jack’s voice meant business. And sometimes he even heeded it. With a huff at the stymied first contact, Daniel moved closer to his teammates. When he reached them, Jack deliberately took a half-step forward and angled his shoulder to place Daniel and Carter behind him to either side. Teal’c stood like a pillar to his right, the pair of them ready to defend their team.

“Sobek made us work for him for generations,” Rath told them. “He made us work long and hard. And for many generations, the weak among us died. Sobek made us strong. Too strong. His creation was his doom. The slaves are slaves no longer.”

“Mother Goose will be contacting you for the story rights, I’m sure,” Jack quipped with an insincere smile.
“Rath frowned.

“Jack…” Daniel implored desperately from behind Jack’s left shoulder.

“Hold your tongue, Son of Jack,” Rath barked. Jack just lifted an eyebrow. That was one way to interpret ‘Jackson’, he supposed.

Daniel pursed his lips together, torn between his wish to respect local cultures and his proven rebellious streak with domineering authority figures.

“You know what,” Jack clucked his tongue, “it’s a huge pet peeve of mine when strangers try to critique my parenting skills.” He heard Daniel muffle a squawk behind him. “So what say you back off and we’ll leave you fine folks to your thorn bushes, huh?”

Daniel was tapping him insistently on the shoulder.

“Daniel,” Jack said in a warning tone. “I’d say this place can be classified as unfriendly, wouldn’t you?”

Daniel gave him an incredulous look.

“And I think it’s fair to say we won’t find anything useful here, wouldn’t you?” Jack continued.

That caught Rath’s attention. “You are traders?”

Daniel bounced eagerly on the balls of his feet and nodded emphatically at Jack to say yes.

Jack rolled his eyes and turned his head to confer with Carter behind his right shoulder. She looked dubious but amenable. “If there was a Goa’uld here that was overthrown, there might be something of value left behind.” She simultaneously shrugged and winced at the idea of staying a minute longer than necessary, extremely jaded to hyper-patriarchal societies given past experiences, but the possibility of getting her hands on alien technology was too great a temptation for Carter to resist.

Jack sighed. So diplomacy it was then. Oh goodie, his favorite. “Depends,” he said to Rath. “What exactly is it you have that you think we might want?”

Rath considered the group before him critically, eyed Teal’c and his staff weapon at length, and replied, “If it is the magic of the gods you seek, we have all that you could want and more. For a price.”

‘Oh, I’ll bet,’ Jack thought dryly.

“Your wife clearly wants the magic of the gods,” Rath sneered while giving Carter a withering onceover, like she were an unruly servant. Jack could practically feel Carter’s venomous glare in return. He wondered if they were going to get out of this mission without Carter putting a bullet in this Rath character, and he was pretty sure he didn’t care.

Rath smirked condescendingly at Jack. “You seem like the type of man who would bend to the will of your woman.”

“Well, you know what they say,” Jack countered, his voice a steely counterpoint to his feigned nonchalance, “happy wife, happy life.” Although if Rath had ever heard that saying before in his life, Jack would eat his hat.

Rath harrumphed and turned to one side in a less-than-welcoming invitation. “Come to my village,
and we will discuss trade.”

Jack would really rather not, but if these people did overthrow the Goa’uld in residence then they might have a lot of the Sherbet guy’s stuff laying around. It was worth looking into, at any rate.

“After you, Sunshine.” Jack waved at Rath and Ogar to walk in front of them.

Rath gave Jack a confused scowl and started stomping through the scrub brush ahead of SG-1. Jack started off after them, Daniel and Carter following him with Teal’c bringing up the rear.

Jack was standing by his original assessment that no good came from planets with pyramids.

********

Rath’s village was a small collection of brick and clay huts nestled in a slightly-darken-shade-of-sickly-green valley at the base of Sobek’s pyramid. A dirty stream ran through the settlement that was no doubt the lifeblood of their society, but Jack cringed at the thought of a dog drinking from it, much less a person.

The villagers were obviously not accustomed to visitors who didn’t come raining death from the sky. When they spotted SG-1 with Rath, several of them bolted for cover.

“Fools,” Rath snarled under his breath. “Look at them scatter like vermin. They should know there is no danger so long as I draw breath. The Godslayer will kill any enemy of the Algonque.”

At least the guy was humble.

Rath led them to a large hut and ducked inside without a word of hospitality, as if it were the expectation that they should follow. Ogar went inside the hut after him just as taciturnly and SG-1 had little choice but to follow.

Inside, it was clear that each dwelling was actually a collection of huts, connected like modules to one another through open doorways to allow for separate rooms.

Once they were seated around a central fire pit (though thankfully there was no fire burning – it wasn’t exactly chilly outside), Rath jumped right into what he wanted. “We know there are lightning sticks like the one your first carries in Sobek’s temple. We know there are many that were left behind by the servants of the god that are hidden from us.” He cut a look at Teal’c, measuring him up, then returned his attention to Jack. “You will work the magic to reveal them to us.”

“Will we now?” Jack drawled. “And why would we do that?”

Rath clenched his jaw – the effort of remaining civil was going to cause him to pull a muscle. “There is much magic left in the temple. Many things of the gods inside that do not interest us. We only want the lightning sticks, and if you find them for us, anything else is yours.”

Jack spared a glance over at Carter, silently asking her if there was any merit in even entertaining the idea of a trade deal with these people. He loathed the idea of arming this brute, but then again, the chance to scavenge from a Goa’uld pyramid was rare. Usually Goa’uld were defeated by another Goa’uld and all their Jaffa, ships, and technology were absorbed by the conqueror.

Carter looked thoughtful. “I don’t know, sir. I’d need to see inside first. For all we know, Sobek’s Jaffa took the most valuable technology with them when they fled. It might be completely gutted.”

Rath bristled at the woman being brought into the negotiations – not only that, but doubting his word
in the process. “There is great magic still inside! Cursed objects that the Algonque would never touch, for it is demon magic.” He considered his next words. “The box of immortality is still there.”

“Box of immortality?” Carter asked.

Rath sucked in a breath, looking like it was taking all of his restraint not to yell at Carter for speaking to him without permission. He only held himself in check because he wanted SG-1 to find the armory and give him Sobek’s staff weapons.

“A sarcophagus,” Daniel translated almost to himself.

Carter’s eyebrows rose, but that was the only reaction she allowed at the news.

Jack pondered that a moment, letting Rath sweat it a little. “That’s quite a deal you’re offering there, but I’m going to need to think about it. How about I get back to you?”

Rath’s right eye was twitching. “Of course. Not all leaders are good at making quick decisions. You can ‘think about it’, Jack O’Neill. And while you think, you will be guests of the Algonque.”

Yipee.

“Sudra!” Rath bellowed toward the back rooms (compartments?) of the hut hive construction. From one of the dark doorways appeared a woman. The mere sight of her got Jack’s back up. She was a timid-looking thing, limbs drawn in toward her body, face downturned, movements tentative. She glanced warily at Rath, clearly afraid of him. Everything about her screamed victim of abuse. “Yes, husband?”

“Take these travelers to Hoart’s hut.”

Sudra’s nod looked more like a bow.

From the room from which Sudra had emerged, a child poked his head out and took in the scene in the main room. He was no more than eight years old, small and wide-eyed with eyes the same shape and color as Rath’s, though the soul behind them was infinitely kinder.

The boy shuffled anxiously when he saw his mother move to leave with the strangers. He started to step out into the main room, stopped, and looked toward Rath nervously.

Rath waved the boy away dismissively. “Leave with her, then, Bandu. Cling to her like a baby if that’s all you are.”

The boy trembled and bolted out from the attached room, cleaving to his mother’s side and clutching her long dress in his thin hands.

Rath scoffed in disgust and disappeared into one of the adjoining compartments.

The boy visibly relaxed when his father was no longer in the room.

Jack caught Daniel’s eye wordlessly. The archaeologist’s posture was stiff. He looked a lot angry, a little haunted. Jack never asked about Daniel’s years in foster care, but he didn’t really have to. Daniel was a genius well before the age of ten, and he’d watched his parents die. Not many people would be equipped to deal with that, and some people wouldn’t appreciate being made to feel dumb by a child.

As SG-1 filed out of the hut following Sudra, Jack reached out and squeezed the nape of Daniel’s
These people thought Daniel was his son anyway, so he saw no reason not to. Daniel breathed in and out audibly; afterward, he felt looser under Jack’s hand. It was one of Jack’s private prides that he’d reached a point where he was that source of safety and calm for Daniel. With one last squeeze, Jack dropped his arm.

He noticed Bandu watching them as the boy walked beside his mother, the material of her dress bunched up in his fists. Jack smiled and waved.

Bandu’s eyes widened and he plastered himself tighter against his mother.

The hut they were taken to was on the outskirts of town (such that it was). This Hoart fellow must be an outcast among the Algonque. Sudra gestured for them to go inside, backing away from them when Jack came forward to inspect the accommodations.

“Where’s Hoart?” Carter asked Sudra. “Didn’t Rath say this was his hut?”

Sudra looked up at Carter a moment before casting a careful look toward Jack. It made Jack’s gut turn sour.

“It’s all right,” Carter plied softly. “You can talk to us. Any of us.”

Sudra looked dubious, but she answered. “Hoart was killed in the uprising to slay Sobek. His hut is empty now.”

“This will do just fine. Thank you for showing us the way,” Daniel chimed in with a friendly smile.

That seemed to puzzle Sudra. She looked at the members of SG-1 in turn, as though they were completely alien to her. “I should go back before Rath wonders what took so long.” She backed away and hurried off, herding Bandu along like she feared for his safety if he strayed beyond her reach.

Jack cleared his throat. “All right, everyone inside.”

The hut they’d been given was much smaller than Rath’s, but it was relatively clean and – best of all – far from the center of town. It was no doubt meant as a slight, that the ‘guests’ weren’t worthy of anything more than a hovel on the edge of their society, but Jack much preferred the seclusion from the villagers.

After a quick search for any hidden dangers or traps, Jack gathered his teammates back in the central room. “I don’t like this,” he said without preamble.

“Nor do I,” Teal’c agreed. “These people are most unpleasant.”

“Well, to be fair, the only ones we’ve really met are Rath, Ogar, Sudra, and Bandu. And Sudra and her son don’t seem so bad.”

Jack gave Daniel a ‘seriously?!’ look.

“I’m just saying, Rath and Ogar might not be indicative of their entire population. These Algonque may just have a bad leader. We shouldn’t judge everyone by two individuals. And if the rest of these people are decent and peaceful, they should have the ability to defend themselves if this Goa’uld’s underlings come back.”

Jack turned his eyes toward the ceiling to rein in his frustration with Daniel constantly giving strangers the benefit of the doubt, then he looked toward Carter. “This Sherbet guy’s sarcophagus –”
“Sobek,” Daniel corrected automatically.

“Is it worth our time?”

“We’ve never been able to get our hands on a working sarcophagus that we could take back to the SGC.” Carter canted her head in concession. “I know Janet would love to have one in the infirmary.”

“You know, we haven’t exactly had the best luck with those things,” Jack pointed out, sliding a quick look over at Daniel.

Daniel ducked his head guiltily.

“They can be misused, definitely,” Carter agreed, “but if it was only used in extreme emergencies when conventional medical intervention would fail… sir, it would have the potential to save lives at the SGC. We have to at least explore the possibility.”

“I knew you were going to say that,” Jack grumbled. Then he turned to Teal’c. “What’s the story with these staff weapons Rath wants?”

“It is possible Sobek’s Jaffa had several in storage when they were driven from this place by the Algonque. It is likely the Algonque have merely been unable to access them.”

“Thwarted by a door, eh?” Jack shook his head wryly. “Rath’s all brawn and no brain.”

“Indeed.”

Carter’s mouth twitched, fighting amusement. “To be fair, Goa’uld doors do require a code to open them.”

“Yeah, the same code. And what’s with that, anyway? It’s like the Goa’uld all decided as a species to make their password 12345.”

“Actually, sir, the sequence of commands is a combination that codes for the function assigned to the door. Goa’uld ships install the same doors, whether they’re internal or external, so they need a way to differentiate if a door should seal to hold vacuum or –”

“Carter!”

“Sorry, sir.”

Jack took off his cap and scrubbed a hand roughly through his hair. “All right. Daniel, I want you to find out what you can about these people. Find out if they’re all nutjobs like Rath, because if they’re all dickbags, no way in hell am I giving them firepower. Teal’c, go with him.”

Daniel and Teal’c nodded.

“And Carter,” Jack turned to his 2IC, “don’t take this as a commentary on my faith in your abilities, but I don’t want you going anywhere here without one of us with you.”

Carter looked annoyed but understanding. “Yes, sir.”

“I mean anywhere,” Jack stressed. “I don’t even want you going to the latrine without me, Daniel, or Teal’c with you.”

A weariend expression settled over Carter’s face. “I understand, sir. I’m getting a very Shavadaii vibe
from these people, too.”

“Exactly. And, uh… about the ‘wife’ thing…”

Carter was already waving it off when Daniel jumped in. “It’s probably safer for you if these people think you’re Jack’s than to be an unattached woman wandering around.”

“I get it, Daniel,” Carter sighed. “I don’t like it, but better the Colonel’s wife than getting kidnapped again.”

“Thanks… I think.” Jack gave Carter a cross look for her sass (which was rewarded with a brief smile), then he said, “You and I will check out the pyramid while Teal’c and Daniel get to know the villagers. Stay in radio contact, report anything worth reporting, and unless something changes we’ll meet back here at sundown.”

Without so much as putting down their gear, SG-1 filed right back out of the hut and went about their assigned tasks.

*******

The Hoart Hut had a small fire pit inside the main room, but a few feet outside the front entrance was a much larger outdoor pit that they decided to use instead. Just as darkness was beginning to settle over the village, Sobek’s pyramid regal in the twilight, they had their fire crackling and had pulled up logs and crosscuts of tree trunks enough for seating to make a decent campfire.

The Hoart Hut was well apart from the other huts in the village, lending the Earth team a sense of privacy and comfortable distance. They could see the other homes, some with fires outdoors like theirs, but they weren’t close enough to make out any faces or eavesdrop on conversations… a fact they counted on working in reverse, too.

Teal’c was digging through their supplies for their MREs when Daniel couldn’t take it anymore. “So?” he asked Jack and Carter eagerly. “Did you learn anything about the pyramid?”

“Sure did,” Jack brushed a patch of reddish dirt off his knee. “It has four sides, the walls are angled and come to a point, it’s a big sucker, my theory is it’s a landing platform for an alien mothership…”

“Jaaack.”

Carter snickered. When Jack looked sidelong at her, always pleased when another human being enjoyed his jokes, he was momentarily ensnared by the simple beauty of her. She had dumped her gear by the hut door, and after their hot hike to and from the pyramid, she’d shed her BDU jacket and sat there in boots, pants, and black t-shirt. The falling darkness and the black cotton conspired to make the fair skin of her arms, neck, and face stand out boldly. They stood out only to dance in the firelight, warm tones and hues that invited touches he could not have.

Jack tore his gaze away and looked back at Daniel. “We couldn’t get inside – Rath had some goons guarding the main entrance. They clearly have a society-wide problem with doors, though, because they had the pyramid door jammed open with a big rock. I don’t even want to know how they got that in there.”

“Maybe Ogar rolled it in like a dung beetle,” Carter quipped.

Jack laughed aloud at the mental image of Ogar walking on his hands and kicking the boulder along with his legs.

Carter grinned at him, her smile a brilliant flare of pale between wind-kissed lips, then she thanked
Teal’c as he handed her a meal packet.

“Anywho,” Jack soldiered on, “there’s not much to report. We didn’t feel like starting a brawl with Rath’s guards just to poke around, so we walked the perimeter of the pyramid looking for any unguarded entrances, found none, and came back here.” Jack caught the packet Teal’c tossed him. “Did see that gator-headed guy you mentioned carved on the outside of the pyramid, though.”

“Crocodile,” Daniel corrected.

Jack peeled back the cellophane on his MRE. “What’s the difference?”

“Sobek was the god of the Nile River. There aren’t alligators in the Nile.”

“Oh well, then… so what’s the story on this Sobek guy?” Jack looked between Daniel and Teal’c, knowing from one he would get the ancient Egyptian history and the other the tale of the imposter god.

“Sobek was an underling of the god Ra,” Teal’c said as he settled on a stump with his dinner in hand. “Once a powerful Goa’uld in his own right, Sobek fell out of favor with the System Lords after attempting a coup against Bastet and Ba’al. A cunning plan that – had it worked – would have set the two System Lords against each other. Unfortunately, when his plan was thwarted and his intentions discovered by both System Lords, they threw their combined might against him in retaliation. For his failed venture, he was stripped of nearly his entire army and forced to become a lesser Goa’uld in the service of Ra.

“When Ra was defeated, there was much speculation as to where Sobek went. He had not been heard from nor seen since his benefactor Ra was killed.” Teal’c lifted one eyebrow. “It is likely Sobek remained in hiding when he learned of Ra’s destruction. The System Lords would not have suffered his return to power in any measure.”

Jack scooped a mealy spoonful of green beans and corn gruel up from his tray and let it fall back to his tray with an unappetizing splat. “So this Goa’uld just squats here in the ass end of nowhere and tries to keep his head down so the other Goa’ulds don’t come gunning for him?”

“That is likely.”

“In Egyptian mythology,” Daniel chimed in, his dinner untouched, “Sobek was associated with the power of the pharaoh. He was also seen as a protective figure against the dangers of the Nile River, which was central in ancient Egyptian culture, so at one point – on Earth, in any case – he was an important deity. Although clearly not on the same level as Ra, Osiris, or Apophis.”

“It says something really screwed up about my life that you talk about all these Egyptian gods and I go ‘oh yeah, I know him’,” Jack mused. He poked at the mystery meat in his tray and looked up at Daniel. “So what did you and Teal’c learn about the Algonque?”

“Well, I’m pretty sure they are descended from the Algonquin tribe, an indigenous people of North America who lived in what we now know as the New England area.”

“And by any chance were these Algonquins known for being assholes?”

“Not at all,” Daniel countered. “But remember that thousands of years and a world of difference in living conditions changed these people from the way they were when they were taken from Earth.”

Then Daniel frowned thoughtfully. “Actually, most of the other people we spoke with today seemed perfectly nice. A little spooked, maybe, but you can hardly blame them considering how recently they were slaves to a Goa’uld.”
“Great, so it’s just Rath who’s a dick. Why don’t these people band together and fight him?”

Daniel scowled. “We didn’t get the sense that he was hated among his people.”

“You’re kidding,” Carter said in disbelief.

Daniel shook his head. “Rath was the one who rallied the men of the tribe to mount an attack against Sobek. They look up to him. A lot of the people we talked to seem to acknowledge he’s… cold… but they doubt he would have been able to free them from Sobek if he hadn’t been. They all seem to forgive him his character flaws on account of him being a local hero.”

Jack rolled his eyes. “I guess when you’re used to a Goa’uld and his Jaffa, a minor egomaniac like Rath doesn’t seem so bad in comparison,” Carter thought aloud.

“Screw that,” Jack said. “That man’s family was afraid of him.”

Daniel shrugged. “The Algonque men hold all the power in this society, so by our terms the culture is misogynistic, but they’re also very family-oriented. I suspect it’s a byproduct of an extreme ‘every man for himself’ kind of mentality when it came to surviving under Goa’uld rule, although in this case it’s more like ‘every family for itself’. Family units seem to be the only concrete groups that exist here – which is probably why it was assumed we were a family.”

“They didn’t think Teal’c was,” Jack pointed out.

“No, but… remember Rath called Ogar his first?”

“Yeah, so?”

“Well, men outnumber women here three to one, so a lot of men don’t have a family of their own, and among the Algonque, stability and security comes from having a family. Those unattached men can try to pledge themselves to another man’s family as a… like a personal guard or assistant. Since the Algonque’s only other model for social structure was the Goa’uld, they call these family guards ‘firsts’, like a Goa’uld’s First Prime.”

“Whoops. Sorry about that, T,” Jack teased his Jaffa friend. “Looks like you’re a First Prime again.”

Teal’c smothered a smile. “I would consider it an honor to be your First Prime, O’Neill.”

“I promise I won’t let that go to my head,” Jack smirked.

The sound of something rustling in the brush near their hut stopped the conversation cold and everyone turned to strain their senses into the darkness for the source. Teal’c set aside his meal and grabbed his staff weapon while Jack rested his hand against the grip of his holstered handgun.

Stepping into the light of their fire, Sudra moved closer with a large bowl in her arms and her head bowed. “Forgive me… I was told to bring you food.”

From behind her legs, Bandu peeked around his mother at the strangers. Jack moved his hand away from his gun and Teal’c put his staff back down. “You’re just in time,” Jack said with a friendly smile, “whatever you have has got to be better than MREs.” He stood to approach Sudra.

Sudra flinched back when Jack reached out a hand.

“Hey, it’s okay. I’m not going to hurt you.” He peered into the bowl. Small hunks of charred meat
sat atop a mound of what looked like greens and rice. “Smells good. What is it?”

Daniel hopped up. “Who cares what kind of animal it came from? It has to be better than chickeroni and cheese.” The archaeologist came up alongside Jack and accepted the bowl from Sudra. “This does look good. Would you and Bandu like to join us?”

Sudra’s eyes widened. “Oh, no… we were told to wait for you to finish and return with the bowl.”

“Well, that’s silly,” Carter frowned. “Have you two eaten yet?”

Sudra looked warily at Carter and shook her head. Her hand fell to the top of her son’s head as he cowered behind her.

“Then eat with us.” She beckoned Sudra closer.

Wary, Sudra went to where Carter was sitting. Bandu stuck to her like glue, gaping wide-eyed at the men of SG-1 as they cleared a spot in front of the fire where they could all sit around the big bowl and eat from it together, fondue-style. They’d have to sit on the ground in a semicircle around the bowl, but it was good enough for a group that regularly ate out of cans and meal packets.

Carter joined the guys, Jack on her left and the spot on her right left free for Sudra and Bandu. Daniel was on Jack’s left, Teal’c to the left of him. The members of SG-1 used their sporks from their unfinished MREs and started to dig in. It wasn’t the most savory dish Jack had ever tasted – knowing Rath, he’d probably given them the equivalent of rat meat – but it was a far cry from vacuum-sealed bean burritos and the joke was on Rath, because by those standards it was delicious.

Bandu reached slowly toward the food, looking nervously at Jack as he did.

“Go on,” Jack nodded. “Eat before it gets cold.”

Bandu grabbed a fistful in his bare hand and brought it to his mouth, eating cautiously with one hand and gripping his mother’s sleeve with the other. The boy’s grip on her top pulled down the shoulder of Sudra’s dress and several raised scars stood out in sharp relief in the firelight.

Jack clenched his jaw.

Carter froze when she saw it, too. “Did Rath do this?” she asked softly, ghosting a hand over Sudra’s shoulder.

Sudra shied from the suggested touch and tried to tug up the cloth. “It’s his right to punish a bad wife.”

“What could you have possibly done to deserve that?” Carter asked bitterly.

Sudra looked down at Bandu. The boy looked away, distraught. “I did not give him a strong son.”

Bandu curled in on himself miserably, dinner forgotten.

“The way I see it, that’s Rath’s problem, not Bandu’s or yours,” Carter stated angrily. “I don’t see a single thing wrong with your son. Absolutely nothing you should be beaten for.”

Sudra looked up at Carter, aghast, then her eyes flew to Jack, no doubt expecting him to hit Carter for her outspoken insolence.

Jack set his spork in the rice bowl. “If that sorry excuse for a father doesn’t know how lucky he is to have a son, then Bandu’s better off without him.”
Bandu gaped at Jack, speechless.

Sudra shook her head. “Rath is the strongest in our tribe. He slayed a god. He should have a strong son. But Bandu is not... he is not made for war.” She brushed her hand over her son’s hair mournfully. It was clear that she alone loved the son she and Rath had made.

Bandu ducked his head and spoke softly. “I am not fit to have the name Bandu Rathson. I am not what my father wanted.”

“Hey,” Jack leaned down to look Bandu in the eye. “You listen to me. It’s not your job to be anything for your father, okay? It’s his job to love you just as you are, and if he can’t then it means he’s the weak one, not you.”

“You can’t mean that,” Sudra whispered, as if what Jack was saying was either complete blasphemy or a total fiction.

“Damn right I do.”

“And just because you’re not a fighter now doesn’t mean you will never be one,” Daniel chimed in gently. “I wasn’t a warrior when I was little, but I learned how to be one when I was much older. When I was your age, I was just like you.”

Bandu blinked. “You? But you are big and strong!”

Daniel grinned. “That took a long, long time. And a lot of hard work. I’m still not the best fighter, but with my... family... I don’t have to be.”

Bandu edged closer to SG-1, leaving his mother’s personal space just barely. He looked in wonder between Jack and Daniel. To Jack he said, “You loved your son even when he was not strong?”

“Daniel was always strong. He was strong up here,” Jack tapped his temple. “And here.” Jack patted his chest above his heart. “There are ways to be strong that aren’t about hurting other people.”

Bandu looked hopeful, maybe for the first time in his life.

Sudra was shaking her head faintly, like her own doubts tortured her. “You are not like us, Jack O’Neill. You speak of strength without anger, but Rath killed a god. To do such a thing, a man must be mean. This is the power Rath wanted in a son.”

“Rath killed a god,” Jack agreed, “and that’s not bad. But we’ve killed many gods.”

Bandu’s mouth dropped open.

“That cannot be true,” Sudra gaped.

“Oh, it is. We’ve killed... what, six or seven at least? Right, Teal’c?” Jack looked toward his ‘First Prime’.

Teal’c gave a scant smile and nodded. “At least.”

Sudra stared in amazement at the team of visitors, her eyes moving from Teal’c to Jack to Daniel and back again. When Jack noticed the woman deliberately skipping over Carter, he placed a hand on Carter’s shoulder. “And when I say we killed, I mean Carter, too.”

“You!!” Sudra gasped, wide eyes locked on Carter.
“Oh, yes,” Jack assured. “Carter here is a great warrior. She even killed one god *single-handedly*.” Quite literally, in fact. Jack still got a little hot and bothered when he thought about Carter blasting Seth into the ground with the Goa’uld hand device (which he would *never* confess to another living soul, because even he knew that was kind of sick).

Carter smirked at Sudra’s astonished gaze. “Well, I don’t like to brag…” she said with a modest shrug.

Bandu scooted closer to SG-1, spellbound. “Could you teach me how to be strong, too? I want Father to be proud of me.”

The truth was, Rath would probably never be. Jack knew the type – he’d seen them at Charlie’s little league games. Fathers who had been star athletes when they were young saddled with what they saw as disappointing progeny who had no natural gift for sports. He watched angry men yell at children for not being everything their selfish fathers had hoped and dreamed for in a son.

“You can’t make someone love you, Bandu,” Daniel answered softly. “Maybe one day you will be big and strong, but that won’t change all the days when Rath didn’t want you. Those days will never leave your heart.”

Bandu slumped. “But if I could be a strong son for him, maybe he would not hurt me anymore.”

Rage flared hot and bright up Jack’s spine, filling his skin to bursting with the need to see Rath in pain. “He hurts you?” Jack asked, fighting to keep his voice even.

“It is his right,” Bandu said, the words mechanical like they were practiced. “No one has the right to hurt a child.”

Bandu looked embarrassed as he looked timidly at Daniel. “Jack does not hit you?”

Daniel blinked in shock. “Never.”

The idea seemed foreign and fantastic to the boy. “Then your father loves you more than mine loves me.”

Jack would bet his life on that, and Daniel wasn’t even actually his son.

Sudra looked curiously at Carter. “Does Jack…” she began in a whisper, then she stopped and looked down at her lap in shame.

“Does he hit *me*?” Carter asked, astounded.

Sudra nodded and peeked from the side of her eye at Carter.

Carter, for her part, looked too stunned by the very idea that she didn’t know what to say. She looked to Jack, her face open and innocent. Throw advanced alien technology and complex astrophysics at Carter and she didn’t bat an eyelash. She tackled that shit head-on with a brave smirk. But present her with the notion that Jack O’Neill would strike her in anger and she was flabbergasted.

Jack wanted to pull Carter into him, smooth away the shock in her face with his thumbs. He might even be able to here, under the assumption that they were husband and wife. Instead, he leaned toward Sudra. When he caught the native woman’s eye, he said with absolutely sincerity, “I would *never* hurt her.”
Carter briefly brought her hand to rest on Jack’s shoulder as he leaned past her, a fleeting moment when she showed her appreciation. Because it was true. So much of their act on PR7-418 was just that, but Jack’s words were honest.

Sudra took a deep breath and bit her bottom lip. After a moment, she looked shyly over at Carter. “Your husband is strange… and wonderful.”

Carter smiled and let her hand slide down Jack’s shoulder and arm before winding up back in her lap. “Yes, he is.” She threw a warm look over at Jack that held so much unrealized potential, so much ‘what if’ and ‘in another life’.

Jack straightened and went back to eating dinner, uncomfortably forlorn about how much he wasn’t actually Carter’s husband.

Sudra and Bandu slowly rediscovered their appetites and helped SG-1 finish the meat and rice dish. In order for everyone to be within easy reach of the bowl, they had to sit pressed close together; Jack’s knee was folded underneath Carter’s with her leg practically in his lap. It was at an ideal height for an armrest, and after inadvertently putting his arm there several times, Jack gave up and just outright draped his arm across her leg. He would contend he was just selling the ‘husband and wife’ act.

By the time the meal was gone, Sudra had relaxed considerably in SG-1’s presence. Enough that she complimented Daniel and Carter on their blue eyes. None of the Algonque had blue eyes.

Carter chuckled. “Thank you, but they’re not all that unusual where we come from.”

“They run in families, yes?” Sudra asked.

“Well, yes,” Carter hedged, then she frowned. “Although I really hope you don’t think I’m Daniel’s mother.”

Sudra actually laughed, a frail thing like she so rarely let that sound escape her ribcage, and she shook her head. “Oh no. You are much too young to be Daniel’s mother.”

“Thank you,” Carter responded.

“I do not doubt you are one of several wives Jack has. Though you are naturally the favored wife because of your beauty.”

“Oh,” Carter stammered and blushed dark pink, her cheeks and ears flushed with color.

“While I’m flattered, Sudra, multiple wives isn’t really my style.” Jack couldn’t stop staring at Carter while he said it, lost in the rose of her complexion.

“I do not understand,” Sudra said.

“Where we come from, a man has only one wife,” Daniel answered.

“But you are not…” Sudra struggled to comprehend.

Daniel grinned. “Sam’s son? No. But Sam’s, uh… not Jack’s first wife.”

Jack fidgeted uncomfortably at the turn in conversation. Their ‘story’ for the natives and his actual personal life were starting to bleed together.

“Oh,” Sudra marveled. “You sent away all others for this one?”

“Something like that,” Jack answered. Because no, he hadn’t, but he would. He’d love to if only it were allowed. In a different reality, he’d do whatever it took to make Carter his last wife.

Sudra was chatting comfortably with SG-1 and Bandu was practically in Daniel’s lap as the archaeologist introduced the boy to chocolate when a looming figure appeared from the darkness.

“Sudra!” Ogar barked.

Sudra scrambled to her feet in an instant. Bandu whimpered and crawled into Jack’s lap for protection. The move startled Jack, but in the next heartbeat he had a hand on the boy’s back and a beady look narrowed at Ogar.

“What keeps you so long, woman?” Ogar demanded. “Rath asks for you.”

“Of course. I am sorry. The visitors were telling me of their ways.”

Ogar scowled. “Worry about your own.”

“Yes, First,” Sudra stammered, ducked down to fetch the empty bowl, and held out her hand for her son. “Come, Bandu.”

Bandu looked plaintively at Jack for a second before he slunk from his lap and rushed to his mother’s side.

Jack was moving to rise to his feet before he even realized he was doing it, stopped when Daniel reached out and grabbed hold of his arm. “Jack…”

“Daniel,” Jack said tersely, an encyclopedia of communication in just their names.

Daniel’s face was stony as he whispered, “Beating up Ogar won’t help. He’s just the messenger.”

Jack ground his jaw but sank back to the ground beside the linguist. Daniel’s tight grip on Jack’s arm loosened, but he kept hold of the material of Jack’s jacket in a loose fist. The gesture snared Jack’s attention like a barbed spear, making his chest hurt for what it might mean Daniel was remembering. It just made Jack’s protective instincts stronger.

When Sudra and Bandu disappeared into the night, heading for the pinpricks of fires in the village, Ogar stood glaring at the team. “You tried to sneak into Sobek’s temple today.”

“I wouldn’t call it ‘sneaking’,” Jack countered. “Just wanted to get a look at what ol’ Rath has to offer.” Jack gave Ogar a pointed look. “You do want those staff weapons, don’t you?”

Ogar faltered, his intimidation routine floundering in the face of something he actually wanted from them. With a scowl, he said, “You will be taken to the temple tomorrow under the watch of Rath.”

“Can’t wait,” Jack droned sarcastically.

“Do not attempt to go alone to the temple again,” Ogar snapped, then he turned and strode toward the village proper after Sudra and Bandu.

“Do you think he’s just as bad as Rath,” Carter muttered, “or is this a case of monkey see, monkey do?”

“I think that’s probably insulting to monkeys,” Daniel noted.

“I will not be sorry to put this place in my rearview mirror,” Jack said lowly. “All right, campers,
let’s turn in. Sounds like we have a busy day tomorrow. Teal’c? You’re on first watch.”

Teal’c nodded gravely while the rest of SG-1 trudged into the hut and laid out their sleeping bags.

Normally, they slept with plenty of space between them to allow for rolling and flopping in the middle of the night without disturbing anyone else. Wisely, neither Carter nor Daniel said a word when Jack made them sleep front to back within arm’s reach of each other with Carter sandwiched between the men.

********

Sobek’s temple smelled horrible – maybe something to do with the fact Rath and his men had left the bodies of the Jaffa they’d killed to rot wherever they had fallen. To make matters worse, the environmental controls (or whatever passed for Goa’uld air conditioning) were busted. So it was hot, stale, and reeked of corpses.

Jack clamored over the boulder doorstop and staggered into the pyramid after Carter, the pair of them following Rath, and Jack watched the swell of nausea race across Carter’s features as she brought a hand to her mouth and nose.

“Oh my god,” Daniel gave a muffled gag behind his own hand when he and Teal’c followed Ogar in after them.

“They did not deserve a burial,” Rath scoffed, although even he looked like he was breaking a sweat trying to pretend the stench didn’t bother him.

“Yeah, great plan there, Chief,” Jack swallowed hard and caught Carter’s eye. She looked pathetically close to throwing up, and Daniel… yep, Daniel was throwing up. He’d dashed over to one side of the pyramid entryway to retch.

Carter winced sympathetically and her complexion went ashen like she was a hair’s breadth from joining him.

“I think I can speak for all of us when I say we’d like to get this over with as quickly as possible,” Jack said, reaching grouchy at light speed. “So Carter, you’re with me on sarcophagus detail.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Teal’c, Daniel, you two see what you can find out about our late friend Alligator Face,” Jack cast a reluctant glance at Rath, “and try and find where the Jaffa stashed their weapons. Just for the fyi.” He hoped his teammates would catch on that he wasn’t ready to hand over anything to Rath and Ogar yet.

Daniel waved feebly from his spot by the wall.

“Go with them, Ogar,” Rath ordered his first. “Do not let them from your sight.”

Jack rolled his eyes and nodded his head for Carter to get on with the mission.

She nodded grimly and followed Rath through the pyramid with Jack close behind her.

When they entered the room with the sarcophagus sitting as a gaudy centerpiece, Carter immediately started toward it.

Rath lashed out with a barked, “Stop!” barring her with an arm across her chest and turning to
confront her with fury in his face.

Carter moved her right foot back into a fighting stance, hands dropping automatically to her P-90 and preparing to bring her weapon to bear.

“Hey!” Jack strode forward and knocked Rath’s arm aside, filling the void between Rath and Carter with his body and squaring off toe-to-toe with Rath. The Alongque leader’s nostrils were flaring in anger, his breathing hard and hateful. Jack gave as good as he got. “You lay a hand on any of my people again and we are done, you get me?”

“You wife oversteps her bounds,” Rath growled.

“My wife is doing her job. With my full support, I might add.” Jack gave Rath a contemptuous onceover. “Our women aren’t cowed, Rath, so you better watch it.”

“So you say,” Rath snorted, “but still you stand between us.”

Jack let slip a serrated smile. “Oh, this is for your protection. Because I’m pretty sure Carter really wants to shoot you.” Jack dropped the act that this was a game. “And I’m almost inclined to let her.”

“I do not fear a woman,” Rath spat back.

“You should fear this one.” Jack turned his head to bring Carter into the corner of his eye. She was standing behind him, still tensed to raise her weapon, fire and fury in her face. Their fireside chat with Sudra and Bandu had not left anyone on SG-1 with warm fuzzy feelings toward Rath. She looked dangerous, and Jack reveled in it. She may be brilliant and kind and caring, but that didn’t make her any less a fighter.

Really, he loved every fractal side of Carter.

“Carter,” he said lowly, “see if that thing is worth a damn.” He nodded toward the sarcophagus.

“Yes, sir,” Carter replied and moved over to the Goa’uld machine.

Rath watched her approach the device and sneered. “What can a woman do with the magic of the gods?”

“Make it work, for starters,” Jack countered.

“Ha!”

Jack cocked his head, considering Rath long enough that the leader seemed to grow uneasy. “I’d be careful if I were you, Rath… Carter could destroy your sun if she wanted to.”

“No one can do that, not even the gods.”

Jack just shrugged. “She’s done it before.”

Rath’s eyes widened slightly and he glanced toward Carter, a seed of uncertainty taking root in his mind.

Jack left the conversation on that note and went to join Carter. Rath huffed and prowled the edges of the room like a sullen dog.

When Jack knelt beside her, Carter whispered, “I really don’t have what I would need to blow up this planet’s sun.”
“Yeah, I know that. But he doesn’t.”

Carter fought a smirk. “Laying it on a little thick, don’t you think, sir?”

“Carter, this man needs a heavy-handed lesson in kickass women, and I have volunteered you.”

“Thanks… I think,” Carter answered, suppressing a chuckle to be able to turn his own words back on him.

Jack huffed an almost-laugh. “Just figure out if this coffin is worth dealing with the walking sphincter over there.”

Carter choked on a sound and she nodded. “Yes, sir.”

*******

Carter was poking around in the guts of the sarcophagus so long, leaving Jack bored silly, that he was actually glad to hear Daniel radio in for a report.

“What do you got, Daniel?”

“We found some tablets that talk about the end of Sobek’s reign that I think even you might find interesting. From the looks of it, they were written by some disgruntled Jaffa in Sobek’s service.”

“Like unhappy Jaffa journals? ‘Dear Diary, this job sucks?’”

“Essentially.”

“Any luck with the staff weapon cache?”

There was a pause. “A few possibilities. We’ll have to figure out the right ‘spell’ to reveal them.”

Ah… so Ogar was listening.

“I think we’ve learned all we’re going to,” Daniel reported. “We could wait outside for you and Sam to finish?”

Jack could not blame him.

“Copy that.” Jack turned to see Carter heading toward him. “Report, Major?”

“Sir… this thing is on its last leg. The power source has been damaged, and it looks like it’s been that way for a long time. I doubt Sobek was getting much use out of it toward the end.” She glanced sidelong at Rath on the other side of the room and lowered her voice, “It might be how Rath was able to kill a Goa’uld with the primitive weapons we’ve seen the Algonque use. If the sarcophagus wasn’t working properly, Sobek could have been severely weakened, maybe even sick or dying, by the time Rath challenged him.”

“Any chance we could repair it if we got it back to the SGC?”

Carter grimaced. “I doubt it. There are parts of the power system that are completely fused. It’s barely generating enough to turn the lights on, much less heal people.”

Jack nodded as he processed the information, then he turned to Rath. “Hey! We’re done here.”

“When will you give me the lightning sticks?” Rath demanded.
“Just hold your horses… or whatever it is you’ve got around here. I’ll need to have a chat with my, uh, son to go over magic spells and whatnot.” Jack flapped a hand in the air.

Rath narrowed his eyes.

“Or me and mine can just pack up and leave now,” Jack laid out the ultimatum. “It’s up to you.”

Rath stomped toward the exit. “Fine! Follow me.”

As Jack and Carter moved to follow him, shoulder-to-shoulder, Carter said faintly, “He’s not going to suffer this much longer.”

“Ya think?” And Jack wasn’t sure what would happen when Rath finally lost his patience. Worse, Jack suspected he was deliberately pushing Rath to his breaking point just to have an excuse.

********

Back at the Hoart Hut, SG-1 clustered around the cold fire pit for an exchange of information.

Daniel started.

“Sobek was in worse standing with the other Goa’uld than we thought.”

Teal’c nodded. “It appears this world was a last resort; these slaves toiled at nothing more than feeding Sobek and what little remained of his army.”

“So no naquadah mines?” Carter asked. A fair question, since that was usually what the Goa’uld forced their human slaves to do.

Daniel shook his head. “There’s nothing here. Sobek was destitute without Ra’s patronage, so he came here because it’s worthless to the Goa’uld. No one would bother pursuing him here… the satisfaction of killing him wasn’t worth it, and there was nothing else on this world to sweeten the pot.”

“Then why is there even a Stargate here?” Jack asked.

“Well,” Daniel blinked, “there’s nothing here of value to the Goa’uld, but who knows what the Ancients might have wanted with this place.”

There really was no good guess on that count… unless the Ancients liked a good mesquite barbeque.

“Or perhaps there was once something of great value here that is no longer present,” Teal’c suggested.

“How about you, Sam?” Daniel asked. “Did you come up with anything?”

“The sarcophagus is a hunk of junk. We’ll never get any practical use out of it.”

“Sounds to me like we can pack up and head home,” Jack said optimistically.

Of course it was Daniel who threw a wrench in that plan. “So… are we just going to leave these people defenseless against any other Goa’uld who might show up?”

“You just said this planet was useless.”

Daniel vacillated with a side-to-side head bob. “And yet Sobek set up shop here. There’s nothing to
say another Goa’uld wouldn’t do the same thing if they were desperate enough.”

Jack groaned and rubbed his eyes.

“I’m not fond of the idea of arming Rath any more than you are, Jack, but… the other Algonque we’ve met are good people. Or they could be, if they could shake the trauma left behind by Sobek’s rule. We can’t just leave them like this.”

Jack sighed and turned his eyes to Teal’c. “Did you find the armory in that pyramid?”

“We did.”

Jack blew out a breath and tipped his head back to squint into the sky. “I’m not sure it matters, because I’ll be damned if I put a weapon in the hands of that son of a bitch.”

Carter had that intense look of thought about her. “Maybe we could try to stipulate that they only get the weapons if they create a diplomatic governing body for their people. Say we’ll only turn the staff weapons over to a council or committee.”

“And who do you think is going to control that committee?” Jack asked sarcastically.

Carter went quiet.

Daniel looked between his friends. “Well, what exactly do you suggest then, assassination?”

Jack looked long and hard at Daniel, unflinching and unblinking.

Daniel’s eyes widened. “You can’t seriously be considering that.”

“Why not? That man deserves it.”

A strange mixture of stubbornness and hostility settled over Daniel’s face. “Even if he does, who are we to make that decision? Like it or not, Rath is a hero to these people. There’s no telling what kind of repercussions it could have if a bunch of strangers waltz into town and gun him down.”

“One way to find out.”

“Jack!”

For a moment, a staring contest ensued between Jack and Daniel. Jack’s darkness against Daniel’s undying morality.

After a long minute of silence, Jack looked away. “Fine, so we can’t kill him and we can’t replace him. You have any bright ideas?”

Daniel deflated a little. “Not really.”

“Uh huh.” Jack scowled into the cold embers from last night’s fire. “All right, if we haven’t come up with something by tomorrow, we’re walking away from the whole mess.”

“But –” Daniel began to protest.

“If you’re so bent out of shape about not leaving these people undefended, you can take it up with Hammond when we get back. Maybe he can send in a team of mediators who can try to sort out this mess a hell of a lot better than we could. Bottom line, I am not opening up a Jaffa weapons’ closet if that scumbag Rath is going to be the one in charge of everything in it.”
Daniel capitulated with a sigh and nod.

It was one of the easier battles Jack had ever won with Daniel, and that probably said a lot about Daniel’s honest opinion of Rath.

*******

That evening, Ogar and Rath came to the Hoart Hut to pressure SG-1 about handing over the staff weapons. When he didn’t get what he wanted, Rath looked ready to beat someone to death.

It made Jack worry about sending such an angry man home to Sudra and Bandu.

In the interest of getting the mother and son out of there, Jack sent Rath packing with a request to have another meal brought to SG-1. Daniel spun some tale about the magic needed to make the Goa’uld devices and controls work requiring a lot of energy, and that they would have to be well-rested and well-fed to get him the lightning sticks.

Rath looked suspicious, but ultimately too stupid to know for a fact that SG-1 was lying and so desperate to get his hands on the weapons that he caved.

When Sudra and Bandu arrived bearing another bowl of meat and grains, they both looked spooked.

“Did he hurt you or Bandu?” Jack asked as soon as Sudra approached him with the meal in offering.

She shook her head jerkily while Bandu detached from her dress and slipped in among SG-1 like he was seeking shelter. He ended up standing between Jack and Daniel, a tanned tiny thing between two towering men in green BDUs.

Sudra held out the bowl. “Rath says you need to eat well to use the magic of the gods.”

Jack accepted the bowl and looked thoughtfully at Sudra. “We lied.”

Sudra looked horrified.

“We just wanted to have you and Bandu with us until Rath calms down,” Daniel explained.

“So you cannot work the magic of the gods?”

“Oh, we can. But it’s not magic. Anyone can make the gadgets and gizmos in Sobek’s temple work with the right know-how.”

“Even the hand of death!?” Bandu asked in awe, tugging on Jack’s pant leg to timidly beg the colonel’s attention.

“Hand of death?” Jack asked, looking down at Bandu with the bowl held to one side so as not to obstruct his view of the boy. Teal’c took the bowl Jack happened to be holding in his direction and turned to set up their ‘dinner table’ same as last night.

“I think he means the ribbon device,” Daniel said carefully.

“Oh! Well, okay, no. Not just anyone can make that work.” Then Jack cast a look at Carter, who had gone to Sudra’s side during the conversation in a show of support. She looked like honey and rose quartz in the dying light, lit from the west by the kaleidoscope colors of dusk and from the front by the warm hues of firelight. She looked ethereal, like the kind of creature a primitive people would look upon as a goddess – it would make his next words all the more believable. He couldn’t help the tiny proud smile that twitched at the corners of his mouth. “Carter can, though.”
Sudra and Bandu both looked at Carter in shock. “Truly?” Sudra asked.

Carter gave a modest smile. “It’s complicated. You see, I have an element in my blood that allows me to use Goa’uld technology that was specifically designed for hosts with symbiotes.”

“That’s a Carter-yes,” Jack offered helpfully.

Carter gave him a wooden smile. Jack tried not to look cheeky. He did so love getting Carter’s dander up, and bottom-lining her technobabble did the trick every time.

The team and their guests settled on the ground in a semi-circle around the large bowl and ate together as they had the night before. Bandu spent the whole time staring at Carter, big brown eyes full of awe.

In hindsight, Jack should have known it was going to lead to trouble.

********

The next morning, SG-1 set about breaking camp. The Algonque village was stirring in the distance, children running around in play while women started cooking fires for the morning meal. The men patrolled like lords – maybe the role had been functional when Sobek and his Jaffa were on the planet, but now it just smacked of patriarchal privilege and arrogance.

Jack would not miss PR7-418. He knew Carter wouldn’t miss it, either. They’d run into enough races and cultures hostile toward women that she knew when to play along, but she did so badly. And Jack could hardly blame her – he didn’t like a meek, cowed Sam Carter any more than she liked playing that part.

Still, Jack noticed Carter standing motionless and watching the village start their day with a troubled look on her face.

“Something on your mind, Major?” Jack asked as he came up alongside her.

“I hate leaving Sudra and Bandu here with him,” she answered grimly.

“Yeah.”

“Couldn’t we…” she started then stopped, visibly consternated.

“What? Take them back with us? I’m not sure how we could pitch that one to Hammond in a way he’d bite off on it. They’re in no immediate mortal danger, not like when we evac a village under Goa’uld attack. They don’t offer anything of strategic value, and they have no intel on our enemies we could use to justify their trip to Earth. Their voices don’t hold weight with their people, so we can hardly call them emissaries of the Alongque.”

“What about on humanitarian grounds?”

Jack sighed and squinted into the rising sun. He pawed at his chest for his sunglasses hanging around his neck. “You’re forgetting the biggest problem. They haven’t asked for help, Carter.” That fact sat ill with Jack, but it was a key point.

“What difference does that make?” Daniel asked as he sidled up to the pair, holding his pack awkwardly with one hand and shoving his MRE trash in a pocket with the other.

Carter looked dejected. “Because if we take them with us when they haven’t asked for asylum…”
technically, that’s kidnapping.”

Daniel froze, mouth agape and glasses halfway down his nose and no hands free to perch them back in place.

Jack reached up and nudged Daniel’s glasses up to the bridge of his nose with two fingers.

“Surely there’s wiggle room for situations like this,” Daniel argued.

Jack turned away, sick with how little they could do. Lacking a preexisting policy on interplanetary cultural interactions, the SGC adopted many of the same guidelines the military used for international cultural encounters in foreign lands, and it put limitations on what they could do that defied or ran counter to an indigenous people’s way of life.

It came down to the fact that they couldn’t save everyone. It was one of the things he hated the most about their job.

Carter had the dubious honor of explaining it to Daniel. “In our country on our planet, yes… but we can’t know how traumatic it might be for Sudra and Bandu to be taken from the only life they’ve known and carted off to what is essentially an alien world. These people are primitive by our standards, Daniel… it would be a huge culture shock for them.”

“But ultimately it would be better.”

“Yes… but how keen would you be to leave your world behind?”

Daniel blinked guileless blue eyes at Carter. “Well, I did once.”

Carter’s glum expression cracked in a smile. “Most people aren’t as brave as you are, Dr. Jackson.”

“Look,” Jack returned to his two young teammates, “we’ll get Hammond to send in a team that specializes in this diplomacy crap. They can explain it to Sudra, make sure she understands what leaving would mean, and if she asks for refuge, she’ll get it. But until then, our hands are tied. We can’t get involved.”

Daniel looked pissy and Carter looked heavyhearted. Jack just wanted to get off the miserable planet. “Let’s head out,” he commanded.

SG-1 clipped on their packs and started off through the thorny trees in the direction of the gate.

They weren’t far from the village when Jack caught a flash of movement in the trees from the corner of his eye. He halted mid-step and peered into the scrub brush looking for the source.

He saw a small face with big brown eyes crouched among the bushes watching them.

“Bandu?” Jack called out.

The rest of SG-1 stopped and looked into the trees for themselves.

Bandu popped his head up from his measly cover bush and nervously looked left and right.

“What are you doing out here?” Jack asked as he took a step toward the boy.

“You are going away?”

Jack swallowed. “Yes, we are.”
Bandu shook his head. “But I have something for you! Please! Wait!” Then he darted off into the trees.

“Bandu!” Jack yelled. Then he sighed. “Crap. Stay here,” he told the rest of his team, “I’ll go get him.” Then he trudged into the tangled nettle bushes and thorny trees to follow the boy.

Bandu was waiting for him on a game trail where the overgrowth thinned out. “Come on!” Bandu beckoned for Jack to follow him.

“Where’s your mother?” Jack asked as he tried to catch up with Bandu.

“She does not know I am here. She would be very angry if she knew I was doing this.”

“And what exactly are you doing?”

Bandu grabbed Jack’s hand in exasperation and dragged him along after him insistently. Jack went along with it just to see what the boy had in mind.

Bandu stopped at the base of a bush, released Jack’s hand, and knelt to pull out a cloth bundle hidden under the gnarled branches. Bandu folded back the rough-woven fabric to reveal a Goa’uld ribbon device.

Bandu picked it up by the wrist band and held it out to Jack. “Your wife can use this, yes?”

Jack eyed the device warily. “Yes, she can.”

“Then it is valuable to you. You can have it if you take me and Mother with you.” The boy practically shoved the ribbon device at Jack. “It is a good trade! The hand of death is yours if only you take us away.”

Jack knelt in front of Bandu. “Where did you get this?” he asked, hefting the golden device in one hand.

“I stole it from Father,” Bandu admitted, head ducked. “He stole it from Sobek, but he could never make it work. He hid it in our home, but I knew where he put it.” Bandu looked beseechingly up at Jack. “Is it enough? Will it buy us passage?”

Jack started to reach his free hand toward Bandu when a twig snapped behind him and Jack rose and spun to face the figure emerging from the trees.

Rath’s eyes landed on the ribbon device in Jack’s hand and his face flushes angrily. “So this is how you are? You get my son to steal my prized possessions for you?”

Jack couldn’t tell Rath the truth that Bandu had acted of his own volition when he stole from his father. That would be worse for the boy than the notion Jack and his team had coerced the child to do their bidding.

“What do you care?” Jack asked. “This thing’s worthless to you anyway. You can’t make it work.”

“And you can?” Rath snorted derisively.

“Jack’s wife can!” Bandu proclaimed.

Rath laughed. “That woman is no goddess. These people have made a fool of you, Bandu. I should not be surprised.”
Bandu ducked his head.

“Hey, back off,” Jack growled as he dropped the device to the ground to free his hands.

“I can forgive your foolishness, because you are a fool,” Rath said to Bandu, ignoring Jack, “but I will not let this treachery go unpunished.”

Bandu paled and trembled. Then he bolted.

“Bandu!” Jack called out just as Rath lunged forward to run down his son.

Jack reacted on instinct. He rushed at Rath and the pair went down in a tangle of limbs.

Rath screamed in rage and twisted under Jack, ready for a fight.

Jack’s body moved without conscious thought, acting on muscle memory of acts he would rather not remember. Quick as a viper, he freed his knife from his belt sheath, brought it to Rath’s neck, and expertly slit his throat.

Rath gave a startled, breathy grunt and jerked in Jack’s grip. Blood spilled over Jack’s hands as he held Rath immobile, one hand in the man’s hair and the other holding the knife in case a second blow was necessary.

It wasn’t.

Rath died quickly in Jack’s arms like the pathetic animal he was.

Jack dropped the body and rose to his feet, stepping away from the kill with cold detachment. He stared down at the corpse sprawled on the ground in front of him. The mental image burned into his brain, a still image added to the others in his memory. A catalogue of men he’d killed, some without faces, many without names.

He knew better than to expect remorse to set in. It never did. And that was the worst part of these moments – that Jack could do these things and feel nothing. Sometimes it terrified him what the military had made him.

Jack wiped his blade on his pant leg, slipped it back into the sheath on his belt, and looked up to see Bandu several feet down the game trail, standing stock still and staring with wide eyes at Jack.

The boy had watched the colonel kill his father.

Jack looked down at his bloody hands and closed them into fists. He took a deep breath, closed his eyes, and tried to push back the killer.

“Come on,” Jack held out a red hand to the boy.

Bandu hesitated a moment before he moved toward Jack. He skirted his father’s body, watching the corpse like he expected it to jump up like a bad guy in a horror movie.

Jack knelt down and scooped the boy up in one arm.

His team froze when they saw him returning with Bandu on one hip and his hands covered in blood. He catalogued their expressions. Teal’c was stolid and stalwart, a constant ally. He would never ask. Sometimes Teal’c’s silence was a gift.

Daniel looked haunted again… haunted, but strangely satisfied. Rath may not have been Daniel’s
demon, but he’d been cut from the same cloth, and any victory over that breed of demon counted, apparently.

Carter looked… Jack couldn’t really place her reaction. She had schooled her features admirably, she would be the unflinching officer to the last breath, but he knew her too well. He could see the shock in her expression to face the killer in her commanding officer. Because it was one thing to take out Jaffa shooting at them – it was another to open a man’s throat.

Jack stepped into the path with his team and nodded to Teal’c. “T…” he knelt and put Bandu down. “Take Bandu home.” He looked down at the boy then up at Teal’c. “And tell Sudra how to find the armory in Sobek’s temple. Make sure she knows how to open it.” Rath was dead, Sudra and Bandu were free, and Jack would put all the power of their late god in Sudra’s hands. He would trust the Algonque to be better off having Sudra in charge (or if not leading them herself, then being the one who chose the next leader of the tribe).

Teal’c nodded and took the boy by the hand, leading him back down the trail.

Jack turned to his remaining team members. Daniel was too calm, too steady. Carter looked uncomfortable – like the Jack before her was at odds with the image she had of him. Clearly, Carter had always given him too much credit.

Something about that was shattering.

Jack resumed the trek to the gate, Carter and Daniel wordlessly falling into step behind him.

Right when the gate came into view, Jack stopped and went to the small creek weaving through the trees. He knelt and washed the blood off his hands as best he could, watching the red wash away and run pink down the murky water.

When he stood, hands dripping wet but shining cleanly, Daniel was beside him while Carter hung back on the trail. She looked from his hands to the bloodstain on his pants and back again, at a loss for words.

Daniel reached up and cupped the back of Jack’s neck in his hand. It was a touch Jack usually bestowed upon Daniel.

It steadied something unstable in Jack.

How strange that Daniel of all people, eternal humanitarian Dr. Jackson, could take Jack with all his monsters as very few could. Daniel could see the best in Jack as well as the assassin and embrace the dichotomy.

One look at Carter and Jack knew his 2IC’s concept of him was not so honest. She obviously thought too highly of him. It invited disappointment at worst and morbid surprise at best. He’d seen that look on Carter’s face before, after Euronda when Jack ‘let’ Alar walk into the iris, and it was no easier to reconcile the second time than it was the first.

It begged the question which of them was better to Jack: Daniel, who accepted what Jack was capable of; or Carter, who expected more from him.

Daniel squeezed the nape of his neck reassuringly.

“Let’s go,” Jack ordered softly. “We’ll wait for Teal’c by the gate.”

Carter nodded and straightened her posture, all hints of uneasiness disappearing in the blink of an
eye. “Yes, sir.” And just like that, she was powering through it, pushing past it, filing it away in that brilliant mind of hers. It would be one more example of all the reasons Carter could do better than Jack O’Neill, and one day she would do the math and rule against Jack.

Not that he was surprised… he’d known from day one that Sam Carter was too good for the likes of him.
Chapter 4

Jack kind of adores Carter’s eyes. Not the hue of them, per se, although he likes that, too. What captivates him is the way her eyes will light up when she has some brilliant idea or works out a vexing problem with the gate. It’s the damnedest thing, because she’s too smart by half and wisdom gives her a lot of maturity, but scientific marvels still evoke such wonder in her… she’s ancient and young at once. He admires that about her.

***********

For someone who wasn’t a scientist, Jack seemed to find himself wandering into Carter’s lab in his free time an awful lot. He hoped no one on base examined that little habit too closely, because the flimsy cover he’d cooked up for his behavior wouldn’t hold up to a stern look.

He could pretend he was trying to make an effort to understand what went on at the SGC all he wanted, but as he stood in the entrance to Carter’s lab watching the scientist play with one of her doohickeys, even he didn’t buy it.

He came because he enjoyed the view.

They were on duty but not off-world, and technically Jack should have been doing paperwork. Naturally, he ended up in Carter’s lab instead.

She was sitting at her work table scrutinizing a pair of devices, one of which Jack recognized as a Goa’uld ribbon device. The sight of those things always made Jack’s gut clench and a phantom headache sizzle behind his eyes. The other object on her table was blocky and slate gray. He couldn’t identify it, but something about it still rang familiar in the back of his brain.

Carter was looking between the two objects with a consternated look, as though mediating an argument between them. An array of tools lay unused, scattered across her work table like she didn’t know where to start… or had hit a roadblock. Lamps flooded the table with light, and it turned her eyes a sparkling cornflower blue. She’d recently gotten a haircut, and the spikes were almost platinum in the harsh light of the work lamps, her complexion flawless ivory.

In the right light, at certain moments, Carter looked more fairytale than mortal.

“You could always try sending them both to time-out,” Jack finally spoke.

Carter blinked, startled from her thoughts, and looked up at him in the doorway to her lab. “Sir?”

“You look like you caught your toys fighting. Maybe they need some time in separate corners to think about what they’ve done.” When Carter cocked her head, puzzled, Jack started to explain, “Char–” but Jack’s heart stopped cold in his chest for a split second, nervous system seizing when his brain caught up with his mouth and realized what he was about to say.

Charlie used to put his toys in time-out when he was little.

It wasn’t that Jack couldn’t talk about his son, only that it took mental preparation, fortifying himself to discuss Charlie without letting grief bleed through. Usually, he could only bring up his son after he’d girded himself. But once in a while, a memory or anecdote would want to fly off his tongue before he could think about it, and those moments were dangerous. It was terrifying how easily and freely the grief wanted to bleed.
Jack didn’t want to bleed out on Carter’s floor.

He cleared his throat and ambled closer, forced nonchalance in his stride and posture. “Whatcha doing?” He nodded down at the ribbon device and other object before her.

Carter looked at him a moment in silence, gauging him. He pleaded with her to drop it with a pointed look.

She nodded. “I got to thinking about the Goa’uld hand device after our last mission.”

“Why?”

Carter shrugged. “I’m not really sure. Something about how Bandu called it the hand of death just wouldn’t leave me alone, I guess.” She took a breath and peeked up at him, clearly trying to ascertain his threshold for technobabble today. She must have liked her odds. “I’ve always wondered how devices like this and the healing device can respond to someone with a symbiote and not to an average person like you, for instance.”

“Average,” Jack stressed.

A tiny, conciliatory smile twitched at the corner of Carter’s mouth. “I mean someone who isn’t and has never been taken by a Goa’uld or blended with a Tok’ra. We understand what it does – it detects the naquadah in the bodies of hosts and only activates in the presence of that element – but how it does that is another story.” She picked up the ribbon device and held it out to him.

One eyebrow quirked, Jack took the contraption and held it above the table in his hand. He looked from the device to Carter. “Am I supposed to be doing something with this?”

“You don’t feel anything when you hold that, right?”

“Just kind of creeped out,” Jack admitted, “but that’s true whether I’m holding it or looking at it.” He hefted its weight a little, watching the gold fingers glint and sway in the artificial light. It was unnerving because of his past encounters with others like it, but the device itself was cold, dead metal in his hand. He looked at Carter curiously. “I take it you feel something?” He held it back out to her.

Carter nodded as she took it. “It’s hard to explain, but I get this… sort of a rush when I’m holding it.”

Well, that didn’t sound good. “Is this some mind-altering effect we should be worried about? You’re not about to go megalomaniac on us and terrorize the SGC, are you?”

She huffed. “No, sir. What I feel is… it’s that thrill right before the afterburners kick in, or just before you pull the trigger when the enemy’s bearing down on your position. It’s a good feeling and a bad one.” She idly slipped the device onto her left hand, slotting the finger clasps over her first joints. “It’s just adrenaline, I suspect. But how does it trigger that sensation in me just by contact? What is it that happens in my body and not yours that makes the device work?” She flexed her hand with the ribbon device fully donned. The red jewel in the center began to glow yellow-orange.

Jack flinched back. “Hey, careful with that thing.”

Carter curled her fingers around the jewel. “It’s all right, sir. I’ve been practicing with it so I can control it better.”

Jack wasn’t sure what he thought of the idea of Carter walking into the firing range with that thing on her hand. It was equal measures unnerving and sexy, and that was just giving his body a lot of
mixed signals. “Yeah, well… if it’s all the same to you, I’d feel more comfortable if you took that thing off.”

Carter did as ordered, setting the ribbon device back on the table next to the gray block of unknown origin. “It got me wondering about alien technology that is keyed to respond to certain traits in certain people. It may sound simple, work for a particular group of people and not others, but it’s actually very sophisticated.” She gave a shrug. “I didn’t have any other pressing projects, so I thought I’d take another crack at trying to figure it out.”

“Oh huh. So what’s that?” he asked, pointing at the gray box.

Carter picked it up off the table and turned it over in her hands a few times. It had rectangular designs running its length on either side with no obvious controls or buttons. It looked like a glorified paperweight, inert and solid in Carter’s hands. That, too, she held out to him.

Jack accepted it and startled when a charge, like static electricity, swept up his arm and the device sputtered to life, blue-white light glowing weakly between the lines of the design.

“Whoa!” he put it down on the table and snatched his hand back. The device went dark again. “So…”

“Ancient technology.”

“Oh.” Jack wiped his hand on the front of his BDUs, as if the device had left dirt behind. “Any idea what it does?”

She shook her head. “SG-3 found it in what was essentially a galactic junkyard. Daniel’s been over it with a fine-tooth comb, but there’s no writing on it to indicate what it might have been for. I wasn’t even sure if its power source was still functioning until just now.”

Jack gave her a look. “Was this a setup, Carter?”

She gave him a small smile. “You came here on your own, sir. I didn’t ask for your assistance.”

“Yes.” Still, he wouldn’t put it past Carter to trick him into coming to her office to turn on her toy, even if by all outward appearances it had been his idea. She was certainly smart enough to do it.

“Did you feel anything?” she asked him, nodding at the Ancient block.

Jack scowled, remise to admit that he had. “Static, I guess. Kind of tingly.” He hesitated. “Actually, when I first walked in it felt familiar, like I recognized it but I didn’t.” He understood better what Carter had meant about a feeling being both good and bad – Ancient technology gave him the same feeling.

That tidbit intrigued Carter. She looked at him, engrossed, mind whirling to accommodate that information. With an assimilating nod, she said, “Ancient technology and Goa’uld technology both have the ability to differentiate between individuals with the right traits to operate them… I’ve been trying to figure out how.”

“Unsuccessfully, I take it.”

Carter sighed and sagged. “The general won’t let me take the ribbon device apart – it’s the only one we have, and it’s too valuable as a weapon.”

“And Daniel would cry if you took apart anything Ancient just to see how it worked.”
Carter bit back a laugh. “Yes… although I will let that stay my hand only so long.” She cast a wicked look up at Jack, all mischievous delight and scientific curiosity.

Jack found himself trapped for a moment just staring at her. It was hard to pick his favorite thing about Carter, but that brilliant inquisitiveness about her was high on the list. If ever one day he was so bold, for Christmas he would get Carter an alien device and her present would be permission to dismantle it right in his living room while he kept her in a steady supply of hot chocolate and cookies.

“So, which one would win?” Jack asked, trying to shake from his mind the image of Carter in pajamas on his living room floor.

“Excuse me?”

Jack waved at the two alien devices on her table. “If we squared off right now, you with your Goa’uld thingy and me with this Ancient thingy, O.K. Corral style, which one of us would win?”

Carter smirked. “Well, since we know for a fact the ribbon device is a weapon and this Ancient device could be nothing more than a high-tech aquarium pump, I’m going to guess the odds are in my favor, sir.”

“Yeah,” Jack sighed and whined, “When are we going to find an Ancient ray gun?”

“That I would love to take apart.”

“Then General Hammond would probably cry.”

Carter laughed, that bubbly, easy sound she made when they weren’t in dire straits. He didn’t get to hear it nearly enough, but any more frequently and he would be irrevocably lost to Sam Carter.

Laboring under the assumption he wasn’t already, of course.

“Think you can bear to pull yourself away from staring down these doohickeys to grab a bite?” Jack asked.

Carter’s laughter was still dancing around the corners of her eyes as she looked up at him. “Cake day?”

Jack beamed. She knew him so well. “Cake day.”

Carter stood up and rounded her work table. “Only if you agree to hit the gym with me later so we can work off said cake.”

“Where’s the fun in that?”

“I know, sir, it’s a real bummer being able to pass our physicals.” She smiled at him in that playful, teasing way that made him feel too young and too old in one fell swoop.

“All right, fine, but I propose the pool versus the treadmill.”

As they started down the hall, side by side, Carter gave him a perturbed look. “We’ll have to go into town to use the pool at the Y – what’s wrong with the equipment in the gym on base?”

He sighed. “My knees, Carter.”

“Oh.” Her gaze dropped to his legs briefly before she brought her eyes back to his. “All right, the
pool it is.” She used dodging a passing airman as an excuse to nudge him with her shoulder. “I thought you were just trying to come up with a scheme to see me in a bathing suit, sir.”

“I would never,” Jack countered, acting scandalized, but the look he shot Carter and the one he got back said it all. He would… he definitely would.

Somewhere between Carter’s lab and the commissary, Carter started rambling on about how she could actually take apart any piece of alien technology if she really wanted to by arguing the case to the general that reverse engineering was how they made most gains from alien technology, and Jack was just letting her voice settle over him. He was coasting on her consonants and vowels. He’d gotten good at being in Carter’s presence without needing to grasp everything she did or said.

Once upon a time, with Sara, he’d felt pressure to attend to her words, to understand all of her attitudes and opinions. There wasn’t that expectation with Carter. He didn’t follow most of what she said; he didn’t agree with some of her ideals. But that was okay. There was a respect even in the absence of agreement that worked for them, both professionally and personally.

Jack tried not to let his thoughts stray down that path too often, though. Even he knew it was treacherous to compare Carter to his ex-wife.

They were standing at the counter loading their respective trays with a plate bearing a delectable slice of cake each when Carter’s drone about alien doodads changed tracks. “So, Colonel, when are you free to swim a few laps?”

Jack’s ears perked up and he lifted his head. “We have to wait at least an hour, Major. Do you want the poor lifeguard to be fishing our bodies off the bottom of the deep end?”

“I didn’t mean now.” She rolled her eyes good-naturedly as they carried their trays to an empty table. “Besides, that’s an old wives’ tale, sir, and you know it.”

“Oh, do I?” he speared the end of his slice of cake with his fork and took a bite. Oh yes, that was worth any exercise necessary to work it off.

Carter took a bite of her own piece and licked the vanilla icing from her fork. Jack’s jaw unhinged and hung agape just for a second. So cake with Carter was either a terrible idea or a great one.

“You know,” she said thoughtfully, “it wouldn’t hurt for us to start going to the pool on a regular basis.”

He snapped his mouth closed and went for another bite of cake. “Are you calling me fat, Carter?” If she was, it was clever of her to wait until he was eating cake to do so. Made it hard for him to contradict her.

“Fine, I should start going to the pool on a regular basis.”

“Your knees bothering you too, Major?”

“No, sir,” she replied with a tiny almost-smile. “At least, not yet.” She shrugged and scraped a bit of icing off her plate with the tines of her fork. Jack didn’t know if he could keep his cool if she licked it off again. “Swimming’s good exercise, I could use more PT, and they say you’re more motivated to exercise if it’s with someone else.”

“Are you sure this isn’t just a scheme to see me in a bathing suit?” Jack asked archly.

Carter sputtered on a laugh, chocolate crumbs escaping her mouth before she clamped her hand over
her lips. It would be the crowning achievement of Jack’s week.

They finished their cake in silence and were on their way back to Carter’s lab when she brought up the subject again. Her voice came out subdued, almost remorseful. “On second thought, maybe it’d be better if we didn’t make swimming together a regular thing.”

He didn’t have to ask what she meant. He’d been secretly fixating on the idea of seeing Carter in a bathing suit on a weekly basis and quietly losing all reason. “I’m sure Fraiser would go with you.”

“Oh Daniel,” Carter mused.

It hurt that she could be that unconcerned about Daniel and so worried about Jack. But it also meant Carter trusted herself around Daniel in a way she didn’t trust herself around Jack. He took a small measure of comfort from that. He had to – it was all he’d get. “I don’t think they make water wings in Daniel’s size.”

Carter chuckled. “Daniel’s a good swimmer, sir.”

“That seems unlikely. He’s a desert guy.”

“If you haven’t caught on that he’s a man of many talents by now, you’re not as observant as I thought.”

Jack smiled faintly to himself. Truth was, Jack was surrounded by people far more talented, intelligent, and versatile than he. He was the black sheep on SG-1, the one-trick pony, and part of him lived in the fear of the day his friends would realize that.

They arrived back at Carter’s lab and she turned in the entryway to face him. He stood with his hands in his pockets to keep himself from touching her. It felt strangely like that night on her porch when they’d dropped her off after an evening at O’Malley’s. It felt like the end of a date, and his instincts told him to pull her close, kiss her, promise her tomorrows. That was dangerous for so many reasons, not the least of which being they were on base.

“So,” he cleared his throat.

“So, even if we’re not going to be swim buddies,” Carter said with false-levity (clearly sensing the same tension he was and blasting through it), “you still owe me a few laps, sir.”

“Do I?” he asked with a tiny smile.

“We had cake.”

“That we did. And a deal’s a deal.” He’d relish getting to see Carter in a bathing suit once. Not nearly what he wanted, but more than he had any right to hope for – the story of Jack O’Neill’s life when it came to Samantha Carter.

“So what day would you like to go?” she asked, her expression gentle and inviting.

Every day for the rest of his life.

But just one day would have to do.

“Are you free this –” he started to say when the SGC disappeared in a blinding flash of white light.***********
“… weekend,” he needlessly finished his sentence.

It said a lot about Jack’s life that he could be standing deep in the bowels of Cheyenne Mountain one second, aboard an Asgard spaceship in orbit above Earth the next, and not miss a beat.

He took a second to consider the immense window he stood before, then he turned to scan the alien vessel for…

“Thor! Buddy!”

“Greetings, O’Neill.”

Jack peered over his shoulder at the view of Earth one more time (that never got old), then he walked toward the Asgard commander’s chair. “What brings you to our neck of the woods?” He held up a hand, “No wait, don’t tell me, let me guess… trouble brewing in the galaxy.”

“The replicators continue to be a scourge to the Asgard,” Thor answered gravely. “That is why I have come.”

Jack let loose a strangled sigh to contain his frustration. Most aliens didn’t warrant the colonel’s restraint, but Jack actually liked Thor. “Listen, Thor… you know we want to help you guys out as much as we can, but isn’t it getting a little ridiculous how often you run to us for help?” After all, the Asgard were supposed to be the advanced race of the two, and yet humans seemed to be pulling their scrawny gray asses out of the fire a lot lately.

Not to mention every time Thor showed up looking for help, Jack’s team ended up in mortal peril.

“Yes,” Thor agreed, “it is ridiculous.”

“Oh… well, that’s big of you to admit that. Lesser men, uh… so… what can we do for the Asgard?”

“You are currently aboard the latest ship in the Asgard fleet, the Carter.”

Jack couldn’t help a slow-blooming smile. Carter was going to love that.

“The Carter is still under construction and not yet ready for combat, but this ship is being designed specifically to fight the replicators.”

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but didn’t you guys try this once before?”

“Indeed, we did. The Asgard invested a great deal of effort and utilized our greatest scientific minds in building the last ship that was specifically created to serve in the war against the replicators.” Thor’s head dipped. “The loss of the O’Neill was regrettable.”

“Yes,” Jack agreed glumly.

“Despite the O’Neill’s short time in service, the Asgard learned many valuable lessons from its one encounter with the replicators and from Major Carter’s assistance. We believe we can correct the mistakes made with the O’Neill in the Carter.”

“Okay, great! So what do you need us for?”

“When we created the O’Neill, the Asgard built the most advanced ship in the fleet to date.”

“As I recall, you were too smart for your own good. Needed our ‘dumb ideas’ to save the day.”
Thor seemed to hold back a sigh and canted his head. “We realize now that such an approach is not the best way to fight the replicators. For that reason, the Carter was built using schematics from our archives of a ship design that the Asgard have not made in hundreds of years.”

“You went old school, huh? Nice.” Jack looked around the room, trying to spot the ‘retro’ style of which Thor spoke. It looked basically the same as the Beliskner… maybe not as sleek or shiny, but still leaps and bounds beyond what puny mankind could cobble together with their best and brightest at the helm.

“We hope that by reverting to a less advanced model, the Carter will not become a target for replicator absorption, the very thing which doomed the O’Neill. However, stealth is only one aspect of the Carter’s intended advantages against the replicators.” Thor’s big black eyes narrowed fractionally – it was only because Jack had come to know the little gray guy that he could interpret it as frustration. “Unfortunately, even when this model was originally in use, Asgard weapons technology was still hundreds of years beyond current human technology.”

The kicker was, Jack knew Thor didn’t mean that as an insult. Still sounded like one, though.

“So what exactly do you want from us?” Jack asked.

“We had hoped your people would assist us by designing the weapons for the Carter.”

Jack’s eyebrows rose. “You mean you want human-style guns and whatnot on this ship?” Thor gave Jack an impassive look. “Are we talking crude explosives, metal projectiles, bullets, missiles, bombs, good ol’ American know-how for blowing stuff up?”

“Yes.”

Jack rocked back on his heels with an eager bounce. “Thor, buddy… you have definitely come to the right place.”

------------

Since Jack was not the final word on helping the Asgard, Thor wasted no time beaming him directly to Hammond’s office to get permission from the man who was. And because it was the SGC, the general did not look the least bit surprised when Jack O’Neill appeared in his office out of thin air in a flash of white light.

“General, sir! Sorry for not knocking. Thor sends his regards. Oh, and you might want to schedule a meeting.”

With a wry twinkle in his eye, Hammond merely gestured toward the window that looked out on the briefing room. Jack looked over and saw his team already seated at the table waiting for them.

“Major Carter beat you to it,” Hammond said needlessly as he rose from his chair to start the briefing.

Yet another indication of the state of Jack’s life that he could vanish while talking to his second-in-command and instead of rushing for the red button and sending the base onto high alert, she calmly tracked down the general and convened a meeting in preparation for his return. It was not odd for Jack to be beamed to an alien ship midsentence.

The briefing was, well, brief. General Hammond was characteristically eager to help the Asgard. After all, they were Earth’s strongest ally (and their best one, in Jack’s opinion – Jacob notwithstanding, the Tok’ra were unreliable), and the universe would get a lot worse for a lot of planets if the Asgard were wiped out. The question of whether or not to help them was decided
within five minutes. The brass tacks of how to help them took a little longer to hammer out.

Carter, predictably, volunteered to lead the team that would outfit the new Asgard ship (the name of which Jack had kept to himself – he wanted to see the look on Carter’s face when Thor told her the ship had been named after her). However, even with a crew of Asgard to assist her, Carter felt she would need a contingent of personnel from the SGC working on the project. Then it was a matter of allocating resources. Hammond had to balance providing the Asgard with enough quality people to do a bang up job without depriving Stargate Command of all of its talent at the same time.

In the end, Carter secured a team of nine scientists, engineers, and weapons specialists to go with her. Jack made it known in a low-key, casual way that his inclusion with the group was non-negotiable. Not that he didn’t trust Thor to look out for Jack’s people, but with the Asgard mundane situations could turn into crises at the drop of a hat. Jack wasn’t letting Carter go without him.

Jack just assumed the rest of SG-1 would follow suit, but Daniel asked to bow out of the mission so he could help SG-13 with translating a recently-discovered obelisk off-world instead. He pleaded his case well: the Asgard weapons project didn’t need an archaeologist, and SG-13’s linguist was having trouble with the hybrid Demotic and Akkadian script on the monolith and had requested Dr. Jackson’s help.

When Hammond gave Daniel permission to work with SG-13 for the duration of the Asgard project, Jack point-blank told Teal’c to go with Daniel. Daniel gave Jack a sour look, grumbled about not needing a babysitter, but accepted the compromise well enough. Either he was used to Jack’s overprotective streak or he would be grateful for Teal’c’s company (possibly both).

In the end, the most painful part of the briefing was Hammond’s insistence that the official face-to-face with Thor to accept the invitation for the joint project with the Asgard should be done in dress blues.

***********

Jack objected to wearing his Class As mostly because of the functions at which they were required. He hated the politics of higher rank and would sooner face a band of armed Jaffa than rub elbows with diplomats and politicians. The uniform itself he didn’t mind so much. It wasn’t comfortable, but Jack was career Air Force and it was simply part of the job.

It helped that he happened to know he looked damn good in his dress blues.

That wasn’t vain conceit on his part. It was just a proven fact. Sara used to practically drool when he had to get dressed up for some kind official shindig. While hiding behind dark aviators, he’d seen plenty of heads turn his way when he was wearing his finest.

As he strode through the halls of the SGC in his dark blue uniform, cover tucked under his left arm, he pretended not to notice the women who paused to appreciate the sight. He secretly enjoyed it a little, because he figured his days of being ogled were numbered. He wasn’t exactly a young man anymore. Someday soon, the female gaze would skip him over for men younger and fitter.

Jack was fine with that so long as he still turned one woman’s head.

Jack walked into the briefing room to find Carter standing alone in front of the window looking down into the gate room. She caught his reflection in the glass and turned to face him. Her eyes drank him in, slid from his neatly combed hair to his polished shoes and back again. Rosy points of color flared subtly in her cheeks, her bright eyes darkened, and her mouth softened.
Yep. That was the onceover he’d been waiting for, the one by which he still judged his attractiveness.

“Carter,” Jack greeted and moved around the table to stand beside her. “Where’s Hammond?”

She nodded past his shoulder. “Finishing up a call with the Chiefs of Staff.”

He nodded absently and stole a moment to study Carter. She looked sharp in her dress blues, the uniform immaculate and crisp. The dark blue jacket and the light blue shirt underneath seemed to be competing to see which could bring out the most color in her eyes. He had to say, the shirt seemed to be winning. Carter’s eyes were a dazzling sky blue, made all the more striking by the dark eyeliner she wore. As part of her Class A look, she was also wearing lipstick, a hue Jack would have to call ‘kissed breathless red’ that snared at his senses, inspired the insane urge to nibble, and made him shift his stance awkwardly. The richness of her lips made the glimpses of her teeth between them arresting for how perfectly white they seemed. He couldn’t tell for sure if the pink blush that lingered in her cheeks was from cosmetics or him, or rather her reaction to him, but he chose to believe it was the latter.

They ended up looking each other in the eye a few seconds longer than was proper before Jack cleared his throat and brushed at an imaginary piece of lint on his lapel. “You realize how completely unnecessary this is, right? Dressing to impress the Asgard? They don’t even wear clothes.”

Carter suppressed a smile. “I’m sure General Hammond is just trying to show the commander of the Asgard fleet the proper respect.”

“For all we know, this is offensive to them,” Jack said with a half-hearted wave at himself decked in layers of thick fabric. “I feel like I’m channeling Daniel here, but what if respect to them would be us dressing – or rather, not dressing – like they do?”

Carter’s eyebrows rose imperiously. “Sir, I am not streaking aboard Thor’s ship.”

Jack smirked playfully. “When in Rome, Major.”

She gave him a challenging look, chin raised, then her eyes skimmed down his body pointedly. “In that case, sir, I think you should go first. Lead by example.”

“Ah, but I’m strictly backup on this mission, remember? I’m the REMF on this adventure.”

Carter’s lips twitched as she fought a smile. “That might change how I feel about you watching my six, Colonel.”

She noticeably didn’t say if it would change her feelings on that in a good way or a bad way. Which was probably for the best.

“If you feel strongly about this diplomatic gesture, you could make it an order that the refit team go nude,” Carter shrugged like she was indifferent herself, “but remember Sergeant Siler and eight other men are going to be up there with us.”

“Eeee. All right,” Jack conceded, “the clothes stay on.”

“Good call, sir,” Carter quipped, and Jack didn’t realize how relaxed she’d become until her eyes flicked to a spot beyond his shoulder and she snapped to attention. The lines of her body went from soft and curved to sharp and straight in an instant. He immediately missed the gentler Carter, but Air Force Carter was hot, too.
Jack turned to see Hammond emerge from his office. He was also in his dress blues in preparation to officially accept the Asgard proposal for a joint venture.

A lot of pomp and circumstance that would go right over Thor’s head, Jack was sure of it.

“Everything good to go, General?” Carter asked, her voice clear and concise.

“The Joint Chiefs have a few concerns they’ve asked me to bring up with Thor, but otherwise yes.” Hammond gave Jack an assessing look like it was a parade review. Jack must have passed inspection, because Hammond’s next words were, “Now that we’re all here, we might as well get on with it.”

Jack fished the Asgard communication crystal Thor had given him from his pocket and fiddled with it until it gave a blue glow.

“Here we go,” he said as he put on his hat to complete the ensemble. For all that Thor wasn’t going to appreciate it.

In a cascade of bright light, Hammond, Carter, and Jack disappeared from the SGC.

***********

When they materialized on the Carter a second later, Thor was standing in wait for them. “Greetings, General Hammond. Major Carter, it is good to see you once again.”

“Hello, Commander Thor,” Hammond responded.

“It’s good to see you, too, Thor,” Carter said with a nod and a friendly smile.

Hammond began his spiel with formality, “On behalf of the United States government and the SGC, I want to thank you for the opportunity to work alongside the Asgard on this project.”

“The honor is mine, General Hammond,” Thor said with a dip of his head. “Speaking for the Asgard race, it is my pleasure to welcome all of you aboard the Carter.”

Jack flicked a quick look over at Carter just in time to see a look of complete shock sweep over her face, quickly followed by a giddy delight she could barely contain. He knew the feeling – he’d experienced it himself when he found out about the O’Neill. Only to have his delight crushed a second later when he heard about it being blown up. Alas.

Hammond chuckled at hearing the ship’s name. “I hope she proves to be as impressive as her namesake.”

Carter blushed.

“As do we,” Thor said. “My crew of engineers and builders are awaiting your expertise, Major Carter.”

“Great!” Carter chirped. “I can’t wait to get started.”

“About that,” Hammond interjected, “my superiors have a few more questions about the details of this joint venture before we hand over to you some of our best people.”

“Of course. I will answer any question you have.”

Hammond looked wearied to have to drag technicalities into the encounter. “How long do you
“We cannot be certain – your weaponry is so unfamiliar to us that we have not been able to make a precise estimate as to how long it will take to install your systems – but given the size of the Carter and its armament needs, we believe the work will take no less than ten of your days. And it is quite likely it could take more.”

“That’s what we figured… or near enough to know we’ll need to iron out a few more problems before we get to work.”

“Such as?” Thor asked, head cocked curiously.

“My leaders are concerned about an Asgard ship being parked in orbit around Earth for a protracted period of time.” Hammond sighed. “If this refit is going to take over a week… that’s a long time to hope no other nations notice your ship up here. Even with any stealth technology you might have, there’s a good chance someone is going to see you. I should remind you that very few countries on our planet are aware of the Stargate, and the majority of our population is unaware that there is intelligent alien life in the universe. A great many of them aren’t ready to know that. We don’t want to incite any panic.”

“We agree that staying in orbit above Earth is unwise,” Thor said. “Although our concern was for your planet’s safety.”

“How’s that?” Jack asked, attention thoroughly captured.

Thor looked to his human friend. “The Protected Planets Treaty with the Goa’uld System Lords prohibits us from providing technological aid to your world that could advance it to a point equal or superior to the Goa’uld.”

Carter frowned. “But you’re not giving us advanced technology… are you?”

Thor gave Carter a calculating look. “Even if we weren’t, the Goa’uld are not likely to believe that should they notice one of our ships in prolonged orbit around your planet.”

“Yes, it does sound fishy to say ‘no, honest, Snakeheads, they were giving us primitive weapons’,” Jack mused.

“The Asgard are beholden to too many other worlds through the Protected Planets Treaty to risk gifting Earth with Asgard weapons.” Thor’s right eye twitched.

Carter narrowed her eyes shrewdly. “So not weapons… what about defensive technology?”

“Giving Earth any Asgard technology would endanger the Protected Planets Treaty; however, your engineers and scientists will be working closely with my own on this project. The Carter is not outfitted with Asgard weapons, but all of its other systems are present in their entirety and will interface with whatever weapons you intend to install. If you were to glean useful information from working with our systems that you could modify and adapt using your own resources… it would not be Asgard technology you were using, so it would technically not be a breach of the treaty, as we would have given you nothing. We could hardly be at fault for your kind being clever and observant during your work.”

It was basically permission to poke around the innards of an Asgard ship and try to figure out how it worked. Carter beamed like a little girl who’d actually gotten a pony for her birthday.

Jack had to admit, it was a pretty sweet deal. “Thank you, Thor,” he said with a fond smile.
“It is the Asgard who will be in your debt once the *Carter* is finished,” he countered. “Access to our technology so that you might emulate some of our systems is the least we can do. I only wish our accord with the System Lords would allow us to do more.

“The Protected Planets Treaty is one reason we do not intend to conduct our work on the *Carter* near Earth. The other reason is the replicators.”

“I thought you said this vintage design was going to keep the replicators from paying attention to it,” Jack said.

“That is our belief, but our understanding of the replicators is not perfect, and we are not willing to risk drawing their attention to Earth with this ship if we are wrong.” Thor looked toward Hammond and Carter. “When we have all personnel and necessary material on board, we will take the *Carter* to a secure location and conduct the work there, hidden from detection by both the replicators and the System Lords.”

“I think that will be a relief for my superiors to hear,” Hammond chimed in, “but that does bring up a whole new set of issues.”

“What issues do you foresee?”

“Provisions for my people, for one. They’ll need supplies if they’re going to be living on this ship for any appreciable length of time.”

“We are prepared to provide living quarters – the *Carter* does not have a full crew aboard at present, so there is ample space available. We will gladly transport aboard any supplies you feel your people may need. We will even provide the sustenance for your crew, if you wish. However, Major Carter found our cuisine quite disagreeable when she was assisting us with the *O’Neill*.”

Jack looked askance at his second. “Carter?”

Carter winced. “Really, sir, we should bring our own food.”

“That bad?” he asked.

“That bad,” she assured. Then she looked quickly at the Asgard commander. “No offense, Thor.”

“No offense was taken, Major Carter.” Thor tipped his head back to ponder Carter closer. “Perhaps you would like the blue ones better.”

Carter laughed a second before she reined in her amusement. “Better bring our own snacks, just in case.”

“Indeed,” Thor agreed with a distinct note of playfulness in his voice.

“Will we have a way to contact you when the *Carter* leaves orbit?” Hammond asked. “I don’t mind telling you I’m sending a lot of my best people with you on this, and I don’t like the idea I won’t be able to reach them if an emergency comes up on the base.”

“The crystal I gave to Colonel O’Neill will easily reach us where we will be working on the *Carter*. The ship’s propulsion system is fully operational – I assure you your people can be returned to you in a relatively short amount of time if necessary.”

Hammond nodded, satisfied. “All right then. I’m satisfied with this arrangement. We’ll head back to the SGC, work out what supplies will be needed for the mission, and we’ll have you start bringing
up shipments.”

“We look forward to beginning work on the Carter alongside the humans of Earth.”

**********

Back on terra firma, Carter and Siler holed up in her lab with the door shut for the better part of a day calculating what material they would need in order to install manmade weapons on the Carter and how much of everything it would take to get the job done. When they had their list, they passed it to Hammond, who then had to requisition all the equipment and ordnance from the U.S. government (no small feat, even if it was intended for their extraterrestrial allies).

The commissary scrambled to put together enough non-perishable food to last eleven people two weeks. The bulk of the food stack was MREs, but one could only live on MREs so long before the inclination was to eat less rather than eat another MRE, so they had to try to sneak in as much fresh food as was practical.

Fraiser created the most comprehensive first aid kit known to man – much larger than their field kits, since this wouldn’t need to be small enough to fit inside a pack that they would be carrying on their backs. “You’re going to be splicing together power sources from two different technologies; that’s just asking for trouble,” she said to forestall any argument. “You’re taking an AED.”

The last task was for everyone going on the Carter to pack a bag – clothes, toiletries, and whatever else they thought they might need for a two-week work trip. Jack packed as much stuff to keep him occupied as possible. Trapped on an alien spaceship for two weeks, the only non-geek among a horde of geeks… he saw a lot of boredom in his future.

**********

Jack never asked where Thor was planning to take the Carter to do the installation work – he assumed if he did, he wouldn’t understand the answer anyway. He bet Carter had asked, though. She’d probably peppered Thor with so many questions the Asgard might have faked a summons from one of his crew just to escape the major’s insatiable curiosity.

The day they left Earth, both crews were standing on the bridge watching the tunnel-effect of hyperspace surround the ship. Jack stood with his hands in the pockets of his blue BDUs, the very picture of laid-back since he was just along for the ride. Carter was standing next to him, visibly excited about their destination.

But when the Carter decelerated out of hyperspace into a sweeping panorama of magenta and rose, Jack heard Carter actually gasp. Apparently the view was a surprise to her.

“This nebula should hide us from any Goa’uld or replicator scans and allow us to do our work in peace,” Thor explained.

“This is incredible,” Carter breathed as she stepped closer to the window. Gargantuan clouds of gas hung suspended in the deep cold of space, filling the viewport like an enormous aquarium of color. Stars shined through the nebula in varying intensities – some faint pin-pricks of white and others blazing points of light.

She wasn’t wrong. It was incredible.

Jack went to join her, as much to get a better look at the nebula as to be in the presence of her wonder. It felt like witnessing the pure essence of Samantha Carter.
The nebula dwarfed the *Carter*, a fountain of dusky red and ruddy purple curled in the blackness like a sea of shades frozen in the middle of a great cresting wave. Jack stared out at the sight, mesmerized, but when he cut another look at Carter beside him his attention was thoroughly captured. In his opinion, she eclipsed the nebula.

The light falling on her through the window gave her a hue somewhere between lilac and the color of sunlight shining through a glass of red wine. Her eyes became pale burgundy and her hair a freeze-frame explosion of strawberry blonde.

The nebula was pretty enough, but the nebula on Carter was stunning.

Carter leaned forward and craned to see as far up as possible. She jerked back and whirled to him in excitement. Pure, innocent excitement that had no business in the eyes of a grown woman. “Sir! It’s the horsehead nebula!”

“Sweet.”

She grinned and looked back out the window, one hand resting lightly on the surface like she longed to be beyond it, free of her physical form and casting her energy out among the reds and purples.

“Major Carter?”

Jack silently cursed Siler’s interruption. After all, one did not get to see such untainted awe often.

She turned to the sergeant. “Yes?”

“She should get started, ma’am?”

Carter visibly pulled herself together. Jack watched the mature woman shove away the little girl just by the change in her eyes. “Yes, of course.” She turned away from the window to face the colonel. “Will you be all right on your own, sir?”

Jack lifted his eyebrows and quirked a smile. “I’m here babysitting you, remember?”

“Yes, sir,” she said indulgently and with a small nod left to join Siler and the others.

Jack bit back a sigh and turned once more to face the window. If he was in for two weeks of being essentially useless, at least he had a great view.

***********

“Colonel…”

“Yes?”

Jack took a sadistic delight in watching Siler try to find a way to tactfully tell him to fuck off.

“Sir, you’re kind of, um… would you mind moving aside a little bit, sir?”

“Yep, you bet. This way?” Jack asked, pointing in the direction of a pile of assembly parts for the weapon mounting structure with a batch of humans and Asgard clustered around it.

“No, sir… just…”

“This way?” he pointed the opposite direction, where a pair of engineers were experimenting with ways to interface the electrical wires of the missile launch control system with an Asgard power
Siler valiantly held back a curse. “No, sir… if you could just… how about over there?” Siler gestured toward a work table where a Gatling gun had been partially taken apart in order for the Asgard to study the firing mechanism. It also just happened to be where, currently, no one was working.

“Sure, sure,” Jack said airily and side-stepped Siler’s project, a partially gutted AMRAAM missile, with a devilish smirk.

On his way to the table of banishment, Jack was distracted by four SGC engineers and three Asgard engineers in a huddle discussing the placement of weapons and the logistics of reloads. When they noticed Jack heading their way, he saw his own men cringe and the Asgard tense.

It had only been four days, but Jack had gotten a bit of a reputation for being in the way.

“How goes the work, gentlemen?”

“Good, sir!” Rodriguez blurted cheerfully, albeit a bit desperately. Clearly he hoped to deflect the colonel’s attention with a short response that would send him on his way.

“Figuring out how to insert Tab A into Slot Z, then?” he craned his neck to try and see the schematic Fredericks was holding.

Fredericks pulled the paper closer to his chest protectively. “Yes, sir, we’re getting there. Hard at work.”

“Excellent.” Jack patted Fredericks on the shoulder. He looked up when he sensed, like an internal radar, Carter walk into the room. His hopes rose eternal.

“Carter!” he called out and started wending his way to her.

Carter stuttered to a halt and looked at him and… well, truthfully, the look of dread on her face hurt.

“How’s it going, Carter?”

“Fine, sir.”

“Well, that sounded a little *terse*. Have you run into problems?”

Carter gave him an exasperated look. “Colonel, no offense, but you’re the only trouble we’ve been having.”

Jack’s eyebrows rose. Oh sure, he knew everyone was *thinking* it, but only Carter had been gutsy enough to *say* it.

“In the way, am I?”

“A little bit,” Carter agreed. She gave him a sympathetic look. “Sir, there’s no reason you need to skulk around the lab while we’re working. If we run into trouble, I promise we’ll come get you.”
“And in the meantime I should do… what, exactly?” He’d already explored the entirety of the Carter from stem to stern as it were. He’d even barged into Thor’s living quarters unintentionally once. It could have become an intergalactic incident if Thor didn’t like Jack so much and easily forgave the intrusion.

She gave him a horrified look. “You mean to tell me you didn’t bring anything to occupy yourself for two whole weeks?”

Of course he had, but it was too much fun to make her sweat a little. “I thought I could spend the time learning a bit more about what you’re doing here.” He gestured around the large room full of half-assembled ordnance.

“Sir…”

“O’Neill.”

Jack turned at his name. “Hey, Thor! What can I do for you?”

“You can accompany me to the observation deck.”

“Oh, yeah? Is there a meteor shower passing by or something?”

“No.”

“Then why are we going?”

Thor narrowed his eyes. “Because you are bothering the scientists.”

Carter stifled a snort and gave him an insincere smile. “Have fun, sir.” And with that, she hurried off to rejoin her fellow eggheads.

“Humph,” Jack grunted. Then he turned to face Thor. “All right then, looks like you’re stuck with me. Lead on, buddy.”

Once they were in the corridor and out of earshot of the lab, Thor looked sidelong at Jack. “The work would progress much more smoothly if you would refrain from distracting the scientists at every available opportunity.”

“Yeah, I know… I’m just bored.”

“And being a nuisance assuages that boredom?”

“Not really.” Jack smirked. “Although it is fun to rile Carter up.”

“Do you not value her work?”

“Of course I do!”

“Then why do you insist on interfering with it?”

Jack frowned at that. Thor made it sound so… disrespectful. “I don’t do it because I don’t value her work. I just…”

“Want her attention.”

Jack jerked to a halt in the corridor and looked down at the Asgard commander.
Thor stopped and turned to face him. “I presume you pester Major Carter as part of some human courtship behavior.”

“I do not,” Jack squawked. “There is no courting going on.”

Thor looked puzzled. “Then I do not understand why you seek her attention so persistently.”

“Because I’m bored. And I like messing with Carter. If Daniel were here, I’d be doing the same thing to him. And no, before you go there, I’m not courting Daniel, either. And besides, Carter’s used to me pestering her.” He shrugged. “She gets a little irked sometimes, sure, but I generally reel it in before she gets really pissed at me.”

“I do not imagine she resents the attention,” Thor responded easily and turned to resume his trek toward the observation deck.

“What exactly does that mean?” Jack asked as he strode to catch up with the Asgard.

“Only that Major Carter seems to return your affection.”

“Okay, stop right there, Thor. There is no ‘affection’.”

“You are not fond of Major Carter?”

“Well, sure…”

“Do you not believe she is fond of you?”

“I’m sure she… that’s not really what we’re talking about. When you say ‘affection’, it suggests deeper feelings than friends have toward each other.”

“And you do not care more deeply for Major Carter than you would for a mere friend?”

Jack was conspicuously silent.

The silence lasted until they reached the observation deck, which Jack would almost call a rec hall – there was free space enough for a couple of foosball tables and a bulkhead that practically screamed for a dartboard. The entire back wall was window, and butting up against it were several restaurant-style booths. It was the perfect place to sit and stare out at the stars. Or in this case, the nebula.

When Jack and Thor had taken seats facing each other, Thor began, “I apologize if I have offended you.”

“How would you have done that?”

“I suspect I have spoken improperly regarding you and Major Carter.”

Jack sighed. “Look, Thor… the thing is, the organization we work for has rules against…”

“Courtship?”

“Sure, let’s go with that.”

“I see.” Thor mulled that over a moment. “So, if it were not for these rules prohibiting a pair bond between you and Major Carter…”

Jack fidgeted uneasily and looked around for any human eavesdroppers. “Well, there are rules, so
there’s no point talking about it. Because it won’t change anything. In the end, the rules are the rules, and that’s just the way things are.”

“You do not seem pleased with ‘the way things are’.”

Jack didn’t know how to respond to that. So he didn’t. Instead, he tapped his fingers against the tabletop in a syncopated beat, nervy and restless.

Thor rested his skinny gray arms on the table between them. For a moment, he did and said nothing. Then he matched Jack’s arrhythmic beat with his own fingers against the table.

Jack stilled his hands and smiled faintly.

“I believe,” Thor said with care, “that one of my favorite things about your species is your passion. Humans rarely exist in a state of lassitude. Everything you do is done so intensely. Your curiosity is fervent, as is your hate… and your love.”

“Thor…”

“I imagine at times it must be a burden to be laden by so much passion… and yet, I have to say I admire it.”

“Thanks… I think.”

Thor looked pointedly at Jack. “Human passion is so powerful that I believe, ultimately, no rules can stop it.” Thor lifted his chin slightly, haughty in his position as a leader of an advanced alien race. “Nor should they.”

Jack blinked, stunned. He could hardly believe his ears. It sounded like the supreme commander of the Asgard fleet was pulling for him and Carter. First Jacob Carter, now Thor? Next thing he knew, Yu would be rooting for them to get their happily ever after.

Sadly, the rest of the galaxy could want them to end up together, but it wouldn’t matter because the Air Force would never allow it. Not without someone losing their place on SG-1, and that was not a sacrifice either of them were willing to make.

“You know,” Jack said with a smirk, “we have a term for folks like you on Earth. We call them hopeless romantics.”

Thor pondered that phrase a few seconds before he passed judgment on it. “I would prefer to call it hopeful.”

***********

It required all of Jack’s self-control, but he refrained from being a constant pest to the scientists (particularly Carter) after his chat with Thor. Since Carter was elbow-deep in the weapons installation project, that meant Jack went over a week seeing hardly hide nor hair of his favorite major. Truth be told, it sucked, but he felt like he had to prove something to Thor.

From the snippets he’d gathered when he managed to corner one of the engineers for a progress report (he was well within his rights to ask how things were going), he got the impression work was wrapping up. He hoped that meant they were going home soon – he was bored silly, and not being able to hang out with Carter had made him cranky.

Of course, the humans had been aboard the Carter for twelve days, and they’d only provisioned for
fourteen. They would have to go home whether work was finished or not, even if the project still had a few loose ends in two days’ time.

Jack was eagerly awaiting the return to normal.

That countdown was keeping him sane as he sat alone on the observation deck playing with his yo-yo. He watched the Simpsons characters in his hand turn into a yellow blur when he rolled out the toy, Homer and Bart spinning dizzily while the Simpson women became an oddly-colored orb in the center. They transformed back into shapes with edges when the yo-yo couched back into his hand, ready for another whirl.

“Colonel O’Neill?”

Jack looked up to find Siler approaching him. The technician looked tired – about as tired as he’d ever looked at the SGC during one of their many crises. Jack had to remember that while he’d been twiddling his thumbs, his people had been working in a frenzy. The threat of the replicators was a strong motivator.

“Yes, Sergeant?”

“Sir, would you mind ordering Major Carter to bed?”

Jack’s eyebrows rose swiftly. “Excuse me?”

Siler gave a weary, humorless smile. “She’s been working in the lab nonstop for the past forty-eight hours. She needs to take a break, she doesn’t agree, and none of us are high enough in rank to order her to sleep.”

“Oh,” Jack said knowingly and slid out of the booth he’d staked a claim to days ago. Being called upon to order Carter to stop working was not an unusual part of Jack’s command. Honestly, Jack was glad for the excuse to seek her out. “On it. You look like you could use some rack time yourself, Siler.”

“Yes, sir. I was on my way to do that. I just wanted to make sure Major Carter was taken care of first.”

“Go get some sleep,” Jack ordered, “I’ll deal with Carter.”

Siler looked glad to be free of the responsibility and walked off toward the personnel quarters, feet dragging wearily.

Jack had lost his sense of night and day aboard the Carter – Thor clearly didn’t feel any need to mimic a day/night cycle aboard ship – so he didn’t realize how late it must have been until he walked into the lab and found it almost deserted. Two Asgard were putting back together the systems they had allowed the humans to study, but otherwise Jack’s eyes went to the only living soul in the lab at that hour.

Carter was folded over a parts-strewn table, her head pillowed on her arms. Her tousled blonde hair was sticking out at odd angles, the black sleeves of her shirt making her locks even fairer by comparison.

Jack made his way to her side and reached down to jostle her shoulder. “Carter… oh, Carter, wakey wakey.”

“Hmmm?” she hummed sleepily, head lolling but remaining firmly planted against her forearms.
Jack leaned closer. “Daniel wants to use the Stargate to power some kind of Ancient device. He’s got jumper cables – that’s safe, right?”

Carter’s head popped up and she looked around, disoriented and worried. “Daniel!” she scolded an archaeologist who was not there.

Jack grinned while Carter was too groggy to notice.

Carter blinked down at her work table, rubbed a hand over her face, then she noticed Jack beside her. “Sir! Sorry, I dozed off.”

“Yes, one would if one had been at this as long as you have. Siler tells me you haven’t left this lab in days.”

Carter’s mouth gaped open a moment, clearly contemplating denials, then she pursed her lips. “That traitor.”

“Now, now. Is that any way to talk about one of your frequent partners in crime? You usually cover for your accomplices. You must be tired.”

Carter blushed faintly and ducked her head, blonde hair falling into new, interesting configurations of chaos. Jack had to restrain himself from combing his fingers through it.

“Go to bed, Carter.”

He expected a fight, so it surprised him when Carter just nodded and started to gather up the plethora of notebooks and journals scattered across the desk. When it became obvious she wasn’t willing to leave any for a second trip, no matter how laden her arms became, Jack picked up a few to carry for her.

On their way toward the personnel quarters, they walked past the observation deck. Carter pulled up short.

“Carter, your bed’s this way,” Jack nodded toward the corridor beyond.

“Sir… just a few minutes? I’ve been so busy I haven’t really had a moment to stop and enjoy the view, and I figure by tomorrow we’ll be on our way home…”

He couldn’t really deny an astrophysicist the chance to gaze upon a nebula up close. “All right, but ten minutes tops. Then it’s lights out.”

Carter nodded and bee-lined for the observation deck. Who knew an exhausted woman could move so fast?

By the time Jack caught up to her, Carter had appropriated a booth and dumped her armful of notebooks on the far side of the table from where she sat. She was staring out at the great gas cloud in wonder, eyes tired and expression haggard but a strange contentment in the lines of her body.

Jack considered the table situation before he added his own load of journals to the pile on the left side of the table and slid into the seat next to Carter on the right. He would argue it was easier than moving all the notebooks.

“It really is breathtaking,” Carter marveled softly.

“Thor sure knows how to treat his friends to a killer view.” He looked around the observation deck
thoughtfully. “I’m kind of surprised the Carter has a room like this, though. Seems kind of indulgent on a warship.”

“Vanir told me it’s going to be a hangar bay for smaller attack ships – like Goa’uld death gliders – but they’re still being built at the Asgard shipyard. They won’t be completed until the Asgard return with the specs for adding human weapons.”

“Huh. Well, that certainly makes more sense given what the Carter’s for. Guess Thor figured if he was going to be playing host to a band of humans, he might as well give them a window.” Given how much time Jack had spent on the observation deck, he really should thank the guy.

“It’s a remarkable ship.”

Jack smirked. “Coming from you, that sounds somehow arrogant, Carter.”

She smiled, unabashedly pleased with herself.

“Although,” Jack angled his body toward hers (under the guise of getting a better view out the window, of course), “it must be a bit of a kick to the old ego that the Asgard’s least advanced ship is the one that gets your name. That’s so wrong on so many levels. The Carter ought to be top-of-the-line to be worthy of its name.”

Carter huffed out a breath. “Sir, this ship will hopefully be instrumental in the Asgard defeating the replicators. I am definitely okay with that namesake.”

“I see your point.” Jack cast his eyes to the mountain of notebooks. “How’s everything going with all this?” He waved one hand at the stack.

“We’ve installed multiple missile launchers to the exterior of the ship and gave the Asgard six live AMRAAMs and one dud. That won’t be enough for combat, of course, but it’s more than enough for them to copy our design and build their own. We also supplied them with all manner of handguns, assault rifles, and explosives so they can use them as a template to manufacture their own versions of Earth weapons.” Carter frowned. “I just hope the Asgard inclination to design up doesn’t get them in trouble.”

“Yes, to do a damn bit of good against replicators, the cruder the better.” Jack cocked his head. “Think we should send the Asgard on their way with a few clubs? Tell them to go all caveman on the bugs?”

Carter smirked. “You might be on to something there, Colonel. Maybe the more primitive the human weapons, the more effective. But can you imagine Thor swinging a morning star?”

Jack snorted. “The thing would probably outweigh him. I’m sure he’d topple ass over teakettle the first time he tried to use it.”

Carter started to giggle and clamped her hand over her mouth when the sound became feral. There was a loopy quality to her laughter, like it could easily get out of control. Jack would be a goner if it did.

Carter forced down the sleep-deprived cackle that wanted to break free and rubbed at her eyes like a tired toddler. She yawned. “Sorry, sir. This assignment’s been pretty relentless. Guess I got a little carried away.”

“I am shocked,” Jack said sarcastically. “Was it that much work to add Earth weaponry to the Carter?” Because Carter looked wiped and Siler had been almost dead on his feet.
“It was a challenge, definitely, but not appreciably harder than anything else we’ve done at the SGC. Plus the Asgard were a huge help.” She glanced at him. “But remember, while we were doing all the work to outfit the Carter, we also had to try and learn everything we could about the Asgard technology we’d been given access to. They can’t give us anything to take home to study, so we had to cram it all in while we installed the weapons systems. It was really two jobs, sir.”

“Right.” Jack hadn’t thought about that. “So… get anything we can use?”

Carter gestured expansively at the journals. “I’ve been making notes like crazy in every spare second that I have. Asgard technology is so far beyond where we are, but maybe in a few years we’ll be able to build approximations of our own.”

“Years…”

“Sir, reaching this level of technological advancement on our own would take us hundreds, if not thousands, of years. Four or five years would be really impressive.”

“Yeah, I guess. Guess I’m just impatient to finally get my ray gun.”

“Yes, sir,” Carter replied indulgently and turned to look back out at the nebula. The dark patch that would be the horse’s ears or forelock had loomed into view as the Carter drifted over the past twelve days. Up close, the resemblance to a horse was less uncanny than it was as seen from Earth, but it didn’t take too much imagination to still see the celestial equine.

“So I’ve been thinking this guy needs a name,” Jack said conversationally, gesturing out the immense window with one hand and then oh-so-casually dropping that arm along the booth seatback behind Carter. All in the name of getting a better look out the window of the unnamed space stallion, of course. “Mister Ed seems a little too obvious. Sea Biscuit, maybe? What do you think, Carter?”

Carter tipped her head back against the seatback. Really, it would be a matter of opinion if it could be said her head was actually on Jack’s arm or not. She was so tired it was doubtful anyone would make an issue of it if they were caught. After all, no one as exhausted as Carter was would be thinking about ‘fraternizing’.

“His name’s Barnard.”

“Oh, is it now?” Jack asked archly, eyebrows high. “Already decided on a name, have you?”

“I didn’t name him that – the horsehead nebula is also known as Barnard 33. Sorry, sir, but you don’t get to pick out a name this time.”

“Damnit. But Barnard’s lame.”

“And Mister Ed would have been a better choice?” she countered playfully, voice dangerously soft, low, and sleepy.

“Cooler than Barnard.”

Carter settled more comfortably in her seat. “I would have gone with Bucephalus.”

“Carter, I have no idea what you’re talking about, but from the sound of that name I’m going to go ahead and say you’ve been spending too much time with Daniel.”

Carter hummed in agreement and continued to stare out the window.
It was really no surprise when her head dropped to his shoulder five minutes later, the major fast asleep.

Jack looked down at her, partially curled into him and radiating a sense of safety. Trust. Carter could sleep with one eye open with the best of them, but with Jack there she knew she didn’t have to. And that could be down to nothing more than professional trust in a teammate. It need not be inappropriate.

But Jack knew it was down to its core.

He knew he should wake her. He knew he should send her on to her room for some quality sleep in a real bed.

And he would. Later.

He wanted to bask in the moment a little while longer. Carter warm against his side with her head on his shoulder, almost in his arms but not quite. Almost the way he wanted her with him, but not quite.

It was the consolation prize Jack had to be content with when it came to Samantha Carter.
Chapter 5

Some men might be turned off by the fairness of Carter’s skin, but Jack always had a soft spot for it. His history of dating (and marrying) blondes is a huge tell on that count. He is of the opinion that fair skin looks better on blondes than a dark tan does – sun-worshipper skin topped by pale hair makes a woman look like a baked potato with sour cream.

He appreciates how Carter embraces her natural skin tone. In a culture where women are told to look tanned and beach-ready year-round, Carter has more important shit to worry about than sunning herself like a biscuit to be baked until golden brown. In fact, the only hint of a tan she has is a farmer’s tan, courtesy of the black shirts they wear beneath their BDU jackets, and something about that delights Jack to no end.

Secretly, he suspects he digs Carter’s porcelain complexion because his own skin browns and tans seemingly the instant it sees the sun, and there’s something thrilling about the contrast of tanned skin and fair skin tangled amid rumpled bedsheets.

Not that he can think that way about Carter… not openly, anyway.

**********

“Whoa,” was the first word out of Jack’s mouth when they stepped into the hall beyond the gate room on P56-517.

“That is a lot of cats,” Carter said beside him.

And she was right.

The MALP had only been able to reconnoiter as far as the room containing the Stargate – a plain and barren fare with a narrow doorway that gave them the wrong expectations for the planet – so the sight that greeted SG-1 the moment they stepped through the door was a surprise.

It was full of cats. Cat statues the size of lions lying like sphinxes to either side of the walkway, figurines of cat-headed women in varying sizes and colors atop the pedestals and tables flanking the long central hall, cats painted on the walls, stained glass cat eyes throwing emerald-tinted light into the gallery, and even… yep, Jack spotted a live cat, a gray striped stray, dart quickly from the room at their arrival.

Daniel drifted toward the tables like a toddler with no self-control.

“Daniel,” Jack took a step further into the cat shrine, “how did we gate to a world ruled by my granny?”

Carter stifled a chuckle behind his shoulder.

Daniel bent over to study one of the statues more closely, adjusting his glasses and tipping his head up to peer down his nose at the inscriptions. “Bastet,” he said softly, as if to himself.

“Actually, we just called her Granny O,” Jack quipped.

Daniel straightened and turned to give Jack his Not Amused face. “I meant this is obviously some kind of temple to the Egyptian cat goddess Bastet.”
“Really?” Jack looked around a moment for effect. “What was your first clue?”

Daniel looked constipated at his intractable commanding officer and muttered something under his breath as he turned back to the artifacts. Jack didn’t catch the archaeologist’s words, but he doubted they were flattering.

Teal’c strode forward, his staff weapon firmly in hand as he surveyed the room. There was a tension in the Jaffa’s shoulders that snared Jack’s eye.

“Teal’c?” he prompted.

“Bastet is one of the System Lords,” Teal’c explained.

“Meaning she’s no backwater, small potatoes snake,” Jack mused.

Teal’c glanced Jack’s way with a lifted eyebrow. “I fail to see what irrigation and vegetables have to do with a Goa’uld.”

Jack rolled his eyes. “It means we’re probably talking about a fairly powerful Goa’uld here, right? As in large armies, big ships, lots of death gliders, up to her megalomaniac eyebrows with firepower?”

“Indeed.”

Jack tensed much as Teal’c had.

“Jack…” Daniel began to protest, no doubt sensing Jack’s unease at the tactical situation. “Let’s not get ahead of ourselves and give up on the mission yet. We haven’t seen any sign of hostiles.”

“Not true, we saw that cat.”

Daniel stared incredulously at Jack.

“Hey, have you ever been scratched by a cat before? It’s not pleasant. They have evil shark-tooth claws. That shit burns.”

Daniel looked about ready to have an aneurysm.

Carter stepped up beside Jack and subtly nudged him with her elbow. “All due respect, sir, but I think you’re speaking more as a dog person than as a CO.”

“Well, maybe,” Jack agreed. Then he glared at the nearest cat-sphinx as he made peace with the fact they were likely in enemy territory and he was going to order his team to proceed anyway… because that’s what SG-1 did. “All right, fine, take a look around, but everyone be on your toes. I am not in the mood to be tortured by a snake with a cat fetish today.”

Daniel threw himself into exploring the shrine to Miss Kitty. Carter, noting Daniel’s distracted single-minded attention to his work, went quickly to his side and shadowed him as he studied the artifacts, her hands on her weapon and her senses trained for any hint of danger that Daniel was definitely not going to notice sneaking up on him.

Teal’c came up alongside Jack. The Jaffa’s jaw was clenched in displeasure.

“So, what else can you tell me about this Basket lady?” Jack asked.

“Bastet!” Daniel called out.
Before Jack could chastise him for raising his voice (again, *enemy territory*), Carter swatted Daniel on the arm with the back of her hand. The linguist gave her a guilty look and dutifully returned to *silently* exploring the room.

“She is one of the more stable System Lords. Though she is not the most powerful on the Council, she is one of the members who has held her place the longest. She does not seek new conquests with the voracious appetites that the likes of Ra and Apophis did, but her control over the worlds she does command is absolute.”

“Only takes on what she can handle and handles what she has very well,” Jack said in summation.

Teal’c nodded. “When I was First Prime of Apophis, we did battle with her but once. She possessed a world Apophis wished to take for himself. We were unable to achieve our goal – Bastet’s forces on the planet were too well-organized and easily repelled our every advance. Had the battle been against any other System Lord, I would have been executed for my failure, but such outcomes are common in dealings with Bastet. She is rarely an aggressor, but defends exceedingly well. She will only attempt to gain new worlds when she has ample means with which to do so and her victory is all but certain.”

“Didn’t know Goa’uld had it in them to be that conservative in their warfare,” Jack said. “She sounds like a CEO. I’m picturing her in a pantsuit.” While he talked with Teal’c, he watched Carter and Daniel moving through the room. Carter, clad like the rest of them in her desert BDUs, was a fair vision from blonde head to Mojave toe. Her path took her through the light of one of the cat eye stained glassed windows, sliding a swath of emerald through her hair and over her shoulders and back before falling flat on the sandstone floor.

Growing uncomfortable with the distance his scientists were putting between themselves and the guard dogs of SG-1, Jack moved forward to slowly close the gap.

Teal’c matched his stride and said, “Many of the Goa’uld believe Bastet is weak.”

“Doesn’t sound like it from what you just told me,” Jack said as he reached out and tapped an alabaster cat statue on the nose.

“Her method of rule is not typical of a Goa’uld.”

“She still poses as a god, right?”

“She does.”

“Has human slaves?”

“Indeed.”

“Then I don’t see the difference.”

Teal’c seemed stymied by how to explain it. “Her dominion over her subjects is perhaps as ‘loving’ and ‘compassionate’ as a Goa’uld is capable of being.”

“Which is to say not much.”

Teal’c smirked. “By Tau’ri standards, no. But to those in the galaxy accustomed to the reigns of terror like those of Ra and Apophis…” Teal’c tipped his head in concession. “Many System Lords have the loyalty of their subjects through fear and intimidation. Many slaves and Jaffa proclaim to love their god because they are afraid to be heard professing otherwise.”
“But Bastet?”

Teal’c considered his words. “I believe there are those among her ranks for whom the loyalty and love is genuine.”

“Oh sure, in a Stockholmy kind of way.”

Teal’c gave Jack and perplexed look.

“So she’s a *nice* Goa’uld?” Jack asked skeptically.

“No.” Teal’c scowled. “She is a *more cunning* Goa’uld than the others. She understands that those loyal to her for reasons beyond fear will fight for her harder and more fiercely than a scared subject will. In the heat of battle, some Jaffa will surrender and pledge fealty to the prevailing Goa’uld rather than die at the hands of the enemy. Bastet’s warriors *never* turn against her.”

Jack had to hand it to her, Bastet sounded slick. “You know, the more I hear about how devoted these cat-heads are to their goddess, the more I get a bad feeling about being here,” Jack said.

No sooner had he said that than two women wielding staff weapons rushed into the room from the far entryway. They were clad in leather skirts and knee-high boots, cloth and leather tops that covered their breasts but left muscular shoulders bare and arms exposed save for leather bands at the upper arms and on the wrists. If Jack had a mental image of Amazonians, they would fit the bill.

In any other instance, he would appreciate their aesthetic, but not when the leggy brunette leveled her staff weapon at Carter and yelled, “*Halt!*”

Carter snapped around and raised her weapon, taking aim but holding fire.

Jack and Teal’c both brought their weapons to bear and split up, Jack veering to stand next to a pillar on the right side of the room, prepared to use it as cover if a firefight broke out, while Teal’c did the same with a pillar on the left.

Daniel whirled on his heels to face the newcomers, blue eyes wide in surprise and mouth hanging open.

The redhead zeroed in on Teal’c and her green eyes blazed with fury. “These invaders serve Apophis!”

“No!” Daniel strode forward to try and diffuse the situation.

“*Daniel!*” Jack barked.

Daniel pulled up short and slid up right behind Carter, using her like a shield (which would seem cowardly but was in fact exactly what Jack’s bark had told him to do). “No, no… he doesn’t serve Apophis! None of us do. We’re *enemies* of Apophis. I’m Daniel, this is Sam, that’s Jack, and he’s Teal’c.”

The redhead looked unconvinced as she continued to glare daggers at Teal’c.

“If you are not here in service of the serpent god,” the brunette asked, “then why are you here?”

“We’re explorers. *Peaceful!* Peaceful explorers. We’ve come to meet you and learn about your people, your culture.”

The redhead deferred to the brunette, clearly the higher ranking of the two. The brunette eyed all the
members of SG-1 critically, giving each man a head-to-toe look before she turned her attention to Carter. “You.”

Carter readjusted her grip on her P-90.

The brunette noted the action, looked down at her staff weapon still aimed at Carter, and relaxed her grip on the stick. The guard casings at the tip clicked shut.

Carter lowered the barrel of her weapon slightly.

“The mouthy one called you ‘Sam’.”

Daniel made a wounded noise. Jack was so going to tease Daniel about that one later.

“That’s right,” Carter replied. “Major Samantha Carter.”

The brunette gave Carter an assessing look. “I am Troja. This is my most trusted warrior, Riva.” She rested the butt of her staff on the ground, holding it at her side like a walking stick. “Do you truly come in peace?” Because apparently she couldn’t take Daniel’s word for it.

Carter dropped her P-90 against her chest but did not take her hands off it. “We don’t want any trouble. If you don’t want us here, we’ll gladly go back where we came from.”

Troja cast a considering look at Daniel, Jack, and Teal’c again. “That won’t be necessary.”

“Troja…” Riva said in warning.

“Riva. These visitors arrive mere days before the Ceremony of Wadjet, and for the second year now our goddess and our guests have not come. Do you not think this is an auspicious event?”

Riva at last lowered her own staff weapon, prompting Jack and Teal’c to ease up on their weapons in kind. Whatever Troja said made Riva consider something she hadn’t before as she let her eyes move from Jack to Teal’c to Daniel thoughtfully. The rage that had clung to her like an aura dissipated and an eagerness took its place. “Yes, of course.”

Then Troja unleashed a smile that was frankly breathtaking. Jack wasn’t usually one for brunettes, but damn. Her transformation from hard-ass warrior and potential enemy to beautiful woman was stark. “We welcome you and these men to Saqqar, Major Samantha Carter.”

“Uh, just Sam’s fine,” Carter answered, puzzled.

“Sam,” Troja nodded agreeably. “Let us escort you and these men to our village and, if it would please you, we invite you and these men to participate in the Ceremony of Wadjet with us.”

“Oh, well, that’s thoughtful of you,” Carter said awkwardly, visibly angling her body to invite Daniel to slide forward and take over – this was certainly sounding like his area of expertise. Daniel, peculiarly, remained behind Carter.

“You would honor us by joining in our celebration.” With that, Troja stepped aside to gesture toward the entrance she and Riva had sprung from with staff weapons at the ready, prepared to shoot them just a minute ago.

Jack and Teal’c had slowly made their way toward the group and presently stood at Carter’s side. Troja swept a covetous look over them and spoke to Carter. “If you will follow me.”

“Follow you where, exactly?” Jack interjected.
A flicker of disapproval flashed in Troja’s dark eyes. “To our homes, which we are graciously inviting you into.” The tone of her voice said Jack shouldn’t turn up his nose at the invitation.

“We’d like to keep our weapons,” Carter said, setting the ground rule before budging an inch that they would not stand for being disarmed.

“Of course,” Troja allowed easily enough.

Okay, well, that was… unexpected. It left Jack in a quandary as to what to think of this world. Teal’c had described the followers of Bastet as dangerous, but at the moment they were acting downright friendly. He had to make the call whether to investigate further or get the hell out of Dodge.

He reasoned: if they were getting to hold on to their guns, how bad could the situation get? At least if shit went south, they could shoot their way out and haul ass to the gate. When Carter looked toward Jack for a cue, Jack just shrugged and waved her on to follow Troja. Nothing wrong with going along and learning what they could – so long as they kept their ears and eyes open for trouble.

**********

The cat shrine turned out to be the main hall of a small-scale pyramid (igniting Jack’s now-Pavlovian distrust of pyramids) on a savannah. There were light posts to either side of the entrance to the pyramid, though at the present time of day they were unnecessary. SG-1 and their hosts emerged into bright sunlight and pale gold grasslands with paths worn down in several directions.

Troja chose one of those beaten-down tracks and started walking.

Carter was first behind Troja, then Daniel, then Jack, with Teal’c in the rear and Riva trailing him. It would have felt like they were prisoners being marched to a cell block, aside from the fact that they still had all their guns and knives and no one was yelling at them to keep moving.

“So,” Daniel trotted forward to walk abreast with Carter as he spoke to Troja, “you said your goddess hasn’t been to this planet for a couple of years?”

“No,” Troja said curtly and offered no more.

Daniel turned a plaintive look to Carter, who made a ‘what do you want me to do?’ gesture, to which Daniel nodded imploringly toward Troja’s back. It was testament to how well SG-1 could read each other that it constituted an entire conversation.

“Any idea why Bastet hasn’t been here lately?” Carter asked.

Troja sighed… not in annoyance, but sadness. “Our beloved goddess has been at war with her sister recently. Her sister had been missing for a very long time – the worlds and people Bastet once held in her sister’s name awaiting her return naturally, over time, became Bastet’s. These worlds happily pledged dual loyalty to the sisters, believing the lost sister would never return and they would never be made to choose between the goddesses. Then, very suddenly, Hathor did return.”

Carter faltered and looked over her shoulder at Jack. Jack scowled – they knew exactly how Hathor had come out of the woodwork without warning.

“Hathor wanted her worlds and her subjects back, but many of them had sworn themselves to Bastet and had grown to love her as we do. They refused to renounce her, so for years now the two sisters have been fighting over these split worlds.” Jack had a very good idea where the split on that fell – dollars to doughnuts all the men were flocking to Hathor while the women threw themselves at Bastet’s feet. He couldn’t imagine whole worlds being divided by gender.
Troja checked her pace and allowed Carter to catch up and walk alongside her. Daniel quietly fell back a few paces.

“We are a small part of Bastet’s domain,” Troja said softly. “When our goddess is embattled, we are the first to miss our beloved ruler. It has always been this way for the people of Saqqar. When the fighting first began, Bastet came to Saqqar and called most of our men to fight for her – which they did gladly – though we had few to begin with. For two years now, the Ceremony of Wadjet has been a sad affair without enough men to properly celebrate it.” Troja placed a friendly hand on Carter’s shoulder. “That is why we rejoice that you arrive when you have with these men.”

Daniel reached forward and eagerly tapped Carter on the shoulder not occupied by Troja’s hand. That was all Daniel did – didn’t launch into a thousand questions like Jack had expected – but still Carter knew what Daniel wanted to ask.

“What exactly is the Ceremony of Wadjet?”

Troja smiled, disarming and gorgeous. “You will see, Sam. It is a glorious celebration that lifts spirits and gives us hope for the future.”

Didn’t sound too bad… then again, the party-scene at Argos had seemed nice at first, too.

**********

When they reached the village about twenty minutes later, a settlement that seemed equal parts buildings and cat statues, Jack noticed immediately that there were a lot of women. A lot of very attractive, very fit, very Amazonian women. They greeted the arriving party with great enthusiasm when they saw the men of SG-1.

A chiseled beauty with bronze hair and freckles rushed up to Troja excitedly. “Troja! Bastet finally sends participants for the Ceremony of Wadjet?!”

“These are not sent from Bastet, Iyves, these men are here thanks to Sam.” Troja put an arm around Carter’s shoulders like they were dear friends. Jack could see Carter’s back tense up uncomfortably, although Jack held himself back from interceding. It hardly seemed worth causing a scene because the locals were being too nice.

The women of the village (like a casting call for ‘hot chicks’ in Hollywood) gathered around the group with Troja and Riva. A few brave souls reached out and touched Jack, Daniel, and Teal’c like they were royal steeds up for auction. Daniel weathered the attention gracefully (if a little shyly), but Jack flinched away from at least half a dozen hands, and Teal’c crowded next to him to mutter, “I do not like this.”

“Yeah, you know, not as great as I would have imagined,” Jack agreed. He sidestepped a sneaky hand that ventured alarmingly close to his ass.

“Sisters!” Troja spoke firmly. “Leave them be, for Baast’s sake! There will be plenty enough time to get to know these men before the Ceremony. Off with all of you!”

The women grumbled and sulked at the dismissal but dispersed as ordered. From rooftops and wooden benches, several cats watched the proceedings with bored indifference. A few retreating women stopped to pet the animals, though Jack wondered if it was just an excuse to linger and eye the newcomers longer.

Troja turned to Carter. “Forgive them. We haven’t had a proper Ceremony of Wadjet in years. They’re excited.”
“That’s, uh… what exactly is this Ceremony?”

Troja laughed. “You will see, Friend Sam. I will tell you all about it later. But first, we must do something about this.” She plucked at Carter’s BDUs with a grimace of distaste.

“What do you mean?”

Troja smiled warmly. “Sam… these clothes hardly celebrate the beauty of the warrior woman! You are like us – you should dress like the goddess you are.”

Jack could see the back of Carter’s neck flush pink in embarrassment.

Troja looked over Carter’s shoulder at the men of SG-1. “And they will need to change into appropriate attire as well.” What that was Jack couldn’t begin to guess – he’d yet to see a single man. “These shapeless sacks you all wear will not do at all.” With that, Troja took Carter’s hand and began to lead her away. “Come.”

Jack started to follow immediately, not interested in the team getting split up and leaving no room for discussion on the matter. Daniel and Teal’c followed Jack’s lead.

Troja didn’t speak to their baby duck routine until they reached a small dwelling. She stopped at the door, Carter’s hand still in hers, and frowned at the men. “You will be given shelter elsewhere.”

“I don’t think so,” Jack retorted. Last time they let an indigenous people split them up by gender, Carter got kidnapped and sold to a warlord. Granted, at the moment it seemed like abduction was more of a threat to the guys this time, but still.

Troja’s beauty faltered as a glower crept over her features. “We prefer to stay together,” Carter agreed.

Troja looked a long moment at Carter, then she shook off the glare and gave a tight smile. “If that is your wish. But it will be small for four of you in here,” she gestured toward the door to the house, made of tightly-bound reeds and arched with a hole at the bottom (like a pet door) and a porchlight overhead that was not on. “The house is not large – meant for a single woman and perhaps her chosen, but no more. It would be much better if you allowed these men to bunk with the rest.”

“I understand. I still want them here with me,” Carter insisted, a firm edge to her voice that warned she would not take no for an answer.

“Very well. Iyves will bring you all the proper attire shortly.” Before leaving, Troja let loose that blinding smile on Carter again, her ire and displeasure of a moment ago seemingly forgotten. “It brings me so much joy that you have come just before the Ceremony of Wadjet, Sam.” With that, and a last critical look at Jack, Daniel, and Teal’c, Troja turned and left SG-1 to their own devices.

At least hoping for refuge from the touchy women of Saqqar, SG-1 went into the house they’d been shown. A light switch near the door turned on a series of low-watt lights throughout the dwelling and gave them a clear view of the accommodations. It was one large room with a half-wall that protruded from the back and reached midway into the space, essentially cutting the room into two halves, dividing it into a large living room in one half, and the other half separated into a bedroom on the left (they could see a large mattress taking up most of the room) and a bathroom on the right (with a contraption that looked like a toilet and another that was an enormous bath). There were no doors at all. There would be no privacy, but they’d suffered worse.

The accommodations were the least of Jack’s worries. “Daniel?” he asked, turning to their cultural
They’re a matriarchal society,” he answered.

“ meaning the women are in charge.”

Daniel nodded.

“That is correct,” Teal’c added. “ Bastet’s worlds are all ruled by their women.”

“Which explains why they’ve only really shown Sam any measure of respect,” Daniel gestured toward Carter.

Carter met Jack’s gaze and gave a sheepish shrug. “Sorry, sir.”

Men like Makepeace would have taken affront to being seen as a woman’s subordinate, even for the sake of a mission, but Jack was not that much of an ass. They’d all been on SG-1 long enough and in enough strange off-world scenarios to roll with whatever part they had to play for the locals in order to avoid trouble.

“Looks like you’ll be pretending to be the leader of SG-1 on this mission, Major,” he quipped. Luckily, he trusted Carter enough not to be worried about her appearing to lead the team, even if that meant she had to give orders before consulting him. “All right… well, there’s no way to say this without sounding like a chauvinist pig, so I’m just going to say it… why are they all so hot?”

Teal’c raised his eyebrow judgingly.

“Don’t give me that eyebrow,” Jack snarled, “condescending toward men though she may be, Troja’s hot.”

“Yeah, she is,” Carter mumbled.

Jack turned a shocked look toward Carter.

Carter blushed bright red. “What? You’re right, sir, she is.”

Yes, but knowing Carter found Troja attractive… well, that was just not something his brain could handle and manage to stay focused on the situation. He’d just… dwell on that gem later. Much, much later. When he was much, much more alone.

“Bastet has long been known to practice a form of selective breeding among her human subjects,” Teal’c answered. “She only allows the strongest, most visually appealing humans under her rule to produce offspring. The physically inferior and the unattractive found among her followers are used for trade with other Goa’uld who are less concerned with the appearance of their slaves. If she does not remove them from her herd completely, she sterilizes them and puts them to work mining naquadah, where they will eventually die – taking their inferior genes with them.”

“Eugenics,” Daniel gave the name to the practice Teal’c had described.

“That’s… I’m not sure if that’s better or worse than the shit Nirrti pulls,” Jack grumbled uncomfortably. “What does she do with ugly babies?”

Teal’c’s expression was stony. “You do not want to know.”

Jack felt a shiver of disgust run up his spine. Then he turned to look at Daniel. “And I suppose you want to stay and see what this Ceremony of Wicket is all about?”
“Wadjet,” Daniel corrected. Then he girded himself. “And yes, Jack, I think we should stay.”

“Give me one good reason.” Jack was already not feeling generous toward the townspeople now that he knew this civilization did something unspeakable to their less-than-beautiful babies.

Daniel looked mightily aggrieved that he had to plead his case every time. “For one, it sounds like we should be safe from any run-ins with Bastet, giving us unique access to these people in a peaceful setting – a chance we might not get again. And other than being a little handsy, these Saqqarans have been friendly.”

“A little too friendly,” Jack commented.

Daniel allowed that much with a shrug. “Besides, if we stay, we might learn more about the System Lord Bastet. I know about the cat goddess of Ancient Egypt, but we know next to nothing about Bastet the Goa’uld other than what Teal’c just told us. These are the first worshippers of Bastet we’ve run into, and considering how much of the galaxy we’ve seen so far and how many Goa’uld we’ve tangled with, that’s kind of remarkable.”

Jack wasn’t completely won by that argument.

Daniel scowled. “We could also learn what became of Hathor’s followers.”

“Well, Hathor’s dead, I can vouch for that,” Jack said proudly.

“Yeees,” Daniel said at length, like Jack was dense, “but just because she’s gone doesn’t mean her worlds and subjects just vanished. If Bastet’s still MIA, it could mean she’s fighting to get them back from whatever Goa’uld absorbed them after Hathor died.”

Jack pursed his lips in thought. He turned to Teal’c. “Would Bastet –”


“Would she do that? Go after slaves that used to be hers before Hathor stole them and lost them?”

“I believe she would. Bastet has spent thousands of years on her breeding program, and she would not give up her stock without a fight.”

“Creeeeepy,” Jack responded. “Although to them, I’m sure it would look like a rescue. I can see why these cat-fanatics are fooled into thinking their goddess actually loves them.”

“She loves her breeding program, of which these people are integral parts,” Teal’c allowed. “In a very twisted way, it could be said that Bastet does love them.”

“Well, in any case, I don’t think we’re going to be convincing these folks to see the error of their ways and come into the light anytime soon.”

“I would not suggest an attempt even be made,” Teal’c said drolly.

“Which begs the question…” Jack began, opening the floor back up to discussion.

He was not surprised in the least at who chimed in.

“Jack,” Daniel pressed, “this is important! In our time going through the Stargate, we’ve seen many patriarchal societies, but few matriarchal ones. This is a rare opportunity to witness an uncommon culture among human populations. Studying the cultural aspects of the various peoples of the galaxy is part of our mission.”
Much as that part of it peeved Jack O’Neill to no end. “How do you know this Widget thing isn’t a big party where the three of us,” he gestured at himself, Daniel, and Teal’c, “are the main course?”

“I really doubt they’re cannibals,” Daniel answered with a put-upon expression. “Besides, they’re letting us keep our weapons. Not really something you’d do if you were planning to jump someone and spit them.”

Not about to bank on that as an assurance, Jack looked to Teal’c. The Jaffa said, “There are no accounts that describe the followers of Bastet as eaters of human flesh.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Jack drawled. “I definitely felt like a piece of meat out there.” He sighed. “Fine, we’ll stay for this Wicker party… shindig… thing. Who doesn’t like a party, right?”

He felt like eating those words when a moment later a booted toe wiggled in the small hole in the door. “Greetings! It is I, Iyves. Troja sent me; I’ve come with your proper attire.” Iyves came in with armfuls of brown cloth and supple leather. She handed a sizable amount of it to Carter, then turned to hand Jack, Daniel, and Teal’c each a much, much smaller amount of material. As in loincloths.

Jack stared in horror at the miniscule scrap of leather and fabric dangling from his hand. “Oh, there’s not a chance in hell…”

Iyves gave Jack a displeased look. “You would disrespect the people of Saqqar by refusing to wear that which all our men wear?”

“Lady,” Jack waved the pathetic excuse for clothing at her, “where we’re from, there are places where I’d be arrested if all I wore was this.”

“We are not where you are from,” Iyves pointed out crossly. “This is Saqqar, and the men here wear these.”

Daniel was scowling down at his own loincloth, visibly uncomfortable with the traditional wardrobe but no doubt reluctant to side with Jack on any topic of a cultural nature.

Teal’c just looked resigned to following whatever order he was given, including traipsing around in a loincloth if he was told to do so. But then, Teal’c had nothing to be ashamed of – the guy logged more gym time than any of them. That and Jack remembered the skirts Apophis made his Jaffa wear. Teal’c was probably used to humiliating clothing.

Iyves turned to Carter. “If they will not wear the traditional garb, especially so close to the Ceremony of Wadjet, they will cause great offense.”

Carter looked carefully at Jack, who could feel Daniel’s imploring stare at his back, and he rolled his eyes and gave in with a disgusted grunt.

“They’ll wear them,” Carter assured Iyves, using the wordless acquiescence of the colonel to make it seem like she commanded her teammates and that the men would wear the loincloths because she told them to. If the women were the leaders here, it was important to maintain the appearance that Carter had command over her men.

Iyves grinned, flashing a set of irresistible dimples. “Well met, Friend Sam! Oh, we really are so happy to have you with us! Well, I’ll leave you all to change, then!” She turned, slid an appreciative look over all three of the guys, and slipped out the door.
“Let the record show that this is done under stringent protest,” Jack grumbled acerbically, “and when this mission is over, this will never be spoken of again.”

Daniel nodded quickly.

Teal’c lifted an eyebrow.

Carter bit back a smirk.

“Something funny, Major?” Jack asked.

Carter fought back a vindictive chuckle as she said, “No, sir. It’s just… it looks like today you’re an anthropologist.”

Despite how disgruntled Jack was with the whole loincloth situation, he had to give that one to Carter. After all the poor treatment she’d suffered on all those misogynistic planets they’d been to over the years… yeah, she’d earned a little payback.

Daniel’s face was downturned, but Jack could still tell the archaeologist was smiling. Teal’c’s face was impassive toward the subject of loincloths, but an affectionate twinkle in his eye was aimed at Carter. They both recognized the ‘turnabout is fair play’ vibe to their current predicament, and they clearly did not hold their present discomfort against her.

As well Jack shouldn’t. After all the crap Carter dealt with on a far more regular basis for being a woman on an off-world team, they could just shut up and wear the damn loincloths for once.

But Jack didn’t have to be happy about it.

**********

Considering Carter had a lot more clothes to put on than they did, it wasn’t surprising the men of SG-1 finished changing first. Daniel was champing at the bit to go talk to some natives, and since it would give Carter privacy to change, the guys went outside when they were ‘dressed’.

Jack was expecting them to get swarmed the second they were out in the open, but remarkably the women who had been pawing at them only moments ago were keeping their distance. They were watching, for sure, but no one accosted the three members of SG-1. It eased a knot of tension at the base of Jack’s spine. He’d known enough kickass women in his day not to underestimate or think less of the threat the Saqqarans could pose simply for being predominantly women.

Still, he felt naked under their glances… because he practically was.

He was bare from the waist up, the wind and sun lying on his skin salaciously, a glaring reminder every second that he was bare, exposed, vulnerable. In addition to the loincloth the Saqqarans had so generously provided, Jack wore the belt from his gear – which meant he had his handgun in his right thigh holster, extra magazines in the left, and his knife sheathed on his right hip. They weren’t given anything in the way of footwear, and no way was Jack going to prance around barefoot, so he wore his boots. Combat boots, thigh holsters, and loincloth – he looked like a freaking idiot.

If Teal’c was uncomfortable, he showed no sign of it. He had his staff weapon at his side, blunt end planted on the ground as he surveyed their surroundings like a chiseled sentry. The loincloths came as ‘one size fits all’, but they most certainly did not fit all. Teal’c was barely, uh… contained. Jack worried that by the time this mission was over, he’d get an eyeful of Teal’c’s bait and tackle. The Tarzan look also meant the fleshy X of Teal’c’s symbiote pouch was bared for all to see, and Jack wasn’t sure if he was more worried about getting a peek of Teal’c’s junk or his snake.
For all that he touted being a chameleon in new cultures, Daniel looked bashful about showing so much skin, arms folded over his chest in some vain attempt to cover himself. He looked torn about sacrificing his comfort level to dive into the deep end of a new society. It was Daniel Jackson who lamented that he had to be flesh and blood at all, a creature who would much rather be energy and free to learn without skin to hold him back. But he was flesh and blood, and if Jack were being honest Daniel was good-looking flesh and blood at that. The dweeby archaeologist he’d known on that first mission to Abydos was long gone, replaced with this man who’d honed his body for the war they waged against the Goa’uld. Daniel was a warrior, too, and Jack didn’t give him enough credit for that.

Riva and Troja approached them, their eyes raking over each man appreciatively. Daniel was eye candy, Teal’c looked like a gladiator, and Jack knew he wasn’t too shabby for a man his age, but seriously… those women needed to dial it down a notch.

“That is much better,” Troja smiled when she reached them. “You look like proper men now.”

They looked like proper idiots.

“Would it be all right if we looked around a little?” Daniel asked hopefully. “We’re interested in learning all we can about your people and your ways. Maybe learn more about this Ceremony of Wadjet you’ve invited us to celebrate with you?”

Riva smiled indulgently. “Of course. I will show you around, and we can talk about the ceremony.”

“That would be great!” Daniel dropped his arms from that self-hug and eagerly stepped toward Riva to be given the tour. So much for stranger danger.

Jack caught Teal’c’s eye and tipped his head in silent command. Teal’c nodded and followed Riva and Daniel as they meandered off into the village.

The rattle of reeds behind Jack and Troja’s friendly call of, “Hail, Friend Sam!” had Jack turning to look.

Carter came out of the house decked in the attire of the Saqqaran women. The dark leather of her skirt, knee-high boots, and arm-baring top made her fair skin practically glow in contrast. Her shoulders were paler than her forearms, the soft line of a farmer’s tan marking where her standard issue t-shirt sleeves usually stopped. The dark brown of her clothes made her hair all the more flaxen gold in the sunlight, her blue eyes vibrant like gems. She had the height and musculature to look like she belonged among the women of Saqqar.

She was hot. Jack wondered, fleetingly, if seeing her like this was worth the humiliation of a loincloth. It wasn’t, but he reconsidered it for a nanosecond.

When Carter joined them, Jack noticed that she had also taken her belt from her gear set and wore it like he did his. The difference being the holsters and sheaths looked fitting with Carter’s Amazonian garb while they looked ridiculous with a loincloth.

“Well met, Sam! This clothing suits you. You truly belong among the fierce women of Saqqar,” Troja proclaimed and placed a lingering touch on Carter’s naked arm. Jack would swear he saw a faint blush pink the apples of Carter’s cheeks. She looked away from Troja and her eyes fell on Jack. She seemed to really take note of his state of undress, her eyes widened, and she quickly looked back to Troja.

“Where are Daniel and Teal’c?” she asked with a clearing of her throat that Jack alone could identify
as nerves.

“Riva has taken them to see our city,” Troja answered. “And fear not… I have spoken with my sisters about their behavior toward your men. You must understand, they are just excited about the possibilities their arrival presents for the Ceremony of Wadjet. I have warned them their actions are unseemly and they should comport themselves more honorably. You have my word, these men will be treated appropriately.”

Whatever passed for ‘appropriate’ treatment of men in this place.

“Oh, well, thank you,” Carter replied.

“Do you require anything?” Troja asked. “Food? Drink? I know you have brought your own men to tend to you, but if you would like to experience the ministrations of Saqqaran men…”

“No! Ah, no,” Carter stammered, “that’s all right. I, uh, prefer to have my men tend to me.”

Jack shot Carter a wry look, and she ducked her head enough to cast him a mortified ‘I am so sorry’ expression.

“Of course.” Troja hesitated then, considering Carter closely, and she slid a look over at Jack. She lifted her chin haughtily toward him in lieu of pointing. “You prefer this one?”

“What?” Carter asked.

“This one.” Troja gestured at Jack. “I have watched how you interact with your men, and you seem to favor this one. Is he your first choice?”

“You could say that…” Carter hedged.

Troja beamed again. “Splendid! I’m afraid I have duties I must attend to, so many preparations for the ceremony, so I will leave you to explore Saqqar on your own, but any woman will be pleased to answer your questions, and any man will serve you.” She nodded at Carter, merely glanced at Jack, then turned and left them.

Carter let out a breath and tension melted off her shoulders. She glanced at Jack with a wince. “Sorry, sir… I’m not sure what she meant by ‘my first choice’, but hopefully it means she won’t think much of me looking to you when I have to give an order.”

Jack waved it off. “Don’t sweat it, Major. But I am going to rub Daniel’s nose in the fact you like me more than him.”

Carter smiled. “I’ll deny it categorically, sir.”

“I’ll bet,” he teased. He looked toward her and froze a second, momentarily trapped by the sight of her standing before him in soft leather and showing so much creamy skin. He caught glimpses of moles and freckles he rarely got to see, and it was a dangerous peek into places on Carter normally concealed. It was added to his treasure trove of memories of Carter’s skin, building up to a picture of what she must look like naked, inch by inch. With effort, he dragged his eyes away from her and ended up staring at a black cat sitting primly beside a cat statue, watching him with narrowed eyes as if to say ‘that’s right, asshole, this is my world’.

“Freaking cats,” Jack mumbled.

“I like cats, sir.”
“Well, nobody’s perfect,” Jack quipped. Carter’s mouth twitched at the corners, fending off a smirk, and Jack needed to focus on something other than her. “Come on, let’s see what we can find out about these crazy cat ladies.”

**********

“It’s like Valentine’s Day,” Daniel said by way of greeting when the two halves of SG-1 met back up in front of the house two hours later.

“This Widget Ceremony?” Jack asked.

“Wadjet, and yes.” Daniel looked entirely too enthusiastic as he gestured back toward the village proper, a crowd of women surreptitiously watching them like wolves pacing a circle around their dying prey. “They celebrate it every solstice, so once in the summer and once in the winter. From what I’ve gathered, this population has always had a skewed gender ratio – Bastet doesn’t keep many men here on purpose. She keeps her male slaves in service on the front lines.”

“Wait a minute,” Jack interjected, “I thought this Goa’uld was all about girl power.”

“She is.” Daniel gestured again at the high population of strong women. “Obviously.”

“Then why would she sit them out of the fighting?”

“Because she’s more interested in her selective breeding program.”

“That would explain the lopsided gender ratio,” Carter mused aloud.

Jack looked at her in silent question.

Carter smiled apologetically. “Reproductively speaking, sir, women are more valuable. Sperm is cheap.”

Well, that hurt.

Undeterred, Daniel forged on with his report. “A week before the ceremony, Bastet sends a contingent of men through the Stargate, her choice picks for breeding stock, and the days leading up to the ceremony are a bit like speed-dating. The women court the men, and at the ceremony the man chooses which woman he wants and he stays here on the planet with her until the next solstice trying to conceive a child.”

“And what if a man doesn’t choose a woman?”

“Well, I gathered that doesn’t happen often, but if a man makes no selection he’s sent back through the Stargate with the previous ceremony’s batch of men.”

Jack scowled.

“Jack,” Daniel said preemptively. “I don’t think there’s any danger in staying to observe the ceremony. We can just… not participate.”

“Right. Because these ladies seem like the type who get turned down a lot.” With a sigh, Jack rubbed a hand through his hair. “Fine. But I hope I don’t have to remind anyone that we’re not here to stand at stud, so be careful about not doing or saying anything that would be construed as accepting any proposals, got it?”

Daniel and Teal’c nodded, one quickly and the other solemnly.
Carter frowned at Daniel and turned, disappearing into their guesthouse. She came back with a tube of sunscreen. “Daniel, come here… you’re burning.”

Daniel looked down at his shoulders, scowled at their pink color, and turned his back to Carter so she could rub sunscreen on his back and shoulders.

If a tiny bud of jealousy simmered in Jack’s gut watching Carter comfortably rub sunscreen all over Daniel’s bare back, well, he would keep that to himself. But he wasn’t the only one feeling envy. Jack noticed several of the Saqqaran women watching the pair with unhappy expressions. A few discussed it among themselves, clearly displeased that Carter was lavishing attention on the archaeologist. At one point, Iyves began to approach, a moody glower on her face.

When Carter was done with Daniel’s back, she handed him the sunscreen so he could do his front. Daniel slathered it on messily, no doubt missing patches that would burn later, and gave it back. “Thanks, Sam.”

“Daniel!” Iyves called.

“Well, what do you know,” Jack mumbled, “They know we have names.”

Daniel turned. “Yes?”

“I was about to prepare the ritual drink for the Ceremony of Wadjet… you expressed interest in how it was made?”

“Oh, yes! Jaaa–uh, Sam? Can I go watch how they make it?”

Carter flicked a glance at Jack, who lifted his hands in surrender.

“Yes, you can go, Daniel,” she agreed.

Daniel was off like a bolt, as if Jack’s warning only a minute ago had never happened. It was a wonder Daniel Jackson was still alive.

“Teal’c…” Jack said with a wearied sigh.

“I will keep watch over Daniel Jackson,” Teal’c intoned and followed after Daniel and Iyves.

“Is it just me,” Jack muttered when they were out of hearing range, “or do missions like this turn into everyone babysitting Daniel?”

“I don’t know if that’s fair, Colonel,” Carter responded diplomatically. “This is why we have SG-1.” Of course, she would defend Daniel – when it was a planet with some fancy alien technology or an advanced race, it was Carter who threw caution to the wind and wanted to explore recklessly and trust too easily.

Carter looked down at the sunscreen in her hand and then glanced up at Jack’s shoulders. “Do you need to put some of this on?”

Jack looked down at his shoulders. Unlike Daniel, who had begun to burn, a brown tan was already darkening Jack’s skin. “Nah.” He noticed a pink tone to Carter’s bare shoulders. “You do, though.”

Carter scowled down at her fair skin and proceeded to layer the sunscreen on her arms and face. She reached as much of her shoulder blades as she could on her own then sheepishly held the tube out to him. “Would you mind, sir?”
He really probably shouldn’t, but he couldn’t very well tell his major to burn. “Of course not.” He took the tube from her and squirted a dollop onto his hand.

“Sucks being blonde,” Carter joked lamely as she turned her back to him.

“Oh, I don’t know… I’d say having to wear sunscreen is a small price to pay for golden locks,” he said as he rubbed the sunscreen into the back of her shoulders.

“No offense, sir, but you tan like a bronze god. You have no idea what a pain in the ass it is to have fair skin.”

“Fair enough,” he chuckled, trying not to latch on to the ‘bronze god’ thing, because it was just a saying. People said that.

Jack finished her shoulders and reached up to make sure she got all the exposed back of her neck. She tipped her head down to give him access, and something about the movement hit him like a thunderbolt. Constant vigilance over his body was a fact of life around Sam Carter, and normally Jack was damn good at it. He kept a rein on his physical self in a way that would do Teal’c proud, but something in that moment about Carter baring her naked neck to him caught him by surprise. His skin flushed hot from head to toe and his sidearm gave a twitch of interest.

Jack took a hurried step backward, as though her touch had burned. He shifted his hips guiltily, desperately trying to think unsexy thoughts. He could not get a boner in a loincloth, there would be no way to hide it.

“Sir?” Carter turned to him, confused by his sudden retreat.

“That ought to do it, Major.” He capped the tube of sunscreen and tossed it back to her.

Carter caught the sunscreen and canted her head, perplexed. Her eyes locked with his at first, then traveled down his chest, his stomach, and snared on his groin.

Shit. Her gaze on him like a touch did not help his problem. Safe to say it made the problem worse.

Carter noticed, and Jack had hoped mortification would help cool his jets, but oh no. Because Carter didn’t look offended or disgusted. She looked fascinated, the way she looked when she saw an alien gizmo she couldn’t wait to get her hands on…

Fuck.

“Go keep an eye on Teal’c and Daniel,” Jack ordered gruffly and turned to march toward the guesthouse.

“Yes, sir,” Carter said after him, then called, “Sir!”

“What?” he whirled angrily to face her.

“You sure you don’t need this?” she asked sweetly, brandishing the sunscreen, the closest thing to lotion any of them carried off-world.

Jack wasn’t sure if he was incredibly turned on or incredibly mad. “Carter!”

A look of horror swept over Carter’s face when she realized what she’d just said and she fled with all the dignity a warrior woman could muster.

**********
Dinner in Saqqar was served in a pavilion full of picnic tables (or the equivalent of them) with lights hanging from the trestle roof. When Jack arrived, his team was already seated prominently near the center, clearly the guests of honor.

He sat down next to Carter, who glanced up at him then quickly away. Damnit.

Dusk had brought a slight dip in temperature, but not enough to qualify as cold, and sadly not enough to argue for wearing more than a measly loincloth. Jack repositioned several times on the bench, trying to find a comfortable way to sit where it didn’t feel like a splinter was driving into his ass. Daniel was fidgeting just as much as Jack was, while Teal’c seemed untouched by the discomforts of the flesh.

The fact that Carter wasn’t giving them a hard time about their skimpy clothing problems when she had been the one to suffer them on so many planets was proof how much the encounter earlier still weighed on her mind.

The meal was awkward to say the least, but not just because of the tension between Jack and Carter. Women kept coming up to Daniel and Teal’c and offering them treats, desserts, sweets, candies, drinks… they showered Daniel and Teal’c with offerings and, strangely, offered Jack none.

“Did I get remarkably less attractive in the course of a single day?” he asked aloud after Daniel was plied with yet another dish.

“That’s probably my fault, sir,” Carter said meekly. “Because I told Troja you’re my, uh… preferred.”

Daniel’s eyes widened with interest.

“So that’s a way of saying hands off?” he asked.

Carter looked tongue-tied, but Daniel jumped in to save the day. “It means you’ve already been claimed. Interesting fact – you would think, given the scarcity of men in this culture, that the men would routinely take more than one woman, but they don’t. When a man chooses a woman, he chooses her for the season, solstice to solstice. The Saqqarans honor that commitment. If Sam said you are her chosen, and if they have every reason to believe you’ve also chosen her, then they won’t try to court you.”

“Yay for me,” Jack said drolly.

“It’s actually a brilliant way of keeping genetic diversity in the Saqqaran population,” Daniel prattled on. “Theoretically, a single man could come in here and impregnate all of the women, but then all the children of an entire generation would share the same father, and eventually someone is going to have children with their half-brother or half-sister…”

“Daniel, please,” Jack interrupted him, “I’m trying to eat.”

Carter smirked tentatively.

“I’m just saying,” Daniel finished lamely.

“You have to admit,” Carter said after they’d all had a few bites, “these people are much better cared for than a lot of the humans under Goa’uld rule are. They even have electricity and running water. Compared to the conditions Apophis and Ra kept their slaves in, this is the lap of luxury.”

“A gilded cage is still a cage, Carter,” Jack said.
“Yes, sir. But they seem content.”

“Right.” He picked at the roast-like meal before him. “And what right do we have to show them the truth and make them miserable if there’s nothing they can do to escape Bastet’s control? Would be kinder to let them believe this lie.”

A glum mood settled over the four SG-1 members.

The atmosphere at the feast was so jovial that it was hard to stay morose. The few men left over from the last proper Ceremony of Wadjet (four cycles ago, meaning they had been on the planet with the women far longer than they should have been) were dancing with woman after woman, swapping partners and wallowing in the attention.

“Since they haven’t had any new men come through the gate in two years,” Daniel answered the question no one asked. “The Saqqarans have made do with recycling the same men. Every ceremony, each man picks a new woman to spend the season with.”

“So they’ve just been… passing them around?” Carter asked, a hint of judgment in her tone.

“No wonder they look so giddy,” Jack noted dryly as he watched the festivities… until his eyes were drawn to two women near the far corner kissing. “Hello.”

Daniel followed his gaze. “Oh, yeah… since there aren’t enough men to go around, it’s common for the women here to…” Daniel trailed off and gestured toward the couple in the back, the rest self-explanatory.

“Does that news change your attitude about Troja’s friendliness toward you, Major Carter?” Teal’c asked, genuinely curious.

Carter started coughing when she inhaled a sip of water at Teal’c’s question. Daniel laughed. Jack was just praying that he never had to witness Carter and Troja making out… he would not survive the embarrassment that scene would inevitably cause him. It would make the ‘incident’ that afternoon seem like nothing.

After a constant barrage of pestering, Daniel timidly agreed to dance with Iyves. Teal’c would not be budged by any of the women who approached him to take to the dance floor, but a passel of children who had never met a Jaffa before (or were too young to remember meeting one, at any rate) were able to lure him away from the table for story time. Unfortunately, it seemed to garner Teal’c a new legion of fans among the Saqqaran women.

It left Jack and Carter alone with their awkwardness.

Jack was just taking a breath to apologize when Carter beat him to it. “Sir… I want to apologize for earlier.”

He looked archly at her.

She but briefly met his eyes before she looked back down at her plate, a blush painting her cheeks and neck a fiery red. He was on her right side, and the flush to her face made the thin, silvery-white line of the scar on her temple all the more visible. He found himself staring at it instead of her eyes or her mouth (because it was easier), as she said, “What I said was inappropriate, and I’ll understand if you want to file a complaint with General Hammond.”

Jack could just imagine what that grievance would look like when it crossed Hammond’s desk. He might consider doing it if only he could watch the general’s face when he read the memo. And if he
wanted to drop a grenade into the middle of his life.

“If anything, I’m the one who should be apologizing.” When Carter looked at him, startled, he shrugged. “You wouldn’t have been inappropriate if I hadn’t been inappropriate first.” He let slip a playful smirk. “So if you want to file a complaint…”

“No, sir.” She huffed. “Honestly, the thought never crossed my mind.”


“Yes, sir.”

The vehemence of her agreement was reassuring… in an utterly frustrating way.

Carter picked at her food, studiously not meeting his eyes. “How long do you think we can do this?” she asked lowly.

He didn’t have to ask what ‘this’ was. “As long as we have to.”

Carter scowled like that was a shitty answer.

And it was… but it was the only answer Jack had.

**********

Jack woke to a sense of something amiss in his universe.

He sat up and peered around the house with no doors they’d been given for guest quarters. Last night, Jack and Teal’c had taken the floor in the living room while Carter and Daniel shared the bed. Jack was getting used to that bur in his belly that was jealousy toward everyone who got to do things with Carter that he wanted to do with her but couldn’t.

Jack saw Teal’c sitting against the far wall with legs crossed and eyes closed. A calico was sprawled in his lap, blinking lazily and purring up a storm. All the doors in Saqqar had tiny holes cut out of the bottom, and apparently it was a crime to bar the cats from coming and going as they pleased.

Jack shook his head at Teal’c’s kel’no’reem buddy and looked toward the bed. He saw Daniel but no Carter.

“She stepped outside moments ago,” Teal’c whispered without opening his eyes, startling Jack because he didn’t realize Teal’c was even tuned into the outside world.

“Thanks,” he whispered back and kicked his legs out of his sleeping bag. He’d slept in a t-shirt and fatigue pants but reluctantly grabbed the loincloth he’d discarded nearby. “Who’s your friend?” he asked Teal’c.

Still without opening his eyes, Teal’c smiled softly, reached up, and pet the cat. The cat purred louder and stretched into Teal’c’s touch. “I find this companion animal quite pleasing.”

“Carter’s gotten to you,” Jack accused, then he got up and went to the bathroom to take a piss and get not-really-dressed.

Teal’c was still meditating and Daniel was still sleeping when Jack was as dressed as he was going to get on Saqqar and slipped out of the house into the morning light. He squinted into the sunrise and looked around for any sign of his wayward teammate.
He didn’t have to look far. Carter was standing next to an unlit bonfire with Troja, the two women talking amicably about something. They were a stunning counterpoint to one another, Troja dark and Carter light. Black and blonde, tan and fair. Carter was gesticulating with her hands, the way she did when she was trying to explain apples and wormholes to him, and Troja was nodding, smiling, landing light touches on Carter’s bared skin…

_Nope_. Nope, nope, nope. Jack was not going to let his mind wander that dangerous path. Instead, he started ambling toward the two women.

“Morning, ladies,” he announced his presence when he was close enough that he didn’t have to yell.

Troja looked annoyed that he had interrupted, but Carter smiled warmly. “Good morning, Colonel.”

“Whatcha talking about?” he asked as he came up alongside Carter. Maybe standing a little closer than he should have, but he felt strangely territorial about Carter when it came to Troja. Especially given what Daniel had said last night. It was weird – he was used to feeling like he had to defend his nonexistent claim to Carter against strange men, but this was the first time he was giving a strange woman ‘back off’ signals. He supposed he shouldn’t be surprised that men _and_ women would be interested in Carter.

“I was just explaining some of the differences in how our two cultures view men,” Carter answered.

“Ah.” He looked toward Troja. “Learning anything?”

Troja smiled woodenly. “Only that it seems women everywhere are superior.”

It was clearly meant to provoke him, but Jack wasn’t biting. Instead, he hummed thoughtfully. “Since the woman from our planet you’ve met is Carter, I can see how you’d think that.”

Carter gave him a startled look then a shy half-smile.

Troja turned to Carter again. “We can speak later, Dear Sam.” She shot a brief glance at Jack. “When your man is not so needy.”

Jack merely raised his eyebrows. Carter tried to muffle a snort. She mostly failed.

When Troja left, Jack looked down at her. “Dear Sam is it now?”

“Colonel…”

“What? I’m just saying… I told Daniel and Teal’c not to go getting engaged to any of the local women, but I’m wondering if I should have given that lecture to you, too.”

She lifted her hand like she desperately wanted to swat him on the arm – if he’d been Daniel, she _would_ have – then she let it fall back to her side with an exasperated noise. “She’s a stunning woman, I’ll give you that, and maybe I’m a little… but I’m not stupid.”

Jack gave her a shrewd look. “I feel like you’re actually saying something about us boys. _Subtly_, mind you, but still casting aspersions.”

“I would never,” she countered cheekily, at last looking up and meeting his eyes dead-on. Something in her gaze was calming, putting to rest all the petty jealousy he’d been feeling moments ago. There was loyalty in her look. Jack might not be her _anything—_ couldn’t be her anything – and yet he knew in that moment that she wasn’t about to betray him.
He relaxed and nodded minutely.

Without speaking, they began to walk together. He loved these quiet moments with Carter. In these moments, the regs didn’t really matter. They could have been doing the exact same thing even if they’d been more than friends and colleagues. He could see himself going for a walk with Carter if she were his 2IC or his wife, and the universality of those moments was soothing.

And heartbreaking, but Jack was a glutton for punishment.

He noticed Carter focusing less on her feet during their stroll and more on him, stealing glances at him out of the corner of her eye.

“Carter?”

She bit her bottom lip. “To steal your line the time I wore that Shavadaii dress… you look great.”

Jack laughed. “Carter, I’m in a freaking loincloth.”

“It kind of works for me,” she quoted his own words back at him again with a smile and a wicked twinkle in her eye.

Jack veered into Carter enough to nudge her with his shoulder. She chuckled and nudged him back, ducking her head and seemingly drifting off to some warm, happy place in her thoughts. He wondered if, in that happy place, he was wearing a loincloth.

“I guess we really had this coming,” Jack mused. “What with how many times you’ve been in this position.”

“It is nice to have the tables turned for once,” she agreed, brushing a spot of dirt off the dark leather of her skirt, the hide chocolate brown against her pale thigh.

“Sorry it sucks to be the girl on the team.”

“It’s worth it. Even if I have to wear a few hideous dresses and skimpy costumes, it’s worth it.” She slid a mischievous look his way. “If I get to see you in a loincloth, it is definitely worth it.”

He valiantly fought back a grin but knew his eyes gave him away all the same. “You’re never going to let me forget this, are you?”

“Not a chance, sir.”

Jack rolled his eyes and settled back into the comfortable pace and silence of their walk. Several cats darted across their path, thick as fleas in the causeways of Saqqar. It seemed like the only art allowed had to be about cats; they adorned building facades, plaques, benches, market kiosks, jewelry, everything. “Granny O would have loved this place,” he said.

“Crazy cat lady, I take it?”

“Crazy, period. She’d do anything for an adventure. I guess these days she’d be called an adrenaline junkie, but they didn’t have a term for that back then. She was just the insane lady that went skiing, skydiving, swam with sharks, that kind of stuff. Mind you, this was back in the day when it wasn’t seemly for women to do those types of things. But Granny O did them anyway. By the time I came around, age and injuries had slowed her down – bad knees, ironically enough – but she was still a pistol. And she had a mouth on her like you would not believe. You didn’t want to piss off Granny O, she’d rip you to shreds with her tongue-lashings. She lived well into her nineties, and that last
decade she really went overboard with the cats.” Jack smiled fondly at the memory. “Miss her, though.”

“She sounds a lot like you.”

“You think?”

“Adrenaline junkie, a little crazy, brutal dressing-downs… I’d say so, sir.”

“Hmm. Maybe so… but when I’m ancient and senile I’m going to be surrounded by dogs.”

Carter nearly giggled. “I would expect nothing less, sir.” Then she frowned. “Do you actually think about being that old?”

“It’s not that far off for me, Carter.”

She gave him a scolding look. “You’re not that old, sir. But I mean do you actually think you’ll…”

“What, live that long?”

She nodded.

“Not really.”

Carter took a steeling breath. “I don’t think I will, either.” It made sense that she would have the same vision of her future that Jack had of his, but hearing her voice it was still like a kick to the ribcage. He wanted more for her than his inglorious demise.

She shared a morbid look with him. “That’s messed up, isn’t it? That we both just assume this job will kill us but we do it anyway?”

“You could always stop.”

“So could you.”

They both stopped walking and stood facing one another, staring each other down in the quiet of the morning. Jack’s heart was pounding, racing in that nearness of an alternative, the glimpse of another path where he had only ever seen one. If she quit the program – or even transferred off an SG unit and took a science position – then he could leave, too. If she walked away, he could walk away. They could both lay down their arms and maybe end up in each other’s.

That blinding, shining possibility was burning hot between them, tantalizing and dangerous… then Carter shook her head and looked away with a facial twinge of remorse. “I just… I can’t imagine a time when I could leave this job with a clear conscience.” That was not ego talking – Carter had been instrumental in saving the world several times.

“Then we don’t,” Jack said easily, like his future had not gone dark in an instant. It was okay. He’d long ago made peace with how his life would probably end.

The ‘we’ caught her attention. “You wouldn’t consider leaving?”

He would, but not without her. He didn’t leave his people behind.

**********

The Ceremony of Wadjet began with lighting a bonfire at nightfall and trotting out the ritual drink
that Daniel had been so keen to see made. It was fermented something-or-other and definitely alcoholic. After the incident P3X-595 (which Carter banned them from ever discussing), SG-1 was leery of local hooch and drank only enough to be polite then stuck to water.

No one else at the party felt the need for such restraint. As the party raged into the night, the Saqqarans got increasingly boisterous. A small band of musicians had a hodge-podge of woodwinds, string instruments, and drums and were filling the night with music. The women were dancing in the firelight, all swaying hips, come-hither eyes, and whipping hair. The men were jumping from dancer to dancer like bees gathering honey from a field of flowers, tasting and testing each bloom in search of the choicest prize.

By comparison, SG-1 looked like real party poopers, sitting together on a log facing the fire and watching the spectacle without participating.

“The men will pick their partner for this season tonight,” Daniel explained loudly over the driving drumbeat. “We need to be careful.”

“Prime time for misunderstandings?” Jack guessed moodily.

Daniel shrugged and kindly waved away a girl that wanted him to dance with her. She pouted at him, eyed Teal’c a moment, then she trotted off to join the dancing throng. She sidled up behind another woman and the two began to rock their hips in tandem. Seemed like the men weren’t the only ones who would end up with partners tonight.

Jack was just ready for the evening to be over. And not because he was a cranky old curmudgeon (as Daniel would accuse), but because they were in a situation where energy and emotions were high. It wouldn’t take much to turn that positive energy into negative energy, and he was not interested in another mission when they all limped home battered and bruised.

“This is really amazing,” Daniel marveled as he watched the Saqqarans move and gyrate in the firelight. He turned to his teammates. “Have you ever seen anything like it?”

“I remember the sixties,” Jack answered dryly, earning a frown from Daniel and a chuckle from Carter. The latter caught Jack’s attention. He looked over at Carter sitting beside him and just stared a moment. Jack would never tire of Carter by firelight. The orange and yellow tones danced amber and gold in her hair and kissed her skin with a warmth that he ached to feel. Her lines were softened by the guttering light, her eyes darker (bedroom dark) for the gentle spectrum of the fire. Her lips were a shade darker in the bonfire glow, like they’d been nibbled and left worshipped. The dark leather of her outfit was the color of gingerbread in patches of light and the flickering shadows were pitch dark, almost inviting his hands to peel away the darkness to find Carter’s ivory body underneath.

“Dear Sam!”

Apparently he wasn’t the only one who’d noticed how ravishing Carter looked tonight.

Troja dodged around the press of dancers and approached the log where SG-1 sat. Her silhouette was something straight out of the Sports Illustrated Swimsuit Edition – Jack couldn’t even blame Carter for having a bit of a crush.

Troja knelt before Carter and smiled up at her, offering her hand. “Dance with me?”

Carter blushed. “Oh, no… no, thank you.” She sat back and hooked her hand around Jack’s arm. “I’ve already chosen, remember?”

Troja dropped her hand and her smile faltered. “But you two do not dance.”
“Bad knees,” Jack quipped.

Troja harrumphed and moved down the line to Teal’c. “Will you dance with me, Jaffa?”

“I must decline.”

Troja narrowed her eyes and turned to Daniel.

“Ah, sorry, no… but thank you.”

Troja’s expression hardened, and it stole the beauty from her face. She pinched her lips together sourly and rose to rejoin her sisters.

It was the first crack in the evening that was primed to devolve into disaster.

As the night wore on, women continued to approach Daniel and Teal’c to no avail. As the rejections began to accumulate (and the amount of alcohol consumed increased), the women became less gracious about the refusals. Some even began to ask Jack to dance, despite Carter’s claim. The hot looks they sent Carter when they propositioned Jack were becoming increasingly hostile – asking Jack right in front of her was clearly a challenge.

The fact that none of the men of SG-1 would leave Carter’s side was becoming a point of contention among the drunk, horny women of Saqqar.

Jack was just about to pull his team out and demand they call it a night when it came to a head. Without warning, Iyves lurched out of the crowd and grabbed Daniel’s hand. It seemed the time for asking nicely was over. She began to pull on his arm, trying to haul him into the festivities whether he wanted to or not.

“No, no thank you, I’m not interested,” Daniel tried to decline with grace, ever the diplomat, but Iyves ignored his protests.

“Let go of him,” Carter stood at once, moving to intercede. Daniel was trying to get free without causing a scene or ruffling too many feathers, but Jack felt like Carter had the right idea. He was itching to jump into the fray himself, but given the power imbalance between men and women on Saqqar, Carter had a better chance of putting a stop to this.

Iyves released her hold on Daniel only to round on Carter. “Stay out of this! You already have your man!”

A hush fell over the crowd and the music died. It immediately ratcheted up the tension in the air as all eyes turned to the visitors.

Carter stepped between Iyves and Daniel and squared off with the Saqqaran woman. Never taking her eyes from the freckled warrior, Carter pointed back at Daniel and said, “He’s my man, too.”

A crowd had begun to gather. Jack slowly got to his feet, freeing his access to his sidearm should things get out of control.

“You can’t have all of them!” Iyves snarled at Carter. “Why would you possibly need three?”

Troja emerged from the throng of onlookers, expression grim as she took in the scene before her.

Carter looked toward the brunette. “Troja, tell your sister to respect that my teammates don’t want to dance with them.”
Troja frowned. “Iyves is right, Sam. You can’t have three men. That’s not the way it’s done. You may have one.” She looked past Carter’s shoulder to Jack and sneered. “That one. The others will choose a Saqqaran woman.”

Jack bristled at the veiled threat, but before he could step in Carter herself strode toward Troja. She stopped before the Saqqaran leader, stood at full height, and pulled back her shoulders. Jack knew the stance. It was the Sam Carter who faced down gods. It was Carter stripped bare of every shred of gentleness and mercy. “These are my men, and no one is going to touch them.”

Troja narrowed her eyes at Carter. “Those are dangerous words, Friend. You can’t fight us all.”

Daniel and Teal’c rose to their feet at that. The three of them ended up presenting a united front behind Carter as she confronted the Saqqaran leader.

“I don’t want to hurt anyone,” Carter said with measured words. “But I will not let you force my men to take part in your ceremony.”

Riva arrived at Troja’s elbow, clearly prepared to assist her leader if a brawl broke out.

Carter eyed the two. “You can’t win this one. Yes, I’ll fight you if I have to. And they’ll fight you.”

“They won’t,” Riva scoffed.

“Oh, yes, we will,” Jack responded.

“Indeed,” Teal’c concurred.

“We’re loyal to Sam,” Daniel stated point-blank.

Troja frowned, this time puzzled, and studied Carter again. “This makes no sense. How can you have so many men willing to fight for you?” Troja’s eyes widened slightly. “Are you a goddess?”

Jack would argue that depended on the definition.

Without answering Troja, Carter turned her head to look over her shoulder at the men of SG-1. She glanced at them each in turn, then she settled her eyes on Jack. “I think it’s time to go.” There was a ‘sir’ at the end of that sentence, even if she did not say it aloud.

Jack nodded complete agreement.

The crowd was agitated as SG-1 withdrew from the sitting area of the bonfire and walked back toward the guesthouse to get their things. Carter’s deliberate failure to answer the question whether or not she was a goddess kept the natives at bay. There was clearly some concern that she’d been a Goa’uld in their midst this whole time, and they were too afraid of the power of a Goa’uld to risk angering one.

Little did they know they had just as much to fear from getting on Carter’s bad side. This was a woman who could build bombs and destroy stars.

Back at the guesthouse, SG-1 grabbed their gear and started the trek back toward the gate. Jack generally preferred not to hike in the dead of night on strange planets, but they were all eager to put some distance between them and the village.

Their journey back to the temple of Bastet was made in silence. It wasn’t until they were back in the pyramid full of cat statues that the team relaxed a little. No one had followed them, and they were
only a room away from the Stargate and getting back to Earth.

Jack called a stop and dropped his pack on the floor. “Let’s change out of these damn loincloths before we gate home. There’s no way I’m walking into the gate room dressed like this.” Siler would never let him live it down.

Wordlessly, Daniel and Teal’c nodded and started to rifle through their own gear for their BDUs.

Jack noticed Carter standing off to the side, motionless and tense.

He abandoned what he was doing for the moment and went over to her. “Carter? You okay?”

Carter looked at him, distress pinching the skin at the corners of her eyes and drawing her mouth into a grim line. Her complexion was pallid, her skin ashen and eyes shadowed. “Fine, sir.”

“You don’t look it.”

Carter shook her head. “It was kind of funny at first, when they made you guys dress up like Tarzan and you had to address the women as your superiors, but it was not funny when they wanted to…” she trailed off, visibly shaken and disgusted.

“Hey,” Jack touched her arm. “For what it’s worth, I don’t think they would have gone that far.”

“You don’t know that, and we got lucky. What if they hadn’t backed off when I told them to?”

“Well, they did, so stop beating yourself up about it.” Jack gauged Carter’s mood a moment, debated the propriety of making a quip, then went for it anyway. “Thanks for saving our precious virtues.”

She looked up at him, stunned, then she broke into nervous laughter. By the end of it, though, it was her relieved, relaxed laugh. “Guess that makes us even, sir.”

“Guess so.” He looked down at his mostly-naked body. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to put on some actual clothes.”

“If you have to,” Carter muttered under her breath, lowly enough that Daniel and Teal’c couldn’t hear her.

Jack lifted his eyebrows.

Carter gave him a private smirk. Shaky at the edges, proof Carter was still rattled, yet containing the seed of pure Carter charm. It went straight to Jack’s heart and reminded him – as if he needed reminding – why he cared about Carter a lot more than he was supposed to. Why he would always care about her more than he should.

He flashed Carter a mischievous smile, very nearly winked, and went back to his gear to dig out his normal clothes. Daniel and Teal’c had already moved off to private corners to change – mostly out of consideration for Carter, who had already gotten an eyeful of her teammates on this mission.

Jack followed suit and found a spot behind one of the sphinx cat statues to get back into his BDUs. When he finished, he stood there with the loincloth in his hand.

His first instinct was to fling it away… but he hesitated. Carter’s fondness for the thing was absolutely the reason.

It would be stupid to keep it. Carter was never going to see him wear it again. They weren’t a couple. They couldn’t spice up their sex life with a little role play and sexy costumes. Jack would
probably end up using his damn loincloth to wash his truck when he ran out of chamois.

But Jack lived on the impossible hope of one day, somehow, and maybe. He tortured himself clinging to a future he knew would never happen. In that spirit, he discretely stuffed the scrap of leather into his pack. Even if Carter never knew he’d kept it, he would know. There would be a scandalously-skimpy outfit tucked away in his dresser drawer that was solely for Carter. It would be a secret thrill and private torment all at once.

Which was pretty symbolic of his relationship with Samantha Carter.
He gets a visceral joy from the pink points in her cheeks when they’ve been trudging through an alien landscape for hours. He pretends it’s not the flush of exertion that piques his interest so keenly, nor the dirty places his mind goes with that particular vision of Carter, all breathless and rosy.

He likes the look of her when they gate somewhere cold, too. Cold enough and the flush spreads to her nose, and she looks downright elfin. He finds it far more alluring than anyone should.

The blush brings out the brightness of her eyes in a way that he finds devastatingly attractive.

***********

To the outward observer, Jack O’Neill would look like the perfect Air Force officer. SG-1’s mission briefing didn’t start for another twenty minutes, but there the colonel sat in wait ahead of the rest of his team and the general. Like an eager beaver lieutenant out to impress the brass. He even had the mission report in front of him.

Well, next to him.

And it wasn’t open.

What was open was his notepad, in which he was happily doodling construction plans for improvements to his cabin in Minnesota.

He wasn’t alone in the briefing room much longer before the actual inimitable Air Force officer arrived.

“Good morning, Colonel,” Carter greeted as she walked into the briefing room with her own copy of the mission report in her hand. The difference being she had probably actually read hers.

“Carter,” he said with a nod. When she took a seat next to him on his left and proceeded to flip open her mission report, thus for the moment distracted, he indulged in a lingering look of resigned fondness. That she was a consummate officer was so much of the barrier keeping them apart, yet oddly enough it was so much of what made Carter Carter, and he wouldn’t want her any other way. It was like one of Daniel’s Greek tragedies. His life really was an exercise in looking but not touching.

And so he looked. Carter had clearly left her house that morning before completely drying her hair. It was still damp at the back of her neck and behind her ears, fawn curls defying Carter’s half-hearted attempt to tame them. He could smell her shampoo and the body wash she liked from where he sat, and it was pulling at deep, primal places in him. She had a busted knuckle on her right hand, a harsh road burn red against fair skin. It was the essence of the beautiful dichotomy that was Sam Carter. There were any number of ways she may have skinned her knuckle – overzealous punching on the bag in the gym, a wrench slipping while she was working on her motorcycle, a mishap in the lab with a high-tech alien device, a brawl with a misogynistic pig who needed to learn a harsh lesson about strong women. And that didn’t even touch on her genius. She was definitely much more than just a pretty face.

Carter glanced over at Jack’s notepad curiously. “What’s that, sir?”

Jack tore his eyes from her with herculean effort. “Layout of my place up in Minnesota.”
“The cabin?” she asked, her voice giving away her interest like it always did. Her words always suggested disinterest in his fishing retreat, but her tone always betrayed her. Her tone gave him eternal hope that he would get her up to his cabin one day.

“Yep. Been thinking of building one of those gazebo things.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. I’ve already got a dock and a deck, but they’re both for fair-weather relaxation, and some days when I’m up there it rains.”

Carter smiled and fought a chuckle. “You could just sit inside, sir.”

Jack scoffed. “The whole reason I go up there is to enjoy the outdoors.”

“That’s funny,” Carter teased, “because you complain about the outdoors when we’re off-world.”

“These are my trees, Carter. My grass. My pond. Big difference.”

“Clearly,” she responded with a playful twinkle in her eye. Then she shifted her chair closer. “Where are you thinking of putting it?”

Jack lifted one eyebrow at her, surprised she hadn’t called an abort on her overt show of interest, then tapped the paper with the end of his pen. “Thought maybe here. That way we would still have a view of the water.” Whoops. He hadn’t meant to use ‘we’, but he didn’t bother to backtrack and correct himself.

“Could you fish from it?”

“Nah. But sitting and listening to it rain on the water still sounds pretty nice.”

“Yeah, it does,” she said almost wistfully. Then she straightened her back and peered closer at the drawing. “That’s going to be pretty close to the cabin. You thinking of running any lights out to the gazebo?”

“Not really.” Jack shrugged. “I’m as handy as the next guy, and I can build the thing with hammer and nails no problem, but I wouldn’t trust my electrical skills not to fry myself if I tried to run lights out there.”

“Well, that’s easy. I could do that,” Carter said, clearly before she thought about it, because in the next second her eyes widened.

“Volunteering to help on this project, Carter?”

She gave him a slightly panicked look at first… then something remarkable happened. Her expression transformed from fearful to fierce. That ‘eureka!’ look in her eyes he normally associated with figuring out an alien doohickey bloomed behind the blue, and she became a force of nature with it. “If you’re asking for my expertise, sir.” A flicker of mischief flashed through her eyes, that wily side of Carter he treasured so much, and the corners of her mouth twitched. “No one could say I didn’t have good reason to go and make sure you didn’t electrocute yourself on a DIY project, right?”

Jack caught on to her train of thought immediately. She had never accepted his invitation before because of how it would look. They lived on the razor edge of appearances, and the two of them taking off together to go fishing was suspicious as hell. But if Jack needed her there because she had
technical skills he didn’t…

“You’re right,” Jack agreed at once. “This thing definitely needs lights.”

The pragmatic voice in Jack’s head piped up that if they were talking construction work, he should probably bring Daniel and Teal’c along too, if only for the manpower alone. They could get the job done twice as fast with twice as many hands. But logic be damned, Jack didn’t say a word about the rest of the team going. He wanted it to be just him and Carter.

And it said something about what Carter wanted that she didn’t bring up taking the boys, either.

Speak of the devil, though… Jack heard the clank of boots on the metal stairwell leading up from the control room, and the arrhythmic beat of them meant it had to be Daniel.

“So,” Jack said lowly as he slid his notepad back toward him and turned the page to hide the evidence of their conspiracy, “we’ll look at our schedules later and see when we can both work in some time off?”

Carter nodded and smiled. “Sounds good, sir.”

Oh, hell yeah, it did. He was getting Carter up to his cabin! He thought Netu would have to freeze over before that happened. If cooking up projects he needed Carter’s help with was the key to getting her to accompany him to Minnesota… well, his cabin might be in for a series of high-tech upgrades in the near future. The place might end up looking like an Asgard disco before it was all said and done, but that was a price Jack was willing to pay.

Daniel blustered in juggling three reports, a cup of coffee, a notepad, and two pens while his glasses slid precariously down his nose without a free hand to nudge them back into place. “Hi, guys,” he greeted distractedly as he dumped his armload unceremoniously on the table across from Jack and Carter, taking care only with the coffee.

Teal’c and General Hammond arrived almost at the same time, like-minded on the subject of punctuality, and they all took their places to begin the briefing.

Hammond had barely greeted the team before Daniel was holding up a finger. “Excuse me, General Hammond?”

“Yes, Dr. Jackson?”

“I know we’re scheduled to go to PX-4-655 today, but I’d like to propose we take SG-13’s follow-up mission to PG1-319 instead.”

Tapping his pen idly against his notepad, Jack looked across the table at his friend and asked, “What’s so special about PG1-319?” He wasn’t even annoyed, just acclimated to Daniel’s modus operandi and well aware a lengthy reason would soon follow.

“PG1-319 is the planet Teal’c and I went to with SG-13 while you and Sam were with the Asgard aboard the Carter.”

“You were translating some kind of tower or something, right?”

“That’s right.” Daniel blinked like he was shocked Jack had remembered that much. “There was an obelisk with a mixture of Demotic and Akkadian writing on it that Balinsky was having trouble with, so he asked me to give him a hand.”
“Does the follow-up mission have to do with something you translated?” Carter asked.

“Actually, no, we completed the translation and it turns out it was a sort of Farmer’s Almanac from the first civilization that lived there. Fascinating, and by all indications a phenomenally accurate predictor of cyclical weather patterns on PG1-319, but no… the follow-up has nothing to do with that.”

“Then why do you want to go back?” Jack asked.

Before Daniel could answer, General Hammond said, “While on the planet, SG-13, along with Teal’c and Dr. Jackson, made contact with the local people.”

Jack scowled. He hated lending Daniel to other teams, but he especially hated it when those teams went to populated worlds. Daniel was twice as likely to get into trouble with off-world humans. Of course, there had been no mention of natives when Daniel had asked to go with SG-13. Probably deliberately so.

“They call themselves Sheridans. They’re mostly farmers and ranchers with a thriving livestock industry, which makes them unusual among the populated worlds we’ve encountered. Animal husbandry is either minimal or nonexistent on most of the worlds we’ve visited. That in itself is astounding, given how crucial the domestication of animals was for the development of civilization on our own planet.”

“On many of the worlds ruled by the Goa’uld,” Teal’c spoke, “beasts of burden are not permitted for the same reasons that sophisticated machinery is forbidden.”

“Control the population,” Carter mused aloud. “Mankind can do a lot more with less when they have horses and oxen.”

Teal’c dipped his head in acknowledgment.

Daniel took back the reins of the conversation. “Abydos had those camel-rhinos and the Shavadaii had horses and dogs, but those places seem to be the exception rather than the rule among worlds that the Goa’uld have visited.”

“Yes, well,” Jack drawled, “while I agree that the galaxy having an acute lack of dogs is a crying shame, I fail to see what this has to do with… anything.”

Daniel gave Jack a sour look. “It was the middle of fall on PG1-319 when SG-13, Teal’c, and I were there, and the Sheridans invited us to return in three weeks to attend their Autumncrest Festival.”

“Is this anything like that Ceremony of Wicker Baskets you were so keen on back on that planet of the Amazon supermodels? Because that didn’t turn out very well, if you’ll recall.”

“That was Bastet’s Ceremony of Wadjet,” Daniel corrected thinly, “and no, it’s nothing like that. From what we learned from the Sheridans, it’s kind of like a mixture of Groundhog Day, Christmas, and Thanksgiving. It’s a celebration to fill the town with good spirits and a sense of community as they face the coming winter with a little prognosticating about the length and severity of winter thrown in.”

Sounded like one of Daniel’s cultural extravaganzas, and Jack had zero interest in it. “General… Daniel opened this sales pitch saying this follow-up was originally SG-13’s mission?”

“That’s right.”
“Then why, pray tell, can’t SG-13 do it?”

Hammond huffed out a near laugh. “Colonel Dixon’s wife just gave birth to their third child, so he’s on paternity leave as of 2130 last night.”

“And Balinsky has strep throat,” Daniel added. “So it makes sense for SG-1 to take the mission, since Teal’c and I were part of the first group that established contact with the Sheridans. We’ve already developed a rapport with them. In fact, they’re probably expecting us. Or the original first contact team, anyway, but Teal’c and I were part of that.”

Daniel and his rapports were the chief cause of so many of Jack’s headaches. “What about our mission to PX-whatever?”

“PX4-655,” Carter said as she looked down at her report. “It’s a survey mission on what appears to be, from MALP scans, an uninhabited world. Any team can replace us on the mission rotation. Daniel has a point that there’s justification for SG-1 to do SG-13’s follow-up on PG1-319.”

Jack quirked one eyebrow and barely lifted the cover of his report to peek at the contents. He really needed to start reading those things.

“I see no reason to disallow it,” the general said before he turned to Jack. “Unless you have any objections, Colonel?”

“Oh, where to start…” Jack drawled. He didn’t bother to list said objections, however, because he’d go wherever the general told him to go.

“Any reasonable objections,” Hammond amended. Meaning did Jack see any tactical problems with the mission. Which Jack didn’t. His resistance to the mission was down to the fact that Daniel got a kick out of partying with the natives, but that was not Jack’s idea of a good time.

He couldn’t imagine there was anything Daniel could say to make the mission sound at all appealing.

Across the briefing room table, Daniel tried to fight back a smile, and immediately Jack was suspicious.

“Did I mention the development stage the Sheridans are at right now is very similar to America’s Old West?”

Despite himself, Jack went quiet in grudging interest. “Old West, you say?” Jack cocked his head and rocked his jaw side to side in thought, even though he already knew what he wanted to say. Daniel was giving him a smug look, and Carter was looking down at her report to try and hide her smile. Teal’c looked unmoved, but his eyebrow was twitching like it wanted to climb up his forehead in the worst way.

Jack slid a look toward the general. “Well, General… they are expecting us.”

Hammond smiled in amusement. “SG-1’s mission to PG1-319 is a go. You’ll ship out in two hours. Dismissed.”

When the general had retreated to his office, Daniel let loose the victorious grin he’d been biting back. Carter actually chuckled.

Jack looked across the table at Daniel archly. “You think you’re so smart, don’t you, Danny?”

“I know you’re a sucker for the Old West,” Daniel replied with no hint of regret for his tactics.
“I am not.”

“Oh, please. You made all of us sit through that stupid western show.”

“Ah!” Jack barked and lifted a warning finger. “Legend was not stupid. It’s not my fault none of you appreciate good television.”

“It was ridiculous,” Daniel said.

“Indeed,” Teal’c intoned deeply.

“I thought it was okay,” Carter admitted.

“See!” Jack gestured toward Carter. “She liked it!”

“Please.” Daniel rolled his eyes. “Sam had the hots for the main character. That doesn’t make the show good.”

Carter made an indignant noise at that; however, she didn’t deny the accusation.

Honestly, Jack didn’t want to talk about the other men Carter found attractive. Instead, Jack pushed back from the table, gathered up his things, and headed toward the door to get ready for the mission to PG1-319. He could only hope the mission went smoothly and was over quickly – he had a trip to Minnesota to plan.

***********

“Jack… Jack!” Daniel fumbled with pulling his tac vest out of his locker as the men of SG-1 prepared for their mission to PG1-319. Jack looked over at Daniel with one eyebrow raised as Daniel’s thigh holster strap tangled with the jeans he’d worn to the mountain that day and the archaeologist proceeded to engage in a small game of tug-of-war to free it. “Do you want to hear something really fascinating about the Sheridans?” he asked, undeterred by his gear and clothes mimicking fighting octopi.

“Nope,” Jack answered, making sure to pop his ‘p’ for emphasis.

Daniel went quiet and Jack looked over at him. Daniel looked sullen, and Jack felt a twinge of guilt. He enjoyed giving Daniel a hard time, sure, but sometimes he went too far or carried on too long. Daniel would take the ribbing only so long before some comment finally hit home. Every so often, Jack would shoot Daniel down and the guy would get that look – the ‘orphan that no one wanted’ look.

Jack hated that dejected, wounded look on Daniel.

Jack reached over and squeezed the nape of Daniel’s neck in one hand in apology. “What’s fascinating about them?”

Daniel perked up, his eyes shined, and he started to ramble as he yanked on his tac vest to free it from his hanging clothes. “The Sheridans weren’t the first humans on PG1-319. The first civilization was the one that left behind the obelisk Balinsky and I translated, but the carvings on that obelisk are in a language that is completely different from the one used by the Sheridans. As in not even derivatives or roots in common. There’s evidence that something – maybe a pandemic – wiped out the original population and the Sheridians’ ancestors were brought to the planet later to replace them.”

“No kidding,” Jack remarked as he reached over and helped Daniel untangle the military and civilian
“And the Sheridans aren’t associated with the Goa’uld.”

“A protected planet?” Jack guessed as the tac vest came loose.

“There was no evidence of any Asgard devices such as those we found on Cimmeria,” Teal’c answered from the other side of the locker room.

“And the Sheridan culture isn’t Celtic or Norse,” Daniel added. “We – that is, Balinsky and I – think what happened is that when the Sheridan ancestors were brought to PG1-319, they staged their own revolt much like the one that happened here on Earth against Ra in ancient Egypt. They buried their gate, like we did, and dug it up thousands of years later… like we did.”

“That is kind of interesting,” Jack conceded.

Daniel shrugged his vest on and bounced excitedly on his feet. Heaven save them from Daniel when he had someone’s ear. “It is interesting. We have rarely run across humans on other planets that rebelled like the humans of Earth did, I suppose because it takes a lot of guts to rise up against a god and any venture of that kind is going to have a high rate of failure.”

“Why wouldn’t the Goa’uld come back with ships when the peasants revolted and buried their gate?”

Daniel gave him a very flat look. “Why didn’t Ra come back to Earth in ships when we did? My guess is that for the Sheridans and Earth, the people and the planets weren’t worth the trouble at the time.”

“Yay for being a piss-ant planet,” Jack quipped with a sarcastic ‘ra ra’ fist. Pun very much intended. He noted that all three of them were dressed and gestured for them to follow him to the armory to get their weapons.

Daniel hurried after him, not done taking advantage of Jack’s agreeable mood (Jack was blaming Carter for that). “The Sheridans are very friendly people – much friendlier than a lot of the people we’ve encountered on other planets, and that’s probably because they don’t have a culture of fear built around the oppressions of the Goa’uld. You really will like these people, Jack. Your Old West thing aside.”

“I don’t have a thing…”

“Right. Whatever you say.”

Jack snaked out a hand and ruffled Daniel’s short hair.

“Jaack!” Daniel ducked out from under the touch and tried to pat down his hair, acting annoyed, but Jack caught the fleeting expression of… well, Jack would label it a mixture of delight, affection, and relief. It was Daniel’s look that screamed ‘I matter to someone, I belong somewhere’.

In unguarded moments, Daniel could break Jack’s heart. He ached for the son he had been as a father who’d lost his own.

When the men of SG-1 reached the gate room, the Stargate was already an active, shimmering blue cynosure, and Jack noted that Major Carter was not there waiting for them. He looked toward the control room and spotted her at one of the computers next to Lieutenant Simmons. Carter was fully decked in her mission attire, a dark juxtaposition to Simmons in his pale button-down shirt. Their
faces looked constipated, and that had to mean complications.

“Sit tight, fellas,” Jack bade Daniel and Teal’c as he left the gate room and climbed the small set of stairs into the control room. “Problem, Carter?”

She looked over at him. “We sent the MALP through first to have a look around, maybe make contact with the people Daniel said should be expecting us, but as soon as the MALP came through on the other side it… fell.”

“Fell?”

“Yes, sir. Seems there’s some kind of drop-off right in front of the gate, and the MALP’s on its side. The way it landed jammed the camera, so we can’t see anything but this.” She gestured at the screen, and Jack leaned down to look closer. It was a wonky view of the Stargate taken from the ground, looking up at the shimmering event horizon past what looked like a craggy edge of stone.

“Great,” Jack said sarcastically.

Hammond joined the trio and said, “Luckily we already know this planet to be friendly, but that means you’re adding to your mission objective retrieval of the MALP.”

“You know, General,” Jack groused, “those MALPs are almost more trouble than they’re worth.”


“Right.” He sighed. “Well, come on, Carter. Let’s not keep Daniel waiting or he might leave without us.”

Carter snickered. “Yes, sir.” She pushed her chair back, picked up the P-90 she’d set on the table, and followed Jack down the stairs.

In the gate room, Daniel looked between Jack and Carter as they came in together. “Is something wrong?”

“The MALP toppled over the end of Stargate platform,” Carter answered.

“That first step’s a doozy,” Jack quipped.

Daniel frowned. “Um… no, it isn’t.”

“It isn’t?”

“No… at least, it wasn’t when we went there with SG-13 three weeks ago.”

“Huh.” Jack cast a look over Daniel’s shoulder at Teal’c that communicated the unspoken order to stay sharp. Teal’c nodded and turned a grouchy look at the Stargate.

They’d find out soon enough what the story was on PG1-319, though Jack hoped any planet with ‘PG-13’ in it would be low-hassle and violence-free.

It was obviously asking too much.

***********

SG-1 arrived on PG1-319 on what was clearly the cusp of winter. The world had that slate gray cast to it of cold weather rolling in, and the air had the distinct, metallic smell of snow. All the plant life
was dull with the shades of death, and the tree limbs were gnarled and naked. A bracing wind tugged at their clothes and their breaths fogged in front of their faces with every exhale.

Expecting a sharp drop immediately upon arrival, SG-1 bunched up the second they’d stepped through, bumping into each other in order to avoid toppling down the missing step that had overturned the MALP. Like most planets, the Stargate was on a stone platform with steps leadings up to the great metal ring, but something had damaged the platform and the left side was blown away. The MALP was on its side in the depression left behind, whirling and clicking uselessly, its camera pointing up at them like a cyclops eye begging for help.

The spastic jerks of the MALP were the only signs of movement as far as the eye could see.

Jack stepped down the still-intact right side of the platform, eyeing the horizon and its portent of winter as the gate behind them deactivated. “Daniel?”

“Uh… I don’t know. I expected Marshall and his men to greet us – they knew we were coming.”

Daniel descended the steps and turned in a circle, peering into the tree line for signs of life.

“The platform wasn’t like this when you and Teal’c were here before?” he asked, kicking one hunk of debris stone.

“It was not,” Teal’c answered. “This is recent damage.”

Jack was getting that cold, sinking feeling in his gut that meant shit-storm ahead. “Do the Sheridans have anything that could have done this?”

Daniel frowned at the obliterated stonework. “They mine some nearby hills – they have something comparable to dynamite on Earth. They could have done it.”

“But would they?”

“I can’t imagine why they would,” Daniel said grimly.

“Smell like trouble to anyone else?” Jack asked sarcastically. Teal’c actually lifted his nose into the wind to sniff. Jack rolled his eyes and gestured for Teal’c to do a sweep of the area.

Carter slipped past them and made a beeline for the DHD, visibly relieved as she reported, “The DHD looks undamaged, sir. At least we shouldn’t have any trouble getting home.”

Jack nodded and kicked the MALP for good measure. “Any hint of trouble among the locals last time you guys were here?”

Daniel shook his head. “They had their petty quarrels and trouble-makers, like any community, but nothing extreme. There are a few neighboring settlements that are rivals for land and resources, but Marshall made it sound like they weren’t a big deal. Nothing that would explain this,” Daniel gestured at the platform and the firepower it would have taken to damage it.

Teal’c came jogging back to the team, his face grim. “There are many tracks surrounding the Stargate. They are Jaffa.”

Daniel’s eyes blew wide. “But the Goa’uld don’t come here!”

“Clearly they do now,” Jack groused. “Crap.” It was becoming harder to deny that eerie feeling like he’d wandered into a graveyard. Or the end of the world. “How fresh are those tracks, would you say?”
“They are not recent. Several days have passed since the Jaffa came through here.”

Carter came up alongside Jack, alert and ready to follow any order given. Jack appreciated that about her – she could have her moments as much as Daniel, but when the shit hit the fan she was a perfect soldier. Her blue eyes were steely and her mouth pinched in grim determination.

“We have to check on the Sheridans,” Daniel pronounced predictably. “They could have been captured. We have to help them.”

Jack narrowed his eyes at PG1-319, basically blaming it for turning into a clusterfuck within the first five minutes of their mission, then nodded. “Which way to the settlement?”

Daniel waved over his shoulder. “It’s about a two-day hike that way.”

“Two days?”

“Yeah.” Daniel flapped his hand at the Stargate in general. “These are useless ruins to the Sheridans – it doesn’t play any role in their culture. No more than our Stargate does on Earth today. The Demotic Akkadians are the ones who…”

“I get it,” Jack snapped to shut Daniel up, his patience for lectures from earlier well and truly evaporated. “Teal’c, take point.” Only two on the team knew the way, and there was not a chance in hell Jack was putting Daniel in front in what was now very likely hostile territory.

Daniel fell quickly into step behind Teal’c, eager to reach the settlers. Jack looked down at Carter a moment, his frustration turning into anger. Fortunately, Carter was cut from a similar cloth as Jack O’Neill. She didn’t see his flinty gaze and take it personally. She mirrored it back at him, black sparks and blue fire.

So much for a quiet mission to party with some natives.

***********

SG-1 marched through a mottle of pastureland and sparse woodlands for hours without a sign of the enemy. They also saw no sign of friendlies, either. After several hours of tomb-like stillness, Jack almost wished they would run across a patrol of Jaffa. The cloying unknown was grating on Jack’s nerves, and he’d really like to shoot something to bleed off some energy.

As evening began to fall, snow flurries started to blow, and with the temperature drop, Jack’s right knee began to burn in protest. Their pace and the fact they’d been walking for hours didn’t help.

His foot came down on uneven ground at one point, and the twist it caused as he stumbled to regain his footing pulled a hiss from between his teeth.

Ahead of him, Carter turned sharply to look at him. The cold had buffed her nose and the points of her cheeks a pretty pink, a look Jack normally enjoyed on Carter far too much, but the situation hardly allowed him to revel in it.

Her brow furrowed in concern when she saw him limp slightly as he regained his stride. She opened her mouth to say something, but Jack shook his head and gave her a stern look.

Carter scowled, hesitated, then turned to continue their march.

Up ahead, Teal’c jerked to a stop and froze.
All of SG-1 followed suit.

Teal’c tipped his head, listening.

“What is it?” Jack whispered.

Teal’c determined the direction of the noise and pointed. “There.” The team broke from the path to town and headed toward the source of the sound.

When they got closer, Jack heard it, too. A high-pitched whine. A cry.

He feared it was a child.

It turned out to be a dog.

SG-1 came around a copse of trees to a grisly sight. A man was strung up on a wooden frame, almost like a sloppy crucifixion. He had clearly been dead for days, his belly torn open and entrails dangling from the gaping wound.

Tied to a tree a short distance away was a dog. In body shape and size, it looked like a wolf, but it was a color no wolf on Earth would be – brindle with white paws and a jagged blaze on its face. It was cowering at the base of the tree, body curled, head down, and tail tucked tight between its legs. It shivered and whined piteously as SG-1 approached.

“Ah hell,” Jack muttered as he took in the sight. He looked from the dead man to Daniel. “Know him?”

Daniel crept closer to duck down and look at the man’s face. He stepped back, green around the gills, and shook his head. “I’ve never met him, but Marshall said they had their fair share of travelers, especially around this time of year. Might have been on his way from another settlement for the Autumncrest.”

“Unlucky bastard,” Jack noted. “Why would they turn him into a scarecrow?”

“This is a common practice among Goa’uld when a planet’s population proves rebellious,” Teal’c explained.

“The Sheridans would have been,” Daniel muttered, clearly sick to his stomach.

“It is intended to serve as a warning to others of the punishment for defying a god.” Teal’c nodded toward the corpse. “This man was no doubt alive when he was disemboweled.”

“Oh god.” Carter breathed in horror.

“We will likely see more settlers dispatched in this fashion the closer we get to the town,” Teal’c warned.

“Great,” Jack snarled. “What’s with the dog?”

Teal’c eyed the canine a moment, thoughtful. “I believe it was this man’s companion animal. If he begged for its life, the Jaffa would have made him aware of their intention to make it die of thirst and hunger by his side.”

“Oh for god’s sake,” Jack growled furiously and handed his P-90 off to Carter. He then unclipped his canteen and started to walk slowly toward the dog.
The dog saw him coming and tried to flee only to be stopped by the rope around its neck. When it failed to escape, the animal flattened itself against the ground and whimpered, body trembling.

“Jack…” Daniel said warily, “are you sure you should be doing that? It could bite.”

“I’m not leaving it tied up to die, Daniel,” he answered tersely. Although, yes… being bitten was a distinct possibility. The thing was obviously scared to death. That didn’t change his answer, though.

When Jack was within two steps of the dog, he crouched down and held out the hand not holding the canteen. “Hey, boy. Or girl. It’s all right, I’m not going to hurt you. Are you thirsty?” Jack uncapped the canteen and poured a small amount into his cupped hand.

The dog perked its ears up and licked its lips.

“That’s it… come on, no one’s going to hurt you.”

The dog was clearly still terrified, but its thirst won out. Slowly, it crawled closer to Jack. It craned forward to lick the wet underside of his hand, then tentatively pushed into a sitting position to dip its muzzle into Jack’s palm. The dog lapped up the water then looked up at Jack plaintively.

Jack poured small servings of water into his palm five more times – the best he could do without a bowl handy and not wanting to pour his drinking water on the ground – and by then the dog was warming to Jack’s efforts. No longer shaking uncontrollably, it was worming its way closer to Jack, lapping up the water he offered each time then lingering to lick his skin. Jack looked it over enough to know it was a boy, and that aside from being terrified, thirsty, and probably hungry, it looked uninjured.

“All right,” Jack capped his canteen, “that’s all I can spare, buddy. But I’ll get you free and you can go find a nice stream and drink until you have a tummy ache, okay?”

Someone behind him snorted at ‘tummy ache’, but Jack ignored whoever it was (he suspected Daniel).

Jack worked his fingers under the rope around the dog’s neck, loosened it, and slipped it over his head. The dog jerked away from the rope and gave its body a good freedom shake. Then it padded back to Jack, tucked up beneath him so it could reach up submissively, and proceeded to shower his face with kisses.

Jack allowed it for a few seconds (it would be rude not to accept thanks, right?), then he patted the dog and gently pushed it away. “All right, that’s enough.”

The dog whined.

“Okay, last good deed for the day, then you’re on your own.” Jack fished a granola bar out of his pocket, unwrapped it, and offered it to the dog. The dog snatched it from his hand and wolfed it down greedily.

Jack gave it another pat on the back and pushed up to his feet. “That’s it… we freed you, watered you, and fed you. Rest is up to you.”

The dog sat at Jack’s feet and looked up at him, its eyes adoring.

“Oh, no.” Jack made shooing motions. “Go on. Go home.”

The dog gave no signs of moving until Jack did.
“You’ve done it now, sir,” Carter quipped with a half-smile.

Jack sighed. “Let’s keep heading to town. It’ll get bored and take off.”

The dog, however, had other ideas. When SG-1 moved out, the dog moved out with them, sticking close as though Jack had bade it to heel.

Jack tried not to give it much thought. The dog was quiet and settled into a work-like state as they resumed their hike – presumably he’d done this often with his dead master and knew the drill – so it wasn’t a liability or in danger of blowing their cover. Jack let him be. He was certain the dog would leave of its own volition at some point.

***********

When darkness gathered and the team had to stop to make camp, the dog was still with them. Jack had been doing his best to ignore the animal on their walk, certain that the cold-shoulder treatment would eventually convince the dog to strike out on its own, but it clearly didn’t and when they stopped for the night Jack couldn’t seem to help reaching down and petting it. The dog leaned against his leg, basking in the affection.

“You’re only making it worse,” Daniel warned lowly.

Jack gave Daniel a glare. “The poor thing saw its owner gutted. Have a heart.”

Daniel winced and wandered off to help Teal’c set up his tent.

The temperature had dropped as the sun set, and the earlier flurries had turned into a light snowfall. While the team would have loved a nice, warm fire, they didn’t know if there were still Jaffa in the area and dared not risk it. Their only defense against the cold was setting up their tents.

In the interest of keeping their pack loads down, they only had two tents between the four of them. Teal’c and Daniel almost had one set up while Jack and Carter set about putting up the second tent.

The dog jumped at the opportunity to lick Jack’s face when he crouched down to wrestle with putting up the tent. Jack allowed it longer than he should have before pushing the dog away. In the dying light, he saw Carter giving him an amused look.

“What?” he asked, defensive.

“You can’t keep him,” she replied.

Jack scowled. “*I know.*”

It didn’t seem like the dog knew that, though.

Once the two tents were staked and set, SG-1 huddled together to share a quiet, cold meal of MREs before they turned in. Jack ate half his then put the rest down for the dog. The dog scarfed down the food while Carter gave Jack a reproving look. Jack ignored it – he was in command, and if he wanted to give half his dinner to a dog, that was his prerogative.

When the dog was done with Jack’s dinner, Carter leaned over and scraped part of her entrée onto the ground. As the dog set into the new food with gusto, Jack gave Carter a look. She just shrugged. “I never liked the meatloaf, anyway.”

From Daniel, the dog scored another granola bar. Teal’c offered it a square of hardtack.
It was a strange moment when Jack was stupidly proud of his team.

When it was time to turn in, Jack took first watch while Carter crawled into one tent and Daniel and Teal’c took the second. The dog disappeared into the trees, and for a moment Jack assumed it was gone, but clearly it had only been a bathroom break because the dog came back and laid down next to him, body language screaming it was there to stay.

Night watch was lonely, and Jack found himself absently petting the dog while keeping an eye out for enemy approach. It wasn’t long before Jack was glad for the dog from a strategic standpoint. The dog’s ears perked up and it became alert several times while Jack was on watch, the animal staring out into the darkness and only relaxing when whatever it had heard had passed… all without Jack hearing or seeing a damn thing. Maybe there was something to be said for dogs on SG teams. The military used dogs in other capacities, why not on off-world missions? He might have to broach the idea to Hammond.

The hours passed without incident until Teal’c emerged to take over. Since Teal’c required less sleep than the rest of them, night watches consisted of one person taking roughly three hours to allow the Jaffa to kel’no’reem, then Teal’c would stand guard the rest of the night.

“All’s been quiet,” Jack whispered to Teal’c and patted the Jaffa on the shoulder to bid him good luck. Teal’c, a hulking shadow in the darkness, merely nodded and scanned the surroundings with an ‘I dare you’ face.

When Jack crouched down to unzip the flap of the tent he was sharing with Carter, the dog was presumptuously close.

“Oh no,” Jack whispered and shouldered the dog away. “You stay out here with Teal’c.”

The dog whined.

“Shhhh!” Jack touched the dog on the nose to startle it into silence. “You’re not coming in.”

The dog sat down and looked imploringly at him.

Jack had to duck into the tent and zip it up fast behind him to escape the begging eyes (or the dog leaping in after him, orders be damned).

He patted around in the darkness until he found his sleeping bag. Going through a routine he didn’t need to see to perform, he unclipped his P-90 and stashed it between his sleeping bag and the wall of the tent with the safety on. He shed his vest and its attached sheaths and holsters and stowed his gear and hand weapons where his feet would go, still within easy reach if the shit hit the fan. He knew without looking that Carter had arranged her things in mirror image of his on her side of the tent. Lastly, he plucked off his cap and flung it to the spot above where he would lay his head.

He’d barely wrestled into the nylon sleeping bag and stretched out on his back before there was a pitiful whine from outside.

“No!” Jack whispered harshly.

The dog whimpered again.

“You’re going to wake up Carter,” Jack hissed. As if the dog would understand.

The dog stopped for a second. Then he whined again.
“Just let him in, sir,” Carter mumbled.

Jack winced guiltily that Carter had been woken, then he figured doing what she said would be the only way to shut the dog up and therefore the only way they’d get any sleep. “Sorry about this,” Jack apologized, then he sat up and scooted over to unzip the flap. The dog pushed his way in happily, tail smacking Jack in the face as he bowlled past.

As Jack zipped the flap up again, he heard the distinct sound of licking and Carter giving a muffled chuckle. Jack reached out and found a hairy hindquarter. It stopped the licking sounds and Jack nudged the dog. “Lay down and go to sleep or I’m tossing you out on your ass.”

The dog huffed but dutifully laid down in the narrow space between Jack and Carter’s sleeping bags.

Jack felt like he’d been played.

When Jack had wormed his way back into his sleeping bag, the dog was pressed against his side, and he hated to give the dog points after the stunt he’d pulled, but he was warm, and that was greatly appreciated on a snowy night with no fire. He felt kind of bad that Daniel didn’t have his own body-heater to cuddle. Jack gave in and reached over to give the dog a few pats on the side.

“You’re a softie,” Carter whispered, her voice amused and oddly warm. It definitely didn’t sound like the tone of voice a subordinate took with her superior officer. Worse that it was spoken in the dark, when they were lying as close as a couple sharing a bed would be.

He shouldn’t like it, but he did. “Don’t let it get out at the SGC,” he replied, “I have a reputation to maintain.”

Carter huffed. “Your secret’s safe with me.” The ‘sir’ was missing, and it was painfully obvious. It felt deliberate. Dangerous. Rebellious. As rebellious as they ever were.

Jack startled when he felt Carter’s fingers snag on his sleeping bag, confused until he realized she had thrown her arm over the dog and was snuggling with him. Jack didn’t know one could be jealous of a dog. The dog wiggled, Jack would say preened, and settled more firmly against Carter like he’d made his choice for the night.

“Show-off,” Jack grumbled.

Carter started giggling, whisper-quiet and muffled… probably in the dog’s fur. It hit like a kick to the gut, because Jack wanted that laughter muffled against his chest.

“Everyone go to sleep,” Jack mumbled peevishly, slightly bitter at the unfairness of his life, “that’s an order.”

“Yes, sir,” Carter answered.

This time, the dog obeyed.

***********

Jack woke to a paw in his face. He opened his eyes and swatted the paw away with a short-lived sputter. The dog lifted its head to look at him, as if to ask why he was ruining their perfectly good cuddle pile, then laid his head back down with the offending paw tucked close it its body.

Jack sat up and looked over at his tent companions. Carter was still asleep with one hand buried in the dog’s coat. The dog’s dark black and brown markings were a sharp contrast to his 2IC’s fair skin.
and pale hair. Her fingers looked like ivory keys on a piano nestled amid shadow tones. Carter’s relaxed face was slightly tucked toward the animal, a wordless suggestion that Jack wasn’t the only one who’d let themselves get a tiny bit attached.

It was so much of Jack’s wildest dreams, waking up beside Carter with a canine companion close by. If Jack’s life were a movie, it would be a twisted version of a genie granting wishes – a cautionary tale that there were ways to have everything he wanted and also nothing he wanted.

Jack sighed and crept to the tent flap to open it.

Cold air hit him in the face the second he’d pulled back the nylon, and only then did he realize how much three bodies had warmed the interior of the tent. He blinked into the breaking dawn and peered out at a thin layer of snow that had coated the ground overnight.

The dog shouldered past him and dashed into the outdoors, no doubt to hike a leg on a tree.

Jack pulled himself out of the tent and grimaced when his right knee protested everything: the cold, the night spent on the ground, the previous day’s exertions. He rubbed at it, annoyed at his body falling apart, and moved toward Teal’c. The Jaffa was sitting on a rock, staff weapon held comfortably at his side as he performed sentry duty.

“Hey, T.” Jack tapped him companionably on the shoulder. “Quiet night?”

“Too quiet.”

“Yeah, I know what you mean.” PG1-319 was giving Jack the creeps.

Carter emerged from the tent a few minutes later, yawning and rubbing sleep out of her eyes like a kid on Christmas morning. Jack tried not to find it adorable and failed miserably.

Someone had to be sent in to rouse Daniel, who was not a pleasant person when it was obvious they couldn’t start a fire to make coffee.

The team huddled together and chewed on bland protein bars for breakfast. The dog was trotting the perimeter of the camp, nose low to the ground and tail up. He stopped occasionally to chomp mouthfuls of snow or listen intently into the distance. Jack had to admit, he felt more relaxed when the dog continued to explore without alerting them to any dangers.

“Daniel,” Carter’s brain had started to wake up and spin at its usual light speed, “you said the Sheridans mined the hills… was it naquadah mines?”

Daniel rubbed at his eye socket and gave himself a hard shake to try and dispel the remnants of sleep. “Um… no. Mostly copper and coal.”

“Then what would the Goa’uld want with this planet?”

Daniel’s mouth hung agape in morning brain-fog long enough for Teal’c to take over. “The Goa’uld and their armies must be fed just like any other – this planet was no doubt originally established for that purpose.”

“Makes sense,” Jack mused.

“That explains the history of farming and ranching here,” Daniel mumbled around a bite of protein bar. “Even the people that were here before the Sheridans were farmers and ranchers, judging by the Farmer’s Almanac on the obelisk.”
“Indeed,” Teal’c intoned. “In order to limit the worlds that they permit to have beasts of burden, the Goa’uld concentrate agriculture and animal husbandry on a small number of worlds where it is the chief industry.”

“And one of those small number of worlds allowed to have animals is one of the ones that rebelled. Like Earth. Like Abydos. Who also just happened to have ‘beasts of burden’. I’m sensing a pattern.” Jack probably didn’t find that nearly as interesting as Carter or Daniel did, but it was interesting nonetheless.

“That says a lot about the relationship between man and animals throughout history and how crucial they are to human development,” Carter mused, looking out thoughtfully at the dog pacing the outskirts of the camp like a watchdog on a self-assigned mission.

It was fascinating, sure, but what did it ultimately mean for the Sheridans?

“Teal’c…” Jack began.

The Jaffa looked toward him.

“If the Sheridans wouldn’t surrender or submit…”

“They wouldn’t,” Daniel seemed certain about that.

Jack clenched his jaw. “What would the Goa’uld do?”

Teal’c looked grave. “They would try to force their cooperation through intimidation, torture, and murder. If the humans still did not accept the Goa’uld as their god, the adults would be slaughtered and the children relocated to a subjugated world where they may be raised to serve false gods.”

A tense silence fell among the members of SG-1.

“Right,” Jack said darkly. “Let’s move out.”

The team made quick work of breaking down and packing away the tents. As they were kitting up, Jack popped a couple of aspirin for his knees. He looked up and noticed Carter watching him, her expression worried. Jack shook his head minutely and slapped Teal’c on the shoulder to bid him to lead the way once again.

Although he wanted to, Jack didn’t call the dog. It would probably be better if the animal wandered off, even if it was on a planet whose human population had been decimated… at least then it wouldn’t be walking right into danger. That was SG-1’s job.

Even still, when the dog noticed the team moving out he hurried to catch up and fell into step alongside Jack. Knowing he shouldn’t, that it would just make the situation and eventual separation worse, Jack reached down and pet the animal before turning his focus to the mission.

***********

Teal’c had been right when he predicted they would find more people strung up on the way to town. At first it was a corpse now and then, but the closer they got to town the more frequently they came across bodies until they appeared regularly, like grisly highway mile markers. Daniel began to recognize faces and assigned names to the bodies they passed.

The number of dead they encountered made Jack’s stomach sink for what they would probably find when they reached town. The Sheridan settlement wasn’t big, if one were to take Daniel at his word
(which Jack did), and Jack couldn’t fathom how there could be anyone left in town given all the human scarecrows they’d encountered.

It began to feel like a planet of the dead. The underworld flipped topside. The only sound aside from the crunch of SG-1’s boots on the snow was the caw of PG1-319’s version of ravens as they feasted on the corpses.

Even though there had been no sign of the enemy that was responsible for the carnage, there was a visceral unease that wove through the team as they marched past sightless sentries. Even the dog was affected, behaving much less like a dog and more like the wolf he resembled. He padded alongside SG-1, hackles bristled, head low, and mouth shut in intent concentration.

Daniel spotted something about one of the bodies that drew him closer. He peered at a dead man and his expression tightened. “It’s Marshall.”

“Guess we know why he didn’t meet us at the gate,” Jack quipped darkly.

“He was sort of the mayor and sheriff of the Sheridans… they don’t have a word for either, so…” Daniel dragged a hand down his face. “How could they do this?”

“They’re Goa’uld, Daniel,” Jack answered unnecessarily.

“We haven’t seen any… uh… fresh ones,” Daniel said indelicately.

“You are correct, Daniel Jackson,” Teal’c answered. “All of these people were killed many days ago.”

“We could be too late,” Daniel voiced his dread.

It was starting to look that way. “Only one way to find out,” Jack stated flatly.

“Sir,” Carter, who had moved around to the back of the body to look for any clues, had clearly found one. “Take a look at this.”

The rest of the team circled around and saw a black design burned into the wood that had been used to splay Marshall out like a lab rat for dissection.

“That is the crest of the System Lord Ba’al,” Teal’c explained.

“Ba’al did this?”

“It would appear so.”

Jack put the snake on his list of assholes to kill at the next available opportunity. “Let’s keep going. How close are we to town?” He wanted to say they had to be running out of bodies. The corpses were starting to line the path to either side, a freeze-frame march of the dead.

“Not far,” Daniel answered.

Jack gestured for the team to keep moving, even though it was starting to look like they would find nothing but a ghost town.

***********

When they got there, the Sheridan settlement was deserted.
True to Daniel’s description, it looked like a town from the Old West, with a dirt road thoroughfare, wooden buildings on each side, and hitching posts in front of every establishment for visitors to tie their horses. Empty corrals echoed eerily of the life that should have been there… much like every doorway and window.

Several buildings were blackened and half-collapsed from being set on fire, though the fires themselves were out and left behind only their sooty, ruinous handiwork.

‘Ghost town’ was a pretty apt description, and they had walked past all the bodies who had given up those ghosts on the way in.

Jack’s hands flew to his weapon when movement at the end of the road caught his eye, but in the next second he realized it was a horse. The muddy chestnut had a rope halter and tattered lead dangling from its head as it trotted into the center of town. It caught SG-1’s scent and whipped its head in their direction, ears swiveling forward and nostrils flaring frantically.

Whereas the dog had warmed to the human travelers, the horse had been traumatized beyond rehabilitation by the Goa’uld attack. Its eyes rolled at their presence and a panicked scream strangled from its throat. It half-reared, wheeled in the opposite direction, and bolted down the road and out of sight.

Jack forced himself to take his hands off his P-90.

“My god…” Daniel whispered in horror at the scene before them.

“Let’s start searching building by building for any survivors,” Jack commanded.

“Jack…” Daniel said, his voice despairing of their chances of finding anyone that had escaped the attack.

“Building by building,” Jack repeated. “Teal’c, you’re with Daniel. Carter, with me.” The dog assigned itself to Jack and Carter’s team as SG-1 split up to look for survivors.

***********

It took the rest of the day for them to poke around in every building, house, shop, saloon, and storage shed in town, but by the time nightfall was creeping in, it was obvious the Goa’uld had come and gone and left no one to tell the tale. All they found were more bodies, and Jack wasn’t sure if he should be grateful or not that all the corpses were adults. He wasn’t sure which would be worse for the kids – outright slaughter or a life of slavery.

When SG-1 met back up at dusk, Daniel took them to a hotel that SG-13, Teal’c, and himself had stayed at when they were on the planet a mere three weeks ago, when things had been bustling and alive and completely different from the horror scene SG-1 had discovered.

The hotel, like everything, was devoid of human life. A few overturned chairs, broken windows on the first floor, and a puddle of something (bourbon or blood) spilled on the floor were the only indications of the chaos that had swept through the settlement.

Orange, red, and yellow bunting adorned the unattended check-in desk. Daniel touched it somberly. “This wasn’t here before… must have been put up for the Autumncrest.” A festival no one would ever celebrate again, because everyone who knew the traditions and customs was dead.

The empty hotel sent a shiver of unease down Jack’s spine. “Why the hell do you want to stay the night here again?”
That earned a defeated shrug from the archaeologist. “They have beds. And at least here we won’t be sleeping in a dead person’s home.”

He had a point there. A hotel would be neutral, lacking the personal touches that would hint at the soul who’d lived there.

And Jack’s knees would really appreciate not sleeping on the ground two nights in a row.

“All right, we’ll sleep here tonight and head back to the gate at first light.”

“Shouldn’t we try to find where the children were taken and go after them?” Daniel asked, turning wide blue eyes toward Jack.

Jack clenched his teeth, biting back the urge to snap. He wasn’t mad at Daniel, but if Jack said a word about the Sheridan kids it would come out wrapped in fury, and Daniel would unfairly take the brunt of it.

Carter, mercifully, explained the harsh reality to Daniel (far more calmly than Jack could have). “There’s no way to know where they’ve been taken, Daniel. All we know is that Ba’al did this, but he’s a System Lord… he controls how many worlds?”

“A great many,” Teal’c intoned solemnly.

“This happened days ago. The kids could be anywhere.” Carter’s shoulders slumped. “I’m sorry, but there’s nothing we can do to track them.”

“But…”

“Daniel.” Jack sighed, pulled off his cap, and threw it down on the check-in counter – a pitiful substitute for what he really wanted to do, which was gun down the Jaffa sons-of-bitches who did this. “You see anything that looks like a forwarding address, and we’ll go… but we have to face facts. We got here too late.”

Daniel’s face fell and he struggled to breathe evenly, whether warring with rage or grief was anyone’s guess. Jack felt awful for the Sheridans, but he felt bad for Daniel, too. The linguist befriended people quickly – he’d no doubt lost people he cared about in Ba’al’s attack, regardless of how brief a time he’d known them.

A somber silence descended around SG-1. The dog, sensing the tension, whined and sidled closer to Jack. Without thinking, Jack reached down to pet it.

Carter looked around the lobby of the hotel in the dying light. “Colonel… there’s a fireplace. Think we’re okay to light a fire?”

“We haven’t seen a single Jaffa since we got here… I think it’s safe to say they got the hell out of Dodge long before we got here. Permission granted, Major.” At least they wouldn’t have to spend another night cold and miserable because they were worried about Jaffa patrols.

Carter nodded and headed toward the hearth.

“The kitchen may still contain food for our evening meal,” Teal’c offered.

Sounded better than MREs. “All right. Go see what you can rustle up.”

Teal’c left with a tip of his head.
“And I’ll go upstairs and make sure there are four rooms, uh… unoccupied.” Daniel grimaced, because they all knew what would be occupying a room in Sheridan right now, and trudged up the stairs to investigate.

SG-1 quietly found tasks and chores to make themselves useful. It was their way of trying to ease the guilt of not getting there in time to be useful to the Sheridans.

Jack looked down at the dog and it gazed back up at him, expression watchful and solemn. “Come on,” Jack huffed as he moved toward the splintered front door of the hotel, “let’s do a sweep around the building just to be sure there aren’t any Jaffa ninjas hiding anywhere.”

The dog padded along beside him, intent on its job. To Jack, the animal felt like a member of the team. They had traveled a necropolis together, the dog and SG-1, and at the waystation they arrived as one unit.

Or maybe it just felt like the last living things on PG1-319 had to stick together.

***********

Teal’c found enough in the ransacked kitchen for them to salvage a decent meal, and Daniel reported that the bedrooms upstairs were corpse-free. Carter got a fire going, and almost more than the heat, Jack appreciated how it cast a warm light around the room. The place was less creepy by firelight.

It was Carter’s turn to take first watch, so Teal’c went upstairs to kel’no’reem soon after dinner. Daniel followed not long after him, subdued and somber by what they’d found on PG1-319. Knowing Daniel, he’d beat himself up about what they might have done if they had only come a few days earlier.

Jack learned a long time ago it was deadly to play those kind of mind games. He couldn’t live life replaying tragedies and wondering how he might have stopped people from dying.

The mere thought of Charlie’s death, even in a glancing blow, was always enough to send Jack spiraling. He slipped out onto the hotel porch to find someplace as cold and depressing as that place in his heart. PG1-319 turned out to be good for that.

The dog accompanied him, a stalwart and unquestioning companion, and Jack was grateful.

Unlike the previous night that brought cloud cover and snowfall, their second night was more of a clean, penetrating cold from a clear sky. The sky was full of stars, brilliant and undiluted, and the crescent moon was an almost neon blue, a striking arch of color in the night sky that reminded him of Carter’s eyes.

He sat on the edge of the porch – not a proper step, but there was at least ten inches between the dirt road and the wooden decking, so it sat like one – while the dog went off into the night. The light from the moon and stars were enough to track the animal by his white paws and striped face.

“Colonel?”

Jack glanced over his shoulder at Carter standing in the hotel doorway. She was backlit by the fire inside, a shapely shadow with orange limning the outline of her body.

“Major.”

She must have sensed something in his tone, because she hesitated. “Are you okay?”
“Peachy.” Jack turned his attention back out to the night, half-hoping she’d go away and leave him to his demons.

After a moment, Carter came up alongside him and sat down shoulder-to-shoulder with him. He glanced over at her and caught himself staring. The light from the fire in the lobby hit her obliquely, casting sharply-angled shadows over her face that twitched and danced in time with the flame inside. It was weak light, and golden warm, and it made Carter tantalizing. Like a mirage dancing at the edge of a desert. And Jack was the man dying of thirst.

A sudden gust of cold wind whipped down the walkway, seemingly slicing through their clothes, and Carter sidled closer to him, pressing the side of her body along his to share body heat. Even before there was an inappropriate attachment between them, that was something they’d done – shared body heat. Jack knew he had to be insane, because he didn’t look back on that snafu in Antarctica as entirely bad, and all because it was the first time she’d pressed herself to him. Like she was right now.

The contact warmed him far more than just the mere touch of their sides could explain. Her effect on him went beyond their bodies.

He’d gone outside to be alone and wallow in his past, but the mere presence of Carter seemed to defy his intentions. She was pulling him back without knowing it, without asking, and he realized he was grateful for that, too.

He suspected there would never be a time when he wouldn’t welcome her. When she wouldn’t be a positive influence in his life, even when she was simultaneously a cruel temptation from a life he couldn’t have.

“Not exactly the Old West experience you were hoping for, is it, sir?”

Jack snorted. “Not even close.”

“These people, what the Goa’uld did…” Carter shook her head and clasped her hands together between her knees. “I know it’s awful to wish for the extinction of an entire species, but…”

“But nothing. The Goa’uld deserve it.”

She nodded darkly. “I really hope I live to see the day when they’re wiped out.”

Jack glanced sidelong at her. “You and me both, Carter.”

They sat in companionable silence a moment before Carter cocked her head his direction. “How’s your knee?”

He recalled her concerned look when she caught him taking pills that morning. “Fine.”

Carter was conspicuously quiet a moment. Then, “Sir…”

She had no right to pry as a subordinate, but his heart thought of her as so much more. As a could-have-been spouse who did have the right to ask. He shouldn’t acquiesce to that unrealized reality of Samantha Carter, the woman in his life she might have been if their lives were different, but the longer he knew her the harder it was to keep her from becoming that… even if only in his heart.

“It hurts, but it’s nothing I can’t handle.” He’d been battered, beaten, and banged up so much in his life that he had a refined understanding of how far beyond the first signs of pain he could push his body.
Maybe one day he could face the potential consequences of a medical discharge… maybe one day he’d have a reason to want a life outside the mountain. But for now this and them, his job and his team, were all he had.

“Can I be honest with you, sir?”

Jack’s first instinct was to say ‘always’, but they both knew absolute honesty between them was dangerous. “Depends… what’s on your mind?”

“I feel kind of guilty,” Carter said softly.

“For what?”

She looked at him with a wince. “I was really hoping this would be a quick, easy mission. I feel like I jinxed us.” She smiled thinly. “Which is silly, of course, because there’s no such thing…but I was looking forward to our trip so much…” She tucked her elbows closer to her ribcage to conserve body heat… or maybe make herself smaller in undeserved shame.

“Well, if you can be faulted for that, then I’m just as much to blame. I’m really looking forward to it, too.” He felt the dark vise around his chest let loose entirely. “You’re going to love it.”

“I don’t know,” she teased, “Teal’c wasn’t too impressed.”

Jack scoffed. “Teal’c is a good man and I love him like a brother, but he doesn’t understand the zen of fishing.”

“Teal’c meditates on a daily basis. If he’s not the zen one of this group, I don’t know who is. Hate to say it, sir, but I probably would have disappointed you.”

Jack looked searchingly at her. He realized that while he’d been talking about going up to Minnesota like it was still happening, Carter had been referring to it in the past tense. Like it was a chance that had passed her by.

“Carter… are you trying to bow out?”

She paused, and he held his breath. It would be just like them if she did. Go too far only to backtrack when good sense and reality set in. He couldn’t even say he hadn’t expected it a little bit.

But she surprised him. After a moment, she shook her head. “No, sir. I’m not backing out. I’m tired of waiting to…” she stopped and considered her words. “I’m just tired of waiting.”

“Yeah.” He understood. *Boy,* did he understand.

A tension settled between them until Carter started to move. “I should go inside, sir… before I say something stupid.”

He should let her go, he knew that, but despite that he reached out and kept her seated with a hand on her arm. “Like what?”

She froze and stared at him, her energy sparking between them, then she took a steeling breath. “That one day the Air Force might not be a good enough reason not to.”

That felt monumental, like Atlas whispering the world was getting heavy. A rush of air left his lungs. Carter dipped her chin. “I’m sorry. It’s not fair of me to say that.”

And he got that. Knowing only made their working relationship harder.
“Well, I don’t disagree,” he finally answered.

She winced visibly, like that was the least helpful answer he could give.

Jack studied her closely. In a sense, he felt like this, them, had always been on Carter’s terms. Maybe because she was and always had been a better person than he was. “What do you want to do?” he asked gently.

“What I want to do, what I should do, and what I can do are three different things.” She raked her hands through her hair in frustration. “We don’t have a lot of options.”

Jack felt like his world was tipping on its side. They had never talked about options before. Maybe because they didn’t have any.

But dammit, one would think that if they both wanted this they would figure out something. Carter was a genius, for crying out loud!

“What if we talk timelines? Like, if things haven’t changed by the time you make lieutenant colonel…”

“If things haven’t changed, we’ll what?” Carter gave a humorless laugh. “Break up the best team the SGC has in the fight against the Goa’uld? And in doing so, put the entire planet at risk? How could we be that selfish?” She shook her head. “It just feels like we’re always going to be stuck.”

He wished he didn’t agree, but he’d told Jacob Carter essentially the same damn thing months ago.

That disobedient, criminal voice in Jack’s head whispered wickedly in his ear, and the words found their way to his mouth. “You know,” he ventured cautiously, “there is another option…”

Her head whipped around and she looked at him, eyes wide in shock. He just met her stare, unflinching. He knew what he was suggesting, and he knew it would fly in the face of every shred of honor Carter had. And he knew just mentioning it could tarnish her opinion of him irreparably.

“Col…” she started to say, then seemed to realize their ranks dare not be anywhere near this conversation. “Jack…”

His name on her tongue sent a flare of heat through him. “Sam, listen to me… I would never ask you to do that.”

She frowned, confused. “Then, why…”

“Because I want you to know that you need only ask.”

She gaped at him, thunderstruck. Then she began to scowl, a storm building behind her eyes. “How can you put that on me?”

“Because I’m not a good person.”

She gave him a withering look. “What you’re suggesting… it would jeopardize your career, too. You can’t tell me you don’t care about that.”

“Then I won’t, if that’s what you need to hear.” At her stunned, nearly-furious look, he added, “We both know if we got caught it would come down harder on you.” She was the junior officer and the woman. It wasn’t fair, but that was the US military. For that reason, Jack would never let anything illicit between them be his call. It happened on Carter’s word or not at all.
Carter sat rigid beside him, nearly shaking with anger. Her face was flushed and her hands clenched into fists. He couldn’t remember seeing her so mad outside of an engagement with the Goa’uld in a long time.

Without another word, Carter stood and stormed back into the hotel. There were no intact doors to slam, but Jack flinched like she’d slammed one anyway.

Jack felt the frigid cold along his side where she had so recently been, every bit of heat having left with her.

The dog approached him from the darkness and sat at his feet, looking up at him sympathetically.

“I think I just fucked up big time, buddy,” he told the dog as he gave it a scratch behind the ears. The dog huffed as though in agreement.

***********

The hike back to the gate the next day was painfully quiet. The macabre tone to the entire mission aside, the team was especially tense for a myriad of reasons.

Daniel was doing his ‘withdrawn angry scowling’ thing he did when he was upset. Many at the SGC incorrectly identified it as pouting, but it wasn’t. Because it wasn’t Daniel trying to get his way, it was Daniel who didn’t know how to express his grief. It was the remnants of a little boy who’d lost the very people he could have gone to for comfort. It was Daniel frantically trying to cope on his own, because even after all these years with SG-1 he still wasn’t used to looking to others for comfort.

Carter was barely speaking to anyone, though Jack felt her silent treatment was especially frosty toward him. He gave her space and didn’t push. He knew he’d stepped over the line big time last night, and the least he could do was back off.

Jack was quiet because he felt like his mouth had gotten him into enough trouble on this mission already. And he was mad at himself. If he had somehow damaged his relationship with Carter… they didn’t have nearly as much as he would have liked, but the friendship they did have was vital to him. He doubted he’d unwind until he had some indication how Carter wanted to proceed.

Teal’c, ever the silent strength of their team, seemed to be observing his teammates and wondering what inner crisis his Tau’ri friends had fallen into this time. He was also, as usual, above it all.

The dog, once again their travel companion, sensed the disquiet in the group and left Jack’s side periodically to nose at someone else’s hand. Carter and Daniel always broke from their dark ruminations to pet the animal. Teal’c gave the animal respectful nods, like the dog would understand Jaffa etiquette.

When it started to get dark, Jack broke his stretch of silence to order them to make camp. A light snow had started falling about four hours earlier, and it was already blanketing the world in a thin layer of soft white.

They were going to have to set up tents again, and Jack realized he’d have to speak to Carter.

She was dropping her pack and rolling her shoulders to work out the kinks when he walked up to her. “Carter.”

She turned to him, her expression wary. “Yes, sir?”
Jack studied her a moment, wished he could take it all back, then he stepped closer to drop his voice. “If you want to double up with Daniel tonight, I’ll understand.”

She looked at him a moment, expression unreadable, then she shook her head. “If it’s all the same to you, sir, I’d rather sleep with you.” When Jack raised his eyebrows, too afraid to hope, she smirked. “Daniel snores.”

Jack smirked. “That he does.” He went to leave when Carter’s hand shot out and grabbed his arm.

“Colonel? Could we talk?”

Jack looked over his shoulder at Teal’c and Daniel discussing the chances of finding anything dry enough to start a fire. The dog, now familiar with the camp-striking routine, had darted off into the trees to explore as soon as they stopped for the night. It was just him and Carter.

Jack canted his head away from the direction of camp, suggesting privacy. “Care to take a walk?”

She nodded and visibly girded herself for the impending conversation.

They wanted to speak alone, but they weren’t stupid and they still held to their training. They never left sight of the camp, just moved far enough away to speak without being overheard.

When he was confident even Teal’c and his excellent hearing wouldn’t be able to eavesdrop, Jack started. “Look, Carter… I’m sorry about what I said last night. It was out of line, and I won’t put up a fight if you want to report me.”

Carter stared down at her feet as they strolled the far reaches of the campsite’s boundaries. She seemed to mull his words over before she spoke. “That depends… are you sorry because you didn’t mean it, or are you sorry because I got angry?”

Jack’s stride broke and he hesitated. “Um… okay, honestly, I don’t know what the right answer is here.”

She smirked faintly. “The right answer is the truth.”

Jack swallowed. “Okay, then truthfully…? I meant it.” He winced and threw a worried look at her. “But that doesn’t mean you have to do anything with that. I would never ask you to risk your career for me.”

She stopped and turned to face him. The day was colder than the others they’d spent on PG1-319 – her nose and cheeks were rosy from the chill, and her eyes seemed to leap from her face in a brilliant winter blue. Pale gold locks poked out from under the green cap she’d donned for the added warmth while snowflakes gathered on the bill and perched across her shoulders.

“Fact is, sir… I said it first.” She dropped her gaze self-consciously.

“Yeah, well… you did try to leave before you ‘said anything stupid’… I just wouldn’t let you. Which I guess is further proof you are way smarter than I am.”

She huffed an almost-laugh, her face still down-turned and half-hidden beneath the bill of her cap. He wondered if she wasn’t doing that intentionally to hide from him.

“If you don’t mind me asking, if we’re both of the same mind on the subject… why did you get pissed?”
Carter sighed, annoyed, and looked up at him. Her gaze was icy. “Because I count on you to keep me in check. Just like I keep you in check. This,” she gestured between them, “is more than one person can handle. And for you to just give up and tell me it’s all on me, that I’m the only one keeping us in line… I can’t take on that much responsibility. I don’t trust myself to do the right thing if you’re not trying to do the right thing, too. I can’t be strong for both of us.”

“Okay.” Jack thought about that, then nodded. “Okay, I think I get it. And if both of us staying sharp and making sure we don’t step over the line is what you need… then I can do that.”

Carter looked aggrieved. “But that’s not what I want.”

He considered her a moment. “No, but I think it’s what you need.”

She looked at him in distress, and seeing the typically confident and kickass Samantha Carter freaking out broke his heart.

“Listen, Sam… you know I care about you.”

“Same here,” she mumbled. “That’s the problem.”

“Yeah… but beyond caring about you as someone who means more to me that the Air Force approves of, I care about you as a friend. And I will always be there for you. No matter what.”

“Good. Because I can’t lose you.”

He was taken aback. “You were worried about that?”

She nodded.

“What, over this little spat?” Jack smirked. “Hell, it doesn’t even really qualify as an argument. I mean, people usually fight because they want different things.”

“Holy Hannah,” Carter tipped her head back, face turned skyward. “This is such a fucked up situation.”

“Won’t argue that.” He leveled a look at his 2IC. “How about this… until the day when you want things between us to change – and I mean completely, one hundred percent want it, to hell with the consequences – then I’ll row this boat right along with you.”

Carter nodded slowly, a mixture of grief and relief in her expression. “Thank you, sir. Because I really need your help on this.”

He would take solace in the fact she needed his help to hold their ranks between them because she wanted him that much. Enough that if she were the only one holding the line, the line would not hold.

“I got your back.”

She eyed him pointedly. “But, sir…?”

“Yeah?”

“I meant what I said, too. At some point, loyalty to the Air Force won’t be enough.”

He couldn’t help a slow grin splitting his face. “Copy that.”
Carter beamed back, and just like that the tension that had haunted them since the previous night was
gone. They were back on familiar ground – both wanting, both aware of the mutual attraction, but
both of them committed (for now) to resisting it. All while both of them privately held on to the
promise of ‘one day’.

Odds were that day would never come – not before something killed one or both of them – but it felt
more possible than it did yesterday.

That sent an altogether different shiver down Jack’s spine.

***********

When they got back to camp, Daniel and Teal’c had cobbled together a small fire and pitched both
tents. The flame didn’t look like it would last long, especially since the snow was coming down
thicker with every passing hour, but they would take the warmth while they could.

Jack came up alongside Daniel and the archaeologist looked between him and Carter. “You two
work out whatever was going on between you?”

Jack shouldn’t have been surprised that Daniel noticed the tension between them, even when he was
consumed with his own worries.

“Yeah,” Jack answered simply. Then he reached up and squeezed the nape of Daniel’s neck. “You
doing all right?”

“Not really. I keep picturing all their faces. I can’t believe they’re all gone. They were peaceful
people.” He glowered into the sputtering fire. “I hate the Goa’uld.”

“I think we’re all co-presidents of that club.”

Daniel’s half-hearted smile didn’t reach his eyes, but at least he tried.

SG-1 pulled out MREs and huddled around the fire to eat. Carter sat practically pressed against
Jack’s left side under the pretense of sharing body heat. The dog leaned against Jack’s right side,
patiently waiting and hoping for a share of the food. Between the two of them, Jack hardly noticed
the cold.

Halfway through a painfully-quiet meal, Daniel turned to Teal’c. “What did they do with all the
livestock?”

“What’s that?” Jack butted into the conversation.

“A lot of the land we walked through between the gate and town… the first time we were here, it
was full of cattle being tended by cowboys on horseback. It was like a cattle drive every day. But the
only animal we’ve seen this time besides crows and that dog was one spooked horse. Where did they
all go?”

“They were likely taken through the Stargate to feed Ba’al’s army,” Teal’c answered.

“Bastards could have just taken the animals and let the people live,” Carter grumbled as she stabbed,
uninterested, at her food.

“Not really the Goa’uld MO,” Jack noted.

Carter sighed, giving up on dinner, and leaned across Jack to put it down in front of the dog. “Here
you go, Fido.” The dog scrambled to his feet and wagged his tail energetically as Carter surrendered
her meal.

“His name’s not Fido,” Jack said off-handedly, then he looked down at the nameless dog chowing
down on Carter’s leftovers. While the odds his name were Fido were slim to none, the fact remained
that at some point he did have a name. His owner called him something, had begged for his life from
the Jaffa using a name. A name they would never know.

Suddenly, the dog reminded him of Cassandra. The last survivor of a world wiped out by the
Goa’uld.

“I feel kind of bad we never gave him a name,” Daniel commented. “Even if we are going to have to
leave him behind tomorrow.”

Jack gritted his teeth at that last statement. Not because Daniel was wrong, but because Jack had
started to think of the dog as part of the team, and going back to Earth without him ran counter to
Jack’s creed of ‘no one gets left behind’.

“We could still give him a name, even if it will only be for one night,” Carter said, latching on to the
topic as a welcome distraction from all the death and destruction around them. “The colonel shot
down Fido, so what about Rover?”

“His name’s not Rover,” Jack protested.

“All due respect, sir, you have no idea what his name is.”

“Well, it’s not Rover.”

“How do you know?”

“This is how.” He looked over at the dog. “Hey, Rover.” The dog’s closest ear twitched toward him,
but that was it as far as his enthusiasm to respond went.

Carter half-smiled. “Okay, so it’s probably not Rover.”

“Or Fido.”

“I don’t know, he seemed pretty excited when I called him Fido.”

“He was excited because you gave him food, Carter. You could have called him Dirtbag and he
would have been thrilled.”

Carter huffed a near laugh that hurt so good for Jack.

Even still, Jack felt himself warming to the spirit of the discussion. “I say we name him Daniel.”

Daniel frowned. “Um…”

“Why Daniel?” Carter asked.

“I just really like the idea of having a Daniel who does what he’s told.”

Daniel scowled at Jack while Carter tried to stifle a laugh.

“You know, Jack,” Daniel said with measured words, “you’re not as funny as you think you are.”
“Oh, I think I’m hilarious.” He glanced over at Carter. “Wouldn’t you agree, Major?”

She shook her head adamantly. “Oh no, sir, I’m not taking a side on this one.”

Jack feigned injury at that, then conceded with a shrug. “Wise woman.”

“I do not believe naming the dog Daniel would be wise, O’Neill,” Teal’c chimed in.

“Thank you,” Daniel said.

Teal’c cast a wry look toward the young linguist. “When Colonel O’Neill yells at you, Daniel Jackson, the dog would be confused and not understand what it had done wrong.”

Daniel’s jaw dropped while Jack and Carter both laughed aloud. The dog, done with dinner and licking its chops happily, caught the positive energy of the group and leapt at Jack to lick his face.

“You all think you’re so funny,” Daniel grumbled, but a twinkle in his eye gave away the fact he wasn’t really angry… not when it got all his friends in a better mood after the botched mission they’d had.

“Okay, fine,” Jack relented. “Not Daniel. Or Fido or Rover.” He gave it some thought for a minute, studying the dog in question, then he grinned when he had a brilliant idea. “Nope, I’ve got it. Nick.”

“Nick?” Carter queried.


“The very one.”

Teal’c looked aggrieved.

Carter smiled. “I like it.”

“You would,” Daniel groused. “Surely we can come up with something better.”

“Nothing doing. Carter and I agree. He’s Nick now.”

Daniel threw up his hands and clearly washed his hands of them.

The dog stood beside Jack, watching him intently with an expression in his dark eyes that said he was eager to please. Jack pet him along the back, knocking a dusting of snow off the fur, and fought to keep his smile in place when he thought about tomorrow when they would have to leave him – Nick – behind.

***********

After the first night in the tents – and the night in the hotel, where the dog insisted on sleeping in Jack’s room – Jack didn’t even bother trying to ban Nick from the tent he and Carter were sharing. He let his second in command get in and settled first before he and his canine companion joined her.

Carter was already tucked inside her sleeping bag when Nick laid down beside her, nuzzling her neck and delighting in the giggle it elicited.

“Ah! What have I told you about giggling?” Jack chided.

“Sorry, sir. It tickles.” She reached up and wrapped her arm around the dog’s neck. Nick settled in
beside her, and Carter smiled softly to herself as she pet the dog, peace falling around her like the
evening snow.

Jack was quite honestly captivated. How could his life have this, and yet not have this?

“Colonel?”

“Huh?” At her questioning look, he shook his head. “It’s nothing.” He moved toward his sleeping
bag. “Just… I thought you liked cats.”

“I do… that doesn’t mean I don’t like dogs, too.”

“Most people are usually one or the other.”

Carter carded her fingers through Nick’s coat, her ivory through his brindle. “All things being equal,
I actually like dogs better. But between the hours I’ve always kept at various universities and labs,
cats just worked better for my lifestyle.”

“Haven’t I always told you that you spend too much time at work?” he scolded playfully as he
wrested into his own sleeping bag. It was tricky with the dog already in his ‘spot’ between them and
refusing to budge over to give Jack room to maneuver.

“Yes, sir,” Carter said in answer to his question, rhetorical though it was. She pillowed her head on
her folded arm and rubbed the dog’s ears in turn. Nick closed his eyes contently at the massage.

Jack got himself situated in his sleeping bag and turned on his side facing her. He ended up watching
her with the dog for a moment, noting the contentment on Carter’s face, before he asked, “Do you
ever miss Schrodinger?”

“A little… although these days I’m barely keeping my plants alive. If I had a pet right now, I’m sure
one of my neighbors would report me to the ASPCA for abandonment.”

Jack often wondered what all their respective neighbors must think of them. Would Carter
disappearing for a week and leaving a cat home alone even be noticed amid their permanently
strange hours?

He understood what Carter meant, though. It was the same reason he didn’t currently own a dog.

He propped his head on one hand. “You know, my life doesn’t feel quite right when I don’t have a
dog.” At Carter’s quizzical look, he continued, “Don’t you think it says a lot about this team’s
workaholic tendencies that none of us have pets?”

“Daniel has fish.”

“That he is constantly replacing because they die.”

Carter snorted.

Jack reached over and roughed the scruff of Nick’s neck. “I do miss having a dog.” It was a part of
his old life that wasn’t intrinsically tied to Sara and Charlie. Since he was a kid, he’d always had
dogs. He’d wanted to get one right before Sara got pregnant, but she’d insisted they wait until
Charlie was older. He’d just talked Sara into it when…

Jack shoved the thought away and instead basked in the scene before him, a beautiful woman lying
beside him with a trusty pooch betwixt, using it as a balm for the pain that tried to crest within him.
“If you miss having a dog, then you should get one,” Carter said.

“You said it yourself, it’s not really practical. I’ve gone just as much as… well, okay not as much as you are, but close to it.”

“Then stop spending so much time on base.” She gave him a knowing look. “You hang around off-duty a lot when you don’t have to.” Usually pesterin Carter in her lab or giving Daniel a hard time in his.

He shrugged guiltily. She wasn’t wrong. He didn’t go home because there was nothing to go home to. That and the honest truth was he liked spending any free time he had around Carter. “Yeah, well… I’m pretty sure if I wasn’t hanging around keeping an eye on you, you’d be trying to weasel your way onto every off-world mission while I wasn’t looking.”

“Sir, that’s preposterous.” Carter smirked. “I wouldn’t volunteer to join the Marine team.”

Jack huffed. Then he shook his head. “Ah, who are we kidding? I’m not getting a dog anytime soon.”

“Why not?”

“Because I’d miss bugging you if I went home in my free time to take care of a dog.” It was a hard sacrifice to make, but in the end it seemed like he could have the tiny fraction of Carter he had now or a dog, but not both. Because his life was just that unfair.

When Carter didn’t press the issue, Jack could only assume that she didn’t want him to stop finding excuses to be around her, either.

In the silence that fell inside the tent, Carter spent a moment distractedly petting Nick. “Do you think he’ll be okay on his own when we leave?”

“I hope so.” He looked like the kind of dog that could fend for himself without human help. And maybe the settlement his owner had been traveling from hadn’t been attacked, and if it hadn’t, when the dog didn’t have SG-1 to follow, it might go home. That was an uncomfortable number of ‘ifs’ and ‘maybes’, though. “Kind of wish we could take him with us.”

She smiled sadly. “Hammond would tear you a new one.”

“Yeah, I know.” It was enough of a headache filling out the paperwork for human refugees – Hammond was not going to go through all that trouble on account of a dog.

The gloom that surrounded PG1-319 came back in full force and Jack rolled on to his back, dreading the journey home tomorrow. Stepping through the gate and leaving Nick behind would feel like leaving a kid behind.

He was starting to wish he’d listened to Daniel, who had warned him at the outset not to get attached.

**********

Their fourth day on PG1-319 was a dead calm cold that made the muscles in Jack’s neck ache from constant tension. The previous night’s snowfall clung to naked tree limbs and completely covered the path they had walked only days prior. The crypt-quiet, not even a whisper of a breeze to give artificial breath to the world, made Jack feel like he was being watched. And since they hadn’t encountered anyone living, he was left feeling like they were being watched by the dead.
The sky was heather gray and unmoving, the clouds seemingly stuck in their position in the sky. The world was monochrome save for the solitary SG team, a crawling olive drab centipede marching toward the Stargate.

Jack glanced at Carter walking alongside him. Even her colors looked washed out in the dreary light. Ashy and gray where she normally shined gold.

At the start of the hike, Jack had valiantly hidden his slight limp, but the longer their march dragged on, the more his stride started to hitch. He must have noticeably favored his right leg on one step, because Carter snapped out of her ruminations and looked over at him in unspoken concern.

He shook his head. There was nothing to be done for it this close to the gate but to get home. A couple Advil and a heating pad would fix him up as much as his busted body could be fixed up.

The dog was keeping pace alongside Jack, and the colonel still didn’t know how he was going to shake his shadow when they reached the Stargate. He dreaded to think he might have to drive the animal away and what it might take to get the dog to give up on them. He was hoping he’d have some ideas that wouldn’t be traumatizing for all parties before they reached the gate.

They were about fifteen minutes from the gate when Nick jerked to a sudden stop. Jack faltered, surprised, and looked back at the dog. It was staring intently into the trees off to the right, the hackles between his shoulders and along his back bristling. As Jack watched, the dog dipped his head, flattened his ears, curled his lips back from his sharp teeth, and began to growl.

“Hold up,” Jack called to his team. Teal’c and Daniel ahead stopped and turned while Carter, who had been abreast with him until he’d stopped to check on the dog, came back to his side instantly.

“Sir?”

Jack squinted in the direction the dog was growling. “I think we could have trouble.”

By then Teal’c and Daniel had joined them. Daniel frowned at the empty trees surrounding them and said, “Could be a squirrel.”

Jack’s gut said otherwise. “Maybe.”

“We haven’t seen any indication of hostiles since we got here,” Carter reminded him.

Nick growled louder.

“If it turns out to be a raccoon, you can all mock me later,” Jack decided. “Teal’c, you and I will scout in that direction,” he pointed in the direction the dog was warning them. “Carter, you and Daniel continue on to the gate. We’ll flush whatever has Nick antsy, and if it’s trouble, well… be ready to dial us out fast.”

“Yes, sir. Come on, Daniel.”

While Carter led Daniel back onto the path toward the gate, Jack nodded for Teal’c to move into the trees. Nick, thoroughly agitated, hurried to stick with Jack.

The two men crept through the deciduous trees looking for signs of the enemy only a few moments before the dog, perhaps tiring of their aimless pattern, bounded ahead and took the lead. Jack hesitated a moment, then gestured for Teal’c to follow the dog.

They were tracking mostly back toward the gate, albeit taking an indirect route, which only made
Jack’s suspicions worse.

Suddenly, Nick tensed. Then he raced forward.

Jack just stopped himself from calling after the dog before swearing under his breath and motioning for Teal’c to double-time after the animal.

They heard the ambush party of Jaffa before they saw them, because deep-voiced shouts of alarm, then anger, were overlaid over the sound of a dog barking and snarling.

Then came the distinct sound of staff weapons fire.

“Crap!” Jack muttered and started to run.

It was a scene of chaos when they caught up with Nick. Jaffa crouched behind a berm they’d made of dirt and snow hidden amid trees within sight of the gate. They had been plainly waiting to attack whoever had come through the gate, possibly not knowing their numbers or allegiance. Their surprise attack, however, had been thwarted by a dog.

Five Jaffa were scrambling for weapons and trying to get a bead on Nick as he dashed between the servants of Ba’al, snarling and biting and leaping out of reach before anyone could grab him. He’d surprised the Jaffa, and they were momentarily clumsy, but they wouldn’t stay that way for long.

Jack put his shoulder into a tree for partial cover, brought up his P-90, took aim, and fired.

Bullets rained on the armor plate of the nearest Jaffa, sending him staggering and eventually falling when a few lucky rounds found weak spots in the armor.

Teal’c leveled his staff weapon and shot another. Then he dove for cover behind a tree that was quickly blown to pieces when the Jaffa aiming for him hit the trunk.

Out of the corner of his eye, Jack saw Daniel and Carter making a run for the DHD.

So did one of Ba’al’s goons. “Jaffa, kree!” He wheeled to bring his staff weapon to bear on the two younger members of Jack’s team.

Jack bolted from his cover and rushed toward the Jaffa, firing in controlled bursts and aiming high to avoid hitting the dog. The Jaffa got off a shot before forced to the ground by Jack’s barrage of bullets, severely wounded. Jack glanced briefly to see if anyone had been hit. Carter was hauling Daniel up off the ground and the two of them continued their dash toward the DHD.

“O’Neill!” Teal’c bellowed, and Jack turned just in time to see another Jaffa climbing over the berm and barreling toward Carter and Daniel.

Jack got in position and began to fire at the Jaffa’s back. Bullets ricocheted off the back plating the Jaffa wore and sped past to pepper the ground beyond. The sound of earth being torn up by bullets grabbed Carter’s attention, and she turned sharply to see the Jaffa coming toward them.

She snapped up her weapon and began to fire while Daniel ran for the DHD.

Jack wasn’t sure whose fire brought the Jaffa down in the end, his or Carter’s, but the Jaffa cramped with a scream all the same.

Jack turned to find Teal’c and Nick locked in battle with the last standing Jaffa. Teal’c had dropped his staff weapon at some point, as had the enemy Jaffa, and the two were struggling hand-to-hand.
Nick had his teeth sunk into the Jaffa’s calf, and the man was twisting and yelling, forced to divide his attention between the man trying to strangle him and the dog trying to tear his muscles free of his body.

The distraction was enough for Teal’c to land a crippling blow to the Jaffa’s head. He jerked, staggered, then folded to the ground. Nick released his hold and darted out from under the body before it landed on him.

A great horn sounded somewhere in the trees. The yells of a much larger force of Jaffa surging closer swelled from the stillness.

“Time to go!” Jack barked and waved at Teal’c to haul ass to the gate.

Teal’c retrieved his staff weapon and raced toward the gate. At that moment, Daniel input the final symbol and activated the center control. From the Jaffa ambush position, Jack watched the Stargate whoosh to life. Daniel scrambled with the GDO to send through the code.

Jack scaled the berm and was fast on Teal’c’s heels.

Without warning, a fireball erupted high on Teal’c’s back and he went down.

“Teal’c!” Carter yelled and raced forward to help their fallen friend. Daniel, unwilling to leave until he was ordered to, stood by the DHD watching in horror.

The next three seconds seemed to slow to a near stop.

Jack turned to look at where the shot had come from. He saw the second Jaffa he’d shot – apparently wounded, not killed – cradling his staff weapon in his damaged arms and aiming directly at Carter. Jack’s muscles jerked in order to bring his P-90 up to fire, but even as he did his instincts screamed it wouldn’t be in time. The Jaffa’s thumb moved over the firing control.

Out of nowhere, a black and brown blur lunged at the Jaffa. Teeth clamped down on one forearm just as the Jaffa fired. The dog’s attack was enough to throw the Jaffa aim off. The shot went wide, blasting the ground three feet to Carter’s left as she manhandled Teal’c to his feet and propelled him toward the gate.

Nick thrashed his head side to side with the Jaffa’s arm still locked between his jaws. The Jaffa dropped his staff weapon with a scream, then scrambled for something behind him.

“No!” Jack didn’t even realize he was yelling as he ran straight at the pair. Past his shoulder, Carter fired at the Jaffa, trusting him not to veer into the line of fire so she could cover him. Her aim was spot on, and the Jaffa was dead by the time Jack reached the scene of the battle.

Jack dropped to his knees next to the dog. He was alive, panting, bleeding.

The sound of the Jaffa reinforcements was growing dangerously loud. Dangerously close.
Without a second thought, Jack scooped the dog up into his arms and ran toward the gate. Carter was standing with her P-90 coughed against her shoulder, glaring into the trees at his back and preparing to open fire at the first sign of attack.

Blood soaked Jack’s uniform and made his grip on the body in his arms slippery, but he dare not stop. “Move, Major!” he ordered as he reached Carter’s position.

He didn’t have any hands free to cover their retreat, and she knew it. “Go!” she yelled back at him and began to slid-step backward in his wake.

The whine of staff weapons building power reached his ears like the buzz of a horde or wasps. He wanted to dress Carter down for defying his order to go ahead of him, but getting his ass through the event horizon would be the quickest way to get her through.

With a possibly dying dog in his arms, Jack raced through the gate and was spirited away from PG1-319.

***********

Jack stumbled on the SGC ramp as he reached the other side, clutching his cargo tighter and yelling, “Medic!”

They had already been summoned for Teal’c, who was sitting on a gurney being swarmed by Fraiser’s people. Fraiser herself looked up from Teal’c’s wound toward Jack and her eyes widened when she saw him covered in blood.

Carter barreled through the gate behind him yelling, “Close the iris!” and the heavy mechanical sound of the defense shield contracting shut grated on his nerves like nails on a chalkboard.

“Doc!” Jack hurried toward Fraiser and held out his patient.

She looked down and blinked. “Sir, that’s a dog.”

“Just help him!”

“Colonel, I’m not a veterinarian!”

“You’re a doctor, help him!” Jack realized he was shaky and took a breath. “Please.”

Fraiser looked uncertain and threw a look over her shoulder. It was only then that Jack noticed General Hammond in the gate room. “Colonel O’Neill?”

“General, please… he’s going to die if doc doesn’t do something.”

Puzzled but noting something in Jack’s demeanor, Hammond gave Fraiser a nod. Fraiser, looking out of her comfort zone, ordered a male nurse to collect the dog from Jack then the pair were rushing off into the bowels of the SGC.

Jack turned to Carter. “Are you all right?”

“Yes, sir. I came through just before the Jaffa broke through the tree line.”

The adrenaline that had propelled him through battle and rescue, the spike of fear when he thought he’d been about to watch Carter die, seemed to pull out of him in one massive rush, leaving him unsteady in the backwash. The sensation, or rather the intensity of it, surprised him. He had been in worse fights and not been nearly so rattled, but his heart felt like a tiny hummingbird in a hollow beer
barrel.

It was taking all his self-control not to reach out and clutch Carter’s arm just to be sure she was actually okay.

“Colonel,” General Hammond began in a tone of potential ire, “would you care to tell me what the hell is going on? And why in god’s name you brought an animal back with you?”

“Yes, sir…” Jack looked down at his hands red with blood. Nick’s, but god had it been so close to being Carter’s. It would have been hers if the dog hadn’t attacked the Jaffa when he did. Too damn close. “Permission to get cleaned up first?”

Hammond looked down at the colonel’s blood-soaked front and relented. “Very well. Debriefing in two hours.” With that, he turned and stalked off.

Jack stepped down off the ramp and went to Teal’c. “T? You okay?”

Teal’c’s expression was pinched with pain, but he was sitting up on his own and nodding. “I will heal.”

“Daniel?” Jack turned to his friend.

“I’m okay, Jack. Are you…?”

“Yes, I’m… none of this is mine.” He waved abstractly at his bloody clothing. He couldn’t erase from his mind that split second when he almost lost Carter. The Jaffa was going to get his shot off before Jack could stop him. In that nanosecond, he knew the Jaffa had the edge and Sam Carter was going to die.

But then she didn’t, but only because of a dog they had intended to leave behind.

He felt sick. “I’m going to hit the showers.” He had to get himself together before he faced Hammond.

************

In the end, Jack let Daniel and Carter do most of the talking during the debriefing with Teal’c missing, still in the infirmary being treated. Jack was freshly showered and in clean BDUs, but he still felt the taint of PG1-319 all over him. He kept wondering what would have happened if the dog hadn’t alerted them to the ambush waiting at the gate. At that point, he didn’t really care why the Jaffa were even there or where the hell they came from… it didn’t matter. All that mattered was that he’d come distressingly close to losing members of his team.

Hammond dismissed the rest of the team and waited until he and Jack were alone to face the colonel. “Care to tell me about this dog?”

“Just like Carter said, sir. We found him tied up next to his dead master, and when we set him free we couldn’t get rid of him.”

“And what possessed you to bring him back with you?” The general’s voice was no longer irate, just patiently curious. It was that almost fatherly tone he took sometimes, usually when one of his people was upset. Jack had to think it meant he still looked shaken and berated himself for that.

“I wasn’t really thinking much of anything at the time, sir. We were in the middle of a firefight, and I saw him go down and just… went and got him.” It had been reflex – at the time, not rescuing Nick
“I see.” Hammond tapped the conference table with his knuckles thoughtfully. “And what exactly do you propose we do with him?”

“Sir… with your permission, I’d like to keep him.” Jack swallowed. “If he lives, that is.”

Hammond frowned disapprovingly. “Colonel, the Stargate Program doesn’t operate so you can go out and adopt strays.”

Jack looked the general in the eye. “General Hammond, sir… that dog may have saved my entire team, and he definitely saved Carter. We might have walked right into that ambush if it hadn’t been for him. He’s earned a home, and I intend to give him one.”

Hammond studied Jack a moment, searching his face for something. Jack wasn’t sure if he ever found what he was looking for by the time he looked away. “All right, Colonel. I’ll allow it. Assuming he survives his injuries, you can have him. But only after he’s passed the same quarantine and health screens by a veterinarian that a dog entering this country from overseas would.”

Jack sagged in relief. “Thank you, sir. Am I free to go? I’d like to check on him.”

“Of course.” Just as Jack pushed back from the table, Hammond stopped him. “Jack? Is everything all right?”

Jack really didn’t know. “Can I get back to you on that, General?”

Hammond looked concerned with that answer, but gave a reluctant nod and sent Jack on his way.

***********

“I was able to stop the bleeding and stitch up his wound,” Fraiser explained when Jack walked into the isolation room where she was treating the dog. “The cut missed hitting any vital organs. I’m guessing the Jaffa was trying to stab him but mostly missed. He got lucky.”

“So he’s going to be okay?” Jack asked as he approached the table where the dog was laid out on his side. The hair on his side had been hastily shaved away and the twelve-inch line of stitches extended from his last rib, over his flank, and around to the top of his hip. It was easy to see where the Jaffa had been trying to gut him but the dog’s violent movement had turned the killing blow into a glancing one. It still looked bad, but at least he was still breathing. He was out cold with a human breathing mask cupped awkwardly around his nose.

“Sir… I can’t begin to tell you how irresponsible it was for me to treat him. I’m not trained to treat animals. I could just as easily have killed him trying to sedate him for surgery.”

“But you didn’t,” Jack said kindly.

Frasier sighed. “No, but I really don’t like that you put me in that position. I would have felt awful if I killed him by mistake.” She rubbed a hand over her forehead. “I’ve called in a veterinarian, the top vet in Colorado Springs, but even putting a rush on the paperwork to get her cleared to come on base it’s going to take time, to say nothing of the logistical nightmare of keeping the top-secret nature of the work at this base top-secret.”

“Thank you,” Jack said gently.

The softness of his voice ended her rant and she looked up at him, head cocked thoughtfully.
Jack reached down and pet the dog’s head. He could feel Fraiser’s eyes on him. “He saved Carter’s life.”

That apparently was all she needed to hear, because the inquisition ended.

They were alone in silence only a moment before the isolation room door opened and Carter came in. “Hey, Janet. How’s Nick?”

Fraiser’s eyebrows rose. “Nick?”

Carter came up alongside Jack and eyed the damage. “Ouch.”

“Doc did a good job,” Jack said. “He’s going to be okay.”

“I didn’t say that,” Fraiser said, aggrieved. “Honestly, I wouldn’t venture to make predictions about his chances of recovery until a vet takes a look at him.”

“He’s going to be fine,” Jack insisted, believing it. Fraiser regularly pulled their asses back from death’s door… it should be child’s play for her to do the same for Nick.

Carter nodded and reached down to massage the dog’s ears. “Hammond say anything about what’s going to happen with him?”

Jack looked over at Carter and started to smile. “Yep. He’s letting me keep him.”

Carter began to grin. “Really?”

“He’ll have to pass a buttload of health screenings, but… yeah.”

Their late night conversation on PG1-319 about dogs and how much Jack missed their presence in his life was shining out at him from her rich blue eyes. They were in danger of swallowing him whole, so Jack forced himself to look away. “Hey, Doc… think I could talk Cassie into dog-sitting for me when I’m off-world? I promise the pay’s good.”

Fraiser chuckled and shook her head. “I’m sure you could talk her into it. She’ll probably even do it for free.”

They could sort out all the details later. For the time being, Jack returned his attention to comforting the still-unconscious dog. The poor thing was in rough shape, and would be for a while, but Jack was strangely light. It felt like a victory in a life full of unfulfilled wishes. He spent so much of his energy consumed by the things in his life that were unattainable – namely Carter – that sometimes he felt like he was living his life on the ragged edge of drowning.

A dog wouldn’t make all that hardship go away, but it would certainly make the struggle a little easier.
Chapter 7

Jack is mesmerized by the way different suns shine gold in Carter’s hair. She rambles on about the science of alien suns – radiation levels, UV spectrum, life cycle, their nearness to or farness from the star, the number of suns present – but Jack knows his worlds for the way they play on Carter’s hair. The differences are subtle, but he’s a master at observation. Of this, at least. Honeyed, ash blonde, corn yellow, pale gold, straw-tinted, bleached platinum, steely almost-gray, cream, sandy, diluted blue-white, flaxen, tawny.

Jack didn’t know there were so many shades of blonde until he saw Carter become every one of them under the light of alien skies.

He can say with certainty he loves every permutation.

***********

“Hello, Mr. O’Neill!” the receptionist at the Colorado Springs veterinary hospital greeted him cheerfully when he walked through the door. “How are you today?”

“I’m doing all right, Stacy. How about yourself?”

“Oh, can’t complain.” She grinned. “Finally get to take him home today, huh?”

“Yep. Been looking forward to this all month.”

She chuckled. “I think he has, too. Just let me go find Dr. Walsh for you.” With that, the receptionist disappeared into the bowels of the clinic. Jack pondered the posters on the wall reminding owners to spay and neuter, protect their dogs against heartworms, and a cheesy kitten inspirational poster. He’d gotten to know the signage well during Nick’s month-long quarantine stay at the clinic.

Jack was waiting only a minute before Stacy returned with another woman in tow. “Colonel O’Neill,” Sharon Walsh, DVM, greeted him and held out her hand.

Jack shook it. “Hey, Doc Walsh. So, do I get to spring Nick today?”

“You sure do. Come on back.”

Jack fell into step behind the vet as they walked toward the back of the clinic.

As they traversed the narrow hallway, Sharon Walsh said to him over her shoulder, “I wasn’t sure which one of you was going to show up to take him home today, you or Sam.”

Jack hummed noncommittally. He knew Carter had been coming to visit Nick at the clinic nearly as much as he had, though they had not come together at any point. He had a nagging suspicion Sharon Walsh thought he and Carter were a couple. A misunderstanding he had never bothered to correct… mostly because he didn’t want to talk about it.

Frankly, his feelings toward Carter were guarded as hell since PG1-319.

They exited the main building through the back, moved along a paved walkway to a second, smaller building, and went inside.

It looked like a combination kennel and examination room, and in the cage against the back wall a certain brindle dog with white paws and a blaze on his face was wagging his tail frantically the
second he recognized Jack.

“Heya, Nick!” Jack called out.

The dog yipped and tap-danced anxiously to be set free. After a month under observation, he was beyond ready to get out of the clink.

Sharon opened the cage door and Nick raced to Jack. Jack knelt to properly receive the attention. Nick did not disappoint – he showered Jack’s face with kisses.

“You’ll be happy to know he’s perfectly healthy,” Sharon reported while Jack was being loved to within an inch of his life. “He came through quarantine without a hint of illness, he’s been brought up on all of his shots, and the wound on his side looks great.” The stitches had come out two weeks ago, and between the four weeks to heal and for the hair to grow back (not quite completely, but enough to no longer have a bald spot), he almost looked good as new.

And, finally, Jack got to take him home.

“Thanks, doc,” Jack said as he pushed Nick away and stood. Nick whined like he wasn’t done adoring Jack, then leaned against his legs as if to say ‘if you’re thinking of leaving me here again, you’ve got another think coming’.

“Sam was asking about any exercise restrictions he might have the last time she was here,” Sharon informed Jack, “but I told her he doesn’t have any. Given the extent of his injury when I first saw him, I wasn’t sure how quickly he’d bounce back, but I’d say he’s in ship shape. He’s a hardy guy, that’s for sure.”

“All right,” Jack responded, trying not to sound stilted talking about Carter and whatever conversations she’d had with the veterinarian. The veterinarian who had clearly gotten the impression that he and Carter owned Nick together.

“Do you have any other questions before I send you two home?” Sharon asked.

“Nope, I think we’re good. I really appreciate everything you’ve done for him.”

“My pleasure.”

“What do you say, Nick? You ready to go home?”

The dog looked up at him and started to fidget excitedly as if to say ‘hell yes!’.

Jack clipped a leash to Nick’s collar and led him out of the quarantine building. Nick tried to pull him in every direction at once, elated to finally be free, and Jack indulged the poor guy on his first freedom walk.

They were stopped under a tree Nick felt compelled to lift his leg on when Jack’s cell phone began ringing in his pocket.

“Hello?”

“Jack! Hey! It’s me. You’re picking Nick up today, right?”

“I’m watching the big hero piss on a tree as we speak.” Nick stepped away from the tree, pleased with his work, and cocked his head at Jack. “But you knew that already, and I know that tone of voice. You’re scheming something, Daniel, so spill it. What’s up?”
“Well… what would you say to throwing Nick a welcome home party?”

“I’d say he’s a dog and he won’t know the difference if he’s greeted by a posse of adoring fans or not.”

Daniel sighed, perturbed. “Come on, Jack. It’ll be fun. It’ll be like a team night, but with dogs. How can you possibly object to that?”

Jack narrowed his eyes at a squirrel up in the branches, but only because Daniel wasn’t there for him to scowl at. “You’re already at my house, aren’t you?”

“Kind of?” A pause. “Is that really not okay? I know we didn’t ask first, but we just figured you’d be fine with it.”

‘We’… so Teal’c and Carter were there with him.

Jack sighed in resignation. “No, it’s fine.” He couldn’t avoid his team forever. He’d already been ducking out of rooms that Carter just happened to be in more than he could pass off as coincidence for the past month. Maybe Daniel had the right idea with a get-together.

“Great! Oh, and Janet and Cassie were going to drop by later. Cassie’s been dying to meet the wonder dog who saved Sam’s life.”

Jack snorted. “As well she should be. He’s pretty awesome.” Jack tried to concentrate on Cassie coming over, which always brightened his day, to avoid thinking about the ugly thing he had going on with Carter at the moment. “Look, I’m about to head out, so I’ll be home in a few.”

“Okay! See you soon!” With that, Daniel hung up.

Jack closed his phone and looked down at Nick. The dog was watching him intently, a solemn aura of support in his brown eyes. Jack wondered if the animal had noticed that the two people he’d slept sandwiched between on PG1-319 had not come to see him together.

“Nick, buddy… I hate to tell you this, but your new human is a mess. It’s a flaw I’m hoping you can overlook.”

Nick moved closer to him and nudged his hand with his muzzle.

“And that right there is why dogs are my favorite people. Well, next to my team, of course. Crazily enough, I’d probably have to rank my teammates above dogs. Although Daniel can be a pain in the ass sometimes.” Jack shook his head ruefully. “Guess that’s what I get for giving him a key. And his own room. Between you and me, Mr. Legend, all of SG-1 is one giant Gordian knot.” With a shrug, Jack started toward his truck, “Come on, boy, let’s go see what kind of party Uncle Danny has planned.”

************

As far as dog parties went, Daniel actually came through with a pretty good one. Jack figured he’d be set on dogfood and treats for a month, not to mention enough chew toys to ensure he’d be tripping over them in the dark in every single room of his house.

Having Nick stuck in quarantine for a month gave Jack time to get his home ready for a dog, and a fresh cedar privacy fence encircled his entire backyard. He’d enlisted Teal’c’s help on the fence work… but not Carter’s or Daniel’s. He’d been dodging Carter, and by not inviting Daniel either, he hoped it wasn’t quite as obvious.
Luckily, Carter and Daniel were always finding things to do… or people were finding things for them to do at the SGC. Theirs were never idle hands (or brains). Carter in particular had been spending a lot of time off-world with SG-9 making short-term visits to P4X-103, what Jack had unaffectionately dubbed the ‘Earthquake Planet’, setting up remote monitoring equipment to study its gravitational phenomena. Jack was pretty sure her busy schedule kept his avoidance behavior under the radar.

When they got to Jack’s house, Nick was happy to see everyone on SG-1, but he gravitated toward Carter. Considering she’d been to the vet’s office to see Nick often enough for the staff to assume he and Carter were an item, even with her proverbial dance card full helping SG-9, Jack didn’t wonder if Nick thought he was theirs, too.

Good thing dogs weren’t kids, or Jack would have to put the poor, confused guy in therapy.

Jack was just putting hamburgers on the grill when Fraiser and Cassandra showed up. Cassie had JJ with her, the shiba inu Jack had given Cassie when she first got to Earth. The dog’s name, short of ‘Jack Junior’, was an endless source of teasing from Daniel. It didn’t matter how many times Jack tried to defend the choice – Cassie had been new to the planet and knew a grand total of about four Earth boy names at the time – Daniel never passed up an opportunity to give Jack a hard time about his doggy namesake.

JJ and Nick took to one another like long lost brothers and immediately started playing, SG-1 and the Fraisers ate a late lunch outside, then the highest item on the agenda seemed to be relaxing and enjoying their rare collective day off.

All in all, not a bad day. And he’d been able to avoid Carter without actively avoiding Carter… there were enough distractions that Jack spent most of the day near Carter without having to talk to her.

He thought he was clever… until Daniel joined him on the deck.

Jack was sitting in one of his deck chairs drinking a beer and watching the gathering in his backyard. Teal’c was walking the fence admiring their handiwork like it was a platoon inspection. Carter and Fraiser were sitting on a blanket in the grass watching Cassie throw a ball for the dogs. Nick was faster, but JJ was the one who understood the concept of ‘fetch’… every throw turned into JJ chasing Nick down to steal the ball from him in order to take it back to Cassie for her to throw again.

Daniel scaled the deck steps and pulled up the second chair next to Jack’s. “Hey, Jack.”

“Daniel.” Jack glanced sidelong at his friend, then gestured with his beer out at the yard party that oddly reminded him of a scene from Alice in Wonderland. “Not a bad shindig.”

Daniel nodded, letting his pause hang just long enough to be damning before he asked, “So… are you actually going to talk to Sam, or…?”

Jack looked over at Daniel, struggling to school his expression. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Daniel gave him a disappointed look. “Come on, Jack… you’re avoiding her.”

“Am not.”

“Are too.” Daniel frowned. “She’s noticed, you know.”

Jack winced.
“Did you really think she wouldn’t? She’s not stupid.”

“I know she’s not.” Jack narrowed a look at Daniel. “Is that what this party was all about? Getting me to talk to Carter?”

“No. Well, not entirely. Two birds, one stone.” Daniel shrugged, unapologetic.

“None of the guys at the SGC believe me when I tell them what a devious little shit you can be.”

“Thanks, I guess.” Another pointed silence. “You want to talk about it?”

“Nope.”

“Jack, come on… whatever’s bothering you, you can’t keep giving Sam the silent treatment.”

Jack stubbornly held his tongue.

Daniel sighed in frustration. “Fine, don’t talk to me, but please talk to her. You’re being an ass, and she doesn’t deserve that.” With that, Daniel got up and rejoined his friends in the yard.

Citing homework and an early morning shift respectively, Cassandra and Janet were the first ones to leave, taking Nick’s new buddy JJ with them. Not long after that, Daniel offered to drive Teal’c back to the mountain on his way home. Jack was almost certain it had been orchestrated that way so that Carter would be the last one left.

The long-overdue encounter it foreshadowed made him anxious as hell.

Just to have something to do, he began picking up the trash left behind by his guests.

Carter started to help him clean up without saying a word. It was silent between them, but not the comfortable kind it usually was. It was fraught with the month of avoided conversations, weighted down by all the things they should have said if they’d had anything resembling a healthy relationship, and Jack knew that was his fault. If he were a bigger person, he’d take that to mean it was his job to talk first.

Instead, Carter had to do it. “Sir…”

“Well…” He crammed the last of the dirty paper plates into the kitchen trashcan and looked at her. “He’d been seeing her obliquely all afternoon, stealing glances from the corner of his eye but never looking directly at her. Like she was the sun and he could burn his eyes if he stared.

And it did kind of feel like something irreversible happened inside him every time he looked at her. Like a fool, he stared. She was wearing a well-worn pair of faded blue jeans and a black blouse with a colorfully-stitched dragon dancing across her chest. It had an oriental look to it that clashed with the casual cast of her pale jeans; it must have been another gift from Aunt Susan.

And yet somehow the green, yellow, red, and blue dragon played against her colors beautifully. The yellow in her hair, the red in her lips, the blue in her eyes. She was a mythical creature… or may as well be for as much chance Jack had of catching her.

She was rare and coveted and Jack couldn’t look at her without reliving that split-second on PG1-319 when he’d been about to watch her die.

Something must have lanced across his face, because Carter’s expression tightened. “Sir… are you mad at me?”
“What?”

“You’ve been avoiding me since PG1-319.”

“No, I haven’t.” When Carter gave him a ‘don’t bullshit me’ look, he gestured at Nick lying sacked out in the hallway, worn out from playing with JJ and Cassie for hours. “I’ve just been busy with Nick, that’s all.”

“No, sir. It’s not just that you haven’t dropped by my lab lately, you’ve barely spoken to me since PG1-319.” She dropped her eyes then, suddenly timid. “I knew you weren’t going to want to leave town until Nick was released, but I thought we would at least start planning our trip to Minnesota.” She returned her eyes to him, a look in them that let him know she was hurt. “But you haven’t said a word about it.”

Jack tensed.

“Do you even still want to go?”

Jack inhaled to answer and found everything, the words and the air, stuck in his chest. He had no clue how to answer that.

Carter looked wounded by his silence. “So I want to know how I screwed up, because I must have for you to freeze me out like this.”

“No, Carter, you… you didn’t do anything wrong.” Jack sighed and leaned back against the counter, defeated. “Look, this is my… mess.”

She narrowed her eyes. “All due respect, sir, but it’s not just your mess. You’ve been practically ignoring me, and I think I deserve to know why.”

He couldn’t really deny that… never had, in fact. He’d just been too chicken shit to sit down and talk about it.

Looked like he didn’t have a choice anymore. With weary resignation, Jack went to his fridge and grabbed two beers. He handed one to Carter, who lifted her eyebrows in silent question.

“If we’re talking about this, I’m going to need a drink… and I suspect you will, too.”

Dread, acceptance, and understanding crowded behind her irises.

“Come on,” Jack bade and headed back outside onto the deck. He reclaimed his chair from earlier, and Carter sat down in the one Daniel had pulled up alongside his. It was a strange recreation of the team night when they’d sat on the deck together sharing a glass of wine.

In hindsight, he couldn’t understand how his realization on PG1-319 could have possibly been a surprise.

Nick had stirred from his nap when his humans started leaving and followed them out onto the deck. When they sat down, the dog lay beside Carter’s chair, and she absently reached down to pet him while keeping her eyes on Jack.

Jack took a couple of swallows of his beer before he spoke. “Back on PG1-319, I had a moment when I realized exactly why the regs exist.”

When he didn’t volunteer anything else, Carter asked, “Is this about our, uh… conversation?”
“No. Yes. Maybe. It just hit me how much we should not have had that conversation at all. Either of them. Hell, any of them.”

“Sir…” Carter pulled a face like she’d bitten into something sour, the face she made last time when she’d used his rank during one of these conversations. “Jack…”

“No, see, that’s exactly the problem.”

“What is?”

“We put this possibility out there, and even if we both knew ever getting there was a longshot, we still put it on the map. Then it was a thing, and it didn’t matter how many sirs you put in front of it, it still did damage.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I almost watched you die, Carter. I would have if it hadn’t been for that dog.”

“You’ve seen me have countless brushes with death before.”

“Yeah, but we’d made this quasi-promise, and I didn’t realize how much it meant until… you nearly got killed, and I was really fucking close to losing it.” Even Hammond had seen something very wrong in Jack’s post-mission behavior. He figured he’d escaped a psych eval by the skin of his teeth, and probably only then because he’d kept his ass off base unless he was required to be there.

Carter stared at him, speechless.

“What about next time? If we’re off-world somewhere and you get killed… I wouldn’t be able to keep it together. I could get Daniel or Teal’c killed because I fell apart over losing you.” He wasn’t sure which part of that made him feel sicker… losing Carter or being responsible for losing Daniel and Teal’c, too. Grief or guilt. He knew both too fucking well.

Carter looked down at her untouched beer and pressed her lips together in thought. “So you’ve been avoiding me because you were panicking?”

“Well, I think that’s a little harsh but… I’ve just been trying to figure out how the hell to make this work.”

“And?”

Jack shrugged. “I got nothing. I mean, it’s not like I can just not care about you.” That wasn’t a choice. At this point, it felt like Carter was written into his DNA.

“Do you want to know what I think?” Carter asked.

“Always.” She was way smarter than he was, after all. He’d have to be an idiot not to hear her thoughts on the matter.

“I think everyone on SG-1 would be devastated if a teammate died. I’d be a wreck if I lost you… but I’d be a mess if I lost Daniel or Teal’c, too. Saying you’d be torn apart by my death doesn’t make me special among the team, it makes me just like everyone else on the team.”

“Not like this, Carter. This is different and you know it. I made a place for you.” In his life, in his future, in the dreams he carried of a life beyond duty and service.

“Did you, sir? Or was I already there?”
Jack flinched. “Okay, but it’s one thing to imagine you there one day… it’s another for you to tell me you’d be there waiting.” Jack shook his head. “It’s a hope I can’t afford.”

“Are you really going to deny yourself hope?”

“You don’t understand, I have to.” Her smallest mercies were supernovas in his world. The grace of her smile could save him from the darkness, and the scary reality was that maybe among the shadows was the only place where he was useful.

Carted bit her lip and looked away… probably to hide the wetness in eyes. “So… what, then? Where does that leave us?”

“I don’t know.”

Carter took a shaky breath and put her beer on the deck between their chairs. “I think I should request a transfer to another team.”

Jack could swear the temperature dropped to absolute zero. “What?! Why?”

She looked at him then, pain in the lines of her face, paleness in her cheeks, and redness rimming her eyes. “Because you say you can’t be close to me because it would be a danger in the field, but whatever this is right now – whatever’s been going on the last month – that’s just as dangerous.” She looked at him pointedly. “Sir, you can’t even talk to me. How long before you think that backfires on us in enemy territory? Sooner or later, if we keep going out there with the team like this, someone’s going to get killed. So if we can’t be close and we can’t stay away from each other… I don’t see another option.”

“No, there has to be another option. Splitting up the team is unacceptable.”

“Avoiding me is unacceptable!”

His control reaching a boiling point, Jack turned sharply in his chair to face her, accidentally knocking his beer to the deck and startling Nick when the glass shattered. “Come up with another option, Sam.” It came out a plea and an order. He practically begged her to come up with some brilliant idea he’d never even considered. That’s what she always did.

Carter glared back at him, though whether she was mad at him or their impossible situation he didn’t know.

In the end, she looked down at the mess of spilled beer and broken glass on the boards at their feet. “We should clean this up.”

Was she talking about the glass or their fucked up relationship?

“Yeah,” he agreed softly. “Just tell me what to do.”

Carter’s head snapped up to him and her eyes went wide. He knew it was because he’d put her in the position of giving him orders. And at that moment, he would do anything Carter said. If she told him to retire, he would. If she insisted transferring was the only viable option, he’d bite back his grief and rage and let her. If she lunged forward and kissed him, he’d give as good as he got. He was waiting on her word, his future in her hands.

Carter blinked a few times, then she cleared her throat. “Do you have a broom and dustpan?”

The question felt like it came out of nowhere, despite the mess at their feet, and he stared blankly a
moment before he could move. “Sure. Hold on.” Jack went into the house, found the cleaning tools, and returned to the deck to find Carter picking up the larger shards of glass in her hands.

“Don’t… you’ll get hurt,” he warned gently.

Carter looked down at her palm, already cut in thin lines and blooming pinpricks of red. “Too late.”

God, the layers of their talks would be the death of him.

Jack nudged her out of the way and swept up the mess. They both carried their wreckage into the house and dumped it in the trash. Then Carter went to the sink and ran cold water over the tiny cuts on her palm.

Jack came up beside her and watched quietly as Carter smoothed her thumb over the crisscross of cuts. There were more than he’d suspected.

“What did you do?” he asked, taking her wounded hand in his, “Make a fist with them?”

Carter stood perfectly still as he cradled her hand. At length, she said, “You can’t ignore me, Colonel.”

“Yeah, I know.” He ducked his head to try and catch her eyes. “But you get that I can’t hold out hope for us either, right?” If they made it that far and they ended up together when it was all said and done, then fine, but he couldn’t cling to it as a sure thing. Having a light at the end of the tunnel only made not reaching it harder. If he had to bear the burden of the weight of the world, he’d just as soon it never be lifted… the reprieve would only make him comprehend his suffering that much more keenly.

Carter got that fierce look on her face he normally only saw when a piece of technology was vexing her… or a misogynist pig was testing her patience. It was Carter about to rewrite the laws of physics or break some asshole’s jaw. “I’ll think of something,” she said with savage determination.

“That’s all I need to hear.” He trusted her. Even when he didn’t trust himself, he trusted her.

“I should go,” Carter said at last, pulling away from Jack with obvious reluctance.

“You sure you’re good to drive with that hand?”

Carter gave him a small smile. “I’ve gotten myself home in worse shape than this.” He wasn’t sure if she meant her hand or her heart. She reached down and kissed Nick on the head. “See you later, Nick. Take care of Jack for me.”

And with that, she was gone. And Jack was still a tangled knot of conflict and misery, but he was going to let himself hope there might be an answer to their untenable situation, and his genius 2IC would find it.

***********

There was a stand-off happening in the O’Neill house.

On one side was Nick, ears pricked and attention laser-focused on Jack. On the other side was Jack with his Simpsons yoyo in one hand… a chewed-up Simpsons yoyo.

“Okay, look,” Jack said seriously as he ran his thumb over the bite marks on his treasured toy. “I’m sure at some point I probably promised to spoil you for the whole saving-Carter thing, but that wasn’t
a carte blanche to chew on whatever you want.”

Nick cocked his head.

“For your information, this was a present from Carter.” Jack held out the yoyo for emphasis, but Nick just perked up like Jack might throw it. He’d caught on to ‘fetch’ a little too readily after just one time playing with JJ.

“Ah!” Jack snatched the yoyo back. “No. No chewing. Come on, Daniel brought you a ton of toys. You’re welcome to all of those. This one is mine, so you keep your furry paws off it, capisce?”

Nick huffed and fidgeted restlessly.

Jack sighed and dropped the arm holding the yoyo down by his side. “Don’t give me that face, I’m not calling you a bad dog. I would never dream of calling you that.” Jack sat down on his couch and leaned toward Nick. “Who saved Carter, huh? Who saved her?”

The dog cheered up at Jack’s upbeat tone and moved forward to lick Jack’s chin, taking the lilt to Jack’s voice as a truce.

Jack patted Nick affectionately and pulled his face out of licking range. “Listen… this is a lot my fault, and I get that. You’re clearly an active dog who needs more exercise than I’m up for at my age with these knees, but I thought you’d last longer than two days before you started climbing the walls.”

Nick stretched his neck across Jack’s lap and tried to get at the yoyo in his far hand.

“Oh, for crying out loud,” Jack held the yoyo further out of reach and ruffled the dog’s ears. “You’re going to be a pain the ass, aren’t you? I really should have called you Daniel.”

Nick whined and gazed up imploringly at Jack.

“Okay, fine… we’ll go to the park, how does that sound?” Since Nick didn’t know the word for ‘park’ yet he didn’t fly into an excited frenzy, but given how quickly Nick had cottoned to ‘fetch’, Jack didn’t imagine it would take long for park to become a trigger word.

Jack got to his feet and headed down the hall toward his bedroom to change clothes. Nick followed close behind and when they entered the bedroom Nick darted around the human to jump up on Jack’s bed, quickly lying down in his spot. Jack hadn’t even bothered buying a dog bed for Nick; from the start, he’d had every intention of letting the animal sleep with him.

“I know what you’re thinking,” Jack mused aloud as he found a pair of jeans to put on while the dog watched with head on his paws. “But I’ll have you know that in my prime, I would have been the perfect human for you. You would have been struggling to keep up with me. But what can I tell you, injury and age have not been a winning combination.”

Jack put his slightly damaged yoyo on top of the dresser and peeled off his ratty sleep shirt. He eyed Nick a second then tossed his shirt at the dog, laughing when it landed over his head and Nick reared back to dislodge it.

Payback for chewing on his yoyo.

Jack was ready to go and pocketing his wallet and keys when his cell phone began to ring. He dug it out of his jacket pocket and answered. “O’Neill.”
“Colonel?”

Jack tensed at the sound of her voice. He hadn’t heard from Carter since their chat on his deck. He wouldn’t pretend it hadn’t been a really stressful two days for him, waiting to find out what solution Carter could come up with that would save their team. “What’s up, Carter?”

“Sir… could I come over? We need to talk.”

Those words settled in the pit of Jack’s stomach like lead. “Could we meet at the park instead? I was just about to take Nick.”

“Sure, that’s fine. I’ll meet you there.”

Jack hung up and looked down at Nick. The dog was sitting at his side, staring up at him expectantly. Jack reached down and brushed his hand over Nick’s head. “Well… this will either go well or it won’t. Wish me luck.”

Nick couldn’t, of course, but Jack still got the sense the dog had his back.

***********

Carter was waiting for them by the fence that ran the perimeter of the off-leash dog park. She was wearing the same faded blue jeans from the other night, a pink cardigan, and was rolling a tennis ball between her hands. Several other dog owners were inside the play area with their dogs, some pets exclusively engaged with their owners and some playing with each other while their humans stood back and left them to it.

Nick started pulling on the leash as they approached, but whether it was from the other dogs or catching wind of Carter Jack wasn’t sure.

Carter turned her head toward them. There was a split-second of awkward discomfort at the sight of Jack before she grinned and knelt down to receive Nick’s adoration.

“Hey, Nick! How are you, huh? The colonel treating you okay?” Nick happily greeted her with a barrage of licks. Carter laughed and pushed the dog away from her face. “Hey, look what I brought for you.” Carter brandished the ball. Nick’s tail began to wag even harder.

“Oh thank god, yes,” Jack said dramatically. “Please, wear him out.”

Carter looked up at him from one knee. The midday sun was highlighting Carter’s hair the color of pale spun gold, bleaching it to a fairy tale fair belonging to princesses and happily ever afters. The jeweled blue of her eyes didn’t help dispel the fabled quality about her.

Carter ventured a smile just for him. “Too much dog for you to handle, sir? And you’ve only been on paternity leave three days.”

“All right, for one, Daniel’s an ass for calling it that, and how dare you repeat it. Secondly, I think we can safely assume Nick’s former lifestyle was a lot less about creature comforts, if you know what I mean.”

“I’m sure he was probably a working dog, given the place where we found him,” she conceded.

“Yeah, so of course my townie life is going to take some getting used to.”

Carter stood and waved the ball in front of Nick. “How about it, Nikki? Want to play fetch?”
Nick barked excitedly.

Jack and Carter took Nick into the fenced in area, unclipped his leash, and Carter threw the ball for him a few times before the lure of the ball gave way to the draw of his own kind and Nick wandered off to make friends with the other dogs.

Carter joined Jack where he was sitting on a bench and for a moment they didn’t say anything. Jack had been waiting for her to broach the subject she’d come to discuss with him, but so far she’d seemed content to play with Nick while Jack slowly went insane.

Finally, it was too much. He looked toward her and took a deep breath. “So… what did you want to talk about?”

Carter bit her lip and looked down at the dirty tennis ball in her hand. She started rolling it between her palms restlessly, and Jack sat watching the thin scratch marks on her hand from the broken beer bottle appear and disappear behind the yellow fuzz.

“Come on, Carter, please tell me you thought of something.”

She grimaced, stopped rolling the ball, and glanced up at him. “Okay, let me just preface this by saying that it’s not a perfect solution. In fact, in the eyes of the Air Force, it’s probably a stupendously bad one.”

Jack’s eyebrows rose.

“But I don’t see how it can be worse than our other choices, so…” she shrugged.

At this point, Jack would take any solution, really. “All right… what is it?”

She glanced around to make sure nobody was around to eavesdrop, then she said lowly, “Would you be willing to make the disregard of military chain of command a standing contingency plan for us?”

“Uh… are you suggesting we…”

“No!” Carter shook her head adamantly. “No, sir, I’m not saying we… I mean, that train of thought is what got us into this mess in the first place, right?”

“Oookay. So if you’re not talking about giving the regs the finger, then…?”

Carter angled her body toward him until their knees were touching. She leaned slightly forward, all in the interest of making their conversation as private as possible, but hell if it wouldn’t look like they were a couple out enjoying a beautiful Colorado day.

“You’re worried about losing the ability to effectively command the team if I die, right?”

Jack nodded.

“And the same would go for me if you were killed.”

That was the most morbidly romantic thing Jack had ever heard.

“So… I think we need to talk to Teal’c.”

“Why?”

She hesitated. “Sir… what I’m going to propose would have to stay between the three of us.
Hammond would have a fit if he knew. Actually,” she scowled, “if he found out about this, it would be all the grounds he’d need to break up the team. Because it’s pretty damn incriminating.”

“What is? Just spit it out, Carter.”

“Right.” Carter took a steadying breath. “I think we should ask Teal’c to agree to take command in the event either one of us gets killed in action.”

“Under the assumption that whichever one of us lived would be unfit for command.”

She nodded. “I know if it was you, I’d be in no shape to lead the rest of the team.”

“Same here.”

That reciprocation didn’t seem to warm Carter’s heart so much as make it ache. “That’s why I say we talk to Teal’c… tell him that if one of us dies to consider the other incapacitated and take over the mission.” Effectively having Teal’c leap-frog over the remaining military officer in defiance of the command structure at the SGC.

Jack gave that some thought, mind on the problem while he absently watched Nick playing chase with a husky. “Well, you’re right. It’s not perfect.”

“I know.”

But it did free him from the crippling fear that his attachment to Carter, and his assured meltdown if he lost her off-world, would put Daniel or Teal’c in mortal danger. His mistake of falling in love with his subordinate didn’t have to doom his friends. It was damage control at best, but Jack felt like that was the best he could hope for in life.

“It could work,” he said at length. “I know T would agree to it. And he’d be discrete.”

“At least we’d be shielding our friends from our mistake as much as possible if this becomes a complete disaster.”

Which it might.

“And you wouldn’t put in for a transfer?” Jack asked hopefully.

Carter gave him a look like drowning. “The truth is, I don’t know if I could go through with it at this point, even if it was the right thing to do. I can’t leave you.”

It was probably unhealthy how much that confession relieved Jack. “It’s just as well, because I don’t think I could let you go.”

Carter shook her head in astonishment. “God, if they had any idea…”

They both knew which ‘they’ Carter meant. The kind that wore stars on their shoulders and judgement in their eyes.

“So what about us?” Jack ventured.

She cocked her head at him.

“Where does this plan leave us?”

“Shouldn’t I be asking you that? You were the one who hit the brakes.”
“For good reason,” Jack stressed. Then he sagged. “Bottom line, I need you. I thought I could just pull back and throw some good old O’Neill military bravado at it, but… yeah, that’s not going to work worth a god damn.”

Carter smirked. “Well… since inappropriately attached seems to be the name of the game, we could go back to the way things were before.”

“Before what?” They had a lot of professionally inappropriate mile markers in their relationship, a lot of potential reset points, each with their own pitfalls.

She studied him carefully as she said, “Before we left Sheridan?”

Jack blinked at her in silence a moment, taken by the daring of her. “You mean when we made promises we shouldn’t have?”

“Even when you were freaking out, I still meant it.”

“I always meant it, Carter… that’s why I was freaking out.” Although he’d like to argue colonels didn’t ‘freak out’, they just aggressively considered all the possible disastrous consequences at the same time. And in the process, the weight of his responsibility to his team – all of them – had been crushing.

“If you think you can stand living life on the edge,” she cast him a mischievous smirk, “then I’d like to go back to that.” Clearly despite the risk to their careers. “I hate not being able to talk to you.”

“Yeah, me too.” Jack nodded. “All right. It’s probably a bad idea, but I’m the king of bad ideas, right?”

“Does that make me the queen of them?”

Jack snorted. “Carter… I think this is probably the only bad idea you’ve ever had.” And that she went against character for him was something for which he was deeply grateful. It probably made him a horrible person, but he’d rather live as her mistake than lose her to good sense.

They stayed at the park for another hour, reveling in each other’s company after the tense month of quasi-separation, until Jack decided it was time to head home and called Nick to him. The dog was engaged in a tug-of-war match with a Labrador over a rope toy, but he dropped it obediently and trotted over to Jack at the summons. Jack was happy to see the dog panting with exhaustion.

“Looks like I’m going to have to work the dog park into my schedule a lot more,” Jack noted aloud as he headed toward the gate, Nick on his left side and Carter on his right.

“Is he really that high energy?” Carter asked as she held open the gate for them.

“Not excessively, no, but he needs more exercise than I can give him. Bad knees, you know.”

Carter nodded distractedly, lost in thought as they strolled in the direction of Jack’s truck, when she said, “You know, sir… I could come by in the mornings and take him running with me.”

Jack looked at her. “You could?”

“Might as well, right? I try to get in four or five miles every day anyway. And to be honest, I’d appreciate the company. I had a dog in high school that was my running buddy – probably the perk that lets dogs edge out cats as my favorites – but I haven’t had one since Quasar died.”
“You named your dog *Quasar*?”

Carter lifted one eyebrow at him archly. “I was obsessed with outer space since I was a little girl, sir. Damn right, I named my dog Quasar.”

Jack chuckled, shook his head ruefully, then looked down at Nick. “You sure it wouldn’t be a hassle? You’d have to wake up earlier, drive to my place, drive back to your house afterward to get ready for work…”

“If I had a life outside of work and you, it might be an issue. But I don’t, so…” she shrugged.

Jack’s heart skipped a few times, almost painful in its unaccustomed hopeful flutter, to hear Carter comment on how central he was in her life.

“Well, if you’re sure you wouldn’t mind, I know Nick would love it. And maybe he’d keep his teeth off my things.”

Carter chortled. “Is he being a terror?”

“He’s just letting me know I’m not meeting all of his needs,” Jack answered diplomatically.

She shook her head with a smile. “You know, sir, if you gave the Tok’ra as much credit as you give Nick…”

“Hey, Nick’s *earned* it. The Tok’ra are more of a headache than they are a help. Dad being the exception, of course.”

“I’m sure he’d be glad to hear that,” Carter teased. They reached Jack’s truck and Carter leaned against the side while Jack opened the door for Nick to hop in. “So, I’ll come by tomorrow morning?”

“Sounds good. And thanks.”

She cocked her head at him in gentle, silent question.

He wanted to say ‘for everything’, but that seemed a step too far. “For offering to exercise my dog.”

“No problem, sir. I’ll see you later.”

Jack watched her walk away, a leggy swath of cream-gold, soft pink, and faded denim, and he let out a breath. They were no doubt just digging themselves deeper, but climbing out of their ‘care too much about each other’ hole was not an option. Even if the Air Force would contend what they were really doing was digging their own graves.

***********

Carter taking Nick for a morning run seemed like a great idea until Jack was jarred awake by his doorbell at 4:32 in the morning. He’d barely begun to groan in protest when Nick bolted out of bed at the sound of the doorbell, stepping on Jack’s stomach in the process and turning Jack’s groan into a yelp as he jackknifed into a sitting position.

It was entirely too early to be firing on all cylinders, and Jack opened his front door with a surly, “*What?!*”

Carter was standing on his doorstep in tennis shoes, track pants, an Air Force t-shirt, and a sweatband holding her hair back from her face. It was Carter making no effort whatsoever to be
attractive and yet being just that anyway. Her expression at his rough greeting was not as surprised as one might think – Carter had seen him off-world in every imaginable state of exhaustion with every imaginable accompanying state of grouchy.

The forcefulness behind his greeting didn’t rattle her, but her eyes flicked down his body the second he opened the door and her lips fell open. Her cheeks flushed pink and her eyes became more pupil than iris, black swallowing blue.

Jack looked down and realized he’d answered the door in his boxers.

“Oh, for crying…” Jack stepped back from the door to let her in and headed toward the bedroom to find some clothes.

“Colonel, you don’t have to bother getting dressed. Just show me where you keep Nick’s leash and we’ll be off.”

Jack hesitated in the hallway, weighing his choices, then he turned back still clad in nothing but his underwear and went into the kitchen. There was a row of pegs next to the entryway and he plucked off the leash that hung there. He turned and handed it to Carter.

“Thanks, sir,” she said hoarsely as she took the leash, her eyes raking over him again like she couldn’t help it. Jack suddenly felt the nakedness of his skin acutely, electrified by Carter’s gaze.

Carter forced herself to turn away. “You should go back to bed, sir. We’ll be gone at least an hour.”

Jack grunted agreement and saw them out the front door. He left it unlocked, hoping it would be invitation enough for Carter to enter without waking him to return the dog. Then he turned on his heel and went straight back to bed.

He adored Carter, but there was something fundamentally wrong with someone who woke up before sunrise to run.

***********

Jack felt like a father dropping his kid off for his first day at preschool the first time he took Nick to the Fraiser house to leave him in Cassie’s care. Nick hadn’t even been with Jack a week when SG-1 was given a mission, but when Nick spotted JJ any concerns about homesickness or missing the stability of Jack’s presence went out the window.

Contrary to the reputation SG-1 had of being a team that was constantly in the thick of the action – if they weren’t engaging in firefights with Jaffa, they must be taking down a Goa’uld or saving the world – they had their fair share of boring, mundane missions, too. PT5-249, however, showed no signs that it had supported human life since the civilization that left the cave paintings disappeared.

Of course, Daniel wouldn’t agree that PT5-249 was going to be a snooze-fest. They’d been given the green light to study a network of caves near the Stargate that had paintings on the walls reminiscent of the Lascaux caves in France, and Daniel was like a kid at Christmas. So often missions were dual-purpose… assess a Goa’uld threat while trying to glean as much historical and cultural information they could on the fly. PT5-249, however, showed no signs that it had supported human life since the civilization that left the cave paintings disappeared.

It was a purely archaeological mission, and Daniel was a happy camper.

Every once in a while, Jack liked these kinds of missions (not that he’d let on as much to Daniel). There was something to be said for low-key missions: no enemies shooting at them, no locals
begging them for help, no one looking to them to save Earth from being destroyed. After a string of shitty missions, boring ones were a gift. It was like getting paid to go camping, and though Jack’s back and knees preferred a mattress these days, it wasn’t a bad way to make a living.

PT5-249 was either deep in the grip of winter or the planet was in the middle of an ice age. The ice age hypothesis might explain the disappearance of the human population – either by extinction or migration. The Stargate was next to the foothills of a mountain, and the caves Daniel wanted to study were about a third of the way up the rock face. It was a steep climb and snow and ice threatened to make the ascent perilous, but obvious paths built by humans long ago made the going easier.

There was plenty of room in the cave, clearly once home to a large clan of hominids, for SG-1 to make camp in the very place where Daniel wanted to work. It was essentially being paid to keep an eye on Daniel in a place where they’d be lucky to blast him out of there with C-4. For the rest of SG-1, it almost amounted to a vacation. Hell, Daniel would call it one, too, for as much as he was looking forward to studying the cave paintings at his leisure.

As evening bled into nightfall and heralded the end of a quiet day on an alien world, Jack lingered near the mouth of the cave. He stood between Daniel and the entrance while Carter and Teal’c worked on building a fire deeper within the cave. They’d found the remains of what had clearly been a hearth used centuries ago by the cave painters, and it seemed like a logical place to build their own campfire.

“This is incredible,” Daniel muttered to himself as he sat in front of the painted wall with a notebook in his lap and pen in hand.

“What’s that?” Jack asked idly as he came up behind Daniel.

“These paintings are consistent with the type of art seen on Earth in the Paleolithic age, which would put it in a time frame as recent as ten thousand years ago, but as old as two and a half million years ago.”

“So they’ve been here a long time,” Jack noted in disinterest.

Daniel twisted to look up at him. “Jack, you don’t get it. If we’d found these caves on Earth, I’d be comfortable estimating these paintings were done by Homo erectus or Neanderthals. But we’re not on Earth. You see what that means?”

“Uh, sorry… I kind of stopped listening after you said ‘erectus’.”

Daniel’s mouth dropped open in indignation. He visibly collected himself before he continued, “All the evidence we’ve found so far would suggest that the Goa’uld first came to Earth and started abducting humans only as far back as five thousand years ago, give or take a few centuries. If these paintings were done by erectus or neanderthalensis or possibly even habilis… well, it means we’ve been completely wrong about how long the Goa’uld have been visiting Earth.”

“Well, how about that.”

Daniel frowned petulantly at Jack for not being as intrigued as Daniel himself was by the possibility. Feeling a little bad that he couldn’t share Daniel’s enthusiasm, Jack tried to at least feign interest.

“Any way you can prove these paintings are as old as you think?”

Daniel’s sour expression softened and he looked back at the wall. “I’ll take as many pictures as I can to compare them to Paleolithic art back home, but I think we’ll probably need to take a sample of the
wall back, a section that contains some of the paint if we can,” he winced at the idea of defacing ancient art, “so we can carbon date it. If I’m right and this dates back as far as I think it does… well, I know you don’t get it, but it would be a huge discovery.”

“Hey, you say it’s big news, that’s enough for me.”

Daniel turned to look up at him again, surprised by his easy praise on a matter of history.

Jack shrugged, reached down to ruffle Daniel’s hair (even if it wasn’t the same ever since Daniel cut it short), and started back toward the others. “Don’t stay up all night, Daniel. We’re here for three days and the only thing on our agenda are those paintings, so pace yourself.”

Daniel scowled after him a second before turning his attention back to the wall.

When Jack reached the rest of his team, Carter and Teal’c had made a cozy fire and arranged their sleeping bags around it like the four cardinal directions on a compass. There was a noticeable temperature difference walking from the front of the cave to the back, and the first thing Jack did when he sat down atop his sleeping bag was peel off his jacket.

“How’s Daniel?” Carter asked.

“Happy as a pig in shit.”

Teal’c’s eyebrow jumped up.

Jack smirked. “It’s just a saying. Means he’s having the time of his life.”

“Indeed,” Teal’c responded drolly, possibly disgusted by the mental image of Daniel rolling around in feces.

Jack caught Carter’s eye and she looked meaningfully at him, then at Teal’c.

Right. Jack stole another look at Daniel, fully immersed in his work and oblivious to his friends, then he leaned forward to rest his elbows on his knees and pitch his voice lower. “T… listen, we need to ask you for a favor.”

“I would be honored to assist you.”

“Yeah, well… hear us out first.”

Teal’c visibly noticed that Jack had referred to the two of them twice and looked briefly at Carter sitting on her own sleeping bag. “Very well, proceed.”

“Okay, first thing’s first… you have to keep this request to yourself. No one at the SGC can know about it.” He cast a look at Carter. “Carter and I would be in a lot of trouble if this got out.”

Something in Teal’c’s eyes lit up and he looked like he was fighting a smile. “If you intend to ask of me silence and discretion concerning an illicit relationship between yourself and Major Carter, know that I would not reveal the truth under pain of torture.”

“Uh… thanks, but… that’s not actually what we were going to ask.”

Teal’c actually looked disappointed. “I see.”

“No, we wanted to ask you if you would agree to take command of the team in the event one of us was killed in action.”
Teal’c’s expression darkened in confusion and he looked between Jack and Carter.

“He means if I die in combat,” Carter clarified, “then you would take over. Even if Colonel O’Neill wasn’t injured.”

“And if I kick the bucket off-world, it’d be up to you, not Carter, to get the team back home.”

“I do not understand. Would not the hierarchy of your military dictate the other would lead in the event of one’s death?”

Jack blew out a breath and raked a hand through his hair. “Yes, point in fact, it would.” When Teal’c still didn’t seem to catch on, Jack grumbled. “For crying out loud, Teal’c. It means I’d be too upset to be trusted with command if something happened to Carter.”

“Same for me if something happened to the colonel.”

“And that’s exactly the kind of attachment the Air Force is not okay with,” Jack added.

Understanding finally washed over Teal’c’s face. “I see. Am I correct in assuming that you ask this of me because you wish SG-1 to remain intact despite your attachment to each other?”

Jack and Carter exchanged a look.

“Yes, that’s what it means,” Carter answered.

Teal’c faintly began to smile. “I understand.”

“So you’ll do it?” Jack pressed.

Teal’c bowed his head. “As I said, it would be my honor to assist you both in any way I can.” Teal’c lifted his head then and eyed them both conspiratorially. “And should this vow ease your burdens and allow a deeper bond to form between my two friends, then accepting this duty would be a pleasure as well as an honor.”

Whoa… okay. Teal’c was definitely encouraging them to have an affair. If it could even be called that. Neither of them had spouses to cheat on, so it probably didn’t fit the actual definition, but it was taboo as hell given their ranks in the military. Although he supposed it kind of would be like cheating on the Air Force.

It hit Jack in that moment how much easier it would be for him and Carter to have a ‘thing’ on SG-1 than it would be for anyone on any other team. Daniel was a civilian, and Teal’c wasn’t even from Earth. Air Force regulations don’t mean squat to them. They’d probably gladly aid and abet an unauthorized relationship between their two military team members.

Jack physically shook off that thought. It was a dangerous place to let his mind wander. He’d be in trouble if he started contemplating the logistics and comparative ease of dating Carter on the sly. “Thanks, Teal’c.”

Teal’c nodded again, looking decidedly smug with his role in the plot against the United States Air Force.

Jack stole another look at Carter, her face dark in the firelight from the blush that had flooded her cheeks, her hair fire-kissed locks of amber and honey. It spread a warmth through his body that had nothing to do with the fire.
Archaeological missions for Daniel meant Jack got bored quickly, which was how he ended up stepping outside the mouth of the cave to look at the snow-blanketed view. A pale half-moon hung in the sky amid a myriad of stars. It looked a lot like Earth’s moon only brighter, like their moon had been white-washed or bleached of its sooty gray rabbit.

The moon and stars were not alone. Seafoam and lilac ribbons of light hung from the heavens like great curtains in the sky. It was a celestial marvel, and Jack’s thoughts immediately went to Carter.

He reached up and toggled his radio on his shoulder. “Hey, Carter.”

“Yes, sir?”

“Come out here a minute.”

She arrived a moment later, looking at him expectantly. “Yes, sir?”

“Look up.”

She tipped back her head obediently, her eyes widened at the sight, and her mouth fell open. “Oh!”

“Thought you’d like that,” he responded with a smile.

She nodded stiltedly, not prepared to drop her eyes from the heavens just yet, and he stood there just watching her take in the universe. The faint colors landed softly on her features, a hint of pale green reflecting off her eyes and diluted purple settling on her cheeks and lying supine down the bridge of her nose. The orange firelight behind her, the blue moon overhead, and the purple and green folds of colors above fell in the yellow of her hair like rainbows. Jack had a mental catalogue of Carter’s hair as painted by alien skies. Usually suns, but some remarkable planets did their most beautiful work by night.

Even if they weren’t together, even if they never would be, he liked to think he would always know Carter better than any man on Earth could know his lover. Most men only knew their loved ones by the light of a single star. Jack knew Carter by the light of hundreds.

“This is incredible,” Carter breathed.

“Yeah, it’s pretty,” he said, never taking his eyes off her.

Unaware of her commanding officer’s sappy moment, Carter smiled up at the sky and bounced ever so slightly on the balls of her feet. “Did you know an aurora is the result of energized electrons colliding with the atmosphere? All we’re looking at are electrons slowing from an accelerated state and releasing their energy as light. Amazing that something so beautiful can be so simple at its core, isn’t it? Of course, the shape or folds you see are dictated by the magnetic fields of the planet…”

“Carter…”

“Yes, sir?”

“Don’t suck the fun out of this.”

She finally tore her eyes from the sky to look at him. She gave a bewildered blink at first, thrown by having her lecture interrupted when she was on a roll, then she smiled bashfully. “Right… sorry.”

Jack studied the light show a minute, taking in the beauty and wonder of it, then he looked back at
Carter. “Have you ever seen Earth’s?”

Carter, head canted back, nodded and hummed. “Once, when I was little… eight, I think. Mom’s birthday was coming up, and she’d browbeat Dad into taking a week off to spend time with the family. He’d been working a lot at the time, late nights, TDYs, you know, the usual.” A flicker of unhappiness at the memory raced across her face. Only getting to know Jacob Carter post-Selmac, it was hard for Jack to picture the aloof, impossible-to-please parent Carter said he’d been.

“But Mom got him to take leave.” Carter chuckled. “Of course, she’d been so focused on convincing him to take leave that she hadn’t thought about what we’d do when he did.” A slow smile spread over Carter’s face. “I’d done a book report earlier that school year about the Aurora Borealis and was dying to see it. Mom made some calls and got us a reservation at a wilderness lodge in Alaska to see it in person.”

“She picked taking you to see the Aurora Borealis as her birthday present?”

Carter grinned. “Yeah. I don’t think she really cared what we did, as long as we were doing it as a family. And she knew going to see it would make me happy.” The fondness slipped from her face then, replaced by melancholy.

“Sounds like she was a great mom,” Jack observed.

“She was.”

Jack knew Carter’s mom had died when his 2IC was a kid. And while he had no complaints about how she’d turned out, he couldn’t help but wonder how different she might have been if she’d grown up with a mother. Carter was tough as nails on the surface, but beneath that she housed a lot of insecurities. People who didn’t know Carter only saw her confidence, but SG-1 was like a family. They saw each other’s vulnerable moments, and Jack felt like a mother’s love would have done wonders on the few weak spots Carter had.

“So you haven’t seen the Northern Lights on Earth since you were eight?” Jack asked, trying to move the conversation away from dead family.

Carter shook her head. “I kept meaning to go back, but somehow I just never got around to it. Mom… well, you know. And then life got busy.”

Jack hummed in the back of his throat. Then he slid a look at Carter. “Did you know that sometimes, if the conditions are right, you can see them in Minnesota?”

“Really?”

“Yep.” He waited a beat. “Maybe if we’re lucky, we’ll see them when we’re up at my cabin.”

Carter turned a quick look at him.

“That is, if you’re still interested in helping me with my little construction project.”

In the contending lights dueling on her face, yellow and orange on the right from the hearth fire and blue, green, and amethyst on the left from the painted sky, he thought she looked like art. Van Gogh would have given his other ear to capture such varicolored beauty.

“I wasn’t sure you wanted me to go anymore,” she said lowly.

“Yeah, well, what did you say the name of the game was? Inappropriately attached?” At her
consternated look, he dropped the lame attempt at humor and said sincerely, “I still want you to come. I have for a long time, you know that.”

The troubled look on Carter’s face disappeared and was replaced with a softness that could bring men to their knees… it made Jack feel unsteady on his feet, at any rate. “I’m looking forward to it, sir.”

“Good.” Jack nodded to himself. “Good. We’ll get together and hammer out a plan later.”

“For real this time?” she asked, one corner of her mouth twitching up in teasing.

Jack rolled his eyes. “Yes, for real this time.” He gave her a narrowed look. “Wiseass.”

“You like my wiseass, sir.”

“I like your other –” Jack started to say, caught up in the playfulness of their repartee, then realized how wildly inappropriate his next words were going to be and bit them back at the last second. Maybe in another life, another reality, he could let those words fly. But not this one.

It didn’t matter, because Carter guessed where he’d been going with that and gave him one hell of a saucy grin.

Samantha Carter would be the death of him, but man, what a way to go.

***********

Making plans outside of work was a crapshoot for anyone on SG-1, so Jack wasn’t surprised that he and Carter still hadn’t managed to make any real progress on their efforts to get away together up north a month and a half after their talk on the Planet of the Painted Skies as Jack called it in his head (because Daniel had a point, the destination designations the computer spit out weren’t catchy at all).

This time, it wasn’t because of anyone having second thoughts about the trip, but rather a busy mission rotation schedule coupled with the fact Carter was virtually indispensable at the SGC.

Fortunately, the missions they’d been pulling were uneventful, which was a nice change of pace. Typically, SG-1 jumped from one crisis to another, but once in a while they had a string of good luck and a cluster of consecutive missions where no one tried to kill them.

They paid a visit to Sudra and Bandu on PR7-418 to check up on them and found a number of positive changes. Sudra had remarried, a council now ruled the village, and Bandu had started an SG-1 fan club among the children.

Carter made a few more guest-appearances on SG-9 in order to do final calibrations on the monitoring equipment they’d been setting up on the Earthquake Planet. Even though Carter had calculated several emergency evacuation destinations from P4X-103 in the event they weren’t able to gate back to Earth, Jack would still feel better once the damn scientists were done playing around on that nightmare of a planet.

Daniel took off to D.C. for almost a week to confer with an anthropologist at the Smithsonian Natural History Museum on the cave paintings from PT5-249. With part of SG-1 missing, Hammond took that as an opportunity to assign Carter to a diagnostic of the gate dialing computer, which effectively grounded SG-1 until she was finished.

Teal’c took a few days off to visit Ry’ac, which always put the Jaffa in a better mood upon his return.
Thor dropped by in his characteristically dramatic fashion of just snatching Jack up without warning with news that battle results with the Carter against the replicators so far were promising.

All in all, it was a low-key couple of months for SG-1, and Jack wasn’t going to complain.

Even though he and Carter hadn’t managed to get away for their trip up north, they had settled into a routine that was terrifyingly domestic. Said routine was not a sudden new normal for them, but evolved in stages.

Carter continued to stop by Jack’s house at ass o’clock in the morning to take Nick for a run. It did wonders for Nick, but it did not do wonders for Jack’s REM cycle.

After three mornings in a row of Carter ringing the doorbell at ungodly hours, Jack virtually shoved her and Nick out the door with a grumpy, “You have a key, Carter. Use it. Stop waking me up.”

“Yes, sir,” Carter laughed and took off down the sidewalk with Nick trotting happily beside her.

That was how Carter started letting herself into Jack’s house and puttering around while he slept.

While the time frame between 4:30 and 5:00 a.m. when Carter came over was unseemly, the 5:30 to 6:00 a.m. range when she came back was more reasonable, and Jack was often awake when she and Nick both came in breathing hard, Carter drenched in sweat and Nick making a beeline for the couch where he’d lie sprawled over the cushions while he recovered.

The first few invitations to join him for breakfast Carter declined, as was probably wise in their situation. But Jack was persistent, and she started to accept. At first he’d make bacon and eggs, waffles, sausage and pancakes, traditional breakfast fare. Carter ate sparingly until finally admitting over a ham and cheese omelet that she preferred something lighter after a run. “I don’t want to sound ungrateful, sir, this is delicious, but it’s a little heavy on my stomach after a run.”

“Oh… well, that makes sense. What do you eat at home after you go running?”

“I usually just have a slice of toast with peanut butter and half a fruit.”

So Jack changed the menu and started buying fruit. The first time Carter saw him pull out her preferred post-run breakfast at his place, she smiled at him brightly enough for him to forgive all the mornings she’d yanked him out of a peaceful sleep at horrid hours.

She cut the apple in half, pondered the fate of the second portion a moment, then she chuckled when Jack held out his hand. She handed it over with a smirk. “This actually works out better, sir. At home I save the second half for breakfast the next day, meaning every other morning I have a browning apple or soft pear to look forward to.”

And for a while that was their routine… until Carter floated the idea that they stop doing breakfast together.

“Why?” Jack asked. Having breakfast together was a small thing, but their relationship hung on the small things. He’d grown fond of their time in the mornings and didn’t want to give it up.

Carter gave an apologetic smile. “Because I reek, sir. I feel gross sitting around in my drying sweat, and I know you notice the smell. Holy Hannah, who wouldn’t? I think even Nick’s offended.”

“Nick would roll in a dead squirrel if you let him, so I doubt he’s offended. I’m not either, for the record.” He’d been in the field with Carter enough that he was used to the stink of everyone on SG-1 after a grueling day of physical exertion. But Jack understood Carter’s concern and pointed out
nonchalantly, “I have a shower, you know.”

Carter was quiet a moment. “I didn’t want to impose.”

“Pshaw… impose away, Major.”

That was how Carter started bringing a bag with a change of clothes with her when she went to his place in the mornings to take the dog for a run.

From there, it was a small step for Carter to start bringing over a few more items so she could just get ready for work at his house. It saved her the trip back to her place, which meant she could shave off twenty minutes from her morning by leaving for the mountain straight from Jack’s house.

Neither of them mentioned the transformation in the guest bathroom, how it was slowly filling up with her shampoo, her conditioner, her body wash, her toothbrush, her toothpaste, her deodorant, her make-up, her hairbrush, her styling products.

Jack did address the clothes situation, only so far as to tell Carter after she’d schlepped her bag of clothes with her for the umpteenth time, “I cleared one of the drawers in the dresser in Daniel’s room for you, if you want.”

She looked momentarily on the side of panic at that before she seemed to embrace dancing too close to the flame. “Thank you, sir.”

“No problem. And just toss your sweaty clothes in the hamper. I’ll wash them when I do a load. No point cooking sweaty workout clothes in your car all day.” Which was what Carter had been doing when she left for work from his house.

“No thank you, sir. My car was starting to smell a little… ripe.”

In the course of less than two months, with remarkably little fight put up by either of them, Jack was waking up to Carter in his house, her things in his extra bathroom, her clothes in his guestroom, and her laundry mixed with his.

It felt dangerously close to living together.

And it said a hell of a fucking lot about how worn down they were by the regulations that they both allowed it. Some days it felt like they were torturing themselves, but neither put an end to it. There was a time when they would have. Jack was plagued by questions about what it meant that they weren’t exercising better judgment. He wondered if that ‘someday’ Carter had mentioned – the day when the Air Force wouldn’t be a good enough reason not to – was closer than he thought.

**********

While Jack was undeniably too close to his second in command, the same could easily be said about him and his team archaeologist.

Although to be fair, Jack O’Neill and Daniel Jackson had a lot of history.

That history was how Jack knew exactly what to do when he walked into Daniel’s lab and found the linguist sitting at his desk, pen loose in his grip and his eyes locked on the framed photograph of Sha’är. An aura of suffering and sadness crowded around him like heavy air.

It didn’t matter what had brought on the maudlin episode, only that Jack was the self-appointed one to rescue him from it.
Daniel looked up from his wife’s picture and toward Jack, dazed. “What?”

“Indiana Jones. My place. Seven o’clock.”

When Jack’s words registered, Daniel gave a faint smile. “Okay.”

Because what archaeologist worth his salt didn’t idolize Indiana Jones?

It had become a Jack and Daniel thing, born of the days right after Daniel came back from Abydos when he’d stayed with Jack. They had watched the Indiana Jones movies a lot, sort of a default distraction when they were at the house, and now they were a go-to for the guys when Daniel’s life felt overwhelmingly shitty.

Jack was putting the tape in the VHS player, Nick lying next to the couch merrily chewing on a rawhide bone, when Daniel emerged from the hallway.

“Umm… Jack?”

“Yeah?”

A silence followed that had Jack turning to look toward his younger friend. Daniel stood atop the step into the living room, his brow furrowed in confusion. He looked uncertain, like a little boy scared to ask a question. Or a confused genius. Funny how much alike the two looked.

“What’s up?” Jack asked.

“Uh… did Sam move in?”

“What? No. Of course not. What on earth gave you that idea?”

Daniel’s mouth pursed. “It’s just… there’s a lot of her stuff in the bathroom.”

“Oh. Right.” Jack waved Daniel toward the couch. “That’s a long story, but I can promise you Carter isn’t living with me.” Although honestly, she damn near was.

Jack ducked into the kitchen to grab two beers and the credits to the movie were starting by the time he got back and gave one to Daniel. When he took his spot on the far side of the couch, Nick abandoned his toy and shoved his head into Jack’s lap for attention. Jack snorted and began to pet the dog.

He felt Daniel’s eyes on him and ignored it a whole ten minutes before he looked askance at him. “What?”

Daniel gave him an expectant look.

Jack rolled his eyes. “It’s really not a big deal. Carter comes by in the mornings to take Nick for a run. It’s just easier for her to shower here afterwards and head straight into work.”

Daniel’s eyes moved from Jack to Nick and back again. “But Sam’s not living here.”

“No, she’s not living here. Do you think we’re idiots? Ah! Don’t answer that. Do you think Carter’s an idiot?”

“Not about most things, no.”
That gave Jack pause. “Are you saying she’s an idiot when it comes to me?”

Daniel gave an evasive shrug. Then he slumped down on the couch with a disgruntled pout, looking for all the world like a kid on the cusp of giving him the silent treatment.

“Okay, now what?” Jack asked.

Daniel crossed his arms. “I believe you that Sam’s not living here, and I get why she can’t… but she should.”

That was an entire life out of his reach that Jack didn’t want to pine for more than he already did. He sure as shit didn’t want to dissect it with Daniel – the guy would point out layers of possibilities Jack hadn’t even noticed. It was his own fault for surrounding himself with so many smart people. “We’re not having this conversation,” Jack snapped.

“Fine.” Daniel tucked his chin nearly to his chest and radiated hurt.

It made Jack feel bad, because he knew this was mostly about Sha’re. Jack sighed. “Daniel… you know we can’t.”

“The regulations are stupid.”

“Not really. They exist so people don’t endanger lives in the field because they’re emotionally compromised.”

“You’re emotionally compromised when it comes to Sam already.”

Jack froze.

“Just like you are with me. And Teal’c. This whole team’s too attached and about as emotionally compromised as it gets.” Daniel gestured at himself and the couch. “Perfect example. You think all the other COs on base see a teammate down in the dumps and take them home for movie night?”

“Well, if you’re going to be a shit about it, I can kick you out.”

Daniel deflated. “I’m not trying to be a shit, I just… it’s hard to see you two do this.”

“Act like if things weren’t different you two wouldn’t be married by now.”

Jack felt his strength leave him in a rush, and he wondered for a split second if there’d be anything left inside to hold him up or if he’d just collapse like a leaky balloon. Nick whined and jumped on to the couch space between the two men, wedging himself tight between their bodies and laying his head and front legs over Jack’s lap. Jack gratefully stroked the dog as he rallied himself.

“We’re doing the best we can,” Jack finally responded with rare sincerity in his voice.

That sincerity seemed to temper Daniel’s tetchy attitude. Carter would probably say there was a lesson there in how to best handle Daniel. Although Jack would argue that all things considered, given their wildly different personalities, he and Daniel did all right.

“It’s just hard to watch,” Daniel said lowly, resting one hand absently on Nick’s back. “Sha’re’s gone and I’ll never get her back, and then here you two are. You’re both alive and you’re a daily part of each other’s lives, but you won’t be anything more than teammates and friends because of rules.”
“I didn’t say it didn’t suck.” Especially when everyone in their lives seemed to be of the opinion they should be together.

Daniel huffed and shook his head. “Guess I just never really saw you as one for following rules.”

“Yeah, well, there’s also Carter.”

Daniel smirked fondly. “I don’t know, Sam’s got a rebel streak.”

Boy, did she. And the two of them had already discussed the future day when those two traits – his rule-breaking and her rebellious side – would collide. It was going to be a glorious disaster.

“Just watch your movie, you geek.”

Daniel didn’t comment further, but a soft almost-smile lingered at the corners of his mouth. Jack considered it mission accomplished.

***********

Jack found the sheet of notepad paper with the plans for his cabin improvements while sorting through his catch-all drawer one evening. He honestly forgot he’d kept it, but the sight of it made him stop and smile. He remembered the swooping sense of victory when Carter had agreed to accompany him to Minnesota… in the interest of saving him from death by electrocution, of course.

They hadn’t found a good time to work the trip into their crazy lives yet, but Jack had every intention of making it happen even if he had to threaten retirement again.

Before he went to bed that night, Jack laid the paper on his kitchen counter for Carter to see in the morning.

The next day was one of their weekly days off, so he didn’t roll out of bed until Carter was already back, showered, and putting around in the kitchen. He pulled on a pair of old jeans and padded barefoot into the kitchen to find her making scrambled eggs. Carter was a walking disaster in the kitchen, but a few things even she could manage, and scrambled eggs were one of them.

Jack knew the eggs were for him. Carter’s customary post-run breakfast of toast with peanut butter, plus half a pear, was already prepared and waiting on the counter. She had a second plate next to hers with the other half of the pear and a plain slice of toast awaiting eggs.

Jack stopped in the doorway to the kitchen and just watched her a moment. Her hair was wet from her recent shower – in deference to their day off, she hadn’t bothered to blow-dry it – and she had on black jeans and a plain white t-shirt. Her bare feet stuck out the bottom of her jeans, and the fact that Carter was barefoot in his kitchen had Jack’s stomach and heart turning somersaults.

They had moved so far past the danger zone with this, whatever it was they were doing, but Carter wasn’t putting a stop to it and he sure as hell wasn’t going to. It felt like they had passed the point of no return, anyway.

Carter finally noticed Jack from the corner of her eye. “Hey. Breakfast is almost ready, but my cooking skills stop at eggs, so if you want something else you’ll have to do it yourself.”

Jack chuckled. “Eggs are fine. You start the coffee yet?”

“I was about to.”
“It’s okay, I’ve got it.” He slid into place beside her and set about making a pot of coffee.

“I fed Nick and let him out after my shower. I think he’s sleeping under a tree in your backyard.”

“I call it laying an ambush for the local squirrel population.”

Carter giggled and Jack shot her a stern look.

“Right, sorry,” Carter covered her mouth with the hand not stirring the eggs.

“That’s better.” It wasn’t that Jack disliked Carter’s giggle… it was that he liked it too much. For his sanity, it was better if he didn’t hear it.

He crossed to the dishwasher and fetched two particular coffee mugs, their preferred coffee vessels. His was a chipped, stained cup Charlie had given him on Father’s Day. His kindergarten class went to a pottery studio, and Charlie’s handprints wrapped around the cup in bright blue paint. The glaze was wearing thin after so many washes, and the name ‘CHARLIE’ in childish block letters with a backwards R was almost unreadable, but Jack wasn’t ready to retire the mug just yet.

Carter’s favorite mug was a gaudy thing she’d unearthed from the back of his cupboard – a cup in the cartoonish shape of a black and white cat. After enduring a judging look from her, he explained the mug had belonged to his grandmother – she used to hand it to him every time he came to visit, full of caramel candies, and he wasn’t allowed to leave until he’d eaten them all. It was a lot of candy for a kid (Jack’s parents usually snuck pieces when the O’Neill matriarch wasn’t looking), but it was the old woman’s way of saying she wanted to spend more time with her grandson. “Granny O?” Carter had asked, and when he confirmed the cup had belonged to none other, Carter forged an immediate attachment to the stupid coffee mug.

The coffee finished percolating and the eggs finished cooking about the same time, and together Jack and Carter carried their meals to the adjacent dining room table. Jack paused when he saw the plans for the cabin in his spot with several notes scribbled in Carter’s handwriting.

“Salsa?” Carter asked needlessly as she went back into the kitchen for the condiment. She came back, set the jar next to him, and rounded the table to sit opposite him and start in on her toast.

Jack picked up the paper and studied her additions. “Geez, Carter. This was just supposed to be a rough outline.”

“I know.”

“Not from the looks of this.”

“That’s a rough outline, sir.”

“You drew a grid pattern on it.” He looked down at his eggs that she’d cooked, after the four or five mile run she’d already done, and somewhere between all that she’d turned his doodle into a schematic. “When the hell did you find the time to do this?”

“Is it not what you had in mind?” she asked, suddenly concerned.

“I’m not objecting to your input, Carter, I’m just marveling at your time management skills.”

She relaxed and smiled. “Well, honestly, I saw it when I picked up Nick, and I was thinking about it all during our run, and I couldn’t wait to get back and put some of my thoughts down, so… long story short, I may have skipped the last two miles.”
Jack huffed and shook his head fondly as he put down the paper to add a dollop of salsa to his eggs. “So what are your plans for today?”

“Well, I was thinking we could go to the pet store and get a harness for Nick. I think it’d be more comfortable for him on our runs than a collar.”

Jack froze with his fork halfway to his mouth as he gaped at Carter a second. He’d been expecting a typical Carter free-time activity – going for a ride on her motorcycle or building a particle accelerator – but she apparently had ideas about spending the day with him.

Her expression shuttered when she realized he had gone stock-still. “Oh, I’m sorry, sir. I didn’t mean to commandeer your day, I just thought… that’s okay, I’m sure you have other plans. I can go by myself.”

“No,” Jack forced his locked muscles to move. “No, I don’t have plans. We can do that.”

“Oh, great.”

“I mean… I want Nick to be comfortable.”

“Absolutely, sir,” Carter said with a playful glint in her eye.

***********

That’s how they ended up at the pet store two hours later with Nick in tow.

They were standing in the aisle with an array of nylon harnesses before them when Jack handed Carter Nick’s leash. “Watch him a minute, would you? Since we’re here, I’m going to get JJ a box of milkbones.” A thank you present for helping ease Nick’s transition to life on Earth.

Carter accepted the end of Nick’s leash with a distracted nod, though it hardly seemed necessary. Nick was stuck to Carter’s side like glue.

The dog treat section was a few aisles over, and after Jack made his selection he headed back to rejoin Carter. He came around the end of the aisle to fall into step several paces behind a woman heading toward Carter.

“Mrs. O’Neill!”

Carter looked up from trying to wrestle Nick into a harness, startled, then she smiled politely. “Oh hi, Stacy.”

The veterinary clinic receptionist stopped to talk to Carter. “I thought that was you! My, Nick looks good! You can hardly tell where he was hit by a car.”

Carter maintained her patented cover-story smile. “You guys did a good job with him, definitely.” Her eyes shifted from Stacy to Jack as he came up alongside the receptionist.

“Oh, hello, Mr. O’Neill! Nice to see you again.”

“You, too. How’s it going?”

“Oh, can’t complain. Well, I can’t stay and chat – Dr. Walsh sent me to pick up some newborn kitten formula – but I saw your wife and Nick and couldn’t resist checking in to see how everyone’s doing.”
“That’s very thoughtful of you. Everyone’s doing great. Give our regards to Doc Walsh.”

“You bet! Have a good day!” Stacy hurried off with a wave and a smile.

Carter, still crouched on the floor midway through putting a harness on Nick, winced up at Jack.

Jack drummed his fingers against the box of milkbones held against his hip. “Well, that settles that.”

“What does?” Carter asked, confused.

“I suspected they all thought we were a couple up at the vet clinic, but I never knew for sure. I’d say that clinches it.”

Carter gave a half-wince, half-smile. “Sorry, sir.”

“Why are you sorry? Did you tell them we were married?”

“Of course not.”

“Because if you did, but it was to get visitation rights to see Nick while he was under lock and key, well, I can forgive you. You do what you have to do for one of the team, right?”

Carter visibly relaxed seeing that Jack was taking her being mistaken for his wife so well. Not that it didn’t happen off-world often enough, but it was another thing for it to happen on their homeworld. “That’s nice, sir, but you know I would have just picked the lock and gotten in on my own without needing to pretend to be married to you if they had tried to keep me from seeing Nick.”

Jack snorted. “You are delightfully delinquent, Major. I approve. So, find a harness for him yet?”

They picked out a black nylon harness that fit Nick and Carter grabbed a matching leash. When Jack tried to protest that he already had a leash, Carter looked at him like he was nuts. “It’s all faded and frayed, sir. If he’s getting a new harness, he should get a new leash to match.”

As if a dog gave a shit about his things matching.

“Is this a woman thing?” Jack asked.

Carter narrowed a dangerous look at him.

“Nope, never mind, it’s clearly a common sense thing. New harness equals new leash, of course! What was I thinking? Let’s go.” And with that he carried both items and the milkbones to the check-out register.

Carter tried to pay for the harness and leash but Jack shouldered her back with a stern, “Ah! No way.”

“But sir…”

“He’s my dog, so it’s my job to buy his stuff.”

Carter looked unimpressed. “I’m the one who runs with him. I’m the one who insisted he get better gear.”

“That doesn’t make you financially responsible, it just makes you right.” His leash had seen better days – it had been languishing in a box since the last dog Jack had owned before he married Sara. That alone spoke to how old his dog accessories were.
Carter let the matter drop, and Jack foolishly thought he’d won. That was until they got back in the truck and Carter said, “Could you swing by the strip on Bluff Street?”

“What for?”

“I want to stop in at Madam’s.”

Jack gave her a strange look, but it wasn’t like he had anything better to do so he shrugged, started the truck, and headed that direction.

He was pulling into a parking spot in front of Madam’s Seamstress Shop while Carter fished a scrap of paper and pen out of his glove box. When the truck stopped, she leaned forward to use the dash as a desk.

“Carter?”

She shot him a victorious look, reached into the shopping bag to pull out the black leash, and held out the piece of paper so he could see what she’d written. “Just going to have them put Nick’s name on his leash.”

‘Nicodemus Legend O’Neill’ was scrawled in Carter’s handwriting on the scrap of paper.

“Oh, for crying out loud, Carter! Don’t do that.”

“Is that an order?”

He debated that a moment. “No.”

“Then I’m doing it.” She held the leash like a sword she was readying to take into battle in one hand, the paper in the other, and flashed him a challenging smile. “It’s a woman thing.”

It absolutely was not, she was just throwing his previous (and admittedly vaguely sexist) comment back in his face, but Jack had been married. He knew when to surrender. Which he proceeded to do by holding his hands up in the universal signal of ‘I give up’.

Carter beamed. “I’ll be back in a few minutes, sir.” Then she opened the door and hopped out of the truck.

Jack sighed and looked down at Nick sitting between the driver and passenger seat where the center console had been flipped up. The dog was watching Carter stride off intently, then turned a concerned look at Jack.

“Hey, don’t look at me. If I’m not willing to pull rank, I have basically no control over her. Less than none, really. Because you take rank out of the equation and she has me wrapped around her finger.”

Jack reached out and scratched Nick behind the ear. “You have no idea how deep the shit I’m in is, buddy. No idea. I think the Air Force could find enough damning evidence to have us both dishonorably discharged faster than you could say ‘fraternization’. Even if we haven’t technically done anything. I mean, it’s that bad.”

Nick shuffled closer to Jack and leaned in to lick him on the face.

Jack gently shoved the dog’s muzzle away. “Stop that. I’m trying to have a serious conversation with you. This could have consequences for you, too, you know. They toss my ass in the brig, then who takes care of you? I would say Daniel would get custody, but at the rate he kills fish I’m terrified to imagine you in his care. Teal’c couldn’t do it; Hammond’s okay with Teal’c living on the base, but I
don’t think he’d make the same allowance for a dog. The obvious answer would be Fraiser, but I’ve already dropped one dog in her lap – not sure she’d appreciate me dumping a second on her.”

Nick whined at him, understanding not a word but picking up on Jack’s mood.

“For what it’s worth, I’m sorry. When Carter and I… our deal with Teal’c was supposed to make sure our ‘inappropriate attachment’ didn’t hurt anyone on the team but us if shit went south. Looks like I didn’t take you into account.”

Nick nudged Jack in the side with his nose, catching him almost in the armpit and making Jack squawk. “Ah! No tickling.”

Nick then caused Jack to let out a winded oomph when Nick planted his front paws in Jack’s lap, perilously close to his groin, to stand over him to look out Jack’s window.

“All right, that’s it.” Jack gathered up Nick’s leash and popped the door open. “You’re a hazard in a confined space. Let’s take this outside.”

***********

Jack and Nick were strolling up and down the walkway along the storefronts when Carter came out of Madam’s empty-handed. Jack imagined it would be a few days before the leash was ready, so he’d expected as much.

“Ready to go?” Jack asked.

“Actually, I came to ask if you’d mind coming back to pick me up in about an hour?”

“Why?”

“I may have pulled a few strings and struck a few deals with the talented ladies of Madam’s.” Carter smiled triumphantly. “Zoey said she’d do it right now, and in exchange I told her I’d set up their network computer system.”

Jack’s eyebrows rose. “And that’ll only take an hour?”

Carter started to nod, then stopped and frowned, “Wait, are you asking about the monogramming or setting up the network?”

“Obviously I meant the computer wizardry.”

Carter flashed him a grin that made a home in his heart. “Honestly, sir, why would you even ask at this point?”

“Right… of course. What was I thinking? Go ahead, we’ll wait for you.”

“You don’t have to wait, sir. I don’t want to put you out any more than I already am. If I’d anticipated this, I would have driven my own car.”

“Carter, it’s fine. It’d hardly be worth driving home just to turn around and come right back. Nick and I will just take a walk.” At the look on Carter’s face like she might object again, he shooed her. “Go on, go astound them with that rocket scientist brain of yours.”

“All right. I’ll try to make it quick.”

“I’m sure you will, if for the bragging rights alone.”
Carter laughed as she turned and headed back into the store.

Jack did walk Nick around the block a couple of times, then he spotted the small park across the street from the strip of shops, a square of grass just large enough for a couple of picnic tables and shade trees, and went over to have a seat. Nick sat against his legs, leaning into Jack and looking up at him in a demand for love.

Jack snorted and began to pet the dog. Nick seemed perfectly content to while away the rest of the day there if Jack were so inclined. It was exactly the kind of peaceful, unconditional companionship Jack had loved about dogs his entire life. It felt good to have that again.

“Jack?”

Jack snapped out of his unfocused stare and turned to see Sara walking toward him with a plastic bag dangling from one hand. She had on a pair of jeans so old he recognized them, stained by grass and engine grease, and a blue flannel with the sleeves rolled up to her elbows. Her short blonde hair was messy and she wasn’t wearing any makeup. She obviously hadn’t expected to run into anyone she knew. Honestly, it was how he’d always liked her best.

It hit him behind the sternum at that moment just how alike Carter and Sara were. A dangerous thought to entertain.

“Sara. Hey. What brings you to these parts?”

She hefted the plastic bag with one hand and hooked her thumb over her shoulder toward an auto part store with the other. “I needed a distributor cap.” Her eyes dropped to the dog. “Who’s this?”

“This is Nick.” Jack patted the dog affectionately. “Nick, this is Sara.”

Nick stood to give Sara an investigative sniff. She held her hand out for him to smell. “Hello, Nick.” She looked up at Jack. “He yours?”

“Yes.”

Sara smiled. “That’s nice. I know you were wanting a dog for a long time.”

Sara passed Nick’s inspection and he nosed at her hand to encourage a petting. Sara smiled as she obliged.

“So…” Jack drew out the word, “haven’t seen you in a while.”

“Yeah, I think the last time was…” her words hitched when they both remembered last time.

“O’Malley’s.”

“Right.” Sara stood there uncomfortably a moment as that evening so long ago loomed over them. Jack felt like he should explain, but he wouldn’t even know where to start.

Eventually, Sara stepped forward to sit beside Jack. She kept distance between them that would not have existed once upon a time. The span of inches felt like a razor-sharp sword, poised to cause pain at the slightest misstep.

There was a pause as Sara visibly gathered her nerves to finally ask, “Who is she?”

There was no point lying to Sara. “Carter.” Jack frowned. Somehow, her surname didn’t seem right for this conversation. “Sam.”
“Sam…” Sara parroted, being careful to keep her voice neutral. “Didn’t I meet her before?”

“Yeah, once. She’s part of my team.”

Sara frowned. “I didn’t think the Air Force allowed that kind of thing.”

“They don’t.”

Sara looked over at him, blue eyes widening and mouth popping open.

“It’s not like that,” Jack cut her off before she could question his integrity. Or Carter’s. “Sam and I aren’t…”

“Oh.” An awkward pause descended as Sara eyed him. Damn, but she knew him too well. “But you want to be, don’t you?”

Jack didn’t answer that, but his silence was answer in itself.

Sara nodded sagely. “Does she…?”

“Yeah.”

“So that man you called ‘Dad’ that night…” Sara prompted.

Even he winced. “Sam’s father.”

“Jesus, Jack.”

“I know.”

“Does he know that you two could get court-martialed for this if the Air Force found out?”

“I guess I didn’t mention Sam’s dad is a general.”

“Wow. Wow. I don’t even know what to say to that. And he’s okay with…”

“With what? I told you there’s nothing going on between me and Sam.” There was a sharpness to his tone that he didn’t intend, born of his own frustration with the situation, but once it was out he couldn’t take it back, and it made Sara go quiet.

He knew he should probably apologize, but his inability to tell Sara he was sorry was a cornerstone of their divorce.

After a minute of neither speaking, Sara shook her head.

“What?” Jack prodded. She might know him too well, but he knew her, too.

“I saw you two that night, and I was jealous. I know it’s stupid, we’re not married anymore, and it’s not like I… uh…”

“It’s okay. You’d be crazy to want me back after what I put you through.”

Sara hesitated. She also noticeably didn’t argue the point. “I saw you two, and I felt like you were happy again, like you were at this place I’ve been trying so hard to get to, and you were just there, like it was easy… now come to find out I was wrong about everything.”

Jack thought about his complicated relationship with Carter. Their stolen mornings they shouldn’t
share, their quasi-promises and maybe-somedays.

“You’re not entirely wrong,” Jack mumbled. When Sara looked closely at him, Jack shrugged. “It’s not so bad.”

“Jack… That’s not healthy. You deserve more, you know.” When he didn’t concur, she pressed, “You do know that, right?”

He doubted a man whose negligence had gotten his own son killed deserved anything good in life. So by that logic, the life he had was more than he had right to hope for. “It’s not so bad,” he repeated softly.

“But is it enough?”

“It has to be.”

Sara blew out a frustrated breath through her nose, mouth pinched angrily as she turned her head away. Oddly enough, it made Jack’s mouth twitch in a smile. She was doing the same thing she’d done when they were married, getting riled up on behalf of him. Not because of him. She wanted him to be happy, and that he stood in his own way, chose the hardest path, was pissing her off.

He’d missed that side of Sara.

“I’m okay, Sara. Really.”

The tension in her body released and she looked back at him. Something in his face must have convinced her he was telling the truth, because a softness took hold of her features. She studied him a moment, then a devilish twinkle sparked in her eyes and she fought off a smile. “I’m almost afraid to ask about the man who was all over you.”

Jack laughed at the conclusion she had drawn. Not that he could blame her. From Sara’s perspective, Daniel and Carter had been equally affectionate toward him that night.

“That was just Daniel. You met him before, too. His hair was different then.”

“And he’s…?”

“Also on my team. He’s a friend.” Jack considered that a moment. “A really good friend.”

“Good… that’s good. You were always too good at shutting people out.”

Strange that now his problem was wanting so badly to let someone in but the rules not permitting it.

He sat on the picnic tabling talking with Sara for a while. He lost track of time until he happened to glance up and saw Carter standing on the other side of the street watching them hesitantly.

Jack jerked his chin up in a silent ‘come on over’ signal.

Carter crossed the street, the coiled black leash in hand, and approached the pair with a carefully polite smile.

“Carter.”

“Sir. Sorry that took so long.”

Jack conferred with his watch. “It was less than an hour.”
Carter shrugged. “I thought I could do better. Tanya kept distracting me with gossip.”

Jack snorted. “Carter, you remember Sara, right? Sara, Samantha Carter.”

Sara stood and shook hands with Carter. “We weren’t formally introduced last time. It’s nice to meet you.”

“Likewise.” She cut an uncertain look down at Jack. “Sir, I can give you a few minutes…”

“That’s all right,” Sara interjected, “I should get going anyway.” She turned. “It was nice to see you again, Jack.”

“Yeah, you too. Take care of yourself.”

“You too.” After biding Carter a polite farewell, Sara walked away.

Carter stood rooted to the spot. “Sir, I’m sorry I interrupted…”

“You didn’t. I bumped into her and we got to talking, that’s all.” He nodded toward the leash in her hand. “Is it finished?”

“Yes, sir.” She didn’t look like she was in any hurry to show it off, though. In fact, she looked distinctly uncomfortable having come upon Jack with his ex-wife.

Which was probably on target for the tangled relationship they had.

He sighed in resignation and stood. “Let’s go.”

***********

Carter was quiet the entire ride back to Jack’s house, fiddling with the leash in her lap and petting Nick whenever he tried to cheer her up. Taking his lead from her, Jack didn’t say a word. He was already dreading what kind of uneasy backtracking the chance encounter with Sara in the park would cause. Two steps forward and three steps back.

He hated how unstable their personal relationship was. He hated even more how they weren’t allowed to take any of the measures that would make it stable.

When Jack pulled into his driveway, he turned to Carter with one enduring hope. “Want to come in for lunch?”

She shook her head. “I should head home, sir. Thanks anyway.” She put the leash in the pet store bag and opened the passenger side door.

“Carter?”

She turned back to him. “Yes, sir?”

“Are we okay?” His gut told him they weren’t.

Carter sighed and nodded. “Yes, sir. I’m sorry, I just… I need a little time.”

He eyed her warily. “That’s a very worrying phrase, Carter.”

She gave him a fragile smile. “It’s not that, it’s just…”
“Just what?”

“It’s not easy coming face-to-face with someone who had everything you can’t.”

“Oh.” And when Jack thought about it from Carter’s perspective, he supposed it made sense. In the same day, she’d gone from being mistaken for Mrs. O’Neill to standing before the actual former Mrs. O’Neill, and the comparison no doubt threw a spotlight on every way the imitation paled to the real thing. It probably made their strange routine feel like children playing house.

She gave him an apologetic shrug. “Don’t worry about it. Nothing a good old-fashioned pity party won’t cure.” She forced a smile. “I’ll see you later, sir. We’ll do some more work on the cabin plans.”

It was her way of telling him she had no intention of them suffering another setback. She was blindsided by the crappy parts of their non-relationship at the moment, overwhelmed by the limitations when lately they had been focusing on the slices of the forbidden they did have, but she wasn’t going to let it sabotage them.

“Yeah… sure, sounds good. See you later, Carter.”

Carter gave Nick one last pet then turned, got into her own car, and backed out of his driveway. When her car had disappeared, Nick turned a judgmental look on Jack.

“I’m pretty sure I warned you this was fucked up when I brought you home. If I didn’t, I meant to. But our options are having Carter all messy and complicated or not having her at all.”

Since Nick loved Carter, Jack knew the dog was as pathetic as him in the ‘take what Carter-time I can get’ department.

Inside the house, Jack tossed the old collar and leash in his junk drawer and hung up the pristine new harness on the kitchen hook in its place. Then he unfurled the leash and got his first look at the stitch-work she’d had done.

‘Nicodemus Legend O’Neill’ crawled down the center of the leash in tight blue thread, a vibrant contrast of colors that made the name pop.

Jack smiled a little and hung the leash from the hook next to the harness. He’d protested the expense on something so pointless, but seeing the finished product, he had to admit it was fitting. It was Carter’s touch, her subtle claim to the dog they owned together… if not literally, then virtually. If Nick could talk, he’d say he belonged to both of them.

If they were being honest, the name on the leash should probably read ‘Nicodemus Legend Carter-O’Neill’.

***********

There were days when Jack felt pretty good about the kind of match he’d be for Carter if only their lives had taken slightly different tracks. There was never any question Carter would always be the smarter one in the relationship, but Jack liked to believe he’d make up for what he lacked in brains in devotion and affection.

Then there were days when Jack was hit upside the head with the fact that Carter was way out of his league. Moments when it was clear that all Jack would ever do for Carter was hold her back.

PK1-283 was proving to be one of those moments.
MALP recon of PK1-283 was a new one in the books for the SGC. The moment their robot rolled through the gate on the other side of the galaxy, it was caught up in some kind of net. Suspended above the ground like a fly in a spider web, they watched through the video feed as a contingent of guards moved to meet the artificial alien visitor.

Communicating through a midair MALP that was tilted halfway on its side (not the most dignified way to make their ‘we come in peace’ pitch), General Hammond convinced the guards and later their superiors that the people of Earth were not enemies and sought only peaceful relations with the residents of PK1-283.

The inhabitants of PK1-283 were wary to say the least, but they agreed to allow one SG team to come through to represent Earth. Since Daniel Jackson was one of the best cultural wizards they had for smoothing over ruffled feathers, the assignment went to SG-1.

The natives called their city Sudala, and it was a semi-arid metropolis baking under a blazing sun and hugging the bank of a vast river. The color palette of the landscape reminded Jack of all the shades of Carter’s hair… variations of blonde, wheat, champagne, and caramel. On Carter they were enchanting tones – as a nature scheme, it was distressing. Jack got the feeling the place was on the cusp of being another Abydos.

Daniel took to the place like a camel to a sand dune.

As if in defiance of the sepia and papyrus cast to the world around it, Sudala itself was resplendent with color. Art married function at every turn, with bold blues, reds, blacks, and whites rebelling against a sun that strove to bleach everything the color of bone. It felt like the harsher the environment was, the more fervently the Sudali fought back with beauty.

The Sudali themselves were an extremely advanced technological race. Not quite as advanced as the Tollan or the Nox, but in several respects leaps and bounds ahead of Earth.

Like the Tollan and Nox, the Sudali showed a distinct reluctance to share technology with Earth, but their cultural expert was eager to discuss their respective peoples with Daniel, and Carter made fast friends with a Sudali scientist named Makubwe.

As they tended to do when Carter wanted to fly one way and Daniel another, Teal’c accompanied Daniel to keep him out of trouble while Jack tagged along with Carter while she discussed the mysteries of the universe with Makubwe.

It wasn’t long before Jack was wishing he’d taken Daniel duty instead.

Makubwe was a very affable man. Intelligent and funny, interesting and curious, and undeniably handsome. He was a brainiac who defied the dorky nerd stereotype.

He was, in summation, a perfect match for Carter.

When Makubwe realized how smart Carter was as they toured one of their university labs, his dark eyes sparkled with delight, and from that moment on Carter and Makubwe were in a world all their own, discussing interstellar travel and the inner workings of the Big Bang like best friends on a grade school playground. Jack started to suspect they’d ceased to even notice his presence as they yammered on about the universe and protons and everything in between.

Carter was riveted by her intellectual peer, as she had so few, and it dropped a sour feeling into the pit of Jack’s stomach. Because he could never be that for her. He could never work her into an intellectual frenzy with the errant genius thought he’d had over breakfast that morning. He could
never ask a question that would suddenly electrify Carter with cerebral acrobatics. He’d never rise above the morass of average to reach the heights where Carter dwelled, no matter how much he studied.

Makubwe existed there effortlessly, and Jack kind of hated the man for that.

The Sudali government forbade Makubwe from giving SG-1 any technology, but it did nothing to bar him sharing his theoretical work and research with a fellow scientist.

“Sir!” Carter hurried up to him as he lingered moodily on the edge of the university lab near a wall of windows. She was almost breathless with excitement, her face lit up with a joy he could never ignite in her.

Light angled in through the window panes behind him and the Sudala sun exploded in Carter’s hair like platinum sparks. Facing into the sunlight, Carter’s eyes were the color of the sky at high altitudes, just before the planet gave up dominion to the stars. She was starlight and sky. The sun that would seek to leech the life out of everything in Sudala could only ascend Carter to a state of near-divinity.

“Carter?”

“Colonel, Makubwe said he works at a facility where they’re conducting research on the detection of gravitons.”

“In a word, sir: yes. If you adhere to the principle put forth in quantum mechanics that everything exists as both a wave and a particle, then by definition gravity must also exist as particles, which scientists have termed gravitons. Now, we’ve been able to observe the effect of wave-based gravitational forces as theorized by Einstein in his theory of relativity – we have evidence that the mass of objects can curve the space around them, and objects react to that curvature as we would expect them to – but the same cannot be said for particle-based gravitational forces. Based on the way the universe works within the framework of quantum physics, gravitons have to exist, but we’ve never been able to observe them. At least on Earth, no one has ever detected a graviton. If they do exist, as we theorize they do, then they have no mass. Imagine trying to detect a subatomic particle itself, and not just its effect, if that particle has no mass. It’s a huge question mark in the field of quantum physics; even string theorists have joined the search for the elusive gravity particle. When and if someone finds a way to detect a graviton… well, sir, it’s going to be a very big deal in my intellectual circles.”

That circle including people like Makubwe. “Uh huh… Carter, was there a point to this PBS special?”

“Oh…” Carter blushed slightly, a defiant blossom of pink amid the alabaster, chrome, and white-gold of her, and visibly steadied herself. “Makubwe’s invited us to go see his work… with your permission, sir.”

It pained him to grant her request, but at the same time her excitement meant he could do nothing else. “Lead on, Major.”

Jack followed Carter and Makubwe as the pair walked side by side down the streets of Sudala, both barely breathing in their attempts to cram the most conversation into a single encounter as possible. Jack kept a watch on their surroundings as they went, always alert for suspicious behavior, but time and again his attention was drawn to the pair before him.
Carter’s dull desert camo was a sharp contrast to the rich crimson and cerulean of Makubwe’s robes. Under the blaring Sudala sun, her nearly-white hair was at striking odds with his pitch black curls. Her porcelain skin was the photographic negative to his dark chocolate complexion.

They were a stunning couple, both visually and intellectually, and Jack could only curse his aging body, graying hair, and lackluster MENSA scores for making him poor competition.

The worst thing was that Makubwe was actually a really nice guy. Jack would like to hate him on principle, but he reminded him too damn much of Carter.

***********

The Sudali put SG-1 up in the penthouse of a high-rise hotel, and for a team used to yak tents, mud huts, and sleeping on the ground, it was the lap of luxury. The suite had a communal living room the size of Daniel’s entire apartment with bedrooms that branched off like wagon wheel spokes at angles consistent with the hexagram shape of the building.

They got in well after nightfall. The Sudali’s equivalent of Daniel had rallied a local dance company to dress in traditional Sudali garb and showcase their rich culture of performance arts for their off-world visitors. The dancers were impressive, all lean limbs, dark skin, and effortless grace, but Jack couldn’t shake his somber mood enough to appreciate the show.

The Sudali anthropologist, a woman named Zuasu, was essentially a female version of Daniel. They had the same voracious appetite for learning about new people at the expense of common sense. Eventually, Jack realized this and had to physically pull Daniel away or they would be partying until dawn. He remembered Daniel’s tales of the post-Ra party on Abydos; he knew the dweeby guy could party until sunup when the occasion called for it.

Despite the late hour when the team filed into their opulent accommodations, no one was quite ready to go to bed. Daniel was still too wired, high on the day of cultural immersion. Carter was still buzzing from her hours in Makubwe’s lab. They both sprawled on the couches in the communal room and started telling each other about their days like kids home after the first day of school.

They were in high spirits, they were his team, and Jack couldn’t seem to resist being around them. He dropped down on one end of a couch and tried not to draw attention to his dark cloud.

“So, Daniel,” Carter prompted. “What did you find out from Zuasu about the Sudali?”

Daniel perched on the edge of the couch and leaned forward eagerly. “For starters, their ancestors came from somewhere in sub-Sahara Africa. They were brought here to serve Anubis.”

“Really?” Jack blurted. “This world on the ragged edge of being Death Valley? What the hell could Anubis want with this place?”

Daniel gave him a trying look. “This exact place? Nothing. The original slave settlement was north of here near the sea, a place with great shipyards where the Sudali ancestors built al’kesh and ha’tak motherships for Anubis. It gave them access to Goa’uld technology in a way forbidden to most slaves, and these people were smart. They started to learn how to use it. They realized that mastering the technology of the gods was the only way they could defeat them, so they started to sneak out their smartest citizens. They build this city, Sudala, as a hideaway and think tank where their most gifted intellectuals could work on unlocking the secrets of the Goa’uld without getting caught.

“It turned into a project spanning generations, with Sudala’s ranks steadily growing with the intellectual cream of the crop. The Sudali devised several of their own weapons of advanced
technological design from studying pieces and parts of ships smuggled out by the shipbuilders, and one day they attacked Anubis. To hear the Sudali tell it, the victory was near absolute. Anubis’s forces were driven from the planet and ever since then Sudala has been free.”


Daniel nodded emphatically. “After the uprising, they moved their capital here, and to this day they highly value intellect, ingenuity, and freedom.”

“That’s nice,” Jack snarled.

Daniel looked closely at Jack. There was something keen and discerning in Daniel’s eye, and Jack knew it was time for a strategic withdrawal.

“Hey, Carter... tell Daniel about the gravity things.”

She, too, gave him a calculating look, then she began to fill Daniel in on Makubwe’s research.

Jack pushed up off the couch and wandered out onto the balcony. The view was commanding and Jack could see that far beyond the city the landscape did in fact turn into desert. The river delta where Sudala had been built seemed like the only pocket of habitability as far as the eye could see. It put Jack in mind of Egypt (god knew Daniel talked about it enough that some of the information had to finally sink in), full of desert except for the cities that crowded along the Nile River.

“Oh’Neill.”

Jack looked back and saw Teal’c coming out onto the balcony to join him. “Hey, Teal’c. Carter finally lose you with the gravity things? You lasted longer than I did. My eyes started glazing over when she started rambling on about waves.”

Teal’c came up alongside him and pinned Jack with a penetrating stare.

Jack squirmed. “What?”

“You seem troubled, my friend.”

“Oh no,” Jack groaned. “Buddy, we are not doing this.”

“I do not understand. What ‘this’ are we not doing?”

“The thing where I tell you my problems and you give me a pep talk.”

Teal’c cocked his head. “Is that not precisely the function of a friend?”

Jack sighed and rubbed his eyes with one hand.

Teal’c lifted one eyebrow. “Very well. If you do not wish to discuss it, then we shall stand out here in silence.”

“Thank you.”

For a moment, they did just that. Then Teal’c said off-handedly, “Major Carter seems to hold Makubwe in high regard.”

Jack’s head whipped around and he stared, flabergasted, at Teal’c for all of two seconds. Then he narrowed his eyes beadily. “Pretty sure I said I don’t want to talk about it.”
“You are jealous of Major Carter’s rapport with the Sudali scientist.”

“No. No, I’m not.” It wasn’t jealousy Jack was feeling, and it wasn’t even Makubwe that bothered Jack. It was the truth he embodied. There was a type of person that was Carter’s equal, and it wasn’t Jack. Which he’d always known, of course, but brilliant assholes like Makubwe really drove the point home. “There are levels of smart, Teal’c, and Carter’s right at the top. Not a lot of people are up there with her. I’m not. Makubwe is.” With a shrug, Jack fell silent.

Teal’c pondered that a moment. “You believe Major Carter values intellect above all else.”

“Most geniuses do, and no one would deny she’s a genius.” He’d always known he would never match Carter intellectually, but he realized he’d always taken solace in the fact no one could. Carter would always have to settle for someone dumber than her, so it might as well be Jack. And then they found someone who did measure up to Carter’s smarts, and it was just depressing. Because then if Jack tried to hold on to Carter, it would be denying her the chance to be with someone who could keep up with her. Maybe not Makubwe, necessarily, but someone like him.

And did Jack have any right to do that?

Maybe the Sudali had the right idea. Spirit away their geniuses, collect them together where they could think their world into salvation in the company of their equals. That certainly sounded like the kind of place where Carter could shine.

“If you truly believe that Major Carter would rank you beneath her on the basis of intelligence alone, then she is indeed much smarter than you are.” With that, Teal’c turned and headed back inside.

Jack gaped after him. “Wait, was that your pep talk? Wow, thanks, Teal’c, I feel so much better!” he called after him sarcastically.

Teal’c did not rise to the bait as he left Jack to brood. "Some friend," Jack muttered to himself when he was once again alone on the balcony.

He turned his eyes back out to the horizon, coming to an unhappy realization about Carter. He hated clichés, but he was going to have to embrace one if one day she met her perfect match, a genius of her own caliber.

If you love something, set it free.

*************

“We are sad to see you go, Earthlings. Our time together has been rich.”

As SG-1 and the Sudali farewell party stood at the base of the Stargate platform, Daniel took Zuasu’s hands in the tradition of the Sudali people, then he smiled and stepped forward to hug Zuasu in the tradition of theirs. “We’ll keep in touch, I promise. The friendships forged today won’t be left to die on the vine.”

Zuasu chuckled and stepped back slightly, keeping hold of Daniel’s elbows in her hands. “You speak like a Sudali after only three days, Daniel. Perhaps you are meant to be among us.”

That sounded like she was trying to adopt his archaeologist. And that was a big bucket of nope in Jack’s book. “Ah, actually, he’s like that everywhere we go.” When Daniel gave Jack a ‘you’re not helping’ glare, Jack amended, “Although he sure did like you folks. He’ll be pestering me to come back for a visit in no time.”

Daniel sighed and returned his attention to Zuasu. “I will come back, you have my oath. I hope for great things in the future from the friendship between my people and yours.”
Zuasu smiled brightly and leaned forward to press a kiss to Daniel’s lips. Daniel’s eyebrows jumped skyward, but none of the other Sudali seemed startled by the gesture so he rolled with it.

“And I do hope you will return as well, Samantha,” Makubwe said in his deep baritone voice as he reached out and took Carter’s hands. She was standing about a foot in front of Jack, so she couldn’t see his face twitch at the warmth in Makubwe’s words. What was it with smitten alien guys calling her ‘Samantha’? Martouf, Nareem, Makubwe… it was a god damn theme.

“We’ll be in touch,” Carter assured. “If nothing else, I’ll find a way to sneak back to check up on how you’re doing on the graviton research.”

Makubwe laughed, straight white teeth in a chiseled cast of ebony. “I would gladly harbor a runaway genius of your caliber.” Then Makubwe leaned forward to kiss her as Zuasu had Daniel.

Jack girded himself not to interfere, not to rage or grieve, but the instant Carter realized Makubwe’s intent she stiffened and pulled away. She took a quick step back, enough to put her firmly at Jack’s side.

Only then did she seem to consider what she’d done. Like the last two seconds had been reflex. “Um… sorry, Makubwe.”

“Have I offended?”

“No! You didn’t, it’s just…” Carter faltered and threw a look up at Jack.

Makubwe looked from Carter to Jack and back again. “Oh, I see. I have misjudged. I apologize, Colonel O’Neill, I assure you I intended no challenge to your claim.”

Jack studied Carter a few seconds, trying to gauge how she wanted him to handle the situation. Carter lifted her chin slightly and swayed a little closer to him.

It was enough for Jack. He looked at Makubwe. “No offense taken, Mak. It was an honest mistake. No harm done.”

Makubwe nodded once in respect, then he and the other Sudali turned and headed back toward the city.


While Daniel followed orders, Jack looked down at Carter. It was not unusual for one of the men of SG-1 to pose as Carter’s husband/mate/betrothed/etc. if the locals were likely to cause trouble, but Makubwe and the Sudali didn’t seem to fit that category. Leaving Jack to wonder why Carter had pulled the ‘sorry, I’m taken’ bit with her fellow science geek.

“Something about Mak I should know about?” There was always the possibility that the scientist had done or said something threatening when Jack wasn’t close enough to catch it.


And he finally understood.

Whatever quasi-relationship they had, she was honoring it. She was being faithful. She’d spent days with a brilliant scientist, a man clearly a perfect match for her on an intellectual level, but in the end she still picked Jack.
If Jack were a little more selfless, he should probably argue with her about dismissing someone so suited for her on account of him, but he didn’t utter a word. Instead, he smiled to let her know he finally got it. There were obviously qualities in him she valued as highly as he valued her intellect, enough to make him the one she wanted. Even in the face of seemingly superior options.

The Stargate whooshed to life, and Carter turned her head to look. Jack watched the event horizon dance in blue ripples over Carter’s face. He supposed, in a sense, this would always be Carter’s natural habitat, standing in the light of the Stargate.

“Let’s go home,” Jack announced to his team.

Daniel transmitted the GDO code and went first.

Teal’c followed him, but not before casting Jack an ‘I told you, you idiot’ look.

Jack looked over at Carter, his second-in-command standing tall by his side, and he felt the weight of his worries slough off his shoulders. They would start piling back on the minute they stepped through the gate, he knew that, but for now they were on a world where Carter had declared her preference for him. Not as a ruse or an act for the sake of the natives, but an honest gesture. A genuine fondness. A forthright ‘I choose him’.

They couldn’t make such statements on Earth, so they had to content themselves with making the point on other planets.
Chapter 8

Jack feels a heart rush every time he spies the flash of white when Carter laughs. She smiles prettily, of course. Smiles that are polite, bemused, shy, flattered, obedient, insubordinate, sly, brittle, pained, cunning, brave, whip-smart, and deadly. But there is something about her laugh that cracks the hard cement of Jack’s foundation and for a moment, every time, he’s worried he’ll stumble to his knees.

The fact he can coax that laugh out of her gives Jack such a god damn thrill. Because he knows his humor is an acquired taste. It’s too caustic and snide for most – it’s the most humor he was able to salvage after Iraq, after Charlie. He knows it’s a broken, ugly thing, but it’s all he was able to dig from the wreckage of his life. And miraculously, Carter likes it.

Jack lives for the thrill of startling out of Carter that full-belly laugh that turns his insides to jello (the blue kind, naturally). He feels a little lighter basking in the dazzling white of her smile.

***********

P74-656 was turning out to be a pain in the neck for Jack O’Neill.

Literally.

They had only been on the planet for a few hours, but from the moment they met the locals Jack had been so tense that the muscles in his neck were stiff, his jaw ached from clenching his teeth, and a headache was hammering away at the gray matter behind his eyes.

His on-edge behavior was made worse by the fact that no one else on SG-1 was acting like there was anything amiss. Because by all accounts, there wasn’t.

The team had stepped through the Stargate on P74-656 to be greeted by the sight of a long sandstone road that stretched toward three giant pyramids in the distance. Lining either side of the road were buildings, shops, lean-tos, tents, and kiosks. It looked like a bazaar, albeit an abandoned one. A basket lay on the ground, overturned with fresh loaves of bread spilling out onto the street. There were definitely people living in the city.

Daniel was just speculating that the residents fled and hid when the Stargate activated when a party of inhabitants emerged from a side street and approached SG-1. They had in their hands plates and trays, some piled with food, some with drinks, and others with trinkets of gold and gems. The tithes looked haphazardly thrown together. The people had clearly not expected a god to appear expecting tribute.

It wasn’t anything out of the ordinary for SG-1. Gating to a world with pyramids, being mistaken for gods, meeting groveling locals. Annoying, sure. Unusual, no. And while Jack wasn’t fond of any planet that had pyramids, it wasn’t enough to get his back up.

Not until the welcoming committee came closer, bowed to Daniel as he neared them, and one brave soul spoke. “A-salam wa a’aleykom!”

Jack immediately stiffened and he had not relaxed since, no matter how friendly the natives of P74-656 were.

Daniel assured the frightened locals they weren’t gods, and the streets filled back up with hidden people in garb clearly taken from Earth’s Middle East. A group of women approached Carter. Jack quickly grabbed her elbow to ensure she couldn’t be dragged off. The women seemed to have no
such intentions, and Carter gave him a questioning look for his bruising grip. The women offered Carter a hijab, but when Daniel learned from the leader that it would not offend if Carter declined, the major waved them away with a polite smile. Then she had to physically pry her elbow out of Jack’s grip – he hadn’t even realized he was still holding on to her.

The natives milled around SG-1 curiously, many giving Teal’c the side-eye, and the women seemed incapable of leaving Carter alone. Daniel was fielding questions and offering greetings like a pro. Carter was clearly something of a unicorn with the ladies for her fair skin, golden hair, and blue eyes, and while the native women gave the men of SG-1 a wide berth, they felt comfortable approaching Carter and reaching out to touch her hands or pinch a pale lock between their fingers.

It was all harmless and not nearly the worst reception they’d received on a new planet, but Jack’s shoulders were practically up around his ears with discomfort. The tan faces and dark eyes crowded too close, and he felt an absurd urge to lash out to clear some space between him and them. Someone bumped into him on accident and Jack flinched away and shot out a hand to Teal’c’s shoulder, fisting the large man’s jacket in his hand so the team couldn’t leave him behind.

Teal’c gave Jack a concerned look, not understanding the colonel’s response to the natives, but the great thing about Teal’c was he didn’t have to understand. He wordlessly opened his stance and invited Jack closer, turning himself into a shield on one side. Jack hated to take Teal’c up on the offer, but he was too uneasy to turn it down. He gratefully took a step into Teal’c’s space, putting the Jaffa on his left and Daniel on his right. It helped, but Jack was far too aware that the move put Carter beyond his reach and he found himself constantly checking on her.

The leader, a man named Raheem, took SG-1 on a tour of the city. Daniel was making friends as usual, Carter caught wind of a mineral in the local hills that piqued her curiosity, and Teal’c was his typical, unflappable self. Meanwhile, Jack was opening and closing his hand to keep his finger off the trigger of his P-90. If Fraiser could take his blood pressure at that moment, she would be appalled and probably ground him.

It was a mission he would love to pull the plug on and bug out ASAP, but he had no good reason to do so.

The group stopped at an eatery and were shown to a shaded outdoor table while Raheem went to fetch them water.

“The city’s called Medinat B’alshams,” Daniel reported.

Jack’s eyes flicked skyward.

“It means ‘City of the Sun’, and they call themselves the Nas B’alshams,” Daniel continued. “These people were former slaves of Ra. He had them mining the surrounding hills for… uh… well, they call it ta’iraya, which from the loose translation I would guess has something to do with he’tacs and tel’tacs… possibly death gliders. Something that flies, at any rate.”

“Naquadah?” Carter asked eagerly.

“I don’t think so… I mean, that word’s been pretty universal on Goa’uld-occupied planets we’ve encountered. I would think if it was naquadah they’d just call it that. Of course, the Goa’uld spaceships aren’t made out of naquadah, just powered by it, so maybe this is something to do with their construction.”

“I’d love to take a sample back with us for study,” Carter said. “Do you think you could convince Raheem to part with some?”
“I think so. Sounds like when Ra ‘disappeared’,’” Daniel shot Jack a knowing look, “the slaves kept mining for a while until it was obvious their god wasn’t coming back. Then they staged a revolt against the Jaffa Ra left on the planet to oversee the mining operation, drove them out of the city, and abandoned the mines years ago. From what I understand, this mineral is useless to the Nas.”

Raheem returned with a tray bearing four cups of water. “Mashroubat, minfadlik,” Raheem set the tray down in the middle of the table with a bow.

“He knows we’re not servants of the Goa’uld, right?” Carter asked of Raheem’s obsequious behavior.

“I told him, but apparently they’re not willing to risk it with travelers through the Stargate. That and Teal’c here might be giving them pause.”

“If it scowls like a Jaffa and shoots like a Jaffa,” Jack mumbled.

“Something like that.” Daniel smiled up at Raheem. “Shukran.”

“Afwan, afwan… turedoon aiy shay?”


Raheem bowed again and retreated to the restaurant.

Teal’c watched after their guide then lifted an eyebrow in Daniel’s direction.

“Oh, uh… I told him earlier we’d like a chance to talk amongst ourselves,” Daniel explained as he took a cup. That was born of working with Jack O’Neill in the field enough to know what the colonel liked… time to assess the situation and pick his geniuses’ brains.

Except Jack didn’t pick up the ball. Instead, he snatched up a cup and drank half its contents in the hopes his pounding headache might be partially due to dehydration and therefore fixable (even though he knew it wasn’t).

When he remained silent, Carter filled the gap. “Daniel, what’s with those?” She gestured toward a chipped and fading green painting of the eye of Ra on the façade of the eatery. “I’ve seen a lot of them between here and the Stargate in different colors.”

“That’s how they differentiate parts of the city,” Daniel explained. “Raheem said B’alshams is divided into eight sections, and each one uses a particular color paint as a way to help navigate.”

“That is not an uncommon practice on worlds where the Goa’uld have forbidden their slaves from learning to read and write,” Teal’c said.

“They did something similar on Abydos,” Daniel commented with that familiar twinge of pain in his voice anytime he spoke of the desert world that had briefly been his home.

“Where are the Jaffa?” Jack asked curtly, startling everyone with his rough tone.

Daniel blinked.

“The Jaffa,” Jack repeated. “The ones these folks ran out of town? I assume they didn’t just vanish into thin air.” Jack knew damn well they hadn’t, but he wasn’t fluent enough to catch all the details. He had only heard Raheem say ‘jaesh’ and had gone on alert.

“They were chased out past the wall. Apparently B’alshams has a wall around it like the village on
Abydos did to protect it from sandstorms, and the Jaffa were driven outside the gates.”

“And from there they what?” Jack asked, all but glowering at Daniel.

Daniel pursed his lips, baffled by Jack’s biting attitude. “They formed an army that’s been trying to get back into the city ever since.”

“To retake it?”

“Most likely they wish to gain access to the Stargate so they may flee this abandoned world,” Teal’c said.

“Well, if that’s true, you’d think these people would be glad to be rid of them,” Daniel observed. “Why don’t the Nas just escort them to the gate and say good riddance to bad rubbish?”

“If you’d just fought tooth and nail to drive out an enemy, would you want to risk letting them back in on the chance they were lying?” Carter countered.

“No, I guess not.”

“Exactly how big a problem is this Jaffa army?” Jack asked.

Daniel shrugged. “Well, these people don’t act like a population that’s besieged. I can ask Raheem when he comes back.”

“Do that.” Jack looked around at his teammates. “So what are we looking at here, objective-wise?”

“Whatever they were mining for Ra,” Carter chimed in immediately. “If it was valuable to the Goa’uld, it could be of value to us. Especially since these people seem to have no use for it.”

“Trade relations,” Daniel added. “If this mineral is something we want, we’ll have to figure out what we can offer in trade for it.”

“A check of the defenses and an assessment of the threat posed by Ra’s Jaffa beyond the wall,” Teal’c added.

Jack was keenly concerned with that last point.

“Establishing good relations with these people couldn’t hurt either, Jack,” Daniel offered the suggestion almost tentatively, picking up on Jack’s hostility toward the mission and handling him with annoying care.

“I’m much less concerned about making friends and far more concerned about the enemies at the gate,” Jack growled. Then he realized he had his excuse to leave. “If this is a rock thing, then this is a job for our minerology boys. Daniel, Teal’c, you two are on perimeter check. Find out how safe the city is with those Jaffa outside. Carter, you and I are on rock detail. Daniel, get us a guide.”

“All right,” Daniel hedged uncertainly, “but Jack, none of these people speak English. Are you sure we should be splitting up?”

“How much conversation does it take to show us a rock? Tell them what we want; all the guy has to do is lead and point. I want us back at the SGC before nightfall.”

“Why?”

“Just do it, Daniel!”
Daniel startled and hastily got up from the table to fetch Raheem.

“Sir…?”

“What?”

Carter was watching him with a worried expression. “Are you all right?”

“Just fucking dandy, Major.”

Carter frowned and opened her mouth to speak, but before she could get another word out Daniel came back with Raheem. After a brief conversation, Raheem fetched another man named Yousef, who gestured for Jack and Carter to follow him.

“Check in every hour. Teal’c, make sure Daniel doesn’t get into trouble.”

“Hey…” Daniel protested.

“Not in the mood, Daniel,” Jack snapped. “Do your assignment and let’s get the hell out of here. Major, let’s go.” With that, Jack strode after Yousef, leaving Carter no choice but to follow.

Jack and Carter had just been led to a storage shed filled with the last hauls of the mineral mined before the uprising when it was time for the first radio check-in with Teal’c and Daniel. Jack tried to raise them only to receive static. He toggled the button on his device several times and switched channels to no avail.

“Damnit,” Jack spat.

“It’s probably this mineral, sir,” Carter said as she held up a chunk of the amber-colored rock in one hand and one of her science doohickeys in the other. “It seems to interfere with radio signals.”

“So step outside and try again?”

“I don’t think so, sir. I suspect the deposits in the surrounding hills would make radio communication impossible anywhere in this city.”

“Wonderful,” Jack grumbled. “Can you bag a rock to study later? I’d like to find the boys before trouble finds them.”

Carter gave him another puzzled look for his agitation, but she quickly nodded and took off her pack to stow the rock away inside a plastic bag. When she had her gear back in place, Jack and Carter stepped outside the storage shed.

Then they hit a language barrier.

“Uh… we might not have thought this through,” Carter admitted as she looked at Yousef and waved her hands helplessly. “We’d like to go back to our friends. Friends?”

Yousef just looked between them, shaking his head and holding up his hands in mirror image of Carter.

“Daniel,” she circled her fingers around her eyes to pantomime glasses. “Teal’c,” she waved a finger at her forehead and then pointed at her stomach.

Yousef put a hand to his mouth and pretended to eat.
“No, no…” Carter waved the misunderstanding away.

Jack felt his temper fraying.

Carter tried to charade hint at Daniel again. Jack was having flashbacks to doing the same thing to the kids on Abydos. Unfortunately, clucking like a chicken wouldn’t help this time.

When Yousef tried to offer his head wrap to Carter (perhaps thinking she wanted her head protected from the sun), Jack snarled, “Oh for crying out loud,” and shouldered Carter to the side to address Yousef. “Ayna asdeqaikna? Tafham?”

Yousef perked up. “Na’am, afham. Hom fe al’medinat al’zaroc’a.”

Jack turned to Carter and translated in clipped tones. “They’re in blue town.”

Carter was watching him with a dawning look of realization.

Jack felt like someone was running a plow down his spine, rusty metal digging into nerve and bone. Phantom pains were aching all over his body, and his hands were clutching his weapon with a desperation that frankly scared even him.

A hand touched his shoulder and Jack jerked away violently, spinning to see Yousef watching him with a frightened look.

Carter slipped quickly between them, giving Jack her back and holding up her hands toward Yousef in a placating gesture. She was smiling by the sound of her voice when she said, “It’s all right, everything’s okay. Just take us to our friends.”

Yousef blinked at Carter, uncomprehending, then he flicked a look over her shoulder at Jack.

“Noreed asdeqaikna. Al’lan.”

Yousef nodded nervously and gestured for them to follow him.

Before she moved from her spot, Carter turned to look back at Jack. There was a fount of compassion in her face. And pity.

“I don’t want to hear it, Major,” Jack snapped and strode after Yousef.

Jack was in no better mood when they were finally taken to Daniel and Teal’c inspecting the wall with Raheem. Not even the fact that it appeared to be a tall, sturdy barrier could improve Jack’s attitude.

“All right, pack it in,” Jack announced. “We’re heading back.”


Jack felt his skin crawling. Whatever was about to come out of his mouth was going to be unpleasant.

Carter saved him.

“The colonel’s right, Daniel. If the objective here is to secure mineral rights, we’re not the team for this. I’ve got the mineral sample, the best thing we can do is get it to the experts and see if it’s worth anything.”
“But why leave in such a hurry? We’ve barely gotten to know these –”

“Daniel,” Jack barked. “SG-1 is going back through that gate, with or without you, in twenty minutes. Do I make myself clear?”

Daniel stared at Jack a moment, flabbergasted. Then he seemed to get it, because he got that same pitying look in his eyes that Carter got in hers.

Jack wasn’t sure how much Daniel actually knew – if he just suspected or if word-of-mouth at the base had reached the linguist at some point in the last several years. Hell, maybe Daniel worked it out on his own at that very moment. He always was too smart for his own good. Carter had no doubt read his file – what little of it that wasn’t classified, at any rate. Teal’c was a warrior and had been for longer than Jack had been alive… if he hadn’t figured it out since they’d arrived on P74-656, then Jack would eat his cap. The fact that Teal’c wasn’t coddling him was a small mercy when he had Carter and Daniel watching him like he was a shivering dog at the animal shelter in need of rescue.

Either way, they knew. Or knew enough to feel bad for him.

It was the last fucking straw. He didn’t want his teammates feeling sorry for him. “Move out. Now.”

Daniel told Raheem they wanted to go home, and their guide led them back to the Stargate. The entire time, Raheem seemed overly concerned with how the Nas had displeased their guests. Daniel did everything he could to assure Raheem that there was nothing to apologize for, but that fell on deaf ears when Jack was on such a hair trigger.

When they reached the gate, Jack paced while Carter dialed up and sent the GDO code. Jack’s gut screamed at him to be the first one through, to get the hell off that miserable planet, but he fought the urge to run in order to see his team safely through before he made his own escape through the gate.

***********

Hammond was confused to see them back so soon, especially without a threat chasing them back ahead of schedule. By then, the entire team was subdued and watching Jack like a hawk, which only pissed him off.

“General, if you don’t mind, I’d like to get the briefing over with as soon as possible.”

Hammond gave Jack a long, assessing look, seemed to weigh the decision to reprimand him for insubordination, then he took in the rest of SG-1. Seeing their demeanor seemed to stay Hammond’s wrath until he knew more. “Very well.”

Jack zoned out for most of the debrief, concentrating on his physical surroundings to help ground and calm him. He pressed his hands down on the table until the tips turned white, focusing on the cool, smooth wood surface. He slid his booted foot back and forth along the carpet, attending to every catch on his tread. If he breathed in deeply enough, he could catch hints of Carter’s sun-sweat smell… they hadn’t bothered to hit the showers before the meeting. He slid covert looks at Carter beside him, staring at the patches of desert camo on her arm, the folds of fabric at her elbow, the angle of her shoulder. He dared not look higher than that, knowing he was already treading on thin ice just fixating on her BDUs in front of the general.

Finally, Carter joined Daniel’s recount of events. “I brought back a sample of the mineral with us. Once minerology determines its composition and possible usefulness, we can go from there as far as P74-656 is concerned.”
“Was that not an assessment you could make on the planet, Major?” the general asked.

Carter noticeably paused, stole a glance at Jack, then answered, “Unless it has weapons-grade applications, it’s really not my area, sir. Daniel already suspects it’s not an energy source, so I think the mineralogists are our best bet.”

“I see,” Hammond responded, his voice revealing he thought something fishy was going on.

“And General, if I may,” Daniel interjected. “If the mineralogical team does go back to P74-656, I’d like to go with them. Uh… that is, just me. I mean, there’d be no good reason to involve the rest of SG-1.”

“If that’s true, then why should you be involved in a follow-up mission?”

Daniel faltered. “Ah… well, General… as a translator. The truth is, no one on this base speaks Arabic as well as I do.”

A heavy silence fell in the space after Daniel’s words, and Jack could practically feel the general’s gaze on him.

“In that case, I suggest you all hit the showers and report to the infirmary for your post mission physicals.” When the team pushed back to follow orders, Hammond said, “Colonel O’Neill, I’d like to speak with you a moment.”

Jack’s chest locked, stuck mid-inhale.

The rest of his team filed out, though they seemed hesitant to leave him. It gave Jack a strange kernel of comfort to know they wanted to stay and have his back. Although he honestly didn’t want them listening to the impending conversation.

Jack brought his eyes up to Hammond at length, dreading what he’d find.

The general looked concerned. “Are you all right, son?”

No.

Jack deliberately peeled his fingers off the edge of the table. “Just got caught in a rut on memory lane and couldn’t quite get out of it, sir. I was going to screw up the mission and our chance at peaceful relations with those people if we’d stayed.”

“If you’d like to speak with our psychiatrist…”

“I’d really rather not, if it’s all the same to you, General.”

Hammond sighed.

“I’ll be fine, sir.” Jack almost believed that. “Permission to be dismissed?”

Hammond studied him closely a moment. “All right, you can go. But if you’re having trouble…”

“No trouble, sir. Just a bad day.” Then he pushed his chair back and practically fled the room.

***********

Daniel and Teal’c were talking in the locker room when Jack walked in.
“… I have ever said this before, but your command of languages is most impressive, Daniel Jackson.”

Daniel cut a look at Jack briefly before he turned back to Teal’c. “Thanks. I’ve just got an ear for them. Although, here’s an interesting fact: I was born in Egypt on one of my parents’ digs, lived my first four years there and learned to speak from the workers almost as much as from my mom and dad. So in a way, you could almost say Arabic is actually my first language.”

“That is indeed an interesting fact about your life,” Teal’c agreed pleasantly.

“Yeah… uh… Jack?” Jack was standing with his back resolutely to his friends, so he didn’t see Daniel close enough to touch him until the archaeologist laid a hand on his shoulder.

Jack jerked, slipped out from under the touch, and turned to face the person at his back.

_Daniel. It’s just Daniel._

Jack clenched his hands into fists to hide any hint of unsteadiness.

Daniel looked wounded, but Jack was too nervy to care. “Don’t touch me.”

Daniel lowered his hand. “I’m sorry.” He looked like he wanted to lunge at Jack and hug him. Jack was pretty sure he’d lose his last bit of control if Daniel did. “Are you okay?”

“Do I seem okay to you?” Jack countered bitterly.

Daniel radiated hurt, though whether for Jack’s rebuff or empathy for him Jack wasn’t sure.

“You know if you ever wanted to talk…”

Forget this… he’d wear his BDUs home. “As a matter of fact, I _don’t_,” Jack said as he slammed his locker shut and stormed out before Daniel could try to talk more about _feelings_.

Jack would like to go straight home, but he still had to stop in and see Fraiser. He wanted nothing more than to skip it, but breaking post-mission protocol and leaving base without being cleared by medical would be the fastest way to get his ass grounded and on McKenzie’s couch whether he wanted his head shrunk or not.

So he gritted his teeth and marched toward the infirmary with the resolve of a man going to face a firing squad. He boiled the next few hours down to simple tasks, items to mark off a short to-do list before he could be alone where he didn’t have to hold it together anymore.

_Do his physical._

_Pick up Nick_.

_Go home_.

_Get black-out drunk_.

_Sleep. Hopefully without nightmares_.

***********

Hoping he wouldn’t have nightmares was asking too much.
Jack lurched out of a fragmented dream of torture so vivid he came awake shouting. His dark bedroom seemed to swallow the sound and wait for more, a dark monster crouching above his bed, eager to be fed. Jack lay there panting, and he could swear he felt the wounds still fresh. The broken ribs his captors had kicked in, the fire ant bite of electrical shock on every inch of his skin, the seized rigidity of a spine seemingly welded at every vertebra.

Worse, his mind played tricks. Part of him knew he was home, that he was safe, but another part was just as sure he was in Iraq and they were coming to put him through another round.

Something living touched him and Jack recoiled. He turned on his side and curled his body, trying to protect himself from the worst of the attack.

The living thing didn’t attack him. It whined and licked his face.

Jack’s breath gusted out and he reached up and clutched a handful of dog hair. He gripped too hard and Nick whimpered, though he did not fight to escape. The sound cut through Jack like a lance. He knew what it felt like to have someone hurt you, and here he was doing the hurting.

“I’m sorry,” Jack croaked and let Nick go. Undeterred by the rough handling, the dog continued to lick him until Jack pushed himself up and sat with his legs hanging over the side of the bed. His heart was still hammering, beating like it wanted to escape the cage of his ribs. Cage. His stomach turned and Jack braced himself on the nightstand with one arm, prepared to make a dash for his bathroom if he was going to throw up.

Nick whined louder and pressed against Jack, trying to lick his mouth in supplication.

Jack shoved the dog away. He didn’t trust himself not to hurt the animal in his current state.

It was barely four in the morning, but there was no chance he’d be getting any more sleep. As soon as he felt certain he wouldn’t vomit, Jack pushed up out of bed and started walking through his house turning on lights.

He needed to be able to see no one was hiding in wait to attack him.

***********

Jack could tell Carter was surprised to see him awake when she arrived to take Nick for their run. He was sitting on his couch well before sunrise, a veritable dark cloud of pain and anger. Nick was sitting across the room watching Jack, worried and fretful. Nick had tried getting closer, but Jack had driven him away until they’d compromised on the very spot where Nick now sat. When Carter came in, the dog didn’t rush to the door to meet her but instead gave a pitiful whine from his spot, like he was calling for reinforcements.

Carter came into the living room and hesitated when she saw Jack. Her “Good morning, sir,” sounded almost like a question.

Jack couldn’t do the banal chit chat. He couldn’t play the good host. It was taking all his restraint not to yell at her to get out of his house. His head was a horror show, and he couldn’t let it out. He couldn’t let it spread and infect the few good things in his life.

Carter stood there silently a moment, clearly uncertain what to do.

Nick whined again, and Jack couldn’t handle it. He couldn’t listen to those wounded sounds. “Get him out of here already,” Jack growled. “He’s being a pest.”
Carter audibly took a breath, probably to defend Nick, then she sighed. “Come on, Nick.”

Nick was reluctant to leave, but in the end he made the smart move. He chose Carter and her light over a broken master.

Jack was in the exact same spot when Carter returned about half an hour later. He didn’t greet her, hoping his blatant ‘fuck off’ vibes would send her on her way quickly.

Nick came into the living room and hesitated at his previous spot before venturing closer while watching Jack’s reaction.

Jack was too busy listening to Carter moving through his house to pay much attention to Nick until suddenly the dog jumped up on the opposite side of the couch. Jack tensed and sucked in a strained breath, preparing to shout the dog down. Except he didn’t. Sacking out on the couch was Nick’s post-run routine, and Jack could cede ground to that, he supposed.

Truthfully, Jack barely noticed the dog.

Because Carter wasn’t leaving. She was going through her normal morning routine like nothing was different, like Jack wasn’t a walking disaster stitched together from nightmares and awful memories.

Maybe she was just going to take a shower before she left. Driving home funky from a run sounded nasty. That had to be it. Jack resolved himself to keeping his cool as long as it took for her to shower and leave.

Except Carter didn’t leave after her shower. She emerged from the guest bathroom and made her way to the kitchen, where she started to putter around with skillets and plates.

The presence of another person was like steel wool on raw nerve, and Jack clenched his jaw in disproportionate, irrational fury. Why wouldn’t she just leave him alone? He didn’t have a handle on his actions right now. He didn’t trust himself not to lash out, and god, if he hurt her…

She had no idea. She was cooking in his kitchen, unaware that he was a ticking time bomb in the next room.

He had to get her out. If he did nothing else, he had to keep her from getting caught in the blast.

With a rush of energy, Jack surged off the couch and strode to the kitchen to demand she leave. Before the nuke detonated with her at ground zero.

He drew up short when he actually saw her. She’d changed into a fresh set of clothes that she kept in the dresser in Daniel’s room, a clean pair of gray track pants and a black tank top. The muted tones made the flush in her cheeks from her shower and the spun gold of her hair radiant by contrast. The look wasn’t especially flattering, certainly not intended to draw attention, but something about the sight of her put a snare in Jack’s chest and he couldn’t get the words out. He’d bulled into the kitchen meaning to toss her out on her ass, and now he stared at her, a bloom of vibrancy in his dark world, and he couldn’t get a single word out.

Carter looked over at him briefly, gave him a small smile, then turned back to her cooking. Eggs. She was making eggs. He was a hair’s breadth from falling apart, and she was making fucking eggs. He wasn’t sure if that was absolutely perfect or positively insane.

She scrambled a skillet of sun yellow and stark white while he watched like a deranged man.

Then she started singing. Softly, but singing nonetheless.
Jack’s eyebrows rose.

Carter had a lot of gifts, but carrying a tune wasn’t one of them. Jack didn’t know the song, but it didn’t really matter. The fact remained that Sam Carter was in his kitchen, making eggs and *singing*.

He stood there watching her like a nut job for a good five minutes. How she didn’t get uncomfortable with his staring was a mystery, because even Jack knew he was being creepy. But he just couldn’t seem to stop. Carter was barefoot in his kitchen, cooking and singing, and it had some kind of hold on his brain. He couldn’t move past the strangeness of it all. He couldn’t *think* past it.

Then he realized... he wasn’t thinking about *anything* but Carter at that very moment. Not about P74-656, not about the nightmares, not about Iraq. Just her.

Just Carter.

At that moment he understood fully just how much he would never deserve her.

“You’re a terrible singer, Carter,” Jack finally said, his voice rough like sandpaper.

Carter stopped, glanced at him, then shrugged. “My plants never complain.”

“They would if they could.”

Carter smiled to herself. “Probably. Want to start on the toast?”

He’d had every intention of throwing her out, but somehow that turned into him padding over to his toaster and slotting in two slices of bread. He took a steadying breath and gripped the edge of his counter when his traitorous brain freaked out about someone being behind him. That is until Carter started singing again. Off-key though it was, the sound identified the presence... it could be no one but Carter. It filled his house with her, everything Carter crowding out the amorphous darkness that had been pressing close to his skin since he woke up.

Jack let out the air in his lungs in a rush and loosened his grip on the Formica. “Carter...” He didn’t even know what he planned to say to her, but it felt like he was asking her to save him.

“Do you have any apples?”

“Apples?” Jack asked, baffled. Then he remembered. Right. Breakfast. “Yeah, I think so.” With that, he went to the fridge and dug an apple from the vegetable crisper.

When he placed it on the cutting board to half it he stopped, unable to pull a knife from the block. He knew with a cold certainty in his gut that couldn’t hold a blade right now.

And then she was there, sliding gently toward him with the wooden spoon in hand. “Trade you.” She put the spoon in his hand and nudged him out of the way with her hip to cut the apple herself.

Jack wandered, dazed, to the eggs and stirred out of muscle memory more than culinary intent. Carter started humming – the same tune as before, only wordless now. It was a warm sound that he used like an anchor.

McKenzie would probably call the strange brain fog Jack was in some kind of fugue state. All he knew was he drifted, half there and half not, but always something about Carter hauled him back to the surface if he started to sink. Her humming or her eyes or the smell of her shampoo. She was like a talisman fending off the darkness, and he couldn’t understand how she did that. He was used to Carter performing miracles, but how could she do *this*?
“Sam?” He hadn’t planned to say anything, but the word popped out. Maybe he wanted to see if he could call her to him. If this amazing creature would answer someone like him, someone so broken and damaged.

Carter turned from putting the eggs on his plate and settled her eyes on him. She was sunshine and blue skies and pink evening primroses.

God, she was fucking beautiful.

She stepped over to him and took the jar of peanut butter from his hand. He didn’t remember grabbing that from the pantry, either.

“Thanks,” she said with a smile.

She started to draw away, and he couldn’t let her. “Wait.”

She stopped in her tracks and looked up at him, expectant and trusting.

Jack snatched the peanut butter out of her hand, set it on the counter, then wrapped his arms around her before he could second guess himself. He held her tightly, probably too tight, but he couldn’t stand the thought that she’d be anywhere else just then than pressed against him.

Carter slipped her arms around him and held him back just as tightly.

“I’m sorry,” Jack breathed.

“Don’t be.”

“It’s not okay.” He wanted to say it before she uttered that patented lie, that empty and infuriating platitude people said without thinking, without understanding the pain it caused.

“No, it’s not.” Her palms slid up and down his back soothingly. “But I’m here.”

“You shouldn’t be. I’m a mess.”

“We both are.”

“Not you.” Jack pulled away enough to look down into her eyes, a riot of sapphire and lapis lazuli. “You’re perfect.”

Carter smirked sardonically. “Not even close.” A tiny crease furrowed her brow and she looked away. “I hate people or places on sight because of things that happened to Jolinar. That wasn’t even me.”

“That’s not your fault.”

“What happened to you wasn’t your fault, either.”

He didn’t want to talk about what happened to him. Instead, Jack tugged experimentally on Carter’s shoulders, wondering if he could bring her back to him. If she’d fold against him again.

She did. With so little coaxing, Carter slid her arms back around him and nestled her head on his shoulder.

Jack clung to her, hating himself for lashing her to him, for becoming her burden, but at the same time knowing he couldn’t give her up. “This is always going to be there, you know.” He would
always have this past, and there was always the possibility something would trigger a flashback. There was always going to be the risk he’d become dangerous.

“I have my demons, too. They’re not going anywhere, either.”

Jack curled one hand around the back of her neck. Her hair was damp and cool and wonderfully soft to the touch. “So, what? I’ll fight yours and you’ll fight mine?”

“Isn’t that what we do? Watch each other’s sixes?”

“I always assumed that was a euphemism for checking out each other’s asses.”

Carter snorted and started to giggle, turning her face into his body to try and muffle the sound. She was shaking with laughter in his arms, and he should really make her stop, but he didn’t see the point. Forbidding her from giggling had been to keep himself from falling in love with her, but he already was.

“Thank you,” he whispered.

Carter’s arms around him squeezed. “I’ll always be here for you, Jack. No matter what.”

Their ‘no matter what’s always felt foreboding – he didn’t want to imagine the circumstances that could bring this to ruin – but he also knew she meant it just as completely as he did.

***********

Jack felt like an entirely different person when he arrived on base that morning after Carter’s visit. He’d bolted yesterday a man on the ragged edge of a breakdown, but now he was just tired. And he had a slight headache, but that was probably the beer’s fault more than anything.

He swung by his much-neglected office and grabbed a couple of aspirin from a bottle in his desk drawer before heading for the commissary to find something with which to wash them down.

He found Daniel there eating breakfast one-handed while he read a book splayed open beside his tray. Jack grabbed a glass of orange juice and made his way to Daniel’s table.

“Morning,” Jack greeted as he took a seat across from the archaeologist.

“Jack! Hey!” Daniel looked shocked to see him. Or maybe just to see him in a much better mood. “Uh… how’s it going?”

“Fine.” Jack popped the aspirin in his mouth and downed several swallows of orange juice. When he lowered his glass, Daniel was watching him, a crease of concern between his eyebrows. “Relax, Danny. Just a headache. Level two at most.” He hadn’t had as much beer in the house last night as he’d hoped and had been too far past his limit for dealing with people to go get more… which had probably saved him from a massive hangover.

“Okay.” Daniel pursed his lips. “You seem…” Daniel read something in Jack’s ‘don’t go there’ glare and changed directions. “I mean, you haven’t been in the mess for breakfast in a long time.”

He hadn’t really thought it about, but Daniel was right. Jack tended to eat breakfast at home now.

“Neither has Sam, come to think of… ooooh.”

“That headache’s heading toward a level three, Daniel,” Jack said in warning.
“Yeah, no, I just meant… I’m just glad you’re feeling better. Headache notwithstanding.”

“Yeah.” Jack looked down at his glass of juice to avoid eye contact. “Look, about yesterday…”

“It’s okay.”

“I was an ass.”

“You frequently are.” When Jack glared at Daniel, the younger man shook his head. “Really, Jack. I mean, there are plenty of times I wish would you apologize to me, but yesterday wasn’t one of them.”

“I can’t promise it won’t happen again.”

“Well, if it does, I’ll be better about catching a clue next time. We’ll get out of there faster.”

Jack gave a wordless nod that seemed to end the discussion on the matter. “Any word yet if Hammond is sending another team to P74-656?”

“Yeah, SG-3’s scheduled to embark this evening.”

“You going with them?”

“That’s the plan.” Daniel gave Jack a wary look. “Unless you’re not comfortable with that.”

“I’m never comfortable with you going off with another team. None of the other team leaders appreciate just how closely you have to be watched.”

“I’m not a child, Jack.”

“Which is a shame, because I’ve seen these backpacks with leashes for kids that were no doubt made with people like you in mind.”

Daniel sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose.

“I try to explain to the other teams what a trouble-magnet you are, but it’s really something that has to be seen to be believed.”

“Excuse me, but you and Sam get into just as much trouble off-world as I do.”

“We do not.”

“Oh, please. Sam follows any blinking light or energy reading she finds, and you follow… well, let’s just say that if Sam or I jumped off a bridge, you’d totally jump, too. If only to yell at us for jumping on the way down.”

Jack could hardly deny that. “Yeah, you’re probably right about that.”

“Let’s face it, SG-1 would be dead ten times over were it not for Teal’c,” Daniel said with a twinkle in his eye.

Jack began to smile. “You’re probably right about that, too.”

Daniel closed his book. “We don’t tell Teal’c enough how much we appreciate him.”

“We really don’t… you thinking a party in his honor?”
“You know Teal’c loves a cook-out.”

“We should have cake.”

“Teal’c does love cake.”

Jack grinned. Teal’c would, of course, gladly attend a team party and thoroughly enjoy it, but his Jaffa-style awesomeness was just an excuse to throw it. It was about all of them more than it was about any one of them. It was about their bond as SG-1.

Daniel was smiling conspiratorially across from Jack, and the colonel had a sappy moment when he admitted (at least to himself) that while he did love Carter, he loved Daniel and Teal’c, too.

***********

As per standard procedure, Hammond summoned Jack to his office to inform the commander of SG-1 that his linguist would be on loan to SG-3 for the duration of the latter team’s mission to P74-656.

That was the official reason for Jack going to Hammond’s office, anyway. It became obvious pretty quickly that Hammond really wanted to check up on Jack.

The general seemed surprised at Jack’s marked improvement.

“I appreciate your concern, General, but I’m okay.”

“I can see that,” Hammond answered, a clear ‘and how the hell is that possible?’ in his voice.

Jack shrugged it off. “I had a rough night, but… what can I say? I’ve got a great team.” He felt like he could say that, because it wasn’t just Carter who’d helped. Daniel had, too. Even Teal’c had helped, and Jack hadn’t even seen the big guy yet.

“You certainly do,” Hammond concurred, though there was a flicker of doubt in his eyes that was all too common these days when he dealt with SG-1. Jack felt like he could see the dilemma in Hammond’s expression. The internal debate on whether he should step in and do something about a team obviously too close to each other when that team had such a good track record in the field. How long did he turn a blind eye before it was endangerment to the team and therefore a command failure on his part for not putting a stop to it?

Jack didn’t envy Hammond that decision. He’d already accepted he was incapable of splitting up the team, even if it was the right thing to do.

There was a kind of reckless freedom in embracing the choice he and Carter made, be it right or wrong.

***********

Jack and Carter were in the embarkation room to see Daniel and SG-3 off to P74-656. It was later than originally planned, delayed by another team coming in with wounded, and Jack and Carter were scheduled to go off-duty in fifteen minutes. Not that end of duty periods necessarily meant anyone on SG-1 went home, but today Jack intended to head for the surface the minute he saw Daniel off. His night of poor sleep plus an ungodly reveille meant he was dragging by early afternoon.

He was looking forward to hitting the sack, but not before giving his friend a proper O’Neill send-off.
“You have everything? Did you remember to pack your homework? Do you have your lunchbox?”

Beside him, Carter tried to suppress a smile by ducking her head.

Daniel heaved a weary sigh and gave Jack a perturbed look. “*Not* a child, Jack.”

“I’m pretty sure I had to sign a permission slip for you to go on this field trip.” Hammond’s paperwork was close enough to it, anyway.

Daniel looked spiritually afflicted and looked over at Carter. “Sam? A little help?” When she looked up at Daniel, the linguist gestured at Jack for emphasis.

“Play nice with the other boys,” Carter said cheekily.

Jack broke into a grin.

“Oh for crying out loud,” Daniel groaned dramatically, then he narrowed a look at Jack. “You’re a terrible influence on her.”

Probably so. Not just on Carter, either.

The gate began to spin and dial.

“Dr. Jackson,” Colonel Reynolds broke from his own team to come up alongside Daniel. “You ready?”

“Yeah, I’m ready.” He looked like he wanted to add ‘get me away from my immature teammates’, but he bit his tongue and just said it with his eyes.

“Have fun,” Jack chimed in, then he slid his gaze from Daniel to Reynolds. The warmth and playfulness afforded Daniel dimmed and he gave Reynolds a stern, knowing look. Reynolds gave a half-nod in return. It was well-known at the SGC that the fastest way to have Jack O’Neill breathing fire at you was for one of his team to get hurt on your watch. It was a reputation Jack liked to keep alive.

Jack and Carter stood shoulder-to-shoulder until Daniel and SG-3 disappeared through the event horizon and the Stargate deactivated. When the gate room was quiet, Jack looked down at Carter. The ghost of a smile was still dancing at the corners of her mouth.

“You know, sir... you keep treating Daniel like a child – even in jest – and he might retaliate by giving you some teenage attitude.”

“I’d say he already does,” Jack countered, though a twinge in his heart filled him with the ache that maybe he didn’t mind so much. Maybe Daniel throwing him some teenage attitude would be a pale substitute for the teenage hell Charlie never gave him.

By unspoken agreement, they walked out of the gate room side-by-side and headed down the concrete halls.

“You heading out, sir?”

“Yep. Feel like I’m dead on my feet. You?”

Carter shook her head. “I’ve got an experiment in my lab I want to get a little more work done on before I call it quits.”
“Don’t stay up too late, Major.”

Carter smirked. “I won’t, sir.” She threw a look up at him. “You’d actually be proud of me, Colonel. I’ve really cut back on my overtime.”

He knew it was because she spent a lot more time with him outside of work. Even on days when all she did was stop by in the morning for Nick’s run, the time she had to wake up for it meant she went home much earlier in order to get to bed at a decent hour.

The fact that it was a sacrifice Carter was willing to make spoke volumes.

“I knew if I pestered you long enough about practically living on base you’d finally start listening,” he teased.

She huffed. “Yes, sir.”

“There’s more to life than work.”

“I’m beginning to agree with you.”

“Yes, well… appearances to the contrary, I’m not a complete idiot.”

Another almost-laugh. “Of course not, sir.”

They rounded the corner of an empty hallway and Jack dug around in his pocket for his key card. “Well, I’m off. See you at home.”

Jack didn’t even realize what he’d said until Carter’s eyes widened and she darted a look around the hall. Jack froze and gaped. Shit, he was tired if he was slipping like that at work.

Carter looked like a deer in the headlights for a moment, then she spared another look around and relaxed slightly when there was no one else around. Still, that was too damn close, and Jack was, in fact, a complete idiot.

“I, uh…” Jack stammered.

He had no idea what else he might have said if the gate activation alarmed hadn’t begun blaring.

“Unscheduled off-world activation!”

Out of habit, Jack and Carter both turned on their heels and started running for the control room.

When they got there, Hammond was turning away from ordering the tech to open the iris. “It’s the Tok’ra,” he said when he spotted Jack and Carter.

The three of them filed into the gate room and were there to greet Jacob Carter when he came down the ramp.

“Nice to see you, Jacob,” Hammond greeted.

“A pleasure as always, George… I just wish it was under better circumstances.” Jacob reached the bottom of the ramp and moved forward to give Carter a brief hug and kiss on the cheek.

“Trouble?” Jack asked with dread.

Jacob frowned. “Not exactly.” He reached into a pouch on his belt and withdrew a tangle of rust-
colored beaded strings. Jack would know a wad of weathered dog tags anywhere.

“The Tok’ra were scouting a planet as a possible base and we found these in the ruins of an old settlement.” Jacob handed them to Jack, who flipped over the first tag and his stomach dropped.

“Ferretti.”

Lou Ferretti had been given command of SG-2 after Kowalsky died. A couple of years later, SG-2 disappeared on a mission. They were long ago declared MIA, presumably KIA, but the SGC never found out what happened to them. The loss of Lou Ferretti made Jack and Daniel the only people at the SGC left who’d been on the original Abydos mission. They both became something of a relic (and a legend) in the program for that fact alone.

“I insisted on bringing those back to Earth when we found them,” Jacob was saying to Hammond, “although I don’t think the Tok’ra understood my insistence.”

“Any idea what happened to the men that belonged to these tags?” Jack asked as he handed the lot over to Hammond.

“Not yet. In that settlement I mentioned there’s some debris from a battle that took place a long time ago, so we might learn something about the Goa’uld responsible, but…”

“Right.” Years after the fact, it might not matter much. There was no chance the old SG-2 were still alive, and it was entirely possible the guilty Goa’uld had already been killed.

It was not the way Jack had hoped to end his day, but he was used to life kicking him in the teeth. “Well, I was just heading home… so unless anyone needs me…?”

Hammond shook his head. “Go on, Colonel. I don’t think there’s anything we can do about this.”

“Then good night, sir.” He glanced at the Carters and nodded. “Carter, Jacob.”

“Good night, sir,” his second echoed. She caught his eye briefly and he saw a fleeting hint of apology in her expression. He got it. Her dad was in town, so she wouldn’t be stopping by tomorrow for their usual post-run breakfast.

He tried not to feel disappointed.

“Good night, Jack,” Jacob said, and Jack gave him a sloppy salute and left.

**************

Given the poor quality of Jack’s sleep the previous night, Jack slept hard the following night. It actually took his alarm to wake him when he usually woke on his own before it was set to go off.

After he’d silenced the alarm clock, he grumbled and pushed back the covers, noting the distinct lack of dog in his bed. The poor guy was probably lying at the front door waiting for his running buddy to show up. Jack would have to find time to take Nick to the dog park to make up for missing his run that morning.

Jack shuffled, yawning and raking a hand through his bedhead, into his kitchen.

Only to freeze when he saw Jacob Carter sitting at the small table in his breakfast nook.

For a moment the two men just stared at each other, Jacob frustratingly neutral and Jack horribly confused.
“Uhhh… Jacob.”

“Jack.”

Jack rubbed at his eyes. Yep, the guy was still there. Jack looked around, hoping he might spot Carter, then he glanced down to make sure he was still wearing pants and a t-shirt. Maybe he was having one of those ‘naked in public’ dreams.

He was dressed, which was only a small mercy.

“What, uh… what are you doing in my house?”

Jacob’s eyebrows rose. “Apparently this is what Sam does with her mornings.”

“I, uh… coffee. Desperately need coffee.” Jack crossed to his counter to start a pot. “You want some?”

“No.”

Well then.

Jack startled when the front door opened and Nick came trotting into the kitchen. The dog spotted Jack and went to him immediately, giving Jacob an uncertain look as he did so. Jack knew the feeling.

“Hey, boy,” Jack leaned down to pet the dog, giving him the reassurance he himself wanted.

A sweaty Carter came into the kitchen a second later. Like Nick, she too cast Jacob a wary look.

“Morning, sir.”

“Carter.” He looked at her pointedly, trying to send an entire conversation straight into her brain. She winced a little, gave him an apologetic shrug, and Jack took a steeling breath and nodded. Nothing they could do to make their predicament vanish, so they just had to deal with it.

Carter relaxed marginally and looked toward her father. “I’ll be right back, Dad.” Then she hung up Nick’s leash and disappeared down the hall.

Jack wasn’t about to be the one to break the awkward silence between him and Jacob, so he turned his attention to chores. He got Carter’s cat mug out of the cupboard and set it next to the coffee machine. He loaded a piece of toast in the toaster, put a plate on the counter, set a jar of peanut butter next to it, then fetched a peach from the fridge and cut it in half. He was just putting one half on Carter’s plate when he jumped to discover Jacob had risen from his seat and come to stand a few feet from Jack.

“Don’t sneak up on me like that,” Jack ground out roughly, clearing his throat when he realized it sounded brusque.

Jacob came closer and inspected Jack’s work.

The toast popped up and Jack lunged to busy his hands slathering it with peanut butter and setting it on the plate next to the half peach. He turned to take the peanut butter back to the pantry and found Jacob looming close. The older man looked pointedly at the toast and fruit – Carter’s customary post-run breakfast. Belatedly, Jack thought maybe he shouldn’t have gone about making it so automatically, like it was part of his daily routine to make the man’s daughter breakfast.
He frantically tried to do damage control. “I was thinking of whipping myself up some oatmeal. Care for some?”

Jacob skewered Jack with a hard look for a moment before he nodded. “Sure.”

Jack escaped to the range and gave it his undivided attention.

Carter took possibly the fastest shower known to man and rejoined her commanding officer and father in the kitchen less than ten minutes later dressed in jeans and the dragon blouse. Not that her presence made the situation any less awkward. They all kind of stood there, three pawns in an imaginary game of chess, too uncomfortable to say anything to each other.

Except apparently Jacob wasn’t too uncomfortable after all. “Jack made you breakfast.”

Carter’s eyes darted to her plate and she bit her lip.

Jacob crossed his arms. “I take it he does that a lot.”

Carter blushed bright red, but to her credit she lifted her chin and shot her father a challenging look. “It’s not like that.”

“Like what, exactly?”

“Sordid.”

Jack choked on air at the implications Carter was making. Of course, they were all thinking that’s what Jacob was thinking, but she didn’t have to go and say it.

“I’m sure it isn’t,” Jacob answered in a voice that suggested he totally thought it was.

Carter gave her father a stubborn, rebellious look that Jack had only seen hints of before. He was suddenly very glad he’d never had to parent a young Sam Carter.

“Oatmeal’s ready!” he announced far too eagerly. “Jacob, how do you like yours?”

“Do you have brown sugar?”

“I absolutely do.” He unearthed some from his spice cabinet and held it out to Jacob like a shield. Jacob managed a half-smile that did nothing to soften his features as he took it.

Jack put some oatmeal in a bowl and handed it to Jacob. “Dining room’s through there. I’ll bring you something to drink. You want water, milk, or orange juice?”

“Water is fine.” With a lingering beady look, Jacob turned and went into the dining room.

Jack immediately stepped closer to Carter and dropped his voice. “Why did you bring him here?”

“I’m sorry! He came home with me last night to spend the night at my house, and I guess I was bummed I wouldn’t get to come over here in the morning, and he could tell something was bothering me, and…” Carter threw up her hands in exasperation. “He has ways of making me talk, sir! He practically ordered me to go about my morning like I normally would, and when I told him my ‘normal routine’ had me leaving for the mountain from somewhere other than home, he was all ‘that’s fine, I’ll just tag along’, and it’s not like I could say no.”

“He probably thought you meant going to the gym,” Jack mumbled. “You know, you could have gone there.”
Carter’s eyes blew wide when she realized how neatly she could have covered their tracks and how spectacularly she hadn’t. “Shit.”

“It’s fine.”

“No, it’s not! What the hell was I thinking?”

If he weren’t involved, he might be amused to see cool and collected Samantha Carter losing her composure. Instead, Jack reached out and took her shoulders in his hands. “Carter!”

“Sir?”

“Relax.”

“But, sir…”

“He hasn’t killed me yet, and maybe he won’t. Dad likes me.”

“I don’t know if he likes you this much.”

Carter only said that because she hadn’t been privy to the chat Jacob and Jack had at O’Malley’s. Jacob might not be thrilled, but Jack was pretty sure Jacob wasn’t about to whip out a ribbon device. “Still, I’ve faced worse than your dad.”

Carter looked dubious. “Go on,” Jack tipped his head toward the dining room. Carter looked almost too nervous to eat, but she poured herself some coffee, gathered up her plate, and went to the dining room.

When Jack had his bowl of oatmeal tucked in his elbow, half a peach wedged in his teeth, a glass of water in one hand and his coffee in the other, he walked into the dining room to find Carter picking at her food and Jacob dividing his time between looking at his daughter and at Nick, who was conspicuously sitting against Carter’s chair between father and daughter while giving Jacob the stink-eye.

Jack put his things down across from Carter, passed Jacob his water glass, then plucked the peach from his teeth, leaving behind a bite to chew on as he took his seat.

“I think I make your dog nervous,” Jacob said to break the silence. “I take it he doesn’t like symbiotes?”

“He likes Teal’c just fine,” Jack answered. “You’re probably making him nervous because you’re making us nervous.”

Carter froze and shot him an incredulous look.

Jacob smirked. “Am I, now?”

Jack gave Jacob a reproving look. “Are you really going to pretend that it’s not deliberate?”

Carter actually kicked him under the table. It was so out of character that Jack jumped and yelped. Carter groaned and face-palmed.

Jack rubbed the sore spot on his shin. “Well, that was uncalled for,” he muttered, then he looked over at Jacob to see the man biting back amusement. “This really isn’t what it looks like.”
“So it’s completely innocent?”

Jack couldn’t say that, and he looked over at Carter to see if she’d be the one to bald-faced lie to Jacob Carter.

Carter bristled. “We haven’t done anything, Dad.”

Jacob studied his daughter a moment, thoughtful.

The scrutiny ignited that rebel teen in Carter. “That’s what this is about, isn’t it? You’re looking for proof that we’ve broken regulations, right?”

“I just want to know you both realize what you’re getting yourselves into… if you are getting yourselves into anything.”

It wasn’t exactly a condemnation of a relationship between them. More like Jacob was seeking confirmation that if they were breaking regulations, then they were doing it with full cognizance of the possible consequences. That if they were in this, they were all in.

Jacob Carter’s position wasn’t a complete shock to Jack, because they’d already touched on this very subject at O’Malley’s. It was, however, a shock to Carter. She was looking at her father like he’d grown a second head. No snake puns intended.

“Listen, Sam.” Jacob reached over and took his daughter’s hand. “I’m not saying there’s anything going on here. If you insist there isn’t, then I believe you. I’m just saying that if there were… well, I would have hoped the details would be different, like better timing or new professional titles, but…” he spared Jack a glance before turning his eyes back to Carter. “You’re a smart woman. And if you’re willing to accept the risk to your career, then… then I’m not going to lecture you.”

“Dad… are you high?”

Jack thought about chiming in with ‘good decade’, but thought better of drawing attention to the age difference between him and Carter.

“Are you sure? Because it sounds like you’re telling me to sleep with my CO!”

“I didn’t say that. I’m pretty sure I will never say that. Truth is, fathers take more of an ‘accept the truth then actively ignore it’ approach when it comes to their daughters and sex.”

“DAD!”

Jack was a second from interceding, a family matter be damned.

Jacob beat him to it. “I’m sorry, Sam. This is clearly upsetting you. That wasn’t my intention.” Jacob sighed and gave Carter a sad look. “I just want you to be happy. I know we’ve had our differences, things weren’t always great between us, but you have to believe that’s all I’ve ever wanted for you.”

“You’re a general in the Air Force!”

“I’m your father first.”

“Since when?” Carter spat, then she clamped her mouth shut when she realized what she’d said.

Jacob looked hurt.
Nick whimpered and nudged at Carter’s hand.

Carter tore her eyes away from her father. “Sorry… I… I should get ready for work.” With that, she pushed back from the table and disappeared down the hall.

Jack blew out a breath he didn’t know he was holding and glanced carefully toward Jacob.

Jacob hung his head and rubbed a hand over his bald pate. “Well, I thought those days were behind us. Guess it was just wishful thinking.”

“I’m sure she didn’t mean it.”

“Oh, I’m sure she did.” Jacob looked up. “The Carter family wasn’t exactly the Waltons.”

“Well, who is?” He looked down at his practically untouched breakfast. “We really haven’t broken any regulations.” At Jacob’s disbelieving look, Jack added, “Bent them, maybe. But I promise you we haven’t crossed the line.”

“Yeah, well maybe that’s the problem.”

Jack blinked. “Okay, now I’m with Carter. Are you high?”

“What do you mean?”

“With my daughter. What is going on here? What is this?” he gestured around Jack’s house and at Jack’s dog.

“I… I don’t know what you want me to say.”

“I want you to say Sam matters enough for you to do something about it.”

Jack slumped. “You mean ‘do something’ like retire.”

“She deserves better than this.”

“I told you why I can’t, Jacob. I told you…”

“You really think that much of yourself? That only you could keep her safe out there?”

“No.” Jack shook his head. “No, if anything it’s the opposite. My life is nothing compared to hers. If I could trade my life to save her, I’d do it in a heartbeat. I wouldn’t hesitate. She’s that important. And I don’t trust any other son of a bitch to understand that like I do.”

For a moment, Jacob Carter just sat there staring at him. Then he blew out a breath and shook his head. “You two may not have technically broken any regulations, but you’ve sure as hell shattered the spirit of them into a million pieces.”

There was no arguing that. “We’re doing the best we can.”

The admission seemed to pain Jacob, because their best wasn’t nearly good enough.

“You know, Jack…” Jacob slid his bowl of half-eaten oatmeal away so he could fold his arms atop the table. “When I hinted that you had permission to date my daughter, this wasn’t what I had in mind.”
“It wasn’t what we had in mind, either.” Then Jack frowned. “And Carter doesn’t need your permission to do anything.”

“No, I don’t suppose she does.” Jacob chuckled. “She is headstrong, isn’t she?”

“That she is.”

“That doesn’t bother you?”

“Are you kidding? Her stubbornness has saved my life more than a few times, and it’s saved this planet two or three times, at least. If you ask me, it’s one of the best things about her.”

Jacob eyed Jack thoughtfully a moment, then he seemed to accept the situation with a grace that would surely have been impossible before his blending with Selmac. “Blatant disregard of the fraternization regulations notwithstanding… you’re not the worst she could have done.”

“Thanks… I think.”

“It’s a compliment. Don’t get me wrong, I love my daughter, but she hasn’t always had the best taste in men.”

Jack had only met one of Carter’s exes, but if Jonas Hansen was any indication…

“Dad?”

Both men looked up to see Carter standing in the dining room entryway, the front door at her back. She’d swapped out the dragon blouse for a pink button-up, put on her shoes, and had her purse in hand. The need to flee was etched in every angle of her body.

Jacob stood and joined her. Jack went to see them out.

“Listen, Dad…” Carter began.

Jacob waved it off. “It’s all right.”

“I shouldn’t have said that.”

“And I should have kept my mouth shut and let my grown daughter live her life.”

Carter winced.

“We’ll talk about it later,” Jacob promised and reached out to put his arm around her shoulders in a quick hug.

Carter nodded mutely.

“I’ll see you both back at the mountain,” Jack said.

“In case I’m gone by the time you get there, it was good to see you again, son.”

A tiny Fourth of July fireworks show was erupting in Jack’s chest. Carter looked like she was trying to work out how to determine if one had woken up in an alternate reality without drawing attention to herself.

“You too, Dad.”
Jacob nodded and turned for the door. Carter just looked between the two most important men in her life like she only _then_ realized something immense. Maybe she’d never given much thought before to the fact Jack so often called Jacob ‘Dad’… or to the fact that Jacob let him.

It wasn’t often Jack could say he’d worked something out faster than Carter. Then again, she may have been too close to see it. Couldn’t see the forest for the trees and all that.

Not that Jack would ever say so, because _clichés._

************

For reasons that were completely lost on Jack O’Neill, Daniel got a bee in his bonnet about repairing his professional reputation in the world of archaeology. Jack felt like it was wasted effort.

“What do you care what those shrubs think of you? You know you’re right.”

“It matters,” Daniel insisted stubbornly, and Jack backed off. He suspected there were a lot of reasons Daniel Jackson cared about his academic reputation, and he suspected most of them were about his family more than him. Nicholas Ballard left the field regarded as a nut job, then Daniel was laughed out of academia… if Jack were a gambling man, he would bet Daniel’s desire to clear the Jackson name had more to do with Daniel’s parents and their enduring legacy than Daniel’s own.

Daniel co-authored a paper with the anthropologist from the Smithsonian about early hominid cave art after studying the pictures and notes Daniel took on the Planet of the Painted Skies. The paper was ground-breaking, apparently, and the pair of them were invited to do a ten-day lecture circuit.

Daniel was like a kid on a sugar rush.

It seemed like a tricky venture to Jack. “You know you can’t _use_ any of the pictures you took off-world, right?”

“Yes, I know that, Jack.”

“Then what’s there to say? And how did this guy get clearance to see your notes from the Planet of the Painted Skies, anyway?”

Daniel gave Jack a momentary blank look at the moniker, then answered, “He already had clearance. Clearance up to a point, anyway. Jean-Philip Dubois was one of the people who tried to decipher the Stargate before I was brought onboard.”

“And he obviously left with his tail between his legs.”

Daniel sighed. “A lot of really smart people tried to figure out the Stargate and failed. That doesn’t mean they aren’t smart.”

“Nope… just means you’re smarter.”

Daniel’s mouth twitched, fighting a proud, pleased smile at Jack’s unhesitant praise. “Dr. Dubois’s name commands a lot of respect in the field of archaeology. It will do me good to be associated professionally with him.”

“Pfft,” Jack scoffed. “This guy should be riding _your_ coattails, not the other way around.”

Daniel was trying to preen and act perturbed at Jack’s behavior at the same time, and the result was a twisted expression. “It’s just ten days. This is important to me.”
“Hey, I never said you couldn’t do it… I just questioned the wisdom of it. If you’re not using anything you got off-world, what is the paper even about?”

“Granted, without the use of off-world material our conclusions are going to look like wild leaps to the average archaeologist, but there are actually some fascinating connections. A lot of what we were seeing in the art from PT5-249 bore striking similarities to art found here on Earth, but the differences led us to theorize that…” Daniel trailed off and narrowed a look at Jack. “Do you actually care?”

“No really, no.”

Daniel rolled his eyes.

“You know you’re going to be walking on eggshells trying not to let slip anything about the Stargate program.”

“Believe me, the Air Force goons went over our paper with a fine-toothed comb before they let us publish it, and we’ve both had to submit our prepared presentations for approval, plus there’s going to be an Air Force rep with us the entire ten days ready to, I don’t know, tackle us to the stage if we start to say something we shouldn’t?”

“Sounds like fun,” Jack said sarcastically.

Daniel winced and shrugged.

“You want to take Teal’c along for protection?”

Daniel gave Jack a flat look. “It’s a lecture on early hominid paintings… what exactly do you expect will happen?”

“Hey, I know how crazy you nerds can get when you’ve got your teeth in something. I just thought Teal’c could keep the feral hordes back… or stop the bespectacled women from throwing themselves at you. Whatever. Or not. Whatever on that, too.”

Daniel groaned and slid his hands under his glasses to rub his eyes. The younger man was clearly on the cusp of a headache.

“Look, if you want to spend ten days talking about crappy art by cavemen, knock yourself out. You have my leave.” Jack twirled his hand in the air with a flourish, like a nobleman granting permission to a vassal.

Daniel just left with a shake of his head to see to his travel plans.

Jack was just trying to decide if it was worth continuing their mission rotations with Daniel missing, already dreading the replacement process (Jack gave Daniel a lot of shit, but he didn’t appreciate how perfect Jackson was for SG-1 until some other dweeb tried to fill his shoes)…”

*Then* Jack had an epiphany and he was off like a shot, walking through the halls as fast as he could without breaking into a run.

Carter was in the middle of something when Jack strode into her lab. She was down to her black long-sleeve shirt and blue BDU pants, the dark hues almost blending her body into shadows while her fair skin and pale hair were resplendent in the light of her work lamp. She looked like an artistic rendering of a witch bent over her spellwork. For all that Carter’s science seemed mystical and magical to Jack, she might as well be a witch. The good kind, obviously. Not the kind with flying monkeys.
“Hey, Carter.”

She looked up from the paper she was reading, the light on her face turning her into a beacon in the dim lab. The blue of her eyes was striking and penetrating. “Hello, sir.”

“Whatcha doing?”

“Analyzing the metallurgic report on the mineral we brought back from P74-656 to see if it has any practical applications that fall under my purview.”

“Basically, ‘can it power shit or blow shit up’?”

Carter smiled at him, the azure sparkle in her irises genuine, private, and exhilarating. “Yes, sir.”

“Sweet. Any luck?”

“Not yet. If it has weapons applications, they’re not obvious like with naquadah.” She put the paper down and regarded him a moment. “What’s up, sir?”

“You got a calendar handy?”

She frowned, puzzled, but turned to unearth one from a side desk and laid it down on her table.

Jack came around the table, jabbed his finger down on the day Daniel’s leave for the lecture began, and said, “Minnesota.”

Her eyes widened and she looked up at him. “Really?”

“Daniel’s out for ten days… why not?”

Carter tried to fight back a smile and failed. “Did you get your leave approved yet?”

“Was just on my way to run it by Hammond. Wanted to make sure you hadn’t already earmarked those days for defying the laws of physics.”

She grinned so wide her cheeks dimpled. It was Sam Carter delighted, and it did things to Jack’s insides. “I’ll reschedule.”

Jack smirked. “Good.” He realized how close he was standing to her and stepped back. “Well, let me see how Hammond takes the request.”

“Good luck, sir. Let me know how it goes.”

“Yeah, sure, you betcha!”

By the end of the day, Jack and Carter both had their ten-day leaves approved, and just like that – after years of invitations, months of planning, and endless daydreams and fantasies – Jack was going to get Carter up to his cabin.

***********

“Is that the one you want to pack?”

Nick stood in the hallway with a toy snake in his mouth (what Jack would forever think was Daniel’s idea of a joke) watching Jack in his bedroom as he packed for Minnesota. At the question,
the dog cocked his head, the snake tail swaying.

“Because you’re not taking all your toys. You can bring one. Do you want to bring Apophis?”

Nick perked up at the word and gave the snake a fierce shake.

Jack laughed. “Yeah, that’s right… you get that snake!”

Nick dropped to his elbows, butt in the air, and growled playfully.

“Sorry, buddy, I don’t have time to play right now. We’re heading out at 0600, and –”

A knock at the front door stopped Jack mid-sentence and had Nick jumping up to all fours and looking down the hallway on high alert. He dropped Apophis and rushed to the door. The quality of his bark a second later told Jack it wasn’t Carter paying him a visit on the eve of their vacation.

As it turned out, it was General Hammond dressed in civilian clothes.

“General, sir.”

“Please… I’m off-duty.”

Jack paused. “All right… what can I do for you, George?”

“You got a minute?”

“For you? Always. Come on in.” Jack shoved Nick out of the way as the dog tried to stand defensively between his home and the newcomer seeking entry. “Cut it out, Nick, he’s the reason you live here.” Jack shrugged at Hammond. “Sorry. He’s an absolute ingrate.”

Hammond smiled down at the animal. “He’s looking good. How’s it been having him around?”

“Oh well, you know I love dogs.” Jack led Hammond into his living room and eyed the man. “But you didn’t come over to talk about dogs, did you?”

Hammond kind of winced. “Not exactly.”

“Uh huh. Look, it’s not that I don’t welcome your visits…”

“But you’re wondering why I’m here.”

“Kind of.”

Hammond sat in Jack’s recliner and seemed to brace himself for a difficult conversation. That didn’t bode well.

“Beer?” Jack offered.

“God, yes,” Hammond answered.

So this was going to be that kind of conversation.

Jack went to the kitchen and came back with two beers. He handed one to Hammond then took the other and sat on his couch. Nick jumped up beside him and Jack gratefully slung an arm around the dog. The presence of a friend for backup was comforting, even if it was the four-legged variety.

Hammond didn’t say anything at first, staring down at the beer in his hands like it would give him
some sought-after answers. “I caught wind of a rumor that you’re going on vacation with Major Carter.”

Jack froze for a second, doing his damnedest not to look panicked, and answered after a beat, “I don’t know if I’d really call it a vacation. I recruited her help on a construction project at my cabin.”

Hammond scowled like that answer did nothing to ease his concerns. “I wonder if that’s wise.”

Jack gave Hammond a deadpan look, determined to give away nothing. “I’ve taken Teal’c and Daniel up there before. You never had issue with that.”

“That was different.”

“Why?”

Hammond narrowed a look at him. “Don’t play dumb with me, Jack. You know why.”

Jack had no response to that.

Hammond took a drink of his beer and rubbed his face with one hand. “I hate to ask you this, and I won’t… officially.”

“Off the record?”

Hammond nodded.

Jack gestured mutely for Hammond to continue.

“Is anything going on between you and your second-in-command that shouldn’t be?”

Well, shit. He never anticipated Hammond flat-out asking him that. Jack used Nick as an excuse to look away from his commanding officer, turning his head toward the dog but covertly looking around his living room to see if there were any incriminating pieces of Carter laying around. There would be no recovering if Jack told Hammond nothing untoward was going on between him and Carter if her panties were laying atop a pile of laundry in plain sight.

“Jack,” Hammond sighed impatiently.

“I’m trying to decide how I should react to you even asking that,” Jack hedged. He determined his living room safe of damning evidence and looked back at Hammond. “You’ve always trusted us before.”

“It’s different now.”

“Why?”

Hammond frowned. “I think you know damn well why, but if you’re going to be pig-headed about it… truth is, you and Major Carter have gotten closer over the years. Noticeably closer.”

“I’m closer to Daniel and Teal’c, too. What’s your point?” Jack tried not to sound defensive. It would be as good as an admission of guilt. Guilt about a relationship he and Carter weren’t even in. Not exactly, anyway.

“My point is Major Carter is a woman under your command. And frankly, I never made an issue of Dr. Jackson or Teal’c going up to the cabin with you because I never had to worry about you with either of them.”
“And you think you have to worry about me with Carter?”

“In a word: yes. But to be fair, I worry about her with you, too.” When Jack gave only a stony expression in response, Hammond set his beer on the coffee table. “Look, Jack… I know you have some pretty strong feelings for Major Carter. And I know she has some pretty strong feelings for you, too. And I’ve looked the other way for years because I felt it wasn’t to the point where I should intervene. But I’m starting to think it’s time I do.”

Jack didn’t like the sound of that one bit. It sounded like Hammond was contemplating breaking up the team. But why now? Unless… “Did you talk to Jacob?”

“No.” Hammond looked immediately suspicious. “Why, should I?”

Jack shook his head, both relieved Jacob Carter hadn’t ratted them out and on the point of frantic to keep his team together. “I won’t sit here and tell you I don’t care about Carter. I do. I care about everyone on my team. We’re good together, and you know it. Since we’re off the record, you’d be a fool to split up SG-1.”

Hammond blinked at that, surprised at the audacity of the colonel, then he huffed. “To be perfectly honest, I’ve let it go this far because I agree with you. I know better than anyone that this world would have been lost several times over were it not for the heroic efforts of SG-1.”

“Then leave this one alone, George. Keep looking the other way.”

Hammond leveled Jack with a penetrating look. “So you’re saying there is something going on between you and Major Carter.”

“No, I’m not. And there isn’t.” Not what Hammond was thinking, anyway.

Hammond sat back with a disappointed shake of his head. “All right. If you say so, Jack.” He obviously didn’t believe Jack, but he wasn’t ready to force a confession out of him. Instead, Hammond pushed up out of the recliner and turned toward the door. He stopped before taking a step and looked back at Jack. “Be careful, son. I know you don’t give much of a rat’s ass about your career, but this could ruin her.”

“That won’t happen,” Jack said with certainty. Because if he and Carter ever did cross the line, it would be when they had both decided the other person was more important than the Air Force. And at that point, nothing the Air Force could do would have the power to ruin them.

Hammond left looking more troubled than when he’d arrived.

The second he was gone, Jack picked up the phone to call Carter.

“Hello?” she answered on the third ring.

“Hey, it’s me.”

She knew him well enough to hear trouble in his tone. “What’s wrong?”

“So… General Hammond just stopped by my house to ask if you and I were breaking the regs.”

A heavy silence fell on the other end of the line. “You’re joking.”

“Wish I was. It was an off-the-record chat, but I thought you should know.”

A loud exhale. “Okay.”
Another silence stretched between them until Jack spoke. “Look, if you want to bail on this trip, I’ll understand.” Because Hammond was right about one thing – this could ruin Carter. And while they might reach the point where they said ‘fuck it, I don’t care if this destroys my career’ someday, they weren’t there yet. At least Carter wasn’t, and Jack wouldn’t risk that until Carter was ready for the consequences.

“You still picking me up at 0630?”

Jack was momentarily speechless. He had been certain the talk with Hammond would scare her off. “You still want to go?”

“If we changed plans now after Hammond had a talk with you, it would essentially be admitting he’s right, right?”

“Right.” Jack mulled the situation over a moment. “You know this means he’s going to be watching us like a hawk from now on. Going to the cabin might be more trouble than it’s worth.”

“Maybe. But truthfully, sir? I’ve been looking forward to this for so long that I don’t think I care what Hammond thinks.”

That sent a wave of exhilaration, pure adrenaline with a dash of fierce affection, crashing through Jack’s veins. God, he loved her. And maybe one day he could tell her.

“Unless you’re having second thoughts…” Carter trailed.

“Wild horses, Major.”

She gave a relieved chuckled. “Yes, sir.”

“See you at 0630.”

“Can’t wait.”

***********

Jack O’Neill had made the drive to his cabin more times than he could count. He’d made the drive from every direction in the United States imaginable. He’d made the drive with his parents as a child. He’d made the drive with Sara and Charlie. He’d made the drive with Daniel and with Teal’c. He’d made the drive alone.

And now he was making the drive with Carter.

Every version of the journey had its own serenity, and he could never say heading to the cabin with Carter was better than taking his son there, but Carter was a damn close second.

Jack kept stealing looks at her in the passenger seat of his truck, Nick sprawled in the space between them with his head on her lap. She liked to ride with the window down, and she looked good with her hair whipping in the wind. Sunlight slanted through the window and painted her shining and ethereal. Almost comically, she didn’t take kindly to the sky illuminating her with brilliance and donned sunglasses. As if that could ever dull her shine. She was wearing jeans and a long-sleeve v-neck top that was navy blue at her shoulders and faded to nearly-white as it fell down her body. She was a painter’s wheel of blue and gold. Hues and tones too nuanced for names hid in the angles of her body, a living defiance to artisans since the beginning of time who slaved away trying to capture even a fraction of a living masterpiece like her, and Carter was just sitting there with her arm propped in the window and free hand idly carding through Nick’s coat like she had no idea how remarkable
she was.

The two-day drive seemed to be over before it even began, Jack’s perception of time mangled by the presence of this woman he’d let far too close to his heart.

When he pulled up to the cabin, he felt a sudden swell of trepidation that Carter wouldn’t like it. Teal’c hated it, and Daniel was ambivalent at best. He’d dismissed their opinions because they weren’t her, but what if she didn’t like it?

Once they stopped, Carter got out of the truck and approached the cabin to take a look. Nick bounded out of the vehicle and started exploring the nearby trees and stands of tall grass, tail wagging at the new adventure.

Jack unlocked the cabin’s front door and showed Carter in.

“So… this is the much-talked-about cabin,” Jack said with an expansive gesture. “What do you think?”

Carter turned in a circle to take in the whole of the living room then turned back to him. “It’s great.”

“Yes?”

She nodded. “From the way Teal’c and Daniel described it… well, I was worried.”

Jack snorted. “Figures. See if I ever bring those two up here again.”

“Is that a punishment or a reward?”

“Ouch. That hurts, Carter.”

“Well, I love your cabin.”

“Excellent. Then that’s all that matters. Daniel and Teal’c are fools.”

She chuckled. “Yes, sir.”

“Ah! First rule of the cabin is no ‘sirs’ or ‘colonels’. I come up here to get away from all that crap. As long as we’re here, it’s Jack.”

A light like challenge sparked in her eyes and lit a fire in Jack’s core. “All right. But that means you’re not allowed to call me ‘major’ or ‘Carter’ while we’re here, either.” She quirked one eyebrow at him. “Think you can handle that, Jack?”

If he were smart, he’d rescind the order that she had to use his first name. The way it fell from her lips did dangerous things to him. But Jack never claimed to be smart. “Oh, I think I can manage, Sam.”

Her smile transformed slowly into a sly grin that curled hot and restless in Jack’s gut.

This trip would either be the best thing that had happened to him in ages or the death of him.

And the two need not be mutually exclusive.

***********

If Hammond had imagined his two officers having a clandestine, romantic holiday together,
snuggling in front of a fire and whiling away the hours whispering sweet nothings in each other’s ears, he would have been disappointed (or perhaps relieved) at the reality. Because while Jack had long dreamed of getting Carter up to his cabin for something very much like what Hammond feared, the truth was they had a project to finish and a deadline breathing down their necks.

What had begun as a sketch Jack doodled on a single sheet of notepad paper in the briefing room had, over the ensuing months, become an entire folder of notes and plans. A lot of it was useless scratch paper – the folder chronicled their back-and-forth between their different ideas for the gazebo. Their compromise on the final design had been reached entirely through scraps of paper left on Jack’s kitchen counter or dining room table. Jack would redraw the plans after Carter’s latest round of suggestions, Carter would make alterations or notes on his design, sometimes she’d redraw it entirely in her vision, and he would proceed to do the same to her plans until, finally, they had a final design they could both agree on.

Although the pages with the rejected designs were useless, Jack kept them. He wouldn’t call them his and Carter’s version of love letters, but that’s exactly what they were, her handwriting schooling him on snow loads and corner braces akin to flirtations in their strange world. Hell, he even smiled fondly at the angry note she’d written in capital letters, underlined, and circled when he’d suggested a totally impractical crow’s nest just to get a rise out of her.

They had been hard at work on the gazebo for three days, and their progress was pretty impressive considering it was just the two of them. The final design ended up being less gazebo in the traditional octagonal sense and more of a rectangular covered deck just big enough to shelter a bench. The right angles were easier to measure and cut in the time they had to finish the project, and (as Carter pointed out) it wasn’t like Jack was trying to host a hoedown in the thing.

They had set the corner posts and bearing beams, the roof trusses were naked to the elements like an exposed ribcage, and the floor was leveled, framed, and joisted, awaiting decking. A pile of lumber had been stacked next to the cabin and a work station set up near an external power outlet. They’d rigged a table with a length of particle board between two sawhorses, and an array of power tools lay atop it like a robot’s buffet. They’d dug a narrow trench between the house and the gazebo, and several lengths of PVC conduit leaned against the wall, sheltering a shopping bag with a GFCI for when Carter connected to the cabin’s electricity.

It was a lot of work done in a short amount of time, and the only way they were accomplishing it at the pace they were working sunup to sundown.

Honestly, the only one who was getting a vacation was the dog.

At that very moment, Nick was sprawled out on the dock, right in Jack’s fishing spot, taking a nap when Jack looked up from his task. “Well, he doesn’t have to rub it in,” Jack muttered.

“Jack?”

Carter’s voice startled him – he still wasn’t used to her opting for ‘Jack’ versus ‘sir’ – and he looked over at her standing next to him wielding a drill. She was in battered old jeans turned fawn in spots by carpentry dust and a blue flannel with the sleeves rolled up to her elbows. She was dirty and sweaty and happy.

“Just griping about Mr. Lazy over there relaxing while we’re toiling.”

Carter looked toward the dog and smiled. “A matter of perspective, I guess. I don’t know about you, but I’m having fun.”
“You would,” he teased.

She gave him an arch look.

Jack surrendered. “All right, I’m having fun, too. But we knew I was a few fries short of a happy meal. Besides, I would have assumed this was too low-tech and low-octane to hold your interest.”

Carter smiled. “I’d be lying if I said I hadn’t considered mounting a laser on this thing…”

Jack barked a laugh that had Nick jerking out of his restful sleep to look toward them.

“But it’s not that different from my ‘science projects’, as you call them.” She waved up at the gazebo skeleton. “And the progress here is so visible. A lot of my work is nothing until it’s something, so in that respect this is really satisfying.” She ducked her head slightly and cast a glance at him. “And you’re really good at this.”

“There are things I’m good at.”

“Trust me, I know. I see what you’re good at every day.”

He lifted his eyebrows in silent question.

The dumb act earned him a mildly scolding look from Carter. “You’re great at your job, but our missions don’t really give you the chance to show off all your skills.”

“They show off the extent of my skills more than you think.” He wasn’t a certified genius like half his team.

“All due respect, but that’s bullshit.”

Jack gaped.

Carter gave him a rebellious look. “You’re not a colonel here, remember? So don’t expect me to bite my tongue.”

“I would never dream of it, Sam. Although now I’m wondering how often you bite your tongue when I am a colonel.”

Carter gave him an enigmatic smile. “Could you hand me another three-quarter screw?”

Jack plucked a screw from the container near his feet and stepped closer to give it to her.

Up close in the sunlight, Jack saw tiny wrinkles at the corners of Carter’s eyes, wrinkles that weren’t there when he met her, and he had the thought that he was growing old with her… just not the way he wanted to.

“Jack?”

He shook himself from his thoughts and lifted his hand to brush a finger against the back of her neck. “You’re burning.”

Carter put one hand to the back of her neck and felt the flushed skin. “Damnit. Time to reapply.” She set the drill down, marched over to their table, and retrieved a tube of sunscreen. She came back with it and held it out to Jack. “Do you mind?”

In answer, he plucked the sunscreen from her hand and twirled his finger in an ‘about-face’ motion.
Carter gave him her back and pulled down the collar of her flannel to give him access to her neck. He uncapped the tube and started to smear sunscreen on her pink skin.

“This brings back memories,” Carter hummed.

“You mean the planet of the Amazons?”

“I like to think of it as the planet where you all wore loincloths.” He could hear the grin in her voice.

“Ah yes, the planet where Teal’c was a stiff breeze away from traumatizing everybody.”

Carter burst into laughter, and Jack’s world caught and hung on the sound for a split second.

Even if they didn’t get the gazebo finished, getting that laugh out of Carter made the trip a success.

***********

They finished construction two days before they would have to pack up and head back to Colorado Springs. Their last day would be for clean-up and Carter wiring the electricity, which sounded like a piece of cake in comparison to the last stretch of days.

Because Jack found something fundamentally wrong with going to the cabin and not spending at least some time on the dock, the gathering stars found him and Carter sitting by the water in folding chairs. They were sipping wine out of plastic cups (because Jack didn’t often have classy guests at the cabin) while Nick lay at Carter’s side.

It was finally the trip to the cabin Jack had wanted for years, just the two of them kicking back and relaxing. There was even the added bonus of a dog.

“This is nice,” Carter said as they watched the night sky fill with stars.

“I told you.”

“It’s a shame you didn’t get any fishing in, though.”

Jack shrugged and tipped his head back to look up. “No Aurora Borealis, either.”

Carter hummed as she took a sip from her cup.

“Oh well. There’s always next time.”

Carter spared him a meaningful look but said nothing. The cabin’s back porch light was the only source of light beside the moon and stars, and it was hard to see each other, but Jack was used to watching her by moonlight and less. He just wished his ability to read her in sparse light was on account of more intimate reasons than camping off-world.

“Thank you for bringing me here.”

“You know I’ve been trying to get you up here for years.”

“I know. I’m sorry it took so long.”

He appreciated the apology, but Jack understood why she had always turned him down. It had been the smart decision. It still would be, if they weren’t both beyond the point of doing what they should. There were better angels being stringently ignored on both sides.
“Yes, well… let’s not dwell.”

Carter let loose a sad sigh that told him she was most definitely dwelling.

“Hey,” he chided gently as he reached over and tapped the back of her wrist. “Let’s just make sure it doesn’t take us years to do this again.”

Carter turned her hand over in silent invitation and Jack threaded his fingers through hers.

“It’s a promise,” she said lowly. And it struck Jack in that moment that the last time they sat together holding hands, she made it clear it wasn’t a promise. How times had changed.

Jack squeezed her hand in silent agreement.

They stayed like that for nearly an hour, basking in the stars of home, sipping wine, and holding hands. It gratified almost as much as it hurt.

“I want this,” Carter whispered into the darkness, squeezing his hand to let him know what ‘this’ meant.

“Me too.”

“If only…” she began, then she shook her head mournfully and tugged her hand free. “Never mind. I should probably call it a night… before I do something stupid.”

A defiant part of Jack wanted to make her stay, to press to see what stupid thing Carter would do if she didn’t go. But the last time he’d stopped her from leaving after that kind of statement, it had ended in a fight. He didn’t want to end a good trip on a bad note.

“Okay,” he allowed, and got to his feet when she did.

When he saw his humans getting up, Nick rose, too.

All three were crowded toward the end of the dock, penned in by water on three sides and chairs on the other, when something in the pond began splashing. Since there were no fish in his fishing pond, Jack guessed it was a duck. Maybe a lost beaver. Whatever it was, Nick went after it without warning. Like a bolt, the dog lunged to the end of the dock and leapt into the water, knocking into Carter’s legs in the process.

Carter lost her balance. There wasn’t room for her to stagger and recover, and she looked destined to fall into the pond. Without thinking, Jack reached out and snagged her around the waist, pulling her tight against him. She grabbed on to his arms with both hands as she fought to keep her feet under her.

Then they both froze. They’d both lost their cups somewhere, Nick was barking and dog-paddling after his prey – which, yes, it was a duck, it quacked mockingly at the ground-bound dog as it took off – and Jack had his second-in-command in his arms.

“Shit,” Carter cursed when she was no longer in danger of toppling off the end of the dock. “Sorry.”

“No problem.”

She gave a nervous chuckle. “Nice catch.”

“Yes, well, I just assumed you didn’t want to reek of pond water.”
Carter shook her head. Her breathing was oddly shaky for a mere near-miss with his pond.

And he was still holding her. Which he should probably stop doing. Just as soon as he could get his arms to obey him. But then, she was still holding on to him, so…

She looked up at him. Even in the darkness, he could see a clash of emotions at war in her face. Embarrassment, excitement, indecision, fear… arousal.

Jack’s heart was pounding like it wanted to beat its way out of his chest. If Carter wanted some distance between them, she was going to have to be the one to put it there. He physically could not let her go.

Her searching gaze dropped from his eyes to his mouth and Jack dared not breathe.

He could swear he saw the exact moment when she thought ‘fuck it’, the sentiment flaring immediate and bright in her dark eyes. He got to admire it only a second before Carter leaned in, up, and pressed her lips to his.

In that moment, Jack was infinite and finite all at once. Hurtling at light speed and standing still. Everywhere in the universe and existing only against her mouth in the same heartbeat.

He counted seconds in years and waited for her to pull away, to be overcome with her error and beat a hasty retreat.

But she didn’t. She pressed more firmly against him, her lips softened against his mouth, and Jack’s arms (already looped conveniently around her waist) hauled her closer as he parted his lips to invite her in.

Her tongue slipped inside and Jack couldn’t think about anything but the taste of her. Carter and wine. He never knew forbidden had a taste until he tasted her.

Carter angled herself to deepen their kiss and slid her hands up until she had one on his shoulder and the other carded through his hair. She made a soft, needy sound in the back of her throat that Jack wanted to chase. He pressed closer, moving one hand from the small of her back to cup her neck and coax her deeper.

In that moment, Jack couldn’t fathom that they weren’t supposed to be doing this. There was no concept of wrong in it. How could there be? They were so obviously right.

When he shifted against her they both became acutely aware of Jack’s arousal. It turned Jack’s thoughts to static – he wanted more – but Carter tensed and tore her mouth from his.

“Wait, stop…”

Jack did, but he didn’t comprehend at first why, only that she asked him to and he obeyed. He stood rooted to the spot and stared down at her, drinking in every detail of her, blinking and trying to understand why they weren’t kissing anymore.

She dropped her hands from around him and placed them on his chest. It was a position to caress him… but also to push him away if need be.

“We can’t do this, sir.”

Sir?
Oh.

Right.

Jack felt reality crash back into him like falling into a frozen lake and he sucked in a breath. “I know.”

“I’m sorry.” Carter reluctantly moved away from him, opening up space between their bodies.

He felt her leave like she was taking all the warmth in the universe with her, but still he let her go. “It’s okay,” he rasped.

“No, it’s not.”

No, it wasn’t. But… “I understand.” If she wasn’t ready to risk the team, her career, the planet, then they had to stop.

Carter looked at him desperately, longing and misery in her eyes, then she winced. “Goodnight, sir.”

Deep breath. Two. “Goodnight, Sam.”

She flinched as if him saying her name caused her physical pain, then she retreated toward the cabin.

For a few minutes, Jack stood alone at the end of the dock, trying to find his grip on the world again. He was just starting to feel like he might yet be sane when Nick came trotting up to him, sopping wet. Jack looked down at the animal with a scowl. What had happened between Jack and Carter was Nick’s fault, and Jack didn’t know if he should scold the dog or praise him for it.

***********

The next morning, Jack shuffled into the kitchen to find Carter sitting at the table waiting for him. There were two bowls of Froot Loops on the table, perhaps a pithy apology for the prior evening, and Nick was draped over Carter’s lap, his back paws on the floor and his front legs on her thighs.

Carter looked uncomfortable as hell, so Jack decided to start the conversation by ragging on Nick. “Do we need to explain to him that he’s not a lapdog?”

Carter smiled wanly and scratched the dog behind the ears. “I think he’s just trying to cheer me up.”

Well, that was ominous, but Jack tried to sound casual. “Oh?”

“Sir…”

Jack stopped just shy of the table and gave Carter a pointed look.

She grimaced. “Jack… I’m sorry about last night.”

“You don’t have to apologize,” he answered as he took the seat to Carter’s left.

“I was out of line.”

Jack eyed the bowl of cereal, dismissed it for the time being, and folded his arms atop the table. “How do you figure?”

Carter looked at him like he was crazy not to know.
“So we kissed,” he said with a shrug.

“I kissed you.”

“Yes, well… I wasn’t exactly beating you back with a stick.”

Her mouth twitched like she wanted to smile, but she frowned instead. “No, but it’s going to make this harder.”

Jack sighed. “Honestly, Sam? I don’t think anything can make this more difficult than it already is.”

Carter scowled. “That’s not comforting.”

It really wasn’t, but it was the truth. “Look, how about this? No matter how painful or difficult or complicated it makes our situation, you never have to apologize for kissing me.”

That time a smirk did tug at one corner of her mouth. “Can that be retroactive?”

“Oh?”

Carter flushed faintly pink and allowed a self-deprecating smile. “Just thinking back to that caveman thing when I jumped you in the locker room.”

“Ah, yes…” good times, “the sweet little tank top number.”

Carter snorted and shook her head. “I’m always the one kissing you.” And she always would be, at least until their situation changed. As the superior officer, Jack couldn’t risk her ever doing something she didn’t want to do because she felt any instinct to do what he said.

Except…

There was something he’d never told her, but he thought maybe knowing would ease some of her guilt.

“First of all, again, not complaining. Secondly, not true… I kissed you once.”

Carter spent a few seconds trying to recall what incident he was referring to, then she frowned. “That doesn’t count. That was an alternate version of me. And besides, you didn’t kiss her – she kissed you.”

“I’m not talking about kissing Dr. Carter, I said I kissed you.”

Carter gave him a confused look.

Jack took a breath. Confession time. “Remember that time loop thing Teal’c and I were stuck in for months?”

It only took her a second to get it. “You didn’t.”

“If it helps, I handed Hammond my letter of resignation first. It was totally above board, I promise.”

Carter gaped at him, no doubt trying to imagine how that had gone down in the time loop. Jack gave a sheepish shrug. “So you’re not always the one initiating.”

For a moment, Carter was just flabbergasted. Then she broke into a surprising laugh. “Oh my god…”
“What’s so funny?”

“The fact that we have to specify the times we’ve kissed. How has Hammond not split us up already?”

Jack didn’t bother trying to fight back a smile. “I think we’re a professional quandary for him.” Uphold the regs or protect the planet? Because, all modesty aside, the dilemma of SG-1 could be boiled down to: SG-1 was the best team at the SGC, and anything that upset that dynamic would put Earth at risk. It was undoubtedly a tough call for a career-military general like Hammond.

Jack looked across at Carter and told himself to appreciate what he had. She was in a rumpled sleep shirt and pajama pants sitting at his cabin’s kitchen table. He might wish she’d spent the night in his bed instead of the guest room, but she was there. And he was grateful for that.

“So, are we done?” he asked as he picked up the spoon laying beside his bowl.

“Done?”

“Agonizing about us,” he answered and scooped up a spoonful of loops. “Because we’ve got a lot to do today. No time for angst, daylight’s a-wasting.”

Carter’s eyes lit with understanding – he was trying to force them past awkward back to a place where they were comfortable with each other. She gladly took it. “Yes, ss… Jack.” She nudged Nick off her lap and reached for her bowl of cereal.

Just like that, things were back to normal.

That was to say wrought with sexual tension, dripping with unresolved attraction, and ringing with a seething hatred for the regulations… the Jack O’Neill and Samantha Carter brand of ‘normal’.

***********

“All right, this is it.” Jack rubbed his hands vigorously together like a peddler warming up a crowd to swindle. “The finishing touch, the piece de resistance, the whole reason the venerable genius Major Doctor Samantha Carter absolutely had to come to the wilds of Minnesota with one irreverent yet ruggedly handsome Jonathan J. ‘Jack’ O’Neill –”

“What does the ‘J’ stand for, anyway?”

Jack shot her a look and held up a finger. “Ah! No interrupting the ceremony, and also none of your beeswax.”

Carter’s eyes sparkled with laughter that never escaped her lips. It saved him having to endure the pain and glory of her giggle.

“Now, where was I?” he asked, honestly derailed by the light in her eyes. They were standing alongside the completed gazebo, the smell of fresh-cut lumber heavy in the air, the wooden bench under the roof an inviting respite. Nick was prowling around the pond’s edge, and if Jack had to hose him off two nights in a row there’d be hell to pay.

“Your handsome irreverence,” Carter prompted.

“Ah, yes! Thank you. My handsome – wait, I forgot to add ‘beautiful’ to your accolades.”

“That’s okay, I think I’ll live.”
“No, no… if we’re counting this grizzled mug as ‘handsome’, then it would be an absolute travesty to ignore your beauty, as it is quite exceeding.”

Her cheeks pinked. “Jaaack.”

“Whoa… okay, don’t say my name like that. You sounded like Daniel.” Jack gave an exaggerated shiver like he’d been creeped out by the similarity.

“I’m starting to understand why Daniel says your name like that,” Carter teased.

“Tread carefully, Samantha. Right now you’re my favorite, but if you side with Daniel against me, well… let’s just say it’s looking good for Teal’c.”

“Will you wax poetic about his beauty, too?” Carter asked with a cheeky smile.

Jack narrowed a look at Carter, mostly to mask how enchanting he found her sass. He’d miss it when they were the major and the colonel again and she had to watch what she said to him.

Carter snickered. “I’m sorry. Proceed with the lighting ceremony.”

“Yes, ma’am!” Jack hopped into the gazebo and stood beside the light switch. He cracked his knuckles and wiggled his fingers. “This is it, why you had to come all the way from Colorado Springs for a ten-day adventure with yours truly. Drum roll, please!” Jack proceeded to provide the drum roll himself, pounding his hands against the rail in fast staccato rhythm, then he flipped the switch with a flourish.

A single incandescent light bulb at the apex of the ceiling flicked on.

Jack gestured grandly at the dinky bulb, quite pleased with himself and their accomplishment.

When he looked over at Carter, she was hanging on to the rail with one hand, doubled over and holding her side with the other hand.

“Sam?” he asked, concerned.

She shook her head, looked up at him, and he grinned. She was laughing so hard she had tears in her eyes and a stitch in her side.

Jack joined her in rauous laughter.

That one measly light in the gazebo would probably always feel like the punchline of a really good joke… a joke only Jack and Carter would get.

Jack wouldn’t want it any other way.
Jack always suspects there will come a day when he runs out of time. He has catalogued all things Sam Carter from a distance for so long, and part of him knows his gamble on ‘someday’ could be stolen from him far too easily. It’s a risk he accepts because Sam doesn’t want things to change, or can’t accept the consequences of change, so he pines and covets and watches her back in a desperate attempt to keep her safe.

But he knows one day an enemy will catch them on a bad day. Or will simply be better than they are. That’s just the way war is.

It’s a constant heartbreak to live knowing that that grisly future is likely – to know he will never have Carter the way he wants to – but he’d rather be out in the field with her as a friend than being the lover left behind.

It’s just hard to bask in all her colors and know he will probably never hold her.

Because Jack suspects the way Carter would light up in his arms would put all her other colors to shame.

**********

“I can’t believe I’m saying this,” Jack whispered to Carter as they stood shoulder-to-shoulder in the gate room, “but I almost wish we were going to look at some of Daniel’s rocks.”

Carter’s mouth twitched at the corners, a smile denied full bloom, and she looked up at him. The rest of the smile was in her eyes. There was warmth in her gaze that should not be there, affection not so neatly held in check anymore, and Jack should be more worried than he was.

They’d come back from their trip to Minnesota and dutifully resumed the roles of colonel and major, but something was different. Jack couldn’t forget the side of Carter he’d seen at his cabin. He’d gotten a taste (literally) of Sam, and he couldn’t help seeing her every time he looked at Carter.

The look in her eyes was proof she was having the same problem. She was seeing Jack.

It meant they were in big trouble, and they should be panicking, but they had plunged headlong into that abyss months ago.

“Teal’c feels pretty strongly about this mission,” Carter commented.

“Teal’c always feels strongly about anything to do with the Jaffa rebellion,” Jack groused. “And hey, don’t get me wrong, I am all for the backbone of the Goa’uld armies taking a collective hike and leaving the snakes high and dry, but…” Jack threw a look over his shoulder toward the control room. Within, he could see Teal’c talking with General Hammond, one last attempt on the Jaffa’s part to ditch the rest of SG-1 and go on the mission alone. “I think Teal’c’s got a blind spot when it comes to this stuff.”

“The rebellion will never gain traction if its leaders don’t take a few chances,” Carter hedged, as if she agreed with Jack but felt obligated to defend Teal’c’s passionate support of the free Jaffa movement.

“Bra’tac’s already handling this one. I don’t see why Teal’c has to get involved.”
Daniel joined the conversation. “As a former First Prime, he’s famous – or infamous – among the Goa’uld for renouncing Apophis and joining us. I’m sure any rebel movement tied to Teal’c’s name has a better chance of succeeding.”

“Then we’ll make campaign buttons and pass them out.” His teammates seemed unmoved by the quip. Possibly because they were as edgy about the mission as Jack was. “I guess I have a hard time believing an entire battalion or squad or whatever a group of Jaffa are called up and abandoned this, who was it? Segment…?”


Jack gave Daniel a flat look. “Now see, you telling me that doesn’t make me feel better about the mission.”

Daniel shrugged. “According to Bra’tac, Sekhmet’s armies were at war with Ba’al’s when Ba’al managed to repel Sekhmet’s forces… cutting off this particular patrol of Jaffa from retreat.”

“Strategically,” Carter added, “they were too entrenched in Ba’al’s territory for a rescue to be practical. Especially if Sekhmet already saw them as expendable.”

Daniel nodded. “The Jaffa lost faith in their deity when she didn’t come to rescue them. I guess we should count ourselves lucky they didn’t just pledge their loyalty to Ba’al and join his army like most Jaffa trapped on the wrong side of enemy lines would.”

“Oh yes, that’s us,” Jack said sarcastically, “lucky ducks.”

Daniel narrowed his eyes at Jack briefly, then continued his account of the Sekhmet Jaffa, tacitly ignoring Jack’s flippant remark. “The abandoned Jaffa fought their way to the planet’s Stargate, gated to PK3-348…”

“At which point someone just happened to know how to track down the leader of the Jaffa rebellion. Once again, how lucky.”

Daniel lifted his hands in an ‘I have no explanations for that one, and also I give up trying to have a conversation with you’ gesture.

“It’s just so damn suspicious,” Jack groused.

“All due respect, sir, but isn’t that why you said Teal’c was doing this mission solo ‘over your dead body’?” Carter did the air finger quotes on the last four words, a habit she had undeniably picked up from Jack.

“Don’t remind me this whole thing was my idea,” Jack grumbled. He rolled his shoulders to try and loosen the tense muscles. He was all knotted up, and the mission hadn’t even started yet… great.

“You know, I consider Teal’c family, and I’m pretty fond of ol’ Bra’tac, but so far every other Jaffa we’ve dealt with hasn’t exactly given me the warm fuzzies.”

Carter gave a half-nod that Jack would interpret as agreement.

“Well, consider this from the Jaffa perspective,” Daniel said in his maddening way. “A lot of these Jaffa have faced SGC personnel in combat. They’ve probably lost friends because of us. And even if they’ve never gone up against an SG team, the Jaffa are used to dealing with Goa’uld.” When Jack appeared unmoved by that, Daniel pressed on. “Think about that. They’re used to raging megalomaniacs. I would hazard a guess that they just don’t have the first clue how to deal with us.”
“Thank you, Alien Whisperer.”

Daniel rolled his eyes and flapped his hands in resignation.

“Personally, I’m with you, sir,” Carter said in the wake of Daniel’s surrender to Jack’s intractability. “I find this large a contingent of Jaffa turning against their god highly suspect.”

“Thank you.”

“But if it’s legitimate... the ranks of the Jaffa rebellion would almost double overnight. That’s worth a little risk.”

Or a big risk, as it would seem, but that had been Jack’s call. Bra’tac had requested Teal’c gate to PK3-348 alone because Sekhmet’s Jaffa didn’t trust the Tau’ri. Teal’c had been ready to drop everything and go the second Bra’tac asked. It was Jack who informed Teal’c that there was no way in hell he was walking into a situation that heavily outnumbered without backup.

Jack didn’t have a lot of fights with Teal’c, but Jack’s refusal to let Teal’c go alone had been an ugly battle of wills. A battle Jack won in the end, though Teal’c was appealing to Hammond at that very moment trying to overturn the decision.

Fat chance. Hammond trusted the rebel Jaffa about as much as Jack did.

Their conversation was brought to a screeching halt when the side door opened and Teal’c all but stormed into the gate room, staff weapon in hand and a thunderous expression on his face. Looked like the rest of SG-1 was going with, and Jack was going to have a moody Jaffa on his hands for the duration of the mission. Yippie.

“Okie dokie, kiddos, let’s get this party started.” He turned to the control room and gave Walter a vague hand signal that the tech knew meant ‘dial her up’.

As the Stargate began to spin, Carter sidled up closer to Jack and whispered, “I don’t know about you, sir, but I’d rather be fishing.”

Teal’c, damn his bat ears, shot Carter a withering look.

Jack looked down at Carter while struggling not to smile. She was looking up at him with dancing blue eyes, her irises shimmering like the gate event horizon while the device itself continued to lock in chevrons. One corner of her mouth twitched, drawing Jack’s eyes to her lips. He was bowled over by the memory of kissing them. It was scary how much he wanted to taste them again – for a nanosecond, he considered doing it right there and then.

But of course he didn’t, because they couldn’t. They shouldn’t have in the first place.

The gate whooshed to life in a cascade of blue light and not-water, unbelievably managing to dull Carter’s shine.

Jack glanced up at Hammond through the control room window and saw the general scowling down at the two of them. As Jack had presciently warned Carter, Hammond had been watching them even more closely since Minnesota. And always with that grim look on his face, like he was watching a disaster unfolding before his eyes.

Jack had the nagging feeling they were running out of time before Hammond broke up the team.

Jack didn’t wonder if he and Carter both secretly hoped Hammond would do what they couldn’t.
“Sir?”

Jack turned at Carter’s voice and saw her halfway up the ramp standing alone, Teal’c and Daniel having already gone through to PK3-348.

She cocked her head at him in silent question before she turned and resumed her ascent of the ramp.

Jack followed her.

Like he always had.

Like he always would.

**********

It turned out Bra’tac had good reason to call in reinforcements… and he was also smarter than Jack had given him credit for. When they got to PK3-348, they met only briefly with Master Bra’tac because he had to go through the gate almost immediately to get back to his batch of Jaffa.

There were so many of Sekhmet’s deserters that Bra’tac realized the danger of keeping that many unproven allies together. He split them up into four groups and put them on four different planets – Bra’tac oversaw one group, a trusted apprentice manned another, a third was under the watch of a recently-sworn rebel out to prove his loyalty, and Teal’c would get the group on PK3-348. It still left SG-1 outnumbered, four to one, but it was better than having the whole rabble together where they could start trouble.

Then began the tedious process of trying to bring the newly-unshackled Jaffa into the fold and to heel.

Since Sekhmet’s Jaffa wanted nothing to do with the human members of SG-1, the Earthlings found it wiser (for the sake of keeping the peace) to keep an eye on Teal’c from a distance and let their friend handle the Jaffa.

For Jack, it was a strange combination of on edge and bored.

He was pacing the outskirts of the Jaffa encampment for probably the hundredth time, watching Teal’c bicker with a particularly querulous Jaffa named Uandor, when he turned his attention to his other teammates.

Daniel and Carter were sitting shoulder-to-shoulder on a crate, heads bent together in conversation. If circumstances were different, Jack would have smiled. It reminded him of the early days, when his two scientists had been thick as thieves.

Jack wandered closer. “Whatcha up to, kids?”

Carter looked up first, the brilliance of her irises in direct sunlight a captivating net of color that tied Jack’s tongue. “Daniel was just telling me about Sekhmet.”

“The ancient Egyptian goddess Sekhmet, of course,” Daniel amended. “I don’t know anything about the Goa’uld.”

“Let’s hope she’s not as bad as the Egyptian goddess version,” Carter said drolly.

“When have we ever been that lucky?” Jack asked rhetorically. Then he winced. “Bad?”

“The Powerful One? Goddess of war, destruction, and plagues? I’d say so, sir.”
“Right.”

A silence fell over the team as they all gravitated toward watching Teal’c try to wrangle the newly-emancipated Jaffa. It wasn’t a pretty sight.

“Teal’c seems to be having a hard time with Sekhmet’s Jaffa,” Daniel noted as he frowned at Teal’c squaring off with Uandor. There was a lot of that going on lately. Uandor was the worst by far, definitely the repeat offender, but Teal’c had gone toe-to-toe with nearly every Jaffa on PK3-348 in the short time they’d been on the planet. Every one of them wanted to test Teal’c, to what end Jack dreaded to speculate.

“They’re like a pack of attack dogs without a master for the first time,” Jack noted sourly. “I don’t trust any of them.”

That statement caused Daniel some kind of injury judging by his expression. “Teal’c’s going to have a hell of a time getting anywhere if you have that attitude. I thought we were here to back him up.”

“And the second one of those yahoos goes for a weapon, I will.”

Daniel gave Jack a flat look. “I actually thought the concept ‘back him up’ meant in all possible interpretations of that phrase.”

“Yeah, no. I’m not about to make teaching these Jaffa how to integrate into a civilized galaxy my responsibility.” Talk about a waste of time.

Daniel looked toward Carter, as though for support.

She shrugged. “Is the galaxy really all that civilized?”

“Touché,” Jack allowed. “I’m still not adopting these psycho orphans, though.”

Daniel looked wounded while Carter looked like she agreed with Jack, even if she kept quiet so as not to take sides against Daniel.

“Jaffa! Hear me!” Teal’c bellowed, calling the attention of the restless Jaffa surrounding him like an agitated beehive. His next words were not shouted, so all that SG-1 could hear was the stern tone of his voice as he launched into yet another speech.

“Teal’c’s going to need a vacation after this,” Jack said.

Carter nodded then grimaced. “I should probably apologize to him for what I said in the gate room.”

“What did you say?” Daniel asked.

“I whispered to the colonel that I’d rather be fishing than go on this mission and Teal’c overheard me.”

Daniel’s eyebrows shot up, probably as much for her new affinity for fishing as her gall to say something so callous. “Wow… um, that was pretty insensitive, Sam.”

“I know.”

“This rebellion means a lot to Teal’c.”

“I know.” Carter looked guilty about the flippant remark, but in her defense, she hadn’t meant for Teal’c to hear it.
Seeing Carter’s remorse, Daniel eased up on her, playfulness tugging at the corner of his mouth as he said in mock-horror, “You’re turning into Jack.”

“Hey,” Jack protested.

“Which isn’t a good thing,” Carter added.

“Hey,” Jack said again. “I’m standing right here, you know.”

“I think what Sam’s trying to say is we only need one ass on this team, and you’ve cornered the market.”

Carter fought back a laugh, and Jack was so gone that he almost wanted her to laugh at him just to hear the sound.

“All right, that’s enough,” Jack growled instead, but he was only pretend-angry. Because Carter and Daniel were ducking their heads and smiling at each other like two kids caught at mischief, and honestly their bond like family – his family – warmed his heart too much for genuine anger.

Which should really be ample justification for Hammond to split all of them up. The Air Force wasn’t supposed to be sending families through the Stargate.

**********

For all that Jack loathed the mission, PK3-348 really was a beautiful planet. It looked like Vermont in the throes of fall, the trees a riot of red, orange, yellow, and maroon. When the sun began to set and threw the sky into a kaleidoscope of pink, lavender, and cobalt blue, it was enough to make Jack long for a camera.

Especially when he came upon Carter sitting on the ground looking out at the painter’s dream of a landscape. As far as Jack was concerned, she was part of it. The gold of her hair, the ivory of her skin, the olive of her BDUs, and the benitoite of her eyes wove her into the tapestry of color, and Jack wished he could capture it. Or maybe it was just her he wanted, but he would have settled for a photograph. Something to frame and put on his wall, an image of Carter as he loved her best – a born galactic traveler.

She became aware of his approach and looked over her shoulder at him. Her expression softened. “Time to come in?” she asked.

“Nah,” Jack said as he dropped down to the patch of grass beside her. “The street lamps aren’t even on yet.”

She smiled and looked back out at the sprawl of fall splendor. Jack just looked at her. He used to be better about guarding his glances, stealthier for fuck’s sake, but something in him just didn’t care anymore about discretion. At least not here, millions of miles from home and anyone who would begrudge them. Because Teal’c and Daniel wanted them to be happy, not compliant with regulations. And clearly the two were mutually exclusive.

At the thought, Jack glanced over his shoulder toward the camp SG-1 had pitched on the outskirts of the Jaffa base. Daniel had paused in rolling out his sleeping bag around the as-yet-unlit fire to steal a look toward Jack and Carter. When Jack caught his eye, Daniel flashed a brief but supportive smile then turned back to his nightly preparations.

“I can’t imagine ever giving this up,” Carter mused lowly as she tipped her head back to peer at the first array of alien stars breaking through dusk. The hues of nightfall were tinting her skin a
tantalizing bedroom shade, her pupils swallowing blue in a tormenting mimicry of arousal.

“Who says you have to?” he asked, voice pitched low to match hers.

Carter gave him a pointed look.

“Ah.” General Hammond and the Air Force if they ever wanted to be together, that’s who. Jack draped his elbows over his knees and clasped his left wrist with his right hand.

“I’m sorry,” Carter breathed miserably.

“For what?”

“I wish this didn’t mean so much to me. If we actually were working with deep-space radar telemetry… well, let’s just say I would have walked away a long time ago.” Regret lanced through her features. “But I…”

“Sam… stop. It’s okay.”

“It’s really not.”

“Okay, it’s not. But you love what you do, it’s who you are, and I would never ask you to change who you are. I…” He stopped himself before saying ‘I love who you are’. That went without saying, anyway. “Besides, you don’t see me touting a ‘retired’ after my rank, do you?”

Carter gave a humorless smirk.

“And Earth would be screwed if you gave up the program. So if it’s on anyone to give up gate travel, it’s on me. And there’s not a chance in hell I’m letting you do this without me.”

Carter frowned at that and turned a look on him. “What does that mean? Do you not trust me to do this alone?”

He couldn’t tell her the truth – that he didn’t trust anyone else to consider his own life expendable in the defense of hers. He had no right putting that weight on her. “I mean I’m not sitting back and letting you have all the fun.”

She studied him a moment, then she smiled. “It is a hell of a lot of fun.”

Even with all the Goa’uld, Tok’ra, Jaffa, Unas, angry natives, local wildlife, inclement weather, long hikes, nights sleeping on the hard ground, MREs, and the roadblock it put between them being together… “Yeah, it is.”

Carter shifted closer to him, not even pretending it was for warmth against the falling temperature.

“And who knows? Maybe someday.”

Neither one of them was willing to voluntarily surrender their position on SG-1, but that didn’t mean circumstances couldn’t preclude one of them from active duty. If Jack had to lay odds, he’d say Hammond was probably a pen stroke away from reassigning one or both of them.

Which would be a disaster in one sense but a blessing in another.

Carter nodded distractedly. “Maybe.”

Jack stole another glance at Carter, debated the action only briefly, then let go of his wrist so he
could put his arm around her shoulders. She tipped into him and laid her head on his shoulder. Once upon a time, they would only dare so much if Carter were sick or hurt. Now they allowed it because, given what they truly wanted from each other, a shoulder was downright Victorian.

“Hey, Teal’c,” Daniel’s kind voice drew them both from their quiet solace.

Carter lifted her head from Jack’s shoulder and they both looked back to see Teal’c approaching SG-1’s camp. The Jaffa looked exhausted… and displeased. Jack took that to mean the day spent trying to win the Jaffa to the rebellion cause had not gone well.

“So how’d it go?” Daniel asked needlessly.

Teal’c scowled. “These Jaffa care nothing for freeing their brothers and sister still under the yoke of the Goa’uld.”

“Then why did they seek out Bra’tac in the first place?” Daniel wondered aloud, obviously offering Teal’c the chance to vent his frustration more than truly asking.

“They fear the idea of complete freedom. They do not want to help the rebellion, they just want the structure the movement offers to free Jaffa.”

“I guess I could see how being on their own after a lifetime in service could be daunting at first,” Daniel allowed.

“They have a responsibility to their brethren to fight the oppressors of our people!” Teal’c snarled. “They are cowards if they will not take arms against the Goa’uld, and I have no time for cowardice. I am trying to free all Jaffa, and that cannot be done if others are not willing to fight.”

Daniel winced. “I’m sorry, Teal’c.”

Teal’c looked at Daniel, tensed, then sighed. “It is not your fault they are afraid, Daniel Jackson. I apologize for speaking harshly to you.”

“It’s fine. You’re frustrated. I get it. I want to see an end to the Goa’uld as much as you do. Not everyone is cut out for doing the right thing, especially when the right thing is so hard.”

Teal’c seemed to consider the wisdom in that. “You are correct, Daniel Jackson.” A cruel smirk twitched at Teal’c’s mouth. “I wonder how these Jaffa would react to know a Tau’ri has far more courage than they do.”

Daniel lifted his chin proudly, bravely. As well he should – Daniel had stood before gods and defied them without fear, something these Jaffa couldn’t do even with an army at their backs. The universe really did underestimate Daniel Jackson.

“So, what say you, Teal’c?” Jack asked from his spot on the ground. “Do we throw in the towel and head home tomorrow?” Jack was all for declaring the Sekhmet Jaffa a lost cause and getting the hell out of Dodge.

Teal’c pondered the suggestion, then he shook his head. “There may yet be some among this group who will come to realize the importance of the rebellion’s cause. I cannot give up until I am certain there is no hope.”

“Then we stay,” Jack decreed. He might not like it, but the rebellion was important to Teal’c, and he would stand behind his friend.
Teal’c nodded in thanks.

“Teal’c,” Carter said as she got to her feet and approached the Jaffa. “I want to apologize to you for what I said this morning…”

Jack turned his back on his friends – he knew how the rest would play out. Carter would tell Teal’c she was sorry, Teal’c would forgive her, and the two would embrace like family more than coworkers.

Sometimes Jack wondered at the confluence of events that led to SG-1. The universe had a strange way of taking family away only to give it back in unexpected ways.

**********

The planet was awash with shouts and weapons fire.

Jack wished he could say he was surprised that the Jaffa turned on them, but that would be a lie. The only surprise was that some of Sekhmet’s Jaffa stood with SG-1 against their own. Jack cared only insomuch as it made the two sides more equal in number and gave SG-1 a fighting chance.

The first shot was fired late that morning by Uandor. Within seconds, it became an all-out battle.

SG-1 was crouched behind crates, fallen Jaffa, and downed trees sporting their glorious caparisons of autumn. The red leaves were challenged by the patches of blood-soaked earth.

The crates were only large enough to cover one man, two at most, meaning SG-1 was spread out on the west end of camp. Sekhmet’s Jaffa were holding the east. The Stargate lay between them, mired in a no man’s land that each side fought to win control over.

Staff blasts sang through the air and exploded against trees, threw up clods of dirt, or found an unlucky victim and burned through flesh and bone. Bullets raced toward targets, pinging off armor until a lucky few found weak spots and burrowed into bodies. Screams of pain and battle cries blended together to make the soundtrack of war.

Jack knew the symphony well, the music in all its variations buried in his bones.

He played his part, a percussionist of combat with his P-90.

A strange split tore a person in half during a firefight. Some details were laser-sharp while others fell into a black fog. Some sounds rang clear in his skull, while others melded into a muffled background noise. Jack was hyper-aware of his heart and his pulse in his neck and his hands on his weapon, but the exact placement of his legs and feet were less certain.

He was highly attuned to the exact position of each member of his team, but the rest of the Jaffa were a moving mass of strange faces.

The battle had been raging either five minutes of five millennia.

In that moment, Jack felt like he’d been living this war forever. His life outside of now was a dream, a utopia without death and pain that he could not fathom. He was never a father, a husband, a friend, a lover, he wasn’t even a man… they all paled to this, the real Jack O’Neill, the instrument of war.

Jack became the gun, the knife, the grenade.

He became war to save his friends.
Jack peppered an enemy Jaffa with bullets, doggedly firing until the Jaffa fell, then he scanned the battlefield. Between the fires started by the staff weapons and the reds and oranges of the foliage beyond, it looked like the entire planet was aflame.

“Sam!” Jack heard Daniel cry out, and Jack snapped his head to the left to find his 2IC.

Carter dove out from behind her half-destroyed crate when a concentrated volley of staff weapon blasts plowed into it, shattering the object that had been providing cover for Carter and throwing shrapnel and smoke into the air.

Carter scrambled in a combat crawl along the ground, then got to her knees with her weapon at the ready as she searched for new cover.

Jack caught movement in the corner of his eye and looked.

A Jaffa was taking aim at Carter.

Jack jerked his weapon toward the Jaffa and put the man in his crosshairs.

The Jaffa’s staff weapon continued to point at Carter, but the Jaffa’s eyes flicked to Jack a split second away from shooting him. From across a warzone, Jack could see the Jaffa weighing his choices: shoot her or shoot him.

In that instant, Jack thought this might be the day. The day when their luck ran out and he died. Or Sam did.

Battlefield revelations were breathtakingly brutal, and Jack was bombarded with regrets. He should have kissed Sam. He should have held her. He should have made love to her every chance he got. At the moment of staring down death, regulations seemed like such a stupid reason not to love her unreservedly.

For all that the thing between them had been too much, it hadn’t been enough.

He hoped if one of them had to die, it would be him. If it saved her, he would be okay with that. Maybe this was why he hadn’t died after Charlie, or on Abydos that first time, or on all the missions off-world since… maybe it was to be here, now, when his death could save Sam.

Because it couldn’t be her.

She couldn’t die while he lived.

He couldn’t go home after losing her and find all her things in his house. Her clothes in his hamper, her cup in his cupboard, her shampoo in his bathroom, her dog on his couch. He couldn’t stand it. It would break him. Jack had lived through so much in his life, but he couldn’t live through that. The straw that broke the camel’s back.

The Jaffa’s finger moved to fire, and Jack’s did, too.
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Sam Carter sat in her car clutching the steering wheel tightly. Her knuckles had gone white, and the tendons in her forearms stood out in sharp shadows. Her fingers would be stuck in a rictus of claws when – if – she finally managed to let go.

It felt like she was trying to keep herself from flying apart.

She had blown past fight-or-flight long ago. Now she was teetering on the edge of breakdown, and she could feel her mind trying to pull away in self-defense. The reality of her world at that moment was too intense, too much… the place her mind wanted to drag her was so appealing. A dark void where she wasn’t functional, but at least the pain would be dulled.

She wasn’t getting all the air she needed. Her limbs were shaking beyond her control.

Daniel had been reluctant to let her drive. In a distant part of her mind, she could acknowledge he was right. She shouldn’t be on the road.

But she couldn’t accept Daniel’s offer of a ride. She couldn’t even admit he could be right. It would be as damning as a confession of caring more than she was supposed to, and she hadn’t toed the line this long to stumble now.

She owed Jack that much.

And she had to pick up his dog.

Sam took an unsteady breath and looked up through her windshield at Janet Fraiser’s house. The doctor, of course, wasn’t home. Anytime disaster struck off-world and a team came back in pieces, Janet stayed in the infirmary to try and snatch people back from the jaws of death. Sometimes she succeeded. Sometimes she failed.

Sam physically recoiled from that train of thought. She’d never get out of her car if she didn’t.

Sam pried her hands from the steering wheel, shook out the stiff curl of her fingers (like rigor mortis), opened her car door, and trudged toward the house.

Cassie answered the front door with tears in her eyes.

So Cassie knew. Janet must have called.

Sam was grateful she didn’t have to put on a convincing act that everything was fine. She didn’t think she could do it.

“Hey, Cass…” Sam offered in an unsteady greeting.

At that moment, Cassie looked so much like that little girl Sam had closed inside a bunker when they thought her chest was going to explode. Sam wanted to grab her and cling to her as she had then, but she was sure if she gave in and showed that much agony she wouldn’t make it back to her car.

Cassie’s breath hitched as she fought off sobs, bit back questions, and ended up gripping the doorknob like she would fall to her knees otherwise. Sam knew how she felt.
Nick shouldered his way around Cassie to move toward Sam.

Nick knew something was wrong. He ducked his head and crept toward Sam timidly. JJ, the shiba inu Jack had given Cassie years ago, cowered behind Nick, swept up in the darkness that had fallen over everyone associated with SG-1.

Nick licked Sam’s hand in a feeble gesture of shared sorrow.

Sam felt tears stinging her eyes as she looked down at the dog Jack had saved from a dead world. The same way they’ve saved Cassandra. SG-1 ran afoul of death a lot.

“I tried to tell him,” Cassie croaked as she handed Sam his leash, the black nylon with ‘Nicodemus Legend O’Neill’ crawling in blue stitching along its length. The threading was starting to unravel on the last L, and Sam felt an irrational terror that the ‘O’Neill’ part of the embroidered name was trying to fall off.

“I tried to tell him,” Cassie repeated in a cracking voice, “but I don’t think he understood.”

Sam hated the thought that Cassie had tried to tell the dog why his master wasn’t coming to pick him up.

“I’ll take care of him,” Sam replied, because she would. If Nick’s care fell to anyone, it undeniably fell to her. It said things about her relationship with Jack that were damning, too, but Sam was too threadbare to care.

When Sam knelt to clip the leash to Nick’s collar, the dog craned up and licked Sam on the cheek. Sam knew she must taste like salt.

***********

It made the most sense to take Nick back to her house.

She went to Jack’s instead.

Stepping into his empty house was the breaking point for Samantha Carter. She closed the front door, leaned back against it, and began to cry. Her walls crashed, and the world came tumbling after. She ended up on the floor, knees pulled toward her chest and face buried in her arms.

Nick wormed his way closer, pressing his body against her and licking her until Sam wasn’t sure if she was wetter from tears or tongue.

When she pulled back from her tucked position and opened up to him, Nick practically threw himself in her lap. He was far too big for it, but Sam wrapped her arms around the dog and was grateful for his weight. It felt like it was the only thing grounding her.

Sam looked down at her hands and felt her stomach lurch when she saw streaks of dark brown on her skin. She hadn’t even considered…

She looked down at a pant leg and found another patch of dried blood on the olive drab fabric.

Sam let out a strangled cry and pushed the dog off, scrambled to her feet, and started stripping off her clothes right there in Jack’s foyer.

It wasn’t like he was going to walk in and catch her.

Sam peeled and shed and pulled until she was standing completely naked in the hallway, a pile of
blood-stained BDUs at her feet.

She was starting to shake again.

Had Cassie noticed? Sam could only hope it had been too dark or that it had been mistaken for mud. *Anything* but the truth.

Sam kicked the pile of stained clothes across the living room with a savage bolt of adrenaline then rushed down the hall to the guest bathroom to turn on the shower.

To wash off Jack O’Neill’s blood.

***********

Part of Sam knew she should be calling into work and letting someone know that she wasn’t coming in. She should be checking in, touching base, following protocol.

But she didn’t.

She lay in Jack O’Neill’s bed instead with his pillow pressed to her face because it smelled like him.

She remembered doing the same thing when her mother died, and she clutched the pillow until her fingers ached knowing his smell would fade. No matter how hard she held on, that scent that was pure Jack O’Neill wouldn’t last forever. Jack would disappear a little more each day.

Nick alternated between being glued to Sam’s side and wandering the house looking for Jack. Every time his search came up empty, Nick came back to Sam a littler sadder for his failure.

Nick had started whining intermittently as he curled against Sam’s side, his head on her hip. The sound of his pain tore at Sam’s heart, and she rolled onto her side and surrendered the pillow a moment to fill her arms with Nick instead. At least he was a living warmth to hold.

***********

Sam lost track of time.

Days bled into each other, a blur of hours that seemed to stretch infinitely.

Normal things, like hunger, ceased to exist.

She left the back door open so Nick could go in and out as he needed, and she was diligent about feeding and watering him. Jack would be counting on her to take care of him, and that became the only thing that mattered. She could wither away to nothing, it didn’t matter, but Nick had to be okay.

Nick had no appetite, either, but Sam put down food every day for him, anyway.

***********

Sam wasn’t sure how many times the phone rang before she finally acknowledged it.

For a moment, she sat on Jack’s couch and stared at the offending object. It was strange to her that the world was still carrying on outside her cocoon. It seemed wrong. The world should stop for Jack O’Neill. It owed him that much.

With a heavy sense of detachment, Sam reached out and picked up the phone, more to stop its screaming than to speak to someone.
There was a moment of silence on the other end, then a tentative, “… Sam?”

Sam closed her eyes and clutched the pillow she’d carried from the bedroom tighter against her chest. Daniel’s voice was a serrated edge cutting her wound open anew. Her last memory of the archaeologist was him wearing Jack’s blood, too.

“Sam? Please, say something.”

“Like what?” she croaked, shocked at how raw and rough her voice sounded. She had done nothing in the last few days but cry, and her voice was wrecked.

“Are you okay?”

Sam snorted. Stupid question.

“Right… dumb question.” Daniel heaved a sigh. “I guess you’ve been at Jack’s this whole time.”

“So?” she challenged, daring him to question her being there.

“I’m not telling you to leave,” Daniel assured her gently. “I’m just worried about you.”

Sam tuned Daniel out as Nick padded into the living room from another search of the house for his absent master and rested his head in Sam’s lap forlornly.

Sam let go of Jack’s pillow to pet his dog.

“Sam, did you hear what I just said?”

Not really.

Daniel sighed and said carefully, “We need to talk about what happens to SG-1 now.”


“Sam…”

“No, Daniel,” Sam snapped. Then she hung up.

Nick looked up at her, commiserating.

Sam grabbed the pillow and went back down the hall to Jack’s bedroom. She didn’t even hesitate anymore to climb in and curl up in his sheets, surrounded by his scent (though it grew weaker by the day, slowly giving up his ghost).

***********

“Why didn’t I tell him I love him?”

Nick looked over at Sam as they lay together on Jack’s bed. It was day outside, but which day Sam could not say. It seemed the world beyond Jack’s walls existed in another state of reality. One Sam wasn’t remotely ready to rejoin.

Oddly, besides Daniel’s one call, no one seemed to be trying to drag her back. Maybe they knew. Maybe she and Jack had never been very good at hiding it, after all. They were the worst-kept secret of the SGC.
Nick laid his head on his paws and pricked his ears toward Sam.

She could think of a hundred moments, easily, when she had looked at Jack and thought ‘I love him’. At the beginning, when the thought had been scandalous and terrifying. Later, when it had been dangerous and exhilarating. Toward the end, when it became the bedrock of her strength. At the last, when it became an unshakable truth.

So many times when those three words became a mantra in her mind, echoing so loud she thought she would scream it just to be free of the cacophony inside her skull. Every single time it would have been true. And Jack had deserved to hear it. Regardless of whether or not he knew, he deserved to hear her say it.

“Why didn’t I tell him?” Sam lamented as she reached out and ran her fingers through Nick’s brown and black fur. “It’s been true for years… why didn’t I tell him?”

Nick had no answer.

***********

The trees and leaves were red and orange, and so were the flames around her. All the hues of russet and rust, everything sanguine and sacred, until all the world was blood and fire.

In the angry sea of reds and golds, a lone figure in olive green stood at arms. Olive and tan and silver and brown.

I love him. Even as he turned to face the gaping maw of death itself.

Death came in plated gray armor and the black tattoo of a counterfeit god.

A bolt of yellow, sickly and distressed, and then chaos. The world cracked and splintered under her feet – the Earthquake Planet, he called it, but no, it couldn’t be, there was an autumn explosion of trees and no ocean – and Sam watched her world blow apart.

Smoke roiled and billowed as the kaleidoscope trees burned, choking her.

“Colonel!”

Maybe there was an ocean, because her own voice sounded like it was underwater. The high-pitched ring in her ears from close-range weapons fire was muffling the world.

If he was alive and screaming, she couldn’t hear it.

She fought her way through the world tearing itself apart, fighting to get to him.

But there was fire.

And so much blood.

***********

Sam dreamed of Jack.

That wasn’t new or unusual, but the last hours she’d spent with him on the autumn planet filled her sleep with nightmares. Reality and all the demons a soldier’s mind could harbor thrashed at each other in her sleep and created her own private apocalypse where the world ended with Jack O’Neill.
But the dreams where she watched him fall were not the worst.

The worst were the dreams of him alive and well, when the ache of his presence haunted her. Jack’s smile when Sam caught him before he could school his features as he watched her. That look in his eyes that spoke of secrets kept and rooms they’d left, despite promises. His profile lifting skyward under the bill of his hat as he let an alien sun touch his face.

The sheer mass of him next to her, every inch of him loud and demanding the attention of all her senses until she had none left.

She felt like she could almost reach out and touch him.

It was heartbreaking when she woke up and he wasn’t there.

Sometimes, in the hazy boundary between waking and sleeping, she could swear he was there. A figure in the corner of her eye that became empty air when she turned her head or reached for him.

When Sam opened her eyes and saw Jack looking down at her as she slept in his bed, she just hurt for the torment of her imagination. She wanted to scream knowing the mirage would fade in the next second. She had tried everything she could think of to make the spirit stay, to hold the vision in its place. To keep him.

But it never worked, and in the next heartbeat Jack would be gone. Sam swallowed the heartache preemptively and blinked.

But Jack didn’t disappear.

In defiance of all logic, he smiled. “Hey, Goldilocks.”

Sam’s eyes widened as her mind started to race. She wondered if this was what going insane was like. The specters dancing at the edges of her vision cloying and agonizing until the delusions suddenly just stayed.

Being able to look her hallucination right in the face was a strange kind of madness, but she was ready to embrace it. She had begged the universe for Jack, and beggars couldn’t be choosers.

Then little things started to register. Jack’s unshaven cheeks and jaw, his disheveled hair, the bruise color under his eyes, the gauntness of injury hollowing his cheeks, the ashen pallor to his face, the beads of sweat on his upper lip and brow, an angry line of stitches just below his hairline over his left temple, the stiff and painful way he leaned over her...

Sam propped up onto her elbows and stared. It made no sense. In her dreams of him, he was either hale and hearty or being torn apart. He was never coasting on painkillers and still more broken than not.

Which must mean...

“Jack…?”

Jack smirked tiredly. “If I’d known I was going to come home to find you in my bed, I would have harassed Fraiser into cutting me loose earlier.”

Sam swept her eyes down his body. He was dressed in a baggy t-shirt and a pair of sweat pants that were cut off at the left knee. His left knee was a mass of bandages, and propped against the nightstand was a pair of crutches.
What really drove it home, though, the thing that made Sam truly believe she wasn’t dreaming, was Nick. The dog was dancing in place in the middle of the bedroom (no doubt fended off with a crutch before Sam woke) with his stuffed snake Apophis in his mouth that he’d fetched to celebrate. He was a completely different dog from the past few days of moping and mourning. Nick was over the moon happy, and that had to mean it was real.

Not a dream.

Sam’s eyes flew back to Jack as hope swelled to bursting in her chest.

Behind the drugged edge of pain in his eyes was warmth. Affection. That pure, raw essence of Jack O’Neill.

Sam sat up and kissed him.

Jack made a surprised noise, but he didn’t try to pull away or push her off.

Emboldened, she took his head in her hands and licked the seam of his lips. When he opened under her, she swept her tongue into his mouth. She kissed him like she had every right, like he was hers to kiss. She should be worried about the regulations, their careers, her professional reputation, but none of that mattered except that he was alive, breathing into her mouth and solid and warm in her hands.

Sam deepened the kiss, almost testing to see where he drew the line.

He never did. He canted his head to get a better angle, met her tongue with his own, and Sam was soaring. The sum total of her days of heartache turned to alacrity in one fell swoop. She was dizzy with it.

She had to pull away to breathe. She felt like she had the structural integrity of ones of those burned leaves on the autumn planet. The mere thought of the fire and blood had her shaking.

“C’mere,” Jack beckoned softly, and Sam went.

She buried her face in his shoulder and let out a happy sob when she was inundated with the smell of Jack O’Neill. It was buried under the stink of the infirmary, tainted with the acrid hint of medication, but it was there. The scent she had been chasing as it faded day by day. She could get herself drunk on it.

“Hey…” Jack curled one hand around her back to hold her gently, carefully, like she was an unstable explosive device. She certainly felt like one.

“It’s okay.”

Sam shook her head against his shoulder but couldn’t speak. She felt too much. If she opened her mouth, she might detonate. She heaved for air, trying so hard not to sound like a beached fish, and anchored herself to Jack’s scent, his touch, his heat. She clung to his shoulders and tried not to pull him toward her, because from the way he braced himself and tensed it was obvious he was in pain, and she didn’t want to hurt him. But she also couldn’t let him go. Not yet.

Jack didn’t pull away. He kept his hand on her back, eventually beginning to slowly rub it up and down her curved spine as she incrementally accepted that he wouldn’t vanish if she loosened her grip.

It seemed like they stayed that way for hours, though it couldn’t have been more than a few minutes. Time forgot them in that bedroom, and Sam would greedily suck up all the lost minutes and rogue hours it felt like giving them.
“It’s okay,” Jack whispered roughly against the shell of her ear. “I’m here.”

“For a minute, back on the planet… I saw you go down, and for a minute I thought…” It had been one of the worst minutes of her entire life.

“I know. Guess it’s a good thing Jaffa aim sucks at long range, huh?”

It hadn’t sucked enough, though. That moment, burned into her memory, when she had fought her way to his bloodied figure, prone and motionless on the ground, would haunt her to her dying day. A loud breath escaped Sam, “Shit.”

“I have it on authority it looked worse than it was,” Jack offered.

“Don’t… please, just… don’t.” She couldn’t make light of what had happened. No kernels of logic – head wounds bleed like a motherfucker, the Jaffa mostly missed, it could have been worse – could soften the serrated edge of the memory of seeing Jack and for a moment thinking he was dead.

“Yeah, okay,” Jack said lowly in a voice that said he understood more than anyone should. She felt the press of his lips against her hair before he spoke again. “Daniel said you kind of lost it.”

Sam hated the suggestion she was weak as much as she hated that Daniel was right. She felt a stubborn reflex kick in and fisted Jack’s shirt in her hands. “I didn’t lose it on base.”

It was important that he know that – she hadn’t fallen apart at work. But god, had she come close. For a moment on the planet she thought Jack was dead, and it had torn her down to the foundation in a way she had not expected. It had terrified her. She realized he had the power to completely destroy her.

The second she knew Jack wasn’t going to die, she fled the base before she fell apart. Before everyone could see what Jack O’Neill did to her.

“Yeah, I didn’t figure you did. You know how Daniel exaggerates.” Or Daniel just knew Sam better than anyone else. That wasn’t surprising.

Sam tried to remember her numb, shell-shocked escape from the mountain and couldn’t recall most of it now. She had fleeting memories of Cassie in tears, of Nick’s leash losing its last name, then just blurry memories of hours, days, eons in Jack’s bed needing him so badly she could barely breathe.

Jack rested his head against her shoulder. “Want to tell me?”

Sam bit back tears and struggled to keep her voice small when it felt like the force of her feelings could reduce the house to rubble. “I almost lost you.”

“I know… I’m sorry.” As if it had been his fault. As if he’d had a choice who got shot, and he’d picked himself instead of her.

Maybe he had, maybe he hadn’t… but she knew, given the choice, he would.

“I’m sorry I didn’t visit you in the infirmary.”

“I’m not going to lie, I was kind of hoping you would… I wasn’t sure you got out of there in one piece until Daniel told me you were okay.”

The firefight with the Jaffa on the autumn planet flashed through her mind like a nightmare. Seeing him go down was the instant she knew they couldn’t keep doing this. That was the moment the Air Force stopped being a good enough reason not to.
“I couldn’t go see you in the infirmary. On the planet… I saw you get hit, I thought you were dead, and then you were alive… and I knew I couldn’t see you without kissing you.”

Jack paused a moment, then he chuckled. “Yeah, probably best you didn’t do that in front of everyone.”

She hoped that meant he accepted her apology. She hoped he could understand how absolutely done with the regs she was in that split second of shrapnel and fire.

But she had no right to make that decision for him while he was unconscious, and she knew it would be made the second anyone saw her with Jack. Jack deserved the chance to wake up and have a say, and so Sam had to stay away.

But it had been one of the hardest things she’d ever done. Jack was no longer a possibility in her future, he was an absolute. A guarantee. He couldn’t be anything less than her partner from that moment on, and she would not suffer anyone to suggest otherwise. Not even the Air Force.

They had both had brushes with death before, they were both walking maps of scars from battle, so Sam couldn’t say why the autumn planet was the straw that broke the camel’s back.

But that camel’s back was snapped clean in two.

“Speaking of Daniel and his tall tales, though…” Jack said, his voice rumbling in his chest where she was pressed against it, “if he tells you I came to in the infirmary calling for you… just ignore him.”

Sam coughed on a startled laugh, worried that it would too easily turn into crying for the mere thought of how close she had come to never getting to enjoy his sense of humor again.

“And what if Janet says you did?” she asked.

There was a guilty silence. “I mentioned I didn’t know at that point if you got out all right, didn’t I? Clearly I’m just a good commander worried about his team. I’m sure Teal’c’s name was going to be the next one on the tip of my tongue. Hey, maybe I said his name first. You know Daniel likes to stir the pot, that gossip-monger.”

Sam laughed again, this time with less threat of tears, and pulled at Jack’s shirt harder.

Jack’s playful air disappeared and he held her a little tighter. “Hey… it’s okay.”

“I’m not leaving.”

Jack brought up his hand and cradled the back of her neck, pressing her hair flat against her nape. “Okay.”

Sam frowned and pulled back to look him in the eye. “I mean it. I’m moving in. I’m not leaving your house. I’m not leaving your bed.”

Jack smiled tiredly. “Do you see me trying to stop you?”

Sam narrowed her eyes, puzzled. After all the years, their storied history of toeing the line, she had expected some token resistance, at least.

The pain Jack was riding etched sharp lines in his face as he looked down at his wrecked left leg. “This was my good knee, and now it’s blown to hell. I’m looking at a couple of surgeries, at least, months of physical therapy, and that’ll probably just get me to the point where I can walk without a
cane *if I’m lucky*. Even when this heals up as much as it’s going to, there’s no way I’ll be able to pass a physical for gate travel again.” He looked back at Sam, and there was sorrow there… but also relief. “I’m out. Done.”

Sam looked down at his bandaged leg. “What about the Tok’ra? They could use the healing device…”

“A busted knee doesn’t really warrant calling in the alien cavalry. And *even if*…” Jack winced. “Truth is, if we start calling them in every time part of me breaks, they’re going to get annoyed with all the house calls.” Jack shrugged. “I’m not exactly getting any younger here. Even *if* we patched *this*… won’t be long before something else lands me in the same situation.”

“Oh.”

“A man has to know when to bow out gracefully. And hey…” he gestured at his wrecked knees. “I can live with this.” Key word being *live*.

She hated that he was going to be off a front line team, that it would be the end of SG-1 as she’d always known it, but she also knew what it could mean for her. For *them*.

“Hammond mentioned me possibly staying on at the SGC as a desk jockey, but I can’t see myself doing that. I’d rather retire.”

Sam was afraid to hope that he was saying what she *thought* he was saying.

Jack leaned forward just enough to press a brief kiss to her lips. “So by all means… stay in my house, and *please* stay in my bed.”

“Really?”

Jack grinned. “Oh, yeah.”

Sam captured his mouth in another searing kiss.

Jack hummed contently into her, leaned forward as though to lay her out on his bed beneath him… then he hissed in pain.

Sam jumped back. “Oh god, I’m sorry!”

Jack straightened up with a grimace. “*Never* apologize for kissing me… I just hit an angle that my knee wasn’t happy with.” Though he tried to play it off, she could tell his face had gone even whiter and the perspiration on his brow glistened.

Sam looked down again at his injured limb and for the first time started contemplating the logistics. “How did you get home? *Please* tell me you didn’t drive yourself.”

“*Pfft*… like Doc was going to let *that* happen.” Jack placed his left hand on the part of his leg above where the bandages started. “No, Daniel drove me home.” He hesitated then and looked carefully at Sam. “We saw your car in my driveway, so I had Daniel help me to the front door and told him to scram. I figured we needed to talk.”

She’d have to call Daniel later and thank him. Thank him for a lot of things, actually. She had a feeling he’d been running interference for her a lot while she was having a breakdown. “I can’t believe I didn’t wake up when you guys came in the front door.”
“To be fair, it was a long time between when we came through the door and when I hobbled my ass to the bedroom. It took me about half an hour to go twenty feet.”

Sam fought back a sympathetic smile. “You shouldn’t be on your feet, anyway.” She peered at his pain-pinched face. “And knowing you, you’re probably pushing the limits of how long you should go between doses of medication.”

Jack scowled. “I don’t like being drugged up,” he groused.

“I know,” Sam said kindly. “But I hate seeing you in pain.”

After a moment in quiet, mulish stubbornness, Jack grumbled, “Fine.” It was clearly a concession to her, and Sam loved him for it.

“I’m sure you’re not supposed to take your pain medication on an empty stomach, either.” She moved to get out of bed. “Here, lay down. I’ll go get you something to eat.”

“You don’t have to that.”

Sam gave him a fiery look. “You almost died. Please, let me… just, let me.”

Jack studied her a moment, then he nodded. “Okay.”

Jack struggled to maneuver himself onto the bed. Sam did her best to help get him in a semi-reclined position then pulled a throw blanket at the foot of the bed over him. Once, that would have been where she stopped. She couldn’t appear to care too much. But now she carded her fingers through his sweat-damp hair. Just getting situated in bed had taken a lot out of him. She could tell he was hurting from the way his breath hissed through his clenched teeth.

“Where are your meds?” she asked.

Jack rubbed at one eye socket with the heel of his palm – his classic ‘I’m hurting’ gesture. “Jacket pocket… hanging up in the hallway.”

She touched his lips with her thumb just for the sake of doing it. “Okay… try to relax, I’ll be right back.”

Sam wasn’t a culinary wizard even at the best of times, and Jack’s pantry was kind of bare at the moment, so she was extremely limited in what she could make him. She somewhat sheepishly brought him a peanut butter sandwich and a glass of water, the prescription bottle tucked between her elbow and her side.

Jack just chuckled at the rudimentary meal, ate half the sandwich, then he obediently took the pain pill Sam held out for him.

Nick had given up trying to entice anyone into playing with Apophis and wormed his way next to Sam, tap-dancing plaintively until Jack dropped his hand over the side of the bed for the dog to lick. “Heya, Nick… miss me?”

More than Jack could know.

Sam gave the rest of the peanut butter sandwich to Nick, who scarfed it down – his appetite resurrected with the return of his master.

Sam took the empty plate back to the kitchen and took her time cleaning up some of her mess from
the last several days. It felt like a chance to regain her equilibrium, to wrap and tuck away that version of herself that had reacted so badly to Jack’s injury. That had treated the end of a stage of life so much like death. Because though it was the end of so many things, and those endings were terrifying, they were also the prelude to something new. Something that might be amazing.

At the time, Jack’s injury had been all about the pain and blood and the end of things – Sam’s ability to keep up the act, SG-1, the status quo – but Jack was home, and he’d brought with him the hint of good things to come from that disaster.

She marveled at the change just for Jack’s presence in the house. She had been drowning in the nearness of losing him, and so quickly on its heels she was soaring on the promise of having him.

She wasn’t even sorry. The Air Force – the god damn planet – owed them this.

When she was feeling less like a stained glass window about to shatter into a thousand brilliantly colored shards of rainbow, she made her way back to the bedroom.

Jack was settling into a medicated doze, and she knew he was grouchy about it, but the furrow of pain between his brows had softened. Knowing he wasn’t hurting as much made Sam hurt less.

She fussed quietly over Jack as the medication took a stronger hold, evidenced by the way Jack was getting that drugged, loopy glaze to his eyes.

Sam pulled the blanket up to his chest then looked into his eyes. He was smiling at her. In pain and weary, but smiling just the same.

“What?” she asked with a return smile of her own.

“You called my house ‘home’… I like the sound of that.”

Sam ducked down and kissed him, tender and slow. His response was a beat late, his reflexes dulled by the medication, but it seemed nothing was going to stop Jack from kissing her back. She was sure she would never tire of that. “Me, too,” Sam replied. She was more than ready to make Jack’s house her home.

Then she remembered something she’d said to Nick in the depths of her agony. Something about regrets, and Sam was done living with them. “Jack?”

“Yeah?”

“I love you.”

The confession seemed to momentarily vanquish any pain he was feeling. Jack grinned. “I love you, too.” He reached up and traced a hand down her cheek, brushing his thumb over the sensitive skin just below her eye. His eyes tracked from her hair to her eyes to her lips and back again. “I love you and all your colors.”

She had no idea what that meant. She’d blame it on the pain meds.

She brought his hand to her lips and kissed his palm. “And I love you and all of yours.”

Jack gave her a goofy smile and waggled his eyebrows. “So… are you getting in, or what?” He patted the bed space beside him. “Plenty of room for a pretty lady.”

Sam rolled her eyes with a small laugh.
But she was *absolutely* getting in.

END

Chapter End Notes

A/N: What's this, you say? An update (on a completed fic, no less) over two years after the last chapter posted? Has the world gone mad?!

Truth is that I wrote this epilogue to AHC shortly after I wrote the last chapter, but I didn't post it for a lot of reasons. It's in a different POV from all the rest of AHC, it changed the direction I originally envisioned for AHC, and I liked the open-endedness of AHC's final chapter. I felt like more to the story could only take away from the work.

So then you might ask why I'm posting it now. I have done depressingly little writing since AHC, and while this was not written recently, it can still be recently shared. I feel like all my contact with the fandom world died when my Muse did, and I do so miss fandom. It gave color to my life (pun intended). Also, December seemed like a good time to make a random update on an old fic. Merry Christmas? :)

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!