Above and Beyond

by AuroraNova

Summary

Continuing my J/D AU, this installment sees Jack receive a special honor.

Notes

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Standard disclaimer: I own nothing and am not making a cent.
Part I

Daniel had just finished putting up the new 2007 calendar when his cell phone rang. He didn’t recognize the number, which was unusual because very few people had his number. “Hello?”

“How, Daniel.”

“Sarah.” He had definitely not expected to hear her voice. It had been two years since she decided that she needed a clean break from anything and anyone who reminded her of Osiris. “How are you?”

“I’ve been worse. You?”

“I’m doing well.”

“Good,” she said. “Listen, I know it’s been a while. But I can’t keep pretending those three years didn’t happen. Can I come see you?”

“Sure. Where are you now?”

“I’ve been teaching in Boston.”

“Just email me flight information.”

“I will. Are you still in the same place?”

“No. I live with Jack now,” he told her matter-of-factly. He’d never hidden his orientation from her.

“The general?” she asked with clear surprise.

“He retired from the Air Force and is the civilian director.”

“I see. Well, congratulations.”

“Thank you.”

“Thank you, Daniel. You were a good friend when I needed one the most, and then you let me run away.”

“You had your reasons.” Besides, he’d disappeared once.

“Yes. Or so I thought. I was sure that I could bury it all and have a normal life again.”

Daniel could see how that wouldn’t work. She’d been a prisoner in her own body for three years, after all. “I’ll email our address, okay?” They couldn’t have a proper conversation on the phone.

“I appreciate it. Cheers.”

“Bye.”

He was sitting in the living room thinking about Sarah when Jack came out, freshly showered. “I know that look, Daniel. Deep thoughts.”

“Sarah called.”
“Gardner?”

“Yes. She’s coming next week to talk.”

“So, no more pretending nothing happened.”

“Apparently.”

Jack slumped down onto the couch. “The Air Force has kept an eye on her, you know.”

“I know.” He’d purposely never asked what Jack knew. Sarah had wanted a clean break, and he respected that. “Although I suspect it’s more out of self-preservation than concern about Sarah.”

Jack didn’t try to deny it. That was just the way the military worked. “Do you know what she wants?”

“To talk. Other than that, no.”

“If she wants, and you think it’s a good idea, we can use her. Not on a front-line team. As one of your people.”

That made sense. It would make keeping an eye on her easier and take advantage of her knowledge. “Making unilateral hiring decisions now?”

“Trust me, the Pentagon will be thrilled.”

He had no trouble believing that. “I’ll keep it in mind, but she called me as a friend, and my primary concern is her wellbeing.”

“Fair enough,” said Jack. “I can make myself scarce when she comes over.”

“You don’t have to.”

“I’ll see if Teal’c wants to catch a movie.”

A niggling suspicion formed in Daniel’s brain. “I told her about us.”

“I wasn’t doubting you, cariad. Don’t know what you see in an old man like me, but I know you’re not going anywhere.”

“I see you, Jack O’Neill, and don’t you forget it.”

Zelda chose that moment to trot into the living room and drop her favorite rope toy at their feet. Or more precisely, Jack’s feet. It had taken the dog about three days to learn that Jack was much more enthusiastic about tug-of-war than Daniel. On the other hand, Daniel dispensed dog treats more freely.

To Zelda’s annoyance, Jack postponed the tug-of-war in order to give Daniel a kiss. “Don’t plan anything Friday,” he said when they parted.

“Date night?”

“You betcha.”

Daniel fervently hoped that nothing came up Friday at SGC.
The door to Daniel’s office was open, so Sam walked right in. “Hungry?” she asked.

He looked up from something that might have once been a bowl but was presently in many pieces. From the looks of it, Daniel was piecing it back together. Usually those more mundane tasks were delegated.

“Just a second,” he said. “I’ve almost got this.”

It was really thirty seconds later before he looked up. “This broken vase is actually a very sophisticated puzzle,” he shared eagerly. “The way the pieces are broken, at least two could fit in every one spot. The key is to match up the Ancient writing.”

“What’s the test?”

“I’m not sure yet. The text is some kind of poem. We think this is older than almost all of the Ancient artifacts we’ve found so far. It could be the key to something we can’t imagine. It could be a puzzle for rainy days.” Daniel shrugged. “I really don’t know.”

She nodded, knowing that he’d be one of the first people she told if it turned out to be something big. “Up for a lunch break?”

“Sure.” He stood up, and they headed towards the mess. “What’s on the menu today, anyway?”

“Beef stroganoff and carrots.”

“Edible,” he said. “So, how was your trip?”

“I had a good time.” The elevator opened, revealing a couple of airmen who snapped to attention. She nodded at them, “At ease.”

They didn’t talk about her trip any more in the elevator. Sam took basic measures to keep her personal life from feeding SGC’s well-developed gossip mill, and elevator talk never stayed in the elevator.

She had, in fact, had a more relaxing time than she’d expected. The idea of meeting Eddie’s family made her nervous. They were all in Phoenix at once: both of his sisters, his brother-in-law, nieces, and mother. It seemed a silly thing to unsettle a decorated USAF lieutenant colonel who had faced down death more times that she could count, but meeting Eddie’s family had been a big deal.

“The worst thing was when his nieces decided to pretend to be each other,” she explained. “They’re identical twins and I had enough trouble telling them apart when they were helping me.”

“So the cover story wasn’t a problem?” Daniel knew she’d been worried about the deep-space radar telemetry cover. Eddie’s brother-in-law was a committed amateur astronomer. To prepare, Sam had done her homework and read the latest on actual deep-space radar telemetry.

“No. Eddie did a good job of explaining right away that my work is classified, and his family respected that.”

They had only stayed in Phoenix a few days to celebrate the new year, but she already felt that her boyfriend’s family accepted and liked her. It had her in an exceptionally good mood.

She and Daniel had almost reached the mess when Sgt. Harriman’s voice rang out over the
intercom. “Colonel Carter, report to the gate room.”

Daniel followed her back to the elevator. They didn’t try to guess what might await them. That had lost its charm after five years or so.

“You’ve got a visitor,” Jack informed her, indicating a man in Tok’ra clothing standing in front of the gate.

“I am Rowal of the Tok’ra,” said the host. “My condolences on your father’s death. He was my friend.”

“Thank you,” she answered quietly. It had been over a year and a half since her dad died, and more often than not when the Tok’ra IDC came through, her first thought was still a hope that it might be her dad.

“Had I not been undercover, I would have come sooner. We are not in a position to place great value on possessions, Colonel. I understand more than most, which is why your father entrusted me with the task of delivering this to you if and when it was necessary.” Rowal removed a familiar book from his bag and solemnly placed it in her hands. “This was his kev’pel.”

“Final request,” Daniel whispered to Jack. Sam knew before he translated. Sometimes, when they were applicable, Jolinar’s memories came to her as though they were her own. Tok’ra, knowing that they might die at any mission, shared a kev’pel with one other. Though time was not a critical factor, a kev’pel was as binding a promise as a Tok’ra could make.

She blinked back tears as she turned the familiar book over, although she didn’t think she was fooling anyone into believing she was perfectly composed. “Thank you,” she said again, although the words didn’t seem nearly enough.

Her mother’s cookbook. The old, stained Better Homes and Gardens cookbook had been an ever-present sight when she was growing up. It had her mom’s recipe notes, the scribbled-over page where Sam had attempted to prevent any more appearances of cream of mushroom soup, and so many of her childhood memories. She’d always assumed Mark took it, but her father had it all along. Not only that, he even brought it with him after blending with Selmak.

“It is my privilege,” Rowal replied. And she knew that it was a privilege for a Tok’ra to honor a friend by completing their kev’pel, but Sam felt that she was the privileged one. “Jacob once told me that this book held more memories than recipes. Which was fortunate, because his attempts to recreate recipes with alternate ingredients did not satisfy him.”

She hadn’t known that her dad tried to cook offworld. There was still so much about him she didn’t know, and that pained her. At least she knew her father better than she had before Selmak. She was thankful for that.

As soon as she got home, she was going to make a list, go to the grocery store for ingredients, and try to make her mom’s quiche.

When he returned home, Jack was in a good mood. The Avalanche had won an exciting game. And even though he didn’t think Teal’c fully appreciated hockey, the Jaffa liked it alright and was happy enough to leave the mountain. There were worse people to go to a hockey game with. Namely Sam. Once Jack had made the mistake of having team night at a game, and she sucked all the fun out of hockey before the first period was over.
Daniel and Sarah Gardner were still in the living room, with a plate of Sam’s cookies. Sam had been on a cooking and baking spree since she’d gotten her mom’s cookbook. She was a better baker than a cook, but nobody minded that because the last few days she’d been plying people with baked goods.

“Dr. Gardner,” he greeted.

“General. Daniel tells me you’ve authorized him to offer me a position at Stargate Command.”

“Not on an SG team,” he clarified.

“I don’t want that,” she said. “I don’t do violence. That was Osiris.”

Jack figured that made as much sense as anything could for a woman who’d been a prisoner in her own body for three years. “You’d be working for Daniel, and possibly going on offworld digs.” She had Daniel had been colleagues once, plus had their brief romantic history. He needed to know that wouldn’t be a problem for her.

“I have to finish out the academic year, but I want to do something else, so those three years can yield something good.”

“The situation is a lot better than what it was,” he told her. She wasn’t surprised; Daniel would’ve told her that. “But we can still use all the knowledgeable help we can get.”

“Daniel tells me that the Goa’uld threat has been greatly reduced.”

“We’re down to three System Lords that we know of.”

Daniel added, “I told her that we’re interested in her expertise, not just what she learned from Osiris.”

“Right. He’s always telling me how hard it is to recruit qualified archaeologists,” Jack told Gardner.

“I can imagine.”

He didn’t want to cut short her talk with Daniel, so Jack excused himself and went up to the roof. It was a chilly night, but the sky was clear and great for stargazing, so he figured he’d check out the winter sky.

Surprisingly, Jack wasn’t bothered by this reappearance of his boyfriend’s ex-girlfriend. He figured that, after everything Daniel had put up with when they started seeing each other and having to be so paranoid, he had nothing to worry about. He trusted Daniel completely, and it was pretty obvious that Gardner wasn’t trying to get back together with Daniel anyway.

Jack thought she had to be a strong woman, to have made it through three years of Goa’uld control and come out alright. Oh, she was clearly marked by it – damaged, even – but who wouldn’t be? And yet she wanted to come back to SGC. The Air Force had been worried about her for a while, but the last couple of years she’d managed to hold her life together. Daniel would keep an eye on her and make sure she was okay at SGC. He’d grown into his personnel responsibilities as department head, and he cared about his friends.

It pleased Jack to think that, even after everything, Osiris hadn’t managed the victory of completely destroying Gardner’s life.
Paul Davis was very happy with his new position. For one thing, it came with what, in his highly biased view, was a long-overdue promotion. It certainly didn’t hurt that he was getting to be a part of the most exciting program on the planet. He got a bigger office, one prominently placed not far from the general’s. Moreover, General O’Neill’s welcome was sincere; the man was obviously happy to have someone to deal with some of his extensive bureaucratic workload, and Paul got the distinct impression that O’Neill already trusted him. Dr. Jackson was similarly pleased that he would no longer have to wear “the diplomat hat.”

Like everyone else at the Pentagon with the security clearance to know about the stargate program, Paul had learned that O’Neill and Jackson were a couple. Unlike everyone else, he hadn’t been surprised. What had surprised him was the new decoration up in the general’s office, some kind of framed alien writing (Ancient, if Paul didn’t miss his guess) which made Jackson’s place in his life as clear as a picture of the two of them would have. But, Paul figured, more power to them. And maybe, just maybe, knowing that for once he didn’t have a homophobic superior would be enough that he’d get around to entering the dating scene. If he still remembered how.

After his meetings with O’Neill and Jackson, he realized he needed to devote his first morning to reorganizing the diplomatic files so that he could locate things in a timely fashion. Clearly, he and O’Neill had vastly different ideas of what constituted a sensible filing system. (So far, he suspected O’Neill used some kind of method based on his personal feelings about the races in question.) He didn’t need to read the background files, because before he left Washington he’d gone over any he wasn’t already familiar with. Paul was a great believer in being prepared by knowing all the available information.

At the knock on his door, he looked up and saw Carter. “Come in,” he said, reveling in the simple pleasure of not having to call her “ma’am.” Damn, he loved being a lieutenant colonel.

Carter glanced around the office quickly. It had been a rarely-used conference room; now it held Paul’s desk, a bookcase, and a filing cabinet besides a smaller conference table. When her gaze landed on his framed picture – the only truly personal item he had out – she smiled.

“My nieces and nephews,” he explained.

“Seven? Wow, I can barely keep up with two.”

“They are a handful.” But he loved them anyway. Though Paul didn’t particularly want children of his own, he loved being Uncle Paul.

“I just wanted to stop by and say hello,” Carter told him. “And congratulations on the well-earned promotion.”

“Thank you. It’s good to be here.”

“Best posting on the planet,” she said with a grin.

Paul was very pleased with it, that was for sure. Now if he could only figure out what logic O’Neill used to organize files, he’d be all set.

Since he and Jack fought on the way home, Daniel shut himself in his study and buried himself in work. It was 9:10 that night before he emerged.
The fight had started out as a stupid disagreement over whose turn it was to do laundry. Daniel didn’t even know how, but it had escalated until he called Jack a control freak for always wanting to be the one who drove and Jack accused him of neglecting the present because he spent too much time working out the past.

He could hear the laundry tumbling around in the dryer, Jack’s admission that things had careened out of control.

“Hey,” he said.

Jack was watching some Matt Damon movie, and he turned the volume down almost all the way. “Hey.”

Daniel sat on the other end of the couch. “We both had rough days.”

Jack nodded. “Made us kinda stupid, huh?”

“It’s the only excuse I’ve got.”

“Me too. You wanna drive tomorrow?”

Touched though he was, he shook his head. Jack was a good driver and Daniel was not at his best first thing in the morning, so it was nice to sip coffee and relax on the way to work. “Thanks, but I really don’t mind.”

“C’mere, you.”

Happy to oblige, Daniel moved over and leaned onto Jack, who pulled him in close.

“I don’t mind either, Daniel. Your work’s important. I get it.”

Daniel suspected that once in a while all the SGC business he brought home did annoy Jack, just as once in a while he did get irked by his partner’s tendency to assume command of any given situation. But they know those traits long before they got involved. Jack knew he was loved more than artifacts just as Daniel knew they shared a relationship of equals.

He settled in, cuddling up with Jack. “You’re more important, as long as we’re not under attack of course.”

“Naturally.”

“Can we stop being stupid now?” he suggested.

“Good plan.”

It was true that both of them were capable of holding grudges, but they didn’t with each other. They saved them for when it really mattered, for the fate-of-the-planet kinds of situations. Well, mostly. Jack still disliked Russians and communists and Daniel still couldn’t abide Budge. But they didn’t hold grudges over silly spats.

“Daniel,” whined Jack, “since you’ll to be on P7K-325, who am I gonna bring to make that charity dinner bearable?”

One of the local policemen had been shot and paralyzed in the line of duty. The story had made headlines, and a charity dinner was coming up to help with his family’s expenses. Jack, having drawn the police commissioner’s attention during the incident with the drunk at the Bucklin’s
house, was apparently expected to attend. Daniel would’ve gone – he was all for supporting the injured man, and it was the kind of event that could yield very interesting people watching – but the dinner fell in the middle of his weeklong dig.

“Sam?” he suggested.

“She’s taking Eddie to meet her brother and family.” Right. Daniel didn’t know how he could forget, because Eddie was nervous and excited while Sam was calm about the whole thing. Her relationship with her brother was, she claimed, ‘alright,’ but she really liked to see her niece and nephew.

“Teal’c is out.” The dinner was a formal affair, which meant ties were required. Teal’c hated ties second only to the Goa’uld and categorically refused to wear them. (Besides finding them uncomfortable, he thought it was ill-advised to wear anything that would allow someone to easily strangle you.) Of course, formal dinners were not something Teal’c enjoyed anyway.

“Yep,” agreed Jack.

“Cassie.”

“Then everyone will think I’m a dirty old man.”

“So introduce her as your goddaughter.” It was true in spirit anyway.

Jack scowled, evidently not happy with that solution.

“Or ask Alana.” Daniel figured Alana was about his own age.

“That could work.”

“Then stop thinking.” There were better things to do.

Jack got the hint. “I can do that,” he replied with a wink, sliding his hand down onto Daniel’s butt. The night was still young, after all.

Jack was doing his rounds again. It was a good way to see what was going on, in the unabridged way reports didn’t quite capture. Of course, some things were better abridged, like whatever the geologists were doing with some kind of almost-coal. Jack rarely had interest in what happened in the geology lab. And really, something either was coal, or wasn’t.

Sam and her people were having a great time with one of their physics journals. Some of them appeared to be in danger of laughing themselves sick. Jack asked, “Do I want to know?”

She held up the journal. “A special issue devoted to space travel, sir.”

“Ah,” he said. That explained a lot.

“I think this is my favorite part,” said Dr. Tellman or Tollhouse or something like that. “Most absurd of all is the idea that travel between galaxies is remotely feasible.’ We’ve got to send a copy of this to Atlantis.”

“I’d pay money to hear McKay’s reaction to that!” said someone else through laughter.

Jack left them to their fun. He walked away to an apparently hilarious quote about how nothing
that traveled faster than light would arrive in the same molecular configuration as it had left. Personally, he found that more disturbing than amusing, but he figured that he’d have realized by now if his molecules weren’t configured right.

Teal’c was teaching one of his combat classes again. Every now and then when things were slow he would run a class for a month or so, meeting a few times a week. The particular session Jack stopped in for was focused on handicapped fighting. Everyone was paired up, and one person in each pair had an arm tied behind his or her back.

Teal’c was a good teacher. He worked his students hard, and of course sugar-coating anything was against his nature. Comments such as, “That overconfidence could well cost you your life” were not unheard of. Jack suspected that outside the military, most people wouldn’t appreciate Teal’c’s teaching style. But the Jaffa also pointed out what students did well, like, “Sergeant Lovell was prepared for any method of attack. You would do well to emulate her.” Attendance was purely voluntary, but the classes filled so quickly only a limited number of people could participate. The classes were great learning experiences for the students, and Teal’c had once informed Jack that he found it gratifying to share the benefits of his experience.

Showing up in the infirmary had been a mistake. Dr. Brightman’s eyes lit up. “I was just going to call about your annual physical, sir!” And before he could come up with a plausible excuse – not even one patient in the infirmary he could claim to be visiting, dammit! – she dragged him off for a torture session thinly disguised as preventative medicine.

When he finally escaped the clutches of his zealous CMO, he headed to the mess. Instead of the usual large eggs, the latest shipment had been medium eggs. This was throwing everything off and creating an egg shortage. “Why don’t you just skip the boiled eggs tomorrow morning?” he suggested. “Then you’d have enough for everything else, right?”

“But we always serve boiled eggs in the morning!” was the horrified reply.

“I’m sure we’ll survive a day without them.”

He left while the kitchen staff was still mulling over that revolutionary concept.

Daniel and one of his linguists had a chalkboard out and were intently translating a stone block of some kind. It looked to Jack like the base of a statue, but he’d learned a long time ago that what something looked like might or might not actually mean anything. He’d never gotten the hang of telling the difference between when it meant something and when it didn’t, but that was Daniel’s job anyway.

“That’s more than enough time for linguistic shift to alter the grammar structure,” declared Daniel with a frown.

Jack eyed the letters, which even he could tell were Greek. Or at least Greekish. “It’s all Greek to me.”

“Very funny, Jack,” replied Daniel without looking up.

As much fun as he could have along those lines, part of being in charge was moving on, so Jack left them to their deciphering. Next door a couple more of Daniel’s people were having a deep conversation that was their version of the old ‘chicken or the egg’ question. Their version was, ‘which came first, the idea of the god or the Goa’uld?’

Jack had never worried much about chickens or eggs. He figured that as long as there were both chickens and eggs in the present, and would continue to be in the future, it didn’t really matter
which came first. So long as the snakes were a dying race, Jack didn’t care much if they stepped into preexisting roles or created the roles. Unless, of course, there was some tactical advantage to be gained to the knowledge, but he seriously doubted that.

The door to the chemistry lab was shut and had a sign taped on: *Light-Sensitive Experiment in Progress. DO NOT OPEN DOOR!* Jack had a meeting with Davis soon anyway, so he headed back to his office. It was always easier to deal with the diplomatic and bureaucratic aspects of his job after a stroll around the base.

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Military history was not Daniel’s favorite subdiscipline, although it wasn’t his least favorite either, because economic history was worse. He’d agreed, all the same, to watch the History Channel program Jack had recorded on the history of fighter jets. This wasn’t because he especially liked jets, but because he enjoyed Jack’s enthusiasm. Daniel wondered if Jack had any idea how sexy he was when his eyes lit up about planes.

 Barely a minute into the show the phone rang. Jack grabbed it, since he was closer, while Daniel paused the show.

 “Hi Aunt Kate,” said Jack. “Thanks for the warning… no, it’s fine… I will. Bye.”

 “Warning?” asked Daniel once Jack hung up.

 “My cousin Hugh was in Denver looking at colleges with his daughter. Jill. He called Aunt Kate to get my address so he could say hi.”

 “Has it been a while since you last saw him?”

 “Mom’s funeral.”

 That had been nearly five years ago. Daniel nodded, and Jack continued, “Don’t know how he’ll handle us.”

 “Okay.”

 He had a pretty good idea what Jack was thinking. Namely, that while Hugh was forcing the timing, they’d be in Jack’s house, on his turf. Sometimes, Jack could be predictably alpha male.

 “If you don’t want to be here, that’s fine,” said Jack.

 “I’m staying.”

 Ten minutes after the fighter jet program ended, Jack had managed not to think about his cousin – how he did it, Daniel would never know – and was enthusiastically situating F-302s in the evolution of fighter jets. With swooping hand motions and gleaming eyes, he was a sight indeed.

 The doorbell interrupted his fun and Daniel’s Jack-admiring. Jack answered the door while Daniel waited on the couch, rather uselessly, and listened.

 “Hi, Jack.”

 “Hugh. Come in. Zelda, sit. This is Zelda.” Of course Zelda was there. She considered greeting and examining visitors to be her job, and she took it seriously.
They entered, and Daniel could hear them scuffing their shoes. “You remember my daughter Jill.”

“A much smaller version.”

“I know, we’re out looking at colleges and it seems like it hasn’t been nearly long enough since her first day of school.”

“Got a major in mind?” asked Jack.

“Art history.”

“Ah,” said Jack, who clearly didn’t know what else to say about the subject.

Hugh asked, “Still working on… what was it?”

“Deep-space radar telemetry.”

“Right. Mom said you retired.”

“From the Air Force. I’m a civilian consultant now. Living room’s this way.”

Hugh was six inches shorter than Jack and looked nothing like him. Jill, a petite brunette, was dressed in a unique style, not the ubiquitous teenage look pushed by commercials. Daniel appreciated that.

“Oh, if you’ve got company…” began Hugh while Daniel stood.

Jack shook his head. “Daniel, my cousin Hugh and his daughter Jill. Hugh, Jill, this is Daniel. My boyfriend.”

Jill stepped forward and shook his hand, unbothered. “Hi Daniel.”

“All in all, he thought the morning was going alright. Sure, Hugh was flabbergasted and speechless, but he was sitting in their living room, so he couldn’t be too bothered. Daniel wasn’t very good with this family business. He was the only child of two only children, so he didn’t even have any cousins. It was a bit hard for him to relate. But if he just took things one step at a time, he usually did alright. Like this. He didn’t know a lot about art history aside from ancient pieces, but he knew enough to talk with Jill about her interest.

Daniel and Jill were getting along great. It turned out she had a particular interest in preserving art pieces, and Daniel was all for preserving just about any artifact, from broken pottery to paintings. That was good for them, but it left Jack with Hugh.
“Well, this is a surprise,” his cousin said, finally managing to speak.

Jack’s cell phone rang, giving him at least a temporary reprieve. “Excuse me,” he said, grabbing the phone off the coffee table and walking across the room. “O’Neill.”

“General O’Neill, Secretary Wolfe for you, sir.”

“Thank you.” This couldn’t be good. A personal call from the Secretary of Homeland Security at 1130 on a Saturday did not ever mean anything good.

“O’Neill.”

“Yes, Mr. Secretary.”

“We might have a problem.” He’d gathered, but waited for Wolfe to elaborate. “Internet chatter in Arabic; automated program flagged something from a suspected terror cell.” Daniel’s phone rang, and Jack was pretty sure he knew where this was going. “We don’t have any Arabic translators cleared to know about the stargate, so we’re sending it to Dr. Jackson. If this is real, we’ve got a problem.”

“Yes sir,” replied Jack.

“I trust you’ll coordinate with Dr. Jackson?” said Wolfe. Daniel was already heading to his study.

“Yes sir.”

“Good. I’ll expect a report from you if this is real.”

“Of course.”

“I have to say, O’Neill, you run a tight base. One of the few places I don’t lose sleep over, actually. I have little concern about unauthorized entry.”

That was a pleasant surprise. “Thank you, Mr. Secretary.”

“I am concerned about leaks, but with so many governments in on the program…”

Personally, Jack figured that if any terrorists heard about the gate, odds were good they’d be broadcasting it over al-Jazeera, but he couldn’t be sure and kept that thought to himself. “True.”

“Keep me informed.”

“Will do.”

With that, Wolfe hung up.

“Mr. Secretary, huh?” asked Hugh.

Jack was really not in the mood to make small talk, but then he couldn’t do anything until Daniel finished translating whatever had been picked up. “It’s a living.”

Apparently Hugh decided to take advantage of Daniel’s absence. “So, you and Daniel,” he began.

“Yes?”

“Mom knows, doesn’t she?”
He nodded. “And Lisa.”

“Okay. How long?”

“We’ve been together…” he had to think for a second, because his thoughts were still really on terrorists and Arabic chatter, “over a year and a half now. But we’ve known each other closer to ten.”

“I see,” said Hugh in a way that meant he really didn’t. “You work together?”

“Yes.”

“And you live together?”

“Yes.”

“Well.” Hugh was clearly not entirely comfortable with this, but he wasn’t leaving either.

Jill filled in the silence before it could get too awkward. “I noticed you have a lot of medals.”

“Thirty-four years in the Air Force. I had a lot of time to earn them.”

“It’s an impressive collection.”

“Thanks.”

“Is Daniel Air Force?” she asked.

Jack almost laughed. “No. He’s civilian, always has been.”

Daniel came out, snapping his phone shut. It must not have been a long conversation he had to translate. “Not us,” he reported, to Jack’s immense relief. “But NASA’s going to have some explaining to do.”

“Better them than me,” replied Jack. He suspected Wolfe was going to want some kind of thorough review anyway.


Jack shrugged. “It happens.”

It was a short visit; in just under an hour Hugh and Jill were heading out. They spent most of the time listening to Jill describe the trials and tribulations of her college application process. Hugh, it turned out, was also a dog lover, and he liked Zelda very much. She, of course, was inclined to like anyone who would spend fifteen minutes patting her.

Daniel thought things had gone alright, so he was caught off-guard when Jack glanced at Hugh’s retreating car and muttered, “Bastard.”

“Jack?”

“He ignored you, Daniel. Like pretending you weren’t there could make me straight.”

He considered that for a moment and realized his partner was right. “Jill was very nice,” he finally
“Yeah. Good kid. Unlike her dad.”

“It’s fine, cariad.” He thought it better not to bring up the fact that he had a lot of practice with people ignoring him. That bothered Jack. So instead he said, “His approval doesn’t matter to me.”

Jack gave a jerky nod, indicating that he conceded the point. “At least I’m back to having you for myself.”

Zelda chose that moment to come racing up to them with a rope toy in her mouth. “She begs to differ,” observed Daniel.

“P-A-R-K?” suggested Jack. Zelda liked the park, and they’d had to stop saying ‘park’ unless they were heading out the door to that very destination. If she realized they were spelling it out, they were going to have to start saying ‘park’ in other languages.

It was the kind of winter weather that Daniel found mostly tolerable and Jack considered decent. Daniel had never really gotten used to cold winters, and he would have a hat and scarf though Jack would likely deem it a gloves-only day. But it was sunny and not too windy, and Zelda adored the park, so he agreed, “Let me just get a drink first.”

His partner followed him into the kitchen. “We can hit the drive-thru on the way.”

“Sure.”

Daniel set the limeade on the counter and before he could get a glass was stopped by a hug from behind. “Jack?”

“Hmm?”

“What are you doing?”

“Nothing.”

“Oh. Alright then.” He could get behind that. They so rarely got moments of doing nothing in their lives, although those moments were more frequent since they stopped regular gate travel.

After a minute Jack released him and he got to have his limeade. Meanwhile Jack had collected the leash, bag, and pooper-scooper. Zelda was quite pleased, and by the time Daniel went back to the door she was staring at it expectantly.

“Want to go to the park, girl?” asked Jack.

Zelda gave a little bark and immediately started walking in excited circles around them. Daniel had moved in with Jack nearly eight months ago, but sometimes a moment like this still had the power to stop him. This was what they’d fought so hard for: the struggle and the sacrifice, the people they’d lost and the pain they’d endured, all of it was so that the rest of the world could enjoy their lives. Certainly, Daniel was motivated by pure knowledge, but that alone couldn’t convince him to risk his life on a weekly basis for years. Moments like this, with the simple weekend pleasure of him and his partner taking their dog to the park, had a deeper meaning for him than most people.

He grabbed his scarf and Zelda’s toy. “Let’s go.” Neither Jack nor the dog had to be told twice.
Daniel had an important translation that he wanted to finish before leaving on the dig, so they’d taken their separate vehicles to the mountain. It was close to 2200 by the time Daniel got home. He looked tired but happy.

Jack spent the evening at home with Zelda, getting little things done like fixing the chair leg that had started to wobble and dusting. (He’d never worried about dusting all that much when it was just him, but too much dust would bother Daniel’s allergies, so they regularly went around with the Swiffer duster.) By the time his boyfriend got home, Jack had called it a day and settled on a cable showing of *The Patriot*. He decided that movie was better the first time around, but kept it on anyway.

“How’s the translation?” he asked, muting Mel Gibson when Daniel dropped down beside him on the couch.

“Done. It’s a fascinating history. Even halfway across the galaxy, they maintained their Hebrew tribes. Ra could never eradicate their believe in Yahweh, either.”

Jack had spent enough time in Sunday school as a kid to know that was the Hebrew name for God, the same Judeo-Christian God that he’d spent so many hours hearing about. “That must’ve made Ra pretty mad.”

“Oh yes. Someday scholars of the ancient Hebrews are going to love this.”

“Did this book say what happened to them?”

“Yes. A ship came and offered to take them beyond Ra’s reach. There was apparently a heated debate over whether or not it was Yahweh’s will that they go. Only a few ended up staying, and the record stops after another generation.”

“Beyond Ra’s reach, huh?” Personally, Jack had a hard time seeing what there was to debate about that one.

“Unfortunately, the record focuses on the debate and not the benefactors. There’s really nothing to go on.”

“So their descendents are probably still out there.”

“Probably, yes,” said Daniel before yawning.

“Hungry?”

“No, I had a late dinner. Just tired.”

Jack pulled his lover in and realized, “Damn, you’re tense. Sit up.”

Daniel, happy enough to have the knots worked out of his shoulders, was eager to comply. Jack didn’t consider himself especially good at shoulder massages, but Daniel enjoyed them at least. “Ohh, that’s good, Jack.”

“Daniel, Daniel. Working yourself stiff again.”

There was no reply except a relaxed, easy sigh. Jack liked that he could at least do this small thing
for Daniel after a long day. When he was the one whose day had been long and hard, it was always a relief to go home. After a few quiet minutes with Daniel, he invariably began to feel better. Now it was gratifying to feel his boyfriend’s muscles start to relax under his fingers.

“Don’t ever stop,” mumbled Daniel.

Jack chuckled and planted a kiss on the back of his neck. “We have to sleep eventually.”

“Damn.”

Alana didn’t know where the saying came from, but it hit the nail squarely on the head: most of the good men really were taken or gay. She’d been lucky enough to have a wonderful husband for thirteen years, and even four years after his death she still missed him terribly.

She was thoroughly enjoying her evening with Jack, though. And there was something to be said for going somewhere with a man who was both taken and gay, because there was no pressure, which Alana found she very much enjoyed. She got to dress up in her good blue cocktail dress, the one she hardly ever wore (it still fit, to her great delight) and go out for a classy evening with great food. All of this without using half of her mind to wonder if he would try for a serious goodnight kiss, did she want him to, or any of those questions that arose on dates. Alana was really quite happy that Daniel had to go out of town, since it meant she got a lovely evening out.

Despite warning her that he “wasn’t very good at these things,” Jack was every bit a gentleman. He opened doors for her and only had one glass of wine at dinner, which Alana appreciated since he was driving. He was quite a striking figure in a classic black suit, white shirt, and maroon tie. The only unfortunate aspect of the evening was the reason for the benefit dinner; Alana hoped that the event raised a lot of money to help the paralyzed police officer. (It ought to, because the ticket prices were pretty steep.) Since she hadn’t even contributed by purchasing her own ticket, she picked up an envelope for the local bank which had a fund set up for the man and his family.

Jack didn’t know many people at the event, but it turned out that he knew the most influential of the other guests. Which was how Alana found herself meeting her senator, who’d flown back from Washington for the dinner.

“Senator, this is Alana Bucklin. Alana, Senator Mike Hadley.”

“Pleased to meet you,” she said, shaking his hand.

“Charmed, Ms. Bucklin. I see you’re attending the evening with the most powerful man in the room.”

She glanced at Jack, not quite sure how to reply to that. “I’ll take your word for it, Senator.”

The senator chuckled. “Now that’s not something I hear very often. Business as usual at Cheyenne Mountain, O’Neill?”

“You could say that.”

“Good. Enjoy your evening.” And with that, Senator Hadley was off.

“Most powerful man in the room, huh?” she asked Jack.

Jack gritted his teeth. “The senator is mistaken. My facility studies deep space radar telemetry.”
She got the picture. Hadley wasn’t saying anything classified, but he wasn’t exactly cooperating with the Air Force either. Alana knew full well that Jack and Daniel were into something much bigger than radar telemetry; that night when they stopped the idiot from attacking her, they’d mentioned Jack talking with both the President and the Secretary of Defense. And since when did people studying deep space need to ask their neighbors to watch their dog without warning? No, whatever Jack and Daniel did, it wasn’t deep space radar telemetry. Alana knew it, and Jack knew she knew it. But whatever they did was none of her business, and while she was of course curious, she knew enough to keep a tight lid on her curiosity. She’d grown up with that sort of thing, since her dad was an FBI agent.

“I’m sure Senator Hadley meets a lot of people,” she said by way of telling Jack she understood.

He gave a slightly relieved nod.

Neither of them put in bids for the silent auction. It wasn’t for lack of interest on Alana’s part, because there were some fantastic choices; her favorites were the weekend spa getaway and a very chic ruby necklace. She didn’t have that kind of money to just throw around, however. She had a decent job and was able to provide for Kelly, but she wasn’t rich.

While they were waiting for the valet to bring Jack’s truck, he said, “Thanks for coming. You made it bearable.”

“My pleasure.” And how. Alana hadn’t enjoyed herself so much in weeks. This non-date evening had proven to be a very good thing.

It was another sunny morning on P8R-206, the dig was going well, and breakfast had been almost good (almost good being, in most cases, the best that food got on digs). Daniel thought the day was off to a promising start.

Of course the members of SG-20 were less excited than his people. SG teams didn’t exactly consider protecting archaeological expeditions to be a prime assignment, especially the Marine teams. Major Newall was conferring with his team, probably laying out the plans for the day. Even though they were less than thrilled with the assignment, they took it seriously. SG teams, after all, were only open to the best people.

What Daniel didn’t quite understand was Greg Rawling’s glum mood. Greg had been with SGC for a year or so and was the newest member of Daniel’s department. He’d made the best find of the previous day: a whole plate almost two feet across which was covered in what appeared to be a hybrid of Goa’uld and Arabic writing.

“You alright, Greg?” he asked.

“Sure.”

Sue Thibodeau looked at Greg over her coffee mug. “You’re a terrible liar, you know.”

“If you must know, it’s my wife’s birthday. She didn’t exactly sign up for all this secrecy when she married me. Don’t get me wrong, I love this job. It’s just rough on my marriage sometimes.”

“That’s why I’m single,” admitted Xavier Rikes.

“You’re single because you hardly ever leave the mountain,” countered Greg. That was true.
Daniel turned to Greg. He wasn’t sure what to say, but felt that he ought to say something. “I’m sorry you’re missing her birthday,” he said.

Greg nodded. “It’s okay. Mel’s got the patience of a saint. Has to, since she married me. I just wish I could tell her.”

“Right,” agreed Sue. “Going home to Joel is tough when I’m psyched up about something and I can’t say a word about it. But, you know, it’s better than not going home to him. You’re lucky, boss.”

He was, and he knew it. When they went back to Earth, he’d probably get home before Jack, so first he would play with Zelda, but when Jack got home, after they had sex, he would give Jack the highlights of the mission and Jack would give him the highlights of what went on at SGC. Likely followed by more sex.

“I know,” he said.

“That’s it. I just need to find a good woman at work,” mused Xavier. “Maybe Air Force – those dress blues are pretty sexy.”

“How about we finish our dig first?” suggested Daniel lightly as he stood up. Though privately, he was in full agreement with Xavier. Dress blues were decidedly sexy.

Daniel was back, so Jack was a happy man. On base, their contact had been strictly professional. At home, Jack barely had the front door closed before he was pinned up against it being kissed. They kissed intently until oxygen started to become a problem. Oh yes, he loved having Daniel back.

When he could breathe again he tugged Daniel close. “So you weren’t too busy digging stuff up to miss me?”

Daniel pulled off Jack’s coat while answering, “No moons, so we couldn’t dig at night. I got lonely.”

“It’s not possible to get lonely in a two-man tent,” he pointed out while taking off his shoes. Ready to strangle each other, yes. Lonely, no. Jack had plenty of experience to back this up.

“It is with Sue Thibodeau. She’s asleep as soon as her head hits the pillow. Besides,” added Daniel while heading down the hall towards their bedroom, “I was stuck in my sleeping bag, thinking of you and our nice big bed.”

“I can’t speak for the bed, but I much prefer having you beside me.” Even though Daniel was a terrible blanket hog.

“Beds can’t talk, Jack.”

“There’s gotta be a planet with talking beds.”

Daniel cringed. “That’d be some sort of kinky threesome.”
He hadn’t thought of that. It was a little creepy. “Right. Anyway, we were at the part where we’re getting naked.”

Daniel somehow managed to shut the bedroom door with his foot while taking off his shirt. He had a thing about Zelda being in the room while they were having sex. Jack didn’t think it really counted as exhibitionism if their dog saw, but it completely ruined the mood for Daniel so he went along with the prohibition.

“Good to have you back, cariad,” he said, trailing his fingers down Daniel’s chest.

“Missed you too,” Daniel replied. He then proceeded to show Jack just how much he’d missed him.

That was the silver lining to Daniel’s occasional offworld missions and Jack’s much-hated trips to Washington: the homecoming sex was always great.

Daniel had just finished up his meeting with Jack. As department head of Archaeology and Linguistics, he met with Jack every other week. Sam did the same. This time he didn’t have any big developments to share; then again, he hardly ever waited for a scheduled meeting for big developments anyway. They’d only had a couple of days to study what had been found on P8R-206, and Jack did a lousy job pretending to be interested in the working theory on that hybrid Goa’uld-Arabic writing. He was slightly more interested in Nyan’s theory on the evolution of the staff weapon.

“That’s everything I have,” he told Jack. This of course meant ‘everything I have which you have any official interest in, not precluding sharing more at home.’

“Post holes,” repeated Jack. “I can’t believe I just approved a mission based on post holes.”

He had, and Trevor Voss was going to be very pleased when Daniel shared the good news. The mission would hopefully teach them a lot about what happened to Pacific islanders transplanted to an inland location. Daniel wasn’t going on that mission – it was really rather far from his specialty – but he was looking forward to seeing what Trevor’s team found.

“Good luck with Secretary Wolfe.” Jack had a phone conference scheduled for later that afternoon to discuss homeland security as it related to SGC, and he was not looking forward to it. Daniel did not envy his partner that.

When Daniel opened the door, he found Major Ashburn standing outside. “I think you’ll want to hear this, Dr. Jackson,” said the major. He stuck his head into Jack’s office. “Lieutenant Phillips said you have a moment, sir.”

“Sure. Come on in.”

“Prince Alistair has been informed of the stargate program,” reported Ashburn. Daniel supposed that made sense, since as a younger son of the Queen of England he no doubt served some military role or other, even if it was mostly honorary. “He’s very impressed by SG-1. He and Her Majesty both. It’s my privilege to inform you, sir, that for extraordinary heroism which directly saved Earth from Anubis, Queen Eleanor wishes to make you an honorary Knight Commander of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire.” With a flourish, he handed Jack an envelope.

Jack was stunned for a moment, but finally managed a reply. “Sweet.”
“Lieutenant Phillips will be contacted to make arrangements. It will be a rather secret ceremony, but I took the liberty of suggesting that you have a guest with the appropriate security clearance.” With that, Ashburn glanced at Daniel.

“Thank you,” said Daniel. “I really appreciate that.” He could hardly imagine not being there to see his partner be knighted. It was a tremendous honor, one Jack richly deserved.

“Glad to. Congratulations, sir.”

“Thanks. I did not see this coming.”

Ashburn grinned. “A nice change from the usual things we don’t see coming.”

“True, Major. Very true.”

Daniel, naturally, had done research, and as soon as Jack met him in the parking lot shared the relevant details. (And some which were less relevant.) “As an American citizen, you can’t be called ‘Sir Jack.’”

“There goes half the fun.”

“But you can call yourself General Jonathan J. O’Neill, KBE. Knight of the British Empire.”

“Which is kind of weird, if you think about it,” he pointed out. “You know, revolution and all.”

“You deserve it, Jack.”

Extraordinary heroism, Ashburn had said. Jack just considered it doing his job. “I did what had to be done.”

“I think you deserve it and I won’t argue with you about it.”

Daniel’s tone of voice left no room for argument, so Jack changed tracks. “Not any more than you, Sam, or Teal’c.”

“Big damn hero, Jack. That’s you.”

“Never thought I’d need to look up those uniform codes for the wearing of foreign honors.” He was sure that receiving honorary knighthood for his military service was one of those occasions where he should take out the dress blues.

They got in the truck (it was a carpool day), both still thinking about the honorary knighthood. “I’m glad I get to be there,” said Daniel.

“Me too.” Then another thought occurred to him. “I hope the queen has a steady hand with the sword.”

“I don’t think they use swords anymore.”

“Huh.” Jack had figured they would, since the British loved their traditions. He started up the truck and checked behind them before putting it in reverse.

“At least not for honorary knighthood. I looked up footage online. Did you know Bill Gates is also an honorary knight?”
“Nope. Did you know it’s next to impossible to explain knighthood to a Jaffa?” He’d figured that Sam and Teal’c should hear the news from him personally, namely so that he could work in his opinion that they deserved it too, not just him.

Daniel chuckled. “How’d that go?”

Unlike regular traffic mergers, nobody ever tried to cheat Jack out of his turn to get onto the main road. He was pretty sure some kind of memo had gone out when he’d gotten a new truck.

“He was going to Google when I left.” Teal’c really liked Google, because he really didn’t like it when he didn’t understand what was going on around him. “Don’t be surprised if you get questions.”

“You’ll have to tell Cassie,” said Daniel.

“And Aunt Kate. It’s gonna kill her that she can’t tell people the story of what I did to get knighted. Or even know herself.” She was also going to insist he come visit and show off the… whatever he got.

“You know,” mused Daniel, “just because you can’t officially be Sir Jack doesn’t mean we can’t still have fun with it.”

“Oh?” asked Jack hopefully. If Daniel meant what he thought, well, Jack was all for it.

“I’ll have to think about that,” said Daniel, “but out of curiosity, what do you think of having our own private celebration once you’re officially an honorary knight?”

“I have to wait that long?” he whined. “You’re a terrible tease, Daniel.”

By the next afternoon, Jack O’Neill’s upcoming knighthood was the talk of SGC. It seemed like he was the only one not talking about it. (Instead, Eddie had overheard him and Siler mournfully discussing how The Simpsons just wasn’t what it used to be.)

Nobody doubted that he deserved the honor. Eddie did however think that really, all of SG-1 deserved it. And okay, sticking his head in the Ancient repository knowing full well what would happen… yeah, that required a special kind if heroism, mixed with desperation and maybe a touch of insanity. Eddie didn’t even claim to be impartial, either, since he was after all in love with Sam.

When he’d mentioned this to Sam, she told him, “Jack said the same thing.” Eddie appreciated that. She didn’t seem jealous, though. She did have an extension collection of Air Force awards and was moving pretty quickly up the ranks. Anyway, she knew that once the program went public her contributions to science would go down in history. Eddie had high hopes for her getting a Nobel Prize.

Eddie didn’t consider himself especially conceited, but neither was he falsely modest. He knew that he was an intelligent man and a very good biologist. He also knew, however, that he wasn’t in the same category as Sam. She was vital to the program in a way he never would be. And on top of that, she was a hero. Oh, she was still human, with flaws and quirks and a complete inability to watch Back to the Future without a running commentary on the shoddy science. He loved Sam the person, not Sam the ideal. All the same, he dearly would’ve liked to have her be given honorary knighthood, or would it be damehood? Whatever the term was, Eddie thought she deserved it.
There was no doubt that Jack deserved the honor. True, he wasn’t one to boast. At home his medals were on display, and considering the types of things he’d done to earn them (and Eddie only knew a couple) Eddie thought it was highly appropriate that they be out on display. Still, Jack wasn’t overly hung up on medals and honors. He appreciated them, but always maintained that he was just doing his job.

And that, of course, was why Jack O’Neill was so good at his job. Eddie would worry if SGC was run by someone who was excessively concerned with their own career advancement and getting every accolade possible. Jack was good precisely because he cared about doing his job and doing it well.

The ceremony was over a month away and Daniel already seemed about to burst from pride. He didn’t even have to say anything. It was written all over his face whenever he heard people talking about the honor to be bestowed on his partner. So maybe Jack wasn’t making too big a deal out of it, but Daniel was proud enough for both of them.

Eddie could relate to that.

It had been time for a haircut, and while he was out Jack picked up more of the good winter windshield wiper fluid. When he got home and opened the door, Daniel was chattering away in French.

It turned out that Daniel hadn’t been kidding about talking to the dog in foreign languages. Jack found him in the kitchen, making a sandwich and talking to Zelda. She was very interested, although not so much in the French as the turkey sandwich.

“I was just going to call and ask you to pick up more provolone,” said Daniel.

“The guy with the appointment before mine cancelled, so I got bumped up. Besides, we wouldn’t go through so much cheese if you didn’t keep ‘accidentally’ dropping it on the floor in front of the dog.”

“These things happen,” replied Daniel, nonplussed. “Want a sandwich?”

“Please tell me Zelda didn’t get the last piece of cheese.”

“No. I did.”

Jack sighed and grabbed the mayonnaise out of the fridge. Daniel didn’t like mayo, but Jack thought it added a lot to a sandwich, particularly if he was forgoing cheese.

“Anyway,” countered Daniel, “I’m not the one who went online and ordered a deluxe dog bed.”

“The first one got all flat.”

“Uh-huh. You just keep telling yourself that, Jack.” Daniel handed over a sandwich with turkey and lettuce, to which Jack added mayo.

Changing the subject, Jack suggested, “What do you think if we stay over in New Hampshire a night on the way back from London? Aunt Kate really wants to see the medal or whatever it is I get.”

“Works for me.”
“I’ll tell Phillips.” The lieutenant was a very capable aide. Jack thought he’d give her a couple of extra days off while he was gone. She certainly worked hard enough to earn it, and she was the one who’d spent a great part of the work week sorting out details for the trip.

“Are we going to have any free time?”

“You might. I get to have a nice long meeting with senior military officials while I’m there.”

“I guess I’ll just have to occupy myself at the British Museum,” said Daniel, who didn’t even pretend to be sorry.

“We do have a day in between, actually, and we’ve been given tickets to what I’m told are very good seats for the Royal Shakespeare Company’s performance of *Julius Caesar*.”

“I’ve always thought it would be nice to see the Royal Shakespeare Company.”

“I thought you said Shakespeare was overrated.”

“Well, sometimes. That doesn’t mean I don’t appreciate good acting.”

Jack shrugged. “Could be worse. *Julius Caesar* isn’t so bad. Not like… what was that one we had to go see when Cassie was an extra?”

“A Midsummer Night’s Dream.”

“Right. It could be that one.” Never mind a dream, it had come across to Jack more like the hallucinations he’d suffered after getting drugged by a poisoned spear offworld.

“Either way, I’ll be there with my partner the knight.” Daniel gave him a proud smile, which Jack had been seeing a lot. “Since I have to wait, this might be the longest experience of February I’ve ever had.”

“We’re not even out of January yet.”

“Don’t remind me. And grab the pickles.”

For his part, Jack figured that this whole knighthood business was a lot more fun because he had Daniel to be all proud and excited about it.

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Despite Daniel’s impatience, life at SGC continued as usual. He and Xavier Rikes had spent the morning trying to make sense of the artifacts they’d recovered on their dig. Xavier was good with some of the newer computer programs, and was creating a possible map of the site. Sue Thibodeau had checked into stories on a hunch and found a likely time and place for the abduction of the original settlers of P8R-206. Nyan was getting ready to leave and realize his long-held dream of visiting Disney World; he could hardly contain his excitement at the chance to personally visit such a curious place. Trevor Voss was getting ready to go on his dig. There were four translations on Daniel’s desk, and those were only the most important ones that required his personal attention.

And then, of course, there was explaining to Teal’c about knighthood. The Jaffa had rented *A Knight’s Tale* over the weekend, assuming because of the title that it would illuminate the historical practice of knighthood. He was most perplexed to find modern dancing and music in the
film. Daniel had never even seen the movie, so he was at a disadvantage. Fortunately Julia MacDonald had come along, taken pity on both of them, and dragged Teal’c off to explain over coffee.

Colonel Dinsmore stuck her head in his office. “Do you have a minute, Dr. Jackson?”

He waved her in. Jack said that Dinsmore was just about certain to retire as a lieutenant colonel, once her run as co-commander of SG-28 was up. One of her great strengths was knowing when to let Teal’c take over. Evidently the Air Force had a slightly schizophrenic mixed faith in her abilities, but SG-28 continued to do just fine so nobody was complaining.

“I’ve been wondering,” she began, “the Asgard seem to like dealing with SG-1, but are there things we should know if we run into them? You know, anything that would make interacting with them smoother. I asked Nyan, but since he hasn’t actually met an Asgard, he said I should ask you.”

Daniel figured that if Nyan hadn’t been so excited about his vacation, he’d have been in there himself. “The Asgard are very flexible and tolerant. Of course, like any encounter offworld, it’s best if you avoid slang and figures of speech. But from what we’ve seen the Asgard have no qualms about asking for clarification and explanations. There aren’t any set rules, at least that they apply to us.”

“Good to know. Thanks.”

“No problem.”

“Have a nice afternoon.”

“You too,” he said, his mind already going back to a translation for SG-2.

At least he had plenty to keep him busy while he waited for the end of February to come. Then again, this was SGC. He’d never once lacked for work. Quite the opposite, he always had more than he and his staff could properly analyze. When the program went public, there would be troves of material for archaeologists, anthropologists, linguists, and historians. At least his staff had grown with SGC; Daniel had fought for that, with help from General Hammond and Jack.

It would be nice to have Sarah, once she came in May. He hoped that working at SGC would help her find some of the peace she was so desperately seeking. It certainly had for him.

Daniel had been quiet and contemplative since they got back from the grocery store after work. Jack was of course curious, but he knew from experience that this was not a stage where Daniel could be pushed. Pushing too early inevitably made the situation worse.

Finally, when Daniel slid under the covers and settled in bed, he announced, “I’ve been thinking.”

Jack flipped over on his side and propped his head up on his arm. “I noticed.”

“It started with that woman at the grocery store who was flirting with you.”

Jack frowned slightly. He thought he’d been polite but clearly not interested and failed to see what the problem was. “I didn’t encourage her,” he said defensively.

“No, cariad, I know, and that’s not it.” He relaxed a bit while Daniel continued, “She looked to
The conversation was veering away from what he’d expected so fast that Jack was having a bit of trouble processing it. “You want us to get rings?” he finally repeated.

“We don’t have to.”

“But you want to.”

“Well, yes.”

He considered that for a minute. There was something to be said for that outward symbol, even if they weren’t legally married. “Okay.”

“Okay, what?”

“Okay, let’s get rings.”

Daniel’s whole face lit up. “Really?”

“Yeah, Daniel.” He paused, then added, “I mean, we’re pretty much everything but married, so this way people know, right?”

Daniel leaned over and kissed him. “I love you. Thank you.”

“Love you too.”

His lover pushed him down and then made himself comfortable on Jack’s shoulder. “It was never about doubting you, Jack. It’s about the symbolism.”

“I get that. I mean, symbolism’s your thing, but this way people can tell we’re off the market.”

“Exactly,” said Daniel happily, his tone of voice conveying just how much this meant to him.

He moved his thumb in little circles around the nape of his lover’s neck, an intimate touch that Daniel found relaxing. “It’s a good idea.”

“I thought so.”

He turned his head and planted a kiss on Daniel’s forehead. “Night, cariad.”

“Goodnight,” yawned Daniel.

While waiting for sleep to overtake him, Jack reflected that although he really hadn’t wanted to be out at SGC, the upside included the freedom to wear matching rings if they wanted. And he did want to, because he liked the idea of that public acknowledgement that they belonged to each other. Plus, it clearly made Daniel very happy, and Jack liked making Daniel happy.

Sam scowled at her computer screen as though it were a subordinate bound to correct itself when exposed to her displeasure. The data simply didn’t make sense. She was doing some further research into Asgard beaming technology, but nothing that she could do seemed to replicate it. Worse still, it failed to work in a completely different way each time, with no pattern she could discern that would tell her what she was doing wrong. It was nice to have the devices on the Prometheus, but Sam wanted to be able to understand and replicate them, and so far that was
going nowhere. All she’d managed to do was incinerate several pieces of paper.

So when Daniel came in she was happy enough to take a break. “Sam?”

“Hi Daniel.”

He pushed in a cart on which there was a metal box about a foot square. “I’m hoping we can set up a time to try to get this open. I’ve tried everything I can think of without success.”

“Saving the blowtorch for a last resort?” she joked.

“Artifact, Sam. I try to keep them away from blowtorches.”

“Right. I need a break, so now’s good for me.”

“Great.”

As he spun the cart, she caught a metallic flash on his hand. “Daniel?”

“Yes?”

Sam eyed his hand. “You have a ring.”

He looked up and smiled. “I got tired of watching women flirt with Jack.”

“Oh, and they never flirt with you.” Sam had seen women – and the occasional man, in Daniel’s case – flirt with both of them.

At her questioning gaze, he slipped the ring off and handed it to her for inspection. It was a simple gold band, neatly inscribed on the inside with two words: Jack and then across from that Cariad. She handed it back, touched. “It’s great, Daniel.”

He was still smiling, clearly very happy with this outward sign of his commitment to Jack. “Jack thought it would be better to have naquadah rings, but that would be a misuse of resources.”

“Naquadah is kind of heavy for a ring,” she replied automatically. Besides, she didn’t think it was an especially pretty metal. Fascinating from a scientific standpoint, and very useful, but too much of an institutional grey to be ornamental.

“We didn’t even get that far.”

“Good for you and Jack.”

“Thanks.”

An hour and a half later, when her instruments had discovered an invisible welding line, Daniel reluctantly conceded that it was time for the blowtorch. It was worth the destruction, though, because they found a list with eighteen gate addresses, three of which were unknown to them. When they went to show this to Jack, she saw his matching ring.

Sam stood by and listened as they debated about how much of a priority the new addresses were. They were completely professional (in the sense that their arguments had always been, anyway), but the shiny new rings spoke volumes about their loving bond. When they got outed at SGC some of the personnel commented on how romantic their story was. Sam knew it was more complex than most people would ever know, but she had to agree all the same.
Teal’c had been offworld for a few days, so when Jack saw him at lunch he headed over and sat down next to his friend. “How’s the family?” he asked.

“They are well.”

Teal’c had a hearty appetite, but his tray was loaded even by his standards. And while lasagna was admittedly one of the better meals on base, Jack didn’t really think it was good enough to warrant three servings. “Did they feed you at all?”

“My son chose his wife well,” said Teal’c while buttering his roll. “She is devoted to him and to freedom. Her organizational talents keep chaos at bay.”

“I’m sensing a ‘however,’” noted Jack.

“However, cooking is not foremost among her skills. Nor Ishta’s.”

“I don’t know about Kar’yn,” Jack ventured, “but Ishta never struck me as the Betty Crocker type.” Teal’c looked up, uncertain but not entirely happy, so Jack hastened to clarify, “I mean, she’s a busy lady. Cooking’s gotta be low on the totem pole.”

That, at least, satisfied Teal’c. Jack hadn’t meant any offense. He didn’t think he could be happy in a cross-galactic relationship the way Teal’c was, and Ishta was pretty hotheaded, but she had always been one of the good guys (or gals) in Jack’s book.

“Rya’c assured me that it is possible to adapt to Kar’yn’s cooking.” Teal’c didn’t seem convinced, but added, “He does not seem to be suffering any ill effects.”

“We could get ribs tonight,” suggested Jack. Teal’c loved baby back ribs, and Jack himself would never refuse them either.

Sure enough, he had a very pleased Jaffa friend. “That is an excellent idea.”

“I thought so.”

“Do you believe Daniel Jackson will be joining us?”

“Nope. He and half his department are going to see a meaning-of-life movie about some anthropologist.”

“I have not heard of such a movie,” said Teal’c, who liked to be up on movie releases.

“It’s at that indie theater he likes.”

“I see.” That was all Teal’c needed to hear. He was more of a Hollywood blockbuster fan. Although he could surprise people. Daniel had insisted he had to watch *Citizen Kane*, which Jack never managed to stay awake through. Teal’c found it ‘extremely thought-provoking.’ In fact, when Jack gave up and went to bed, Daniel and Teal’c had still been talking about all the thoughts it provoked.

“So, how’re things going for the Free Jaffa?”

“Turbulent. Jaffa leaders are warriors. A nation requires more than warriors. We have few leaders
with Bra’tac’s wisdom. It is a learning process.”

Teal’c was among those who considered himself a warrior. He wanted freedom for himself and his people, and as long as there were a few snakes left he was happy to fight them instead of trying to build a nation. Jack thought that perhaps T wasn’t giving himself enough credit, but then again Jack didn’t want to be a political leader either.

“As it happens,” continued Teal’c, “some of the priestesses have proven able to prevent their worlds from falling into chaos.”

“Always good.”

“Indeed. There is much to be done. Our people are not accustomed to freedom.”

“And freedom can be abused,” observed Jack.

“That is true.”

“You’ve come a long way, though.”

“Though we have much further to go, we accomplished what I once believed that I would not live to see. One can anticipate that culinary achievements may improve when there is time to devote to them.”

“A good decade’s work. Did you hear Daniel and Carter found a few new gate addresses?”

“I did not.”

“UAV showed a vein of what might be trinium on one of them.”

“That is good news.”

“Sure is. So, meet you topside at 0530?”

“I will be there.”

Jack wondered if maybe next time Teal’c went to visit his family, his Jaffa friend should bring some good barbeque sauce.

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The weather was so miserable that Zelda didn’t even want her evening walk, which was a first. Daniel wasn’t sorry, because walking in a sleet storm with his weak foot didn’t sound like a great idea anyway.

Lousy weather notwithstanding, it was February, which meant they were in the month Jack was going to be knighted, so things could’ve been worse. Besides, Jack decided it was a good night for a fire, so they swung the couch around and were cuddled up together in front of the fire, with Zelda contentedly napping at their feet.

Daniel looked down and saw the reflection of flames glinting off his ring. It mesmerized him for a moment, seeing the orange and yellow of the fire illuminated on the gold band. He was extremely glad Jack liked the idea of rings. He’d marry Jack if they could, but he didn’t need to. Didn’t need a ring, either, but he very much liked it. Rings were loaded with symbolism; they were a tangible display of their commitment to each other. Wearing the rings proclaimed that he was Jack’s and
Jack was his – not in a creepy possessive way, of course, but in the sense that they’d willingly given their hearts to each other.

“Hypnotized?” asked Jack, his voice gentle.

“Happy.”

“You know,” said Jack slowly, “I wish they were wedding rings.” Daniel’s head snapped up so he could look his partner in the eye, and it was clearly written in Jack’s brown eyes that he meant it wholeheartedly. “When Cassie said we should go to Massachusetts, I actually looked into it, but it turns out there’s a residency requirement so-”

Daniel cut him off with a kiss that lasted for a good minute. “When we can, if we can, I want to marry you.”

“Deal.” Jack grabbed his hand, twirling the ring around.

He’d been married, but nobody had ever expressly wanted to marry him. Sha’rè had been given to him because he father found it politically and diplomatically expedient. They’d grown to love each other in very little time, but this was something entirely different, and Daniel didn’t think his heart could even hold more love than it did for Jack.

“I love you,” he said, pressing himself tightly up against Jack.

“I love you too, Daniel.” Jack had been applying himself to saying the words more often over the last few months, because he knew how much weight words carried for Daniel. In truth Daniel didn’t need to hear the words all the time – after all, Jack had just said he wished they were married – but he certainly enjoyed it. “And in case I wasn’t clear, I’m happy too.”

“Even though I recorded over your hockey game?” It had been an honest mistake. Jack had watched it once – how was Daniel to know it was a great game and he wanted to watch it again? He didn’t even know people watched games a second time.

“I wasn’t happy that minute.”

“Try the entire afternoon.” Jack had spent several hours sulking.

“But I was still… content, you know?”

“Yes.”

After a minute of peaceful, silent thought, Jack asked, “Anything exciting happen today?”

“Colonels Fisk and Warren were in my office debating whose translation was more important. The debate got pretty heated.”

Jack frowned. “Nothing too heated, I hope.”

“No, you don’t have to worry about conduct unbecoming.”

“Good.”

“Nyan had a great time at Disney World. He’s fascinated by the anthropomorphizing and the love of fairy tales.”

“Of course he is.”
“We’re 90% sure the obelisk SG-17 found on P8V-039 was a monument to Bastet.”

“Cat lady?”

That was rather oversimplified, but basically true and he didn’t want to spoil the easy mood, so he just said, “Yes. Oh, and Amanda Wilson is pregnant.” Daniel was happy for Amanda, because she was clearly ecstatic.

“At least she doesn’t go offworld.”

Amanda preferred to work out linguistic challenges in the relative security of the mountain. She was especially good at Asian languages and, after Teal’c and Daniel himself, was the best Goa’uld speaker at SGC. “She’s thrilled, and evidently her husband is as well.”

“Good for them.”

“Yes.” Children had never really been a priority for Daniel, and Jack had always been very clear that he had no intentions of having any more kids. Charlie had been it for him. They were happy with their already-full lives, and they had Cassie as a sort of goddaughter or niece. “How about your day?”

“Teal’c wants to show Rya’c Earth, more than just the inside of the mountain.”

“That’s not surprising. He wants to show his son the world he’s living on.”

“Right.”

“Are you going to approve it?”

“Probably, but nothing overnight.”

“Is he going to introduce him to skiing?” Skiing was the latest in Teal’c series of pastimes. He liked skiing much better than snowshoeing, which he’d tried a few years earlier and found tiresome.

“I don’t know, but he really wants to bring the kid to a Chinese buffet.”

“Definitely not something Rya’c has seen before,” noted Daniel.

For a moment he remembered when he was on his last dig and Sue Thibodeau told him how lucky he was that he could share both his life and work with his partner. At that moment, he felt very lucky indeed.

Sergeant Siler had high praise for ice cream from a place called Cold Stone, so Teal’c decided he wanted to eat this dessert himself. He was very fond of ice cream. Unsurprisingly, O’Neill and Daniel Jackson were eager to join him; both were ice cream fans. He also invited Colonels Carter and Dinsmore, but the former expected her experiment to run late into the night and the latter believed it would be detrimental to her diet.

Once they entered the establishment and examined the menu, Teal’c had to concede that Cold Stone would indeed be a bad place for someone who was attempting to make healthier food choices. The sorbets, which were supposed to be more nutritious (or at least less unhealthy), did not look nearly as good as the ice cream selections.

“The Mud Pie Mojo also has coffee ice cream,” noted Teal’c.

Daniel Jackson informed them, “I do eat other flavors of ice cream.”

“Would you like to try any of our ice cream flavors?” asked one of the employees.

Teal’c thought it a rather pointless question. Of course he would. “Certainly.”

She picked up a very small plastic spoon and prompted, “What flavor?”

“Sweet cream.”

“Live a little, T!” said O’Neill. “I’ll try the cake batter.”

“This is a delicious way to live,” he replied. The employee seemed pleased.

“Cheesecake, please,” requested Daniel Jackson.

Teal’c decided that sweet cream ice cream with berries would be very good, so he informed the employee, “I would like a Berry Berry Berry Good ice cream.”

“Like it, love it, or gotta have it?”

He thought that was a peculiar question. “I have yet to taste this concoction, so I cannot tell you how much I enjoy it.”

She tried but failed to cover her laugh. “Those are our sizes,” she explained, pointing to a display of bowls.

“I see.” What he did not see was why the company did not think that small, medium, and large were sufficiently explanatory labels for their sizes. Perhaps they were great admirers of Starbucks.

“In that case, I will have a love it.”

O’Neill was busy snickering, so Daniel Jackson placed his order with a second employee. “A Coffee Lovers Only, please. Um, love it size.” At O’Neill’s knowing look, he insisted, “I have nothing to prove about my ice cream preferences.”

“Coffee,” said O’Neill through a fake cough.

“Do you not enjoy Haagen-Dazs dulce de leche, Daniel Jackson?”

“Thank you, Teal’c.”

“Would you like a waffle cone bowl?” the employee asked Teal’c.

“No.” He did not like waffle cones in general. They interfered with the flavor of his ice cream.

“Alright, here you are, and Jeremy will ring that up for you.”

“Thank you.”

She moved down to O’Neill. “What can I get for you, sir?”

“That cake batter ice cream, with strawberries. Medium.”
Sergeant Siler had failed to mention that Cold Stone was very expensive ice cream. Teal’c was not terribly concerned, because he earned more money than he had any use for. Years before, when O’Neill had informed him that he was to receive bimonthly paychecks in addition to being housed and fed, Teal’c had been completely shocked. Over time he had accumulated what was considered a “nest egg,” and he only wished it could be of more use to his family and his people. (Though on his recent visit he had brought several milk-producing goats, which were well-received once he got the recalcitrant creatures through the stargate.)

He had adapted quite well to paychecks, even if he required very little currency. What still perplexed him was the practice of tipping. It struck him as very odd, no matter how many times it had been explained to him. Finally he had given up on understanding and accepted it as a peculiar Tau’ri custom, though Daniel Jackson informed him that it was not nearly as prevalent in other countries. So he dropped his change – sixty-four cents – into the tip jar without much thought.

To his great surprise, that apparently served as some sort of cue for the employees to start singing. “Zippity Doo Dah, Zippity Day. My oh my, what a wonderful day. Plenty of ice cream headed your way. Zippity Doo Dah, Zippity Day.”

Teal’c took some measure of satisfaction in the fact that both O’Neill and Daniel Jackson were as shocked as he was. The Tau’ri could be quite absurd at times. However, they produced excellent desserts.

Daniel’s jaw had mostly recovered from the dentist by the time he got home, but he still hoped (not for the first time) that the Goa’uld never thought up a way to torture people by making them hold their mouths open.

“Hi Zelda,” he said, petting the dog upon his entry into the house. “Let’s go see Jack.”

He found his partner in the kitchen chopping carrots with a slightly alarming amount of force. “Bad day?”

“General Milligan,” spat Jack. “He’s heading to Afghanistan soon.”

“I haven’t heard of him.”

“He wants some of our weapons.”

“I see the problem,” said Daniel. Honestly he’d expected the issue to come up before. In all likelihood it had, and General Hammond had dealt with it.

“I tried to explain to him that a lot of them were given to us with the understanding that they’ll be used to protect Earth as a whole, not for national interests. He decided that meant any weapons we found on our own were up for grabs.”

“Yes, because that would make such a good impression on our allies and potential new allies.”

“I tried to explain that too. Not to mention there’s a risk of them falling into hostile hands over there.”

“I take it he didn’t agree?”

“Not at all.”
Daniel still vividly remembered Shifu’s vision. He’d been deliberately vague when explaining it at the time, except to General Hammond who’d insisted on the whole sordid tale. But Jack knew more details than anyone besides the general, and he obviously remembered when Daniel said quietly, “Might doesn’t make right.”

“Try telling that to Milligan,” retorted his partner. “I know you get it. Hell, you get it more than I do. But Milligan would take an al-kesh to Kabul if he could get away with it. So then he very politely implied that I think nobody else’s commands are as important as mine and that the brass’s keeping me on as a civilian has gone to my head.” With that, Jack sliced the carrot so violently a piece went flying over by the dishwasher.

“It kind of is the most vital command,” pointed out Daniel gently.

“Yes and no. That’s not the point. Now if we can start making our own zats, that could work in the field on Earth. Could really reduce civilian casualties in unconventional warfare, which is always good.”

“So the point is that Milligan’s a jerk?”

“Exactly.” A carrot top went spinning across the counter.

“Would you please stop wielding the knife like that? You’re starting to scare me.”

Jack dropped the knife so fast Daniel might’ve said it was radioactive. “Shit, I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay, cariad. I was only scared for your fingers.”

“Oh,” said Jack, clearly relieved.

“Jack?” he prompted. That reaction really needed an explanation.

His partner sighed. “I got really angry once at the cabin – Charlie just told us his teacher was turning a blind eye to bullying – and I went outside to chop wood and Sara… she said I was scaring her. I swore I’d never do it again.” It was obvious that the experience had been hard on him.

Daniel pulled Jack into a hug. “I won’t say that again. I had no idea.”

“No way you could’ve. I couldn’t stand to scare you.”

“You don’t. I’m the one who’s always seen past your scary soldier routine, remember?”

“Yeah. It’s just…” Jack trailed off.

“Okay. Now I know.”

Jack said softly, “I love you. So much.” What he didn’t say, but Daniel understood anyway, was how much it pained him to be a source of fear. He was a protector, and the more he cared about someone the more he was driven to protect them.

“I love you too, Jack. Come on. Dinner can wait.” He led his partner into the living room, Zelda behind them.

“Dentist appointment go alright?”

“Oh, the usual.” He’d inherited very good teeth from his father. He remembered that his mom once said she was glad Daniel got his dad’s teeth and not hers.
They settled in on the couch with Daniel idly running his fingers through Jack’s hair. “So,” said Jack. “I told him our jobs are complementary. Mine is to keep the planet safe. His is to keep it worth living on.”

“Fair enough.”

“I thought so. But you know what he said? ‘Well, O’Neill, I’ll try to keep that in mind when I’m sending good men home in caskets.’”

Daniel cringed. Jack accepted that losing people under his command was part of the job. It bothered him every time, but he maintained that soldiers knew the risks and that no matter how good a commander he or anyone else was, people would always die. But for Milligan to blame Jack for other deaths was hitting below the belt. “That’s low.”

“Does he really think the Air Force hasn’t considered that?” asked Jack. “We want to keep our people alive.”

“Of course.”

“But we’d never have made it this far without allies like the Asgard. And Thor’s been pretty clear that he respects us because we’re doing our best for everyone on Earth.”

Daniel remembered that. It had been one of the main reasons Thor agreed to help when Kinsey tried to seize control of SGC. “Let me guess, Milligan isn’t all that concerned with alliances.”

“Got it in one. Yeah, the Asgard aren’t always around, but that doesn’t mean they aren’t valuable allies.”

“Can you imagine how the Nox would react if we were to start using these weapons on Earth?”

“We’re already only kids to them, but at least they seem to think we’re okay kids. If we’re lucky, they’ll share some toys once they decide we’ve grown up. Which is never gonna happen if we use *Prometheus* to flatten half of Afghanistan.”

Daniel privately wasn’t holding out a lot of hope for the Nox sharing technology any time in the next several generations. If they thought SG-1 was young, he had a feeling they’d be pretty unimpressed with Earth as a whole. All the same, this line of thinking tended to be more persuasive to the Pentagon types than arguing morality.

“I did tell him about the zats,” continued Jack. “He liked that idea well enough. In fact, he’s already thinking of how zatting hostiles instead of killing them gives us a chance to question them.”

“Speaking of zats, how’s the SGC- Area 51 development race?” He hadn’t heard about that in a little while.

“There may be a truce in the works. Apparently Sam and her people have worked up a better power cell, but Area 51 is ahead on the firing system.”

“It would be nice to have our own supply of those.”

“Yeah. Especially if it gets Milligan off my back.”

Daniel really, really didn’t envy Jack’s job.
Normally Dr. Brightman wouldn’t have let Daniel out of the infirmary quite so soon after a severe allergic reaction, but SG-17 had come in with a fungal infestation so she’d sent Daniel home with Jack, who was under strict instructions as to complications to watch out for. Because of the meds, Daniel was a little bit loopy, but most of all he was tired. He’d fallen asleep leaning against the elevator on base, and once they got to the truck he’d fallen asleep before even buckling his seatbelt.

“Daniel, we’re home.”

Nothing. Jack got out and went around the truck to open the door. “I’m not carrying you inside,” he informed Daniel’s sleeping form while releasing the seatbelt. “C’mon, wake up.”

“J’ck?”

“Yeah, Daniel. Let’s get you to bed.”

“Mmm, bed.”

“Right. Here we go.” He steered Daniel towards the front door.

“C’n I have breakfast in bed?”

“Don’t think you’ll stay awake for it.”

“Later?”

“We’ll see.”

“You’re no fun.”

“Daniel, we’re never going to get inside if you stand in front of the doorknob like that.”

His boyfriend looked down at the doorknob as though its location was a great surprise. “Oh.” Jack sighed and shuffled him off to the side so he could unlock the door. “Alright, off to bed.”

“Bathroom first.”

While Daniel took care of his business, Jack went out the back door and took Zelda off her run. She didn’t really need a leash, because she was always excited to go in the house and see if there was anything or anyone interesting. This was all the more so because usually when they put her outside and left it meant they would be gone most of the day, not returning before it was even 1300.

By the time Jack got back inside, Daniel was trying to untie his shoelaces but his uncoordinated efforts were being thwarted by the dog, who’d concluded that he intended to pat her. “Not now, girl,” Jack told her, untying the laces so Daniel could step out of his shoes. Then he took off his own shoes as well.

Confused by their behavior, Zelda trotted down to the bedroom behind them. Daniel hadn’t even bothered to zip up his jeans and they were already falling down by the time they reached the bedroom, where he awkwardly shucked them off. “Bed in the afternoon,” he muttered, “all decadent-like.”
“Not quite,” replied Jack. “You’re all doped up.”

“At least get this straightjacket off me.”

The ‘straightjacket’ was his sweater, which Daniel was having a hard time pulling off. Jack dutifully removed it and pulled back the covers on Daniel’s side of the bed. It was a good thing Daniel slept on the side nearer the door.


It was pretty hard to refuse a request like that, so after taking off Daniel’s glasses Jack stripped down to his underwear and white t-shirt, then joined his lover in bed. Daniel hadn’t been kidding about his Jack pillow, and Jack found himself with a Daniel heating blanket. The man threw heat like a furnace.

By the slight jingling of her collar, Jack figured Zelda had settled in by the door. She liked to plop down in front of doors because people had to go over her to leave the room. Daniel was already asleep.

Jack hadn’t intended on napping himself, but before long the two men and the dog were all fast asleep.

Daniel woke up and groped around on his nightstand for his glasses. He’d slept until 5:40 pm, but felt significantly better. After pulling on a pair of sweatpants he wandered out for food and to find Jack.

His partner was in the living room, reading *Fish Tales: 47 (Mostly) True Angling Stories*, which had been a Christmas gift from Teal’c. Jack stuck his bookmark in when Daniel joined him on the couch. “How’re you feeling?”

“Better. Still a little groggy.” The really strong meds did that to him. He rarely needed them, but he’d had a particularly nasty reaction to the pollen covering the artifacts SG-11 had brought back.

“Brightman said you should avoid coffee today.”

Daniel wasn’t surprised. “Killjoy.”

“Want me to start dinner?”

“That’d be good.” He trailed into the kitchen to help, or watch, or whatever. His mental fog hadn’t finished lifting yet, after all. Zelda, who was always interested in what happened in the kitchen, followed.

“You probably don’t remember SG-17’s fungus.”

“No.”

“They came back with this weird blue fungus growing in their hair,” explained Jack while examining the contents of the cupboard. “I called to check with Brightman, and she said they’re clear now. But the goop she had to use to get rid of it also turned all of them into bleached blondes. They’re not happy.”

“I imagine not.”
“And apparently they’ve sworn off mushrooms.”

“Why?”

“Fungi.”

“Oh. Right.” He really disliked this mental fog.

“Macaroni work for you?”

“Yes.”

Jack pulled out the box of macaroni and a jar of marinara sauce. Once the water was on the stove heating up, he realized, “Hey, we’ve got that sausage. That’d be good in the sauce.” Once the fridge was open, he added, “And we should eat this cucumber while it’s still good.”

“I’m hungry. Let’s have the cucumber now.”

While Jack washed and peeled the cucumber, another thought occurred to Daniel. “Did I embarrass myself?”

“Nah. That’d have required staying awake.”

“Oh.” It could’ve been worse, then.

“Oops,” said Jack as a piece of peel dropped to the floor. Zelda loved to hear ‘oops’ in the kitchen especially, but was fairly disgusted when this turned out to be cucumber peel.

“Thanks for taking care of me today.”

Jack shrugged. “Never in question, Daniel.”

He probably had no idea just how loved that made Daniel feel.

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Eddie usually took a later lunch to avoid the worst of the crowds, but he’d been too hungry to wait. The mess hall was crowded, but there was room around Jack. Not many people were bold enough to casually walk up and ask if they could sit with him.

Jack didn’t even look up from the report he was reading and had given no indication that he was aware of Eddie until he said, “Have a seat.” Apparently those legendary Special Ops skills also worked in crowded, noisy mess halls.

So he sat down and started in on his meatball sub. A couple of people looked at him, taking note of the fact that he was welcome to join Jack. Eddie would’ve liked to have blamed the hierarchical military mindset for the way most people seemed to think of Jack. (Though not SG team leaders. Eddie suspected there was some kind of former-and-present SG team leader understanding.) On the other hand, SG-1 had acquired a quasi-legendary status and Eddie himself hadn’t been entirely immune to that. Now, though, he saw them all as real -if extraordinary- people, just like everyone else.

“Interesting reading?” he asked.

“Could be worse. It’s Davis’s report on something I didn’t have to deal with myself.”
“Possibly less stressful than trying to figure out what to do for my first Valentine’s Day with Sam.” They’d been together close to a year, but since they’d started seeing each other in March it was their first Valentine’s Day. Eddie always found it a trying holiday. That was a little weird this year because he knew Sam wasn’t holding him to some impossibly high standard, unlike certain exes of his. He’d made dinner reservations early enough that they had a good time at a good restaurant, and he was planning to buy her Lindt chocolate. (Expensive, but her favorite.) Which reminded him, he only had a couple of days left to get the chocolate. “Why is it that Valentine’s Day feels like a test?” Then, in case that made him sound like he thought so little of Sam, he clarified, “In general, I mean. Sam’s not like that.”

Jack shrugged. “I guess it depends on how many demanding exes you have.”

That was entirely too observant of him, so Eddie asked, “What about you?”

“Clearly you haven’t heard Daniel’s spiel on how Valentine’s Day is a commodification of human emotions. They’re trying to reduce complex emotions into nice, easily marketed clichés.”

“Uh, no.”

“He objects on principle.”

“That makes your life easier, I guess.” Although once he said the words, he wondered if maybe two guys wouldn’t do Valentine’s Day the same way a straight couple would.

Jack raised an eyebrow. “You have met Daniel, right?”

Okay, that was a good point. Daniel was a complex man. What Jack failed to acknowledge was that it took a complex man to understand him and live with him; acknowledging that would be tantamount to admitting that he wasn’t the simpleton he liked to portray himself as. Daniel just wore his multiple facets more openly than Jack did.

“Fair enough. So, what, do you have some kind of anti-Valentine’s Day?”

“Uh, no.”

“Just a quiet night in.”

In a comfortable, domestic way, quiet nights in could be pretty romantic, but Eddie didn’t say that. Instead he remarked, “I imagine that’s assuming a crisis doesn’t come up.”

“It always is.”

“Here’s to hoping.” He really didn’t want anything to interfere with his first Valentine’s Day with Sam. She deserved the best.

“They say it springs eternal.”

“Would that be the same they who decided to commodify human emotions?”

Jack shrugged. “You’d have to ask Daniel.”

Eddie was not at all sure he wanted to go down that road, and from the knowing gleam in Jack’s eye, he was making his thoughts on the suggestion pretty clear.

It had been an uneventful but highly productive day for Daniel. He’d made steady progress on his
translation, reviewed MALP footage, filled out his latest round of requisition forms, and renewed SGC’s subscription to several academic journals. When it was time to go home, he felt that he’d accomplished a good amount, which was always a nice way to end the day.

He met Jack near the exit, and they both signed out before heading to the parking lot. Jack couldn’t restrain a huge yawn.

“I’m dragging,” said his partner, stating the obvious. “You wanna drive?”

“That’s fine.” He reached for his keys, noting, “Tired on the day you and Sam lugged a telescope to the middle of nowhere at 3 am. Do you think that’s a coincidence, or should we consider a cause-and-effect relationship?”

“The sarcasm meter is off the charts here.”

“Do you still think that comet was worth it?”

“Yes,” replied Jack without hesitation.

“If you say so.”

They got into the truck and Daniel switched to the driver #2 setting. That was a helpful invention. He drove Jack’s truck now and again, but really preferred the easy maneuverability of his car. (On the other hand, nothing was as bad as the van in 1969.)

“If you had come, you’d get it,” insisted Jack.

“I doubt it. Besides, one of us has to drive.”

“I could drive,” insisted Jack. “I’d just rather let you chauffeur me.”

Daniel backed out of the parking spot and, once he had the truck headed out of the lot, said, “Right. Because that’s just the kind of person you are.” Jack almost always wanted to be the one behind the wheel.

“Never to late to get used to the lap of luxury.”

“I’m sorry, did we get in the wrong vehicle? I didn’t see a limo in the parking lot.”

“Nah, too conspicuous.”

Teasing, he remarked, “It’s too bad. You’re probably too tired to come with me and Cassie tonight.” He knew Jack had absolutely no desire to see the art exhibit in the first place.

“Never mind tired. I refuse to pay money to stare at trash.”

“Pop art, Jack.”

“Trash, Daniel. I saw your brochure.”

“First of all, it’s art.”

“No, it’s not. It’s trash, but like the naked emperor, most people don’t want to sound uncultured, so they pay money to walk by and pretend it’s art.”

“Do you really want to insult my intelligence while I’m driving your truck?”
“I sort of figured you were going for the anthropology. You know, the cultural mindset of… oh, for cryin’ out loud, I’m too tired for this conversation.” With that, Jack closed his eyes.

“That is part of it,” Daniel admitted. “It’s interesting to see such controversial art, and I like the challenge of looking at familiar things in new ways. That and Cassie really wants to go, but art exhibits aren’t nearly as much fun alone.”

“Too bad Thor’s not around. He’d probably love it.”

That was a good point, actually. Then again, Thor wouldn’t have the same frame of references for the objects used to create the art. He had very much liked modern art when they visited the Tensta Konsthall in Stockholm, to Jack’s chagrin. (Jack had spent the entire time in the museum muttering denigrating comments and working on a plan to swap a toddler’s fingerpainting to see how long it took before anyone noticed it wasn’t famous.)

“Anyway,” Daniel corrected, “the piece on the brochure was made of soda cans. That’s not trash, that’s recycling.”

“Trash, recycling. It’s pretty much the same thing.”

“You have heard about landfills, right?”

“I mean, it’s not art. It’s something I toss out.”

“You’re a traditionalist.”

“I prefer the term ‘purist.’”

Daniel just shook his head. He could appreciate some aspects of modern and pop art, even if it wasn’t his favorite. Getting Jack to appreciate it was a lost cause.
Jack wasn’t having the best of days, and he was at the moment jealous of Teal’c. In truth he was always a little bit jealous of Teal’c, because Teal’c’s son was still alive. It had been eleven years, but there were still moments that broke Jack’s heart. Seeing Teal’c take his son off to introduce him to skiing and buffets had been one of them.

At least Daniel had picked up on that and manufactured an excuse to drag him to the mess hall for coffee. It had helped, some, to sit with Daniel and half-listen to the problem with over-reliance on computer translation programs. He already knew most of Daniel’s thoughts on the subject, but that was sort of the point anyway.

The improvement in his mood had lasted only as long as it took him to get back to his office and see the growth of his inbox. He knew that paperwork didn’t actually breed when he left his office, but it sure as heck seemed like it did.

He flipped the paperwork over so that the oldest stuff was on top and started in. First up was Carter’s report on the latest update to the dialing computer. It was supposed to prevent any problems arising from the time loop Jack and Teal’c had been caught in several years ago. Apparently, it slightly altered their solar system, as well as several others, in relation to the rest of the universe, as far as planetary positions and such went. It was true that this wouldn’t be a problem when dialing out for another 600 years or so, but Carter thought it better to fix the problem now and Jack was all for preventative measures. He skipped over the sections of calculations and programming code, down to the part where she said the problem was solved, and happily signed off on that report. One down.

An hour later he’d made decent headway on the paperwork and was still at it when someone knocked on his half-open door. He looked up and saw Siler, holding what was probably an addition to the paperwork pile. “Come in.”

“Maintenance report, sir.”

Jack took the document and added it to his pile. “Anything that I need to know right now?”

“From that report, sir? No. But I’d like to schedule a day to take the gate offline for an overhaul. You know what they say about an ounce of prevention.”

“Pound of cure.” It had been a while since Siler’s last overhaul. “Schedule it with Sergeant Harriman. And let Colonel Carter know, in case she wants to take advantage of the downtime.”

“Yes sir. Thank you.”

“If only everything were that simple.”

Siler nodded slightly. “Good luck, sir.”

“Thanks.”

Thus dismissed, Siler headed out to continue making sure SGC equipment functioned at top capacity, and Jack went back to his paperwork. That lasted about three minutes, until Dr. Lee rushed in.

“General, we have a problem.”
“Words I never like to hear.”

“Do you remember that fish we brought back from P3X-772?”

Jack frowned. “The goldfish?”

“That’s the one. It leapt out of its tank when we were feeding it yesterday, and when Airman Dawes picked it up to return it… well, we think that’s why Dawes seems to be turning into a fish.”

He abandoned his paperwork and headed out the door. “I presume he’s in the infirmary?”

“Dr. Brightman has him in isolation.”

“Is this… transformation… contagious?”

“Not as far as we can tell. It seems to require direct contact with the fish, which nobody else has had. And we’ve got measures in place to make sure nobody else touches the fish.”

The news didn’t improve in the infirmary. “His DNA is being rewritten,” Dr. Brightman told Jack, her face grave. “I’m going to have to sedate him because of the pain. Sir, I can’t say how much longer his lungs will be able to breathe air.”

Airman Dawes didn’t look anything like a goldfish. He did, however, look very ill. He was pale and sweaty and the heart monitor showed an erratic pulse that didn’t require much medical training to identify as unhealthy. Jack was never going to look at goldfish the same way again.

“I don’t have any idea how to stop this, and he’s running out of time. Colonel Carter just left, and the Goa’uld healing device didn’t do anything.”

Brightman had the one-way mic on, so they heard Dawes rasp, “General O’Neill?”

He pressed down on the button so Dawes could hear him. “Hang in there, airman.” Dawes was young – barely twenty-five, if Jack guessed right. Only a few years older than Charlie would’ve been. (Jack still had his son on his mind.) He had a whole future ahead of him, one that shouldn’t be stolen away by some damn fish.

“I’m dying, sir.”

“Yeah, but I’ve lost count of how many times I thought that. Never mind Daniel.”

Dawes failed to be reassured. “The Tok’ra are always looking for new hosts. I’d be honored if they would consider me.”

“You wanna be a host?”

“I’d still be alive. And I’d be doing something important. Right, sir?”

The hitch in the airman’s voice got to Jack. “Right. If you’re sure, I’ll contact the Tok’ra.”

“Thank you, General,” said Dawes, who proceeded to fall asleep immediately.

“Normally I don’t condone such extreme measures,” sighed Brightman, “but he’s got five, maybe seven hours at most. I don’t know if a symbiote could cure him, but they can do amazing things.”

“I’ll let you know when I hear from the Tok’ra,” he told her. Personally, Jack had been there, done that, and would rather die, thankyouverymuch, but Dawes wanted this and he owed it to the
Jack’s day had been pretty bad, and he’d been uncharacteristically quiet through dinner. So once he had the dishwasher going, Daniel sat down next to his partner on the couch, where he was looking at the options in the TV guide.

“It could’ve been worse, you know,” Daniel pointed out. “Dawes is alive.”

“He’s got a snake in his head.”

“A Tok’ra.”

“Still a snake.”

“It’s what he wanted.”

“Yeah.”

The Tok’ra, of course, had been thrilled. They had no less than five symbiotes currently in tanks waiting for hosts and were, in their own Tok’ra way, beside themselves with joy at the unexpected offer.

“We’ll have a liaison you can feel good about.”

“What if Parel takes him somewhere to be tortured?” spat out Jack.

Daniel sighed and put his arm around Jack. “Isn’t Parel one of the Tok’ra scientists? Not an undercover operative?”

“I don’t trust them, Daniel.”

“I know you don’t, and you have good reasons. But they aren’t all bad, Jack. You never had any problems with Selmak. Jolinar took Sam without asking, yes, but in the end sacrificed herself so Sam could live. You respected Lantash.”

“Then we have underhanded, sneaky Anise and body-snatching Kanan. And let’s not forget that they’re only one very small step away from the Goa’uld.”

“Dawes is alive,” Daniel repeated. “What’s more, he’s excited. He sees this as more important than anything he would’ve done otherwise.”

“Doesn’t that bother you?” asked Jack, incredulous. “That he thinks he needs a snake in his head?”

“A little,” he admitted, “but realistically, he may have a point.” Dawes was an airman serving as an assistant to the scientists, mostly doing simple tasks. Eddie and Dr. Lee were both quite relieved that Dawes was going to live, and Daniel had gotten the distinct impression that they regretted taking the young airman for granted.

Jack grimaced. “Doesn’t mean I have to like it.”

“No. But at the end of the day, Dawes is alive and happy. That has to count, Jack.”

“I know.”
There was nothing more to say, really, so Daniel gave a little squeeze with the arm around Jack’s shoulders and rested his other hand on his partner’s thigh. Jack set down the TV guide and leaned into the embrace.

He couldn’t fix everything, of course, no more than Jack could fix things for him. All the same, there was a great deal to be said for knowing that you weren’t alone when things were rough. Daniel had tried to do that earlier, when he knew Jack would be thinking of Charlie, and was again then on the couch.

“I just hope he doesn’t regret it,” said Jack after a minute.

“We’ll be in touch.”

“Yeah.”

They sat together on the couch, silently sharing the burden of their work. Their jobs could be so stressful sometimes – Jack’s especially. Daniel was very grateful they didn’t have to carry those burdens alone.

Paul Davis went to Target for three things: new socks, a birthday card, and the DVD his niece wanted for her birthday. (He'd carefully written down the name of the movie his sister-in-law had suggested, because all of those pre-teen movies for girls seemed the same to him.) He decided to get the socks first, and upon arriving at the sock section he found Dr. Jackson, who had khakis slung over one arm and was examining the sock options.

"Hello," said the archaeologist.

"Hello, Dr. Jackson."

Paul wished he was better at this kind of interaction. He dealt with people all of the time at work, and in fact he was good at it. But those relationships were all structured by rules and hierarchies, spoken and unspoken. Once he learned the complexities involved, they were easy to navigate and professional relationships followed along, more or less, the established patterns. Paul was good at this kind of neatly delineated relationship. He was not, on the other hand, as good at genuine, personal relationships. Particularly not with people like Dr. Jackson, who considered rules suggestions at best.

“How do you like Colorado Springs?” asked the archaeologist.

“I don’t see much of it.”

Jackson nodded knowingly. “You’ve already earned yourself a reputation as a workaholic.”

That was just the kind of disregard for social rules that threw Paul. Generally, one didn’t tell somewhat what other people said about them. “There’s a lot to do,” he replied, for lack of anything better to say.

“Always. But you know, I’ve learned there’s something to this whole having a life thing.”

From anyone else that might’ve been a stinging remark or over-earnest suggestion, but from Dr. Jackson it was simply a statement of fact.
“Of course, having so much of your life classified complicates things,” continued the archaeologist.

“Exponentially,” chimed in Paul, who was happy to focus on the classified angle and less on the more troublesome being gay angle. Obviously Jackson would understand, since everyone knew now that O’Neill retired to be with him, but still, the secrecy was deeply ingrained.

Besides, he wasn’t completely without a life. He’d made the happy discovery that there was an SGC officers’ book club, which met every Thursday unless something came up, and besides interesting discussion it was a good social activity. “We can’t even have a book club discussion without getting into classified material,” he said. That wasn’t an exaggeration, either. Just that week when complaining about a deus ex machina ending, Major Sawyer had compared it to being beamed out by Thor at the last minute.

Paul grabbed his favorite brand of athletic socks while Dr. Jackson made his own selection. “I know yours is an underappreciated skill set,” said Jackson.

“We can’t all have the flashy adventures. And General O’Neill certainly seems appreciative.”

“Oh, yes, he’s thrilled to have you to take over some of his least favorite responsibilities. Anyway, we’ll get you through one of these days.”

Paul tried not to let on just how much he was looking forward to traveling through the stargate.

General O’Neill came over with a frying pan and spatula in hand. “I’m investing in a silicone spatula,” he announced. “It’s not supposed to melt until it hits over four hundred degrees. Hello, Davis.”

“Good evening, sir.”

“Or you could just take the pan off the burner when you get a phone call,” said Dr. Jackson.

“It was a surprise call from the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs. Besides, it’s not like I burnt the house down.”

“You’d never know from the smell of the kitchen.”

“It’s not that bad.”

“Yes,” objected Jackson. “Yes, it really is.”

The general ignored that. “And I found the Boston CD I’ve been looking for. How’s it going, Colonel?”

“Very well, sir, thank you. And you?”

“Oh, fine, just a slight kitchen incident yesterday.”

“Glad it wasn’t worse, sir.”

“Me too,” replied O’Neill, ignoring his partner’s skeptical glare.

“Well, I have to go find a movie about a mermaid. My niece’s birthday is coming up.”

“Mermaid, huh? Have fun with that,” said O’Neill.

“Fun might be optimistic, sir.”
“See you later,” said Dr. Jackson.

“Have a good evening.”

As Paul headed to the DVD section, Jackson and O’Neill continued to debate just how serious the kitchen incident was on a scale of one to ten. Burnt-smelling kitchen notwithstanding, Paul couldn’t help but be more than a bit jealous of them. Not either of them specifically – Jackson was too complicated and as for O’Neill, older men had lost their appeal a decade ago – but of their relationship and the way they seemingly balanced work with it.

Teal’c experience with canines was limited in the extreme, and at O’Neill’s urging he agreed to go “see what a dog is all about.” It was obvious that both O’Neill and Daniel Jackson derived great satisfaction from their pet. Teal’c, however, was having difficulty understanding the appeal.

He was attempting to play ‘fetch,’ but that was proving more difficult than anticipated. “If you do not release this toy, I cannot throw it,” he told the dog firmly.

O’Neill smirked. “She wants to play tug of war, T.”

At least he was familiar with that exercise, although with a much longer rope and multiple humans. He was good at tug of war training exercises. “Will this not damage her teeth?”

“Nah, she knows what she’s doing.”

That made one of them. Teal’c found it slightly disturbing that it was the dog and not him.

“If you don’t want to play tug, tell her to give. And use her name, that helps.”

“Give, Zelda.”

The dog paused for a moment as though evaluating him, and then released her hold on the toy. Teal’c threw it in a wide arc across the backyard, and she raced off in pursuit.

“Huh,” said O’Neill. “Guess your I-mean-business-look works on dogs as well as airmen and Marines.”

“So it would seem,” he answered with some satisfaction. While waiting for Zelda to return, he inquired, “Are you aware of General Hammond’s plans?” Everyone at SGC had learned in short order that their former commander was retiring in April.

“He’s moving back here.”

“That is unsurprising, as his family was here.” Teal’c was aware that General Hammond had not liked that his promotion required he leave his family.

“Said he might get more than one golf game in this summer. Good for him.”

Zelda returned, and Teal’c once again threw the dog toy across the backyard. “What do you know of his successor?”

“Arnold Yarrow. He’s a good man. I served under him during a tour in Japan. Can you believe Hammond actually said that if I hadn’t retired, I’d’ve been in line? Me, at the Pentagon?”
“You would be most unhappy.” Teal’c believed he and O’Neill were similar in that regard.

“No kidding.”

“And yet, were it not for your relationship to Daniel Jackson, I believe your sense of duty would have compelled you to take the position anyway.”

O’Neill scowled. “And be miserable?”

“Do you believe I am wrong?”

“No. Damn, but I’ve got it good.”

“I will remind you of that the next time you feel the need to complain about your duties.”

“I’m sure you will, T. But even when it drives me crazy, I know I’m doing something important.”

Zelda was once again reluctant to release her hold on the toy. “Give, Zelda,” instructed Teal’c. The dog promptly obeyed, and he rewarded her by throwing the toy. “I believe I understand,” he told O’Neill. “Your contributions are vital, and the environment is more pleasant than the Pentagon.”

“Way more pleasant,” agreed O’Neill with a nod. “So, whatcha think? Gonna want a dog one of these days?”

“I do not believe so. Yours is a fine canine,” he assured his friend, “but I am not in a position to care for a pet.”

“Ah, well, you can always come visit ours.”

Daniel Jackson opened the window and announced, “The pizza’s here.”

Zelda was a pleasant enough creature, but Teal’c was more interested in the evening of pizza and watching Star Wars on O’Neill and Daniel Jackson’s superior television with accompanying surround-sound.

Cassie’s car needed work, so Jack drove over to the shop with her. One of her friends could’ve done that, of course, but it was a well-known fact that mechanics were much more likely to try cheating a couple of mechanically clueless young women. Therefore Sam, who had spent half of her teenage years working on cars with her brother, usually went along to Cassie’s car appointments and asked detailed questions. But Sam was offworld trying to figure out how SG-2 had activated some kind of energy-field trap and, more importantly, how to deactivate it and spring them free. Jack didn’t know as much about vehicle mechanics as Sam, but he was the next best choice. Daniel thought having a premium AAA membership was an acceptable substitute for knowing anything more than how to add more windshield wiper fluid. Teal’c could do in a pinch because he was good at intimidating—a fair deterrent for would-be cheaters— but he didn’t know any more about cars than Daniel did. Apparently Apophis hadn’t been a fan of combustible engines.

Jack was in a good mood because he’d talked to Dawes that morning, and the young man seemed to be happy with the Tok’ra. Rowal, the host who’d brought back Sam’s mother’s cookbook, had taken Dawes under his wing. Seeing Dawes obviously pleased with his new life had eased Jack’s concern, and of course he was happy to see Cassie.
After dropping off her car, it was dinnertime so they decided to get something to eat. Cassie mentioned a new soup-and-sandwich shop she wanted to try; the place only used local ingredients available in a fifty-mile radius. In the middle of a Colorado winter, Jack was surprised they managed enough to have a menu, although he paid hand over fist for the meals. At least the food was good; Jack thought the turkey club was one of the better sandwiches he’d eaten in a while, and the carrot cake was really something.

He listened to the news about Cassie’s pilates class, how horrible a teacher her physics professor was, the guy she went on a couple of dates on before they realized their goals were too different, and her initial musings about where she might want to go for med school (being a junior, she had plenty of time to decide). He’d thought she might want to at least leave the state, but it turned out she was interested in UC Denver.

“It looks like a good school,” she said, “and maybe Denver is a good transition step, you know? After that I’ll have rotations and residency and there will be time to be further away from everything I know.”

“Makes sense to me,” replied Jack. After all, she’d already lost so much in her young life; he could see why she might not want to be too far from the people who loved her. “As long as you’re happy.”

“It’s daunting. I mean, med school is hard, Jack. But I can’t think of anything more fulfilling than making people better.”

“You’ll be great.”

“I like to think so,” she said. “So, you leave for London in a couple of days, right?”

Jack had long ago given up on ever understanding the logic behind Cassie’s subject changes. Then again, he was used to subject changes with Daniel. Sometimes the two of them thought a bit alike, making five mental leaps and assuming everyone else had as well. “Saturday morning.”

“I can’t wait to see the medal, no, wait, I looked it up, and it’s called a badge.”

“You’re almost as bad as Daniel.”

She grinned. “It’s sweet, how he’s so proud of you he can barely contain himself.”

“I’m a lucky man, to have him.”

“I hope I find love like you guys have,” said Cassie, a little bit wistful.

“You will. Might break some hearts along the way, too. Give it some time.”

She nodded. “I don’t want to take as long as you and Daniel did! Eight years of just being friends? No thanks.”

“Fair enough,” he said with a shrug.

“And Sam,” she mused. “I really think Eddie is the one for her.”

“They seem happy.”

“Yes. But it’s more than that. They want the same things out of life. Sam needs someone who understands how much her work is a part of her, someone who doesn’t want two-point-five kids and a white picket fence, you know?”
Cassie was an amazingly observant young woman, and also very good at understanding people. Janet had once theorized that it came from paying close attention to everyone around her so she could fit in on Earth. “That sounds about right,” agreed Jack.

“But I’m digressing again. London. I want to hear all about it.”

“I’m sure Daniel will be happy to tell you in vivid detail.”

“I can hardly wait,” she said.

Since Daniel was no doubt going to get great enjoyment out of telling the story, it was a good thing he already had eager listeners lining up.

Sam finally made it to the new coffee shop Daniel loved so much, only to realize she didn’t remember which blend it was that she’d wanted to buy for herself. She pulled out her cell phone and called to ask him.

He picked up halfway through the third ring. “Hi Sam.”

“Hey Daniel. I’m at your coffee shop, but I can’t remember what blend I wanted to get.”

There was a scrabbling sound that faded, so she assumed Daniel was walking away. “Sorry about that,” he said. “Jack’s playing fetch with Zelda.” He lowered his voice to add, “Between you and me, I don’t know which one of them is having more fun.”

Sam always thought of fetch as an outdoor game, but it was a very cold evening. “Glad they’re enjoying themselves.”

She was more of a cat person – which worked out well, because Eddie had a calico named Roxanne – but Zelda was a good dog. It was obvious that Jack and Daniel loved her, and she in turn adored them. While she was a friendly dog, there was never any doubt that Jack and Daniel were her people.

“The coffee you liked was the Rainforest Haven blend,” Daniel told her.

“Great, thanks.”

“I don’t suppose they have any of the Gaudalupe Family blend?” he asked hopefully.

She scanned the list of available choices. “Sorry, no.”

“It always sells out quickly.”

“Do you want anything else?”

“No thanks, I’m all set. I was just there Monday.”

A bright orange flier caught her eye. “Did you see the flier advertising the coffee tasting?”

Daniel regretfully informed her, “It’s during our trip.”

That was too bad, because a coffee tasting would be a dream come true for him. As it was Sam thought she’d see if Eddie wanted to go. “You’ve got something even better then,” she said. Sam
knew how much Daniel was looking forward to Jack’s knighthood. He’d never been so anxious for time to pass as he had the last several weeks and he couldn’t hide his pride in Jack if his life depended on it.

“Oh yes,” he agreed. “Much better. One second, Sam.” She could tell he had his hand over the phone, because his, “Jack, door!” was muffled.

“I’ve got it,” replied Jack.

“FedEx is here,” Daniel explained to Sam.

“More books?” she guessed. Daniel was forever getting books delivered from all over the world.

“Not this time. Jack ordered a set of paintball guns. He and Teal’c can hardly wait to try them.”

Personally, Sam had been shot at with enough real bullets that she didn’t see the fun in paint bullets, but it did sound like just the kind of thing Jack and Teal’c would enjoy. (Of course, Teal’c would try anything once.) “I pity the other players,” she said.

Daniel chuckled. “So do I.”

“I should go; I think they’re getting ready to close.”

“See you tomorrow,” he said.

“Bye.”

While she waited for her turn, Sam started thinking up excuses not to play paintball with Jack and Teal’c.

Daniel was examining an artifact which resembled a Grecian urn except that the perspective of the pictures was unlike anything he’d ever seen on a Grecian urn. He was, in fact, rather perplexed by the whole thing. Looking at the painted figures gave the impression of looking up. He was utterly fascinated.

“Daniel.”

About an eighth of his brain registered the presence beside him and responded. “Hi Jack.” The buildings in the background were amazing and were those Ionic columns? He reached for his stronger magnifying glass.

A warm hand closed over his, preventing him from getting the magnifying glass. “Daniel, it’s time to go home.”

Sometimes, carpooling didn’t work out so well. “But Jack, I think these are Ionic columns. This is far more detailed than any -”

“That thing was lying around in a stream for a while before SG-10 saw it. I’m sure it’ll keep.”

Undeterred, he kept examining the object without the aid of a magnifying glass. “There are similarities to Grecian urns, such as the shape, colors, et cetera, but this perspective… it’s like the artist tried to imagine the world from the point of view of a small child, or possibly a pet, although I don’t know if -”
“Daniel, it’s past 1800 hours.”

“So? Can’t you and Teal’c go box or something? Just another hour, Jack.”

“No. We have to leave at 0400 to catch our flight and we haven’t finished packing.”

Like he’d have forgotten when they were leaving so Jack could be knighted. It would take a much bigger find than the urn for that. “I know. I can sleep on the plane.”

“No, you can’t. You’ll try, but you won’t be able too, and then you’ll be cranky, so can we please just go home and get a few hours of sleep?”

Sometimes he hated it when Jack was the voice of reason. “I guess you have a point,” he conceded reluctantly.

Jack wisely refrained from gloating. Instead, while Daniel carefully put the artifact back in its box, he asked, “You wanna stop at Subway on the way home?”

“That works for me.”

Daniel was caught completely off guard when his partner casually mused, “You know, I’ve never gotten that whole Grecian urn thing.”

“What’s not to get?”

“Grecian,” replied Jack as they headed to the elevator.

“It’s a simple adjective,” said Daniel, frowning slightly.

“I know what it means, Daniel. But why not just say Greek? There’s Greek and then there’s Grecian. Why do they need two words? We don’t even have two words, and the name of our country is so long we shorten it most of the time.”

To his annoyance, Daniel lacked a concrete explanation. “Greece has been around a lot longer than the US. In that time different languages and dialects have -”

“Entirely failed to reach a consensus?” finished Jack with a faux-helpful smile.

“…developed in ways that reflect various historical and cultural experiences, which can be seen in the multiplicity of languages.”

“So what you’re saying is that you don’t really know.”

No, he wasn’t. He didn’t know, but he wasn’t admitting that. “No, I’m saying that asking the question reflects on the singularity of your cultural mindset.”

Jack just grinned. “You don’t know,” he repeated, gleefully poking the elevator button.

“Has anyone ever told you how annoying you can be?”

“Yep. You, in fact.”

Love, Daniel reflected, was a very strange thing.
It was a typical Friday night in the Bucklin household. Alana was sitting on the couch with the latest Jodi Picoult novel. Kelly had just returned from the movies and was on the computer chatting with several friends at once. Alana had no idea how her daughter could keep track of so many conversations, but then again she also had no idea what the acronyms meant most of the time either. Mocha, sprawled in front of the heater, was a picture of feline decadence.

The doorbell rang, and Alana stood up to get it. “That’s probably Jack and Daniel,” she said. They were due to drop Zelda off, since they had to leave early in the morning for a business trip.

Kelly, who was highly enamored of the entire top-secret-hero-neighbors concept, tore herself away from the computer and followed Alana to the door. They could see Jack and Daniel through the frosted glass of the window.

“Come in.”

“Hi,” said Kelly brightly.

“Hi,” said Daniel at the same time Jack said, “Hi Kelly, Alana. Zelda, sit.”

The dog obediently sat. She was remarkably well-behaved. “Thanks for watching her,” said Daniel.

“Sure.”

Kelly took off Zelda’s leash and began petting her. “Hi Zelda.” It was a good thing that Zelda was content to ignore Mocha, because Mocha was Kelly’s cat and she could be quite protective of him. Alana wondered if the dog had picked up on that, because whenever Zelda encountered Mocha, even outside, she pretended he didn’t exist.

Daniel put a tote bag down. “Okay, we’ve got her food, behandelt, both her dishes, toys, and Jack’s got the bed.”

Alana wasn’t sure she’d ever heard that b word before. “The what? I didn’t catch the word after food.”

“T-R-E-A-T-S,” explained Jack while handing over the dog bed. “Daniel likes to use different languages to throw her off. What’re we on now, Dutch?”

“Yes.”

“Do you speak Dutch?” asked Kelly.

“Yes,” replied Daniel.

“Dutch, French, German, Spanish, Italian, Russian, Arabic, Portuguese, Latin, Greek, Welsh, Hebrew…” Jack paused, clearly proud of his partner’s accomplishments. “I can never keep track of them all.”

Kelly was very impressed. “Wow.”

“Then there are the hieroglyphs and the… what’s that other one nobody speaks?”
“That doesn’t really narrow it down much,” said Daniel.

“Proves my point anyway,” concluded Jack.

“It’s my job. Anyway, Jack made a list.”

Kelly took the list. “Is this what they call military precision?”

Daniel’s eyebrows shot up; Jack just smirked and said, “Maybe.”

The list was, in fact, detailed and precise instructions for taking care of Zelda. Scanning it, Alana couldn’t think of any more questions to add.

“We’ll have our phones, but they’ll have to be off sometimes. Daniel’s less than mine.”

“I’m sure we’ll be just fine. She’s a good dog, and you won’t even be gone a week.”

“Thanks for taking care of her.”

“Have a good trip,” said Kelly.

Daniel smiled. “Thank you, we will.”

“He has more free time than I do,” noted Jack, “so he’s going to the British Museum. They’ll probably have to drag him out at closing time.”

“More fun than most people have on business trips,” remarked Alana.

For a split second she was sure that her neighbors were amused, as if sharing some kind of inside joke, but they covered it so well Alana soon doubted herself. Well, that was neither here nor there, she reminded herself.

"Jack?" asked Daniel.

"Daniel.”

The rest of that conversation, such as it was, happened without words. Daniel cocked his head towards Alana. Jack raised his eyebrows. Daniel looked from Zelda to Kelly then back to his partner. Jack pursed his lips. Daniel smiled ever so slightly. Jack gave a small nod.

"Jack's going to be made an honorary Knight Commander of the Order of the British Empire,” declared Daniel, positively brimming with pride.

“Really?” squealed Kelly, while Alana noted that both Jack and Daniel were much more likely to brag about their partner than themselves.

“I still say Daniel and Sam were the brains.”

“Jack,” said Daniel with some impatience, “nobody’s bought your dumb act since you made general, if then.”


“A knight! That’s so cool!” Kelly was positively gleeful at this development. “So do we call you Sir?”

“Nope. It’s just honorary, ‘cause I’m not British.”
Kelly didn’t think much of that phrasing. “Just honorary?”

Daniel, quite pleased that the magnitude of Jack’s honor was appreciated, gave her a satisfied smile. “What he means is, it’s not full knighthood, per se.”

“It’s still awesome!”

“It is,” agreed Daniel, “and we really should be going.”

“Gotta love those oh-six hundred flights,” added Jack.

Daniel clarified, “That’s six am, for the rest of us.”

Jack leaned down to pet his dog. “Be a good girl for the ladies, Zelda.” Daniel followed this by rubbing behind her ear.

“We’ll take good care of her. Have a safe trip, and congratulations again.”

Kelly gave them a thumbs-up. “Way to go, General O’Neill!”

The door had barely closed behind the neighbors when Kelly turned to Alana. “An honorary knight, Mom! Can you imagine what he did to get that?”

Alana had her suspicions that whatever it was, it hadn’t all been pretty. Her daughter wasn’t quite old enough yet to realize the dark and gritty side to heroism, and the toll it could exact. Alana had learned that lesson earlier than most because of her FBI agent father. She didn’t doubt that Jack and Daniel were good men, but she didn’t believe that their lives were all like a glamorous fairy tale, either. All the same, it was exciting to think that her neighbor was going to be a knight.

There was no sword involved in Jack’s honorary knighting. In fact it was quite a quick affair centering around the presentation of his badge. In no time at all Daniel, still so proud he was sure everyone guessed that he and Jack were together, was sitting with Jack, Queen Eleanor, and Prince Alistair, having tea.

Jack’s earlier concerns notwithstanding (“They better not expect me to drink with my pinkie up, Daniel!”) he was at his most charming and graceful. Queen Eleanor, who was more grandmotherly in person than Daniel would’ve guessed, took an instant liking to Jack, while Daniel suspected that Prince Alistair had a serious case of hero worship. They also seemed pleased that he was Jack’s guest and took the opportunity to ask both of them about the stargate program.

“Someday every lad is going to want to be just like you, General,” said Prince Alistair.

“The only reason I’m still here is because of my team. Best team I ever commanded.”

The queen said, “Do give my best wishes to Colonel Carter and Mr. Teal’c.”

“I will, ma’am.”

“And Dr. Jackson,” she continued, “You’ve done more to change our understanding of human history than anyone I can think of, and I do like to consider myself a student of history.”

“It’s my pleasure.”
“We’re very pleased to have members on SG-27,” said the prince, who was obviously pleased indeed that his country was participating in the program. Daniel suspected Prince Alistair would’ve dearly loved to be on an SG team himself.

“They’re a good team,” replied Jack.

“I believe the stargate program is vitally important, and that legends will remember SG-1 for ages to come. We sometimes bandy about the phrase ‘saving the world,’ but with you, it’s quite literal.” Queen Eleanor smiled before asking, “What’s it like, walking through the stargate?”

Jack said, “Surprisingly chilly.”

“Really?”

“Carter tells us it’s not actually a change in temperature, that it’s just how our brains process the transition to subspace and back out again.”

“Subspace. When I first heard about this, I thought it all sounded a bit like it’d come from Doctor Who,” said the queen with a little chuckle.

“There’s a unique, high-pitched sound,” explained Daniel, “and it feels like you’re on a dark roller coaster, and then in a few seconds you’re through.”

“And you always arrive standing up?”

“Unless you went through in another position, yes.” Say, on a stretcher or being carried by Teal’c. Daniel had traveled through the gate both ways more than once.

“What’s the most unusual planet you’ve been to?” asked Prince Alistair.


He supplied, “Klckengork’a.”

“Thanks. All the plants and buildings glowed in the dark. The people, and I use the term loosely, were these little hairy guys about three feet tall.”

“Very friendly,” added Daniel. “I still think Omivex was the most unusual, though. For one thing, the gravity was significantly less than Earth’s. We think the Ancients generally put stargates on planets or moons with similar gravity, but this one was only about 2/3 Earth gravity. Which could explain why the humanoid inhabitants were able to fly.”

“Amazing,” said the prince.

“Does it change your perspective on life?” asked the queen.

Jack looked to Daniel, a sign he should go first. “I’d be worried if it didn’t. Some aspects of day-to-day reality don’t change, of course. We still complain about gas prices going up and discuss issues like caring for the environment. But there’s this whole other level where we realize that the human race isn’t confined to Earth. That makes some things seem very insignificant.”

“Such as?” prompted Queen Eleanor.

“Recently, the American media spent an absurd amount of time on the First Lady’s wardrobe.”

The queen chuckled at that before turning to Jack, waiting for his answer.
“It’s a huge project when you realize that we’ve got to defend Earth from the Goa’uld,” said Jack. “They’re weaker now than they’ve been – well, since anyone we’ve come across can remember, and that’s saying something.”

“For which we are all extremely grateful,” said Prince Alistair. Daniel hid a smile behind his cup of tea.

“It wasn’t just us, but we’ve done our part. Anyway, sure, there’s a whole universe out there, and it makes some of the things people worry about seem especially silly. On the other hand, we’ve got a pretty nice world going here, and we shouldn’t lose sight of that.”

“Well put, General.” Queen Eleanor smiled approvingly. “It’s a rare thing for a man in a position of such importance to keep a balanced perspective.”

Daniel didn’t think he could be any more proud of his partner. He did so love it when other people appreciated Jack.

The first thing that Jack registered when he woke up was the warm weight of Daniel’s arm thrown across his chest. The second was the recent memory how just how much of a turn-on Daniel found honorary knighthood. He checked the clock and learned he’d been asleep about an hour and a half. Plenty of time until their dinner reservation, then.

Now he had a bit of a dilemma. Jet lag was not kind to Daniel, who might sleep for quite a while still. In that case he’d be up half the night and cranky in the morning. On the other hand, if Jack woke him up, he might be cranky just then.

First things first. Jack slid out of bed and, after a minute of figuring out the unfamiliar machine, started the coffeemaker. Then he took a quick shower. When he got out, there was a nice, slightly cooled cup of coffee ready to tempt Daniel into waking up. He stirred in the sugar and advanced towards the bed.


This earned him a barely audible but clearly unamused, “Lemme sleep.”

“Not such a great plan. It’s past 5 pm.” Jack caught himself at the last. Over the years Daniel had gotten used to military time, but when he was half asleep it was better to use civilian time.

“Coffee?”

That at least got Daniel to open his eyes and lift his head. “Sugar?”

“Yep.”

Daniel grunted and then managed a move where he sat up and reached for the coffee in one continuous glide. Once he was sitting up and drinking coffee, he muttered, “I hate jet lag.”

“I know.”

“Says the man for whom jet lag is a minor inconvenience at worst.”

“Practice.”

Daniel made a little ‘hmph’ sound and went back to his coffee.
“This is a whole lot more fun because you’re here, cariad,” Jack told him. “And I don’t just mean because of the sex.”

“It was hot though.”

“Oh yeah.”

“Jet lag and all, I wouldn’t miss this. Those three months when you…” Daniel trailed off, tapping one finger against his mug. “We didn’t know anything and we had to leave you in Antarctica. Maybe it’s not as bad as when I ascended, but even Teal’c was less stoic than usual. So this, to me, helps make it worthwhile. Aside from the planet-saving, I mean.”

Jack had no memories of those three months. He’d just gone to sleep after using the Ancient weapon and woken up on Thor’s ship. Now that had been a little freaky, since he’d woken up without a body, but at least Thor fixed him up. “I’m glad,” he said simply. “Never thought I’d get a happily ever after, Daniel.”

Daniel got out of bed and gave him a coffee-flavored kiss. “I think it’s even more poignant for us,” he suggested after another sip of coffee, “because we spent so many years fighting for it, and so other people could have it. Of course, you did a lot longer than I, but you know what I mean.”

“Yeah.” He knew exactly what Daniel meant. “C’mon, gorgeous.”

Daniel’s eyebrows went up. “Gorgeous?”

Jack gave him a gentle, loving kiss before saying, “You are.”

His boyfriend just grinned. “I’ll take a shower, and then what do you say to a walk before dinner?”

“Sounds good.” Jack watched Daniel take clothes out of his suitcase, and realized it would be a perfect moment to tell Daniel how much he loved him. That was Jack’s personal mission now: to make sure he told Daniel all those important things, because his boyfriend deserved to hear them. “Daniel, what I said a minute ago, it’s not just now. You make everything better, my whole life.”

Daniel smiled broadly. “That’s beautiful, cariad.”

Jack thought he was getting better at the whole expressing-his-love business.

“I really do need to shower,” said Daniel, going back to his suitcase. “I’m having a nice dinner tonight with this knight I’m in love with.”

He was a lucky, lucky man.

Jack was great with strategy and tactics, which meant that he approached souvenir shopping like a mission. He wasn’t especially fond of souvenir shopping, but he did like spoiling Cassie, and felt that they should pick up something for Aunt Kate. Then Daniel pointed out that they really should get something for Alana and Kelly as a thank-you for dogsitting.

“So, earrings for Cassie?” asked Jack while they entered the enormous souvenir shop.

“We get her earrings a lot.” They’d given her earrings for Christmas and brought a pair back from their last trip, to Australia (where they were clueless and a very nice saleswoman had taken pity on
“Because she likes them.”

That was true. Cassie loved earrings. He hadn’t seen her without them in years. “Okay, but it’s easier when she’s there to pick them out.” That was what they’d done for her Christmas gift.

Evidently the appearance of two confused men at the jewelry counter was an international cue for saleswomen. A young saleswoman came over and asked, “Can I help you gentlemen?”

“We’re looking for earrings,” Daniel said.

“Silver, not the cheap stuff,” clarified Jack. Cassie was allergic to one of the metals used in cheaper jewelry.

“Nope, those are in this section.”

Daniel peered down under the glass at a few rows of earrings. Really, it was much easier when they took Cassie along and she chose exactly what she wanted.

“I like these,” suggested the saleswoman cheerily.

“The Tower Bridge?” asked Daniel.

“Yes.”

Jack observed, “Hey, we walked across that this morning.”

She took the box out and put it on the counter. Jack checked the bottom for the price and seemed satisfied.

“Well, I doubt she has any like them,” said Daniel.

Jack shook the box a little, making the earrings swing. “Works for me.”

“We’ll take them,” Daniel told the saleswoman.

“One down,” declared Jack. Turning to the saleswoman, he asked, “What do you recommend for a… how old is Kelly, Daniel?”

“Fifteen.”

“For a fifteen-year-old girl?”

“Charm bracelets are very popular,” she said, leading them over to another section. “You can get a bracelet or individual charms.”

“Big Ben,” noted Jack.

Daniel hoped that charm bracelets were also popular with American teenagers, because in short order they had a Big Ben charm. Neither he nor Jack had any better ideas. The actual bracelets were pretty expensive (probably because they were still in the section with real silver), so they passed on that.

Finding a present for Aunt Kate didn’t take long, either. “She seemed to drink a lot of tea when we were there,” Daniel remembered, looking in the direction of a large tea display.
“Great.”

On the way to the display, Daniel’s eye was caught by something else: a 2-CD set, ‘Celtic Music of Britain.’ He grabbed one.

“Who’s that for?” asked Jack.

“Me.” It looked interesting.

Jack scanned the tea display for about fifteen seconds before grabbing a box. “Tea in tins. She loves tins. Plus scone mix and jam. Seems like a good thing for her.”

“That just leaves Alana.”

“I wonder if she likes tea.”


“Do you have any idea what she likes to read?”

“Not that kind of book. A coffee table book, with scenic pictures.”

Jack considered that for a second before deciding, “It’s probably better than tea.”

They found the book aisle easily enough, Jack muttering some weird comparison about Daniel and books working like homing pigeons. Daniel didn’t catch every word, but he got the idea and pointed out, “You’re reaping the benefits right now.”

Because he understood the strategic importance of a tactical retreat, Jack kept any comment he might’ve had to himself.

Kate sat by the window and waited for Jack and Daniel to arrive. She’d have picked them up from the airport, but in the last couple of years she’d given up night driving. Jack assured her that renting a car was no trouble at all. At least the weatherman had been right and it wasn’t snowing.

She’d been very close with Jack when he was younger, before she moved to New Hampshire, and over the years they’d stayed in touch. So Kate had followed her nephew’s career (what he could tell of it, anyway), and always listened with pride when he mentioned a promotion or award. This honorary knighthood was something else. More so than she had in years, Kate wished her brother was still alive to share in the joy of his son’s accomplishment. And Jack’s mother as well – Annie had always been so proud of her boy.

She also dearly wanted to know what Jack had done to earn him knighthood. Oh, she’d gotten used to not knowing specifics, but this irked more than most. Deep space radar telemetry, her foot. Kate knew Jack and Daniel were up to something far more important than that, as surely as she knew her own name.

Their arrival was heralded by headlights in the driveway. Kate met them at the door and as soon as they’d put their suitcases down pulled Jack in for a hug. “Jack, dear. My nephew, the knight. It’s so good to see you!”

“You too, Aunt Kate.”
“And Daniel, glad you’re here.” She hugged him too. Her nephew’s boyfriend was a very nice man who clearly adored Jack as much as Jack adored him. Kate was glad that she’d decided she was too old to worry about whether Jack was with a woman or a man, because Daniel was a pleasure to have visit. She could tell that Jack was happy with him, and after everything Jack had suffered it was good to see him happy again.

“My pleasure,” Daniel said.

“Now, I want to see this badge of yours, Jack!”

He laughed. “Yes ma’am! Guest room? I’ve gotta dig it out of my suitcase.”

“Guest room’s the same place it’s always been. Wait, you didn’t carry them with you on the plane?”

“Nope.”

While they were in the guest room, Kate set the table for snacks. She’d made her prize-winning chocolate cupcakes with peanut butter frosting.

“Ooh, cupcakes,” said Jack happily.

“*After* I see the badge.”

While Daniel chuckled, Jack handed over a box. Excitedly, Kate opened it. “Let’s see. ‘Your Majesty the Queen, who stands at the head of the cradle of democracy, and safeguards the freedoms of man.’ Well, you can’t say the British don’t have a flair for the dramatic. What has she done to safeguard freedoms compared to you?”

Daniel almost choked laughing. “Hey, that’s why we’re not British,” replied Jack.

She continued reading, “‘With heartfelt admiration and great respect. Jonathan J. O’Neill, United States Air Force. 26th February 2007.’”

The medal itself was impressive-looking, heavy and ornate. The ends of the four arms looked vaguely floral, had blue enamel to make it even fancier, and hung down from a crown. There was a red crimson edge around the inner circle, which had some British insignia seal she didn’t recognize. Kate thought that stamping ‘For God and the Empire’ didn’t really apply to Jack either (empire didn’t even apply to Britain anymore), but it was impressive all the same. All of this hung from a dark pink ribbon.

“This grey stripe means it’s for military service,” pointed out Daniel.

“Very impressive. I’m proud of you, Jack, whatever you did to earn this.”

“Thanks. Can I have a cupcake now?”

“Yes, you may.”

“How did it go?” she asked.

“No sword,” Jack answered between bites. “I got announced, I walked in, shook hands with the queen, and she gave me my medal. And her picture, but she sort of joked about that.”

“Then we had tea with Queen Eleanor and Prince Alistair,” finished Daniel. “Very good cupcakes.”
“Thank you.”

“They always are,” said Jack.

“Tea?” prompted Kate. Not that she didn’t enjoy praise for her cupcakes, but this was honorary knighthood they were discussing, and she wanted to stay on that topic.

“The most painfully formal snack I’ve ever eaten,” Jack told her. “But you know, they were nice enough people.”

“What did you talk about?”

“Classified stuff.”

“Really? You’re allowed to do that?”

Jack squirmed the way he did when she asked too pointed a question. It was Daniel who explained, “Our program isn’t exactly a secret from our allies.”

“Oh, okay.”

“Also, I think Prince Alistair has a case of hero worship for Jack.”

“Really?” asked Kate. This was delightful news indeed.

Jack blushed ever so slightly while Daniel continued, “Oh yes. ‘General O’Neill, we owe you so much.’ ‘The world would be a better place with more men like you.’ ‘You must have absolutely fascinating stories, General.’ ‘Some day every lad is going to want to be just like you.’”

Kate grinned. It really was lovely to have Daniel fill her in on the juicy details Jack left out.

“Railing’s fixed.”

The railing on Aunt Kate’s porch was wobbly and not going to be much use. Jack didn’t like leaving her with that, especially in the winter, so he went out to fix it over her protests that he didn’t need to bother. The whole porch could use replacing, but that was not a good winter project. He found everything that he needed in the basement, carefully organized the way his uncle had always kept things. When he was done Aunt Kate once again had a sturdy railing, and it didn’t even take very long.

He left Daniel and Aunt Kate happily swapping stories about him. This wasn’t an activity Jack was entirely sure he approved of, but that was a moot point because he was powerless to stop it. Besides, they were having such a great time, Jack had to admit that he didn’t mind too much if some of the laughs were at his expense. Just that morning Aunt Kate had calmly told Daniel, in between sips of tea, “You’re family now, dear. You really ought to call me Aunt Kate.” She probably had no idea how much that meant to Daniel, but Jack did. So, while he didn’t particularly appreciate Aunt Kate sharing the details of his Lassie obsession at age six, he figured he could live with it. As long as Daniel kept those details to himself.

By the time he put the tools back and returned to the living room, Aunt Kate had brought out an old photo album, no doubt pleased to have an eager audience. “Now here he is with his new baby cousin. That’s Bradley, my oldest. Let’s see, he was born in March of ’57, so Jack would’ve been… four. Hello again, Jack.”

“Railing’s fixed.”
“Thank you, dear. That’s very sweet of you.”

“Sure. How’s Brad doing these days?” asked Jack.

“Still busy as ever.” Turning to Daniel, she explained, “He lives and breathes for his corporate law firm. Doesn’t even have time for a goldfish, but he’s happy enough, though I can’t imagine how.”

Daniel gave a little shrug. “I’m only a partially reformed workaholic myself,” he admitted.

Aunt Kate didn’t miss a beat. “Yes. I’m sure there’s so much for an archaeologist and linguist to do studying deep space telemetry.”

This kind of offhand remark was nothing new to Jack. She didn’t expect an answer; she was just making it clear that she didn’t buy the cover story. Daniel didn’t know that and got a deer-in-headlights look for a second.

“Oh, I know, top secret, et cetera.” She set the photo album aside, still open. “I should start lunch. What would you boys like?”

“Actually,” said Jack, “we thought we’d take you out. There’s plenty of time before our flight for that little Greek place you like so much.”

“Really?” Aunt Kate was clearly delighted. “Why thank you! And with such lovely company, too. I don’t suppose you’ll wear that impressive new badge, Jack?”

“Nope.”

“Pity. It would be such a good conversation starter.”

Jack resisted the urge to roll his eyes, while his partner was silently chuckling. Oh yes, Daniel and Aunt Kate got along wonderfully. Despite the potential for endangering Jack’s sanity, he was glad. It pleased him that his aunt appreciated Daniel.

They’d only been home about an hour – just enough time to shower, pick up Zelda, give Alana and Kelly their gifts, and start laundry – when Sam, Eddie, Teal’c, and Cassie showed up for a little celebration. Sam and Eddie brought champagne, Cassie brought a cake, and Teal’c, for reasons only he knew, brought fruit salad.

When Jack protested, “You guys didn’t have to do this,” he’d been told in no uncertain terms by both Sam and Cassie that they wanted to. Daniel loved it – this was their family (Eddie having somewhere along the line been adopted in) getting together to celebrate.

Of course everyone wanted to see the badge. Teal’c still didn’t get exactly why honorary knighthood was such a big deal compared to Jack’s numerous other honors, but he was happy enough for Jack anyway. Cassie had enough experience with American culture to be more familiar with the idea than Teal’c, and she was already working out where in the house the badge should be displayed for maximum impact.

Zelda was making a nuisance of herself by trying to stay very close to Jack and Daniel. She didn’t seem to appreciate the visitors interfering with her attempts to keep near her humans. When Teal’c moved in for a closer look at the badge, he nearly tripped over the dog.

The experience with the Ancient outpost that had earned Jack the honorary knighthood (as well as
his Air Force Cross) had been before Eddie’s time at SGC, but was pretty much common knowledge around the mountain. New recruits were often informed of what Jack had done, along with Sam’s blowing up of a sun and several other key tales. Cassie was the only one who didn’t know the specifics of what happened, but she was a smart young woman. Jack had disappeared for three months right after mysterious lights were seen in the sky. She’d put two and two together.

“My word,” commented Eddie, “are you supposed to pin that beast to your clothes, Jack? It’d rip right through, it’s so heavy!”

“Wow,” said Cassie, “it’s more impressive in person than the pictures online. Way to go, Jack!”

“Well-deserved,” noted Sam.

Teal’c eyed the badge and then, with a perfectly straight face, asked, “Are you now required to rescue damsels in distress, O’Neill?”

“Been doing that for years, T.”

Sam asked, “Can we have glasses?”

“Wine glasses will have to do,” said Jack.

“Sure.”

Jack looked over to their Jaffa friend, who drank only rarely. “T, you in?”

“I will partake of a small amount in celebration. Very small. I am the designated driver.” Teal’c took designated driving responsibilities very seriously, which meant he’d only take about two sips of champagne. Daniel seriously doubted that six of them were going to get drunk on one bottle of champagne, but he appreciated Teal’c’s commitment to unimpaired driving.

“Sixth glass, please,” said Cassie, only half looking up from her study of the badge.

“I can’t get the hang of that,” muttered Jack, grabbing her glass.

Daniel had to agree. It was still a little strange that Cassie was legal drinking age. She was a responsible young woman and none of them had ever worried about her getting carried away, but it was still weird.

Sam managed to get the bottle open without making a mess. While she poured, giving Teal’c only a little splash, Cassie noted, “Eddie came up with a good toast on the way over.”

When everyone had a glass, Eddie remarked, “I guess I’m up, then.” They lifted their glasses. “To saving the world, again, and living to enjoy being knighted for it.”

“Hear, hear,” said Daniel and Cassie at the same time. They clinked their glasses together before sipping the champagne.

“Good champagne,” noted Daniel. He wasn’t a champagne connoisseur by any means, but the brand was unfamiliar to him.

“It’s an independent label my brother was raving about,” explained Sam.

Meanwhile Jack had taken out a knife for the cake. “Want to do the honors?” he asked Cassie.

“Sure.”
Daniel grabbed a stack of plates. “It looks great, Cassie.” She’d clearly made the cake from scratch. Sam had been teaching her more baking skills lately.

“Is that butter cream frosting?” Jack asked hopefully while getting a spoon for the fruit salad.

“Of course.”

“Sweet.”

“It is indeed high in sugar,” stated Teal’c.

“Someone’s in a stand-up mood tonight,” replied Jack.

Cassie set about cutting very generous pieces of cake. “So, how was London? We need details.”

Jack accepted the first piece from Cassie and scooped some fruit salad on his plate beside it. “Daniel had more fun than I did. I got to spend ten hours in a small room with two generals and an admiral. Meanwhile, Queen Eleanor got him access to the Egyptian stuff that the British Museum doesn’t have out right now.”

“And I got to see the Royal Shakespeare production of *Julius Caesar* with this handsome knight,” added Daniel.

“Details, guys.”

Jack chuckled and launched into a description of Buckingham Palace. When he was done, Daniel would tell how the knighting ceremony went.

Yet he was surprisingly content to wait with that story, because there was much to enjoy just in that moment. Their house was filled with the love of their friends, their family. Cassie and Eddie were laughing over Jack’s description of the palace guards. Teal’c was trying to work out why they were so amused. Sam sipped her champagne and leaned contentedly against Eddie; Daniel caught her eye and could tell she was also enjoying the moment. Zelda sat down between Jack and Daniel, eyeing the distribution of food with great interest. It was a perfect instant in time. Daniel took a bite of Cassie’s delicious cake, looked over at Jack, and smiled. Life didn’t get any better.

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