

A BEAUTIFUL NECESSITY

A SLASH STORY BY BIBLIO



Rating: PG-13

Pairing: Jack and Daniel

Category: First Time. Friendship. Humour. Off-World Stuff. Romance.

Season/Spoilers: Season 7. Episode tag for "Enemy Mine."

Synopsis: After seven years of being broken in, Jack is pretty much used to giving Daniel whatever he wants. Caving *works* for him. It's just that this time, what Daniel wants is Jack.

Warnings: Warm fuzzies abound.

Notes: The story first appeared in my 2004 Biblio Phile zine.



Jack looked around him with calm satisfaction.

Running field exercises wasn't exactly the thrill of a lifetime for him, but this one was shaping up to be moderately okay. Colonel Edwards' men were at least efficient. The generators were hooked up and the Command Post was fully

operational. As well as the C.P., the armoury, infirmary, field kitchen and barracks tents had all been erected, latrines christened, laptops were powering up, communications were being tested and the coffee pot was simmering.

"Camp's in good shape," he remarked casually. "Which is more than can be said for you." He smirked at the hapless Edwards.

"What the hell happened here?" Edwards demanded, more in sorrow than in anger.

"DanielJackson," Teal'c supplied accurately if unhelpfully.

"I know that!" Edwards flared. "I mean?" He didn't appear to know what he meant, deflating into baffled, bristling silence.

"You mean what the hell happened here?" Jack offered, feeling Edwards' pain.

"Vengeance," Teal'c informed them with a certain warm approval. "DanielJackson was most perturbed that your men failed to exhibit the proper reverence for important archaeological artefacts."

"How can you tell?" Edwards appealed to them both. "How do you know when junk that's in your way is an important artefact?"

"It is the stated opinion of DanielJackson that all artefacts are important and should be respected accordingly," Teal'c informed him. "You are in fact in their way." He gave this bleak message time to sink in before administering the coup de grace. "Nor does DanielJackson care for the appellation 'junk'."

"If you hadn't moved them?" Jack shrugged, wincing over the memory of hissy fits past, and present, mentally bracing himself for hissy fits future. Which were pretty much a given if Edwards' men were as clued in for this little training exercise as they had been back there with the Unas. "You might, and I stress might, have gotten away with it. He never, ever forgets these things but he does sometimes forgive."

They ambled gently around the perimeter of their small camp, watching various wary members of SG-11 scuttling anyplace Dr. Jackson wasn't, with the sole exception of Major Lorne, who was stuck right in front of him. Daniel was in full flow and the poor man was visibly alarmed, trying to back away from him without actually embarrassing himself in front of the rest of the unit by moving. It made for some interesting body language, even from this distance.

"Where, exactly, does Dr. Jackson fit in the command structure of the SGC?" Edwards asked thoughtfully, watching his 2iC failing to explain something to the archaeologist's satisfaction.

"That's a question I've asked myself more than once," Jack admitted, ignoring one of Teal'c's blander smiles and a smugly cocked eyebrow. "About the only conclusion I've reached is that Daniel talks me into things I don't want to do and out of things I either do want to do or the Air Force wants me to do. He talks Hammond into and out of things too."

"Also General Vidrine," Edwards interrupted sourly, dwelling on another unpleasant memory.

"Along with the Joint Chiefs, the President and assorted unsuspecting aliens."

"Me too," Edwards confessed manfully, glowering at the offensively pretty wildflowers clustered around the camp.

They both looked at Teal'c and were treated in return to his best poker face. The big guy wasn't about to admit to anything, even though Jack knew and Teal'c knew most of the time he didn't even put up a token resistance when Daniel had his dander up and was insisting on doing something insanely dangerous.

"Teal'c let Dr. Jackson romp off to his pow-wow with the Unas unarmed," Edwards obligingly filled in the blanks for a curious Jack. "Something *I* would not have signed off on had either of them bothered to inform me what they were up to."

"Then you would have been wrong. Acting upon the advice of the Unas Chaka, Daniel Jackson was certain all would be well. He was proved correct in his assertion," Teal'c said coldly.

"He talks Teal'c into stuff too," Jack noted for the record. He also made a mental note to discuss with Daniel this vexed matter of giving him vicarious heart attacks, at their earliest possible convenience. "And you could not have known at the time all would be well. Haven't we had this conversation?" he complained to the big guy. "Don't let him do shit you *know* I wouldn't let him do!"

Teal'c was very amused by this. "Had you been present on this occasion, O'Neill, you would merely have disarmed and accompanied Daniel Jackson, since you would have been unable to prevent his departure."

Edwards seemed unsurprised by this insulting pronouncement on Jack's leadership abilities. "So what we're saying," he drawled, drawing some unflattering conclusions, "is there's a command structure which Dr. Jackson is basically at the top of."

"I tend to think of him being kind of off to one side," Jack explained.

"Does it help?"

"No."

They watched the abject Major Lorne some more, still stupidly attempting to defend whatever his point of view was, which simply egged Daniel on to greater heights of eloquence in his attempt to guide the major towards a deeper, fuller understanding of his archaeological inadequacy.

"That guy is drowning, not waving." Jack didn't bother to hide his grin. Daniel explained things to him all the time so it seemed only fair on this exercise he got to enjoy himself watching Daniel explain things to everyone else. This was one of the few perks of command, at least on field exercise. So far as Jack was concerned, anyone dumb enough to argue with Daniel deserved everything they were asking for and would assuredly get, and he wanted to be around when it happened.

"Should we help Lorne out?" Edwards asked, not making a move.

"Do you wish to take his place?" Teal'c enquired politely.

"It's character building," Jack suggested, smirking again, while Edwards, generally a caring C.O., wavered.

After a protracted pause, Edwards self-consciously chose to stick with Jack and Teal'c, strolling on when they did, apparently abandoning Major Lorne to his fate. "Dr. Jackson likes you." This came out as a definite accusation.

"Well, he doesn't actively hate you," Jack retorted, taking this personally.

"He broke you in, Jack."

"At least I'm man enough to know it," Jack admitted lightly. He patted Edwards' shoulder with suitably insolent pity. "And I've got news for you."

"Colonel Edwards is also broken," Teal'c beat Jack to the punch.

"Look who's talking!" Edwards sneered.

"Daniel is a very sweet, very gentle guy." Jack angled them towards the C.P., figuring he needed to know now how bad the coffee was. A decaffeinated archaeologist was an unhappy archaeologist. "Nice. And an absolute, once-in-a-generation genius."

"Mostly for getting his own way." Edwards was fighting a tiny, rueful grin too. "And for being a pain in the ass."

"Daniel excels in a number of fields."

"I believe Major Lorne has capitulated," Teal'c observed, smiling at their now cheerful archaeologist, once more victorious on the field of verbal battle.

Jack looked at his watch. "Seven and a half minutes. Not bad." He beamed at Edwards, who growled, fished into a pocket, grudgingly handing over his twenty bucks. Jack snapped the notes to crispness, folded them neatly before Edwards' regretful face and slid them into his own pocket. "These defensive bets are gonna kill you." Not that he could blame the man for backing his people, even in the face of overwhelming odds. "Let's just hope there's something fascinating behind those big honkin' doors in the cliff face."

"You mean if he gets distracted, he'll go easy on us?"

"No."

Teal'c's flat pronouncement appeared to daunt Edwards.

Jack looked at him sadly. "You moved artefacts, Edwards. He'll never be *that* distracted."

He was beginning to quite enjoy all of this. Daniel had spent six days keeping the Unas from re-enacting the Alamo with SG-11 in starring roles as assorted martyrs while Edwards' men trained the Unas to mine the naquadah deposit. By some miracle of the archaeologist, this had not led to the expected massacre. That was good, Jack supposed. No one dying was good, especially not Daniel. He should be satisfied with that.

Six days, though. Six whole days. Days which dragged. He'd missed Daniel. He did not care who knew this. Not that he went into specifics, of course. He simply loomed up at sundry airmen and happened to them.

Everyone was pleased to see Daniel return to the SGC. Jack modestly accepted his due accolade as the entire base breathed a collective sigh of relief and rolled out the proverbial red carpet and killed the fatted cheesecake for their prodigal.

Of course the mission debriefing was hijacked by the burning issue of the rape of the artefacts, very much on Daniel's mind, and once he got going, he made sure it was on Hammond's mind too.

After surrendering the mining operation to the Unas, Daniel, Teal'c and Edwards' team had all been technically left with a window in their busy, busy schedules. Daniel was obsessing over some very tempting aerial photographs and MALP video footage from the unexplored world of the Odokai, and dying to get at whatever was behind those massive carved doors in the cliff. With Jack recuperating from a clawed shoulder and sadly very much at his disposal, all Daniel needed was a team for the dig survey and manual labour. Unfortunately for Colonel Edwards and his team, they needed – according to Daniel – training in surveying archaeological digs and a variety of other vital field skills the Air Force

had never let on they'd need, including Jack's personal favourite, inter-species diplomacy. He and Teal'c had themselves one helluva double act on that one.

It took Hammond mere moments to add Daniel and SG-11 and make mission, and when a bright-eyed, hopeful look was turned on him, even less for Jack's spine to dissolve. He tended to notice how very, very blue Daniel's eyes were at *the* most inopportune times.

Having made General Vidrine a very happy bunny indeed with the prospect of a fat fleet of battle cruisers, Daniel had definitely earned his treat and he got it mostly because no one had had the heart or, more to the point, the energy to say no to him.

Edwards was inclined to be entertainingly bitter about how hard, how fast and how unexpectedly Daniel had hit him. Why it had come as such a shock was anyone's guess. Edwards knew Daniel was a pain in the ass. Having worked with him in person, it wasn't as if he needed to go digging for proof.

Jack was very happy to be around to enjoy Daniel making SG-11 suffer as only he could.

He was even happier he'd have Daniel alone with him in a nice roomy tent for the best part of a week and he could make Daniel talk about stuff while he lolled idly on his bunk and listened.

He beamed as Daniel and Lorne joined them. "Gentlemen, welcome to Field Archaeology 101!"

Daniel gave him a shy, distinctly pleased smile, sidling closer as Lorne appealed to his C.O. Edwards for a command ruling over some inanity in a futile attempt to salvage some dignity.

"Field archaeology?" Daniel murmured, his eyes sparkling. "I'm impressed."

"You should be."

"Weird how you didn't even know what Sam was doing this past week and yet you can make a distinction like that over my area of expertise," Daniel said confidentially, leaning in a little.

Jack leaned in too. "Don't spread it around," he ordered teasingly. "People might think I care."

"Yes," Daniel agreed softly, looking at him very directly. "They might." He glanced across at Teal'c, standing nearby, serenely watching their by-play. "Sam gets annoyed when you show that kind of disdain for what she cares about."

Carter would live.

"I do too."

Jack shrugged, not willing to concede but ruefully aware his willingness or otherwise was often a moot point where Daniel was concerned.

"Just be careful, Jack, please." Daniel squeezed Jack's arm meaningfully. He meant be nice.

Jack was easy with Daniel being close to him these days. Easier than he could ever have imagined in all the time Daniel was taken from him. Having Daniel safe and home, having this chance with his friend he'd believed he'd lost, made him easy with most things. Jack had lost his cutting edge, had moved past his need for distance almost without knowing, and so Daniel was open to him again, safe, relaxing into their old rhythm, his weary defensiveness forgotten.

There was so much warmth between them, such trust, he was simply going with the flow of their friendship, feeling they were getting closer, going deeper, all the time. It was good. It was all good. He was easy and he was making sure this time.

No more grief, not for either of them.

He found himself smiling now, as he so often did, liking Daniel's answering smile, liking the confidence and faith he saw. Daniel smiled more for him now than he ever had before. For all of them.

"Time for chow, I think," Edwards commented casually, his attention now on his men. Playtime was clearly over. "Be dark soon and I need to check on my men." He marched off, Lorne in attendance.

Daniel was looking up at the sky. "Sunset," he noted inconsequentially.

"I will remain with you, Daniel Jackson, if you wish to observe," Teal'c offered graciously.

"Me too." Jack squeezed Daniel's shoulder encouragingly and they wandered down through the long, sweet meadow grasses, starred with wildflowers bordering the camp, aiming for a bleached log stranded on the broad shale shore of the wide, serene river. Everywhere they looked there was a burst of colour, among the grasses, among the leaves, in the sky above.

Daniel didn't seem to notice, or at least to not mind being kept tucked safely between Jack and Teal'c when they sat. "It's beautiful," he sighed, drinking it in, pulling off his bandana, lifting his face to bathe in the sun.

Jack's fingers were twitching to smooth his rumpled hair. "What did you say they called this place?" he asked, prudently hanging onto his P-90. He tried half-heartedly, but he couldn't feel bad about being so distractible. They weren't exactly surrounded by ravaging alien hordes bent on mass destruction. The locals were mostly startled, that he recalled.

"Odokai," Daniel said dreamily, watching the sun dance on the clear water, flickering the reflections of the slim, graceful trees on the far shore. "Their name for themselves and their home."

"They are a quiet people," Teal'c observed with masterly understatement.

The few natives who'd showed their faces when Jack and his people came through the gate were extremely timid of strangers, but cautiously welcoming after a substantial gift of food. Their gratitude wasn't an overreaction. A long winter was just ending and it was too soon for them to begin to hunt. Jack appreciated the way the locals seemed to care not only for their land, but also for each other, a trait he tended to see far less often. People weren't exactly a cash crop.

The Odokai homes were simply constructed of what looked like reeds. Reed igloos, for want of a better word. The domes were oddly graceful, barely standing out from the forest surrounding them. From what little the team had been allowed to observe, technology appeared non-existent but Jack had the feeling it was because they didn't want material trappings, that they'd chosen not to go down that road rather than had it denied them. Daniel kept harping on about the Odokai being organic something or other. Even Jack was curious about why.

"They're accepting of our presence, but don't want significant contact with us," Daniel said regretfully. "I would've liked the opportunity to learn more about their culture and history but I guess we have to respect their earnestly expressed wish to be left alone." He sighed, despondently scuffing his boot in the shale. Then he straightened up. "What?" he asked suspiciously. "Why are you both looking at me like that?"

"Once more with feeling, Daniel," Jack urged him. "If you like, Teal'c and I could go round a few of them up at gunpoint for you to interrogate."

Daniel was horrified yet strangely drawn to this heart-warming offer, despite his best efforts at radiating disapproval. "Would you?" he asked feebly.

Jack beamed at him.

"As would I," Teal'c agreed generously.

"That's. No." Daniel was somewhat lacking in conviction. "No."

"Yet you feel no such compunction to respect the wishes of the men of SG-11," Teal'c pointed out an apparent ethical contradiction.

"The Odokai aren't storming around the galaxy destroying the extremely limited body of archaeological evidence and eradicating the historical record because it's quote 'in the way!'" Daniel argued hotly.

"We get the point!" Jack interrupted rapidly.

"Indeed," Teal'c seconded him. "It has been several years since O'Neill last destroyed irreplaceable archaeological evidence he felt was impeding him."

"You know, when you feel the need to share, don't let us hold you back or anything," Jack scowled malignantly at Teal'c.

"O'Neill is proof your brainwashing methods are successful, DanielJackson," Teal'c went on, taking Jack at his word.

"Brainwashing?" Daniel nibbled his lip musingly over this. He seemed quite pleased with the analogy, glancing around speculatively at the men in the camp behind them. A swift, mischievous grin dimpled.

"How's it going, by the way?" Jack asked, jerking a thumb over his shoulder in the general direction of the cliff and its massive carved doors. He was conscious of a need to focus, however vaguely, on his responsibilities.

"I have digital images of each section of the door," Daniel reported ebulliently, breaking out into an anticipatory smile. "Of the entire cliff-face in fact. I downloaded them onto my laptop for further study."

This tragic enthusiasm sadly suggested an evening of exciting cross-referencing, not Travel Scrabble, chess or Daniel's endearing rants and meanderings about life, the universe, sports, Jack and everything.

"You know," Jack said slyly, deciding to make his own entertainment, "the entire camp are already taking bets on whether you'll get those doors open or not."

"Start another book on when," Daniel instructed crisply, "not if."

A nice thought occurred to Jack. "Any insider information forthcoming on exactly when?"

Teal'c frowned over this broad hint, then got awfully pensive too.

"Watch the sunset, Jack," Daniel advised him kindly.

"What could it hurt?"

"Get over it, Jack."

"But?"

"Jack."

Teal'c watched the tree line, Daniel watched the sunset and Jack watched Daniel. He did this a lot, more than he ever had before, knowing it wouldn't be questioned. Daniel never noticed these things and everyone else knew how Jack was that whole year without him. He'd grieved more than he thought was possible, more than he imagined he could. Nothing had touched him so deeply since he lost Charlie. No one moved him the way Daniel did. It was only in losing Daniel that Jack opened himself to everything he meant to him. Daniel was the best friend he'd ever had.

Looking at his friend now, his vivid face serene, Jack had to ask himself again how he could ever have seen Daniel as some kind of threat to him, how he could've treated him the way he did. It was an error he'd promised himself he would not repeat or compound. Daniel was never going to pay the price for Jack's emotional failings, not ever again.

Hell, it was past time he cared more about Daniel than he did about himself.

He sat patiently, waiting for Daniel to snap back to reality as the sky streaked rosy with gold and peach, slowly darkening to an intense tangerine. Waiting and watching, his eyes were drawn lazily to trace the way Daniel's fine, fair hair hugged the contours of his head, with errant curls and tendrils here and there. He didn't even realise he was so tuned out until he missed Daniel's quiet question to Teal'c.

"I continue to find Kel'No'Reem difficult, Daniel Jackson. I would prefer to be alone."

"If you're sure?"

"I am."

Daniel accepted Teal'c's reassurance reluctantly.

Jack was inclined to be indignant. Daniel's assertiveness was great, he was behind it one hundred and ten percent, except when Daniel wanted to do something he didn't. Such as, random example here, inviting half the camp to share his tent!

Someone's stomach rumbled and Daniel got up, looking pained. "I guess we can't hold out forever," he grumbled. He always tried. He was not a fan of MREs and

he was a man who would eat bugs and weird alien goo without hesitation and act as if he were grateful for the honour.

Jack thought it would be a calculated cruelty to tell Daniel that Edwards hadn't weaselled a good cup of coffee out of his team in three months. This was simply too much for him to take on top of the boil-in-the-bag dining experience for the second week in a row.

With the sun almost gone and the air sharpening, the camp was quieter, most of the men settled inside their tents. A CD player was spilling out Barry Manilow of all things from one barracks, while a spirited poker game was underway in the other. Several smaller tents had been erected for Edwards and his officers, one for Teal'c, plus one Jack and Daniel would be sharing.

Carter had excused herself without compunction for another science project Daniel would be pissed Jack hadn't cared enough about to catch the name of. She was ready to gate through if they found something techy and interesting but Jack doubted they'd be seeing her any time soon. The Odokai didn't exactly strike him as conspicuous electronic consumers.

The field kitchen was a fancy pants name for a tent with a few tables and chairs where everyone could grab a coffee, fresh drinking water, or boil a bag of whatever allegedly balanced nutrition the SGC had inflicted on them this trip.

Edwards was the only occupant, sitting scowling darkly over a tall, polished steel cup of coffee, and what, if given the benefit of the doubt, might be described as pie. It was actually a toaster pastry but Edwards was really making it work for him.

Daniel's face fell. He trailed unhappily after Jack and Teal'c to inspect the tempting array of delicious blue-plate specials, petulantly picking out the spaghetti menu almost at random. After unpacking, sorting the contents and irritably dumping his bag into the field stove to boil, he dragged himself and the rest of his three-course meal with whine over to the table to sit with the colonel.

"Vanilla cappuccino?" Daniel asked, eyeing a beverage sachet he'd just unearthed in his spaghetti/meat sauce menu pack.

"Don't even try it," Edwards warned him, holding out his cup for inspection.

Daniel slumped.

Jack decided to live dangerously with beef teriyaki while Teal'c, after careful perusal, risked the western beans for some inexplicable reason. Possibly for no other reason than he owned a Stetson. It certainly wasn't for anything fun. The guy wasn't even sharing his tent. Then they closed in on Daniel to begin the traditional barter session in the hopes of reconstructing a meal one of them actually wanted to eat.

Teal'c had applesauce and traded Jack a chocolate mint pound cake for an almond poppy seed one. After some thought, Daniel decided to keep his fudge brownie but traded crackers with cheese spread for Jack's chocolate chip cookies. Jack assured himself that as a sign of affection, giving up his cookies was waaay less obvious than notes in Daniel's locker or asking Teal'c to ask Daniel if he liked Jack.

No one was willing to risk the vanilla cappuccino, so Daniel ventured over bravely to investigate the coffee pot, with everyone watching anxiously. After a horrified shudder, he pronounced it caffeine. Teal'c got some water.

"The really frightening thing is," Edwards observed gloomily as he sipped his hot beverage, "these are the new and improved Happy Meals." It seemed to perk him up, reducing Daniel to a state of inchoate dread, his gaze fixed on the field stove.

They retrieved their entrées. They stoically ate their entrées. Then they ate everything else extremely quickly in an effort to take away the taste of their entrées.

"So, Dr. Jackson?" Edwards prompted as Daniel munched on his appropriated cookies, looking slightly more human than he had pre or even during the spaghetti/meat sauce menu. "What are your plans for tomorrow? The general was vague about what this exercise entailed. Deliberately so, I thought."

"Instant, total, unquestioning obedience," Jack interpolated cheerfully before Daniel could speak.

Edwards was disconcerted to see Daniel nodding agreement to this sentiment as he gamely swallowed his last mouthful of cookie.

"Jack is exaggerating," Daniel informed Edwards reassuringly. "I don't mind questions."

Edwards appeared to have no response to that.

"He has his reasons," Jack prompted evilly.

"There are three main causes of accidents on digs," Daniel responded guilelessly and with frightening earnestness. "Ignorance, heedlessness and most ludicrous of all, machismo. There is no place on an excavation for unthinking or uncivilised behaviour," he pronounced with calm finality.

"Your team can get the three-minute version of that tomorrow, or the three-hour," Jack added, grinning fiendishly. "I should point out the choice is not yours."

"The fact you've been running a geological survey on P3X-403 suggests you and your men have some transferable skills," Daniel acknowledged, eyeing Edwards as

dubiously as he had the coffee pot earlier. "I have to effect entry to the site and conduct a preliminary survey." He looked slightly more hopeful as a thought occurred. "Do you have anyone who's good with the video camera? We'll need a complete record of all artefacts and possible texts in situ."

"He means don't move anything," Jack translated, his grin widening.

"The resonance scanner and other geological equipment may also prove to be useful," Daniel speculated happily, oblivious to any possible mutinous military undercurrents. "Major Lorne can help me with mapping the site, and with the CAD software you have, even prepare a computer model."

Jack had a strong suspicion Daniel's fondness for computer models of his precious sites were the main reason Carter had cried off from the mission. The woman had serious smarts and approximately the same level of resistance to Daniel's wiles as Jack did. It was bad enough doing something boring as crap without Daniel batting his eyes at you and making you happy to help.

Cheerfully admitting he existed in this exact mental space, Jack settled back to appreciate Daniel painting for Edwards a beguiling picture of ruthless exploitation he was the only one not to see. In fact, he had the warm certainty of a man whose passion and enthusiasm would be embraced and shared. This was where Jack and Teal'c came in. They were experts at the looming, visible threat thing.

Jack doubted Edwards would prove to be too much of a handful for Daniel to handle. He had the punchy look of a cobra which hadn't worked out the cute, cuddly, little bundle of bouncy fur was a mongoose until its ass was being served up as steak tartare. And Daniel was just getting warmed up.

He adored watching Daniel's unquenchable mojo at full force. His personal, complementary contribution to the exercise would be crowing over the stunned discomfiture of the stricken victims littering his innocent archaeologist's energetic wake.

Archaeology was great when Jack was watching it knock the socks off other people, even people he thought were okay. The best thing about it, though, was what it did for Daniel, lighting him up with passion and an unstinting kid-at-Christmas wonder Jack guessed professional archaeologists were supposed to have shaken off their first week at school. Daniel loved his research, he lived for it, and he didn't care who knew it. Jack cared. He cared a lot. Daniel was better than all of them. He was original. This was why he opened the Stargate when no one else could and why he was here.

"Look," Jack told Edwards. "This is a training mission. Your men are here to learn. Daniel is here to teach. This is not a pointless exercise. We actually want to know what's behind those doors and the chances are, whatever it is, we'll be able to use it somehow. This stuff is, well, er, it's, er, kind of, er, important."

He was impressing the hell out of Daniel. He could tell. The man was all big blue eyes, flushed cheeks and dimpling grin. Edwards was staring too, but definitely not for the same reason and not cute by any stretch of the imagination.

"The sooner you accept that archaeology is effectively intelligence gathering out here, the better for you and for your men," Jack elaborated firmly, trying to claw back some semblance of command credibility. "Plus, like it or loathe it," and he left his rapt audience to decide which on side of the fence he was sitting, "on the direct order of the President, the SGC is obligated to bring back not just the doohickeys and the rocks you've been looking for, for the past three months, but the pots, the bones, and where possible, the scrolls too. We have to evaluate the scientific and cultural value of every mission as well as fulfilling our standing orders to locate tech, weapons and allies. Eventually, this will make sense to you."

"I agree with Jack," Daniel backed him up emphatically to the shock of no one seated at the table. "Archaeology does have a place at the SGC whether you appreciate that or not. These are not dead cultures." He gestured eloquently around him. "Our enemies are living out what we popularly consider to be myth and legend, not history. The past is our key to understanding, and hopefully, eventually defeating those enemies, like the Goa'uld, but it's also part of what's helped us to forge the alien alliances we have and to assess how the neutral races might react to given situations."

He leaned forward, unconsciously reaching out across the table with clasped, compelling hands. "Communication is vital. It's the single most important function of a first contact team like SG-1. Every mission, every dig has the potential to yield scrolls, tablets, pictographs - vital texts which aid in the translation of the many written and spoken ancient and alien languages we've encountered. Language!" he said passionately. "It's the one universal constant of sentient beings."

Edwards met Daniel's eyes. He nodded gravely, sober as a judge. "I've got work." He pushed back his chair and exited the tent with impressive speed and zero dignity, leaving Daniel sitting seething with indignation and Jack pleased he still had more credibility as a sonovabitch than Edwards did. Daniel hadn't made him run away for years.

"A tactical withdrawal," Teal'c noted.

"He's even ruder than you are," Daniel bitched, apparently blaming Jack for this.

Jack patted Daniel gently. "You can get him tomorrow," he promised. "I'll order him to stay put until you're done with him and if he tries to get away again, I'll let you shoot him."

"Good!"

Jack decided it was time for him to execute a tactical withdrawal too. With the ease of long experience, he took one of Daniel's hands and pulled. Where his hands went, Daniel tended to follow. He was unable to communicate without them. Once he was on his feet, Jack gently propelled him towards the exit, glancing back at Teal'c before they went out. "I dare you to drink that cappuccino," he taunted.

Teal'c's eyebrows soared.

Jack loved when he did that. No one rose to the bait quicker than the big guy did.

"Jack?"

"Hmm?"

"Colonel Edwards isn't under pressure."

"Not right this minute, no," Jack acknowledged carefully, wondering where Daniel was going with this. "Apart from you, obviously."

Daniel took this unflattering observation well. "You still think he's a good man?"

"Meaning you don't?"

"Meaning I want to know what you think."

"Makepeace was a good soldier. You remember him? Tall, balding? Gung ho? Jerk?" Jack prompted.

Daniel's lips thinned. He remembered.

"He used to call Teal'c 'the Jaffa.'" Makepeace had names for Daniel too. "You see Edwards treat Teal'c different than anyone else?"

"No," Daniel said softly, smiling a little.

"He's a good man who needs experience of all the insane crap which can happen out here."

"Intelligent and willing to learn?"

"Intelligent and will learn," Jack corrected, erring on the side of honesty.

Daniel shivered, hugging himself as he walked, glancing up now and then at the stars. The sky was clear, the air cool and nature-scented. Pretty near perfect. "No matter how many times we sleep under alien skies, I never get used to it," he said

quietly. "It's the stars more than anything which remind you how far you are away from home."

It had been a long time since Jack was really certain what home was. Mostly, home was his team, along with Hammond and Fraiser. Not a place at all. He wondered if it was the same for Daniel.

Daniel ducked into the tent while Jack walked beyond it, taking one last look around, checking the sentries had good positions and all was quiet in the C.P, close by them. He was nominally running the exercise, but he didn't want or need to ride herd too closely on Edwards. All the guy needed was to loosen up a little. There was a time and place to be a hard-ass and it wasn't always where or when you expected. Daniel had already started to help Edwards see this. This exercise would let him see a little more and when he was least expecting it, when he thought the worst was over, Jack and Teal'c would hit him with their patented alien diplomacy double-act, and Daniel would show him how that worked too.

He went inside and found Daniel brushing his teeth, shrugging off his jacket and trying to log onto his laptop at the same time.

Jack rolled his eyes disapprovingly at the haphazard multi-tasking but said nothing. He was saving his strength to mediate bigger, badder arguments. They were sure to come, especially once Daniel got them inside those doors and started to investigate whatever was buried in the mountain.

"I hope we find something cool," he remarked absently, securing his weapon, shucking his jacket and parking his ass on his bunk with a gratitude he didn't want anyone to see.

"We always find something cool."

The dignified, toothbrush-muffled retort had Jack grinning again. His grin faded as he guiltily jerked his gaze away from Daniel's ass, his fatigues clinging faithfully to the tight, perfect curves. Daniel grabbed his tin cup, hustled outside, gargled, rinsed and came back in a better mood than he left. He liked to brush his teeth. He liked the taste of the mint. It was one of those things.

Daniel stood by the camp table a moment, ignoring his laptop in favour of looking seriously at Jack.

Jack quirked his eyebrows, wondering if a mean game of Dirty Scrabble was on offer after all. He was surprised, but definitely okay with it, when Daniel chose to come over and sit next to him. The cot creaked but held up to their combined weight quite well.

"I wanted to talk to you," Daniel confided, staring straight ahead at the wall of the tent.

"I figured." He could feel the heat from Daniel's thigh and shoulder, pressing into him. "What's up?" he asked, keeping it matter-of-fact. Something was on Daniel's mind and he was offering Jack a rare opportunity to finesse it out of him.

"The mission to P3X-403?" Daniel said hesitantly. "Not so much Edwards and his men, I've been through a similar dance with most of the teams we've worked with and he got the point I was making quicker than most." Daniel thought about this. "Actually, he got the point Iron Shirt and the massed tribes of Unas made. There's nothing quite like an imminent massacre to focus even the most rigid military mind."

Jack was sure Colonel Edwards would thank Dr. Jackson for this glowing tribute.

"It was the Unas," Daniel confided. "A thriving, evolving society with a healthy value system and a level of honesty and honour which far exceeded our own in that situation. Negotiating with them, working closely with them in the mine this past week, seeing how direct and generous they are, totally without duplicity or the comfortable self-deceit which seems to typify our own culture." Daniel glanced at Jack to see how he was taking this. "Seeing the value they as a culture and as individuals place on honesty, it got me thinking, it helped me realise some things."

Patience was required. Daniel would eventually explain, if Jack waited him out and didn't piss him off in the meantime. "Unas?" he queried carefully.

"Thank you for not referring to them as big stinky monsters this time."

"You're welcome."

"The Unas. Their lives are simpler."

Tooth and claw, mostly, with the occasional clubbing thrown in for good measure. It didn't get any simpler.

"They don't lie." Daniel turned to him, mildly watching Jack's face and his responses to this. He couldn't seem to emphasise this particular point enough. "They don't dissemble. Their language is rudimentary but it serves to communicate their wants and desires, their expectations, their laws and responsibilities. The essence, the spirit of what they want to share with you. It isn't masked by misunderstandings. Their vocabulary, their body language, their social structure, all designed around honour and respect not just for one another but for their home, their world, and even for their enemies. Like their culture, their language has integrity. It, it doesn't get in the way."

Okay, this was new. He'd never heard Daniel talking quite like this before. "You love language," he reminded him. "You get giddy when people use your favourite words. You *have* favourite words. Now, suddenly, words get in your way?"

"Sometimes."

"I'm sorry, Daniel, I'm not following this at all," Jack admitted, frustrated at how slow he was tonight. He was usually better at this stuff. As long as he didn't have to talk, that was. Listening, he could do. Usually. It bothered him that words were definitely getting in his way. Daniel really didn't do this confiding thing a lot and Jack felt he should be offering back something more than polite incomprehension. Strong, silent support wasn't quite cutting it here.

"You don't think we use language to frame our thoughts, our feelings?" Daniel asked him, earnestly. "The compromises we make, the lies we tell each other and ourselves? We use language to hide as much as we use it to communicate intent."

Daniel was focused and resolute, clearly knowing where he was going with this, while Jack was pissed and feeling he was just along for the ride. There didn't seem much he could do to contribute until he figured out what was going on with Daniel. Sometimes, he just went too deep for Jack.

"Well, as I said, I've been thinking. I guess I've been thinking and questioning a lot recently. My assumptions, my memories, my judgements and decisions. I remember everything up until the point I ascended, Jack. I know why I made that decision," Daniel said slowly, his eyes very far away, looking inward. "I needed to feel I belonged."

This left Jack wincing. It wasn't anything he hadn't thought himself this past year, but it still hurt to hear Daniel prove him right. All he could do was take Daniel's shoulder in a comforting clasp and hold onto him, like he should have held onto him before.

"I wouldn't unmake that, I've changed too much because of it, but I understand now why I chose to come back. Not only because I could do more here, but because I could be myself. The compromises of ascension were too great for me. I don't remember, not details, specifics, I just, I feel it." He seemed to really need Jack to understand this.

Jack wanted to show Daniel he was with him, that he understood and could even accept. They'd moved beyond blame, both of them. He slid his arm right around Daniel's shoulders, hugging him into his side.

"Everything I needed was here, Jack. I - I know that now. Everyone I care about. My family. You were here. It took me so long to learn and accept what you were all trying to tell me when I was dying. That I made a difference to you."

Daniel's voice was so strained.

"If you know you made the choice?" Jack offered, finally finding his voice, embarrassingly gruff and grateful.

"I know," Daniel interrupted, gently insistent.

"Then that's good," Jack assured him warmly. Better than good, but he didn't want to get carried away, not when he was already hugging and this was serious stuff.

"You see?" Daniel shook his head, eyes rueful.

No. He didn't. He was still hoping they'd come to the eureka point. The executive summary. Soon. He liked hugging Daniel way too much to allow himself to really get into it like this. It was very difficult for him to let go. So, he worked, he kept it easy.

"Sometimes, language is a hindrance and words can't frame what you need to say." Daniel reached around, took Jack's chin in his hand and turned his startled face. He looked at Jack, very intense and very afraid, and then his eyes cleared, he smiled, and he kissed him.

You were here.

You.

Oh.

Oh, god.

Sweet, serene kiss, because Daniel knew, knew exactly. Tender, murmuring pressure, lingering over his mouth, strong body leaning into him, arms coming around him. Jack was flaming and shaken, kissing back, he couldn't help that, holding onto Daniel, holding him tight, couldn't stop. It was good, it was so good. It was Daniel.

Daniel, sitting back from him the small distance Jack's arms allowed, dreamy-eyed and determined, his fingers resting over Jack's cheek.

"No," Jack said blindly.

"No?" Daniel smiled waveringly and kissed him again, his gentle hand cupping around Jack's head, keeping him close as their mouths moved tenderly. Moved together. "No?" he whispered.

"No. I can't. *I can't.*" Jack didn't deny he wanted to. At this moment. Dammit, dammit! He couldn't lie. He wanted this so badly and Daniel knew it as well as he did. They both wanted. "I made a promise!"

"I made a promise too," Daniel said, solemn and determined. "A promise to myself. Now I'm making one to you. I'm going to seduce you."

"Daniel!" Jack hissed. It didn't help he hadn't let go and Daniel's curious fingertips were delicately tracing the lines of his throat. His skin burned where Daniel touched and he found it hard to swallow. Impossible to push Daniel, in all his gentle reverence, away.

"Better be prepared to defend yourself, Jack," Daniel warned him, "because I won't quit until you give in."

"I can't. I shouldn't have to explain why!" Sitting here in the middle of the camp, surrounded by the men he was commanding, kissing his friend, wanting him, barely maintaining enough control not to just push him down, take it all the way. He couldn't be more compromised. He wouldn't let himself think about Daniel this way. He'd never allowed...he, he couldn't. Everything inside him lashed out and he'd promised, not again. He wouldn't be that way.

They were *friends*.

"You'll have to explain why we can't be together if I'm going to demolish all your denials," Daniel explained patiently.

"Daniel."

"No more compromises, Jack. I've decided."

"What about what I've decided?" Jack demanded, unable to take in what he was hearing, what was happening. That Daniel could possibly want him.

"Fight you for it," Daniel retorted with a flash of grimacing humour. "You can take care of yourself."

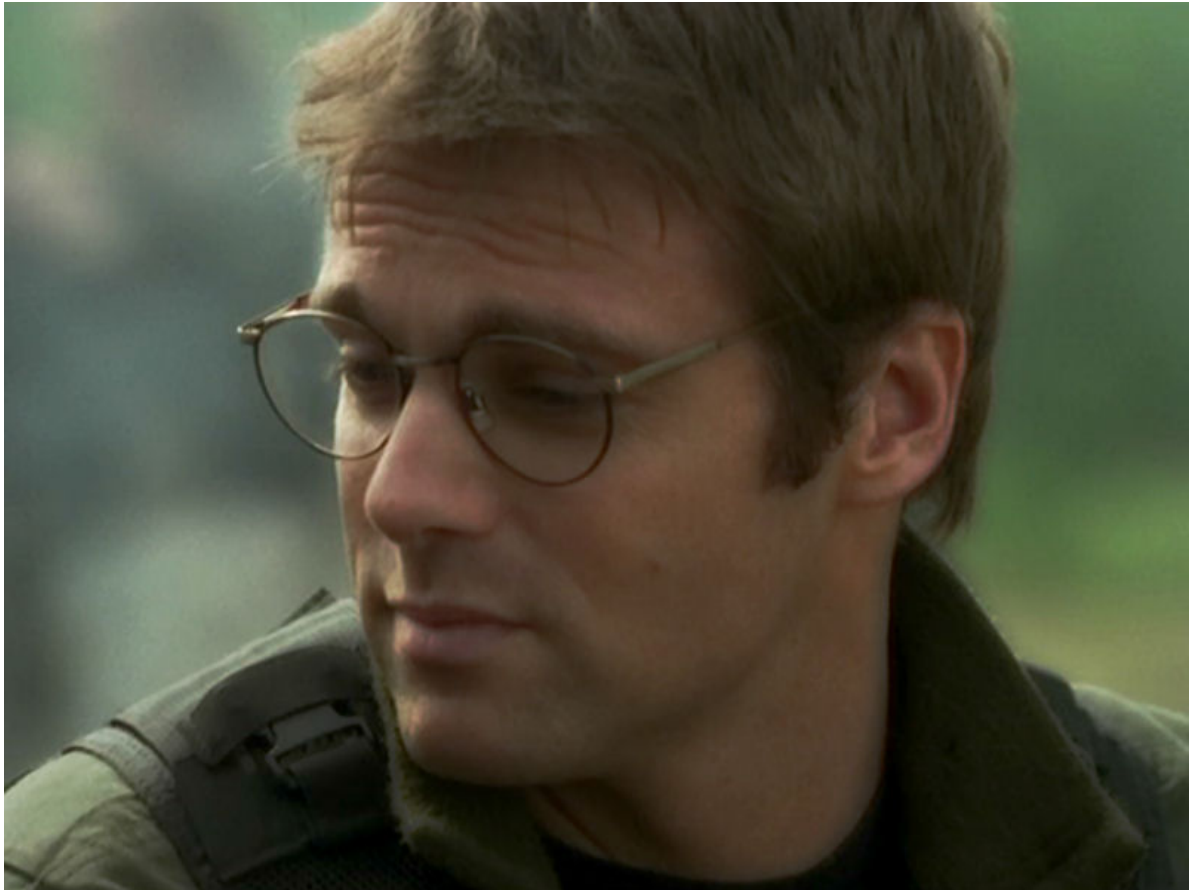
"I intend to!" For Daniel's sake, not his own. One of them had to make sense, had to keep their head. This wasn't possible. It couldn't happen. Wanting was not enough. Wishes weren't horses and beggars didn't ride.

"Good," Daniel assured him. "You'd better make a start, then, because *I* intend to have you." Looking decidedly impish, he brushed a tiny, teasing kiss over Jack's mouth and slipped away, quite pleased with himself.

Jack just sat there, speechless with shock, while Daniel sat down in front of his laptop and pulled his journal towards him, his hands hardly trembling at all as he took up his pen and started a fresh entry.

He wanted to say he was an absolute bastard, that was why this couldn't happen, that he knew his own limitations. There wasn't anything he could say Daniel didn't know about him too.

Daniel wanted him anyway and Jack truly didn't know what to do.



Daniel sincerely hoped he looked, and sounded, more confident than he felt. Waaay more.

The silence behind him was absolute, but he didn't dare look around. He couldn't give Jack an inch because he *was* going to win. He'd promised himself he would not be passive, not any longer, he would not allow himself to merely react. Jack had pushed him away before and he had colluded, never confronting what was really happening between them until all his choices were gone. All but the one Oma had offered him.

It was in the past and he was impatient of that. He was a different person now. Jack was different too. Softer. He'd made a peace with himself, different but perhaps no less difficult for him than the path Daniel had taken. It was the story of their friendship, their story from the earliest days. Opposites, at odds, coming at

each other from different places, yet always coming together. Daniel had hardened. He'd grown. He'd had to leave his life to learn it was right for him, it was his place.

Jack was about the opposite, forced by Daniel to be more feeling, not less. A lot of the lessons Jack had learned in the military were turned on their heads during his time with SG-1. He went from being the one with the power, the weapons, the technology, to being little more or less than the victim of circumstance, of whatever was coming at them through the Stargate.

SG-1 was the team most often in the difficult position of having to make first contact, bearing the brunt of many of the attacks made on Earth and the SGC. Jack had had to learn to deal with being outnumbered, outmanoeuvred, outgunned by forces vastly superior in ways he'd never imagined, never been trained to face. His comfortable certainties had been eroded, attacked and even defeated by all these external, alien forces he'd been exposed to.

Daniel had watched Jack's cynicism and bitterness grow in the face of repeated failures to achieve their primary mission goals, yet he'd still forced his friend to open himself, to feel even more. He'd helped to strip away Jack's natural defences and felt the responsibility of this, even though he'd come to terms with his part in it, with the blame.

Was it any wonder the two of them had turned on each other? Never meaning to, never consciously, never dealing with the reality of all those changes affecting them both. They'd both thrown up walls to hide the raw feelings, the losses and disappointments.

Daniel ached now to think of them losing the one thing that had so strongly marked their friendship, made them unique to one another. They'd lost their ability to communicate when they'd both needed it most. That connection they'd shared, call it comprehension or empathy or compassion, a reaching out, all of those things, had festered.

Daniel didn't know how this would turn out. How the two of them could or would be together. He knew only he needed to try. What he and Jack were to each other, as friends? He saw potential for so much more. He hoped for so much more.

With all of their history, with the pain and the problems that had driven them apart, made them realise how much they needed and valued and loved each other exactly when it was too damned late to do anything but suffer without one another, Jack wouldn't let himself see they'd moved on, that they could be more to each other. He was afraid and he would fight because it was who he was. A protector. It was his strongest instinct, his defining quality.

Jack was not always right.

"We have a lot to talk about," Daniel said firmly, opening up the digital footage of his doorway on the laptop. He kept his eyes on the carved stone as he spoke, trying to trace out familiar patterns and shapes in the whole. The familiar process helped to steady him. He needed this, really, he was more than nervous, he was scared. "I guess, I guess I'm a loner."

Jack said nothing.

"It took me all the time I've known you to realise I fit." He straightened, consciously, in his seat. "That we fit."

He was tired of being the one to react in love, the one to be kissed. He was too slow to find focus with other people, terribly slow. Sarah and Sha'uri, he'd loved them, had given them all he could, little as that was, there was no mistake in his feelings, but he'd never sought them out. Never put them first. More lessons he'd been slow to learn, slower still to put aside blame and simply accept. He was who he was, a loner, a scholar, a soldier. With Jack, he would be different. He would be the man he was only just beginning to find and to know. He was still afraid of needing Jack this much, but he was taking it, he was open.

"Get back over here!"

Jack's abrupt, muted roar made him jump and then grin.

"Throwing in the towel already?" he asked brightly.

"No!"

"More kissing?" he offered, willing to stretch a point.

"No!" The need for discretion was severely hampering Jack's volume. He sounded as if he were about to pop a vein.

"Then I'm busy," Daniel retorted, his eyes once more gliding over sinuous, alien curves.

"Don't make me come fetch you!" Jack threatened.

"I think," Daniel confessed naively, conscious of a very specific stir of excitement, a disturbingly intense, literal pang, "I'd like to be fetched."

Jack let out this outraged, strangled snort of laughter.

"See!" Daniel glanced around triumphantly. "You want this too."

"Daniel!"

"Honestly, Jack, you're safer if I stay here," Daniel advised kindly. "I really want to kiss you again."

"Daniel!"

"Although, truthfully, what I really want is to pin you down and make you sweat." He shot Jack a slightly apologetic look over his shoulder. "It's the whole Air Force thing. And the tent."

"The whole Air Force thing?" Jack repeated giddily.

Daniel glanced around enquiringly in time to catch him shuddering.

"God help me," Jack groaned heartrendingly. "I know exactly what you mean."

"And the, and the tent," Daniel insisted, frankly wondering at the erotic magnetism of canvas. "There's a lot of camping in our future." He was drawn to stare at Jack again, lingering over the strong lines, the experience marking his handsome face. "A lot of lovemaking, period," he announced, decidedly.

"You've known me, what? Eight years in all? Eight? Now, out of the blue, you're feeling the call of the wild thing?" Jack complained aggrievedly.

"Not out of the blue," Daniel corrected him, wanting to be fair. "For a while. For a long time before I ascended, I think. I'm just, I'm slow." He frowned as Jack strove for words. "This isn't about apportioning blame, either," he warned him. "Stop trying to hide in irrelevancies."

"I'm not!"

"Then get over here and kiss me the way we both know you want to," Daniel challenged him.

"I can't."

"You want to."

"I won't."

"You still want to." He turned back to his laptop. "You will," he said softly, smiling a little.

"Credit me with some backbone."

"I credit you with being my friend," Daniel retorted coolly. "And with having a dick."

There was another stunned silence.

"All I wanted was a game of Scrabble," Jack bleated eventually.

"I know the kind of Scrabble *you* like, especially after a few beers," Daniel admitted cheerfully. "If you want, we can try out some of those triple word scores?"

"I don't want," Jack argued with more panic than conviction. He wanted, alright, and they both knew it.

"I know I'm supposed to be your pure, innocent little-"

"Pure?" Jack parroted incredulously, avoiding Daniel's searching eyes.

"The thought of being the first man I've been with doesn't turn you on?" Daniel asked politely, curious about this. While he waited for a response, he busied himself increasing the magnification on his image and beginning his second careful sweep of the carvings. "Because it turns me on, knowing you've nev-"

Jack cleared his throat desperately loudly.

"Assuming a lot, am I?" Daniel translated sweetly, sneaking another glance.

Jack looked as if he'd been stuffed.

"Assuming accurately," Daniel acknowledged, satisfied. It shouldn't be important to him, but it was. He didn't want Jack to be more experienced than he was and it wasn't only that he wanted sex to be about them both learning, together, not teaching or pre-conceived ideas from either of them about what was good for them. He didn't want to be a second or a third, or the latest in a long line, he wanted to be the only man to make Jack O'Neill feel this way, the only one to reach him.

Daniel never knew whether it was a strength or a flaw he was such a private person, he found it so difficult to set aside his reserve. Both, maybe. Being so bold, speaking out so strongly about his wants and desires was very difficult for him. Exhausting. He was trying to be honest about his sexuality, his identity. He was grateful their friendship was in this place, that they could be bantering back and forth this way, not cutting into each other as they would have in the past. He felt more certain than ever that they'd both grown during their time apart and it meant a great deal to him Jack wasn't shutting him out when they both knew that he could.

It was still easier to look at his laptop screen than it was to look at Jack and as another heavy silence fell, he let the language draw him in. The carvings reminded him of the organic complexity of the Celtic languages but were no more than an

echo of those. Knowing he was reaching, searching out the familiar and not finding it, he was beginning to be excited. Seriously excited. This was a truly alien language to him. The second, he supposed, he was trying to translate today. It was a slight concern to him he was doing marginally better at comprehending Jack than he was these symbols and no one in the camp was betting how long it would be until he got Colonel O'Neill in the sack. Tomorrow could possibly prove very embarrassing, although not more painful than his boldness this evening.

"I know it would help you out a lot if you could get mad at me and stay mad," he told Jack sympathetically, wanting to make it clear that he wasn't unreasonable. The last thing he wanted was to hurt his stubbornly protective friend but he didn't feel he had much choice in his approach. Jack was basically in need of the metaphorical zat-blast to the ass and however he personally felt about it, Daniel was pledged to deliver. "But I'm happy you can't. We're, I think we're past that. Both of us are."

"I know." Jack, oddly tender in his reluctance, had to respond to this. "You're a colossal pain in the ass, Daniel Jackson." His slightly helpless warmth towards Daniel was a balm, a pleasure freely offered and one that was once again dependable.

"You like that about me," Daniel spoke out, teasing again, trying his utmost to disguise a shy breathlessness which overwhelmed him whenever he was struck by a sense of the reality of what he was doing, finessing Jack into admitting his feelings and then, as promptly as he could manage it, into bed with him.

"I do not."

"You told Colonel Edwards I was well worth it."

"I lied."

"He's nice. He, er, he." Daniel hitched around in his seat and demonstrated how nice Colonel Edwards had been, reaching up to squeeze his shoulder as Edwards had after Iron Shirt had chosen to accept their obeisance and let them live. The man's generosity had surprised him. He hadn't felt he'd earned it.

It didn't appear Jack entirely supported this precise assessment of 'nice'.

"I was surprised in the beginning how demonstrative military officers could be in times of severe stress," Daniel elaborated wickedly, "Even officers who aren't you."

A surly look suggested Jack knew he was being baited. He lay down, stretching himself comfortably out on his bunk, arms tucked behind his head.

Daniel found himself staring at the BDUs straining across Jack's crotch. It was much more intriguing than anything unfolding behind him on the monitor screen.

"You're the only one who's ever held my hand, though," he babbled on, quite distracted.

The fabric was shiny over the buttons, faded and creased where it traced familiar curves.

"See anything you like?" Jack enquired politely.

"Yes." Why else would he be ogling?

"Oy."

"I really want to be over there with you," Daniel acknowledged with a faint sigh, stoically turning back to his laptop. "You're very engaging when you don't know whether to kiss me or kill me. I'm only sorry I didn't read this, this *look* you get, sooner. We could've had a lot more fun."

"Daniel, look," Jack began, then stopped right away.

Willing to wait Jack out, Daniel patiently tried once again to focus on his carvings, because if there was any kind of repeated pattern or symbol here, he was damned if he was seeing it.

"God, I wish you were easier to lie to," Jack sighed. "Wanting, it's not enough."

"You do want me, though?" Daniel's heart thudded painfully. Relief. Gratitude. Fright. Pretty much in equal measure.

"You know I..." Jack cleared a suddenly raspy throat. "You know. In the, er, the moment. I shouldn't, though, and I can't."

"That's where you're wrong."

"I'm not wrong."

"I need you. We need each other."

"We're friends. Can't that be enough?"

"Not for either of us, and you know it too, or your eyes wouldn't follow me the way they do."

"I didn't mean," Jack apologised in a stifled tone.

"I'm glad that you do."

"I made peace with it. With myself."

"It's not enough," Daniel said sincerely. "I've learned that. The compromises are too great. We have to go on."

"Together?" Jack asked heavily.

"Could you - could you bear to let me go?" Daniel asked bravely. Jack's body jerked but he didn't look up at Daniel or speak. "I can't let you go either."

"I can't sleep with you, Daniel, and I won't. I've moved on from this place you're apparently just finding and you, trust me, you need to move on too."

"You haven't moved so far, Jack. We kissed. We."

Jack was patient with him, careful, even smiling a little despite the gravity in his dark, beautiful eyes. Everything he was, everything he'd learned to be, invited Daniel's trust.

"You want to sleep with me," Daniel went on, "And even though I want it too, now you say you won't. You're going to have to do some thinking, Jack, you're going to have to clarify, because with the attraction you feel for me, I don't get the distinction you're apparently making. Wanting to and not. It's the not part that doesn't work for me. Doing the time but not the crime." As Daniel heaped analogies, Jack petulantly pulled the pillow over his face. "They're both sins, if you want to look at it that way, one of omission and one of commission."

"I can't take philosophy on top of everything else!" Jack complained piteously.

"Shall I keep it simple?"

"Please."

Simple. Daniel could do simple. He could! "Want to see my scar?" he offered.

"For cryin' out loud!" Another muted roar sounded from the wounded soldier under the pillow.

"I know that means yes."

"We're arguing in circles, Daniel," Jack sighed.

"All you have to do is give in and we can stop."

"I was just in the mood for Scrabble," Jack whined plaintively, apparently to himself.

"I'm in the mood for sex."

"Is it really the tent?"

"Also the Air Force thing. The thought of your position at the apex of the chain of command is disturbingly arousing to me."

"You can't say stuff like that to me."

"Why not? You above all people should applaud my strategy of using my opponent's weaknesses against him."

"Not when your opponent is me."

"I'm making you fight both of us," Daniel explained. "You can't win a war if you have to fight on two fronts. And," he added daringly, "a rear."

Jack emerged, somewhat wild about the eyes and cutely tufted around the hairline, from behind the pillow to gape incredulously at Daniel. His powers of speech seemed to have once again deserted him.

Daniel folded his arms across his chest and did his very best to look like a stalker.

"Can't we just play a nice game?" Jack pleaded.

Daniel smiled at that. "We're playing a very nice game."

"One which doesn't involve torturing me to the point of insanity," Jack riposted tartly.

"Strip poker?"

Jack just about managed to turn another snort of laughter into a growl. Daniel told him it was cute and then a shout for "Dr. Jackson!" went up in the camp. Astonished, he got to his feet and stooped to lift the tent flap. A hand clamped vice-like on his shoulder, he took the jacket and Beretta thrust at him, then Jack moved out past him, his P-90 raised as he ducked out of the tent. Daniel followed immediately, finding everyone spilling out of their tents, armed, milling and confused.

"Dr. Jackson!"

Daniel stepped out from behind Jack's sheltering, over-protective bulk and headed off towards the caller as another shout went up. He broke into a run, Jack cursing as he emerged out from behind the relative cover of the C.P. tent onto completely open ground.

"Daniel!"

"Doctor!"

The whole camp seemed to be hard on Daniel's heels as he ran towards the cliff face and their excited sentries.

"Look up, to the top, the top!"

Daniel looked up automatically, astonished when he saw a silvery radiance bathe the rock at the top of the escarpment. He glanced around and for the first time saw Odokai's moons in the clear night sky, three of them, the central moon larger than its two satellites.

"That's amazing," he called out to Jack as he and Teal'c peeled away from Edwards and Lorne, focused on restoring order as there was no immediate threat for the men to respond to.

He staggered to a halt, mouth falling open as the cliff face seemed to burst into flame, a clean, sweeping sheet of radiance its entire expanse. Wild-fire raced down, burning the rock to silver, to stars, three moons at the centre, their rays streaking down to strike the faces of two tall, armoured men standing either side of the door, outstretched hands clasped. One had a crown and a sword, the other a sword and a bow, long hair spilling down their backs, flickering in an unseen breeze.

Daniel stopped breathing, looking everywhere at once, awestruck as each image burst from the rock. Trees bordered the men, graceful, rich with fruit. An army of archers and swordsmen, much smaller in scale, stood among them, poised on the brink of fighting, or ceasing fire, Daniel was uncertain. At the extreme edge of the escarpment, to his left, there was a tall, angular city, perhaps ruled by the man who wore the crown. Mirroring that, on the right, stood a single tree, its roots artfully probing into the ground at the foot of the cliff, its uppermost branches reaching the top.

"Incredible!" Daniel gasped. "Monumental." Literally!

"I have never seen a sight such as this," Teal'c echoed his stupefaction.

"Yes, you have," Jack instantly countered, still pissed at Daniel's regrettable independence in the field and showing it. "You two dragged me to "Lord of the Rings" five times and made me buy you both the two-disc and the four-disc DVD sets. Only difference here is budget."

Daniel and Teal'c looked at one another and then they both looked at Jack.

"You think the Odokai are pulling a bit of a Nox act on us?" Jack asked, backpedalling from the bitching thing into the colonel thing as fast as dignity allowed.

"The Nox weren't starving their elderly and their children to add that extra touch of realism to the pastoral illusion," Daniel said somewhat crisply.

"Indeed," Teal'c intoned, still eyeing Jack broodingly.

"Good point," Jack conceded. "Not the Odokai?"

"I don't know."

"We have encountered races which appear to have regressed technologically before, O'Neill," Teal'c reminded him.

"What in hell?" Colonel Edwards demanded, hustling over to join them, his rasping voice intrusive and grating.

"Daniel doesn't know what in hell. All he knows is he wants it," Jack informed him. "Get someone up here with that video camera."

"We're not talking Steven Spielberg, you know," Edwards snarked. "God knows how much, or more likely how little of this we'll actually pick up."

"Just get the guy up here to record all this before Daniel blows a gasket."

"I can't tell if this is history or if it's an allegory," Daniel interrupted, instantly quashing the chit-chat. "We have a city-dwelling culture on one side," he gestured expansively. "An arboreal people on the other. Are they clashing or evolving? Is this the history of one society or the merging of two? If it's one society, which came first, the city or the arboreal? Are the Odokai the scattered remnants of one or other or both of these cultures? Is it a celebration or commemoration of a tragedy? Are these deities or leaders? I can't tell." His voice was thick, shivering with excitement as he turned impulsively to Jack. "It's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen."

"You know, back at the Academy, they never said there'd be days like this," Edwards commented more or less to himself. He squeezed Daniel's shoulder, making him jump. "I never saw anything like it," he said quietly, when Daniel looked around questioningly.

"It *is* beautiful," Teal'c agreed sincerely.

"I didn't train for this," Edwards said awkwardly, his eyes straying to the silver-sheened army among the trees. "And I don't know that I like it. But." He cleared his throat, aware of his thronging, gawping men. "Whatever you need," he promised, distantly.

"Aww, jeez, Edwards," Jack griped. "Why don't you just go back to your tent and break out the Indiana Jones DVDs? You're one *small* step away from breaking out the costume, hat and bullwhip."

"Is the central placement of the moons of significance, DanielJackson?" Teal'c asked, coming over to stand by him.

"That's a good question, Teal'c." Absently, Daniel pushed his glasses up his nose. He couldn't tear his eyes away if a mothership were landing on his head. "I have no idea."

"There are guy moon gods," Jack said gruffly, sounding as if he wished he could keep his yap shut.

"Guy moon gods?" Impressively, Edwards managed to convey the presence of incredulous metaphorical quotation marks around this pronouncement.

"You never see the History Channel?" Jack snapped, looking extremely self-conscious. "When you hang out with an archaeologist, these things happen from time to time."

"What things?"

"Specials."

"And I bet they never clash with a really big game," Edwards said sarcastically.

"He's no respecter of a man's remote," Jack responded coldly, disclaiming all responsibility for any educational value his TV viewing might coincidentally contain.

"So, do you watch these specials in *your* Indy get-up, O'Neill?"

"Aww, like you never got caught maxing out your credit card on the home shopping network!"

"Will you two *shut up!*" Daniel ordered indignantly, cutting into these promising hostilities.

"It's not as if the cliff has a sound-track, Daniel," Jack attempted to excuse himself. He immediately thought better of it. "Shut up," he ordered Edwards. "He can't hear the mythic ambience for you yakking."

A small, excited man with glasses like windshields hustled past them, wielding the camera with enthusiasm and a few mumbled whimpers.

"Didn't that guy get eaten on 403?" Jack demanded, doing an irritable double-take.

Daniel was quite pleased to see Jack jumpy. It was nice to have proof he was happening to him.

"Clearly not," Teal'c remarked sarcastically, pointedly watching the small man frame a shot.

It was clear Jack was out of favour with Teal'c. He was a big fan of repeat showings and a mainstay of the multiplex at the Chapel Hills mall. For him, a fine movie matured much like a fine wine, and was meant to be enjoyed just as lingeringly.

Daniel was glad Teal'c was on his side. It would help ensure Jack continued to be both jumpy and, publicly at least, malleable. Content with his stalking prowess to date, he filed Jack in his list of things to do and got back to ogling the monumental cliff art. It was gorgeous but it was also, so far as the SGC were concerned, only the appetiser. They still wanted in. They wanted whatever was behind the cliff, not pretty pictures of what was adorning it. He turned impulsively to Jack. "Do you rappel?"

"Not nearly hard enough," Jack muttered darkly, scowling at him.

There was a short, confused silence where everyone nearby looked interestedly at Jack, trying to work out what planet he was on and who it was he wanted to turn off.

"Rappel not *repel*." Daniel enunciated carefully, happily aware it was more a question of which tent Jack was in, and he was guilty as charged on the second count. "A, two 'p's. You know? Rappel."

With a surreptitious, viciously accusing look at Daniel, a badly rattled Jack glowered hatefully until their inconveniently curious audience prudently melted away.

"Rappel down cliffs," Daniel elaborated unkindly with only the slightest quiver in his voice. "I was thinking those clasped hands?" He pointed to the two warriors or kings or legends or whoever they were, towering above them. "Those clasped hands are the logical place to start looking for a way in."

"Why?" Jack demanded mulishly.

Feeling distinctly naughty, Daniel snagged Jack's hand and warmly clasped it in evidence, suppressing the embarrassed, macho, covert tugs Jack made to get free. If Jack could kiss him, he'd survive having his hand held by him. "It's the only part of the fresco where the two halves of the design touch," he explained patiently,

firmly holding on. "And also the only place where the two men at its metaphorical heart touch."

Ants in his long-legged, nicely filled pants, Jack appeared to think Daniel was doing this on purpose, right in front of Edwards and Teal'c and everyone who hadn't melted nearly far enough away from the unfolding drama. Jack was right.

Daniel was rather enjoying being a stalker. He was quite good at this ambush predator thing, when he set his mind to it. Having made his point – that Jack had better just *watch out* – he finally, magnanimously let go.

"Shouldn't one of the men do it?" Major Lorne enquired tactlessly, appealing to the good sense of his C.O. Edwards.

"Jack's not that old," Edwards replied with manifestly false innocence, dulcet eyes wide and unconvincingly candid. He immediately thought better of this. "And if he is too decrepit to shin down that cliff, I'm sure Hammond can find a nice desk for him someplace quiet back at base."

"I will accompany you, Daniel Jackson," Teal'c announced, tiring of the time-honoured, traditional USAF pissing game.

"Accompany?" Jack stiffened up.

"Accompany?" Edwards echoed him, eyeing Daniel in fascination. "You, er, you do that stuff?"

"I'm sure you don't mean to be insulting," Daniel responded mildly. "I imagine I can do as much, if not more, 'stuff' than you can."

"Special ops trained," Jack commented idly, jerking a thumb towards himself and then Edwards.

"Oriental Institute trained," Daniel reminded him evenly.

"Military precision." Jack was warming to this new game, which at least didn't involve touching.

"Archaeological precision," Daniel countered. "Which means everything is in fewer pieces than when I found it and sometimes in working order by the time I'm done. That's a helluva lot more than you can say."

"I..."

"You've broken suns, Jack. Suns."

"Suns?" Edwards, an easy military mark, registered awe.

Preening, Jack buffed modest fingers against the sleeve of his jacket. The SGC offered a *lot* of career opportunities for those who believed in better living through ordnance.

Teal'c was still disenchanted with the denizens of the US Air Force. He turned his back on Jack and asked Daniel what time he wanted to start out for the slow, steep climb through the dense trees – he recommended the left as being slightly less precipitous terrain – flanking their precious cliff.

"I suppose it'll have to be after breakfast," Daniel admitted grudgingly. "Not because of the food or anything. Sadly, the light doesn't get good early enough in the day we can avoid making those menu choices."

"Am I talking to myself?" Jack asked, possibly rhetorically. "Have I not registered disapproval and dismay at the idea of Daniel rappelling down anything?"

"Nope," Daniel said cheerily. "You just got mad when Teal'c invited himself along with us." Not that he was jumping for joy himself. Much as he liked Teal'c, he'd been looking forward to trapping Jack neatly on the end of a rope and talking dirty to him.

"A *word*, Daniel?" Jack took Daniel firmly by the shoulder and steered.

Teal'c's suggestive look implied he was willing to make something of this if Daniel were so inclined. Daniel was inclined to make something of it himself. He was inclined to make Jack just as soon as they were back in the tent.

Ambush, he told himself. Ambush. Ambush.

He was ready when Jack propelled him into the tent, turning smartly on his heel, bracing himself to pounce as Jack popped up like a cork through the tent flap.

"Talk to the hand, Jack!" The archaeologist was busy, faking him out.

Jack gaped at the offending hand while Daniel tangled them hard at the lips. He kissed Jack. Jack kissed him back, gulping and greedy, spit and sweet, sweet feeling. It was necessary, their mouths together, together, more than breathing, more than sense and rules. No world outside them, their mouths, this tent.

"You see?" Daniel panted as Jack fought them both. "You see?"

Kissing, again. Feeling, all the feeling, pouring out. The two of them.

Necessary.

They stumbled, side by side. Sat.

"None of your reasons make sense," Daniel argued passionately. "You're not that man."

"I lost you once." The man was stubborn.

"We're not the same. Not the same."

"You don't make sense!" Jack snapped, angry for his lost control, the mockery his body made of his verbal refusal to love Daniel.

"I wasn't lost. Not when I was with Oma. I was looking. Trying to find answers."

"What answers?" Jack was resentful even of the mention of Oma Desala's name. She was...not quite an enemy. Complicated. For Jack, it was personal.

"I was looking for you," Daniel said it straight out. "All the things I couldn't see and couldn't face when I was alive. All the confusion and grief."

"I don't want to hear this." Jack made no move though.

"You have to." Daniel took a deep breath. "Because all my answers were here. With you."

"Daniel," Jack breathed his name.

"I love you." Daniel took hold of Jack's arm, needing and wanting the contact, the touch of Jack. "I didn't see how that could be my path. It never felt – it was never right. Not for me. I loved you..."

"More?" Jack was quick and angry. Afraid.

"Differently." Daniel glanced tentatively at Jack and then away. Jack at least was listening to him. "I loved you. I saw you. I wanted..."

"Me?"

"You. It was all from me. That's what I couldn't handle. That was the difference." It wasn't easy for Daniel to say these things, to open himself up this way, but he had learned some things. He could do it finally. "It doesn't mean I loved Sha'uri less because she wanted me, she chose me. I was – I was passive. People happened to me, I can't put it any better than that."

Jack softened some, leaning his weight into Daniel for a warm moment. "I was there, remember? I saw some of those people 'happen'."

"I didn't know myself," Daniel said soberly. "I had to learn."

"You had to die?" Jack asked harshly.

"I had to."

"Because of me?"

"Because of me," Daniel corrected him patiently. "I left myself with no choices, Jack. I did that to myself as much as – more than it was done to me. Ascension was supposed to be the ultimate truth, the ultimate path, but it wasn't for me. I really did have to lose everything to understand that here, this life, is right for me. That I belong here. That this is my place. I had to connect with myself before I could be open to someone else."

He tried to smile and faltered, shy now because it mattered so very much to him that Jack understand.

"I didn't know who I was. I had to learn to know and more than that, I had to accept. That's what I learned when I was with Oma." He hesitated, conscious of the hole in his mind, the slippery, sullen evasions of his dreams and the wall, difficult and alien, he knew was there. "That's what I believe," he corrected himself quietly, trying to be honest. "Just like I believe I made a choice to come back. To effect change. To actually be the person I...I..."

This was difficult. He had come a long way, he did think he was more of a man now than he had been, more, more himself. He had never been able to talk, not about himself. He was drying up now. "I don't mean to hurt you, Jack," he promised faithfully. "I don't mean to force you. I just can't...I have to do this, that's all. I have to tell you."

Jack took hold of Daniel's face and kissed him very gently.

"Be with you," Daniel sighed, putting his arms around Jack.

"You know I feel..." Jack muttered desperately. "You *know*."

"I know I'd like to hear you say it," Daniel admitted in a small voice, not quite on the ropes yet.

"I love you."

It was thrilling to hear the words, the admission. Jack didn't even sound as if Daniel were pulling teeth. He was still open, still honest. Daniel found himself quaking with relief and sheer gratitude. It was all too complicated right now for unalloyed joy, but he hoped that would come.

"I won't let you take responsibility for me, Jack," Daniel insisted, implacably tender. "I take it for myself. I promise you, I won't let you hurt me any more than I'm going to let you run from me. No more hiding, no more lies or misunderstanding, not for either of us. It's time for truth."

Jack didn't know what to do or to say, but for now he wasn't running or hiding from all of this. He was hearing Daniel. It was the start of dealing.

"It's our time." Daniel had to give himself credit for doing really well with all of this. He might be purple in the face, crucified with embarrassment and remembering with crystal clarity how far and how fast he used to run from all this emotional intimacy stuff, but his sorry behind was still on the bed and his stiff lips were still moving.

"You should come with a federal health warning and your own twelve-step programme," Jack declared with some bitterness.

"Does that mean we get to have sex now?" Daniel enquired, just in case.

"No."

"Then I think I should get back to my fresco. People will talk."

"People will?" Jack sputtered. "People! After the way you – back there? People? I don't know how you have the *nerve!*"

"Years and years of watching you and all the evil things you do," Daniel replied promptly, prudently getting to his feet and backing off to a safe distance while Jack strove for sanity. "Plus, you know, I really, *really* want to have sex with you. If that means torturing you into submission?" Recovering some balance, he managed to smile this time. "It's a dirty job and I'm very happy you're making me do it."

Watching the metaphorical steam burst from Jack's ears, Daniel withdrew – tactically – from the tent. It was tactical. He wasn't running scared or anything like that. It was just, he had work to do. His fresco was waiting.

Teal'c was waiting too. "I have directed the individual with the video camera to repeat the pattern of filming you had determined was appropriate when the daylight recording of the cliff face was made."

"Thank you!" Daniel said brightly, beaming appreciatively at his friend. He had the sense of being ahead of life on points, not a feeling he'd had very often. "What's his name?" he asked, watching the small man with the large glasses bustling back and forth.

"I do not recall."

"Me either," Daniel admitted, shamefaced. "You'd think anyone who looked so, um, distinctive would be easy to remember."

"Not in this case."

"What do you think of the fresco?"

"I believe O'Neill may have made a valid point about the budgetary requirements."

"He'll be amazed to hear it."

Grinning, Daniel folded his arms across his chest and fell into companionable step with Teal'c as he walked to the farthest limit of the fresco, signalling himself ready to accompany Daniel on a slow, meticulous inspection of its wonders. "Although, I have to admit he may have inadvertently made a good point too." He glanced up at Teal'c's serene face. "Did anything you observed of the Odokai lead you to suspect they had the resources to construct a monument like this?"

"It did not."

"Me either. In fact, it's pretty frustrating they couldn't even guess at its meaning. With this exact location in regular, frequent use as a communal fishing camp, I'm astonished that its history isn't a significant element of their oral traditions. Or at least the Odokai version of the après fishing campfire boast-and-bitch fest."

"Perhaps it is not their history," Teal'c suggested, with a measuring look at the carved city above them.

"They could be identified with the arboreal people depicted on the other panel of the fresco," Daniel agreed. "But if this is a record of some historical encounter with the city dwellers, it should be remembered in histories, plays, songs, even myth."

"Perhaps the Odokai keep their culture private," Teal'c offered.

"So private it never comes up in conversation? Ever?" Daniel responded doubtfully. The SGC had had the people under surveillance for quite a while before the first team came through the Stargate and made contact. He looked up again, smiling. "It's a mystery," he said softly.

"To which I am confident you will find the resolution."

"Opening the doors into whatever's behind this cliff will be a start."

"O'Neill has signified his willingness to blast a way in."

"That's only his idea of motivating me."

The small man whose name they couldn't remember rushed up and handed Daniel the camera. Then he skirted Teal'c nervously and bolted for the barracks tents.

"Thank you!" Daniel called after his fleeing form. "That was quick," he said, surprised.

Teal'c bowed modestly.

"Thank *you*," Daniel snorted, shaking his head disapprovingly. "You're as bad as Jack."

"I am worse," Teal'c stated with magnificent finality, raising a supercilious eyebrow.

Refusing on principle to encourage either of them, Daniel refused to rise to the bait, instead turning his attention to memorising the glorious sweeps and curves of sinuous, shining silver.

"This never, ever gets old," he murmured distractedly, suddenly seeing the strong parallels between his archaeology and his, for want of a better descriptor, soul searching. Painstaking re-creation of a buried, barren past, sifting reality from the lies of history, myth and legend, constructing a truth grounded in evidence. Only this time, the truth he'd found had been an inner truth, a gift of perspective that was finally allowing him to see some good in himself, in who and what he was.

He was beginning to find a happiness previously only expressible, conceivable, through his scholarship. Happy. Him! He wanted to get back to the tent and aggravate Jack some more.

"You mind if I?" he hinted to Teal'c, edging away.

Smiling beneficently, Teal'c inclined his head.

Clutching the precious camera protectively to his chest as he trotted purposefully across the camp, Daniel was fairly confident he could upload his digital footage and provoke Jack into a frenzy, preferably of the sexual kind. Man, he was discovering, could not live by uploading alone. Not this man, anyway.

Jack greeted his arrival with a loud groan and a piteous collapse on his cot, clutching the pillow over his face.

"That's the nicest thing you've said all day," Daniel said cheerfully, busily interfacing camera with computer.

When the data transfer was complete, he decided the quickest way to check the small frightened man had captured all the shots he needed for an accurate, comprehensive comparison was to superimpose the new footage over the already

captured daytime footage. Calling blessings down on Sam's oblivious head, he fed both files into her computer modelling software – so user-friendly and intuitive it was guaranteed to be even Jack-proof – layering the silver lines of the fresco over the crisp, clean contours of the sunlit rock. He saw immediately that the match was phenomenal, surely no accident!

"This is amazing! Jack, you have to come see this."

"No, I don't. I'd like to go on with my mid-life crisis right here, thank you very much."

"Mid-life?" Daniel queried, not about to let a golden opportunity to harass pass.

Jack emerged from behind his pillow. "I hate you," he stated clearly, for the record. Then he pulled the pillow back over his face.

"But it's engineered! The cliff-face. The whole thing! Look..."

"I've made my position on looking clear."

"Jack, I'm serious. The whole damned cliff-face was engineered, carved precisely to frame the silver metal, mineral, chemical, compound, paint or whatever the hell it is. It's a perfect fit! Perfect. That's no accident, it's technology."

"Technology?" Jack's position on shiny new toys was possibly open to negotiation. The pillow twitched responsively.

"Something big and honkin'," Daniel said the magic words firmly. "You only have to look at the scale of the fresco."

"It's not as big as Mount Rushmore."

"I hate you too," Daniel informed his love, turning grumpily back to his monitor. On his third painstaking comparison scan of the superimposed images, he made a discovery. A gap. Contours strongly marked but curiously not outlined in silver. He looked carefully at the specific, excluded contours. Very, very carefully, deciding they weren't so much a gap as a, well, a presence. He looked again, his eyebrows going up. A tumescence, even.

Wanting to be sure his somewhat Jack-fixated imagination wasn't playing dirty tricks on him, he took a screen-print of the salient points of the fresco and pasted it into Photoshop. Then he opened the paint tool, picked out an offensively lurid yellow, and carefully traced the outline of the contours that should have been tastefully framed in silver.

"Jack?" he said eventually, when he was absolutely, positively, unequivocally sure. "You really need to come look. I think I just found the way in. The hands aren't the only things touching."



Jack started to whine when the pillow was plucked brutally away from his face and replaced with the laptop. Then his eyes focused. Then they bugged.

"Is this a joke?"

"Fraid not."

"Are they?"

"Yes."

"Are those?"

"Yes."

"Dear god." In front of Edwards and everyone.

"An erect phallus is a *classic* mythological fertility symbol," Daniel informed him brightly.

"Two guys?" Jack objected. Surely, fertility was the one thing two guys *didn't* have to worry about! "You did this on purpose!" he accused Daniel.

"Me? How is this my fault? I didn't build the thing!"

"That's not the point!"

"Well, what is the point?"

"You're the one who dragged us here in the first place!"

"Oh, god, Jack, let's not get into another one of those interminable circular arguments, please!" Daniel begged.

"You find it funny!"

"I find you funny. It's hard to believe you're trained to kill or die on command, to survive torture, brainwashing, severe injury and hardship and a little thing like sex absolutely slays you."

Jack looked at the image on the monitor. "A *little* thing?" he queried, incredulously.

"Don't be silly," Daniel instructed him, oddly coaxing.

"Please tell me this will all be worth it?" Jack pleaded, shuddering away from a mental image of himself having to poke around up there.

"It will all be worth it," Daniel parroted obediently, twinkling mischievously at Jack.

"Do you have any idea what's behind those doors?"

"Not a clue." Daniel leaned over to look at the laptop for a moment.

"Daaaniel?" Jack was deeply suspicious of this sudden abstraction.

"I'm not entirely convinced we'll find anything behind the doors," Daniel confessed, deciding this was a good time to sit on the bed next to Jack and make with some more stroking of Jack's face. "In fact." He trailed off, smiling in abstraction, decidedly more interested in exploring Jack than in archaeology, which was something of a first.

"In fact?" Jack prompted sternly, his heart sinking towards his socks.

"I'm no longer convinced those are doors."

Jack made a noise in the back of his throat.

"They're door-shaped," Daniel generously stretched the point. "By our standards, at least. They're also, um."

Jack had to fight the urge to smack Daniel smartly with the laptop. He had similar urges all the time. They didn't mean anything. They were just necessary to his sanity. Venting. That was the term. Or was it sublimation? Vital, either way, when dealing with Daniel.

"Book-shaped." Daniel brought his open hands together and mimed opening them. "The leaves of a stylised book, engraved with text that might explain the meaning of the fertility theme in the fresco."

Very carefully, Jack turned the laptop so they could both inspect the image. The yellow outline was distressingly rampant.

"Two male fertility symbols suggest a strongly patriarchal society." Daniel was like a terrier with a rat when he got going. The only way to get him to drop it was to distract him with something juicier.

"A dirty book," Jack broke in, his voice failing. "All this for a dirty book." All this and more to come. Much, much more. In front of everyone.

A gentle hand ghosted over Jack's stomach.

"How's your shoulder?" Daniel asked distractedly.

"The clawed one?" Jack clarified politely. "Still located *above* my belt-buckle." He peeled away Daniel's investigating fingers and ignored the pout directed at him.

"You feel nice."

"Immaterial."

"I bet you'd feel even nicer if we got rid of all this." Daniel tugged pettishly at Jack's T-shirt.

"What did I do?" Jack asked the world. "What was so bad I deserved to have life, the universe, landscape topography and *you*," this, bitterly, to Daniel, "conspiring against me?"

"Me?" Daniel seemed pleased by the heady accolade of coming out top of Jack's lengthy list of woes.

"You," Jack said emphatically. "I've got cliff porn out there and you prowling in here. I'm surrounded by guys with their dicks out." The, er, the naughty mood Daniel was in, Jack immediately thought better of throwing down this particular gauntlet. "Metaphorically in your case," he added hurriedly.

"Killjoy."

At this point, Daniel took outrageous advantage of their proximity, stretching out bouncily on top of Jack while he juggled the laptop and the creaking cot. When he was comfy on Jack, Daniel coolly disposed of the laptop. It was in his way.

"This is nice," he said.

"This is not nice," Jack countered. "This is harassment."

"That's what I said. Nice." Daniel lowered his head, breathing in Jack's skin.

"Harassment is not nice. You wouldn't try this on Fraiser or Carter."

"Sam doesn't want me to try it on her," Daniel replied reasonably, planting a small, grazing kiss on Jack's jaw, and then another. "Nor does Janet."

"Haven't I explained why this can't happen?" Jack sighed.

"Not to my satisfaction, no."

"I'm not so evolved as you." Jack punctuated this by putting his arms around Daniel and trying to hold him still. Daniel approved. "I'm not the man you think I am or the man you want me to be."

"I don't want you to be anything but honest. With both of us."

"Regulations..."

"Please!" Daniel interrupted, for the first time showing annoyance.

Jack had to see the justice in that. No one knew better than he did how many rules he'd broken in his long, sometimes ignominious career, how easily, or how comfortably he lived with the consequences. It was a necessary balance, a defence against the vicious, ugly acts he'd willingly embraced and expertly executed.

The only reason Jack had survived and avoided jail time for his insubordination was because he was so talented, so good at what he did, he was always worth more than the trouble he caused. Even General Hammond understood that Jack needed to buck the system, to stick it to the man, as much as he might rail against

any individual defiance. The latitude Jack allowed himself was enormous, Hammond's collusion a key factor he pushed at all the time.

"Sorry," he muttered, meaning a lot more than he was saying. Daniel didn't need to hear it. He knew – most of it, Jack guessed.

"This is only about you, Jack. Or maybe I should say it's about you and me, how you see me. Maybe you can't be with me until you can accept me."

"I do accept you!" Jack retorted, startled and uncomfortable at the accusation.

"No," Daniel said in a measured, thoughtful tone. "You try to control me."

"Protect!" Jack snapped, stung.

"It's just another measure of control." Daniel lifted himself, reaching up to clasp both Jack's shoulders. He was smiling a little, fondly and in some indulgent exasperation. "You think I don't know you? I know. It's all about control for you. It's all about compartments, a place you create for everything and everyone, lines you draw and won't have crossed, while all the time you're pushing boundaries and crossing lines yourself. You love me – part of the reason you love me is none of that works for me. I won't stay where you put me, where you want to keep me safe and you safe from me. I cross your lines as fast as you draw them, I push you as hard as you push. It's more, even, than that. I see you. I hear you. You can't shut me out."

"You know a lot." Jack had always known Daniel saw far more than he was supposed to, but to have it all laid out for him, to be analysed so clinically wasn't something he was ready to lie here and just take.

"We're the same. Opposites, equals, infuriatingly, challengingly different and the same."

"That makes no sense!"

"None," Daniel admitted cheerfully. "I don't know why, Jack, I only know it works. That I need it." He had the nerve to look shy. "You need it too," he said with some hesitation, stroking Jack's shoulders with fretful thumbs.

You need me, is what he wanted to say, what he wanted to hear from Jack.

Daniel had grown. He had changed. He was stronger than before, more certain, more – whole. Jack had changed too, he had moved on, even congratulated himself on his newfound ease. He was gutless, though. Keeping control, keeping his centre and maintaining that neat, safe distance, not risking anything, not giving anything he didn't want to. He wasn't putting himself out there, taking the leap of faith Daniel was.

"It's not you," he confessed impulsively, wanting to give Daniel something.

"I know," Daniel soothed him. "It's okay, I know." He kissed Jack delicately on the mouth, caressingly rubbed stubble-roughened cheeks. "I'm not asking for the world, I'm not even asking for an instant, no-obligation decision or a money-back guarantee. Just a chance, Jack. That's all I want. For you to give us a chance."

"Not taking no for an answer?"

"I told you already. You're necessary to me."

"I'm afraid I'll let you down." Daniel was worth the truth. He was necessary to Jack too.

"Only happen if you don't think I'm worth the risk."

"No money-back guarantees, huh?"

"Only if the sex sucks."

"Please," Jack closed his eyes in pain. "I beg of you. No puns. Not when I have cliff porn to rappel." Edwards and SG-11 would probably break out the beer and lawn chairs.

"What'll you give?" Daniel scented an opportunity.

"What'll it take?"

Daniel jiggled his hips suggestively.

Jack grabbed him in self-defence, frantically trying to prevent a physical re-enactment of the cliff porn. All he managed to do was make Daniel aware he was sporting a serious target of opportunity. Smug-eyed and unnecessarily gleeful, Daniel rubbed persuasive hips against him, making him – and the cot – groan and quiver. Jack clutched defensively at the parts he could reach. Naturally, he wound up with two wonderfully disturbing handfuls of ass. His physical reaction was immediate and emphatic.

Blushing, Daniel thanked him.

"I'm totally out of control," Jack groaned. "My career is flashing before my eyes."

"Not my naked body?" Daniel demanded resentfully, launching into more of those nice, nibbling kisses.

"This is insane."

"Tell me you're not loving every minute." Daniel kissed him some more.

"I love *you*," Jack sighed. "God help us all."

"I guess I upset all your plans by loving you back."

"You did," Jack agreed vehemently. "You damn well did. And you know it! I was doing fine until you came along and decided to shake your bootie."

"You're still holding onto that, by the way," Daniel noted, giving a delicious little wriggle. "Feels niice."

"The control thing?" Jack had to swallow hard. His throat had dried. Daniel's long, clever fingers slid up, up into his hair, stroking and soothing. The control thing. Yeah. "I loved my wife."

Daniel only nodded, thankfully accepting this as a given.

"I don't want to do to you what I did to her."

"Jack?" Daniel jerked back, startled.

"Compartments," Jack reminded him jerkily. "Lines." God, this was not easy. He had to commit, though, because it had been about this easy for Daniel to open to him. "Sara didn't leave me because of Charlie. We could..." Sweating buckets, he had to swallow again. His tongue felt twice its normal size, choking him. "We could have survived losing him. If I had wanted her enough, loved her enough. She was angry, she did blame me and I – I used that. Against her. I shut her out. Turned my back. She'd learned to live with me not talking, with the lines I'd drawn, but she couldn't live with that. That was – it was proof I put myself first, my needs, my feelings, not hers."

"I don't want to say anything to put Sara down," Daniel told him gently, respectfully. "I don't know her well, I never saw how you two were with each other. I only know your side. I guess what I'm trying to say here is I don't think you love me more. If that's what you're worried about. Sara and I, we're just different."

"Different," Jack echoed, remembering this from their earlier talk. "I love you differently." It wasn't Sara's fault, it wasn't even Jack's fault that his definition of a partner went deeper, needed more than Sara could ever give. What he'd needed was to be challenged, to have his partner fight back instead of giving in. It wasn't about power and control so much as it was about balance.

Jack recognised himself as an alpha, he knew the games he played. The people he could dominate, manipulate, he lost respect for. He would always limit what they

had of him, giving less, always giving less than they wanted. Sara had always caved when Jack pushed her and so did Sam Carter. Even General Hammond, for all the protection of his rank, let Jack play him. Teal'c could beat out Jack when he chose to but Jack always resisted. He figured maybe the difference with Daniel was as simple as he wanted to give something of himself. Giving in to Daniel didn't feel like he was losing.

"I won't be shut out, Jack. I won't shut you out. We did that already, don't you see?" Daniel urged him passionately. "It destroyed us. Playing by the rules we set ourselves as much as those the others expected of us, we already did all of that. It isn't *us*. It's over now. We're past that, we've both of us moved on."

Yes. Jack knew it was true. He had made his own realisations and self-congratulations. What Daniel needed from him was a willingness to move forward a step or two, to take on a little more than he had. That was all that was being asked of him.

Sins of omission, eh? Wanting to and not. Jack was doing okay with that. He was rubbing along just fine. Daniel wasn't. Whatever he said, whatever spin he came out with to make Jack feel good, Daniel was hurting. He wanted more. He wanted the sins of commission. He wanted Jack to open up, step up, give something of himself. Take the risk. Commit.

Could Jack really do just fine when Daniel was in need? Could he be happy knowing he was leaving Daniel wanting? When he looked at it in these simplest terms, the answer was absurdly simple. It was no. They were about give and take, that was the foundation of their friendship, that was who they were.

"You know what you're letting yourself in for?" Jack capitulated resignedly. Daniel's stunned, shining joy left him blinking and growling. So he was giving in? So what! Didn't he always? The only question was when he gave, and how hard he was going to fall.

Why was he giving? He thought he knew the answer to that. It was about the opposite of control. It was trust. He couldn't put a limit on how much he trusted Daniel, just as he knew Daniel put no limit on how much he trusted Jack. They had crossed lines before, busted out of stereotypes, stepped out blindly on each other's say-so.

Jack was a pusher, a risk-taker. Nothing and no one pushed him the way Daniel did, challenged, infuriated, thrilled and satisfied him. Daniel made sense when nothing else did. Jack did control what he loved and valued, he put limits on what he would give of himself, to keep himself safe, keep those he loved safe. He would always try, he would always clash with Daniel, he would always give, even just a little. He wasn't alone, though, because Daniel would also give. That was their secret, what made opposites bond. They were better together to the point they

couldn't be apart. Wasn't this what he'd learned when he'd lost Daniel and ultimately himself?

Daniel was necessary to him too.

"I'll try, okay?" he promised urgently, because it was important to him Daniel understand it was all he could promise. He smiled, his trademark cockiness going a little awry. "I'll always try," he added meaningfully, holding Daniel's eyes.

"You can lead a colonel to bed but you can't make him strip." This was, presumably, Daniel's version of supportive acknowledgement. They were really going to have to talk about this whole assertive thing. Sex-starved and assertive was a damn scary mix.

Daniel took Jack's face firmly between his hands and gave him a slight shake. "Whatever you're thinking, stop. This is a momentous occasion. We just agreed to get together. We're in a relationship. A sexual relationship. We just turned our lives upside down. Inside out. This is a huge deal." He gave Jack another slight shake, in case he didn't get how huge a deal this was. "We're happy and we get to have sex now."

"Not now! Not here!" Jack yelped, his last puny shred of self-preservation insisting the groaning cot was barely holding up, even if his libido and his volubly horny archaeologist were prepared to take the risk. "Shut up!" Jack broke in ruthlessly on Daniel's fluently expressed complaints and allegations. "I'm trying to save our asses here!"

"Trying to save *yours*," Daniel scowled malevolently, curling his lip at this abject display of sexual cowardice. He didn't want to shut up. Jack was trying to slip right through his greedy fingers yet again and he wanted to let Jack have it. A piece of his mind, with both barrels.

It occurred to Jack to let Daniel have it first, teeth, tongue and tonsil. Now this he could see was a huge deal. The impact of this was life-changing. After seven years, at last he got to shut Daniel up, and with his complete co-operation, no less.

"I think I like the new, improved, assertive you," Jack whispered in Daniel's ear.

"Good. I do too." Daniel nudged Jack. "So? Does that mean we get to?" He jiggled lasciviously.

"No! No sex. *Not* here. These cots were expressly designed by the Air Force to prevent amorously adventurous airmen from getting to have sex on them!"

"The floor, then."

"No. N-O spells no! No! Jeez! In my wildest dreams I never imagined you were such a dog."

"Me either," Daniel said sheepishly. "It's new."

"Well, it's new to me too." In the Jack-Daniel sense, that was.

"You need to work up to it?"

"Don't take it personally. It's not you," Jack explained, thoughtfully massaging Daniel's nice, broad shoulders. "You're fine. You're, er, you're great, in fact. Just great."

"You're scared to have sex with me?"

"You are too," Jack riposted. "What do you think all this horndog obsessing is about? Getting it over with!"

"I wouldn't put it like that," Daniel said coldly.

"I would. I do. But that's not a problem either. It's not you, it's not me, it's just timing, is all. Not here. Not now."

Toying with the neck of Jack's T-shirt, Daniel allowed himself to be persuaded. "Is this about you being the guy in charge of this mission? Responsible and therefore not distractable?"

"Exactly," Jack agreed gratefully. "Just because the Odokai look as if they'd blow over in a stiff breeze doesn't mean they aren't loaded for bear and out for blood. That Ingrid Bergman act of theirs could all be a front. They could be saying they want to be alone when what they really want is space and time to plan an attack."

Daniel considered this. "I think they just want to be alone, Jack. In fact, I think the reason this place doesn't figure in their history and oral traditions is because it's embarrassing to them."

"Two guys with their humongous glow-in-the-dark schlongs out for everyone and their Aunt Minnie to see from miles around? If that's the epitome of your culture, what's not to be embarrassed about?"

"So, you don't think they're planning an attack either?"

"Nope," Jack admitted cheerfully. "But they could be. And it's my job to be ready for that. To prevent that, in point of fact. I can't be ready if my tongue is hanging out and the only thing I can think about is the next way to get you into this tent with me."

"I'm not happy," Daniel said warningly, gimlet eyes making this clear. "But I will give you this one."

"I'm overwhelmed," Jack thanked him meekly for this concession.

"You're very glib and plausible about this Air Force stuff," Daniel criticised. "I don't like it."

"You're even more glib and plausible about the archaeology stuff and I haven't liked it for years."

Daniel's lips twitched. "I told you," he said ruefully. "We're the same. Exactly the same."

"We want what we want and we want it now," Jack said whimsically.

"And we want it with each other."

Jack smiled and rubbed at Daniel's cheek. "We've covered a lot of ground, Dannyboy."

"Take your time," Daniel urged him, serious now, shyly smiling back at him. "About it all. There's time for it all."

"I've got things I need to sort through in my head. I need to be clear before I can sleep with you," Jack disclosed uncomfortably. Clear wasn't the same as sure, but it was the best he could offer. "All the reasons I think should keep us apart, those haven't just evaporated into thin air."

"There's time," Daniel said again.

"This is crazy." Jack tightened his hold on Daniel. "I need my head examined. Who flicked the switch from straight to gay, from girls to guys?"

"You did."

"Not helpful."

"Then try this. You found what you were looking for, what you need in a partner. You're having to work harder in some ways, not so hard in others, because what you need, you found in me." Daniel gently touched Jack's face, his hair. "Recognising that was hard, accepting was harder still. Now, you have to act on it. You have to effect change in you and deal with it in me."

"I'm still getting used to the package."

"Strangely, me too. And that's before I get to your package."

"You don't seem to be having any difficulty getting to my package I can see," Jack said tartly, peeling away a questing hand.

"You are no fun."

"None. Anal-retentive control freak, here," Jack joked.

"I didn't mean to hurt you with that," Daniel said seriously.

Could Jack admit he was hurt? He thought not. He was still too glib and plausible for that. "I've got some issues," he tossed out, trying for lightness.

"I have faith you'll deal with them honestly."

"Is it that simple?" Jack asked him, shaken by this simple affirmation.

"Simple? No." Daniel smiled. "None of what I'm feeling, none of what I want, is simple. I trust it, though. I'm trusting myself."

"You want me to trust myself?"

"Trust us." Daniel was watching Jack's face. "I can't find an easy way to say this so I'll say it right out. You have to. I won't be without you anymore."

"Necessary, huh?" Jack said gruffly, moved and horribly afraid he was showing it. "I look back?"

"Yes?" Daniel asked eagerly, hoping.

"I don't see anyone I was necessary for," Jack confided slowly. "Not a single person who couldn't get along without me and plenty who would have maybe been better off." If he had been the one to leave Sara, if he'd had the guts to cut her out of the whole of his life and not just the parts that ruined him. Too many ifs. His life was what he'd made it, and that was little enough. "You need me? You of all people? I never imagined you needing anyone." He'd wanted it, though. Wanted as much feeling from Daniel as he had for him. Had starved for it. "Everything you ever needed was in here." He tapped the side of Daniel's head.

"No. No way. That wasn't life. That was a wall."

Jack, who lived with walls of his own, got it. "Sometimes I'm a little slow, a little thick. You have to pound it into me."

"I've been trying," Daniel huffed.

"You and me." Jack drew Daniel down to him. "We are the same."

It shouldn't work, but it did.

They shouldn't love, they shouldn't fit, they shouldn't need.

But they did.

They were necessary.

FINIS