



He thought Jack looked good. The tight jeans made Jack's long legs look endless, accentuating his narrow hips and tight ass. Daniel felt a shock of arousal, low in his belly.

Jack took Daniel's bottle of water, drank deep, then tossed it onto the bureau, his slow smile growing. "You look better naked."

"You want to fuck," Daniel recognised the predatory gleam in Jack's heavy, prowling eyes.

"You mind?" Jack asked as he tugged Daniel's sweater up over his head, letting it pool on the floor with the jacket. His hands were already busy unbuttoning Daniel's charcoal grey chinos, pushing them down around Daniel's hips along with his briefs.

Daniel gasped out loud, leaning in to rest his head on Jack's shoulder as Jack freed his cock and held it, Jack's callused trigger finger rubbing lazy circles along the big vein that ran on the underside.

Jack kissed Daniel's cheek as Daniel's cock swelled in his hand. "I want you," he whispered, grazing greedy kisses over Daniel's cheekbone.

"Me too," Daniel admitted into the warm skin of Jack's shoulder, still feeling shy about their lovemaking. Jack was the only man he'd been with. He would never have believed that intercourse could feel so good, that he and Jack could be so intimate, so connected. "I can't stay too long," he reminded Jack, obligingly arching his throat for soft kisses as he rocked his hips easily into Jack's certain touch. "We have a mission."

"You can sleep with me," Jack countered, scowling, as Daniel made himself useful, unzipping Jack's jeans. "Even if it is a school night."

"I can't. You know I can't. You don't let me," Daniel complained gently as he eased Jack's jeans down over his narrow hips, releasing an eager, slippery erection to jut demandingly against his belly.

"You're young," Jack smiled winningly, stepping lightly out of the jeans and backing towards the bed, leading Daniel by the cock. "You need lots of sex."

"You're a pervert," Daniel argued, feeling the customary warmth spreading through his body. There would be heat soon enough, but for now he was basking in Jack's affection. "You get off watching me come."

"You moan. It drives me crazy doing that to you, you know it does," Jack agreed, his smile deepening. He cupped his hand over Daniel's nape, pulled him close then kissed him hard on the lips, plunging confidently into Daniel's mouth to stroke sleekly over his tongue.

They tumbled onto the bed, settling themselves side by side, kissing deeply. Daniel hooked his leg over Jack's butt, hugging Jack close to him. Their cocks ground together as they pushed unsubtly into one another.

Daniel's expectations of intercourse had been limited. The guy on the bottom lay on his stomach and got fucked, the guy on top had a good time. End of story. How wrong he'd been. "Remember the first time?" he murmured, struggling free of Jack's mouth for a few moments. Jack's cock twitched against Daniel's belly, surprising a chuckle out of him. "Jack!" he protested.

Jack pulled him back into the kiss, growing more passionate, more demanding, driving deep into Daniel's mouth with limber, rasping thrusts, stroking and squeezing. Revelling in him.

Daniel still wasn't wholly accepting of the fervid way Jack would touch him when they were together, like Jack couldn't get enough of him, couldn't have him close enough. Sometimes Daniel thought Jack wanted to fuck him every time they slept together, though they were both more creative, more open than that.

Jack dropped his head to nuzzle restlessly at Daniel's throat and shoulders. "I did you against the door in your apartment."

"Not the first time you made a pass at me," Daniel contradicted impatiently, sinking his teeth into Jack's broad shoulder, then licking it better, which made Jack shiver.

"Made a pass?" Jack asked incredulously, obviously recalling the incident in detail. "I didn't make a pass. We were arguing. You lost it!"

"You lost it!" Daniel argued hotly. "I still don't know how I ended up with my jeans round my ankles while you..."

"Rubbed suggestively against you?" Jack interrupted, laughing bawdily at the memory. "Sticking my tongue down your throat was the only way to shut you up."

"It shut YOU up," Daniel snapped, dropping down to suckle pointedly at each of Jack's nipples in turn. "You moan delightfully too," he observed complacently as Jack's cock twitched against his belly. Jack's fathomless brown eyes were glazed, his strong, straight lips swollen and slick from the force of Daniel's kiss.

"You want to fuck like this?" Jack asked, his voice warm and low, sweet as honey. "Face to face?"

Daniel nodded. He hadn't even realised two men could fuck like this. He'd learned the position from Jack. He'd learned a lot. He loved the slide of skin inside him and over him, Jack's heated pleasure, his weight and power driving him deeply into Daniel's body. Jack would always lose control, he would always need more. Daniel always wound up on his

back, Jack jolting him up the bed. He'd never felt more pleasure from sex, his whole body electric. Part of it was he loved to see and feel Jack that way, red faced and sweating, focused and intense, his powerful muscles contracting and flexing beneath Daniel's greedy, groping hands.

"I do remember the first time," Jack admitted as Daniel rolled him onto his back to stroke and kiss his face. "You were kind of naïve about this stuff. Sweet."

Something in Jack's face, his eyes, told Daniel this was a good thing, maybe the best thing. For Daniel the best thing had been Jack's gentle generosity.

"You know I've told you it's not an issue if you want to do me?" Jack murmured questioningly into Daniel's hair.

Daniel smiled to himself. Jack liked to sniff and nose into the rumpled strands, his hands wandering back to pet and stroke again and again as they made love. Jack also liked when Daniel did this, took Jack's tongue into his mouth to lick and suck on it.

With fingers outspread, Jack's big hands slid firmly down the length of Daniel's back to cup and knead his ass, pointedly suggesting Daniel get with the program here.

"It's not an issue for me either," Daniel responded easily, stretching up to nip at Jack's nose. "Is it okay for me to like how we are for now?"

"More than okay," Jack agreed readily, cupping Daniel's face gently. His kiss was warm and tender, slow sweetness.

Daniel really didn't have a problem with fucking Jack. He was just - well - greedy. When Jack was inside him, the immediacy and intensity of their connection moved him almost unbearably. The world went away for Jack. For Daniel too. He would lose himself in Jack, his hands slipping on the sweat that pooled on Jack's broad back, the rough, capable hands holding his ass just so, holding him right where it felt good for Jack, good for them both. Jack's eyes would be liquid with the force of his feelings, the pleasure he was taking and giving. Maybe Jack was like this with Sara, with his other lovers. Daniel didn't ask. He was amazed and grateful Jack had found it in him.

He took tiny, nuzzling bites over Jack's jaw and throat, wriggling pleurably against the finger stroking his ass, pushing down to open himself to the one broad finger nudging meaningfully at his anus. Daniel chuckled. "I bet you could get a girl's bra off one-handed too," he accused teasingly.

Jack beamed at him complacently. "Manual dexterity is high on the list of useful skills for a pilot."

"Shut up," Daniel ordered roughly as Jack's finger rocked into him. "Too much talking." Hissing with pleasure as Jack stroked him, Daniel kissed Jack fiercely, thrusting

aggressively into his mouth. Jack's finger began to move in the same pulsing rhythm. "More," Daniel demanded, plunging back into the kiss again.

Just as he always did when they were together, Jack opened up to him and let Daniel do whatever he wanted. He did laugh a soft protest into Daniel's mouth as he was fiercely kissed, but a moment later he was pushing back as powerfully as Daniel was driving into him. Jack got the upper - um - tongue in the kiss, purely because he was demonstrating his flawless manual dexterity in Daniel's ass, which was incredibly distracting. Daniel gave in, pushing and writhing against two knowing fingers.

"More, Jack, I need more," Daniel demanded as sullen desire stabbed in his belly. His cock was throbbing as he ground his hips against Jack, planting his foot on the mattress to keep Jack close.

They broke apart just enough to allow Daniel to take the lube from Jack. He squeezed a generous amount into his shaking hand and stroked it onto Jack's cock, smiling involuntarily as Jack jerked greedily against his fingers.

"You okay like this?" Jack asked as he slid down the bed a few inches.

"I want to kiss," Daniel said clearly.

Jack licked his lips, smirking. "I noticed."

Smug was a good look for Jack, but then Daniel thought everything was a good look for Jack. They never really talked about this stuff, but Daniel thought Jack was gorgeous. Jack showed his age in the laugh lines around his beautiful eyes, his distinguished grey hair, the lined throat. The first hint of softness in his still enviably muscled belly. Daniel admired every inch of Jack, who was so very real, and dear to him. Jack was comfortable in his own skin in a way he wanted Daniel to share. Daniel wasn't there yet, except when he was with Jack. He was learning to see himself through Jack's eyes, to understand his value to Jack. It was hard to be with someone whose every look and touch saw beauty in him and not be affected.

It took a little while to get themselves into position, with both of them on their sides, Daniel's legs hooked around Jack's back, his ankles comfortably crossed. Jack tilted his pelvis up so he could penetrate Daniel; his thighs would be hot and chafing against Daniel's ass when Jack curled up. They would make love slowly, tenderly, rocking easily together, touching, holding, kissing.

"Mmm," Daniel hummed anticipation when he felt the slick, snub touch of Jack's cock at his anus.

"Slut!" Jack accused, his eyes twinkling.

Daniel just had to kiss him. Growling, he pounced, grabbing Jack's ears to steer him close, chewing on his straight lower lip.

Jack snorted with laughter, his body shaking. "You're like a terrier puppy I once had, Jackson. Adorable yet relentless." He laughed again when Daniel wriggled his ass, fuck-me-already meaningfully.

Firm hands closed over Daniel's hips, holding him steadily as the snub touch became insistent pressure. Daniel's head arched back involuntarily as his body fought the steady penetration. Eyes closed, he reached up blindly to grasp Jack's shoulders, snatching quick, panting breaths as the head of Jack's cock pushed steadily inside him. Daniel pushed down against Jack, both of them moaning out as Daniel's body opened and Jack sank into him. Daniel moaned again as Jack rocked steadily, working his cock deeper until the heat of his balls rested velvet against Daniel's ass.

They lay still, arms around one another, flowing into a deep, passionate kiss, tongues pulsing rhythmically. It was one of the necessities of intercourse, this quiet time to allow Daniel's body to adjust to Jack. They fit exactly, every thrust would massage the tight channel, Daniel able to feel the heat and pulse of blood in Jack's cock. The sensation of his body being filled and slightly helpless against Jack's vigour and strength was powerfully erotic.

Jack - went deep. In every way.

"Fuck me," Daniel ordered, tightening his legs imperatively around Jack's back. He found himself gazing into Jack's eyes, heavy-lidded and slumberous with desire. Impulsively, he planted a soft kiss against each eyelid, then kissed Jack's forehead ceremoniously. "Now, Jack."

This position was good for them both. Jack was satisfyingly deep and they could rock and thrust easily.

Daniel gasped as Jack withdrew a little way then stroked into him. "Mmmm," he sighed. "I like that. Do that."

"This?" Jack asked innocently, stroking deeply.

"That. Deeper, though."

"Here?" Jack sought clarification, stroking into Daniel again.

Daniel arched pleurably, pulling Jack into another kiss as he pushed subtly into the next thrust. His body was rocked each time, his cock rubbing over the firm ridges of muscle on Jack's belly. It felt good. Jack went deep and stayed deep, rocking his hips, angling to find Daniel's prostate, rubbing sleekly over it.

"There!" Daniel gasped as he quivered, his fingers clenching hard into Jack's shoulders. "Just there. Again, Jack."

"You're God's own definition of assertive in bed, Jackson," Jack wryly told him.

Daniel smiled at him, stroking a gentle finger over the fascinating scar in Jack's eyebrow, tightening his legs instinctively as Jack's cock slid over his prostate again. His whole body was tingling with shocks of pleasure, leaving him breathless and shaking. "Harder, Jack," he ordered, licking Jack's Adam's apple. "Please."

Jack made a reluctant noise.

"And slower," Daniel suggested a compromise, writhing sensuously. "Actually...roll onto your back, please."

"Anything else?" Jack demanded, his lips quivering. He rolled slowly, holding Daniel carefully.

Daniel smiled at him as he planted his palms flat on Jack's belly and rocked himself voluptuously.

"Christ," Jack groaned, a quiver running through the whole of his body, his hips arching convulsively.

Daniel rocked again, moaning as the hard, throbbing heat pulled the tight muscles inside him. Jack gave Daniel what he wanted, obediently lifting his legs to plant his feet against the mattress, his thighs warm against Daniel's back. Daniel took Jack's hands in his, kissing each palm. Jack looked dazed as Daniel began to suckle on each finger in turn, Jack's thrusts getting harder, deeper. "Fuck me, Jack. Fuck me hard," Daniel breathlessly ordered.

Jack sat up, kissing Daniel passionately as he writhed sensuously in Jack's lap. They licked tongues, fighting over who would lead this kiss. Daniel pulled back suddenly to look at Jack, his hand shaking as he stroked reverent fingers down Jack's temple, cheek and jaw. Jack was red-faced and sweaty, panting as they fucked as hard and slow as Daniel wanted, Daniel's saliva glistening on his lips and chin.

Daniel's smile was from his heart. He snatched Jack to him, thrust deep into his mouth, biting down on Jack's tongue as he clenched his ass muscles around Jack's cock. Jack howled, toppling back, his head thrashing on the pillow as Daniel rode him.

It was good, it was so good. Satisfyingly deep and slow, just as Daniel liked it. His thighs were trembling, sweat pricking his skin, pooling deliciously on Jack's belly. Daniel liked to watch Jack's muscles work as they fucked, his hands moving from tracing the ridges on Jack's belly to press firmly into his own, low, so he could feel Jack moving inside him. Daniel reached out to rub Jack's nipples to aching hardness.

He cried out as Jack's hand closed over his cock and began to stroke him. Pleasure shook through Daniel, panging sharp and low in his belly over and over, quickening, rippling through his body in tight waves of dizzying heat. He rode it out, rode Jack for a long time, slowing Jack's hand on his cock, slowing his own rocking, wanting, needing, taking more. Jack was shaking as much as Daniel, reaching out to take Daniel's hand, their fingers entwining, rubbing restlessly together over Daniel's flexing thigh.

Jack groaned wrenchingly as the continual contractions in Daniel's ass squeezed his cock again and again. He was totally gone, gazing up at Daniel, his eyes black with the force of his passion, mouth working soundlessly, shoulders arching up from the bed as the pleasure took him.

Daniel's breath was labouring, sobbing in his throat as he ground himself against Jack's groin. "Jack!" he pleaded. Jack's grip on Daniel's hips was bruising as he thrust up wildly, his ass lifting from the bed to drive fierce stabs against Daniel's prostate. Daniel saw white flashes before his eyes as his body tensed and shook, Jack fingers squeezed hard on Daniel's cock and Daniel came, clenching convulsively around Jack.

Heat exploded inside him, Jack's cock pulsing steadily as he shot his load. Limbs leaden with satiation, Daniel lifted himself clear, Jack having to help him. Daniel tumbled limply forward onto Jack's chest, kissing him in gentle gratitude, then snuggled into Jack's affectionate, encompassing embrace, his racing pulse gradually slowing, the sweat and semen sticky on his cooling body. The sweet ache in his ass would stay with him for a long time.

"How long can you stay?" Jack asked after a while.

"Midnight, maybe," Daniel muttered, nuzzling at the sensitive hollow between Jack's throat and shoulder. They'd cuddle for a while, shower, dress and eat. Maybe watch some TV or talk. Not about them. Just - stuff.

They didn't need words.



"Sorentir."

"Daniel?" Jack hissed, his careful, diplomatic smile congealing.

"I don't know this language!" Daniel whispered back. He turned back to the small alien woman who stood facing them.

The indigenous species of P4Y-790 was bipedal and humanoid, not tall, but also not fine boned. The woman's white skin was mottled with soft touches of purple, as if her blood pooled close to the surface. It seemed slick with moisture of some kind, possibly secreted. Her hair was white too, bound around her head in a complicated array of fine braids.

At this distance, her eyes seemed wholly black to Daniel, her nose was - well, there was a reason Jack kept humming 'How much is that doggie in the window?' off-key and under his breath. Her nose was definitely snub, the flesh delicately wrinkled, with nostrils Jack had with his usual sensitivity likened to jet intakes.

"Daniel," he said again, touching his fingertips to his chest. "Daniel."

The woman quirked her head inquisitively, with quick, sharp, birdlike movements. "Sorentir."

"Jesus, Daniel," Jack snapped. "Her name is Sorentir. After an hour of this, even I get that."

"Jack, I don't think so," Daniel quickly disagreed.

"Sir, I agree with Daniel," Sam said at once, shooting Daniel an uneasy look. "Carter," she offered the woman, touching her free hand to her chest.

Daniel noticed Sam's grip was white knuckled on the butt of the P-90 slung from its customary harness around her shoulders and chest. Sam's unease was making him edgy too. Sam was wholly to be trusted to keep a cool head, even when Jack was losing his. Especially then. Daniel caught Sam's eyes, looking at her questioningly. She shook her head, her lips thinning in obvious frustration.

"Aw, for cryin' out loud," Jack bitched. "Teal'c!" He smacked Teal'c in the chest.

"O'Neill," Teal'c promptly responded, smacking Jack back just that much harder.

Jack scowled at him.

"Daniel," the woman said. She brought her hands together in front of her face like a child praying, touching the palms of each to her forehead, the slow, measured movements striking Daniel as being ritualistic. "Errys."

Daniel took an eager step forward, only to find Sam muscling in front of him, her arm outflung to bar his way. Her defensive posture was unmistakable, close to threatening.

"Carter!" Jack snapped, stalking up to join them, trying to glare Sam down.

"Sam?" Daniel queried sotto voce, carefully watching Errys to gauge her reaction to this. To his surprise, she was looking blandly 'through' Sam as if she wasn't there, focused wholly on Daniel.

As she had been all along, Daniel realised suddenly.

"Jack, say something to Errys," he instructed quietly. Sam shot him a look, part approval, part apology, but she didn't lower her arm even with Jack glaring at her.

"Dial 5-5-5-F-R-E-Y-A," Jack said jovially to Errys.

Daniel and Sam both turned to look at him, their disapproving frowns identical.

"When Freya yanks your yo-yo, get back to me," Jack responded tartly to their unspoken criticism. "Lighten up, willya? It's not like she learned English since we got here. This isn't 'Star Trek'."

"There's no evidence to prove she didn't learn English long before we got here," Daniel riposted, frowning. He carefully avoided using Errys' name, hoping to avoid triggering her interest in their quiet conversation if she didn't speak English. "We literally only have her words for that."

"Daniel," Errys repeated insistently. "Sorentir."

"What's yanking your chain, Carter?" Jack asked more seriously, eyeing Errys in aggravated disbelief. "Apart from the fact you-know-who is like a broken record?"

Sam shook her head, her eyes tight, tracking every move Errys made. "I don't know. I - she's dangerous, Sir. I know it."

"How?" Jack demanded. "Being a boring conversationalist isn't sufficient grounds for shooting her."

"I just know it!" Sam snapped. She looked a quick, uncertain apology at Jack, turning impulsively to Daniel for help.

He stepped discreetly closer.

"I don't do this," Sam complained to him, low-voiced and pissy. "I just - it's not me."

"All the more reason for us to take it seriously," Daniel blithely suggested, looking Jack right in the eye as he said it. Behind Sam's back, Jack gave Daniel the finger.

"I concur," Teal'c interjected.

Daniel glanced behind them to see that Teal'c had moved position to keep a clear line of sight on Errys, who he realised was walking towards them, sniffing the air delicately.

Sam stiffened involuntarily, raising her P-90.

Jack's hands twitched towards his gun before he could stop himself.

Annoyed with himself for reaching for his pistol, Daniel gave Jack credit for not losing his temper with Sam, simply ordering her through clenched teeth to fall back. She went, but she didn't make it look easy or willing, backing away slowly, never taking her eyes from Errys.

"I don't know what the hell is going on," Jack told Daniel quietly. "Errys isn't doing anything overtly hostile. She isn't even armed. But if Carter is this spooked..." He looked wryly at Daniel. "Carter doesn't do spooked."

"Teal'c?" Daniel called. "Do you sense anything?"

"I am calm, Daniel Jackson."

"It's nothing to do with Jolinar, Daniel!" Sam snapped. "This is..." She tutted in frustration. "Visceral is the best way to describe it."

"If you say ANYTHING about woman's intuition, she'll shoot YOU," Daniel warned Jack under his breath.

"I'm sensing that, yes," Jack agreed, glancing from one female to the other.

"What?" Daniel asked, his attention arrested. "Sensing?" He looked again at Errys, who walked right up to him, still sniffing the air. No, not quite. He realised she was sniffing him. Errys wasn't intrusive, she didn't touch him in any way, but he still shifted uneasily from foot to foot.

Sam took that as permission to close in on Daniel. Jack frowned at her but moved in also.

Daniel was too used to his friends reacting like this to fault them for it, even though he wished they could be more open-minded. Their defensive postures came off too much like aggression, the one true universal language Daniel had found. All that appeared to change was the nature of the response. His friends were more disciplined than most of the races they met, unfortunately.

"We should leave this place, O'Neill," Teal'c announced, his voice stony.

Errys inhaled deeply, lifting her head to scent the air, turning to Jack instantly, moving so fast to stand in front of him he jumped, raising his gun instinctively. He jerked back as she sniffed him.

"Okay! This chick is weirding me out too," Jack barked. "Let's chalk this one up to experience and head for the hills." He jerked a thumb at the Stargate behind him.

"There's trinium in those hills," Daniel reminded Jack, looking meaningfully at the low mountains spreading out before them, purple and blue in the hazy light.

"That is what we came here for, Sir," Sam reluctantly concurred.

"Tahlen," Errys pronounced with calm satisfaction. She held out her arms, her movements slow and graceful, the palm of each long fingered hand raised to Daniel and Jack, then she brought her arms together to cradle over her stomach. "Daniel. O'Neill. Tahlen," she said significantly, looking knowingly from Jack to Daniel.

"Forget the trinium," Jack ordered sharply, visibly rattled as Sam processed this by-play, frowning. "We're outta here." His eyes met Daniel's briefly in warning.

It was no shock to Daniel that Jack didn't want anyone to know they were in a sexual relationship, especially their teammates. Nothing about the situation was fair, but Daniel had made his choice from their first time together. His first loyalty was to Jack. There was too much going on for Sam to pry into what 'tahlen' meant, and he hoped it could as easily be interpreted as 'friends' instead of 'lovers'.

He was still startled that Errys could tell. Daniel had showered with Jack last night at his place - admittedly they'd had slippery sex in the suds, with the water pounding down on them - but he'd showered again alone this morning at his loft to wake himself up. There was no way Errys could smell Jack on him, even with what seemed to be her superior olfactory senses.

Was there?

"Daniel, O'Neill. Sorentir."

"Fall back," Jack ordered his team flatly. "This is a supposedly simple survey mission. Let's not start a war here. I'm not in the mood."

Obediently, Daniel turned to walk away, basically getting himself out of the way as he'd been endlessly drilled to do. He was fascinated, disappointed and slightly spooked by the encounter. It was rare they met a truly alien species, though the various human cultures they encountered were uniquely different from those of Earth. The Goa'uld had seeded the galaxy thoroughly with their human slaves, and of course the Stargate network was designed to take them to worlds which supported...

"Carter!" Jack roared.

Daniel spun around, startled, drawing his pistol as he turned. Sam was huddled on the ground, in the grip of some kind of seizure, her body jerking. As Daniel ran forward to help her, Jack was raising his P-90, spitting harsh words at Errys.

"What the FUCK!" Jack hollered, purple with fury. "Watch out!" he snarled as Daniel dropped to his knees beside Sam to check her pulse. "We have a sniper!"

"I see nothing, O'Neill," Teal'c reported tersely.

Daniel rolled Sam into the recovery position and angled her head carefully to keep her airway clear.

"How is she?" Jack asked. He was systematically scanning the horizon when Daniel glanced up.

"Alive. Sam's pulse is weak and thready, she's having difficulty breathing, and she's unconscious. There's nothing I can do for her here. We need to get her to Janet ASAP." Daniel rapidly reported. He wondered how much chance there was of that. Jack didn't dare open fire on Errys now he knew they weren't alone. There could be one man out there or a hundred, and there was no cover.

Errys tossed back her head and let out a loud, high-pitched ululating cry.

The tall, fragrant purple grasses before the Gate rippled as a small army silently stood up, each alien male carrying some kind of chunky rifle.

"O'Neill," Teal'c barked. "We are surrounded."

"No shit, Sherlock," Jack retorted bitterly.

"Sorentir, Daniel," Errys ordered with calm satisfaction, her dark eyes gleaming in the placid face. "Sorentir."

There was no sound but the familiar spit of Teal'c's staff weapon. Daniel saw the narrow, focused flare of light strike out from one of the weapons, then Jack was hurled back, his arms outflung as he thudded gracelessly to the ground, twitching and jerking as Sam had. Daniel was scrabbling for his pistol when he was struck in the chest, tossed backwards, unable to breathe, to see...



Daniel's head swam sickeningly every time he tried to lift it, so he stayed where he was, curled up at Jack's side. Sam was on her back an arm's length from him, still out cold, though Jack was stirring fretfully.

He managed to strain up a little, peering around to locate Teal'c. His friend was a few yards away from them, seated in his accustomed stance for Kel'No'Reem. Daniel's glasses were hanging from one ear. He freed them, then slid them clumsily on. The world wavered and reluctantly focused. He could see that the skin on Teal'c's bare arms and face was marked with ugly purple welts. Daniel looked anxiously at Jack, then at Sam, and found them unmarked.

"The aliens are venomous, DanielJackson," Teal'c said softly, opening his eyes.

"L-literally?" Daniel asked weakly, his voice parched and husky.

"Indeed. The venom is secreted through their skin."

"How are you?"

"My symbiote begins to heal me," Teal'c said placidly. "We are prisoners." He rose elegantly to his feet and padded over to kneel at Daniel's side, carefully lifting him to a sitting position. Teal'c sat behind Daniel, holding him comfortably. "I regret that I must know your opinion of this place, DanielJackson," Teal'c murmured, a hint of apology in his voice.

Daniel wondered vaguely why they'd been stripped of not just their weapons and packs, but some of their uniform too. Their feet were bare, their jackets missing. 790 wasn't a warm planet. Daniel felt the chill in the air, biting at his bare skin from the floor. The cold would make them sluggish, make it difficult to think and act. When it got dark, they were in real danger of suffering from exposure.

He really felt like just laying his head down on Teal'c's shoulder and closing his eyes. It hurt to breathe and his dizziness was making him bitterly sick. The symbiote seemed affected too, stirring in its pouch behind him, soft, unpleasant touches against his back. Daniel fought hard not to let his revulsion show, wishing as he always did that Jack would even make the attempt for Teal'c's sake.

"Daniel," Teal'c gently reminded him of his duty.

"Just - just give me a minute to process, okay?" Daniel asked. Hazy natural light was slanting down on them from high above. Blinking hard, Daniel looked up, then around. They were in a small square chamber. The walls were dark grey, almost black. "This is a tower," Daniel said quietly. "The walls are rising above us maybe three or four storeys. I can't tell if the walls are stone or metal." This was important. The presence of metal walls and floors helped them to determine the level of technological advancement the team was facing. Daniel leaned forward a little, trailing his fingers over the cold floor. "Metal," he

said slowly, gazing into the shadows. "Taken with the weapons we saw, this level of sophisticated construction suggests their technology is in advance of our own."

"I concur," Teal'c responded. "We are on a platform separated from the rest of the chamber. I have been unable to determine how far down the chamber extends below our position."

"It was designed for this purpose," Daniel said thoughtfully, looking at the way the daylight artfully pooled around his teammates. The windows were purposely high above them, specifically placed to illuminate the platform only. Everything else was in shadow. Daniel struggled up with Teal'c's support. He winced, remembering he wasn't the only one hurt here, looking anxiously around. "Your wounds?" he asked sharply.

"My injuries do not trouble me, Daniel Jackson," Teal'c serenely answered.

He meant they shouldn't trouble Daniel. Daniel looked over his shoulder, shooting Teal'c a hard, reproving stare, which he ignored. Surrendering an always unequal struggle, Daniel went on with his visual survey. "There's a walkway there, skirting the walls. I can just glimpse the edge here and there," he muttered, pointing vaguely.

As Daniel stared, the shadows dancing before his eyes then slowly coming into focus. "No. Perhaps an auditorium of sorts. Just a single row of throne-like seats, not ornate, but imposing." The architecture was featureless, as subtle as a fist. "It's not encouraging," he admitted gloomily. "Did you know Washington D.C. was deliberately designed to intimidate and humble visitors?"

"Yes," Teal'c replied unexpectedly, derailing Daniel's trail of thought.

"Christ. He's still talking," Jack whined pitifully. "Someone knock me out again."

"Happy to," Daniel hissed indignantly, choking down a very unprofessional wave of relief as his colonel stirred. It continually pissed Daniel off that the soft-eyed man who'd lounge drowsily in bed with him, listening happily to any damn thing Daniel chose to chatter about, wouldn't let Daniel give him the time of day without calling him on it when they were on duty. Knowing Jack, he probably did it on purpose.

Jack opened his eyes, rolled cautiously onto his side and scowled evilly at Daniel. He seemed decidedly unenthusiastic about Daniel's intimate and at this point fairly interactive proximity to Teal'c, but clearly wasn't up to doing anything about it, though his dangerous eyes promised pleasurable retaliation at some unspecified point in the future, when Daniel least expected it.

Not that Daniel would deliberately annoy Jack or anything. Uh-uh. Not him.

"Carter?" Jack asked sharply.

Sam groaned piteously. "Here. Unfortunately."

"Allow me to assist you, Major Carter," Teal'c offered kindly.

"Thanks," Sam responded with real gratitude.

Daniel managed to keep himself upright as Teal'c freed him to go to Sam, then got ambitious, crawling over to Jack's side. Jack's fingers touched his for a fleeting moment, his eyes soft and questioning. Daniel managed a tiny, wavering smile.

In the next moment, Jack's face was stony. His game face.

Behind them, Sam was retching distressingly. Wincing sympathetically, Daniel swallowed the bitter saltiness flooding his own mouth again.

"Well?" Jack demanded, cringing as Sam puked her guts up over the edge of the platform, hanging limp from Teal'c's arms. "Smaller body mass," Jack murmured to Daniel as he sat up, reeled and steadied himself, pushing away Daniel's instinctive helping hand. "She was struck by the same charge we were from the weapons so it hit her harder." He shook his head muzzily. "I feel like crap," he complained.

"Me too," Daniel sighed.

"Me..." Sam panted, waving an eloquent hand, "three." Shivering abjectly, Sam slumped against Teal'c, her head lolling on his supporting shoulder, her face pale and pinched.

"I do not know if we are prisoners or prey," Teal'c announced without preamble, gently cradling Sam.

They all glared at him, although Sam's glare was directed more or less up his nose. Teal'c seemed quite pleased by the sensation he had caused.

"That is NOT helping!" Jack bitched.

"The aliens are venomous, O'Neill," Teal'c went on. "I was unable to determine if this was a natural means of defence against predators or attackers, or an aggressive response. However..."

"If they were armed, it might have another purpose altogether," Daniel interrupted excitedly.

"Do you ever listen to yourself?" Jack demanded incredulously. "When the cannibals are stuffing Carter in the cook pot I'm sure it will comfort her to know you're utterly fascinated."

"They won't," Daniel corrected him absently.

"Won't what?"

"Stuff Sam in the cook pot. Not if they're cannibals."

"What?" Jack asked blankly, frankly not looking up to dealing with any kind of conversational fracas.

"If the aliens eat us, that doesn't make them cannibals." Daniel looked vaguely at his limp lover. His lover looked apoplectic. "It makes them carnivores. If they were cannibals, they'd be eating each other," he explained hurriedly.

"Carter could be the dessert," Jack insisted stubbornly.

"But I doubt they'd eat us even if they are carnivores. We're sentient beings. Errys knows that. We've communicated," Daniel went on hurriedly, correctly interpreting Sam's resentful silence as a none too subtle indicator he should change the subject with some rapidity.

"Communicated?" Jack hooted rudely.

"I think Teal'c's first suggestion is the correct one," Daniel went on, ignoring what he felt to be more deliberate provocation.

"I think the aliens are higher up the food chain we are," Jack argued.

"I think you should stop thinking," Daniel unkindly advised Jack. "I also think we're going to be subjected to some kind of rite."

"If I may clarify," Jack said crisply, holding up a quelling finger. "We're no longer on the menu, just heading up the list for ritual sacrifice at dawn?"

"There's no reason to think we'll be sacrificed, Jack," Daniel retorted impatiently. "Ritually or otherwise."

"Apart from Errys and her army shooting the shit out of us and trying to fry Teal'c in his boots?" Jack asked witheringly, leaning past Daniel to nod pointedly at Teal'c.

"The chamber appears to have only one purpose, Jack. It's for the leader..."

"Errys," Jack interrupted. "I think that's fairly obvious."

Daniel nodded agreement.

"I have reached the same conclusion, O'Neill," Teal'c said quietly.

"Ditto," Sam added in a carefully neutral 'I'm not even THINKING I told you so even though I DID' voice. When Daniel checked on her, she was staring at her bare toes like they could change the face of physics if only the little buggers would co-operate.

"Errys and her priests - generals - council of advisers - influential people certainly, can gather privately to observe what goes on here, on this dais," Daniel went on. "It's the seating," he added, pointing out at the shadows surrounding them. "I count ten - thrones, for want of a better descriptor, running parallel to us on two sides, and one much larger throne set alone behind us." He jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "Four straight ahead of us, then a gap, then another four."

"I believe that gap you speak of is the entrance to this place, though no one has entered in our time here," Teal'c informed them. "It is difficult to determine the construction with the chamber shadowed in this way. I agree with Daniel Jackson's judgement that we are dealing with a technologically sophisticated species. The construction of this chamber is most impressive, fulfilling a number of different functions."

"What he said," Daniel smiled, looking warmly at Teal'c.

Jack made it to his feet, swaying. "Any way off this thing?"

"There is not."

"Probably a retractable walk-way," Sam suggested, sounding a little stronger. "There might be a mechanism we can trigger," she said optimistically as Teal'c helped her up. "The sooner the better. It's cold in here," she added, rubbing her bare arms.

"It was I who removed your jackets and footwear," Teal'c answered the unspoken question. "I believe Errys was not pleased to see me damaged by the touch of her people. She allowed me to tend to you. Though I could not understand her words, her meaning was clear. I bathed your feet."

Jack cleared his throat, apparently feeling the comment was directed at him. "Sorry about that. The laundry kinda piles up. Things get on top of you."

Daniel, the 'thing' that usually got on top of Jack, naturally with Jack's wholehearted assistance, choked. The odds of Jack trading sex for laundry were slim to none, unless they did it on the drier. "Cleansing is a common precursor to a ritual or ceremony," Daniel observed in as steady a voice as he could manage. As he was walking across the dais to join Jack, the wall ahead of them began to slide noiselessly up.

"Just keep thinking those happy thoughts, Daniel," Jack instructed him tartly, his mind apparently very much dwelling on ritual sacrifice.

The team assumed their customary defensive positions, Daniel tucked neatly behind Jack, Sam and Teal'c spreading out to flank them. They stood alertly watching as alien men

dressed in flowing iridescent white robes strode into the chamber, each turning to stand before a throne, the man behind him taking the throne next to his, filling each place in turn with impressive synchronisation.

Daniel was interested by this. It was usual that rising societal status was reflected in the closer proximity members of each social strata were allowed to the leader. From what little he'd been able to observe of them so far, Errys' people seemed rigidly hierarchical to Daniel.

As far as the aliens themselves were concerned, Daniel could detect no discernible markings, dress or decoration to suggest a caste system, but couldn't rule it out at this stage. He simply didn't have enough observational evidence to make valid assessments. At first sight, there was no clear pattern of physiological differences - the aliens had differing facial features of course, none of them were tall, they were solidly muscled and shared identical eye and hair colouring, their skin mottled and slick.

Errys was the last to enter the chamber, the door sliding closed behind her. She too robes, though hers were finer, of many layers and natural shades of cream, floating around her legs as she moved. She stepped confidently out into thin air, a walk-way gliding out before her to span the chasm that surrounded the dais the team was imprisoned on.

"Damn," Sam muttered, craning her head to try to see where the walk-way had sprung from. "It must be operated by sensors." Her tone suggested this made it useless to them.

Daniel caught Jack and Teal'c exchanging a quick look. He knew Jack's body language better than he knew his own. Jack was uneasy at Errys' calm assurance, seeming unsure if she was a direct threat or a potential hostage.

"She burned you just touching you?" Jack asked Teal'c, who inclined his head. Jack's lips thinned. "Won't be easy," he whispered.

"I am with you," Teal'c promised.

"So are we," Sam interjected sharply.

"Daniel," Errys greeted him as she stepped onto the dais. The walk-way instantly retracted, gliding back.

"Oh, I don't like this," Sam said tightly, shifting nervously from foot to foot.

"If the next word out of that bitch's mouth is 'sorentir' so help me!" Jack grumbled an aside to Daniel. "Carter," he warned, low-voiced. "Hold your position." Daniel turned, startled, to see Sam moving forward, her eyes intent on Errys.

"We haven't seen another female, Sam. It's possible Errys is the only one," Daniel said rapidly, trying to distract her, not wanting this to escalate as it had back at the Stargate.

He literally had to get in Sam's face, taking her shoulders to hold her back, stepping with her as she sidled impatiently to get past him.

"She sees me as a threat, you mean?" Sam asked, still glaring over Daniel's shoulder. "That doesn't explain my reaction to her," she said dismissively.

"Errys' body secretes chemicals," Daniel suggested urgently, taking Sam's shoulders, forcing her to focus on him. "We can see the secretions glistening on her skin. Perhaps one of those chemicals is affecting you."

Sam looked at him then, frowning consideringly.

Daniel recalled Errys scenting the air. "What's the least developed sense humans possess?"

"Smell," Sam answered instantly. "Studies have shown - oh. Oh! Pheromones," she recalled triumphantly, her face clearing.

"Exactly!" Daniel said excitedly. "Do you remember Janet telling us about VMOs - vomeronasal organs?"

"Some scientist - I can't recall the name - thought he'd discovered vomeronasal sacs in humans," Sam answered. "Janet was pretty excited about it," she recalled fondly.

"The olfactory system is wired into the hypothalamus," Daniel went on.

"Which governs sexual and maternal behaviour! That's where the aggression is coming from," Sam realised, nodding at him with brisk approval, her quick mind already analysing.

"Can we FOCUS here?" Jack demanded in a sarcastic aside to them.

When Daniel glanced around, Jack was planted solidly in Errys' way, Teal'c circling gently around behind her. "Ja-ack," Daniel warned, aware of the relaxed regard of their interested observers.

Errys MOVED, flowing backwards at blinding speed to launch herself spinning into the air, her foot lashing out to strike Teal'c solidly in the head. He was thrown backwards, landing limply at the edge of the platform. He didn't move.

"Teal'c!" Jack roared. "Stay where you are!" he barked as Sam and Daniel ran forward to help. They froze in their tracks, Sam moving protectively in front of Daniel. "I guess we know why Errys is the Alpha Bitch round these parts," he acknowledged grimly. "Me! You talk to me. O'Neill. You get that?" he raged at Errys, low-voiced and deadly.

Errys stood before Jack, the many layers of her robes still whispering to stillness around her legs. She quirked her head in that 'listening' stance that seemed her signature, then

she moved again, dancing past Jack to kick his legs out from under him as her arm slammed into his chest. He landed jarringly on his back, his head striking the floor with a sickening thud.

"Jack!" Daniel yelled, trying to get past Sam. Errys was coming, coming fast. She easily evaded Sam's punch, lashing out in a punch of her own that landed on Sam's solar plexus. Sam folded up, dropping to her knees, then falling forward onto her face, wheezing desperately. She curled up into a ball, scrabbling to get back up. Errys grabbed a good handful of Sam's short hair and dragged her brutally across the floor to fling her down at Jack's side.

Sam tried to make it up again as Daniel ran forward. Errys made no hostile move towards him as he roughly shoved past her. She seemed slightly amused by his anxiety, walking easily behind him as he crouched between Sam and Jack, a hand resting on each of them. Jack was unconscious, Sam huddling into a defensive ball, her knees lifting jerkily as she fought to get past her pain, to get to her feet, her eyes huge, frightened and determined.

Errys stooped gracefully. She pointed first at Jack, then at Sam. "Sorentir, Daniel." Errys mirrored Daniel's pose, one hand poised over the face of each of his friends. "Sorentir."

Daniel's heart was beating fast. The ugly burns on Teal'c's skin had come from one of Errys' people. She was asking him to choose which of his friends to hurt, to torture. It was impossible, there was no way he could choose between - Choose! Of course! How stupid of him! Daniel imperatively rose up on his knees. "I choose myself! Sorentir." He smacked both hands to his chest. "Sorentir Daniel!" he demanded.

Errys bowed her head in gratified acknowledgment of teaching the stupid human a new trick, then she lightly touched her fingers to his cheek.

Daniel cried out in agony, falling back on his ass in shock as his skin scorched and blistered instantly. He sprawled between his friends, gaping up in sick disbelief at Errys' sleek, purring pleasure at his pain, her little murmur of appreciation echoed among the watchers.

"Choose," Errys softly tried the word. "Sorentir..." she nodded at him. "Choose."

"Choose what?" Daniel gasped out. He leaned back instinctively as Errys moved closer. He thought for a moment she was going to kiss him, but she halted just short of him, inhaling deeply, sniffing delicately at his face. Daniel fought to hold still as he felt her warm breath gust over his skin. Despite his determination to show nothing, he flinched when she licked delicately over the wound on his cheek, lapping him like a cat. Choked with revulsion, Daniel looked deep into her sloe black eyes. "Sorentir?" he questioned.

"Vestae," Errys answered readily, pointing at each of his friends in turn. "Im'da vestae rohan." She lifted her head and pointed at the doorway. Daniel glanced behind him to see the chamber door had been opened once again.

"You could be asking me to choose which of them to set free," Daniel reluctantly acknowledged the symbolism of the open door to their prison. "Or which of them to send to their deaths." He took a deep, calming breath.

"Daniel, no!" Sam ordered shakily. "Don't choose, don't give her what she wants."

"Sorentir Daniel," he said steadily. With no reason to trust Errys, what other choice could he make? The consequences of his choices had to fall on him, not on his friends.

"Nah," Errys retorted, her eyes caressingly indulgent. She breathed Daniel in again, inhaling ecstatically "Nah, Daniel." Errys rose smoothly to her feet. "Tu vay mir na sante, tu do'este amente se frene nen. Sorentir," she warned him before walking calmly away.

"Jesus," Jack grumbled weakly, finally admitting to consciousness, roughly scrubbing both hands through his hair. Daniel turned to him at once, helping him to sit, painfully slowly, glad just to feel Jack's solid warmth against him. "That bitch has a kick like a mule." Jack scowled at Daniel, failing to hide his relief at finding him and Sam okay. "We're in this mess because you smell good?" he asked challengingly, his strong tone sounding forced to Daniel's sensitive ears.

"From what little we've observed, I'd argue that Errys' species appears to have highly developed olfactory senses, Sir," Sam reported wearily. "Daniel's scent could be exciting her sexually..."

"Unless they stock full body condoms round these parts, you'll be chargrilled," Jack informed Daniel unpleasantly.

"Thanks!" Daniel retorted resentfully.

"Maternally..." Sam looked doubtfully at the blistering welt on Daniel's cheek and let that supposition go. She tutted in frustration, frowning up at Daniel. "I wish we knew more about their physiology."

"Me too." Daniel patted Sam's knee consolingly, then scrambled to his feet and went to check on Teal'c, realising with a shock that their audience was still present, still watching, their robes reflecting the light while their faces were shadowed in darkness. The intimidation was silent and surely intentional. Daniel was wise enough to admit he was afraid. "Um - guys?" he called, making sure everyone knew they were under observation.

"Im'da vestae rohan," Errys ordered in measured tones, gracefully gesturing at the open doorway as she ascended the steps to take her bleak throne. "Sorentir, Daniel."

"I have no idea what that means!" Daniel huffed in supreme frustration. He had nothing to work with!

"Forget about her," Jack ordered impatiently. "Just go check on Teal'c."

Teal'c rolled onto his knees as Daniel drew level with him. He accepted Daniel's assistance to rise to his feet, inclining his head in thanks. "You are injured, Daniel Jackson," he observed, his eyes hardening.

"And you lied about your wounds being okay," Daniel retorted. "This burn hurts like hell."

"It is of no importance." Teal'c looked warningly at Daniel, then behind him to their friends, each busily surveying their audience and the chamber they were imprisoned in. "We will not speak of it."

They walked with great dignity back over to Sam and Jack, neither of whom seemed up to moving around much. Teal'c knelt solicitously at Sam's side, returning her grateful smile as he helped her to sit. Sam was deathly pale but up, more or less alert, plainly hurting and rubbing her stomach continuously.

Daniel helped Jack up again, alarmed that he hadn't been able to stay upright without Daniel there to support him, and very conscious that Jack was taking the burn on his cheek personally, his brown eyes flinty. He hated that Jack actually leaned on him, knowing Jack felt strongly how dangerous it was for prisoners to show weakness. Daniel hid his worry as best he could, bracing himself to take Jack's weight as Jack slumped pathetically against him. "Is this a tactical slump?" he whispered anxiously, still hoping.

"I wish," Jack groaned. He patted the back of his head, his hand coming away wet with blood. "I'm making it look worse than it is," he added unconvincingly as Daniel's fingers fumbled agitatedly in his hair in search of the wound.

"We're in a lot of trouble," Sam observed quietly, glancing edgily at the invitingly open door.

Daniel took advantage of Jack's bluff - which was apparently that he was bluffing - to hug him supportively, something Jack apparently felt lent much needed credence to his ruse. Daniel belatedly remembered the thump in the chest Jack had received, apologetically loosened his grip, whispering something disjointed about ribs. Jack's sudden snort of stifled laughter Daniel took as permission to hug the shit out of his exasperating colonel.

"Tahlen," Errys observed with great satisfaction. A knowing murmur ran through the appreciative audience in the shadows.

A familiar heat warmed Daniel's cheeks. Jack simply stared stoically at nothing, particularly at nothing Sam or Teal'c shaped.

"Is there anything about this - ritual - you find familiar, Daniel?" Sam asked hopefully. Her beautiful eyes were clouded with pain, lips tight.

"Honestly?"

"Oh." Sam deflated, sighing.

"What are our options?" Jack asked.

Daniel decided that comment was directed at him and answered for everyone. "It seems I can't choose myself for whatever 'vestae' is, Errys made that clear. 'Im'da vestae rohan', to be precise. Our choices are pretty limited, Jack. I can refuse to choose. I can choose one of you. Errys could let that one go. Errys could kill that one," Daniel rapidly marked each untenable option off on his fingers. "Regardless, I'm stuck here translating new and exciting ways to possibly kill each of you." He glanced at Errys on her throne, still watching his every move. "Actually, I think I'm stuck here full stop," he confessed miserably. "Errys won't deign to communicate with anyone else."

"There was sniffing," Jack observed in a cool, distant voice, his shoulders tensing against Daniel's chest.

"Licking," Sam supplied helpfully. "Errys' interest in Daniel is probably sexual," she suggested tactlessly. "It's nothing personal, Daniel," she added comfortingly. "Stimuli from the environment are converted into electrochemical nerve impulses, which as you know are the language of the brain. Your body is simply emitting a chemical Errys is reacting powerfully to, a chemical we," she gestured at her teammates, "aren't even aware of, exerting an attraction we don't share."

"Speak for yourself," Jack muttered under his breath so quietly only Daniel caught it. "So Dog Breath is one quivering mass of uncontrollable hormonal lust?" Jack's voice was deceptively casual, his eyes, dwelling on Errys lounging on her throne, anything but.

"Perhaps DanielJackson is a narcotic, not an aphrodisiac?" Teal'c offered, entering into the obnoxiously pessimistic spirit of things.

Daniel Jackson was fighting a losing battle against a blush like a sunset. Amazingly he had enough panic to share between imminent death and imminent outing if survival was actually an option, which seemed unlikely at this point. He would be the first to admit it was a teensy bit selfish to prefer option A. He'd been dead before. He could deal with that.

This though...Daniel was morbidly conscious that cuddling his colonel was certainly not helping his case for strictly platonic connotations to be attached to 'tahlen' by his teammates. Even so, he couldn't bring himself to let go of the annoyingly smug and slightly dented bastard lounging fetchingly in his arms, ready to tilt at windmills in his own unique, aggravating and currently non-ambulatory way.

For once in his life, Daniel was praying Sam didn't think outside the box.

Daniel honestly had no idea how he would feel if Sam and Teal'c knew he and Jack were having sex, if they knew Jack had fucked him. Knew how much he enjoyed being fucked. He couldn't deal with it; it was too freaky. Daniel had never expected to tumble into bed with Jack, hadn't even seen Jack coming until they were humping wildly against his apartment door, their trousers round their ankles.

Sanity had returned when Jack had happily suggested a sleepover. Accepting the unexpected gift Jack had given him, Daniel had promised himself he would be mature and realistic. He would never compromise Jack, never damage his reputation. It had to be that way for Jack's sake. It was hard to be pragmatic, to be careful and considerate, to be content with what little time they could snatch together, especially when Jack went out of his way to make it hard on Daniel.

Jack was fucking Daniel, but the Air Force was his life. No question.

Stifling an ache of accustomed regret, Daniel yanked himself back to more immediate problems than his still-budding sexuality. "How about if I choose all of you?" he hesitantly suggested.

"What?" Jack snarled, surging up to glare at him. "Forget it!"

"But..." Daniel protested.

"I said forget it!"

"I'm not leaving you!" Sam snapped.

"Nor will I, Daniel Jackson," Teal'c coldly rebuked him.

"It presents you with the best option for escape and survival," Daniel said, blinking hard against a rush of affection for his stubborn, infuriatingly over-protective friends. "I can take a little sniffing until you guys come back with the Marines." Daniel sensed almost immediately he was alone in judging what he could take His friends weren't buying.

"I doubt I could make it out of here under my own steam if a snake was crawling up my ass," Jack announced defiantly.

Daniel hugged Jack harder, making him squawk a wheezing protest as his ribs creaked.

"Me either," Sam insisted staunchly, hugging her stomach and rocking a little for effect.

"Teal'c could carry you," Jack suggested to Sam, far from idly.

"I could not," Teal'c responded blandly. "My wounds are causing me great pain and Major Carter is heavy." He ignored Daniel's outraged look, choosing instead to respond to Major Carter's.

"We all go or we all stay," Jack announced with flat, frankly quixotic finality.

"I think you're letting emotion cloud your judgement," Daniel argued, very aware of the irony here.

"I beg your pardon?" his team leader responded icily. "Three of us are wounded, we have no idea where we are..." Jack looked questioningly at Teal'c, who nodded agreement with this statement. "How far it is to the gate, or if these guys want us on the a la carter menu. We have no weapons, no compass, no rations, no water, no socks and no frigging idea what the hell is going on. If we 'vestae' our asses out of here, the odds are extremely high we'll die whimpering from exposure three hundred yards from whatever hellhole the bitch lets us crawl out of."

"That was very convincing," Daniel informed his lover and his sagely nodding 'what the colonel said' teammates. "Especially as you all know perfectly well the only way the rest of us get out of here is if one of us takes a calculated risk, walks out the door and makes a break for it."

"Makes a break for - crap! The bitch is back."

No one said anything. Daniel simply helped Jack to his feet while Teal'c helped Sam. They stood with their arms around one another, proudly staring down Errys as she strolled onto the dais, with the slow confidence of the powerful.

"Im'da vestae rohan," Errys insisted, gesturing again at the door. "Sorentir, Daniel."

"We all go or we all stay. We're probably dead, either way," Jack said tightly.

"Thanks for the pep talk."

"Just choose us, Daniel," Sam urged. "Choose all of us."

"We'll see which way the cards fall."

"I concur."

"Can you stand?" Daniel whispered to Jack.

"Only if I have to," Jack said grimly. He looked at Daniel, his face drawn beneath the tan. "Wasn't kidding about the tail spin the walls are doing."

"You have to," Daniel told him gently, squeezing his waist. "I need to try something." Jack stepped away from him, head held high. He was swaying perceptibly. Sam shuffled across and got her shoulder against his back, Teal's supporting arm still at her waist. "I wish I had something to write with," Daniel fretted.

Jack reached behind his head, scrubbing his hands over his hair, then held out his cupped palms to Daniel. "I can't manage the Gettysburg Address, but scalp wounds always bleed like goddamn bastards."

Daniel's mouth fell open. Feeling sick to his stomach, he inched reluctantly forward, dipped his trembling fingers into Jack's blood and knelt down to draw the Stargate on the floor. A simple circle, with five stick figures beneath it. "Errys," he called. She walked over and stood before him. "Stargate." Daniel's finger traced his circle in the air. He pointed at each stick figure in turn. "Daniel." He tapped the floor, indicating a particular figure. "O'Neill."

Understanding at once, Errys stooped to tap the floor where a single isolated figure stood. "Errys."

Daniel nodded. "Stargate," he said meaningfully, tracing its shape again. "Stargate."

Errys was staring at him, a good deal of comprehension in her eyes.

"Stargate," Daniel prompted, politely insistent.

Errys traced the circle of the gate in the air exactly as Daniel had. "Rohan," she said approvingly.

The stupid human had learned a new trick. Daniel, a veteran of airplane impressions for uncomprehending aliens and unsatisfactory conversations with canines, a stranger to embarrassment, glanced behind him. "Jack?"

"Rohan is the Stargate, gotcha. Figure out what 'vestae' means and we're cooking with gas."

The greatest difficulty in communicating was never with the concrete. Anything Daniel or an alien could point to, they could find a word for and share understanding. Abstract concepts were the killer. There were simply no cultural reference points to share. He would have to start slow and build up, and with their lives on the line, be sure.

"Human," he said slowly, significantly.

"Houman," Errys repeated, frowning.

"Good." Daniel made an encouraging face, though he'd noted Errys and her people seemed to have few facial expressions. "Daniel is human male." He pointed to himself. Then he stood up and pointed to Jack. "Human male."

"Human female," Sam said swiftly.

"Jaffa male," Teal'c went on, inclining his head.

"Houman male," Errys repeated slowly. She pointed to herself. "D'ahin to'ai." Her hand flashed out to cup his face caressingly. "To'hin."

Daniel reared back in shock, clapping his hand to his face, his friends crying out angrily, surging forward. "I'm okay!" he called urgently, snatching his hand away to reveal unmarked skin.

"Vestae," Errys said smugly.

"Daniel!" Jack asked sharply.

"Vestae is mercy, I think," Daniel answered. He turned impulsively to Teal'c. "You know what this means, don't you?" he said bitterly.

"Indeed," Teal'c agreed stonily. "Errys and her people chose deliberately to inflict these wounds, concealing their control of the secretions from me."

"Sorentir," Errys shrugged elegantly, her voice light and humorous, eyes filled with bright malice.

"Kel mar sha'lokma'kor, Errys. Kel'cha," Teal'c promised.

Daniel bit his lip, pulling a face at Sam and Jack. "Jaffa revenge thing," he muttered.

"Get in line!" Sam whispered indignantly to Teal'c.

"Im'da vestae Rohan," Daniel repeated slowly, frowning.

"Does that mean Errys is willing to let us all go but you?" Sam queried suspiciously.

"Oh, I don't think so." Daniel needed to understand the last part of the phrase, which most likely meant something simple, such as 'go to' or 'take'. 'Take' was a concept he could illustrate. He took his glasses off.

"Im'da?" he asked.

Errys frowned.

He put his glasses on, then took Errys' hand in his. "Im'da?"



possible. Teal'c lay in a state of deep Kel'No'Reem, facing the tantalising open doorway with Sam spooned up tightly against his back. Daniel lay with his back to Sam's, and Jack lay facing him, which allowed Jack to watch the door while Daniel watched Errys, and all the aliens watched them. At this point, only the aliens appeared to be able to see anything. It was pitch dark in the chamber.

Daniel was glad Sam had recovered her equanimity. She had found it extremely difficult to have to relieve herself surrounded by enemies watching and weighing her every move. Daniel was less than thrilled himself. In counterpoint to their modesty, Jack had casually unbuttoned his fly and pissed right in front of Errys' throne.

"Sir, I've been thinking."

"I'd be shocked if you ever stopped, Carter," Jack responded as he usually did, the sarcasm automatic.

It was surreal situation. Sam was chastely spooning, hugging herself, while Daniel lay with Jack's legs wrapped around his, discreetly holding hands between their bodies.

"I think the sensors triggering the walk-way to the dais detect scents," Sam said thoughtfully, "and right now they're programmed only to respond to Errys. None of the other aliens are triggering the device, and we've seen them to-ing and fro-ing with some regularity."

"Comfort breaks and hot dogs," Jack commented, his sarcasm biting.

"I also think that's why some of our clothing was taken," Sam suggested. "just as you would give clothing to a dog to learn a person's scent."

"To programme our scent into the security system?" Jack asked, interested.

"Possibly," Sam agreed.

"The D'ahin themselves are very focused on sensory perception," Daniel added. "Their olfactory and visual acuity is exceptional, their cultural focus possibly experiential rather than iconic."

"Daniel means they're getting their rocks off from the live SG-1 action instead of staying home watching TV like decent sentient species," Jack informed Sam.

"Daniel," Daniel snapped, "means the purity of line and severe simplicity of the architecture suggests the D'ahin aren't interested in the decorative arts or abstract visual representations." He allowed himself to be mollified by some affectionately conciliating cheek nuzzling from Jack.

"How does that help us?" Sam asked.

"It doesn't, not materially," Daniel admitted, slightly embarrassed. "I'm just trying to find a hook, something about us that Errys can connect with."

"She connected with your nipples just fine earlier," Sam retorted coldly. "She practically mauled you right in front of us."

Jack went from nuzzling to twanging with tension almost instantaneously.

"We're a different species," Daniel suggested nervously, making with a little conciliating nuzzling of his own.

"Daniel," Sam sighed, then bit off whatever she was going to say. Her hand clumsily patted his hip.

"It - it's just my scent." Daniel wasn't sure who he was trying to convince here. "Just my scent," he said again, appealing to Jack, who found the way Daniel smelled deeply arousing. Although to be fair, Jack found most things about Daniel deeply arousing.

Unseen in the darkness by anyone who mattered to them, Jack swiftly kissed the tip of Daniel's nose. "You've gotta quit wearing that Issy Miyake," Jack warned him softly, a smile sounding in his voice.

"We still don't know anything about their societal structure," Daniel went on, holding Jack's hand tighter.

"We still don't know much about their species full stop," Sam interjected. "Errys is the only female we've seen. Why?"

"Who says these guys are guys?" Jack added. "They could be drones for all we know."

Daniel had a glimmer of an idea. He kept coming back to the D'ahin's sensory acuity. "You know our - human - physiology may be just as receptive to chemical messages as that of other mammals?"

"It's a known fact that women in close proximity will synchronise their menstrual cycle," Sam agreed, "something researchers have attributed to the same kind of chemical stimulus that triggers oestrus in mice."

"Let's not go there, Carter!" Jack ordered briskly.

"Janet referred to the accessory olfactory system," Daniel told them. "It begins with the vomeronasal organs - tiny sacs in the nasal cavity - that are wired straight into what Janet referred to as the 'reptilian' part of the brain."

"I remember this," Sam murmured. "Humans tend to lose olfactory acuity because we have so many environmental stimuli competing for the brain's attention. The accessory olfactory system sends signals to the part of the brain that controls reproduction and maternal behaviour."

"In humans..." Daniel wriggled uncomfortably, something Jack appeared to enjoy, catching his breath, then squeezing Daniel's hand warningly. "It's an alternate route to the brain, right?"

"That's right," Sam agreed. "It bypasses the cerebral cortex, which means we have no conscious awareness of it at all. There are sensory receptors in the noses of rodents which allow them to receive and respond to a range of social and sexual signals. With humans, the role pheromones play is much less clear. Our behaviour isn't stereotypical like that of insects or even the lower mammals on which the research is based."

"Our culture places such a low value on olfaction we've never developed a proper vocabulary for it," Daniel said softly. "In 'A Natural History of the Senses', poet Diane Ackerman explained that it's almost impossible to describe a scent to someone who hasn't smelled it. We can name every shade in a hue of colour, but there are no words for the tones and tints of a smell, even though humans can detect over ten thousand odorants."

"Is this going somewhere?" Jack asked impatiently.

"I think so." Daniel bit his lip, thinking about each of their encounters with Errys. "If our bodies emit chemicals the D'ahin can scent - responses to these social and sexual signals we aren't aware of - and they're aroused by them, excited..."

"A narcotic AND an aphrodisiac!" Sam said excitedly. "I know where you're going with this, Daniel. Errys..."

"Is deliberately provoking specific behaviours in us to..."

"Trigger our bodies to release the chemicals that excite them."

"Fear."

"Aggression."

"You two could open an act in Vegas," Jack informed them after a brief, contemplative pause. "You're saying we're just performance art to these creepy voyeurs?"

"I think so. I'm not sure," Daniel said tightly. Not sure enough to risk their lives on it. Jack's finger stroked soothingly over Daniel's palm.

"If it is right, and it all kinda fits, it occurs to me that once we stop responding to Errys' bluffs, this is going to get very real, kids," Jack soberly warned them. "To scent our fear, Errys will have to make us afraid."

There was a deflated silence.

"Errys is drawn to you, Daniel, maybe because out of all of us, you're the most emotional," Jack said gently. "You're...passionate."

"Oh."

"That's not a bad thing," Sam assured Daniel earnestly. "It's worked for us many times before."

"You care about us all," Jack added warmly. "Hell, we care too much about each other. SG-1 is like a frigging 'all you can snort buffet' to these assholes."

"They're - getting off - on all of us," Sam bit the words off. "Our fear for ourselves and each other, our anger and pain, singling us out one at a time to provoke the strongest possible reactions from all of us."

"I guess they've had practice, Carter."

Daniel shuddered at the thought.

"How do we use this against them, Sir?" Sam asked. "If this is something they need, then it's a vulnerability."

"We can't control our bodies, Sam," Daniel reminded her. "We aren't even consciously aware of these chemical signals we're sending out."

"Putting out, more like," Jack bitched.

The frustrated silence got...crowded.

"Perhaps a controlled experiment," Sam suggested in a wooden little voice that made it plain she was strictly a non-participant observer of said experiment.

"How controlled?" Jack asked carefully.

"We just need to determine if the D'ahin are affected by sexual arousal in any way we can use to our advantage," Sam responded, just as carefully. "I had to pee in front of them, Sir," she added with a marked lack of sympathy for whoever was about to join her on the All-Humiliation Network.

"So did I!" Jack complained.

"I didn't enjoy it."

"Carter, are you seriously suggesting I just whip out my - sidearm - and..."

"Yes, Sir."

"Why doesn't Daniel..."

"Sir!" Sam hissed, outraged.

Daniel smiled somewhat smugly at his colonel. It vanished abruptly when Jack pulled Daniel's hand down to cup his crotch. Daniel's groin tightened reflexively as Jack got hard, which he always did when Daniel touched him, a pang of arousal striking in the pit of Daniel's stomach. Jack rubbed himself against Daniel's hand, leaning in suddenly to rest his forehead against Daniel's. The intense eyes so close to his mesmerised Daniel; he was barely aware of the murmur that ran through the watchers.

"Tahlen!" Errys groaned. "O'Neill! Im'da Daniel," she ordered imperiously, the watchers adding their voices to hers. "Daniel do'este amente se frene nen! Im'da!"

"Daniel is hot stuff and I should fuck him," Jack translated in case they didn't get that.

"Errys would naturally be more excited by male arousal than female," Sam said coolly, appearing to get it just fine. "My heart bleeds."

Daniel's decision was that none of them were getting any.

"Sorentir, Daniel!" Errys spat. "Teal'c ne Carter a vestae Rohan. Ne..." she paused threateningly. "Do'este amente vos tahlen O'Neill."

"You will not choose, DanielJackson."

"Have a good nap?" Jack enquired with heavy sarcasm.

"I begin to heal," Teal'c smoothly acknowledged. "You will give Errys nothing, DanielJackson, least of all your honour. We are as one in this."

"Oh, yeah!" Jack agreed emphatically.

They were exhausted, dehydrated and cold, their injuries making them stiff, slow and scarily clumsy, but they made it up, Sam and Teal'c sitting proudly back to back with Daniel and Jack.

"We give the D'ahin nothing," Jack instructed.

"Except attitude," Sam said crisply.

Daniel was warmed as much by his friends' defiance as by their presence. "You have to choose," he whispered to Jack. "As team leader, you have to choose."

"This is different," Jack snapped.

"How is it different?"

"Daniel!"

"No, seriously, Jack. Please. How is it different?" Daniel persisted, wanting to understand more of a burden of responsibility he'd never really questioned before. "You give us orders every day, Jack, you make choices knowing they could get us killed. I mean, we trust you to do it, but..."

"No," Jack contradicted. "I trust you to do it. I can't lead where my team won't follow. Like now. I could order Carter out that open door right now, but without a realistic expectation of being able to reach the gate and effect a rescue, she won't take it."

"Damn straight she won't," Sam said smartly. "We don't leave our people behind."

"Nor would you give such an order, O'Neill." Teal'c sounded amused.

"Separating us is exactly what this bitch wants," Jack went on. "Are you seriously telling me no one ever fell for that ploy? She knows exactly what it does to people not to know what's happening to their friends. What you don't know, you imagine, and what you do to yourself is always far worse than what can be done to you. If she splits us up, she gets everything she wants from all of us, including whoever walked out the door. The threat you don't see is the one that kills you."

Daniel could only dimly see Jack's face, but what little he could see was deservedly smug.

"Take that from a guy who learned poker from his Nana."

"We sit tight and just say no until we're rescued?" Daniel asked, tabling a talk about Jack's Nana until they were home in bed. Preferably with Jack in Daniel.

"No speaka da lingo," Jack tossed out insouciantly.

"Looks like you get to explain that in person, Sir," Sam warned them. "We've got company."

"On your feet," Jack ordered his team.

They took up defensive positions, waiting stoically as Errys stormed onto the dais. She stopped, scenting the air.

"Looks like we confused her. Let's keep it that way," Jack tersely instructed. "Any of you kids play dodge ball?"

"Sir?"

"Keep your asses moving, Carter."

The four of them spread out on the dais as Errys stalked into the centre. She'd taken them easily the first time, but they hadn't known what they were facing. It wouldn't be so easy this time.

Sam darted across to Teal'c's place, startling Errys, who then had to watch Teal'c march over to take Sam's vacated spot, staring Errys down every step of the way.

Daniel started towards Jack, turned on his heel abruptly and headed back to Teal'c. The two of them crossed their arms - Teal'c's behind his back, Daniel's across his chest - and stood staring blandly at Errys.

"Making her look bad in front of her guys is going to piss her off, you'll forgive the pun, royally," Jack suggested pleasantly.

"Daniel!" Errys spat.

"Nah," Daniel said coolly, remembering her refusal of him earlier.

Errys nodded calmly, then charged Sam, the many layers of her robes flowing out behind her.

Sam moved into Errys' path, first grabbing the alien woman's shoulders, then dropping to her ass, her bare foot planted solidly in Errys' stomach. As Sam rolled backwards, she straightened her leg, flipping Errys over her head, scrambling up instantly to stamp hard on Errys' hand. Sam's attack faltered as she cried out, stumbling back, unable to touch her foot to the floor.

No vestae this time, Daniel realised grimly. Errys wasn't controlling her secretion of the venom. Teal'c and Jack were crossing the dais at a dead run, Jack stripping off his T-shirt as he ran. Daniel pulled off his own and ran forward to help his friends.

Errys leapt to her feet, snatching Sam's bare arms. Sam yelled in agony, reaching out to grab a fistful of Errys' braids, then smacked her forehead hard into Errys', both of them reeling back, dazed.

Jack smashed into Errys' side, sending her stumbling into the wall that was Teal'c. She recovered fast, lashing out at Teal'c's face. He blocked her punch with his forearm, his face twisting as his skin burned, but he didn't back down.

His T-shirt wrapped around his hands, Jack grabbed Errys' wrist as Daniel arrived to take the other. She fought them, was so strong they could barely hold on to her, suddenly using them as leverage to kick out viciously at Teal'c, catching him hard on the thigh before he could evade her. Grunting in pain, Teal'c staggered.

Errys screamed suddenly, her left leg buckling.

Startled, Daniel looked behind him to see Sam, grey-faced and grim, hopping painfully back. He realised she'd kicked Errys in the kneecap, possibly dislocating it, from the way Errys was unable to take her weight on that leg.

"Now!" Jack roared, dragging Errys forward.

The silent watchers in the shadows were scrambling to their feet, running for the narrow walk-way that led on to the dais, realising at last their leader was about to die.

Sam took Teal'c's place behind Jack and Daniel as they wrestled and shoved Errys towards the edge of the dais.

Meanwhile, Teal'c ran for the walk-way that spanned the chasm. "I will hold these, O'Neill," he promised.

"How far down did you say this fucker was?" Jack demanded, his menacing tone unmistakable to Errys.

"Nah! Nah!" Errys cried, still fighting desperately. She jerked her hand free and struck at Jack. He dodged her fist, barely, closing in fast to punch her hard in the face.

Daniel heard her cheekbone snap.

"D'ahin!" she roared.

"NAH!" Daniel yelled. "Nah vestae, nah vestae!" he called urgently to the watchers as he and Jack dangled Errys over the edge of the dais, her feet scrabbling for purchase on the smooth wall behind her. "Im'da Rohan ne nah vestae!"

"Im'da Rohan!" Sam called out as Teal'c poised himself to meet the threat at the walk-way. "Im'da Rohan!" Her higher-pitched voice echoed around the chamber.

"If the bitch doesn't crack, we drop her," Jack warned Daniel.

He nodded reluctantly, acknowledging the hateful necessity. His attempts at meaningful communication had utterly failed. The irony was they were in fact struggling to hold her up. The way Errys was struggling, she was likely to take them with her.

Jack took a handful of braids and jerked Errys' head brutally up to face him. "Im'da Rohan," he purred menacingly.

"Ne nah vestae," Daniel supplied helpfully.

Jack simply loosened his grip. Errys slid a few inches, screaming in fright.

"I think she gets it now."

Daniel hoped she got it quick, because his knees were shaking and whatever Errys was secreting was slowly seeping through the wrapped T-shirt from the friction.

"Sorentir!" Jack ordered icily, letting her slip another inch or so.

Daniel could only be glad of the slim, strong arms slipping tight around his waist, the bracing body behind him. Sam.

"Vestae," Errys spat. "Im'da Rohan, D'ahin."

The watchers fell back instantly, clearing a path to the doorway leading out of the chamber.

Teal'c at once began to walk across to it.

Sam hauled Daniel back, helping him and Jack lift Errys back onto the dais. Jack shifted his grip on his T-shirt, wrapped it again around his hand, then took Errys' hand in his, twisting it back behind her at an odd angle. She gasped out in pain, instinctively leaning forward.

"Walkies."

"Jack!" Daniel hissed in supreme irritation.

Jack incorrigibly winked at him.

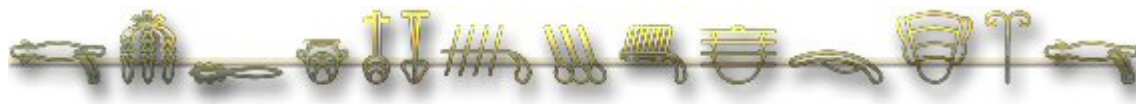
Shaking his head in disbelief, Daniel slid his arm around Sam and helped her to limp after Jack. "I can carry you?" he offered.

Sam shook her head. "Not safe, Daniel. Not even close."

Teal'c led them out of the chamber, Jack forcing Errys to walk ahead of him, Sam and Daniel turning to cover the rear. One of the watchers walked in front of Teal'c, clearly leading the way, beckoning them forward.

They walked down a short hallway, then out onto a narrow bridge that spanned a gorge. The tower they had been imprisoned in was perched at the top of a pinnacle that stood out from a cliff's edge. Dawn was breaking. Daniel didn't hear the boom of waves below. In the misty light, he glimpsed green. And then he did hear a sound, a too-familiar sound, volley after volley of P-90 fire crashing through the crisp, cool air. He sagged in relief, grateful only that they wouldn't have to fight their way back to the gate.

General Hammond had come through for them, like always.



"Close the iris!" Hammond ordered Sgt. Davis as Jack and Daniel staggered into the gate room, the last to come through. Errys was on her knees, cursing them to their graves on the other side of the gate.

Daniel sought out Sam and Teal'c in the melee at the foot of the ramp. Teal'c stood at Sam's side, holding her carefully as she balanced awkwardly against him, her burnt foot balanced on the tip of her big toe. The med techs were rushing into the gate room, Janet striding in behind them ready to conduct triage. She headed straight for Teal'c and Sam while the med techs swarmed around the members of SG-2 who'd been burned by the aliens dogging their trail during the slow retreat to the Stargate.

As Hammond came up the ramp towards them, Jack swayed. Daniel grabbed him around the waist, pulling Jack's arm around his shoulders. Jack leaned gratefully into him.

"Colonel?" Hammond queried, his customary calm tones roughened with anxiety.

Jack looked up the general, opened his mouth, hesitated, then shook his head blearily.

Hammond patted Jack's shoulder understandingly. "We'll debrief after Dr. Fraiser has treated you all," he offered compassionately.

Janet's heels clattered on the ramp as she trotted up to check them out. Two of the med techs headed purposefully for Jack.

"We're fine!" Daniel snapped.

Janet looked at him consideringly, then briskly assigned her team to assist the team she'd assigned to get Major Carter onto the stretcher, a simple task which seemed to be developing into a fracas Sam was currently winning.

Jack rallied enough to make a lame-assed joke about Sam having too much testosterone.

"How is Sam?" Daniel asked anxiously.

"She's sustained minor injuries," Janet answered soothingly, slipping behind him to check Jack out.

"Ow!" Jack whined.

"I haven't touched you yet," Janet retorted in a brisk 'don't be such a baby' tone.

Jack smirked at Daniel. "Sign writing a speciality," he told Janet.

She emerged from behind him looking pensive. "Did you lose consciousness?"

"A few seconds."

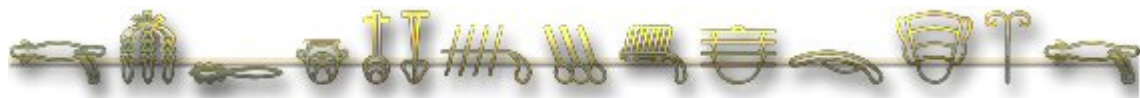
Daniel snorted.

Janet nodded, removing her penlight to check Jack's pupils. "I'll take an X-Ray to be sure," she told him. "Though you managed a three-hour forced march with very little difficulty," she commented mildly, eyeing Daniel's supportive embrace thoughtfully.

It finally occurred to Daniel that if Jack was looking for sympathy, it wouldn't be from Janet. Not when there was a sucker much closer to hand. He could only be grateful there were cameras directly above them, or the hand would probably be on his ass.

"Exhaustion," Jack said blandly, leaning for effect.

"I'll get you a stretcher," Janet offered sweetly.



The familiar bustle of the infirmary was soothing. Janet was delicately cleaning the burn on Daniel's face, preparatory to dressing it.

With her now cleaned and dressed foot elevated on a cushion, Sam lay stretched out on the next bed, her fingers clasped over her stomach, staring at nothing in particular.

Teal'c stoically sat on the bed behind Sam's patiently enduring having his burns cleaned. There was only so much Janet was prepared to admit Junior could take care of without her assistance.

Jack was sitting on the bed at Daniel's side.

"You're all very quiet," Janet observed as she accepted the dressing her nurse handed her and settled it carefully over Daniel's burn. "This will heal well, Daniel," she promised. "Without scarring. Sam's wounds too."

"That's good to know," Jack answered, surfacing from whatever reverie he'd been in.

"We did the right thing, Daniel Jackson," Teal'c said.

Sam looked across at Daniel too, peering past Janet. "I know it wasn't what you would have chosen, Daniel," she said gently. "For what it's worth, I'm proud of you. We needed you...you were there for us, no question."

"As it should be," Teal'c approved, smiling at Daniel.

"Nothing new there," Jack said sharply, bristling a little. His fingers clenched white-knuckled on his thigh for a moment, then he consciously relaxed, apparently aware of Janet's sharp eyes on him. On all of them.

"I failed," Daniel contradicted softly. "Completely. My job - my function on the team is to communicate. I failed to do that."

"You did good from where I was sprawling after getting my butt kicked," Jack snapped, scowling at him.

"I don't mean translating," Daniel retorted impatiently. "Any five year old can point at themselves and say 'my name is' or 'je m'appelle' or whatever. I mean communicating, Jack. I learned the meaning of a few D'ahin words but I didn't share anything with Errys. I couldn't establish commonality, except in violence." He crossed his arms over his chest, looking down at the floor as Janet backed off to stand watchfully beside Sam.

"Get your ass back on that bed, Major," Janet ordered without looking around.

Sam froze in her attempt to sit up, pulled a resentful face and flopped back down.

"Carter was going to thank you for saving our lives, but I guess that's tabled for now," Jack told Janet dryly.

Janet looked round at Sam, startled.

"It's true," Sam agreed, looking marginally less pissed off at the universe. "Remember the research you told Daniel and me about? The accessory olfactory system?"

"Vomeronasal cavities in humans!" Janet brightened up. "Sure!"

"Daniel remembered it at a critical time and we were able to figure out between us what was going on with the D'ahin," Sam told her. She smiled at Daniel over Janet's shoulder.

"Well, I'm glad I could help," Janet said a tad doubtfully.

Sam took Janet's hand affectionately for a moment. "I'll fill you in later," she promised.

"It was good work, you two," Jack praised Daniel and Sam warmly.

"I too have observed how often solutions can be found in science instead of in battle," Teal'c agreed respectfully, smiling at his friends.

"Not this time," Daniel sadly reminded them. "Science only got us so far. We didn't learn anything except how to take Errys out," he went on. "And all Errys learned was to hit the next travellers she takes prisoner that much harder, and sooner. We taught her to be more careful in future, but we didn't teach her to stop."

"Nothing could, Daniel," Jack said slowly.

Daniel looked across at him, seeing the sorrow in Jack's eyes, his regret that they'd been through this. He saw responsibility as well, reached out automatically to take Jack's hand, to comfort him. Jarringly, he remembered who and where they were, his hand falling to the mattress, lying useless between them, plucking nervously at the blanket.

"No one could have done more," Daniel faithfully promised Jack. "No one." Some of the tightness eased from Jack's eyes.

When they could be alone, Daniel would make sure Jack understood that he didn't fault him for the way things had gone down. The whole team had acted as one, in defence. Their lives had depended on it. Daniel was very clear on that.

He had changed, but he couldn't wholly regret it. He'd learned on Abydos that he could kill for an ideal, for freedom. He'd learned with SG-1 that he could kill - and die - for his friends. Maybe none of it was right, but it was part of who Daniel was now. His friends were part of him and he loved them dearly.

It distressed him that he was unable to find any redeeming qualities in the D'ahin, that he didn't even feel particularly guilty about meeting violence with violence instead of empathy and compassion. He'd taken the path of least resistance with his team and wasn't sure what that meant for him, if the change in him went this deep, or if this was in reaction to a situation he hoped never to see his friends subjected to again.

"I learned something," Sam spoke up. "I mean - it's not the first time something like this has happened to us. Remember the Gamekeeper? And the time we were memory stamped?" She lay quietly for a moment, gathering her thoughts.

"Even Jolinar had a purpose for using me," Sam said at last. "I guess in meeting Errys I gained some perspective on those experiences. Even the Gamekeeper was acting in what he believed to be the best interests of his people. The D'ahin though - they do it for kicks." Sam's face twisted in revulsion. "They're not forced to use other species by physiology that won't allow them to survive without a host. It's not a matter of survival or a belief system for the D'ahin. They take for pleasure. It's despicable."

"We don't know what the D'ahin lifespan is," Daniel mused.

"Errys looked to be in her prime," Teal'c said grimly.

"I don't understand?" Janet queried carefully, looking at each of them in turn, clearly concerned about them all.

"Daniel means we've no idea how many people died before we were captured," Jack supplied.

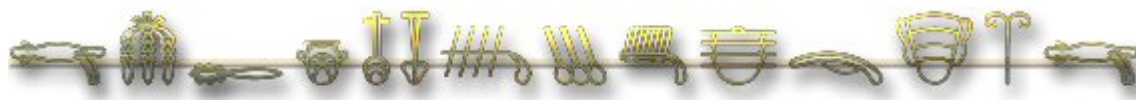
"Nor how many will die in the future," Teal'c added.

"Even if this debacle costs Errys her throne, there's no guarantee that this was just HER," Sam spat. "Her power might come from being the quintessential D'ahin for all we know. She might not be a deviant, in fact she might very well be a shining example of the norm," Sam said bitterly. "Literally the Alpha Bitch."

Janet looked at each of them. "But that would make them..."

"Irredeemable," Daniel firmly interjected. He didn't say it lightly, but he believed it to be true. The D'ahin were despicable hedonists, murdering fellow sentient beings in their ruthless pursuit of pleasure. "Errys will be desperate to recoup the credibility she's lost."

"I pity the poor bastards who walk through that gate next," Jack observed, staring determinedly at the concrete walls. "If that was Errys on a good day."



"Go on, Major," General Hammond invited Ferretti.

"We met some resistance at the gate to the D'ahin city, Sir," Ferretti reported. "It was at this time that Colonel O'Neill was effecting an escape. My men and I were under heavy fire when SG-1 escorted out the alien leader Errys. She ordered her men to surrender after some arm twisting from the colonel." Ferretti didn't laugh at the pun.

Daniel shifted uncomfortably, remembering the sound of splintering bone as Errys had fought Jack for dominance, and lost.

"I don't consider my use of force excessive in the circumstances, Sir," Jack interjected quietly, looking frequently at Daniel, whether seeking tacit approval or reassurance, Daniel wasn't certain.

Daniel was trying not to huddle in his chair between Jack and Ferretti, but reaction was setting in with a vengeance. He felt shivery and distant, his fingers trembling on the coffee mug he had balanced at the edge of the briefing table. He was grateful for Jack's silent support at his side, the wordless empathy they shared, the quick, warm looks from Sam and Teal'c.

"We were surrounded by hostiles, Errys had made it clear she was going to torture my team to death, we were effectively cut-off from the Stargate," Jack went on with his report.

Three hours of screaming tension on the slow march back to the gate, the skirmishes between the restive, threatening aliens and Ferretti's men, put down every time by Teal'c's rapid intervention and Errys screaming out for them to hold as Jack had bested her yet again. Datakh to'hin, she would cry out after Jack fought her to surrender.

"She did it deliberately," Daniel said softly, a promise to Jack and reassurance to the general.

"Doctor?" Hammond's voice was very kind.

"She made him..." Daniel faltered, unable to think of a word that wasn't cruel to describe what it had taken from Jack to get them to the gate, to get them out. "Errys wanted Jack's aggression, his fear for us...She was all over him, pushing. Always pushing. She needed him to react to her."

"I agree, Sir," Sam concurred.

"As do I." Teal'c steepled his fingers together. "Errys gave O'Neill no choice, General. She would not surrender."

"I don't think she could, Teal'c," Daniel sighed. "I don't think SHE had a choice. Her men know her scent. They could smell her fear as easily as they smelled ours." He looked apologetically at Ferretti, who seemed inclined to dispute the assertion. "Nothing personal, Major. Our bodies emit chemicals we aren't even aware of that the D'ahin could sense with astonishing acuity. It's why the D'ahin were so aggressive." He turned back to

the general to continue his assessment. "Errys pushed Jack hard because she had to save face in front of her men somehow."

"I've ordered those co-ordinates locked out of the dialling programme," the general told them, tactfully letting this particular matter go.

Sam nodded quickly, looking across the table at Daniel, her eyebrows raising.

Daniel understood. It only helped them, not the other travellers who would land on that world. "I don't think its enough, General," he argued.

"It's all we can do, son."

A quick look from Jack asked Daniel to please, let it drop. A tense silence fell which even Ferretti was momentarily reluctant to break.

"Errys was some piece of work," Ferretti finally noted uneasily, looking with regretful curiosity at each of them in turn.

"She took pleasure in inflicting pain on others, which makes her a sadist in my book," Jack replied distastefully.

It was an assessment Daniel had to agree with, looking at his friends. Jack was the only one of them without burns, though he had a minor concussion and what he described as a bastard of a headache. Sam's arms were both bandaged, and she'd be using crutches for at least a week until her foot healed. Daniel didn't know how she'd made it back to the gate, limping along on her own as he and Jack dragged Errys between them, covering their backs while Teal'c, Ferretti and SG-2 skirmished with the D'ahin. Teal'c's own burns were still visible on his arms and face. Daniel had a huge purple welt on his cheek and bruises every place Errys had kicked him, but physically, he got off pretty light.

Hammond dismissed Ferretti, thanking him for his efforts, waiting until the door had closed behind SG-2's C.O. before saying anything further to his dispirited flagship team.

"I understand that this was a difficult mission for you all," Hammond told them with quiet empathy.

"Do you?" Daniel blurted out, pulling an apologetic face at once.

"I believe I do, son," Hammond answered, still calm, still kind.

"We didn't do anything but try to communicate," Daniel said drearily, not about to get into an argument with a man who'd fought in Vietnam.

"Errys must take everyone who comes through the Stargate." Jack rubbed his eyes tiredly. "She had a small army waiting in ambush there."

"The D'ahin have no respect for other sentient beings," Daniel told the general.

"They're as bad as the Goa'uld," Jack spat.

"Worse, I think," Sam argued, futzng nervously with her pen. "The D'ahin don't have even the limited excuse of the biological imperative imposed by the physiology of the Goa'uld, or the genetic memory that predisposes them to evil."

"The D'ahin are xenophobes," Daniel commented. He looked sorrowfully at the general. "Actually, I'm not sure what they are. Technologically and socially sophisticated beings getting their kicks from torturing other sentient beings to death. They don't ascribe any value or meaning to the lives of other species."

"We were okay on 790, Sir," Sam took up the narrative when Daniel faltered to a stop. "We were so focused on each other, on surviving..." She looked helplessly at Teal'c, at a loss for words too.

"General Hammond, we begin to wonder how many travellers died before our arrival. How many more will die in the chamber the D'ahin built to take their amusement," Teal'c observed gravely. "Such thoughts weigh heavily."

"We can't even destroy the Stargate," Jack complained, his bitterness showing. "Not without significant loss of life allegedly innocent D'ahin life."

"If at all," Sam reminded them. "We've seen a Stargate withstand bombardment by a particle accelerator, a meteor strike, uncontrolled re-entry to Earth's atmosphere, a naquadah enhanced nuclear attack and the gravitational forces of a black hole."

There was a long, pained silence. No one wanted to probe too closely at the implications of this. Their feelings about their treatment at the hands of the D'ahin were clouding their judgement. Any overt action would feel like revenge. It would be for them, not for the assumed protection of hypothetical future travellers.

"We have no idea if all the D'ahin share Errys' sadism, her xenophobia," Daniel went on bleakly, "but even if they do, we can't stand in judgement over an entire species."

"Daniel is speaking for himself, obviously" Jack interrupted, his anger evident.

"Permission to contact the Asgard, Sir. Maybe Thor can swing by and beam the gate into space for us."

Hammond opened his mouth, looking at each of them in turn. Their pale, strained faces softened him. "See to it, Major," he ordered.

"Sir," Sam acknowledged.

"I will assist you," Teal'c offered at once.

Sam leaned her head towards Teal'c, a soft, affectionate smile on her face as she glanced up at him. Teal'c's own answering look was warm and gentle.

Some of Daniel's tension eased. He wouldn't need to call Sam tonight, see how she was doing. Teal'c would be with her, they would talk. Janet too. She'd drag Sam home for dinner and interrogate her ruthlessly. Daniel would wait until tomorrow, let Sam have some space, get some perspective. They would talk more easily.

Jack though - Jack wouldn't wait.

"SG-1 is confined to light duties for the immediate future."

"What?" Jack muttered as he got wearily to his feet, his usually graceful, compact movements stiff and slow. "We're arguing?"



Daniel had meekly agreed to leave his Volvo in the car park at Cheyenne Mountain. He had refrained from retorting when Jack had tactlessly discussed the chances of it being stolen - slim to none - then had acquiesced to every one of Jack's suggestions to improve his handling of the truck on the way down the mountain.

He had obediently driven to the Chapel Hill Mall, parked and allowed himself to be convinced of the absolute necessity to attain some semblance of normalcy through the ingestion of a variety of saturated fats known as Burger King's Chicken Whopper with extra-large fries. Daniel had paid.

"I want the triple chocolate fudge," Jack ordered now, a provocative smile tugging his lips.

"Two," Daniel said vaguely to the Patisserie guy, who was poised over a tempting array of cheesecakes.

Jack raised a supercilious eyebrow.

"Three," Daniel corrected.

Jack beamed at him.

Daniel wondered if Jack had any idea how good he looked in his new jeans. Black jeans. Tight black jeans. A fine, clinging black sweater skimming his hips. A hint of white jersey

crisp at his throat. His black leather jacket. Jack looked so good, so god-damned edible, Daniel wanted to swallow him whole.

The linguist was monosyllabic. Staring. Quivering and possibly drooling.

How could he have worked for so long with Jack and not seen how - how BEAUTIFUL he was?

Daniel knew how lucky he was to have Jack, to have this unexpected, unsuspected chance. They were good together. Better than good. They were great. He made Jack happy, just being with him. Like now. It was a gift. It filled Daniel with giddy gratitude at this luck that made up for so much lost.

How come they'd never done this before? Just - walked. Jack was beatifically savouring each bite of luscious, oozy cheesecake, his left hand cupped around Daniel's elbow as they strolled through the mall. Envious glances slid over them as they moved through the crowds, the stares of anonymous shoppers sliding over their skin. That was how good Jack looked.

It should have been blazing neon above their heads, ten feet high. Jack was with him. Jack looked at Daniel more than he looked at anything or anyone else, his brown eyes melting, making Daniel's heart skip the beat.

Daniel was scared to death. He knew what this feeling was. He'd fought it too long and too hard. Maturity - hurt. He wanted to shove Jack against a wall and eat his mouth, right here, right now, by the fountains and the palms. He didn't want to talk, didn't want to deal with whatever had Jack so watchful, so...sensitive.

Later.

He needed to stay in the moment.

"Penny for them, Daniel," Jack prompted gently.

Daniel smiled, a quick wincing thing. "I need toothpaste," he answered mildly.

"Oddly, I do too."

Daniel was supposed to be careful. He should have confiscated Jack's cheesecake and made him walk at a discreet, platonic distance. Instead they shared the cheesecake, trading off bites, Jack's hand skimming Daniel's waist from time to time, making him shiver.

Giddy. Giddy and reckless.

They wandered into the first drugstore they came across. Daniel selected his toothpaste, Jack took two tubes then hunkered down to look at toothbrushes. Daniel slumped against the shelves of shampoo and gaped at Jack's shapely ass, thinking maybe he could be greedy in bed in a whole new way.

"Homer!" Jack hooted triumphantly, brandishing one of the kids' novelty toothbrushes. A Simpsons one, naturally. He looked Daniel over thoughtfully, perused the selection carefully, then selected Eeyore from the Winnie the Pooh range. "I need a razor." Jack straightened up, surveyed the terrain then called loudly for assistance. The clerks looked around, saw how good Jack looked and came scurrying, smiling and helpful, giving their all, leading the tall man in leather and tight, tight jeans to whatever he wanted. Jack bought two razors, blades and after consultation, moisturising foam.

"I need pyjamas."

Daniel's mind was already on bed. It was a short leap from there to extracting Jack from his pyjamas as interactively as possible. "Why?" It was all he could manage in the way of enquiry.

"Tell you later," was all Jack would say, with another of those warm, watchful looks.

It occurred to Daniel that Jack was being - protective was the best way to describe it. More than ordinarily solicitous. Jack was definitely worried about something, but was also not about to let Daniel in on it. It occurred to Daniel that the best reassurance he could offer Jack that he was okay, that he wasn't losing it in a hundred different ways over the D'ahin, was to be - natural.

He made enthusiastic noises about the pyjamas and they roamed amicably through the mall in search of men's clothing stores, although Jack had to extract Daniel quite firmly from several really quite inferior bookstores he'd optimistically investigated.

As everyone did, eventually they wound up in Dillard's, battling their way through the scary scrum of forty-somethings surrounding the two-for-one sale at the cosmetics counters to the saner climes of Men's Fashions. Jack happily browsed through the displays selecting a variety of clothing, none of which was nightwear. Sweat pants, sweatshirts, T-shirts, underwear, socks. Lots of socks.

Jack still looked hot in his new jeans, but curiosity was surfacing amidst Daniel's slavering lust.

Catching a puzzled look from Daniel, Jack commented it was either this or laundry.

It was possibly a guy thing, but this actually seemed reasonable to Daniel. They decided Daniel didn't care for laundry either and ambled off in the direction of sweat pants, sweatshirts, T-shirts, underwear and socks for the younger - and in Jack's not particularly humble nor particularly accurate opinion - sexier guy. Jack's greens, creams and greys

looked good draped over Daniel's arm alongside the navy and the blues he wound up with. Jack announced that Daniel didn't need socks, looking distinctly flirty.

Daniel blushed. Even with a proud oral fixation that made Daniel's professional curiosity and courtesy pale by comparison, Jack was particularly fond of Daniel's toes. Podalic stalker fond.

They paid for their many and varied purchases - which oddly didn't include pyjamas - then left the store to walk around the outside of the mall back to the truck, enjoying the evening sunshine. Daniel had to admit there were worse ways to forget about an absolutely god-awful day than a little conspicuous consumption.

"How do you cope?" he asked Jack, curious, hoping to tease out hints of what had Jack giving his all to his patented jocular 'I'm fine, he's fine, everybody's fine' act.

"Hmm?"

"You know. With - with work."

"I forget about it," Jack said flatly. "As soon as my ass is off the mountain."

"Do you?" Daniel persisted.

Jack's look was tender and meaningful. "I try."

"Me too," Daniel admitted shyly, looking at his booted feet, flushing at the implied compliment. He got totally lost in Jack too. It was far, far more than physicality for him, far more than company. He was never lonelier than when he left Jack's bed to drive across town to his own. It hurt him in ways he was unable to deal with, ways he couldn't face and be able to keep what they allowed themselves to have of one another.

Jack was worth it, worth any price to Daniel.

He looked again at his lover, admiring the easy grace with which Jack moved, feeling clunky and mundane by comparison. His white jeans didn't look as good as Jack's black, his zippered sweater seemed staid, even though Jack had pulled the zipper all the way down as soon as they'd got in his truck back at the mountain. Jack had traced the hollow of Daniel's bared throat with one gentle finger, wordless and staring. That soft light in Jack's eyes was worth anything.

"Daniel, when I'm not around, all you do is work MORE," Jack accused him.

Daniel jumped, at a loss. It took him a moment to mentally change gears and remember he was trying to hold a conversation here.

"I'm good for you in all kinds of ways," Jack added complacently.

That was the truth. Smiling a little, Daniel unlocked the truck while Jack tossed the shopping in the back. He was amused to see Jack abruptly - and visibly - recalling he allegedly had a bastard of a headache. How Jack managed to leap athletically into the passenger seat one minute and look wounded and decrepit the next...As he climbed into the truck and buckled up, Daniel shook his head in mild disbelief.

As they left the mall car park, Jack was poking around in the patisserie bag. "My blood sugar is low," he announced, apparently feeling this was sufficient justification for eating Daniel's portion of cheesecake right in front of him. "I need to lie down in a darkened room. Let's go to your place," he suggested. "It's nearer."

"To rest your head?" Daniel asked somewhat sarcastically as Jack gloated over the cheesecake.

Jack laid a coaxing hand on Daniel's thigh. "To have some nice sex," Jack corrected, fondly patting him.

"Oh." Daniel grinned at Jack and turned left with a panache that made Jack bleat with distress for his precious truck. "Now you're talking."

"Whimpering!"

Jack whiled away the drive back to Daniel's apartment building volubly enjoying every ecstatic mouthful of triple chocolate fudge cheesecake, chatting about the 'stress diet' Sam had posted in her locker.

"You start your day with three teaspoons of cottage cheese and end it with an entire frozen cheesecake," Jack informed him. "There are a lot of rules that make perfect sense to me, like different foods which are the same colour have the same calorific value and are equally good for you. Mushrooms and white chocolate, for example. Also, there's one that says if no one sees you eat it, it has no calories. Comfort food has no calories either, and the diet advocates the medicinal qualities of chocolate, ice-cream and buttery toast. I think Carter's favourite is the one about diet sodas dissolving calories. She guzzles Diet Pepsi every time she scarfs down that blue Jell-O."

"Why were you in Sam's locker?" Daniel queried when he could get a word in.

"M&Ms."

Daniel too felt that that pretty much covered it.

"No point having all these special skills if I don't use them," Jack explained reasonably. He sat quietly brooding as Daniel pulled into the garage below his building and parked, stirring to help Daniel gather up the shopping. "Do you think Carter and Fraiser are

synchronised?" Jack asked eventually, making an 'ewwww' face as they walked over to the elevator "Don't tell me it doesn't explain a LOT."

"My mind won't even go there."

"Mine went kicking and screaming to PMS hell, and now it can't get out."

Daniel punched eight to call the elevator.

"It does," Jack announced enigmatically, blandly ignoring Daniel's quizzical look. Jack stepped onto the elevator and lounged attractively in the corner. "Explain a lot. A helluva lot," he went on.

"Such as?" Daniel asked carefully, exceedingly wary of inviting way too much information.

"Such as if you hit Carter's locker up for chocolate M&Ms, you can guarantee Fraiser has peanuts."

"It doesn't matter how outrageous you get, I'm not falling for it," Daniel said tartly. "If I believe you, you'll call me a sucker, and if I don't, it'll turn out to be gospel truth."

"But that's why it's fun!" Jack explained, his eyes gleaming with mischief.

Daniel tried for sceptical, philosophically accepting he'd stalled somewhere around fuckable from the way Jack started licking his lips and comprehensively looking Daniel over. Jack tended to get very focused very quickly. Like Jack, Daniel tried to live his life and not his job. He'd managed to stay fairly focused himself all the way through the mall, with more or less the same thing on his mind that was clearly on Jack's mind right now.

To say Daniel was put out when Jack trotted straight up the steps into the apartment without even kissing him, let alone suggestively rubbing against him while he tried to lock the door, was an understatement.

Sullenly, Daniel followed. He perked up slightly when Jack leapt gracefully down the living room steps and accelerated towards the bedroom, picking up his own pace accordingly.

"Oh," he said unenthusiastically when he trotted in to find Jack emptying the contents of one of his bureau drawers onto the bed. "What are you doing?"

"Making my mark. Staking my claim. Depositing..." Jack held up some discreet grey evidence, "socks."

Daniel blinked and sat down on his bed.

"It finally occurred to me to ask you what you think this is," Jack commented conversationally, shovelling more socks into the drawer.

"Weird?"

"What you think WE are!" Jack tossed at him impatiently, brandishing the socks.

"Um..."

"Since what I thought we are turned out to be dead wrong."

Daniel stiffened, his heart beginning to pound.

"When you look at me, Daniel, do you just see a good friend you have sex with?" Jack challenged him, waving a pair of very brief wine-coloured briefs, en route to the drawer, for emphasis. "We're not fuck-buddies."

"I..."

"When I look at you, that's NOT what I see. I know I screwed up big-time letting you send me home that first night we made love together."

"I..."

"Big time. If I'd known what it would lead to..." Jack shook his head, grimacing. "I realised you were totally freaked out by me sucking you off like that, even if it was good."

There was a distinct challenge to the final words. Daniel hastened to reassure Jack - a tad incoherently - on this apparently key point.

Jack grabbed the rest of the brief and stuffed them into the drawer. "I figured I'd do the decent thing, give you some space, let you work things through in your mind, get comfortable with the guy/guy thing. Let you come to me. How dumb was that?"

Hoping that was a rhetorical question, Daniel meekly hitched up his butt and handed Jack the bag of T-shirts he was impatiently gesturing for.

"Of course you'd think it through and decide to be sensible. You drive a VOLVO for Chrissake! You took what you were given - which was me stupidly allowing you lots and lots of space to be mature all alone in - and put on your game face. That works for fuck-buddies, Daniel. It does not work for us."

"W-why?" Daniel stammered, accepting Jack wasn't about to dump him ignominiously. He was fighting the hope, the wild exultation surging.

"Why? I actually thought it was totally frigging obvious why!" Jack yelled. "You're my lover, my Significant Other, and a complete pain in the ass!" Jack yanked Daniel up from his bed and enfolded him in a vast embrace, burying his face in Daniel's shoulder. "I'm in love with you, Daniel," Jack whispered tenderly. "I'm sorry you didn't know that. I'm sorry I didn't know you needed to hear the words."

Daniel hugged Jack convulsively. "Hearing you now, Jack," he stammered, his face blazing, stomach churning with sick relief, his knees shaking.

"And?" Jack prompted, roughly cupping Daniel's nape.

"I'm in love with you too."

"Not at first though," Jack acknowledged with gentle understanding, kissing Daniel's brow.

"I - I didn't know at first," Daniel admitted bashfully. "And then it didn't seem...I couldn't say anything, Jack. You understand." He couldn't change the ground rules, couldn't be that unfair on Jack, who had seemed perfectly content with what they'd had. Good friends who had great sex.

"Yeah, as a matter of fact I do." Jack leaned back to take Daniel's face in his hands. "You're too good to me, Daniel. Try to be more selfish in future, okay? No more giving me space I don't actually want." Jack tucked Daniel's head onto a welcoming shoulder and held him very tightly, climbing-inside-his-skin, never-letting-go tight. "Keep on using me for sex, though," he instructed firmly.

"Um - okay."

"I'm staying with you tonight," Jack added. His arms were still supportive, but his lips were whispering soft kisses over Daniel's cheek, his hips pushing a none too subtle erection where he figured it might get some petting. "Most nights. Sleeping with you." He savoured the words with vast satisfaction.

"It is what I want, Jack," Daniel whispered, turning his still red face to kiss Jack softly on the lips.

"It's what I wanted the first time we kissed, Daniel," Jack promised. "I would never have made love with you if I wasn't in love with you. It was never about the sex." He grinned at Daniel's look of polite incredulity. "It was never just about the sex," he amended good naturedly.

Daniel slid his fingers under the sweater, unbuttoned and unzipped Jack's jeans, nudging the denim out of his way to stroke through Jack's crisp pubic hair. He rubbed Jack's groin tantalisingly, pulling Jack into another kiss as urgent hands grabbed his ass, hauled him

close for Jack to grind into him. "Let's make love," Daniel asked, feathering kisses along Jack's jaw.

Jack frowned at him. "You're not thinking anything freaky about fucking me are you?" he asked. "I wouldn't offer if it wasn't completely ok...mmmphhh."

Daniel kissed Jack hard, chewing on his lip, biting at him until he sighed and opened.

"Mmmm," Jack murmured, curling his tongue sweetly around Daniel's. He slowly leaned into Daniel and they fell onto the bed together in a mound of squeaky, bouncing shopping bags. They broke off the kiss, shoved the shopping onto the floor to make room, glanced at one another, then mutually decided to take advantage of the natural break to strip feverishly.

Daniel pulled back his quilt and slid into bed, watching avidly as Jack bent to get the lube out of the bottom drawer of his bureau. Dammit, even Jack's spine was sexy. "Jack!"

Jack hesitated at the side of the bed, looking down at Daniel. "Seriously."

"Do we have to talk about..." Daniel blushed furiously.

"Yeah, I think we do."

"I like it," Daniel blurted in a small, wooden voice. "I enjoy..." He peeked up to find Jack looking distinctly melting-eyed. Jack climbed into bed, lay on his back, then held out his arms. Daniel rolled on top of Jack, snuggling into his chest, the way he did after they made love.

"So talk," Jack invited softly, kissing Daniel's hair.

"I don't know how I'm supposed to feel about it - about letting a man fuck me in the ass," Daniel confessed in a rush of embarrassment. "I only know how good it feels."

"Physiology," Jack said easily.

"Intimacy." Daniel nibbled Jack's chin, which they both enjoyed. "Connection." In those moments, he wasn't alone, he was SURE...of himself, of Jack. It meant everything to him, to share himself so openly, wordless and giving.

"You're a seriously sweet guy, Jackson." Jack tilted Daniel's face up and kissed him, a warm, affectionate brush of lips. "I want you to fuck me," he asked seriously.

Looking into unwontedly grave eyes, Daniel realised this was important to Jack, murmuring his agreement at once. Saying no to a casual suggestion was one thing; refusing something Jack wanted very much from him was unthinkable. "Please," Daniel begged for his treat, schoolboy-polite, making Jack chuckle and kiss him again.

"In the morning," Jack added.

"I like to make love in the mornings," Daniel commented with quiet satisfaction.

"And for now?"

"This is good." With the whole night stretching out ahead of them, Daniel's urgency had unexpectedly given way to contentment. He felt warm and achy, just wanting to be close to Jack. He feathered kisses along Jack's jawline. "Just being here like this with you." There was something profoundly satisfying about being liked as well as loved. Maybe that was why they were so good together. They had never sacrificed their friendship for sex, just slowly earned themselves more than they'd had before.

"We've got time," Jack said agreeably, nuzzling into Daniel's hair. "I'm not going anywhere." He rubbed Daniel's back. "Just remember the whole feel free to use me for sex thing," he encouraged.

"I'm fine," Daniel said lightly.

"Oh."

Ignoring the directional quality of Jack's thwarted little-boy sullenness, Daniel tugged the quilt over them both, sliding across to spoon comfortably at Jack's side. It took Jack very little time to recall how much he liked Daniel's skin and to achieve optimum possessive sprawl over most of him. Smiling to himself, Daniel soothingly stroked Jack's shoulders and back. He was touched at the way Jack relaxed, the tension seeping from him. For Jack, it showed a lot of trust. "I take it all the stuff I bought for myself is migrating over to your place?" Daniel wondered idly.

"When I'm not here, you'll be there," Jack informed him a lordly manner.

Daniel meekly acquiesced. He liked the idea. He liked it a lot.

"You miss me," Jack murmured, radiating complacency.

"I love you," Daniel said simply, toying with Jack's wayward hair, the silver strands slipping over his fingers. "I know I hurt you," he hesitantly added, feeling a need to clear the air, to move on with no misunderstandings between them. "Every time I left."

"Hey," Jack straightened up, frowning. "Don't eat your heart out over that. It's a done deal. I walked into this with my eyes wide open. I know we got together because I basically lost control and seduced you against your own front door..." he shrugged eloquently. "Every time you left, or I walked away, it was my choice too, you know?" He grinned, his eyes rueful. "My strategy was attrition. I figured all that tactical good sex would wear down your defences."

"It did," Daniel promised mischievously.

Jack's grin widened. "God, I wish you could have seen your face the first time we went to bed together, après hot door-sex. I thought you were going to faint when I went down on you."

"It was - something of a shock," Daniel responded with careful dignity.

"And completely hot," Jack prompted.

With Jack Eskimo kissing him, Daniel couldn't do anything but swallow hard and nod, wide-eyed and wordless, which Jack annoyingly appeared to accept as no more than his due. "The first time we - you know..." Daniel shrugged, awkwardly meaningful.

Jack's face quivered. "I know," he agreed gravely, failing to completely choke down an indulgent laugh.

Daniel scowled at him. He had been going to confide in Jack how erotic that had been, how natural it had felt to him to lift his legs over Jack's shoulders, the power and intensity of that first stunning slide of hot, throbbing skin deep inside him. "I wasn't the same after that," he said diffidently. He'd had Jack, had all of him. He'd wanted more, needed more. Daniel guessed that dissatisfaction was the root of his desire to be fucked, to know in those moments he loved, and was loved. "In a good way."

Jack relaxed in a way that subtly drew attention to the tension Daniel hadn't noticed before.

"Do you think Sam and Teal'c have figured out that we're together?" Daniel asked musingly.

"I think it was rough out there."

"Errys made it rough," Daniel answered at once, wondering if Jack didn't want to talk about it. Protecting Jack's reputation had seemed such an absolute to him, he hadn't been able to get past his own diffidence. "It wasn't just you. We all just went for it. I admit...it was brutal, Jack. Even Sam..." He remembered Sam's grey face, the vicious kick that had given him and Jack the edge they'd needed against Errys. "We had to do it."

Jack lifted his head suddenly and Daniel realised Jack was distressed for him. "I hate you even think like that. You think you failed..." Jack was at a loss for words momentarily. "I remember how you were in the early days, barely knowing which end was up, or north from south. You always knew right from wrong, though. Always. If you agreed - hell, I know it's selfish, but I figured I was okay if you agreed with me. Now, though."

"I wouldn't have let the team down, Jack, not ever," Daniel denied stiffly.

Jack smiled a little, his face softening. "I know." He thought some more. "Naïveté isn't a bad thing, Daniel, just dangerous and costly. I guess I didn't want you to be the one paying the price."

"It's too late for that." Daniel rubbed his face against Jack's, softly reassuring. "It always was. Sha'uri paid the price on Abydos, Jack because I couldn't leave it alone. I had to push, I had to know. I never had enough, always needed more. I knew what I was getting into. I don't feel cynical," he promised. "I feel hope, you know?"

Jack's gentle kiss said he knew.

"Realism is hard to face in myself," Daniel mused. "But it is easier on me. My expectations of others aren't so high, but balancing that a little, my disappointments aren't so great. Most of the time, I think it's a good thing. We have to change, Jack. We have to grow."

Jack looked as if he wanted to be persuaded. Daniel lent an assist. He licked the smooth skin of Jack's shoulder.

"I'm trying to talk, here!" Jack complained.

Daniel lay still, looking obediently attentive. Then he licked Jack's throat, slowly, slowly lapping a warm, moist trail over the sensitive hollow and each fine line. Jack shivered.

Daniel surged up, shoving Jack roughly onto his back, taking the big hands in his to pin them to the pillow either side of Jack's face. "I love you," Daniel promised, gentle and wondering. They kissed then, Daniel tasting Jack's smile as they rubbed mouths with soft, eloquent passion.

"Love you," Daniel whispered again, savouring the words, the feeling, then pushed his way into Jack's willing mouth. Jack was always willing. It was hurtful to understand why at last, but it was the kind of pain that made Daniel feel alive. How ridiculous that they'd both acted with the best of intentions, thinking only of the other. Selflessness had kept them apart far too long in their amicable arrangement. "Jack?" Daniel asked gently.

"Hmm?" Jack cupped Daniel's face, staring at him, drinking him in like he couldn't get enough.

Daniel blushed, stroking a coaxing finger down Jack's cheek. "I feel selfish," he confessed shyly.

