

Title: Hidden In Plain Sight

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Synopsis: Love and friendship, affection and attraction, all bound up in ambiguity and sublimation.

Warnings: None.



Hidden In Plain Sight

A slash story by Biblio

"You are fortunate in your people."

The President looks around him, thoughtfully regarding the SGC personnel going quietly about their business, his own bodyguards, calm in their vigilance. He smiles then at General Hammond, who stands close by, attentive but in no way intrusive. "Exceedingly fortunate, High Councillor," he agrees.

My gaze returns, as it has so often, to Doctor Jackson, silent, melancholy and again distracted, his eyes dwelling on the Stargate in the room below. He seems alone in the midst of all these watchful people.

General Hammond and the President are aware of my too-frequent observations of this young man, though he is not.

"I was most impressed by the amendments Doctor Jackson made to the Treaty between our two peoples. I found the document inspiring," I confess, embarrassed at the naïveté and romanticism of my reaction.

"Inspiring," the President says dryly, "is not the word most often associated with Earth politics."

Hammond's lips twitch responsively. "Doctor Jackson felt strongly that accentuating the similarities - the bonds between our two peoples - would ultimately prove more productive."

"I am not aware that Doctor Jackson permitted to remain a single phrase suggesting there *were* two peoples," I counter.

The President sighs. "If I could get away with that in front of Congress."

"He believes, does he not?" I ask General Hammond, nodding to Doctor Jackson. "The force of his arguments was compelling," I hint. "There was - faith." I find it difficult to quantify my own response. Emotion is rarely to be embraced; circumstance does not allow such luxury. I have been both soldier and politician longer than either of these two humans have been alive, I stand in Garshaw's place to lead my people in a war which predates the history of the humans of this long lost world. I above all can least afford to indulge sentiment.

"Doctor Jackson is always sincere," the President replies, surprising Hammond. "Passionate," he admits, "but sincere in his advocacy. That carries weight around these parts. It's a rare enough quality."

"I agree." With some pride, Hammond glances across at the oblivious Doctor Jackson.

"I feel that signing the Treaty was but the first step in the forging of our alliance. The Tok'ra are aware that we are held in some suspicion by those among your people." The crass, antagonistic O'Neill comes immediately to my mind. "We are at war with the Goa'uld and each time we meet with representatives of the SGC, we are in crisis. Would it not be beneficial for us to learn more of each other as people and not as warriors?"

"If we're to honour the spirit of the alliance as well as the letter of the law," Hammond interjects quickly, before his President can speak, seizing the opportunity, as I thought he might, to gather additional intelligence about us.

"That is what I feel," I respond. "Perhaps Doctor Jackson?" I suggest politely. "He appears genuinely interested in our ways and if his word carries weight among your people?"

"That's a good suggestion," the President agrees hurriedly, his eye drawn by a hovering, expectant aide. "Please excuse me."

"Do not stand on ceremony on my account."

Relieved, the President shakes my hand, says all that a politician must on occasions such as these, and withdraws, leaving me to General Hammond.

"The death of Martouf is a difficult loss for us all and one which I am certain is raising tensions." I need say little more. Hammond is as aware as I am that the only one of his

personnel who has made a real effort to speak with my brother Tok'ra is Doctor Jackson. His teammates did not attend the Treaty ceremony or the reception. "Major Carter?"

"Was upset," Hammond says firmly.

"Understandably, given the part she played in the death of Martouf," I respond sympathetically. "Though the suspicions she expressed regarding our intentions towards the internment of Martouf and Lantash were unwarranted. Anise does what she can for our people and our cause," I hint delicately, calmly awaiting Hammond's measured acceptance of my offer to lay the minds of his people at rest with regards to our intentions on this one matter at least. The man is no fool.

"If you were to take Doctor Jackson back with you," he suggests slowly, weighing the advantages of the situation and particularly the timing of my offer.

"It would perhaps allay some of those fears."

"Why don't you ask him yourself?"

Hammond could issue an order but he chooses not to and I accept his advice with alacrity, finding this odd courtesy of his towards Doctor Jackson pleasing.

When I reach him, Doctor Jackson looks up at me, smiling a little in that hesitant way of his. Earlier, he spoke easily and naturally with me, his interest in all I had to say genuine and palpable, his questions flowing. I have watched him since our quiet conversation as he speaks with others, the distance he requires, the small, defensive motions of his body. Even when with his colleagues I witnessed subtle signs of discomfort and distancing. I am honoured that he feels no such need with me.

"How is Major Carter?" I ask him sympathetically.

For a moment he seems at a loss and I recall belatedly that he has not been approached by any of his teammates since Martouf tragically revealed himself as the Zatarc agent. "Your friends are with her, are they not?"

Doctor Jackson relaxes. "Sam - Major Carter - is very professional, very dedicated."

"Martouf spoke highly of her," I assure him. "As does Selmak. You may have noticed he at least is far from easy to impress." He flushes with pleasure at this praise of his friend, his eyes lighting. I find myself bemused and staring, wondering when I have seen eyes so intense, so expressive a blue as his. A most foolish fancy, but still, I stare.

"A part of Martouf will always live on in Sam. She has Jolinar's memories of him as well as her own."

Doctor Jackson is a gentle man, a quality for which we Tok'ra have little time. Garshaw spoke of this, as did Kel'tar, rescued so unexpectedly from Sokar by this idealist and his

friends. Even the bounty hunter, the 'great' Aris Boch himself, was charmed. If I am no less foolish, at least I am surrounded by fools.

"Major Carter is concerned about our intentions. About possible experimentation," I remind him gently. "I have a proposal for you, Doctor Jackson, which may help to allay her fears."

"Daniel," he invites me, bowing respectfully, curious now.

Gratified by the gift of his name, I too bow. "General Hammond is not averse to you accompanying my party back to Vorash to learn more of the Tok'ra, our customs and our history. We seek to honour our alliance in spirit as well as in letter."

Daniel frowns, glancing down again at the Stargate and the personnel clearing away the debris of Martouf's destruction. When he looks back at me, all hesitance is gone. "Thank you," he says clearly. "I'd like that, very much."

I do not know him well but feel compelled to speak. "Do you think of your friends? We can postpone if you would prefer it?"

"That won't be necessary," Daniel responds firmly. "If I was needed," he murmurs, more to himself than to me, I feel.

"Forgive me for the interruption, High Councillor."

We turn at once to find Anise standing sombrely before us, General Hammond at her side.

"I wish to ask your advice, Doctor Jackson," Anise informs him. "General Hammond. I am most perturbed by the day's events. I did not suspect Martouf of being the Zatarc and because of that, I feel I have contributed to his death."

Daniel offers no platitudes or thoughtless reassurances.

"I am also concerned about the damage I may have caused to Colonel O'Neill and Major Carter."

"Me too!" Daniel says sharply.

"Our understanding of the Zatarcs is limited," Anise reminds him, her manner surprisingly conciliating for one noted among us for her forthrightness. "I have made a promise to Major Carter which I intend to keep. Martouf's death must have meaning. His loss must be of help to others. My judgement was faulty but my methodology - my technology - is sound." She turns to General Hammond. "I must request that Colonel O'Neill make himself available to me for further testing," she demands abruptly.

"Excuse me?" Daniel snaps, glowering. "After what happened to Lieutenant Astor? After what could have happened to Jack? And to Sam?"

"Easy, son," Hammond advises him, placing his hand on Daniel's shoulder. They exchange a look and Daniel's face softens.

"That is exactly my concern!" Anise steps forward, her urgency unmistakable. "General Hammond, you must understand the opportunity we have here. The Colonel and Major Carter are the only subjects I have been able to test who have generated false readings and yet have not been Zatarcs. I must refine the device's analysis of false recall to protect future subjects. The data I can gather from further testing would prove invaluable!" she argues passionately.

I notice that Daniel's scientific interest has been caught. He appears, reluctantly, to agree with Anise. Hammond notes this as well as I.

"A control subject," Daniel acknowledges unhappily.

"I do not ask that Major Carter submit herself to further testing," Anise assures him. "She has been through enough. My host is in agreement."

"And of course in her emotional state, the readings might be false," Daniel suggests sweetly.

I am forced to hide a smile at this unexpected evidence of his astuteness, as is General Hammond.

Anise has no such difficulty. Nor does she deny she has considered this possibility.

"You're sure the colonel would be in no danger?" Hammond challenges.

"I am positive," Anise responds confidently. "He is not a Zatarc."

"Scientists here used similar techniques when they were designing lie detectors," Daniel muses aloud. "Which, ultimately, is what the Zatarc detector is, albeit a very advanced one. Control questions can be used to identify particular emotional responses and their charting by the device and whether they read correctly if the answer was false. Of course, that requires a co-operative subject," he suggests mischievously.

Once more, Hammond is forced to look down quickly to hide his amusement.

Even Anise appears daunted.

"I could - er - break the news. If you'd like," Daniel suggests blandly, the gleam of mischief more pronounced.

It is long since I have felt such an attraction. I would know more of this intriguing young man.



"You want me to what?" Colonel O'Neill howls indignantly, abruptly ceasing his restless pacing of General Hammond's office. "Martouf isn't cold and you want to strap me back in that thing?"

"Colonel!" the general warns him, low-voiced and grim.

This very awkward. It is rare my symbiote and I are so at odds with one another and it is the first time in our long history together that Anise is as interested in a man as I. She has never failed to respect my desire to share physical intimacy and affection with another or to accommodate any of my wishes, making many generous compromises only because it would please me. We were ill-prepared for each of us to be attracted, and to a different man. It is most upsetting.

"Look, Anise," Colonel O'Neill addresses me, his manner a trifle more conciliating.

"Freya," I correct, hurt by his careless look. Am I so very unimportant to him that my feelings do not matter? Reassurance whispers from my symbiote and I cannot help but acknowledge in turn to Anise that were her Doctor Jackson here, Colonel O'Neill would not behave so. Anise's presence comforts with a gentleness she shares only with me, and I understand that her withdrawal here was not meant to give me pain. It was intended as an acknowledgement of my feelings, not hers. "I am Freya."

General Hammond silences me with a sharp look and proceeds to relay to the colonel all that I had previously explained to him and High Councillor Per'sus.

Anise and I are surprised and pleased by the High Councillor's desire to return with Doctor Jackson to Vorash. He appears to me to be one who will learn as well as teach. His knowledge impresses even Selmak and I am sure we will each gain much from sharing further scientific encounters. I do look forward to the opportunity. It is rare for Anise and I to find an individual who shares our passion or one who is so challenging both in his beliefs and of ours.

"Daniel knows about this!"

Another eruption of outrage draws my attention again to Colonel O'Neill's handsome, infuriated face. "He in fact suggested a number of questions I might ask," I point out helpfully. The colonel is speechless. "Control questions," I elaborate, mindful of Doctor Jackson's explicit instructions on how I was to proceed on this point. "Questions to which Doctor Jackson had the answers."

"He's added mind-reading to his impressive list of accomplishments?" O'Neill glares at me. "Oh. I forgot," he says with great sarcasm. "That's your job."

His opinion of my abilities is apparent to all but he nevertheless feels the need to vocalise at length. I withstand the storm which breaks over my head, conscious of Anise's careful withdrawal. General Hammond offers no further assistance as O'Neill rants. We must simply wait until he has calmed himself again.

Doctor Jackson suggested that when Colonel O'Neill asked *which* questions, his participation was assured. It appears he was right. At least, the colonel offers no further voluble protests as I escort him to the isolated medical room Doctor Fraiser made available to us.

She and Major Carter are sequestered somewhere, no doubt angrily commiserating over our refusal to allow them to examine Martouf's body. He was taken through the Stargate immediately. There are scientists on Vorash more skilled than we in such medical matters. There is some small hope we can save Lantash at the least, and if Martouf is in stasis, perhaps in the future we may help him too, though Anise and I both acknowledge that it is more likely it is he who will once more serve his people. There may be answers imprinted in his physiology, markers we may use to search out other Zatarcs.

I feel no need to share this information with either of the two women and trust that on Vorash, High Councillor Per'sus will distract Doctor Jackson as he must.

"O'Neill."

The Jaffa Teal'c greets us as we enter the medical room, his demeanour suggesting he will not be moved from his watchful position, close by my side. I glance to Colonel O'Neill and see that he has no objections to Teal'c's presence. He appears more relaxed, making a number of jovial comments to which Teal'c reacts with seeming indifference as he helps O'Neill into position, attaching the memory recall device at my direction. Only then does he explain his presence. General Hammond sent him to assist. It is not clear whether the Jaffa means to assist me or to assist O'Neill.

I feel excluded. Much is communicated between the two men which does not need words. O'Neill was perhaps more likely to question Teal'c's absence than his presence. It is at once familiar and strange. Anise and I share such a bond yet we do not value it as we should in humans. Their diversity and individuality is no less or more a weakness than our mutual dependence, the loss of one as devastating to the whole as the loss of Anise would be to me or I to him.

It should be easier for us to communicate. We cannot always be at odds.

"I will begin," I announce, activating the device. "Please direct your vision here." O'Neill sighs loudly but gazes obediently at the laser.

"What is your favourite colour?"

"Pink."

Teal'c inspects the monitor with some interest. "You are a Zatarc, O'Neill," he observes solemnly.

The colonel appears to find this very amusing.

"Peridot."

"Who is your favourite actress?"

"Mary Steenburgen," the colonel responds eagerly, smiling as if at some pleasing thought. "She seems very nice."

"Remember to be as specific as possible," I warn him as my monitor indicates he is not being truthful with me. "We are seeking to help others in the future who may be Zatarcs, Colonel. I do not wish them to share the fate of Lieutenant Astor and Martouf." O'Neill is silenced by this merited rebuke. "I must learn from you what I can in order to enable me to adjust this device to differentiate as accurately as possible between a false memory caused by inadvertently faulty or inappropriate recall and that which is caused by Zatarc programming. I would appreciate your co-operation."

"Very nice and very sexy. Er, Mary Steenburgen, I mean," he reiterates uneasily and unnecessarily.

Satisfied by the accuracy of this response, I consider the list of questions. Naturally, Doctor Jackson is unaware of what transpired in the second test which cleared his friends, but he did suggest a mix of questions to ensure the widest possible range of responses for the device to measure, some of which he was sure his taciturn friend would be reluctant to answer.

"What is your second favourite sport?"

"I wasn't aware Daniel knew which was my favourite sport," O'Neill retorts, disconcerted.

"Colonel!" I snap, exasperated as the reading shows his recall is false. "Once again, I remind you that I require your co-operation. I will ask questions which allow you to dissemble but this is not one of them. Please answer correctly."

"Curling," he responds in a more quiet tone than any I have yet heard from him.

"That is better."

He continues to co-operate as I ask each of Doctor Jackson's control questions in turn, the readings consistently measuring true and reasonably accurate recall of facts and events. I am pleased by our progress.

"In this next phase of the testing, I will ask questions which are more specifically about your feelings. I leave the choice to you whether to lie in your answer or not." I glance at

him to be sure that he understands. "It is vital that in the event of a memory reading as false, you are then absolutely honest when I question you about the veracity of your answer. Please be prepared for that. Some of what I ask may be difficult for you to answer. In that event, you must be honest with me if you genuinely feel confusion over what you are able to recall. We will refine the line of enquiry as I attempt to quantify the device's ability to predict true and false recall of feelings."

"As hot as Mary Steenburgen is, I think George Hammond is hotter."

I believe he is signifying assent. Smug amusement at his inappropriate irreverence ripples from Anise.

"You said earlier that you would rather die than lose Major Carter."

O'Neill's face goes stony. "Yes," he snaps.

I did not intend that to be anything more than an opening statement to my line of enquiry, but a swift glance to the monitor shows his answer to again be accurate even though he is angry with me. I am heartened by this evidence that the device can measure reiterated recall with some degree of consistency, at least.

"You also said that you care for her far more than you are supposed to."

"Yes. Can we move it on?" he commands impatiently.

"Would you have left Teal'c alone behind that force field?"

"No."

Teal'c smiles benignly.

"Would you have left behind Doctor Jackson?"

"In a heartbeat!"

The reading is emphatically false.

Both the colonel and the Jaffa find this very amusing.

I find it intriguing that whereas O'Neill can answer questions about Teal'c straightforwardly, he feels the need to obfuscate and bluster regarding Doctor Jackson. My curiosity is piqued. I had thought to enquire more closely into his feelings for Major Carter as it is this matter of which I have most knowledge, but perhaps questions about Doctor Jackson will prove easier for him to answer without having to sacrifice the complexity and perhaps ambiguity of emotion I require to trigger for this experiment.

"Have you ever left Doctor Jackson behind?"

"Yes."

I see at once this is the truth and look at him, startled. It is quite opposed to what I know of his personal beliefs.

"We had false memories implanted in our minds," O'Neill tells me dryly.

"I am sorry. It must have been difficult for you."

"Piece of cake."

I am unsure of his exact meaning but his recall is false. "Please verify the accuracy of that statement."

"I beat the shit out of General Hammond's car."

"I was present at this event," Teal'c confirms.

The reading does not wholly reflect the accuracy of this. "Please be more specific. What were your feelings when you 'beat the shit' out of-"

"Frustration," O'Neill interjects hurriedly. "Anger. The usual."

"Because you had lost Doctor Jackson?" I frown as the reading continues to be ambiguous.

"Because Duluth beat out Bemidji in the finals!" he retorts sarcastically.

"That statement is false," Teal'c observes unnecessarily.

"Throwing in a little curling reference, big guy, as requested," the colonel points out insouciantly.

I attempt to recall his attention. "Did you feel that you had failed Doctor Jackson?"

The colonel's humour evaporates. "Yes," he replies curtly.

"Your response is ambiguous," I note. "Please be specific about your feelings over your loss of Doctor Jackson."

"I was upset, okay?" the colonel snarls.

"Your explanation is not adequate."

"Dontcha mean your device isn't adequate!"

"That is what we are attempting to determine," I remind him. "You spoke of damaging General Hammond's vehicle. Why did you do that?"

"I already said. Anger. Frustration."

"You were in pain?"

Colonel O'Neill is at a loss to respond to this, inappropriately or otherwise.

"I did warn you some of the questions might be difficult for you to answer," I remind him.

"Yes," he admits slowly and with extreme reluctance. "I was in," he hesitates, grimacing, "pain."

"Is there more that you are unable or unwilling to recall?" I ask. The monitor once again indicates to me that he is not telling me the truth.

O'Neill looks at Teal'c for a long time, and then his resistance fades.

"I was ready to quit the team," he confesses resentfully. "Retire."

"Had you not lost men before?" I attempt to clarify, puzzled by this seeming over-reaction.

"This was different. Daniel was my friend."

"Was Kawalsky not also your friend?" Teal'c asks, his curiosity genuine.

"Sure he was!"

The monitor glows blue, confirming the colonel's veracity.

"But he did not mean as much to you as Doctor Jackson does," I suggest, again attempting to clarify. I have discovered that accurate recall of events and factual data is a difficult process for humans, but I begin to feel that the complexity of emotions of which they are not always even aware may simply be too imprecise for my device to quantify with any degree of accuracy.

I feel compelled to do all I can to remedy what may be a fundamental flaw in the testing of humans. We have no other technology with which we can detect Zatarc programming and I will not willingly witness the needless death of another such as Major Graham or Lieutenant Astor. Their realisation of what they had done as they turned their weapons upon themselves is not something I can or will forget. It is a calculated cruelty on the part of the Goa'uld responsible for this insidious threat.

"They're both friends," O'Neill stresses.

"Are you attempting to dissemble, Colonel O'Neill?" I enquire, frowning at the monitor. "It is not an appropriate time for that. The analysis of your recall once again indicates that you are lying or that your recall is faulty. I require you to be completely honest."

"I believe O'Neill is attempting to be honest," Teal'c observes as the colonel sits brooding, his expression most unpleasant.

"I will accept your judgement, Teal'c." I bow politely to the Jaffa. "Very well, Colonel. I will re-phrase the question. I am still hopeful that we will gather pertinent data in this trial. It was equally difficult for you to quantify your feelings for Major Carter, yet you were able in the end to recall accurately with prompting."

"Are you being sarcastic?" O'Neill demands incredulously. "Prompting?" he complains to Teal'c.

"I am not. The analysis the device made of your responses to those earlier questions may be a suitable base to judge the ambiguity of these feelings also." Colonel O'Neill has nothing to say in response to my comment, so I go on. "Do you care more for Doctor Jackson than you are supposed to?"

"No. He's my friend." O'Neill appears to realise at once this is not enough and rushes to elaborate. "My best friend, okay? How can you care more than you're supposed to for a friend?"

"Is Major Carter not also your friend?"

"Yes! No! It's not the same, no!"

"Because she is your subordinate? Is not Daniel Jackson your subordinate also?"

"Yes! Technically, yes."

"It appears the correct response is technically 'no'," Teal'c observes dryly as he watches the monitor with me. "Do you not consider him to be your equal, O'Neill?"

"Yes! Thank you!" the colonel responds with a sarcastic tilt of his hands. "Yes! I'm glad someone's making sense here," he grumbles, scowling at me.

"That person is not you," Teal'c informs him.

"I'm too close to all my team. You've all become friends," O'Neill insists, his aggravation apparent as he transfers his scowl to the Jaffa. "I've never had a posting that was like this in my career. Normal S.O.P. does not apply."

Of this at least, O'Neill is confident. I confess I am fascinated by his inability to quantify and express his deepest feelings, particularly for Major Carter and Doctor Jackson. How can any individual have so little self-awareness?

"Do you love Major Carter?"

"Define love," O'Neill retorts.

"Do you feel affection for her?"

"Yes."

"Attraction?"

Once again uneasy, the colonel mumbles an affirmative, then looks appealingly to Teal'c.

"I make no judgements, Colonel," I assure him. "My discretion is assured. I seek only to quantify these emotions of which you speak. Do you feel affection for him?"

"Teal'c?"

"Doctor Jackson."

"Er, sure. Sure."

The device indicates that he is once again being evasive in his reply. I am growing frustrated because I am unable to determine from my readings whether he does this deliberately or if his confusion is genuine. "Do you love him?" I ask sharply.

"I -"

We wait, but O'Neill can make no further answer. He stares back at us, his brow furrowing deeply as his strain becomes more evident.

I think he does not know why his responses are unsatisfactory, only that they are.

If I wish to elicit specific memories, perhaps it is I who should be more specific in my questions. I think it would be wise to consult Doctor Jackson when I return to Vorash. I feel certain he will offer valuable insight into the framing of questions which will help the test subjects to recall and express their thoughts and feelings appropriately. Positive reinforcement is vital if I am to avoid once again triggering the self-destructive programming of the Zatarc. My questions must not be perceived as threatening. It would be advisable to test out those limits on subjects I know to be in no danger. My own subjective powers of observation will have to play a greater part in the analysis than I had previously determined.

"Are your feelings for Doctor Jackson deeper than the affection you feel for Major Carter?" I elaborate, trying to help Colonel O'Neill to attain some measurable clarity of thought.

"No." His already strained face pales as he waits for my reaction. "Yes?" he demands disbelievingly.

"Why do you ask if you already know the answer?" I query, curious, as the monitor again glows blue.

When we spoke privately earlier, I asked if there was someone to whom O'Neill was loyal. I assumed this person was Major Carter but it now appears I was wrong. Though I am disappointed personally that there is little hope of engaging in Lo'machen with the colonel, I must acknowledge that this data is proving very valuable. It may still be possible with sensitive questioning to differentiate the programmed memories of a Zatarc. The orderly recall of such memories may itself be an indicator I had not previously considered. I fear I was too simplistic in my initial approach. Rephrasing the same question and asking it again for the purposes of comparison may be another useful strategy I could employ. This appears a most fruitful line of enquiry to pursue.

"Are you attracted to Doctor Jackson?"

Colonel O'Neill's eyebrows soar.

"No!" he sputters in shock. "Hell, no! He's my *friend*," he emphasises. "Plus, he's a he!"

"I ask you again not to dissemble at this time."

"I'm not!"

I look significantly at the monitor. "Then your recall is faulty."

"What?"

"I will rephrase my question. Can you recall any incidences where you exhibited physical attraction to Doctor Jackson?"

"No!"

"We have discussed the stigmas and inhibitions with which the people of Earth surround physical intimacy, Colonel. I assure you of my understanding of the difficulties of such an admission. However, to gain an accurate reading, I must ask that you do so."

"I am not attracted to Daniel Jackson!"

If Colonel O'Neill is not lying to me, then he is lying to himself. I sense that his bewilderment is genuine. Instead of glaring at the detection device or at me, he appears to be staring at nothing and his face is grey and pinched.

"Are you alright, Colonel O'Neill?"

"You're saying that even if I'm lying," he answers in a rush, "I mean, even if I don't even know I'm lying, the machine can tell? It can tell?"

"The subconscious mind will not lie though the conscious mind can and seemingly does. You did not know you were lying about your feelings for Major Carter either until this was pointed out to you."

"But you're insisting my feelings for Daniel are deeper!"

"It is not I. The memories are yours, Colonel O'Neill. Specifically, there are incidences of sexual attraction to Doctor Jackson which you are unable or unwilling to recall."

He looks helplessly to Teal'c, unable to respond directly to me. The Jaffa offers no comment, staring back inscrutably at his friend.

"Are you in love with Doctor Jackson, Colonel?" I ask directly, careful to employ the common human usage of this terminology to describe profound emotional and sexual intimacy, both of which I begin to feel, from the ambiguity of his responses, to be applicable to his relationship with Doctor Jackson.

O'Neill's gaze focuses at once on the device, a look almost of fear on his face.

"No."

"You must answer again, O'Neill," Teal'c informs him gravely.

The colonel closes his eyes, his knuckles clenching on the arms of the chair in which he sits so rigidly.

"I'm not in love with Daniel Jackson."

"You must answer again," Teal'c repeats.

Colonel O'Neill sits in silence for so long, I do not think he will answer, though his friend is as insistent upon it as I.

"Yes?"

Though it is more a question than a statement, O'Neill's hesitance does not affect the accuracy of my reading and the screen at last glows blue.

"We may proceed," I advise, satisfied with his veracity.

"You must speak with Daniel Jackson," Teal'c orders O'Neill sternly, ignoring my instruction as he walks over to release his friend.

"Are you out of your mind?" the colonel argues vehemently as he jumps to his feet, shuddering as he momentarily glances at me then turns away. "That's the last thing I should do!"

"I do not agree."

"You don't have any say," O'Neill warns Teal'c angrily.

"I am your friend," Teal'c contradicts him flatly. "As your friend I must tell you that you can no longer conceal your feelings. You have much to answer for in your behaviour to him."

"I beg your pardon?" O'Neill says furiously, his face thunderous.

"I had previously considered the difficulties you were experiencing working with Daniel Jackson would be resolved in time. I was not aware that your behaviour was a consequence of your sexual frustration," Teal'c informs him coldly, barring his way when he attempts to barge past. "You have given me cause to doubt your continuing respect and regard for Daniel Jackson. How much more cause have you given him?"

Colonel O'Neill has no answer to this.

"I have seen how he has become more withdrawn and more insecure in the acceptance of his judgement and his place on SG-1 than at any time since I first knew him, O'Neill," Teal'c insists. "This cannot be permitted to continue."

"I am *not* talking to him about this," O'Neill insists with dangerous finality.

"You cannot speak with Doctor Jackson," I point out, annoyed at this inconvenient disruption. "He has gone to Vorash with High Councillor Per'sus. Your presence there is not required, Colonel. Please resume your seat so we may continue."



The Tok'ra are a very, shall we say, studied people? Their formality and courtesy appears ingrained, so much so I'm beginning to see it as another conscious rejection of their Goa'ulded state. They're very deliberate in all that they do and say, excruciatingly careful to recognise the equality of the host, and any miscellaneous humans about the place, in all things. That gesture of theirs, dropping the head to signal the change in - what? Consciousness? Or simply which one chooses to speak at a given time? I wonder if the host sees it as a courtesy or as a constant reminder of what the symbiote is capable of yet chooses not to do?

I'm getting distracted again.

It's not that I'm not completely fascinated by ritual, or filled with innumerable questions about Tok'ra history and culture, about them as a people and as individuals, host and symbiote, it's just - well - the formality. I'm excited. I suspect it shows. I've been on Vorash about an hour and a half and I feel like a hyperactive toddler.

High Councillor Per'sus appears bemused. Or is that amused?

The bodyguards aren't.

"High Councillor?"

"Your presence is not required," he repeats patiently. "Your time will be better employed by examining the records of recent missions in order to determine those who may have been exposed to Zatarc technology." He glances across at me. "There is no doubt now that all of our operatives are potentially vulnerable to this programming. Martouf was one of the best among us."

"I take it you have no doubt now that Anise was correct in her assertions about the existence of the Zatarcs?" I ask.

"None," the High Councillor responds heavily. "The evidence appears incontrovertible." He nods absently to his bodyguards and they unhappily disperse with the kind of unquestioning alacrity Jack often volubly wishes I had. "I will show you to your quarters."

"There's no need, High Councillor," I respond, a trifle disconcerted. Surely one of the bodyguards should've been assigned such a menial task? I hesitate to ask about it as he falls into a brooding silence, confining myself to watching the reactions of the few other Tok'ra we meet as he leads me through one dark, anonymous tunnel after another. It isn't difficult to see that he's held in complete respect and not a little awe. I'm intrigued by this. The Tok'ra I've met haven't exactly struck me as impressionable.

"Please, Daniel, call me Per'sus," the High Councillor invites me suddenly, his rather stern face relaxing.

As a matter of courtesy, naturally I will.

"You are my guest," he assures me warmly.

I realise he means this literally when we turn into a space which apparently isn't another corridor because it has some personal belongings scattered here and there on the angular outcroppings of crystal. Sadly, the, king-sized, er, slab which adjoins a particularly spiky bit of wall doesn't strike me as being the last word in comfort.

Per'sus gestures to an opening tucked away behind another spiky outcrop and I see I have a slab of my very own.

"You're taking my safety very seriously," I comment dryly as I release my pack and carry it through into the small sleeping chamber. Anyone trying to get to me will have to get through Per'sus and his bodyguards first. Jack would be proud of my threat assessment. If he was paying attention, he would be.

"I like this about you," Per'sus responds, startling me.

I hadn't realised he'd followed. He moves silently for such a big man, a trait he shares with Jack and Teal'c. I'll have to ask him sometime if he's been a soldier.

"You do not dissemble. I find your sincerity pleasing."

"Um, thank you," I mumble, flushing at the unnecessary compliment. Feeling awkward, I busy myself with my laptop. A zippered bag isn't much of a security measure but I'm not overly concerned about leaving it out on display. For one thing, there's no knowing when I'll need it and after falling over Jack, fielding his complaints, finding the zippered bag and then extracting my laptop from it and booting the darned thing up, sometimes I've forgotten what I wanted to write. Jack lives for moments like that. Plus, the Tok'ra didn't know the symbiote Cordesh was a Goa'uld spy because going through his things would have been considered rude.

If I have anything important to write, I have my journal and a really peachy flashlight Jack gave me when I complained the Air Force issue one was no good for sneaking a quiet chapter when I was supposed to be sleeping in my sleeping bag. My journal is an excellent security measure. Jack can't install games on it and my handwriting is allegedly more impenetrable than one of Sam's really-easy-equations-for-fun, the ones Jack is always...

I really think about Jack a lot, don't I?

I've never been off-world without Jack knowing. It isn't, or rather I should accept it wasn't, conceivable. I don't want to think about that at all.

"Tell me why the Tok'ra have so little regard for personal privacy?" I invite Per'sus instead.

"I could, but I would much prefer to hear your own deductions." He smiles at me, his green eyes warming.

"Regard is the wrong word," I respond readily. "I see it more as another of your checks and balances to maintain equality between host and symbiote. Living in a space without walls and doors makes it that much harder for symbiote to abuse host."

"You are very perceptive, Daniel," Per'sus says softly, not arguing with my interpretation.

"The fundamental difficulty all Tok'ra face is imposing a state of equality on a mutually dependent relationship which is inherently unequal," I go on, warming to my theme and frankly amazed no one has told me to shut up yet. "The host's mind can be suppressed by

the symbiote at any time and so you work at maintaining both the independence and interdependence of both." This strikes me as being a tad harsh and possibly even tactless. I feel that as Mr. Inspirational Intergalactic Diplomat, I should say something nice. "I appreciate that you work at it." I don't know that I sound terribly convincing.

"I look forward to spending time with you, Daniel," Per'sus confides charmingly. "I wish very much to learn more about you. It is long since I have been so attracted to another. Longer than your lifetime."

"Attracted?" I sound like Minnie Mouse.

"You are very beautiful, of course," Per'sus smiles warmly, his eyes gentle as they roam appreciatively over my flaming face, "but your intellect challenges me as much as your character engages and appeals. Though I do not know you well, I feel," he adds with great dignity, "much for you."

I have no idea what to say to this. Absolutely none. I'm usually drugged to the eyeballs when people say this kind of thing to me. At least, that's what my friends tell me later. I emerge from pink fogs and find my DNA spattered all over the communal shower room. Or people just do stuff. "I'm not used to anyone *asking!*" I blurt out in piteous confusion.

"You are not?" Per'sus has no difficulty interpreting this pronouncement. He's horrified. He would be. The exertion of that kind of force over another individual is anathema to the Tok'ra. They prefer to manipulate you.

I'm glad we're in a space with no doors and the Tok'ra are so studied. I might be fairly freaked by this declaration of his, otherwise.

Naturally, I stupidly have to ask myself why.

Because someone is interested? A man is interested? A parasitic life form I've been getting along with quite nicely wants to get to know me a little better? And is apparently interested. Why am I panicking? I'm kind of *assuming* that he wants to have sex with me. I could ask.

"When you say attracted, do you mean you want to?" Instead of being explicit about what Per'sus might want to, I find myself vaguely waving my hand between us.

"Do I desire you?" Per'sus suggests helpfully. "I wish very much to lie with you, Daniel, if this is what you wish also."

Okaaay. Just clarifying. He does want to - Jeez. Oh, Jeez. "You haven't had sex longer than I've been alive?"

There's a very disturbing light in Per'sus' eyes.

"I desire you greatly," he promises me, all low-voiced and husky.

I can't tell this very large, impossibly powerful man how much I appreciate the respectful distance he's careful to keep. He might want to pounce - he really, *really* wants to pounce - but I think he won't, any more than I think he'd stifle the voice of his host.

"I do like you," I admit breathlessly. "But I'm not, I mean, I don't." Um.

"I do not feel you are the kind of man who would condemn a pleasure you have not experienced."

"I've read a lot." I highly doubt this inanity adequately expresses my abhorrence of bigotry, which is what I was going for. It does however, sound like a come-on. I'm not good at this stuff. No one is more aware of this than I am. "Can I talk to your host?"

Per'sus at once bows his head and when he lifts it, he's smiling again.

"Hello?"

"I am Geryon." He takes my hand and lifts it to his lips, kissing me with practiced, lingering ease and courtesy. "Per'sus and I will not harm you, if this is what you seek to know."

"Partly."

"Do not fear us, Daniel."

"I don't," I admit shyly. "Do you, um?" I can't actually say 'want me'. It's too ridiculous.

"My symbiote and I are as one in our desire for you," Geryon assures me. "We wish to give you such pleasure as you have never known before."

Honestly, that would not be difficult. I don't get out much, not even out of my own head. I never have. I've always been somewhat obsessed with more cerebral pleasures, something to which my one and only ex-girlfriend could attest. She broke up with me before I actually realised we were together, as in *together*. All I knew at the time was she spent a lot of time hanging out with me while I worked and when I absolutely had to fuel up on coffee and carbs, she'd trail along with me willingly enough.

And that was me when I met my wife. My complete sexual history. A few kisses and, now and again, Thai food.

"I am glad that we do not offend you, Daniel," Geryon says softly.

"No, I'm not offended," I admit honestly enough, trying without much success to pull myself together. "I'm just surprised. Confused" I add, "and surprised." Not that confused does my current chaotic state of mind justice.

"May I kiss you?"

"Kiss?" My voice climbs half an octave. Think Minnie Mouse on speed.

Geryon interprets this as permission and gathers me into his arms for the gentlest, warmest whisper of lips imaginable. Of course, we are talking about *my* imagination, so this isn't saying much.

I'm kind of glad he's holding me up. My brain has fused along with my knees. I cling giddily to him as his mouth moves softly over mine. When he sets me back down, I know at once I'm looking at Per'sus. His thumb brushes over my shaking mouth and then he takes my hand comfortingly between both of his.

"My host is more forward than I, Daniel. I did not mean to make you uncomfortable. I give you my word-

"I'm not," I interrupt.

He gestures for me to go on.

"Uncomfortable."

I don't know what I am and for the first time, it hammers home that I have nobody to talk to about it.

"Not with you, Per'sus."

His face lights up.

Uncomfortable with myself, maybe. Excruciatingly aware that I need to be very, very careful here. While I don't believe Per'sus would hurt me or force me to do anything against my will, I am concerned about how he'll react if I can't give him what he wants from me. Will the alliance we've spent months patiently, painstakingly building, for which Martouf gave his life, and for which Sam hurt herself so deeply, fall apart if I don't put-out for the Tok'ra High Councillor?

"We can talk," I offer, feeling my wince of a smile in a very stiff face. "I'd like that. To talk."

"I would be honoured."

"I've never," I announce determinedly in the general direction of the rather attractive chain he wears as part of the High Councillor's official regalia. "You're, um." This is very, very difficult. "I haven't spent a great deal of time getting to know men who want to make love to me. In fact, I haven't spent any." I nod obscurely, really quite intrigued by the intricacy of the carving on Per'sus' heavy gold chain. "I'm not sure of the etiquette."

"All that is required is that you speak freely if any word or action of mine makes you uncomfortable," Per'sus assures me kindly. "Allow me to show you some of the objects my host and I have gathered through our travels."

"Please," I agree eagerly, practically desperate to see and touch something that makes sense.

Per'sus puts his arm around my waist. "Is this acceptable to you, Daniel?"

"It's fine," I mumble at my feet, flushing. And oddly, it is.



I didn't get to be an Air Force colonel by being anything but smarter than the average bear. I'm certainly smart enough not to act like it, which is why I can do stuff like dodge Carter, Teal'c and Anise with effortless ease. I'm taking a rain-check on my sexuality crisis and imminent nervous breakdown because I have a far more immediate problem.

My C.O. let my boyfriend go off-world without me.

General George Hammond does nothing without a reason and I've known the wily old bastard since he was a pissant lieutenant. I have no idea why he didn't choose to let me in on the fact he let the biggest snake of 'em all spirit Daniel back to his lair for a cosy tête-à-tête, but something tells me I'd better find out, and quick.

George does not do this. Not without damned good reason.

Charging into his office and ranting hysterically until he lets me go after Daniel may feel good, but all it will get me is my ass in a sling and possibly in Psych.

I think my C.O. is waiting to see what I'll do. I'm sure I'm losing points for the amount of time it's seemingly taking me to figure out my team is coming up short one linguist, but I won't get a second shot at this so I'm taking a timeout to plot. It's apparent something went down while Daniel was schmoozing and glad-handing with our nation's finest, something of sufficient magnitude to make George let one of our most prized and carefully guarded assets waltz off all alone.

I missed all of it. The stuff that was supposed to 'stay in the room' got ugly and spilled blood all over the gateroom. I cleaned up the mess while Fraiser scooped up Carter and the snakes what was left of Marty, then I bailed with the big guy and left them all to it while I hid out and licked my wound.

Did I even talk to Daniel? I don't remember.

I think he needed me to. I can tell, here, by the look on his face. The camera loves him, even the security kind. He's framed perfectly by the blue of the curtain behind him, looking anywhere but at the guy trying to attract his attention. He looks kind of lost.

The guy is good-looking, the guy is Hollywood leading man good-looking, and now he has Daniel's attention. He has Daniel in his space and he watches every move Daniel makes. That's what went down. It's right there, on every tape of the treaty shindig the SFs brought me. The guy never stops watching. He makes his play and George sees how Daniel gets in this guy's space. That's all it takes. Daniel likes the guy and wants to go and that's enough for George. I don't think he sees how much the guy likes Daniel. I know Daniel doesn't.

Telling myself I do not have a problem with or over Dr. Daniel Jackson is kind of moot, huh? Because it sure looks like Daniel has a problem with me. I should have talked to him. I should have been, not to put too fine a point on it, nicer. I've seen that lost look on Daniel's face a few times recently. Maybe it's time to face facts. That maybe I'm the one who put it there.

I get from A to Z with no fuss, from Daniel's office to Hammond's. George isn't thrilled to see me but he'll make the time regardless. He's good that way.

"What can I do for you, Jack?" he asks straight-forwardly.

"Permission to gate out to Vorash, Sir."

George sits back, folding his hands neatly on his desk, eyeing me thoughtfully. "Any particular reason?"

"I'm not comfortable with Daniel being alone out there with the Tok'ra."

"Go on."

"Frankly, Sir, I'm surprised you allowed it. The recent events with Tanith are still fresh in my mind at least."

"High Councillor Per'sus has personally guaranteed Dr. Jackson's safety."

Per'sus? That's the guy who was all over Daniel? I forgot, or wasn't paying attention in the first place.

"With all due respect, Sir, he couldn't guarantee his own!" I argue forcefully. "Graham shot him right in front of me! Hard as it is to believe that Anise can be right about anything, she's right about the Zatarcs. Vorash could be infested with them for all we know."

"Your presence didn't make a difference when Graham's Zatarc programming was activated," Hammond argues mildly.

"It did in the gateroom," I remind him. I may not be able to help some snaky Zatarc, but I can sure as shit stop one. Dead.

"Your cogent arguments aside, Colonel, I'd always planned to send you through to Vorash," George observes mildly, his eyes twinkling with amusement. "At this point in time, I have no idea whether the Treaty we just signed with the Tok'ra is worth the paper it's written on."

"But you plan to find out," I retort, a tad annoyed he caught me out so easily. Too damn busy obsessing over Daniel. I don't like what that says about me. I can live with it though, because I like the way Per'sus was looking Daniel over even less.

"I thought I'd leave that to you," George replies humorously. "Just be yourself, Jack."

"I plan to."

"Without endangering the alliance," George add firmly.

"It never crossed my mind, Sir." There's an art to obnoxiousness. Naturally, I excel. George is the latest in a long line of baffled C.O.'s who can attest to that. I tend to get promoted instead of court-martialled and none of them have ever quite worked out why. As long as Jacob isn't around to rain on my pissy parade, Per'sus and I will get along just fine.

"Major Carter and Teal'c?" George hints, his eyes keen.

"Better off here," I say firmly. I don't need Carter at Anise's throat or Teal'c at mine. If I do have a problem with Daniel - and despite what Anise's stupid-assed machine insists, I'm not convinced I do - I do not need Teal'c doing his over-sized Jiminy Cricket act, insisting I get off my ass and *do* something. Daniel, presumably. Plus, there's the whole Jaffa revenge thing to consider. Daniel may be really cutting to Tanith if he runs into him but he's not likely to beat the loveless bastard to death with his own symbiote.

"You can gate out to Vorash tomorrow, Jack. I don't see any need to give them advanced warning, do you?"

"Tomorrow?" I bark. What? That gives Percy the Perv a whole night alone with Daniel!
"With all due respect, Sir!"

"It's dark, Jack," George patiently reminds me. "Vorash isn't safe after dark."

My point exactly! There's a good reason I'm climbing the walls, here!

"General, I'm not comfortable with that kind of delay." My head has been up my own ass too long as it is.

"I am."

I just want to go. I don't want to be alone in my own head. I don't want to think about Daniel, I want to be with him. Things make sense when he's round. I make sense.

That's friendship, right?

Friendship.



I'm feeling ever so slightly outnumbered here. The only one not taking an interest in me on any level is Freya, and she's on some well-deserved down-time after the grilling she apparently gave poor Jack.

"The human mind is chaotic," Anise announces with infuriating finality.

"Thank you," I acknowledge sarcastically on behalf of my species.

"I am merely reporting a fact, Doctor Jackson. No insult is intended."

While I'd be the first to admit Jack has the attention span of a student at the start of a five o'clock lecture on a Friday night, especially where I'm concerned, I'm not about to say so. Anise is smug enough, thank you. "If the results are variable, the responsible scientist will look again at the methodology employed, not the alleged inadequacies of the subject." Insult very much intended.

Per'sus takes refuge in a sip of the rather nice fruity, fizzy, sherbet drink he produced in my honour at the start of the council meeting. There are nibbles, too, small dishes of fruits, nuts and pastries. Someone must have told him humans need feeding and watering at regular intervals. Despite the attentiveness of my host, I can't tell if my lowly, invasive presence is casting a pall, if they're upset about Martouf or if they're just always like this. I'm the original anti-social animal and I still feel like the life and soul of the party.

The spirit of Jack, I'm sad to say, is still very much with me. The urge to shake things up a tad is impossible to resist.

I turn abruptly to Per'sus. "If it isn't an imposition, High Councillor, may I witness the burial rites for Martouf and Lantash?" I ask respectfully. "We know so little of your customs."

I wonder if this is why I do so badly at parties? Bringing up burial rites unprovoked?

Per'sus looks disconcerted. "There will be no rites at this time."

"You'll be performing an autopsy, then?" I enquire. "Examining the bodies to determine what you can physiologically about Zatarcs?" I'm almost positive they'll make sure he's dead and stuff first.

Per'sus seems grateful for my understanding.

"You are certainly more reasonable regarding such a necessary scientific endeavour than your colleagues," Anise comments dryly.

Sadly, I think most of the fuss was because Janet and Sam wanted to examine the bodies of Martouf and Lantash themselves. We don't doubt the scientific competence of the Tok'ra but they've given us nothing but cause to doubt their veracity. They'll only share partial truths, and those grudgingly. Anything they tell us willingly, we worry about.

"We share with you all that you need to know," Anise goes on.

"That's the problem right there," I retort quite sharply. "You determine what we need to know and so far, in every instance, we've needed to know more! You control the flow of information but expect full disclosure from us. It's a fundamental inequality between us and where you have such an inequality, trust is hard to build."

"I do not doubt the justice of what you say, Daniel," Per'sus replies, "But it is our way. Secrecy has long served us. Our numbers are few and the Goa'uld are many. We have not the forces to engage in war as you have known it in the brief, turbulent history of your world. Our operatives work from within to undermine, to seed dissent and foster rivalry among the ranks of the System Lords. It is in this way that we seek to maintain balance."

"I understand the concept but I also see the contradiction," I argue.

"Your country has allies on Earth, does it not?" Per'sus knows the answer to this. The President was very amusing about some of his livelier experiences abroad. "How many of them know of the existence of the Stargate?" he asks me straight-forwardly.

"None," I say stiffly.

"No doubt you keep from them other secrets of state, so ultimately our ways are the same."

"That doesn't mean I can't question it!" I retort with as much dignity as I can muster.

"Were we to deny such questioning, that would be a crime indeed," Per'sus observes seriously.

It's nice of him to let me off the hook. He could have a field day with our 'do as we say, not as we do' double-standards. He's more generous than I actually deserve at this point. Certainly more generous than I would have been. I'm a naturally gifted treader of toes.

My sherbet drink seems very appealing. I crawl into it for a while and let the Zatarc talk ebb and flow around me. The zesty taste lures me into a second cup and then Per'sus slides over a dish of deliciously crunchy candies which had previously escaped my attention.

I munch away, listening with half an ear while someone reports that they're pulling together a list of all operatives who could have been vulnerable to Zatarc programming, which appears to be a very long list.

Per'sus assigns Anise and Aldwin to grill them. I reach for the sherbet again in self-defence. I know Aldwin. He tried to blow us up and then had to share a Pel'tac home with Jack, after. Jack had been shot in the leg. He took this very personally. It made for a uniquely horrible experience.

I think I'm lousy at being covert. Here I am at the dark heart of secret Tok'ra operations and the uppermost thing in my mind is the operative opposite eyeing up my sherbet.

Unless he's eyeing up me.

I think I need to lie down. The sherbet is going to my knees.

"Would you like to take a walk with me on the surface, Daniel?" Per'sus asks me invitingly. "The moons are full tonight."

Can my knees take it? More importantly, can I take the sherbet?

"Is this an alcoholic beverage?" Jack has painstakingly trained me to be suspicious and, as far as possible, less co-operative with people trying to zap me, drug me or get in my pants.

"It is not. We do not ingest fomented liquids of any kind," Anise responds. "It is merely the chilled juice of the jolian fruit."

Aaah. That's okay, then. I'm not really giddy. I must just be tired. "I'd love to, Per'sus," I agree happily. "A walk will do me good." I achieve an upright position under my own steam, but when Per'sus gallantly offers assistance with achieving actual locomotion, I generously decide not to brush him off. He seems to like holding me, even my elbow. As lust-crazed looming lovers go, he's very undemanding.

The crystalline tunnels are very beautiful and very alien, glowing richly blue wherever my slightly glazed gaze falls as we walk. "Are you still growing new tunnels?"

"Is this a way to discover our numbers, Daniel?" Per'sus queries, smiling down at me.

Um, it probably should be. Yes. Thanks for that. Plus, you know, I saw them use the crystals one time and it's really cool!

"You are delightfully innocent, Daniel," Per'sus announces amusedly as he rings my ass right out of there.

I resemble that remark.

The night sky is vast and shivering with stars, the sands drenched in silver light. I close my eyes for a moment and drink in the aching familiar chill of clean desert air.

"Tell me something of yourself, Daniel," Per'sus invites me, his tone warming to intimacy.

"What would you like to know?"

"Some small thing," Per'sus responds after a moment's reflection. "A private thing another man might not seek to know."

Small and private? "There's nothing much to tell. I put so much energy into my researches." I shrug, knowing that by the standards of most men, especially men who are Jack, I'm a bit of a loser. "I love language," I offer tentatively, not at all sure this is anything he wants to hear. He looks encouraging so I stumble on through an explanation. "It's more than losing myself in reading, in the challenge of ideas or the images unfolding in my mind. I love words. I have favourites," I admit bashfully. Words which make me feel.

"Tell me."

"Langorous." The way the syllables glide, I always want to close my eyes and feel this word fill my mouth as I speak it.

"Another?"

"Blithe."

Per'sus strolls comfortably at my side, listening attentively as I ramble on about my passion for the written word, the smell and other quiet pleasures of books and the magic of a pen. "I find language beautiful," I apologise at last, a trifle stiffly, feeling I've bored him quite long enough. "Written or spoken, it has the power to affect profoundly the hearts and minds - the souls - of others."

I think I owe him something for his patience, so I allow myself to be drawn down to sit for a while, hugging my knees and staring up at the stars. Per'sus puts his arm around me and I ask him to tell me something of himself, something he wouldn't normally say.

"Is there not equality in love?" he asks as last.

"There must be or it isn't love as I understand it."

"Then know this, Daniel. I love my host, Geryon. We chose one another and we would do so again. We live to serve our cause, but in our service is a love more complete than any the unblended can know."

"Cordesh," I blurt.

"The traitor?" Per'sus asks, his brows snapping together.

"His host - he took his own life, but before he did, he told us he didn't act alone." I'm babbling but Per'sus gets my drift.

"Host and symbiote are as one," he agrees. "Both are free and yet both are bound, by our choice, by our cause and by our love. To be anything less is to be Goa'uld."

"Yet Jolinar took Sam as a host against her will."

"And she gave her own life to save that of Major Carter," Per'sus reminds me at once. "I do not condone nor do I condemn her choices. I was not in her place and I cannot judge."

"Do you think it was as painful for Jolinar as it was for Sam?" I ask, genuinely wanting to know.

"Of that I have no doubt. She was a warrior among us and she took great risks, but she and Rosha were as one for centuries and in Martouf and Lantash they found their soulmates. The loss of her host," he begins and then stops. "Perhaps Selmak is a better one to question on this. He and Jacob still mourn for Dayaene. It was not easy for Selmak to leave her, knowing that she would die. His choice was as difficult as Jacob's."

I feel ashamed that I've thought so little about the Tok'ra and made so small an effort to understand them. Jacob would have answered any questions but I had none to ask him. I'm as prejudiced as anyone because I'm as human as anyone. Still, I thought I was a better man than that. An arrogant assumption. The Tok'ra are not Goa'uld and it's wrong of me to judge them by the same standard. Very wrong.

"If the bond between host and symbiote is so deep, how can there be room for anyone else? Can you both feel for another person?" Would Selmak ever care for Sam as much as Jacob did? I've never seen any extraordinary signs of affection from the symbiote for his host's daughter. Perhaps for Selmak, all Sam will ever be is a necessary encumbrance of Jacob's life.

"We can."

I look up questioningly and Per'sus' hand cups my face. It occurs to me then that as he can't read my mind, all he has to go on mood-wise is what I just said and what I just said - damn. I'm bad at this. He leans in slowly, giving me plenty of time to react in some way. I don't bleat in abject horror or anything so he keeps coming and then his mouth is on

mine. Both his arms are around me and his mouth is one mine. Just touching. Maybe seeing how we fit. I don't know.

He's very warm and very certain and when his lips rub against mine, very gentle in his insistence, I surrender gracefully to the pressure and he glides into my mouth, delicately touching, tasting, his tongue fitting to mine. Savouring and then stroking sensuously into me.

I think he's been kissing *way* longer than I've been alive. My toes are curling at the extraordinary, contained eroticism of it all. He's holding me and kissing me and I'm quite content to bask for a time in this warm flow of feeling. It's been so long since I shared anything of myself. It's good to let go, even for a little while, and with this man, with all he's capable of, I'm safe.



Daniel is sleeping peacefully at my side. I do not believe I have ever kissed a man into unconsciousness before, but I am able to see the humour in this most inconvenient accomplishment. I fear nothing he does will ever be ordinary.

I find that there is much pleasure to be had simply from watching him. The moon bathes his face in light and he seems to me even more beautiful than before. I am restless with need for him. Daniel is filled with a need all his own, though he does not seem to know it.

He is more alone than I knew. If I could be sure it would be the right thing for us both, I would wake him and pleasure him here among the dunes. I believe it is what his body needs and desires, but of his mind, his heart and his will, I am less certain. He returned my kiss but I do not know that he was truly with me.

Still, I am more hopeful than I was that in time Daniel may return my feelings. The intimacy he allows me is more than he has ever granted to any man.

It is better to wait and to be sure than to risk all for mere physical gratification and lose him.

Now that Daniel has so unexpectedly entered my life, I do not want him to leave me.





George gave me a go to gate through to Vorash at first light and I feel I'm doing nothing more than taking him at his word even though the first light is my flashlight. I wave it around for effect. The lazy bastards can come over here and ambush me. I'm not taking a swan-drive down a dune for their amusement.

"Helloooo!"

Loose translation: take me to my linguist.

Not that he's mine, per se.

I'm not possessive, no matter what Teal'c says. How could I be? I'm not having that problem the zanax thingie, the snake, the host and the Jaffa insist I'm having. Not me, nosir, no way.

"Helloooo!"

I am more than happy to begin shooting if the ambush does not proceed in an orderly manner.

"Colonel O'Neill."

Oh, gimme a break! I don't even get to shoot *one* of these suckers in the ass? I've got the bad light and everything!

"Welcome to Vorash."

I know this guy. "Didn't you try to kill me last time we met? Alvin, is it?"

"Aldwin."

"Right."

"This way, Colonel." Aldwin gestures and I obediently follow, dunes and dives very much on my mind. Not that I'm looking forward to the ring experience either. I never know how they know where the damn things are in broad daylight and I've seen what happens when bits of you are in the wrong place. They stay in the wrong place. The rest

of you doesn't. You never get any warning either, you're just standing there for a second and then you're -

"Jeez!"

Someplace else!

"Take me to Dr. Jackson," I state politely as soon as my molecules judder to a complete halt, pull themselves together and scoot my ass out of harm's way.

"I do not believe he has arisen yet," Aldwin replies mildly. "Allow me to show you to your quarters. I will inform the council of your arrival."

Only an idiot would make a fuss. As soon as they park my butt in my assigned waiting room, I'm outta there. They haven't said I can't take a look around on my own.

If I don't ask, they can't say no.

"Peachy."

"Follow me."

Aldwin is as much of a sparkling conversationalist as ever, I see.

"Just one question," I ask as he leads me through the hallways, which all look like their druggie decorator - in his blue period - took his inspiration from the 60s. "We've never really stuck around here all that long. Where exactly do you guys take a bathroom break?" I can't keep going up to the surface to pee.

Aldwin just looks at me. It's a different look than the one Daniel gives me when I'm humorous. I know he thinks I'm funny just like I know he thinks it's a really bad idea to encourage me. He's laughing on the inside even if he's rolling his eyes and sighing on the outside. Aldwin just looks at me.

"Tough room."

Tough mattress!

"Don't you think you're taking the orthopaedic support thing just a smidgeon too far?" I eye the, for want of a better word, slab, gracing my bijou guest pad. "The floor looks more comfortable."

"Your weapons, Colonel."

I look innocent, patting my MP-5 fondly. "We carry weapons to defend ourselves."

"I am aware of your reasoning, Colonel. We have had the same argument each time you have visited Vorash. If you wish to retain your weapons, it will be my pleasure to escort you back to the Stargate and return you to the SGC."

Somehow, I have no doubt of his sincerity. It would be his pleasure to boot my butt back through the wormhole. I make the usual vocal fuss as I hand them over. I do have a reputation to maintain and there's no point arousing any inconvenient suspicions.

"Remain here until you are summoned," Aldwin instructs.

I know he doesn't mean that. If he did, he would have left guards.

I ditch my pack, which contains nothing exciting, then park my behind on the slab long enough to let Aldwin get clear, wait a little longer after that just to be sure, then I mosey on out to find my linguist.

The hallways are clear, but just in case of awkward questions, I'm prepared with awkward answers. Aldwin did not in fact tell me where the bathroom is. I'm more than happy to explain, 'why, no, I couldn't wait until he came back to get me,' in as much graphic detail as it takes.

Everything looks the same, all the hallways, all the small, open rooms. I see dark, unmoving shapes here and there in the gloom and wonder if the Tok'ra sleep or if they meditate the way Teal'c does.

I walk and walk, trying to orient myself, and then I hear Daniel's voice, soft as always, but unmistakably his. He's answered by a deeper, resonant voice. I turn a corner and there they are, Daniel and the Grand High Pooh-Bah himself, standing very close together. Percy has his hands on Daniel's shoulders and I don't like this, I don't like it at all. The guy is huge, he looks like he could snap Daniel in two. He lowers his head and I'm already moving when I actually take in what I'm seeing.

Daniel.

Daniel is reaching up, lifting his face as Per'sus kisses him, gently at first. Daniel likes it though, I can see how much he likes it. He looks dazed and he touches his mouth and Per'sus gathers him up and kisses him hard, with so much pleasure and passion that Daniel is losing it, clinging and kissing him back.

I think Daniel kissing is the hottest thing I've ever seen and then I think it should be me.

I duck back into the shadows and hug the wall, shaking and shaking, rage boiling up and choking me in a fury of denial. He should be kissing *me*. He's *mine*. Mine!

"I really think we should stop doing this!" Daniel protests breathlessly. "I don't know where it's taking us."

The answer is too low for me to catch but Daniel stutters Percy's name in response.

I know exactly where they're headed if Percy has his way. I don't believe this. It never occurred to me Daniel might actually *like* the guy! He does like him, though. A lot. When I sneak another look, I see how Daniel moves shyly into the offered embrace and they kiss again, even more deeply than before. Daniel lifts a hand to rest against Percy's throat while Percy's big hands slide down his back to hold his ass.

A gentleman would probably accept he's beaten and bow out gracefully at this point.

Personally, I plan to get Percy the Pervert alone someplace and stuff his snake so far down his throat it bites his ass. I don't quit until I'm dead and even then I've been known to bounce back. Daniel is mine and he'd better get that and quick.

Time to make my entrance. I'm not hanging out here sweating and fuming while Percy molests my Daniel. I back up the hallway and grumble loudly about the inexplicable absence of restrooms.

"Jack?"

I step out boldly just as Daniel emerges from Percy's bedroom, flushed, ruffled and suspiciously bright-eyed. I think he's happy to see me. I think. Or it could just be a residual glow from the most thorough kissing he's ever had in his life. Of course, he hasn't been kissed by me yet.

"Jack!"

My god, he is happy to see me!

"Freya will be happy to see you."

The kissing thing? The sooner the better in my opinion. I may be in love with him but I can stand him without the attitude. Humour is *my* bag.

"High Councillor Per'sus, this is Colonel Jack O'Neill," Daniel cheerily introduces me.

"We've met," I reply coolly. "You were shot at the time."

"I was sorry for the loss of Major Graham and Captain Blasdale," Percy offers his condolences at once.

Weird how he remembers them and not me, huh? He may have had his hands on Daniel's ass but he isn't confident enough of him to appreciate an old friend showing up out of the blue, especially one Daniel quite likes.

I thank god for this small mercy and decide antagonising Percy in front of Daniel is a really bad idea. Tragically, Daniel quite likes him too.

"I'm sorry for the loss of Martouf," I reply with dignity.

Daniel is so taken aback by this he walks into the wall.

I'm starting to think I may have a little work to do, here.

"Will one of your minions transfer my gear here or Daniel's gear to my place?" I enquire cheerfully as I hook a hand around Daniel's elbow and steer.

"Um," Daniel says vaguely, finally reassured, after much futzing, that his glasses are still in one piece, although from all the wrinkling, his nose may be doubtful.

"That will not be necessary," Percy responds heavily.

"When we met, High Councillor," I reiterate with iron patience, "You were shot. And that's not even addressing what went down at the SGC."

"I have personally guaranteed Dr. Jackson's safety."

"I'm aware of that," I reply evenly. "And yet, I insist."

"I don't have a problem sharing with Jack," Daniel interjects, surprising me. He flashes me a grateful look and just to make sure, mouths 'thanks!' at me. "I'm sure your own guards would be a lot more comfortable with this arrangement, Per'sus."

This about floors me. I hadn't missed the fact the bodyguards are conspicuous by their absence but I'm surprised Daniel has noticed it too. I could maybe wish he was equally as aware why Percy wanted them to make themselves scarce, absence making the libido grow fonder and all that, but damn! Was that my boy getting all tactical on me or something?

Sadly, Per'sus doesn't go postal and treat Daniel to a disgusting display of jealous rage. He surrenders gracefully.

I don't really care. Tonight, Daniel will be parked on my slab, and not his, and I can start on my fact-finding. Just what is it Percy has that I don't? Apart from being nicer, taller, and possibly, to the myopic, clueless and undiscerning, sexier and better-looking.

I have to win this one. I do not handle rejection well. I mean, I could probably take it knowing Daniel isn't attracted to men full-stop but knowing that he is and just isn't attracted to me? No. I don't think so. I have to win. Daniel is mine. I just have to figure out some ways to let him in on this.



I can't believe Jack is here. I can't understand why he's here. Yesterday, he seemed to be pretty much blanking me. Today, he's my best friend? The irony here is very much intended. I just don't get it. Why so nice? Why now?

He doesn't seem to have had any problem making me feel like shit any other time recently.

Now he's not just being nice to me but to the Tok'ra gathered here in the council chamber! I'm braced for a punchline which so far hasn't come. Everything Jack's saying makes perfect tactical sense, which is why I'm having such a hard time believing it. He's being politic. He's scaring me.

"So you don't have any idea which Goa'uld is responsible for programming the Zatarcs?" Jack asks Anise.

"We do not. The self-destruction of each Zatarc is clearly intended to prevent them from revealing anything of their mission or the perpetrator of the programming." Anise looks sober, even for her cheery personality. "I have observed that each Zatarc we have detected appears to return to their senses as they take their own lives. I find this most disturbing."

"It's calculated cruelty," I respond.

"I agree, Doctor Jackson," Anise inclines her head towards me, looking slightly less forbidding than normal.

I find it alarming that she's drawn to me on an intellectual level. I don't know what that means. I don't want to know. I don't want Anise helping me to find out. I find it equally alarming that Freya has yet to put in an appearance and she tried to seduce Jack! Anise can't be more drawn to me than Freya is to Jack. If I was anyone else it wouldn't be conceivable. Why do I get the scary, manipulative one?

That's a rhetorical question.

"I'd recommend instituting security measures, effective immediately," Jack pipes up. "Once you've cleared all the Tok'ra currently on base, screen everyone returning from an off-world mission. We have similar protocols in place to screen all returning personnel for infestation by a parasitic Goa'uld."

I wince at this off-hand tactlessness, leaning around Jack to shoot a slightly apologetic look to Per'sus, sitting to his right.

"Colonel O'Neill's suggestion is one I fear we will have to implement," Per'sus informs the council. "Select suitable candidates and train them to operate the Zatarc device, Anise. We must be prepared at all times to meet this insidious threat to our security."

"It may be possible from our examination of Martouf's body to identify physiological markers of a Zatarc," Anise replies. "Which in turn could lead to the design of a more

effective detection device. A less invasive screening procedure will, I hope, help to safeguard the life of any Zatarc detected."

"Systematic screening could help you to identify the Goa'uld who's responsible," I suggest. "Not that I want you to find a single other Zatarc in your ranks," I add, feeling I've had a moment of Jackian tact.

"I take your point, Daniel," Per'sus agrees. "If we do identify other Zatarc among us, we will be able to establish a pattern of vulnerable planetary systems and from that pattern we may be able to identify the System Lord responsible. It is only then that we will be able to battle this threat. At present we know too little to counteract the Zatarcs."

"Are you sure it's a Goa'uld who's responsible?" Jack queries.

"We are examining the weapon which Major Carter was able to retrieve from Martouf after she killed him. We hope to have more answers shortly," Anise reports matter-of-factly.

"Answers you'll share?" Jack retorts sharply, abruptly losing some of his urbanity.

This doesn't surprise me. He has been somewhat protective of Sam recently.

"We will share with you all that you need to know, Colonel," Per'sus answers, with a swift, humorous glance to me.

I return his smile.

Jack leans forward, rudely propping his elbows on the table.

I'm almost grateful to have him sitting between Per'sus and me. I'm trying very hard to keep my mind on our discussions which isn't easy to do when I can still taste Per'sus in my mouth. I keep telling myself to say no, that this can't go anywhere, and then he kisses me and I forget. I wish I understood this. I'm not exactly quivering with raging lust or rendered mute by his presence or anything.

I guess if I'm having to face facts, the reason I'm not saying no is pretty obvious. I don't want to beat myself up about this, not when Per'sus seems as realistic as I am about the unlikelihood of it going anywhere.

Is it the end of the world to be lonely? To enjoy some attention for a change? Jack has kind of cut me out of the loop. The only time the two of us have even met up outside of work recently, we started a fight in O'Malley's and got banned for life.

Unfortunately, Jack is not the only one. Somehow we keep ending up on opposite sides, three against one, and I'm the one.

I sigh.

Even when I can read really fast, when I have super powers, all people see is a geek. After four years, that's still all Jack seems to see. We do seem to be as incompatible as friends as he told me we were, not too long ago. He was right, too. Even if I am supposed to be a bright guy, I didn't sense anything. I didn't see this coming.

It's more than friendship for me, more than respect. I - I admire Jack. It hurts that he doesn't hold me in the same regard. I thought he did, but what do I know?

Jeez. Listen to me. I sound pathetic, like some little kid snivelling in the schoolyard because the big boys don't like me. Not that I ever snivelled!

"Daniel?"

I look up blankly. Everyone is making a move except me. The council meeting is over.

"Would you care to?"

"We have to-"

I blink at Per'sus and Jack, each trying to talk over the top of the other. "I need some air."

"Are you unwell, Daniel?"

"You're not going anywhere alone."

"I'm not sick, Per'sus, and yes, Jack, I'd like to take a walk alone."

"I would not advise it," Per'sus replies, looking at me in concern. "But if you are decided on this, then it will be as you wish."

It's nice to be treated as an adult for a change.

"I don't advise it, and happily, I make the decisions for both of us, so it'll be as *I* wish," Jack snaps, glaring at Per'sus.

I rest my case! I want my walk.

"Hey! Daniel! Wait up!"

No, I don't think so. In my case, misery doesn't love company.

"For cryin' out loud, Daniel!" Jack hisses in exasperation, grabbing my hand to tug me to a halt.

I tug back.

Jack refuses to let go. "What's wrong with you?"

He's not mad and it throws me. I didn't expect his sympathy. He's holding my hand and being nice. I don't understand him or how he has the power to move me. "What's happening?" I ask bewildered.

"I'm trying to apologise."

"Didn't we just do this?" He held my hand over a DHD on another world and said he was sorry, for, I think, the first time.

"Did it work?"

"Do you want the truth?"

"Always."

"Do you?" Nothing he's done recently would suggest he wants anything of the kind, not to me. Not from me, either, not the truth.

"Tell me."

"No, Jack. No. It didn't work. I'm not five years old. You can't hold my hand and make it all better."

"I'm sorry." He still doesn't let go, though.

"Jack."

"There's a lot I don't see." He's staring at me with so much earnestness, willing me to believe him. "Myself included," Mr. Introvert adds with humorous grimace.

"You're sorry."

"Try to sound as if you believe it, Daniel."

"So the next time we disagree, you won't humiliate me in front of our friends and anyone else who happens to be passing just to score a point?"

Jack winces but refuses to look away. "No. I won't."

I don't believe him. "Why would you say it's never enough for me? Where did that come from, Jack?" It still hurts. It shouldn't, at least, I shouldn't allow it to. Unfortunately, unhappy as I am about holding on to these feelings, I can understand why I can't let them go. It's a matter of principle. Unfairness burns me up inside. "It's not about me." Jack shouldn't need to be told that. He knows me.

Jack looks around edgily and lets go of my hand only to take my arm and steer me off down the hallway. "We can talk more up on the surface."

"Since when do we talk?" I enquire plaintively.

The look Jack shoots me is wry. "You're quite right, Daniel. We don't talk." He emphasises the 'we' biting. "Correction: I talk. You just listen and make like limpet lips when it's your turn."

Limpet lips? Dear god, where does he dredge up these dreadful similes?

"Guess what?" he says brightly.

"We're in the wrong hallway?"

"What?" Jack looks blankly at the walls. "No!"

We're in the wrong hallway.

"Your turn to spill your guts and completely embarrass yourself."

Speaking of turning, we'd better take a left at the next intersection.

I shrug off the special treat he's offering me. "Nothing to spill."

"We resolved everything in two minutes flat?"

Everything I care to resolve. "I don't want to talk to you, Jack."

"Why not?" Jack is surprised and hurt.

His blindness annoys me. I know he just admitted he can't see everything clearly but recognition is a long way from resolution. Too far for me. "Whenever I try, you tell me to shut up."

"I already said that won't happen."

"You also said we weren't friends."

"Oh, come on!" Jack complains, rolling his eyes. "I was acting. You know why! Maybourne? Sting operation? Ring any bells?" He shakes his head, frustrated. "Acting!"

"You said that, yes," I reply pleasantly. "I would have believed you, Jack, I mean, I really wanted to believe you-"

"The whole friendship thing is solid," he reminds me sharply.

"Not from where I'm standing."

"What?" I can see he didn't expect this.

"On the outside," I reply steadily. "Looking in." He didn't expect that either. "If you want me to believe we're still friends, Jack, you can try acting like one." I take my left turn as he storms ahead. Same old, same old.

"That was not funny."

He followed. He came after me. I - I thought he'd get pissed and just keep on walking. Take the easy way out.

"Yes, it was." I stumble over the words.

"No, it wasn't."

"Was."

"Wasn't." Jack has an odd light in his eyes. He does think it was funny, he just won't admit it.

This shakes me as much as anything. Why didn't he keep on walking? The Jack who's been around recently hasn't had much time for our usual silliness and strange non sequiturs. He hasn't had any time for me full-stop.

"Are we just people who work together?" I ask impulsively, pulling a face at how stiff and small I sound.

"God, no!" Jack retorts emphatically. "No, Daniel." He reaches up to squeeze my shoulder, scowling for effect at the Tok'ra stationed nearby to operate the rings. Moments later we're up to our ankles in sand.

Jack shudders and scoots me to safety. "That just isn't right," he confides seriously. "It's unnatural."

"If everyone shared that attitude, you wouldn't have cable," I retort cynically. Jack appears to find this a persuasive argument. At least, he grabs me by the scruff of the neck and gives me an affectionate shake.

This isn't just confusing. It's surreal.

"We're friends," Jack promises softly. "The best of friends."

Walking seems like the only sensible option at this point, with Jack being weird and clinging like ivy.

"Do I piss you off, Daniel?"

"Most of the time."

"Ditto," he comments pleasantly.

"But we're friends." Am I making a statement or asking a question?

"The best of friends," Jack emphasises. "Ever wonder why?"

"We work - worked," I correct myself carefully, "On the whole friendship thing."

"Hence the solidity of our foundations," Jack responds on cue, eyeing Vorash with less enthusiasm than he's been eyeing the Tok'ra. He's not a fan of sandy planets. "Why?"

Do I care?

I steal a swift glance and find he's looking at me anyway. I find myself flushing.

I care. We both know it.

The only answer I can give is a casual shrug which brings the smile back to Jack's face and his hand to my shoulder for another gentle squeeze.

"You're acting weird!" It comes out a bit more accusingly than I intended.

"I feel weird."

"It shows."

We walk for a while as the planet warms and light streaks the sky to brilliance, neither of us seeming sure what to say. We don't do this. We don't communicate. We've never really needed to. Most times I get tongue-tied and when I don't, I piss people off, while Jack is the taciturn antithesis of the stereotypical talkative Irishman. And yet, that's always worked for us in a way, not against. I mean, I've never known anyone who could just look at me and know what I'm thinking, what I'm feeling, what I want and can't ask for. Who hears what I mean even when it's not what I say. Maybe it's like that for Jack too. Maybe it's why we work at our friendship thing. We both need it. We need us.

"You haven't explained anything, Jack," I say at last, risking a small, tentative smile. "Why you need to have this out here." I gesture out at the shimmering sands rippling away from us to the horizon. "Now."

"Maybe I learned something."

I'm watching him, seeing him turn serious yet without the edge of anger I've been failing to get used to. "From the interrogation?" It seems a logical deduction. He doesn't ask questions of himself unless he's made to, something he's now openly acknowledging.

"From all of them," Jack says dryly. "From the first one, I realised I don't let me know myself too well. From the second, I learned I care too much. From the third." He bites off the end of the sentence, looking at me with strange intensity.

"The third?"

"I'm not sure I can tell you. I'm not sure you can know," he says simply. He doesn't look as if he wants to say anything more but there's this determination too, as if he wants to do the right thing but doesn't yet know what it is.

"If we're friends, don't shut me out," I ask hesitantly.

"If I let you in, we might not stay friends," Jack replies soberly. He suddenly turns and scrambles up the side of the dune we're navigating, parking his butt at the top of it.

Thinking this is getting serious, I follow him.

"I think you could tell me anything," I offer, hoping he can believe that. The silence and the isolation are what hurt me.

Jack sits staring down at the sand trickling into his footprints without acknowledging my invitation.

Feeling out of my depth, I'm prepared to wait too. My friend is a proud man and a private one, and he needs my help. That's all I know. That's pretty much all I need. I'm not good at this, at the people stuff, and that's another reason I work at it. Jack sits and I sit with him, glancing at him from time to time but mostly trying not to intrude while he struggles with whatever this is. The minutes stretch out and still Jack says nothing. He can't even look at me, his fists balled on his knees as he stares and stares at the sand.

I'm worried for him. Jack doesn't do this. When he has a problem, at least, when he sees he does, he tackles it head on. He doesn't know any other way.

"I have - feelings."

The strained, low-voiced confession takes me by surprise.

"Feelings?"

There are times of intense clarity and certainty, times an idea is so right your whole body sings with it. You may not know how or why it's so right, but you feel that it is. This is one of those times and I'm furious! I guess I knew what was going on, as little as I wanted to be made to face it. Jack and Sam - neither of them has exactly been subtle. I've been

watching all the pieces fall into place and refusing to accept the sense of them. I didn't - I don't want to be in competition with Sam. I won't be. If Jack is trying to tell me there's room for us both, that we can still be friends, that's better than the deal I'm currently getting. I still hate it. I don't know what to think.

"What?" I snap.

"What?"

I flush again. I thought he was talking. He's waiting, for what, I don't know. This is the part where he tells me one of them has to leave the team, right? The part where I lose one of them. The part where I - I lose Jack.

I hate the waiting. I hate the heavy silence. "Feelings?" I prompt sharply.

Jack takes my face in his hands and I stare at him, swallowing hard. He looks so stern, determined and hopeless at the same time. This is going to be bad. I can't let him do this alone, I can't be this small. I don't remember ever seeing Jack desperate and I can't bear to see the blind look in his eyes.

"Jack?"

I reach out to him instinctively and he takes hold of me, pulling me off-balance. As I topple into him, he puts his arms around me and kisses me on the lips for a few seconds, very obviously experimentally, then he leans back and stares at me.

"Oh my god," I whimper, absolutely stunned.

Jack kisses me again.

I can't believe this. I can't. This is - this is insane. Jack is kissing me. Jack! The man who wants *me* to bleed cammo!

Jack sits back and glares at me accusingly. "Goddammit, Daniel," he grumbles, totally pissed. "I want to kiss you again!"

"Which makes it my fault how, exactly?" I snap, rallying slightly.

Jack pulls off my glasses before I can stop him and glares at me some more, as if I'm somehow compounding my offence, whatever that may be. "Talk about having your ass against the wall," he bitches to the dune in general while ignoring me in particular.

"What the hell are you babbling about, Jack?" I demand angrily as he carelessly drops my glasses in the sand. I reach for them and he yanks me up close to him.

"You! You've got me batting for the other team!" he hollers and then he kisses me again. Third time apparently is the charm in the O'Neill offensive, because he sighs gustily and really gets into it, his mouth rubbing warmly over mine.

I'm mad at him and he knows it. There is absolutely no excuse for me to be rubbing back. I blame it on shock. We break apart after a minute or so of quite nice mutual rubbing and hostilities resume.

"Batting for the other team?" I demand. "That is not how I would phrase such a - such a life changing event!"

"I want you," Jack interrupts rudely.

"You, er, you?" I stutter.

"Want to have sex with you? Yes, dammit. Right now!" Again, apparently, this is solely my fault.

There's a certain appeal to this forcefulness. I'm really quite horrified, at him and at myself. There is no way I should be encouraging Jack in this kind of behaviour. I know what he's like. Give him an inch and he takes everything.

"We're friends," I object, somewhat provocatively.

Jack certainly seems to think so. He kisses me again. My response falls far short of the requisite cold dignity. In fact, despite my best intentions, and I think Jack's, I'm quite co-operative. I kiss him back. He seems to like the feel of my mouth on his and sets about exploring.

After a very little mutual nibbling, he inconveniently frees my motor mouth.

"This is impossible! Inconceivable! I'm incredulous!"

"God," Jack groans. "You're still talking." He immediately remedies this terrible state of affairs by kissing me again.

I never imagined he could be so sweet. I never imagined this at all. The gentle pressure against my lips is warm and persuasive. I put my arms around him and kiss him back.

"It would help," Jack whispers, "if you would not do that."

"Do what?"

"Kiss me back."

"Oh." Tough. I kiss him some more, liking the way his mouth moves with mine. "Why?"

"I can't think when you kiss me."

I blink at him. "Really?" I ask dubiously. It doesn't sound likely. I lean in and Jack's somewhat glazed eyes immediately fixate on my lips. "I think that's the nicest thing anyone's ever said to me," I admit naively, embarrassing myself yet again.

"Daniel? You panicking?"

"Any time now."

"Me too," Jack admits gruffly, stunning me for the second time in about as many minutes. "I like this."

He likes it enough we give it another shot. Jack's fingers find my hair, mine find his strong, character-filled face and when his tongue flickers over my lips, I surprise us both by opening to him. He slides delicately into my mouth and we both freeze, staring at each other as we try to work out how we feel about this.

Naturally, curiosity gets the better of me. I rub my tongue against Jack's, he rubs back and we're sultry, silken, stroking pressure. We kiss deeply and gently, with a hesitant, asking passion. We don't know any limits for this and our warmth intensifies to heat and shocking pleasure. We kiss for a long time, clinging and shaken by our growing arousal.

We kiss.

Breathing hard, Jack sits back from me and takes my face in both his hands, looking as dazed and turned on and bewildered as I feel. "I don't know what to say to you."

"Say anything." Just don't leave me hanging here, Jack.

"I swear I didn't know."

He closes his eye and rests his cheek against mine, wrapping his arms tight around my shoulders. I hold him too, returning what comfort I can. Jack's murmur is soothing as he strokes my back but he's trembling as much as I am, his heart hammering against mine.

I want to help him so badly. I feel how difficult this is for him and I need him to know he isn't alone. The heart isn't wise and none of us is all-knowing. My own feelings make less sense and yet more sense to me than they ever have before. This isn't new, this is - we're more. This is us. We're just finally facing the sex.

I kiss his face.

"I'm in love with you."

Jack's body jerks violently. "Great," he bitches shakily, rocking me. "The biggest confession of my miserable life and the man I'm in love with steals my line."

"I'm attracted to Per'sus." It's completely the wrong time, but I can't wait. I can't deceive him. Or myself. "He kissed me."

"You kissed him back."

"You saw."

"Would you have let him make love to you?"

"I think you know," I whisper, swallowing painfully. I feel so low and guilty. I think the strongest emotion I've had over these past weeks has been defeat. Telling myself I wasn't using Per'sus doesn't make it true. I needed the way he made me feel more than I needed him. I needed to be valued. I needed to just be seen.

"It's okay, Daniel," Jack promises. "I saw you together. I saw. He wasn't me."

My turn to swear I didn't know but Jack hushes me with a gentle finger, his eyes wide and wondering.

"I wanted to do this so much I had to stop," he confides as he touches me. "Anise asked me right out. Were there times when I," he hesitates, looking for the right words. "You know? Wanted to touch."

"I didn't know."

"Like either of us is good at this," Jack warmly excuses my naïveté. "I love my wife, you love yours. Neither of us was ready to move on and face loving each other. I don't know that there would ever have been a right time for that!" he admits humorously.

It's so long since I've seen him without anger. I can't help but stare at him, captivated by his mobile face and melting eyes. I've missed us so much that I should have known. I've joked to myself that Jack and I are like an old married couple without ever questioning how wrapped up in each other we are. It feels so natural, so right, to think of 'us' and 'we'.

"Is that what was happening between us, Jack?" I ask carefully, wary of encroaching. I don't want to lose this mood. "You were acting out over your frustration?"

"Sexual frustration," Jack says bitterly, shooting me a sharp look. "I hate to think," he begins and then bites the thought off, his eyes dark with apology.

"Tell me," I urge him.

"I hate to think where I could go."

"I don't understand."

"How long would it have taken me to figure out that I want you, Daniel? Where were those feelings supposed to go? The way I've been treating you?" Jack prompts soberly. "I didn't even know I had a problem. Didn't have a clue."

I don't like hearing this and I can't hide my disbelief.

"I don't want to upset you," he says quickly. "I just don't know how far I would go."

My eyes widen as I understand what he means. "You'd never force me!" I argue fiercely, furious he would even think this of either of us. He's no more a bully than I am a victim, a fact of both our lives he should not need to be told.

"No?"

"No!"

"I'd like to think so."

"I wouldn't let you," I inform him flatly and then I kiss him. I'm amazed and humbled by the way he melts into me. Too much has changed for us too fast for romantic eagerness or maybe even for acceptance, but there's comfort and sharing in our intimacy, our recognition that we can never go back. There's so much we need to say but for now, I give in hopefully to this unexpected, difficult tenderness.



"Zippedy doo dah, zippedy aye, my oh my, what a -"

"Jack!" Daniel hisses in exasperation.

I know my singing has the same effect on him as fingernails screamed down a blackboard but he's going to have to live with it. Now we're up and walking, I've got more spring in my step than a pneumatic Tigger.

"I'm happy," I complain aggrievedly.

"You are?" Daniel is startled and a very him mix of dubious and delighted.

"It's going well."

"What is?"

"Us!"

"We've been together for what?" Daniel makes a big show of checking his watch. "Wow! A whole ten minutes, for most of which we've been arguing," he points out sarcastically.

"Ah, but the rest of it!" Feeling Daniel would benefit from a practical demonstration of the key points, I snake my arm around him, pull him off balance and into a nice kiss. He struggles a bit on principle, then strokes his fingers into my hair and happily surrenders. He's lovely. I know he'd hate to hear me say it and I know I'm embarrassed to even think it, but that's what my friend is. I think gentleness is a highly underrated quality in a man.

God, I can't wait to get him into bed!

We should probably talk about that. I'm fairly confident that when you step up to the plate, the body will know which way to come out swinging. Confident. Yep, indeedy. Except for the minor difficulty that most times, Daniel will instinctively swing a different way to me.

Talk. We probably should. It's not as if it's going to happen soon. The Tok'ra come up short on walls and doors, there are reasons I hate sandy planets, particularly when I didn't pack my big, fluffy blanket, and we're on a delicate diplomatic mission negotiating implementation of a planetary alliance so fresh the ink isn't dry with a horny snake Daniel is about to 'Dear John.' As commanding officer, no one is more aware than me that I shouldn't even be thinking about how I'm going to get my linguist into the missionary position.

"Jack? You're slaving."

Sadly, I know I'll take those odds. I've recently discovered he's irresistible.

"I'm apologising upfront for being," I hesitate, searching for a suitably modest and self-effacing introduction to my naturally sensitively phrased proposition.

"Brash?"

"Huh?"

"Sorry."

"No. Not brash."

"Crass?"

"Daniel! Behave."

"I've never come to heel for you before and I'm not about to make a habit of it now," Daniel retorts briskly, his eyes demure.

"Horny!" I interrupt loudly. Amazingly, Daniel doesn't fall off the dune in shock.

"You don't think you're rushing this?" he asks mildly. "Us?"

"You mean I'm rushing you." Why am I not surprised? After four years together on SG-1, I shouldn't need reminders that we have to work for everything.

"Sex is a big commitment."

Well, d'uh! "Must you be sensible?"

"Well, technically that's your job, Sir, Colonel Jack, Sir," Daniel reminds me pleasantly.

"You have to be the biggest pain in the mikta who ever lived."

"No," Daniel disagrees definitively. "That's an accolade reserved exclusively for you by anyone who knows you and everyone who knows us both."

He's a sarcastic little shit and he's smiling. He knows I like this about him.

"You're just asking for another make-up kiss," I threaten him cheerfully. The sun is lighting his eyes to clear stunning turquoise and I definitely like that about him.

"Promises, promises."

"If you're not ready to sleep with me," I hint broadly, making a show of trying to do the big thing.

"I haven't thought about it." Daniel glances at me, frowning. "I really haven't."

"I'm insulted." I think I am. "You honestly haven't thought about sleeping with me?"

"It's been a packed ten minutes," Daniel snorts, savouring my wounded ego. "I need to make sense of my feelings for you and I guess about myself. I'm not going to rush any decisions about our future and certainly not one of this magnitude."

"You make it sound like I need an appointment for a consultation," I complain, manfully suppressing any hints of suspicious maturity or jokes about magnitude. It's a short yet obvious walk to all things 'size matters'. I think I've annoyed - and confused - Daniel enough. When I sneak a look at him, strolling along at my side, I have to admit his sunny expression is something of a surprise. "Enjoying stomping all over my libido, are we?"

Daniel chuckles softly.

I'll take that as a yes! "There are limits, you know," I warn him darkly.

"Yes, Jack, I know. I'm liking this very much. How often does this happen to me?"

"Your best friend grabbing you and kissing the shit out of you?" Okay, I maybe know what he means, but he'd be disappointed if I didn't play along.

"Walking into a relationship with a chance."

I absolutely cringe. Aww, jeez. Jeez. Talk about a sucker punch. I didn't see that one coming. Low blow, Daniel, low, low blow.

"Really knowing the other person."

I'm disconcerted he makes this sound like such a good thing when the other person is me. I know from the journal entry Carter shouldn't have read out to me one time that Daniel had a certain puppyish quality of loyalty and admiration for me. I'm pretty damned certain that watching me Coles Notes my way through life with the worst of them has to have dented some of that early enthusiasm. Right?

"Talking about things and deciding them, not just having them happen to me."

His passion is breaking my heart. It's not the first time. It's just, when he talked about his feelings - damn. I never guessed he felt this much for me. Never even suspected. Impulsively I catch hold of his wrist and pull him to a stop. He looks around questioningly and I take his shoulders and gently turn him to face me.

"I hurt you."

He reaches up to rest his hands on my shoulders, his intense eyes steady on mine.

He doesn't need to say anything. I can see that I hurt him.

"It won't happen again."

"Don't make promises you can't keep," Daniel counters hastily, getting upset.

Hard as it is, I have to acknowledge the fairness of that. I was married for twelve years and one thing I learned was that you can never know how you'll hurt another person. All you can realistically do is never make the same mistake twice.

"Not this way," I promise simply. "You won't let me." It's not a question. I'm giving him something here, giving him a right, and he knows it. His face gets pale and shaky but he has a hint of a smile. I don't think he quite believes this. "We're not exactly love's grand fantasy, here," I sigh, deciding I need a hug. As I engulf him, Daniel decides he agrees.

"Reality is good, Jack."

The little nuzzling kiss on my throat is better, though.

"I'm sure it goes without saying that I'm planning to drive you insane until you to go to bed with me," I fondly inform Daniel.

"I'm equally sure which one of us will lose his mind," Daniel retorts confidently, hugging me a bit harder. "While the other one curls up with a good ethnolinguistics book."

This narrows the field a tad. "I'll take that bet." I think I'll lose and I think he knows it. He's stubborn clear through to the backbone and I like this about him too. "You really haven't thought about doing the dirty?"

"Jack!"

"We're closing in on fifteen minutes, you know."

"You're impossible!"

"But I want you."

"Do you?"

I don't like the mischief in his eyes.

"Daaaniel," I warn him in my best sing-song.

He reaches between us.

"Daaaa - shit!" Hand! "Hand!" There's cupping, here!

Daniel makes like the Cheshire Cat, insultingly kisses me on my nose and swaggers away.

"Chickenshit!" I may have hit soprano but he broke before I did.

"I think this is the part where you're overcome with a spirit of fake generosity and syrupy supportiveness and assure me there's no rush, we can build up to sex, plenty of time, yadda, yadda," he drawls offensively.

"Hey! For your information, that happens to be the first time a guy," I argue hotly, abruptly breaking off as I realise how true this is.

"Yes?" Daniel enquires innocently. He's just waiting to pounce.

"I don't know anyone with the balls to come on to me like that. If any guy felt me up like you just did?" I shrug. Do I need to dot the 'i's here? Or just black them?

"Am I supposed to be grateful you didn't punch me out?" Daniel retorts, a trifle resentfully.

"Anyone can do something once, Daniel. It takes balls to do it twice."

He turns right around and marches back my way and I have to fight the urge to go into a defensive huddle as he comes up close to me, reaching out.

"Balls?" he snaps, eyes sparking ire.

"Got them eatin' out of your hand, Danny-boy," I snap back, amazed I manage it without so much as a squeak as he squeezes gently.

"You are such an ass, Jack."

"Oh, say it like you mean it," I sneer. His hand is interesting. Long. Strong. Sensitive. Nimble-fingered. A painfully pushy part of me is adding two and two and wanting to make Daniel. We've got ourselves an interesting variation of the Mexican standoff going here and I can see El Gringo is starting to worry about my cavalry rallying. "I think this is the part where you-"

Kiss me? Okay. That'll work. Turns out I'm easy where Daniel is concerned. He's an exquisite kisser, focusing on me with all his signature intensity. He's sweet and gentle, but he's still turning me inside out. I hope I do the same for him. I guess I have to do something for him, because he's taking us so seriously.

"I can't imagine making love with you, Jack," Daniel whispers wonderingly, his eyes wide and still worried.

If we're being totally grown-up and realistic about it, er, me either. Hormonal fixation apart, my imagination can't quite make it past my bedroom door.

"So much has changed for us already, just with the talking," Daniel enthuses.

"And the kissing." Big fan of that. "That's working out great."

"We need a comfort zone," Daniel advises me earnestly as he lets go of me and ambles away with a disappointing lack of come hither promise.

"Build slow?"

"Exactly!"

"I can't believe we're agreeing on this stuff," I observe wryly. "We argue about every damned thing under the sun and yet sex - the one thing guaranteed to cause more strife than anything else in the whole of human history - we romp through hand in hand."

Looking slightly alarmed, Daniel promptly shoves his hands in his pockets.

It's always nice when he shows some tactical smarts, although it doesn't help in this particular instance. I have designs on another part of his anatomy entirely.

"Does this mean you're throwing in the towel on the whole sexual harassment thing?" Daniel asks, a trifle smugly.

Nope. Going to retaliate right about now. I don't recall ever looking a whole lot at Daniel's ass but it feels - "Wow." Daniel makes a noise that sounds like 'eep!' then cranes round to look at my hand on his behind. We're talking tight, serious curves here. Pretty near perfect, like the rest of him. "Will I ever be inside you?"

Daniel's mouth falls open.

"Kiss the boys and make them cry," I tell him gently as he struggles to pull himself together. I think I floored him.

"Don't be silly," he argues, shaking his head pityingly. "You're the pretty one."

"I love how you manage to wrap an insult in a compliment," I admire. "While neatly avoiding the issue."

"I'm an inspirational diplomat," he retorts flippantly.

"A smug one too." He isn't going to answer my question for the simplest reason. I guess he doesn't know.

"I find," Daniel says slowly, smiling tentatively, "the thought of us together to be very erotic."

"You trying to edge ahead on points again?" I have to at least try to cover for my excruciatingly obvious sappy joy.

"Edging?" Daniel sneers, snatching this particular out with relief as we start to get a little too personal and intense. "May I remind you that I'm not the one who jumped two feet in the air or hit a girly high 'c'?"

His talk-to-the-hand-Jack! attitude is very entertaining but he does have the most amazing eyes. I'm staring into them. Somehow, they express more than all those fancy words of his. It's starting to sink in that the best man I know is in love with me. Suddenly, I want to respond in kind and I don't think we're getting personal enough.

"I guess we do have a lot to talk about," I admit gruffly. "Stuff to decide."

Gaping at me incredulously, Daniel shakes his head giddily.

"I knew the maturity thing would be a mistake," I sigh.

"Stuff?" Daniel blinks. "Could you narrow it down?"

"Do we want to sleep together? How far do we want to go? How soon?"

"You're fixated."

"If we do sleep together, do I leave the team?" I add loudly.

"Oh." Daniel elbows me lightly in the ribs, which is all the apology I'm going to get for his brash crassness. "You can't leave us."

"I think I might have to."

"I don't want you to."

"I should."

"I know that the rules say you should but I also know rules are only supposed to be a guide and you're the only one who knows if your leadership is dangerously compromised," Daniel states calmly. "These past few months haven't been easy or pleasant, Jack. I think you've already been compromised by denying your feelings towards me. You've been acting out for months. I'm not trying to talk you into anything you consider to be dishonourable, I'm just trying to be -"

"Practical?" I interrupt, wincing inwardly at the acting out jibe. Looks like I don't get to gloss over anything that's brought us to this point together. "That's my job."

"I don't think you could take being off the team and frankly, we need you in the field. I also don't think you could come up with an adequate explanation for the general to justify reassignment to another team and if you retired, you'd go out of your mind." Daniel shrugs with conscious casualness.

This is all very plausible and pragmatic, but his face is burning. He can't believe I just offered to give up everything he thinks is important to me or that I'd be willing to do it for him. I don't know what to say. My so-called career already cost me my son and my wife. While a loud, insistent part of me is not prepared to be a loser or to be lonely all my life, I also know Daniel is right in what he just said. I would absolutely hate to leave my team and my command behind. He has a legitimate concern, I think, that in time I would come to blame him.

"This isn't a choice I can make for you, Jack. I hope," he says hesitantly. "I hope you know I'll support you whatever you decide."

He's killing me. "How about we add this to the list of things we play by ear? I don't like second-guessing how I'm going to feel about stuff before it even has a chance to happen."

"I can understand that if you were in this position with Sam, you couldn't even consider it," Daniel surprises me again. "I'm well aware that as the civilian, I have a favoured position on the team. You look to Sam and Teal'c to take care of themselves even if they aren't in a position to take care of me. If you were to favour Sam over me in a combat situation, you'd fail in your responsibility to both of us. Does this make sense?" he asks quietly. "The bias towards me is an existing one even if the Air Force falls short of requiring it of you."

"Don't tell me what I want to hear," I whine. I'm terrible at being noble and unselfish. If he gives me a way out, he has to know I'll take it.

"I don't know that you and I being together could unbalance the team anymore than it already is, but it's an imbalance we've all accepted and compromised for since our first mission together."

"It makes sense," I sigh.

"I'm trying to help."

"You're giving me my cake with whipped cream on the side and a cherry on top."

"I like cherries," Daniel replies inconsequentially.

"You're feeding it to me naked." I scent an opportunity.

"Nice segue."

"I thought so too."

"I don't cater."

"Could you give an inch?"

"I'll give you everything you've got coming to you," Daniel promises with knowing ambiguity.

I don't know what to believe. The prim, lecturing mouth or tentatively flirty, bedroom eyes.

"It's great that you can talk to me, Jack."

Damn. The big beautiful baby-blues are just another sucker punch. They work, too. Jeez. Did I just blurt out some crap about not being able to talk to anyone else? Daniel is looking pleased so I guess the answer to that is a big, honkin' yes. Oh, my god.

"I guess that's how you got yourself in such a mess emotionally," he says thoughtfully. "I was the last one you could talk to about your feelings for me."

"Don't run away with the idea I'm some well-adjusted introvert," I caution him hastily. "I may have been acting out but I didn't know I was and I sure as shit didn't know why."

"It'll be good for us to work through these issues together," Daniel informs me with calm serenity.

"I know a threat when I hear one."

"You don't feel up to sharing the naked truth?"

"Figuratively speaking?" I got burned on the big, pleading eyes once already. I'm covering my bases this time.

"I was thinking I could come over. I covet your tub."

"Naked, sudsy, slippery truth?" I politely seek clarification. There has to be a catch.

"We have to start somewhere."

"This is the most blatant attempt at behaviour modification I've ever seen."

"Just so long as it's working."

"I can't wait to see your reaction to my humorously shaped loofah."

"Not a bad comeback, Jack, but I'm still ahead on points."

We could try for a deep, meaningful conversation but it just isn't us. So maybe we're both a little giddy. So what? Overwhelming, exultant relief will do that to you. How long has it been since we shared this kind of energy? Since we could talk at all? There's no anger. We're both talking loud and clear. Saying just what we mean and for the first time in a long time, being heard. Right now we're electric and we're riding it. We'll take what we can get, knowing we'll be grounded soon enough.



"High Councillor?"

I look up from my report, my impatience at the interruption melting into pleasure at the cause.

"Daniel." As I greet him warmly, he steps out at once from behind my bodyguard.

"Can we talk?" Daniel asks quietly.

I nod sharply and Deos bows reluctant acknowledgement before leaving us alone. Daniel walks up to table and sits opposite me.

"Is there someplace more private, Per'sus?"

"We are quite alone. What is it that disturbs you, Daniel?" I am growing concerned for him. He is without his usual energy and his brilliant eyes are shadowed.

"I feel terrible," he says in a rush. "I feel I've misled you, although I never meant to."

"I do not doubt your sincerity." My words are kindly meant but they trouble him further. He jumps up again and restlessly begins to pace.

"When you kissed me, it was a shock," he confides. "I wasn't expecting - I didn't know how to feel, how to react."

"I understand." This much reassurance I can offer to him freely.

"I am attracted to you."

I had not expected to hear such an admission from him or for it to be the cause of sorrow.

"In other circumstances," he says with difficulty, staring at me. I think he is too proud and too kind a man to look away.

"You do not care for me."

"I do," Daniel whispers wretchedly. "If you'd wanted - I think I was - was ready to."

I am sick at heart, Geryon's presence heavy in my mind. It is long since we shared such a hope as this and it is hard for us to lose Daniel. If he needs to be free of us, we should give him up, but I find I cannot do it and Geryon will not.

"What has changed, Daniel?" I ask as I stand and walk around to him. "Is the cause of your upset the arrival of your friend?"

"I realised something about myself," Daniel responds softly. "Feelings I couldn't face before."

"Feelings you have for another?" I find this painful to hear. I do not wish to be the cause of his reconciliation with anyone who will take him from me.

"About myself." He tries to smile. "Most of my realisations are difficult."

I do not doubt his word but I think there is a larger truth which he is concealing. I assumed that when O'Neill chose to accompany Daniel to the surface it was to caution him

against further involvement with me. It was clear to me that he saw much of the feeling between us and he did not approve. It was my thought that O'Neill's disgust at Geryon and I willingly sharing this body was too great for him to allow Daniel to make the choice to be with us.

Now, I begin to question if it is a simpler matter.

It could be O'Neill who has taken Daniel from me. I know Daniel has not lain with any man. It angers me greatly that my respectful advances to Daniel could have made him aware that other men might desire him.

"Are you loyal to someone, Daniel?"

"Loyal?" Daniel looks startled and then his face reddens. "Loyal. You could say that. Yes."

"I am sorry." I am not gracious to him. This is too difficult.

"You may find it hard to believe, but so am I, Per'sus."

Looking at him, I find it easy to believe. Daniel does not wish to hurt me or this person to whom he is loyal, this person whom I believe is O'Neill, and so he hurts himself.

I wish I could express my gratitude for his honesty or offer a generous word to him. I cannot. I am to be left alone again with all my hope gone.

I am sorry now that I wished for Daniel to choose me when I know last night I could have taken him. He was mine for the asking; there was no resistance in him. I chose instead to wait and to hope. I am sorry for it now.

I hoped in vain and I waited too long.



Jack pounces practically as I clear the doorway.

"Well?" he demands urgently, shaking me a little. "How'd it go?"

"Horrible," I retort uncommunicatively. Jack wasn't thrilled about letting me go in there alone in the first place, but what choice did I have? I owe both of them my honesty, moreso now that I know I got it all so badly wrong. My blithe assumption that Per'sus was as realistic about any chance of a relationship developing as I was just got wiped out in that painful little scene. "He cares."

Jack lets go of me, incalculable sympathy on his face as he stares into the gloom of the council chamber. "Poor bastard."

"This day has just been too confusing," I sigh wearily.

"It's not over yet," Jack retorts, eyes glinting sly humour.

When will I learn about being bold? Let's not even get into wanton. I should never have encouraged him to start dwelling on bubble baths. He's talking about getting a hot tub. On the long, sweaty walk back to the base, I've had to put up with Jack's wide-ranging, taste-free jocularly on everything from buddy breathing to bobbing for apples. All he wants now is to get me back to our room with the view so he can check me out behind the slab. He's totally getting into this naked truth thing.

I know he's teasing, that he's trying to help us both out by keeping it light, but I just hurt a good man terribly and Jack should know without me saying this is not time.

"You don't care that I hurt Per'sus' feelings," I retort, snappy and miserable.

"No," Jack agrees calmly, steering me down the hallway. "I don't. I care about securing Tok'ra goodwill for the treaty and I care about your feelings being hurt and not necessarily in the order Hammond would expect."

"It's really annoying that you're being nice and reasonable when I want to shout at you," I inform him resentfully. I feel choked and stupid. I asked him for his honesty and I'm carping when I get it. He cares for me. I shouldn't let it, but this small pleasure warms me.

"I know you do," Jack says soothingly, ruffling my hair. "That's why I'm doing it. It takes two to start a fight. I may be nice but I'm not dim."

"I didn't mean to use him," I blurt out betrayingly.

"For what it's worth, I don't think you did." Jack hesitates perceptibly, then watches me warily.

"What is it?"

He winces apologetically. "Did Per'sus say anything about the treaty?"

"No. I doubt it even occurred to him. He gave his word."

Jack looks dubious.

"He's a good man and an honourable one. He won't break an alliance he signed for the good of his people because of me. I'm - I'm personal to him. It's not the same." It's going to be a difficult week for all of us. I see now just how personal it got for Per'sus and how

long it is since he let himself hope this way. I'm trying not to burden myself with responsibility for his feelings but it's tough. "Please be careful, Jack," I urge him. "I don't want to make this any worse for him than it already is."

"Ah, Daniel." Jack squeezes my shoulder reassuringly. "I doubt there's much I can do that won't upset him. It doesn't take a genius to work out I had something to do with your sudden change of heart."

"I hate this." I wish I could hide how upset I am, especially in front of Jack.

"I know."

"I doubt he's going to last the week," I say sadly. "We have the reception tonight and I think he'll ask us to leave."

"No," Jack contradicts gently. "I don't think he'll be able to let go of you until he absolutely has to." He puts his arm around my shoulders. "I know I can't let go at all."

I'm still stuttering in amazement over this when Jack leads me into his sparse, compact quarters. There's only one small space of privacy and Jack, uncaring of appearances, takes me straight to it. We sit in the lee of the sleeping platform, Jack holding me tightly. His sympathy is too much for me.

"I used him."

"How? Why?"

"Because I'm pathetic. Because I really, really needed someone to pay attention and sadly for Per'sus, that someone turned out to be him."

"Daniel."

"It was great to have someone who listened when I talked. Who noticed when I wasn't around. This man who barely knows me."

"Which makes it my fault, not yours."

I don't think this particular wallow in self-pity is big enough for the both of us.

"I liked the way he turned me on."

"Yet you won't sleep with me," Jack snaps, then immediately shoots me a remorseful look.

"I don't know him."

"You aren't in love with him," Jack says softly, mollified.

I'm grateful he understands.

"Jack?" I turn to face him. "I was acting out," I confess drearily.

"This isn't doing you any good, Daniel." Jack kisses me, an affectionate cuddle of a kiss over my temple. "Why don't we agree that there's enough blame and self-recrimination to go around? Accept that it's in the past and move on."

"There is a point where you have to wonder if confession is more about helping you than the other person," I suggest quietly. "I think that's what you're saying to me."

"I think that's what I'm saying too."

"It's okay to talk, though?"

"Have I ever been able to stop you?"

"Ha ha."

Per'sus is a good man who was nice to me and I think that sooner rather than later he would have seduced me and he would've been an excellent lover.

This is Jack, though. My Jack. He means the world to me and I'm scared. He knows me too well and when he looks at me, he sees too much. I can't forget myself with him. I - I am myself with him, completely myself. How can I let him be as close as I need him to be? I don't think I could let go and I'm so afraid of being alone again, of being desperate.

Jack is startled when I turn convulsively into him, shivering as I bury myself in his heat. He holds me close to him, his heart beating steadily, his face rubbing against mine.

"Friends, Jack?" I whisper.

"The best of friends."

"That won't change?"

"Never."

"I don't want to lose you. I can't." This is my truth.

"I can't promise that you won't, not with what we do." Jack strokes my hair. "I can promise to put you first. For that, I'll do and give whatever it takes."

Good enough, Jack. More than enough for me.

"This is so hard for me to say but I don't think you know and I need you to understand how much you mean to me." My parents were lovers as well as friends. Equals and soul

mates. It's an ideal I've searched for and one it's hurt me not to find. I loved my wife with all my heart but it's Jack who filled up all the empty places inside, Jack who became my one defining relationship. "I love you, Jack."

His face lights up. "Me too, Daniel," he promises gently. "Me too."

"It was all here for us," I admit shyly.

"Hidden in plain sight," he sighs, regretting the waste of too much time.

I love him and I'm content.

Wrapped up in each other, we kiss tenderly, lingering.

We kiss.

FINIS