

Title: Sharing Breath

Author: Biblio

Rating: NC-17

Pairing: Jack and Daniel

Category: First Time. Off World Stuff. Romance.

Status: Complete

Series: Entente Part One

Season/Spoilers: Season 5.

Synopsis: Sometimes life gives you exactly what you want when you least expect it.

Warnings: None.



## Sharing Breath

### Entente Part One

#### A slash story by Biblio

"I'd like to propose a mission to PJ3-133," Daniel launched right into his spiel as he walked into Hammond's office.

Jack unfurled himself from where he was leaning against the star chart and strolled over to assist with the precariously balanced pile of files and books, smiling at Daniel's slightly impatient gratitude. "Daniel is enthused," he commented to Hammond, who, wise in the ways of their linguist, was already making space on his desk.

"I can see that," Hammond acknowledged, his shrewd eyes gleaming as Daniel got his files and his books settled.

"The terrifying thing is that he's going to make us look at all of these," Jack added, "Before he'll accept we're not going near 133."

"Why not?" Daniel asked, frowning up at Jack while he plumped himself down in the seat before Hammond's desk.

"I remember that mission, Daniel. We all do. Griff and his men are still talking about it! 133 was a bust." Jack said tartly. "The locals shot down the UAV for a start."

"We'd do exactly the same if an alien aircraft invaded our airspace," Daniel reminded them, unarguably. "There's a distinct difference between defence and aggression." His tone implied, 'I should not have to remind you of this'.

"They also kicked SG-2's ass and tossed them back through the wormhole," Jack pointed out.

"The only serious injury was to Major Griff's dignity, and the people also tossed these through the wormhole!" Daniel announced triumphantly, pointedly ignoring Jack's snort of outraged disbelief. He held up in evidence a sheaf of digital images of the clay tablets which had accompanied the woefully ego-bruised SG-2 back to the SGC eleven weeks before. "I've been able to translate the tablets," he announced happily.

"We'd be amazed if you hadn't," the general greeted this news warmly. "But perhaps you could explain to us where you found the time? Colonel O'Neill tells me you've had rather a full work-load on top of a packed mission schedule."

Daniel looked slightly uneasy and avoided Colonel O'Neill's jaundiced, knowing eye. "That's not important," he denied hastily, "but what is important is this!" He brandished the folder containing his translations. Jack and the general failed to look impressed. Daniel sensed a kind but firm lecture about him getting a life was imminent.

"Do you recall Griff's debriefing?" Jack prompted Daniel. "Even after almost three months, I do. Vividly. His tactical assessment of 133 was not so much Desert Storm as Afghanistan."

"Is that a problem?" Daniel asked.

"Only if you're Russian, son," Hammond said dryly.

"Obviously, this is a warrior culture we're dealing with," Daniel crisply interjected, ignoring these irrelevant interpolations. "I don't deny that. *But*, from what I've been able to translate, all social and familial relations are governed by a strict code of conduct, rigid enough I'd describe it as ritualised, and their laws of hospitality and trade appear equally prescribed."

Jack and the general continued to look at him, politely uncomprehending.

Daniel was quite accustomed to this reaction. "Griff and SG-2 ran into difficulty because they were there in force, they bore weapons, and they didn't communicate in any way the people were honour-bound to respond to," he patiently explained. "In effect, Griff failed to render the people the respect they were owed and that in turn freed them from obeying their own laws."

Jack turned to Hammond. "Griff said he didn't care how many exciting unknown mineral compounds the UAV telemetry showed 133 has sitting at the bottom of that inland sea, he

would not recommend further contact. If you recall," he went on, speaking loudly over the top of Daniel's indignant bristling, "The major likened the sudden appearance of the locals among the dunes to the arrival of the Zulu in that movie, you know the one. Michael Caine was in it," he suggested vaguely. "Griff said he knew now how that Welsh male voice choir felt and he personally wasn't about to risk singing soprano."

"I don't think the Haril were serious about the threat of castration," Daniel insisted, "They were merely being insulting."

"It worked!"

"So will this!" Ignoring Jack's glowering, Daniel looked appealingly to the general. "Sir, I don't believe the Haril - that's the name of the people - are hostile to us. They returned SG-2 more or less unharmed when they could easily have killed them, as well as providing us with the means to communicate and trade with them on their terms, terms they're honour-bound to respect. The tablets they provided included a key to their language as well as a code which describes in simple terms the system of laws governing behaviour. It's quid pro quo," he added in his most persuasive tone. "If we respect their rules, the Haril will follow them to the letter."

"Why?" Hammond asked straightforwardly.

"They're a curious people," Daniel said softly. "Just like us."

"Look, Daniel, I know you're fascinated, God knows you're always fascinated by everything," Jack interrupted, utterly failing to suppress a treacherous pang of arousal as Daniel eyed him sulkily, all big eyes and tight mouth. "And I know you want to go, because you always want to go. But," Jack said loudly, ruthlessly suppressing his linguist's outraged attempt to get a word in, "apart from the unknown minerals, which might be useless for all we know, these Haril have nothing we want."

"Really?" Daniel asked pleasantly, still scowling darkly. "Then how did they shoot down the UAV?"

"Carter said some kind of projectile weapon," Jack impatiently reminded Hammond.

"If you read Griff's report, and I have, several times," Daniel said crisply, "you'll see he makes no reference to the Haril carrying projectile weapons."

"He was understandably focused on the big gleaming swords," Jack retorted. "Given what the locals were planning to use them for." There was a brief silence from Daniel. Jack sensed this was merely so he could re-group and attack again. He was amused by Daniel's determination, touched - although he wouldn't admit it - by the trouble Daniel had taken to analyse the tactical elements of the abortive mission so he could speak a language Hammond would appreciate. Not that he wanted to encourage this alarming innovation.

Daniel was hard enough to manage as it was; their very own Jiminy Cricket was always talking them into stuff they didn't want to do and out of stuff they were supposed to do.

"Where do the Haril live?" Daniel asked dulcetly.

"The UAV spotted tents," Jack responded, making a 'wind this up and move on gesture' to Hammond.

"The UAV didn't spot enough tents to accommodate all those Haril. How many did Griff report?" Daniel asked innocently.

"Thousands," Jack admitted, frowning. "Are you suggesting those tents are a feint? Diverting attention away from - what?"

Daniel definitely preferred Jack when he didn't play dumb. It was far less exhausting. "I don't know, but I'd like to find out. A population that size would need a city, Jack, yet the partial topographical survey conducted via the UAV before it was destroyed revealed no indications of human habitation other than the scattering of tents near the Stargate. The reason Sam assumed a projectile weapon took out the UAV was because she was unable to detect a discernible energy source."

Not bothering to argue the existence of a city, not when Daniel was this sure, Jack suggested that the Haril could live underground, like the Tok'ra.

"It's possible," Daniel graciously conceded. "Or they could be shielding their city and their weapons. Both the Nox and the Tollan had that capability."

Jack eyed Daniel in dismay. Not just tactics, but the siren call of Good Stuff We Can Use If We Can Get It.

"You're suggesting that these - Haril? - have a technology in advance of our own," Hammond said slowly, thoughtfully looking Daniel over.

"I don't have any answers, General," Daniel admitted with disarming honesty. "Just questions. Lots of questions."

"I don't know that I disagree with you," Jack admitted reluctantly. "Just because we don't know what those exciting new minerals can do doesn't mean the Haril don't. However long those people have been parked by that inland sea, someone was bound to get curious sooner or later and try to figure out what the crud could do, even if it is only good for clearing the complexion." A brief silence greeted this. "Like the Dead Sea," Jack explained impatiently. "Salts! They put it in stuff. Chick stuff," he elaborated.

"What are these rules of the Haril?" Hammond asked Daniel, apparently not about to get into what kind of 'stuff'.

Daniel brightened up, eagerly leaning forward to rifle through the papers and photographs he had spread over the General's desk. Jack folded his arms over his chest, watching indulgently as Hammond made suitably encouraging noises over an array of digitised images blurred at high speed past his nose, illustrating various key points throughout Daniel's lecture.

"Haril society appears to be founded on the basis of Lohitakwar, what I would best describe as bonded pairs. The pairings are for life, literally, the only separation is in death," Daniel reported enthusiastically. "The pairings appear to be based on the warrior bond, strengthening the defence of the Haril at the same time as fostering a strong sense of familial and community responsibility. I couldn't get a clearer definition than that," he apologised. "The Haril really did only provide the basics."

"Warrior bond, we can do that," Jack said lightly. "We're a team."

"The rules call for the initial approach to be made by one Haril Lohitakwar, and met by one bonded pair, or our equivalent." Daniel glanced up brightly at Jack. "It's supposed to establish equality and mutual respect, help in building trust. There's a formal greeting ritual called the ikvala that's fortunately described in detail, then if we make a sufficiently good impression, we all share hospitality, food, water, shelter."

"Okay. What's the catch?"

Daniel smiled up at Jack, his eyes lighting ruefully.

"I knew it," Jack sighed. "You get nothing for nothing."

"Before we can offer to trade, there's a reference to a rite of passage, a test of character shared by both bonded pairs," Daniel admitted.

"Team building," Hammond said at once, Jack nodding agreement.

"The Haril are honour-bound to keep their guests from harm, General," Daniel said earnestly.

"What's a little castration between friends?" Jack joked.

"If our offer to trade is rejected, they'll just shove us back through the Stargate. They won't kill us, just like they didn't kill SG-2," Daniel insisted, scowling at Jack. "To represent the SGC in the ritual, I thought Sam and I?" he suggested to Hammond.

"Think again," Jack snapped instantly. He was thinking tactically, of course. This simply needed the best man for the job, which, fortunately, was him. There was no other reason. He was a professional, so he was being professional. That was all.

"Well one of the pair has to be me," Daniel snapped back. "I'm the only one who speaks the language! The translation was, I believe, a test in itself." He was slightly embarrassed about how long it had taken him to complete the translation, even with the lexicon the Haril had provided. Not that he was out to beat the record or anything, but he also didn't want to come off as a slow learner. He could hardly explain to either Jack or the Haril that the only reason he'd had time to do the translation at all was because he wasn't sleeping too well when he wasn't on a mission. He - um - he needed something to help him sleep. Jack, apparently. He...dreamed.

"Sam and I will..."

"Both get giddy over the Arabian Knights deal," Jack said flatly. "A freakin' invisible city, Sir!" he protested volubly to the general. "We'll both go," he informed his visibly mutinous subordinate. This was not open to negotiation. Daniel's lovely unbonded behind wasn't going anywhere without Jack.

"I agree with the colonel," Hammond backed Jack up, both of them blandly overlooking Dr. Jackson's pointedly offended hauteur. "I do see some merit in what you've said, Dr. Jackson. As I recall, the Haril didn't make the first aggressive move towards SG-2, even though they had previously destroyed the UAV. Griff made an assumption, in my opinion a reasonable assumption based on what he'd seen, about the sophistication of the hostiles surrounding his team. He opened fire over their heads, trying to scare them off to a safe distance for all parties. It failed, and it resulted in his team being efficiently disarmed with minimal injuries sustained."

"Griff was smart enough not to kill anyone," Jack mused, "so there's no way for us to determine if the Haril would have used deadly force in response. They reacted to SG-2's tactics like they understood what Griff did and why, didn't really fault it, but they made a big point about showing respect." He found himself returning Daniel's shy, grateful smile, feeling like he should have 'S-A-P' tattooed across his forehead. He looked wryly at Hammond. "It was the whole staked-out-in-the-sun-facing-castration-with-a-huge-freakin'-sword thing," he grinned. "It tends to focus a man's mind."

"Colonel?" Hammond queried.

"What the hell," Jack said easily. "We've faced worse odds." He was absolutely not doing this just because Daniel wanted it so badly. He wasn't so in love with the man that he couldn't do his job, couldn't use his judgement. If there wasn't a tactical advantage to be gained, he wouldn't consider it. Daniel was right about the questions he was asking, even if he was playing Jack and Hammond to get his own way. To Jack, the risk was calculated.

"Very well. Because of the Haril's reaction to Griff's team, I'm unwilling to risk a further breach of their trade rules. I'll have Major Carter, Teal'c and SG-3 on standby here at the SGC, ready to assist if needed," Hammond decided. "Colonel, you have a go. I'll give you twenty-four hours to establish peaceful contact with the Haril. Carter, Teal'c and SG-3 will gate to the planet at that time to assist in extraction if necessary. If all goes well, they'll

assist in the mineralogical survey. Dr. Jackson? I'd like you to fully brief Colonel O'Neill on those Haril trade rules, as well as this ritual greeting you've described."

"We need to be there as the sun is setting, which is around 2am, our time," Daniel informed him. "It's part of the ikvala ritual, the sharing of hospitality, very symbolic."

"Very tactical," Jack corrected him. "The light will be crappy and if the Lohiwhatsits toss us out on our ear, we get to stumble back to the gate in the dark, surrounded by hostiles, through inhospitable territory we don't know and they do."

"I don't think it's going to be a problem," Daniel said confidently. "We just need to follow the rules."

"What do the rules say about us carrying weapons?" Jack queried.

"With the Haril, I don't think they're optional," Daniel responded thoughtfully.

"P-90?" Jack prompted. Daniel acceded with good grace.

"Gentlemen? You're no doubt aware that we have a very brief window in a very full mission schedule."

Daniel self-consciously avoided Hammond's ironic eye. Then he avoided Jack's, blushing slightly.

"Your twenty-four hours begin at 0200. That gives you eight hours to prepare for the mission while I brief Major Carter, Teal'c and SG-3. Dismissed."

"Sir," Jack acknowledged smartly. He helped Daniel gather up his stuff, then herded him out of the office. "Not bad," he commented when they were safely out of earshot, grinning. "Not bad at all. Soft soap, hard sell and perfect timing. You're definitely getting better at this." Jack was sad he found Daniel endearingly smug about it. Cute was not a word he should even be thinking in Daniel's presence.

"What was all that crap about you and Carter going solo on this one?" he asked as they got onto the elevator, Daniel juggling his files with the ease of long practice, and the aid of a carefully balanced knee, to reach up and punch nineteen.

"Hmm?" Daniel muttered vaguely, his mind definitely elsewhere.

"You and Carter berserking off into the blue without adult supervision," Jack repeated, not taking Daniel's distraction personally.

"Oh, I just thought it would be easier on her."

"What would be easier?" Jack asked eventually, when Daniel failed to elaborate.

"The ritual, the greeting," Daniel answered as the elevator doors opened after the short ride. He strode out confidently, leading the way to his office. "The ikvala - well, the literal translation is sharing breath."

"Sharing breath? Like CPR?" Jack asked doubtfully.

"More like a kiss," Daniel corrected Jack as he dumped his stuff on his desk. He took the rest of the files and books from his glorious leader, looking at him thoughtfully. "If I'm making assumptions, I apologise, Jack, sincerely. I just didn't think you'd feel comfortable having to kiss me and the Haril."

"Kiss."

"Yes. I mean, that's what it looks like, that's what it is on our terms, but not on theirs." Noting that Jack had headed straight over to close the rear office door, Daniel closed the near one, more than happy to grant Jack what he no doubt felt to be necessary privacy. "I think like so many other species, the Haril have suffered predation by the Goa'uld, and the sharing of breath is both a - well, a double dog dare and the ultimate expression of trust."

"Look, Ma, no snake?" Jack tossed off lightly as he prowled back from the safely locked door. He should be ashamed of himself. He really should. The thought of having to plant one on a whole load of sweaty Lawrence of Arabia-type frogs didn't appeal at all, but it would be worth it if he got to kiss Prince Daniel in the line of duty.

Daniel sat on the corner of his desk, leaning forward confidently. "The information the Haril provided about the bonded pairs was less than precise. I really don't know what the bond entails, what status the bonded pair enjoys or what their social and familial responsibilities are, but that's something I can ask about. I couldn't find any indication that the bonds are gender specific, so we should be okay," he informed Jack brightly.

"So I have to kiss you?" Jack sought clarification of the only part that mattered.

"Yes," Daniel said seriously, resting his hand on Jack's arm in what he apparently thought was a sustaining manner.

Jack was very touched that Daniel was anxious about how he was taking this shattering news, what with him being a sheltered Special Ops colonel and all. "I wouldn't worry General Hammond with the specifics of the ritual unless we absolutely have to." Translation: Jack was not about to give Hammond the chance to be a killjoy. He heaved what he hoped came off as a long-suffering sigh. "Let's get to it!"

Daniel jumped right up, seeming very willing to help Jack through his terrible ordeal. "You have to hold me," he instructed Jack.

Jack was completely cool with this, wrapping his arms round Daniel's slender waist with alacrity. He was trying very hard not to enjoy himself too obviously.

The extremely sexy, sensitive and somewhat naïve young man Jack was in love with, was frankly disconcerted by this unexpected embrace. After craning around to try to look down his own back, Daniel took a moment to adjust his strategy to what he was assuming was more Jack's speed. He curled his fingers around Jack's upper arms. "Hold me like this," he said carefully. "Around the arm."

"Oh." Damn. "Got it." Oh, well. At least Daniel had great biceps. Jack felt the fondling would be even more fun if they were wearing fewer clothes but was pragmatic about taking what he could get for now. He could wait until they both got sweaty from all the practice they were going to need to do before he mastered sharing breath.

"And now we place our mouths together," Daniel lectured him, "And breathe."

"We open our mouths?" Once again, Jack meticulously sought clarification. "No tongue?"

Daniel scowled at him.

Jack placed his mouth on Daniel's.

"Eathe," Daniel hissed, his order muffled by Jack's mouth.

They stood close, not touching except in the mutual clasp around their arms, breathing into one another's mouths for a few seconds, then parted.

"These people don't kiss, do they?" Jack said at once.

"The ikvala ritual has no sexual connotations for the Haril, and it shouldn't for us," Daniel gladly acknowledged, relaxing as Jack showed his comprehension. This was all going much more smoothly than he'd thought it would. He felt slightly guilty for assuming Jack would be freaked.

"I think you're right," Jack said abruptly. "It is a double-dog dare. The Goa'uld don't enter the host through the mouth, but through the back of the neck. Even so..." He shrugged. In his opinion, there had to be smarter ways for the Haril boys to show the world they'd really got a pair.

"This is a symbolic defiance, a very powerful ritual of independence and pride," Daniel agreed, delighted that Jack was really with him. "Are you okay with this?" he asked softly. He wouldn't for the world embarrass Jack, but their observance of the ritual was a necessity. He had to be sure Jack was up to it. "It's an affirmation of trust, Jack, nothing more."

"I'm okay with it."

"We don't have to do this with every Haril we meet, at least I don't think we do. With the Lohitakwar, the bonded pair who come to greet us, yes, but after that, only with each other, and I think if a Haril initiates contact in some formal way," Daniel mused thoughtfully. "To seal negotiation, something like that. That's my best guess, anyway. Remember, Jack, it's a way for the Haril to communicate trust to us and for us to communicate respect to them."

"Want to try communicating again?" Jack invited, holding up his hands. Daniel walked readily into the embrace, which was a fairly damning indictment of Jack's technique right there. Or a compliment to his control. Fairly depressing, either way. If Daniel had any idea what Jack really wanted to do with his perfect, pouty mouth, he wouldn't stand so close. He wouldn't be in the same room. Possibly, he'd be wary about sharing the planet. This was anthropology, though, and the man who would yell hello to an empty room, or film plants, or hold unsatisfactory conversations with dogs, was completely open to sharing breath with his best bud in the name of science, without a thought in his brilliant mind about sexual connotations. Not with good old Jack, anyhow.

Jack enjoyed the hell out of the warm, sweet pressure of Daniel's lips against his, getting this was about trust, getting off on Daniel trusting him this much. He wasn't going to rock Daniel's world, not if he could help it, which sadly meant keeping his tongue in his own mouth. They kept on sharing breath until they did it easily, holding for the prescribed beats of their heart and moving apart. Daniel tried to kill him a couple of times by gently licking his lips to taste Jack on him before Jack had even let go of him, but other than that they muddled through.

When Daniel got away unmolested, Jack felt he could legitimately pride himself on being well-adjusted *and* well-behaved. He was cooking with gas, here.

Daniel was excited and happy, wanting Jack to share the treat, and for once he didn't have the heart to slap Daniel down. He listened patiently to a break-neck stream of educated guesswork about human-Haril etiquette, the sacred law of hospitality, the symbolism of sharing water and breaking bread, although no information was forthcoming from his cultural expert on the proper way to break wind. Daniel appeared to suspect facetiousness on Jack's part.

After a few hours of this, Carter and Teal'c dropped by to collect them on their way to the commissary for dinner. Daniel once more demonstrated his sensitivity by refusing to demonstrate the famous greeting ritual Hammond had told Carter, Teal'c and SG-3 all about, at least until Jack reminded him that being rude could get them castrated. Daniel ably demonstrated on Carter, who was, in Jack's opinion, inappropriately enthusiastic. Then Daniel had to demonstrate on Teal'c, who was pouting and feeling left out.

Both Carter and Teal'c demanded to see Daniel demonstrate this ritual with the colonel. Neither of them believed the colonel would do it, and when he did, Carter nearly killed herself trying not to laugh as she sputtered something incoherent about a Kodak moment.

After gently reminding her who would have the honour of demonstrating this technique to SG-3, Jack moseyed down the hallway with Teal'c, feeling justifiably smug as he let Daniel's excited chatter and Carter's abject horror wash over him.

"Daniel Jackson's tactics in securing this mission were most effective," Teal'c observed placidly.

"Played us like violins," Jack agreed cheerfully. "We might even get something out of it. Who knows?"

"Major Griff believes you are fools to attempt this."

"I disagree, and so does Hammond."

"As do I," Teal'c said calmly. "It is rare Daniel Jackson is incorrect in his deductions. I would advise you to use the honour code of these Haril to your own advantage, O'Neill."

Jack was looking at Daniel, walking just ahead of them, talking animatedly with Carter, making his point with eloquent hands. "I intend to," he said softly.

Teal'c was looking at Daniel too. After a moment, he simply inclined his head in unspoken acknowledgement, a slight smile tugging at his lips.

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"Find out anything you can about the Haril to aid us in negotiations for access to those mineral deposits," Hammond ordered Jack. "And of course to their technology. Whatever you can discover without compromising the rules."

"Understood, Sir," Jack acknowledged briskly.

They both watched Daniel stalking back and forth in front of the ramp while he waited impatiently for the gate to complete dialling.

Hammond quirked an enquiring eyebrow.

Jack leaned closer. "He wasted a whole hour sleeping at his desk when he could have been drilling me on my peachy keen grasp of a language he isn't willing to admit neither of us can pronounce."

"Ah."

It wasn't worth commenting that most of Daniel's annoyance stemmed from waking up to find Jack mesmerised not by the Handy Haril Hints he was supposed to be memorising, but by a desperate website called 'My cat hates you'. At this point in time, Daniel was very much at one with the cats.

"Jack!" Daniel called imperatively, approximately one nanosecond after the wormhole stabilised.

"The MALP telemetry shows nothing but sand and clear skies, for what that's worth," Hammond reported, indulging in a little C.O. sarcasm. "You have a go, Colonel. And twenty-four hours."

"Siamu a wei, Sir, Siamu a wei," Jack said solemnly, giving an eloquent little wave of his P-90.

"Gezundheit," Hammond responded equally solemnly.

Jack had to hustle up the ramp to make sure he cut Daniel off at the event horizon. "The Haril choice of sunset is deliberate, Daniel. The light is uncertain, making camouflage easier, and the terrain works in their favour. Let's take it nice and slow when we get through."

"They'll be watching us from the moment we arrive," Daniel acknowledged readily.

Satisfied, Jack let it go at that, hiding a smile as Daniel settled his P-90 more comfortably. It always took him a while. "You going to give me hell because I wouldn't let you bring any books?" he asked teasingly.

"Every step of the way," Daniel promised as they went through the gate.

They'd learned through long experience to keep moving through the disorientation. It would pass within moments. The intensity of reintegration hadn't changed; they'd simply grown accustomed to the nausea.

Jack was pleased to see Daniel efficiently scanning the terrain to his right, without being told to do so, while Jack did the same to his left. Maybe Daniel would never truly think like a soldier, but he took his responsibilities for the safety of his teammates seriously.

"There could be ten thousand Haril within spitting distance," Jack observed quietly as they walked slowly forward into what felt like a wall of heat. The Haril desert was disconcertingly like the dunes wallpaper on his Windows XP. "I hate these sandy planets," he sighed.

"I know."

"Can't even play 'I spy'."

"Everything beginning with 's'. I know."

"Or complain about the weather."

"The heat is a pain in the ass. I know."

"It's the chafing."

Not that it was all bad. On the upside, Daniel looked good enough to eat in his desert cammos, and, knowing his linguist was sensibly naked under them, Jack always wanted to do bad things to him all night long.

"I hope the Haril we have to share breath with aren't stinky. I flossed, you know," Jack announced informatively.

Daniel's lips were twitching. "They could put you on CNN and no one would believe you're Earth's first line of defence."

Jack modestly accepted the implied compliment as his due. "Do you feel like the heat is standing on your head, trying to hammer your ass into the ground?"

"I thought you couldn't complain about the weather on sandy planets?"

"When has that ever stopped me trying?"

"Um - Jack?" Daniel said quietly, watching dark shapes rising to stand silhouetted at the top of a not particularly distant dune to his left.

"I see 'em," Jack answered, reassuringly blasé.

"I think I've seen that movie," Daniel commented. "Zulu." He looked again at the Haril, each warrior slipping into position with perfect, silent synchronicity. "Michael Caine," he muttered distractedly. "It's, um, it's definitely coming back to me. The hordes."

"Cast of thousands," Jack agreed. "But the only ones we have to worry about are these two right in front of us."

Daniel looked around in time to see two robed figures walking steadily towards them. Their clothing was loose and layered, the same colour as the sand.

"Keep walking," Jack ordered and they went on at the same steady pace as before. "Could you not look so eager?" he hissed at Daniel. "You're practically quivering."

"We're going to tell the Haril we come in peace. It can't hurt to look as if we vaguely mean it."

"This feels like a slow-mo game of chicken," Jack complained as they all kept walking and walking and walking. "Although, if they're trying to psyche us out, I guess they can tell from the way you're bouncing it ain't working," he added unkindly.

"Do you remember what to say?" Daniel prompted, ignoring that. His job was to communicate and he was going to do that, no matter how snarky and chafed Jack got.  
"Jack?"

"Wimoweh."

"That is not funny."

"Yes, it is," Jack argued complacently. He'd grasped the stuff about equality on both sides was important, Daniel had made a big deal about that, even bigger than the big deal he made about all the other stuff that gave Jack a headache, so he kept them walking, another fifty yards or so, coming to a natural halt at the same time the Haril did.

Both Haril in this bonded pair were men, maybe older than Daniel. Two tall, extremely good looking men, with olive skin and watchful, dark, liquid eyes, their long hair braided and bound by trailing leather thongs. Each man stood with legs braced apart, a callused hand resting on the hilt of the slim, straight sword at his waist. A large water skin was slung across each of their backs, and each carried a leather drawstring pouch on the opposite hip to the sword. Jack also noted knives tucked into sheaths in each knee-high boot and on the broad leather belt that carried the sword. And those were just the visible weapons.

"Siamu a wei," Jack greeted them confidently.

"Siamu a wei," Daniel echoed in his soft, expressive voice.

Not surprisingly, the Haril reacted to Daniel, not Jack. His pleasure and enthusiasm were genuine and who in their right mind could resist that sweet little smile anyway?

"Siamu a wei," the shorter of the two Haril returned their greeting, the taller picking up the refrain.

It also didn't come as a complete shock that Daniel stepped forward first to meet 'n' greet the shorter Haril and share breath. The space between their bodies was neatly filled by one P-90 and the hilt of one freakin' big sword. Daniel timed it perfectly, moving back exactly as the other man did, a courtesy that pleased both the Haril. Daniel turned to the taller Haril, repeating the ritual as smoothly as the first time.

It still looked as if Daniel was kissing the two men, but there was nothing sexual in their touch. It clearly wasn't aggressive, either. Both parties were taking an equal risk, if they knew anything about the Goa'uld. Jack decided he was okay with this walk softly and carry a big freakin' sword approach, refraining from giving either of the men attitude or tongue as he took his part in the ritual. Just a few moments of clasped arms and spice-scented mouths and it was over. No harm, and surprisingly, given the usual state of desert hygiene, no foul.

"Uri ae Daniel," Daniel gave the Haril the expected gift of his name.

"Uri ae Jack," Jack said readily, praying he heard something he could pronounce in turn.

"Uri ae Ekala," the shorter Haril man announced.

"Uri ae Daksh," the taller introduced himself.

The formal solemnity got cloying after about ten seconds, so Jack uncorked his canteen, took a drink of water, hopefully demonstrating the contents were safe, handed it to Daniel. He drank too, then he passed the canteen to Ekala. Each of the Haril took a mouthful of water, then Daksh ceremoniously returned the canteen to Jack.

"Oja, Jack."

"You're welcome." Jack recognised fellow professionals in the calm, assured tones of the Haril men. He had no immediate concerns about either of them losing their heads or pulling any macho posturing bullshit.

"Omu arei indivar," Ekala invited, turning to gesture gracefully at the dunes behind him.

Daniel stepped forward involuntarily, frowning in concentration. "Indivar," he repeated carefully, then glanced at Jack. "Fortunately, the Haril language is phonetic," he advised Jack confidentially. "We lucked out with the simpler vocabulary of the greeting, our pronunciation wasn't wildly off. Indivar is part of the ritual, it means shelter. I think they're inviting us to take shelter."

"It's what we came here for, so let's go," Jack approved.

Daniel turned to Ekala. "Oja," he politely repeated the thanks Daksh had offered Jack in return for the water. He was grateful the Haril at this point were keeping communication as simple as possible, using words and phrases familiar to Daniel from the clay tablets and the lexicon. He'd need to hear much, much more of the spoken language to even begin to correct his pronunciation and syntax, but each party could make themselves understood for now. It was a start.

"Looks like we're doing okay so far," Jack commented.

"I think it was the flossing," Daniel acknowledged solemnly.

"Minty fresh breath," Jack agreed, winking. "Impressed the hell out of them."

Jack dropped into step with Daksh as Daniel fell behind to walk with Ekala. When he glanced up at the dunes surrounding them, the Haril were retreating silently, in perfect order. Jack understood that. You couldn't survive in the desert without discipline, and it

had to be taught and learned from the earliest age. Neither Daksh nor Ekala spoke to them, though the silence was easy, the men looking at them from time to time, but mostly focusing on the terrain. It just seemed to be their way.

They steadily walked two klicks from the Stargate, picking their way carefully between and occasionally over the dunes, always seeming to take the path of least resistance. Daksh held up his hand, stopping the party in its tracks. "Lekakh," Daksh murmured to Jack, pointing to the ground ahead.

Squinting in the still deteriorating light, Jack noted a narrow strip of fractionally paler sand a few yards in front of them.

Daksh reached into his robes, not hurrying the movement, drawing out a small pouch tied around his neck, from which he extracted a coloured stone. He tossed the stone lightly onto the sand. Instantly, the narrow strip of what had looked like paler sand, reared up and viciously struck at it.

A glint of metal flashed past Jack, one of Ekala's knives neatly spearing the snake through the skull.

"Lekakh?" Jack queried.

Daksh nodded solemnly.

"Daniel? Lekakh means shoot the big ugly fanged fucker from as far away as possible."

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"Nice digs!" Jack gloated as he ducked into the palatial interior of the seemingly unprepossessing tent.

Behind him, Daksh waited politely until Daniel and Ekala entered, then he turned to seal the flap behind them. The seal was a panel of the same dense sand coloured fabric as the tent, braced on either side by a pole. Daksh stretched the panel across the entrance, then hammered the pole deep.

"Lekakh?" Jack asked meaningfully, not enthused about the prospect of cuddling up to a lonely snake. He flinched involuntarily when Ekala swung their already expertly skinned and filleted, finger-lickin' good, big ugly fucker, fanged dinner at him, which struck both their hosts as a very funny joke.

"I'm laughing on the inside," Jack informed Daniel, who was standing watching him with arms folded across his chest. "And I'm still stuffed from that yummy cannelloni we ate in the commissary," he added cunningly.

"You're eating that snake," Daniel ordered him, his expression ominous. "Sacred hospitality."

"No," Jack retorted. "No way. I bet we get to suck a fang each as guests of honour. Or the balls. I can't eat a snake's balls."

"I can, and so can you," Daniel insisted stonily, looking around appreciatively. Filmy woven cloths in varying abstract designs draped the walls of the tent, some with rich earth tones, others harmonious greens and vivid blues. Thick, deeply-coloured carpets lined the floor, except for the centre of the tent, which was clear sand. A metal brazier stood well clear of the carpets, ringed by smooth grey stones. In front of the cooking area, cushions edged a low table which had a metal circle inlaid in the middle of it. At the rear of the tent, more of the fine cloths were hanging suspended from poles to make two private rooms, if sheer walls could be described as private. With the heaped cushions he glimpsed between the flowing cloths, Daniel guessed they were for sleeping.

Daksh and Ekala were removing their boots, so Daniel followed suit. He poked Jack hard in the leg when he affected to take an interest in the decorative cloths. Jack was always a complete pain when it came to airing his socks, for reasons only Jack knew. Daksh placed a simple beaten metal bowl on the carpet between the four of them, then Ekala poured a little water into the bottom of it. He moistened a soft cloth, making a gesture first at his face, then at his feet.

Daniel politely accepted the cloth, washing first his face, then his feet. Jack was given a fresh cloth and followed suit, looking microscopically less grumpy than previously. Daniel was relieved the Haril men seemed to find Jack a source of perpetual quiet amusement, their dark, expressive eyes filled with laughter at his antics.

Charm was an indefinable quality, but it was what Jack had. In spades. No one else could get away with half the stuff he did and still have people getting in line to take more, including one staid linguist who should definitely know better, yet still somehow willingly wound up at the head of the line time after time.

Uncomfortably aware he'd spent far too much time thinking about Jack these past months, Daniel made a conscious effort to connect with their Haril hosts. A light touch to Ekala's arm drew the man's attention. Daniel held out his canteen, miming taking a drink, then he skimmed his finger over the surface of the little water that remained in the bowl. "Water," he said. "Water."

Ekala skimmed the water in the bowl, then unslung his water skin to show his understanding. "Aakhad. Water," he repeated carefully.

"Aakhad," Daniel said pleasantly.

"Now you're on a roll, find out the Haril for beer," Jack incorrigibly instructed him as the two Haril walked over to the brazier to prepare the meal.

"There wasn't a section in the Haril code entitled 'How to hit us up for our exciting unknown mineral compounds'," Daniel retorted. "We have to move from the general - as in aakhad, water, or hopefully a recognisable synonym for the sea if I'm standing there pointing at it, to the specific."

"The specific being 'exciting unknown mineral compounds in the sea'," Jack supplied.

Daniel nodded agreement. "At no point do we detour via beer, no matter how pathetic and dehydrated you look," he added meanly.

"Can't wait for you to act out 'invisible city' for them. I love charades," Jack confided, smiling wolfishly. "I have an idea for asking about their weapons. You do an airplane-cum-UAV impression and I'll chase you round the tent and shoot you a coupla times," he suggested cheerfully. "Man, I used to love those Red Baron movies," he sighed nostalgically. "I do great sound effects."

"Somehow, I knew you would. This is why I wanted Sam," Daniel whispered, scowling. "You. You're exactly why."

"Me?" Jack looked wounded. "I'm trying to help."

"You're only succeeding in being a complete pain in the ass."

"Laksh mir maran," Ekala snorted to Daksh, looking hurriedly away from Daniel and Jack.

"You don't look very diplomatic," Jack translated helpfully as both Haril stole glances at Daniel, their shoulders shaking. "But I think they think you're cute when you're all sullen and resistant."

Daniel growled at him.

"They're okay," Jack nodded at Ekala and Daksh, prudently changing the subject. "In fact, are you starting to get the feeling they were winding up Griff on purpose?"

Daniel shrugged slightly reluctant agreement, not certain he could survive both a colonel and an alien species who shared the same warped sense of humour. He was interested in the food preparation and wandered over, giving Ekala plenty of time to object if he was encroaching. He was warmly welcomed and handed some dried fruits and a small dish of velvety blue-black liquid. Daniel lifted the dish and inhaled gently.

"Shubh," Daksh supplied the name obligingly.

"Moonshine?" Jack asked, his interest piqued enough to join them. "So we do detour via beer after all," he said happily, dipping an approving finger into the shubh. "We drink

drinks," he informed their smiling hosts. "Sacred hospitality and all," he reminded a slightly disapproving Daniel.

It didn't take a genius to figure out what needed to be soaked in the alcohol, and it wasn't the colonel. Daniel extracted Jack and added the fruits, not bothering to hide his amusement as Jack was given a small, fragrantly simmering pot to stir and more or less told to make himself useful by Daksh. Daniel spotted an angled stone, a smaller set on top of it. He had an aching memory of Sha'uri grinding yaphetta flour, the early light of dawn pooling at her feet, gilding her hair as she watched the world outside their door stirring into life.

Ekala was expertly dicing the snake meat as Daksh took the pot of sauce from Jack, then tossed it into a large shallow metallic dish. The meat followed, sizzling in the heat as Daksh smoothly tilted the dish from side to side to keep the contents moving. A vivid yellow grain was added, some small shoots, then Daniel's dried fruits and the shubh. Ekala walked over to a low, intricately carved cupboard of dark, oiled wood, fetching out four chased-metal cups and a jug which he set on the low table.

Daniel went over to his pack to find their contribution to the meal. They'd never met a vaguely humanoid species that didn't like chocolate and Sam had been happy to contribute half a pound of Janet's precious secret stash of Belgian praline truffles to the mission. What Janet would have to say about this when Sam broke the terrible news to her was anyone's guess, but fortunately she'd be saying it to Sam, a wormhole away.

Ekala poured shubh into the cups as Daniel took the chocolates out of his pack. Jack, a stranger to shame, instantly made a beeline for the table, presumably to closely inspect the quality of their offering, and was less than impressed when he wasn't allowed to assist in any way with the distribution of the spoils. When Daniel mischievously handed Jack his pack and suggested he got their gear squared away, Jack stalked off, grumbling, not particularly under his breath. He took the P-90s with him.

This show of faith was enough for the Haril to shed their weapons, and the tension eased down another notch. Jack just had a way about him. His everyman good-guy goofing worked, sometimes inexplicably, but it worked. Daniel felt his optimism rise. The minerals the SGC had found thus far off-world had been uniformly valuable and that gave him some room for manoeuvre here. Hammond wasn't asking the impossible of them. Twenty-four hours to establish rapport with the Haril, enough to fill a case of vials with mud and water samples - he and Jack could do that. He was sure of it.

Finding out about the city and the Haril technology would be more difficult. The Nox had seemed to be without the most basic resources for living, and since that mission Daniel had taken nothing for granted. The UAV had been disposed of before the SGC could confirm that there were simply too many Haril to be accommodated by the tents they'd seen, there were no slip-ups, no obvious signs of advanced technology anywhere in the tent, the two men weren't carrying advanced weapons.

Daniel was going to enjoy himself communicating these questions, taxing to the utmost his ability to comprehend and to make himself comprehensible in this fascinating new language. If the minerals did prove to be as exciting as the tech team hoped, he had every expectation Hammond would assign SG-1 to find the answers. Then he and Sam could get their teeth into exactly the kind of mission they lived for.

Daksh called out for Ekala and Jack, everyone gathering together as dinner was served. Lying comfortably on the heaped cushions, they ate the hot, spicy food with their fingers, right out of the dish it was cooked in. The snake was tender and tasty, and with no balls of any kind facing him, Jack allowed himself to enjoy it.

They were managing to communicate a lot with very few words, the atmosphere easy-going and humorous, Daksh's appetite more than a match for Jack's. Daksh and Ekala talked to one another in soft, low tones, smiling now and again, teasing, Ekala eating food from Daksh's fingers. They were attentive hosts, quick to share new words with Daniel, eager to learn the English equivalents.

Dividing his time between watching Daniel thoroughly in his groove and watching how closely the two Haril men lay together, how intimate they were, the expressive looks they shared, Jack decided he knew exactly what a bonded pair was round these parts. As Daniel was the last of the bleeding-heart liberal do-gooders and a genuinely nice person, he would not have a problem with this. In fact, he would no doubt think it was extremely cool and get excited about it, and wish their own allegedly enlightened society was similarly respectful and accepting of human nature, at great length, as soon as their hosts were out of earshot.

Jack thought it was extremely cool too. Daniel hadn't been sure of much, but one of the things he was definite on was the equality thing. All the bonded pairs had the same status in Haril society, and it really wasn't gender specific. Jack guessed that made Ekala and Daksh as married as any man and woman, or woman and woman, among the Haril.

Unlike Daniel, Jack wasn't a genuinely nice person, he was in fact extremely selective who he chose to be nice to, and he was looking forward to the moment when Daniel took him aside and tactfully explained the nature of Ekala and Daksh's bond to him. These days, Jack took his kicks where he could get them. He'd long since ceased to be amazed how he and Daniel could look at homosexuality, both be completely cool with it in theory, and Daniel never, ever bought a clue he spent most of his life hanging with a man who'd sell his soul to make love to him.

It had to be the biggest freakin' irony in the history of ever.

It was exactly why no man in his right mind should fall in love with an anthropologist-linguist-archaeologist babe. Dr. Jackson was completely open to the concept of homosexuality. He could lecture with confidence and sensitivity on various cultural perceptions of homosexuality throughout history, as well as on the lives of a motley assortment of heroic historical figures who liked to take it in the ass. Via his linguistic

studies, Daniel had garnered considerable expertise on interesting ancient techniques of making love.

He probably wouldn't freak at all if a man made a pass at him, any more than he would reject the notion of a relationship with the sadder and wiser man who'd grasped the hard way he had to put the work in if he wanted to get some, 'cause Daniel didn't do casual. At least, Daniel wouldn't reject it on the grounds of the man being a man.

Unfortunately Jack wasn't a man, except in the boring biological sense, he was an Air Force colonel, and his beloved anthropologist-linguist-archaeologist babe had done what he was trained to do, and Learned The Rules Of His Tribe. Daniel was no more capable of ignoring Air Force taboos than he was capable of ignoring Haril or Nox or Asgard taboos, no matter how much he argued about his adopted Air Force tribe getting off its collective rule-bound apathetic ass and doing something, preferably the moral and right something. If the Nox started frying people in their shoes just because they could, Daniel wouldn't hesitate to mix it up, but if correct Nox behaviour required him to fart in Lya's face, he'd do that too.

Daniel was empathetic to every damned thing, except the possibility that his best friend the Air Force colonel could and indeed very definitely had fallen in love with him, and wanted to have lots of steamy sex with him every single day. Dr. Jackson's admirably open, impeccably educated mind did not go there. For these, and for many other reasons, Daniel was possibly the most aggravating man who'd ever lived.

Ekala poured each of them a cup of shubh, taking a respectful sip from his own cup to make sure they got they weren't supposed to toss it back a cup at a time.

Sipping equally respectfully, in fact, beatifically, Jack found the shubh hard to quantify. With the blue-black sheen, it should have been thick and sticky, like a liqueur, but it slipped down as fine as wine. It was silk-smooth, exotically spiced and warming.

"Wow," Daniel murmured after a while, stretching out contentedly on his stomach as Daksh lit lanterns to delicately illuminate the now dark tent.

"Oh, yeah," Jack agreed.

"Lohitakwar keyu?" Ekala asked them politely.

"Daniel?"

"I don't know." Daniel propped himself up on his elbows. "Lohitakwar..."

"Lohitakwar keyu," Ekala repeated carefully. "Daksh-keyu."

"I think he's asking us about our bond," Daniel said quietly to Jack.

"You don't say?"

"Daksh!" Ekala called. "Kavera kanishk, keyu."

"Ishwara, keyu," Daksh called back good-naturedly. He lit the last of the lanterns then ambled back to lie at Ekala's side. "Lohitakwar, Ekala-keyu," he said softly, trailing his knuckle tenderly over Ekala's cheek.

Intrigued, Daniel watched the two men. "The Haril appear to be very demonstrative, not that this is unusual in..."

"Ishwara, Daniel," Daksh interrupted, cupping Ekala's face and drawing him close. "Ishwara."

"Looks like a less formal version of the ritual greeting," Daniel reported as the two men's mouths met. "The formal greeting is ikvala and this is ishwara, so..."

Jack was fighting not to laugh, watching Daniel benignly watching two really hot men suck each other's tonsils, genuinely thrilled because he'd identified a new verb.

Ishwara, to give tongue.

"Lohitakwar is a noun, it's the name of the bond itself, qualified by 'keyu' it identifies bonded lovers," Daniel whispered, happy with another socio-linguistic puzzle solved. "Ekala is asking if we're lovers," he announced triumphantly.

"No!" Jack gasped in awe at Daniel's amazing deductive abilities as the two Haril went at it.

"Haven't we discussed inappropriate sarcasm?" Daniel snapped.

"Lohitakwar keyu?" Suddenly demurely apart, Ekala and Daksh were looking at them interestedly.

"I have no idea how to structure this sentence," Daniel said unhappily. "Jack? Lohitakwar." He pointed from himself to Jack. "Bonded, teammates, friends, yes. Keyu? No. Edi. No."

"Finibhusan, Jack," Daksh commented sadly.

Jack raised his cup of shubh to that.

Ekala and Daksh glanced at one another, then Ekala shrugged and passed Daniel's cup to him, urging him to finish the little that was left. "Rushir falah nek, Daniel, Jack."

"Rushir is sun, if rushir ekash is sunset, then logically rushir falah is sunrise. The trial must begin at sunrise," Daniel reported.

While Daniel continued to obsess on his syntactic inadequacy, Jack assisted Ekala and to Daksh pig out on the yummy praline treats. Jack sensed every little Belgian seahorse was winning them major brownie points. When the lovers started ecstatically licking melted chocolate from one another's fingers and making with the 'come to my cushions' eyes, Jack dropped a gentle hint to his oblivious expert on customs and ancient sex and stuff. "I don't think the boys can hit the hay unless we hit it first."

"Hmm? Oh!" Abruptly realising they were wearing out their welcome as guests, Daniel scrambled to his feet. "Siamu," he said warmly.

"Siamu," Jack echoed, wondering why the Haril used the same word going and coming. They all indulged in a little polite post-prandial ikvala, which Jack still thought was a helluva way to say hi to cute linguists who flossed, then everyone ambled merrily off to bed, Ekala and Daksh with their arms around one another, definitely looking like they were planning on having way more fun than Jack was.

After Daniel disposed of his glasses and Jack one or two concealed weapons, they lay down among the sinfully plump, comfortable cushions, not particularly far apart. Of course they'd been sleeping together most nights for five years and it was late in the day to get bashful, just because a few feet away from them their genial hosts were happily - and quite visibly - getting naked.

After a few very uncomfortable minutes failing to keep his eyes decently shut, Daniel sighed and hitched closer to Jack. He'd been trained to sleep no more than an arm's length away and honestly, he found it hard to fall asleep at all unless Jack was right there. These past months, he'd had to work himself to the point he was almost falling off his chair in exhaustion and some nights he'd still come close to calling Jack, just to hear him. He needed that steady presence at his side. "I like to listen to you breathing," he blurted out.

"I've got used to having you around too," Jack with careful casualness, trying not to embarrass either of them. Was it any wonder he'd fallen in love with Daniel, when he felt and thought like this, when he looked to Jack and trusted him enough to share?

Listening to the soft murmurs from the boys next door, Jack watched Daniel desperately trying to ignore what was going on, or should he say down? It was a very unequal struggle. If Daniel had a downfall, it was curiosity. He couldn't resist the lure of the unknown, but he was definitely fighting the good fight on this one. Either that, or he was suffocating in the huge, over-stuffed pillow his face was buried in. It was just a matter of time before Daniel really, really needed to see if two guys doing it was anything like what he'd read in his books.

Smiling to himself, Jack closed his eyes.

As Jack's breathing evened out, Daniel found it harder and harder to ignore Ekala and Daksh. A low cry made him jump and once he looked he was hooked. The filmy cloth that divided them merely blurred the outlines of the two men making love. Unbound hair streaming down his arching back, Ekala was astride Daksh, slowly rocking himself, his hands planted flat on his lover's belly, each of them giving soft, pleased moans. Daksh sat up to pull Ekala into his arms and they kissed passionately.

Even when he rolled determinedly away, facing Jack, Daniel couldn't block out the sounds. Though he found it beautiful, listening to their lovemaking left him shaken in mind and unexpectedly stirred in body. He wasn't able to pull out of it even when the two reached orgasm, soothing one another into sleep and silence.

He lay awake for a long time, listening, trembling. It was Jack's breathing that held him now. It felt to him as if Jack had held him for a long time.

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"No!"

The muffled cry jerked Jack awake, one hand on his gun, the other reaching instinctively for Daniel. He found him right where he should be, close by Jack's shoulder, apparently losing his battle with the large heap of pillows he was under. "Daniel?"

"It's nothing," the uppermost pillow hissed in a savage undertone

"What's..."

"It's nothing!"

Jack propped himself up on his elbow and waited.

"Go back to sleep."

Jack waited some more. Unlike a watched kettle, the linguist always boiled.

The uppermost pillow twitched irritably. "It was just a stupid dream."

"Was I in it?" Jack asked hopefully, feeling like Daniel owed him something for all the quality time they spent naked together in his dreams and his 2iC kept waking him up to take watch just as they got to the good stuff. He was surprised when most of the pillows Daniel was buried under cringed. Intrigued, Jack decided to excavate.

It became apparent what kind of dream Jack had featured in when Daniel hung grimly onto the plump pillow that was over his groin, looking anywhere but at Jack.

"It's a perfectly natural reaction," Jack whispered consolingly. "If you've never seen two guys going at it before." He was now absolutely certain Daniel Jackson was trying to kill him. How dare he lie there with an erection Jack couldn't so much as...A terrible thought struck him. "You yelled 'no'! What the hell was I doing to you!" he demanded urgently.

"Nothing," Daniel whispered sullenly, avoiding his eyes. "And I didn't yell."

"What!" Shit! What kind of sicko subliminal Freudian stuff was he projecting, for Chrissake, if Daniel was picking up on it? He was adjusted, right? He'd embraced his unrequited side. Right? "*What!*"

"Nothing!" Daniel was absolutely mortified. "You weren't doing a damned thing!"

"Daniel!"

"You stopped, Jack. I swear. You stopped! Don't look so...please," Daniel pleaded disjointedly.

Definitely relieved about that, Jack put his arms around Daniel, who scared him by not putting up any kind of fight at all, which he definitely should have if Jack was being perverted in his subconscious. Daniel was trembling and Jack wasn't exactly Joe Cool, here.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry, I just didn't want you to stop!" Daniel babbled into Jack's shoulder.

Ekala held back a corner of the drape, looking questioningly at Jack. He shook his head slightly and the Haril man bowed, then backed noiselessly away.

Definitely shaken, Jack didn't say anything at first. He simply held Daniel, was accepting of the pounding erection hot against his thigh, hoping that would help calm Daniel, him being okay with this. He wouldn't allow himself to make assumptions, not yet, not when Daniel was completely freaked. He could not blow this. No way. He might never get another shot.

"I am sorry," Daniel whispered after a while.

"Don't be," Jack replied matter-of-factly. He did not have a problem with Daniel wanting him and figured the sooner Daniel understood that, the sooner he'd start to feel better.

"It's not the first time," Daniel confessed miserably, stunning Jack. "I just - it wasn't..." He couldn't get the words out, his frustration stifling him. "It wasn't like this. I just - I wanted you. I always seem to want you, Jack. I can't sleep..." He trailed off again, still not looking up. "I guess I dreamed you there," he whispered.

Jack was smiling as he slipped his arm down from Daniel's shoulders to curve around his slim waist. God, that was good to hear. He didn't know what was bothering Daniel but

he hoped, like he always did, it got him somewhere. Maybe that was selfish. He didn't know. He didn't seem to know much of anything any more, except he'd be good for Daniel. Now Daniel was dreaming him. It had to mean something. "I like that," he promised.

At this, Daniel did glance up, his face soft with surprise as his eyes searched Jack's. "You really mean it," he said diffidently.

"What were you dreaming, Daniel? Tell me," Jack invited him, doing a piss-poor job of controlling his impatience.

Daniel shook his head, blinking hard, his jaw clenching. If Jack wasn't looking at him like this, with so much understanding, if he could think...Daniel couldn't hurt Jack, but he couldn't answer.

"Daniel, please."

He couldn't speak and Jack was so close to him, he seemed to matter to Jack so very much. Jack was asking for his trust and this he could never refuse. He couldn't find the words he needed for his dream so he kissed Jack, his mouth shaking, his mind greyed and numb.

"Is this what you want?" Jack's voice was even gentler than before. He kissed Daniel, his firm mouth coaxing.

Caught up in the giddy rush of relief, they were okay, Jack was okay, not hurting from this, Daniel blindly, gratefully returned Jack's kiss. It felt so good to be accepted, to be wanted, when he needed Jack so much, he flowed with the feeling, opening himself. Jack's tongue stroked slowly over his, tasting him. Daniel rubbed his tongue beneath Jack's, his mouth rich with spices and the alcohol they'd shared. He wanted more, took it, Jack met him with answering pressure and it was all so easy, he wasn't thinking, he wasn't prepared for the swift, efficient tugs that opened his BDUs. Daniel gasped into the kiss, shuddering with pleasure when Jack's hand closed firmly over his aching cock, thrusting helplessly, hard into the rough, gripping fist.

It was too much, too fast for Daniel, but Jack was the one who was shaking, moaning into Daniel's mouth, kissing him passionately, tongue driving deep as he ate Daniel alive. Daniel dug his fingers into the broad shoulders as he fucked Jack's heavy, pumping hand. He was wracked with aching pleasure as Jack mercilessly worked his cock, strong, wringing fingers setting off white flashes behind his eyes, his body spasming into wrenching orgasm.

Daniel was out of it, leaden and stupid with satiation, only dimly aware of quick, clumsy hands stripping him. He was rolled onto his back, held cradled beneath Jack's weight and strength, deep, powerful thrusts pounding a slick, jutting cock into his belly. His shoulder was wet where Jack's face was buried, Jack's distress lifting him from his stupor. Daniel pulled his dear friend into a kiss, holding Jack tightly, deepening the shivery friction of

Jack's cock grinding over his as his body was rocked with each powerful thrust. He was clumsy, couldn't seem to match Jack's rhythm, but Jack was easy with that. Daniel was tense, awkward and exhausted, but it seemed he was enough, and Jack came hard, kissing him softly, stopping him thinking as they tumbled into heavy sleep.

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Waking up naked and covered in come from the most incomprehensible orgasm of his life wasn't enough, not for Daniel. He also had to wake up with no feeling in his ass because Jack was using him as a mattress. There was something disturbingly primal about the way Jack had him pinned flat, an unsubtly Stone Age statement of ownership.

Dazed and very definitely confused, Daniel was certain of only one thing. He needed to pee. He shifted Jack with a good hard shove and a vigorous heave of his hips, scooting out from under. Jack's hand shot out and clamped over his wrist. "I need to pee!" Daniel bleated. Gathering this was a genuine urinary emergency, Jack let go, lounging there watching him as he dug furiously among the jumbled cushions in search of his BDUs.

"You have the most amazing ass," Jack observed with profound satisfaction.

Not daring to make eye contact, Daniel yanked his pants up with shaking hands. He didn't even attempt the buttons, just gripped the fabric together and stumbled away as fast as he could. He erupted out into the main area of the tent and Ekala's unexpectedly waiting arms.

"Siamu a wei, Daniel," Ekala greeted him delightedly, smiling as he more or less held Daniel up and gently shared breath with him. "Milind nilabh nrupal," he said gravely. "Menak inder fanee devghya jag gonath." He cupped his hand behind his ear, quirking his head in an obvious mimed listening stance.

It was the second time in a few hours Daniel had been clasped to a naked male body. He was more upset than he could deal with that kind, tactile Ekala felt utterly wrong to him. He was so shaky, it took him far longer than it should to hear the familiar roar. "Sandstorm?" he questioned.

"Gonath," Ekala repeated meaningfully, looking at Daniel in concern.

Daniel twitched a fleeting, nervous smile at him. Why did lexicons never cover anything useful, like the Haril for Must Pee Now, Nervous Breakdown Later. "Aakhad," Daniel hissed desperately, looking pointedly down. Best he could do. His brain was seizing. A minute later he was limp with relief against the wall of the tent, pissing inelegantly into a bucket as Ekala prudently extinguished the lanterns and the brazier, keeping his back tactfully turned.

As soon as he was done and discreetly buttoned, Daniel was smacked upside the head by a memory of Jack pounding into him, so strong he could *feel* it. He wanted to sit down

and gibber, but that was just pathetic. He wanly accepted a drink of lukewarm water from Ekala, was sympathetically told 'edi' several times when he asked about the rushir falah nek they'd spoken of, bitterly accepting that until the distant storm blew out, there would be no shared test of character, not unless he was up for a threesome.

How was he supposed to do *anything* with a bright-eyed Daksh hauling Ekala off to make whoopee, a smug, naked colonel waiting to make his nervous breakdown an interactive experience and the whole tent heavy-scented with sex and spices?

Reluctantly, Daniel ducked through the fine, enveloping drapes to find Jack waiting, check; naked, check; aroused, dear god, he could put someone's eye out with that, check check; and as warm and concerned as he had been when he suckered Daniel into that orgasm last night.

For a minute, Jack thought Daniel was going to cry, he looked so miserable. He waited with what patience he could muster to see how Daniel would play this. Personally, he wanted to do a victory lap round the tent but he sensed this would not go down well. After a minute or so of strained silence, Daniel came over and sat down quite close to Jack, his arms hooked around his knees, eyes fixed on his bare feet.

"What do you want me to say?" Jack asked, watching the play of sleek muscle in Daniel's bicep.

"I don't know." Daniel pulled an impatient face. "I honestly don't. I was not expecting...I wasn't prepared for that."

"If it means anything at all, I thought I was helping," Jack promised. He hadn't been thinking about himself, not really, not at first, just wanting to make it good for Daniel, for once be able to give him what he needed. Trying to make it okay for Daniel to want it even though he was far from sure Daniel had wanted *him*.

Daniel looked at Jack, making eye contact for the first time since he'd slunk back in to the space they were sharing. "I believe you," he said slowly, his face softening.

"I shouldn't have...after," Jack said awkwardly, not doing a very good job of projecting the regret he knew he should feel. He went way over the line when he shoved Daniel on his back and had sex with him, but damn, it was good. He'd waited so long and Daniel hadn't said no, he'd held on to Jack, kissed him with so much warmth and feeling it had been all too easy for Jack to forget he hadn't asked.

"Was it good?" Daniel asked, going red. There was something in his face, an edgy, defensive look that said it shouldn't have been good.

"It was," Jack said sincerely. Over far too quick, but hell, he'd been waiting more than a year. He was lucky he lasted as long as he did.

Daniel seemed to have heard more than Jack had told him, looking down at his feet again.

"What was in your dream, Daniel? What got you so shook up?" Jack moved over to sit beside Daniel. He put his arm around the broad shoulders, exulting in the slide of Daniel's smooth skin beneath his palm. He was trying not to ogle and not doing too well; Daniel was shifting self-consciously. "You can tell me," he urged.

Daniel turned to face him, swallowing hard, his flush deepening, reaching out to trace a tentative thumb over the contours of Jack's mouth. "You're really attracted to me, aren't you?" he asked uncertainly, modesty getting the better of him. "I mean - you want me?"

Choosing to read permission between those lines, Jack smoothly pulled Daniel into his arms and kissed him. Daniel's start of surprise allowed Jack to slide into the gentle mouth. He embarrassed himself with his needy moan as Daniel's tongue sweetly touched his. Despite his best intentions, Jack's easy embrace tightened imperatively, Daniel wheezing a faint protest that allowed Jack to slide deeper into him, ecstatically rubbing his tongue in slow, sensuous pulses over Daniel's.

After a shaky start, Daniel felt he had to be fair, had to be open. This was *Jack*. He wrapped his arms around Jack's neck and kissed him back, tasting the firm, straight mouth, yielding to Jack's deepening passion, to a forceful dance of plunging tongues that took his breath.

Jack shifted position, kissing and sucking Daniel's throat while his hands were busy unbuttoning the BDUs. "I want you," Jack whispered huskily as he slid the BDUs down Daniel's slim, muscular legs. "You okay with that? You've got a boner there but I'm trying not to leap to conclusions," he observed, reassuringly sarcastic, already assuming, already moving.

Daniel faltered when Jack's weight bore him down to the cushions and settled over him. It was one thing to theorise about sexual techniques to aid effective translation, quite another to be pinned down by a large, naked and very aroused man and be turned on by it.

Ambiguity had got Daniel laid last night but it seemed he wasn't thinking any more clearly this morning. He - he ached. "Jack?" he whispered uncertainly, wanting the closeness, the rush of feeling again. Needing Jack. "Go slow." Please.

"Slow as you need, Danny," Jack promised, wilfully misunderstanding as he fiercely took Daniel's mouth again, stroking greedily over the silken rasp of tongue while his knees carefully worked the slim thighs apart to warmly grip his. Whatever sensible answer Daniel had been going to make dissolved into a shaken gasp as Jack's cock stroked over his in a deep, knowing glide. Jack unhurriedly rocked their bodies together, stroking tenderly into Daniel's gentle mouth, smiling as his wary lover surrendered to the deep, drugging kisses.

Holding Jack close, Daniel pushed his hips up into each slow thrust, moaning low in his throat as Jack's hot skin rubbed sleekly over his. "What are we doing?" he murmured shakily into Jack's broad shoulder.

"Making love."

"I didn't mean..."

Jack silenced him with a kiss, sucking Daniel's tongue into his mouth with a sigh of satisfaction.

Daniel's mind raced, dazed and disarmed by the way Jack held him, moved against him. Jack more than wanted him; need was eloquent in every gentle, wondering touch, in their kissing and the quiet murmurs of his name against his mouth, his skin.

"Is this why you needed me close?" Jack asked him softly, grazing kisses over his face. "Is this what you dreamed?"

Daniel reached up to smooth some of the sweat from Jack's brow, nodding wordlessly, his throat tight. He hadn't known.

Jack smiled then, a blaze of feeling in his eyes, fierce and glad. He held Daniel tighter, closer, moving with him, moving slow, gloating as heat and pleasure spread over Daniel's face, raised to his to share kiss after kiss as they loved tenderly. When Daniel's whole body was straining, shaken and wracked with that shivering pleasure, he whispered to Jack to slow down, to please, let him *feel*.

Jack could never find words for what was between them, couldn't express how much he felt for Daniel. They connected so deep, Daniel was part of him. He shared his love freely with his body, with his mouth and his touch, holding Daniel safe as he shook and shook through shattering orgasm. When generous, trembling fingers glided over his cock, Jack convulsed.

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Noiselessly, Daksh cleared a space among the cushions for Ekala to set down a dish of steamy water and soft cloths. They each stood for a minute, staring down at Daniel, sleeping heavily, soothed by the beat of Jack's heart beneath his cheek. Jack sensed a measure of approval in their sudden, warm smiles as they eased out of the small, private space.

Jack rubbed his face into the silky hair tickling his chin, enjoying the rasp of Daniel's stubble chafing his skin, the warm clasp of long fingers across his shoulder. He was content to lie here holding Daniel, idling the stormy morning away, lingering over the memory of their lovemaking. It was so good between them, slow and aching. Daniel was as sweet and passionate, as giving as Jack had ever imagined him. Jack was free this

morning, a knot of grief and wanting unclenching in his gut. Daniel was his; he felt it. Daniel had cried out to Jack when he came, all his unspoken longing shaking his voice.

"Jack?"

The sleepy murmur made Jack smile. Sometimes, it seemed to him that Daniel had wanted him as long as they'd known one another, that he'd touched Daniel on some level no one else had reached since his parents had died, leaving him alone. Somehow, Jack had filled that lack in Daniel's life.

"Oh."

"I think I'm insulted," Jack complained, failing to keep the smile out of his voice as Daniel surfaced in a daze of confusion. He thwarted Daniel's dignified withdrawal, rolling easily with him to hug him close. He was pleased when Daniel's arms went straight round him.

"What are we going to do, Jack?" Daniel asked, serious eyes going shy as Jack began to stroke his face.

"For now, we get cleaned up," Jack responded readily, rubbing his knuckles over Daniel's seriously sexy stubble. "We convince the Haril to give us a rain check because this sacred trial of theirs is not happening." He looked wryly at the walls of the tent, buffeted now by the gusting winds outside.

Daniel sighed.

"When the sandstorm lets up, we report back to Hammond that freak weather conditions made the mission a bust," Jack went on, entertained by Daniel's reaction to the petting. He seemed to like it very much, especially when Jack stroked his hair, but wasn't sure if it was the guy thing to show it. "Then we bail for my place, I'll cook you dinner."

"Okay," Daniel agreed, his fingers idling over Jack's shoulder blade. "Thank you," he added, minding his manners. "We can talk."

"We can make love," Jack corrected crisply, "Then you can sleep with me and we can make love again."

"You want to go on?" Daniel asked, blinking hard at this. "You want a - a relationship? You want to be with me?"

"Yes, Daniel, I want a relationship. With you. The full meal deal," Jack answered, slightly sarcastic. "Dinner. Dates. Detergent. Sex, sports and The Simpsons. Even the occasional conversation, if you insist," he offered generously, giving Daniel's hand a quick squeeze. "Is that what you want?" he asked, oh-so-casually, as if his heart wasn't in his mouth and what passed for his life wasn't on the line.

Daniel smiled, his rare, sweet smile lighting up his eyes, then he kissed Jack wonderingly, passionately, in wordless promise.

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Breakfast was waiting for them when they emerged from their private space, slightly less sticky than they had been, thanks to some interactive washcloths, and more or less in uniform. Daniel's bashfulness before their expectantly waiting hosts was forgotten when he spotted a stack of steaming pancakes, oozing dark berries and juices.

The light clasp of Jack's fingers at Daniel's waist brought a knowing smile from Ekala. "Keyu?" he challenged them softly, eyes laughing.

"Youbetcha!" Jack agreed heartily, grinning wolfishly at Daniel's dignified discomfiture.

Daksh extracted the uppermost two pancakes, folding them swiftly into a neat parcel, soon soaked through with juices. He handed it to Daniel with a consoling pat and urged him to eat while fragrant tea was poured.

Jack accepted his pancake parcel, gobbled it down in two bites and demonstrated he was a fast learner with the next two on the pile while Daniel followed Daksh's example and slid a slice of soft mellow cheese into his next parcel.

"Good?" Jack queried hopefully, poised to follow suit with parcel number three.

Chewing beatifically, Daniel gave him a thumb's up.

Jack made himself a triple-decker and eyed the depleted pancake pile, wondering how hard he could push the honoured guest thing.

Daniel had the brilliant idea of trying some of the gooey chocolate praline with the berries in his next pancake, which achieved instant success with the Haril. As Ekala drank the last of the tea, Daniel retrieved his precious Ethiopian Djimma coffee from his pack and introduced their hosts to his own personal addiction. The two men watched carefully as Daniel prepared a pot of coffee, sniffed and sipped at their cups at first cautiously and then ecstatically, beaming as Daniel thoughtfully presented them with the remainder of the coffee, for no other reason than they liked it.

Jack suspected it was stuff like this that made Daniel so good at the diplomacy thing. He liked people, he was interested in them and their ways. Whatever he said, whatever he did, or gave or promised, he meant it. The Haril were proving highly susceptible to Daniel's unconscious charms. Idly watching the three of them gloating over the java, chattering incomprehensibly, Jack trailed his fingers in the cool sand that surrounded the brazier. It gave him an idea.

He went over to his pack and retrieved his regrettably limited map of the desert terrain surrounding the Stargate, then took it back over to the table. Jack sat with the map in hand, sketching in the sand the key features. After a few moments, Daniel knelt behind him, peering interestedly over his shoulder, while Ekala and Daksh squatted either side.

Jack smiled to himself as Daniel began to name the features, lightly touching the Stargate, saying the name the Haril gave it, 'Manasaiana'. Where Jack sketched the inland sea, carefully reproducing its contours, Daniel tapped in the centre and said 'aakhad', water.

Ekala looked up, grinning. "Mithun," he corrected easily.

Daniel exchanged a quick look with Jack, then headed over to pick up the sample case. Ekala watched as Daniel opened one of the containers. "Mithun," Daniel asked meaningfully as he poured some of the water from his canteen into a sample container. "Mithun," he repeated hopefully as Ekala tried to puzzle out his meaning. Daniel pointed to the sea Jack had sketched, then to the container, miming pouring in water.

Ekala's face cleared and he called out cheerfully to Daksh, who was helping Jack sketch in the sand, filling in detail the UAV hadn't mapped before it was shot down. The two clearly thought it was a good joke that the humans wanted sea water, but they good naturedly gave permission.

It was ridiculously simple. "What was the word for shelter?" Jack asked Daniel, figuring he was on a roll here, and he could tell he was completely impressing his linguist.

"Indivar. Sketch the tent, Jack," Daniel suggested, "And four figures. Then sketch more figures and ask about 'indivar' again."

"Gotcha," Jack agreed smartly, moving round to some fresh sand with Daksh in close attendance, eager to assist. Jack's stick figures bore no resemblance to the Zulu hordes let alone the Haril, but Daniel's polite, persistent query about indivar yielded some intelligence. Shadanan Suren, whatever that meant.

"Shadanan?" Daniel asked.

Daksh smoothed the sand over Jack's sketch, then he quickly represented the tent. "Geet," he said to Daniel, patting the drawing in the sand.

"Geet is tent, I understand," Daniel reassured him.

Daksh erased the outlines of the tent, then began to sketch again, rapid strokes outlining a large square which he began to fill with smaller.

"Shadanan," Ekala prompted, touching the city Daksh was drawing in the sand.

"Suren?" Daniel asked, frowning. He pointed to himself. "Daniel?" Then to Ekala. "Ekala?" Then he touched the town. "Suren?"

Ekala beamed at him. "You are a gifted scholar of languages, Daniel," he said warmly. "And Jack too, of course. Your communication strategy was simple, yet effective."

Daniel rocked back, stunned. "You speak English?" he gasped, dismayed.

"You speak English?" Jack echoed, flushing to the roots of his hair. How lovey-dovey did he get with Daniel? Jack ran a frenzied mind over some sweet memories and cringed. The answer was...bad. Very, very bad. He remembered being tender. He remembered petting and stroking. Shit! How much did the smug bastards hear? Looking at the decidedly 'aww, aren't the humans sweet when they're fucked and floundering?' expressions on two complacently approving Haril faces, Jack realised his mission cred was in his pants. "Sonovabitch!" he howled, completely embarrassed.

"Why would you lie to us?" Daniel asked Ekala unhappily. He'd been so impressed by the honesty of the Haril ritual, the slow building of mutual trust. He was completely deflated by this unwelcome revelation, and by his own naivete, because he really hadn't seen it coming. After the work he and Jack had put into communicating, he felt cheated of the pleasure of their small, shared successes.

"Please, Daniel, be at peace," Ekala asked, taking Daniel's shoulder. "You have earned our trust. That is why we speak now to you in your own tongue. We wish to honour you."

"You may ask of us what you wish," Daksh informed Jack as Ekala cunningly distracted the pouting, reproachful, fortunately syntactically-challenged Dr. Jackson with an offer to teach him the Haril language.

"Trial of character, huh?" Jack enquired, shooting Daksh a hard look as a torrent of terrifyingly erudite technical questions broke over Ekala's head.

"Was not a truth revealed here?" Daksh asked keenly, smiling as Jack's eyes went at once to Daniel. "A greater truth than either of you knew? Was that not trial enough, Jack?"

"I guess it was for you." Jack followed Daksh as he prudently retreated from the two excited linguists.

"It was." Daksh shrugged. "We have long believed you can learn more about the man in how he deals with weakness than strength."

"That only works if you aren't weak," Jack grudgingly admitted. He couldn't bring himself to fault the Haril for their tactics just because they'd disappointed his linguist.

Daksh looked modest.

"Where is that city of yours?" Jack asked challengingly.

"Suren stands beside the sea, on the far shore."

"It's shielded somehow? We couldn't detect any energy signatures."

"Suren is for the Haril and those we name nakin or friend, Jack. No girik - outlanders - may go to the Great City. We grew weary of battle and it is for the safety of our people that we stand apart. It is law now," Daksh explained. "We will trade freely and in honour, but will not allow the girik to take."

"You can't covet what you can't see."

"That is so."

"A wise soldier once said the battle you win is the battle you don't fight," Jack announced sententiously, entering into the spirit.

"Which wise soldier?" Daniel asked brightly, and somewhat inconveniently. Ekala also appeared to want to know.

"I don't recall," Jack retorted with stiff dignity and a cold look at Daniel.

Daksh snorted. "You are honest men, Jack."

"We honour it," Ekala agreed, walking round to sit next to his lover. "We hide our knowledge of other tongues. It is a test, and a simple one. We do not wish to be wooed with honeyed words and promises for what we are thought to possess. We simply seek to know something of the men who would trade with us. There is much that can be seen and learned in how a man deals not only with us, but with those whom he names friend. Some cannot understand us or make themselves understood, some choose not to, for they judge themselves better men than we. And than their fellows."

"Those who respect our ways, and each other, we lead into trial, to know more of them."

"Trial?" Daniel asked, sitting up straighter.

"We passed," Jack said coolly.

"We did?"

"Veni vidi veni," Jack hissed, trying for a little subtlety.

"What?" Daniel's eyebrows quirked questioningly.

"We came, we saw, we - er - we came again," Jack elaborated.

Daniel blushed and subsided with distressing - to Jack - adorability.

"You spoke the truth, always," Ekala said soothingly.

"You had respect for our ways, and for each other," Daksh agreed.

"You do what is right, though it is the harder path to take."

"What more of you would you have us know?" Daksh asked.

Daniel felt strongly that naked and thoroughly laid was way more than he wanted anyone to know.

"You may have what you sought, Daniel," Ekala promised. "You will know more of us."

"And you may have your taste of our sea, Jack," Daksh added. "Lohitkwar Kerrys and Gora know more of Mithun than any of us, they will speak with your scholars and teach you what you are willing - and able - to learn."

"The storm stands between us and Mithun. It is not safe to pass this day. You will come to us again, yes?" Ekala asked Daniel.

"Yes," Daniel promised, glancing to Jack for corroboration.

"Freakin' invisible cities?" Jack said dryly. "You bet we'll be back."

"Then we will take you back to Manasaiana, so you may return to your people and speak of this with your leader," Ekala said cheerfully. "If you will say a time, we will send through your taste of our sea." He patted the sample case Daniel had given him.

"We'll send a team through to collect it," Jack said easily. "The SGC is kind of like your Suren."

"Then it is agreed. Send your people through when you will, at rushir ekash, to travel in the cool of the evening."

"That's it?" Daniel asked, slightly disconcerted.

"You ask little," Ekala replied, surprised.

"We usually get even less," Jack retorted.

"Do you not trade honourably?"

"Honestly? We usually don't have anything people want," Daniel admitted. "Or they think we're too 'young'," he grimaced, "to be trusted to share what they have."

"But they like me - us - anyway," Jack added smugly.

"Or they're willing to trade with us and they have nothing we want," Daniel went on pursuing his unique spin on 'honesty is the best policy'. "Or they have something we want but we'd have to sell our souls to get it."

Sensing that Daniel was just getting warmed up, Jack interjected with a neat précis. "It rarely goes well."

"Rarely," Daniel agreed emphatically.

"Just out of curiosity," Jack asked idly, vis a vis a potential fly in the diplomatic ointment. "How serious are you about that castration thing?"

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"We cannot linger," Daksh said regretfully as he freed Jack and stepped back. "We must get to shelter. The storm is not passing as we had hoped."

"You must go through the Manasaiana soon, Jack," Ekala urged. "Do not fear for us, and know that you are welcome here," he said courteously, stepping up to share breath first with Daniel and then with Jack. "Siamu a wei, Lohitakwar-keyu," he said softly.

"Siamu a wei," Daniel responded. The two Haril turned at once and loped away at a disciplined pace, glancing back to raise a hand in salute as they passed from sight.

"I'm completely thrown by how easy that was," Jack commented as he leaned against the DHD.

"Me too," Daniel admitted.

"I keep waiting for the other shoe to drop." Jack shifted his P-90 restlessly. "I mean, when does this ever happen?"

"It never happens."

"That was a rhetorical question, Daniel. I was building up to a punchline there."

"I thought you were just whining."

"Whining?" Jack repeated, curling his lip. "Excuse me?"

"Sure," Daniel said sweetly. "It's not like I'm not used to it."

"You'll probably get struck by lightning when you dial the DHD," Jack said loudly. "Or something."

The something turned out to be a forceful colonel snatching him close to share breath. They kissed passionately, Daniel clinging to Jack in mute gratitude as their kiss gentled and deepened, slow pulsing tongues rubbing sensuously, warming him through.

"You're coming over tonight?" Jack demanded. "You'll stay with me?"

"I'll sleep with you," Daniel promised. "I want to, Jack." He rested his face against Jack's shoulder, his arm hooked tight around Jack's neck. Gentle hands stroked his back.

"That's good to hear," Jack said with quiet satisfaction.

"Did I hurt you?" Daniel asked in a stifled voice. He knew from the way Jack had loved him that his friend had wanted this, had wanted him for a long time.

"Never."

"I wanted you, Jack. I didn't know I wanted this," Daniel admitted with difficulty. "Not a physical relationship. Maybe I didn't let myself know."

"The aliens made you do it," Jack suggested teasingly.

"Just you, Jack," Daniel promised shakily.

Jack heard a small sniff. "Are you crying?" he asked, horrified, clutching Daniel protectively to him.

"No," Daniel said, sounding surprised. He gave a little protesting wriggle against the emphatic grip on his creaking ribs. "My nose is running."

Jack's lips twitched. "You're a complete pain in the ass, Daniel!" he accused forcefully. "You're more than any sane man can handle," he promised.

"Am I who you want?" Daniel asked, lifting his head suddenly.

"You know you are," Jack said gruffly, melted by bright, beguiling eyes. This admission was received so well, Daniel stretched up and kissed him softly on the lips. Jack hadn't chosen to fall in love with the sweetest, gentlest man alive, hadn't chosen to allow Daniel to worm through all his defences and turn him to mush. He didn't know when or how or why Daniel had become a part of him, Jack just knew that he was. He knew he would be good for Daniel, that they would be good together. He wanted to see Daniel happy, not grateful, trusting and sure of him, not working at him the whole time. Daniel didn't have

to work to keep Jack; he *had* Jack. It was purely in the spirit of retaliation that Jack was going to spoil Daniel rotten.

"Go slow, Jack," Daniel asked seriously, plucking nervously at Jack's combat vest. "I'm not used to having what I want. I - I don't have the coping mechanism for it anymore."

"Me either, Daniel," Jack reassured gently, stroking his knuckle over Daniel's cheek.

Mostly because he would be content to stay right where he was, in Jack's arms, Daniel pushed him away and finished dialling, smacking his palm emphatically on the last chevron. Lightning failed to strike, but Jack goosed him to make up for it.

It felt anti-climactic for them to just walk quietly into the wormhole, as if Daniel hadn't changed, his whole life and everything he thought he was, everything he thought he knew and felt, hadn't changed. He was reeling from the thought that tonight he wouldn't be alone. He'd be with Jack, he'd be wanted by the man he needed so badly, and so very blindly. As he walked into the event horizon, Daniel was wondering what hellish concoction Jack would think it was amusing to inflict on him to eat, what he could make Jack talk about, what they would do in bed together. Daniel wanted to make love, he wanted to sleep with Jack - he just wanted to be with him, share with him.

When had he ever come back from a mission thinking about himself? For Daniel, possibility was on the other side of the Stargate. The gateroom hubbub seemed distant and tinny as a rush of feeling burned in Daniel's chest, choking him with its intensity. Daniel had found Jack, and he was beginning to find himself again. God, it had been so long, he'd almost forgotten. He was - he was *happy*. He stumbled on the ramp, a quick, capable hand there to steady him. Jack was always there, at his back.

"Okay?" Jack asked, a strained note in his voice as he moved in front of Daniel, his eyes intense as he backed down the ramp.

"I will be," Daniel promised, everyone else fading to silence in Jack's blinding smile.

**FINIS**