

# SIGNS AND WONDERS

## A SLASH STORY BY BIBLIO



**Title:** Signs And Wonders

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**Rating:** R

**Pairing:** Jack and Daniel

**Category:** Angst. Drama. First Time. Introspection.

**Season/Spoilers:** Season 8 to Moebius. Hints of Season 9.

**Synopsis:** Love. For Jack and Daniel, it's contradictory and unexplainable. Damned if they know what to do with it.

**Warnings:** None.

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*Let your hook always be cast. In the pool where you least expect it,  
will be a fish. Ovid.*

## PART ONE: A RIVER RUNS THROUGH IT

It's five after nine and I'm still sitting here, completely alone in the packed, stridently lit parking lot of the World Arena, hearing and feeling the lash and jolt of biting cold wind against the truck, listening to the muted roar as the Tigers shellac Minnesota State on the ice.

I've started to make the phone call a dozen times or more. I've bailed on it a dozen times or more. It's not that I don't know what to say to him. I know what he did, and he'll know as soon as I open my big fat mouth and start yelling.

He stood me up.

Daniel Jackson, scourge of my existence, stood me up.

'Stood me up.' Jeez.

Everyone says it, everywhere, with varying degrees of meaning and layers of disappointment. It's such a commonplace expression, such a lame Goddamn cliché.

It's not supposed to *mean* anything.

Except when it does.

You know?

Like now. If it didn't mean anything to me, I could bellow it right in Daniel's unsuspecting ear. Only it does. It means something. It's not supposed to mean anything, not to me, not about Daniel.

It does, though.

It means he stood me up and I am mad as *hell*.

It means he was supposed to be here. He was supposed to be with me.

And *that* is definitely not supposed to mean as much to me as it apparently does.

He.

Stood.

Me.

Up.

There's really only one excuse for me being this mad at him and this depressed with myself. It's an inescapable conclusion. It's logical, even.

We were on a date.

At least, we were supposed to be on a date.

I can't make the call to him and sound like my wife. I can't ask him what was so frickin' important it kept him, what was more important to him than me? I can't even think like this. I know I can't. I don't know where thinking like this will lead.

Why can't I stop?

I can be pissed. That's okay. That is the natural, the acceptable response to missing the hockey game of the season because my aggravating best bud is a temporally challenged social amnesiac. That's solid ground under my itching-to-kick feet.

I'm not supposed to be hurt.

I'm not supposed to be missing him.

Why isn't the selfish, self-absorbed shit missing me?

Daniel isn't going to call. He isn't going to race into my evening in a squeal of tires and breathless apology. He doesn't even know what he's done, because if he did, he'd be here.

He found something better to do than me.

There's nothing unusual in this. It's not the first time he's forgotten me. He's made something of a habit of it. It's not the first time I've tried to get him out of whatever is going on inside his head by dragging him off someplace that makes sense to me if not to him. Special occasion social torture – like when he gets killed or I get killed, or he finds a baby and a future and has to give it up, or he finds family and his past and has to give that up.

Daniel has to give up a lot.

He gave up on the team, on life, on himself. He gave up on me. On us. Our friendship. Couldn't see a place for himself, a point, and he slipped away from us. And when I would have held on, he asked me to let him go.

He asked *that*.

He tells me he had to go, he had to take that path of good intentions Oma paved for him right into her glowy limbo, he had no choice in this, because he couldn't see what was in front of him the whole time. *Who* was in front of him. It's typical of Daniel he had to put himself - and me - through a year of absolute hell in order to find out for himself what any schmoe on the mountain could have told him if he'd cared to ask.

He *belongs*.

Now he's Joe Cool, the man with the plan, faster than a speeding bullet, our go-to guy, everything to everyone.

I refuse to accept this does not include me, even though the evidence is kind of stacking up.

My Energiser Bunny best bud won't come out with me, he won't come over, just because I want him to. He's incapable of just hanging out. There has to be a reason, a point, because he always has something better to do, something he should do. He always wants to stay inside his own head.

Do I accept that? Is it even in question?

He matters too much.

I'm *involved*.

This is what gives me pause. This is what has me sitting in my truck an hour after everyone else started screaming for the homeboys. Daniel - well, the only word I can come up with that fits what I'm feeling is...he matters. Daniel matters to me. I can't go anyplace that leads. I want him to come when I call, I want him to be where I am, so I don't have to think about missing him when he's gone. It was never a part of the deal he'd be gone more and more, or I'd start to think about what he means to me. Start to think and find I can't stop.

I know I matter to Daniel. I know I do. He turns to me. He needs me, me more

than anyone. He wants me on his terms. Quality time. He wants his time - our time - to mean something.

I want him all the time and that does mean something.

"Listen up, sports fans!"

Yelling doesn't help. Volume isn't freeing. Yelling only drives home the point there's no one around to hear.

"I got stood up."

True confessions in a parking lot, huh? Helluva way to face up to a fact of my life I guess I've been trying not to know for far too long a time.

I love the exasperating, heedless sonovabitch.



After a beer and a couple or three shots of the best Irish malt last year's Secret Santa money can buy, the laptop in my den makes sense to me.

Daniel is at the other end of it. Not here, but there. A click here and then there.

I'm not aware of thinking much of anything but restive, nervy fingers do my talking anyway.

**ElusiveCrappie:** Hey

I wait. It seems to me a good idea to talk to him without talking, without him hearing. To give myself the time we so often don't have when he's careering off ahead of me in those complicated verbal games we play.

**Palamedes:** Hi

**ElusiveCrappie:** Forget something tonight?

**Palamedes:** If I've forgotten it, how would I know?

**ElusiveCrappie:** Need me to be more specific?

Palamedes: Please

ElusiveCrappie: You forgot me

Palamedes: I remember you quite well. Tall man, annoying...

ElusiveCrappie: You were supposed to be with me. At the game

Palamedes: The game?

ElusiveCrappie: Don't say what game

Palamedes: What game?

Palamedes: Sorry

ElusiveCrappie: But - what game? Only the game of the season. Don't sweat it

Palamedes: Clearly, I didn't :(

ElusiveCrappie: Clearly

Palamedes: Now I remember what I've forgotten. Shit. The game.

Palamedes: Minnesota State. That game.

Palamedes: I was supposed to be holding your hand through all the trauma of divided hockey loyalties.

ElusiveCrappie: I said don't sweat it

Palamedes: :(

ElusiveCrappie: what were you holding tonight, btw?

Palamedes: A book. A really truly cool book

ElusiveCrappie: A book?

Palamedes: A really truly cool book

ElusiveCrappie: a BOOK!?!

Palamedes: but it was a book about Tlillian-Tlapallan, the middle

ElusiveCrappie: Don't tell me

Palamedes: middle of the three Aztec heavens

Palamedes: Sorry

Palamedes: You're pissed at me, right?

Palamedes: That's why you're AIMing.

Palamedes: You only AIM at me when you're pissed

ElusiveCrappie: I'm not pissed and I AIM at you plenty.

Palamedes: Pun intended?

ElusiveCrappie: Clearly, the book was more important

Palamedes: No. It wasn't

Palamedes: I just forgot

Palamedes: about the game

ElusiveCrappie: about me

Palamedes: I didn't mean to

ElusiveCrappie: you never do

Palamedes: Look, I forgot. I got distracted and I forgot. I didn't mean it. Okay?

Palamedes: Okay?

Palamedes: ?

Palamedes: It's not okay?

ElusiveCrappie: weird how you rush to fill a silence

Palamedes: weird how you won't. In fact

ElusiveCrappie: in fact?

ElusiveCrappie: in fact?

Palamedes: In fact

Palamedes: You do it a lot

ElusiveCrappie:

Palamedes: like now

Palamedes: I don't even know why you're so pissed

Palamedes: It's not like you missed the game

Palamedes: and I know you didn't miss me

ElusiveCrappie: I didn't miss you?

Palamedes: You didn't have time!

Palamedes: you saw me in your office today and you told me you didn't want to see me in your office tomorrow

Palamedes: so if I'm in your way

Palamedes: then you couldn't have missed me

Palamedes: QED!

ElusiveCrappie:

Palamedes: Jack?

ElusiveCrappie:

Palamedes: You're doing it again

Palamedes: The silence thing

Palamedes: Jack?

Palamedes: Okaaay...

Palamedes: Verbal ball back in my court, then?

Palamedes: Come on, Jack. What do I have to do here? Double-dog dare you?

Palamedes: Jack, what's going on?

Palamedes: **\*\*Something\*\*** is going on or you wouldn't be sitting there giving me dead air and attitude

Palamedes: Nope. Still nothing.

Palamedes: You miss me?

Palamedes: You miss me? Is that it?

Palamedes: newsflash: I'm there all the time.

Palamedes: underfoot

Palamedes: in your face

Palamedes: you can't miss me

Palamedes: Jack?

Palamedes: Jack?

Palamedes: You miss me?

Palamedes: Jack?

ElusiveCrappie: you're the one with all the answers

ElusiveCrappie: You tell me

Palamedes: Tell you what?

Palamedes: That now I'm not the only one?

I shouldn't understand that, but I do.

I do.

I should have remembered pushing Daniel only leads to answers. Always with the answers and then more questions than I started out asking.

This is as far as I can go.

I guess he knows it, because he doesn't reply or try to keep me when I sign off and he doesn't call after. I wander through the house, making it safe, not really thinking about anything, although as a strategy it's not working so good for me tonight.

If anything seems clear, it's that I'm not the man to eat my heart out over the impossible and this – I don't know if I even want it.

If I want him.

I fall into bed and into sleep.



I wake early, way too early, and now I think.

I guess I knew. About him, I mean. About the times Daniel can't have me close enough and the times he can't shove me far enough away. He blows hot and he blows cold, all or nothing. His life depends on me or he forgets me for a book. He can't find the middle ground I need, the always there, never thinking, ground.

Daniel is always thinking.

And he's right.

He's not the only one.

I make coffee and eggs. More eggs, then cereal. Even juice. I can do all that with an empty head but as soon as I sit, as soon as I stop scrambling through the routine start of my day, I'm thinking again.

I've studiously avoided patterns. Awareness. Seeing the curve of Daniel's neck is only that, not connected to the stronger curve of his spine or the small of his back. No more or less than seeing and knowing with clarity the length and shape of expressive fingers, the odd fragility of his wrist or the way he'll look up at me when he wants something.

I don't want this awareness. Don't want, can't have. It can't mean anything. It can't be shared.

I didn't want to know, but now I do.

Knowing, I don't want to act, and I won't.

It's strange, but I almost feel better about Daniel forgetting me. At least I know why. I figure we're in the same space, we're both a little too – how do I say this? A little too *much*. It's almost good to know we're both dealing with it, each in our own way. That we won't let it be a problem. That's the upside to me being the

man, to Daniel being my go-to guy. I took on this command and both our priorities have changed. I have the SGC as well as SG-1 and Daniel is still with me even if he can't stop over-thinking it all.

I pour myself another cup of coffee and think about toast. There's nothing but a slow day ahead of me, a catch-up day of meetings and briefings and paperwork. A nothing day but one where everyone gets their piece of me. Guy in charge? That's a joke. Toast. Sounds like a plan. I'm crouched rifling through my freezer in search of bread with only hot and buttery on my mind when I hear the rap at the door, then a sharp second rap, a sharper third, before the vibration of the first has even faded.

I know who it is. Who it has to be. Give him a minute, he'll be kicking the door.

Stupidly, I'm smiling when I open it.

He missed me.

"Pack," Daniel orders.

"You didn't call."

"I called the general instead. Pack."

"You called the general? In *Washington*?" Hey! Daniel managed to pull rank on me, which isn't easy when I'm the man and he's the civilian. Calling Hammond for reinforcements, that's a good tactic. If I weren't as pissed with him now as I was last night, I'd be proud.

"I told him we were having a problem." Daniel's eyebrows are practically meeting in a dark, impatient frown that furrows his brow. "I can make it more of a problem if you don't start packing."

"What kind of a problem?" I'm fascinated by the way Daniel's mind works. The kind of problem we're having - the kind I think we're maybe having - General Hammond would be the last person I'd call.

"The kind that can be fixed over a few days fishing."

"Fishing? Why didn't you say?"

"There's a *lot* I don't say." Daniel shoots me a hard look, clearly feeling this is mutual.

Oh. Nothing I haven't been thinking myself, but still...Oh. Can't we be in the same space and not talk about it?

"Coffee?" I generously offer up one of his favourite distractions.

"Pack."

If Daniel wasn't pissed at me last night, he is this morning. It's kind of fun.

"I'm only going along with this for the fishing," I inform him, pitifully glad Walter won't be meeting me at the elevator, handing off coffee and schedules, killing me one minute, one paper cut at a time.

"That's okay," Daniel replies with somewhat unnerving understanding. "You've already said more than you intended to say."

I pack.



Daniel drives extremely well, steering his ancient jeep smoothly through the light, very early morning commuter traffic. I watch the road now and then out of habit, but mostly I watch his confident hand riding the stick shift. It's purely the driver who makes this cherry-red World War II surplus into such a sweet ride.

"Is this a vacation or a kidnapping?" I ask cheerfully as he zooms west on US-24. I'm kind of enjoying the attention as well as the extravagance of the gesture. I should get pouty and depressed more often if I score some outdoors action like this. Anything that gets me out of my office. Anything.

"You tell me."

"You have to feed me either way, so I'm easy."

"I like to think of it as a kidnapping," Daniel decides, the smallest fugitive grin twitching his lips.

"You pulled it together remarkably quickly," I praise him, admiring the logistics of it. The back is stacked neatly with the latest in luxurious cold-weather gear and supplies, most of which I didn't know he owned.

"I was motivated." Daniel spares me a look, his first since he drove us away from my house; a direct, determined look. "I would've done it sooner if I'd thought there was any point."

I didn't expect this and he knows it. That little grin of his widens.

"You miss me, Jack," he says simply. "You miss me when I'm not around and I miss you."

"I don't want..."

"You look at me." His soft voice rises effortlessly over mine, stifling my instinctive protest. "Do you think I haven't looked at you?"

He looks at me again, my mouth slack, half-open in shock, nothing coming out. Nothing there.

"I never know what you want." His voice falls again to almost a whisper. "I'm never sure."

I can't stop this, can I? I can't stop what I started. I'm not even sure I want to. The blood is pounding and I feel like yelling, howling out until I'm hoarse.

"If you want me."

He said it. I didn't believe he could or I ever would.

"Sometimes I felt it was all in my head." He's being brave, he's so brave and it's costing him, his voice is shaking. "That it was only real there."

He sounds like me.

We are in the same space. Exactly the same.

His hand is there, riding the gear stick, and for a moment my hand rides his.

"I don't know. Daniel..." I have to swallow and start again because I can't lie to him and I can scarcely get these words out. I don't know what to do. Only...it seems to me I've grown attached to him and that's the realest thing I feel. I latch onto it, although I don't know what it means or what I want, except I need to not hurt him. "I don't."

He hears the truth in this, he can even accept it.

I have to face a truth too, that he knows I want him. I do want him. I do. It's why I've worked so hard at blanking the reality of what he makes me do and see and feel.

I guess the other truth here is maybe I don't get to make the choice of what to do with this. I need this all to go quietly away and I don't believe Daniel is about that.

He hasn't said no.

"Where are we headed?" I strive for normality and if I don't quite make it, Daniel isn't calling me on it.

"Bitter Creek Trail. There may be fish, even at this time of year." He doesn't care.

"Seriously?"

"Seriously? It's a rougher trail, less used than others, likely deserted at the ass-end of the season. I figured you'd like it that way."

"If we can't avoid talking?" He's right.

Daniel almost, almost smiles. "If we can't avoid having sex."

"That's not going to happen." God help me, he's frowning. He's thinking this through. "No sex."

"I think it's a little early myself," he confesses. "It's a huge step from thinking about it to doing it with you. But I won't rule it out. It might get cold up there."

"Was that a joke?"

"Are you laughing on the inside?"

"Sex?"

"I'm not ruling it out."

"I am."

"All those times you've looked?" Daniel's bright face is speculative, filled with sudden sly amusement. "You've never thought about doing me?"

"I'm not allowed to think that." I manage something like dignity, a painful habit I've had to get into since the stars were first pinned on my shoulders. I feel like

croaking.

"You're not allowed to think a lot of things but it doesn't stop you doing them," Daniel reminds me with maddening logic.

"So let me rephrase: I don't allow myself to think that."

"Let's not bore each other with recitations of rules and regs, okay?" Daniel pleads. "We both know you break them whenever you feel it's worth it and we both know how much our allies like having you around. General Hammond is only the first in a long line of Air Force officials and politicians to look the other way with the rare luxury of getting to care more about ends than means. Because it's you. Why else do you think you got promoted?"

I haven't been ready for most of the things that have come out of Daniel's mouth, but this one leaves me blinking.

"I told you," he says in a milder tone. "I have a lot to say to you."

"I didn't know your opinion of me was still this high." Not the only shock of my day and we haven't even made it off the highway yet.

"Some of the rules make sense to me," Daniel says thoughtfully. "Some of them make a difference in what we do. Mostly they're just the lowest of common denominators, blanket legislation to stop individuals thinking and questioning. An irrelevance to SG-1. To the SGC too, or the general and the brass in Washington would never have looked the other way for you for all this time. You're not good at letting anyone do your thinking for you. Unquestioning obedience isn't your style."

"If we're dealing with reality and not rules and regs?" I reply.

Daniel nods and makes encouraging noises.

"If it's just us, just about the team and us? Then unquestioning obedience is very much my style."

Some days it's a moot point whose name is on the brass plaque sitting on what even I still think of as George Hammond's desk. Daniel wanted me to take the promotion as much as he wanted me to take the 'advice' of my friends. Namely, him.

I glance around at the near empty road and the glittering sky, the pine trees and the colour-washed red dirt of the high desert. I like the contradictions of Colorado.

I like the contradictions - the challenges - of Daniel Jackson. Half of the time he drives me mad, half of the time he keeps me sane. Most of the time, he gets his way. I want to know if he can see how often he makes me do the wrong thing for the wrong reason, go against my orders and my training, only to please him. And that's only the big stuff.

"Pull in at the next gas station," I order. "I need to pee."

His grunt of acknowledgement is vague. Busy now. I've set him a puzzle and he's working at it. He won't quit until he has an answer by the throat.

This is fun. I'm not sure if life as I know it is breaking down or if we're building something up, but all the rules have changed. What I know no longer applies. There's nothing to hold Daniel or me back. We can - and we are - saying what we mean. Not what's expected, not what the rules allow, only what we mean.

While Daniel worries at what we are to each other, what he does to me, I open my window and let the air bite at my face. The sting of it fits my mood.

I'm waking up.

"I'm sorry."

Daniel's hesitant guilt has me grinning. He's been bad and now he knows it. I've been worse and I figure now he knows that too.

"I wanted you to take the job." He doesn't look at me.

"To be the man," I agree understandingly. "Take advice from my friends." He meant from...

"I meant from..."

Him.

"Me."

I grin at him. "You weren't subtle about that."

"I've given you all kinds of advice."

Most of it, I've taken. Couldn't do without what he has to offer. And I've held onto him when he wanted to go, to leave all of us and everything behind him, go haring off after those Goddamned Ancients. Again. Atlantis may be there, but I'm

here.

"You didn't want me to go rescue Sam when she was taken by the Trust." Daniel spares me a speculative look.

"Not in that damned stupid way, no," I retort briskly, wishing he'd zeroed in on almost anything but this. Anyone watching that particular run-in of ours could've been forgiven for thinking *he* was the man. He was certainly more in control than I was, something Siler would no doubt verify.

"Was that about this?" Daniel looks even more dubious. "It never occurred to me you were making any kind of value judgement about our lives, Sam's and mine."

"I wasn't!" It was never a case of trading Carter's life for Daniel's. She was the one who screwed up, left her back-up behind and just *had* to play with the shiny new toy the bad guy dropped. Why compound her error?

"You didn't want me to take the risk."

"The risk I didn't want to take was maybe losing you both."

"But you let me go anyway." Daniel is both pleased and slightly unnerved, remembering this.

"And the moral of this story is?" I ask him.

"Jack is a pushover?"

My turn to sigh.

Thoughtfully considering our *long* history together, Daniel tosses a few more not so random conclusions my way. "Sam asks and you say no. You come down on her and she has to take it. She always has to take it."

"It's those pesky rules and regs we aren't boring ourselves with."

"I don't take it, though," Daniel pushes on. "Even now, when you're the general and I know I'm supposed to. I would have taken it from Hammond. But not from you. I can't. I do try, but I – I can't. I have to fight." He's genuinely perplexed by this crucial differentiation he can't stop himself from making. "Because, I guess, you look at me and not at her."

That stings. He's too blunt and he puts me on the defensive. "I'm not proud."

"You should say no," Daniel advises me sincerely.

"You shouldn't ask."

"I'm selfish." He's woeful. "I always ask. I always push. I always want more."

He's shooting me these sidelong glances hinting I need to brace myself and be brave.

"That's not going to change, you know."

I take this on the chin and he perks up a bit.

"I am selfish."

What was I saying about the normal rules no longer applying? Daniel means this. I guess I have to mean it too.

"You are."

"I don't think, not about you, not about Sam or Teal'c. Not right then. Not at the time. I see what matters to me."

"Like a really truly cool book."

"And not what matters to you."

"Like the game of the season. You being with me for the game of the season."

"It's not that I don't care, Jack."

"Then what is it?" My turn to be blunt.

This upsets Daniel. He hates me thinking he doesn't care. Because he does. Passionately. He blows hot...

"I'm selfish."

And he blows cold.

"Personal isn't the same as important," I suggest and he looks horrified. "Gas station," I warn, spotting a sign at the side of the road ahead of us. "We're not all that dissimilar in the way we think, Daniel. We just have different objectives."

He drives into the gas station and pumps gas while I prowl over to the brazen oasis of beer, snacks and facilities. Small towns used to have this kind of a store on the main street. Part of the community, maybe the heart. Now, non-drivers with urgent chocolate cravings are completely screwed. It's down to progress, apparently. Franchising, economies of scale, all those big, bad things that mean small people get screwed coming and going, again and again.

Some things you can't change.

I can't change Daniel. He lives and breathes his research. He's a scholar, always learning, always needing and wanting to know more. It's more than what he is, it's who he is. Everything comes second to that. Everyone. He's always going to ask, he's always going to push and so long as it isn't lives on the line, only sports and tempers and convenience, when I can't come up with something better, I'm always going to say yes.

Every time I say yes it costs, in small ways for sure, but it costs everyone but him. Now he knows.

It's up to him what he does with that.

When I come out of the bathroom he's bought us steaming coffee and breakfast burritos we wolf down, picnicking out by the padlocked ice bin, idly watching the mundane world beginning to waken and stream by us on the highway.

He's still upset. Still thinking.

I still feel good. I wish I knew why. Nothing is going my way.

Daniel doesn't notice when I switch to watching him. Have I seen him in jeans before? I don't recall. If I have, they weren't so tight as these: they didn't make me *look* at him. It's impossibly weird to look and not look away. He's all legs and ass, and that face, gorgeous, all of him, everything, every single thing he has works for me. He's right for me. It's why I've worked so hard not to see him, not to connect the hip-bone to the thigh bone.

He walks and I follow him the way I do, seeing his grace.

Then I have a knot in my chest and I don't know where to look.

We're barely out of the gas station when Daniel brings up the question of sex. It seems to be on his mind.

"You think sleeping with me would only make me worse?" he asks, brutally direct.

"About everything?"

I can hardly believe we're talking about having sex. Not only sex, but sex together. Sex is not a subject we have ever discussed. I've teased him about the effect he's had on this woman or that, about being a Stone Age dog, but we've never talked. It's not what we do. I'm at a loss for the appropriate response, this is so out of left field.

"You actually want to sleep with me?" I ask him. I sound incredulous.

"I'm not sure."

That's Daniel, incurably honest.

"But I'm not..."

"Ruling it out," we chorus together and he finds that apologetic half-smile of his again.

This is what I can't get a handle on. Daniel isn't hurling himself at me with promises of endless love and unnatural passion. He's very quiet and determined and thinking things through. He's not sure this is a good thing, not for either of us, and he believes it's going to happen to us regardless. If we can't avoid it.

That feels real to me. That's right.

I wonder if, deep down, as crazy as all of this is, he feels as alive as I do?

"Sex is an unnecessary complication," I tell him. "I'd be okay with it if you just remembered to turn up for the game."

"If you didn't believe on some level sex was going to become a very necessary complication for us, you wouldn't be here with me now," Daniel counters. He's back at me with the determination thing, a definite glint in his eye. "The game is only a metaphor."

"No, I'm pretty sure it's only a game."

"A metaphor. Like my book. It's what we have instead of sex."

"If I'm following you, what you're saying here is: you'll stop reading if I start putting out?"

Coming from Daniel, this offer makes as much sense to me as a fish promising not

to swim.

"Why'd you get attached to me, Daniel?" I ask him, giving way momentarily to utter bewilderment. "Why not Carter? Or Fraiser? Or anyone who *gets* most of the stuff that comes out of your mouth? You and me, we're not the perfect match, you know?"

"Sam and Janet and maybe a whole lot of people get the sense of what I say," Daniel admits readily. "But they don't get me."

"Carter gets you. Carter practically is you."

Now his expression is pitying. "Sam doesn't push me. Or distract me. You do."

"I don't get most of the things you do or say, Daniel. I'm not the man you are." If I'm pushing, it's out of ignorance and because I want my way as much as Daniel wants his.

"Since when did you let that stop you?"

It's weird, but when I see how flushed his face gets, how small and lost and difficult he is owning up to all of this, when I get caught up in that and stop listening to what he's saying - I hear him. I hear what he means and not what he says.

He needs me to be the man I am. He needs me.

"It doesn't make any sense," I argue.

"I can't explain," Daniel stubbornly argues back. "It's just the way things are. Get over it."

"You love me." I didn't mean to say it, I didn't mean to push his back up against some wall but it's out and he doesn't deny it. He can't lie in that way, not to me.

"You reach me." For the first time, he sounds terribly strained.

I stretch out my arm behind him, rub his back.

"You love me too, Jack."

When it comes down to it, with my own back against the wall, I can't deny it either.



There's only one other car in the bare, functional gravel lot at the trailhead and according to the prominent sign the absent party has considerably taped to the inside of the passenger window, they're not in our way.

We get our stuff ready with the minimum of fuss and chatter, the routine a familiar one even if we haven't ever done it this side of the Stargate. I check out the gear because I have to, the need is too ingrained to ignore, but there's nothing for me to do. Daniel has taken every wilderness precaution and packed every camping convenience, right down to the special spray thingie to scare bears. I guess he doesn't want me shooting 'em.

The sun is shining, the air is like wine and all the leaves are gold.

We're hiking uphill and upstream through dense forest, heavily laden, but the trail is good and whatever pace I set, Daniel will keep it. I don't feel any need to rush and we walk steadily, with no particular place to go and time to look around us. I'll know the spot when I see it. We ghost through tall shivering aspens and tumbling leaves in every shade of red and gold into an open space of green meadow grasses and small, still pools reflecting sky.

I don't feel like being still and we walk on, still climbing. It's too soft here, too pretty. Lulling. The peace of it is soaking into me but I'm an awkward bastard. I don't give in so easy. I like to pick my spot and I like to know my risks are there. I'll see them coming.

I'm not sure Daniel is totally here with me but I lead and he follows along. With no one else around, I wait for him to do that thing he does when it's just the two of us. I don't know when I first noticed. I do know it takes work; his legs are shorter than mine by an inch or two. Still, he manages it. He fixes on me, lets his mind go and walks precisely in my footsteps, a pace or two behind me, keeping perfect time. Never misses a beat or a step. We have this rhythm, one we look for. If not him, then me. It has to be there. Everything else, everyone, they're only counterpoint. Background to him. Him and me. Even walking.

There's plenty I've been ignoring, huh?

It gets me thinking maybe I've refused to make all these connections, see what I was doing, because I need this rhythm. Becoming aware of it, that can only lead to losing it.

We walk through rougher terrain, deeper into the forest, looking for a spot with the edge I want. Crossing a shallow, stone-tossed stream, I find it ahead of us, to the east and off the trail. A wide, deep place in the creek, the ground sloping steeply down to meet the clear, rushing water. There are rocks, mossy and damp but well placed with the aspens rearing up behind to camouflage us while we fish. A tiny clearing is set back in the trees, big enough for the tent and a fire-ring. It's a good spot.

I could almost forget why we're here. What we have to decide.

Making camp with a man who knows I love him turns out not to be any different than all the other times. Things need to be done and are done, smoothly and efficiently, each in their turn, by Daniel or by me or by us both. Shelter, bedding, heat, food, fuel and water, all taken care of with no fuss and little in the way of conversation. We heat soup and drink it down, shed some muffling, weather-proof layers, apply more sunscreen and head down to the creek.

All the while I'm thinking: Daniel is going to explode. I should have been timing him, he's been quiet so long. This has to be some kind of record. When Daniel isn't talking it's because he's thinking. He's been quiet so long and thinking so much I should be shit-scared.

This is a good day. I'm up for a fight.

I sit and start to put together the sections of my fishing rod while Daniel settles down beside me and looks out at the sun in the water.

Any minute, I think. He's going to start talking at me. Any minute now. I'm not talking. He's not talking. It has to be eating him up. He doesn't do silence.

He does me.

He leans right around and kisses me hard and fast on the mouth, then sits back so quickly he loses balance and has to throw out a hand to steady himself.

I knew he couldn't take it.

"Better?" I enquire as I ease the reel down into its seat and slide the lock over the top of it. My hands aren't even shaking.

"No, not really."

He just kissed me. Apparently, it was depressing.

"I want to do it again." He's pissed about this. "Properly."

"Wasn't that your evil plan?"

"I told you I wasn't sure about having sex with you."

"That makes two of us," I retort briskly as I pull out about twelve feet of line from the reel. As statements of intent go, this one is pretty definite. Fishing now.

Daniel pulls an impatient face. "It's not about whether you turn me on or whether I'd enjoy it," he complains. "I think that's pretty much a given."

It is?

"What I'm struggling with is do I want you to have even more of me?"

"You love me and you still stood me up to read a good book!" I remind him indignantly. "Which begs the question: you don't want me to have more of *what*?"

"It may be selfish, well, I guess it is selfish," Daniel corrects himself scrupulously. "We've established that, but I don't want to give up my books. I don't want to compromise my research. I don't want to have more demands on my time or deal with one single other commitment more than I have now."

"That is selfish." And I'm not sure I want to hear it. It's too close to the way I'm thinking.

"I've admitted it," he says quietly.

"Then maybe I should be admitting I'm getting in your way."

Daniel takes me seriously, which always disconcerts me. "I'm happy living my life this way, Jack," he asserts stubbornly.

"Alone?" I query, not believing him.

"I'm not alone. I have..." Hastily, he bites off what he was going to say and then he bites his lip.

"You have?" I prompt.

He doesn't want to answer this, even when I elbow him in the ribs by way of encouragement. Obliging as ever, I fill in the blank. "You have me." I can't resist

expressing a certain amount of satisfaction with this.

"Unfortunately."

"But I'm not *with* you," I hint discreetly. Probably too discreetly, if the look on Daniel's face is anything to go by. He's not with me. "I mean, you don't have me – er..." How can I put this? "You don't have anyone *at home*."

"At home?"

"With you."

"With me?"

"It's just you. Alone. Alone at home."

"Just me," Daniel confirms, nodding vaguely.

"Just you." I think he thinks I've lost the plot. Should I just come right out and ask if the only action he's seen is through the gate with SG-1? How hard can it be to ask a guy who loves you – who you love – if he misses intimacy? Being intimate. Having someone there. Home. With him. "Just you and the books."

"And the really truly cool books," he reminds me ironically.

Okay, I need to get this straight in my head. "You're happy for all of this just to be the way it is between us? For us to be this – this...How can I put it so it makes sense? This wrapped up and this tangled in one another, to want as much as we do from each other, and to keep it all the way it is? To go on exactly as we are? You want we should go this far and no further?"

Wasn't this what I wanted? For this all to go quietly away? It sounds different coming from Daniel. It feels different.

"Yes. Although I find happiness tends to be a moot point." Daniel is so intense as he says this to me, so serious.

"Wanting and never having."

Daniel isn't flinching from this.

"Or should I say wanting and having me only in ways you can cope with?"

"Pretty much."

Like looking in a mirror.

"You don't actually know where it would stop, do you?" I ask him softly. "The wanting? You're as obsessed with me as I am with you."

"Obsessed?" Daniel is nonplussed, not so much at me characterising his feeling for me this way, but at me so strongly characterising my feeling for him. We're the same. It's too much for him. "Jack, I've never..."

"Felt this way?" I interject too quickly, rushing him.

"Affected anyone this way," Daniel confesses, also too quickly. Too honestly.

"That's what you think."

"There are times I've barely felt part of – of life, of the present. I look back so much it's hard to see myself sometimes, let alone..." He breaks off, frustrated at his inability to adequately express himself. "How am I supposed to know – how can I see the impact I have on others when I'm so – so small?"

"Small?" I echo incredulously.

"Compared to the scale of human history, human endeavour? To what's out there? Through the gate? Small."

"I never knew anyone who thought like you."

"Another thing you love about me?" Daniel asks impulsively.

"Another thing."

"For your information, I've never known anyone who thinks like you either, Jack."

"It's like you're living under glass. As good as you are with people, as engaged and driven to help them as you seem, you're never really touching anyone, never letting them touch you. Not where it counts." Not *intimately*.

Daniel is so passionate, so definite, I've never thought of him as being stifled. I see now that he is, that he's the one who's tied some of these knots he's in. I've been so busy avoiding reality I've hurt us both, I think. In trying not to see us, I've lost sight of him.

I know he's been hurt, he's been hit harder by life than almost anyone I know. I

was with him when some of his worst wounds were inflicted. At times, I've felt like Daniel is fated, almost marked out for grief and suffering. All the time I've known him, all the pain he's quietly shouldered - I should know what that's done to him. I should. But do I? Do I really? Or have I had enough losses of my own I've been glad I've never had to carry his?

Daniel's alone with his really truly cool books, trying desperately to believe this is how he wants to live, how he's meant to live. Maybe the truth I haven't been seeing is that this is how he *has* to live.

He has me but not all of me. Not even enough of me. Only enough to hurt. Because he loves me. And he's too scared to want more than the little he has. A lot of his bravado has deserted him and all I see in his face now is trouble. He wants me to know this about him but it still hurts.

"You don't know what to do with me, do you?" I ask him mildly. "How to feel, what to do? You're hiding out in those books of yours."

"I'm lost in them, sometimes." Daniel glances at me, wanting to tell me all of it but afraid to open up, to let me in so deep.

I think it's this moment where I realise he does love me. It's not just something he says. It's something he feels and means. Something he needs. He would never talk like this if he could avoid it, any more than I would.

I do the only thing I can for him, setting my fishing rod carefully down on the rock behind us. It's easy and natural then for my arm to hug against his back. I find I can smile at him and he smiles back, looking too grateful for comfort.

"I want to be lost at times," he murmurs, timid for the first time. "To be lifted outside of myself. To be part of something so much bigger... I've given everything over to my research, believing - it's my life, Jack." He needs me so badly to hear him. "My life."

"Nobody ever has distracted you, have they?" I ask him gently. "Not the way I do."

"I'm obsessed. I am." Daniel sounds strange even to himself. "It's cost me - it's..."

"I know," I acknowledge simply, not judging, only hearing him. It's what he needs from me. He's not even asking me to understand him, to accept. He doesn't want to struggle through this alone.

"My work has to have meaning." His own feelings scare him more than anything can.

"Has it ever occurred to you what you need to learn isn't in here?" I tap a quick finger against his head. For a genius, he can be dumb. "Or in books? What you're supposed to learn about is yourself."

"What's occurred to me," Daniel says quickly, unsteadily, "is how often I'm wrong, how often you're wrong. When we get together, that's when we're right. When we make sense. Most everything makes sense."

He is trying to learn about himself. It's why we're here, suffering through this expensive honesty of his.

"I don't think I lie too much, not to myself," Daniel unconsciously echoes me. "I'm like everyone else, though. The defences I have may be small, but I need them. My dependence on my scholarship, my obsession, is pretty near my only defence. My intellect, Jack. It's all I've ever had."

From anyone else, this might have sounded pitiful.

I know what I'm up against and I know how much I've fed into this obsession myself. We're all guilty of it, of making Daniel our go-to guy. Every team, bringing every scrawl on a wall, mouldy old tablet, weird-assed doodad or suspect pottery sherd straight to his door. We've validated everything that's held him back, helped to keep him locked up inside his own head.

"I don't know how to go about breaking a cycle of obsession," Daniel confesses painfully.

Especially not with everyone he cares for constantly feeding it and needing so damned much from him. Not with the weight of expectation on him, the incessant demands that he prove himself. We need him to be what he is, but by God, we make him pay for it. Being a part of something – part of us – means that much to him.

"I can intellectualise the fact of that obsession but I don't know what it means, how much of who I am is bound up in it, or how much would be left. How much would be broken. Sometimes, I feel I've been through too much. Too many changes, too many losses, too many endings. I don't know what to do, Jack," Daniel admits, small-voiced and a little shaky. "How do I change what defines me? Do I?" He breaks off, biting his lip.

"Go on," I urge him, trying for reassurance.

"Do I even want to? Because this is who I am. I'm a scholar. It's fundamental to

me to challenge, to question, to learn. It's life."

"And yet, you're here. With me. Asking questions, getting under my skin, failing to come up with ways to avoid having sex. On some level, you've already made a decision."

He's paralysed with love. Why didn't I see that? How could I not know? Being the one who's getting in his way, that's only my side of it all. Daniel doesn't see me holding him back or being wrong for him. He only sees the ways he'll let me down. It's because he'll let me down - because he's damaged - he's let us be apart.

I can't stand to let Daniel down. He can't give up all this, take these risks, make himself so vulnerable to me and get nothing back. I'm starting to make sense of why it can only be me for him, why he loves me of all people. I didn't expect it to be so simple. I'm the one who can break him free of his obsession. The one who can reach him even when he doesn't want to be reached. He let Oma take him away, but he couldn't stop me from bringing him back. That first line he crossed, he crossed for me. All the power of the universe, the answer to every inconceivable question within his reach, and he came for me.

At least as confused as Daniel is by the effect we have on each other, I don't know what to say to him, I don't know what to do for him. Or for myself.

I think he might want me to kiss him or something, but I put my arm around him instead. We haven't even gotten to my part in this.



Daniel Jackson is not the man to let a little thing like emotional honesty traumatise him. He's quite worried about things but this hasn't stopped him bouncing back to - more or less - his usual self.

Happiness, he said, is pretty much a moot point where he's concerned. This is pushing all kinds of buttons for me but at least I can see where he gets some of his resilience from.

Lowered expectation.

I'm worried too.

Obviously, this means we're sitting here talking about fishing. I'm not exactly Dr.

Phil, but I'm giving the supportive platonic buddy thing my best shot.

Daniel is not helping.

"But the rod is the primary piece of tackle!" I argue. "You can't just buy any old piece of crap the guy in the store tosses at you."

"It was on special."

"Especially if it was on special! That's sacrilegious." I'm deeply offended and I hope this shows to the philistine taking up valuable space on my fishing rock. "You feel the whole fishing experience through your rod. It literally connects you to the fish."

Daniel peers dubiously into the creek. "The water, maybe," he concedes reluctantly.

"Buying your rod is like buying your car." I consider Daniel's reclaimed junker for a moment. "Okay, bad example."

Daniel looks from my rod to his. "Ostentation versus function?" he enquires a trifle coldly.

"Don't you get fishing at all?"

"I get fish." Before I can counter his sarcasm he scuffs a foot and sighs. "I get fishing," he says quietly. "No errors in fishing. No right or wrong."

"A fight where everyone gets to walk - or swim - away."

"You think of it in terms of a fight?"

"Most anglers do," I reply cagily. "At least the ones I've known. A fight you can't win by brute force, only by skill and tactics, by outmanoeuvring the fish in its own element."

Daniel lets out this snort. "If you'd ever caught a fish, I might, and I repeat *might*, buy into some of that Churchillian Crappie Club propaganda." Displaying a complete lack of soul, he shrugs amusedly. "But until I see you actually fighting your fish on the beaches instead of the seafood aisle at Safeway, I'll stick with healthy scepticism."

I bet Dr. Phil would have something to say about it if I pushed the irritating shit off my rock. I mean, come on! What does Daniel want from me? The truth? I'm not

getting into the beauty of nature or the rhythm you find in the water or crap like that. Not with him. He's had more than his piece of me already. Suffice it to say even on days when I cast into trees, have wind knots, lose flies or fat fish or fall in the river, something keeps me coming back for more.

It's simple.

I'm simple.

I *like* fishing.

"I guess you read, you study for a lot of the same reasons I fish," I allow. "You want those moments where you're lifted completely outside yourself, when there's nothing else."

Hey, now. That was pretty damn good. Daniel is still dry and I'm supporting up a storm here. Dr. Phil would be proud.

Daniel's lips are moving in this slow, extra-exaggerated way. I think he's trying to work out what I just said to him and what I did with the real Jack O'Neill.

"It's relaxing!" I snap, goaded. "You should fish," I decide on his behalf, strongly drawn to any activity that might shut him up for five minutes. "Go fish with me. Being up to your ass in icy water watching the sun come up has to be better for you than always burning the midnight oil."

"I thought I *was* fishing with you," Daniel protests, with a significant look at my tackle.

"Don't be so literal," I advise him patronisingly. Can't he see I'm on a roll here? I have smooth segues going.

Fishing as metaphor...

"You do know that every time you mention your rod, I'm thinking about?" Daniel leans over and sort of nods shiftily at a significant portion of my anatomy. "You know?"

...but not for that.

"Colour me the one that got away."

"Why?" Daniel asks in his most reasonable, wheedling tone.

"I can't have sex with you, for many, many reasons so self-evident, I shouldn't have to explain."

"Humour me."

"It would be – and I use the word advisedly – criminally stupid."

"Criminally stupid?" Daniel muses thoughtfully, with a snippy cast of his rod for added emphasis. "Is having sex – in private – more or less criminal than, say, desertion? Mutiny? Insubordination? Aggravated assault? Threatening a government official? Aiding and abetting the escape of prisoners in custody? Kidnapping a minor? Finishing wars we didn't start? Starting riots in downtown bar-&-grills?"

"No one likes a smart-ass with a good memory." His memory is better than mine. "Aggravated assault?" Drawing a blank on this one.

"The assault was on me."

Ah. In that case, it goes without saying I was aggravated.

"Is the difference only that sex is personal?" Daniel stiffens up, not sure whether to get hostile or defensive on me. "Is this what you're trying not to tell me, Jack? You don't want to get that close to me?"

He asks this with an insistent, pissy dignity I can't bring myself to brush off, staring searchingly into my reluctant face. I watch his change as he reads mine.

"Oh." It's a flat, heavy sound, dull with disappointment. "You're scared you *do* want to get that close."

"You're not exactly all over this yourself," I remind him as neutrally as I can. "Come on, Daniel. Get real. You wouldn't know how to deal with it if I did jump your bones." Relationships. Daniel has not had a lot of luck with those. People he cares about tend to destroy or be destroyed right before his eyes. He knows it. I give a little. With his track record, I can hardly blame him for being gun-shy. "So maybe I'm selfish too."

He smiles fleetingly, in wry acceptance. "You have your own obsessions," he concedes. "We both want the Stargate more than anything."

"I also like to think I'm an honourable man," I state more sharply than I intend. Daniel reads me too well and he's damnably quick.

"You're above all a practical man," Daniel retorts. "You bend and break the rules and regs whenever it suits you, so don't try to hide out behind them now. Don't try to make this about rank or integrity, because the only person you truly answer to is yourself. You set the standard you choose to meet. This is where your measure of integrity lies." I tapped him the head earlier. He pokes me in mine. "Right here! You've always been your own man, Jack. The only question here is whether having sex with me is worth your while."

"It's not the only question. Of course it's not!" I snap. "I may love you but that doesn't mean I want to have sex with you or with any man. Maybe I just want to be your friend."

Couldn't that be enough? For both of us?

I expect Daniel to get mad and make some snap judgement about me being some kind of homophobe, something ugly, but strangely, this admission softens him.

"Maybe you can only deal with being my friend," he murmurs, his brow furrowing. "Or think you can." He blinks slowly, lost in so much thought he makes me nervous all over again. "Sorry," he apologises absently. "I didn't think about issues of masculinity per se."

Masculinity?

"Easy," I warn.

I do not like the way Daniel is looking at me.

"Coming from a man who admits he'd rather jump into bed with a good book, any discussion of what might or might not constitute masculinity is going to be problematic," I inform him sourly, sure he's gonna git me anyway.

"I'm comfortable with my definition. You're the one with the problem," Daniel retorts.

It's amazing how the prospect of giving my blinkered, stone-age psyche a good smacking energises him.

"You can't even say 'I do not have a problem'," he says brightly. "Because you manifestly do."

I know I do. "I can't have sex with you, and I won't."

Daniel nods understandingly, looking as if this makes perfect sense to him. "Why

not?"

"I. Will. Not. Be. Compromised."

"Compromised? Interesting choice of words," Daniel muses thoughtfully, his brow wrinkling in that way it does. "Compromised how?"

"I don't have to answer that, you know. Just because you're asking."

"I know."

It's not sympathy I'm seeing.

"But answer anyway."

"I'm military." All my life. A soldier. A pilot. I've worked for it, paid for it. Excelled. "You think you know what that means." If I sound accusing, I guess I mean to. I think I know what that means to him. He's quick to see the negatives and use the positives. What I am, what I do, it gets him what he wants. He's with me and against me, in my world and standing apart from it, needing and sometimes despising, using and judging, all at the same time.

I love what I do. Does Daniel see that? Does he see me? All of my life. If I wasn't in love with it all, how could I do the things I've done? How could I live with myself?

Nothing the Air Force demands of me could be worse than not being part of it.

That much of myself, I know.

The rules I break, there are limits. Lines I won't cross, things I won't give up. Hammond knows. Carter too. Every soldier does. Nothing I've done, nothing I would do, has cost me respect. I break the rules and it's tolerated only because the men are with me. The men will follow me.

Not something Daniel finds so easy. He can function without respect, he's fearless. He can walk alone.

I can't. I *need* respect. I stand up when I have to, I fight when it's right, but there's always a point. There are always eyes on me, judgements made.

I lead.

Daniel doesn't want that for himself, he doesn't care. He can walk alone, he's

happy alone and he can't *see*.

I'm not alone.

Some rules can't be broken. Some secrets can't be kept. They corrode, eat at you from inside out. This may be the biggest cliché of them all but it's still a cold truth: *you* always know.

My world, my men – there's no place for gays. I don't have the luxury of judging that, not the way Daniel does. I have to live with it, there's no choice about it. It's my command, it's who I am. I lead those men, I have to have their respect even if they are – if they can be – homophobic bigots Daniel Jackson wouldn't spit on.

What I feel, what I want, doesn't come into it.

More than a soldier, I'm an officer. It's not my job, it's my identity. I chose this life, I've *paid* for this life because honour, integrity – those aren't just words on a recruiting poster to me. Those are life and death.

I lead by example: that's the essence of who and what I am.

How can I fuck Daniel? How can I live that lie? It's not even the risk of being discovered. Those rules and regs we aren't troubling ourselves with cover my ass. No one is ever going to ask me if I'm fucking Daniel. I'll never have to tell. I *am* needed that much, not kidding myself here.

I would know.

How could I lead, knowing? Betraying men who trust me, who respect me, is betraying myself. Even though it's ugly and it's not my choice, it has to be a part of me because it's a part of them, and it's not the worst of any of us.

Compromised, how?

Is he kidding?

Fucking Daniel would change *me*. I would be lying, cheating, hiding. That's *my* honour, *my* integrity. My doubt, my guilt. I would be what they despise and if they knew, I'd lose them. I'd lose myself.

I don't want to talk any more. I don't want to think.

I need this all to go away. I need Daniel to live for what goes on inside his head, what we find through the gate, not live for me. I need to say no.

I look at him now, at his tight, steady eyes and pinched determination and I think I'll lose him.



## PART TWO: UNDER THE ROCKS ARE THE WORDS

Jack is sitting on the steps of my back porch, loose and relaxed, a beer just about the only thing he's vaguely focused on. His Air Force driver is out there someplace waiting for him but Jack doesn't care.

"Thanks," I tell him gratefully, slumping down on the step below his.

"Thanks for what, Joe? For ruining your life?" he asks quizzically, grinning.

"I got my life back." More, maybe, because I don't have to hide in stories anymore. I can talk to Charlene about what's real and what's not and I know she'll believe me now. Having proof - having Jack come here - was what made the difference.

"But you had to give up the stone."

There's a faint question in Jack's voice, a slyness in his sidelong look. I guess I don't have to tell him what I'm thinking. He knows about wanting it all. He knows about compromise.

"You had to give up something too," I remind him. All the things we've talked about, explained, mysteries solved, knots untangled - I feel like I've set the world to rights and yet I still don't dare bring up the name. Jack knows I know, but will he let me talk about it? I need to talk. As much as anything else I've learned about Jack O'Neill, felt I've lived through with him, this is outside of my experience. Truly alien. "Someone."

For a second there, I think he's going to tear my head off, but then he shrugs and drinks some more of his beer.

"There's no point denying it," I caution him, even though he hasn't.

"Everything going on in my life and *that* showed?"

Jack isn't eaten up with this life we've shared, not the way I am. My life - it's just relaxation to him. Whimsical. I haven't consumed him the way he's consumed me. I figure there wasn't room. Jack has his own drives.

"Daniel...shone," I explain earnestly.

There. It's out. I've said the name and Jack doesn't react, except in rolling his beer can between his hands. And he doesn't look at me anymore.

"When he died, I was - I guess devastated was the only word for it. I mourned Daniel, you know?"

I don't think Jack wants to know and I can hardly blame him. Even for me, who lived through it, it's still hard to fathom. All that grief, the weight of Daniel's loss breaking me down for months and it wasn't only second-hand grief, it was Jack under *control*, writing it up for public consumption, for the reports.

A pale imitation for sure, but my feelings - Jack's feelings - are so strong, I love Daniel too. Jack's love took over my life, my feelings. Grieving for a man I only knew through Jack's eyes and Jack's mind while my own wife slipped away from me.

I'm jealous. What Jack has, I should be so lucky.

I tell him this and he shrugs again. Drinks more beer.

What I can't say to him is that of all the terrible and wonderful things I've lived through Jack, loving Daniel is what I'll never recover from. I never thought that way, I never looked at a guy. Maybe not feeling the desire is what allowed me to see the truth of his love. I understood what Jack was feeling - what I was feeling through him - probably long before he did. The physicality - the gut-punch Daniel is to Jack, I'm clear of that. I feel the *love*. Not so different than what I feel for my wife, and a strength and constancy that seduced me, suckered me right into loving Daniel too. For my own sake.

I doubt I'll ever get over Daniel. I could never tell Jack how complete that love was, how it bled right out into my life. Jack was my hero for sure, but Jack lives through Daniel. At times, he's all there is.

The thought of living in my own head - living without them - frightens me. You can't have one without the other and now I'm losing them both, I wonder what's left that's truly me. I don't remember the man I was or the man Charlene wants in me and I don't know the man I'm going to have to be.

"I'm smarter than you too," I snap at Jack, irritated by his stubbornness. He has it easy compared to me, if only he could be brought to see it. "I had to lose everything to understand what I had, what it meant to me. Charlene and Andy, they're my life. I lost them, I hit bottom and I came up fighting. I came to you, Jack. I came to figure things out, put things right." I look at him pleadingly. "That shouldn't be the difference between us. I shouldn't be the fighter here."

Not when Jack's love and Jack's grief were part of what made me fight. I couldn't be without my wife. I couldn't live without love - not again. The gulf between Charlene and me, the damage that's been done to us, it's all so much greater than anything that lies between Jack and Daniel. If I can do it, plain old Joe from Indiana, if I can fight for love, I know Jack can. And because he's been a hero to me, I can't bear to let him leave without getting him to try. He has to hear me.

"I'm not you, Joe," Jack asserts without any comprehension of just how much of him is in me. "I'm not free to do what I want."

"Whose mind have I been reading the past seven years?" I argue heatedly. Jack might not be free, but he does whatever he wants. And I *know* Daniel is what he wants. For me to have accepted that, after my first schizophrenic Freudian nightmare, I *know*.

"I'm not free to do this."

He gets up with a calm deliberation that tells me this is it. It's over. Because he's lying to me and he's lying to himself, I won't be seeing him again, I won't be seeing into him again. I gave up the stone to get my life back. My family. I got my house, my shop - everything else, I have to build. Including myself.

Charlene is hearing me for the first time. She's still with her mom and dad, but she's letting me talk and she's listening. The door is open now. Some day, she'll be home. It's all I want. All I need. My family.

Maybe my life is small and insignificant - relaxing, even. But I'm better off. I guess I had to live Jack's life to know it.

And maybe...maybe I'm glad I don't have to see the rest of it.

Because the man walking out of my yard and out my life, the one he helped square away, he's already home if only he could see it. He only has to put out his hand. The only thing he's fighting is himself.

I drove away my love too. I can't have Jack inside of me when he realises the

tragedy.



It's done. I've just walked away from Jack. Closed the door on us. I'm back to being a plaque on a desk to him. Johnson, CIA.

Over and done.

I thought it was about her. Samantha Carter. That she was the one in the back of his mind, the one he couldn't quite let go of. I believed it right up until she was standing in his yard *looking* at him that way.

And Jack, cornered like that, couldn't look at her.

It wasn't about her any more than it was about me. Looking back, it's obvious now, and the only question I'm left with is how could I have been so slow?

I knew what I was getting into, I understood the rules. The limitations. I imposed some of them myself. I have the same priorities, the same responsibilities Jack does. I got it.

I thought I got him.

Jack didn't encourage me to want more except by being...Jack. He gives a little, you want it all. It's not his fault.

I mean, come on. I knew there was *something*, going in. And I honestly thought it was her. Enough people were talking about it. I should've known if he'd bend the rules a little to be with me, someone he barely knew, then after all the two of them have been through and been to each other just as teammates, he'd bend them a helluva lot more for her. Jack...the man I've caught glimpses of, the man I could love...he'd risk anything for the one he loves.

That's what Sam wants. What she hopes.

She sees less than I do.

Because in the end, it all comes down to a scrappy little snapshot, years old, that I found in the drawer with those gift shop Air Force t-shirts Jack likes to sleep in. I didn't realise the significance of it, that the photo would be the last thing he saw –

if he chose to see - before sleeping. A small thing he could hold on to.

The hair was longer and the face softer back then, but I know the man Jack is joking with, has his arm around.

Dr. Jackson. Daniel Jackson.

The man who's missing, the man Jack refuses to believe is dead. He refuses so absolutely, with such crippling need, he was capable of standing out there in his yard today with a beer in hand while he charred meat with gusto.

I can scarcely comprehend the fury of *that* denial.

What makes it worse is how easily he let me go. He didn't fight or fuss or even feel much of anything that I could see. He was sleeping with me. Now he's not. He's not on the hook for any of it; easy come, easier go.

I didn't have any impact on him at all, did I? Didn't leave a mark.

It's no comfort at all to know Sam Carter - a woman Jack *does* care about - is just as easy for him to put out of mind. I'm not eating my heart out but Jack - Jack won't think of me again.

What *is* the difference here? What am I not seeing?

Did he talk about Daniel Jackson too much? Not enough? What didn't I see or hear or know? Was there anything but the photograph and Jack's absolute refusal, his utter inability to see that a guy he worked with, a guy he was friends with for a long time, had died? He never shut me down so much as he never gave me an opening. No loss, no sympathy required.

My God, I should have questioned. Death has been such a fact of Jack's life, how could he fail so completely to encompass this one loss among so many?

I don't know him well.

I hardly know him at all.

I saw him today with Sam Carter, though, and it's only now I understand what he does, how he is. The side of him he didn't mean for me to see.

What he can't deal with, what he can't take, he shuts away. He shuts down. He can't deal with Sam's, for want of a better word, her crush on him, so he ignores it. Sam is in his *face* and he's still ignoring it. Trying to force her to deal with him on

his terms.

He leaves you nowhere to go. He's *good* at this.

What does Jack do to Daniel Jackson? How does Jack deal with him?

When I think about it, and boy do I wish I could think of something – anything – else, I see Jack does talk about Daniel. He talks about Daniel in passing, idly, humorously, a fact and at times a frustration of his existence. I thought it was because Daniel was just a guy, just a friend, but in actuality it's because Daniel is always *there*. Jack can put some things away from him, he can shut off some people, but Daniel isn't one of them. Maybe he's the only one.

I guess I sat neatly enough in a small, no-strings box labelled 'affair.' I didn't require any effort on Jack's part. He was great with the deal we made. He was great with me. I don't know how to feel about that. It's hard to feel used when I had such a damned good time with him and he delivered no more and no less than he offered at the start.

My mistake.

All this time, Jack has been smart enough to hide right out there in plain sight. Smart enough to be Daniel's friend. He's controlled but he's also obsessed and *that* shows. Everyone here knows it. I was told in so many words the day I got here the way to the general's heart was through his archaeologist. Jack's obsession with Daniel is such a fact of existence, the SGC no longer questions. It simply is.

With all of my training, all of my experience in the Company sizing people up, knowing them better than they know themselves, manipulating them to my ends, I didn't believe Jack loved Daniel. I never thought to go there. I guess that's how Jack gets to wear his heart on his sleeve as much as he does. It's so fucking unbelievable.

Jack and *Daniel*?

Jack and a guy?

*Jack*?

I don't know if I can believe it now, except for one thing.

Jack didn't deny it.

I never said the name. I only said he had issues. One big one in particular.

He didn't deny it.

He didn't answer my question either.

Is the Air Force the only thing keeping the two of them apart? Is it the rules and regulations? Or is it more complicated than that? Is it Jack?

Jack likes neat, labelled, no-strings boxes but has to live with being tied in knots by Daniel. He likes control but has to know better than anyone when it comes to this one man how little control he truly has or he would never have fallen for him.

Obsessed. Shut down. In love.

I wish I could feel better about getting one thing right.

He's making a *very* big mistake.



It's the contrast that strikes me. I was standing in the general's yard – Jack's yard – ready, finally ready to bare my soul to him. To admit to what our ranks and military positions should have precluded. God knows I was past the point of subtlety. He had to know what I was talking about. How could he not know? That woman he was with, she knew. One look at me and she knew.

He looked right back at me, though. He was steady. I don't know if he wanted to hear what I had to say to him, but he didn't back down from it. His eyes met mine.

So how can that not be what I'm seeing here?

This is Daniel.

This Lazarus act of his – the general was expecting it. He was ready for it. We said the nice things and here's Daniel, waltzing through our door right on schedule. Just like the general said he would. Naked as a jaybird. It should be funny, because this is after all...Daniel.

Only first the general can't look at Daniel and then he can't look away.

He's *nervous*.

Have I ever seen him nervous? Ever?

After all we've seen together, all we've done, this is what he can't handle?

Daniel, wrapped in an SGC flag? Daniel naked?

Daniel?

Why can't he let Daniel see that he's looking? We're all looking; there's nothing intrinsically wrong with looking, given the circumstances. Only...the general is acting like if *he* looks, it's wrong. Not us, just him. We've all looked. Even Bra'tac has looked. But the general...he has to look away. And when Daniel tries to catch him out, he has to make like he never looked at all.

If I were returned to him naked, if I were wrapped in that flag, his reaction would make sense. The tugging at his jacket, his fumbling at the flagpole - so masculine, so obvious. There would be cause, still unacknowledged between us, but cause nonetheless. Attraction. All those unspoken feelings we've danced the knife-edge for.

But that isn't me and this can't make sense.

It doesn't make sense.

He wasn't this way with her either. Kerry Johnson. I saw them together, first here in his office and then in his yard. Even blindsided, he wasn't embarrassed to be caught, didn't try for a half-convincing cover story, something I maybe could've bought if I'd worked at it. Worked hard.

Despite the promises he made to me when dad was dying, I'm forced to conclude he didn't try because he didn't care to. It didn't particularly matter to him if I knew he was with someone.

Someone else.

Two women he's involved with colliding over him in his own back yard, he takes on the chin. Steady.

What am I really seeing here? What's going on? The general has a problem with Daniel? With Daniel, being...naked? In front of all of us, or just in front of him?

Change the context, the protagonist, and attraction is evidenced. An involuntary physiological response allied to an awkwardly self-conscious emotional awareness.

An inherited biological imperative and perhaps the simplest of human equations.

Or the most complicated.

Because I can't change the protagonist any more than I can change the fact of the general's inability to control his response to him.

To Daniel.

I don't want to think about this any more.



I'm exhausted. Accepting the fact of Dad's loss didn't prepare me for the reality of it slamming down. So many questions I'd chosen not to ask of myself or of him when I took him through the Stargate that first time, so many issues left unconfrosted.

My dad was cured of cancer. Naquadah flows through his veins, the corpse of an alien parasite is wrapped around his brain stem and a deadly toxin of unknown origin saturates every cell of his body.

I wanted to bury him with Mom, I wanted Mark to mourn him, for us to come together as a family in Dad's passing in the way Dad and I came together so unexpectedly in life. The Tok'ra had said their goodbyes, relinquished their hold on Selmak and her host, and my dad was back where he belonged. He was home.

I wasn't ready to hear what Daniel had to say or to know my dad was as much a security risk in death as he was in life. The burial he'd chosen became a cremation, the public honours he'd earned forgone in favour of a strictly curtailed family ceremony, every detail of which was scrutinised and supervised by the SGC's security forces. Private was the last word I'd use for that. But what choice did I have? Medical records, autopsy, open casket, questions and risks. To the people in the shadows, the government agencies and private enterprise, the ghouls and the spies, even in death Dad's body has enormous scientific value. Secrets to be learned. Sending Dad's body through the gate to be buried off-world was never an option. I could never rob my brother of his chance to mourn, to say his goodbyes to Dad.

At least Mark was there, even if I couldn't answer his questions or explain why I'd ignored Dad's long expressed wishes. My brother only knows the military

screwed his father's death in the way it had always screwed our lives. Mark left me knowing I'd crossed the line, I was part of that agenda now. I'm not sure he can forgive me, but I want to forgive him. I know I had a part of Dad he never got to see outside those furtive, fleeting visits that grew fewer and further between as the relationship between the Tok'ra and the SGC deteriorated and Dad himself came under suspicion. I got to connect with Dad, to have him become the father I'd always dreamed of. I know he loved me in a way Mark will never experience or understand Dad was capable.

Weddings and funerals. Family. My dad is gone, Pete is gone and my certainties have gone with them. It feels as if all I have left are questions and there's some comfort here in the smaller uncertainties of fishing. When I tell the general how good this feels, I mean it. And I do wish we'd done this years ago.

I guess I've left a whole lot of issues unresolved and Jack O'Neill is maybe my biggest issue of all. When I look at Pete, at what we had and what I did to him, I have to think I've fooled myself into believing I've grown and that I'm a stronger person than I once was.

Pete knew something was wrong with me, something was off, and he thought I was worth the risk regardless.

I'm not so sure. Not any more.

Crossing lines. Not something that comes naturally to me but I'm doing it now. I'm watching. I've been watching since I understood there was something there, something I hadn't seen or had seen and failed to comprehend. Something between the general and Daniel.

I figure I haven't been too subtle about this either, because one night, far later than either of us should have been on base, Kerry Johnson walked into my lab and told me frankly at least she wasn't the only one. She's watching too, watching and wondering.

I wonder if she aches the way I do? If she has these dark, empty spaces in her life where people and love used to be? I loved Pete and I lost him. I gave up on everything we had, everything we could have been. I didn't want that to mean I was giving up on life, on the potential for happiness, but I'm only now starting to feel the loss. The loneliness.

Pete hoped I would get what I want but do I even know what that is?

It's not this. Not...watching.

Daniel has on these really old jeans, old and worn. They're shredded at the knee and tight at the thigh, disappearing under a frayed camouflage jacket he must have taken from the base. He's not dressed the way any of us are used to seeing him and I'm not the only one who's curious. When Daniel comes out onto the dock to give us our beers, the general makes sure to turn, to look, not just take.

It bothers me that I see this. It bothers me even more Kerry Johnson sees it too. That wasn't an affirmation I was ever looking for.

Daniel goes to sit with Teal'c and busies himself with rod, line and beer. He doesn't talk much and that's not something we're used to from him either. He doesn't look at the general and the general doesn't look at him, so why do I feel I've faded into the scenery?

It's not something I want to put to the test. I don't want to talk and not be heard.

The crisp afternoon slips away from us in silence no one feels inclined to break. The general only sees his line arcing out over the water. I know what fishing is and let it take me, focusing on the rhythm of it, the easy physicality. A long and quiet afternoon but by the end it feels natural. I feel a part of things again.

Dinner is thrown together; any and every bad thing the general can toss on a barbecue, eaten just as it comes, the four of us gathered companionably around the table out on the deck.

"It's a sweet spot," the general observes, looking around him with vast satisfaction.

"There are no fish in this pond and the woods surrounding it swarm with mosquitoes," Teal'c contradicts somewhat bitterly.

As the highest, rarest treat on the mosquito food chain, he gets to sleep out the feeding frenzy in one of the cabin's two bedrooms under specially rigged netting. The general has threatened to tuck him in at least twice today.

As the girl, I get to sleep in the other room.

The general will be sleeping in the living room with Daniel. Somehow, I don't think he's drawn the short straw. He made such a fuss to get the couch for himself, I suspect his sleeping bag will be on the floor right alongside Daniel's. It's the kind of game the general plays, the kind that always winds up with him getting exactly what he wants.

I hate that I'm thinking like this, thinking about the difference between courtesies Jack O'Neill genially extends to his guests and the perfunctory arrangements for

comfort he perpetually aims in Daniel's direction. It's more fun to abuse Daniel, to see him put out and sniping. It almost hides the fact the general can't see Daniel as a guest.

The line is barely visible, you have to look, I mean really *look*, but it's there just the same. A fine line dividing Daniel from everyone else.

Dinner is good, our mood is good, and conversation flows as fast as the heady red wine. The Zero Point Module that came to us so unexpectedly from a team of archaeologists in Egypt is uppermost on Daniel's mind. We've already talked this over exhaustively, weighed up every pro and con, every possible scenario of best use for the ZPM. The decision has already been made. The ZPM is going to Daedalus and Daedalus is going to the Pegasus Galaxy. To Atlantis.

We're still talking about it only because Daniel wants to go to Atlantis too. He wants it as much as he's ever wanted anything. He's made no secret of this, just as the general has made no secret of his absolute refusal to allow it. When General O'Neill was overruled by General Hammond, he fretted and fumed at everyone over everything, especially his stolen chair.

I did try to talk to him about Daniel, I always do try, just as he always deflects and obfuscates. His appropriated seating was the centre of his three-ring crisis, not the loss of our archaeologist. Sgt. Harriman was mourned volubly while Daniel was never mentioned. Daniel who?

And I did *try*.

I guess this is another line, another unspoken rule. Jack O'Neill's feelings about Daniel Jackson are *private*. His and his alone. He's talked about his feelings for Charlie more than he's talked about them for Daniel. His dead son is an area of his life I'm allowed to know on some level, to share in a limited way, but not his relationship with our teammate, our mutual friend?

This is not empirical evidence. Not quantifiable or measurable. I can scarcely see past my own faulty judgements, flawed assumptions and biases of the past, my own needs and hopes, but there is the balance of probability.

In all my doubts and my questions, my quiet surveillance of the past days, there is a slow bleed of truths I would never have chosen to face, each telling me that in all probability, General Jack O'Neill wants Daniel Jackson. Wants him in a way he didn't want Kerry Johnson.

Or me.

My loss of appetite is almost as abrupt as my departure, but they let me go. I buried a relationship and a family in less than a week. Even by SG-1's standards, I caught a tough break. It's enough they don't ask questions. Cold to the bone, I want only my bed, closing the door between me and them, burrowing under the blankets to huddle and shiver.

I think I sleep. I find my bed is pooled in shadows but I don't remember it getting dark. I was cold before but now I'm hot and thirsty. I need to pee. Brush my teeth. I have my routines, needs and comforts I'm rigid about. That I don't feel right without. Pete would have said rigid in a wonderful way but he loved me more than he should have. He made too many allowances.

Because the cabin is quiet, I'm quiet. The moon is high and Teal'c has his rituals too. When I pause to check on him, I see candlelight creep from under his closed door. He can't find the trance-like state that so defined who he was, how his mind and his body functioned, he can't go that deep any longer, but he can't give up on Kel'No'Reem entirely.

There's a fire warming the room but the back door is open and a soft breeze stirs and freshens the air. The general is outside, standing watchfully a little way from the house. I see him as I ease closer. I see Daniel too, sitting alone on the dock. He thinks he's alone and his head is bowed. Even from this distance, I can see how low he is, slack and unfocused where he should be bright, coiled and energetic.

I wish I could go to him. Reach him, instead of intrude.

I can't be seen unless the general turns around and I know I haven't been heard, but my presence seems enough to break a spell. He's going to Daniel. Before I can stop myself, I'm following him, right up to the window. I'm pulling back the drape before I realise what I'm doing and then I panic, backing up instinctively. I forgot Daniel so *fast* it frightens me. I hit a warm, solid wall that holds me in place. Teal'c, who's had my back too often for me to dream of fighting him now. If he's looking...watching...if he wants me to see?

I want to see.

Framed in moonlight, the general sits down close by Daniel and talks to him. He talks until Daniel straightens his spine, lifts his head and practically spits in his eye. His hand is on Daniel's shoulder then. Both of Teal'c's are on mine, the only heat I feel as chills grip my chest. Daniel won't allow himself to lean into the general's touch but Teal'c doesn't give me a choice. He's here for me, whether I want him or not.

Jack is there for Daniel. He touches Daniel's face so gently my throat tightens. He

puts his arms around Daniel, holds him tightly, protectively, very close to him. Much too close. I want so badly for this to be just about friendship, for Daniel to keep on fighting him, but my friend has had his losses too. He's so tired, too tired to fight when Jack is there for him, right there. Haltingly, he puts his head down again, puts his head right on Jack's shoulder.

I didn't know Daniel could. I doubt Jack knew, but he wants it. He's eating it up.

As Daniel's arms come around Jack, I can't breathe and the chills are shaking me. I don't need to see this. I don't *want* to see. I don't have the will to stop looking, to close my eyes or break away.

Whatever Jack meant this to be, he's losing it now. Because Daniel needs him. Daniel has admitted his need, given in to it. Jack's hands can't be still on Daniel. He's rubbing Daniel's back, his shoulders, his hair, soothing, fingers stroking in a slow, greedy slide from sympathy to sex.

Daniel doesn't stop him. He could, there's no doubt he could, but he chooses not to. Jack's hands are on him, where he wants them to be, coaxing the trouble from him.

Their bodies are eloquent long after words fail them.

I feel sick and I'm no longer sure Teal'c has my back. Not for this. Not to make me watch them falling this way.

In my time alone on Prometheus, in my dreams, Jack told me this wasn't about him, he wasn't that complicated. What he told me – what I told myself – it was the truth, wasn't it? Unvarnished, unwanted. If he loved me, if he wanted me, I should have known. Without doubt. It should have been me he turned to, me his eyes would seek out in any crowd. He would want me with him. Listen to me. Let me in.

I've tried to tell him, tried to cross the line with him. The best he can do with that is let me expose myself to him the way I have? Let me try to come to him again and again, wearing myself out, lingering on alone in this uncertainty only because he doesn't want to deal with it? With me?

I feel nothing but doubt so I go back to what I know. To science. To evidence.

The balance of probability here is that while Jack cares for me, while he can promise to be here for me always and mean it, he doesn't care enough to tell me how he feels. To tell me no and tell me *why*. I'd like to believe it's because he can't lie to me, but mostly, I think it's easier on him to let me go right on making a fool

of myself than to give me an answer. The truth.

He cannot, he will not tell me the truth. I don't know if he can tell Daniel or if he can even tell himself. He knows who he wants and why, but can he accept it? Admit it?

The unbelievable truth.

"I believe O'Neill has finally exhausted all his avenues of escape," Teal'c observes mildly.

"You knew?" I demand hoarsely, breaking away.

Teal'c lets me go, but it's his room and confrontation he steers me to. Immovable and quite without pity for my pain and confusion, he's still able to be kind to me, draping a blanket around me, getting me water. Sitting close and affecting not to see me shake.

"O'Neill has been enamoured of Daniel Jackson for as long as I have known him," he answers me calmly when he's ready. Or when he thinks I'm ready.

"He's a good liar." I sound as hollow as I feel.

Teal'c gives a measured, thoughtful nod. "To himself, certainly."

"He can't do this!" I burst out. The truth is out there, but I may never be capable of anything but railing at it.

"Nor can you," Teal'c reminds me dryly.

"I'm serious!" I argue hotly.

"As am I."

"The general can't have feelings for a - for a *man*," I stutter. "It could cost him *everything*. His whole career. His reputation. Maybe even his life! He could wind up in prison."

"Do you object to homosexual relations?" Teal'c enquires.

"That's none of your business!"

Teal'c nods as if my refusal to answer to his intrusiveness makes complete sense to him. "I see you share the well-documented prejudices of your military," he

decides.

"None of your business."

"Tell me, Colonel Carter," Teal'c urges. "Is your objection to any man loving and desiring another? Or merely to General O'Neill loving and desiring another?"

"My personal beliefs are not on trial here," I inform him stonily.

"Nor are those of General O'Neill, a fact for which your military allows."

"Only on paper," I snap. "Believe me when I tell you if this got out it would ruin the general's career. He would lose the respect of the men."

"He has not lost mine. Nor has DanielJackson," Teal'c replies. "Have they lost yours?"

I'm not answering that. I'm not on trial here. I owe Teal'c neither explanation nor justification. My moral code is every bit as complex and difficult as his own and he has no more right to question my beliefs than I have to question his. He should *know* this!

"The general can't be with Daniel," I insist, returning emphatically to the point.

"You are not so inflexible where your own desires are concerned, Colonel Carter," Teal'c reminds me coolly. "Your true objection here is that General O'Neill loves DanielJackson and not you. Were O'Neill to return your regard, DanielJackson would without question guard your feelings and remain your friend, as I hope you will remain his."

Do I have to be paranoid to hear the unspoken threat here?

"May I remind you, Colonel Carter, that it is you and not DanielJackson who has pursued O'Neill?"

While O'Neill was pursuing Daniel Jackson.

"I'm well aware of how compromised I am, Teal'c." I can't believe how rough I sound, how close to losing it I am. "I'm equally aware the general did little or nothing to either put me off or set me straight. As often as I've tried to talk to him, he's listened, he's told me..." My voice breaks. "Told me he *knows*."

"O'Neill has not been honest with you as you have not been honest with him." Teal'c looks at me sternly. "Did you not give your word to him that your feelings

would remain private and with your admission of it, the emotional difficulty you had experienced was at an end?"

I meant it. At the time I meant it completely. I don't know why I couldn't let go, why I always turn full circle back to him. I can't move on. Something is crippling me, keeping me locked in this pattern, keeping me needing. Dependent.

In the final analysis, is Jack O'Neill any different than me? Wanting the one person he can't have but can't let go? I know him well enough to be sure he didn't choose to love Daniel or to want him the way I have to believe he does.

The difference can't be that he's more honest than me, if only with the person he loves. More honourable than me. That he's fought his feelings instead of wallowing in them as I've allowed myself to.

I won't let that be the truth here. I can't. I've brought down enough humiliation on my head, given enough cause Teal'c can tear me down like this and believe it's the right thing to do. The general and me, we're not that different. We care too much - and we don't care enough. The only real chance I ever had with him was the one I passed on five years ago. I wouldn't give up SG-1 for him. I couldn't.

I wish I could have given up on him. I went after a man who can't even let me use his name. Not because of the rules or the regs but because of our ranks. Because that's what I am to him. I'm a soldier. A subordinate. He'll care for me only so long as it's on his terms.

And I'm still justifying to myself, aren't I? Still fawning over the emperor's amazing new clothes.

Kawalsky used the general's name. That was allowed. That didn't feel *wrong*. It's wrong when I do it. I have a place in his life, a line I can't cross. He never said love. Never felt love. Not the kind that would ever let me use his name and have it feel right.

I always thought that distance was there, insisted upon, to disguise his feelings. All it ever hid from me was the lack of them.

My part in this is done.

It's not just that I can do better, be better.

Daniel didn't do this, not to himself and not to me. He's my *friend*. And his life is about to change because of Jack O'Neill, even more than mine.

Because Jack means everything with Daniel and Jack isn't fighting. Not any more. He's done.



## PART THREE: ALL THINGS MERGE INTO ONE

Jack is holding me like this is where I'm meant to be. He's set. He's good. He's got me.

He's where I want to be.

All it took for me to realise this was the clarity of a blade in my chest.

"It didn't flash before my eyes," I murmur disjointedly.

"Life?" Jack gets what I'm trying to tell him.

"There was nothing."

Just the ice of the blade and her eyes, and then heat, tremendous heat, searing through the heart of me. Blood filling my mouth, spilling out.

Nothing. No life half-lived, no paths not taken. No illusions, dreams or fantasies. No Jack, waiting.

No Jack.

I was falling away from him with blood in my mouth.

"Nothing."

He's warm with me. He feels good and right and I soak him in, his chest against mine, our heartbeats blended.

"I could stay like this."

I could let go.

I'm more shaken than I care to admit; Jack hears me whisper.

"If it wasn't such a cliché, I'd kiss you," he promises gruffly.

"And we all know how you feel about clichés." I've been inching towards him for so long that I'm not capable of jumping now. It isn't in me. This is all I can find to say to him in the hope he'll hear me, he'll know what I'm holding inside.

He smells of beer and sunshine. Peace. There's even patience. He's all I want to know. I find I can inch a little closer...

"Could you? Jack? Could you kiss me?"

"You try and stop me."

As much as I like being with him like this, guarded and protected, as much as I want to feel this safe, I need to look at him. He's worth everything to me, worth the risk. I can't die without Jack again and I know that means I must live with him.

"You need to know what's changed." Jack smiles soft recognition, pulling me gently back to him. "I've changed."

"If only it were that simple."

"I'm simple."

He's making promises to me and this feels so good. If only I weren't crippled by confusion and the memory of pain. Jack might as well kiss me; it makes no more sense to me than anything else does.

I hold onto him.

Jack knows I want this and he makes it easy for me. He makes me feel this is right, his arms tight and his face against mine.

"Maybe I haven't changed at all," he muses. "Maybe I finally just saw the light."

"I don't understand." I'm pleading quite nakedly, wanting only to know where I stand. To find sense and some semblance of certainty.

"I love you. That's the way it is."

The way I want it to be.

"You loved me before, Jack. It wasn't enough. So what's changed?" I don't even know if I wanted it to be enough. Not then, not when it was first acknowledged between us.

"Me," Jack admits wryly, wanting me to know he's past this. "I don't seem to have had the blinding revelations that dog you into the afterlife and back again. I wish I could tell you different. Truth is, the only thing I woke up to was – I was an ass. Yeah, I loved you all this time but I loved myself more. I was telling myself having respect and honour, having my command – those were worth more to me than having you."

"I knew it." As little as I was ready to commit to the idea of 'us,' I was hurt by it.

"I doubt I'll ever be able to say 'screw my command' and completely mean it," Jack says frankly. "But I did manage to grasp two simple facts of life as I know it."

His lips ghost over my cheek and my heart freezes.

"It's *your* respect I need most and there's no honour in me if I can love you and cut you off because it's easier on me." He sits back with a smile that melts his eyes then takes my face between both eloquent hands. Studies me unflinchingly with a – a *heat* I barely understand, not from him. "There's never going to be a right time to do this," he decides. "Not the first time."

If he means to kiss me, to give me what I want, he doesn't quite make it. I can't trust myself not to ask for it, can't be this close and not touch him, and so we find each other. Our mouths meet and I shudder hard. One time. Explode out of my skin.

Fear and pain and falling. God, I know this. Falling away from Jack or into him, I can hardly tell. I can't breathe for what I'm losing, the one thing I would have given anything to keep safe. I would have given my love to keep his friendship.

No time to think.

Jack is hot and hard and hungry, wanting to take us deep, wanting it all, pulling me down with him when his back hits the dock.

There's only feeling.

Jack's iron body, his throttling hold on me with arms and legs, his tongue slipping over mine, his hands on me.

Fear and regret and clenching tension.

Not holding back.

Heat tears at the ice inside, in my gut; the cold, clear memory of pain. The blade. Piercing me like her eyes. Sam's eyes.

Letting go.

Falling into Jack, into his mouth and his eyes and his arms. I'm wide open - wrenched open - and my heart is shaking me; I'm holding onto him in a way that feels completely wrong.

I *love* him.

Only Jack could want more.

"Don't let go," he whispers.



I shiver abjectly despite the warmth of the fire and the blanket, pressing my cheek into Jack's thighs. The couch is too small for us, too obvious if Sam or Teal'c were to come out of their rooms, but for so long as I'm curled up beside him, Jack has no place he'd rather be. He's stroking my hair with one hand, soothing the tension from my back with the other.

"There's no scar," I remark inconsequentially, reaching out from under the blanket to touch Jack's wrist, his arm. Feeling able to touch him in small ways. "There should be." I don't have to close my eyes to feel the wound. The blade.

"This is different, isn't it?" Jack is so gentle with me, my eyes sting. "Dying this time - it was different for you."

"It was personal."

Jack looks away from my face to stare enigmatically at the door Sam is sleeping behind. There's a darkness, a blame in his eyes that relieves me. I took a real risk in trusting him with the truth. The others will go on thinking Replicator Carter and I died together in the lash of the terrible Ancient weapon on Dakara, that it was instantaneous, painless for me. Only Jack will ever know I was murdered. I could only share with him the violence and desperate pain of dying alone,

wrenched with fear and regret.

It's only because he has me safe I can face this. It's not a burden lifted, only shared, but I find I can be glad Jack is in this with me.

I've felt so alone.

"I saw into her mind, Jack," I confide. "Into Sam's mind."

"The Replicator?"

"I'm not sure any longer." I find I'm holding on to his arm and Jack's grip naturally shifts to hold mine. Easier to look into the fire than to have Jack look into me, but I turn my head at this and let him see. "I don't know what I expected of a human form machine but I found what I recognised to be Sam. Her memories, the way her mind works. Not so very different than our own Sam because only a few months of experience separated them. I even know how the Replicator Carter saw Sam - those memories were there too."

"How?" Jack interrupts. He's feeling something here and he needs to know. He and Teal'c both assured Sam that she wasn't responsible for the Replicator Samantha Carter. Sam knew better, she knew she was the root of it all. Fifth learned betrayal from her and it came full circle to haunt her in the form of her copy. It's only now that I've seen into the Replicator Carter I fully understand Sam's insistence on her guilt.

There but for the grace of God.

"The Replicator believed if Sam could only see past her insecure need for acceptance and compliance, if she could set aside her compassion and pursue power the way she was meant to, they would be the same," I confess in a stifled voice. The machine was filled with dark, arrogant egocentrism, sublime conviction of its superiority and a consuming need for absolute power. I don't believe it had the emotional maturity to comprehend our Sam's essential humanity. It couldn't understand the profound impact of human feelings, how they drive us.

I love Sam. I wish I was bigger than this, but I'm struggling to separate my friend from the cold, self-serving thing that killed me. I'm influenced not only by my unwanted insight into the workings of Sam's mind but the glacial perceptions of the machine, untrammelled by bonds of affection. I had no choice about going into the Replicator's mind, but I never expected it to leave these kinds of wounds.

"I hate what this has done to me, Jack," I confess slowly in a low, reluctant voice. "I hate that I'm seeing the Replicator every time I look at Sam. I know in reality

they're *not* the same, but I feel her – she's cutting into me and I can't get past it."

I was in her way. She took me out. That's Sam's logic at work. Nothing could stop the Replicator Samantha Carter; not guilt or remorse, certainly not those shared feelings for me she laid claim to. The machine knew me at least as well as Sam did and now I know what that means. I've seen myself through Sam's eyes. I've seen myself with a clarity that Sam's emotions and insecurities won't allow her. I wish I didn't know the person Sam sees. In some of her memories, I see only a caricature of myself. An aggravation. What I can no longer see is Sam loving me.

"I can't get past it."

"A year ago I made a promise to someone," Jack says stonily. "I think it's time I made good on it."

"A promise?" I'm confused. A promise is not something Jack O'Neill makes lightly and this is coming out of nowhere. "Jack? Who did you make a promise to?"

"To the guy who saved our asses in the battle over the Antarctic, the guy who bought me time to get to the Ancients' weapon. Cameron Mitchell. He led the squadron of F-302's that kept back Anubis' forces and he paid for it. He paid dearly."

Mitchell? I know the name but not the man. Jack's the only pilot I hang with, the only one of them I know who doesn't think if you don't fly you don't live.

"Mitchell's fighter went down in a dogfight and he's spent the past year in Rehab learning to walk again." Jack respects this.

"You've been keeping tabs on him?"

"I keep tabs on every member of SG-1." Seeing my shocked reaction, Jack is cocky and grinning.

"SG-1? That's your promise? A place for him on the team?"

"In my book, Mitchell earned it."

Then it's done. This is why we haven't had our fourth since Jack stepped up to lead the SGC. This man Cameron Mitchell. It's important to Jack so it's important to me. SG-1 – we're still Jack's team. We'll always be. If he needs for Mitchell to be on his team, then I'll do what I can to make it work. To make room for the man in a place I only ever want to have Jack.

"Isn't Mitchell the same rank as Sam?" I ask cautiously, unsure of where this is taking us.

"We'll work it out." Jack's grin widens, his eyes dwelling darkly on Sam's door. I think I see the sense of this, of having a second military presence on the team and an objective one. A fresh perspective – even, if you wanted to look at it that way, a second-guesser. Someone to ask the right questions and challenge the answers in a way Jack himself might.

I wish I could say Jack is reading more into my distress than he should but I'm mired in my unwanted inability to trust. My faith in Sam has taken a cut – a literal cut I still feel as ice inside of me – I'm not sure I can recover from. I can't see my way clear of this. Not yet.

I wish I could say Jack was wrong.

I can only say I'm grateful.



On this crisp, uncertain morning, Jack's exuberance is purely offensive.

Breakfast barbecue? Dear God.

Faced with greasy sausage and fossilised eggs even Teal'c is daunted, while Sam's brittle smile deserts her completely when Jack blithely announces – as if this is a good thing - SG-1 is getting its fourth.

Sam knows the name too. She knows a threat when she hears it. Sam is – what do they call it? As a pilot, she's second chair. Mitchell is like Jack, though. A leader.

Sam knows it.

"I have news too," she announces almost defiantly, pushing her barely touched plate away from her. "I've been offered a command at Area 51. Again. They want me to head up the team of military and civilian scientists there." She went looking for the reaction she's now getting but I can't say she's enjoying it.

Teal'c's glass of OJ, suspended mid-way to his lips, resumes its journey. He takes a measured sip and sets down his glass again. "Given the mistrust that has been fostered between the scientists of Area 51 and those of Stargate Command, there

would be many tactical advantages to your acceptance of such a position," he judges.

"There he goes again," Jack complains exaggeratedly to the rest of us. "Letting that wayward heart of his rule his head. Haven't we talked about you getting all weepy and emotional like this?" he demands.

"Colonel Carter does not require my verbal assurance in order to be certain that I do not wish her to leave SG-1," Teal'c replies, unmoved by Jack's sarcasm.

Colonel Carter looks as if she requires something, but it's not from Teal'c, and as for me - I might as well not be here. It's Jack she's looking at as if he might open up and swallow her whole.

"I think it goes without saying I don't want you to go either, Carter," Jack says steadily. "But if this is what *you* want, and I guess General Hammond signed off on the offer for it to have even been made, then I can't stand in your way."

"You can't or you won't?" Sam quietly challenges, torn between anger and - I think - tears.

Jack raises a decidedly supercilious eyebrow.

"Sir," Sam snaps grudgingly. I think she knows this is all the answer she's going to get but she can't quite bring herself to accept it.

"More coffee, Carter?" Jack offers blandly.

Sam's face flames at this brutal snub.

She's not cold, she's far from cold, and I feel a queer pain. I see my friend in her and I see more, much more than I was ever meant to know.

The Replicator Samantha shared Sam's needs and drives even if she had moved past so many of them. What Sam wants is Jack, or at least her idea of Jack. She's wanted him for as long as I have, and been clear about how she wanted him. As a woman, it was simpler for her to comprehend wanting.

She's never going to have what she wants. She's never going to touch Jack, not the way she craves. I think...I think she'd have to see him first. See him for who he is and not who she needs him to be.

Placidly, Jack smiles at me as he cuts her off. "Feel like taking a walk?" he invites. "I could do with some air."

Somehow failing to notice Sam picking up her breakfast things with slow, angry precision and walking frigidly into the cabin, Teal'c generously offers his mosquito repellent for the expedition and tells us emphatically he and Colonel Carter will *not* be here when we return.

"Good man." Jack's smile not only holds, it widens to mostly teeth. Pearly white teeth and a certain suspicious smugness.

"You should go after her," I object as my arm is taken and I'm hauled gently but firmly out of my chair under Teal'c's benignly approving gaze.

I don't know whether to be grateful or insulted Teal'c thinks I'm so easy he doesn't bother to question Jack's blatant extraction of me from a difficult scene. My traitorously paternalistic Jaffa friend *wants* me in safe hands and he's having no difficulty at all with those hands belonging to Jack. Those hands have his *blessing*.

Feeling like a baton that's been passed or something, I'm inclined to stand my ground and kick both their asses.

Teal'c smiles at me.

I gulp as it finally sinks in.

He knows about us. About Jack. Jack and me.

*He knows!*

"Sam!" I bleat in Jack's direction, unable to deal with all of this. "You should talk to her."

"I should," Jack agrees equably. He's not going to. Instead, he pockets buttermilk biscuits to stave off possible starvation and drags me off to picnic in the dewy - read damp - woods.

"Don't worry about Carter," he advises me as we walk away from the cabin. "The guy she should be sorry over is that poor dumb cop Pete. That was real. That mattered. The rest, the stuff that was only in her head, she'll get over."

"You'll talk to her?" I urge. His only reply is a non-committal grunt. He's not about to accept his culpability where Sam's fantasies are concerned and I don't have the energy or the will to make an issue of it. "Jack," I sigh, wishing I could be a more forceful advocate than I feel. I don't want Sam to go, I don't want to lose her, I just don't feel up to fighting for her.

"We're not going far," Jack warns me as I tramp along the narrow, overhung trail behind him, ticked off, a little depressed, and soaked to the ankles. "We'll go back as soon as they've gone." He glances around to check on me and I see all of his teeth bared at me again. "Back to bed."

Bed? Oh.

"Jack...I'm not sure."

"About?"

"About almost everything."

"You love me. I love you. That's sure."

*That's* sure. But nothing else is. For me, not even death and taxes.

"Stop your whining," Jack snorts, thwarting my efforts to falter to a halt and get nervous on him. "Or at least walk and whine at the same time."

"It's not about the sex per se. It's not issues of masculinity or anything like that." I'm not scared of getting physical with him. Only of what it means. To go from inching towards him to tumbling headlong over a precipice? Can I even *try*?

"I tried sleeping with a woman," Jack casually stuns me. "It was about the sex per se. And I guess you could say I did have issues of masculinity, only not the ones I expected. Sex?" He shrugs indifferently. "Its okay, y'know? It's sex. It's supposed to be fun. Only there's no point to it if I'm not with you." Jack is fearless as he tells me this. He not only knows the truth of it, he's accepted. I'm a part of him now. "No one gets to me the way you do."

"Like living under glass?" This is what Jack said to me at Bitter Creek. That I couldn't touch, couldn't be touched. Not where it counted. Not...intimately.

Jack turns around and eyes me. "You're not mad?" he enquires doubtfully. "About the woman? Only, I decided if you were trying so damned hard to leave me that maybe I should try leaving you. I don't tell you this to hurt you, Daniel, only to be honest with you. Okay? I want you to know where I'm coming from, that's all. I know it's important to you."

"Was she nice?" What else can I say? Like his fishing and my books, like Atlantis, this woman is a metaphor for what's been going on with Jack and me. She's about wanting and not having. Illusion, and even obsession, in place of commitment.

"She was great. It's not her fault I figured out that sex – it takes *you*."

Jack looks inward, reflective, while I hardly know how to respond. This is the man who wouldn't sleep with me because he was afraid to get that personal.

"She figured out on her own that for me there's no real point to anything unless you're a part of it and she made sure to let me in on it."

"She dumped you?"

"Aaah, she had cause," Jack allows indulgently. "I couldn't even figure out you were dead."

*I could*, I think involuntarily.

Possibly reading my mind, Jack comes much closer, his hands sliding around to clasp the back of my neck. "Bed," he says decisively. "That's what you need."

"There are more clichés for love and death than for anything," I say quietly. "It's impossible to communicate honestly your experience of either of those extremes."

Jack pulls on his supportive look like he would a coat.

I put my hands on Jack. Swallow hard.

"You're what I need," I tell him timidly.

This is love. Reaching out.



I'm in a room with a bed in it. A bed and Jack. He's waiting and I'm going to have to reach out again. Give in to him a little. Only this time he's the one who can't wait, who has to ask before I can give him what he wants and we meet up at the foot of the bed. There's an awkwardness for us in daylight, in being eye to eye. We sit. Then we lie back, each of us keeping our bare feet firmly on the floor.

"I'm not leaving you," I tell Jack as I give my hands a place to be, folding them tightly over my stomach. I look up at the ceiling. "Not anymore."

"Good." Now Jack has to swallow. "That's good to know."

"It doesn't mean I don't belong in Atlantis," I hasten to add. "Because I do."

"You're obsessed."

"Yes. I *am* an archaeologist and this *is* Atlantis. In point of fact, obsessed is possibly an understatement. We should be talking selling my soul." I find I'm smiling. "I'm staying here."

"Yes?"

"You're here."

"Yes."

"I wish I could give you a better answer. An easier..."

"That's okay," Jack quickly interrupts. I hear a grin in his voice again. "You and me - it's been real. Let's not get all hearts and flowers on each other now."

I steal a sidelong glance and find Jack's looking at the ceiling too. And he's trembling. Laughing. On the inside.

"How about we settle for getting comfortable?" He sits up, pushes back, plumps down on the pillows.

With little hesitation I plump down next to him.

"Have we resolved anything?" I want to know, tracing a crease of fabric down his shirt. "Are we any further forward than that time at Bitter Creek?"

Jack considers this. Then he pulls open a few buttons and pushes my hand under his shirt. Against his skin. "If we were any further forward, we'd be naked," he observes with warm satisfaction.

"I didn't make a decision." I feel a distant, quivering sadness. "It was - if anything, it was made for me. I died. That's all it took. I only had to die to know..."

Jack's hands are busy helping my hands feel him up so he puts his face against mine. "That only means you're human," he promises. "Come on, Daniel, listen to yourself. You *died* to know you could be with me? Who could ask for more?"

"You could ask for certainty."

"I don't feel it myself." The heat is there in his eyes again, killing me with tenderness. "I just heard it said to me once too often, what I wouldn't tell myself."

"The woman?" I roll onto my side, hitch closer to Jack, then hitch closer again, until we touch.

"And the barber." Jack's face lightens, he lightens, his whole body growing loose. "Even the goddamned Ancients." He's trembling again. Light and laughing. "Stuck you back butt naked right in my office."

"I wasn't in danger of Ascension. I'm sure of it." I'm making him the promise now. "Whatever Oma and the Others wanted of me, you were here."

I can't see enough of Jack smiling.

"Could you, Daniel?" he asks me softly. "Could you kiss me?"

Live with fear for him or don't live at all?

That's a choice I've already made, if it was ever a true choice for me at all.

I kiss him.

It takes all of me, takes the whole of my body to kiss Jack the way I need to and the way he wants me to. His smiling mouth is smooth and hot, each stroke of his tongue directly connecting to my cock, excitement skittering across tingling nerve endings, spiking low in my belly. His hold on me is tight, as solid as anything I've known. He must feel my heart banging against my ribs, the breath I can't catch.

Attacking buttons and zippers, his fingers are no steadier than mine. Rolling and pushing ineffectually at strangling clothes, we strain for skin. Jack is trembling again, clenching up on me, looking as if something is really, really wrong with him. He groans out something thunderous and low.

I think - I hear my name. I hear him.

Jack's found what was missing from sex, that's all. He's found me. Touching and being touched. And it's really, *really* right for him. Then he's tearing at my jeans, baring my hips and my thighs, he's on me and doing wonderful things to me with lips and tongue and greedy fingers, he's shaking and groaning and wet and hard and hot, and it's right, it's exactly right for me.

There's a rhythm to mouths and tongues and touch and hips, a slow-fast pulse of

body on body, cock on cock that squeezes my heart like a fist. This makes sense to me. This is certainty. The rest, I don't know. If there's a world outside of making love with Jack, I don't know it. I don't care. I can only be with him. This is *simple*.

My Jack is a simple man. All the issues we have outside of loving and being loved? His solution is simple.

"You and me," he whispers pleurably in the ear he's nibbling. "After this..."

He's assuming we'll survive.

"We should go fish."

**FINIS**