

## THREE'S COMPANY A SLASH STORY BY BIBLIO



Rating: PG-13

Pairing: Jack and Daniel

Category: First Time. Humour. Romance.

Season/Spoilers: Season 4. A sequel to "The First Ones."

Synopsis: In every reality where Robert Rothman dies, Jack O'Neill will never get to know what he - and schnapps - can do to Daniel Jackson.

Warnings: Warm fuzzies abound.

Notes: Revised for publication on the web, the story first appeared in the 2004 Make It Write Zine.



Our Daniel's heartfelt relief and gratitude at finally reaching the archaeological base camp evaporates faster than the muzzle flash from a P-90 when he gets his glasses back and the huddled heap on the ground in front of the battered C.P. tent grudgingly swims into recognisable focus.

"Jack!" Daniel yelps instinctively, swinging around to glower at me. "What the *hell* have you done to Robert?"

"It wasn't me!" I protest loudly. I ask you! Is that the face of a man I just snatched from the jaws of death? He looks more pissed now than when he thought we were getting trigger happy on his Unas.

"It was I," Teal'c nobly, and somewhat unexpectedly, sticks up for me.

"It was him!" I agree forcefully. It almost *was* me but I don't think we should get into that. Things are complicated enough with Rothman trussed up like a silent movie heroine tied to a railroad track. That and the fact he's so pleased to see his buddy Daniel alive and uneaten, it's brought a sentimental glow to his eyes.

"Ha'taaka!" the snake in Rothman's head spits in Teal'c's direction.

I guess it makes a change from shol'va for the big guy.

Directing an aggrieved stare at me, Daniel mutters darkly resentful recriminations - not quite below his breath - from which Teal'c's name is markedly absent.

I almost emptied a full clip into Rothman's chest back there at Symbiote Central. Don't ask me how, but my irate honey can *tell*.

Not that he's *exactly* my honey.

Close, but sadly no cigar yet.

Allegedly, getting pitifully hammered on butterscotch schnapps a sadistic pint-sized Secret Santa got me, and rolling around on the rug in my den while Dorothy loudly ruby-slippered her way up the yellow brick road doesn't count.

Daniel chalked our close encounter of the finest kind up to alcohol poisoning and bolted off-world when an impromptu re-match against his washer-dryer conclusively proved him wrong on New Years.

Personally, I think there's a limit to how many times you can accidentally have energetically ecstatic sex with a guy before you have to admit there's something there.

I'm working on third time being the charm.

Daniel is working on a look that could kill as he hunkers down in front of the snake in Rothman's head.

"Careful, Daniel!" Carter snaps, reaching out automatically to tug at his shoulder.

She gets protective. It annoys the crap out of me that Daniel thinks it's *cute* when *she* does it. I never get a smile like that.

"Robert?" Daniel calls compassionately to his dear departed friend. "I know you can hear me. Just hang in there, okay? We'll get you to the Tok'ra and have this thing out of you in no time."

The thing responds with a torrent of invective the only word I can pick out is 'kree.'

Teal'c, who appears to think this means him, promptly obliges by triggering his trusty staff weapon right in its face, then spits something even ruder back.

"This is fascinating." Ignoring the curdling insults being traded behind him, Daniel gets arthritically to his feet and then almost falls over them when they don't work for him the way they're supposed to.

Carter purses her lips, ducks neatly under his arm and offers herself up as a crutch. Daniel gives her a distracted thank-you hug.

I don't like that woman.

"The Goa'uld symbiote doesn't recognise the Tok'ra," Daniel informs us, his overactive brain visibly sapping the very last of his strength. "It doesn't even recognise Ra."

"It doesn't?" That ticks me off. I *like* it when my reputation precedes me. Knowing I've already whacked the Supreme Snake saves time, effort and bullshit when I'm getting down to finishing off the snake in front of me. If not about me and the pain in its mikta..."Then what was all that yakking about?"

"Uh, Robert," Daniel replies distractedly, frowning.

"Rothman?" Huh? If that thing is bitching about anyone, it should be me. I *did* almost empty a whole clip into it. Famous snake slayer or not, for that reason alone I should be uppermost in what passes for its mind. "What about him?"

"It's pissed because it didn't pick a better host." Admitting this, Daniel isn't looking any happier than the snake's apparently defective host. "Has anyone seen his inhaler?"

"It can't heal him?" Carter blinks in astonishment.

"In time, I guess," Daniel says slowly. "I think."

In other words, he doesn't know.

"Without access to a sarcophagus, the symbiote is dependent on its own regenerative powers and asthma isn't some mild infection it can just slough off," Daniel insists defensively. "It's dealing with irritable, physically constricted airways."

That's Rothman, alright.

And *this* is Daniel, so I know what's coming.

"We should go now," Daniel announces decisively. "Take Robert to the Stargate and get him to the Tok'ra right away."

And this is me, so *he* should know what's coming.

"No."

"Jack!"

"No, Daniel. No. You're exhausted, beat up and you were almost an Unas entree, Griff took a staff weapon blast to the shoulder and the rest of us ran our asses off. We're not leaving more people behind here to double-time it to the gate because the damned snake is wheezy."

"Robert is --"

"No!"

It's sad but true. He doesn't like me when I'm masterful.

Teal'c, the suck-up, pats Rothman down and comes up with the inhaler. He gets major brownie points from a Carter-propelled Daniel and somehow manages to get away with practically shoving the inhaler down the snake's unwilling throat when it huffs and it puffs and he blows its house down.

I guess Rothman is cramping its godlike style. Hard to pull off the studly sinister omnipotence shtick when you sound like Muttley from Wacky Races.

Naturally, this immediately has me thinking of myself as Dick Dastardly. I get to enjoy the thought of finally catching my Pigeon for all of two seconds before my damned Vulture Squadron hauls him off to the tent he shared with Rothman and slakes her maternal instinct on his quivering body.

With Samantha Carter standing over him tapping a pissed foot and looking like *that*, Daniel manages to gulp down some food, meekly acquiesces to having his hands and face washed, lies down like a good boy, accepts the extra comfy blankey and tumbles into the waiting arms of Mr. Sandman within seconds.

He's probably paralysed with horror because she's stroking his hair and stuff.

I know I am.

I do not, I repeat, I do not like that woman.

Teal'c, who's been conducting a hushed yet vigorous interrogation of the snake in Rothman's head, walks away from it with a derisive sneer of discontent. "I do not believe the Tok'ra will be interested in the knowledge this Goa'uld possesses."

"It's been swimming around in a pond," I point out reasonably. "Its ancestors swam around in the same pond. Its vaunted genetic memory is of swimming around in that pond. Put it all together, you've got yourself a snake hypno-sleep tape. Two minutes of pond scum, puts you out like a light."

We look at the snake in Rothman's head. It's not quite as vocal and annoying as the Rothman in Rothman's head but all this kree-ing 'til the cows come home gets old.

Our stoic Jaffa warrior is eyeing up the other barracks tent and mentally placing his candles.

"Griff snores, y'know," I comment idly, also eyeing the tent, with its limited supply of cots. "He farts too."

Teal'c is unmoved. "As do you."

"Maybe, maybe," I admit without rancour, "but I didn't just scarf down three MRE packs of barbecue beans topped off with jalapeno spread to build up my strength."

Factoring this into the already complicated sleeping arrangements, the two of us pensively weigh our options.

"Actually, you can take the tent," I offer generously, prudently deciding discretion is the better part of odour. "I'll stay out here and guard the prisoner. Take my chance with the snake and the stinky monsters."

"I will remain also," Teal'c decides. He's very good at being noble, but it doesn't take much to see that the problems of one digestively compromised major amounts to one steep hill of beans in this crazy, snake-filled world.

Thinking about it, I guess there aren't many fates worse than being paralysed by a state of Kel'No'Reem in a small tent with a keenly heightened sense of smell and a flatulent marine – or an Air Force colonel – for company.

Cool! I'll keep that in mind.



Since I'm not a total bastard and I'd put money on Tok'ra Spice having Martouf's brain mounted in a jar on her mantelpiece in her cosy pied-a-tunnel on Vorash, I decide to send Carter back to the SGC with our casualties in tow.

Then it occurs to me if I take Teal'c along, there are likely to be more casualties.

From the anticipatory smirk on his face, it's clearly occurred to him too. He gets very pouty when I send him home with Carter.

I also try to send Daniel home with Carter, but even when she, I, Teal'c, Coburn and a woozy Griff – he's on the good drugs – point out claw marks do count as injuries sustained in the field, he refuses to accept this makes him a casualty.

Carter, Teal'c and Coburn are inclined to be bitter about this on the grounds he won't be the one having a coronary on the gateroom ramp trying to sneak his absence without medical leave under Janet Fraiser's radar while she's shining her pen thingie right in his eyes. Griff gets a little weepy just thinking about the ordeal to come and tries to blame it on the morphine.

Daniel, the only one of us who isn't scared of Fraiser, has decided that whither Rothman goeth, he goeth also, no matter how much it pisseth me off.

I don't feel up to arguing.

After one nasal ha'shak too many, we finally cracked, gagged the snake in Rothman's head with some duct tape we found after a frenzied search of the C.P. tent, and caught some well-earned zees.

Daniel has questions about the Geneva Convention and the humane treatment of vocally aggravating, personality-challenged prisoners.

I pointed out that extracting any bearded man from a liberal application of duct tape was wanton cruelty by anyone's standard. Daniel was even more surprised than I was when he looked for a comeback and couldn't find one.

Jokingly asking if he was talking about Rothman or the snake does not seem to have helped matters for me. If Daniel's shoulder was any colder during our escorted excursion to the Tok'ra Tunnels, my lips would be freezing to the ass I'm kissing.

Our arrival in the land of the snaked and the home of the freak is greeted in state by High Counsellor Per'sus and Anise, at least three-quarters of whom definitely want it doggy style with Daniel. The fourth is the one who really scares me. She wants it with me.

"Dr. Jackson," Per'sus says warmly. "And Colonel O'Neill."

Shit on his shoe, what am I?

"What has brought you here?" Tok'ra Spice asks suspiciously at the exact same time her besotted leader wants to know what he can do for Daniel. She purses her lips in just that way Carter and Fraiser do.

It's not fair. Women have a natural biological and physiological advantage that helps them avoid abject anatomical humiliation in these emotional situations. They're not slaves to their dicks like me and Per'sus.

"Well, it's, er, it's more what we can do for you." Daniel boldly puts a Frisbee-like spin on our metaphorical begging bowl. "An unparalleled research opportunity into the origins of the Goa'uld."

"Sounds intriguing," Anise admits, going easier on us now Daniel is talking dirty.

"We've located a planet we believe to be the original homeworld of all Goa'uld," Daniel pitches rapidly, working his charm on the crowd. The gang of four are intrigued by his rakish new scar if nothing else. "Our excavation has uncovered the skeletal remains of prehistoric symbiotes, including a queen. We've also found a population of aboriginal Unas from which we deduce the first hosts were taken and a series of freshwater lakes inhabited by the current generation of Goa'uld descendents."

Recognising my cue, I step back and do a kind of a magician's lovely assistant 'Ta Da!' thing with the trussed Rothman. "And here's one we prepared earlier!"

"What proof do you offer for these claims?" Anise frowns.

"Suck out the snake and you'll see," I suggest helpfully.

"I wouldn't put it quite like that myself," Daniel critiques dampeningly, "but Jack has a point." He looks significantly at each of our expectantly hovering hosts. "Do either of you sense a presence within Dr. Rothman?"

This has them blinking and sniffing the air like Griff's tentmates when they staggered out into the camp this morning.

"I do not," Per'sus admits, exchanging a thoughtful look with Anise.

"There's no naquadah present in the symbiote's blood," Daniel entices them on. "No evidence of it within the skeletal remains we found. I don't know what you can do with that knowledge of your species' evolution but surely it's enough to justify helping our friend?"

*Our* friend? Excuse me? What's this 'we' thing, pale face?

"We'll give up the amazing undetectable symbiote and toss in the gate address for free," I offer generously. "In case you want to go fishing."

The clincher is a wide-eyed, melting look of appeal from under Daniel's fluttering eyelashes. Per'sus offers to take him off and show him his treaty while Anise wants him to observe the vacuuming procedure with her.

Daniel's shoulder may be cold but mine clearly isn't. He promptly takes refuge behind it, me and my trusty P-90. Then he regretfully turns them down because I'm a pain in the mikta who won't let him do anything. Something like that.

With a less than diplomatic look at me and my trigger finger, Per'sus goes off to do whatever it is he does while Anise has the guards drag the snake in Rothman's head off to her lab.

"Go easy with the duct tape," I advise her with a sympathetic wince. "The beard - that's got to hurt."

I got it tangled in my pubic hair one time - long story. Not pretty.

They stick us in the waiting room all these tunnel complexes have, the one with the fountains and the podiums we gather around to make unreasonable demands like 'let us go.'

Daniel, who didn't get enough exercise yesterday, eyes me nervously and takes a little stroll around the room. I stroll right after him. He accelerates. I find my game of Catch The Linguist funny for about three circuits, then I cheat and catch him in more or less the same way I caught him with his laundry out.

"Want to go grab some dinner tonight?"

"I have plans."

"Plans? That's pretty socially impressive for a guy who was on the menu himself until last night. Where exactly were you planning to go eat on 888?"

"The Unas have a special on symbiote heads." Daniel grins reminiscently, his humanitarian halo slipping for a moment. "Spit-roasted and lightly tossed."

"I know what else is good lightly tossed."

Daniel knows too. "Should we be talking about that *here*?" He glares around us as if the walls have ears.

"No," I reply easily. "So, how about dinner?"

"I can't," Daniel says lamely. "I have to, er, Robert. Robert needs me."

"No, he doesn't. You've still got skin on you and stuff. It's only bones he's got the jones for. You're too recent."

"Maybe Robert could come with us," Daniel suggests, wisely abandoning an untenable defensive position.

"No."

"You'll have fun."

"I won't." Daniel won't let me.

"But he, er, he has this amazing effect on people."

"I've seen up close the effect he has on people. People who include me. I'm not sure sucking out the snake will be an improvement."

"Well, you're not a woman," Daniel snaps, bristling in defence of his bud.

"A woman?" It's news to me Rothman is even aware homo sapiens offers a choice of genders.

"Honestly, Jack, you have to see it," Daniel urges me. "Every time we go out, he – he literally turns heads."

"Rothman does?"

Daniel nods vigorously, exhibiting a certain awe at this Svengali-like masculine accomplishment. "If we take him with us, we won't have to pay for a drink all night."

"What," I ask carefully as reality reels, "happens when you go out alone?"

"I don't."

He doesn't even know why I'm asking. Daniel's naïveté is as immutable as any law of nature. When it's up against his particular blind spot, chaos doesn't stand a chance. Trying to convince him he's hot is as easy as trying to convince one of his fish that it's wet.

"Why are you going out with *him* anyway?" I complain, feeling neglected and ill-used. "Why not with me?"

"Robert isn't trying to get in my pants."

"It's more accurate to say I'm not stopping you getting out of them," I counter with clear, confident recall of the precise effect schnapps has on his otherwise sadly depressed exhibitionism.

"It's wrong," Daniel insists hurriedly. "Freakishly wrong on every conceivable level."

"Fun, though."

Failing to come up with a convincing rebuttal to this persuasive claim, Daniel's embarrassed gaze drops. He makes it as far down as my lips and has to bite his own.

Oh, yeah. Baby! He's lots and *lots* of fun.

"Daniel!"

"Robert!"

Daniel jerks forward before I can jerk back and leaves me seeing stars. *Not* the ones I intended.

When my vision clears, I see that both the boys are back in town, already arguing over who had the most fascinating cultural encounter.

Daniel has the cachet of an impressively animalistic kidnap but Rothman tries to edge ahead on points with a vivid description of the horror of being a helpless prisoner in his own body while Teal'c rendered first aid. Daniel's participation in a primordial rite of passage pales into insignificance before the bald spots where Rothman's beard used to be before I duct-taped him.

Within minutes of the two of them getting going, I don't have a date for dinner but Rothman does.

I miss his little snake already.

It's a long, long walk back to the Stargate.



On the first night back, Daniel and Rothman have dinner together.

On the second and third nights back, they work late on their immensely detailed report on P3X-888.

On the fourth, they work on General Hammond to let them go back to 888.

On the fifth, Daniel consoles himself with a hefty new translation while Rothman gets all bitter and mouthy about General Hammond not letting them go back to 888.

On the sixth, they go see a movie with Carter, Teal'c, Nyan and some new guy on the Geek Squad called Lee.

On the seventh night, Jesus weeps, I crack, go online and pathetically order myself a copy of 'Mythology For Dummies' from amazon.com, then call into Safeway to buy a nice bottle of Chianti on my way downtown to Daniel's place to make love, not war.

When I get there, Daniel opens the door and smiles at me. "Hi, Jack," he says cheerfully. "We were just talking about you."

I wish with all my dark heart I'd killed Rothman.

Oddly, this turns out to be what Daniel and Rothman are talking about. At least, all the other me, my selves and I and what they - or is it we? - did to Rothman.

"In how many other realities did Jack pull the trigger before Teal'c did?" Daniel yells out from the kitchen while he opens the Chianti and finds glasses.

"In all the ones that make sense!" I yell back, smiling unpleasantly at Daniel's infuriatingly omnipresent and unconscious wide receiver, permanently blocking whenever I run out for a pass.

Rothman, who for some reason thinks I don't like him, kind of grimaces back at me.

Daniel, trotting in and out of the kitchen to pour Chianti for us and heap up the table with cold meats, cheese and savoury snacks, seems pleased we're getting along so well. He drops into the chair next to mine and beams at us both.

"Can I just clarify?" I ask, helping myself to lean Black Angus roast beef. "You two have exhausted every possible avenue of anthropological, archaeological and linguistic inquiry relating to the snakes and the stinky monsters? To the extent you're now putting down the alternate realities angle?"

"Pretty much." Daniel hospitably nudges the hickory-smoked turkey my way. "It's fascinating."

"It's tragic." I turn around and look right at him. "You need to get laid."

Which he would be, if he didn't have Rothman running interference. The most irritating part of it all is Daniel isn't really using Rothman for anything. He *likes* him. Frustrating me into freezing my balls off in the ice tray is just a bonus.

"Why didn't you shoot?" Rothman wants to know. "I was trapped in the back of my own mind, seeing all of this happen right in front of my eyes but not able to do anything but watch. Mostly the gun. That's a big gun. A very big gun that you didn't fire at me."

He'd probably be better at the interference thing if he knew what he was interfering with. I can talk about Daniel getting laid right in front of him and he doesn't bat an eyelid. If he can't take a shovel to it, it doesn't register. If people are too recent for him, what does that make sex?

"Colonel O'Neill?" Rothman prompts. "Why didn't you..."

"God only knows!"

I know. The guy is charging towards me with Teal's staff blazing, Griff is already down, I'm next and I can't shoot him because Daniel would hate me for not finding a way.

In every reality where Jack O'Neill can't admit he's in love with Daniel Jackson, Robert Rothman is dead.

Every one.

In this reality, Daniel Jackson puts a gentle, grateful hand on my thigh and gives me a soft look that almost makes up for Rothman gobbling down the chicken tenders and pepper jack cheese.

I smile.

Daniel looks at my mouth and glazes over very satisfactorily.

There's a reason he keeps running. It's because every time he stops, I catch him.

"Rothman?"

"Colonel?"

Daniel is still staring.

"Go play in traffic."

"Sure," Rothman agrees absently. "Either of you wanted shrimp?"

"Yes."

"Really? Er, Daniel? You have any more shrimp?"

"I wonder what's happening in those other realities?" Daniel asks reflectively.

I'm far more interested in events unfolding in this reality. It appears to have escaped Daniel's attention his hand is still lingering right where he put it.

My tongue isn't the only part of me trying to hang out.

"Well," I reply, willing to beg and roll over for Danny treats. "I bet I'm not having dinner at your place, trying to work out if making a joke about serving up Rothman's liver with this nice Chianti is in remarkably poor taste."

"It is."

"We've got liver?" Rothman fingers the buffet hopefully.

"I bet you're all alone and miserable at your place and I'm all alone and miserable at my place, neither of us is talking, and both of us have our hands where we can see them."

If Daniel could tear his eyes away from my mouth, he'd see his hand – and mine – just fine.

"I bet we wouldn't have a certain *discussion* we keep starting and somehow never get to finish. In all those other realities, I'm sure you'd still be running, but I'd be the loser letting you go."

"Oh," Daniel murmurs, his eyes getting all tentative and questioning and velvety soft on me.

"Rothman might be blessedly out of every other Jack O'Neill's way, but just think about this: so are you."

"Those sound like shitty realities to me," Rothman comments, applying himself with gusto to the mustard potato salad in lieu of the missing liver.

"I know where I'd rather be," I agree with him, making a firm mental resolve this must never happen again.

Feeling quite affectionate and thankful towards me for not subtracting Rothman from this reality, Daniel makes three in the in the grateful stakes and then it occurs to him he can make me. Obviously feeling bold and wanton, and knowing he's dealing with a dog, he starts with this little stroking thing.

"Robert?"

Rothman is fully occupied getting the rest of the roast beef, the guacamole and the Havarti cheese while the getting is good. Hands and mouth bulging, he grunts a vague acknowledgement at Daniel.

"Go home."

"Oggy-ag?"

"Sure, help yourself," Daniel urges him warmly. "There are boxes and stuff in the kitchen." He can afford to be magnanimous. He's starving, but he's planning to make a meal of me. "Take anything you like. Take it with you."

Rothman, who at least doesn't take this shit personally, goes off to poke around in the kitchen. Before Daniel's inquisitive fingers can get really adventurous, he's back with the saran wrap. Scooping up the food platter, he gives it a neat turn in his hand at regular intervals, expertly fanning out the wrap to seal the entire thing.

Then he tosses off his topped-up glass of Chianti and, taking Daniel at his word, departs with the savouries and also the unopened dessert.

He pauses at the door long enough to tell Daniel he'll see him tomorrow at the opening of the Myth And Tragedy exhibition at the Fine Arts Centre.

I tell him he won't unless he's gunning to *be* the tragedy.

He takes this well. He takes almost everything I say to him well, mostly because he doesn't understand it even when he repeats it.

He starts to go out.

Then he comes back in and takes a couple of books he thinks he might want. Plus an apple and a bunch of grapes from the fruit bowl he passes along the way. Apparently deciding to leave Daniel the furniture for now, he finally exits with an emphatic slam.

Daniel instantly decides there's room on my chair for two, scoots over to sit on me and kisses me hard, and then soft, and then hard again.

I don't speak twenty-three languages but I'm fluent in Daniel. This translates as: God, you're sexy and I want you, I'm sorry for being so stupid, and do we get to go to bed now?

I figure if I'm going to look wounded and make him fuss over me and make it up to me for a while, we might as well get comfortable before he suffers for me.

Daniel takes me the short way to bed, cutting through his bathroom. Then he looks from his bed to me and back again.

It's that awkward moment of transition with someone before you actually make it into bed. You're not drunk, you weren't taken by surprise, this is all deliberate and you can't blame anything but your own dick for getting you into it.

The moment you accept you *are* going to do this and realise at the exact same time you're both wearing too many clothes. Before anything nice and interactive can happen, you have to work out how to get out of at least some of them.

"You owe me," I inform my honey, taking hold of a double handful of his fine green-striped shirt and pulling him in for a kiss.

"I do?"

"I bought a *book* for you."

"You did?" He lights up with innocent pleasure and helps me with the buttons on my shirt. "Jack, that's so cool. Which one?"

"Gimme a break, Daniel! I may have been pitiful enough to buy the damned thing but I still have enough pride not to tell you about it. Not in detail." I intend to collect on my due brownie points but that's as far as my self-abasement goes.

"Oo-oh," Daniel drawls in apparent recognition as some kind of cartoon light-bulb goes off for him. "You know, Jack," he says very gently, leaning in to coax kisses

over my always sluttily willing mouth. "It's sweet of you, it really is, but honestly, you shouldn't have worried. The first couple of times weren't all *that* bad."

"Huh?" I lean back, glaring irately as this sinks in. "You think I bought a *sex* book? You think I *need* a sex book?"

"No, I think you don't need a sex book."

"Because it's not all *that* bad?" I ask dangerously.

"The, er, the vibrations helped." Daniel is fighting – albeit not very hard – a tiny, teasing grin. "The spin cycle."

"I don't need a sex book, a utility closet or even a goddamned power tool!" I growl, bouncing him down on the bed.

"Prove it!" he demands, happily clamping arms and legs around me.

"You think I'm easy? You think all you have to do is kiss me a couple of times, maybe blow in my ear a little, and I'll put out?"

He looks at me consideringly. "Yes."

"Yeah, you're right." I tilt my chin, presenting an ear to him.

"You want me to get that?" Daniel asks politely.

"Please."

He pulls me down and gives my ear lobe a nibbling kiss. "Thank you," he whispers.

"No, thank you."

"For Robert, I mean. He's my friend."

"*I'm* your friend," I argue instinctively. When I think about what I'm saying here, I'm surprised at myself, that I could let something so small sting me as much as it does. I didn't think I could be this jealous. "Carter's your friend, Teal's your friend," I add quickly.

"It's not the same." Daniel shakes his head decisively.

He's thought about this. I wish he hadn't.

"Robert's been my friend for a long time, Jack. Whatever you may think of him, he's always been there for me. He looked out for me when I spent every dime on books and on financing digs. He understands me when I talk. He never has to make allowances for me or acts to me as if I should apologise to him for feeling the way I do or loving the things I do. I can't be too enthusiastic for him to take. He feels the same."

"I guess that puts me in my place." Boy, I really am this emotional pygmy. Is there no end to my bullshit, I have to fool myself too?

"No. No, it doesn't." Daniel smiles affectionately and blows in my ear. "You understand *me*."

"That's better."

"Different."

"Better."

"Jack, you're obsessing."

"Ah, blow it in my ear."

He does just that, and very nicely too, then he decides we should be kissing, thoroughly kissing, and take our own sweet time about it. It's about more than lips and tongues, teeth and enthused mutual tonsillectomies, it's about Daniel finding he can do this. Do me. He wants to do this. He wants me. He can never be too enthusiastic about me and now he's starting to be happy to show it.

I touch his face, getting intimate with him. "What was with all the running?"

"I don't know," he sighs, licking my chin.

"It isn't obvious I'm nuts about you?"

"It isn't obvious my problem was maybe with me and not with you?"

"Not obvious, no."

"Well, that's what the running was about, I guess. Me. It was about me and not you."

"Why?" This is a perfectly reasonable and possibly even innocent question, in my opinion. Not an opinion Daniel shares. He glowers.

"You're greedy."

"Yes."

"Demanding."

"Yep."

"Manipulative."

"That's me."

"You want everything, all the time, now."

"On a good day, I get it."

"Maybe I didn't want you to get me. Maybe I didn't want things to change. Lines to blur."

"What lines?"

"The kind where I watch the History Channel and you watch sports and The Simpsons. The kind where I love to read, to spend rainy afternoons in museums, to watch sci-fi movies, to look at art, to sit in Garden Of The Gods and watch the people go by. The kind where I can eat dinner for breakfast because a whole night passed me by and I was so gone, so happy in my study I never knew it."

"Your choices, your time."

"The kind of lines where Robert is my friend and you're my friend, where Robert doesn't ask anything from me and you ask everything and I want to *give* you everything."

Good to know he's got it about as bad for me as I've got it for him.

"I don't want to change everything, Jack." Daniel is half apologetic to me, half defiant. "I don't want to give up all of those things that I care about and bring me pleasure. I don't want to always compromise and give in. I want to be selfish sometimes. I want to be alone sometimes. I want to be moody or pissed or

distracted or anything I feel like being. I don't - I don't want all my happiness, all my sense of who I am, to be so dependent on one person. I'm so afraid of that. Of investing so much of myself in you and then losing you. And of losing myself."

I can relate to that. He might not think it, but I can. "Then why stop running?" I ask reasonably.

"Because maybe a hockey game with you will be more fun than a museum by myself. Because for every episode of *The Simpsons* I have to suffer through, there may be a history special I can get you to sit through with me. Because maybe we'll find a book we both like even if it is only a sex book. A movie we can love or hate or pull apart or laugh at together. Maybe you'll sit with me and watch the people go by. Maybe you'll bring me dinner and make me eat it, make me think I'm wasting time I could be spending with you, more gone on you, happier with you, than I've ever been."

I swear to god, if he makes me cry, I'm killing him first.

"I love you, Jack," Daniel promises passionately. "I love you very much."

"Tomorrow," I say huskily, trying to swallow my treacherously sappy heart again. "That - art - thing. Maybe I could, er, I could, you know, come along."

"With Robert and me?" Daniel asks, his eyes getting very wide.

I'm in actual physical pain when I give a short, excruciated nod of surrender. "I have plenty I could say about the tragedy of mythology." I'm trying for a smile but I know a rictus when I'm wearing one. "Three's company."

"Three's a crowd," Daniel retorts unfeelingly. "How about we skip the exhibition and go try out some of the things in that sex book of yours?"

"How about we try some now?" I counter-propose, willing to let him make it up to me for being an insensitive bastard.

"You think I'm easy?" Daniel asks indignantly. "You think all you have to do is kiss me a couple of times and tell me you love me, and I'll put out?"

"For love and lifelong commitment? For Me? Youbetcha! You put out for schnapps, butterscotch butt."

Daniel bleats a *very* rude word at me. He knows - and he definitely was hoping I was so drunk I couldn't *possibly* know - who laid the first tooth on him, and it sure as shit wasn't some stinky Unas.

I feel sorry for me, my selves and I in all those other realities. Every O'Neill who blasted Robert Rothman out of his life and figured it could've been worse, it could've been someone he cared about who got snaked, every single one of them will be eaten alive when he learns far, far too late this one mistake is going to cost him everything he wanted.

Those dumb-fuck loser O'Neills are never going to hear just how deeply and desperately their Daniel loves them or get to wrestle him from under the pillow he's trying to put himself out of his misery with.

They're never going to go try out the sex books or know what it means for Daniel to be able to do all of those other ordinary lover-type things together.

They're never going to know how badly Daniel wants and how scared and grateful he is to have the chance to be one half of one helluva unique whole.

They're never going to know what schnapps and Jack O'Neill can do to Daniel Jackson. Or what Daniel Jackson will willingly do for Jack O'Neill for as long as and as hard as it takes to be happy.

Every one of those O'Neills who pulled the trigger on Robert Rothman killed the Daniel Jackson I'm about to have.

All those long nights alone, they'll only know what they're missing.

FINIS