Daniel

I stride into the briefing room, eyes fixed on my coffee mug as I say casually, “Morning.” It’s perfect. Perfectly casual. You’d think this was the first time I’d laid eyes on Jack today. Nothing whatsoever for even the keenest observer to discern from our body language. Certainly nothing to suggest less than two hours ago Jack was giving me a thorough, full body oral examination, conclusively proving his point this was exactly why God invented the hot shower AND why I should get up half an hour earlier every day.

I don’t feel stupid until I tear my eyes away from my oh so fascinating mug and realise the briefing room is empty. Oh.

Jack’s “Hey,” is casual enough but he’s horribly amused by my totally wasted effort.

Cut me some slack, Jack. You’ve had as many years as I’ve had days to get used to this whole being in love and having almost continuous mind blowing bone melting sex thing.

Jack drops his amused, knowing eyes back down to the journal he’s reading.

“What’s that?”

As I sit down, I keep staring, trying to work out what’s got him so engrossed.

“Um - ” He holds up the cover for me. ‘Glimmer’. NOT a journal. One of those rabid tabloids. He gives me a tiny, slightly embarrassed shrug.

“Teal’c’s into this stuff.”

Strange. I don’t in fact see Teal’c anywhere in the room as Jack flips the tabloid back over and picks up right where he left off when I interrupted him. He settles back in his seat, already reading.

“I don’t get it.”

I’m not wholly convinced. I start to open my files but my eyes keep wandering back to Jack. Possibly it’s Terra Incognita, the magnetic allure of the unknown.

“A great week is in store for you.”

He doesn’t get it but he’s reading bits aloud to make sure I don’t get it too. That’s Jack, always so thoughtful and considerate of others. So willing to give of himself, no matter what the personal cost.

“You’ll be going on a trip.”

I’m staring in bemusement at a lurid headline when the accompanying photograph suddenly leaps into focus. This face is so wildly out of place, it was just a blur of planes and angles. This must be some mistake. This man does not belong in this context.

I lean forward, disbelieving. “Let me see that.” I’m not mistaken. It can’t be, shouldn’t be, but is. I snatch the tabloid from Jack’s grasp.

“Okay.”

Jack’s sarcasm barely registers. I feel like sure ground is gaping open up beneath me.

“Oh my God.”

“What?” Jack says curiously.

“He’s dead.” Impossible. I thought there’d be time - I thought...

“Who?” Concern creeping into Jack’s voice. Guess my face is something he can read too.
“My archaeology professor.”

The world has just tilted crazily, taking every semblance of emotional balance with it. Professor Jordan is dead, but he’s dying again right in front of me, dying in print, a glittering, respected career reduced to a lurid headline in a squalid, soul tarnishing rag feeding the paranoia and bigotry of the unquestioning masses for a buck fifty.

Forgive me if I can’t appreciate the entertainment value just now.


I never got to tell him – he died – DIED, thinking I was a failure, a disappointment, an embarrassment. Laughing stock. His support of me the only blemish on an otherwise distinguished career.

Paragon to pariah in a single paper. With my lecture as the pièce de résistance. My swansong. Credibility and career slain by my own hand. Didn’t even get to go out in a blaze of Quixotic glory. More of a whimper, in the quiet, soul destroying humiliation of a slowly emptying room and the excoriating PITY of my peers.

“Daniel.”

I listen to all kinds of warnings in Jack’s voice but I’m not able to hear him. I feel heat flooding my face, then I feel the heat of his hand gently cover mine. Can’t tear my eyes from the page.

“Daniel?”


“Give me a minute. I’ll have the briefing re-scheduled, then we can talk.”

I have to swallow what feels like a coil of barbed wire in my arid throat. “I’m fine.”

Jack tells me, not unkindly, “Crap.”

I read the article yet again. My third attempt and I still can’t comprehend the morass of invective, innuendo and inaccuracies. I don’t resist as Jack suddenly looms up in front of me and pulls me to my feet.

“Your place or mine?”

Jack whisks me back to my office with more speed than dignity and shuts the door with a snap. Then he grabs me and hugs the crap out of me. My attempt to stop him kissing me
is even less convincing than my attempt to push him away. He just hugs me that bit closer, kisses me that much more deeply and strokes my back soothingly.

After he stops kiss – okay, after I stop kissing him – I of course find myself addressing the least important issue, saying in a distinctly accusatory manner, "You promised you –" I catch the satirical gleam in his eye and sulkily amend, "WE promised we wouldn’t - How, exactly, do you think you could explain what just happened if anybody had walked in?"


"Under no conceivable circumstances would that work for even a nanosecond."

"Cut me some slack. Somewhere there’s a me who got away with the Space Monkey thing." Jack tosses that out as he hops up onto my desk, sending several fragile scrolls skittering towards the floor. With the ease of long practice, I nimbly catch them and tenderly escort them to a place of safety. By the time I get back to him, he’s lightly juggling a coprolite from P3R179.

"This rock feels weird."

"Piece of shit." I correct.

Jack looks wounded. "Alright already, I’ll be good. No more kissing you where I know you can’t scream for help."

I lean against my workbench and leave him playing with 10,000 year old fossilised excrement. "What was that about the Space Monkey thing?" I AM curious. This was the very moment I realised just how much Jack cared for me. I might have wished to make this very welcome discovery without the large, fascinated audience and the – name – but this WAS one of the happiest moments I’ve had in my life. I’d never been a ‘best’ friend before!

"You wanna hear my theory?"

There’s a look of fatuous pleasure on Jack’s face. He’s about to hit me with O’Neill pseudo-science, I can tell. Some bizarre, dangerously compelling and utterly unanswerable crock of coprolite. It’s moments like this make me wonder just why I never noticed the trifling detail I was in love with him.

"No." I say baldly. Emphatically. "N-O."

Jack’s eyes go puppy on me, "Harsh. Very harsh. It’s a GOOD theory. Makes more sense than that crap Carter is always dishing out."
I find myself softening involuntarily. Jack has his own way of helping me deal with things. Instead of standing here weeping my heart out on his shoulder, which was my first instinct, I’ve had my face kissed off and now he’s deliberately annoying the hell out of me. I don’t know what I’d do without him.

“I need another one of your theories like I need a hole in the head. Speaking of which - I don’t know how you dare, after your graphic demonstration of chaos theory. A colonel claps his hands in one part of the SGC, unleashing a chain of events which results in an inoffensive archaeologist, with whom said colonel now professes to be in love, ending up in the infirmary under Janet’s tender care for two interminable days. With concussion. You remember? After the ‘fall’.”

Jack doesn’t bother to answer the unanswerable. “It’s my Space Monkey theory of alternate realities.”

I have to sit down. I still feel like somebody stepped heavily on my aorta, but now that out-of-control, giddy, helpless feeling has the familiar, comforting flavour of Jack. He looks insufferably pleased with himself. The sirens could learn a thing or three from my colonel. He knows he’s got me. I’m caving because I’m conserving all the strength I’m going to need to fight him when he insists on attending the funeral with me. I wave a helplessly acquiescent hand.

Jack jumps up and assumes a stance I recognise as his caricature of me being ‘informative’. His ‘Dr Jackson’ has brought the house down at every single Christmas party we’ve had since we started. He tries it on this year, it’s ‘look but don’t touch’ for a week.

“I’ve been thinking about how realities diverge,” he says proudly, “In every reality where I don’t have you, I’m dead.”

“HAVE me?” As in OWN me? Like a pet?

He rushes past my remark. “Admittedly, so is everyone else. Trying not to draw conclusions from that. Also, I’m a humourless Roger Ramjet up to the point where I buy the farm. Tactically speaking, we wander into another alternate reality, I need a quick way to test whether I’m an asshole or not. Trust me, we’d need to know. Figure I can get the intel with one quick question. ‘Space Monkey mean anything to you?’ If the answer is a firm negative, or there are any hints I’m doing the nasty with anybody but you, we gate the hell out of there ASAP. Sound reasonable?”

I nod weakly. It could have been worse. He could have just pounced on the alternate Daniel and -

“The alternative would be to just oil you up and hurl you naked at the alternate me, but I wouldn’t be surprised if he caught you anyway, asshole or not, so I scratched that one.”
He does it on purpose. He does. He thinks I talk too much, so he actually sits down and deliberately comes up with ways and means to paralyse my vocal chords as often as possible.

“That got me thinking about things that are the same in all the realities. Like the raid on Apophis’ ship. The reunion scene must have played out in a lot of realities. But somewhere, one of us had to have the idea first, then all the rest of us did it and just chalked it up to - “

“Temporary insanity?”

“Relief.” Jack says coldly. “Somewhere, one Jack actually did what every other Jack bit down on hard and stuffed back in the deepest darkest corner of his psyche wondering where the hell THAT came from.”

“What?”

“What?”

“’That’?”

“What that?”

“Exactly.”

Jack looks confused but ploughs on regardless. “The original Jack just did it. Grabbed you and stuck his tongue down your throat.”

My Jack radar has been honed by years of continuous practice but this one – I can’t argue with the fearful logic. Jack does have the brass balls to do exactly that, if he wanted to badly enough. However, he’s also an honourable man who would never do that, not in a million years. Every single Jack might have wanted to, even for a moment, which is very flattering - and slightly worrying – but none of them actually did. I’m not heartless enough to crush what has obviously been a pleasant daydream. It takes me a moment to find my voice again, but I manage to say tartly, “Not so much don’t ask, don’t tell, as don’t sell the bootleg gateroom footage, huh?”

Jack agrees solemnly. “Best seller. Especially the part where Ferretti yells, ‘I’m gonna need a bigger gun’.”

My imagination shudders back from a montage of appalling images. He’s grinning ear to ear. It’s irresistible. I find myself grinning back.

“So when and what time flight we catching to Chicago? Oriental Institute, right? That’s where you studied. Top of the heap. Elite. In with in crowd. Golden boy.”
Devious bastard. I glare at him, to no effect whatsoever. Of course he’s read my file. He knows exactly what reception I’m likely to get if I go back to the Institute. Guess this little diversion wasn’t just about me regaining my equilibrium, it was to give Jack time to plan his attack. He teases me relentlessly and creatively about anything and everything he pleases. Occasionally, this fools the unwary into thinking they can do the same, and someone will make a derogatory comment which Jack will amiably tolerate for about a heartbeat before doling out merciless destruction. They never do it twice.

Looking at him now, I see he’s spoiling for a fight. It’s written all over his face. And this is even before he knows about Steven. Jack will promise to behave himself and then cut Steven into tiny pieces first time he gives vent to some perfectly understandable feelings. Understandable from Steven’s point of view, anyway. Jack knows my theories are absolutely vindicated, Steven doesn’t. Knowing he can’t say so will only hone Jack’s cutting edge.

“You’re not going.”

I think of Steven and shudder.

“Absolutely not.”

And then there’s Sarah. I get to introduce my possessive, psychotically overprotective new lover to my equally possessive, intense old lover? At Professor Jordan’s grave side? When Sarah and I broke up - our parting was not sweet sorrow.

Jack is very good at reading people. So good, we trust our lives to his skill. Jack is also, not to put too fine a point on it, crazy about me. Regrettably, he does not appreciate it AT ALL if anybody else hints at similar appreciation. He gave the waiter on ‘The Date’ HELL just for smiling at me while serving me a second espresso I couldn’t remember ordering. His conviction that everyone on the planet is after my body does have its engaging qualities, but not on the rare occasions when he is proven correct. A mere three times in three da– er – skating over thin ice here, obviously extraordinary circumstances, better drag myself back to the point.

He’s already obsessing over Alex. In the interests of self-preservation, I’ve been utterly spineless and failed to tell him Alex has asked me out on a date. Explicitly. Several times. Alex has slightly misinterpreted my taking Jack home that night. Short of telling him outright Jack is doing me every chance he gets – and to be honest, far more frequently than I was even remotely prepared for - I’m not sure how much more strongly I can hint him off. I’m convinced that with rivalry so much on his mind, Jack will take one look at Sarah and KNOW.

If I’m to get to the bottom of Professor Jordan’s death I’m going to need the help and co-operation of the hostile ‘geek’ and the ex. Jack rampaging all over the Oriental Institute will not help in any way.
Jack is doing the arms folded, disapproving colonel. Decision made. Obey me. He’s going to require delicate handling.

“You aren’t coming, Jack. I know you want to be there, and I want you to be there,” I lie without a tremor, “but it isn’t practicable. What possible reason could Colonel O’Neill have for handholding Dr Jackson at the funeral of a man he’s never even met, who is, moreover a distinguished representative of a profession for which said colonel has expressed his loathing on numerous memorable occasions?”

I read the thoughtful look on Jack’s face and head him off at the pass, “I swear, if the words ‘sensitive’, ‘distressed’, ‘vulnerable’, ‘you know what he’s like’ or any facsimile thereof pass from your lips to General Hammond’s ears you will be sleeping alone for a month.”

A variety of intense emotions chase themselves across Jack’s face.

“A MONTH. Not a day less, Jack, I swear.”

“I could –“

“No.”

“Just ask for some leave and –“

“No.”

“Not say what it’s for.”

“No. A month.”

Jack realises I mean it. He shoots me a hostile look and I get another solid dose of disapproving colonel. It occurs to me he’s entirely capable of letting me go, then asking for leave when I’m not here to stop him, turning up at the cemetery in his dress blues muttering something about being in the neighbourhood and having the honeymoon suite at the Four Seasons, in case I’m interested.

“I’m only thinking of you, Daniel.”

He’s trying the big puppy eyes on me again. Uh-uh.

“Surely you can last a few days without –“

Jack snarls, betrayingly, “This has NOTHING whatsoever to do with sex. If I can get through a drought lasted years, I think I can manage a few days without shtupping you.”
I apologise. “Sorry, Jack, my mistake.” He looks mollified, so I add innocently, “Although you haven’t actually managed more than a few HOURS without - “

“Daniel!”

Jack eyes me with dislike, but he’s not budging. I realise I’m going to have to get him out of my hair long enough to speak to General Hammond on my own. Alex is a big boy. He can take it. I wander over to the computer and start a search for Chicago flights, saying chattily, “Did I mention Alex asked me out on a date?”

There’s a certain quality of stillness behind me. Jack says, carefully, “Did he now?”

“Several times. He’s fairly persistent.” So persistent in fact, I’m coming to the conclusion my little display at dinner bagged me TWO lovesick colonels.

“Really,” Jack says flatly, “Won’t take no for an answer?”

Actually, no. My resolutely turned back and silence speak eloquently enough for me.

Jack eases down from my desk, reaches out and turns me to face him, eyes searching.

“Nothing I can’t handle when I get back, Jack. Really. Just leave it alone.”

“I don’t - “

I cup his jaw in my hands and pull him to me for a kiss. His participation is as enthusiastic as ever, hands slipping around to tangle themselves into my hair and keep me close while his tongue slips into my mouth, gently exploring. When he does eventually let go, it’s only to nuzzle his forehead against mine.

“Sorry about the professor,” he says softly.

“I appreciate that. He - he was a good man, a good teacher and a better friend.”

“If you’re not back by Friday, I’ll come and drag you back. I’m warning you, better not eat any asparagus while I’m not around to keep an eye on you.”

Jack-speak for I love you and that’s the only reason you get to go. He gives me a little shake by the scruff of the neck, then saunters over to the door.

“Jack?”

He turns and gives me his patented ‘don’t start with me’ look.

“You said no. He doesn’t get it. So I’m just going to go down there and explain it to him. Until he does get it.”
He’ll have great difficulty. Alex is in New York overnight. I should know. He wanted me to go with him. I don’t think there’s any chance of the quiet, intellectual friendship I was hoping for. Alex wants to have sex with me. In fact, he told me he can’t stop thinking about having sex with me. In this very office, he described a couple of the ways he particularly couldn’t stop thinking about, neither of which Jack has tried yet. This depressing development could seriously affect his life expectancy, once Jack realises how explicitly Alex is stating his – er - wishes.

For the moment, he makes a useful decoy. By the time Jack works out Alex isn’t hiding in some forgotten corner of the base I’ll be on my way to Chicago.

I call after him, “Feed my fish.”

“To what?”

I’m sure I heard that incorrectly.

I wait until I’m sure he’s not going to sneak back and then haul ass to the general’s office. I emerge triumphant half an hour later, overwhelmed by the general’s sympathy and understanding of all the difficulties of my situation. I found myself telling him far more than I could tell Jack. It would only have made Jack all the more determined to be by my side, ready to take on all comers. I was granted all the personal time I need, travel plans were made for me and best of all, a brief noncommittal mention of ‘friction’ between colonel’s O’Neill and Devoe bore instant fruit. The general fully appreciates the potential for disaster, even though he hasn’t the least clue about the source of the friction. George, bless his heart, promises to keep them apart whatever it takes.

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JACK

This isn’t exactly the dock of the bay, but I’m sure wasting time. With a vengeance. And with the only member of my little family who couldn’t come up with an excuse to get out of being here. Here with me, which is the kicker, apparently.


Daniel snowed me royally over Devoe. I admire how beautifully he played me, but I’m still pissed as hell. I fully intend to take it out on both him and Devoe soon as I get back. It’s not because I’m hurt he didn’t want me around. I’m not. Not in the least. Just because he couldn’t have made it more OBVIOUS - No.

It’s because he was so damned devious. There’s only room for one devious lover in a relationship and the position is filled. Daniel is supposed to be the one spending his every waking moment wondering about me and what I’m up to. This was an integral part of
our friendship. I see no reason whatsoever to mess with a winning formula now we’re lovers.

This isn’t the only worrying trend. In our little discussion vis a vis the funeral, Daniel made sure to point out a couple times he didn’t think I could last without the sex. I cannot have him going round thinking all he has to do to get his own way over every little thing is cut off my access rights and I’ll surrender with a whimper. Especially as it’s true. As soon as he waved the no sex card I – well - I caved. Can’t wriggle out of that one.

As for the quantity issue, he should be flattered. We’ve barely gotten started. I haven’t had enough of Daniel naked to even take the edge off. And with all the whimpering, moaning, sighing, groaning and begging he’s been doing, he clearly has no complaints whatsoever about the quality. I can last three days without sex, no sweat – unfortunately - even if I can’t last three hours without thinking about sex. It’s a guy thing.

Okay. Okay. It’s a Daniel thing.


All things considered, I’d rather have been in Chicago. I distracted him ‘cause I couldn’t stand that stricken look on his face, then unfortunately he distracted me right back. I just never got a chance to tell him I wanted to take him home to meet the folks.

Daniel ever asks me how come I knew I was in love with him when he didn’t know he was in love with me, I’m pleading the fifth. It took him longer, but at least he worked it out on his own. I didn’t realise just how much time and energy I spent thinking about Daniel, how often I talked about him. I still remember the exact moment I knew. Well, when someone pointed out the humiliatingly obvious.

I was sitting at the kitchen table, Chez O’Neill, fighting Mom for the last piece of coffee walnut cake, Dad wrestling with the crossword, as usual. I said something about Daniel selling his soul for coffee and Dad just said casually, “So when do we get to meet this boy you’re in love with?” Never even looked up from his crossword while he was taking me out at the knees. Mom crowing because I was blushing. Hadn’t done that since I was about fourteen. I kept opening my mouth to deny it but the words choked me. Mom made some crack about guppies.

All in all, they took the news better than I did. They’d had longer to think about it, for a start. Once the first shock of them double teaming me was over, I could even thank them for letting me in on it. I showed Mom a picture of Daniel and she wolf-whistled. Offered to fight me for him. No chance. On my best day I wouldn’t take on Kate O’Neill. Neither of my doting parents thought I stood a cat’s chance in hell. Too old, too straight, too military. Not too bright and not too pretty, either. They were stunned when I called them and gloated, ‘Guess who’s sleeping in my bed?’ They were also thrilled for me and heartily sorry for Daniel. It’s lucky I don’t take stuff personally.
If Daniel wasn’t so stubborn we’d be making nice with the folks right now. The folks will spoil him rotten, that’s a given. They’re even more susceptible than I am. They’re vaguely aware their forty four year old son landing himself a boyfriend isn’t something they should be doing a victory dance over, but they’re happy at any sign Jack Plays Well With Others. After Charlie – they know exactly how much I owe my present state of well being to Daniel. They’ve got nothing but time for a man who saw me at my absolute worst and still became my friend at the lowest point in my life.

Took Mom about a nanosecond to figure out what – or rather who - I’d spent most of my night doing. I couldn’t get off the goddamn phone quick enough. It takes a lot to scare me, but my dear old mother is top of a short list that do it for me every time. At no point in my life will I be up to discussing my sexual technique with Mom, just because she’s been reading up and wants a few facts confirmed. I hung up as soon as she started talking about tantric something or other.

If Daniel was here I wouldn’t be sitting on the dock. We’d be in the cabin, making love for the fourth or fifth time, maybe trying the tantric something or other. He’s not here, just the Jaffa of Doom looming at my side. Won’t even deign to pull up a chair. I can’t have Daniel in the flesh, so all I can do is sit here and think about him. And try not to let my mind dwell on the flesh part too much.

Speaking of flesh, I hear another whine and a splat. The mosquitoes are clearly into Jaffa to Go. I haven’t had so much as a nibble.

With all the time on my hands and complete lack of conversation from the big ‘T’, I’ve managed to make one decision. I’ve decided Daniel having his own apartment will only encourage him to make good on threats to deprive me of my quality time. Much harder to manage when you’re both sleeping in the same bed. He naturally gravitates to the warmest spot in the bed, i.e., to me. I just have to hang on to him once I’ve gotten him in my clutches. Await developments. Always ready to lend Danny a helping hand.

I’ll do it in easy stages. It’ll be a while before he works out he’s moving out of his apartment and in with me. I don’t do the sharing thing. He’s mine.

There is one minor problem - He’s got feelings for his fish. It’s not I’m so insanely jealous I can’t even share him with his own fish, but, still, just idly speculating here.

Do I know anyone who’d say, pick the lock and drop a toaster in the tank? For a negotiable fee. It’s that or I have to give ’em house room. I can’t have fish. They’re non-pets. Shit with fins. You can’t do a damn thing with them except watch them swim around in their tank. Whoop de doo. Give me a dog any day. First time I get bored I’ll be propped up in front of the tank with my rod. I doubt Danny would see the funny side.

Electrocution - Yeah. It is. It’s going too far.
There has to be a more humane way to do it. Maybe I could hit up Doc Fraisier for some good drugs. Send them off happy to the great aquarium in the sky.

Or how about I ‘Free Willy’ them? Next long weekend we get, I can take Danny to Maui, set the fish free in their natural habitat.

Or maybe I could track down some kind of miniature shark Danny doesn’t know about, introduce it to the food chain, step back and let Mama Nature do some high speed small scale natural selection type stuff. Cool. I like that one. Survival of the fittest. Daniel will -

““There appears to be no fish here, O’Neill.””

It speaks!

“‘T’. It’s not about the actual fish - themselves. The fish are not important in this context. It’s about fish-ING. The act of fishing itself.”

I lazily cast my rod, hopefully oozing relaxation rather than ‘I want MY archaeologist and I want him NOW’ lust, which is closer to the way I’m feeling at any given moment.

“I see.”

Jeez. Could he sound any LESS enthusiastic?

I hear a beep. An unmistakeable beep. I stiffen. Look slowly round. And down. Then up.

“You didn’t?”

Could I have made it any more clear to Dan - General Hammond - we weren’t to be disturbed for three whole days? How can I prove to him - not the general - I’m not so pathetically needy I can’t last three days without him if he can call me up and chat to me any time he feels like it? He’s supposed to be the one feeling needy and cut off, dammit. He’s supposed to think I’m happy as a clam here, without him, not hanging on with bated breath for a bootie call.

“By request of General Hammond.” Teal’c refuses to look at me.

I drop my rod, turn and fish around in the bag. I suppose, if Daniel’s gone to the trouble of phoning me and all, it’s only polite to answer. He might be missing me. He might want to know what I’m wearing. I wonder if I can get Teal’c outta my hair for a while?

One last scowl up at Teal’c for appearance’ sake.

Bet Daniel’s never had phone sex before. He’s got a definite way with words - and an impressive aerial.
Might not even be Daniel. I can’t be thinking about phone sex and talking to General Hammond. Not at the exact same time.

If it is Daniel, I can’t have him thinking I’m DESPERATE to hear the sound of his voice or sitting here fantasising obsessively about making love to him while he’s wearing nothing but his boonie or anything…

“No way.” I mutter, delving about in the bag and finally laying hands on the damned phone, which I flip open. “What?” I say laconically.

“Is Teal’c there?”

I say coldly, “Yes, Daniel. He’s right here. Please hold.”

I hand the phone up to Teal’c without another word. Is he fucking KIDDING me? What am I, Teal’c’s answering service? The help?

“DanielJackson.”

I sit, simmering, listening to Teal’c’s side of the conversation.

“We have caught nothing. We are fishing.”

Et tu, Teal’c?

And, yeah, big guy, how come you got all the time in the world to chit chat with ‘T’, while your lover, i.e., ME, doesn’t even rate a ‘hi’? Guess you’re not fantasising about ME in a goddamn boonie, no way no how.

No phone sex, huh?

Teal’c smacks another mosquito. Serves him right for dissing the fishing.

“Banish to oblivion.”

Well said. Couldn’t have put it better myself. Talk about out of sight out of frigging mind.

“If you require assistance, I would be more than happy to return to the SGC.”

For Chrissake! What am I? Some embarrassing social disease people don’t want to be associated with? I scowl up at Teal’c and strain to hear Daniel’s voice. Just in case. He might be saving the best for last, might be asking for – oh. He can take it from here. That’s it. That’s all.
“Are you certain?” Teal’c sounds as close to desperate as I’ve ever heard him.

Sonovabitch! Both of them! I smack him on the arm. “Gimme that!” I reach up and snatch the phone. Daniel. Hah. This morning you were screaming ‘Oh God, oh yes, Jack, yes, Oh GOD!’ and now you can’t work up the energy to even speak to me. Two can play at that game.

I say emphatically, “Goodbye, Daniel,” and maliciously enjoy the increasingly desperate, pathetically abbreviated squeaks. “Ah no no wait listen er – “ Singing a different tune now, huh, darling? I hang up. Then I extract the batteries with care and deliberation and throw them away before handing the phone back to Teal’c.

Screw you, ‘T’. You can damn well stay here and fish in pond which has no fish. Run interference with the mosquitoes for me. I’m not suffering on my own.

Daniel is SO going to pay for this. I’m gonna keep him naked and horizontal the entire weekend. I got another two days to survive and that gives me plenty of time to work out how to have him make it up to me. For starters, I think he’ll look cute in my Class A cap.

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DANIEL

Sam covers the tomb entrance while I carefully load one of the sedative darts into the tranquilliser gun. I’m barely aware of Janet’s comforting presence at my side. I can’t believe how bad things have gotten or how fast they got this way. God, sorry, Sam. Sorry. It’s not about trust. Not you. Me. I - I just want Jack. Need him.

Steven a murderer? Steven killed Professor Jordan? I can’t – My career is in the toilet so far as he knows, his is in a Porsche and still, STILL he’s sick with jealousy. I can see why he could – still can’t believe he did. My fault. Mine. My work is vindicated and it’s enough to send him over the edge. How could he hate me so deeply and I - I didn’t know.

My fault. Professor Jordan, the curator, the lab technician. Three innocent people dead because of me. Only me. Steve doesn’t have to hate me. Managing to hate myself plenty just now. Enough for both of us. Can’t believe I want the alternative to be true. Steven being a Goa’uld, being condemned to deathless subjugation – Christ, that’s the upside? ‘Cause that way Osiris lets me wriggle right off the hook I’m writhing on.

Sam nods. Let the games begin. It’s so strange doing this without Jack. Without Teal’c. Sam leads the way confidently, every cautious step perfectly placed, eyes everywhere. I have absolute confidence in her abilities, as she has in mine. She isn’t checking behind her ‘cause she knows I’m covering her six. Janet too, as professional a soldier as she is a doctor. We can do this. I just don’t want to do this without Jack.
The tomb is cool, sunlight shafting down through the dust. As we turn the corner and head down the last flight of steps into the main chamber, Sam’s flashlight picks out a body crumpled to the ground.

“It’s Steven.”

Sam swiftly kneels beside him, alert for any motion. “I’m not sensing anything. He’s not Goa’uld.”

I can’t disguise my dismay. Fifteen years with Professor Jordan – fifteen years of friendship and support, weighed and found wanting against the inexorable rise of Steven’s career? Professor Jordan’s life a smaller price to pay than admitting I was right? How could Steven be so far from what I believed him to be?

Janet checks him over carefully as he regains consciousness. What happened here? He’s so pale beneath the blood beading his lips and throat.

“Steven.” I say anxiously. Have a reason, Steven. Please.

Janet looks up at me. “He’s bleeding internally.”

What the hell HAS happened here? He’s been attacked, brutally. Have I been too quick to judge? He needs my help, either way. I reach out to him, gently. “Steven, it’s me.”

“Daniel.” His voice is weak, thready, eyes clouded with pain, but he’s alert.

“What happened?” I still don’t want it to be you, Steven. If it’s Osiris, we can help, we can – if it’s you…

“I took the amulet.”

No. I don’t want to hear your death bed confession, dammit. I want to hear I was WRONG.

“It’s over ten thousand years old. Your theory was right all along. I’m sorry.”

S-sorry? Sorry you were wrong? Am I then wrong? If I am, it’ll be the BEST news I’ve - He groans wrenchingly under Janet’s careful ministrations. I look quickly at her as she says, “Just – just take it easy, okay? I need you to hold still.”

Janet’s frustration sounds in every syllable. She can fix this, but not here. Not here.

He’s resisting. I know it hurts, just - just let her – “It’s okay, she’s a friend.” He hears me, manages to calm himself. I’m reaching him. It’s getting harder and harder to see him as a cold blooded murderer, lying here, so open, defenceless. Suffering. I hate to put him through this, but we MUST know. “What about the jar?”
“Huh?”

Steven is totally bewildered and I’m not far behind him. “The Osiris jar. Did you open it?”

“No.”

His quiet, emphatic tone is enough to convince me. He’s in too much pain to dissemble. “Why did you come here?”

“I figured out the amulet was a key. There’s a – a chamber.”

I look up. The tomb has been stripped. There’s nothing here but the - The altar. Of course – the chamber must be concealed behind the altar. It’s classic Goa’uld camouflage.

“I wanted to make the discovery.”

I’m torn between relief and aching pity. Every word from Steven is forcing me to accept he didn’t murder Professor Jordan. I’m so glad he doesn’t have that burden, when he’s carrying so much baggage already. He couldn’t accept I wasn’t the unutterable failure I realise now he wanted me to be, couldn’t even be happy for Professor Jordan’s sake I’d been vindicated. He was consumed by the need to beat me. If he only knew how little I care. It’s never been about beating people, just about the pursuit of knowledge for it’s own sake. Jack could tell him a thing or two about that.

Steven is passing out again, the breath sighing from his lips. Janet looks at me gravely. “Daniel, we have to get him out of here.”

Jack would kick my ass for letting my mind wander this way, a habit he’s dedicated years to eradicating. We still don’t have any answers about Osiris or who left Steven to die this way. “Steven, who did this to you?”

I hear stately, measured footsteps behind me.

“I did.”

Sam spins, rising, gun already braced and ready to fire; Janet is up too. I scramble to my feet raising the tranquilliser gun and face – “Sarah?”

Osiris activates the ribbon device and the explosive burst of energy hurls first Sam, then Janet, crashing against the chamber wall. I fire immediately but Osiris deflects the dart with a subtly controlled blast. Jack’s voice is almost tangible in my mind, urging me to see only Osiris, to kill in order to live. I hear ya. I scramble desperately for my pistol, fingers clumsy with haste, managing to draw it but not to fire as Osiris reaches out Sarah’s hand and crushing pressure at my throat forcibly removes my ability to choose my own fate.
“Daniel Jackson.”

I’m dangling from the relentlessly tightening grip, fighting for breath that won’t come, Sarah’s face and Osiris’ voice wavering before me. I helplessly drop the pistol. Jack. Letting you down. Hard to – can’t...

“You seem to know much of the Goa’uld, much more than any other human I have encountered since my awakening. Now, tell me. Where is the Stargate?”

My hand may as well be just resting on Osiris’ hand for all the strength I can muster to fight. The brutal pressure eases enough to permit speech.

“I don’t know what you’re talkin’ about.” I KNOW I never mentioned the Stargate to Sarah.

Sarah’s icy face tightens as Osiris hurls me to the ground, the impact forcing the rest of the little precious air from my lungs. I lie there, unable to move – speak – think – every part of me straining to draw in breath.

“Insolence.”


“This temple was once filled with worshippers.”

Osiris stands regal, sunlight shafting down and burnishing Sarah’s hair with gold, outlining every curve under the flowing white robe.

Okay. For Jack I can do laconic, even with burning lungs and desperate waves of dizziness. “Yeah, well, times have changed.” Keep rubbing my throat like it can help. Ha ha.

“So I have observed. Where is my brother Setesh?”

And now for the entertainment portion of my death. “Ah, you mean Seth? He’s dead.” Speaking of which – got the other dart, got no gun. Have to get closer. I don’t think pathetic and helpless is much of a stretch dramatically but I try to crank up the vulnerability as I crawl forward. “We – er – we killed him.” I cock a thumb in Sam’s direction.

“You LIE.”
“No – no – we also killed Ra and Hathor. And – erm – who else? Erm – Sokhar.” I KNOW the throat rubbing thing doesn’t help so why is my hand back up here? Rubbing. Jack kissing it better would be just fi -

“Then you have done me a great favour. I will rule without opposition.”

“No. No. You won’t rule at all. See, we don’t worship false gods anymore.”

“You have come far, it is true, but you are still weak. Even now you are torn between your desire to kill me and your concern for my host. She who freed me from my long sleep.”

Sarah was in the lab with Professor Jordan. Osiris killed the Professor to cover his tracks. I didn’t know – didn’t see any sign of Osiris in there but it must have been. The whole time. Sarah would have fought – she would have said – done - something. If she could - Osiris, then, manipulating me through Sarah’s memories. Played me beautifully. Just rolled over and died, good old Daniel, trusted the mature, mellow friendship she – HE – offered. God, oh God. Heartsick. Sarah.

Osiris strides towards me, all sensual confidence. “What do you know of my queen?”

I drop my hand to my waist, try to make it look like I’m holding myself steady. Need a little time. Got to get Osiris close enough to use the dart. Draw him in.

“Um – she was trapped like you. We have the jar.”

My voices rises a little, emphasising what is frankly not much of a threat, but the best I can do. I’m trying to bluff with no cards, here.

“Where is it?”

Osiris is looming over me now.

“I’m not gonna tell you.” Don’t QUITE have Jack’s panache but I do passive resistance pretty well.

“You are mistaken.”

This Goa’uld is terrifyingly calm. Controlled.

Oh. Oh yeah. HERE we go again. Here – CHRIST. The energy pounds into my skull, pain crashing through me, should be heat but it’s icy cold, a spear of core ice driving through my brain – unbearable – pulsing – excoriating – not Sarah – nothing of her in this – not HER – gone – deal with it - My fingers closing agonisingly slowly over the dart. Can’t fuck this up. One shot deal. Jack will kill me if I get myself killed.
“Where is my queen?”

Deadly deliberate.

Me too. I ease out the dart.

“Tell me.”

Flip the cover free and stab viciously, deeply into Osiris’ side, grunting with the effort of using a leaden hand feels like someone else not related to me in any way is driving right now.

Off – thank CHRIST. I’m already tumbling forward as Osiris flinches back. Groaning? Me. Oh. Make that noise for Jack too, but more fun his way. Ways.

“What is this? What have you done?”


“You will pay for this impudence.”

Tremors in the chamber, me, everywhere. Brain pulverised in my skull, leaving me breathless, nauseated. Down not out. Need to be – out. Just a second’s respite. A moment. My hands wrap protectively around the top of my head, pushing down, trying to match the pressure pummelling up from the inside, trying for an out.

“Make no mistake. Osiris will return, and the rivers of the Earth will run red with blood.”

Missing you already.

Even through the roaring in my ears I hear the unmistakeable sound of transport rings activating and then shot after shot as someone vainly empties a clip.

Pounding. Head and – hand. Not helping. No. Maybe if I cut out the middle man and pound my pounding head…

“You all right?” Sam’s voice. Sam’s arm, gentle across my shoulders.

Jesus, God, no! No. “Oh yeah. Yeah. Think I’m - ” We take a break in this ambitious sentence to gasp at the sheer effrontery of this sentiment, “ - getting used to that thing.” Yep. Just as searingly agonising every damn time. Love to stay and faint but there’s a doctor in the house. I’m not taking on this doctor. No way. I’m sick. Self-preservation gets me upright.
“Where’s Osiris?” Janet. Oh God. Gotta stay up. She doesn’t miss a thing. Only got one patient here, Janet, and he ain’t me.

“Gone.”

Sorry, Sam. I - I tried. Let you down. Let Sarah down. Jack…

“Steven.” I can only see out of one eye. That’s new. I press the heel of my hand to it, like that will make a difference.

My only operational eye vaguely makes out Janet checking on Steven. “If we get him out of here right now, I think he’ll make it.”

The hand didn’t work. I try shaking my head. My sight isn’t up to par without my glasses anyway, but Janet is not long going to miss the fact it’s only in fact fifty percent operational. I do not count the sparks currently pin wheeling in front of the good eye. I think I can work around those.

I manage to lift my head long enough to tell them, “Then I guess we’d better think up a story to tell him,” but that’s all she wrote. I droop forward onto my forearm, rest for a moment, then turn and sit. I’m past caring what Janet thinks. I drop my head and cradle my hands around it protectively.

The cacophony of competing pains and anxieties clamouring for a full nervous breakdown at my earliest convenience cancel themselves out. White noise. I only have strength for one incoherent thought.

Jack is going to make me pay for this until my dying day. I’ll pay and I’ll pay and I’ll pay. Then he’ll make me pay some more for the hell of it. I foresee months of ‘I damn well told you so’ and ‘if you’d listened to me in the first place’ and ‘last time I ever let you out of my sight’ and…

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JACK

“Carter? You look like crap!”

“It’s nothing, sir. Had a high-speed butt to wall interface. Janet too. We’re fine. I’m just on my way back from the infirmary. Colonel Devoe kindly offered to sit with Daniel.”

“What the hell happened? Is he all right?” Cut to the chase, Carter, for Chrissake.

“He’s been ribboned again. Janet’s just observing him as a precaution, sir.” Carter’s voice and face are soothing.
At least she got to the important stuff. “He was at a goddamn funeral! I knew I shouldn’t have let him outta my sight.”

“This didn’t happen at the funeral, sir. We’ve been to Egypt in pursuit of the Goa’uld, Osiris. Professor Jordan, the museum curator and a lab technician were all murdered to cover his tracks. Dr Rayner was badly wounded; he’s in the American Hospital in Cairo. That’s not the worst of it, though. Poor Daniel. After losing Sha’uri – Osiris took Dr Gardner as his host. He’s lost two women he cared about to the Goa’uld. Osiris ribboned Daniel and escaped, threatening to return and, I quote, ‘make the rivers of Earth run red with blood’. Charmed, I’m sure. We didn’t have a clue Sarah was Osiris until we found Dr Rayner unconscious on the floor of the temple. This Goa’uld is very subtle and dangerously disciplined. Sarah tried to milk Daniel for information, playing on their past relationship, and must have been Osiris the whole time.” Carter shudders.

Damn him to hell anyway. THIS was why he didn’t want me there. Didn’t want Colonel Psycho to go ape with the ex, huh, big guy? As soon as I get my hands on him, I am going to use them to KILL him.

What is it with Daniel and the Goa’uld? What is it with Daniel and lovers for that matter? One ex, one very much current and one wannabe on his hands, all in one day.

“Why’s the Doc keeping him in?” I’m already heading for the elevator. Devoe, who can’t take no for an answer, has been left alone with MY archaeologist? He’d better have his hands in his goddamn pockets, he wants to live.

“You know Daniel. There are any number of mild medical conditions a creative doctor can use to have him where she can keep an eye on him for as long as she can get away with it.”

“General principles, huh?” Janet’s about to lose custody.

Carter grins suddenly, “She’s insisting he’s in shock. General Hammond took very little convincing to put his foot down quite firmly and order Daniel to take the full three days medical leave. Janet was willing to stretch a point and send Daniel home, if anybody was willing to stay with him, be strict about keeping him in bed. With SG-11 grounded until they’re at full strength, Colonel Devoe said he’d be happy to - Sir? Sir!”

I’m already accelerating, calling back over my shoulder, “Find Teal’c and fill him in. Find out what, if anything, he knows about this Osiris. Write it up and go home. You did good.”

SonovaGODDAMN bitch! Devoe is dead this time. Dead for sure. I don’t slow down until I’m in the infirmary. I hear the familiar soft, cultured tones. I saunter in, not looking at all like I just set a base record for reaching the infirmary.
Daniel is slumped against the pillows looking pale and exhausted and distressingly vulnerable. He lights up when he lays eyes on me. A sight to gladden the stoniest heart. Bless. Funny thing. Still want to kill him.

“Jack.”

I wait for the nurse to finish doing to Daniel whatever it is she’s doing and quietly close the door behind her.

“You look like shit. I’m taking you home and putting you in my bed and I want it clearly understood I will NOT be letting you out of my sight ANY time soon. EVERY goddamn time I turn my back you pull some STUPID stunt could get you KILLED. Where’s Devoe? He lay a finger on you? Spit it out, Daniel. I’m NOT in the mood.”

He gives me a shocked look. “He w - wouldn’t. He didn’t.”

Daniel is clueing in I’m angry. The smile falters. Then he just wilts, my eyes following him all the way down. Only when I’m sure he’s fully aware of the extent of my displeasure and he’s looking at me with apology and not a little guilt do I snatch him into my arms. Crap, kid. Where do I start?

I hold him away from me, seeing the raw spot where the ribbon device has burned his flawless skin, shadows bruising the achingly clear blue eyes, the pallor. The goddamn finger marks marring his throat. He’s rigid with tension and apprehension. I’ve made point number one forcefully. I’m furious with him for being so goddamn wilful and he’s utterly in disgrace for almost getting himself killed. Time for point number two.

“I love you. I’m going to put you over my knee and paddle some sense into you as soon as you’re up to it, and don’t think for a SECOND you’re getting out of talking about this. I’m not having you doing the silent just fine and dandy routine on me - ” I’ve spoken more kindly to people I’ve killed.

Daniel gives me a wavering smile and lays his weary head on my shoulder. Point number two equally forcefully made. Welcome home, kid. I engulf him and hold on, my hands making those sweeps of his spine seem to have the most calming effect on him.

I hear the door and my glare freezes Devoe in his tracks. His eyes on me are bleak, but he doesn’t budge while he checks Daniel is fine. The naked hunger and longing in eyes riveted to Daniel tell me there’s a shit load of stuff going on HERE Daniel hasn’t been ‘worrying’ me with either. I know perfectly well he’ll find genuine emotion much harder to deal with than straightforward sexual harassment, which is what I thought this was until a few seconds ago. I was convinced Devoe was looking for sex. Hot, ‘lasts as long as he’s posted here’ sex, but still - sex. I’m shocked when Devoe smiles. He’s - happy - Daniel has what he needs, even if it’s not coming from him. Fuck’s sake, the man is falling in love! He’s seeing stars, not to mention picket fences.
I reject outright any thought of reporting the merest breath of a hint of sexual harassment. Given the special place Daniel holds in Hammond’s affections, the general would bounce Devoe farther, faster and harder than even I could dream of. Only a total bastard would do such a thing, and still, it’s only the fact Daniel would never forgive me staying my hand. Daniel is ridiculously tender hearted. This is not something I have to worry about, except vicariously.

Quick and clean won’t do here. I do have to deal with this myself. I won’t permit Devoe to cause Daniel a moment’s pain or anxiety, so ‘Just call me Alex’ has ME looming up in his immediate future. I do not admire persistence in this case. I’m beginning to suspect a touch of wanting the forbidden fruit may be creeping in to Devoe’s thinking. Either that or prolonged exposure to Daniel is doing to him exactly what it did to me. You get a little taste, you need a little more. Then you need a whole lot more. A self-fulfilling prophecy, or, on my bad days, what Daniel calls al’ishk, a sickness of wanting.

Soon as I’ve got Daniel back on his feet, Devoe will get a house call. I’m here for him. I have just the medicine he needs, if he’s to avoid contracting this potentially fatal sickness. One colonel mooning around the SGC starry eyed over Daniel is enough. Devoe is going to get my help to reach a mature understanding of the situation and make the rational decision. Otherwise, I’m going to rip his nuts off.

I don’t have to make an embarrassing scene. Janet whisks into the doorway and despatches Devoe with a single glance. Nobody messes with the Doc in her own domain. She then closes the door behind her and eyes me hugging Daniel with mild approval.

Not for the first time I’m profoundly grateful for my long history of hugging the crap out of Daniel at the most inconvenient of times and in the most public of places. The whole damn base knows Colonel O’Neill pretty much dotes on every move young Dr Jackson makes. Nothing out of the ordinary here. I unhurriedly let Daniel go and he flops down as if his spine can’t hold him up.

Janet also reads the freezing disapproval on my face and this hits the Hippocratic spot too. I guess I must look suitably quelling because she gives a measured, approving nod and says clearly, “I’ve got a long list of instructions on his care and feeding. I’m relying on you to be ruthless about keeping him in bed AND making sure he doesn’t sneak any work in just to take the edge off. When I say bed rest I MEAN bed rest.”

There is a very haughty sniff from somewhere round pillow level.

The Doc ‘n’ me exchange a look of complete understanding and empathy. She can tell Daniel’s charms are NOT going to work their magic on this occasion. The ONLY distraction Daniel is going to have from paralysing boredom is me. He can talk to me or he can lie there and pout. I want every single worry he’s got weighing on him aired and put down ASAP. He’s been alone for so long, in some ways it’s hard for him learn to share himself again. I’ve no sympathy with his touchingly gallant self-reliance, and three days of having him utterly at my mercy ought to sort that right out. I’m going to run him
through a steep learning curve, polish up those rusty inter-personal communication skills. Touching lightly on the ex, this Rayner guy, the Professor, the murders, being frustrated as hell he can’t ever tell a bunch of sheep with PhDs he’s RIGHT and they’re WRONG, and, last but by no means least, EXACTLY what Devoe’s been trying on that I’m not to know about for Devoe’s protection.

I turn to Janet and say heartlessly, “Does he get to walk out of here under his own steam? He looks like hell. Maybe a chair?”

Daniel snaps bolt upright, a furious rejoinder dying on his lips as he meets my unforgiving eyes. He turns slowly and gives Janet a pleading look which she affects not to see. She looks impressed. This is a first, Daniel thinking she’s the soft option.

Her lips twitch but she manages to say gravely, “I think he’ll be better off in a chair. His vision hasn’t returned to normal. He couldn’t see out of his right eye until a couple of hours ago.”

My gaze returns slowly to my wayward lover. “Blind?” I enunciate crisply.

Daniel lies down again, body language doing it’s best to suggest he has some choice in the matter. A shadow in the doorway alerts us to Teal’c’s inimitable presence. I take one look and ease off the bed and out of the master’s way. As does Janet, with a little choke of unprofessional laughter as she closes the door behind her.

Daniel clearly interprets one quirked eyebrow and a sombre, “DanielJackson,” as the Gettysburg Address of disapproval and disappointment, Teal’c style. No escape there, either, kid.

“I asked if you required assistance,” Teal’c says mildly.

Daniel rallies slightly. “I didn’t at the time.”

“Three murders?” I say witheringly.

Daniel launches a spirited counter attack. “I tried and tried to get back in touch. There was no answer. None.”

“The cell phone ceased to function when the power supply was forcibly removed and disposed of.”

Oh, SHIT. I clue in a little late in the game. All that disapproval and disappointment? NOT aimed at Daniel. Oh. Gotcha. Yeah. This is going to hurt, right?

Daniel sits up slowly and impales me with a disbelieving look. “Jack? You BROKE the phone? Why?”
Teal’c presses him gently back down to the bed, saying kindly, “You are injured. You must rest. I have much to say to Colonel O’Neill. If you will permit, I will speak for us both.”

Daniel snuggles down on to the pillow and waves a ‘be my guest’ hand at Teal’c. I make a time out gesture. It’s not like Daniel not to fight his own battles. I shoot over and check his brow. He’s clammy.

“You’re really not well. Should I get the Doc back in here?” I leave my hand where it is, soothing him.

He just shakes his head a little. “You got that headache you get before you throw up?” That’s what this is. Shoulda known. “Hit the lights, Teal’c. Scoot over, Daniel.” I sit down beside him, and start to gently massage his forehead. Helps better than any painkiller. With the light at more manageable levels I can start to work on relieving some of the crushing pressure at his temples. He did his best to put words to this indescribable pressure for me once, said it was like someone standing on top of his head, weighing him down, while the pressure inside tried to punch its way out.

I realise my hands are shaking just a little. “Better?” I ask him gently.

“A little.”

“Just be still, let me…”

We sit in silence, the big macho colonel tenderly massaging his lover’s temples with shaking hands, occasionally just resting them across his brow, to soothe him with the heat I’m generating. That helps too. I’m largely oblivious to Teal’c’s presence. Or maybe I just trust him too much and Daniel needs me too much to mind him seeing this.

“It is a beginning.” Teal’c’s eyes are very gentle when they rest on Daniel but cool when he meets my gaze.

I don’t cease the gentle circles my fingertips are working around Daniel’s eyes but I brace myself. Teal’c is not going to spare me. He loathed the fishing and I was lousy company. The cost of my childish display is one I expect I will be repaying in full in the manner of his choosing, when he’s ready, but in the meantime I guess I can expect him to tear me off a strip. I just hope it’s a metaphorical strip and he does it quietly. Danny is just starting to relax a fraction, here.

“DanielJackson. After a sullen silence punctuated only by your call, O’Neill then became distressingly verbose and spoke of you incessantly for two interminable days.”

Ouch. There are so many subtle insults in there I’m not sure which one to safely tackle first. “Incessantly?”
“Indeed.” Teal’c intones with flat finality.

I decide discretion is the better part of avoiding annihilation and step up the massage. I can’t help but notice the tiny smile Daniel isn’t bothering to try to fight.

“I believe he missed your presence.”

Daniel’s smile grows just a little wider.

“As did I.” Teal’c offers up the graceful compliment, clearly hitting the spot with Daniel. Then he says smoothly, “I believe the answer to O’Neill’s childish destruction of the cell phone was pique.”

“Pique?” I say with quiet, yet profound indignation. I’m not touching childish.

Teal’c explains kindly, “A feeling of anger or vexation caused by wounded pride, resentment of a slight – “

“All right already, you don’t need to draw us a picture.” I try to cut him off before we get the full, humiliating Webster’s definition and a quick trot through the more amusing synonyms.


I brighten up. “Yeah? Carter’s the one with the knack for it, but – you know, so long as it’s doing you some good,“ I say unconvincingly. I’m thoroughly enjoying myself despite the blows raining down on my ego. I’d like to think Daniel is trading up. I normally just get to do the recuperative fishing stuff. Carter does the cookies and the infirmary TLC. I get to watch and criticise but she’s never trusted me with the actual hands on. I’m meanly glad I sent her home. Teal’c always reads to him. It’s stuff the medical staff just never think to do. Small stuff that makes all the difference to Daniel. I’m just starting to relax back into it when Daniel fakes me out.

“I LIKE to see the big picture.”

“O’Neill was most – upset - you did not appear to wish to speak with him, DanielJackson,” Teal’c obliates promptly.

Daniel opens his eyes and gives me a long, disappointed look I have the greatest difficulty meeting.

“You hung up on ME.”

I foresee a long talk about colonels and archaeologists and unreasonable jealousy in the not too distant future.
“I must sincerely request that you do not again abandon Colonel O’Neill to his own resources for such a protracted period. Next time, I may not be so forgiving of his separation anxiety.”

I feel a tidal wave of heat surge across my entire face. Separation anxiety for Chrissake! Sounds even more pathetic and needy than - er - pathetic and needy.

I feel a slight tremor beneath my hands. Daniel is shaking. With not very suppressed laughter.

Teal’c regards these signs of resuscitation with calm approval.

“I will leave you now, trusting you will put O’Neill out of my misery.”

Thanks. Really. Just step over the mangled corpse of my dignity and don’t let the door hit you in the ass on the way out. Brothers, huh? How sharper than a serpent’s tooth.

Teal’c saves the lowest blow to last. “DanielJackson? O’Neill expressed strong sentiments over the future well-being of your fish. I believe you must do all in your power to assuage these ‘sentiments’.”

My jaw drops. Teal’c leaves me with a subtly malicious look and I’m desperately wondering just how drunk I was and what the hell else I said to him. I’ve got a terrifying feeling those weren’t the only strong – sentiments - I expressed.

Daniel’s head sort of snuggles up into my now limp hands and he dredges up the first genuine smile I’ve seen from him since I got back. He’s very committed to his fish. I smile back, it’s wavering a little, true, a ‘don’t mind me and my little fantasies of first degree piscicide, just insanely jealous’ waver. It’s the softness in his eyes. I could no more - Crap.

Danny’s eyes should come with some kinda government health warning. Danger: hazardous to sanity, self-discipline and good judgement. Prolonged exposure will result in irresistible urge to please. Spine will dissolve on contact if attempting to disappoint. In an emergency, cave instantaneously, move heaven and earth to fulfil expectations, kiss better.

“I’ll start looking at places for the tank, don’t worry. The fish will be just fine.” I don’t know how God doesn’t strike me dead for sheer effrontery. “Shelves, too. For all your – stuff.”

“Thank you. It’s very considerate of you.”

It isn’t. He gets pissy as hell when I break things and he’ll always be leaving rare, fragile artefacts wherever I least expect them if I don’t give him a little corner for his clutter.
“Some of my books are very old and rare. They need humidity and dust control as well as special lighting. As do some of the artefacts. I think we should get the company who did the work on my apartment round to give us an estimate and do the work on your house if I’m to keep any of my things there.”

Maybe I could build an extension.

I decide to clear the air between us while he’s all tender hearted over a tank of fish I want dead and of which I have just gained joint custody. “So we’re even, then? You should have let me go with you to the funeral in the first place and I shouldn’t have dismantled the phone however hurt my feelings were.”

The soft glow in Daniel’s eyes is replaced by the fine sparkle of temper. “EVEN? You were so JEALOUS I needed to speak to Teal’c you destroyed the phone? And you were wondering why it was I wouldn’t let you come to the funeral! Asked AND answered, Jack. I could just picture the scenes you would have made the moment you ran into Steven and Sarah. You were spoiling for a fight, don’t deny it.”

“This is not about blame, Daniel.” I say with superb conviction, firmly ignoring Daniel’s outraged gasp.

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DANIEL

I cannot believe he - how dare he? I’m almost stammering at his audacity – “Jack? You know I really, TRULY love you?”

Jack gives me a wary look, then he relaxes and his eyes go all soft. “Yes.”

“Right now, I really, TRULY have to wonder just why the hell I do.”

He’s done nothing BUT blame me, from the very moment he walked through the door. I ruthlessly suppress my urge to palliate my severity as his face falls. I know perfectly well he was scared to death at the thought of having come so close to losing me – and Sam and Janet of course – knowing it was largely his own fault he wasn’t there, and, being Jack, naturally he transferred the culpability firmly onto me.

I swallowed his utterly unjustified tirade without a murmur, knowing he’d apologise and make it up to me once he’d vented and calmed down. He’s not a total shit. He’s just JACK. This is what selflessness gets me. He’s had ALL the slack I intend to cut him. He’s got some SERIOUS making up to do.

I say in a shy little voice, “I’m going to need some help dressing.” Good. I’m confusing the hell out of him. He likes to assist me with my clothes, mostly because I can’t get out of them fast enough to suit him. He’s pathetically easy to distract. “Would you call me a nurse, please, and I’ll see you topside in about fifteen minutes.”
“A nurse?” His voice is rising as he gains the first glimpse of the abyss. “I thought – “

I know exactly what he thought. Three days of romping make-up sex, Jack? I hardly think so. He’s forfeited his rights to my person for the immediate future. I need my rest. Doctor’s orders.

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I’ve executed part one of my plan with military precision, and now I’m sitting demurely in the passenger seat of the Explorer, with a gratifyingly anxious, uncertain colonel casting longing looks at me whenever he thinks he’s getting away with it.

I still feel distressingly limp and exhausted, and possibly I am a little pale. I no longer have the headache I have before I throw up. I have the headache I have after I throw up, which I of course managed to do when we were on the road. Jack dealt with the whole humiliating episode by the side of the road with impeccable sensitivity and patience, which naturally cranked up my annoyance levels no end.

I’m also cold. Shivering in fact. I’m not entirely successful in disguising it from Jack.

“Nearly home.”

Speaking of which – I’ve had a chance to put together a throwaway comment from several days or half a lifetime ago, a pointed comment from a Jaffa who is a mutual friend of ours and a sickly smile from less than an hour ago.

“I’ve been thinking about my fish. About where I’d like the tank. I do have some choice in the location?” I ask gently.

Jack is so relieved by my first attempt at verbal communication since I asked him with heartfelt sincerity to just let me die, right there, by the side of the road, he takes that without a blink. “Sure, Danny. Sure. Whatever you want.”

“You’re certain? I don’t want to put you out – I just want a quiet little corner where I can keep an eye on them.”

Jack brightens visibly. “NOT the living room, then?”

I heartlessly lower the boom. “No. The bedroom.”

I can almost read Jack’s mind. He immediately pictures the fish WATCHING us while we make love. The wicked flee when no fish pursueth, hmm, Jack? The prick of a guilty conscience? Jack is clueing in this is the only prick he’s going to be feeling for quite some time. Unless my mood improves significantly.
He waits until we have negotiated the turn into his drive before answering in a wooden little voice, “Fine. That’s just – it’s fine.”

Liar Liar – I glance down – pants definitely on fire.

As I turn to get out of the car, a quelling hand on my arm and a stern voice I normally hear only in the field stop me. “Wait! I’ll come round and get you. You’re still woozy.”

“I can mana -“

“I can carry you, if you’d prefer?”

One glance tells me he’d damn well do it, too. I give in with the best grace I can muster, knowing he’s likely to do it anyway and the hell with the number of extra days celibacy it might earn him, if I sulk too obviously.

He opens my door.

“Such a gentleman.”

There’s a sudden gleam in his eyes I don’t understand. He gives a chuckle and says, “Officer too.”

When I gain my feet, my head swims unpleasantly. Jack simply drapes his arm around me and leads me, unresisting, to the front door.

He lets us in and resets the alarm while I lean up against the wall. “You need to eat something.”

I shudder uncontrollably as my stomach rebels at the mere thought.

“Daniel. Your blood sugar is in your shoes right now. Toast. Nothing more comforting than toast.”

He leads me down the steps into the living room and smoothly divests me of my jacket, hands seeming to be on automatic pilot. I’m nestled on the sofa under a blanket and he’s lighting a fire by the time I identify the source of this coaxing kindness. It’s the ease of long practice, twelve years of practice to be precise. I’ve teased him mercilessly about his mother hen with all the brakes off mode, but I realise now Jack’s nurturing instincts haven’t atrophied, merely redirected. I’ve slipped into another part of his psyche perhaps even he isn’t fully conscious of. When his hand checks my brow for fever for what is way more than one too many times, I just smile up at him and say, “Toast sounds good.”

I eat my toast as meekly as I drink the milk he heated for me without being asked. I’m surprised he knows exactly what helps to settle my nausea; milk has the opposite effect on
most people. I guess he’s been paying more attention than I ever realised. I do feel marginally more human when I finish.

He eyes the shivers I can’t suppress, frowning. “Let’s take a bath.”

“A bath?”

He laughs as he hauls me to my feet, tells an imaginary audience, “Apparently it’s okay for us to have SEX but when it comes to sharing a bath, he’s shy.”

I’m not shy. Not at all. I just had no plans whatsoever to get naked anywhere near a sneaky, underhanded colonel with no morals and extraordinary powers of persuasion.

“Fully fitted. I’ve got a little duck and everything.”

My eyes widen with astonishment, “A DUCK?”

“A little duck,” he corrects. “It squeaks. I’ll just grab some candles while you grab the towels.”

Is he trying to seduce me or lull me into a false sense of security in order to extract information? I ask with extreme caution, “Jack, are you being ROMANTIC?”

He takes the stairs two at a time. “Depends. Tell me after you’ve seen what I’ve got in mind for the duck.”

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The huge tub is already filling by the time I slip into the bathroom. I’m wrapped in an enormous fluffy towel. Jack is cautiously sniffing some tiny bottles but he rolls his eyes at the sight of me wrapped up like a mummy. He is gloriously naked. A few treacherous hormones take a keen interest.

“I’m cold.” I say defiantly. “I am not shy or body conscious.” He looks disbelieving. “I’m not. Nakedness has its place, just not –”

“Not in the bathroom, huh?”

I glare at him but refuse to play into his hands. I hold on to my towel.

“We’ll use this one. Vetiver.”

Jack says mildly, “It’s the least objectionable smell. My Mom bought them for me after my last visit home. I’m not drawing any conclusions from the fact the entire hand-picked selection is good for relieving stress, just because Mom said they were happier to see me going than they had been to – They say hi, by the way. And thanks.”

“Who? What for?”

“The folks. The one and only Kate and Joe O’Neill.” He gives a malevolent chuckle. “They know ALL about you and they said to be sure to tell you you’re throwing yourself away. You could do much better. That’s thanks for trading down, I think.”

“They actually said I was throwing myself away?” I’m fascinated and slightly indignant.

“Yep. There might be a weird alternate reality where they worship the ground the alternate me walks on but frankly, I find it hard to believe. Whatever else might be different, I’m comforted to know there are a billion Kate O’Neill’s out there calling up their beloved only son and dispensing sage advice on how to keep a drop-dead gorgeous young archaeologist fully satisfied between the sheets and I can only hope the billion other me’s have more success shutting her up than I did.”

Jack eyes my appalled confusion with grim satisfaction. “Blow by blow. Literally. Welcome to the family, Daniel. They’re gonna eat you alive.” He also takes ruthless advantage of my dazed state and neatly extracts me from the towel. When he climbs into the tub and holds out an imperative hand I meekly acquiesce.

By the time he has us settled to his satisfaction, I’m one hundred percent in favour of this latest variation on the patented Jack O’Neill bearhug. My head is on Jack’s shoulder, his arms are wrapped around my chest and his legs are tangled with mine. His toes are taking a keen interest in my toes. There’s a lot of stroking going on down there. I start to relax just a tad.

What with the barely there mood music, the candles, the hot scented water and of course the duck, which squeaks every time one of us stirs it with a foot, I’d have to say Jack does romantic very well. VERY well. He’s - er - he’s a rock at my back. Or, more accurately, at my butt. And - um - a LOT of stroking going on now. I don’t mind the hugging but he’s wandering below the waterline here. I pointedly remove his questing hand and a sigh gusts against my hair. Maybe that’s because he’s kissing it. His arms tighten around me, gentle fingers covering the bruises on my throat, then cupping my jaw.

I don’t want to leap to any conclusions here so I don’t ask the question until I’ve removed the same exploratory hand for the third time from a part of me he knows perfectly well is strictly off-limits. “Are you trying to seduce me?”

“Which answer will get me the week on the couch?”

“That’s for me to know and you to die of frustration.”
“You started this. You kissed me first.”

“What? Is that the best line you can come up with? It was only a week ago, Jack. I was provoked, by YOU – “

“A week?” The familiar siren tones.

What? What does he – is he saying there was ANOTHER first time? I feel giddy and out of control. Just Jack being Jack. He wouldn’t have said if there wasn’t a question – I don’t remember a thing. Must have been – oh no. No.


Jack says calmly, “Did I say a word?”

I groan again, piteously. “You didn’t have to.”

“Quit your worrying. It wasn’t the end of the world. You were very -”


Jack tilts my face to him and smiles at me, eyes soft. He says gently, “Sweet.”

Bastard. “SWEET?” I snarl, unable to adequately express the depth of my loathing. “Sweet.” Typical. Classic Jackson. “Did you kiss me back?”

“I’m only human.”

“When?”

“Daniel, it wouldn’t do you any good to know.”

I think about that for all of two seconds. “When?”

Jack sighs. “After that business with Nick and the crystal skull.”

Oh! That. Still rankles. “I would have worked through the night for YOU.”

Jack groans, “Don’t start with me, Daniel. That’s what you said last time.”

“Well…”

“Let’s just say I was profoundly grateful you didn’t follow me to my room that very night on the base and then let’s leave it alone.”
Oh. Oh! “So how’d I end up kissing you?”

Jack says very distantly, “You needed some reassurance. Kept touching everything. Including me.”

Including lips. Hence – ‘sweet’. Rather forgetting my original point, I mourn, “You were ‘nice’ to me, I’ll just bet you were. What a waste.” Bet he patted ‘Dear Little Drunken Daniel’ on the head and tucked me up chastely in bed. And left me. Bastard.

Jack’s face melts into a grin. He just shakes his head at me. What’s done is done. Not worth fretting over it now. He then presses home his advantage and both hands slide down to encourage my hormones to betray me. They don’t take much convincing, especially when he starts licking that spot behind my ear. I’ve no backbone at all.

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JACK

Daniel can’t resist tangents. I get him every single time. I’ve got him now, thank God. I realise I’ve insinuated myself into the part of his life he keeps the most private, the most guarded. The ‘I WILL be fine’ part. The nervous shivers he couldn’t hide from me, the heavy, resistant silence in the car. I don’t quite know what I did, but something gave once I got him home. Still resistance, but it’s playful now.

He’s letting me touch him at last. Okay. Now I’ve pushed it a little. Can’t think of a better way to warm him through. He’s swelling beneath my fingers, but I release him when he slowly nudges my hands away. He’s not quite ready to let me THAT close. Closing the gap though, as he turns his head and gives me a sweet little kiss before he remembers he’s supposed to be all haughty and distant.

“I’m throwing you a bone,” he says, apparently feeling some explanation is owed for this temporary lapse.

I can’t let a great cue like that pass me by. I leer at him dreadfully and my hand pounces back below the waterline, closing eagerly on his erection.

He gives a little gasp and then tells me sternly, “I said BONE, Jack. Drag your mind out of the gutter, if you please.”

There’s a magic spot on the underside – if I can find the EXACT – yes, here, he’s moaning - I just have to rub little circles with my finger and it does more for him than all the energetic tugging two enthusiastic hands can muster. Daniel is very sensual, incredibly sensitive to touch. I’m devoting almost all my free time to finding out which parts of him respond best to exactly what kind of touch. Sometimes it’s fingers, sometimes lips, or tongue. His hands, for example, love the feel of my hair. It’s a hell of a job and I’m just goddamned glad I get to do it.
Daniel cut me an inch of slack when he got into this bath. I’ve taken exactly six feet. His hand reaches back down to mine. I’ll stop if he moves my hand again. Don’t want him ‘giving in’ because I’ve turned him on. I keep up the gentle rubbing as his left hand hesitates and then slowly settles on top of mine, the other reaching up behind him to clasp the back of my neck and tangle in my hair. It’s looking like he’s letting me keep him.

I eagerly take the kiss he offers up to me, accepting the invitation of his parted lips, reaching in to stroke his tongue as I hug him closer to me, hoping he’ll feel he’s at the centre of everything, that he can trust me and let go. Daniel lies very still, only the long sensitive fingers clenching rhythmically over mine and the kisses he reaches for continuously tell me I’m doing this just right. Gentleness and patience to burn, that’s all it takes to please him. Even in sex, he won’t take the quick, easy way.

He’s flushed, sweat spiking the hair at his temples, eyes closed, biting his lips. Totally lost in what I’m doing for him, trembling and beginning to arch into my hand as I bring him unhurriedly to climax. He groans wrenchingly and slumps against me. Slumberous eyes open and he smiles up at me. Forgiven me, huh? Forgetting. Accepting.

“Better?”

“Mmm.”

Good enough. I’ll try not to push it. I’ll try to be patient. I want him to come to me and talk about what went down in Egypt when he’s ready for me to hear it. I can wait for that. I’ve got to know about Devoe. Now. Got to know what’s coming at him so I can protect him. He’s too kind, too compassionate, too trusting. Devoe is willing to go through ME to get to Danny and that worries me.

I hope I’m not spoiling the mood here. I say quietly, “Danny? About Devoe? You’d tell me – you’d tell me if –”

His eyes widen. “I don’t play games, Jack! Not with you and certainly not with him.”

“Then what is it you have to ‘deal with’ now you’re back?” And do you really expect me to let you deal with it on your own?

“He asked me out. Several times. I said no.”

“Every time. He just keeps on asking though.”

Daniel doesn’t deny it. I’m tensing up and I feel him shift awkwardly away. Okay, gotta crank this down or I’ll be undoing all the good work I’ve just done. I consciously relax and casually tell him to top up the hot water while he’s in the neighbourhood. When he’s done he settles right back against me.
I actually like this. There isn’t the level of interactivity you get with the O’Neill Shower Experience, which is a definite showstopper, but this is very, very nice. Being in love with Daniel is going to mean sharing stuff like baths and grocery shopping. Remodelling for his books. Taking him out to dinner and showing him off around town. I do draw the line at TV. I’m keeping custody of the remote. I have SOME pride.

“Jack?”

“Hmm?” An armful of naked archaeologist is nice whatever the context.

“About - Alex?”

I say carefully, “Yeah?”

“He’s a little beyond the asking out stage. He – er – he – “

“Propositioned you?” Very cool.

“Eloquently. If he could be told about us – I –“

I can’t fault Daniel for caution in this case, so I say calmly, “I’ll talk to him tomorrow. Tell him to put in for a transfer. He has an excellent record, this won’t harm his career in any way. I’ll find him something more exciting than supervising digs. He’s a smart guy. No point hanging around eating his heart out. You’re spoken for.”

Daniel looks unconvinced. “And you won’t – “ He makes a fist and punches the air.

I look shocked. “Of course not! I’ll simply help him to make the mature, rational choice – “

“Til he loses consciousness?” Daniel says witheringly.

“The alternative is I have to go to General Hammond and tell him I suspect a member of my team is being sexually harassed by a senior officer under his command. Better Devoe makes his own choice, Daniel.”

“But – “

“I’m responsible for your welfare, Daniel. It’s my duty to deal with this. It isn’t Devoe’s fault – “

It damn well is but Danny doesn’t need a run through the military versus civilian debate right now.
“...and it certainly isn’t yours, but he’s crossed the line. I’d prefer to deal with it as painlessly as possible. If Hammond gets involved – you know he’s deeply concerned with your welfare as a civilian in a military command.”

That’s the toughest spin I can put on the doting paternal fondness the general has developed for Daniel. Both of us, snared by a pair of melting blue eyes.

“It’s a matter of honour as well as duty.”

Daniel eventually nods, accepting the hateful necessity. He looks sad. I feel sad. I’ve just destroyed the mood and I’m going to have to sit on this erection until we’re both back on the same hot sex page. In fact, Daniel looks too damn tempting to be safe another minute with me in this bath. I’m getting the logistics a little too clearly on how we can make love in all this scented water. A little variation on the position we’re getting so much out of mastering in bed. And on the couch. And...

“I’m hungry,” I say abruptly, hoping he’ll think it’s for food.

“Me too. Er -”

He gives a little wriggle against me that makes the breath catch in my throat.

“I could – if you want - “

“I’m not in the mood now,” I lie heroically. “Let’s just eat. You can make it up to me later.” Got to stop saying up. “Scoot, big guy. Move some butt. I want you on my lap in jammies, in front of the fire, in five.”

“A man with a plan.”

“You know it.”

I very much admire the insouciant way he jumps out of the tub, then abruptly remembers he’s naked in a bathroom within company and snatches for his towel. He exits the bathroom at a gentle trot. He’s definitely feeling very cosy and tender hearted if I’m getting him in jammies without a fight. I should have said ten. I’m gonna need at least five under the coldest setting in the shower before I’ll be fit for company.

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DANIEL

I feel better now Jack knows the worst about Alex. I’m glad I trusted him with it. His solution is by far the most civilised. I don’t want to hurt ANYBODY, but I can’t argue with the logic of a clean break. I’m also glad Jack refrained from pointing out it was actually my naivété that got me into this tangle in the first place. He didn’t apportion blame, just concentrated on resolving it to the best advantage of all concerned.
I was impressed. It’s the only explanation I have for spinelessly agreeing to put myself back in jammies. Like nudity, jammies have a place. Although I must admit, at Jack’s place I have a way of starting in one state and finding myself rapidly in the other. He can’t keep his hands off the fuzzies. Foot and flannelette fetish. However, flexible as I am about bare feet, I am not going to run around half naked for his edification. I’m wearing my own charcoal grey jammies and I’m standing in front of his closet admiring his favourite T-shirt. The light dove grey goes perfectly. I’ve been coveting this T-shirt – what the hell, if he goes ballistic I’ll just slip both feet into his lap and let him do his worst. It works every time I want custody of the TV remote.

As I breeze past the bathroom I can hear the shower going. We’ve had a bath and now he’s taking a shower? I guess this is no weirder than some of Jack’s other habits. Like his penchant for nudity.

I’m really hungry. Ravenous in fact. We haven’t had the serious Talk I was braced for about Sarah and Steven. I’m not ready to cover that ground just yet. He let it be, so I’ve got a chance to think it through before I say anything to him about it. My headache is easing off too. All in all, I feel far better than expected and far more kindly disposed to the concept of three days of romping all over the house practicing new skills. Jack is far stronger and far more athletic than I’ve ever given him credit for. He has an incredibly sexy spine, but I admire it far more for context than aesthetics. I know exactly what he can do, courtesy of that spine and how long he can keep it up.

I head straight for the freezer. Jack makes heroic portions of everything so he can freeze half and I can reheat it when it’s my turn to cook. I’m willing to give real cooking a try, but he’s not. I rummage around and find the neatly bagged remains of the bœuf bourguignon he made to celebrate Friday. The first Friday night we spent doing what he’d actually wanted to for a lot of the time he’s known me. Strangely, hockey wasn’t so much as mentioned.

As fond as I am of the freezer, the microwave is also a wonderful invention. Ten minutes on defrost and ten minutes on full power and we’ll have a meal fit for the gods. I just have to uncork the burgundy, light the candles and set out the plates. I’m in the middle of this when the phone rings. Everybody knows I’m here, for medical reasons, so I’m not afraid to pick up.

“Hello?”

“Daniel! What are you doing up? Thought it was strict bed rest?”

“Sam. I’m in my jammies, does that get me off the hook? I’m getting time off for bad behaviour. We’re about to eat.”

“You COOKED? That’s two on the sick list then.” She’s chuckling.
I say sulkily, “Jack cooked.”

“How are you feeling? I was worried.”

“Honestly, I’m better now. My headache is almost completely gone.” A slight exaggeration. Sam frets.

“And everything else?” Her voice is very kind.

“Putting it into perspective. Steven is going to make it so – “

“Janet checked up on him. He made it just fine through the surgery, she wanted you to know. I’m just off. Janet’s coming with me to see ‘Manon des Sources’. Her French isn’t anything like yours, but we’ll give it a go. Hope you don’t mind?”

“Oh no, no. I forgot. I’m sorry. Have a good time and call me tomorrow, tell me what you thought. Not like I have anywhere to go or anything to do. In fact, I can see Jack looming up at me now, wondering what the hell I’m doing standing up – “ Wearing HIS T-shirt.

“Good NIGHT, Carter.”

I hear her goodnight and her chuckling clearly. I can also see Jack’s disapproval clearly. He fingers the precious T-shirt gently, looking ominous. I smile sweetly and stroke his foot with my bare toes. He’s utterly unable to withstand blatant podalic advances. He gains the upper hand in a moment. There’s something wrong with that metaphor.

“Dinner is defrosting. Bœuf bourguignon.”

“Thank God. For one terrifying moment I thought you’d had enough time alone down here for optimism to triumph over bitter experience.”

“One small, easily contained fire!” I say indignantly.

“Water. You burnt WATER.”

You can just cancel that bootie call, colonel. Kindly remove your foot. And I’m putting this puppy through the next hot cycle, you want to see what I can do with boiling water. If the T-shirt fits, I get to wear it.

I stalk into the kitchen. Jack lets me reprogramme the microwave and then he stalks me. We end up doing a kind of hunter-prey dance around the butcher’s block. It’s unfair. He’s a Special Forces colonel. What’s a poor defenceless archaeologist to do? I zig when I should have zagged and he lifts me quite off my feet, then sets me on the worktop. For easy access I guess. He stares at me for a long moment and then his arms go around me as he leans in for a kiss, tongue sliding comfortably in to stroke mine. He lazily explores the
contours of my teeth, which makes his tongue conveniently placed for me to nibble on. Jack gives me a hum of appreciation and more tongue to play with.

I never imagined how much I would enjoy kissing another man. Although I have to say, Jack is in a minority of one in the category ‘men I have kissed’. He’s astonishingly talented at osculation. Depth, length, interactivity, strength of feeling, he’s got it all. And then some. Kissing isn’t an activity I’ve had a lot of experience with over the past few years. I’m having to relearn my old skills. Learning new ones too. Still a shock to my system, to be passionately kissed by someone who can lift me off my feet like this when he gets carried away.

I hold him now with lips, arms, legs. It seems much too short a time to me when he laughs against my mouth and I have to let him go. Reluctantly. I almost let him get away from me, then I tighten my legs around his waist and snatch him back to me. The hell with it. I’m enjoying this. I want more.

“Daniel! We’ve got fish boiling.”

I sneak my fingers under his T-shirt and start to pull it up. Jack firmly removes my hands and tugs it down again. I start to stroke his chest in a manner I know, from several day’s experience, he finds very distracting. Me breathing is distraction enough for him, most of the time.

“Fish?”

“Beef.”

“You said fish.”

“I said - beef.”

Jack doesn’t sound at all certain. I glance up. He’s flushed and won’t meet my eye. Excellent. My fish and I are going to have lots of fun finding out just how far we can push Jack before he cracks and admits he doesn’t like them. I’ve been thinking about deluxe new accommodation. Wonder if I can get him to spring for a new tank?

I glide my hands over the smooth surface of his wine coloured T-shirt and rapidly sneak them up to start exploring his spine. Jack suddenly zones back in from wherever he’s been and gets the hint when I tighten my legs around his waist. He surrenders and avidly kisses me again, his hands returning the compliment to my spine. My fingers go to his hair of their own volition, the thick silver strands sliding over the sensitised tips like silk.

As lack of breath forces us apart I lazily open my eyes. Movement in the doorway catches my attention. I freeze and yank away.

“Sara!”

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“NOW you want to talk! Can it WAIT?”

“Sar-”

He dives back into my mouth. I struggle wildly.

“Jack?” She’s utterly bewildered. Oh God! Oh…

He lets go abruptly just as I try to violently wrench myself free. My head smacks into the cupboard behind me and the room tilts sideways.

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JACK

Holy crap! Before I have a chance to react to Sara’s voice Daniel’s head hits the cupboard door with a sickening thud and he just drops. I manage to catch him, barely. He’s hanging limp against my shoulder.

“Daniel!” He doesn’t rouse at my call.

Sara is a hell of a woman. She’s at my side in an instant, checking on Daniel.

“Knocked out. We’d better get him to the couch. Move it, Jack.”

Yes ma’am. She helps me get him balanced in my arms, cradling his head gently, then I carry him out of the kitchen and down the stairs to lay him out on the couch. He’s already stirring, thank God, but he’s deathly pale. She hustles me out of the way and sits by him, lifting his head and running careful fingers through his hair. They come away bloody.

“Get the first aid kit. I’ll clean this and put a dressing on it.”

“I would NEVER – you have to know I wouldn’t - you cancelled.”

“Not now, Jack.” Sara’s voice is as quiet, as dignified as ever.

Right. She’s right. I haul ass to the bathroom. So much for breaking it gently. He was supposed to be at that arty foreign movie with Carter, while Sarah and I were supposed to sit down and talk. Quiet and civilised. Like she did for me when she started seeing Phil. Just like we promised. Dignified. Christ. She cancelled. I CHECKED my messages. Made sure I called her and asked her to reschedule. It was important. I’ve got more respect for both of them than this.

I didn’t check the machine tonight. Hustled Daniel straight over to the fire. If she called today – Crap. They didn’t have to meet, ever, if that’s the way they wanted it. Now
they’ve both lost that choice. Can this day get any worse? He’s just had one frigging shock after another.

I take the stairs down far more slowly than I took them up. My wife is talking to my lover. Daniel’s abject misery is obvious from here. I was going to tell Sara about Daniel, let her think and decide if she wanted to meet him. Then I was going to tell Daniel she knew, and what her decision was, and why she made it. Sara had a good idea why I called. I used the same words she used to me. I feel like shit. Daniel didn’t have a clue. Not only that, she found us making out in the kitchen, so that’s choice AND dignity out the window. He’s absolutely mortified. If this was anybody but Sara -

They both look up at me. Sara’s eyes are lighter than Daniel’s, but just as intense at this moment. She’s shocked as hell but coping. Daniel looks worse, but he’s also coping. They always do. They cope with me, far too much of the time. Sara takes the first aid kit from me and Daniel manages to sit upright so she can dab antiseptic on the cut and dress it for him.

“I didn’t recognise Daniel at first. He looks so different from the way he did at the hospital.”

Sara eyes Daniel’s pallor with obvious concern and gently touches the burn mark from the ribbon device. Then the palm of her hand settles on his forehead in the same gesture mine did. Daniel isn’t thrilled about strange women invading his personal space, for obvious reasons, but he takes it from Sara without a murmur.

“Fetch the blanket, Jack. Daniel isn’t well.”

As Sara moves to the chair, I not only wrap Daniel in the blanket, I quell his silent protests as I settle his head in my lap and patiently start to massage his temples again. Janet is going to kill me. A blow to the head on top of what he’s already been through? I’ll never live this down. I look apologetically at Sara. “He’s already injured. Couldn’t see out of his right eye until a few hours ago. This is the only thing that helps.”

“How long have you been together?”

“Four years.” I say without thinking.

“A week.” Daniel scowls up at me, then says more emphatically, “Friends for four years – lov – er - together for a week.”

I’ve got the distinct impression we may not make it to two at this rate.

Sara picks up on the subtext too. Just the tiniest twitch of the lips but I catch it.

“It’s love then, Jack?”
“Yes.” I say without hesitation.

“Daniel?”

He thinks about it. The little SOB actually lies there and thinks about it. Then he sighs and says flatly, “Yes. I honestly don’t know what I did to deserve him.”

Something terrible from the sound of it.

He sighs even more heart rendingly, “I’ve got no luck. None.”

This seems to escape him without him realising it. I’m sensing that Sara is actually the easier option at the moment.

“Are you okay?”

“Apart from finding out my ex-husband is in love with another man?”

Tough room.

I say with as much dignity as I can muster, “It was my intention to tell you both in a calm, mature – “

There’s a choked snigger from Daniel, then he looks an apology at Sara.

“Seconded.”

Daniel’s sweet little smile lights his face for a moment before the misery kicks back in.

“I need a drink,” Sarah murmurs.

I look up. I know what she needs. “I’ll get it. I’ve some tea somewhere.”

“I can manage.” She glances at Daniel. “You’ve got your hands full.”

I ease out from under Daniel, kiss him gently and follow her into the kitchen anyway. I know Daniel’s eyes follow me all the way. Neither of them is going to say what they mean for fear of hurting the other. Or me. Sara can say stuff to me she wouldn’t dream of hurting Daniel with. I close the door. He’ll fret himself to pieces whether he hears anything or not, but at least this way they’ve both got as much privacy as possible.

Sara fills the kettle while I rummage around for the tea. She freezes for a moment, by the sink, puts the kettle down abruptly and takes a few steadying breaths. I put a hand on her shoulder and she lets it rest for a moment before shrugging me off.

She asks fiercely, “Are you gay?”
I know what she means. “No. Only Daniel.” I never cheated on her when we were married, not with anyone.

“Is he?”

“No. Barely aware of the concept, to be honest, otherwise we’d have had our dignified discussion a long time ago. He lost his wife. I waited.” I say simply.

“It’s long term then?”

“Permanent.” If it’s up to me.

She looks disbelieving. “Your career?”

“If it comes to a choice – “

“You choose him,” she says flatly. Blinking hard as she leans heavily against the worktop. “He’s younger than you.”

She means younger than her, too. “Nine years. Just feels like more, some days.”

“He’s nice.” She tests that concept out, not quite believing she said it.

“Very.” I agree gravely.

“Sweet.”

“For cryin’ out loud, don’t let him hear you SAY that. Just got him calmed down. Be on the couch for a week, rate I’m going.” Yeah, hon. I’m doing the nasty with the sweet, nice, gorgeous young guy back there. It’s real. You and Phil aren’t just holding hands, either.

“It feels more final than the divorce, Jack.” She gives me a helpless look. “No going back, not now.”

I reach out and bring her in my arms, hug her close. She’s trembling. There was no going back from the moment I left. I made my decision.

Her eyes search mine. I see a lot of emotions there but guilt isn’t one I expected. If it’s something I can fix - “What’s hurting you, Sara? You can tell me.”

Her face crumples into a few hard, hot tears. “I was ready – ready for it. I couldn’t wait – couldn’t – couldn’t bear it. Had to know. I couldn’t have borne -”
I get the first inkling. Happy families? “Nobody could EVER replace Charlie. Just like nobody could ever replace YOU.”

“We were great together.” She dredges up a tiny smile.

“The greatest.”

“You and hi – and Daniel?”

“Different. I’M different. Him and me together, it doesn’t take anything away from US.”

“I - I know. I do. I - I’m glad it’s him you’re with. I - is it selfish of me to - not to want to share - to be glad you won’t be starting over with a new family?”

“No.” I say with absolute certainty.

Sara resolutely straightens up and that tiny smile grows. “This is going to give me a certain cachet in the couples therapy sessions. I’ll have to whip up the trauma. My macho military ex and his little studly –"

“Space Monkey.”

She’s crying again but she’s chuckling too. It’s not so bad. She’s doing better than I did over Phil, and given how I felt over Daniel even then I can’t squirm away from my motives for hating the guy’s guts. Daniel hasn’t hitched his wagon to a star.

I suggest gently, “You could talk to him, if you feel up to it. It won’t hurt YOU. There’s a whole lot of sensitive mixed in with the sweet.”

She gets the picture. “You’re different. Open.”

“YOU helped a lot. And I guess a lot of it - it’s him. He sneaks into every damn place you don’t want him to be in your psyche and won’t quit on you until you live up to his expectations.” Aw crap. I’ve got that doting Daniel grin again. How embarrassing. I take a minute and my grin turns wolfish. I let her in on a big secret. “Or down to them. In some respects, his expectations of me are so low it’s actually a challenge living DOWN to them. Always worth the payoff though. Just get the breakables outta his way, sit back and enjoy the show.”

I cup her face gently as the wavering smile steadies. She’s nowhere near dealing with this, too much of a goddamn shock to the system, but she’s getting her balance back. Being Sara, she will go out there and talk to Daniel. Just like Daniel, being Daniel, will listen and talk right back. Oh yeah –

“Gotta warn you, the problem isn’t getting him to start talking, it’s getting him to stop. He gets enthusiastic over the damndest things. Sorry about that.”
She shakes her head at me a little and leaves me to make the tea. I think I’m going to get us through this one by the skin of my teeth. Looks like we get mature and -

“Daniel!”

I’m out the kitchen in a heartbeat.

“What the HELL do you think you’re doing? Get your ass back on that couch NOW. I turn my back for a SECOND, you gotta try for a broken neck as well as concussion?” I retrieve him from the stairs, he’s muttering something disjointed about privacy, leaving us alone, being in the way. I continue to scold every step of the way back the couch, where I stuff him back under the blanket.

“Jack?” Daniel fixes me with an earnest look.

“Spit it out.”

“Shut the cluck up.”

After a moment of stupefied silence Sara lets out a choke of laughter. She’s smiling now, the first genuine smile I’ve seen since she got here and Daniel’s answering smile lights his face.

Jesus. I can’t take the mother hen stuff on top of everything else and beat a rapid retreat to the dubious safety of the kitchen, grinning like a fiend as they let out some of the tension. It’s a beginning.

I decide if Daniel needs cheering up, the inconceivable sight of Colonel Jack O’Neill demurely drinking tea is as good as anything. It might get him over the hump of not being allowed any coffee for the next three days, but I doubt it. When I get back, it’s just in time to hear Daniel asking shyly about the folks.

Sara is at a loss for words. She looks from me to Daniel’s innocent little face and just doesn’t have the heart. Eventually she manages, “Let’s just say the fruit doesn’t fall far from this particular family tree.”

“Who does Jack take after?”

She doesn’t hesitate. “Kate. Doesn’t have her killer instincts though. Never won an argument with her in his life. Every time he goes home he drops thirty years before he’s across the threshold. I always enjoyed seeing him floundering helplessly – “

I dish out the tea, which reduces Daniel to speechless indignation after one incautious gulp reveals the appalling truth.
“You’re cut off, kid. Number one on the Doc’s list of not under any circumstances. If you’re good, you get milk and cookies.”

“But –”

“You’re always telling us you could give up the java any time. Any time. You CHOOSE to drink it. Twenty four seven but still, by choice. Going without should not be a problem, not for three days.”

“Quite.”

Crap. Pardon me while I get both these feet out of my mouth. Daniel’s memory for ill judged remarks made by his team leader in the heat of battle is legendary. Still, I’m smugly aware I’ve done my time and – He sips his tea demurely, smiling tentatively at Sara, ostentatiously ignoring me even though I’m sitting right next to him – I see now I may be doing some more.

I turn to Sara. “Kate would like to have you for a really long visit.”

She flushes fiercely. “I thought - I - “

“You don’t divorce your kids. The folks wanted you to understand that. You’re welcome any time. That won’t ever change.” I smile maliciously. “No escape. No retreat. Just surrender. Once they know you know, they’ll wait so long – then they’ll come and get you.”

Strangely, she doesn’t look at all averse to the prospect. It’s a small thing, but it matters she knows they still love her, for her sake. Not just as my wife and Charlie’s mother.

I’m looking forward to my own next visit. I’ll have Daniel, running interference for me. Mom has already hinted she’d like to paint him nude. He’ll have his hands full while I get to hang out with Dad, scarfing down beer and homemade cake.

When Sara abruptly says she has to go, I don’t try to stop her. She’s got more than enough to think about. I hug her and then Daniel offers his hand. She hesitates but takes it.

“I truly regret the circumstances, but I’m happy to have met you, Sara. If you ever want – you know where I’ll be. You’d be most welcome.”

She can see he means it, her face softens for a moment as she squeezes his hand fiercely. Sara is a class act all the way. As is Daniel. I stand and see her off. Then I turn to face an absence of Daniel. This shiny new love has just been one kick in the butt after another. I can’t even convince myself he’s traded up at the moment. He hasn’t lost a single thing we had before, true, but he’s got a whole host of new stuff to learn to put up with.
I can see him curled up in a defensive ball on the couch as I lope down the steps into the living room. Chest hugging very much in evidence. Face burrowed into the back of the couch. Back resolutely turned on the world, on me.

I don’t think so.

God, I hope not.

“Daniel.”

Nothing. I want to snatch him up and hug all hell out of him but that rigid back is speaking volumes. Guess this has been a day with two too many Sara’s and maybe one too many Jack’s.

“Daniel.”

Great line. Original. And the tone? Begging. Right on top of the situation as usual. And I got a response! Whoo! He’s just hugged himself that little bit closer to the back of the couch. That little bit further away from me.

The uppermost hand releases it’s death grip on his arm. I think he’s actually gonna wave me away.

“Jesus, Daniel, throw me a bone.” Can’t even come up with my own lines.

Daniel goes absolutely rigid, then a glacial voice informs me, “I was actually trying to make some room for you but if that’s your attitude you can just walk on by.”

Oh. I now grasp that his hand was in fact reaching up behind him so I could – er - maybe hold it. Mere seconds later I’ve rolled him onto his back and made myself quite at home on top of him.

I am definitely holding the hand he wanted me to hold so why is he glaring up at me? Mmm. Those tear spiked lashes, they’re pushing a few too many buttons. It’s souls we’re baring here, not…

“Comfy? You need a pillow? Jack!”

Alright! I’ll stop licking away the tears AFTER I’ve done both eyes, just give me a minute or so.

I tell him, like it’s the most reasonable thing in the world, “I couldn’t help but notice if anybody was going to fall off the couch, it would have been me. It’s only been destruct tested for hot inventive sex. There’s no warranty for trying to comfort pissy lovers with sharp elbows. I’m better off up here.” I give a little wriggle. “You ARE more comfortable naked, I’ll give you that.”
Daniel opens his mouth to launch some devastating counter-attack so I promptly drop my head and kiss him gently but thoroughly. I remember this is supposed to be O’Neill Grief and Unexpected Ex-Wife Counselling so I heroically refrain from slipping him the tongue.

When I finally release him, there is a brief, pensive silence. Daniel is a very quick study. He gave me an inch and I took exactly six feet. Again. He’s beginning to see a pattern emerging here.

“I’m not sleeping with you.”

“No, Daniel.”

“No?”

“I’ve no intention of sleeping.”

“Oh.”

I decide maybe another kiss would help the healing process so I just drop my head. Every time I look at Daniel’s mouth it convinces me somewhere in there he has an actual chromosome marked, ‘perfect pout’. His lips just naturally pout. He has to put effort into getting them to do anything else. I appear to have a chromosome marked ‘kiss the perfect pout’. My lips just naturally want to kiss his, and I have to put heroic efforts into getting them to do anything else whenever we’re alone.

I’m not feeling heroic just now.

When we come up for air, quite some time later, Daniel is looking very ruffled around the edges and a lot happier. I’m damn good at this therapy stuff. When I get him into bed, gonna go all out for primal howl, round out my repertoire. In the meantime, he’s overdressed. I make myself busy.

“What do you think you’re doing, Jack?”

“I think I’m getting us comfortable so we can have a really long, intense, meaningful heart to heart discussion. Begin the healing process. Why? What do you think I’m doing?”

“I think you’re getting us naked so we can have sex on this couch.” He gives a little wriggle. “Really long, intense – “

“I’m only thinking of you.” I match his wriggle and raise him. “You threw me the bone, after all.”

“I’m still hungry,” he complains.
“Me too. I’ll grab the ice cream – the Ben & Jerry’s,” It can’t hurt me to try and soften him up with the good stuff, “Kill two fish with one stone.”

His eyes turn flinty on me. Where’d that come from? Er - “You want the Chunky Monkey?”

“The Phish Food. Just to get you in the spirit of things to come.”