

# THEIR LONELY BETTERS

## A SLASH STORY BY BIBLIO



Rating: R

Pairing: Jack and Daniel

Category: Angst. Character Study. First Time. Friendship. Romance.

Season/Spoilers: Season 2. A sequel to "One False Step."

Synopsis: When Jack is finally certain of Daniel's love, he reaches for more than friendship.

Warnings: None.

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



*"Let them leave language to their lonely bidders  
Who count some days and long for certain letters;  
We, too, make noises when we laugh or weep:  
Words are for those with promises to keep."  
W.H. Auden*

"What I don't understand is how I ended up as your designated driver," Daniel complained testily as he pulled smoothly into Jack's driveway.

"You don't like beer," Jack responded readily. "This simple fact makes you the logical and reasonable choice to drive us. I thought it was pretty much self-explanatory."

"It might've been if not for one minor detail that's somehow escaped your hawk-like attention."

"And what minor detail would that be?" Jack asked encouragingly as Daniel parked neatly at the end of the path leading up to the front door.

"You drank wine with dinner," Daniel said darkly. "I *do* like wine."

"Then I guess it's because you're a sucker," Jack shrugged, grinning.

"I'm not the sucker who paid for dinner at Zio's," Daniel sniffed, directing a speculative look at Jack.

"Yeah, well," Jack muttered, deliberately non-committal, as he got out of the jeep and slowly drifted towards the house, refusing to be drawn on his reasoning for the treat. You call a guy Plant Boy, the least you can do is buy him a nice Italian dinner to make up. Italian food was good, but when the guy was Daniel, French kissing would be better. Kissing would be cool. But kissing wasn't allowed, not even to make up, so Jack had made do with an offering of chicken and shrimp calzone, an enormous brownie tower, and two espressos.

"Um, goodnight, Daniel?" Daniel called sarcastically after him. "Goodnight and thanks for the ride?"

"I bought a new espresso maker," Jack called back. "Wanna try it?"

"Is it any good?" Daniel asked interestedly, emerging with alacrity from the jeep just in case third time was the charm for espresso this evening.

He was pathetically easy to lure.

Jack figured if he ever cracked and gave in to this insane crush of his, if he lost what little was left of his mind and actually tried to get Daniel Jackson into bed, then a trail of coffee beans leading to his bedroom would be the way to go.

"It's especially good with a warm whiskey chaser," Jack tempted him.

"I can't drink. You selfishly designated me your driver, remember?"

"I have a spare bed and my place is *so* on your way to the base, if they'd only put a gate in the perimeter fence for me, I could walk to work."

"Okay."

Stunning display of willpower there.

Jack smiled at Daniel when he breezily bounded up the path to join him. Immediately proving his own willpower was nothing to write home about, he draped a casual, companionable arm around Daniel's nice, broad shoulders.

"It's not exactly easy getting through an evening with you," Daniel chose to confide as they ambled up to the front door.

"Thank you," Jack replied politely.

Daniel grinned responsively. "No, I mean, if we're out, if we're in a restaurant, we can't talk."

"After the extensive conversational ground you covered non-stop this evening, I'm sure you'll understand why this revelation comes as a complete shock to me," Jack said pleasantly, hospitably waving Daniel into the house and into his clutches for the night.

"I don't mean we can't talk, I mean we can't *talk*." Daniel earnestly confused rather than clarified the issue. "Not about anything important."

"I beg to differ," Jack responded politely. "We talked about sports. It doesn't get any more important than the place of sports in a man's life."

"What if there's no place for sports in a man's life?" Daniel momentarily allowed himself to be diverted.

He was even easier to divert than he was to lure.

"That man is either dead or you." Jack extracted Daniel from his jacket and scooted him along towards the living room. Rather than watch Daniel, he confined himself to hanging up the jacket. There was no point in watching Daniel. What there was to see was so swamped and swaddled in layers of loose clothing, all you could be sure of was Daniel was in there somewhere.

"Dead or me?" Daniel huffed. "That's insulting on a number of levels."

"I aim to please."

"I don't," Daniel retorted unexpectedly, grinning cutely over his shoulder at Jack as he trotted down the stairs into the living room and plumped down on the couch.

"Wait!" Jack instantly panicked in response not so much to the content of what Daniel was saying but his apparent evil intent. "Just wait a damn minute!"

"Wait for what?" Daniel popped up into view from behind the low wall separating dining from living room, looking enquiring.

"If you're going to start talking at me," Jack explained hastily, rushing for the drinks cabinet, "I want to brace myself with a good belt of this first." He retrieved the Jack Daniel's and waved it in evidence.

Rolling his eyes at this arrant display of emotional cowardice, Daniel sank from sight again. "I do *not* talk at you!" his disembodied voice called discontentedly.

"Discuss. Debate," Jack amended peaceably as he came down into the living room with the Dutch Courage clutched to his stoic, manly chest. "Whatever. Go easy on me," he instructed Daniel in a friendly way as he dropped down onto the couch beside him. "This is only half full, you know."

"Since when I have I talked at you?"

"Since we met."

"I was working up to saying something nice to you, but I guess I won't bother now."

Grinning to himself over Daniel's snippy dignity, Jack poured them both a generous shot of whiskey, toed off his shoes and settled comfortably back on the couch.

"If I can use an analogy," he said.

Energetically applying himself to his convivial beverage, Daniel only hunched a haughty shoulder.

"Con conversationally-speaking, Daniel, you're like an anaconda. The unsuspecting victim wades out into deep, murky water. You rear up out of nowhere and chow down. The victim thinks the worst has happened. They got tied up in knots and swallowed whole. It's all over bar the indigestion. The thing of it is though, being an anaconda as opposed to a python like say Carter, you're only toying with them first time. You spit the losers out and chow them down again. Because you *can*."

Thoughtfully nibbling at the polished rim of one of Jack's best old mismatched crystal whiskey glasses, Daniel tried hard not to look as if he were quite drawn to this rather flattering analogy. Which he manifestly was. Despite his best efforts in clamping his traitorously expressive lips to the glass, they were twitching appreciatively.

"You can tell me the nice thing now," Jack invited him, smiling expansively.

"Sorry. I've, um, I've lost the moment," Daniel informed him, avoiding Jack's eyes. He didn't look or sound in the least sorry for this.

"Well, I'd rather gaze into this." Jack raised his glass in a quick, ironic toast. "Than gaze into my navel any day."

"It's not your average day," Daniel hinted broadly, joining him in the toast.

"Temper tantrums, vocal disagreements, plants, linguists who dance, a chorus-line of weird-assed, bare-assed singing aliens who don't? Sounds pretty average to me," Jack briskly disagreed.

"I don't dance and it isn't every day I call you ignorant and condescending."

"I hope." Jack took a stiff drink. "I hope it isn't every day you think it."

"Of *course* it isn't!" Daniel stuttered, his reassurance falling all over itself.

"Just when you're pissed, huh?"

"Does it matter?"

Uh, no. No way Jack was answering a loaded question like that one. He wasn't

even going to think about it mattering. He had a drink instead.

Daniel joined him, and then he poured them both another. They drank some of that too.

"This is kind of what I was going to tell you earlier," Daniel said uncertainly.

"What? That we call each other stupid, childish names when we get pissed?" It could've been worse, Jack thought wryly. Daniel did do that weird little dance of his but at least there was no hair-pulling, no eye-poking, stamped feet, wedgies or Indian burns.

"No, that we *can* get pissed. With each other, I mean." Looking more embarrassed than he probably should after this not exactly controversial assessment of the fairly solid state of their friendship, Daniel sought refuge in his whiskey. It let him down in only two quick gulps, so he crawled into another.

Thinking he knew what it was Daniel was chewing over but not 'fessing up to, Jack kept him company. He guessed this wasn't a day exactly like every other, not for Daniel.

Jack remembered with great clarity where and when and how he worked out he loved Daniel Jackson. Majorly freaking, he smashed a hockey stick through General Hammond's car window. The satisfying violence of it was as much him as bouncing madly up and down and making no sense about mythology at the top of his lungs was Daniel. Wildly different expressions, but the sentiment was the same.

Love.

No. It wasn't every day you admitted to yourself you didn't only care about your friend, you *loved* your friend.

"I never had that many friends," Daniel said with a tight smile, staring out into the deepening shadows pooling at the windows. "None I argued with the way we argue. Automatically, about everything, all the time. None I..." He bit the thought off abruptly, drinking again.

"None you?" Jack prompted him. When Daniel didn't answer, Jack reached across to hug the back of the bowed head with his hand, the soft strands slipping pleasingly over his rough, gliding palm. He found himself bemused, fingers spread wide, lifting fair, shining hair to fall over his wrist. Then tightening at Daniel's nape, tangling there.

"None I could argue with," Daniel admitted with a trace of bitterness. "None I could trust enough to feel able to do that." He looked around at Jack, consciously trying to smile and lighten the mood. He didn't quite make it.

Daniel trusted Jack enough. He didn't have to say it for Jack to know it. It was a good thing.

"It takes work, you know?" Daniel frowned over this. "I'm not saying it shouldn't take work, only that it does. It takes work."

"It takes too much work if you still can't trust it," Jack said slowly, distractedly wondering when it would occur to Daniel to shake off his encroaching hand. If it would occur to him at all. Wasn't Jack too close? He felt too close. Why wasn't he letting go?

Daniel lit up with shy gratitude at Jack's ready understanding. "I know I can say things to you," he confided, trying not to sound too earnest or precious about it. "I know I can get mad and – and..."

"Say things," Jack supplied, rubbing Daniel's neck without the least idea what he thought he was doing. "Inappropriately sarcastic..."

"Flaky..."

"Ignorant and condescending..."

"Things." Daniel was smiling now.

"You jump up and down when you get mad."

"No, I don't."

"You do. You were airborne while you were yelling."

"I wasn't."

"Both your feet were off the ground most of the time. It's probably on video along with the incredible shrinking plant."

Recognising it probably was, Daniel reluctantly gave ground on this one. "There was something wrong with us."

"Physically..."

"Physically..." Daniel said at the same time, "wrong with us."

"We knew."

"Even if Dr. Fraiser didn't."

"It was physical."

"It had to be."

"We don't yell like *that*."

"No."

"No."

"But we can," Daniel said softly, finding his point again. "And it's okay."

"You're stuck with me," Jack grinned, giving Daniel's nape a squeezing sort of shake. "I'm stuck on you." This struck him as funny.

"Exactly!" Daniel agreed enthusiastically, finding it funny too.

"Have some more Jack," Jack urged hospitably, using a lazy knee to slide the bottle in Daniel's direction.

"I like the one I have, thanks," Daniel said with a warm, definite smile and a quaint, evocative tilt of his head that left him looking up through his lashes at Jack.

"Not enough to let me anywhere near your sister," Jack joked teasingly.

"What sister?" Daniel argued with feigned indignation. "Come on, Jack! Get real! Any psychiatrist in the world would tell you that's *the* single most obvious metaphor for..." His impish grin faded into an odd, arrested look. "For..." And then his mouth fell open. "Oh."

They were neither of them good at backing down and Jack didn't now. All the things he should do were only a hammering, disorienting roar of white noise. His heart was firing in his chest and he could hardly see, or breathe, or move, but his mouth found Daniel's. He knew then why his hand was where it was; so it could do this, draw Daniel up close, real close to him. Daniel's lips were stiff but not

resistant, unmoving beneath Jack's not because Daniel was scared but because he was working out what to do.

What he did was put his arms around Jack's neck and push into him with the whole of his body as his mouth softened and he kissed Jack back.

It wasn't, it really was not every day you admitted you *loved* a guy.

Jack wasn't coherent enough to set limits and Daniel kissed as if he didn't know limits were possible. This wasn't the guy who hardly knew what hit him when his wife had kissed him with a fraction of the punch Jack packed. This was...more. Much, much more. This was Jack giving and Daniel getting what he wanted even if he didn't know until two minutes ago that this, exactly this - *Jack* was what he wanted.

Tangled at the lips, they tussled back and forth, outdoing one another in who could touch most and hold tightest, Jack not so much lowering Daniel romantically to the couch as shoving him flat. Retaliating in kind, Daniel chewed on Jack's tongue, shoved energetically back, and they fell on the floor. Jack landed on his back with a thud and a snort of laughter as the coffee table went skidding and then Daniel was on him.

There was only this. Their mouths, their hands. Too many buttons, too many layers, too many barriers between them. They tore into it all, tore it all down and put it away, coming together in a clash of hips, thirsty skin and parched, seeking kisses. It was so easy, so them, they could have done this a million times before. It was only the first time.

Daniel felt good on him. Daniel was good and big and real, out from under all the wrappings of his brilliant disguise. The same energy that sent him bounding through his Stargate translated into the lavish touch of trembling fingers everywhere at once on Jack's body, the answering, responsive arch of Daniel's body into Jack's own reaching hands.

Reaching.

It was the right word for what they did together. They reached out and neither let the other one fall. They caught and held each other with honest, earthy passion, rocking, rubbing, heaving, straining, reaching.

Reaching.

Stuttering hips and spurting cocks were *good*. Finding what they were each

reaching for in the other, that was better. Their hands and bodies slowed but passion was there, love was there in their slow, deep kiss.

It was only the two of them in love, almost oblivious to creeping cold, cramps from the awkwardly held weight and the floor, the pressing need to pee. Almost. They were still drunk, still in love when they tumbled into Jack's bed and each other.

Sober when they woke. Sober and unnaturally quiet, occupying the same space but each of them consciously, painfully alone. Obligations were the only things real to them then, their awareness of all the good and sufficient reasons keeping them apart. Jack had his command and Daniel had a wife. Those alone were reason enough this should never have happened.

It had happened. For both of them.

Daniel couldn't talk, Jack wouldn't, they had a mission.

Obligations, awareness, guilt and regrets, crowding in. The same white noise clamouring as before, only this time Jack was hearing snatches of it. It was roaring all around him. He longed for the silence and the certainty of their mouths and hands on each other, not this, this heaviness, not the sinking of his heart whenever he and Daniel would look and then more quickly look away.

Showered and dressed and frighteningly quiet, Daniel froze for a moment at Jack's door, looking straight back at him. Every hurting thing he wanted was written clear on his face before he went through the door and away.

The only thing clear to Jack was he wouldn't let Daniel go. All his dependence was on them being able to fight things through, find their way together.



The world they stepped onto was high desert coloured by the bold strokes of a child's crayon. The glittering sand was hot shades of red and orange, the sparse scrub and brush primary shades of green. Strange as all of this was, the lights were what had brought them here; intense flames of red and green arcing across the sky in a glowing sheet of ever-changing light and hue.

"This is your show," he said to Carter as she and Daniel carried the Overhauser magnetometer down from the Stargate dais. "Where'd you want us?"

"Over on that rise there?" she suggested, nodding towards a low hill wound around by a steep, rough trail.

"It is wise to occupy a position so exposed?" Teal'c enquired, always the voice of caution.

"I don't think we're in any danger, Sir," Carter countered. "The UAV didn't detect any major signs of civilisation from the aerial reconnaissance."

"And I'll be on the ground looking for tiny, little signs of civilisation," Daniel said lightly, although behind Carter's back, his face was a picture as he looked at the path they were going to have to carry the equipment up.

Jack didn't think they were in any danger either, except from terminal boredom, so he okayed setting up camp on the rise and began to navigate FRED towards the foot of Carter's hill. Teal'c took point, meticulously scouting ahead of them before he set off up the narrow path at a dead run and disappeared from sight at the top of the rise.

"Show-off," Jack bitched, making his own thorough visual checks of the terrain.

"Doesn't look real, does it?" Daniel commented idly, looking around him as he picked his way along, balancing the crate carefully to take as much of its weight as he could and matching his steps to Carter's. "It's like a kindergarten class painting project."

"Well, let's hope we don't run into the bug-eyed monsters." Jack and Daniel had brought along plenty of demons of their own to fight. This crazy kid's alien picture they were standing on felt about as grounded and natural as their friendship did this morning. Jack had to admit, though, it kind of fit how he saw and felt about the world when he was aching and hung-over.

What felt real to him was making love with Daniel. He wanted to get back to that place of hands, mouths and skin. Daniel, chatty and evasive, hiding out beneath boonie and behind sunglasses, was ignoring they'd ever been there.

If Carter had been less involved with the pretty lights in her big sky, she would've been wondering why Daniel wasn't entranced right along with her. Jack could only be grateful she was all big blue eyes and wondering silence. It wouldn't last. It never did. Daniel feeling compelled to fill the silence with anything that came into his head was the only visible sign - and Jack was *looking* - he too was lingering in that place they'd found together last night.

This was not going to be easy. Nothing worthwhile ever was.

Carter set a careful pace as they began to climb up the rise, Jack driving FRED along behind them, wondering if it was going to make it to the top. The path was narrow, then grew narrower still, sand and shale slipping now and again beneath their feet. Carter or Daniel would stumble and right themselves, asking if the other was okay, but they climbed on and eventually they made it onto flat ground. FRED's greater weight slid back a time or two, but the heavy tires found traction and Jack leapt triumphantly out into open space.

Daniel had abandoned Carter and her precious magnetometer to go stand by Teal'c on the far side of the rise and drink in the view spreading out before them. They were up much higher than they'd imagined, the ground falling away in rich waves of colour to frame the sheeting, striking lights.

"It's beautiful," Daniel breathed, his sunglasses loosely cupped in his hand. "The UAV, the terrain radar system - it doesn't do it justice. You can't look at landscape topography on a flat, matte print-out and get *this*." He smiled gently, his wide eyes dreamy.

"I consider this position to be defensible, O'Neill," Teal'c judged prosaically. "The escarpment of which it forms a part is most...impressive."

"And with only that one narrow path behind us giving access to the place?" Jack agreed readily. "Carter can play all she wants with her shiny new toys."

Teal'c frowned slightly. "Do you propose to leave Captain Carter to conduct her observations alone?" he queried.

"Someone has to watch Daniel's back while he pokes around the badlands," Jack said innocently.

"Then should I not remain here to assist Captain Carter?" Teal'c asked, readily accepting the 'someone' watching Daniel's six would be Jack.

"Better you than me," Jack accepted cheerfully, meeting Daniel's knowing, sceptical look head-on. "Let's make camp."

Hardly an onerous task, given their array of the biggest and the best and the latest absolutely everything the USAF had to offer. The tents practically put themselves up, the fire was laid ready in a jiffy and Jack knuckled down to establishing the command post tent while Teal'c went off in search of fuel and Daniel, their expert digger, grudgingly tackled the latrine.

When Jack checked on Carter, hooking up gizmos and doohickeys to power sources, she showed an alarming tendency to talk glowingly about plasma, positive ions and charged particles. Jack beat a rapid retreat to the shade of his command post and watched the way the muscles moved beneath Daniel's clinging T-shirt as he dug rhythmically, with fluid, practiced grace.

There was something about the desert cammo, Jack sighed inwardly. A specific sexiness Daniel projected, some part of it at least on a conscious level. Jack had only to think back as far as their run-in with the dying, snakily poisonous Apophis to be able to picture Daniel sprawled sinuously at his feet, dressed just this way, gliding his fingers caressingly over and over the worn, smooth stone of the steps leading down from the Stargate. That was a poised even if likely not a deliberate display of sensuality, and for whose benefit, exactly? Whose attention had Daniel been trying to draw? There was only Jack.

Jack couldn't sit when he should be up and doing. Dealing poorly with his sudden strident impatience, he stripped off his cammo jacket, put on his vest, slung his MP5 into its accustomed place in his arms and went for Daniel.

"We're going to take a look around," he told Carter as he passed her. She looked up brightly, smiling acknowledgement, not wanting to hoard *all* the fun. "Radio check in thirty mikes."

"Sir."

When Jack came up to him, Daniel looked up from the trench, crinkling his eyes against the strong, glancing light. "Time for us to boldly go," Jack told him, reaching down a hand to help pull him out. Daniel hesitated fractionally, then held on, let Jack take some of his weight and steady him as he jumped up. For a moment, they were awkwardly close and remembering the night before, looking full into one another's eyes, and then they both backed off, reaching for sunglasses and necessary distance.

Daniel told Carter to have fun but said nothing to Jack, guessing correctly they'd be talking soon enough. Copying Jack, Daniel left behind his smothering jacket but put on his vest and hefted the pack containing his archaeological tools onto his back. He stiffened up when Jack couldn't stop himself from lending a hand, settling the pack securely against sun-hot, broad shoulders.

It was obvious they both found the touch, the proximity electric. Astonishing Carter couldn't see the charged energy right in front of her.

They walked steadily away, Daniel tucked in at Jack's shoulder, not entirely feigning his interest as he looked alertly around them. He looked with different eyes than Jack but that was okay. Between them, they saw most things. Daniel was looking for possibilities and potential, Jack for threats. They saw only bright sand, tacky emerald green cartoon plants, the quivering sky and stole a furtive glimpse now and again, to and from each other.

Looking and not speaking, they followed one trail to a natural dead-end, and then methodically they followed another. Then a third. Jack checked in with Carter, who reported Teal'c was back, her equipment was functioning within the expected parameters, the colonel was bothering her and could he go away please...

Jack and Daniel walked on and on, steadily descending until they turned a sharp, steep corner on the trail and found a small, still pool filled with all the light in the sky. A smile of pure joy burst from Daniel and Jack's heart fired again in his chest. He took hold of Daniel and kissed him hard. Daniel pushed him away and in the next moment pulled him close with a greedy, needing sound growling low in his throat. There were only their mouths and hands, the crush of Jack's weapon between them and his fisting, clawed grip on the loose vest, as if he would haul Daniel physically inside him.

They kissed until they could kiss no more, until they *needed* more.

"I love you," Jack said tightly, barking out the words too abruptly, with too little feeling.

Daniel's face crumpled.

Jack freed the straps of the pack, dropping it to the ground, pulling Daniel tightly into him in one swift, sure movement.

"I know you love her. I do know," Jack promised roughly. "But it's not the same, Daniel, it's not the same."

Daniel's arms were choking tight around Jack's neck. He said nothing at all. He only held on, breathing fast and shallow as he splintered in two. Making love with Jack, Daniel had made a choice and he knew it. His choice, his own, not one taken from him or made for him. He had reached out for Jack as much as Jack had reached for him, because he loved him. He'd reached out knowing he could trust Jack enough they'd not lose everything if his answer was no, they couldn't do this. Their friendship was that solid.

Sha'uri was a choice made for Daniel.

Jack was the choice Daniel had made.

It was not the same.

Jack didn't try to tell Daniel it was okay, because it wasn't. Or that he was sorry, because he wasn't.

He was only in love.

"I love her very much," Daniel said shakily, his voice rusty and far away.

Jack glanced around, backing Daniel up to sit perched with him on a nearby rock. They both took a long, gulping drink from Jack's canteen, sat with their shoulders pressed close together and looked down into the shivering water, trying to pull themselves together enough they could function again.

"Tell me what you haven't told me before," Jack invited Daniel.

"We were friends."

But not the kind of friend Jack was? Not the one Daniel trusted to let him fuck up and still be with him?

"We *became* friends," Daniel amended, sounding sore. "It took...time."

"You didn't know her, she didn't know you, you were husband and wife," Jack said easily. "Sure it took time."

"It was more than we didn't know each other," Daniel said introspectively, leaning forward to rest his elbows on his knees, staring down at his reflection at the water's edge. "We had no common frame of reference with which to communicate. The only shared experience we had was fighting Ra. What could I tell Sha'uri about my life she could understand? Her life, I could see unfolding all around me, her language, her culture, her frame of reference I could learn. Mine was a mystery to her. A wonder. A *pen* was a wonder to her."

"So you lost your life?" Jack said this as neutrally as possible, as sensitive as he could be to the deeper meaning Daniel would read into anything he said now.

"Yes." Daniel sounded surprised, as if he hadn't thought of it quite this way. "I guess."

"I can imagine how hard it was," Jack said gently. "You and me, it seems most days we have nothing in common, no point of agreement we meet on. But when we met, I knew you were an archaeologist, a linguist, an honest-to-god maverick genius. You didn't need to explain to me what an archaeologist was, what a career was, or a university, or a lecture, or an apartment, or an eviction, or a writing system or a pen. It wasn't magic to me, only science. It was you."

"Sha'uri didn't know who I was," Daniel recognised sorrowfully. "It wasn't only that I was changed by being with her and the Abydonians, it was that I had to fit myself to their culture."

"You taught them English."

"I missed the language. I missed hearing it. Can you imagine?"

"Oh, yes," Jack said with certainty.

"Teaching and learning, it helped me and the Abydonians to begin to understand each other better. It helped us build that necessary common frame of reference, with me teaching them the English words that fit their lives, and the Abydonians teaching me in turn how to make their lives fit mine."

"Not so easy with Sha'uri, huh?"

"I'd never been married. Never..." Daniel coloured, glancing fleetingly at Jack and then away. "It took a long time. Before we became friends. Before we did know each other."

A long time, he meant, before they were ready for sex.

"No," Daniel said softly. "No, that's not true. Not entirely. I never did know Sha'uri as well as I could have. In some ways, she was unfathomable to me, as much a product of her culture as I was of mine. She could lead Skaara and the boys in rebellion against Ra, she could fight for her people, but she wouldn't fight against them. For her, a woman, a wife, was not an equal to a man. Her husband, her father, she submitted herself to. She understood submission. She understood the roles she and I were supposed to play in our marriage. I - I couldn't. It was incomprehensible to me."

"And when you didn't?"

"It made her unhappy. I wanted her to stand beside me, but what she understood and responded to was the man Kasuf was, not the man I was. I had to push her to

make her own choices and I never had confidence they were right for her or if she thought they were right for me. What made her comfortable was being told what she would do, giving in gracefully when it didn't matter, fighting for her own way when it did. That made sense to her. She understood and embraced that kind of power. Speaking out clearly and directly for herself, avoiding those complicated marital games only to express her own needs, was beyond her."

"She loved you."

Daniel smiled naturally for a moment. "As much I frustrated, disappointed and baffled her, yes. She loved me."

"You were friends," Jack said carefully, wanting to address the first thing Daniel had said to him. This one was important. It helped Jack know his place as well as Sha'uri's in Daniel's life. "Friends rather than lovers?"

Horribly uncomfortable with where this question was taking them, Daniel surged impulsively to his feet. Jack caught at his wrist and Daniel froze, not able to come towards him but not wanting to move away.

"It sounds so small to keep saying I loved her," Daniel said breathlessly, his tight face paling.

"You didn't have a whole lot of choices," Jack reminded him. "You had nothing to go back to on Earth, literally nothing, or you wouldn't have made such a desperate decision as the one you made to stay on Abydos. You were trapped completely alone among the Abydonians with no resources and only your reputation as god-slayer to live off of. Sha'uri was your connection to Kasuf and through him, your place was secure with his people. Through you, Sha'uri got the freedom that came with marriage and the status of being married to the guy who offed Ra. I think it would've been easier for you both to get tied up in those practicalities, in the deal that was on the table, rather than learn to care for one another."

"Love." Daniel was stifled. "I loved her."

Jack was the one who held him, though. He'd had this hold on Daniel for a long time, if only he'd been smart enough to see it.

"I have to find her, Jack," Daniel said passionately, turning his hand in Jack's to return the hard clasp on his wrist.

"You have to try. And I have to help you. I promised."

Daniel's fingers tightened to the point of pain but Jack didn't wince from it.

"We will keep on looking. We will do what we can to find Sha'uri. It doesn't change things, though. Not between us." Jack stood, direct and serious. "You can't be with her. You can't and you *know* you can't."

"I don't *know* that I have to be with you!" Daniel flared. His fingers bit into Jack's skin, grating over the bone at his wrist.

"Daniel," Jack said as sympathetically as he was able. "You'd already left her. You did that before I ever came back to Abydos for you. You left her and she knew you had. She had no way to hold on to you even when you had no choices, when the two of you were all there was. You didn't embrace the Abydonian culture: you tried to change it. You didn't accept the present: you went digging for the past. You could never transplant Sha'uri into the life you live with us and you always needed more than she and Abydos together could ever give you."

"Oh, God!" Daniel gasped out as if Jack had gut-punched him. A tense fist came up to ball at Jack's shoulder and Daniel hung there shaking in his agony of indecision.

Willing as he was to give and do any and every thing, Jack was smart enough to know he could do nothing for Daniel, not for this. Daniel had already made his choice and it was for him to admit to it. To accept not Jack, but himself. Accept guilt and grief were always going to be a part of loving Jack and of being loved.

Only when Daniel's face came haltingly to rest on Jack's shoulder could Jack hold him. He pushed back the shadowing boonie and put his hand tightly into Daniel's hair, held him there.

Daniel didn't push away.

It was enough for now.



"Were you able to locate signs of civilisation, DanielJackson?" Teal'c greeted them when they returned to camp with the slow-setting sun.

"Not a thing," Jack said with a shrug. "Tomorrow we head up the trail behind the Stargate, see what there is to see up there."

"It's strange. The only things that seem to be alive here are the plants," Daniel said, his abstraction clear to Jack at least. He was talking for the sake of talking, filling in the silence again. "Think about it," he urged them as they walked over to sit by the camp fire Teal'c had got going for them. "Have you seen or heard any birds? Insects? Found any animal tracks?"

"I have not," Teal'c confirmed, formally handing over the evening's MRE selection to each of them.

"Chilli and macaroni?" Daniel read out with a shudder of distaste.

"I've said it before and I'll say it again," Jack sighed. "If the bug-eyed monsters don't get you, the rations will." He looked across at Carter, still hard at it by the light of several lanterns placed carefully around her impromptu field lab. "How's it going?" he asked Teal'c.

"I have learned that energetic electrically charged particles, many of them electrons, accelerate along the lines of the magnetic field which surrounds this world into the upper atmosphere, where they collide with gas atoms," Teal'c replied with daunting fluency. "This causes the atoms to emit light. The fluctuations in the light are caused by bombardment from what Captain Carter describes as a solar wind. The solar wind is..."

"We get the picture!" Jack interrupted hastily. "Jeez, you sound like a high school physics textbook," he grumbled.

"It is not I, but Captain Carter," Teal'c argued, calmly laying blame where it was due. "My remarks were merely a summary of those she made to me throughout the course of this day."

"Does anyone know why we're actually here?" Jack appealed to Daniel and Teal'c.

"I do not."

"Not really."

"Carter's having fun, I guess," Jack said dubiously.

"Perhaps I will accompany you on your explorations tomorrow," Teal'c suggested suavely.

"Daniel's the lesser of two evils this time, huh, big guy?" Jack said mockingly,

utterly without sympathy for Teal'c's self-inflicted pain. "You were the one who wanted to cover her six."

Daniel whimpered.

"Chilli?" Jack asked feelingly.

"I will add more fuel to the fire," Teal'c offered kindly.

"I'd settle for a little Pepto," Daniel said grimly, abandoning the chilli in favour of his crackers and cheese spread.

With an expression of mild confusion, Teal'c let this latest in a very long line of incomprehensible Tau'ri exchanges pass and returned to the original point of their discussion. "Perhaps the strong magnetic field is what has caused all but the plant life to die out on this world." He looked expectantly at Daniel.

"I don't know."

Jack looked at him too.

"Well, I don't," Daniel insisted, looking mulish. "I'm an archaeologist. You're the one who allegedly graduated the Air Force Academy as an engineer."

Teal'c turned his enquiring gaze on Jack.

"I don't know!" Jack snapped irritably.

"Sam would know," Daniel suggested. They all turned around and looked at the industriously oblivious Carter, who was so perky she should've been whistling while she worked. "Do we care enough to ask?"

"Nope, not me."

"I do not."

And that was dinner under dazzling alien skies. Never a dull moment.

After examining his somewhat limited entertainment options, Jack broke out the travel checkers he'd bought from Cracker Barrel and challenged Teal'c to take a shellacking while Daniel wandered off into the tent he was sharing with Jack to work on his latest journal entry.

Jack, watching Daniel stretch out on top of the sleeping bag and start to write in the light from the lantern, hoped it would help him cope with everything going on between them.

He didn't know how much help he would be. Going through their respective relationship histories was hardly necessary for them to both know they were piss-poor at this emotional intimacy thing. Jack hadn't been able to talk to his wife and Daniel hadn't found much he could talk about to his.

Carter, who'd suddenly realised Jack was back, excitedly called out to him to come see.

He hunched his shoulders and hunkered down over the checkers cloth-cum-board, spread out neatly on the ground between him and Teal'c. "Ignore her," he advised. "Hope she goes away."

"There is nowhere for Captain Carter to go to."

"You know you're only ever that pedantic to annoy me. It's just a ploy to put me off my game."

"From the number of defeats you have suffered at my hands and at those of Daniel Jackson," Teal'c responded with cool precision, making a neat move on the board. "I was not aware you were ever 'on' your game."

"Carter?" Jack yelled.

"Colonel?" She sounded startled.

"I don't think Teal'c caught all of that stuff you told him about the magnetotail! Why don't you take him through it again?"

Teal'c's eyebrow met what should've been his hairline and was almost, one time, Jack's.

Jack coldly withdrew.

"That," Daniel said disapprovingly when Jack flung himself sulkily down on his sleeping bag. "Was not nice."

"Nice isn't me. Nice is you."

Daniel snorted derisively, an oddly bitter sound from him. "There's nothing *nice*

about cheating on my wife and sleeping with you," he murmured, his voice barely there.

"The only thing *keeping* you with your wife was you being *nice*." It would've been very easy for Jack to sound bitter too.

"Why did this have to happen?" Daniel put down his journal and pulled off his glasses, rubbing tiredly at his face.

"Because for the first time you got to make a decision about what - who - you wanted," Jack said patiently. "Because I got drunk enough to give you the choice."

"I wasn't that drunk."

"I know." Jack smiled at him understandingly. "I know I got you into this."

"I don't blame you!" Daniel denied quickly.

"That's good. I don't know that I blame myself. I don't think blame comes into it. It just - it's happened, Daniel. It was meant to happen, sooner or later, and last night it did. It happened for both of us."

"What am I going to do?" Daniel whispered.

"Whatever you need to in order to find your wife and be with me," Jack said steadily.

"I don't even know if she wants me," Daniel admitted painfully. "Sha'uri was hidden on Abydos for an entire season with Kasuf and they never unburied the Stargate. They waited and waited until the whole year was past before he finally sent for me. I didn't even know she was there, Jack, until she was in front of me. Sha'uri called me her 'Husband' but she chose to be with Kasuf. She was more his daughter than my wife. She didn't believe I loved her, not then. She didn't have any faith I'd be there for her."

He looked across at Jack then, his mouth working as he began to realise what he was saying.

"She loved me, but she wanted the child to be safe. That was why she agreed to come back to Earth with me. For the child. I - I didn't realise," he said thickly, swallowing audibly at a lump in his throat. "I didn't hear what she was trying to tell me. Her child, she said. Hers. Not the child of Amaunet and Apophis, but her child. He gave her what I...couldn't. What I chose *not* to give. I had so many other

things I chose to do, so much I wanted to accomplish." Daniel closed his eyes tightly against the grief. "That's so wrong. So wrong. I gave her so little."

"You gave her what you could. You loved her even though she was completely wrong for you and you were completely wrong for her. You only get happily ever after in fairy tales, Daniel. Life doesn't work that way. The more you two went on, the less there was holding you together." It was Jack who spoke out from the bitterness of experience now. "The differences mean more and more as you go on. You don't mean it to happen, you work to stop it from happening, but over time, the differences become everything."

"Apophis told me he loved Amaunet. I didn't believe him. I didn't think he was capable. I didn't *want* to believe it. He told me he was so much more than I could imagine and I guess he was right," Daniel said mechanically, almost beyond emotion in his distress. "He loved his queen more than I could love my wife and Sha'uri had to suffer through it all, even the comparison. The child – she's claiming him as her own because he's all she has left."

Daniel reached out to Jack almost without knowing he was, a futile hand falling to the ground between them. Jack put out his own hand at once, his outstretched fingers barely touching Daniel's.

"Loving someone," Jack said compassionately, "is no guarantee you should be with them or you'll ever make them happy. Sometimes, the only thing you can do with that love is to let them go."

"You know this?" Daniel asked quietly, capable of trust.

"I know," Jack admitted honestly.

"Kasuf already made his choice. He already took Sha'uri's side. When we – when we find her, she has a place to go. She has her father and she'll have her child." Daniel's voice was beginning to steady. "What will I have, Jack?"

"You'll have me and you'll have to live with it."

"It's hard. It always has to be so hard for us."

"Yeah, I think it does," Jack agreed reflectively, reaching out that bit further to squeeze Daniel's fingers. "I've lost or walked away from everyone and everything easier than you," he said simply. "It's the differences that make this – make *us* right. I can't explain it, Daniel, any more than you can. It just is."

"When do you know that it's wrong to be with someone, Jack? When do you know you're hurting them more by being with them? By trying to love them?"

"When they leave you."

Jack was beginning to think Daniel was right. Sha'uri had left him. She had moved on from the woman she was and the life she'd had. She did have a choice when she was with Kasuf and the choice she made was not to reach out for Daniel.

He had no doubt she was ashamed and afraid of Daniel's reaction to her pregnancy but now he was figuring maybe what she was really afraid of was Daniel's reaction wouldn't be what she needed it to be. And she was right to be afraid.

Any other man, finding his wife pregnant like that, the first thing out of his mouth would've been 'Who's the father?' Not from Daniel, though. Teal'c had made *that* clear to Jack when they talked about everything that had gone down on Abydos, everything hurting Daniel.

"I don't know what to believe. I don't know to do. I don't want to lie to myself, to convince myself of what I need to only so I can make this easier on me," Daniel confessed miserably.

"What do you want?"

Daniel's fingers tightened in Jack's. "I want you," he surrendered hoarsely. "I *love* you."

"Me too," Jack promised willingly, although he'd already made this commitment to Daniel. "It's not only me, you know." Jack spread his fingers wide and slid them between Daniel's. "It's the Stargate and everything it opens up to you. The team. The SGC and the greatest endeavour of mankind. This whole life you have now that Sha'uri isn't a part of. You've grown since I've known you, Daniel. You've changed. You haven't meant it to happen, but all the choices you've made have taken you further and further from her. I know you want to find her, I *know* that. But can you honestly see any future, any place for you both, when you do?"

Daniel shivered convulsively, throwing his other arm across his face.

"You've both been changed by losing Sha'uri to Amaunet and Apophis. Both of you." Jack wasn't sure Daniel had really taken this on-board. "You're both thinking of more than only each other now, you're both affected by more than only each other. If we found Sha'uri tomorrow you could no sooner give up SG-1 than she could give up Abydos. I don't mean to hurt you with this, I really don't, but

there's no place for you. Not for both of you. Not together. It just - it's not meant to be."

"And we are?" Daniel challenged.

"Do you really need me to answer that for you?" Jack replied evenly. This was about as hard for them as he'd thought it would be but Daniel wasn't letting go any more than he was backing down from the fight. Jack was proud, so proud of him, wishing there was more he could do to help him through it than only being here and listening. Because he loved him, all he could do was ask the questions that would help Daniel see it through. That, and hope.

"How long have you known?" Daniel asked softly, consciously lowering his strained voice even further as they heard quiet movement from Carter's tent, the assured rattle of keys on her laptop. "How long have you been watching me move away from Sha'uri and towards you?"

"About as long as I've been coming for you."

Daniel waited, needing Jack to spell it out for them both.

"Since we met, Daniel. Since we met."



"Carter?" Jack whispered, giving the foot-shaped lump in her sleeping bag a quick nudge.

"Colonel?" she replied muzzily, starting to sit up, wondering what in hell she was doing cuddling the laptop she'd fallen asleep on. "I'm awake, Sir," she said unconvincingly. "I'm up."

"It's your watch." The dead hours right before dawn. She liked the early start to her day just as Daniel liked the late finish to his. Jack and Teal'c were easy and took it in turns in the middle.

"How's the sky?" she asked at once, craning to see past him.

"Better than the coffee." He smiled at her. "We got it all on tape for you, Carter, in glorious Technicolor."

"Daniel!" she happily recognised his empathetic resourcefulness, smiling gratefully as she scrambled clear of the sleeping bag. "G'night, Sir." She was pleasant but this meant he was now in her way.

"Take your time, Carter," Jack advised her beneficently. "In fact, take a load off. Break out the telescope. Nothing out here except us and the sky."

"Thank you, Sir," she said sweetly and then she shot him a gimlet look, the one that said specifically: I need to pee.

Jack's people skills were unparalleled. Immediately grasping he had to go before Carter could, he beat a rapid retreat for his own tent. Teal'c was sitting by the fire, facing where the sun would eventually come up as he emerged from his state of Kel'No'Reem. Carter was trotting out into the darkness beyond camp towards the latrine and her telescope would keep her out of mischief for hours when she got back. There was nothing and no one for miles around them. It was as safe as it ever got off-world.

He shucked his boots, parked his butt on his sleeping bag and watched Daniel sleep for a while, his face obscured by a tousled wing of shining hair catching the ever-changing arc and coil of red and green fire from above. Of course Daniel had to open his eyes, smile sleepily and catch Jack mooning over him like a besotted schoolgirl.

"Come here," Daniel invited drowsily.

"Safer where I am," Jack grinned.

"I want to talk about you."

"My favourite subject." Jack didn't budge an inch. They were both safer if he stayed put.

"Jack..."

"We can't make love in a tent with Teal'c and Carter right outside the flap."

"Even if we want to?"

"Especially if we want to."

"I do. I want to. I can be quiet and I very much want to." Daniel put his hand on Jack's knee, too proud to beg, but too close to begging anyway.

Jack was capable of a lot, but leaving Daniel in need was beyond him.

He went quietly over to pull down the zipper and close off the tent, grateful at least it was the last watch before dawn and this was not the first time one or other of them had shut out the morning sounds of camp to snatch some extra sleep.

When he turned around, Daniel was out of his sleeping bag, undressing without fuss, his slim hips arched up from the ground as he wriggled free of his pants. He lay on his back naked and waiting as Jack stripped with quick, unsteady fingers.

When Jack moved over Daniel, his legs at once spread invitingly wide and his eyes were clear when they kissed. They were quiet and slow, holding one another more than they needed to touch just then, together finding a satisfying friction in the steady grinding of bellies and cocks. It was only the rubbing of one body against another but it was good and they found a kind of magic in it nonetheless. When Daniel whispered again he loved Jack, there was no doubt he meant it.

It was cold to have to part, clean off and dress as soon as they were done, but there was a limit to the risks Jack would take and this was one. They came back together soon enough, curling into a drowsy, boneless huddle on the tumbled sleeping bags in the centre of the tent. Daniel's hand rested warm against Jack's throat.

"I meant what I said before," Daniel murmured, his eyes still clear. "About trusting you."

"That's good."

"Do you know what it means to me to be able to do that?"

"Probably not," Jack said honestly. "I know most relationships take work and compromise and sometimes you give more than you should and sometimes you take more than you can ever give, but I also know how different we are. I'm not the loner you are."

"That's it," Daniel smiled. "You do understand."

"I guess."

"It's not natural for me to be with people. It's not easy." Daniel liked where his hand was on Jack, contentedly fingering his hair, the skin at his throat and beneath the jersey fabric of his T-shirt. "As much as I'm part of this team, I feel the strain at times of being so close with you all. I'm content with my own company, my own

resources. I don't need anyone. I don't need to *be* with anyone."

"Are we worth the work?"

"Yes. The work and the commitment. I wouldn't leave you, not now."

"Me or SG-1?"

"I never really left you. You know that, Jack. You know how little it took to reach me when you needed to."

Just a box of tissues through the Stargate. That was nothing there on the surface, nothing anyone from the outside could see looking in on the two of them, but the layers and complications of their odd, almost unwanted connection, had gone so deep even then, it had told Daniel everything Jack had needed him to know. The ease and totality of their wordless communication must have been painful for Sha'uri to see after a year of failing to find common ground with Daniel.

Jack had reached out and touched Daniel through the Stargate, something Sha'uri couldn't do with her heart or her body. No wonder she had hated Jack before he ever set foot on Abydos again. He'd never wholly left them in that year Daniel was gone.

"Neither of us let go," he admitted.

Sha'uri could fight for Daniel but she couldn't fight against Jack. She couldn't, in the end, compete against the thrill of excavating the cartouche room, the uncovering of the map of gate addresses luring Daniel back to the Stargate and consuming him. She was a warm, brave, uncomplicated woman with no education, nothing in common with her brilliant, passionate husband, nothing to hold him. It wasn't anyone's fault.

If Sha'uri hadn't been taken by Apophis, she would have seen Daniel taken by Jack and the Stargate. There was no place for her on Earth and Daniel had always been too vital, too strong for her and for Abydos. He was an explorer, a man who would always strive for something more, something greater than himself.

Ultimately, as much as all of this drew her to Daniel, the things Sha'uri wanted were small: husband, status, family. She even placed limitations on the freedom she'd helped to win for her people. It was the freedom only to be who and what they were without fear that she fought for, not for them to be something more or something different than they were. Sha'uri hadn't wanted to change the world so much as she'd wanted to live freely in it.

"We didn't fight," Daniel said in a low, stony voice. "It would've been better, I think, if we had."

"Try ignoring me for a hole in the ground, see what you get," Jack warned.

"Exactly." Daniel's fingers went exploring over Jack's cheek and jaw. "I yell at you, I get mad, I jump up and down, I get in your face and in your way and I fuck up because I can. Because I won't lose you if I do. Because it never occurs to you to back down or back off. You don't give in only to keep the peace, you fight back. I don't have to worry if I should keep something bottled up, if I should hurt myself instead of facing you. You push at the limits of what we have as hard as I do, trusting it won't break us. I can't..." Daniel hesitated, trying to smile. "I honestly *can't* tell you what that means to me."

"Not so very far off what it means to me, I imagine," Jack said matter-of-factly.

"You know I'm not going to make you wait, don't you?" Daniel recognised regretfully. "I love my wife very much, I always will, and I'm never going to give up on finding her. But that doesn't change the fact I'm in love with you, Jack. I can't have and I can't do everything I would want, so I have to face up to what's possible for me. I can't hurt you and I won't. I can find Sha'uri and help her find herself again, but I can't make her happy. I can take her back to her home but I can't be with her. You're right about that. About a lot of things."

"I've had time to think. About a lot of things."

"Is this right?" Daniel honestly didn't know.

"It's right for us." It was all the answer Jack could give.

"Is anything ever right for us? Everything we do takes work."

"Yeah, but that's only about the small stuff," Jack explained. "The big, important, life-changing stuff, we've got covered."

"Yes?"

"Yes."

"I wish I were a better man," Daniel muttered absently, a crease between his brows.

"I could only wish you were luckier."

Wide-eyed and candidly humbled by all the deeper things Jack meant by this and would never bring himself to say, Daniel could only kiss him in response.

"We have promises to keep," Daniel reminded him anxiously.

"Yes." Jack kissed him back. "We do."

He knew how it was going to be for them.

They would be together, and maybe even happy, although neither of them was too good at that. But they wouldn't be alone. Sha'uri would always be their third unspoken presence.

If Jack wanted Daniel, then he had to accept her place, her intrusion in both of their lives for as long as it took to find her. He wouldn't allow Sha'uri to come between them; better this way, with Daniel feeling he could turn to Jack, talk honestly to him at any time.

Daniel loved him and Jack would do everything he could for him. Daniel knew Jack was with him, and was comforted by it.

It was too soon for Daniel to know the rest, to know that whether they found Sha'uri or not, he was already letting her go, letting some of his guilt and recrimination go, moving on from her more completely at greater peace with himself, with Jack and the life he loved.

Jack wanted to find Sha'uri if only so Daniel would never have to know.

So long as Daniel kept reaching for him, Jack had pretty near everything he wanted.

FINIS