



*Happy Holidays*  
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*All I Want*

*Happy Holidays* by *Cleo the Muse*  
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# All I Want

by Cleo the Muse

Rating: Older Kids

Genre: Romance (Het), Angst, Drama, Hurt/Comfort, Little Daniel

Warnings: A bad word or two, some violence, Danny-whumping, temporary character death, and you might need a hanky for a few scenes if you're a sympathetic sniffer.

Episodes: Takes place instead of "Moebius", anything before that was fair game. Also includes a few hints at season 9 and season 2 of *Atlantis*.

Synopsis: Daniel gets down-sized, Jack takes him in. But when Jack insists the adoption be as "normal" as possible, they're both in for a few surprises! Response for holiday 'fic challenge on the DJsSG-1Lverse list.

Pairings: Jack/Sara (very unusual for me since I normally write just gen 'fic... but this one begged for it)  
Status: Complete as of December 24, 2006.

Notes: I'm not married/in a relationship, don't have any kids, and never adopted, so any errors in any of the three are entirely the fault of my ignorance. Also, as this becomes an AU as of the end of "Threads", it also becomes an AU of my story "Renewing Trust"; therefore, some of the events of that tale will be revisited in their altered form. This isn't an alternate season nine because I wasn't satisfied with the change in cast--far from it, actually--but rather because I can't bring myself to include Vala in a story that doesn't have a full-sized Daniel for her to harass and annoy to distraction.

Disclaimer: I don't own *Stargate*, though I certainly wish I did. I also claim no rights to the adorable little boy whose pictures grace these pages. He is Drew, adopted son of designer and scrap-booking teacher Melodee Langworthy. All of these photos are hers, though I've added my touch to a few.

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*"He knew a path that wanted walking;  
He knew a spring that wanted drinking;  
A thought that wanted further thinking;  
A love that wanted re-renewing."*

*—Robert Frost, "A Lone Striker"*

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## Chapter 1

"No. As in absolutely *no way*."

Jack O'Neill sighed and did his best to look un-intimidated, but he was well aware that he was at an unfair disadvantage. He'd always found it difficult not to buckle under the blue-eyed death glare of the galaxy's most brilliant archaeologist, anthropologist, linguist, diplomat, etc., and the stubborn set of Daniel's jaw was a red flag warning that Jack was about to have a battle on his hands. He briefly wondered what the other shoppers thought of him standing in the mall, arguing with Daniel and losing miserably. Just as quickly, he realized no one probably cared; they were used to seeing grown men being pushed around by little kids.

And what a little kid he was, too! It was hard to believe the six foot, broad-shouldered, muscular guy Jack had shared Thanksgiving Dinner with just eight days ago was *ever* such a cute little runt. Despite his protestations that he was *at least* six, the SGC's new CMO, Doctor Lam, had put her dainty little foot down and declared him to be no more than *five* years-old—and a small five, at that.

"C'mon, Daniel! Think of it as exploring a new culture." The skinny little arms crossed the equally scrawny chest. "Besides, I don't have any pictures of you at the house at this size."

"I've been 'this size' for three days," the stubborn mini-archaeologist began, "and with any luck, the Maidierans will be able to make me the right size *again*. Soon."

"Daniel, even *Thor* couldn't figure out how it went wrong. I hate to say it, big guy, but you're just going to have to get back to big the normal way."

That was so not the way to make a pint-sized Doctor Jackson a happy little camper. Now he was not only annoyed with the holiday crowds in the shopping mall, but also ticked off at Jack, too.

"Fine. You got a digital camera for Christmas *last* year, why don't you take a picture with *that*? Because I will *not* consent to sitting on the lap of an old guy in a fat suit and a fake beard."

"Yeah, but it makes for a *really* cute phot—" *Oh, crap*. Now he'd done it: he'd dared utter the 'c' word.

"Cute, Jack? *Cute*?"

"Uh, Daniel?" A quick glance at the Salvation Army Angel Tree booth confirmed that a few of the volunteers were glancing in their direction. "The other shoppers can hear you."

"So?!"

"So... any further yelling you'd doubtlessly like to do is probably classified in nature and should wait 'til we get out to the truck."

The little monster clammed up faster than a Tok'ra giving mission intell, letting those dangerous eyes of his burn holes in Jack. Unshielded by glasses—which the rugrat insisted he hadn't needed until he was seven—the effect was even more deadly.

He could probably kill a snakehead at fifty paces with that glare.

"Look, Daniel, we'll skip Santa—"

"Good."

"—Since the line's at *least* a mile long, and get photos taken at the Sears. Whaddya say?"

"No' to *any* photos, Jack. If you want to use your digital, that's fine, I guess, but we are *not* wasting money on one of those cheap, generic department store things, either."

Of course, the little brat knew Jack hadn't yet figured out how to operate the camera, but it was still a compromise, *so...*

"Deal. Now how about we head into the GAP?" Daniel heaved a martyred sigh and grudgingly held his tiny hand up for Jack to hold. Despite all his protests that though he *looked* like a kid, he was still a forty year-old man who could handle pretty much anything, thank-you-very-much-now-buzz-off-Jack, he hadn't put up much of a fuss when the general insisted he hold onto his hand or belt while they shopped. The crowded, brightly-lit mall was probably pretty scary for a tyke no bigger than him.

For that matter, it was pretty scary for Jack, too. Who'd have guessed the mall would be so crowded on a Friday afternoon? He'd thought there wouldn't be a major press while kids were in school and parents at work, but he'd obviously thought wrong.

While he didn't have to dodge any teenagers, Jack found the many grandmothers, military wives, toddlers, and babies were just as likely to run over a gray-haired general and his fair-haired ward as

anyone else. He also found it rather awkward to be the only adult male in the building not wearing a big red suit.

Daniel was clearly unhappy with the children's clothing in the GAP, glaring at all the khakis and button-up shirts as though *they* were at fault for his diminished physical age. While the squirt debated the merits of plaid versus pinstripe, Jack scooped up a pair of jeans, a polo, and a t-shirt.

"Try these on," he suggested, holding out the garments.

Daniel peered at the label. "They're awfully small."

Jack sighed. "I hate to say it, kiddo, but *you're* awfully small, too."

The mini-archaeologist glanced down at the much-too large clothing sagging off his scrawny frame. The jeans, long-sleeved tee, and battered tennis shoes came on loan from Colonel Dave Dixon's seven year-old son, whose mother always kept him a change of clothes at the Cheyenne Mountain Complex's day care facility. Greatly over-sized and somewhat tattered from wear, the outfit made Daniel look like a malnourished little third-world waif. It also did *nothing* to detract from the dreaded "cuteness" factor.

Just as Jack was about to point out this particular feature, Daniel collected the clothes and marched off to the dressing rooms. "Be sure to step outside when you have them on so I can see how they look," Jack reminded him.

"Yes, Dad," the little imp sniped over his shoulder.

As soon as he was out of sight, the saleswoman folding sweaters grinned. "God makes 'em cute so you don't smother 'em in their sleep."

"Ain't that the truth," he grumbled, good-naturedly. The *real* truth, though, was that he was simply grateful to have a living breathing Daniel of *any* size after the events of last week.

*On Monday, SG-15 left on a survey of a planet which had looked like an untouched, temperate paradise, only to discover the DHD on the other side was a non-functional stone replica placed next to the ring to preserve the 'historic value' of the site. The two objects were then left as curiosities in what basically amounted to the local equivalent of New York City's Central Park.*

*Prepared for a mineral survey, Dixon and his team were astonished to discover a sprawling glass metropolis in view just beyond the first bend of the path. Before they could return to the 'Gate to wait for the next dial-in, the local law enforcement showed up, discovered the team, and knocked them all out with a weapon very similar to the intar weapons the SGC used for training.*

*Possession of lethal firearms was a crime in that particular part of the world, it turned out, and sensors in the park detected the presence of ammunition when the team arrived, scrambling the "law preservation" team to intercept SG-15. Dixon and company were able to successfully plead their ignorance of the local laws, however, and had their weapons returned sans ammunition. They were then welcomed warmly by the city government, given a filling dinner, and offered the grand tour of the local history museum. While only a few of the artifacts on display were of any interest, one item in particular caught the team's eyes: a cheerfully glowing ZPM.*

*The locals, it turned out, actually had two Stargates on their planet, and only a freak accident which had knocked their primary 'Gate out of commission for several hours allowed the MALP and SG-15 to arrive by the one in the park. They were only too happy to allow the team to dial back home, especially when they learned that one General Jack O'Neill possessed the ability to manipulate Ancient technology—a feat which they, themselves, had been unable to accomplish. They were also very interested in learning how to read Ancient, which they had also been unable to decipher, so SG-1 and Jack stepped through the 'Gate to begin the first steps toward securing a new technologically advanced ally.*

*A gesture of respect Daniel insisted upon was that they arrive armed only with intars, in compliance with the local laws. Though Jack protested, he eventually agreed since the training weapon could be used to render someone unconscious. Further armed with a slight advantage in their understanding of Ancient technology, SG-1 set out to negotiate an exchange of their expertise and genetics for the fully-charged ZPM.*

*Maidiera, unfortunately, still had a few surprises in store for the team.*



## Chapter 2

"Thank you so much," Jeanette Autry gushed, taking off her coat. "I know Christmas hasn't been the same for you since your son died, Roy, but it means a lot to each of the kids whose names hang on this tree."

"Roy?" asked the other volunteer just arriving, her expression puzzled.

"She's Jean Autry, so I'm Roy Rogers," Sara O'Neill replied with a grin, gathering her own belongings as the Angel Tree volunteers changed shifts for the afternoon rush. "Anyway, like I tell you every year, Jean, if I can't see my kid smile—"

"—You can at least give a smile to someone else's," Jean finished. "Have a great evening, Sara, and I'll see you tomorrow."

Slinging her purse over her shoulder, Sara headed for the nearby food court to fortify herself with a cup of coffee and a pastry before she headed for home. Once she got her order and sat down at a small table, she finally allowed herself to reflect over what she'd seen earlier: Jonathan "Jack" O'Neill having a rather loud "discussion" with a blond-haired little boy.

Almost nine years since the divorce, and she *still* wasn't over him. Of course, they'd been married for fifteen and parents together for an entirely too-short eleven, but they still hadn't spoken much with one another since the day their son died.

That didn't count, of course, that bizarre incident with the Jack-that-wasn't-Jack-but-also-wasn't-Charlie-either. The military hadn't even bothered to try to come up with a plausible explanation for what happened, insisting that there'd been some sort of radiation leak at the hospital that caused hallucinations. That didn't explain the strange lightning she'd witnessed *before* she took not-Jack to the emergency room, but as a former military wife, she knew that classified meant *classified*.

The last time she'd spoken with Jack, though, had been about six months after that incident. He always sent flowers for her birthday and occasionally left a message on her answering machine, but she had never actually held conversation with him since. She hadn't tried very hard to keep in touch, either, devoting her efforts to classes at the community college and volunteer projects whenever she wasn't working. Then she'd accepted a position in a new career and did her best to put her ex-husband out of her mind.

It all came rushing back today, though, watching him try to keep a straight face while he held what looked like a "serious, adult conversation" with the skinny kid for whom he'd had to get on one knee and hunch his shoulders to talk to at eye-level. She remembered with fondness how he'd done the same with Charlie, looking somber and involved when she knew what he *really* wanted to do was grin and ruffle their son's hair. The Angel Tree booth was too far away from the pair to hear any details of the conversation, but she had a pretty good idea the skinny kid in the baggy clothes had Jack wrapped around his little finger.

And speaking of the devils, here came Jack and the boy now, loaded down with bags from three different children's clothing stores. The baggy shirt and jeans were gone, replaced with a striped polo and blue jeans which only served to re-emphasize how skinny the little guy really was. Just as she'd made up her mind to go over and give Jack a friendly scolding for not feeding his kid enough, the pair waved at someone in the throng.

Sara's heart sank, and she chided herself for being stupid. If Jack O'Neill had a young son, it stood to reason that the boy also had a mother. The tall, attractive blond who'd returned the friendly wave was still carefully making her way toward Jack and the boy, but Sara didn't wait to see the happy reunion. As she gathered her coffee and tossed her trash, she realized that while *she* may not have gotten over Jack, her ex-husband hadn't had the same problem.

"Save me from him!"

Sam chuckled at the first words out of Daniel's mouth. "He's that bad, is he?"

"No, I'm not," the general protested. "Carter, save me from *him*!"

"You're the one who keeps trying to make me look 'cute'. If you're not trying to put a cartoon character across my chest, it's some sports name and number across my *back*."

"It's better than all those button-up shirts *you* kept grabbing—I didn't know they made that many different patterns of plaid for pre-schoolers."

"Six year-olds are first-graders, Jack."

"Five year-olds are kindergarteners, and you're shorter than even those. And *normal* six-year olds, yes... but you weren't 'normal' the first time around either, were ya? Were you in high school by six or college?"

Sam shook her head in amazement. Some things, it seemed, would never change.

"That's not the point. Sam, he even dragged me into The Disney Store. Disney!"

"And *who* didn't want to leave without buying that Miles shirt?" Jack asked.

"Milo," Daniel corrected, "and I find the irony of me wearing that shirt to be worth it."

"Milo?" Sam asked.

"Yeah, the archaeologist who gets laughed at by all his peers, is hired by a mysterious person to translate an ancient text, gets a whole crew of new friends from diverse capabilities and backgrounds, and eventually discovers the lost city of Atlantis."

The colonel grinned. "I like the irony, too."

"It's still *Disney*, Daniel."

"And who's the one who dragged me in there in the first place?"

"You know, I thought Daniel 3.5 would have at least *half* the fashion sense version 2.0 had."

Sam grinned. "Actually, sir, version 2.0 had no clothes other than BDUs until Janet and I dragged him out shopping."

Jack raised an eyebrow. "Well, *that* explains a lot. Version 3.0 came back without clothes, too—"

"But 3.0 still had all of 2.0's clothes." Leave it to General O'Neill to find an easier way to refer to the many incarnations of Daniel Jackson. "And we had 3.0 for only a few weeks before he—"

"Was down-graded to 3.5?" Daniel finished crossly, lower lip jutting out stubbornly.

If the older Daniel was cute when he pouted, the younger version was almost *sickeningly* adorable. "More like one of those space-saving package redesigns. Same contents, smaller container."

"Ha," the little boy answered glumly, glaring at the brightly-colored Gymboree bag.

"Carter, are you *sure* you don't want to take over his clothes-shopping?"

She shook her head. "I'd have to check the contents of the bags to be completely sure, sir, but I think the two of you managed well enough on your own. You'll probably want to head over to Wal-Mart to get some basics, though. I brought you a list."

Jack accepted the paper and gave it a quick once-over. "Underwear and socks are already taken care of, but I didn't think about some of this other stuff."

Sam nodded. "It's a modified version of the list Janet and I made for Cassie."

"Ah."

"Also, since you insisted on making everything seem as 'normal' as possible, all the paperwork's been filled out and submitted to the state... I just got back from the Child Welfare Services office, actually. They'll be sending a social worker by on Monday."

"That's fast."

She'd thought so, too, but it had been explained. "Given that Daniel's *already* living with you, they have to bump up the schedule a bit. They normally don't do home studies while the child already lives with the adoptive parent, so they're making an exception."

"I don't get why we're doing the adoption thing at all," Daniel griped. "What if the Maidierans figure out how to change me back? Or Thor?"

Jack rolled his eyes as though this was an old argument. It probably was. "Because as smart as those guys are, even *they* can't figure out why the machine did what it did, and neither can Thor. At this point, I don't care, either. You're *alive* thanks to that machine, which is more than what can be said *before* they stuck you in it. Now, since there may one day be some question about me having a five year-old kid at my house when it's public knowledge I'm neither married nor have a living biological child, I'm *adopting* you."

When Daniel's jaw set in that familiar, stubborn way, Sam's admiration for the general's patience went up a few notches.

\* \* \*

The Maidierans were gracious and eager to meet with the flagship team and the leader of the SGC, having prepared a welcoming committee which included delegates from the central government of the continent and ambassadors from the neighboring continents. Despite the team's unvoiced concerns that they might be walking into another Langara, the mere presence of representatives from the other major powers eased the tension of the initial meeting. The city where the Stargates were housed was called Pravestia, which Daniel eagerly pointed out was a derivative of the Ancient word for "source". Brain working at the lightning speeds for which he was known, he quickly deduced that the continent's name, Araliem, meant "guardian of children" and the world itself, Maidiera, could mean "protective mother" or "mother land".

To say the delegates were impressed would have been an understatement. In less than a minute, a stranger from another planet had translated the Old Tongue names and compared them to the language they had been unable to grasp for hundreds of years. Jack had responded with a quip about Daniel having had a lot of practice and began the introductions. Known for cutting to the chase when there were other matters at stake, the general quickly explained that while they'd be happy to participate in an exchange of information, the team was there for the ZPM. Time was running out for Atlantis, and no one could be sure when the Wraith would arrive to attack the city.

Surprised by the rather straight-forward approach, the delegates invited the team to discuss their needs over a meal. The food was delicious, but when it became apparent the general's patience was being tested, one of the lead scientists admitted that the ZPM at the museum was but one of many, and more could always be constructed.

To say SG-1 was impressed would have been an understatement.



### Chapter 3

"I don't see why we have to do anything to the guest room at all," Daniel grouched.

Jack paused, resting his forehead wearily against the bookshelf he was attempting to move.

"Because this room was originally decorated as the boring guest room of a boring old colonel, and *now* it's the bedroom of a not-so-boring child genius of a still-boring old general, that's why."

"It doesn't mean we have to repaint it."

"Yes, we do. This paint is so old you could carbon date it."

"Could not."

"Whatever. The point is, the social worker's coming on Monday, so we have two days to make this house look like a kid actually lives here."

"I'm not a kid."

Jack sighed, tired of the argument already. "Maybe not inside that over-active little head of yours, you aren't, but on the *outside* you look very *much* like a kid."

"What I'm trying to say, Jack, is that the social worker will *know* I've been here less than a week. If you make the place look too kid-friendly on Monday, she'll think you're trying too hard to impress her."

"So you're saying I should leave the paint?"

"Leave the paint, Jack," the stubborn little archaeologist insisted. "Leave the bookshelves, leave the bedspread, leave all of it. We can tell her we're going to re-decorate the bedroom later, but haven't had time yet. She'll buy that."

"What if *I* want to redecorate and having you here is just giving me a good excuse?" Jack countered.

"I saw you looking at the monkey bedding in the housewares store, Jack. Cute as you may think calling me the 'Micro-Spacemonkey' might be, I will *not* sleep on monkey sheets." The stubborn set to the tiny little jaw was back.

The general wasn't even going to deny the charge, as he *had* looked at the monkey comforter set. But what had really caught his eye—and that of the not-so-peaceful explorer who'd never admit to looking—was the burgundy Jeep bedding with matching blue plaid sheets.

Yes... *plaid*.

"I promise I won't make any decorating decisions you don't agree with, okay?" he suggested, instead. "There was a bedding set there that I was thinking about buying, but it wasn't the monkey set. And the sheets were even all-cotton, so we don't have to worry about scratching that tender skin of yours with bad sheets."

Daniel's arms crossed. "Now you're just making fun of me."

"A little. But you have to admit, Daniel, you're taking a lot of this *way* too seriously."

"It *is* serious, Jack. I've been turned into a little kid *entirely* against my will—"

The "poor-me" thing was getting a *little* old, Jack decided. "It's not like we had any choice in the matter. I'd much rather have you around as a little kid than six feet underground. You've died way too many times as it is, and I'm glad this wasn't the last. Scratch that, it *better* be the last time for about a hundred years! Now I'm sorry you've been poured into a smaller package than you're used to, but you're still the same guy and we're *all* just going to have to make the best of it."

"I know." Suddenly quiet, the down-sized Doctor Jackson stared down at his feet.

"But?" Jack prompted.

"It's not all the same."

Ignoring the bookshelf for the moment, Jack dropped to one knee. "What's not the same?"

One tiny hand tapped the side of his head. "Up here."

A monosyllabic Daniel Jackson of *any* age was never a good sign, and Jack felt his blood chill. "What's wrong? You never said anything about it before, Daniel, what is it?" Putting a finger under the boy's chin, he lifted the troubled blue gaze to meet his own.

"I still *remember* everything I knew when I was big, but it's sometimes like it's a different person. It's even worse than when I came back—as version 2.0, and was reading about all the things the original me did. I *knew* it was me, but it felt like somebody else."

"You never said anything then, either."

"It went away... I got used to it."

"You'll get used to this, too."

"Maybe. When I was big, I could concentrate on stuff. Now I have a really short attention span, and I get tired a lot more easily than I used to. I can't *do* a lot of the things I used to, either, 'cause I'm not tall enough to reach the books in my lab, or too small to carry a P-90, or—"

"Daniel, we can get ladders and stools for your lab, but I'm afraid there's nothing we can do for the other. There may be some instances, some missions, where it might be okay to take a kid offworld, but there won't be any more first contacts for you until you're bigger. I'm sorry, too, kiddo, 'cause I know how much you liked exploring the galaxy and discovering new cultures." Even though he knew the bigger Daniel had never been the tactile sort, Jack couldn't resist pulling the kid into his arms and giving him a reassuring hug.

It seemed to be the right way to go. Daniel's arms came up and wrapped around Jack's ribcage, resting his tousled blond head in the crook of the man's shoulder. "This is another thing I have to get used to," he added quietly, voice slightly muffled by the t-shirt pressed against his mouth. "I didn't used to want hugs all the time."

"And now you do?"

He nodded against his neck. "Uh-huh. Ever since you got me out of the machine, I've wanted to be hugged more."

"Any time you want a hug, Daniel, you don't even have to ask. To be honest, I think versions one, two, and three-point-oh could have used a few more hugs."

"Really?"

"Yep. And I'd have been happy to give them."

"Spacemonkey."

"Yeah," Jack grinned, ruffling Daniel's hair like he had long ago.

Unable to contain the wistful smile that particular shared memory provoked, Daniel pulled out of the hug. "I'm still a lot different up here though, Jack. For a moment, I actually *liked* the monkey comforter."

Jack chuckled. "All those bright colors and happy faces, huh?"

"Yeah."

"So that's why I'm going to offer you a compromise, Daniel. No monkey comforters, but how about that burgundy Jeep set?"

Daniel's eyes widened. "The one with the plaid sheets?"

"You thought I didn't notice, did ya?"

For the first time in a long, *long* time, Daniel actually grinned.



## Chapter 4

Sara couldn't believe her eyes. The first file in the stack on top of her desk was for her ten o'clock appointment, the contents of which included the adoption papers of one Daniel Jackson, Junior, by Jonathan O'Neill.

"Is this for real?" she asked no one in particular.

Nancy Montgomery, the office secretary, paused on her way back to the lobby. Taking the file, she gave it a quick look and nodded. "Looks real to me. Oh, the adoptive parent has the same last name as you, ma'am... is he related?"

She'd forgotten that not everyone in her new profession knew of her troubled past. "He's my ex-husband."

"Oh! I didn't know you'd been married, ma'am."

Yes, Nancy Montgomery had been military, and the constant ma'am-ing reminded her of the fresh-faced youngsters she used to meet when she went shopping at the BX. Resisting the urge to sigh at the younger woman, she nodded instead. "We've been divorced almost nine years. I'm just surprised—*very* surprised, actually—to see him adopting a five year-old boy."

"Oh, the Jackson boy!" Abigail Ramsey gushed, peering around the door frame. "A lady in uniform came by here Friday with all the paperwork, including a copy of the boy's father's will. Seems Jackson Senior stipulated his son be placed in his commanding officer's care in the event of his untimely demise." She sniffed disdainfully. "The lady seemed to hint that there was some very high political clout backing the adoption... one of those hush-hush military things, I suppose."

Sara sighed, watching the perceptible tightening of Nancy's shoulders. A veteran of the war in Iraq, the former Sergeant Montgomery was medically retired following an injury sustained in combat. Abby's superior attitude toward all members of the military was well-known, and often the cause of tension around the office. It never ceased to amaze Sara how such behavior could exist in a major military center like Colorado Springs, but Abby was hardly the first she had met in the city.

She lifted her chin. "Yes, my ex-husband was into *very* hush-hush military things. Full colonel, special ops, sudden trips out of the country, that sort of the thing."

"Well, it's no wonder you divorced!"

Sara's jaw worked. "Things were good while he was still *in*. It's when he retired that we had problems."

"Oh. Well, if it's your ex, you should probably give the case to me, and I'll give you one of mine."

Over her dead body! "Actually, I've *already* started their homestudy. I got the opportunity to see Jack and the boy out at the mall on Friday, and I can tell you I didn't realize they *weren't* related." And knowing Abby's dislike of the military, she wouldn't give Jack a fair chance to prove he could look after a child by himself, despite the wishes of the biological father and the implied political movers and shakers.

Grabbing her purse and coat, Sara slid the file into her canvas satchel. "I'll be back later," she promised.

Once in her car and away from the distractions of the office, she withdrew the file and perused the contents more closely. The boy's parents had been separated. The mother, Sherry, had been deceased since the child was barely a year old, so he'd been in the care of his maternal grandfather in some unpronounceably-Arabic city in Egypt. When the grandfather passed away, the boy was sent back to Jackson Senior, who was very shortly thereafter listed as missing in action, then killed in the line of duty.

It was interesting to see that Jackson Senior was either *not* military, or was in such deep cover his military identity wasn't revealed. She didn't expect any answers on how a "civilian advisor" attached to a deep-space telemetry project ended up missing in action when his office was under a mountain. Some things you just *didn't* ask.

Fortunately, he had had time to change his will to include provisions for his five year-old son only days before his disappearance and death. Jackson Junior then went to live with Jack, who began the necessary paperwork to adopt the boy as his own. There was no mention of a political backer anywhere in the file, so she just dismissed it as Abby's chronic paranoia and focused on the boy himself.

Her heart went out to the skinny youngster for having seen so much death already in his young life. She'd chosen this profession so that she could always do right by innocent children in unfortunate circumstances, and vowed to do what was best for this boy... even if that meant placing him with someone other than Jack.

She started the car and pulled out into the late-morning traffic, heading toward the house she'd visited only once since their divorce. If she remembered correctly, it was in a very good neighborhood, so that was one point in Jack's favor already.



## Chapter 5

"It's almost ten o'clock, Daniel, the social worker will be here any minute!"

"Is that military time or civilian?" the little imp mumbled, trying to get uncoordinated fingers to button his shirt.

Making a noise of exasperation, Jack tugged Daniel around on the stool so he could reach his front and swiftly straightened the shirt, ruffling Daniel's hair lightly when finished. "Sarcastic little devil."

"Yeah... who'd I learn that from?"

"You keep that up and the social worker will think we're related." There was the faint sound of a car pulling into the driveway, and Jack quickly peeked out the living room window at the dark green sedan. "Crap! She's here. Did you brush your teeth?"

"Yes. And combed my hair, too, which lasted all of five minutes before you mussed it all up. *Relax*, Jack, the social worker's a formality," Daniel griped.

"Says you. What if she says I can't keep you?"

"Then you'll just pick up the red phone on your desk and give the President a call and he'll make *sure* I stay here with you."

Jack raised an eyebrow. "What happened to the kid who was squawking about not wanting to be adopted at all?"

"He was replaced by the more pragmatic side of me who realized that *maybe* you weren't such a bad choice after all."

"Thanks. I think."

The doorbell rang, causing Jack to nearly leap out of his skin. "Uh, that'd be her. Ready?"

"Ready."

Steeling his nerves, he grabbed the door knob and yanked it open—

—Only to come face-to-face with the bemused expression on his ex-wife's face.

"Sara! Hi! Didn't expect to see you here. Long time no see, how you been?"

Her lips quirked perceptibly, as though she was trying *very* hard not to smile. "Jack, hi, nice to see you too, yes it has, just fine," she replied evenly, answering each of his statements in turn. "You mind if I come in?"

"No, not at all... well, actually I was expecting someone important any minute now—not that you're not important, of course—but this is—"

"Really important?"

"Yeah. Can I call you later? You still have the same number, right?"

"Sure, yes, and how important?"

"Life-shatteringly important. This could be one of the most important days of my life, if you know what I mean."

"Expecting the Publisher's Clearing House?"

"No—"

"The Avon lady?"

"No, but—"

"The door-to-door encyclopedia salesman?"

"Sara—"

"Ah, so it *is* the Avon lady!"

Despite himself, he grinned. Sara O'Neill *née* Basham and Daniel Jackson were the only two people in the world who could get a rise out of him, and here he was with both only fifteen feet apart from one another. "If you *must* know, Sara, I'm adopting."

"A puppy?"

"A kid."

"Oh. So I guess that explains why I have a file here for a Daniel Jackson, Junior, doesn't it?" she replied, hefting the satchel on her left shoulder.

He gaped. "You're the social worker?"

"Got it in one, Fly Boy. So I'll ask again, mind if I come in?"

Aware that he was probably catching a goodly number of flies, Jack closed his mouth, stepped to the side, and held the door open. Smiling broadly because she clearly knew she'd won this round, Sara stepped into the living room and looked around casually. "Nice place," she commented.

"You've been here before."

"Just once, and that was years ago. Not a lot as changed, has it?"

"With the house? No." Personally? Yes. Like the forty year-old archaeologist sitting on a stool in the kitchen, looking an *awful* lot like a five year-old kid. He was even swinging his feet in the air as he finished the juice from his breakfast. "Daniel? Come on out and meet your social worker."

There was a muffled thump as Daniel's hiking boots landed on the vinyl floor, then the blond-haired little imp popped around the corner from the kitchen. His brow furrowed in confusion, glancing first at Sara, then at the photo of the O'Neill family sitting on Jack's end table. "Yep, kiddo, that's Sara. That's Charlie's mom."

"Hi," Daniel began uncertainly, looking at Jack, then at Sara again. "Nice to meet you."

Sara smiled warmly, casually setting her tape recorder on the coffee table. "It's nice to meet you, too, Daniel. How are you and Jack getting along so far?"

"Well, we annoy the crap out of each other, but that's not surprising, is it?"

Jack sucked in a breath, watching Sara's eyes widen. This wasn't the approach he and Daniel had agreed to, but then again, their plan had been formulated before they'd found out the social worker was Jack's ex-wife.

"Not really," she replied hesitantly, gaze meeting Jack's for a moment. "How do you like America so far? I understand you're actually from Egypt."

"Yes, ma'am. It's a *lot* different from Colorado. Sand. Camels. No snow. Pyramids... that sort of thing."

"Are you looking forward to starting a new school?"

Jack coughed lightly, sitting down on the couch opposite Sara and pulling Daniel into his lap. "Actually, he's going to be home-schooled. We haven't had any tests done or anything, but Daniel is really, *really* far ahead of his age-group."

"What about interaction with his own age group?"

"Daniel's more comfortable with adults. I'm as big a kid as any there are around, though, so I'll be trying to get him to try out team sports and such like that, though. It's still too early to say for sure, but I'm not going to let the little runt miss out on the best parts of being a kid."

"*Jaaa-ack*," Daniel griped good-naturedly. Jack only wished it were true and that he *could* let Daniel experience what childhood was supposed to be. Instead, he foresaw many days arguing with the mini-archaeologist over what constituted a day's work and just how many hours a five year-old linguist was allowed to put in every week.

"He made me watch *The Simpsons* yesterday, Ms. O'Neill," Daniel announced, "as if the most dysfunctional TV family in the world would help me understand what it's like to be the average American kid." He shuddered dramatically.

Sara's eyebrows were now up to her hairline. Clever, sneaky Daniel was really spinning the adjusted, mature angle for as much as he could. By throwing out words like 'dysfunctional' and 'average'—which rarely made it into a ten year-old's daily vocabulary, let alone a five year-old's—he was forcing Sara to re-evaluate him as an intelligent and self-confident young man.

Even though he still looked like a scrawny five year-old.

"I didn't have any American clothes, so Jack and I went shopping over the weekend. We also started to fix up my bedroom here, but the only thing we've gotten so far is a new comforter set and a step-ladder so I can reach all the books in my room. We'll have to wait until spring to repaint my walls, but I think they're okay the way they are."

Jack resisted the urge to grin in triumph. The brilliant linguist and diplomat was chattering on like the precocious child he both was and was pretending to be, telling Sara all about his trips to the mall and various shopping centers over the weekend, their preparations at the house, and the big dinner they'd had out at a steak house with Sam and "Murray".

When he finally finished, Sara swallowed heavily. "Daniel, normally we handle adoptions very differently than this so I'm pretty much making this interview up as we go. I'll have some more questions for you later, but for now I'd like to talk to Jack alone."

"Sam wanted me to call her today," Daniel agreed, hopping off Jack's lap and grabbing the cordless phone. His hand was barely big enough to hold it, so he ended up carrying it with both hands. "I'll talk to her in my room." Giving Sara one last bat of his big blue eyes, he headed down the hall, looking very pleased with himself.

"Cute kid," she commented when the bedroom door clicked shut.

"Yeah, he is. Just don't use the 'c' word in his presence... it makes the little guy turn into a heathen," Jack grinned. "This weekend at the mall, I accidentally used that word, and he lectured me long and hard about it."

"Was that what the conversation over at the Angel Tree was?"

He blinked in surprise. "You were there?"

She shrugged noncommittally. "I volunteer for the Salvation Army every year, Jack. To be honest, I was surprised to see you there with a child. Up until Daniel's file crossed my desk this morning, I would have sworn he was yours."

"He is mine," Jack answered softly. "We've been best friends—uh, his dad and me, that is—for longer than the little guy's been around. And while I miss Big Daniel, Little Daniel's *just* like him."

"Are you sure he's not just trying to be just like his dad? To feel closer to both you and him?"

Jack shrugged. "Big Daniel never was much on touching people, but the imp admitted Saturday that he sometimes needs a hug. He also likes to pretend he's just as brave and strong as the bigger version, even though he was practically glued to my side at the mall. But he's also every bit as stubborn as Big Daniel, too."

Sara smiled. "It sounds like the two of you had an interesting friendship."

"More than you could ever know," he admitted.

"You must really miss him, then."

"I sure do. No more pizza and beer on hockey nights, even though he hated beer and didn't care for hockey. But I have the imp to take care of, now... I can't complain."

"Wait a second..." she began, frowning her brow in concentration. "You mean you were friends with a guy who wasn't military, hated beer and hockey, and was a *scientist*? Who are you and what have you done with Colonel Jack O'Neill?"

He grinned. "Actually, it's Brigadier General Jack O'Neill."

"And you let them promote you, too. I repeat my previous confusion."

"Jack O'Neill the cold-hearted bastard died the day a shaggy-haired geek stood up to him and told him there *were* still things in this world worth living for." He looked down at his hands as he spoke, then back up at his ex-wife. "He saved my life, Sara, both literally and figuratively. I couldn't for the life of me figure out why the general in charge of the mission—which was supposed to be one-way, I might add—assigned a civilian as our translator and liaison, but it worked."

"And now he's gone," she finished softly.

"Yeah, but Little Daniel's here, and I'm going to make sure he has the childhood Big Daniel never got to have."

His ex-wife tipped her head questioningly. "What do you mean?"

"His parents were killed when he was eight, Sara. He spent the next eight years after that being bounced around from foster home to foster home because no one had the patience to deal with a traumatized genius. Who knows how he turned out to be the man he did, but *this* Daniel has a home, and I plan to keep him."

Sara smiled. "That's good to hear, Jack, because I think I'll be recommending the placement."

Jack let out the breath he didn't know he'd been holding. "Thank goodness. And thank *you*."

"I'll still need to talk to Daniel one-on-one, but I think we can skip most of the formalities that go with normal adoptions. It's clearly a good match, I know your capabilities as a dad, and even though you're a little older than the state normally allows for adoptive parents, there's the matter of Big Daniel's will."

"Where there's a will, there's a way?" he quipped.

Sara grinned and shook her head. "Only you, Jack... but in this case, you're right. Now, can you keep yourself busy for a few minutes while I have a talk with Little Daniel?"



## Chapter 6

Some people were born geniuses, others grew into it, and most never even came close. Sara considered herself and pretty much everyone she knew in the third category and had met a few folks she counted amongst the ranks of the second group. Daniel, however, was clearly one of the rare individuals born to brilliance. His intelligence shone through his eyes even though he shyly avoided her gaze after Jack excused himself outside to split logs for the fireplace.

"So, Daniel... other than annoying the crap out of one another, how *are* you and Jack getting along together?"

He squirmed uncomfortably for a moment, then answered, "We're making progress."

Her eyebrows lifted at the rather adult-sounding statement. "Progress?"

"We're both having to adapt. Jack has to get used to there being a kid around, and..." He trailed off, biting his lower lip.

"And you have to get used to having a dad again?" Sara prompted.

"Something like that, yes." He gave a small, sad grin.

"How do you feel about Jack home-schooling you?"

He shrugged. "It won't be Jack doing the home-schooling. I think he was looking at a private tutor or something."

"You won't get to be around many kids your own age."

"I don't have anything in common with 'normal' kids."

She winced at the implications the emphasized 'normal' held. So many children in foster care thought they were 'damaged' in some way. "What do you consider 'normal'?"

Daniel gave her an assessing look which did *not* belong on the face of a five year-old. "Normal five year-olds enjoy watching 'Dora the Explorer'. *I'm* already fluent in Spanish—as well as Arabic and German—and would much rather read a book."

Sara coughed in surprise. "*Verstehst du mich? Wieviel Uhr ist es?*"

"*Ja, Frau O'Neill, ich koenne Sie verstehen. Es ist fuenf nach halb elf,*" he answered with a small smirk, telling her he *could* understand her, and that it was ten thirty-five. The "in the morning" went unspoken, but she was pretty sure the little smart-aleck far surpassed her own limited skill with German, and she had no way to test his claims on the other two languages.

He was probably right about those too, then. Definitely *not* 'normal' for any five year-old but this one.

"You should still meet other kids. I'll be the first to agree that you can learn a lot from books, but there are some things you can't."

"Jack's already threatened me with little league hockey as soon as I'm big enough to keep from getting completely flattened on the ice."

"You skate?"

"I'm from *Egypt*, Ms. O'Neill."

"That answers *that* question!" With a big, resounding 'no', she added inwardly. "So, are you excited about being adopted?"

Daniel sighed. "Well, it would be much nicer to not need to be adopted at *all*, but if anybody does, I'm glad it's Jack."

He made a very good point, she decided.

"Can I ask *you* a question?" he blurted.

"Whatever you want."

"What was Jack like when you were married?"

Her smile was wistful. "The Jack O'Neill I married wasn't the same man I divorced. The man I talked to just a few minutes ago seems to be a lot like the old Jack I remember. From what I can tell, we have your dad to thank for that."

Daniel looked a little embarrassed, and she thought the expression terribly cute on him. Following Jack's advice, though, she mentally squelched the dreaded 'c' word straightaway. She wondered at the shy gesture, though, as it seemed talking about his dad made him uncomfortable.

She chided herself for her foolishness immediately. His father was dead only a few *weeks*—it was a testament to the boy's resilience that he was handling it as well as he was. Much as she hated to, though, that meant one last question had to be asked. "Daniel, I'm going to ask you something that might be really tough for you, so you don't have to answer if you don't want to, okay?" He nodded. "How are *you* coping? Your mother, father, and grandfather—"

"—Are all gone."

The interruption surprised her. "Yes, they are, Daniel... and your acceptance of that is a very good sign. In situations like yours, though, I *do* have to ask how you are handling your... loss."

"No child should ever know loss," he began softly, "but it's always been with me. You never get used to it, either, so your only option is to enjoy the time you have with your friends and family." He looked up at her then, expressive blue eyes brimming with unshed tears. "Jack is my family, now. So are Sam and T—Murray."

Sara's heart broke to see the pain that wisdom had cost this child reflected on his thin features, and she swallowed hard to force the lump out of her throat. "Thank you, Daniel... that'll be all."

He nodded again, biting his lower lip as it started to tremble. "Should I go get Jack?"

"Please." She used the time it took him to go to the back door and call his guardian to gather up her belongings and compose herself mentally. A few rather traitorous tears were starting to sting her eyes, and she had to clench them tightly shut for a moment.

This was why she'd chosen this profession, she reminded herself. Every day, she dealt with children who were abused, mistreated, and neglected by their parents, or—like Daniel—had no parents at all. Fortunately, there were people in the world who agreed to care for and protect children who weren't their own, and she felt blessed every time she was able to join a child in need with a loving parent. Though she'd witnessed Jack's parenting skills first-hand with Charlie, she never would have guessed Jack to be a good candidate for raising a child not of his own blood—let alone adopting—yet in this house she's just witnessed the sort of perfect match only fate could create.

The door to the deck rattled again, and she opened her thankfully-dry eyes in time to see Daniel disappear around the corner in the direction she assumed the bedrooms lay. She had just switched off her tape recorder and tucked it back into her satchel when she sensed she was being watched.

"You know, I always thought it creepy how you could remember entire conversations verbatim. Did you even turn that thing on?"

Sara turned toward him and smiled. "Yes I did, Jack, but only because I've found audio recordings useful in the occasional custody battle."

"Ah. So what'd you say that upset my kid?"

Normally, she would have bristled at a similar question from anyone else, but Jack's tone was very non-confrontational. "Where'd he go?"

"He went back to his room. He said he wants to be alone right now, but I'll go check on him in a few minutes." He shoved his hands in his pockets and leaned against the wall.

"I let him know he didn't have to answer, but I *did* ask him how he was dealing with the loss of his parents and grandfather."

"And?"

"And he said that no child should ever know loss, even though he does. That you never get used to it, so you enjoy the time you have with your friends and family." She shook her head. "How does a five year-old get so smart? So wise?"

"He's a special kid," Jack answered softly. "So—uh, walk you to your car?"

"Thanks." The walk out to the car was made in silence, but as Sara unlocked her car door, she blurted, "Do you want to go out for coffee?"

Jack rocked back on his heels. "Now?"

"Oh, no! I meant later. Definitely later."

"That wouldn't be fair to Daniel."

She shook her head. "You're right... you really need to spend as much time with Daniel—"

Jack grinned. "What I meant was that Daniel *loves* coffee, but I won't let him have any no bigger than he is, and he turns up his nose at the decaffeinated stuff. I'd have to get somebody to watch him."

"Oh! So... later?"

"Later," he answered, and Sara felt a warmth she hadn't in years.

*As a gesture of goodwill, a single ZPM was gifted to the SGC, which was promptly used to send a relieving task force to the besieged Atlantis expedition. Although Daniel made clear his desire to join the Daedalus as it made its way to the Pegasus Galaxy by means of ZPM-boosted Asgard hyperdrive, Jack was able to convince him that they really had no idea what to expect in Atlantis until the Wraith threat was taken care of, and that his time was better spent on Maidiera, teaching their scholars how to read Ancient.*

*Daniel agreed with reluctance, but realized that an alliance with the Maidierans could prove every bit as valuable as Earth's long-standing friendship with the Asgard. The team was given transport to the local version of the Ancient outposts found on Taonas and beneath the ice of Antarctica, though this one was considerably larger—and on the planet's third moon. With Jack's help, he and the scientists began turning on and translating devices whose purpose had previously eluded the Maidierans.*

*Caught up in the excitement of the discovery, no one noticed the activities of the traitor in their midst until it was too late.*



## Chapter 7

Jack sat upright in bed, heart pounding with an unnamable fear. It wasn't as though he'd been having a nightmare, as his dreams had been of better times, before his own carelessness left a loaded gun where an eleven year-old boy could find it. That then reminded him that he needed to secure the weapons he kept in *this* house, even though inside that surprisingly small body of Daniel's was a forty year-old man who knew very well how to handle firearms properly.

Well, thirty-nine year-old man, actually, and thirty-eight if you didn't count the year he spent on a higher plane of existence. Then again, he was less than a month old if you started counting from his most-recent descension, and only days if you started with his down-sizing. As Jack's thoughts stilled, he heard a faint sound from down the hall.

Cursing and throwing back the covers, he leapt out of bed and threw open the guest room door. Dwarfed by the double bed, the little boy was thrashing back and forth under a tangled sheet, muttering in Ancient and soaked in sweat. Unsure whether the dream was the result of recent events on Madeira, an earlier memory, or something new entirely, Jack raised a hand to shake Daniel awake—

And promptly found himself lying against the chest of drawers near the door, staring at the ceiling and wondering how a thirty-five pound kid could toss him across the room. As soon as the shock wore

off, he was on his feet again, intending to lunge for the bed so he could pin the now-wildly thrashing Daniel and hopefully interrupt the nightmare's grip. Before he'd taken a step though, a flying book clipped him in the side of the head, and he had to duck to avoid another.

In any other situation, the realization that books were defending Daniel would have been hysterical, but as the chest of drawers began to rattle its way off the floor, Jack made the decision to use whatever means necessary to awaken the miniaturized and apparently telekinetic archaeologist.

"Daniel! Wake up, kid, wake *up!*" he shouted, diving under the dancing ring of books to scoop up the tiny, trembling body. He grasped him by the shoulders and gave him a slight shake before pulling him close and holding him tightly.

The strangled gasps abruptly stopped, and the flying objects fell to the carpet with muffled thumps. "Jack?"

"It's me, Daniel. You're safe." He began rubbing soothing circles on Daniel's back.

A small sob escaped. "I'm sorry."

"It was a nightmare, kiddo... you don't have to be sorry at all."

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner."

"Tell me what?"

"The Replicator that looked like Sam. What she did to me."

Jack froze. He'd suspected there was far more to Daniel's experience as a prisoner of the Replicators than the younger man-turned-boy had been telling, but so far there'd been no evidence, no sign that—

He berated himself for his stupidity. Of *course* something bad had happened. Human-form Replicators didn't just have friendly chats with their victims, after all, they preferred sticking their hands in people's heads and screwing with their minds. He and Sam had been joking all weekend about the down-sized Daniel being version 3.5, with an unspoken acknowledgement that version 3.0 had descended into Jack's office a week after his disappearance.

Descension, as far as he knew, *first* required death and ascension. Who was to say Daniel's death *hadn't* been the quiet and relatively painless result of the disruptor wave technology on Dakara destroying the ship aboard which he was captured, but something more sinister entirely?

"I'm listening," he said softly, and held Daniel even tighter to his chest.

Hesitantly at first but speaking more steadily with each sentence, the pint-sized linguist began to relate his experience aboard the Replicator ship, beginning from the moment he was captured. Though his voice was muffled by his face being pressed into Jack's t-shirt, the little guy didn't let up until he'd finished every last detail of his kidnapping and *murder* by the Replicator. By that time, Jack's shirt was soaked with tears and Daniel was seated in his lap, skinny arms wrapped around Jack's torso and holding on tightly.

"I'm sorry, too," Jack whispered when he was finished. "I'm sorry we didn't go looking for you when you were captured, didn't really think about how you got back to the SGC, and I'm really *really* sorry I left you alone on Maidiera's moon. You'd think I'd know better by now, huh?"

There was no reply. Jack looked down to see that Daniel had fallen asleep, though his grip on Jack's ribcage had loosened only slightly. At first he made to disentangle the down-sized archaeologist, but just as quickly decided against it. If Daniel had another nightmare tonight, Jack wanted to be right there to stop it before it got to the book-throwing stage again.

Oh, boy, and wouldn't *that* be an interesting conversation in the morning?

Twisting around so that he was lying against the pillows and Daniel was asleep atop his chest, Jack went to sleep stroking the fine strands of blond hair.



## Chapter 8

Daniel scrunched up his nose, wondering what in the world he could be smelling. While not particularly pleasant scents by themselves—sweat, body odor, and the faintest traces of fresh-cut wood—the combination of the three smelled...

"Well, I'm sure you don't smell much like a bed of roses yourself, squirt."

Daniel's eyes flew open in surprise, looking up the length of the body his face was pressed against to see the amused expression on Jack's face. "You smell safe," he blurted.

"Safe?"

"Um, yeah." Despite his embarrassment, he realized he still hadn't made any moves to roll away from Jack's side.

"Safe's a good smell, then. But I still could use a shower, and I think you need one, too."

"Bath," Daniel corrected automatically.

"Bath?"

"Yeah. I mean, I'm a kid right now... I should enjoy it while it lasts, right?"

Jack laughed, ruffling his hair affectionately. "Sure, kiddo." His cheerful expression fell away. "We need to talk about last night."

Daniel squirmed away and sat up. Unconsciously, he drew his knees up to his chest and hugged them. "I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"For having a nightmare and making you get out of bed and sleep in here all night."

Jack sat up and pushed back against the headboard. Then, to Daniel's utter surprise, he picked him up and put him on his lap. "First off," he began, "you had nightmares as a grown-up, too. I never had a problem coming to wake you up from those, either, and I still don't. Secondly, you didn't *make* me get out of bed. If I hadn't *wanted* to come down here and wake you up from your nightmare, I wouldn't have. And thirdly, I didn't *have* to sleep in here all night, I could probably have tucked you back under the covers and gone back to bed, but the thing I *really* wanted to talk about is why I stayed."

"What?"

Jack pointed, and Daniel followed his finger to see the emptied bookshelves, then the books strewn across the floor. "Huh?" he asked intelligently.

"Apparently version 3.5 comes with a few surprises."

Daniel frowned. "I was sleepwalking?"

"Nope." The finger moved on to point at the chest of drawers, sitting at an angle from the wall. "I think you're a bit scrawny to be moving *that* around while sleepwalking, and I *know* I didn't imagine all those books circling the wagons around their owner. Now, either they've suddenly developed the ability to fly or *you're* telekinetic."

"Telekinetic?" he repeated dumbly.

"Yep. Looks like some of Oma's tricks have rubbed off on you."

"Oma's gone."

"So you told me last night. I'm afraid the hardbound that beamed me upside the head last night was you."

"I'm sor—"

"Now, how can you be sorry for something you didn't even know you did? Unless you *meant* to wallop me with a book."

Daniel took a deep breath. "How could this happen? Do you think the machine did this?"

Jack shrugged. "For all I know, you could have come back with these abilities in version 3.0, just never had a witness to any of your nightmares."

"I haven't *had* any nightmares since I came back. Too many other things going on."

Jack sighed. "You mean you haven't been *sleeping*. You've always had nightmares."

He was right, Daniel realized. Except for the amount of time he's spent... well, *dead*, and then the full day he was unconscious in the infirmary, he'd not slept more than an hour at a time since his descension, even while at Jack's house. "No wonder I was so tired."

"Uh-huh. Unfortunately, this now means you and I have to shower and head back to base. Doctor Lam would kick both our tails if I don't report the flying book incident. She'll probably have to put you through some more tests, though."

Daniel nodded, clutching Jack's t-shirt in a hand that looked too-small even to him. "You'll stay with me?"

"You betcha. George is covering for me until we get you settled in, so I don't plan on going anywhere near that comfy chair in the general's office until my leave's up."

Feeling an intense gratitude which threatened to turn into tears, Daniel nodded again. "I hate being this... this..."

"Vulnerable?"

"I was going to say 'clingy', but that works."

"You're a *kid*, Daniel. Grown-up memories or not, you *look* like a kid and your brain's been rewired to *think* like a kid. To be honest, I don't how the adult version of you could always be so closed off all the time. For a guy who was great at getting other people to talk about their emotions, you're a tough nut to crack when it comes to your own."

"Not anymore. One nightmare and I turn into a sobbing wreck."

"Yeah, but you're *my* sobbing wreck," Jack chuckled, tousling his hair and causing Daniel to wiggle off his lap to get away from him. "Now, what say you and I put these books back where they belong? Unless you can put them back the same way you got them down, that is."

Daniel stared hard at one of the books on the floor, but nothing happened, not even a twitch of a page. "I guess not," he answered, simultaneously disappointed and relieved.

"Oh, well. Guess we do it the old fashioned way, huh?" Swinging his feet to the floor, Jack yawned and stretched. "Books, shower, breakfast, then the mountain. What do you think we should do the rest of the afternoon, kiddo?"

He swung his own feet over the edge of the bed, dismayed to see that his toes came nowhere near the floor. "Maybe I can work on some stuff in my office while you meet Sara for coffee?"

Jack paused mid-stretch and stared at him. After a second, he shrugged. "Maybe. But since I *know* I didn't tell you that, the list of new and improved features for version 3.5 is *definitely* going to include telepathy."



## Chapter 9

"Well, there's definitely some heightened activity in areas of the brain normally dormant," Doctor Lam began, clutching her clipboard to her chest.

Jack's eyebrows rose. "So is that the *cause* of the possessed toy brigade or a symptom of it?"

Daniel thumped him on the arm. "They were books, not toys."

"Whatever. Cause or symptom?"

The new base CMO frowned. "Both and neither... more like an indication of the changes that are occurring in his brain. Now while I can't say for certain what the cause of the increased brain activity is, it appears to be manifesting itself as the witnessed telepathic and telekinetic episodes."

"Episodes," Jack repeated, half to himself. Daniel hadn't been able to repeat the levitating book trick, and had scored only average on the telepathy card game Lam insisted they try. "So what triggers these 'episodes'?"

Lam gave him a look that reminded him of the stern glares Fraiser used to level at him. It worked almost as well for *this* tiny doctor as it had her predecessor, leaving Jack in fear of sharp, pointy needles in his near future. "Well, if I had to *guess*, General, I'd say it was caused by emotional stress."

"The nightmare," Daniel suggested.

"Quite likely. My first suggestion is therapy—"

"No," the stubborn archaeologist vetoed immediately. "Find me a psychiatrist who has experience helping people cope with their own murder and I'll happily talk to him."

The diminutive Doctor Lam tried the glare on Daniel, but since he'd never been affected by even Fraiser's efforts, he wasn't fazed in the slightest. "I was *going* to say, that while my first suggestion would normally be therapy, that isn't the case with your... history."

"You mean the fact that the last time a psychiatrist got his hands on him, he nearly wound up a permanent guest of the happy house?" Jack joked lightly. "But seriously, Doc, I think telling me about it last night probably helped. I think it'd help even more if he talked to Sam, since it was *her* face the Replicator wore."

"And her memories, too," Daniel shuddered. "But as Jack pointed out this morning, I've *always* had nightmares, ever since I was a little kid the first time. We got lucky last night, what if I hurt someone the next time I have a bad dream?"

"Actually, Doc, that's not a bad idea."

She looked confused. "What's not?"

The general gave Daniel a long look, then turned back to the doctor. "Getting Daniel a therapist."

"Jack..."

"Daniel, getting your emotions under control has *got* to be one of our top priorities," he replied. "Last night's little humdinger was because you didn't tell anyone what happened to you when you were an adult, and I know there are a lot more bad dreams where that one came from. But I hesitate to get you to start pouring your heart out to a shrink if you're going to send all his books flying the first time things get... rough." The down-sized archaeologist stared down at his hands, not even denying the charge.

Lam sighed and tucked a strand of dark hair behind one ear. "Well, if I knew anyone who specialized in the training of paranormal abilities, I'd recommend him. The point is, this is an *entirely* new area for me, for pretty much anyone."

"Not entirely," Jack corrected. "There's Nirrti's freak show, but they're all back to normal, now, and blew up all the toys when they were finished. Oh, and let's not forget Daniel's buddies, the Ancients."

"Oh, *let's* forget the Ancients," Daniel retorted.

"They've always been so helpful, you know."

"Smartass," Jack grinned.

"Takes one to know one." Interesting, wasn't it, how quickly he bounced back from being upset?

"Cassandra Fraiser?" Lam suggested.

"Nerdy fixed her back to normal," the general replied. "Besides, her stuff was magnets, not telekinesis."

"Electromagnetism," Daniel corrected.

"I was close."

"Close! only counts in horseshoes and hand grenades."

"That's *my* line!"

"Not any more," the little imp smirked.

He *really* had to give Lam credit for patience, since Janet would already have made them both shut up. Then again, she was still new to the base and thus had never experienced a full-blown "O'Neill-Jacksonism", as he'd once heard a nurse describe it.

"General," Lam finally interrupted, "weren't there telekinetic aliens who could also render people and objects invisible?"

If he hadn't been friends with her Air Force General father, he might've kissed her. "The Nox!"



Daniel frowned. "We lost our line of communication to the Nox when the Goa'uld destroyed Tollana."

Jack waved his hand dismissively. "So we get the Asgard to send 'em a message, since they used to be allies, right? Or we could take the *Prometheus* there ourselves 'cause we still have the 'Gate coordinates."

The pint-sized linguist nodded hesitantly. "If the Nox are willing to help—"

Jack rolled his eyes. "Daniel, you had Lya wrapped around your finger as a grown-up. She'll probably find you *completely* irresistible as a squirt."



## Chapter 10

"Jack, it's your office... you don't have to knock to come in."

Jack grinned at the bald-headed general. "Old habits die hard when I see you sitting at the desk, Gen—George. Actually, I much prefer to be on *this* side of the desk, with you on *that* side."

George Hammond chuckled. "You *do* know I'm thinking of retiring and handing the Homeworld Security office to you?"

"What are you trying to do, kill me? As though pushing papers around *here's* not bad enough, you want to stick me with the bean counters in Washington?"

"There's no one better for the job, Jack," Hammond reminded him, "especially now that you have Doctor Jackson to look after. How's our boy doing?"

Jack scrubbed his hand through his hair and slumped in the nearest chair. "That nightmare last night gave us both a good scare, and I as much as I hate clichés, I think it's only the tip of the iceberg. Daniel's had some pretty bad crap handed to him over the years, and some of the worst of it has been in the last *month*. We'll eventually get it written into a report, but did you know that the Replicator killed him *before* the disruptor wave wrecked her ship?"

Hammond's expression changed very little, but there was a slight tightening of his jaw. "I assume that's what last night's incident was about?"

"Yeah. The little guy insisted on talking it over with Carter, since the blasted thing looked like her, so I dropped him off at her lab on my way down. The line wasn't secure this morning, so I couldn't tell you over the phone that the *real* reason I took him to Doc Lam was 'cause we had a little flying book incident. Daniel's apparently telekinetic—"

"Good Lord—"

"—and maybe just a *slight* bit telepathic."

"My goodness, Jack! What did Doctor Lam say?"

Jack shrugged. "I'm sure the files will be on your—er, my... *the* desk within the hour. The gist of it is, Daniel's scans are showing extra activity in the noggin, but he wasn't able to make anything move with just his mind. Scored average on the 'what card am I holding' test, too." He quickly explained the paranormal activities of the previous night and that morning, then their suspicions about stress being the trigger.

"None of us can say for sure if he gained these abilities with version 3.0 or 3.5, but unless he gets some control over them, nightmares are going to be interesting adventures for a while," he finished. "I never thought I'd *hope* there was a ghost in my house, but spooks were pretty well ruled out when the books stopped flying when he woke up. Daniel and I are hoping the Nox will be able to help him with both his abilities *and* his emotions. I gave Walter a message for Thor to pass along."

Hammond looked stunned. "Should he stay on-base until then? If he has no conscious control—"

He grimaced and twiddled his thumbs absent-mindedly. "I'd rather he didn't. The reason I insisted Daniel come live with me in the first place is that he *is* a kid. Now, he may have a grown-up's memories and experiences, but he's a lot more... open. He needs sunshine and fresh air and somebody to tell him he doesn't have to be so serious all the time."

"Other than his size, he seems normal enough to me," Hammond began.

"That's because he's a little scared of showing people he's not still the same." He took a deep breath. "That machine took away more than just his physical age, George, it stripped him down to a much younger *emotional* age. Big Daniel wasn't big on touching people. Little Daniel likes hugs. He also used to be pretty particular about choosing clothes and such in neutral colors, but now he likes bright, happy colors. Big Daniel read the Sunday newspaper during *The Simpsons*, Little Daniel fights me for the funnies and laughs at Bart and Homer."

"Jack, I don't quite know what to say," Hammond admitted. "Doc—Daniel's always been so private, it's hard to imagine him so... child-like, is the only word I can think of."

Jack sighed. "Yeah. It's taking quite a bit of getting used to for both of us."

Hammond nodded. "I understand the two of you got a visit from a state social worker yesterday. Now, I had Colonel Carter drop a few hints when she took the paperwork in Friday that the whole process needs to go as fast and smoothly as possible, and that we'd be willing to take the case to higher authorities if necessary."

"I don't think that'll be a problem," Jack smiled. "At least not from Daniel's new social worker: Sara Basham O'Neill."

"Your ex-wife?"

"Got it in one. I think the Jackson charm's pretty well got her won-over, and I know the little imp's positively delighted she's got his case. He practically *ordered* me to ask her out for coffee."

There was a knock at the door, and Sergeant Harriman leaned into the room. "Sirs, Thor relayed our message but has yet to receive a reply from the Nox. He broke orbit of Maidiera just a few minutes ago to travel to the Nox homeworld to find out what's happened."

"How long 'til we hear back?" Hammond asked.

"He said he'll be there in just under three hours."

"Thank you, Walter," Jack dismissed, turning back to the other general. "In the meantime, I have a phone call to make."

Hammond glanced at the clock on the wall. "If you make it fast, son, you may be able to invite the social worker to lunch."

Jack grinned. "Excellent strategy, sir."



## Chapter 11

*The research station was enough to send Carter into the throes of scientific ecstasy. Discovered within the last fifty years, the Maidieran understanding of the many technologies within the Ancient outpost was severely limited by their inability to read the language or manipulate any of the genetically-linked devices. Maidieran technology had developed almost entirely independent of Ancient influence, so there were a few challenges to overcome when it came to interfacing their computers. Naturally, they'd begun their efforts in the largest facility within the station, which was the containment laboratory where ZPMs were charged.*

*The earlier boast that ZPMs could be produced easily had been a bit of an exaggeration, as the entire process required a careful network of Maidieran computers interlinked between the containment chamber itself and the Ancient control consoles which operated the laboratory. Because of the lag in information caused by the processing of raw data and reinterpretation into figures they could understand, the researchers in charge of the station had placed a 'better safe than sorry' restriction on the amount of energy which could be drawn at a time, taking several weeks to charge a single module.*

*To Carter's rather vocal expression of amazement, the Maidierans had actually been toying with various theories and experiments on zero point energy for a decade before the outpost was discovered on the tertiary moon. Their intuitive brilliance enabled them to determine what the purpose of the chamber and partially charged module inside had been even without a clear understanding of the information being displayed on the monitors in the lab, but it had taken several years to develop computers which could communicate with the consoles.*

The fact that not only had they been able to determine the lab's purpose but also make the technology work without an understanding of the language was simply astounding. As Jack put it, they were way smarter than the people from Earth were. Carter was having almost as many fits trying to understand Maidieran physics as she had with the Tollan. Unlike the Tollan, however, these people were as eager to share their knowledge as the two scientists on SG-1 were to learn it.

For the first few days, Daniel grumbled good-naturedly about feeling like a walking Ancient-English-Maidieran dictionary, to which Jack always responded that he was a walking battery: just plug him into the device, light it up, switch it off, and move on to the next. Teal'c decided that his contributions to the efforts would be minimal and requested permission to travel to Dakara to help his fellow Jaffa with the construction of their new government.

The single greatest challenge in helping the Maidierans translate the computer interfaces lay in Daniel's limited technical expertise. Fortunately, the Old Tongue and Ancient were not so greatly diverged that the scientists couldn't help Carter and Daniel make educated guesses at the meaning of a word or phrase. Ancient terminology was also very straight-forward or literal, such as *astria porta*, which directly translated to "star gate", or Jack's personal favorite, the small, hand-held *dentemondo*, or "dental cleaner" which was essentially a battery-powered toothbrush.

Then there was the machine in another lab which Jack immediately called an "Ancient tanning bed" for its clam-shell construction. Upon discovering the experiment log within the database referenced it as a *renovus cucicum*, Daniel immediately forbade anyone to touch it. The name translated indirectly as a "chamber or bed of reviving or repair", and he speculated it was one of the first steps between the *Tel'chak* device used to reanimate dead tissue and the *Goa'uld sarcophagus*. While the notes indicated the machine was inoperable, it saw use in only a few short days.

"Have I mentioned I always liked your hair long?"

Sara smiled, resisting the urge to finger the locks kept blond by the magic of Revlon. "Only twice since we sat down."

"Right. Well, I do, you know."

"Charmer. So how'd you find someone to watch Daniel so quickly?"

Jack grinned back at her, looking for all the world like a Cheshire cat. "Would you believe the little guy practically *ordered* me to call you this morning? Told me he'd be *just* fine spending the day with Sam since he wanted to talk to her about Big Daniel."

"Sam? Daniel mentioned her yesterday, along with somebody named Murray."

"Colonel Carter, his—or rather Big Daniel's team leader and intellectual twin." He shook his head. "Those two have been known—*were* known to drive me absolutely nuts with their high-speed geek conversations. Murray is a really *really* big guy who took Big Daniel's safety seriously, and has now sworn to protect Little Daniel. His name's not *actually* Murray, but it's a lot easier to say than his real name, so we call him that or 'T'."

"Foreign?" Sara asked, dipping a few fries into her ketchup.

"Yeah, definitely not from around here," Jack nodded.

She swallowed her mouthful. "Okay, I got it now. Sam's a blonde, Murray's a big black guy, and Daniel wore glasses?"

Jack hooked-guppy expression was remarkably reminiscent of the look on his face when he first opened his front door the day before. "How... oh, right... I had pictures of them at my house."

She shrugged. "That *and* I remember them from the hospital."

"Hospital?"

"The hospital where I apparently hallucinated them, two different versions of you, and an imaginary kid who looked an *awful* lot like Charlie," she replied, nibbling on another fry.

Now he looked like somebody kicked him. "Oh. That."

"Yeah. That." Sara let him squirm a few seconds longer before adding, "I don't expect any answers, Jack, especially not after all this time. That was over eight years ago, you know."

"Yeah," he agreed. "To paraphrase a good friend of mine, 'that was a lot of brown hair ago'. But... uh... you know, you're right about which ones they are. Were. Whatever."

"So that was Sam who met the two of you at the mall?"

"You saw *that* too?"

"Of course, Jack, I was secretly stalking you," she teased.

He lightly smacked his cheek with one hand before using the open palm to prop his chin up on the table. The effect was of comical bewilderment, and she found herself smiling. "Dang, the kids were teasing me about being out of shape just a few weeks ago... now you're telling me all my spec-ops honed senses have gone to pot?"

Her sarcastic reply was cut short by the sudden ring of a cell phone. Jack had just taken another bite of his sandwich, so he peered at the number on the face as he chewed, swallowed hard, and answered the call with a food-muffled "O'Neill".

Sara couldn't hear the other side of the conversation, but it was not a call her ex-husband had been expecting. "Already?" he gaped. "No, no, I'm still at lunch. Yeah. Really? Crap, I'll head back right away. Don't tell Daniel."

"Duty calls?" she sighed when he hung up.

"Emergency back at the base," Jack confirmed, digging for his wallet and dropping enough bills on the table to cover their meal and a generous tip. As he shrugged into his jacket, he asked, "Can we do this again? Soon?"

She nodded absently. "Sure, Jack. Just give me a call."

With a puff of cold air from the front door, he was gone from the deli, backing his truck out of the parking lot so quickly his tires barked on the pavement. Appetite gone, Sara wadded up her napkin and threw it on the table, reaching for her coat and purse. Enjoyable and enlightening as the lunch had been with regard to his former teammates, it only served to remind her that Jack O'Neill lived two lives, and his personal life always took a back seat to his military secrets.

"Don't tell Daniel," he'd said before he hung up, and she felt the illusion she'd created about Jack and Daniel's new life together fade away like wisps of smoke.

With that many secrets, what sort of life could Jack give the boy?



## Chapter 12

There was something afoot on-base, and Daniel wanted to know what. When he'd finished his confession to Sam about her evil duplicate's actions, the pair had hugged each other tightly until he'd squeaked. For a moment, they'd both forgotten he wasn't stronger than her anymore, and broke away in surprise. Then they shared a laugh about it until the phone rang.

Her smile was gone when she hung up the phone. "Nothing, Daniel, just an update on something offworld," she hedged when he asked her about the call.

And people thought *he* was a lousy liar. Instead of pressing the issue, though, he changed the topic, asking her about the data packet sent back from Atlantis when they'd dialed in with the Maidieran ZPM to report the successful repulsion of the Wraith attack. The lively discussion which followed reminded him of some of his and Sam's earliest brainstorming, and he completely forgot about the phone call for nearly half an hour.

Blame it on his newly-shortened attention span, but Daniel got bored of the conversation long before he would have as an adult. Looking around the room to find something else to do, he caught sight of the phone and remembered the reason he'd switched topics in the first place. He felt a brief pang of guilt as he deliberately distracted Sam with a question about Atlantis' defense shields, then slipped out the lab door while she searched through the data packet to find the answer.

Moving as quickly and quietly as his little legs would carry him, he headed to the elevator. Earlier, he'd picked up his access card from the belongings left in the care of the infirmary after his down-sizing, and if he stood on the tips of his toes, he could swipe the card through the reader on the elevator. The doors opened on an empty lift, so he stepped inside and pushed the button for the twenty-seventh floor.

The sergeant waiting for the elevator on that level looked surprised to see a kid exiting the compartment, so Daniel grinned and waved. "Hi, Siler! Just going to ask Hammond if Jack's gotten back to base yet," he offered casually, walking down the corridor like he belonged there.

Which, of course, he *did*, and he defied anyone to tell him otherwise.

Jack's office was empty of either general and so was the briefing room. Passing the big table, he made his way to the staircase down to the Control Room and was surprised by the rapid activity taking place in it and the 'Gate room just beyond the window.

"Daniel!" a voice exclaimed, and he looked up to see Jack striding across the room toward him. "How did you get down here?"

"I took the elevator," he answered matter-of-factly.

"I meant *why* are you down here? Carter was supposed to—"

"General O'Neill!" Sergeant Harriman interrupted. "Colonel Carter says—oh, wait." He turned back to the phone in his hand. "He's down here, ma'am."

"Sam was supposed to keep me in her office?" Daniel asked. "What's going on that you don't want me to know about?"

Just then, Hammond came up the stairs, in deep discussion with the trailing Colonel Reynolds. Daniel didn't hear all that was said, as the last word he heard was "Replicators".

For a moment, Daniel was standing once again in that weird amalgamation the Replicator version of Sam had created of his homes on Vis Uban and Abydos. He was powerful, in control, and could feel every one of the trillions of mechanical demons straining against his command to do that which they'd been programmed: feed, learn, multiply, spread. They were not normally driven by a singular conscience, but by a common purpose, and that had made his struggle to keep them immobilized all the greater.

Their mistress had sent her minions in spider-shaped ships to advanced worlds her template had known unreachable by Stargate: the ruins of Tollana, Harlan's factory, Euronda, Bedrosia and Optrica, Hebridan, the Gadmeer's new planet... and the Nox homeworld. Because she was modeled after Sam in memory and emotion, the Replicator shared Sam's frustration with the incredible, almost magical powers of the Nox.

If Sam found anything unexplainable by science to be annoying, then the evil android found it intolerable. And anything which she couldn't possess or understand, she destroyed.

Like Daniel.

"Come on, Danny! Talk to me, kiddo. Please."

Daniel was startled from the memory, blinking through unwelcome tears to find himself back at the SGC. Jack had dropped to one knee in front of him, carefully cupping his hands on Daniel's lower jaw and cheeks, thumbs tenderly stroking those treacherous tears away. The look in his eyes was of deep concern, bordering on fear. Daniel wondered briefly what brave, stubborn Jack was so afraid of, then realized the fear was for him. Jack was afraid *for* him.

"Thor can use the disruptor technology on his ship to destroy the Replicators," he blurted.

"Daniel?"

"The Replicators on the Nox world. The total knowledge the Replicators possess is limited by their numbers, and the ones on the Nox world are among only a few thousand in this galaxy *not* destroyed when the rest of them were. They don't have the knowledge to combat the disruptor technology any more, so Thor can destroy them to save the Nox."

Jack's eyes were wide with surprise. "How did you—"

"I remember, Jack. I remember being in control of them, trying to get them all to just *stop*, but it was like... trying to fight a forest fire with a garden hose: it works for a short time, but soon there's just too much and the smoke... I remember..."

"Do you know why these weren't destroyed when the others were?" General Hammond asked, leaning over Jack's shoulder to look down at him concernedly.

Daniel choked on the moisture running down his cheeks and wrapped his arms around himself to try to stop the shaking of his body. "The Nox 'Gate was buried. They dug it up to rescue the Tollan from Maybourne, but when Lya came to Skaara's Triad, she arrived in a Tollan ship."

"So... no 'Gate, no Destructo-Wave from Dakara," Jack summarized. "Walter, get Thor back on the line and tell him to just use the disruptor on the bugs. Then he can find out what happened to the Nox."

"You're sure that will work?" one of the scientists in the room blurted.

"Of *course* it will," Jack answered, turning to pin the scientist with a glare. "Daniel said it would, didn't he?" Suddenly, he rose to his feet, but before Daniel could mourn the loss of the comforting touch, he was scooped into Jack's arms and cradled against his body.

Daniel should have been embarrassed that he was being carried out of the Control Room by his best friend and commanding officer in full view of the assembled scientists and soldiers, but it felt surprisingly *good* instead. Of their own volition, his arms crept around Jack's neck and held on tightly.

A quiet "it's all right, kiddo" was murmured into his ear, and the arms wrapped around him gave a little squeeze. Then the voices and sounds of the SGC were miles away, because Daniel's face was pressed against Jack's collar, and Jack still smelled safe.



## Chapter 13

Teal'c was surprised to find the VIP quarters so quiet and spartan, but when O'Neill looked up from the paperwork spread across the suite's small dining table to make a shushing gesture, he immediately understood the reason for the silence. Looking tiny against the size of the bed was a bump in the covers, golden hair just barely visible over the top of the navy bedspread. Over the gentle rumble of the SGC's environmental systems, he could hear the soft exhalations of the soundly sleeping child.

"I came as quickly as I could, O'Neill," he began quietly, crossing the room to stand beside his white-haired friend.

O'Neill put his ink pen down and rubbed his eyes. "I know you did, T. Did Hammond tell you why you were called?"

"He said only that there had been some change with Daniel Jackson. I believed some ill had befallen him, but General Hammond assured me that was not the case."

"No, nothing *really* bad has happened to him this time... he's only re-lived some pretty terrible things."

"Maidiera," Teal'c guessed.

"No, we haven't gotten to *that* nightmare yet. I'm afraid this has to do with his capture by the Replicators."

"I was informed the Nox had been attacked. Did this trigger—"

"Actually, that was *before* we found out about the Nox. The reason we asked Thor to contact them was 'cause Daniel's developed some unusual abilities and can't control them."

Teal'c cocked his head to one side. "Abilities?"

"Yeah," O'Neill sighed. "Telekinesis and a little telepathy. He had a nightmare last night about the Replicators and books started flying around the room. This morning, he told me to meet my ex-wife for coffee, which is something he couldn't *possibly* have overheard us talking about since Sara and I were outside in the driveway and he was in his room."

"You are seeing your wife again?"

"Well, sorta. She's Danny's social worker."

"I see," Teal'c acknowledged, though he still had only a basic understanding of the Tau'ri rules for adoption. On Chulak, if a child was in need of a home, he was immediately taken in by a family which desired to do so or raised by the temple.

"Anyway, once we realized he had no control over his, uh, talents, Doc Lam suggested we contact the Nox. Thor did the honors for us but didn't get a response. He went to their planet to find out why and found the place crawling with bugs."

"I was told Thor was able to destroy the Replicators using the disruptor technology you created."

"Yes, but only after Daniel freaked out in the Control Room and remembered some vital information about the bugs."

O'Neill had this terrible tendency to make one pull proverbial teeth to get any details from him. "Freaked out'?" he repeated, wishing the general would simply *tell* the story instead of making it a guessing game.

"Yeah. It might have been another use of his new abilities or he might've overheard something in the Control Room. You know how he puts two and two together and gets seventeen anyhow, so it might've just been one of his big leaps. Either way, he remembered that the little buggers can hold only so much information. By destroying nearly all of them in this galaxy, we crippled their little collective

and made 'em vulnerable to the weapon again. So Thor blew 'em all up, and now the Nox are rebuilding."

"That is good to hear. Were the Nox casualties great?"

"Well, since they never attacked the bugs, none of them were hurt, but *that* was apparently a close thing." He smirked. "One of their Elders said the younger ones were about to go on the offensive just before Thor blew them all to Kingdom Come. Can you imagine a Nox fighting back?"

The gentle, sweet-natured Nox were probably the most peace-loving beings Teal'c had ever met, but he found it no challenge to envision one of their people doing battle with evil. After all, the gentlest, most peace-loving human Teal'c had ever met was once quite formidable in combat. Now, of course, he was the size of a small child.

"Have they agreed to assist Daniel Jackson?"

O'Neill slumped in his chair. "Yeah, but it will be a few days before they can spare anyone. In the meantime, I'll be watching a telekinetic, telepathic, pint-sized doctor of multiple-ologies who suffers from violent nightmares and can't control his *emotions* let alone his abilities. Poor little guy fell apart in the Control Room when he remembered the Replicators, so I brought him down here and let him cry himself to sleep. I also had Siler's team clear the room of pretty much anything Daniel's mind could pick up and throw."

Teal'c felt the sudden need to sit down, and quickly claimed the table's other chair. "I presume, then, that neither Thor nor the Maidierans have been able to make progress with the machine."

"Nope. Thor's pretty well convinced it never worked right in the first place, and whichever Ancient scientist wrote the log entry on the thing was lying to cover his own sweet self. Since the Ancients were even more advanced than the Asgard, probably the only way we'll have of fixing that machine or reversing what it did is finding the idiot who built it and kicking his glowy butt. Assuming he's one of 'em who Ascended, anyway."

The bump on the bed stirred. "You should call Sara, Jack."

O'Neill leapt to his feet and crossed the room to the boy's side. "Did that this morning, Danny, just like you asked me to."

"Yeah, but now she's upset with you 'cause you took off in the middle of lunch." The general's jaw dropped, but before he could formulate a reply, Daniel Jackson burrowed back under the covers and resumed his slumber.

"Oooo-kay," O'Neill began, exhaling heavily. "Telepathic incident number two—or maybe it's number three."

"You were thinking of calling your wife?"

"Well, I am *now*. It's just that the only thing I told him I was going to do this morning was meet Sara for coffee. Lunch was a spur-of-the-moment thing, and I *know* I didn't tell him Hammond called me halfway through to tell me about the Replicators. In fact, I insisted no one tell Daniel I was back, since he'd ask why, and I wasn't sure how he'd react to the bugs so soon after his nightmare. Stubborn as he is, Danny distracted Carter, gave her the slip, and was down in the Control Room before she knew he was gone. She feels like crap about it, too, especially since he'd just told her what her evil twin did to him."

Teal'c sighed inwardly, certain O'Neill was dragging out his explanations deliberately. "What transpired?"

"Remember the liquid guy from *Terminator 2*?"

"Indeed."

"Sword-thing right through the chest."

The Jaffa winced sympathetically. "Has he not experienced nightmares of this event before now?"

O'Neill shrugged. "He said he hadn't been sleeping much since he descended again, so there's no way to know if the machine caused his current wackiness or not. It's probably *safer* to keep him on



base where he can't throw too many things around, but I want to take him back home where he'll be more comfortable. What do you think I should do?"

Teal'c raised an eyebrow. "Whatever you believe is best for Daniel Jackson, of course. Firstly, I believe you should do as he asks: call Sara O'Neill."



## Chapter 14

*Progress on the Ancient research station proceeded well. Besides the sarcophagus-like device which had apparently once worked but inexplicably broke, the scientists discovered several other experiments and inventions left in various states of completion or disrepair. Daniel was now working continuously with the Maidieran linguist assigned to the station, a small man with a keen mind who was eager to learn the Ancient language and how the Old Tongue had varied from it. SG-1, like a few of the scientists stationed there, had requested and been given quarters within the underground complex so Daniel and Carter could work continuously without returning to the planet every day. Carter's military demeanor had been cast aside for her techno-geek alter-ego, so it was an exasperated Jack who rounded up his 'kids' each evening so they would actually get some sleep.*

*Now in their fourth day with the Maidierans, Jack actually welcomed the interruption when General Hammond—left in charge of the SGC in Jack's absence—requested the younger general return to Earth for an important meeting with Pentagon officials. He wasn't particularly excited about going from a boring geek-fest to a mind-numbing bureaucratic, bull-puckey convention, but it was a change of pace. Telling his former teammates to "have fun" and mind their curfews while he was gone, he left with the courier and returned to Pravestia and the SGC.*

*The higher-ups in the military and members of the international committee had decided that things were going so well with the Maidierans that they were ready to begin negotiating a formal alliance treaty. Although the politically-minded diplomats danced around the issue, it was obvious the exchange which formed a central part of the agreement was for a dozen Maidieran scientists to join the Atlantis expedition in the Pegasus Galaxy. In exchange, the committee offered the gene therapy treatment devised by the expedition's Doctor Beckett, as well as full-partnership in any of the discoveries made at Atlantis.*

*Accompanied by Teal'c, the appointed ambassador to Maidiera, and the rest of the diplomatic delegation, Jack crossed back through the wormhole later that evening to find their soon-to-be allies in a frenzied panic. Just minutes before the SGC's return, the lone transport remaining at the Ancient facility took off from the tertiary moon for deep space. When no response was received from their hails, fighters scrambled from the defense outpost on the primary moon to intercept. Before they could get close enough to disable the transport, a Goa'uld ha'tak appeared from the sensor-shadow of the system's largest gas giant and the shuttle disappeared into the ship's cargo bay. Mothership and transport immediately disappeared into hyperspace.*

*Jack's internal alarm that told him when one of his team was in trouble was screaming like a banshee. When the Maidierans prepared their fastest ship to return to the Ancient outpost and determine why the facility was no longer responding to communications, Jack and Teal'c were aboard.*

"Don't tell Daniel.' Maybe it had to do with the kid's Christmas present."

Sara rolled her eyes. "Sure, Jean, except for the fact that Jack admitted there was an 'emergency back at the base'. The thing is, I was just getting used to the idea of him looking after that little boy by himself. Jack was very tactile with Charlie, giving him hugs and picking him up and such, but always very respectful of his distance with other kids, no matter how well they liked him. He seems to give Daniel every bit of attention and affection he ever gave our own son, but then he goes and pulls another of his spec-ops military stunts and rides off into the sunset." She sighed. "Good grief, I can't believe I'm telling you about one of my cases."

"You're telling me as a friend and Jack's ex-wife, so it's all right," the matronly schoolteacher answered, never taking her eyes or smile off the Tuesday evening shoppers. She had been Charlie's

sixth grade English teacher, and the two women had become close after he died. "Now, he *is* a general, so I'm sure it was important."

"I'm sure it was, too, but he can't keep leaving the boy in care of one of his subordinates while he goes and does whatever the heck it is they do under that mountain. I don't believe for a *moment* it's not dangerous, especially when the whole reason that kid's an orphan now is because his dad—a *civilian*, I might add—went missing and was later declared dead. Oh, and let's not forget that evacuation scare last month, or the chemical spill incident almost two years ago."

Jean shook her head. "Us military wives know the score, Roy... need-to-know."

"Yes, well as Daniel's social worker, I need to know if Jack's actually going to be there for that little boy or not," Sara retorted, then quickly changed her scowl into a smile as a young lady approached the booth.

"Which one of you is Sara O'Neill?" the nervous young woman asked, relaxing once Sara waved her hand. "I'm with the mall information office, there's a call for you from your husband."

"Ex-husband," Sara responded.

Jean made a great show of looking at her watch. "Oh, my, would you look at the time? Go ahead and take your break, dear, I've got you covered."

"Traitor," she muttered as she stood. Once inside the mall office, the employee showed Sara into a small, plain room and indicated the phone resting atop a table tucked between the two upholstered chairs.

"I'll transfer the call in here, ma'am," she smiled, and vanished.

A tone sounded within seconds, and she snatched up the handset. "This is Sara."

"Sara!" Jack exclaimed over the phone. "Hey, I tried you at the office, but a Miss Montgomery told me you were working Angel Tree stuff on Tuesday and Thursday evenings."

"Friday and Saturday mornings too, Jack, but you could have called my cell phone."

"I *tried* your cell phone, but it went straight to voice mail. Listen, I'm sorry about taking off so quickly at lunch. Can I make it up to you tomorrow?"

Well, *this* was new. Jack had never apologized for being called away to duty in fifteen years of marriage. "That depends on whether you find someone to watch Daniel or not."

"Nope, I'll bring the little guy with me. Remember how you and I took Charlie to the arena to teach him how to skate?"

"Of course I do." Then she started. "Wait a minute, you want me to help you teach Daniel to skate?"

He laughed. "Yeah, I figure the little guy could do with something fun to take his mind off... other stuff. So what say you? You're the one who knows all the fancy little twirls and stuff, I only know how to stop, go, and pass a puck."

"I haven't skated in nine years," she answered. "And what's with this 'other stuff'?"

"Oh, yeah. That."

"Jack," she warned, "don't lie to me if there's something I should know... both as Daniel's social worker *and* as someone who cares about him."

He sighed heavily. "Danny had a really bad nightmare last night and scared the crap out of both of us. I can't really go into details because... it had something to do with what his dad used to do. We've asked for someone who can help him, but due to the nature of the project's classification, we have to get a specialist with the right clearance. That's going to take a few days to get that person in, so he's feeling a little... um, vulnerable... especially after having had a—daymare?—today."

"You're telling me a five year-old boy knows about the secret things you people do under NORAD's noses?"

"Uh, well the project's how Big Daniel met Sha're—"

"Who?"

"Sherry. That's the Americanized version of her name, but Daniel's wife's name was Sha're. Anyway, you can say the project's how Little Daniel came to be." He sounded terribly pleased with himself for some reason. "That's the truth, Sara, I swear. So, you gonna come with us? Please?"

Sara never could resist Jack when he begged, and while she was sure she wasn't getting the *whole* story, she was reasonably certain he was being honest. "On one condition."

"Name it. If it is in my power to grant, that is."

Well, that ruled out asking him what the important project was. "Before you hung up this morning, you told the person on the other end 'don't tell Daniel'. If you're deliberately keeping secrets from that boy, I want to know... so what was that about?"

"Oh. Well, I didn't want them to tell Daniel I was cutting short my lunch with you to deal with an off—uh, offsite emergency. He's the one who made me call you, after all. Actually, he found out anyway and made me call to apologize, so here I am. Skating was my idea."

"Hmm," she replied, non-committal. It seemed Little Daniel well and truly had Jack wrapped around his tiny fingers after all.

"Sara..." Jack whined at the silence.

She laughed. "Sure, Jack. But there'd better be hot chocolate."



## Chapter 15

"Jack, are you sure this is a good idea?" General Hammond asked.

"Other than rattling the table lamp a little before I woke him, we didn't have any incidents last night," the younger general answered. "Well, there *was* that slight little bit of mind-reading he did when Teal'c came to visit. He's still a little underweight, but at least he's eating well and *finally* sleeping. A lot. These psychic power incidents seem to wear him out, but I think the exercise will be good for him."

"Yes, Jack, but how is Doctor Jackson doing *mentally*? In all these years, I've never seen him as shaken as he was yesterday."

Jack grimaced. "Well, he's a little kid—mentally and physically both—and I think he's becoming a little more child-like every day. One minute, he might be bouncing off the walls and happy as a clam, but then something scares him and he's suddenly flattened against the wall or wrapped around me and sobbing his eyes out. A few minutes later and he's bouncing off the walls again. In an adult, we'd probably call it bi-polar or something, but I remember Charlie used to do the same thing. He'd be playing baseball and having a great time, then fall down and skin his knee or whatever. All I had to do was make him smile or laugh just once and it was like he'd never tripped at all."

Hammond nodded, having been a parent—and now a grandparent—himself. "Children recover from their 'hurts' more quickly."

"Yeah, only his 'hurts' are a big person's, not a kid's. It's like I told you yesterday, si—er, George, he *likes* hugs and wants somebody to hold him and chase away all the nightmares. That can *only* be a good thing in my book, 'cause goodness knows he's got more nightmares than a kid of his age should. To me, that just means he needs to be hugged and held more."

"And you're confident there won't be any... 'incidents' if I allow him to leave base today?"

"They seem to happen only when he's drowsy or asleep. Or exposed to a stressful memory, like he was when he overheard you and Reynolds talking about Replicators. Anyway, ice skating should be good, clean fun, and Sara's going to be along to help me keep an eye on him."

Hammond leveled a narrow-eyed look at him. "And what if Sara witnesses something unusual?"

Feeling like a teenager trying to convince his dad to let him borrow the family car, Jack fidgeted. "She's witnessed something unusual once before and accepted the load of bull we fed her afterward. That's not to say she believes any of that crap, but at least she hasn't been asking a lot of questions."

"Jack—"

"We should have at least told her *some* of the truth anyhow; she's not stupid. She can also be trusted not to go talking to the nearest reporter or whatever," he continued. "I was married to her for *fifteen* years, George. She woke me up from a whole lot of classified nightmares in those years."

"I'll talk to the President, Jack."

"Thanks. 'Cause if Carter can get permission to tell a cop about the 'Gate just because *he* witnessed a Goa'uld trashing Daniel's front yard, *surely* Sara—"

"I'll talk to the President, Jack," Hammond repeated a little more emphatically.

Jack grinned. "Thank you, sir! I mean George."

Hammond laughed. "Get out, Jack."

"All right, all right. Oh, one more thing: Danny and I had a good long talk after he *finally* woke up this morning, and one of the things he mentioned is some other places the Replicators were sent. I already gave the list to Walter to send to Thor, so that should pretty well take care of the bugs in our galaxy."

"That's good to hear, Jack... now go 'bug' Doctor Jackson!"

Shoving his hands in his pockets and resisting the urge to whistle, Jack made his way to the elevator. Daniel had practically *insisted* he be allowed to work on translations in his office without Jack in there to annoy and distract him, especially as short as his attention span was now. Realizing that Daniel just needed a little normalcy, Jack agreed to leave him alone for a few hours on condition that Teal'c stayed with him. Now as Jack stepped up to Daniel's office, voices from within were carrying on an animated conversation.

"...Like *The Crow*, or Bruce Willis' character in *Unbreakable*," Carter suggested excitedly.

"My suggestion was Phoebe Halliwell of the *Charmed* sisters," Teal'c replied.

"How do you guys know so many science fiction shows and movies?" Daniel sighed.

Jack grinned and stepped around the door frame. "They're just scary on a level neither one of us will ever attain, Daniel."

Daniel's whole face lit up when he saw him. The little imp had apparently given up on trying to balance atop the stack of books he'd piled in his chair so he could reach his desk, and was now actually sprawled across the worktable's surface, head propped up on one hand while the other gripped a pen. He'd kicked off his hiking boots, letting his socked feet swing in the air over his back. "Jack! Sam and Teal'c and I were just trying to figure out what type of ESP I seem to have."

The general shrugged. "ESP's ESP, isn't it?"

Carter shook her head. "Actually, sir, there's a whole slew of different parapsychological phenomena which—"

"Ack!" Jack waved his hands in the air emphatically. "How do you know, Carter? I thought you didn't believe in anything you couldn't measure with one of your doohickeys."

Her lips pursed. "Maybe not, sir, but there are plenty of movies and TV shows which deal with psychic powers."

Teal'c bowed his head. "We were just discussing the possibility of Daniel Jackson's being psychometric."

"Maybe he learned about your conversations with Sara by touching you. It's the ability to touch people and things and learn their history," Carter explained excitedly.

Jack raised an eyebrow. "Daniel's *always* done that."

The pint-sized archaeologist snickered. "Not *quite* like that, Jack, but I was trying to tell them that that wouldn't explain what you told me this morning, about me waking up and telling you to call Sara 'cause she was mad at you for leaving during lunch and going back to sleep."

"Did you even *breathe* in that sentence?"

"Perhaps clairvoyance," Teal'c suggested. "The ability to see events not within the viewer's immediate physical range of sight."

"In which case it's also coupled with retrocognition, like Johnny in *The Dead Zone*," Carter added, "since he had no knowledge of the event as it occurred, but later."

Jack rolled his eyes. "If you two are done geeking out on this Psychic Friends Network stuff, Daniel and I have plans for this evening."

"Really?" Daniel blinked, sitting up immediately. "General Hammond's letting me leave base?"

"Yep. You and me are going to go by the house, change clothes, then go pick up Sara for supper."

He grimaced. "Oh."

"You don't want to?"

"What? No, it's not that, Jack. I like Sara an' all, but it'll be *really* hard to pretend to be a normal kid around her all the time... well, mostly normal, that is."

In truth, Jack hadn't even thought of that. "Oh," he echoed. "I asked George to talk to the President for me, see if we can get permission to tell Sara at least *some* of the truth."

Carter nodded. "If you're going to continue seeing her, sir, it wouldn't be fair to her or Daniel either one if she didn't know."

"My thoughts exactly. So... think you can manage just one more time?"

Daniel nodded so vigorously he shook all over, and Jack couldn't help the smile on his face as he mentally compared it to a dog's happy tail wagging its whole body. "Where we going to eat?"

"I dunno... which languages did you tell Sara you speak?"

The mini-linguist paused with his feet dangling over the edge of the table. "Uh... three? Arabic, Spanish, and German."

"We'll go to that Greek place you like so well if you promise not to correct the wait-staff's pronunciation," he answered, crossing the room to lift Daniel down off the desk so the little guy wouldn't have to jump. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught Carter and Teal'c exchanging smirks, as though telling each other "look how easily Daniel gets Jack to do stuff".

"So are we just going to dinner or we going somewhere after? The movies?" Yes, Hyper-active Daniel was in the house, chattering on ninety miles-a-minute while he laced his shoes. "I'm not sure what movies are playing right now, but I think we—"

"We're going to the skating rink to teach you how to ice skate," he interrupted. "And don't give me that lower lip, it'll be fun." The traitorous two teammates were splitting their faces with grins, now.

"If you say so," Daniel sighed, grabbing his coat.

"I *do* say so," Jack agreed, following the little imp to the door. "Oh, by the way, Carter, Teal'c: if you think Daniel's *always* been psychometric, you could also argue he's always been slightly xenoglossic, too. That's the psychic phenomenon when people who haven't been given enough exposure to naturally learn a new language suddenly know how to speak it fluently."

How he *loved* leaving dumb-founded expressions in his wake!



## Chapter 16

Dinner went very well, Sara decided, though Daniel kept quiet throughout. Based on what she had seen at Jack's house, she'd gotten the impression he was normally a very talkative individual. Jack kept the conversation flowing, though, asking her questions about what she'd been doing the past few years and sharing a few carefully-worded anecdotes about his team. The little boy grinned at all the right places in the story but certainly didn't contribute much to the conversation—not even when it involved his recently-deceased dad.

Sara wondered yet again what was so blasted important about Jack's precious project that it had not only orphaned this poor kid, but now gave him terrifying nightmares, too.

"—just pick your feet straight up and back down. Here, Sara and I will each hold a hand so you don't have to worry about falling. Sara?"

Startled out of her reverie, Sara reached down and grabbed Daniel's right hand. "On the count of three. One. Two. *Three!*" As though they'd rehearsed it, both adults made groaning noises like it took all their combined strength to lift the light-weight to his feet. Predictably, Daniel giggled, and Sara realized she and Jack *had* practiced that silly maneuver.

In fact, they'd done the same with Charlie over a dozen times.

"Careful now... step down," Jack coaxed, leading the way out onto the ice. "Okay, Danny, have you ever been roller-blading?" The boy shook his head. "That's fine, then. Here's what we're going to do: Sara and I are going to skate, and you just hold on and let us pull you."

And they were off, Jack providing gentle instruction along the way while he and Sara gradually picked up speed. It had been so long since she last was on the ice, she'd forgotten how *free* skating felt. Daniel was starting to get the rhythm down, lifting his skates to step-*glide* and beaming like a second sun.

Or a second *son*.

Startled by the thought, she almost dropped his hand. While it was true she'd never stopped loving Jack, finding out she also loved this quiet boy beyond the affection she held for any of her "kids" came as a surprising but not unwelcome revelation. Was it possible she and Jack could make a second go of it? Daniel wasn't Charlie. Daniel couldn't *replace* Charlie. Daniel seemed to have pretty well filled that

great, gaping, Charlie-shaped hole in Jack's heart, though, and looked to be well on his way to doing the same for her, too... and she still barely knew him.

This one, special child had managed to thoroughly find his way into her heart, despite the slight emotional distance she'd always been able to maintain between herself and her cases. There was a sweet innocence to the shy smiles though his eyes held the weight of the boy's incredible intelligence. She was grateful he didn't often meet her gaze, if only because those beautiful blue eyes were almost disconcerting in their depth.

"Ready to let go?" Jack asked. Daniel gulped and nodded, so on another count of three, the adults let go of his hands and slowed their own speed to watch the little guy forge on ahead. Their fingers brushed, then suddenly Jack's hand was holding hers, and she gave him a slight squeeze.

Sara hadn't smiled so much in years, and when she turned to look at Jack, she saw a contented gleam in his eyes. All the troubles which led to the end of their marriage seemed lighter, and though nothing could change the fact that their own son was gone, it seemed as though fate had handed them a second chance.

There was a thump and a surprised "oof!" and Sara and Jack spun about to see Daniel sprawled on the ice twenty feet away. Faces splitting into matching grins, they skated over to the fallen boy and helped him to his feet.

"That's *really* fun," he grinned, looking over his shoulder at the distance he'd skated all by himself. "It's kinda like flying."

Jack reached out a hand as though to ruffle Daniel's hair, but was thwarted by the bright blue ski cap fitted snugly over the short blond strands. Instead, he gripped the parka-padded shoulder and crouched down to the boy's height. "Only we gotta work on those landings, kiddo!"

The responding giggle was sweet. "C'mon, let's go again!" she laughed, tugging him by the hand.

"Danny, you charmer, why do you always get all the women?" Jack joked.

Before the little boy could answer, Sara swerved behind a raucous group of teenagers, pulling him along with her. As Jack threatened to catch them, Daniel got caught up in the thrill of the chase, short legs pumping furiously to keep up with Sara's strides. Cutting around past a young couple holding hands, she risked a glance over her shoulder, grinning when she saw Jack wasn't immediately behind them.

"Oh no!" Daniel cried out just as a cackling Jack swooped in from the side and snatched the boy up in the air, shrieking with laughter.

It was music to Sara's ears. Making a lazy loop back toward the noisy pair, she took a moment to enjoy the sight before sliding up to Jack and giving him a playful smack on the arm. "Jonathan O'Neill! How dare you cut in without asking permission!"

"Sorry, ma'am," he grinned, setting Daniel back on his feet and straightening the rumpled parka. "How ever might I make it up to you folks?"

She winked. "By getting us that hot chocolate you promised, of course."

"D'oh!" he exclaimed. "I better go do that, then. Danny, don't steal my girl while I'm gone!"

"Your girl?" the boy demanded, grabbing Sara's hand and setting off again.

Sara hadn't stopped laughing, thrilled beyond words that she was once again Jack's "girl". She looked down at Daniel, pleased to see a healthy, pink glow on his cheeks. "You're a natural at this, Daniel."

"Thank you, Ms. O'Neill—"

"You can call me Sara."

"Sara," he corrected with shy smile. "Just don't tell Jack!"

She gave him a conspiratorial wink. "Your secret is safe with me! Hey, want to see if I still know a few jumps?"

"Sure!"

"Actually, I'd rather you and the boy make your way to the edge of the ice," replied an unfamiliar voice.

"Excuse me?" Sara asked, turning around to confront the coldly smiling, dark-haired stranger.

"It's nothing personal, lady," he began in a smirky way she found "personally" offensive, "but if you and the boy don't go straight over to those seats and remove your skates... well, there are an *awful* lot of kids out here I'd just *hate* to see hurt, if you catch my meaning."

Sara's heart thudded in her chest, but she gripped the white-faced Daniel's hand and moved forward with no further argument. "Are we being kidnapped?"

The smug superiority in his voice was almost sickening. "Actually, we're just after O'Neill's brat, but like / always say: two hostages are better than one."



## Chapter 17

"Hot chocolate and marshmallows, what's not to love?" Jack quipped, rounding the corner to the section of the arena seating where the rink's skaters often left their shoes. Daniel and Sara weren't there though. Setting the cardboard tray on the armrest of one of the seats, he leaned against the wall, looking out over the ice. When he didn't immediately spot Sara's blond hair or Daniel's bright blue cap, prickles of fear shot up his neck.

The ol' teammate-in-trouble alarm was starting to make noise in his skull. Daniel's and Sara's shoes were still where they'd left them, but there was no sign of either person. Craning his neck and sweeping the bleachers with a sharp gaze, he caught a glimpse of bright blue across the ice. Almost stumbling over himself, Jack raced along the aisles, anxiously hoping to see Daniel jump up and wave at him.

The pulse at his temples throbbed when he discovered Daniel's hat perched on the back of a seat and three pairs of skates nearby: a woman's white pair, a child's tan pair, and a man's black pair bearing the arena's rental tag.

"Hey!" he yelled at the elderly custodian sweeping the aisle nearby. "Did you see a blond woman and boy go by here?"

"Kid blond too?"

"Yes, did you see them leave?"

"Yeah, 'bout five minutes ago. They hustled out of here in a real hurry. Tall, dark-haired feller with 'em, had the kid by the arm, looked like. Met another dark-haired feller at the top of the steps—"

Jack pulled his cell phone out of his pocket and punched in a number. "George, this is Jack: Daniel's been kidnapped... at least two kidnappers and probably a third driving. They have a five to eight minute lead since roads are clear. I need a security team—"

"Slow down, son! Are you and Sara still at the restaurant or—"

"The Olympic Rink at the World Arena. Sara was taken along with Daniel. She had her cell with her, but I can't risk calling the number to find out if she still does. I swear, I was out of sight for less than ten minutes, so this couldn't have been random."

"The Trust?"

"Probably. I bet they were just *itching* to get their hands on him again, especially now that he's too small to fight back. Sara knows some self-defense, but she's too smart to try anything."

In the background, he heard Hammond issuing orders. "SG's 3 & 15 are on the way, Jack. Sergeant Harriman is getting Agent Barrett on the line to get the NID involved. What do you have at the arena?"

"Janitor who saw 'em leave the ice and a very *unhelpful* size eleven rental skate."

"Sir!" a voice called from the top of the seating area, and Jack turned to see a security officer standing next to the janitor. "Nate says your son's been kidnapped?"

Jack angled the mouthpiece away from his face. "Yes... *and* my wife."

"Walter says local authorities have been alerted," Hammond added. "Detective Shanahan's been put on the assignment."

"Excellent. He likes Daniel and doesn't have to be told not to ask certain questions. Thanks, sir." He flipped the phone shut. "Cops are on their way. I need you to cordon off the arena, post guards at every door—no one in or out. The kidnappers are probably already gone, but somebody here had to have seen something."

The man looked surprised at being given orders. "Sure, Mister. Who we lookin' for?"

"Skinny blond boy, three-and-a-half feet tall, wearing a navy parka, blue jeans, and a red polo. Blond-haired woman—shoulder-length—five-and-a-half feet tall, peridot parka, blue jeans, and a white Pikes Peak College t-shirt."

"Peridot?"

"It's a shade of green," he snapped. "She was also wearing a lavender fleece headband—lavender's a *light purple*, by the way—but since Daniel's hat was left behind, hers might have been dropped somewhere, too. Oh, they're both in socks, probably. Skates were left here and they didn't go back to get their shoes." He knew he was being hostile, but he couldn't help himself: it was either that or he'd end up screaming.

"Names, uh, Mister—?"

"*General* Jack O'Neill, Air Force. Their names are Daniel and Sara O'Neill." He cleared his throat. "Or rather, Daniel *Jackson*, since he hasn't been adopted yet."

The guard was relaying this information into his radio, but paused. "You think this could be a custody kidnapping?"

Jack glared. "How about you worry about securing the exits and the cops and I worry about the motive?"

"Oh. Right."

Clutching the blue knit cap in his hands, Jack took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I need to go to the office and check the security cameras. Have someone come get me as soon as Detective Shanahan from CSPD or Colonel Reynolds from Cheyenne Mountain arrives."



## Chapter 18

*The Maidierans' fastest shuttle wasn't fast enough for Jack. He knew his own radio signal couldn't possibly cross the thousands of miles between the planet and its third moon, but he kept fingering it anyway, hoping it would crackle to life with the welcome and relieving voices of Carter, Daniel, or both. He also paced the cabin after the ship left Maidiera's atmosphere, needing to do something to pass the time.*

*Finally, they reached the moon and slowly lowered the shuttle into the crater housing the Ancient complex. It thumped down softly, and he bounced impatiently on his toes, waiting for the hangar to finish pressurizing. The intar hanging from his vest was almost as comforting as his P-90, but he still wished he'd had the heavier firepower with him, especially since he, Teal'c, and the strike team were going in blind.*

*When the pilot checked his instruments again and gave them thumbs-up, Jack wasted no time in releasing the ship's hatch and heading quickly but cautiously into the tunnel leading into the research station. Teal'c's reassuring presence stayed close to his back as they and the Maidieran team passed through the heavy airlock doors. After determining all was still quiet, Jack clicked his radio twice.*

*Carter's voice floated over the airwaves immediately, sounding raspy and stressed. Her hesitation in replying about his inquiry into hers and Daniel's conditions told Jack that his suspicions were correct, and that something was terribly wrong. At his prodding, she said the team's archaeologist was hurt very badly, and that Jack had better double-time it to the living quarters. Needing no further encouragement, he threw caution to the wind and raced through the corridors, throat closing tighter with each step he took, especially when a trail of dripped blood became evident. At long last, he stumbled into the brightly-lit dining hall, and was directed to the Maidieran linguist's room by the other scientists.*

*The sight which greeted him took him out at his already weak knees, and it was all he could do to crawl across the room to Daniel's side. Splatters of blood garishly decorated the once-pristine walls and floor, over-turned furniture and loose sheets of paper littered the floor, and lying in the middle of all the chaos was the almost-unrecognizably battered body of his best friend.*

*Carter had Daniel's head in her lap, tears spilling from her eyes freely as she explained hearing alarms sounding from where she'd been working with some of the prototype technologies. She'd run to the station's control center to find the communications console smashed, the life support systems off,*

and the facility's only remaining shuttle taking off for deep space. Life support being the most important, she and the two technicians who'd followed her quickly made the necessary repairs and re-directs to get it restored.

With internal communications down, she'd tried to reach Daniel on her radio, but hadn't received a reply. She traveled back to the living quarters, as less than an hour before, her teammate had mentioned working with the local linguist, Jatham, on a few more translations. As soon as she entered the dining hall, she was met by another scientist who shakily explained what he'd found.

Her meager first aid supplies weren't doing Daniel any good, she then admitted tearfully, and expressed her belief that he wasn't going to live much longer without miraculous intervention. The archaeologist had obviously been hit several times with a large, blunt object—most likely the slab-like artifact lying next to the wall in its own pool of blood. Carter had counted at least three blows to Daniel's chest and two more to the head, crushing his rib cage and smashing his skull. His assailant had to have been extraordinarily strong, and she suspected Jatham—who was the only one reported missing after she'd ordered a head-count—had been inhabited by a Goa'uld. A quick search of the room yielded a short-bodied syringe discarded on the floor, which Carter likened to the symbiote-concealing concoction used by Ba'al's spies.

Mentally screaming for revenge against his hated nemesis, Jack gathered the limp body of his friend in his arms and rocked quietly until the last breath was exhaled.

Sam dashed into the SGC's briefing room. "News from Barrett," she began, not waiting for the assembled crowd to grow silent. "There's been recent activity amongst some of the companies associated with the Trust. Based on the NID's information, one of the private jets registered to a company called Stark Consortium filed a flight plan from Virginia to Los Angeles, but made an unscheduled stopover in Denver, presumably for emergency repairs. The plane's still there, though."

"Alert Denver authorities to keep that plane on the ground," Hammond ordered one of the airmen in the room, but Sam didn't see whom. "Did Agent Barrett have any indication of the Trust's interest in Doctor Jackson?"

"Nothing recent, sir, though he can't be certain since it's been only a week since Daniel was... down-sized."

Sergeant Harriman set down the handset into which he'd been speaking. "Detective Shanahan reports security footage at the arena shows Doctor Jackson and Mrs. O'Neill being escorted to a black van by two dark-haired men. The license plate was tracked to a Denver rental agency and the ID used was a fake."

"No surprises there," Sam muttered to herself. Although initially uncomfortable with the thought of her former fiancé being put on the case, she was grateful for Pete's liaising efforts between the local police forces and the SGC.

"Denver again," Hammond commented. "Either it's a deliberate misdirection or this is an incredibly *clumsy* job of covering their tracks."

"Probably the former," Sam agreed, annoyed by her forced inaction while the SGC waited to find out in which direction to jump.

The idiots who'd kidnapped Daniel were *definitely* going to pay. After the scare from last week, she was already feeling almost frantically overprotective of him. That feeling had only intensified yesterday after his quiet admission that her Replicator double had murdered him *before* the Ancient weapon at Dakara destroyed her and her ship. He'd allayed her belief in her own failure on Maidiera's moon by telling her no one had suspected the linguist was a Goa'uld spy, but his assurances had done nothing to stem the horrifying memory of discovering his mangled body.

Now he was missing again, for the third time in just a few, short weeks. The guilt left from her failures to stop her double from escaping the Alpha Site, protect Daniel from the Replicators when they'd attacked Bra'tac's ship, and detect the spy in their midst on Maidiera's moon coupled with her maternal instinct toward the now child-sized Daniel to make Sam Carter one *very* annoyed Colonel with a few marksman's qualifications and a fully-stocked armory just down the hall.

Scratch that. All she needed was place to go and she'd be ready to tear his kidnappers apart *bare-handed*.



## Chapter 19

"Where's my dad?" Daniel whined again, and Sara tried very hard not to stare at the boy pressed against her side. Ever since they'd been forced—in sock-feet across a snow-and-salt covered sidewalk, no less—into this swaying, roller-coaster of a van, he had suddenly started behaving... uncharacteristically. The normally quiet and collected child had begun acting like a nervous and clingy five year-old. He also began deliberately referring to Jack and Sara as his "dad" and "mom"—a name which didn't displease her in the slightest, but was surprising to hear again after almost a decade. Their kidnappers had mistakenly identified him as Jack's natural-born son, and he was doing nothing to dispel that illusion.

"Hush, Danny, your dad will find us," she soothed, deciding to go with the flow. The boy was clearly smart enough to have some idea of what he was doing, and she got the impression he knew far more about the circumstances of their kidnapping than she probably *ever* would.

He flung himself at her, wrapping his arms around her waist. Startled by the motion, Sara stroked his hair and alternated between staring at the top of his head and glaring at the goon pointing a gun at her from the bench across the aisle. She hoped none of her surprise showed on her face when she suddenly felt Daniel's left hand digging into her right jacket pocket. Apparently he had *something* in mind for her cell phone, though he left the device where it was.

Having watched enough spy movies and crime dramas on TV, she was fairly certain these kidnappers weren't very well organized. For one, they hadn't bothered to check her or Daniel either one for cell phones, and she dearly hoped she got a chance to use the small pepper spray attached to the keys in her left pocket—preferably on the grinning goon across the aisle. He'd graduated from the smirk once the van doors were shut, and Sara didn't find it much of an improvement... other than making a wider target for whenever she could get a chance to punch him in the mouth.

"Mom, I wanna see Dad. Why don't we have our shoes? Where are we going? Who's that guy over there? What's he holding?" The continual questions were just enough noise, Sara realized, to cover the sounds of Daniel slowly but deliberately entering a number into her cell phone. How in the world he could find the buttons without looking, she couldn't guess, until she recalled how the fairly new device had a slightly raised line on the bottom of the '5'.

*How smart was this kid again?*

Whatever he'd been doing he was apparently done now. "You three are in a *lot* of trouble once my dad gets a hold of you," he declared defiantly, twisting around again to glare at the gun-toting idiot. "You don't just shove people into your big black van without permission. Dad says it's rude to point guns at people and order them around unless you're military an' then it's okay. You aren't military are you?"

"Nope," Goon answered. The kidnapper she'd nicknamed "Scowl" glared over his shoulder at them, but turned back to the road. The driver and second man they'd met—whom Sara had dubbed "Solemn"—didn't even blink. "Well, I *did* ask your mom to come along nicely."

"Maybe she doesn't trust you," Daniel answered. "I don't trust you. Dad has friends from here all the way to Denver, so when he finds us you are so going to be in trouble."



"Your dad doesn't know where you are," Goon smirked.

"He's got a lot of smart people working for him, he's gonna find us." He then crossed his arms and leaned back against Sara, pouting sulkily.

Whatever the little genius had in mind, she hoped it worked.

Jack couldn't believe his eyes when Sara's cell number appeared on his phone. Daring to hope, he lifted it to his ear in time to hear a distant-sounding voice say, "...In a *lot* of trouble once my dad gets a hold of you." The down-sized archaeologist then proceeded to give details of his surroundings, verifying that there were three kidnappers—at least one of whom was armed—and they were still in the van from the surveillance video. He also didn't think they were military or even ex-military—which Jack thought evident by their sloppiness in not confiscating the cell phone in Sara's jacket.

Hitting the 'mute' button so his own voice wouldn't be heard, Jack yelled for Shanahan. Carter's former fiancé looked up from the print-out he'd been handed by one of the local cops. "Sara still has her cell phone, and she and Daniel managed to get it dialed without anyone noticing. Daniel's giving some details about his kidnappers, but I need you to get a trace started on her phone."

"On it!" the detective called back, turning to one of his team and issuing instructions. Jack never thought he'd be grateful the man had ever followed Carter into the middle of SGC affairs, but he was glad now for Shanahan's security clearance: he'd saved them a lot of time getting the local agencies to cooperate fully without asking too many questions.

He turned his attention back to the cell, listening in as Daniel cleverly and covertly told Jack he wasn't sure these people were the Trust, though they "may be" connected to them. He was also pretty sure the van was headed north for Denver. It was also clear that whomever these kidnappers were, they hadn't a clue Daniel was a down-sized Doctor Jackson, but rather seemed to believe he was Jack's biological son.

Eyes widening, Jack snatched up a nearby phone and called the SGC again. "Carter! Get Barrett on the line and ask him to check into any Trust-related inquiries that have been made about my wife or son."

"Sir?"

He quickly explained about the cell phone in Sara's pocket, and some of the information Daniel had been able to share in code. "Whoever this is thinks Daniel's my son. Their bad intell and shoddy technique makes me think this is rush job, so they might have gotten careless covering their tracks, too."

"We're already working in the same direction as you, sir. Agent Barrett has a team in Denver securing the hangar of a Trust-owned private jet in case they show up there."

Jack huffed. "C'mon, they couldn't be *that* sloppy, could they?"

"It seems that way at the moment. Maybe they're working on short notice."

"For *what*? They think Daniel's *my* kid, for cryin' out loud... what would they want with a five year-old?"

"They think he's your *son*," she pointed out to him. "I would guess they think they can hold him ransom for something from you, sir."

He resisted the urge to add another "For what?" question to his already impossibly-long list. "Hang on for a minute, Carter, it sounds like one of the kidnappers is getting a call on *his* cell. I'll call you back in just a few."

Unfortunately, the cell phone-carrying kidnapper was too far away from Sara for her own phone—probably still concealed in her pocket—to pick up any distinct words. He trusted Daniel to convey any important information he gleaned from the conversation, though. He might've been only five years-old in size and temperament, but the little guy clearly still had the forty year-old's brain.

"Got it!" Shanahan crowed. "The cell towers she's using place them on I-25 near Monument."

Jack nodded. "Saddle up!"



## Chapter 20

"What?" the kidnapper Daniel had nicknamed "Smiley" demanded by way of answering his phone. The other two, Smirk and Skirk—named for their expressions and driving habits, respectively—looked at their dour-faced companion briefly.

"No, we got something better. More cooperative too, I'm certain," Smiley answered the caller. "O'Neill's wife and son."

There was a loud reply which Daniel heard from even four feet away, though the words weren't clear.

"I saw an opportunity and I took it!" Smiley defended. "What? Fine, we're almost there anyway." He put the phone down and turned to the driver. "Next exit, there's an old refueling station a half mile down the road."

"Got it," Skirk replied.

"Refueling station" was a rather odd turn of phrase for an otherwise American-sounding man. Daniel used his most petulant whine to ask, "Why are we turning off the road? You're not from around here. Are we stopping to ask for directions? Dad never stops when Mom—"

"Silence!" Smiley snapped, turning around in his seat to glare at Daniel.

He had to bite his lower lip to keep from grinning, grateful for the first time *ever* that he'd let Sam talk him into watching *The Mummy Returns*. Alex O'Connell's lessons on "how to annoy the daylights out of your kidnappers" seemed to be paying off nicely. Of course, nearly nine years of the Jack O'Neill School of Bad Guy Baiting helped, too.

Speaking of Jack, he sure hoped "Dad" was listening in and deciphering Daniel's admittedly cryptic clues, especially given Daniel's suspicions that Smiley was foreign-born.

Or, more disturbingly, a Goa'uld.

A sudden change in speed signaled the van's transition onto an exit ramp, but Daniel was unable to see the exit number without Smirk realizing what he was doing, and trying to locate any landmarks in the darkness beyond the headlights was impossible. True to the driver's name, the tires barked on the pavement when he accelerated out of the turn.

Their new road was coarse-sounding and bumpy, and Daniel's heart sank. This part of Colorado had a *lot* of roads that never showed up on maps, and rough pavement this early in the winter was *not* an indicator of an oft-used road.

Sara had been quiet for quite some time now, so he found her hand and gave her a reassuring squeeze. She looked down at him then, meeting his gaze and smiling slightly, though her eyes were understandably frightened, worried, and angry all in one. He wished he could use the telepathic powers he supposedly possessed to mentally reassure her. So far, she'd been amazingly calm and quick-thinking, not reacting when he'd reached into her pocket for the cell phone and playing along with the "happy little O'Neill family" routine. At this point, all they needed was an imaginary dog to complete the cliché.

On second thought, there was no way he was mentioning that to Jack. The last thing Daniel needed in his newly-shrunk world was a slobbering pooch whose biscuit-scented breath was unavoidable because his nose and the dog's were at the same height. Much better to get a cat, so he could leave her alone for a day or two if he and Jack got stuck at the mountain. Sara struck him as a cat-person, too.

Curse his short attention span! He was snapped out of his mental meanderings by the slowing of the van. It swung to the right, pulling onto a surface that was amazingly even more pitted than the last—either that or just covered in an inch or so of snow—then slammed to a stop. Based on the slight slide of the van's rear end, he guessed they were now on snow-covered pavement. Skirk's take-offs and landings certainly left much to be desired, and Daniel was of half a mind to tell him so... and he wasn't entirely sure if it was his grown-up half or kid half that wanted to say it.

"Why have we stopped?" Sara asked, taking over for Daniel on the running commentary to the cell phone. She seemed to have gotten the idea of what he was doing, even though she couldn't possibly follow most of the obscure references.

No wonder Jack liked her.

"We're meeting some friends," Smirk answered as Skirk and Smiley opened their doors and stepped out of the van. Somewhere along the drive, he'd laid his pistol across his lap, fingers curled casually around it. Noticing Daniel's interest in the handgun, he casually lifted the barrel. "Don't worry, kid, the safety's on until I need it." Daniel had to bite his tongue to keep from pointing out that double-action pistols of that particular make and model didn't *have* a safety, but he supposed little kids weren't supposed to know that sort of thing.

Maybe he'd get a chance to demonstrate his knowledge of firearms later.

The back door on the van swung open, the interior domelight revealing Smiley and a newcomer. The shorter of the two, Daniel immediately named the middle-aged and balding man "Homer". He was pretty aware how frighteningly like Jack he'd become, but honestly couldn't think of a better name for the guy.

"Get out of the van," Homer ordered. He had a *terrible* voice for issuing commands, as it was rather quiet and raspy and not at all imposing.

"But I'm not wearing any shoes!" Daniel protested.

"One more comment out of you, boy, and I'll cut out your tongue!" Smiley snarled.

"Mouthy one, is he?"

"The whole time! Must be an O'Neill trait."

They were pushed out of the van by the gun-wielding Smirk, and the vertically-challenged archaeologist shivered involuntarily when his sock-clad feet touched the snow covered parking lot. Homer raised an eyebrow and looked the two prisoners over before turning to Smiley and saying, "Too bad that's not O'Neill's son or wife."

Daniel tensed, ready to jump on Smirk and steal his gun as Smiley's eyes widened. "What? But I was sure—"

"Not sure enough. If you'd even *bothered* to check your sources before wasting valuable resources to fly all the way out here, you'd have discovered that O'Neill's son has been dead and he and his wife divorced for nearly a decade."

Smiley gaped and gulped so much Daniel was ready to change his name to Guppy. "But her picture..."

Homer crossed his arms. "This *is* Sara O'Neill, at least you got *that* right; she and General O'Neill have not been married for many years, though. As for the boy, I doubt he has the necessary genetics since the adoption papers filed with the state courts say he's Doctor Jackson's son."

"D-Doctor Jackson?"

"I'm certain we can still use the boy against O'Neill as intended, but your incompetence has resulted in one of our company jets being detained at the Denver airport. Furthermore, had you waited for this information, you would also have learned that we could have had a plane waiting at the airport in Colorado Springs... a mere *fifteen minutes* from the arena."

Smiley paled and stammered. "I-I didn't know."

Homer gave him a nasty smile. "Were you not the sole possessor of valuable information, I would have you killed where you stand. Instead, I will leave *that* up to Lord Ba'al."



## Chapter 21

*After a long moment of silent respect for their lost friend, one of the female scientists spoke up nervously, suggesting the renovus cucivum. Even though Daniel had forbidden anyone from tampering with the device, she had found the broken machine presented a challenge she was unwilling to let pass. Along with another of the facility's experts, she had scavenged two parts from a pile of assorted junk and managed to get the device active again. They hadn't had a means to fully test its function, though, but as she pointed out: what did they have to lose?*

*Recalling the zombie-like rebel who'd pursued Daniel through the Honduran jungle, Jack thought they still had a lot to lose. Still, Oma Desala hadn't "glowed" him yet and he hadn't miraculously revived on his own, which left them with Daniel's old stand-by for staving off death: a sarcophagus. Madness*

*and addiction were dangers, but they couldn't be sure that particular slate hadn't been wiped clean by Daniel's first ascension, and it wasn't as though there were many other options other than returning Daniel to Earth for burial.*

*Which clearly was an absolute last option.*

*Reluctantly, Jack allowed Teal'c to lift the limp body into his massive arms, cradling Daniel's muscular bulk carefully as he rose. Carter scrambled to her own feet, offering a hand to Jack to help his protesting knees uncurl from their cramped position on the floor. While the Maidieran security team returned to the transport to relay the turn of events to the planet, the scientific expedition tramped back to the laboratories, staring straight ahead to avoid acknowledging the steady dark drips marking the trail behind them.*

*After what seemed an eternity, they reached the room where the renovus cuvicum had been built, the scientists, Jack, and Sam stepping into the main portion of the lab. Teal'c proceeded to the isolation chamber and carefully laid Daniel on the "bed" of the device. Jack had long given up on trying to fight tears of anguish, but let them roll their way down his cheeks as he pressed blood-covered fingers against the glass partition. Once Teal'c was safely out of the isolation room, the nervous scientist activated the controls.*

*The pale, slackened face soon disappeared behind the closing top half of the clamshell, brilliant light emanating around the seams. The imagery only furthered the peculiar similarity between this device's appearance and that of the tanning bed Jack had first likened it, and he found himself pressing closer to the glass in breathless anticipation. He was only peripherally aware of Teal'c and Carter clustered closely behind him.*

*When the woman announced the sensors were detecting brain activity and a slow sinus rhythm, it was all Jack could do to keep from leaping for joy. His elation was shattered a moment later when—through the barrier separating him from the isolation room—he heard Daniel screaming.*

Teal'c glanced at O'Neill again, watching as his human friend drummed the fingers of his free hand against the dashboard of the SUV. His other hand held his cell phone firmly to his ear, listening intently for any change in Sara O'Neill's and Daniel Jackson's conditions. He understood his friend's restlessness perfectly, as he himself was anxious to find the kidnappers and teach them why stealing a child under a Jaffa's protection was a *bad* idea.

He hadn't spent nearly as much time with the younger version of Daniel Jackson as O'Neill had, but nothing would ever replace the memory of discovering his dearest, wisest friend lying near-death, the victim of a brutal attack by a cowardly Goa'uld who had fled the scene of his betrayal. Nothing would ever erase the weight of the lifeless body of the kindest, most selfless man he'd ever known, holding the empty shell to his chest as one would clutch the most precious of treasures.

Another stolen glimpse of O'Neill revealed more of the same, clenched-jaw determination as before. Teal'c returned his gaze to the evening traffic on the interstate, gunning the engine again and passing a minivan he decided wasn't going nearly fast enough. He was grateful for the assigned task of driving, as he was certain forced inaction would be unbearable at this point.

O'Neill muttered an expletive. "They're getting ready to turn off the interstate. Danny thinks the guy calling all the shots is a Goa'uld."

Teal'c did not question how O'Neill had interpreted what was likely a very cryptic statement, as he had often witnessed O'Neill's and Daniel Jackson's shared ability to communicate with one another without any words at all. Instead, he gripped the steering wheel more tightly and nodded solemnly. "He will pay for his actions."

"Stand in line, Teal'c," O'Neill answered, lifting his two-way radio to his mouth. "Pete, give me a new location on the cell trace."

There was a moment before the radio crackled. "North of Monument now, General."

"So the next exit would be... what? Greenland Road?"

"Should be."

"That's where they're getting off the interstate then. Give Carter a holler, let her know to get that chopper over there."

"Sam's got it. They're lifting off from Fort Carson now."

"Thanks, Pete. I can only imagine what a mess we'd be having with the police without you."

The detective's reply was warm. "Hey, Daniel's my friend, too. It's the least I could do."

Daniel Jackson's ability to make friends with almost anyone, anywhere was perhaps one of his most endearing traits. Despite the discomfort between Pete Shanahan and Colonel Carter over the dissolution of their engagement, the two were working well enough together in coordinating the military and civilian efforts to recover the missing archaeologist and O'Neill's wife. Although Teal'c had initially had misgivings when Colonel Carter was given permission to tell Pete Shanahan about the Stargate program, his security clearance was now paying off well.

O'Neill glared at the phone in his hand. "Crap, they've stopped wherever it is they were going to pull over. I think I heard one of the guys say something about 'friends', but it's too muffled. We have got to get there *now*. While they're stopped."

"We are still fifteen miles from that exit, O'Neill." That was Teal'c's not-so-subtle way of informing the general that they were already traveling as fast as was safely possible in this land-based form of transportation.

"Daniel says they've been made to get out of the van. I bet they're going to transfer them to another vehicle. Somebody's talking but I can't hear what they're saying, it's too quiet." O'Neill grabbed his radio again, switching channels. "Carter, you in the air yet?"

"Just clearing the Academy air space now, sir. We'll be over you shortly."

"Get past us and get on up to exit 167. Daniel and Sara have been forced out of the van and are probably about to change vehicles."

"We're moving as quickly as we can, sir."

Teal'c grimaced, accelerating just a little more, now considerably over the legal speed limit. Just as he'd switched lanes to avoid a line of semis, a loud popping noise sounded from the cell phone, sounding suspiciously like gunfire. Horrified, he turned his head to look at O'Neill.

The general had yanked the phone away from his ear, staring at it with widened eyes. Then a noise began which no one on SG-1 had ever hoped to hear again: Daniel Jackson screaming.

There was a final bang, then silence.



## Chapter 22

The first sensation was of darkness. The second was of cold. The third was a rock digging a very uncomfortable spot into her right hip.

Sara sat up with a gasp, one hand going to her sore hip, the other to the lump on her temple. Funny, she could have *sworn* she'd been shot, so why did it feel like only a bruise? For that matter, why did it feel at *all*? In her own terrible experience with gunshot wounds to the head, the victim usually *died*.

Sure enough, it was still just a bruise. Maybe the gun had been loaded with rubber bullets... in which case Goon and Solemn should be waking up any time now, too. One glance at their shadowed forms disproved that theory, though. Too much darkness stained the snow beneath them for their wounds to not be fatal. Had Shorty's friend been playing some sort of sick game of Russian Roulette, then? Jack would probably say—

"Jack!" she shouted, fumbling in her pocket for her cell phone. "Oh, Jack, please, are you there?"

"Sara!" came the excited reply. "Jeez, Sara, I heard gunshots... what happened?"

"I-I d-don't know," she stammered, shivering with shock and cold. "We stopped and the main k-kidnapper talked to this guy who s-seemed to know a lot about D-Daniel and his dad, but then the new guy's friend pulled a gun and shot the other two kidnappers. When he pointed the gun at m-me, I heard Daniel scream and then that was it. Jack, I thought I'd been sh-shot."

"We're almost there, Sara, hang with me for a sec. Is Daniel there, too?"

"N-no... I don't see him."

"Do you still see the van?"

"Y-yeah. The other car's gone."

"What kind of car was it? This is *very* important."

"Ford," she answered. "B-big dark-colored SUV." There was a brief moment while Jack relayed this to someone else and received a muffled acknowledgement. "Sara, do you hear the helicopter?"

"Yes."

"Good. I'm only a minute away from you, Sara. Are you near the road? Can you walk closer to it for me?"

"C-cold, Jack. Wearing socks."

"Crap. I forgot. Sit tight... the helicopter should be right overhead."

It was. A split second later she was being buffeted by a downdraft from the rudders as a brilliant spotlight lit up the area. In the eerie, washed-out illumination, she spotted a strangely shaped object beside her, but had to grab for it twice due to her doubled vision. Just then, snow crunched beneath tires, and she had to quell a surge of panic, thinking the kidnappers were coming back to finish the job.

"Sara!" Jack yelled, but this time it wasn't over the phone. Looking up, she saw him jump out of the passenger side of the Durango, while other doors swung open on the two Suburbans flanking it. He was suddenly at her side, kneeling in the snow and cupping her face with a warm hand. "Talk to me, Sara... you all right?"

"Concussion," she replied, finding single-word answers far easier to manage. He nodded, bringing his radio to his mouth and ordering someone to call for medics. "I don't want to wait for medics, Jack," she protested. "Daniel—"

"O'Neill! The tire tracks turned to the east."

"Not heading for the interstate, thank God." He grabbed his radio again. "Carter, head east and keep an eye-out. As soon as you have a chance to block them off, go for it."

"Yes, sir!" the female officer acknowledged.

"These two have had it," one of the other men reported, having checked on Solemn and Goon.

Too bad she wasn't going to get to use her pepper spray on his smug grin, Sara lamented inwardly.

"Meyer, Henson, stay with the bodies and don't let anyone get too close to 'em, if you know what I mean. Teal'c, help me get Sara into the truck. How many in the Ford, Sara?"

"Three, or maybe four. I don't see Scowl's body, and there could have been another driver." She gasped as the big black man Jack had called "Teelk" easily lifted her, causing her head to swim. That must have been the foreign name Jack said Murray had, but she didn't think it was terribly difficult to pronounce.

"Did they just start shooting or did they say anything?" Jack was questioning, following his large companion to the car as Sara was carried toward it.

Her head was foggier than normal, but her ability to remember conversations was still intact. "He—Shorty, I mean—did a lot of dressing down on Scowl, telling him off for grabbing Daniel and I before they had all the information they needed... especially since Daniel isn't your natural-born son like they thought. There was some concern he wouldn't have the, uh... 'necessary genetics' for—"

Jack swore. "Whoa, genetics?"

"Yes," she replied, arranging herself more comfortably in the back seat as Jack drew the seatbelt across her shoulder and lap. She took the end from him and clicked it into place. "They thought they could still use him against you, though, since he's your friend's son."

"No, he's not," Jack answered.

"Doctor Jackson wasn't your friend?" she asked, confused.

"No, I'm saying he's not my friend's son. Sara, what I'm about to tell you is classified, but in this case I'll say it's better to ask forgiveness than permission."

"A cliché, Jack?"

"Yeah, Sara... it's important enough I'm using clichés," came the amused reply. "Listen, Daniel is the *original* Daniel. Okay, not exactly that either, but... uh, inside that cute little five year-old body is the mind of a thirty-nine year-old genius with three doctorates and eight years of combat experience."

Sara blinked, watching as Jack slid into the front seat and the Durango started off again. Wow, the concussion must be worse than she thought, given what she *thought* she heard Jack say. "Daniel's not a kid?"

"Daniel's a kid in body and emotion, just not in brains. We had an accident with an alien healing machine that ended up down-sizing him."

"Alien?"

"It's a long story, Sara, and I promise to tell you everything. Suffice to say, I now have an inkling why they were anxious to get their hands on my kid: I have a genetic marker which allows me to use certain types of advanced alien technology."

She gaped. "What?"

Jack's silhouetted head nodded. "Yeah... leave it to the Trust to try force a kid into powering up their toys. I hope they don't... What's that in your hand?"

Glancing down, Sara uncurled her fingers. "I think it's the bullet that shot me."

Twisting in his seat, Jack plucked the cold metal from her hand and examined it closely. "Thank God for telekinetic archaeologists."

"Telekinetic?" she repeated, beginning to feel a bit like a parrot. Maybe she could blame all the weird things she'd been hearing on the blow to her head.

"Yeah. I hope the Trust hasn't figured out about Daniel's psychic powers or he'll be in even bigger trouble than he is already... unless Carter finds 'em first. Did they say where they were going?"

"No, but I guess they work for somebody English. Shorty mentioned a 'Lord Ball' and—"

Jack blistered the air with a colorful expletive.



## Chapter 23

*Jack beat on the window, tried to pry the door open with his bare hands, and yelled at the scientists to shut the machine off. The scientist operating the console frantically pounded buttons, trying to get the device to comply until Carter yanked open an access panel and ripped out a component. The lights on the machine faded and the tortured screams abruptly stopped. Jack dug his nails into the seam on the door and tugged, finally forcing it open when Teal'c added his strength to the general's.*

*He staggered into the room, fearful of what he would find when the cover was lifted, yet hopeful that the malfunctioning device had been able to restore Daniel to life. Nodding at Teal'c, the men heaved on the top half of the clam-shell, hinges squealing in protest.*

*Vacant eyes stared upward from a too-pale face, framed by matted blond hair. Too-small hands and pencil-thin arms stuck out of the sleeves of what had been a regulation short-sleeved t-shirt, but was torn and twisted by those little fingers. Black BDU trousers lay flat against the bed's surface, empty save for two small indentations at the hips. Carter pushed between the men, fingers flying to her mouth in surprise at the small boy who looked so tiny and lost in a grown man's clothing, pupils uneven dark pools outlined with uniquely-blue irises. There was no doubt this was Daniel.*

*And sweetest of all were the rapid gasps for air heaving the fragile chest with their efforts.*

*He found the vein on the boy's neck throbbing weakly but rapidly beneath his fingertips, then slid his hand up to caress the soft blond hair. Carter leaned in over his arm, checking his pulse, too, as though she couldn't believe Daniel had pulled yet another miracle out of his bag of tricks and come through this one.*

*He was in shock, she diagnosed, clearly concerned about the dilated, unresponsive pupils. Jack took off his field jacket, lifting the little boy from the device and wrapping him in the warmed garment. Feeling that time was of the essence, he clutched the limp body to his chest and dashed through the halls, racing determinedly for the hangar. Carter and Teal'c were right behind him.*

They hit a bump in the road and Daniel was jostled awake. He sat up with a gasp, the sound of gunfire still echoing in his ears. Homer's friend had pulled a gun, shooting Smirk before the incompetent fool could figure out which end of his own firearm was the business end. Skirk went down just as quickly, gawking as he was at the demise of his formerly grinning pal. Then the barrel turned on Sara and... that was the last he remembered.

Heart pounding in fear, he looked around for Jack's ex-wife, only to find himself staring past thin metal bars at Smiley's leering face. The Trust operative laughed coldly at the confusion evident on Daniel's face when he reached out to trace the walls of his prison.

"Like your kennel, pup?" he sneered, one arm casually propped up on the back of the seat as he looked over his shoulder. "I hope you're comfortable... you'll be in there a *long* time."

"It could use a pillow and a couple of curtains," Daniel answered flippantly, channeling Jack. "Where's Sara?"

"Decorating the lovely white snow with the contents of that pretty little head of hers," the kidnapper answered, laughing at Daniel's involuntary recoil.

"Knock it off," warned the voice of Homer, who must have been in the front seat of the truck, though Daniel couldn't see him from his cramped quarters. "Or do you want the boy to start screaming again?"

Daniel didn't remember screaming, though his throat sure felt like he had been. He wasn't about to believe anything Smiley said, though. "What do you want with me?"

"First, we're going to see if your blood has what we need in it. Then if it doesn't, we're going to hold you captive until your precious General O'Neill comes to rescue you. Since we *know* his blood has what we need, we'll just keep the both of you, and let you do the job of persuading O'Neill to cooperate."

"Jack's after you now," Daniel promised. "And when he catches—"

"O'Neill doesn't know where you are," Smiley interrupted, "and is little lady friend won't be talking when he finally finds her. You've caused me a lot of trouble, boy, almost as much as your father."

Daniel stilled. "My father?"

"The late and lamented Doctor Jackson," the kidnapper snapped. "Don't play games with me, boy, I'm—"

"Look out!" Homer yelled, just as the road immediately in front of them turned a bright white.

The truck swerved sharply, sliding sideways on the wet pavement. Daniel's cage was secured to the floor of the cargo area, and he was thrown against the bars. He tasted blood on his lip where his face had impacted, and his right cheek was throbbing. He seemed to have a pretty good headache, too; his pulse was throbbing in his ears with a steady tempo.

"Get back on the road! Get us turned around!" Homer was yelling, and Daniel realized the noise he was hearing was the beat of a helicopter's rotors.

"How did they find us?" Smiley demanded, turning around again to glare at Daniel. "What did you do, boy?"

"We're stuck!" the driver yelled, barely audible over the noise of the spinning tires and the hovering helicopter.

"Get out of the truck!" Homer ordered. "Grab the boy; they won't shoot if they think they'll hit him."

"There are houses only a mile or so down the road," the driver confirmed, pointing out at the darkened shapes of trees looming against the mostly-flat land. "We'll get another car if we can get to the woods over there... some of the houses are right up against it."

"Move it!"

Smiley slid over the backseat, fumbling in his pocket before pulling out a set of keys and inserting one into the padlock securing the kennel door. Although Daniel did his best to shrink against the back wall of the cage and wrap his fingers around the bars, his skinny five year-old body was no match for a grown man's strength, especially when backed with the physical enhancement of a Goa'uld symbiote.

Come to think of it, his muscular thirty-nine year-old body hadn't done well against a Goa'uld's strength either.

He tried kicking and struggling for all he was worth, putting all his energy into trying to claw, bite, or wriggle his way free and make it to the safe haven the helicopter presented. Smiley just gripped him all the harder, seemingly immune to the scratches Daniel was making on his arms in his frantic efforts to get free. With his right arm, he popped the rear hatch on the truck, drew his pistol, and stepped down on the pavement, muzzle pressed against Daniel's temple.

"Fight me some more, boy, and I'll make you regret it," he warned.

"Shoot me and you lose your hostage," Daniel spat back, wishing he could unpin his arms and grab for the gun. He kicked Smiley's shin with all the strength he could muster, but the man—Goa'uld, rather—ignored the hit. Homer, the driver, and he were attempting a careful dance, trying to keep Daniel between them and the helicopter at all times while they edged around the ditch-bound truck.

There was more light, six brilliant beams coming from the road in the opposite direction of the hovering aircraft, and Daniel cheered inwardly to see them. His team had arrived!

"Put the boy down!" yelled the welcome and familiar voice of Jack. "Just let him go and you won't get hurt!"

Although trapped between the two rescuing forces, the kidnapers continued to move across the road, Daniel being swung back and forth in Smiley's grip as he tried to keep himself covered with his five year-old human shield. A shot rang out, and muffled thud from behind signaled at least one of Daniel's captors was down, and the smaller but no-less-determined archaeologist began his struggle anew, even though he knew he was weakening rapidly.

The gun shifted from his head, and suddenly his right side was on fire. "Try that again, O'Neill, and the boy loses the other leg!" Smiley screamed.

Through the haze of agony, Daniel was aware that Smiley was almost in the forest, and that he'd be a lot harder to catch if he made it into the shadows of the densely-packed trees. He also didn't doubt the Goa'uld's promise to cripple him further if anyone attempted to take down his other companion, as he had done far greater damage to Daniel once already.

He stiffened, shocked at the familiarity he now sensed in the symbiote inhabiting the man's body. Suddenly, he was assaulted with flashes of memory: metal walls, a lighted control panel, a stone slab covered in markings, a slender box opened to reveal a syringe, a surprised face—his own face—as the Goa'uld struck him again and again...

"Jatham," Daniel whispered, and the world faded to white.



## Chapter 24

Fingers tightened on Jack's shoulder, startling him out of his stupor. "Hey," he greeted, glancing up to see who it was. "Are you supposed to be up?"

Sara grabbed another of the infirmiry chairs and pulled it up beside his. "Not up anymore," she pointed out as soon she was seated. "The rest of the team finally leave?"

"Yeah. Doc Lam scared 'em off—" he glanced at the wall clock "—about an hour ago."

She nodded, biting her lower lip. "Any change?"

Jack looked down at the tiny limp hand cradled carefully in his own. "Nope. Doc said she was working to get a pediatric orthopedist the clearance to come here and work on his leg." His jaw clenched so tightly his teeth creaked. "He can't be moved to a regular hospital in his condition, but he's going to lose that leg if we don't—"

Sara scooted closer and wrapped her arms around Jack, eyes moist with tears. "He hasn't woken up, either?"

"No." He met her gaze briefly before letting his own eyes return to Daniel's pale, still face. "He was like this when we first got him back from Maidiera," he began after a long moment of silence.

"The planet where he was... killed?" Sara guessed.

"And 'littled', yeah. Whatever that machine did to him to make him a kid, it completely drained him. Burned him up. Doc said that's why he's such a skinny little guy, the machine somehow sped up his metabolism or something while it was doing its thing. He lay like this for a whole day, Sara... so quiet and still. Not at all like Daniel."

"He's normally very... active?"

Jack nodded. "You know how I get when I'm bored... I grab whatever objects are nearest and start playing with 'em. Daniel's the same way, only he does it with words and gestures. He can rattle on for hours about the significance of river gods and annual flooding and spring fertility rites and what-not, and *that* keeps him occupied. I've seen him this still only a few times, Sara... all of 'em were bad."

"He's going to be okay," she reassured him, taking his left hand in her own and placing her right atop his and Daniel's. "Even if... even if they can't save his leg, he'll still have us, Jack."

Jack looked at all the monitors and tubes and wires and had trouble believing it. "I want to believe that Sara, I do... if anybody can survive, it's Daniel. What I'm worried about is up *here*," he answered, releasing Daniel's hand and carding his fingers through the soft blond hair. "Every time he used his

abilities, it wore him out. Remembering one of his deaths left him asleep for half a day. This was... bad."

"Bad" only began to describe it. When the SGC's rescue team arrived at the kidnappers' truck, a scene from one of Jack's worst nightmares greeted him: Daniel, struggling to free himself from the grip of the maniac holding a gun to the boy's head. Jack yelled a warning for the three men to surrender, tightening his grip on his own handgun and hoping he wouldn't have to use it.

But the kidnappers continued moving toward the edge of the road and the safety of the woods. He warned the rest of the rescue team not to let *any* of the men leave the road, so when the farthest man out stepped into the ditch, a single shot rang out from the vicinity of the now-landed Blackhawk, and he would bet it was Carter. The target spun gracelessly, falling to the ground.

Suddenly, the man holding Daniel moved his arm, and another shot rang out, the boy's body jerking. Jack screamed soundlessly as the shooter shifted the pistol to point at Daniel's other leg, warning that he'd destroy it too if anyone fired again. Before Jack could restart his brain enough to issue any orders, all hell broke loose.

A fierce wind began to blow, whipping across the road with staggering force. Twigs and branches began snapping off the trees, caught up in the swirling maelstrom forming just over the shooter's head. The man then dropped Daniel, but the boy's body did not fall, but hung suspended in the air like a marionette with invisible strings. The tree limbs then descended upon the kidnapper like an angry swarm of bees, slicing ribbons of flesh. In seconds, the man was covered in red, yelling and futilely trying to protect his head and face with his arms.

For a moment, Jack stood in stunned silence and watched Daniel's pain tear the Goa'uld to pieces. Then, realizing Daniel would hate himself if he killed someone this way, Jack raised his weapon and snapped off a single shot, hearing Teal'c's own weapon report a split-second later. The man jerked twice and fell to the ground; so did Daniel. Heedless of the sticks raining down around his head, Jack raced across the pavement, stumbling and going to his knees beside the small body.

"Jatham," Daniel whispered, closing his eyes. Then he went limp, lying broken and bloody on the ground just like—

"General O'Neill?"

Jack jumped, unaware he and Sara had fallen asleep with their heads resting on Daniel's bed, or that their hands still lay entwined with the boy's. "What?" he mumbled, reluctant to rub the sleep out of his eyes to properly look at the airman, as that would mean disentangling his fingers from those of the two most important people in his life.

"The Nox are here, sir."



## Chapter 25

"It was of his own choosing."

"What?!" Jack demanded, not quite believing his ears.

Serene and patient as ever, the Nox woman Lya started again. "The abilities which Young Daniel exhibited were the result of changes made to his mind when he descended this most recent time. Because he felt he had endangered the galaxy when the Replicator probed his mind, he sought to find a way to prevent such a violation from occurring again."

"He shielded his mind, I got *that* part," Jack replied. "It's the part where that has anything to do with his bizarre powers that escapes me."

"It is our belief," began Thor, "that the device attempted to regress his mind when it transformed his body. The protections he had placed on himself reacted poorly to the change."

"I'll say."

Lya's eyes narrowed slightly in that quiet, assessing way of hers. "I do not believe the intended function of the machine was to reduce the age of its user, and that perhaps such a malfunction was the reason the experiment was discontinued."

"I concur," added the Asgard. "The abrupt cessation of the log supports this."

"They screwed up and didn't report it," Carter guessed. "Took out a few parts, declared the machine broken, and went on to other things."

"That is very likely," Thor agreed.

"Whatever the intended function," Lyra continued, canting her head to one side, "Daniel's mind reacted to the drastic change in physical capability by boosting his mental gifts to levels not achievable by normal humans. The original protections on his mind were established as passive defenses only, so the new abilities were also set to trigger defensively."

"Anytime he had a bad dream or unpleasant memory," Carter observed.

"Or when one to whom he was close was in jeopardy," Teal'c amended, "as when he saved Sara O'Neill from being seriously harmed."

"That is also correct," the Nox smiled. "It wasn't a perfect compromise, as it also allowed some... latent ability to surface when he was most relaxed. No Tau'ri at your current state of evolution is meant to have such powers, though, and use of these abilities was a great strain on his mind and body."

"But you've fixed that now, right?" Jack asked. "But that *still* doesn't explain... *this!*"

"It was of his own choosing," Lyra explained. "We were able to repair the damage to his body very easily. We also fixed the connections in his mind to prevent any further incidents while still preserving the original intent of his protections. We could not, however, return him to his adult form. When we explained our problem, he chose... this."

"I'd really like for you to reconsider, Jack," George sighed. "The Maidieran team will be a valuable addition to the Pegasus expedition, but the Stargate program needs an experienced eye overseeing all of Earth's offworld operations."

The younger general stared down at his clasped hands for a long moment before looking back up. "I can't leave Colorado, George. Sara's here, the Stargate's here... Daniel *belongs* here. I can't move out to D.C. and leave any of that behind, although Daniel would go with me no matter what."

"Daniel would be safer in Washington than out here," the Texan tried again, using up his last appeal. "The NID still hasn't found the one Sara called 'Shorty', and I don't think they're going to—not alive anyway. His symbiote has probably already changed hosts, and—"

"The answer's still 'no'," Jack answered. "Sam's decided to head up that project at Area 52, so she's only a few hours away. Teal'c's gone to Dakara, but all it takes is a spin of the 'Gate to get him back... and the State of Colorado still hasn't finished all the red tape on Danny's adoption. My life is *here*, George. If you want somebody to take your spot at the Pentagon, go bug Hank Landry, not me."

George smiled. "I thought you'd say that, so I'll leave you be. Oh, before I go—"

"Yeah?"

"There's a matter of a certain young colonel by the name of Cameron Mitchell... I believe you promised him a spot on SG-1 if he recovered from his injuries?" He glanced over his shoulder as he stepped out of the office.

Jack's expression of consternation was priceless. "Crap."

"Sara! It's great to see you out and about, dear," Jean Autry smiled warmly. "You're lucky you weren't more seriously injured."

Sara smiled, squeezing Daniel's hand. "Well, *that'll* teach me to try to run up a staircase that quickly," she joked, the cover story for her concussion slipping easily from her lips. "I never want to do *that* again!"

"So, this is the infamous Jack O'Neill?"

"Oh, come off it," Jack grinned. "I remember you from Parent-Teacher meetings."

"*Meeting*. Singular, not plural, Jack," Sara corrected. "You went to only one."

"Whatever," he replied impishly. "Nice ta meet'cha again, Ms. Autry."

She waved off the formal title. "Jean, please... seein' as how you've asked my best friend to move in with you." She grinned. "And you must be Danny."

The five year-old looked up from the brightly-colored tablecloth. "Hello, Ms. Autry," he beamed. "Jack? Can we adopt an Angel?"

"It's the last day for it," Jean urged.

"Weeee-ell," Jack began, dragging the word out.

"Please?" Daniel begged.

"Sure, kiddo," the general laughed. "Do you want a boy angel or a girl angel?"

The little boy seemed to have difficulty deciding, so Sara quickly suggested a little girl. Daniel seemed happy with the choice and couldn't wait to start picking out gifts.

"Good choice," Jack whispered conspiratorially. "Cause we're already adopting a little boy angel." Sara couldn't agree more.

Danny couldn't believe how much *fun* Christmas shopping could be for someone he'd never met. Actually, he couldn't believe how much fun Christmas shopping was for *anyone*. He didn't really know what it was like with his real parents, but he was pretty sure they'd never spent an hour perusing a specialty hat store to find *just* the perfect cap to give to Teal'c. He couldn't remember much about Egypt, but he knew for sure they didn't have such a pretty selection of gloves and scarves there as the ones he'd picked out all by himself to give to Sam.

They were on their way back to the Angel Tree booth to turn in their completed list when Danny saw just *one more* thing he had to have.

"Please, Jack?"

"Really?" his new dad asked, looking surprised.

"Uh-huh."

Sara looked down at him, and he really liked how pretty she looked when she smiled like that. "Go right ahead, Jack. I'll take care of the Angel."

Jack must have thought that was okay, so Danny let go of Sara's hand and blew her a kiss like she'd shown him how to do. Then he turned around and bounced back the other way, holding onto Jack's hand tightly.

He hated having to stand still, but stand still they did until it was his turn. Waving at Jack, Danny hopped across the carpeted floor and held out his arms so he could be lifted more easily.

"Ho ho ho! Have you been a good little boy this year?" Santa asked once he was settled on his lap.

He nodded vigorously, then remembered Jack's instructions and replied, "Yes, sir!"

"Good! Now, what do you want for Christmas this year?"

Danny looked back toward the entrance to Santa's area to see Sara had finished up with the Angel Tree and now stood with her arm around Jack's waist, and his around her shoulders. "I don't remember much about my real mommy and daddy," he began, "But when they died, all I wanted was to have them back. Now I have a *new* mommy and daddy for Christmas." Impulsively, he kissed Santa on the cheek. "Thanks, Santa... but I *have* all I want!"



## Epilogue

"Santa came! Santa came! Jack, Sara, wake up!"

Jack glared at the alarm clock's display. "Danny, it's five in the morning."

"That's afternoon already in Egypt!" the little boy gasped, practically bouncing in place.

"Told you not to teach him about time zones," Sara muttered, rolling over, then sitting up and swinging her legs over the edge of the bed. "Just give us a minute or two, Danny... we old folks don't move as fast as you do."

"You're just silly," Daniel declared, flashing them a brilliant smile before disappearing back out of the room.

"Oi," Jack groaned. "Told you not to teach him about Santa Claus."

"Touché," Sara laughed, leaning over to give him a quick kiss. "All right, general, let's go see what the fat man brought."

"As if we don't already know."

"Fine. Let's go see how tickled Danny is to see what the fat man brought!"

Jack grinned. "Now you're talking! Where's my camera?"

Sara waggled her finger at him. "Nope, I've got the photo-taking duties, thank you. You barely know how to turn the thing on as it is."

"Busted." Yawning and making sure all his joints stayed in place when he stretched, Jack stood up from the bed and shuffled down to the living room. He'd expected Daniel to fly into the pile of brightly-colored presents as soon as the adults sat down, since that's what Charlie had always done, but was surprised when Daniel dug under the tree to extract two messily-taped packages.

"These are for you," he declared, handing one gift to each of his "parents", then putting his hands on his hips in a very-grown-up-Daniel-like gesture. "Well, open them!"

Sharing surprised but pleased looks, Jack and Sara began slowly peeling back each strip of tape, not surprised in the least when Daniel giggled at their pace. Finally, Jack had his last piece detached and slid the box out of the wrapping paper.

"Will it explode?" he asked, shaking the box carefully.

"No!" Daniel grinned.

"Will it try to walk off if I put it down?" Sara joined in, enjoying the game.

"Nope!"

"Will it—"

"Jaaa-ack!" the little boy whined. Chuckling, Jack slipped his finger under the lid and lifted it off to reveal his gift.

Sometime in the last week and a half, Daniel had gotten someone to carve a flat piece of wood into the shape of a boy Angel Tree figure. The features of the angel had been wood-burned into the surface, along with his name and the date the judge signed the adoption papers. Then the whole thing was varnished, polished, and given a metal bracket so it could be hung on the wall. The O'Neill name had never looked so good as it did following "Daniel".

Sara gasped at her own copy of the same. "It's *beautiful*."

"You can hang 'em in your offices," Daniel smiled shyly, looking down at his feet as he twisted back and forth.

Jack pounced, scooping him up and tossing him in the air. Daniel shrieked with delight as he came back down, wrapped in the biggest bear hug Jack could manage without cutting off the boy's circulation. "It's *perfect*, kiddo," he grinned, letting him go only so Sara could enfold him in a hug of her own.

Then he was off like a miniature tornado, gleefully attacking the presents Santa had brought him. Despite his obvious delight in opening each gift, he carefully peeled back the tape and unfolded the creases, just as the adults had done with their own gifts, laying each sheet of paper aside before turning his attention to the box. Jack and Sara exchanged smiles, seeing a future archaeologist at work.

When the last package was opened, Daniel bounded back across the room and flung himself at Jack and Sara, wrapping an arm around the neck of each and hugging again. "This is the best Christmas *ever*."

"It's the *only* Christmas ever," Jack reminded him. "I didn't think you remembered any of your other ones."

"Nope," Daniel agreed. "But it's *still* the best Christmas ever!"

"Well, if you want me to put together your new desk," Sara began, "you better go get my tool box from the pantry."

"Oh, *you're* going to put it together?" Jack questioned.

"I'll let you start it, Jack," she answered. "Then after you get frustrated when part A and part B don't go together like you think they should, I'll finish it."

Daniel giggled. "Funny," Jack sighed. "All right, Danny, go get that tool box."

When he vanished around the corner into the kitchen, Jack held up five fingers, counting down the seconds. When he had only one finger remaining up, a squeal was heard from the kitchen. "There's another present in the pantry!"

"Can you bring it in here?" Sara asked.

"It's kinda heavy," came the answer. "And lopsided!" He staggered back around the partition, arms wrapped around the base of the box.

"Put it on the coffee table and open it," Jack suggested.

The little boy slid the package carefully onto the surface of the table, then reached for the ribbon holding the box shut. Taking the lid off, he stared with wide eyes at the dark green eyes staring back at him.

"A *kitten!*" he squealed, lifting the sleepy feline out of the box and cradling it to his chest.

"Shoulda gotten a dog," Jack sighed, earning him a thump on the arm and a look from Sara.

"You claim to have been Doctor Jackson's best friend, but you don't recognize a cat person when you see one?" she teased. "She's all yours, Danny... she doesn't even have a name until you pick one for her."

Daniel beamed, cuddling the kitten. "Her fur is so pretty," he said softly. "Long and black and a little curly. Can I name her Sha're? That's a pretty name, isn't it?"



*The End*