

Title: Twofold

Author: Elizabeth

Email: elizabeth@starwarriors.net

Category: Crossover, Drama, Hurt/Comfort, Gen.

Pairing: None, Jack/Other, Jack/Daniel, Jack/Team.

Rating: 13+

Season: Four

Spoilers: Slight for The Fifth Race, The Tok'ra, and Fair Game.

Summary: Everyone's in for a shock when Jack gets a visitor.

Warnings: None.

Status: Complete May 2006. But there is scope for a sequel if this is enjoyed enough.

Notes: This is my first crossover, so I hope I've not done either series a complete disservice <g>. Many thanks again to Karen (Kent) for an excellent beta and patience with me over the long delay - hope it was worth it. And thanks to Margo and Mu for the bullying to get this done. As always, feedback is appreciated and will be replied to. However, no flames please. I can burn my own toast without any help, thank you.

DISCLAIMER: Stargate SG-1 and its characters are the property of Stargate (II) Productions, Showtime/Viacom, MGM/UA, Double Secret Productions and Gekko Productions. This story is only for entertainment purposes and no money exchanged hands. No copyright infringement is intended. Anyway, if they were mine do you think I'd let anything happen to them? The original characters, situations, and story are the property of the author. This story may not be posted elsewhere without the consent of the author.

\*\*\*\*\*

Daniel Jackson sighed as he finally sat down in the chair by the window, closing his eyes for a moment. It had been a long, tiring morning, and he sank into the soft cushions with a bone-deep sigh of relief. At least Operation Get-Me-The-Hell-Outta-Here had gone without mishap. Fraiser had taken a bit more than her usual persuading to authorise Jack's release paperwork, and then it had taken a couple more hours to get the semi-mobile man through the mountain and home. The wheelchair that Doc had insisted the man use for the journey up to the car may have made it easier on his body, but not on his psyche.

Jack had wanted to sneak out, unnoticed, having a keen dislike of being seen injured and less than able. But it seemed that half the base had tracked them down, wanting to wish the Colonel well, which heaped embarrassment on top of unease upon him.

Daniel had sighed with concealed amusement at that, because Jack never could understand why the other officers held him in such esteem.

Then had come the car journey from hell; stuck in traffic jams for a large part of the way home, so that by the time they got there, Jack was grouchy and exhausted. But not so far out of it that the Colonel still hadn't put up a fight over the pills he'd been released with. However, a bit of emotional blackmail, citing a certain overzealous doctor, had done the trick, and Jack had reluctantly downed the offensive medications whilst Daniel quickly changed the weeks' old bedding for fresh sheets.

By the time everything was ready for him, Jack was about on the verge of collapse and it hadn't been hard to persuade him to go straight to bed. He was asleep before Daniel had even finished pulling the sheets up around him.

Now Daniel was quite content to sit down, enjoying the peace and quiet for an hour or two, looking out through the large picture windows at the many birds that visited the well-kept garden. He'd discovered, by watching Jack, that some of them would let you get to within just a few feet of them before they hopped away. At the moment they were busy picking at flower seeds, before darting away with full beaks.

Later on, he'd have to think about finding food to tempt Jack into eating, that his friend's bruised stomach could manage. But for now, he was happy to sit back and do nothing.

And with those thoughts, his mind wandered and gradually switched off.

\*\*\*\*\*

The sound of a car door slamming woke Daniel up, leaving him slightly disorientated, and the sound of a key in the front door reached him before he'd had chance to do much more than stand up. They weren't due any visitors yet, but it wouldn't surprise him if Sam, Teal'c, or Janet had decided they couldn't wait until tomorrow before springing an appearance.

However, the tall male who entered the darkened hallway, halting in mutual surprise, certainly wasn't anyone Daniel knew.

"Who're you?"

They both asked at virtually the same time.

The stranger absentmindedly toed the door shut behind him, without taking his eyes off Daniel. "You must be Daniel." He stated, rather than asked, tilting his head to one side, in what looked like an eerily familiar way.

The hallway was too dark to allow much definition of the visitor's face. So Daniel studied what he could of the man, until he moved further into the house and down the few steps to the brightly lit den.

The fact that the man had a key; had entered the house with familiarity; hadn't either suddenly run back out, or attacked him; and knew who Daniel was, helped put the archaeologist's mind at ease about his intentions being honourable. Or, at least it did for the moment. After all, everyone had friends away from work. So why should Jack be any different? Just because the infuriatingly private man never, ever talked about them, didn't mean they didn't exist, right? And if Daniel was slightly put out about that, then surely that was **his** fault, rather than Jack's?

But while these myriad thoughts chased each other around in the back of his mind, Daniel's focus was caught by the face of the man, as his features became more discernable in the light from the den windows.

If he hadn't known that Jack's face was black and blue with bruises, that one arm was in a cast, and that he needed a crutch to get about on at the moment (or, that he'd personally put the aforementioned invalid into bed only a short while ago), Daniel would have sworn that it was Jack standing before him. The athletic build, the rugged face, and the deep brown eyes - everything shouted 'Jack'. But, as Daniel studied him closely, he could see small differences from the friend he knew so well: like the hair being a couple of inches longer than Jack's military cut, with slightly less grey (which Jack insisted **he** was responsible for!); and the absence of that distinctive scar in his eyebrow.

But for all that, this man was Jack's double.

The doppelganger scrutinized him in return, an infuriatingly recognisable half-smile appearing on those too similar lips.

"I'm kinda guessing here that Jack's never told you about me?" Even the voice could have come from Jack himself.

Daniel quickly forgot any lingering notion of threat assessment, and found himself drawn forward in curiosity instead. "Ah. No. He didn't. You're the spitting image of him." Which was the understatement of the year.

"Yeah?" An eyebrow quirked upwards with amusement. "Well, there's a very good reason for that."

Daniel waited eagerly to hear what it was, but the man just stood there, smiling, and irritatingly not volunteering any further information. Just like Jack would have done, damn it. The man seemed to be actually enjoying Daniel's internal struggle with his inclination to mind his manners and not to ask.

"Who are you?" Daniel asked eventually.

"Mac." Which, by its brevity, unfortunately told Daniel nothing else.

"Where's Jack?" Mac asked, as he scoped out the den and the dining room for the missing house-owner. He stuck his hands in his jeans pockets and rocked back on his heels, looking more self-assured than Daniel felt at the moment.

Daniel hesitated, as he pondered what to say. Mac might not appear to be a danger at first sight, but Daniel still didn't want to give a stranger information about Jack's present condition, without the Colonel's prior approval. He was positive junior officers had suffered horribly for lesser transgressions. And with their work at the SGC, they'd all learned how deceptive first appearances could be. "He's asleep at the moment."

"Asleep? At this time of day?... Jack?" Mac's voice betrayed his surprise and his eyes quickly narrowed in suspicion.

"Yes," Daniel replied, a little defensively. What rule said you had to be up and about, just because some visitor turned up at the door? As far as Daniel was concerned, Jack had every right to sleep the whole day through if he wanted, injured or not! "So I'd appreciate it if you kept quiet and didn't disturb him." He hoped he came across authoritatively enough that Mac wouldn't challenge him.

Mac raised his chin, as though weighing the truth of the words he'd heard. Then abruptly spun on his heels and strode quickly up the steps and down the hallway to the master-bedroom.

Which definitely proved Mac knew the house well, Daniel thought, as he belatedly tried to catch up, praying the man wouldn't awaken Jack from his much needed sleep. Daniel might not have the fighting prowess of the far more experienced Colonel, but he was quite prepared to do whatever was needed to protect his injured friend, if it was needed. Although, despite the sudden chase, he was still prepared to consider Mac wasn't a physical threat for the moment.

But, instead of charging straight into the bedroom, Mac paused at the door first, then gently pushed it opened, before quietly stepping into the darkened room. His gaze settled almost instantly on the man in the bed, sparing the rest of the room a quick once-over before he moved forward. The sharp brown eyes catalogued the injuries, barely visible in the poor light, which filtered around the closed curtains.

Jack was lying on his back, his right arm encased in a cast up to his elbow, and cushioned by a pillow on top of the sheets. Even the dim light couldn't hide the vivid bruises, standing out in stark relief against the pale face. And the sheets were pushed far enough down the sleeper's body to show bandages wrapped around his upper chest. A single crutch, propped up beside the bed, suggested more damage that wasn't visible.

"Aww, Jack." Mac whispered as he carefully lowered himself to sit on the bed beside the injured man. "What have you done now?" He reached over to place his hand on Jack's forehead and left it there for a few seconds. "Well, at least there's no fever this time."

Daniel watched, fascinated, as he stood guard in the doorway. He was seeing Jack treated with a level of familiarity, which he knew he had never seen before. Excepting certain medical personnel, of course. Even his team, which Daniel was sure Jack considered his closest friends, sometimes struggled to get past the man's closely guarded boundaries.

Jack might be asleep and unaware of what was happening, but the unhesitating way Mac acted, led Daniel to suppose that this might be normal behaviour between the two men. Which again led to the question - who the heck was he? The facial features were so similar, that Daniel assumed they must be very closely related, and brothers seemed the most obvious answer. But, if that was the case, why did no one know about him, this double of their friend? Why had Jack kept quiet all these years, if Daniel's hunch was correct? There was very little Jack didn't know about any of his team's background. The Colonel **needed** to know, even if the friend in him didn't. Although Daniel suspected that the way Jack always, if surreptitiously, looked out for them, that the friend needed to know too.

Having Jack's friendship meant the world to Daniel, but damn the man if he didn't make it hard work getting to know him in return!

Mac slid his hand upwards, until his fingers were carding through Jack's hair. Then, just as Daniel thought he'd been forgotten about, Mac turned his head around to face him again. The familiar features transformed instantly from the caring expression of a moment ago to barely concealed anger.

"I suppose this was another **training** accident?" Mac accused, with a touch of derision, while still managing to keep his voice low.

Daniel was temporarily lost for words, which would have amused Jack if he'd been awake. It didn't seem to the linguist that either confirming, or denying, the allegation would make any difference to Mac. So why bother, especially when it was classified anyway? So, Daniel shrugged his shoulders instead.

"Oh, don't bother." Mac whispered, saving him from pondering the dilemma any further. "I know Jack too well to believe all that BS. He can evade and misdirect better than anyone I know, but I **do** know **him**. He's no more sat behind some desk pushing paperwork, than I'm Santa Claus."

Mac turned back to the man in the bed again, and started to pull his hand away, when Jack's eyes fluttered open. The dazed eyes slowly travelled around the room, missing Daniel who was too far away for him to focus on in his present condition, but settling on the man sat beside him.

"Mac?" Jack whispered, his voice rough from medicated sleep.

"Hey, buddy," Mac whispered back, trying not to disturb Jack too much, hoping he'd fall back to sleep quicker.

"What'ya doing here? Am I late? Just gimme a minute..." The voice started to slur as Jack's eyes slid shut again.

"No, you're not late," Mac assured him quietly, his fingers gently tousling Jack's short fringe. "Go back to sleep and I'll see you later." It wasn't clear if Jack heard him or not, before he drifted off.

Finally, able to finish withdrawing his hand, Mac gently eased himself up off the bed and quietly left the bedroom. He passed by Daniel without a word and walked back towards the den. Daniel watched Jack for a moment longer, assuring himself that the man was definitely sleeping peacefully again. Then he too left quietly, pulling the door back until it was barely open, and followed the other man.

\*\*\*\*\*

Once back down in the den, he found Mac standing by the fireplace, apparently staring at the collection of commendations Jack kept on display there. Daniel never did understand why Jack didn't have the more usual collection of family portraits up there, but had long ago decided to accept Jack's different nature as he was.

"Is it really worth it? What you do?" Mac asked, without turning around. Daniel could see the tense set of the man's shoulders, and it was obvious Mac was struggling to come to terms with what he'd seen. Although, anyone who knew Jack closely, should have been used to seeing him injured. Or, maybe **that** was the problem?

"Yes." It was an unhesitating reply. And the only one Daniel or anyone at the SGC could give, knowing what they did.

"I mean..." Mac said, still facing the wall, "I know he's always undertaken the more risky jobs." He seemed to pause for thought for a moment. "He was always a real adrenaline junky..." A small laugh sounded. "Well, I guess we both were if it comes to that," Mac pointed vaguely at the framed awards, "But some of these awards were given for doing the most dangerous and God awful things. Some of them were practically suicide missions. Assignments so violent, and in such terrible places, that others couldn't manage them. And," another sigh, "because I know he's damned good at what he does." Mac turned his head to look at Daniel for a quick moment, as though gauging his reactions, before returning his gaze to the wall. "And while I appreciate Jack's maybe had no choice in the tactics used, always having to follow someone else's orders, the military being what it is. I also know he believes what he's done has protected others."

Feeling a sudden kinship for Mac, at least in their shared concern about Jack, Daniel asked, "So why doubt him now?"

Mac finally turned around, his expression sad. "I don't... No... Of course I don't... I just worry, that's all." He sighed. "I worry that one of these days I'm going to come over and discover I'm too late. I'm going to find out that his luck's finally run out on him and I'll be left on my own... again." The last word was barely a whisper and Daniel would have missed it altogether if he hadn't been paying such close attention.

Daniel pondered over the last sentence, and its significance. The linguist in him, as ever aware of how one word could make such a difference. He **really** needed to know who this man was!

As if reading his thoughts, Mac asked quietly. "You haven't even figured out who I am yet, have you?" There was a slight chuckle at the end of the question, and it seemed to break the strained mood.

“No,” Daniel admitted. “And it’s really starting to bother me.” He smiled across the room, wanting to be friends with whoever Mac was.

“I’m Angus MacGyver, better known as Mac. I’m Jack’s twin brother.”

\*\*\*\*\*

If the floor had suddenly opened up and swallowed him whole, Daniel couldn’t have been more surprised. Or, even more surprisingly, a bit angry “His twin?” he squeaked, choking back on the words, as he barely remembered to curb his volume at the last moment.

Sure, it was one thing to excuse Jack for not generally speaking about his personal life, but someone as close as a **twin** you’d think would have been mentioned at some point! Especially to supposed close friends. Best friends, as the often ostracised young scientist hoped they were.

“Yeah. Surprise!” Mac replied with a casual shrug of his shoulders, watching the emotions chase themselves across the younger man’s face. After a moment, Mac moved over to sit down in the lone comfy chair by the window. The slouched pose was so reminiscent of a tired Jack, that Daniel couldn’t doubt for a moment that what the man said was true.

Mac turned around to look out of the window, as if he couldn’t trust himself to look at Daniel as he continued. “You mustn’t blame Jack for not telling you, you know.”

His voice took on a far-away quality, almost as though he’d forgotten Daniel was there. “It’s nothing to do with trust, or anything like that. Sometimes, life just teaches you at a very early age to keep quiet about those you care for. It becomes important if you want to keep them safe. And then, as you grow older, it sorta becomes second-nature in some lines of work, to keep secret any liabilities you may have back home. Hostages to fortune and all that.” His voice trailed away for a moment. Then, “You learn never to give the bad guys a hold over you; for your family’s sake, rather than your own. And after a while, you don’t even know you’re doing it any more. You forget how to stop, even if you want to, it’s so ingrained by then.”

Daniel was stunned by the depth of feeling in Mac’s quiet voice, and wondered what specific events he was talking about. Was it Mac’s own, Jack’s, or both of theirs? He couldn’t help feeling that Mac was referring to more than Jack’s time in Special Operations. Because while he could understand a specialist, with access to top-secret information, not wanting his family to be used as leverage against him. Daniel’s well-honed instincts told him Mac was referring to something entirely different too.

And did this explain why Mac had a different surname? What was the reason for that?

Mac turned his face back towards Daniel, but kept his body facing the garden, his uneven posture unconsciously reflecting the part-information he was giving. “I know all about you though.”

“Oh, yes? I can just imagine what Jack would say about me.” Daniel smiled, self-deprecatingly.

“Don’t sell yourself short Daniel,” Mac’s disconcertingly familiar brown eyes scolded. “I know for a fact that you’ve saved his ass on more than one occasion.”

Daniel’s face must have betrayed his shock at initially thinking Jack might have given away confidential information. After all, Mac and Jack had to be incredibly close.

“Oh, stop worrying. You know darned well that Jack’s tighter than a clam when it comes to talking about what he does. But that doesn’t mean I don’t glean something out from our half-baked conversations.”

Daniel nodded in relief, mentally chastising himself for ever considering Jack would be less than one hundred per cent circumspect where the gate was concerned.

But, what of knowing that Jack had been speaking about him? Was Daniel at all curious to know what had been said? It only took a moment to realise that it didn’t matter. He and Jack already knew how much they meant to each other, and he didn’t need a second-hand report to confirm it.

As the pause lengthened once more, Daniel decided he’d had enough shocks for one day and he really needed a coffee-break. He hadn’t had one since before entering the infirmary that morning, which was several hours ago now.

“Do you want a drink?” he asked, as he headed for the kitchen.

“Water, please.”

Well that was unexpected for an O’Neill, or MacGyver, Daniel mentally amended.

“Water? That’s not what I’d have expected from Jack’s brother.” he replied, as he helped himself to the contents of the kitchen, which he knew as well as his own.

“Just ‘cause we’re twins, doesn’t mean we’re identical.”

“Not from where I’m standing!” Daniel joked back, although for a joke, it couldn’t have been truer.

Daniel busied himself with sorting out the two drinks, as he listened to Mac moving about in the den and the hallway. The front door opened quietly, but didn’t immediately shut, indicating that Mac wasn’t leaving yet, much to Daniel’s (and his curiosity’s) relief. Next, a car door opened, followed a few moments later, by it clunking shut again. Then the front door was gently closed once more. Daniel visualised the movements in his mind, wondering what Mac was up to.

He was just about to pour his coffee in to his cup, when he caught the quiet sounds of a couple of clicks of metal fastenings, which sounded like a box being opened. He didn’t have to wonder for long about what was happening, before the quiet strains of

soft guitar playing drifted through the house. It was wonderful to listen to and Daniel was in no hurry to get back in the den and disturb the player.

It was obvious Mac was an experienced guitarist; both by the complexity of the music being made, and the ability to play so quietly, in deference to his sleeping brother.

Finally, Daniel brought both drinks through and watched as Mac quietly played, subconsciously noticing the solid wood guitar case propped up in a corner of the room. Mac seemed to be simply relaxing, constructing a melody as he went along. It sounded like a sad tune to Daniel, and he wondered about the causes of such melancholy. Granted, everyone had pensive moments in their lives, but the sadness emanating from the player's fingers seemed old and very familiar to him. The linguist in him was used to analysing music, which was often used in early societies as a medium for communication.

Placing the glass of water on the table near Mac, Daniel made himself comfy on the couch. He was quite content to spend the time sipping his coffee and studying this new facet of Jack's life.

Mac sighed as the music seemed to come to a natural end.

"That sounded sad," Daniel commented in the sudden silence. Earlier on, when he'd finally got Jack settled, Daniel hadn't wanted anything other than peace and quiet. But now, it was the last thing on his mind.

"Playing can be cathartic for me," Mac replied, reaching over for the glass and taking a large mouthful.

"Unlike Jack, who likes to blow things up?"

The familiar features broke into a large smile. "You could say that. Weapons and me don't exactly get on."

That information surprised Daniel, considering how proficient Jack was in that field. It was yet another difference between the twins.

"You play very well," he said instead, being diplomatic.

"It's easy on an instrument like this." Mac almost caressed the guitar, as his fingers gently slid across the frets.

"Looks expensive."

"It is. Which is why Jack'll kill me if I damage it."

"That's **Jack's**?" Daniel almost sprayed his remaining coffee over his clothes. He'd never seen Jack playing anything, except maybe a hockey-stick! What else was he going to find out about his reclusive friend?

"Yeah. I thought it was about time I returned it."

“I didn’t even know he played. I know he’s very knowledgeable about classical music, but I didn’t know he actually played anything.”

“You should have seen us when ...” Mac’s voice quieted to a stop, and a wistful expression came over his face. “But that was another time.”

They were stopped from what looked like heading into a sad introspection, by the sound of shuffling footsteps coming slowly down the hallway.

Daniel was quicker to his feet, as Mac turned to prop the guitar up against the wall. So Daniel was already helping a sleepy Jack down the steps, as Mac sorted out some cushions on the couch for him.

Jack was clad only in sweatpants, his bare feet hesitant on the floor, the bandaged left one obviously very painful to put weight on. Bulky dressings could be seen, disappearing up the pants leg. In the much brighter light of the den, Mac could see even more bruising on his brother’s stomach, which wasn’t covered by the chest bandages. Daniel heard him sigh, quietly, but kept his attention on his unstable friend instead.

So far, Jack hadn’t looked around, being more concerned with watching where his feet were going, while leaning heavily on Daniel.

“Why aren’t you using your crutch?” Mac asked, as he reached over to help turn Jack around and ease him down amid the cushions. Once sat down, Jack looked up at him and blinked owlishly, his eyes still glazed from either sleep, or medication, or both.

“Mac? I thought I was dreaming. But then I heard the music...” His voice was quiet, completely lacking the energy normally associated with him.

“No, you’re not dreaming, buddy. I brought your guitar back.”

“You didn’t need to worry about that. It’s not like I play much these days anyway,” Jack yawned as he leaned back, which quickly turned into a wince at the pain the movement caused in his chest, despite the pain-killers.

Daniel ignored his strong desire to fuss over Jack, and moved over to the chair instead, leaving Mac to sit beside his brother. It wasn’t a completely altruistic move. He was fascinated by this new-found relationship and wanted to watch them interact. The resemblance between the two men was absolutely hypnotic, now he could see them together.

“Yeah, well. We were supposed to be going away this weekend, remember?” Mac asked his brother. “I finally managed to find a match to yours and I thought we could take them with us.”

“Oh... Yeah... Sorry about that, but I don’t think I’ll be going anywhere just yet. Doctor’s orders. You know how they fuss over things.” Jack’s head bobbed a moment and he leaned further back into the extra cushions, completely missing Daniel’s quiet

snort and Mac's resigned expression to his comment. Then he straightened up again, wincing once more against the sudden movement, looking almost frightened when he spotted Daniel in the chair. Jack gulped audibly. "So... Daniel... Have you met my brother?" he asked as sheepishly as he could.

If Jack hadn't looked so vulnerable just then, the evidence of injuries so obvious, Daniel would have loved to wind him up thoroughly. But he didn't think a little teasing would hurt much. "Yes, Jack." He nodded sagely. "I've met your **twin** and Mac and I have been having a **very** interesting conversation."

Jack gulped, obviously wanting to reply, to come up with some sarcastic comment to cover his embarrassment. Not to mention his fear over what information the talented linguist might have prized out of Mac. Daniel could pick up verbal nuances, like most people picked up their morning papers. And if the archaeologist in the eternally curious man could fathom out whole civilisations from just a few buried rocks, what was one unprepared brother compared to that? But Jack was clearly far too tired to worry about damage control at the moment. There was always later for that. He leaned backwards again, propped up on one side by cushions, and on the other by his brother. "Play some more, Mac?"

Mac held his arms out towards Daniel, who obliged by picking up the guitar next to the chair and bringing it over, before returning to his grandstand seat. Mac then began to strum gently, producing another random tune. It was as soft as a lullaby, and Mac stopped watching his fingers to turn and watch his brother relax under its influence.

"Nice," came the quiet critique and Mac responded by stopping for a moment to lean over and touch his forehead briefly to Jack's. It was a fleeting tender moment, which Daniel thought might have happened a lot throughout the brothers' lives. It made him realise just how much he'd missed himself as a child, not having any siblings, let alone someone as close as twins were reputed to be. Although he doubted Jack would appreciate having an audience if he were fully aware of it, which fortunately for Daniel, he wasn't at the moment.

The half-lidded eyes opened fully for a second and Jack smiled. Then his eyes closed again as Mac straightened up and continued playing.

It was obvious a minute later that Jack was asleep, so Daniel came over to cover the still form with the afghan he'd left by the couch earlier. Exchanging a few hand-signals with each other, Mac stood up to place the guitar safely by the wall, then, together, they managed to manoeuvre Jack's lax form until he was fully stretched out on the couch. It was an exercise in deciding just where they could safely hold him, but he was soon under the cover again, never having been disturbed by all the handling.

"Drugged up to the eyeballs, I'd say," Mac commented quietly, as their ministrations failed to rouse the sleeper.

"Yes," Daniel confirmed, smiling broadly. "Janet does have a way with him."

"Janet?"

“Our CMO. Sorry, Chief Medical Officer.”

“I do know what the term means,” Mac chided, gently.

Daniel stared at him, his curiosity constantly peaked by these little snippets of information that still told him nothing. “So what do you do for a living, Mac?”

“Oh, if I told you that...”

“You’d have to shoot me?” Daniel finished off the well-known phrase.

“Not quite,” Mac laughed quietly. “But I do work for an organisation that likes to guard its privacy.”

“Not the military then?”

“Heaven forbid!” Mac answered assertively. “I leave the gun-toting to Jack, thank you... I suppose you could say I’m a facilitator. I help get things done that others can’t.”

‘A bit like us’ Daniel thought to himself, but voiced instead “Sounds rather like the Mafia!”

“No. I’m one of the good guys, honest,” Mac replied, with a smile. “In fact, I keep wishing I could get Jack to join us. He’d be so much safer. Oh, I know he’s still one tough SOB, but that’s not really the point. I want him to live long enough to enjoy what he’s so fond of protecting for others.”

He closed his eyes and sighed as memories washed over him. “He was always the more physically active of us, and I’m hardly a wall-flower. The stunts we used to pull...” Jack tried to move in his sleep, and moaned at the pain it caused. But he didn’t wake, and Mac quietened his voice in response. “He can’t keep on going like this. But he thinks what you’re doing here is too important to leave. So important, that he won’t retire, even to come work with me.”

“It **is**, Mac. It’s more important than you could ever know. You’re one of the ones he’s protecting too you know.” Daniel wished he could explain what it was they did, and not for the first time in his career either. But it simply wasn’t an option until the gate went public.

“He’s always doing that,” Mac commented quietly, as he carefully settled himself on the end of the couch, gently moving Jack’s feet to the back of the cushion and out of his way. He looked across at his sleeping twin. “Every time I see him, he’s got more scars than the last time. Some so unusual that I can’t even begin to think what instrument made them.”

Which made Daniel think that considering Mac didn’t like weapons, he must still have more than a passing acquaintance with dangerous places and situations to make a comment like that. However, there still wasn’t anything about the SGC that he had

authorisation to explain about, so he shrugged his shoulders and moved back over to the chair again.

“It’s strange you know,” Mac continued, not really talking to Daniel at all. “It’s not as though we have some weird psychic connection, or anything like that. But, sometimes, it’s as though he’s so far away that I can’t **feel** him anymore. I don’t like that. It’s like he’s dead - no longer there. I always used to just have this awareness that somewhere there was this other part of me. When we were kids...” he shook his head slightly, “...even when he was in Special Ops. Those times when he couldn’t get home and everyone else thought...” Mac’s voice caught for a moment in some painful memory. And it was a moment before he continued. Then, quietly, “But since he’s joined this new command, it’s been different. Even though our jobs mean our schedules don’t cross as often as we’d like, I just know something’s very different. I can’t explain it. It just is.”

Daniel couldn’t help feeling how profound that small speech had been. But, again, he couldn’t explain what those gaps in ‘awareness’ were, without breaking confidentiality.

The whole visit so far had been totally unexpected. Not only did Jack have a close living relative, about whom he never talked - he had a **twin**. Their schedules didn’t often cross, due to both of their jobs. And both of them had become used to not discussing family because of job security – or maybe something else. Daniel’s thoughts about Jack’s life had been turned on their head in a single hour. Not that he’d ever really had much to go on earlier though. The man, as ever, was an enigma.

“Just ignore me,” Mac announced as he slowly stood up once more. “I’m rambling again. I’m going to get something to eat, although God only knows what Jack’s got that’s edible in his fridge. Are you hungry?” Mac made his way to the kitchen, listening out for a reply as he went.

“Actually, we stocked the fridge yesterday, when we knew he was being released today.”

“We?”

“Me, Sam and ... Murray.”

“Sam? Ah, that would be Carter, I guess. And Murray, also known as Teal’c when Jack gets excited and mixes his given and tribal names.”

“Yeah...” Jack? Excited? Somebody must have stolen his yo-yo...

“You know, you’re nowhere near as casual with all this BS as Jack is, and I’m pretty darned good at filtering out what he says. I’ve had a lifetime of experience at that...”

Daniel could have sworn he heard a quiet ‘mostly’ uttered at the end of that sentence. He stood up to follow the other man, then they wouldn’t have to shout over the couch. “Guess that must be where the grey comes from.” He pointed towards Mac’s head as he joined him in the kitchen.

“Well you should know. Jack tells me he got all of his thanks to you.”

Daniel sputtered behind him, as Mac searched through the fridge to cover the smile on his face. Mac got a feeling he could understand why Jack enjoyed teasing the younger man so much. It was fun! He finally selected a chicken casserole that Janet had made. He still preferred to eat mostly vegetarian, but his dislikes had mellowed with age. Odd little discretions no longer tore him up like they once would have done.

“You OK with this?” Mac asked, tilting the dish towards Daniel.

“Yeah. That’s fine.”

“Good. I’m sure there’ll be enough left for a small helping for Jack, if he’s hungry when he wakes up.” Mac pulled the Clingfilm off the dish and put it in the oven to heat up, throwing the plastic wrap in the bin. Then he got the loaf out of the breadbin and started to butter a few slices. “I guess you were going to sleep in the spare room tonight?”

“That was the plan, but I can easily go home if you want to stay instead.” Daniel could hardly object to Mac wanting to look after his brother. “Jack does need someone here though, so you’ll have to stay if I go. Even **you** won’t be safe from the wrath of Janet if she finds out no one’s been taking care of him. And then she’ll be sure to take him back to the infirmary, which won’t go down too well at all.”

Mac laughed at that. A deep and hearty laugh, and it was a sound Daniel enjoyed. He wished he could hear Jack laugh like that. The man could be completely infantile when he wanted to be, a child in a man’s body, with all its charms and naiveté. But his Colonel’s persona rarely gave him the opportunity to fully let go. Even off duty, you could just tell from his mannerisms that he still needed to feel in control, still felt the responsibility – just in case...

“Must be one heck of a woman to instil such fear in a grown man!” Mac’s voice interrupted his thoughts.

“You have no idea!” Daniel replied, with feeling.

“I’d love to meet her.”

“I’m sure you will, if you’re going to be stopping for a while. She’s sure to call over and check on Jack, probably tomorrow. By rights, he shouldn’t really be here. But space is always at a premium in the infirmary on base, and Jack’s notoriously difficult as a patient. The nurses at the Academy Hospital can’t handle him at all.”

“But you can?”

“We’re a team. We look out for each other.” Other branches of the military might not approve of such closeness within a team, or such fraternizing off duty. But the SGC wasn’t your usual command, in more ways than one.

“Strange term that, don’t ya think - team? For a bunch of people sat behind desks?” Mac smiled to take any sting out of his words, but both of them understood the truth of the comment.

Daniel just smiled.

“Anyway,” Mac continued. “I’ll feel guilty if I push you out of your bed. I can easily take the couch, or put a cot in Jack’s room. I’ve slept in a lot worse places.”

‘So have I’ Daniel thought. “No, honestly, it’s fine. You said yourself, your schedules don’t often meet. I’m sure Jack would rather spend some quality time with you, and I can always catch up later.” Plus, his mind was already planning alternative activities with his computer for the evening. Although it wasn’t anything SGC related that he was thinking of investigating.

Mac nodded. “But you will come and visit still, won’t you? I’d like to get to know you, now I’ve finally met you. Jack doesn’t say much, but it’s obvious you’re all very important to him.”

Daniel raised his eyebrows at that. Jack wasn’t exactly known for admitting to feelings. No matter how deeply his friends knew he felt them.

Mac caught the look. “Don’t get me wrong. It’s not like he’s been spouting hearts and flowers or stuff like that. But I **do** know my brother. Don’t tell me **you** can’t read between his lines?”

“I guess.”

“I’m sure you do.” Mac’s expression was knowledgeable. “Well, just imagine that ten-fold for me. Even though we don’t get to see each other nearly enough anymore, he’s a part of me, and vice-versa.”

“That must be hard. I never had any brothers or sisters myself, let alone someone as close as you two must be.” Although it still rankled that Jack had never mentioned his twin, despite how close he and Daniel were.

“He’s got his job and I’ve got mine. And they’re both important. I’m either out of the country, or on a case... or he’s out, wherever he is. When we can get together, we do. Either up at the cabin, or skiing, or diving someplace. It varies, but we usually get completely away from where anyone knows us, so we can clear our heads and just be ourselves. Well, until the phone rings of course. We can never seem to completely escape that.”

“I wish I’d known about you sooner,” Daniel had to admit.

“Well, don’t thank badly of Jack. As I said, it’s a hanger-on from before, when the less you said about someone, the less they could be used against you.” His face turned sad again, as though remembering something specific.

“That all sounds incredible to me. To deliberately shut out something so vital like that.”

“Sometimes it’s the only way to keep it safe. So don’t knock it unless you’ve had to live through it.”

“And you have?”

“Not to the same extent as Jack, no. I didn’t have it as rough as he did. Even after the trial...” Mac stopped, horrified about what he’d been giving away so casually, and his face paled.

Daniel couldn’t help being both surprised and curious by that revelation. “Trial?”

“Forget I said anything, OK? It was nothing - and a long time ago. Please?” Mac’s expression was almost desperate.

“For now,” Daniel replied provisionally. He couldn’t seriously promise to do something of which he knew he was incapable.

Mac accepted that for now, hoping he’d be able to field any more questions if they appeared later on. It was old history that had happened a long time ago. It could only be hurtful to bring it back up now, more so for Jack than himself.

“So, how many slices?” Mac asked, casually trying to change the subject. He’d been so preoccupied with the conversation that he hadn’t realised how many slices he’d buttered.

Daniel moved closer to the counter and saw how much bread Mac had got through. “I’m sure that’s enough,” he jokingly replied. The loaf was nearly half gone. Either Mac had been on autopilot while they were talking, or he could eat like Teal’c!

“Well, I’m sure Jack will want something later on. I suppose he needs to eat with whatever meds he’s got?”

“Yes, but they’re not due for another couple of hours yet.”

“Maybe the birds will enjoy it, if it’s gone a little stale by then.”

Mac moved into the dining room, taking a quick peek over the balcony to check on Jack first, before setting the table.

Daniel grabbed some plates out of the cupboard to warm up, wondering what else the day would bring, and what a bit of researching would find out later on that night.

\*\*\*

An hour later, they were both sat down in front of the TV, watching hockey. ‘No change there then’ thought Daniel, when Jack began to stir.

Assuming he was about to wake, Daniel kept his seat, while Mac sidled up alongside the covered legs to place a comforting hand on Jack's thigh. However, instead of waking up, Jack began to moan and curse in his sleep. Realising Jack was probably in the midst of a nightmare, and conscious of the need for secrecy about the SGC, Daniel quickly moved across the room and knelt by the couch. He wasn't about to shake Jack awake. Not only because he didn't fancy getting a right hook, but also because he didn't want Jack to hurt himself by trying to give him one under the circumstances! Instead, he placed a hand lightly on Jack's shoulder, neither pressing too tightly, nor enclosing it in a possessive grip.

"Get your stinking hands away from my team!" The words might have been quietly murmured, but they were easily understandable to the two men listening so attentively.

"Jack! Jack! Wake up. You're dreaming," Daniel called to him.

"Good for nothing, arrogant snakeheads! Kneel before your God, my ass!"

"Come on, Jack." Daniel raised his voice with greater urgency. "You're home, we're all safe."

Mac decided to sit still, watching as Daniel automatically took control of the situation, as though the younger man was used to doing it. But the seemingly nonsensical, probably drug-induced, mutterings continued.

Daniel risked a slight shake to the shoulder and quickly moved out of the way when he saw both of Jack's hands curl up into fists. But trying to bend the fingers poking out of the right-hand cast, caused a grimace to cross over his face. And Jack's eyes opened slightly, before either hand was raised.

"Damn!" Jack moaned, his left hand reaching up to rub across his eyes, before he opened them fully and looked about him at his audience.

"Sorry," he apologised to both of them, clearly feeling sheepish for having been caught in a bad dream, like a child.

"That's OK," Daniel replied, wishing Jack wouldn't always feel so embarrassed about suffering them. After all, Daniel had been woken from them himself enough times in the past. "How are you feeling?"

They both watched as Jack gently moved all his limbs, testing each of them in turn to see where the various hurts were. A few grimaces flickered across his face, but not a sound emerged. "Not too bad," he lied easily.

"Yeah," Daniel replied, a small smile on his face. "And I'm the King of Siam!"

"Your Majesty." Jack dead-panned back. "I'd bow, but I'd have to get up first, and I think I'll need your help for that."

“Do you want something to eat?” Mac asked, his hand rubbing the leg underneath the quilt.

“You’re due your meds anyway,” Daniel prompted.

“Honestly! The Doc’s got you too well trained!” Jack half moaned, obviously hating the mother-hen routine, even though he appreciated the caring behind it.

“Oh, and you don’t do exactly the same when it’s me laid there?” Daniel scoffed.

“That’s different.”

“How?”

“I’m the team leader. It’s my job to annoy the hell out of you.”

“And believe me, Jack, there’s no one better at it than you!” Daniel grinned as he stood up and made his way to the kitchen, while Mac looked down at his brother.

“Do you want to sit up and eat here, or try and make it to the table?”

“You two already eaten?” Jack asked, almost certainly stalling and giving himself a moment to completely throw off the nightmare images and wake up his aching body.

“A while ago now.”

“Here’s fine then. Give us a hand up will ya?”

Standing up, Mac helped first by swinging Jack’s legs towards the floor. Then he leaned over to put his hands around the bandaged chest, and underneath Jack’s armpits, before he pulled slowly upwards. He handled Jack with easy familiarity, neither one of the brothers bothered by the closeness. And between Mac pulling upwards, and Jack pushing off with his left arm, the injured man was soon sitting upright, with the quilt rearranged to cover his lap and legs. Jack breathed harshly for a few moments, until the pain caused by the movement settled back down to a dull throb again.

“Are you warm enough?” Mac asked, still having difficulties staring at the bruises across the bare skin. It wasn’t easy to be clinical when it concerned the person he was closest to. Even his son Sam, whom Mac loved dearly, wasn’t as close to him as Jack was.

And now Mac could see clearly in the bright daylight streaming in through the large den windows, he could make out lots of tiny scratches across Jack’s skin. It looked as though he’d been dragged shirtless, across rough flooring. And the images that brought to mind, made Mac bite back a moan of despair.

“I’m fine Mac. Quit yer worrying.” Jack studied him in return. “I’m sorry about the weekend away. I would have called you, but I was kinda out of it for a while there.”

“I’m not surprised, looking at you.” Mac shook his head. “If Mom could see you now...”

“Yeah, well, no chance of that happening, is there?” There was a slight note of hurt in the voice, as there always was when family were mentioned, and Mac instantly regretted the comment. It was just one more subject rarely raised, especially with company nearby.

“No, I guess not.” There was a slight pause. “You do know I truly believe they can still see us from where they are, don’t you? That they watch over us?” He couldn’t help reminding his brother of his strong faith, brought on by a near-death experience, even if he lowered his voice from Daniel.

A smile crossed over Jack’s features for a moment. “They’d have to go a hell of a long way to watch over me sometimes...” But, he was almost talking more to himself, his voice was so soft.

Mac puzzled over the comment, but his brother had always been cryptic, even on his good days. This new job had just made him ten times worse.

“How are the folks anyway?” Jack asked, changing the subject, as he usually did, when Mac inadvertently touched on a sore topic, sometimes more subtly than others.

“Sam’s still God knows where. Out east someplace. Heard from him a couple of weeks ago and he’s enjoying himself. Pete’s giving his carer a hell of a time, but I think they both get off on it. And Jack? He’s just replaced that old plane of his and has taken up flying tourists around!”

“I thought they’d have to bury Dalton with that bucket of bolts he insultingly called a plane.” Both Jacks enjoyed hurling insults at each other over the state of Dalton’s aircraft, or his supposed lack of accredited flying skills.

Meanwhile, Daniel was listening as keenly as he could to the conversation between the two men, a room away from him. And he found himself surprised by the similarities between their lives. Mac also had a Jack and a Sam in his family, and this other Jack was into flying too. The twins’ lives had some strange parallels, but he knew those kinds of coincidences were popular fodder for documentaries and studies, so maybe it wasn’t that unusual.

It didn’t take long to reheat the casserole in the microwave, and Daniel buttered a couple of fresh slices of bread, to go with it. Mac had wasted no time earlier, taking the excess bread from their own lunch and throwing it out for the birds. They’d then both enjoyed watching the frenzied feeding through the windows. Mac had taken the time to explain a lot about the different species he saw there, leading Daniel to think he was a big fan of the ‘outdoors’, probably more so than his brother.

Daniel selected the appropriate pills for Jack, pre-sorted by Janet into a daily dispenser, along with a glass of water to wash them down, and added them to the tray. Walking carefully, so he didn’t spill anything, he headed back in to the den. Mac had

already placed a cushion on Jack's lap and moved out of the way, back to the other end of the couch, giving Jack plenty of elbowroom.

"You should raise that leg," Daniel commented before he put the tray down. And he waited until Mac dragged the coffee-table into a better position and put a cushion on it for Jack's foot, rearranging the man again before he could eat. Jack scowled through the manoeuvre, clearly not wanting to show how much it hurt to move again, but both men ignored the grumbling, recognising it for what it was.

They continued watching the hockey as Jack managed his food single-handedly, using the spoon Daniel had thoughtfully provided. He even took the pills without any complaints. But Daniel thought that probably meant he was just too tired for an argument with his brother sat there, because there was no doubt whose side Mac would be on.

The exercise seemed to use up Jack's remaining strength though, and before long he was lying back against the back of the couch, half asleep again, the tray tilting dangerously on his legs. Mac and Daniel exchanged quick glances.

"Come on, buddy," Mac announced, standing up. "I reckon it's sack time for you."

Daniel got up and took the tray back to the kitchen, whilst Mac helped pull an unresisting Jack to his feet.

"And next time, use the God-damned crutch, Jack. You're no featherweight any more."

Even though Jack was obviously all but asleep, Daniel could swear he heard him snigger as he replied, "Well I notice you've been putting on the pounds too. Don't they serve those health foods any more where you are?"

"Sarcasm will get you nowhere!" came the exasperated reply.

"Works fine with Daniel." He heard Jack stifle a moan as they managed the steps up out of the den.

"I doubt that!" Mac replied. "Daniel seems to have you pegged all right."

"Daniel?" Jack called as they passed the kitchen.

"Go to bed, Jack!" Daniel replied as he started to load the accumulated dishes into the washer.

"I get no respect! I'm hurt, I tell ya!" Jack replied amiably, letting his brother take most of his weight as they slowly shuffled down the hallway.

"We can already see that," Mac grumbled. "It's time you really **did** take a desk job you know. You're getting far too old for whatever it is you do."

“Pot calling kettle, Mac.” Jack stared at his brother, before concentrating on his feet again.

While in the kitchen, Daniel was prompted once more into wondering what it was that Mac did for a living. Visually, the man seemed as lithe and fit as Jack, which suggested that whatever it was, it was an active occupation. Or he could just like keeping fit in the gym. Daniel sighed.

Mac got Jack safely sat on the bed, and helped change the rumpled sweat pants for boxers. He could now see that the bandage trailed from his foot right up past his knee to nearly thigh height.

“Jeesh, Jack. What did they do to you?”

“Same crap as always...” Jack replied sleepily, as Mac helped lay him back and then tucked him in. Mac wondered what was in those pills to knock him out so quickly. He concentrated on arranging the bedding, rather than the little snippet Jack had just let slip, before Jack was too far gone to help by moving his limbs himself anymore.

“Where’s Daniel?”

“In the kitchen, dummy. Are you OK now?”

“Uh ummm. Are you staying?”

“Daniel says I can have the spare room and he’ll go home. Is that alright with you?”

“If Daniel’s OK with it, I’d like that...” But then he fell asleep before he could say any more.

Mac grabbed a pillow and slipped it carefully under the cast, as he’d seen before, making sure his brother looked comfortable. Then taking one last look, and thanking God that Jack was going to get better, Mac left the bedroom. He left the door ajar, so he could hear if Jack needed anything, and went back to the den. The dishwasher was already working quietly in the kitchen as he passed, and Daniel was walking down the hallway with his clothes bag in hand. It looked as though he hadn’t even had time to unpack.

“Are you sure you’re OK with this?” Mac asked. “I really don’t want to step on anyone’s toes here.”

“I’m fine, honest. It will give me time to check my apartment. I haven’t been back there for days and the fish are probably all dead by now.” Daniel didn’t mention he also intended to do some Internet research the moment he got in.

“You keep fish?” Mac’s eyebrows were raised in a way that was getting far too familiar.

“Yeeees. They’re not just for sticking hooks in to and eating, you know.”

“Coulda fooled me!”

“Sounds like I just did.” There was a moment’s pause, before Daniel held his hand out. “It’s been a pleasure meeting you, Mac.”

“Likewise.” Mac shook his hand. “When will you be back?”

“I imagine you’ll have a house full tomorrow. Jack’s important to a lot of people you know.” There was a depth of sincerity in that last statement that couldn’t help but impress Mac.

“He’s important to me too.”

“Which is why there’ll be a lot of questions once people see you.”

“But not you?” There was that familiar head-tilt again. Daniel felt like he’d been in the Twilight Zone all day. And it was time to change channels.

“Oh, I’ve got questions, but today wasn’t the day.” He pointedly glanced towards the bedroom where Jack was. “So I’ll see you some time tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow.”

Mac walked Daniel to the front door and watched as the other man took Jack’s truck and steered it around his Jeep, then closed the door behind him. He wandered into the spare room and noticed how unlike Jack it was. Shelves were filled with archaeology books, small figurines and shards of pottery, which looked like they’d come from a wide variety of locations. Although he knew from past conversations that the whole team looked after each other, he suspected Daniel spent more time with Jack than the others. Some part of him had always suspected that Jack thought of Daniel like a younger sibling, perhaps sublimating for all those lost years away from his real brother. He now suspected that maybe Daniel thought of Jack in a familial way too.

Life had been cruel to the twins, but more so to Jack than himself. He hoped Daniel filled some of the gaping hole in his brother’s life, and helped him to cope with what life had taken from him so harshly; firstly with his brother and parents – and then with his wife and son.

Taking a quick trip back out to his Jeep to retrieve his travelling bag and own guitar, he took care to lock up the house as he came back in. Then it was time for a quick shower, to wash away the long car journey he’d had that day.

While there, he took a long look at himself in the mirror, musing about whether it was time to grow a beard, or maybe even just a moustache, again? Maybe he’d have a chat with Jack tomorrow, as sometimes his brother liked to grow the face fuzz instead. Being together for any length of time often led to awkward moments, as people could become fascinated with their identical appearances. And neither twin usually felt like answering the oft repeated, and unintentionally painful, questions. At the cabin, it wasn’t so bad, mainly due to the lack of visitors. But here at Jack’s house, it could easily get uncomfortable for them.

Before making a decision he decided to go to bed early. It was still evening and not late yet, but if he was going to have a house full of strangers tomorrow, all poking and prodding at him, he wanted to be wide awake for the assault, as it looked like Jack probably wouldn't be of much help.

\*\*\*

The following morning Jack slept on as Mac washed, shaved (having not made his mind up yet) and dressed for the day. He left a short note for Jack by his bed, in case the man woke up before he got back, and made a quick trip to the local mall. He needed more health foods for himself, as he hadn't been expecting to be staying at Jack's. Normally, they bought everything they needed as they neared the cabin.

Checking into the master bedroom when he returned, he saw that Jack was still sound asleep, his arm still resting on the pillow where Mac had left it the previous night. Mac tended to roll about in his sleep (which had nothing to do with years of living on a houseboat) and was often lucky if he still had sheets on the bed in the morning. But Jack could remain motionless the whole night if needed. Maybe it was a skill he'd perfected during his Special Operations' days, when remaining undetected 24/7 could mean the difference between life and death.

He wondered what he could make Jack for breakfast that his brother wouldn't struggle to eat single-handedly. Settling on toast and cereal, he decided to take a brief walk around the garden whilst the toast was, uh, toasting. No matter how much time he spent in the city, or in a town, he never got fed up of wanting to be back in the wilderness again. A refrain from an old song came back to him: "All the lights in Broadway, don't amount to an acre of green." He'd not be caught dead singing it, but the idea behind it was so in tune with his psyche. More so for him, than for Jack, anyway. Jack loved the mountains just as much as he did, but while Jack could live down here in The Springs until retirement, it would drive Mac insane within weeks. But even Mac couldn't figure out how Jack managed working inside \*that\* mountain all the time.

Mac left by the den door, noticing that it squeaked slightly when he opened it. Deciding he'd have a look at that later on, he trod carefully over the dew-covered decking and down the steps on to the wet grass. The air was sweet with the smell of the many flowers Jack loved to grow, although it still wasn't the same aroma as in the mountain forests. He wandered about aimlessly for a few minutes, until he felt the dew soaking in through his sneakers, which prompted him to head back indoors. But noticing the covered woodpile by the garage, he decided to bring an armload in, to save time later on. If Jack was going to wander around only half clothed, he'd need to keep the house warmed. He grabbed as much as he could carry with both arms, and struggled up the wet steps without slipping, leaning against the handrail for balance. He was halfway back through the door, when he heard a sharp, authoritative female voice behind him.

"Stop right where you are, sir! I'm a Major in the U.S. Air Force and I'm armed. Who are you and what is your business here?"

Ahh, it seemed like the first of the visitors had arrived. Why, oh why, couldn't Daniel have warned them?

"Can I at least turn around?" Mac asked, thinking this could be funny, if there wasn't probably a loaded gun pointing at his back at the moment. If this was Major Carter, and he had no reason to think it was any other female USAF Major, then he firmly believed she would definitely have a gun levelled at him right now, fully loaded with a bullet chambered and ready to fire. Jack didn't suffer fools around him, either in work, or out. She'd probably noticed the truck was missing, and was suspicious of any strangers with Daniel probably absent.

"I suggest you do it slowly and make no unexpected moves," came such a deep voice that it seemed to emanate from the Earth underneath him. Guess they'd both come together, which made sense.

"I can do that," Mac sighed. He slowly turned to face them, automatically planning what he would do in unfriendly circumstances. Like maybe throw the armload at them and run like hell...

"Holy Hannah!" came the voice of the highly attractive blonde standing a few feet away. Positioned on the grass, she was slightly lower down than his elevated position, but the small handgun she held was centred confidently on his chest. Her large ebony-skinned team-mate stood slightly behind her and to one side, effectively blocking off the exit from the garden to the drive. Not that Mac couldn't have gotten over the fence, if he'd tried; although a bullet wound would have been a hindrance! Mac admired his visitors' stealth capabilities, even accounting for the grass. He must have been deep in thought to have not even heard a vehicle pulling up, unless they parked further down the street. But then again, he wasn't exactly out on a covert mission at the moment. He was visiting his brother, for crying out loud!

"Who are you?" The large man questioned again, clearly surprised by the remarkable Jack-like features.

"I'm Mac, Jack's brother. And you must be Samantha Carter and Murray. I'd like to shake your hands, but you've got a weapon held on me, which isn't too friendly by the way, and I've got my arms full of... this." He shrugged, apologetically and gestured with the armful of logs; but still took hidden pleasure from the stunned looks on the faces below him. One he would love to get to know on a dark night, but the other would put the fear of God into him on that same night down a dark alley. And why on Earth was Murray wearing that woollen cap on what promised to be a warm, sunny day?

"Umm, sorry about that, but you can't be too careful." Carter apologised, putting the small handgun back in her jacket pocket. Its familiar weight and proximity were a reassurance to her in these unusual circumstances. Just as Teal'c's formidable presence behind her was. The Colonel never talked about his family, so the team-mates had no grounds to dispute Mac's statement, and his look-a-like features were impossible to doubt. So for the moment, his explanation was accepted. The Colonel had a lot to answer for, as soon as he was up to a bit of polite interrogation.

“Yes, you never know whose brother you might bump into, stealing logs from his garden.” Mac might have sounded angry, except for the wink and the smile on his face. It was a pleasant smile. “Do you want to come in, or shall we stand out here all day? Only this lot is getting heavy.”

“We shall enter,” Teal’c announced, as they followed Mac into the den, Teal’c shutting the door behind them. Once inside, both team-members took a quick look around, before sitting hesitatingly on the couch. Sam was still too wired from their unexpected encounter to settle, and Teal’c was in his usual ramrod straight position. Which might have looked uncomfortable on anyone else, but on him looked perfectly natural.

“Where’s the Colonel?” Carter asked, wasting no time. Not only did she want to check on her CO’s condition, after his release yesterday from the infirmary, but she also wanted the opportunity to quiz him about his brother.

“Still asleep,” Mac replied, laying the wood down by the fire before he toed off his wet sneakers. “I was just doing some breakfast for him. Would you like some?”

“I would like to know more about you, Mac, brother of O’Neill,” Teal’c replied, somehow still managing to look superior, even from the disadvantage of a sitting position. Mac had the distinct impression that should Murray think Jack was in any danger, the large man wouldn’t need any weapon to disable the threat – permanently.

“That’s a long story, Murray, one which I’d hoped Daniel would have warned you about before you came over.”

“Daniel knew?” Carter questioned, not knowing which to be more annoyed about; that the Colonel had a brother, an identical looking one too, or that Daniel seemed to know about it and hadn’t said anything.

“Don’t worry, he only found out yesterday. Had the same reaction as you, actually. Seems Jack doesn’t talk about me much.”

“At all,” Teal’c corrected.

“Well, that’s just one of the joys of the lives we lead.” Mac straightened up and headed past them. “I’ll just finish off his breakfast. Feel free to help yourself to whatever,” he offered graciously, then felt a little naive, as they probably knew the house better than he did.

“We’re just going to check on the Colonel first,” Carter announced, and Mac didn’t know whether to try to stop her or not. However, it seemed she didn’t need his permission anyway, as she followed him down the hallway and carried straight on past the kitchen. And Mac certainly wasn’t going to try and get in the big man’s way. Murray didn’t seem the type who would take ‘No’ for an answer.

Deciding that if Jack didn’t want his team in his bedroom, then he could tell them himself, Mac left them all alone. It **was** Jack’s house, after all. He busied himself

putting the now burnt toast to one side for the birds, and putting fresh slices in for Jack.

Five minutes later, he entered the bedroom wearing dry shoes, and carrying a breakfast tray. Carter was sat on the edge of the bed, a respectful distance away from her superior. And Murray was stood at parade rest by its side, looking just as much at ease as he had on the couch. He still hadn't taken his cap off though, and Mac wondered if he had some kind of embarrassing scalp condition. It wasn't obvious what they'd been discussing, but Jack had an intense look on his face, that had nothing to do with his bruises. Someone must have helped to prop him up, as he was now resting against the headboard, sheets re-tucked around his waist. And a sling had magically appeared, to hold his arm in place.

"Mac," Jack greeted. "I take it you've met Carter and Murray?"

"Oh, I think it's fair to say I won't forget our introduction," Mac answered, with another smile. He was by far the more relaxed of the two brothers. He started to put the tray down on Jack's lap, but paused when he saw Carter grab a spare pillow to place underneath it first.

"Thanks, Carter," Mac acknowledged.

"Sam, please." She smiled up at him and he had to concentrate on letting go of the tray before he spilled the juice out of its glass.

"So what've we got to tempt me with this morning?" Jack asked, sounding a lot more awake than he had yesterday. Although he hadn't fidgeted around to get a better look at the tray as it lowered, which for Jack, was very telling.

"Nothing that's going to make too much of a mess, I hope," Mac answered, as he moved back to settle in the chair by the wall.

"Well," Jack looked over them all, "much as I love an audience when I'm eating, I don't love an audience when I'm eating. So go on, scram, get your own if you're hungry. I'll shout when I'm finished."

Despite suspecting it was more likely that Jack didn't want to be seen struggling as he fed himself, they gave him his privacy. Reluctantly, they left the bedroom and Mac led them in to the kitchen.

"You didn't answer me before about breakfast," Mac commented, as he headed for the breadbin yet again. He still hadn't had his own breakfast and the birds were eating better than he was. "Do you want anything?"

"I would enjoy some toast, MacO'Neill."

"It's just Mac. There's no O'Neill in my name."

"But I thought you were brothers?" Sam asked, clearly puzzled.

He placed his hands on the counter, and sighed quietly. He knew that the moment he'd decided to stay with Jack, that this was bound to come out. He wished it had been later, rather than sooner, and preferably when Jack was about. That way, he could either lead, or miss-direct, his team how he wanted. That was Jack's right. But the instinctive curiosity of his team-mates was understandable. And stalling likely to only sharpen their military mind-set tenaciousness. He might as well tell them just a little bit and hope it satisfied them for now. He just hoped Jack didn't kill him for it later. His brother was always more guarded of his privacy than even he was.

“We are. MacGyver's **my** surname. Jack and I were brought up by different families.”

“Why would your parents not raise you together?” Teal'c queried, straight to the point.

“It's a long story, Murray, and one I'm not sure I have the right to tell you.” Mac didn't want to usurp the relationship he knew Jack had with his team. The two members before him already looked stunned with everything they'd recently learned.

“But in my culture, it is unthinkable to deny your responsibility to your offspring. Even though adult males are expected to leave their homes to work for their employer, a female of the family would be entrusted with the child's care.” Teal'c was clearly disturbed. He might no longer follow his previous 'employer', but he couldn't imagine leaving Rya'c with strangers to raise.

“It's just the way it had to be for us. I'm sorry, but I really can't say any more.”

“But it wasn't your choice?” Sam asked, noticing the sad look on Mac's face. It was uncanny how easy it was to read the expressions on this stranger's well-known features.

“No. Nor Jack's.” He shrugged the bleak mood off and concentrated on buttering the toast as it pinged up, putting another lot in. Passing the hot toast over to his guests, he started to fill the coffee machine next.

They heard the thump-thump of Jack's crutch on the bedroom floor and listened as he entered the master bathroom, the door closing slowly behind him.

“Should not one of us see if O'Neill is in need of any assistance?”

“That's way out of my line of responsibility,” Sam answered through a mouthful of toast, her fingers catching a drip of melted butter off her chin.

“I'll get it,” Mac volunteered. He wanted to get away from any more prying questions anyway. Teal'c moved to take his place by the toaster, and Mac gave it a last longing glance before he left.

The two remaining friends exchanged a brief look after Mac had disappeared.

“Strange, huh?” Sam asked, not needing to say any more.

“Indeed,” was the succinct response.

Quietly, they continued to eat their second breakfast of the day, thinking about everything they’d just learned, and realising there was a lot more to know. In time maybe, but not likely very soon, knowing the Colonel.

Their long years of companionship made the silence between them a comfortable one as they silently echoed each other’s thoughts.

Several minutes later, Mac and Jack appeared, one helping to hold the other up, and the guests were struck anew by the remarkable resemblance between the two men. They were both dressed in sweats and, apart from tiny facial differences, and injuries notwithstanding, they could be looking at mirror images.

‘Bookends,’ Carter thought.

“Hiya, kids,” Jack greeted again, raising his head for a moment to look at them as they passed the kitchen, rather than down at his feet. “Missed me?”

“I do not recall you being mislaid,” Teal’c responded easily, but the Jaffa decided to keep his bantering to a minimum. It would not do to relax too much, nor to let too much of his alien heritage slip through with Mac in their presence. “I have prepared some heated bread for you, MacGyver.”

Neither he, nor Sam, missed the quick apprehensive look shared by the brothers at the mention of Mac’s full surname, before Mac continued to help Jack down into the den and on to the couch. He took the crutch and propped it next to the couch, then rearranged the coffee-table as a foot stool again, while Jack carefully shuffled himself backwards. Even though he moved slowly, Jack barely managed to stifle the small moans of discomfort it caused, which everyone tried to ignore. Once Jack’s bandaged foot was safely perched on its cushion again, Mac could step back and finally get his own breakfast.

“Thanks,” he belatedly called back to Teal’c, but then saw how dangerously near Jack’s guitar was to the crutch. The instrument was still propped against the wall from the night before, not even back in its case. He moved it to a safer position, then disappeared down the hallway and past the kitchen.

Three sets of eyes watched as far as they each could follow, as Mac continued to move around the house. Jack was used to seeing this never-can-sit-still behaviour in his brother, and was fondly amused by it. He didn’t realise for one moment that people also saw the same trait in him. And perhaps it was this similarity that fascinated his two team-mates as well, although Teal’c was also sparing an eye for the quickly cooling toast.

They heard as Mac checked the master bedroom, returning a moment later with the empty breakfast tray. Mac was pleased to note that the pills he’d put on it for Jack with his food had now both gone. He only hoped they hadn’t gone down the toilet! Something he knew Jack was eminently capable of.

Once he reached the kitchen and put down the tray, Teal'c handed him the plate with the still warm toast on it, and pointedly signalled into the dining room, where a glass of orange juice also waited on the table. Feeling as though he didn't have a choice in the matter, Mac moved through to the dining room to sit down and quickly devour it. Is this what Jack referred to as his team's mother hen routine? However, it did feel like he'd been on the go for ages without any food and his stomach appreciated the attention.

"So what's on the schedule for today, kids?" Jack spoke up from the den, grunting a little as he reached over for the TV remote.

"Janet said both she and Cassie were coming over this morning," Carter replied as she and Teal'c left Mac to eat in peace and joined him in the den.

"Oh, goody," came Jack's resigned response as he settled himself carefully backwards again.

"I thought you liked them?" Mac shouted through, recalling the many brief mentions of them from past conversations.

"He does," Carter replied.

"It's just the black bag Fraiser brings with her that worries me." There was definite humour in Jack's voice.

"Sounds kinky to me," Mac joked.

"Believe me, there's nothing kinky about the Doc when she gets her stethoscope and bag of tricks out."

"I can't wait to meet this fearsome woman." Mac finished off his last mouthful and downed the orange juice.

"Oh you will, if Cassie has anything to say about it," Carter informed him, suddenly finding another reason to look forward to the visit. It would be so much more fun to see their expressions, than imagine what her own had been like to meet Mac for the first time.

"Just be thankful it's not **you** they've come to check up on," Jack grouched, as he flicked through the TV stations.

"Come on, Sir, you know how much you enjoy Cassie's visits."

"And Fraiser's too. It's the **Doc's** I'm not keen on."

"I am sure Cassandra Fraiser will take your mind off any medical procedures."

"Yes, you're a real kid when she's about." There was genuine affection in Carter's voice.

“Jack’s always been good with children,” Mac said as he entered the den. “You should have seen him with Char...” He voice broke off as Jack’s eyes rapidly zeroed in on him, followed quickly by Sam’s knowing looks. Teal’c would have looked just as stoic as before, but his eyebrows nudged the rim of his cap. So Charlie wasn’t unheard of then, just not discussed by the looks of it. Which didn’t surprise Mac in the slightest.

“So, anything to watch?” Mac nodded towards the TV to change the subject, noticing that although ESPN was now on, the sound was turned low and no one was watching it.

“Nah, just re-runs,” Jack answered. “Wanna play a game instead?”

“What sort? Board games? Cards?” Mac asked.

“Have you played Monopoly yet, Murray?” Jack asked, not in the mood for anything more taxing.

“Cassandra Fraiser has introduced me to that game recently.”

“Great. It’s in the bottom of the hall cupboard, Carter.”

She dutifully went to find the box, whilst Mac settled down immediately next to Jack, carefully dragging the coffee-table nearer for them all to share. Teal’c settled into a lotus position on the floor on the opposite side, unable to conceal the fact that he was still observing the two men before him. But the twins had become used to a lot of intense study during their childhood and tried not to take too much notice. Jack was already used to Teal’c watching over him during injury downtime and this wasn’t that much different, if he didn’t think about it. While Mac had his own fascination over the larger man in return, envying his suppleness, especially considering the huge muscles that bulged under his clothing.

Carter returned with the box and an amused expression on her face. “Would this be the one, sir? ‘The Simpsons Monopoly’?”

“Yeah, great isn’t it?” Jack smiled back. “Daniel got it me. Can I be Homer?”

Carter shook her head in fond exasperation, before grabbing a spare seat cushion and sitting herself on the floor next to Teal’c. Setting up the game gave everyone the chance to concentrate on something other than each other. Mac rearranged the cushions behind Jack, to help support him nearer the table, while Carter placed the board a safe distance away from his foot. Within a few minutes, they were deep into friendly bantering as their pieces leap-frogged each other around the game.

\*\*\*\*\*

Both Carter and Teal’c were baffled by the frequent quips and teasing comments that passed between the brothers. Jack had insisted that Mac play with Marge, “Because of the hair,” he said, which meant nothing to his friends, but raised a laugh from Mac. They were only used to seeing this type of behaviour from their CO when he was with

Daniel, but even that didn't equate to the level of understanding exhibited between the brothers. They finished off each other's sentences, or else left them unfinished, because completion didn't seem to be needed. It appeared as though they were almost telepathic once they got going. And while his team never doubted how much the Colonel cared for others, as evidenced by his latest injuries, they were watching a level of familiarity they'd never witnessed around him before.

An hour later, there was a knock on the front door and Teal'c went to see who was there. Luckily it wasn't a door-to-door bible salesman, as Teal'c's rather unique response to questions about his beliefs in God must have circulated far and wide by now. They all heard Cassie's enthusiastic greeting and a moment later both she and Janet Fraiser walked down the steps in to the den. Fraiser had just finished explaining that she'd parked on the main road to leave a space for the Colonel's truck on the drive, when both their eyes simultaneously caught sight of the double act before them. Whether Teal'c had failed to warn them deliberately, or accidentally, no one asked. But everyone was a witness to their stunned reaction as they got their first looks at the stranger sitting next to Jack.

"Colonel?" Fraiser was the first to regain her tongue, followed closely by Cassie's squawked exclamation of, "Twins?"

Carter was about to refute that, after all it hadn't been mentioned, when she heard Jack's, "Surprise!"

"Cool!" Cassie exclaimed, all restraint quickly gone as she ran over to give Jack a careful hug, before looking speculatively across at Mac. The others were still trying to deal with this latest revelation. But looking at the two men, how could it have been otherwise?

"Hi, I'm Cassie."

"Hi, I'm Mac, and it's a pleasure to finally meet you." He reached his hand over in front of Jack for her to shake, which she did.

There was a puzzled expression on her young face, as she pulled back to look at Jack. "What have you been saying about me?" she asked, only half seriously.

"Wouldn't you like to know?" He raised his eyebrows at her. At least they were one body part that didn't hurt when he moved!

"Nothing but the best, Cassie," Mac interrupted, fearful that the young girl's cuddling of Jack might become overzealous if she got too excited. Although everyone else here might know each other extremely well, they were still relatively unknown quantities to him.

"I should think so!" She gently cuddled close to Jack once more, then took his chin in her hand and looked at him directly in his face. "I swear, Uncle Jack, if you don't take better care of yourself, I'm going to go and tell Uncle George to stop sending you out." She stopped for a moment, and looked over to Mac, clearly realising she shouldn't have said that much, although he didn't seem to be taking too much notice.

But, she pulled back with embarrassment, and moved to sit on the floor on the other side of Teal'c. She only tended to use the honorific Uncle now when she was worried, or upset. She considered herself far too grown up under normal circumstances.

"If there's any swearing to be done, young lady," Fraiser interrupted, "it will be done by me when I examine the Colonel."

Jack couldn't help but notice the familiar black bag she carried. "Sir?" The polite voicing of his title couldn't possibly be taken as anything other than an order, so he sighed and tried to get up.

"Oops," he apologised, rather than swore with Cassie about, when his muscles totally failed to cooperate.

Fraiser dropped her bag and was there in a moment, before the others could move, stature irrelevant as her professional experience soon had the Colonel levered up on to his feet. "Lean on me, Sir," she instructed as she reached out for the nearby crutch. "Cassie, can you bring my bag?"

Carefully, all three left the den, heading for the bedroom, Jack's hesitant gait emphasised by the thumping sound of the crutch on the floor. The few steps up proved a hindrance again, but the Colonel had become well versed in using crutches over the years, and they were soon disappearing down the hallway. The three remaining adults waited until Cassie came back a minute later.

"So, who's winning?" the youngster asked as she looked at the board.

"Who knows?" Carter replied distractedly, as they all half-listened to the muted sounds from down the other end of the house. "Do you want to take the Colonel's place?"

"Don't mind if I do," she replied eagerly, leaping on to the couch and smiling at Mac, before she studied the board and Jack's considerable pile of money. "Are you sure Jack doesn't cheat?" she asked the group.

"We have yet to catch him at it," Teal'c replied, which obviously indicated that the Jaffa didn't necessarily believe it past his CO's abilities.

Half an hour later, and with Jack's winnings considerably reduced, Fraiser returned to the den alone.

"Where's Jack?" Mac asked, looking beyond her.

"Sleeping for now."

"How is he?" Carter asked, beating anyone else to the question.

"Not too bad, all things considered. Providing he continues to take it easy, and we watch out for signs of infection, he'll soon be running around, annoying us all to distraction."

“Jack’s never annoying,” Cassie argued, with a smile on her face, and Mac sat back enjoying the banter. It felt good to know his brother had such good friends in his life.

They heard a key in the door and looked up as Daniel let himself in. He must have coasted down the drive to arrive so quietly. Something Jack would not appreciate him doing in **his** truck. “Thought I’d use the key and save you from getting up,” he explained. “Where’s Jack?” He asked, after he’d looked around the den.

“Taking a nap,” Fraiser replied.

“That’s good, isn’t it?” Daniel asked, needing to make sure. After all, Jack had only been out of the infirmary for one day.

“He’s fine, Daniel. Well, at least as much as he can be under the circumstances.”

“Riiight,” he replied, waiting to see if Janet qualified that remark with anything, but she didn’t.

Mac tapped his hands on his legs and stood up. “I’ll just go and check on him then. Daniel can take my place.”

“There’s no need for that,” Fraiser said, automatically holding her hand out to stop him and moving to block his path. Her response was a purely autonomic reflex, brought on by years of nursing patients within a military controlled environment.

Mac took a step towards her, completely baffled by her order and fully prepared to move her aside if need be. Although he didn’t carry the ordnance about him that his brother frequently did, he was still used to finding a way around obstacles. What right did this woman have to think she could stop him from seeing his own brother? And in his brother’s own house too? The frown on Mac’s face spoke volumes about both his confusion and determination. They’d all seen the same look many times before on an identical face, when confronted by a problem he hadn’t expected to find.

Belatedly remembering that she wasn’t in her infirmary, nor was she dealing with an officer bound to her command, Fraiser took a hesitant step backwards. Everyone by now had stopped what they were doing, to watch. Seeing Fraiser being challenged so openly was a situation no one was used to witnessing. Mac’s stance spoke of an unquestioned confidence in his own abilities, regardless of the doctor’s diminutive stature.

The anxiety increased in the room as each person watched the scene, ready to interfere if necessary. Teal’c, in particular, was keen to see what would happen. He’d already made a swift judgement that Mac was a man of honour, probably even more so considering he had the same genetic heritage as O’Neill. But, by that same reasoning, Mac also had to have very strong feelings regarding his need to be with his sibling.

None of this attention was lost on the two protagonists. Mac hadn't meant to appear intimidating, but Jack was his brother and this doctor, whom he'd only just met, had no right to stop him looking out for him. No one did.

Not any more.

Fraiser, for her part, realised the same thing. The Colonel might be her patient and friend, but she had no jurisdiction over the man in front of her. "I'm sorry," she apologised, still getting used to the fact that there was an outsider in their previously SGC-exclusive family. And they'd all have to make adjustments, accordingly.

"S OK," he said. "I just need to go and see for myself. If you'll excuse me," he apologised to the room at large, then strode quickly away without risking a backwards glance.

"That was a close call," Cassie commented into the silence.

"Not really," Daniel was quick to reply. "I think Mac's too much like Jack. He'd never try to hurt any one of us." He wondered if he'd have any time today to talk to Sam and Teal'c about what he'd found out last night on the web. It certainly added a new perspective to what they'd all just witnessed. He made himself comfy in Mac's place, and looked down at the board. "Who's got Bart?" he asked, as Jack always let him play that character.

"I have," Teal'c replied, while placing a possessive hand over the top of the small pewter piece.

"Oh." He tried not to sound disappointed. "Who am I then?"

"Marge," Cassie answered.

"OH." This time he did sound disappointed. He'd suffered far too many comments over the past few years about his hair.

The game resumed, but Daniel found himself too caught up in what he'd discovered the previous night to concentrate, and it showed as he lost money quicker than Cassie did. He'd determined to take his time in sharing what he'd discovered with his late night research, but now that he was here, in situ so to speak, he found his patience sorely lacking.

\*\*\*\*\*

As soon as he'd got back to his apartment yesterday, he'd logged-on and hit the Internet. After all, researching histories was his speciality and he saw this as little different. It was one of his reasons for volunteering to leave Jack with his brother so easily.

He knew Jack's military history was locked up tighter than Fort Knox, but would that secrecy also extend to his brother? Or to their childhoods?

What little he did find out was extremely disturbing and proved difficult to track down. He'd needed all of his intuitive skills for spotting clues: collating the tiny scraps of information and investigating each of them further; extrapolating likely dates and locations; knowing which government bodies' websites to hit; and which newspapers followed which types of stories.

As he suspected, there wasn't much under the name of Jack O'Neill except a few details referring to the adult officer, and even that hinted at more blanks than typeface. That didn't come as a surprise, considering Jack's Special Operations history and current assignment. However, when searching for Angus MacGyver, he'd eventually found some heartrending information. Google had become invaluable when searching for links to 'twins' and 'trial' stories. And the history came out almost in reverse order, as headline-seeking reporters ignored pleas to leave the witnesses names out of stories.

He'd found decades old articles about James and Ellen MacGyver, the parents of twin boys, then aged nine, being prime witnesses to a high-ranking Mafia Mob assassination. Having identical twins involved in the story, especially attractive-looking ones (which were easy for people to visualise and remember), forced the authorities into hustling the whole family away into protective custody. They were initially moved to the maternal grandparent's cabin, Harry and Celia Jackson (and wasn't that surname also a weird coincidence, Daniel thought), in the hopes that the different surname and remoteness of the woods in Minnesota would be protection enough, until arrests were made and a trial convened.

Unfortunately, a few months later, once everyone had relaxed their guard, one of the boys developed tonsillitis. The worried parents took him into the nearby town, to the local hospital, without waiting for full police protection. During the adult's return trip home the car had an accident. Or, at least it would have been assumed to be a tragic accident, if the boy left at the hospital hadn't also suffered an attempted kidnap. Both the father and grandmother were killed in the car, and the sick boy witnessed the murder of his police 'minder', before escaping himself with minor injuries.

The latest sad events, forced the authorities into making what they hoped would only be a short-term, though radical decision. No longer were the survivors of the family safe together. The injured twin was now also a witness in his own right, making his survival almost as important as his mother's. He had to be relocated separately to reduce the risk of all the witnesses being housed together. Hopefully, splitting up the boys would further help keep their anonymity, despite how much more heartache it would bring the grieving family.

Daniel just knew somehow that the boy had been Jack. He didn't know why he was so sure, it was just a feeling he had. Maybe that was when Jack's surname was changed? Maybe under a witness protection plan? Or maybe they'd all changed names and Mac simply decided to change his back years later, once it seemed safer to do so. That bit of their history wasn't reported. The articles also never mentioned if the attacked child's family were ever allowed to visit him in the hospital, but he assumed not. Otherwise he felt sure that at least one of the reporters would have noticed the extra security raised for the visit. What they did hint at was that the child was swiftly moved far across country to a safer location.

The boys were still only ten years old.

The images of a lonely child, hurt and torn from his family particularly upset Daniel. He remembered what it had been like to have his family taken from him at an early age. The situations might have been radically different, but it raised a new level of kinship from the civilian towards his military commander and friend.

So in an unusual move, the twins were split up; both to help protect their identities and also to make their movements less visible to track. It appeared as though a leak in the police department may have led to the recent attacks, so records were further classified. Even the grandfather was relocated to sever another link to the witnesses, and a single mother and child now bore little visible resemblance to the original family group. As sad as it was for the innocent people involved, too many other lives throughout the country hung on a successful outcome.

But Daniel was sure the price had been too high for Jack and his family, as the case failed to come to the hoped for quick conclusion. And contracts were placed on the family's lives, particularly high ones for the mother and child witness.

Years passed as evidence grew and more gangland members were indicted. Reprisals and rival Mob assassinations continued as a power-struggle grew between conflicting Mafia territories. And, as a result, the case continued to grow in size, with no relief in sight for the family caught up in its midst. The boys, now estranged from each other, eventually entered into young adulthood and their respective careers. Maybe that was another reason why Jack had never reverted to his birth surname? Maybe it would have been an unwanted complication for a fledgling career within the military? Or maybe there might still have been a contract out on his life?

The case finally did convict several important gangland leaders, but it had extracted an horrendous price for the unfortunate witnesses. Ellen died of illness shortly after it was successfully closed, having never been given the chance to rebuild her family.

Daniel simply couldn't comprehend how much it must have damaged the boys psychologically, and he was sure things would have been done differently now. He knew his own childhood had been traumatic, but he couldn't imagine having lived through what the twins had either. Throughout all his drunken evening chats with Jack, and recalling the support the other man always unflinchingly gave, never once had he let on how much he'd also suffered as a child. It was typical Jack behaviour, and something that wasn't ever likely to change much.

Sitting back in his chair after hours of reading, he'd wiped his hands across his face and stretched upwards to relieve the ache in his back. Worried thoughts had skittered across his mind. **This** was probably where Jack's reticent nature came from when discussing anything remotely concerned with family. His need for utter secrecy regarding his brother and parents had been ingrained through painful necessity at a very early age. And Daniel fully understood how much early lessons hurt.

In his friend's case - keeping them secret kept them safe.

It was a lesson no doubt further reinforced by his training in Special Operations. Daniel considered the lack of photographs in Jack's house, and decided it was probably just another side effect of that bitter lesson, learned so long ago. Obviously, as Mac had hinted, it was something that once you learned, you couldn't easily unlearn.

Daniel had printed out the various newspaper articles with a sad heart, planning to show them to Sam and Teal'c as soon as he could. Jack would be furious if he found out. But sometimes, friends just had to do what they had to do. He knew Sam and Teal'c would both treat the information with sensitivity, probably never even mentioning to Jack that they knew about his sad history. But somehow, he felt that it **was** important for them to understand. It explained so much about Jack's reclusive nature and what made him the man he was. For which they were all eternally grateful. If, by knowing this, they could somehow make life easier for Jack in some small way, he was sure they'd want to. And if they already knew, they wouldn't need to ask any intrusive questions.

By the time he had eventually crawled into bed, it was the early hours of the morning. And his dreams had been punctuated by alternate visions of a young Jack, separated from his family and running from contract killers, to the adult Jack on their last mission, facing down his torturers, until his team had come to rescue him.

In typical Jack behaviour, the Colonel had sacrificed several minutes on his own flight to safety, to ensure his team's tracks were covered. And in doing so, he'd unselfishly left himself open to capture and brutality. He knew Jack fully expected a rescue attempt would be made - when they were able to. But Jack didn't know for certain that they'd be able to get back in time. The man was possessed of a selfless bravery that Daniel had rarely found in the self-centred world around him.

But it was still a bravery that would assuredly kick his butt if Jack ever found out his friend had uncovered his secret past.

\*\*\*\*\*

Jack didn't surface again until mid-afternoon, when the aromas of grilling burgers and sausages wafted in through both the house and the open bedroom window. Whoever had opened it was a mystery, as it had been firmly shut when the Doc gave him the once over and changed his bandages that morning. Come to think of it though, he couldn't actually remember her leaving. Which was a bit rude, falling asleep on her like that. He hoped she didn't take it personally.

Easing his aching body out of bed, he made his way to the master-bath and took care of a full bladder before attempting a quick wash using the sink. He could just imagine Fraiser's outrage if he got his cast and bandages wet from a shower! It took him several minutes trying to wash his body, it reminding him with every reach of the sponge just how much it didn't want to cooperate. Then he had the same problem trying to dry it! Once finished, he hobbled back to his bedroom where he managed to slowly fight his way into some clean sweats. By now he needed to rest for a moment before making his way down to the den. Getting up had never seemed so much work. And, although he didn't particularly want any help with these intimate tasks, it made

him wonder where everyone was. Were they just going to leave him to starve while they ate all **his** food off **his** barbeque, for crying out loud?

As he carefully descended the steps to the den, he spotted Mac on his way back in through the side door. His brother had paused, opening and shutting the door to determine which hinge was making the faint squeaking sound. Jack smiled at the familiar sight. Mac could be really annoying about fixing things, needing to sort problems straight away, while Jack could easily wait for a better time. Especially as this particular squeak informed the security conscious Colonel of when someone was entering his property.

Mac obviously heard Jack's crutch thumping on the steps, and turned to see the other man had stopped to watch him. So he returned the gesture. No matter how many years they'd now had back together, it still never failed to make each of them feel grateful that they **had** managed to eventually find each other. The years they'd missed growing up together would be forever lost to them, but at least they had each other now.

"Fancy a hand down?" Mac asked, waving one hand behind him towards the garden.

"I think I'd better. You can't trust that lot not to ruin the meat."

"They looked to be doing fine to me. I was just on my way to make some salad to go with all that protein." By this time the brothers had met each other part way.

"Yeah, well, looks can be deceiving. Murray likes his meat still breathing. Carter likes it cremated. And Daniel's still analysing the coal for fossil remains."

"Nothing to say about Janet?" Mac helped Jack slowly down the few outside steps. Although the dew had long since evaporated, Jack could still have a nasty accident if the crutch slipped. The rest of their friends were just around the side of the house, where the patio set had been moved into the sunshine and away from the afternoon shade.

"Not while I'm still her patient, thank you. I don't have a death wish!"

"Very wise decision, Sir," the petite woman in question replied, as they reached the rest of the group. They were all busy setting the table with crockery, cutlery and cold foods, but they stopped for the time it took to settle Jack in a chair. Someone had already placed a cushion on top of a sturdy log for him to use as a foot-rest.

"Jack!" Cassie called, "I was just about to come and get you. The meat's almost ready. Did you make some salad, Mac?"

"Give me a chance, Cassie. I've only been gone two minutes and I spent those helping Jack down."

"I'll go and do it then." She scurried past them, shouting a cheeky, "Men!" at them, as she passed.

“Take after her mother?” Mac asked quietly.

Jack smiled with genuine affection for the youngster. “Every inch of her.” It didn’t matter to Jack that Fraiser wasn’t Cassie’s blood mother. She was, in every other way that mattered.

It didn’t seem too long before Daniel and Teal’c had finished cooking the meat. As neither one would defer to the other over the barbeque, they’d shared the duties instead.

“Doesn’t he get hot, cooking with that cap on?” Mac whispered to Jack, looking at Teal’c’s shiny face over the hot grill.

“Nah, it’s glued on. Murray has this thing about nudity of body parts. It’s a tribal rule!” Jack whispered back, fully aware that the Jaffa’s extra-keen hearing could be picking up his comments, and being unable to prevent himself from teasing the man.

Cassie soon brought out a mixed salad, although her mother commented on the lack of lettuce in it. “Well it’s boring,” the youngster replied.

“And it always gets left anyway,” Jack added helpfully. Which earned him a bright smile from the young girl. Even before meeting her, Mac had suspected the two probably got up to a lot of mischief together. And the sly look they both exchanged now seemed to confirm it.

The food didn’t last long, Mac sticking to the salad and tuna, while the others quickly demolished the burgers and sausages. Conversation was light, and they talked about sports and cars, no-one feeling safe talking about work. The sun slowly disappeared behind some growing clouds, which in turn brought a cool breeze down around them. Fraiser made some rather broad hints about convalescents being better off indoors rather than catching a chill outside. So Mac helped Jack back inside as the others tidied everything up behind them.

“I could get used to this,” Jack sighed as he was helped back down onto the couch again, and the coffee-table placed underneath his foot once more.

“No you couldn’t.”

“Course I could. Meals made for you, stuff put away. I don’t have to do a thing here but sit and command.”

“And the bandages, cast and bruises don’t bother you?”

“Well, obviously some aspects of this aren’t exactly welcome.”

“I’ll bet.”

Mac settled down beside him and reached for the TV remote. “So what d’ya feel up to doing next?”

At which point the others re-entered the den. Teal'c was the last one in, as usual, so he closed the door firmly behind him. Still watching everyone's six, Jack thought. While Mac's attention was inevitably drawn by the slight squeak from the hinges again.

"Now," Cassie said, "you can tell us all how come you're twins and none of us knew anything about it!"

"No, Cassie," Jack answered, looking down at his lap, suddenly extremely interested in his fingers. Mac kept quiet, still believing this was Jack's decision, but supporting him whatever he chose to say.

"But I want to know. Why the big secret all this time?"

"Cassie!" Fraiser admonished. "If the Colonel doesn't want to say, that's his business, not yours."

"But it's so cool. Tell us please, Jack?" she begged, sitting down on the coffee-table in front of the men. Not seeming to notice their reticence.

"Cassie!" Fraiser warned her again. The last thing the Colonel needed now was stress, and it was obvious he was very uncomfortable with the questions. "Collect your things, it's time to go home."

Cassie pouted, realising she'd been reprimanded, but collecting her shoulder-bag and sulking all the way to the door.

"We really do have to be going, Sir, but we've had a good time." There was a note of apology in Fraiser's voice, which couldn't be missed by those that knew her.

"Thanks for coming. See you again soon?" Jack looked up again, back on safe territory.

"Of course you will. I'll call around on my way home tomorrow evening. But if you feel unwell, or experience any unusual symptoms, call me straight away." Her gaze also took in Mac with those instructions, and he nodded back at her. Message received and understood.

Once the Fraisers had gone, the rest of the team settled down on the various seats and chatted amiably for an hour. But, as the time passed, the conversations got increasingly uncomfortable. Mac could no more talk about his day-to-day activities with The Foundation, than they could about the SGC, and the awkward pauses stretched out for longer and longer moments. It didn't help that they could all see that Jack was starting to cover up the occasional yawn. It would be days yet before his energy levels started to build up again. And then they would all struggle to keep him entertained until the Doc allowed him back on light duties. Although Jack and **light** duties didn't necessarily go hand-in-hand either!

Finally, Daniel felt they'd all had enough and made his excuses to go. He was still bursting to share his newfound knowledge of Jack's history with his friends, and they couldn't do that in Jack's house. Noticing some subtle hints from Daniel, Carter and

Teal'c quickly took the opportunity to join him and Mac saw them all to the door. He watched from the doorway as the team-members walked back to their cars, whispering to each other on the way. He couldn't hear what was being said, but nods were exchanged and the three friends left immediately afterwards; Sam's car following Daniel, still in Jack's truck, as they turned right at the bottom of the drive.

Jack was leaning back against the cushions, in the middle of a jaw-cracking yawn by the time he got back. The Doc must have given him some more knock-out drops at some point, Mac supposed.

"Wanna lie down?" he asked the sleepy man and, when all he got was a nod in reply, was only too pleased to help him stretch his long legs out on the couch. It wasn't cold yet inside, so instead of pulling the quilt over Jack, he merely arranged the cushions in a more comfortable position around him. Although it was difficult to know what to cushion most when there were so many injuries. He hadn't forgotten the chest injuries under the sweat top, nor the bandages trailing up the leg. The bruises on his brother's face were a little more pronounced today too.

"Some interesting friends you've got there," he commented as Jack closed his eyes.

"The best."

"And they all work in Deep Space Radar Telemetry?"

"Well, except for Cassie. You do know there's an age restriction for the service, don't you?"

"Smart-ass!"

"Not Jack-ass?"

"I thought I'd leave that one until later." He paused, as Jack started to drift off, enjoying the quiet banter. "So, anyway, I've often wondered what acronym you use for this place of yours. I've never heard you use one. DSRT. Could make it DeSeRT..."

"Sooner have dessert. I've never deserted anything in my life."

Mac merely smiled down at the closed eyes. "You OK there?"

"M fine. Go and find something to do and stop fussing over me. I'm not gonna break just laying here."

"Only if you promise," Mac laughed.

"Scout's honour."

"But they booted you out of there!"

"Only because their honour wasn't the same as mine."

Mac remembered back to when they were very young. He had watched his brother beating up a boy, much bigger than himself, who was bullying one of the newest recruits. Although the bully had been expelled, so had Jack, so Mac had voluntarily left with him. The young recruit had pleaded Jack's cause, but they'd been informed 'rules were rules' and exceptions couldn't be made. It was one of the first instances that Mac could remember feeling proud of his twin and his strong sense of morality.

"No - it wasn't," he agreed.

There was a quiet harrumph from the couch and Mac wandered into the kitchen to see how much food was left, from their earlier decimation. There was still plenty in the freezer, so he restocked the fridge from there, grateful that he'd got the extra bread that morning.

By the time he got back to the den, he could tell that Jack was fast asleep. So he looked around for something to occupy himself with that wouldn't make too much noise. There was a pile of unopened mail waiting on the table, so he set about dealing with that, writing checks for the bills and throwing out the junk mail. Neither of them had any qualms about looking after each other's private affairs. Jack had done the same for him in the past. They could forge each other's signatures so well, that not even they could always tell who had written what.

Wanting to make sure everything got filed away safely afterwards, Mac went down to the basement where Jack kept all his household documents. Most were locked away in metal filing cabinets, but Mac knew where the keys were hidden, so it wasn't difficult to find the appropriate ones and pull out the folders. Looking around, he could see years of accumulated history in the room around him: spare, or old household goods that weren't needed at the moment; tools; spare timber and glass; sports uniforms; Christmas decorations; and hidden away in the corner, he knew he'd find a couple of untouched boxes of Charlie's belongings.

He spotted an old hockey stick on the work bench, it's old grip brittle with age, slowly breaking off and decaying. His heart jumped for a moment as recognition dawned, and the memories flooded through him. Placing the folders down, he picked up the old wooden instrument reverently, noting its small size. It was obviously a child's stick, and one he recognised by the personalised markings. How had Jack managed to hold on to it for all these years, after everything they'd been through? Had Charlie ever asked to play with it, although it would have been too old and easily broken by then? And how come he'd never seen it in the house before?

He couldn't see the traditional ball made out of all the previous used grips anywhere in sight. Maybe that was still tucked away in some box somewhere. Although he thought this particular grip was probably too damaged to be added to it anyway.

Feeling a deep sadness for everything the stick symbolised, he wondered how long it had lain there, waiting to be repaired. There was a new black tape on the bench alongside a tube of adhesive, obviously waiting to be used, but the dust on the packet suggested it too had lain there for a long time. Maybe it was a job Jack was finding just as hard to do, as not to do. Maybe removing the old grip, might bring back too

many painful memories? Jack never did handle the old history very well, which was perfectly understandable.

But the tape was there and the stick was there. Maybe this was a decision Mac could make for his brother. Maybe if **his** hand did the repair, the memories wouldn't have to be disturbed?

He wondered what Jack was going to do with the stick later. You couldn't risk actually playing with something as old as that, its fragility would make it dangerous. Maybe he was going to hang it up on display? Or more likely, it was just another part of his past that Jack couldn't bear to part with, but would be put back in storage as soon as the damage was repaired.

Running his hands along the faded veneer, he could still recognise the pattern in the grain, and he was swept away in time. In his mind's eye, he could see them both as young boys, speeding around the rink, or chasing down the street after a puck, like nothing was more important in their lives at that moment. All the laughter and tears they'd shared, all the times when they'd never been more than a hand's-span apart from each other. What he wouldn't give to have those times back.

It was a lifetime ago now, and so much had changed for them both. He leaned against the bench, his sorrow at everything they'd gone through temporarily swamping him. Which was why he didn't tend to dwell on the past either. Gathering his thoughts back together, he collected the items and made his way back up the stairs. He preferred to work where he could watch over his brother, and maybe sneak the stick back down after he'd finished. Jack would know what he'd done, but they'd never have to acknowledge it if Jack didn't want to.

Once back in the den, he placed the folders on the table, next to the completed paperwork. Then he sat down to work on the hockey stick. It wouldn't take much effort, as he'd done this numerous times to his own sticks throughout his life. He even still twisted the tape at the tip in the same rope finish they'd both done as boys. Just like this one was. It was the style their father had taught them. He remembered the last time he'd been with Jack when they'd redone their sticks together, and with a shock realised he was probably removing that very same tape. No wonder Jack had been hesitant about this. That had been one of their last days together as children.

Carefully continuing to peel off the old grip, he put it to one side as he checked the exposed wood underneath to make sure it was free of dirt. Then, he carefully applied the adhesive as he started the rewinding process with the new grip. He completed the rope at the tip, identical to the design of the one he'd removed, and it didn't take him long to finish after that. It had been a strange job to do, becoming caught up in all those memories again. But now it was done and he put the stick down on the table, meaning to return it to the basement before Jack woke up.

But that left him with nothing else to do again, and neither he, nor Jack, had ever been good at doing nothing. So he wandered about the house again. Remembering how the side door had been squeaking earlier, he made another trip down to the basement to retrieve some oil, cursing on the way back as he'd forgotten to take the hockey-stick

back down. But he was sure he could still remedy that in a few minutes, before Jack woke up.

He set about swinging the door to and fro so he could access the hinges properly. He gave them a good dose of the lubricant and left the door open slightly - to remind him to test the result in a few minutes. He didn't think there'd be enough of a draught to disturb Jack for the short while it wouldn't be shut. He could take both the oil and the hockey-stick back down to the cellar at the same time afterwards.

After a fruitless search for anything else to fix, he came back to stare at the hockey-stick, once more caught up in the memories it evoked. He picked up the smaller instrument and took a few imaginary slap shots through the air, glad the den was a decent size and that he wouldn't break anything.

"Jack? Hope you don't mind, I saw the door was open," a male voice spoke up behind him. Mac groaned and lowered the stick again. This really was getting old! How many more people were going to creep up on him in this house? Although technically the garden wasn't the house, it was still splitting hairs.

Mac turned around to see an older, balding man, casually dressed, but with a well-kept figure and stance that instantly spoke of the military. Mac was about to introduce himself, but couldn't manage it quickly enough before the stranger realised he'd made a mistake.

The man moved with a speed Mac found difficult to follow. Before he was even aware of what was happening, the man had him pressed up against the fireplace, the hockey stick flung roughly away, and fingers closing around his neck with an unbelievably vice-like strength.

"Where is Colonel O'Neill?" the man demanded, barely allowing Mac enough air to answer.

Mac tried to chop his attacker at the waist with both hands, but whoever this man was, he hardly flinched at the powerful strikes. Mac had no desire to hurt someone who was apparently defending his brother, but he was finding it increasingly hard to breathe.

The man looked around and reviewed the hockey stick on the floor, the private papers on the desk and, belatedly, Jack's still form on the couch. Jack's plaster cast was hidden underneath a spare cushion, which had tipped over, so with a quick glance, all he could see was Jack's highly bruised face.

"What have you done with him?"

The voice was gruff with anger, but what bothered Mac the most was the way it came out in a timbre he knew wasn't normal, like the man was suddenly using an electronic voice-box, only there was no such device in sight.

And his eyes glowed!

Double crap!

Mac had been in many dangerous situations before in his life, but this frightened him in a way he'd never previously been frightened before.

“Who are you? An Ashrak? Who sent you? What technology did they use? Or are you NID? Answer me, damn you, before I tear you limb from limb.”

Mac felt himself being raised off the floor, the man's fingers closing tighter until he began to see stars. He felt his world spinning away, as he slowly processed the fact that this older man was able to hold a greater height and weight than his own up off the ground with only one arm! And he wasn't even breaking out in a sweat to do it. Mac didn't understand the strange questions he was being asked and got desperate. He didn't doubt the man's ability to do him serious harm and struggled harder. He kicked out with his legs, aiming for the man's kneecaps, but again the man hardly flinched at his attempts. God! What was Jack going to say when he woke up to find him dead? Killed by a man with glowing eyes and robotic voice.

The strange man was speaking again, but Mac found it hard to concentrate as everything receded further.

“Are you the work of some renegade Asgard? I know some of them are experimenting with cloning. But no, Thor would never allow anything like that to happen to O'Neill.” The terrible voice rattled within the whooshing noise in his ears, and just before his world disappeared completely, Mac thought he could hear Jack's voice desperately calling out “Selmac, NO!”

He was vaguely aware of being lifted up, and placed on the couch. No way could Jack have helped lift him, so this Selmac character must be doing it on his own. He could hear the thump of a crutch nearby and Jack's anxious voice.

“Why the hell didn't you just wake me Jacob? There was no need to fly off the handle like that!”

Jacob? Then who was Selmac?

“Selmac says she's sorry, Jack.” The voice now sounded normal. “There's been a lot of strange talk about an Asgard named Loki, recently, experimenting with cloning. And you know there's a huge bounty on your and SG-1's heads. I'm afraid we both thought the worst when we came in and saw him looking like you, with your papers spread around and you laid out like that on the couch.”

Mac heard the stranger, whose name appeared to be Jacob, explaining to Jack how he'd borrowed a car and driver from the 'SGC' and asked to be dropped off a couple of streets away, enjoying a brief walk on his own planet for a change. The Tok'ra's desert planets never felt completely right to him and he loved these trips home. He knew he could always use Jack's phone to call for Sam to collect him if she wasn't there. And it would be pleasant to visit with the Colonel first anyway, especially as he was on sick leave. He'd seen the open den doorway through the windows and decided to come in that way, rather than disturb Jack, although he hadn't actually been told

what was wrong with him. But then he'd seen Jack up and about anyway, and that was when everything had gone completely FUBAR.

But at least Selmac was sure that the unconscious man (and Mac assumed that she, whoever 'she' was, meant him in this instance) wasn't seriously hurt. She hadn't applied enough pressure for long enough to damage bones or cartilage. Huh?

Mac desperately wanted to wake up from this strange dream he'd suddenly found himself in, but his body wasn't ready to cooperate yet. The unwanted lethargy left him with no option but to absorb what was being said and try to understand it.

"Didn't Hammond warn you I'd been injured?" Jack's voice sounded a little more understanding now, but Mac still recognised the anxiety within it.

"Well yes, but that's all he had time to say. It could have been a nosebleed for all I knew. He had a briefing room full of Pentagon types, so I skedaddled out of there and came straight over here, thinking that's where everyone else would be."

"They were, earlier... So you're playing hooky?" Jack sounded more amused now. Whoever this man was, Mac was right on the money about him being a friend. A friend who'd nearly made a dreadful mistake. Which made him desperate to wake up and join in this weird conversation. Maybe it was a lack of oxygen, which had twisted everything up in his mind? But his body was still recouping and wasn't ready to follow his commands just yet.

"You kidding? I get enough of that with the Tok'ra, I don't need it here on Earth too!"

Earth?

Triple Crap... Did he just hear what he thought he heard?

Which made him rethink his usually exceptional, if currently fuzzy, memory for all those other weird things the man had asked while he'd been asphyxiating him.

Which might explain the superhuman strength, the deeper than deep voice and the fairy-light eyes...

Which also meant...

Surely not...

Oh... Dear God!

What the hell was his brother into?

"You and me neither. Hammond thinks I did this on purpose!"

"And you didn't?" Even this Jacob, or Selmac, or whatever, was laughing now.

“Yeah, well what can I say? Budget meetings, or taunting the Goa’uld? It’s a tough decision!”

There was a slight pause, before Jacob (Mac decided it was easier to stick with the one name for now) said quite genuinely, “Listen, Jack, I really am sorry about this. Who is this double of yours then and what do we tell him?”

“His name is Mac and you’ll have to ask him for his forgiveness, not me. As for who he is, he’s my **twin**, so if Selmac’s got it wrong about him being one hundred per cent OK, you’ll both be wearing this crutch back through the gate.”

Mac believed him too, although there wasn’t a gate on this property. No one took attacks on their family quite like Jack did, but was his brother aware about Jacob’s extraordinary strength? He must be, if he knew the man well, and it sounded like he did. But that wouldn’t stop Jack from carrying out his threat, even as injured as he was. Damn it, Mac decided, he really did need to get with the program here, in case the situation escalated and Jack needed him.

“Twin? Does Sam know? She’s never mentioned it. And will you **please** sit down, before you fall down!”

Mac felt the couch dip by his feet, as Jack’s weight settled there cautiously. His head was a lot clearer now and he concentrated on trying to open his eyes.

“Yes, twin. And the reason she never mentioned it before is because no, she didn’t know. At least, not until today. No one did, but Mac and I. And as for what we tell him, let’s wait and see what he’s figured out first.”

Mac found his body was finally ready to re-join the strange world he’d just found himself in. Now he knew how Alice felt when she fell down the rabbit hole, though the image of Jack in a rabbit costume didn’t bear thinking about. “How about I more or less heard everything you’ve said, and saw the greatest parlour trick with a pair of eyes ever performed, before everything went black?” His voice was a bit rough, but it still worked.

“Oops!” Jacob said, as he sat heavily on the coffee-table in front of him.

“That’s my line,” Jack objected, but smiled at his brother, seeing him awake again. “You OK?”

“Think I’ll live, but I bet I’ll have the largest hickey to try and explain tomorrow.”

“I really am sorry about that,” Jacob apologised, waving a finger towards Mac’s neck. “I thought you’d hurt Jack, and he’s kind of important to me.”

“After that display, I believe you too.” Mac coughed a bit, to clear his throat. Then looked between the two men. It really was difficult to feel anger towards someone who was trying to protect his brother. “So how about someone explains what Deep Space Radar Telemetry is really all about? Because even though it was obviously only

a cover story before, I reckon I've joined more than a few dots in the last few minutes, and earned the right to the rest of the picture."

Jack looked over towards Jacob, who shrugged his shoulders back at him. "It's your call, Jack. He's your brother and you're the one who has to answer to the Pres., I can just catch the next gate out of here and run for the hills."

"The Pres?" Mac gulped. "As in The President? Well, I guess it makes sense with everything else I'm sensing here, but I really would like to know the truth. And what's this gate you keep mentioning?"

"Why don't you go and clue Hammond in, Jacob, while I figure out how to explain all this without making it sound like a cheap second-rate Science Fiction film."

"You kidding?" Jacob said as he rose up. "It still sounds like second-rate sci-fi to me and I'm the one living it!" He disappeared down the hallway.

"OK then, Buddy. Lay it on me." Mac pulled his legs up underneath him, making himself comfy, and leaving more room for Jack to settle himself back. He trusted his brother, and it was only the fact that Jack was here, and acting as though everything was perfectly normal, that stopped him from feeling panicked about what little he knew, or suspected.

Jack sighed, and leaned backwards into the support of the couch. For the past few years he'd learned to curb everything he'd ever said to his brother about his work. They had always been able to read between the lines with each other so easily, that lying was almost impossible. So he'd learned to tell half-truths instead.

Luckily, with Mac's work at the Phoenix Foundation, his brother understood the need for secrecy and hadn't pressed for any further details than Jack had been prepared to give. But what about after today? Once Mac knew the basics, Jack realised he'd never be able to keep any of it secret any longer. Mac would have to sign the Official Secrets' Act, which he'd probably already done a version of for the Foundation anyway.

Jack could have tried to recruit Mac to the program at any time over the past few years, he was certainly skilled enough to be of use. But Jack had never wanted him to be near so much danger, more so than even Mac was used to. Maybe it was selfish. After all, why should Mac be kept away, in relative safety, when so many others were out there dying? But wasn't Jack allowed a little human selfishness? Hadn't he lost enough in his life already? However, with the information he was about to give his brother, all his options were about to change. The knowledge of what was out there was something Jack could no longer protect Mac from. And knowing his brother, there could only be one way forward.

"You did sign the Official Secrets Act, didn't you?"

Mac nodded.

"Well, you're going to be asked to sign another one."

Mac shook his head in puzzlement, “Why?”

“Believe me, the old one doesn’t even begin to cover what you’re about to find out. And the only reason we’re doing this here, and not going to the mountain for a debrief, is because you’re you and I’m me.”

Mac smiled. He knew how seriously Jack took his oaths. “Just tell me, Jack... It’ll be all right. Honest.” He reached over to pat the tense shoulder and shuffled nearer.

“OK. And no matter how far-out this sounds, Mac, this is the truth.” Jack turned his head so that identical brown eyes could regard each other. “A few years ago a group of archaeologists digging in Egypt found a huge metal artefact. Two storeys high at its apex - a honkin’ great ring. Looked like a giant bagel, of all things. The Air Force shipped it back to the states, where the biggest collection of geeks you could find in one place studied it. And the reason they studied it...? Because the metal didn’t come from Earth.”

Jack waited until Mac stopped looking like he’d swallowed a fishhook.

“The ring’s actually two concentric circles, one of which moves around inside the other.” He used his left hand to illustrate the effect. “The outer ring is covered with equally placed glyphs and there are locking devices moulded around its outer edge that we call chevrons.” His good hand continued to add visuals to the descriptions, wincing slightly when his right hand tried to join in. “They had this thing for years, going nowhere fast, no matter what they thought it was - and they had the **weirdest** notions of what it was, believe me. When along comes one Doctor Daniel Disaster Jackson who deciphers the damn thing in a fortnight! You should have seen their faces!”

Jack smiled at the memory. It wasn’t often Daniel was able to prove his theories, but that had been one of those rare times. It was just a shame he couldn’t do it in public and have his theories vindicated.

“Anyway, the ‘Stargate’ as we now call it, creates a wormhole which connects with another stargate of the same design in another location. You’ll have to work on your physics to understand that, or ask Carter... The glyphs are actually representations of stellar constellations and they act as reference points to pinpoint a specific location in space. The chevrons are part of the dialling process, enabling us to lock on to each point in space, until we’ve accessed another gate,” he waited for a moment, then used his left hand to point upwards. “somewhere... Up there.”

He waited, giving Mac time to assimilate what he’d been told. At the moment, it looked like he was still struggling around that same fishhook.

“We go through the gate, exploring other planets. Sometimes making friends and allies. Sometimes meeting things far worse. I can’t begin to explain what it feels like, going through it. Don’t know that Jacob could either. But I wouldn’t change what I do. It’s important. There’s an enemy out there you couldn’t even begin to imagine and

it's only the teams we send out there that's keeping it from our doorsteps, from the Earth. Because that would be bad – very bad...”

Jack paused again, now that he'd got the basic introduction out of the way, waiting to see if Mac had any initial questions. Mac was usually a very curious person, but this wasn't exactly an everyday topic to spring on him. Jacob returned and sat back down on the coffee-table again.

“I managed to persuade George's aide to prise him away from the meeting for a few minutes and hinted at the situation to him. He's on his way here afterwards with a few papers to sign.” Both Jack and Jacob were aware that the Colonel's landline couldn't be guaranteed secure, and that he wouldn't go into detail over the phone.

Mac studied Jacob, “So, I'm assuming you're one of our friends then?”

“Actually, I'm perfectly human, just like you.”

Mac frowned with suspicious disbelief at that.

“But I'm not,” came the Tok'ra reply from within. Mac noticed this time the tiny head movement and far briefer flash of eyes as the persona changed. He even managed not to flinch. “My name is Selmac and I am Tok'ra, the symbiote within Jacob.”

“Symbiote within?” Mac asked Jack, automatically turning to his twin, as he had done for years.

“It's a double-deal with the Tok'ra,” Jack explained, showing none of his usual reticence about the species. “The host, Jacob in this case, and the symbiote inside the host, both get something from the relationship. The Tok'ra needs a body to move around in. They're a little like mudskipper fish, but with long snake-like tails - not exactly conducive to exploring the galaxy in their natural state. And the host gets an incredibly long life, excellent health and incredible strength. You may have noticed that last detail.”

“No kidding!” Mac confirmed, rubbing his neck again, which was already developing a large circular bruise from the earlier assault. “So would you take one of these symbiotes one day?”

“Not likely!” Jack shuddered. “The symbiote and host share each other's minds and I like to keep my own company in my own head, thanks very much - no offence there, Selmac.”

“None taken,” Selmac answered. “The Tau'ri make excellent hosts, but not everyone has the mental attitude necessary to share oneself so fully. Jacob and I have a lot in common and I'm grateful you brought him to us.”

Although aware that he was only getting the most superficial information about this alien species, Mac was relieved his brother didn't want to join with one. It might be immature, but Mac was jealous at the thought of someone else sharing his brother so completely. Not after having been without him for so long himself.

Jacob retook control, fascinating Mac who watched, “I’d have been dead otherwise, so you have my thanks too.”

“It was nothing,” Jack shrugged. “Besides, Garshaw wasn’t about to let us go home otherwise.”

‘Let him go home?’ Mac wondered, startled, as the first inklings of the risks his brother must often take started to sink in. Along with other thoughts about how he might have got his latest injuries, and many of those before this.

“She can act a bit desperately at times, but it’s a dangerous time we’re going through at the moment, what with the Goa’uld chasing us from base to base.”

“The Goa’uld?”

“Those really, really bad guys out there,” Jack answered. “The Tok’ra are actually an offshoot of the Goa’uld. They’re basically the same creature to look at. But whereas the Tok’ra live in a truly symbiotic relationship with their host, and want to live in peace, the Goa’uld are only interested in taking bodies, and suppressing the host’s mind completely. It’s rape of the worst kind. Their whole aim in life is complete domination of the galaxy, and destruction of anything that stands in their way.”

The fact that Jack had said all this in a voice completely devoid of emotion, left Mac with no doubt about his sincerity. He wasn’t aware that this was the first time Jack had been heard speaking of the snakes without his usual barbed quips. But Jack knew he had to let Mac come to terms with this new knowledge in his own way, without distracting embellishments. He didn’t want his comments to blur the issue – at least, not for his brother, anyway.

Mac’s mouth was completely dry by the time Jack had finished. It had only taken half an hour to totally re-evaluate his view of his place in the universe, and his brother’s importance in it. He knew Jack must have only scratched the surface of what he and his team had experienced. How many other teams were there, out there too, protecting the planet? He briefly thought about all the current war zones on the Earth. And there was his brother, out on truly alien soil, fighting a deadly threat that people didn’t even know existed.

It took Mac a few minutes to process all that he’d heard, before he turned back to Jacob. Now seemed like a good time to address some of those earlier comments, only half heard during his attack.

“Selmac mentioned... Tau’ri?”

“Yes. That’s the name given to humans throughout the galaxy. We’re the favourite hosts for both Goa’uld and Tok’ra, which is why we’re so popular. The Goa’uld have harvested us like cattle, throughout history, to populate other planets as both slaves and hosts.”

“How come this isn’t common knowledge then? If they’ve been visiting and taking us for so long, surely someone must have noticed by now?”

“In the distant past, the Goa’uld disguised themselves as the Gods of the various early religions, when societies were generally less advanced. With their superior technology, it was easy to fool people who didn’t know any better than to worship them and accept whatever they did as God’s will.”

“So we’ve never fought back before now?”

“Oh, we did – eventually,” Jack intervened, once more leaning back with his eyes closed. “That’s why they buried the gate at Giza. We kicked their asses back then and we’re doing it again now.”

“Is the balance of power out there so uneven that no one else can keep these beings under control? You mentioned alliances. Is there no sort of galactic police force?”

Jack shrugged his shoulders, then winced at the movement. “I wish! Although we do get the occasional help, it’s not something we’ve come to depend on. Too many superior races with more important things to do than worry about anyone else. Or else they reckon we’re too young to be trusted with so called ‘advanced’ technology.”

“Come on, Jack, we’re not all that bad.”

“Oh, sure Jacob. So when’s the last time the Tok’ra came to us with the sole intention of helping **us** out? You know I don’t include you, or Selmac, in that. But you know damn well the Tok’ra only come to us, when it serves their purpose.”

Jacob wisely kept quiet. He’d had a few disagreements with the Council about that very point himself, only to be ignored and labelled as too involved to be subjective about the inferior Tau’ri. However, mentioning that would only corroborate Jack’s already low opinion of them at the moment.

Mac quietly watched the byplay between the two men and wondered how much his brother must have endured over the past few years. He spoke with such conviction in his voice. No wonder Jack was the more grey haired of the twins - or had the greater collection of scars and nightmares! Which now took on a whole new perspective.

“Earlier, when you attacked me, you asked some pretty weird questions, and mentioned some names I’m trying to remember. Normally I’ve got a pretty good memory, but having your hand around my neck was a little preoccupying.”

Jacob had the grace to look embarrassed at that. He looked over to Jack to see if he wanted to join in more with this question and answer session, but the other man still had his eyes closed and made no attempt to open them.

“Which ones do you remember?”

“One was an acronym. NID I think.”

“The NID are a rogue government agency, who have the same ultimate goal as us, to defend the Earth, but they don’t see the need to police how they do it. The ends justify the means for them, no matter what the means are. They’ll steal from allies, or kidnap personnel, basically stopping at nothing, if they think they’ll get an advantage from it. They’re a risk to both the SGC and the alliances they’re making out there. What’s worse, is that some people get involved purely for the political power it can give them.”

Mac nodded, not finding it difficult to compare the NID to any commercial espionage unit. Unfortunately, it was to be expected when human nature was involved.

“And the Ashra... something or other?”

“The Ashraks are a trained guild of assassins, paid for by the Goa’uld. In this case, they’re after SG-1, which is Jack’s team, as they all have prices on their heads up there.” Jacob chuckled, causing Jack to briefly open his eyes in amusement. “They’ve put away more System Lords than any other resistance group we’ve ever known.”

“System Lords?”

“The highest rank a Goa’uld can reach. And they’re extremely powerful, with huge spaceships and thousands upon thousands of Jaffa, their foot soldiers.”

“Jaffa?” How much more was there to learn, and could he take it all in? Each question seemed to lead to another one.

“You’ve met one already,” Jack finally joined in, quirking a small grin. “Murray, or Teal’c, which is his real name.”

“That huge guy is an alien too? But he looks so human, like Jacob here. Are they all like that?”

“Not all.” Jacob took over again. “And don’t forget, I **am** human, it’s Selmac who’s not. Like I said before, humans have always been popular as hosts, so there are hundreds of planets out there populated by them. The Jaffa were human too, long ago, but they have mutated slightly over thousands of years service.”

“And do they believe their leaders are gods too?”

“Without doubt.”

“So, not a lot of reasons for them to want to change the status quo either then?”

“They don’t know any different. Or, at least, they didn’t, until the Tau’ri started going out there. Teal’c was one of the first to rebel. He turned against his God, Apophis, to join Jack and his team. And he used to be Apophis’s right-hand man.”

“He did? You must have really impressed him Jack, to make him switch sides. He’s obviously very loyal to you, from the little **I’ve** seen.”

Jack just smirked. It still amazed him to this day that Teal'c had thrown everything away on a five minute meeting with a complete stranger who had been residing as a prisoner in the dungeon, and condemned to death.

"Jack's done a lot of impressing out there, believe me! I was a General and I knew nothing about what he and his team did. The SGC, Stargate Command, is so hush-hush, that only a handful of people know about it in Washington, aside from the President. It's probably our most closely guarded secret."

"But why not tell the people? Warn them about what's out there? Maybe you could get more help if this was all out in the public domain?"

"That decision's not up to us," Jack interrupted, shifting a little bit to a new position, while trying not to disturb his numerous aches. "The President feels it would do more harm than good, and that more people would panic, than accept it. You know how short sighted Joe Public can be, only thinking about themselves, and living for today. It's a tough choice. But once it's out there, you couldn't put it back."

"A bit like Pandora's Box?"

Jack gave him such an intense stare at that remark, that Mac wondered what it was he'd said.

"You could say that," Jack nodded.

Mac stood up, suddenly needing a physical release, and wandered over to the fireplace. He spotted the hockey stick, still laying on the floor where Jacob had flung it, and reached down to pick it up. He noticed Jack watching him, but the man was silent and didn't mention the obvious repair work. Running his hands along its length, Mac was pleased to notice that it hadn't been damaged in the scuffle, because the memories it held would have been priceless to Jack. They certainly were to him. So he moved to place it safely on the table, before returning to the fireplace, where he stared at the commendations arranged there. He took a deep breath, wondering how many were earned for Earth-side conflicts and how many for... not Earth. Jack tracked his progress the whole time.

"So all those times I couldn't 'feel' you, you were out there?" Mac asked, turning around and waving his hands upwards.

"Feel you?" Selmac asked, over-riding Jacob in her eagerness to explore a new facet of the Tau'ri, and wondering if it could be of any use to them.

"Don't get your panties in a knot." Jack quickly stomped on that idea. "It's nothing like as profound as you're hoping. We can't read minds, or anything. We just tend to be aware when the other one's in trouble, that's all."

"Panties, Jack?" queried Jacob with a raised eyebrow.

"Sorry, Jacob. I dare say that would be painful, all things considered."

“Brings tears to my eyes, just thinking about it. Although Selmac’s laughing herself silly at the visuals.”

“So you were out there?” Mac repeated, having lost control of the conversation again. Which often happened when Jack was about.

“More than likely. We go out often enough, depending on what’s on the schedule.” At Mac’s puzzled look, he continued. “There are quite literally thousands of combinations the gate can dial up. Some get a lock, but others don’t. You’d have to ask Carter about that. She devised our cold-calling program.”

“So brains as well as beauty?”

Mac wondered why Jacob cleared his throat rather pointedly at that moment.

“Mac, I think it’s time I introduced you to General Carter.”

“Carter?” Mac gulped.

“As in, Carter’s dad.” Jack grinned, enjoying Mac’s embarrassment, because he didn’t often get the chance to do that. Mac was generally too level headed and intelligent to get caught out - unlike himself.

Luckily, Jacob just smiled, an indulgent expression on his face. “So brains and beauty, eh? Must take after her mother then. She sure didn’t get those from me.”

Desperate to change the subject before he got into further trouble, Mac asked. “And those injuries you’ve got now. How did you get those?”

“Afraid that’s still classified. Thanks to Selmac here letting the proverbial cat out of the bag, we’ve had to fess up to some stuff. But actual mission data will still be ‘need to know’ only, unless you joined the program.”

Mac shook his head in surprise, replaying Jack’s last words in his mind. Did he really just hint at a job offer, doing something that half an hour ago he couldn’t even imagine existing? Did Jack even have that level of authority? “I used to think what I did at the Foundation was special. Always tried to get you to join me. Now it turns out your job is the special one and mine now looks paltry by comparison. What on Earth, no pun intended, could you possibly want me for?”

“You’d be surprised at how much we could use someone with your talents.” Jack’s eyes sharpened and his face was earnest, despite the tiredness showing.

“But I won’t even touch a gun. You know that!”

“Believe me, Daniel can’t some days either.” He sighed. “There’s so much more to the mountain than gun-toting and Goa’uld control. We have whole teams of geeks, who’d be just itching to get their hands on someone like you.”

“Why?”

“Because of all the technology and artefacts we bring back. Daniel’s one of those scientists who likes to go and see things *in situ*. Even Carter, who is military, is valued primarily for her scientific knowledge on a lot of our missions. But not everyone goes off-world. And everything we bring back has to be catalogued and studied. Someone with your problem-solving skills would never be short of something to do at the SGC.”

“I can’t believe all this. It’s just too much at one time.” Mac scratched his head and moved back over to sit on the couch again, one leg folded up underneath him. “And what’s your actual role in all this, Jack?”

“Just one of the grunts, Mac. I lead SG-1, the primary first contact team, but there are lots more teams out there, all risking their necks just as much as we do.”

“Not just a grunt, Jack,” Jacob disagreed, turning towards Mac. “Your brother’s second-in-command to General Hammond, in charge of the SGC, who reports to the Joint Chiefs Of Staffs, who report directly to the President.”

Well that settled the question over Jack’s level of authority. He’d never known how important his brother had become.

“That’s a heady group, buddy.”

“The rarefied air doesn’t make it any sweeter, though.”

Mac laughed. “You never were one for diplomacy. How on earth do you do it?”

“I’m mostly not on Earth when I do it!” Jack plucked at the cushion beside him, strangely embarrassed by the talk about him.

The behaviour was so Jack-like, that it broke through Mac’s mounting sense of disconnection with reality. If Jack could treat all of this as commonplace, then maybe he could get used to it too. Even Jacob laughed. The ex-General had always had a soft spot for Jack, especially when it was obvious how frequently he put himself in the path of danger to protect his daughter.

“So, what about this Thor I heard you mention? He was a Norse God, wasn’t he? Is he one of these Goa’ulds too?”

“You’d like Thor,” Jack commented to his cast. “Small, grey, naked, big puppy eyes. Think of Roswell and you’ve pretty much got him visualised. One of the good guys.”

“He’s taken quite a shine to Jack,” Jacob furnished, enjoying the obvious embarrassment factor. “The Asgard are extremely intelligent and technologically highly advanced. They’re the nearest thing to that police force you asked about. There is a Protected Planets Treaty, which they try to monitor, but they can’t be everywhere at once and they have their own problems too.”

“Protected Planets? Are we one of those?”

“Yes, Thor nominated Jack as Earth’s Ambassador when we applied for membership. Although the Goa’uld have since proved they can’t be trusted to adhere to it anyway.”

“Jack? An Ambassador?”

“Hey, I wasn’t **that** bad!” Jack objected. “And the rule book was only a couple of inches thick.” He smiled at Mac, enjoying the surprise which that comment elicited. It wasn’t often he got to talk about what he did. And sometimes, he didn’t think his team really appreciated what he was capable of.

“Well, at least it was safer than sticking your head in that Ancient library download gizmo!”

Jack gave Jacob a stare that had Mac thinking he was going to stick his tongue out at any moment, but Jack didn’t. Mac decided he wasn’t even going to ask about whatever the library device was; he was more or less at saturation point now. He might believe all this, but he could still only absorb so much at one time.

“Told you it was like a bad sci-fi movie.” Jack demonstrated again how easily he was able to read his twin.

“Yeah? Well let me know me when we reach the credits.” Mac stood up, needing to move again, or jump out of his skin. “I need a drink. Anyone else want anything?” He headed off to the kitchen, listening as he went. Maybe a whisky would help make all of this more palatable? He didn’t usually drink alcohol, but was prepared to make an exception tonight.

“Beer?” Jack called hopefully, not surprised by the “Not likely” which was shouted back.

“No thanks,” Jacob answered. Then continued in a more subdued voice for Jack’s benefit, “Since I’ve been blended, alcohol doesn’t taste the same anyway.”

“That must be a bummer,” Jack sympathised.

“You have no idea!”

Mac returned a few minutes later, smelling distinctly of whisky, and they spent the next half hour discussing whatever aspects of the SGC Jack felt was safe to mention. He only hoped Hammond didn’t give him too much grief over any of this. For once, he was totally innocent and was quite happy to let Jacob shoulder the blame. After all, the Tok’ra had nearly killed his brother! Jacob deserved a little aggravation, if only for that!

The sound of a car drawing up was followed by a sharp knock on the door.

“Hammond,” Jack said. He’d know that authoritative knock anywhere.

“You sure you don’t want to handle this?” Jacob asked hopefully.

“Oh no you don’t!” Jack insisted. “You got yourself into this. Besides, he can’t fire you!”

“No, but he can dock my visiting privileges!”

Jacob sighed in defeat, and left to let the General in. It would have taken Jack too long to get up, and coming face to face with Mac on his own had been what started this whole mess off anyway. So it was only fair to play the same card on Hammond.

Mac studied the portly, but still impressively authoritative, figure that returned with Jacob, dressed in a Class A uniform. He’d heard a lot about ‘the General’ from Jack, and was familiar with his brother’s high opinion of his commander.

The look was returned, ten-fold, when Hammond spied the identical men sitting on the couch, but he quickly got his surprise under control. With his job, he’d come to expect the unexpected, especially with SG-1. At least the injuries easily identified which one was his trouble-prone Colonel.

“Hello, sir.” Jack greeted, attempting to stand up.

“No, Jack.” Hammond stopped him rising with a single hand movement. “And I think under the circumstances, this conversation would be better suited to first names.”

The circumstances were obviously what sat beside O’Neill, and Hammond was looking forward to the explanation. Not inclined to worry yet over the Jack-double, because O’Neill and Jacob were obviously at ease here, it was, nonetheless, leading him to form his own suspicions about the request for non-disclosure documents.

Deciding to give everyone a chance to collect their thoughts together first, he took a moment to pull a chair over next to the coffee-table, putting his briefcase beside him on the floor. Once settled, he scrutinised the two men again, taking time to notice the slight variations in their features. But if he’d ever come across either of them separately, he’d have struggled to identify which one he was looking at. It was remarkable.

“Well, I think it’s time someone told me what this is all about, and who this gentleman is.”

“Sir, I’d like to introduce you to my twin brother, MacGyver, which is his surname by the way, and I’ll explain all that later. Mac, I’d like you to meet General Hammond, who’s the officer in charge of the SGC.”

“Jack?” Hammond warned instantly at the mention of the base. His curiosity was quickly overridden by security concerns. Even though he realised there must **already** be a security issue, he didn’t like to think anything had already been decided without authorisation. Although he was still going to enjoy grilling Jack about his family once the dust had settled.

“I’m sorry, sir. But I’ve had to tell Mac about the gate. It was...” Jack coughed, “sorta... ummm... unavoidable.”

“There’s nothing unavoidable about The Official Secrets Act, Jack. You’d better have a damn good reason for breaking confidentiality, no matter who is involved. Leavenworth is not a myth!”

“It wasn’t his fault!” Mac jumped to his brother’s defence, much to Hammond’s private amusement. The General might not like the current situation, but Jack rarely had enough people in his corner when things got dicey. And loyalty was something Hammond valued greatly.

“He’s right George,” Jacob owned up. “It was my fault. And Selmac’s.”

“Selmac’s?” Hammond almost groaned aloud, his fingers twitching with frustration. Why did trouble so often involve the Tok’ra? And just how much had this civilian been told? And more importantly, was the situation contained?

“I came in looking for Sam and found Mac here instead. Jack was laying asleep on the couch, only I didn’t know he was just sleeping, and Mac was waving a hockey stick about, and there were papers all over the table...” Jacob hurried on, hardly pausing for breath, sounding like a child called to the Principal’s office. “And I guess both Selmac and I made the wrong judgement call. I really thought Mac was an Ashrak, or a clone, or something, and I guess I said and did some things I wouldn’t have, if I’d known better.”

Seeing it from Jacob’s view for the first time, caused the quickly tiring Jack to snigger quietly, which earned him a glare from Hammond. “This is no laughing matter, Jack. We have a serious situation and we need to decide where we go from here.”

“I know, sir, but you have to agree, it is kinda funny.”

Jack tried to stifle a yawn, which no one missed. Hammond couldn’t totally begrudge the injured man a small laugh at what had happened. He guessed it did have its funny side, and it wasn’t often a Tok’ra admitted a mistake. Although this was Jacob they were dealing with, a long-time friend, who already was an exception to most of their rules anyway.

“So, how do you want to proceed now, Jack? Mister MacGyver is your brother, and that’s information I will want clarifying in your records as soon as you’re up to it. I don’t like knowing my SIC has been keeping secrets from me. I want to know how his knowledge will affect the security of the project, and how you plan to deal with that.”

“Well, actually, Sir, I plan to recruit him, if he’ll consider it.”

Hammond thought for a moment, then slowly nodded his head in resigned acceptance of his Second’s decision. Although he knew nothing yet about this stranger, if Jack felt the man’s presence had merit, and could be trusted, then the General had

confidence in his judgement. He'd had no reason to doubt Jack's instincts previously and didn't want to start now. He just didn't like surprises.

"Mister MacGyver?" He looked towards Mac to gauge his reaction to the offer. It seemed even Jack's personal life was as much a mystery as his professional one. Having different surnames might have camouflaged the men's relationship previously, but that cover would quickly disappear once both men started working within the same environment.

Mac hesitated thoughtfully before giving his reply. "I'm fully prepared to sign whatever papers you've brought, General, although I must tell you that I'd never do or say anything to put my brother in danger." Hammond nodded again in quiet acceptance. "This was all a huge misunderstanding." Mac rubbed his neck, where even Hammond could now see the beginnings of a bruise, and guess the reason for it. He'd been in enough fights in his life before he learned to fly a desk. "But having said that, and the fact that knowing all this scares the crap outta me, how can I not become involved, when I now know what we're up against? If Jack thinks I can be of some small help to you, then I guess I have to offer my services, however they'll best fit in."

Jack smiled at him in relief, and, when Mac returned an identical look, Hammond wondered how much more complicated life was about to get in the mountain with the pair of them there.

"So, Jack. In what capacity do you believe Mister MacGyver can be of use to us?"

"Mac, please," Mac offered, straight away. MacGyver was such a mouthful, and as for his forename... well, being referred to as Mac was just so much better than that too. He wondered if he could have his first name kept off the records altogether? He'd have to ask Jack about that. Because he was darned sure Jack had doctored his own records on occasion.

"As a civilian scientist, sir. You'll find his CV is very impressive, with a range of skills we could use in just about any department."

Hammond turned back to Mac. "Are you sure about this, Mister MacGyver? Even as a civilian, there are risks associated with the program. You could leave now, with the proviso that you sign these papers first of course, and go back to your old life."

"Mac, sir," Mac repeated. "I might need a whole bottle of whisky to get me to sleep tonight. But yes, I'm sure. If this is as important as Jack says, then yes."

"Very well, Mister MacGyver, it will be a pleasure to have you on board." Even Jack's brother would need to earn the General's friendship, although he doubted that, if the man was anything like his twin, that it would take very long. "I'll just get you to sign these first, and then I want to hear all about you and why I had no idea you existed."

"It's a long story," Jack told him as Hammond opened the briefcase at his feet, leaning over his substantial stomach to retrieve the manila folder on top.

“With you, Jack, it usually is,” commented Jacob.

Hammond had just stood up to lean over the coffee-table towards Mac, when a column of white light suddenly surrounded Jack.

“Jack?” queried Mac, frightened by yet another unnatural occurrence with his brother at its midst, whilst Hammond and Jacob both groaned with shared understanding.

However, instead of moving away from the light, like most uninformed people would have done, Mac slid nearer. He grabbed on to his brother’s arm, which seemingly prompted the light to switch bodies to him instead.

“Thor!” yelled Jack to the ceiling, although he doubted the alien was actually listening to him. He was frantic to stop his brother from getting a close encounter he wasn’t in any condition for yet. But instead of switching back to the Colonel, the light spread out to enclose both of them, as though it couldn’t identify which man was the one it wanted. There had never been any reason to previously wonder what the Asgard would do if two people shared identical DNA.

“Crap!” the brothers said in unison as they both disappeared.

Jacob swivelled around on the coffee-table to face Hammond, who’d sat back down again, still uselessly holding the folder out before him.

“Well, I might have damaged him somewhat, George. But I think losing him completely probably trumps that.”

Hammond blustered.

“But he hasn’t even signed the forms yet...”

\*\*\*The End\*\*\*